

Dear Miss Mansfield

their *police batons raised*. It was — Suddenly, she felt Kuini nudging her and pointing down to the floor. Kuini's voice was still and drained of life. 'Anei,' she whispered. Although the light was waning, the pattern in the dust could still be seen. 'Anei, te roimata toroa.' The soft sounds of waiata swelled in the darkness like currents of the wind holding up Kuini's words. 'E noho ra, Pearl Button,' Kuini said, 'taku moko Pakeha.' The syllables drifted like two birds beating heavily eastward into the night. Then the light went, everything went, life went.

W. H. Shimada

This Life is Weary

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The little cottages were in a lane to themselves at the very bottom of a steep rise. At the top was the house that the children called *The Big House* — everybody called it that because it was oh so lovely with its lovely house and gardens lived in by its lovely owners — like another world really, one much nicer than down here below the broad road which ran between. But Dadda would always laugh whenever the children were too filled to the brim about the goings on up there, and he would remind them that 'We are all equal in the sight of God' or 'Remember — the lilies of the field —' This was Dadda's way of saying that no envy should be attached to *The Big House*, nor malice against its gilded inhabitants.

The children loved their Dadda so much, especially Celia the eldest, who thought he was the most wonderful, most handsome, most perfect man in the whole world. Truth to tell, Celia was not far wrong about him — Jack Scott was a fine man. His face was strong and open and was topped with blond curly hair. His shoulders were broad and, altogether, he was a fine figure of a man. But Dadda was more than physically attractive — he possessed a sense of goodness and wholeness, as if his physical beauty merely reflected an inner purity untouched by coarseness. 'When I grow up, Dadda,' Celia would say, 'I shall marry someone just like you.' To this Jack Scott would laugh again — her dear, laughing Dadda — and caution Celia that beauty or handsomeness faded with years and, 'Oh, my sweet Celia, follow your heart and, wherever it leads, to ugly plump thin or brown, there lie you down.'

This kind of simple honesty was what made Dadda so greatly loved in this land of chocolate-brown houses. Although the very smoke coming out of the chimneys-might-be-poverty-stricken — not at all like the great silvery plumes that uncurled from *The Big House* — one could hear the larks sing whenever the carter, Jack Scott, was around. 'ere you, Old Faithful,' the washerwomen would call as Dadda whistled, past. 'ow come you're always so 'appy of a mornin'?' Dadda would answer, 'God has given us another beautiful day, ladies,

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and there are so many beautiful things in it.' And the washerwomen would blush, for they took his remarks as declarations of romance and they loved him all the more — not lasciviously, mind, because they were decent women and beyond the age of temptation. 'Oh my, Jack Scott,' they would call, 'you 'ave a way with the words, but be off with you!' Ah yes, and the men loved Dadda too because of his uprightness and fairness. 'You're a good lad, Jack,' the old pensioners would tell him whenever he was able to spare them some victuals. 'Yes, you're a good mate,' the young men agreed. There was not a finer friend to the young men than Dadda.

He was not old, was Dadda, being only twenty-nine, and his responsibilities as a good husband and father had not brought weariness to him. In the case of Mam, though, Celia could see that life's travails had changed her greatly from the little slip of a thing whom Dadda had met on the ship bringing settlers from England. Romance had blossomed below decks between Jack and Em — and Em's parents had not put a stop to it, for they could tell that Jack would make honest passage through the world and, given his good head for business, a profitable one. Nobody could want better for a daughter of fifteen years. So, on arrival in Wellington, Jack and Em had become man and wife, and they had fulfilled God's commandment to be fruitful by producing Celia, Margaret and Thomas within the first three years of marriage. The doctor had cautioned Jack, saying, 'Give Em some peace now, lad, and let her body recover from the child-bearing.' Dadda had laughed and said, 'It's not for my want of trying, Doctor, but the babies just seem to come and, if it is God's will —' And God willed that there should be two more, the babes Matthew and Mark.

The Big House was regarded with simple awe by many who lived in the little cottages below. Others were not so awestruck, looking upon The Big House with a sense of grievance, for it represented everything that they had hoped to escape from when they had left England. Even Dadda was not untouched by the angry murmurs of the working men at meetings of an evening. But above all else, he truly believed that Work and Self-improvement would win the changes that all strived for.

Dadda went to work every morning before dawn. He would slip out of bed and creep with candle up into the loft to see his little ones. 'Blessed be the new day,' he would whisper, 'and God keep you all safe and well.' Then he would be gone, often not returning until long after dark. Mam had the babes to tend to and, whenever she could, she took small mending work from The Big House — she had artistic

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fingers for embroidery. As for the children, they went off to school during the week. Mam was very firm about this and did not want them swarming in the little crowded lanes like many of the other children who were kept at home.

However, Saturday afternoons were free for the children to do as they pleased and, without fail, this meant going up to The Big House, crossing quickly over the broad road between, to watch the house and the comings and goings of the lovely people who lived or visited there. Celia had found a special place — you had to slip between the rose bushes and under the karaka trees to get to it — right by the tennis court. Under the trees was an old wrought-iron loveseat, just ideal for the children. The seat had obviously been thrown out many years ago but it was comfortable enough — once you wiped away the birds' droppings — and perfect to observe from. There was the house, side on to the sun, gleaming like a two-storeyed dolls' house. The driveway was at the front with a circle of green in the middle. Oh, what excitement was occasioned whenever the front gateway opened and a carriage came in! There was a back gateway also and, there, the delivery vans and storemen would enter, bringing the groceries, meat and other supplies to Cook. Once, the children had seen the familiar figure of Dadda himself, and that night they couldn't wait to tell him, 'Dadda, oh Dadda! We saw you at The Big House today!' — as if grace and divinity had been suddenly bestowed on him. The house was surrounded with broad swathes of bright green lawn bordered by daisy plants. Just beyond the borders were the roses — hundreds and hundreds of glorious dark red roses of the kind that the children had seen on chocolate boxes.

It was Celia, of course, who thought of keeping notebooks on The Big House. Celia had always been an imaginative child and it only seemed natural that simple observation should lead to something more formal — like setting it all down in writing. Dadda and Mam were amused at first but grew to be thoroughly approving. 'Better that the children should be constructive,' Mam would say, 'than down here wasting their lives away.' And Dadda had said, 'Who knows? Some of what they see might rub off on them!' So it soon became part of the Saturday routine for Mam to sharpen pencils and, when the children became more serious about keeping notebooks, to let them take a simple lunch — a crust of bread each and a bottle with water in it — with them. 'Be back before dark!' Mam would cry as the children scampered off. 'We will, Mam, we will!' Celia would reply — because telling Mam and Dadda, right after supper, about what they had seen at The Big House became part of the Saturday excursions also. And the

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children knew that Mam and Dadda welcomed their reports, taking them as signs that their children would do better than they had to make good lives for themselves.

Although Celia had never been to any theatre, watching *The Big House* was just as she imagined a play would be. Like all theatrical settings, the weather was always ideal up there and the days perfect and made to order. The backdrop was windless and warm, with a light blue sky flecked with gold. It was all so unlike the dark and dirty eyesore which cluttered the area the children came from. Indeed, sometimes it was difficult for the children to accept that this world was as real as their own — it really was as if they had paid a penny to go to His Majesty's Royal Theatre for a few hours of a drab Saturday afternoon. But what fun! Naturally, the house itself was the main stage prop, particularly the verandahs, top and bottom, and the french doors on to the verandahs. From out of these doors would come the lovely people of *The Big House*, the main actors of every Saturday afternoon performance. Head of the Household was Mr Sheridan, who worked in the city and never seemed to be around very much. He generally slept late on Saturdays, sometimes not appearing until 2 p.m., all hairy and drumming his chest after a wash. Mistress of the House was Mrs Sheridan, prone to sitting on a chair off the main bedroom and fanning herself like a lady in a magazine. Once, so Margaret swore, Mrs Sheridan actually waved to the children where they sat. 'Impossible,' Celia replied. Her version appeared that night, after supper, when she produced a sketch of Mrs Sheridan trying to swat at something going bbbzzzz — Mam and Dadda thought that was very funny, but Margaret was cross.

Mr and Mrs Sheridan had three daughters, Meg, Jose and Laura, and a son, Laurie — and it was on these four fascinating golden creatures that the children focused all their attention. Celia would scribble like mad in her notebook as Margaret and Thomas described every appearance: 'Meg has just washed her hair,' Margaret would say, in awe, because washing one's hair in the afternoon was the prerogative of the wealthy. 'Oh, look, there's Jose! She has put on her lovely silk petticoat and the kimono jacket.' And Thomas would reflect, 'Do you think she got the jacket from the Chinamen who play pakapoo?' To which Celia, the expert on fashion, would say, 'Kimonos come from Japan, Thomas, not China.' But Margaret might interrupt, 'Oh, quick, here comes Meg again! Doesn't she look pretty? I'll bet a beau is coming to call.' And sure enough, half an hour later, the gateway would open and a fine handsome would deposit a grave but hopeful young man. 'Oh, he's not right for Meg,' Celia would say. 'Pooh, no!'

Thomas and Margaret would agree, for they knew that without doubt Meg was going to be a famous pianist. Her life was not to be squandered away on silly young men! Wasn't it true that every afternoon Meg practised the piano and showed signs of improving? — why, only four mistakes in the 'Für Elise' last Saturday! As for Jose, oh dear, she would just have to give up any thought of an operatic career. While her voice was strong enough, alas, her sense of timing was woeful. Worse still, she could never hold the tune. Apart from which, nobody could sing 'This Life is Weary' better than Dadda —

This Life is Wee-ary,
A Tear — a Sigh.
A Love that Chan-ges,
This Life is Wee-ary,
A Tear — a Sigh.
A Love that Chan-ges,
And then . . . Good-bye!

No, Jose would be better off receiving silly young men herself. In this manner, the children would observe, ponder, dream and hope that the characters whom they had come to love would grow, prosper and make the right decisions.

The children's main interest was in the heroine of the Sheridan family, the one whom they thought was most like themselves — Laura. Her every entrance was greeted in the same way as a diva by a star-struck audience — with a hushed indrawn breath, moment of recognition, long sigh of release and joyous acclamation. Laura was Celia's age — at least, that's what Celia insisted — and could do no wrong. She was the one whom the children most wanted to have as a friend, if class would ever allow it. Their notebooks were filled, positively to the very margins, with anecdotes, drawings and notes about Laura in all her moods. To even get a good likeness was difficult enough, for Laura was always flying in and out, here and there, to and fro. Often the children would have to compare their drawings for accuracy and, 'No, she didn't look like that,' Celia would say, 'she looked like this.' Then Margaret would interject, 'But she wasn't wearing the blue pinafore, she was wearing the yellow one with the tiny wee apron.' To which Thomas would respond, 'Well, she was just perfect as she was, a perfect little princess.' This was, in fact, patently inaccurate, because perfect little princesses were not tomboys — and there was a streak of this in Laura. Perfect little princesses did not do cartwheels on the front lawn or thumb their noses at beaux they didn't like. Oh, she was such a character sometimes! 'I wonder what her bedroom is like?'

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Margaret would wonder. 'Does it have a huge bed and are all her dolls propped up on the pillows?' Interrupting, Thomas would venture, 'And would there be a rockinghorse?' To which Celia would purse her lips and say, 'Perhaps. Rockinghorses are really for boys but — yes, Laura is bound to have one.'

On most occasions, the appearances by the Sheridans were seen from afar. There was one magical moment, however — the children had to pinch themselves to make sure they weren't dreaming — when Hans, one of the servants, brought a small table and four chairs on to the tennis court right in front of the children. Laura appeared with three of her dolls, placed them on chairs and proceeded to have afternoon tea with cakes and biscuits. 'Lady Elizabeth,' Laura said, 'would you care for some milk? Sugar? One lump or two?' Then, with a laugh, 'Oh, quite, Countess Mitzi, quite.' And Celia almost fainted away with pleasure when, turning to the third doll, Laura said, 'Princess Celia, how was your last visit to Paris?' For the rest of the afternoon the children were just transported, bursting with ecstasy — and they could hardly wait to tell Mam and Dadda. 'Oh, slow down, lovey,' Mam said to Celia. 'Do slow down!' And that put the seal on the entire afternoon, for it was exactly the sort of comment that the children were constantly passing about Laura herself.

One day, the children came running back from an afternoon watching *The Big House* with the news 'Oh, Mam! Dadda! There's going to be a garden-party! At *The Big House*! We heard Mrs Sheridan reminding Cook! Next Saturday! Oh, can we go for the whole day? With our notebooks? In the morning? So many people have been invited! Please, Mam! Please, Dadda! As it happened, Em had hoped the girls would mind the babes while she visited her parents but, 'Let the little ones go,' Dadda said, adding with a wink, 'and I shall try to come home early in the afternoon, eh, Em love?' Trying not to blush, Em said, 'All right, children, you may go,' and the children clapped their hands together with glee. Then a thoughtful, twinkling look came into Mam's eyes and she suddenly left the kitchen to rummage in the glory box in the bedroom. When she came back she had some velvet and other material in her arms. 'Come here, Celia lovey,' Em said. 'My, you've grown —' and her eyes sparkled with sadness, mingled with pride, at the thought of her eldest daughter growing into womanhood. 'What are you doing, Mam? Celia asked. 'Why, measuring you, your

sister and brother, of course,' Mam said. 'You can't go to a garden-party in your everyday clothes.' And Margaret said, 'But Mam, we're not invited —' To which Em said, 'Hush, child. We can dream, can't we?' And Jack came to hold Em close and kiss her. 'That we can, Em love,' he said, 'that we can.'

The children could hardly contain themselves. All that week they conjectured about the garden-party — who would come, what food would be served, what Laura would wear, would there be a band, how many waiters — and they were so fidgety that Mam had to say, 'Do keep still, Margaret, or else your dress will not be ready in time!' Then Margaret would stay very still indeed, hardly drawing breath, because green velvet was her favourite colour and she wanted to look her very best — and Mam even made a green bow for her hair! Thomas, reluctant at first, also got into the swing of things. He knew that he was going to look a proper guy — and how was he going to get up to *The Big House* and back without the other swarming children seeing him — but, oh, there was such a delicious silky feeling to the new shirt! As for Celia, she had determined, 'Mam, I can make my own dress and hat.' So while Mam stitched costumes for Margaret and Thomas, Celia worked on a cloth that had once been a curtain. When Celia completed her dress Mam trimmed it with a lace ribbon she had been saving for herself.

Then, when all the stitching and sewing was completed, didn't the children look just lovely, parading in front of Dadda and Mam that Friday night before the garden-party? Hardly a wink was slept, so that when Dadda came to wake them, why, the children were already dressed and waiting! And wasn't Dadda the most perfect man? He had transformed the cart into a carriage and placed cushions on the seats. Then, bowing, he handed the children up, saying, 'Lady Margaret, if you would be so kind — Princess Celia, charmed — Sir Thomas, delighted —' And Mam, trying not to laugh too much, came from the doorway with a hamper of cordial, sandwiches and a dear wee cake. 'Oh, Mam. Oh, Dadda,' was all that Celia could say because the words got caught in her throat. 'Have a lovely time, children,' Mam said. 'And Thomas, don't worry — your Dadda will pick you all up before dark from the gateway of *The Big House*. Byebye —' And she blew a kiss as they left.

And after all the weather was ideal. When the dawn came creeping across the sky, the children knew it was going to be a perfect day for the Sheridans' garden-party. From their position under the trees they saw the garden-party from beginning to end. They saw the Maori gardener already at work mowing the lawns and sweeping them. 'Oh,

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he's missed a piece!' Margaret wailed but, joy, he returned to sweep the swathe so that the lawn looked all combed the same way — not a lick out of place. 'Nothing must go wrong,' Celia nodded. Then the children saw movement in *The Big House* and knew that Mr and Mrs Sheridan, Meg, Jose, Laura and Laurie were at breakfast. Mr Sheridan came out the front door with a BANG to go through the gateway. At the same time the men came to put up the marquee. And who else but Laura, the little princess herself, should appear to give the men their instructions! 'Oh, she's so pretty!' Thomas said, 'and look, she's eating bread and butter — just like we do.' The next few moments, though, were anxious ones for the children because at one point, Laura pointed to the tennis court. Yes, it was certainly the most appropriate place for the marquee but, 'it will spoil our view,' Celia whispered. And, why, Laura must have heard, because the workmen set the marquee near the karaka trees instead!

'Message, Laura!' a voice cried from the house, and away the little princess skimmed. But what was happening at the back door? Why, the florist had arrived and just look at the pots and pots of canna lilies — so radiant and frighteningly alive on their bright crimson stems! And then, from the drawing room, was that Meg on the piano? Pom! Ta-ta-ta Tee-ia! Oh dear, was Jose really going to embarrass herself by singing at the garden-party? There she was, warming up — 'This Life is Wee-ary, A Tear — a Sigh —' Oh dear, dear, dear. But now look! Someone else had arrived at the back door. Surely it was the Godber van, clattering into the yard, bringing lovely cream puffs! And there was the man from Godber's talking to Cook, and —

Suddenly the sky was filled with a soft radiance and it was almost like — like a shooting star, in the daytime though, going UP into the sky — and Celia felt such sweet pain that she wanted to weep. Her heart was so full, so overflowing, so brimming over, and in that same instant she thought of her Dadda.

Strange really, but for a while after that the house fell into silence. Laura's voice could be heard piping and alarmed. 'What is happening now?' Margaret asked. 'I'm not sure,' Celia said. 'Perhaps it is lunch-time already.' Indeed it was — hadn't time passed quickly? So Margaret opened the hamper, Celia laid the food out, and Thomas said, 'Lady Margaret, would you care for some wine?' Margaret clapped her hands together and, 'Thank you, Sir Thomas,' she said as Thomas poured some cordial into her glass. 'And you, Princess Celia?' Celia inclined her head. And oh, it was so much fun to be sitting there sipping wine on the perfect day.

Lunch in *The Big House* was over by half past one. The green-coated bandsmen arrived and established themselves right next to the children near the tennis court. The man on the tuba saw them and gave a cheery wave. Would he tell? No — he was too jolly to do that. Soon after, the guests began coming in streams — one carriage after the other — the women so lovely, oh so lovely. The band struck up. The hired waiters ran from the house to the marquee. Wherever the children looked there were couples strolling, bending to the flowers, greeting, and gliding across the lawn. The children were enchanted, transported, transformed — in Heaven — by it all. There in the shadows they imitated the movements of the guests, and sometimes when the band played, Sir Thomas first asked Lady Margaret and then Princess Celia to dance with him, on and on and on. The man on the tuba smiled when he saw them dancing and, oh goodness, when the waiters came to offer the band refreshments he must have pointed out the children! Over came one of the waiters with a tray of delicious cakes and cream puffs, and he bowed gravely, saying, 'Mesdames? Monsieur?' And always, far away in the sunlight was dear, darling Laura. Something was bothering her, but she was so gracious, wasn't she? 'Oh, I must sketch her,' Celia cried. And the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed. And soon it was all over.

The children were in ever such an excited state as they waited for their Dadda to pick them up. They had stayed beneath the trees until the very end when the last bandsman had packed his instrument and left. The man with the tuba had given a very cheery wave. By the time the children reached the gateway it was almost dark. 'Wasn't it wonderful when —' the children would reminisce to one another. They wanted to savour every minute of the garden-party and, 'Oh, write that one down, Celia,' Margaret would cry. 'We forgot about that moment.' So for a while they sat scribbling away in the gathering darkness. 'Weren't the guests all so lovely?' Margaret whispered. On and on the children chattered.

The darkness deepened. The children couldn't wait for Dadda to arrive so that they could get home quickly and tell him and Mam about the garden-party. When the night fell like a cloak, Celia said, 'Dadda must be delayed. Come along, let's go on home. Like as not we'll meet him coming up the hill.' Thomas was so happy that he didn't even think to be embarrassed should they meet any swarming children. Down, down, down into the sordid lanes the children descended. The lights were on in some of the houses. People were like silent wraiths slipping into and out of the light. All of a sudden

someone came running from behind the children, passing them and turning the corner. When the children rounded the corner themselves, they saw a young man with a girl. The girl was pressed against him and she looked as if she was crying. Celia overheard the young man say, 'Was it awful?' The girl shook her head — and there was something terribly familiar in the motion — but it was so dark, so dark.

Then the children were in sight of their own house and they started to run towards it. But what was this? Lamps were shining in the front parlour. A dark knot of people stood outside. Women in shawls and men in tweed caps were gathered there. Without knowing why, Celia felt an awful feeling inside her heart. She saw Gran, Mam's mother, sitting in a chair beside the gate. As the children approached, Gran gave a cry. The knot loosened and voices came out of the darkness at the children, 'Oh, the poor wee children.' Gran kissed the children and held them tight. 'What's wrong, Gran?' Celia asked. 'There's been an accident, Celia dear,' Gran answered. 'Your father —' Celia pulled Margaret and Thomas quickly through the crowd and into the house. Auntie May was there in the passageway, but Celia didn't want her.

'Mam? Dadda?' Celia called. 'Mam?' Then another woman was there. Her face was all puffed up and red, with swollen eyes and swollen lips. 'Mam?' Celia whispered, because it was indeed her mother. But she looked so — so — awful.

'Your Dadda's gone,' Mam said. 'He's gone.'

Margaret started to wail and Thomas bit his lip and screwed up his eyes. The two children ran to the comfort of their mother's arms. But Celia just stood there. *Oh, Dadda, was that you, that soft radiance? Was that your soul coming to say goodbye before going to Heaven?* Then, in the corner, Celia noticed a basket of fruit — the fruit looked so lovely, oh so very lovely — and she remembered the garden-party. 'I must tell Dadda,' Celia thought. Her heart was breaking into a thousand pieces. 'Where's Dadda?' she asked. Mam motioned toward the bedroom.

For a moment Celia was too frightened to go in. She didn't want to know. She didn't want to see. All of a sudden, she felt a fleeting sense of unfairness that The Big House, with its gilded life, should be so impervious to all the ills of the world. But no, she shouldn't think like that. Dadda wouldn't want her to think like that, would he? 'Dadda?' she called from the doorway. 'Dadda?' She took a step and, why, there he was in his bed, and she had caught him asleep! There he was, glowing in the light of the smoky lamp, her handsome laughing Dadda. And fast asleep he was, sleeping so soundly that he

didn't even stir when she knelt beside him. Curly headed Dadda, deeply, peacefully sleeping.

'Oh Dadda,' Celia whispered. She put her head against his, and the first glowing tear dropped down her cheek like a golden sun. 'It was a lovely garden-party, Dadda, just lovely,' she said.

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