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Author: Mrs. Molesworth

Illustrator: H. R. Millar

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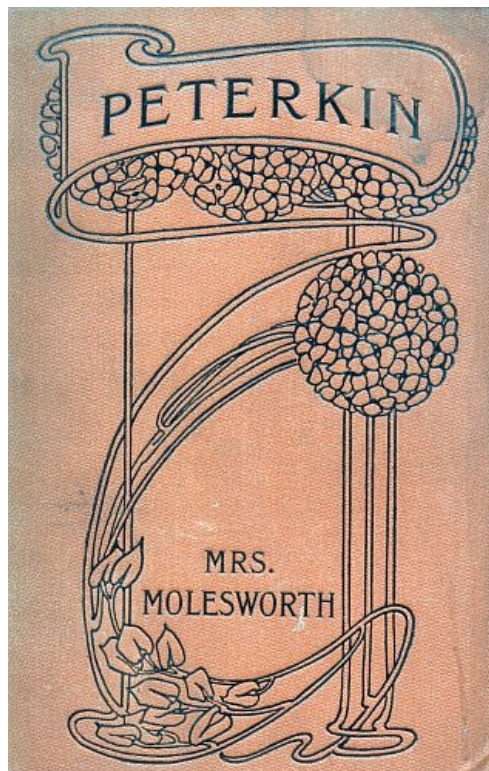
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PETERKIN



MAMMA . . . HUGGED HIM AS IF HE'D BEEN LOST
FOR A YEAR.

[*Frontispiece.*



PETERKIN

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF 'CARROTS,' 'CUCKOO CLOCK,' 'TELL ME A STORY'

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. R. MILLAR

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TO

"ALEX"

ALEXANDER DOBREE HERRIES

I DEDICATE THIS LITTLE STORY

155 SLOANE STREET, S.W.
May Day 1902

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PETERKIN

CHAPTER I

WHAT CAN HAVE BECOME OF HIM?

WE were all at tea in the nursery. All except him. The door burst open and James put his head in.

'If you please, Mrs. Brough,' he began,—'Mrs. Brough' is the servants' name for nurse. Mamma calls her 'Brough' sometimes, but we always call her 'nurse,' of course,—'If you please, Mrs. Brough, is Master Peterkin here?'

Nurse looked up, rather vexed. She doesn't like burstings in.

'Of course not, James,' she said. 'He is out driving with his mamma. You must have seen them start.'

[2]

'It's just that,' said James, in his silly way. 'It's his mamma that wants to know.'

And then we noticed that James's face was much redder than usual. It may have been partly that he had run upstairs very fast, for he is really very good-natured, but it looked as if he was rather in a fuss, too.

Nurse sat very bolt up in her chair, and *her* face began to get queer, and her voice to get vexeder. Lots of people get cross when they are startled or frightened. I have noticed it.

'What do you mean, James? Please to explain,' she said.

'I can't stop,' he said, 'and I don't rightly understand, myself. His mamma sent Master Peterkin home before her, half-an-hour ago or more, but he hasn't come in, not as I've seen, nor nobody else, I'm afraid. So where he's got to, who can say?'

And James turned to go.

Nurse stopped him, getting up from her place as she spoke.

'Was he in the carriage?' she asked.

'Of course not. Beckett would have seen him in, all right, if he had been,' said James, in a very superior tone. 'He was to run home by himself a bit of a way, as I take it,' he added, as he hurried off at last.

[3]

'I must go downstairs to your mamma,' said nurse. 'Miss Blanchie, my dear, will you look after Miss Elvira, and see that she doesn't spill her tea?'

'*Nursie*,' said Elvira, in a very offended tone, 'you know I never spill my tea now.'

'Not since the day before yesterday,' I was beginning to say, but I didn't. For I thought to myself, if there was any real trouble about Peterkin, it wouldn't be at all a good time to tease each other. I don't think Elf—that's Elvira's pet name—had understood about him being lost. Indeed, I don't think I had quite taken it in myself, till I saw how grave the two eldest ones were looking.

'Clem,' I said, 'do you think there can really be anything the matter?'

Clement is the eldest of us all, and he is always the one we go to first if we are in any trouble. But he is sometimes rather slow; he is not as quick and clever as Blanche, and she often puts him down at first, though she generally comes round to his way in the end. She answered for him now, though I hadn't spoken to her.

'How can there not be something the matter?' she said sharply. 'If Peterkin has been half-an-hour or an hour, perhaps, wandering about the streets, it shows he has at least lost his way, and who knows where he's got to. I wish you wouldn't ask such silly questions, Giles.'

[4]

Then, all of a sudden, Elf burst out crying. It may have been partly Blanche's sharp tone, which had startled her, and made her take more notice of it all.

'Oh, Clem, Clem,' she wailed, 'could he have been stolen?'

'No, no, darling,' said Clement, dabbing her face with his pocket-handkerchief. 'There are kind policemen in the streets, you know. They wouldn't let a little boy like Peterkin be stolen.'

'But they does take little boys to pison,' said Elf. 'I've see'd them. It's 'cos of that I'm frightened of them for Peterkin.'

That was not quite true. She had never thought of policemen till, unluckily, Clem spoke of them in his wish to comfort her. She did not mean to say what was not true, of course, but there never was such a child as Elf for arguing, even then when she was only four years old. Indeed, she's not half as bad now that she is eight, twice as old, and I often tell her so. Perhaps that evening it wasn't a bad thing, for the talking about policemen stopped her crying, which was even worse than her arguing, once she started a good roar.

[5]

'It's just because of that, that I'm so frightened about dear sweet little Peterkin,' she repeated.

'Rubbish, Elf,' I began, but Clem looked at me and I stopped.

'You needn't be frightened that Peterkin will be taken to prison, Elfie,' he said in his kind, rather slow way. 'It's only naughty little boys that the policemen take to prison, and Peterkin isn't naughty,' and then he wiped Elf's eyes again, and she forgot to go on crying, for just then nurse came upstairs. *She* was not actually crying, of course, but she did look very worried, so Clem and Blanche's faces did not clear up at all. Nor did mine, I suppose. I really did not know what to think, I was waiting to see what the others thought, for we three younger ones looked up to Clement and Blanche a good deal, and we still do. They are twins, and they seem to mix together so well. Blanche is quick and clever, and Clement is awfully sensible, and they are both very kind, though Clem is the gentlest. They are nearly sixteen now, and I am thirteen past, so at the time I am writing about they were twelve and I was going to be ten my next birthday, and Peterkin was eight and Elvira five. I won't say much about what sort of a boy Peterkin was, for as my story is mostly about him and the funny things he did and thought, it will show of itself.

[6]

He *was* a funny child; a queer child in some ways, I mean, and he still is. Mamma says it is stupid to say 'funny' when we mean queer or odd, but I think it says it better than any other word, and I am sure other children will think so too.

Blanche was the first to speak to nurse.

'Is mamma really frightened about Peterkin, nurse?' she asked. 'Tell us what it is.'

But nurse had caught sight of her darling pet baby's red eyes.

'Miss Blanchie,' she said, 'I asked you to look after Miss Elvira, and she's been crying.'

'You asked me to see that she didn't spill her tea, and she hasn't spilt it. It's some nonsense she has got in her head about policemen taking strayed children to prison that she has been crying about,' replied Blanche, rather crossly.

'I only wish,' began nurse, but the rest of her sentence she mumbled to herself, though I heard part of it. It was wishing that the policemen *had* got Peterkin safely.

[7]

'Of course, your poor mamma is upset about it,' she went on, though I could see she did not want to say very much for fear of Elf's beginning to cry again. 'It was this way. Your mamma had to go round by Belton Street, and she did not want to keep Master Peterkin out so late to miss his tea, so she dropped him at the corner of Lindsay Square, and told him to run home. It's as straight as straight can be, and he's often run that far alone. So where he's got to or gone to, there's no guessing.'

'And what is mamma doing?' asked Blanche.

'She has sent Mr. Drew and James off in different directions,' said nurse, 'and she has gone herself again in the carriage to the station, as it's just time for your papa's train, and he will know what more to do.'

We did not live in London then; papa went up and down every day from the big town by the sea where our home was. Clement thinks perhaps I had better not say what town it is, as some people might remember about us, and I *might* say things that would vex them; so I won't call it anything, though I must explain that it is not at all a little place, but quite big enough for any one to lose their way in, if they were strangers. But Peterkin wasn't a stranger; and the way he had to come was, as nurse said, as straight as straight.

[8]

We all listened with grave faces to what nurse told us. Suddenly Clement got up—I can't say 'jumped up,' for he was always rather slow.

'Nurse,' he said, 'mamma's out, so I can't ask her leave. But I've got an idea about Peterkin. Will you give me leave to go out for half-an-hour or so? I promise you I won't go far, but I would rather not tell you where I want to go, as it may be all nonsense.'

Nurse looked at him doubtfully. She trusted Clem the most of us all, I know, and she had good reason to do so, for he was and is very trustworthy. And it was nice of him to ask her leave, considering he was twelve years old and quite out of the nursery, except that he still liked having tea there when he came in from school every evening.

'Well, Master Clement,' said nurse, 'I don't quite know. Supposing you go out and don't get back as soon as you expect? It would be just a double fright for your poor mamma.'

[9]

'Let me go too!' I exclaimed, and I jumped up so suddenly that I made all the cups rattle and nearly threw over the table altogether. 'Then if anything stops Clem getting back quickly, I can run home and explain. Anyway you'd be more comfortable if you knew the two of us were on the hunt together. You don't mind my coming, do you, Clem?'

'No,' said Clem, 'but do let's go.'

'And you won't be long?' pleaded nurse.

Clem shook his head.

'I don't think we can be—not if there's anything in my idea,' he called out, as we ran off.

We didn't take a minute to pull on our coats, which were hanging in the hall. I daresay I should never have thought of mine at all, if Clem hadn't reminded me, even though it was late in

November and a cold evening. And as soon as we were outside and had set off at a good pace, I begged Clem to tell me what his idea was, and where we were going to look for Peterkin.

'It's the parrot,' he replied; 'the parrot in Rock Terrace.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said. 'I never heard of a parrot, and I don't know where Rock Terrace is.'

[10]

'Nonsense,' said Clem, stopping for a moment. 'You must have forgotten.'

'I haven't indeed,' I said.

'Not about the parrot that Peterkin has been dreaming of ever since we passed it on Saturday, when we were out with mamma—next door to old Mrs. Wylie's?' Clem exclaimed.

'No,' I repeated. 'I wasn't with you that day, and——'

'No more you were,' said Clem.

'And,' I went on, 'I don't know where Mrs. Wylie lives, though I've often seen her herself at our house. And you know, Clement, that's just like Peterkin. If he's got anything very much in his head, he often doesn't speak of it, except to any one who knows about it already.'

'He hasn't said very much about it, even to me,' said Clement. 'But, all the same, I know he has got it tremendously in his head.'

'How do you mean? Is he making up fairy stories about it?'

'Perhaps! You see he had never heard a parrot speaking. I'm not sure if he knew they ever did. But he wanted very much to see it again, and it just came into my mind all at once, that if he had a chance he might have run round there and lost his way. I don't suppose he *meant* to when mamma told him to go home. It may just have struck him when he got to the corner of Lindsay Square.'

[11]

I did not answer. We were walking so fast that it was not easy to go on speaking. But I did think it was very clever of Clement to have thought of it. It was so like Peterkin.

Clement hurried on. It was quite dark by now, but the lamps were lighted, and Clem seemed quite sure of his way. In spite of feeling rather unhappy about Peterkin, I was enjoying myself a little. I did not think it possible that he was really badly lost, and it was very exciting to rush along the streets after dark like this, and then I could not help fancying how triumphant we should feel if we actually found him.

It was not very surprising that I did not know where Rock Terrace was, or that I had never even heard of it. It was such a tiny little row of such tiny houses, opening out of one corner of Lindsay Square. The houses were rather pretty; at least, very neat-looking and old-fashioned, with a little bit of garden in front, and small iron gates. They looked as if old maids lived in them, and I daresay there were a good many.

[12]

Clement hurried along till he was close to the farther off end. Then he stopped short, and for the first time seemed at a loss.

'I don't know the number,' he said, 'but I'm sure it was almost the end house. And—yes—isn't that a big cage on the little balcony, Giles? Look well.'

I peeped up. The light of the lamps was not very good in Rock Terrace.

'Yes,' I said. 'It is a big cage, but I can't see if there's a bird in it.'

'Perhaps they take him in at night,' said Clement. Then he looked up again at the balconies.

'Let me see,' he went on, 'which side is Mrs. Wylie's? Mamma went in at the—' but before he had time to finish his sentence his doubts were set at rest—his doubts and all our fears about Peterkin. For the door on the left of the parrot's home opened slowly, letting out what seemed, in contrast with the darkness outside, a flood of light, just within which, in the small hall or lobby of the miniature house, stood two figures—the one, that of a short thin old lady with white hair, dressed all in black; the other, a short fat little boy in a thick coat—our missing Peterkin!

[13]

They were speaking to each other most politely.

'So pleased to have seen you, my dear,' said Mrs. Wylie. 'Give my love to your dear mamma. I will not forget about the parrot, you may be sure. He shall have a proper invitation. And—you are quite certain you can find your way home? Oh, dear!—that poor child must have been bemoaning herself again! Polly always knows.'

And as we stood there, our minds scarcely made up as to what we should do, we heard a queer croaking voice, from inside the house on the right of Mrs. Wylie—the parrot's voice, of course, calling out—

'I'm so tired, Nana; I'm so tired. I won't be good; no, I won't.'

Mrs. Wylie and Peterkin both stood silent for a moment, listening. So did we. Then Clement opened the gate and ran up the two or three steps, I following him.



OUR MISSING PETERKIN.—p. 13.

'Peterkin!' he exclaimed, 'mamma has been so frightened about you.'

And Peterkin turned round and looked up in his face with his big blue eyes, apparently quite astonished.

'Has mamma come back?' he said. 'I've only been here for a minute or two. I just wanted to look at the parrot.'

Mrs. Wylie was a quick-witted old lady. She took it all in, in a moment.

'Dear, dear!' she said. 'I am afraid it is my fault. I saw the dear boy looking up at the parrot next door when I came in from my stroll round to the pillar-box with a letter, and he told me he was one of Mrs. Lesley's little sons, and then we got talking. But I had no idea his mamma would be alarmed. I am afraid it has been much more than a few minutes. I *am* sorry.'

It was impossible to say anything to trouble the poor old lady: she looked as if she were going to cry.

'It will be all right now,' said Clement. 'Mamma will be so delighted to see him safe and sound. But we had better hurry home. Come along, Peterkin.'

But nothing would make Peterkin forget his good manners. He tugged off his sailor cap again, which he had just put on, and held out his hand, for the second or third time, I daresay, as he and his old lady had evidently been hobnobbing over

their leave-takings for some minutes before we made our appearance.

'Good-bye!' he said; 'and thank you very much. And I'll ask mamma to let me come whenever you fix the day for the parrot. And please tell me all he tells you about the little girl. And—thank you very much.'

They were the funniest pair. She so tiny and thin and white, with bright dark eyes, like some bird's, and Peterkin so short and sturdy and rosy, with his big dreamy ones looking up at her. She was just a little taller than he. And suddenly I saw his rosy face grow still rosier; crimson or scarlet, really. For Mrs. Wylie made a dash at him and kissed him, and unluckily Peterkin did not like being kissed, except by mamma and Elf. His politeness, however, stood him in good stead. He did not pull away, or show that he hated it, as lots of fellows would have done. He stood quite still, and then, with another tug at his cap, ran down the steps after Clem and me.

Clement waited a moment or two before he spoke. It was his way; but just now it was a good thing, as Mrs. Wylie did not shut the door quite at once, and everything was so quiet in that little side street, in the evening especially, that very likely our voices would have carried back to her. I, for my part, was longing to shake Peterkin, though I felt very inclined to burst out laughing, too. But I knew it was best to leave the 'rowing' to Clem.

'Peterkin,' he began at last, 'I don't know what to say to you.'

Peterkin had got hold of Clem's hand and was holding it tight, and he was already rather out of breath, as Clem was walking fast—very fast for him—and he has always been a long-legged chap for his age, thin and wiry, too; whereas, in those days—though, thank goodness, he is growing like a house on fire *now*—Peterkin was as broad as he was long. So to keep up with Clement's strides he had to trot, and that sort of pace soon makes a kid breathless, of course.

'I—I never thought mamma'd be flightened,' he managed to get out at last. He had been a long time of saying his 'r's' clearly, and now they still all got into 'l's' if he was bothered or startled. 'I never thought she'd be flightened.'

'Then you were a donkey,' I burst out, and Clement interrupted me.

'How could she not have been frightened?' he went on. 'She told you to run straight home, which wouldn't have taken you five minutes, and you have been at least an hour.'

'I thought it wouldn't be no farther to come this way,' replied Peterkin, 'and I only meant to look at the pallot one minute. And it would have been very *lu—rude* not to speak to the old lady, and go into her house for a minute when she asked me. Mamma always says we mustn't be rude,' said Peterkin, plucking up some spirit.

'Mamma always says we must be *obedient*' replied Clement, severely.

Then he relapsed into silence, and his quick footsteps and Peterkin's short trotty ones were the only sounds.

'I believe,' I couldn't help murmuring, half to myself, half to Peterkin—'I believe you've got some rubbish in your head about the parrot being a fairy. If I were mamma I'd stop your—' but at that I stopped *myself*. If Clement had heard me he would have been down upon me for disrespectfulness in saying to a baby like Pete what I thought mamma should or should not do;

and I didn't care to be pulled up by Clement before the little ones.

[18]

Peterkin was as sharp as needles in some ways. He guessed the end of my unfinished sentence.

'No,' he half whispered, 'mamma'd *never* stop me reading faily stolies—you know she wouldn't, Gilly, and it's velly unkind of you to say so.'

'I didn't say so,' I replied.

'Be quiet, both of you,' said Clem, 'and hurry on,' for we had slackened a little.

But in spite of the breathlessness of the pace, I heard another gasp from Peterkin—

'It *is* velly like the blue-bird,' were the words I distinguished.

And 'I knew I was right,' I thought to myself triumphantly.

CHAPTER II

[19]

FOUND

THE carriage was standing waiting at our own house when we got there. And there was some bustle going on, for the front door was not shut, and we could see into the hall, which of course was brightly lighted up.

Papa was there, speaking to some one; he had his hat on, as if he was just coming out again. And—yes—it was Drew he was speaking to, and James too, I think—but behind them was poor mamma, looking so dreadfully unhappy. It did make me want to shake Peterkin again.

They did not see us as quickly as we saw them, for it was dark outside and they were all talking: papa giving directions, I fancy.

So they did jump when Clem—hurrying for once—rushed up the steps, dragging Peterkin after him.

[20]

'We've found him—we've found him!' he shouted. 'In with you, Pete: show yourself, quick.'

For mamma had got quite white, and looked as if she were going to faint or tumble down in some kind of a fit; but luckily before she had time for anything, there was that fat boy hugging and squeezing her so tight that she'd have been clever to move at all, though if she *had* tumbled down he would have made a good buffer.

'Oh, mamma, mamma—oh, mummy,' he said, and by this time he was howling, of course, 'I never meant to frighten you. I never did. I thought I'd been only five minutes, and I thought it was nearly as quick home that way.'

And of course mamma didn't scold him! She hugged him as if he'd been lost for a year, and as if he was the prodigal son and the good brother mixed up together.

But papa looked rather stern, and I was not altogether sorry to see it.

'Where have you been, Peterkin?' he said. And then he glanced up at us two—Clem and me—as Peterkin seemed too busy crying to speak. 'Where has he been?' papa repeated. 'It was very clever of you to find him, I must say.'

[21]

And mamma's curiosity began to awaken, now that she had got old Pete safe in her arms again. She looked up with the same question in her face.

'Where—' she began.

And I couldn't help answering.

'It was all Clem's idea,' I said, for it really was only fair for Clem to get some praise. 'He thought of the parrot.'

'The *parrot*,' mamma repeated, growing more puzzled instead of less.

'Yes,' said Clement. 'The parrot next door to Mrs. Wylie's. Perhaps you don't remember, mamma. It was the day Peterkin and I were out with you—Giles wasn't there—and you went in to Mrs. Wylie's and we waited outside, and the parrot was in a cage on the balcony, and we heard it talk.'

'Yes,' said Peterkin, 'he *talked*,' as if that was an explanation of everything.

Mamma's face cleared.

'I think I do remember something about it,' she said. 'But I have never heard you mention it since, Peterkin?'

'No,' said Peterkin, getting rather red.

'He has spoken of it a little to me,' said Clement; 'that's how I knew it was in his mind. But Peterkin often doesn't say much about what he's thinking a lot about. It's his way.'

[22]

'Yes,' said Peterkin, 'it's my way.'

'And have you been planning all these days to run off to see the parrot again?' asked mamma. I wasn't quite sure if she was vexed or not, but *I* was; it seemed so queer, queer as Pete often was, for him not to have confided in somebody.

But we were mistaken.

'No, no, truly, mamma,' he said, speaking in a much more determined way now, and shaking his curly head. 'I didn't ever think of it till after I'd got out of the calliage and I saw it was the corner of the big square where the little houses are at one end, and then I only meant to go for one minute. I thought it was nearly as quick that way, and I ran fast. I never meant to flighten you, mamma,' he repeated again, his voice growing plaintive. 'I wasn't planning it a bit all these days. I only kept thinking it *were* like the blue-bird.'

The last sentence was almost in a whisper; it was only a sort of honesty that forced him to say it. As far as Clement and I were concerned, he needn't have said it.

'I knew he'd got some fairy-story rubbish in his head,' I muttered, but I don't think Peterkin heard me, though papa and mamma did; for I saw them glance at each other, and papa said something under his breath, of which I only caught the words 'getting too fanciful,' and 'schoolboy,' which made mamma look rather unhappy again.

[23]

'I don't yet understand how old Mrs. Wylie got mixed up in it all,' said papa.

'She lives next door to the parrot,' said Clem, and we couldn't help smiling at the funny way he said it.

'And she saw me when she was coming back from the post, and she was very kind,' Peterkin went on, taking up the story again, as the smile had encouraged him. 'She 'avited me to go in, up to her drawing-room, so that I could hear him talking better. And he said lots of things.'

'Oh yes, by the bye,' I exclaimed, 'there was something about a little girl, Mrs. Wylie said. What was it, Pete?'

But Peterkin shut up at this.

'I'll tell you the next time I go there. Mummy, you will let me go to see that old lady again, won't you?' he begged. 'She was so kind, and I only thought I'd been there five minutes. Mayn't I go again to see her?'

[24]

'*And* the parrot,' said mamma, smiling. She was sharp enough to take in that it was a quarter for Mrs. Wylie and three quarters for the parrot that he wanted so to go back to Rock Terrace. 'Well, you must promise never to pay visits on your own account again, Peterkin, and then we shall see. Now run upstairs to the nursery as fast as you can and get some tea. And I'm sure Clem and Giles will be glad of some more. I hope poor nurse and Blanche and Elfie know he is all right,' she added, glancing round.

'Yes, ma'am. I took the liberty of going up to tell the young ladies and Mrs. Brough, when Master Peterkin first returned,' said James in his very politest and primmest tone.

'That was very thoughtful of you,' said mamma, approvingly, which made James get very red.

We three boys skurried upstairs after that. At least I did. Clement came more slowly, but as his legs were long enough to take two steps at a time, he got to the top nearly as soon as I did, and Peterkin came puffing after us. I was rather surprised that Blanche and Elf had been content to stay quietly in the nursery, considering all the excitement that had been going on downstairs, and I think it was very good of Blanche, for she told me afterwards that she had only done it to keep Elvira from getting into one of her endless crying fits. They always say Elf is such a nervous child that she can't help it, but *I* think it's a good bit of it cross temper too.

[25]

Still she is rather growing out of it, and, after all, that night there was something to cry about, and there might have been worse, as nurse said. She had been telling the girls stories of people who got lost, though she was sensible enough to make them turn up all right at the end. She can tell very interesting stories sometimes, but she keeps the *best* ones to amuse us when we are ill, or when mamma's gone away on a visit, or something horrid like that has happened.

They all three flew at Peterkin, of course, and hugged him as if he'd been shipwrecked, or putting out a fire, or something grand like that. And he took it as coolly as anything, and asked for his tea, as if he deserved all the petting and fussing.

That was another of his little 'ways,' I suppose.

Then, as we were waiting for the kettle to boil up again to make fresh tea, if you please, for his lordship—though Clem and I were to have some too, of course, and we did deserve it—all the story had to be told over for the third or fourth time, of the parrot, and old Mrs. Wylie meeting Pete as she came in, and his thinking he'd only been there about five minutes, and all the rest of it.

[26]

'And what did the Polly parrot talk about?' asked Elf. She had a picture of a parrot in one of her books, and some rhymes about it.

'Oh,' answered Peterkin, he said, "How d'ye do?" and "Pretty Poll," and things like that.'

'He said queerer things than that; you know he—' I began. I saw Pete didn't want to tell about the parrot copying the mysterious child that Mrs. Wylie had spoken of, so I thought I'd tease him a bit by reminding him of it. I felt sure he had got some of his funny ideas out of his fairy stories in his head; that the little girl—for Mrs. Wylie had spoken of a 'her'—was an enchanted princess or something like that, and I wasn't far wrong, as you will see. But I didn't finish my sentence, for Peterkin, who was sitting next me, gave me a sort of little kick, not to hurt, of course, and whispered, 'I'll tell you afterwards.' So I felt it would be ill-natured to tease him, and I didn't say any more, and luckily the others hadn't noticed what I had begun. Blanchie was on her knees in front of the fire toasting for us, and Elf was putting lumps of sugar into the cups, to be ready.

[27]

Pete was as hungry as a hunter, and our sharp walk had given Clem and me a fresh appetite, so we ate all the toast and a lot of plum-cake as well, and felt none the worse for it.

And soon after that, it was time to be tidied up to go down to the drawing-room to mamma. Peterkin and Elvira only stayed half-an-hour or so, but after they had gone to bed we three big ones went into the library to finish our lessons while papa and mamma were at dinner. Sometimes we went into the dining-room to dessert, and sometimes we worked on till mamma called us into the drawing-room: it all depended on how many lessons we'd got to do, or how fast we had got on with them. Clement and Blanche were awfully good about that sort of thing, and went at it steadily, much better than I, I'm afraid, though I could learn pretty quickly if I chose. But I did not like lessons, especially the ones we had to do at home, for in these days Clem and I only went to a day-school and had to bring books and things back with us every afternoon. And besides these lessons we had to do at home for school, we had a little extra once or twice a week, as we had French conversation and reading on half-holidays with Blanche's teachers, and they sometimes gave us poetry to learn by heart or to translate. We were not exactly *obliged* to do it, but of course we didn't want Blanche, who was only a girl, to get ahead of us, as she would very likely have done, for she did grind at her lessons awfully. I think most girls do.

[28]

It sounds as if we were rather hard-worked, but I really don't think we were, though I must allow that we worked better in those days, and learnt more in comparison, than we do now at—I won't give the name of the big school we are at. Clement says it is better not—people who write books never do give the real names, he says, and I fancy he's right. It is an awfully jolly school, and we are as happy as sand-boys, whatever that means, but I can't say that we work as Blanche does, though she does it all at home with governesses.

That part of the evening—when we went back to the drawing-room to mamma, I mean—was one of the times I shall always like to remember about. It is very jolly now, of course, to be at home for the holidays, but there was then the sort of 'treat' feeling of having got our lessons done, and the little ones comfortably off to bed, and the grown-up-ness.

[29]

Mamma looked so pretty, as she was always nicely dressed, though I liked some of her dresses much better than others—I don't like her in black ones at all; and the drawing-room was pretty, and then there was mamma's music. Her playing was nice, but her singing was still better, and she used to let us choose our favourite songs, each in turn. Blanche plays the violin now, very well, they say, and mamma declares she is really far cleverer at music than she herself ever was; but for all that, I shall never care for her fiddle anything like mamma's singing; if I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget it.

It is a great thing to have really jolly times like those evenings to think of when you begin to get older, and are a lot away from home, and likely to be still less and less there.

But I must not forget that this story is supposed to be principally about Peterkin and his adventures, so I'll go on again about the night after he'd been lost.

He and I had a room together, and he was nearly always fast asleep, like a fat dormouse, when I went up to bed. He had a way of curling himself round, like a ball, that really did remind you of a dormouse. I believe it kept him from growing; I really do, though I did my best to pull him out straight. He didn't like that, ungrateful chap, and used to growl at me for it, and I believe he often pretended to be asleep when he wasn't, just to stop me doing it; for one night, nurse had come in to know what the row was about, and though she agreed with me that it was much better for him to lie properly stretched at his full length, she said I wasn't to wake him up because of it.

[30]

But if he was generally fast asleep at night when I came to bed, he certainly made up for it by waking in the morning. I never knew anything like him for that. I believe he woke long before the birds, winter as well as summer, and then was his time for talking and telling me his stories and fancies. Once I myself was well awake I didn't mind, as it was generally rather interesting; but I couldn't stand the being awakened ages before the time. So we made an agreement, that if I didn't wake him up at night, he'd not bother me in the morning till I gave a sign that I was on the way to waking of myself. The sign was a sort of snort that's easy to make, even while you're still pretty drowsy, and it did very well, as I could lie quiet in a dreamy way listening to him. He didn't want me to speak, only to snort a little now and then till I got quite lively, as I generally did in a few minutes, as his stories grew more exciting, and there came something that I wanted him to alter in them.

[31]

That night, however, when I went up to bed there was no need to think of our bargain, for Peterkin was as wide awake as I was.

'Haven't you been to sleep yet?' I asked him.

'Not exactly,' he said. 'Just a sort of half. I'm glad you've come, Gilley, for I've got a lot of things in my head.'

'You generally have,' I said, 'but *I'm* sleepy, if you're not. That scamper in the cold after you, my good boy, was rather tiring, I can tell you.'

'I'm very sorry,' said he, in a penitent tone of voice, 'but you know, Giles, I never meant to——'

'Oh, stop that!' I exclaimed; 'you've said it twenty times too often already. Better tell me a bit of the things in your head. Then you can go to sleep, and dream them out, and have an interesting story ready for me in the morning.'

'Oh, but——' objected Pete, sitting up in bed and clasping his hands round his knees, his face very red, and his eyes very blue and bright, 'they're not dreamy kind of things at all. There's really something very misterist—what is the proper word, Gilley?' [32]

'"Mysterious," I suppose you mean,' I said.

'Yes, misterous,' repeated he, 'about what the parrot said, and I'm pretty sure that old lady thinks so too.'

'Didn't she explain about it, at all?' I asked him. I began to think there *was* something queer, perhaps, for Peterkin's manner impressed me.

'Well, she did a little,' he replied. 'But I'd better tell you all, Gilley; just what I first heard, before she came up and spoke to me, you know, and——'

Just then, however, there came an interruption.

Mamma put her head in at the door.

'Boys,' she said, 'not asleep yet? At least *you* should be, Peterkin. You didn't wake him, I hope, Giles?'

I had no time for an indignant 'No; of course, not,' before Pete came to my defence.

'No, no, mummy! I was awake all of myself. I wanted him to come very much, to talk a little.'

'Well, you must both be rather tired with all the excitement there has been,' mamma said. 'So go to sleep, now, and do your talking in the morning. Promise,—both of you—eh?' [33]

'Yes,' we answered; 'word of honour, mamma,' and she went away, quite sure that we would keep our promise, which was sealed by a kiss from her.

Dear little mother! She did not often come up to see us in bed, for fear of rousing us out of our 'beauty' sleep, but to-night she had felt as if she must make sure we were all right after the fuss of Peterkin's being lost, you see.

And of course we were as good as our word, and only just said 'Good-night!' to each other; Pete adding, 'I'll begin at the beginning, and tell you everything, as soon as I hear your first snort in the morning, Giles.'

'You'd better wait for my second or third,' I replied. 'I'm never very clear-headed at the first, and I want to give my attention, as it's something real, and not one of your make-ups,' I said. 'So, good-night!'

It is awfully jolly to know that you are trusted, isn't it?

CHAPTER III

AN INVITATION

I SLEPT ON rather later than usual next morning. I suppose I really was tired. And when I began to awake, and gradually remembered all that had happened the night before, I heartily wished I hadn't promised Peterkin to snort at all.

I took care not to open my eyes for a good bit, but I couldn't carry on humbugging that I was still asleep for very long. Something made me open my eyes, and as soon as I did so I knew what it was. There was Pete—bolt upright—as wide awake as if he had never been asleep, staring at me with all his might, his eyes as round and blue as could be. You know the feeling that some one is looking at you, even when you don't see them. I had not given one snort, and I could not help feeling rather cross with Peterkin, even when he exclaimed— [35]

'Oh, I am so glad you're awake!'

'You've been staring me awake,' I said, very grumpily. 'I'd like to know who could go on sleeping with you wishing them awake?'

'I'm very sorry if you wanted to go on sleeping,' he replied meekly. He did not seem at all surprised at my saying he had wakened me. He used to understand rather queer things like that so quickly, though we counted him stupid in some ways.

'But as I am awake you can start talking,' I said, closing my eyes again, and preparing to listen.

Pete was quite ready to obey.

'Well,' he began, 'it was this way. Mamma didn't want me to be late for tea, so she stopped at the end of that big street—a little farther away than Lindsay Square, you know—'

'Yes, Meredith Place,' I grunted.

'And,' Pete went on, 'told me to run home. It's quite straight, if you keep to the front, of course.'

'And you did run straight home, didn't you?' I said teasingly.

'No,' he replied seriously, but not at all offended. 'When I got to the corner of the square I looked up it, and I remembered that it led to the funny little houses where Clem and I had seen the parrot. So, almost without settling it in my mind, I ran along that side of the square till I came to Rock Terrace. I ran *very* fast—'

[36]

'I wish I'd been there to see you,' I grunted again.

'And I thought if I kept round by the back, I'd get out again to the front nearly as soon—running all the way, you see, to make up. And I'd scarcely got to the little houses when I heard the parrot. His cage was out on the balcony, you know. And it is very quiet there—scarcely any carts or carriages passing—and it was getting dark, and I think you hear things plainer in the dark; don't you think so, Gilley?'

I did not answer, so he went on.

'I heard the parrot some way off. His voice is so queer, you know. And when I got nearer I could tell every word he said. He kept on every now and then talking for himself—real talking—"Getting cold. Polly wants to go to bed. Quick, quick." And then he'd stop for a minute, as if he was listening and heard something I couldn't. *That* was the strange part that makes me think perhaps he isn't really a parrot at all, Giles,' and here Pete dropped his voice and looked very mysterious. I had opened my eyes for good now; it was getting exciting.

[37]

'What did he say?' I asked.

'What you and Clement heard, and a lot more,' Peterkin replied. 'Over and over again the same—"I'm so tired, Nana, I won't be good, no I won't."'

'Yes, that's what we heard,' I said, 'but what was the lot more?'

'Oh, perhaps there wasn't so *very* much more,' said he, consideringly. 'There was something about "I won't be locked up," and "I'll write a letter," and then again and again, "I won't be good, I'm so tired." That was what you and Clement heard, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' I said.

'And one funny thing about it was that his voice, the parrot's, sounded quite different when he was talking his own talking, do you see?—like "Pretty Polly is cold, wants to go to bed"—from when he was copying the little girl's. It was always croaky, of course, but *squeakier*, somehow, when he was copying her.'

Peterkin sat up still straighter and looked at me, evidently waiting for my opinion about it all. I was really very interested, but I wanted first to hear all he had in his head, so I did not at once answer.

[38]

'Isn't it very queer?' he said at last.

'What do you think about it?' I asked.

He drew a little nearer me and spoke in a lower voice, though there was no possibility of any one ever hearing what he said.

'P'raps,' he began, 'it isn't *only* a parrot, or p'raps some fairy makes it say these things. The little girl might be shut up, you see, like the princess in the tower, by some *bad* fairy, and there might be a *good* one who wanted to help her to get out. I wonder if they ever do invite fairies to christenings now, and forget some of them,' he went on, knitting his brows, 'or not ask them, because they are bad fairies? I can't remember about Elf's christening feast; can you, Gilley?'

'I can remember hers, and yours too, for that matter,' I replied. 'You forget how much older I am. But of course it's not like that now. There are no fairies to invite, as I've often told you, Pete. At least,' for, in spite of my love of teasing, I never liked to see the look of distress that came over his chubby face when any one talked that sort of common sense to him, 'at least, people have got out of the way of seeing them or getting into fairy-land.'

[39]

'But we *might* find it again,' said Peterkin, brightening up.

And I didn't like to disappoint him by saying I could not see much chance of it.

Then another idea struck me.

'How about Mrs. Wylie?' I said. 'Didn't she explain it at all? You told her what you had heard, didn't you? Yes, of course, she heard some of it herself, when we were all three standing at the door of her house.'

'Well,' said Peterkin, 'I was going to tell you the rest. I was listening to the parrot, and it was much plainer than *you* heard, Gilley, for when you were there you only heard him from down below, and I was up near him—well, I was just standing there listening to him, when that old lady came up.'

'I know all about that,' I interrupted.

'No, you don't, not nearly all,' Peterkin persisted. He could be as obstinate as a little pig sometimes, so I said nothing. 'I was just standing there when she came up. She looked at me, and then she went in at her own gate, next door to the parrot's, you know, and then she looked at me again, and spoke over the railings. She said, "Are you talking to the parrot, my dear?" and I said, "No, I'm only listening to him, thank you"; and then she looked at me again, and she said, "You don't live in this terrace, I think?" And I said, "No, I live on the Esplanade, number 59." Then she pulled out her spectacles—long things, you know, at the end of a turtle-shell stick.'

[40]

'Tortoise-shell,' I corrected.

'Tortoise-shell,' he repeated, 'and then she looked at me again. "If you live at 59," she said, "I think you must be one of dear Mrs. Lesley's little sons," and I said, "That's just what I am, thank you." And then she said, "Won't you come in for a few minutes? You can see the Polly from my balcony, and it is getting cold for standing about. Are you on your way home from school?" So I thought it wouldn't be polite not to go in. She was so kind, you see,' and here his voice grew 'cryey' again, 'I never thought about mamma being flightened, and I only meant to stay a min—'

'Shut up about all that,' I interrupted. 'We've had it often enough, and I want to hear what happened.'

'Well,' he said, quite briskly again, 'she took me in, and up to her drawing-room. The window was a tiny bit open, and she made me stand just on the ledge between it and the balcony, so that I could see the parrot without his seeing me, for she said if he saw me he'd set up screeching and not talk sense any more. He knows when people are strangers. The cage was close to the old lady's end of the balcony, so that I could almost have touched it, and then I heard him say all those queer things. I didn't speak for a good while, for fear of stopping him talking. But after a bit he got fidgety; I daresay he knew there was somebody there, and then he flopped about and went back to his own talking, and said he was cold and wanted to go to bed, and all that. And somebody inside heard him and took him in. And then—' Pete stopped to rest his voice, I suppose. He was always rather fond of resting, whatever he was doing.

[41]

'Hurry up,' I said. 'What happened after that?'

'The old lady said I'd better come in, and she shut up the window—I suppose she felt cold, like the parrot—and she made me sit down; and then I asked her what made him say such queer things in his squeakiest voice; and she said he was copying what he heard, for there was a little girl in the *next* house—not in his own house—who cried sometimes and seemed very cross and unhappy, so that Mrs. Wylie often is very sorry for her, though she has never really seen her. And I said, did she think anybody was unkind to the little girl, and she said she hoped not, but she didn't know. And then she seemed as if she didn't want to talk about the little girl very much, and she began to ask me about if I went to school and things like that, and then I said I'd better go home, and she came downstairs with me and—I think that's all, till you and Clement came and we all heard the parrot again.'

[42]

'I wonder what started him copying the little girl again, after he'd left off,' I said.

'P'raps he hears her through the wall,' said Pete. 'P'raps he hears quicker than people do. Yes,' he went on thoughtfully, 'I think he must, for the old lady has never heard exactly what the little girl said. She only heard her crying and grumbling. She told me so.'

'I daresay she's just a cross little thing,' I said. 'And I think it was rather silly of Mrs. Wylie to let you hear the parrot copying her. It's a very bad example. And you said Mrs. Wylie seemed as if she didn't want to talk much about her.'

'I think she's got some plan in her head,' said Peterkin, eagerly, 'for she said—oh, I forgot that—she said she was going to come to see mamma some day very soon, to ask her to let me go to have tea with her. And I daresay she'll ask you too, Gilley, if we both go down to the drawing-room when she comes.'

[43]

'I hope it'll be a half-holiday, then,' I said, 'or, anyway, that she will come when I'm here. It is very funny about the crying little girl. Has she been there a long time? Did your old lady tell you that?'

Peterkin shook his head.

'Oh no, she's only been there since Mrs. Wylie came back from the country. She told me so.'

'And when was that?' I asked, but Pete did not know. He was sometimes very stupid, in spite of his quickness and fancies. 'It's been long enough for the parrot to learn to copy her grumbling,' I added.

'That wouldn't take him long,' said Peterkin, in his whispering voice again, 'if he's some sort of a fairy, you know, Gilley.'

This time, perhaps, it was a good thing he spoke in a low voice, for at that moment nurse came in to wake us, or rather to make us get up, as we were nearly always awake already, and if she had heard the word 'fairy,' she would have begun about Peterkin's 'fancies' again. [44]

Some days passed without our hearing anything of the parrot or the old lady or Rock Terrace. We did not exactly forget about it; indeed, it was what we talked about every morning when we awoke. But I did not think much about it during the day, although I daresay Pete did.

So it was quite a surprise to me one afternoon, about a week after the evening of all the fuss, when, the very moment I had rung the front bell, the door was opened by Pete himself, looking very important.

'She's come,' he said. 'I've been watching for you. She's in the drawing-room with mamma, and mamma told me to fetch you as soon as you came back from school. Is Clem there?'

'No,' I said, 'it's one of the days he stays later than me, you know.'

Peterkin did not seem very sorry.

'Then she's come just to invite you and me,' he said. 'Clement *is* too big, but she might have asked him too, out of politude, you know.'

He was always fussing about being polite, but I don't think I answered her in that way.

'Bother,' I said, for I was cross; my books were heavier than usual, and I banged them down; 'bother your politeness. Can't you tell me what you're talking about? Who is "she" that's in the drawing-room? I don't want to go up to see her, whoever she is.' [45]

'Giles!' said Peterkin, in a very disappointed tone. 'You can't have forgotten. It's the old lady next door to the parrot's house, of course. I told you she meant to come. And she's going to invite us, I'm sure.'

In my heart I was very anxious to go to Rock Terrace again, to see the parrot, and perhaps hear more of the mysterious little girl, but I was feeling rather tired and cross.

'I must brush my hair and wash my hands first,' I said, 'and I daresay mamma won't want me without Clement. She didn't say me alone, did she?'

'She said "your brothers,"' replied Peterkin, 'but of course you must come. And she said she hoped "they" wouldn't be long. So you must come as you are. I don't think your hands are very dirty.'

It is one of the queer things about Peterkin that he can nearly always make you do what he wants if he's really in earnest. So I had to give in, and he went puffing upstairs, with me after him, to the drawing-room, when, sure enough, the old lady was sitting talking to mamma. [46]

Mamma looked up as we came in, and I saw that her eyes went past me.

'Hasn't Clement come in?' she asked, and it made me wish I hadn't given in about it to Pete.

'No, mamma,' I said. 'It's one of his late days, you know. And Peterkin made me come up just as I was.'

I felt very ashamed of my hair and crushed collar and altogether. I didn't mind so much about my hands; boys' hands *can't* be like ladies'. But Mrs. Wylie was so awfully neat—she might have been a fairy herself, or a doll dressed to look like an old lady. I felt as clumsy and messy as could be. But she was awfully jolly; she seemed to know exactly how uncomfortable it was for me.

'Quite right, quite right,' she said. 'For I must be getting back. It looks rather stormy, I'm afraid. It was very thoughtful of you both, my dear boys, to hurry. I should have liked to see Mr. Clement again, but that must be another time. And may we fix the day now, dear Mrs. Lesley? Saturday next we were talking of. Will you come about four o'clock, or even earlier, my dears? The parrot stays out till five, generally, and indeed his mistress is very good-natured, and so is her maid. They were quite pleased when I told them I had some young friends who were very interested in the bird and wanted to see him again. So you shall make better acquaintance with him on Saturday, and perhaps—' but here the old lady stopped at last, without finishing her sentence. [47]

Nevertheless, as each of us told the other afterwards, both Peterkin and I finished it for her in our own minds. We glanced at each other, and the same thought ran through us—had Mrs. Wylie got some plan in her head about the little girl?

'It is very kind indeed of you, Mrs. Wylie,' said mamma. 'Giles and Peterkin will be delighted to go to you on Saturday, won't you, boys?'

And we both said, 'Yes, thank you. It will be very jolly,' so heartily, that the old lady trotted off, as pleased as pleased.

Of course, I ran downstairs to see her out, and Pete followed more slowly, just behind her. She had a very nice, rather stately way about her, though she was so small and thin, and it never suited Pete to hurry in those days, either up or down stairs; his legs were so short. [48]

We were very eager for Saturday to come, and we talked a lot about it. I had a kind of idea that Mrs. Wylie had said something about the little girl to mamma, though mamma said nothing at all to us, except that we must behave very nicely and carefully at Rock Terrace, and not forget that, though she was so kind, Mrs. Wylie was an old lady, and old ladies were sometimes fussy.

We promised we would be all right, and Peterkin said to me that he didn't believe Mrs. Wylie was at all 'fussy.'

'She is too fairyish,' he said, 'to be like that.'

That was a very 'Peterkin' speech, but I did not snub him for it, as I sometimes did. I was really so interested in all about the parrot and the invisible little girl that I was almost ready to join him in making up fanciful stories—that there was an ogre who wouldn't let her out, or that any one who tried to see her would be turned into a frog, or things like that out of the old fairy-tales.

'But Mrs. Wylie *has* seen her,' said Peterkin, 'and *she* hasn't turned into a frog!'

That was a rather tiresome 'way' of his—if I agreed about fairies and began making up, myself, he would get quite common-sensical, and almost make fun of my ones. [49]

'How do you know that she doesn't turn into a frog half the day?' I said. 'That's often the way in enchantments.'

And then we both went off laughing at the idea of a frog jumping down from Mrs. Wylie's drawing-room sofa, and saying, 'How do you do, my dears?' instead of the neat little old lady.

So our squabble didn't come to anything that time.

Blanchie and Elf were rather jealous of our invitation, I think, though Blanche always said she didn't care to go anywhere without Clement. But Elf made us promise that some day we would get leave to take her round by the parrot's house for her to see him.

Of course we never said anything to any one but ourselves about the shut-up little girl, and Clement had forgotten what he had heard that evening. He was very busy just then working extra for some prize he hoped to get at school—I forget what it was, but he did get it—and Blanche was helping him.

CHAPTER IV

 [50]

VERY MYSTERIOUS

SATURDAY came at last. Of course jolly things and times *do* come, however long the waiting seems. But the worst of it is that they are so soon gone again, and then you wish you were back at the looking forward; perhaps, after all, it is often the jolliest part of it.

Clement says I mustn't keep saying 'jolly'; he says 'nice' would be better in a book. He is looking it over for me, you see. *I* think 'nice' is a girl's word, but Clem says you shouldn't write slang in a book, so I try not to; though of course I don't really expect this story ever to be made into an actual book.

Well, Saturday came, and Peterkin and I set off to Mrs. Wylie's. She was a very nice person to go to see; she seemed so really pleased to have us. And she hadn't turned into a frog, or anything of the kind. She was standing out on the little balcony, watching for us, with a snowy-white, fluffy shawl on the top of her black dress, which made her seem more fairyish, or fairy-godmotherish, than ever. I never did see any one so beautifully neat and spotless as she always was. [51]

As soon as the front door was opened, we heard her voice from upstairs.

'Come up, boys, come up. Polly and I have both been watching for you, and he is in great spirits to-day, and so amusing.'

We skurried up, and nearly tumbled over each other into the drawing-room. Then, of course, Peterkin's politeness came into force, and he walked forward soberly to shake hands with his old lady and give her mamma's love and all that sort of thing, which he was much better at than I. She had just stepped in from the balcony, but was quite ready to step out again at the parrot's invitation.

'Come quick,' he said, 'Polly doesn't like waiting.'

Really it did seem wonderful to me, though he wasn't the first parrot I had ever seen, and though I had heard him before—it did seem wonderful for

a bird, only a bird, to talk so sensibly, and I felt as if there might be something in Peterkin's idea that he was more than he seemed. And to this day parrots, clever ones, still give me that feeling.

They are very like children in some ways. They are so 'contrairy.' You'd scarcely believe it, but no sooner did the creature catch sight of us two with his ugly, round, painted-bead-looking eyes—I don't like parrot's eyes—than he shut up, and wild horses couldn't have made him utter another word, much less Mrs. Wylie.

I was quite sorry for her, she seemed so disappointed.

It was just like a tiresome baby, whose mamma and nurse want to show off and bring it down to the drawing-room all dressed up, and it won't go to anybody, or say 'Dada,' or 'Mam-ma,' or anything, and just screeches. I can remember Elvira being like that, and I daresay we all were.

'It is too bad,' said our old lady. 'He has got to know me, and I have been teaching him some new words. And his mistress and her maid are out this afternoon, so I thought we should have him all to ourselves, and it would be so amusing. But'—just then a bright idea struck her—'supposing you two go back into the room, so that he can't see you, and I will say "Good-bye, my dears," very loud and plainly, to make him think you have gone. Then I will come out again, and you shall listen from behind the curtain. I believe he will talk then, just as he has been doing.'

Pete and I were most willing to try—we were all three quite excited about it. It was really quite funny how his talking got the Polly treated as if he was a human being. We stalked back into the drawing-room, Mrs. Wylie after us, saying in a very clear tone—

'Good-bye, then, my dears. My love to your mamma, and the next time you come I hope Poll-parrot will be more friendly.'

And then I shut the door with a bang, to sound as if we had gone, though, of course, it was all 'acting,' to trick the parrot. Peterkin and I peeped out at him from behind the curtain, and we could scarcely help laughing out loud. He looked so queer—his head cocked on one side, listening, his eyes blinking; he seemed rather disgusted on the whole, I thought.

Then Mrs. Wylie stepped out again.

'Polly,' she said, 'I'm ashamed of you. Why couldn't you be kind and friendly to those nice boys who came to see you?'

'Pretty Poll,' he said, in a coaxing tone.

'No,' she replied; 'not pretty Poll at all. Ugly Poll, I should say.'

'Polly's so tired; take Polly in. Polly's cold,' he said, in what we called his natural voice; and then it seemed as if the first words had reminded him of the little girl, for his tone suddenly changed, and he began again: 'I'm so tired, Nana. No, I won't be good; no, I won't. I'll write a letter, and I won't be locked up,' in the squeakier sort of voice that showed he was copying somebody else.

'Nonsense!' said Mrs. Wylie. 'You are not tired or cold, Polly, and nobody is going to lock you up.'

He was silent for a moment, and peeping out again, we saw that he was staring hard at the old lady.

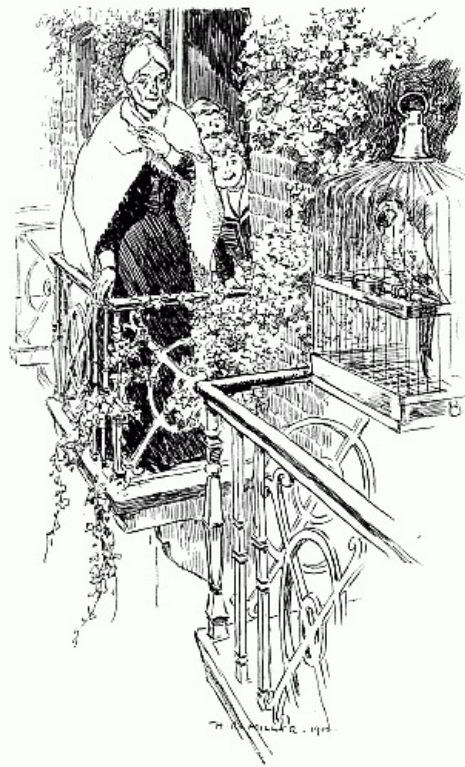
Then he said very meekly—I am not sure which voice it was in—

'Polly be good! Polly very sorry!'

Mrs. Wylie nodded approvingly.

'Yes,' she said, 'that's a much prettier way to talk. Now, supposing we have a little music,' and she began to sing in a very soft, very thin, old voice a few words of 'Home, Sweet Home.'

There was something very piteous about it. I think there is a better word than 'piteous'—yes, Clement had just told it me. It is 'pathetic.' I felt as if it nearly made me cry, and so did Peterkin. We told each other so afterwards, and though we were so interested in the parrot and in hearing him, I wished he would be quiet again, and let Mrs. Wylie go on with her soft, sad little song. But of course he didn't. He started, too, a queer sort of whistle, not very musical, certainly, but yet, no doubt, there was a bit of the tune in it, and now and then sounds rather like the words 'sweet' and 'home.' I do think, altogether, it was the oddest musical performance that ever was heard.



NO SOONER DID HE CATCH SIGHT OF US TWO WITH HIS UGLY ROUND BEADY EYES . . . THAN HE SHUT UP.—p. 52.

And when it was over, there came another voice. It was the maid next door, who had stepped quietly on to the balcony—

'I'm afraid, ma'am, I must take him in now,' she said, very respectfully. 'It is getting cold, and it would never do for him to get a sore throat just as he's learning to sing so. You are clever with him, ma'am; you are, indeed: there's quite a tune in his voice.'

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Mrs. Wylie gave a little laugh of pleasure.

'And did the young gentlemen you were speaking of never come, after all?' the maid asked, as she was turning away, the big cage in her hand.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs. Wylie, 'they are here still. But Polly was very naughty,' and she explained about it.

'He's learnt that "won't be good" from next door,' said the girl, 'and I do believe he knows what it means.'

'I very sorry; I be good,' here said the parrot.

They both started.

'Upon my word!' exclaimed the maid.

'Has he learnt *that* from next door?' said Mrs. Wylie, in a lower voice.

'I hope so. It's very clever of him, and it's not unlikely. The child is getting better, I believe, and there's not near so much crying and complaining.'

'So I have heard,' said the old lady, and we fancied she spoke rather mysteriously, 'and I hope,' she went on, but we could not catch her next words, as she dropped her voice, evidently not wishing us to hear.

Peterkin squeezed my hand, and I understood. There *was* a mystery of some kind!

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Then Mrs. Wylie came in and shut the glass door. She was smiling now with pleasure and satisfaction.

'I did get him to talk, did I not?' she said. 'He *is* a funny bird. By degrees I hope he will grow quite friendly with you too.'

I did not feel very sure about it.

'I'm afraid,' I said, 'that he will not see us enough for that. It isn't like you, Mrs. Wylie, for I daresay you talk to him every day.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I do now. I have felt more interested in him since—' here she hesitated a little, then she went on again—'since the evening I found Peterkin listening to him,' and she smiled very kindly at Pete. 'Before that, I had not noticed him very much; at least, I had not made friends with him. But he has a wonderful memory; really wonderful, you will see. He will not have forgotten you the next time you come, and each time he will cock his head and pretend to be shy, and gradually it will get less and less.'

This was very interesting, but what Peterkin and I were really longing for was some news of the little girl. We did not like to ask about her. It would have seemed rather forward and inquisitive, as the old lady did not mention her at all. We felt that she had some reason for it, and of course, though we could not have helped hearing what she and the parrot's maid had said to each other, we had to try to think we *hadn't* heard it. Clement says that's what you should do, if you overhear things not meant for you, unless, sometimes, when your having heard them might really matter. *Then*, he says, it's your duty—you're in honour bound—to tell that you've heard, and *what* you've heard.

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'Now,' said our old lady, 'I fancy tea will be quite ready. I thought it would be more comfortable in the dining-room. So shall we go downstairs?'

We were quite ready, and we followed her very willingly. The dining-room was even smaller than the drawing-room, and that was tiny enough. But it was all so neat and pretty, and what you'd call 'old-fashioned,' I suppose. It reminded me of a doll-house belonging to one of our grandmothers—mamma's mother, who had kept it ever since she was a little girl, and when we go to stay with her in the country she lets us play with it. Even Peterkin and I are very fond of it, or used to be so when we were smaller. There's everything you can think of in it, down to the tiniest cups and saucers.

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The tea was very jolly. There were buns and cakes, and awfully good sandwiches. I remember that particular tea, you see, though we went to Mrs. Wylie's often after that, because it was the first time. The cups *were* rather small, but it didn't matter, for as soon as ever one was empty she offered us more. I would really be almost ashamed to say how many times mine was filled.

And Mrs. Wylie was very interesting to talk to. She had never had any children of her own, she told us, and her husband had been dead a long time. I think he had been a sailor, for she had lots of curiosities: queer shells, all beautifully arranged in a cabinet, and a book full of pressed and dried seaweed, and stuffed birds in cases. I don't care for stuffed birds: they look too alive, and it seems horrid for them not to be able to fly about and sing. Peterkin took a great fancy to some of

the very tiny ones—humming-birds, scarcely bigger than butterflies; and, long afterwards, when we went to live in London, Mrs. Wylie gave him a present of a branch with three beauties on it, inside a glass case. He has it now in his own room. And she gave me four great big shells, all coloured like a rainbow, which I still have on my mantelpiece.

[60]

Once or twice—I'm going back now to that first time we went to have tea with her—I tried to get the talk back to the little girl. I asked the old lady if she wouldn't like to have a parrot of her own. I thought it would be so amusing. But she said No; she didn't think she would care to have one. The one next door was almost as good, and gave her no trouble or anxiety.

And then Peterkin asked her if there were any children next door. Mrs. Wylie shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'The parrot's mistress is an old maid—not nearly as old as I am, all the same, but she lives quite alone; and on the other side there are two brothers and a sister, quite young, unmarried people.'

'And is the—the little girl the only little girl or boy in *her* house?' asked Peterkin.

He did stumble a bit over asking it, for it had been very plain that Mrs. Wylie did not want to speak about her; but I got quite hot when I heard him, and if we had been on the same side of the table, or if his legs had been as long as they are now, I'd have given him a good kick to shut him up.

Our old lady was too good-natured to mind; still, there was something in her manner when she answered that stopped any more questions from Pete.

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'Yes,' she said, 'there are no other children in that house, or in the terrace, except some very tiny ones, almost babies, at the other end. I see them pass in their perambulators, dear little things.'

It was quite dark by the time we had finished tea, and the lamps were lighted upstairs in the drawing-room, where Mrs. Wylie showed us some of the curiosities and things that I have already written about.

They were rather interesting, but I think we've got to care more for collections and treasures like that, now, than we did then. Perhaps we were not quite old enough, and, I daresay, it was a good deal that the great reason we liked to go to Mrs. Wylie's was because of the parrot and the mysterious little girl. At least, *Peterkin's* head was full of the little girl. I myself was beginning to get rather tired of all his talk about her, and I thought the parrot very good fun of himself.

So when the clock struck six, and Mrs. Wylie asked us if mamma had fixed any time for us to be home by—it wasn't that she wanted to get rid of us, but she was very afraid of keeping us too late—we thought we might as well go, for mamma had said, 'soon after six.'

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'Is any one coming to fetch you?' Mrs. Wylie said.

I didn't quite like her asking that: it made me seem so babyish. I was quite old enough to look after Pete, and the fun of going home by ourselves through the lighted-up streets was one of the things we had looked forward to.

But I didn't want Master Peterkin to begin at me afterwards about not being polite, so I didn't show that I was at all vexed. I just said—

'Oh no, Peterkin will be all right with me!'

And then we said good-bye, and 'thank you very much for inviting us.' And Pete actually said—

'May we come again soon, please?'

His ideas of politeness were rather original, weren't they?

But Mrs. Wylie was quite pleased.

'Certainly, my dear. I shall count on your doing so. And I am glad you spoke of it, for I wanted to tell you that I am going to London the end of this next week for a fortnight. Will you tell your dear mamma so, and say that I shall come to see her on my return, and then we must fix on another afternoon? I am very pleased to think that you care to come, and I hope you feel the same,' she went on, turning to me.

[63]

She was so kind that I felt I had been rather horrid, for I *had* enjoyed it all very much. And I said as nicely as I could, that I'd like to come again, only I hoped we didn't bother her. She beamed all over at that, and Peterkin evidently approved of it too, for he grinned in a queer patronising way he has sometimes, as if I was a baby compared to him.

I was just going to pull him up for it after we had got on our coats and caps, and were outside and the door shut, but before I had got farther than—'I say, youngster,'—he startled me rather by saying, in a very melancholy tone—

'It's too bad, Giles, isn't it? Her going away, and us hearing nothing of the little girl. I really thought she'd have asked her to tea too.'

'How you muddle your "her's" and "she's"!' I said. But of course I understood him. 'I think you muddle yourself too. If there's a mystery, and you know you'd be very disappointed if there

wasn't, you couldn't expect the little girl to come to tea just as if everything was quite like everybody else about her.'

[64]

'No, that's true,' said he, consideringly. 'P'raps she's invisible sometimes, or p'raps she's like the "Light Princess," that they had to tie down for fear she'd float away, or p'raps——'

'She's invisible to us, anyway,' I interrupted, for, as I said, I was getting rather tired of Pete's fancies about the little girl, 'and so——'

But just as I got so far, we both stopped—we were passing the railing of the little girl's house at that moment, and voices talking rather loudly caught our ears. Peterkin touched my arm, and we stood quite still. No one could see us, it was too dark, and there was no lamp just there, though some light was streaming out from the lower windows of the house. One of them, the dining-room one, was a little open, even though it was a chilly evening.

It was so queer, our hearing the voices and almost seeing into the room, *just* as we had been making up our minds that we'd never know anything about the little girl; it seemed so queer, that we didn't, at first, think of anything else. It wasn't for some minutes, or moments, certainly, that it came into my head that we shouldn't stay there peeping and listening. I'm afraid it wasn't a very gentlemanly sort of thing to do. As for Peterkin, I'm pretty sure he never had the slightest idea that we were doing anything caddish.

[65]

What we heard was this—

'No, I don't want any more tea. I'd better go to bed. It's so dull, Nana.'

Then another voice replied—it came from some one further back in the room, but we could not distinguish the words—

'There aren't any stars. You may as well shut the window. And stars aren't much good. I want some one to play with me. Other little—' but just then we saw the shadow of some one crossing the room, and the window—it was a glass-door kind of window like the ones up above, which opened on to the balcony, for there was a little sort of balcony downstairs too—was quickly closed. There was no more to be heard or seen; not even shadows, for the curtains were now drawn across.

Pete gave a deep sigh, and I felt that he was looking at me, though it was too dark to see, and there was no lamp just there. He wanted to know what I thought.

'Come along,' I said, and we walked on.

'Did you hear?' asked Peterkin at last. 'She said she wanted somebody to play with her.'

[66]

'Yes,' I said, 'it is rather queer. You'd think Mrs. Wylie might have made friends with her, and invited her to tea. But it's no good our bothering about it,' and I walked a little faster, and began to whistle. I did not want Pete to go on again talking a lot about his invisible princess, for such she seemed likely to remain.

It was far easier, however, to get anything into Peterkin's fancy than to get it out again, as I might have known by experience. We had not gone far before I felt him tugging at my arm.

'Don't walk so fast, Gilley,' he said—poor, little chap, he was quite breathless with trying to keep up with me, so I had to slacken a bit,—'and do let me talk to you. When we get home I shan't have a chance—not till to-morrow morning in bed, I daresay; for they'll all be wanting to hear about Mrs. Wylie, and what we had for tea, and everything.'

I did not so much mind about *that* part of it, but I did not want to be awakened before dawn the next morning to listen to all he'd got to say. So I thought I might as well let him come out with some of it.

'What do you want to talk about?' I said.

[67]

'Oh! of course, you know,' he replied. 'It's about the *poor* little girl. I am so dreffully sorry for her, Gilley, and I want to plan something. It's no good asking Mrs. Wylie. We'll have to do something ourselves. I'm afraid the people she's with lock her up, or something. *P'raps* they daren't let her go out, if there's some wicked fairy, or a witch, or something like that, that wants to run off with her.'

'Well, then, the best thing to do *is* to lock her up,' I said sensibly.

But that wasn't Peterkin's way of looking at things.

'It's never like that in my stories,' he said—and I know he was shaking his curly head,—'and some of them are very, very old—nearly as old as Bible stories, I believe; so they must be true, you see. There's always somebody that comes to break the—the—I forget the proper word.'

'The enchantment, you mean,' I said.

'No, no; a shorter word. Oh, I know—the spell,' he replied. 'Yes, somebody comes to break the *spell*. And that's what we've got to do, Gilley. At least, I'm sure I've got to, and you must help me. You see, it's all been so funny. The parrot knows, I should think, for I'm sure he's partly fairy. But, very likely, he daren't say it right out, for fear of the bad fairy, and——'

[68]

'Perhaps he's the bad fairy himself,' I interrupted, half joking, but rather interested, all the same, in Peterkin's ideas.

'Oh no,' he replied, 'I know he's not, and I'm sure Mrs. Wylie has nothing to do with the bad fairy.'

'Then why do you think she won't talk about the little girl, or invite her, or anything?' I asked.

Pete seemed puzzled.

'I don't know,' he said. 'There's a lot to find out. P'raps Mrs. Wylie doesn't know anything about the spell, and has just got some stupid, common reason for not wanting us to play with the little girl, or p'raps—and this was plainly a brilliant idea—'p'raps the spell's put on her without her knowing, and stops her when she begins to speak about it. Mightn't it very likely be that, Giles?'

But I had not time to answer, for we had got to our own door by now, and it was already opened, as some tradesman was giving James a parcel. So we ran in.

CHAPTER V

[69]

'STRATAGEMS'

I REALLY don't quite know what made me listen to Peterkin's fancies about his invisible princess, as I got into the habit of calling her. It was partly, I suppose, because it amused me—we had nothing much to take us up just then: there was no skating that winter, and the weather was dull and muggy—and partly that somehow he managed to make me feel as if there might really be something in it. I suppose when anybody quite believes in a thing, it's rather catching; and Peterkin's head was so stuffed and crammed with fairy stories that at that time, I think, they were almost more real to him than common things.

He went about, dreaming of ogres and magicians, and all the rest, so much, that I scarcely think anything marvellous would have surprised him. If I had suddenly shot up to the ceiling, and called out that I had learnt how to fly, I don't believe he would have been startled; or if I had shown him a purse with a piece of gold in it, and told him that it was enchanted, and that he'd always find the money in it however often he spent it, he'd have taken it quite seriously, and been very pleased.

[70]

So the idea of an enchanted little girl did not strike us as at all out of the way.

We did not talk about her any more that night after we had been at Mrs. Wylie's, for we had to hurry up to get neat again to come down to the drawing-room to mamma. Blanche and Elf were already there when we came in, and they, and mamma too, were full of questions about how we'd enjoyed ourselves, and about the parrot, and what we'd had for tea—just as I knew they would be; I don't mean that mamma asked what we'd had for tea, but the girls did.

And then Pete and Elf went off to bed, and when I went up he was quite fast asleep, and if he hadn't been, I could not have spoken to him because of my promise, you know.

He made up for it the next morning, however.

I suppose he had had an extra good night, for I felt him looking at me long before I was at all inclined to open my eyes, or to snort for him to know I was awake. And when at last I did—it's really no good trying to go to sleep again when you feel there's somebody fidgeting to talk to you—there he was, his eyes as bright and shiny as could be, sitting bolt up with his hands round his knees, as if he'd never been asleep in his life?

[71]

I couldn't help feeling rather cross, and yet I had a contradictory sort of interest and almost eagerness to hear what he had to say. I suppose it was a kind of love of adventure that made me join him in his fancies and plans. I knew that his fancies were only fancies really, but still I felt as if we might get some fun out of them.

He was too excited to mind my being grumpy.

'Oh, Gilley!' he exclaimed at my first snort, 'I am so glad you are awake at last.'

'I daresay you are,' I said, 'but I'm not. I should have slept another half-hour if you hadn't sat there staring me awake.'

'Well, you needn't talk,' he went on, in a 'smoothing-you-down' tone; 'just listen and grunt sometimes.'

I did grunt there and then. There was one comfortable thing about Peterkin even then, and it keeps on with him now that he is getting big and sensible. He always understands what you say, however you say it, or half say it. He was not the least surprised at my talking of his staring me awake, though he had not exactly meant to do so.

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'It has come into my mind, Giles,' he began, very importantly, 'how queer and lucky it is that the old lady is going away for a fortnight. I should not wonder if it had been managed somehow.'

He waited for my grunt, but it turned into—

'What on earth do you mean?'

'I mean, perhaps it's part of the spell, without her knowing, of course, that she should have to go to London. For if she was still there, we couldn't do anything without her finding out.'

'I don't know what you mean about doing anything,' I said. 'And please don't say "we." I haven't promised to join you. Most likely I'll do my best to stop whatever it is you've got in that rummy head of yours.'

'Oh no, you won't!' he replied coolly. 'I don't know that you could if you tried, without telling the others. And you can't do that, of course, as I've trusted you. It's word of honour, you see, though I didn't exactly make you say so. And it's nothing naughty or mischievous, else I wouldn't plan it.'

[73]

'What is it, then? Hurry up and tell me, without such a lot of preparation,' I grumbled.

'I can't tell you very much,' he answered, 'cos, you see, I don't know myself. It will show as we go on—I'm certain you'll help me, Gilley. You remember the prince in the "Sleeping Beauty" did not know exactly what he would do—no more did the one in—'

'Never mind all that,' I interrupted.

'Well, then, what we've got to do is to try to talk to her ourselves without any one hearing. That's the first thing. We will tell her what the parrot says, and then it will be easy to find out if she knows herself about the spell.'

'But what do you think the spell is?' I asked, feeling again the strange interest and half belief in his fancies that Peterkin managed to put into me. 'What do you suppose your bad fairies, or whatever they are, have done to her?'

'There are lots of things, it might be,' he replied gravely. 'They may have made her not able to walk, or very queer to look at—p'raps turned her hair white, so that you couldn't be sure if she was a little girl or an old woman; or made her nose so long that it trails on the floor. No, I don't think it's that,' he added, after stopping to think a minute. 'Her voice sounds as if she was pretty, even if it's rather grumbly. P'raps she turns into a mouse at night, and has to run about, and that's why she's so tired. It might be that.'

[74]

'It would be easy to catch her, then, and bring her home in your pocket, if you waited till the magic time came,' I suggested, half joking again, of course.

'It might be,' agreed Pete, quite seriously, 'or it might be very, very difficult, unless we could make her understand at the mouse time that we were friends. We can't settle anything till we see her, and talk to her like a little girl, of course.'

'You certainly couldn't talk to her like anything else,' I said; 'but I'm sure I don't see how you mean to talk to her at all.'

'I do,' said Peterkin. 'I've been planning it since last night. We can go round that way once or twice to look at the parrot, and just stand about. Nobody would wonder at us if they saw we were looking at him. And very likely we'd see *something*, as she lives in the very next-door house. P'raps she comes to the window sometimes, and she might notice us if we were looking up at the parrot. It would be easiest if she was in the downstairs room.'

[75]

'I don't suppose she is there all day,' I said. 'The parrot would not have heard her talking so much if she were. I think she must have been out on the balcony sometimes when it was warmer.'

'Yes,' Peterkin agreed. 'I thought of that. Very likely she only comes downstairs for her dinner and tea. It's the dining-room, like Mrs. Wylie's.'

'And if she only comes down there late she wouldn't see us in the dark, and, besides, the parrot wouldn't be out by then. And besides that, except for going to tea to Mrs. Wylie's, we'd never get leave to be out by ourselves so late. At least *you* wouldn't. Of course, for me, it's sometimes nearly dark when I come home from school.'

I really did not see how Pete did mean to manage it. But the difficulties I spoke of only seemed to make him more determined. I could not help rather admiring him for it: he quite felt, I fancy, as if he was one of his favourite fairy-tale princes. And in the queer way I have spoken of already, he somehow made me feel with him. I did not go over all the difficulties in order to stop him trying, but because I was actually interested in seeing how he was going to overcome them.

[76]

He was silent for a moment or two after my last speech, staring before him with his round blue eyes.

Then he said quietly—

'Yes; I'd thought of most of those things. But you will see. We'll manage it somehow. I daresay she comes downstairs in the middle of the day, too, for she's sure to have dinner early, and the parrot will be out then, if we choose a fine day.'

'But we always have to be in for our own dinner by half-past one,' I said.

'Well, p'raps *she* has hers at one, or even half-past twelve, like we used to, till you began going to school,' said he hopefully. 'And a *very* little talking would do at the first beginning. Then we could be very polite, and say we'd come again to see the parrot, and p'raps—' here Peterkin looked rather shy.

'Perhaps what? Out with it!' I said.

'We might take her a few flowers,' he answered, getting red, 'if—if we could—could get any. They're very dear to buy, I'm afraid, and we haven't any of our own. The garden is so small; it isn't like if we lived in the country,' rather dolefully.

[77]

'You wouldn't have known anything about Rock Terrace, or the invisible princess, or the parrot, if we lived in the country,' I reminded him.

'No,' said Pete, more cheerfully, 'I hadn't thought of that.'

'And—' I went on, 'I daresay I could help you a bit if it really seemed any good,' for I rather liked the idea of giving the little girl some flowers. It made it all look less babyish.

Peterkin grinned with delight.

'You *are* kind, Gilley!' he exclaimed. 'I knew you would be. Oh, bother! here's nurse coming, and we haven't begun to settle anything properly.'

'There's no hurry,' I said; 'you've forgotten that we certainly can't go there again till Mrs. Wylie's out of the way. And she said, "the end of the week"; that means Saturday, most likely, and this is—oh dear! I was forgetting—it's Sunday, and we'll be late.'

Nurse echoed my words as she came in—

'You'll be late, Master Giles, and Master Peterkin, too,' she said. 'I really don't think you should talk so much on Sunday mornings.'

It wasn't that we had to be any earlier on Sundays than any other day, but that dressing in your best clothes takes so much longer somehow, and we had to have our hair very neat, and all like that, because we generally went down to the dining-room, while papa and mamma and Clement and Blanche were at breakfast, after we had had our own in the nursery.

[78]

There would be no good in trying to remember all our morning talks that week about Peterkin's plans. He did not get the least tired of them, and I didn't, for a wonder, get tired of listening to him, he was so very much in earnest.

He chopped and changed a good bit in little parts of them, but still he stuck to the general idea, and I helped him to polish it up. It was really more interesting than any of his fairy stories, for he managed to make both himself and me feel as if we were going to be *in* one of them ourselves.

So I will skip over that week, and go on to the next. By that time we knew that Mrs. Wylie was in London, because mamma said something one day about having had a letter from her. Nothing to do with the little girl, as far as we knew; I think it was only about somebody who wanted a servant, or something stupid like that.

It got on to the Monday of the next week *again*, and by that time Pete had got a sort of start of his plans. He had got leave to come to meet me at the corner of Lindsay Square, once or twice in the last few days. I used to get there about a quarter or twenty minutes to one. We were supposed to leave school not later than a quarter past twelve, but you know how fellows get fooling about coming out of a day-school, so, though it was really quite near, I was often later.

[79]

Mamma was pleased for Peterkin to want to come to meet me. She was not at all coddling or stupid like that about us boys, though her being in such a fuss that evening Pete was lost may have seemed so. And she was always awfully glad for us to be fond of each other. She used to say she hoped we'd grow up 'friends' as well as brothers, which always reminded me of the verse about it in the Bible about 'sticking closer than a brother.' And I like to think that dear little mummy's hopes will come true for her sons.

It wasn't exactly a fit of affection for me, of course, that made Pete want to get into the way of coming to meet me. Still, we *were* very good friends; especially good friends just then, as you know.

So that Monday, which luckily happened to be a very nice bright day, he had no difficulty in getting leave for it again. I had promised him to hurry over getting off from school, so we counted on having a good bit of time to spend in looking at the parrot and talking to him, and in 'spying the land' generally, including the invisible princess, if we got a chance, without risking coming in too late for our dinner. We had taken care never to be late, up till now, for fear of Peterkin's coming to meet me being put a stop to; but we hadn't pretended that we would come straight home, and once or twice we had done a little shopping together, and more than once we had spent several minutes in staring in at the flower-shop windows, settling what kind of flowers would be best, and in asking the prices of hers from a flower-woman who often sat near the corner of the square. She was very good-natured about it. We shouldn't have liked to go into a regular shop only to ask prices, so it was a good thing to know a little about them beforehand.

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I remember all about that Monday morning particularly well. I did hurry off from school as fast

as I could, though of course—I think it nearly always happens so—ever so many stupid little things turned up to keep me later than I often was.

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I skurried along pretty fast, you may be sure, once I did get out, and it wasn't long before I caught sight of poor old Pete eagerly watching for me at the corner of Lindsay Square. He did not dare to come farther, because, you see, he had promised mamma he never would, and that if I were ever very late he'd go home again.

I didn't give him time to be doleful about it.

'I've been as quick as I possibly could,' I said, 'and it's not so bad after all, Pete. We shall have a quarter of an hour for Rock Terrace at least, if we hurry now. Don't speak—it only wastes your breath,' for in those days, with being so plump and sturdy and his legs rather short, it didn't take much to make him puff or pant. He's in better training now by a long way.

He was always very sensible, so he took my advice and we got over the ground pretty fast, only pulling up when we got to the end, or beginning, of the little row of houses.

'Now,' said I, 'let's first walk right along rather slowly, and if we hear the Polly we can stop short, as if we were noticing him for the first time, the way people often do, you know.'

Peterkin nodded.

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'I believe I see the corner of his cage out on the balcony,' he said, half whispering, 'already.'

He was right. The cage was out.

We walked past very slowly, though we took care not to look up as if we were expecting to see anything. The parrot was in the front of the cage, staring down, and I'm almost certain he saw us, and even remembered us, though, out of contradiction, he pretended he didn't.

'Don't speak or turn,' I whispered to Pete. It was so very quiet along Rock Terrace, except when some tradesman's cart rattled past—and just now there was nothing of the kind in view—that even common talking could have been heard. 'Don't speak or seem to see him. They are awfully conceited birds, and the way to make them notice you and begin talking and screeching is to pretend you don't see them.'

So we walked on silently to the farther end of the terrace, in a very matter-of-fact way, turning to come back again just as we had gone. And I could be positive that the creature saw us all the time, for the row of houses was very short, and he was well to the front of the balcony.

Our 'stratagem'—I have always liked the word, ever since I read *Tales of a Grandfather*, which I thought a great take-in, as it's just a history book, neither more nor less, and the only exciting part is when you come upon stratagems—succeeded. As we got close up to the parrot's house, next door to Mother Wylie's, you understand, *and*, of course, next door to the invisible princess's, we heard a sound. It was a sort of rather angry squeak or croak, but loud enough to be an excuse for our stopping short and looking up.

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And then, as we still did not speak, Master Poll, his round eyes glaring at us, I felt certain, was forced to open the conversation.

'Pretty Poll,' he began, of course. 'Pretty Poll.'

'All right,' I called back. 'Good morning, Pretty Poll. A fine day.'

'Wants his dinner,' he went on. 'I say, wants his dinner.'

'Really, does he?' I said, in a mocking tone, which he understood, and beginning to get angry—just what I wanted.

'Naughty boy! naughty boy!' he screeched, very loudly. Pete and I grinned with satisfaction!

CHAPTER VI

[84]

MARGARET

THERE'S an old proverb that mamma has often quoted to us, for she's awfully keen on our all being 'plucky,' and, on the whole, I think we are—

'Fortune favours the brave.'

I have sometimes thought it would suit Peterkin to turn it into 'Fortune favours the determined.' Not that he's *not* 'plucky,' but there's nothing like him for sticking to a thing, once he has got it into his head. And certainly fortune favoured him at the time I am writing about. Nothing could have suited us better than the parrot's screeching out to us 'naughty boy, naughty boy.'

I suppose he had been taught to say it to errand-boys and boys like that who mocked at him. But we did not want to set up a row, so I replied gently—

'No, no, Polly, good boys. Polly shall have his dinner soon.'

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'Good Polly, good Polly,' he repeated with satisfaction.

And then—what *do* you think happened? The door-window of the drawing-room of the next house, *the* house, was pushed open a little bit, and out peeped a child's head, a small head with smooth short dark hair, but a little girl's head. We could tell that at once by the way it was combed, or brushed, even if we had not seen, as we did, a white muslin pinafore, with lace ruffly things that only a girl would wear. My heart really began to beat quite loudly, as if I'd been running fast—we had been so excited about her, you see, and afterwards Pete told me his did too.

The only pity was, that she was up on the drawing-room floor. We could have seen her so much better downstairs. But we had scarcely time to feel disappointed.

When she saw us, and saw, I suppose, that we were not errand-boys or street-boys, she came out a little farther. I felt sure by her manner that she was alone in the room. She looked down at us, looked us well over for a moment or two, and then she said—

'Are you talking to the parrot?'

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She did not call out or speak loudly at all, but her voice was very clear.

'Yes,' Peterkin replied. As he had started the whole business I thought it fair to let him speak before me. 'Yes, but he called out to us first. He called us "naughty boys."'

'I heard him,' said the little girl, 'and I thought perhaps you *were* naughty boys, teasing him, you know, and I was going to call to you to run away. But—' and she glanced at us again. I could see that she wanted to go on talking, but she did not quite know how to set about it.

So I thought I might help things on a bit.

'Thank you,' I said, taking off my cap. 'My little brother is very interested in the parrot. He seems so clever.'

At another time Pete would have been very offended at my calling him 'little,' but just now he was too eager to mind, or even, I daresay, to notice.

'So he is,' said the little girl. 'I could tell you lots about him, but it's rather tiresome talking down to you from up here. Wait a minute,' she added, 'and I'll come down to the dining-room. I may go downstairs now, and nurse is out, and I'm very dull.'

We were so pleased that we scarcely dared look at each other, for fear that somehow it should go wrong after all. We did glance along the terrace, but nobody was coming. If only her nurse would stay out for ten minutes longer, or even less.

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We stood there, almost holding our breath. But it was not really—it could not have been—more than half a minute, before the dark head and white pinafore appeared again, this time, of course, on the ground floor; the window there was a little bit open already, to air the room perhaps.

We would have liked to go close up to the small balcony where she stood, but we dared not, for fear of the nurse coming. And the garden was very tiny, we were only two or three yards from the little girl, even outside on the pavement.

She looked at us first, looked us well over, before she began to speak again. Then she said—

'Have you been to see the parrot already?'

'Oh yes,' said Peterkin, in his very politest tone, 'oh yes, thank you.' I did not quite see why he said 'thank you.' I suppose he meant it in return for her coming downstairs. 'I've been here two, no, three times, and Giles,' he gave a sort of nod towards me, 'has been here two.'

'Is your name Giles?' she asked me. She had a funny, little, rather condescending manner of speaking to us, but I didn't mind it somehow.

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'Yes,' I replied, 'and his,' and I touched Pete, 'is "Peterkin."'

'They are queer names; don't you think so? At least,' she added quickly, as if she was afraid she had said something rude, 'they are very uncommon. "Giles" and "Perkin."'

'Not "Perkin,"' I said, "Peterkin."'

'Oh, I thought it was like a man in my history,' she said, 'Perkin War—something.'

'No,' said Peterkin, 'it isn't in history, but it's in poetry. About a battle. I've got it in a book.'

'I should like to see it,' she said. 'There's lots of *my* name in history. My name is Margaret. There are queens and princesses called Margaret.'

Pete opened his mouth as if he was going to speak, but shut it up again. I know what he had been on the point of saying,—'Are you a princess?' 'a shut-up princess?' he would have added very likely, but I suppose he was sensible enough to see that if she had been 'shut-up,' in the way he had been fancying to himself, she would scarcely have been able to come downstairs and talk to us as she was doing. And she was not dressed like the princesses in his stories, who had always gold crowns on and long shiny trains. Still, though she had only a pinafore on, I could see

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that it was rather a grand one, lots of lace about it, like one of Elf's very best, and though her hair was short and her face small and pale, there was something about her—the way she stood and the way she spoke—which was different from many little girls of her age.

Peterkin took advantage very cleverly of what she had said about his name.

'I'll bring you my poetry-book, if you like,' he said. 'It's a quite old one. I think it belonged to grandmamma, and she's as old as—as old as—' he seemed at a loss to find anything to compare poor grandmamma to, till suddenly a bright idea struck him—'nearly as old as Mrs. Wylie, I should think,' he finished up.

'Oh,' said Margaret, 'do you know Mrs. Wylie? I've never seen her, but I think I've heard her talk. Her house is next door to the parrot's.'

'Yes,' said I, 'but I wonder you've never seen her. She often goes out.'

'But—' began the little girl again, 'I've been—oh, I do believe that's my dinner clattering in the kitchen, and nurse will be coming in, and I've never told you about the parrot. I've lots to tell you. Will you come again? Not to-morrow, but on Wednesday nurse is going out to the dressmaker's. I heard her settling it. Please come on Wednesday, just like this.'

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'We could come a little earlier, perhaps,' I said.

Margaret nodded.

'Yes, do,' she replied, 'and I'll be on the look-out for you. I shall think of lots of things to say. I want to tell you about the parrot, and—about lots of things,' she repeated. 'Good-bye.'

We tugged at our caps, echoing 'good-bye,' and then we walked on towards the farther-off end of the terrace, and when we got there we turned and walked back again. And then we saw that we had not left the front of Margaret's house any too soon, for a short, rather stout little woman was coming along, evidently in a hurry. She just glanced at us as she passed us, but I don't think she noticed us particularly.

'That's her nurse, I'm sure,' said Peterkin, in a low voice. 'I don't think she looks unkind.'

'No, only rather fussy, I should say,' I replied.

We had scarcely spoken to each other before, since bidding Margaret good-bye. Pete had been thinking deeply, and I was waiting to hear what he had to say.

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'I wonder,' he went on, after a moment or two's silence,—'I wonder how much she knows?'

'Why?' I exclaimed. 'What do you think there is to know?'

'It's all very misterous, still,' he answered solemnly. 'She—the little girl—said she had lots to tell us about the parrot and other things. And she didn't want her nurse to see us talking to her. And she said she could come downstairs *now*, but, I'm sure, they don't let her go out. She wouldn't be so dull if they did.'

'Who's "they"?' I asked.

'I don't quite know,' he replied, shaking his head. 'Some kind of fairies. P'raps it's bad ones, or p'raps it's good ones. No, it can't be bad ones, for then they wouldn't have planned the parrot telling us about her, so that we could help her to get free. The parrot is a sort of messenger from the good fairies, I believe.'

He looked up, his eyes very bright and blue, as they always were when he thought he had made a discovery, or was on the way to one. And I, half in earnest, half in fun, like I'd been about it all the time, let my own fancy go on with his.

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'Perhaps,' I said. 'We shall find out on Wednesday, I suppose, when we talk more to Margaret. We needn't call her the invisible princess any more.'

'No, but she is a princess sort of little girl, isn't she?' he said, 'though her hair isn't as pretty as Blanche's and Elf's, and her face is very little.'

'She's all right,' I said.

And then we had to hurry and leave off talking, for we had been walking more slowly than we knew, and just then some big clock struck the quarter.

I think, perhaps, I had better explain here, that none of us—neither Margaret, nor Peterkin, nor I—thought we were doing anything the least wrong in keeping our making acquaintance a secret. What Margaret thought about it, so far as she did think of that part of it, you will understand as I go on; and Pete and I had our minds so filled with his fairies that we simply didn't think of anything else.

It was growing more and more interesting, for Margaret had something very jolly about her, though she wasn't exactly pretty.

I can't remember if it did come into my mind, a very little, perhaps, that we should tell somebody—mamma, perhaps, or Clement—about our visits to Rock Terrace even then. But if it did, I think I put it out again, by knowing that Margaret meant it to be a secret, and that, till we

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saw her again, and heard what she was going to tell us, it would not be fair to mention anything about it.

We were both very glad that Wednesday was only the day after to-morrow. It would have been a great nuisance to have had to wait a whole week, perhaps. And we were very anxious when Wednesday morning came, to see what sort of weather it was, for on Tuesday it rained. Not very badly, but enough for nurse to tell Peterkin that it was too showery for him to come to meet me, and it would not have been much good if he had, as we couldn't have spoken to Margaret.

Nor could we have strolled up and down the terrace or stood looking at the parrot, even if he'd been out on the terrace, which he wouldn't have been on at all on a bad day—if it was rainy. It would have been sure to make some of the people in the houses wonder at us; just what we didn't want.

But Wednesday was fine, luckily, and this time I got off from school to the minute without any one or anything stopping me.

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I ran most of the way to the corner of Lindsay Square, all the same; and I was not too early either, for before I got there I saw Master Peterkin's sturdy figure steering along towards me, not far off. And when he got up to me I saw that he had a small brown-paper parcel under his arm, neatly tied up with red string.

He was awfully pleased to see me so early, for his round face was grinning all over, and as a rule it was rather solemn.

'What's that you've got there?' I asked.

He looked surprised at my not knowing.

'Why, of course, the poetry-book,' he said. 'I promised it her, and I've marked the poetry about "Peterkin." It's the Battle of Blen—Blen-hime—mamma said, when I learnt it, that that's the right way to say it; but Miss Tucker' ('Miss Tucker' was Blanche's and the little ones' governess) 'called it *Blennem*, and I always have to think when I say it. I wish they didn't call him "*little* Peterkin," though,' he went on, 'it sounds so babyish.'

'I don't see that it matters, as it isn't about you yourself,' I said. 'I'd forgotten all about it; I think it's rather sharp of you to have remembered.'

'I couldn't never forget anything I'd promised *her*,' said Pete, and you might really have thought by his tone that he believed he was the prince going to visit the Sleeping Beauty—after she'd come awake, I suppose.

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We did not need to hurry; we were actually rather too early, so we went on talking.

'How about the flowers we meant to get for her?' I said suddenly.

'I didn't forget about them,' he answered, 'but we didn't promise them, and I thought it would be better to ask her first. She might like chocolates best, you know.'

'All right,' I said, and I thought perhaps it was better to ask her first. You see, if she didn't want her nurse to know about our coming to see her it would have been tiresome, as, of course, Margaret could not have told a story.

There she was, peeping out of the downstairs window already when we got there. And when she saw us she came farther out, a little bit on to the balcony. It was a sunny day for winter, and besides, she had a red shawl on, so she could not very well have caught cold. It was a very pretty shawl, with goldy marks or patterns on it. It was like one grandmamma had been sent a present of from India, and afterwards Margaret told me hers had come from India too. And it suited her, somehow, even though she was only a thin, pale little girl.

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She smiled when she saw us, though she did not speak till we were near enough to hear what she said without her calling out. And when we stopped in front of her house, she said—

'I think you might come inside the garden. We could talk better.'

So we did, first glancing up at the next-door balcony, to see if the parrot was there.

Yes, he was, but not as far out as usual, and there was a cloth, or something, half-down round his cage, to keep him warmer, I suppose.

He was quite silent, but Margaret nodded her head up towards him.

'He told me you were coming,' she cried, 'though it wasn't in a very polite way. He croaked out—"Naughty boys! naughty boys!"'

We all three laughed a little.

'And now,' Margaret went on, 'I daresay he won't talk at all, all the time you are here.'

'But will he understand what we say?' asked Peterkin, rather anxiously.

Margaret shook her head.

'I really don't know,' she replied. 'We had better talk in

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PETE HELD OUT HIS BROWN-PAPER PARCEL. 'THIS IS THE POETRY-BOOK,' HE SAID.—p. 97.

rather low voices. I don't *think*,' she went on, almost in a whisper, 'that he is fairy enough to hear if we speak very softly.'

Peterkin gave a sort of spring of delight.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, 'I am *so* glad you think he is fairyish, too.'

'Of course I do,' said she; 'that's partly what I wanted to tell you.'

We came closer to the window. Margaret looked at us again in her examining way, without speaking, for a minute, and before she said anything, Pete held out his brown-paper parcel.

'This is the poetry-book,' he said, 'and I've put a mark in the place where it's about my name.'

He pulled off his cap as he handed the packet to her, and stood with his curly wig looking almost red in the sunlight, though it was not very bright.

'Put it on again,' said Margaret, in her little queer way, meaning his cap. 'And thank you very much, Perkin, for remembering to bring it. I think I should like to call you "Perkin," if you don't mind. I like to have names of my own for some people, and I really thought yours was Perkin.'

I wished to myself she would have a name of her own for *me*, but I suppose she thought I was too big.

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'I think you are very nice boys,' she went on, 'not "naughty" ones at all; and if you will promise not to tell any one what I am going to tell *you*, I will explain all I can. I mean you mustn't tell any one till I give you leave, and as it's only about my own affairs, of course you can promise.'

Of course we did promise.

'Listen, then,' said Margaret, glancing up first of all at the parrot, and drawing back a little into the inside of the room. 'You can hear what I say, even though I don't speak very loudly, can't you?'

'Oh yes! quite well,' we replied.

'Well, then, listen,' she repeated. 'I have no brothers or sisters, and Dads and Mummy are in India. I lived there till about three years ago, and then they came here and left me with my grandfather. That's how people always have to do who live in India.'

'Didn't you mind awfully?' I said. 'Your father and mother leaving you, I mean?'

'Of course I minded,' she replied. 'But I had always known it would have to be. And they will come home again for good some day; perhaps before very long. And I have always been quite happy till lately. Gran is very good to me, and I'm used to being a good deal alone, you see, except for big people. I've always had lots of story books, and not *very* many lessons. So, after a bit, it didn't seem so very different from India. Only *now* it's quite different. It's like being shut up in a tower, and it's very queer altogether, and I *believe* she's a sort of a witch,' and Margaret nodded her head mysteriously.

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'*Who?*' we asked eagerly.

'The person I'm living with—Miss Bogle—isn't her name witchy?' and she smiled a little. 'No, no, not nurse,' for I had begun to say the word. '*She* is only rather a goose. No, this house belongs to Miss Bogle, and she's quite old—oh, as old as old! And she's got rheumatism, so she very seldom goes up and down stairs. And nurse does just exactly what Miss Bogle tells her. It was this way. Gran had to go away—a good way, though not so far as India, and he is always dreadfully afraid of anything happening to me, I suppose. So he sent me here with nurse, and he told me I would be very happy. He knew Miss Bogle long ago—I think she had a school for little boys once; perhaps that was before she got to be a witch. But I've been dreadfully unhappy, and I don't know what's going to happen to me if I go on like this much longer.'

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She stopped, out of breath almost.

'Do you think she's going to enchanter you?' asked Peterkin, in a whisper. 'Do you think she wasn't asked to your christening, or anything like that?'

Margaret shook her head again.

'*Something* like that, I suppose,' she replied. 'She looks at me through her spectacles so queerly, you can't think. You see, I was ill at Gran's before I came here: not very badly, though he fussed a good deal about it. And he thought the sea-air would do me good. But I've often had

colds, and I never was treated like this before—never. For ever so long, *she*, and Margaret nodded towards somewhere unknown, 'wouldn't let me come downstairs at all. And then I cried—sometimes I *roared*, and luckily the parrot heard, and began to talk about it in his way. And you see it's through him that *you* got to know about me, so I'm sure he's on the other side, and knows she's a witch, but—'

CHAPTER VII

[101]

THE GREAT PLAN

AT that moment the clock—a clock somewhere near—struck. Margaret started, and listened, —'One, two, three.' She looked pleased.

'It's only a quarter to one,' she said. 'Half-an-hour still to my dinner. What time do you need to get home by?'

'A quarter-past will do for us,' I said.

'Oh, then it's all right,' she replied. 'But I must be quick. I want to know all that the parrot told you.'

'It was more what he had said to Mrs. Wylie,' I explained, 'copying you, you know. And, at first, she called you "that poor child," and told us she was so sorry for you.'

'But now she won't say anything. She pinched up her lips about you the other day,' added Peterkin. [102]

Margaret seemed very interested, but not very surprised.

'Oh, then, Miss Bogle is beginning to bewitch her too,' she said. 'Nurse is a goose, as I told you. She just does everything Miss Bogle wants. And if it wasn't for the parrot and you,' she went on solemnly, 'I daresay when Gran comes home he'd find me turned into a pussy-cat.'

'Or a mouse, or even a frog,' said Peterkin, his eyes gleaming; 'only then he wouldn't know it was you, unless your nurse told him.'

'She wouldn't,' said Margaret, 'the witch would take care to stop her, or to turn her into a big cat herself, or something. There'd be only the parrot, and Gran mightn't understand him. It's better not to risk it. And that's what I'm planning about. But it will take a great deal of planning, though I've been thinking about it ever since you came, and I felt sure the good fairies had sent you to rescue me. When can you come again?'

'Any day, almost,' said Pete.

'Well, then, I'll tell you what. I'll be on the look-out for you passing every fine day about this time, and the first day I'm sure of nurse going to London again—and I know she has to go once more at least—I'll manage to tell you, and *then* we'll fix for a long talk here.' [103]

'All right,' I said, 'but we'd better go now.'

There was a sound of footsteps approaching, so with only a hurried 'good-bye' we ran off.

We did not need to stroll up and down the terrace to-day, as we knew Margaret's nurse was away; luckily so, for we only just got home in time by the skin of our teeth, running all the way, and not talking.

I wish I could quite explain about myself, here, but it is rather difficult. I went on thinking about Margaret a lot, all that day; all the more that Pete and I didn't talk much about her. We both seemed to be waiting till we saw her again and heard her 'plans.'

And I cannot now feel sure if I really was in earnest at all, as she and Peterkin certainly were, about the enchantment and the witch. I remember I laughed at it to myself sometimes, and called it 'bosh' in my own mind. And yet I did not quite think it only that. After all, I was only a little boy myself, and Margaret had such a common-sensical way, even in talking of fanciful things, that somehow you couldn't laugh at her, and Pete, of course, was quite and entirely in earnest. [104]

I think I really had a strong belief that *some* risk or danger was hanging over her, and I think this was natural, considering the queer way our getting to know her had been brought about. And any boy would have been 'taken' by the idea of 'coming to the rescue,' as she called it.

There was a good deal of rather hard work at lessons just then for me. Papa and mamma wanted me to get into a higher class after Christmas, and I daresay I had been pretty idle, or at least taking things easy, for I was not as well up as I should have been, I know. So Peterkin and I had not as much time for private talking as usual. I had often lessons to look over first thing in the morning, and as mamma would not allow us to have candles in bed, and there was no gas or electric light in our room, I had to get up a bit earlier, when I had work to look over or finish. And nurse was very good about that sort of thing: there was always a jolly bright fire for me in the nursery, however early I was.

Our best time for talking was when Peterkin came to meet me. But we had two or three wet days about then. And Margaret did not expect us on rainy days, even if Pete had been allowed to come, which he wasn't.

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It was, as far as I remember, not till the Monday after that Wednesday that we were able to pass along Rock Terrace. And almost before we came in real sight of her, I felt certain that the little figure was standing there on the look-out.

And so she was—red shawl and white pinafore, and small dark head, as usual.

We made a sort of pretence of strolling past her house at first, but we found we didn't need to. She beckoned to us at once, and just at that moment the parrot, who was out in *his* balcony, most luckily—or cleverly, Peterkin always declares he did it on purpose—screeched out in quite a good-humoured tone—

'Good morning! good morning! Pretty Poll! Fine day, boys! Good morning!'

'Good morning, Poll,' we called out as we ran across the tiny plot of garden to Margaret.

'I'm so glad you've come,' she said, 'but you mustn't stop a minute. I've been out in a bath-chair this morning—I've just come in; and now I'm to go every day. It's horrid, and it's all nonsense, when I can walk and run quite well. It's all that old witch. I'm going again to-morrow and Wednesday; but I'm going to manage to make it later on Wednesday, so that you can talk to me on the Parade. Nurse is going to London all day on Wednesday, but I'm to go out just the same, for the bath-chair man is somebody that Miss Bogle knows quite well. So if you watch for me on the Parade, between the street close to here,' and she nodded towards the nearest side of Lindsay Square, 'and farther on *that* way,' and now she pointed in the direction of our own house, 'I'll look out for you, and we can have a good talk.'

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'All right,' we replied. 'On Wednesday—day after to-morrow, if it's fine, of course.'

'Yes,' she said; 'though I'll *try* to go, even if it's not *very* fine, and you must try to come. I know now why nurse has to go to London. It's to see her sister, who's in an hospital, and Wednesday's the only day, and she's a dressmaker—that's why I thought nurse had to go to a dressmaker's. I'm going on making up my plans. It's getting worse and worse. After I've been out in the bath-chair, Miss Bogle says I'm to lie down most of the afternoon! Just fancy—it's so *dreadfully* dull, for she won't let me read. She says it's bad for your eyes, when you're lying down. Unless I do something quick, I believe she'll turn me into a—oh! I don't know what,' and she stopped, quite out of breath.

[107]

'A frog,' said Peterkin. He had enchanted frogs on the brain just then, I believe.

'No,' said Margaret, 'that wouldn't be so bad, for I'd be able to jump about, and there's nothing I love as much as jumping about, especially in water,' and her eyes sparkled with a sort of mischief which I had seen in them once or twice before. 'No, it would be something much horrid—a dormouse, perhaps. I should hate to be a dormouse.'

'You shan't be changed into a dormouse or—or *anything*,' said Peterkin, with a burst of indignation.

'Thank you, Perkins,' Margaret replied; 'but please go now and remember—Wednesday.'

We ran off, and though we thought we had only been a minute or two at Rock Terrace, after all we were not home much too early.

'We must be careful on Wednesday,' I said. 'I'm afraid my watch is rather slow.'

'Dinner isn't always quite so pumptual on Wednesdays,' said Pete, 'with its being a half-holiday, you know.'

[108]

It turned out right enough on Wednesday.

Considering what a little girl she was then—only eight and a bit—Margaret was very clever with her plans and settlings, as we have often told her since. I daresay it was with her having lived so much alone, and read so many story-books, and made up stories for herself too, as she often did, though we didn't know that then.

We had no difficulty in finding her bath-chair, and the man took it quite naturally that she should have some friends, and, of course, made no objection to our walking beside her and talking to her. He was a very nice kind sort of a man, though he scarcely ever spoke. Perhaps he had children of his own, and was glad for Margaret to be amused. He took great care of the chair, over the crossing the road and the turnings, and no doubt he had been told to be extra careful, but as Miss Bogle had no idea that Margaret knew a creature in the place I don't suppose 'the witch' had ever thought of telling him that he was not to let any one speak to her.

It was a very fine day—a sort of November summer, and when you were in the full sunshine it really felt quite hot. There were bath-chairs standing still, for the people in them to enjoy the warmth and to stare out at the sea.

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Margaret did not want to stare at it, and no more did we. But it was more comfortable to talk with the chair standing still; for though to look at one going it seems to crawl along like a snail, I can tell you to keep up with it you have to step out pretty

fast, faster than Peterkin could manage without a bit of running every minute or so, which is certainly *not* comfortable, and faster than I myself could manage as well as talking, without getting short of breath.

So we were very glad to pull up for a few minutes, though we had already got through a good deal of business, as I will tell you.

Margaret had made up her mind to run away! Fancy that—a little girl of eight!

Pete and I were awfully startled when she burst out with it. She could stand Miss Bogle and the dreadful dulness and loneliness of Rock Terrace no longer, she declared, not to speak of what might happen to her in the way of being turned into a kitten or a mouse or *something*, if the witch got really too spiteful.

'And where will you go to?' we asked.

'Home,' she said, 'at least to my nurse's, and that is close to home.'

We were so puzzled at this that we could scarcely speak.

'To your *nurse's!*' we said at last.

'Yes, to my own nurse—my old nurse!' said Margaret, quite surprised that we didn't understand. And then she explained what she thought she had told us.

'That stupid thing who is my nurse now,' she said, 'isn't my *real* nurse. I mean she has only been with me since I came here. She belongs to Miss Bogle—I mean Miss Bogle got her. My own darling nurse had to leave me. She stayed and stayed because of that bad cold I got, you know, but as soon as I was better she *had* to go, because her mother was so old and ill, and hasn't *nobody* but nurse to take care of her. And then when Gran had to go away he settled it all with that witchy Miss Bogle, and she got this goosey nurse, and my own nurse brought me here. And she cried and cried when she went away, and she said she'd come some day to see if I was happy, but the witch said no, she mustn't, it would upset me; and so she's never dared to; and now you can fancy what my life has been,' Margaret finished up, in quite a triumphant tone.

Peterkin was nearly crying by this time. But I knew I must be very sensible. It all seemed so very serious.

'But what will your grandfather say when he knows you've run away?' I asked, while Peterkin stood listening, with his mouth wide open.

'He'd be very glad to know where I was, *I* should say,' Margaret replied. 'My own nurse will write to him, and I will myself. It'll be a good deal better than if I stayed to be turned into something he'd never know was me. Then, what would Dads and Mummy say to *him* for having lost me?'

'The parrot'd tell, p'raps,' said Pete.

'As if anybody would believe him!' exclaimed Margaret, 'except people who understand about fairies and witches and things like that, that you two and I know about.'

She was giving *me* credit for more believing in 'things like that' than I was feeling just then, to tell the truth. But what I did feel rather disagreeably sure of, was this queer little girl's determination. She sometimes spoke as if she was twenty. Putting it all together, I had a sort of instinct that it was best not to laugh at her ideas at all, as the next thing would be that she and her devoted 'Perkins' would be making plans without me, and really getting lost, or into dreadful troubles of some kind. So I contented myself with just saying—

'Why should Miss Bogle want to turn you into anything?'

'Because witches are like that,' said Peterkin, answering for his princess.

'And because she hates the bother of having me,' added Margaret. 'She has written to Gran that I am very troublesome—nurse told me so; nurse can't hold her tongue—and I daresay I am,' she added truly. 'And so, if I seemed to be lost, she'd say it wasn't her fault. And as I suppose I'd never be found, there'd be an end of it.'

'You couldn't but be found *now*,' said Peterkin, 'as, you see, *we'd* know.'

'If she didn't turn *you* into something too,' said Margaret, with the sparkle of mischief in her eyes again.

Pete looked rather startled at this new idea.

'The best thing to do is for me to go away to a safe place while I'm still myself,' she added.



WE HAD NO DIFFICULTY IN FINDING HER BATH-CHAIR.—p. 108.

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'But have you got the exact address? Do you know what station to go to, and all that sort of thing?' I asked. 'And have you got money enough?' [113]

'Plenty,' she said, nodding her head; 'plenty for all I've planned. Of course I know the station—it's the same as for my own home, and nurse lives in the village where the railway comes. Much nearer than *our* house, which is two miles off. And I know nurse will have me, even if she had to sleep on the floor herself. The only bother is that I'll have to change out of the train from *here*, and get into another at a place that's called a Junction. Nurse and I had to do that when we came here, and I heard Gran explain it all to her, and I know it's the same going back, for the nurse I have *now* told me so. When she goes to London she stays in the same railway; but if you're *not* going to London, you have to get into another one. And nurse and I had to wait nearly half-an-hour, I should think, and that's the part I mind,' and, for the first time, her eager little face looked anxious. 'The railway people would ask me who I was, and where I was going, as, you see, I look so much littler than I am; so I've planned for you two kind boys to come with me to that changing station, and wait till I've got into the train that goes to Hill Horton; that's *our* station. I've plenty of money,' she went on hurriedly, for, I suppose, she saw that I was looking very grave, and Peterkin's face was pink with excitement. [114]

'It isn't that,' I said; 'it's—it's the whole thing. Supposing you got lost after all, it would be——'

'No, no! I won't get lost,' she said, speaking again in her very grown-up voice. 'And remember, you're on your word of honour as *gentlemen!—gentlemen!*' she repeated, 'not to tell any one without my leave. If you do, I'll just run away by myself, and very likely get lost or stolen, or something. And how would you feel then?'

'We are not going to break our promise,' I said. 'You needn't be afraid.'

'I'm not,' she said, and her face grew rather red. 'I always keep *my* word, and I expect any one I trust to keep theirs.'

And though she was such a little girl, not much older than Elvira, whom we often called a 'baby,' I felt sure she *would* 'keep hers.' It certainly wouldn't mend matters to risk her starting off by herself, as I believe she would have done if we had failed her. [115]

It has taken longer to write down all our talking than the talking itself did, even though it was a little interrupted by the bath-chair man every now and then taking a turn up and down, 'just to keep Missy moving a bit,' he said.

Margaret's plans were already so very clear in her head that she had no difficulty in getting us to understand them thoroughly, and I don't think I need go on about what she said, and what we said. I will tell what we fixed to do, and what we did do.

Next Wednesday—a full week on—was the day she had settled for her escape from Rock Terrace. It was a long time to wait, but it was the day her nurse was pretty sure—really quite sure, Margaret thought—to go to London again, for she had said so. She went by a morning train, and did not come back till after dark in the evening, so there was no fear of our running up against her at the railway station. There was a train that would do for Hill Horton, after waiting a little at the Junction, at about three o'clock in the afternoon; and as it was my half-holiday, Peterkin and I could easily get leave to go out together if it was fine, and if it wasn't, we would have to come without! We trusted it would be fine; and I settled in my own mind that if we *had* to come without asking, I'd leave a message with James the footman, that they weren't to be frightened about us at home, for I didn't want mamma and all the others to be in a fuss again, like the evening Peterkin was lost. [116]

Margaret said we needn't be away more than about an hour and a half. I don't quite remember how she'd got all she knew about the times of the trains. I think it was from the cook or housemaid at Miss Bogle's, for I know she said one of them came from near Hill Horton, and that she was very good-natured, and liked talking about Margaret's home and her own.

So it was settled.

Just to make it even more fixed, we promised to go round by Rock Terrace on Monday at the usual time, and Margaret was either to speak to us from the dining-room window, or, if she couldn't, she would hang out a white handkerchief somewhere that we should be sure to see, which would mean that it was all right.

We were to meet her at the corner of her row of houses nearest Lindsay Square, at half-past two on Wednesday. How she meant to do about her bath-chair drive, and all the rest of it, she didn't tell us, and, really, there wasn't time. [117]

But I felt sure she would manage it, and Peterkin was even surer than I.

The last thing she said was—

'Of course, I shall have very little luggage; not more than you two boys can easily carry between you.'

CHAPTER VIII

A TERRIBLE IDEA

THAT was on a Wednesday, and the same day the next week was to be *the* day. On the Monday, as we had planned, we strolled along Rock Terrace. Luckily, it was a fine day, and we could look well about us without appearing to have any particular reason for doing so. It would have seemed rather funny if we had been holding up umbrellas, or, I should say, if *I* had been, for when it rained Peterkin wasn't allowed to come to meet me.

We stood still in front of the parrot's house. He was out on the balcony. I wondered if he would notice us, or if he did, if he would condescend to speak to us.

Yes, I felt that his ugly round eyes—don't you think all parrots' eyes are ugly, however pretty their feathers are?—were fixed on us, and in a moment or two came his squeaky, croaky voice—

[119]

'Good morning, boys! Good morning! Pretty Poll!'

'He didn't say "naughty boys,"' I remarked.

'No, of course not,' replied Peterkin; 'because he knows all about it now, you see.'

'We mustn't stand here long, however,' I said. 'I wond—'

'I wonder why Margaret hasn't hung out a handkerchief if she couldn't get to speak to us,' I was going to have said, but just at that moment we heard a voice on the upstairs balcony—

'Good Polly,' it said, 'good, good Polly.'

And the parrot repeated with great pride—

'Good, good Polly.'

But when we looked up there was no one to be seen, only I thought one of the glass doors of Margaret's dining-room clicked a little. And I was right. In another moment there she was herself, on the dining-room balcony—half on it, that's to say, and half just inside.

'Isn't he good?' she said, when we came as near as we dared to hear her. 'I told him to let me know as soon as he saw you, for I couldn't manage the handkerchief, and I was afraid you might have gone before I could catch you. Nurse has been after me so this morning, for the witch was angry with me yesterday for standing at the window without my shawl. But you mustn't stay,' and she nodded in her queenly little way. 'It's keeping all right—Wednesday at half-past two, at the corner next the Square—wet or fine. Good-bye.'

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'Good-bye, all right,' we whispered, but she heard us.

So did the parrot.

'Good-bye, boys; good Polly! good, good Polly!' and something else which Peterkin declared meant, 'Wednesday at half-past two.'

I felt pretty nervous, I can tell you, that day and the next. At least I suppose it's what people call feeling very nervous. I seemed half in a dream, and, as if I couldn't settle to anything, all queer and fidgety. A little, just a very little perhaps, like what you feel when you know you are going to the dentist's, especially if you *haven't* got toothache; for when you have it badly, you don't mind the thought of having a tooth out, even a thumping double one.

Yet I should have felt disappointed if the whole thing had been given up, and, worse than that, horribly frightened if it had ended in Margaret's saying she'd run away by herself without us helping her, as I know—I have said so two or three times already, I'm afraid: it's difficult to keep from repeating if you're not accustomed to writing and feel very anxious to explain things clearly—as I know she really would have done.

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And then there was the smaller worry of wondering what sort of weather there was going to be on Wednesday, which did matter a good deal.

I shall never forget how thankful I felt in the morning when it came, and I awoke, and opened my eyes, without any snorting for once, to hear Peterkin's first words—

'It's a very fine day, Gilley—couldn't be better.'

'Thank goodness,' I said.

He was sitting up, as usual; but I don't think he had stared me awake this morning, for he was gazing out in the direction of the window, where up above the short blind a nice show of pale-blue sky was to be seen; a wintry sort of blue, with the early mist over it a little, but still quite cheering and 'lasting' looking.

'All the same,' I went on, speaking more to myself, perhaps, than to him, 'I wish we were well through it, and your princess safe with her old nurse.'

[122]

For I could not have felt comfortable about her, as I have several times said, even if *we* had not promised to help her. More than that—I do believe she was so determined, that supposing

mamma or Mrs. Wylie or any grown-up person had somehow come to know about it, Margaret would have kept to her plan, and perhaps even hurried it on and got into worse trouble.

She needed a lesson; though I still do think, and always shall think, that old Miss Bogle and her new nurse and everybody were not a bit right in the way they tried to manage her.

I hurried home from school double-quick that morning, you may be sure. And Peterkin and I were ready for dinner—hands washed, hair brushed, and all the rest of it—long before the gong sounded.

Mamma looked at us approvingly, I remember, when she came into the dining-room, where we were waiting before the girls and Clement had made their appearance.

'Good boys,' she said, smiling, 'that's how I like to see you. How neat you both look, and down first, too!'

[123]

I felt rather a humbug, but I don't believe Peterkin did; he was so completely taken up with the thought of Margaret's escape, and so down-to-the-ground sure that he was doing a most necessary piece of business if she was to be saved from the witch's 'enchanting,' as he would call it.

But as I was older, of course, the mixture of feelings in my mind *was* a mixture, and I couldn't stand being altogether a humbug.

So I said to mamma—

'It's mostly that we want to go out as soon as ever we've had our dinner; you know you gave us leave to go?'

'Oh yes,' said she. 'Well, it's a very nice day, and you will take good care of Peterkin, won't you, Giles? Don't tire him. Are any of your schoolfel—'

But at that moment a note was brought to her, which she had to send an answer to, and when she sat down at the table again, she was evidently still thinking of it, and forgot she had not finished her question, which I was very glad of.

So we got off all right, though I had a feeling that Clement looked at us *rather* curiously, as we left the dining-room.

At the *very* last moment, I did give the message I had thought about in my own mind, with James. Just for him to say that mamma and nobody was to be frightened if we *were* rather late of coming back—*even* if it should be after dark; that we should be all right.

[124]

And then we ran off without giving James time to say anything, though he did open his mouth and begin to stutter out some objection. He was rather a donkey, but I knew that he was to be trusted, so I just laughed in his face.

We were a little before the time at the corner of the square, but that was a good thing. It would never have done to keep *her* waiting, Peterkin said. He always spoke of her as if she was a kind of queen. And he was right enough. All the same, my heart did beat in rather a funny way, thinking to myself what could or should we do if she didn't come?

But we were not kept waiting long. In another minute or so, a little figure appeared round the corner, hastening towards us as fast as it could, but evidently a good deal bothered by a large parcel, which at the first glance looked nearly as big as itself.

Of course it was Margaret.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'I am so glad you are here already. It's this package. I had no idea it would seem so heavy.'

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'It's nothing,' said Peterkin, valiantly, taking it from her as he spoke.

And it really wasn't very much—what had made it seem so conspicuous was that the contents were all wrapped up in her red shawl, and naturally it looked a queer bundle for a little girl like her to be carrying. She was not at all strong either, even for a little girl, and afterwards I was not surprised at this, for the illness she had spoken of as a bad cold had really been much worse than that.

'Let's hurry on,' she said, 'I shan't feel safe till we've got to the station,' for which I certainly thought she had good reason.

I had meant to go by the front way, which was actually the shortest, but the scarlet bundle staggered me. Luckily I knew my way about the streets pretty well, so I chose rather less public ones. And before long, even though the package was not very heavy, Peterkin began to flag, so I had to help him a bit with it.

But for that, there would have been nothing about us at all noticeable. Margaret was quite nicely and quietly dressed in dark-blue serge, something like Blanche and Elvira, and we just looked as if we were a little sister and two schoolboy brothers.

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'Couldn't you have got something less stary to tie up your things in?' I asked her when we had got to some little distance from Rock Terrace, and were in a quiet street.

She shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'it was the only thing. I have a nice black bag, as well as my trunks, of course, but the witch or nurse has hidden it away. I *couldn't* find it. It's just as if they had thought I might be planning to run away. I *nearly* took nurse's waterproof cape; she didn't take it to London today, because it is so fine and bright. But I didn't like to, after all. It won't matter once we are in the train, and at Hill Horton it will be a good thing, as my own nurse will see it some way off.'

We were almost at the station by now, and I told Margaret so.

'All right,' she said. 'I have the money all ready. One for me to Hill Horton, and two for you to the Junction station,' and she began to pull out her purse.

'You needn't get it out just yet,' I said. 'We shall have quite a quarter of an hour to wait. If you give me your purse once we're inside, I will tell you exactly what I take out. How much is there in it?'

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'A gold half-sovereign,' she replied, 'and a half-crown, and five sixpences, and seven pennies.'

'There won't be very much over,' I said, 'though we are all three under twelve; so halves will do, and returns for Pete and me. Second-class, I suppose?'

'Second-class!' repeated Margaret, with great scorn; 'of course not. I've never travelled anything but first in my life. I don't know what Gran would say, or nurse even, if she saw me getting out of a *second*-class carriage.'

She made me feel a little cross, though she didn't mean it. *We* often travelled second, and even third, if there were a lot of us and we could get a carriage to ourselves. But, after all, it was Margaret's own affair, and as she was to be alone from the Junction to Hill Horton, perhaps it was best.

'I don't want you to travel second, I'm sure,' I said, 'if only there's enough. I'd have brought some of my own, but unluckily I'm very short just now.'

'I've—'began Peterkin, but Margaret interrupted him.

'As if I'd let you pay anything!' she said indignantly. 'I'd rather travel third than *that*. You are only coming out of kindness to me.'

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After all, there was enough, even for first-class, leaving a shilling or so over. Hill Horton was not very far away.

A train was standing ready to start, for the station was a terminus. I asked a guard standing about if it was the one for Hill Horton, and he answered yes, but we must change at the Junction, which I knew already.

So we all got into a first-class carriage, and settled ourselves comfortably, feeling safe at last.

'I wish we were going all the way with you,' said Peterkin, with a sigh made up of satisfaction, as he wriggled his substantial little person into the arm-chair first-class seat, and of regret.

'I'll be all right,' said Margaret, 'once I am in the Hill Horton railway.'

For some things I wished too that we were going all the way with her, but for others I couldn't help feeling that I should be very glad to be safe home again and the adventure well over.

'By the day after to-morrow,' I thought, 'there will be no more reason for worrying, if Margaret keeps her promise of writing to us.'

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I had made her promise this, and given her an envelope with our address on. For otherwise, you see, we should not have heard how she had got on, as no one but the parrot knew that she had ever seen us or spoken to us.

Then the train moved slowly out of the station, and Margaret's eyes sparkled with triumph. And we felt the infection of her high spirits. After all, we were only children, and we laughed and joked about the witch, and the fright her new nurse would be in, and how the parrot would enjoy it all, of which we felt quite sure.

We were very merry all the way to the Junction. It was only about a quarter-of-an-hour off, and just before we got there the guard looked at our tickets.

'Change at the Junction,' he said, when he caught sight of the 'Hill Horton,' on Margaret's.

'Of course, we know that, thank you,' she said, rather pertly perhaps, but it sounded so funny that Pete and I burst out laughing again. I suppose we were all really very excited, but the guard laughed too.

'How long will there be to wait for the Hill Horton train?' I had the sense to ask.

'Ten minutes, at least,' he replied, glancing at his watch, the way guards nearly always do.

[130]

I was glad he did not say longer, for the sooner Peterkin and I caught a train home again, after seeing Margaret off, the better. And I knew there were sure to be several in the course of the afternoon.

As soon as we stopped we got out—red bundle and all. I did not see our guard again, he was somewhere at the other end; but I got hold of another, not so good-natured, however, and rather in a hurry.

'Which is the train for Hill Horton? Is it in yet?' I asked.

He must have thought, so I explained it to myself afterwards, that we had just come in to the station, and were at the beginning of our journey.

'Hill Horton,' I *thought* he said, but, as you will see, my ears must have deceived me, 'all right. Any carriage to the front—further back are for—'. I did not clearly hear—I think it must have been 'Charing Cross,' but I did not care. All that concerned *us* was 'Hill Horton.'

'Come along,' I called to the two others, who had got a little behind me, lugging the bundle between them, and I led the way, as the man had pointed out. [131]

It seemed a very long train, and as he had said 'to the front,' I thought it best to go pretty close up to the engine. There were two or three first-class carriages next to the guard's van, but they were all empty, and I had meant to look out for one with nice-looking people in it for Margaret to travel with. Farther back there were some ladies and children in some first-class, but I was afraid of putting her into a wrong carriage.

'I expect you will be alone all the way,' I said to her. 'I suppose there are not very many people going to Hill Horton.'

'Not first-class,' said Margaret. 'There are often lots of farmers and village people, I daresay. Nursey said it was very crowded on market days, but I don't know when it is market days. But it is rather funny, Giles, to be getting into the same train again!'

'No,' I replied, 'these carriages will be going to split off from the others that go on to London. The man said it would be all right for Hill Horton at the front. They often separate trains like that. I daresay we shall go a little way out of the station and come back again. You'll see. And he said—the *first* man, I mean—that we should have at least ten minutes to wait, and we've scarcely been two, so we may as well get in with you for a few minutes.' [132]

'Yes, do,' said Margaret, 'but don't put my package up in the netted place, for fear I couldn't get it down again myself. The trains never stop long at our station.'

So we contented ourselves with leaving the red bundle on the seat beside her. It was lucky, I told her, that the carriage *wasn't* full, otherwise it would have had to go up in the rack, where it wouldn't have been very firm.

'It is so fat,' said Peterkin, solemnly.

'Something like you,' I said, at which we all laughed again, as if it was something very witty. We were still feeling rather excited, I think, and rather proud—at least I was—of having, so far, got on so well.

But before we had finished laughing, there came a startling surprise. The train suddenly began to move! We stared at each other. Then I remembered my own words a minute or two ago.

'It's all right,' I said, 'we'll back into the station again in a moment.'

Margaret and Peterkin laughed again, but rather nervously. At least, Margaret's laugh was not quite hearty; though, as for Peterkin, I think he was secretly delighted. [133]

On we went—faster and faster, instead of slower. There was certainly no sign of 'backing.' I put my head out of the window. We were quite clear of the Junction by now, getting every instant more and more into the open country. At last I had to give in.

'We're off, I do believe,' I said. 'There's been some mistake about our waiting ten minutes. We're clear on the way to Hill Horton.'

'I'm very glad,' said Pete. 'I always wanted to come all the way.'

'But perhaps it needn't be all the way,' I said. 'Do you remember, Margaret, how many stations there are between the Junction and yours?'

'Three or four, I think,' she replied.

'Oh well, then,' I said, 'it won't matter. We can get out the first time we stop, and I daresay we shall soon get a train back again, and not be late home after all.'

Margaret's face cleared. She was thoughtful enough not to want us to get into trouble through helping her. [134]

'We shall be stopping soon, I think,' she said, 'for this seems a fast train.'

But to me her words brought no satisfaction. For it did indeed seem a fast train, and a much more horrible idea than the one of our going all the way to Hill Horton suddenly sprang into my mind—

Were we in the Hill Horton train at all?

IN A FOG

I WAITED a minute or two before I said anything to the others. They went on laughing and joking, and I kept looking out of the window. At last I turned round, and then Margaret started a little.

'What's the matter, Giles?' she said. 'You're quite white and funny looking.'

And Peterkin stared at me too.

'It's—I began, and then I felt as if I really couldn't go on; but I had to. 'It's that I am dreadfully afraid,' I said, 'almost quite sure now, that we are in the wrong train. I've seen the names of two stations that we've passed without stopping already. Do you remember the names of any between the Junction and Hill Horton, Margaret?'

She shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'but I know we never pass any without stopping; at least I think so. They are quite little stations, and I've never known the train go as fast as this till after the Junction, when we were in the London train. I've been to London several times with Gran, you see.'

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Then it suddenly struck her what I meant.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, with a little scream, 'is it *that* you are afraid of, Giles? Do you think we are in the *London* train? I did think it was funny that we were getting back into the same one, but you said that the man said that the carriages at the front were for Hill Horton?'

'Well, I *thought* he did,' I replied, 'but—' one's mind works quickly when you are frightened sometimes—he *might* have said "Victoria," for the "tor" in "Victoria" and "Horton" sound rather alike.'

'But wouldn't he have said "London"?' asked Peterkin.

'No, I think they generally say the name of the station in London,' I explained. 'There are so many, you see.'

Then we all, for a minute or two, gazed at each other without speaking. Margaret had got still paler than usual, and I fancied, or feared, I heard her choke down something in her throat. Peterkin, on the contrary, was as red as a turkey-cock, and his eyes were gleaming. I think it was all a part of the fairy-tale to him.

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'What shall we do?' said Margaret, at last, and I was forced to answer, 'I don't know.'

Bit by bit things began to take shape in my mind, and it was no good keeping them to myself.

'There'll be the extra money to pay for our tickets to London,' I said at last.

'How much will it be? Isn't there enough over?' asked Margaret quietly, and I could not help admiring her for it, as she took out her purse and gave it to me to count over what was left.

There were only four or five shillings. I shook my head.

'I don't know how much it will be, but I'm quite sure there's not enough. You see, though we're only halves, it's first-class.'

'And what will they do to us if we can't pay,' she went on, growing still whiter. 'Could we—could we possibly be sent to prison?'

'Oh no, no. I don't think so,' I answered, though I was really not at all sure about it; I had so often seen notices stuck up on boards at railway stations about the punishments of passengers not paying properly, or trying to travel without tickets. 'But—I'm afraid they would be very horrid to us somehow—perhaps telegraph to papa or mamma.'

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'Oh!' cried Margaret, growing now as red as she had been white, 'and that would mean my being shut up again at Rock Terrace—worse than before. I don't know *what* the witch wouldn't do to me,' and she clasped her poor little hands in a sort of despair.

Then Peterkin burst out—

'I've got my gold half-pound with me,' he said, in rather a queer voice, as if he was proud of being able to help and yet half inclined to cry.

'Goodness!' I exclaimed, 'why on earth didn't you say so before?'

'I—I—wanted it for something else,' said he. 'I don't quite know why I brought it.'

He dived into his pocket, and dug out a very grimy little purse, out of which, sure enough, he produced a half-sovereign.

The relief of knowing that we should not get into trouble as far as our journey *to* London was concerned, was such a blessing, that just for the moment I forgot all the rest of it.

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'Anyway we can't be put in prison now,' said Margaret, and a little colour came into her face. 'Oh, Perkins, you *are* a nice boy!'

I did think her praising him was rather rough on *me*, for I had had bother enough, goodness knows, about the whole affair, even though I had made a stupid mistake.

We whizzed on, for it was an express train, and for a little while we didn't speak. Peterkin was still looking rather upset about his money. He told me afterwards that he had been keeping it for his Christmas presents, especially one for Margaret, as we had never had a chance of getting her any flowers. But all that was put right in the end.

After a bit Margaret said to me, in a half-frightened voice—

'What shall we do when we get to London, Giles? Do you think perhaps the guard would help us to go back again to the Junction, when he sees it was a mistake? As we've got money to pay to London, he'd see we hadn't meant to cheat.'

'No,' I said, 'he wouldn't have time, and besides I don't think it'll be the same one. And if we said anything, he'd most likely make us give our names, or take us to some station-master or somebody, and then there'd be no chance of our keeping out of a lot of bother.'

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'You mean,' said she, in a shaky voice, 'we should have to go all the way back, and I'd be sent to the witch again?'

'Something like it, I'm afraid,' I said. 'If I just explain that we got into the wrong train and pay up, they'll have no business to meddle with us.'

'But what are we to do, then?' she asked again.

'I don't know,' I replied. I'm afraid I was rather cross. I was so sick of it all, you see, and so fearfully bothered.

Margaret at last began to cry. She tried to choke it down, but it was no use.

I felt awfully sorry for her, but somehow the very feeling so bad made me crosser, and I did not try to comfort her up.

Pete, on the contrary, tugged out his pocket-handkerchief, which was quite a decently clean one, and began wiping her eyes. This made her try again to stop crying. She pulled out her own handkerchief and said—

'Dear little Perkins, you are so kind.'

I glanced at them, not very amiably, I daresay. And I was on the point of saying that, instead of crying and petting each other, they'd better try to think what we should do, for I knew we must be getting near London by this time, when I saw something white on the floor of the carriage.

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I stooped to pick it up. It had dropped out of Margaret's pocket when she pulled out her handkerchief. It was an envelope, or what had been one, and for a moment I thought it was the one I had given her with our address on, to use when she wrote to us from Hill Horton, but *that* one couldn't have got so dirty and torn-looking in the time. And when I looked at it more closely, I saw that it was jagged and nibbled in a queer way, and *then* I saw that it had the name 'Wylie' on it, and an address in London. And when I looked still more closely, I saw that it had never been through the post or had a stamp on, and that it had a large blot in one corner. Evidently the person who had written on it had not liked to use it because of the blot, and the name on it was *Miss*, not *Mrs.* Wylie,

'19 Enderby Street
LONDON, S.W.'

I turned it round and round without speaking for a moment or two. I couldn't make it out. Then I said—

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'What's this, Margaret? It must have dropped out of your pocket.'

She stopped crying—well, really, I think she had stopped already, for whatever her faults were she wasn't a babyish child—to look at it. She seemed puzzled, and felt in her pocket again.

'No, of course it's not the envelope you gave me,' she said. 'I've got it safe, and—oh, I believe I know how this old one got into my pocket. I remember a day or two ago when I was trying if it would do to tie my handkerchief on to Polly's cage, he was nibbling some paper. He's very fond of nibbling paper, and it doesn't hurt him, for he doesn't eat it. But he would keep pecking at me when I was tying the handkerchief, and I was vexed with him, and so when he dropped this I picked it up and shook it at him, and told him he shouldn't have it again, and then I put it into my pocket. He was very tiresome that day, not a bit a fairy; he is like that sometimes.'

'But how did he come to have an envelope with "Miss Wylie" on?' I said. 'He doesn't live in Mrs. Wylie's house, but in the one between yours and hers, and this must have come from *her*.'

'I daresay she gave it him to play with, or her servant may have given it him,' said Margaret, 'You see he's sometimes at the end of the balcony nearest her, and sometimes at our end. I think his servants have put him more at our end since she's been away; perhaps they've heard me talking to him. Anyway, I'm sure this old envelope must have come out of his cage.'

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I did not speak for a moment. I was gazing at the address.

'Margaret,' I exclaimed, 'look at it.'

She did so, and then stared up at me, with a puzzled expression in her eyes, still red with crying.

'I believe,' I went on, 'I believe this is going to help us.'

Peterkin, who had been listening with all his ears, could contain himself no longer.

'And the parrot *must* be a fairy after all,' he said, 'and he must have done it on purpose.'

But Margaret did not seem to hear what he said, she was still gazing at me and wondering what I was going to say.

'Don't you see,' I went on, touching the envelope, 'this must be the house of some of Mrs. Wylie's relations? Very likely she's staying with them there, and anyway they'd tell us where she is, as we know she's still in London. She told us she was going to be there for a fortnight. And she's very kind. We would ask her to lend us money enough to go back to the Junction, and then we'd be all right. You have got your ticket for Hill Horton, and we have our returns for home.'

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'Oh,' cried Margaret, 'how clever you are to have thought of it, Giles! But,' and the bright look went out of her face, 'you don't think she'd make me go back to the witch, do you? Are you sure she wouldn't?'

'I really don't think she would,' I said. 'I know she has often been sorry for you, for she knew you weren't at all happy. And we'd tell her more about it. She is awfully kind.'

I meant what I said. Perhaps I saw it rather too favourably; the idea of finding a friend in London was such a comfort just then, that I felt as if everything else might be left for the time. I never thought about catching trains at the Junction or about its getting late and dark for Margaret to be travelling alone from there to Hill Horton, or anything, except just the hope—the tremendous hope—that we might find our kind old lady.



HE LOOKED AT THE TICKETS . . . 'HOW'S THIS?' HE SAID.—p. 145.

The train slackened, and very soon we pulled up. It wasn't the station yet, however, but the place where they stop to take tickets, just outside. I know it so well now, for we pass it ever so often on our way from and to school several times a year. But whenever we pass it, or stop at it, I think of that miserable day and all my fears.

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The man put his head in at the window. He was a stranger.

'Tickets, please,' he said.

I was ready for him—tickets, Peterkin's half-sovereign, and all. I held out the tickets.

'There's been a mistake,' I began. 'I shall have to pay up,' and when he heard that, he opened the door and came in.

He looked at the tickets.

'Returns—half-returns to the Junction,' he said, 'and a half to Hill Horton. How's this?'

'We got into the wrong train at the Junction,' I replied. 'In fact, we got back into the same one we had just got out of. I expect the guard thought I said "Victoria" when I said "Hill Horton," for he told us to go to the front.'

'And didn't he tell you, you were wrong when he looked at the tickets before you started?' the man asked, still holding our tickets in his hand and examining us rather queerly.

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I began to feel angry, but I didn't want to have any fuss, so instead of telling him to mind his own business, as I was ready to pay the difference, I answered again quite coolly—

'No one looked at the tickets at the Junction. There were two or three empty carriages at the front: perhaps no one noticed us getting in.'

I thought I heard the man murmur to himself something about 'rum go. Three kids by themselves, and first-class.'

So, though I was getting angrier every moment, I just said—

'I don't see that it matters. Here we are, anyway, and I'll pay if you'll tell me how much.'

He counted up.

'Eight-and-six—no, eight-and-tenpence.'

I held out the half-sovereign. He felt in his pocket and gave me back the change—a shilling and twopence, and walked off with the halves of Pete's and my return tickets and the half-sovereign.

We all began to breathe more freely; but, as the train slowly moved again at last—we had been standing quite a quarter-of-an-hour—a new trouble started. [147]

'It's very dark,' said Margaret, 'and it can't be late yet.'

I looked out of the window. Yes, it was very dark. I put my head out. It felt awfully chilly too—a horrid sort of chilly feeling. But that wasn't the worst of it.

'It's a fog,' I said. 'The horriddest kind—I can't see the lights almost close to us. It's getting worse every minute. I believe it'll be as dark as midnight when we get into the station. What luck, to be sure!'

The other two seemed more excited than frightened.

'I've never seen a really bad fog,' said Margaret, as if she was rather pleased to have the chance.

Pete said nothing. I expect he'd have had a fairy-tale all ready about a prince lost in a mist, if I'd given him an opening. But I was again rather taken aback. How were we to find our way to Enderby Street?

I had meant to walk, you see, in spite of the red bundle! For I was afraid of being cheated by the cabman; and I was afraid too of running quite short of money, in case we *didn't* find Mrs. Wylie, or that she had left, and that, if the worst came to the worst, I might have to go to a hotel with the two children, and telegraph to mamma to say where we were. Papa, unluckily, was not in London just then. He had gone away on business somewhere—I forget where—for a day or two, and besides, I was not at all sure of the exact address of his chambers, otherwise I might have telegraphed *there*. I only knew it was a long way from Victoria. [148]

Indeed, I don't think I thought about that at all at the time, though afterwards mamma said to me I might have done so, *had* the worst come to the worst.

CHAPTER X

 [149]

BERYL

YES, the fog *was* a fog, and no mistake. I don't think I have ever seen so bad a one since we came to live in London, or else it seemed to me terribly bad that day because I was not used to it, and because I was so anxious.

I felt half provoked and yet in a way glad that Margaret and Peterkin were not at all frightened, but rather pleased. They followed me along the platform after we got out of the carriage, lugging the bundle between them. It was not really heavy, and I had to go first, as the station was pretty full in that part, in spite of the fog. The lamps were all lighted, but till you got within a few yards of one you scarcely saw it.

I went on, staring about me for some one to ask advice from. At last, close to a book-stall, where several lights together made it a little clearer, I saw a railway man of some kind, standing, as if he was not in a hurry. [150]

'Can you tell me where Enderby Street is, if you please?' I asked as civilly as I knew how.

'Enderby Street,' he repeated, in surprise. 'Of course; it's no distance off.'

Wasn't I thankful?

'How far?' I said.

'Well—it depends upon which part of it you want. It's a long street. But if you're a stranger you'll never find your way in this fog. Better take a hansom.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'It's only a shilling, I suppose?'

He glanced at me again; he had been turning away. By this time the two children were close beside me. He saw that we belonged to each other.

'A shilling for two—one-and-six for three,' he replied. 'Hansom or four-wheeler,' and then he moved off.

Just then Margaret began to cough, and a new fear struck me. She looked very delicate, and she had had a bad cold. Supposing the fog made her very ill? I was glad the man had spoken of a four-wheeler. [151]

'Stuff your handkerchief or something into your mouth,' I said, 'so as not to get the fog down

your throat. I'm going to call a four-wheeler.'

In some ways that dreadful day was not as bad as it might have been. There were scarcely any cabs about, but just then one stopped close to the end of the platform.

'Jump in,' I said, and before the driver had time to make any objection, for I know they do sometimes make a great favour of taking you anywhere in a fog, we were all inside.

I heard him growling a little, but when I put my head out of the window again, and said '19 Enderby Street,' he smoothed down.

We drove off, slowly enough, but that was to be expected. I pulled up both windows, for Margaret kept on coughing, in spite of having her handkerchief, and Peterkin's too, for all I knew, stuffed over her mouth and throat. They were both very quiet, but I *think* they were rather enjoying themselves. I suppose my taking the lead, as I had had to, since our troubles began, and managing things, made them feel 'safe,' as children like to do, at the bottom of their hearts, however they start by talking big.

It was a horrid fog, but the lights made it not quite so bad outside, for the shops had got all their lamps on, and we could see them now and then. There was a lot of shouting going on, and yet every sound was muffled. There were not many carts or omnibuses or anything on wheels passing, and what there were, were moving slowly like ourselves. [152]

After a few minutes it got darker again; it must have been when we got into Enderby Street, I suppose, for there are no shops, or scarcely any, there. I've often and often passed along it since, but I never do without thinking of that evening, or afternoon, for it was really not yet four o'clock.

And then we stopped.

'Nineteen, didn't you say?' asked the driver as I jumped out.

'Yes, nineteen,' I said. 'Stop here for a moment or two, till I see if we go in.'

For it suddenly struck me that *if* we had the awful bad luck not to find Mrs. Wylie, we had better keep the cab, to take us to some hotel, otherwise it might be almost impossible to get another. And then we should be out in the street, with Margaret and her bundle, and worse still, her cough.

I made my way, more by feeling than seeing, up the steps, and fumbled till I found the bell. I had not actually told the others to stay in the cab, though I had taken care to keep the window shut when I got out, and I never dreamt but what they'd stay where they were till I had found out if Mrs. Wylie was there. [153]

But just as the door opened—the servant came in double-quick time luckily, the reason for which was explained—I heard a rustling behind me, and lo and behold, there they both were, and the terrible red bundle too, looking huger and queerer than ever, as the light from inside fell on it.

We must have looked a funny lot, as the servant opened the door. She—it was a parlour-maid—did start a little, but I didn't give her time to speak, though I daresay she thought we were beggars, thanks to those silly children.

'Mrs. Wylie is staying here,' I said. I thought it best to speak decidedly. 'Is she at home?'

I suppose my way of speaking made her see we were not beggars, and perhaps she caught sight of the four-wheeler, looming faintly through the fog, for she answered quite civilly.

'She is not exactly staying here. She is in rooms a little way from here, but she comes round most afternoons. I thought it was her when you rang, but I don't think she'll be coming now—not in this fog.' [154]

My heart had gone down like lead at the first words—'she is not,' but as the servant went on I got more hopeful again.

'Can you—' I began—I was going to have asked for Mrs. Wylie's address, but just then Margaret coughed; the worst cough I had heard yet from her. 'Why couldn't you have stayed in the cab?' I said sharply, and perhaps it was a good thing, to show that we *had* a cab waiting for us. 'Please,' I went on, 'let this little girl come inside for a minute. The fog makes her cough so.'

The parlour-maid stepped back, opening the door a little wider, but there was something doubtful in her manner, as if she was not quite sure if she was not running a risk in letting us in. I pushed Margaret forward, and not Margaret only! She was holding fast to her precious bundle, and Peterkin was holding fast to *his* side of it, so they tumbled in together in a way that was enough to make the servant stare, and I stayed half on the steps, half inside, but from where I was I could see into the hall quite well. It looked so nice and comfortable, compared with the horribleness outside. It was a square sort of hall. The house was not a big one, not nearly as big as ours at home, but lots bigger than the Rock Terrace ones, of course. [155]

'Can you give me Mrs. Wylie's address?' I said. 'I think the best thing we can do is to—' but I was interrupted again.

A girl—a grown-up girl, a lady, I mean—came forward from the inner part of the hall.

'Browner,' she said, 'do shut the door. You are letting the fog get all over the house, and it is bitterly cold.'

She was blinking her eyes a little as she spoke: either the light or the fog, or both, hurt them. Perhaps she had been sitting over the fire in a darkish room. 'Blinking her eyes' doesn't sound very pretty, but it was, I found afterwards, a sort of trick of hers, and somehow it suited her. *She* was very pretty. I didn't often notice girls' looks, but I couldn't help noticing hers. Everything about her was pretty; her voice too, though she spoke a little crossly. She was rather tall, and her hair was wavy, almost as wavy as Elf's, and the colour of her dress, which was pinky-red, and everything about her, seemed to suit, and I just stood—we all did—staring at her.

And as soon as she caught sight of us—I daresay we seemed quite a little crowd at the door—she stared too!

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Then she came forward quickly, her voice growing anxious, and almost frightened.

'What is the matter?' she exclaimed. 'Has there been an accident? Who are these—children?'

Browner moved towards her.

'Indeed, Miss,' she began, but the girl stopped her.

'Shut the door first,' she said decidedly. 'No, no, come in, please,' this was to me; I suppose I seemed to hesitate, 'and tell me what you want, and who you are?'

Her voice grew more hesitating as she went on, and it must have been very difficult to make out what sort of beings we were. Margaret's colourless face and dark eyes and hair, and the bright red of the bundle, at the first hasty glance, might almost have made you think of a little Italian wandering musician; but the moment I spoke I think the girl saw we were not that class.

'We are friends of Mrs. Wylie's—Mrs. Wylie who lives at Rock Terrace,' I said, 'and—and we've come to her because—oh! because we've got into a lot of trouble, and the fog's made it worse, and we don't know anybody else in London.'

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Then, all of a sudden—I'm almost ashamed to tell it, even though it's a good while ago now, and I really was scarcely more than a little boy myself—something seemed to get into my throat, and I felt as if in another moment it would turn into a sob.

Margaret is awfully quick in some ways. She heard the choke in my voice and darted to me, leaving the bundle to Pete's tender mercies; so half of it dropped on to the floor and half stuck to him, as he stood there staring with his round blue eyes.

Margaret stretched up and flung her arms round my neck.

'Giles, Giles,' she cried, 'don't, oh don't!' Then she burst out—

'It's all my fault; at least it's all for me, and Giles and Perkins have been so good to me. Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do?' and she began coughing again in a miserable way. I think it was partly that she was trying not to cry.

Seeing her so unhappy, made me pull myself together. I was just going to explain things a little to the girl, when she spoke first. She looked very kind and sorry.

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'I'll tell you what's the first thing to do,' she said, 'and that's to get this child out of the cold,' and she opened a door a little farther back in the hall, and got us all in, the maid following.

It was a very nice, rather small dining-room; a bright fire was burning, and the girl turned on an electric lamp over the table. There were pretty ferns and things on it, ready for dinner, just like mamma has them at home.

'Now,' she began again, but there seemed nothing but interruptions, for just at that moment another door was heard to open, and as the one of the room where we were was not shut, we could hear some one calling—

'Beryl, Beryl, is there anything the matter? Has your aunt come?'

It was a man's voice—quite a kind one, but rather fussy.

'Wait a moment or two, I'll be back directly,' said the girl, and as she ran out of the room we heard her calling, 'I'm coming, daddy.'

The parlour-maid drew back nearer the door, not seeming sure if she should leave us alone or not, and *we* drew a little nearer the fire. So that we could talk without her hearing us.

'Isn't she a kind lady?' said Margaret, glancing up at me. 'I think she looks very kind. You don't think she'll send me back to the witch, do you, Giles?'

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'Bother the witch,' I was on the point of saying, for I would have given anything by this time to be back in our homes again, witch or no witch. But I thought better of it. It wouldn't have been kind, with Margaret looking up at me, with tears in her big dark eyes, so white and anxious.

'I shouldn't think so,' I replied. 'She must be Mrs. Wylie's niece, and we'll go on to Mrs. Wylie, and she will tell us what to do.'

The girl—perhaps I'd better call her 'Beryl' now. We always do, though she is no longer Beryl Wylie. Beryl was back almost at once.

'Now,' she began again, sitting down in an arm-chair by the fire, and drawing Margaret to her, 'tell me all about it. In the first place, who are you? What are your names?'

'Lesley,' I said. 'At least *ours* is,' and I touched Peterkin. 'I'm Giles and he's Peterkin. We know Mrs. Wylie, and we live on the Marine Parade.'

Beryl nodded.

'Yes,' she said, 'I've heard of you. And,' she touched Margaret gently, 'this small maiden? What is her name—she is not your sister?'

'No,' I replied. 'She is Margaret—' I stopped short. For the first time it struck me that I had never heard her last name!

'Margaret Fothergill,' she said quickly. 'I live next door but one to Mrs. Wylie, and next door to the parrot. Do you know the parrot in Rock Terrace?'

Beryl nodded again.

'I have heard of him too,' she said.

But suddenly a new idea—I should rather say the old one—struck Margaret again. Her voice changed, and she clasped her hands piteously.

'You won't, oh, you won't send me back to the witch? Say you won't.'

'What does she mean?' asked Beryl, turning to me, as if she thought Margaret was half out of her mind, though, all the same, she drew her still closer.

'She—we—' I began, and Peterkin opened his mouth too. But I suppose I must have glanced at the servant, for Beryl turned towards her, as if to tell her not to wait. Then she changed and said instead—

'Bring tea in here, Browner, as quickly as you can. You can put it on the side table.'

Browner went off at once; she seemed a very good-natured girl. And then, as quickly as I could, helped here and there by Margaret and by Peterkin (though to any one less 'understanding' than Beryl, his funny way of muddling up real and fancy would certainly not have 'helped'), I told our story. It was really wonderful how Beryl took it all in. When I stopped at last, almost out of breath, she nodded her head quietly.

'We won't talk it over just yet,' she said. 'The first thing to do is to see my auntie. You three stay here while I run round to her, and try to enjoy your tea. I shall not be long. It is very near.'

The idea of tea did seem awfully tempting, but a new thought struck me.

'The cab!' I exclaimed, 'the four-wheeler! It's waiting all this time, and if we send it away, most likely we shan't be able to get another in the fog. There'll be such a lot to pay, too. Don't you think we'd better go with you in it to Mrs. Wylie, and perhaps she'd lend us money to go to the Junction by the first train? I don't think we should stay to have tea, thank you,' though, as I said it, a glance at Margaret's poor little white face made me wish I needn't say it. She was clinging to Beryl so by this time as if she felt safe.

And Peterkin looked almost as piteous as she did.

Beryl gently loosened Margaret's hold of her, and got up from the big leather arm-chair where she had been sitting.

'Never mind about the cab,' she said. 'I will go round in it to my aunt, and perhaps bring her back in it. I will settle with the man. I may be a quarter-of-an-hour or twenty minutes away. So all you three have got to do in the meantime is to have a good tea, and trust me. And don't think about witches, or bad fairies, or anything disagreeable till you see me again,' she added, nodding to the two children. 'Browner, you will see that they have everything they want.'

Browner smiled, and Beryl ran off, and in a minute or two we heard her come downstairs again, with her cloak and hat on, no doubt, and the front door shut, and I heard the cab drive away.

Talking of fairies, I can't imagine anything more like the best of good ones than Beryl Wylie seemed to us that afternoon.

Browner was very kind and sensible. For after she had poured out our tea, and handed us a



'NOW,' SHE BEGAN . . . DRAWING MARGARET TO HER, 'TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT.'—p. 159.

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plateful of bread-and-butter and another of little cakes, she left the room, showing us the bell, in case we wanted more milk or anything.

And then—perhaps it may seem very thoughtless of us, but, as I have said before, even I, the eldest, wasn't very old—we really enjoyed ourselves! It was so jolly to feel warm and to have a good tea, and, above all, to know that we had found kind friends, who would tell us what to do.

Margaret seemed perfectly happy, and to have got rid of all her fears of being sent back to the witch. And Peterkin, in those days, was never very surprised at anything, for nothing that could happen was as wonderful as the wonders of the fairy-land he lived in. So he was quite able to enjoy himself without any trying to do so.

I do feel, however, rather ashamed of one bit of it all. You'd scarcely believe that it never came into my head to think that mamma might be frightened about us, even though the afternoon was getting on into evening, and the darkness outside made it seem later than it really was!

I can't understand it of myself, considering that I had seen with my own eyes how frightened she had been the evening Peterkin got lost. I suppose my head had got tired and confused with all the fears and things it had been full of, but it is rather horrid to remember, all the same.

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CHAPTER XI

[165]

DEAR MAMMA

BERYL must have been away longer than she had expected, for when we heard the front bell ring and a minute later she hurried in, her first words were—

'Did you think I was never coming back? I will explain to you what I have been doing.'

When her eyes fell on us, however, her expression changed. She looked pleased, but a little surprised, as she took in that we had not been, by any means, sitting worrying ourselves, but quite the contrary. Margaret was actually in the middle of a laugh, which did not seem as if she was feeling very bad, even though it turned into a cough. Peterkin was placidly content, and I was—well, feeling considerably the better for the jolly good tea we had had.

'We've been awfully comfortable, thank you,' I said, getting up, 'and—will you please tell us what you think we'd better do? And—please—how much was the cab?'

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'Never mind about that,' she said. 'Here is my aunt,' and then I heard a little rustle at the door, and in came Mrs. Wylie, who had been taking off her wraps in the hall, looking as neat and white-lacy and like herself as if she had never come within a hundred miles of a fog in her life.

'She *would* come,' Beryl went on, smiling at the old lady as if she loved her very much. 'Auntie is always so kind.'

I began to feel very ashamed of all the trouble we were giving, and I'm sure my face got very red.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, as Mrs. Wylie shook hands with us, 'I never thought of you coming out in the fog.'

'It will not hurt me,' she replied; 'but I feel rather anxious about this little person,' and she laid her hand on Margaret's shoulder, for just then Margaret coughed again.

'Oh,' I exclaimed, 'you don't think it will make her cough worse, do you?' and I felt horribly frightened. 'We'll wrap her up much more, and once we are clear of London, there won't be any fog. I daresay it's quite light still, in the country. It can't be late. But hadn't we better go at once? Will you be so very good as to lend us money to go back to the Junction? I know mamma will send it you at once.'

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All my fears seemed to awaken again as I hurried on, and the children's faces grew grave and anxious.

Mrs. Wylie sat down quietly.

'My dear boy,' she said, 'there can be no question of any of you, Margaret especially, going back to-night. The fog is very bad, and it is very cold besides. My niece has told me the whole story, and—'

'I suppose you think we've all been dreadfully naughty,' I interrupted. 'I did not mean to be, and *they* didn't,' glancing at the others. 'But of course I'm older, only—'

Mrs. Wylie laid her hand on my arm.

'There will be a good deal to talk over,' she said, speaking still very quietly, but rather gravely. 'And I feel that your dear mamma is the right person to—explain things—your mistakes, and all about it. I believe certainly you did not *mean* to do wrong.'

Her mention of mamma startled me into remembering at last how frightened she and all of

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them would be at home.

'Oh!' I exclaimed, 'if we stay away all night, what *will* mamma do?'

'I was just going to tell you what we have done,' said Mrs. Wylie. 'That was what kept us—Beryl and me. We have telegraphed to your mamma. She will not be frightened now. Indeed, I hope she may have got the telegram in time to prevent her beginning to be anxious. And we also—' but here she stopped, for a glance at Margaret, as she told me afterwards, reminded her of Margaret's fears lest she should be sent back to Rock Terrace and Miss Bogle. And what she had been on the point of saying was, that they had also telegraphed to 'the witch.'

'It was awfully good of you,' I said, feeling more and more ashamed of the trouble we were causing.

I would have given anything to go home that night, even if it had been to find papa and mamma more displeased with me than they had ever been in their life, and, as I was beginning to see, as they had a right to be. But in the face of all Mrs. Wylie and Beryl were doing, I could not possibly have gone against what they thought best.

'I shall also write to your mamma to-night,' Mrs. Wylie went on. 'There is plenty of time. It is not really as late as the fog makes it seem. And the first thing we now have to do,' for just then Margaret had another bad fit of coughing, 'is to put this child to bed. If you are not better in the morning, or rather if you are any worse, we must send for the doctor.'

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'Oh, *please* don't!' said Margaret, as soon as she could speak. 'It's only the fog got into my throat. It doesn't hurt me at all, as it did when I had that very bad cold at home. I don't like strange doctors, *please*, Mrs. Wylie. And to-morrow nurse can send for our own doctor at home at Hill Horton, if I'm not quite well. I may go home to my nurse quite early, mayn't I? And you will tell their mamma not to be vexed with them, won't you? They only wanted to help me.'

She looked such a shrimp of a creature, with her tiny face, so pale too, that nobody could have found it in their heart to scold her. Mrs. Wylie just patted her hand and said something about putting it all right, but that she must go to bed now and have a good long sleep.

And just then Beryl, who had left us with Mrs. Wylie, came back to say that everything was ready for Margaret upstairs, and then she walked her and the red bundle off—to put her to bed.

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I really think that by this time Margaret was so tired that she scarcely knew where she was: she did not make the least objection, but was as meek as a mouse. You would never have thought her the same child as the determined little 'ordering-about' sort of child I knew she could be, and I, rather suspected, generally *had* been till she came under stricter management.

When she was alone with us—with Peterkin and me—Mrs. Wylie spoke a little more about the whole affair. But not very much. She had evidently made up her mind to leave things in mamma's hands. And she did not at all explain any of the sort of mystery there seemed about Margaret.

She rang the bell and told Browner to take us upstairs to the little room that had been got ready for us, and where we were to sleep, saying, that she herself was now going to write to mamma.

'*And* to Miss Bogle,' she added, 'though I thought it better not to say so to Margaret.'

She looked at us rather curiously as she spoke; I think she most likely wanted to find out what we really believed about 'the witch.' Peterkin started, and grew very red.

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'You won't let her go back there?' he exclaimed. 'I'm sure she'll run away again if you do.'

It sounded rather rude, but Mrs. Wylie knew that he did not mean it for rudeness. She only looked at him gravely.

'I am very anxious to see how your little friend is to-morrow morning,' she replied. 'I earnestly hope she has not caught any serious cold.'

The way she said it frightened me a little somehow, though we children often caught cold and didn't think much about it. But then we were all strong. None of us ever coughed the way Margaret used to about that time, except when we had hooping-cough, and it wasn't that that she had got, I knew.

'You don't think she is going to be badly ill?' I said, feeling as if it would be all my fault if she was.

Mrs. Wylie only repeated that she hoped not.

We couldn't do much in the way of dressing or tidying ourselves up, as we had nothing with us, not even a red bundle. We could only wash our faces and hands, which were *black* with the fog, so having them clean was an improvement. And there was a very pretty brush and comb put out for us—Beryl's own. I think it was awfully good of her to lend us her nice things like that. I don't believe Blanchie would have done it, though I daresay mamma would. So we made ourselves as decent-looking as we could, and our collars didn't look as bad that evening as in the daylight the next morning.

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And then Beryl put her head in at the door and told us to come down to the drawing-room,

where her father was.

'He is not able to go up and down stairs just now,' she said. 'His rheumatism is very bad. So he stays in the drawing-room, and we dine earlier than usual for his sake—at seven.'

She went on talking, partly to make us more comfortable, for I knew we were both looking very shy. And just outside the drawing-room door she smiled and said, 'Don't be frightened of him, he is the kindest person in the world.'

So he was, I am sure. He had white hair and a thin white face, and he was sitting in a big arm-chair, and he shook hands kindly, and didn't seem to mind our being there a bit. Of course, Beryl had explained it all to him, and it was easy to see that he was most awfully fond of her, and pleased with everything she did. All the same, I was very glad, though it sounds horrid, that he couldn't come downstairs. It didn't seem half so frightening with only Mrs. Wylie and Beryl.

Peterkin got very sleepy before dinner was really over. I think he nodded once or twice at dessert, though he was very offended when I said so afterwards. I began to feel jolly tired too, and we were both very glad to go to bed. There was a fire in our room. 'Miss Wylie had ordered it because of the fog,' the servant said. Wasn't it kind of her?

We couldn't help laughing at the things they had tried to find for us instead of proper night things—jackety sort of affairs, with lots of frills and fuss. I don't know if they belonged to mother Wylie or to Beryl. But we were too sleepy to mind, though next morning Pete was awfully offended when I said he looked like Red-Riding Hood's grandmother, as the frills had worked up all round his face, and he looked still queerer when he got out of bed, as his robe trailed on the floor, with his being so short.

He did not wake as early as usual, but I did. And for a minute or two I *couldn't* think where I was. And I didn't feel very happy when I did remember.

The fog had gone, but it still looked gloomy, compared with home. Still I was glad it was clear, both because I wanted so to go home, and also because of Margaret's cold. I think that was what I first thought of. If only she didn't get ill, I thought I wouldn't mind how angry they were with me. As to Peterkin, I would stand up for him, if he needed it, though I didn't think he would. They'd be sure to remind me how much older I was, and pleasant things like that. And yet when I went over and over it in my own mind, I couldn't get it clear what else I could have done. There *are* puzzles like that sometimes, and anyway it was better than if Margaret had run away alone, and perhaps got really lost.

And, after all, as you will hear, I hadn't much blame to bear. The name of this chapter will show thanks to whom *that* was.

When we were dressed—and oh, how we longed for clean collars!—we made our way down to the dining-room. Beryl was there already, and I saw that she looked even prettier by daylight, such as it was than the evening before. She smiled kindly, and said she hoped we had managed to sleep well.

'Oh yes, thank you,' we said, 'but—' and we both looked round the room. 'How is Margaret?'

'None the worse, I am glad to say,' Beryl answered, and then I thought to myself I might have guessed it, by Beryl's bright face. 'I really think it was only the fog that made her cough so last night. She looks a very delicate little girl, however, and she speaks of having had a very bad cold not long ago, which may have been something worse than a cold. So I made her stay in bed for breakfast, till—'

At that moment the parlour-maid brought in a telegram. Beryl opened it, and then handed it to me. It was from mamma.

'A thousand thanks for telegram and letter. Coming myself by earliest train possible.'

'It's very good of mamma,' I said, and in my heart I was glad she was coming before we—or I—saw papa. For though he is very kind too, he is not quite so 'understanding,' and a good deal sharper, especially with us boys. I suppose fathers need to be, and I suppose boys need it more than girls.

'Yes,' said Beryl, and though she had been so awfully jolly about the whole affair, I could tell by her tone that she was glad that some one belonging to us was coming to look after us all. 'It is very satisfactory. My aunt said she would come round early too. I think it will be quite safe for Margaret to get up now, so I will go and tell her she may. You will find some magazines and picture-papers in my little sitting-room, behind this room, if you can amuse yourselves there till



THE FRILLS HAD WORKED UP ALL ROUND HIS FACE.—p. 173.

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auntie comes.'

I stopped her a moment as she was leaving the room, to ask what I knew Peterkin was longing to hear.

'Mamma will take us home, of course,' I said, 'but what do you think will be done about Margaret?'

'They—' whom he meant by 'they' I don't know, and I don't think he knew himself—'they won't send her back to the witch, you don't think, do you?' he burst out, growing very red.

Beryl hesitated. Then she said quietly—

'No, I *don't* think so,' and Peterkin gave a great sigh of relief. If she had answered that she *did* think so, I believe he would have broken into a howl. I really do. [177]

It seemed rather a long time that we had to wait in Beryl's room before anything else happened. Peterkin said it felt a good deal like waiting at the dentist's, and I agreed with him. It was the looking at the picture-papers that put it into his head, I think.

We heard the front-door bell ring several times, and once I was sure I caught Beryl's voice calling, 'Auntie, is it you?' but it must have been nearly twelve o'clock—breakfast had been a good deal later than at home—before the door of the room where we were, opened, and some one came in. I was standing staring out of the window, which looked into a very small sort of fernery or conservatory, and wishing Beryl had told me to water the plants, when I heard a voice behind me.

'Boys!' it said; 'Giles?' and turning round, I saw that it was mamma. I forgot all about being found fault with and everything else, and just flew to her, and so did poor old Pete, and then—I am almost ashamed to tell it, though perhaps I should not be—I broke out crying!

Mamma put her arms round me. I don't know what she had been meaning to say to us, or to me, perhaps, in the way of blame, but it ended in her hugging me, and saying 'poor old Gilley.' She hugged Peterkin too, though he wasn't crying, and had no intention of it, *unless* his beloved Margaret was to be sent back to Miss Bogle, and then, I have no doubt, he would have howled loudly enough. His whole mind was fixed on this point, and he had hardly patience even to be hugged, before he burst out with it. [178]

'Mummy, mummy,' he said, 'they're not going to send her back to the witch, are they?'

Mamma understood. She knew Peterkin's little ways so well,—how he got his head full of a thing, and could take in nothing else,—and she saw that it was best to satisfy him at once if we were to have any peace.

'No,' she said. 'The little girl is not to go back to Miss Bogle.'

Peterkin gave a great sigh of comfort. After all, he *had* rescued his princess, I suppose he said to himself. *I* thought it very extraordinary that mamma should be able to speak so decidedly about it, and I daresay she saw this, for she went on almost at once—

'I have a good deal to explain. Some unexpected things happened yesterday and this morning. But for this, I should have come by an earlier train.' [179]

Here, I think, before I go on to say what these unexpected things were, is a good place for telling what mamma said to me afterwards, when we were by ourselves, about the whole affair, and my part in it. She quite allowed that I had not meant to do wrong or to be deceitful, or anything like that, and that I had been rather in a hole. But she made me see that, to start with, I should not have promised Margaret to keep it a secret, and she said she was sure that Margaret would have given in to our telling *her*—mamma, I mean—of her troubles, if I had spoken to her sensibly and seriously about it. And now that I know Margaret so well, I think so too. For she is particularly sensible for her age, especially since she has got her head clearer of fairy-tales and witches and enchantments and ogres and all the rest of it; and even then, there was a good deal of sense and reasonableness below her self-will and impatience.

Now, I can go on with what mamma told us. The first she heard of it all was the telegram from Mrs. Wylie, for she had been out till rather late and found it lying on the hall-table when she came in, before she had even heard that Pete and I had not turned up at the nursery tea. That was what Beryl had hoped—that the news of our being all right would come before mamma had had a chance of being anxious. At first she was completely puzzled, but James, who was faithful to his promise, though rather stupid, helped to throw a little light on it by giving her my message. [180]

And then, as she was still standing in the hall, talking to him and trying to think what in the world had made us dream of going to London to Mrs. Wylie's, all by ourselves, there came a great ring at the bell, and when James opened, a startled-looking maid-servant's voice was heard asking for Mrs. Lesley.

'I am Mrs. Wylie's parlour-maid,' she said, 'and I offered to run round, for the old lady next door to us, Miss Bogle, to ask if Mrs. Lesley would have the charity—I was to say—to come to see her. The little young lady, Miss Fothergill, who lives with her, has been missing all the afternoon. Miss Bogle did not know it till an hour or two ago, as she always rests in her own room till four o'clock. But I was to say she would explain it all to Mrs. Lesley, if she could possibly come to see

Mamma had gone forward and heard this all herself, though the maid had begun by giving the message to James. And she said immediately that she would come. She still had her going-out things on, you see, so no time was lost.

CHAPTER XII

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NO MYSTERY AFTER ALL

WE listened with all our ears, you may be sure, to what mamma told us; she did so, very quickly. It takes me much longer to write it.

'And did you see Miss Bogle?' I asked. 'And what *is* she like?'

'The witch herself,' said Peterkin, his eyes nearly starting out of his head.

'No, Peterkin,' said mamma, 'you are not to call her that any more. You must help me to explain to little Margaret, that Miss Bogle is a good old lady, who has meant nothing but kindness, though she made a great mistake in undertaking the charge of the child, for she is old and infirm and suffers sadly. Yes, of course, I saw her. She was terribly upset, the tears streaming down her poor face, though she had scarcely had time to be actually terrified about Margaret, thanks to Mrs. Wylie's telegram. She was afraid of the child having got cold, and she was altogether puzzled and miserable. And I was not able to explain very much myself, till I got Mrs. Wylie's *letter* this morning, fully telling all. Still, I comforted her by saying I knew Mrs. Wylie was goodness itself, and would take every care of all the three of you for the night. Miss Bogle had not missed Margaret, as she always rests in the afternoon, till about four. And, strange to say, the servants had not missed her either. The nurse was away for the day, and I suppose that the others, not being used to think about the child, had not given a thought to her, though it seems strangely careless, till it got near her tea-time, and then they ran to Miss Bogle and startled her terribly. The first thing she did was to send in to the next-door house'—('The parrot's house?' interrupted Pete)—'and to Mrs. Wylie's,' mamma went on, 'where the parlour-maid knew that you boys and Margaret had made friends, and she offered to speak to Miss Bogle, thinking that perhaps you had all gone a walk together, and would soon be coming in. And *while* she was telling Miss Bogle this, came the telegram, showing that indeed you had gone a walk, and more than a walk,'—here mamma turned away for a moment, and I *think* it was to hide a smile that she could not help. I suppose to grown-up people there was a comical side to the story,—'together. And then the poor old lady sent for me.'

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'And was that all that happened?' I asked.

Mamma shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'While I was still talking to Miss Bogle, came another telegram, from the little girl's nurse, her present nurse, to say that her sister was so ill that she could not leave her, and that she was writing to explain. Poor Miss Bogle! Her cup of troubles did seem full; I felt very sorry for her, and I promised to go back to see her, first thing this morning, which I did, before starting to fetch you boys. The nurse's letter had come, saying she did not know *when* she could return. And so—' mamma stopped for a moment—'it all ended—papa came back last night, so he was with me, and it was his idea first of all—in a way which I don't think you will be very sorry for,'—and again mamma smiled,—'in our settling that Margaret is to come home with *us*, and stay with us till there is time to hear from her grandfather, General Fothergill, what he wishes. How do you like the idea?'

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'I'm awfully glad of it,' I said. And so I was. Not so much for the sake of having Margaret as a companion, as because it quite took away all responsibility and fears about her. For I felt sure she would never have settled down happily or contentedly in Miss Bogle's house.

But as for Peterkin! You never saw anything like his delight. He took all the credit of it to himself, and was more certain than ever that the parrot was a fairy, Miss Bogle a witch, and himself a hero who had rescued a lovely princess. His eyes sparkled like—I don't know what to compare them to; and his cheeks got so red and fat that I thought they'd burst.

And when I said quietly—I thought it a good thing to sober him down a bit, but I really meant it too—that I hoped Blanchie and Elf would like Margaret, he really looked as if he wanted to knock me down—ungrateful little donkey, after all I'd done and gone through for him and his princess! But mamma glanced at me, and I understood that she meant that it was better to say nothing much to him. He would grow out of his fancies by degrees. And she just said, quietly too, that she was sure the little girls would get on all right together, and that Blanche and Elvira would do all they could to make Margaret happy.

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'And I am so thankful,' mamma went on, 'that the poor child is none the worse for her adventures, and able to travel back with us to-day. And I can never, never be grateful enough to Mrs. Wylie and her niece for their goodness to you. Miss Wylie is perfectly sweet.'

Just as she said this the door opened and Beryl came in, leading Margaret with her. Mamma, of

course, had already seen them upstairs, before she saw us.

Margaret looked pale, naturally, paler than usual, I thought, and she never was rosy in those days, though she is now. But she seemed very happy and smiling, and she was not coughing at all. And another thing that pleased me, was that she came round and stood by mamma's chair, as if she already felt quite at home with her.

Beryl drew a chair close to them and sat down.

'I was just saying,' said mamma, 'that we shall never be able to thank you enough, dear Miss Wylie, for your goodness to these three.'

'I am so glad, so *very* glad,' said Beryl, in her nice hearty sort of way, 'to have been of use. It was really quite a pleasant excitement last night—when it all turned out well, and Margaret was clever enough not to get ill. But please don't call me Miss Wylie. You have known dear old auntie so long—and she counts me almost like her own child. Do call me "Beryl."' [187]

And from that time she has always been 'Beryl' to us all.

They, the Wylies, made us stay to luncheon. It was just about time for it by this. We did not see Mr. Wylie again, though he sent polite messages to mamma, and was very kind about it all.

And Mrs. Wylie came in to luncheon, and petted us all round, and said that we must *all*—Blanche and Elvira, and Clement too, if he wasn't too big, come to have tea with her, as soon as she got back to Rock Terrace.

We thanked her, of course. At least Peterkin and I did, but I noticed that Margaret got rather red and did not say anything except 'thank you' very faintly. She was still half afraid of finding herself again where she had been so unhappy, and indeed it took a good while, and a good deal of quiet talking too, to get it *quite* out of her head about Miss Bogle being a witch who was trying to 'enchanter' her, as her dear 'Perkins' (she calls him 'Perkins' to this day) would persist in saying. [188]

Mrs. Wylie noticed her manner too, I fancy. For she went on to say, with a funny sort of twinkle in her eyes—

'There will be a great deal to tell the parrot. And I don't expect that he will feel quite happy in his mind about you, little Margaret, till he has seen you again. He will miss you sadly, I am afraid.'

And at this, Margaret brightened up.

'Yes,' she said, 'I *must* come to see dear Poll. But I may talk to him from your side of the balcony, mayn't I, Mrs. Wylie?'

'Certainly,' said the kind old lady, 'and you must introduce your new friends to him. Mrs. Lesley's little girls, I mean.'

Margaret liked the idea of this, I could see. She is not at all shy, and she still is very fond of planning, or managing things, and people too, for that matter, though of course she is much more sensible now, and not so impatient and self-willed as she used to be. Still, on the whole, she gets on better with Peterkin than with any of us, though she is fond of us, I know, and so are we of her. But Peterkin is just a sort of slave to her, and does everything she asks, and I expect it will always be like that. [189]

What a different journey it was that day to the miserable one the day before! To *me*, at least; for though I wasn't feeling particularly happy, as I will explain, in some ways, the horrible responsibility about the others had gone. *They* were as jolly as could be, but then I knew they hadn't felt half as bad as I had done. They sat in a corner, whispering, and I overheard that they were making plans for all sorts of things they would do while Margaret stayed with us. And Pete was telling her all about Blanche and Elf, especially about Elf, and about the lots of fairy story-books he had got, and how they three would act some of them together, till Margaret got quite pink with pleasure.

I saw mamma looking at me now and then, as if she was wondering what I was thinking about. I *was* thinking a good deal. There were some things I couldn't yet quite understand about it all—why there should have been a sort of mystery, and why Mrs. Wylie had pinched up her lips when we had asked her about Margaret the day we went to tea with her. And besides this, I was feeling, in a kind of a way, rather ashamed of being taken home like a baby, even though mamma—and all of them, I must say—had been so very good, not to make a regular row and fuss, after the fright we had given them, or had *nearly* given them. [190]

But I didn't say anything more to mamma just then. For one thing, I saw that she was looking very tired, and no wonder, poor dear little mamma, when you think what a day of it she had had, and all the bother with the witch the night before, too.

I never saw Miss Bogle, and I've never wanted to. I shall always consider that she was nearly as bad as if she *had* been a witch, and it was no thanks to her that poor little Margaret didn't get really lost, or badly ill, or something of that kind.

They were expecting us when we got home. Blanche and Elf were in the hall, looking rather excited and very shy. But there was not much fear of shyness with Margaret and Peterkin, as neither of them was ever troubled with such a thing.

I left Pete to do the honours, so to say, helped by mamma, of course. They all went off together upstairs to show Margaret her room and the nursery, and to introduce her to nurse and all the rest of it, and I went into the schoolroom—a small sort of study behind the dining-room, and sat down by myself, feeling rather 'out of it' and 'flat,' and almost a little ashamed of myself and the whole affair somehow.

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And the fire was low and the room looked dull and chilly, and I began thinking how horrid it would be to go to school the next morning without having done my lessons properly, and not knowing what to say about having missed a day, without the excuse, or good reason, of having been ill.

I had sat there some time, a quarter-of-an-hour or so, I daresay, when I heard the front-door bell ring. Then I heard James opening and the door shutting, and, a moment after, the door of the room where I was opened, and some one came in, and banged something down on to the table. By that I knew who it was. It was Clement, with his school-books.

It was nearly dark by this time, and the room was not lighted up at all. So he did not see me at first, till I moved a little, which made him start.

'Good gracious!' he exclaimed, 'is that you, Gilley? What are you doing all alone in the dark? James told me you had all come—the kid from Rock Terrace too. By jove—' and he began to laugh a little to himself.

It seemed a sort of last straw. I was tired and ashamed, and all wrong somehow. I did not speak till I was at the door, for I got up to leave the room at once. Then I said—

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'You needn't go at me like that. You might let me sit here if I want to. You don't suppose I've been enjoying myself these two days, do you?'

He seemed to understand all about it at once. He caught hold of my arm and pulled me back again.

'Poor old Gilley!' he said.

Then he took up the poker and gave a good banging to the coals. There was plenty on the fire, but it had got black for want of stirring up. In a moment or two there was a cheery blaze. Clement pushed me into a seat and sat down near me on the table, his legs dangling.

I have not said very much about Clem in this story—if it's worth calling a story—except just at the beginning, for it has really been meant to be about Peterkin and his princess. But I can't finish it without a little more about him—Clem, I mean. Some day, possibly, I may write about him especially, about our real school-life and all he has been to me, and how tremendously lucky I always think it has been for me to have such a brother. He is just as good as gold, without any pretence about it, and jolly too. And I can never forget how kind he was that afternoon.

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'Poor old Gilley!' he repeated. 'It must have been rather horrid for you—much worse than for those two young imps. Mamma told me all about it, as soon as she got the letter—she told me a good deal last night about what Miss Bogie, or whatever the old thing's name is, had told her.'

I looked up at this.

'Yes?' I said. 'I don't understand it at all, yet. But, Clem, what shall I do about school to-morrow? I've no lessons ready or anything.'

'Is it that that you are worrying about?' he said.

'Partly, and—'

'Well, you can put *that* out of your head. It's all right. Mamma told me what to say—that there'd been a mistake about the trains, and you'd had to stay the night in London. It wasn't necessary to say more, and you'll find it all right, I promise you.'

I was very glad of this, and I said so, and thanked Clem.

He sat still for a minute or two as if he was expecting me to speak.

'Well?' he said at last.

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'Mamma's been very good, *very* good about it altogether,' I said at last, 'and so has papa, by what she says. But still—' and then I hesitated.

'Well?' said Clement again. 'What? I don't see that there's much to be down in the mouth about.'

'It's just that—I feel rather a fool,' I said. 'Anybody would laugh so at the whole affair if they heard it. I daresay Blanche will think I've no more sense than Pete. She has a horrid superior way sometimes, you know.'

'You needn't bother about that, either,' said he. 'She and Elf have got their heads perfectly full of Margaret. I don't suppose Blanche will ever speak of your part of it, or think of it even. As long as papa and mamma are all right—and I'm sure they are—you may count it a case of all's well that ends well.'

I did begin to feel rather cheered up.

'You're sure I'm not going to get a talking to, after all?' I said, still doubtfully. 'I saw mamma looking at me rather funnily in the train.'

'Did you, my boy?' said another voice, and glancing round, I saw mamma, who had come into the room so quietly that neither of us had heard her.

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She sat down beside us. And then it was that she explained to me what I had done wrong, and been foolish about. I have already told what she said, and I felt that it was all true and sensible. And she was so kind—not laughing at me a bit, even for having a little believed about the witch and all that—that I lost the horrid, mortified, ashamed feelings I had been having.

Just then the nursery tea-bell rang. I got up—slowly—I still felt a little funny and uncomfortable about Blanche, and even nurse. You see nurse made such a pet of Peterkin that she never scarcely could see that he should be found fault with, and of course he was a very good little chap, though not exactly an angel without wings—and certainly rather a queer child, with all his fairy-tale fancies.

But mamma put her hand on my arm.

'No,' she said. 'Clem and you are going to have tea in the drawing-room with me. The nursery party will be better left to itself to-day, and little Margaret is not accustomed to so many.'

'I don't believe anything would make her feel shy, though,' I said. 'She is just as funny in her way as Peterkin in his. And, mamma, there are some things I don't understand still. Is there any sort of mystery? Why did Mrs. Wylie leave off talking about Margaret, and you too, I think, all of a sudden? I'm sure it was Mrs. Wylie's way of pinching up her lips about her, that made Pete surer than ever about the enchantment and the parrot and the witch and everything.'

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Mamma smiled.

'No,' she said, 'there is no mystery at all. I will explain about it while we are having tea. It must be ready for us.'

And she went into the drawing-room, Clement and I following her. It looked so nice and comfortable—I was jolly glad, I know, to be at home again!

Then mamma told us—or me; I think Clem had heard it already—about Margaret.

Her father and mother were in India, as I have said, have I not? And her grandfather was taking care of her. He was not a very old man, though he was a General. He had vineyards or something—yes, I am sure it was vineyards, in the south of France, and he had had to go, suddenly, to look after some business to do with them. And just when he was starting, Margaret got ill. It was the illness she had spoken of several times, which she called a very bad cold. But it was much worse than that, though she didn't know.

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Her grandfather put off going till she was getting better, and the doctors said she must have change of air. He couldn't take her with him, and he had to go, so the only thing he could think of was to ask old Miss Bogle, who had been Margaret's father's governess once—or General Fothergill's own governess when he was a little boy; I am not sure which—to take charge of her. He had forgotten how old, Miss Bogle was, and I think she must have forgotten it herself! She wasn't fit to look after a child, especially as Margaret's nurse had to leave just then.

So you can pretty well understand how dull and lonely Margaret was. And General Fothergill was in such a fuss about her, and so terrified of her getting any other illness, that he forbade her making friends with any one out of Miss Bogle's house, unless he was asked about it, and wrote to give leave.

And when Mrs. Wylie found out about her, she—or Miss Bogle—*did* write to ask leave for her to know *us*, explaining how good and sensible mamma was about children every way. But till the leave came Mrs. Wylie and mamma settled that it was better to say nothing about it to us. And in this, *I* think, they made a mistake.

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That was all. The leave *did* come, while Margaret was with us. Of course, all that had happened was written to her grandfather, but she wasn't a bit scolded!

Neither was her 'Perkins'; the big people only said that they must not be given so many fairy-stories to read.

I wasn't scolded either, though, so I should not complain. And several nice things came of it: the knowing Beryl Wylie, and the going to stay at General Fothergill's country house, and the having Margaret with us sometimes.

I don't know what the parrot thought of it all. I believe he is still there, as clever and 'uncanny' as ever; at least so Mrs. Wylie said, the last time she came to see us.

THE END

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