Title: Half-Past Bedtime

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Release Date: January 21, 2011 [EBook #35029]

Language: English

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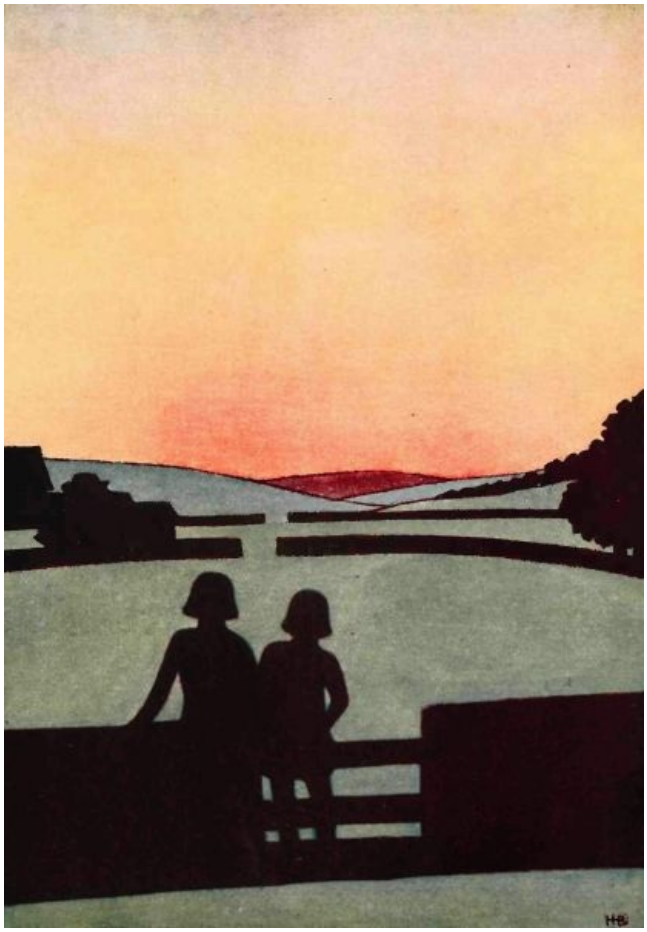
HALF-PAST BEDTIME

By the Same Author

THE CORNER OF HARLEY STREET
PITY THE POOR BLIND
VAGABONDS IN PÉRIGORD
SONGS OUT OF SCHOOL
THE PLAIN GIRL'S TALE



HALF-PAST BEDTIME

HALF-PAST

BEDTIME

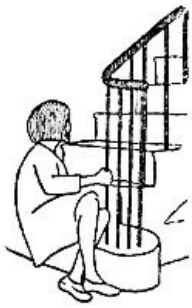
BY

H. H. BASHFORD

AUTHOR OF

"THE CORNER OF HARLEY STREET" ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON, NEW YORK AND CHICAGO

TO

JOE & ADA MAGGS

AND THE CHILDREN THAT LOVE THEM

When Farmer Sun with rosy wink
  Says good-bye all, and drives away,
When safe in fold the sheep-bells clink,
  And hard-worked horses munch their hay,

When brown and blue eyes sleepy grow,
  And Nurse downstairs clears up the crumbs,
When God pulls down His blind, and so
  What people call the twilight comes,

Then lazy Moon lifts up her arm,
  Shakes back her hair and smooths her beams,
And softly over field and farm
  Scatters the milk-white seed of dreams.

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MR JUGG

Marian and Mr. Jugg

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I

MR JUGG

The name of the town doesn't really matter; but it was a big town in the middle of the country; and the first of these adventures happened to a little girl whose Christian name was Marian. She was only seven when it happened to her, so that it was rather a young sort of adventure; but the older ones happened later on, and this is the best, perhaps, to begin with.

Marian's house was in a street called Peter Street, because there was a church in it called St Peter's Church; and some people liked this church, because it had a great spire soaring up into the sky. But Marian's daddy didn't like spires, because they were so sharp and so slippery. He liked towers better, because the old church towers, he said, were like little laps, ready to catch God's blessing. But Marian's daddy was a queer sort of man, and nobody took much notice of what he said.

At the other end of Peter Street there was a field in which some people were beginning to build houses, and Marian used to love going into this field to watch the builders at work. But one afternoon she became tired of watching them, and so she climbed over a gate into the next field. [Pg 14]

Here the grass was so tall that it tickled Marian's chin. There were great daisies in it, taller than the grass, and they looked into Marian's eyes. They had calm faces like Marian's mummy's nurney's face, and they didn't mind a bit when Marian picked them. There were also buttercups, shiny and fat, like the man in the butcher's shop who was always smiling.

This was such a big field that when Marian came to the middle of it the voices of the builders were quite faint, and the tinkle of their trowels on the edges of the bricks sounded like sheep-bells a long way off. When she turned round she could see the roofs of the houses, and the tops of the chimneys, and the spires of the churches all trembly because of the heat, as if they were tired and wanted to lie down. But they couldn't lie down, although they were so much older and bigger and stronger than Marian. "I'd rather be me," thought Marian, and when she had picked a bundle of flowers she lay down in the deep grass.

It was so hot that, when once they had become used to her, the stalks of the grasses stood quite still. She could see hundreds and hundreds of them, like trees in a forest, or people in church waiting for the anthem. Up in the hills it was different. There the grasses were always moving—not running about, of course, but standing in the same place and bending to and fro, to and fro. Some of them would move, so her father had once told her, as much as four miles in a single day, just as far as it was from Marian's house to the top of Fairbarrow Down. [Pg 15]

But here in the valley they weren't moving at all. They weren't even whispering. They were holding their breath; and if they were listening to anything, it was to something that a little girl couldn't hear. She stared into the sky, but it was so blue that it made her eyes ache trying to see how blue it was; and when she closed them, to give them a rest, she could see little patterns on her eyelids. Then she opened them again, and the green of the grass, as she looked between the grass blades, was cool like an ointment.

"And nobody in the world," she thought, "knows where I am."

She felt a sort of tickle in the middle of her stomach.

"How do you do?" said a voice.

Marian gave a jump. She saw a little man looking up at her. He was not even as tall as an afternoon tea-table.

"What's your name?" he asked. He was very polite. He held his hat in his right hand. Marian told him her name. She wasn't a bit frightened.

"What's yours?" she asked.

"I'm Mr Jugg," he said.

"And who are you, Mr Jugg?" she inquired.

"I'm the King of the Bumpies," he replied.

When Marian was puzzled there came a little straight line, exactly in the middle, between her two eyebrows.

"What are bumpies?" she said.

"My hat!" he gasped. "Haven't you ever heard of bumpies?"

Marian shook her head. [Pg 16]

"Oh dear, oh dear!" he sighed. "Have you ever heard of angels?"

"Well, of course," said Marian. "Everybody's heard of angels."

"Well then, bumpies," said Mr Jugg, "are baby angels. They're called bumpies till they've learned to fly."

"I see," said Marian, "but why are they called bumpies?"

"Because they bump," said Mr Jugg, "not knowing how."

Marian laughed.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"If you'd care to come with me," he said, "I could show you."

"Oh, I should love to!" said Marian. "May I?"

He put on his hat and gave her his hand, and helped her to stand up with her bunch of daisies.

"Come along," he said, and he took her across the field, and through a hole in the hedge into the next one. This was a smaller field with some cows in it, and the grass in it was quite short. He led her across it, and helped her over a gate into the field beyond, where the grass was shorter still.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm seven," said Marian.

"That's very young," he replied. "I'm seven million."

"Good gracious!" said Marian. "And how old is Mrs Jugg?" [Pg 17]

"She's as old as I am," he said, "but she looks younger."

When they came to the middle of this field he stood still and stamped with his foot three and a half times—three big stamps and a little stamp—and then the field suddenly opened. Marian saw a hole at her feet with a lot of steps in it going down, down, down.

"This is where I live," he said. "You needn't be frightened. It's quite safe. I'll lead the way."

He was still holding her hand, and he went down before her, a step at a time, very carefully.

"Isn't it rather dark?" said Marian.

"Wait till I've shut the door," he said, "and then you'll get a surprise."

When both their heads were well below the ground, he tapped twice on the wall; and then the hole was shut so that they couldn't see the sky, and a most wonderful thing happened. They were at the beginning of a long passage, almost a mile long, with a lovely slope in it; and on each side of it there were hundreds of little lights, all of different colours. There were blue lights, and green lights, and yellow lights, and crimson lights, and lights of all sorts of other colours that Marian had never seen or even imagined. Both the walls and the floor of the passage were quite smooth, and just where they stood there was a little cupboard. "This is where I keep my scooter," he said. "It saves time, and there's lots of room on it for two."

He opened the cupboard door and took out a scooter.

"Now put your hands," he said, "on my shoulders." [Pg 18]

"Oh, what fun!" said Marian, and she suddenly noticed that he seemed to have grown taller.

She climbed on to the scooter behind him. He gave it a little push and they began to glide down the passage. At first they went quite slowly, because the slope was so gentle. But soon they were going faster and faster; and presently they went so fast that all the coloured lights became two streaks of light, one on each side of them. Marian could hardly breathe.

"What's going to happen at the end?" she thought. But about half-way along the passage began to go uphill again. The coloured streaks became separate lights. The scooter went slower and slower. At last it stopped just in front of a closed door, and there, in the wall, was another little cupboard.

"Here we are," said Mr Jugg, putting the scooter away. "I expect they're all having tea."

Then he opened the door, and Marian almost lost her breath again, for what she saw was a great long room, with lots and lots of little tables in it, and bumpies sitting on chairs round every table. Hanging from the ceiling of this room were hundreds of coloured lights just like the lights that she had seen in the passage—blue lights, and green lights, and yellow lights, and crimson lights, and lights of all sorts of other colours of which she didn't even know the name. And there was such a clamour of talking and laughing, and spoon-clinking and plate-clinking, and chair-creaking and table-creaking, that Marian could hardly hear what Mr Jugg was saying, although he was shouting in her ear. [Pg 19]

"That's my wife," he said. "That's Mrs Jugg, that lady over there, just coming toward us."

Marian looked where he was pointing, and saw a stout little lady with a smiling face.

She was exactly as tall as Mr Jugg, but she weighed two and a half pounds more. As for the bumpies, they were of all sorts of sizes, but they all wore the same kind of clothes—little dark green jackets over little dark green vests, little dark green knickers, and little dark green socks. Fastened to each jacket were two little hooks, one behind each shoulder—these were for their wings. But they only wore wings when they were having their flying lessons. Suddenly they all stopped talking and stared at Marian. Some of them stood on their chairs in order to see her better. She felt very shy, and began to blush.

Mrs Jugg came and gave her a kiss.

"This is Marian," said Mr Jugg. "Can you give her some tea?"

"Why, of course I can," said Mrs Jugg, giving Marian two more kisses. "Come with me, my dear. You shall have tea at my table."

She introduced Marian to all the bumpies.

They gave her three cheers, and then went on with their tea, and soon Marian was having tea herself—such a tea as she had never had before, not even at her Uncle Joe's. There was bread and butter with bumpy jam on it and bumpy Devonshire cream on the top of the jam, and there was bumpy cake with bumpy cherries in it, and there were bumpy meringues, and there was bumpy honey. [Pg 20]

"Why, it's just like a birthday tea!" said Marian.

"That's because it is one," said Mr Jugg. "Every tea's a birthday tea down here. There are so many bumpies, you see, that it's always somebody's birthday."

"Dear me!" said Marian; "but isn't that rather a bother—I mean for you and Mrs Jugg?"

Mrs Jugg gave her another meringue.

"There aren't any bothers," she said, "in Heaven."

"But this isn't Heaven," said Marian, "is it?"

"Well, of course it is," said Mrs Jugg—"part of it."

"But it's under the ground," said Marian.

"Well, never mind. Heaven's everywhere, only most people don't know it."

Marian was surprised, but she felt all lovely and shivery. Fancy Heaven being so near home! What a thing to be able to tell Mummy! Mrs Jugg gave her some more cake. Some of the bumpies had finished now, and were getting impatient. Presently Mr Jugg clapped his hands. Then they all stood up, and Mrs Jugg said grace, and then they all rushed toward the door.

This wasn't the door by which Marian had come in, but a door that opened into another room—a great big room with even more lights in it, and hundreds of swings and all sorts of rocking-horses. In less than a minute there were bumpies upon every one of them, and two of the bumpies took charge of Marian. She had a lovely swing and a ride on a rocking-horse, and then they all began to play games. They played ring-a-ring o' roses, and bumpy in the corner, and bumpy hide-and-seek, and angel's buff; and then Mr Jugg took her into the flying school to see some of the older bumpies fly. [Pg 21]

This was like a big gymnasium, with lots and lots of pegs in it, and a pair of wings hanging from each peg; and on the floor there were great soft mattresses so that the bumpies shouldn't hurt themselves if they fell down. But the bumpies that Marian saw had almost learned to fly. They would soon be proper angels and able to fly anywhere.

"And then," said Mr Jugg, "they'll be going into the upper school to learn history and geography and all about dreams and things."

"Where's the upper school?" asked Marian.

"Oh, it's all over the place," said Mr Jugg; "there are ever so many class-rooms, you see. And then they go to college."

"And what happens then?" asked Marian.

"Well, then they're able to begin to work. There's always heaps for them to do."

"I see," said Marian; "and now I really think that I ought to be going home."

"Perhaps you ought," said Mr Jugg. He led her back into the playroom, and then into the room where they had all had tea. The tables had been cleared now, but Mrs Jugg came toward them with a big box of bumpy chocolates. Marian took one, and Mrs Jugg kissed her and told her that she must be sure to come again.

"You haven't seen half the place," she said, "nor a quarter of it. There are miles and miles of it. Have another chocolate." [Pg 22]

Then Marian thanked her and gave her a kiss, and Mr Jugg opened the door and they went into the passage. When they had come this part of the passage had been uphill, but going back, of course, it was downhill. He opened the cupboard and took out the scooter, and Marian stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders. Just as before, they began to go quite slowly, but soon they were going as fast as ever. Just as before, the coloured lights became two streaks of light, one on each side of them. But Marian knew now what was going to happen, and presently the scooter went slower and slower. At last it stopped just at the foot of the steps, and Mr Jugg put it away in the cupboard. He hit the wall twice, and there, at the top of the steps, Marian saw the hole open, and the sky above it.

"Goodness me!" she said. "How late it is!"

The sky was quite dark, and the stars were shining.

Mr Jugg blew his nose.

"Poor Mummy!" she said; "she will be so frightened."

"Where do you live?" asked Mr Jugg.

Marian told him.

"I'd better fly you there," he said. "Half a tick."

He went down the steps again, and opened the little cupboard, and came back with a pair of wings.

"Now, if you can get on my back," he said, "we'll be home in half a minute."

She climbed on to his shoulders, just as if she were going to ride pick-a-back, and then he gave a little jump and they were up in the air. They skimmed across the fields and down Peter Street just [Pg 23]

as fast as an express train. At Marian's door he put her down.

"Which is your bedroom window?" he asked.

She told him.

"Now I must be saying good-night," he said. "No, I won't come in. It's against the rules for the King of the Bumpies." So he took off his hat and made her a little bow, and before she could wink almost, he had gone. Then she knocked at the door, and next moment Mummy was hugging her as tight as tight. Then Daddy came and hugged her too, and Cuthbert, who had gone to bed, looked over the landing banisters.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"Why, where *haven't* I been?" said Marian, and then she told them all about it. Cuthbert didn't believe her. But Cuthbert didn't believe anything. He was nine years old, and was beginning to learn French. But Mummy believed her, and Daddy believed her; and I'll tell you another thing that happened.

Late that night, when everybody was asleep, Mr Jugg flew to Marian's window. Marian's angel—everybody has a guardian angel—was smoking a quiet cigarette on the sill outside.

"Hullo!" he said; "fancy seeing you here!"

He had once been a bumpy, you see, and Mr Jugg had taught him to fly.

"Good evening," said Mr Jugg; "what do you think of this?"

It was a little dream that he had brought for Marian.

"By George!" said the angel, "that's a beauty." [Pg 24]

He slipped it very softly under Marian's pillow.

She must have dreamed it too, for next morning when Mummy made her bed it wasn't there. But, alas! the loveliest dreams of all are the ones that we never remember. [Pg 25]

Like the jungle he lives in,
Tiger wears a dappled skin.
Foxes on the plains of snow
White as their surroundings go.

So do fishes lose their sight,
Buried in the ocean's night,
Little knowing lovely day
Lies but half a mile away.

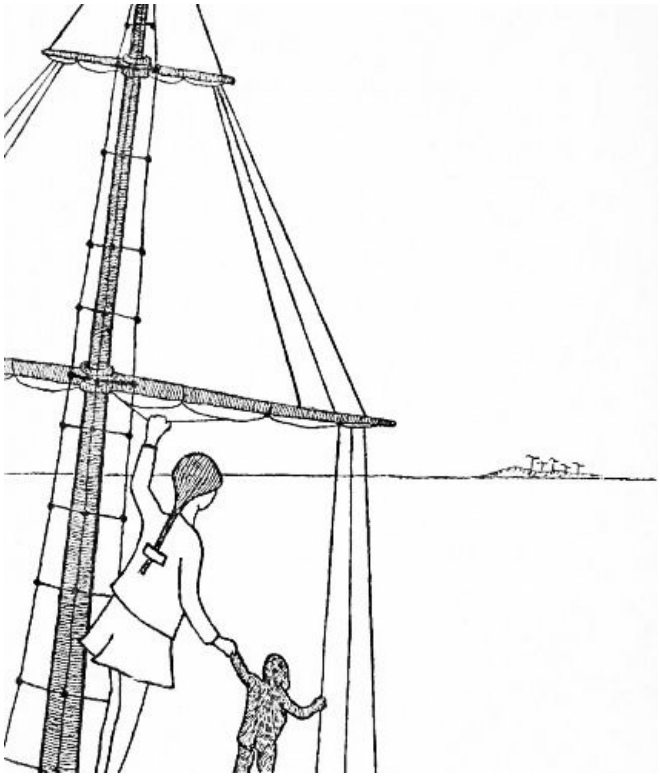
For the truth is plain to see,
As our haunts are, so are we; [Pg 26]
And in cities you will find
Busy blind men just as blind.

Long ago they lost their eyes
Under bags of merchandise;
And they know not there are still
Angels on the window-sill.

[Pg 27]

GWENDOLEN

[Pg 28]



Monkey Island

[Pg 29]

II

GWENDOLEN

Living in the same town as Marian there was a little girl called Gwendolen. Marian didn't know her very well, though they went to the same school and sometimes smiled at each other in church. Her father and mother were always climbing mountains and lecturing about them afterward, so Gwendolen had to live with her aunt, who was very rich and wore a lot of rings.

In many ways Gwendolen was a nice girl, but she had an exceptionally large tummy. Some people said that it was her own fault, because she was always sitting about eating marzipan. But some people said that she couldn't help her tummy, and had to eat a lot to keep it full. There were also people who said that her aunt spoiled her, being so greedy herself and always eating buttered toast.

Gwendolen's aunt had a pale, proud face, deeply lined by indigestion, and she lived in a big house on the right-hand side of Bellington Square. The colour of this house was a yellowish cream, and it had two pillars in front of the front door. There were eleven steps leading up to it, and there was a boy to open it who wore twelve brass buttons. [Pg 30]

In the middle of this Square there was a sort of garden with tall iron railings all round it, and each of the people living in the Square had a key to open the gate of it. It was the tidiest garden in the whole world, and all the flowers in it stood in rows; and the people in the Square paid for a gardener to shave the grass every day. One of the reasons why the people in the Square were so rich was that they had so few children; and the children that they did have had to be very careful not to make foot-marks on the grass. Gwendolen's aunt sometimes went there when she had a headache and wanted to throw it off; and Gwendolen went there to eat marzipan and read about Princes and Princesses. She generally sat on a painted iron seat in front of a flower-bed shaped like a lozenge, and once she was sick behind a bush called *B. stenophylla* on a tin label.

One day she was sitting on this seat when she heard a curious sort of sound. At first it was rather faint, so that she didn't take much notice of it, but gradually it became louder and louder. Her aunt was sitting on the same seat wondering which of her medicines to take before dinner, and Gwendolen noticed that she began to look annoyed, because the noise was the sound of a harmonium. Some people like harmoniums, and have them in their houses, and play hymns on them on Sunday afternoons. But this was a harmonium that went on wheels, with a man to push it, and a woman walking beside him. After he had pushed it for a few yards he would sit down and play a tune on it, while the woman walked up and down, looking at people's windows and [Pg 31] trying to catch their eye. If she saw anybody she would say "Kind lady," or "Kind gentleman," as the case might be, and perhaps the kind lady or the kind gentleman would throw her some money, and then she would say "God bless you." But people like that, with travelling harmoniums, weren't allowed to come into Bellington Square, and Gwendolen's aunt said, "Dear me, just when I wanted a little peace and quiet!"

If there had been anybody near, such as a policeman or a gardener, she would have told him to

send the musicians away. But it was very hot, and there was nobody about, and so the people went on playing. Gwendolen watched them for a while through the railings, and the butler at Number Ten gave the woman a sixpence. Her aunt was very angry about it when Gwendolen told her, for what was the good of making rules, she said, if you encouraged people to break them?

The people with the harmonium came a little nearer, and then Gwendolen could see what they looked like. The woman was stout, with a hard brown face and rolling eyes like dark-coloured pebbles. When she smiled it was as if she had pinned it on, and as if the smile didn't really belong to her. The man had pale eyes, like those of ferrets in a hutch, and he watched the woman all the time he was playing. Gwendolen noticed that there was a long string fastened to one of the handles of the harmonium. She heard a little voice close to her knees.

"Oh, Gwendolen," it said, "save me."

Gwendolen looked down and saw the unhappiest little face that she had ever seen in her life. It belonged to a small brown monkey wearing a red jacket and a blue sailor hat. He was staring up at her with timid dark eyes. [Pg 32]

"I heard your aunt speak to you," he said. "So I know your name."

He looked over his shoulder at the man and the woman. But the woman was looking at the houses, and the man was watching her.

"What's the matter?" said Gwendolen.

He was holding on to the garden railings.

"Lift up my jacket," he said, "and you'll see."

Gwendolen stooped down and lifted up his jacket. There were three great wounds across his back.

"Oh dear!" she cried; "how did you get those?"

"They beat me," he said. "They're always beating me."

Gwendolen may have been lazy, and she may have been greedy, but she had a soft heart, and the monkey had seen this.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she said. "But when did you learn to talk?"

The monkey shivered a little.

"Hush, they don't know," he replied. "I've lived with them so long that I've learned their language."

"But why don't you run away?" asked Gwendolen.

"How can I? They keep me on this string and beat me every night."

Gwendolen thought for a moment.

"Oh, Gwendolen," he said, "do save me if you can!" [Pg 33]

From where she was kneeling Gwendolen could see the woman going up the steps to one of the houses. The man was watching her as usual. Gwendolen was half hidden from them by a bush.

"But there's my aunt," she said. "I don't know what my aunt would say."

"Listen," said the monkey. "I could take you to a lovely island."

Gwendolen frowned a little.

"But I don't know," she said, "that my aunt's very fond of islands."

"She would be of this," said the monkey. "What's your aunt fondest of?"

Gwendolen thought for a moment.

"Buttered toast," she said.

"Well, it's ever so much nicer," said the monkey, "than buttered toast."

Gwendolen looked at her aunt and then at the monkey, with his sad eyes and shaking limbs. There wasn't much time. In another minute the man and the woman would be moving on. Close beside her, in a little green box, she could see the tops of the handles of the gardener's shears. She took a deep breath. Then she made up her mind.

"All right," she said. "I'll see what I can do."

She crept to the box and took out the shears. The monkey squeezed himself through the railings. With a beating heart Gwendolen cut the string, caught up the monkey, and ran to her aunt. Her aunt looked up.

"Why, what have you got here?" she asked. [Pg 34]

"He belongs to those people," said Gwendolen, "with the harmonium."

"Oh, save me!" said the monkey. "Save me!"

"Look what they've done to him," said Gwendolen. She lifted the monkey's jacket. Gwendolen's aunt put on her spectacles.

"Dear me!" she said; "but the monkey talks!"

"Yes," said Gwendolen. "He's been learning for a long time."

The monkey clasped his hands and looked into Gwendolen's aunt's face. He saw deep down into her, where her good nature was.

"If you let me go back to them," he said, "they'll kill me. Oh, lady dear, please help me!"

Gwendolen's aunt was rather disturbed. Nothing like this had happened to her before. If she took the monkey away, people would call her a thief. But if she let him go back, perhaps he would be beaten to death.

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"On Monkey Island; it's the loveliest island in the world."

"But how did you come here?" she said.

The monkey began to tremble again.

"They stole me away," he said, "from my wife and children."

"Oh, Auntie," said Gwendolen, "can't we take him back there? He says it's ever so much nicer than buttered toast."

Her aunt stood up. [Pg 35]

"Oh, bother the buttered toast," she said. "It's his wife and babies that I'm thinking about."

Then the harmonium suddenly stopped, and they heard the man cry out.

"Why, where's that monkey?" he said. He began to swear. They saw the woman run down the steps. The monkey gave a little cry and jumped into Gwendolen's aunt's arms. Then they saw the man and the woman rush toward the railings. Both their faces were dark as night.

"Come on," said Gwendolen's aunt. "We'll have to run for it. Make for the gate."

Fortunately, the gate was on the opposite side of the garden, and their own house was opposite the gate. The man and the woman would have to run right round the Square.

"We ought to beat them," said Gwendolen's aunt.

Oh, how sorry Gwendolen was then that her tummy was so large! But she ran as fast as ever she could, and almost kept up with her aunt. The man and the woman had started to run too, shouting aloud at the tops of their voices.

"We shan't be safe," said her aunt, "till we've got to the island; because we shall really be thieves till we've taken the monkey home."

They dashed across the grass and through the gate, and, just as they were running up their own front steps, they saw the man and the woman coming into sight round the corner of the railings. They had found a policeman, and he was running with them. [Pg 36]

"Luckily the servants are out," said Gwendolen's aunt.

She was quite excited, and her eyes were shining. Gwendolen had never seen her looking so young. As soon as they were safely in the house, she shut the front door and bolted it.

"That'll give us another five minutes," she said. "Run upstairs and get your hat and overcoat."

Gwendolen ran upstairs, panting and puffing, and fetched her hat and overcoat and her doll David. Meanwhile her aunt ran into the study, opened her cash-box, and took out a hundred pounds. A minute later there came a thunder of knocks and two or three peals of the front-door bell.

"We'll get away," said her aunt, "through the back garden."

She had packed up a knapsack and slipped into a rain-coat. The knocks were repeated—rat-a-tat-*tat*. They heard angry voices shouting through the letter-box. Gwendolen's aunt laughed and shook her fist at them.

"Come along," she said; "now for the back garden."

From the back garden there was a little door leading into a street behind. Here there was a cab-stand, and Gwendolen's aunt told the cab-driver to drive to the station.

"We shall just be in time," she said, "to catch the 3.40 train."

It was only a horse-cab, but the horse galloped, and they arrived at the station just as the train came in. There was hardly a moment to take their tickets in. But the guard waited for them, and [Pg 37]

they just managed it. The engine whistled, the porter slammed the door, and the next moment they were off. The monkey, who had been hiding under Gwendolen's aunt's coat, poked his head out, and looked about him. Fortunately they had the carriage all to themselves.

"Oh dear!" said Gwendolen. "How splendid!"

It was an express train, and it didn't stop for an hour, and then Gwendolen's aunt thought that they had better get out.

"We'll hire a motor-car," she said, "and go to Lullington Bay and find my old friend Captain Jeremy. When I was young he wanted to marry me. But I was too proud and wouldn't let him."

So they got out and hired a motor-car, and drove at full speed to Lullington Bay. It was a long drive, and when they arrived at the Captain's cottage the stars were shining and the Captain was in his garden. Deep below them they could see the ocean, dark as bronze and knocking at the shore. Captain Jeremy was looking through a telescope. A stout little sailing-ship was anchored in the bay.

"Why, Josina," he said—that was Gwendolen's aunt's name—"fancy seeing you here after all these years!"

He was a sunburnt man with blue eyes, and Gwendolen liked him because he looked so kind. They told him what had happened, and he looked very grave.

"We must be off at once," he said. "I know that man and woman."

"Why, who are they?" asked Gwendolen. [Pg 38]

"Smugglers," he said. "They're two of the most dangerous people I know. Luckily my ship is all ready to sail. We'll put off at once for Monkey Island."

The Captain lived alone. He had never been married. So he had only to lock up his cottage and put the key in his pocket.

"We ought to get there," he said, "in a couple of months' time if the wind holds fair."

It was the first time that Gwendolen had been on the sea, and for two or three days she was rather sea-sick. But after that she began to enjoy the voyage and the smell of the spray and the sight of the waves. It was lovely weather, and as they drew near the equator a great yellow moon shone on them all night. It was so hot that she hardly wore any clothes, and used to go barefooted just like the sailors; and she grew so brown and so graceful that she scarcely looked like the same girl. As for her tummy—well, there was no marzipan on board, and she soon began to lose all her love for it. She would ever so much rather be up in the rigging with David her doll and Captain Jeremy's telescope.

One day she suddenly noticed a sort of little cloud on the horizon. But it didn't move, and as the ship drew nearer she saw that the cloud was really an island. She called to the monkey, and he ran up the rigging beside her, and after one look he could hardly contain himself.

"That's the island," he cried, "my beautiful island, with my wife on it and my children."

Presently they came so close that they could see the golden sand and the tall trees with their clusters of fruit; and soon the ship was anchored, and Captain Jeremy gave orders for a boat to [Pg 39] be lowered. Captain Jeremy himself, with two of his sailors, and Gwendolen, and Gwendolen's aunt all got into it; and in another five minutes they were standing on dry land again, with the happy monkey dancing beside them. Captain Jeremy and the sailors stayed by the boat, but Gwendolen and her aunt and the monkey began to explore the island. There were flowers everywhere, not planted in rows like the flowers in Bellington Square, but growing where they liked, and rejoicing in their freedom and praising God with their beautiful colours. Some of the trees were smooth, with curious flat leaves and knobbly brown berries that tasted like buttered toast. But Gwendolen's aunt had made a resolve to give up eating buttered toast. Since she had helped Gwendolen to rescue the monkey all her indigestion had disappeared; and she felt as fresh, and looked as pretty, as if she were only half her age.

Some of the trees were different, with twisted trunks, and pale red blossoms dripping with juice; and this juice tasted like marzipan, but Gwendolen had resolved to give up marzipan.

But it was a lovelier island than they had ever imagined, and soon the little monkey gave a cry of joy, and the next moment he was hugging in his arms another little monkey that had dashed to meet him. It was his wife, and just behind her there were two smaller monkeys waiting to be kissed; and Gwendolen and her aunt could almost have cried to see how happy they all were.

For nearly a month they stayed at the island, sleeping on board, but landing every morning; and [Pg 40] Gwendolen learned to swim almost as well as a fish and to climb trees almost as well as a monkey. But Captain Jeremy wasn't really happy until a big steamer happened to come by with news that the man and the woman had been drowned in a storm on their way to try and catch Gwendolen and her aunt. It was now October, and by the time that they arrived home Gwendolen would have been away from school for a term and a half. So they said good-bye to the monkey and his family, and set sail from the island. Gwendolen cried a little, and so did her aunt; but on the way home an odd thing happened, for Captain Jeremy asked her aunt to marry him, and they had to think a lot about the wedding. They decided to get married on Christmas Day, and when

Gwendolen's school-friends saw her as a bridesmaid she had grown so tall and straight and happy-looking that they wondered what on earth could possibly have happened to her. [Pg 41]

"Sailor, sailor,
What's the song
That you sing
The whole day long?"

And the sailor
Said to me:
"Birth's the jetty,
Time's the sea,

"Death's the harbour,
Life's the trip,
Hope's the pilot,
You're the ship."

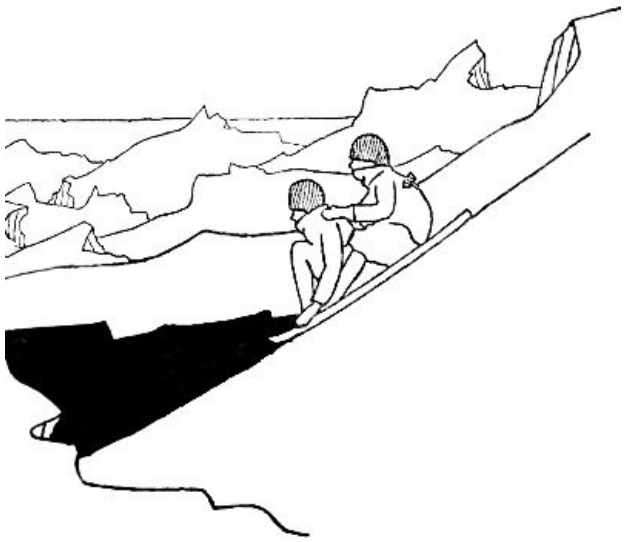
"Sailor, sailor,
Tell me true,
What's beyond
Those waters blue?" [Pg 42]

But the sailor
Shook his head;
"That's a secret,
Sir," he said.

[Pg 43]

THE LITTLE ICE-MEN

[Pg 44]



Cuthbert and Doris

[Pg 45]

III

THE LITTLE ICE-MEN

Marian's daddy was very glad when Captain Jeremy married Gwendolen's aunt, because he and Captain Jeremy had been boys at school together, and he had always been very fond of him; and he was gladder still when Captain Jeremy and Gwendolen's aunt left Bellington Square. This they did a week after the wedding, because Captain Jeremy hated Bellington Square; and they went to live in an old farmhouse, two miles out of the town.

It was a beautiful old house, with a gabled roof and golden-red bricks like a winter sunset; and the hall and passages of it were dark and velvety, and the rooms upstairs smelt of lavender. Leading from the road to the front door was a cobbly path, with lawns on each side of it, and big

trees standing on the lawns, with low-spreading branches that touched the grass. Behind the house was a kitchen-garden full of cucumber-frames and vegetables, and behind that was an orchard, with a gate leading into the fields. These were all hard and crinkly with frost, and the fruit-trees were bare, because it was the second of January, but that made the house seem all the snugger, with its low panelled walls and log fires. [Pg 46]

When they had been in this house a week, Gwendolen's aunt gave a children's party, and Marian and Cuthbert were asked to go, because their daddy was Captain Jeremy's friend. Marian was very pleased, because she had always liked Gwendolen, although she had never known her very well, but Cuthbert said that he didn't like her and that he'd rather stay at home. Marian told him how much she had improved since her voyage to Monkey Island, but Cuthbert said that he didn't care, and that she was a silly sort of girl anyhow. He was only pretending, however, because just after Christmas he had been in hospital having his tonsils out, and he had already missed two or three parties and didn't mean to miss another.

So they went to the party, and Cuthbert was rather glad, because one of the girls there was a girl called Doris, who had been in hospital having her tonsils out just at the same time as he. She was rather a decent girl, ten years old, with dark-coloured eyes and brown hair, and one of her thumbs was double-jointed, and she had been eight times to the seaside. Just at present she was a little pale, and so was Cuthbert himself; and Gwendolen was so brown that, when they stood near her, they looked paler still.

Captain Jeremy came and shook hands with them.

"Hullo," he said, "what's the matter with you?"

"It's their tonsils," said Marian. "They've just had them out, and of course they're a little pulled down."

Captain Jeremy examined them thoughtfully.

Cuthbert liked him, and so did Doris. [Pg 47]

"What you want," he said, "is a trip with me. That would soon set you up again."

Gwendolen and Marian had gone off to play, so Cuthbert and Doris had him to themselves.

"I should like it very much," said Cuthbert.

"So should I," said Doris, "but I'm afraid Mummy wouldn't let me go."

"I see," said the Captain. "Well, I'm off next week to Port Jacobson in the Arctic Circle. But you wouldn't be able to go to school next term if you came with me, because I shan't be back till the middle of May."

Cuthbert put his hand up and pinched his throat.

"It's still rather sore," he said.

"So is mine," said Doris.

Captain Jeremy laughed.

"Well, there's nothing like the Arctic Circle," he said, "for people who've just had their tonsils out."

Then he spoke to Doris.

"Let me see," he said: "I know where Cuthbert lives, but where do you live?"

Doris told him that she lived in John Street, which was the next street to Cuthbert's. Her father was dead, and her mummy was rather poor, as she had five other children besides Doris.

Captain Jeremy nodded.

"Then perhaps I shall be able to persuade her," he said, "to let me take you off her hands for a bit."

Doris danced up and down.

"Oh, I wish you would!" she cried. "I'd simply love to see the Arctic Circle!" [Pg 48]

"So should I," said Cuthbert, and they were both so excited that they could hardly eat any tea. When Marian heard about it, she wished that she was pale too, and she wished it ever so much more the next morning when Captain Jeremy called on her father and mother and persuaded them to let Cuthbert go. Then he went to John Street and talked to Doris's mother, and he looked so commanding and yet so gentle that Doris's mother said she would be very glad to let Doris go with him to Port Jacobson.

"Of course, it'll be very cold," he said, "and they'll have to wear furs, but we can easily get those when we arrive, and all they'll want for the voyage is plenty of underclothing and their oldest clothes."

For a voyage like that, all among the ice, Captain Jeremy's sailing-ship wasn't quite suitable, so he had hired a little steamer with very thick sides, and a trusty pilot. Port Jacobson was in a sort

of bay just under the shelter of Cape Fury, and beyond Cape Fury the coast had hardly been explored, it was all so bare and bleak and rocky. The only people who lived there were a few fishermen, a clergyman called Mr Smith, and a couple of engineers, who had been there for a year and had just found a coal-mine. It was the engineers who had written to Captain Jeremy, because they wanted him to bring them some machinery, and also because they wanted him to take back some of the coal that they had already dug up. That was how Captain Jeremy made his living, fetching and carrying things across the sea.

Neither Cuthbert nor Doris was the least bit sea-sick, and they loved to stand on the bridge [Pg 49] beside Captain Jeremy and see the great billows rushing toward the steamer, one after another, in the bright sunshine. Sometimes they went below into the dark engine-room, where they had to shout to make themselves heard, and where the pistons of the engines slid to and fro like the arms of boxers that never got tired. How they loved the cabin, too, at meal-times, when the cook rolled in with the steaming dishes, and what meals they ate, in spite of the lurching table and the water slamming against the port-holes!

In a couple of days' time they had forgotten all about their tonsils, and two days after that they had almost forgotten their homes, and a week later they saw something in the distance like the grey ghost of a cathedral. It was an iceberg—the first that they had seen; but soon they began to see them every day, sometimes pale, in mournful groups, like broken statues in a cemetery, and sometimes sparkling in the sun as though they were crusted with a million diamonds.

One day they came on deck just after breakfast and saw miles and miles of ice, all jumbled together, and three hours later they saw a great cliff, covered with snow, standing out to sea. That was Cape Fury, and as they drew nearer they could see a little cluster of dark houses, with spires of smoke rising from their chimneys, and that was Port Jacobson. The pilot was on deck now, shouting all the time, and the steamer was going very slowly, with ice on each side of it, and they could see some men coming toward them, with rough-haired dogs pulling sledges. At last the steamer could get no farther, although it was still about a mile from the town, and they cast [Pg 50] out anchors and a long cable that they began to carry toward the shore. It seemed very funny to Cuthbert and Doris to feel their feet again on something steady, even though this was only the rough surface of the frozen bay in front of the port. The days were so short here that the sun was already low, and the great cape stood dark and menacing, while far inland they could see the peaks of mountains slowly fading against the sky.

Among the men who had come to meet them were the two engineers and Mr Smith, and they were very surprised to see Cuthbert and Doris running about on the ice and trying to make snowballs. Then they all set off toward the little town, with the lights shining in its windows, and Mr Smith said that they must stay with him, because he and Mrs Smith had no children. Captain Jeremy was to stay with the two engineers, who had built a little house of their own, but they all came in to supper with the Smiths, and Cuthbert and Doris were allowed to sit up.

"To-morrow," said Mr Smith, "we'll get you some furs, and then you'll be able to go tobogganing with the other children," and Cuthbert and Doris said "Hooray!" because they had learned to toboggan on Fairbarrow Down. Just before they went to bed they saw a wonderful thing, for the whole of the sky began to quiver, and beautiful colours went dancing across it, melting away and then coming back again. These were the Northern Lights, or the Aurora Borealis, and Cuthbert and Doris could have watched them all night. [Pg 51]

But they soon fell asleep; and most of the next day they were out tobogganing with the other children, and they soon became so good at it that they could go as fast as any of them, and hardly ever had a spill. By the end of the week they had got into the habit of climbing on to the top of Cape Fury and tobogganing back again, more than a mile and a half, right down to Mr Smith's house. The first time they climbed up there the slope had looked so steep, and the roofs of the houses so far below them, that they had stood for nearly ten minutes before they could make up their minds to start. But some of the other children had done it, and at last Doris had said, "Well, come on, Cuthbert, we mustn't be afraid," and Cuthbert had told her to hold on tight, and so they had pushed off over the frozen snow.

By the time they had got half-way, they were going so fast that the air was roaring in their ears, but the track was straight, and they had kept in the middle of it, and ran safely into the town. After that it didn't seem worth while to go tobogganing on any of the lower hills, and that was how it came about that the following Wednesday they found themselves as usual on the top of Cape Fury.

It was a still, cold day, and the air was so clear that they could see the coast for miles and miles, and the tops of mountains far inland that they had never seen before. Below them in the bay, stuck in the ice, they could see the little steamer, with the sailors on the deck, and beyond the ice a strip of blue water, and beyond that again more ice still. That was on one side of them, and on [Pg 52] the other they saw the farther slope of Cape Fury, slanting down and down and down to the unexplored regions toward the north. It was a gentler slope than the slope toward the town, and suddenly Cuthbert had a great idea.

"I say," he said, "why shouldn't we toboggan down there? I don't suppose anybody has ever done it."

What with the wind and the sun and the snow, the cheeks of both of them were like ripe chestnuts, and Doris's eyes began to sparkle as she listened to Cuthbert's great idea. When he

was at home Cuthbert didn't get many ideas, and he generally used to laugh at other people's, so he was very pleased when he got this one and Doris said that she thought it ripping.

"We won't go too fast," he said, "so that, if we see a precipice or anything, we shall be able to stop ourselves in time."

They had a stout little toboggan, just big enough for two, and so they started off down this new slope, with the sun shining and the snow glittering. At first they moved quite slowly, but lower down the side of the hill became steeper, and soon they were going so fast that, even if they had wanted to, they would have found it pretty hard to stop themselves. And then an awful thing happened, for suddenly, just in front of them, they saw a deep cleft in the snow sliding down, at a terrific angle, into a sort of tunnel under the hillside.

Almost before they could breathe, they had plunged into this, and now there was nothing to do but to hold on. They saw the tunnel's mouth leaping toward them, and the next moment they [Pg 53] were in darkness. Neither Cuthbert nor Doris had ever been so frightened before. In the pitchy blackness they could see nothing. They could only feel themselves shooting deeper and deeper into the very heart of the frozen earth. Sometimes a bump on the floor of the tunnel would send them careering toward the roof, and then they would come down again with a thud that almost pitched them off the toboggan. Every moment they expected to be killed. There came another tremendous bump. And then they felt their toboggan springing through the air and dropping like a stone into some fearful well. They shut their eyes, waiting for death, and then went rolling over and over, with something strange and soft and feathery wrapping them round like a bedroom quilt. For a minute or two they could only gasp, and then Cuthbert sat up and called to Doris.

"Hullo, Doris!" he said; "are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so," said Doris. "Are you?"

Cuthbert told her that he was; and now that they could look about, they saw that they were on the floor of an immense cave, and that they had pitched down from somewhere near the top of it on to a huge mass of feathers. These were evidently the feathers of thousands and thousands of sea-birds; but who could have plucked them and stored them here so carefully?

Then they heard a strange sort of coughing and grunting and spluttering, and they saw the oddest of little men. He was about three feet high, with a red beard and a very cheerful sort of face, and he had evidently been asleep in among the feathers, for he was rubbing his eyes and [Pg 54] staring at them in astonishment. Then they heard some more grunting and coughing, and at last they saw a dozen of these little men standing all round them, dressed in the skins of animals, and with feathers sticking to their beards. They were all looking rather disturbed, but when Cuthbert and Doris smiled they began to smile too and come toward them. Then they began to talk, and, though at first the sounds that they made seemed very queer, Cuthbert and Doris, rather to their surprise, found that they could understand them perfectly well. That was because the language in which the little men spoke was the oldest language in the world, the father and mother of all the other languages, and so of course the children soon understood it. They also found that in a very little while they could talk in this language themselves, and soon they were all chattering together about what had happened, as if they had known each other all their lives.

Now that they had become used to the dim light, they could see that this great cave had walls of rock, with long icicles hanging from the roof and the sticking-out pieces of the walls. Most of the floor of it was of smooth ice, but in the middle there was a flat rock; and on this rock there was a little fire burning, a little fire made of coal. The leader of the men was a man called Marmaduke, and he told the children that they had all been asleep, and that they had lived in this cave for hundreds of thousands of years, and that the great pile of feathers was where they went to bed. [Pg 55]

"But it's day-time," said Cuthbert. "Why do you go to bed in day-time?"

Marmaduke laughed, and so did all the other men.

"Because at night," he said, "we go out and hunt to get our wolf-and seal-meat, when no one can see us."

But they were all so excited at the appearance of Cuthbert and Doris that they led them to the fire, where they sat and talked to them, and presently they cooked a delicious meal for them of seal-soup and wolf-chops. The coal that they burnt they had found in a deep hole in one corner of the cave, and at the other corner there was a little crack, down which they presently led the children. This opened upon a ledge of ice, five or six feet above the shore, but now they could hardly see anything, because the air was full of snow, driving fiercely into their faces. The little ice-men looked grave.

"It's a blizzard," they said, "and very likely it'll go on for a week. But luckily we've got plenty of meat, so that we shan't be in want of food."

"But how shall we get back?" said Doris. "They won't know where we are, and they'll think that we're both dead."

Marmaduke shook his head.

"I don't exactly know," he replied, "how you'd get back in any case. You could never climb up the way you came, and it's very difficult to get round the coast."

"But we'll have to get back somehow," said Cuthbert, "because of our relations at home."

Marmaduke looked puzzled. [Pg 56]

"What are relations?" he said. "And why should you want to go back?"

So Cuthbert had to tell them all about his father and mother and his Uncle Joe and his sister Marian; and Doris had to tell them all about her mummy and her five little brothers and her aunts and cousins. They were very interested, but it was quite clear that Cuthbert and Doris couldn't leave that night; and so presently they crept in among the feathers, and were soon very comfy and fast asleep. The next morning it was still snowing, but it was rather fun helping to cook the meals, and the little men showed them some lovely dances that were almost as old as the world itself.

For a whole week they had to stay in the cave, with the blizzard raging outside, but one morning when they crept down the crack they found the sky clear and the sun shining. They could now see, towering straight above them, tremendous precipices of rock, and miles of boulders and broken ice, stretching out toward the horizon.

"Our only hope," said Cuthbert, "is that Captain Jeremy and some of the fishermen will come exploring for us," and just as he said that far in the distance they heard the report of a gun. Then a long way off they saw some little figures and a tiny sledge drawn by dogs; and they stood on tiptoe and waved and waved, hoping that Captain Jeremy might see them through his telescope.

The little ice-men never came out by daylight, and when they heard what the children had seen they made them promise on their dying oath not to tell anybody the way to the cave. Once before, [Pg 57] they said, a learned man had discovered them, and he had tried to measure them with a pair of compasses, so they had had to kill him, as gently as they could, by putting him in the middle of the pile of feathers. Then they said good-bye, and all the little men kissed them and sent their love to everybody at home, and Cuthbert and Doris began to scramble over the ice toward the sledge-party that was now much nearer.

When Captain Jeremy met them, you can guess how pleased he was, because he had made up his mind that they must have been killed; and good Mr Smith had tears in his eyes, but they were tears of joy. Everybody at Port Jacobson, too, was so pleased that they made a big bonfire to celebrate the occasion, and they all drank the healths of the little ice-men and ate a lot of sweets in their honour.

When the children arrived home, however, early in May, and Cuthbert told Marian all about them, she said at first that she wouldn't believe in them, because Cuthbert hadn't believed in Mr Jugg. But Cuthbert had grown wiser and less conceited, and he told Marian that he had changed his mind. So Marian believed in them, and her daddy was rather pleased, because there were more things under the earth, he said, than most people imagined. [Pg 58]

Not a twig that learned to climb
In the babyhood of time,

Not a bud that broke the air
In the days before men were,

Not a bird that tossed in flight
Ere the first man walked upright,

Nor a bee with craftier cell
Than a Roman citadel,

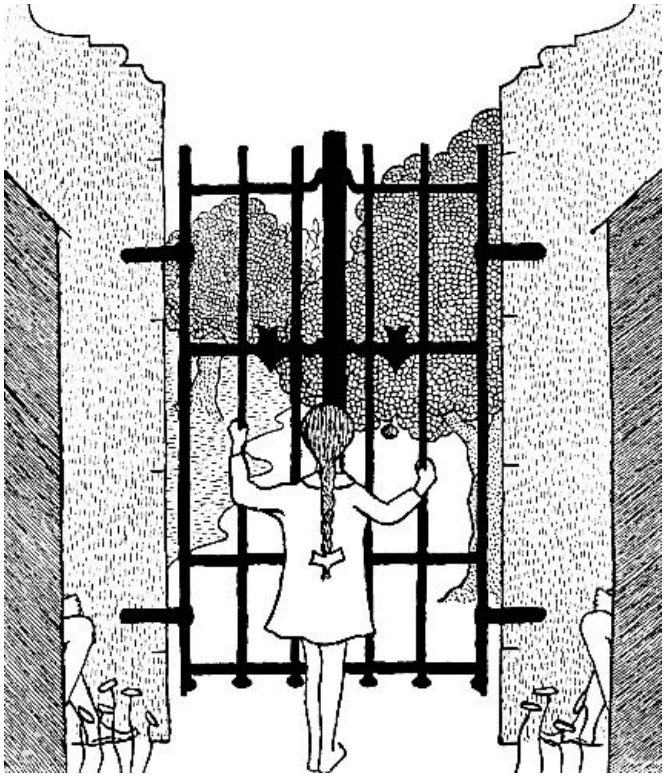
But, with all its pride and pain,
Into dust crept back again.

Oh, what wisdom there must be
Hidden in the earth and me!

[Pg 59]

UNCLE JOE'S STORY

[Pg 60]



Bella at Eden

[Pg 61]

IV

UNCLE JOE'S STORY

Marian's mummy used to read the Bible to her, so that she knew all about Adam and Eve; but she never knew that Eve had a little daughter until Uncle Joe told her this story. Next to her mummy and daddy, Marian loved Uncle Joe better than anybody in the whole world. He lived in a little house tucked into a sort of dimple on the side of Fairbarrow Down, and a man called Mr Parker lived with him and helped to keep the place tidy. Uncle Joe had been a soldier in a lot of queer countries a long way off; and when Marian and Cuthbert asked him what he had fought for, he generally used to tell them that it was for lost causes. In between wars he had done lots of other things, such as trying to find out what caused diseases, or whether plants that grew in some places could be made to grow in others. Mr Parker had been a soldier too—a soldier of misfortune, he used to say—and he had saved Uncle Joe's life three times, and Uncle Joe had saved his life twice.

Uncle Joe's face was yellowish brown, because he had been in the sun so much and had fever; but Mr Parker's face was red, and one of his eyes was made of glass. Mr Parker used to call himself a [Pg 62] lone, lorn orphan, though he was much fatter than Uncle Joe, and afterward he used to spit and say that it was rough weather in the Baltic.

It was about a fortnight after Cuthbert and Doris had come back from the Arctic Circle that Uncle Joe told Marian this story, while they were sitting under one of his apple-trees. Some of the apple-petals had begun to drop, leaving the tiny, weeny, baby apples behind them, and the only really ripe apples in Uncle Joe's garden were the two apples in Marian's cheeks.

"But those aren't real apples," said Marian.

"Well, it all depends," said Uncle Joe, "on what you mean by real."

"You see," said Mr Parker, who had just come out to mow the lawn, "there's more kinds of apples than a few. There's eating apples and cooking apples and pineapples and crab-apples; and there's oak-apples and Adam's apples and the apples what you sees in little girls' cheeks."

"Kissing apples," said Uncle Joe. "They're one of the most important kinds."

He began to fill his pipe.

"And now that I come to think of it," he said, "they're one of the oldest kinds too."

"As old as Mr Jugg," asked Marian, "or the little ice-men?"

"Well," said Uncle Joe, "I don't know about that. But they're certainly as old as Eve's little girl," and then he began to tell Marian all about her. [Pg 63]

"I'm not quite sure," he said, "what her name was. It might have been Gretchen or Olga, or it might have been Seraphine or Marie-Louise, but I rather think that it was Bella. Of course you

remember what happened in the Garden of Eden, and how Adam and Eve had to leave it, not because the good Lord God wanted to turn them out, but because He knew that they could never be happy there any more. Every hour that they stayed they would have become more and more miserable; and if they had come back it would have broken their hearts, so He had to put two angels to guard the gate. You see, He had wanted them to be sort of grown-up babies in the loveliest nursery ever imagined, and to be able to go there and play games with them whenever He was tired of ruling the universe. But when once they had heard about growing up, and choosing for themselves, and things of that sort, they could never have been babies any more, and it would have been cruel to keep them in the nursery.

"Of course, they didn't understand that, and they thought it very hard, and very often they used to grumble; and when they had learned to write they used to send Him angry letters and say bad things about Him in books. That was chiefly because they had to work and learn to look after themselves; but that was the only way, as the good Lord God saw, in which they could ever be happy again. 'They weren't content,' He thought, 'just to be My playthings, so now they must learn to be My comrades; and perhaps in the end that'll be the best for everybody, though it'll be a long, long time before they've learnt how.' And then He sighed as He saw the empty nursery [Pg 64] and all the animals that they used to play with, just as fathers and mothers sigh now when their babies grow up and have to go to school. So Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden, and just outside it there was a big town, full of houses and factories and chimneys, and men and women who worked all day long. Who were those men and women, and where did they come from? Well, it's rather hard to explain. You see, Adam and Eve, through never having grown up, had been in the Garden for thousands and thousands of years. But outside the Garden there were seas and deserts and thick, hot jungles full of wild animals. Some of these animals had looked through the railings and been very struck with Adam and Eve, and sort of wished in the bottoms of their hearts that they could have children just like them. Some of them wished so hard that their next lot of children actually did become a little like them, and their grandchildren became liker still, and at last their great-great-grandchildren became real men and women. Of course they weren't Garden men and women, like Adam and Eve; they were just jungle men and women, running wild.

"Well, after thousands of years these jungle men and women became so clever that they cleared away the jungle, and then they dug fields and planted hedges and sowed corn and built towns; and those were the people that Adam and Eve found when they left the Garden and began to look for work. Later on Adam and Eve's children married the children of the jungle people; so that [Pg 65] now all the people in the world are half Garden and half jungle."

"Even clergymen?" asked Marian.

Uncle Joe nodded.

"Yes, and policemen and postmen too."

"And lone, lorn orphans," said Mr Parker, "and the man what comes to mend the bath."

"But that's jumping forward," said Uncle Joe, "a long time, for when Adam and Eve left the Garden they didn't even know what children were, and their hearts were full of bitterness against the good Lord God. That was one of the reasons why He thought it would be so nice for them to have a little girl of their own, because then in time they might begin to guess, He thought, something of what He felt toward themselves.

"So about a year after they had left the Garden little Bella was born, and they both thought that she was the loveliest baby that had ever been seen since the world began. Poor Adam and Eve were then living in a dark street on the outskirts of the town, and all that they could afford was one room on the top floor at the back.

"Adam had got work at one of the factories where they made boots and shoes, but he was only a beginner, of course, and hadn't learnt much, and so his wages were very small. Sometimes Eve took in a little washing, or got a job from somebody of darning socks, but she did her best to keep their home tidy and some fresh flowers on the mantelpiece. Every day, too, she put crumbs on the window-sill, and soon she had made friends with the birds that came and ate them, and sometimes a bird would fly from the Garden, and feed from her hand, and tell her the news. Both [Pg 66] Adam and Eve, you see, knew the birds' language through having lived with them for so long. But they were never able to teach it to their children, and since they died no one has ever learnt it.

"Soon after Bella was born Adam got a rise in wages, but soon after that Eve had another baby; and then she had some more, and though they rented another room or two they were always poor and often hungry. But after a while they began to think less often of their old life in the Garden of Eden, and sometimes they would even wonder whether they would go back there if the good Lord God gave them the chance. You see, in spite of their poverty and their hard work and the noise and smells of the great town, they had learnt what it meant to have children, and to bend over their cots and kiss them good-night.

"When Bella was eight she was rather a fat little girl, with dark eyes and an impudent mouth, and she wore her hair in a long pigtail, and her nose was ever so slightly turned up. Adam and Eve thought that she was very beautiful, but everybody else thought her quite ordinary, and she spent most of her time in the streets, though she was always punctual for meals. She had lots of friends, most of them boys, but every now and then she would get tired of them all; and those were the times when she would go exploring and generally end up by hurting herself. Eve was

too busy ever to bother much about what Bella did or where she went, and the Garden of Eden was the only place that she had strictly forbidden her to go near. It was one of the rules, of course, that nobody was to go near it, and there were angels at the gate with swords of flame; and this was a rule, Eve thought, that it would be very much worse for one of *her* children to break than for anybody else. [Pg 67]

"So she had always told Bella never even to go up the street that led into the fields just outside the Garden; and if Bella hadn't been feeling bored on this particular day—it was just a week after her birthday—and if it hadn't been so hot, and the sun so scorching, and the streets so dusty, and everybody so cross, and if Bella hadn't been inquisitive just like her mother used to be, and if she hadn't sort of happened to be walking up that street, and if the fields at the end of it hadn't seemed so cool and so inviting, and if Bobby Gee, who was a great friend of hers, hadn't dared her to do it—well, there's no saying, but perhaps after all Bella wouldn't have stood looking at those dreadful gates.

"There was now only a strip of grass between her and the Garden, and she could see it stretched there beyond the railings. It was the middle of the afternoon, and so heavy was the sunshine that the leaves of the trees were all pressed down by it. None of them stirred. There was no sound. The lawns beneath them looked like wax. And where were the angels? Bella held her breath. There were none to be seen. There were only the sentry-boxes.

"Very cautiously she took a step or two forward. Her bare feet made no noise. The bars of the gate quivered in the heat. Then she stopped again and listened. At first she heard nothing, but then, very, very faint, there came to her ears the ghost of a sound. It came and died, and came and died, like the waves of a sea hundreds of miles off. She crept nearer and listened again, and now there were two sounds, rising and falling. They came from the sentry-boxes, one on each side of the gate. The angels inside were fast asleep. Bella bit her lip and crept forward. She could feel her heart jumping like a mouse in a cage. The scents of the Garden came to meet her. She could see its curved and vanishing pathways. [Pg 68]

"But what caught her eyes and made them grow round was a bending tree just inside the gate. With her hands on the bars she stood looking at it, and presently her mouth began to water. For from every branch of it there hung such apples as she had never seen in all her life, and from the lowest bough there hung an apple that was the biggest and most beautiful of them all. And then another thing happened, for as she pressed against the bars the great gate began to move. Very slowly it swung open, and still the angels were fast asleep. Her heart was beating now like two clocks at once—what an apple it would be to eat! A bright-coloured bird hopped across the grass, and stood looking up at her with an inquiring eye. She glanced round about her and over her shoulder, but there was nobody in sight. Dared she go in? She thought about the rules, and what her mother had said, and then she remembered Bobby Gee. The angels were still breathing lightly and regularly. The bright-coloured bird had flown away.

"Then she took a bold step and went into the Garden and tiptoed softly up to the tree. The apple was so ripe that it was nearly ready to drop, and it was just on a level with the tip of her nose. It smelt like honey, and when she touched it it was as cool as marble. Then she touched it again, and caught hold of it, and somehow or other it came off the tree. She lifted it to her lips, and it felt like a kiss; and then a Voice behind her said— [Pg 69]

"'Well?'

"She jumped round, almost dropping the apple. It was the good Lord God who stood looking at her.

"'What are you doing?'

"She hid the apple behind her, but His eyes shone through her, like light through a window. She hung her head.

"'Are you Eve's little girl?' He asked.

"Bella nodded. She couldn't say a word.

"'I thought you must be,' He said. He put His finger under her chin. There came a sound like the rushing of a great wind. The two angels had heard His voice, and drawn their swords, and leapt into the Garden. In another moment, Bella thought, they would have killed her. But the good Lord God held up His hand. The two angels stood one on each side of Him, leaning on their swords and looking rather downcast. Bella held out her hand. The good Lord God bent forward and took the apple away from her.

"'Well, what excuse have you,' He said, 'for stealing My apples?'

"Bella considered for a moment. Then she thought of one. [Pg 70]

"'Please, sir, mother did it. She told me so.'

"'But you knew the rules,' said the good Lord God.

"Bella hung her head again. She knew them quite well.

"'And the rules must be obeyed,' He said.

"Bella began to tremble.

"There was a moment's silence. The two angels stood like statues, still leaning on their swords. Then the good Lord God spoke again.

"'Look at Me,' He said.

"Bella lifted her eyes and saw the World without End. He gave her back the apple.

"'Well, you may keep it,' He went on, 'on condition that you give half of it to Bobby Gee.'

"Bella said, 'Thank you, sir.'

"'But that's not all,' He continued.

"He bent forward and touched her cheeks.

"'For I hereby ordain,' He said, 'that now and for ever every little girl and every little boy shall wear apples in their cheeks in remembrance of what you have done. They shall be known as the brand of Eden—the brand of Eden for little thieves—and their parents must see to it, on pain of My displeasure, that they shall never be allowed to fade away.'

"Then He bent still lower and gave Bella a kiss, and the tall angels led her outside the gate; and that's why it is that the apples in little girls' cheeks are almost the oldest kind in the world."

Uncle Joe lit his pipe. From where they were sitting they could see the country for miles and miles. Down below them the town looked quite small, and the spire of St Peter's Church just like a toy spire. Far behind it, beyond the level cornlands, the sun was dropping into the evening mists. It grew rosier and rosier, until it almost looked like an apple itself. Mr Parker winked at Marian. [Pg 71]

"Rough weather," he said, "in the Baltic."

Then he spat in his hands and rubbed them together.

"Well, I must be getting along," he said, "with this here lawn-mowing." [Pg 72]

Eden had an apple-tree,
  Eve a little daughter,
Tried to do as mother did,
  But the Good Lord caught her.

"Wherefore 'tis ordained," He said,
  "Here and in all places,
Children shall henceforward wear
  Apples in their faces."

[Pg 73]

BEARDY NED

[Pg 74]

Beardy Ned's Fire

[Pg 75]

V

BEARDY NED

Near Uncle Joe's house there was a small pool which was really the beginning of a river; and this river ran into a bigger one that flowed through the town in which Marian and Cuthbert lived. The big river was rather muddy, but the little one was nearly always clear, and it was quite easy to paddle across it, though there were some pools in it six feet deep.

Up in the downs, where it began, it was hardly more than a bubbly trickle, but lower down it grew wider and wider, and ran between the reeds at the edges of the meadows. Close to Captain Jeremy's farmhouse, where it joined the big river that flowed through the town, it ran for almost a quarter of a mile through the middle of a sort of wood. It was under the roots of some of these trees, as they pushed through the water into the soil beneath, that the biggest of the trout had their nests, where fishermen with flies couldn't reach them. But there were some big trout, too, that lived under the meadow banks, and used to put up their noses in the summer evenings, and suck down the flies that fell on the water when they were tired of dancing in the air.

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Cuthbert and Marian and Doris and Gwendolen were all very fond of this river, and when they had finished paddling or bathing in the pools (for they had all learnt to swim) they used to lie on the bank and keep very still and watch the trout having their evening meal. They would see an orange-coloured fly or a blue fly or a fly with pale wings like a distant rain-cloud floating down on the top of the water and probably wondering where it had got to; and then they would hear a little noise like grown-up people make with the tips of their tongues against the roofs of their mouths; and then the fly would be gone, and there would be a tiny wave on the water, shaped like a ring, and growing bigger and bigger. That meant that a trout had been lying in wait, with his eye cocked on the surface of the stream, and had seen the fly, and liked the look of him, and suddenly decided to swallow him up.

Sometimes a fisherman would come quietly along and kneel down on one knee, and, after he had seen a trout rise, would open a little box and take out a fly like the one that the trout had eaten. But this would be a sham fly, made of feathers and silk, cunningly tied round a sharp hook, and he would thread it on to a piece of gut so thin that they could hardly see it. Then he would tie the gut to a sort of string that was hanging down from the point of his fishing-rod; and then he would swish his rod until the fly flew out straight and fell upon the stream, just as the real one had done.

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Sometimes they could see a trout come up and look at this fly and shake his head, and go down again; but once or twice they had seen a big trout rise and swallow it just as if it had been a real one. Then the trout had found himself caught, and they had seen the fisherman's rod bent almost double as the trout dashed to and fro; and at last they had seen the fisherman slip a net into the water, and lift the trout on to the bank, all curved and shining. But very often there would be no fishermen at all, and they would see nobody for hours and hours, and hear nothing but the cries of the river-birds and the suck, suck, of the feeding trout.

The man that they saw most often was a man called Beardy Ned, because, though he was only a youngish man, he had a sandy-coloured beard; and they were always very sorry for him, because he had lost his wife in a terrible railway accident soon after he had married her. She had left him with a little girl only ten months old, and that was why Ned had let his beard grow. He hadn't time, he said, to look after the little girl and shave his face every day as well. When he had married, Ned had been a postman, but after his wife had been killed he had given that up; and he had wandered about ever since, doing all sorts of odd jobs.

Sometimes he helped the farmers get their hay in, or the gamekeepers trap stoats, and sometimes he would chop wood, and sometimes he would go far away and not come back for weeks and weeks. But wherever he went he would take his little girl, whom he had called Liz after her mother; and sooner or later he would always come back to this river, because that was where he had first met his dead wife. He had lived so much in the open air that his skin was as dark as a Red Indian's, and when he laughed his teeth were like snow, and his eyes like the sea [Pg 78] on a sunny day. People like clergymen and large employers often used to tell him that he ought to settle down. But why should he settle down, he asked, so long as there was only Liz, and she could sleep in his arms as snug as snug?

Liz was four years old now, and as brown as her father, and her hair was short and curly like a boy's; and Cuthbert and Marian and Doris and Gwendolen loved her almost as much as they loved Beardy Ned. For Beardy Ned, in spite of his great trouble, was always full of a secret happiness, and he had made this little song out of his own head that he used to sing every two or three hours:

The wickedest girl there was,
The wickedest girl there is,
The wickedest girl there ever will be
Is my young daughter Liz.

He only meant it in fun, of course, and when Liz was running about he would shout it at the top of his voice, but when she was sleepy he would only croon it until her eyelids began to drop.

Of course Cuthbert couldn't always be bothered to go up the river with the girls, and on the same evening that Uncle Joe told Marian about the apples he went by himself to have a bathe in a big pool called Kingfisher Pool. It was still only May, so that the water was cold, but the air above it was warm and still, and he was lying on the bank without anything on, when he suddenly heard a splash and a gurgling cry. He sat bolt upright, and then, looking across the pool, he saw a little [Pg 79] form struggling in the deep water, and rolling over in it, head downward, and then beginning to slip out of sight. It was Liz, with all her clothes on. She had evidently slipped down the steep bank, and if Cuthbert couldn't save her she would be sure to drown, because Beardy Ned was nowhere in sight.

It was so awful to see her that at first Cuthbert couldn't move; but a moment later he was in the water and swimming across the pool as fast as he could, and faster than he had ever swum before. He prayed to God that he might be in time. The pool had never looked so wide. But at last he had swum across it and made a grab at a piece of Liz's frock just under the surface. He pulled this hard, and tried to go on swimming with his other arm and both legs; and then it was only a second or two before his toes touched the bottom of the river, and he was able to stand up and lift her out of the pool.

She was quite pale, and the water was pouring from her mouth, and her eyes were staring as if they couldn't see anything. He scrambled up the bank, grazing his knees, and then she began to choke and take deep breaths. Just then, too, Beardy Ned came crashing through the reeds with great strides, for Cuthbert had shouted as loud as he could just before he plunged into the pool. Ned's face had turned grey, and there was a look in his eyes that made Cuthbert feel almost frightened. But when he saw Liz sitting up and crying he gave a shout and caught her in his arms. Then he gripped Cuthbert by the wrist, and Cuthbert could feel that he was shaking all [Pg 80] over; and then Beardy Ned began to cry too, so that Cuthbert had to look the other way. But next moment both he and Liz were laughing, and Cuthbert swam back again to put on his clothes; and then he crossed the river upon a plank lower down, where he found Beardy Ned and Liz waiting for him.

Beardy Ned took him by the shoulder.

"Come along," he said, "and have supper with us."

He was carrying Liz, and sticking out of one of his pockets Cuthbert could see the tails of a brace of trout; and presently they came to a bend of the stream, where the bank was high and there was a little beach. From the top of the bank a great tree had fallen, with its roots sticking up in the air, and under the trunk there was just room enough for Beardy Ned and Liz to sleep. He had put a couple of blankets there and an old waterproof, and standing on the beach were a cup and kettle; and soon he had made a fire with some dry sticks, and was showing Cuthbert how to cook trout.

It was beginning to get dark now, and the stars were shining, and the flames of the fire made the river look like ink. But they were so sheltered under the high bank that they might almost have been at home. They had trout for supper, and drank tea, and Liz, who was almost asleep, had a cup of milk; and then they ate biscuits, and jam out of a pot, and Beardy Ned filled his pipe. He had made Liz take off her wet clothes, of course, and these were hanging from sticks on either

side of the fire, and he had wrapped her in a blanket, and soon she was fast asleep, lying on his knees as he sat and smoked. [Pg 81]

He seemed to be thinking a lot, but at last he looked at Cuthbert.

"You've saved my little girl's life," he said, "and I can never pay you back. But I'll show you a secret that no one else in the whole world knows."

Cuthbert liked secrets, so he was rather pleased. But Beardy Ned changed the subject.

"It was just here," he said, "just where we're sitting, that I first saw my Liz—I mean her mother. Perhaps, in a manner of speaking, it was where I first saw this one too, but that's neither here nor there. She was just nineteen. She'd been paddling in the stream. I called out to her, and she turned and looked at me. She was in an old frock, but she looked quite the lady. Her eyes was dark, and she was smiling."

He moved his head a little.

"There goes a fox," he said.

He sucked his pipe for a moment in silence. The sound of the fire was like somebody talking to them. But the sound of the river was like something talking to itself.

Then Beardy Ned felt in his pocket and pulled out the end of a candle. It looked like an ordinary candle, with an ordinary wick, and it was just about an inch long.

"This was give me," he said, "by an old feller—James Parkins, that was his name—and there's not another like it in the whole world, and there never won't be again." [Pg 82]

Beardy Ned held it in the palm of his hand, as though he were weighing it, while he looked at Cuthbert.

"Have you ever wondered," he said, "where candles goes to—where they goes to when they goes out?"

"No, I don't think so," said Cuthbert. "Where *do* they go to?"

Liz stirred a little, and Beardy Ned bent over her.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "They goes into the In-between Land—the place as is in between everything you can see. How do I know? Because I've been there. Because James Parkins showed me how."

"That's very interesting," said Cuthbert politely, but Beardy Ned didn't seem to hear.

"The trouble is, you see," Beardy Ned continued, "that candles, when they goes out, can't take people with them. But James Parkins, he'd found a candle that could take a person with it, and this is the candle. When he first gave it me, two year ago, it was about eight inches long. But I've used it a lot, and after you've blowed it out, and it's taken you with it, it goes on burning. When you come back, it's an inch shorter—an inch shorter every time. And this here bit is the last bit as'll ever take anyone to In-between Land."

He gave it to Cuthbert.

"Do you want to go there?" he said. "You've saved my little girl's life, and you've only to say the word."

"But it's the last bit," said Cuthbert.

"Never mind. I know what's there. That's the chief thing." [Pg 83]

"Is it quite safe?" asked Cuthbert. "It seems rather queer."

"I'll tell you what it's like," said Beardy Ned. "It's like a dream. Or rather it's not like a dream so much as waking up from a dream. You sees the trees and things, all kind of misty, and the houses in the towns, and the people in the houses. And you sees 'em quarrelling and the like, and grieving, and you wants to tell 'em as it's only a dream. You wants to tell 'em they're just going to wake up. That's what it seems like in In-between Land."

Liz stirred again, and he shifted her on his knees a little.

"You see, in a manner of speaking," he went on, "there ain't no time there, not as we reckons time. But once you've been there—well, you'll see for yourself if you'd like to go."

Cuthbert held out the candle.

"Yes, I'd like to," he said. "It would be rather exciting."

Beardy Ned bent forward and took a stick from the fire. He lit the end of the candle between Cuthbert's fingers.

"Now blow it out," he said, "and you'll go out with it. It'll be all right. You'll be back in a tick."

Cuthbert's hand was shaking a little, but he blew out the candle, and then, for a moment, he saw nothing at all. But he felt something. He felt as if he'd been asleep for ever and ever and had

suddenly opened his eyes. He felt as if he could do anything, he was so strong. He felt as if he could jump over the highest star. Toothache, and school, and taking medicine—they all seemed too stupid even to bother about. He felt like a prisoner just set free. He knew that he was really free, and that nothing could ever hurt him. Then he began to see things—the fire of sticks, the stream beyond, and the dusky meadows. But they looked just like dream-sticks, and a dream-fire, and there were real things beyond them whose names he didn't know. Then he looked round and saw Beardy Ned with little Liz upon his knees; and it was just then that he saw something else that was perhaps the most wonderful thing of all. For beside Beardy Ned stood a girl of nineteen, who had been paddling in the stream. She was in an old frock, but she looked quite the lady, and her eyes were dark, and she was smiling. [Pg 84]

Then she was gone. The candle had burnt away. Cuthbert was back again in the ordinary world. He saw Beardy Ned looking at him gravely.

"Now you know," he said, "why I'm happy."

Cuthbert rose to his feet.

"I must be going home," he said. "They'll be wondering where I've been."

Beardy Ned nodded.

"Well, good night," he said.

"Good night," said Cuthbert.

He climbed the bank.

But on the top of the bank he turned round for a moment and looked down again at Beardy Ned. He was still sitting there with Liz on his knees, and Cuthbert saw him stoop and give her a kiss. Then he began to sing very softly the queer song that he had made up: [Pg 85]

The wickedest girl there was,
The wickedest girl there is,
The wickedest girl there ever will be
Is my young daughter Liz.

[Pg 86]

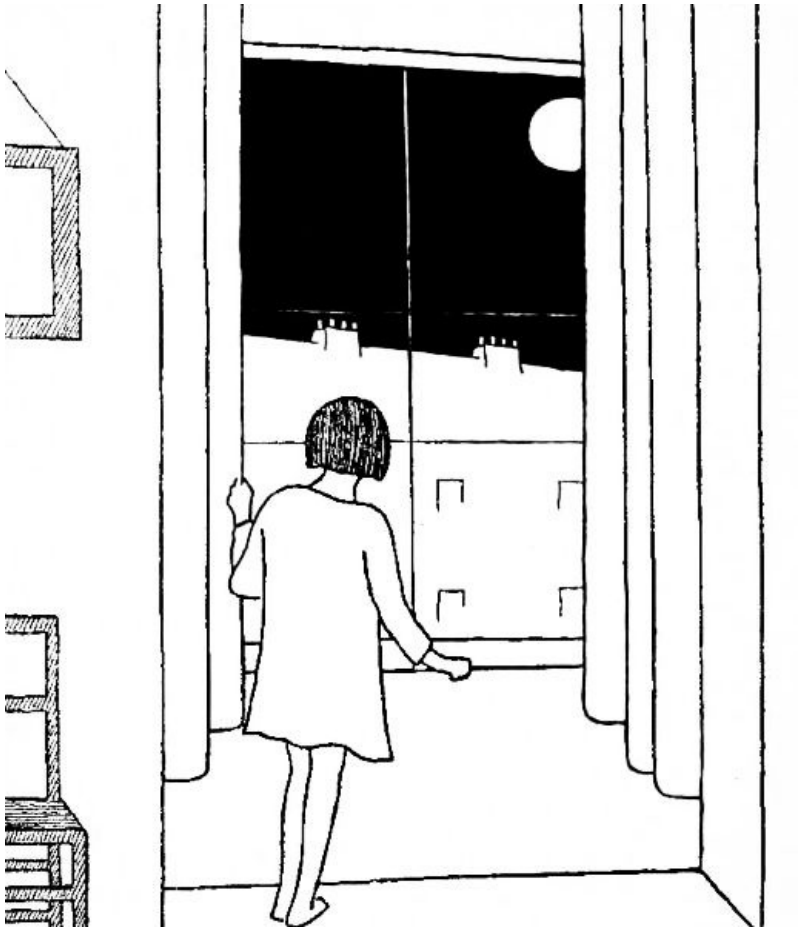
In between the things we know,
  Touch and handle, taste and see,
Lies the land where lovers go
  At their life's end quietly.

There, in that untroubled place,
  There, with eyes amused, they scan,
Cradled still in time and space,
  This, the infant world of man.

[Pg 87]

THE MAGIC SONG

[Pg 88]



The Magic Song

[Pg 89]

VI

THE MAGIC SONG

About a month after Cuthbert had been lucky enough to save Beardy Ned's little girl, the weather grew so hot that all the people in the town became rather discontented. It is always easier for people in towns to become discontented than it is for other people, because instead of fields to walk on they have only pavements; and instead of hills to look at they have only chimneys; and instead of bean-flowers to smell they have only dust-bins and the stale air that trickles down the streets. So the men in the ironworks were discontented because they thought that the men who owned the ironworks didn't give them enough money; and the men in the cotton-mills were discontented because they thought that the men who owned the cotton-mills made them work too hard; and the girls in Mr Joseph's refreshment shops thought him a cruel old beast; and the policemen thought that nobody loved them.

Also, the men who owned the ironworks thought that their men were greedy; and the men who owned the cotton-mills were afraid of becoming poor; and Mr Joseph was feeling depressed; and the policemen still thought that nobody loved them. Even dear Miss Plum, the head of the school, [Pg 90] had a frown on her forehead, and the French mistress slapped Doris so hard that she left a red mark on Doris's cheek. Of course Doris was very angry about it, and her little brothers wanted to know exactly where the mark was. But it had faded away by the time she arrived home, and her mother only said that it had probably served her right. Doris was rather fond, you see, of cheeking the French mistress, and asking her silly questions to make the other girls laugh; and since she had had her hair bobbed the week before, she was even cheekier than usual.

Doris, as you may remember, lived in John Street, which was the next street to Peter Street, where Marian and Cuthbert lived. But the houses in it were smaller than the houses in Peter Street, and most of the people in them were rather poor. Doris's mother was poor, because Doris's daddy was dead, and Doris had five little brothers—Teddy and George, who were the twins, and Jimmy and Jocko and Christopher Mark. They were much too poor to be able to have a maid, and so Doris's mother had to do most of the work. She had to be cook and housemaid and nurse and governess and Mummy darling all in one. Now that Doris was ten she was able to help her mother sometimes, and she used to take Christopher Mark out in his push-cart; and since she had been to the Arctic Circle with Cuthbert and Captain Jeremy her mother had begun to lean upon her a little more.

But oh, it was hot! The people in the streets lagged along with pale faces. They talked about the [Pg 91] trouble in the ironworks, and the trouble in the cotton-mills, and what would Mr Joseph do if his girls went on strike, and didn't the policemen look ill-tempered? And Miss Plum couldn't make

her accounts come right; and the French mistress went home to her boarding-house; and there she told everybody that she was going to be ill, and that the ham was tepid and the milk-pudding sour.

Even in John Street it was almost as bad, though it was a quiet street with a field at the other end of it. For the sun poured right into it, so that there wasn't any shade, and the stones of the pavement shone like martyrs, and the drains at Number Fifteen were out of order, and there was half a haddock lying in the middle of the road. So Doris went into the garden when they had all finished tea, but it was as hot in the garden as it was anywhere else; and the lady next door was grumbling to the lady beyond about one of her husband's collars that had been spoilt in the wash. Doris played about a bit and made Jocko cry, because he was silly and wanted to read a book; and then she went round to Peter Street to see Cuthbert and Marian, and found that they had gone into the country to see their Uncle Joe.

So she came back and teased the twins, and at last it was time to go to bed; and it was almost as hot after the sun had gone down as it had been in the middle of the day. She slept in the same room with Jimmy and Jocko, and they all turned and twisted and kicked off their bedclothes; and as the daylight faded the moonlight grew, so that it was past ten before they fell asleep. That was [Pg 92] when their mother came and kissed them, and she was so tired that she could hardly stand; and then she went to bed and fell asleep too, and the church clock struck eleven times. Happy was Beardy Ned then, sleeping by the stream, with little Liz and his beautiful secret; and happy was Gwendolen in her farmhouse bedroom smelling of lavender and last year's apples. But sorrowful and sticky were the people of the town, and troubled were their slumbers.

Then Doris sat up suddenly, for out in the street was the biggest din that she had ever heard. She jumped from her bed and ran to the window, and there she saw nine of the strangest-looking people. There was a big sailor with a concertina, and a stout lady with a tambourine, and a soldier with a pair of cymbals, and an elderly greengrocer, who was very thin. They were standing in a row, and sitting on the ground behind them were five men, each with a drum. Doris leaned out, and when they saw her they all sang louder than ever; but the funny thing was that nobody else in the whole street seemed to hear them. The blinds were all down, the moonlight lay on the road, and there wasn't a head at anybody's window.

When Doris first listened they had been singing about the lady, but now they began to sing about the sailor, and the sailor stepped forward, playing his concertina, and singing the loudest of them all. He had a tenor voice with a great smack in it, like the smack of a wave against a jetty, and when he sang softly without taking a breath it was like water running through seaweed. The [Pg 93] soldier sang bass, like a motor-lorry in a hurry to get home over a rough road, and the stout lady sang soprano, and the elderly greengrocer only squeaked. This is what they sang:

Here's a sailor come home from the Guineas,
  His face is as black as a leaf,
His eyes are like forests of darkness,
  His heart is a hotbed of grief,
His arms are like roots of the jungle,
  He has ladies tattooed on his skin,
And his clothes smell of cinnamon—cardamom—
tar.

  Oh, mother, must I let him in?
    Bang! Bang! [went the drums],
  Oh, mother, must I let him in?

Then there was a chorus and the queerest sort of dance, and it all seemed somehow to be just wrong; and when they stopped and looked up at her window Doris really didn't know what to make of them. Then the sailor coughed, and scratched the back of his head, and said, "Beg pardon, miss, but are you ten years old?"

Doris said that she was.

"And have you five brothers younger than yourself?"

Doris said that she had.

"And have you five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot?"

Doris laughed and said that they could come and count them if they didn't believe her word.

They looked at one another with a peculiar expression, while the five drummers stared at the ground; and then the stout lady asked her if she would come downstairs and let them count her [Pg 94] eyelashes.

"Why do you want to count my eyelashes?" asked Doris.

"It's most important," said the greengrocer.

"If you'll come downstairs," said the soldier, "we shall be most happy to tell you why."

Doris pulled her head in and glanced round the bedroom. Jimmy and Jocko were still fast asleep. She put on her dressing-gown, but not her slippers, in case they should want to count her toes. Then she opened the door and ran softly downstairs, and drew back the bolts, and went into the

street.

"Wouldn't it be better," said the stout lady, "if we went to a quieter place?"

"Well, there's a field," said Doris, "at the end of the street. Of course, we might go along there."

"You're sure you're not frightened?" asked the sailor.

The five drummers still stared at the ground.

"Not very much," said Doris. "You aren't going to hurt me, are you?"

"God forbid!" said the elderly greengrocer.

So they went up the street to the field at the end, and there they all crouched under the hedge; and the sailor, whose name was Lancelot, did most of the talking, because he was the biggest.

"You see, we've all lost something," he said, "so we went to see an old man as lives in the middle of Brazil. He's the wisest old geezer as ever lived, and we all of us told him what we had lost. This [Pg 95] here lady has lost her husband and has been trying to find him for years and years; and this here soldier has lost his character and can't find a general to give him a job; and this here greengrocer has lost his appetite and is getting thinner and thinner; and as for me, I've lost my temper and can't find a ship to sail in."

"That's very sad," said Doris. "And what have these drummers lost?"

"Their senses," said Lancelot. "Each of these here drummers has been and lost one of his senses. The first can't see, and the second can't hear, and the third can't smell, and the fourth can't taste, and the fifth can't feel."

"I see," said Doris. "And what did the old man tell you?"

"Well," said Lancelot, "that's just what I'm coming to. He told us he'd thought of a magic song. There was four verses to it, and the words didn't matter, he said, so long as they was each sung by somebody as had lost something. After each verse there was a chorus, and in between the verses there was a dance. When we'd told him our troubles, he made up some words for us, and then he lent us these here drummers. But what you've got to find, he said, is a little girl as can play this here flute, for until you've found her you can sing as loud as you like, but you won't sing right, and nobody won't hear you. But when you've found her—that's what the old man said—she'll be able to blow this here flute, for this here flute can play by itself if you find the right little [Pg 96] girl to blow it. Well, of course we was interested, so we asked him to go on, and he said that it would play for just about an hour, and by the end of that time, he said, it would have settled all our troubles and all the troubles of the people as heard it. Only, first of all, he said, you must find the right little girl, and the time must be midnight, and the moon must be full."

"Dear me!" said Doris, "that sounds rather odd."

"That's what *we* thought," said the stout lady.

"Well," said Lancelot, "naturally we asked him where this here girl was to be found. But he shook his head, and he said as he didn't know, and that all we could do was to go and look for her. You must travel about, he said, and sing this here music, but the only people as'll be able to hear you will be little girls twice five years old, with five brothers younger than theirselves, and with five fingers on each hand, and five toes on each foot. And of them, he says, the only little girl as'll be able to play this here flute must have a hundred and five eyelashes on her right upper eyelid."

He felt in his pocket and pulled out a magnifying glass.

"So that's why we want to count your eyelashes."

They looked at her anxiously, all except the drummers, and they were still looking at the ground.

"All right," said Doris, "count away. I'm sure I don't know how many I've got."

She closed her eyes, and they stared through the magnifying glass, and began to count her right upper eyelashes. She became quite excited as they went on. [Pg 97]

"A hundred and three," they said, "a hundred and four, a hundred and five," and then they gave a great shout.

"You're the one," they cried, "you're the very one! You've exactly a hundred and five!"

She opened her eyes again and saw them dancing about.

"Where's the flute?" she asked.

The soldier gave it to her.

"And the moon's full," said the greengrocer, "and it's a quarter to twelve. Perhaps we shall soon find my appetite."

"And my character," said the soldier.

"And my husband," said the stout lady.

"And my temper," said Lancelot.

But the drummers had lost hope, and still stared at the ground.

"Now," said Lancelot, "we'd better go to the market-place. This here little girl will show us the way. And when the clocks have struck twelve we'll sing our song and see what happens."

So they went to the market-place, where the Town Hall was, and where all the tram-lines criss-crossed; and the policeman on duty outside the Bank stared at them sleepily, but didn't say anything. There were also two dustmen with a cart clearing up rubbish and bits of newspaper, and a water-man watering the asphalt, and some postmen outside the Post Office loading a mail-van. Then the deep bell in the old abbey tower began to toll the hour of midnight, and the moon looked down on them with her silver face, and they stood in a row and began their song. [Pg 98]

Doris's hands were shaky, as you can imagine, when she lifted the flute to her lips. But when she began to blow, the flute began to play; and oh, the difference it made to the song! For it was now a song with the maddest and sweetest and most beguiling melody that anybody in the world had ever imagined, or ever imagined that anybody could imagine. It began very softly, like a boy whistling, and the cracking of sticks in a deep wood, and then it sounded like birds singing, and water falling, and ripe fruit dropping from trees. Then it grew louder, until it sounded like thunder and sea-waves shattering on the beach; and then it grew softer again, like leaves rustling, and crickets chirping in the grass.

Before the stout lady had sung half the first verse, Doris could hardly stand still enough to play the flute. She could scarcely believe that it was possible for anybody in the world to feel so happy. She saw the policeman running toward them, and the postmen, and the man from the water-cart; and she saw the windows above the shops in the market-place thrown up, and people looking out. Then came the chorus, like the pealing of great bells, and the policeman and the postmen began to join in, and people in their nightdresses and pyjamas came running out of their front doors, singing at the tops of their voices.

Before the chorus was over there were nearly a hundred people singing and shouting and beating time, and the cymbals were clashing, and the concertina was groaning, and the five drummers [Pg 99] were hitting like mad. But it was the flute, it was Doris's flute, that soared up and up and led the whole music; and when the dance came, it was the magic of Doris's flute that stole into the feet of all who heard it.

Most of them were bare feet, like Doris's own, but some were in slippers and some in boots, and soon they were all whirling and twisting and hopping, as the people that they belonged to danced and sang. The news had spread abroad now, and by the end of the second verse the whole of the market-place was simply crammed, and by the end of the third verse all the streets that led into it were bubbling over with people dancing. There were the ironworks men dancing with their employers, and Mr Joseph dancing with his girls, and the heads of the cotton-mills dancing in their pyjamas, arm-in-arm with the people that worked for them. And there was the French mistress dancing with the two dustmen, and there was Miss Plum dancing with the chimney-sweep, and there was the policeman trying to dance with everybody, and everybody trying to dance with him.

Then a little man with a carroty moustache pushed through the crowd and caught hold of the stout lady; and she nearly dropped her tambourine, because he was her long-lost husband. As for the greengrocer, he became so hungry that he danced into one of Mr Joseph's shops, and Mr Joseph gave him permission to eat everything that he could see. Funnily enough, too, both Uncle Joe and Captain Jeremy happened to be in town; and when Uncle Joe caught sight of the soldier he was so struck with his honest appearance that he gave him the names of three or four [Pg 100] generals who would be only too glad to have him in their armies. It was the same, too, with Lancelot, for when Captain Jeremy spoke to him his face became so gentle that Captain Jeremy resolved at once to give him a job as bosun's mate.

Then the French mistress came and kissed Doris, and then everybody cheered everybody else; and the five drummers shouted with joy, because each of them had found the sense that he had lost. The blind one could see; and the deaf one could hear; and the one that couldn't feel felt somebody squeezing him; and the one that couldn't smell suddenly smelt somebody's tooth powder; and the one that couldn't taste had the biggest surprise of all. For one of Mr Joseph's girls gave him a box of chocolates, and it was the loveliest thing that had ever happened to him; and after that, when she gave him some almond rock, he asked her if she would marry him, and she said that she would.

For a whole hour Doris played her flute, and then it stopped, and everybody looked at everybody else; and everybody else looked so queer and funny that everybody began to shout with laughter. Even the moon laughed, and the end of it was that they all resolved to make up their quarrels, because after what had happened it seemed so silly to go on quarrelling about anything. But what the tune of the song was no one remembered; and next morning when Doris took the flute to school, none of the girls could make it play anything, not even Gwendolen, who had a flute at home. [Pg 101]

"*H'shh*," said the man in the moon,

Full-faced and white,
And I listened,
I listened so hard that I heard through the night,

Faint through a crack
In the ice of the whiteness, I heard
Somebody whisper my name
With a magical word.

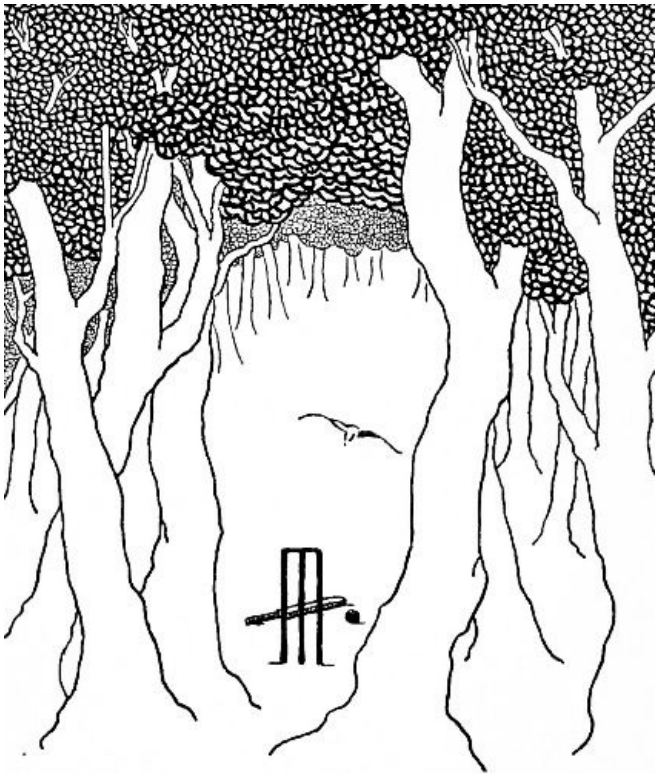
And the moon and the stars and the sky,
And the roofs of the street,
Fell in fragments of darkness and silver [Pg 102]
That danced at my feet.

And we danced, and we danced, and we danced,
And oh! tired was I
When, full-faced and white, the cold moon
Shone again in the sky.

[Pg 103]

THE IMAGINARY BOY

[Pg 104]



The Haunted Wood

[Pg 105]

VII

THE IMAGINARY BOY

Soon after Doris's adventure with the flute, Marian and Gwendolen made a most solemn vow. Marian pricked her finger with a needle and made a tiny drop of blood come, and then she rubbed it into the palm of Gwendolen's hand and promised to be faithful to her for ever. Then Gwendolen pricked her own finger and rubbed it into the palm of Marian's hand, and took her dying oath that Marian should always be her greatest friend. Then they washed their hands under the nursery tap and cleaned the needle and put it back in the workbox, and Marian was very pleased, and so was Gwendolen, and when they told Cuthbert he said that he didn't mind much.

Marian was pleased, because she knew that Gwendolen would ask her to tea pretty often at the old farmhouse; and Gwendolen was pleased, because that was the first time that she had ever had a greatest friend; and Cuthbert didn't mind much, because he had gone to a new school,

where there was a boy called Edward Goldsmith, who was wonderfully strong, and could dive into the water backward from the top diving-board at the town baths. He was going to be a barrister like Mr Jenkins, who took the plate round at St Peter's Church, and after that he was [Pg 106] going to be Lord Chief Justice, like the great Lord Barrington at Fairbarrow Park.

Gwendolen's aunt was pleased too, and so was Captain Jeremy when Gwendolen told him, and so were her father and mother, who were climbing the Himalaya Mountains and writing a book called *Two Above the Snowline*. But Gwendolen didn't know, of course, about her father and mother being glad till she got a letter from them; and by then she had become quite used to having Marian for her greatest friend.

This letter came during the first week of the holidays, while Marian was staying for a few days with Gwendolen. Both Gwendolen's aunt and Captain Jeremy were away on a short voyage, and Marian and Gwendolen had the house to themselves, except for Mrs Robertson, the cook, Amy and Agnes, the two maids, and Percy, the boot-and-garden boy.

Percy was the boy that used to open the door when Gwendolen's aunt lived in Bellington Square, and his father was a gamekeeper, called Mr Williams, who worked for Lord Barrington at Fairbarrow Park. Percy was sixteen, and was going to marry Agnes as soon as he had saved enough money, and though he was rather proud, Marian and Gwendolen liked him, but not so much as they liked his father.

They liked Mr Williams, because he knew all about rabbits, and used to take them through places marked PRIVATE; and they liked Mrs Williams, because she gave them peppermints and never minded how many questions they asked. Mr Williams was tall, with a grey moustache, and his [Pg 107] clothes smelt of tobacco, and he wore gaiters; and Mrs Williams was short, and her arms smelt of soap, and she was always popping upstairs to change her apron. They lived in a little cottage near the Park gates, and they had six children besides Percy, but Mr Williams was nearly always out, setting traps or counting the young partridges.

Fairbarrow Park was about three miles round, and was half-way to Fairbarrow Down; and in the middle of it was Lord Barrington's house, with its thirty bedrooms and all its gardens. There was an Italian garden and a Dutch garden and a rose-garden and a water-garden; and there were lawns as smooth as a ballroom floor, over which the peacocks cried and strutted. But besides all these, and the Park in which they nestled, most of the country round belonged to Lord Barrington; and it was in the woods and fields which he let to different farmers that the pheasants and partridges made their homes.

When they had finished reading Gwendolen's letter, which came just after their middle-day dinner, Marian and Gwendolen thought that they would go and see Mr Williams, and watch the young partridges that he was bringing up by hand. So they set off, and presently they found him just at the farther edge of Lord Barrington's estate, where there was a little wood climbing up the side of Fairbarrow Down. There was a sort of grassy hollow near the wood, and here Mr Williams had placed half a dozen hen-coops; and in front of these he had built a little mound, made of lumps of turf dug from the Down. In among these lumps of turf there were thousands of ants and [Pg 108] several ants' nests full of eggs; and a score of young partridges were scrambling over them, finding their afternoon meal.

Usually Mr Williams was glad to see the girls, and to let them play with the young partridges, but this afternoon he only nodded to them and went on smoking in silence. They were a little surprised, because it was such a lovely afternoon, with the sky bluer than any ocean, and the fields all glittering with the leaves of the root crops, or hidden away under the golden wheat. Here and there the reapers were already at work cutting the first of the oats and barley, and about a mile away they could see the chimneys of the great house shining in groups between the tree-tops.

The only dark spot was the thick and tangled pinewood, known as the Haunted Wood, into which Lord Barrington never allowed anybody besides himself to go. It was inside the Park, and round two sides of it ran the Park wall, with sharp iron spikes on the top; and round the other two sides there was a barbed-wire fence, with a small gate in it, heavily padlocked. For twenty years it had never been touched. When a tree fell over, it lay where it had fallen; between the trunks of the trees there had grown a jungle of undergrowth; and only Lord Barrington had the key of the gate.

Mr Williams was still sitting down, staring moodily in front of him, when Marian asked him what was the matter, and was he angry with them for coming?

"No, no, it's not that," he said, "but I've just got the push. His lordship has given me a month's [Pg 109] notice. I'm got to quit and find a new job, after forty-two years here, man and boy."

Marian and Gwendolen stared at him in astonishment.

"Why, whatever have you been doing?" Gwendolen asked.

He took his pipe from his mouth and pointed to the Haunted Wood.

"See that wood there," he said, "the Haunted Wood? Well, last night one of these here dogs, he bolted into it, and I couldn't get him out, so I went in to hunt for him. I was only in there for about five minutes, but just as I was coming out I met his lordship. He stared at me as if I was a criminal in the dock, and give me a month's notice to leave his service.

"'You know my rules,' he says, 'and you've broken them. It's no good arguing,' he says, 'you've got to go.'"

Marian and Gwendolen felt very angry, angrier than they had ever felt before.

"What a beast!" they said. "But p'raps he'll think better of it."

Mr Williams shook his head.

"Not he," he said. "I've seen him this morning. 'I'll give you a pension,' he says, 'and I'll give you a good character. But that wood's forbidden ground,' he says, 'and I'll have nobody going into it.'"

Mr Williams rose and began to collect the young partridges, and put them away into the various hen-coops. [Pg 110]

"Well, I must be getting along," he said, "and next month you'll have to make friends with a new keeper."

After he had gone, Marian and Gwendolen sat thinking of all the good times that they had had with him, and of poor Mrs Williams, who would have to turn out of her cottage—the gay little cottage that she was so proud of. Their cheeks were quite red, and there was a hot sort of prickly feeling at the backs of their noses, and they felt as if they would like to go to the great house and shoot Lord Barrington dead.

"Dog in the manger," said Gwendolen, "that's what he is, with that great big house and no wife or children. And he's always going into his old wood himself. I know he is, because Percy told me."

"Yes, I know," said Marian, "and half his time he never lives at the Park at all. He's judging people and sending them to prison, or travelling about and enjoying himself."

"P'raps he doesn't know," said Gwendolen, "what a nice man Mr Williams really is."

Then she suddenly thought of something.

"Suppose we go and find him," she said, "and ask him to let Mr Williams off."

Marian was a little frightened. She had never seen Lord Barrington, but she had once seen his picture in a magazine; and she remembered the grim look of his eyes and his high-bridged, hawk-like nose. But the thought of Mr Williams and his sad face soon gave her fresh courage; and as they drew near the Park wall she was much too excited to feel afraid. [Pg 111]

Gwendolen was excited too, but they both knew how important it was to keep cool; and before they climbed the wall they looked carefully round to see that nobody was watching them. Then they found a couple of niches to put their toes in, and they hoisted themselves up till they could see over the wall; and there they stopped for a moment, holding on to the spikes, and studying the lie of the land. Just to their right was the corner of the Haunted Wood, but spreading in front of them was the open park-land, with its great trees casting their blue shadows, and the delicate-limbed deer nibbling the grass tips. Beyond these were the gardens, and the broad terrace in front of the house; and the only person in sight was a distant gardener with a watering-can.

Then they almost fell down, for round the corner of the wood came the tall figure of Lord Barrington himself. Marian recognized him at once, though he was not wearing a wig as he had been in the magazine picture, and was dressed in a grey flannel suit, carefully pressed, and russet-brown boots. Luckily he didn't see them, and they crouched behind the wall, holding on to the edge with their finger-tips; and when they next peeped over they could see him unlocking the padlock of the little gate that led into the wood. He went inside and locked it again behind him, and they saw him begin to push his way between the branches of the trees.

"Come along," whispered Gwendolen, "let's follow him"; so they climbed over the wall and dropped into the park. Then they ran across the grass to the little gate, where they stooped down for a moment and listened. They could hear Lord Barrington still moving through the wood. And [Pg 112] then very quietly they squeezed through the fence. They both tore their frocks on the barbed wire, and Marian scratched her arm, but she didn't mind. And then they began to glide, as softly as possible, deeper and deeper into the forbidden wood.

Soon it was so dark, owing to the thick-spreading branches and the overgrown weeds and bushes, that they found themselves creeping through a sort of twilight, smelling of pine-resin and crushed herbage. But always, just in front of them, they could hear Lord Barrington's footsteps, and sometimes they caught a glimpse of his side or back. Tripping over roots, and stung by nettles, they followed in the track that he had beaten down; and presently the brushwood began to grow thinner and the trunks of the trees farther apart.

He was walking more quickly now, and in another three or four minutes they saw him come out into a sort of clearing, where the ground was smooth, with a thin growth of grass, and the sun pouring down upon it as upon a little circus. Here he stopped, and they bent down, each behind the trunk of a great pine tree; and then, to their surprise, they saw him take his coat off and fold it carefully and put it on the ground. Then from under a bush he drew out three wickets, and set them up on the other side of the clearing, and put the bails on them, and laid down a bat beside them, and came back tossing a cricket-ball. They could see his face, still rather stern-looking, but not so stern as it had been before; and then they heard him say "Ready?" and saw him bowl the [Pg 113] ball, which bounced over the wickets and hit a tree behind. They crept nearer, until they were

almost on the edge of the clearing.

"You ought to have stopped that one," they heard him say; and still the bat lay in front of the wickets, and there wasn't a sound but the murmur of the trees.

For a long time—almost ten minutes, they thought—he went on bowling and fetching back the ball; and every now and then he spoke a few words as if there were somebody really batting. And then a strange thing happened, for slowly, as they watched, they saw the bat rise from the ground; and then they saw the figure of a little boy taking guard with it in front of the wickets.

He was about fourteen, with short fair hair, and he was dressed in a flannel shirt and trousers; and the shirt was unbuttoned, showing the upper part of his chest, and its sleeves were rolled back over his sturdy arms. They looked at the judge and saw that his whole face had altered, as if the sun had come down and were shining through it; and the boy smiled at him, and then tucked his lips in, as the judge bowled him a difficult ball.

"Well played," said the judge, and they saw the boy look up and begin to colour a little at the words of praise; and then Gwendolen got a cramp in her foot and couldn't help moving and making a sound.

Lord Barrington turned sharply toward her.

"Who's there?" he asked in a terrible voice.

Gwendolen stood up, and so did Marian. It was no good hiding. They were both too frightened to speak. [Pg 114]

When he saw them, he stood quite still. A wood-pigeon flew across the clearing. The little boy was no longer there.

"Come here," he said, and they had to obey him.

He stood looking at them. His face was like marble, and his eyes searched them through and through.

"Well," he said, "what have you got to say for yourselves?"

They hung their heads and said nothing.

Then Marian tried to speak, though her voice sounded funny.

"Please, sir," she said, "we wanted to ask you something, but you were playing with the boy."

"The boy?" he said: "did you see the boy?"

They lifted their eyes to him.

"Why, of course," they answered.

For a moment he was silent. Then his voice changed a little.

"Come and sit down," he said, "and tell me what you saw."

When they had told him, he just nodded, and sat, as Mr Williams had done, staring in front of him.

"Well, now you know," he said, "why this wood is private, and why I never allow anybody to come into it."

"Because of the boy?" asked Marian.

"Because of the boy," he said. "I'll try to explain to you, but I doubt if you'll understand. You see, I had a notion that if we human beings could only imagine anything hard enough, the thing that we imagined might become actually real, if only just for a minute or two." [Pg 115]

He moved his hand, with its heavy gold signet-ring.

"This is the place," he said, "where I come to imagine."

"I see," said Marian. "But why do you imagine the boy?"

He reached for his coat and took something out of a pocket-book.

"This is his photograph," he said. "He was my only son."

The two children looked at it, and then gave it back to him.

"He was fond of cricket," he said. "He died at school."

Then he rose to his feet, and they followed him out of the wood.

"Well, what was it," he said, "that you wanted to ask me?"

They told him, and his face became stern again.

"But he knew the rule," he said, "and he was older than you; and rules are made to be kept, you know. I can't have them broken."

They were silent for a moment, and then Gwendolen had a rather awful and irreverent idea.

"But p'raps if God hadn't broken one of His rules," she said, "you might never have seen the boy."

He stood looking at her for a long time, or at least it seemed long, though it was only twelve seconds. Then he glanced at his watch. [Pg 116]

"What are your names?" he asked.

They told him their names, and he held out his hand.

"Well, good-bye, Marian and Gwendolen," he said; "and you can tell Mr Williams that I've changed my mind." [Pg 117]

Deep within the wood I know,
There's a place where mourners go,
Just as, in the twilight cool,
Crept they to Siloam's pool.

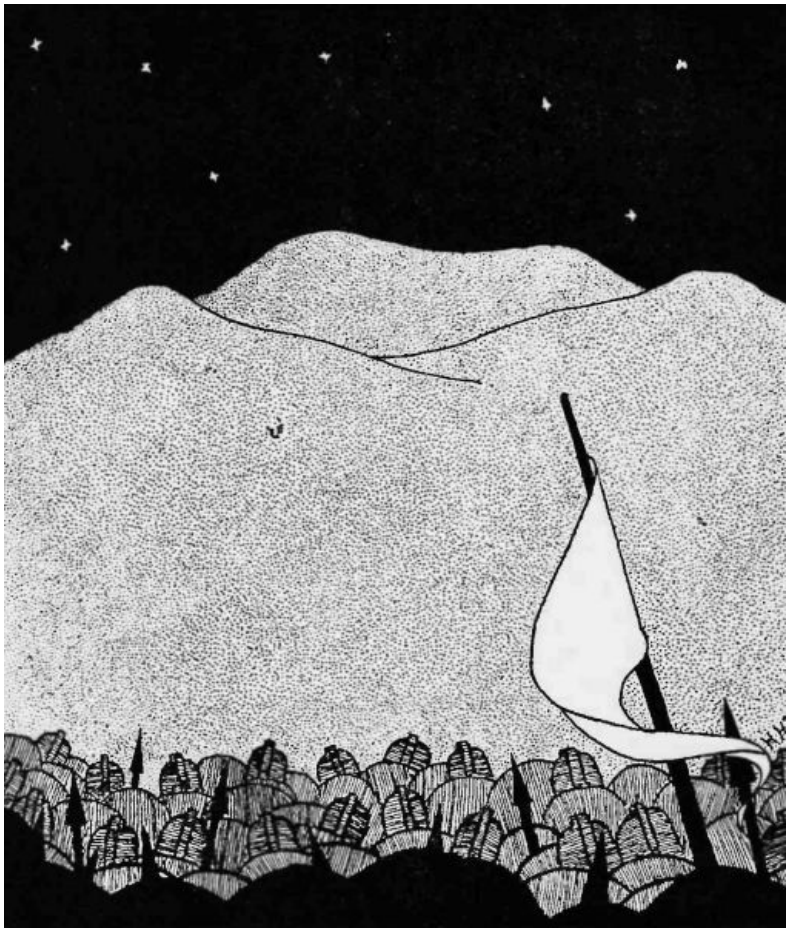
[Pg 118]

There, with one accord, they bring
Sorrows for a healing wing;
And each hushed and stooping leaf
Lays its hand on their heart's grief.

[Pg 119]

THE HILL THAT REMEMBERED

[Pg 120]



Cæsar's Camp

[Pg 121]

VIII

THE HILL THAT REMEMBERED

Cuthbert's friend, Edward Goldsmith, was six months older than Cuthbert, but they were in the

same form, which was the lowest but one, in Mr Pendring's school. Most of the other boys thought him conceited, and so did Cuthbert, and so he was. But Cuthbert had once been conceited himself, and so he was able to sympathize with him. Besides being strong too, and able to dive backward, Edward had given Cuthbert his second-best pocket-knife; and that was why Cuthbert resolved at last to introduce him to Tod the Gipsy.

That was rather a special thing to do, because Tod was rather a special sort of gipsy; and Cuthbert had never introduced him to anybody, not even to Doris, although she had asked him to. It was in the hospital, just before he had had his tonsils out, that Cuthbert had first met Tod; and Tod had told him not to be frightened, because there was no need to be, and it wouldn't do any good. Tod himself was often in hospital, because he had consumption and had lost one of his lungs; and besides that he was always getting knocked down or run over, through being absent-minded. He was tall and thin, with a lot of black hair that kept tumbling over his eyes, and his [Pg 122] eyes were brown, like a dog's eyes, only they were brighter and always laughing.

When Cuthbert next met Tod, he had been living in his little tent on the other side of Fairbarrow Down; and Cuthbert had stayed there all night with him, and Tod had told him the names of the stars. Very early in the morning, when Cuthbert woke up, he had seen Tod kneeling in the dew, and a couple of wild rabbits nestling in his arms and smelling his clothes, just as if they had been tame ones.

Then Tod had beckoned him with his head and whistled a peculiar sweet whistle, and a hare near by had pricked up her ears and come through the grass to have her back stroked. That whistle was one of Tod's secrets, and he knew lots more, and was always learning new ones; and when Cuthbert had told him about In-between Land he said that he had been there too, by another way.

So it was rather a great thing for Cuthbert to promise Edward that he would introduce him to Tod the Gipsy; and Edward was naturally rather impatient to go and find him, and talk to him. But the difficulty was that Tod was always travelling about, and Cuthbert never knew where he was likely to be; and it wasn't until tea-time on the third Monday of October that at last they found him, quite by accident.

Owing to one of Mr Pendring's boys having won a medal for helping to save somebody's life, the whole school had been given an extra half-holiday, and Cuthbert and Edward had gone for a country walk. Already in the town most of the leaves had fallen, and were lying in dirty heaps by [Pg 123] the roadside, and the scraps of gardens in front of the houses were sodden and empty of flowers. But out in the country, where the harvest was stacked, and men were drilling seed into the moist-smelling earth, the oaks and elms were still glowing with coppery or rusty-red leaves. The cottage gardens, too, were full of flowers—clumps of starry Michaelmas daisies, and sheaves of dark-eyed golden sunflowers, like bumble-bees on fire. But there were real fires about also, as there always are when summer is over—fires of weeds at the ends of the plough-furrows, and fires of potato stems in the kitchen-gardens; and it was over a little fire of sticks and dead leaves that they suddenly came upon Tod the Gipsy.

They were now about six miles from home, at the foot of the long range of hills, of which Fairbarrow Down, with its close-cropped turf, was the nearest to the town. Behind this the ground dipped a little, and then became a hill called Simon's Nob, and behind Simon's Nob rose the highest hill of all, known as Cæsar's Camp. From Cæsar's Camp, on a very clear day, it was just possible to see the sea; and battles had been fought on all these hills hundreds and thousands of years before. Sometimes they had been held by the ancient Britons when they were fighting against each other; and sometimes they had been held by the ancient Britons when they were fighting against the Romans. Sometimes the Romans had held them when they were attacked by the Britons, and once the Britons had held them against the Saxons; and then in their turn the Saxons had held them when they had been attacked by the Danes. After that they had [Pg 124] slept for hundreds of years, with only the sheep to nibble their grass, and an occasional shepherd shouting across them to his shaggy and wise-eyed sheep-dog.

The fiercest battle of all had been fought on Cæsar's Camp, from which the Romans had driven away the Britons, and there was a great mound on it, covered with grass, in which the dead soldiers had been buried. But that was nearly two thousand years ago, and it had never looked more peaceful than on this autumn afternoon, with the baby moon peeping above it and growing brighter as the daylight faded. It was a steep climb to the top of Cæsar's Camp, and the hill was guarded at the bottom by a fringe of elm trees; and in front of these elm trees there was a belt of bracken, reddening with decay, and reaching to the boys' shoulders. It had been rather fun to push their way through it, startling the rabbits, and listening to the rooks; and it was in a little quarry among the elms that Tod the Gipsy had made his fire.

Close to the fire he had spread some branches and a heap of bracken to make a mattress, and over this he had thrown his blanket and the little tarpaulin that made his tent. When they first caught sight of him, he was humming a song and beating an accompaniment to himself on an empty biscuit-box:

Where do the gipsies come from?
The gipsies come from Egypt.
The fiery sun begot them,
  Their dam was the desert dry. [Pg 125]
She lay there stripped and basking,

And gave them suck for the asking,
And an emperor's bone to play with,
  Whenever she heard them cry.

Cuthbert introduced him to Edward Goldsmith, and Tod held out a bony hand.

"Glad to meet you," he said. "You're just in time for tea. You'll have to share a mug, but there's lots of bread and jam."

He was thinner than ever, but he had the same old trick of tossing his hair back from his eyes; and his eyes were as bright and gay and piercing as if they had just come back from some magic wash. While they were eating, he sipped his tea and filled his pipe and went on singing:

What did the gipsies do there?
They built a tomb for Pharaoh,
They built a tomb for Pharaoh,
  So tall it touched the sky.
They buried him deep inside it,
Then let what would betide it,
They saddled their lean-ribbed ponies
  And left him there to die.

He nodded his head toward the sides of the quarry, the overhanging trees, and the hill beyond.

"And this is where they've left me," he said.

Cuthbert stared at him.

"But you're not going to die, are you?"

"Pretty soon," said Tod. He tapped his chest. "There's not much left, you know, in this old box of mine." [Pg 126]

"Well, you don't seem to mind much," said Edward.

"I don't," said Tod, "and I'll tell you why. I've just found out something that I've been looking for very nearly all my life."

He lit his pipe and leaned forward, with the fire shining in his eyes. The days were so short now that the dusk had already come, and the firelight cast strange shadows over the little quarry. The boys drew closer to him, and he took from his waistcoat pocket a small box, with a pinch of red powder in it.

"For twenty years," he said, "I've been trying to make this powder; and at last I've succeeded—just in time."

They bent over his hand and examined the powder. It was as light as thistle-down, and smelt like cloves.

"Now look," he said.

He threw some on the fire. But the boys could see nothing except the crumbling leaves.

Tod laughed.

"Look a little higher," he said; and then, in the smoke, they suddenly saw a bird hovering, and then another bird and another, and a couple of nests hanging faintly in the air.

"Now listen," said Tod; and above the whisper of the flames they could hear the soft sharpening of tiny beaks, and the sound of wings, and the ghosts of cheepings and chirpings, as if they had been hundreds of miles away. Then they faded, and Tod leaned back, looking triumphantly at the two boys.

"But what were they?" said Cuthbert. [Pg 127]

"They were memories," said Tod. "They were the memories of those dead leaves."

"But do leaves remember?" asked Edward.

"Everything remembers," said Tod, "only nobody's been able to prove it. The ground we're sitting on, the fields you've come across, the hills above us, they're crammed with memories. And when they die, if they ever do die, these memories come crowding back to them, just like they do to a dying man; and it's this powder that makes them visible."

He rose to his feet and looked about him.

"Of course, those leaves," he said, "were only a year old, and all that they remembered was just those birds. But look at this,"—he picked up a piece of wood—"this is the core of an old tree. This was a sapling three hundred years ago." He sprinkled the rest of the powder on it and threw it on the fire.

For a minute or two nothing happened, and then, high up, they saw some more birds hovering; but presently, as they looked, they saw the figure of a man, with his hair in ringlets hanging down over his shoulders. He wore a plumed hat, and his sleeves were frilled, and there was a sword at

his belt, and he wore knee-breeches and stockings and jewelled buckles upon his shoes. He stood in mid-air, looking about him, and then he was joined by the figure of a girl. He took her in his arms, and then they faded away; and there instead was a peasant in a smock.

They saw him lean forward and carve something in the air, as though he were cutting somebody's name upon a tree-trunk; and then he too was gone, and there were two children playing hide-and-seek in the wreathing smoke. One was a little girl, and she wore a mob cap and a long skirt dropping almost to her ankles; and the other was a boy with a very short jacket and trousers that looked as if they had shrunk. [Pg 128]

Then they saw a fox, with his ears pricked, and one of his front paws lifted; and then there was nothing again but the sides of the quarry and the deepening shadows of the elms.

"That's all," said Tod, "because I've no more powder. All the rest's up there."

He jerked his thumb toward the top of the hill, hidden away from them by the trees.

"Why is it up there?" asked Cuthbert.

Tod stared at them as if he were trying to read their hearts.

"Have you courage?" he asked.

It was a difficult question. They told him that they hoped so, but that they weren't quite sure.

"Well, if you have," he said, "and you'd like to come back here to-night, just about half-past twelve, you'll be able to see something that nobody alive has ever seen or will see again."

Cuthbert and Edward looked at one another. It would be a six-mile walk, and they would have to start about eleven o'clock, and they would have to go to bed first and creep out of their houses without anybody knowing. The moon would have sunk, too, so that it would be quite dark. They both felt a little queer inside. But they promised to come, and agreed to meet at eleven o'clock near St Peter's Church. [Pg 129]

Cuthbert was there first, just before the clock struck. Everybody was in bed, and he had slipped out unnoticed. But his heart sank a little as he ran down the empty street and saw no Edward at the corner waiting for him. But Edward came just as the clock struck, and the night seemed less dark now that there were two of them, and soon they were out of the town and running close together between the hedges of the country road. Once a motor-car came travelling toward them, almost blinding them with the glare of its head-lamps; but after they had left the road and struck across the fields the night was so still that they could almost have heard a star drop.

It was so still that they spoke in whispers, and so dark that they sometimes tripped; and once when they stopped for a moment to take breath, a star did drop, and they almost heard it. Presently, when their eyes became used to the darkness, they could see the dim outline of the hills, and the faint ribbon of the Milky Way rising like smoke from Cæsar's Camp. At the edge of the bracken they found Tod waiting for them.

"Come along," he said, "only don't go too fast," and they began to climb through the belt of trees out on to the hillside beyond. The grass was short here and slippery with dew, with glimmers of chalk beneath it where the turf was broken; and it was so steep that half-way up Tod stopped to fight for his breath.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll be better in a moment," and as they stood waiting for him and looking back, the country behind them seemed to have vanished into a lake of darkness. Then they began to climb again, their boots slipping, and suddenly as they climbed they smelt a new smell—a strange sort of acrid, sweet smell, as of turf-fires burning above them. [Pg 130]

"Yes," said Tod. "I was up there an hour ago. I've lit half a dozen fires."

At the top of the hill he dropped down for a moment close to a large white stone. He lit a match and looked at his watch.

"Ten minutes to one," he said. "We're just in time."

They were now in a sort of trench or grassy moat that encircled the great mound, and they had climbed into this over a smaller mound that had once been a barricade. In this trench Tod had dug half a dozen holes, and in each of these holes there was a turf-fire smouldering; and now he turned and lifted the white stone, and took from under it a little bag.

"This is the rest of the powder," he said, "all there is, and all there ever will be, for the secret will die with me."

He rose to his feet and began to sprinkle it thickly over the burning turf in each of the little holes. Then he came back and spoke to the two boys.

"There are great memories," he said, "stored in this hill, but they are fierce ones, and you'll need all your courage."

Then he moved away from them toward the farthest of the fires, and Cuthbert felt a sort of change coming over the hill. He could see nothing, but it felt different, as if it were surrounded by a different sort of country—a savage country, with no railways in it, or roads, or parliaments, or policemen. Even the stars seemed to have grown younger, and nearer the earth, and more [Pg 131]

lawless; and then he heard voices filling the air about him, and a man shouting hoarse commands.

He turned with a start and found himself among a crowd of naked and half-naked men—small men, with hair hanging over their shoulders, and bearded chins, and glittering eyes. Some of them were painted with curious patterns, shining in dull colours from their skins; and they were all pointing toward the darkness that lay like a sea round the sides of the hill. Then some of them spoke to him and asked him who he was, and he found that he understood them and could answer them; and the man who had been shouting, and who seemed to be their leader, came and looked into his eyes. He laid his hands on Cuthbert's shoulders.

"Son of my sons," he said, "are you ready to fight with us?" And Cuthbert suddenly felt himself burning with anger, because he knew that they were going to be attacked.

"Of course I am," he said, and then there was a great shout, and everybody rushed to the barricade; and there all round them, pricking out of the darkness, they could see helmets and the rims of shields.

Cuthbert somehow knew that these belonged to the Romans, and that he hated them for invading his country; and he was so excited that he had forgotten to notice what had happened to Edward Goldsmith. He only knew that he had disappeared. [Pg 132]

As for Edward, he had forgotten all about Cuthbert. For he had suddenly noticed that there were now trees growing half-way up the hillside, and he had jumped over the barricade and run down to explore them. When he got there, he had found himself among an army of men marching up the hill behind locked shields, and a young centurion with merry eyes had stooped and gripped him by the arm.

"Hullo!" he said; "son of my sons, are you going to fight with us against these barbarians?" And Edward tingled all over with pride, and said, "Rather, you bet I am." Then a great stone from the top of the barricade came leaping down the hillside and crushed one of the men in the front rank, but the others closed together and never stopped marching.

When Cuthbert saw them he was blind with anger, but he knew in his heart that they were bound to win; and next moment they were over the parapet like a wave of hot and breathing iron. He heard groans and cries and the shouts of the British chief, and his eyes were full of tears as he beat at the Roman shields; and then he saw Edward and hit him in the face, and made his nose bleed, and knocked out two of his teeth. Edward struck back, and gave Cuthbert a black eye, and the night was full of hewings and the flashings of swords; and then everything was still again, and the hill was empty, and the stars were the same stars that they had always known.

Squatting on the barricade, with his arms round his knees, they saw Tod the Gipsy laughing at them; and Cuthbert rubbed his eye, and Edward sniffed hard to try and stop the blood running from his nose. Tod rose and stretched himself. [Pg 133]

"Well, you've had it out," he said, "and so has the hill, and now you'd better be off home."

So they said good-bye to him, and they never saw him again; and next morning when Edward came down to breakfast, his father scolded him for explaining that an ancient Briton had hit him on the nose. But Cuthbert's daddy only stroked his chin when he heard that the Romans had given Cuthbert a black eye, because that was just the sort of thing, he said, that the Romans sometimes did, though they had many good qualities. [Pg 134]

Down the dead centurions' way,
Tod the Gipsy drives his shay.

Roman, Briton, Saxon, Dane,
Tod the Gipsy hears them plain.

Faint beneath the noonday chalk,
Tod can overhear them talk.

Fiercer than the stars at night,
Chin to chin, he sees them fight.

[Pg 135]

ST UNCUS

[Pg 136]

Doris and St Uncus

[Pg 137]

IX

ST UNCUS

It was now November, and even in the country the last of the leaves had fallen from the trees, and the bushy hollows between the roots of the downs were grey with old man's beard. Some people like November, because it is the quietest month of the year—as quiet as somebody tired, who has just fallen asleep—and they love to see the fields lying dark and still, and the empty branches against the sky. But some people hate it, especially people who live in towns, because of its fogs and falling rains, and they turn up their coat-collars, and blow their noses, and call it the worst month of the year.

Doris hated it too, and she hated this particular November more than any other that she could recall, because it had rained and rained and rained, and because her mummy was so ill that she had had to go to hospital. She was also angry with Cuthbert, because she thought that it wasn't fair for him to have taken Edward to see Tod the Gipsy, and never even have offered to take her, although she had asked him to over and over again.

So she hadn't spoken to him for nearly a month, not even after her mummy had been taken to the hospital; and she hated Auntie Kate, who had come to look after the home, because she kept [Pg 138] asking her how her little boy-friend was. Auntie Kate had a face like a hen's, with a beaky nose and bobbly eyes, and she always counted people's pieces of bread and butter, and wondered what income their father and mother had. Her husband was a clergyman, so she went to church a lot, on week-days as well as on Sundays; and now she had gone to a bazaar at St Peter's Church, just when Doris had meant to go to tea with Gwendolen.

So Doris was very angry, because she had to stay at home and take care of her five brothers; and the only happy thing that she had to think about was that Mummy would be home next week. But at half-past three on a wet Saturday afternoon next week seems a horribly long way off, and Jimmy and Jocko were being as naughty as ever they knew how. Jimmy was six and Jocko was five, and they were playing water games in the bathroom; and Doris knew that they would be soaking their clothes and making an awful mess, but she didn't care.

"At any rate they're quiet," she thought to herself, "and I don't see why I should fight with them any more," and then she pressed her nose against the front-door glass and looked dismally into the street.

But there was nothing to see except the falling rain, and the dirty brown fronts of the opposite houses, and a strip of mud-coloured sky, and the milkman's cart with its yellow pony. Behind her, in a dark cupboard under the stairs, Teddy and George, the twins, were playing at Hell; and every now and then she could hear a faint clicking sound, as they practised gnashing their teeth. [Pg 139] As for Christopher Mark, who was three and a half, she had forgotten all about him; and by now, if it hadn't been for Auntie Kate, she might have been playing in Gwendolen's big barn. Then she thought of Cuthbert again and of his exciting adventure on the top of Cæsar's Camp, and she breathed on the glass, and drew a picture of Cuthbert, making him as ugly as she could.

"I hate him," she thought, "and I hate Auntie Kate, and I hate the twins, and I hate everybody," and then she turned round, and her heart stood still—or at least she felt as if it did—and her cheeks became white. For there was Christopher Mark at the top of the stairs, with a rabbit under one arm and an engine under the other; and she suddenly saw him slip and begin to pitch head-long down, with a sickening thud, thud, thud.

For a moment she was so frightened that she could hardly breathe, but just as she sprang forward an odd thing happened, for he stopped short, almost as if somebody had caught him, and didn't even begin to cry.

"My goodness!" she said, and then she stopped short too, for squatting down on the topmost stair was the strangest little man that she had ever seen, hanging on to Christopher Mark. He was a little man with a bald head and a big mouth and a crooked back; and his right arm was only a stump, with a very long hook at the end of it. His left arm was odd too, almost as crooked as his back, and he had curled it round one of the banisters, while he hooked Christopher Mark up with the other.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I see you have recognized me. That's very clever of you. Most people don't." [Pg 140]

Doris was too surprised at first to be able to answer him. But he didn't seem to mind, and went on smiling; while as for Christopher Mark, he climbed upstairs again, just as if the little man hadn't been there.

"I'm afraid I don't recognize you," said Doris at last; "but I'm frightfully obliged to you for saving Christopher Mark."

"Not at all," he said. "That's what I'm for. I'm St Uncus."

Doris frowned a little.

"St Uncus?" she asked.

"Latin for hook," he said. "Excuse me half a moment."

For a flicker of an eyelid he disappeared.

"Just been to China," he said, "to hook another one."

Doris opened her eyes.

"But are you a *real* saint?" she asked.

The little man flushed.

"Why, of course I am. I'm a patron saint. I'm the patron saint of staircases."

"But I didn't know," said Doris, "that staircases had patron saints."

"They don't," he said. "They have only one."

"I mean," said Doris—"it's frightfully rude, I'm afraid—but I didn't know that they had even one."

He smiled again.

"Very likely not," he said. "Lots of people don't. But they have." [Pg 141]

He disappeared once more.

"Baby in Jamaica," he said, "just beginning to fall from the top landing."

Then he stroked his chin and looked at her thoughtfully.

"I suppose you've been left here," he said, "to look after the children."

Doris nodded.

"Well, then, you ought to know," he said, "that there are two things that children love more than anything else. One of them's water and the other's staircases. And they're both a bit dangerous. So they each have a patron saint."

"I see," said Doris. "And who's the patron saint of water?"

"Fellow called Fat Bill," he said. "He's my younger brother."

"That seems a queer name," said Doris, "for a saint."

"Well, he's a queer fellow," said St Uncus, "but we've both been lucky."

Doris couldn't help looking at his crooked back, and his deformed left arm, and his right stump.

"Ah, yes," he said; "but you mustn't judge by those. That's the very mistake that I made. You see, I once fell down a staircase myself, two or three years after staircases were invented."

He looked at Doris and nodded his head.

"It was when I was a small boy," he said, "as small as your little brother; and that's why I grew up

crooked and deformed. I was very unhappy about it. It was thousands of years ago. But I can still remember how unhappy I was. I used to watch the other children playing games, and when I [Pg 142] grew up I watched the men go hunting. And I had to stay at home, and the women despised me; and at last I died, and then I saw how silly I had been."

"Why had you been silly?" asked Doris.

"Well, I'd wasted the whole of my life, you see, thinking about the staircase and how miserable I was; and so when the good Lord God asked me what I wanted to do next, there was hardly anything that I could turn my hand to. But I told you I was lucky, and so I was, for as it happened I had a great idea; and that was to try and save as many children as I could from being as miserable as I had been. Of course, I couldn't expect much of a job, seeing how I'd thrown away all my chances, so I asked the good Lord God if He would allow me to look after the world's staircases."

He disappeared again.

"Been to Port Jacobson," he said. "Well, the good Lord God thought that it was rather a fine idea; and so He laid His hand upon me and gave me a new name; and my new name was St Uncus."

"Shall I have a new name too?" asked Doris.

St Uncus beamed.

"Why, of course," he said. "Everybody has a new name, only it generally depends, to a certain extent, upon what they did with their old ones."

Doris thought for a moment.

"But wouldn't you rather be in Heaven," she said, "than sitting about on these silly old staircases?" [Pg 143]

St Uncus laughed.

"But Heaven's not a place, my dear. Heaven's being employed by the good Lord God."

Then he looked at his watch.

"And now I wonder," he said, "if you'd mind doing me a good turn?"

"Oh, I should love to!" said Doris; "but how can I?"

"Well, you see," he said, "the worst of my job is that I can never get a chance of seeing my brother Bill. He's always busy by the edges of ponds and things, and I'm always stuck on somebody's staircase; and I thought perhaps, if you wouldn't mind taking my hook for a bit, I could slip off for a moment and have a talk to him."

Doris felt a little shy.

"But should I be able to use it?" she asked. "And how could I tell whether somebody wanted me?"

"Oh, that'll be all right," he said, "as soon as you catch hold of the hook; and perhaps you won't be wanted at all. The only trouble is when two children are falling at once, and then you have to decide which you'll go for. But that doesn't happen very often, considering how many children there are."

So Doris went upstairs, and he unbuttoned the hook, and when she caught hold of it she felt a strange sort of thrill. She felt like Cuthbert had felt when he went into In-between Land; and indeed that was where she really was. St Uncus had vanished, and she saw Christopher Mark like a little fat ghost, with his soul shining inside him. Then she suddenly heard a cry in a strange foreign language, and she saw a dark-eyed mother at the bottom of some stone steps, and a small [Pg 144] round baby, with an olive-coloured skin, tumbling down them one by one. She felt a hot wind, full of the odour of spices, blowing faintly against her cheek; and then she bent forward and hooked up the baby, and saw the look of terror die out of the mother's face.

Never in her life had Doris felt so pleased. She felt as if she could shout and sing with joy. No wonder, she thought, that St Uncus looked so happy. She began to understand what being in Heaven meant. And then she heard a shout, and smelt a smell of herrings, and she saw a man in a blue jersey, and a curly-headed boy, about four years old, pitching head first down a dark staircase. Through a dirty window-pane she could see the mouth of a river, full of fishing-smacks floating side by side; and she saw a woman, with rolled-up sleeves, run out of a kitchen and stand beside the man.

Then she hooked up the boy, and she heard the woman say "Thank God!" and the man say "You little rascal, you!" and then she was back again, and there was St Uncus sitting beside her and rubbing his hands.

"Ever so many thanks," he said. "I haven't seen old Bill for nearly three hundred years. He says he'd like to meet you, but of course it's only now and again that anybody like you is able to see us."

Then he said good-bye to her, and she never saw him again, but she knew that he was there, and once she actually heard him; and that was very late on this same evening, long after everyone

had gone to bed. For soon after midnight, when Auntie Kate was dreaming about clergymen and bazaars, and when Teddy and George were dreaming about bears, and Jimmy and Jocko about bathrooms, and when Christopher Mark was dreaming about rabbits, and Doris wasn't dreaming at all—soon after midnight a little red-hot cinder suddenly popped out of the kitchen grate. [Pg 145]

It fell on a bit of matting, and burnt its way through to the floor-boards below; and presently a wisp of smoke, with a wicked pungent smell, began to twist upward and flatten against the ceiling. Fuller and fuller grew the kitchen of smoke, and Teddy and George began to dream of camp-fires, but Auntie Kate still dreamt of bazaars and pincushions marked tenpence halfpenny. Teddy and George were sleeping by themselves, and Christopher Mark slept in a little room turning out of Auntie Kate's. These rooms were above the sitting-room in the front of the house, and it was Teddy and George who slept over the kitchen; while Doris herself and Jimmy and Jocko shared a little room under the roof.

The floor of the kitchen was now blazing fiercely, with the boards crackling in the flames, and Teddy and George began to dream about guns, but still they didn't wake up. They only moved a little uneasily, and it was somebody shouting that finally woke them, just as it was a neighbour banging at the front door that roused Auntie Kate from her dreams.

"Hurry up!" cried the neighbour, "your house is on fire!" and Auntie Kate was so flustered that she quite forgot where she had put her clothes, and rushed downstairs in her nightdress. As for Teddy and George, their room was full of smoke, and they bolted out of it, coughing and [Pg 146] spluttering, and met Doris coming down from the attic, pushing Jimmy and Jocko in front of her.

The kitchen door had now swung open, and the flames were darting across the hall; and clouds of smoke were rolling upstairs like a sour and suffocating fog.

"Never mind," said Doris. "Hold your breath, and run downstairs as quick as you can," and soon they were all standing together in the street, while some of the neighbours were running for the fire-engine.

It had stopped raining, but the pavement felt all cold and clammy as they stood upon it with their bare feet, and it seemed funny to be out in the dark with nothing on but their nightgowns. Auntie Kate had fled into an opposite house, because she couldn't bear that so many people should see her; but Teddy and George were rather enjoying themselves, though Jimmy and Jocko had begun to cry. Then Doris looked round, "Where's Christopher Mark?" she cried, and everybody looked at everybody else, and Doris knew that he must be still asleep in his little dressing-room upstairs. She rushed into the house, but the leaping flames had already begun to curl round the banisters; and the lady next door caught hold of her arm and told her that it would be madness to try and rescue him. But Doris shook her off and ran across the hall, and dashed blindly up the burning staircase.

"Oh, St Uncus!" she said, "come and help me; come and help me to save Christopher Mark."

The sound of the flames was like the roar of an engine, and the smoke was thicker than the [Pg 147] blackest night. But at the top of the stairs she suddenly heard a whisper, "It's all right, my dear, I'm here."

And then she laughed, and found Christopher Mark fast asleep, hugging his white rabbit; and in another few seconds she was out in the street again, with Christopher Mark safe in her arms.

Some of the people cheered her and patted her on the back, and began to tell her how brave she had been; and she was rather pleased, of course, especially when she thought of Mummy, who would be sure to hear about it in hospital. But she wasn't conceited, because she knew that she had been helped by a little saint with a crooked back, who served God by keeping an eye on all the staircases in the world. [Pg 148]

Never a babe in Port of Spain,
Peabody Buildings, Portland Maine,

Limerick, Lima, Boston, York,
Nottingham, Naples, Cairo, Cork,

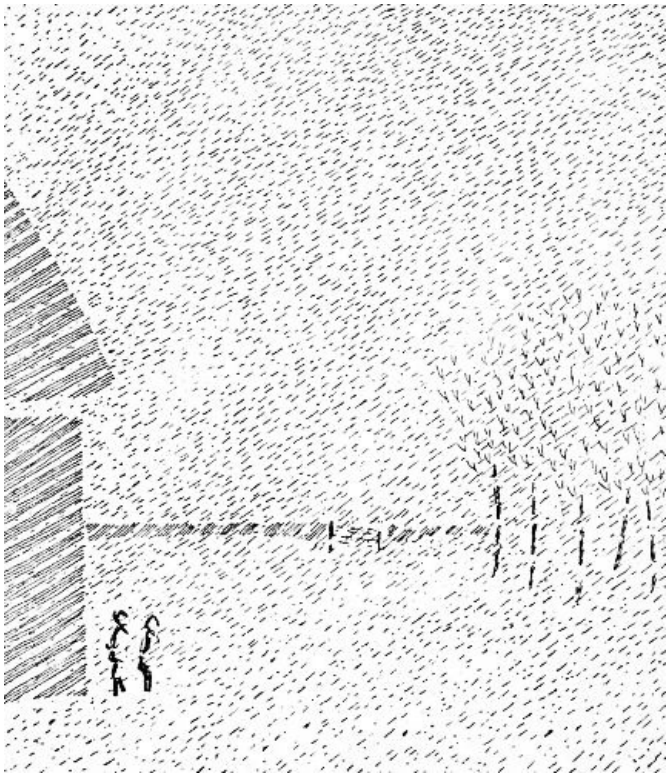
Milton of Campsie, Moscow, Mull,
Halifax, Hampstead, Hobart, Hull,

Never a baby climbs a stair
But little St Hook is waiting there.

[Pg 149]

OLD MOTHER HUBBARD

[Pg 150]



Mother Hubbard's

[Pg 151]

X

OLD MOTHER HUBBARD

Cuthbert was very sorry when he heard about the fire at Doris's house, and when he next saw her in the street, he almost crossed the road to speak to her. But she hadn't spoken to him for so long that he had resolved not to talk to her unless she spoke to him first. Doris and Jimmy and Jocko were now staying with some people called Brown; and Doris's mother and the twins and Christopher Mark were staying with Gwendolen's aunt and Captain Jeremy. It was rather fun staying with the Browns, but on the whole Doris was rather sad, because it would be two months, so the builders said, before they could all be at home together again.

Cuthbert knew about this, because Marian had told him; and that was why he nearly crossed the road. But he decided not to, and he didn't see Doris again until the second day of the holidays. That was the Thursday before Christmas, and it was a grey day and very cold, with a strong wind blowing out of the north-east, and all the houses looking huddled and shrunken. It was early in the afternoon, and he had just been to call for Edward, but Edward had gone out to sit by the railway. He was collecting the numbers on engines, and had already got thirty-seven. [Pg 152]

Cuthbert was collecting too, but he was collecting the dates on pennies, so he didn't feel inclined to go and sit with Edward; and it was just as he was wondering what to do that he saw Doris turn the corner. For a moment he thought that he would pretend not to see her, but she was all alone, and it suddenly occurred to him that it would be rather a good idea to take her out to tea at Uncle Joe's.

So he stopped and asked her, and she was very glad, because she had nothing particular to do; and she told him all about St Uncus and the fire and what it was like being nearly burnt to death.

"Let's cut across the fields," she said, "past old Mother Hubbard's. It's jolly cold. I think it's going to snow."

"I hope it is," said Cuthbert. "But it's not so cold as the day on which we found the ice-men."

But it was quite cold enough, with the horses in the fields standing dismally under the naked hedges, and the black north-easter crumbling the ridges of the plough-lands until they looked like pale-coloured powdered chocolate.

"I shall be jolly glad," said Cuthbert, "when we get to Uncle Joe's," and just then they passed Mother Hubbard's—a melancholy house standing by itself, with all its blinds and curtains drawn.

It was always like that, and behind it were some ruined stables, with a tin roof that flapped up and down; and a big yellow dog on a long chain ran out and yelped at them as they passed. This [Pg 153] was called Mother Hubbard's house, because it belonged to a Miss Hubbard who lived there all by herself, and who had allowed nobody to enter the door since her father had died fifty years ago.

He had been a proud old general with a bad temper; and some people said that he had driven Miss Hubbard mad, but other people said that she was only queer, and hated everybody except her dog. Occasionally she could be seen peering round one of the blinds, or feeding her dog in the ruined stables; and once a week she went into the town with a big bag to do her shopping. The shop-people said that she was very polite, and so did the postman, who sometimes took her a letter. But she always kept her own counsel, and nobody could ever make her talk. Why she lived like that, nobody knew. Some people said that it was because she was so poor, and because her father had made her promise never to let people know how poor she was. But other people said that she was really rather rich, and that she must have had some great trouble. She was very old —nearly eighty—although her eyes were clear and so were her cheeks; but there were still a few people who remembered her as a girl galloping on horseback over the fields.

"Silly old thing," said Doris, as they left her house behind them. "I shouldn't be surprised if she was a witch."

But Cuthbert said that there weren't any such things, and perhaps she had killed somebody and had a guilty conscience.

Then they crossed a road, and climbed over a stile, and skirted a great field pricked with tiny wheat-blades; and then they slipped down a rather steep bank into a sheltered lane still wet with mud. They had already forgotten old Mother Hubbard, and the next moment they forgot her still more; for just then there came clattering down the lane a young man on horseback, splashed to his eyes. His bowler hat was crammed down on his head, and he shouted at them as he galloped by. "Which way have they gone?" he cried, but he never stopped for an answer, and soon there came some more riders, both men and women. They had evidently come down the lane to avoid a big ploughed field that lay between high hedges on the other side of it, for Cuthbert and Doris presently saw them turn sharply to the right into a grass meadow where it was easier to gallop. [Pg 154]

"It's the hunt," said Doris. "Let's run after them," so they turned and ran down the lane, and saw the riders, one by one, jumping over a gate on the far side of the meadow. Then they crossed the meadow and scrambled over the gate just in time to see the last of the horsemen disappearing over another hedge a couple of hundred yards away.

"We shall never catch them," said Cuthbert, but just then they heard a horn blowing. "It's the fox," cried Doris. "They've seen the fox," and half a minute later, from a little rise in the ground, they saw the whole hunt streaming away from them.

They were so hot now that they had forgotten all about the wind and the grey clouds gathering over the downs, and their only thought was to be up among the horses and their jolly, red-cheeked riders. So they ran down the rise and across another road and over some more fields and past a wood, until they came at last to a stream, running rather sluggishly between some pollarded willows. On one of these there was a man standing, and he waved his hand to them as they came up. [Pg 155]

"They're coming back," he said. "Keep along the stream, and I'll lay a dollar you'll see some fun."

It was now nearly four, and the light was beginning to fade, and they were ever so far from Uncle Joe's; but they pushed their way through the tangled grass until they came to a plank across the stream. This led them out beside a hazel copse, and just as they were wondering which way to go they heard the horn again, not very far away, and the clear, deep calling of the hounds. Something cold fell on Cuthbert's cheek.

"Hullo!" he said, "it's beginning to snow." And then a burly man on a big grey mare came crashing through the undergrowth on the other side of the stream. He gave a shout, and they jumped aside as his horse rose to clear the water; but the next moment he was sprawling on the ground in front of them, with his scarlet coat about his ears.

They heard him swear, but as he picked himself up and helped his horse out of the stream he began to laugh, and soon he was in the saddle again and vanishing into the dusk. For a minute or two they waited, but nobody else came. An old cock pheasant rattled out of the hazel copse. The horn blew once more, and then all was still. Their breath stood like smoke upon the air. [Pg 156]

Then Doris suddenly stooped and picked up a coin that had been half trampled into the bank.

"Hullo!" she said, "he's dropped a penny. You'd better add the date of it to your collection."

Cuthbert took it from her, but the penny was an old one, and the date was difficult to see. The snow began to fall upon them in heavy flakes. Cuthbert took out his handkerchief and polished the coin. And then an odd thing happened, for suddenly, as he polished, the stream and the hazel copse seemed to fade away; and it was another girl—a grown-up girl—who had just given him the penny.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said, and Cuthbert knew that she wasn't speaking to him, but to somebody else; and the thoughts that came into his head weren't his own, but a grown-up man's. He knew that they were somebody else's thoughts, because he was thinking his own thoughts too; and the other person's thoughts were of two kinds—the weak thoughts that he decided to tell the girl, and the strong thoughts that went into the penny.

The thoughts that he told the girl were that, when he got to South America, he was going to spend his spare time studying the birds there. He was going to write a book about them, and

perhaps, when he had written his book, he would get a job looking after a museum. But his strong thoughts, that he didn't tell her, were "I love you and want to marry you; but I mustn't tell you that, because I'm only a carpenter, and you're a lady, and ever so far above me." [Pg 157]

"What's the matter?" said Doris.

Cuthbert gave her the penny.

"It's a queer sort of penny," he said. "Catch hold of it."

Doris took it.

"I don't see anything queer in it," she said. So Cuthbert polished it once more. This time he polished it harder, so that when he gave it to Doris again it was quite warm from the polishing; and Doris seemed to be standing in a strange sort of room, full of old-fashioned furniture and heavy ornaments. The same girl said, "A penny for your thoughts," and the same thoughts came to her as had come to Cuthbert. The day drew in. It was almost dark now, and the snow was glistening on their shoulders.

"I know what's happened," she said. "His real thoughts were so strong that they all went into the penny."

Cuthbert nodded.

"That's what I thought," he said. "And when you rub the penny they all come out."

"Did you notice the girl's dress?" asked Doris, "and the way her hair was done, and the blue china dog on the mantelpiece?"

Cuthbert shook his head.

"Let's have another go," he said, and he rubbed the penny again as hard as he could.

This time he noticed the room, with its queer high-backed piano, and a picture of people hunting hanging on the wall, and the blue china dog, and the girl's dress, and the curious way in which [Pg 158] she had done her hair. It was pulled back from her forehead into a smooth sort of bundle behind her head; and her dress was all in terraces, like a wedding-cake, or a theatre turned upside down.

"It must have been a good long time," said Cuthbert, "since she gave him the penny. Do you think he was the man who fell off the horse?"

"Oh, he couldn't have been," said Doris. "He was much too young; and besides I'm sure that he was never a carpenter."

She shivered a little.

"We ought to be getting home," she said, but Cuthbert lingered for a moment, looking at the penny.

"I expect hundreds of people," he said, "have had it in their pockets and never known what was inside it."

"I daresay," said Doris, "but I know I'm jolly hungry, and we must be miles away from anywhere."

Nor were they quite sure where anywhere was, but they crossed the plank again and started for home, with the snow driving past their ears and piling up in front of their feet. Grey-capped hedges loomed up before them, rising unexpectedly out of the darkness; and so thick lay the snow that they were never able to tell whether the next field was a ploughed one. But they passed the tree—or they thought that they did—on which the man had been standing; and they crossed the road—or they thought that they did—that they had crossed after running down the rise. But the hours went by, and they felt emptier and emptier, and several times they stumbled into snow-filled ditches; and the snow roared past them in angry whiteness, and melted upon [Pg 159] their necks and trickled down their backs.

Longingly they thought then of Uncle Joe's and of plates of hot muffins before the fire, and even more longingly of supper at home, with bowls of steaming bread and milk. But every field seemed endlesser than the last, and the snow grew deeper and ever more deep; and the night closed down upon them like a lid, and their feet felt heavier than ten-pound weights.

"I believe we're lost," said Cuthbert, but Doris didn't seem to hear, and so they toiled on with sinking hearts, and then at last, just as they were almost spent, they suddenly knocked their knees against a little gate. It was the sort of gate that leads into a garden path; and though they could see no sign of this, or even of a light, they pushed it open with a great effort, and went plunging into the snow beyond.

Sometimes people have been frozen close to a house, but in a little while they saw a great dark shadow; and then to their joy they found themselves in front of a door, with a gleam of light shining through the letter-box. For a long time they knocked, but nobody came; and several times they shouted through the letter-box. But still nobody came, and then from behind the house they heard the barking of a dog.

Doris gripped Cuthbert's arm.

"It's old Mother Hubbard's," she said. "That's her dog. I know it's bark."

"Then we'll never get in," said Cuthbert, but just as he said that they heard footsteps coming down the hall. [Pg 160]

"Who's there?" said a voice. It had an odd sort of creak in it, like the creak of a drawer that is seldom opened. Cuthbert told her; and then, after a long pause, the door moved a little on its hinges. An eddy of snow whirled in in front of them, and the door swung back an inch or two more.

"You'd better come inside," said Miss Hubbard, and they went into the hall, her first guests for fifty years. She stood looking at them over a flickering candle. Her eyes were frostier than the wind outside. The air of the house smelt like a tomb. They could hear the ticking of several clocks.

"You'd better come into the scullery," she said, "and shake the snow off," and she led them in silence to the back of the house, where she left them alone for nearly twenty minutes before she came back to ask them in to tea.

"It's in the drawing-room," she said, "and I hope you won't talk. I'm very strong and I have a big dog."

So they followed her into the drawing-room, and then a second, and even more wonderful, thing happened. Cuthbert stopped short, and so did Doris, and old Miss Hubbard switched round and stared at them.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "What are you gaping at?"

"Why, it's the penny room!" said Cuthbert; and so it was. For there was the queer high-backed piano; and there was the picture of people hunting; and there were the old-fashioned heavy ornaments.

"But where's the dog," said Doris, "the blue china dog that used to stand on the mantelpiece?" [Pg 161]

Old Miss Hubbard had turned quite white.

"The blue china dog?" she asked. "What do you know about that? It was broken thirty years ago."

"But it's the same room," said Cuthbert, "and there was a girl in it, and she gave a man a penny for his thoughts."

Old Miss Hubbard began to tremble. She sat down heavily, and her eyes looked frightened.

"But how do you know?" she asked. "You're only children; and that was more than fifty years ago."

Cuthbert felt in his pocket and pulled out the penny.

"This is the penny," he said, "that the girl gave him. We've just found it, quite by accident. And he didn't tell her all of his thoughts. He only told her some of them. The rest are in here, and we made them come out."

He began to polish it again with his handkerchief; and then he gave it to her, and they stood watching her. For about five minutes she sat quite still; and then she looked up, and her voice had changed a little.

"If I tell you a story," she said, "will you let me keep it?"

Cuthbert looked at Doris, and Doris nodded her head.

"Why, of course," said Cuthbert. "We should be very pleased."

So while they were having tea she told them that long ago a girl had lived in that house, and that she fell in love with a young man, who was a carpenter by trade. But he was also a naturalist, and especially fond of birds, and he wanted to discover all sorts of things about them; and one day he [Pg 162] told the girl that he was just going away to work on a railway in South America. Then he hesitated, as if he wanted to tell her something else, and she gave him a penny for his thoughts; and then he left the house, and was drowned at sea, and the girl never knew whether he had loved her or not.

"It was very silly of him," said Miss Hubbard, "not to have told her. But perhaps the girl was sillier still. For she was so sad that she wasted her whole life; and now it seems that he loved her after all."

Then she went to the window and pulled up the blind. The storm had died down, and it had stopped snowing. Brighter than eyes at a Christmas party, the stars in their thousands shone in the sky. Cuthbert and Doris said that they must be going; and old Miss Hubbard took them to the front door.

"You must come and see me again," she said. "Come as often as you like; and perhaps next time you'll bring some of your friends."

"But she never told us," said Cuthbert, "who the girl was."

"Why, you silly," said Doris, "it was Miss Hubbard herself." [Pg 163]

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard
To fetch her poor dog a bone,
But this Mother Hubbard in her heart's cupboard
Lives in the dark alone.

Sorrow's grey dust on the chandelier
Never a sun-ray sees,
Never a finger stirs the blind, [Pg 164]
Nor the harpsichord's yellow keys.

Dumb is the clock with the china face,
The carpet moulds on the floor;
Oh, won't you come down to her house with me
And open Miss Hubbard's door?

[Pg 165]

MARIAN'S PARTY

[Pg 166]

The Little Temple

[Pg 167]

XI

MARIAN'S PARTY

For a whole month after Cuthbert and Doris had had tea with old Miss Hubbard the snow lay white upon the ground, and the ice grew thick over the ponds. Day after day during the Christmas holidays the children went skating or tobogganing; and Cuthbert and Doris learnt to waltz on skates, and even Marian learnt to cut threes. And then the frost broke, and it rained all through February, and then came March with its blustering winds. Sometimes it was an east wind, drying the wet fields or powdering them over with tiny snowflakes; and sometimes it was a west wind, shouting in the tree-tops, with its arms full of sunshine and golden clouds; and the week before Marian's birthday, which was on the 27th, was the windiest week of all, chasing people's hats across the tram-lines, and blowing the chimney-smoke down into their sitting-rooms.

Marian always had a party on her birthday, and this year it was going to be a specially nice one. Twelve of her friends were coming, and so was Uncle Joe, and so were Captain Jeremy and Gwendolen's aunt. So was Mr Parker, who lived with Uncle Joe, and so was Lancelot, the bosun's mate; and the most wonderful thing of all, so was old Miss Hubbard. [Pg 168]

It had been Cuthbert's idea to ask Miss Hubbard, and she had promised to come on one condition—that she might be allowed to bring the birthday-cake and the nine candles to stick into it. For Marian was going to be nine, and it was nearly two years since she had met Mr Jugg; and she sometimes wondered—it seemed so long ago—if she had ever seen him at all. Cuthbert used to tease her by pretending that she hadn't, and that Mr Jugg was only a dream, just as he used to tease her by telling her that the 27th of March was a silly sort of day on which to have a birthday. That was because his own birthday came in April, so that it was always in the holidays; but Uncle Joe, who knew a lot about birthdays, used to take Marian's side. March was the soldier's month, he said, full of bugles, and one of the best months to be born in; while, as for Cuthbert, anyone could tell by listening to him that he had come in April with all the other cuckoos.

So Marian was naturally rather excited; and then, on the very morning of her birthday, Cuthbert woke up with a strawberry-coloured tongue and a chest as red as a cooked lobster. That was just the sort of thing, Marian thought, that Cuthbert would do, although she knew that she ought to feel sorry for him; and then the doctor came and said that he had scarlet fever, and that was the end of Marian's party. For Mummy had to put on an overall and begin to nurse Cuthbert, and a big sheet was hung across the bedroom door, and Mummy had to sprinkle it with carbolic acid, and of course Marian wasn't allowed to go to school. But she could go for walks, said the doctor, [Pg 169] as long as she went by herself and didn't go near anybody, or travel in trams and things; and so she spent the morning in taking notes to her friends, telling them that there wasn't to be a party after all. As for Uncle Joe, Mummy sent him a message by a carrier who passed near his house. "And the first thing in the afternoon," she said to Marian, "you must slip across the fields to old Miss Hubbard's."

Now a little girl whose only brother has just been silly enough to get scarlet fever is one of the loneliest people in the world; and that was just how Marian felt. Even her mummy tried to keep away from her, because she was nursing Cuthbert, who was so infectious; and she had had strict orders when she arrived at Mother Hubbard's not to go inside her house.

"Everybody's happy," said Marian, "except me," as she saw the people laughing in the country roads, and the horses biting at each other's manes, and the birds circling together in the soft air. For, as if Somebody had known that it was going to be her birthday and waved a wand during the night, the wind had dropped and the clouds vanished, and the air was full of a thousand scents. There were earth-scents, warm and wet, and hedge-scents of primroses and growing weeds, and the scents of small animals, and cow-scents and lamb-scents, and tree-scents of bark and cracking buds. Invisibly they rose and spread and mingled, like children flocking upstairs in their party frocks; and the sun beamed down on them like some gay old admiral who had just spied summer on the horizon. [Pg 170]

But Marian was still unhappy and disappointed, and when she had given her message to old Miss Hubbard she wandered across the fields, not very much caring where she went or what might happen to her. That was how she was feeling when she came at last to a small wood, called the Pirate's Wood because it was shaped rather like a ship, with a lot of masts in it, easy to climb. It was Cuthbert who had christened this wood, because he had climbed higher than the others—almost to the top of the tallest tree. But Doris had climbed nearly as high, and they both laughed at Marian, because she would only climb half-way up. It occurred to her this afternoon, however, that she would climb higher than either of them; and she didn't care, she said, if she fell from the top.

So she swung herself up on to the lowest branch of the big elm-tree near the middle of the wood; and presently she saw above her the fork between two boughs that Cuthbert had christened the crow's-nest. Level with her nose, cut in the bark of the trunk, was a big D, standing for Doris, so that already she had climbed as high as Doris had climbed, and was able to look out over the other trees. But now she had come to the hardest part of the climb, for in order to reach the crow's-nest she would have to swarm up a piece of the elm-trunk from which there were no branches sticking out to help her. There were only roughnesses in the bark, into which she would have to dig her fingers, and first of all she had to pull up her skirt and tuck it down inside her knickers. For a moment or two she began to be frightened. But then she told herself that she [Pg 171] didn't care; and soon she had swarmed high enough to reach one of the forking boughs, and had swung herself up into the crow's-nest.

She was now as high as Cuthbert had climbed, and rippling away below her she could see the fields and farm-lands stretching into the distance. Two or three miles to her right lay the spires and chimneys and crinkled roof-tops of the town, and two or three miles to her left, golden in the sunlight, the hills lay strung along the sky. Then she saw yet another fork between two slender boughs, just about a foot above her head, and in a minute or two she had climbed higher even than Cuthbert had done, and was safely perched in the top of the tree. If only the others had been there she could have sighted imaginary ships for them sooner than any of them had done before; and then she remembered again how sad and lonely she was, and that nothing really mattered after all.

So she stuffed her handkerchief into a crack in the tree just to prove that she had really climbed there; and it was just then that she saw a young man swinging across the fields toward the wood.

He was wearing an old shooting-jacket and grey flannel trousers; and he was singing a song, of which she couldn't hear the words. She saw him climb a gate—rather cautiously, she thought; she had expected from his general air that he would vault it; and then he disappeared under the trees just as she began to climb down.

But climbing down anything is often more difficult than climbing up, as Marian found; and half-way down she suddenly discovered that she had somehow worked herself to the wrong side of [Pg 172] the tree. Below her were two or three branches that she thought would bear her, but there were long gaps yawning between them; and the main trunk was growing broader and broader, so that she could no longer span it with her arms. Once a piece of bark broke in her fingers, and she slithered down a yard or more and nearly fell; and she could feel her heart jumping against her ribs, as she stood with both feet on a bending bough. Then she heard the young man singing again in a cheerful voice, and she thought of shouting to him, but she felt too shy; and then she began to lower herself very carefully until she touched the branch below her with the tips of her toes.

The young man stopped singing.

"Steady on," he cried. "You're touching a rotten branch."

Marian pulled herself up again.

"But it's the only one there is," she said. "I can't reach any other."

She heard him whistle.

"Hold on," he said. "I'm trying to find you—half a tick."

He came to the bottom of the tree and looked up.

"Where are you now?" he asked. Marian thought it a silly question.

"Why, just here," she said.

"Well, why don't you come down," he asked, "the same way that you got up?" [Pg 173]

"I don't know," she said. "I wish I could. But I've got wrong somehow. I'm stuck."

She saw him touching the elm-trunk with his hands, running his fingers lightly and quickly over it. Then he swung himself up on to the lowest bough, and soon he was near enough to touch her hand.

"Now catch hold," he said, "and jump toward me. Don't be frightened. I'm as firm as a rock."

Marian jumped, and he caught and steadied her.

"Now you're all right," he said. "You'd better go down first."

In another moment or two he was on the ground beside her, looking down at her with a smile. He was about six feet high, she thought, with queer-looking eyes and curly brown hair and a skin like a gipsy's.

"Well, what are you doing here," he asked, "climbing all alone?"

Marian told him about her party, and how she had had to put it off. "And it'll be seven or eight weeks," she said, "before Cuthbert's well again, so that I shan't have one at all."

"Yes, I see," he said. "That's jolly bad luck. What about having some tea with me?"

Marian looked at him a little doubtfully.

"But where do you live?" she asked. "Do you live near here?"

"Well, just at present," he said, "I'm staying with Lord Barrington. But I have a flask in my pocket full of hot tea, and I stole some cakes before I came out."

So they sat down together between the roots of the elm-tree, and the sun poured down upon [Pg 174] them, almost as if it had been summer.

"But why did you come here," said Marian—"to this wood I mean?"

"Oh, just by accident," he said, "if there's any such thing."

Marian looked him up and down again. She wondered what he was. Perhaps it was rude, but she ventured to ask him.

"Well, I used to be a painter," he said, "once upon a time. I was rather a successful one. So I saved a little money."

"But you're quite young," she said. "Why aren't you one now?"

"Because I had a disappointment," he said, "just like you have had."

Marian began to like him.

"Was it a bad one?" she asked.

"Pretty bad," he said. "I became blind."

For a moment Marian was so surprised that she couldn't say anything at all; and then she felt such a pig that she didn't want to say anything. For what was a silly little disappointment like hers beside so dreadful a thing as becoming blind? But he looked so contented and was humming so cheerfully as he counted out the cakes and began to divide them that her curiosity got the better of her, and she spoke to him once more.

"But how did you know," she asked, "that I was up the tree?"

"Quite simple," he said. "I heard you." [Pg 175]

"And how could you tell that that was a rotten branch?"

"Because I heard the sound of it when your toes touched it."

Marian was silent for a moment.

"You must have awfully good hearing," she said. "But I suppose you've practised rather a lot."

"Well, a good deal," he admitted. "You see, I was in the middle of Asia when I first lost my sight. I was camping out, and painting pictures, and shooting an occasional buck for my breakfast and dinner. Then a gun went off while somebody was cleaning it, and the next moment I was blind; and for a couple of months there was only one thing I wanted, and that was to die as soon as I could."

He poured out some tea for her and dropped a lump of sugar into it.

"And then one day," he said, "there came a man to see me, and he told me that I oughtn't to be discouraged. He was an old priest of some queer sort of religion that the people of those parts believed in; and he was sorry for me, and took me to stay with him in a little temple up in the mountains. I never knew his name, we were just father and son to each other, and I suppose that most people would have called him a heathen. But he had lived all his life up among the mountains, studying nature and praying to God. Well, I stayed with him for more than a year, and he used to talk to me about the things he knew. I was a bad pupil, I'm afraid, but he was infinitely patient; and after a time I began to learn a little. 'You are blind, my son,' he used to tell me, 'but [Pg 176] only a little less blind than other people. And you have ears that are still almost deaf. Why not stay with me and learn to hear?' I told him that I *could* hear, but he only smiled—it's a lovely thing to hear people smile—and then he began to teach me, just as he would have taught a child, the ABC of hearing."

He finished his cake and filled his pipe.

"Did you know," he went on, "that everything has a sound, just as it has a shape and colour of its own? Well, it has; and presently I seemed to be living in a strange new world, all full of music. Of course it wasn't really new. It was the same old world. Only, like most people, I had been almost deaf to it; and when I first heard it, up in that little temple, I nearly went mad with joy. Day after day and night after night I went out by myself and listened, and gradually I began to distinguish the separate sounds of things, like the notes of instruments in an orchestra."

He stopped for a moment.

"Just behind us, for instance, there's a clump of anemones singing next to some primroses."

Marian turned and saw them, just as he had said.

"Oh, I wish," she cried, "that I could hear them too."

The painter smiled.

"Wait for a moment," he said. "Well, then once more I began to grow miserable. For I was an artist, you see, and every artist wants to make other people see what he sees. That was why I had painted my pictures. But how could I make people hear what I heard? So I told the old priest [Pg 177] about it, and he said that, if I were a real artist, the power would come back to me somehow. 'Wait a little,' he said, 'Stay a little longer. You've hardly begun yet to hear for yourself.'"

He paused again and lit his pipe.

"And at last it came to me," he said. "Hold my hand."

Marian slipped her hand into his.

"Now close your eyes," he told her, "and listen."

For a moment she could hear nothing but a ploughman shouting to his horses and the tap-tapping of a woodpecker; but slowly as she listened sounds began to come to her, as of a hidden band far in the distance. Presently they drew nearer, and at first they were confused, like hundreds of people gently humming through closed lips; but at last she began to recognize different notes, like tiny drums and flutes and fifes. All the time, too, close at hand, there was a faint persistent ringing of bells; and these were the anemones swaying on their stems; and the little trumpet-sounds came from the primroses. Then there was a rough sort of scraping sound; and that was a mole, he said, burrowing in the earth two or three yards away. And there was a sound like a chant on one full note from a big field of grass just in front of the wood. Those were the distincter

notes; but there was a continuous sharp undertone, like millions of finger-tips tapping on stretched parchment; and those were the buds opening all along the hedges and upon the leaf-twigs up above them. But deeper than all, deeper and softer than the softest organ, there was a great sound; and that was the sap, he told her, rising like a flood in all things living for miles around them. [Pg 178]

Then she opened her eyes and dropped his hand, and it was as if she had suddenly become almost deaf. She lifted her fingers and put them in her ears.

"It's as if they were stopped up," she said. "Hold my hand again."

But he turned and smiled at her.

"Are you still unhappy?" he asked.

Marian shook her head.

"No, not now," she answered.

"That's right," he said. "The world's much too good a place for a little girl like you to be unhappy in."

Then he held her hand again, and as the sounds of the world came back to her there happened the oddest thing of all. For now there came other sounds, clearer and nearer, lighter than breath and closer than her heart. They said "Marian" to her, "Marian, Marian"; and the strange thing was that she seemed to remember them—just as if their names were on the tip of her tongue, like the names of old friends, stupidly forgotten.

"That's what they are," he said. "They're the voices of the friends that we left behind us when we were born. Whenever we go back, and whenever we have a birthday, they come flocking down to greet us."

He stood up and stretched himself, and Marian rose to her feet.

"So you've had a party," he said, "after all." [Pg 179]

Could we, down the road to school,
Run but with undeafened ears,
Then what joy in this sweet spring
Just to hear the gardens sing,

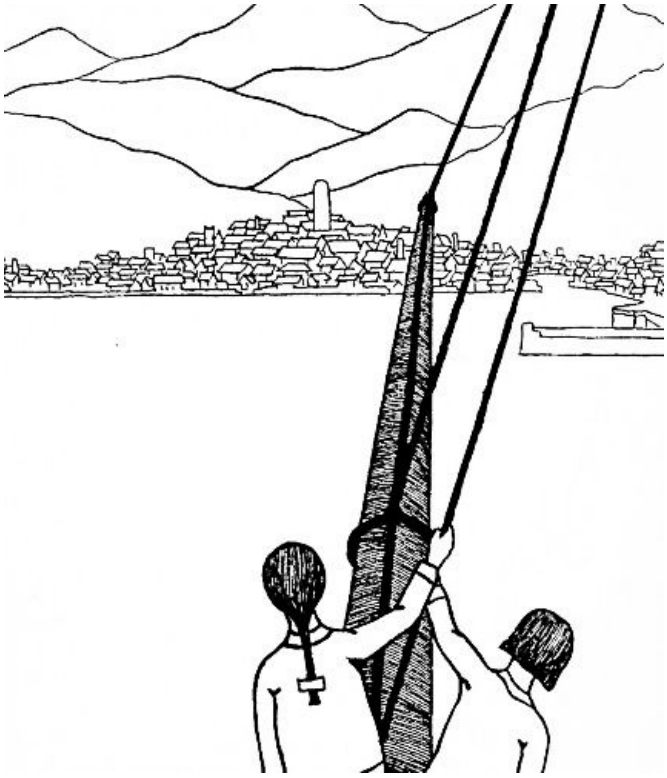
[Pg 180]

Scilla with her drooping bells
Playing her enchanted peal,
Primrose with his golden throat
Shouting his triumphant note.

[Pg 181]

THE SORROWFUL PICTURE

[Pg 182]



Porto Blanco

[Pg 183]

XII

THE SORROWFUL PICTURE

Marian never told anybody, not even Gwendolen, about that strange party of hers under the elm-tree; and the blind painter faithfully promised that he would keep it a secret too. But a fortnight later, when the doctor said that it was quite safe, she introduced him to Gwendolen; and Gwendolen was rather excited, because he was the very man who had painted her favourite picture.

This was a picture, only half finished, that her aunt had bought when Gwendolen was quite little and when she used to play games all by herself in the big house in Bellington Square. One of these games was a queer sort of game, in which she would shut herself up in a room, and imagine herself climbing into the pictures on the wall and having adventures with the people inside them. If the picture had a tower in it, she would climb up the tower and peep down over the other side; or if there were ships in it she would go on board and talk to the sailors down below. But her favourite picture she called the "sorrowful picture," because though she loved it, it made her feel sad.

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It was really little more than a sketch, rapidly painted in a few strokes, and Gwendolen's aunt had only bought it because she had been told that the artist was famous. But it was full of sunlight, of a hot, foreign sunlight, through which an old house had stared at the painter, a yellow-walled house with latticed windows and violet shadows under its broken roof. In a crooked pot near the front door a dead palm stretched its withered fingers; and the front door itself was a cave of darkness, with a jutting eave above it like a frowning eyebrow.

But what made it so sorrowful, at any rate to Gwendolen, was a little window up in the right-hand corner—an unlatticed window, as dark as the front door, but with a different sort of darkness. For the darkness of the front door was an angry darkness. When Gwendolen was little, it had made her feel frightened. But the darkness of the window was like a wound. She wanted to kiss it and make it well. After she had played with the other pictures, and climbed the mountains in them, and gone paddling in the streams, she always came to this one and stood on its threshold and wondered why it was so different from the others. She never played with it. It seemed too real. "I believe there's something sad," she said, "that the window wants to tell me."

[Pg 185]

But she loved it too, better than all the other pictures, because nobody else seemed to understand it; and when her aunt had married Captain Jeremy, and they had left Bellington Square, and most of the other pictures had been sold, her aunt had allowed her to take this one with her and hang it in her bedroom in the old farmhouse. So she was rather excited when Marian introduced her to the blind painter; and when he came to tea with them in the middle of April she took him upstairs and told him all about it, because, of course, he could no longer see it.

But he couldn't remember it, or even where he had painted it, though there was a date on it which showed that it was six years old, because that was a year, he said, in which he was travelling all over the world and making little sketches almost every day. But he didn't laugh at

her as her nurse had done, because pictures, he said, were queer things; and nothing was more likely than that there should be something in this one that only Gwendolen could feel.

"You see, a picture," he said, "if you look at it properly, is just like a conversation painted on canvas; and you can see what the artist said to his subject as well as what his subject said to him. Of course, in most pictures, just as in most conversations, all that happened is something like this: 'Good morning,' said the artist, 'fine weather we're having,' and whatever he was painting just nodded its head. That's because he was really thinking about something else—his indigestion or the money that he hoped to make; and nobody ever tells their inmost thoughts to people who talk to them like that. But if he has tried to be a real artist, loving and understanding, and not thinking about himself at all, the hills and the trees, or whatever he was painting, have begun to tell him all about themselves. They've swopped secrets with him just like old friends; and there they are for you to see. Sometimes they have even told him things that he didn't understand himself. But he has painted them so faithfully that other people have; and that's the most wonderful thing that can happen to an artist—better than finding a hundred pounds." [Pg 186]

He lit a cigarette.

"And I shouldn't be surprised," he said, "if that little window wasn't giving me a message. Only it was a message that I never understood; and perhaps Gwendolen does."

But Gwendolen shook her head.

"Not very well," she said. "I only know that it makes me feel sad."

And then Gwendolen's aunt came to tell them that tea was ready, and in a couple of minutes they had forgotten all about the picture; and a quarter of an hour later they forgot it still more, for in came Captain Jeremy and Lancelot, the bosun's mate. They were both in high spirits, because they had had an order to put to sea again for Porto Blanco, to fetch a cargo of fruit from the Gulf of Oranges, on the shores of which Porto Blanco was the principal town.

"A matter of three months," said Captain Jeremy, "out and home." He gave Marian a kiss and pulled Gwendolen's pigtail. "You'd better come with us. What do you say, Lancelot? Or do you think they'd bring us bad luck?"

But Lancelot only grinned and made a husky noise—not because he was naturally shy, but because he was always afraid of having tea in the drawing-room, in case he should spill something on the carpet. He would much have preferred, in fact, to have tea in the kitchen with [Pg 187] Mrs Robertson, the housekeeper, because he was very fond of Mrs Robertson, and wanted to marry her, and had told her so several times. But Mrs Robertson couldn't make up her mind. Her first husband had been rather a nuisance; and though he had been dead for nine and a half years, she was still a little doubtful about taking a second one. But Marian and Gwendolen couldn't help jumping up and down, and the blind painter said that they ought to go, and Captain Jeremy promised to go round to Peter Street and see what Marian's mother had to say about it.

"But you'll have to talk to her," said Marian, "through the window, because she's still nursing Cuthbert."

"Then that's all the more reason," said Captain Jeremy, "why she'll be glad to let you go."

Then he asked the blind painter if he would like to come as well, but he shook his head and said that he would be unable to, though he had several times visited the Gulf of Oranges, and would much have liked to go there once more. But after a little persuasion Marian's mother said that Marian could go if Gwendolen went; and a week later they were climbing on board the schooner as she lay at anchor in Lullington Bay.

That was the first time that Marian had been aboard her, and everything seemed strange to her, smelling so fresh and salt. But of course Gwendolen knew all about the ship, and soon she was busy taking Marian round. She showed her the big hold, dark and empty, in which they would bring back the cases of fruit, and the cook's galley, and the sailors' bunks, and Captain Jeremy's [Pg 188] neat little cabin. And then, just after tea, the anchor was pulled up, and the sails were shaken out, and the wind began to fill them; and presently there were little waves slapping against the bow, and the land was fading into the dusk behind them.

Both of them were sea-sick during the night, and felt rather queer most of the next day. But the day after that they were as hungry as they could be, and were soon on deck talking to the sailors. Most of these were the same sailors that had been to Monkey Island, and so Gwendolen knew them already; and she introduced Marian to them, who very soon felt as if they had been friends of hers all her life. But Lancelot was her favourite, just as he was Gwendolen's, and when he was off duty and smoking his pipe, they would sit on either side of him and listen to his stories as the deck beneath them rose and fell. As for Porto Blanco and the Gulf of Oranges, he had been there more times, he said, than he could remember; and once he had been stranded there for such a long time that he had learned to talk the language as well as any of the inhabitants.

"But it's a queer place," he said, "and they're queer people, sort of half-way between black and white, and the sun's in the bones of them, and half the time they're fighting, and the other half they're snoozing in the shadders." But for the most part, he said, they were kindly people and very indulgent to each other's faults; and the women all went barefooted and smoked cigarettes, and the men sang love-songs together when they weren't quarrelling. [Pg 189]

"And up in the hills," said Lancelot, "back of the town, you can see such flowers as you never saw anywhere, and great big oranges hanging off of the trees, and corn-cobs taller than your head. And back of the orange-trees there's great big forests, full of little Injuns with long beards, and nasty yeller snakes, and birds of paradise, and parrots and monkeys and inji-rubber trees," and sometimes he would go on talking till they forgot all about supper-time, and the stars would open above their heads, and far away, perhaps, like a little chain of beads, they would see the port-lights of some great liner.

The wind held so fair that by the end of a month they were nearly four thousand miles from home, and a week later when they came on deck they found the sea dotted with little islands. So lovely were they in their wet colours that they might have been enamelled there during the night, and Marian and Gwendolen almost gasped with joy as the ship slid past them in the early morning. For a long time now the weather had been so hot that awnings had been stretched over the deck; and Marian and Gwendolen wore as little as they could—the thinnest of white jerseys and the shortest of skirts. For nearly three weeks they had worn no shoes or stockings, and their feet and legs were the colour of copper; and for two or three hours in the middle of the day Captain Jeremy had made them go to sleep.

But to-day they were much too excited to stay in their hammocks; and presently, as they hung over the schooner's bow, they could see the horizon beginning to creep closer, and the hill-tops and forests of the mainland. The wind had dropped now, and the sea was like glass, and [Pg 190] sometimes the ship scarcely seemed to move, but early in the afternoon they began to see the roofs of the town and the tower of the cathedral and the white-walled quay. Slowly they drew nearer until they could see the people on the shore or lounging in the other ships at anchor in the harbour; and just before sunset they had come to their moorings and were lying securely against the quay.

Down in the cabin, Captain Jeremy was talking business with two of the fruit-merchants—dark-skinned men in white linen suits, smoking pale-coloured long cigars. But Marian and Gwendolen stayed up on deck, watching the night coming down like a shutter, and the lamps beginning to shine in the crooked streets and behind the windows of the houses. Now that it was cooler the people were taking the air, and gaily-dressed women sauntered up and down; and in front of a cafe, where there were a lot of little tables, some men were singing and playing guitars. It was all so strange, it was like being in a theatre, and the air was full of spice-scents and the scent of oranges; and it was hard to believe that they were even in the same world with school and Peter Street and Fairbarrow Down.

But next morning it all seemed more real again, and Captain Jeremy took them round the town; and they had lunch with one of the fruit-merchants in a low-walled house built round a courtyard. After lunch they slept in long armchairs, and when they woke up queer sorts of drinks were brought to them; and then it was time to go back to the ship again and watch the cases of fruit [Pg 191] being packed in the hold. After a day or two, when they had learned their way about, Captain Jeremy let them go ashore alone; and by the end of the week they had explored every corner of the town, and even gone for walks along the country roads. Some of these were broad roads leading to other towns, but most of them became mule-tracks after a mile or two; and they seldom went very far up these because of the heat, which was greater then even the inhabitants had ever known.

Day after day, through the still air, the great sun emptied itself into the town; and the streets cracked, and the barometer fell, and Captain Jeremy looked anxiously at the weather; and it was upon the hottest day of all—the day before they were leaving—that Gwendolen suddenly gripped Marian's arm.

It was early in the morning, before the sun was at its steepest, and they had wandered past the cathedral into the outskirts of the town, where a little track between two high garden walls had tempted them to explore it. It had led them into a sort of garden, untidy and deserted, and on the other side of this there stood a house—a yellow-walled house with latticed windows and violet shadows under its broken roof. Beside the front door stood a crooked pot, and the front door itself was a cave of darkness, and up in the right-hand corner, under the roof, was a little window standing open. Gwendolen found herself shaking all over.

"Why, it's the very house," she said, "of the sorrowful picture." [Pg 192]

And so it was, and as they stood looking up at it, it seemed more sorrowful to Gwendolen than ever. For there was the little window almost beseeching her in actual words to go and comfort it; and she even had a feeling that for all these years it had been crying in vain to her across half the world. But there was the front door too, dark with anger, and before they could move a man came out of it. He was a big man with a fat face, and he stood blinking for a moment in the sunshine; and then they saw him frown as he caught sight of them; and he shouted words at them that they didn't understand.

But it was evident that he wanted them to go away, and they saw him touch a knife that he wore in his belt; and so they ran back again up the little track, and there in the street they met Lancelot. He was grinning as usual, and he looked so big and strong that they could almost have hugged him on the spot; but his face grew serious when they told him what had happened, and he stroked his chin and became thoughtful.

"Well, it's a good thing," he said, "that you come away. In this here town you have to be careful.

But I'll have a turn round and see if I can find anything out about this here house and the feller as lives in it."

Then he mopped his face and looked at the sky and told them to go back again to the ship; and a couple of hours later he came aboard and beckoned them to talk to him while he smoked his pipe. Everything was ready now for the ship to sail next morning, and most of the other sailors were asleep, and Captain Jeremy had gone to lunch again with the fruit-merchant in the town. [Pg 193]

"Well, this here feller," said Lancelot, "seems a queer sort of cove, with a bad name, and he lives all alone; and his wife ran away from him six years ago, taking their only little girl along with her. But there's some folks believe that he went after her and killed her—anyway, she was found dead in the forest—but what happened to Pepita, who was three years old at the time, nobody knows, for she's never been seen."

Then he smoked his pipe for a minute. "But I tell you what," he said. "He's pretty sure to be asleep just now. And if you like I'll go and have a look at the house, and see what there is to it, and come and tell you."

"But I must come too," said Gwendolen. "I really must."

"And so must I," said Marian. "We must both come," and after a while they persuaded him to take them, and they set off again through the town. It was now so hot that it seemed as if the very earth must begin to melt and crumble away; and when they came to the house there were no signs of life—there was only that little window, dark and aching. For a moment they stood listening at the front door, and then they cautiously stepped inside; and there, in a lower room, asleep on the floor, they saw the big man with the fat face. Then they stole upstairs until they came to the little room under the roof to which the window belonged; and then, as they pushed the door open, the tears sprang to their eyes, and Lancelot swore a great oath.

For there they saw, tied to a staple in the wall, a little girl of about nine years old, ragged and scarred, with timid dark eyes and cheeks like a flower that has never seen the sun. Tied across [Pg 194] her mouth was a dirty cloth, and when she first saw them she shrank away; but as Gwendolen went up to her with outstretched arms, her eyes widened in sheer astonishment. Then Lancelot stooped and cut the rope that bound her, and pulled away the cloth that was gagging her mouth; and then he jumped round just as the little girl's father came stumbling fiercely into the room.

Gwendolen heard him shouting something and using the word Pepita; and as she clasped the little girl in her arms she knew why it was that all these years the sorrowful picture seemed to have been calling to her. It was because the little girl's pain and longing for freedom had somehow stolen into the painter's brush. Then she saw Lancelot's fist shoot out like a bullet, and Pepita's father tumble to the floor; and then Lancelot shouted to them to hurry away, and picking up Pepita, he ran down the stairs. In less than a minute they were in the little track between the high garden walls; and in a few seconds more they were out in the street, and then a most strange and awful thing happened. For Marian stopped short and pointed with her finger.

"Why, what's the matter," she cried, "with the cathedral tower?"

They all stared at it, and saw it rock to and fro; and then Lancelot swung round toward the open country.

"Run for your lives," he said, and then, as they followed him, they felt the ground beneath them rise and fall. Then they heard a crash, and people shouting, and then all was still again, and they [Pg 195] stopped running. Lancelot wiped his forehead.

"Well, now you know," he said, "what an earthquake's like. Lucky it wasn't a worse one."

And there was the cathedral tower still standing on its foundations, but when they looked for Pepita's house it had fallen down like a pack of cards, a fitting grave for Pepita's father. For they heard in the evening that he had been killed; and Pepita afterward told them how he had killed her mother, and how he had kept her for all those years tied to the wall in that dark upper room. As for Captain Jeremy, he was so rejoiced at seeing Marian and Gwendolen safe that he told Lancelot he would have forgiven him if he had brought fifty Pepitas on board. Lancelot was very pleased about that, because, in his heart of hearts, he knew that he ought never to have let them come with him. But, as he told Gwendolen, all was well that ended well, and he hoped that she would allow him to take care of Pepita.

Gwendolen wasn't quite sure at first, but when they arrived home her aunt and Mrs Robertson thought it a good idea. For Mrs Robertson had made up her mind to marry Lancelot, and Pepita was just the little girl, she said, that she had always wanted. [Pg 196]

We're going the way that Drake went,
  We shall see what Drake's men saw,
A coppery curly cobra-snake,
  And a scarlet-cloaked macaw.

For we're going the way that Drake went,
  We're taking the jungle trail,

And we'll bring you a dark-eyed damsel home,
And a cock with a golden tail.

[Pg 197]

THE MOON-BOY'S FRIEND

[Pg 198]

The Lagoon

[Pg 199]

XIII

THE MOON-BOY'S FRIEND

It was about a week after Marian and Gwendolen had arrived home from Porto Blanco that Uncle Joe suddenly asked Cuthbert and Doris to spend a fortnight with him at Redington-on-Sea. It was not the sort of town that Uncle Joe liked, because it was full of big houses and glittering hotels; and most of the people in it wore expensive clothes, and it had a long pier, with a theatre at the end. But he always went there in the first week of August, when Mr Parker took his annual holiday, so that he could visit an old friend of his, who had lodgings on the Marine Parade.

This old friend was called Colonel Stookley, and he had lost both his legs as the result of wounds; and Uncle Joe generally took rooms next door and played chess with him every evening. He had been very brave, but was now rather wheezy, besides having something wrong with his liver; and as he had lost most of his friends he was always glad to see Uncle Joe. Generally Uncle Joe went to see him alone, so that he could be with him most of the day; but this year he thought that Cuthbert needed a change, and he asked Doris, because Marian had just had a voyage. At first they were afraid that they would have to take their best clothes, but Uncle Joe said that he didn't [Pg 200] mind. So long as they brushed their teeth every day they could wear what they liked, he said, and they could paddle and swim as much as they pleased.

So they met Uncle Joe at the station at eleven o'clock on the 3rd of August, and a couple of hours later they were having lunch with him in the big dining-car of the express. Through the windows, as they rocked along, trying their best not to spill their soup, they could see the harvesters at work in the fields, and ribbons of flowers as they crashed through the little stations; and a couple of hours after that, where some hills had broken apart, Doris was the first of them to see a stitch of blue; and by half-past four they were talking to the landlady of number 70 Marine Parade.

This was next door to where Colonel Stookley lodged, and the landlady's name was Mrs Bodkin; and she gave Doris a kiss, and said that she was tall for her age and that Cuthbert's cheeks would soon have some roses in them. Then she showed them their bedrooms, which were at the top of the house, looking out to sea over the esplanade; and they found that they could talk to each other out of the windows and watch the people in the gardens below.

These were very trim gardens, like the garden in Bellington Square, separated by railings from the flagged esplanade; and beyond the esplanade there were terraces of pebbles, crumbling into a stretch of hard, wet sand.

As it was tea-time there were not many people about; but by six o'clock there were people [Pg 201] everywhere—people in the gardens, listening to the band, and looking sideways at each other's clothes; people on the esplanade, sauntering up and down, and saying how-do-you-do to their friends; people on the pier staring through telescopes, and people on the beach reading magazines, and people on the sands building castles or paddling with their children on the fringe of the sea. The tide was so low that nobody was bathing, and weed-capped rocks stood out of the water; and after they had paddled a little Doris suggested that they should go and listen to the pierrots.

This was the hour—just before the children's bedtime, and before the grown-up people went home to dinner—when the pierrots and beach-entertainers were all at their busiest, trying to earn money. Upon a wooden platform, with three chairs and a piano, two men and two girls were singing and dancing; and a hundred yards away from them, on a similar sort of stand, there were three banjo-players with blackened faces. But there were such crowds round each of these platforms that Cuthbert and Doris couldn't get near them; and there was a conjurer, a little farther on, who seemed to be even more popular. They watched him for a minute or two, and saw the people raining pennies on him, but they were too far away to be able to see his tricks; and then they saw a clown, farther along still, turning somersaults on the sand.

There were a few children round him, some of them with nurses, but the people on the esplanade were taking very little notice of him; and by the time that Cuthbert and Doris reached him, he [Pg 202] had stopped somersaulting and was wiping his forehead. Standing near him, dressed like a gipsy, was a woman, who was evidently his wife, and sitting on the sand was a queer-looking boy about fourteen who seemed to be their son. The clown was dressed in a baggy sort of smock, tied round his ankles with pink ribbon, and his face was white, with a crimson diamond painted on the middle of each cheek. His lips had been coloured to make them seem smiling, and he wore a wig of carroty hair, but his eyes were tired, and underneath his wig they could see some of his own hair, which was quite grey.

Then his wife brought a little box round, but none of the children seemed to have any pennies, and the two or three grown-up people who had been watching the performance turned aside without giving anything. Cuthbert and Doris heard one of them say that it was a rotten show and not worth a farthing; and then the old clown began to sing a song about a cheese that climbed out of the window. Some of the nurses laughed a little, but the children didn't understand it, and Cuthbert and Doris thought it rather stupid, but the woman had noticed them and brought them the box, and they each put a penny in it, though they didn't much want to. Then the old clown and his wife pretended to have a quarrel, and she kept knocking him down with an umbrella; but what interested them most was the queer-looking boy, who kept laughing to himself and playing with his fingers. Once or twice he got up and went straying among the audience, and they could [Pg 203] see his mother watching him rather anxiously; and presently he came and talked to them and told them that he was a moon-boy and that his name was Albert Hezekiah.

It was now nearly seven, and the tide was coming in, and there was nobody left to watch the old clown, so his wife stopped hitting him with the umbrella and helped him on with a shabby blue overcoat. Then they emptied the pennies out of the box, and the old clown counted them in the palm of his hand.

"Ten and a half," he said, "not much of a catch, old lady," and then they looked round for Albert Hezekiah.

He was still talking to Cuthbert and Doris, and the old clown and his wife came up to them. The woman spoke to Doris.

"Don't you be frightened," she said, and the old clown tapped his forehead.

"He's a little bit touched," he said, "that's all, my dear. But he's a good lad and he's quite harmless."

Then they said good-night, and the moon-boy shook hands with them and told them that he liked them, because they had nice faces; and two or three times during the next few days they saw him playing about near his father and mother. Then one day they saw him alone, and he told them that his father was ill in bed, and that his mother had sent for the doctor, and that they had no money to pay the rent with. It seemed rather funny to think of a clown being ill, but Doris and Cuthbert each gave him sixpence, and he ran off singing, and they didn't see him again till the [Pg 204] last day of their holiday.

This was a bright hot day, and they had bathed in the morning, and then Mrs Bodkin had cut them some sandwiches, and they had had their lunch on the top of Capstan Beacon, which was a high hill about five miles away. Then they had walked inland and had tea at a little village; and it was toward dusk, just as they were reaching the town, that they saw the moon-boy in the middle of a group of boys on a piece of waste land near the gas-works. He was waving his arms and looking rather bewildered, and the other boys were mocking him and singing a sort of song, "Loony, loony, moon-boy; loony, loony, loo"; and when they came nearer they saw that he was crying, and that one of the bigger boys was throwing stones at him.

Doris was so angry that she could hardly speak, but she caught hold of the boy who was throwing stones, and when he tried to hit her she slapped his face and told him that he was the biggest coward that she had ever seen. Then he tried to hit her again, but Cuthbert jumped in front of her, and after a minute or two Cuthbert knocked him down; and then the other boys ran away, after throwing stones at them and calling them names.

"Little beasts," said Doris, "look what they've done," and Cuthbert saw that they had cut the moon-boy's cheek. So Doris took out her handkerchief and stopped the bleeding, and then they both took the moon-boy home. He was so excited at first that he lost the way, but at last he stopped in front of a little house; and in a back room they found the old clown, sitting up in bed [Pg 205] and trying to shave himself. His wife was at the fireplace, frying some fish; and when they heard what had happened to their son, they shook hands with Cuthbert and Doris and thanked them over and over again.

"Luck's against us, you see," said the old clown. "We're getting past work, and the people won't laugh at us. And this here boy of ours is all that we have, and there's nobody else to look after him."

"Excepting one," said the moon-boy, and the old clown began to laugh.

"That's one of his crazes," he said. "He says that he has a friend who comes and talks to him once a week."

"Out of the sea," said the boy. "He comes out of the sea. I never see him except by the sea."

"Nor there either," said his mother, "if the truth was known." But when Cuthbert and Doris said good-bye the moon-boy followed them into the street and began speaking to them in a whisper.

"I tell you what," he said. "If you'll meet me to-night at ten o'clock just by the lighthouse I'll show him to you, if you'll promise not to laugh. Because if you laugh, he won't come."

For a moment they hesitated because they were pretty sure that Uncle Joe wouldn't allow it; but then they decided that they needn't ask him, as he would be sure to be playing chess with Colonel Stookley. So they promised to be there, though they thought it very likely that the moon-boy wouldn't come; and just before ten they were on the little path that led from the town toward the [Pg 206] lighthouse.

This was about a mile from the end of the esplanade, under a great cliff called Gannet Head, and at low tide it was possible to reach the lighthouse by climbing over some fifty yards of rocks. But the tide was high to-night, and the little path that slanted down across the face of the cliff came to an end upon a slab of rock not more than a foot above the water. There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that the air was full of a sort of sparkle; and the sea was so still that the water beneath them hardly seemed to rise and fall. *Clup, clup* it went, with a lazy sort of sticky sound, like a piece of gum-paper flapping against a post, and then slowly becoming unstuck again before doing it all once more.

At first they could see nobody, but as they stood looking about them they heard a soft whistle a little farther on; and there was the moon-boy, with his arms round his knees, squatting on another ledge of rock. This was broader and flatter than the one at the bottom of the path, and a little higher above the water; and Cuthbert and Doris were soon sitting beside him and wondering what was going to happen.

"Where's your friend?" asked Cuthbert.

The moon-boy touched his lips.

"*H'shh*," he said. "He'll be here in a minute. He was here half an hour ago, and I told him all about you."

"But where's he gone?" said Doris.

The moon-boy shook his head. [Pg 207]

"I don't know," he said. "He might be anywhere. He spends his life pulling children out of the water. But nobody ever sees him except me."

Doris suddenly felt her heart beginning to beat quicker.

"Why, I believe I know him!" she said. "Is he a saint?"

The moon-boy nodded.

"Yes, he's a patron saint," he said. "He's the patron saint of water."

"Then I do know him," said Doris. "At least, I've heard of him, and I've met his brother, St Uncus."

"This one's St William," said the moon-boy, "but he's generally known as Fat Bill."

And then they heard a pant, and there, sitting beside them, was an enormous man with a red face. Like his brother, he was nearly bald, but he was about seven times as large, and he had blue eyes and a double chin, and there was a big landing-net in his right hand.

"Good evening," he said, "pleased to meet you. I've heard about the girl of you from my brother

Uncus. And the boy of you I saw last year, pulling a little nipper out of a stream."

Cuthbert blushed.

"That was young Liz," he said, "Beardy Ned's kid, but it was quite easy."

"Maybe it was," said Fat Bill, "but, as it happened, you really helped to save two nippers. You see, there was a kid, just at the same moment, fell into a lagoon off Hotoneeta."

"What's Hotoneeta?" asked Cuthbert. [Pg 208]

"Bit of an island," he said, "a hundred miles south of the equator."

He cleared his throat.

"Well, I couldn't save 'em both, because I was pulling a boy out of Lake Windermere; and I was just going for Liz when I saw that you were after her, so that I was able to land Blossom-blossom just in time."

"Was that her name?" asked Doris.

Fat Bill nodded.

"That's the English of it," he said. "But her people are savages."

Then he disappeared for a moment, and there was nothing but the starlight and the *clup, clup* of the water; and it was while he was gone that there came into Doris's mind a wild but just possible idea. She turned to Cuthbert.

"I tell you what," she said. "Why shouldn't he take us to Hotoneeta? I expect he could somehow, if he really wanted to; and you *did* help to save Blossom-blossom."

Cuthbert considered.

"Well, of course he *might*," he said, and then Fat Bill was sitting beside them again.

"Just been to Ohio," he said, "to a place called Columbus—kid fell into a lake there—nobody by."

He laid down his landing-net and rubbed his hands.

"It's a hard life," he said, "being a saint."

But he looked so comfortable, sitting on the rock, with his fat thighs spread out beneath him, that Doris was almost sure that he wouldn't mind, and so she asked him if he would take them. He [Pg 209] stroked his chin for a moment and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, of course I *could*," he said, "though it would be rather irregular. But Albert Hezekiah here would have to look after my landing-net, because I've only got two hands."

So they all three of them looked at the moon-boy, and he promised to take care of the landing-net; and then Fat Bill held out his hands, and Cuthbert and Doris each took one of them. The moment they did so they were, of course, in In-between Land, because that was where Fat Bill and his brother lived; and the rocks looked ghostly, just like dream-rocks, and they could see the moon-boy's soul, like a tiny flame. But the next moment they were alone on a shore of the whitest sand that they had ever seen, and the dawn was coming up over an enormous sea, stiller than stillness and breathlessly blue. At their feet lay a shallow lagoon—or at least it looked shallow—trembling with colour; and strange-petalled weeds swung to and fro in it, and the silver-scaled fishes slid between them.

It was so hot that they wanted to throw their clothes away, and the jungle behind them was full of odours—sleepy odours, like the odours of a medicine-chest—and nodding, red-lipped flowers. Leading from the shore, between the walls of the jungle, was a narrow path of grass and sand; and standing in the middle of it, still as an idol, was a little dark-brown naked girl. Fat Bill had gone, but they knew that it was Blossom-blossom, and then she gave a yell and fled from sight; and Cuthbert and Doris couldn't help laughing as they began to explore the rim of the lagoon. [Pg 210]

But a minute or two later, as they were kneeling on the shore and peering down into that wonderful water, something happened that made them think of Blossom-blossom in rather a different sort of way. For just as Doris had made up her mind to take off her shoes and stockings, they heard a little sound, and the next moment a spear was quivering in the sand between them. They sprang to their feet just in time to avoid another one and to see a man crouching at the edge of the jungle; and then they were snatched up, and there they were on the rock again, with Gannet Head towering above them. The moon-boy was laughing, but Fat Bill looked serious.

"Narrow squeak," he said. "That was Blossom-blossom's father. I thought he was asleep in his hut."

Then he shook hands with them and said good-bye, and they climbed up the path again and went home to bed; and when Uncle Joe came up to look at them, they confessed to him what they had been doing. He was rather angry, of course, but he didn't laugh at them, and as for Fat Bill, he said that he had heard of him; and as for the old clown, he promised to see what he could do for him before they left the town next morning.

"But don't you think it was rough," said Cuthbert, "after I had helped to save Blossom-blossom, to

have her father throwing spears at me?"

But that was just the sort of thing, said Uncle Joe, that saviours had to be prepared for. [Pg 211]

The candle's finger shakes.
  My story's done. [Pg 212]
"No more," says Father Time, "or shall we say
  Just one?"

[Pg 213]

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

[Pg 214]

Still Talking

[Pg 215]

XIV

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The worst of discovering anybody like Fat Bill at the very beginning of the summer holidays is that it makes the rest of the holidays seem a little dull; and that was just what Cuthbert and Doris felt. So they were really rather glad when the winter term at school began; and so were Gwendolen and Marian, who hadn't been to school since the spring.

It was an important term, too, for they were all moved up; and Marian had to buy her first hockey-stick; and Doris and Gwendolen began to learn Latin; and Cuthbert's homework became really unbearable. But he managed to survive, and they were all so busy that the term was over almost before it had begun; and here was Christmas close at hand again, and everybody rushing about buying presents.

As for Cuthbert and Marian, they had so much to do in the three or four days before Christmas that they were half afraid they would never be able to do it, because on Christmas Eve they were going to have a party. It was to be rather a special party, because neither Cuthbert nor Marian had been able that year to have a birthday party; and all the people that they had invited had sent replies saying that they were coming. [Pg 216]

Old Miss Hubbard was coming, and so was Uncle Joe, and Mr Parker was coming with him; and Doris's mummy was coming with Doris and her five brothers; and Beardy Ned was bringing little Liz. Then there was Gwendolen, of course, who was coming too, with her aunt and Captain Jeremy; and Lancelot and Mrs Robertson were bringing Pepita; and Percy the gamekeeper's son

was bringing Agnes. Just at the last minute, too, they had a letter from the blind painter saying that he was bringing Lord Barrington. And Mr and Mrs Williams were coming, and so was Mummy's nurney, and so was Edward Goldsmith.

"Goodness knows," said Mummy, "where we shall put them all. I hope they won't mind sitting on the floor."

But Cuthbert and Marian said that it would be all right, and that they would have the Christmas tree in the hall.

"Then we can have the doors open," said Cuthbert, "and people can sit on the stairs; and Marian and I will make the paper festoons."

So Mummy and Mummy's nurney and the cook spent hours and hours making cakes and pastries; and just as it seemed as if they would never be ready, they suddenly found that there was nothing to do except to keep a lookout for old Jacob Parsley, who came every year selling Christmas trees.

That was on the morning of the 23rd of December, with a fine rain falling outside; and as they sat at the window both Cuthbert and Marian felt a little stale and out of temper. In spite of all the excitements of the term and the preparations for the party, it suddenly seemed to them a very long time since they had had a real proper adventure. [Pg 217]

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Marian, "if we never have another."

"Perhaps we shan't," said Cuthbert, "but it'll be an awful bore," and then, at that very moment, they heard a familiar voice; and there was Jacob Parsley in the street below.

Where he came from nobody knew; but every year on the 23rd of December he limped into the town with his old white horse and a ramshackle cart full of Christmas trees. There they were, year after year, shining and crisp and neatly potted; and people used to say that he had dug them up at night from rich men's plantations in other parts of the country. As for himself, he was a red-faced old man, with a stubbly grey beard and a scar on his chin, and a pair of bright eyes that used to work separately, so that nobody could tell which he was looking with.

"Ker-rismus trees," he would shout, "all in per-hots. All in per-hots, Ker-rismus-trees," and whenever he sold one he would spit in the road, and wish the buyer the compliments of the season. Also, if there were any change he would generally try to keep it, to buy some cough mixture, he would explain, for his bronchial tubes; and most people let him, because they were afraid that he would slue one of his eyes round and pierce their hearts with a reproachful glance.

But to-day for the first time his cart seemed empty, though he was still shouting; and when they ran downstairs and opened the front door they saw that he had only one tree left. It was a queer little tree with silvery-grey leaves; and that was the reason, he said, why nobody had bought it. All the others he had sold at once—almost as soon as he had entered the town. [Pg 218]

"Wish I'd 'ad more," he said, "but this here tree, it ain't folk's notion of a Ker-rismus tree. Not but what it ain't a good tree, though it's a little 'un, and the feller I bought it off a queer sort of feller."

He stood looking at it, or as nearly looking at it as he ever seemed to look at anything; and then he coughed for rather a long time and hit himself on the chest and wished them a happy Christmas.

"It's this here rain," he said. "It gets into the bronchial tubes. Five shillings—that's all I'll ask you for it. And it's a good tree. You can take my word for it. And them as buys it won't regret it."

Cuthbert and Marian touched its leaves. Just behind them stood their guardian angels. Even more intently than Cuthbert and Marian they bent their gaze on the little tree.

"But what kind of a tree is it?" asked Cuthbert.

Jacob spat in the road.

"Well, they tell me," he said, "as it's a olive. And they tell me as it's the seedling of the great-great-grandson of the first Ker-rismus tree of all."

He spat in the road again.

"Aye, of the very tree," he said, "as held Love's Innocence atween two thieves." [Pg 219]

"I like the leaves of it," said Marian. "It's got wonderful leaves."

The two angels drew a little closer. The old horse began to shake his blinkers. So they bought the tree and carried it indoors.

Round the pot they bound some scarlet paper, and round the paper they twined a wreath of holly; and they placed the tree on a little table near the foot of the stairs in the front hall.

Said Cuthbert's angel, "This is a queer go."

Marian's angel smiled as he lit his evening pipe.

"And they were just grumbling," he said, "because they never had any adventures. What do you

suppose will happen when the guests have assembled?"

But Cuthbert's angel shook his head.

"That's hard to tell," he said. "There's no precedent. Not since the Great Day has a tree of that line ever been used as a children's Christmas tree."

The rain had stopped by then and the moon was shining, and soon after midnight the thermometer fell. A hoar frost crept over the roof-tops. The sun's rim rose out of a well of vapour. At eleven o'clock Cuthbert went to play football, and Marian and Doris went to see Gwendolen.

The sun had climbed free by then, but the wind was in the north, and as the day went on the frost deepened. During the afternoon the children went to some friends' houses to borrow chairs for the party. When they came back Mummy was stooping over the Christmas-tree, fixing candles to its slender twigs. In her eyes there was a curious look. Cuthbert kissed her and asked her what was the matter. [Pg 220]

"Nothing," said Mummy, "but wouldn't it be wonderful if what Jacob said about this tree were true?"

Marian bent her lips to one of the leaves.

"I believe it is," she said. "It makes me feel funny."

Old Mother Hubbard was the first guest to come, and she brought a hamper with her full of presents. Some of them were new, but some of them were trinkets that she had kept ever since she was a girl.

"And now I want to give them away," she said, "because for fifty years I have never known what giving was like."

Soon after that came Uncle Joe, driving in his little pony-cart with Mr Parker; and Mr Parker took the pony-cart to the stables at the end of the street. Uncle Joe was wearing an overcoat, with poacher's pockets in its lining; and the pockets were bulging with middling-sized parcels to be placed on the floor round the Christmas tree. Then came Captain Jeremy and Gwendolen and Gwendolen's aunt, with the frosty air still in their faces; and Lancelot and Mrs Robertson brought Pepita, well wrapped up and a little shy.

Then a great car hummed down the street bringing Lord Barrington and the blind painter, with Mr and Mrs Williams in their Sunday clothes, and a big round cheese that they had brought for a present. Percy, their son, and his sweetheart Agnes were the next to knock at the front door; and they had hardly stepped inside before Doris and her mummy arrived with the five boys. Then [Pg 221] came Edward, looking very smart, with a hot-house flower in his button-hole; and the last to appear was Beardy Ned, as shabby as usual, with Liz on his shoulder.

Most of the others were having tea by now round the dining-room table, or in the drawing-room, or sitting on the stairs, or standing in the hall, or leaning against the banisters. And there, in the middle of them, still unlit and waiting till the feasting should be over, stood the little olive tree, hushed and inconspicuous, with the scarlet paper round its pot.

Mr Parker came back from the stables.

"Rough weather," he said, "in the Baltic. That's a rum-looking tree you've got for a Christmas tree," and the blind painter heard him and turned round.

"Where is it?" he asked. "Will you take me to it?" And Marian led him to the little table. He bent his head for a moment, and there crept into his eyes the same odd look that Marian had seen in Mummy's.

Said Cuthbert's angel, "He's beginning to hear something. What do you suppose will happen when they have lit the candles?"

But Marian's angel shook his head.

"The others will hear nothing," he said. "But will they see?"

Said Doris's angel, "Can they see and live?"

"Look," said Gwendolen's angel. "They're lighting the candles." And it was just at that moment that a young man, shabbier even than Beardy Ned, turned into Peter Street. But for his presence the street was empty. Doris's angel was the first to see him. He lifted his head and spoke a Name, [Pg 222] and slowly the others filed out after him. Down the front steps and along the pavement they made a lane of angels. But the door was shut, and deep in their hearts was the dreadful fear that it mightn't be opened.

Then Uncle Joe struck another match and lit the last candle on the tree, and Marian's daddy picked up one of the parcels and turned it over to find the name on it. Smiling in her chair, old Miss Hubbard envied the luckier women who had had children. Half in shadow, between Marian and Gwendolen, stood Lord Barrington with his hawk-like face. There came a knock at the front door. Cuthbert, who was nearest to it, turned and opened it. He saw a young man in shabby clothes, and there was no beauty in him that he should desire him. He stood there smiling in the outside darkness.

"May I come in?" he asked, and Cuthbert changed his mind. Everything beautiful that he had ever seen shone into his heart from the young man's eyes.

"Yes, rather," said Cuthbert. "We're having a party."

His eyes sought his mother's.

"Mummy, here's somebody else."

Everybody turned round as the young man entered. The candles on the olive tree shed their light upon him. All but the blind painter looked into his eyes. Each saw the thing in them that he wanted most. Marian and Gwendolen and Cuthbert and Doris, not wanting anything in particular, only saw vaguely all that they hoped to be when they should have become grown-up men and [Pg 223] women. So did Edward and so did Pepita; but Christopher Mark saw a celestial rabbit; and Percy and Agnes, holding each other's hand, saw the darlingest of babies. What Beardy Ned saw you can guess, and what Lord Barrington saw was Truth; and the blind painter heard the angels singing the song that explains every other song.

Then the young man stooped for a moment over the little olive-tree.

"Make them happy," he said, and then he was gone; and though nobody saw them, of course, the guardian angels came and stood again in their accustomed places. Marian turned impulsively to Lord Barrington.

"Oh, who was he?" she said. "Tell me his name."

Lord Barrington kissed her.

"The loveliest present," he said, "that ever hung upon a tree."

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