THE END OF MAKE BELIEVE: BY MARY HEATON VORSE

This is a hard story to tell because the things which happened touched me so deeply and because I have always had the feeling that somehow I should have prevented it all, though of course, I could not, but one feels that way toward the cruel things of life that ought not to have happened. I should at least have gone back and comforted Ellis, though there was nothing I could have said which would have given him back what he lost that day. I told myself then he wouldn’t want to see me, and I still think that is so, but the real reason is that I was too cowardly, I couldn’t meet his little drawn face. My only excuse is that I was a girl at the time and there was a horror about it all to me. My part in the story is an account of a series of remissnesses toward Fanny and Ellis and I cannot but feel ashamed when I think how much I meant in their two lives and how little I did for them.

They lived in one of the handful of houses which looked as if chance had thrown them against the face of the Simsbury hills, and theirs was the bleakest in the settlement. Two forbidding pine trees stood before the house which stared with empty unseeing windows at the bare bones of the mountain which rose in its face only a stone’s throw across the road. It gave the effect of a house which has long since been deserted and left to tumble to pieces quietly behind its picket fence which looked like the sparse pointed teeth of an old man. It gave me a sense of desolation to look at it; a genial tumble-down disorder, chickens and even a pig running in and out of the door would have been grateful.

The first time I went to Thornton Corners I went on foot because of the roads being hard for a horse in the early spring. Two miles of steady rise and three miles of steep climbing it is. Part of the way I caught a ride on an ox team and the man told me that the best place for Mayflowers was in the hill pasture opposite Forges’s. That is how I found Fanny and Ellis. I recognized their house by the ravine and the pine trees the man had told me about.

They were in the front yard playing croquet with two grown boys. The wickets were made of willow twigs bent over, the mallets were shingles, but I especially admired the ingenuity which would lead one to use china hen’s eggs for croquet balls.

They played with great interest and gravity, so absorbed that they did not notice my approach. In the interest of the game they had quite lost sight of the fact that there was anything original in
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their croquet set. I plucked up courage enough to ask my way to the
field where the arbutus was. They gazed at me open-eyed a moment,
then Fanny replied:

"Ellis he knows where there's Mayflowers," thus comfortably
shifting all responsibility for the question I had put her.

"All over there, it's full of it." Ellis waved a vague hand to the
mountainside. I made my way to what looked to me a likely place,
and found leaves and buds but no flowers. Presently I heard a shy
little voice behind me which said:

"Ellis he says that you ain't in the right place. Ellis he says for
me to show it to you." I turned to find Fanny, who since I had seen
her a few minutes before had made a marvelously quick change. I
saw at once that she had on a clean frock and a new hair ribbon,
even though she had withdrawn as much as was possible into the
branches of a little pine tree. I felt touched at the honor done me.

"It's over there," Fanny went on in her little faraway voice, but
I knew that she was very glad to see me for all she drew the branches
of the pine around her like a garment.

I HAVE two vivid pictures in my mind of Fanny. One of them
comes to me unbidden; it is the picture of Fanny as she was the
last time I saw her, and I blot it out as quickly as I can with the
picture of Fanny dressed in her clean brown frock, her shining new
hair ribbon and her pine tree, her brown eyes gleaming out at me from
the pine needles like some friendly wood creature. As she told me
the Mayflowers were over there I saw Ellis careening around over
the southern slope; he whooped joyfully as he ran.

"Ellis," Fanny explained, apologetically, "is a camel-leopard.
He made the hump on his back." With that she came forth definitely
from her pine tree and I saw that her thin little face was shining from
a recent soapy washing. She was a very little person and I was sur-
prised when she told me she was going on twelve in exchange for the
information that my name was Marion Hughes. These confidences
further cleared the air of shyness, for Fanny now volunteered:

"He's been a camel-leopard three days now, all the time 'cept
when he plays croquet. The others won't play, 'less he stops—he
made up the croquet set." She looked at me sideways with a little
note of embarrassment and of pride also in her voice as she gave me
the first glimpse of make-believe world where she and Ellis spent
their days.

We were well acquainted by the time we reached the southern
slope, though still a little embarrassed by one another. Fanny greeted Ellis with the simple statement:

"Her name is Marion," which it seemed was enough to make us good friends at once, for Ellis, though he was a wood creature like Fanny, had not learned then that human beings are bad and therefore to be feared. That he might help me better he soon discarded his hump, which was made of a newspaper and craftily tied on with string. After a while the temptation of a new audience grew too strong for him. As he hopped toward me there was no room left for doubt that he had suddenly turned into a rabbit, and I told him so.

"A white rabbit," he corrected. "I eat up all the pink May-flowers, that's what makes my eyes so red." When I ran after him imploring him not to eat them all up he rolled down the hill, laughing and laughing—I have never heard anyone else laugh as Ellis did. It was as if his little soul was a crystal spring of laughter, as if he were pouring out his inner being in the throbbing happy noise, as some birds sing. One could not hear it unmoved, for it seemed as if all the glad innocent things had their share in the making of it, as though Ellis had tapped the hidden source of all good and it came to the surface in him in his laughter.

It took us all out of ourselves. I ran down the hill after him laughing, and Fanny rolled down as Ellis had, no longer a little brown wren of a girl, but a gay wild thing drunk with spring and laughter. Yet all the time we must both of us have felt conscious, Fanny and I, that this wasn't our doing, but Ellis's magic; that he had given us one of the most precious things that life holds—a few minutes lived high above the ordinary scale that life is tuned to.

We stopped as we began and again fell to picking arbutus soberly, while Fanny said to me, "Ellis makes you laugh and laugh. He makes everyone laugh, but when you get through you don't know what you've been laughing at." That was it. He could make one laugh and he didn't need the makeshift of having to have something to laugh at. He had the key which opened the treasure-house, and laughter bubbled forth like water from a living spring. You wouldn't have guessed it to look at him, for he looked like any other little undersized boy of ten with a delicate little profile, a brown face and tousled brown hair.

No one who saw us engaged at our pleasant task would have supposed that one of these children, who seemed more like little brown birds than anything else, had at his command two of the most precious things in the world, illusion and laughter.
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IT GREW late and I started for home, but I stopped at the house which gleamed out from behind the pine trees as fragile and gray as an empty shell which the sea has forgotten. An old man very much bent and infirm was pottering around the yard, a fit occupant for such a house.

“It’s my father,” Fanny explained, for Ellis was off the road, the adventure of life upon him. The old man came forward and with a very gentle and courteous manner bade me come in and be seated. A woman, untidy and shiftless, appeared at the door, and shading her face against the late western sun with her bony hand, called with shrill listlessness:

“Ellis, Ellis!” She could as well have called him back from another world.

“That there boy’ll be the death of me,” she said in her indifferent, monotonous voice. “He’s forever at some nonsense, don’t no one know what he’s drivin’ at. He’ll be solemn for days, then off he’ll go like that. Come in and set, won’t you?” Fanny had gone in ahead and was busy getting me a drink. “Excuse the looks er things, I’m feelin’ real poorly and ain’t had the heart to slick up.”

A chill crept over me as I sat there in the disorderly room. Fanny slipped up beside me and shyly took my hand while the woman whose face and hair and faded calico seemed shades of one dismal color, talked on and on about how poorly she felt and how bad Pa’s rheumatiz was—discouragement was in the air she breathed. Then I started on my way home and found Ellis and laughter waiting for me.

After that, I often found him waiting for me in the bend of the road. It makes my heart ache to think how many long hours he spent watching for me there. You see, I was the first one he had ever met who was akin to him except Fanny. She waited for me too, and as soon as I appeared, scudded off to the house to put on the famous clean dress, kept, I suspected, for my visits.

“Don’t you have to go to school?” I asked them.

“Not when we have company,” they answered, for they thought that arbutus was only a secondary reason for my coming up into the hills, and so after a time it came to be. They always had new places for me, for they ranged the woods looking for them against my coming. Then when we had gathered all I could carry back over the long road, we would sit in the pine woods, while Fanny bound the flowers into convenient little nosegays and Ellis lay on his back looking up in the sky make-believing for me, the wings of his little fancy taking longer flights all the time. This make-believe of
his went beyond the imaginings of children, it was a living force with him. He lived the things he imagined and made Fanny live them; she had some mysterious feeling that the things Ellis imagined actually were, and since it had been the very fabric of her life as long as she could remember it is not strange that this should be so. I reached my greatest intimacy with them the last time I saw them that summer. Ellis lying on his back made his own kind of rambling poetry for me.

“If I was the brook,” he half chanted, “if I was the brook, I’d tear all the Mayflowers off my banks and float them down to you——”

“Oh, don’t be the brook, Ellis,” Fanny begged. “You’d leave me. I can’t bear to have him the brook—there can’t be two brooks in one place.”

He didn’t look at her, but went on with his chant.

“If I was the wind I’d blow them there. But if I was a hawk, if I was a hawk,” he went on with rising exultation, “I’d bring them to you, I’d knock on the door with my beak and drop ’em there. Then I’d fly to a tree—there’s a tree near your house, isn’t there, Marion? I’d fly to it and sit and watch you and you’d come out and see the flowers and look to see who’d brought ’em, an’ I’d be laughing and laughing to see you look. Oh! Ho!” and he laughed aloud with that joyous laugh of his. “You’d never think it was a hawk and that the hawk was me.”

I DIDN’T go back for some weeks. Summer had come before I went up into the hills. The house looked more forbidding and empty than ever. The old man was sitting under the pine tree whittling at a wooden bowl.

“Where are Fanny and Ellis?” I asked.

“They’ve gone away,” he told me, with his gentle vagueness. “Won’t you come in and be seated?” He never forgot his manners.

“Have they gone for long?”

“I can’t rightly say. She didn’t let on exactly. They’ve gone with their Ma,” he explained.

“Where did you say they were?” I persisted.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. They’ve gone up state. They’ve gone to the city. She told me where—but I can’t sort o’ remember. She’s got folks there. Yes, she’s got folks there.” He brightened up at being able to tell me anything as definite. I sat with him a few minutes while he whittled at his bowl. His vagueness seemed to have wiped them off the earth. I felt as if they were make-believe children of my own invention. I might of course have
found out from the older brothers or the neighbors where, but I
didn’t. I didn’t do anything, I only sentimentalized over what would
happen to Ellis. I thought of him turning his imagination to bad
ends, I fancied him flying his little kite of illusion in some dangerous
place. I thought of him arrested perhaps for having played too
much and laughed too much, arrested and sent to a reformatory. I
knew what would happen to Fanny—she would go to school and tidy
up after her slovenly mother. I sentimentalized, but that was all
I did, then as was natural I even stopped thinking about them except
as I went to Thornton Corners in the spring after arbutus. Two
springs I asked for them to learn that they’d “been home for a spell,"
that “they were expected soon.” They seemed to spend their time
between Thornton Corners and the town where their mother went
to work. I suppose the older boys couldn’t make enough for all of
them and the father had passed his usefulness, for I had never made
any inquiries as to how they lived nor done anything to help them
in any way. Ellis had given me something precious, we had met
only in his make-believe country, and in exchange I had given him
sympathy. Until they went away it hadn’t occurred to me how much
I had left undone.

The third spring I found Ellis again. He was waiting for me at
the bend in the road as if it hadn’t been three years since we had seen
each other, and as he sprang forward I saw that none of my dark
imaginings had been fulfilled. He hadn’t changed in looks, he
wasn’t even much taller. His eyes had the same lovely wild gleam,
and I knew that laughter was bubbling in his spirit waiting for any
excuse to run over. We didn’t have to get acquainted over again,
it was the happiest sort of a meeting.

“I knew you’d come, Marion,” he said. “They told me you’d
been here every spring. Do you ever play you are spring? That’s
what I play you are. Never seem’s if it came till you do.”

We talked on just as we used to, and as he didn’t talk of the things
he had seen, neither did I. At sight of him my vague self-reproach
vanished and I let him take me by the hand and lead me into his own
little magic world.

“Fanny’ll be here in a moment,” he said. “She’s gone in to fix
her hair.” Everything was as it should be, nothing had changed,
and I sang the glad tune Ellis had taught me. “She’s been sick,”
he added.

She came lumbering across the pasture to me, a spick and span
little mother bunch huddled in a little shawl. She hadn’t grown
much either, but she had filled out amazingly to a veritable little roly-poly, her round face was an unhealthy pasty color from being ill so long, I supposed. I should hardly have known Fanny; she looked at me with her good childish eyes in a funny questioning way like a hurt child who asks one why it has to be hurt. Neither Ellis’s gaiety nor mine could lift her out of herself for more than a moment; left to herself she would fall into an absent-minded stare, open-mouthed, open-eyed, as if life were a painful riddle for which she could find no answer. Her brown eyes followed me as though they asked me, “What has happened? What has happened?” When Ellis dashed off on a winged flight down the hill she would run after him, from force of habit, I suppose; though her ungainly figure rolled around like a little old woman’s, her poor feet still imagined they could carry her along with the old-time dash and fleetness.

I DIDN’T analyze all this at the time, I was too glad to get Ellis back, too glad to get into the open and play at little girl again. Spring was in my blood and in Ellis’s, and we made believe to our heart’s desire. I didn’t waste time philosophizing about Fanny and accepted as simply as any little girl Ellis’s statement that Fanny had “been sick.”

I went in as I always did to pass the time of day with their mother and to get my drink of water. This was the regular ending of my little party.

Mrs. Forges greeted me listlessly as usual, but there was a tinge of hostility in her tone, like that of a person who has been standing on the defensive so long that she in turn had become aggressive.

Ellis welcomed me in joyfully, he ran ahead of me toward an old-fashioned wooden cradle, a contemporary of the antiquated benches in the school.

“Come here and look, Marion. See what’s here!” he said. “See my little brother.”

Tenderness and pride were in his voice, there was not a note to warn me.

I bent over the little red creature.

“Why,” I exclaimed, “I didn’t know you had another little one, Mrs. Forges.” It was in my mind to go on to say something foolish about the distance in ages between this last baby and the others, for even then no suspicion of the truth had touched me, when she interrupted me with a gesture not without its harsh dignity.

”’Taint my baby—” she said. “It’s Fanny’s.”
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Fanny stood near the cradle gazing at the child with her look of stunned surprise on her face.
For a moment there was perfect quiet in the room.
"I can't be's hard on her's mebbe I oughter," the woman went on, a vague note of apology in her voice. "She ain't seemed all there—sense."

Again there was silence in the room; the baby slept while Fanny gazed at it with her stupid open-mouthed wonder, while Ellis stood tense and rigid, his eyes flaming at me. Then Mrs. Forges spoke again. "Ellis he always makes believe it's his little brother——" "And so you might, so you might," he cried, springing forward—for a moment I thought he was going to strike his mother. "Just this once you had a right to make believe! Oh, couldn't you have done it for this once? She'd almost got to believing it's real—Fanny thought 'twas true most," he had turned violently to me. "She believed most 'twas our brother. And now she's spoiled it, she's spoiled it. Fanny knows, and we never can make believe again." His voice broke and he fled from the room. I could hear him sobbing in the woodshed beyond. I started to go to him, but at the sound of me he turned and ran from me like a hunted wild thing and I watched him until the merciful forest hid him from me, and I turned back to the room where Fanny stood looking with stupid eyes at her baby.

COMPENSATION

O
VER the grasses sere and brown
The silver shadows press.
With giant steps the sun strides down
The golden terraces.
Silver and gold! But my heart grieves:
"Oh, for the little vanished leaves!"

The ghosts of little leaves upsailed
In song, on winter's wing:—
Forgotten wonders were. We veiled
From you their gladdening.
O lift your eyes across the plain!
Behold, the hills have come again!

Agnes Lee.