“Geen Baceler”

by

Elizabeth Robins

ONE is quite sure, on reflection, that love of Make-believe is more deeply implanted in the human breast than any concern about truth.

To the mind unjaundiced by years this business of saying sooth is like the foot-rule or the spirit-level--a useful means to certain dull mechanical ends, but a poor, a servile thing, born to drag the chain. Not alone the myth-maker, the poet, and the novelist who are lured along the lanes of fancy--but every creature that is born human, walks that way while youth is with him.

Before the pure outlines of infancy are blurred by repeated corrections, the superiority, the splendid necessity of Make-believe is perhaps the clearest perception of the untrammelled intelligence. It is one of the few things no child has to be taught. Indeed, a good many bewildered little sons of men have fallen on their first evil days in learning that to be good and to be grown up (terms synonymous) involve a casting away of Make-believe, unless, retaining this shred or that, you give some pre-concerted signal, like ringing a bell to take up a playhouse curtain, or like printing the word “Romance” on the title-page of a book, lest any one should find himself more convinced than was good for him. “Another way,” as the cook books have it, is to say unimaginatively to the child at your knee, “Now I’ll tell you a story,” which clearly spoils the fun, since making a story is the opposite of making believe.

The odd thing about it is that, in one sense, the child is not really

deceived any more than the grown man--only the child observes more rigidly the rules of the game.

Little Jack Farnborough, for instance, is not old enough to realise that in admitting to this game a person stricken in years--stricken even to the extent of a score--you must take into account his slow-moving, ethic-clogged fancy and give him a clue; just as you daren't leave it to his unaided dulness to know that what you have drawn on your slate is not a windmill, but a knight in armour, and that you simply *have* to drag your brother about by the heels since he is Hector and you are Achilles.

It is not improbably that Jack's prospects in life will be permanently blighted by his loyalty to the rules of the game.

For the first years of his existence he was the favourite grandchild of the rich and somewhat eccentric old Mrs. Farnborough. He maintained this proud position even after the birth of an astute Jacob of a younger brother, in spite, or possibly because of the fact that Jack did everything at the earliest possible moment, except talk. The proficiency of three elder sister left him cold. He didn't and he wouldn't *try* to learn more than a scant tourist's vocabulary (barely sufficient for a lordly young traveller in an alien land) until his younger brother was prepared to take part in the conversation. It is quite clear that this younger brother will cost Jack dear. But at the time that old Mrs. Farnborough lost her emerald bracelet, the young Jacob had only recently arrived, and Jack still carried on intercourse with his fellows, much as though they were creatures of some barbarian tribe, whose lingo it wouldn't repay him to master. Nevertheless in his own eloquent way, he conveyed approval of his grandmother's country place, her dogs and horses, her pigs and chickens, her sweetmeats, her great bunch of seals and her somewhat barbaric taste in jewellery. The old lady was accustomed to see children flee at the sight of her brown nutcracker face and towering head-dress, into which she fastened violent-hued ribbons and jewelled ornaments. Jack would stare solemnly at each new combination, and towards the more outrageous results he would stretch out clutching little hands and grunt a crescendo of avaricious delight, till the infatuated old lady, in high good humour, would unbuckle paste clasps and things of price and let the child play with them as he sat in her lap. She was amazed at his infant taste and intelligence, and had him constantly with her. He was even thought worthy of going to church in her company. Jack's nurse, who had abundant proof that the young gentleman made up in other

ways for any backwardness he might evince in speech, respectfully pointed out that Master Jack had never yet been to Divine Service, and when pressed for the absent mother's reason for this neglect, Matilda feebly opined that it must be because "Master Jack was that un-expected."

Old Mrs. Farnborough was convinced that young Mrs. Farnborough didn't understand boys--having so many girls had enfeebled her views of life. Of course jack should go to church. And behold, true to his character for unexpectedness, he covered himself with glory. He had stared speechless with amazement at the processional, and had smiled and drummed softly with his fingers while they sang; he had followed the very sermon with a solemnity and attention that left nothing to be desired. Mrs. Farnborough was enchanted. It was easy to see the child had inherited her interest in affairs ecclesiastic. The boy would be a bishop.

It was that very day at luncheon that Mrs. Farnborough missed her emerald bracelet. She sent her maid upstairs for it. The maid was gone a long time, and returned to say it wasn't anywhere to be seen. Mrs. Farnborough scolded the maid, and sent her back to look again. The young woman didn't reappear, and Mrs. Farnborough hobbled upstairs to find her maid in tears, the room in confusion, and no emerald bracelet anywhere. The other servants were called and interrogated, and for the greater part of the afternoon everybody was hunting high and low.

Everybody, that is, except Matilda and Master Jack, who had come in from a walk and gone to the big bare room opening on the garden, where generations of children had played, and kicked the wainscot, and battered the high brass fender, and otherwise passed the time in summers long gone by.

In the midst of one of Mrs. Farnborough's harangues to her quaking servants--some of whom were losing their Sunday out "all along of that old peacock's finery"--the ancient lady suddenly bethought her of Matilda. She would go down and arraign *her*. Arrived at the play-room door, she flung it open as if she expected to find Matilda gloating over the bracelet at that precise instant. But Matilda had fallen asleep over a book, and Jack, with his nightgown over his clothes and a dark woolen comforter hung stole-like round his hot little neck, was standing up in a high chair at the end of the long room, facing all the other chairs ranged in

symmetrical rows. He balanced "The Child's Animal Book" on the back of the high chair, and was intoning in an unknown tongue, but with a pious volubility that recalled vividly the Rev. Ganthorny's performance of the morning. Mrs. Farnborough's fury abated before the touching spectacle. She sat down not far from Matilda, in the nearest "pew," and Jack, never pausing, went on, with the face of a seraph and the added zest imparted by the presence of an audience which has not gone to sleep. His grandmother was melted almost to tears. The boy's leaning towards the Church was unmistakable. She bowed her tired old head, with its incongruous decoration, on the back of the chair before her. Jack understood the signal. His grandmother was really playing up very well. He knelt down and mumbled a low despairing monotone; and when the fun of that palled, he stood up and sang "Here we go round the mulberry bush," the first strains of which waked up Matilda, and recalled Mrs. Farnborough to the affairs of the world.

Matilda knew nothing of the bracelet, and offered angrily to have her box searched, which was promptly done, with no effect beyond the further enraging of Matilda.

It was an inspiration of the tea hour that, after all, the person who had abstracted the bracelet was Jack. The only time he had cried since his arrival had been when he wasn't allowed to clasp that very bracelet round the neck of the cat. All the servants in a chorus of relief remembered seeing Master Jack either looking at the trinket with longing eyes or trying to coax it off Mrs. Farnborough's wrist.

The young gentleman was called into the drawing-room and the case put to him. But the recital bored him. He stood by his grandmother shifting from one foot to another. Yes, he was uneasy, that the old lady saw. But she would be very kind and very wise with this innocent little creature, who had been encouraged to look upon a lady's trinkets as a dispensation of a thoughtful Providence for the entertainment of little boys. He naturally didn't want to disgorge a pretty shiny green toy with a snap and a little chain.

"Now, darling" -- Mrs. Farnborough smoothed her grandson's hair -- "you thought you might play with it, didn't you?"

"Hm--hm--" said Jack, indifferently.

"Yes, dear." (What a comfort the child had not been frightened into telling lies.) "And so you took the bracelet, didn't you?"

"M--t," he grunted, shaking his head.

"Now, darling, tell the truth."

His attention wandered to the Brazilian beetle in her cap.

"Listen, my pet. I'm not the least angry with you." Jack's indifference was profound. "Where is it, Jackie? Tell your own dear grandmamma." Jackie yawned. "Come, come now, listen dear." She shook him gently. "You took the pretty green bracelet to play with, didn't you, my angel?"

He shook his head, but slowly; the old lady's tone was so appealing, he seemed reluctant to fall below her genial expectation. Suddenly she had an inspiration. She hobbled to the Japanese cabinet where in wonderful little drawers lived an inexhaustible store of wonderful sugar joys. Jackie's eyes sparkled. If the affair tended this way it was worth consideration. But Mrs. Farnborough stopped, with her beringed and bony hand in the nearest drawer, and looked at Jack.

"If you are a good boy you shall have some." Jack grinned and nodded hopefully. "Will you be good?"

"Yeh."

"Very well, then confess you took the green bracelet."

"Yeh."

"Aha! so you really *did* take it?"

"Yeh--yeh!" He was sure he was on the right track now. He held out both hands.

"Where did you put it?" His look clouded. There was to be a lot of ceremony about these bonbons.

"Can't you remember?"

He shook his curls despairingly.

"Poor little boy--try!"

He tiptoed up, endeavouring vainly to see into the drawer.

"If I give you one, will you try to think?"

"Yeh!" He showed his milk-white teeth in an obliging smile. Out of the cabinet came a beautiful pink bonbon, and he crunched it with satisfaction.

"Now remember you are to try and think." She took him on her lap.

"Yeh," he said with his mouth full. But his mind seemed to wander from the point.

"Now attend to me, young man! *Where -- have --you -- put -- the -- green -- bracelet?*" said Mrs. Farnborough, in the same gruff staccato in which Matilda recited the "Fee-Faw-Fum." Jack's brown eyes

twinkled. He hadn't quite got the hang of this game, but it evidently had possibilities.

Mrs. Farnborough caught the look of merry intelligence and was sure she was on the track of her property.

"Come," she said indulgently, "shall we go and find the pretty green bracelet?"

"Yeh," agreed Jack readily, scrambling down off her lap.

"Come then where shall we go?"

Jack expressed a modest preference for the direction of the Japanese cabinet.

"Yes, after you give me back the bracelet." She led the way to the door. "You shall have three bonbons and the new black kitten." Jack's eyes sparkled. "Come upstairs, and I'll show you where you found it, and that will help you to remember where you put it." He trotted gaily after his grandmother, evidently much diverted at her unwonted activity, and pleased to find her so agile a playfellow. "Now," puffed the old lady, arriving at her own room, "it was here you remember --on this cushion." he nodded. "And my dear little Jack came in and saw it."

Dear little Jack looked dubious.

"Now, now be careful!" the old lady frowned." "It's wicked to tell lies."

Jack's face fell.

"You came in, and there was nobody here, and you saw something shining."

"Yeh?" he ventured with reviving hope, tiptoeing up to inspect the dressing-table.

"And you took the pretty bracelet off the cushion?" She waited.

"Yeh!"

"Yes, that's right, tell the truth--and you took it away?"

"Yeh! yeh!" He was getting the hang of the game after all.

"And you put it--where?"

The child looked about as if considering.

"Now come," said his grandmother, fired to a superhuman briskness. She took him by the hand. Jack capered with anticipation. "You took it off the pincushion like this--"

"Yeh, yeh!"

"And then you went--where did you go?" She followed the infant's

dancing eyes. Behind the door? Of course! We never looked there." Behind the door they went: Nothing. Nobody more surprised apparently than Jack.

And after you had played with it behind the door; *then* where did you go?"

Jack's birdlike glance seemed to suggest under the table was a good place, then behind the curtains, in a sort of stately hide and seek, suited to one's grandmother, and finally under the great valanced and curtained bed. Mrs. Farnborough carried her aged bones and her nodding cap into many an unwonted place that afternoon, and Jack's good spirits mounted with each new adventure.

At last when Matilda appeared to take him off to bed, the fun was at its height. Jack was jigging wildly at the growing excitement of this sudden power of his to cause boxes and doors to fly open and reveal their contents by the mere magic of those syllables "geen baceler," pronounced at intervals with a rising inflection. Mrs. Farnborough, with cap awry, breath short, and temper growing momentarily shorter, stopped as Matilda appeared, and said with emphasis to her grandson:

"You little *monster*, where *have* you put it?"

"Cub-cub?" suggested Jack feverishly, ignoring Matilda, and beating with his fists on the jam-cupboard door.

"Well, its' the only place left. Nobody's thought of looking there." So Hannah was called and scolded for allowing the door to stand open. The housekeeper protested the door *hadn't* been left open; but that was a detail. The cupboard was inspected from the highest shelf a child could possibly reach down to the very threshold of the door, Jack lending an obliging hand as well as an adventurous finger now and then to the contents of the jars.

The base Matilda, tired of waiting and soured by the day's experience, betrayed Jack's traffic in the jam and laid hold of him. But no, no, not yet will he submit to the petty tyranny of bedtime. He has tasted not jam alone, but great jollity and unwonted freedom.

"No, no!" He struggled out of her arms, moved to longer speech than he had yet made within the memory of man. "Me mus' do fin' geen baceler."

"But where, you little wretch?"

Jack shook himself free and darted down the staircase.

"He does know where it is all this time--the little demon!" groaned

his grandmother, and the servants shook their heads at his depravity. Matilda pursued and laid ungentle hands on him, he struggling valiantly and shouting the mystic formula he had found so potent for entertainment all the afternoon-- "Fin' geen baceler, fin' geen baceler." His small face, in spite of arabesques of jam, glowed with purpose and with truth. Mrs. Farnborough rallied and stood erect. She would give him one more chance.

"Come then, Jack, for the last time, where is it?"

He shook himself free of Matilda half way down the stairs.

"Come," repeated his exhausted grandmother, straightening her dishevelled head-gear with a shaking hand. "Where shall we look this last time?"

He stood a moment undecided, his eyes flashing with victory.

"Where?" repeated the quavering old voice above him. Jack looked up and then down. The wide world beckoned. Suddenly throwing back his head, he said firmly: "Go see pig!" and darted down stairs and out of the side door.

Mrs. Farnborough tottered back against the wall. Her grandson had cast the Farnborough emeralds before swine!

While a detachment of servants inspected the pigsty, Jack was seized and brought in to bed. Twenty minutes later, according to custom he was led into his grandmother's room to say his prayers. Mrs. Farnborough was prostrate on the sofa, breathing asthmatically. Jack, with recovered serenity but somewhat tired too, looked more like a seraph than ever in his white nightgown with his little feet bare and a halo of wild tossed hair. For the first time in her life, his beauty and his infant piety roused no enthusiasm. in his grandmother's breast. She half turned away as she saw him coming, and felt feebly in the black velvet reticule that never left her side for a bottle of salts. She drew forth the emerald bracelet! Far from being pleased at finding it safe in the place where she now remembered she had put it with her own hands, she was so enraged that, instead of listening to his prayers, she sat up suddenly and boxed the seraph's ears. Her agitated words shed no light on the unprovoked attack.

Wounded and weeping, the poor little seraph went back to bed, hopelessly bewildered by the strange manners and customs of the rude tribe with which he had been obliged to cast in his lot. But the magnanimity of childhood rises up renewed each day --- putting all un-

worthy lapses out of mind. Not so the grudge-bearing elder: he wakes brooding over wrongs, willing to waste to-day and even barter tomorrow so he may revenge himself on yesterday.

Mrs. Farnborough's unusual Sabbath exertions seemed to result in a slight illness. At all events she kept her bed, and Jack was not privileged to see her for some days. When he did, he was struck, as indeed a less perceptive person might have been, by the contrast between her spirited manners of Sunday and her present prostrated lassitude, the absence of enlivening trinkets about her person, and above all, the subdued nightcap in lieu of the gorgeous multi-coloured headgear.

Jack stared at her with surprise and sympathy. What a falling off was here! He showed her the new whip he had made--but she did not smile. He lifted up the black kitten and held it clawing and mewing quite near enough to be stroked, but the yellow hands lay languid and the dull eyes did not brighten. At last, "Take it away," said the feeble voice, and Matilda fancied it was not even the kitten Mrs. Farnborough meant. The nurse took the child's hand and drew him to one side.

"Poor grandmamma isn't very well. You mustn't bother her," she whispered very low. "Run away and play."

Jack clutched the kitten and looked back full of pity as he was drawn towards the door.

"Poor! Poor!" he said sympathetically, and then breaking away from Matilda he ran back to the bedside with the inspired air of one who has thought of a sovereign remedy.

"Come fin' geen baceler!" he said, seizing the inert hand on the coverlet.

Jack was quite right in his surmise. Mention of that talisman *did* rouse his drooping grandmother, but not exactly as he had intended.

Before the electric suddenness of Mrs. Farnborough's recovery of voice, gesture and facial expression, Jack dropped the black kitten and fled. But he did not know that he was that day turned out of Holy Orders, and that a bishopric had passed from him to his younger brother.