

# The Boy by the Beach

*FROM A COTTAGE IN TROY*

By Quiller-Couch

There are in this small history some gaps that can never be filled up; but as much as I know I will tell you.

The cottage where Kit lived until he was five years old stands at the head of a little beach of white shingle, just inside the harbour's mouth, so that all day long Kit could see the merchant-ships trailing in from sea, and passing up to the little town, or dropping down to the music of the capstan-song, and the calls and the creaking, as their crews hauled up the sails. Some came and went under bare poles in the wake of panting tugs; but those that carried canvas pleased Kit more. For a narrow coombe wound up behind the cottage, and down this coombe came not only the brook that splashed by the garden gate, but a small breeze, always blowing, so that you might count on seeing the white sails take it, and curve out majestically as soon as ever they came opposite the cottage, and hold it until under the lee of the Battery Point.

Besides these delights, the cottage had a plantation of ash and hazel above it, that climbed straight to the smooth turf and the four guns of the Battery; and a garden with a tamarisk hedge, and a bed of white violets, the earliest for miles around, and a fuchsia tree three times as tall as Kit, and a pink climbing rose that looked in at Kit's window and blossomed till late in November. Here the child lived alone with his mother. For there was a vagueness of popular opinion respecting Kit's father; while about his mother, unhappily, there was no vagueness at all. She was a handsome, low-brewed woman, with a loud laugh, a defiant manner, and a dress of violent hues. Decent wives clutched their skirts in passing her: but, as a set-off she was on excellent terms with every sea-captain and mate that put into the port.

All these captains and mates knew Kit and made a pet of him: and indeed there was a curious charm in the great serious eyes and reddish curls of this child whom other children shunned. No one can tell if he felt his isolation; but of course it drove him to return the men's friendship, and to wear a man's solemnity and habit of speech. The woman dressed him carefully, in glaring colours, out of her means: and as for his manners, they would no doubt have become false and absurd, as time went and knowledge came; but at the age of four they were those of a prince.

"My father was a ship's captain, too," he would tell a new acquaintance, "but he was drowned at sea—oh, a long while ago; years and years before I was born."

The beginning of this speech he had learned from his mother; and the misty antiquity of the loss his own childish imagination suggested. The captains, hearing it, would wink at each other, swallow down their grins, and gravely inform him of the sights he would see and the lands he would visit when the time came for him, too, to ho a ship's captain. Often and often I have seen him perched, with his small legs dangling, on one of the green posts on the quay, and drinking in their talk of green icebergs, and flaming parrots, and pig-tailed China-men; of coral reefs of all marvellous colours, and suns that burnt men black, and monkeys that hung by their tails to the branches and pelted the passers-by with coco-nuts; and the rest of it. And the child would go back to the cottage in a waking dream, treading bright clouds of fancy, with perhaps a little carved box or knick-knack in his hand, the gift of some bearded, tender-hearted ruffian. It was pitiful.

Of course he picked up their talk, and very soon could swear with equal and appalling freedom in English, French, Swedish, German, and Italian. But the words were words to him and more, as he had no morals. Nice distinctions between good and evil never entered the little room where he slept to the sound only of the waves that curved round Battery Point and tumbled on the beach below. And I know that, one summer evening, when the scandalised townsmen and their wedded wives assembled, and marched down to the cottage with intent to lead the woman in a “Ramriding,” the sight of Kit playing in the garden, and his look of innocent delight as he ran in to call his mother out, took the courage out of them and sent them home, up the hill, like sheep.

Of course the truth must have come to him soon. But it never did: for when he was just five, the woman took a chill and died in a week.

She had left a little money; and the Vicar, rather than let Kit go to the workhouse, spent it to buy the child admission to an Orphanage in the Midlands, a hundred miles away.

So Kit hung the rose-tree with little scraps of crape, and was put, dazed and white, into a train and whisked a hundred miles off. And everybody forgot him.

Kit spent two years at the Orphanage in an antique, preposterous suit—snuff-coloured coat with lappels, canary waistcoat, and corduroy small-clothes. And they gave him his meals regularly. There were ninety-nine other boys who all thrived on the food: but Kit pined.

And the ninety-nine, being full of food, made a racket at times; but Kit found it quiet-deathly quiet; and his eyes wore a listening look.

For the truth was, he missed the noise of the beach, and was listening for it. And deep down in his small heart the sea was piping and calling to him. And the world had grown dumb; and he yearned always: until they had to get him a new canary waistcoat, for the old one had grown too big.

At night, from his dormitory window, he could see a rosy light in the sky. At first he thought this must be a pillar of fire put there to guide him home; but it was only the glare of furnaces in a manufacturing town, not far away. When he found this out his heart came near to break; and afterwards he pined still faster.

One evening a lecture was given in the dining-room of the Orphanage. The subject was “The Holy Land,” and the lecturer illustrated it with views from the magic-lantern.

Kit, who sat in one of the back rows, was moderately excited at first. But the views of barren hills, and sands, and ruins, and palm-trees, and cedars, wearied him after a while. He had closed his eyes, and the lecturer’s voice became a sing-song in which his heart searched, as it always searched, for the music of the beach; when, by way of variety—for it had little to do with the subject—the lecturer slipped in a slide that was supposed to depict an incident on the homeward voyage—a squall in the Mediterranean.

It was a stirring picture, with an inky sky, and the squall bursting from it, and driving a small ship heeling over white crested waves. Of course the boys drew their breath.

And then something like a strangling sob broke out on the stillness, frightening the lecturer; and a shrill cry—

‘Don’t go—oh, *da’mn it all!* don’t go! Take me—take me home!’

And there at the back of the room a small boy stood up on his form, and stretched out both hands to the painted ship, and shrieked and panted.

There was a blank silence, and then the matron hurried up, took him firmly in her arms, and carried him out.

“Don’t go—oh, for the Lord A’mighty’s sake, don’t go!”

And as he was borne down the passages his cry sounded among the audience like the wail of a little lost soul.

The matron carried Kit to the sick-room and put him to bed. After quieting the child a bit she left him, taking away the candle. Now the sick-room was on the ground floor, and Kit lay still a very short while. Then he got out of bed, groped for his clothes, managed to dress himself, and, opening the window, escaped on to the quiet lawn. Then he turned his face southwest, towards home and the sea—and ran.

How could he tell where they lay? God knows. Ask the swallow how she can tell, when in autumn the warm south is a fire in her brain. I believe that the sea’s breath was in the face of this child of seven, and its scent in his nostrils, and its voice in his ears, calling, summoning all the way. I only know that he ran straight towards his home, a hundred miles off, and that next morning they found his canary waistcoat and snuff-coloured coat in a ditch, two miles from the Orphanage, due south-west.

Of his adventures on the road the story is equally silent, as I warned you. But the small figure comes into view again, a week later, on the hillside of the coombe above his home. And when he saw the sea and the white beach glittering beneath him, he did not stop, even for a moment, but reeled down the hill. The child was just a living skeleton; he had neither hat, coat, nor waistcoat; one foot only was shod, the other had worn through the stocking, and ugly red blisters showed on the sole as he ran. His face was far whiter than his shirt, save for a blue welt or two and some ugly red scratches; and his gaunt eyes were full of hunger and yearning, and his lips happily babbling the curses that the ships’ captains had taught him.

He reeled down the hill to the cottage. The tenant was a newcomer to the town, and had lately been appointed musketry-instructor to the battery above. He was in the garden pruning the rose-tree, but did not particularly notice the boy. And the boy passed without turning his head.

The tide on the beach was far out and just beginning to flow. There was the same dull plash on the pebbles, the same twinkle as the sun struck across the ripples. The sun was sinking; in ten minutes it would be behind the hill.

No one knows what the waves said to Kit. But he flung himself among them with a choking cry, and drank the brine and tossed it over his head, and shoulders and chest, and lay down and let the small waves play over him, and cried and laughed aloud till the sun went down.

Then he clambered on to a rock, some way above them, and lay down to watch the water rise; and watching it, fell asleep; and sleeping, had his wish, and went out to the wide seas.