

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
Mommssen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier
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Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius
Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates
Brentano Strachwitz Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Gibbon Tschchow
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist
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Christopher Hibbault, Roadmaker

Marguerite Bryant

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CHAPTER I

It was a hot July day, set in a sky of unruffled blue, with sharp shadows across road and field, and a wind that had little coolness in it playing languidly over the downland. The long white dusty road kept its undeviating course eastward over hill and dale, through hamlet and town, till it was swallowed up in the mesh-work of ways round London, sixty-three miles away according to the mile-stone by which a certain small boy clad in workhouse garb was loitering. He had read the inscription many times and parcelled out the sixty-three miles into various days' journeys, but never succeeded in bringing it within divisionable distance of the few pennies which found their way into his pockets. His precocious little head carried within it too bitter memories of hungry days, and too many impressions of the shifts and contrivances by which fortune's votaries bamboozle from that fickle Goddess a meagre living, to adventure on the journey unprepared. Moreover, Mr. and Mrs. Moss of the Whitmansworth Union were not unkind, and meals were regular, so he did not run away from the house that had opened its doors to him and an exhausted mother six months ago. But he still dreamt of London as the desideratum of his fondest hopes, and that, in spite of a black terror crouching there and carefully nurtured by the poor mother in the days of their wanderings. He saw it all through a haze of people and experiences, of friends and foes, and it was the Place of Liberty.

Therefore, when escape was possible from the 4 somewhat easy rule of the Union, he hurried away to the mile-stone on the "Great Road," as it was called about here. The stone with its clear distinct black lettering, seemed to bring him nearer London, and he would spend his time contentedly flinging pebbles into the river of dust at his feet, or planning out in his active little mind what he would do when old Granny Jane's prophecy came true.

There was a wide strip of turf on each side of the road bejewelled with poppies and daisies, matted with yellow and white bedstraws, carpeted with clovers, and over all lay a coating of fine chalky dust, legacy of passing cart and carriage.

The boy was very hot and very dusty, and a little sleepy. He lay on his back drumming his heels on the turf and watching an exuberant lark tower up into the sky above him. He was not unmindful of the lark's song, but he vaguely wondered if a well-thrown stone could travel as far as the dark mounting speck.

"It's a year ago I am sure since that old woman told me my fortune," he said, suddenly sitting up. "I wonder if it will come true. Mother said it was nonsense."

It was a lonely stretch of road. The mile-stone was on the summit of a rise and the ground sloped away on his right to a reach of green water-meadow through which a chalky trout-stream wandered, and the red roof of an old mill showed through a group of silvery poplars and willows. On the other side of the road were undulating fields that dwindled from sparse cultivation to bare down-land. There was no sign of any house except the distant mill, but directly over the summit of the hill, happily hidden, an ugly little red-brick mushroom of a town asserted itself, overgrowing in its unbeautiful growth the older picturesque village of Whitmansworth.

The faint sharp click of horses' hoofs stepping 5 swiftly and regularly swept up the road towards the boy. He stood up the better to see the approaching vehicle which was coming from out of the east towards him. Two horses, he judged, listening intently. Presently a distant dark spot on the road evolved itself into a carriage—a phaeton and a pair of iron grey horses. It was long before the days of motors, when fine horses and good drivers were common enough in England, but even the small boy recognised that these animals were exceptional and were stepping out at a pace that spoke of good blood, good training and good hands on the reins.

He watched them trot full pace down the opposite hill and breast the steep rise after without a break in the easy rhythm of their movements. It was a matter of their driver's will rather than their pleasure that made them slacken pace as they neared the mile-stone.

The lonely little figure standing there was clearly visible to the travellers in the phaeton. The man who was driving looked at him casually, looked again with sudden sharp scrutiny, and abruptly pulled up his horses. He thrust the reins into his companion's

hands, and was off the box before the groom from behind could reach the horses' heads.

The owner of the phaeton came straight towards the small boy who was watching the horses with interest, pleased at the halt and oblivious of his own connection with it. The traveller was a man who looked forty-eight despite his frosted hair, and was in reality ten years older. He was tall, well beyond average height, thin, well-fashioned, with a keen kindly face, clean shaven. His mouth was humorous, and there was a certain serenity of expression and bearing that invited confidence. The boy, casting a hasty glance at him as he approached, thought him a very fine gentleman indeed: as in fact he was, in every possible meaning of the word. 6

"Is this Whitmansworth?" demanded the owner of the phaeton. His tone was not aggressive. The boy gave him as straight a look of judgment as he himself received.

"Down there it is," with a nod of his head in the direction of the distant townlet.

"And not up here?"

"Dunno, they calls it the Great Road."

The stranger still stood looking down at him fixedly.

"Is your name James Christopher Hibbault?"

Without warning, without time for the canny little morsel of humanity to weigh the wisdom of an answer, the question was shot at him and he was left gasping and speechless after an incriminating "Yes," forced from him by the suddenness of the onslaught, and the truth-compelling power of those keen eyes. "Least it's Hibbault," he added unwillingly. "Jim, they calls me."

"I think it is Christopher as well, and I prefer Christopher. And what are you doing on the Great Road at this hour in the afternoon, Christopher?"

And Jim—or Christopher,—trained and renowned for a useful evasiveness of retort in those far-off London days, answered mechanically: "Waiting for the fortune to come true."

Then the hot blood rushed to his face from sheer shame at his own betrayal of the darling secret of his small existence.

"Your fortune?" echoed the other slowly. "Fortunes do not come for waiting. What do you mean?"

"It was the old woman said so—mother didn't believe it. She said as how my fortune would come to me on the Great Road. There wer'n't no Great Road there, so when I heard as how they called this the Great Road, I just stuck to it."

It was a long speech. The boy had none of the 7 half-stupid stolidity of the country-bred, and yet lacked something of the garrulity of the cute street lad. His voice too was a surprise. The broad vowels seemed acquired and uncertain and jarred on the hearer with a sense of misfit.

"Do you live at Whitmansworth Union?"

There was a faint tinge of resentment in the short "Yes."

How did the gentleman know it, and, anyhow, why should he tell him? Jim felt irritated.

The owner of the phaeton stood still a moment with one hand on the dusty little shoulder, and then looked round at the water-meadows, the distant copses, the more distant shimmering downs. Then he laughed, saying something the boy did not understand, and looked down at the sharp inquiring little face again.

"Which means, Christopher, hide-and-seek is an easy game when it's over," he explained. "Come and show me where you live."

They walked back towards the carriage together. The elderly gentleman holding the reins was looking back at them; so was the groom. The elderly gentleman cast a puzzled, inquiring glance from the boy to his companion as they came near.

"Fortune meets us on the road-side, Stapleton," said the owner of the phaeton. "Let me introduce you to Christopher Hibbault. Get up, child."

Get up? Mount that quietly magnificent carriage, ride behind those beautiful animals with their pawing feet and arched necks?

The small boy stood still a moment to appreciate the greatness of the event.

“Are you afraid, Christopher?”

Resentment sprang to life. Yet it was almost well so transcendent a moment should have its pin prick of annoyance. With a “No” of ineffable scorn, Jim—or Christopher—the name was immaterial to him—clambered up into the high carriage and wedged himself between the elderly gentleman and the inquisitive driver, who had regained his seat and the reins.

Christopher’s experiences of driving were of a very limited nature, and certainly they did not embrace anything like this. He had no recollection of ever having travelled by train, and it was the question of pace that fascinated him, the rapid, easy swinging movement through the air, the fresh breeze rushing by, the distancing of humbler wayfarers, all gave him a strange sense of exhilaration. Years afterward, when flesh and blood were all too slow for him and he was one of the best motorists in England, if not in Europe, he used to recall the rapturous pleasure of that first drive of his, that first introduction to the mad, tense joy of speed that ever after held him in thrall.

The owner of the phaeton and the elderly gentleman whom he had called Stapleton exchanged no remarks, but they both cast curious, thoughtful glances at their small companion from time to time. They had to rouse him from his rhapsody to ask the way at last. He answered concisely and shortly with no touch of the local burr.

“How came you to be so far away?” demanded Jim’s fine gentleman as they were passing through the market-place.

Jim was engaged in superciliously ignoring the amazed stares of the town boys who were apt to look down on the “workhouse kid,” though he attended the Whitmansworth school. Once past them he answered the question vaguely.

“The master was out: I hadn’t to do anything.”

“And you had permission to wander where you liked?”

To this Jim did not reply. He had *not* permission, but he counted on the good nature of Mrs. Moss, with 9 whom he was a favourite, to plead his cause with her husband.

"Had you permission?" demanded his questioner again, bending down suddenly to look in the boy's face with his disconcerting eyes.

It would have seemed to Jim on reflection a great deal more prudent and quite as easy to have said "yes" as "no," but the "no" slipped out, and the questioner smiled, not ill-pleased.

At last they came to a standstill before the door of the Whitmansworth Union. Jim, with a prodigious sigh, prepared to descend. The glorious adventure was over. Also he prepared to slip away to a more lowly entrance, but was stopped by a retaining hand.

The porter, no friend of Jim's, stared with dull amazement at the apparition of the fine turn-out, and the still finer gentleman waiting on the doorstep with that little "varmint" of a Hibbault. He signed to the boy angrily to begone, as he ushered the visitor in.

"The boy will stay with me," said the owner of the phaeton quietly, and they were accordingly shown into that solemn sanctum, the Board Room. It was a cheerful room with flowers in the window and a long green-covered table with comfortable chairs on each side, but it struck a cold note of discomfort in Jim's heart. The first time he had entered it, about six months ago, the chairs had been occupied by ten more or less portly gentlemen who informed him that his mother, now being dead (she had died two days previously), they had decided to give him a home for the present, and would educate him and teach him a trade, and that he should be very grateful and must be a good boy.

Jim had said tearfully he would rather go back to London and Mrs. Sartin, which appeared to surprise them very much, and they were at some pains to point out the advantages of a country life, which did not appeal to him at all. Then one of them, who had not spoken before, said abruptly, "his mother had wished him to stay there, and there was an end of it."

That was six months ago. Jim remembered it all very distinctly as he waited with his companion in the Board Room.

Mr. Moss bustled in: he was a stout, cheerful man of hasty temper, but withal a man one could deal with—through his wife—in Jim’s estimation.

He held the card the visitor had sent in between his fingers and looked flurried and surprised. Jim noticed he bowed to the stranger, but did not offer to shake hands as he did with the doctor and parson and the few rare visitors the boy had observed. So Jim concluded *his* gentleman was a very great gentleman indeed, as he had all along suspected.

“My name is Aston—Charles Aston”—said the owner of the phaeton in his pleasant voice. “I have driven down from London to make inquiries about a small boy I have reason to believe came under your care about seven months ago: Hibbault by name.”

“Yes, sir,—Mr. Aston,” said Mr. Moss, assuming an air of importance, “and that is the boy himself.”

“A good boy, I hope?” He bestowed on him one of those keen, sharp glances Jim was beginning not to resent.

“Not bad as boys go,” Mr. Moss answered dubiously, scratching his chin, “but his bringing up has been against him. London, sir,—and then tramping about the country for a year.”

Jim regarded Mr. Aston anxiously to see how this somewhat negative character struck him, but he was still looking at Jim and seemed to pay small heed to Mr. Moss’s words.

“We passed him on the road,” he said; “I was struck by the likeness to someone I knew, and I thought there could not be two boys so like in Whitmansworth. You were master here when he was admitted?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Aston. It was in November last, on a Thursday night, I remember, because service was on. The mother was clean exhausted, and was taken to the infirmary at once and—”

Mr. Aston interposed.

“Christopher, go out and stay by the carriage till I call you, and ask the gentleman—Mr. Stapleton—to come in here.”

And James Christopher Hibbault obeyed without so much as a glance for permission at Mr. Moss.

He delivered his message and then interviewed the groom, who seemed used to waiting. The tea bell rang, but Jim, though hungry, never thought of disobeying his orders. The hall porter came out and went off on his bicycle and presently returned with Mr. Page, one of the Board gentlemen.

The groom eventually grew communicative and told Jim the horses' names were Castor and Pollux, and there wasn't their match in the country, no more in all London, though to be sure Mr. Aston had some fine horses at Marden Court.

"Is that where he lives?" inquired Jim.

It appeared he lived there sometimes, but Mr. Nevil, — Jim did not know who that was — lived there mostly. Mr. Aston spent most of his time in London with Mr. Aymer. They had left London the previous day, Jim learnt, and had been driving to queer out-of-the-way places, always stopping at Unions.

At which point the door opened and Mr. Aston came out, and with him Mr. Page and Mr. and Mrs. Moss and Mr. Stapleton with a bundle of papers in his hand, and all these people looked at Jim in a perplexed way, except Mr. Aston, who appeared quite happy and unconcerned. 12

"Say good-bye to Mrs. Moss, Christopher," he said authoritatively. "You are coming with me."

"Where to?" demanded the boy with a sudden access of caution.

"To London."

Christopher began to scramble up into the carriage and was unceremoniously hauled down.

"Manners, Christopher. Mrs. Moss is waiting to say good-bye."

Now, Mrs. Moss had been very kind to the little waif and taken him to her motherly childless heart, and in spite of her excitement over this wonderful event, or because of it, she could not refrain from a few tears. Jim was not indifferent to the fact — any more than he had been to the lark's song, but he secretly thought it very incon-

siderate of her to cloud this extraordinary adventure with anything so depressing as tears. He was the more aggrieved as against his will, against all reason and all tradition of manliness, he found objectionable salt drops brimming up in his own eyes. A culminating point was reached, however, when Mrs. Moss fairly embraced him. It should be stated that on occasions and in private Jim had no sort of objection to being cuddled by Mrs. Moss, who was a comfortable, pillowy sort of person.

The ordeal was over at last and he was clambering up into the carriage when Mrs. Moss bethought her he had had no tea.

Mr. Aston protested they were going to stop at Basingstoke, but the good woman insisted on provisioning the boy with a wedge of cake and tucking a clean handkerchief of her own into his pocket.

"We shall sleep at Basingstoke, and I'll send back his clothes by post," said Mr. Aston. "No doubt we can get him some sort of temporary outfit there."

Jim, who had been secretly afraid he would be relegated to the back seat with the groom, breathed a sigh of relief as Mr. Aston mounted to his place. That gentleman apparently understood the innermost soul of the boy, for he gravely asked Mr. Stapleton to find room for a companion, and then with a toss of their proud heads Castor and Pollux moved off. Mr. Aston raised his hat courteously to Mrs. Moss, and Jim, observing, made an attempt to remove his own dingy little cap, a performance everyone took as a matter of course until he had gone, when Mrs. Moss remembered it and exclaimed to her husband: "Didn't I always say, Joseph, he wasn't like the rest of them?"

But Joseph only said "Umph," and went in doors.

"We will telegraph to Aymer from Basingstoke," said Mr. Aston as they started, and after that there was silence.

The monotonous click-clack of the horses' feet lulled the tired child into blissful drowsiness. He had had too many ups and downs in his eleven years of life to be alarmed at this unexpected turn of fortune, and he was still too young to grasp how great a change had been wrought in that life since the hot hour he had spent lying by the mile-stone on the Great Road.

As they clattered through the narrow streets of the country town in the light of the long July evening Christopher sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"I've been here before," he volunteered.

Mr. Aston effected a skilful pass between a donkey cart and two perambulators.

"Yes, quite right, you have. What do you remember about it, Christopher?"

The boy looked dubious and a little distressed, but just then they passed a chemist's shop.

"We went there," he cried. "Mother got something for her cough, so she couldn't have any supper. 14 We stayed at a horrid old woman's, a nasty, cross thing."

"You did not go to the Union, then?"

"No, we had some money, a whole shilling and some pennies."

Mr. Aston said something under his breath and Mr. Stapleton murmured "tut-tut-tut."

"That's how we first missed the trail, Stapleton," he said, and then as they walked up a steep hill he spoke to the boy.

"Christopher, I want you to tell me anything you remember about your mother and the old days if you wish it, but you must not talk about that to Aymer. It would make him unhappy."

"Who is Aymer?" asked Christopher, not unreasonably.

"Aymer is my son, my eldest son. You are going to live with him."

"Is he a boy like me?"

"No, he is quite big, grown up, but he can't get about as you can, he is — a cripple."

He said the words with a sort of forced jerk and half under his breath, but Christopher heard them and shivered.

"Do you live there, too?" he asked, pressing a little nearer the man who was no longer a stranger.

“Live where?”

“With the — your son.”

“Yes, I live there too. My boy couldn’t get on without me — and here’s the White Elephant, which means supper and bed for a tired young man. Jump down, Christopher.”

15

CHAPTER II

The spirit of waning July hung heavily over London. In mean streets and alleys it was inexpressibly dreary: the fagged inhabitants lacked even energy to quarrel.

But on the high ground westward of the Park, where big houses demand elbow-room and breathing space and even occasionally exclusive gardens, a little breeze sprang up at sundown and lingered on till dusk.

In this region lies one of the most beautiful houses in London, the country seat of some fine gentleman in Queen Anne's day. It hid its beauties, however, from the public gaze, lying modestly back in a garden whose size had no claim to modesty at all. All one could see from the road, through the iron gates, was a glimpse of a wide portico, and a long row of windows. It stood high and in its ample garden the breeze ran riot, shaking the scent from orange and myrtle trees, from jasmine and roses, and wafting it in at the wide open windows of a room which, projecting from the house, seemed to take command of the garden.

It was a large room and the windows went from ceiling to floor. It was also a very beautiful room. In the gathering dusk the restful harmonies of its colours melted into soft, hazy blue, making it appear vaster than it really was. Also, it was unencumbered by much furniture and what there was so essentially fitted its place that it was unobtrusive. Three big canvases occupied the walls, indiscernible in the dim light, but masterpieces of world fame, heirlooms known all over Europe. There was a curious dearth of small objects and unessentials, nothing in all the 16 great space that could fatigue the eye or perplex the brain of the occupant.

The owner of the room was lying on a big sofa near one of the open windows. Within reach was a low bookcase, a table with an electric reading lamp, and a little row of electric bells, some scattered papers and an open telegram.

The man on the sofa lay quite still looking into the garden as it sunk from sight under the slowly falling veil of purple night.

He was evidently a tall man, with the head and shoulders of an athlete, and a face of such precise and unusual beauty that one's instinct called out, "Here, then, God has planned a man."

Aymer Aston, indeed, was not unlike his father, but far more regular in feature, more carefully hewn, and the serenity of the older face was lacking. Here was the face of a fighter, alive with the strong passions held in by a stronger will. There was almost riotous vitality expressed in his colouring, coppery-coloured hair and dark brows, eyes of surprising blueness and a tanned skin, for he spent hours lying in the sun, hatless and unshaded, with the avowed intention of "browning"; and he "browned" well except for a queer white triangled scar almost in the centre of his forehead, an ugly mark that showed up with fresh distinctness when any emotion brought the quick blood to his face. There was indeed nothing in his appearance to suggest a cripple or an invalid.

Nevertheless, Aymer Aston, aged thirty-five, the best polo-player, the best fencer, the best athlete of his day at College, possessing more than his share of the vigour of youth and glory of life, had, for over ten years, never moved without help from the sofa on which he lay, and the strange scar and a certain weakness in the left hand and arm were the only visible signs of the catastrophe that had broken his life. 17

A thin, angular man entered, and crossed the room with an apologetic cough.

"Is that you, Vespasian?" demanded his master without moving. "Have they come?"

"No, sir, but there is a message from the House. I believe Mr. Aston is wanted particularly."

"What a nuisance. Why can't they let him alone? He might as well be in office."

The man, without asking permission, rearranged his master's cushions with a practised hand.

"The young gentleman had better have some supper upstairs, sir, as it's so late," he suggested. "I'll see to it myself."

"Send him in to me directly they come, Vespasian."

"Yes, sir."

He withdrew as quietly as he had entered and Aymer continued to look out at the dark, and think over the change he, of his own will, was about to make in his monotonous existence. He was so lost in thought he did not hear the door open again or realise the "change" was actually an accomplished fact till a half-frightened gasp of "Oh!" caught his ear. He turned as well as he could, unaided.

"Is that you, Christopher?"

The voice was so singularly like Mr. Aston's that Christopher felt reassured. The dim vastness of the room had frightened him, also he had thought it empty.

"Come over here to me," said Aymer, holding out his hand, "I can't come to you."

Christopher nervously advanced. The brightness of the corridor outside left his eyes confused in this dim light. Aymer suddenly remembered this and turned on a switch. The vague shadowy space was flooded with soft radiance. It was like magic to the small boy.

He was first aware of a gorgeous glint of colouring in a rug flung across the sofa, and then of a man lying on a pile of dull-tinted pillows, a man with red hair and blue eyes, watching him eagerly.

Children as a rule are not susceptible to physical beauty, turning with undeviating instinct to the inner soul of things, with a fine disregard for externals, but Christopher, in this, was rather abnormal. He was very actively alive to outward form.

Since Mr. Aston had told him Aymer was a cripple Christopher had been consumed with unspeakable dread. His idea of a cripple was derived from a distorted, evil-faced old man who had lived in the same house that had once sheltered his mother and him. The mere thought of it made him sick with horror. And when the tall gentleman in black, who had met them in the entrance hall and escorted him here, had opened the door and put him inside, he had much ado not to rush out again. He conquered his fear with unrecognised heroism, and this was his reward.

He stood staring, with all his worshipful admiration writ large on his little tired white face. Aymer Aston saw it and laughed. He was quite aware of his own good looks and perfectly unaffected thereby, though he took some pains to preserve them. But his vanity had centred itself on one thing in his earlier life, and that, his great strength, and it died when that was no more.

"Little Christopher," he said, "come and sit down by me: you must be tired to death."

"Are you Mr. Aymer?" demanded Christopher, still staring.

"Yes, only you mustn't call me that, I think. I wonder what you will call me?"

Christopher offered no solution to the problem.

"Would you like to live here with me?"

He looked round. A dim sense of alarm crept back. The room looked so empty and unreal, so 19 "alone." Without knowing why, Christopher, who had never had a real home to pine for, felt miserably homesick.

Aymer watched him closely and did not press the question. Instead, he asked him in a matter-of-fact way to shut the window for him.

The boy did so without blundering. The window-fastening was new to him, and Aymer noticed he looked at it curiously and shut it twice to see how it went. Then he sat down again and continued to gaze at Aymer.

"I forgot, I was to tell you something," he said suddenly, his face wrinkling with distress. "The other one—the gentleman who brought me--"

"My father?"

Christopher nodded. "I oughtn't to have forgotten. He said he had to go to the House, but he'd be back quite soon, he hoped."

"He's had no dinner, I suppose," grumbled Aymer.

"Yes, we had dinner at—I forget the name of the place—and tea. And yesterday we had dinner too."