

JOAN AND PETER

THE STORY OF AN EDUCATION

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1918

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Set up and electrotyped. Published, September, 1918

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I PETER'S PARENTAGE	1
II STUBLANDS IN COUNCIL	13
III ARTHUR OR OSWALD?	31
IV FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE UNIVERSE	59
V THE CHRISTENING	78
VI THE FOURTH GUARDIAN	102
VII THE SCHOOL OF ST. GEORGE AND THE VENERABLE BEDE	112
VIII THE HIGH CROSS PREPARATORY SCHOOL	142
IX OSWALD TAKES CONTROL	204
X A SEARCHING OF SCHOOLMASTERS	255
XI ADOLESCENCE	282
XII THE WORLD ON THE EVE OF WAR	377
XIII JOAN AND PETER GRADUATE	443
XIV OSWALD'S VALEDICTION	544

JOAN AND PETER

THE STORY OF AN EDUCATION

CHAPTER THE FIRST

PETER'S PARENTAGE

§ 1

EARLY one summer morning in England, in the year 1893 in the reign—which seemed in those days to have been going on for ever and to be likely to go on for evermore—of Queen Victoria, there was born a little boy named Peter. Peter was a novel name then; he was before the great crop of Peters who derived their name from Peter Pan. He was born with some difficulty. His father, who had not been to bed all night, for the trouble of the birth had begun overnight at about nine o'clock, was walking about in the garden in a dewy dawn, thinking the world very dreadful and beautiful, when he first heard Peter cry. Peter, he thought, made a noise like a little frightened hen that something big had caught. . . . Peter's mother had been moaning but now she moaned no more, and Peter's father stood outside and whispered "Oh, God! Oh! Damn them and *damn* them! why don't they *tell* me?"

Then the nurse put her head out of the window; it was a casement window with white roses about it; said "Everything's all right. I'll tell you when to come in," and vanished again.

Peter's father turned about very sharply so that she should not see he was fool enough to weep, and went along the flagged path to the end of the garden, where was the little summer-house that looked over the Weald. But he could not see the Weald because his tears blinded him. All night Peter's father had been thinking what an imperfect

husband he had always been and how he had never really told his wife how much he loved her, and how indeed until now he had never understood how very much he loved her, and he had been making good resolutions for the future in great abundance, in enormous abundance, the most remarkable good resolutions, and one waking nightmare after another had been chasing across his mind nightmares of a dreadful dark-grey world in which there would be no Dolly, no Dolly at all anywhere, even if you went out into the garden and whistled your utmost, and he would be a widower with only one little lonely child to console him. He could not imagine any other woman for him but Dolly.

The last trailing vestige of those twilight distresses vanished when presently he saw Dolly looking tired indeed but pink and healthy, with her hair almost roguishly astray, and the room full of warm daylight from the dawn-flushed sky, full of fresh south-west air from the Sussex downs, full of the sense of invincible life, and young master Peter, very puckered and ugly and red and pitiful, in a blanket in the nurse's arms, and Dr. Fremisson smirking behind her, entirely satisfied with himself and the universe and every detail of it.

When Dolly had been kissed and whispered to they gave Peter to his father to hold.

Peter's father had never understood before that a baby is an exquisite thing.

§ 2

The parents of Peter were modern young people, and Peter was no accidental intruder. Their heads were full of new ideas, new that is in the days when Queen Victoria seemed immortal and the world settled for ever. They put Peter in their two sunniest rooms; rarely were the windows shut; his nursery was white and green, bright with pretty pictures and never without flowers. It had a cork carpet and a rug displaying amusing black cats on pink, and he was weighed carefully first once a week and then once a month until he was four years old.

His father, whom everybody called Stubbo, came of an old Quaker stock. Quakerism in its beginnings was a very fine and wonderful religion indeed, a real research for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, a new way of thinking and living, but weaknesses of the mind and spirit brought it back very soon to a commoner texture. The Stubland family was among those which had been most influenced by the evangelical wave of the Wesleyan time. Peter's great-grandfather, old Stubland, the West-of-England cloth manufacturer, was an emotional person with pietistic inclinations that nearly carried him over at different times to the Plymouth Brethren, to the Wesleyan Methodists, and to the Countess of Huntingdon's connexion. Religion was his only social recreation, most other things he held to be sinful, and his surplus energies went all into the business. He had an aptitude for mechanical organization and started the Yorkshire factory; his son, still more evangelical and still more successful, left a business worth well over two hundred thousand pounds among thirteen children, of whom Peter's father was the youngest. "Stublands" became a limited company with uncles Rigby and John as directors, and the rest of the family was let loose, each one with a nice little secure six hundred a year or thereabouts from Stubland debentures and Stubland ordinary shares, to do what it liked in the world.

It wasn't, of course, told that it could do what it liked in the world. That it found out for itself—in the teeth of much early teaching to the contrary. That early teaching had been predominantly prohibitive, there had been no end of "thou shalt not" and very little of "thou shalt," an irksome teaching for young people destined to leisure. Mankind was presented waiting about for the Judgment Day, with Satan as busy as a pickpocket in a crowd. Also he offered roundabouts and cocoanut-shies. . . . This family doctrine tallied so little with the manifest circumstances and natural activity of the young Stublands that it just fell off their young minds. The keynote of Stubbo's upbringing had been a persistent unanswered "Why *not*?" to all the things he was told not to do. "Why *not* dance? Why *not* go to theatres and music-halls? Why *not* make love? Why

not read and quote this exciting new poetry of Swinburne's?" . . .

The early 'nineties were a period of careless diastole in British affairs. There seemed to be enough and to spare for every one, given only a little generosity. Peace dwelt on the earth for ever. It was difficult to prove the proprietorship of Satan in the roundabouts and the cocoanut-shies. There was a general belief that one's parents and grandparents had taken life far too grimly and suspiciously, a belief which, indeed, took possession of Stubbo before he was in trousers.

His emancipation was greatly aided by his elder sister Phyllis, a girl with an abnormal sense of humour. It was Phyllis who brightened the Sunday afternoons, when she and her sister Phœbe and her brothers were supposed to be committing passages of scripture to memory in the attic, by the invention of increasingly irreligious Limericks. Phœbe would sometimes be dreadfully shocked and sometimes join in with great vigour and glory. Phyllis was also an artist in misquotation. She began by taking a facetious view of the ark and Jonah's whale, and as her courage grew she went on to the Resurrection. She had a genius for asking seemingly respectful but really destructive questions about religious matters, that made her parents shy of instruction. The Stubland parents had learnt their faith with more reverence than intelligence from *their* parents, who had had it in a similar spirit from their parents, who had had it from their parents; so that nobody had looked into it closely for some generations, and something vital had evaporated unsuspected. It had evaporated so completely that when Peter's father and Peter's aunts and uncles came in their turn as children to examine the precious casket, they not only perceived that there was nothing in it, but they could very readily jump to the rash conclusion that there never had been anything in it. It seemed just an odd blend of empty resonant phrases and comical and sometimes slightly improper stories, that lent themselves very pleasantly to facetious illustration.

Stubbo, as he grew up under these circumstances, had not so much taken on the burthen of life as thrown it off. He decided he would not go into business—business struck him

as a purely avaricious occupation—and after a pleasant year at Cambridge he became quite clear that the need of the world and his temperament was Art. The world was not beautiful enough. This was more particularly true of the human contribution. So he went into Art to make the world more beautiful, and came up to London to study and to wear a highly decorative blue linen blouse in private and to collect posters—people then were just beginning to collect posters.

From the last stage of Quakerism to the last extremity of decoration is but a step. Quite an important section of the art world in Britain owes itself to the Quakers and Plymouth Brethren, and to the drab and grey disposition of the sterner evangelicals. It is as if that elect strain in the race had shut its eyes for a generation or so, merely in order to open them again and see brighter. The reaction of the revolting generation has always been toward colour; the pyrotechnic display of the Omega workshops in London is but the last violent outbreak of the Quaker spirit. Young Stubland, a quarter of a century before the Omega enterprise, was already slaking a thirst for chromatic richness behind the lead of William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. It took a year or so and several teachers and much friendly frankness to persuade him he could neither draw nor paint, and then he relapsed into decoration and craftsmanship. He beat out copper into great weals of pattern and he bound books grossly. He spent some time upon lettering, and learnt how to make the simplest inscription beautifully illegible. He decided to be an architect. In the meantime he made the acquaintance of a large circle of artistic and literary people, became a Fabian socialist, abandoned Stubland tweeds for fluffy artistically dyed garments, bicycled about a lot—those were the early days of the bicycle, before the automobile robbed it of its glory—talked endlessly, and had a very good time. He met his wife and married her, and he built his own house as a sample of what he could do as an architect.

It was, with one exception, the only house he ever built. It was quite original in design and almost indistinguishable from the houses of a round dozen contemporaries of Mr. Charles Voysey. It was a little low-browed, white house,

with an enormous and very expensive roof of green slates; it had wide, low mullioned casement windows, its rooms were eight feet high and its doors five foot seven, and all about it were enormous buttresses fit to sustain a castle. It had sun-traps and verandahs and a terrace, and it snuggled into the ruddy hillside and stared fatly out across the Weald from beyond Limpsfield, and it was quite a jolly little house to live in when you had learnt to be shorter than five feet seven inches and to dodge the low bits of ceiling and the beam over the ingle-nook.

And therein, to crown the work of the builder, Peter was born.

§ 3

Peter's mother came from quite a different strand in the complicated web of British life. Her "people"—she was brought up to call them that—were county people, but old-fashioned and prolific, and her father had been the sixth son of a third son and very lucky to get a living. He was the Vicar of Long Downport and an early widower; his two sons had gone to Oxford with scholarships, and Dolly had stayed at home, a leggy, dark-eyed girl with a sceptical manner, much given to reading history. One of her brothers passed from Oxford into the higher division of the Civil Service and went to India; the other took to scornful, reactionary journalism, dramatic criticism, musical comedy lyrics, parody, and drink—which indeed is almost a necessity if a man is to stick to reactionary journalism; this story will presently inherit Joan from him; she had a galaxy of cousins who were parsons, missionaries, schoolmasters, and soldiers; one was an explorer; not one was in business. Her father was a bookish inattentive man who had just missed a fellowship because of a general discursiveness; if he could have afforded it he would have been very liberal indeed in his theology; and, like grains of pepper amidst milder nourishment, there were all sorts of sceptical books about the house: Renan's *Life of Christ*, Strauss's *Life of Christ*, Gibbon, various eighteenth century memoirs, Huxley's *Essays*, much Victor Hugo, and a "collected" Shelley, books that his

daughter read with a resolute frown, sitting for the most part with one leg tucked up under her in the chair, her chin on her fists, and her elbows on either side of the volume undergoing assimilation.

Her reading was historical, and her tendency romantic. Her private daydream through some years of girlhood was that she was Cæsar's wife. She was present at all his battles, and sometimes, when he had had another of his never altogether fatal wounds, she led the army. Also, which was a happy thought, she stabbed Brutus first, and so her Cæsar, contrariwise to history, reigned happily with her for many, many years. She would go to sleep of a night dreaming of Mr. and Mrs. Emperor driving in triumph through the gates of Rome after some little warlike jaunt. Sometimes she drove. And also they came to Britain to drive out the Picts and Scots, and were quartered with her father in Long Downport, conquering Picts, Scots, Danes, and the most terrific anachronisms with an equal stoutness and courage. The private title she bestowed upon herself (and never told to any human being) was "The Imperatrix."

As she grew up she became desirous of more freedom and education. After much argument with her father she came up to an aunt in London, and went to study science in the Huxley days as a free student at the Royal College of Science. She saw her future husband at an art students' soirée, he looked tall and bright and masterful; he had a fine profile, and his blond hair poured nobly off his forehead; she did not dream that Peter's impatience for incarnation put ideas into her head, she forgot her duty to Cæsar and imagined a devotion to art and beauty. They made a pretty couple, and she married amidst universal approval—after a slight dispute whether it was to be a religious or a civil marriage. She was married in her father's church.

In the excitement of meeting, appreciating and marrying Stubbo, she forgot that she had had a great pity and tenderness and admiration for her shy and impulsive cousin, Oswald Sydenham, with the glass eye and cruelly scarred face, who had won the V.C. before he was twenty at the bombardment of Alexandria, and who had since done the most remarkable things in Nyasaland. It had been quite typical

heroism that had won him the V.C. He had thrown a shell overboard, and it had burst in the air as he threw it and pulped one side of his face. But when she married, she had temporarily forgotten Cousin Oswald. She was just carried away by Arthur Stubland's profile, and the wave in his hair, and—life.

Arthur was Stubbo's Christian name because he had been born under the spell of "The Idylls of the King."

Afterwards when Oswald came home again, she thought the good side of his face, the side of his face that hadn't been so seriously damaged by the Egyptian shell, looked at her rather queerly. But the wounded side remained a Sphinx-like mask.

"Congratulations!" said Oswald, fumbling with the word. "Congratulations! I hope you'll be happy, Dolly." . . .

She was far gone in rationalism before she met Arthur, and he completed her emancipation. Their ideas ran closely together. They projected some years of travel before they settled down. He wanted to see mediaeval Italy "thoroughly," and she longed for Imperial Rome. They took just a couple of rooms in South Kensington and spent all the rest of their income in long stretches of holiday. They honeymooned in pleasant inns in South Germany; they did some climbing in the Tyrol and the Dolomites—she had a good head—they had a summer holiday on the Adriatic coast, and she learnt to swim and dive well, and they did one long knapsack tramp round and along the Swiss Italian frontier and then another through the Apennines to Florence.

It was a perfectly lovely time. Everything was bright and happy, and they got on wonderfully together, except that— There was a shadow for her. She found it difficult to say exactly what the shadow was, and it is still more difficult for the historian to define it. She dismissed the idea that it had anything to do with Cousin Oswald's one reproachful eye. She sometimes had a faint suspicion that it was her jilted Cæsar asking for at least a Rubicon to cross, but it is doubtful if she ever had any suspicion of Peter, waiting outside the doors of life. Yet the feeling of something forgotten, of something left out, grew throughout those sunny days. It was in some sweet meadows high up

on the great hill above Fiesole, that she tried to tell Arthur of this vexatious feeling of deficiency.

Manifestly she puzzled him, which was not to be wondered at since the feeling puzzled her. But it also had a queer effect of irritating him.

"Arthur, if you always say I don't love you," she said, "when I tell you anything, then how can I tell you anything at all?"

"Aren't we having the loveliest times?" he asked.

"Yes," she said without complete conviction. "It isn't that."

"You admit you love me. You admit you're having the loveliest time!"

She sat up with her elbows on her knees and her knuckles pressing her round, firm chin.

"It's just all one holiday," she said.

"I did some work last month."

He had planned three impossible houses and made a most amusing cardboard model of one of them. She disregarded this plea.

"When we came up here people were working in the fields. Even that pretty little girl among the bushes was looking after sheep."

"By Jove! I wish I could paint her—and those Holman Hunt-faced sheep of hers. It's tantalizing to be able to see—and yet not to have the—the expressive gift. . . ."

"Things are going on now, Arthur. Down there in the valley along that white road, people are going and coming. . . . There is a busy little train now. . . . Things are happening. Things are going to happen. And the work that goes on! The hard work! Today—there are thousands and thousands of men in mines. Out of this sunshine. . . ."

There was an interval. Arthur rolled over on his face to look at the minute railway and road and river bed far below at the bottom of a deep lake of pellucid blue air.

"I don't agree with you," he said at last.

"Too much is happening," he said. "Noisy, vulgar fuss. Commercialism, competition, factory production. Does it make people happy? Look at that horrid little railway disturbing all this beautiful simple Tuscan life. . . ."

Another long pause.

She made a further step. "But if something beautiful is being destroyed," she tried, "we ought not to be here."

That also took a little time to soak in.

Then he stirred impatiently.

"Don't we," he asked, "protest? By the mere act of living our own lives? Don't I, in my small way, try to do my share in the Restoration of Craftsmanship? Aren't people of our sort doing something—something a little too unpretending to be obvious—to develop the conception of a fairer and better, a less hurried, less greedy life?"

He raised an appealing face to her.

She sat with knitted brows. She did not assent, but it was difficult to argue her disaccord.

He took advantage of her pause.

"Confess," he said, "you would like to have me a business manager—of some big concern. Or a politician. You want me to be in the scrimmage. No!—lording it over the scrimmage. The real things aren't *done* like that, Dolly. The real things aren't done like that!"

She put her next thought out in its stark simplicity.

"Are we doing any real thing in the world at all?"

He did not answer for some seconds.

Then he astonished her by losing his temper. It was exactly as if her question had probed down to some secret soreness deep within him. "Oh, *damn!*" he shouted. "And on this lovely morning! It's too bad of you, Dolly!" It was as if he had bit upon a tender tooth. Perhaps a fragment of the stopping had come out of his Nonconformist conscience.

He knelt up and stared at her. "You don't love *this*, anyhow—whether you love me or not."

He tried to alter his tone from a note of sheer quarrelsome-ness to badinage. "You Blue Conscience, you! You Gnawing Question! Are we doing anything real at all, you say. Is no one, then, to stand up and meet the sunlight for its own sake, when God sends it to us? No! You can't unsay it now." (Though she was not unsaying it. She was only trying for some more acceptable way of saying it over again.) "My day is spoilt! You've stuck a fever into me!"

He looked about him. He wanted some vivid gesture. "Oh, come on!" he cried.

He sprang up. He gesticulated over her. He banished the view with a sweep of rejection. "Let us go back to the inn. Let us take our traps back to stuffy old Florence. Let us see three churches and two picture-galleries before sunset! And take our tickets for home. We aren't rushing and we ought to rush. Life is rush. This holiday has lasted too long, Dolly."

"Life is real! Life is earnest!
Simple joys are not its goal."

"Own, my Dolly! If only this afternoon we could find some solid serious lecture down there! Or an election. You'd love an election. . . . And anyhow, it's nearly lunch time."

She knelt, took his hand, and stood up.

"You mock," she said. "But you know that what I want to say—isn't that. . . ."

§ 4

He did know. But all the way back to England he was a man with an irritating dart sticking in his mind. And the discussion she had released that day worried him for months.

He wanted it to be clear that their lives were on a very high level indeed. No mere idlers were they. Hitherto he said they had been keeping honeymoon, but that was only before they began life in earnest. Now they were really going to begin. They were going to take hold of life.

House and Peter followed quite logically upon that.

How easy was life in those days—at least, for countless thousands of independent people! It was the age of freedom—for the independent. They went where they listed; the world was full of good hotels, and every country had its Baedeker well up to date. Every cultivated home had its little corner of weather-worn guide books, a nest of memories, an *Orario*, an *Indicateur*, or a *Continental Bradshaw*. The happy multitude of the free travelled out to beautiful places

and returned to comfortable homes. The chief anxiety in life was to get good servants—and there were plenty of good servants. Politics went on, at home and abroad, a traditional game between the Ins and Outs. The world was like a spinning top that seems to be quite still and stable. . . . Yet youth was apt to feel as Dolly felt, that there was something lacking.

Arthur was quite ready to fall in with this idea that something was lacking. He was inclined to think that one got to the root of it by recognizing that there was not enough Craftsmanship and too much cheap material, too much machine production, and, more especially, too much aniline dye. He was particularly strong against aniline dyes. All Britain was strong against aniline dyes,—and so that trade went to Germany. He reached socialism by way of æsthetic criticism. Individual competition was making the world hideous. It was destroying individuality. What the world needed was a non-competitive communism for the collective discouragement of machinery. (Meanwhile he bought a bicycle.) He decided that his modest six hundred a year was all that he and Dolly needed to live upon; he would never work for money—that would be “sordid”—but for the joy of work, and on his income they would lead a simple working-man’s existence, free from the vulgarities of competition, politics and commercialism.

Dolly was fascinated, delighted, terrified and assuaged by Peter, and Peter and a simple house free also from the vulgarities of modern mechanism kept her so busy with only one servant to help her, that it was only in odd times, in the late evening when the sky grew solemn or after some book had stirred her mind, that she recalled that once oppressive feeling of something wanting, something that was still wanting. . . .

CHAPTER THE SECOND

STUBLANDS IN COUNCIL

§ 1

BUT although Dolly did not pursue her husband with any sustained criticism, he seemed now to feel always that her attitude was critical and needed an answer. The feeling made him something of a thinker and something of a talker. Sometimes the thinker was uppermost, and then he would sit silent and rather in profile (his profile, it has already been stated, was a good one, and much enhanced by a romantic bang of warm golden hair that hung down over one eye), very picturesque in his beautiful blue linen blouse, listening to whatever was said; and sometimes he would turn upon the company and talk with a sort of experimental dogmatism, as is the way with men a little insecure in their convictions, but quite good talk. He would talk of education, and work, and Peter, and of love and beauty, and the finer purposes of life, and things like that.

A lot of talk came the way of Peter's father.

Along the Limpsfield ridge and away east and west and north, there was a scattered community of congenial intellectuals. It spread along the ridge beyond Dorking, and resumed again at Haslemere and Hindhead, where Grant Allen and Richard Le Gallienne were established. They were mostly people of the same detached and independent class as the Stublands; they were the children of careful people who had created considerable businesses, or the children of the more successful of middle Victorian celebrities, or dons, or writers themselves, or they came from Hampstead, which was in those days a nest of considerable people's children, inheritors of reputations and writers of memoirs, an hour's 'bus drive from London and outside the cab radius.

A thin flavour of Hampstead spread out, indeed, over all Surrey. Some of these newcomers lived in old adapted cottages; some of them had built little houses after the fashion of the Stublands; some had got into the real old houses that already existed. There was much Sunday walking and "dropping in" and long evenings and suppers. Safety bicycles were coming into use and greatly increasing intercourse. And there was a coming and going of Stubland aunts and uncles and of Sydenhams and Dolly's "people." Nearly all were youngish folk; it was a new generation and a new sort of population for the countryside. They were dotted among the farms and the estates and preserves and "places" of the old county family pattern. The "county" wondered a little at them, kept busy with horse and dog and gun, and, except for an occasional stiff call, left them alone. The church lamented their neglected Sabbaths. The doctors were not unfriendly.

One of the frequent visitors, indeed, at The Ingle-Nook—that was the name of Peter's birthplace—was Doctor Fremison, the local general practitioner. He was a man, he said, who liked "Ideas." The aborigines lacked Ideas, it seemed; but Stubland was a continual feast of them. The doctor's diagnosis of the difference between these new English and the older English of the country rested entirely on the presence or absence of Ideas. But there he was wrong. The established people were people of fixed ideas; the immigrants had abandoned fixed ideas for discussion. So far from their having no ideas, those occasional callers who came dropping in so soon as the Stublands were settled in The Ingle-Nook before Peter was born, struck the Stublands as having ideas like monstrous and insurmountable cliffs. To fling your own ideas at them was like trying to lob stones into Zermatt from Macugnana.

One day when Mrs. Darcy, old Lady Darcy's daughter-in-law, had driven over, some devil prompted Arthur to shock her. He talked his extremest Fabianism. He would have the government control all railways, land, natural products; nobody should have a wage of less than two pounds a week; the whole country should be administered for the universal benefit; everybody should be educated.