

THE AMAZING YEARS

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The amazing years by W. Pett Ridge

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YEARS**

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BY

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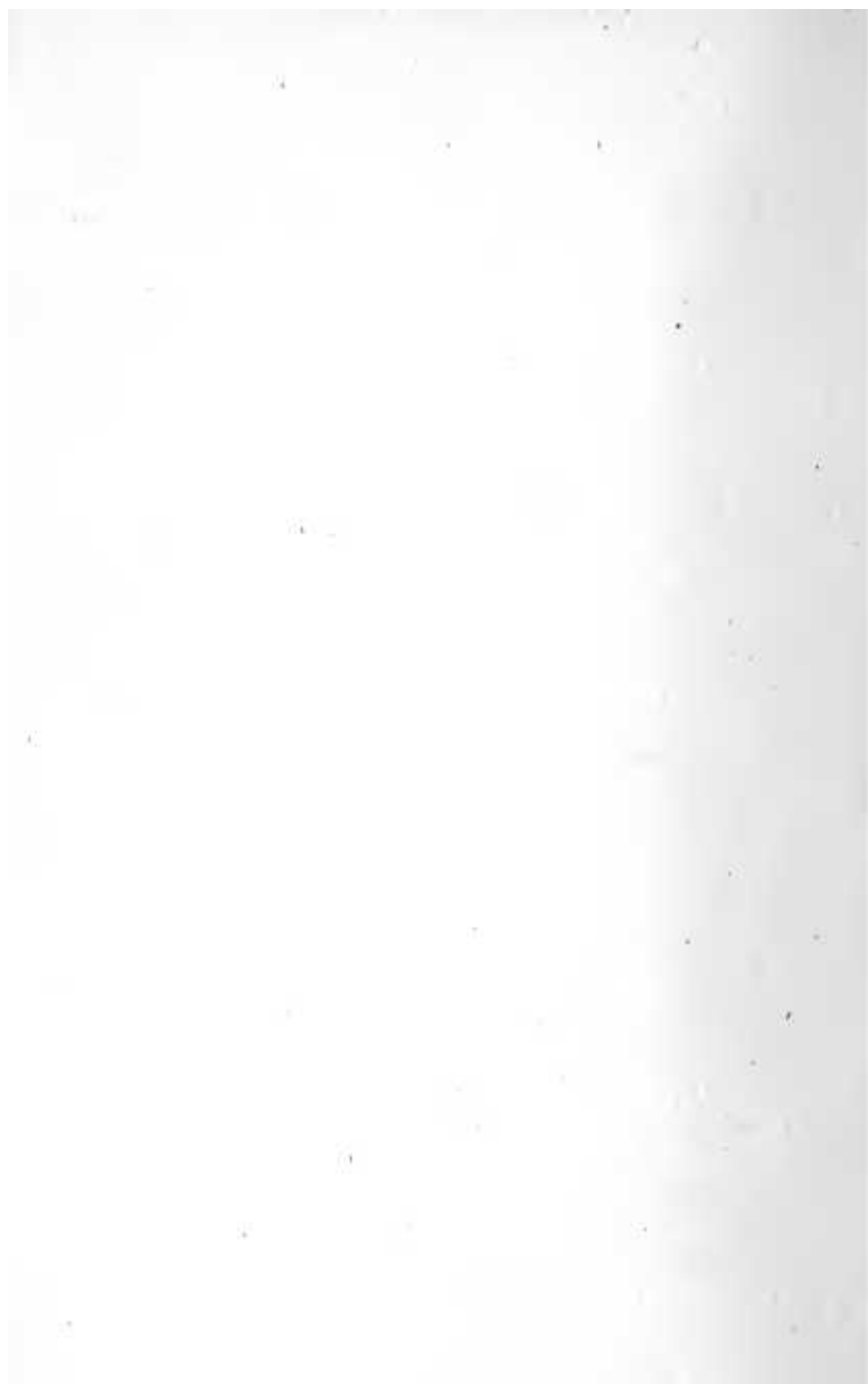
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THE AMAZING YEARS

CHAPTER I

MRS. HILLIER said something just before lunch that touched me more than she could have guessed. The family was to leave on the Saturday, and the elder of the two young ladies—Miss Muriel—had grumbled throughout the week because of the delay insisted upon by the master. The departure had originally been fixed for the twenty-fifth; Mr. Hillier, who seldom spoke at home, but when he did talk expected to be obeyed, announced that the party would not cross the Channel until the first. That would be two days before the Bank Holiday, and Miss Muriel foresaw discomforts arising from overcrowded compartments, carriages reserved for the incredible Polytechnic folk and the impossible Lunn trippers. Mrs. Hillier, as I managed with some difficulty to turn the key of a trunk, put her hand on my shoulder.

"Weston," she remarked, impulsively, "I wish you were coming with us."

"Ma'am," I said, "I don't like the sea, and I can't endure foreigners. Furthermore, a woman like myself, knowing only the English language, would be simply a hindrance."

"Wherever you found yourself," she declared, "you'd contrive to make yourself understood. Who is coming here to stay with you whilst we are away?"

"Thought, ma'am, of asking my young nephew. He's just got a scholarship, and the month's rest will do him good."

One of the maids knocked and came in to ask me

whether she should sound the gong. Mrs. Hillier's manner altered at once. She gave definite instructions regarding the tying on of the blue labels that had been specially printed by a firm at Sidcup Hill, commented sharply on the condition of Master Edward's laundry, and mentioned that the working classes were becoming intolerably careless. When the maid had gone, she turned to me again.

"Weston," she said. "I'm worried about this trip. Before, I've felt confidence in your master to see us through any difficulty. He's been a sort of a dependable courier, and though he can't have relished the holiday, it's been at any rate a change for him. But lately—Oh I don't know," she broke off. "Perhaps I'm wrong."

Talk at lunch, I noticed, was devoted to the coming journey. The conversation could not be described as good tempered: it needed the presence of Master John to ensure anything like cheerfulness, and you might have assumed that the three, instead of going for a holiday, were about to engage upon one of the most trying and distasteful tasks of a lifetime. I had come into the family when it lived in Tressillian Road, Brockley, and Miss Muriel was twelve—that was ten years before—and Miss Katherine eight. A dear little soul Miss Katherine was too at that time, with her doll's perambulator, and her hoop, and a nursery not over furnished. There came Mr. Hillier's good luck in the City with the agency in Basinghall Street, and we moved to The Croft, where I was told to make no reference to Brockley, and to disclose to the maids of the house, or to the servants at any other house, no particulars of early days that had been imparted to me in confidence or gained by observation. It was little Miss Katherine's fault that I did not go from the family when Mr. Hillier went up in the world. It means a lot for a woman to be near a child—near any child—who can put its arms around her neck, and hug her.

"Dover and Calais," Miss Muriel was saying, as I directed the parlour maid to bring in the sweets.

"Folkestone and Boulogne," announced Mrs. Hillier.

"Dover and Calais is the shorter route, mother, dear."

"There's very little difference, darling, and one saves on the land journey."

"I shall tell father," declared Miss Muriel, "that unless we travel by way of Dover and Calais, I prefer not to go at all. Kitty, you agree with me, I'm sure."

"Your sister," said Mrs. Hillier, "has the good sense to take my view."

"I vote," remarked Miss Katherine, "for Newhaven and Dieppe, and I bet a large red apple that's the way we take." She hummed something about Yo ho, yo ho, a sailor's bride I'd be, and live for ever gaily on the bounding sea. Her mother requested her not to sing at table, and pointed out that the wives of seamen invariably lived on shore.

"Let Weston decide," suggested Miss Muriel. "Come along, Weston. This is where you come in, in the usual way, as peacemaker."

"To foil their plans," said Miss Katherine, quoting from last year's pantomime, "we now bring upon the scene, The villain's foe, our friend the Fairy Queen."

"If it was my case," I said, "I should wait until there was a Channel tunnel." It proved to be not the first time that I had managed, by disagreeing with all three, to check an argument.

Master Edward came home from Blackheath soon after six, and brought a new subject for consideration. He had enjoyed a good day in watching Kent play, and Kent had done well; in my room he rattled off the figures exultantly. Humphreys 45, Hardinge 86, Seymour 66, A. P. Day 55 and so on; three hundred and forty-nine in all. "Let's see Surrey beat that!" he remarked, defiantly. The boy took the brass

shovel from the empty fire-place, and described some of the most important hits of the game. I reminded him of his own score of twenty-five, not out, performed on the ground of his boarding school at Westgate, and we had a serious talk concerning the wise life to lead: Master Edward thought mere education was very much over-rated, and declared he would rather be Mr. Troughton, captain of Kent, than a science master at a college. I was unable to go all the way with him, and suggested, as a compromise, that games should be cultivated in moderation.

"But you see, my tall old bird," he said, persuasively, "you're only a woman. I don't say you can't throw a ball in straight, because, as it happens, it's one of the things you can just manage to do; but apart from that— Realise what I mean, don't you?"

Contention about the route came up again at dinner, when Mr. Hillier took the foot of the table, crumbling his bread in the absent-minded manner he had recently adopted. Sometimes the evening meal went through, I noticed, without a syllable from him, and when the savoury came he would give a nod of apology to his wife, and go off to his workshop at the back of the house. On this particular Thursday night he was cross-examined by Miss Muriel with severity concerning the question of tickets, and he admitted he had not yet secured them. Miss Muriel gave a picture of the rush, and tumult, and hurry-scurry at the station; the most cheerful detail seemed to be that father would undoubtedly be left behind. I was absent from the dining room in order to see that his two pipes were filled, that, in the study, the cigars set out in case any one should call; the liqueur stand had to be replenished, and I suppose ten minutes had gone when I returned. I found everyone talking—excepting, of course, the master—everyone shouting at the top of the voice, everyone begging the others to be silent.

"Weston," said Mrs. Hillier. ("Keep quiet, all

of you. Impossible to hear oneself speak with all this din going on. Edward, I forbid you to say another word. Muriel, I'm surprised at you.) Weston, I want to ask you something." She rapped her forehead with her knuckles. "So much chatter that it's no wonder thoughts go out of my head." The rest declined to give the cue. "Oh, I remember. Have you heard any rumours about trouble on the Continent?"

"Only what I've read in the papers, ma'am."

"There!" she said, triumphantly to her husband. "Now perhaps you'll leave off throwing out these foolish suggestions that you have somehow got into your head. You speak before you think, James. I've warned you about it previously. You men in the City meet at lunch time, and over your chop, and your bottle of wine——"

"I always have a cup of coffee, and a piece of shortbread."

"And on that," she remarked, changing the subject, "you expect to keep well. Why don't you have a sensible meal at mid-day, the same as I do? It's very difficult," she said to the girls, "very difficult indeed to knock any sense into men."

Mr. Hillier rose, I opened the door. Miss Katherine followed him to whisper something consoling.

"Don't dare forget to see about the tickets to-morrow, father," directed Miss Muriel.

"I'll make inquiries," he said.

Colonel Edgington called later and I switched on the lights in the billiard room, took off the cloth, chalked two cues, and summoned the master from the workshop. I asked Mr. Hillier whether I should remain in the billiard room and look after the scoring board; he said, "Thank you, Weston, no. We shan't want to bother you this evening." As I was going, he called me. "Afraid," he went on, apologetically, "that we trouble you too much in this establishment. We get into the habit of depending upon you, Weston." I