

ONLY BUTTONS!

CHAPTER I.

'Come on, Tom! do be quick!' shouted one boy.

'Don't keep us waiting till Christmas!'

'We shall go on without you!' called a third.

'Oh do come on!' cried a fourth.

The boys stood staring at the little figure in the distance. It was quaint, thick-set, very short and stout; and the little dog that was racing round, and on all sides, was truly no beauty, with its short body and clumsy head, and a mouth showing three crooked teeth. Further, his name was 'Buttons,' so it will be easy to understand that the eyes were very round and bright. As his master gave him his stick to carry, he did look proud, with his head erect and his tail curling well over his back.

But what is it that makes the boys shade their eyes with their hands, and look earnestly along the road? Tom is not running now. A gentleman on horseback has stopped close to him, and is talking to him.

'What can he be saying to Tom?' said Fred.

'Hush!' whispers long-eared John, as if he hoped to overhear something. But the wind is in the wrong direction.

'There's no good hushing a fellow,' answers Fred, crossly. 'I shall go and meet Tom.'

Following Fred's example, they all trooped slowly down the road to meet Tom, who, no longer running as before, walked as if he were considering something very important; and his little dog, squeezed tightly in his arms, looked up in his face, as if wondering what made his master so serious.

'Well, Tom,' said Fred, impatiently, 'what did the old gentleman say to you?'

'He wasn't old at all,' answered Tom.

'Come now, never mind that,' said John, 'tell us, what did he talk about all that long time?'

'It wasn't a long time at all,' said Tom; 'it seemed to me he was gone in a minute.'

'Oh, bother your minutes! cannot you tell us what he said?' asked Fred. 'I am sure I could tell a thing quickly if a fellow wanted to know.'

'Well!' said Tom, deliberately, 'he said, if ever I wanted a sovereign I was to come to him.'

'Whew!' exclaimed all the boys in one breath, and for a moment the news was so astounding that they could say nothing.

'Oh, Tom, how very jolly! Of course you'll go to him and get it, and then you can buy us a new set of cricket things!' shouted Fred, looking scornfully at a very old bat he held in his hand. 'That will be jolly! Then we shall be able to challenge the Moreton eleven. I know they've just got a new set.'

'What nonsense you talk, Fred!' said Tom, gravely. 'I have not got the sovereign; and, what is more, I don't mean to get it,' and he squeezed his little dog tighter than ever.

If Buttons could have understood, he would have licked his

'Oh, what a lot of story-books it would buy,' sighed William, as he thought of his well-worn *Masterman Ready*.

Jim, pale and silent, said nothing. What would a sovereign not do for him? No wonder he was silent, for a crowd of thoughts were surging up in his mind.

'But,' began John, who always liked to get at the bottom of everything, 'you have not told us why the gentleman promised you a sovereign.'

Here Fred broke in,—

'As long as Tom has the sovereign, I don't care how he gets

dog, and I don't mind his being ugly.'

'Poor Buttons, he thought you ugly,' and Tom looked affectionately at the little snub nose, as Buttons returned from his chase.

'I said I was very fond of him, and would not part with him for anything. "Not even for a sovereign?"' he asked, and I said, "No, sir."

'Then he said something about my being a very true friend, or some such nonsense; and afterward added, "Well, if ever you want a sovereign, bring your little dog to me; I live close to Melcombe, over the hills, and any one will show you Major Brown's house."

'Then he rode on, and I could have told him beforehand it was only wasting time stopping to talk to me. I wouldn't part with Buttons, not for anything—not for twenty sovereigns. Would I, Buttons?' And Buttons' round eyes answered 'No!'

There was a pause, and then, each boy having made up his mind, spoke it out, in what was a confused babel of voices; but only one verdict amongst them—'Sell Buttons, Tom!'

Silent Jim was the only boy who did not give his opinion on the subject: he would give anything to have a sovereign, and he did not know what it was to possess a pet dog.

Meanwhile the game of cricket proceeded. Buttons was regarded by them all with far greater respect than heretofore; nay, he was even forgiven when he seized the cricket-ball and held it firmly in his teeth. Such is the power of twenty shillings.

Its enemies call Cricklade a village; its friends call it a town. It boasts of a Mayor and Corporation, of a School, and a High Street, and a Broad Street; and lastly, though they ought to have headed the list, a beautiful

church and an old ruined castle, which were a great attraction to tourists in summer weather.

The houses were of various degrees—some high, some low, some with door-knockers, and some without.

Tom's mother lived in a house with a knocker, while Jim's mother had only a poor little thin, shrunken door without a knocker; and though it seems a small matter, there is something important in the fact.

A knocker means that within you will find a parlor—a room set apart for grand occasions—



"BUTTONS" AFTER A BIRD.

master's hand very heartily; but as it was he did not quite like being squeezed so tightly, while his temper not being of the very best quality, he resented it with a little growl, and then dashed wildly off after a hedge-sparrow.

Tom's speech caused immense surprise; it made even reserved John wake up as he pulled Tom's sleeve. 'You must be dreaming, Tom; think, there are twenty whole shillings in a sovereign!'

'Why it would buy us cakes enough to last us a fortnight,' said one greedy fellow.

it; nor does any one, I'm sure. And it's getting very late,' added he impatiently; 'so if we don't begin at once, we shall have no time for our game.'

'Well,' said Tom, 'to begin at the beginning, the gentleman stopped his horse and said, "What a funny little dog that is of yours! Can he do any tricks?"'

'I answered, "Just a few, sir. He can beg, and ask for anything he wants; he is very sharp and quick at learning!"'

"I suppose you would not part with him?" he asked next; "because I want a nice, sharp, little