

BOY
A SKETCH

By **MARIE CORELLI**

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To

MY DEAREST FRIEND IN THE WORLD

BERTHA VYVER

WHO HAS KNOWN ALL MY LIFE FROM CHILDHOOD

AND HAS BEEN THE WITNESS OF ALL MY

LITERARY WORK FROM ITS

VERY BEGINNING

THIS SIMPLE STORY

IS

GRATEFULLY AND LOVINGLY DEDICATED

BOY



CHAPTER I

IT is said by many people who are supposed to “know things,” that our life is frequently, if not always, influenced by the first impressions we ourselves receive of its value or worthlessness. Some folks, presuming to be wiser even than the wisest, go so far as to affirm that if you, while still an infant in long clothes, happen to take a disgust at the manner and customs of your parents, you will inevitably be disgusted at most events and persons throughout the remainder of your earthly pilgrimage. If any truth exists in such a statement, then “Boy” had excellent cause to be profoundly disappointed in his prospects at a very early outset of his career. He sat in what is sometimes called a “feeding-chair,” wedged in by a bar which guarded him from falling forward or tumbling out upon the floor, and the said bar was provided with an ingenious piece of wood, which was partially hollowed out in such wise as to keep him firm by his fat waist, as well as to provide a resting-place for the plateful of bread-and-milk which he was enjoying as much as circumstances would permit him to enjoy anything. Every now and then he beat the plate solemnly with his spoon, as though improvising a barbaric melody on a new sort of tom-tom,—and lifting a pair of large, angelic blue eyes upwards, till their limpid light seemed to meet and mix with the gold-glint of his tangled curls, he murmured pathetically,—

“Oh, Poo Sing! Does ’oo feels ill? Does ’oo feels bad? Oh, Poo Sing!”

Now, “Poo Sing” was not a Japanese toy, or a doll, or a bird, or any innocent object of a kind to attract a child’s fancy; “Poo Sing”

was nothing but a Man, and a disreputable creature even at that “Poo Sing” was Boy’s father, and “Poo Sing” was for the moment—to put it quite mildly—blind drunk. “Poo Sing” had taken his coat and waistcoat off, and had pulled out the ends of his shirt in a graceful white festoon all round the waistband of his trousers. “Poo Sing” had also apparently done some hard combing to his hair, for the bulk of it stood somewhat up on end, and a few grizzled and wiry locks strayed in disorderly fashion across his inflamed nose and puffy eyelids, this effect emphasising the already half-foolish, half-infuriated expression of his face. “Poo Sing” staggered to and fro, his heavy body scarcely seeming to belong to his uncertain legs, and between sundry attacks of hiccough, he trolled out scraps of song, now high, now low, sometimes in a quavering falsetto, sometimes in a threatening bass; while Boy listened to him wonderingly, and regarded his divers antics over the bar of the “feeding-chair” with serious compassion,—the dulcet murmur of, “Does ’oo feels bad? Poo Sing!” recurring at intervals between mouthfuls of bread-and-milk and the rhythmic beat of the spoon. They were a strangely assorted couple,—Boy and “Poo Sing,” albeit they were father and son. Boy, with his fair round visage and bright halo of hair, looked more like a child-angel than a mortal,—and “Poo Sing,” in his then condition, resembled no known beast upon earth, since no beast ever gets voluntarily drunk, save Man. Yet it must not for a moment be imagined that “Poo Sing” was not a gentleman. He *was* a gentleman,—most distinctly,—most emphatically. He would have told you so himself, had you presumed to doubt it, with any amount of oaths to press home the fact. He would have spluttered at you somewhat in the following terms:—

“My father was a gentleman,—and my grandfather was a gentleman—and my great-grandfather was a gentleman—and d—
—n you, sir, our people were all gentlemen, every sanguinary man-jack of them, back to the twelfth century! No tommy-rot with me! None of your mean, skulking, money-grubbing Yankee millionaires in *our* lot! Why, you d——d rascal! Call me a gentleman!—I should pretty much think so! I am a D’Arcy-Muir,—and I have the blood of kings in my veins—d——n you!”

Gentleman! Of course he was a gentleman! His language proved it. And his language was the first lesson in English Boy received, though he was not aware of its full significance. So that when two or three years later on Boy cried out “D——n rascal papa!” quite suddenly and vociferously, he had no consciousness of saying anything that was not the height of filial tenderness and politeness. To be a D’Arcy-Muir, meant to be the descendant of a long line of knights and noblemen who had once upon a time possessed huge castles with deep dungeons, where serfs and close kindred could be conveniently imprisoned and murdered at leisure without distinction as to character or quality;—knights and noblemen who some generations onward were transformed into “six-bottle-men” who thought it seemly to roll under their dining-tables dead drunk every evening, and who, having merged themselves and their “blue blood” into this present nineteenth-century Captain the Honourable James D’Arcy-Muir, the father of Boy,—were, we must suppose, in their condition of departed spirits, perfectly satisfied that they had bestowed a blessing upon the world by the careful production of such a “gentleman” and Christian.

Captain the Honourable, mindful of his race and breeding, took care to marry a lady,—whose ancestry was only just in a slight

degree lower than his own. She could not trace her lineage back to the twelfth century, still she came of what is sometimes called a good old stock, and she was handsome enough as a girl, though always large, lazy and unintelligent. Indolence was her chief characteristic;—she hated any sort of trouble. She only washed herself under protest, as a sort of concession to the civilisation of the day. She had been gifted with an abundance of beautiful hair, of a somewhat coarse texture, yet rich in colour and naturally curly,—it was “a nuisance,” she averred,—and as soon as she married, she cut it short “to save the bother of doing it in the morning” as she herself stated. Until she had secured a husband, she had complied sufficiently with the rules of society to keep herself tidily dressed;—but both before and after her boy was born, she easily relapsed into the slovenly condition which she considered “comfort,” and which was her habitual nature. Truth to tell, she had no incentive or ambition to appear at her best. She had not been married to Captain the Honourable D’Arcy-Muir one week before she discovered his partiality for strong drink, and being far too lymphatic to urge resistance, she sank into a state of passive resignation to circumstances. What was the good of a pretty “toilette”? Her husband never noticed how she dressed,—whether she wore satin or sackcloth was a matter of equal indifference to him,—so, finding that a short skirt and loose-fitting blouse formed a comfortable sort of “get-about” costume, she adopted it, and stuck to it morning, noon, and night. Always inclined to *embonpoint*, she managed to get extremely stout in a very short time; and chancing to read in a journal an article on “hygiene,” which eloquently proved that corsets were harmful and really dangerous to health, she decided to do without them. So that by the time Boy was four years old, Mrs. D’Arcy-Muir, in her continual study of personal ease, had developed a loose, floppy

sort of figure, which the easy fitting blouse covered, but did not disguise;—to save all possibility of corns she encased her somewhat large feet in soft felt slippers,—swept the short hair from off her brows, did without collars and cuffs, and “managed” her small house in Hereford Square in her own fashion, which “managing” meant having everything at sixes and sevens,—meals served at all hours,—and a general preparation for the gradual destruction of Boy’s digestion by giving him his bread-and-milk and other nourishment at moments when he least expected it.

Thus, it may be conceded by those who know anything about married life and housekeeping, that Boy began his career among curious surroundings. From his “feeding-chair” he saw strange sights,—sights which often puzzled him, and caused him to beat monotonous time on his plate with his baton-spoon in order to distract his little brain. Two large looming figures occupied his horizon—“Muzzy” and “Poo Sing.” “Muzzy” was the easy-going stout lady with the felt slippers, who gave him his bread-and-milk and said he was *her* boy,—“Poo Sing” was, in the few tranquil moments of his existence, understood to be “Dads” or “Papa.” Boy somehow could never call him either “Dads” or “Papa” when he was seized by his staggering fits; such terms were not sufficiently compassionate for an unfortunate gentleman who was subject to a malady which would not allow him to keep steady on his feet without clutching at the sideboard or the mantelpiece. Boy had been told by “Muzzy” that when “Papa” rolled about the room he was “very ill,”—and the most eloquent language could not fittingly describe the innocent and tender emotions of pity in Boy’s mind when he beheld the progenitor of his being thus cruelly afflicted! Were it possible to touch a drunkard’s heart in the mid career of his drunkenness, then the gentle murmur of “Poo Sing!” from the

fresh rosy lips of a little child, and that child his own son, might have moved to a sense of uneasy shame and remorse the particularly tough and fibrous nature of Captain the Honourable D'Arcy-Muir. But Captain the Honourable was of that ancient and noble birth which may be seen asserting itself in rowdy theatre-parties at restaurants in Piccadilly,—and he, with the rest of his distinguished set, said openly “D——n sentiment!” As for any sacredness in the life of a child, or any idea of grave responsibility resting upon him as a father, for that child’s future, such primitive notions never occurred to him. Sometimes when Boy stared at him very persistently with solemnly enquiring grave blue eyes, he would become suddenly and violently irritated, and would demand, “What is the little beggar staring at? Looks like a d——d idiot!”

Then pouring more whisky out of the ever-present bottle into the ever-present glass, he would yell to his wife, “See here, old woman! This child is going to be an infernal idiot! A regular water-on-the-brain, knock-down idiot! Staring at me for all the world as if I were a gorilla! He’s over-fed,—that’s what’s the matter! Guzzling on bread-and-milk till he can’t get a drop more down. Never saw such a d——d little pig in all my d——d life!”

Thus would this gentleman of irreproachable descent bawl forth, the while Mrs. D'Arcy-Muir, provokingly passive, irritatingly flabby, and indolently inert, preserved a discreet silence. Such behaviour on her husband’s part was of daily occurrence,—“She knew James’s little ways,” she would remark to any sympathising friends who chanced to discourse with her on the delicate and honeyed bliss of her matrimonial life. “Why did you marry him?” was the question often asked of her, whereat she would answer betwixt a sigh and a yawn,—“Really I don’t know! He seemed quite as decent as most men, and he belongs to a

splendid family!” “Did you ever love him?” was another query once put to her by a daring interlocutor inclined rather to romance than reality. Mrs. D’Arcy-Muir looked politely surprised.

“Love! Oh, I don’t think that had very much to do with it,” she said. “One doesn’t think about love after one is fifteen or sixteen. That’s all goosey-goosey-gander, you know!”

And a placid smile of superior wisdom lit up her fat face as she thus clinched the would-be heart-searching enquiries of the mere sentimentalist. Because, after all, as she argued, if Jim *would* get drunk it was no use attempting to thwart him,—he was master of himself and of his own actions. When, after a good heavy bout of it, he was laid up in bed with a galloping pulse, throbbing veins, parched tongue, and a half-crazed brain, that also was no business of hers. She had made no attempt to either restrain or guide him, because she knew it was no use trying to do either. If he did not drink in the house, he would drink outside the house;—if he did not drink openly, he would drink on the sly,—few men ever took a woman’s advice for their good, though they would take all women’s recommendations to the bad. Mrs. D’Arcy-Muir was perfectly aware of this peculiar code of man’s morals, as also of the strange limitations of man’s logic, and knowing these things was content to make herself as bodily comfortable as she could, and let other matters go as an untoward fate ordained. Thus it happened that it was only Boy who really thought at all seriously concerning the puzzle of existence. Boy, whose proper Christian name was Robert, seemed nearly always preoccupied about something or other. Judging by the generally wistful expression of his small features, it might be presumed that he had memories. Probably most children have, though they are incapable of expressing them. The enormous gulf of difference between the

very young and their elders, exists not only on account of the disparity in years,—but also because the elders have retained, for the most part, nothing more on their minds than the quickly crowding and vanishing impressions of this present world,—while the children are, we may imagine, busy with vague recollections of something better than the immediate condition of things,—recollections which occasionally move them to wonder why their surroundings have become so suddenly and strangely altered. It is impossible not to see, in the eyes of many of these little human creatures, a look of infinite perplexity, sorrow and enquiry,—a look which gradually fades away as they grow older and more accustomed to the ordinary commonplace business of natural existence, while the delicate and dim memories of the Soul in a former state wax faint and indistinct, never to recur again, perhaps, till death re-flashes them on the interior sight with the repeated and everlasting assurance that “here is not our rest.” Boy had thoughts of the past, though none of the future;—he was quite sure that all was not formerly as it appeared to him now,—that there was a time, set far away among rainbow eternities, when “Muzzy” and “Poo Sing” were *non est*,—when indeed “Muzzy” and “Poo Sing” would have seemed the wildest incoherences and maddest impossibilities. How it had chanced that the rainbow eternities had dispersed for awhile,—had rolled back as it were into space, and had allowed the strange spectacle of “Muzzy” and “Poo Sing” to intervene, was more than Boy could explain, consciously or unconsciously. But he was certain he had not always known these two now apparently necessary personages,—and he was equally certain he had known some sort of beings infinitely more interesting than they could ever be. Fully impressed by this inward conviction, he often dwelt upon it in his own mind,—and this it was that gave him the lovely far-away look in his dreamy blue

eyes,—the tender little quivering smile on his rosy mouth, and the whole serene and wise expression of his fair and chubby countenance. Scarcely four years old as he was, it was evident that he had the intuition of some truer life than those around him dreamed of,—the halo of divine things was still about him,—the “God’s image” was just freshly stamped on the bright new coin of his being,—and it remained for the coming years to witness how long the brightness would last in the hands of the untrustworthy individuals who had it in possession. For it is a dangerous fallacy to aver that every man has the making of his destiny in his own hands: to a certain extent he has, no doubt, and with education and firm resolve, he can do much to keep down the Beast and develop the Angel,—but a terrific responsibility rests upon those often voluntarily reckless beings, his parents, who, without taking thought, use the God’s privilege of giving life, while utterly failing to perceive the means offered to them for developing and preserving that life under the wisest and most harmonious conditions. It is certainly true that many parents do what they call their “best” for their children,—that is, they work for them, and educate them, and “place” them advantageously, as they think, in life,—but they are apt to forget that this “life” they set store by, is not only a question of food, clothing, money, and position,—its central pivot is Thought,—and thought begins with the first brain-pulsations. There is no use or sense in denying the fact,—it is so. Therefore the progenitors of those living thought-cells cannot possibly shirk the moral obligation which they take upon themselves from the very moment of a child’s birth. “The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children” is often quoted as a merciless axiom,—but it is merely the declaration of a natural law, which, if broken, brings punishment in its train.

Boy, lately arrived from the Infinite, was guiltless of his present dubious surroundings. He did not make his “honourable” father a drunkard, or his mother a sloven. He came into the world designed, perchance, to be the redemption of both his parents, had they received his innocent presence in that spirit. But they did not. They accepted him as a natural result of marriage, and took no more heed of him than a pair of monkeys casually observant of their first offspring. They, by virtue of the evolution theory, should, as human beings, have been on a scale higher than the Simian ancestor,—but Captain D’Arcy-Muir was not even on a par with that hairy personage, inasmuch as the bygone aboriginal monkey, not being aware of strong drink, could not degrade himself that way. As long as Boy was fed, clothed, taken out, and put to bed regularly, “Muzzy” and “Poo Sing” considered they were doing all their necessary duty by him. “Muzzy” would indeed have been profoundly astonished if she had known that Boy took her clothing into his consideration, and wondered why hooks were often off, and buttons often gone from her garments, and why her hair was so like some of the stuffing of the old arm-chair,—woolly sort of stuffing, which was coming through the leather for want of mending. Boy used to compare “Muzzy” with another lady who sometimes came to visit him,—Miss Letitia Leslie,—a wonderful vision to Boy’s admiring eyes,—a rustling, glistening dream, made up of soft dove-coloured silk and violet-scented old lace, and tender, calm blue eyes, and small hands with big diamonds flashing on their dainty whiteness,—“Miss Letty,” as she was generally called, and “that purse-proud old maid,” as Captain the Honourable frequently designated her. Boy had his own title for her,—it was “Kiss-Letty,” instead of “Miss Letty,”—and he would often ask, in dull moments when the numerous perplexities of his small mind became too entangled for him to bear—“Where is

Kiss-Letty? Me wants Kiss-Letty! Kiss-Letty loves Boy,—Boy loves Kiss-Letty!”

And to hear him sweetly meandering along in this fashion, the uninitiated stranger might have imagined “Kiss-Letty” to be a kind of fairy,—an elf, born of moonlight and lilies, rather than what she really was, a spinster of forty-five, who made no pretences to be a whit younger than she was,—a spinster who was perfectly content to wear her own beautiful grey hair, and to wish for no “touching up” on the delicate worn pallor of her cheeks—a spinster, moreover, who was proud of her spinsterhood, as it was the sign of her unbroken fidelity to a dead man who had loved her. Miss Letitia Leslie had had her history, her own private tragedy of tears and heart-break; but the depths of sorrow in her soul had turned to sweetness instead of sourness,—her own grief had taught her to be compassionate of all griefs, and the unkind sword of fate that had pierced her gentle breast rendered her delicately cautious of ever wounding, by so much as a word or a look, the sensitive feelings of others. Death and circumstance had made her the independent mistress of a large fortune, which she used lavishly for the private doing of good where evil abounded. Into the foul and festering slums of the great city—into the shabby dwellings of poorly paid clerks and half-starved curates,—up among the barely furnished attics where struggling artists worked for scanty livelihood and the distant hope of fame, “Kiss-Letty” took her sweet and gracious presence, wearing a smile that was a very good reflex of God’s sunshine, and speaking comfort in a voice as tender as that of any imagined angel bringing God’s messages. Much of the grinding of the ceaseless wheel of tribulation did Miss Letitia see, as she went to and fro on her various errands of mercy and friendship; but perhaps among all the haunts and homes where her personality was

familiar, her interest had seldom been more strongly aroused than in the ill-ordered household in Hereford Square, where Captain the Honourable D'Arcy-Muir drank and swore, and his wife "slovened" the hours away in muddle and misanthropy. For here was Boy,—Boy, a soft, smiling morsel of helpless life and innocent expectancy,—Boy, who stretched out plump mottled arms to "Kiss-Letty," and said, chucklingly, "Ullo!"—(an exclamation he had picked up from the friendly policeman at the corner of the square, who greeted him thus when he went out in his perambulator)—"Ullo! 'Ows 'oo, Kiss-Letty? Wants Boy out! Kiss-Letty take Boy wiz her walk-talk."

Which observation, rendered into heavier English, implied that Boy politely enquired after Miss Letitia's health, and desired to go out walking and likewise talking with that lady.

And no one in all the world responded more promptly or more lovingly to Boy's delightful amenities than Miss Letitia did. The wisely-sweet expression of the child's face fascinated her,—she saw in Boy the possibilities of noble manhood, graced perhaps by the rarest gifts of genius. Believers in hereditary development would have asked her how she could imagine it possible for a child born of such parents to possess an ideal or exceptionally endowed nature? To which she would have replied that she did not believe in the heritage so much as the environment of life. Here she was partly wrong and partly right. Such inexplicable things happen in the evolution of one particular human being from a whole chain of other human beings that it is impossible to gauge correctly the result of the whole. Why, for example, the poet Keats should have had such indifferent parentage will always be somewhat of a mystery. And why men, lineally descended from "ancient, noble and honourable" families should, in this day, have degenerated into

turf-gamblers, drunkards and social rascals generally, is also a bewildering conundrum. In the case of Keats, birth and environment were against him,—in the case of the modern aristocrat birth and environment are with him. The one has become an English classic; the other is an English disgrace. Who shall clear up the darkness surrounding the working of this law? Miss Letitia made no attempt to penetrate such physiological obscurities,—she simply argued that for Boy to be brought up in a “muddle,” and set face to face with the ever-present whisky-bottle, was decidedly injurious to his future prospects. The D’Arcy-Muir’s were poor, though they had “expectations,”—she, Miss Letitia, was rich. She had no relatives,—no one in the world had the least claim upon her,—and she had serious thoughts of adopting Boy. Would his parents part with him? That was a knotty point, a delicate and very doubtful question. But she had considered it for some time carefully, and had come to the reasonable conclusion that, as Boy seemed to be rather in the way of his father and mother than otherwise, and that moreover, as her terms of adoption were inclusive of making him her sole heir, it was probable she might gain the victory. And the very day on which this true narrative begins, when Captain the Honourable was executing his whisky war-dance to the accompaniment of his son’s murmured “Poo Sing!” and rhythmic spoon-tapping, was the one selected by the gentle lady to commence operations, or, as she put it, “to break the proposition gradually” to the strange parents whose daily lives furnished such a singular example of wedded felicity to their observant offspring. When her dainty brougham, drawn by its sleek and spirited roans, drew up at the door of the house in Hereford Square, there were various signs even outside that habitation to fill the order-loving spirit of Miss Letitia with doubtful qualms and hesitations. To begin with, there was not a

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