

The "Heart's Desire"

IF the evening was one of those which seem longer than usual, but still has far to go, it was once a custom in Millwall to find a pair of boots of which it could be claimed that it was time they were mended, and to carry the artful parcel round to Mr. Pascoe. His cobbler's shop was in a street that had the look of having retired from the hurry and press of London, aged, dispirited, and indifferent even to its defeat, and to be waiting vacantly for what must come to elderly and shabby despondence. Each grey house in the street was distinguished but by its number and the ornament which showed between the muslin curtains of its parlour window. The home of the Jones' had a geranium, and so was different from one neighbour with a ship's model in alabaster, and from the other whose sign was a faded photograph askew in its frame. On warm evenings some of the women would be sitting on their doorsteps, watching with dull faces their children at play, as if experience had told them more than they wanted to know, but that they had nothing to say about it. Beyond this street there was emptiness. It ended, literally, on a blind wall. It was easy for a wayfarer to feel in that street that its life was caught. It was secluded from the main stream, and its children were a lively yet merely revolving eddy. They could not get out. When I first visited Mr. Pascoe, as there was no window ornament to distinguish his place from the others, and his number was missing, I made a mistake, and went next door. Through a hole drilled in that wrong door a length of cord was pendant, with a greasy knot at its end. Underneath the knot was chalked, PULL. I pulled. The door opened on a mass of enclosed night. From the street it was hard to see what was there, so I went inside. What was there might have been a cavern, narrow, obscure, and dangerous with dim obstructions. Some of the shadows were darker than others, because the cave ended, far-off, in a port-light, a small square of day framed in black. Empty space was luminous beyond that cave. Becoming used to the gloom I saw chains and cordage hanging from the unseen roof. What was faintly like the prow of a boat shaped near. Then out from the lumber and suggestions of things a gnome approached me. "Y' want ole Pascoe? Nex dore, guv'nor!" At that moment, in the square of bright day at the end of the darkness, the apparition of a tall ship silently appeared, and again was gone before my surprise. That open space beyond was London River.

Next door, in a small room to which day and night were the same, Mr. Pascoe was always to be found bending over his hobbling foot under a tiny yellow fan of gaslight which could be heard making a tenuous shrilling whenever the boot-mender looked up, and ceased rivetting. When his head was bent over his task only the crown of a red and mottled cricketing cap, which nodded in time to his hammer, was presented to you. When he paused to speak, and glanced up, he showed a face that the gas jet, with the aid of many secluded years, had tintured with its own artificial hue, a face puckered through a long frowning intent on old boots. He wore an apron that had ragged gaps in it. He was a frail and dingy little man, and might never have had a mother, but could have been born of that dusty workroom, to which he had been a faithful son all his life. It was a murky interior shut in from the day, a litter of petty tools and nameless rubbish on a ruinous bench, a disorder of dilapidated boots, that mean gas jet, a smell of leather ; and there old Pascoe's hammer defiantly and rapidly attacked its circumstances, driving home at times, and all unseen, more than those rivets. If he rose to rake over his bench for material or a tool, he went spryly, aided by a stick, but at every step his body heeled over because one leg was shorter than the other. Having found what he wanted he would wheel round, with a strange agility that was apparently a consequence of his deformity, continuing his discourse, and driving his points into the air with his hammer, and so hobble back, still talking ; still talking through his funny cap, as his neighbours used to say of him. At times he convoluted aerial designs and free ideas with his hammer, spending it aloft on matters superior to boots. The boots were never noticed. Pascoe could revivify his dust. The glitter of his spectacles when he looked up might have been the sparkling of an ardent vitality suppressed in his little body.

The wall space of his room was stratified with shelves, where half-seen bottles and nondescript lumps were to be guessed at, like fossils embedded in shadow. They had never been moved, and they never would be. Hanging from a nail on one shelf was a framed lithograph of a ship : " The ' Euterpe,' off St. Catherine's Point, July 21, 1849." On the shelf below the picture was a row of books. I never saw Pascoe look at them, and they could have been like the bottles, retained by a careful man because of a notion that some day they would come in handy. Once, when waiting for Pascoe, who was out getting a little beer, I glanced at the volumes, and supposed they bore some relation to the picture of the ship ; perhaps

once they had been owned by that legendary brother of Pascoe's, a sailor, of whom I had had a misty apprehension. It would be difficult to say there had been a direct word about him. There were manuals on navigation, seamanship, and shipbuilding, all of them curiosities, in these later days, rather than expert guides. They were full of marginal notes, and were not so dusty as I expected to find them. The rest of the books were of journeys in Central America and Mexico: *Three Years in Guatemala*; the *Buried Cities of Yucatan*; *Scenes on the Mosquito Coast*; *A Voyage to Honduras*. There was more of it, and of that sort. They were by authors long forgotten; but those books, too, looked as though they were often in use. Anyhow, they could not be classed with the old glue-pots and the lumber.

Not for long after my first visit to Pascoe did he refer to those books. "Somebody told me," he said one evening, while offering me a share of his tankard, "that you have been to the American tropics."

I told him I could say I had been, but little more. I said it is a very big world.

"Yes," he said, after a pause; "and what a world. Think of those buried cities in Yucatan—lost in the forest, temples and gods and everything. Men and women there, once on a time, thinking they were a fine people, the only great people, with a king and princesses and priests who made out they knew the mysteries, and what God was up to. And there were processions of girls with fruit and flowers on feast days, and soldiers in gold armour. All gone, even their big notions. Their god hasn't got even a name now. I should like to see that place. Have you ever read the *Companions of Columbus*?"

I was as surprised as though one of his dim bottles in the shadows had suddenly glowed before my eyes, become magical with moving opalescence. What right had old Pascoe to be staring like that to the land and romance of the Toltecs? I had been under the impression that he had read nothing but the Bible and *Progress and Poverty*. There was a biography of Bradlaugh, too, which he would quote copiously, and his spectacles used fairly to scintillate over that, and his yellow face to acquire a new set of cunning and ironic puckers; for I believe he thought, when he quoted Bradlaugh—whose name was nearly all I knew of that famous man—that he was becoming extremely modern, and a little too strong for my sensitive and conventional mind. But here he was, telling of Incas, Aztecs, and Toltecs, of buried cities, of forgotten treasures, though mainly of the mind, of Montezuma, of the quetzal bird, and of the vanished splendour of nations

that are now but a few weathered stones. It was the forlorn stones, lost in an uninhabited wilderness, to which he constantly returned. A brother of his, who had been there, had dropped a word once into Pascoe's ear, probably while his accustomed weapon was uplifted over a dock-labourer's boot-heel, and this was what that word had done. Pascoe with a sort of symbolic gesture rose from his hobbling foot before me, tore the shoe from it, flung it contemptuously on the floor, and approached me with a flamboyant hammer.

And that evening I feared for a moment that Pascoe was spoiled for me. He had admitted me to a close view of some secret treasured charms of his memory, and believing that I was not uninterested, of course now he would be always displaying, for the ease of his soul, supposing we had a fellowship and a bond, his fascinating quetzals and Toltecs. Yet I never heard any more about it. There was another subject, though, quite homely, seeing where we both lived, and equally absorbing for us both. He knew our local history, so far as our ships and house-flags were concerned, from John Company's fleet to the "Macquarie." He knew, by reputation, many of our contemporary master mariners. He knew, and how he had learned it was as great a wonder as though he spoke Chinese, a fair measure of naval architecture. He could discuss a ship's model as some men would a Greek vase. He would enter into the comparative merits of rig suitable for small cruising craft with a particularity which, now and then, gave me a feeling almost akin to alarm; because in a man of Pascoe's years this fond insistence on the best furniture for one's own little ship went beyond fair interest, and became the day-dreaming of romantic and rebellious youth. At that point he was beyond my depth. I had long forgotten, though but half Pascoe's age, what my ship was to be like, when I got her at last. Knowing she would never be seen at her moorings, I had, in a manner of speaking, posted her as a missing ship.

One day I met at his door the barge-builder into whose cavernous loft I had stumbled on my first visit to Pascoe. He said it was a fine afternoon. He invited me in to inspect a figure-head he had purchased. "How's the old 'un?" he asked, jerking a thumb towards the bootmaker's. Then he signed to me, with some amused winking and crafty tilting of his chin, to follow him along his loft. He led me clean through the port-light of his cave, and down a length of steps outside to his yard on the foreshore of the Thames, where among his barges, hauled up for repairs, he paused by a formless shape covered by tarpaulins.

“ I’ve seen a few things in the way of boats, but this ’ere’s a — well, what do you make of it ? ” He pulled the tarpaulin back, and disclosed a vessel whose hull was nearing completion. I did not ask if it was Pascoe’s work. It was such an amusing and pathetic surprise, with the barge-builder’s sardonic grimace turned to me waiting for my guess, that there was no need to answer. “ He reckons,” said the barge-builder, “ that he can do a bit of cruising about the mouth of the Thames in that. ’Bout all she wants now is to have a mast fitted, and to keep the water out, an’ she’ll do.” He chuckled grimly. Her lines were crude, and she had been built up, you could see, as Pascoe came across timber that was anywhere near being possible. Her strakes were a patchwork of various kinds of wood, though when she was tarred their diversity would be hidden from all but the searching of the elements. It was astonishing that Pascoe had done so well. It was still more astonishing that he should think it would serve.

“ I’ve given him a hand with it,” remarked the barge-builder, “ an’ more advice than the old ’un ’ud take. But I dessay ’e could potter about with the dam tub round about as far as Canvey, if ’e keeps it out of the wash of the steamers. He’s been at this job two years now, and I shan’t be sorry to see my yard shut of it. . . Must humour the old boy, though. . . Niggin’ job, mending boots, I reckon. If I mended boots, I’d ’ave to let orf steam summow. Or go on the booze.”

I felt hurt that Pascoe had not taken me into his confidence, that his ship, so far as I was concerned, did not exist. One Saturday evening, when I called, his room was in darkness. Striking a match, there was his apron shrouding his hobby foot. This had never happened before, and I turned into the barge-builder’s. The proprietor there faced me silently for a moment, smiling with a jest he was going to give me when I was sufficiently impatient for it. “ Come to see whether your boots are done ? Well, they ain’t. Pascoe’s gone. Christened his boat this morning, and pushed off. Gone for a trial trip. Gone down river.”

“ Good Lord,” I said, or something of the sort. “ Yes,” continued the barge-builder, luxuriating in it, “ and I’ve often wondered what name he’d give ’er, and he done it this morning, in gold leaf. D’yer remember what she looked like ? All right. Well, ’er name is the ‘ Heart’s Desire,’ and her skipper will be back soon, if she don’t fall apart too far off.”

Her skipper was not back soon, nor that day. We had no news of him the next day. A few women were in his workshop, when I called, hunting about for foot-wear that should have been repaired and returned, but was

not. " 'Ere they are," cried one, " 'er's young Bill's boots, and nothing done to 'em. The silly old fool ! Why didn't 'e tell me 'e was going to sea ! 'Ow's young Bill to go to school on Monday now ? " The others found their boots, all specially wanted, and all as they were when Pascoe got them. A commination began of light-minded cripples who took in young and innocent boots, promising them all things, and then treacherously abandoned them, to do God knew what ; and so I left.

This became serious ; but old Pascoe, with his " Heart's Desire," had vanished, like his Toltecs. A week went by. The barge-builder, for whom this had now ceased to be a joke, was vastly troubled by the complete disappearance of his neighbour, and shook his head over it. Then a few lines in an evening paper, from a port on the Devon coast, looked promising, though what they wished to convey was not quite clear, for it was a humorous paragraph. But the evidence was strong enough for me, on behalf of the barge-builder and a few others, to run down to that west-coast harbour.

It was late at night when I arrived, and bewildering with rain, total darkness, and an upheaval of cobbles in by-ways that wandered to no known purpose. But a guide presently brought me to a providential window, and quarters in the " Turk's Head." I could hear in my room a continuous murmur, no doubt from the saloon bar below, and occasional rounds of hearty merriment. That would be the place for news, and I went down to get it. An oil-lamp veiled in tobacco smoke was hanging from a beam of a sooty ceiling. A congregation of longshoremen, visible in the blue mist and smoky light chiefly because of their pink masks, was packed on benches round the walls. They laughed aloud again as I went in. They were regarding with indulgent interest and a little shy respect an elegant figure overlooking them, and posed negligently near an opening of the frosted glass screen of the bar, an opening which framed the large bust of a laughing barmaid. She was as amused as the men. The figure turned to me as I entered, and stopped its discourse at once. It ran a hand over its white brow and curly black hair with a gesture of mock despair. " Why, here comes another to share our ' Heart's Desire.' We can't keep the beauty to ourselves."

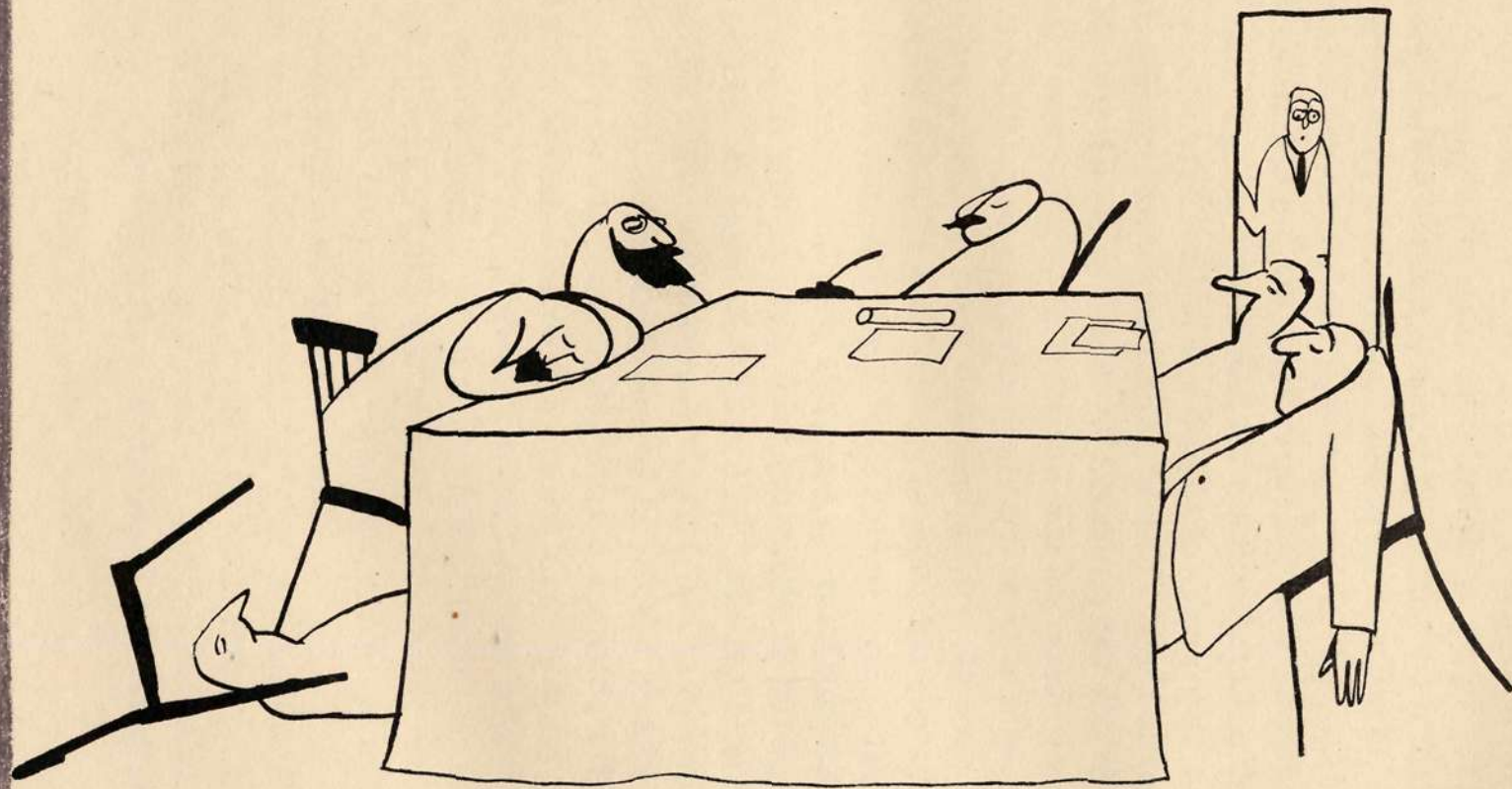
It was young Hopkins, known to every reader of the " Morning Despatch " for his volatility and omniscience. It was certainly not his business to allow any place to keep its secrets to itself ; indeed, his reputation including even a capacity for humour, the world was frequently delighted with more than the place itself knew, even in secret. Other correspondents

from London were also in the room. I saw them vaguely when Hopkins indicated their positions with a few graceful flourishes of his hand. They were lost in Hopkins' assurance of occupying superiority. They were looking on. "We all got here yesterday," explained Hopkins. "It's a fine story, not without its funny touches. And it has come in jolly handy in a dull season when people want cheering up. We have found the Ancient Mariner. He was off voyaging again, but his ship's magic was washed out by heavy weather. And while beer is more plentiful than news, we hope to keep London going with some wonders of the deep."

In the morning, before the correspondents had begun on the next installment of their serial story, I saw Pascoe sitting up in a bed at another inn, his expenses an investment of the newspaper men. He was unsubdued. He was even exalted. He did not think it strange to see me there, though it was not difficult to guess that he had his doubts about the quality of the publicity he had attracted, and of the motive for the ardent attentions of his new and strange acquaintances from London. "Don't be hard on me," he begged, "for not telling you more in London. But you're so cautious and distrustful. I was going to tell you, but was uncertain what you'd say. Now I've started and you can't stop me. I've met a man here named Hopkins, who has given me some help and advice. As soon as my craft is repaired, I'm off again. It was unlucky to meet that sou'wester in July. But once out of home waters, I ought to be able to pick up the Portuguese trade wind off Finisterre, and then I'm good for the Caribbees. I'll do it. I'll do it. She should take no more than a fortnight to put right."

There was no need to argue with him. The "Heart's Desire," a centre of attraction in the place, answered any doubt I had as to Pascoe's safety. But he was humored. Hopkins humored him, even openly encouraged him. The "Heart's Desire" was destined for a romantic adventure. The world was kept in anticipation of the second departure for this strange voyage to Guatemala. The "Heart's Desire," on the edge of a ship-repairer's yard, was tinkered, patched, re-fitted, made as right as she could be. The ship-repairer, the money for the work made certain for him, did what he was told, but made no comment, except to interrogate me curiously with side glances when I was about.

A spring tide, with a southerly wind, brought us to a natural conclusion. An unexpected lift of the water, washed off the "Heart's Desire," rolled her about, and left her broken on the mud. I met the journalists in a group on their way to the afternoon train, their faces still reflecting the brightness



A Parish Council Meeting rectifying a dangerous roadway.
(Impression of.)

John Nash.

of an excellent entertainment. Hopkins took me aside. "I've made it right with old Pascoe. He hasn't lost anything by it, you can be sure of that." But I was looking for the cobbler, and all I wished to know was the place where I was likely to find him. They did not know that.

Late that evening I was still looking for him, and it had been raining for hours. The streets of the village were dark and deserted. Passing one of the many inns, which were the only illumination of the village, I stumbled over a shadow on the cobbles outside. In the glow of a match I found Pascoe, drunk, and with his necessary stick beside him, broken.

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