READING PASSAGE

Mr Frensham opened his shop at eight-thirty, but it was past nine when the woman and the child went in. The shop was empty. The child listened to the melancholy sound of the bell as the door closed behind him – he had never been in this shop before. He was going to have his hair cut for the first time in his life, except for the times when his mother had trimmed it gently behind the neck.

Mr Frensham was sitting in a large chair, reading a newspaper. He could make the chair turn around, and he spun twice about in it before he put down his paper, smiled, and said, 'Good morning.'

He was an old man, thin, with flat white hair. He wore a white coat.

'One gentleman,' he said, 'to have his locks shorn.'

He put a board across the two arms of his chair, lifted the child, and sat him on it.

'How are you, my dear? And your husband, is he well?' he said to the child's mother.

He took a sheet from a cupboard on the wall and wrapped it about the child's neck, tucking it into his collar. The sheet covered the child completely and hung almost to the floor. Cautiously the boy moved his hidden feet. He could see the bumps they made in the cloth. He moved his finger against the inner surface of the sheet and made a six with it, and then an eight. He liked those shapes.

'Snip snip,' said Mr Frensham, 'and how much does the gentleman want off? All of it? All his lovely curls? I think not.'

'Just an ordinary cut, please, Mr Frensham,' said the child's mother. 'Not too much off. I, my husband and I, we thought it was time for him to look like a little boy. His hair grows so quickly.'

Mr Frensham's hands were very cold. His hard fingers turned the boy's head first to one side and then to the other and the boy could hear the long scissors snipping away behind him, and above his ears. He was quite frightened, but he liked watching the small tufts of his hair drop lightly on the sheet which covered him, and then roll an inch or two before they stopped. Some of the hair fell to the floor and by gently moving his hands he could make nearly all of it fall down. The hair fell without a sound. Tilting his head slightly, he could see the bright curls on the floor, not belonging to him any more.

'Easy to see who this boy is,' Mr Frensham said to the child's mother. 'I won't get redder hair in the shop today. Your husband had hair like this when he was young, very much this colour. I've cut your husband's hair for forty years. He's keeping well, you say? There, I think that's enough. We don't want him to dislike coming to see me.'

He took the sheet off the child and flourished it hard before folding it and putting it on a shelf. He swept the back of the child's neck with a small brush. Nodding his own old head in admiration, he looked at the child's hair for flaws in the cutting.

'Very handsome,' he said.

The child saw his face, a moon in the mirror. It looked pale and large, but also much the same as always. When he felt the back of his neck the new short hairs pushed like a hedgehog against his hand.

'We're off to do some shopping,' his mother said to Mr Frensham as she handed him the money.

They were going to buy the boy a cap, a round cap with a little button on top and a peak over his eyes, like his cousin Harry's cap. The boy wanted the cap very much. He walked seriously beside his mother and he was not impatient even when she met Mrs Lewis and talked to her, and then took a long time at the fruiterer's buying apples and potatoes.

'This is the smallest size we have,' the man in the clothes shop said. 'It may be too large for him.'

'He's just had his hair cut,' said his mother; 'that should make a difference.'

The man put the cap on the boy's head and stood back to look. It was a beautiful cap. The badge in front was shaped like a shield and it was red and blue. It was not too big, although the man could put two fingers under it, at the side of the boy's head.

'On the other hand, we don't want it too tight,' the man said. 'We want something he can grow into, something that will last him a long time.'

'Oh, I hope so,' his mother said. 'It's expensive enough.'

The boy carried the cap himself, in a brown paper bag that had 'Price, Clothiers, High Street' on it. He could read it all except 'Clothiers' and his mother told him that. They put his cap, still in its bag, in a drawer when they got home.

His father came home late in the afternoon. The boy heard the firm clap of the closing door and his father's long step down the hall. He leaned against his father's knee while the man ate his dinner. The meal had been keeping warm in the oven and the plate was very hot. A small steam was rising from the potatoes, and the gravy had dried to a thin crust where it was shallow at the side of the plate. The man lifted the dry gravy with his knife and fed it to his son, very carefully lifting it into the boy's mouth, as if he were feeding a small bird. The boy loved this. He leaned drowsily against his father's leg.

Afterwards he put on his cap and stood before his father, certain of the man's approval. The man put his hand on the boy's head and looked at him without smiling.

'On Sunday,' he said, 'we'll go for a walk. Just you and I. We'll be men together.'