

# **The Blue Room**

Kenneth Grahame

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THAT nature has her moments of sympathy with man has been noted often enough, and generally as a new discovery; to us, who had never known any other condition of things, it seemed entirely right and fitting that the wind sang and sobbed in the poplar tops, and in the lulls of it, sudden sprits of rain spattered the already dusty roads, on that blustering March day when Edward and I awaited, on the station platform, the arrival of the new tutor. Needless to say, this arrangement had been planned by an aunt, from some fond idea that our shy, innocent natures would unfold themselves during the walk from the station, and that on the revelation of each other's more solid qualities that must then inevitably ensue, an enduring friendship springing from mutual respect might be firmly based. A pretty dream, nothing more. For Edward, who foresaw that the brunt of tutorial oppression would have to be borne by him, was sulky, monosyllabic, and determined to be as negatively disagreeable as good manners would permit. It was therefore evident that I would have to be spokesman and purveyor of hollow civilities, and I was none the more amicable on that account; all courtesies, welcomes, explanations, and other court-chamberlain kind of business, being my special aversion. There was much of the tempestuous March weather in the hearts of both of us, as we sullenly glowered along the carriage-windows of the slackening train.

One is apt, however, to misjudge the special difficulties of a situation; and the reception proved, after all, an easy and informal matter. In a trainful so uniformly bucolic, a tutor was readily recognizable; and his portmanteau had been consigned to the luggage-cart, and his person conveyed into the lane, before I had discharged one of my carefully considered sentences. I breathed more easily, and, looking up at our new friend as we stepped out together, remembered that we had been counting on something altogether more arid, scholastic, and severe. A boyish eager face and a petulant pince nez, untidy hair, a head of constant quick turns like a robin's, and voice that kept breaking into alto, these were all very strange and new, but not in the least terrible.

He proceeded jerkily through the village, with glances on this side and that; and "Charming," he broke out presently; "quite too charming and delightful!"

I had not counted on this sort of thing, and glanced for help to Edward, who, hands in pockets, looked grimly down his nose. He had taken his line, and meant to stick to it.

Meantime our friend had made an imaginary spy-glass out of his fist, and was squinting through it at something I could not perceive. "What an exquisite bit!" he burst out; "fifteenth century, no, yes, it is!"

I began to feel puzzled, not to say alarmed. It reminded me of the butcher in the Arabian Nights, whose common joints, displayed on the shop-front, took to a started public the appearance of dismembered humanity. This man seemed to see the strangest things in our dull, familiar surroundings.

"Ah!" he broke out again, as we jogged on between hedgerows: "and that field now backed by the downs with the rain-cloud brooding over it, that's all David Cox every bit of it!"

"That field belongs to Farmer Larkin," I explained politely, for of course he could not be expected to know. "I'll take you over to Farmer Cox's tomorrow, if he's a friend of yours; but there's nothing there to see."

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Edward, who was hanging sullenly behind, made a face at me, as if to say, "What sort of lunatic have we got here?"

"It has the true pastoral character, this country of yours," went on our enthusiast: "with just that added touch in cottage and farmstead, relics of a bygone art, which makes our English landscape so divine, so unique!"

Really this grasshopper was becoming a burden. These familiar fields and farms, of which we knew every blade and stick, had done nothing that I knew of to be bespattered with adjectives in this way. I had never thought of them as divine, unique, or anything else. They were well, they were just themselves, and there was an end of it. Despairingly I jogged Edward in the ribs, as a sign to start rational conversation, but he only grinned and continued obdurate.

You can see the house now," I remarked presently; "and that's Selina, chasing the donkey in the paddock, or is it the donkey chasing Selina? I can't quite make out; but it's them, anyhow."

Needless to say, he exploded with a full charge of adjectives. "Exquisite!" he rapped out; "so mellow and harmonious! and so entirely in keeping!" (I could see from Edward's face that he was thinking who ought to be in keeping.) "Such possibilities of romance, now, in those old gables!"

"If you mean the garrets," I said, "there's a lot of old furniture in them; and one is generally full of apples; and the bats get in sometimes, under the eaves, and flop about till we go up with hair-brushes and things and drive 'em out; but there's nothing else in them that I know of."

"Oh, but there must be more than bats," he cried. "Don't tell me there are no ghosts. I shall be deeply disappointed if there aren't any ghosts."

I did not think it worth while to reply, feeling really unequal to this sort of conversation; besides, we were nearing the house, when my task would be ended. Aunt Eliza met us at the door, and in the cross-fire of adjectives that ensued both of them talking at once, as grown-up folk have a habit of doing we two slipped round to the back of the house, and speedily put several solid acres between us and civilization, for fear of being ordered in to tea in the drawing-room. By the time we returned, our new importation had gone up to dress for dinner, so till the morrow at least we were free of him.

Meanwhile the March wind, after dropping a while at sundown, had been steadily increasing in volume; and although I fell asleep at my usual hour, about midnight I was wakened by the stress and cry of it. In the bright moonlight, wind-sung branches tossed and swayed eerily across the blinds; there was rumbling in the chimneys, whistling in the keyholes, and everywhere a clamour and a call. Sleep was out of the question, and, sitting up in bed, I looked round. Edward sat up too. "I was wondering when you were going to wake," he said. "It's no good trying to sleep through this. I vote we get up and do something."

"I'm game," I replied. "Let's play at being in a ship at sea" (the plaint of the old house under the buffeting wind suggested this, naturally); "and we can be wrecked on an island, or left on a raft, whichever you choose; but I like an island best myself, because there's more things on it."

Edward on reflection negated the idea. "It would make too much noise," he pointed out. "There's no fun playing at ships, unless you can make a jolly good row."

The door creaked, and a small figure in white slipped cautiously in. "Thought I heard you talking," said Charlotte. "We don't like it; we're afraid Selina too. She'll be here in a minute. She's putting on her new dressing-gown she's so proud of."

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His arms round his knees, Edward cogitated deeply until Selina appeared, barefooted, and looking slim and tall in the new dressing-gown. Then, "Look here," he exclaimed: "now we're all together, I vote we go and explore."

"You're always wanting to explore," I said. "What's there to explore for in this house?"

"Biscuits!" said the inspired Edward.

"Hooray! Come on!" chimed in Harold, sitting up suddenly. He had been awake all the time, but had been shamming sleep, lest he should be fagged to do anything.

It was indeed a fact, as Edward had remembered, that our thoughtless elders occasionally left the biscuits out, a prize for the night-walking adventurer with nerves of steel.

Edward tumbled out of bed, and pulled a baggy old pair of knickerbockers over his bare shanks. Then he girt himself with a belt, into which he thrust, on the one side a large wooden pistol, on the other an old single-stick; and finally he donned a big slouch-hat once an uncle's that we used for playing Guy Fawkes and Charles-the-Second-up-a-tree in. Whatever the audience, Edward, if possible always dressed for his parts with care and conscientiousness; while Harold and I, true Elizabethans, cared little about the mounting of a piece, so long as the real dramatic heart of it beat sound.

Our commander now enjoined on us a silence deep as the grave, reminding us that Aunt Eliza usually slept with an open door, past which we had to file.

"But we'll take the short cut through the Blue Room," said the wary Selina.

"Of course," said Edward, approvingly. "I forgot about that. Now then! You lead the way!"

The Blue Room had in prehistoric times been added to by taking in a superfluous passage, and so not only had the advantage of two doors, but enabled us to get to the head of the stairs without passing the chamber wherein our dragon-aunt lay couched. It was rarely occupied, except when a casual uncle came down for the night. We entered in noiseless file, the room being plunged in darkness, except for a bright strip of moonlight on the floor, across which we must pass for our exit. On this our leading lady chose to pause, seizing the opportunity to study the hang of her new dressing-gown. Greatly satisfied thereat, she proceeded, after the feminine fashion, to peacock and pose, pacing a minuet down the moonlit patch with an imaginary partner. This was too much for Edward's histrionic instincts and after a moment's pause he drew his single-stick, and with flourishes meet for the occasion, strode onto the stage. A struggle ensued on approved lines, at the end of which Selina was stabbed slowly and with unction, and her corpse borne from the chamber by the ruthless cavalier. The rest of us rushed after in a clump, with capers and gesticulations of delight; the special charm of the performance lying in the necessity for its being carried out with the dumbest of dumb shows.

Once out on the dark landing, the noise of the storm without told us that we had exaggerated the necessity for silence; so, grasping the tails of each other's nightgowns, even as Alpine climbers rope themselves together in perilous places, we fared stoutly down the stair-case moraine, and across the grim glacier of the hall, to where a faint glimmer from the half-open door of the drawing-room beckoned to us like friendly hostel-lights. Entering, we found that our thriftless seniors had left the sound red heart of a fire, easily coaxed into a cheerful blaze; and biscuits a plateful smiled at us in an encouraging sort of way, together with the halves of a lemon, already once squeezed, but still suckable. The biscuits were righteously shared, the lemon segments passed from mouth to mouth; and as we squatted round the fire, its genial warmth consoling our unclad limbs, we realized that so many nocturnal perils had not been braved in vain.

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"It's a funny thing," said Edward, as we chatted, "how I hate this room in the daytime. It always means having your face washed, and your hair brushed, and talking silly company talk. But to-night it's really quite jolly. Looks different, somehow."

"I never can make out," I said, "what people come here to tea for. They can have their own tea at home if they like, they're not poor people, with jam and things, and drink out of their saucer, and suck their fingers and enjoy themselves; but they come here from a long way off, and sit up straight with their feet off the bars of their chairs, and have one cup, and talk the same sort of stuff every time."

Selina sniffed disdainfully. "You don't know anything about it," she said. "In society you have to call on each other. It's the proper thing to do."

"Pooh! you're not in society," said Edward, politely; "and, what's more, you never will be."

"Yes, I shall, some day," retorted Selina; "but I shan't ask you to come and see me, so there!"

"Wouldn't come if you did," growled Edward.

"Well, you won't get the chance," rejoined our sister, claiming her right of the last word. There was no heat about these little amenities, which made up as we understood it the art of polite conversation.

"I don't like society people," put in Harold from the sofa, where he was sprawling at full length, a sight the daylight hours would have blushed to witness. "There were some of 'em here this afternoon, when you two had gone off to the station. Oh, and I found a dead mouse on the lawn, and I wanted to skin it, but I was n't sure I knew how, by myself; and they came out into the garden and patted my head, I wish people would n't do that, and one of 'em asked me to pick her a flower. Don't know why she could n't pick it herself; but I said, 'All right, I will if you hold my mouse.' She screamed and threw it away; and Augustus (the cat) got it, and ran away with it. I believe it was really his mouse all the time, 'cos he'd been looking about as if he had lost something, so I was n't angry with him; but what did she want to throw away my mouse for?"

"You have to be careful with mice," reflected Edward; "they're such slippery things. Do you remember we were playing with a dead mouse once on the piano, and the mouse was Robinson Crusoe, and the piano was the island, and somehow Crusoe slipped down inside the island, into its works, and we could n't get him out, though we tried rakes and all sorts of things, till the tuner came. And that was n't till a week after, and then "

Here Charlotte, who had been nodding solemnly, fell over into the fender; and we realized that the wind had dropped at last, and the house was lapped in great stillness. Our vacant beds seemed to be calling to us imperiously; and we were all glad when Edward gave the signal for retreat. At the top of the staircase Harold unexpectedly turned mutinous, insisting on his right to slide down the banisters in a free country. Circumstances did not allow of argument; I suggested a frog's march instead, and frog's marched he accordingly was, the procession passing solemnly across the moonlit Blue Room, with Harold horizontal and limply submissive. Snug in bed at last, I was just slipping off into slumber when I heard Edward explode, with chuckle and snort.

"By Jove!" he said; "I forgot all about it. The new tutor's sleeping in the Blue Room!"

"Lucky he did n't wake up and catch us," I grunted, drowsily; and both of us, without another thought on the matter, sank into well-earned repose.

Next morning we came down to breakfast braced to grapple with fresh adversity, but were surprised to find our garrulous friend of the previous day he was late in making his appearance strangely silent and (apparently) preoccupied. Having polished off our porridge, we ran out to feed the rabbits, explaining to them that a beast of a

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tutor would prevent their enjoying so much of our society as formerly.

On returning to the house at the fated hour appointed for study, we were thunderstruck to see the station-cart disappearing down the drive, freighted with our new acquaintance. Aunt Eliza was brutally uncommunicative; but she was overheard to remark casually that she thought the man must be a lunatic. In this theory we were only too ready to concur, dismissing thereafter the whole matter from our minds.

Some weeks later it happened that Uncle Thomas, while paying us a flying visit, produced from his pocket a copy of the latest weekly, *Psyche: a Journal of the Unseen*; and proceeded laborously to rid himself of much incomprehensible humour, apparently at our expense. We bore it patiently, with the forced grin demanded by convention, anxious to get at the source of inspiration, which it presently appeared lay in a paragraph circumstantially describing our modest and humdrum habitation. "Case III.," it began. "The following particulars were communicated by a young member of the Society, of undoubted probity and earnestness, and are a chronicle of actual and recent experience." A fairly accurate description of the house followed, with details that were unmistakable; but in this there succeeded a flood of meaningless drivel about apparitions, nightly visitants, and the like, writ in a manner betokening a disordered mind, coupled with a feeble imagination. The fellow was not even original. All the old material was there, the storm at night, the haunted chamber, the white lady, the murder re-enacted, and so on, already worn threadbare in many a Christmas Number. No one was able to make head or tail of the stuff, or of its connexion with our quiet mansion; and yet Edward, who had always expected the man, persisted in maintaining that our tutor of a brief span was, somehow or other, at the bottom of it.