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PENNY PLAIN

BY O. DOUGLAS

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Solemn Small Boy—"Penny plain, please. It's better value for the money."

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CHAPTER XXIII.—(Cont'd.)

Mhor asked if there were any railways near Mintern Abbas, and was rather cast down when told that the nearest raiway station was seven miles distant. It amazed him that any one should, of choice, live away from railways. The skirl of an engine was sweeter to his ears than horns of elfland faintly blowing, and the dream of his life was to be allowed to live in a small white-washed shanty which he knew of, on the railway-side, where he could spend ecstatic days watching every "passenger" and every "goods" that rushed shrieking, or dawdled shunting, along the permanent way. To him each different train had its own features. "I think," he told Jean, "that the nine train is the most good-natured of the trains; he doesn't care how many carriages and horse-boxes they stick on to him. The twelve train has always a cross, snorty look, but the five train"—his voice took the fondling note that it held for Peter and Barrie, the cat—"that little five train goes much the fastest; he's the hero of the day!"

Pamela's engagement to Lewis Elliott had made, what Mrs. M'Cosh called, "a great speak" in Priorsford. On the whole, it was felt that she had done well for herself. The Elliotts were an old and honored family, and the present laird, though shy and retiring, was much liked by his tenants, and respected by every one. Pamela had made herself very popular in Priorsford, and people were pleased that she should remain as lady of Laverlaw.

"Ay," said Mrs. M'Cosh, "he's waited lang, but he's waled weel in the end. He's gotten a braw leddy, and she'll no' be as flighty as a young yin, for Mr. Elliott likes quiet ways. An' then she has plenty siller, an' that's a help. A rale sensible marriage!"

Bella Bathgate agreed. "It'll mak' a big differ at Laverlaw," she said, "for she's the kind o' body that makes hersel' felt in a hoose. I didna want her at Hillview wi' a' her trunks and her maid and her fal-lals an' her fykey ways, but, d'ye ken, I'll miss her something horrid. She was an awfu' miss in the hoose when she was awa' at Christmas-time; I was fair kinna lost wi'out her. It'll be rale nice for Maister Elliott havin' her aye there. It's mebbe a wakeness on ma pairt, but I whiles mak' messages into the room juist to see her sittin' pittin' stitches into that embroidery, as they ca' it, an' hear her gie that little lauch o' hers! She has me fair bewitched. There's a kinna glawmour aboot her. An' I tell ye I culdna stand her by onything at the first. . . I even think her bonnie noo—an' she's no' that auld. I saw a pictur in a paper the ither day of a new-mairit couple, an' baith o' them had the auld-age pension."

Jean looked on rather wistfully at her friend's happiness. She was most sincerely glad that the wooing—so long delayed—should end like an old play and Jack have his Jill, but it seemed to add to the empty feeling in her own heart. Pamela's casual remark about her brother perhaps being at Stratford had filled her for the moment with wild joy, but hearts after leaps ache, and she had quickly reminded herself that Richard Plantagenet had most evidently accepted the refusal as final and would never be anything more to her than Pamela's brother. It was quite as it should be, but life in spite of April and a motor-car was, what Mhor called a minister's life, "a' 'dullsome job."

That year spring came, not reluctantly, as it often does in the uplands, but generously, lavishly, scattering buds and leaves and flowers and lambs, and putting a spirit of youth into everything. The days were as warm as June, and fresh as only April days can be. The Jardines anxiously watched the sun-filled days pass, wishing they had arranged to go earlier, fearful lest they should miss all the good weather. It seemed impossible that it could go on being so wonderful, but day followed day in golden succession and there was no sign of a break.

David spent most of his days at the depot that held the car, there being no garage at The Rigs, and Jock and Mhor worshipped with him. A chauffeur had been engaged, one Stark, a Priorsford youth, a steady young man and an excellent driver. He had never been farther than Edinburgh.

The 20th came at last. Jock and Mhor were up at an unearthly hour, parading the house, banging at Mrs. M'Cosh's door, and imploring her to rise in case breakfast was late, and thumping the barometer to see if it showed any inclination to fall. The car was ordered for nine o'clock, but they were down the road looking for it at least half an hour before it was due, feverishly anxious in case something had happened either to it or to Stark.

The road before The Rigs was quite crowded that April morning. Mrs. M'Cosh stood at the gate beside the dancing daffodils and the tulips and the opening wall-flowers in the border, her hands folded on her spotless white apron, her face beaming with its accustomed kind smile, and watched her family depart.

"Keep a haud o' Peter, Mhor," she cautioned. "Ye needna come back if ye lose him." The safety of the rest of the party did not concern her.

Mr. and Mrs. Jowett were there, having breakfasted an hour earlier than usual, thus risking the wrath of their cherished domestics. Mrs. Jowett was carrying a large box of chocolates as a parting gift to the boys, while Mr. Jowett had a box of lavender water for Jean.

Augusta Hope had walked up from Hopetoun with her mother's love to the travellers, a basket of fruit for the boys, and a book for Jean.

The little Miss Watsons hopped forth from their dwelling with an offering of a home-baked cake, "just in case you get hungry on the road, you know."

Bella Bathgate was there, looking very saturnine, and counselling Mhor as to his behaviour. "Dinna lean oot o' the caur. Mony a body has lost their heid stickin' it oot of a caur. Here's some tea-biscuits for Peter. You'll be ower proud for onything but currant-cake, I suppose."

Mhor assured her he was not, and gratefully accepted the biscuits. "Isn't it fun Peter's going? I couldn't have gone either if he hadn't been allowed, but I expect I'll have to hold him in my arms a lot. He'll want to jump out at dogs."

And Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald were there—Mrs. Macdonald absolutely weighed down with gifts. "It's just a trifle for each of you," she explained. "No, no, don't thank me; it's nothing."

"I've brought you nothing but my blessing, Jean," the minister said. "You'll never be better than I wish you."

"Don't talk as if I were going away for good," said Jean, with a lump in her throat. "It's only a little holiday."

"Who can tell?" sighed Mrs. Macdonald. "Its an uncertain world. But we'll hope that you'll come back to us, Jean. Are you sure you are warmly clad? Remember it's only April, and the evenings are cold."

David packed Jean, Jock and Mhor into the car. Peter was poised on one of the seats that let down, a cushion under him to protect the pale fawn cloth from his paws. All the presents found places, the luggage was put on the top, Stark took his seat. David, his vest pocket bulging with maps, got in beside him; and amid a chorus of good-byes they were off.

Jean, looking back rather wistfully at The Rigs, got a last sight of Mrs. M'Cosh shaking her head dubiously at the departing car.

One of the best things in life is to start on a spring morning for a holiday. To Jock and Mhor at least life seemed a very perfect thing as the car slid down the hill, over Tweed Bridge, over Cuddy Bridge, and turned sharp to the left up the Old Town. Soon they were out of the little grey town that looked so clean and fresh with its shining morning face, and running through the deep woods above Peel Tower. Small children creeping unwillingly to school stopped to watch them, and Mhor looked at them pityingly. School seemed a thing so far removed from his present happy state as not to be worth remembering. Somewhere, doubtless, unhappy little people were learning the multiplication table and struggling with the spelling of uncouth words, but Mhor, sitting in state in "Wilfred the Gazelle" (for so David had christened the new car), could only spare them a passing thought.

He looked at Peter sitting self-consciously virtuous on the seat opposite, he leaned across Jean to send a glance of profound satisfaction to Jock, then he raked from his pocket a cake of butter-scotch and sank back in his seat to crunch in comfort.

They followed the Tweed as it ran by wood and field and hamlet, and as they reached the moorlands of the upper reaches Jean began to notice that Wilfred the Gazelle was not running as smoothly as usual. Perhaps it was imagination, Jean thought, or perhaps it was the effect of having luggage on the top, but in her inmost heart she knew it was more than that, and she was not surprised.

Jean was filled with a deep-seated distrust of motors. She felt that every motor was just waiting its chance to do its owner harm. She had started with no real hope of reaching any destination, and expected nothing less than to spend the night camping inside the car in some lonely spot. She had all provisions made for such an occurrence.

Jock said suddenly, "We're not going more than ten miles an hour," and then the car stopped altogether and David and Stark got down. Jean leaned out and asked what was wrong, and David said shortly that there was nothing wrong.

Presently he and Stark got back into their places and the car was started again. But it went slowly, haltingly, like a bird with a broken wing. They made up on a man driving a brown horse in a wagonette—a man with a brown beard and a cheerful eye—and passed him.

The car stopped again.

Again David and Stark got out and stared and poked and consulted together. Again Jean's head went out, and again she received the same short and unsatisfactory answer.

The brown-bearded man and his wagonette made up on them, looked at the car in an interested way, and passed on.

Again the car started, passed the wagonette, and went on for about a mile and stopped.

Again Jean's head went out.

"David," she said, "what *is* the matter?" and it goes far to show how harassed that polished Oxonian was when he replied, "If you don't take your face out of that I'll slap it."

Jean withdrew at once, feeling that she had been tactless and David had been unnecessarily rude—David who had never been rude to her since they were children, and had told each other home-truths without heat and without ill-feeling on either side. If this was to be the effect of owning a car——

"Wilfred the Gazelle's dead," said Mhor, and got out, followed by Jock, and in a minute or two by Jean.

They all sat down in the heather by the roadside.

Dead car notwithstanding, it was delicious sitting there in the spring sunshine. Tweed was nearing its source and was now only a trickling burn. A lark was singing high up in the blue. The air was like new wine. The lambs were very young, for spring comes slowly up that way, and one tottering little fellow was found by Mhor and carried rapturously to Jean.

"Take it; it's just born," he said. "Jock, hold Peter tight in case he bites them."

"Did you ever see anything quite so new?" Jean said as she stroked the little head, "and yet so independent? Sheep are far before mortals. Its eyes look so perplexed, Mhor. It's quite strange to the world and doesn't know what to make of it. That's its mother over there. Take it to her; she's crying for it."

David came up and stood looking gloomily at the lamb. Perhaps he envied it being so young and careless and motor-less.

"Stark's busy with the car," he announced, rather needlessly, as the fact was apparent to all. "I'm dashed if I know what's the matter with the old bus. . . . Here's that man again. . ."

Jean burst into helpless laughter as the wagonette again overtook them. The driver flourished his whip and the horse broke into a canter—it looked like derision.

There was a long silence—then Jean said:

"If it won't go it's too big to move. We shall have to train ivy on it and make it a feature of the landscape."

"Or else," said David, savagely and irreverently—"or else hew it in pieces before the Lord."

Stark got up and straightened himself, wiped his hands and his forehead, and came up to David.

"I've found out what's wrong," he said. "She'll manage to Moffat, but we'll have to get her put right there. It's . . ." He went into technical details incomprehensible to Jean.

They got back into the car and it sprang away as if suddenly endowed with new life. In a trice they had passed the wagonette, leaving it in a whirl of scornful dust. They ate the miles as a giant devours sheep. They passed the Devil's Beef Tub—Jock would have liked to tarry there and investigate, but Jean dared not ask Stark to stop in case they could not start again, and soon went sliding down the hill to Moffat. Hot puffs of scented air rose from the valley they had left, the moorlands and the winds, and the town was holding out arms to welcome them. They drove along the sunny, sleepy, midday High Street and stopped at an hotel.

Except David, no member of the Jardine family had ever been inside an hotel, and it was quite an adventure for them to go up the steps from the street, enter the swinging doors, and ask a polite woman with elaborately done hair if they might have luncheon. Yes, they might, and Peter, at present held tightly in Mhor's arms, could be fed in the kitchen if that would suit.

Stark had meantime taken the car to a motor-repairing place.

It was half-past three before the car came swooping up to the hotel doors. Jean gazed at it with a sort of fearful pride. It looked very well if only it didn't play them false. Stark, too, looked well—a fine, impassive figure.

"Will it be all right, Stark?" she ventured to inquire, but Stark, who rarely committed himself, merely said, "Mebbe."

Stark had no manners, Jean reflected, but he had a nice face and was a teetotaller, and one can't have everything.

To Mhor's joy the road now ran for a bit by the side of the railway line where thundered great express trains such as there never were in Priorsford. They were spinning along the fine level road, making up for lost time, when a sharp report startled them and made Mhor, who was watching a train, lose his balance and fall forward on to Peter, who was taking a sleep on the rug at their feet.

It was a tire gone, and there was no time to mend it if they were to be at Carlisle in time for tea. Stark put on the spare wheel and they started again.

Fortune seemed to have got tired of persecuting them, and there were no further mishaps. They ran without a pause through village after village, snatching glimpses of lovely places where they would fain have lingered, forgetting them as each place offered new beauties.

(To be continued.)

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Give the youngsters this wholesome, long-lasting sweet - for pleasure and benefit.

Use it yourself after smoking or when work drags. It's a great little freshener.

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SMP DAIRY PAILS

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—says Mrs. Experience, speaking of the economical use of soap.

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And wondering what he'll do next;
He acts in a manner distressing,
And keeps all his fellows perplexed;
He's turning and twisting and curving,
And weaving his way in and out;
His stunts are breathtaking, unnerving,
And no one knows what he's about!

One minute he's trailing behind you;
The next he is darting ahead,
And kicking up dust clouds that blind you,
And knocking the speed limit dead!
He toots and he squawks and he screeches,
To make others let him get by;
He cares not a hoot, so he reaches
The place he is bound for, on high.

Some day he'll be heading for heaven,
And then he will step on the gas,
Intent on his share of the leaven—
And all of his brothers he'll pass;
And when he arrives there, St. Peter
Will point to the regions below,
And he will reverse his speed-eater—
And head for Gehenna, on low!

—James Edward Hungerford.

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