

THE THOUGHTS OF YOUTH

BY OLIVER ONIONS

THE schools were closed for measles; and because a boy about the house all day was a nuisance, Roy Vanner's aunt came into his bedroom at the top of the house as he was preparing for bed, put down half a sovereign on the corner of the dressing table, and told him to be off in the morning and not to come back again till it was spent. She had one of her mysterious 'Conferences' on the morrow, that always filled every hook and hatpeg in the hall, lengthened the dining table by three leaves, and meant improvised beds and shakedown for such of the conferrers as came from a distance. Roy did n't know what they conferred about, except that it had to do with Welfare or Rescue or Missions or something equally joyless, and that the last time they had come he had had to sleep on the floor.

'Go right away,' his aunt said. 'You can cut yourself some sandwiches in the kitchen if you like. And don't read in bed, because we've all got to be up early to-morrow.'

And she went out, leaving the boy staring wide-eyed at the coin she had put down.

He was in his stockings, shirt, and knickers, and had stood with one brace-strap over his shoulder as his aunt had talked. Half a sovereign! He doubted his eyes. Once, one Christmas, he had possessed three separate half-crowns all at the same moment, but never, never a whole gold coin all in one piece. He moved softly to where it lay, as if half afraid to touch it.

Then he became all action. From a

drawer he took a piece of paper, wrapped the coin up in it, and put it into the pouch of his belt. Then he undressed hurriedly, put on his sleeping suit, fastened the belt two holes tighter than usual about it, slipped on his jacket again, and dashed barefooted downstairs to the kitchen.

'Aunt says I may have some sandwiches,' he said.

Roast beef was cooking, to be cut cold in the morning, and there were hams and pies and oven-trays of hot tarts about. They told him they could n't be bothered to cut sandwiches at that time of night.

'But I'm going off early — five o'clock.'

'Then cut them yourself. No, no, not that new loaf! Dear, oh, dear! Ellen, is there any of that cold mutton left? Sit you down on that chair while I cut them, the bother you are — I don't suppose there's any measles at all —'

The sandwiches were cut, but Roy demanded more than they gave him. His hands were tightly clenched about his belt. He was n't going to spend golden money on sandwiches. Golden money was for golden things.

Ten minutes later he was in bed, with the light out, excitedly running over the list of his most cherished possessions and regretting that his knapsack was so small. There were no end of things he wanted to take. Finally, he had cut down the list to his map, his water-color box and sketching block, his folding stool, Shakespeare, a spare pair of stockings, the heels of which he would soap in the morning,

and as many other odds and ends, including the *Morte d' Arthur*, as could be crammed into his pockets.

Then he fell, not so much asleep, as into a sort of intermittent sub-trance from which he half woke from time to time to ease the tightened belt that contained the gold coin.

No doubt his aunt had intended that he should take a half-crown excursion ticket somewhere, sleep that night at a farmhouse, and return the next day, when the business of Missions or Rescue or whatever it was was over. But that was by no means the idea of the boy, who at half-past five the next morning, closed the door of the house softly behind him, glanced up at the drawn blinds from the end of the short laureled drive, and began to drop down a broad road to the heart of the factory town. He wore a white jersey under his jacket — his folding sketching stool was thrust through the straps of his bulging knapsack, he had a spare stocking in either jacket pocket, and his sandwiches were distributed in small parcels over half his slender person. About him hooters and 'whews' sounded, calling the shawled girls and wood-clogged men to their work; the sun made brown velvet of the smoke on his right hand, but flashed like gold on the windows on his left. His face was set north. He could have taken tram or train out of the town, but Lancelot or the Knight with the fetterlock and shacklebolt azure would not have taken train or tram. Besides, he had decided that that half-sovereign was to last him, not a day, but as near a week as he could spin it out.

He was a noisy and bright boy among the other lads of the Upper Fifth at his school, but just as happy when he was alone. Painting pictures, when you came to think of it, meant being a good deal alone, for the other

fellow could n't be expected to hang round doing nothing while he worked, and he wanted to be a painter of pictures. He wanted to paint pictures like the cavaliers, signed 'Coleman (Roma),' that he saw in the dealers' windows in the Arcade, or those others, of moors and streams and hayfields, signed with the initials 'M. R. J.' For these things, and for the glowing lines in Shakespeare and the magic of *Endymion* and the *Morte d' Arthur*, his mind was unfolding like a tree that bursts its silky sheaths in the spring, renewing the miracle of the spring before, and the one before that, and all the springs that ever were. He was just turned fourteen.

He intended to walk a mere trifle of thirty miles, or perhaps thirty-two, that day. It was, perhaps, just a little more than he had ever walked before, but he was a good walker, and had all sorts of thoughts to wile away the time. His ordinary walk was twenty miles, which meant ten miles out, a tantalizing glimpse of country yet untrodden, and, therefore, fairer than all the rest, and so home again. But this time it was not going to be like that. He had ten shillings.

He had only one light regret. He lived in the middle of the country, and the sea was out of the question. He must wait for the sea until the summer holidays came round, and even then he would be more or less attached to people who held stuffy conferences and the like.

By eight o'clock he was ascending the street of a village that was partly a country village but partly also a residential suburb of the town he had left; but by half-past nine he was breakfasting, a little late it was true, but where he had planned to breakfast — in a good grouse-butt on the rise of a well-trodden moor. He reckoned that another hour and a half's walking

would bring him somewhere near the limit of his ordinary walks, and so to the real beginning of this walk, so heaven-sent and utterly unexpected twelve hours ago. He knew the cottage he meant to go to. It had white painted windows that slid sideways, and roses over them, and an old seat in the little front garden to read Shakespeare on, and, at the bottom of the field, a brown brook for bathing that tumbled into the broad river just near where the stepping stones led to the old Abbey. He remembered also lovely hot tea, and fried ham half an inch thick, and home-made jam and pastry that melted in your mouth.

He sprang up, his eyes sparkling, buried the débris of his breakfast under the heather, shouldered his knapsack again, and pushed blithely on.

Midday found him dropping down steep jolting sheep tracks to a town with baths and wells and hydro-pathic establishments. It was a clean town, but, nevertheless, a town; but it was the last one he would see. A couple of miles out of it and he need not even tread a road. There was a path that mounted up a plantation, up and up and up, till the plantation lay below, and above was a world of jagged silvery limestone and silky bents, with thyme and potentilla and wild pansies set like jewels in it. Limestone walls, their tops all broken where the mountain sheep had jumped over them, straggled across this world, and farther on, not more than an hour or two, lay his destination. He was very proud of the dust that lay thick and white on his black boots and black stockings. His knapsack felt only a little heavy, and as he put the miles behind him he changed its position only a little more frequently. The blissful thought that he should be here — here — carried him on.

What a lot money could do if only you possessed it in sufficiently large quantities! It never occurred to him to wish that the ten shillings had been more. More could not have purchased more. He did not know, indeed, that it had not purchased and could not purchase this that he already had—his mind's innocence, his maiden health, the openness of his eyes to beauty, of his ears to the music of the world, of his heart to sudden delight. As he slowly climbed the hill, his jacket over one white jerseyed arm and his knapsack dragging on the other, he blessed all the wrong things — measles, his aunt's funereal conferences, the stranger who would occupy his bed that night, the unbroken coin in his belt. The real things passed unnoticed, undreamed of. He had always had them. Should he not continue always to have them?

Of the love that his treasured books talked about he knew nothing except what he had read in them.

He dined like a king, with Richard Cœur-de-Lion and Hotspur, Coleman (Roma), and the President of the Royal Academy for invisible company. The woman who had opened the cottage door to him had looked him up and down and had asked where his friends were, but he had not told her that these were his friends. When he had made her understand what he wanted, she had agreed to house and board him for the sum of three-and-sixpence a day. Thereupon, he had made a swift calculation. The day was Tuesday; reckoning from his first meal, he had enough, all but sixpence, to last him for two whole days as well as up to and including tea-time on Friday. That, with the day spent in getting there and a day to get back again, would be five days. For a moment he had felt inclined to bother the slight shortage that would have

made a round week of it; but now a whole chicken lay on the dish before him, with gravy, cauliflower, potatoes, and a great gooseberry pie with a jug of cream on the other side of a cruet as big as a chandelier.

Unskillfully he attacked the chicken with a table-knife, and opened his Shakespeare.

At nine o'clock a candle was brought in to a slight, white-jerseyed figure fast asleep in a horsehair chair. He had been going to look for the pool he would bathe in before breakfast, had only sat down for a moment, and could n't understand why he had fallen asleep. It was with a bent and stumbling walk that he got somehow up the narrow stairs and reached his bedroom. Afterwards he dimly remembered saying his prayers and winding up his watch.

The next morning the mere physical operation of getting out of bed took him nearly five minutes. The truth was that he had walked nearer thirty-five miles than thirty. But, of course, the stiffness would be all right after his bath. Barefooted (he had tried to get his boots on) he sought the pool. It was part of the ritual of the holiday to bathe, and he did so in a brook that must just have had an iceberg taken out of it. Then, chattering between his teeth that it was glorious, he returned to breakfast and warmth.

After breakfast he glanced across the parlor to where his sketching things lay on a chair. He refused to admit that it would be quite a horrible effort to go across the room for them. He told himself, instead, that it would be better to take a preliminary stroll before committing himself to a subject. That was at half-past eight; but it was nearly ten o'clock before, barefooted and leaning heavily on a stick he had borrowed, he had dropped down the mile of steep hillside and reached the

stepping stones that crossed the river to the Abbey.

He sat down again to knead his thighs and calves and to make careful little pressures on his feet.

M. R. J., together with most other artists, has painted that Abbey; but M. R. J. never painted anything half so lovely as the girl of thirteen who, as Roy sat, presently appeared upon the farther bank, sat down to take off her shoes and stockings, and then began the perilous passage of the stones. Not that Roy saw how lovely she was all at once. At first he saw only her dark hair and long white legs, and, purely as a matter of picture-composition, the stately old Abbey was quite able to hold its own with the approaching figure. But as she drew nearer, her arms outspread for balance, the Abbey began as it were to lose ground. What had been a landscape with a figure in it became a figure with some sort of landscape behind. A few moments later it was not even that. It was a portrait pure and simple, at which Roy could only gaze with parted lips and eyes as big and round as saucers.

The dancing water near the bank cast the light upward, so that all the shadows were turned upside down. A golden mesh of light rippled on her legs and upcaught skirt of blue serge; and the light glowed also under her chin, her brows, the soft 'M' of her upper lip, and into the recesses of the dark hair about her neck. And at the sight of her eyes the quiet old Abbey passed away from Roy's vision altogether. They looked like damsons fallen into a pot-pourri of rose-petals, big as pennies, liquid as the black pool below the stones. As she sprang to the bank he could see — for he had got somehow to his feet — a tiny fleck in each of them — his own white jersey.

The ripple from the water went; the

light became ordinary again; but the Abbey did not reappear.

Then as he looked her lips parted. Underneath that soft M, like the standard petal of a sweet-pea, the pearls appeared. She was smiling at him.

'Hallo!' she said, as if they had just come together after having been parted for a short time.

'Hallo!' he replied.

'Do you live here?'

But he had only just been able to get out that 'Hallo,' and now had a foolish stammering. Oh, he knew already what he wanted to say — that he had only just come to live there, but had lots of money and now was n't going to live anywhere else. He wanted to say that when they were married they would go on living there together, and she would always look like that, and they would live up at his cottage, and have chicken and gooseberry pie for dinner with Geraint and Enid and Coleman (Roma) and the President of the Royal Academy every day. He wanted to tell her — for it had all come upon him in one overwhelming instant — that that was quite true about knights and ladies' sleeves and tourneys and Queens of Love and Beauty. He wanted to read his thumbled old Shakespeare with her, to have those eyes and his own gray ones looking at the same words at the same moment, her glossy curls against his own fair tumbled toppin. Those were just a few of the things he wanted to say.

But 'I'm living up there, for a bit; I only came yesterday; I walked,' he said.

'All by yourself?'

'Yes.'

'How far did you walk?'

'I should think nearly thirty-five miles.'

'O-o-oh! What a lot! That's ever so

much farther than I could walk! Were n't you tired?'

'No,' he replied. He sincerely believed it. He forgot that his puffed and pink feet proclaimed that he could not yet get his boots on.

'I saw you looking at your feet. I once walked ten miles, but I was very tired.'

'Were you?' he said. 'Girls are, I suppose.'

It was the first time he had ever supposed anything whatever in the world about girls.

'And I had an awful blister,' she confessed. 'Do your feet hurt you when I touch them like that?' She stooped and put a cool palm on one of them. 'Oh, how hot! The water's made mine as cool as anything — feel!'

Already behind his bliss was a tremendous contempt for all grown-up people, except Shakespeare and a few others who wrote books. Presumably they knew all about this huge thing that had just happened to him, but yet they found time to hold conferences about other things. He must be mistaken. They could n't know about it. Only he, Shakespeare, and a few others knew about it.

'And shall you walk back again?' she asked. They had sat down, and her cool hand was again on his hot and bruised foot.

'Rather!' he replied.

'What is your name?'

'Roy Vanner.'

'Mine's Mildred. Mildred Lake. We've taken the rectory behind the Abbey there for a month. Father's gone fishing, and mother's busy. Why don't you come and sit on the stepping stones and waggle your feet in the water so they'll be cool?'

He nearly fell in the attempt, but her back was toward him so that it did not matter. They had to cross seven

or eight stones before the water became deep. Then she sat down on one stone and he on the next, facing her. The rushing water was dark as ivy berries, and swirled and gurgled and made bubbles like soda-water about their legs.

'Do you go to a nice school?' she asked.

'Not bad. But I want to be an artist and paint pictures.'

'Oh, how lovely! Would you paint me?'

Shyly he replied, 'No.' How could anything so adorable be painted?

'I'm going to a school in the south soon, where my cousin Marjorie is,' she informed him. 'She's seventeen.'

Borne down on the stream toward them came a spray of meadowsweet. Her foot cornered it against the moss of the stone on which she sat. He plunged in his hand and secured it.

'May I have it?' he asked.

'Yes, if you like.'

'No, I mean you give it to me,' he said, holding it out to her. And his voice was husky and the heart beneath the white jersey beat violently and his face was a deep brown red as he added, 'Will you kiss it?'

She put the wet fragrant spray to her lips. 'There!' she said.

'Would you kiss me?'

She sought for a better hold on the stone. 'I don't think I could reach without slipping off ——'

But she managed to reach. Then, when she had kissed him, 'I think I ought to be going now,' she said. 'I'm going with mother to Kirkley this afternoon.'

His heart fell like a stone.

'Oh! Shan't you be here?'

'Mother's ordered the trap. She's going shopping. I said I wanted to go with her.'

'Oh, Mildred, don't go! Anyway,' he added dejectedly, 'I shall come down here.'

He meant that he would n't be able to help it. Though he were to set off north, south, east, or west, with no matter what resolution to sketch, his feet would drag him there.

She did not go to Kirkley that afternoon after all. She was at their meeting-place at a little after two o'clock, by which time he had lunched, or rather dined, with Enid and Rosalind and Juliet for company, all carrying their shoes and stockings in their hands and dressed in navy blue serge. He had seen the dust of a trap on the Kirkley Road as he had hobbled down to the river again.

'I told mother I should go and look for father,' she announced as she sprang from the last stone. 'I've got a lot of cherries. Come along if your feet are better. Shall I hold your hand?'

Hand in hand they sought the bank path to the woods.

Busy grown-up people who wile away a quarter of an hour's wait for dinner or a train by reading this story—do you remember? Have you traveled so far through life without some such memory behind you? If not, though there was 'nothing in it'—no more than is written here—you will forget many things before you forget that. The sudden smell of hay that sometimes surprises you through your absorbed thoughts, that sweep of rolling moor that bursts on your preoccupied eyes as you gain the last top—do they not evoke some slender figure, clad in a white jersey or what-not, that far-off innocent ghost that once was you? Has the long chain broken that links your plenteous picnic basket on the coach-top or your luncheon laid out in the clearing with those sticky mutton sandwiches or those cherries put into your mouth by a large-eyed child? And when you think of love, and see lovers about you, what kind of a love

is it if it falls so very, very far below that first kiss on a mossy stepping-stone or that hand-in-hand walk through the beechwoods in June?

And do you remember how you had it, the whole three-days' immortality of it for just ten shillings?

They walked, those two children, your parents-in-love, she with her arm sometimes about him to steady him over the rougher places, past glades of campion and stitchwort and fern, or on the hot slippery bents gemmed with the wild pansies and thyme. They paddled in pools where the moss made soft bolsters for his feet. They tried (but failed) to get near the red deer, and turned up the leaves of the hazels to see how the nuts were ripening. Their teeth were blue with the stain of bilberries, and laughing they compared indigo tongues. They kissed often. He had bound her hair with an old snake skin he had found, and he talked a lot of nonsense of ladies' sleeves and Queens of Love and Beauty. She had promised never to marry anybody else, and he was going to practise his painting ever so hard and be a Royal Academician. She wore his ring. It was made of a bit of old rabbit-snare with a forget-me-not in it, that he renewed every time they came to a patch of the flowers by brook or marshy patch. Twenty times a day he said, and made her repeat after him, 'I love you.'

'And you will write me letters at my school, won't you?' she asked.

A little scruple popped up that he had tried to keep under. It was not about writing letters to her at her school, but about not writing them to her at her home. They were engaged, of course, but they could not be 'really' engaged without some sort of regard to her home.

'I ought to see your father,' he said with a show of boldness.

'Oh, he might be cross!'

'But it will be years and years before we are married, and he can't be cross all that time.'

'I don't think mother would be quite so cross,' she ventured.

But no. He insisted that it must be her father. This was an affair between man and man.

Between the days spent with her and the nights when he crept into his bed at the cottage up the hill there was, for bliss, very little difference. In some golden state that was neither sleep nor waking, he went over it all again and again, every look of her eyes, every word she had spoken. And then, on the Thursday night, he got into bed remembering that that was the last night he was to sleep there. His ten shillings would give him tea on the morrow, and after that.

A flood of cold misery overwhelmed him.

The place was just within the 'nightingale-line,' and that night a brute of a bird sang.

By morning he had taken a resolution. It was a hardy one, and hurt him afresh somewhere in the breast every time he thought of it, but it could not be escaped. He must see her father about their being 'properly' engaged.

And (as was bound to happen) that morning she did not appear at their trysting-place. Some accident or bidding kept her within doors. He was in an agony. Unless she appeared in the afternoon that meant that he would not see her again to say good-bye to.

He dared not go back to the cottage for dinner for fear of missing her. At three o'clock she had not appeared, at half-past three there was still no sign of her.

And that settled it. Four o'clock found him knocking at the front door of the rectory, behind the Abbey and asking for Mr. Lake.

He was put to wait for Mr. Lake in a dark and pleasant drawing room with many silver objects on the tables and a mirror on the wall that reflected the gray stones of the ruined refectory outside. A tall man in tweeds entered, and he rose.

'Have you brought those May flies?' the tall man asked.

'No,' said Roy, swallowing hard.

'Are n't you the boy who went for the May flies? What is it, then?'

Roy's resolution that this was solely a man's affair suddenly failed him.

'Please may Mrs. Lake come in too?' he said. 'I want to be engaged to Mildred, please.'

The tall man's mouth opened wide, and then suddenly he frowned. Roy thought he knew what the frown meant. He felt guilty at having been un-really engaged to Mildred for more than two days without saying anything to anybody.

'Who are you?' Mr. Lake demanded, and then, without waiting for Roy to answer, he strode to the door and called, 'Caroline! Come here at once. What's all this about?'

A graceful lady, too like Mildred to be anybody but her mother, entered the drawing room.

'Now, what do you say, boy?' demanded Mr. Lake.

Ten minutes later Mr. Lake had gone out again. Most of what he had said had not been addressed to Roy at all, but to his wife. Roy had heard the words 'Running wild all over the place — picking up heaven knew who — apparently a man could n't have a quiet day's fishing without something or other happening — the sooner she went to school the better.'

He had not even looked at Roy as he had gone out.

But Mrs. Lake was looking at the

The King's Highway

tearless figure in the white jersey and bare feet. Suddenly she approached him.

'He did n't mean it all, dear,' she said gently. 'You'll understand some day. Now you can't possibly walk back home — why it's enough to kill a strong man! — so I'm going to give you your railway-fare and send you in the trap to the station. Look, here's five shillings. You will do as I say, won't you?'

It was a mistake to speak gently to Roy just then, but he swallowed the choke.

'No, thank you, if you don't mind,' he said.

'But I shan't let you go. I'm going to wire to your people at once. They must be horribly anxious; why you've been away nearly a week! Now,' and she put her arm about the boy and drew him to her, 'will you do as I say if I'll do something you want very much?'

'What, please?' Roy managed to get out.

For answer Mrs. Lake got up and walked out of the room.

A minute later the door opened again and Mildred stood there. She ran to him.

'Oh, dearest!' she said, as he had taught her. 'Mother says only a quarter of a minute — father's so cross — good-bye —'

She put up her face to be kissed.

But Roy broke his implied word to Mrs. Lake after all. He had had no dinner, and could n't have eaten any tea, but they could have his ten shillings at the cottage.

And as at the cottage, so at the rectory. A maid, coming in presently with tea, found, among the silver and bric-a-brac on a little table, two half-crowns lying side by side.

QUITE, QUITE

I HAVE decided at last upon a profession. I am going to set up as a quorister.

It had been a busy morning with me at the office, and I felt annoyed at first on being interrupted. I had been engaged for about twenty minutes in preparing a draught by putting the office copy of the *Times* over the fireplace, where two lukewarm pieces of coke had been laid. I had just got them to spark nicely when the paper suddenly went up with a loud roar into Victoria Street by way of the chimney. The only thing to do was to paste the edges of a number of spare minute sheets together in order to form a substitute, and I was just accomplishing this when Enderby burst in.

'You're wanted at once in Room 1005,' he said.

'What for?' I asked nervously and gluing myself rather badly on the left sleeve.

'The committee are sitting,' he said; 'you've got to make a quorum.'

'I'm awfully sorry,' I said, 'but I never got beyond quadratic equations; besides —'

'It's perfectly easy,' he told me; 'you've to take Anderson's place. You'll only have to sit there and say nothing and look wise. The secretary will introduce you as acting for Mr. Anderson.'

'Lend me your spectacles and your spats, then,' I stipulated.

He did so, and when I had adjusted these I went down immediately to a long dark room, in which several kind-looking and sleepy old gentlemen and one extremely young and alert one sat about a table covered with green baize and furnished with more pink blotting-paper than I had ever seen before in the whole of my life.

As soon as I came in I was intro-

duced to the chairman, and the alert young man began to read out in a quick clear voice a number of entirely unintelligible sentences, and every time he stopped for breath the chairman looked round rather timidly and said, 'I think we all agree with that, gentlemen.' Thereupon the old gentlemen frowned a little over their spectacles and said, 'Quite, quite,' and I frowned a little over Enderby's spectacles (it is, as a matter of fact, extraordinarily hard to frown under them), and kicked my spats with each toe in turn to make sure they were there and said, 'Quite, quite,' too.

Every now and then I felt an irresistible temptation to say, 'Quack, quack,' but I checked it in time, feeling somehow that it was better to follow the normal procedure. By degrees something about the authoritative manner or the sonorous quality of my 'Quite, quite's' made such an impression that one by one the old gentlemen began to leave off quite-quiteing and relinquish the whole business to me. And when, toward the end of the meeting, I was able to produce a box of matches and light the cigar of the old gentleman on my right and the cigarette of the old gentleman on my left, it was clear that they regarded me as a man of profound administrative capacity and skill in worldly affairs.

It was after this that I made my momentous decision. I am about to rent an office and engage a typist with gold hair and gray suede shoes and a bag with a powder-puff in — a typist of the kind that makes tea at eleven o'clock in the morning and three o'clock in the afternoon, and spells 'customary' with an 'e'; and I am going to put a brass plate outside the door with 'H. Jenkinson, Quorister' engraved upon it, and underneath this, 'Business, professional, and political quora ready-made or bespoke.' And