

"WHILE THE EVIL DAYS COME NOT."

A BOYVILLE STORY.

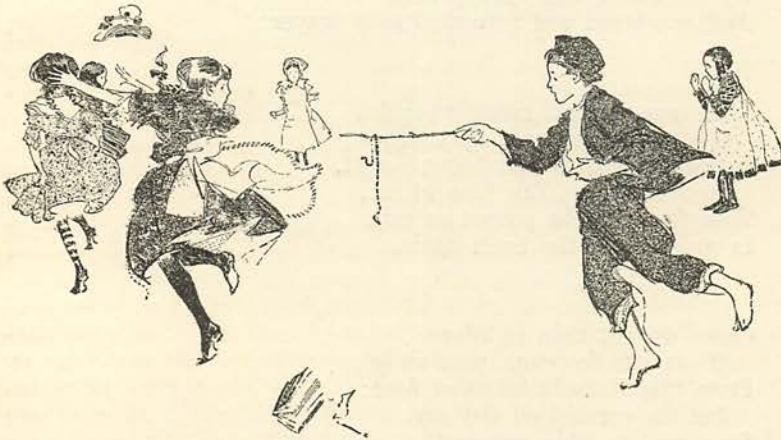
By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE,

Author of "The King of Boyville," and other Stories.

"We duck through the court, reminded a bit by our feelings of our first love, who hadn't the cleanest of faces, or the nicest of manners; but she takes her station in our memory because we were boys then, and the golden halo of youth is upon her."—*George Meredith.*

WHAT little things turn great events! Tragedies swing on such inconsequential hinges. It is so exasperating to look back over the path of a calamity and see

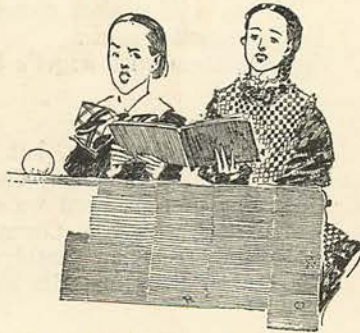
Similarly, if Winfield Hancock Pennington, of the town of Boyville, had slipped his shoes off in the second block from his home, instead of slipping them off in the first block, on his



"chased the little girls around the yard with it."

how easily it might have been averted! If one man in the little town of Lawrence a generation ago had eaten two pieces of pie-plant pie instead of three for supper, the night of a certain party caucus, he would have attended that caucus and another set of delegates would have gone to the County convention, another would have been sent to the State convention, another Governor of Kansas would have been nominated and elected, and he would have chosen another United States Senator, who would have voted for, instead of against, the impeachment of a President of the United States, and the history of the civilized world would have been an entirely different affair from the one now in use.

snake, he could not have brought it to school on a stick; and not having brought it to school on a stick, he could not have chased the little girls around the yard with it before



"to sit and sing with her during the opening hour."

way to school, a great shadow that settled over his life might have been lifted. For if he had not been sitting exactly where he sat on the curbing of the street on that bright, beautiful Monday morning in September, slipping off his shoes and stockings, he would have found no garter snake to kill; and not having killed the snake, he could not have brought it to school on a stick; and not having brought it to school on a stick, he could not have chased the little girls around the yard with it before the teacher came. And if he had not been doing that, he would not have conceived the chivalrous notion that he might gain the esteem of his Heart's Desire by frightening her with a snake. And if Winfield Hancock Pen-

nington had not made his Heart's Desire angry—without giving her a chance to cool off—she would not have invited Harold Jones to sit and sing with her during the opening hour. But probably all that happened had to happen in the course of things; so speculation is idle. But when it did happen, it seemed to be a hopeless case. Young Mr.



Harold Jones
—“Mealy.”

Pennington had lived through the day, a week before, when the teacher changed his seat so that he could not see his Heart's Desire smile; but he knew that she was sorry with him, and that helped a little. But when he saw Harold Jones singing from the same book with his Heart's Desire, he tried in vain to catch the fragment of a smile from her. Instead of a smile, he found her threatening to make a face if he persisted. Piggy

seemed to be buried in an avalanche of woe. Then it was that he saw what a small thing had started the avalanche of calamity thundering down upon him, and he smarted with remorse. In his anguish he tried to sing alto, and made a peculiar rasping sound that tore a reproof for him off the teacher's nerves.

From the hour of the Jones boy's triumph, he and Winfield Hancock Pennington—familiarily known as “Piggy”—became boon companions. A grown-up outsider might have wondered at such a friendship, for Harold Jones, who answered to the name of “Mealy” on the play-ground, was a pale, thin youth, with a squeaky voice. His skimmed-milk eyes popped out over a waste of freckles which blurred his features and literally weighted down a weak, loosely-wired jaw and kept an astonished mouth opened for hours at a time. Piggy, on the other hand, was a sturdy, chunky, blue-eyed boy, who had fought his way up to glory in the school, and who had run and jumped, and tumbled and swam, and bantered himself into right to be King of Boyville. Chummery between the two boys seemed impossible, yet it was one of the things which every school



“To study his tastes.”

expects in a certain crisis. When the affair is reversed, the two little girls go about breathing undying hatred for one another. But a boy begins to consume his rival with politeness, to seek him out from all other beings on earth, to study his tastes and cater to his humors. And so, while the comradeship between Piggy Pennington and Mealy Jones was built on ashes, its growth was beautiful to see.

In all their hours of close communion neither boy mentioned to the other the name of the little girl in the red shawl and the paint-brush pigtails whose fitful fancy had brought on all his trouble. In some mysterious way each managed to



“... the comradeship
was beautiful to see.”

show her with picture cards, to compass her about with oranges, to embower her desk with flowers; but it was all done in stealth, and she who was the object of this devotion rewarded it openly and—also for the vanity of her sex—impartially. All the school watched the battle of the hearts eagerly. The big boys, who usually know as little about the social transactions beneath them as the teacher knows, felt an inkling of the situation. The red-headed Pratt girl became deeply interested in the affair, though she was never invited to a party in the school's aristocracy. She did

not even get an invitation to Bud Perkins's surprise party, where everyone who had any social standing was expected. Yet she saw all that went on in the school, and once she all but smiled sympathetically at Piggy, when she met him slipping away from his Heart's Desire's desk, wherein he had left a flock of Cupids nestling in a perfumed blotter, and a candy sheep. Mealy Jones would have snubbed the Pratt girl if she had caught him thus, but Piggy gave her a wink that made her his partner. After that hour the Pratt girl became his scout. The next day she blundered. That Friday was burned into Piggy Pennington's memory with a glowing brand.

The trouble occurred in this way: On the Friday following Piggy's black Monday, the King of Boyville decided to resort to an heroic measure. In his meditative moments Piggy had made up speeches addressed to his Heart's Desire wherein he had proposed reconciliation at any sacrifice save that of honor. Twice during those four days he had stood by his Heart's Desire during the recess, while they had looked out at the play-ground. But the words next to his heart had sputtered and bubbled into nothing on his lips. He could only snap chalk at the young gentlemen in the yard below him in a preoccupied way and listen to his Heart's Desire rattle on about the whims of her fractions and the caprices of her spelling-lesson. Friday noon, Winfield Hancock Pennington took a header into the Rubicon. In the deserted school-room, just after the other youngsters had gone to dinner or to play, Piggy, with much wiggling of his toes, with much hard breathing, and with many facial contortions, wrote a note. He gave it to the Pratt girl to deliver. When the first bell was ringing that noon, Piggy was piling up the primary urchins



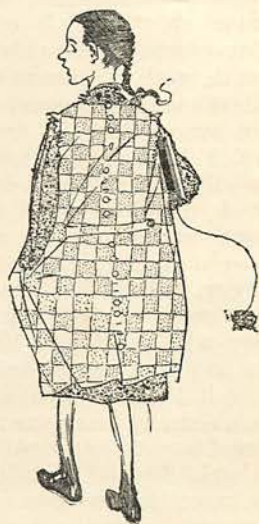
"... could only snap chalk in a preoccupied way."



in wiggling, squealing piles at "crack the whip." During the fifteen minutes that followed, he was charging up and down the yard, howling like a Comanche, at "pullaway." But run as he would, yell as he would, and wrestle as he would, Piggy could not escape the pictures that rose in his mind of a boy wearing his features and using his body, writing the note that he had written. When dismembered words and phrases from that note rose to his mind on the play-ground, the quaver of terror that rose in Piggy's whoop was not dissembled. Sometimes fear froze his vitals, then a flush of self-abasement burned him with its flames. And all the time he knew that the Pratt girl had that note. He almost hoped that an earthquake would swallow her with it before she could deliver it. When Piggy came straggling in, hot, sweaty, and puffing, just as the teacher was tapping the tardy-bell, a wave of peace swept over him. His Heart's Desire was not at her desk. He knew that he had still a few moments' reprieve.

They were singing when his Heart's Desire came in. Piggy's head was tilted back to give his voice full volume as he shouted, "All jewels, precious jewels, His loved and his own." His eyes were half closed in an ecstasy, and he did not turn his face toward the paint-brush pig-tails, nor give any sign that he knew of their owner's presence. Yet when she passed his desk, his voice did not quaver, nor his eyes blink, nor his countenance redden, as his foot darted out for her to trip over. She tripped purposely, thereby accepting affection's tribute, and was glad.

To elaborate the



"The red-headed Pratt girl."

tale of how the Pratt girl blundered with Piggy Pennington's note would be depressing. For it holds in its barbed meshes a record of one agonizing second in which Piggy saw the folded paper begin to slip and slide down the incline of his Heart's Desire's desk, whereon the Pratt girl had dropped it; saw the two girls grab for it; heard it crash from the seat to the floor with what seemed to him a deafening roar. Nor is this all that the harrowing tale might disclose. It might dilate upon the horror that wrenched Piggy's spine as he watched the teacher's finger crook a signal for the note to be brought forward. It would be manifestly cruel and clearly unnecessary to describe the forces which impelled the psychic wave of suggestion that inundated the school

—even to the youth of the "B" class, with his head under the desk, looking for a pencil—and gave every demon there gleeful knowledge that the teacher had nabbed the note and would probably read it aloud. It is enough to submit the plain, but painful, statement that, when the teacher tapped her pencil for attention, a red ear, a throbbing red ear, flared out from either side of Piggy Pennington's Fourth Reader, while not far away a pair of pig-tails bristled up with rage and humiliation from a desk where a little girl's head lay buried in her arms. The teacher unfolded the crackling paper. Would anyone but a savage enjoy the recital of the fact about the barbaric mirth that inspired peal after peal of laughter as the teacher read these words?

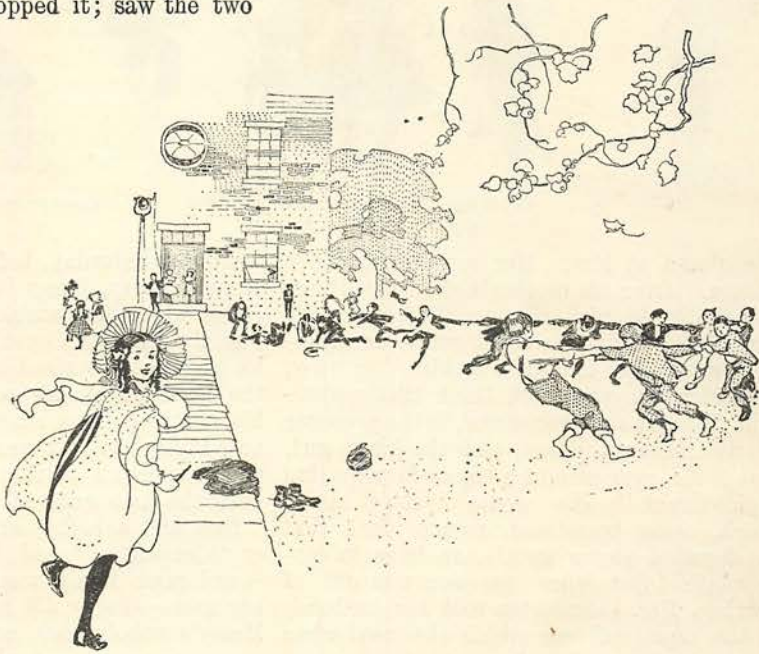
Friend Mary.—Did you mean anything by letting Him sing with you. I dont care if you did but I never don anything to deserve it, but if you didnt I am very sorry, will tell you bout it at the party. Well that is all I can think of today, from

Yourse Ever,

WIN PENNINGTON.

P. S. If you still meen what you sed about roses red and vilets blue all right and so do I. W H P.

Piggy waded home though blood that night. The boys could not resist calling out "Friend Mary" or "Hello, Roses Red," though each boy knew that his taunt would bring on a fight. Piggy fought boys who



"... was piling up the primary urchins in wiggling, squealing piles."

were three classes above him. He whipped groups of boys of assorted sizes from the lower grades; but the fighting took him away from his trouble, and in most cases he honored his combatants. He was little the worse for wear when he chased the last swarm of primary urchins into his father's cow lot, fastened them in, and went at them one by one with a shingle. A child living next door to the Penningtons had brought the news of Piggy's disgrace to the neighborhood, and by supper-time Mrs. Pennington knew the worst. While the son and heir of the house was bringing in his wood and doing his chores about the barn, he felt something in the air about the kitchen which warned him that new tortures awaited him.

A boy would rather take a dozen whippings at school than have the story of one of them come home; and Piggy thought, with inward trembling that he would rather report even a whipping at home than face his mother in the dishonor which covered him. At supper Mrs. Pennington repeated the legend of the note with great solemnity. When her husband showed signs of laughing.



"... fought boys who were three classes above him ... whipped groups of boys of assorted sizes."

she glared at him. Her son ate rapidly in silence. Over his mother's shoulders Piggy saw the hired girl giggle. The only reply that Mrs. Pennington could get to her questions was, "Aw, that ain't nothin'," or "Aw, gee whiz, ma, you must think that's somethin'." But she proclaimed, in the presence of the father, the son, and the hired girl, that if she ever caught a boy of hers getting "girl-struck" she would "show him," which, being translated, means much that no dignified young gentleman likes to contemplate. But when the son was out of hearing, Mrs. Pennington told her husband, in the repressed tone which she used when expressing her diplomatic communications, that he would have "to take that boy in hand." Whereupon the father leaned back in his chair and laughed, laughed until he grew red in the face, laughed till the pans in the kitchen rattled, laughed—to use the words of his wife in closing the incident—"like a natural born simpleton." And the son—alas for Piggy Pennington—he might affect great pride in his amours when the hired girl teased him; he might put on a brave face and even lure himself into the belief that this arch tormentor saw him only as a gay deceiver; but when the lights were out, Piggy covered his head with the bed-clothes, and grew hot and cold by turns, till sleep came and bore him away from his humiliation.

All day Saturday, before the Bud Perkins surprise party, Piggy Pennington and Mealy Jones were inseparable. And Piggy, who was the King of Boyville, came down from his throne and walked humbly beside Mealy, the least of all his courtiers. In fact, in his noctivagations since the reading of his note Piggy had become needlessly deferential and considerate of the feelings of his rival.

If the two entered a crowd and played "foot and a half" or "slap and a kick" or "leap-frog," and if Mealy was "it"—and poor Mealy was generally "it" in any game—Piggy did not jump viciously on Mealy's wobbly back, nor did he slap hard, nor kick hard, as he would have slapped and kicked on other days, before he descended from his throne to dwell with the beasts of the field on that fatal Friday. Pride kept Mealy on the rack.

Time and again his little, freckled, milky face hit the moist springy ground as Bud or Abe or Jim bumped into him at their play. He was glad when the day ended and he could go home. For Mealy Jones abhorred the dirt that begrimed his face and soiled his white starched collar. He liked to play in lukewarm water, to slosh in the suds, and to rub his soft little hands whiter and whiter in the foam. His cleanliness pleased his mother, and she boasted of it to the



"... watched the teacher's finger crook a signal for the note to be brought forward."

mothers of other boys—mothers of boys with high-water marks just above their shirt collars; of boys who had to be yanked back to the roller-towel after washing to have their ears rubbed; of bad, bad, bad boys who washed their feet in the dew of the grass at night and told their mothers that they had washed them in the tub at the pump; of wicked and sinful boys who killed toads and cried noisily when their warts bled in the hot water; in fact, to the mothers of nearly all the boys in Boyville. And thus it came about that Boyville, having Mealy Jones set before it as a model child, contracted a cordial hate for him, and rose against him when he presumed to contest with Piggy for his Heart's Desire. Yet all Boyville loved a fight, and all Boyville goaded the King to wrath, teased him, bantered him, and even pretended to doubt his worth. Therefore, when Piggy Pennington, the King of Boyville, dressed for the party that night in his Sunday clothes and his Sunday shoes and limped down the sidewalk to the Jones's, where the boys and girls were to meet before descending upon Bud Perkins, there was rancor in the royal heart and maternal hair-oil on the royal head. But a strange throb of glad pain in the pit of the royal stomach came at the thought of the two bright eyes that would soon meet his own. The eyes made him forget his blistering shoes, and a smile at the door divested his mind of the serrated collar upon which his head had been pivoting for five distracted minutes. The last thing of all to go was his pride in the hair-oil, but it fell before a voice that said: "Well, you got here, did you?"

That was all. But it was enough to make Piggy Pennington feel the core of a music-box turning inside him, while outside the company saw the King of Boyville transformed

into a very red and very sweaty youth holding madly to the back of his cuffs and chuckling deliriously. In a daze he took off his hat, and put a sack of oranges, his part in the evening's refreshment, on a table in the next room. When he regained consciousness, Piggy noticed that Mealy Jones,



"... saw the hired girl giggle."

who had pranced into the room with much unction, was sitting next to his Heart's Desire. The children were making merry chatter. Piggy took his place on the end of a lounge, and turning his back to the guilty pair, gave an "injin" pinch to Jimmy Sears, with orders to "pass it on." Indeed, so unconcerned was Piggy in the progress of the affair behind him that he began to shove the line of the boys on the lounge; the shoving grew into a shuffle, and the shuffle into a wrestle, which ended on the front porch. At length Piggy stalked through the room where the girls were sitting, saying, when he returned with his oranges and his hat: "Come on, fellers, everybody's here."

The boys on the porch followed Piggy's example, and in a minute or two they stood huddled at the gate calling at the girls in the house to hurry. When the girls were on the porch, the boys struck out, and the two groups, a respectful distance apart, walked through the town. Mealy Jones was enjoying the triumph of his life, walking proudly between the noisy boys and giggling girls beside—but why linger over the details of this instance of man's duplicity and woman's worse than weakness.

The young blades of the Court of Boyville waited politely at the gate before the house where Bud Perkins lived with Miss Morgan, his foster mother. When the maidens arrived, all the company went trooping up Miss Morgan's steps. After Piggy had chased Bud from the front door into a closet, from which the host fought his



"Her son ate rapidly in silence."



"... boasted of it to the mothers of other boys."

way gallantly into the middle of the parlor floor, the essential preliminaries of the evening's entertainment were over. A little later the games began. First, there was "forfeits." Then came "tin-tin." "Clap in and clap out," followed, and finally, after much protestation from the girls, but at the earnest solicitation of Mealy Jones, "post-office" started. Piggy did not urge, nor protest. He had gone through the games listlessly, occasionally breaking into a spasm of gaiety that was clearly hollow, and afterwards sinking into profound indifference. For how could a well-conditioned boy be gay with a heartache under his Sunday shirt and the spectacle before his eyes of a freckled human cock-sparrow darting round and round the bower of his Heart's Desire? Under such circumstances it was manifestly impossible for him to see the eyes that sought his in vain across the turmoil of the room. Indeed, a voice pitched a trifle high to carry well spoke for him to hear, but met deaf ears. A little maid in a black-and-red check which the King of Boyville once preferred to royal purple even made her way across the throng—undesignedly, he thought, but Piggy basked in the joy of her presence and made no sign to show his pleasure. A little later, in the shuffle of the game, Piggy and his Heart's Desire were far apart. Half an hour passed, but still he did not revive. Mealy Jones called her out in "post-office," and

Piggy thought he saw a smile mount her brow. That was too much. When the dining-room closed behind the black-and-red checked dress, the pitcher that enclosed his woe broke and the wheel at the cistern of his endurance stopped. Mealy Jones came into the room, and the boy who kept the "post-office" called out, "Piggy Pennington." But the slam of the front door was his answer.

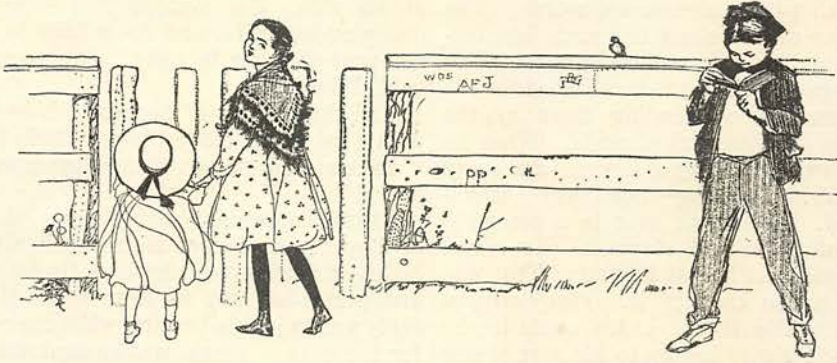
Piggy sat on the front porch, and reviewed the entire affair. It began when his Heart's Desire had fluttered into his autograph album with a coy:

"When this you see
Remember me."

He followed the corrugated course of true love step by step up to its climax where, a week before, she had given him his choice of her new pack of assorted visiting-cards. He rose at the end of five minutes' somber meditation, holding the curling gelatine card of his choice in his warm hand. After venting a heavy sigh, he checked a motion to throw away the token of his undoing and put it back into his pocket. While he was plotting dark things against the life and happi-



"... sat on the front porch, and reviewed the entire affair."



"... had fluttered into his autograph album."

ness of Mealy Jones, Piggy heard the sound of the merriment within, and a mischievous smile spread over his angry countenance. He tiptoed to the window, and peeped in. He saw his Heart's Desire sitting alone. He cheered up a little, not much—but sufficiently to reach in his pocket for his tick-tack.

Now, it may be clearly proved, if necessary, that the tick-tack was invented by the devil. Any wise man's son knows that every boy between the ages of ten and fourteen carries with him at all times a complete outfit of the mechanical devices on which the devil holds the patent and demands a royalty. So there is nothing really strange in the statement that Piggy Pennington took from his Sunday clothes, beneath a pocketful of Rewards of Merit for regular attendance at Sunday-school—all dated before the Christmas-tree—a spool with notched wheels, a lead pencil, and a bit of fishline. The line wound round the spool. Piggy put the pencil through the hole in the spool, and held the notched rims of the spool against the window pane by pressing on the

pencil axle. He gave the cord a quick jerk; a rattle, a wail, and a shriek were success-



"A little maid in a black-and-red check."

ively produced by the notches whirling on the glass. The company within doors screamed. Everyone knew it was Piggy, but no one ever lived with nerves strong enough to withstand the shock of a tick-tack. At the first shock those in-doors decided to ignore the disturbance. But it occurred twice afterwards, and a third tick-tack at a party is a dare.

So the boys took it up. As Piggy ran he forgot his hot, heavy shoes; he felt the night wind on his face and in his hair. He cared nothing for his pursuers; he ran for the gladness that came with running. Now he slackened his pace and let the boys catch up with him, and again he spread the mocking distance between them. He turned down an alley, and eluded the pack.

All the youngsters at the party, even the girls, had scampered out of the house to watch the race. When Piggy vaulted the back-yard fence into Miss Morgan's garden, he heard the pursuers half a block away. He saw, a hundred feet distant, a bevy of girls standing on the sidewalk. And he saw, too, as he came bounding down the lot, something that made him fairly skim over the earth:



"At this important bit of repartee."

his Heart's Desire standing alone near the porch in his path under an apple-tree. The exhilaration of the chase had made him forget his trouble. He was so sure-footed in the race that he forgot to be abashed for the moment and came bounding down by the apple-tree. He was full of pride. When he stopped he was the King of Boyville and every inch a king. The king—not Piggy—should be blamed. It was all over in a second—almost before he had stopped. He aimed at her cheek, but he got her ear. That was the first that he knew of it. Piggy seemed to return to life then. In his confusion he felt himself shriveling up to his normal size—shriveling and frying. In an instant he was gone, and Piggy Pennington ran into the group of girls on the sidewalk and let them catch him and hold him. The breathless youths went into the house telling their adventures in the race between gasps. But Piggy did not dare to look at his Heart's Desire for as much as five minutes—a long, long time. No one had seen him beneath the apple-tree. He was not afraid of the teasing, but he was afraid of a withering look from his Heart's Desire—a look that he felt with a parching fear in his throat would throw the universe into an eclipse for him. He observed that she got up and changed her seat, to be rid of Mealy Jones. At first Piggy thought that was a good sign, but a moment later he reasoned that the avoidance of Mealy was inspired probably by a loathing for all boys. He dared not seek her eyes, but he mingled noisily in the crowd for a while, and then, on a desperate venture, carelessly snapped a peanut shell and hit his Heart's Desire on the chin. He seemed to be looking a thousand miles away in another direction than that which the missile took. He waited nearly a minute—a long, uncertain minute—for a response.

Then the shell came back; it did not hit him—but it might have done so—that was all he could ask. He snapped shells slyly for a quarter of an hour, and was happy. Once he looked—not exactly looked; perhaps peeked is the better word; took just the tiniest lightning peek out of the tail of his eye, and found a smile waiting for him. At supper, if anyone save Piggy had tried to take a chair by his Heart's Desire when the plates came around, there would have been a fight. Mealy Jones knew this, and he knew what Piggy did not know, that it would have been a fight of two against one. So Piggy sat bolt upright in his chair beside the black-and-red checked dress, and talked to the room

at large; but he spoke no word to the maiden at his side. She noticed that Piggy kept dropping his knife, and the solicitude of her sex prompted her to ask: "Are your hands cold, Winfield?"

And the instinct of his sex to hide a fault with a falsehood made Piggy nod his head.

Then she answered: "Cold hands, a warm heart!"

At this important bit of repartee, the King of Boyville so forgot his royal dignity that he let an orange-peel drive at Jimmy Sears, and pretended not to hear her. His only reply was to joggle her arm when she reached for the cake. Piggy was so exuberant and in such high spirits that he put his plate on his chair and made Bud Perkins walk turkey fashion three times around the room. He forgot the disgrace which his note had brought to him in the school; he forgot the pretensions of Mealy Jones; he did not wish to forget the episode of the apple-tree, and for the time Piggy Pennington lived in a most peculiar world, made of hazel eyes and red-ribboned pig-tails, all circling around on a background of black-and-red checked flannel.

After that nothing mattered very much. It didn't matter that Piggy's shoes, which had bruised his feet in the race, began to sting like fire. It didn't matter much if Mealy Jones's mother did come for him with a lantern and break up the party. It didn't matter if Jimmy Sears did call out, "Hello, Roses Red," when the boys reached the bedroom where their hats were; for a voice that Piggy knew cried back from the adjoining room, "You think you're cute, don't you, old smarty?" Nothing in the world could matter then, for had not Piggy Pennington five minutes before handed a card to his Heart's Desire which read:

IF I MAY NOT C U HOME
MAY I NOT SIT ON THE FENCE
AND C U GO BY?

And had not she taken it, and said merrily, "I'm going to keep this." What could matter after that open avowal?

And so it came to pass in a little while that the goodly company, headed by the King of Boyville, filed gaily down the path. They walked two by two, and they started on a long, uneven way. But the King of Boyville was full of joy—a kind of joy so strange that wise men may not measure it; a joy so rare that even kings are proud of it.