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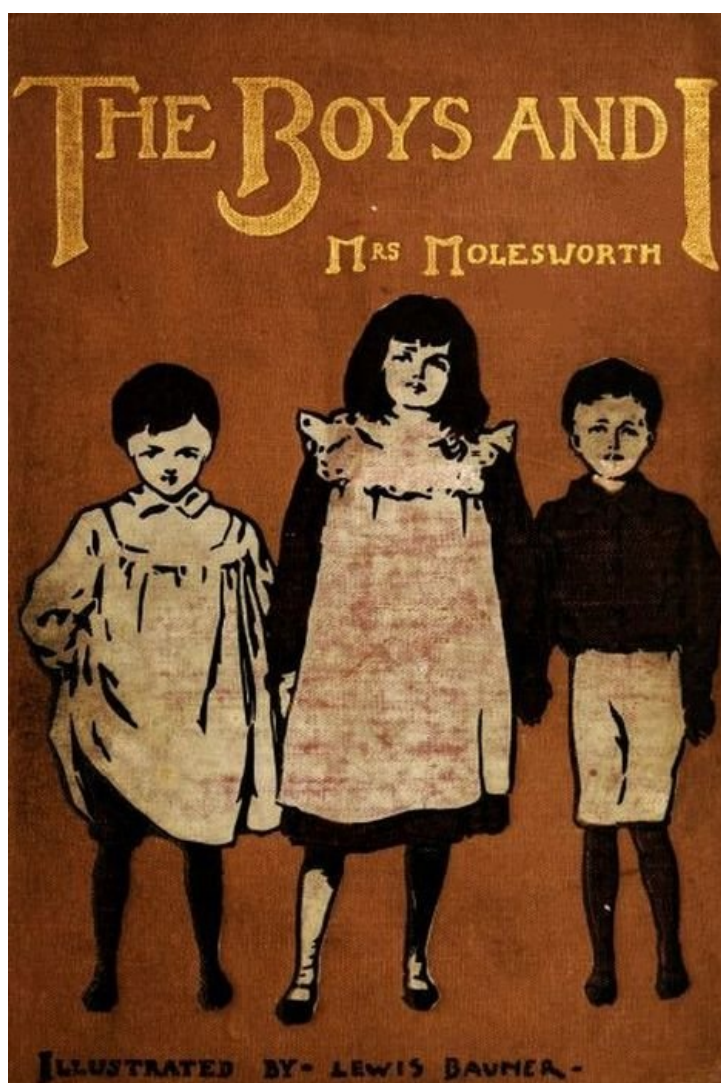
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOYS AND I: A CHILD'S STORY FOR CHILDREN ***





"Oh, young man, this house is to be sold, I hear!"—PAGE
32.

The Boys and I

A Child's Story
for
Children

by
Mrs Molesworth



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CHAPTER I.

OUR FIRST SORROW.

"O, it is trouble very bad,
Which causes us to weep;
All last night long we were so sad,
Not one of us could sleep."

Sometimes they called us all three just "the boys." But I don't think that was fair. I may have been rather a *tomb*boy, but I wasn't quite so bad as to be called a "boy." I was nine then— I mean I was nine at the beginning of the time I am going to tell you about, and now I am fourteen. Afterwards, I will tell you what put it into my head to write it down. If I told you now you wouldn't understand—at least not without my telling you things all out of their places—ends at the beginning, and middles at the end; and mother says it's an awfully bad habit to do things that way. It makes her quite vexed to see any one read the end of a book before they have really got to it. There aren't many things that make her really vexed, but that's one, and another is saying "awfully," and I've just said it, or at least written it. And I can't score it through—I've promised not to score through anything, and just to leave it as it came into my head to write it all down.

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I was nine that year, and Tom was seven, and little Racey six. I remember it quite well, for that year a lot of things happened. Tom and I had the measles, and how it was Racey didn't have them too I don't know, but he didn't. And just when we were getting better, the first very big thing that we had ever known about, happened. Papa was ordered to go to China! (I dare say it seems funny to you that we call him "papa" and mother "mother." I can't tell you how it was, but we always did it, and Tom and I used to like to hear Racey say "papa." He said it in such a sweet way, more like the way little French children say it.)

Papa wasn't a soldier, or a sailor, as you might think. He was something very clever, with letters after his name, and he had to go to China partly because of that. Now that I am big I understand about it, but I need not say exactly, because then you might find out who he was, and that wouldn't be nice. It would be like as if I thought we were cleverer or nicer than other people, and I don't think that—at least not in a stuck-up way, and *of course*, not at all about myself. It isn't any harm to think it a little about one's father or mother, I don't think, but of course not about one's-self.

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I shall never forget the day I heard about papa's going away. I keep saying "papa's going away," because you see it had to do with him, but it was even worse than his going, though that would have been bad enough. It was just as we were getting better of the measles, and we had been very happy all day, for mother had been telling us stories, and we had had quite a "feast" tea—sponge-cakes and ladies' bread and butter; and I had poured out the tea, for mother had put a little table on purpose close to my bed, and Racey had been the footman to wait upon Tom and give him all he wanted, as the table wasn't so near his bed as mine. Tom had fallen asleep—poor Tom, he had had the measles worse than I. I am so awfully strong, even though I'm only a girl, and boys always think themselves stronger. And little Racey had fallen asleep too, lying at the foot of my bed. He hadn't been kept away from us because of what Tom called the "affection" of the measles, for the old doctor said he had better get it too and have it over. But he didn't get it, and if ever I have children I shall not do that way with them. I'll try and keep them from having

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any illnesses at all, for I don't believe we're *forced* to have them. I think mother thought so too, but she didn't like to contradict the doctor; because he was so old she thought he must know best. And after all it didn't matter, as Racey didn't get the measles. I really must try to go straight on—I keep going back when other things come into my head, so it isn't so easy to write things down nicely as I thought it was.

Well, Tom was asleep—he looked so nice; he always does when he's asleep, he has such a white forehead, and such rosy cheeks, and pretty dark hair. I remember, because of what came after, how pretty he looked that evening. And dear Racey—he looked so pretty too, though generally he isn't counted so nice-looking as Tom, for his hair is a *little* red, and he is rather too pale for a boy. Well, the boys were both asleep and I was *nearly* asleep, when I heard some one come into the room. I thought it was the nurse come to undress Racey and put him to bed properly, and as I was in that nice, only half-awake way when it's a great trouble to speak, I thought I'd pretend to be quite asleep, and so I did.

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But it was not the nurse who came into the room—it was two people, not one, and I very soon found out, even without opening my eyes, who the two people were. They were papa and mother. They came in quite softly and sat down near the fire. It was the month of October, and rather cold.

"Are they all asleep, Marie?" said papa. I must tell you that though mother is quite English, her name is "Marie." I think it was because she had a French godmother, and I do think it is such a pretty name.

Mother glanced round at us.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice, "they are all asleep. Oh, Horace, my darlings!"

At first when I heard mother say "yes," I laughed a little to myself. I didn't mean to listen in any mean way, of course, and a comical idea came into my head that it was just like the ogre and his wife in the fairy tale.—"Wife, are they all asleep?" said the ogre. 'All fast asleep,' said the ogre's wife." Only poor papa wasn't at all like an ogre, and *dear* mother wasn't a bit like the ogre's wife, though she *was* much nicer than her husband. I was nearly laughing out loud when this fancy came into my head, but before I had time to laugh mother's next words quite changed my feeling, and all in a minute I got frightened somehow. It is so queer—isn't it?—how quickly fancies run through one's mind. The one about the ogre and his wife came into my head and out again between mother's saying "asleep," and "Oh, Horace." And then, all in a moment again, came a number of other fancies. Something must be the matter for mother to speak like that. What could it be? I thought of all sorts of things. Could papa have lost all his money? I had heard of such things, but I did not think I should mind it so very much. It would be rather nice to live in a cottage, and have no servants, and do the cooking and the washing ourselves, I thought; though very likely mother would not think so. Could anything have happened to Uncle Geoff? Oh no, it couldn't be that, for that would not make mother say "my darlings," in that way. And poor little mother had no near relations of her own whom she could have had bad news of to make her unhappy. What *could* be the matter? I was so frightened and anxious to hear more, that I really quite forgot I was doing wrong in listening, and when I heard mother give a sort of little sob, I got still more frightened. I have often wondered since that I did not jump out of bed and run to mother to see if I could comfort her, but a queer *stopped* sort of feeling seemed to have come over me. I could do nothing but listen, and though it is now so many years ago—five years ago!—I can remember all the words I heard.

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My father did not answer at first. Whatever was the matter, it seemed to have been something he did not find it easy to say any comforting words about. And mother spoke again.

"Oh, Horace, how *can* I leave them?"

"My poor Marie," said papa. "What is to be done? I cannot give it up—nor without you can I undertake it. Bertram would have got it if he had had a wife, but it is never given to an unmarried man."

"I know," said mother. "I know all you can say. It is just because there is nothing else to be done that I am so miserable. I cannot help it to-night—to-morrow I will try to be braver; but—oh, I have been so happy with them to-day, and so glad they were getting better and that dear little Racey had not got it—for whatever Dr. Nutt says, I cannot help being glad of that—oh, I have been so happy with them."

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"Perhaps it was cruel of me to tell you to-night," said papa very sorry-ly.

"Oh no, it was much better," said mother, quickly. "There is so little time, and so much to settle. Besides, you couldn't have kept it from me, Horace. I should have been sure to find out there was something the matter. Tell me what is the latest we should have to go."

"Six or seven weeks hence. I don't think it could possibly be made later," said papa. And then he went on to explain things to mother, which at that time I couldn't understand (though I dare say I should now), and therefore have forgotten—about the work he would have to do, and the money he would get, and all that.

But I had heard enough. My heart seemed as if it was going to stop. Mother going away—to have to live without mother—it didn't seem to me so much a grief, as an impossibility. I think I was rather a babyish child for my age in some ways. I was very fond of the boys, and I was very

unhappy if ever I was away from them, but I don't think I had ever thought much about whether I loved anybody or not. And I know that sometimes people said I wasn't affectionate. Things hadn't happened to make me think about anything in any deep way. We had always lived in the same house—even in the same rooms—and we had had our breakfasts and dinners and teas with the same plates and cups and saucers, and mother had always been there, just like the daylight to us. I couldn't *fancy* being without her, and so just at first I couldn't tell if I was dreadfully unhappy or not. I was too startled to know. But I think in another moment I would have jumped out of bed and rushed to mother, if I hadn't heard just then something which I quite understood, and which I listened to with the greatest interest and curiosity.

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"Yes," mother was saying, for, for a minute or two, you understand, I hadn't been listening. "Yes, I see no better plan. It isn't as if either you or I had had a mother or sisters to send them to. And as you say, with Geoffrey, their *health* will be thoroughly looked after, and he will be very kind to them, and we can depend on his telling us the truth about them. Anything is better than sending them to strangers."

"That's what he said," replied papa. "He was quite full of it when I went to-day to tell him of this most unexpected proposal. He is so very eager for me to accept it that he would do anything. His house is large, much larger than he needs; and of course he knows more about children than most unmarried men, through seeing them so constantly when they are ill. And then, Marie, there is Partridge—that is a great thing."

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"Yes," said mother, gently, but not very eagerly. I knew the tone of her voice when she spoke that way—I could feel that she was smiling a little—she always did when she didn't want to seem to disagree with papa and yet didn't quite agree with him, for papa always gets so eager about things, and is sure they'll all come right. "Yes," said mother, "I'm sure Partridge is very good and kind, but she's old, you know, Horace. Audrey and the boys must have a young nurse, besides—I wish Pierson were not going to be married."

Pierson was the nurse we had just then—she was going to be married in a fortnight, but we didn't much care. She had only been about a year with us, and we counted her rather a grumpy nurse. She always thought that we should catch cold if we ran into the garden without being all muffled up, or that we should break our necks even if we climbed *tiny* trees.

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"I don't know," said papa. "She would never have got on with Partridge. A younger one would be better."

"Perhaps," said mother. But her tone had grown dreadfully low and sad again. It almost seemed as if she could not speak at all. Only in a minute or two I heard her say again, still *worse* than before, "Oh, my darlings! Oh, Horace, I don't think I *can* bear it. Think of dear little Racey, and my pretty Tom, and poor Audrey—though I don't know that she is naturally so affectionate as the boys—think of them all, Horace—alone without us, and us *so* far away."

"I know," said papa, sadly. "I know it all. It is terribly hard for you. But let us try not to talk any more about it this evening. To-morrow you may feel more cheerful—I don't know about Audrey not being so affectionate as the boys," he added, after a little pause; "perhaps it is that she's older and more reserved. They are such little chaps. She's very good and motherly to them any way, and that's one comfort."

"Indeed it is," said mother. "She's a queer little girl, but she's very good to the boys. We must go down-stairs now," she went on, "and I must send Pierson to carry Racey to his own bed. I am so afraid of waking Audrey and Tom, perhaps I had better carry him myself."

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She came towards my bed as she spoke, and after seeming to hesitate a little, stepped close up to the side. Poor mother! I didn't understand it then, but afterwards, when I thought over that strange evening, as I so often did, I seemed to know that she had been *afraid* of looking at us—that she could not bear to see our happy sleeping faces with what she knew, in her heart. It is funny, but lots of things have come to me like that. I have remembered them in my mind without understanding them, like parrot words, with no meaning, and then long afterwards a meaning has come into them, and that I have never forgotten. It was a little that way with what I overheard that evening—the meaning that came into it all afterwards made such a mark on my mind that even though I may not have told you just exactly the words papa and mother said, I am sure I have told you the sense of them rightly.

Well, mother came up to my bedside and stood looking at us—Racey and me. I *fancied* she looked at Racey most—he was her "baby" you know, and I didn't mind even if sometimes it seemed as if she cared more for Tom and him than for me. They were such dear little boys to kiss, and they had such a pretty way of petting mother. I knew I hadn't such loving ways, and that sometimes it seemed as if I didn't care for mother—when I wanted to say nice words they wouldn't come. But I never minded a bit, however much mother petted the boys—I felt as if I was like her in that—we were like two mothers to them I sometimes pleased myself by fancying.

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Mother stood looking at us. For a minute or two I still kept my eyes shut as if I were asleep. We often played with each other at that—"foxing," we used to call it. But generally we couldn't manage it because of bursting out laughing. To-night it wasn't *that* feeling that made it difficult for me to go on "foxing." It was quite a different one. Yet I was, too, a very little afraid of mother knowing I had been listening—it began to come into my mind that it was not a nice thing to do—a little like telling stories—and I almost am afraid I should not have had courage to tell mother if it had not been that just then as she stood there looking at us I heard her give a little sob. *Then* I

could bear it no longer. I jumped up in bed and threw my arms round her neck.

"Mother, mother," I cried, "I have *heard*. I wasn't really asleep. I didn't mean to listen, but I couldn't help it. Oh, mother, mother, are you going away? You *can't* go away—what should we do?" [Pg 20]

Mother did not answer. She just held me close in her arms—very close, but without speaking. At last, after what seemed quite a long time, she said very softly,

"My poor little Audrey."

I pressed my arms still tighter round her.

"Mother," I said, "I heard you say something about me. Mother, I do love you—you said I wasn't affectionate, but I'm sure I love you."

"Poor little Audrey," she said again. "I am sorry you heard that. You must not think I meant that you don't love me. I cannot quite make you understand how I meant, but I did not mean that. And oh, Audrey, how glad I am to think that you love the boys so much. You are a very kind sister to them, and you do not know what a comfort it is to me just now to think of that."

"Do you mean because of your going away, mother?" I asked. "Will you *really* go away? Will it be for a long time, mother? As long as a month, or two months?"

"Yes," said mother, "quite as long as that I am afraid. But you must go to sleep now, dear. You are not quite well yet, you know, and you will be so tired to-morrow if you don't have a good night. Try and not think any more about what you heard to-night; and to-morrow, or as soon as I can, I will tell you more." [Pg 21]

"I did hear more," I said in a low voice, "I heard about our going to uncle Geoff's. Mother, is uncle Geoff nice?"

"Very," said mother. "But, Audrey, you must go to sleep, dear."

"Yes, mother, I will in one minute," I said. "But do tell me just one thing, *please* do."

Mother turned towards me again. She had just been preparing to lift Racey.

"Well, dear?" she said.

"I do *so* want to know what suits the boys would travel in," I said. "I have my big, long coat, but they haven't got such big ones. Mother, *don't* you think they should have new ulsters?"

Mother gave a little laugh that was half a sigh.

"Audrey," she said, "what a queer child you are!— But perhaps," she added to herself in a low voice, "perhaps it is as well."

I heard the words, and though I could not quite see that there was anything queer in my thinking about new ulsters for the boys, I did not tease mother any more about them just then. She kissed me again quite kindly, and then carried Racey away. He just woke up a very little as she lifted him, and gave a sort of cross wriggle—poor little boy, he had been so comfortably asleep. But when he saw that it was mother who was lifting him, he left off being cross in one moment. [Pg 22]

"Dear little muzzie," he said, and though he was too sleepy to open his eyes again, he puckered up his little red lips for a kiss. "Muzzie," was what the boys called mother sometimes for a pet name. It wasn't very pretty, but she didn't mind.

"My darling little Racey," she said, as she kissed him; and somehow the way she said "darling" made me wish just a little that I was Racey instead of myself. Yet I didn't think about it much. My fancy would go running on about going to uncle Geoff's, and the journey, and how I would take care of the boys and all that; and when I went to sleep I had such queer dreams. I thought uncle Geoff had a face like Pierson when she was cross, and that he wore a great big ulster buttoned all down the back instead of the front, because, he said, that was the fashion in China. [Pg 23]



CHAPTER II.

REAL AND PLAY.

"And I'll be Lady Fuss-aby,
And you shall be Miss Brown."

I woke very early the next morning—for after all it had not been at all late when I fell asleep. I woke very early, but Tom was awake before me, for when I looked across to his bed, even before I had time to say "Tom, are you awake?" very softly, to which if he was still feeling sleepy he sometimes answered, "No, I'm not"—before I had even time to say that, I saw that his bright dark eyes were wide open.

There was a night-light on the little table between our cots. Mother had let us have it since we were ill. By rights the cot I was sleeping in was Racey's, for I had a little room to myself, but Tom and I had been put together because of the measles. I could not have seen Tom's face except for the light, for it was still quite dark outside, just beginning to get a very little morning. [Pg 24]

"Tom," I said softly, "do you know what o'clock it is?"

"Yes," said Tom, "I think it's six. Just as I woke I heard the stair clock striking. I only counted four, but in my sleep I'm sure there had been two."

"Tom," I said again.

"Well," said Tom.

"Tom," I repeated. "I wish you could come into my bed or that I could get into yours. I do so want to speak to you, and I don't like to speak loud for fear of Pierson hearing." Pierson slept in a little room next ours.

"Pierson's asleep," said Tom. "I heard her snoring a minute ago. We mustn't get into each other's beds. Mother said we must promise not, for fear of catching cold."

"I know, but it's a pity," I said. "Tom, do you know—oh, Tom, do you know?"

"What?" said Tom.

"Something so wonderful, I don't know if I should tell you, but mother didn't say I wasn't to. Tom, what should you say if we were to go away—a long way away in the railway?" [Pg 25]

"I'd say it was vrezny nice," said Tom. "If it was all of us together, of course."

"Ah, but if it wasn't all of us—what would you say then?"

Tom stared at me.

"What do you mean, Audrey?" he said. "We always does go all away together, if we go away at all."

"Oh yes—going to the sea-side and like that. But I mean something quite different from that. Suppose, Tom, that you and me and Racey had to go away somewhere by ourselves, what would you think of that?"

Tom's dark eyes stared at me more puzzledly than before.

"Audrey," he said, "what *can* you mean?" He looked quite startled and frightened. "Audrey," he said, suddenly jumping out of bed, "I must get into your bed. I'm sure I won't catch cold, and I want to whisper to you."

I could not help making room for him in my cot, and then we put our arms round each other, and Tom said to me in a very low voice—"Audrey, do you mean that Racey and you and me are all going to *die*?" [Pg 26]

Poor Tom, he looked so pitiful when he said that I was so sorry for him.

"Oh no, Tom dear. Of course I don't mean that. What could have made you think so?" I said.

"Because unless it was that I don't see how we *could* go away alone. Papa and mother would never let us. We're too little."

"I didn't mean that we'd really go alone in the railway," I explained, "somebody would go with us—Pierson perhaps, if she wasn't married. But still in a way it would be going away alone. Oh Tom, I have felt so funny all night—as if I *couldn't* believe it."

Then I told him what I had heard and what mother had told me; and all the time we held each other tight. We felt so strange—the telling it to Tom made it seem more real to me, and poor Tom seemed to feel it was real at once. When I left off speaking at last, he stared at me again with his puzzled-looking eyes, but he didn't seem as if he was going to cry.

"Audrey," he said at last, starting up, "don't you think if we were all to pray to God for papa and mother not to go away that that would be the best plan?"

I didn't quite know what to say. I knew it was always a good thing to pray to God, but yet I didn't feel sure that it would stop papa and mother's going away. I was rather puzzled, but I didn't quite like to say so to Tom. [Pg 27]

"Audrey," he said, jiggling me a little, "speak, be quick. Wouldn't that be a good plan? Perhaps then a letter would come at breakfast to say they weren't to go—wouldn't they be pleased?"

"I don't know," I said at last. "I almost think, for some things, papa wants to go, and that it's a good thing for him, and if it's a good thing for him I dare say God wouldn't unsettle it."

"But if it isn't a good thing for *us*?" said Tom, "and it can't be a good thing for *us*—I'm sure God would unsettle it then."

I could not see it like that either.

"I shouldn't like to say it that way," I replied. "Don't you see that would be like saying papa would do something that wasn't good for us, and I shouldn't like to say that of papa—not even to God."

Tom lay down on the pillow again and gave a great sigh.

"I don't know what to do then," he said. "I am sure God would find out some way of making it right, and it's vrezzy cross of you not to let me ask Him, Audrey. I don't believe you care a bit about them going away, and I know it has begun to break my heart already. When you told me first it began to thump so dreadfully fast, and then it gave a crack. I'm sure I felt it crack," and Tom began to cry.

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It was dreadful to hear him talk like that. He didn't often cry. He wasn't a boy that cried for knocks and bumps at all, but just now he was rather weak with having been ill, and what he said about his heart quite frightened me. I don't know what I should have done, but just then Pierson opened the door of her room and began scolding us for talking so early in the morning. We were so afraid of her finding out that we were both in one bed, that we lay quite, quite still. Tom proposed to me in a whisper that we should begin to snore a little, but I whispered back that it would be no use as she had heard us talking just a minute before. And after grumbling a little more, Pierson shut the door and retired into her own room. Then Tom put his arms round me again and kissed me—his cross humours never lasted long; not like Racey's, who, though he was generally very good, once he *did* begin, went on and on and on till one didn't know what to do with him.

"I'm very sorry for calling you cross, Audrey," he said. "Perhaps we'd better wait and ask mother about it," and then we both kissed each other again, and somehow, though we were so very wide awake, all in a moment we went to sleep again and slept a good long while. For Pierson told us afterwards that what Tom had heard striking was only four o'clock after all.

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When we woke again it was *real* morning—quite bright and sunny. And mother was standing beside the bedside, and little Racey beside her, looking very smooth and shiny with his clean pinafore and clean face and freshly brushed hair. Till I looked close at mother's face I could have fancied that all the strange news I had heard the night before had been a dream—it did not seem the least possible that it could be true. But alas! her face told that it was. Her eyes looked as if she had not been asleep, and though she was smiling it was a sort of sad smiling that made me feel as if I couldn't help crying.

"Children," she said, "didn't you promise me not to get into each other's beds?"

We both felt rather ashamed.

"Yes, mother," I said, "I know you did, but—"

Tom interrupted me—

"Don't be vexed with Audrey, mother," he said, jumping up and throwing his arms round her neck, "it was most my fault. Audrey wanted to whisper to me. Oh mother," he went on, hugging mother closer and burying his round dark head on her shoulder, "oh mother, Audrey's *told* me."

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Then without another word Tom burst into tears—not loud crying like when he was hurt or angry, but deep shaking sobbing as if his poor little heart was really breaking. And for a moment or two mother could not speak. She could only press him more tightly to her, trying to choke back the tears that she was afraid of yielding to.

Poor Racey stood staring in fear and bewilderment—his blue eyes quite ready to cry too, once he understood what it was all about. He gave a little tug to mother's dress at last.

"Muzzie, what's the matter?" he said.

Mother let go her hold of Tom and turned to Racey.

"Poor little boy," she said, "he is quite frightened. Audrey, I thought you would have understood I would tell the boys myself."

"Oh, I am so sorry," I exclaimed. "I wish I hadn't. But I did so want to speak to somebody about it, and Tom was awake—weren't you, Tom?"

"Yes, I was awake," said Tom. "Don't be vexed with Audrey, mother."

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Mother didn't look as if she had the heart to be vexed with anybody.

"I daresay it doesn't matter," she said sadly. "But, Audrey, you need not say anything about it to Racey—it is better for him to find out about it gradually."

After that day things seemed to hurry on very fast. Almost immediately, papa and mother began

to prepare for the great changes that were to be. Our house had a big ticket put up on the gate, and several times ladies and gentlemen came to look at it. Mother did not like it at all, I could see, though of course she was quite nice to the ladies and gentlemen, but the boys and I thought it was rather fun to have strange people coming into the house and looking at all the rooms, and we made new plays about it. I used to be the ladies coming to look, and Tom was the footman to open the door, and Racey, dressed up with one of my skirts, was mother, and sometimes Pierson, showing the ladies the rooms. Sometimes we pretended they were nice ladies, and then Racey had to smile and talk very prettily like mother, and sometimes they were cross fussy ladies, and then Racey had to say "No, ma'am"—"I'm sure I can't say, ma'am," like Pierson in her grumpiest voice. And one day something very funny—at least long afterwards it turned out to be very funny—happened, when we were playing that way. I must tell you about it before I go on with the straight part of my story.

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It was a wet day and no *real* ladies had been to see the house, so we thought as we had nothing to do we'd have a good game of pretence ones. Racey had to be Pierson this day (of course Pierson didn't *know* he was acting her), and we were doing it very nicely, for a dreadfully fussy lady had been only the day before and we had still got her quite in our heads. I—being the lady, you know—knocked at the nursery cupboard door, and when Tom the footman opened it, I stood pretending to look round the entrance hall.

"Dear me, what a *very* shabby vestibule," I said. "Not *near* so handsome as mine at Victoria Terrace—quite decries the house. Oh, young man," I went on, pretending to see Tom for the first time, "this house is to be sold, I hear? Its appearance is not what I'm accustomed to, but I may as well give a look round, as I'm here."

And so I went on, finding fault with the dining-room, drawing-room, &c.—Tom giving very short replies, except when a fit of laughter nearly choked him, till I was supposed to have reached the first floor where the imaginary Pierson took me in charge.

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"You don't mean to say this is the *best* bedroom?" I said, "how *very* small!"

"Yes, ma'am, because you're so very fat. I daresay it *does* seem small to you," said Racey.

This brilliant inspiration set Tom and me off laughing so that we could hardly speak.

"Oh, Racey," I said, returning to my real character for a minute, "Pierson wouldn't really say that."

"She said she'd have *liked* to say it to that ugly lady yesterday," said Racey. "I heard her telling Banks so, on the stair." (Banks was the name of the real footman.) "She said, 'I'd like to tell that wat'" (Racey couldn't say "*f*" he always call *fat*, *wat*, and *feet*, *wee*) "'old woman that it's no wonder our rooms isn't big enough for *her*.' And Banks did so laugh."

"Well, go on, Audrey. Perhaps Racey'll think of some more funny things," said Tom.

So I proceeded with my inspection of the house.

"What very common papers!" I said, looking up at the walls with an imaginary eye-glass. "I am always accustomed to a great deal of gold on the papers. It lightens up so well."

"Yes, mum," replied Racey, rather intoxicated by his success, and now drawing wildly on his imagination, "yes, mum, I should think you was becustomed to walls that was made of gold all over, and—and—" hesitating how to make his sarcasm biting enough, "and floors made of diamonds and pessus stones, and—"

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"Racey, hush," said Tom, "you're talking out of the Bible. Isn't he, Audrey?"

I was not quite prepared to give an opinion.

"Pierson doesn't talk like that, any way," I said, without committing myself. "Let's go on about there not being enough rooms for the servants. She did say that."

"And about her pet dogs," suggested Tom.

"Oh yes," I said, in the affected squeaky voice which we imagined to be an exact copy of the way of speaking of the lady who had taken such a hold on our fancy, "oh dear yes—I *must* have a very good room for my dear dogs. They are never allowed to sleep in a room without a fire, and I am so afraid this chimney smokes."

"No, mum, it's *me* that smokes, mum, not the chimney, mum. Sometimes I have a cigar, mum, in my room, mum, and a room that's good enough for me must be good enough for your dogs, mum," said Tom, the imaginary Banks.

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We all three shouted with laughter at his wit, though poor Banks, the most modest of young men, whose only peculiarity was that in his nervousness he used to say "ma'am" or "sir" with every two words, would have been horrified if he had known how Tom was caricaturing him. We were still laughing when the door opened suddenly and mother with some *real* ladies, to whom she was showing the house, came in.

There were two ladies—a not very particular one, just rather nice, but we didn't notice her very much, and a much younger one whom we noticed in a minute. It was partly I think because of her pretty hair, which was that bright goldy kind that looks as if the sun was always shining on it.

Mine is a *little* like that, but not so bright as aun—oh, I forgot; you wouldn't understand. And her hair showed more because of her being all dressed in black—regular black because of somebody belonging to her being dead I mean. She came last into the room, of course that was right because she was youngest, and mother came in first to open the door like—I can remember quite well the way they all stood for a minute.

"This is the nursery, I see," said the nothing particular lady. "Well, with me it would not be that, as I have no children. But it would make a nice morning-room—it must be a bright room on a sunny day."

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"Yes," said mother, "that is why we chose it for a nursery. It is a pity for you to see the house on such a dull day—it is such a bright house generally—we have liked it very much."

Mother spoke sadly—I knew the tone of her voice quite well. We all three had of course stopped playing and stood round listening to what was said. We must have looked rather funny—Racey with a skirt of mine and a white apron of Pierson's, Tom with a towel tied round him to look like Banks in the pantry, and I with an old shawl and a bonnet very much on one side, with a long feather, which we had got out of our "dressing-up" things. We were so interested in listening to mother and in looking at the ladies, particularly the golden-haired one, that we quite forgot what queer figures we were, till the young lady turned towards us.

"These are your little children," she said, with a smile—a rather sad smile—to mother. "They are playing at dressing-up, I see."

"We're playing at ladies coming to see the house," I said, coming forward—I never was a shy child—"There have been such a lot of ladies."

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Mother turned to the young lady.

"It is perhaps well that they should be able to make a play of it," she said.

"Yes," said the young lady very gently, "I remember being just the same as a child, when once my mother had to go away—to India it was—I was so pleased to see her new trunks and to watch all the packing. And now—how strange it seems that I could have endured the idea of her going—now that I shall never have her again!"

Her lip quivered, and she turned away. Mother spoke to her very, very kindly—the other lady, the nothing particular one was examining the cupboards in the room and did not notice.

"Have you lost your dear mother?" she—our mother, I mean—asked the young lady.

She could not speak for a moment. She just bowed her head. Then touching her dress she said in a sort of whisper, "Yes; quite lately. She died in London a fortnight ago. I have neither father nor mother now. I am staying for a while with my cousin."

Then, partly I think to hide the tears which would not be kept back, partly to help herself to grow calm again, she drew me to her and stroked my long hair which hung down my back below my queer bonnet.

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"What is your name, dear?" she said.

"Audrey," I replied. "Audrey Mildred Gower is my long name," I added.

"'Audrey' is a very pretty name," said the young lady, still stroking my hair, "and Gower—that is not a very common name. Are you perhaps relations of Dr. Gower, of — Street?"

"That's Uncle Geoff," cried the boys and I.

"He is my husband's brother," said mother.

The young lady quite brightened up.

"Oh, how curious!" she said. "Dr. Gower was *so* kind to my mother," and again her pretty eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered.

Racey, staring at her, saw that something was the matter, though he had not the least idea what. He came close up to her, stumbling over his skirt and long apron on the way, and tugged her sleeve to catch her attention.

"Don't cry," he said abruptly. "We're going to live with Uncle Geoff. Perhaps he'd let you come too."

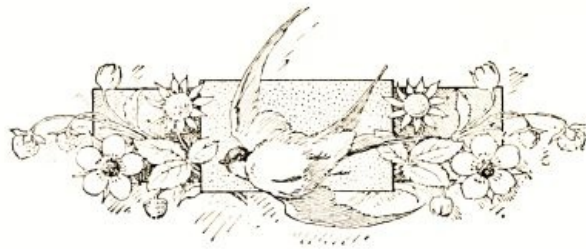
The young lady could not help smiling.

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"Are they really going to live in London?" she said to mother. "Perhaps I shall see you again then some day. I know 'Uncle Geoff's' house very well."

But before there was time to say any more the other lady came back from her inspection, and began asking so many things about the house that the young lady's attention was quite taken up. And soon after they went away. Afterwards I remember mother said she was sorry she had not asked the young lady's name. But we among ourselves fixed to call her "Miss Goldy-hair."

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CHAPTER III.

THREE LITTLE TRAVELLERS.

"What will she do for their laughter and plays,
Chattering nonsense, and sweet saucy ways?"

I will now try to go straight on with my story. But I cannot help saying I do not find it quite so easy as I thought. It is so very difficult to keep things in order and not to put in bits that have no business to come for ever so much longer. I think after this I shall always be even more obliged than I have been to people that write stories, for really when you come to do it, it isn't nearly so easy as you'd think, though to *read* the stories, it seems as if everything in them came just of itself without the least trouble.

I told you that after it was really settled and known, and all arranged about the goings away, things seemed to go on very fast. In one way they did and in one way they didn't—for now when I look back to it, it seems to me that that bit of time—the time when it was all quite settled to *be* and yet hadn't come—was very long. I hear big people say that children get quickly accustomed to anything. I think big people do too. We all—papa and mother, and the boys and I, and even Pierson and the other servants—got used to feeling something was going to come. We got used to living with people coming to see the house, and every now and then great vans coming from the railway to take away packing-cases, and an *always* feeling that the day—the dreadful day—was going to come. Of course I cannot remember all the little particular things exactly, but I have a very clear remembrance of the sort of way it all happened, so though I may not be able to put down just the very words we said and all that, still it is telling it truly, I think, to put down as nearly as I *can* the little bits that make the whole. And even some of the littlest bits I can remember the most clearly—is not that queer? I can remember the dress mother had on the last morning, I can remember *just* how the scarf round her neck was tied, and how one end got rumbled up with the way Tom clung to her, and hugged and hugged her with his arms round her, so tight, that papa had almost to force him away.

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But in my usual way I am going on too fast—at least putting things out of their places. I do not think I in the least understood then, what I do so well understand now, how terribly hard it must have been for mother to leave *us*; how much more dreadful her part of it was than any one else's. I must have seemed very heartless. I remember one day when she was packing books and music and odd things that she would not of course have taken with her just for a journey, I said to her, "Why, mother, what a lot of books you are taking! And all those table-covers and mats and things—you never take those when we go to the sea-side." Papa was standing by and mother looked up at him. "Need I take them?" she said. "It is as if I were going to make a home out there, and oh, how can it ever be like a home? How could I wish it to be? The barer and less home-like the better I should like it."

Papa looked troubled.

"We have to think of appearances, you know," he said. "So many people will come to see you, and it would not do to look as if we took no interest in the place."

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Mother said no more. She went on with her packing, and I think a good many big tears were packed among the things in that box.

I asked her one day how long she and papa would stay away. "Longer than we stay at the sea-side in summer?" I said. "Three months?—as long as that, mother? Any way you'll be home before our birthdays."

For, rather funnily, all our three birthdays came close together—all in one week. We thought it the most important time of the whole year, and we counted everything by the birthday week, and when mother didn't answer at once "Oh yes, we shall certainly be home by the birthday week," I felt quite astonished. But just then something or other put it out of my head, and I forgot to speak of it again. I can't think now how I could be so silly in some ways as I was then—it is so queer to remember.

Well—the day *did* come. We—the boys and I—were the first to leave our dear old home, even though our journey was to be such a short one—only three hours to London. Papa and mother were to start on *their* journey the next day, so we were not to see them again. They had been at Uncle Geoff's the week before, seeing the rooms we were to have, and settling everything; and I think they thought it was better not to see us again, after we were in his house, but to get the parting over in our old home. I suppose they thought we would get over it more quickly if the journey and the newness of it all was to come after, and I daresay they were right.

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I can't tell you about the saying good-bye. It was so bad for us, though we could not understand it at all properly of course, that for mother it must have been awful. And then fancy the long day after we had all left. The empty nurseries, the sort of *sound* of quietness through the house—the knowing we should never, never more be all together in the old happy way—that we should be changed *somehow* before she saw us again. For three years (and poor mother knew it would be three years) is a long time at our ages, Racey would have learnt to speak plain, and Tom would be such a big boy that he would have got out of the way of "hugging," perhaps, and Audrey even, that was me, you know, might have forgotten her a little—all these thoughts must have gone through mother's mind that dreadful afternoon, when papa had taken us to the station and seen us off to London under Pierson's care. Oh *poor* little mother, she has told me all about it since, and I must say if ever I am a big lady and have children of my own, I hope these dreadful havings to go away won't happen to me.

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Well—we were in the train. Our eyes were so red that any one might have seen something sad had happened to us, but we didn't care. Tom's eyes were the worst of all, and generally he would do anything rather than let his red eyes be seen; but to-day he didn't care, we were too full of being sorry to care whether people noticed our eyes or not. And at last when papa had kissed us all three once more for the very last time, reaching up to the railway-carriage window, and the boys and I holding him so tight that he was nearly choked; at last it was all over, all the last tiny endings of good-byes over, and we three were—it seemed to us as far as we could understand it in our childish way—alone in the world.

There was no one else in the railway-carriage—Pierson of course was with us—she had put off being married for two months, so that she could see us settled and get the new nurse into our ways, as she called it; she too had been crying, so that she was quite a fright, for her nose was all bumpy-looking with the way she had been scrubbing at it and her eyes. She was very kind to us; she took Racey on her knee, and let Tom and me sit close up to her; and if she had had three arms she would have put one round each of us I am sure.

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"Poor dears!" she said, and then she looked so very sad herself that Tom and Racey took to comforting *her*, instead of expecting her to comfort them. I *was* sad really—three poor little things like us going away like that; away from everything we had ever known, away from our nice bright nursery, where everything a mother could do to make children happy our mother had done; away from our dear little cots, where mother used to kiss us every night; and our little gardens where we had worked so happily in the summer; away to great big London, where among the thousand faces in the street there was not one we had ever seen before, where other little boys and girls had their fathers and mothers, while ours were going far, far away, to strange countries where they would find no little boys and girls like their own, no Audrey and Tom and Racey.

I thought of all this in a half-stupid way, while I sat in the railway-carriage with my arm round Tom's neck and my head leaning on Pierson's shoulder. We had never cared *very* much about Pierson, but now that she was the only thing left to us, we began to cling to her very much.

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"I am so glad you've not gone away, Pierson," I said, and Pierson seemed very pleased, for I didn't very often say things like that.

"Poor dear Miss Audrey," she said in return. "Poor dear," seemed the only words she could think of to comfort us with. And then we all grew silent, and after a while it began to get dark, for the days were short now, and Tom and Racey fell asleep, just sobbing quietly now and then in their breathing—the way little children do, you know, after they have been crying a good deal; and I sat quite still, staring out at the gloomy-looking country that we were whizzing through, the bare

trees and dull fields, so different from the brightness and prettiness of even a flat unpicturesque landscape on a *summer* day, when the sun lights up everything, and makes the fresh green look still fresher and more tempting. And it seemed to me that the sky and the sun and all the outside things were looking dull because of our trouble, and that they were all sorry for us, and there seemed a queer nice feeling in thinking so.

And after a while I began making pictures to myself of what I would do to please mother while she was away; how I would be so good to Tom and Racey, and teach them to be so good too; how I would learn to be always neat, and how I would try to get on with music, which I didn't much like, but which mother was so fond of that she thought I would get to like it when I was bigger and had got over the worst part. And then I began thinking of the letters I would write to mother, and all I would say in them; and I wondered too to myself very much what Uncle Geoff would be like, for I had not seen him for some time, and I couldn't remember him properly at all; and I wondered what his house would be like, and what sort of a nursery we should have, and what our new governess would be like, and how everything in our new home would be. I went on wondering till I suppose my brain got tired of asking questions it couldn't answer, and without knowing that I was the least sleepy, I too fell fast asleep!

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I was busy dreaming—dreaming that I was on board the ship with papa and mother, and that Uncle Geoff was a lady come to see the house; in my dream the ship seemed a house, only it went whizzing along like a railway, and that he had a face like Pierson's, and he would say "poor dear Miss Audrey," when another voice seemed to mix in with my dreaming. A voice that said—

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"Poor little souls—asleep are they—all three? Which of them shall I look after? Here nurse, you take the boys, and I'll lift out Miss Audrey."

And "Wake up, Miss Audrey, my dear. Wake up. Here's your uncle come himself to meet you at the station. I had no idea, sir, we were so near London, or I'd have had them all awake and ready," said Pierson, who never had all her ideas in order at once.

There was nothing for it but to wake up, though I was most unwilling to do so. I was not at all shy, but yet in the humour I was in then I felt disinclined to make friends with Uncle Geoff, and I wished he hadn't come to the station himself. He lifted me out, however, very kindly; and when I found myself standing on the platform, in the light of the lamps, I could not help looking up at him to see what he was like. I felt better inclined to like him when he put me down on my feet, for I had been afraid he was intending to carry me in his arms till he put me into the cab, and that would have offended me very much.

"Well, Audrey, and are you very tired?" he said kindly.

I looked up at him. He was not very tall, but very strong-looking, and had rather a stern expression, except when he smiled; but just now he *was* smiling. I remembered what mother had said to me about being very good with Uncle Geoff, and doing all he told me. So I tried to speak very nicely when I answered him.

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"No, thank you, Uncle Geoff, I am not very tired, but I am rather sleepy; and I think the boys are very sleepy too."

"All right," said Uncle Geoff, "that is a trouble that can soon be cured. Here nurse," he went on, turning to Pierson, "I'll take Miss Audrey on with me in my carriage, which is waiting; but there is only room for two in it. So my man will get a cab for you and the boys and put the luggage on it."

Pierson was agreeing meekly, but I interfered.

"If you please, Uncle Geoff," I said, "mayn't I stay, and come in the cab too? I don't like to leave the boys, because mother says I'm *always* to take care of them now."

"Miss Audrey, my dear—" began Pierson, in reproof, but Uncle Geoff interrupted her. He did not seem at all vexed, but rather amused. I did not like that, I would almost rather he had been vexed.

"Never mind, nurse," he said. "I like children—and grown people too for that matter—to speak out. Of course you may stay and come in the cab if you would rather, Audrey. But in that case I fear I shall not see any more of you to-night. I have one or two serious cases," he went on, turning to Pierson, "and may be very late of coming home. But no doubt Mrs. Partridge will make you comfortable, and Audrey here seems a host in herself. Good-night, little people."

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He stooped and kissed us—kindly but rather hurriedly—and then he put us all into a cab, and left the servant who was with him to come after with the luggage.

"It is better not to keep them waiting," he said to Pierson as we were driving away.

"Your uncle is very kind and considering," said Pierson; she always said "considering" for "considerate." "I wonder you spoke that way to him, Miss Audrey."

"I didn't speak any way to him," I said crossly. "I don't see that it was very kind to want to send me away from the boys. Mother told me I was to take care of them, and I'm going to do what she told me."

"And I'm sure if you're going to teach them to get into naughty tempers and to be so cross, they'd be better without you to take care of them," said Pierson.

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That was her way; she always said something to make us more cross instead of saying some little gentle thing to smooth us as mamma did. Nobody ever made me so cross just in that kind of way as Pierson did. I am sometimes quite ashamed when I remember it. Just then I did not answer her again or say any more. I was too tired, and I felt that if I said anything else I should begin to cry again, and I didn't want Mrs. Partridge to see me with red eyes. Tom and Racey pressed themselves close to me in the cab, and Tom whispered, "Never mind, Audrey. Pierson's an ugly cross thing. We'll do what you tell us, always—won't we, Racey?"

And Racey said "Yes, always," and then, poor little boys, they both patted my hands and tried to comfort me. They always did like that when Pierson was cross, and I don't think she much liked it, and I felt that it was rather a pity to vex her when she had meant to be kind, but still I didn't feel much inclined to make friends.

So we drove on—*what* a long way it seemed! We had never been in London before, and the streets and houses seemed as if they would never come to an end. It was a very wet evening; I dare say it looked much less dull and gloomy now than it had been earlier in the day, for the gas lighted up the streets, and the shops looked bright and cheerful. I could not but look at them with interest, what quantities there were, how nice it would have been to come to London with mother, and to have gone about buying lots of pretty things; but now it was quite different. And once when I saw from the cab-window a poor, but neatly-dressed little girl about my own size walking along by her mother, holding her hand and looking quite happy in spite of the rain, I felt so miserable I could do nothing but press more closely the two little hands that still lay in mine, and repeat to myself the promise I had made to mother. "Oh I *will* try to take care of them and make them happy and good till you come back," and there was a great deal of comfort in the thought, especially when I went on to make, as I was very fond of doing, pictures of papa and mother coming home again, and of them saying how good Tom and Racey were, and what great care I must have taken of them. I only wished—especially since she had spoken crossly to me—that it had not been settled for Pierson to stay with us. I felt so sure I could take better care of the boys than any one else.

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But my thoughts and plans were interrupted by our stopping at last. Uncle Geoff's house was in a street in which there were no shops. It was a dull-looking street at all times; to-night of course we could see nothing but just the house where we stopped. It looked big and dull to Tom and me as we went in; Racey, poor little fellow, didn't know anything about how it looked, for he had fallen asleep again and had to be carried in in Pierson's arms. The hall was a regular town house hall—you know the kind I mean—not like ours at home, which was nicely carpeted and had a pretty fireplace, where in winter there was always a bright fire to welcome you on first going in; the hall at Uncle Geoff's was cold and dull, with just oilcloth on the floor, and a stiff hall table and hat-stand, and stiff chairs; no flower-stands or plants about, such as mother was so fond of. And the servant that opened the door was rather stiff-looking too. She was the housemaid, and her name was Sarah. It was not generally she that had to open the door, but the footman had gone to the station you know, and perhaps Sarah was cross at having to open. And far back in the hall an oldish-looking person was standing, who came forward when she saw it was us. She was dressed in black silk, and she had a cap with lilac ribbons. She looked kind but rather fussy.

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"And so these are the dear children," she said. "How do you do, little missy, and little master too; and the dear baby is asleep, I see? And how did you leave your dear papa and mamma?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Tom and I together. We squeezed each other's hands tight; we were determined not to cry before Mrs. Partridge, for we knew it must be her, and by the way Tom squeezed my hand I quite understood that he had not taken a fancy to Mrs. Partridge, and I squeezed his again to say I hadn't either.

We hated being called master and missy, and of all things Racey hated being called "baby." Oh how angry he would have been if he had been awake! And then I didn't like her speaking of papa and mother in that sort of way, as if she would have liked us to say they were very ill indeed—she had such a whiney way of talking. But of course we were quite civil to her; we only squeezed each other's hands, and nobody could see that.

Mrs. Partridge opened a door on the right side of the hall. It led into the dining-room. A nice fire was burning there, but still it did not look cheerful—"not a bit," I said to myself again—that thought was *always* coming into my head—"not a bit like our dining-room at home." But still it was nice to see a fire, and Tom and I, still holding each other's hands, went up to it and stood on the rug looking at the pleasant blaze.

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"You've had a cold journey I'm afraid," said Mrs. Partridge.

"Yes, ma'am, very," said Tom, who fancied she was speaking to him. He blinked his eyes as he looked up to her, for he had been asleep in the train, and coming into the light was dazzling.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Partridge at once, "what weak eyes he has! What do you do for them, nurse? He must take them of his mamma, for our young gentlemen always had lovely eyes."

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"I'm sure he doesn't get ugly eyes from mother," I said indignantly. "Mother has beautiful eyes, and Tom has nice eyes too. They're not weak."

"Deary me, deary me," exclaimed Mrs. Partridge, "what a very sharp-spoken young lady! I'm sure no offence was meant, only I was sorry to see little master's eyes so red. Don't they hurt you, my dear?"

"No thank you, ma'am," said Tom, still holding my hand very tight.

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He didn't quite understand what had been said. He was a very little boy and very sleepy. I wondered what made him say "ma'am" to Mrs. Partridge, for of course he never did in speaking to ladies. I think it must have been some confused remembrance of our playing at ladies, for Mrs. Partridge had a sort of peepy way of talking, something like the way we did when we were pretending ladies.

Pierson had said nothing. I don't think *she* liked what the old housekeeper said about mother's eyes any better than I did, but she was vexed with me already, and more vexed still, I suppose, at my "answering back" Mrs. Partridge, and so she wouldn't speak at all.

Then Mrs. Partridge, who all the time *meant* to be very kind to us, you see, took us up-stairs to our rooms—they were on the second floor—above what is always the drawing-room floor in a London house, I mean, and they looked to the front. But to-night of course— I don't know if it is right for me to say "to-night," when I mean *that* night, but it is easier—we did not notice whether they looked to the front or not. All we did notice was that in the one which was to be the day nursery the fire was burning cheerfully, and the table was neatly spread with a white cloth for tea.



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"Dear me," said Mrs Partridge at once, "what weak eyes he has!"

Tom, who was looking very sad, sat down on a chair by the fire and pulled me close to stand by him.

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"Audrey," he whispered, "I do feel so sad, and I don't like that Mrs. Partridge. Audrey, I can't eat any tea. I didn't think it would have been nearly so bad, mother's going away and us coming to London. I don't like London. I think it would have been much better, Audrey, if we had died—you and I when we had the measles."

And stooping down to kiss my poor little tired brother, I saw that two big tears were forcing themselves out of his eyes; in spite of all his trying to be manly, and not to let Mrs. Partridge see him crying, he could not keep them in any longer. I threw my arms round him and kissed his poor red eyes. "Horrid old woman," I said to myself, "to say he had ugly eyes." And a feeling came over me that I can hardly say in words, that I would put my arms round Tom and Racey and never let them go till mother came back again, and that *nobody* should dare to vex them or make them cry. I felt, in that minute, as if I had grown quite big and strong to take care of them—as if I were really their mother. I kissed him and kissed him, and tried to think of something to comfort him.

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"Tom, dear," I said, "do come and have your things off, and try to take some tea. There are Bath buns, Tom," I added.

But Tom still shook his head.

"No thank you, Audrey," he said. "I can't eat anything—I can't indeed. It would have been better, Audrey, it would really, if you and I had died."

"But poor Racey," I said. "He would have been all alone—just fancy that."

"Perhaps they would have taken him with them," said Tom dreamily. Then he put his arms round me and leant his little round head on my shoulder.

"I'm glad I've got *you*, Audrey," he whispered, and in that there was some comfort. Still, altogether, I felt what he said was true; it was very sad for us.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE AIR-GARDEN.

"But children, good though they may be,
Must cry sometimes when they are sad."

It was not quite so bad the next morning. That is one good thing of being a child, I suppose—at least mother says so—things never are quite so bad the next morning!

We all slept very soundly; we had three nice little beds in one rather big room, which we thought a very good plan; and the first thing that woke me was feeling something bump down on the top of me all of a sudden. It was Racey. He looked quite bright and rosy, all his tiredness gone away; and then you know he was really such a *very* little boy—only five—that he could not be expected to remember very long about poor mother going away and all our trouble.

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"Audrey," he said, in what he meant to be a whisper, but it was a very loud one, "Audrey, I don't want to wake Tom. Poor Tom's so tired. Audrey, let me get in 'aside you."

He had clambered out of his bed and into mine somehow; and though it was against rules to get into each other's beds—mother had had to make the rule because Tom and I got in the way of waking each other so dreadfully early to tell stories—I could not this first morning refuse to let the poor little thing get in under the nice warm clothes to be cuddled.

"Oh dear, Racey, what cold little toes you've got," I said. "You haven't been running about without your slippers on, surely?"

"Just for a minute; don't tell Pierson," said Racey. "I wanted to look out of the window. Audrey, this is such a funny place—there's no trees and no garden—and lots and lots of windows. Is all the windows Uncle Geoff's?"

"Oh, no—there are lots of other people's houses here," I said. Poor little Racey had never been in a town before. "In London all the houses are put close together. You see, Racey, there are such a lot of people in London there wouldn't be room for all the houses they need if each had a garden."

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"But some peoples has little gardens—*air* gardens," said Racey eagerly. "There's one I sawed out of the window."

"*Air* gardens! What do you mean, Racey?" I said.

"High up—up in the air," he explained. "Sticking up all of theirselves in the air."

"Oh, I know what you mean—you mean a little glass place for flowers," I said. "I've seen those—once I was in London before with mother, in a cab, when we were coming from Tonbridge Wells."

"Were you?" said Racey, greatly impressed. "Was Tom?"

"No, not Tom—only me. When we're dressed, Racey, I'd like to look out of the window at the air garden."

"Come *now*," said Racey. But I firmly refused to get out of bed till Pierson came, as it was one of the things mother had particularly told me not to do—we had so often caught cold with running about like that. And it was a good thing we didn't, for just then Pierson came into the room looking rather cross, and if she had found us running about without our slippers on she'd have been crosser still.

"It's time to get up, Miss Audrey," she said in a melancholy tone, "past half-past-eight; though I'm sure no one would think so by the light. I hope you've had a good night—but—" as she suddenly caught sight of my little visitor, "whatever's Master Racey doing in your bed?"

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Racey ducked down under the clothes to avoid being caught, and Pierson was getting still crosser, when fortunately a diversion of her thoughts was caused by Tom, who just then awoke.

"Oh dear!" he said with a great sigh, "oh dear! Will the ship have gone yet?"

He was hardly awake, but he sat up in bed, and his big sad eyes seemed to be looking about for something they could not find. Then with another sigh he lay down again. "I was dreaming," he said, "that we got a letter to say we were to go in the train again to South—South—that place where the ship goes from, and that Uncle Geoff was the man on the engine, and he kept calling to us to be quick or the ship would be gone. Oh dear, I wish it had been true!"

Poor Tom! Pierson forgot her crossness in trying to comfort him. Of us all I'm sure he was her favourite, even though he was very mischievous sometimes. We all went on talking about Tom's dream till Pierson had got back into quite a good temper—a good temper to *us*, that is to say, for she at last confided to us what had made her so cross. She "couldn't abide that Mrs. Partridge," that was the burden of her song. "Stupid, fussy old thing," she called her, "going on about Master Tom's eyes last night. I dare say I shouldn't say so to you, Miss Audrey, but I can't help owning I was glad you spoke up to her as you did. She's that tiresome and interfering,—as if I didn't know my own work! I'll be sorry to leave you, my dears, when the time comes, which it will only too soon; but I can't say that there'd be peace for long if that stupid old woman was to keep on meddling."

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We were all full of sympathy for Pierson, and indignant with Mrs. Partridge.

"Never mind, Pierson," we said, "we won't take any notice of her. We'll just do what *you* tell us."

So breakfast was eaten in the most friendly spirit, and after breakfast, our hands and faces being again washed, and our hair receiving a second smooth, we were taken down-stairs to be inspected by Uncle Geoff.

He was busy writing in a small room behind the dining-room—a rather gloomy, but not uncomfortable little room. A fire was of course burning brightly in the grate, but for a minute or two we all three stood near the door, not venturing further in, for though Uncle Geoff had replied "come in" to Pierson's tap, he did not at once look up when we made our appearance, but went on finishing his letter. Some mornings he had to go out very early, but this was not one of them; but instead of going out, he had a great many very particular letters to write, and it was difficult for him to take his mind off them even for a minute. I understand that now, but I did not then; and I was rather offended that the boys and I should be left standing there without his taking any notice. Racey kept tight hold of my hand, and Tom looked up at me with a surprised, puzzled expression in his eyes. I didn't so much mind for myself, but I felt very sorry for the boys. I was not at all a shy child, as I have told you, and I had rather a sharp temper in some ways; so after fidgeting for a moment or two I said suddenly—

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"May we come near the fire, if you please; or if you don't want us may we go back to the nursery?"

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For an instant still Uncle Geoff took no notice. Then he laid down his pen and looked at us—at me in particular.>

"What did you say, my little lady?"

I got more angry. It seemed to me that he was making fun of me, and that was a thing I never could endure. But I did not show that I was angry. I think my face got red, but that was all, and I said again quietly, but not in a very nice tone, I dare say—

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"I wanted to know if we might go back to the nursery if you don't want us, or at least if we might come near the fire. It isn't for me, it is for the boys. Mother doesn't like them to stand in a draught, and there's a great draught here."

"Dear me, dear me, I beg your pardon," said Uncle Geoff, with a comical smile. "Come near the fire by all means. My niece and nephews are not accustomed to be kept waiting, I see."

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He pulled forward a big arm-chair to the fire as he spoke, and lifting Racey up in his arms, popped him down in one corner of it. He was turning back for Tom, but Tom glanced up at me again from under his eyelids in the funny half-shy way he did when he was not sure of any one. I took his hand and led him forward to the fire.



'May we come near the fire, if you please?'

"Tom is quite big," I said. "He's never counted like a baby."

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Again Uncle Geoff looked at me with his comical smile. I felt my face get red again. I am ashamed to say that I was beginning to take quite a dislike to Uncle Geoff.

"He's just as horrid as Mrs. Partridge," I said to myself. "I'm sure mother wouldn't have left us here if she had known how they were going to go on."

But aloud I said nothing.

Uncle Geoff himself sat down on the big arm-chair, and took Racey on his knee.

"So you're to be the boys' little mother—eh, Audrey?" he began. "It's a great responsibility, isn't it? You'll have a good deal to do to teach *me* my duty too, won't you?"

I did not answer, but I'm afraid I did not look very amiable. Uncle Geoff, however, took no notice. He drew Tom gently forward, and as Tom did not pull back at all, I let go his hand. Uncle Geoff made him stand between his knees, and, placing a hand on each of his shoulders, looked rather earnestly into his eyes. Tom fidgeted a little—he stood first on one leg, and then on the other, and glanced round at me shyly; but still he did not seem to mind it.

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"He's his mother's boy," said Uncle Geoff, after a minute or two's silence. "He has her pretty eyes."

That was a lucky remark. After all, Uncle Geoff must be much nicer than Mrs. Partridge, I decided, and I drew a little nearer. Uncle Geoff looked up at me.

"And you, Audrey?" he went on. "No, you're not like your mother."

"I'm not nearly as pretty," I said.

"You're more like your father," he continued, without noticing my remark. "And Racey—who is he like? Where did you get that white skin, and that golden—not to say red—hair, sir?" he said, laughing. "Whom *is* he like?"

"Like hisself," said Tom, smiling.

"Yes, that is quite certain," said Uncle Geoff. "And now, my friends, having looked you all over, so that for the future I shall know which is which, tell me how you are going to amuse yourselves to-day?"

We looked at each other—that is to say, the boys looked at me and I at them, but we did not know what to say.

"It is too bad a day for you to go out, I fear," continued Uncle Geoff, glancing up at the window from which only other houses' windows and a very dull bit of gray sky were to be seen. "It's not often we have bright days at this time of year in London. But we must try to make you happy in the house. Partridge will get you anything you want. Did your mother tell you about the tutor?"

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"Yes, Uncle Geoff," I said, meekly enough, but feeling rather depressed. I did not at all like being referred to *Partridge* for anything we wanted. "Mother told us we were to have lessons every day from a gentleman. She said it would be better than a lady, because Tom is getting so big."

"Of course; and by next year he'll be going to school, perhaps."

"But that won't be till after papa and mother come home," I said hastily. "Mother never said anything about that—and of course they'll be home long before next year," I continued, a misgiving darting through me which I refused to listen to.

Uncle Geoff looked a little troubled, but he just nodded his head.

"Oh, of course, there's lots of time to think of Tom's going to school," he said, as he rose from his chair. "I must be off, I fear," he went on. "You know I am a dreadfully busy person, children, and I shall not be able to see as much of you as I should like. But with Partridge, and your tutor, and your nurse—by the by, I must not forget about her having to leave before long. You know about that—your mother told me you did?"

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"Yes," I replied. "Pierson is to be married on the tenth of next month. But—" I hesitated.

"But what?" said Uncle Geoff.

"I wish we needn't have a nurse. I'm *sure* I could dress and bath the boys, and we'd be so happy without a nurse."

Uncle Geoff laughed heartily at this, and I felt very vexed with him again. And just then unfortunately a knock came at the door, and in answer to Uncle Geoff's "Come in," Mrs. Partridge

made her appearance smiling and curtesying in a way that made me feel very angry.

"Good morning, Partridge," said Uncle Geoff; "here I am surrounded with my new family, you see."

"Yes, sir, to be sure, and I hope they are very good young ladies and gentlemen, and won't trouble their kind uncle more than they can help," said Mrs. Partridge. Uncle Geoff was used, I suppose, to her prim way of speaking, for he seemed to take no notice of it. He began buttoning his great-coat before the fire.

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"You'll look after them, and make them happy, Partridge," said he as he turned to the door.

"Of *course*, sir," she replied. And then in a lower voice she added as she followed him out of the room, "I sha'n't be sorry, sir, when Pierson, the nurse, goes. She's so very interfering like."

"Ah well, well, it's only for a very short time, and then we must look out for some suitable person. My little niece, by the by, has been begging me not to get a nurse at all; she says she's sure she could wash and dress the boys herself—what do you think of that, Partridge?"

"It's all that Pierson, sir," said Partridge; "it's all jealousy of another coming after her, you may be sure. Not but that,"—by this time Uncle Geoff and the old servant were out in the hall, but my ears are very sharp, and one can always catch one's own name more quickly than anything else—"not but that Miss Audrey's far too up-spoken for her age. She has been spoilt by her mother very likely—the only girl."

"Perhaps," said Uncle Geoff. "Her father did tell me she was rather an odd little girl—a queer temper if taken the wrong way. But we must do our best with them, poor little things. Miss Audrey seems very fond of her brothers, any way."

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Partridge said nothing more aloud, but it seemed to me I caught a murmured "far too fond of managing and ordering them about for her age," and I boiled with indignation, all the deeper that I was determined not to show it. I was angry with Mrs. Partridge most of all, of course, and angry with Uncle Geoff. I was not angry with papa—I did not mind his having told Uncle Geoff that I had a queer temper, for I knew it was true, and I did not mind Uncle Geoff knowing it; but I was horribly angry at his talking me over with Partridge, and making fun of what I had said, and most determined that she should not interfere with either me or the boys. So when we went up to the nursery again I called my little brothers to me.

"Tom and Racey," I said, "Mrs. Partridge is a cross, unkind old woman. You mustn't mind what she says—you must only do what I tell you. Mother told me I was to take care of you, and she would like you to do what I say—you will, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," said both the boys. "Of course we love you, Audrey, and we don't love that cross old thing one bit." "But," pursued Tom, looking rather puzzled, "aren't we to do what Uncle Geoff says?"

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"And Pierson?" said Racey.

"Pierson's soon going away. It doesn't matter for her," I said.

"But Uncle Geoff?" repeated Tom, returning to the charge. "Don't you like him, Audrey?" he continued half timidly, as if afraid of having a different opinion from mine. "I think he's nice."

"Oh, I dare say he's nice," said I. "Besides, any way, he's our uncle, whether he's nice or not. But we sha'n't see him often—he's so busy, you know. It doesn't matter for him. It's only that I want you always to count me first—like as if I was instead of mother, you know. That's what mother wants."

"Yes, dear Audrey, *dear* Audrey," cried both boys at once. And then they put their arms round my neck, and hugged me so that we all three rolled on the floor, and Pierson, coming in just then, would no doubt have scolded us, but that her mind was too full of Mrs. Partridge and her offences to take in anything else.

"It isn't *her* house," she said, "and I'm sure to hear how she goes on any one might think it was."

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"What does she say, Pierson?" I asked, coming close to Pierson, and looking up in her face.

"Oh, nonsense—grumbling about what an upset it's been in the house, children coming; having to take down the bed in this room, and get new little ones, and all that sort of talk. And worry-worrying at me to see that you don't scratch the walls, or go up and down-stairs with dirty boots on, and all such nonsense. And after all, what could be more natural than your coming here? Dr. Gower is own brother to your papa, and no one else belonging to him. But I'm sure if it wasn't for what Harding would say," Harding was Pierson's going-to-be husband, "and that I really *durstn't* put him off again, I'd—I'd—I really don't know what I'd do."

"What would you do? Do tell me, Pierson," I entreated.

"I don't know, Miss Audrey. I'm silly, I suppose; but it seems to me if your mamma could have left you with me in some little house in a nice country place, we might have been ever so happy."

"Only our lessons, Pierson?" I said regretfully. "And Harding wouldn't wait, would he?—so there's no use thinking about it."

"None whatever, and of course it's true about lessons. No doubt Master Tom—and you too, Miss Audrey—will need good teachers. I must just hope that whoever comes after me will be good to you and not let that old woman put upon you."

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"She sha'n't put upon *the boys* any way," I said, with so determined a look in my face that Pierson was quite startled. "You may be sure of that; for whatever I'd bear for myself, I'd bear nothing for them."

"But it wouldn't be as bad as that, Miss Audrey," said Pierson, rather startled at the effect of her words. "Of course they all *mean* to be kind to you—there's no doubt about that; and then your papa and mamma wished you to stay here. I shouldn't talk so out to you as I do, but I was just that vexed at Mrs. Partridge interfering so."

I turned upon Pierson impatiently.

"I wish you wouldn't be so changeable," I said. "I can't bear people that say a thing and then try to unsay it. I don't believe they *do* mean to be kind to us."

"Hush, hush, Miss Audrey, don't let your brothers hear what you are saying, any way. We must try and find something to amuse them with, this dull day."

I went into the day nursery to see what the boys were doing, for my conversation with Pierson had been in the bedroom. Poor little boys, they did not look very merry. Racey, who was cleverer at amusing himself than Tom, was creeping about the floor drawing an imaginary cart, in reality the lid of Pierson's bonnet-box, to which with some difficulty he had ingeniously fastened his own two boots as horses, for the toys we had brought with us were not yet unpacked. Racey was quite cracked about horses—he turned everything into horses.

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"Look, Audrey, look," he said. "See my calliage and pair. But Tom won't play."

"How could I play with that rubbish?" said Tom. "Indeed, I don't care to play at all. I don't want Pierson to unpack our toys."

"Why not?" I asked, rather puzzled.

Tom was sitting on the window-sill, which was wide—for the house was rather an old one I think—swinging his feet about and staring gloomily at the dull rows of houses opposite.

"Why don't you want Pierson to unpack our toys?" I repeated.

"Oh because—because— I can't quite say what I mean. If our toys were all unpacked and put out nicely like they used to be at—at home," said poor Tom with a tremble in his voice, "it would seem as if we were to stay here *always*—as if it was to be a sort of a home to us, and you know it would only be a pertence one. I'd rather just have it like it is, and then we can keep thinking that it's only for a little—just till they come back again."

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I did not answer at once. What he said made me think so much of that day when poor mother couldn't bear to pack up any pretty things for her house in China, because she said she didn't want to make a home of it. It was queer that Tom should say just the same—it must be true that he was like mother.

"Audrey," he went on again in a minute, still staring out of the window, in the same dull way, "Audrey, how many *days* will it be till they come back again?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"If we could find out exactly," he said, "I was thinking we might make a paper—a great big paper, with marks for every day, and then every night we might scratch one out. Papa told me he did that when he was a little boy at school, to watch for the holidays coming, and I'm sure we want them to come back more than any holidays."

"It might be a good plan," I said, for I didn't like to discourage Tom in anything he took a fancy to just now. But a sick, miserable feeling came over me when I thought that we were actually speaking of counting the days to their return, when they had not yet *gone*. Only this afternoon would they reach Southampton, the first stage on the terrible long journey.

Tom still sat swinging his legs.

"Audrey," he said, "London isn't a very nice place, *is* it?"

Certainly the look-out to-day was not tempting. Rain, rain—wet and sloppy under foot, gray and gloomy over head. I pressed my cheek against Tom's round, rosy face, and we stared out together.



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"London isn't a very nice place, is it?"

"There must be *some* happy children in London, I suppose," I said, "children whose fathers and

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mothers are at home with them to make them happy," and as I said the words, suddenly on the other side of the street, a few doors down, my glance fell on the little conservatory which had caught Racey's eyes—his "air garden." I pointed it out to Tom, who listened with interest to Racey's funny name for it.

"I wonder," I said, "if there are happy children in that house?"

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CHAPTER V.

A NEW TROUBLE.

"Ah! folks spoil their children now;
When I was a young woman 'twas not so."

That first day passed—but drearily enough. Pierson was really very kind—kinder than we had ever known her. Not that she had ever been *unkind*; only grumbly—but never unkind so that the boys and I could be *afraid* of her, and when mother was with us, mother who was *always* cheerful, it didn't matter much if Pierson did grumble.

But to-day she was kinder than ever before, almost as if she had known by magic what was going to happen; and through her kindness there was a sort of sadness which made me like her all the better. I knew she kept thinking about poor mother—about its being her last day in England—in the same country as her poor little boys and girl, and so did I. *All* the day it was never out of my head for one inch of a minute, though I didn't say so, not to make the boys think of it like that. For in their funny way they seemed already to fancy papa and mother *quite* away, almost as if they were in China, and I didn't want to unsettle that feeling, as it would only have made it worse for them again.

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Pierson unpacked our toys, and after all, Tom did cheer up a little when he saw his soldiers and his fort, which had been best toys at home, but which mamma told Pierson were to be every-day ones in London, both to please Tom and because there had been such a great throwing away of old ones, not worth packing, that really we should have had none to play with if our best ones had been kept *for* best. Mother had had such a good thought about our toys—almost as soon as it was really fixed about papa and her going away, she had begun packing up the good ones, so that when we got them out in London they seemed quite new, for it was nearly two months since we had had them, and it was quite a pleasure to see them again, though a little sadness too. Every one that came out of the box, there was something to say about it.

"My best paint-box that mother gave me last Christmas," Tom would say, or "My dear little pony horse with the little riding man, that Muzzie made a jacket for," Racey cried out. While as for me, every doll that appeared—dolls of course were my principal toys, and I had quite a lot of them—reminded me of some kind thought that perhaps I had not noticed enough at the time. Racey was perfectly silly about his horses—he loved them so that he almost provoked Tom and me—and we looked at each other as much as to say, "He doesn't understand." He really was, I suppose, too little to keep the thought of our trouble long in his mind, even though he had cried so dreadfully the day before, and I think the sight of his forgetting, as it were, made me all the sadder.

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But when the toys were all arranged in their places, and the long day was over at last, even Racey grew dull, and unlike himself. It had been a very long day—we had not been out of our own rooms at all, except just for those few minutes in the morning, to see Uncle Geoff. He ran up to see us again in the evening—about four o'clock, our tea-time, that is to say—and said he was sorry the weather was so bad, he hoped it would be better to-morrow, but even as he was speaking to us the man-servant came up to say he was wanted again, and he had to run off. And I'm sure all the afternoon the bell had never left off ringing, and there were lots and lots of carriages came to the door, with ladies and gentlemen and even children, to see him. If we could have watched the people getting out and in of the carriages it would have been fun, but from the day nursery window we couldn't see them well, for standing up on the window-sill was too high, and standing on a chair was too low. It wasn't till some time after that, that we found out we could see them beautifully from the bedroom window, by putting a buffet in an old rocking-chair that always stood there. And by four o'clock it was quite dark!

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After tea we all sat round the fire together—*the* thought, I know, was still in Pierson's mind and mine—whether it was in Tom's or not, I don't know, for he didn't say anything. Only we were all tired and dull, and Racey climbed up on to Pierson's knee, and told her he would go away to the

country with her—"London was such a ugly place." And Pierson sighed, and said she wished he could. And then she began telling us about the village in the country, that was her home, and where she was going back again to live, when she was married to Harding, who was the blacksmith there. Her father had been a farmer but he had died, and her mother was left very poor, and with several children. And Pierson was the eldest, and couldn't be married to Harding for a long time, because she had to work for the others, so perhaps it was all her troubles that had made her grumpy. But now all the others were settled—some were in America and some were "up in the north," she said. We didn't know what that meant—afterwards Tom said he thought it meant Iceland, and Racey thought it meant the moon, but we forgot to ask her. So now Pierson was going at last to be married to Harding.

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"Is he *all* black?" I remember Tom asked.

"All black, Master Tom," Pierson said, rather indignantly. "Of course not—no blacker than you or me, though perhaps his hands may be brown. But once he's well cleaned of the smoke and the dust, he's a very nice complexion for a working man. Whatever put it in your head that he was black?"

"Cause you said he was a blacksmith," said Tom, "and I thought it was something like a sweep, and sweeps never can get white again, can they? It says so in the Bible."

I burst out laughing. "He means about the Ethiopian," I said, but Pierson didn't laugh. That was one of the things I didn't like about her. She never could see any fun in anything, and she still looked rather offended at Tom. "All black," she repeated. "What an idea!"

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I tried to put her in a good humour again by asking her to tell us about her house. It was a very pretty cottage, she said, next door to the smithy, but of course a different entrance, and all that.

"Has it roses on the walls?" I asked, and "Yes," Pierson replied. "Beautiful roses—climbing ones of all colours. And there's a nice little garden in front. It's a very pretty cottage, but most of the cottages in our village are pretty. It's a real old-fashioned village, Miss Audrey—I would like you to see it—it's not so very far from London."

"Will you go there in the same railway we came in?" asked Tom.

"Oh no," said Pierson, "it's quite the other way from Elderling."—Elderling was our old home. "It's only two hours and a half from town, by express. You go to Coppleswade Junction, and then it's a walk of five miles to Cray—that's the name of the village, and Coppleswade's the post-town."

"Perhaps," said I, "perhaps some time we'll come and see you, Pierson."

Pierson smiled, but shook her head. She was at no time of a very sanguine or hopeful disposition.

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"It would be nice," she said, "too nice to come true, I'm afraid. I would like to show you all to mother. Poor mother, she's counting the days till I come—she's very frail now, and she's been so long alone since Joseph went to America. But it's getting late, my dears. I must put you to bed, or we'll have Mrs. Partridge up to know what we're about."

"Horrid old thing!" I said. And when Pierson undressed us, and had tucked us all in comfortably, we kissed her, and repeated how much we wished that we were going to live in the pretty village of Cray with her, instead of staying in this gloomy London, with Mrs. Partridge.

I have often thought since, how queer it was that Pierson should have been so very nice that last night, and from that what a great lot of things have come! You will see what I mean as I go on. I can't help thinking—this is quite a different thought, nothing to do with the other—that without knowing it people *do* sometimes know what is going to happen before it does. It seemed like that that night, for I had never known Pierson quite so nice as she was then.

Late that evening—it seemed to me the middle of the night, but it couldn't really have been more than nine or ten—I was half wakened up by sounds in the day nursery next door. I heard one or two people talking, and a low sound, as if some one were crying, but I was so sleepy that I couldn't make up my mind to wake up to hear more, but for long after that it seemed to me I heard moving about, and a sort of bustle going on. Only it was all faint and confused— I dreamt, or thought I dreamt, that some one stood by the side of my bed crying, but when I half opened my eyes, there was no one to be seen by the tiny light of the little night lamp that mother always let us burn in our room. By the next morning I had forgotten all I had heard, and very likely if I had never had any explanation of it, it would not have come into my mind again.

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But the explanation came only too soon. We woke early that morning—we generally did—but we were used to lie still till Pierson came to us. But she had been so kind the night before that we felt bolder than usual, and after having talked in a whisper to each other for some time, and hearing no sound whatever from her room, we decided that she must have overslept herself and that she would not be vexed if we woke her. So "Pierson! Pierson!!" we called out, softly at first, then louder. But there was no answer, so Tom, whose cot was nearest the door, jumped up and ran to her room. In a moment he was back again—his face looking quite queer.

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"What is the matter, Tom?" I exclaimed.

"She's not there," he cried, "and she's not been there all night. Her bed isn't unmade."

I sat up in alarm.

"Oh dear!" I said. "I do believe she's gone away, and that was the noise I heard. Oh I do believe that horrid Mrs. Partridge has made Uncle send her away."

But almost before the words were out of my mouth we heard some one coming up-stairs.

"Quick, Tom," I said, and in his hurry Tom clambered into my bed, and I hid him under the clothes.

Stump, stump— I think I forgot to tell you that Mrs. Partridge was rather lame from rheumatism, and sometimes used a stick—stump, stump, in she came, feeling rather cross, no doubt, at having had to get up so much earlier than usual.

"Good morning, my dears," she said.

"Good morning, Mrs. Partridge," I replied, feeling very brave and determined.

"I have come all the way up-stairs to tell you that you must be very good indeed to-day, and not give any trouble, for your nurse, Pierson, has had to go away. A friend from her home came to fetch her late last night, because her mother was dying. So she left at once, to catch the first train this morning. Of course I couldn't have had the house disturbed at four or five o'clock in the morning and——"

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"But she'll come back again—she'll come back again in a few days, won't she?" said Tom, in his anxiety forgetting where he was, and popping up his round head from under the clothes.

Mrs. Partridge hesitated.

"I can't say——" she was beginning when she suddenly perceived that Tom was not in his own quarters. "Master Tom," she exclaimed. "What business have you in your sister's cot? What tricks to be sure—deary me, deary me! Go back to your own bed, sir, at once."

Tom showed no inclination to move.

"Yes, Tom," I said, and these first words, I think, astonished Mrs. Partridge very much. "Yes, Tom, go back to your own bed." Tom looked at me in surprise, but prepared to obey me, nevertheless. "But," I added, turning fiercely to Mrs. Partridge, "it isn't to please *you* he should get into his own bed—it's only because mother told us always to stay quiet in the morning before Pierson came to dress us, and we mean to do everything mother told us."

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"And I should like to know what your mother would say to hearing you talk like that?" said Mrs. Partridge. "It's not at all like a pretty behaved young lady to fly into such tempers to any one as kind as can be to you—your uncle should be told of it, but I've never been one to make mischief. Now you must all three lie still and make no noise, till Sarah can find time to come up and dress you."

"I want to det up now," said Racey undauntedly. "I've been awake never so long."

"You can't get up now, my dear," said Mrs. Partridge. "The house has been upset enough already—the whole work can't be stopped to get you up and for my part I don't hold with such early gettings up, and wanting your breakfasts so ridiculous soon."

She turned and left the room, and for a minute or two none of us spoke. Then Tom, who after all had not decamped to his own quarters, having stopped short in excitement at my speech to Mrs. Partridge, which had also had the effect of putting him out of her head—Tom gave me a push, and said inquiringly,

"Audrey?"

"Well, Tom?"—I dare say I spoke impatiently.

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"Audrey, speak. What are you thinking?"

"I don't know what I'm thinking," I said. "At least I do, but I think I'd better not say it."

"Why not?" said Tom.

"Because it's no good."

"Audrey," said Tom again, "you're rather cross, and I'm *so* unhappy."

"Oh, *dear* Tom," I said, "don't speak like that. It's just because I love you so, and I can't bear you to be unhappy, that I'm cross."

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"*I'm* unhappy too," said Racey's high-pitched little voice from the corner of the room. "I'm vrezzy unhappy, and I do so want to det up."

A sudden idea struck me. "You shall get up," I said. "I'm sure mother never would have wanted us to stay in bed hours after we were awake. Jump up, Racey, and Tom too; *I'll* dress you."

Up jumped both boys with the greatest delight, and we set to work. There was no hot water! That we had quite forgotten, and it was too cold to wash properly without it, even though we always had a cold bath too. Racey made rather a fuss, but Tom was very good, and at last we got the dressing finished without any worse misfortunes than the breaking of Tom's comb, for his hair was very tuggy this morning, and the spilling a

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great lot of water on the floor. This last catastrophe troubled us very little, for the carpet was not very new or pretty, but we were sorry about the comb, as now that Pierson was away we did not know to whom to apply for a new one! Just as I was telling the boys to go into the day nursery and warm themselves at the fire, forgetting that no one had come to make it, a knock came to the door and in marched Sarah, looking decidedly cross. Her face cleared, however, when she saw us all dressed.

"So you've been and dressed yourselves," she said. "Well, that's very clever of you, though I don't know what Mrs. Partridge will say."

But it was something for Sarah to be pleased, and she set to work to make the fire with good-will, for we were very cold and our hands were blue and red.

We were helping Sarah to the best of our ability, when stump, stump, up-stairs again came Mrs. Partridge, and oh, how cross she was when she saw that her orders had been disobeyed; only, fortunately, it all fell on me. I was a naughty disobedient child—it was all I that made my brothers naughty—it was high time some one took me in hand, that was clear. What she meant by this last remark I did not quite understand, and I dare say that was a good thing, for if I had thought it was any reflection on *mother*, I should have answered in a way which would not have made Mrs. Partridge think any better of my temper.

As it was, I answered nothing. If I had spoken at all I should have burst out crying, and that I was determined Mrs. Partridge should not see me do. So when she was tired of scolding she went away, and Sarah, who had made an excuse of fetching our breakfast to get out of the way, came back again in a few minutes with the tray.

I was too angry and unhappy to eat, but Tom and Racey, though looking somewhat soberer than usual, ate with a good appetite. Towards the end of breakfast I found I had no handkerchief, and I jumped up and went to the chest of drawers in the other room to fetch one. There a great surprise met me. Pinned to the top handkerchief of the little pile was a note addressed to me, "Miss Audrey Gower." I knew at once what it was. It was from poor Pierson—her only way of saying good-bye. Though I was nearly nine years old I could not read writing very well, and this Pierson knew, for she had written it very large and plain. Poor thing, it must have taken her a good while, and late at night, too, when she had all her packing to do. I tore open the envelope. This was the little letter. Oh, how pleased I was to see it!

"MY DEAR MISS AUDREY, AND MY DEAR LITTLE BOYS,—I am half broken-hearted to go away like this and leave you with strangers, but what can I do? My poor mother is dying, and begging for me to come. I would promise to come back for a week or two any way, but I am afraid Mrs. Partridge will make your uncle think it better not. But I beg you, dear Miss Audrey, to try to write to me, and tell me how you all are, and do not be afraid to say if you are unhappy, for I would try to do something; and any way I could write to your mamma.

"Your faithful nurse,
"ESTHER

PIERSON."

I read it over two or three times. Then I took it into the nursery where the boys were calling for me, and read it over again, word by word, to Tom. He listened with his big eyes staring up at me.

"How nice of Pierson," he said at the end. "Audrey, won't you write and tell her how *horrid* Mrs. Partridge has been?"

"We must think about it," I said, solemnly.

"Would you know how to *dreck*" (he meant direct) "the letter?" continued Tom.

I hadn't thought of that; and my face fell. But Pierson had had more foresight than I had supposed.

"Cray was the name of the village—near—near—oh, I can't remember near where," I was saying, when Tom, who had been examining the letter with great attention, exclaimed, "Audrey, there's more writing here on the other side that you haven't seen—C. R.—I believe it's the 'drecktion.'"

And so it was.

"ESTHER PIERSON,
Flure's

Cottage,



For his hair was very tuggy this morning.

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Coppleswade.

is my adress," Pierson had added. Of course there was only one *d* in "address."

"What a good thing, isn't it?" said Tom. But just then we heard some one coming up-stairs. In a fright I stuffed the letter into the front of my dress; it was the first time in my life I had ever had anything to conceal, and I felt at a loss how to do it. The steps turned out to be Sarah's.

"Miss Audrey," she said. "You've to go down-stairs, please, to your uncle's study. He wants to see you before he goes out, and he's in a great hurry."

"Me alone?" I said.

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"Yes, Miss; nothing was said about the young gentlemen; and I'm sure," she added, in a lower tone, "I'm sure Mrs. Partridge has been making mischief. But never you mind, Miss, speak up for yourself."

I did not answer, but ran quickly down-stairs.

I was not the least afraid, but I had very bitter feelings in my heart. Why should I be called naughty, and disobedient, and impertinent, and all that, for the first time in my life? I knew I had sometimes a rather cross temper, but when mother had spoken to me about it, I had always felt sorry, and wished to be better. And since we had come to London, I had really tried to be good, and to carry out what mother had said about making the boys happy, and being kind to them. No one had any right to begin scolding me when I had *not* been naughty. This was what I was saying to myself as I ran down-stairs, and though I was not afraid, yet the feeling of Pierson's letter was a great comfort to me. I was not altogether friendless.

When I knocked at the study door, Uncle Geoff called out, "Come in," at once. He was standing on the hearth-rug, all ready—his coat buttoned up to the top—to go out. I saw at once that he was quite different from the day before.

"Audrey," he said, as soon as he saw me, "I do not want to be severe or harsh to you, but it is necessary you should understand me. And it is better you should do so at once. I wish to be kind to you, as kind as I can be, but you, on your side, my little girl, must do your part, and that part is *perfect obedience*. I am very little at home, as you know, and I cannot constantly direct you and the boys myself, but in my absence you must obey Mrs. Partridge, who is very kind, and good, and knows what is right for children. It is unfortunate that your nurse has had to leave so suddenly, though, if it was *she* that put it into your mind to disobey Mrs. Partridge, it is better she has gone. Now you understand me— I expect that you will do your best to-day to be good and obedient, and to give as little trouble as you can."

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He turned as if to leave the room—he did not seem to expect an answer. Words were burning on my lips— I wanted to ask him if he wished us to listen to unkind remarks on mother, and unkind reproaches for the trouble our coming had given, from Mrs. Partridge, who he said was so good. I wanted to tell him that we *had* tried to be good, hard as it was on us to be sent suddenly among strangers— I wanted to tell him that I wished to do *everything* mother had said, that I wished to please him, and to love him, but when I looked up at his face, and saw the stern expression it had, I felt it was no use, and I too turned away.

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But just at the door Uncle Geoff stopped and looked back. I suppose the hard set look of unhappiness on my childish face touched him. He turned, and stooping down put his arm round me, and kissed me.

"Don't look so miserable, Audrey," he said. "*That* is not what I wish at all." I looked up at him again—his face looked ever so much kinder. I was on the point of saying some nice words, like "Uncle Geoff, I do want to be good," or something of that sort, which perhaps would have helped to make him find out that Mrs. Partridge was really not managing us as he wished, when suddenly I felt the paper—Pierson's letter I mean—rustle a little under the pressure of his hand. I felt my face grow red. Suppose he found the letter and took it away? I was so little accustomed to conceal anything that I felt quite guilty, and in my fear I drew away a little from his arm. He said nothing, but he must have been chilled, for he took away his arm, and turned to go, and as he left the room, I was almost sure that I heard him say in a half whisper, "Strange child! I am afraid we shall have trouble with her."

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CHAPTER VI.

WE TRY TO BE GOOD.

"Our sister is quite in her glory,
When telling us nice little tales."

As ill-luck would have it, this day also was wet and dreary. I don't know that Mrs. Partridge or Sarah regretted it, for if it had been fine one of the servants would have had to take us out for a walk. But we were very sorry. Anything would have been better than another long dreary day up in the dull nursery. Still we had some variety to-day, for our tutor came to give us our first lesson, which took up two hours. He was not a very amusing person; he was very thin and tired-looking, but he was perfectly gentle, so we liked him well enough. We liked him too for another reason. He said that we were very well on for our ages; and as mother had always taught us herself, we felt quite pleased for him to say so. He left us some lessons to do for the next day, but not much. Long before the afternoon was half over we had finished them, and were wondering whatever we could get to do to help us through all the hours that still remained. This was not a day for Uncle Geoff seeing people in his house, so we had not even the fun of listening to the carriages stopping, and the bell ringing, and trying to peep at the ladies and gentlemen getting out. Sarah was rather kind—she came in and out to see us as often as she could, but of course she had a great deal of work to do, and she said Mrs. Partridge made her work even harder than she needed. Mrs. Partridge did not come up-stairs again herself all day, and of that we were very glad— I suppose she found the stairs too much for her.



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He was not a very amusing person.

Before the end of that afternoon, I think we had changed our minds about wishing we might have no nurse. Even a rather cross nurse would have been better than none at all. It was very tiresome every time we wanted anything to have to fetch it ourselves, or to have to run out to the landing and stand there till Sarah happened to come in sight. There was no bell in the nursery, at least it was broken, but even if it hadn't been, we shouldn't have dared to ring it. And two buttons came off Racey's boot—both off the same boot, just out of tiresomeness—and he couldn't keep it on properly, and he had to wear cloth boots in the house, because the winter before he had had such bad chilblains, so I had to try to sew them on, and you don't know how I pricked my fingers! I do think there is nothing so horrible as sewing on boot buttons.

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And then when Tom and I were doing our writing for Mr. Lingard—that was our tutor—for the next day, Tom would pull the ink close over to him, and I pulled it back to me, and we both got cross, and the end of it was that the ink was all spilt over the table; and oh! it made such a big black pool, and then little streams of it began running to the edge, and would have fallen on to the carpet.

"Oh," said Tom, "I'll wipe it up;" and up he jumped to fetch something to wipe it with, and before I could see what he was about, what do you think he had done? He had seized my Lady Florimel's opera cloak, which was lying on a chair—of course it *shouldn't* have been lying about, I know—and scrubbed up the ink with it all in a minute. The cloak was black silk outside, so he thought it was just a piece of black stuff lying about—but inside it was lovely pale pink, and of course it was quite spoilt. I was so vexed that I began to cry, and then Tom was dreadfully sorry, and came and hugged and kissed me, and so we made friends again, and the ink spilling sent away our quarrelling any way. And perhaps it was better for Lady Florimel's cloak to be spoilt, than for the carpet, for then we should have had a very great scolding from Mrs. Partridge. It didn't matter for the table, as it just had an oilcloth cover that would not stain. And when we had made friends again, we all climbed up on to the window-sill, and began to wonder what we should do.

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"Tom," said Racey, pressing his face flat against the window, so as to see out better, "Tom, have you seen the air-garden?"

"The air-garden," repeated Tom, "what do you mean?"

"He means that little sticking out glass place," I explained, "with flowers and plants in—there, further down on the other side."

"A preservatory," said Tom, rather contemptuously, "why, who would think what you meant, if you say a' air-garden?"

"I zink it's a much prettier name than 'servatory," said Racey indignantly.

I began to be afraid of getting into quarrelling again just from having nothing to do; the big clock

on the stair which we could hear from the nursery, had struck only three a few minutes before, and there was still a whole hour to tea. The boys were really tired of all their toys, and I didn't care to play with my dolls. The misfortune to Lady Florimel's cloak had put me out of conceit of them for the present.

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"Let's tell each other stories," I said.

"Don't know none," said Tom.

"Well, make them up," said I.

"I know lots," remarked Racey.

"Well, you begin then," said I.

"Oh no," objected Tom, "Racey's stories are *so* silly. You tell us one, Audrey, and I'll think of one while you are telling it."

"Thank you—how much would you listen to mine, if you were making one yourself all the time?"

"Oh but I *would* listen—*dear* Audrey, your stories are always so nice," said Tom, coaxingly; but Racey was so offended at Tom saying his stories were stupid, that he wouldn't speak at all.

"Well, I'll tell one if you'll let Racey tell one too. I don't think his are stupid at all. And if you can think of one, you can tell yours too. Let's all be quiet for five minutes to think of them."

"Mine's all ready," said Racey. "It's about a——"

"Hush, you're not to tell till it's your turn," said Tom sharply, so that Racey looked offended again; and I was in such a hurry to stop their quarrelling, that I had to begin my story before I had got it half settled. I mean before I had thought quite how to tell it rightly, for the story itself was true, as mother had told it me herself.

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"Tom and Racey," I said, "I don't think you ever heard the story I am going to tell you. Mother told it to me one day when you weren't in the room. It is about mother's godmother when she was a little girl."

"Mother's godmother's little girl," said Tom, looking rather puzzled.

"No, of course not, you stupid boy," said I, at which Tom looked offended. It seemed as if we couldn't get out of the way of quarrelling that afternoon, and the minute I had said it, I was sorry. "Oh, dear Tom, don't be vexed. I didn't mean to call you stupid," I said, quickly. "I'll tell you how I mean. Mother had a godmother, you know, just like you have Uncle Geoff for your godfather. And mother was called after her godmother, whose name was like mother's of course, as she was called after her. Well, this godmother was partly French and partly English, and of course when she was young, before she was grown up, she was a little girl, just like everybody else."

"Except boys," said Tom very seriously. He was anxious to show me that he was giving his whole attention. "When men are little they're boys, not girls."

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"Of course," I said again. "Well, any way, you see now how I mean—this lady, Madame——I forget her last name, it's very hard to say, I'll call her Marie, for that was her first name, and of course when she was little she wasn't called Madame——, well when she was little, she was taken for a visit to her grandmother, who lived in France."

"Didn't she live in France herself?" said Tom; "I thought you said she was French."

"She was partly French—not all. No, I don't think she lived in France. They took her there for a visit, so she couldn't have been living there. She went to stay with her grandmother, I told you, and her grandmother lived in a queer old town, that was as old as—as old as—" I stopped to think of the oldest thing I knew.

"As old as old," suggested Tom.

"As old as twenty grandmothers, all top of each 'nother," said Racey.

This was thought very witty, and we spent a minute or two in laughing at it. Then I started again. "Well, never mind how old it was, any way it was very old, for mother told me she had once been there herself, and the churches and houses were all like old castles, the walls were so thick, and the stones they were made of so grey and worn-looking. And in this old town once a year, there was a great, great, big fair—you know what I mean, boys—people used to come from ever so far, bringing things to sell, and all the biggest streets were set out with little wooden shops, with all the things in. There were even Turkish and Chinese people selling things; and all the people in the town, and the country people round about, used to look forward all the year to the things they would buy at this fair. It wasn't all for buying though; there were lots of show things, animals you know, shows of lions and tigers, and snakes and monkeys, and other shows, like circuses—ladies and gentlemen all dressed up, and even little children riding round and round on beautiful horses, and sometimes dancing up in the air on ropes. And there were music places, and lots of shops too, where you could get nice things to eat—altogether it was very nice. Marie used to go out for a walk every day with her nurse, and she always pulled and pulled till she came the way to where the fair was. But her grandmother told the nurse she must never take Marie to the fair without *her*, because there were sometimes such crowds and crowds of people, that the

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grandmother was afraid Marie might get hurt some way. Marie cried the day her grandmother said that, because she wanted very much to go to spend some money that some one had sent her, or given her; perhaps her father had sent it her in a letter for her birthday—I think that was it. She was only five years old, quite a little girl, so it was no wonder she cried. And so her grandmother promised she would take her the next day if it was fine; and it was fine, so Marie set off to the fair with her grandmother, and her nurse walked behind. It must have been a *very* funny place mother told me, for besides all the Turkey people, and Chinese, and Spanish, and all that, there were all the funny dresses of the country people themselves. The women had high caps, all stuck up with wires, and bright coloured skirts, and velvet bodies. I know what they were like, because mother had a doll once that her godmother had sent her dressed that way, and mother remembered it quite. I wish we could see a picture of that fair now, don't you, Tom? how funny it would be, and even that little Marie's dress would look funny and old-fashioned now!"

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"What would it be like?" said Tom.

"I don't know. I dare say it would be something like the little tiny pictures there used to be in the drawing-room, hanging up in velvet cases on the wall—mini—something mother called them, of papa's aunts when they were little. They had white frocks, and blue sashes, tied right under their arms, and their hair all curling."

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"Oh yes, I remember," said Tom. "Go on, Audrey, I can fancy Marie quite well."

"Well, she went trotting along beside her grandmother, and she was very pleased, because she had her money to spend, and she was a very pretty little girl, so everybody looked at her. And she was very nicely dressed, and her hair was beautiful; I was forgetting that, for it has to do with the story—long, long curls of bright light hair down her back. And she bought with her money a very pretty little basket with roses painted outside; and after a while, when they had looked at all the shops, her grandmother thought it was time to go home. They had to pass through a very crowded place, where a lot of people were standing to see some kind of show, and Marie's grandmother said to the nurse, 'Wait a minute, the crowd will be going, for the show is just over.' So the nurse, who had Marie's hand, stepped back just a little bit to wait, and Marie, seeing her grandmother just in front pulled away from the nurse to get beside her grandmother. But just then—they were standing like at the edge of the crowd, you know—Marie caught sight of a funnily dressed up dog, that a man had on a table, and that he was making bow to the people that passed. Meaning to come back in a moment, Marie darted away to see the dog, and just for a little while the nurse didn't miss her, thinking she was with her grandmother, for she had said when she pulled away her hand, 'I want to go to grandmother,' and of course her grandmother didn't miss her, thinking she was behind with the nurse. Marie was so pleased with the dog that she stood for a minute or two looking at it, and laughing to herself at its tricks. And then she heard some one saying to her, in French of course—she could speak both French and English—'Oh, what pretty hair the young lady has! Oh, what a charming young lady!' And when she turned round she saw the person that was speaking to her was a gipsy-looking girl—of course Marie was too little to know that she was gipsy-looking—but she remembered that she had very dark hair and eyes, and a bright scarlet dress, and shiny gold things about her head. She must have been one of the rope-dancing players, mother told me, for afterwards her grandmother noticed that their tent was close by the dancing dog place. Little Marie looked up at the girl without speaking. Then the girl said to her, 'I have two little dogs that dance much better than that. Will the young lady come with me to see them?'

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"She held out her hand, but Marie would not take her hand, because she thought it was dirty. She wanted dreadfully to see the two dogs though, so she said to the girl, 'You show me where, and I'll come, and then you must take me back to my grandmother.'

"'Oh yes,' said the girl, 'you come after me, and then, when you've seen the dogs, I'll take you back to your grandmother.'

"So the girl turned another way and went in among the tents, like at the back of them, and Marie went after her. The girl walked quick, but she kept looking back to see if Marie was coming. Marie was coming as fast as she could, when all of a sudden, close to her it seemed, she heard the most awful big noise she had ever heard in her life; a roar, so dreadfully loud, that it seemed to shake the ground like thunder. Marie knew what it was, for when she had been at the fair before, alone with her nurse, she had heard it, though never so near, and her nurse had told her it was the lion, the great big lion they had in the animal show place."

"Oh Audrey," Racey interrupted, coming close up to me and cuddling his face into my shoulder, "don't tell stories about lions. It does so f'ighten me."

"Lubbish," said Tom, "do go on, Audrey. It's lovely." (Why Tom always said "lubbish" for "rubbish" I'm sure I don't know, for he could say his *r*'s well enough.)

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"Well," I went on, "Marie was no braver than Racey, for when she heard this terrible roar, she really thought the lion was coming after her, and she turned and ran, as fast as ever her feet could go, right the other way. She turned so suddenly and ran so fast, that when the gipsy girl turned round to look for her, she was out of sight."

"Was the gipsy vexed?" asked Tom.

"Of course she was."

"But it was very kind of her to say she would show Marie her two little dogs. Wasn't she a kind girl?"

"No, not really. Marie's grandmother told her afterwards that no doubt the girl had wanted to steal her, and that her people would have made Marie into a rope-dancing girl, because you see she was so pretty, and had such beautiful hair. And they would have taken her far away to other countries, and she was so little that after a while she would have forgotten her friends very likely, and her father and mother would never have seen her again. Just think what a difference it would have made if the lion hadn't roared just that minute! Marie would very likely have grown up a poor dancing girl, and nobody would ever have known who she was. And she would never have been mother's godmother, so I wouldn't ever have been telling you this story."

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"How queer!" said Tom, consideringly. "All just because of the lion's roar. But please go on, Audrey. Where did Marie run to?"

"Zes, where did she run to?" said Racey.

"You're a parrot, Racey. I don't believe you've been listening."

"I has," said Racey, indignantly.

"Well, she ran and ran, till she got quite out of the fair, and in among a lot of streets, where she didn't know her way a bit. She did know some of the big streets close to her grandmother's house a little, but these little narrow streets she didn't know one bit; and when she stopped, after running till she was quite out of breath, she didn't know how to go home at all. She was still frightened, she fancied perhaps the lion was running after her, and she looked about to see where she could go to be safe out of his way. Near to where she was she noticed a door open; she went up and peeped in. It was a kitchen, and in this kitchen an old woman was sitting with a pillow—not a pillow like what we have in bed, you know—but a hard cushion, more like a footstool, that's what they call a lace pillow—with a pillow before her, making lace. She looked a nice old woman, and the room seemed clean, and there were flowers in the window, so Marie peeped in a little further, and at last got in altogether, and stood in the doorway. The old woman looked up to see what it was that was in her light, and when she saw it was a little girl, she said, 'Good morning, miss,' to her very nicely, and asked her what she wanted. Marie said, 'Good morning, madame,' to her, quite nicely too, and then she said, still looking frightened—

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"'Oh it's the lion; I ran away from the lion, because I thought he was going to eat me up.'

"The old woman quite understood, for of course she knew about the fair and the animals that were there, and she saw that the little girl must have strayed away from her friends. So she made Marie come in, and she gave her a little chair to sit on, and some milk to drink, and then she asked her her name, to try to find out who she was, only unfortunately Marie didn't know any of her name except just 'Marie.'

"'Dear me,' said the old woman, 'that won't do, there's such lots of little Maries.'

"But she went on questioning her till she found that Marie was staying with her grandmother, that she had come over the sea to stay with her, and that her grandmother had a parrot, whose cage hung out of the window, and who talked to the people passing in the street, and that he called her grandmother's maid, 'Babette, Ba-Ba-bette.' And when Marie said that, the old woman quite jumped.

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"'To be sure, to be sure,' she said. 'I know who is the young lady's grandmother;' and up she got, and put away her lace, and took Marie by the hand to lead her home. Marie was just a little frightened at first to go out into the street again, for fear the lion should be coming that way; but the old woman told her she was sure he wouldn't be, and *really*, you know, though Marie didn't know it, she had far more reason to be afraid of the gipsy girl than of the poor lion, who had only been roaring to amuse himself in his cage. But they got on quite well through the streets, and just as they came to the corner near where was Marie's grandmother's house, there they saw her grandmother and the nurse, and Babette behind them, and the cook behind her, and the gardener last of all, all coming hurry-scurrying out of the house, all to go different ways to look for Marie. Her grandmother had come home, you see, thinking *perhaps* Marie had found her way there; but she and the nurse were most dreadfully frightened, and you can fancy how delighted they were when they found her. Only all the time of the fair after that, Marie's grandmother would not let her go out except in the garden, which was a big one though, for fear the gipsy dancing girl should try to steal her again."

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"But she *didn't*?" said Racey, drawing a long breath.

"No, of course she didn't. If she had, I couldn't have told you the story."

"Oh I'm *so* glad she didn't," said Racey again. "Oh Audrey, I'm *so* glad nobody stolened her, and that no lions eated her. Oh, it makes me s'iver to think of dipsies and lionsd."

"You little stupid," said Tom. Really he was very tiresome about teasing poor Racey sometimes.

"You're not to tease him, Tom," I said; "and now it's your turn to tell a story."

"Well," said Tom, "it's about a boy that was dedfully frightened of li—"

"Oh Audrey, he's going to make up a' ugly story about me," said Racey, beseechingly.

"No, no, I'm not," said Tom, "I was only teasing. My story's very nice, but it's very short. Once there was a bird that lived in a garden—Pierson told me this story—but when it came winter the bird went away to some place where it was always summer. I *think*, but I'm not quite sure—I *think* the bird went to the sun, Pierson said."

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"Oh no, it couldn't be that. The sun's much too far away. I've heard about those birds. They don't go to the sun, they go to countries at the other side of the world, where the sun always shines, that's what you're thinking of, Tom."

"Well, perhaps that was it," said Tom, only half satisfied, "though it would be much nicer to say they went to the sun. Well, this bird had a nest in the garden, and there was a girl that lived in the garden—I mean in the house where the garden was—that used to look at the birds, 'cause she liked them very much. And she liked this bird best, 'cause its nest was just under her window, and she heard it singing in the morning. And when it began to come winter she knew the bird would go away, so what do you think she did? She got it caught one day, and she tied a very weeny, weeny ribbon under its wing, some way that it couldn't come undone, and then she let it go. And soon it went away to that other country, and the winter came. And the girl was very ill that winter. I don't know if it was measles she had," said Tom, looking very wise, "but I should think it was. And they thought she was going to die after the winter was gone. And she kept wishing the birds would come back, 'cause she thought she'd die before they comed. But at last one morning she heard a little squeaking—no I don't mean squeaking—I mean chirping, just outside her window, and she called the servants, and told them she was sure her bird had come back, and they must catch it. And her nurse caught it some way, and brought it to her, and what do you think? when she looked under its wing, there was the weeny ribbon she had tied. It was the very same bird. Wasn't it clever to know to come back to the very same *window* even? It's quite true, Pierson knowed the girl."

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"And did she die?" I asked Tom.

"Oh no; she was so glad the bird had come back, that she jumped out of bed, and got quite well that very minute."

"That very minute, Tom," I said; "she couldn't get well all in a minute."

"Oh, but she just did; and if you don't believe it, you needn't. Pierson knowed her. *I* think it's a very nice story, not frightening at all."

"Yes, it's very nice," I said. "Thank you, Tom. Now, Racey, it's your turn."

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CHAPTER VII.

TOAST FOR TEA.

"Did you hear the children say.
Life is rather out of tune?"

"Mine's very stupid," said Racey.

"Never mind, I dare say it'll be very nice," said Tom and I encouragingly.

"It's about a fly," said Racey. "It was a fly that lived in a little house down in the corner of a window, and when it was a fine day it comed out and walked about the glass, and when it was a bad day it stayed in its bed. And one day when it was walking about the glass there was a little boy standing there and he caught the fly, and he thought he'd pull off its wings, 'cause then it couldn't get away—that was dedfully naughty, wasn't it?—and he was just going to pull off its wings when some one came behind him and lifted him up by his arms and said in a' awful *booing* way—like a giant, you know—'If you pull off flies' wings, I'll pull off your arms,' and then he felt his arms tugged so, that he thought they'd come off, and he cried out—'Oh please, please, I won't pull off flies' wings if you'll let me go.' And then he was let go; but when he turned round he couldn't see anybody—wasn't it queer?—only the fly was very glad, and he never tried to hurt flies any more."

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"But who was it that pulled the boy's arms?" said Tom, whose interest had increased as the story went on.

Racey looked rather at a loss. "I don't know," he said. "I should think it was a' ogre. It *might* just have been the boy's papa, to teach him not to hurt flies, you know."

"That would be very stupid," said Tom.

"Well, it *might* have been a' ogre," said Racey. "I made the story so quick I didn't quite settle. But I'll tell you another if you like, *all* about ogres, kite real ones and awful dedful."

"No, thank you," said Tom, "I don't care for your stories, Racey. They're all muddled."

Racey looked extremely hurt.

"Then I'll never tell you any more," he said. "I'll tell them all to Audrey, and you sha'n't listen."

"Indeed," said Tom, "I can listen if I choose. And when the new nurse comes she won't let you go on like that. She'll be *vrezy* cross, I know." [Pg 129]

Racey turned to me, his eyes filled with tears.

"Audrey, *will* the new nurse be like that?"

I turned to Tom.

"Tom," I said, "why do you say such unkind things to Racey?"

Tom nodded his head mysteriously.

"It's not unkind to Racey than it is to us," he replied. "I'm sure the new nurse will be cross, because I heard Mrs. Partridge say something to Uncle Geoff on the stair to-day about that we should have somebody '*vrezy* strict.' And I know that means cross."

"When did you hear that?" I asked.

"'Twas this afternoon. Uncle Geoff hadn't time to come up. He just called out to Mrs. Partridge to ask how we were getting on. And she said in that horrid smiley way she speaks sometimes—'Oh, *vrezy* well, sir. Much better since their nurse is gone. They need somebody much stricter.' Isn't she horrid, Audrey?"

"Never mind," I said. But that was all I would say. I would not tell the boys all I was feeling or thinking; they could hardly have understood the depth of my anger and wounded pride, though I really don't think it was a very bad kind of pride. I had always been trusted at home. When I was cross or ill-tempered, mother spoke seriously to me, sometimes even sternly, but she seemed to believe that I wanted to be good, and that I had sense to understand things. And now to be spoken of behind my back, and before my face too, as if I was a regularly naughty child who didn't want to be good, and who had to be kept down by strictness, and who wanted to make the boys naughty too—it was more than I could bear or than I would bear. [Pg 130]

"Mother told me to make the boys happy," I said to myself, "and I *will*. I'll write to Pierson—to-night, when nobody can see, I'll write to her."

Tom and Racey saw that I was unhappy, though I only said "never mind," and when they saw that, it made them leave off quarrelling, and they both came to me to kiss me and ask me not to look "so sorry."

Just then Sarah came up with our tea-tray. She spoke very kindly to us, and told us she had begged Mrs. Partridge to send us some strawberry jam for our tea. And to the boys' great delight, there it was. As for me, I was too angry with Mrs. Partridge to like even her jam, but I did think it kind of Sarah.

"I'm sure you deserve it, you poor little things," she said. "And I don't see what any one has to find fault with in any of you. You've been as quiet as any three little mice to-day." [Pg 131]

"Sarah," I said, encouraged by her way of speaking, "have you heard anything about the new nurse that is coming?"

Sarah shook her head.

"I don't think there's any one decided on," she said. "Mrs. Partridge has written to somewhere in the country, and I think she's expecting a letter. She said to-day that if to-morrow's fine, I must take you all out a walk."

Then she arranged our tea on the table and we drew in our chairs.

"I wish we had a tea-pot," I said. "I know quite well how to pour it out. It's horrid this way."

"This way," was an idea of Mrs. Partridge's. Since we had had no nurse, she had been unwilling to trust me with the tea-making, so she made it down-stairs and poured the whole—tea, milk, and sugar—into a jug, out of which I poured it into our cups. It wasn't nearly so nice, it had not the hot freshness of tea straight out of a tea-pot, and besides it did not suit our tastes, which were all a little different, to be treated precisely alike. Racey liked his tea so weak that it was hardly tea at all, Tom liked his sweet, and I liked hardly any sugar, so the jug arrangement suited none of us; Racey the best, perhaps, for it was certainly not strong, and sweeter than *I* liked, any way. But this evening the unexpected treat of the strawberry jam made the boys less difficult to please about the tea. [Pg 132]

"It was rather kind of Mrs. Partridge to send us the jam," said Tom. He spoke timidly; he didn't quite like to say she was kind till he had, as it were, got my leave to do so.

"It isn't *her* jam," I said. "It's Uncle Geoff's, and indeed I shouldn't wonder if the strawberries were from our garden. I remember mother always used to say 'We must send some fruit to Geoff.'"

"Yes," said Tom, "I remember that too." He was just about biting into a large slice of bread and butter *without* jam—I had kept to old rules and told the boys they must eat one big piece "plain," first—when a new idea struck him.

"Audrey," he said, "do you know what would be lovely? Supposing we made toast. I don't think there's *anything* so nice as toast with strawberry jam."

Tom looked at me with so touching an expression in his dark eyes—he might have been making some most pathetic request—that I really could not resist him. Besides which, to confess the truth, the proposal found great favour in my own eyes. I looked considerably at the ready-cut slices of bread and butter. [Pg 133]

"They're very thick for toast," I said, "and the worst of it is they're all buttered already."

"*That* wouldn't matter," said Tom, "it'd be buttered toast. That's the nicest of all."

"It *wouldn't*, you stupid boy," I said, forgetting my dignity; "the butter would all melt before the bread was toasted, and there'd be no butter at all when it was done. But I'll tell you what we might do; let's scrape off all the butter we can, and then spread it on the toast again when it's ready, before the fire. That's how I've seen Pierson do. I mean that she spread it on before the fire—of course she didn't have to scrape it off first."

"I should think not," said Tom; "it's only that horrid Mrs. Partridge makes us have to do such things."

We set to work eagerly enough however, notwithstanding our indignation. With the help of our tea-spoons we scraped off a good deal of butter and put it carefully aside ready to be spread on again.

"The worst of it is it'll be such awfully thick toast," I said, looking at the sturdy slices with regret. "I wish we could split them." [Pg 134]

"But we can't," said Tom, "we've no knife. What a shame it is not to let us have a knife, not even *you*, Audrey, and I'm sure you are big enough."

"I've a great mind to keep one back from dinner to-morrow," I said, "I don't believe they'd notice. Tom, it's rather fun having to plan so, isn't it? It's something like being prisoners, and Mrs. Partridge being the—the—I don't know what they call the man that shuts up the prisoners."

"Pleeceman?" said Racey. [Pg 135]

"No, I don't mean that. The policeman only takes them to prison, he doesn't keep them when they are once there. But let's get on with the toast, or our tea'll be all cold before we're ready for it."

It was no good thinking of splitting the slices, we had to make the best of them, thick as they were. And it took all our planningness to do without a toasting-fork. The tea-spoons were so short that it burnt our hands to hold them so near the fire, and for a minute or two we were quite in despair. At last we managed it. We made holes at the crusty side of the slices, and *tied* them with string—of which, of course, there were always plenty of bits in Tom's pockets; I believe if he'd been in a desert island for a year he still would have found bits of string to put in his pockets—to the end of the poker and to the two ends of the tongs. They dangled away beautifully; two succeeded admirably, the third unfortunately was hopelessly burnt. We repeated the operation for another set of slices, which all succeeded, then we spread them with the scraped butter in front of the fire by means of the flat ends of our tea-spoons, and at last, very hot, very buttery, very hungry, but triumphant, we sat round the table again to regale ourselves with our tepid tea, but beautifully hot toast, whose perfection was completed by a good thick layer of strawberry jam.



We made holes at the crusty side of the slices, and tied them with string. [Pg 136]

We had eaten three slices, and were just about considering how we could quite fairly divide the remaining two among the three of us,—rather a puzzle, for Tom's proposal that he and I should each take a slice and give Racey half, didn't do. [Pg 137]

"That would give Racey a half more than us—at least a quarter more. No, it wouldn't be a quarter either. Any way, that wouldn't do," I said. "Let's cut each slice into three bits and each take two."

"And how can we cut without a knife?" said Tom.

"How can he marry without a wife?" I quoted out of the nursery rhyme, which set us all off laughing, so that we didn't hear a terrible sound steadily approaching the door. Stump, stump, it came, but we heard nothing till the door actually opened, and even then we didn't stop laughing all at once. We were excited by our toast-making; it was the first time since we were in London that our spirits had begun to recover themselves, and it wasn't easy to put them down again in a hurry. Even the sight of Mrs. Partridge's *very* cross face at the door didn't do so all at once.

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I dare say we looked very wild, we were very buttery and jammy, and our faces were still broiling, our hair in confusion and our pinafores crumpled and smeared. Then the fender was pulled away from the fire, and the poker, tongs, and shovel strewed the ground, and somehow or other we had managed to burn a little hole in the rug. There was a decidedly burny smell in the room, which we ourselves had not noticed, but which, it appeared, had reached Mrs. Partridge's nose in Uncle Geoff's bedroom on the drawing-room floor, where, unfortunately, she had come to lay away some linen. And she had really been seriously frightened, poor old woman.

Being frightened makes some people cross, and finding out they have been frightened for no reason makes some people *very* cross. Mrs. Partridge had arrived at being cross on her way upstairs; when she opened the nursery door and saw the confusion we had made, and heard our shouts of laughter, she naturally became *very* cross.

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She came into the room and stood for a minute or two looking at us without speaking. And in our wonder—for myself I can't say "fear," I was too ready to be angry to be afraid, but poor Tom and Racey must have been afraid, for they got down from their chairs and stood close beside me, each holding me tightly—in our wonder as to what was going to happen next, our merriment quickly died away. We waited without speaking, looking up at the angry old woman with open-mouthed astonishment. And at last she broke out.

"Oh, you naughty children, you naughty, naughty children," she said. "To think of your daring to behave so after my kindness in sending you jam for your tea, and the whole house upset to take you in. How dare you behave so? Your poor uncle's nice furniture ruined, the carpet burnt to pieces as any one can smell, and the house all but set on fire. Oh, you naughty, *naughty* children! Come away with me, sir," she said, making a dive at Tom, who happened to be the nearest to her, "come away with me that I may take you to your uncle and tell him what that naughty sister of yours has put into your head—for that it's all her, I'm certain sure."

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Tom dodged behind me and avoided Mrs. Partridge's hand. When he found himself at what he considered a safe distance he faced round upon her.

"Audrey isn't naughty, and you sha'n't say she is. None of us is naughty—not just now any way. But if it was naughty to make toast, it was me, and not Audrey, that thought of it first."

"You *impertinent* boy," was all Mrs. Partridge could find breath to say. But she did not try to catch Tom again, and indeed it would have been little use, for he began a sort of dancing jig from side to side, which would have made it very difficult for any one but a very quick, active person to get hold of him. "You rude, impertinent boy," she repeated, and then, without saying anything more, she turned and stumped out of the room.

Tom immediately stopped his jig.

"I wonder what she's going to do, Audrey," he said.

"To call Uncle Geoff, I expect," I said quietly. "He must be in, because she said something about taking you down to him."

Tom looked rather awestruck.

"Shall you mind, Audrey?" he asked.

"No, not a bit. I hope she has gone to call him," I said. "We've *not* done anything naughty, so I don't care."

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"But if she makes him think we have, and if he writes to papa and mother that we're naughty, when they did so tell us to be good," said Tom, very much distressed. "Oh, Audrey, wouldn't that be dreadful?"

"Papa and mother wouldn't believe it," I persisted. "We've *not* been naughty, except that we quarrelled a little this afternoon. I'll write a letter myself, and I know they'll believe me, and I'll get Pierson to write a letter too."

"But Pierson's away," said Tom.

"Well, I can write to her too."

This seemed to strike Tom as a good idea.

"How lucky it is you've got your desk and paper, and embelopes and everything all ready," he said. "You can write without anybody knowing. If I could make letters as nice as you, Audrey, I'd

write too."

"Never mind. I can say it all quite well," I said, "but I won't do it just yet for fear Mrs. Partridge comes back again."

I had hardly said the words when we heard a quick, firm step coming up-stairs. We looked at each other; we knew who it must be.

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Uncle Geoff threw open the door and walked in.

"Children," he said, "what is all this I hear? I am very sorry that all of you—you Audrey, especially, who are old enough to know better, and to set the boys a good example—should be so troublesome and disobedient. I cannot understand you. I had no idea I should have had anything like this."

He looked really puzzled and worried, and I would have liked to say something gentle and nice to comfort him. But I said to myself, "What's the use? He won't believe anything but what Mrs. Partridge says," and so I got hard again and said nothing.

"Where is the burnt carpet?" then said Uncle Geoff, looking about him as if he expected to see some terrible destruction.

I stooped down on the floor and poked about till I found the little round hole where the spark had fallen.

"There," I said, "that's the burnt place."

Uncle Geoff stooped too and examined the hole. The look on his face changed. I could almost have fancied he was going to smile. He began sniffing as if he did not understand what he smelt.

"*That* can't have made such a smell of burning," he said.

"No, it was the slice of toast that fell into the fire that made most of the smell," I said. "It had some butter on. We were toasting our bread—that was what made Mrs. Partridge so angry."

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"How did you toast it?"

Tom, who was nearest the fireplace, held up the poker and tongs, on which still hung some bits of string.

"We made holes in the bread and tied it on," he said.

At this Uncle Geoff's face really did break into a smile. All might have ended well, had it not unfortunately happened that just at this moment Mrs. Partridge—who had taken till now to arrive at the top of the stairs—came stumping into the room. Her face was very red, and she looked, as she would have said herself, very much "put about."

"Oh dear, sir," she exclaimed, when she saw Uncle Geoff on his knees on the floor, "oh dear, sir, you shouldn't trouble yourself so."

"I wanted to see the damage for myself," he said, getting up as he spoke, "it isn't very bad after all. Your fears have exaggerated it, Partridge."

Mrs. Partridge did not seem at all pleased.

"Well, sir," she said, "it's natural for me to have felt upset. And even though not much harm may have been done to the carpet, think what might be, once children make free with the fire. And it isn't even that, I feel the most, sir—children will be children and need constant looking after—but it's their rudeness, sir—the naughty way they've spoken to me ever since they came. From the very first moment I saw that Miss Audrey had made up her mind to take her own way, and no one else's, and it's for their own sake I speak, sir. It's a terrible pity when children are allowed to be rude and disobedient to those who have the care of them, and it's a thing at my age, sir, I can't stand."

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Uncle Geoff's face clouded over again. Mrs. Partridge had spoken quite quietly and seemingly without temper. And now that I look back to it, I believe she did believe what she said. She had worked herself up to think us the naughtiest children there ever were, and really did not know how much was her own prejudice. No doubt it had been very "upsetting" to her to have all of a sudden three children brought into the quiet orderly house she had got to think almost her own, even though of course it was really Uncle Geoff's, and no doubt too, from the first, which was partly Pierson's fault, though she hadn't meant it, the boys and I had taken a dislike to her and had not shown ourselves to advantage. I can see all how it was quite plainly now—now that I have so often talked over this time of troubles with mother and with aunt—(but I am forgetting, I mustn't tell you that yet). But at the time, I could see no excuse for Mrs. Partridge. I thought she was telling stories against us on purpose, and I hated her for telling them in the quiet sort of way she did, which I could see made Uncle Geoff believe her.

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All the smile had gone out of his face when he turned to us again.

"Rudeness and disobedience," he repeated slowly, looking at us—at Tom and me especially, "what an account to send to your parents! I do not think there is any use my saying any more. I said all I could to you, Audrey, this morning, and you are the eldest. I *trusted* you to do your utmost to show the boys a good example. Partridge, we must do our best to get a firm, strict nurse for them

at once. I cannot have my house upset in this way."

He turned and went away without saying a word—without even wishing us good night. It was very, very hard upon us, and I must say hard on me particularly, for I *know* I had been trying my best—trying to be patient and cheerful and to make the little boys the same. And now to have Uncle Geoff so entirely turned against us, and worst of all to think of him writing to papa and mother about our being naughty! What *would* they think?—that we had not even been able to be good for one week after they had left us would seem so dreadful. I did not seem as if I wanted to write to papa and mother *myself*—it would have been like complaining of Uncle Geoff, and besides, saying of myself that I had been trying to be good wouldn't have seemed much good. But I felt more and more that some one must write and tell them the truth, and the only person I could think of to do so was Pierson. So I settled in my own mind to write to her as soon as I could; that was the only thing I could settle.

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In punishment, I suppose, for our having been—as she called it—"so naughty," Mrs. Partridge sent Sarah to put us to bed extra early that evening. Sarah was very kind and sympathising, but I now can see that she was not very sensible. She was angry with Mrs. Partridge herself, and everything she said made us feel more angry.

"I hope it will be fine to-morrow, so that I can take you out a walk," she said, when she had put us all to bed and was turning away. "By the day after I suppose the new nurse will be coming."

We all three started up at that.

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"*Will* she, Sarah?" we said. "What have you heard about her?"

"Oh, I don't know anything settled," Sarah replied, "but I believe Mrs. Partridge is going into the country to-morrow to see some one, and to hear her talk you'd think her only thought was to get some one as hard and strict as can be. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child,' and such like things she's been saying in the kitchen this evening. A nice character she'll give of you to the new nurse. My word, but I should feel angry if I saw her dare to lay a hand on Master Tom or Master Racey."

I beckoned to Sarah to come nearer, and spoke to her in a whisper for the boys not to hear.

"Sarah," I said, "do tell me, do you really think Mrs. Partridge will tell the new nurse to whip Tom and Racey? They have never been whipped in their lives, and I think it would kill them, Sarah."

"Oh no, Miss Audrey, not so bad as that," said Sarah. "But still, from what I've seen of them, I shouldn't say they were boys to be whipped. It would break Master Tom's spirit, and frighten poor Master Racey out of all his pretty ways. And if you take my advice, Miss Audrey, you'll make a regular complaint to your uncle if such a thing ever happens."

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"It would be no use," I said aloud, but to myself I said in a whisper, "I shouldn't wait for that."

It was quite evident to me from what Sarah had said that she did think the new nurse would not only be allowed, but would be ordered to whip us—the boys at least—if they were what Mrs. Partridge chose to call naughty. And it was quite evident to me that any nurse who agreed to treat children so could not be a nice person. There was no use speaking to Uncle Geoff, he could only see things as Mrs. Partridge put them, and of course I could not say she told actual stories. She did worse, for she told things *her* way. There was only one thing I was sure of. Mother certainly did not want her dear little boys to be whipped by *any* nurse, and she had left them in my charge and trusted me to make them happy.

All sorts of plans ran through my head as I lay trying not to go to sleep, and yet feeling sleep coming steadily on me in spite of my troubles.

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CHAPTER VIII.

WANTED A STAMP.

"I am so old, so old, I can write a letter."

I had meant, you will remember, to write my letter to Pierson late at night when everybody was in bed. I had been afraid of writing it till I was sure everybody was asleep, for if the light in the nursery had been seen, there was no saying what Mrs. Partridge might not have done, she would have been so angry. So I settled in my own mind to get up in the middle of the night—quite in the middle—to write it. But nobody—no big person at least—will be surprised to hear that for all my plans and resolutions I never woke! The beginning and the middle of the night passed, and the end came, and it was not till the faint winter dawn was trying to make its way through the smoky London air that I woke up, to find it was morning—for a few minutes later I heard the stair clock strike seven. [Pg 150]

At first I was dreadfully vexed with myself, then I began to think perhaps it was better. Even in the very middle of the night I might have been seen, and, after all, the letter would not have gone any sooner for having been written in the night instead of in the day-time. And in the day-time it was easy for me to write without minding any one seeing me, for Tom and I had our lessons to do for our tutor for the next day.

As soon as he had gone, therefore, I got my paper and set to work. I am not going to tell you just yet what I wrote to Pierson. You will know afterwards. You see I want to make my story as like a proper one as I can, *in case* aun— oh, there I am again, like a goose, going to spoil it all! I meant to say, that I have noticed that in what I call proper stories, real book, printed ones, though it all seems to come quite smooth and straight, it is really arranged quite plannedly—you are told just a bit, and then you are quietly taken away to another bit, and though you never think of it at the time, you find it all out afterwards. Well, I wrote my letter to Pierson after Tom and I had finished our lessons for our tutor. I told Tom I had written it, and then—the next thing was how to get it stamped and taken to the post. [Pg 151]

"I wish I had thought of buying a stamp when we were out this morning," I said. I have forgotten to tell you that in the morning, early, we had been out a short walk with Sarah. Only a very short one however, for Sarah had to hurry back, because of course Mrs. Partridge said she needed her, and our tutor was coming at eleven. Still we were very glad to go out at all.

"Sarah would have known; would you have minded?" said Tom.

Somehow it made me feel sorry and puzzled to hear him talk like that. We had always been used to being quite open about everything—we had never thought about any one knowing or not knowing about anything we did, except of course surprises about birthday presents and those kind of things. And now in one short week Tom seemed to have got into little underhand ways—of not wanting people to know, and that kind of thing. I had too, but somehow it made me more sorry for Tom than for myself—it was so unlike his bright open way.

"No," I said, "I wouldn't have minded. At least not for myself, only perhaps Mrs. Partridge would have scolded Sarah if she had found out we had been to the post-office." [Pg 152]

"How *shall* we get it posted?" said Tom. "If we had a stamp I could run with it. I saw a box for letters a very little way round the corner."

"Did you?" I said. "That's a good thing. Let's wait a little, and perhaps there'll come some chance of getting out. I should think we could get a stamp at some shop—there were shops round the corner too."

It was a great satisfaction to have got the letter written. I looked at it with a good deal of pride—the address I was sure was right, I had copied it so exactly from the one at the end of Pierson's letter. Though the boys did not know exactly what I had written to Pierson, they seemed to feel happier since knowing I had written something, and they had a vague idea that somehow or other brighter days would come for us in consequence.

Uncle Geoff had not been up to see us this morning—nor had he sent for us to go down. I was very glad, and yet I did not think it was at all kind. I did not know till a good while afterwards that he had not been at home since the day before, as he had been sent for to a distance to see somebody who was very ill. [Pg 153]

At one o'clock we had had our dinner—it was not as nice a one as we had had the other days, and we said to each other it was because Mrs. Partridge was angry still about the toast. We said so to Sarah too, and though she made no reply we could see she thought the same.

"And we shall have no strawberry jam for tea to-night," said Tom, sadly.

"No 'tawberry dam," said Racey, and the corners of his mouth went down as if he were going to cry. He had been thinking of the strawberry jam, I dare say, as a sort of make up for the dry rice pudding at dinner—quite dry and hard it was, not milky at all, and Mrs. Partridge knew we liked milky puddings.

"Don't be so sure of that," said Sarah, who was taking away the things. "If you are all very good this afternoon I dare say you will have strawberry jam for tea. Mrs. Partridge is going out at three o'clock, and she won't be back till six, so the tea will be my business."

The boys were quite pleased to have something to look forward to, and I, for my own reasons, was glad to hear Mrs. Partridge was going out.

It was, for November, a bright afternoon, much brighter than we had had yet. Tom, who was standing at the window looking out, gave a great sigh.

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"What's the matter, Master Tom?" said Sarah.

"I would so like to go out and play in the garden," said poor Tom. "What a horrid house this is, to have no garden! Sarah, aren't you going to take us a walk this afternoon?"

Sarah shook her head. "I can't, Master Tom," she said; "Mrs. Partridge is in such a fuss about going out herself as never was, and I've got a great deal to do. But if you'll try to amuse yourselves till tea-time, I'll see if I can't think of something to please you after that."

"It's *so* long to tea-time," said Tom, discontentedly; "one, two, three hours—at least two and a half."

"Couldn't we have tea sooner, Sarah," I said; "as soon as ever Mrs. Partridge goes? We've not had a very good dinner, and I'm sure we shall be hungry."

Sarah considered.

"Well, I'll see if I can't get it for you by half-past three," she said.

Two hours even to half-past three! And the more tempting look of the day outside made it more tiresome to have to stay in. We really didn't know *what* to do to pass the time. I couldn't propose telling stories again, for we had had so much of them the day before. Racey, as usual, seemed content enough with his everlasting horses, but Tom got very tiresome. I was trying to make a new lining to Lady Florimel's opera cloak with a piece of silk I had found among my treasures. It was rather difficult to do it neatly, and I had no one to help me, and as it was Tom's fault that the other one had been spoiled, I really did think he might have been nice and not teasing. But he was really *very* tiresome—he kept pulling it out of my hands, and if ever I turned round for a moment, some of my things—my scissors or thimble or something—were sure to have disappeared. At last I got so angry that I could be patient no longer.

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"Tom," I said, "you are perfectly unbearable," and I tried to snatch from him my reel of sewing cotton which he had pulled away just as I was going to take a new thread. But he jumped up on a chair and stretched his hand out of my reach. I climbed up after him—I was crying with vexation—and had nearly succeeded in pulling his arm down to get at the reel tightly clasped in his hand, when unluckily—oh, how unlucky we were!—the chair toppled over, and Tom and I both fell on the ground in a heap. I screamed, and I think Tom screamed, and just at that moment Uncle Geoff put his head in at the door. Was it not unfortunate? Such a scene—Tom and I kicking and quarrelling on the floor, Racey crying because in our fall we had interfered with what he called his railway line round the room, a jug of water which Tom had fetched out of the bedroom—threatening, to tease me, to wash Florimel's face—and which he had forgotten to take back again, upset and broken and a stream all over the carpet—oh dear, it was unlucky!

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We jumped up as quickly as we could, and stood silent and ashamed. Had it been Uncle Geoff alone, I think we would have told him frankly how sorry we were, and perhaps he would have got to understand us better, but of course there was Mrs. Partridge stumping in behind him. Uncle Geoff did not speak to us, he turned round to Mrs. Partridge at once.

"Really," he said, "this is too bad. If these children cannot be trusted to be alone five minutes without risk of burning themselves or drowning themselves, can't you let some one stay with them, Partridge?"

He spoke very sharply, and Mrs. Partridge's face got very red.

"I'm sure I don't know what more I can do," she said in a very injured tone. "There's all the work of the house to do as usual, and indeed a great deal more *now*, of course. And how I can spare any one to be all day long with them I'm sure I can't see. I have to go away to Browngrove in half-an-hour, all about the nurse for them, sir. I do think they might try to be good and quiet for an hour or two, with every one doing their best for them."

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Uncle Geoff looked as if he really did not know what to say.

"I certainly think so too," he said. "I had no idea you ever quarrelled with your brothers, Audrey," he added, glancing at me severely. "I thought at least I could depend on you for that."

Then he turned to go away, and this time, knowing we *had* been naughty, we looked at each other in silence, too ashamed to speak.

"I do hope you will settle with this person and get her to come at once," we heard Uncle Geoff say to Mrs. Partridge at the door. "This sort of thing really cannot be allowed to go on."

"No indeed, sir," said Mrs. Partridge, quite in a good humour again, apparently, as she had got us scolded instead of herself; "it is very evident they need a firm hand."

"Horrible, *horrible* old woman," burst out Tom, as soon as, or indeed almost before, they were out of hearing. "Oh, it's all her that's making me so naughty. I never was naughty to you at home, Audrey, was I? Oh dear, oh dear! I do wish mother would come back quick from China, or else we shall forget all about being good." [Pg 158]

"And I did *so* promise her to be good, and to teach you and Racey to be good too, and to make you happy, and I can't. I don't believe mother would want us to stay here if she knew how miserable we were," I sobbed, and when Tom saw me sobbing, he began crying too, and then when Racey saw us both he set off again, and so we all sat together on the floor crying bitterly. Only one good thing came out of our unhappiness—we all made friends again and kissed and hugged each other, and determined never to quarrel any more.

"It does no good to quarrel," I said, sadly, "and any way that's one thing we can do to please mother, whatever Uncle Geoff or any one says about our being naughty."

We were very quiet for the rest of the afternoon till tea-time. We heard Uncle Geoff's carriage come for him, and as by this time we had found out the way of seeing from the night-nursery window, we were able to watch him get in and drive away. And almost immediately after, a cab came to the door, into which got Mrs. Partridge, and she too drove away. [Pg 159]

"She's gone about the new nurse," said Tom, but still we all looked at each other with relief to think that Mrs. Partridge was really out of the house, if only for an hour or two.

"We might make toast for tea to-day," I said, "without any one scolding us."

"I feel as if I'd like to jump on to the table and make a *fearful* noise," said Tom.

"That would be very silly," I said. "We should be as quiet as we can be while she's out, so that every one can see it's not true we're naughty."

When Sarah brought up our tea she proved to be as good or even better than her word. She had brought us not only the strawberry jam as she had promised, but a beautiful big plateful of toast all ready buttered, and as hot as anything. We were so pleased we all jumped up to kiss her, which was a great honour, as the boys were very particular whom they kissed. She looked very pleased too, but seemed rather hurried.

"Miss Audrey," she said, "I've been thinking after you've had your tea, you might all come down to the big dining-room for a change. Your uncle won't be in till late, and any way I'm sure he wouldn't mind your being there, for it's all nonsense of Mrs. Partridge saying you're so mischievous. There's lots of papers with pictures lying there for the ladies and gentlemen to look at while they're waiting. I've got some work I want dreadfully to get finished, for Mrs. Partridge never will give me the least bit of time to myself, and if you can amuse yourselves good in the dining-room I could be quite easy-like in my mind, for if you wanted me you'd only have to come to the top of the kitchen stairs and call me." [Pg 160]

A sudden idea darted through my mind while she was speaking. Here was the moment for posting my letter!

"Oh, yes, Sarah," I said, "we'd like very much to go to the dining-room, and we'll do no mischief you may be sure. And you can get your work done without troubling about us one bit."

"Thank you, Miss Audrey, and I hope you'll enjoy your tea," said Sarah, as she left the room.

We did enjoy our tea exceedingly—the boys perhaps more than I, for I was excited with the idea of what I meant to do, and I thought it better not to tell Tom till the last moment. So we finished our tea, and Sarah came up and took the things away and told us to follow her down-stairs to the dining-room.

There was a nice fire in the dining-room and the gas was already lighted. It was a pleasant change from the nursery where we seemed to have been "such a lot of days," as Racey said. Sarah came up again from the kitchen to see that we were all right before settling down to her work, she said. She told us which of the papers we might look at, and put a great heap of *Illustrated London News* and *Graphics* on the rug in front of the fire for us, and we all sat down on the floor to look at them. Then she went away saying she would come back in an hour to take us up-stairs—the man-servant was out with Uncle Geoff, and the cook was busy with the dinner, Sarah said, so there'd be a nice quiet time if only nobody would come ringing at the door. [Pg 161]

As soon as Sarah had left us, I pulled Tom close to me and whispered in his ear.

"Tom," I said, "this is just the time for posting the letter."

Tom jumped up on to his feet.

"Of course," he said. "Give it me, Audrey. I can find my way to the post-box *pairfitly*" ("pairfitly" for "perfectly" was another of Tom's funny words, like "lubbish"). "I'll just fetch my cap, and tie my comforter round my throat, and I'll be back in a moment."

He spoke in a very big-man way, as if all his life he had been accustomed to run about London streets in the dark—for by this time it really was dark—and I could not help admiring his courage and feeling rather proud of him. Still I was startled, for I had never thought of Tom's going all by himself. [Pg 162]

"But you can't go *alone*, Tom," I said, "you're far too little. *I* meant to go, if you would tell me quite exactly where you saw the letter-box, and if you would promise me to stay here quite quiet with Racey till I come back."

"Oh no, Audrey," said Tom, in a tone of great distress, "that would never do. I couldn't tell you ezactly where the letter-box is, though I'm sure I could find it myself. And you're a girl, Audrey, and not so *vrezy* much bigger than me. And besides, I'm a boy. And oh, Audrey, I do *so* want to go!"

The last reason was the strongest I dare say, and it was honest of Tom to tell it. I stood uncertain what to do. In his eagerness Tom had spoken out quite loud, and Racey had stopped looking at the pictures to listen. He sat on the floor—his little bare legs stretched out, his mouth wide open, staring up at Tom and me. Then another thought came into my mind.

"Tom," I said, "there's the stamp to get. You'd have to go into a shop and ask for one." [Pg 163]

Tom's countenance fell. This difficulty had more weight with him than if I had gone on saying he was too little, though even without the getting of the stamp I *could* not have let him go alone. "He might be run over or stolen or something dreadful," I thought, "and it would be my fault. Oh no, he *mustn't* go alone." But I felt as if he would be quite safe if I went with him, though I dare say this must seem rather absurd, for I was really not very much older or bigger than Tom, and of course I knew no more about London.

"I wouldn't like that," he said. Then his face brightened up again. "Let's *both* go, Audrey," he exclaimed; "that would be far the best."

But before I had time to reply, a cry from Racey startled us.

"You must take me too," he said. "I won't stay here all alone. P'raps the new nurse'll come and whip me."

He really seemed as if he were going to set off on a regular crying fit, which would have spoilt all. And the precious time was fast slipping away.

"Tom, you're sure it's very near," I said, "the post-box I mean?"

"Vrezy near—just round the corner," said Tom.

"Well then we'd better all go," I said. "I'll run up-stairs and bring down your hats and comforters, and I'll get my hat and old jacket and we'll all go. Now you two be quite quiet while I go up-stairs." [Pg 164]

I knew I could go with less noise and far more quickly than Tom, and in less than two minutes I was back again. I tied on Racey's comforter and hat, and Tom put on his own. Then we were all ready—but, oh dear, how could we get the big front door open without noise? I quite trembled as I stood up on tip-toe to turn the lock handle. But after all it was a very well-behaved door. It opened at once without the least creak or squeak, and in another moment the boys and I stood on the steps outside. Tom was going to shut the door, but I stopped him. "It would make such a noise," I said, "and besides we'd much better leave it open to get in again."

I pulled it gently to, so that from the street no one, unless they looked very close, could have seen it was open, and then with Racey's hand in mine, and Tom trotting alongside, we went down the steps and turned the way which Tom said he was sure led to the post-box he had seen.

There were not many people in the street in which our house was. It was a quiet street at all times, and just now was, I suppose, a quiet time of day. The pavements too—fortunately for our house shoes, which we had quite forgotten about—were perfectly dry. We walked along pretty quickly till we came to a corner which Tom felt sure was the corner near which was the letter-box. We turned down the street, and to Tom's delight, a little further on, there, sure enough, was the pillar-post. [Pg 165]

"Now, Audrey, you see—wasn't I right?" exclaimed Tom. "Where's the letter?"

It was already in my hand, but, alas! "Oh, Tom, the stamp!" I said. "There must be shops somewhere near where they would give us one."

"Oh yes, sure to be," said Tom, whose success had made him quite valiant, "come along, Audrey. We'll turn this next corner—I hear a hum of carriages and carts going along. There's sure to be a big street there."

So there was, what seemed to us a very big street indeed—brilliantly lighted, with quantities of

horses and cabs and carriages and carts of all kinds in the middle, and numbers of people on the pavement. Tom fell back a little and took hold of my other hand, Racey squeezed the one he held more tightly.

"We'll just go a very little way," said Tom. "Audrey, what sort of shops is it that they sell stamps in?"

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"I don't know," I said. "We'd better ask somewhere, for if we go much further we'll lose our way."

The shop, just opposite which we were then passing, was a chemist's. I pulled the boys forward, though Tom was rather unwilling, and wanted to stay outside; but I was too terribly afraid of losing them to let go of either of their hands for a moment. And so we all three went in. There were several grave, rather dignified-looking gentlemen standing behind the counters—one seated at a little desk writing, one or two others putting up bottles and jars on the shelves. As we came in, one stepped forward.

"What do you want, little—" "little girl," no doubt he was going to say, for seeing three such young children coming in alone, of course he thought at first that we must be what Racey called "poor children." But when he looked at us again he hesitated. I was too anxious to get what I wanted to feel shy.

"If you please," I said, "is there a shop near here where they sell stamps?"

The grave young gentleman smiled.

"Postage stamps, do you mean?" he said.

"Yes," I replied, "I only want one. I have a penny."

"They are to be got at the post-office in — Street—a very little way from this, on the right-hand side," said the young man. He turned away as he spoke as much as to say "That is all I can do for you. Now you had better go away."

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I stood for a moment uncertain what to do—the boys looked up at me in perplexity and trouble. It was terrible to think of having to go still further along that crowded street, and having to ask again for the post-office. I was neither shy nor frightened for myself, but I felt the responsibility of the boys painfully. Supposing some harm happened to them, supposing they got run over or lost—supposing even that it was so late when we got home that we had been missed and that Uncle Geoff and Mrs. Partridge were to scold us fearfully—I should feel, I knew I should—that it had been all my fault. I was half thinking of asking the grave young man if the boys might stay in the shop while I ran on to the post-office alone (only I felt sure Tom would greatly object to such an arrangement), when another person—a grave-looking gentleman too, but a good deal older and less hurried, it seemed to me, than the other—stopped, as he was crossing from one counter to another, and spoke to us. His voice was very kind, and somehow I felt sure he had little boys and girls of his own at home.

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"Has any one attended to you, my dear?"

"Has any one attended to you, my dear?" he said.

"Yes, no, at least, I don't want to buy anything," I said. "It's only for a stamp, and I don't like taking the boys any farther along the street for fear they should get lost. It's so dreadfully crowded to-night."

The gentleman smiled at this, but his smile was nicer than the other one's smile, for it didn't seem as if he was laughing at me.

"And are you not afraid of getting lost yourself?" he said. "You are a very little girl to be out without a nurse."

I got really alarmed at that. Supposing he were to call a policeman and send us home with him, as I had heard was sometimes done in London with lost or strayed children! What a terrible fuss it would make.

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"Oh, no," I said eagerly. "We've come such a little way. It was only to post a letter, but I have no stamp. Please I think we'd better go and try to find the post-office."

I took tight hold of the boys' hand again, and we were turning to go, when our new friend stopped

us.

"Stay," he said, "if it is only a stamp for a letter that you want, I can easily give you one."

He turned towards the man who was writing at the desk place and said something quickly, and the man held out a stamp which the gentleman handed to me.

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"Shall I put it on the letter for you?" he asked.

"Oh no, thank you," I said, in a great hurry to get away now that I had actually the precious stamp in my possession. "I can put it on quite well. Here is the penny, and thank you very much for the stamp."

He took the penny quite seriously. I was glad of that, and liked him the better for it. Had he refused it I should have been really offended.

"And what will you do with the letter now?" he said. "Shall you not have still to go to the post-office to put it in?" [Pg 171]

"Oh no," I said, "there is a pillar-post quite near our house."

"And you are sure you know your way?" he said as he opened the shop-door for us. "What is the name of the street where you live?"

I hesitated. Curiously enough I had never heard the name of the street where Uncle Geoff lived—I looked at Tom and Tom looked at me. He did not know it either.

"I don't know the name of the street," I said, "but I am *sure* we can find the way. Can't we, Tom?"

"Oh yes, I am *sure* we can. We live at our uncle's, Dr. Gower's," added Tom, for which I frowned at him. [Pg 172]

"At Dr. Gower's," repeated the chemist with surprise. "Dear me— I don't think your uncle would be pleased if he knew you were out alone. However, as you say, it is very near—and I shouldn't like to get them scolded, poor little things," he added to himself. "I can tell you the name of the street—it is — Street—remember that, and now run home as fast as you can. First turn to the right."

We thanked him again and ran off.



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CHAPTER IX.

MISS GOLDY-HAIR.

"I thought at first sight that she must be a fairy."

No, I can hardly say we "*ran*" off. There were so many persons on the pavement, that three, even very small people, could not walk along all abreast, without some difficulty. Particularly three small people like us who were accustomed to country lanes without any footpath at all, or high roads where the only fellow-passengers whose way we had to get out of were droves of nice silly sheep, or flocks of geese driven home from the market. We knew nothing of keeping to the right hand, and thought the passers-by were very rude and unkind when they jostled us, as indeed they could hardly help doing. For as for letting go of each other's hands *that* we never for an instant thought of.

We were glad to get out of the great crowded, brightly-lighted street, though had we been less in a hurry to get home, we should have greatly enjoyed standing and looking in at the shop- [Pg 174]

windows, more even than by daylight, and as it was, I was obliged two or three times to tug pretty hard at Tom and Racey to get them away from some very tempting one. At last however—it *did* seem as if we had been in the big street rather longer turning back from the chemist's than going there—afterwards I remembered this—at last we found ourselves in what we believed to be the same, rather narrow, darkish street where we had passed the pillar-post.

"Which side is the pillar?" I said to Tom. "I'm sure it was on this side and now I don't see it."

Tom stared about him.

"It must be a little further on," he said.

But further on it was not to be seen, and we began to feel perfectly puzzled. The street was quite a short one—we soon came to the end, where, right and left, it ran into a wider one, quiet and rather dark too—that is to say, compared with the great street of shops where we had just been. We stood at the corner looking about us—

"This is our street—it must be," I said; "but what *can* have become of the letter-box in the little street?"

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Tom could say nothing, he was as puzzled as I. We walked on slowly, more because we did not know what else to do, than for any other reason. Going home without posting the letter, for which we had run such risks, was not to be thought of. Suddenly Tom gave a little scream, and would have darted across the street had I not kept tight hold of him.

"Tom, what is the matter? Where are you going?" I said.

Tom wriggled and pulled.

"Let me go, Audrey," he said. "*There's* one—don't you see—across the street. Let me go, to be sure it's a proper one like the other."

"One" meant another pillar-post. I wouldn't let go of Tom, but we all went across together to examine it. It was just like the one that had suddenly disappeared from the little street, and it took a great weight off me when I had dropped my letter into it.

"It is just as if they had wheeled it across from the street opposite—isn't it?" I said to Tom.

But as there were no wheels, and as the pillar seemed stuck in the ground as firm as a rock, we could not explain the mystery.

"Now," said I, "let's run across again and find our house. It must be just about opposite."

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We crossed the street and went along slowly, peeping at every house we passed in search of some sign by which we would know it. We had left the door the tiniest little bit ajar you will remember—and two or three times when we saw a house which we fancied looked just like Uncle Geoff's, we went up the steps and gently pushed to see if the door was open. But no—none of them were, and beginning to be really frightened we returned to the pavement and considered what we should do.

"I don't understand it," I said, "we *must* have passed it. It wasn't above five or six houses from the street we turned, down, where the pillar-post was."

"But, Audrey," said Tom, "p'raps we came up another street by mistake, 'cause you know we couldn't find the pillar coming back. Let's go back a little and see if we don't come to the street where *it* is, and then we'll know."

It seemed the only thing to do—it was quite, *quite* dark of course by now—the only light was from the gas-lamps, which in this street did not seem very bright. It was very cold—we were all three beginning to shiver, because, you see, running out as we thought just for five minutes we had not wrapped up very warmly. It was worst for the boys, who had nothing besides the sailor suits they always wore, except their comforters and caps, though I had my jacket. And to add to our troubles it began to rain, a miserable, fine, cold rain, which seemed to freeze as well as to wet us. I was so unhappy that it was all I could do not to cry.

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"The boys will get cold," I said to myself. "And mother said we must be very careful of cold for Tom this winter as he had the measles so badly. Oh dear, what *shall* we do! If I could see anybody, I would ask them to help us to find the way back to Uncle Geoff's."

But just then there was no one in sight, and I was thinking whether it would not be best to try to find our way back to the friendly chemist and ask him to help us, when Tom called out suddenly:

"Audrey, we've got on the wrong side of the street. Look, the next house is the one with what Racey calls an air-garden."

I looked and saw the little glass conservatory he pointed out. It belonged to the house next to the one we were passing. I didn't feel satisfied—I couldn't see how we could have got on the wrong side of the street, for we had certainly kept in a right *direction*, but Tom was so sure, I didn't like to contradict him. And he pulled Racey and me across the street almost before I had time to consider.

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"Our house is almost opposite the one with the air-garden," he said, "just a little bit further along. Yes, this one *must* be it." He hurried us up the steps and when we got to the front door gave it a

little push. It yielded—it was open.

"You see," said Tom triumphantly, "you see I was right, Audrey."

But almost before he had said the words, Racey pulled us back.

"This *idn't* our house," he said, "it tannot be. Look, Audrey; look, Tom, this house has a' air-garden too."

He pointed above our heads, and looking up, Tom and I saw what in our hurried crossing the street we had not noticed—there was a conservatory on the first floor just like the one opposite!

"Come back, come back," I said. "This isn't our house. Perhaps the people will be angry with us for pushing the door open."

But it was too late—the door had been a little open before we touched it, for there were people standing in the hall just inside, and one of them, an errand boy, was coming out, when the push Tom had given caught their attention. The door was pulled wide open from the inside and we saw plainly right into the brightly-lighted hall. A man-servant came forward to see who we were—or what we were doing.

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"Now get off the steps you there," he said roughly. "My lady can't have beggars loitering about."

Frightened as we were, Tom's indignation could not be kept down.

"We're *not* beggars, you rude man," he cried, "we thought this was our house, and—and—" he could say no more, poor little boy—for all his manliness he was only a very little boy, you know—the tears would not be kept back any longer, he burst out sobbing, and immediately he heard Tom's crying Racey of course began too. I did not know what to do— I threw my arms round them and tried to comfort them. "Don't cry, dears," I said, "we'll go back to the chemist's, and he'll show us the way home. And nobody shall scold *you*, I don't care what they say to me."

The man-servant was still standing holding the door; he seemed on the point of shutting it, but I suppose something in our way of speaking, though he could not clearly see how we were dressed, had made him begin to think he had been mistaken, and he stared at us curiously. I think too, for he wasn't an unkind man, he felt sorry to hear the boys crying so. The bustle on the steps caught the attention of the other person in the hall—who had been speaking to the errand-boy when we came up, though we had not noticed her. A voice, which even at that moment I fancied I had heard before, stopped us as we were turning away.

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"What is the matter, James?" it said. "Is it some poor children on the steps? Don't be rough to them. I'd like to see what they want."

Then she came forward and stood right in our sight, though even now she couldn't see us well, as we were outside in the dark, you know. We all looked at her, and for a minute we felt too surprised to speak. It was the young lady in the black dress with the pretty goldy hair that had come one day to our house. We all knew her again—she looked sweeter and prettier than ever, with a nice grave sort of kindness in her face that I think children love even more than smiles and merriness. We all knew her again, but Racey was the first to speak. He pulled himself out of my arms—I didn't hold him back—and he rushed to the young lady and caught hold of her almost as if she had been mother.

"Oh please, please take care of us," he cried, hiding his fair, curly head in her black skirt, "we're lostened. Muzzie's done away, you know, and we don't like being at London at all."

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The young lady for half a moment looked perfectly puzzled. Then a light broke over her face. She lifted Racey up in her arms, and pressing her face against his in a sort of kissing way, just almost as mother herself would have done, she came forward quite close to Tom and me, still on the steps in the rain, and spoke to us.

"My poor little people," she said, "you must be quite wet. I know who you are— I remember. Come in—come in out of the cold, and tell me all about it."

My first wish was just to beg her to tell us the way to Uncle Geoff's house and to hurry off as fast as we could. I was beginning to be so terribly frightened as to what would happen when we *did* get back. But her voice was so kind, and it was *so* cold outside, and Racey was clinging to her so—it looked, too, so warm and comfortable inside the nice, bright house, that I could not help going in. Tom would have pulled me in, I think, had I refused. He was still sobbing, but once we got inside the hall he began fishing in his pocket till he got out his handkerchief and scrubbed at his eyes before he would look up at the young lady at all. *Nothing* would take away Tom's dislike to be seen crying.

"James," said the young lady, "open the library door."

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James, who had become particularly meek—I suppose he was rather ashamed of having taken us for little beggars, now that he saw the young lady knew us—did as she told him. And still carrying Racey in her arms Miss Goldy-hair (I think I told you that Tom and I called her that to ourselves after the day she had been at our house?) led the way into the library where she had been sitting when she was called to speak to the message boy in the hall. For there were books and some pretty work on the table, and a little tray with two or three cups and saucers and a plate with cake—all very nice and neat-looking—the sort of way mother had things at home. And the fire

was burning brightly. It was a nice room, though rather grave-looking, for there were books all round and round the walls instead of paper.

The first thing she did—Miss Goldy-hair, I mean—was to draw us near to the fire. She put Racey down on a low chair that was standing there and began feeling us to see if we were very wet.

"Not so very bad," she said, smiling for the first time. "Audrey—are you surprised I remember your name?—take off your jacket, dear. I don't think the boys will get any harm, this rough serge throws off the rain. *Now*—" when we were all settled so as to get nice and warm—"now, who is going to tell me all about it? My little fellow," she added, turning to Tom, who was still shaking with sobs, partly I think because of the terrible way he was trying to force them down and to scrub his eyes dry, "my little man, don't look so unhappy," she put her arm round him as she spoke, "I'm sure we shall be able to put it all right."

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"It's not all that," I said, "it's partly that he can't bear you to see him crying, Miss Goldy-hair. He thinks it's like a baby."

A different sort of smile came into her face for a moment, a smile of fun— I wondered a little what it was. It wasn't till she told me afterwards that I understood how funny our name for her must have sounded, for I said it quite without thinking.

"Oh no," she said. "I didn't think that at all, my boy. Here, dear, take a little drink of this tea." She got up and poured some out. "It's still hot, and that will help to make the sobs go away."

"Tom had the measles worse than me," I said, "and he's not been so strong since," for though she said she didn't think him a bit like a baby, I couldn't bear it for him that he shouldn't be thought brave, when really he was.

"Ah!" she said quickly, "then we must take great care of him."

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She looked at him anxiously while he drank the hot tea.

"I know a great deal about children," she said to me, nodding her head and smiling again. "Some day I'll show you what a number I have to help to take care of. But now, little Audrey, what were you three doing out in the street by yourselves in the dark and the rain?"

"We came out to post a letter," I said; "I didn't want anybody to know about it for perhaps they wouldn't have sent it. So Mrs. Partridge was out, and we were in the dining-room, and Uncle Geoff was out, and Sarah was busy sewing and we thought nobody would know, and Tom wanted to go alone, but I thought he'd get lost and Racey wouldn't stay alone, so we all came. And we lost the way, and we thought this was our house because it was opposite one with an air-garden and we didn't see it couldn't be ours because it had an air-garden too."

I stopped for a minute out of breath.

"It was me that sawed the air-garden *wurst*," said Racey. He spoke with great self-satisfaction. There he sat as comfortable as could be—he seemed to think he had got to an end of all his troubles and to have no intention of moving from where he was.

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The young lady glanced at him with her kind eyes, and then turned again to me. She was evidently rather puzzled, but very patient, so it was not difficult to tell her everything. Indeed I couldn't have *helped* telling her everything. She had a way of making you feel she was strong and you might trust her and that she could put things right, even though she was so soft and kind and like a pretty wavy sort of tree—not a bit hard and rough.

Her face looked a little grave as well as puzzled while I was speaking. I don't think she liked what I said about not wanting them to know. *Her* face and eyes looked as if she had never hidden anything in her life.

"And what was the letter, Audrey? And whom was it to?"

"It was to Pierson—that's our old nurse," I said. I hesitated a little and Miss Goldy-hair noticed it.

"And what was it about?" she said, very kindly still, but yet in a way that I couldn't help answering.

"It was to tell her how unhappy we were," I said in a low voice, "and to tell her that I was going to try to go to her with the boys—to take them away from Uncle Geoff's, because Mrs. Partridge is so horrid and she makes Uncle Geoff think we're always being naughty. And mother said I was to make the boys happy while she's so far away, and I can't. And I can't make them good either—we're getting into quarrelling ways already. I'm sure we'd be better with Pierson in the country."

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"Where does Pierson live?" asked the young lady.

"At a village called Cray—it's near Copple—Copple— I forget the name, but I've got it written down. You won't tell Uncle Geoff?" I added anxiously.

"No," said Miss Goldy-hair, "not without your leave. But that reminds me—won't your uncle be frightened about you all this time?"

"He won't be in till late," I said. "But Sarah will be frightened—and oh! I'm so afraid Mrs. Partridge will be coming back. Oh! hadn't we better go now if you'll tell us the way. It's in this street, isn't it?"

"No, dear," said the young lady—and I was so glad she called me "dear." I had been afraid she wouldn't like me any more when she knew what I had been thinking of doing. "No, dear," she said, "you've got into another street altogether—that's why you were so puzzled. This street is very like the one you live in and they run parallel, if you know what that means."

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"I wish it was this street," I said.

"And so do I," said Tom.

"Why?" asked Miss Goldy-hair.

"Because we'd like to be near you," we both said, pressing close to her. "You're like mother."

The tears came into Miss Goldy-hair's eyes—they really did—but she smiled too.

"And what do you say, my little man?" she said to Racey.

Racey was still reposing most comfortably in his big chair.

"I'll stay here," he said, "if Audrey and Tom can stay too. And I'd like 'tawberry jam for tea."

The young lady smiled again.

"I'd like to keep you," she said, "but think how frightened poor Sarah will be—and your uncle when he comes in."

Tom and I looked at each other. We were so glad she didn't say, "Think how frightened poor Mrs. Partridge will be."

"I think the best thing will be for me to take you home," she went on. "Though it isn't in this street it's very near. Not three minutes' walk. Yes," she said, more as if speaking to herself than to us, "that will be best—for me to take them alone."

She rang the bell, and James appeared.

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"James," she said, "I am going out for a few minutes. When Miss Arbour comes in tell her I shall not be long. I am sure to be back by dinner-time."

Then Miss Goldy-hair went away for a minute or two and returned wrapped up in a big cloak, and with a couple of little jackets which she put on Tom and Racey.

"These are some of my children's jackets," she said. Tom and Racey looked at them curiously. It was queer that Miss Goldy-hair's children's cloaks should just fit them.

"They're just right for us," said Tom.

"Yes," she said, "I have several sizes of them. I've been getting them ready for my children for this cold weather."

"Are they here?" said Tom.

"Who?" said Miss Goldy-hair.

"Your childrens," said Tom.

Miss Goldy-hair shook her head.

"No," she replied. "They're in a much bigger house than this. There wouldn't be room for them here."

Then seeing that Tom, and I too, I dare say—not Racey, he wouldn't have been surprised if Miss Goldy-hair had said she had a hundred children; he never was surprised at anything when he was a little boy. If he had heard his toy-horses talking in their stables some day, I don't believe he'd have been startled—but seeing that Tom and I looked puzzled she explained what she meant to us.

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"It is poor children I mean," she said. "Some kind ladies have made a nice home for poor orphan children who have no homes of their own, and as I have not any one of my own to take care of I have a great deal of time. So I go to see these poor children very often to help to teach them and make them happy, and sometimes when they are ill to help to nurse them. I like going to see them very much."

Tom looked rather pleased when he heard that Miss Goldy-hair meant poor children. I think he was a little inclined to be jealous before he heard that.

"But it isn't as nice as if you had children of your own in your own house—like mother has us. It isn't as nice as if *we* were your children," said Tom.

Miss Goldy-hair smiled.

"No," she said, "I don't think it is."

We were in the street by this time, walking along pretty quickly, for it was still raining a little and very cold. But we didn't mind it. Miss Goldy-hair knew the way so well. She turned down one or two small side streets, and then in a minute we found ourselves at Uncle Geoff's.

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Walking along with her we had felt so well taken care of that we had almost forgotten our fears of what might meet us at home. But now, actually on the door-steps, they returned.

"Don't ring, Miss Goldy-hair, please," I said. "Let's see first if the door is still open."

Strange to say it was! After all, though it has taken so long to tell, not more than three-quarters of an hour had passed since we went out, and it was a quiet time of evening. No one had happened to ring at the bell. But as we pushed open the door, the first thing we saw was Sarah—flying down-stairs in a terrible fright, as white as a sheet and looking nearly out of her mind. She had missed us out of the dining-room and had rushed up to the nursery to look for us, and not finding us there did not know what to think.

She gave a sort of scream when she saw us.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she cried. "Where *have* you been? Oh, Miss Audrey, how could you! Oh dear! you have frightened me so."

But before we said anything Tom and I ran forward with the same question.

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"Has Mrs. Partridge come in?" and oh! how thankful we were when Sarah shook her head.

"Thank goodness, no!" she said.

Then Miss Goldy-hair came forward. She had been writing a few words in pencil on a card, and in her excitement, Sarah had hardly noticed her.

"Will you give this to Dr. Gower when he comes in?" said Miss Goldy-hair, and Sarah made a little curtsey and begged her pardon for not having seen her.

"Dr. Gower knows me," she said to Sarah; "but please do not say anything to him about my having brought the children home, as I would rather explain it myself."

Then she turned to go, but we all clung about her. "Oh, Miss Goldy-hair, Miss Goldy-hair," we cried, "you're not going away."

"I must, dears," she said, "but I shall be sure to see you to-morrow. I am going to ask your uncle to let you come and have dinner and tea with me."

"But p'raps the new nurse'll come to-morrow, and she'll whip us," sobbed Racey.

Miss Goldy-hair looked quite distressed.

"No, dear," she said. "I'm sure your uncle wouldn't let her."

"Will you turn early, *kite* early?" Racey begged.

"Yes, that I can promise you," she answered.

But I too had some last words.

"Miss Goldy-hair," I said, "you told me you wouldn't tell Uncle Geoff?"

"Not without your leave, dear, I said," she replied. "But don't you think it would be better to tell him? Won't you trust me to tell him?"



"Can't you trust me, Audrey?"

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"But not Mrs. Partridge," I pleaded.

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"No, I don't think we need tell Mrs. Partridge."

"Well, then I'll let you tell Uncle Geoff, and if he writes to mother that we're naughty you'll write too, won't you?"

"Wait till to-morrow and we'll talk it all over. Can't you trust me, Audrey?"

She bent down and looked in my face. I looked at her for a minute without speaking. I liked to be *sure* before I said a thing, always. So I looked right into her face, but I won't tell you what I thought, because *somebody* that's going to read this over might be vexed. And all I *said* was, "Yes, Miss Goldy-hair."

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CHAPTER X.

TOM'S SORE THROAT.

"Plenty of jelly and nice things to eat,
And we'll hope he'll be better to-morrow."

I woke very early the next morning. I woke with that queer feeling that everybody knows, of something having happened. And before I was awake enough in my mind even to get a distinct thought of what it was that had happened, I yet had a feeling that it was something pleasant. For the first time since mother had gone I woke without that terrible feeling of loneliness that had been getting worse and worse every day. [Pg 195]

As usual I glanced over at Tom's bed to see if he was still asleep.

"Tom," I said softly, "are you awake?"

"Yes," said Tom, all in a minute, as if he had been awake some time. [Pg 196]

It was all clear in my head now—about our losing our way and finding Miss Goldy-hair and the letter to Pierson, and Miss Goldy-hair, promising to invite us to go and see her, and everything.

"Tom," I said, "we can't go to Pierson now. I gave her leave to tell."

"Who?" said Tom, "Pierson?"

"No," I replied. "Of course not. What would be the sense of writing a secret to Pierson if she was to tell it?"

"I didn't know you wrote a secret to Pierson," said Tom; "I can't understand."

He spoke very meekly, but I felt provoked with him. I felt anxious and fidgety, even though I was so pleased about having found Miss Goldy-hair; and I thought Tom didn't seem to care enough.

"How stupid you are, Tom," I said. "You knew I had written to Pierson to tell her I was going to take you and Racey to her."

"I didn't know it until I heard you tell *her*," said Tom. "I don't think we *could* go to Pierson's, Audrey. We might get lost again."

"We wouldn't get lost," I said. "We wouldn't get lost in a cab and in the railway. You're so stupid, Tom. You've been going on so about being so unhappy here, and it was all to please you I thought of going to Pierson's, and now I suppose you'll make out it was all me, when Uncle Geoff speaks about it." [Pg 197]

"I never said it was all you," said Tom, "but I thought you'd be so pleased about Miss Goldy-hair; and now you're quite vexed with me."

We were on the fair way to a quarrel, when a distraction came from the direction of Racey.

"Her's got a' air-garden," he called out suddenly in his little shrill voice. "Did you know her had a' air-garden? I've been d'eaming about it. Her's going to show it me. It's full of fairies." (He really said "wairies," but I can't write all his speaking like that; it would be so difficult for you to understand.)

We couldn't help laughing at Racey's fancies, and in his turn Racey was a little inclined to be

offended, so Tom and I joined together to try to bring him round.

"I don't know how it is we've got in the way of being so cross to each other," I said sadly. "I'm sure it's quite time Miss Goldy-hair or somebody should teach us how to be good again. How dreadfully quick one forgets."

"Miss Goldy-hair wouldn't like us if we quarrelled," said Tom in a melancholy voice.

"Her wouldn't *whip* us," observed Racey.

"No, she would try to teach us to be good," I said. "I'm sure I'd try to be good if I was with her. Tom," I went on—and here I really must put down what I said, whether it vexes somebody or not—"Tom, do you know, I think her face is just exactly like an angel's when you look at it quite close."

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"Or a fairy's," said Tom.

"No," I said, "an angel's. Fairies are more merry looking than she is. She has such a kind, sorry look—that's why I think her face is like an angel's."

Tom gave a great sigh.

"What's the matter, Tom?" I said.

"I don't know. I think I've got a headache," said Tom.

"But aren't you glad Miss Goldy-hair's coming to fetch us?" I said in my turn.

"Kite early," said Racey.

"Yes, quite early. She promised," I said. "Aren't you glad, Tom?"

"Yes," said Tom, "but I'm sleepy."

I began to be afraid that he was not quite well. Perhaps it was with being so frightened and crying so the night before. I made Racey be quite still, and I didn't speak any more, and in a little I heard by Tom's breathing that he had gone to sleep again. He was still asleep when Sarah came up-stairs to dress us, and I was rather glad, for there were several things I wanted to ask her. Mrs. Partridge had come back, she told me, but much later than she had expected, for she had missed her train and got her best bonnet spoilt walking to the station, and she was very cross.

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"But she doesn't know anything about us being out last night?" I said to Sarah.

"Of course not, Miss Audrey. It isn't likely as I'd tell her. But I can't think why you didn't ask me to post your letter instead of thinking of going off like that yourselves. I'll never forget to the last day of my life how frightened I was when I couldn't find you."

"I didn't want to ask you to post it, because I thought perhaps Mrs. Partridge would find out, and then she'd scold you," I said.

Sarah looked mollified.

"Scoldings don't do much good to anybody, it seems to me," she remarked. "I hope your uncle won't scold you," she added. "He was a good while at that lady's last night, but I shouldn't think she's one to make mischief."

"Did he go last night?" I asked, rather anxiously.

"Yes, Miss Audrey. I gave him the card, and he went off at once. Benjamin"—that was Uncle Geoff's footman—"Benjamin says she's a young lady whose mother died not long ago. He knows where she lives and all, but I didn't remember her—not opening the door often you see. She's a very nice young lady, but counted rather odd-like in her ways. For all she's so rich she's as plain as plain in her dress, and for ever working away among poor children, and that sort of way. But to be sure she's alone in the world, and when people are that, and so rich too, it's well when they give a thought to others."

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Here a little shrill voice came from the corner of the room, where Racey was still in his cot.

"What's 'alone in the world'?" he inquired.

Sarah gave a little start.

"Bless me," she said, "I thought he was still asleep. Never mind, Master Racey," she said, turning to him, "you couldn't understand."

Racey muttered to himself at this. He hated being told he couldn't understand. But just then Tom woke. He said his headache was better, but still I didn't think he looked quite well.

"Is the new nurse coming to-day?" he inquired of Sarah. Sarah shook her head.

"I've heard nothing about her," she said. "I don't think Mrs. Partridge can have settled anything, and perhaps that's why she came home so cross."

"I don't care if her comes or if her doesn't," said Racey, who had grown very brave. "I'm going to Miss Goldy-hair's."

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Sarah wasn't in the room just then, and I was rather glad of it. Somehow I wouldn't have liked her to hear our name for the young lady, and I told him he wasn't to say it to anybody but Tom and me—perhaps the young lady wouldn't like it.

Racey said nothing, but I noticed he didn't say it again before Sarah. He was a queer little boy in some ways. When you thought he wasn't noticing a thing he'd know it quite well, and then he'd say it out again some time when you didn't want him to, very likely.

All breakfast time I kept wondering what was going to happen. Would the young lady come for us herself? Would she send to ask Uncle Geoff to let us go, or had she asked him already? Tom was very quiet—he didn't seem very hungry, though he said his headache was better, but his eyes looked heavy.

"I wish she'd come," he said two or three times. "I'd like to sit on her knee and for her to tell us stories. I'd like to sit on somebody's knee. You're not big enough, are you, Audrey?"

I was afraid not, but I did my best. I sat down on a buffet leaning against a chair, and made the best place I could for Tom.

"Is your head bad again, Tom?" I asked.

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"No, only I like sitting this way—quite still," he replied.

I couldn't help being afraid that he was ill. The thought made me very unhappy, for it was my fault that he had gone out in the wet and the cold the night before, and I began to see that I had not been taking care of my little brothers in the right way, and that mother would be very sorry if she knew all about it. It made me feel gentler and different somehow, and I thought to myself that I would ask Miss Goldy-hair to tell me how I could know better what was the right way. I was just thinking that, and I think one or two tears had dropped on Tom's dark hair, when the door opened and Uncle Geoff came in.

At first I couldn't help being frightened. Miss Goldy-hair was sure to have told him, and however nicely she had told him I didn't see how it was *possible* he shouldn't be angry. I looked up at him, and the tears began to come quicker, and I had to hold my breath to keep myself from bursting out into regular crying. To my surprise Uncle Geoff knelt down on the floor beside me and stroked my head very kindly.

"My poor little Audrey," he said, "and you have been unhappy since you came here? I am so sorry that I have not been able to make you happy, but it isn't too late yet to try again, is it?"

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I was so surprised that I couldn't speak. I just sat still, holding Tom close in my arms, and the tears dropping faster and faster.

"I thought you thought I was so naughty, Uncle Geoff," I said at last. "Mrs. Partridge said so, and she said we were such a trouble to you. I thought you'd be glad if we went away; and I thought we *were* getting naughty. We never quarrelled hardly at home."

"But at home you had your mother and your father, who understood how to keep you happy, so that you weren't tempted to quarrel," said Uncle Geoff. "And I'm only a stupid old uncle, who needs teaching himself, you see. Let's make a compact, Audrey. If you are unhappy, come and tell me yourself, and we'll see if we can't put it right. Never mind what Mrs. Partridge says. She means to be kind, but she's old, and it's a very long time since she had to do with children. Now will you promise me this, Audrey?"

"Yes, Uncle Geoff," I said, in a very low voice.

"And you will never think of running away from your cross old uncle again, will you?" he said.

"No, Uncle Geoff," I replied. "I didn't mean to be naughty. I *really* didn't. But we did think nobody cared for us here, and mother told me to make the boys happy."

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"And we will make them happy. We'll begin to-day and see if we can't manage to understand each other better," said Uncle Geoff, cheerfully. "*To-day* you will be happy any way, I think, for I have got an invitation for you. You know whom it's from?"

"Yes," said Tom and I together. Tom, who had been lying quite still in my arms all this time listening half sleepily, started up in excitement. "Yes," we said, "it's from Miss Goldy-hair."

"Miss—how much?" said Uncle Geoff.

We couldn't help laughing.

"We called her that because we didn't know her name, and her hair was so pretty," we said.

Uncle Geoff laughed too.

"It's rather a nice name, I think," he said. "What funny creatures children are! I must set to work to understand them better. Well, yes, you're quite right. Miss Goldy-hair wants you all three to go and spend all the day with her. But what's the matter with Tom?" he went on. "Have you a headache, my boy?" for Tom had let his head drop down again on my shoulder.

"Yes," said Tom, "and a sore t'roat, Uncle Geoff." Uncle Geoff looked rather grave at this.

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"Let's have a look at you, my boy," he said.

He lifted Tom up in his arms and carried him to the window and examined his throat.

"He must have caught cold," he said. "It isn't very bad so far, but I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid he mustn't go out to-day."

He—Uncle Geoff—looked at me as if he were wondering how I would take this.

"Oh, poor Tom!" I cried. "Oh, Uncle Geoff, it was all my fault for letting him go out last night. Oh, Uncle Geoff, do forgive me. I'll be so good, and I'll try to amuse poor Tom and make him happy all day."

"Then you don't want to go without him?" said Uncle Geoff.

"Oh, *of course* not," I replied. "Of course I'd not leave Tom when he's ill, and when it was my fault too. Oh, Uncle Geoff, you don't think he's going to be very ill, do you?"

Tom looked up very pathetically.

"Don't cry, poor Audrey," he said. "My t'roat isn't so vrezzy bad."

Uncle Geoff was very kind.

"No," he said. "I don't think it'll be very bad. But you must take great care of him, Audrey. And I don't know how to do. I don't like your being left so much alone, and yet there's no one in the house fit to take care of you." [Pg 206]

"Hasn't Mrs. Partridge got a new nurse for us?" I asked.

"No," said Uncle Geoff, smiling a little. "She hasn't found one yet."

There came a sort of squeal from the corner of the room. We all started. It was Racey. He was playing as usual with his beloved horses, not seeming to pay any attention to what we were saying. But he was attending all the time, and the squeal was a squeal of delight at hearing that the new nurse was not coming.

"What is the matter, Racey?" I said.

"Her's not tumming," he shouted. "Her won't whip us."

"Who said anything about being whipped?" said Uncle Geoff.

We hesitated.

"I don't quite know," I said. "Mrs. Partridge said we should have a very strict nurse, and I don't know how it was the boys thought she'd whip them."

Uncle Geoff looked rather grave again.

"I must go," he said. "I will let Miss Goldy-hair,"—he smiled again when he said it—"I will let her know that I can't let Tom out to-day and that his good little sister won't leave him;"—how kind I thought it of Uncle Geoff to say that!—"and I must do the best I can to find a nice nurse for you—one that won't whip you, Racey." [Pg 207]

"Must Tom go to bed?" I asked.

"No," said Uncle Geoff, "if he keeps warm and out of the draughts. Mrs. Partridge will come up to see him; but you needn't be afraid, Audrey, I'm not going to say anything about last night to her. You and I have made an agreement, you know."

Mrs. Partridge did come up, and she was really very kind—much kinder than she had been before. She was one of those people that get nicer when you're ill; and besides, Uncle Geoff had said something to her, I'm sure, though I never knew exactly what. Any way she left off calling us naughty and telling us what a trouble we were. But it was all thanks to Miss Goldy-hair, Tom and I said so to each other over and over again. No one else could have put things right the way she had done.

Tom was very good and patient, though his throat was really pretty bad and his head ached. Mrs. Partridge sent him some black currant tea to drink a little of every now and then, and Uncle Geoff sent Benjamin to the chemist's with some doctor's writing on a paper and he brought back some rather nasty medicine which poor Tom had to take every two hours. But though I did my very best to amuse him, and read him over and over again all the stories I could find, it seemed a very long, cold, dull morning, and we couldn't help thinking how different it was from what we had hoped for—spending the day with Miss Goldy-hair, I mean. [Pg 208]

"If only we hadn't gone out in the cold last night you'd have been quite well to-day, Tom," I said sadly.

"Yes, but then we wouldn't have found Miss Goldy-hair," said Tom.

"I don't see that it's much good to have found her," said I. I was rather dull and sorry about Tom, and I didn't know what more to do to amuse him. "I don't believe we'll see her for ever so long, and perhaps she'll forget about us as she has such a lot of children she cares for."

"But they're *poor* children," said Tom, "she can't like them as much as us. She said so."

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"She didn't mean it that way," I said. "She'd be very angry if she'd heard you say that, as if poor children weren't as good as rich ones."

"But she *did* say so," persisted Tom. "When I asked her if going to see the poor children was as nice as if she had us always, she said no."

"Well, she meant it wasn't as nice as if she was mother and had her own children always. She didn't mean anything about because they were poor. *I* believe she likes poor children best. Lots of people do, and I'm sure we've lots of trouble too, though we're not poor. If we'd been poor like the ones in *Little Meg's Children*, or *Froggy's Brother Ben*, Miss Goldy-hair would have been here *ever* so early this morning, with blankets and coals, and milk, and bread and sugar—"

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"And 'tawberry dam and delly and 'ponge cakes and olanges and eberyising," interrupted Racey, coming forward from his corner.

I had been "working myself up," as Pierson used to call it, and I was fast persuading myself that Miss Goldy-hair was very unkind, and that after all we were poor deserted little creatures, but for all that I couldn't help laughing at Racey breaking in with his list of what he thought the greatest delicacies. Tom laughed too— I must say in some ways Tom was a very good little boy in spite of his sore throat, and Racey was standing with his head on one side considering what more he would wish for in Miss Goldy-hair's basket, when—*wasn't* it funny?—there came a little tap at the door, and almost before we could say "come in," it opened, and—oh, how delighted we were—in walked Miss Goldy-hair herself!

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She was smiling with pleasure at our surprise, and wonderful to say, she was carrying a big, big basket, such a big basket that Tom, who had very nice manners for a boy, jumped up at once to help her with it, and in the nice way she had she let him think he was helping her a great deal, though really she kept all the weight of it herself, till between them they got it landed safely on the table.



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Racey danced forward in delight.

"Audrey, Audrey," he cried, "her *has* got a basket, and her *has* come. Her said she would."

In walked Miss Goldy-hair herself!

Miss Goldy-hair stooped down to kiss his eager little face. Then she turned to me and kissed me too, but I felt as if I hardly deserved it.

"Did you think I had forgotten you, Audrey?" she said.

I felt my cheeks get very red, but I didn't speak.

"Didn't you promise to trust me last night?" she said again.

"Yes, Miss Goldy-hair, but I didn't know that you'd come to see us because Tom was ill. You said you'd come to fetch us to have dinner and tea with you, but I didn't know you'd come when you heard Tom couldn't go out."

"Why, don't you need me all the more because you can't go out?" she said brightly. "I'm going to stay a good while with you, and I have brought some little things to please you."

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She turned to the basket which Racey had never taken his eyes off. We all stood round her, gazing eagerly. There were all sorts of things to please us—oranges, and a few grapes, and actually a little shape of jelly and some awfully nice funny biscuits. Then there were a few books, and two or three little dolls without any clothes on, and a little packet of pieces of silk and nice stuffs to dress them with, and a roll of beautiful coloured paper, and some canvas with patterns marked on it, and bright-coloured wools.

"I've brought you some things to amuse you," said Miss Goldy-hair, "for Tom can't go out, and it's a very cold, wet day, not fit for Audrey or Racey to go out either. And as your tutor won't be coming as Tom's ill, it would be a very long day for you all alone, wouldn't it?"

Then she went on to explain to us what she meant us to do with the things she had brought. Some of them were the same that the children she had told us about had to amuse them when they were ill, and she let Tom and Racey choose a canvas pattern each, and helped them to begin working them with the pretty wools.

"How nice it would be to make something pretty to send to your mother for Christmas! Wouldn't she be surprised?" she said; and Tom was so pleased at the thought that he set to work very hard and tried so much that he soon learnt to do cross-stitch quite well. Racey did a little of his too, but after a while he got tired of it and went back to his horses, and we heard him "gee-up"-ing, and "gee-woh"-ing, and "stand there, will you"-ing in his corner just as usual.

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"What a merry little fellow he is," said Miss Goldy-hair, "how well he amuses himself."

"Yes," I said, "he hasn't been near so dull as Tom and me. He was only frightened for fear the new nurse should whip him. But Uncle Geoff has promised she sha'n't, and so now Racey's quite happy and doesn't mind anything. I don't think he minds about mother going away now."

"He's such a little boy," said Miss Goldy-hair.

But I was a little mistaken about Racey. He thought of things more than I knew.

Then Miss Goldy-hair helped me to begin dressing the little dolls. They were for a little ill girl who couldn't dress them for herself, as she had to lie flat down all day and could hardly move at all because her back was weak somehow, but she was very fond of little dolls and liked to have them put round her where she could see them. I had never dressed such small ones before, and it was great fun, though rather difficult. But after I had worked at them for a good while Miss Goldy-hair told both Tom and me that we'd better leave off and go on with our work in the afternoon.

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"It's never a good plan to work at anything till you get quite tired," she said. "It only makes you feel wearied and cross, and then you never have the same pleasure in the work again. Besides, it must be nearly your dinner-time, and I must be thinking of going home."



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CHAPTER XI.

OUR TEA-PARTY.

"Please to draw your chair—
The table's ready."

"Going home! Oh! Miss Goldy-hair," we all called out, "oh! we thought you were going to stay with us all day."

Racey had come out of his corner and stood staring at Miss Goldy-hair.

"Are you kite alone in the world?" he said gravely, "are you, Miss Doldy-hair?"

"Racey," I said, giving him a little shake, "how can you be so rude?"

But Miss Goldy-hair didn't seem vexed, though her face got a little red.

"Never mind, Audrey," she said. "Some one must have said something before him that he has remembered. But it doesn't matter—there's no harm in any one saying it, because it's true, at least, true in a way. What made you ask me that, Racey?" she added, turning to him.

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"I was sinking," said Racey, not at all put about. "I was just sinking that if you are really kite alone you'd better come and live with us. Or we'll go and live with you—which would be best?"

"I think a little of both would be best," said Miss Goldy-hair. "To-day, as Tom isn't well, you see I've come to see you. But afterwards, when he's all right again, you must all come to see me—often, very often."

"But that isn't *living*, that's just seeing us sometimes," said Tom, who seemed to have taken up Racey's idea.

"But you see, dear, people can't always do just as they would like," said Miss Goldy-hair. "Even if

they love each other dearly they can't always live together, or even see each other as often as they would like."

"But you're alone in the world," repeated Racey.

"Well, but I have my house to take care of, and to keep it all nice for the friends who come to see me. And then I've my *poor* children to go to see often, and letters to write about them sometimes. I've plenty to do at home," said Miss Goldy-hair, shaking her head gently at Racey.

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"You could do it all here," said Tom. "I don't see the good of people being as rich as rich—as rich as you are, Miss Goldy-hair—if they can't do what they like."

Miss Goldy-hair's face got a little red again, and she looked rather troubled.

"Who said I was 'as rich as rich,' my boy?" she said, putting her arm round Tom, and looking into his honest eyes.

"Sarah said so," answered Tom; "but you mustn't be vexed with her, Miss Goldy-hair," he went on eagerly. "She didn't say it any not nice way. She said it was a good thing when rich people thought about poor ones, and that you were very good to poor people. You won't scold Sarah, Miss Goldy-hair? Perhaps she didn't mean me to tell you. I'm so puzzled about not telling things, 'cause at home it didn't matter, we might tell everything."

He looked quite anxious and afraid, but Miss Goldy-hair soon made him happy again.

"No, of course I won't scold Sarah," she said. "And I like you much better to tell me anything like that, and then I can explain. I cannot see that it is anything to *praise* rich people for, that they should think of poor ones—the pleasure of thinking you have made somebody else a little happier is so great that I think it is being kind to oneself to be kind to others."

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"I'd like to be *vrezy* rich," said Tom, "and then I'd be awfully kind to everybody. I'd have nobody poor at all."

"Nobody could be rich enough for that," I said.

"And being rich isn't the only way to being kind," said Miss Goldy-hair. "Don't wait for that, Tom, to begin."

"Of course not," I said. "Miss Goldy-hair's being kind to us has nothing to do with her being rich. You don't understand, Tom."

Tom never liked when I said he didn't understand, and now I see that I must have had rather a provoking way of saying it—like as if I wanted to put him down. I saw his face look vexed, and he answered rather crossly—

"It *has* to do with it. Miss Goldy-hair couldn't have brought us oranges, and jelly and things, if she hadn't been rich."

"And *bikstwiks*," added Racey.

"But you like me a little bit for myself, besides for the oranges and biscuits, don't you, Racey?—just a very little bit?"—said Miss Goldy-hair, laughing.

Racey, by way of answer, climbed up on her knee, and began hugging her. Miss Goldy-hair drew Tom to her and kissed him too, and then he looked quite happy.

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"But I *must* go now," she said.

"And won't you come back again?" we asked.

Miss Goldy-hair stopped to consider a little.

"Let me see," she said. "Yes, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll come and have tea with you if you'll invite me."

We all clapped our hands at this.

"And after tea," said Tom, "will you tell us a story? I am sure you must know stories, Miss Goldy-hair, for all your poor little children. Don't you tell them stories?"

"There are so many of them," she said. "I generally *read* stories to them. And most likely you already know most of those I read. But sometimes I tell stories to any of them who happen to be ill and stay in bed. I'll see if I can remember one."

"About fairies, please," we all called out.

"I'll do my best," said Miss Goldy-hair, who by this time was opening the door to go away. She turned round and nodded to us as she said it, and then she shut the door and we three were alone again.

But it didn't seem as if we were alone—it didn't seem the same dull nursery with nothing to amuse us or to look forward to—it didn't seem the same *any way*.

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"Tom," I said, "doesn't everything seem different?"

Tom was sitting on the rug close to the fire—his cold made him feel shivery—he was staring in at the red-hot coals. "Doesn't everything seem different, Tom?" I repeated.

"Yes," said Tom, "but, Audrey, I'm wondering what we can get nice for tea."

My face fell— I had not thought of that.

"I have some money," I said, "I have three shillings, and two sixpences, and seven pennies, besides my gold pound."

"And I have some too, and so has Racey," said Tom.

"Yes, I have a s'illing, and a dear little fourpenny, and three halfpennies," said Racey, running to fetch his purse.

"I've more than that," said Tom in a melancholy tone of voice, "but it's no good. How can we buy anything? It's like being in a ship, starving, with lots of money and no shops to buy at."

We all looked at each other with great concern. It quite went against all our notions of hospitality to have any one, more especially Miss Goldy-hair, at tea without anything nice to offer her. And we all felt too, that it would be almost worse to make use of any of the things *she* had brought *us*, for such an occasion. Children have their own notions on these subjects, I can assure you.

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Just then we heard distant sounds of Sarah's approach with the dinner-tray. The jelly and oranges were still standing on the table. Tom had eaten one orange and we had all three had some biscuits, so any way there wouldn't have been enough to make a nice tea with.

"Suppose we ask Sarah to buy us something?" said Tom eagerly. But I shook my head.

"I don't want to do anything like that," I said. I had somehow a feeling that it would hardly have been keeping my promise to Uncle Geoff. "Sarah might get scolded for it," I said, and Tom seemed to understand.

We ate our dinner very quietly. Miss Goldy-hair's jelly was certainly very nice, and poor Tom, who didn't feel much inclined for meat and potatoes, and regular pudding, enjoyed it very much. And after dinner we each had an orange—we sat round the fire peeling them, and thinking what to do about tea.

"We haven't even any flowers," I said. "We can't even dress up the table and make it look pretty the way we used to on days mother came to have tea with us."

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"We couldn't make bread and butter look pretty," said Tom, rather grumpily.

I was sorry to see him so disappointed, just when I thought that our having found Miss Goldy-hair was going to make everything nice.

"I'd run out myself to buy things if I didn't know it would vex Uncle Geoff," I said. And then suddenly an idea came into my head. The saying Uncle Geoff's name seemed to have brought it.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I said, "I'll ask Uncle Geoff himself."

Tom looked amazed at my boldness.

"Won't he be vexed?" he said.

"No, I don't think he will. Any way I'll ask him. I dare say he's in, for he said something about seeing how your cold was at dinner-time. But I won't wait till he comes up. I'll go straight down and ask him."

Tom and Racey looked at me with increased respect. I just waited to wash my hands and smooth my hair, and down I ran. I met nobody on the way, though when I got to the foot of the stair I heard Sarah and Benjamin talking in the pantry. But I did not feel inclined to ask them if Uncle Geoff was in— I liked better to go straight to his study myself. So I tapped at the door, not very loud, but distinctly. In spite of my boldness my heart was beating a little faster than usual, but instead of that making me tap faintly, it made me wish the more to know at once if Uncle Geoff *was* in, so that I shouldn't stand there waiting for nothing. Almost at once came the answer "Come in." Uncle Geoff had very quick ears.

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I went in. He was sitting writing rather hurriedly it seemed, at his table, but he could not have been in long, for his hat and great coat were flung down carelessly, and unless he is in a great hurry, Uncle Geoff always hangs them up carefully in the hall. He looked up however.

"Well, Audrey," he said, "is that you? Wait a minute and then I'll speak to you."

I didn't mind waiting, and this time of myself I went near the fire. I was counting over our money in my mind, and wondering how much of it it would be right to spend on what we called our "tea-party." And in a minute or two Uncle Geoff left off writing, folded up his letter and addressed the envelope and rang for Benjamin.

"Take this at once," he said; and I couldn't help wondering a little that Benjamin didn't feel frightened when Uncle Geoff spoke so shortly and sharply. But Benjamin didn't seem to mind a bit. "Yes, sir," he said quite cheerfully, and somehow it made me think that after all Uncle Geoff couldn't be really sharp or stern, for Benjamin must know him very well, and when Benjamin had

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gone out of the room and Uncle Geoff turned to me I didn't feel as if I minded speaking to him the least.

"So, Audrey," he said, "you haven't forgotten our agreement, I see. And what are you troubled about now, my little lady?— Tom is no worse, by the by?" he added hastily.

"Oh no, Uncle Geoff, I think he's rather better. He didn't eat *much* at dinner, but he liked Miss Goldy-hair's jelly *very* much."

Uncle Geoff smiled again at our funny name for the young lady, which I had got so used to that I said it without thinking.

"It was very kind of Miss—perhaps you don't want to know her by her real name?" he said smiling. "It was very kind of her to bring Tom some jelly. No doubt it tasted much better than if Partridge had made it."

"Yes," I said, quite gravely. "I think it did," and I thought it was rather funny of Uncle Geoff to smile at me for saying that. But yet I didn't mind. I didn't even mind when he called me "my little lady." I was beginning to think he was really rather nice.

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"And what is the trouble then, Audrey?" said Uncle Geoff.

"It isn't exactly a trouble," I said. "It's only that we haven't anything nice for tea. We've plenty of *money*—it isn't that, but we don't know how to buy anything, for of course we can't go out,"—I felt myself get a little red when I said that,—and we didn't like to ask Sarah without telling you."

"Quite right," said Uncle Geoff, patting my head. "But what sort of things do you want? Is it to tempt Tom to eat, or what has put it into your heads to want something particularly nice to-day?"

"Oh because—why I thought I had told you at the beginning," I said, "how stupid of me! Why it's because Miss Goldy-hair's coming to have tea with us, to make up for us not going to her, you know."

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Uncle Geoff raised his eyebrows.

"Oh ho," he said, "I see! And what is it you want then?"



Two muffins would be exquisite.

"We were thinking," I said gravely, "that six sponge cakes, and six bath-buns, and some of those nice crispy biscuits mother used to have—I think they're German biscuits, they're awfully nice, with a chocolatey taste, mother always sent to London for them—we were thinking that would make a lovely tea. And we've quite enough to pay for that. And oh, Uncle Geoff, if *you* would tell Mrs. Partridge to toast and butter them, two muffins would be exquisite."

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I clasped my hands in entreaty, and Uncle Geoff had such a funny look in his eyes that I quite stared at him.

"You're not vexed?" I said. "I'd promise only to let Tom and Racey eat two bits each, for I know muffins are rather 'digestible.'"

At this Uncle Geoff really burst out laughing—he quite roared.

"Audrey, you'll kill me," he said, and I began to be a little offended. "Don't *you* be vexed," he said, as soon as he could speak. "I really beg your pardon, and I promise you to tell Mrs. Partridge myself. Yes, you shall have the muffins. But how are all these delicacies to be procured? Will you come out with me now—my brougham will be at the door directly—and I'll take you to a confectioner and let you choose for yourself?"

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"Oh yes," I said eagerly, "that *would* be nice—" but suddenly I stopped. "No," I said, "I don't think it would be very kind to the boys to go without them. For it's their money you know, Uncle Geoff, as well as mine."

"All right," said Uncle Geoff, and I could see he was pleased with me; "all right. You shall have all you want in half an hour at latest," and he was turning to go, for while we were talking he had been putting on his great coat, when I stopped him.

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"The money, Uncle Geoff," I cried, "you are forgetting the money. It's all ready—see—this is one of my shillings, and a sixpence and three pennies of Tom's, and Racey's fourpenny and two of his halfpennies. The way we planned it was a shilling for the sponge cakes and buns, and a shilling for biscuits, and two pennies for two muffins. It makes two shillings and two pennies just—doesn't it? I know mother used to say the chocolatey biscuits were dear, but I should think a shilling would get enough—a shilling's a good deal."

"Yes, it's twelve whole pence," said Uncle Geoff very seriously, as he took the money.

"But if the biscuits cost more, you'll tell me, won't you, Uncle Geoff?" I said, and he nodded "yes" back to me as he went out, and I ran up-stairs to the nursery as happy as I could be.

The boys were delighted with my news—Tom, who I must say had from the beginning been inclined to like Uncle Geoff, was quite glad to find I too was beginning to think him nice, for Tom wouldn't have thought it quite fair to me to like him if I didn't. We got out some of the prettiest of my doll's dinner-service plates, for we thought it might look nice to put a few of them up and down the table with just two or three biscuits on each; and we were very busy and happy, and it didn't seem nearly half an hour when we heard some one coming up-stairs, and in another moment Uncle Geoff called to us to open the door, as his hands were so full he couldn't.

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He came in with several tempting-looking parcels in his arms, and oh, best of all, the dearest and prettiest little flowery plant growing in a pot! It was a heath—like some we had in the hothouse at home—and it *was* so pretty. I nearly jumped for joy.

"See here, Audrey," he said, "see what I have brought you for the centre of your table. You are very fond of flowers, I know."

"Oh, Uncle Geoff!" I said. "Oh, I am so pleased. We were so wishing for some flowers to make the table look pretty."

Uncle Geoff looked as pleased as we did.

"Now here are your commissions," he went on. "You'll like to unpack them yourselves I dare say. And I must be off."

"And the money," I asked. "Was there enough?"

Uncle Geoff put on a very counting face. "Let me see," he said; "you gave me in all two shillings and twopence. Well what did it all come to—sponge-cakes so much, buns so much, biscuits," he went on murmuring to himself and touching his fingers to remind him—"yes, it is very curious," he said, "it comes to just two shillings and three half-pence. I have one halfpenny change to give you, Audrey, and I hope you think I have done your marketing well."

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"Oh, Uncle Geoff," we said, "it's lovely. And," I added, "about the muffins. Did you tell Mrs. Partridge?"

"Poor Mrs. Partridge is ill to-day," said Uncle Geoff. "But you shall have your muffins. Now good-bye," and he went away.

We opened the parcels with the greatest interest. They were just what we had asked for—six sponge-cakes, beautifully fresh and fluffy-looking; six bath-buns also fresh and crisp, and sugary at the top; and biscuits more charming than we had ever seen—white and pink and every shade of tempting brown.

"They are German biscuits, I am sure," I said. "Mother has often told me what nice kinds there are in Germany;" and we set to work to arrange them on the plates which I ran down to ask Sarah for, with the greatest pleasure. We were so happy that we felt able to be a little sorry for Mrs. Partridge.

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"I wonder if she's got a sore t'roat," said Tom.

"P'raps she's doin' to die," suggested Racey. "She's so vrezzy hold."

"H-old," said I. "Racey, how dreadfully vulgar you are."

"You're vrezzy vulgar to be so c'oss," said Racey.

"I don't believe you know what 'vulgar' means," I said.

"No," said Racey, calmly, "I doesn't," and in laughing at him I forgot my c'ossness, though afterwards when I remembered it, I felt really ashamed of having been so sharp upon poor Racey just when we had so many things to be happy about.

Almost immediately after we had got the table really arranged for the last time—we had done it and undone it so often that it was nearly four o'clock before it was quite ready—we heard a carriage stop at the door and then the bell rang, and peeping over the bannisters we heard Benjamin open the front door. Then came a soft rustle of some one coming up-stairs.

"It's *her*," I cried, rushing back into the nursery. And then we all flew out to the top of the staircase to welcome her. I should have liked to run down to the first landing but I daren't, for as sure as anything Tom and Racey would have been after me, and I was frightened as it was of Tom's catching cold by even coming to the landing.

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But she saw our eager faces between the rails before she was half way up. "Have you been waiting long for me, dears?" she said. "I came as quickly as I could."

"Oh! no, Miss Goldy-hair," we cried, "we have been *so* happy."

Then we led her triumphantly into the nursery.

"Look," said the little boys, "did you *ever* see such a lovely tea?"

"Muffins is coming," said Tom.

"I gave my fourpenny-bit and two halfpennies, but Audrey gived me one halfpenny back. Uncle Geoff buyed the things, but Audrey and Tom gaved him lotses of money," said Racey.

"Hush, Racey, it's *very* rude to tell people what things cost like that," I said reprovingly. But Miss Goldy-hair didn't seem to mind; she looked as pleased as she possibly could; we felt quite sure that she meant what she said when she kissed us her nice way—not a silly way as if we were just babies, you know—and thanked us for taking so much trouble to please her.

What a happy tea we had! Tom's sore throat seemed to be getting much better, for Miss Goldy-hair and I had really to stop his eating as much as he wanted. We wouldn't have minded if he had been quite well, for he wasn't a greedy boy, but when people are even a little ill it's better for them not to eat much, though I must confess the muffins and the chocolatey biscuits were dreadfully tempting. And after tea, before beginning to tell us the story, Miss Goldy-hair and I had a nice little talk. She had such a nice way of talking—she made you sorry without making you feel cross, if you know how I mean. She made me *quite* see how wrong it would have been of me to try to run away to Pierson with the boys; that it would really have been disobeying papa and mother, and that happiness never comes to people who go out of the right path to look for it in.

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"But it does *sometimes*, Miss Goldy-hair," I said. "We found *you* out of the right path, because it was naughty to have gone out to post the letter without any one knowing."

And Miss Goldy-hair smiled at that, and said no, when we found her we were on the right path of trying to run home again as fast as we could. And then she read to me a little letter she had written to Pierson, telling her all about us, and that Uncle Geoff was getting us a very nice kind nurse and that we were going to be quite happy, and Pierson must not be anxious about us, and that some day perhaps in the summer we should go to see her in her pretty cottage. And at the end of the letter I wrote down that I sent my love, so that Pierson would see the letter was like from me. Miss Goldy-hair asked very kindly for Pierson's poor mother in the letter. It was really a very nice one. She had written it for fear Pierson should be thinking we would really be coming to her; but, after all for *that* it needn't have been written, as—wasn't it queer?—we found out afterwards that Pierson never got the letter that had cost us such trouble! It couldn't have been plainly directed I suppose; and just fancy if I *had* run away with the boys, we should have got to that Copplesomething station, perhaps late at night, five miles from Pierson's cottage, with nobody to meet us!—even supposing we had got the right trains and all in London, and not had any accidents, all of which, as Miss Goldy-hair explained, was very doubtful. Oh dear! it makes me shiver even now to think of what troubles we might have got into, and Tom with a sore throat too! *Miss Goldy-hair's* letter was of course all nicely addressed—and Pierson got it quite rightly, for in a few days we got a nice one from her, saying she was so glad of good news of us and so glad we had found a kind friend, for though her poor mother was dead she couldn't very well have come back to us, as Harding was most anxious to get married and settled at once.

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Now I will get back to the afternoon that Miss Goldy-hair came to have tea with us.

When Sarah had taken away the tea-things and made the room look quite neat, the boys began to think it was time that they got a little of Miss Goldy-hair's attention.

"Miss 'Doldy-hair," said Racey, clambering up on her knee, "zou promised us a story."

"Yes, please," said Tom, "and let me sit on a buffet and put my head against your knee. It makes my sore t'roat feel better."

"What a little coaxer you are, Tom," said Miss Goldy-hair; but though Tom peeped up for a moment to see if she was vexed, it was plain she wasn't, for she made a nice place for his little round head on her knee, managing somehow to find room for Racey too, and not forgetting either to draw close to her a chair for me.

"Now," she said, "we're very comfortable. Shall I tell you my little story? It's not a long one, and I'm afraid it's not very interesting, but it's the only one I could think of to-day."

"Oh! do tell it," we said, "do, do, dear Miss Goldy-hair."

And so she began.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE WHITE DOVE.

"Oh! good is the sunlight that glances,
And good are the buds and the birds;
And so all the innocent fancies
Our lips can express make good words."

"There was once a little girl," said Miss Goldy-hair, "whose every-day life was rather dull and hard. In some ways I think it was duller than the lives of quite poor children, and in some ways I am not sure but that it was harder too. For though not really poor—that is to say, they had enough to eat in a plain way and clothes to wear of a plain kind—still her parents were what is called struggling people. And they had a great many children, little and big, of whom my little girl—Letty was her name—was one of the middle ones. No, I should hardly say one of the middle ones, for there were two older and five younger, so she was more like a big one. But she was small and delicate and seemed younger than she really was. They lived in a town—in the very middle of it; they had to do so on account of the father's work—and it was one of the ugliest towns you could imagine. Yet strange to say, the country round about this town was very—what people call picturesque, if you know what that means? There were hills, and valleys, and nice woods, and chattering streams at but a very few hours' journey off. But many of the people of the town hardly knew it; they were so hard-worked and so busy about just gaining their daily bread, that they had no time for anything else. And of all the hard-worked people, I do not know that any were more so than Letty's parents. If they had been much poorer than they were, and living quite in the country, I do not think Letty would have been so much to be pitied—not in the summer time any way, for then there are so very many pleasures that even the poorest cannot be deprived of. As it was she had almost *no* pleasures; her mother was kind, but always busy, and, as is often the case, so much taken up with her very little children that she *could not* think so very much about Letty. The big brother of fourteen was already at work, and the sister of thirteen was strong and tall, and able to find pleasure in things that were no pleasure to Letty. She, the big sister I mean, was still at school, and clever at her lessons, so she got a good deal of praise; and she had already begun to learn dressmaking, and was what people called 'handy with her needle,' so she was thought a great deal of at home and was neither timid nor shy. Letty was not clever in any way, and very timid—her pleasures were of a kind that her life made impossible for her. She liked beautiful things, she liked soft lovely colours, and gentle voices and tender music. Rough tones really hurt her, and ugly things caused her actual pain. Sometimes when her mother told her to go out and walk with the others, she just begged to stay at home, without being able to say why, for she could not have explained how the sight of the dark, grey streets of houses dulled her, how the smoke-dried grass that had never had a chance of being green in the fields a little way out of the town, and the dreadful black-looking river that some old, old men in the town still remembered a clear sparkling stream, made her perfectly miserable. It was strange, for she had never known anything else—she had never seen the real country—all her life she had lived, a poor stunted little plant, in the same dingy little house, with the small rooms and steep, narrow staircase, and with a sort of constant untidiness about it, in spite of her poor mother's care and striving. But nobody thought much about poor Letty—she was humble and sweet-tempered and never put herself forward, and so it never entered any one's head to wonder if she was happy or not.

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"One day her mother sent her a message—and as it was a message, of course Letty never thought of saying she would rather not go—to a house further out of the town than Letty had ever been alone, and as it was rather a fine day, that is to say, it was not raining, and up in the sky about the place where the sun ought to be there was a faintly bright look in the clouds, her mother told her if she liked she might take a turn before coming home. But Letty did not care to stay out—she left the message, and then turned to hurry home as fast as she could. She was hastening along, when a faint sound caught her ears, and looking round she saw lying on the ground a few steps from her a beautiful white dove. It seemed in pain, for it tried to move, and after fluttering a few steps fell down again, and Letty saw that one wing was dragging in a way it shouldn't, and she thought to herself it must be broken. Her kind heart was always quick to feel pity, and she gently lifted the bird, and sitting down on the ground tried to find out what was wrong. But she was half afraid to touch the wing for fear of hurting the bird more, and was quite at a loss what to do, when suddenly a very soft cooing voice reached her ears. It was so soft that it didn't startle her, still she felt, as you can fancy, *very* much surprised to hear a little dove talking.

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"Don't be afraid, Letty," it said. 'Put your hand in your pocket and you will find a white ribbon. With that you must bind up my wing.'

"Letty put her hand in her pocket as if she couldn't help doing so, though she felt sure there was no ribbon in it. To her surprise she drew out a piece of the prettiest, softest ribbon she had ever seen—pure white and satiny—softer than satin even. And too surprised, as it were, to speak, she carefully and tenderly bound it round the dove's body in such a way as to support the wing. No sooner was it firmly tied, than to her increased surprise, the dove raised itself, gave a sort of flutter, and rose in the air. It hovered a few moments over her head, and Letty held her breath, in fear that it was going to fly away, when, as suddenly as it had left her, it fluttered back again, and perching on her knees, looked at her with its soft plaintive eyes.

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"'What can I do for you, little girl?' it said, 'for you have cured my wing,' and looking at it closely, Letty saw it was true. Both wings were perfectly right, and the pretty white ribbon was now tied like a necklace two or three times loosely round its neck. And at last Letty found voice to reply—

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"Oh, white dove,' she said, 'you are a fairy. I see you are. Oh, white dove, take me with you to Fairyland.'

"Alas!' said the dove, 'that I cannot do. But see here, little girl,' and as he spoke he somehow managed to slip the ribbon off his neck. 'I give you this. It will open the door if you are good and gentle and do your work well.'

"The ribbon fluttered to Letty's feet, for with his last words the dove had again risen in the air. Letty eagerly seized it, for she saw something was fastened to it—to the ribbon I mean. Yes—a little key was hanging on it—a tiny little silver key, and Letty would have admired it greatly but for her anxiety to get some explanation from the dove before it flew away.

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"What door does it open?' she said. 'Oh, white dove, how shall I know what to do with it?'"

"The door of the garden where I live. That is what it opens. Wait for the first moonlight night and you will see,' said the dove, and then it flew off, higher and higher up into the sky, already growing dusk and gray, for the winter was not far off.

"Letty looked again at her precious key. Then very carefully she folded up the ribbon with the key in the centre of it and hid it in the front of her dress, and feeling as if she were in a dream, she made her way home.

"For some days nothing more happened. But Letty waited patiently till the time should come which the bird had spoken of. And the looking forward to this made the days pass quickly and less dully, and often and often she said over to herself, 'if you are good and gentle and do your work well,' and never had she tried more to be good and helpful, so that one day her mother said, 'Why, Letty dear, you're getting as quick and clever as Hester.' Hester was the big sister—and Letty said to herself that the dove had made her happier already, and that night when she went to sleep she had a sort of bright feeling that she never remembered to have had before.

"I think it must be going to be moonlight,' she thought to herself. But when she looked out of the window the dull little street was all wet, she could see the puddles glistening in the light of the lamps—it was raining hard.

"Letty gave a little sigh and went to bed. She had a little bed to herself, though there were two others in the room, for her elder sister and two of the younger ones.

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"In the middle of the night Letty awoke—the rain was over evidently, for the room was filled with moonlight. Letty started up eagerly, and the first thing that caught her sight was a door at the foot of her bed, a common cupboard door, it seemed, with a keyhole in it. It was the keyhole I think which first caught her attention, and yet surely the door had always been there before?—at least—at least she thought it had. It was very queer that she could not quite remember. But she jumped out of bed—softly, not to wake her sisters, and though half laughing at her own silliness in imagining her tiny silver key could fit so large a lock, she yet could not help trying it. She had the key and the ribbon always with her, carefully wrapped up, and now she drew out the key and slipped it in, and, wonderful to tell, it fitted as if made for the lock. Letty, holding her breath with eagerness, turned it gently—the door yielded, opening inwards, and Letty, how, exactly, she never knew, found herself inside—what, do you think?"

"The cupboard of course," said Tom.

"Were there olanges and bistwicks in there?" said Racey.

"Oh, Racey!" I exclaimed. "No, let *me* guess, Miss Goldy hair. She found herself in the bird's garden."

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"Yes," said Miss Goldy-hair, "she found herself standing in the middle of a most lovely garden. Nothing that poor Letty had ever seen in her life could have given her any idea—not the faintest—of anything so beautiful, though for you, children, who have lived in the country and know what grass *can* be, and what trees, whose leaves have never known smoke, can look like, it is not so impossible as it would have been for her, to picture to yourselves this delicious garden. There were flowers of every shape and hue; there were little silvery brooks winding in and out, sometimes lost to view among the trees, then suddenly dancing out again with a merry rush; there were banks to run down and grottos to lose your way in—there was just everything to make a garden delightful. And yet, after all, the word 'garden' scarcely describes it—it was more like a home for honeysuckle and eglantine than like what *we* generally call a garden, with trimly-cut beds and parterres of brilliant roses. There was a beautiful wildness about it and yet it was *perfectly* in order—there was no sign of withering or decay, no dead leaves lying about, no broken or dried-up branches on the trees, though they were high and massive and covered with



"Wait for the first moonlight night and you will see," said the dove, and then it flew off.

foliage—it was all fresh and blooming as if nothing hurtful or troubling had ever entered it. The water of the streams was pure and clear as crystal, the scent of the flowers was refreshing as well as sweet.

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"Letty looked about her in a happiness too great for words—the sight and feeling of this lovely garden were for the poor tired and dulled little girl, ecstasy past telling. She did not care to go running about to find where the streams came from or to pluck the flowers, as some children would have done. She just sat down on the delicious grass and rested her tired little head on a bank and felt *quite* happy.

"'Oh, thank you, white dove,' she said aloud, 'for bringing me here. He said he could not take me to Fairyland,' she added to herself, 'but no Fairyland could be more beautiful than this,' and she sat there with the soft warm sunlight falling on her—such sunlight as never in her life she had seen before—the brooks dancing along at her feet, the gentle little breezes kissing her face, in, as I said, complete content. Suddenly from the groves here and there about the garden, there came the sound of warbling birds. There were many different notes, even Letty could distinguish that—there was the clear song of the lark, the thrilling melody of the nightingale—even, most welcome of all to Letty, the soft coo of the dove—there were these and a hundred others—but all in perfect tune together. And as she listened, the music seemed to come nearer and nearer, till looking up, Letty saw the whole band of songsters approaching her—hundreds and hundreds of birds all slowly flying together till they lighted on a low-growing band of trees not far from where she sat. And now Letty understood that this beautiful garden was the home of the birds as the dove had said. And when the concert was over she saw, to her delight, a single white dove separate himself from the rest and fly to where she sat. She knew him again—she felt sure it was her dove and no other.

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"'Are you pleased, little Letty?' he said, in his soft cooing voice.

"'Oh! dear white dove, how can I thank you?' she answered.

"'You need not thank me,' he said. 'I have done only what I was meant to do. Now listen, Letty; the pleasures of this garden are endless, never, if you lived to a thousand, could you see all its beauties. And to those who have found the way here, it will never be closed again but by their own fault. You may come here often for rest and refreshment—in childhood and womanhood and even in quite old age, and you will always be welcome. You may perhaps never see me again, but that will not matter. I am only a messenger. Remember all I say, be gentle and good and do your work well, and whenever the moonlight shows you the door, you will find entrance here.'

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"He gently raised his wings and flew away—to join the other birds who were already almost out of sight. And a pleasant sleepy feeling came over Letty. She closed her eyes, and when she woke it was morning—she was in her own little bed in the dull room she shared with her sisters, and Hester was already up and dressed and calling to her to make haste. But it was not a dream, for firmly clasped in her hand was the silver key and the white ribbon.

"'How did it get there?' said Letty to herself, for she could not remember having taken it out of the lock. 'The white dove must have brought it back to me,' she thought."

"And was the cupboard door still in the wall?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes," said Miss Goldy-hair; "and when Letty, still hardly awake, said something to Hester about whether it had always been there, Hester laughed at her and said, 'Yes, of course; had Letty never seen inside it?—it was where mother kept the best linen.' And so Letty said no more about it—she knew she would only have been laughed at and perhaps scolded, and yet she knew there was nothing wrong in her beautiful secret, so she just kept it in her own little heart.

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"The days went on, and life seemed now quite a different thing to Letty; through all the tiredness and dulness the thought of the fairy garden which she was free to enter cheered and strengthened her. She did not go *very* often—it would not perhaps have been good for her to go too constantly—but every moonlight night she was sure to wake at the right moment, and if I had time I could tell you many things of the new beauties she found at each visit. But there came a time—it was miserable, cold, rainy winter weather, and the sky was so covered with clouds that neither sunlight nor moonlight could get through—when for several weeks Letty had no chance of getting to the garden—the moon never shone, and do what she would she never woke up. She grew impatient and discontented; she did her work less willingly, and answered crossly when her mother reproved her. And one night she went to bed in a very bad humour, saying to herself the dove had deceived her, or some nonsense like that. Two or three hours later she woke suddenly—to her delight the moon was shining brightly. Up jumped Letty and got her key ready. It slipped as usual into the lock, but, alas! do what she would she could not turn it. She pulled and pushed, she twisted about and tried to turn it by main force. Fortunately it was a fairy key, otherwise it certainly would have been broken. And at last in despair she sat down on the edge of her bed and cried. Suddenly the words came into her mind—'Be good and gentle and do your work well—if the door is ever closed to you it will be by your own fault,' and Letty's conscience whispered to her that it *was* by her own fault."

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Miss Goldy-hair paused a minute as if she wanted to hear what we had to say.

"And did she never get in again?" said Tom. "Oh, poor Letty!"

"Oh yes," said Miss Goldy-hair, "she took her punishment well, and though a good while passed

before she had another chance of visiting the garden, she was very patient and did her best. And when a moonlight night did come again it was all right—the key turned without the least difficulty. And never had the garden seemed to her more beautiful than this time, and never had Letty felt more cheered and refreshed by its sweet air and sunshine and all its lovely sights and sounds. And now, dears, I must leave off, for it is almost time for me to go home; and indeed if I went on talking all night I could never tell you a half nor a quarter of the pleasures of Letty's wonderful garden."

Miss Goldy-hair stopped.

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"Didn't her never have nussing to eat in that garden?" said Racey.

Miss Goldy-hair smiled.

"I dare say she did," she said. "You may fancy she did. If you fancy all the nicest and prettiest things you know, you will not be wrong."

"Oh," said Tom, "that's very nice. We can make plays to ourselves about Letty's garden. Did she keep going till she was big? Did she never lose the key?"

"Never," said Miss Goldy-hair. "She never lost the key. And she went not only when she was big, but when she was old, quite old. Indeed she got fonder and fonder of it the longer she lived, and it helped her through a hard and often suffering life. And I don't know but what in quite old age her visits to the garden were the happiest of all."

"Miss Goldy-hair," I said, "isn't there something to find out like in the story of Letty?"

Miss Goldy-hair smiled.

"Think about it," she said. "I suspect you will be able to tell me something if you do."

But the boys didn't care to find out anything else. They thought it was great fun to play at Letty and the dove, and they pretended to get into the garden through the door of the cupboard where our cloaks hung. And the play lasted them for a good while without their getting tired of it, and Miss Goldy-hair was quite pleased, and said that was one way of turning the key in the lock, and not a bad way either for such little boys. Her saying that puzzled me a little at first, but then it came clearer to me that by the beautiful garden she meant all sweet and pretty fancies and thoughts which help to brighten our lives, and that these will come to children and big people too whose hearts and minds are good and gentle and kind.

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The next day Tom was better, and two or three days after that we went at last to dinner and tea at Miss Goldy-hair's. If I were to tell you all we did, and what pretty things she showed us, and how delighted Racey was with the *inside* of her air-garden, it would take a whole other book. For just fancy, we have counted over the lines and the pages I have written, and there is actually enough to make a whole little book, and just in *case*, you know, of its ever coming to be printed, it's better for me to leave it the right size. And besides that, I don't know that I have very much more to tell that would be interesting, for the happy days that now began for us passed very much like each other in many ways. Our new nurse came and she turned out very kind, and I think she was more sensible than poor Pierson in some ways, for she managed to get on better with Mrs. Partridge. But as for poor Mrs. Partridge, she didn't trouble us much, for her rheumatism got so very bad that all that winter she couldn't walk up-stairs though she managed to fiddle about down-stairs in her own rooms and to keep on the housekeeping. And this, by the by, brings me to the one big thing that happened, which you will see all came from something that I told you about almost at the beginning of this little story.

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All through this winter, as you will have known without my telling you, of course our happiness came mostly from Miss Goldy-hair. She didn't often come to see us after Tom got better, but at least twice a week *we* went to see *her*. And what happy days those were! It was she that helped us with everything—she held Racey's hand for him to write a letter "his own self," to mother; she showed me how to make, oh! *such* a pretty handkerchief-case to send mother for her birthday; and taught Tom how to plait a lovely little mat with bright-coloured papers. She helped me with my music, which I found very tiresome and difficult at first, and she was so dear and good to us that when at last as we got to understand things better, it had to be explained to us that not three months but three *years* must pass before we could hope to see papa and mother again, it did not seem nearly so terrible as it would have done but for having her. She put it such a nice way.

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"You can learn so much in three years," she said. "Think how much you can do to please your mother in that time." And it made us feel a new interest in our lessons and in everything we had to learn.

Well, one day in the spring Uncle Geoff told me that he had a plan for us he wanted to consult me about. He smiled a little when he said "consult," but I had learned not to take offence at Uncle Geoff's smiles.

"Poor old Partridge is going to leave us, Audrey," he said. "She feels she is no longer fit for the work, and indeed it would have been better if she had said so before. I think her feeling it and not liking to say so had to do with the troubles when you first came."

"But she's never vexed with us now," I said eagerly. "Nurse is very nice to her, and then Miss Goldy-hair told us about Mrs. Partridge being so old, and that we should be res—respecting and

all that way to her."

"'Respectful,' you mean, my dear," said Uncle Geoff smiling a little, for I had stumbled over the word. "Ah yes—I think Miss Goldy-hair has been a sort of good fairy to us all;" and then he went on to tell me his plan. He was going to make some changes in the house, he said. Several of the rooms were to be painted and done up new, and it would be better for us to be away for two or three weeks. So what do you think he had thought of—wasn't it a good idea?—he had written to Pierson to ask if she could find rooms for us in her village, and she had written back to say she had two very nice rooms in her own house which she was meaning to let to visitors in the summer time, and oh! she would be so pleased to have us! So it was settled, and in a week or two we went—Tom, Racey, and I, with our kind nurse. Uncle Geoff himself took us to the station, and though we were in high spirits we really felt sorry to leave him; and I felt quite pleased when he said, "It will be nice to have you back again, looking very strong and rosy."

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We had said good-bye to Miss Goldy-hair the night before, and even though it was only for a little while we really nearly cried.

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"You'll come to see us as soon as ever we come back, Miss Goldy-hair, won't you?" said Tom.

"Yes," said Miss Goldy-hair, "you may be sure of that."

"The first evening," persisted Tom, "the very first evening?" and rather to my surprise—for generally when the boys teased like that about settling anything *exactly*, Miss Goldy-hair would reply, "I can't *promise*," or "We'll see nearer the time"—she answered again, "Yes, Tom dear. I'll be here the very first evening."

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Racey was really rather frightened of him, he looked so black and queer.

So we went, and we stayed a month—four whole weeks. And we were very happy, for the weather was fine and we were out nearly all day gathering primroses and daffodils; and Pierson was very kind indeed, and her husband was very polite, though the first time Racey saw him in the smithy he was really rather frightened of him, he looked so black and queer. And Cray was really a very pretty village, just as Pierson had said, and we had no lessons and lots of fresh eggs and new milk. So altogether it was very nice. But yet when the last evening came we couldn't help saying to each other—though of course we were sorry to leave Pierson—that for *always*, you know, counting rainy days and all, we'd rather be in London with Uncle Geoff, and with dear Miss Goldy-hair coming to see us. And we thought—Tom and I at least—*what* a good thing it was we had lost our way that night and had found Miss Goldy-hair, instead of running away to Pierson. And all the way home in the train we kept thinking how nice it would be to see her—Miss Goldy-hair—again, and wondering if she'd be at the house when we got out of the cab. Uncle Geoff we knew we'd see at the station, for he had sent us a letter to Cray to say he'd be there, and so he was.

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He looked so merry and nice we somehow were surprised.

"Uncle Geoff," I said to him, "you must have enjoyed yourself very much when you were away. You look so very merry."

"Yes," he said smiling, "I enjoyed my holiday very much."

We knew he had been away, for he had written to tell us.

"Do you think Miss Goldy-hair will be at the house to see us when we get there?" I asked. "Have you seen her while we were away?"

"Yes," said Uncle Geoff. "I have, and I think she will be there."

The cab stopped. Out we all jumped. What a different coming from the last time!—for there in the hall, looking as if she would have liked to run out into the street to see us, stood dear Miss Goldy-hair.

We all flew into her arms. Then we all looked at her. She seemed a little different. She had a grey dress—a very pretty one—instead of her black one. She had put it on, she told us afterwards, on purpose for this evening, though she had still to wear black for a good while.

"Miss Doldy-hair," said Racey, "is you doin' to stay to tea? You has no bonnet on."

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By this time we were all in the dining-room, where the table was spread out for a most beautiful tea.

"Yes, Racey, if you'll have me, I'll stay to tea," she said. And then she looked up at Uncle Geoff.

"Children," he said, "you'll have to find a new name for Miss Goldy-hair, or rather I've found one

for you. How would 'Auntie' do?"

Tom and Racey stared, but I, being so much older, of course understood. To Uncle Geoff's surprise I jumped up into his arms and kissed him.

"Oh, Uncle Geoff," I cried, "oh, *what* a good plan! Is she really our auntie now?"

"*Really*," said Uncle Geoff, "that's to say, she's been your stupid old uncle's wife for a fortnight."

Then the boys understood too. But Racey looked rather disconsolate. "I thought," he said, "Miss Doldy-hair was doin' to mally *me*."

But in the end he too thought it a very good plan, when he found that our new auntie was really going to live with us always. And I think one of the things that helped to please him *quite* was the discovery of a beautiful air-garden, which Uncle Geoff had had built out of one of the drawing-room windows for Miss Goldy-hair's pet plants.

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Papa and mother have come home since then, for, as I told you, all these things happened a very long time ago—five whole years ago.

And we are, I think, the happiest children in the whole world, for we have not only our own dear mother, but our own dear auntie too—the auntie who was so good and kind to us when we were forlorn and misunderstood, and might so easily have got into naughty ways; and who taught us to be—or at least to try to be—all our dear mother hoped. We live very near Uncle Geoff's, for papa got to be something more clever still when he came back from China, and had to give up living in the country. We were rather sorry for that, but still perhaps we enjoy it all the more when we go there in the summer. And I have an air-garden of my own, which would be very nice if the boys wouldn't try experiments on the plants in the holidays.

And you have *no idea* how fond mother and auntie are of each other, and how often we all talk over how the boys and I found our dear Miss Goldy-hair that rainy evening when we lost our way in the London streets.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOYS AND I: A CHILD'S STORY FOR CHILDREN ***

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