

Samuel John Sawbridge Stableford - born 1869



Our family stayed at Huncote about 2 years and 9 months and the school was working up for the next exam when we moved to Enderby. This time I had passed the 3rd standard and was well in the 4th. Arriving at Enderby I was promptly relegated again to standard three to browse my intellectual way through the same old instruction that I could have done standing on my head.

Boys of my age were, at least, two standards ahead of me, and this was not my fault! It was no wonder that I was browned off!

It made me look - and feel - like a dunce (which I wasn't) and whilst Ernest Kilby and others were in the 7th standard, I was only in the 5th. Yet I was their equal in intelligence and perspicacity, and was inferior to no boy of my own age.

The result was I managed to pass the fifth before leaving school for work in the granite quarries with my father - half time at the age of 12, full time at 13.

Thus analysed, one may begin to understand the processes by which I completely lost my natural heritage of a happy, carefree boy-hood. It would be quite wrong to assume that I had no boyish pleasures. I did have many such moments and periods. Times when I forgot I was the worst boy in the village, or that I was backward at school. At such times I was as happy as the rest, but ever and anon there would come back to me the urge of bad temper, the inevitable cross-grained determination to be "nasty", to be followed by an overwhelming shame when Mother had me taken into the parlour to pray with, and for, me. I hated to be the cause of it. I wished she would punish me instead.

Perhaps she knew best. I think - now - that was the worst punishment she could have given me. And - after all - it was redemptive. I never forgot those moments. And I loved her for it all.

Huncote was a small village of 500 to 600 inhabitants, solely given over to Agriculture and granite quarry work. The quarry was not a new one, but was small compared with Mountsorrel, or even the adjacent one of Croft, little more than a mile away.

The remainder of our stay at Huncote was uneventful. Save for the visit of the Sunday School to sing our Anniversary Songs at Enderby (*where there was no Sunday School*) there were no outstanding events worth recording. But that exception is one that is worth remembering. The walk of two miles or so over the fields in the summer sunshine, each little group of us singing snatches of the songs as we walked; the wonderful reception we had at Enderby; the walk back in the gloaming; the altogether unique event was a soul-stirring experience and one never to be forgotten.

And then Father got better work at Enderby.

Mr. Battersby was the schoolmaster when we arrived at Enderby. He, himself, was almost a new-comer for he had recently replaced a very popular man, a Mr. Birmingham.

He hadn't had too easy a time, for it is never easy to supplant one who has been a popular favourite such as Mr. Birmingham had been. Moreover, he had a most unfortunate physical defect. His right leg was an inch or so shorter than his left one. Sometimes I was very sorry for him, especially when he had to punish some of the more unruly boys. Some of the boys were excessively aggravating.

I can see him now, his anger rising, the colour mounting and flushing his face, then - in extreme cases - the colour fading to a bitter white, while his eyes blazed and he balanced on his left foot, and his right toe (*for his knee was permanently bent*) as he swished his cane to and fro across his victim's hand or shoulders trying the while to maintain his dignity and authority before the school.

The boys had their own name for him coined by some of those whom he had cause to punish most frequently.

Their name for him was "Mop-leg", and I think he knew it, which knowledge must have had its influence and reaction on his bearing.

I found Mr. Battersby a really good schoolmaster, generally of kindly and understanding disposition, ready to help the boys in their studies with a real appreciation of honest effort to learn.

It did not take very long for me to drop into the routine of the new life at Enderby for I had become more tractable now, but I made few close friendships. I think a boy just passing into his teens becomes more reserved, "shy" if you like, and does not make friends freely.

My closest friend was Ernest Kilby, an orphan, living with his grandfather, Mr. Cook, a real quiet, studious, good-natured lad, who lived a couple of doors away, and we became 'chums' in the best sense.

Enderby was much larger than Huncote, with about 2,600 inhabitants and seemed to me, after living at a small place like Huncote, to be quite a town.

There were here quite a sprinkling of what one calls 'characters', one of which was the village postman, Charles Page. He was an officious, overbearing and pompous man who obviously felt that the office he held entitled him to show everybody how important and indispensable

he was in the life of the village. One of his favourite practices was, while going on his rounds, to thump as hard as he could on the cottage doors - there being no letter plates - and if unanswered within seconds, to pound away again so that the whole street could hear him, and drop the letters on the doorstep, regardless as to whether anyone was at home or not, and then to march majestically on to his next call where the performance was repeated. He almost terrorised the villagers by his calculated blustering importance.

On one such occasion, Ernest Kilby and I fell foul of him. Between us we had taken a boys' periodical for our mutual benefit. It was the "Boys' Own Paper" and in its pages appeared various advertisements for boys. Among these was an advert of Messrs. Gamages, Ltd., Holburn Bars, London, offering parcels of chemical substances for home experiments for boys. The price of these parcels was 5/- each, post free.

This advert fired our imagination. We thought it a splendid plan. We would join forces and order one. What results we should get we had no idea, but we should be sure to get a lot of fun out of it. It is said that anticipation is as productive of pleasure as is realization. I think it is quite true, in many cases it is an understatement.

In our case it was as well that it is so, for we had a long period of anticipation.

First, we had to save sufficient to buy the postal order, and - that took quite a long time seeing that we each had the magnificent sum of twopence a week for spending money, and we had to start from scratch. It was no use asking either of my parents or Ernest's Grandfather for any advance. Indeed, it would have been fatal to inform them of our projected investment. We knew full well that to take that course would inevitably lead to disaster. We simply would have been stopped at our little game.

So we set about saving for the great enterprise. Weeks and months went by and, at long last, we were in a position to order our parcel.

But what address should we use for the parcel's destination?

That was the puzzle. Whichever house it came to it might be promptly confiscated and that would mean the end of our dreams. We compromised. It was finally arranged that it should bear the address where I lived and that I should waylay the postman in the street, obtain it from him, and smuggle it away till we could really get down to our experiments in our out-houses.

To make the venture more exciting it was nearing Christmas. A couple of mornings we waited and then I began patrolling the street watching for the postman. He came, and - passed by - there was no parcel for me. And it was not "Charlie" Page. So much the better; I earnestly hoped that, when it did come, Charlie Page would not be the bearer. I had a presentiment that if it was I should find myself in a difficulty, but we had to risk that.

The fateful morning came. As soon as the postman turned the corner I saw the parcel under his arm. My heart leapt in a final burst of anticipation. And then I realised that it was Charlie Page after all.

I plucked up my courage and, boldly meeting him, asked if he had a parcel for me. "No!" he replied. "I have one for Mr. Stableford, but not for you." He went on.

“Well, I’ll take it,” I said.

"No you won't," he replied, "I shall deliver it properly."

My heart sank into my boots as I realised that this man who commonly, almost as a daily rite, left letters and parcels on people’s doorsteps to find their way into the house as varying circumstances might decide, was going to openly flout the desire of a boy who was obviously the anxious recipient of this precious parcel.

But so it was. I think he had a delight in doing anything or in not doing anything, if, by his particular action he could make himself a nuisance, and, upset the even tenor of someone's life.

He did deliver that parcel at the door. He knocked and waited, and banged the door again till my mother appeared, and he placed it carefully in her hands to be quite sure it had reached its proper destination. I stood and saw him do it.

I did not go in home then, I thought it best not to do so. Instead, although it was early, I went to school. And I told Ernest what had happened. I can see his rueful smile now, as we talked about it in the playground.

We never saw that parcel again.

We did, each of us, receive a dressing down, I from my parents and Ernest from his grandfather and aunt, that more than balanced all our months of eager anticipation, and, worse still, it was I who was branded as the 'incorrigible rascal' who was capable of any depth of wrong-doing by Mr. Cook, and unfit to be a playmate friend of Ernest, and he was forbidden to have anything further to do with me, which was a grief to me, for he really was a good friend. I never quite knew how he took it for we saw very little of each other after that.

I think he was kept in home in the evenings, a virtual prisoner, to avoid contact with me.

So I lost my only friend of those years and can you blame me for feeling a bitter resentment against that inestimable 'character' of Enderby - Charlie Page?

At the age of 12 I went half time into the quarry to work for Father at the 'banker' dressing kerbstones. It was a long time before I learnt the art of dropping my elbow properly when striking the head of 'punch' or 'chisel' with the result that every time I missed I struck the base of my thumb and it became a painfully raw spot.

I did learn by painful experience the arts of kerb dressing and squaring but by the time I was 16 my parents had other ideas for my future.

My natural bent was for wood-working which I had begun to do at home by making and mending things for mother, and doing them quite skilfully, and I begged to be allowed to go into the woodworking line, and I felt and knew that I was a born woodworker. I should never be really happy in any other work. After a series of lengthy discussion my parents decided I could not stand the strain of five years' apprenticeship to learn the trade so at last I was sent to a friend of father's at Ratby (a Mr. H. Copson) to learn the trade of baking on a 1½ years'

apprenticeship. The pity of it - I didn't care for baking, and would have done anything to use a plane or a saw.

However, I had to make the best of it, which I did, and eventually - as I believe - made the best loaf of bread for miles around.

After completing my apprenticeship I stayed with Mr. H. Copson at Ratby for a time as improver for 7/6 a week and board, later leaving to take two or three jobs as journeyman and eventually started on my own account at Enderby where Father had a bake-house especially built for the purpose.

It was hard and uphill work to build a business, starting without a single customer, but by dint of hard work I succeeded though through difficulties innumerable and finally contracted "Bakers' eczema" which closed my career as a baker. This was a bitter finish to seven years of unremitting toil and it cast its shadow over the following years of my life.

Meanwhile I had, at the early age of 16, become acquainted with Violetta Burgess and this ripened into a love which one could only call 'worship'.

For at least six years I could only look and wonder. During those years she never knew my feelings towards her, but at last I summoned all my courage and told her of my worship. We were married on the 2nd of February, 1893, which was about two years before my attack of eczema.

I think Violetta felt the bitterness of my illness more than I did, but she bore it bravely and helped me through the following years.

I became a Prudential Insurance Agent, a job I thoroughly detested but as 'needs must' I determined to succeed and was promoted to Assistant Superintendent to a District at Rugby to which town we moved and where our last boy, Horace, was born.

