

Ivanhoe and the German Measles

Dorothy Canfield

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HIS name was Reginald Gerald Whitefield, and he was the sort of little boy who surprised observers by not having freckles. He had the honest look that goes with freckles and a turned-up nose, although his complexion was irreproachable and his nose neither turned up or down but was quite uninterestingly straight. He was the sort of little boy who endures a scientific and expensive bringing up and is not spoiled by it. He had a French house-governess, he took "talking walks" with a spectacled and conscientious German, he was sent in a black velvet suit to dancing-school, he took riding lessons from a severe ex-cavalryman who contrived in a miraculous way to exclude from the exercise all the fun that naturally goes with it; he was taken to the concerts of the Boston Symphony, and bore with fortitude lectures on "What the Nibelungenlied may mean to a child," and he became neither priggish nor misanthropic. It must be plain, therefore, that he was a remarkable little boy. In short he did not deserve his exuberant name.

At the period when this story begins he did not, as a matter of fact, bear his unfortunate name except at home. His real name was Wamba, and Wamba he had become. In the model and scientific school where he was being educated, the old-fashioned "reader" was scorned and the savor taken out of spontaneous novel-reading by using the classics for drill in declamation and spelling. The class to which Reginald Gerald Whitefield had attained always read "Ivanhoe." They did more than read "Ivanhoe" the year he was in it — they lived and moved and had their being in "Ivanhoe," they talked and dreamed and discussed and played and ate and drank "Ivanhoe." The class was organized on a completely feudal basis, with the characters of the novel distributed as far as they would go, and the rest were known vaguely and collectively as "vassals." Reginald Gerald's imagination had been the torch which had fired all this conflagration of interest, but Wamba was the only rTMle he was allowed because he was short and thin-legged and not in the least imposing. In fact, he was irresistibly comic in appearance, in spite of the careful distinction with which his mother always dressed him. His bullet head, little twinkling gray eyes and clown's flexible smile, wide and undignified, made him impossible for a picturesque rTMle in any of the imaginative games which he invented with such wonderful facility.

The authorities of the school, being highly scientific, believed on principle in allowing much scope to "individual initiative," although, as a rule, they made every kindly and mistaken effort to shut off this valuable quality by thinking of all pleasant enterprises before the children possibly could. The proposition of the Sixth Form to make a play of "Ivanhoe" and act it before the school was received, therefore, with the most modern and up-to-date approval, almost enough to take the fun out of the scheme. But with Wamba's eager spirit flashing from desk to desk, interest could not fail to rise high. The play was written by the Sixth Form en masse, a feudal loyalty so welding them together that they acted as one mind. Beside that, they had "played 'Ivanhoe'" so much that there was really little to do beyond arranging chronologically the various scenes they were accustomed to act with prodigious vigor in their model and scientific playground.

With a truly modern feeling for spectacular effect, the parts had been cast long ago according to looks. Helen Armstrong was the worst speller in her class (and that is saying a good deal); was slow and stolid and unutterably spiritless in her acting, but anyone with such large blue eyes and such an astonishing flood of golden curls was evidently intended by Providence to be Rowena, and, forgetting the qualities of the real Helen Armstrong, the Sixth Form accorded to Rowena, the fair symbol of their ideal, a devotion which could not have been greater in the Dark Ages. Peter Stuyvesant, Jr., never could quite make out the sequence of the story in spite of many

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repetitions, but a boy who was so astonishingly big for eleven years, and who had so handsome a dull, blond face was "Ivanhoe by the grace of God," as Wamba put it to their teacher in explaining the matter to her. He, himself, accepted the rTMle of faithful fool, which nobody else would take, and lost himself in a very passion of loyalty to Ivanhoe which was quaintly disassociated from his accurate estimate of Peter Stuyvesant, Junior's, heavy and thick-witted personality.

He had only one speech to make in the play, although he appeared in many scenes. His time came when he followed Ivanhoe into exile, after everyone had deserted him. Kneeling before him he cried out, "Sir! Though all the world forsake thee, Wamba the faithful fool will ever be thy loyal servitor!" Into this one sentence he put all the imaginative fervor which this feudal game of his invention kindled in his heart. He did not envy the others their long and grandiloquent remarks, taken bodily from the book. Brian de Bois Guilbert might shout with all the force of his ten-year-old lungs, "Then take your place in the lists and look your last upon the sun, for this night thou shalt sleep in Paradise." And Ivanhoe might answer, boldly, "Gramercy for thy courtesy, and, to requite it, I advise thee to take a new lance, for, by my honor, thou wilt have need thereof!" But Wamba, looking on the stirring combat which followed, would shout with an excitement untinged by envy of their distinguished rTMles, even untinged by disillusion in the face of the fact that Ivanhoe had revealed to him a few minutes before that he thought the "gramercy" of his speech referred to the park on which he lived.

The hermit in the scene with Richard Coeur-de-Lion might rollick most jovially and win laurels untold by making the teachers present at the rehearsals laugh over his singing and jokes, but Wamba was content with his own part. There was a single-hearted ardor about that speech which the teachers did not applaud as they sometimes did the fiery remarks of Front-de-Boeuf or Ulrica, but nobody offered him any suggestions as to how it should be said, and there was always a little hushed silence after he had finished and caught Ivanhoe's fat Dutch hand in his, which he rightly, although but half-consciously, took to be a tribute to his interpretation.

There was another advantage about his part: it took up very little of his time, and as he was stage-manager, scene-shifter, property-man and guardian of the costumes, it was essential that he be left free. As the fateful day approached his excitement grew more and more intense. His laughing, little gray eyes gleamed with a breathless interest in every detail, and his thin little hands ached with pulling and hauling on the home-made scenery, and with much manufacture of armor from wire-ring dish-cloths. His unfettered originality had seen the possibilities in these clanking implements of the cook at a time when chain-armor had seemed an unattainable ideal.

The presentation of Ivanhoe by the Sixth Form had come to be the central event of the whole institution, and Wamba held his head high with pride as he overheard the big boys and girls from the High School talking curiously about it. His geography and arithmetic lesson went by the board as the actual performance grew nearer and nearer and as rehearsals grew thicker. He was now prompter in addition to all his other duties, as, from much hearing of the rTMles, he had come to know the words the other children spoke better than they did. He walked to school through the park with a base-ball mitt dangling from one button of his coat and the self-manufactured bauble of a medi³/₄val fool hanging from another.

To Wamba, as the head of this fantastic enterprise, there came, the evening before the play, a blurred and tragic scrawl from Peter Stuyvesant, Jr.

Dere Wamba, the doctor says I've got the german meesels and can't go to school for a weak. What shall I do, Ivanhoe.

(They learn feeling for Botticelli in modern scientific schools, but English spelling is a lost art, there as elsewhere.)

Wamba was stunned, overwhelmed. It was impossible — so hideous a catastrophe came upon him like a thunderclap. When he caught his breath, however, his valiant and intrepid mind faced the situation bravely. What

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could be done? The play must go on, of course, but how could it? At once there flamed into his mind the vision of himself as Ivanhoe, resplendent in tin armor and floating plumes. Why not? He knew the part, he was the only one who did, and how he could act it! He saw himself putting fire into the scenes where Peter Stuyvesant, Jr., had lagged and mumbled; he heard his own ringing, high treble delivering those speeches which were like chased gold and glowing purple to his boy's imagination. In a moment his humble rTMle of Wamba lost its value. He felt that his former content with it had been, after all, but making the best of what he had. With the possibility of this glorious opportunity before him, his one poor speech seemed homespun and dull. He rushed down the street to Ivanhoe's house, his heart on fire with ambition, reciting aloud, "On foot, on horseback, with spear, with axe or with sword I am alike ready to encounter thee!" and other choice bits of his hero's rTMle. He was transfigured into Ivanhoe, and Gramercy Park was the veritable Forest of Robin Hood, as his thin legs, clad in silk stockings and irreproachably bench-made shoes, carried him to Peter's door.

Peter's mother was out of town, his father was still at his office, and the butler knew Wamba well, so that there was no hindrance to his rushing directly to the room of the sick boy who was supposed to be quarantined for a contagious disease. Of so much avail are the decrees of Boards of Health when confronted with youth, even scientifically educated youth. Wamba found Ivanhoe in a deplorable state. His pillow was wet with tears, unmanly but not to be choked back, in spite of careful training in self-control. The disappointment was more than he could bear. At intervals he howled aloud violently, like any other child in the clutch of desolation. "It's too dern mean!" he sobbed as Wamba stood by the bed, awed at the sight of his schoolmate's suffering. "I'd just like to kill that doctor, I would! He could have put it off another day if he wanted to! He just did it to be mean!"

He relapsed into incoherent exclamations and cries, the vocabulary of a boy who is scientifically brought up being lamentably weak in objurgations. Wamba lost, for a moment, his usually keen knowledge of the other's far from elevated point of view, and fell into the error of attributing to him the generosity of grief which would have been his own in like case. "Well, Ivanhoe, old boy, don't feel so bad. We'll pull through somehow without you. You needn't feel as though you were to blame for breaking up the whole show. Somebody can take your place, though it won't be so good."

Ivanhoe sat up in bed, and shouted an indignant disclaimer of any such consideration for the common good. "I know you'll get on without me!" he cried bitterly. "And that is what makes me so mad at the doctor! Somebody else will wear those clothes, and that helmet — you probably — and somebody else will fight with Bois-Guilbert, and everybody will applaud; and I'll never have a chance again 'slong as I live to be Ivanhoe. It's not fair! It's not fair! I had the best part. Now if it was you with your measly little speech — anybody could say that! And I just finished putting a new dishcloth on the back of the helmet!"

He writhed in agony and motioned Wamba furiously away when he tried to speak.

Gramercy Park was no longer the forest of Robin Hood as Wamba walked back through it very soberly, with his head hanging; nor was he Ivanhoe. He was two persons — one Reginald Gerald Whitefield, wild with delight and excitement over the sudden opening of a path of gold before his feet to certain glory, and the other, Wamba the soul of unreasoning devotion, plunged deep in poignant sympathy with the sorrow of his liege lord and whipping his invention feverishly to contrive some way by which a loyal servitor could help him. He was silent at dinner, and abstracted during the reading to him by his French governess of selected passages from French classics. After he was in bed he lay wide awake in his carefully ventilated room, staring into the dark. All at once he gave a little start and cried aloud.

"Qu—as tu, mon petit?" asked Marie opening the door.

"Rien," he said bravely, with iron resolution, "Rien — une pensee ." But after she had shut the door he was ashamed to let even the dark see the crumpled and tragic discomposure of his clown's face and he hid it in the pillows with a moan of shame at his own weakness.

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Peter's butler scarcely knew Reginald Gerald the next day, so white and stern was his odd little countenance, as he marched up the stairs to Peter's room.

"Here, Pete, you get up and dress and skin out to the school. You'll get there in time for the first act. I'm going to undress and get into bed and be asleep every time the maid comes in. I'll draw the covers all close around my head and she cannot tell our hair apart. We'll pull down the curtains and make the room dark and I told her I'd seen you and you wanted to sleep all the afternoon. You can be back by six o'clock and it won't make any difference if they do find out then, and maybe we can bribe Simmons to keep still about letting you in. Here, get a move on you!"

Peter fell out of bed in trembling, incredulous joy, obeying without a word, as he invariably did, the all-wise mandates of his friend. In frantic haste one boy dressed and the other undressed, Wamba assuming the discarded pajamas of the sick boy without a murmur, although, being scientifically brought up, he was as much under the nightmare spell of germs as the most enlightened of us. Ivanhoe's mind worked slowly, and it was not until he had opened the door and made a wary reconnoiter of the hall to see whether the coast was clear, that he thought of Wamba's side of the transaction. "Say!" he whispered to the tuft of sandy hair, all that was visible of his substitute. "You'll catch it, lying in my bed in my nightclothes."

"Who cares?" said Wamba, gloomily.

"Say, it's too bad you have to miss it!"

No answer.

"Well, yours was such a little part, anyhow," was Ivanhoe's excusing farewell, as he crept cautiously down the stairs.

In the darkened room which he left behind him it was very still. The clock ticked loudly, marking away the quarter hours at which the maid came faithfully to look at the silent head buried in the covers. Wamba did not sleep. The time seemed interminable to him. As the clock struck half-past three he knew that the play was beginning. He followed in his imagination every scene of it, speech by speech. He waved his gay and tinkling fool's cap in the crowd about the lists where the tourney took place, he crowded among the people in the streets of York, he crouched at the feet of Rowena during the banquet scene, he mocked at Isaac and he pitied Rebecca with all the fervor of a sore and aching heart. Then his scene — his great scene came. Ivanhoe was cast out from his inheritance, all his friends deserted him, an intolerably cruel and irrevocable fate hung over him, alone but for the hero of devotion who was about to speak. In his imagination Wamba felt the audience looking at him with their thousand eyes, he felt within him the swelling power to move them, and as an actual fact he lay in a hot bed in a darkened room. He drew long breaths and blinked his eyes rapidly as he realized that his great opportunity was passing by. But at least Ivanhoe was there, with his handsome, dull face happy in the marvelous helmet. Wamba felt, through his misery, unutterable pride that he had been able to rescue his lord, and self-forgetting joy in another's pleasure. He half rose to his knees, the sheets tumbling about him. "Sir!" he cried in ringing tones, "Sir! Though all the world forsake thee, Wamba the faithful fool will ever be thy loyal servitor!" And then it is to be feared that Wamba the witty, the invincibly humorous, fell forward on his pillow and wet it with the tears of a very bitterly disappointed little boy.

This was on a Friday. On Monday Wamba went to school to face, with what grace he could, the reproaches of the Sixth Form for his desertion. He had no answer to give beyond, "Oh, I couldn't get here. Had something else to do." He thought his cup was full, but it brimmed over with the appearance of Peter Stuyvesant, Jr., ex-Ivanhoe.

"Why, I thought you were quarantined!" he cried, his head whirling.

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Peter looked confused. "I was just sure that old doctor didn't know what he was talking about. He says now it isn't German measles at all, but just a rash from something I've eaten. I might have come to school as well as not on Friday, too."

Reginald Gerald looked at him, quivering with an intolerable sense of bitterness, rent with the pangs of furious rebellion against fate. It seemed that he was called upon for more endurance than flesh and blood could muster. But Ivanhoe went on, "Say, Wamba, you acted awful square about that. I didn't have time to think much about it then, but I have, since. Say, there's not another boy in school who'd have done that."

Wamba's heart suddenly glowed with the pure and generous flame of final disinterestedness. The flower of the feudal spirit was his, the essence of loyalty, the fine disregard of material outcome.

"Oh, anybody could say my little speech," he said, and, although his voice quavered a little, he held his head bravely high.