

Fate and the Artist

By Richard Middleton

The workmen's dwellings stood in the northwest of London, in quaint rivalry with the comfortable ugliness of the Maida Vale blocks of flats. They were fairly new and very well built, with wide stone staircases that echoed all day to the impatient footsteps of children, and with a flat roof that served at once as a playground for them and a drying-ground for their mothers' washing. In hot weather it was pleasant enough to play hide-and-seek or follow-my-leader up and down the long alleys of cool white linen, and if a sudden gust of wind or some unexpected turn of the game set the wet sheets flapping in the children's faces, their senses were rather tickled than annoyed.

To George, mooning in a corner of the railings that seemed to keep all London in a cage, these games were hardly more important than the shoutings and whistlings that rose from the street below. It seemed to him that all his life—he had lived eleven years—he had been standing in a corner watching other people engaging in meaningless ploys and antics. The sun was hot, and yet the children ran about and made themselves hotter, and he wondered, as when he had been in bed with one of his frequent illnesses he had wondered at the grown-up folk who came and went, moving their arms and legs and speaking with their mouths, when it was possible to lie still and quiet and feel the moments ticking themselves off in one's forehead. As he rested in his corner, he was conscious of the sharp edge of the narrow stone ledge on which he was sitting and the thin iron railings that pressed into his back; he smelt the evil smell of hot London, and the soapy odour of the washing; he saw the glitter of the dust, and the noises of the place beat harshly upon his ears, but he could find no meaning in it all. Life spoke to him with a hundred tongues, and all the while he was longing for silence. To the older inhabitants of the tenements he seemed a morbid little boy, unhappily too delicate for sense to be safely knocked into him; his fellow-children would have ignored him completely if he had not had strange fancies that made interesting stories and sometimes inspired games. On the whole, George was lonely without knowing what loneliness meant.

All day long the voice of London throbbed up beyond the bars, and George would regard the chimneys and the housetops and the section of lively street that fell within his range with his small, keen eyes, and wonder why the world did not forthwith crumble into silent, peaceful dust, instead of groaning and quivering in continual unrest. But when twilight fell and the children were tired of playing, they would gather round him in his corner by the tank and ask him to tell them stories. This tank was large and open and held rain water for the use of the tenants, and originally it had been cut off from the rest of the roof by some special railings of its own; but two of the railings had been broken, and now the children could creep through and sit round the tank at dusk, like Eastern villagers round the village well.

And George would tell them stories—queer stories with twisted faces and broken backs, that danced and capered merrily enough as a rule, but sometimes stood quite still and made horrible grimaces. The children liked the cheerful moral stories better, such as Arthur's Boots.

"Once upon a time," George would begin, "there was a boy called Arthur, who lived in a house like this, and always tied his bootlaces with knots instead of bows. One night he stood on the roof and wished he had wings like a sparrow, so that he could fly away over the houses. And a great wind began, so that everybody said there was a storm, and suddenly Arthur found he had a

little pair of wings, and he flew away with the wind over the houses. And presently he got beyond the storm to a quiet place in the sky, and Arthur looked up and saw all the stars tied to heaven with little bits of string, and all the strings were tied in bows. And this was done so that God could pull the string quite easily when He wanted to, and let the stars fall. On fine nights you can see them dropping. Arthur thought that the angels must have very neat fingers to tie so many bows, but suddenly, while he was looking, his feet began to feel heavy, and he stooped down to take off his boots; but he could not untie the knots quick enough, and soon he started falling very fast. And while he was falling, he heard the wind in the telegraph wires, and the shouts of the boys who sell papers in the street, and then he fell on the top of a house. And they took him to the hospital, and cut off his legs, and gave him wooden ones instead. But he could not fly any more because they were too heavy.”

For days afterwards all the children would tie their bootlaces in bows.

Sometimes they would all look into the dark tank, and George would tell them about the splendid fish that lived in its depths. If the tank was only half full, he would whisper to the fish, and the children would hear its indistinct reply. But when the tank was full to the brim, he said that the fish was too happy to talk, and he would describe the beauty of its appearance so vividly that all the children would lean over the tank and strain their eyes in a desperate effort to see the wonderful fish. But no one ever saw it clearly except George, though most of the children thought they had seen its tail disappearing in the shadows at one time or another.

It was doubtful how far the children believed his stories; probably, not having acquired the habit of examining evidence, they were content to accept ideas that threw a pleasant glamour on life. But the coming of Jimmy Simpson altered this agreeable condition of mind. Jimmy was one of those masterful stupid boys who excel at games and physical contests, and triumph over intellectual problems by sheer braggart ignorance. From the first he regarded George with contempt, and when he heard him telling his stories he did not conceal his disbelief.

“It’s a lie,” he said; “there ain’t no fish in the tank.”

“I have seen it, I tell you,” said George.

Jimmy spat on the asphalt rudely.

“I bet no one else has,” he said.

George looked round his audience, but their eyes did not meet his. They felt that they might have been mistaken in believing that they had seen the tail of the fish. And Jimmy was a very good man with his fists. “Liar!” said Jimmy at last triumphantly, and walked away. Being masterful, he led the others with him, and George brooded by the tank for the rest of the evening in solitude.

Next day George went up to Jimmy confidently. “I was right about the fish,” he said. “I dreamed about it last night.”

“Rot!” said Jimmy; “dreams are only made-up things; they don’t mean anything.”

George crept away sadly. How could he convince such a man? All day long he worried over the problem, and he woke up in the middle of the night with it throbbing in his brain. And suddenly, as he lay in his bed, doubt came to him. Supposing he had been wrong, supposing he had never seen the fish at all? This was not to be borne. He crept quietly out of the flat, and tiptoed upstairs to the roof. The stone was very cold to his feet.

There were so many things in the tank that at first George could not see the fish, but at last he saw it gleaming below the moon and the stars, larger and even more beautiful than he had said. “I knew I was right,” he whispered, as he crept back to bed. In the morning he was very ill.

Meanwhile blue day succeeded blue day, and while the water grew lower in the tank, the children, with Jimmy for leader, had almost forgotten the boy who had told them stories. Now and again one or other of them would say that George was very, *very* ill, and then they would go on with their game. No one looked in the tank now that they knew there was nothing in it, till it occurred one day to Jimmy that the dry weather should have brought final confirmation of his scepticism. Leaving his comrades at the long jump, he went to George's neglected corner and peeped into the tank. Sure enough it was almost dry, and, he nearly shouted with surprise, in the shallow pool of sooty water there lay a large fish, dead, but still gleaming with rainbow colours.

Jimmy was strong and stupid, but not ill-natured, and, recalling George's illness, it occurred to him that it would be a decent thing to go and tell him he was right. He ran downstairs and knocked on the door of the flat where George lived. George's big sister opened it, but the boy was too excited to see that her eyes were wet. "Oh, miss," he said breathlessly, "tell George he was right about the fish. I've seen it myself!"

"Georgy's dead," said the girl.