

opening extract from

just william

written by

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published by macmillan

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CHAPTER I

WILLIAM GOES TO THE PICTURES

It all began with William's aunt, who was in a good temper that morning, and gave him a shilling for posting a letter for her and carrying her parcels from the grocer's.

'Buy some sweets or go to the pictures,' she said carelessly, as she gave it to him.

William walked slowly down the road, gazing thoughtfully at the coin. After deep calculations, based on the fact that a shilling is the equivalent of two sixpences, he came to the conclusion that both luxuries could be indulged in.

In the matter of sweets, William frankly upheld the superiority of quantity over quality. Moreover, he knew every sweet shop within a two miles radius of his home whose proprietor added an extra sweet after the scale had descended, and he patronised these shops exclusively. With solemn face and eager eye, he always watched the process of weighing, and 'stingy' shops were known and banned by him.

He wandered now to his favourite confectioner and

stood outside the window for five minutes, torn between the rival attractions of Gooseberry Eyes and Marble Balls. Both were sold at four ounces for 2d. William never purchased more expensive luxuries. At last his frowning brow relaxed and he entered the shop.

'Sixpennoth of Gooseberry Eyes,' he said, with a slightly self-conscious air. The extent of his purchases rarely exceeded a penny.

'Hello!' said the shopkeeper, in amused surprise.

'Gotter bit of money this mornin',' explained William carelessly, with the air of a Rothschild.

He watched the weighing of the emerald green dainties with silent intensity, saw with satisfaction the extra one added after the scale had fallen, received the precious paper bag, and, putting two sweets into his mouth, walked out of the shop.

Sucking slowly, he walked down the road towards the Picture Palace. William was not in the habit of frequenting Picture Palaces. He had only been there once before in his life.

It was a thrilling programme. First came the story of desperate crooks who, on coming out of any building, glanced cautiously up and down the street in huddled, crouching attitudes, then crept ostentatiously on their way in a manner guaranteed to attract attention and suspicion

at any place and time. The plot was involved. They were pursued by police, they leapt on to a moving train and then, for no accountable reason, leapt from that on to a moving motor car and from that they plunged into a moving river. It was thrilling and William thrilled. Sitting quite motionless, he watched, with wide, fascinated eyes, though his jaws never ceased their rotatory movement and every now and then his hand would go mechanically to the paper bag on his knees and convey a Gooseberry Eye to his mouth.

The next play was a simple country love story, in which figured a simple country maiden wooed by the squire, who was marked out as the villain by his moustachios.

After many adventures the simple country maiden was won by a simple country son of the soil in picturesque rustic attire, whose emotions were faithfully portrayed by gestures that must have required much gymnastic skill; the villain was finally shown languishing in a prison cell, still indulging in frequent eyebrow play.

Next came another love story – this time of a noble-hearted couple, consumed with mutual passion and kept apart not only by a series of misunderstandings possible only in a picture play, but also by maidenly pride and reserve on the part of the heroine and manly pride and reserve on the part of the hero that forced them to

hide their ardour beneath a cold and haughty exterior. The heroine's brother moved through the story like a good fairy, tender and protective towards his orphan sister and ultimately explained to each the burning passion of the other.

It was moving and touching and William was moved and touched.

The next was a comedy. It began by a solitary workman engaged upon the repainting of a door and ended with a miscellaneous crowd of people, all covered with paint, falling downstairs on top of one another. It was amusing. William was riotously and loudly amused.

Lastly came the pathetic story of a drunkard's downward path. He began as a wild young man in evening clothes drinking intoxicants and playing cards, he ended as a wild old man in rags still drinking intoxicants and playing cards. He had a small child with a pious and superior expression, who spent her time weeping over him and exhorting him to a better life, till, in a moment of justifiable exasperation, he threw a beer bottle at her head. He then bedewed her bed in hospital with penitent tears, tore out his hair, flung up his arms towards Heaven, beat his waistcoat, and clasped her to his breast, so that it was not to be wondered at that, after all that excitement, the child had a relapse and with the words 'Goodbye,

Father. Do not think of what you have done. I forgive you' passed peacefully away.

William drew a deep breath at the end, and still sucking, arose with the throng and passed out.

Once outside, he glanced cautiously around and slunk down the road in the direction of his home. Then he doubled suddenly and ran down a back street to put his imaginary pursuers off his track. He took a pencil from his pocket and, levelling it at the empty air, fired twice. Two of his pursuers fell dead, the rest came on with redoubled vigour. There was no time to be lost. Running for dear life, he dashed down the next street, leaving in his wake an elderly gentleman nursing his toe and cursing volubly. As he neared his gate, William again drew the pencil from his pocket and, still looking back down the road, and firing as he went, he rushed into his own gateway.

William's father, who had stayed at home that day because of a bad headache and a touch of liver, picked himself up from the middle of a rhododendron bush and seized William by the back of his neck.

'You young ruffian,' he roared, 'what do you mean by charging into me like that?'

William gently disengaged himself.

'I wasn't chargin', Father,' he said, meekly. 'I was only jus' comin' in at the gate, same as other folks. I jus' wasn't



LOOKING BACK DOWN THE ROAD AND FIRING HIS PENCIL WILDLY, WILLIAM DASHED INTO HIS OWN GATE.

looking jus' the way you were coming, but I can't look all ways at once, cause—'

'Be *quiet*!' roared William's father.

Like the rest of the family, he dreaded William's eloquence.

'What's that on your tongue? Put your tongue out.'

William obeyed. The colour of William's tongue would have put to shame Spring's freshest tints.

'How many times am I to tell you,' bellowed William's father, 'that I won't have you going about eating filthy poisons all day between meals?'

'It's not filthy poison,' said William. 'It's jus' a few sweets Aunt Susan gave me 'cause I kin'ly went to the post office for her an'—'

'Be *quiet*! Have you got any more of the foul things?'

'They're not foul things,' said William, doggedly. 'They're good. Jus' have one, an' try. They're jus' a few sweets Aunt Susan kin'ly gave me an'—'

'Be *quiet*! Where are they?'

Slowly and reluctantly William drew forth his bag. His father seized it and flung it far into the bushes. For the next ten minutes William conducted a thorough and systematic search among the bushes and for the rest of the day consumed Gooseberry Eyes and garden soil in fairly equal proportions.

He wandered round to the back garden and climbed on to the wall.

'Hello!' said the little girl next door, looking up.

Something about the little girl's head and curls reminded William of the simple country maiden. There was a touch of the artistic temperament about William. He promptly felt himself the simple country son of the soil.

'Hullo, Joan,' he said in a deep, husky voice intended to be expressive of intense affection. 'Have you missed me while I've been away?'

'Didn't know you'd been away,' said Joan. 'What are you talking so funny for?'

'I'm not talkin' funny,' said William in the same husky voice. 'I can't help talkin' like this.'

'You've got a cold. That's what you've got. That's what Mother said when she saw you splashing about with your rain-tub this morning. She said, "The next thing that we shall hear of William Brown will be he's in bed with a cold."'

'It's not a cold,' said William mysteriously. 'It's jus' the way I feel.'

'What are you eating?'

'Gooseberry Eyes. Like one?' He took the packet from his pocket and handed it down to her. 'Go on. Take two –

three,' he said in reckless generosity.

'But they're – dirty.'

'Go on. It's only ord'nery dirt. It soon sucks off. They're jolly good.' He poured a shower of them lavishly down to her.

'I say,' he said, reverting to his character of simple country lover. 'Did you say you'd missed me? I bet you didn't think of me as much as I did of you. I jus' bet you didn't.' His voice had sunk deeper and deeper till it almost died away.

'I say, William, does your throat hurt you awful that you've got to talk like that?'

Her blue eyes were anxious and sympathetic.

William put one hand to his throat and frowned.

'A bit,' he confessed lightly.

'Oh, William!' she clasped her hands. 'Does it hurt all the time?'

Her solicitude was flattering.

'I don't talk much about it, anyway, do I?' he said manfully.

She started up and stared at him with big blue eyes.

'Oh, William! Is it – is it your – lungs? I've got an aunt that's got lungs and she coughs and coughs,' William coughed hastily, 'and it hurts her and makes her awful bad. Oh, William, I do *hope* you've not got lungs.'

Her tender, anxious little face was upturned to him. 'I guess I have got lungs,' he said, 'but I don't make a fuss about 'em.'

He coughed again.

'What does the doctor say about it?'

William considered a minute.

'He says it's lungs all right,' he said at last. 'He says I gotter be jolly careful.'

'William, would you like my new paintbox?'

'I don't think so. Not now. Thanks.'

'I've got three balls and one's quite new. Wouldn't you like it, William?'

'No – thanks. You see, it's no use my collectin' a lot of things. You never know – with lungs.'

'Oh, *William*!'

Her distress was pathetic.

'Of course,' he said hastily, 'if I'm careful it'll be all right. Don't you worry about me.'

'Joan!' from the house.

'That's Mother. Goodbye, William dear. If Father brings me home any chocolate, I'll bring it in to you. I will – honest. Thanks for the Gooseberry Eyes. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye – and don't worry about me,' he added bravely.

He put another Gooseberry Eye into his mouth and

wandered round aimlessly to the front of the house. His grown-up sister, Ethel, was at the front door, shaking hands with a young man.

'I'll do all I can for you,' she was saying earnestly.

Their hands were clasped.

'I know you will,' he said equally earnestly.

Both look and handclasp were long. The young man walked away. Ethel stood at the door, gazing after him, with a faraway look in her eyes. William was interested.

'That was Jack Morgan, wasn't it?' he said.

'Yes,' said Ethel absently and went into the house.

The look, the long handclasp, the words lingered in William's memory. They must be jolly fond of each other, like people are when they're engaged, but he knew they weren't engaged. P'raps they were too proud to let each other know how fond they were of each other – like the man and girl at the pictures. Ethel wanted a brother like the one in the pictures to let the man know she was fond of him. Then a light came suddenly into William's mind and he stood, deep in thought.

Inside the drawing-room, Ethel was talking to her mother.

'He's going to propose to her next Sunday. He told me about it because I'm her best friend, and he wanted to ask me if I thought he'd any chance. I said I thought he had,

and I said I'd try and prepare her a little and put in a good word for him if I could. Isn't it thrilling?'

'Yes, dear. By the way, did you see William anywhere? I do hope he's not in mischief.'

'He was in the front garden a minute ago.' She went to the window. 'He's not there now, though.'

William had just arrived at Mr Morgan's house.

The maid showed him into Mr Morgan's sitting-room.

'Mr Brown,' she announced.

The young man rose to receive his guest with politeness not unmixed with bewilderment. His acquaintance with William was of the slightest.

'Good afternoon,' said William. 'I've come from Ethel.'

'Yes?'

'Yes.' William fumbled in his pocket and at last drew forth a rosebud, slightly crushed by its close confinement in the company of the Gooseberry Eyes, a penknife, a top and a piece of putty.

'She sent you this,' said William gravely.

Mr Morgan gazed at it with the air of one who is sleep-walking.

'Yes? Er – very kind of her.'

'Kinder keep-sake. Souveneer,' explained William.

'Yes. Er – any message?'



'SHE SENT YOU THIS!' WILLIAM SAID GRAVELY.

'Oh, yes. She wants you to come in and see her this evening.'

'Er – yes. Of course. I've just come from her. Perhaps she remembered something she wanted to tell me after I'd gone.'

'P'raps.'

Then, 'Any particular time?'

'No. 'Bout seven, I expect.'

'Oh, yes.'

Mr Morgan's eyes were fixed with a fascinated wondering gaze upon the limp, and by no means spotless, rosebud.

'You say she – sent this?'

'Yes.'

'And no other message?'

'No.'

'Er – well, say I'll come with pleasure, will you?'

'Yes.'

Silence.

Then, 'She thinks an awful lot of you, Ethel does.'

Mr Morgan passed a hand over his brow.

'Yes? Kind – er – very kind, I'm sure.'

'Always talkin' about you in her sleep,' went on William, warming to his theme. 'I sleep in the next room and I can hear her talkin' about you all night. Jus' sayin'

your name over and over again. "Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan."' William's voice was husky and soulful. 'Jus' like that – over an' over again. "Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan."'

Mr Morgan was speechless. He sat gazing with horror-stricken face at his young visitor.

'Are you – *sure*?' he said at last. 'It might be someone else's name.'

'No, 'tisn't,' said William firmly. 'It's yours. "Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan, Jack Morgan" – jus' like that. An' she eats just nothin' now. Always hangin' round the windows to watch you pass.'

The perspiration stood out in beads on Mr Morgan's brow.

'It's – *horrible*,' he said at last in a hoarse whisper.

William was gratified. The young man had at last realised his cruelty. But William never liked to leave a task half done. He still sat on and calmly and silently considered his next statement. Mechanically he put a hand into his pocket and conveyed a Gooseberry Eye to his mouth. Mr Morgan also sat in silence with a stricken look upon his face, gazing into vacancy.

'She's got your photo,' said William at last, 'fixed up into one of those little round things on a chain round her neck.'

'Are – you – *sure*?' said Mr Morgan desperately.

'Sure's fate,' said William rising. 'Well, I'd better be goin'. She pertic-ler wants to see you alone tonight. Goodbye.'

But Mr Morgan did not answer. He sat huddled up in his chair staring in front of him long after William had gone jauntily on his way. Then he moistened his dry lips.

'Good Lord,' he groaned.

William was thinking of the pictures as he went home. That painter one was jolly good. When they all got all over paint! And when they all fell downstairs! William suddenly guffawed out loud at the memory. But what had the painter chap been doing at the very beginning before he began to paint? He'd been getting off the old paint with a sort of torch thing and a knife, then he began putting the new paint on. Just sort of melting the old paint and then scraping it off. William had never seen it done in real life, but he supposed that was the way you did get old paint off. Melting it with some sort of fire, then scraping it off. He wasn't sure whether it was that, but he could find out. As he entered the house he took his penknife from his pocket, opened it thoughtfully, and went upstairs.

Mr Brown came home about dinnertime.

'How's your head, Father?' said Ethel sympathetically.

'Rotten!' said Mr Brown, sinking wearily into an armchair.

'Perhaps dinner will do it good,' said Mrs Brown, 'it ought to be ready now.'

The housemaid entered the room.

'Mr Morgan, Mum. He wants to see Miss Ethel. I've shown him into the library.'

'*Now?*' exploded Mr Brown. 'What the deu— why the dickens is the young idiot coming at this time of day? Seven o'clock! What time does he think we have dinner? What does he mean by coming round paying calls on people at dinnertime? What—'

'Ethel, dear,' interrupted Mrs Brown, 'do go and see what he wants and get rid of him as soon as you can.'

Ethel entered the library, carefully closing the door behind her to keep out the sound of her father's comments, which were plainly audible across the hall.

She noticed something wan and haggard-looking on Mr Morgan's face as he rose to greet her.

'Er – good evening, Miss Brown.'

'Good evening, Mr Morgan.'

Then they sat in silence, both awaiting some explanation of the visit. The silence became oppressive. Mr Morgan, with an air of acute misery and embarrassment,

shifted his feet and coughed. Ethel looked at the clock. Then –

'Was it raining when you came, Mr Morgan?'

'Raining? Er – no. No – not at all.'

Silence.

'I thought it looked like rain this afternoon.'

'Yes, of course. Er – no, not at all.'

Silence.

'It does make the roads so bad round here when it rains.'

'Yes.' Mr Morgan put up a hand as though to loosen his collar. 'Er – very bad.'

'Almost impassable.'

'Er – quite.'

Silence again.

Inside the drawing-room, Mr Brown was growing restive.

'Is dinner to be kept waiting for that youth all night? Quarter past seven! You know it's just what I can't stand – having my meals interfered with. Is my digestion to be ruined simply because this young nincompoop chooses to pay his social calls at seven o'clock at night?'

'Then we must ask him to dinner,' said Mrs Brown, desperately. 'We really must.'

'We must *not*,' said Mr Brown. 'Can't I stay away from

the office for one day with a headache, without having to entertain all the young jackasses for miles around?' The telephone bell rang. He raised his hands above his head.

'Oh—'

'I'll go, dear,' said Mrs Brown hastily.

She returned with a worried frown on her brow.

'It's Mrs Clive,' she said. 'She says Joan has been very sick because of some horrible sweets William gave her, and she said she was so sorry to hear about William and hoped he'd be better soon. I couldn't quite make it out, but it seems that William has been telling them that he had to go and see a doctor about his lungs and the doctor said they were very weak and he'd have to be careful.'

Mr Brown sat up and looked at her. 'But – why – on – earth?' he said slowly.

'I don't know, dear,' said Mrs Brown, helplessly. 'I don't know anything about it.'

'He's mad,' said Mr Brown with conviction. 'Mad. It's the only explanation.'

Then came the opening and shutting of the front door and Ethel entered. She was very flushed.

'He's gone,' she said. 'Mother, it's simply horrible! He didn't tell me much, but it seems that William actually went to his house and told him that I wanted to see him alone at seven o'clock this evening. I've hardly spoken to

William today. He couldn't have misunderstood anything I said. And he actually took a flower with him – a dreadful-looking rosebud – and said I'd sent it. I simply didn't know where to look or what to say. It was horrible!'

Mrs Brown sat gazing weakly at her daughter.

Mr Brown rose with the air of a man goaded beyond endurance.

'Where *is* William?' he said shortly.

'I don't know, but I thought I heard him go upstairs some time ago.'

William *was* upstairs. For the last twenty minutes he had been happily and quietly engaged upon his bedroom door with a lighted taper in one hand and penknife in the other. There was no doubt about it. By successful experiment he had proved that that was the way you got old paint off. When Mr Brown came upstairs he had entirely stripped one panel of its paint.

An hour later William sat in the back garden on an upturned box sucking, with a certain dogged defiance, the last and dirtiest of the Gooseberry Eyes. Sadly he reviewed the day. It had not been a success. His generosity to the little girl next door had been misconstrued into an attempt upon her life, his efforts to help on his only sister's love affair had been painfully misunderstood,

lastly because (among other things) he had discovered a perfectly scientific method of removing old paint, he had been brutally assaulted by a violent and unreasonable parent. Suddenly William began to wonder if his father drank. He saw himself, through a mist of pathos, as a Drunkard's child. He tried to imagine his father weeping over him in Hospital and begging his forgiveness. It was a wonder he wasn't there now, anyway. His shoulders drooped – his whole attitude became expressive of extreme dejection.

Inside the house, his father, reclining at length in an armchair, discoursed to his wife on the subject of his son. One hand was pressed to his aching brow, and the other gesticulating freely. 'He's insane,' he said, 'stark, raving insane. You ought to take him to a doctor and get his brain examined. Look at him today. He begins by knocking me into the middle of the rhododendron bushes – under no provocation, mind you. I hadn't spoken to him. Then he tries to poison that nice little thing next door with some vile stuff I thought I'd thrown away. Then he goes about telling people he's consumptive. He looks it, doesn't he? Then he takes extraordinary messages and love tokens from Ethel to strange young men and brings them here just when we're going to begin dinner, and then goes round burning and hacking at the doors. Where's the



WILLIAM WAS HAPPILY AND QUIETLY ENGAGED IN BURNING THE PAINT OFF HIS BEDROOM DOOR.

sense in it – in any of it? They're the acts of a lunatic – you ought to have his brain examined.'

Mrs Brown cut off her darning wool and laid aside the sock she had just finished darning.

'It certainly sounds very silly, dear,' she said mildly. 'But there might be some explanation of it all, if only we knew. Boys are such funny things.'

She looked at the clock and went over to the window. 'William!' she called. 'It's your bedtime, dear.'

William rose sadly and came slowly into the house.

'Good night, Mother,' he said; then he turned a mournful and reproachful eye upon his father.

'Good night, Father,' he said. 'Don't think about what you've done, I for—'

He stopped and decided, hastily but wisely, to retire with all possible speed.