

One summer during the World War at War Camp Community Service, I was in charge of a playground in West Virginia.

Standing out conspicuously in my impressions of that summer's experiences is a family whom I will call Berry. The two lads, about ten and twelve, who first presented themselves to my acquaintanceship, were perfect little Ishmaelites—their hand against everybody and every man's hand against them. Teachers of the neighbourhood said that their school record was simply an annual repetition of suspensions and expulsions. They would present themselves regularly in September all spic and span with clean shirts, clean, if patched trousers, and clean eager faces for the year's start; but something always happened before the first lap of the course was run, and everybody thought themselves lucky if October found them still on "praying ground where even the vilest sinner may return."

They were rather shy of the playground, especially when other children were there having a good time. Decidedly anti-social, they would slip in after the gates were shut and the swings locked, pick or break the locks to enjoy criminally what they might have had freely by simply being in the current with other people. They were never openly and bravely bad—they were only bad as rats are bad—with a passion and a genius for getting around all constituted authority. They would delight in climbing a hill overlooking the playground where they would roll down boulders and huge stones that came crashing to a full stop just outside the limits of my jurisdiction. I noticed that their bedevilment was peculiarly voiceless. Most urchins of that type would be ready to sing out in fiendish glee when they thought they had you wrought up to a charming pitch of impotent rage. Not so with the Berry boys. In fact, they resembled nothing more than the silent little old men of the mountains; and if you uttered the word "police!" the whole panorama would disappear so quickly, vanishing so completely you would imagine it had all been a horrid nightmare.

One day, when I was almost alone on the playground in consequence of a steady drizzle all forenoon, I noticed a forlorn little figure with a pair of big round mellow eyes, peeping at me through chinks in the palings. As I started down to speak to her, the frightened little creature, a child of five or six made a dash as though she would run away. I coaxed her in and putting her in one of the little folks' swings, stood by giving her, giving a gentle push now and then, an excitement that she enjoyed very much. Though she said nothing, one could read her gratitude in those lustrous round eyes—her joy was too deep for utterance. Alas, short lived joy! A tall soldier lad in khaki, puttees, and an overseas cap, came stalking up the walk. Without recognizing me or uttering a word, he took a position at the rear where he caught the eye of the little mite in the swing. The effect was electrical. The child fell out of the swing as if she had been shot! And pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, as fast as her little legs could carry her, she flew, neither looking back nor waving goodbye. Startled out of my Olympian calm, I turned on the strange and demanded to know what was the matter.

“Meh wants her hom,” he replied sententiously.

“Yes? but why didn’t you say your mother and father sent for her? You haven’t said a word!”

“She knows what I mean.”