PLAYMATES

A. M. Burrage

I

ALTHOUGH everybody who knew Stephen Everton agreed that he was the last man under Heaven who ought to have been allowed to bring up a child, it was fortunate for Monica that she fell into his hands; else she had probably starved or drifted into some refuge for waifs and strays. True her father, Sebastian Threlfall the poet, had plenty of casual friends. Almost everybody knew him slightly, and right up to the time of his fatal attack of *delirium tremens* he contrived to look one of the most interesting of the regular frequenters of the Café Royal. But people are generally not hasty to bring up the children of casual acquaintances, particularly when such children may be suspected of having inherited more than a fair share of human weaknesses.

Of Monica's mother literally nothing was known. Nobody seemed able to say if she were dead or alive. Probably she had long since deserted Threlfall for some consort able and willing to provide regular meals.

Everton knew Threlfall no better than a hundred others knew him, and was ignorant of his daughter's existence until the father's death was a new topic of conversation in literary and artistic circles. People vaguely wondered what would become of "the kid"; and while they were still wondering, Everton quietly took possession of her.

Who's Who will tell you the year of Everton's birth, the names of his *Almae Matres* (Winchester and Magdalen Col-

lege, Oxford), the titles of his books and of his predilections for skating and mountaineering; but it is necessary to know the man a little less superficially. He was then a year or two short of fifty and looked ten years older. He was a tall, lean man, with a delicate pink complexion, an oval head, a Roman nose, blue eyes which looked out mildly through strong glasses, and thin straight lips drawn tightly over slightly protruding teeth. His high forehead was bare, for he was bald to the base of his skull. What remained of his hair was a neutral tint between black and grey, and was kept closely cropped. He contrived to look at once prim and irascible, scholarly and acute; Sherlock Holmes, perhaps, with a touch of old-maidishness.

The world knew him for a writer of books on historical crises. They were cumbersome books with cumbersome titles, written by a scholar for scholars. They brought him fame and not a little money. The money he could have afforded to be without, since he was modestly wealthy by inheritance. He was essentially a cold-blooded animal, a bachelor, a man of regular and temperate habits, fastidious, and fond of quietude and simple comforts.

Nobody is ever likely to know why Everton adopted the orphan daughter of a man whom he knew but slightly and neither liked nor respected. He was no lover of children, and his humours were sardonic rather than sentimental. I am only hazarding a guess when I suggest that, like so many childless men, he had theories of his own concerning the upbringing of children, which he wanted to see tested. Certain it is that Monica's childhood, which had been extraordinary enough before, passed from the tragic to the grotesque.

Everton took Monica from the Bloomsbury "apartments" house, where the landlady, already nursing a bad debt, was wondering how to dispose of the child. Monica was then eight years old, and a woman of the world in her small way. She had lived with drink and poverty and squalor; had never played a game nor had a playmate; had seen nothing but the seamy side of life; and had learned skill in practising her father's petty shifts and mean contrivances. She was grave and

sullen and plain and pale, this child who had never known childhood. When she spoke, which was as seldom as possible, her voice was hard and gruff. She was, poor little thing, as unattractive as her life could have made her.

She went with Everton without question or demur. She would no more have questioned anybody's ownership than if she had been an inanimate piece of luggage left in a cloakroom. She had belonged to her father. Now that he was gone to his own place she was the property of whomsoever chose to claim her. Everton took her with a cold kindness in which was neither love nor pity; in return she gave him neither love nor gratitude, but did as she was desired after the manner of a paid servant.

Everton disliked modern children, and for what he disliked in them he blamed modern schools. It may have been on this account that he did not send Monica to one; or perhaps he wanted to see how a child would contrive its own education. Monica could already read and write and, thus equipped, she had the run of his large library, in which was almost every conceivable kind of book from heavy tomes on abstruse subjects to trashy modern novels bought and left there by Miss Gribbin. Everton barred nothing, recommended nothing, but watched the tree grow naturally, untended and unpruned.

Miss Gribbin was Everton's secretary. She was the kind of hatchet-faced, flat-chested, middle-aged sexless woman who could safely share the home of a bachelor without either of them being troubled by the tongue of Scandal. To her duties was now added the instruction of Monica in certain elementary subjects. Thus Monica learned that a man named William the Conqueror arrived in England in 1066; but to find out what manner of man this William was, she had to go to the library and read the conflicting accounts of him given by the several historians. From Miss Gribbin she learned bare irrefutable facts; for the rest she was left to fend for herself. In the library she found herself surrounded by all the realms of reality and fancy, each with its door invitingly ajar.

Monica was fond of reading. It was, indeed, almost her only recreation, for Everton knew no other children of her age, and treated her as a grown-up member of the household. Thus she read everything from translations of the *Iliad* to Hans Andersen, from the Bible to the love-gush of the modern female fictionmongers.

Everton, although he watched her closely, and plied her with innocent-sounding questions, was never allowed a peep into her mind. What muddled dreams she may have had of a strange world surrounding the Hampstead house—a world of gods and fairies and demons, and strong silent men making love to sloppy-minded young women—she kept to herself. Reticence was all that she had in common with normal childhood, and Everton noticed that she never played.

Unlike most young animals, she did not take naturally to playing. Perhaps the instinct had been beaten out of her by the realities of life while her father was alive. Most lonely children improvise their own games and provide themselves with a vast store of make-believe. But Monica, as sullen-seeming as a caged animal, devoid alike of the naughtiness and the charms of childhood, rarely crying and still more rarely laughing, moved about the house sedate to the verge of being wooden. Occasionally Everton, the experimentalist, had twinges of conscience and grew half afraid. . . .

II

When Monica was twelve Everton moved his establishment from Hampstead to a house remotely situated in the middle of Suffolk, which was part of a recent legacy. It was a tall, rectangular, Queen Anne house standing on a knoll above marshy fields and wind-bowed beech woods. Once it had been the manor house, but now little land went with it. A short drive passed between rank evergreens from the heavy wrought-iron gate to a circle of grass and flower beds in front of the house. Behind was an acre and a half of rank garden, given over to weeds and marigolds. The rooms were high and

well lighted, but the house wore an air of depression as if it were a live thing unable to shake off some ancient fit of melancholy.

Everton went to live in the house for a variety of reasons. For the most part of a year he had been trying in vain to let or sell it, and it was when he found that he would have no difficulty in disposing of his house at Hampstead that he made up his mind. The old house, a mile distant from a remote Suffolk village, would give him all the solitude he required. Moreover he was anxious about his health—his nervous system had never been strong—and his doctor had recommended the bracing air of East Anglia.

He was not in the least concerned to find that the house was too big for him. His furniture filled the same number of rooms as it had filled at Hampstead, and the others he left empty. Nor did he increase his staff of three indoor servants and gardener. Miss Gribbin, now less dispensable than ever, accompanied him; and with them came Monica to see another aspect of life, with the same wooden stoicism which Everton had remarked in her upon the occasion of their first meeting.

As regarded Monica, Miss Gribbin's duties were then becoming more and more of a sinecure. "Lessons" now occupied no more than half an hour a day. The older Monica grew, the better she was able to grub for her education in the great library. Between Monica and Miss Gribbin there was neither love nor sympathy, nor was there any affectation of either. In their common duty to Everton they owed and paid certain duties to each other. Their intercourse began and ended there.

Everton and Miss Gribbin both liked the house at first. It suited the two temperaments which were alike in their lack of festivity. Asked if she too liked it, Monica said simply "Yes," in a tone which implied stolid and complete indifference.

All three in their several ways led much the same lives as they had led at Hampstead. But a slow change began to work in Monica, a change so slight and subtle that weeks passed

before Everton or Miss Gribbin noticed it. It was late on an afternoon in early spring when Everton first became aware of something unusual in Monica's demeanor.

He had been searching in the library for one of his own books—*The Fall of the Commonwealth of England*—and having failed to find it went in search of Miss Gribbin and met Monica instead at the foot of the long oak staircase. Of her he casually inquired about the book, and she jerked up her head brightly, to answer him with an unwonted smile:

"Yes, I've been reading it. I expect I left it in the schoolroom. I'll go and see."

It was a long speech for her to have uttered, but Everton scarcely noticed that at the time. His attention was directed elsewhere.

"*Where* did you leave it?" he demanded.

"In the schoolroom," she repeated.

"I know of no schoolroom," said Everton coldly. He hated to hear anything mis-called, even were it only a room. "Miss Gribbin generally takes you for your lessons in either the library or the dining-room. If it is one of those rooms, kindly call it by its proper name."

Monica shook her head.

"No, I mean the schoolroom—the big empty room next to the library. That's what it's called."

Everton knew the room. It faced north, and seemed darker and more dismal than any other room in the house. He had wondered idly why Monica chose to spend so much of her time in a room bare of furniture, with nothing better to sit on then uncovered boards or a cushionless window-seat; and put it down to her genius for being unlike anybody else.

"Who calls it that?" he demanded.

"*It's* its name," said Monica smiling.

She ran upstairs, and presently returned with the book, which she handed to him with another smile. He was already wondering at her. It was surprising and pleasant to see her run, instead of the heavy and clumsy walk which generally moved her when she went to obey a behest. And she had smiled two or three times in the short space of a minute.

Then he realized that for some little while she had been a brighter, happier creature than she had ever been at Hampstead.

"How did you come to call that room the schoolroom?" he asked, as he took the book from her hand.

"It *is* the schoolroom," she insisted, seeking to cover her evasion by laying stress on the verb.

That was all he could get out of her. As he questioned further the smiles ceased and the pale, plain little face became devoid of any expression. He knew then that it was useless to press her, but his curiosity was aroused. He inquired of Miss Gribbin and the servant, and learned that nobody was in the habit of calling the long, empty apartment the schoolroom.

Clearly Monica had given it its name. But why? She was so altogether remote from school and schoolrooms. Some germ of imagination was active in her small mind. Everton's interest was stimulated. He was like a doctor who remarks in a patient some abnormal symptom.

"Monica seems a lot brighter and more alert than she used to be," he remarked to Miss Gribbin.

"Yes," agreed the secretary. "I have noticed that. She is learning to play."

"To play what? The piano?"

"No, no. To play childish games. Haven't you heard her dancing about and singing?"

Everton shook his head and looked interested.

"I have not," he said. "Possibly my presence acts as a check upon her—er—exuberance."

"I hear her in that empty room which she insists upon calling the schoolroom. She stops when she hears my step. Of course, I have not interfered with her in any way, but I could wish that she would not talk to herself. I don't like people who do that. It is somehow—uncomfortable."

"I didn't know she did," said Everton slowly.

"Oh, yes, quite long conversations. I haven't actually heard what she talks about, but sometimes you would think she was in the midst of a circle of friends."

"In that same room?"

"Generally," said Miss Gribbin, with a nod.

Everton regarded his secretary with a slow, thoughtful smile.

"Development," he said, "is always extremely interesting. I am glad the place seems to suit Monica. I think it suits all of us."

There was a doubtful note in his voice as he uttered the last words, and Miss Gribbin agreed with him with the same lack of conviction in her tone. As a fact, Everton had been doubtful of late if his health had been benefited by the move from Hampstead. For the first week or two his nerves had been the better for the change of air; but now he was conscious of the beginning of a relapse. His imagination was beginning to play him tricks, filling his mind with vague, distorted fancies. Sometimes when he sat up late, writing—he was given to working at night on strong coffee—he became a victim of the most distressing nervous symptoms, hard to analyze and impossible to combat, which invariably drove him to bed with a sense of defeat.

That same night he suffered one of the variations of this common experience.

It was close upon midnight when he felt stealing over him a sense of discomfort which he was compelled to classify as fear. He was working in a small room leading out of the drawing-room which he had selected for his study. At first he was scarcely aware of the sensation. The effect was always cumulative; the burden was laid upon him straw by straw.

It began with his being oppressed by the silence of the house. He became more and more acutely conscious of it, until it became like a thing tangible, a prison of solid walls growing around him.

The scratching of his pen at first relieved the tension. He wrote words and erased them again for the sake of that comfortable sound. But presently that comfort was denied him, for it seemed to him that this minute and busy noise was attracting attention to himself. Yes, that was it. He was being watched.

Everton sat quite still, the pen poised an inch above the half-covered sheet of paper. This was become a familiar sensation. He was being watched. And by what? And from what corner of the room?

He forced a tremulous smile to his lips. One moment he called himself ridiculous; the next, he asked himself hopelessly how a man could argue with his nerves. Experience had taught him that the only cure—and that a temporary one—was to go to bed. Yet he sat on, anxious to learn more about himself, to coax his vague imaginings into some definite shape.

Imagination told him that he was being watched, and although he called it imagination he was afraid. That rapid beating against his ribs was his heart, warning him of fear. But he sat rigid, anxious to learn in what part of the room his fancy would place these imaginary "watchers"—for he was conscious of the gaze of more than one pair of eyes being bent upon him.

At first the experiment failed. The rigidity of his pose, the hold he was keeping upon himself, acted as a brake upon his mind. Presently he realized this and relaxed the tension, striving to give his mind that perfect freedom which might have been demanded by a hypnotist or one experimenting in telepathy.

Almost at once he thought of the door. The eyes of his mind veered round in that direction as the needle of a compass veers to the magnetic north. With these eyes of his imagination he saw the door. It was standing half open, and the aperture was thronged with faces. What kind of faces he could not tell. They were just faces; imagination left it at that. But he was aware that these spies were timid; that they were in some wise as fearful of him as he was of them; that to scatter them he had but to turn his head and gaze at them with the eyes of his body.

The door was at his shoulder. He turned his head suddenly and gave it one swift glance out of the tail of his eye.

However imagination deceived him, it had not played him

false about the door. It was standing half open although he could have sworn that he had closed it on entering the room. The aperture was empty. Only darkness, solid as a pillar, filled the space between floor and lintel. But although he saw nothing as he turned his head, he was dimly conscious of something vanishing, a scurrying noiseless and incredibly swift, like the flitting of trout in clear, shallow water.

Everton stood up, stretched himself, and brought his knuckles up to his strained eyes. He told himself that he must go to bed. It was bad enough that he must suffer these nervous attacks; to encourage them was madness.

But as he mounted the stairs he was still conscious of not being alone. Shy, timorous, ready to melt into the shadows of the walls if he turned his head, *they* were following him, whispering noiselessly, linking hands and arms, watching him with the fearful, awed curiosity of—Children.

III

The Vicar had called upon Everton. His name was Parslow, and he was a typical country parson of the poorer sort, a tall, rugged, shabby, worried man in the middle forties, obviously embarrassed by the eternal problem of making ends meet on an inadequate stipend.

Everton received him courteously enough, but with a certain coldness which implied that he had nothing in common with his visitor. Parslow was evidently disappointed because "the new people" were not church-goers nor likely to take much interest in the parish. The two men made half-hearted and vain attempts to find common ground. It was not until he was on the point of leaving that the Vicar mentioned Monica.

"You have, I believe, a little girl?" he said.

"Yes. My small ward."

"Ah! I expect she finds it lonely here. I have a little girl of the same age. She is at present away at school, but she will be home soon for the Easter holidays. I know she would be

delighted if your little—er—ward would come down to the Vicarage and play with her sometimes."

The suggestion was not particularly welcome to Everton, and his thanks were perfunctory. This other small girl, although she was a vicar's daughter, might carry the contagion of other modern children and infect Monica with the pertness and slanginess which he so detested. Altogether he was determined to have as little to do with the Vicarage as possible.

Meanwhile the child was becoming to him a study of more and more absorbing interest. The change in her was almost as marked as if she had just returned after having spent a term at school. She astonished and mystified him by using expressions which she could scarcely have learned from any member of the household. It was not the jargon of the smart young people of the day which slipped easily from her lips, but the polite family slang of his own youth. For instance, she remarked one morning that Mead, the gardener, was a whale at pruning vines.

A whale! The expression took Everton back a very long way down the level road of the spent years; took him, indeed, to a nursery in a solid respectable house in a Belgravian square, where he had heard the word used in that same sense for the first time. His sister Gertrude, aged ten, notorious in those days for picking up loose expressions, announced that she was getting to be a whale at French. Yes, in those days an expert was a "whale" or a "don"; not, as he is to-day, a "stout fellow." But who was a "whale" nowadays? It was years since he had heard the term.

"Where did you learn to say that?" he demanded in so strange a tone that Monica stared at him anxiously.

"Isn't it right?" she asked eagerly. She might have been a child at a new school, fearful of not having acquired the fashionable phraseology of the place.

"It is a slang expression," said the purist coldly. "It used to mean a person who was proficient in something. How did you come to hear it?"

She smiled without answering, and her smile was mysterious, even coquettish after a childish fashion. Silence had always been her refuge, but it was no longer a sullen silence. She was changing rapidly, and in a manner to bewilder her guardian. He failed in an effort to cross-examine her, and, later in the day, consulted Miss Gribbin.

"That child," he said, "is reading something that we know nothing about."

"Just at present," said Miss Gribbin, "she is glued to Dickens and Stevenson."

"Then where on earth does she get her expressions?"

"I don't know," the secretary retorted testily, "any more than I know how she learned to play Cat's Cradle."

"What? That game with string? Does she play that?"

"I found her doing something quite complicated and elaborate the other day. She wouldn't tell me how she learned to do it. I took the trouble to question the servants, but none of them had shown her."

Everton frowned.

"And I know of no book in the library which tells how to perform tricks with string. Do you think she has made a clandestine friendship with any of the village children?"

Miss Gribbin shook her head.

"She is too fastidious for that. Besides, she seldom goes into the village alone."

There, for the time, the discussion ended. Everton, with all the curiosity of the student, watched the child as carefully and closely as he was able without at the same time arousing her suspicions. She was developing fast. He had known that she must develop, but the manner of her doing so amazed and mystified him, and, likely as not, denied some preconceived theory. The untended plant was not only growing but showed signs of pruning. It was as if there were outside influences at work on Monica which could have come neither from him nor from any other member of the household.

Winter was dying hard, and dark days of rain kept Miss Gribbin, Monica, and Everton within doors. He lacked no

opportunities of keeping the child under observation, and once, on a gloomy afternoon, passing the room which she had named the schoolroom, he paused and listened until he became suddenly aware that his conduct bore an unpleasant resemblance to eavesdropping. The psychologist and the gentleman engaged in a brief struggle in which the gentleman temporarily got the upper hand. Everton approached the door with a heavy step and flung it open.

The sensation he received, as he pushed open the door, was vague but slightly disturbing, and it was by no means new to him. Several times of late, but generally after dark, he had entered an empty room with the impression that it had been occupied by others until the very moment of his crossing the threshold. His coming disturbed not merely one or two, but a crowd. He felt rather than heard them scattering, flying swiftly and silently as shadows to incredible hiding-places, where they held breath and watched and waited for him to go. Into the same atmosphere of tension he now walked, and looked about him as if expecting to see more than only the child who held the floor in the middle of the room, or some tell-tale trace of other children in hiding. Had the room been furnished he must have looked involuntarily for shoes protruding from under tables or settees, for ends of garments unconsciously left exposed.

The long room, however, was empty save for Monica from wainscot to wainscot and from floor to ceiling. Fronting him were the long, high windows starred by fine rain. With her back to the white filtered light Monica faced him, looking up to him as he entered. He was just in time to see a smile fading from her lips. He also saw by a slight convulsive movement of her shoulders that she was hiding something from him in the hands clasped behind her back.

"Hullo," he said, with a kind of forced geniality, "what are you up to?"

She said: "Nothing," but not as sullenly as she would once have said it.

"Come," said Everton, "that is impossible. You were talking to yourself, Monica. You should not do that. It is an idle

and very, very foolish habit. You will go mad if you continue to do that."

She let her head droop a little.

"I wasn't talking to myself," she said in a low, half playful but very deliberate tone.

"That's nonsense. I heard you."

"I wasn't talking to myself."

"But you must have been. There is nobody else here."

"There isn't—now."

"What do you mean? Now?"

"They've gone. You frightened them, I expect."

"What do you mean?" he repeated, advancing a step or two towards her. "And whom do you call 'they'?"

Next moment he was angry with himself. His tone was so heavy and serious and the child was half laughing at him. It was as if she were triumphant at having inveigled him into taking a serious part in her own game of make-believe.

"You wouldn't understand," she said.

"I understand this—that you are wasting your time and being a very silly little girl. What's that you're hiding behind your back?"

She held out her right hand at once, unclenched her fingers and disclosed a thimble. He looked at it and then into her face.

"Why did you hide that from me?" he asked. "There was no need."

She gave him a faint secretive smile—that new smile of hers—before replying.

"We were playing with it. I didn't want you to know."

"*You* were playing with it, you mean. And why didn't you want me to know?"

"About them. Because I thought you wouldn't understand. You *don't* understand."

He saw that it was useless to affect anger or show impatience. He spoke to her gently, even with an attempt at displaying sympathy.

"Who are 'they'?" he asked.

"[illegible]e just them. Other girls."

"I see. And they come and play with you, do they? And they run away whenever I'm about, because they don't like me. Is that it?"

She shook her head.

"It isn't that they don't like you. I think they like everybody. But they're so shy. They were shy of me for a long, long time. I knew they were there, but it was weeks and weeks before they'd come and play with me. It was weeks before I even saw them."

"Yes? Well, what are they like?"

"Oh, they're just girls. And they're awfully, awfully nice. Some are a bit older than me and some are a bit younger. And they don't dress like other girls you see to-day. They're in white with longer skirts and they wear sashes."

Everton inclined his head gravely. "She got that out of the illustrations of books in the library," he reflected.

"You don't happen to know their names, I suppose?" he asked, hoping that no quizzical note in his voice rang through the casual but sincere tone which he intended.

"Oh, yes. There's Mary Hewitt—I think I love her best of all—and Elsie Power and—"

"How many of them altogether?"

"Seven. It's just a nice number. And this is the schoolroom where we play games. I love games. I wish I'd learned to play games before."

"And you've been playing with the thimble?"

"Yes. Hunt-the-thimble they call it. One of us hides it, and then the rest of us try to find it, and the one who finds it hides it again."

"You mean you hide it yourself, and then go and find it."

The smile left her face at once, and the look in her eyes warned him that she was done with confidences.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "You don't understand after all. I somehow knew you wouldn't."

Everton, however, thought he did. His face wore a sudden smile of relief.

"Well, never mind," he said. "But I shouldn't play too much if I were you."

With that he left her. But curiosity tempted him, not in vain, to linger and listen for a moment on the other side of the door which he had closed behind him. He heard Monica whisper:

"Mary! Elsie! Come on. It's all right. He's gone now."

At an answering whisper, very unlike Monica's, he started violently and then found himself grinning at his own discomfiture. It was natural that Monica, playing many parts, should try to change her voice with every character. He went downstairs sunk in a brown study which brought him to certain interesting conclusions. A little later he communicated these to Miss Gribbin.

"I've discovered the cause of the change in Monica. She's invented for herself some imaginary friends—other little girls, of course."

Miss Gribbin started slightly and looked up from the newspaper which she had been reading.

"Really?" she exclaimed. "Isn't that rather an unhealthy sign?"

"No, I should say not. Having imaginary friends is quite a common symptom of childhood, especially among young girls. I remember my sister used to have one, and was very angry when none of the rest of us would take the matter seriously. In Monica's case I should say it was perfectly normal—normal, but interesting. She must have inherited an imagination from that father of hers, with the result that she has seven imaginary friends, all properly named, if you please. You see, being lonely, and having no friends of her own age, she would naturally invent more than one 'friend.' They are all nicely and primly dressed, I must tell you, out of Victorian books which she has found in the library."

"It can't be healthy," said Miss Gribbin, pursing her lips. "And I can't understand how she has learned certain expressions and a certain style of talking and games—"

"All out of books. And pretends to herself that 'they' have

taught her. But the most interesting part of the affair is this: it's given me my first practical experience of telepathy, of the existence of which I have hitherto been rather sceptical. Since Monica invented this new game, and before I was aware that she had done so, I have had at different times distinct impressions of there being a lot of little girls about the house."

Miss Gribbin started and stared. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but it was as if she had changed her mind while framing the first word she had been about to utter.

"Monica," he continued smiling, "invented these 'friends,' and has been making me telepathically aware of them, too. I have lately been most concerned about the state of my nerves."

Miss Gribbin jumped up as if in anger, but her brow was smooth and her mouth dropped at the corners.

"Mr. Everton," she said, "I wish you had not told me all this." Her lips worked. "You see," she added unsteadily, "I don't believe in telepathy."

IV

Easter, which fell early that year, brought little Gladys Parslow home for the holidays to the Vicarage. The event was shortly afterwards signalized by a note from the Vicar to Everton, inviting him to send Monica down to have tea and play games with his little daughter on the following Wednesday.

The invitation was an annoyance and an embarrassment to Everton. Here was the disturbing factor, the outside influence, which might possibly thwart his experiment in the upbringing of Monica. He was free, of course, simply to decline the invitation so coldly and briefly as to make sure that it would not be repeated; but the man was not strong enough to stand on his own feet impervious to the winds of criticism. He was sensitive and had little wish to seem churl-

ish, still less to appear ridiculous. Taking the line of least resistance he began to reason that one child, herself no older than Monica, and in the atmosphere of her own home, could make but little impression. It ended in his allowing Monica to go.

Monica herself seemed pleased at the prospect of going but expressed her pleasure in a discreet, restrained, grown-up way. Miss Gribbin accompanied her as far as the Vicarage doorstep, arriving with her punctually at half-past three on a sullen and muggy afternoon, and handed her over to the woman-of-all-work who answered the summons at the door.

Miss Gribbin reported to Everton on her return. An idea which she conceived to be humorous had possession of her mind, and in talking to Everton she uttered one of her infrequent laughs.

"I only left her at the door," she said, "so I didn't see her meet the other little girl. I wish I'd stayed to see that. It must have been funny."

She irritated Everton by speaking exactly as if Monica were a captive animal which had just been shown, for the first time in its life, another of its own kind. The analogy thus conveyed to Everton was close enough to make him wince. He felt something like a twinge of conscience, and it may have been then that he asked himself for the first time if he were being fair to Monica.

It had never once occurred to him to ask himself if she were happy. The truth was that he understood children so little as to suppose that physical cruelty was the one kind of cruelty from which they were capable of suffering. Had he ever before troubled to ask himself if Monica were happy, he had probably given the question a curt dismissal with the thought that she had no right to be otherwise. He had given her a good home, even luxuries, together with every opportunity to develop her mind. For companions she had himself, Miss Gribbin, and, to a limited extent, the servants. . . .

Ah, but that picture, conjured up by Miss Gribbin's words with their accompaniment of unreasonable laughter! The

little creature meeting for the first time another little creature of its own kind and looking bewildered, knowing neither what to do nor what to say. There was pathos in that—uncomfortable pathos for Everton. Those imaginary friends—did they really mean that Monica had needs of which he knew nothing, of which he had never troubled to learn?

He was not an unkind man, and it hurt him to suspect that he might have committed an unkindness. The modern children whose behavior and manners he disliked, were perhaps only obeying some inexorable law of evolution. Suppose in keeping Monica from their companionship he were actually flying in the face of Nature? Suppose, after all, if Monica were to be natural, she must go unhindered on the tide of her generation?

He compromised with himself, pacing the little study. He would watch Monica much more closely, question her when he had the chance. Then, if he found she was not happy, and really needed the companionship of other children, he would see what could be done.

But when Monica returned home from the Vicarage it was quite plain that she had not enjoyed herself. She was subdued, and said very little about her experience. Quite obviously the two little girls had not made very good friends. Questioned, Monica confessed that she did not like Gladys—much. She said this very thoughtfully with a little pause before the adverb.

"Why don't you like her?" Everton demanded bluntly.

"I don't know. She's so funny. Not like other girls."

"And what do you know about other girls?" he demanded, faintly amused.

"Well, she's not a bit like—"

Monica paused suddenly and lowered her gaze.

"Not like your 'friends,' you mean?" Everton asked.

She gave him a quick, penetrating little glance and then lowered her gaze once more.

"No," she said, "not a bit."

She wouldn't be, of course. Everton teased the child with

no more questions for the time being, and let her go. She ran off at once to the great empty room, there to seek that uncanny companionship which had come to suffice her.

For the moment Everton was satisfied. Monica was perfectly happy as she was, and had no need of Gladys, or, probably any other child friends. His experiment with her was shaping successfully. She had invented her own young friends, and had gone off eagerly to play with the creations of her own fancy.

This seemed very well at first. Everton reflected that it was just what he would have wished, until he realized suddenly with a little shock of discomfort that it was not normal and it was not healthy.

V

Although Monica plainly had no great desire to see any more of Gladys Parslow, common civility made it necessary for the Vicar's little daughter to be asked to pay a return visit. Most likely Gladys Parslow was as unwilling to come as was Monica to entertain her. Stern discipline, however, presented her at the appointed time on an afternoon pre-arranged by correspondence, when Monica received her coldly and with dignity, tempered by a sort of grown-up graciousness.

Monica bore her guest away to the big empty room, and that was the last of Gladys Parslow seen by Everton or Miss Gribbin that afternoon. Monica appeared alone when the gong sounded for tea, and announced in a subdued tone that Gladys had already gone home.

"Did you quarrel with her?" Miss Gribbin asked quickly.

"No-o."

"Then why has she gone like this?"

"She was stupid," said Monica, simply. "That's all."

"Perhaps it was you who was stupid. Why did she go?"

"She got frightened."

"Frightened!"

"She didn't like my friends."

Miss Gribbon exchanged glances with Everton.

"She didn't like a silly little girl who talks to herself and imagines things. No wonder she was frightened."

"She didn't think they were real at first, and laughed at me," said Monica, sitting down.

"Naturally!"

"And then when she saw them—"

Miss Gribbin and Everton interrupted her simultaneously, repeating in unison and with well-matched astonishment, her two last words.

"And when she saw them," Monica continued, unperturbed, "she didn't like it. I think she was frightened. Anyhow, she said she wouldn't stay and went straight off home. I think she's a stupid girl. We all had a good laugh about her after she was gone."

She spoke in her ordinary matter-of-fact tones, and if she were secretly pleased at the state of perturbation into which her last words had obviously thrown Miss Gribbin, she gave no sign of it. Miss Gribbin immediately exhibited outward signs of anger.

"You are a very naughty child to tell such untruths. You know perfectly well that Gladys couldn't have *seen* your 'friends.' You have simply frightened her by pretending to talk to people who weren't there, and it will serve you right if she never comes to play with you again."

"She won't," said Monica. "And she *did* see them, Miss Gribbin."

"How do you know?" Everton asked.

"By her face. And she spoke to them too, when she ran to the door. They were very shy at first because Gladys was there. They wouldn't come for a long time, but I begged them, and at last they did."

Everton checked another outburst from Miss Gribbin with a look. He wanted to learn more, and to that end he applied some show of patience and gentleness.

"Where did they come from?" he asked. "From outside the door?"

"Oh, no. From where they always come."

"And where's that?"

"I don't know. They don't seem to know themselves. It's always from some direction where I'm not looking. Isn't it strange?"

"Very! And do they disappear in the same way?"

Monica frowned very seriously and thoughtfully.

"It's so quick you can't tell where they go. When you or Miss Gribbin come in—"

"They always fly on our approach, of course. But why?"

"Because they're dreadfully, dreadfully shy. But not so shy as they were. Perhaps soon they'll get used to you and not mind at all."

"That's a comforting thought!" said Everton with a dry laugh.

When Monica had taken her tea and departed, Everton turned to his secretary.

"You are wrong to blame the child. These creatures of her fancy are perfectly real to her. Her powers of suggestion have been strong enough to force them to some extent on me. The little Parslow girl, being younger and more receptive, actually *sees* them. It is a clear case of telepathy and auto-suggestion. I have never studied such matters, but I should say that these instances are of some scientific interest."

Miss Gribbin's lips tightened and he saw her shiver slightly.

"Mr. Parslow will be angry," was all she said.

"I really cannot help that. Perhaps it is all for the best. If Monica does not like his little daughter they had better not be brought together again."

For all that, Everton was a little embarrassed when on the following morning he met the Vicar out walking. If the Rev. Parslow knew that his little daughter had left the house so unceremoniously on the preceding day, he would either wish to make an apology, or perhaps require one, according to his view of the situation. Everton did not wish to deal in apologies one way or the other, he did not care to discuss the vagaries of children, and altogether he wanted to have as little to do with Mr. Parslow as was conveniently possible. He

would have passed with a brief acknowledgment of the Vicar's existence, but, as he had feared, the Vicar stopped him.

"I had been meaning to come and see you," said the Rev. Parslow.

Everton halted and sighed inaudibly, thinking that perhaps this casual meeting out of doors might after all have saved him something.

"Yes?" he said.

"I will walk in your direction if I may." The Vicar eyed him anxiously. "There is something you must certainly be told. I don't know if you guess, or if you already know. If not, I don't know how you will take it. I really don't."

Everton looked puzzled. Whichever child the Vicar might blame for the hurried departure of Gladys, there seemed no cause for such a portentous face and manner.

"Really?" he asked. "Is it something serious?"

"I think so, Mr. Everton. You are aware, of course, that my little girl left your house yesterday afternoon with some lack of ceremony."

"Yes, Monica told us she had gone. If they could not agree it was surely the best thing she could have done, although it may sound inhospitable of me to say it. Excuse me, Mr. Parslow, but I hope you are not trying to embroil me in a quarrel between children?"

The Vicar stared in his turn.

"I am not," he said, "and I am unaware that there was any quarrel. I was going to ask you to forgive Gladys. There was some excuse for her lack of ceremony. She was badly frightened, poor child."

"Then it is my turn to express regret. I had Monica's version of what happened. Monica has been left a great deal to her own resources, and, having no playmates of her own age, she seems to have invented some."

"Ah!" said the Rev. Parslow, drawing a deep breath.

"Unfortunately," Everton continued, "Monica has an uncomfortable gift for impressing her fancies on other people. I have often thought I felt the presence of children about the

house, and so, I am almost sure, has Miss Gribbin. I am afraid that when your little girl came to play with her yesterday afternoon, Monica scared her by introducing her invisible 'friends' and by talking to imaginary and therefore invisible little girls."

The Vicar laid a hand on Everton's arm.

"There is something more in it than that. Gladys is not an imaginative child; she is, indeed, a practical little person. I have never yet known her to tell me a lie. What would you say, Mr. Everton, if I were to tell you that Gladys positively asserts that she *saw* those other children?"

Something like a cold draught went through Everton. An ugly suspicion, vague and almost shapeless, began to move in dim recesses of his mind. He tried to shake himself free of it, to smile and to speak lightly.

"I shouldn't be in the least surprised. Nobody knows the limits of telepathy and auto-suggestion. If I can feel the presence of children whom Monica has created out of her own imagination, why shouldn't your daughter, who is probably more receptive and impressionable than I am, be able to see them?"

The Rev. Parslow shook his head.

"Do you really mean that?" he asked. "Doesn't it seem to you a little far-fetched?"

"Everything we don't understand must seem far-fetched. If one had dared to talk of wireless thirty years ago—"

"Mr. Everton, do you know that your house was once a girl's school?"

Once more Everton experienced that vague feeling of discomfiture.

"I didn't know," he said, still indifferently.

"My aunt, whom I never saw, was there. Indeed she died there. There were seven who died. Diphtheria broke out there many years ago. It ruined the school, which was shortly afterwards closed. Did you know that, Mr. Everton? My aunt's name was Mary Hewitt—"

"Good God!" Everton cried out sharply. "Good God!"

"Ah!" said Parslow. "Now do you begin to see?"

Everton, suddenly a little giddy, passed a hand across his forehead.

"That is—one of the names Monica told me," he faltered. "How could she know?"

"How indeed? Mary Hewitt's great friend was Elsie Power. They died within a few hours of each other."

"That name too . . . she told me . . . and there were seven. How could she have known? Even the people around here wouldn't have remembered names after all these years."

"Gladys knew them. But that was only partly why she was afraid. Yet I think she was more awed than afraid, because she knew instinctively that the children who came to play with little Monica, although they were not of this world, were good children, blessed children."

"What are you telling me?" Everton burst out.

"Don't be afraid, Mr. Everton. You are not afraid, are you? If those whom we call dead still remain close to us, what more natural than these children should come back to play with a lonely little girl who lacked human playmates? It may seem inconceivable, but how else explain it? How could little Monica have invented those two names? How could she have learned that seven little girls once died in your house? Only the very old people about here remember it, and even they could not tell you how many died or the name of any one of the little victims. Haven't you noticed a change in your ward since first she began to—imagine them, as you thought?"

Everton nodded heavily.

"Yes," he said, almost unwittingly, "she learned all sorts of tricks of speech, childish gestures she never had before, and games. . . . I couldn't understand. Mr. Parslow, what in God's name am I to do?"

The Rev. Parslow still kept a hand on Everton's arm.

"If I were you I should send her off to school. It may not be very good for her."

"Not good for her! But the children, you say—"

"Children? I might have said angels. *They* will never harm her. But Monica is developing a gift of seeing and conversing with—with beings that are invisible and inaudible to others.

It is not a gift to be encouraged. She may in time see and converse with others—wretched souls who are not God's children. She may lose the faculty if she mixes with others of her age. Out of her need, I am sure, these came to her."

"I must think," said Everton.

He walked on dazedly. In a moment or two the whole aspect of life had changed, had grown clearer, as if he had been blind from birth and was now given the first glimmerings of light. He looked forward no longer into the face of a blank and featureless wall, but through a curtain beyond which life manifested itself vaguely but at least perceptibly. His footfalls on the ground beat out the words: "There is no death. There is no death."

VI

That evening after dinner he sent for Monica and spoke to her in an unaccustomed way. He was strangely shy of her, and his hand, which he rested on one of her slim shoulders, lay there awkwardly.

"Do you know what I'm going to do with you, young woman?" he said. "I'm going to pack you off to school."

"O-oh!" she stared at him, half smiling. "Are you really?"

"Do you want to go?"

She considered the matter, frowning and staring at the tips of her fingers.

"I don't know. I don't want to leave *them.*"

"Who?" he asked.

"Oh, you know!" she said, and turned her head half shyly.

"What? Your—friends, Monica?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you like other playmates?"

"I don't know. I love *them,* you see. But they said—they said I ought to go to school if you ever sent me. They might be angry with me if I was to ask you to let me stay. They wanted me to play with other girls who aren't—that aren't like they are. Because, you know, they are *different* from children that everybody can see. And Mary told me not to—

not to encourage anybody else who was different, like them."

Everton drew a deep breath.

"We'll have a talk tomorrow about finding a school for you, Monica," he said. "Run off to bed, now. Good-night, my dear."

He hesitated, then touched her forehead with his lips. She ran from him, nearly as shy as Everton himself, tossing back her long hair, but from the door she gave him the strangest little brimming glance, and there was that in her eyes which he had never seen before.

Late that night Everton entered the great empty room which Monica had named the schoolroom. A flag of moonlight from the window lay across the floor, and it was empty to the gaze. But the deep shadows hid little shy presences of which some unnamed and undeveloped sense in the man was acutely aware.

"Children!" he whispered. "Children!"

He closed his eyes and stretched out his hands. Still they were shy and held aloof, but he fancied that they came a little nearer.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "I'm only a very lonely man. Be near me after Monica is gone."

He paused, waiting. Then as he turned away he was aware of little caressing hands upon his arm. He looked around at once, but the time had not yet come for him to see. He saw only the barred window, the shadows on either wall, and the flag of moonlight.