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Title: Black, White and Gray: A Story of Three Homes

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Illustrator: Robert Barnes

Release date: October 20, 2007 [eBook #23130]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BLACK, WHITE AND GRAY: A STORY OF THREE HOMES ***

Amy Walton

"Black, White and Gray"

Chapter One.

Two Good Homes.

"It's as black as ink," said Dennis, lifting one of the kittens out of its warm bed in the hay; "there's not a single white hair upon it."

"Madam's never had a *quite* black one before, has she?" said his sister Maisie, who knelt beside him, before the cat and her family.

It was a snug and cosy home Madam had chosen for her children, in a dark corner of the hayloft, where she had hollowed out a sort of nest in the side of a truss of hay. Here she might well have fancied herself quite secure from discovery, for it was so dim and shadowy in the loft that it needed sharp eyes to see anything but hay and straw.

She had forgotten, however, that it was one of Dennis and Maisie's favourite play-rooms when it was too wet to be out-of-doors, and it turned out that in the midst of their games to-day, they had caught sight of her white coat in her dusky retreat. Though she would rather not have been found, Madam took the discovery calmly, and made no difficulty, even when Dennis softly put in his hand and drew out the black kitten. She knew the children well, and was quite sure they would do no harm, so she lay lazily blinking her green eyes, and even purred gently with pleasure to hear her kitten admired.

It was such a very nice kitten. Not only because of its dense blackness, but its coat was as glossy and thick as that of a little mole, and its shape unusually stumpy and attractive.

"Isn't it a *beauty*?" said Dennis, in a delighted whisper; "we must keep it."

"We haven't looked at the others yet," said Maisie cautiously; "don't let's settle so soon."

The black kitten was accordingly given back to Madam, who at once licked it all over from top to toe, and the others brought out one by one. There was a perfectly white one, much smaller than the first, and the other was a commonplace striped grey.

"I don't care about either," said Dennis; "they're just like lots and lots of other kittens, and they grow up like lots and lots of other cats. Now the black's uncommon."

"I can't bear settling which is to be drowned," sighed Maisie. "I suppose we may really only keep one."

"You're a ninny," said Dennis shortly.

In reality he did not like to doom the kittens any better than his sister, but he would have thought it womanly to show his feelings.

"I call it unfair," continued Maisie, stroking the white and grey kittens with her little brown hand, "to drown them just because they're not pretty. It's not as if they were bad."

"But you *know* we mustn't keep them all," said Dennis impatiently; "so what's the good of going on like that? We *must* choose, and the black's the best, isn't it?"

"Well, then," said Maisie reluctantly, "I think we ought to cast lots, so as to give them each a chance."

This appealed to Dennis's sense of justice, and was besides the usual way of settling differences between his sister and himself. He pulled out three pieces of hay of different lengths, and holding them tightly shut in his hand, with the ends sticking out in an even row, said shortly, "You choose."

"Which is which?" asked Maisie, her face getting pink with excitement.

"The longest's the black, the middling's the white, and the shortest's the grey," said Dennis, with the calmness of fate.

Maisie gazed at the little yellow ends of hay sticking out between her brother's stout red fingers, almost with terror. The old cat, with one paw thrown languidly over the black kitten, watched the proceedings carelessly.

"I'll have this one!" exclaimed Maisie desperately, tugging at the middle piece.

"Hurrah!" cried Dennis, as he opened his hand, and he threw up his cap exultingly; for it was the black kitten that was to live.

"I'm just as sorry as I was before about the others," said Maisie wistfully; "but of course I *do* like the black one best, and Madam seems proud of it too. What shall we call it?"

"Nigger," said Dennis.

Maisie looked doubtful.

"That's not a very nice name," she said slowly. "I should like to call it Jonah, because, you see, the lot fell upon it."

"Well, but, you silly thing," replied Dennis, "that just *wouldn't* do, because Jonah *was* drowned when the lot fell upon him, and the black kitten won't be."

"He wasn't *drowned*," said Maisie, in a low impressive voice.

"Well, worse. I'd rather have been drowned," said Dennis shortly; "anyhow, I don't like the name of Jonah. It ought to have something to do with its colour."

"Do you think," said Maisie, looking with pity at the white and grey kittens, "that we need tell Tom to drown them *quite* directly. Mightn't we leave them till to-morrow, and hear what Aunt Katharine says?"

"She won't say anything different," said Dennis, with a decided shake of the head. "You know she made a rule. But we'll leave them if you like."

Before the children left the loft, half an hour later, they took a tender leave of Madam and her family, and Maisie gave an extra caress to the white and grey kittens, which she felt sure she should never see again. Nevertheless, at the bottom of her heart, there was a tiny hope that she might be able to save them, for sometimes, even when she had made a rule, Aunt Katharine was unexpectedly yielding.

Dennis and Maisie had lived with their aunt, Miss Katharine Chester, since they had been babies. They had arrived one autumn day at Fieldside, all the way from India, two little motherless, white-faced things under the care of strangers, and from that time till now, when Dennis was a square-shouldered boy of ten, and Maisie a sunburnt little girl of eight, Aunt Katharine had been everything to them. Certainly father was in India, and would come home some day, and meanwhile often sent them letters and parcels, but he was such a complete stranger, that he did not count for much in their little lives. On mail-days, when they had to write to him, it was often very hard to think of something to say, for they did not feel at all sure of his tastes, or what was likely to interest him: it was like writing to a picture or a shadow, and not a real person at all.

Now Aunt Katharine was a very real person, though she was also a very busy one, and if it was sometimes difficult to get hold of her during the day, there was always the evening. Then she was quite ready to listen to questions, to hear news, and to go thoroughly into any matters of interest or difficulty which had been saved for that time. The hour immediately after breakfast was devoted to lessons, but it was not easy to talk to Aunt Katharine then, for she had so many things on her mind. She never shortened the time, but the children knew that the moment ten o'clock struck, books must be shut, and Aunt Katharine free to begin her busy round from kitchen to dairy, from garden to poultry-yard and stables. Every part of her pleasant little kingdom was daily visited by this active lady, and it repaid her care within and without, for no one had such good butter, such abundance of fresh eggs, such a well-kept stable, such luxuriantly blooming flowers, and such fine vegetables. No one had a pleasanter house, roomy and cheerful, and not too grandly furnished for children and animals to run about in freely.

And Miss Chester's cares were not confined to her own possessions alone, for nothing that went on in the village of Fieldside, just outside her gates, was unknown to her. She was ready to settle disputes, to nurse sickness, and to relieve distress, and was never known to fail any one who applied to her for help. Into this life, already so full of varied business, Dennis and Maisie had brought added responsibilities, and Aunt Katharine had undertaken them with her usual decision and energy. As long as the children were babies, somewhat delicate and ailing, she had bestowed all her thought and care upon them, and given up many outside interests for their sake.

But now they were babies no longer, but had grown up healthy and strong, and by degrees she returned to her busy life, and left them a great deal to themselves. Her married sister, Mrs Trevor, who lived not far off at Haughton Park, considered her strangely neglectful of their education, but Miss Chester had her own ideas on that subject, and would not listen to objections. Nothing, she insisted, was so important to children of Dennis and Maisie's age as plenty of liberty and fresh air. The time would soon come when Dennis must go to school, and Maisie must have a governess; until then, the daily hour in which they learned to read and write and to do simple sums—for Aunt Katharine was not

great at figures—was quite education enough.

This was decidedly the opinion of the children themselves, and perhaps they were not the worse for the free life they lived at Fieldside, happy in the companionship of all the pleasant outdoor things, and dependent on no one but themselves for amusement. But it was not all freedom. Aunt Katharine made rules, and the children knew that these must be obeyed, and were never relaxed unless for some very good reason. One of these rules applied to the number of pets, which had once threatened to become overwhelming. Cats especially began to swarm in such multitudes in the garden and house, that Aunt Katharine was obliged to take severe measures to reduce them. That done, she made a rule. Madam, the favourite old cat, was to be kept, but all her kittens, except one out of each family, must for the future be drowned. It was a dreadful blow to Maisie in particular, who, being a girl, was not obliged to smother her feelings; and now, here was another of these miserable occasions—the white and grey kittens must be sent out of the world almost as soon as they had entered it!

All the while she was having her frock changed and her hair brushed before tea, she turned the matter over in her mind. Could she possibly prevail on Aunt Katharine to spare the kittens this once. It seemed odd that Aunt Katharine, who was so kind to every one, could bear to let such poor little helpless things be killed. Maisie supposed it must be one of those many, many things she had been told she should understand when she was older. Dennis always said it did not hurt them, but though she looked up to him a good deal, she did not feel at all sure that he was right in this case. At any rate, if it did not hurt the kittens, it must be most painful for Madam to lose two of her children in such a dreadful way.

Full of those thoughts, she went down to the schoolroom, where Aunt Katharine always joined the children at tea-time. She found her already there, listening to Dennis, who was giving an excited account of the discovery of Madam in the hayloft that afternoon.

"It's *such* a jolly little kitten we're going to keep, you can't think, Aunt Katharine," he said; "as black as a coal all over."

"And what does Maisie think?" said Aunt Katharine, turning to the little girl, who had not joined in her brother's description. "Does she like it best too?"

Maisie's round face became very pink, and she nervously crumbled up her cake, but said nothing.

"Would you rather keep the white one or the grey one, dear?" asked her aunt kindly. "I daresay Dennis would not mind. He shall choose next time."

"We didn't choose," put in Dennis quickly; "we cast lots, so it's quite fair. It's only," he continued, lowering his voice confidentially, "that she doesn't like the others to be drowned."

"Is that it, Maisie?" asked Aunt Katharine.

Maisie nodded. She had meant to say a good deal, but now that the moment had come, her feelings were rather more than she could manage. She gazed beseechingly at Aunt Katharine, who could save the kittens by one word, and still crumbling up her cake with her little brown hands, murmured, "Just this once."

Aunt Katharine smiled.

"And how about my rule?" she said. "If you keep the kittens 'just this once,' you will want to keep the next, and the next, and we shall soon have as many cats as there were before. That would never do."

"There were fifteen," said Dennis.—"Pass the cake, please, Maisie."

Maisie gave a little gulp of disappointment. It did not seem to her that fifteen cats were at all too many for comfort and pleasure, but Aunt Katharine knew best. So she drew a small handkerchief out of her pocket, wiped the crumbs from her fingers, and struggled for composure. Both she and Dennis thought the matter quite ended, for their aunt began to talk of other things, and after tea she read to them as usual, and not another word was said about the kittens until bed-time. It was surprising, therefore, to hear her say as she shut up the book:

"Children, I have something to propose to you about the kittens. You know I can't let you keep them, because it is against my rule, which I should not have made unless it had been necessary; but, if you like to find them two good homes, I will allow you to give them away this time."

"Oh auntie!" exclaimed Maisie, clapping her hands, "how lovely!"

"How long may we have to look out?" asked Dennis.

"The kittens must be sent away from here this day three weeks," said Aunt Katharine solemnly; "and remember, children, I said 'two *good* homes,' so I trust you to take trouble to find them. It would be really kinder to drown them at once, than to send them where they might be starved or ill-treated."

Two good homes! It was indeed a serious responsibility, and their aunt had said the words so earnestly, that the children were both much impressed by them. Maisie in particular, in the midst of her rejoicing that the kittens were saved, felt quite sobered by the burden resting upon her.

"How ever shall we find two good homes?" she said to Dennis as they went up-stairs. But Dennis never looked at the troublesome side of life, if he could avoid it.

"It'll be jolly to keep all three of them for three weeks, won't it?" he said. "How pleased Madam would be if she

knew!"

"We must get up very early to-morrow, and go and tell her," said Maisie.

"It matters most to tell Tom," said Dennis; "because if he finds them in the loft, he'll drown them straight off in a bucket."

The horror of this suggestion, and the future of the two kittens if they escaped this danger, kept Maisie awake for a long while that night.

She slept in a tiny room opening out of Aunt Katharine's, and she knew how dreadfully late it must be, when she heard her aunt moving about, and saw the light of her candle underneath the door. After that, however, she soon went to sleep, with the kittens, their homes, and Tom the stable-boy, all jumbled up together in her head.

Chapter Two.

Haughton Park.

Before the clock had finished striking six the next morning, Dennis and Maisie were in the stable-yard. Tom was there, pumping water into a pail, and Jacko the raven was there, stalking about with gravity, and uttering a deep croak now and then. Jacko was not a nice character, and more feared than liked by most people. He was a thief and a bully, and so cunning that it was impossible to be up to all his tricks. In mischief he delighted, and nothing pleased him more than to frighten and tease helpless things, yet, with all these bad qualities, he had been allowed to march about for many years, unreproved, in Aunt Katharine's stable-yard. Maisie had been very much afraid of him in the days when she wore socks, for he had a way of digging at her little bare legs with his cruel beak whenever he could get near her. She was not frightened of him now that she was older, especially when Dennis was with her, but still she did not trust him, and took care this morning not to cross his path on her way to speak to Tom.

"If Jacko knew about the kittens," remarked Dennis as they passed, "he'd go and peck out their eyes."

"Oh!" shuddered Maisie; "but," she added in a whisper, for she always fancied Jacko understood, "their eyes aren't open yet, and besides Madam would claw and scratch at him."

"He can claw and scratch too," said Dennis. "I expect he could kill Madam and her kittens easily. And then he'd bury them, just as he does his food, you know, and then."

Fortunately for Maisie, who was listening with horror to this picture of cruelty and crime, Dennis stopped at this point, for they were now close to Tom, who with his back towards them was making a dreadful noise with a creaking pump handle.

"I say, Tom," he called out. Tom slowly turned his freckled face over his shoulder, but did not leave off his work. "Madam's kittens are *not* to be drowned," shouted Dennis at the top of his voice.

"They're *all* to be saved," added Maisie in a shriller key.—"Oh Dennis, I don't believe he has taken it in. Do tell him to leave off pumping."

But just then, Tom's pails being full, he left off of his own accord, and proceeded to carry them into the stable.

"You *do* understand, Tom," said Maisie anxiously, for she had an idea that Tom rather liked drowning kittens. "*Not* to be drowned."

Tom's voice having answered indistinctly from one of the stalls, she turned to follow Dennis, who was already half-way up the steep ladder which led to the loft. After all, Madam could not be told the good news, for she had gone out for a stroll, leaving her family in a little warm furry heap in their bed.

"Just fancy how dreadful it would be for her if she came back and found only one left," said Maisie, touching the little round heads softly with her finger. "I *am* so glad they're not to be drowned."

"I'm tremendously glad we're going to keep the black one ourselves," said Dennis. "What do you think of the name of Smut?"

"I don't like it a bit," said Maisie.

They had got no further towards a name by breakfast time. All those which Maisie liked, Dennis thought silly, and those which Dennis proposed, Maisie thought ugly, so it promised to be a difficult matter to settle. As soon as they were seated at breakfast, however, Aunt Katharine made a suggestion which put the black kitten out of their heads for the present.

"Children," she said, "I am going to drive over to Haughton Park to lunch this morning. If you like, you may both go with me and see Philippa."

There was a moment's pause, and then Dennis asked seriously:

"Shall you go anywhere besides, Aunt Katharine, or just straight there?"

"I shall only stop at Mrs Broadbent's on my way," she replied, "to ask about so some fowls."

The children looked at each other, but made no answer.

"Well," said their aunt, smiling, "I dare say you'd like to talk it over together. I shall start at twelve o'clock, and if you decide to go, you must be ready to the minute, for I shall not wait for you. Do just as you like about it."

To go or not to go to Haughton was always a matter which required thought. There were things against it, and things for it. In Maisie's opinion, there was a great deal to be liked in the visit. There was a large, beautiful house, much larger than Fieldside, and a park with deer in it: there were all sorts of dolls and toys and pretty things which she enjoyed playing with, and—there was Philippa. Philippa was perhaps a doubtful pleasure, for if she was in a cross mood she was not agreeable, but there was always the chance that she would be pleasant, and then she and Maisie got on very well together with their dolls. Dennis was disposed to be rather scornful about going to Haughton, but in his case there was the attraction of the drive, when Aunt Katharine sometimes let him hold the reins, and there was the chance of her stopping at somewhere interesting on the way. Mrs Broadbent's would be better than nothing to-day, though it was not his favourite farmhouse.

"I don't think I want to go *much*," he said, as soon as he and Maisie had reached the play-room. "Aunt Trevor's sure to have a headache, and then we shall have to be as quiet as mice."

"P'raps she'll let us go out with Philippa," said Maisie.

"Not without Miss Mervyn comes too," said Dennis. "I don't care about that—it's no fun. She's always saying, 'You mustn't do this, or you mustn't do that.'"

"Well," said Maisie, "should I go with Aunt Katharine then, and you stay at home?"

But this did not suit Dennis at all. It would never do for Maisie to come back and describe all manner of enjoyments which he had not shared. It would be better to go and grumble than to be left at home alone.

"Oh, I'll go," he said, condescendingly. And so it came to pass that when the ponies, Jack and Jill, came round, the children were both waiting in the hall, fully prepared for the drive. As she drew on her driving gloves, Aunt Katharine gave a glance at them to see that they were warmly wrapped up, for it was a fresh day in early spring.

"Jump in, children, and let Mary tuck you well up; it's rather cold," she said.—"Give me the reins, Tom. All right."

Then came a dash down the short avenue, with Tom running before to open the gate, and then they were in the village street, where Jack and Jill always thought it right to plunge and shy a little. From their seat at the back Dennis and Maisie nodded at their various acquaintances as they passed, for they knew nearly every one. There was Mrs Gill at the post-office, standing at her open door; there was Mr Couples, who kept the shop; and there was Dr Price just mounting his horse, with his two terriers, Snip and Snap, eager to follow. Above this little cluster of houses stood the church and the vicarage close together, on a gently rising hill; and the rest of the village, including two or three large farms, was scattered about here and there, with wide spaces between.

"Why are you going to Mrs Broadbent's, Aunt Katharine?" asked Dennis, as they turned sharply to the right.

"Because I want to ask her to let me have a setting of Minorcas," replied his aunt, "and no one else keeps them."

"And we might ask her, you know," said Maisie, "whether she'd like one of the kittens. I should *think* that would be a good home, shouldn't you?"

"P'raps she doesn't like cats," said Dennis carelessly. "We've got three weeks, so it really doesn't matter much yet."

The Broadbents' square white house now came in sight. It had a trim garden, a tennis ground, and a summer-house, and was completely screened from the farm-buildings by a gloomy row of fir-trees. The children did not as a rule care to pay visits to Mrs Broadbent, for there were no animals or interesting things about; but to-day Maisie asked leave to go in, for she had the kittens on her mind, and felt she must not lose a chance.

Mrs Broadbent was a thin little widow, who wore smart caps, and had a general air of fashion about her person. She was sharp and clever, well up to the business of managing her large farm, and familiar with every detail of it. Unfortunately she considered this a thing to be ashamed of, and, much to Miss Chester's annoyance, always pretended ignorance which did not exist. What she was proud of, and thrust foremost in her conversation, were the accomplishments of two highly-educated daughters, who painted on china, and played the violin, and on this subject she received no encouragement from Aunt Katharine.

"I shouldn't have thought of disturbing you so early, Mrs Broadbent," she said briskly, when they were seated in the smart little drawing-room, "but I've come on business. I want to know if you've a setting of Minorca fowls to dispose of. I've a fancy to rear some."

Mrs Broadbent simpered a little and put her head on one side.

"I've no doubt we can oblige you, Miss Chester," she said. "I'll speak to my poultry-man about it, and let you know."

"How many Minorcas have you?" asked Miss Chester.

"Oh, I really couldn't tell you, Miss Chester," replied Mrs Broadbent with a little laugh. "I never thought of inquiring."

"Not know how many of each sort of fowls you have!" exclaimed Aunt Katharine. "Why, if I had a farm, I'd know every one of them by sight, and how many eggs they each laid. I suppose, though," she added, "you leave that to your daughters. They must be a great help to you."

Mrs Broadbent bridled:

"Emmeline and Lilian are far too much engaged," she said, "with their studies and their artistic work. Emmeline's quite devoted herself to art. I've given her a large room at the top of the house for a studio."

"Indeed," said Miss Chester coldly. "And what does she do in it?"

"Just now she's painting some lovely plaques," said Mrs Broadbent, "and Lilian's quite taken to the new poker-work."

"What is that?" asked her visitor.

"You haven't seen it, Miss Chester? Well, it *is* quite new, and as I was saying the other day, in these remote parts we don't see anything, do we? But Lilian's been staying in London, and she learned it there. She did that frame."

It seemed that poker-work was intended to have the effect of carving, which was produced by burning patterns on wood with a red-hot instrument.

"Well, if you ask my candid opinion," said Aunt Katharine, rising to look at the frame, "I should like it much better plain; but it's a harmless amusement, if wasting time is ever harmless.—Come Maisie, Dennis will be quite tired of waiting.—You'll let me know about the eggs, Mrs Broadbent, and their price. I shall be much obliged if you can spare me a setting."

In another moment Aunt Katharine would have swept out of the room, with her usual activity, but after waiting so long for a pause in the conversation, Maisie could not give up her purpose.

"Do you want a cat, please?" she said, standing in front of Mrs Broadbent—"that is, a nice little kitten. One of our cat Madam's."

But Mrs Broadbent was quite certain that she did not want a cat, and said so with some sharpness, for she was never pleased at Miss Chester's outspoken opinions, though she was used to them. She had too many cats about the place now. She supposed as long as there were mice there must be cats, but to her mind there was not much to choose between them.

"I don't really suppose it would have been a good home," said Maisie, when she was tucked in again beside Dennis; "Mrs Broadbent doesn't like cats, and she looked quite cross when I asked her, but I think that was because Aunt Katharine didn't like Lilian's poker-work frame."

Haughton Park, towards which Jack and Jill were now quickly making their way, was about four miles from Fieldside, and just outside the little town of Upwell. It was a large house, standing in a park of some extent, and was built in what was called the Italian style, with terraces in front of it, and stone balustrades, and urns and vases wherever they could be put. Inside, the rooms were very large and lofty, and there was a great hall with marble pillars, and a huge staircase with statues in niches all the way up. Perhaps from some association with the sound of the name, Maisie always thought it was a proud cold house, which could not stoop to notice any one who came in and out of its doors, and did not mind whether they went or stayed. Yet, from its very unlikeness to Fieldside, it had a certain fascination for her, and she could not help admiring it.

Here, in lonely grandeur, lived Aunt Katharine's widowed sister, Mrs Trevor, with her daughter Philippa, who was just ten years old. Mrs Trevor had always wondered why her brother, Captain Chester, had not sent Dennis and Maisie to Haughton to be educated with Philippa. Surely nothing could have been more suitable or better for the children!

But by some extraordinary blindness, he had passed over his elder sister and all her possessions, and chosen Katharine as their guardian until his return from India. When he did return, thought Mrs Trevor, he would see what a mistake he had made; even now, if he knew what odd ideas Katharine had, and how she allowed the children to run wild, and associate with the villagers, he would regret his choice—but it was no affair of hers. Nevertheless, it always gave her a sense of injury to see Dennis and Maisie with their Aunt Katharine. It was not that she envied her the charge of them, for she was, or fancied she was, somewhat of an invalid, and would have disliked the trouble. But she felt she had been slighted when the children were sent to Fieldside, and a slight was a thing she could not forget.

Mrs Trevor received her visitors this morning in her boudoir, and rose to greet them languidly from her low chair—a tall elegant figure, in soft clinging robes. The room was full of the heavy scent of hyacinths, and warm with the spring sunshine and a bright fire. As Aunt Katharine entered with her usual alert step, she seemed to bring a great deal of cold air and life into it from the outside world. The children followed her rather shyly.

"Here we are, you see," she said, in her loud, cheerful voice. "How are you, Helen? You look rather white."

"I am suffering from my old enemy to-day," replied Mrs Trevor, with a forced smile; "my head is very painful."

"Ah," said Aunt Katharine, pulling off her gloves briskly, "a little fresh air is the best cure for that. To be shut up in this warm room with all those flowers is enough to poison you. Wouldn't you like a window open?"

"Pray, Katharine!" exclaimed Mrs Trevor, putting up her hand with a shudder; "the very idea destroys me. It is an east wind. Warmth and rest are the only cure." She put up her double eye-glasses, and looked at Dennis and Maisie. "Did you drive over? How are the children?"

"As jolly as possible," said Aunt Katharine. She stood on the hearthrug, flapping her gloves against one hand. Maisie always thought that her aunt wore shorter skirts, rougher tweed dresses, and stouter boots when she came to Haughton, than at any other time. Also, she seemed to speak louder, and to look rosier and broader altogether. Perhaps this only seemed to be so, because Aunt Trevor's skin was so fair, and her voice so gentle, and because she

wore such graceful soft gowns, and such tiny satin slippers. Maisie was very fond of Aunt Katharine, but she admired Aunt Trevor's appearance immensely, and always gazed at her as though she were a picture hanging on the wall. Dennis did not share in this. He fidgeted about in his chair, fingered the things in his pockets, hoped it would soon be time for luncheon, and wondered whether he and Maisie would be allowed to go out first.

"Ah, here is Philippa!" said Aunt Katharine.

A little girl of about Maisie's age—but so much taller and slighter that she looked a great deal older—came into the room. She had rather long features, a pointed chin, and a very pure white complexion, with hardly a tinge of colour; and, as she ran forward to kiss her little brown-faced cousins, she was a great contrast to them in every way. Her dress, which was prettily made and fanciful, and her gleaming bronze shoes added to this; for Dennis and his sister seldom wore anything but serge or holland, and their boots were of strong country make, which made their feet look rather clumsy.

"If the children *must* wear such thick boots, Katharine," Mrs Trevor often said, "you might at least have them made to fit. It gives them the air of little clodhoppers."

But Miss Chester went her own way, and Aunt Trevor's objections had no effect on her arrangements.

"Ask if we may go out!" said Dennis, in an urgent whisper to his cousin, who at once ran up to her mother, and repeated the request in the midst of her conversation with Aunt Katharine. Mrs Trevor cast an anxious glance out the window.

"Well, my darling, as you have a cold and the wind is in the east, I think you had better play indoors. You can take your cousins into the long gallery and have a nice game."

Philippa frowned and pushed out her lower lip:

"I want to go out," she murmured.

"But your cough, my dearest," said her mother in a pleading tone.—"What do you say, Katharine? Would it not be more prudent for her to keep indoors?"

"I think it would be best for her to do as you wish," said Aunt Katharine, with a half smile at Philippa's pouting lips.

"I *must* go out with Dennis and Maisie," said the little girl in a whining voice.

"Dennis and Maisie will be quite happy indoors," said Mrs Trevor entreatingly; "you can show them your new violin, you know, and play them a tune."

"I don't want to," said Philippa, with a rising sob.

Mrs Trevor looked alarmed.

"My darling, don't excite yourself," she said; "we will see—we will ask Miss Mervyn. Perhaps if you are very warmly wrapped up."

Philippa's brow cleared at once.

"Then we may go?" she said.

"Ask Miss Mervyn to come and speak to me a moment," said her mother. "Such a difficult, delicate temperament to deal with," she continued, as the door closed on her daughter. "Not like a commonplace nature," with a glance at Dennis and Maisie; "so excitable, that it makes her ill to be thwarted in any way. Indeed the doctor forbids it."

"How bad for her!" said Aunt Katharine bluntly. "Children are never happy until they learn to obey."

"That sort of system may answer with some children," said Mrs Trevor; "but my poor delicate Philippa requires infinite tact."

"What do you think, Miss Mervyn," as a thin, careworn-looking lady entered, "of Philippa going out to-day? She wants to take her cousins into the garden for a little while."

Miss Mervyn looked anxiously from mother to daughter.

"She *has* been coughing this morning, and the wind *is* cold," she began, when she was interrupted by an angry burst of tears from Philippa.

"I *must* go out," she cried between her sobs. "You're a cross thing to say it's cold. I *will* go out."

"There, there, my darling," said Mrs Trevor; "do control yourself. You shall go.—Pray, Miss Mervyn, take care that she is warmly dressed, and has goloshes and a thick veil. You will, of course, go with the children, and keep to the sheltered places, and on no account allow Philippa to run on the grass or to get overheated."

Philippa's tears and sobs ceased at once, and soon muffled up to the eyes, she was ready to go out with her cousins, followed by the patient Miss Mervyn, and Mrs Trevor was left at liberty to bestow some attention on her guest. As soon as they were out of sight of the windows, Philippa's first action was to tear off the white knitted shawl which was wrapped round her neck and mouth.

"If you don't keep that on, we must go in again," said Miss Mervyn.

"I won't wear it, and I won't go in," said Philippa. "If you tease about it, I shall scream, and then I shall be ill; and then it will be your fault."

Poor Miss Mervyn shook her head, but after a few mild persuasions gave in, and Philip had her way as usual, not only in this, but in everything that she wished to do throughout the walk. Dennis and Maisie were used to seeing this whenever they came to Haughton, but it never ceased to surprise them, because it was so very different from their unquestioning obedience to rules at Fieldside. It certainly did not seem to make Philippa happy or pleasant. Although she did what she liked, she never appeared to like what she did, and was always wanting something different, and complaining about everything.

"Let's go back now," she said at last, dragging her feet slowly through a puddle as she spoke; "my feet are wet."

"I should think they were," sighed Miss Mervyn. "Come, let us make haste home, so that you may have your boots and stockings changed."

But the perverse Philippa would not hurry. She now lingered behind the others, and even stood still now and then, causing Miss Mervyn great misery. "She will certainly take cold," she murmured. "Cannot you persuade her, my dears, to come on."

"Let's have a race, Philippa, as far as the house," called out Dennis.

Running fast had been forbidden, so it was perhaps on that account attractive to Philippa, who at once consented to the proposal, and Miss Mervyn, thinking it the less of two evils, made no objection.

"Maisie must have a start because she's the smallest," said Dennis, placing his sister a little in front; "now, one, two, three, off!"

The little flying figures sped away towards the house, and Miss Mervyn following, was pleased to see that Dennis allowed Philippa to win the race; that would perhaps make her more good-tempered.

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Philippa, pointing a scornful finger at Maisie as she came panting up last, with her round cheeks very red. "What a slow coach! Maisie's too fat to run."

"She's younger than we are," said Dennis, who did not allow any one but himself to tease his sister.

"There's not much difference," said Philippa, as the children walked up to the house; "in three weeks it will be my birthday, and I shall be nine."

"Mine isn't for three more months," said Maisie.

"Any one would think me quite twelve years old," said Philippa, with her chin in the air, "because I'm tall and slight. Maisie has such a baby look.—I'm going to have a party on my birthday."

"Are you?" said Maisie with sudden interest.

She gave Dennis's arm a squeeze, to make him understand she had just got a good idea; but he only stared round at her, and said, "Don't pinch so," and Philippa continued:

"Yes, I shall have a party, and a birthday cake, and magnificent presents."

"Can you guess what they will be?" asked Maisie.

"Mother says she won't tell me what hers is," said Philippa; "but I shall make her."

"How?"

"Oh," said Philippa carelessly, "if I want to know very much, I shall cry, and then I always get what I want."

Philippa was not in a nice mood to-day, and did not improve at luncheon, for her wants and whims seemed to engross every one's attention. If Aunt Katharine tried to turn the conversation to something more interesting, Philippa's whining voice broke in, and Mrs Trevor at once ceased to listen to anything else.

It was a relief to the whole party, when, early in the afternoon, Aunt Katharine and her charges were settled once more in the pony-cart, and on their way home to Fieldside.

"Don't you know why I poked you just after the race?" said Maisie to her brother, as they drove out of the lodge gates.

"Because Philippa said such stupid things, I suppose," said Dennis.

"It wasn't that at all," she replied earnestly; "it was because I'd just thought of a good home for one of the kittens. Wouldn't it be splendid to give it to Philippa for a birthday present? It will be just three weeks old."

"H'm," said Dennis doubtfully. He really thought it a capital idea, but he never liked to encourage Maisie too much.

She looked round at him, her brown eyes bright with excitement.

"It would be a magnificent home," she continued, "*more* than a good one. It would have nice things to eat, and soft things to lie on, and a collar round its neck, and all those beautiful rooms to run about in!"

"I suppose they'd be kind to it," said Dennis. "I don't think I should like to live at Haughton Park."

"Of course not, without Aunt Katharine agreed," said Maisie; "but supposing Haughton Park was hers, wouldn't you like it better than Fieldside?"

"No," said Dennis promptly; "not half so well. At Fieldside you've only to run down the avenue, and there you are in the middle of the village, and only a short way off the Manor Farm. And at Haughton you have to go through the Park, where no one lives, and through three gates, and then you're only in the Upwell road. It's much duller."

"There are the deer," said Maisie.

"But you can't talk to the deer," replied Dennis; "and though they're tame, they're rather stupid, I think."

"Well," said Maisie, "I like some things at Haughton very much, and I daresay the kitten will. A cat's quite different from a boy, isn't it?"

"Which shall we give?" asked Dennis, warming a little to the idea.

"The white, *of course*," said Maisie at once.

She spoke so decidedly, that Dennis felt she must have some good reason, though he could not see why the white should be preferred to the grey.

Maisie could not explain herself, however. She only repeated that *of course* the white kitten was the right one to go to Haughton, and though she generally yielded to Dennis, she remained firm in this, and by the time they reached home the matter was quite settled. The white kitten was thus provided with a good home; and though, on thinking it over, Maisie doubted whether Philippa would consider it a "magnificent present," she had no misgivings as to its future happiness.

Chapter Three.

Old Sally's Eliza.

The time soon came when Madam was allowed to bring her kittens into the play-room, where they lived in a basket near the French window, through which she could go in and out at her pleasure.

Dennis and Maisie were now able to make their close acquaintance, and to observe that they were not at all alike either in appearance or character. The black one continued to be the finest of the three. There could be no question that his coat was sleeker, his tail more bushy, his whole shape more substantial, and even at this early age he showed signs of a bold and daring disposition.

When his mother had disposed herself for a comfortable nap, with her eyes shut and her paws tucked in, he would suddenly dart from some ambush, his eyes gleaming with mischief and leap upon her back. Soundly cuffed for this, he would meekly retreat until Madam had dropped off again, when he would come dancing up sideways, on the tips of his toes, with his back hunched, and every hair bristling, and tweak her by the tail. After these pranks had been repeated many times, the old cat would rise and wrestle with him, rolling over and over on the ground, kicking and biting, until he was subdued for a little while. But he was never good for long, and gave her more trouble than the other two put together.

The white kitten was of a very different nature. It was decidedly prim in its ways, and very particular about its appearance, so that it learned sooner than the others to wash its face, and attend to its toilet. While the black kitten struggled violently when he was washed, and had to be held firmly down all the while, the white one seemed to enjoy licking its fur with its own rough little tongue, and to be quite vexed if it found a dirty spot on its coat. "It's a good thing it's so particular," said Maisie, "because it would look so very bad if it wasn't quite clean." It had rather a meaningless face, a long thin nose, and mincing, dainty ways of walking and taking its food. Secretly, Maisie thought it rather like Philippa, for its temper was somewhat peevish, and it often mewed in a dissatisfied manner for nothing at all; but she kept this fancy to herself, for she knew that Dennis would only call her silly if she mentioned it.



Maisie was obliged to keep a close watch at such times,
to see that it had its share.

Black.

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As for the grey kitten, it was the smallest and weakest of the three, the most easily imposed upon, and the most amiable. When the saucer of milk was put down, the others would thrust their heads greedily into it, and push the grey kitten aside, so that it could scarcely get any. Maisie was obliged to keep a close watch at such times, to see that it had its share, and to correct the conduct of the other two. It was the same thing in their gambols with their mother, or with a cork at the end of a string. The grey kitten seemed to be considered as a mere sport and joke for the other two, who tossed and tumbled it about as if it were nothing: even Madam did not take its part, and often boxed its ears for nothing but awkwardness.

All this, however, did not sour its temper in the least, and after the worst slight or roughest usage it was quite ready to purr and be pleased. Maisie thought this very nice of it, and she was sure it was anxious to do well, if it only knew how. It would allow her, with very few struggles, to dress it in a doll's nightgown and cap, and put it to sleep in a cradle; which neither of the others would submit to for a moment. By degrees she became very fond of it, and the more she took its part and defended it from ill-treatment, the more her affection increased. It was therefore distressing to remember, as the days went on, that though the white kitten had a home to look forward to, there was yet no such prospect for the grey one.

"It's getting dreadfully near the time," she said one morning to Dennis, who was trying to teach the black kitten to jump through his hands; "only ten days more, and we haven't got a good home for the grey kitten yet."

"It's such a common, mean thing," said Dennis, casting a scornful glance at it. "No one could want to have it."

"It's very affectionate, though," said Maisie, "and it purrs more than any of them. I believe it might grow pretty when it's older."

"Not it," said Dennis. "Why, there are lots of cats like it in the village now. Just long, lean, striped things. I don't believe you'd know it apart from them when it's grown up.—Oh, look, Maisie, look! He jumped, he really did."

Maisie looked, but the black kitten turned sulky, and refused to do anything but back away from Dennis's hands with its ears flattened.

"It's quite in a temper," she said. "Now the grey kitten *always* tries to do what you tell it."

"Only it's so stupid that it never knows what you want it to do," said Dennis, as he gave up his efforts and let the kitten scamper back to its mother.

"Well, at any rate," said Maisie, returning to her subject, "we've got to find it a home, and we haven't asked every one yet. Who is there left? Let me see. There's the vicarage, and Dr Price, and, oh Dennis, perhaps old Sally would like it!"

Dennis shrugged his shoulders, but he was quite ready to agree that old Sally should be asked, because he was always glad of any excuse to go near the Manor Farm, which he thought the nicest place in the village or out of it. It was not only pretty and interesting in itself with its substantial grey stone outbuildings, and pigeonry and rick-yard, but Mr and Mrs Andrew Solace lived there, and they were, the children thought, such very agreeable people. There had always been a Solace at the Manor Farm within the memory of old Sally, who was very old indeed, but they felt sure none of them could have been so pleasant as the present one. "Young Master Andrew," old Sally called him, though he was a stout, middle-aged man with grizzled hair; but she gave him this name because she had worked for his father and grandfather, and could "mind" him when he was a little boy of Dennis's age. For the same reason, she never could bring herself to think him equal to the management of such a very large farm, "undreds of acres," as she said. It was a great undertaking for "young Master Andrew," and though every one round knew that there were few better farmers, old Sally always shook her head over it.

Manor Farm was in every respect just the opposite of the "Green Farm," where the Broadbents lived. There was nothing smart or trim or new about it, and the house and farm-buildings were comfortably mixed up together, so that

the farmer seemed to live in the midst of his barns and beasts. It was a very old house, with a square flagged hall and a broad oak staircase. There were beams showing across the low ceilings, and wide window-seats, which were always full of all sorts of things flung there "to be handy." Some of the rooms were panelled, and all the furniture in them was old-fashioned and dark with age. Dogs and cats walked in and out at their pleasure, and though Mrs Solace sometimes chased them all out for a few minutes, they soon returned again through windows and doors, and made themselves quite at home. Mrs Solace was too busy to trouble herself much about them, and also too good-natured, so that the animals knew they could do pretty well as they liked.

It was this complete freedom that made the Manor Farm so delightful to Dennis and Maisie, who ran in and out very much as the cats and dogs did, and always found something to interest and amuse them. If Mrs Solace were too much occupied in dairy, laundry, or store-room to give them her attention, they had only to go into the farm-yard to be surrounded by friends and acquaintances. Some of these, it is true, disappeared from time to time, but you had hardly missed them before there was something new to take their place. The great brown cart-horses, at any rate, were always to be found after their work, and always ready to bow their huge heads and take apples or sugar gently with their soft lips. And in summer it was pleasant to be there just at milking time, and watch the cows saunter slowly home across the fields, to stand in a long patient row in the shed, to be milked.

Indeed it would be hard to say what time was not pleasant at the farm, for in such a large family of creatures there was always something happening of the very deepest interest to the children. In the spring they were quite as anxious and eager about successful broods of early ducklings, or the rearing of the turkeys as Mrs Solace was herself, and she was secure of their heartfelt sympathy when the fox made away with her poultry.

For unlike Mrs Broadbent, Mrs Solace not only knew all about such matters, but liked nothing so well as to talk of them.

"When I'm a man," Dennis would say, "I mean to be a farmer."

"So do I," Maisie would answer.

"You couldn't be," Dennis would argue. "How could you go rook-shooting? You know you scream when a gun goes off; and besides, you're afraid of the turkey-cock."

"Well, then," Maisie would conclude, deeply conscious that both these facts were true, "I'll be a farmer's wife, and rear turkeys; that's quite as hard as shooting rooks, and much usefuller."

"That it is, dearie," Mrs Solace would agree, with her comfortable laugh. "Puley pingling things they are, and want as much care as children."

But apart from the animals, there was to Dennis one corner at the Manor Farm which had special attractions, and that was where the wheelwright worked. It was a long narrow barn fitted up as a carpenter's shop, with a bench and a lathe and all manner of tools: full of shavings and sawdust, planks of wood and half-finished farm implements. Here the wheelwright stood and worked all day. He made and mended carts, wheelbarrows, ladders, hay-rakes, and all sorts of things used in the farm, and had always as much as he could do. Dennis liked nothing better than a little quiet time with Tuvvy, as he was called, and though he did not talk much, he eyed all his movements with such earnest attention that it may be supposed he learned something of carpentering.

Tuvvy's movements were nimble and neat, for he was a clever workman, and knew what he was about: now and then he would cast a swift glance round at Dennis out of his bright black eyes, but he never paused in his work to talk, and there was seldom any sound in the barn but that of the saw and hammer, or the whirring of the lathe. His skin was so very dark, and his hair so black and long, that people called him a gypsy, and Dennis knew that he was a little wild sometimes, because old Sally shook her head when she mentioned him.

That meant that Tuvvy was not always quite sober, which was a great pity, because he was so clever, that he could earn a great deal if he kept steady. In the barn, however, he was as steady and hard-working as a man could be, and what his conduct was out of it, did not at all affect Dennis's attachment and admiration. Maisie always knew, if she missed her brother during one of their visits to the farm, that she should find him in the barn staring at Tuvvy at his work; and he had done this so much, that he began to feel as though he had helped to make Mr Solace's carts and barrows.

All this made him quite ready to agree with Maisie's suggestion, for although he was not very anxious about the grey kitten's welfare, he thought there might be a chance of slipping round to see how Tuvvy was getting on.

"Where shall we go first?" said Maisie, as they started on their expedition, with Peter, the little rough dog, barking round them. "The vicarage comes first, and then Dr Price, and then old Sally."

"All right," said Dennis; "that's the best last, and the worst first."

The vicarage stood on a little hill close to the church, looking down on the village street.

"I don't much think Miss Hurst will want it," said Maisie, as they turned up the steep lane; "because, you see, she's got such a very pet cat. Else that would be a very good home."

"She might like it for a kitchen cat," said Dennis, "to catch rats and mice."

"Ye-es," said Maisie. She did not much like the idea of the grey kitten in such a position. Still, Miss Hurst was so very kind and gentle, that it was likely even the kitchen cat would be well treated in her house.

The vicarage reached, however, and the old question put, it turned out that Maisie had been right. Miss Hurst, who

was a meek-faced little lady with very smooth hair and a kind smile, was afraid she could not have two cats. It might upset Mopsy. And Mopsy was such an old friend, that it would not be fair to make him unhappy for the sake of a new one. She was afraid she must say no. So the grey kitten was again refused, and when the children set out on their farther journey, Maisie was quite in low spirits. Nobody wanted the grey kitten.

"We've got two chances left," said Dennis, trying to console her. "And if I were the kitten, I'd much rather live with Dr Price than at the vicarage."

"But you're not a kitten—you're a boy," said Maisie despairingly, "and that makes a great deal of difference."

"Dr Price is splendid, I think," continued Dennis. "Just see how he can ride, and how he cures people, and how kind he is to them about their bills."

"Why do you suppose Aunt Katharine has Dr Smith over from Upwell to see us when we're ill," asked Maisie, "when Dr Price is quite close, and so clever?"

"Well," said Dennis gravely, "you mustn't say anything, but I *believe*—that is, I've heard one or two of them say in the village—that he sometimes—is—like Tuvvy, you know."

"Oh!" said Maisie, with her eyes very wide open.

"And that, you see," went on Dennis instructively, "is very bad for a doctor, because he may mix up the wrong things together and kill people. But for all that, they say they'd rather have him, even when he's a little 'nervous,' than any one else, because he's so clever and so kind. Why, he sat up all night with Widow Hutchins's son, who had sergestion of the lungs, and then he wouldn't take a penny because she's so poor."

"What a pity he's ever like Tuvvy," said Maisie.

"And then, you see," continued Dennis, who loved to repeat the gossip he picked up in the village, "he's so dreadfully fond of horses and hunting, that whenever there's a meet near, he *can't help* going, and if he goes, he *has* to follow, and then he can't leave off. So sometimes, when there is an accident, or anything, and he's wanted here very badly, he's quite the other side of the county!"

Maisie nodded her head gravely as she heard of those little weaknesses; and just then, reaching the foot of the hill which led down from the vicarage, they came into the village again, and there was Dr Price himself standing at his gate, facing them.

He was a broad, strongly-built man of about five-and-forty, with a clean-shaven square face, and very fair hair and eyebrows. These looked curiously light on his red-brown skin, which was of an even tint all over, as though used to encounter wind and rough weather. He was so constantly on horseback, that it seemed strange to see him standing on his own legs, and more so to see him walk, which, indeed, he did with an odd movement of the knees, as though it were some difficult exercise. He wore riding-boots and breeches, and had a short pipe in his mouth. At his heels were his two white terriers, Snip and Snap.

As Maisie's eye fell on the dogs, she stopped short, and caught hold of Dennis by the arm.

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "I forgot."

"Forgot what?" he answered, with a pull forward. "Don't be stupid. Come on."

"Why, Snip and Snap," said Maisie eagerly, still holding back. "It wouldn't be a good home. They'd chase it. Don't let's speak to Dr Price about it. It wouldn't be any use."

"We must speak to him now," said Dennis, going steadily on, and dragging Maisie with him. "Perhaps he'll know of some one, if he can't have it himself. *You* ask," he added hurriedly, as they came close to the doctor.

Dr Price took off his hat, and smiled down very kindly at Maisie, as she put her question. She spoke hesitatingly, for the sight of Snip and Snap had reminded her of their habits. On most days their swift white forms were to be seen scouring over the country in search of rabbits, or other small defenceless creatures. Dr Price on horseback, and his terriers on foot, were well known for many miles round Fieldside, and Maisie could not help thinking them most unsuitable companions for the grey kitten.

This seemed to strike the doctor himself.

"Well now, that's very kind of you, Miss Maisie," he said, looking thoughtfully at the bowl of his pipe; "but the fact is I'm not much of a hand at cats myself. And then—there are the dogs, you see—"

"Would they chase it?" asked Maisie, glancing at them.

"Why, they're thoroughbred, you know," said the doctor apologetically.

"What a pity!" said Maisie, who thought it must be some very bad quality.

"Well," said the doctor, with a short laugh, "I like them all the better for it myself; but I'm afraid the kitten wouldn't stand much chance, and that's a fact."

"Oh, I wouldn't let it come here for *anything*," said Maisie with a shiver. "Why do you keep such cruel dogs?"

"As to that, you know, Miss Maisie," said the doctor, "it isn't crueller to hunt a cat than a fox."

"But that's cruel too," said Maisie, "very cruel indeed."

Here Dennis felt it time to interfere.

"Don't be stupid, Maisie," he said; "you're only a girl. You don't understand. Of course, people must hunt."

So here was another failure, for not only was Dr Price's home out of the question, but he could not think of any one who wanted a kitten. Everybody had cats; they seemed to be all over the place. If it was a puppy now. He cast an admiring glance at Snip and Snap, who stood in sprightly attitudes, one on each side of the little rough dog Peter, their eager bodies quivering, their short tails wagging, ready for the first signs of warfare. But Peter knew better. He was old and he was wise. He did not like Snip and Snap, but he was not going to be provoked into a fight in which he was sure to be worsted. So he held himself stiffly upright, uttered a low growl of contempt, and took no further notice of them.

"And now," said Maisie, when they had said good-bye to Dr Price, and were on their way again, with Peter trotting in front, "there's really only one more chance left."

There were two ways to old Sally's cottage, and Maisie knew Dennis would be sure to choose the one which led across the rick-yard of the Manor Farm; indeed, she liked this best herself except for one reason, and that was the risk of meeting the turkey-cock. It was useless for Dennis to say, "He won't gobble if you're not frightened of him." She always *was* frightened, and he always *did* gobble, and turned purple with rage, and swelled out all his feathers, and shook a loose scarlet thing which hung down from his neck. They met him to-day, marching at the head of his ladylike wives, who followed him delicately, picking their way and lifting their feet high. Their small heads and quietly elegant toilets made them look rather like Aunt Trevor, Maisie thought.

"Now, walk slowly," said Dennis, and she did try to control her fears; but as usual, the moment the turkey-cock began to gobble, she began to run, and did not stop until she was safe on the other side of the gate. From this refuge she watched Dennis, admiring him greatly as he came slowly on, shaking his stick in the turkey-cock's face, and was quite ready to agree with him when he called her a coward.

"Only I can't help it," she added.

"But you ought to," was Dennis's reply. "It's silly, even for a girl, to be afraid of a turkey-cock."

Old Sally's thatched cottage was so near the farm-buildings that it almost looked like one of them, but a narrow lane really ran between, and it stood on its own little plot of ground. At its door there was an immense horse-chestnut, which she could "mind," she said, helping to plant when she was a girl. She had held it straight in the hole while old Mr Solace, the grandfather of this young Master Andrew, had filled in the earth. She was most sorry to think she had done it now, for this ungrateful tree so shaded her window that it made her cottage dark, and besides this, choked up her well, by dropping its great leaves into it in the autumn.

Old Sally could "mind" so many things on account of her age, that she was a most amusing and instructive person to visit. She had worked for the Solaces as child, girl, and woman, and now she was pensioned off, and allowed to live in her cottage rent-free with her one remaining unmarried daughter, Anne, of whom she always spoke as her "good child." Anne was over seventy years old, and weakly with bad health and rheumatism, so that there was nothing very youthful about her. Indeed, when they sat side by side, both in sunbonnets which they wore indoors and out, it was difficult to say which was the elder of the two old women.

Old Sally, in spite of a long life of hard work, was still straight and wiry, and her brown old face, wrinkled as a withered nut, was lively and shrewd. There was only one point in which Anne had the advantage, and that was in hearing, for her mother was very deaf, and obliged to use a trumpet. This she was always shy of producing, and to-day she allowed Anne to scream into her ear what the children said for some time; but at last, seeing a very earnest expression on Maisie's face, she took the trumpet out with a bashful smile and presented the end to her.

"Do you know any one who wants a kitten?" shouted Maisie.

Old Sally laid down the trumpet and turned to Anne, who as usual sat at her elbow in her lilac sun-bonnet and coarse apron.

"Warn't our Eliza talking of cats last time she was over?" she asked.

Anne nodded.

"Who's Eliza?" inquired Dennis.

"Why, sure you know our Eliza, Master Dennis," said old Sally. "Her as married the tinsmith, and went to live in Upwell town. Eliza's my youngest darter but two. Don't you mind her wedding?"

"Lor, mother!" said Anne, "Master Dennis and Miss Maisie warn't living at Fieldside then. It's a good twelve years ago. —Mother forgets things like that," she added aside to the children, "though she's a wonderful memory for ancient things."

"Would it be a good home, do you think?" said Maisie to Dennis in a low tone.

"Is your daughter Eliza a kind woman?" shouted Dennis down the trumpet.

Old Sally dropped her trumpet and raised both her withered hands on high.

"Kind! Master Dennis. Eliza's downright silly about dumb animals. She always was from a gal."

"We don't want her to be silly," said Dennis, "but we do want her to be kind, because we've promised Aunt Katharine to find a good home."

Both old Sally and Anne were full of assurances as to Eliza's kindness and the comforts which would surround the grey kitten in her house. Certainly it would have to catch mice, but that, they declared, was a pleasure to a cat, and could not be called hard work. So after a little consultation it was settled that the kitten should be brought to old Sally's, and that Eliza should take it back to Upwell the very next time she came over to see her mother. The grey kitten had a home at last. This arrangement made, Dennis got up briskly, with a business-like air.

"I'm going to see Tuvvy now," he said. "I'll come back for you presently, Maisie;" and he was almost out of the door before he was stopped by a call from Anne.

"You'll not find him to-day, Master Dennis," she said. "He's not at work."

"Not at work!" repeated Dennis, turning round with a downcast face. "Why isn't he at work? Is he ill?"

Old Sally had been screwing up her lips and shaking her head solemnly ever since Tuvvy's name had been mentioned. At Dennis's question her face looked full of dark meaning.

"Worse nor that," she said. "He's had a bout. He'll do it once too often, and get sacked. He can't expect Master Andrew to put up with it."

"But he couldn't ever get such a good wheelwright as Tuvvy again, could he?" said Dennis eagerly. "Tuvvy can do so many things, and he's so clever and quick."

"Oh, he's *clever* enough, and he's *quick* enough, is Tuvvy," agreed old Sally: "'tain't that; but he can't keep steady—that's where it is. He'll go on right enough for a bit, and then he'll have a reg'lar break-out. It's cruel hard on his wife and children, so it is."

"Why *does* he do it?" said Dennis mournfully.

Old Sally gave a sort of low chuckle.

"Lor, Master Dennis, the men are made like that. They can't help it."

Dennis usually took all old Sally said for granted, considering that her knowledge of men and things must be very great, but he hesitated a little at this sweeping remark.

"They're not *all* like that," he said; "there's Mr Hurst, and Mr Solace, and a whole lot more. Do you think Mr Solace will turn Tuvvy away this time?"

But as to this, neither old Sally nor Anne could give any idea at all. Mr Solace was a kind man for certain, but then again he was a just man too, and a man of his word. Anne had heard him say with her own ears that the next time Tuvvy broke out, he would get the sack. But there was no telling.

Dennis left the cottage with a weight on his mind which nothing could lift. One of his greatest pleasures would be gone if there were no Tuvvy in the barn for the future. A new wheelwright would most likely be a complete stranger, and not the same thing at all. Why would he be so silly as to break out? Could nothing be done to stop him?

Maisie, too, was rather sober and silent on the way back, for though a home for the grey kitten had now been found, she felt that she should miss it very much, and could not bear the idea of parting with it. It had such coaxing ways, and was so weak and helpless, that it seemed to need her more than the others, and to want her help and affection.

She went to pay a last visit to the kittens before she went to bed that night, and found them all curled up in a soft little heap in their basket. As usual, the grey kitten was lying underneath the others, who were sprawling over it, quite regardless of its comfort.

Maisie lifted it out, held it up to her face, and kissed it gently.

"Dear little kitty," she whispered, "you've got a home at last. You're to go and catch mice for old Sally's Eliza, and I do hope you'll be happy."

Chapter Four.

Philippa's Birthday.

The three kittens were just a month old on the last day of March, and this was also Philippa Trevor's birthday. She would have liked her birthday to be in the summer, because an out-of-doors party was so much nicer than an indoors one, but even Philippa could not arrange everything in the world as she wished. So she was obliged to put up with a birthday which came in the spring, when there were very few leaves on the trees, and the grass was generally too wet to walk on, and the sky often cold and grey. Philippa had found that she could get most things by crying for them, but still there remained some quite beyond her reach, and unmoved by her tears, and it was just these that she most wanted and wailed for when she was in a perverse mood. These were times of discomfort throughout the house, and of great distress to her mother and Miss Mervyn, for with the best will in the world they could not make

the rain stop nor the sun shine, nor time go quicker. Yet, if Philippa cried herself ill, as she often did for some such unreasonable whim, it was so very bad for her.

"We must keep the child cheerful, my dear madam," Dr Smith had said to Mrs Trevor. "The nerves are delicate. She must be amused without excitement, and never allowed to work herself into a passion, or to be violently distressed about anything. It will be well to yield to her, if possible, rather than to thwart her."

But though he said "we," the doctor went away, and it was those who lived with Philippa who had to carry out this difficult task. The last part of it was easy, only it did not seem to produce the desired result. Philippa was yielded to in everything, but instead of being cheerful and contented, she became more fretful and dissatisfied, had less self-control than ever, and flew into passions about the very smallest trifles. This was the case on the morning of her birthday, when there were two things which seriously displeased her. One was the weather, for, instead of being fine and sunshiny, it rained so hard that it seemed doubtful whether her little friends would come to the party. The other was, that the musical box which her mother had promised her, and which was to play twelve tunes, did not arrive as early as she expected.

"It's all as horrid as it can be," she said sulkily when Miss Mervyn tried to comfort her. "I don't care a bit for the other presents if the musical box doesn't come.—And it's raining harder than ever. Everything's horrid."

"It will clear up very likely by the afternoon," said Miss Mervyn.

"But if it does," whined Philippa, "and if they all come, I shan't have my musical box to show them."

"Perhaps it will come before then," said Miss Mervyn patiently, and at that minute a small covered hamper was brought into the room.

"A parcel from Fieldside for Miss Philippa," said the servant.

"Then it's *not* the musical box," said Philippa, who had looked up with renewed hope.

"I wonder what it can be," said Miss Mervyn. "Something alive, I think. Come, Philippa, let us open it."

She cut the cord as she spoke, and Philippa advanced languidly to the table to see what the hamper contained. When the lid was lifted, however, her expression changed to one of interest and surprise, for there, on a bed of straw, its fur beautifully clean, and a blue ribbon round its neck, lay the white kitten. It yawned as the light fell on it, and looking up at the strange faces, uttered a tiny mew.

"What is that card on its neck?" said Miss Mervyn.

"From Maisie and Dennis, with love and good wishes," read Philippa, in a pleased and excited voice. For the moment the musical box had quite gone out of her head.

"I like it best of all the presents I've had yet," she said, and just then Mrs Trevor came into the room.

"Look, mother!" she exclaimed.

Seizing the kitten, she rushed forward and held it up to Mrs Trevor, whose gown was trimmed with an elegant ruffle of lace down the front; in this the kitten's sharp little claws at once entangled themselves.

"Ah, my lace!" she cried. "Take care, my love; it will scratch you.—Miss Mervyn, pray remove the creature.—Yes, very pretty, my darling. Who sent it to you?"

"Dennis and Maisie," said Philippa, squeezing the kitten under her arm. "May I have it to sleep on my bed?"

"Ah no, dear," said Mrs Trevor absently, examining her torn lace with a slight frown; "that's not the proper place for kittens. Dear me, what sharp claws the little thing has, to be sure! I must let Briggs mend this at once."

She went out of the room, leaving the question to be further argued between Miss Mervyn and Philippa.

"I'm sure Dennis and Maisie don't have kittens to sleep with them," said the former.

"Then you're just wrong," said Philippa triumphantly, "because Dennis's dog Peter always sleeps in his room, and that's just the same."

The white kitten had now struggled out of her clutches, and was wandering sadly round the room in search of its old friends and relations. It seemed likely to make one more subject for dispute at Haughton Park, where from the time Philippa got up till she went to bed, there was already no end to the wrangling. Confused by finding itself in a strange land where nothing familiar met its eye, it at last took refuge under a book-case, and when Philippa looked round, it was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, my darling little kitten is lost!" she exclaimed.

Miss Mervyn, who did not like cats or any other animals, would not have been sorry if this had been the case, but Philippa was preparing to shed a torrent of tears, and this must be avoided at any cost.

"Hush, my dear," she said, folding her gown closely round her; "we will find it. It cannot have gone far."

Cats, in Miss Mervyn's experience, were shy treacherous things which always hid themselves, and jumped out from unexpected places. So she now proceeded cautiously round the room, peeping into dark corners and behind curtains,

as if some dangerous animal were lurking there. There was no place too small or too unlikely that she did not thoroughly examine, but it was Philippa who at last caught sight of a pair of green eyes gleaming in the darkness under the book-case.

"There it is!" she cried, and casting herself flat on the floor, she stretched out her arm and dragged it out by one leg. But she did not hold it long, for the white kitten, frightened, and quite unused to such rough treatment, put out its sharp little claws to defend itself.

"Oh!" screamed Philippa at the top of her voice. She flung the kitten from her, and stretched out her arm piteously; on it there was a long scratch, just beginning to bleed a little.

"The nasty, spiteful thing!" exclaimed Miss Mervyn. "My darling Philippa! what will your mother say? Come, my love, we will bathe it, and it will soon be better, and the savage little kitten shall be sent away."

But Philippa would not have her arm bathed, and the kitten should not be sent away. She would show Dennis and Maisie what a bad scratch it was, and what a cross kitten they had sent her for a present, and meantime she would stand and sob.

"We'll ask them to take it back to Fieldside, won't we?" said Miss Mervyn soothingly; "we shall be glad to get rid of it."

The more Miss Mervyn suggested this, the more determined Philippa was to keep it. She even began to make excuses for it between her sobs. It did not mean to scratch; it was a dear little kitten. She was very fond of it. It should not be sent away. It should stay and sleep on her bed.

At last she submitted to have her arm bathed, and discovered that it was not such a very bad scratch after all, and soon the arrival of the musical box gave her something else to think of. For the time the white kitten was forgotten, and it took the opportunity of crawling behind the curtains, where it curled itself up and went to sleep.

But though the musical box had come, the rain still continued to fall, and as there was no possibility of going out, it was settled that Philippa should play with her friends in the long gallery.

The long gallery was a very delightful place to amuse one's self in on a rainy day. It was the only old part of Haughton which remained, and it was much prettier than the new. Six tall latticed windows stood in recesses all down one side, and facing them were dark old portraits of straight-nosed ladies with powdered hair, and gentlemen in wigs. These had the gallery all to themselves, for there were no furniture or ornaments in it, except some great china vases in the window-seats. At either end there was a high stone mantelpiece, carved all over in quaint patterns. The ceiling was oak, and so was the floor—this last very slippery, so that it was as good as ice to slide upon.

Dennis and Maisie were glad to hear that they were to go into the long gallery when they arrived, and they found all Philippa's visitors assembled there, with the musical box tinkling out its tunes in one of the window-seats. Miss Mervyn, who felt the long gallery very cold and draughty, was there too; she had brought in a chair from the play-room, and sat shivering by the huge fireplace, where a fire had been lighted; but the children, warmed with their games, looked merry and gay.

"Let's have a dance!" exclaimed Philippa, as the musical box began a lively waltz tune; "Dennis shall be my partner."

All the little figures in their bright dresses went whirling down the long shining floor, two and two, skirts fluttering and hair streaming out with the rapid movement. At the end of the long gallery the musical box was quite invisible, and its little thin voice could hardly be heard.

"It's like a fairy tune being played up in the air," said Maisie.

The musical box finished its waltz, and almost immediately struck up a solemn march.

"Now we're soldiers," said Dennis, "marching to the funeral of one of our comrades killed in battle. I'm captain."

All the games suggested by the musical box were successful: even Philippa was pleased and happy, and Miss Mervyn began to think that the party might pass off without any quarrels or disturbance. But, unfortunately, Philippa at last had an idea which led to the overthrow of this pleasant state of things. This idea was that they should join in with the musical box when it played the "Bluebells of Scotland," and have a concert. She herself would conduct, and play the violin. One child could sing the tune, another could whistle it, another could play it on a comb, another was provided with a small drum. Every one thought it a beautiful idea, and Philippa, very much excited, mounted on the window-seat by the musical box, violin in hand, with her band disposed round her.

But alas! Instead of the sweet sounds she hoped to hear, the most terrible discords arose at the first tinkling notes of the musical box. It was wonderful that such a small band could produce such a great noise, but perhaps this was because each child wanted to be heard above the rest. The whistling, screaming, squeaking, and banging, all in different keys and different time, quite overpowered the gentle plaintive notes of the violin and the correct melody of the musical box. Miss Mervyn at the end of the room covered her ears, and Philippa dropped her bow, and exclaimed angrily: "Stop! it's a horrid noise."

That was easily said, but no one paid any attention to it. The band went on screaming, banging, tootling, and whistling harder than ever.

"Stop, I say!" cried Philippa again, stamping her foot. "I'm the conductor. I say stop!"

But it had no result. She threw down her violin, and shook the musical box angrily, but there was no way of stopping

that either: it went steadily on, regardless that she was beside herself with rage. In another moment she would have dashed it on the floor; but, fortunately, just at that instant Mrs Trevor appeared at the door. The sight of her had more effect than all Philippa's rage. The band suddenly stopped, the din ceased, peace was restored. Miss Mervyn took her hands from her ears, and advanced from the other end of the room. Philippa flew to her mother, and hid her face in her gown.

"What is it, my darling?" said Mrs Trevor, looking fondly at her daughter, and severely at Miss Mervyn. "Why have you been making this dreadful noise?"

Philippa poured forth her complaints. She had wanted to have a concert—a proper concert—and they had done it all wrong, and they wouldn't stop when she told them, and—

"Poor darling," said Mrs Trevor, stroking Philippa's hair caressingly, "she has such a sensitive ear.—It was hardly wise, I think, Miss Mervyn," turning to that lady, "to allow such a noise. Really, when I opened the door, it was quite like a number of cats quarrelling. Quite enough to give Philippa one of her bad headaches for the rest of the day."

Miss Mervyn looked as if that were likely to be her own case, but she only murmured that she had thought Philippa was enjoying herself, and that she had not liked to put a stop to the children's amusements. The band meanwhile stood disconsolate. Philippa's face had its fretful look, and everything was rather uncomfortable. Mrs Trevor glanced round in despair, and it was at this moment that Maisie gave things a welcome turn by stealing up to her cousin's side, and saying softly, "Where's the white kitten?"

The kitten had been on her mind ever since she arrived: she had not seen it, and did not even know that it had been received, for in the excitement of her party Philippa had quite forgotten to thank her cousins for their present.

"Ah!" said Mrs Trevor, in a tone of relief, "the kitten, to be sure.—Take Maisie to find the kitten, my darling, and have a quiet little game together in the schoolroom. I daresay Dennis will like to stay here, and play with the others until tea-time."

For a wonder, Philippa was quite ready to do what was proposed, and the two little girls went away together.

"Did you like it?" asked Maisie anxiously. "It's pretty, isn't it? And it keeps itself very white. It's the prettiest of all the kittens—next to ours."

"I like it very much," said Philippa graciously, "but it scratches. Miss Mervyn says it's a savage kitten."

"They all scratch, you know," said Maisie seriously, as they entered the schoolroom; "when they're quite little, they don't know better. You'll have to teach it to be good."

"How?" asked Philippa, looking round the room for the kitten, which was nowhere to be seen.

"Entirely by kindness," said Maisie, using an expression she had seen in one of her books.

"It's hidden itself again," said Philippa discontentedly; "it's always hiding itself."

This time the kitten had found a good hiding-place, and the little girls searched everywhere in vain for a long while. At last Maisie thought of lifting the silk cover on the top of Miss Mervyn's work-basket, and there, snugly coiled in the midst of wools, knitting, and fancy work, lay the white kitten fast asleep! This was not the worst, for it had evidently amused itself first by a game of play. All the skeins of wool were twisted up in a tangle, and a quantity of silk was wound tightly round its claws.

"There!" said Philippa, "that's the third wrong thing it's done to-day! It's torn mother's lace, and scratched my arm, and tangled up all Miss Mervyn's wool. Now she'll want it to go away more than ever."

Maisie looked at the white kitten with dismay. It did not seem to have made a good beginning in its new home.

"Will Miss Mervyn be *very* angry?" she said. "Can't we try to put the wool straight?"

"Oh, *that* doesn't matter," said Philippa coolly; "but it *is* a naughty kitten, isn't it?"

Maisie lifted the kitten carefully out of its warm bed, and gently disentangled its claws from the silk.

"Well," she said, "I don't really believe it *meant* to be naughty. Kittens always like to play, and then, you see, it always slept in a basket, so perhaps it thought this was its own. You must give it a ball or a cork, and then it won't want to play with the wrong things."

Philippa generally looked down upon Maisie and thought her babyish, but she had such motherly ways with the kitten, and gave advice with so much gravity, that she now listened with respect to what she said.

"Now you take it and nurse it a little," she continued, putting the kitten, still half asleep, into Philippa's arms, "and I'll try to get the wool straight. What shall you call it? We call ours 'Darkie,' because he's all black, you see. Dennis wanted to call him 'Nigger,' but I didn't like that, and Aunt Katharine says Darkie means just the same."

Philippa thought of a good many names, but was not satisfied with any of them, and still less with those suggested by Maisie.

"I know," she exclaimed at last; "I've got a beautiful name that just suits it. I shall call it 'Blanche.' That's French for white, you know," she added for Maisie's instruction. Maisie did not know, for she had not begun to learn French, but

she quite agreed that Blanche was a lovely name, and seemed made for the white kitten.

After much patient effort she succeeded in untwisting Miss Mervyn's wool from most of the knots and tangles, and putting the contents of the basket into something like order.

"There!" she said; "that's as straight as I can make it."

"I don't see why you took so much trouble over it," said Philippa; "it wasn't your fault—it was the kitten's."

"Well, the kitten couldn't put it straight," replied Maisie. "It wasn't half so mischievous as Darkie at home, but I expect it feels strange here just at first. When it gets to know you, it won't be so naughty."

She looked a little anxiously at the kitten, who was purring contentedly in Philippa's arms.

"I hope," she added, "it will be a nice, well-behaved cat when it grows up."

"It *ought* to be the nicest of the three," said Philippa; "that's very certain."

"Why?" asked Maisie.

"Well, you see," said Philippa, with her chin in the air, "it will have such advantages here. It will sleep on my bed, and have cream for its tea, and it will always wear a lovely ribbon on its neck, or perhaps a collar with a bell. And it will have nothing to do but play, and never be with common, low people."

Maisie looked thoughtful.

"The grey kitten's very nice and affectionate," she said, "though it isn't pretty. It won't have advantages though, because it's got to go and do hard work."

"What hard work?" asked Philippa.

"It's going to catch mice for old Sally's Eliza," replied Maisie, "so of course it can't sleep in any one's bed—it will have to be up all night. And I don't suppose it will have meals exactly except what it picks up. And I'm *sure* it won't wear a collar and a bell, because that would frighten the mice away."

"Blanche will be better off than that," said Philippa; "she'll be a lady."

"We shall be able to see, shan't we," said Maisie, "what sort of cats they are when they grow up. And then we can settle which is the best—Darkie, or Blanche, or the grey one."

"What do you mean by the best?" said Philippa. "Do you mean the prettiest?"

"Oh dear, no," said Maisie. She pondered the question for some minutes, and then added seriously: "I mean the one that's the greatest comfort to the person it belongs to."

Chapter Five.

The Round Robin.

And now that the white kitten was settled in its new home, the time was come for the departure of the grey one, and the day fixed when it should be taken to old Sally's cottage. Maisie felt the parting a good deal, for it seemed to her that it was a very small weak thing to be sent out into the world to earn its living. It would have a very different life to Darkie and Blanche. They could dwell at ease, and need never catch mice except for their own pleasure; but the grey kitten had really hard work before it, and most likely would never be petted again after it left Fieldside. Maisie wondered whether the old cat, Madam, to whom she carefully explained everything, was at all worried and anxious about her children; but if so, she hid her feelings very well. Certainly she looked about a little after the white kitten had gone, and mewed once or twice in an inquiring sort of way, but she did not refuse comfort. On the contrary, when Maisie offered her some fish to distract her mind from her loss, she gobbled it up rather greedily, and even Darkie could not push his round head far into the dish.

"I expect," said Maisie, "if Madam could choose, she'd much rather send Darkie away and keep the grey one; Darkie bothers her so."

It was just after lesson time, and the children were making preparations to start with the kitten for old Sally's cottage. Dennis was tying down the lid of a small hamper, and Maisie stood near, peeping through the crevices to see whether the kitten was comfortable.

"There," said Dennis, as he tied the last knot; "I'm glad it's we that have got to choose, and not Madam, I wouldn't keep this mean-looking kitten for anything. Now Darkie will be a splendid cat."

"Let me carry it," said Maisie eagerly, and hugging the little basket with both arms, she followed Dennis rather sorrowfully out of the door which the kitten was not to enter again.

"I *do* hope," she said on the way, "that they'll be kind to it."

"Oh, of course they will," said Dennis; "don't you remember old Sally said Eliza was quite silly over animals. That meant kind—extra kind."

Old Sally and her daughter Anne were busy when the children arrived, for they had a job of work given to them by Mrs Solace, who wanted some old cushions re-stuffed. On opening these, they had found that feathers instead of down had been used, and they both had a great deal to say on the subject. It was, however, almost impossible to talk without coughing and choking, for their cottage was quite full of fluff and feathers floating about in the air. The children stood in the doorway, and explained their errand as well as they could.

"They've brought the kitten, mother," screamed Anne.

Old Sally had just re-filled a cushion, and was holding it before her at arm's-length.

"Is it fat enough?" she screamed back at her daughter.

"It isn't fat at all," said Maisie, who with Dennis was untying the hamper; "it's a thin little kitten, but it's very good."

"Dear Miss Maisie," said Anne, with a chuckling laugh, "it's the cushion mother means, not the cat."

What with old Sally's deafness, and the increasing thickness of the air, in which the two old figures were dimly seen as through a woolly veil, conversation was really impossible. There were many questions Maisie would have liked to ask about the kitten's future comfort, but she saw that they would be useless; so she contented herself with quietly saying good-bye to her favourite, and dropping a few secret tears over it. Dennis, however, had made up his mind to know one thing, and he advanced a little way into the cottage, and shouted: "Is Tuvvy at work to-day?"

Anne was seen indistinctly to nod in answer to this. "He's got the sack, though," she said. "He won't be there not after next week."

The blow had fallen! Both the children left the cottage in low spirits, and for some time walked along in silence; Maisie grieving for the kitten, and Dennis with his mind full of Tuvvy's disgrace. He had so hoped Mr Solace would not send him away. And now the worst had come, and soon there would be no Tuvvy in the barn.

They had reached the middle of the rick-yard, and Maisie was casting her usual anxious glances round for the turkey-cock, when Dennis came to a sudden stop, and exclaimed:

"I know what I'll do!"

"What?" said Maisie, looking at him inquiringly. She wished he would not stand still just there, but he spoke in such a determined manner that she knew it must be something important; so she stood still too, and waited for him to speak.

"I shall go and ask Mr Solace to let Tuvvy stop," he said.

Maisie's look changed to one of admiration, and almost of awe. "Shall you, really?" she said softly. "Do you think he will?"

"I don't know," replied Dennis, beginning to walk on very quickly, "but I shall try to make him."

"But," said Maisie, after a minute's thought, "wouldn't it be best to ask Tuvvy first to leave off having bouts?"

Although she was a girl, and younger than himself, Dennis was quite ready to acknowledge that Maisie had very sensible ideas sometimes. He now stopped again, and stared at her. It would certainly be better to get Tuvvy's promise first, but he felt he must carry out the interview alone.

"Well," he said slowly, "if I do, where will you wait? I couldn't do it with you listening. Will you go back to old Sally's?"

But that, Maisie, remembering the fluff, quite refused to do. She would go and see Mrs Solace, she said, and this being settled, she went towards the house, and Dennis turned to the barn where Tuvvy worked.

As he entered, and saw the familiar thin figure bending over the carpenter's bench, he felt excited and nervous. How should he begin? As a rule, he did not talk much during these visits, and that made it more difficult now. He took his usual seat on a chopping-block near, and Tuvvy, after giving him one rapid sidelong glance, continued his work without speaking. He was making a ladder, and just now was arranging a heap of smoothly-turned rungs in neat rows. Dennis thought he had a rather shamefaced air, like the dog Peter when he knew he had done wrong. It was of no use to wait for him to make a remark, so he said carelessly:

"Is that going to be a long ladder?"

"Pretty tol'able, master," answered Tuvvy, his long lean fingers moving nimbly amongst the pieces of wood.

"Shall you finish it in a week?" was Dennis's next question.

Tuvvy's dark eyes flashed round at him for a second, but he only answered, "Pretty nigh."

Dennis was silent for a little while. Then he gathered his courage for a great effort, for he felt that it was of no use to beat about the bush any longer.

"Mr Tuvvy," he said, "I'm so sorry you're going away."

"Thank ye, master," said Tuvvy; "so be I."

"Why do you?" asked Dennis.

“Cause the gaffer sacked me,” answered Tuvvy.

“But,” said Dennis, his courage rising, now that he had got into the thick of it, “he wouldn’t want you to go if he could help it. You’re a clever workman, aren’t you?”

“Folks say so,” answered Tuvvy modestly.

“Well,” said Dennis, “I mean to ask him to let you stop. Only you must promise me first not to have any more bouts.”

Tuvvy was so taken by surprise, that he stopped working and turned his whole face round upon Dennis, who sat, an upright little figure, on the chopping-block, with a flushed and eager face.

“Thank ye kindly, master,” he said, after a moment’s survey; “you mean well, but ’tain’t no use.”

“Why not?” asked Dennis, in a resolute voice.

“I couldn’t keep that there promise,” said Tuvvy, “not if I was to make it. There’s times when I can’t get past the Cross Keys; I’m drawn into it.”

“Why do you pass it, then?” asked Dennis.

“I don’t pass it, master, worse luck. I go in.”

“But I mean,” said Dennis, getting still redder in the face with the effort to explain himself, “why do you go by the Cross Keys at all?”

“Well, I have to,” said Tuvvy, “twice in the day. Once of a morning and once of a evening. I live at Upwell, you see, master.”

Dennis had never known or cared where Tuvvy lived, and indeed it hardly seemed natural to think of him in any other place than at work in the barn. It was odd to think he had a home in Upwell.

“Then,” he said thoughtfully, “you have to walk more than two miles each way.”

“All that,” said Tuvvy—“more like three.”

He bent over his work, and Dennis sat silent and rather despondent, with his eyes fixed on the ground. There was so little chance for Tuvvy, if he really could not pass the Cross Keys without being “drawn in.” There seemed nothing more to say. Presently, however, Tuvvy himself continued the conversation.

“Night’s the worst,” he said, “and winter worse nor any. It’s mortal cold working here all day, and a man’s spirit’s pretty nigh froze out of him by the time work’s done. And then there’s the tramp home, and long before I get to the village, I see the light behind the red blind at the Cross Keys. It streams out into the road, and it says: ‘Tuvvy,’ it says, ‘it’s warm in here, and you’re cold. There’s light in here, and a bit of talk, and a newspaper; and outside it’s all dark and lonesome, and a good long stretch to Upwell. Come in, and have a drop to cheer you up. You don’t need to stop more’n five minutes.’ And then—”

Tuvvy stopped, raised his black eyebrows, and shook his head.

“Well?” said Dennis.

“Well, master,” repeated Tuvvy, “then I go in.”

“And do you come out in five minutes?” asked Dennis.

Tuvvy shook his head again: “It’s the red blind as draws me in,” he said, “and once I’m in, I stay there.”

“Mr Tuvvy,” said Dennis, after a pause, with renewed hope in his voice, “I’ve thought of something. Why don’t you go home across the fields? You wouldn’t have to pass the Cross Keys then, you see, and wouldn’t see the red blind, and it couldn’t draw you in.”

“There ain’t no way out into the road,” objected Tuvvy.

“There *is*,” said Dennis; “I’ve often been. You’d have to cross over part of one of Aunt Katharine’s fields, and then there’s a stile into the Upwell road. It’s as straight as anything.”

“Happen Miss Chester mightn’t like to see me tramping over her field,” said Tuvvy.

“She won’t mind a bit. Besides, I’ll ask her to let you. So that’s all right,” said Dennis jumping up, “and I shall go and speak to Mr Solace at once.”

He was nearly out of the barn when Tuvvy’s voice checked him.

“Hold hard, master,” it said; “I ain’t given that there promise you was talking on.”

“But you will,” said Dennis, coming close up to the carpenter’s bench, and looking earnestly up into Tuvvy’s dark face; “of course you will—won’t you?”

Tuvvy made no answer for a moment. He seemed puzzled to account for all this interest on Dennis’s part, but at

length he held out a hand almost black from hard work, and said:

"Well master, here's my hand on it. I'll do my best."

Dennis put his own into it seriously.

"That's a bargain, Mr Tuvvy," he said. "People always shake hands on bargains. And now it will be all right."

Tuvvy raised his eyebrows doubtfully.

"Whether it is or whether 'tain't," he said, "you meant it kind, and I take it kind, master."

Dennis himself had no doubts at all as he ran across the rick-yard to the farmhouse. Mr Solace was so good-natured, he was always ready to do what he was asked, and Dennis knew quite well that he and Maisie were favourites. He felt still more anxious now that Tuvvy should not be sent away, for since this talk with him, he seemed to have taken his affairs under his protection. Tuvvy seemed to belong to him, and to depend on him for help and advice, and Dennis was determined to do his very best for him. So it was with a feeling of great importance that he entered the housekeeper's room, where he was told that he should find Mrs Solace and his sister. They were both there, and both very busy, for Mrs Solace was making meat-pies, and Maisie, covered from head to foot with a big white apron, was learning how to roll out paste.

"Did you want to see Andrew *particularly*, my dear?" asked Mrs Solace. "Fact is, he's in the office, over his accounts, and don't want to be disturbed. If it's a message from Miss Chester, you could leave it with me, couldn't you? and I'll be sure he has it."

"It isn't a message from Aunt Katharine," said Dennis. "It's something I *must* say myself; something very important, indeed. Maisie knows it is," he added, as Mrs Solace still hesitated.

She looked at the children with some perplexity in her good-humoured face. She did not want to disturb Andrew just now, whose temper was seldom ruffled except when he was at his accounts. On the other hand, Dennis and Maisie were both fixing such imploring eyes upon her that she could not bear to say "No."

"Well, then," she said, "you must just go and knock at the door and ask if you may go in. But *don't* ye stay long, my dear, else Andrew'll be vexed, and it's I who'll bear the blame."

The office, where Mr Solace had retired to struggle with his accounts, was not a very business-like apartment. It was a small room with a door opening into the stable-yard, full of a great variety of articles, such as boots, whips, guns, walking-sticks, and pipes. In the window there was a big writing-table, covered with account-books and papers, and it was here that the farm men came to be paid on Saturday night. From his seat Mr Solace could see all that went on in the stable-yard, and could shout out orders to the men as they passed across it without leaving his chair. That was in summer, but now the window was shut and the room was quite full of the fumes of Mr Solace's pipe, from which he was puffing angry clouds of tobacco, as he frowned over a great leather-bound book in front of him.

He was a man of about fifty, with iron-grey hair and very blue eyes which looked keenly out under bushy brows. They were kindly eyes, but they were eyes which could fix themselves commandingly on man or beast, and seemed used to having their commands obeyed. They were set in a face so bronzed and reddened by an outdoor life, that this colour was all the more striking, except to old Sally, who spoke lightly of them compared to others she "minded" in the family. "They weren't nothing at all to what old Mr Solace's was," she said. "They *were* blue, if you like."

Biting the top of his quill pen, and stamping his foot, when the figures were too much for his patience, the farmer had just travelled nearly up a long column, when a loud knock was heard at his door.

At first he only grunted impatiently, for he knew that if he let go his calculation for an instant, he was a lost man, and would have to add it all up again. But almost immediately the knock was loudly repeated.

"Come in," he shouted, flinging down his pen and turning angrily towards the door. His gaze was directed to the height of a full-grown person, and he lowered it hastily to the level of Dennis's small round head, and said in a softer tone: "Oh, it's you, is it, my boy."

Dennis marched straight in at once, and stood at the farmer's elbow. He was not a bit afraid of Mr Solace, and had prepared just what he meant to say, so he began without a pause.

"I've come to ask you a favour, please."

"And I wish you'd come at any other time," said Mr Solace good-naturedly; "but as you're here, out with it."

Dennis's favours were usually connected with jackdaws, or rabbits, or puppies, and no doubt this would be something of the same kind.

"It's a bigger one than ever I've asked before," continued Dennis, "and I want it more than anything I've wanted before."

"Fire away!" said the farmer; "only make haste about it, because I'm busy."

"I want you," said Dennis, speaking slowly and solemnly, as he drew up closer, "to let Tuvvy stop."

The farmer's face changed. He gave a long low whistle.

"Did he send you to ask me that?" he said.

"No indeed," replied Dennis indignantly; "I thought of it my very own self. He's promised not to have any more bouts, if you'll keep him on."

Mr Solace got up and stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece, looking down at Dennis.

"Well, my boy," he said, "that's a thing I must say 'No' to. I'm forced to, by Tuvvy himself. I don't want to send him away. I shan't get another such a clever chap in his place."

"Then why do you?" asked Dennis.

"Because I can't put up with him any longer; I've been too soft-hearted already. I've winked at his goings-on again and again, and I've let him off times out of number. But now my mind's made up."

"But he's *promised*," urged Dennis, "and he's going to walk home the field-way, so as not to pass the Cross Keys. He says it's the red blind that draws him in."

"H'm," said the farmer, with a short laugh. "He don't want much *drawing*, I fancy. And as for his promises—I've had enough of Tuvvy's promises."

Dennis looked crestfallen. He had not expected this.

"Won't you try him just this *once* more?" he pleaded.

"Now, look here, Master Dennis," said the farmer; "you know most of my men. They don't call me a hard master, do they?"

"No," replied Dennis; "they say the gaffer's very kind."

"Well, but there's another thing I've got to think of besides kindness, and that's justice. It isn't fair, you see, to the other men to let Tuvvy off. Why, if I did, I shouldn't have a steady workman about the place soon, and serve me right. They'd say: 'There's that chap Tuvvy can do as he likes, and drink and leave his master in the lurch, and yet he's no worse off. Why shouldn't we do the same? What's the good of being sober and steady, and sticking to our work, if we don't get anything by it?'"

"But I'm sure," said Dennis eagerly, "they'd all like Tuvvy to stop."

"That's the worst of it," said Mr Solace, with an annoyed jerk of his head. "I should like him to stop too. He's such a clever rascal with his head as well as his hands. A hint does for him, where another man wants telling all the ins and outs of a thing, and doesn't get it right in the end. Tuvvy's got a head on his shoulders, and turns out his work just as it ought to be. It's a pleasure to see it. But then, perhaps just at a busy time when we're wanting some job he's at, he'll break out and have a regular fit of drinking for the best part of a week, and leave us all in the lurch. It's no use. I can't and won't put up with it, and I oughtn't to."

The farmer spoke as though arguing with his own weakness rather than with Dennis, who now ventured to ask: "If all the others wanted him to stay, would you let him?"

"I'll have nothing to do with asking them," said the farmer, spreading out his hands. "I'll have nothing more to do with Tuvvy at all. I've given him up. Now you run away, my boy, and let me get to my business."

Dennis stood for a minute, half uncertain whether he should put some more questions; but Mr Solace sat down to his desk, and grasped his pen with such determination, that he did not dare to make another attempt, and unwillingly left the office.

He did not, however, entirely give up hope. Dennis was a stubborn little boy, and when he had fixed his mind upon a thing, he did not soon leave off trying to get it. Could Aunt Katharine help him, he wondered, as he and Maisie ran home together. At any rate he would tell her all about it, and ask for her advice. But when she had heard the story, Aunt Katharine did not seem to have much advice to give.

"I don't think you must worry Mr Solace any more, Dennis," she said. "He knows best how to manage his own affairs and his own men. A little boy like you can't understand such things. If the wheelwright behaves badly, of course he must lose his place."

"But," persisted Dennis, "Mr Solace really does want to keep him, I know, only he says it isn't fair to the other men."

"Well, you'd better get them to sign a Round Robin, then," said Miss Chester, laughing; "I can't interfere."

She was hurrying away, as though there were no more to be said on the subject, but Dennis followed her.

"Oh Aunt Katharine," he said earnestly, taking hold of her dress, "*do* wait a minute, and tell me what you mean by a Round Robin."

Aunt Katharine was always willing to make things clear to the children if she could, and she now sat down patiently to explain to Dennis what a Round Robin was. When he quite understood, he ran quickly in search of Maisie that he might describe it to her before he forgot a word, and get her to help him in preparing one.

Chapter Six.

Lost!

"There!" said Dennis triumphantly, "we've got it right at last."

"There's only one tiny smudge on it," said Maisie, looking anxiously over his shoulder at the Round Robin.

It had cost them nearly two days of earnest effort and repeated failure, for although Aunt Katharine had described exactly how it was to be done, she had left them to carry it out entirely by themselves. It sounded so easy to say: "Take a sheet of cardboard, and draw a large circle on it, leaving room for all the signatures you want. Then write the petition clearly in the middle, and that is a Round Robin." But it was not so easy when you began to do it. First the circle was too large, and then it was too small, then there were mistakes in the spelling, and then there were too many blots; but at last, after wasting four sheets of cardboard, the Round Robin approached perfection. Aunt Katharine came in to see it, and smiled, and said she thought it would do.

"But you've got a good deal before you yet, Dennis," she added. "Do you think you shall be able to get all the men to sign?"

"Every one of them," said Dennis decidedly. "I shall begin with the bailiff, and end with the pig-man. He can't write his name, but he can put a cross."

"It won't matter which you begin or end with," said Maisie, "because there isn't any first and last in the Round Robin."

From this moment all Dennis's energy and interest were spent upon getting the Round Robin signed. He could talk and think of nothing else, but though Maisie was eager for its success too, it did not entirely take her mind from other things. She often thought, for instance, of the two kittens in their new homes, and wondered how they were getting on, and whether Blanche was beginning to be a "comfort" to Philippa. Darkie was certainly growing handsome and more amusing every day, but perhaps he could not exactly be considered a "comfort." Madam, his mother, at any rate did not find him one, and was often very vexed with him, because he would not give up the pranks and follies of childhood. She could no longer put up with it patiently, when he pounced upon her tail if she happened to whisk it, or played leap-frog over her back like a small black goblin. On such occasions she would spit at him angrily, and box his ears with the whole strength of her outstretched arm, but Darkie did not care a bit. He must play with some one, and as Peter the dog would not notice him, there was no one left but Madam. Dennis and Maisie were quite ready to have a game, but they were not to be compared to cats for fun and frolic, and besides, they began to have some tiresome ideas about training and education. Darkie must be taught to beg like Peter. Every morning, before he was allowed to taste his breakfast, he was made to go through certain exercises.

"Beg, Darkie, beg," Maisie would say, holding the plate high above his head; and then Dennis would place him forcibly down on his hind-legs, and lift up his front paws. Darkie was a cunning cat, and he soon found that begging was to his advantage, so he learned his lesson quickly, but it was only one of many which followed, and he got very tired of them.

"Darkie can beg," said Maisie, when she next saw Philippa. "How does Blanche get on?"

Philippa had driven over to Fieldside with her mother one bright afternoon in April, and now she and Maisie were in the garden, Dennis as usual being absent on business connected with the Round Robin. Maisie had been very pleased to see Philippa when she first arrived, for she wanted to hear about the white kitten, and she looked forward to a pleasant talk with her. Before she had been there five minutes, however, it was easy to see that she was not in a nice mood. That was the worst of Philippa, Maisie always found. You could never take her up just at the point you left her; she might be agreeable, and she might be just the opposite. To-day she had her grown-up manner, and was full of little affected airs and graces, and Maisie, glancing at her once or twice, saw the reason of it. Philippa was wearing a new hat of the latest fashion, covered with the most beautiful drooping feathers, and she could not forget it for a moment.

"If I can find Darkie," repeated Maisie, "you should see him beg. He does it most beautifully."

"Fancy!" said Philippa, with a slight drawl and a little laugh. "Well, Blanche doesn't need to *beg* for anything. She gets all she wants without that.—Where's Dennis?"

Maisie repeated the story of Tuvvy and the Round Robin, and Philippa laughed again.

"What odd things you do," she said. "Mother says you're not a bit like other people."

Maisie had been searching in vain for Darkie in all his usual haunts, and calling him at intervals, but no kitten appeared; there was only old Madam curled up in the sun, blinking in lazy comfort.

"I'm afraid I shan't find him," she said, with a disappointed face. "He's such a cunning cat. He knows we want to teach him things, so he often hides. Very likely he's watching us now, somewhere quite near. But I did so want you to see him beg."

"Why do you teach him things?" asked Philippa, "It must be a great trouble to you, and he doesn't like it either."

"Oh, but it's good for him to learn," said Maisie. "It makes him obedient and well-behaved.—Don't you teach Blanche anything?"

"Oh dear, no," said Philippa. "She would scratch me if I tried, directly."

Maisie looked grave. "Do you think Blanche is growing a nice cat?" she asked presently.

Philippa tossed her head, and made all the feathers on her hat wave.

"She ought to be," she said, "for she has all sorts of advantages. She's got bells, and ribbons, and a clockwork mouse, but she hasn't a very nice disposition. She often scratches. Miss Mervyn's quite afraid of her, and mother would send her away at once if she wasn't mine."

Maisie sighed. "I'm sorry," she said, but in her own mind she felt sure that the white kitten was not properly managed.

"I wonder," she added aloud, "how the grey kitten will turn out. Aunt Katharine's going in to Upwell to-morrow, and she's promised to call at the tinsmith's and ask after it."

Philippa yawned, and did not seem to feel much interest in the grey kitten.

"How do you like my hat?" she asked, with a sudden liveliness in her voice. Before Maisie could answer, Aunt Katharine called the children from the drawing-room window. Mrs Trevor was going away, and just as they were seated in the carriage Dennis appeared, rather hot, but glowing with triumph.

"Half of them have signed," he said, waving the Round Robin in the air as he approached. Philippa leaned back languidly beside her mother, and gave a little affected wave of the hand to her cousins as she drove away.

"What's the matter with Philippa?" asked Dennis. "She's got something new on, I suppose."

Without waiting for an answer, he proceeded to tell all he had done that afternoon. No one had refused to sign, although some of the men had a good deal to say before they did so, and others looked as though they did not understand the Round Robin very clearly.

"But I think it will be all right," finished Dennis; "and if I get them all, Mr Solace can't refuse to let Tuvvy stop, can he?"

Maisie agreed rather absently, for she was still thinking over her talk with Philippa. The white kitten's home did not seem to have turned out very well so far, and she had expected it to be the best. Perhaps the grey kitten's humble abode would be happier, after all, than Haughton Park.

"Madam," she said, turning to the old cat, who had chosen a sunny spot on the window ledge, and was taking a nap, "I've got some news for you. Aunt Katharine's going to call at the tinsmith's—that's where old Sally's Eliza lives, you know—and ask after your grey kitten."

"*She* doesn't care," said Dennis, laughing contemptuously, but Maisie knew Madam was pleased, for she tucked her front paws under her and purred. She would no doubt be anxious to hear about her kitten, and the next afternoon, when the time came to expect Aunt Katharine back from Upwell, Maisie stood waiting in the hall with the old cat tucked under her arm. Madam should hear the news directly it came. It seemed a long time in coming, and even when at last Aunt Katharine drove up to the door, she had so many parcels to look after, and so much to say about them, that Maisie could not ask any questions. She followed her aunt into the sitting-room, with Madam still clutched tightly to her side.

"What is it, Maisie dear?" said Miss Chester. "Oh, the kitten, to be sure. I went to see it, but I'm sorry to tell you that they're afraid it has run away."

At this sad news Madam struggled so violently that Maisie was obliged to let her slip down to the floor. Run away! That was the last thing Maisie had thought of.

"Oh Aunt Katharine," she cried, "how did it run away? Why did they let it?"

But there was not much to be told about this. It was supposed that the kitten had run through the shop out into the street, and lost its way. At any rate, it had disappeared, and the tinsmith's wife was very sorry.

"Then," said Maisie, "it's lost! She might have taken more care of it. I wish we hadn't given it to her!"

Poor little grey kitten! Homeless and helpless in the wide world! It was so sad to think of it, that Maisie could not help crying, in spite of Aunt Katharine's attempts to comfort her.

"After all," she sobbed out, "it hasn't got a home at all, and we did take such trouble to find it one."

"Well, darling," said her aunt, "we must hope it has got a good home still. Very likely some kind person found it, and took care of it."

"Do you really think so?" said Maisie, rubbing her eyes and looking up with a gleam of hope; "but perhaps," she added sorrowfully, "an unkind person met it."

Aunt Katharine smiled and kissed her little niece.

"Unfortunately, there are unkind people in the world, dear Maisie," she said; "but I don't think there are many who would hurt a little harmless kitten. So we must take all the comfort we can, and perhaps some day we shall find it again."

Maisie did her best to look on the bright side of the misfortune, but she could not help thinking of all the dangers the grey kitten was likely to meet. There were so many dogs in Upwell, dogs like Snip and Snap who delighted in chasing cats. There were carts and carriages too, and many things which the kitten was far too young to understand. Its ignorance of the world would lead it into all sorts of perils, and there was little chance that it would ever be heard of again. She tried to break the bad news as gently as possible to Madam, who seemed to listen with indifference, and presently fell off to sleep, as though there were no such thing as lost kittens in the world. Dennis also did not show very much concern; but he was just now so busy with other matters that perhaps this was not surprising.

Chapter Seven.

Found!

Meanwhile, what had become of the grey kitten? To learn this we must go back to the time when it began its life in the tinsmith's house at Upwell under the care of old Sally's Eliza. It was kept in the kitchen at first, but by degrees, as it got used to the place, it was allowed to run about where it liked, and its favourite room was the little back parlour opening into the shop. Now the shop was forbidden ground, and it was always chased back if it tried to enter: so perhaps it was for this very reason that it seemed to have fixed its mind on doing it, and one afternoon the chance came. Its mistress was busy behind the counter serving some customers: the parlour door was open; no one noticed the grey kitten, and it marched boldly in.

Pleased to find itself in the midst of so many new and shining things, it played about happily for some time, trying to catch the merry shadowy figures which danced on all the bright surfaces around. It was great fun at first, to make springs and dashes at them with its soft little paws, but finding they were never to be caught, it got tired, and looked about for fresh amusement. Unluckily its eye fell on the open door leading into the busy street, and without a thought of fear it trotted out, and cantered, tail on high, gaily down the pavement.

Too young to understand that it was in the midst of dangers, it saw nothing to alarm, and much that was amusing in all it passed. Now and then it stopped on its way to play with a straw, or chase a fly, and by degrees got a long distance from the tinsmith's shop. It was now late in the afternoon, a drizzling rain had begun to fall, and it was so dull and cold that it was almost like winter. The kitten began to feel wet and miserable. It looked round for shelter and warmth, shook one little damp paw, and gave a tiny mew.

"Hulloa!" cried a rough loud voice, "what's this?" A rough hand grasped it, and held it up high above the ground.

A troop of boys was pouring out from a school-house near, shouting, whistling, calling out to each other, and making the place echo with their noise. The one who had seized the kitten was a big stout fellow of about fourteen, with red hair and small greenish eyes.

"Who wants a cat to make into pies?" he bawled at the top of his voice, holding his prize above the crowd of boys who gathered round him. The kitten, its little weak body dangling helplessly, turned its terrified eyes downwards on all the eager faces.

"Who'll buy?" cried the boy again.

"Mi-auw," said the kitten piteously.

"Give yer five marbles for it, Bill!"

"Give yer tuppence."

"Give yer a lump of hardbake."

One after another the shrill voices sounded above the general noise and clatter, but Bill shook his head.

"Not near enough," he said; "and come to think of it, I shall keep it myself, and have some sport with it. We'll have a cat-chase, sure's my name's Bill."

As he spoke, another boy joined the group. He was much smaller than Bill, slight and thin, with a brown face and very twinkling dark eyes. His clothes were poor, and there was more than one hole in the ragged jacket buttoned tightly round him.



"I'll give yer my knife for 't, Bill," Dan said quickly.

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"I'll give yer my knife for't, Bill," he said quickly.

This was a good offer. Bill hesitated; but casting a glance at the boy's dark eager face, he exclaimed:

"Ah, it's you, is it, Dan Tuvvy; then don't you wish you may get it? I'll just keep it myself."

"'Tain't yourn," said Dan shrilly.

"'Tain't yourn, anyhow," said Bill, with a glare in his green eyes.

The small boy's features worked with excitement. "I'll fight yer for it, then," he said, doubling his fists, and at this there was a loud laugh from the others, for he was about half Bill's size.

"Go it, Tuvvy," cried one, patting him on the back; "go in and win."

"I ain't a-goin' to fight a little chap like you," said Bill, moving off sullenly with the kitten under his arm. "So don't you think it."

"You give me the cat, then," said Dan, following him. "'Ere's my knife, with three blades, and on'y one broke."

"Git out with yer," said Bill contemptuously. "I tell yer I'm a-goin' to have a cat-chase with this 'ere kitten. So no more bother about it."

"You're afraid," snarled Dan, running along by his side. "I wouldn't be a big chap like you, and be afraid—that I wouldn't."

"Take that, then," said Bill, turning suddenly, "if you *will* have it;" and he gave the small boy a blow which struck him to the ground.

In a moment he was up again, quite undaunted.

"Come on, then," he cried, doubling his fists and dancing round his enemy, "if you *aren't* afraid."

"A fight! a fight!" sounded from all sides; and there seemed no doubt of it, for Bill's temper was roused.

"Ketch 'old for a minnit," he said, holding out the kitten, for which a dozen grimy hands were outstretched; "'twon't take long—"

So all the boys thought. It would be short but exciting, for the two were old enemies, and likely to fight with spirit. They placed themselves in a ring, with hoarse shouts of encouragement and approval, and the fight began; the kitten adding its plaintive mew from time to time to the general noise.

At first it seemed that one blow from Bill's heavy hand would be enough to finish the affair; but it was soon evident that Dan's lean figure and nimble movements were greatly to his advantage. He sprang about in such a swift and agile manner, that he seemed everywhere at once; and while Bill was turning to deal a blow, or to catch hold of him, he had ducked his small black head and escaped. Buttoned tightly in his narrow jacket, which he had not taken off, his straight thin figure offered nothing for the hand to grasp, so that it was like trying to lay hold of a wriggling, slippery eel. It was certainly a much better fight than could have been expected from the unequal size of the rivals, and Bill's face grew a deep red, as much with rage as with his vain efforts to close with Dan, who skipped round him breathless but full of spirit. Suddenly, however, while the excitement was at its height, there came a cry of alarm from the onlookers, "The bobby! the bobby!"

A blue uniform turned the corner. The crowd split up, and vanished like magic as the policeman came towards them. Bill turned away sulkily, and Dan seizing the kitten, which had been dropped on the ground, ran off at the top of his

speed.

Without turning his head, to see if his enemy was in pursuit, he sped down the street past the school-house, clasping the kitten to his breast. Soon he had left the shops and busy part of the town behind him, and reached the outskirts, where the houses were poor and mean, and there were ragged people standing about on the door-steps. He gave a quick glance over his shoulder now, and seeing no sign of Bill or the policeman, slackened his pace, loosened the tight pressure of his hand on the kitten, and stroked it gently.

"Poor little kit," he said, "nice little kit. How pleased Becky'll be with it."

It was hard to say whether Dan or the kitten was most exhausted by all they had been through. His fight, his rapid run, and the excitement of the whole affair had made him so breathless, that he was glad to lean against a lamp-post and pant. As for the grey kitten, it lay almost lifeless on his breast, its eyes closed, its little body quite limp, and its heart beating so faintly that it could hardly be felt. The boy looked down at it with pity.

"Looks pretty bad," he murmured; "they've mauled it about so. P'r'aps a drop of milk would set it up."

Urged by this thought, he made an effort to go on again at a slower pace, still panting a good deal, and presently reached a row of small cottages, one of which he entered. A child's voice from a dark corner of the poorly-furnished kitchen cried, as he opened the door, "Mother, it ain't father; it's Dan;" and a woman, who was bending over a pot on the fire, turned towards him.

"Well," she said fretfully, "what makes *you* so late? It's bad enough to have your father coming in at all hours and wanting his supper."

Dan made no answer, but hurried up to the corner from which the child's voice had sounded. "See here, Becky," he said softly; "see what I've brought you!"

The child, a girl of about eight years old, raised herself eagerly on the hard couch on which she was lying. She was very like Dan, with the same brown skin and dark eyes, but the eyes had no merry twinkle in them. Her face was thin and drawn, and had the appealing look which comes of suffering borne with patience.

"Is it a rabbit, Dan?" she asked, peering at the soft furry thing in her brother's arms.

"It's a little cat," said Dan, putting the kitten gently down by her side, "as Bill was going to ill-treat."

Becky touched the kitten with her thin fingers. "Its eyes is shut," she said. "Oh Dan, I'm feared it's dead."

The woman had now drawn near to look at the kitten too. She had a fair skin and very pale blue eyes, which were always wide open, as though she were surprised at something; when this expression changed, it became a fretful one, which had also got into the tone of her voice.

"Give us a drop o' milk, mother," said Dan; "that'll do it good."

"Milk indeed!" said Mrs Tuvvy; "and what next? Where's the money to come from to buy milk for cats, when goodness knows if we shall soon have bit or drop to put into our own mouths?"

Neither of the children took any notice of their mother's remarks, or answered the questions which she continued to put.

"How do you suppose we're going to live, now yer father's got turned off? Who's a-goin' to pay the doctor's bill, I should like to know?"

Dan rose and fetched from the table a small basin covered with a saucer.

"That's yer supper," said Mrs Tuvvy mournfully. "You ain't never goin' to give it to the cat! Well, you won't get no more."

Dan knelt by the couch, and tried to put a little warm milk into the kitten's mouth with the spoon, but its teeth were firmly shut.

"You open its mouth, Dan, and I'll feed it," said Becky eagerly. "There, it swallowed that—now some more. See; it's better already."

For the kitten had opened its eyes, and given itself a little stretch. Soon it was able to lap some milk out of the saucer, and to eat some crumbled bread.

"Ain't it a little dear?" said Becky, her thin face lighted up with pleasure. "Oh Dan, it's purring! It must be quite well, mustn't it?"

"I expect it'll want a good long sleep first," said Dan, looking gravely at the kitten, which had curled itself up by Becky's side, and begun a faint little song of thankfulness; "it's been through a deal."

He took his neglected supper, and sat down to eat it at the foot of Becky's couch, while Mrs Tuvvy returned to her cooking at the fire, still grumbling half aloud. There was not much bread and milk, and Dan, who always had a good appetite, was unusually hungry after his exertions that afternoon. He had been through a deal, as well as the kitten. But by dint of talking to his sister between each spoonful, he managed to eke out the meal, and make it seem much more. Becky listened with the most eager interest, meanwhile, to all the details of the fight, the policeman, and the

escape of Dan with the kitten. When there was no more to tell, and very little more to eat, she leaned back on her couch and sighed.

"He's a reg'lar bad un, that Bill!" she said presently. "Will he want to fight again?"

Dan shook his head. "I shan't come across him no more," he said; "not now I'm going to a place."

"I forgot," said Becky wearily. "Oh Dan, how long the days'll be when you don't come home to dinner. Whatever shall I do?"

"Why," said Dan soothingly, "you won't be alone now. You'll have the kit."

Becky gave a faint little smile.

"I mean to get you a good long bit of string," went on Dan, "and tie a cork to the end, and then, you see, you'll bounce it about for the kit to play with, and carry on fine, without moving."

"I suppose it'll get to know me after a bit, won't it?" said Becky, evidently pleased with Dan's idea.

"Just about," answered her brother decidedly. Becky looked down fondly at the small grey form on her arm.

"Dr Price's dogs came in with him to-day," she said, "but they mustn't come in no more now. They'd worry it to death. Mother told him to-day," she added in a lower tone, "as how she couldn't pay his bill, because of father."

"What did he say?" asked Dan.

"He said, 'That's a bad job, Mrs Tuvvy, but it can't be helped.'"

"Did he say you were getting better?" asked Dan again, scraping his basin carefully round with his spoon.

"He said I wanted plenty of rest, and plenty of nourishing food," said Becky. "What's nourishing food, Dan?"

"Nice things," said Dan, balancing his spoon on the edge of his basin, and smacking his hungry lips; "chickens, and jellies, and pies, and such like."

"Oh," said Becky, with a patient sigh. "Well, we shan't have no money at all now, so we can't get any of 'em."

"I shall get six shillings a week when I begin work," said Dan; "and there's what mother gets charing. But then there's the rent, you see, and father getting nothing—"

He broke off, for the door opened, and Tuvvy himself appeared with his basket of tools on his shoulder. The children looked at him silently as he flung himself into a chair, but his wife began immediately in a tone of mild reproachfulness.

"Yer supper's been waiting this ever so long, and it wasn't much to boast of to begin with, but there—I s'pose we may be thankful to get a bit of dry bread now."

She poured the contents of the saucepan into a dish, sighing and lamenting over it as she did so.

"'Tain't what I've been used to, as was always brought up respectable, and have done my duty to the children. And there's the doctor's bill—I s'pose he won't come to see Becky no more till that's paid—and there she is on her back a cripple, as you may call it, for life p'r'aps. And what is it you mean to turn to, now you've lost a good place?"

As long as there was a mouthful of his supper left, Tuvvy preserved a strict silence; but when his plate was empty, he pushed it away, and said grimly, "Gaffer's goin' to let me stop on."

"Stop on!" repeated Mrs Tuvvy. She stopped short in her progress across the kitchen, and let the empty plate she was carrying fall helplessly at her side. "Stop on!" she repeated.

"Ain't I said so?" answered Tuvvy, pressing down the tobacco in his pipe with his thumb.

Mrs Tuvvy seemed incapable of further speech, and stood gazing at her husband with her mouth partly open. It was Becky who exclaimed, with a faint colour of excitement in her cheek, "Oh father, what made him?"

"Do tell us, father," added Dan, touching him gently on the arm.

Tuvvy looked round at the boy's earnest face, and then down at the table, and began to draw figures on it with the stem of his pipe. Mrs Tuvvy hovered a little nearer, and Becky sat upright on her couch, with eagerness in her eyes as her father began to speak.

"It was along of a little gentleman, Dennis Chester his name is, who used to come and see me work. He asked the gaffer, and gaffer said 'No.' So then he says, 'Will you let him stop,' says he, 'if the others are agreeable?' and to that the gaffer says neither yes nor no. But this morning he sends for me, and 'Tuvvy,' he says, 'I've had a Round Robin about you.' 'And what sort of a bird is that, master?' says I. "'Tain't a bird at all,' he says, 'it's this,' and then he showed it me."

"What ever was it?" asked Dan, as his father paused.

Tuvvy made a large circle in the air with the stem of his pipe.

"'Twas a round drawn like that on a bit of card, and inside of it was wrote as follers: 'We which have signed our names, ask Mr Solace to keep Mr Tuvvy in his service.' All the men's names was round the outside, and the little gentleman's name as well."

"What did Mr Solace say?" asked Dan.

"He said, 'You ain't deserved it, Tuvvy.'"

"No more yer 'ave," said Mrs Tuvvy, regaining her speech.

"But," continued her husband, "the gaffer went on to say that, along of Master Chester, who'd taken such a lot of trouble, he'd give me another chance. So that's all about it."

"And in all my born days," broke out Mrs Tuvvy, "I never heard of anything so singuller. Whatever made Master Chester take such a fancy to *you*, I wonder?"

"So I'm to stop on," continued Tuvvy, putting his pipe in his mouth, and turning his back on his wife.

"And I hope," said poor Mrs Tuvvy, beginning to cry a little from the relief of the good news, "I *do* hope, Benjamin, as it'll be a lesson as you'll take to 'art, and keep away from the drink; and if ever a man had reason to keep steady, you 'ave, with Dan growin' up, and Becky's doctor's bill to pay, and—" Mrs Tuvvy did not speak angrily, or raise her voice above a soft complaining drawl; but it seemed to have a disturbing effect upon her husband, who, when she reached this point, sprang up and flung himself towards the door.

"Look, father," said Becky's childish voice from her corner. "See here what Dan's brought me!"

"Filling the house with cats and dogs and rubbish," mourned Mrs Tuvvy, joining the remark to her interrupted sentence.

"We ain't got no dogs, anyhow, mother," said Dan, as his father turned from the door and went up to Becky's side; "a morsel of a kitten won't eat much. She'll have a bit of my supper till she's older, and then she'll catch mice and get her own living."

Chapter Eight.

Becky.

"It seems as if it had brought luck, don't it?" said Becky.

She was lying on her hard little sofa, with her hands clasped behind her head, and her eyes fixed on the grey kitten, who was playing all sorts of pranks in a spot of sunlight it had found on the floor. There was a smile on her thin face as she watched the little creature's merry antics, and it was indeed wonderful to see how much amusement it was able to find all by itself. First it chased its own tail round and round so fast, that it made one giddy to look at it; then it pounced at its own shadow, and darted back sideways in pretended fear; then it rolled over on its back, and played with its own furry toes. It was a week now since Dan had brought it home, forlorn and miserable, and it had quite forgotten its troubles, and was happy all day long. Even when there was not much for dinner—and that did happen sometimes, in spite of Becky's care—it always purred its little song of thankfulness, and was ready to be pleased, for it had a meek and grateful nature.

Dan, who was sitting at the foot of Becky's couch, with his feet stretched out in front of him, as though he were very tired, looked up as his sister spoke.

"What luck?" he asked sleepily.

Becky turned her dark eyes upon him.

"I'm sorry I waked you," she said. "I meant, because you brought the kit home the same night father wasn't turned off."

Dan nodded seriously.

"It's all been better since," went on Becky. "Father brings his money home, and mother don't worry, and we have dinner every day, and I do think my back don't go all on aching so bad as it did."

"If you was to get quite well, it'd be luckier still," said Dan.

"P'r'aps I shall," said Becky wistfully. "I dreamed ever so beautiful last night, that you and me was dancing to the organ in the street—the one as plays 'Pop goes the Weasel.' When I woke, I cried a bit, because it wasn't true. Do you think as it'll ever come true?"

"Just about," said Dan, rousing himself to speak with confidence.

"If so be as it does," continued Becky, "it'll be along of what the little gentleman at Fieldside did for father. If father hadn't kept his place, I couldn't got well, because of paying the doctor and the nourishing things."

"I think of that a deal too," said Dan; "it's all owin' to him."

"If there was ever anything we could do to please him," said Becky, "wouldn't we be glad! He must be such a very kind little gentleman."

Dan shook his head decidedly.

"'Tain't likely," he said. "He belongs to rich folks, him and his sister. They don't want nought from the like of us."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Becky, with a sigh. "I think over it a deal when I'm alone, and sort of make plans in my head; but, of course, they ain't real."

Poor Becky had plenty of opportunity for making plans in her head, for since a year ago she had been alone nearly all day. Before that she had been as gay and lively as the kitten itself, and as fond of play, but one unlucky day she had fallen down some stone steps and hurt her back. All her games were over now: she must lie quite still, Dr Price said, and never run about at all, for a long time. That was a new thing for Becky, who had scarcely known what it was to sit still in her life out of school hours; but her back hurt her so much that she was obliged to give up trying to do all the active things she had been used to, one by one. Her father made her a little couch, and on this in her dark corner she passed many weary hours alone, watching the hands travel round the face of the Dutch clock, and longing for the time for Dan to come home and talk to her. Dan was her chief friend, for though father was very kind, he went early to work, and sometimes came back very late, so that she saw little of him; and as for mother, poor mother went out charing, and was so tired in the evening, that she generally dropped off to sleep directly she had washed up the tea-things.

So Becky's life was lonely, and often full of pain, which was the harder to bear because she had no companion to cheer her and help her to forget it. She even grew to look forward to Dr Price's visits, short as they were, for the day did not seem quite so long when he had clattered in with his dogs at his heels, and spoken to her in his loud kind voice. He was a nice gentleman, she thought, though he did not cure the pain in her back. Besides Dr Price there was only Dan, and when on leaving school Dan got a place as gardener's boy, Becky felt sad as well as pleased, for he would now be away all day.

Just at this fortunate moment, when it was so much needed, the grey kitten had arrived, to be her friend and playfellow, and to comfort her with its coaxing ways. It was, as Dan had said, not nearly so dull now. The kitten shared her meals, played all manner of games with her, almost answered her when she talked to it, and when it was tired would jump up to her shoulder and snuggle itself to sleep. The feeling of the warm soft fur against her cheek was so soothing, that often at such times she would take a nap too, and wake up to find that quite a long while had passed without her knowing it.

So, as she told Dan, it had all been better since the kitten came, and somehow it seemed to make a part of all the fancies and thoughts that passed through her mind, as she lay dreaming, yet awake, on her couch. Becky had never made "plans in her head," as she called them, while she was well and strong, and could run about all day. But now that her limbs had to be idle, her mind began to grow busy, and though she could not move out of the dusky kitchen, she took long journeys in fancy, and saw many strange things with her eyes fast shut. Some of these she would describe to Dan, and some she kept quite to herself; but now, since hearing of Dennis Chester's Round Robin, they all took one form. They were always connected with him or his sister, and what he had done for her father, and curiously enough the grey kitten seemed to belong to them, and she seldom thought of one without the other. If it could have spoken, how many interesting facts it could have told her about its life at Fieldside with Dennis and Maisie! Perhaps its little purring song was full of such memories, as it lay pressed up so close to Becky's cheek. At any rate it contrived in some way to get into most of her dreams, whether asleep or awake. But though her life was on the whole happier than it had been, there were still some very hard days for Becky to bear, days when the kitten's merriest gambols were not enough to make her forget her pain.

They were generally days when Mrs Tuvvy had "run short," as she called it, and left very little for dinner, so that; Becky grew faint and low for want of food. For Mrs Tuvvy, even when her husband brought home his wages regularly, was not a good manager. On Saturday night and Sunday she would provide a sort of feast, and have everything of the best. After that the supplies became less and less each day, until on Friday or Saturday there was not much besides bread and cheese, or a red herring, until Tuvvy brought home his wages again. On such uncertain fare poor Becky did not thrive, and she always knew that towards the end of the week she should have a "bad day" of pain and weariness.

"There ain't much dinner for yer," said Mrs Tuvvy one morning as she stood ready to go out charing. "I've put it on the shelf. Don't you go giving any to that foolish kitten, and I'll see and bring summat home for supper."

The door banged, and Becky was alone. She and the kitten would be alone now until five o'clock, and must pass the time as they could. The morning went quickly enough, and when it was nearly one o'clock the kitten, who knew it was dinner-time, began to mew and look up at the shelf.

Becky sighed a little as she took down the mug and plate. There certainly was not "much," as Mrs Tuvvy had said, and, moreover, what there was did not look tempting, for there was only a little watery milk and a piece of hard bread and cheese.

"I wish we had nourishing things for dinner, kitty," she said, as she poured some milk into a saucer, and crumbled some bread into it. "You'd like pies and chickens and such, shouldn't you? and so should I. I don't seem to care about bread and cheese."

The kitten ate up its portion eagerly and looked for more, with a little inquiring mew.

"No, no, Kitty," answered Becky, "there ain't no more to-day. To-day's Friday, you know. We'll have to wait and see what mother brings back for supper. P'r'aps it'll be fried fish or sausages—think of that! You must wash your face

now, and go to sleep, and the time'll soon pass."

The kitten soon took the last part of this advice, and curled itself into a soft little ball beside its mistress, but somehow Becky could not sleep this afternoon. The sofa seemed to be harder than usual, full of strange knobs and lumps that were not generally there. Whichever way she tried to lie was more uncomfortable than the last; the room felt hot and stifling, the rain pattered with a dull sound against the window, and her back began to ache badly. Presently she left off trying to go to sleep, and a few tears dropped on to the kitten's furry back. It would be such a long time before any one came home!

Just then a horse's hoofs clattered down the street, and there was a smart rap on the door. It was flung open, and on the threshold stood Dr Price, booted and spurred, the eager white faces of Snip and Snap in the background, with their tongues lolling out thirstily. Poor Becky clutched her kitten to her breast in terror.

"Oh," she cried, "the dogs! Don't let 'em come in. I've got a cat!"

But it was too late. Snip and Snap were in already, running round the kitchen in search of game, sniffing and poking their black noses everywhere. In another minute Becky felt sure they would leap on the sofa, and snatch the kitten from her.

"Oh, *do* send 'em out," she cried in an agony. "They'll kill it."

"Not they," said the doctor soothingly. "Don't you be afraid. We'll soon settle 'em.—Here, Snip, Snap, come out of that, you rascals."

It was not, however, settled very soon. Becky lay trembling on her couch, while Dr Price gave chase round the kitchen to the dogs, lashing at them with his whip, stumbling over chairs, and giving loud and sudden exclamations as they continually escaped his grasp. At last, however, he caught them, and with one white body dangling from each hand, carried them to the door, threw them out, and shut it. Then he straightened himself, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and cast a glance at his patient.

"Little beggars!" he said half admiringly. But now that the danger was over, Becky broke down entirely, and the doctor was dismayed to see that she was sobbing violently, and could not say a word. He strode across the room, and put his arm gently round her.

"It's all right, you know, Becky," he said kindly; "the kitten's all right. You mustn't cry so now. They frightened you, didn't they? But they shan't come in again."

Becky struggled with her tears, and after a while she was able to say that 'twarn't only the dogs, but her back was a bit bad to-day, and she didn't seem to be able to help crying.

"H'm," said the doctor, pulling his hay-coloured moustache thoughtfully, and glancing at the empty plate. "What time did you have dinner?"

"About one," said Becky faintly; "but I didn't just seem to care about it."

"But I daresay you could fancy something now, couldn't you?" said Dr Price, getting up. "Something very nice and hot. I'll be back in a minute. Don't you mind the dogs; they can't get in."

In a very short space of time he was out of the door and back again, followed, not by the dogs, but by a boy from the cook-shop, carrying a covered dish.

"Now," he said, "you just set to work on this, and you'll feel ever so much better."

Becky's eyes brightened at the smell of the savoury food. Hot roast mutton and potatoes seemed almost too good to be eaten all by herself; but she did not hesitate long, and began her meal with evident enjoyment. Dr Price sat near, whistling very softly to himself, and sometimes leaving off to smile a little under his light moustache, as Snip and Snap continued to hurl themselves with hoarse cries against the door.

"Well," he said, as Becky lingered over the last piece on her plate, "how do you like my physic? Is it good?"

"It's beautiful, sir," answered Becky, "and it's done me a deal of good; but might I give this bit to the kitten? She didn't have much dinner more than me to-day."

"To be sure," said the doctor, and he watched with serious interest while Becky prepared a little meal for her pet, and put the plate on the floor. "So *you've* got a cat, have you," he continued, bending down to examine the grey kitten. "Little Miss Chester offered me a cat the other day."

"That's Master Dennis Chester's sister, ain't it?" asked Becky with sudden interest. "Do you know him too?"

The doctor nodded. "I see them about often," he said. "Nice little girl, and nice little boy."

Becky gave a solemn shake of the head.

"He's more than nice," she said; "he's just splendid. Do you know what he did for father?"

Mr Price did not know; and Becky, strengthened and refreshed by her dinner, sat up eagerly on her sofa and told him the whole story, to which he listened very gravely.

"Well, that's a very good job," he said, as she ended. "We must hope Mr Tuvvy will be able to keep straight. But

there's lots of public-houses in Upwell, you know, as well as the Cross Keys at Fieldside, to tempt a man."

"They don't matter near so much," said Becky. "Father don't as a rule want to go out again after he's once home. Not unless," she added, with a little sigh, "it's washing day."

Dr Price gave a slow smile, took out his watch, and jumped to his feet with a suddenness that made Becky start.

"I ought to be seven miles off by this," he said, striding to the door. "Good-bye, Becky."

He seemed to Becky to make one spring from the door to his horse's back, and to gallop furiously up the street the next minute. There were one or two sharp, shrill shrieks from Snip and Snap as they tore after him, and then all was silent.

Dr Price's visits often ended in this abrupt way, but Becky wished he could have stayed a little longer this afternoon, for she was just going to ask him to take a message for her to Master Dennis, and say how very grateful she and Dan felt. However, as that could not be, she comforted herself by making up her mind to ask him next time he came, and settled cosily down to wait for Dan's arrival, when she could tell him all that had passed.

Chapter Nine.

Philippa's Visit.

"There is no doubt," said Mrs Trevor, "that the air of Fieldside suits dear Philippa; it seems to sooth her nerves."

"I think it does," answered Miss Mervyn.

"And there is no doubt," continued Mrs Trevor, "that the child needs change. She is unusually uncertain in her temper, and Dr Smith advised the sea-side at once. But it would be much easier to send her to my sister's."

"And she would have her cousins to play with," suggested Miss Mervyn.

"I do so wish Katharine had not such odd notions," continued Mrs Trevor discontentedly; "it quite makes me hesitate to let Philippa go there much. Those children are allowed to mix with all sorts of people."

"They are nice little children," Miss Mervyn ventured to say.

"Nice enough at *present*," said Mrs Trevor, "but who knows how they will grow up? If I were their father— However, you think it would be a good plan to ask my sister to have Philippa for a few days?"

"I certainly do," said Miss Mervyn, with earnest conviction.

Every one at Haughton Park thought so too, for Philippa had been so troublesome lately, that she had made the whole household uncomfortable as well as herself. "The dear child must be ill," Mrs Trevor said, and sent for Dr Smith.

"The old story, my dear madam," he said; "sensitive nerves. I should advise sending your daughter to the sea-side with some young companions. It is important that the system should be braced, and the mind gently amused."

On consideration, Mrs Trevor did not see how she could manage to supply Philippa with sea-air as well as young companions, but it occurred to her that the air of Fieldside might do as well, and to this Miss Mervyn had heartily agreed. So a letter was at once written to Miss Chester, and the subject gently broken to Philippa, who, greatly to every one's surprise and relief, made no difficulty whatever.

"I shall take the kitten with me," she said, rather defiantly, and nothing would have pleased Mrs Trevor better, for Philippa's kitten had become a plague and a worry to every one from morning till night. There were endless complaints about it. It was a thief, it had a bad temper, it scratched the satin chairs in the drawing-room, it climbed up the curtains, it was always in the way. It had broken a whole trayful of wine-glasses. Scarcely a day passed without some fresh piece of mischief. Perhaps the poor kitten could hardly be blamed for all this, for it would have been difficult for a wiser thing than a kitten to understand how to behave under such circumstances. Philippa would pet and spoil it one day, and scold it the next, so that it never quite knew when it was doing right or wrong. There was no doubt, however, that since its arrival there was less peace and quietness than ever at Haughton Park.

Meanwhile at Fieldside the idea of Philippa's visit was received with something like dismay. She had never stayed more than one day before, and there was a good deal of doubt in the children's minds as to whether she would make herself agreeable. Dennis in particular felt this strongly.

"Will Philippa stay two days or three days, Aunt Katharine?" he asked when he heard the news. "When Aunt Trevor says two or three days, does she count the one she comes and the one she goes, because that only leaves one clear day?"

"Oh, I daresay if you're happy together," answered Miss Chester, "her mother will like her to stay longer than that."

It was breakfast time, and she was reading a pile of letters which had just arrived, so that she did not pay much attention to the children. Dennis turned to Maisie and said softly: "I think one clear day's quite long enough; don't you?"

Maisie took some thoughtful spoonfuls of porridge before she answered.

"I'm not quite sure. Sometimes the longer she stays the nicer she gets."

"But, anyhow," objected Dennis, "I don't like her while she's *getting* nice, so I think it's best for her to go away soon."

Maisie was not quite so sure of this as her brother, though she too felt grave doubts about Philippa's behaviour. If she were in a nice mood, her visit might be pleasant, for there were plenty of things to show her at Fieldside, and plenty to do, if she would only be interested in them, and not have her "grown-up" manner.

"I wonder what she'll say to Darkie," she said, as she sat thinking of this after breakfast.

"She'll say Blanche is much prettier," answered Dennis; "she always says her things are nicer than ours."

"She hasn't seen him beg yet," said Maisie.

It was not long before Philippa had this opportunity, for when she was sitting at tea with her cousins that evening, she happened to look down at her side, and there was Darkie begging. He was the oddest little black figure possible, bolt upright, his bushy tail spread out at the back like a fan, and his paws neatly drooped in front.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, laughing; "how lovely! What a clever cat!"

"He always does it," said Dennis, with quiet pride. "We taught him."

"I told you he begged," added Maisie. "Why don't you teach Blanche?"

"I don't believe she could learn," said Philippa. "She's quite a nuisance at meal times. She stands up and claws and mews until she is fed. She doesn't give any peace."

Maisie looked shocked.

"That's not at all well-behaved," she said. "You oughtn't to let her do that."

"I can't help it," answered Philippa. "I often box her ears, but it's no good. She's a greedy cat, I think. Not so nice as this one, and after all, black is a better colour than white, and Darkie has a bushy tail."

Dennis looked triumphant, but Maisie was sorry to think that the white kitten was not turning out well; and though she had never liked it as much as the others, she felt it was not entirely its own fault. Philippa evidently did not know how to manage cats. She was now on the point of giving Darkie a large corner of buttered toast, when Dennis interfered.

"You mustn't do that, please," he said firmly. "Darkie's *never* fed at meals. He has his tea afterwards in his own dish."

"Well!" said Philippa, looking very much surprised, "I *do* call that cruel. You don't mean to say you let him sit up like that for nothing! Blanche wouldn't bear that. If we don't give her what she wants at once, she cries so loud that we're obliged to."

"She's learned that of you, I suppose, hasn't she?" said Dennis.

He spoke without any intention of offending his cousin, and did not mean to be rude; but Philippa drew herself up, and flushed a pale pink all over her face.

"You're a rude boy," she said. Then after a pause, she gave a little nod at him, and added, "Mother says you've just the air of a little Hodge the ploughboy. So there!"

But this arrow did not hit the mark, though Philippa had aimed it as straight as she could. Dennis did not mind being called a ploughboy a bit. He had seen lots of them, and considered theirs an agreeable and interesting occupation; so he only shrugged his shoulders, and left her to recover her temper as she could.

It never answered to be cross at Fieldside, and Philippa had found this out before. There was nothing gained by it. Maisie only looked surprised and sorry, Dennis took no notice at all, and Aunt Katharine was much too busy to spend any time in settling disputes. This being the case, it was surprising to see how soon Philippa got over her passionate fits, and was ready to behave as though nothing had happened.

It was so now, for though she was rather sulky with Dennis all the evening, she got up in quite a good temper the next morning, and did not seem to remember that he had been rude. The three children started off for a walk together soon after breakfast, for Aunt Katharine wanted a message taken to the Manor Farm. On the way, Dennis and Maisie had much to tell about Mr and Mrs Solace, their house, and all their animals; and Philippa listened with interest, though she thought it all rather "odd." This word was indeed constantly on her lips, for her cousins seemed to live in such a very different way from anything she was used to at home. When they passed through the village, nodding and smiling to nearly every one they met, and making little friendly remarks to the people at their cottage doors, she could not help thinking of her stiff walk in the park with Miss Mervyn, which always lasted a certain time if it was fine, and from which she often came back feeling very cross. If the walk at Fieldside were "odd," it was certainly amusing, and she began to wish there were a village at Haughton.

Presently the village ended, and now there was a long narrow lane to go through before the Manor Farm was reached.

"What a nice stick you've got," said Philippa to Dennis.

"It *is* a jolly stick, isn't it?" he said, holding it out for her to see more closely.

It had all manner of quaint knots on the stem, and the large knob at the top was carved into a very excellent likeness of the little rough dog Peter. Philippa looked at it with admiration.

"I should like one like that," she said. "Where could I buy one?"

"You couldn't buy one at all," said Dennis proudly; "it was made for me. Tuvvy made it."

"Who's Tuvvy?" inquired Philippa.

"A friend of mine," said Dennis; "he's Mr Solace's wheelwright."

"Oh yes, I remember," said Philippa; "Maisie told me about him. What odd friends you have!"

She looked curiously at Dennis as he marched along flourishing his stick. It must be rather nice, she began to think, to do things for people, and for them to be so grateful, and carve sticks on purpose for you.

Still, it was "odd," and there was a good deal in it that she did not understand.

Arrived at the farm, however, her thoughts were soon distracted; first by the appearance of the turkey-cock, and the agreeable discovery that she was not afraid of him.

"What a baby you are, Maisie!" she exclaimed.

"She isn't always," said Dennis; "there are lots of things worse than the turkey-cock that she doesn't mind a bit. Things *you'd* be afraid of, perhaps.—There is Mrs Solace at the door."

Mrs Solace beamed at the children in her usual kindly way; and, as was her custom, would not think of their leaving the house without eating something after their walk. At home Philippa would have despised bread and honey and new milk, but here somehow it tasted very good, and she was too hungry to stop to call it odd.

"The little lady wants some of your roses, Miss Maisie," said Mrs Solace, looking at the children as they sat side by side; "she's as white as a sloe-blossom."

"My complexion's naturally delicate, thank you," said Philippa, rather offended; "I never get sunburnt like Maisie."

"Oh, well, maybe you've outgrown your strength a bit, my dear," said the farmer's wife, smiling comfortably.—"And now, Master Dennis, I mustn't forget that Andrew's got a couple of young jackdaws for you: would you like to take them back now, or let 'em bide here a little?"

There was some consultation between Dennis and his sister, before it was finally settled that the jackdaws should not be taken then and there to Fieldside, but should first have a home prepared for them.

"And I know just where to build it," he said, as the three children started on their return after saying good-bye to Mrs Solace. "Just in that corner, you know, between the fowl-house and the cow-shed."

"Do you know how to build it?" asked Philippa.

"Well, perhaps not just quite exactly," said Dennis with candour; "but Tuvvy will tell me and help with the difficult parts. He passes through our field every night, you know."

"And shall you work at it just like a carpenter?" asked Philippa with surprise.

"As like as I can," said Dennis modestly; "you see, I do know a little carpentering because I've watched Tuvvy so much."

"You're a *very* odd boy," said Philippa. Every day that she passed at Fieldside she became more and more certain that her cousins did strange things, and liked strange things; but, at the same time, there was something pleasant about the life they led, and she did not feel cross nearly as often as she did at home. She even began to share their interest in the affairs of the village.

"I wish there were people at Haughton I could go and see like this," she said one day.

"But there isn't any village at Haughton," said Dennis. "There's only the Upwell Road outside the gates."

"There are lots of poor people in Upwell, though," said Philippa.

"That's quite different," said Dennis; "Upwell's a town. I don't suppose Aunt Katharine would let Maisie and me go about alone there as we do here."

For the rest of Philippa's visit she and Maisie were left a good deal to each other's society, for Dennis was now entirely occupied with the building of the jackdaws' house under Tuvvy's advice and direction. One afternoon the two little girls were sitting together in the play-room, threading beads on horsehair to make a collar for Darkie.

"What made Dennis want to help Tuvvy?" asked Philippa suddenly. "Was it after he had carved that stick for him?"

"Why, no; of course not," said Maisie. "Tuvvy did that because he was so much obliged to Dennis."

"Well, then," repeated Philippa, "why *did* Dennis take all that trouble for him?"

"He liked him," said Maisie; "and when you like people, you want to please them, I suppose."

"I don't think I do," said Philippa slowly; "I want them to please me."

"But that isn't fair," said Maisie. "You ought to please them if they please you; even Darkie knows that. Aunt Katharine says," she added, "that you ought to try to help people and be kind to them, whether they're kind to you or not."

Philippa shrugged her shoulders and seemed to have had enough of that subject, but although she was silent she thought it over in her mind. Maisie, meanwhile, was occupied with a very usual matter—the grey kitten's fate. She was never tired of wondering where it was, who had found it, or whether it was alive at all, and as she had no news of it, the subject was likely to last a long time.

"We shall never be able to see now which of the three is the greatest comfort," she said aloud, "because I don't suppose we shall ever see the grey kitten again."

"Darkie's the best," said Philippa; "he's so clever, and so handsome too."

"Don't you like Blanche?" asked Maisie, dropping her work and looking earnestly at her cousin.

"Sometimes," said Philippa airily, "but she isn't a comfort. Miss Mervyn says she's a plague, and mother would send her away directly if she wasn't mine. If she was as nice and well-behaved as Darkie, we should all love her."

"But," said Maisie, "Darkie is naughty by nature. He really is. We've had a great deal of trouble to make him obedient and good. He was a much worse little kitten than Blanche ever was."

"Well," said Philippa, "I'm quite sure no one could have had more advantages than Blanche. She's had everything she wants, and been allowed to do just as she likes."

"Then," said Maisie solemnly, "I expect you've spoiled her, and that's why she's so troublesome and naughty."

"Perhaps I have and perhaps I haven't," said Philippa recklessly; "I'm tired of threading beads. Let's go out and see how Dennis is getting on."

On the whole, in spite of some sulky moods and one or two fits of temper, Philippa's visit passed off extremely well, and Maisie was quite sorry when the time came to say good-bye. She and Dennis watched the carriage drive away, and waved their hands to her as long as it was in sight.

"She's been quite nice nearly all the while," said Maisie; "I wish she had stopped longer."

She spoke sincerely, for just now Dennis was so absorbed in his jackdaws' house that she felt she should miss Philippa and be rather dull.

"Can't I help you?" she asked, as she followed him to the corner where the jackdaws' house was being put up. It was not much to look at yet, but there were some upright posts, and a roll of wire netting, and some thin lathes of wood and a good deal of sawdust about, so that it had a business air.

"Well, you see," said Dennis, "girls always hurt their fingers with tools, but perhaps you shall try to-morrow. It's too late now. Doesn't it seem a waste, when you're doing something you like, to go to bed and sleep all night?"

"But if you didn't," said Maisie, "you couldn't go on with it, because it's all dark."

"I don't know that," said Dennis; "Tuvvy says it's light all night part of the summer.—There's the tea-bell; we must go in."

"I shouldn't like to be out in the night," said Maisie, with a little shiver, as the children ran towards the house, "when everything's in bed, and it's all so quiet and still."

"Everything isn't in bed," said Dennis. "There's owls, and glow-worms, and bats, and—"

"But they're none of them very *nice* things to be with," said Maisie hesitatingly; "and then there are bad people out at night, who get into houses and steal things, as they did at Upwell, don't you remember?"

"Oh, you mean thieves," said Dennis; "but as far as they go, it's better to be out of doors than in the house. The policemen are out all night as well as the thieves, so it wouldn't matter a bit."

"Well, you won't forget," said Maisie, quitting the subject of thieves, which was an unpleasant one to her, "that to-morrow morning I'm to help you with the jackdaws' house."

Dennis did not forget, and the following day Maisie was supplied with a hammer, and began her work with great zeal, but alas! two minutes had not passed before the heavy hammer came crashing down on her chubby fingers instead of on the nail she was holding. It was a dreadful moment, not only because of the pain, which was severe, but because she felt that it stamped her inferiority as a girl for ever. She looked piteously up at Dennis with her fingers in her mouth, and her eyes full of tears.

"There!" he began tauntingly, but seeing Maisie's round face quiver with pain, he stopped, threw down his tools, and knelt beside her on the grass.

"Does it hurt much?" he said. "Come in to Aunt Katharine."

Maisie suffered him to lead her into the house without saying a word, for she wanted all her strength to keep from sobbing. The poor fingers were bathed and bound up, and after she had been kissed and comforted, Aunt Katharine said that on the whole she thought Maisie had better not use hammer and nails again. Maisie thought so too just then, but presently, when the pain went off, she began to feel sorry that she was not to help with the jackdaws' house any more. Certainly, as Aunt Katharine pointed out, she could watch Dennis at his work and give advice; but as he never by any chance took any one's advice but Tuvvy's, that would not be very amusing.

"You can hand me the nails, you know," said Dennis, as she sat with a sorrowful face on Aunt Katharine's knee, "and after the jackdaws are in, you can always help to feed them." And with this she was obliged to console herself.

Chapter Ten.

One White Paw.

The jackdaws' house got on slowly, and this was not surprising, as Dennis had a way of pulling his work to pieces and doing it all over again. Maisie grew impatient sometimes, for at this rate she thought the jackdaws would not be settled in their home until summer was over.

"Hadn't you better let Tuvvy finish it off?" she said one day, when Dennis had spent a full hour in trying to fix a perch to his satisfaction; "it wouldn't take a real carpenter more than half an hour."

Dennis made no answer at first to this taunt. Maisie was only a girl, who did not understand, so it did not matter what she said. Whistling softly, he tried all manner of different positions for the perch, but none pleased him. After all, it would certainly be necessary to have Tuvvy's advice, but that was quite another matter to letting him do the work.

"I shall have to go and see Tuvvy," he said, carelessly throwing down the piece of wood he held; "perhaps Aunt Katharine will let you go too. You could stop at old Sally's, if you didn't want to go into the barn."

As it happened, Aunt Katharine wanted to send a pudding to old Sally, who had been ill, and she gladly gave Maisie leave to go with Dennis, so Peter in attendance, and the pudding in a basket, the children set out the next morning directly after their lessons.

Maisie was pleased to make this visit, and it was such a very bright fresh June morning, that everything out of doors seemed to be as happy as herself as she danced along, with Peter jumping and barking at her side. The sky was as bright blue as the speedwell in the hedges; the leaves on the trees, not old enough yet to be dark and heavy, fluttered gaily in the wind, and made a light green shimmer everywhere. The fields were still dressed in yellow and white, for none of the farmers had cut their grass, and in the woods the deep purple hyacinths still lingered, though these were nearly over. It looked a very happy, bright, flowery world, with everything in it fresh and new, and nothing old or sad to think about.

Maisie had not much to trouble her either that morning, but there was one little sad thought which would come creeping out of a corner in her mind sometimes, and that was the fate of the grey kitten. She wondered now, as she checked her pace to a walk, and rebuked Peter for snuffing at the pudding, whether old Sally might have heard something about it from Eliza. There was always a faint hope of this, but it grew fainter with each visit, and Dennis thought it quite silly to put the question at all. Nevertheless Maisie made up her mind, with a quiet little nod to herself, that she would not forget to ask to-day.

Sally and Anne were talking so very loud inside the cottage, that it was a long while before the children could make themselves heard, and it was not until Dennis had battered on the door with his stick that it was slowly opened.

"Lawk, mother!" cried Anne, "it's the young lady and gentleman from Fieldside.—Come in, dearies, and sit ye down."

Old Sally was sitting in the chimney corner wrapped in a shawl, her brown old face looking a shade paler than usual. Anne set chairs for the visitors next to her, and drew closely up herself on the other side of them, prepared to join in the conversation as much as allowed by her mother, who was a great talker, and always took the lead. The two old lilac sun-bonnets nodded one on each side of the children, as old Sally began plaintively:

"Yes, I've lost my appetite. I don't seem as if I could fancy nothing just lately. I'm tired of the food—it's taters, taters, taters, till I'm fair sick on 'em. Seems as if I could have a bit of summat green, it'd go down better. There was a gal brought me a mite of turnip tops t'other day. 'Twarn't on'y a morsel, so as I could hardly find it in the pot when it was biled, but it give a relish, like."

"Aunt Katharine's sent you a pudding," shouted Maisie, taking it out of the basket.

"And sech a cough as I've had," put in Anne, seizing the opportunity to speak, while her mother warmed the end of her trumpet at the fire; "I expect it's a sharp touch of influenzy."

"I seem to get weaker every day," resumed old Sally, presenting her trumpet for Maisie's use. "I crawled down to the gate, and couldn't hardly get back this morning."



"Why don't you have the doctor?" asked Maisie.

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"Why don't you have the doctor?" asked Maisie.

Sally shook her head.

"I've never taken no doctor's stuff in all my days," she said. "Anne there, she's had a deal, poor child; but 'twouldn't do *me* no good."

Dennis was beginning to make impatient signs, and Maisie knew he would not stay much longer, so in spite of Anne, who was preparing to speak, she shouted hastily down the trumpet, "Has your daughter Eliza found the kitten?"

It was answered as she expected, by solemn shakes of the head, both from Sally and Anne, in the midst of which the children took their leave.

"Please the Lord to send the rain and make the greens grow," were old Sally's last words. But there did not seem much chance of rain yet, for the sun was still shining splendidly, and as the children entered the shadowy barn, Tuvvy's dark figure was lighted up by a ray which came straight through the little window. Maisie seated herself modestly in the background on a chopping-block, while Dennis asked his questions, for she was rather in awe of Tuvvy, though she liked the barn very much, and found plenty to interest her. High up among the rough rafters over her head there were so many cobwebs hanging about, that it puzzled her to think where all the spiders were who had spun them. There were no spiders now, but there were masses of cobwebs in every nook and corner, some of them waving in the dimness like flimsy grey veils, others spread about in such strange shapes that they almost seemed alive. No doubt bats lived up there, Maisie thought, and she even fancied she could see them clinging to the wall, dusky and shadowy as the cobwebs themselves. She turned her eyes with a little shudder, for she did not like bats, to the floor of the barn, and this was much more cheerful to look at, for it was covered with pretty light yellow shavings all in curls and twists. More continually floated down to join them from Tuvvy's bench, where he was planing a piece of wood for Dennis; they were exactly like the flaxen hair of Maisie's favourite doll. Her serious gaze wandered on to the end of the barn, which was almost filled up by a great machine something like a gigantic grasshopper. It looked terribly strong with its iron limbs, although it was at rest, and she felt half afraid of it, though she had often seen it before. What was it, and why was it there?

She could easily have put this question to Tuvvy, but Maisie seldom asked questions. She had a habit of turning things over in her own little mind, and wrapping fancies round them, until she had quite a collection of strange objects in her small world. She would have missed these very much, if they had been exposed to daylight and turned into facts, and in this she was quite different from Dennis; he always wanted to know the reason why, and to have the meaning of things made quite clear to him.

She was not left long, however, to wonder about the big machine, for Tuvvy, giving a sudden wag of his head towards it, said: "The elevator's my next job, soon as hay harvest's over. Wants a lick o' paint."

"How jolly!" exclaimed Dennis, turning towards it with admiration and envy. "I say, won't it just take a lot of paint! What a jolly job!"

"I wish you had it then, master," said Tuvvy grimly. "'Tain't the sort as pleases *me*. It don't give you no credit when it's done, and the paint splashes you awful. It's what I call a reg'lar comical sort of a job."

"I should *like* it," said Dennis with deep conviction, still staring at the elevator. "What colour shall you paint it?"

"Gaffer said 'twas to be a sort of a yaller," said Tuvvy; "but it don't make much odds. There, master," he continued, as he finished his planing, "that's what you want, and I'll stop to-morrow as I pass, and give a look at the perches."

Dennis would gladly have stayed much longer to go fully into the painting of the elevator, and other like subjects; but he had been warned not to take up much of Tuvvy's time, so he unwillingly started home with Maisie, clutching his piece of wood under his arm. Until they reached the village, he was so lost in thought that he did not utter a word,

but then, coming to a sudden standstill, he exclaimed: "Why shouldn't we paint the jackdaws' house!"

Maisie was struck by the brilliancy of the idea. She stopped too, and gazed at Dennis with admiration.

"It would be splendid," she said. "Do you think Aunt Katharine would let me help?"

"Why, of course," said Dennis; "it's *quite* a different thing from using tools. *Any one* can paint!"

"Only the splashes," said Maisie a little doubtfully. "Tuvvy said you got splashed all over. Aunt Katharine mightn't like me to spoil my frocks."

"As to that," said Dennis, "you could wear a big apron. Painters always do. Hulloa! it's raining!"

So it was. The bright sunshine had vanished, and the sky was downcast and grey. First it rained gently, then faster, then it made up its mind in good earnest, and a regular downpour of drops pattered on the hedges, and fell softly on the dusty roads.

"How pleased old Sally will be," said Maisie, "because of the greens!"

"P'r'aps we'd better go in somewhere," said Dennis, looking at his sister's frock; "you're getting awfully wet, and we haven't got an umbrella."

They were just passing Dr Price's lodgings. Snip and Snap, who stood at the gate snuffing up the moist fresh air with their black noses, wagged their stumpy tails in a friendly manner to the children, and growled at Peter at the same time.

"You go in," continued Dennis, hurrying his sister up to the door, "and I'll run home and fetch umbrellas and cloaks for you. Aunt Katharine always says you're not to get wet."

Maisie would much rather have gone on with Dennis, and did not mind the rain a bit; but it was quite true that Aunt Katharine did not like her to get wet. So she yielded, and stood waiting in the little porch for the door to be opened, while Dennis sped up the road, and was soon out of sight.

"Come in, dearie, and welcome," said Mrs Budget, the doctor's landlady, when Maisie had asked for shelter, "and I'll just get a clean cloth and take off the worst of the damp."

She led the way to a very clean kitchen, talking all the while, and flapped vigorously at Maisie's skirt with a towel.

"The doctor's just in, and I says to him, 'Now I do hope, sir, you'll get your meal in comfort to-day, for it's as tidy a little bit of griskin as any one need wish to see, and done to a turn.' Owin' to his profession, he don't give his vittles no chance, the doctor don't. Most times he eats 'em standing, and then up in saddle and off again. It's a hard life, that it is, and he don't even get his nights reg'lar. Snug and warm in bed, and ring goes that bothering night-bell. If it was me, I should turn a deaf ear sometimes, pertickler in the winter.—Is your boots wet, my dear? No; then come in and see the doctor. He'll be pleased."

Maisie would have liked to stay in the kitchen with Mrs Budget, but she was too polite to refuse this invitation, and soon found herself at the door of the doctor's sitting-room.

"Little Miss Chester, sir," said Mrs Budget, "come to shelter from the rain;" and thereupon vanished to dish up the dinner.

Maisie looked curiously round the room. It was small, and smelt strongly of tobacco smoke; chairs, mantelpiece, and floor were untidily littered with old newspapers, books, pipes, and bills scattered about in confusion; a pair of boxing-gloves, which looked to her like the enormous hands of some dead giant, hung on the wall, and on each side of them a bright silver tankard on a bracket.

The doctor himself looming unnaturally large, sat sideways at the table on which a cloth was laid, reading a newspaper. He had his hat on, slightly tilted over one eye, and his booted legs were stretched out before him with an air of relief after fatigue. He jumped up when he saw the shy little figure on the threshold, and took off his hat.

"Come in, come in, Miss Maisie," he said. "Why, this *is* an honour. Where's your brother?"

"Dennis ran home for umbrellas," said Maisie, placing herself with some difficulty on the high horsehair-chair which he cleared with a sweep of his large hand; "it's raining fast."

"Why, so it is," said her host, glancing out of the window, "and ten minutes ago there was no sign of it. That's a good sight for the farmers. And where have you been? Far?"

"We've been to see Tuvvy," replied Maisie gravely; "he's helping Dennis, you know, with the jackdaws' house."

"Ah, to be sure," said Dr Price readily, though this was the first time he had heard of such a thing. "Tuvvy's a clever fellow, isn't he? And so he's going to stay on at the farm, after all?"

"Dennis did that, you know," said Maisie, forgetting her shyness a little. "Dennis made a Round Robin, and all the men put their names, and so Mr Solace let Tuvvy stop."

The doctor nodded, with a little smile. He seemed to know all about it, and this did not surprise Maisie, who thought it quite natural that such a great event should be widely spread.

"And since then," she went on, encouraged the attentive expression on her listener's face, "he's been as steady as steady! He doesn't have to pass the Cross Keys now, you know, because he goes home over our field, and he thinks it's partly that. It was the red blind drew him in, you see, and then he couldn't come out again."

Dr Price nodded again, and his smile widened in spite of evident efforts to conceal it, as Maisie turned her serious gaze full upon him.

"Just so," he said.

At that very minute it struck Maisie that she had made a dreadful mistake. She ought not to have mentioned red blinds to Dr Price. Dennis had told her he was sometimes "like Tuvvy." She hung her head, and her round cheeks flushed scarlet.

"I heard all about it the other day, Miss Maisie," said the doctor in a very kind voice, "and who do you think told me? Tuvvy's little girl. She's got a brother about the age of yours, and they both think a lot of what you did for their father."

Maisie began to forget her confusion in the interest of Tuvvy's little girl. She stole a glance at the doctor, who did not look a bit vexed at her unlucky speech, but went on as good-naturedly as ever.

"She's a nice little maid, and it's hard lines for her just now. She has to lie quite still all day because she's hurt her back. But she's very good and patient."

"Can't you make her well?" asked Maisie, remembering the firm faith of the village people in Dr Price.

"Oh, I hope so," he replied cheerfully. "But it takes time, and it's dull and lonely for her, you see, while her people are out at work all day."

"Is she *all* alone?" asked Maisie. "Hasn't she got *any one* to be with her?"

"Well, she's got a kitten," answered Dr Price, "and that seems a comfort to her, but that's about all. By the way, Miss Maisie," he added, "how are all your cats? What became of the kitten you offered me some time back?"

"Oh," said Maisie sorrowfully, "didn't you hear about it? We gave it to old Sally's Eliza at Upwell, and it ran out through the front shop and got lost in the streets. Aunt Katharine doesn't think we shall hear of it again now. It *was* such a dear little kitten; not pretty like Darkie, but very good and sweet, and purred more than any of them."

"That *was* a bad job," said the doctor sympathetically.

"Is Tuvvy's little girl's kitten a pretty one?" asked Maisie.

"Well, as to that," he replied slowly, "it looked to me about like other cats, but then I didn't notice it much, you see, because I'm not so fond of 'em as you are. If it had been a dog now, I could have told you all its points at once. The little girl—Becky her name is—was very fond of it, that's quite certain."

Deeply interested, Maisie secretly wondered what the "points" of a dog were, and concluded that they must mean its paws and the tip of its tail. After a minute's silence she put another question, rather sternly.

"What colour was it? You *must* have seen that."

Dr Price looked quite cast down by this severe examination.

"I'm afraid I didn't," he said humbly; "you see they always look alike to me."

"There's *quite* as much difference in them as there is in dogs," said Maisie in an instructive voice; "Madam's three last kittens were not a bit alike. One was black—we kept that; one was quite white—we gave that to Philippa; and one was stripey grey, and that was the one that went to Upwell and got lost."

"It would be odd, wouldn't it?" suggested the doctor, "if it was the one I saw at Tuvvy's."

Maisie sat very upright, with a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

"Could it be?" she exclaimed. "How did the little girl get it?"

Dr Price shook his head with a guilty air. "Didn't ask," he said.

His conduct with regard to the kitten had been thoroughly unsatisfactory, but he looked so sorry, that Maisie could not be hard upon him.

"Never mind," she said graciously; "I daresay, if you don't like cats—it had one white paw," she added quickly, with renewed hope, "but I daresay you didn't even notice that."

Dr Price was so anxious to please, that it is possible he might have gone the length of remembering the one white paw, but he was saved from this rashness by the entrance of Mrs Budget, bearing a covered dish from which came a very savoury smell.

"There's Miss Pringle stepping down with cloak and umbrella for Miss Chester," she said, "so I thought I'd just bring the dinner straight in. It's done to a turn, and smells like a nosegay," she added, lifting the cover with a triumphant flourish.

Pringle was Aunt Katharine's maid. It was most tiresome of her to come just now, for Maisie felt she might really be on the track of the lost kitten at last. She knew, however, that she must not stay any longer, and keep the doctor from the enjoyment of his dinner, so with a little sigh she slid off her chair, and held out her hand to say good-bye.

"And if I were you, Miss Maisie," were the doctor's parting words, as he followed her out to the door, and folded the big cloak carefully round her, "I should just go over to Upwell, and have a look at that kitten one day. You'd leave it with Becky, wouldn't you, if it does turn out to be yours?"

Maisie's eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Of course we should," she said; "that is, if old Sally's Eliza doesn't mind, and it's a really good home."

The doctor lingered so long in the porch looking after his little guest as she hurried up the wet road by Pringle's side, that Mrs Budget replaced the cover with a hasty crash.

"There's no credit in cooking for him, none at all," she muttered.

As for Maisie, she would have liked wings to fly back to Fieldside with this wonderful news, but she had to restrain her impatience and keep pace with Pringle, who held the umbrella and took mincing steps through the mud.

The way seemed endless, and when she did arrive, it was disappointing to find that Aunt Katharine would not be home till late in the evening. There was therefore only Dennis to whom she could pour out the story of Tuvvy's little daughter, and her hopes and fears about the grey kitten. He was interested and impressed at first, but very soon ready to dismiss the subject and return to the one which really filled his mind—the painting of the jackdaws' house.

"Only fancy," said Maisie, breaking out again for the twentieth time, as the children sat at dinner, "if it should be our dear little grey kitten who we thought was dead. Wouldn't it be lovely?"

"Yes," said Dennis absently. Then, after a moment's pause: "What colour had we better paint it?"

"Paint it!" repeated Maisie vaguely; but meeting a look of scorn from Dennis, she hastily added: "Oh, you mean the jackdaws' house; but you *are* pleased about the kitten, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," answered Dennis rather impatiently, "but that's only a chance, you see. If it is the kitten, it is; and if it isn't, it isn't. But the jackdaws' house is a real thing, and we *must* settle about the colour. How do you think," he went on seriously, "it would do to have it the same colour that Tuvvy's going to do the elevator? He might let us have some of his paint, you see."

"I shouldn't like it at all," said Maisie promptly; "he said it was to be a sort of a yaller, and I thought it sounded very ugly."

"Well, then," said Dennis, "you say a colour."

Maisie thought it over, her eyes fixed on the meadows and the fast-falling rain outside.

"I should paint it green," she said suddenly.

"Why?" asked Dennis.

"Because it's a pretty colour," she replied, "and the jackdaws would like it. It's like the leaves and grass, and they might think they were in a tree."

Dennis received the idea with a short laugh of contempt.

"Jackdaws are not such ninnies as that," he said. "They're sharp birds; they're not likely to mistake a cage for a tree. If we don't have it yellow, let's have it bright red, like Mr Solace's new wagon."

Maisie had known from the first that her opinion was merely asked as a matter of form, Dennis would have the colour he wished and no other; so she made no further objection, and it was settled, subject to Aunt Katharine's approval, that the jackdaws' house should be painted the brightest red possible to get. This done, Maisie retired into a corner of the play-room with Madam, and related to her attentive ear the discovery of that morning.—She was a better listener than Dennis, for at any rate she was not eager to talk on other matters, but Maisie longed to tell some one who really cared as much as she did herself. Aunt Katharine would be home soon, which was a comfort, and perhaps Philippa too would like to know. She had never seen the grey kitten, but she had heard about it so very often. Maisie made up her mind to write to her. She would have been surprised if she had known that Philippa also had made a discovery, and bad news to tell her of Madam's lost child. To hear what this discovery was, we must go back to the day when Philippa went home after her visit to Fieldside.

Chapter Eleven.

Philippa makes a Discovery.

When Philippa, looking back from her seat in the carriage by Mrs Trevor's side, could no longer see Dennis and Maisie making signs of farewell, she leaned back with a pout of discontent. Her visit to Fieldside was over, and she had been so happy, that it seemed flat and dull to be going home with only Miss Mervyn to see when she got there. As they drove quickly through the village, she looked quite longingly at all the familiar places they passed. At the post-office,

where her cousins had taken her to fetch the afternoon letters and buy bull's-eyes; at the cottage, where the old woman lived who had the immense yellow cat; at the blacksmith's, who was shoeing Dr Price's grey horse; and at the school-house, where the chubby-faced boys and girls were just pouring out into the road.

Farther on, she could see in the distance the gables and outbuildings of the Manor Farm, and the deep thatched roof of old Sally's cottage, from which a thin thread of smoke was rising. She was sorry to leave all these friendly things, and there seemed nothing to look forward to at Haughton Park, except perhaps the white kitten. She began to wonder how it was, and whether it had missed her, and remembering Maisie's advice, she determined that she would try to improve its behaviour, and make it into a really good cat. Her first question, therefore, when she arrived was, "Where's Blanche?" and she looked impatiently at her mother for the answer, for Mrs Trevor hesitated.

"The kitten, my darling?" she said rather nervously; "the kitten's in the stable, I think. I told Thomas to take great care of it."

Philippa, who was on her way up-stairs, turned round and faced her mother defiantly.

"Why is it in the stable?" she asked. "Who sent it there? It must come back directly."

"My sweet Philippa," said Mrs Trevor in a soothing voice, "do listen to me a moment; the kitten is a naughty little mischievous thing, and I cannot put up with it in the house any longer. I will just tell you why. You know my new velvet mantle which has just come down from London? The other day Briggs found the kitten lying in the very middle of it on my bed! Its paws were muddy, its hairs came off and stuck to the velvet, and I doubt if the mantle will ever be the same. Now, my darling, *don't* agitate yourself. It will be quite happy in the stable, and we shall be much more comfortable without it indoors. If anything's broken or goes wrong, I'm always told it is 'Miss Philippa's kitten,' and I'm tired to death of it."

Mrs Trevor paused and looked appealingly at her daughter, who only stamped her foot angrily in reply.

"I'll give you what you like for a pet instead of it. Love-birds, now, or a cockatoo? A cockatoo is no trouble at all, and quite an ornament to the house, and worth a great deal more than a silly white kitten.—Where are you going, my love?"—for Philippa had suddenly rushed back through the hall and out of the front door. In a short time she reappeared with the kitten hugged up to her breast, passed her mother without a word, went straight into the schoolroom and shut the door very loud. Mrs Trevor looked after her with a sigh of despair, but as usual made no further attempt to oppose her, and Philippa was left to amuse herself with her kitten as she liked.

But it was not nearly so easy, she said to herself, to find amusement at Haughton as it had been at Fieldside. There she had never known what it was to be dull and cross; here she felt both, as she looked round the empty schoolroom with the white kitten tucked under one arm. The room had a prim, precise air, with all the books and toys carefully arranged on the shelves, the musical box in its shining case on its own particular table, and nothing left lying about. Philippa pursed up her lips discontentedly. How different it was to the pleasant noise and bustle, and all the little daily excitements of Fieldside! How dull it was! How sorry she was to come back to it! She let the kitten drop listlessly, and stood regarding her playthings and treasures with gloomy dislike. Not one of them pleased her, not even her last new possession, the musical box. The kitten seemed to share her mood, for she walked restlessly about the room, sniffed in a disdainful way at the furniture, and gave a tiny peevish mew.

"Here, Blanche, come and play," cried Philippa.

She threw an india-rubber ball across the floor, but the kitten hardly deigned to turn her head towards it.

"How stupid you are!" exclaimed her mistress angrily, as she thought of Darkie's frolics and gambols. "You have heaps of things to play with, and yet you won't play, and I don't believe you're a bit glad to see me either."

Blanche continued to stroll uneasily round the room as though in search of something, and took no notice of the ball, even when it was rolled right under her nose.

"Well, I suppose what you want is your clockwork mouse," said Philippa, "and that's your very best toy. But I shan't let you have it long, because I'm not going to spoil you ever any more."

She wound up the little mouse, and let it run nimbly round and round close to the kitten. Formerly it had been a never-failing excitement, but now, to Philippa's surprise and vexation, Blanche sat perfectly unmoved before it, and did not lift a paw. Perhaps during her short visit to the stable she had become acquainted with real mice, for after giving one slight sniff at the imitation one, she rose and walked away with a high and scornful step.

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed Philippa. She stood gazing at the kitten as though she could hardly believe what she had seen, then turned and flung herself moodily into the window-seat. Everything at Haughton, even the kitten, was tiresome, and disagreeable, and dreadfully dull.

"You're not a bit of comfort," she said to Blanche, who was now mewing at the door to be let out, "and if they send you to the stable again, I shan't fetch you back. I believe you're just fit for a low, mean stable-cat. So there!"

It was some relief to hurl this insult, but it hurt Philippa a great deal more than the cat, and her eyes filled with tears as she turned her head and looked out into the garden. Here again the contrast to Fieldside struck her. Broad gravelled terraces, flights of stone steps, masses of brilliant flower-beds; and beyond, the wide green spaces of the park, with its groups of trees all standing in exactly the right places, well ordered, stately, correct, as though the very shrubs and plants had been trained to hold themselves with propriety.

At Fieldside you could not look for a minute out of the schoolroom window without seeing something alive. Cows

strolling across the meadow; Aunt Katharine's chickens venturing into the garden, and driven out by Peter, cackling and shrieking; companies of busy starlings working away on the lawn; it was all lively and cheerful, though Mrs Trevor always said it was "buried in the country." Houghton Park was considered a "beautiful place," and Philippa was used to hearing it spoken of as such, but just now she decided in her own mind that it was not to be compared to Fieldside. As she sat gloomily gazing out of the window, her eye was caught by something which she had not noticed before, and which she began to observe with some interest. It was nothing more remarkable than the figure of a boy in a ragged jacket, who knelt on the garden path below, weeding. Philippa studied him attentively.

He was small and thin, just about Dennis's age, and he was certainly poor, for his clothes were old and shabby. Who was he? If he were a boy in the garden at Fieldside, she went on to reflect, Dennis and Maisie would know his name, and where he lived, and how many brothers and sisters he had, and what his father earned a week, and how long he had left school. Why should she not make these inquiries, and afterwards, perhaps, she could give him some new clothes, and some money to buy sweets. Then he would be grateful, as Tuvvy was to Dennis, and be willing to do all sorts of things for her. Suddenly, fired by this resolve, she jumped off the window-seat, intent on running down into the garden, when Miss Mervyn came into the room.

"Well, my dear Philippa," she said kindly, "have you enjoyed your visit?"

"Very much," answered Philippa ungraciously. "I hate coming home. There's nothing to do."

"Oh, come," said Miss Mervyn, with an air of forced cheerfulness, "you mustn't say that, with all these things to amuse you. Have you wound up the musical box?"

"I don't care for it," said Philippa, with as much disdain as the kitten had shown for the clockwork mouse.

Miss Mervyn's glance fell upon Blanche, who was washing her face delicately with the tip of one paw.

"How pleased the kitten must have been to see you again!" she remarked.

"You're just as wrong as you can be about that," said Philippa decidedly. "She wasn't a bit pleased, and I believe she'd rather go back to the stable."

"Well, to be sure, it *is* the proper place for her, isn't it?" agreed Miss Mervyn, with a look of relief; "and I daresay she's really happier there."

"But, all the same, I don't mean to let her go," added Philippa; "I shall keep her with me more than ever, and teach her to be very fond of me."

"Where are you going, my dear? it is just tea-time," asked Miss Mervyn, as Philippa left the room hurriedly after this remark.

"Into the garden," Philippa called back. "You needn't come," and she ran down-stairs as fast as she could. Her mind was so set upon doing good to the poor boy in the garden, that it did not once strike her that there was some one nearer home to whom she ought to be kind. Poor Miss Mervyn! How often Philippa worried her with her whims and naughtiness, and yet how patient and good she was! But that seemed natural to Philippa. It would have been quite as strange for Miss Mervyn to be cross and selfish, as for Blanche the kitten to be meek and well-behaved.

When Philippa reached the spot where the boy knelt, hard at work, she came to a standstill, and hardly knew how to begin the conversation. It would have been easier if he had looked up, or seemed aware of her presence; but his whole attention was so fixed on getting out the weeds with his knife, that he evidently had not heard her approach.

"Good afternoon, little boy," she began condescendingly at last.

The boy raised a hot face, and touched his ragged cap. He was much taller and bigger than Philippa herself but it seemed right to her to call him "little boy."

"Who are you?" was her first question. "I've never seen you before."

"I'm the new gardener's boy, miss," he answered; "I ain't been here long."

Philippa looked down at him, wondering what she should say next.

"Are you," she began hesitatingly, after a moment's pause—"are you very poor?"

The boy seemed a little puzzled. He sat back on his heels, and scraped the gravel thoughtfully from the blade of his knife.

"We ain't near so bad off as some in Upwell," he said at last; "but we could do with a little more sometimes, now that Becky's so bad."

"Oh, you live at Upwell, do you?" said Philippa; "and who is Becky, and why is she bad?"

"She's my sister, miss," answered the boy, "and she's had a fall and hurted her back. She can't run about, and hasn't not for ever so long. It's very hard on Becky. She was always one to like running about."

"Won't she ever get well?" asked Philippa, drawing a little nearer, and speaking with real interest.

"The doctor says she will, if so be she keeps quiet a bit longer, and has lots of nourishing things," replied the boy.

"Why doesn't she have them, then?" asked Philippa.

The boy cast down his eyes. "Well, you see, miss, up to now things has been a bit orkerd. Father didn't always bring home much, and I was at school. But that'll be different now, and I expect we'll get along fine."

At this moment Miss Mervyn appeared from the house. She carried Philippa's broad hat, a parasol, and a small knitted shawl, and came hastening up rather breathless.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, "no hat, nothing to shield you from the sun, and nothing over your shoulders! You will most certainly be ill!" She put the hat on Philippa's head, and the shawl round her neck, as she spoke. "Your tea is ready," she continued, with a puzzled glance at the boy, who had fallen busily to work again.

Philippa made no other answer than a sharp backward drive with her elbow, which nearly hit Miss Mervyn in the face as she stooped anxiously over her. Then she continued hurriedly to the boy:

"What's your name, and where do you live in Upwell? I mean to go and see your sister, and take her some nourishing things."

"Thank you, miss," murmured the boy shyly; "my name's Dan Tuvvy, and we live at Number 10 Market Street."

"Then," said Philippa, "it's your father, I suppose, that works for Mr Solace?"

Dan nodded.

"And it was my cousin Dennis," continued Philippa, with a superior air, "who was so very good to him, you know, and took so much trouble to persuade Mr Solace not to turn him away. You ought to be very grateful, you know, to my cousin Dennis."

Dan, who had not once looked up since Miss Mervyn's appearance, now seemed suddenly startled out of his shyness. He raised a face so glowing with pleasure and affection at the mention of Dennis's name, that he was almost like another boy.

"Well, we are, miss," he said earnestly, "just about—Becky, and me, and mother too," he added, as an after-thought. "We'd do anything for Master Dennis. And I'm pleased to hear, miss, as how you're his cousin, because p'r'aps you'll tell him so."

His dark eyes brightened as he spoke, and his cheeks flushed. Philippa, surprised at the sudden change, stood looking at him silently for a minute. How fond every one is of Dennis! she thought.

"I'll tell him what you say when I see him again," she said; "and you must remember to tell your sister that I'm coming to see her, and bring her some nourishing things."

"Thank you, miss," said Dan, dropping into his old shy manner again, as he touched his cap and bent over his weeding. He did not seem overcome with pleasure at the idea of Philippa's visit, and she felt a little disappointed, but she had been interested in his talk; and as she went back to the house with Miss Mervyn, her mind was so full of it, that she felt obliged to tell her all about Tuvvy and Dennis, and her own plans for Becky's benefit. Miss Mervyn listened attentively, and though she was not equal to Maisie and Dennis as a companion, Philippa was surprised to find how well she entered into the matter, and what good suggestions she could make. During tea-time, which passed much more pleasantly than usual, she found a great many questions to ask.

"Why do you suppose Dan looked so very pleased when I talked about Dennis?" she inquired.

"I suppose because he is a grateful little boy," answered Miss Mervyn.

"Do people always look like that when they are grateful?" said Philippa. "Will his sister look like that when I take her the nourishing things?"

"Perhaps she will," said Miss Mervyn; "but, my dear Philippa, it is not only giving people things that makes them grateful."

"What does, then?" asked Philippa, with a stare of surprise.

"Well, I think kindness and love make people more grateful than rich gifts. Your cousin Dennis liked Tuvvy, and took a great deal of trouble for him. That was better than giving him a great deal of money."

Philippa thought this over a little.

"But," she said at length, "I can't possibly like Dan's sister Becky yet, you know, because I've never seen her."

"Meanwhile, then," said Miss Mervyn, "you can try to be grateful to all the people you have seen and love, and who do so much for you every day. Perhaps if you see Becky, you will like her too, and then you will be so glad to make her happy, that you will not stop to think whether she is grateful or not."

"What should you think," pursued Philippa, "are the most nourishing things of all?"

Miss Mervyn bent her mind anxiously on the subject, and finally decided in favour of milk, eggs, and beef-tea.

"But," objected Philippa, "they're all nasty, except eggs. Can't she have something nice? Jelly and tarts, and roast chickens?"

"Suppose," said Miss Mervyn, "we write out a list of things, and then you can show it to your mother this evening, and hear what she thinks."

That seemed a good plan to Philippa, and she was soon so absorbed in writing down desirable delicacies, that she would hardly consent to be dressed when the hour came for her to go to Mrs Trevor. Ready at last, she flew down-stairs in high spirits with the list in her hand, and at once burst into the story, jumbling up Becky, Dennis, Dan, and Tuvvy the wheelwright in such a manner that her mother gazed at her distractedly. Philippa was too excited to make things very clear, but at last Mrs Trevor gathered that for some reason or other she wished to go and see the sister of the boy who worked in the garden.

"And I want to take her these," added Philippa, thrusting a long scrawled list before her mother's eyes.

Mrs Trevor raised her eye-glasses and looked at it in despair.

"Why, my darling?" she inquired feebly.

"She's ill," answered Philippa. "May Mrs Bunce pack them in a basket?"

"Certainly, you may send them to the little girl if you wish, my dear, and it's very sweet of you to think of it. But I couldn't let you go into a dirty cottage and see sick people, you know. You might catch all sorts of complaints."

And to this, in spite of Philippa's angry arguments, Mrs Trevor remained firm. It did not matter, she said, what Dennis and Maisie were allowed to do at Fieldside, or how many poor people they went to see there. She did not choose Philippa to have anything to do with sick people in Upwell, and she could not listen to any more on the subject.

Philippa flew out of the room with her eyes full of tears, and her list crumpled up in her hand, cast herself upon Miss Mervyn's neck, and told her all this as well as she could for her sobs.

Miss Mervyn listened with sympathy.

"Did your mother say why she did not wish you to go?" she asked presently.

"Because," said Philippa with difficulty, "she says I should catch complaints. Dennis and Maisie don't catch complaints."

"Would you like me to go and hear what Mrs Trevor says?" suggested Miss Mervyn kindly. "Perhaps I could explain things to her better; but you must promise to be good and patient if your mother does not alter her mind."

"I promise, I promise," said Philippa eagerly. "And if you will persuade her, I will never, never be naughty again, and I will love you always."

Miss Mervyn shook her head rather sadly. "Don't promise too much," she said, as she left the room.

She had a difficult task before her, but she was so sincerely anxious to help Philippa, that she was at last able to put the matter before Mrs Trevor in a way which overcame her objections.

To begin with, it was a really good thing for Philippa to take an interest in something outside herself. Already, since she had this plan in her mind, she was more cheerful and contented. Then the little girl she wished to see was not ill of any complaint which Philippa could possibly catch, but had only strained her back. Then it would be quite possible to ascertain whether the Tuvvys were decent people, and their cottage fit for Philippa to enter. Miss Mervyn herself would go first and observe everything carefully. And finally, the child had so set her heart on making this visit, that it would be unwise to oppose it unless absolutely necessary. At length, therefore, she returned to the schoolroom, where she found Philippa curled up disconsolately in the depths of an armchair.

"Well," she exclaimed, springing up, "may I go?" Then as she saw Miss Mervyn smile, she flung her arms suddenly round her neck. "You're tremendously kind," she said; "and now you'll see how good I'll be always, and always, and always."

Miss Mervyn smiled still more. "That's a very long time, my dear Philippa," she said; "but at any rate you know now what it is to feel grateful, don't you? But you haven't thanked your mother yet. Run down-stairs and tell her how pleased you are."

Philippa's first impulse was, as usual, to refuse to do what she was told, but this evening she felt quite a new wish to please Miss Mervyn, and obeyed silently.

Chapter Twelve.

The Greatest Comfort.

"This *is* a dull room!" exclaimed Philippa.

She had just finished unpacking the basket of good things she had brought for Becky, and still knelt beside it, with various parcels spread out round her on the floor. Miss Mervyn had left her at the Tuvvys' cottage for a quarter of an hour, while she went to do some shopping in the town, and would call for her again in the pony-carriage, so that the two children were alone. They had been very silent hitherto, Philippa occupied with her unpacking, and Becky gazing at her meanwhile with shy admiration. It was like looking at a pretty picture, she thought—only better, because it was

real; and her dark eyes examined her visitor's face and dress narrowly, while the kitten, alarmed at the entrance of a stranger, peeped out from the safe shelter of her arms. Neither she nor her mistress was accustomed to see such fine drooping feathers as those in Philippa's hat, nor such a soft white dress with lace frills. They seemed to make everything round them look dingier and more shabby. Philippa herself however, was much too busy to notice anything but the contents of her basket for some time. She continued to pull out package after package, naming each as she laid it on the floor, "Arrowroot, eggs, sponge-cakes," in a business-like manner, until she reached the last. Then tossing back her long hair, she sat back on her heels, gave a searching look round the room, and without a moment's hesitation exclaimed: "This *is* a dull room!"

Becky did not answer. Now that Philippa was there, it did look darker and more dismal than usual somehow, and the ceiling blacker with smoke.

"Do you lie here alone all day?" asked Philippa. "Don't you hate it?"

"'Tain't so bad as it used to be," said Becky.

"I couldn't bear it," remarked Philippa, after gazing at Becky for a minute with her mouth wide open.

"Folks has *got* to bear things," said Becky.

"I don't bear things," returned Philippa quickly; "I cry, and then mother or some one gets me what I want."

"If I was to cry ever so, mother wouldn't hear me," said Becky, "because she's out charing all day. Anyhow, she couldn't make my back well. Dr Price says as how nought but patience will do that, an' plenty to eat."

"Well, you'll have some nourishing things now, won't you?" said Philippa, with a glance at the parcels, "and I hope they'll make you well. And when you've eaten them all, I'm going to bring you some more."

"Thank you kindly, miss," said Becky, but she did not look so very pleased as Philippa had hoped, and she began to think she was not perhaps a grateful little girl. What should she say next, she wondered, and just then her eye fell on the kitten, which had jumped down to examine the parcels, and was patting them softly.

"Oh, you've got a cat!" she exclaimed. "Not a very pretty one, is it?"

An affectionate light came into Becky's eyes as she looked at her kitten.

"I call it pretty," she said; "but then I'm ever so fond of it, and it's fond of me too."

"I've got a cat at home," said Philippa, "a pretty white one called Blanche, but I don't think she's fond of me, though I give her all sorts of things. How did you make yours fond of you?"

"I don't know," said Becky. "I don't give her much, so 'tain't that. Sometimes she don't get much to eat for ever so long. I expect, though, she knows what a lot I think of her, and that's where it is!"

Philippa looked thoughtfully from the kitten to its mistress.

"I don't believe," she said, "that if I were to be ever so fond of Blanche, she would care much for me. Everybody's cats seem nicer than mine."

"I can't think how I ever got on without this one," said Becky. "She's a loving little thing, and that funny in her ways! Often and often she'll make me laugh with her tricks, even when my back's bad. She's a real comfort, like Dan said she would be—the greatest comfort I've got."

The greatest comfort! The words made Philippa think of Maisie and her grey kitten's loss.

"Where did you get it?" she asked quickly. "Who gave it to you?"

"Dan found her stray in the streets," said Becky. "A boy was going to behave cruel to her, and Dan fought him, and brought her home to me."

Philippa sprang to her feet.

"Then I do believe," she exclaimed, "that it's Maisie's grey kitten!"



Becky clutched her pet closely, and looked up with eyes full of terror.
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Maisie's grey kitten! Becky clutched her pet closely, and looked up with eyes full of terror. How could it be any one's kitten but hers?

"You know," continued Philippa, much too excited by the discovery to think of Becky's feelings, "Maisie Chester's my cousin, sister to Dennis who was so kind to your father."

Becky nodded.

"Well, their cat had three kittens—a black one, a white one, and a grey one. They kept the black one, and gave the white one to me on my birthday, but the grey one got lost. It was sent to the tinsmith's in Upwell, and it ran away, so, of course," ended Philippa, pointing triumphantly at the small form in Becky's arms, "that's it. Won't Maisie be glad! She always liked it the best, and she's always talking about it now."

Before Becky could say a word, and, indeed, before she had got the dreadful fact into her mind that the kitten belonged to some one else, Miss Mervyn's entrance put a stop to any further explanation. She was anxious for Philippa to come away at once, and Philippa herself, full of her great discovery, was equally anxious to go, for she wanted to tell Dennis and Maisie the news without delay. They had tried to find the kitten for such a long while, and now she had been clever enough to do it, all by herself!

Might they drive straight to Fieldside, she asked, instead of going home; and in her eagerness, and the bustle of departure, she almost forgot to say good-bye to Becky at all. Then the big empty basket was carried out to the pony-carriage, Philippa's slim, white figure floated after it, there *was* a clatter of wheels, the scramble of the pony's feet, and Becky was alone.

Had it been a dream? Had Philippa really been there? What dreadful thing had she said? Maisie's grey kitten! Could it, oh, could it really be true? Perhaps it was a bad dream, after all. Becky glanced down on the floor where Philippa had unpacked the basket. There, just as she had left them, were all the nice things she had brought. Eggs, cakes, jelly in a basin, neat packets of arrowroot—it was no dream. She had really been, and brought them all with her, but what were they compared to what she would take away? What were all the good things in the world, if the grey kitten were to be Becky's friend and playfellow no longer? How could she do without her?

Poor Becky threw herself back on her couch, and covered her face with her hands in despair. The kitten seeing this, thought her mistress was going to take a nap, and at once settled herself in her usual place, with her paws planted on Becky's chest, and her green eyes lazily blinking into her face. They had passed many an hour together in this position, but to-day the kitten noticed something strange, for presently one shining tear and then another crept slowly between her mistress's closed fingers. This was some new game or joke, and she at once began to join in it, by patting at them softly, taking care not to put out her claws, and purring to show her satisfaction. What was her surprise when Becky suddenly caught her tightly to her breast, and bursting into heart-broken tears, exclaimed:

"Oh Kitty, Kitty, my own Kitty! Whatever shall I do?"

This was certainly most puzzling, and so unlike anything in the kitten's experience, that she could not make out what part her mistress wished her to play. She got out of the difficulty at last by going snugly to sleep, and presently, worn out by grief and crying, Becky was quiet too, and began to take comfort in the thought that she should soon be able to tell Dan all about it. He had often helped her out of troubles before, and perhaps he would think of some way now.

She lay with her eyes fixed patiently on the door, waiting for him to appear; but she knew before that happened the door would open twice, once for Mrs Tuvvy, and once for her father, who both got home earlier. Becky had seen the same things so often from her dim corner, that she could have described them with her eyes shut, and it was all just the same this afternoon. A heavy, flat-footed step, and Mrs Tuvvy entered with a tired, ill-used look on her face, cast off her shawl, untied the strings of her bonnet, and tipped it forward on her head. Becky would hardly have known her mother without her bonnet, for she wore it indoors and out. Then, talking all the time in a high, drawling voice, she proceeded to get the evening meal ready. If it were early in the week, there would be something savoury to cook,

which she had brought home with her; or, perhaps, only a small piece of cold pork for Tuvvy's special benefit. Tonight there were some slices of ham to broil, and the room was soon full of the sound and smell of her preparations.

The door opened again, and Tuvvy himself swung in, with a nod and a smile, and "How's yourself, Becky?" In times not long gone by Tuvvy had been used to enter in a very different manner, but he always came in steadily now, and sat down hungrily to his meals, however scanty they might be. Last of all, Dan, rosy-faced and cheerful, burst into the room; and then supper began, with a great clatter of knives and forks. Becky could not eat to-night, for she had far too much on her mind, but she knew it would be quite impossible to say anything until the meal was over. It seemed to last a long, long time, but at length Tuvvy gave his chair a little push back from the table, took his pipe and an old newspaper from his pocket, and settled himself to read. Mrs Tuvvy pulled herself out of her seat with a weary sigh, and began to journey backward and forwards with the empty dishes to the back kitchen. Now was the time.

"Dan," said Becky, "come here; I've got summat to tell yer."

Dan left off unlacing his boots, and at once went to his sister's side, but poor Becky's heart was so big with her sad story, that it was some time before she could make it plain to him. When he did understand it, he sat silent for a long while, with his lips pursed up, as though he were whistling.

"Say summat, Dan," cried Becky, in an agony at last.

"If so be," began Dan slowly, "as how it's Miss Maisie's kitten, 'tain't ours."

The kitten had finished its supper, and stretched itself out to sleep, just under Becky's chin. She gazed at her brother over its back, as though he were Fate itself, but said nothing.

"And we allers said," he went on, "as how we was very grateful to Master Dennis alonger of what he did for father."

Becky nodded. She knew that. It had made part of her day-dreams for months past.

"But there didn't seem any way to show it, because they're so rich and we're poor." Becky trembled at what was coming, as Dan went on in an even voice, very low, so as not to disturb his father. "And now we've got a thing to give. Course if I hadn't fought for it, and you hadn't took care on it, 'twouldn't a been alive now at all. So we'll give it to 'em cheerful, and be glad to do it."

This was poor comfort.

"Oh, I don't want to give it up," cried Becky. "I ain't glad to let it go. I'm that fond of it."

"Miss Maisie, she was fond of it too, wasn't she?" said Dan.

Becky nodded. "She loved it best of the three, Miss Trevor said. But she's got another cat, and I've got ne'er a one but this."

"Maybe," said Dan doubtfully, "I could get yer another you'd like as well in time."

Becky's only answer was to kiss the kitten fervently and shake her head.

Dan took hold of his head with both hands, and thought hard for a minute. Then he looked up and said, "There's two things, but you mustn't build on 'em." Becky's eyes showed a faint gleam of hope. "First," said Dan, holding up one finger, "it may not be it. There's more nor one grey kitten lost in Upwell. And second," holding up two, "if it is hers, she may let you keep it. You see she had given it away once."

How wise Dan was! Becky began to feel a little better.

"You mustn't build on 'em," said Dan, as he bent down to unlace his boots; "and if you have to give it up, you must think how pleased they'll be to have it, and do it cheerful."

There are few things easier than to tell others what is right to do, and few things harder than to do right one's self in some cases. Perhaps Dan did not understand all that the loss of the kitten would mean to Becky, when he spoke of giving it up "cheerful." He was fond of his sister, and sorry for her; but he had many things to enjoy in his active hard-working life, and it was natural he should sometimes forget how hard it must be to lie all day long in one dull room, to be often in pain, and to have nothing but a grey kitten to cheer and comfort one. It did not seem such a mighty matter to him to give it up, but to Becky it would be a sacrifice of her one joy and pleasure. If it must go, it must; but as to giving it up "cheerful," that she could never, never do. She loved it far too well. All that evening, and before she went to sleep at night, she could not hinder her mind from dwelling on the two chances Dan had mentioned. Oh, if one of them should turn out to be true! In the middle of the night, she woke with a start from a dream in which the kitten had been taken from her. She put out her hand to feel for it, and when her fingers touched the soft furry form curled up outside her bed, she could not help crying half with relief and half to think that the time might come when she should feel for it, and it would not be there.

Now all this sad trouble might have been spared, if Philippa had been a little more thoughtful. She was not an unkind little girl, but she was so entirely unused to considering other people's feelings, that it did not occur to her to imagine the effect of her words on Becky, or to say, "Of course Maisie will let you keep the kitten." That would have altered everything; but as it was, she was so full of her own cleverness at the discovery, that she talked of nothing else all the way to Fieldside, and seemed for the moment to have forgotten Becky and all she had meant to do for her.

It was a long way to drive round by Fieldside, and Miss Mervyn was not very willing to go, for it was getting late. "You must promise me, my dear Philippa," she said, "not to stay more than a few minutes if I allow you to go in, and I will

wait for you in the pony-carriage.”

Philippa promised readily, and arrived at the house, lost no time in making her way to the field, where she was told she should find Dennis and Maisie. At first she could see nothing of them; but presently, up in the corner where the cowhouse, haystack, and poultry-yard stood, she made out two busy figures in white aprons, deeply engaged with paint-brushes and pots of scarlet paint.

“Whatever are they doing?” she said to herself.

They were painting the jackdaws’ house, and were that moment as perfectly happy as two children could be. Aunt Katharine had given full permission, two immense white aprons, and a liberal supply of paint, which last they were using freely, not only on the jackdaws’ house, but on their own persons. Maisie in particular, who *would* take too much on her brush at a time, had splashed and sprinkled herself all over, even to the tip of her small round nose; so that she looked like a funny little clown squatting on the grass. Even the dog Peter, hunting rats under the haystack near, his agitated hind-legs only just visible, bore a scarlet patch of paint on one toe.

“Well!” exclaimed Philippa, when she had got close to them without being seen, “you are making a mess!”

“Why, it’s Philippa!” exclaimed Maisie, throwing down her brush, and scrambling up from the ground; “but we mustn’t go near you,” she added, stopping short, “or you’ll get all over paint.”

“Isn’t it jolly?” said Dennis. “Come round here and look at the bit I’m doing.”

“No, thank you,” said Philippa primly; “I haven’t come to stay. Miss Mervyn’s waiting in the pony-carriage. I’ve only come to say,” with a pause, “that I’ve found your grey kitten.”

“So have we,” said Dennis coolly; “at least we think we know where it is.”

Philippa’s face fell. “Where?” she asked.

“We don’t *really* know,” said Maisie hastily, “only Dr Price saw a grey kitten at Tuvvy’s house in Upwell, and Aunt Katharine says I may go to-morrow and see if it’s ours.”

“And I don’t believe you’ll know whether it is or not,” said Dennis.

Philippa turned away sulkily. She was thoroughly disappointed to have her news received in this way.

“Oh well, then,” she said, “you don’t want to hear what I know about it, and I am sorry I came round all this way to tell you. Good-bye.”

“Oh, stop! stop!” cried Maisie. “Wait for me. I want to hear very much; I’ll go with you to the gate. Do stop a minute.”

She struggled frantically as she spoke with the string of her apron, which was tied securely round her neck, and her voice was so pleading, that Philippa was softened. She was still cross with Dennis, who painted away, and did not care a bit; but it was difficult to be angry with Maisie, and when the apron was at last torn off, the two little girls ran across the field together towards the house.

Philippa’s story turned out to be so very satisfactory and interesting. It seemed to clear away all doubt as to the whereabouts of the grey kitten. Maisie’s eager questions and exclamations of pleasure were more than enough to satisfy her and make her feel quite good-tempered again.

“Did it seem happy?” inquired Maisie, as they drew near the gate. “Do you think it’s got a good home?”

“Becky said,” replied Philippa, “that it did not get much to eat sometimes, and it’s a very ugly little house they live in; but she’s very fond of it, and it’s fond of her too.”

“Then I expect it’s all right,” said Maisie; “it was always a dear little contented thing.”

“She said it was her greatest comfort,” added Philippa. “Wasn’t it odd she should say that? It made me think of you and wonder if it was yours, and so I came straight off to tell you after I heard it was a stray kitten.”

“Won’t you come with me to-morrow?” asked Maisie. “You see you know Becky now, and I’ve never seen her.”

Philippa quite approved of this. She would ask Miss Mervyn to bring her half-way to meet Maisie, and they would make the visit together.

“And I daresay Dennis will come too, if he’s done painting,” said Maisie.

“That doesn’t matter at all,” said Philippa, as she drove away with Miss Mervyn.

The next morning Maisie at Fieldside and Becky at Upwell woke up thinking of the same thing—the grey kitten—but with very different feelings. Maisie was delighted at the idea of meeting it again, and Becky was full of sorrow to think that she might have to say good-bye to it for ever. After her parents and Dan had all started out to their work, and left her alone with the kitten as usual, she thought it all seriously over, and made one firm resolve—she would not cry. If to give it up cheerful was impossible, she would at least prevent her grief from being seen. It might be hard, but it must be done, because, as Dan had said, Dennis and Maisie had been so good to them. “I’ll shut my teeth tight,” determined Becky, “and they shan’t ever know I want to cry. Then, after they’re gone, I can cry as much as I like.”

With a sigh she proceeded to get the kitten ready for the visit, by brushing its coat carefully and smoothing it down with a duster. It had not very thick fur, but it was glossy and well-kept, and it was so used to kind treatment that it bore itself with confidence, like a cat with a good home. If there were nothing striking or handsome in its appearance, there was at least nothing slinking or miserable about it, and to Becky, who looked at it with the eyes of affection, it had every attraction a cat could possess.

"And now you're as ready as you can be," she said wistfully; "a collar or a bit o' ribbon would finish yer off, but I ain't got ne'er a one. Miss Maisie she'll have lots o' ribbons, and nicer things a deal for you to eat than I can give you, but she can't love you better. Maybe you'd be happier, but oh Kitty, Kitty, I hope you ain't her cat. I want to keep you, I *do*."

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," said Becky in a trembling voice, and both she and the kitten turned their eyes towards it in a frightened manner as it opened.

Philippa appeared first, stepping daintily forward with a swing of her elegant skirts, and for a moment Becky thought she was alone. But no, there was another little girl behind her, with rosy cheeks and very bright brown eyes. She came in shyly, and yet she looked very eager, and her gaze was fastened immediately on the kitten in Becky's arms.

"It's Miss Maisie," thought Becky, her grasp unconsciously tightening on its back.

"This," said Philippa, waving her hand grandly, "is my cousin, Miss Maisie Chester, and—" turning to Maisie—"this is Becky, and that's the kitten."

"How do you do?" said Maisie holding out her hand; "I hope you're better."

It was such a very kind little round face that approached that Becky could not feel afraid. She put out her hand and whispered, "Yes, thank you."

"Philippa says," continued Maisie, still with her eyes fixed on the kitten, "that you've found a stray kitten. And we lost a kitten—a grey one—in Upwell, and Aunt Katharine said I might come and see if this is it."

Face to face with the kitten at last, Maisie began to lose confidence in her memory. After all, it was a long time since she had seen it, and there were a great many grey cats in the world, and Dennis had always declared that it would be impossible to know it again. Her serious gaze rested on the kitten, Becky's on her face, and Philippa waited impatiently in the background for the decision.

"Well," she said at last; "is it it, or isn't it?"

"The thing is," began Maisie, "has it one white paw?"

Alas for Becky! She knew it had, only too well. Lifting it a little away from her, there was the fatal white paw plainly visible to Maisie's searching glance.

"And then," she continued, having observed this with a grave nod, "has it very nice little coaxing affectionate ways?"

Becky nodded with a full heart. She could not trust herself to speak.

"Does it purr much?" pursued Maisie. "*More* than other cats?"

Again Becky nodded. She had clenched her teeth long ago, but she began to be afraid that nothing would prevent her crying.

"May I have it in my arms?" asked Maisie.

She took it gently on to her knee, but the kitten had quite forgotten its babyhood, and thinking her an utter stranger, soon wriggled back to its mistress.

"It doesn't remember me," said Maisie rather sadly, "and yet I nursed it so very often."

"It *is* yours, then?" said Philippa.

"Yes," said Maisie. "I really and truly do believe it is, and I'm very glad."

She glanced at Becky as she spoke, and to her surprise saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"What's the matter?" she asked; "does your back hurt you?"

Becky shook her head. "'Tain't that," she managed to whisper. "I meant not to cry, but I don't seem able to keep it back."

She stopped and struggled with her tears, tore away the kitten, which clung to her with its little claws, and almost threw it into Maisie's lap.

"You're welcome to it," she sobbed out, "and you'll treat it kind."

At this rough usage the kitten gave a tiny mew of complaint, and Maisie herself was quite as much disturbed. She looked round at Philippa for help, stroked the kitten nervously, and stammered: "But it isn't mine any longer—I gave it away; didn't you know?"

"I told her all about it," said Philippa. "I told her it was given to the tinsmith's wife."

"And, of course, you said we shouldn't take it away?" said Maisie.

"Well, no," said Philippa, looking a little ashamed, as she remembered her hasty departure; "I didn't tell her that. I thought she would know it."

Maisie put the kitten gently back into Becky's arms.

"Don't be unhappy," she said. "Of course I'd much rather it stayed with you than with old Sally's Eliza; and I am sure she won't mind, because, you see, she hardly knew it before it ran away. And we couldn't have it at Fieldside, because we mustn't keep more than two cats, and we've got Madam and Darkie. And I don't want it either, because now I know it's happy and comfortable, I don't mind any longer."

Becky found it almost as hard not to cry now as it had been before, the relief was so great; but she managed to whisper some earnest thanks, as she clasped her pet closely to her.

"I hope it will always be a comfort to you," said Maisie, as the children said good-bye. "I always said it would grow up a nice little comforting cat, though it was never so pretty as the others. And now," she remarked to Philippa as they drove home, "the kittens are settled. They've each got a good home, and we know which has grown up the greatest comfort."

Chapter Thirteen.

Strawberries and Cream.

Summer, which had seemed very long in coming to Dennis and Maisie, had at last made up its mind, and was really here, bringing all its best pleasures and most beautiful things to look at and enjoy. It was really hot weather, so that it was possible almost to live out of doors, and to have tea in the garden as a matter of course. Hot enough always to wear cotton frocks and holland suits, and sun-bonnets and broad straw hats, to do very few lessons, and to be out quite late in the evening. The roses were in bloom, the fields smelt sweet with new-mown hay, the strawberries were ripe: it was glorious June weather.

But at Upwell, though it was quite as hot, it was not by any means so beautiful. There the narrow dusty streets were stifling; the sun's fierce rays beat down on the houses all day, and when night came, it brought no coolness or relief, and there seemed no air to breathe. It was not so bad for the people who could get away from the town when their work was done, into the fields and lanes for a while; but there were some who were old or sick and could not move, and amongst these was poor Becky. She got thinner and whiter and weaker as the hot days followed each other, and though she was very patient, and always ready to say, "Better, thank you," with a smile, when her visitors asked how she was, she did not really feel better at all.

But though this was the case, she was not unhappy, and the days were seldom long and weary as they used to be, for she now had three friends who paid her constant visits—Philippa, Maisie, and Dennis. To expect their coming, to think of all they had said, and how they had looked, were such new pleasures that Becky was now more than contented with her lot. Some day she was going to get well, and run about again, and perhaps dance to the organ in the street; meanwhile she had her kitten, and she had her friends; it was all much better than it used to be. Amongst the three, she perhaps looked forward the least to seeing Philippa, who never came without an offering of some kind—a picture-book, or something nice to eat. Philippa tried hard to please, but there was always a little condescension in her manner, from which her cousins were quite free.

Maisie and Dennis seldom brought any present but a bunch of flowers, or a few strawberries, yet they seemed to leave behind them many other pleasant things to think of, which lasted until they came again. So Becky, in spite of aches and pains, thought herself very lucky just now, and would indeed have been surprised to know that there were still luckier days waiting for her not very far off.

For, meeting Dr Price in Upwell one day, Aunt Katharine stopped to speak to him, and asked what he thought of Becky, and whether she would soon get stronger. Dr Price shook his head.

"I can't do much more for her," he said, "all the while she has to stop in that stuffy room and get no fresh air. She ought to be out all day this weather. A month in the country would give her a chance."

A month in the country! Aunt Katharine drove home full of thought, and instead of stopping at Fieldside, went straight on to the Manor Farm. Could Mrs Solace tell her, she asked, after describing Becky's condition in a moving manner, of any suitable place in the village where the child could be lodged for a while? Now, if Mrs Solace had a weakness, it was to nurse and pet up anything ailing or delicate, and restore it to health. She did wonders with weakly chickens, invalid cows, and other creatures on the farm requiring care and comfort.

"Why shouldn't the child come here, Miss Chester?" she asked at once.

"Well, of course," replied Aunt Katharine, inwardly rejoiced at her success, "if you don't mind the trouble—"

No trouble at all, Mrs Solace declared, with her large beaming smile. There would be new milk for her, and fresh air, and the garden to sit in, and the beasts to amuse her; and she'd be better off than anywhere in the village. As to Andrew—certainly there had been a time when Andrew wouldn't have wished to encourage the Tuvvys, but that was over and done with. Tuvvy was as steady as you please now, and a valuable workman, and they'd be pleased to do anything for his child. Before Aunt Katharine left, the very hour and day of Becky's arrival were fixed. She was to

come back in one of Mr Solace's wagons, which had to carry a load to Upwell station.

"She'll travel easiest so," said Mrs Solace, "because she can lie flat; and there's a tilt to the cart, so she'll be well shaded from the sun."

In this way, a few days later, Becky performed the journey between Upwell and Fieldside, not without a little fear and trembling at going so far into the wide world. When the moment came, it was hard to leave the dim room, the uneasy couch, the things she knew so well; and the look of the bright sunshine outside dazzled her unaccustomed eyes and made her blink. She had, however, two great comforts. Dan had begged a day's holiday that he might see her safely to the Manor Farm, and Mrs Solace had invited the grey kitten to come also. With these two friends to support her, Becky felt some courage, and after all, although she did not know Mr or Mrs Solace, there would be father at work quite near, and visits from the children at Fieldside.

Mr Solace's big wagon seemed to fill Market Street. The four iron-grey horses tossed all their gleaming brass medals with a jingling sound, as they stamped impatiently at the flies and gnats.

"We'll not have a heavy load home along, anyway," said George the carter, as he lifted Becky and her little bundle carefully on to the mattress in the wagon, "and you'll ride like a queen."

When she was comfortably settled, with Dan by her side holding the kitten in a hamper, the journey began. Not a hurried or discomposing one, for the grey horses, knowing that there was plenty of time before them, never changed their pace from a stately walk the whole way. So the wagon rolled majestically along through the noisy streets, out into the quiet open country, and carried Becky towards new scenes and fresh faces. The children at Fieldside had entreated permission to go and receive her on her arrival, but this Aunt Katharine would not allow.

"She will be tired, and perhaps rather shy at coming amongst strangers," she said; "the fewer people she sees at first the better. Leave her to Mrs Solace."

So Dennis and Maisie had to content themselves with seeing the wagon pass through the village, and knowing that Becky was in it. The next day Tuvvy stopped on his way home to say that she was not much tired, and doing finely, and Mrs Solace would be glad if Miss Maisie and Master Dennis would call in to see her. It was most provoking after this, that quite suddenly, following weeks of fine bright weather, the rain began, and would not leave off. Day after day one steady downpour: streaming window-panes, great puddles in the garden paths, grey sky, and wet green leaves.

"Isn't it unlucky for Becky?" said Maisie, looking out of the play-room window at the dreary dripping scene. "She won't be able to go out at all."

"It's unlucky for every one," answered Dennis. "Mr Solace doesn't want rain with nearly all his hay down."

Maisie's eyes were fixed on the grass-plot beneath the window, where a company of starlings were busily engaged digging for worms and grubs.

"It isn't unlucky for quite every one," she remarked; "the birds like it."

"But the worms don't," added Dennis quickly.

Maisie was silent. She had a tender heart, but she disliked worms very much, and was always filled with disgust and fear when she dug them up in her little garden. She could not feel quite so sorry for them as she did for other things in trouble.

"There's one good thing," resumed Dennis, after a little silence, "it *can't* go on raining much longer, because of Mrs Solace's strawberry party. It's certain to clear up in time for that."

Maisie agreed. "But," she added with a sigh, "that's a whole week off, and I do so want to see how Becky and the kitten are getting on."

Mrs Solace's strawberry party was a yearly entertainment which she always gave in June, just when the strawberries were ripe, and the children considered it the very best party in the summer. Others might be grander: at the vicarage, for instance, there was always a band, and at the Broadbents' there were glee-singers and ices; but when all attractions had been counted up, the Manor Farm still remained the place which pleased them most. Every one went to Mrs Solace's party, and came away with a feeling that they had spent a pleasant time. The vicar and his sister never missed it; Aunt Katharine and the children, the Broadbents, and others owning farms near Fieldside—even Dr Price, who was shy of gatherings in general—all met and talked to each other with smiling faces in the pretty old garden at the Manor Farm. Tea, with heaped-up dishes of strawberries, and a plentiful supply of cream, stood ready on little tables under the veranda, so that people could help themselves when and how they liked. Nothing could be more simple than Mrs Solace's preparations, and yet her party was always successful. She asked every one, paying no attention at all to family quarrels or the niceties of social position amongst the neighbouring farmers, and yet there were no haughty looks. Even the Broadbents, who were always prepared to be a little superior to every one, laid aside their elegant exclusiveness, and descended to the common ground of unaffected good-nature and enjoyment.

Perhaps one of the great reasons that made the party so pleasant was, that you might, as Dennis had said, always count on having a fine day. However wet or dull or cold it had been, the weather was sure to clear, and the sun to shine, for Mrs Solace, just on that special occasion, so that the children had grown to expect it as a matter of course. And yet another reason lay in the simple kindness and good-will of Mrs Solace herself. The genial warmth of her welcome spread itself abroad and influenced her guests, much as the bountiful rays of the sun turned all the flowers

and fruit to colour and sweetness in her garden. Sour looks, stiff manners, and peevish remarks seemed out of place, and as impossible on that day as cold winds, a cloudy sky, or unripe strawberries.

Mrs Solace had her usual luck this year: by the time the day of the party came, the rain was over and gone, and the sun was shining so brightly, that clouds and greyness were quite forgotten.

Philippa had come over from Haughton to go with her cousins; and the children, who always thought Aunt Katharine started much too late, begged that they might walk over earlier alone.

"We want to have a good long time with Becky, you see," said Maisie; "and we shan't be in any one's way."

When they arrived, therefore, at the door in the long grey wall which skirted the Manor Farm garden, they felt sure they were the very first guests, and walked slowly towards the house, expecting to meet Becky at every turn; for after a whole week at the farm, she surely ought to be running about as if there were nothing the matter with her!

But there was no Becky, nor any one else to be seen in the garden. The flowers and the bees had it all to themselves, and were blooming and buzzing away as happily as possible, with no one to notice them. After the rain, all the blossoms looked as bright and fresh as though they had just put on new clothes to do honour to Mrs Solace's party; and, indeed, they always seemed to enjoy their lives, and to bloom more abundantly here than anywhere else.

Aunt Katharine was proud of her garden, and took a great deal of pains to make her flowers do well; but with all her best efforts, they did not flourish like these, and yet there was so little trouble taken about them. They grew very much how they would and where they would. When they got too thick, they were weeded out; and when one sort died, it was renewed in exactly the same place year after year. Some which were left entirely to their own way, like the snapdragons, seemed to thrive best of all. These thrust themselves into the crevices of the old wall, waved in triumph along the top of it, and had sown themselves industriously at the sides of the garden paths, reaching out their velvety, glowing mouths from the most unexpected places, for the dusty-legged humble bees to dive into.

Certainly the bees had a fine time of it in the Manor garden, and plenty of sweetness to choose from, amongst the herbs, roses, and pinks which were mixed up together with the vegetables. These were separated by a wall from the lawn and flower-garden, and when the farmhouse came in view, the children saw that they were not the first visitors after all, for there were figures moving about under the deep veranda, and soon they were able to make out Becky sitting in a big wicker-chair with a cushion at her back.

"And she's got on my pink sun-bonnet that Aunt Katharine sent her," said Maisie.

All the way along they had been talking of Becky, and felt that they had a great deal to ask her about her journey, and what she thought of the Manor Farm; but now that they were here, and had shaken hands with her, a sudden silence fell on them all. Somehow Becky in her new surroundings struck them as a sort of stranger, and they stood round her, looking shyly at each other, without finding anything to say. This did not suit Philippa.

"Come and show me where the strawberry beds are," she said to Dennis, and when they had run away together, Maisie drew up a chair and sat down by Becky's side.

"How do you like being here?" she asked.

Becky had a faint tinge of colour in her face now, like a China rose washed in the rain; her dark eyes looked brighter, and when she smiled, something that would soon be a dimple showed in her cheek.

"Very well, thank you," she answered. "I can walk a bit now. This morning I walked as far as yonder rose-bush, and to-morrow I'm goin' to try and get up to the big tree."

"Very well" might have sounded faint praise for the Manor Farm to unaccustomed ears; but Maisie knew that the country-people used the term to express the very highest satisfaction, so she was quite content.

From their snug corner under the shady veranda, the children watched the arrival of the guests, as they came out of the house in twos and threes, and moved into the bright sunshine on the lawn.

"It's like looking at a peep-show or a magic-lantern," said Maisie; "we're in the shadow and they're in the light. Now I'll tell you who they are. Here's Mrs Broadbent and Emmeline and Lilian."

Mrs Broadbent and her two daughters stopped on their way to make many excuses for the absence of Mr Broadbent.

"He's such a one, Mr Solace, for sticking to his work; isn't he, girls? I said this morning, 'Now do take a little rest, papa, this afternoon, and leave things to your bailiff for once.' But no. 'The master's eye,' he says, 'does more work than both his hands.'"

"Well, he's in the right there," said Mr Solace good-humouredly.

"That's little Miss Chester, isn't it?" she went on, her sharp eye catching sight of the children, "and her cousin, Miss Trevor? How delicate she looks, poor child!" She nodded and smiled graciously.

"No, that's not Miss Trevor," replied Mr Solace; "that's my wheelwright's little girl. She's been ill, and she's stopping here for change of air. My wife's going to nurse her up a bit."

"So *odd!*" remarked Mrs Broadbent, as she and her daughters moved on into the garden. "I really do think Mrs Solace might draw the line *somewhere.*"

"There's Mr Hurst," continued Maisie; "he's our vicar, you know; and the little lady with white hair and a big hat is his sister, who lives with him. And he's talking to your doctor, Dr Price. I wish he was our doctor, but we're never ill, so it doesn't matter much. I like Dr Price, ever since he told me about the kitten, only I wish he wouldn't keep such cruel dogs. Where *is* the kitten? Didn't you bring her?"

There was a little lump on Becky's knees covered up by her pinafore. She lifted a corner of it, and showed the grey kitten snugly asleep, curled up like a ball.

"I was afraid so many strange folk would scare her," she said.

The garden was soon full of the sound of voices and laughter, and alive with many-coloured figures. Preparations for tea began to appear in the veranda, and presently Dennis and Philippa came slowly back with heated faces, each bearing a cabbage-leaf full of strawberries.

"Philippa will say that they have bigger ones at Haughton," said Dennis; "so I was determined to find the very biggest I could. Now just look here, Philippa!" He spread out his cabbage-leaf exultingly. "The Manor Farm's *famous* for its strawberries; there's nothing like them for miles round. Yours at Haughton are all very well, but the very largest would be squinny beside these."

Philippa had plenty to say on the subject as usual, and she carried on a lively dispute with Dennis as to the merits of the strawberries, until the children's tea was brought out, and placed on a little table all to themselves.

During their meal, they could watch the other guests, who came in and out from the garden to rest from the glare of the sun, or to taste the strawberries and cream and other good things provided for them. They all talked and laughed a great deal, and their talk was almost entirely about strawberries and cream. One preferred strawberries alone; another considered cream such a great improvement; a third found the mixture unwholesome, but the fruit alone, beneficial. Lilian Broadbent sauntered in, very much overcome with the heat, and threw herself languidly into the wicker-chair which an attentive young farmer hastened to bring.

"That is the one they want her to marry," whispered Dennis, who knew every one's affairs.

Would she have some strawberries? With or without cream? Did she take sugar? Would she have them prepared for her? After a careless assent had been given to all these questions, Miss Broadbent thought that on the whole strawberries tasted better picked for one's self, only the very thought of stooping in the sun made her head ache. While her admirer suggested ways of overcoming this difficulty, Aunt Katharine and Mr Solace came in, and talked gravely of crops, and then the portly figures of Mrs Solace and Dr Price approached, and stopped to look at the little party of children.

"Your patient does you credit, Mrs Solace," said the doctor. "She looks better already. She'll soon be out of my hands, if she goes on at this rate."

Mrs Solace smiled at Becky with the same sort of comfortable pride as when she looked at a remarkably fine brood of turkeys.

"She's picking up a bit," she said; "but it's early days yet. We'll see how she looks after she's been here a month. I shouldn't wonder if she gets as hearty as Miss Maisie yonder.—Have you told Miss Maisie, Becky, what we're going to make of you, when you get quite strong and well?"

Becky looked shyly down at her plate. It was impossible to answer with so many people waiting to hear.

"Well, well, she'll tell you presently, I daresay," said Mrs Solace, as she moved away with Dr Price's huge figure plunging along beside her.

"What did Mrs Solace mean?" asked Maisie eagerly, when they were out of hearing.

"It's about the chickens," said Becky. "I like 'em ever so much, and Mrs Solace said this morning that some day she'd ask mother to let me come and bide here and look after 'em; but I've got to get strong, and grow a bit first."

"Well!" exclaimed Dennis enviously, "you *are* in luck!"

"I should earn wages, like Dan," said Becky.

"I only wish I had the chance of working on the farm," said Dennis; "but Aunt Katharine says I must go to school, and all sorts of things, first."

"What would you like to be, if you could?" asked Philippa.

Dennis mashed up his strawberries thoughtfully.

"Wheelwright *best*," he answered; "only that wouldn't have anything to do with the animals. I should like to be the pig-man very well; but it's no use saying what I should like, because I shan't have the chance."

"How nice it will be," said Maisie to Becky, as she set a saucer of cream carefully on the ground for the kitten, "when you and the grey kitten are settled here. Isn't it odd that she should have the very best home of the three, after all? We never thought it would turn out so."

"And she was the meanest and smallest of all the kittens," said Dennis.

“But,” added Maisie, “Philippa and I have quite settled that she’s the nicest of them, because she’s been the greatest comfort.”

And now, while the sun shines, and there are happy voices and smiles all around, it is a good moment for us to say farewell to Dennis and Maisie, Philippa and Becky, and to wish them prosperity. We have seen a little part of their lives, and can only guess what shall befall them further; but we know that life cannot be all sunshine and strawberry parties, and that grey skies and dull moments will come to each as time goes on. The best thing we can wish for them, therefore, is that they may be happy whether the sun shines or the rain falls in their way through the world: and this they can surely be, if their hearts are warm and their hands are willing to love and serve others, both in sadness and joy.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BLACK, WHITE AND GRAY: A STORY OF THREE HOMES ***

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