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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KITCHEN CAT AND OTHER STORIES

THE KITCHEN CAT AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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"A Pair of Clogs" &c.

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THE KITCHEN CAT

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CHAPTER I

The Visitor from the Cellar

The whole house in London was dull and gloomy, its lofty rooms and staircases were filled with a sort of misty twilight all day, and the sun very seldom looked in at its windows. Ruth Lorimer thought, however, that the very dullest room of all was the nursery, in which she had to pass so much of her time. It was so high up that the people and carts and horses in the street below looked like toys. She could not even see these properly, because there were iron bars to prevent her from stretching her head out too far, so that all she could do was to look straight across to the row of tall houses opposite, or up at the sky between the chimney-pots. How she longed for something different to look at!

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The houses always looked the same, and though the sky changed sometimes, it was often of a dirty grey colour, and then Ruth gave a little sigh and looked back from the window-seat where she was kneeling, into the nursery, for something to amuse her. It was full of all sorts of toys—dolls, and dolls' houses elegantly furnished, pictures and books and many pretty things; but in spite of all these she often found nothing to please her, for what she wanted more than anything else was a companion of her own age, and she had no brothers or sisters.

The dolls, however much she pretended, were never glad, or sorry, or happy, or miserable—they could not answer her when she talked to them, and their beautiful bright eyes had a hard unfeeling look which became very tiring, for it never changed.

There was certainly Nurse Smith. She was alive and real enough; there was no necessity to "pretend" anything about her. She was always there, sitting upright and flat-backed beside her work-basket, frowning a little, not because she was cross, but because she was rather near-sighted. She had come when Ruth was quite a baby, after Mrs. Lorimer's death, and Aunt Clarkson often spoke of her as "a treasure". However that might be, she was not an amusing companion; though she did her best to answer all Ruth's questions, and was always careful of her comfort, and particular about her being neatly dressed.

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Perhaps it was not her fault that she did not understand games, and was quite unable to act the part of any other character than her own. If she did make the attempt, she failed so miserably that Ruth had to tell her what to say, which made it so flat and uninteresting that she found it better to play alone. But she often became weary of this; and there were times when she was tired of her toys, and tired of Nurse Smith, and did not know what in the world to do with herself.

Each day passed much in the same way. Ruth's governess came to teach her for an hour every morning, and then after her early dinner there was a walk with Nurse, generally in one direction. And after tea it was time to go and see her father—quite a long journey, through the silent house, down the long stairs to the dining-room where he sat alone at his dessert.

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Ruth could not remember her mother, and she saw so little of her father that he seemed almost a stranger to her. He was so wonderfully busy, and the world he lived in was such a great way off from hers in the nursery.

In the morning he hurried away just as she was at her breakfast, and all she knew of him was the resounding slam of the hall door, which came echoing up the staircase. Very often in the evening he came hastily into the nursery to say good-bye on his way out to some dinner-party, and at night she woke up to hear his step on the stairs as he came back late. But when he dined at home Ruth always went downstairs to dessert. Then, as she entered the large sombre dining-room, where there were great oil paintings on the walls and heavy hangings to the windows, and serious-looking ponderous furniture, her father would look up from his book, or from papers spread on the table, and nod kindly to her:

"Ah! it's you, Ruth. Quite well, eh? There's a good child. Have an orange? That's right."

Then he would plunge into his reading again, and Ruth would climb slowly on to a great mahogany chair placed ready for her, and watch him as she cut up her orange.

[9]

She wondered very much why people wrote him such long, long letters, all on blue paper and tied up with pink tape. She felt sure they were not nice letters, for his face always looked worried over them; and when he had finished he threw them on the floor, as though he were glad. This made her so curious that she once ventured to ask him what they were. They were called "briefs", he told her. But she was not much wiser; for, hearing from Nurse Smith that "brief" was another

word for short, she felt sure there must be some mistake.

Exactly as the clock struck eight Nurse's knock came at the door, Ruth got down from her chair and said good-night.

Sometimes her father was so deeply engaged in his reading that he stared at her with a far-away look in his eyes, as if he scarcely knew who she was. After a minute he said absently: "Bed-time, eh? Good-night. Good-night, my dear." Sometimes when he was a little less absorbed he put a sixpence or a shilling into her hand as he kissed her, and added: "There's something to spend at the toy-shop."

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Ruth received these presents without much surprise or joy. She was used to buying things, and did not find it very interesting; for she could not hope for any sign of pleasure from her dolls when she brought them new clothes or furniture.

It is a little dull when all one's efforts for people are received with a perfectly unmoved face. She had once brought Nurse Smith a small china image, hoping that it would be an agreeable surprise; but that had not been successful either. "Lor', my dear, don't you go spending your money on me," she said. "Chany ornaments ain't much good for anything, to my thinking, 'cept to ketch the dust."

Thus it came to pass that Ruth never talked much about what interested her either to her father or to Nurse Smith, and as she had no brothers and sisters she was obliged to amuse herself with fancied conversations. Sometimes these were carried on with her dolls, but her chief friend was a picture which she passed every night on the staircase. It was of a man in a flat cap and a fur robe, and he had a pointed smooth chin and narrow eyes, which seemed to follow her slyly on her way. She did not like him and she did not actually fear him, but she had a feeling that he listened to what she said, and that she must tell him any news she had. There was never much except on "Aunt Clarkson's day", as she called it.

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Aunt Clarkson was her father's sister. She lived in the country, and had many little boys and girls whom Ruth had seldom seen, though she heard a great deal about them.

Once every month this aunt came up to London for the day, had long conversations with Nurse, and looked carefully at all Ruth's clothes.

She was a sharp-eyed lady, and her visits made a stir in the house which was like a cold wind blowing, so that Ruth was glad when they were over, though her aunt always spoke kindly to her, and said: "Some day you must come and see your little cousins in the country."

She had said this so often without its having happened, however, that Ruth had come to look upon it as a mere form of speech—part of Aunt Clarkson's visit, like saying "How d'ye do?" or "Good-bye."

[12]

It was shortly after one of these occasions that quite by chance Ruth found a new friend, who was better than either the dolls or the man in the picture, because, though it could not answer her, it was really alive. She discovered it in this way.

One afternoon she and Nurse Smith had come in from their usual walk, and were toiling slowly up from the hall to the nursery. The stairs got steeper at the last flight, and Nurse went more slowly still, and panted a good deal, for she was stouter than she need have been, though Ruth would never have dreamed of saying so. Ruth was in front, and she had nearly reached the top when something came hurrying towards her which surprised her very much. It was a long, lean, grey cat. It had a guilty look, as though it knew it had been trespassing, and squeezed itself as close as it could against the wall as it passed.

"Pretty puss!" said Ruth softly, and put out her hand to stop it.

The cat at once arched up its back and gave a friendly little answering mew. Ruth wondered where it came from. It was ugly, she thought, but it seemed a pleasant cat and glad to be noticed. She rubbed its head gently. It felt hard and rough like Nurse's old velvet bonnet; there was indeed no sleekness about it anywhere, and it was so thin that its sides nearly met.

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"Poor puss!" said Ruth stroking it tenderly.

The cat replied by pushing its head gently against her arm, and presently began a low purring song. Delighted, Ruth bent her ear to listen.

"Whoosh! Shish! Get along! Scat!" suddenly sounded from a few steps below. Nurse's umbrella was violently flourished, the cat flew downstairs with a spit like an angry firework, and Ruth turned round indignantly.

"You *shouldn't* have done that," she said, stamping her foot; "I wanted to talk to it. Whose is it?"

"It's that nasty kitchen cat," said Nurse, much excited, and grasping her umbrella spitefully. "I'm not going to have it prowling about on *my* landing. An ugly thieving thing, as has no business above stairs at all."

Ruth pressed her face against the balusters. In the distance below she could see the small grey form of the kitchen cat making its way swiftly and silently downstairs. It went so fast that it seemed to float rather than to run, and was soon out of sight.

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"I should like to have played with it up in the nursery," she said, with a sigh, as she continued her way. "I wish you hadn't frightened it away."

"Lor', Miss Ruth, my dear," answered Nurse, "what can a little lady like you want with a nasty, low, kitchen cat! Come up and play with some of your beautiful toys, there's a dear! Do."

Nevertheless Ruth thought about the cat a great deal that afternoon, and the toys seemed even less interesting than usual. When tea was over, and Nurse had taken up her sewing again, she began to make a few inquiries.

"Where does that cat live?" she asked.

"In the kitchen, to be sure," said Nurse; "and the cellar, and coal-hole, and such like. Alonger the rats and mice—and the beadles," she added, as an after-thought.

"The beadles!" repeated Ruth doubtfully. "*What* beadles?"

"Why, the *black* beadles, to be sure," replied Nurse cheerfully.

[15]

Ruth was silent. It seemed dismal company for the kitchen cat. Then she said:

"Are there many of them?"

"Swarms!" said Nurse, breaking off her thread with a snap. "The kitchen's black with 'em at night."

What a dreadful picture!

"Who feeds the cat?" asked Ruth again.

"Oh, I don't suppose nobody *feeds* it," answered Nurse. "It lives on what it ketches every now and then."

No wonder it looked thin! Poor kitchen cat! How very miserable and lonely it must be with no one to take care of it, and how dreadful for it to have such nasty things to eat! And the supply even of these must be short sometimes, Ruth went on to consider. What did it do when it could find no more mice or rats? Of the beetles she could not bear even to think. As she turned these things seriously over in her mind she began to wish she could do something to alter them, to make the cat's life more comfortable and pleasant. If she could have it to live with her in the nursery for instance, she could give it some of her own bread and milk, and part of her own dinner; then it would get fatter and perhaps prettier too. She would tie a ribbon round its neck, and it should sleep in a basket lined with red flannel, and never be scolded or chased about or hungry any more. All these pictures were suddenly destroyed by Nurse's voice:

[16]

"But I hope you'll not encourage it up here, Miss Ruth, for I couldn't abide it, and I'm sure your Aunt Clarkson wouldn't approve of it neither. I've had a horror of cats myself from a gal. They're that stealthy and treacherous, you never know where they mayn't be hiding, or when they won't spring out at you. If ever I catch it up here I shall bannock it down again."

There was evidently no sympathy to be looked for from Nurse Smith; but Ruth was used to keeping her thoughts and plans to herself, and did not miss it much. As she could not talk about it, however, she thought of her new acquaintance all the more; it was indeed seldom out of her mind, and while she seemed to be quietly amusing herself in her usual way, she was occupied with all sorts of plans and arrangements for the cat when it should come to live in the nursery. Meanwhile it was widely separated from her; how could she let it know that she wanted to see it again? When she went up and down stairs she peered and peeped about to see if she could catch a glimpse of its hurrying grey figure, and she never came in from a walk without expecting to meet it on her way to the nursery. But she never did. The kitchen cat kept to its own quarters and its own society. Perhaps it had been too often "bannocked" down again to venture forth. And yet Ruth felt sure that it had been glad when she had spoken kindly to it. What a pity that Nurse did not like cats!

[17]

She confided all this as usual to the man in the picture, who received it with his narrow observant glance and seemed to give it serious consideration. Perhaps it was he who at last gave her a splendid idea, which she hastened to carry out as well as she could, though remembering Nurse's strong expression of dislike she felt obliged to do so with the greatest secrecy.

As a first step, she examined the contents of her little red purse. A whole shilling, a sixpence, and a threepenny bit. That would be more than enough. Might they go to some shops that afternoon, she asked, when she and Nurse were starting for their walk.

[18]

"To be sure, Miss Ruth; and what sort of shops do you want? Toy-shops, I suppose."

"N-no," said Ruth; "I think not. It must be somewhere where they sell note-paper, and a baker's, I *think*; but I'm not quite sure."

Arrived at the stationer's, Ruth was a long time before deciding on what she would have; but at last, after the woman had turned over a whole boxful, she came to some pink note-paper with brightly painted heads of animals upon it, and upon the envelopes also.

"Oh!" cried Ruth when she saw it, clasping her hands with delight. "*That* would do beautifully. Only—*have* you any with a cat?"

Yes, there *was* some with a nice fluffy cat upon it, and she left the shop quite satisfied with her first purchase.

"And now," said Nurse briskly, whose patience had been a good deal tried, "we must make haste back, it's getting late."

But Ruth had still something on her mind. She *must* go to one more shop, she said, though she did not know exactly which. At last she fixed on a baker's. [19]

"What should you think," she asked on the way, "that a cat likes to eat better than anything in the world?"

"Why, a mouse to be sure," answered Nurse promptly.

"Well, but *next* to mice?" persisted Ruth.

"Fish," said Nurse Smith.

"That would never do," thought Ruth to herself as she looked at a fish-shop they were passing, "It's so wet and slippery I couldn't possibly carry it home. Perhaps Nurse doesn't *really* know what cats like best. Anyhow, I'm sure it's never tasted anything so nice as a Bath bun." A Bath bun was accordingly bought, carried home, and put carefully away in the doll's house. And now Ruth felt that she had an important piece of business before her. She spread out a sheet of the new writing-paper on the window-seat, knelt in front of it with a pencil in her hand, and ruled some lines. She could not write very well, and was often uncertain how to spell even short words; so she bit the end of her pencil and sighed a good deal before the letter was finished. At last it was done, and put into the envelope. But now came a new difficulty: How should it be addressed? After much thought she wrote the following: [20]

THE KITCHEN CAT,
The Kitchen,
17 Gower Street.

[21]

CHAPTER II

Her Best Friend

After this letter had been dropped into the pillar-box just in front of the house, Ruth began to look out still more eagerly for the kitchen cat, but days passed and she caught no glimpse of it anywhere.

It was disappointing, and troublesome too, because she had to carry the Bath bun about with her so long. Not only was it getting hard and dry, but it was such an awkward thing for her pocket that she had torn her frock in the effort to force it in.

"You might a' been carrying brick-bats about with you, Miss Ruth," said Nurse, "by the way you've slit your pocket open."

This went on till Ruth began to despair. "I'll try it one more evening," she said to herself, "and if it doesn't come then I shall give it up." [22]

Once more, therefore, when she was ready to go downstairs, she took the bun out of the dolls' house, where she kept it wrapped up in tissue paper, and squeezed it into her pocket. Rather hopelessly, but still keeping a careful look-out, she proceeded slowly on her way, when behold, just as she reached the top of the last flight, a little cringing grey figure crossed the hall below.

"It's come!" she exclaimed in an excited whisper. "It's come at last!"

But though it had come, it seemed now the cat's greatest desire to go, for it was hurrying towards the kitchen stairs.

"Puss! puss!" called out Ruth in an entreating voice as she hastily ran down. "Stop a minute! *Pretty* puss!"

Startled at the noise and the patter of the quick little feet, the cat paused in its flight and turned its scared yellow-green eyes upon Ruth.

She had now reached the bottom step, where she stood struggling to get the Bath bun out of her small pocket, her face pink with the effort and anxiety lest the cat should go before she succeeded. [23]

"*Pretty* puss!" she repeated as she tugged at the parcel. "Don't go away."

One more desperate wrench, which gashed open the corner of the pocket, and the bun was out. The cat looked on with one paw raised, ready to fly at the first sign of danger, as with trembling fingers Ruth managed to break a piece off the horny surface. She held it out. The cat came nearer, sniffed at it suspiciously, and then to her great joy took the morsel, crouched down, and munched it up. "How good it must taste," she thought, "after the mice and rats."

By degrees it was induced to make further advances, and before long to come on to the step where Ruth sat, and make a hearty meal of the bun which she crumbled up for it.

"I'm afraid it's dry," she said; "but I couldn't bring any milk, you know, and you must get some water afterwards."

The cat seemed to understand, and replied by pushing its head against her, and purred loudly. How thin it was! Ruth wondered as she looked gravely at it whether it would soon be fatter if she fed it every day. She became so interested in talking to it, and watching its behaviour, that she nearly forgot she had to go into the dining-room, and jumped up with a start. [24]

"Good-night," she said. "If you'll come again I'll bring you something else another day." She looked back as she turned the handle of the heavy door. The cat was sitting primly upright on the step washing its face after its meal. "I expect it doesn't feel so hungry now," thought Ruth as she went into the room.

The acquaintance thus fairly begun was soon followed by other meetings, and the cat was often in the hall when Ruth came downstairs, though it did not appear every evening. The uncertainty of this was most exciting, and "Will it be there to-night?" was her frequent thought during the day. As time went on, and they grew to know each other better, she began to find the kitchen cat a far superior companion to either her dolls or the man in the picture. True, it could not answer her any more than they did—in words, but it had a language of its own which she understood perfectly. She knew when it was pleased, and when it said "Thank you" for some delicacy she brought for it; its yellow eyes beamed with sympathy and interest when she described the delights of that beautiful life it would enjoy in the nursery; and when she pitied it for the darkness of its present dwelling below, she knew it understood by the way it rubbed against her and arched up its back. There were many more pleasures in each day now that she had made this acquaintance. Shopping became interesting, because she could look forward to the cat's surprise and enjoyment when the parcel was opened in the evening; everything that happened was treasured up to tell it when they met, or, if it was not there, to write to it on the pink note-paper; the very smartest sash belonging to her best doll was taken to adorn the cat's thin neck; and the secrecy which surrounded all this made it doubly delightful. Ruth had never been a greedy child, and if Nurse Smith wondered sometimes that she now spent all her money on cakes, she concluded that they must be for a dolls' feast, and troubled herself no further. Miss Ruth was always so fond of "making believe". So things went on very quietly and comfortably, and though Ruth could not discover that the kitchen cat got any fatter, it had certainly improved in some ways since her attentions. Its face had lost its scared look, and it no longer crept about as close to the ground as possible, but walked with an assured tread and its tail held high. It could never be a pretty cat to the general eye, but when it came trotting noiselessly to meet Ruth, uttering its short mew of welcome, she thought it beautiful, and would not have changed it for the sleekest, handsomest cat in the kingdom. [25]

But it was the kitchen cat still. All this did not bring it one step nearer to the nursery. It must still live, Ruth often thought with sorrow, amongst the rats and mice and beetles. Nothing could ever happen which would induce Nurse Smith to allow it to come upstairs. And yet something did happen which brought this very thing to pass in a strange way which would never have entered her mind. [26]

The spring came on with a bright sun and cold sharp winds, and one day Ruth came in from her walk feeling shivery and tired. She could not eat her dinner, and her head had a dull ache in it, and she thought she would like to go to bed. She did not feel ill, she said, but she was first very hot and then very cold. Nurse Smith sent for the doctor; and he came and looked kindly at her, and felt her pulse and said she must stay in bed and he would send some medicine. And she went to sleep, and had funny dreams in which she plainly saw the kitchen cat dressed in Aunt Clarkson's bonnet and cloak. It stood by her bed and talked in Aunt Clarkson's voice, and she saw its grey fur paws under the folds of the cloak. She wished it would go away, and wondered how she could have been so fond of it. When Nurse came to give her something she said feebly: [27]

"Send the cat away."

"Bless you, my dear, there's no cat here," she answered. "There's nobody been here but me and Mrs. Clarkson."

At last there came a day when she woke up from a long sleep and found that the pain in her head was gone, and that the things in the room which had been taking all manner of queer shapes looked all right again.

"And how do you feel, Miss Ruth, my dear?" asked Nurse, who sat sewing by the bedside.

"I'm quite well, thank you," said Ruth. "Why am I in bed in the middle of the day?" [28]

"Well, you haven't been just quite well, you know," said Nurse.

"Haven't I?" said Ruth. She considered this for some time, and when Nurse came to her with some beef-tea in her hand, she asked:

"Have I been in bed more than a day?"

"You've been in bed a week," said Nurse. "But you'll get along finely now, and be up and about again in no time."

Ruth drank her beef-tea and thought it over. Suddenly she dropped her spoon into the cup. The kitchen cat! How it must have missed her if she had been in bed a week. Unable to bear the idea in silence, she sat up in bed with a flushed face and asked eagerly:

"Have you seen the cat?"

Nurse instantly rose with a concerned expression, and patted her soothingly on the shoulder.

"There now, my dear, we won't have any more fancies about cats and such. You drink your beef-tea up and I'll tell you something pretty."

Ruth took up her spoon again. It was of no use to talk to Nurse about it, but it was dreadful to think how disappointed the cat must have been evening after evening. Meanwhile Nurse went on in a coaxing tone:

[29]

"If so be as you make haste and get well, you're to go alonger me and stay with your Aunt Clarkson in the country. There now!"

Ruth received the news calmly. It did not seem a very pleasant prospect, or even a very real one to her.

"There'll be little boys and girls to play with," pursued Nurse, trying to heighten the picture; "and flowers—and birds and such—and medders, and a garding, and all manner."

But nothing could rouse Ruth to more than a very languid interest in these delights. Her thoughts were all with her little friend downstairs; and she felt certain that it had often been hungry, and no doubt thought very badly of her for her neglect. If she could only see it and explain that it had not been her fault!

The next day Aunt Clarkson herself came. She always had a great deal on her mind when she came up to town, and liked to get through her shopping in time to go back in the afternoon, so she could never stay long with Ruth. She came bustling in, looking very strong, and speaking in a loud cheerful voice, and all the while she was there she gave quick glances round her at everything in the room. Ruth was well enough to be up, and was sitting in a big chair by the nursery fire, with picture-books and toys near; but she was not looking at them. Her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the fire, and her mind was full of the kitchen cat. She had tried to write to it, but the words would not come, and her fingers trembled so much that she could not hold the pencil straight. The vexation and disappointment of this had made her head ache, and altogether she presented rather a mournful little figure.

[30]

"Well, Nurse, and how are we going on?" said Aunt Clarkson, sitting down in the chair Nurse placed for her. Remembering her dream, Ruth could not help giving a glance at Aunt Clarkson's hands. They were fat, round hands, and she kept them doubled up, so that they really looked rather like a cat's paws.

"Well, ma'am," replied Nurse, "Miss Ruth's better; but she's not, so to say, as cheerful as I could wish. Still a few *fancies* ma'am," she added in an undertone, which Ruth heard perfectly.

"Fancies, eh?" repeated Aunt Clarkson in her most cheerful voice. "Oh, we shall get rid of them at Summerford. You'll have real things to play with there, Ruth, you know. Lucy, and Cissie, and Bobbie will be better than fancies, won't they?"

[31]

Ruth gave a faint little nod. She did not know what her aunt meant by "fancies". The cat was quite as real as Lucy, or Cissie, or Bobbie. Should she ask her about it, or did she hate cats like Nurse Smith? She gazed wistfully at Mrs. Clarkson's face, who had now drawn a list from her pocket, and was running through the details half aloud with an absorbed frown.

"I shall wait and see the doctor, Nurse," she said presently; "and if he comes soon I shall *just* get through my business, and catch the three o'clock express."

No, it would be of no use, Ruth concluded, as she let her head fall languidly back against the pillow—Aunt Clarkson was far too busy to think about the cat.

Fortunately for her business, the doctor did not keep her waiting long. Ruth was better, he said, and all she wanted now was cheering up a little—she looked dull and moped. "If she could have a little friend, now, to see her, or a cheerful companion," glancing at Nurse Smith, "it would have a good effect."

[32]

He withdrew with Mrs. Clarkson to the door, and they continued the conversation in low tones, so that only scraps of it reached Ruth:

"—excitable—fanciful—too much alone—children of her own age—"

Aunt Clarkson's last remark came loud and clear:

"We shall cure that at Summerford, Dr. Short. We're not dull people there, and we've no time for fancies."

She smiled, the doctor smiled, they shook hands and both soon went away. Ruth leant her head on her hand. Was there no one who would understand how much she wanted to see the kitchen cat? Would they all talk about fancies? What were Lucy and Cissie and Bobbie to her?—strangers, and the cat was a friend. She would rather stroke its rough head, and listen to its purring song,

than have them all to play with. It was so sad to think how it must have missed her, how much she wanted to see it, and how badly her head ached, that she felt obliged to shed a few tears. Nurse discovered this with much concern.

[33]

"And there was master coming up to see you to-night and all, Miss Ruth. It'll never do for him to find you crying, you know. I think you'd better go to bed."

Ruth looked up with a sudden gleam of hope, and checked her tears.

"When is he coming?" she asked. "I want to see him."

"Well, I s'pose directly he comes home—about your tea-time. But if I let you sit up we mustn't have no more tears, you know, else he'll think you ain't getting well."

Ruth sank quietly back among her shawls in the big chair. An idea had darted suddenly into her mind which comforted her very much, and she was too busy with it to cry any more. She would ask her father! True, it was hardly likely that he would have any thoughts to spare for such a small thing as the kitchen cat; but still there was just a faint chance that he would understand better than Nurse and Aunt Clarkson. So she waited with patience, listening anxiously for his knock and the slam of the hall door, and at last, just as Nurse was getting the tea ready, it came. Her heart beat fast. Soon there was a hurried step on the stairs, and her father entered the room. Ruth studied his face earnestly. Was he tired? Was he worried? Would he stay long enough to hear the important question?

[34]

He kissed her and sat down near her.

"How is Miss Ruth to-day?" he said rather wearily to Nurse.

Standing stiffly erect behind Ruth's chair, Nurse Smith repeated all that the doctor and Mrs. Clarkson had said.

"And I think myself, sir," she added, "that Miss Ruth will be all the better of a cheerful change. She worrits herself with fancies."

Ruth looked earnestly up at her father's face, but said nothing.

"Worries herself?" repeated Mr. Lorimer, with a puzzled frown. "What can she have to worry about? Is there anything you want, my dear?" he said, taking hold of Ruth's little hot hand and bending over her.

The moment had come. Ruth gathered all her courage, sat upright, and fixing an entreating gaze upon him said:

"I want to see my best friend."

[35]

"Your best friend, eh?" he answered, smiling as if it were a very slight affair. "One of your little cousins, I suppose? Well, you're going to Summerford, you know, and then you'll see them all. I forget their names. Tommie, Mary, Carry, which is it?"

Ruth gave a hopeless little sigh. She was so tired of these cousins.

"It's none of them," she said shaking her head. "I don't want any of them."

"Who is it, then?"

"It's the kitchen cat."

Mr. Lorimer started back with surprise at the unexpected words.

"The kitchen cat!" he repeated, looking distractedly at Nurse. "Her best friend! What does the child mean?"

"Miss Ruth has fancies, sir," she began with a superior smile. But she did not get far, for at that word Ruth started to her feet in desperation.

"It isn't a fancy!" she cried; "it's a *real* cat. I know it very well and it knows me. And I *do* want to see it so. *Please* let it come."

The last words broke off in a sob.

Mr. Lorimer lifted her gently on to his knee.

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"Where is this cat?" he said, turning to Nurse with such a frown that Ruth thought he must be angry. "Why hasn't Miss Ruth had it before if she wanted it?"

"Well, I believe there *is* a cat somewhere below, sir," she replied in an injured tone; "but I'd no idea, I'm sure, that Miss Ruth was worritting after it. To the best of my knowledge she's only seen it once. She's so fond of making believe that it's hard to tell when she *is* in earnest. I thought it was a kind of a fancy she got in her head when she was ill."

"Fetch it here at once, if you please."

Nurse hesitated.

"It's hardly a fit pet for Miss Ruth, sir."

"At once, if you please," repeated Mr. Lorimer. And Nurse went.

Ruth listened to this with her breath held, almost frightened at her own success. Not only was the kitchen cat to be admitted, but it was to be brought by the very hands of Nurse herself. It was wonderful—almost too wonderful to be true.

And now it seemed that her father wished to know how the kitchen cat had become her best friend. He was very much interested in it, and she thought his face looked quite different while he listened to her to what it looked when he was reading his papers downstairs. Finding that he asked sensible questions, and did not once say anything about "fancies", she was encouraged to tell him more and more, and at last leant her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. It would be all right now. She had found someone at last who understood. [37]

The entrance of the kitchen cat shortly afterwards was neither dignified nor comfortable, for it appeared dangling at the end of Nurse's outstretched arm, held by the neck as far as possible from her own person. When it was first put down it was terrified at its new surroundings, and it was a little painful to find that it wanted to rush downstairs again at once, in spite of Ruth's fondest caresses. It was Mr. Lorimer who came to her help, and succeeded at last in soothing its fears and coaxing it to drink some milk, after which it settled down placidly with her in the big chair and began its usual song of contentment. She examined it carefully with a grave face, and then looked apologetically at her father. [38]

"It doesn't look its *best*," she said. "Its paws are white *really*, but I think it's been in the coal-hole."

This seemed very likely, for not only its paws but the smart ribbon Ruth had tied round its neck was grimy and black.

"It's not *exactly* pretty," she continued, "but it's a *very* nice cat. You can't think how well it knows me—generally."

Mr. Lorimer studied the long lean form of the cat curiously through his eye-glass.

"You wouldn't like a white Persian kitten better for a pet—or a nice little dog, now?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, *please* not," said Ruth with a shocked expression on her face. "I shouldn't love it half so well, and I'm sure the kitchen cat wouldn't like it."

That was a wonderful evening. Everything seemed as suddenly changed as if a fairy had touched them with her wand. Not only was the kitchen cat actually there in the nursery, drinking milk and eating toast, but there was a still stranger alteration. This father was quite different to the one she had known in the dining-room downstairs, who was always reading and had no time to talk. His very face had altered, for instead of looking grave and far-away it was full of smiles and interest. And how well he understood about the kitchen cat! When her bed-time came he seemed quite sorry to go away, and his last words were: [39]

"Remember, Nurse, Miss Ruth is to have the cat here whenever she likes and as long as she likes."

It was all so strange that Ruth woke up the next morning with a feeling that she had had a pleasant dream. The kitchen cat and the new father would both vanish with daylight; they were "fancies", as Nurse called them, and not real things at all. But as the days passed and she grew strong enough to go downstairs as usual, it was delightful to find that this was not the case. The new father was there still. The cat was allowed to make a third in the party, and soon learned to take its place with dignity and composure. But though thus honoured, it no longer received all Ruth's confidences. She had found a better friend. Her difficulties, her questions, her news were all saved up for the evening to tell her father. It was the best bit in the whole day. [40]

On one of these occasions they were all three sitting happily together, and Ruth had just put a new brass collar which her father had bought round the cat's neck.

"I don't want to go to Summerford," she said suddenly. "I'd much rather stay here with you."

"And the cat," added Mr. Lorimer as he kissed her. "Well, you must come back soon and take care of us both, you know."

"You'll be kind to it when I'm gone, won't you?" said Ruth. "Because, you know, I don't think the servants *understand* cats. They're rather sharp to it."

"It shall have dinner with me every night," said Mr. Lorimer.

In this way the kitchen cat was raised from a lowly station to great honour, and its life henceforth was one of peace and freedom. It went where it would, no one questioned its right of entrance to the nursery or dared to slight it in any way. In spite, however, of choice meals and luxury it never grew fat, and never, except in Ruth's eyes, became pretty. It also kept to many of its old habits, preferring liberty and the chimney-pots at night to the softly-lined basket prepared for its repose. [41]

But with all its faults Ruth loved it faithfully as long as it lived, for in her own mind she felt that she owed it a great deal.

She remembered that evening when, a lonely little child, she had called it her "best friend".

Perhaps she would not have discovered so soon that she had a better friend still, without the kitchen cat.

SARAH'S SUNDAY OUT

[42]

"Who saw Sarah last?"

It was Hester who had seen her last when she had said good-bye to a friend at the hall door. That was at eleven o'clock in the morning; now it was one o'clock in the afternoon, and there was no Sarah to be found anywhere. Not in the nursery, not in any of the bedrooms, not upstairs, not downstairs; every hole and corner and crevice much too small to hide Sarah was thoroughly searched. Her name was called in the fondest tones by every member of the family from father and mother down to little Diana, and by all the servants, but there was no answer. There could be no doubt about it—Sarah was lost!

Little Diana was heart-broken. It was dreadful to think of Sarah out alone in the noisy London streets, where she knew no one and no one would know her, where she would soon get confused and lose her way, and where all the houses looked so much alike that she would never, never be able to find her home again. Perhaps even some wicked person might steal Sarah, or she might be run over by a carriage, or bitten by a dog, or—there were no end of misfortunes which might happen to her, for it made it all the more sad to remember that Sarah could not speak.

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Who was Sarah?

Perhaps you may have been thinking that she was a little girl. Nothing of the kind. She was the dearest little dog in the world, with a yellow and white silky coat, and a very turned-up nose, and goggling, affectionate dark eyes. She was a gay-tempered little creature, full of playful coaxing ways, and a great pet with everyone; but she was fondest of her mistress, Diana. She went everywhere with her, knew her step from that of any of the other children, and would prick up her ears and listen for it a long way off. Her whole name was "Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough", and she was a Blenheim spaniel.

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As befitted her rank, Sarah led a life of luxury, and had a great many possessions of her very own. Smart collars and bells, a box full of different coloured ribbons, a travelling trunk with her name upon it, a brush and comb, a warm coat for cold weather, and a comfortable basket to sleep in. Everything that heart could desire for comfort or adornment was hers. She had never been used to the least roughness or hardship, and certainly was too delicate to fight her own way in the world.

And now Sarah was lost! All through that Sunday everyone was very much disturbed, and talked of nothing but how they could find her. If a visitor came in, the conversation was all about Sarah; but no one seemed to be very hopeful that she would be brought back. There were dog-stealers about, they said, and such a little dog would be easily picked up and hidden. Poor Diana listened to all this, and got more and more miserable as the day went on, for she began to feel quite sure that she should never see her dear little dog again. She moped about, got very pale, would not eat her dinner, and would have been in utter despair if Mother had not given her some comfort. For Mother was the only person who thought there was a chance of Sarah's return, and this cheered Diana, because she had a feeling that Mother knew everything.

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Nevertheless when Monday morning came and there was no Sarah, Diana went downstairs in the lowest spirits.

"Immediately after breakfast," said her mother, "I shall put on my bonnet and go out to look for Sarah."

"Will you *promise* to bring her back?" asked poor little Diana earnestly.

Even Mother could not *promise*, but she would do her very best, and when she had started Diana went up to the nursery somewhat comforted, to wait as patiently as she could for her return.

Long, long before that could possibly happen she stationed herself at the window, and fixed her eyes on the busy street below. Carts, carriages, cabs, people, how they all went on and on without a pause, full of their own business or pleasure! So many ladies, but not Mother; so many dogs, small and big, but not one quite like Sarah. Diana's mouth began to droop more and more with disappointment, and she was very near crying. Even Mother could not bring Sarah back!

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"A watched kettle never boils, Miss Diana," said Nurse. "You'd much better come away from the window and play, and then the time'd pass quicker."

But Diana would not move. Just as Nurse spoke she caught sight of a bonnet in the distance just like Mother's, but she had been so often deceived that she hardly dared to hope. It came nearer—it was opposite the house. Oh, joy! Mother's face, with an expression of triumphant satisfaction upon it, looked up to the nursery window. No wonder it was triumphant, for under her arm there appeared a yellow and white head, with silky ears and large dark eyes. Sarah was found! It seemed almost too good to be true.

You may imagine how Diana rejoiced over Sarah and petted her, and how interested she and everyone else were to hear how the little dog had been traced to a coachman's house in a mews close by. Sarah, on her side, seemed very glad to be with her dear little mistress again, and after returning her caresses curled herself up and went to sleep on the sofa, no doubt tired with her adventures. How Diana wished she could tell her all she had done and seen on that Sunday when everyone had been so unhappy about her!

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"Where did you go, you darling?" she asked her over and over again, but Sarah never answered. She only wagged her fringy tail, and licked her mistress's hand, and goggled at her with her full dark eyes. And yet Diana felt quite sure that she had many strange and interesting things to tell, if she only could.

One afternoon she was lying on the school-room sofa with Sarah by her side. It was a very hot day, the blinds were down and the windows wide open, so that the distant rumble of the carts and carriages came up from the street below. There was an organ playing too, and as Diana listened dreamily to these noises, and stroked Sarah's head with one hand, she began to wonder again about those wonderful adventures.

"Tell me where you went on Sunday," she whispered once more.

To her great surprise, she plainly heard, among all the other noises, the sound of a tiny voice close to her. She listened eagerly, and this is what it said:

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"You must know, my dear mistress, that I have long had a great wish to see more of the world. The park is pleasant enough, but after all if you are led on a string and not allowed to speak to other dogs, it soon becomes dull and tiresome. I wanted to go out alone, into the busy street, to stay as long as I liked, to take whatever direction I fancied, and to join in the amusements of other dogs. In short, I wanted more freedom; and although I never gave way to temper or became snappish, I grew more and more discontented with my safe and pleasant life. I was so closely watched, however, that I could never get an opportunity for the least little stroll alone, and I began to despair, when, at last, on Sunday, the chance really came. I was alone in the hall, Hester opened the door, I slipped out unseen, and there I was—free!

"It was delightful to find myself alone on the door-step, and to hear the door shut behind me; not that I did not fully intend to go back, for I love my mistress and am not ungrateful for the kindness shown me, but it was so pleasant to think that for a short time I could do just as I liked. I soon found, however, that this was very far from the case.

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"At first I trotted along the pavement in the best spirits, meeting very few dogs, and those of a very rough kind, so that I did not care to speak to them. It was, as you remember, a very hot day. The ground felt quite burning under my feet, and soon I should have been thankful to be carried a little while. I got thirsty too, and I began to look about for a shady place where I could lie down and rest out of the sun. Presently I came to a narrow turning, which looked dark and cool compared to the bright hot streets. It was quiet too, for there was only a man in the yard washing a cart, and a rough-coated grey dog sitting near. I made up my mind to try this, and trotting up to the dog made a few remarks about the heat of the weather. From his replies I soon perceived that he was quite a common dog, though very good-natured in manner, and he shortly told me he belonged to the green-grocer and that his name was 'Bob'.

"We continued to talk, and before long I learnt a good deal about his way of life, which interested me extremely from its great contrast to my own. In spite of its hardships there was something attractive about it too, though quite out of the question for anyone of delicacy and refinement. For Bob was a working dog. He had to be at Covent Garden by daybreak with his master, to go on all his rounds with him, and to take care of the vegetables in the cart while he called at the different houses.

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"And what do you get for all that?' I asked.

"I get my food, and a good many kicks sometimes,' he answered.

"Poor dog!' I exclaimed, for my heart was filled with pity for him, and I no longer thought his an attractive life. 'Why don't you run away?'

"Bob grinned. 'I'm not so stupid as that,' he replied. 'Dogs that run away come to bad ends. Besides, I'm happy enough. I get a holiday sometimes, and a walk in the park, and on Sunday I can do what I like.'

"Dear me!' I exclaimed languidly. 'What a dreadful life! Now, I have nothing to do but to please myself every day in the week, and as for the park, I go there so often I'm perfectly sick of it.'

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"Do you get your Sundays out?' asked Bob.

"I hesitated. 'This is really my first Sunday out,' I replied at length, 'but I intend in future——'

"What's your name?' rudely interrupted Bob.

"He certainly had no manners at all, but what could you expect from a dog of low degree?

"My name,' I replied, holding up my head with a slight sniff of disdain, 'is—Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough!'

"I had no time to notice the effect of these words, for they were hardly out of my mouth when I

felt myself seized by a large hand, lifted into the air, and thrust into someone's coat pocket. From this humiliating position I heard the voice of the man washing the cart:

"That *your* dorg?" And someone answered, 'It belongs to the lady.'

"You may judge, my dear mistress, how frightened I felt. Here was a sudden end to my freedom! Imprisoned in a strange man's pocket, from which escape was impossible, nearly stifled with the smell of tobacco, and filled with dread as to what would happen next. I managed to wriggle my head out of the corner, but saw at once that it would be useless to think of jumping out, the distance from the ground being far too great. I remained still therefore, and as the man walked out of the yard had a faint hope that he knew where I lived and was taking me home. Alas! I was soon disappointed. He turned down a mews, went into a house I had never seen before, up some narrow stairs without any carpet, and entered a room where there sat a large fat man in his shirt sleeves, smoking and reading a newspaper. I was placed trembling on the table by his side, and he took the pipe out of his mouth and turned his head to look at me.

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"Nice little sort of a fancy dorg,' he said at last. 'What they call a "Blennum".'

"Strayed into the yard,' said the man who had picked me up. 'I'm going to show it to the missus presently.'

"Worth a tidy sum,' said the fat man, and went on smoking.

"Was ever a dog of my rank and position brought down so low? No one took any more notice of me, or seemed to think me of any importance, and I remained shivering on the table with large tears rolling down my cheeks. How I repented my folly! I had wanted to see the world, and here it was, a miserable contrast to my happy life at home, where I was fondled and admired by everyone. Foolish, foolish little dog that I had been! I began to think too how my dear little mistress would miss me, and how they would search everywhere and call for me in vain, and the more I thought the more painful it all seemed. A long and wretched time passed in this way, during which the fat man, who was a coachman I afterwards heard, puffed at his pipe and read his newspaper, sometimes shaking his head and talking to himself a little. He hardly seemed to know I was there, and I believe if the door had been open I could easily have escaped, for the other man had gone out of the room. But there was no chance of that; by and by he came back, took me under his arm and went out into the street again. Where was he going, I wondered. He had talked of the missus, but if the missus was any friend of his I had no hope that she would prove agreeable. It was a great surprise, therefore, to find myself a little later in a large house where there were soft carpets, and pictures, and flowers, and everything I have been used to see around me. Not only this, but I was most warmly received by a lady, who called me a duck, a darling, a love, and a beauty. These familiar names, which I had been accustomed to hear from my birth, made me feel somewhat at home, and I began to take comfort. At any rate, I was now with people who knew how to behave to me, and would treat me with consideration. I passed the rest of the day, therefore, in peace, though I still sighed for my own mistress, and had no appetite for the new roll and cream offered me.

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"All my fears returned, however, for to my distress I was sent back to sleep at the coachman's house, where I passed the night full of anxiety and the most dismal thoughts. How would all this end? Who can picture my ecstasy of delight the next morning when I heard the sound of your mother's voice talking to the coachman below? I need not tell you how she had succeeded in tracing me through the green-grocer, who had seen me picked up in the yard, for that you know already. I cannot help feeling that Bob may have had something to do with my recovery, for I am sure though rough in his manners he was a well-meaning dog. If so, I am grateful to him. To end a long story, my dear mistress, I must remark that I have no longer any wish to know more of the world. It is far too rough and noisy a place for me, and you need have no fear, therefore, that I shall try to repeat my experience, or shall ever forget the lesson taught me by 'my Sunday out'."

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THE TOAD IN THE HOLE

[56]

"When is she coming?"

"To-morrow."

"Are you glad?"

"No. Are you?"

"I don't care. I wonder how long she will stay. I know Mother said a week, but I dare say she'll ask her to stay longer as she did last year."

"Well, I know she'll be tiresome, and I shall be glad when she goes away."

"I'm going to sleep now."

"Oh, Martha, how soon you always do go to sleep! I'm not a bit sleepy yet."

A snore from the other little bed soon showed Betty that further talk was hopeless. She would have liked to chatter longer, but Martha had a way of falling asleep at the most interesting

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points, and Betty knew it would be useless to try and rouse her now.

So she resigned herself to her own thoughts with a sigh. Kitty was coming to-morrow! Coming before Martha and she had had any enjoyment of their country life together, for the children had only just left London. Coming to spoil all their plans and games with her tiresome ways, just as she had done last year. Of course she would insist on being first in everything, on ruling everyone, and would be as pushing and disagreeable as possible. It was all very well to say that she was a visitor and must do as she wished, but that did not make it any the less provoking.

And then Martha took it all so quietly. It was almost impossible to rouse her to be angry, and that was annoying too in its way. "I suppose," thought Betty, very sleepily now, "that I ought to try to be patient too, but sometimes I really *can't*." She fell asleep here, and dreamed that Kitty was an immense "daddy-long-legs" flapping and buzzing about in her hair.

The next afternoon Kitty arrived, full of excitement, and ready to be more than delighted with everything. [58]

She was eleven years old, just Martha's age, and Betty was two years younger. Fresh from her life in London, where there always were so many lessons to be learned and so little "fun" of any kind, this beautiful country home was a sort of paradise to her. To have no one to scold her, no lessons to learn, no tiresome straight walks with her governess, and above all, to have two playfellows always ready to join in pleasures and games! Kitty was an only child, and her life was often dull for want of companionship. Everything went on very well at first, for there was so much to do and see that there was no time for disputes. True, Kitty commanded as much as ever, and had a way of setting people to rights which was distinctly trying; but she and Betty did not come to any open disagreement until she had been at Holmwood for nearly a week. Nevertheless there had been many small occasions on which Betty had felt fretted and irritated; for Kitty, without the least intending it, seemed often to choose just the wrong thing to say and do. [59]

And then she always wished to do *exactly* the same as Martha and herself, and that was *so* tiresome.

For instance, all the children were very fond of dear Miss Grey. But now it was always Kitty who must sit next to her, Kitty who rushed to supply her with roses to wear and strawberries to eat, Kitty who kissed her repeatedly at the most awkward moments. Martha and Betty, who naturally felt that Miss Grey was their *own dear* Miss Grey, could hardly get near her at all, and Betty resented this very much. In fact, she gradually got to dwell so entirely on these annoyances that she could not think of Kitty's good qualities at all, and was quite unable to remember that she was generous and affectionate, and that her faults, though tiresome, were partly the result of a longing to be loved.

At last, the clouds having gathered, the storm came.

One morning, almost as soon as she got up, Betty felt that every single thing Kitty did or said was silly. It did not occur to her that perhaps she was a little bit cross herself, which was the real explanation. [60]

After breakfast they all three went down to the pond, and, dividing the water into shares, began to fish for frogs and newts.

"In a minute," said Betty to herself as she watched Kitty, "she'll say Martha and I have the best places."

It happened just so.

"I say," said Kitty, throwing down her net and coming close up to Betty, "I've got the worst place of all, there's nothing to catch in this part!"

"You haven't tried long enough," said Martha.

"Let's change," was Kitty's next suggestion as she stood looking eagerly over Betty's shoulder.

"All right," said Betty moodily, and she went round to the part of the pond Kitty had left, where she almost immediately caught two tadpoles and a newt.

"Look there!" she cried, holding up her net triumphantly.

"Oh!" screamed Kitty, "you *are* lucky. *Do* let me try," and she rushed up to Betty's side and seized hold of the net. But this was too much. Betty let go of the handle and said indignantly, "I shan't fish any more. You're so unfair; you always are!" And she walked away in a rage. "Kitty is more tiresome than ever," she said to herself. "She spoils everything. I wish she would go away!" [61]

All that day she preserved an attitude of dignified sulkiness in spite of Kitty's frequent attempts to make it up. When she came and threw her arm round her, Betty shook it off impatiently.

That evening the three little girls were in the woods with dear Miss Grey and baby Susie, who was just three years old. Betty was walking a little behind the others with her eyes fixed on the ground. It was damp and mossy, and there was a thick growth of ferns and underwood at the side of the path. Suddenly she saw something move quickly through this, and disappear down a hole. She stopped and moved aside the ferns and moss. What do you think she saw sitting comfortably in the hole and staring at her with its moist bright eyes?

A large speckled toad!

"Look, look, Miss Grey!" she cried, and everyone gathered round to see what she had found. Even Susie peered into the hole, and poked a bit of fern gently at the toad, which sat there gazing quietly at them.

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"What a jolly little home he's made for himself!" said Martha. "All soft and moist, and just exactly to fit him."

"He can't see out much," said Betty as she put back the moss gently over the top.

"I don't think he wants to," said Miss Grey. "He is quite satisfied, like many other people who live in holes."

The children ran on through the wood, except Betty, who kept back and took hold of Miss Grey's hand.

"What do you mean about living in holes?" she asked presently.

"Well, you know, we all live in holes of one kind or another. Some are rough and some smooth, some fit us exactly, and some don't fit us at all. Some are softly lined with all sorts of comforts, and some are full of pricks and troubles. And it is always very difficult to see out of them."

"Why?" asked Betty.

"Because, like the toad's hole we saw just now, our own lives are so near us and surround us so closely, that it is only by making an effort that we can get out of them and understand other people's lives at all. The only thing that can really make us do that is sympathy."

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"What does that mean?"

"It is that which makes us able to put ourselves in thought into other people's holes, and feel what it is like to live there. When we do that it makes us remember to be patient and gentle with our friends and companions, for if they live in uncomfortable holes it must be difficult for them to be unselfish and amiable. If we had their troubles and vexations we might not be half so pleasant as they are."

Betty was silent.

"Do you think Martha's hole and mine is nicer than Kitty's?" she said at last.

"Well, I think in some ways it may be. At any rate you know Kitty has no sisters to play with, and very little of this country life you all enjoy so much. While her holiday lasts I should try to make it as pleasant as possible for her, if I were you."

"I do," said Betty, "generally. Only sometimes she makes me feel so cross."

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At this moment up rushed Kitty, and elbowed Betty away from Miss Grey's side.

"You've had her long enough!" she shouted. "It's my turn now!"

And Betty was thinking so much about the toad in the hole, that she did not even frown.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KITCHEN CAT AND OTHER STORIES ***

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