

Jimbo's Longest Day

By Algernon Blackwood

The Longest Day has in it for children a strange, incommunicable thrill. It begins so early in the morning, for one thing, that half of it—the first half—belongs to the mystery of night. It steals upon the world as though from Fairyland, a thing apart from the rush and scurry of ordinary days; it is so long that nothing happens quickly in it; there is a delicious leisure throughout its shining hours that makes it possible to carry out a hundred schemes unhurried. No voice can call “Time’s up!”; no one can urge “Be quick!”; it passes, true, yet passes like a dream that flows in a circle, having neither proper beginning nor definite end. Christmas Day and Easter Day seem short and sharp by comparison. They are measurable. The Longest Day brims with a happy, endless wonder from dawn to sunset. Exceptional happenings are its prerogative.

All this, and something more no elder can quite grasp, lay stealthily in Jimbo’s question “Uncle, to-morrow’s the Longest Day. What shall we do?” He glanced across the room at his mother, prepared for a prohibitive remark of some sort. But mother, deep in a stolen book, paid no attention. He looked back at me. “It’s all right; she’s not listening; but we can go outside to discuss it, if you prefer,” his expression said. I beckoned him over to rue, however, for safety’s sake. My position was fairly strong, I knew, because the stolen book was mine, and had been taken from my work-table. Jimbo’s mother has this way with books, her passion almost unmoral. If a book comes to me for review, if a friend makes me a present of a book, if I buy or borrow one—the instant it comes into the house she knows it. “I just looked in to see if your room had been dusted,” she says; “I’m sorry to disturb you,” and is gone again. But she has seen the new book. Her instinct is curious. I used to think she bribed the postman. She smells a new arrival, and goes straight for it. “Were you looking for *this*?” she will ask innocently an hour later when I catch her with it, household account-books neglected by her side. “I’m so sorry. I was just peeping into it.” And she is incorrigible, as unashamed. No book is ever lost, at any rate. “Mother’s got it,” indicates its hiding-place infallibly.

So I felt safe enough discussing plans for the Longest Day with Jimbo, and talked openly with him, while I watched her turn the pages.

“It’s the *very* beginning I like,” he said. “I want to see it start. The sun rises at 3.44, you see. That’s a quarter to four—three hours and a quarter before I usually get up. How shall we manage it, d’you think?” He had worked it all out.

“There’s hardly any night either,” I said, “for the sun sets at 8.18, and that leaves very little time for darkness. It’s light at two, remember.”

He stared into my face. “Maria has an alarum clock. She wakes with that. It’s by her bed in the attic room, you know.”

Mother turned a page noisily, but did not look up. There was no cause for alarm, though we instinctively lowered our voices at once. I cannot say how it was so swiftly, so deftly arranged between us that I was to steal the clock, set it accurately for two in the morning, rise, dress, and come to fetch Jimbo. But the result was clear beyond equivocation, and I had accepted the duty as a man should. Generously he left this exciting thing to me. “And suppose it doesn’t go off and wake you,” he inquired anxiously, “will you be sure to get up and make it go off? Because we might miss the beginning of the day unless you do.” I explained something about the mechanism of the mind and the mechanism of an alarum clock that seemed to satisfy him, and then he asked

another vital question: “What *is* exactly the Longest Day, uncle? I thought all days were about the same—like that,” and he stretched an imaginary line in the air with one hand, so that Mac, the terrier, thought he wanted to play a moment. I explained that too, to his satisfaction, whereupon he nestled much closer to me, glancing first over his shoulder at his mother, and inquired whether “everything knew it was the Longest Day—birds, cows, and out-of-door things all over the world—rabbits, I mean-like that? They know, I suppose?”

“They certainly must find it longer than other days, ordinary days, just common days,” I said. “I’m sure of that.” And then I cleared my throat so loudly that mother looked up from her book with an unmistakable start. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she exclaimed, with unblushing mendacity, “but d’you want your book? Were you looking for it? I just took a peep—” And when I turned to leave the room with it beneath my arm Jimbo had vanished, leaving no trace behind him.

That night he went to bed without a murmur at half-past eight. He trusted me implicitly. There were no questions: “Have you got the clock?” or “How did you get it?” or anything of the kind—just his absolute confidence that I *had* got it and that I *would* wake him. At the stairs, however, he turned and made a sign. Leading me through the back door of the Sussex cottage, we found ourselves a moment in the orchard together. And then, saying no word, he pointed. He pointed everywhere; he stared about him, listening; he looked up into my face, and then at the orchard, and then back into my face again. His whole little person stood on tiptoe, observing, watching, listening. And at first I was disappointed, for I noticed nothing unusual anywhere. “Well, what is it?” my manner probably expressed. But neither of us said a word. The saffron sky shone between the trunks of the apple trees; swallows darted to and fro; a blackbird whistled out of sight; and over the hedge a big cow thrust her head towards us, her body concealed. In the foreground were beehives. The air was very still and scented. My pipe smoke hung almost motionless. I moved from one foot to the other.

“Aha!” I said mysteriously below my breath,

And that was sufficient for him. He knew I had seen and understood. He came a step nearer to me, his face solemn and expectant.

“It’s begun already, you see. Isn’t it wonderful? Everything knows.”

“And is getting ready,” I added, “for its coming.”

“The Longest Day,” he whispered, looking about him with suppressed excitement and ready, if necessary, to believe the earth would presently stop turning. He gave one curious look at the sky, shuddered an instant with intense delight, gave my hand a secret squeeze, and disappeared like a goblin into the cottage. But behind him lingered something his little presence had evoked. Wonder and expectation are true words of power, and anticipation constructs the mould along which Imagination later shall lead her fairy band. I realised what he had seen. The orchard, the cow, the beehives did look different. They were inviting, as though something was on the way. The very sky, as the summer dusk spread down it, wore colouring no ordinary June evening knew. Midsummer Eve set free the fairies, and Jimbo knew it. The roses seemed to flutter everywhere on wings. . . . The very lilac blooms had eyes. . . . I heard a rustle as of skirts high up among the peeping stars. .

How it came about is more than I can say, for I went to bed with a whirr of wings and flowers in my head. The stillness of the night was magical, four short hours of transparent darkness that seemed to gleam and glimmer without hiding anything. Maria’s alarum clock was not beside my bed, for the simple reason that I had not asked for it. Jimbo and the Longest Day between them had cast a glamour over me that had nothing to do with hours, minutes, seconds. It was delicious

and inexplicable. Yet at other times I am an ordinary person, who knows that time is money and money is difficult to come by without uncommon effort. All this came for nothing. Jimbo did it.

And what did I do for Jimbo? I cannot say. His is the grand old magical secret. He believed and wondered; he waited and asked no futile questions; time and space obeyed his imperious little will; waking or sleeping he dreamed, creating the world anew. I shut no eye that night. I watched the wheeling constellations rise and pass. The whole, clear summer night was rich with the silence of the gods. I dreamed, perhaps, beside my open window, where the roses and the clematis climbed, shining like lamps of starry beauty above the tiny lawn. . . . And at half-past one, when the east began to whisper stealthily that Someone was on the way, I left my chair and stole quietly down the narrow passage-way to Jimbo's room. . . . I was clever in my wickedness. I knew that if I waked him, whispering that the Longest Day was about to break, he would open half an eye, turn over in his thick childhood sleep, and murmur, as in dream, "Then let it come." And so, a little weary, if the truth be told, I did all this, and—to my intense surprise—discovered Jimbo perched, wide awake and staring, at the casement window. He had never closed an eye, nor half an eye. He was watchful and alert, but undeniably tired out, as I was.

"Jimbo," I whispered, stealing in upon him, "the Longest Day is very near. It's so close you can hear it coming down the sky. It's softer than any dream you ever dreamed in your life. Come out—if you will—we'll see it from the orchard."

He turned towards me in his little nightshirt like a goblin. His eyes were very big, but the eyelids held open with an effort.

Uncle," he said in a tiny voice, "do you think it's really come at last? It's been terribly slow, but I suppose that's because it's such an awful length. Wasn't it *wonderful*?"

And I tucked him up. Before the sheet was round his shoulder he was asleep, . . . and next morning when we met at breakfast, he just asked me slyly, "Do you think mother guessed or saw anything of what we saw?" We glanced across the table, full of secret signs, together. Mother's letters were piled beside her plate, a book beneath them. It was my stolen book. She had clearly sat up half the night devouring it.

No," I whispered, "I don't think mother guesses anything at all. Besides," I added, "to-day is the Longest Day, so in any case she'd be a very long time finding out." And, as he seemed satisfied, I felt my conscience clear, and said no more about it.