

The Victoria



Regia

THE

Victoria Regia :

A VOLUME OF

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN POETRY AND PROSE.

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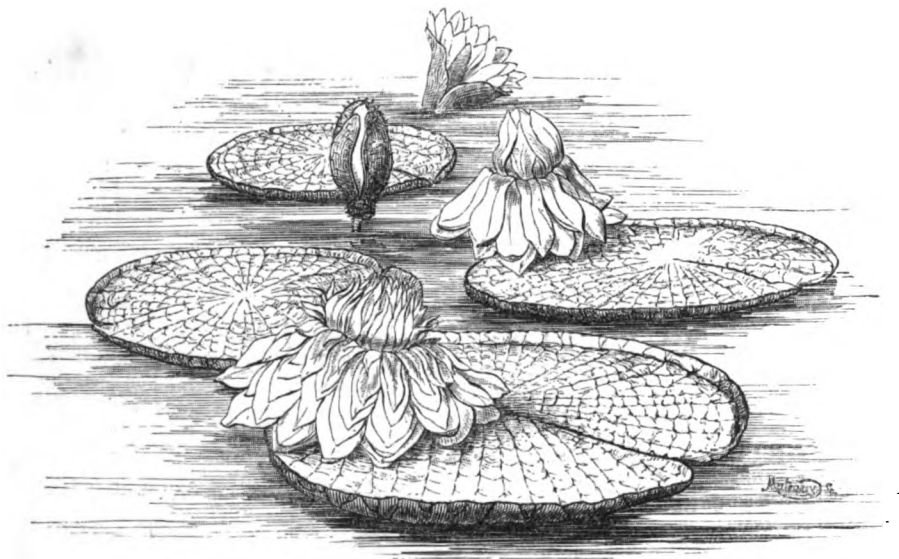
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A Boy of Five.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MRS. MARGARET MAITLAND," ETC., ETC.

“’LL no’ meddle wi’ ye,” said a small voice close to the hedge. The little owner of it stood defiant but trembling, looking from under the shadow of his sunburnt frowning eyebrows, with eyes that but for very terror would have been full of tears, at the little group of young men approaching him. It was twilight, and all that little Walter could see of the wayfarers was, that they were sailors, and that the leader had a gold band round his cap. The child discerned instinctively that he had encountered a party from that dreaded cutter which lay up the Frith like a bird of prey, to pounce on all unwary seamen. For it was “the time of the war”—significant sound to all ears that remember it; and the British navy, popular as it was, had to be recruited by means of something worse than conscription, by impressment; and in this little suffering community the horror of the press sat heavy on all souls, kindling precocious notions of fear and self-defence even in infantine bosoms.

Little Walter Erskine was six years old. He stood with his little brown hands knotted together in an attitude of

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suspicion, defiance, and concealed terror, which no anxious family father could have surpassed; lowering with his blue eyes upon the laughing young lieutenant who stood willing to parley. The hedge was wet with recent rain, the sky all shrouded with tumbled heaps of clouds, and the sound of unseen running water, "the running of the paths after rain," blending with the soft distant rustle of the unseen sea.

"I'll no' meddle wi' ye," said Walter, edging backwards to the termination of the hedge, where, if he could but reach the spot, there was a chance of flight. The little party which had caused such fright to Walter stood before him, vast in the darkness, one figure behind the other, watching the child's retreat with silent amusement; but when he had edged along to that object of his hopes, and with a cry of terror and temerity rushed across the road towards the visible village houses where he could obtain shelter, the little fugitive was pursued and brought back, with remorseless laughter. Struggling desperately, and with a heroic effort of manliness resisting the temptation to bite and scratch and cry, the boy was brought before the leader of the dreaded band. Here, taking courage from desperation, Walter changed his tactics.

"Ye canna meddle wi' me—ye canna press me like you do the other men!" cried the boy, "for I have my protection. Tell him to haud off his hand, and I'll let you see't."

"But if I haud off my hand," said the man who had caught him, in a voice strangely familiar to belong to one of the cutter's men, "you'll rin away."

Walter made no answer, but stood firm, eyeing with profound contempt the mean Colossus who had doubted his honour. Then, after much ruminating in his boyish pocket, full of a salt water miscellany, the child produced proudly the

protection which was to save him from the press. Such a travestie of a scene, sometimes heartrending enough, as the young officer well knew, subdued his mirth a little. He looked at the bit of paper which Walter rested his hopes on, and bowed in mock respect.

“It’s all right, my man—it appears I can’t take you,” said the good-humoured lieutenant. “If all the men in Anster were as well off, we might turn back and go no further. So your name’s Erskine? That’s not a fisher’s name.”

“I’m no’ a fisher’s son,” said Walter, indignantly: then pausing with a generous artifice; “if I was you I would gang away back to the cutter; plenty more in Anster have protections as well as me,” said the child, with a glance from under his sunburnt eyebrows—“and oh, man, if ye saw the wives greetin’!—I would turn a rebel, if it was me!”

The burst of laughter with which this valorous sentiment was received roused Walter’s wrath. He faced upon his persecutors, turning from one to another, with his little brown fists clenched tight.

“If I was a man I would fecht ye a’!” cried the child, in shrill passion. “I would think shame to come into folks’ houses, and carry their men away, if I was you. I would rather be a fisher and gang to the drave, than wear a gold band on my bonnet and steal away the women’s men!”

This outcry of natural indignation had a great effect upon Walter’s unseen adversaries. With various exclamations they turned away, some rubbing rough hands over their eyes. The lieutenant laid his hand kindly on the boy’s shoulder.

“Come along, little hero—I am not going to steal away the women’s men,” said the young officer. “Did you never hear that the minister had a son in the cutter who would never

harm his old friends?—and look here,” said the good-humoured sailor, seizing the child and tossing him up to his shoulder, on a level with the faces, unrecognisable in the darkness, of the men he had defied: “Look here—do you think that big fellow there is one of a press gang?”

Walter uttered a cry of surprise and disgust, and struggled down from the stranger’s grasp. “It’s big Jamie Horsburgh,” cried Walter—“its no’ the cutter’s men! Ye’ve a’ been making a fool of me. Let me go; and a’ this time they’ll think I’m pressed, that I’ve no’ come hame!”

With which indignant words the child struggled to his feet, plunged his hands into his pockets, and disdaining to look behind him or take any notice of his persecutors, marched, affronted and defiant, home.

Ten years after this childish burlesque of one of the saddest features of the time, the entire township of St. Monance was fluttered by the sudden appearance of a strange sail, fighting gallantly through a gale on the Frith, and aiming distinctly at the harbour of that picturesque but most fishy sea-village. A very strange sail; of foreign rig and outlandish aspect, and altogether unknown to the oldest and wisest of those fisher-patriarchs, the business of whose life it was to inspect and keep a record of all the wayfarers who went up and down the Frith. The excitement caused by this sudden appearance brought all the population to the shore. The women stayed the needle in the net, the very hubbub about the newly arrived boat in the harbour, with its silvery cargo of “haddies” was hushed in the greater excitement. The spray dashing over the low black lines of rock, the roll of heavy waves upon

that broken coast, the sinister white that broke into angry snarls the dark, broad, frowning surface of the Frith, increased the stir by providing a fit landscape for its fear and wonder. On the extremity of the pier, groups were collected in earnest discussion. "She's no Dutch. Na, na, far ower licht for a Dutch boat—nor out o' none of the north ports where I'm acquaint," said an old sailor, watching through his glass every movement of the doubtful stranger.

"Let *me* see," exclaimed a veteran with a medal on his breast, lately invalided, and an authority on strange sails—"Dutch! ye may say sae! She's just a French sloop and no other thing—a creature of a gunboat, a' fire and flame. Bring out the auld cannon that's in Newark yonder. Lads, light the beacon on the Billy-ness. Do ye hear what I'm saying—its the French! Afore she wins up further to do mischief a gun might bring her to! She's but the van; tak' ye my word there's mair behind."

"Oh, but if ane might ken what spite the French could have at St. Monance!" said a young woman. "I would be real sure before I would fire a gun."

"Far mair like it's a prize," said another worthy—"there's nae pennon; but I'm for doing nothing rash; let the lads watch, if ye will—but I would wait the morning light."

This prudent decision was gradually resolved upon. The spectators dispersed by degrees, driven off by the storm and the darkness, and inhospitable aspect of the night; while the pressure of private anxieties touching "our men," many of whom were at sea, sufficed to occupy the domestic mind, and divert it from the terrors of a local invasion. Nevertheless, the baillies held solemn council on the subject over their toddy, and with a thrill of excitement and possible danger, the

distinction of the advanced guard in a peril more imaginary than real, the little population went to rest.

In the morning the strange craft lay in the harbour, with the English flag waving triumphant from her masts: and just as the roused community began to pour out of all its cottage doors to inquire about and inspect the stranger, a trim man-of-war's boat shot through the little harbour. The morning was bright and mild, full of that sweet calm after a storm which gives a kind of infantine freshness and exhilaration to the tranquil sea, still owning a thrill of the agitation which is past. The spray dashed in playful handfuls over the rocks, the old church rose grey and calm into the sunshine, the green corn waved all dewy in the morning air. The boats in St. Monance harbour lay motionless, scarcely swaying with the stir of that silvery water, all dappled with streaks of colour, like the sky with clouds. Rapidly the boat from the strange craft came in over those soft ripples. In the bows sat a figure not unfamiliar to the eyes of St. Monance. Bold eyes, full of sweet boyish pride and laughter, cheeks as brown as those of the sailors by his side—there he sat, full sixteen, with his little dirk, dear warlike symbol, his cap with its band of lace, his air of command and authority. There went a cry over the whole town, east and west. The sound of it penetrated the stillest, most secluded house in the place—and drew down to the beach, all trembling with terror and hope, a mother who could not believe her ears. It was little Walter Erskine, no longer in any terror of being pressed; ready, on the contrary, with inimitable airs of despotism, to press the biggest man in St. Monance; a midshipman, happiest of middies, intrusted with the bringing home of a French prize, which the daring imp had brought into his native waters by the way—

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being bound for Spithead! If anybody can fancy anything more joyful or triumphant than the young hero's state of mind after this achievement, I leave it to such a glowing imagination to complete the tale. But somewhere within British boundaries there may still survive a grey-haired captain, whose conscious imagination reminds him of that little harbour of St. Monance, and of this daring freak of the sailor boy.

