The Walking-Stick

by Marcel Aymé
translated by Norman Denny

The Sorbiers having decided to take advantage of the fine Sunday afternoon to go for a walk, Mme Sorbier called out of the window to her two sons, Victor and Felicien, who were amusing themselves in the street by throwing dirt in each other's face. They had a fondness for the sort of rowdy games that are the despair of mothers.

'Come and change into clean clothes. We're going for a walk. It's a lovely afternoon.'

They all put on their Sunday best, Victor and Felicien scrambling into their sailor-suits with unconcealed dislike. Both boys longed for grown-up clothes, but for these they would have to wait until their first communion, when they would also get real silver watches.

Their father carefully adjusted the bow tie in his starched collar. As he was putting on his jacket he looked glumly at the left sleeve and said to his wife:

'Would you mind very much, Mathilde, if I took off the *crêpe* armband? People don't often wear mourning in Paris.'

'Just as you please,' said Mathilde in a wounded voice. 'It's barely two months since Uncle Emile died, but after all he was only my uncle, and it doesn't take you long to forget people.'

'But you know what he used to say—"When I'm dead, my children, I don't want you to—"'

'Of course you're not bound to show respect for my relations, but you've got to admit that I've always worn mourning for yours. I've scarcely ever been out of black in all the eight years we've been

married.'

Sorbier wagged his head vexedly, having no answer to this. He put on his jacket without removing the armband and without feeling the glow of conscious rectitude that an act of self-sacrifice is supposed to procure. Gloomily contemplating his reflection in the wardrobe-mirror he muttered:

'It's the way it stands out. If this were a dark jacket it wouldn't be so bad.'

Sorbier was not excessively vain. He was content, during the week, to wear old and even patched clothes at the office; but he considered, and rightly, that Sunday was a day for dressing with elegance. How, after all, is a man to bear with the tyranny of his boss if he is not conscious of having a Sunday suit at home? It is a matter of human dignity. And obviously a *crêpe* armband detracts from the smartness of a suit. But then on the other hand mourning is mourning, no getting away from it, particularly when one is married and the father of a family.

Victor and Felicien meanwhile were playing touch-you-last under the dining-room table, although they had been warned that this was not a game for indoors. A vase crashed to the floor. Their mother rushed out, slapped the boy who was nearest and locked the other in the lavatory to keep them apart. She could then get on with her dressing in peace, without the risk of further disasters. Returning to the bedroom she found her husband seated in an armchair and stroking his toothbrush moustache while he gazed beatifically at the ceiling.

'What are you staring at? What are you thinking about, and why are you grinning like that?'

'I've just had an idea, Mathilde. It has just suddenly come to me. What I want . . .'

He talked like a man seeing visions, and his wife, at once suspecting some new folly, insisted on hearing what he had to say.

'What I want,' he said, 'is to take Uncle Emile's walking-stick. You know, it never occurred to me before, but don't you think the stick might be put to some use, instead of just being kept in the wardrobe?'

Mathilde pursed her lips and he himself blushed a little, realizing that he was perhaps being somewhat hasty in this matter of the walking-stick, with Uncle Emile scarcely cold in his grave—a fact of which his wife in a furious voice, her eyes damp with indignation, proceeded to remind him.

'Barely two months! A man who worked hard all his life. Why, he never once used that stick!'

'Exactly.'

'What do you mean, exactly? Why do you say that? Where's the sense in saying exactly?'

'All I say is—exactly.' And Sorbier assumed an enigmatic expression, as though the word had some unfathomable meaning.

Mathilde demanded further explanation but he merely whistled between his teeth in a manner which caused her, as she fastened her suspenders, to meditate reprisals. At half-past two they were all assembled on the landing. It looked as though this was going to be just another of those Sunday outings; two hours of tedious walking followed by a rest period during which they would sit in silence round a cafe table. 'Come along, you young devils,' said Sorbier, and this also was routine. But as he was in the act of closing the door of the apartment a thought seemed to strike him, and he said with an air of innocence that deceived his wife:

'I've forgotten my watch. You go on down and I'll catch you up.'

Hurrying to the wardrobe he got out Uncle Emile's walking-stick. The yellow bone knob, carved in the shape of a bulldog's head, was fixed to a stem of varnished wood with a gold band. It had never occurred to Sorbier that the mere fact of carrying a stick in his right

hand sufficed to give a man a greater sense of his own importance. His wife's furious protest, when he rejoined his family outside the house, left him unmoved. With the firmness of a free man and paterfamilias resolved to defend the privilege proper to his status he replied:

'Quite so. I've taken your uncle's stick. I see no reason why not. I'm thirty-seven, an age when a man in a responsible position is entitled to carry a walking-stick. If you insist on keeping this one in the wardrobe I'll buy myself one, and I promise you it won't be anything cheap and nasty.'

Mathilde was constrained to silence, fearing that this might be the thin end of the wedge. A man starts by buying a walking-stick and Heaven knows what may follow—extravagant habits, mistresses . . . For the first time in years she glanced at her husband in a manner that was half apprehensive and half admiring. Although she still deplored his lack of respect for the deceased, she could not help observing the fashionable ease with which he flourished the stick. She gave a sigh that was almost tender, but which he mistook for one of indignation.

'If your feet are hurting you,' he said, 'you'd better go home. I'll carry on with the children. They won't mind.'

'There's nothing the matter with my feet. But why do you say that the children . . . ?'

'Do you think I'm incapable of taking my sons for a walk? What you're implying, I suppose, is that I'm a bad father.'

Sorbier laughed sardonically. Victor was walking a few paces ahead of them, but Felicien's hand was clasped in his mother's and she was keeping a tight hold on it. Observing this and feeling the need for a crushing display of authority, Sorbier said:

'I can't think why you don't allow the boys to amuse themselves on their own. Felicien, let go of your mother's hand.'

'You know what it's like when they go off together,' objected

Mathilde. 'They get quite out of control. They're certain to tear their clothes, even if they don't get themselves run over, and then when the accident's happened it's too late.'

Sorbier ignored this. Giving Felicien a friendly tap on the calves with the stick he said:

'Go on in front with your brother. That's more fun than clinging to your mother's apron-strings.'

Felicien let go his mother's hand and caught his brother unawares with a kick on the backside to which Victor replied with a clout that knocked his beret onto the pavement. Mathilde watched this outcome of the paternal decree with an affectation of indifference that was not untinged with sarcasm. Sorbier laughed and said good-humouredly:

'They're a terrible pair, but still it's wrong not to let them enjoy themselves in their own way.'

However, he conceded the necessity of keeping their enjoyment within bounds.

'You're to stay close in front of us, within reach of my stick, and behave properly. We've made an early start so I'm going to take you for a particularly nice walk. You'll have a chance to improve your minds.'

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The family walked for the better part of a mile along streets and boulevards with the father using his stick to point out objects of interest, and discoursing with an abundance and urbanity that infuriated his wife.

'There are a great many historic monuments round here. The Louvre, for instance—and over there you have the magasins du Louvre, a famous department store . . . That's the Ministry of Finance . . . And here's the statue of Gambetta, the man who saved the

nation's honour in 1870 . . . Mind you don't forget that.'

They had reached the Tuileries garden, and a little further on Victor pointed to the statue of a naked woman standing on a pedestal.

'What about her, papa? Who's she? Did she save the nation's honour too?'

His father, rather put out, said sharply:

'She's just a woman. You don't have to stand there gaping.'

He prodded Victor with the stick, feeling shocked that a child of his age should be asking questions about a naked woman; but recovering almost instantly from this moment of vexation he nudged his wife and remarked in a tone in which the hint of mockery was scarcely disguised:

'It must be said, she's remarkably well-shaped. The sculptor was a real artist, don't you think?'

Conscious of the imperfections contained with difficulty within her corset, Mathilde looked at him in pained reproach; and he made things worse by giving a libidinous click of his tongue.

'Remarkably well-shaped, you must admit. Really it is hard to imagine a more beautiful body.'

Mathilde replied with a confused murmur which was less a contradiction than a shamefaced protest, and its effect on Sorbier was to cause him to bridle as though he had been accused of hypocrisy. He felt that the unique dignity conferred upon him by Uncle Emile's walking-stick was compromised by this suggestion of bad faith. Taking Mathilde by the arm he thrust her within a foot of the statue.

'Look at the line of the hip and the curve of the belly, just a very slight curve, exactly the amount a belly ought to have. And look at those breasts, so firm and deliciously rounded! Did you ever see more beautiful breasts?'

Mathilde was nearly in tears. Victor and Felicien were following their father's discourse with the greatest interest and as he stroked

the curves with the tip of his stick they clutched each other in an effort not to giggle. Mathilde attempted to change the subject, even going so far as to suggest that this kind of lecture was scarcely suited to young ears. But Sorbier, by now carried away, spared her nothing. Going round to the other side of the statue he uttered a positive bellow of enthusiasm.

'And the back view's just as good! Just exactly enough to sit down on and no more!'

The stick described two circles outlining the objects of his admiration, and this drew from Victor and Felicien, who were already pink with suppressed merriment, a snort of half-stifled laughter. Fearing lest the outburst should cause their parents to suspect them of depraved instincts they turned and ran off, and this induced Sorbier to leave the statue.

Mathilde had heard him out to the end, without even thinking of turning her back on him. She fell into step automatically at his side, her mind filled with the picture of that desolatingly flawless nudity. Considering her own bosom, whose amplitude prevented her from seeing her feet, she found herself blushing and in an access of humility she reflected that she was ridiculous and unworthy of this husband whom she had underestimated. Sorbier had acquired a new stature in her eyes, becoming suddenly a demon of seduction, bathed in a glow of perversity. She discovered in herself an unfamiliar sense of devotion, a hankering after subservience and total submission to the tyrant's lightest whim. But she allowed no sign of this sentimental upheaval to escape her. Bearing herself aloofly and with a pursed expression she maintained a wary silence, leaving it to him to keep the children in order; and with an effort that made her red in the face she drew in her ample stomach, not reflecting that this made her bosom even more prominent. In any case, Sorbier was paying no attention to her. Exalted by his inspired commentary on that stony nakedness he was repeating certain phrases which he thought partic-

ularly well-chosen, while in his mind's eye he evoked the figure in detail. Mutterings escaped him concerning legs, neck and shoulders which might have had reference to a cooking recipe, but then with a gasp of excited laughter he exclaimed, 'And the breasts! Upon my word, those breasts!' It had already been apparent that his interest in the statue was not purely aesthetic; and now a gleam had crept into his eye and a tremor into his voice, portents not unknown to his wife. She could no longer remain aloof. Speaking in a low voice, with a trace of bitterness but without anger, she said:

'Perhaps you've been hiding it, but you've certainly never talked to me like this before. Taking Uncle Emile's stick seems to have had a strange effect on you. If my poor uncle were still alive he'd remind you of the duties of a husband and father. He'd tell you that it's not decent or sensible to talk to your wife about another female's breasts, even a stone one. You know what happens to a marriage when the husband goes off the rails—look at the Corvisons, and that's only one example. And anyway what good does it do? What's the use of dreaming about someone else's breasts? Think of our own nights together, darling—there was only one pair of breasts for you. Even last night—you surely can't have forgotten . . .'

Directly she had said it she realized her mistake. In a moment of jealous tenderness she had rashly drawn attention to her own bosom; and Sorbier, not content with the satisfactions of an imaginary debauch, now indulged in those of cruelty and callousness. His eye rested upon her in derisive pity, the stick described an exaggerated outline and he wagged his head in a manner which said all too plainly, 'My poor dear, you simply can't compete. Just look at yourself.'

The message was so unmistakable that Mathilde reddened with fury. She proceeded to counter-attack.

'Not that I care in the least. It's the children I'm thinking of, and you, too, because you don't seem to realize what a fool you're making of yourself, playing at being the gay Lothario. After all,

you're not exactly in the first flush of youth. The concierge said as much to me only yesterday, when I came in after buying a bandage for your varicose veins.'

'Did she indeed? That old slut who's twice tried to kiss me on the stairs! As I said to her, "Any time I want to be unfaithful to my wife I know where to go. There's no shortage of pretty girls in Paris. With a little know-how—"' (and here Sorbier smiled a meaningful smile) '"—a man can pick and choose, thank Heaven."'

As it happened a good-looking young woman was passing at that moment, and for an instant her eyes met those of Sorbier. On a sudden impulse he raised his hat and gave her the most cavalier of smiles. Somewhat startled, she nodded and even smiled faintly in return. Mathilde felt that she was losing her wits. She seized her husband by the arm.

'Who was that? Who was that woman? I've never seen her in my life. Where did you meet her?'

Sorbier was silent as though reluctant to answer, but when she persisted he said in a tone of feigned embarrassment:

'I'm really not sure. I knew her at one time. I don't exactly remember.'

Delighted by Mathilde's agitation he hurried away to tell Felicien to come off the grass.

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Leaving the Tuileries gardens the family walked back to the boulevards by way of the Rue Royale. As they passed a pastry-shop Felicien announced that he was hungry and Victor at once took up the tale.

'I'm hungry too, Mamma. I'm much hungrier than Felicien.'

Mathilde in her irritation slapped them both and they began to blubber. Mathilde's own eyes were red and swollen. The passers-by

glanced pityingly at this unhappy mother, struggling with two tearful children, but Sorbier took no notice. He was striding ahead, cheeks pink and eyes alert, pausing only to glance now and then at a female form. At the *terrasse* of one of the boulevard cafes he paused and waited for them to come up with him.

'We may as well stop and have something,' he said. 'The walk's made me thirsty. And besides, we can watch the world go by, all the women . . .'

Mathilde glanced apprehensively at the establishment, which was a place of padded armchairs, tall mirrors, spick-and-span waiters and a lordly major-domo. As a rule their Sunday outings ended in some back-street cafe smelling of sawdust and wine by the glass—a cosy little nook, as Sorbier was apt to call it, where the *patron* himself served the beer. This display of luxury, with its promise of terrifyingly high prices, confirmed her in her suspicion that her husband was embarked on a slippery slope. He was already propelling her towards it in a manner which he attempted to make casual, but she held back.

'We never go to places like this. You know we don't.'

'It's just a cafe like any other. One would think you'd never been anywhere. Good Lord, I've been coming to this place for years!'

'If it were just the two of us . . .' Mathilde said humbly. 'I mean, that would be different. Perhaps some other time . . .' But Sorbier was now growing impatient, feeling that the people seated at the tables were amused by his wife's awkwardness.

'You can do as you please,' he said. 'Take the children home, if you'd rather. Personally, I'm going to have a drink.'

He strode between the rows of tables without waiting for an answer, and the family followed. A couple were in the act of leaving a table at the back of the *terrasse* and he at once took possession of it. He ordered an aperitif for himself and beer for the children. Math-

ilde preferred not to take anything, saying that she had a headache. Husband and wife sat in oppressed silence on their padded chairs. Sorbier himself was rendered uncomfortable by the thought of the impression his family might be making on this public of well-to-do idlers. More than once, it seemed to him, the waiter gave him a disapproving glance. He said to Mathilde:

'Do for Heaven's sake take something. You look so silly. One doesn't come to a cafe not to drink anything, it's absurd.'

Mathilde finally gave way and said she would have a small beer, and this so relieved Sorbier that his good humour was restored. Remembering that he was carrying a walking-stick he fell to admiring the carved knob.

'No getting away from it, a stick does do something for a man. I don't know why I've never thought of it before.'

The words were addressed in an amiable tone to Mathilde, and she responded with a burst of grateful affection.

'It's quite true. I never dreamed a stick would suit you so well. I'm glad you brought it.'

At this moment a woman approached the *terrasse* whose profession was sufficiently obvious from her attire, her make-up and the appraising glance she bestowed on the male customers. She stood hesitating amid the rows of tables, and seeing a free one not far from the Sorbier family sat down at it. Sorbier had been watching her from the moment she appeared, and when she was seated he had no difficulty in catching her eye. Glances and faint smiles were exchanged, the shameless creature responding the more readily since she was evidently under the impression, from Sorbier's ease of manner, that Mathilde was not his wife. Leaning forward over his glass the better to see her, Sorbier's becks and nods became increasingly demonstrative. Mathilde could not fail to notice what was going on, but, choked with indignation and not wishing to make a scene in public, she said nothing until Victor and Felicien, wondering whom

their father was smiling at, also turned to stare at the new arrival. She then burst out furiously:

'Really, it's revolting! In front of the children! A woman like that!'

The *terrasse* of the cafe was now so crowded that the waiters were being run off their feet and the woman was unable to get served. Seeing the offhand manner in which she was being treated by the personnel of the establishment Sorbier at first manifested his displeasure by gestures, and then, despite Mathilde's effort to restrain him, exclaimed in a voice calculated to reach her ears:

'Really the service here is disgraceful! The place has gone to the dogs. When I think what it used to be like!'

The lady flashed him a smile of gratitude which thrilled him to the core. In order to justify his proceedings to his wife, and being himself now carried away on a tide of high living that appalled her, he added:

'I've been trying for a quarter of an hour to get the waiter to bring me a cocktail.'

The word 'cocktail', with its depraved and dissolute associations —naked women and vintage wines—completed Mathilde's disarray. She had a vision of her husband squandering the family savings on taxis, opera-hats and night-clubs while she pawned the last of her jewels to feed her starving young.

'*Garçon,* you're wanted over here! It's outrageous that one can't get hold of a waiter!'

Sorbier's bellow was lost in the general hubbub, but the lady gave him another look of gratitude and shared indignation. In an access of zeal and chivalry Sorbier grasped his walking-stick by the middle, meaning to bang on the table with it, and raised it vigorously over his shoulder . . .

And the mirror behind him burst into fragments, shattered by Uncle Emile's bulldog head. Sorbier sprang to his feet, scarlet with

embarrassment, while laughter exploded around him, derisive comment and the indignant protests of a gentleman at the next table who said that pieces of glass had fallen into his aperitif. In his consternation he stood clutching the stick with both hands like a soldier presenting arms.

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Seeing her husband thus crestfallen Mathilde, from being plunged in despair, was suddenly brought back to life. Her maligned bosom recovered its authority. Half rising from her chair and with a venomous smile, careless of the hilarity her words provoked among the witnesses of the drama, she said shrilly:

'Five hundred francs! That's what your idiocy is going to cost—and all for a slut of a woman who's only after your money!'

The manager came running to the scene of the disaster and a waiter fetched a policeman. Sorbier gave his name and address and produced his identity-card. Aged and shrunken he stammered out excuses:

'I assure you it was entirely accidental . . . It was Uncle Emile's stick . . . I only wanted to signal to the waiter . . .'

Mathilde was delightedly following the proceedings, interjecting sarcasms of her own. Bowing beneath the storm he could only say beseechingly:

'Please, Mathilde—not now.'

The policeman, touched by his suffering, cut the formalities short. Even the manager was sufficiently moved by compassion to say that the damage was not serious and no doubt he would be able to arrange matters with the insurance company. But Sorbier was still in great distress as he resumed his seat beside Mathilde, who promptly asked:

'Don't you think you'd better have a cocktail to help you pull

yourself together? I'm sure you need something.'

So afflicted was his countenance, so humble his posture, that she felt free to visit every torment upon him.

'And now you're feeling so rich,' she went on, 'you really ought to have a cocktail. You can give me a sip.'

Sorbier sighed deeply and stared in the direction of the young woman who had been the cause of all the trouble, hoping for at least a glance of sympathy. But the wanton creature, finding the spell broken, now had her back to him and was returning the ardent gaze of an old gentleman at another table.

'There you are,' said Mathilde. 'There's your trollop. She's found someone who needs *two* walking-sticks!'

Victor and Felicien, with a cruelty that was not altogether unintentional, were blithely re-enacting the episode, and their mother went so far as to encourage their charade, reminding them of details they had overlooked. In a voice of misery Sorbier called to the waiter and paid the bill. But when finally he started to leave, Mathilde, still lounging in her chair, called him back and said with intolerable sweetness:

'Darling, you're forgetting your stick.'

He returned and, awkwardly retrieving it, followed her out as she herded the boys between the rows of drinkers. The stick was now an encumbrance to him, and passing a table he knocked over an empty glass which a waiter skilfully caught before it hit the ground. Mathilde said derisively over her shoulder:

'There's no holding you today, is there? Are you sure there's nothing else you'd like to break?'

At that moment he dearly longed to break the stick over his wife's head, but it was a passing thought to which he dared not give expression. As they left the *terrasse* he had the added bitterness of seeing the young woman rise and join the old gentleman at his table. Mathilde, whom nothing escaped, did not fail to point out the irony

of this development, but she was now so filled with the need for revenge that mere humour was not enough. Looking squarely at her husband she said in the commanding voice with which he was all too familiar:

'And now I'd like you to tell me the real reason why you took that stick, when it doesn't even belong to you.'

Sorbier made a vague gesture. He no longer knew. Mathilde could have hit him.

'One doesn't do a thing like that for no reason at all. I insist on knowing why you took Uncle Emile's stick.'

She had stopped and was holding him by the lapel of his jacket. Sorbier realized that she would give him no peace until he had furnished an explanation. After peering honourably into the recesses of his soul, and finding nothing, he decided to fall back on poetry in the hope that this would appease her wrath.

'Well, really, it's not easy to put into words. It was—well, it was the sunshine, you see, such a lovely day—the feeling of spring—you know how it is, one gets these ideas in the spring . . .'

At this she affected to be convulsed with laughter, and he repeated pathetically:

'Yes, that's what it was—the feeling of spring. If only you could understand . . .'

She gave him a push to start him moving again, as though he were now no more than an automaton, and said with tight lips:

'You wait till I get you home, my lad. I'll teach you about the spring. You needn't think you're forgiven.'

The boys had taken advantage of this interlude to run on ahead, and they had to hurry amid the crowd of strollers to overtake them. Mathilde said to Victor:

'You're to take your father's hand, and mind he doesn't let go of you.'

Sorbier submissively took his son by the hand and was walking

on when she stopped him.

'Your right hand, silly, you know he's got a sore thumb. It's no use fussing about the stick, you'll just have to carry it in your left hand. You won't look any more ridiculous than you do already.'

Accordingly he transferred the stick to his left hand and the child to his right. The stick was worrying him more and more; he tucked it under his arm, and his air of discomfort drew further derisive remarks from Mathilde. As he was about to turn the corner to the right she said in a calm voice that filled him with apprehension:

'No, keep straight on. I don't want to go that way.'

'But it's getting late. Do you realize it's nearly five?'

'Why are you suddenly in such a hurry? I'm feeling like a bit more exercise. We'll go back along the Rue Royale and through the Tuileries. It's the nicest of all walks at this time of year.'

She had been planning this revenge ever since they left the cafe —to take her crushed and abject husband home by way of the paths he had so arrogantly trodden a couple of hours before.

Sorbier was now dragging his feet, head bowed and shoulders drooping, no longer interested in looking at the women; and Mathilde, following close on his heels, neglected no opportunity of emphasizing the contrast between the then and the now.

'Now that's a pretty girl! Do you mean to say you didn't notice? I thought you'd have been bound to give her a look.'

Back in the Tuileries garden Victor and Felicien were allowed to run off by themselves, but Sorbier did not take advantage of the fact to transfer the stick to his right hand. He was doing his best to forget it. Mathilde, exactly recalling the places which had been the scene of his declaration of independence and his libertine humours, reminded him of the things he had said, adding ferocious comments of her own. When they came to the nude statue she brandished her bosom and said, glaring at him:

'Well, here's your bit of homework! You were keen enough two

hours ago. Haven't you anything more to say?'

Sorbier gazed at the figure with a look of melancholy in which she seemed to catch a hint of defiant regret. Snatching the stick from him she ran its ferrule over the stone curves, acidly remarking upon them as she did so.

'Talk about skin and bone! The poor creature looks half starved —as flat in front as she is behind. You'd be black and blue if you went to bed with her.'

Sorbier was staring abstractedly in front of him, seeming lost in his dream of melancholy. Mathilde frowned, laid the stick down on the pedestal, folded her arms and said harshly:

'Well?'

He gazed at her like a hunted animal. For a moment he hesitated, then a cowardly giggle rose in his throat and he murmured:

'You're quite right. She's too young—boyish, in fact . . . A real woman needs to be more—filled-out, as you might say.'

The flattery thus extorted brought a flush of triumph to Mathilde's cheeks. She slipped her arm through that of her husband with a slow purposeful movement, as though it were a final act of possession, and directed the family footsteps homewards. Victor and Felicien picked up the walking-stick from the pedestal and went running ahead with it, each holding one end. Their father watched them with relief, thankful to be rid of a burden which now seemed to him intolerable; but Mme Sorbier, having some inkling of this, called after them:

'Give the stick back to your father at once. It's not a toy for children.' And to her husband she said: 'Now that you've got it out of the wardrobe, darling, you must carry it every Sunday.'