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Author: E. F. Benson
Illustrator: H. J. Ford

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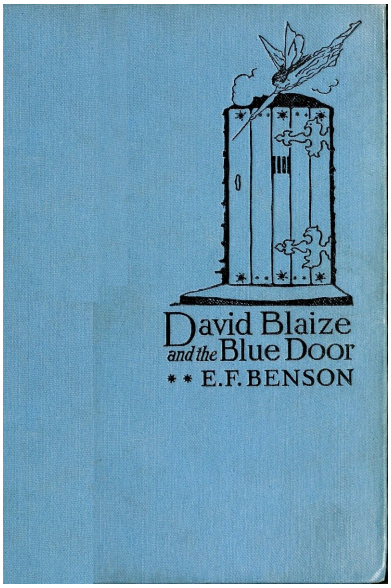

Books by
E. F. BENSON

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DAVID OF KING'S
DAVID BLAIZE
DAVID BLAIZE AND
THE BLUE DOOR
DODO THE SECOND
MRS. AMES
THE OAKLEYITES

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The flame-cats and the black man
coming down the chimney

DAVID BLAIZE AND THE BLUE DOOR

By
E. F. BENSON

Illustrated by H. J. Ford

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ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

Ever since he was four years old, and had begun to think seriously, as a boy should, David Blaize had been aware that there was a real world lying somewhere just below the ordinary old thing in which his father and mother and nurse and the rest of the fast-asleep grown-up people lived. Boys began to get drowsy, he knew, about the time that they were ten, though they might still have occasional waking moments, and soon after that they went sound asleep, and lost all chance of ever seeing the real world. If you asked grown-ups some tremendously important question, such as ‘Why do the leaves fall off the trees when there is glass on the lake?’ as likely as not they would begin talking in their sleep about frost and sap, just as if that had got anything to do with the real reason. Or they might point out that it wasn’t real glass on the lake, but ice, and, if they were more than usually sound asleep, take a piece of the lake-glass and let you hold it in your fingers till it became water. That was to show you that what you had called glass was really frozen water, another word for which was ice. They thought that it was very wonderful of them to explain it all so nicely, and tell you at great length that real glass did not become water if you held it in your fingers, which you must remember to wash before dinner. Perhaps they would take you to the nursery window when you came in from your walk, and encourage you to put your finger on the pane in order to see that glass did not become water. This sort of thing would make David impatient, and he asked, ‘Then why don’t you put ice in the window, and then you could boil it for tea in the kettle?’ And if his

nurse wanted to go to sleep again, she would say, ‘Now you’re talking nonsense, Master David.’

Now that was the ridiculous thing! Of course he was talking nonsense just to humour Nannie. He was helping her with her nonsense about the difference between ice and glass. He had been wanting to talk sense all the time, and learn something about the real world, in which the fish put a glass roof on their house for the winter as soon as they had collected enough red fire-leaves to keep them warm until the hot weather came round again. That might not be the precise way in which it happened, but it was something of that sort. Instead of pinching herself awake, poor sleepy Nannie went babbling on about ice and glass and sap and spring, in a way that was truly tedious and quite beside the real point.

Yet when the sleepy things tried to awake to the real world, they could not get their grown-up dreams out of their heads. Sometimes his mother would come up to the nursery before he went to bed, and take him on her knee, which was a soft, comfortable place, and tell him a story, which often began quite well and seriously. David always asked that the electric light should be put out first, because then the flame-cats would come out of their holes, and play puss-in-the-corner all over the nursery. They always helped the story to seem true and serious, for they were real, only the electric light must be put out first, because it gave them shocks, and naturally you could not play when you were being shocked. He knew that to be true even in the sleepy grown-up world, because once when his mother was playing with him, he had put out his tongue at Nannie when she came to say it was bed-time, and his mother couldn’t play any more, because she was shocked. That was why the flame-cats must have the electric light put out.

Well, there were the flame-cats dancing (sometimes they had a ball instead of puss-in-the-corner), and here was he very comfortable and wide-awake, and sometimes, as I have said, the story began quite well, with an air of truth and reality about it. There was a little green man with whiskers who lived in the pear-tree, and washed his hands with Pears’ soap. Or there was a red-faced old woman who lived in the apple-tree, and kept a sharp look-out for dumplings coming round the corner, for these were her deadliest enemies, and pulled pieces off her, and made them into apple-dumplings. Sometimes they pulled her nose off when they caught her or a finger or two which never grew again till next spring, and often, if spring was late, from going to sleep again after Nannie Equinox had called him, there was practically nothing left of her. So when the regiment of dumplings came round the corner, Grandmamma Apple-tree hid in the grass, and pretended she was Mr. Winfall, the tailor, who had made David’s new sailor clothes. Then Colonel Dumpling would stumble over her, and sometimes he did not know whether she was Grandmamma Appletree or Mr. Winfall. So he began very politely, like a subscription paper with a half-penny stamp in case it proved to be Mr. Winfall, who had the habit of eating Colonel Dumpling whenever he saw him, and often some privates as well, cleared his throat and said in his best suetty voice:

‘Dear Sir or Madam.’

He never got further than that because, if it proved to be Mr. Winfall, Mr. Winfall ate him whether he had an apple inside or not, and if it was Grandmamma Apple-tree, she was so indignant, as every proper female should be at being taken for a man, that she began abusing Colonel Dumpling in a red voice if she was ripe, and a green one if she wasn’t, and gave the whole show away. So she lost an arm or a leg if there were many people in the house, or a finger or two if father and mother were alone, and Colonel Dumpling said to his regiment:

‘Attention! Slow fatigue March! Right-about Kitchen Turn!’

Now all this sort of thing was clearly true, and belonged to the real world, but too often, unfortunately, David’s mother got grown-up and sleepy again, and began talking the most dreadful nonsense. A little girl with golden hair and blue eyes made her unwelcome presence known by singing, or a baby would be found underneath a gooseberry bush (David always hoped that it got frightfully pricked), or a sweet lovely fairy would fly in, just when everything was getting on so nicely, and make rubbish out of it. He was too polite to let his mother know how boring she had become, and so whenever the golden-haired little girl or the sweet fairy appeared, he would try to go on with Colonel Dumpling’s part of the story in his own mind, or watch the flame-cats getting tired as the fire burned low.

Nannie was not so good at stories, but she had flashes of sense, as when, one night, when David preferred to sit up in bed instead of lying down to go to sleep, she hinted that a black man *might* possibly come down the chimney, unless he put his head properly on the pillow. David knew that it was not likely, for it would have to be a very small man indeed, and fireproof, but there was some glimmering of a real idea in it. So he was not the least frightened, and asked, with interest, if he would be like bacon or beef before he got through the fire. This exploded any sense there might have been in Nannie’s original idea at once, because she threatened to go downstairs and tell his mother if he wouldn’t lie down. A very poor ending to the black man coming down the chimney! Nannie clearly knew nothing about him really if she so quickly got sleepy and talked about fetching his mother. Nobody grown-up ever woke to the real world for more than a minute or two at a time, except perhaps his father, who spent so many hours in a big room called ‘The Laboratory.’ There he seemed to dabble in realities, for he could put a fragment of something on the water, and it began to blaze, or he could mix a powder out of certain bottles, and when it was lit it burned with so red a flame that his father looked as if he was illuminated inside like a turnip-ghost. Or he could, by another mixture, produce a smell that he said was ‘Tincture of Rotten Eggs’ and was really made of the ghosts of bad eggs ground up and exorcised. But then, poor man, he got grown-up, and when, subsequently, David wanted to know what the ghosts of bad eggs looked like when they were exercised, he muttered in his sleep something about sulphuretted hydrogen.

David was now just ‘turned six,’ as Nannie expressed it, and knew that he had only about four years more in front of him before he began to lapse into that drowsy state of grown-uppishness which begins when boys are ten or thereabouts, and lasts, getting worse and worse, till they are twenty or seventy or anything else. If he was going to find the real world of which he caught

glimpses now and then, he must do so without losing much time. There was probably a door into it, and for a long time he had hoped that it was the door in the ground by the lake. But one day he had found that door open, and it was an awful disappointment to see that it only contained a tap and a round opening, to which presently the gardener fixed a long curly pipe. When he turned the tap, the pipe gave some jolly chuckling noises, and began to stream with water at its far end. That was very delightful, and consoled David a little for the disappointment.

Then one night he had a clue. He had just lain down in his bed, when he heard a door beginning to behave as doors do when they think they are quite alone, and nobody is looking. Then, as you know, they unlatch themselves, and begin walking to and fro on their hinges, hitting themselves against their frames. This often happened to the nursery door when he came downstairs in the morning, after he was quite sure he had shut it. His mother therefore sent him up to shut it again, and sure enough the door was always open, having undone itself to go for a walk on its hinges. But on this night he thought that the sound of the door came from under his pillow, but he very carelessly fell asleep just as he was listening in order to make sure, and the next thing he knew was that Nannie was telling him it was morning. Again, on the very next night he had only just put his head on the pillow when the door began banging. It sounded muffled, and there was no doubt this time that it came from under his pillow. He sat up in bed, broad awake, and pulled his pillow away. By the light of the flame-cats who were dancing to-night, he could see the smooth white surface of his bolster, but, alas, there was no door there.

David was now quite sure that somewhere under his pillow was the door he was looking for. One time he had allowed himself to go to sleep before finding it, and the other time he had got too much awake. So on the third night he took the pin-partridge to bed with him, in the hope that it would keep him just awake enough, by pricking him with the head of its pin-leg. The pin-partridge had, of course, come out of Noah’s Ark, and in the course of some terrible adventures had lost a leg. So Nannie had taken a pin, and driven it into the stump, so that it could stand again. The pin-leg was rather longer than the wooden one, which made the partridge lean a little to one side, as if it was listening to the agreeable conversation of the animal next it.

David finds the Blue Door

Sure enough, on this third night, David had only just lain down, with the pin-partridge in one hand, and the pin ready to scratch his leg to keep him just awake enough, when the door began banging again, just below his pillow. He listened a little while, pressing the pin-head against his calf so that it hurt a little, but not enough to wake him up hopelessly, and moved his head about till he was sure that his ear was directly above the door. Then very quietly he pushed his pillow aside, and there, in the middle of his bolster was a beautiful shining blue door with a gold handle, swinging gently to and fro, as if it was alone. He got up, pushed it open and entered. For fear of some dreadful misfortune happening, like finding his mother on the other side of it, who might send him back to shut it, he closed it very carefully and softly. He found that there was a key hanging up on the wall beside it, and to his great joy it fitted the keyhole. He locked it, and put the key back on its nail, so that when he came back he could let himself out, and in the meantime nobody could possibly reach him.

CHAPTER II

The passage into which the blue door opened was very like the nursery passage at home, and it was certainly night, because the flame-cats were dancing on the walls, which only happened after dark. Yet there was no fire burning anywhere, which was rather puzzling, but soon David saw that these were real cats, not just the sort of unreal ones which demanded a fire to make them dance at all. Some were red, some were yellow, some were emerald green with purple patches, and instead of having a band or a piano to dance to, they all squealed and purred and growled, making such a noise that David could not hear himself speak. So he stamped his foot and said ‘Shoo!’ at which the dance suddenly came to an end, and all the cats sat down, put one hind-leg in the air, and began licking themselves.

‘If you please,’ said David, ‘will you tell me where to go next?’

Every cat stopped licking itself, and looked at him. Some cat behind him said:

'Lor! it's the boy from the nursery.'

David turned round. All the cats had begun licking themselves again, except a large tabby, only instead of being black and brown, it was the colour of apricot jam and poppies.

'Was it you who spoke?' said David.

'Set to partners!' said the tabby, and they all began dancing again.

'Shoo, you silly things,' said David, stamping again. 'I don't want to stop your dancing, except just to be told where I'm to go, and what I'm to do if I'm hungry.'

The dancing stopped again.

'There is a pot of mouse-marmalade somewhere,' said the tabby, 'only you mustn't take more than a very little bit. It's got to last till February.'

'But I don't like mouse-marmalade,' said David.

'I never said you did,' said the tabby. 'Where's the cook?'

'Gone to buy some new whiskers,' said another. 'She put them too close to the fire, which accounts for the smell of burning.'

'Then all that can be done is to set to partners, and hope for the best,' said the tabby.

'If any one dances again,' said David, 'before you tell me the way, and where I shall find a shop with some proper food in it, not mousey, I shall turn on the electric light.'

'Fiddle-de-dee!' said the tabby, and they all began singing

'Hey diddle-diddle
The cat and the fiddle.'

at the top of their voices.

David was getting vexed with them all, and he looked about for the electric light. But there were no switches by the door, as there ought to have been, but only a row of bottles which he knew came out of his father's laboratory. But the stopper in one of them was loose, and a fizzing noise came out of it. He listened to it a minute, with his ear close to it, and heard it whispering, '*It's me! it's me! it's me!*'

'And when he's got, it, he doesn't know what to do with it!' said the tabby contemptuously.

David hadn't the slightest idea. He was only sure that the bottle had something to do with the electric light, and he took it up and began shaking it, as Nannie did to his medicine bottle. To his great delight, he saw that, as he shook it, the cats grew fainter and fainter, and the passage lighter and lighter.

The tabby spoke to him in a tremulous voice.

'You're shocking us frightfully,' she said. 'Please, don't. You may have all the mouse-marmalade as soon as the cook comes back with her whiskers. She's been gone a long time. And if you don't like it, you really know where everything else is. There's the garden outside, and then the lake, and then the village. It's all just as usual, except that everything is real here. But whatever you do, don't shock us any more.'

David shakes the bottle at the cats

The passage had grown quite bright by now, and there were only a few of the very strongest cats left. So, as he was a kind boy, he put down the bottle again, which began fizzing and whispering:

'*Pleased to have met you: pleased to have met you: pleased to have met you.*'

'I don't know why you couldn't have told me that at first,' said David to the tabby.

'Nor do I. It was my poor head. The dancing gets into it, and makes it turn round and square, one after the other. May we go on?'

The cats began to recover as he stopped shaking the bottle, and he walked on round the corner where the game cupboard stood against the wall. All the games were kept there, the Noah's Ark, and the spillikins, and the Badminton, and the Happy Families, and the oak-bricks, and the lead soldiers; and, as usual, the door of it was slightly open, because, when all the games were put away, even Nannie could not shut it tight. To-night there was an extraordinary stir going on in it, everything was slipping about inside, and, as David paused to see what was happening, a couple of marbles rolled out. But, instead of stopping on the carpet, they continued rolling faster and faster, and he heard them hopping downstairs in the direction of the garden door.

'I don't want to play games just yet,' he said to himself, 'when there is so much to explore, but I must see what they are doing.'

He opened the door a little wider, and heard an encouraging voice, which he knew must be Noah's, come from inside.

'That's right,' it said; 'now we can see what we're doing. Is my ulster buttoned properly this

time, missus? Last night, when you buttoned it for me, you did it wrong, you did, and I caught cold in my ankle, I did. It's been sneezing all day, it has.'

'I never saw such trouble as you men are,' said Mrs. Noah. 'Get up, you silly, and don't sit on Shem's hat. I've been looking for it everywhere.'

David stooped down and looked in. He had a sort of idea that he was invisible, and wouldn't disturb anybody. There was the ark, with all its windows open, and the family were dressing. It consisted of two compartments, in the second of which lived the animals, one on the top of each other right up to the roof. There was no door in it, but the roof lifted off. At present it was tightly closed and latched, and confused noises of lions roaring and elephants trumpeting and cows mooing, dogs barking, and birds singing came from inside. Sometimes there was ordinary talk too, for the animals had all learned English from David as well as knowing their own animal tongue, and the Indian elephant spoke Hindustanee in addition. He was slim and light blue, and was known as the 'Elegant Elephant,' in contrast to a stout black one who never spoke at all. All this David thought that he and Nannie had made up, but now he knew that it was perfectly true. And he stood waiting to see what would happen next.

The hubbub increased.

'If that great lamb would get off my chest,' said the elegant elephant, 'I should be able to get up. Why don't they come and open the roof?'

'Not time yet,' said the cow. 'The family are still dressing. But it's a tight fit to-night. I'm glad the pin-partridge isn't here scratching us all.'

'Where's it gone?' said the elephant.

'David took it to bed; more fool he,' said the cow.

'He couldn't be much more of a fool than he is,' grunted the pig. 'He knows nothing about us really.'

At this moment David heard an irregular kind of hopping noise coming down the passage, and, just as he turned to look, the pin-partridge ran between his legs. It flew on to the roof of the ark, and began pecking at it.

'Let me in,' it shouted. 'I believe it's the first of September. What cads you fellows are not to let me in!'

'You always think it's the first of September,' said the cow. 'Now look at me; I'm milked every day, which must hurt me much more than being shot once.'

'Not if it's properly done,' said the partridge. 'I know lots of cows who like it.'

'But it's improperly done,' said the cow. 'David knows less about milking than anybody since the flood. You wait till I catch him alone, and see if I can't teach him something about tossing.'

This sounded a very awful threat, and David, who knew that it was best to take cows as well as bulls by the horns, determined on a bold policy.

'If I hear one word more about tossing, I shan't let any of you out,' he said.

There was dead silence.

'Who's that?' said the cow in a trembling voice, for she was a coward as well as a cow.

'It's me!' said David.

There was a confused whispering within.

'We can't stop here all night.'

'Say you won't toss him.'

'You can't anyhow, because your horns are both broken.'

'Less noise in there,' said Noah suddenly, from the next compartment.

The cow began whimpering.

'I'm a poor old woman,' she said, 'and everybody's very hard on me, considering the milk and butter I've given you.'

'Chalk and water and margarine,' said the pin-partridge, who had been listening with his ear to the roof. 'Do say you won't toss him. I can't see him, but he's somewhere close to me.'

'Very well. I won't toss him. Open the roof, boy.'

David was not sure that Noah would like this, as he was the ark-master, but he felt that his having said that he would keep the roof shut unless the cow promised, meant that he would open it if she did, and so he lifted the roof about an inch.

At that moment Noah's head appeared. He was standing on Shem's head, who was standing on Ham's head, who was standing on Japheth's head, who was standing on his mother's head. They always came out of their room in this way, partly in order to get plenty of practice in case of fire, and partly because they couldn't be certain that the flood had gone down, and were afraid that if they opened the door, which is the usual way of leaving a room, the water might come in. When Noah had climbed on to the top of the wall, he pulled Shem after him, who pulled Ham, who pulled Japheth, who pulled Mrs. Noah, and there they all stood like a row of sparrows on a telegraph wire, balancing themselves with great, difficulty.

'Who's been meddling with my roof?' asked Noah, in an angry voice. 'I believe it's that pin-partridge.'

The pin-partridge trembled so violently at this that he fell off the roof altogether, quite forgetting that he could fly. But the moment he touched the ground, he became a full-sized partridge.

'No, I didn't,' he said. 'There's that boy somewhere about, but I can't see him. He got through the blue door to-night.'

David now knew that he was invisible, but though it had always seemed to him that it must be the most delicious thing in the world to be able to be visible or invisible whenever you chose, he found that it was not quite so jolly to have become invisible without choosing, and not to have the slightest idea how to become visible again. It gave him an empty kind of feeling like when he was hungry long before the proper time.

'The cats saw me,' he said, joining in, for he knew if he couldn't be seen, he could be heard.

'Of course they did,' said Noah, 'because they can see in the dark when everything is invisible.

That's why they saw you. You needn't think that you're the only thing that is invisible. I suppose you think it's grand to be invisible.'

'When I was a little boy,' said Ham, 'I was told that little boys should be seen and not heard. This one is heard and not seen. I call that a very poor imitation of a boy. I dare say he isn't a real one.'

'I've been quite ordinary up to now,' said David. 'It seems to have come on all of a sudden. And I don't think it's at all grand to be invisible. I would be visible this minute if I knew how.'

'I want to get down,' said Mrs. Noah, swaying backwards and forwards because her stand was broken.

'You'll get down whether you want to or not, ma,' said Shem irritably, 'if you go swaying about like that. Don't catch hold of me now. I've got quite enough to do with keeping my balance myself.'

'Why don't you get down?' asked David, who wanted to see what would happen next.

'I haven't seen the crow fly yet,' said Noah. 'We can't get down till the crow has flown.'

'What did the crow do?' asked David.

'It didn't. That's why we're still here,' said Japheth.

'Some people,' said Noah, 'want everything explained to them. When the cock crows it shows it's morning, and when the crow flies it shows it's night. We can't get down until.'

'But what would happen if you did get down?' said David.

'Nobody knows,' said Noah. 'I knew once, and tied a knot in my handkerchief about it, so that I could remember, but the handkerchief went to the wash, and they took out the knot. So I forgot.'

'If you tied another knot in another handkerchief, wouldn't you remember again?' asked David.

'No. That would not be the same knot. I should remember something quite different, which I might not like at all. That would never do.'

'One, two, three,' said Mrs. Noah, beating time, and they all began to sing:

'Never do, never do,
Never, never, never do.'

Most of the animals in the ark joined in, and they sang it to a quantity of different tunes. David found himself singing too, but the only tune he could remember was 'Rule Britannia,' which didn't fit the words very well. By degrees the others stopped singing, and David was left quite alone to finish his verse feeling rather shy, but knowing that he had to finish it whatever happened. When he had done, Noah heaved a deep sigh.

'That is the loveliest thing I ever heard in my life,' he said. 'Are you open to an engagement to sing in the ark every evening? Matinées of course, as well, for which you would have to pay extra.'

This was a very gratifying proposal, but David did not quite understand about the paying.

'I should have to pay?' he asked.

'Why, of course. You'd have to pay a great deal for a voice like that. You mustn't dream of singing like that for nothing. It would fill the ark.'

'I should say it would empty it,' said Mrs. Noah snappishly.

'I don't know if I'm rich enough,' said David, not taking any notice of this rude woman.

'Go away at once then,' said Mrs. Noah. 'I never give to beggars.'

Just then there was a tremendous rattle from the ark, as if somebody was shaking it.

'It's the crow,' shouted Ham. 'The crow's just going to fly. Get out of the way, boy.'

The crow forced its way through the other animals, balanced itself for a moment on the edge of the ark, and flew off down the passage, squawking. The moment it left the ark it became ordinary crow-size again, and at the same moment David suddenly saw his one hand still holding up the lid of the ark, and knew that he had become visible. That was a great relief, but he had no time to think about it now, for so many interesting things began happening all at once. The Noah family jumped from the edge of the ark, and the moment their stands touched the ground, they shot up into full-sized human beings, with hats and ulsters on, and large flat faces with two dots for eyes, one dot for a nose, and a line for a mouth. They glided swiftly about on their stands, like people skating, and seemed to be rather bad at guiding themselves, for they kept running into each other with loud wooden crashes, and into the animals that were pouring out of the ark in such numbers that it really was difficult to avoid everybody. Occasionally they were knocked down, and then lay on their backs with their eyes winking very quickly, and their mouths opening and shutting, like fish out of water, till somebody picked them up.

The game-cupboard comes to life

David got behind the cupboard door to be out of the way of the animals and all the other things that came trooping from the shelves. Luckily the nursery passage seemed to have grown much bigger, or it could never have held everybody, for the animals also shot up to their full size as soon as they left the ark. But they kept their colours and their varnish and though David had been several times to the Zoological Gardens, there was nothing there half so remarkable as the pale blue elephant or the spotted pigs, to take only a few examples. Every animal here was so much brighter in colour, and of course their conversation made them more interesting. On they trooped with the Noahs whirling in and out, towards the steps to the garden door, and when they were finished with, the ‘Happy Families,’ all life-size, too, followed them. There were Mrs. Dose, the doctor’s wife, with her bottle, and Miss Bones, the butcher’s daughter, gnawing her bone in a very greedy manner, and Master Chip, the carpenter’s son, with his head supported in the pincers. He had no body, you will remember, and walked in a twisty manner, very upright and soldier-like, on the handles of them. The lead soldiers followed them with the band playing, and the cannons shooting peas in all directions, only the peas were as big as cannon-balls, and shot down whole regiments of their own men, and many of the hindmost of the happy families. But nobody seemed to mind, but picked themselves up again at once. Often the whole band was lying on their backs together, but they never ceased playing for a moment. The battledores and shuttlecocks came next, the shuttlecocks hitting the battledores in front of them, which flew down the passage high over the heads of the soldiers, and waited there, standing on their handles till the shuttlecocks came up and hit them again. After this came David’s clockwork train, which charged into everything that was in its way, and cut a lane for itself through soldiers, happy families, and animals alike. It had a cow-catcher in front of the engine, which occasionally picked people up, instead of running over them, and when David saw it last, before it plunged down the stairs, it had Mr. Soot, the chimney-sweep, and the Duke of Wellington, and the llama all lying on it, jumbled up together, and kicking furiously.

While he was watching this extraordinary scene, the cupboard doors banged to again, and he saw that there was a large label on one of them:—

NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT BY PRESENTING
YOUR CALLING-CARD AND VERY LITTLE THEN.

And on the other was this:

NO BOTTLES OR FOLLOWERS OR ANYTHING ELSE.
RING ALSO.

David studied this for a minute or two. He did not want to go in, but he wanted to know how. He hadn’t got a calling-card—at least he never had before he came through the blue door, but so many odd things had happened since, that he was not in the least surprised when he put his hand in his pocket to find it quite full of calling-cards, on which was printed his name, only it was upside down. So he naturally turned the card upside down to get the name un-upside-down, but, however he turned it, his name was still upside down. If he looked at it very closely as he turned it, he could see the letters spin round like wheels, and it always remained like this:

DAVID BLAIZE.

The other trouser-pocket was also quite full of something, and he drew out of it hundreds of other calling-cards. On one was printed ‘The Elegant Elephant, R.S.V.P.,’ on another ‘Master Ham, P.P.C.,’ on another ‘The Duke of Wellington, W.P.,’ on another ‘The Engine Driver, R.A.M.C.,’ on another ‘Miss Battledore, W.A.A.C.’ Everybody had been calling on him.

‘Whatever am I to do?’ thought David. ‘Shall I have to return all these calls? It will take me all my time, and I shall see nothing. Besides’—and he looked round and saw that the passage was completely empty, and had shrunk to its usual size again—‘Besides, I don’t know where they’ve all gone.’

He looked at the cupboard doors again, and found that they had changed while he had been looking at the cards. They were now exactly like the big front door at home, which opened in the middle, and had a hinge at each side. In front of it was a doormat, in the bristles of which was written

GO AWAY.

Now David was the sort of boy who often wanted to do something, chiefly because he was told not to, in order to see what happened, and this doormat made him quite determined to go in. It was no use trying the left-hand side of the door, partly because neither bottles nor followers nor anything was admitted, and partly because you had to ring also, and there wasn't any bell. But there seemed just a chance of getting in by the right-hand part of the door, and he went up to it and knocked. To his great surprise he heard a bell ring inside as soon as he had knocked, which seemed to explain 'ring also.' The bell did not sound like an electric bell, but was like the servants' dinner bell. As soon as it had stopped, he heard a voice inside the door say very angrily:

'Give me my tuffet at once.'

There was a pause, and David heard the noise of some furniture being moved, and the door flew open.

'What's your name?' said the butler. 'And have you got a calling-card?'

David gave him one of his cards, and he looked at it and turned it upside down.

'It's one of them dratted upside-downers,' he said, 'and it sends the blood to the head something awful.'

He gave a heavy sigh, and bent down and stood on his head.

'Now I can read it,' he said. 'Are you David or Blaize? If David, where's Blaize, and if Blaize, where's David?'

'I'm both,' said David.

'You can't be both of them,' said the butler. 'And I expect you're neither of them. And why didn't you go away?'

'You've given me too much curds,' said a voice behind the door. 'I've told you before to find some way to weigh the whey. It's a curd before. Take it away!'

'That must be Miss Muffet,' thought David. 'There's a girl creeping into it after all. I wonder if she makes puns all the time. I wish I hadn't knocked.'

'No, I'm rationed about puns,' said Miss Muffet, as if he had spoken aloud, 'and I've had my week's allowance now. But a margin's allowed for margarine. Butter—margarine,' she said in explanation.

'I saw that, said David.

'No, you didn't: you heard it. Now, come in and shut the door, because the tuffet's blowing about. And the moment you've shut the door, shut your eyes too, because I'm not quite ready. I'll sing to you my last ballad while you're waiting. I shall make it up as I go along.'

Accordingly David shut the door, and then his eyes, and Miss Muffet began to sing in a thin cracked voice:

'As it fell out upon a day
When margarine was cheap,
It filled up all the grocers' shops
In buckets wide and deep.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
Matilda bought a heap.

And it fell out upon a day
When margarine was dear,
Matilda bought a little more
And made it into beer.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
It tasted rather queer.

As it fell out upon a day
There wasn't any more;
Matilda took her bottled beer
And poured it on the floor.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
And that was all I saw.'

'Poor thing!' said Miss Muffet. 'Such a brief and mysterious career. Now you may open your eyes.'

David did so, and found himself in a large room, with all the furniture covered up as if the family was away. The butler was still standing on his head, squinting horribly at David's card, and muttering to himself, 'He can't be both, and he may be neither. He may be either, but he can't be both.' In the middle of the room was a big round seat, covered with ribands which were still blowing about in the wind, and on it was seated a little old lady with horn spectacles, eating curds and whey out of a bowl that she held on her knees.

'Come and sit on the tuffet at once,' she said, 'and then we'll pretend that there isn't room for the spider. Won't that be a good joke? I like a bit of chaff with my spider. I expect the tuffet will bear, won't it? But I can't promise you any curds.'

'Thank you very much,' said David politely, 'but I don't like curds.'

'No more do I,' said Miss Muffet. 'I knew we should agree.'

'Then why do you eat them?' asked David.

'For fear the spider should get them. Don't you adore my tuffet? It's the only indoor tuffet in the

world. All others are out-door tuffets. But they gave me this one because most spiders are out-of-door spiders. By the way, we haven't been introduced yet. Where's that silly butler?'

'Here,' said the butler. He was lying down on the floor now, and staring at the ceiling.

'Introduce us,' said Miss Muffet. 'Say Miss Muffet, David Blaize—David Blaize, Miss Muffet. Then whichever way about it happens, you're as comfortable as it is possible to be under the circumstances, or even above them, where it would naturally be colder.'

'I don't quite see,' said David.

'Poor Mr. Blaize. Put a little curds and whey in your eyes. That's the way. Dear me, there's another pun.'

David calls on Miss Muffet

'You made it before,' said David.

'I know. It counts double this time. But as I was saying, a little curds and whey—oh! it's tipped up again. What restless things curds are!'

She had not been looking at her bowl, and for several minutes now a perfect stream of curds and whey had been pouring from it over her knees and along the floor, to where the butler lay. He was still repeating, 'Miss Muffet, David Blaize—David Blaize, Miss Muffet.' Sometimes, by way of variety, he said, 'Miss Blaize—David Muffet,' but as nobody attended, it made no difference what he said.

'It always happens when I get talking,' she said. 'And now we know each other, I may be permitted to express a hope that you didn't expect to find me a little girl?'

'No, I like you best as you are,' said David quickly.

'It isn't for want of being asked that I've remained Miss Muffet,' said she. 'And it isn't from want of being answered. But give me a little pleasant conversation now and then, and one good frightening away every night, and I'm sure I'll have no quarrel with anybody; and I hope nobody hasn't got none with me. How interesting it must be for you to meet me, when you've read about me so often. It's not nearly so interesting for me, of course, because you're not a public character.'

'Does the spider come every night, or every day, whatever it is down here?' asked David.

'Yes, sooner or later,' said Miss Muffet cheerfully, 'but the sooner he comes, the sooner I get back again, and the later he comes the longer I have before he comes. So there we are.'

She stopped suddenly, and looked at the ceiling.

'Do my eyes deceive me?' she whispered, 'or is that the s——? No; my eyes deceive me, and I thought they would scorn the action, the naughty things. Perhaps you would like to peep at my furniture underneath the sheets. It will pass the time for you, but be ready to run back to the tuffet, when you hear the spider coming. Really, it's very tiresome of him to be so late.'

David thought he had never seen such an odd lot of furniture. Covered up in one sheet was a stuffed horse, in another a beehive, in another a mowing-machine. They were all priced in plain figures, and the prices seemed to him equally extraordinary, for while the horse was labelled 'Two shillings a dozen,' and the mowing-machine 'Half a crown a pair,' the beehive cost ninety-four pounds empty, and eleven and sixpence full. David supposed the reason for this was that if the beehive was full, there would be bees buzzing about everywhere, which would be a disadvantage.

'When I give a party,' said Miss Muffet, 'as I shall do pretty soon if the spider doesn't come, and take all the coverings off my furniture, the effect is quite stupendous. Dazzling in fact, my dear. You must remember to put on your smoked spectacles.'

David was peering into the sheet that covered the biggest piece of furniture of all. He could only make out that it was like an enormous box on wheels, and cost ninepence. Then the door in it swung open, and he saw that it was a bathing-machine. On the floor of it was sitting an enormous spider.

'Does she expect me?' said the spider hoarsely. 'I'm not feeling very well.'

David remembered that he had to run back to the tuffet, but it seemed impolite not to ask the spider what was the matter with it. It had a smooth kind face, and was rather bald.

'My web caught cold,' said the spider. 'But I'll come if she expects me.'

David ran back to the tuffet.

'He's not very well,' he said, 'but he'll come if you expect him.'

'The kind good thing!' said Miss Muffet. 'Now I must begin to get frightened. Will you help me? Say "Bo!" and make faces with me in the looking-glass, and tell me a ghost story. Bring me the looking-glass, silly,' she shouted to the butler.

He took one down from over the chimney-piece, and held it in front of them, while David and Miss Muffet made the most awful faces into it.

'That's a beauty,' said Miss Muffet, as David squinted, screwed up his nose, and put his tongue out. 'Thank you for that one, my dear. It gave me quite a start. You are really remarkably ugly. Will you feel my pulse, and see how I am getting on. Make another face: I'm used to that one. Oh, I got a beauty then: it terrified me. And begin your ghost story quickly.'

David had no idea where anybody's pulse was, so he began his ghost story.

'Once upon a time,' he said, 'there was a ghost that lived in the hot-water tap.'

'Gracious, how dreadful!' said Miss Muffet. 'What was it the ghost of?'

'It wasn't the ghost of anything,' said David. 'It was just a ghost.'

'But it must have been "of" something,' said Miss Muffet. 'The King is the King of England, and I'm Miss Muffet of nothing at all. But you must have an "of." '

'This one hadn't,' said David firmly. 'It was just a ghost. It groaned when you turned the hot water on, and it squealed when you turned it off.'

'This will never do,' said Miss Muffet. 'I'm getting quite calm again, like a kettle going off the boil. Make another face. Oh, now it's too late!'

There came a tremendous cantering sound behind them, and Miss Muffet opened her mouth and screamed so loud that her horn spectacles broke into fragments.

'Here he comes!' she said. 'O-oh, how frightened I am!'

The spider chases Miss Muffet

She gave one more wild shriek as the spider leaped on to the tuffet, and began running about the room with the most amazing speed, the spider cantering after her. They upset the bathing-machine, and knocked the stuffed horse down, they dodged behind the butler, and sent the beehive spinning, and splashed through the curds and whey, which formed a puddle on the floor. Then the door through which David had entered flew open, and out darted Miss Muffet with the spider in hot pursuit. Her screaming, which never stopped for a moment, grew fainter and fainter.

The butler gave an enormous yawn.

'Cleaning up time,' he said, and took a mop from behind the door, and dipped it into the pool of curds and whey. When it was quite soaked, he twisted it rapidly round and round, and a shower of curds and whey deluged David. As it fell on him, it seemed to turn to snow. It was snowing heavily from the roof too, and snow was blowing in through the door. Then he saw that it wasn't a door at all, but the opening of a street, and that the walls were the walls of houses. It was difficult to see distinctly through the snowstorm, but he felt as if he knew where he was.

CHAPTER III

The snow cleared as swiftly as it had begun, and David saw that he was standing in the High Street of the village near which he lived. It was all quite ordinary, and he was afraid that he had somehow been popped back through the blue door during the snowstorm, and was again in the stupid dull world. Just opposite him was the post and telegraph office, and next to that the bank, and beyond that the girls' school. There were the same old shops too, Mr. Winfall the tailor's, and the confectioner's and the bootmaker's, and at the bottom of the street was the bridge over the river.

'Well, if I am back in the world again,' said David, 'it would be a pity to let all this good snow go to waste without its being tobogganed on. I'll go home, I think, and get my toboggan. I wonder how they did it.'

He started to go down the street to the bridge across which was the lane which presently passed by the bottom of the field beyond the lake, on the other side of which was the garden, where was the summer-house in which he had left his toboggan yesterday. But he happened to look a little more closely at the bootmaker's shop, and instead of the card in the window which said, 'Boots and shoes neatly repaired,' there was another one on which was written 'Uncles and Aunts recovered

and repaired.’

‘I suppose they recover them when they’re lost, and repair them when they’re found,’ thought David. ‘But it’s not a bit usual.’

He found it no more usual when he looked at the girls’ school, for instead of the brass plate on which was written ‘Miss Milligan’s school for Young Ladies,’ he saw written there ‘Happy Families’ Institute,’ and in the window of the bank a notice ‘Sovereigns are cheap to-day.’

‘I’ll go in there at once,’ thought David, ‘and buy some. I wonder how much money I’ve got.’

He found four pennies in his pocket, and went in with them to the bank. The manager was there talking in a low voice to a very stout gentleman with a meat-chopper in his hand, whom David knew to be the Mint-man from London, just as certainly as if he had had it written all over him. What made it absolutely sure was the fact that sovereigns kept oozing out of his clothes and dropping on the floor. There was quite a pile of them round his feet, which the porter who opened the door to David kept sweeping up, and putting down his neck again.

‘So it’s only the same sovereigns all over again,’ thought David, ‘but there must be a lot of them. No wonder they’re cheap.’

He walked up to where they were standing.

‘Please, can you let me have four penny-worth of sovereigns,’ he said.

The Mint-man blew his nose before he answered, and some thirty or forty sovereigns rattled out of his handkerchief. ‘Do you want them new-laid or only for cooking?’ he asked.

David finds the Mint-man in the bank

David had no intention of cooking them, so he said:

‘New-laid, please.’

The Mint-man picked off one that was coming out of his right elbow, another from his tie, another from his bottom waistcoat button, and the fourth from his knee, and gave them to David.

‘It’ll never do if other people get to know about it,’ he said. ‘We shall be having all the happy families in, though I don’t suppose they’ve got much money. Have another notice put up at once.’

The manager took an enormous quill pen from behind the counter. It reached right up to the ceiling of the room, and he had to hold it in both hands. Up the side of it was printed, ‘Rod, pole or perch.’

‘What shall I say?’ he asked.

‘You may say whatever you like,’ said the Mint-man, ‘but you must write whatever I like. Now begin’—

‘Sovereigns are five pounds two ounces each to-day, but they’ll be dearer to-morrow.’

‘Then will you please give me five pounds for each of my sovereigns?’ asked the greedy David. ‘Never mind about the ounces.’

The Mint-man and manager whispered together for a little while, and David could hear fragments of their talk like ‘financial stringency,’ ‘tight tendency,’ ‘collapse of credit,’ which meant nothing to him. All the time the porter was shovelling sovereigns down the back of the Mint-man’s neck.

‘The only thing to be done,’ he said, ‘is to write another notice. Write “The Bank has suspended payment altogether. The deposits are therefore forfeited by square root, rule of three, and compound interest.” What do you make of that?’ he asked David triumphantly.

David knew that compound interest and square root came a long way on in the arithmetic book, and that he couldn’t be properly expected to make anything of it. Evidently they were not going to pay him five sovereigns for each of his, but he had done pretty well already, with his four sovereigns instead of four pence.

‘I don’t make anything of it yet,’ he said, ‘because I haven’t got as far.’

‘When I was your age,’ said the manager severely, ‘I’d got so far past it that it was quite out of sight.’

The Mint-man nudged him, and said behind his hand:

‘Never irritate the young. Keep them pleased and simmering.’

He turned to David with a smile, and patted him on the head. Two cold sovereigns went down the front of David’s jersey.

‘We have read your references,’ he said, ‘and find them quite satisfactory. You are therefore appointed honorary errand-boy, and your duties begin immediately. So go straight across to the shop where they repair uncles and aunts, and see if there’s a golden uncle being repaired. If there

is, tell him that his nephew—that's you—wants him to come out to tea—that's here—and that the motor will be round immediately—and that's where.'

David felt that he didn't want to be errand-boy to the bank at all, but somehow he seemed to remember having sent in references. What was even more convincing was that he found his sailor clothes had disappeared, and that he was dressed in a jacket that came close up to his neck, and was covered with brass buttons. He had black trousers, rather tight, and a peaked cap, round the rim of which was written: 'David Blaize, Esquire. To be returned to the bank immediately. This side up.'

But after he had received his appointment as honorary errand-boy, nobody attended to David any more, for they were all most busily engaged. The manager wheeled in a tea-table, and began arranging tea-things and muffin-dishes on it, then when he had done that, brought in easy chairs, and a piano and all the things that you usually find in drawing-rooms, while the Mint-man made up a huge fire in the fire-place, and put a large saucepan as big as a bath upon it, into which he dropped the sovereigns that oozed out of him. Meantime, the porter had gone out carrying a ladder and a pot of paint, and when David went out too on his errand, he had already painted over the signboard outside the house, which said it was the bank, and had written on it:

'This is the house of David Blaize, the nephew of Uncle Popacatapetl.'

'So that's the uncle who's coming to tea with me,' thought David. 'I wonder if he knows who he is yet.'

The snow had already melted, so that he did not again consider whether he should go tobogganing. It had gone very quickly, but everything seemed to happen quickly here. It could hardly have been five minutes since he had gone into the bank with fourpence in his pocket, and here he was with four sovereigns instead, a complete suit of new clothes, an uncle, and a position as honorary errand-boy. He crossed the street, and entered the shop where boots and shoes used to be repaired, but where now they repaired uncles and aunts.

The recovering of Uncle Popacatapetl

On the counter there lay a very odd-looking old gentleman, dressed in rags and tatters in about equal proportions. His hands and face were quite yellow, and wherever there was a tatter, or there wasn't a rag, and he showed through, he was yellow there too. His boots were in very bad repair, and a great golden toe stuck out of one, and a golden heel out of the other: in fact, there could be no doubt at all that he was made of pure gold, and as he was being repaired, he was also either an aunt or an uncle. But though one of David's aunts had a slight moustache, he had never yet seen an aunt with a long beard and whiskers, and so without doubt there was Uncle Popacatapetl.

The bootmaker and his wife were repairing him, which they did by driving nails into him, so as to tack down the rags over the tatters. If there was a very big tatter, which they could not cover with the rag, they nailed on anything else that was handy. In some places they had filled up the gaps with pieces of newspaper, match-boxes, and bits of leather and sealing-wax, and balls of wool, and apples and photographs. While this was going on, Uncle Popacatapetl kept up a stream of conversation, interspersed with laughing.

'Anyhow it can't hurt him much,' said David to himself.

'Delicious, delicious!' said Uncle Popacatapetl. 'Nail the toe of my boot a little more firmly on to the toe of me. Put a paper-knife there if you can't cover up the hole. Now my gloves.'

He put on a pair of thick white woollen gloves that came up to his elbow.

'Would you like them nailed on too, sir?' asked the shoemaker.

'By all means. Put a nail in each finger, and three on the wrist, and ninety-eight round my elbows. Did you gum the gloves inside, before I put them on?'

'I glued them well,' said the shoemaker's wife.

'That'll glue then,' said Uncle Popacatapetl. 'I think when I've put my mask on the disguise will be complete. What fun it all is! To think of the Mint-man having traced me all the way here, only to find I'm not in the least like me any more. Or is it ever more?'

'Never more, ever more, any more,' said the shoemaker, with his mouth full of nails.

'It's every-more, I *think*,' said Uncle Popacatapetl, 'though it doesn't matter. When I'm finished, and when you're finished, they won't think I am anything, still less an uncle. I don't suppose they ever saw anything the least like me, so *why*,' he added argumentatively, 'should they pitch upon uncle?'

They had none of them appeared to notice David at all as yet, and, as he was an errand-boy, he thought he had better proceed with his errand.

'If you please,' he said, 'I think you're my uncle, and I should like to have you come to tea with me. It's quite a short way, in fact it's only across the road, but the motor will be here in a minute, so

that you can get in at one door and out at the other.'

Uncle Popacatapetl sat up so suddenly that David knew he must have a hinge in his back. He looked at David, but he couldn't speak, because the last nail the shoemaker had driven into him had fixed his beard to his chest, which naturally prevented him moving his mouth. But he wrenched off the pair of scissors which had been nailed into his knee, and cut a piece of his beard off, so that he could talk again. He had turned quite pale in the face, which was the only part of him visible, just as if he had been made of silver.

'Say it again,' he said.

David said it again, upon which Uncle Popacatapetl jumped up and looked out of the window.

'It's a plot,' he said. 'That used to be the bank. Now it's David Blaize. Has it been disguising itself too? Because if so, we're as we were, and I've had all the trouble and hammering for nothing.'

He began to cry in a helpless golden sort of manner. The shoemaker had followed him to the window to repair an enormous tatter with very little rag on his shoulder, and was nailing bananas on to it to cover it up. But he was so much affected by Uncle Popacatapetl's misery that he hit his fingers instead of the nail and began to cry too, sucking his injured finger and dropping nails out of his mouth. As for his wife, she gave one loud sob, and tore out of the room, leaving the door open. They heard her falling downstairs, bumpity, bumpity, bumpity, till she came BUMP against the cellar door.

'Bumpity, crumpity, rumpity, numpity, squmpity, zumpity,' said the shoemaker, with a sob between each word. 'There she goes. I don't rightly know if it's her crying that makes her fall down, or her falling down that makes her cry, but it don't make home happy, and it's a great expense in sticking-plaster. The sticking-plaster that's come into this house would be enough to paper it.'

David was determined not to cry whatever happened, for it never did any good to cry, and besides something must be done at once, only he had not the least idea what that something was. It was perfectly clear that the Mint-man wanted to get Uncle Popacatapetl into the bank, and no wonder, since he was worth his weight in gold, with all the bananas and match-boxes thrown in. And he thought with a shudder of the meat-axe and the saucepan heating over the fire. Without the least doubt Uncle Popacatapetl was going to be chopped up and melted down into sovereigns.

'It's all too sad,' sobbed Uncle Popacatapetl, 'and too true and too tiresome. I knew they had tracked me down here—wow—wow—but when I saw that there was this nice respectable shop, where uncles and aunts—wow—wow—wow—could be recovered and repaired, I thought I could have myself recovered and repaired out of all knowledge—wow—wow—wow—wow—and diddle the whole lot of them. Instead of which, they send in my beastly nephew to ask me to tea, and then they'll chop me up, and make sovereigns of me. I've seen their signs and notices. They tried to put me off the scent by saying that sovereigns were cheap, and make me think they didn't want me. And then that was changed, and they said sovereigns were dearer. And then that was changed, and they suspended payment to make me think that they weren't collecting gold any more, never more at all. Oh, I know their cussedness. And just when everything was going so well, and I was going to walk across the street as cool as carrots or cucumbers, and I should have left by the next telegram that was sent from the office. Look at them all flying in! And there's one going out with its mackintosh on, and I could have caught it as easy as a subtraction sum if it hadn't been for this upset. Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow.'

David felt dreadfully sorry for him, but what he said about telegrams was quite as dreadfully interesting, and he looked out.

It was quite true: there was a whole string of telegrams rushing down the wires towards the post-office, each in a neat mackintosh. It had begun to snow again, and was getting dark.

'But why have they got mackintoshes on?' he asked.

'Well, of all the silly nephews that ever I had,' said Uncle Popacatapetl, who had stopped crying as suddenly as if a tap had been turned off, 'this one takes the cake. Why do you wear a mackintosh?'

'To keep me dry,' said David.

'Well, and mayn't telegrams do the same?' asked his uncle. 'They come from America and Australia and Jerusalem, and did you ever see a wet telegram, though it had gone for hundreds and billions and millions and thousands of miles under the sea?'

'No, they all seem dry,' said David.

'And there you are, sitting there,' said the golden uncle, 'and wanting to deprive them of their mackintoshes. Crool, I call it. They puts them on when they starts, and they takes them off when they arrives and cools themselves.'

Uncle Popacatapetl had begun to talk so like David's father's gardener, that again he was afraid he had got back into the stupid world.

'I sees them coming, and I sees them going,' said his uncle, 'and who so free I arsk, as a little ninepenny telegram? They're cheap at the price, they are, going where they please like that——'

He gave a wild shriek, like Miss Muffet when the spider came, and snatched the mask that the shoemaker was holding.

'There's the motor come for me,' he sobbed, 'and what is a poor old man to do? Nail my mask on quickly. Don't mind my eyes or my ears or anythink.'

He lay down in the window-seat, and David and the shoemaker drove nails in all over his face. Sometimes the mask, which was that of a young lady with pink cheeks, tore, and then they tacked on buttons from David's jacket, or bits of the window-curtain.

'Don't mine me,' Uncle Popacatapetl kept whimpering. 'There goes one eye, and there goes the other, but make it safe whatever you do. Cut off my head, if that would make me look more like a young lady—but I won't, I won't, I won't look like anybody's uncle. They may take me for an aunt if they like, or a nephew, or a niece, but I won't be a golden uncle.'

The mask was nailed on at last, and Uncle Popacatapetl sat up.

'Now go outside, David,' he said, 'and find out exactly what sort of motor-car it is.'

David very obediently went out into the street. It looked quite different now, for there were flags flying from every house with the inscription, ‘David Blaize, the fireman’s son,’ which was very gratifying, and showed a pleasant interest in him on the part of the happy families. He felt that he had seen a card of himself as the fireman’s son, but he could not remember his mother as Mrs. Blaize, the fireman’s wife, or his father as Mr. Blaize, the fireman.

But that was not the immediate business in hand. As the whole street was decked out in honour of himself, he naturally bowed right and left, but since nobody was there, it did not matter much whether he bowed or not. Still it was better to be polite. Then he looked in front of him. There stood an immense motor-car, that buzzed in a most sumptuous manner. It was pointing down the street towards the bridge over the river, but it did not much matter which way it pointed, because the bank was immediately opposite. There were two cords attached to the roof of it, and attached to the cords were a couple of aeroplanes, which were pointing in the opposite direction. On the pavement were standing the chauffeur and two pilots of the flying-corps. They all saluted smartly as David came out.

‘Three cheers for David Blaize,’ said one of them. ‘Hip, hip, hip—I’m blowed if I know how it goes on.’

‘You must all say “Hurrah,” ’ said David.

They all said ‘Hurrah,’ in a very depressed sort of voice, and one of the airmen said, ‘Lor’, these civilians.’

‘Lor’, yourself,’ said David, rather rudely. ‘I want to hear about the motor-car.’

The chauffeur stroked the side of the bonnet which contained the engines.

‘She’s a good thing,’ he said. ‘She’s a good going concern. But throttle her up never so, she won’t go less than a hundred miles an hour. So I made so free, your honour, since that was above speed-limit, to harness these two silly aeroplanes which between ’em go ninety miles an hour in the other direction. That brings she down to ten miles an hour, and no one can say a word against her.’

And then the two airmen threw their caps in the air, and shouted ‘Hurrah.’

This was all very clever on the part of the chauffeur, but as the bank was just opposite, and all that the motor-car had got to do was to stand quite still while Uncle Popacatapetl stepped in at one side and got out at the other, it seemed a little superfluous. But David appreciated kind intentions, and next minute he found himself hand-in-hand with the chauffeur and the airmen, and they were all dancing in a circle, singing

> ‘Ninety miles one ways, and a hundred miles the others,
> And some of us are nephews, and all of us are brothers.’

‘Then are you ready to start, your honour?’ said the chauffeur, when they had finished dancing.

David pulled himself together.

‘Yes, but I am taking an invalid with me,’ he said. ‘It’s my uncle, who is far from well, like the spider!’

‘The one that sat down next that old woman?’ asked the chauffeur, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. ‘He’s all right again, he is.’

‘It’s that sort of illness,’ said David. ‘He’s coming to tea with me, but he had better have a little drive first, to give him an appetite. We’ll go along some road with plenty of telegraph wires. They make him feel better.’

The window of the shoemaker’s house was thrown open, and David’s uncle looked out in his mask.

‘Much better,’ he said. ‘Better much, much better,’ and he closed it again so violently that all the glass broke.

‘Crash!’ said the second of the airmen. He had a very long elastic sort of nose, which David had not noticed before. Then both of them and the chauffeur opened their mouths very wide, as if they were going to sing again.

‘There must be no more singing,’ said David sternly, and they all shut their mouths again with a snap.

There was evidently no time to lose, for David could hear the roaring of the fire in the bank opposite, over which poor Uncle Popacatapetl was to be melted after he had been cut up, and against the red glow of it he could see the heads of the Mint-man and the manager pressed so tightly against the glass that the tips of their noses were quite white, as they looked out and wondered why the motor-car didn’t return.

‘Come on, uncle,’ he shouted, ‘the tea will be spoiled,’ and he gave him a great wink to show that he had got an idea in his head.

So the chauffeur got into his place, and Uncle Popacatapetl came out covered with apples and match-boxes and things like a Christmas-tree, and at the very last moment David undid the buttons of the cords to the aeroplanes, and away they flew, leaving the airmen gazing up at them. Then he shut the door, and he and Uncle Popacatapetl drove off at a hundred miles an hour down the street to the bridge.

‘Turn to the left when you get over the bridge,’ shouted David, ‘and drive over the fields till you come to our lake. You’ll have to jump that, but after that there’s only the garden.’

‘She ain’t been jumping much lately,’ said the chauffeur.

‘It can’t be helped,’ shouted David. ‘Then go to the garden door. I’ll hide you in the game-cupboard,’ he explained to his uncle. ‘There’s lots of room there now all the games have gone.’

Suddenly there came an awful crash. They had run into the railing of the bridge, and the whole motor-car flew into several million small pieces, and there were David and his uncle standing in the middle of the road.

Uncle Popacatapetl began whimpering again.

‘I’m a poor old man,’ he said, ‘and I don’t know whether I’m standing on my head or my heels.’

David looked at him attentively.

‘I think you’re standing on your heels,’ he said, ‘but it’s so dark I can’t tell you for certain. Wait till I light a match.’

There came a noise of running behind them, and, before David could be sure whether his uncle was on his head or his heels, he saw the porter and the Mint-man and the bank manager rushing down the street towards them.

At that very moment the telegraph wires began to sing, as they always do when a telegram is coming along them, and looking up he saw a very long one with its mackintosh on sliding down the wires. It was so long that it came within six or seven feet of the ground.

‘Quick, jump and catch hold of it,’ said David, ‘and then you’ll be safe.’

Twice Uncle Popacatapetl tried to jump, but he couldn’t jump far because he was so heavy, and the Mint-man with the meat-chopper in his hand was close upon them. But the kind good telegram, which was reply-paid, reached down a hand, and pulled him up at the very moment the Mint-man and the manager were grabbing at him. They just missed him, and the Mint-man being unable to stop himself flew over the railing of the bridge, followed by the manager and the porter, and they all fell into the river with three splashes, each louder than all the rest put together.

The telegram rescues Uncle P. from the Mint-man

By this time the telegram and Uncle Popacatapetl were far away out of sight, and as the chauffeur had vanished too, there was little use in David’s remaining on the bridge all alone. He tried, as long as his match burned, to put together some pieces of the motor-car, but when that went out, it was like doing the most awful jig-saw puzzle in the dark.

So he walked back up the street, for there was a bright light coming out of the door of the bank, which looked cheerful, and besides he remembered that he had been sent to ask his Uncle Popacatapetl to tea, so that probably there would be tea ready.

‘It must be time for tea,’ he thought, ‘because it has been dark quite a long time, and I haven’t had it yet. Tea always comes soon after dark even on the shortest days.’

By the bank door were standing the two airmen, whose machines he had unbuttoned. They had got their caps on the side of their heads all right, but they didn’t look quite like ordinary airmen. The nose of one had grown enormously since David saw him last, and he waved it about, turning up the end of it in a manner that reminded David not of an airman at all, but of some quite different sort of creature. The other had a large kind face, and kept moving his mouth round and round, and out of his hair there distinctly stuck two horns, both broken.

As soon as they saw David they ran inside the bank, and shut the door in his face, leaving him out in the dark and the cold.

CHAPTER IV

David felt rather hurt at this, for having intended to ask them to tea, it was vexing to find that they didn’t intend to ask him. But before he could feel much hurt the window on the third floor was thrown open, and a giraffe looked out. It bent down to David, and whispered in his ear:

‘They’ll let you in soon. It’s a surprise.’

‘Is it a nice one?’ asked David.

‘That depends on whether you like it. But I’ll stay and talk to you till they’re ready. You begin.’

David didn’t know what sort of conversation giraffes liked, but he supposed that, like everybody else, they enjoyed talking about themselves.

‘How did you get up to the third floor?’ he asked. ‘I should have thought you were too tall to be able to go upstairs.’

‘I was,’ whispered the giraffe.

‘Then how did you get there?’ said David.

‘I didn’t. I’m on the ground floor all the time, and I can feel them running about among my legs. Only my head went upstairs in order to brush its hair. That’s another surprise; you never thought of that! But I didn’t see you jump when I told you. Shall I jump you?’

‘No. I think I’ll stop where I am,’ said David.

‘Very well. I’ll tell you another thing too. Some animals are so short that they have to go down to the cellar to tie their bootlaces. I should think you were one of that sort, aren’t you?’

‘Indeed I’m not,’ said David indignantly. ‘I’m tall enough to tie my bootlaces anywhere.’

The giraffe’s head gave a great jerk.

‘I jumped at that, you see,’ it said. ‘That was a real jumping surprise. I should never have guessed it.’

David looked up at the mild silly head above him. Certainly it looked surprised, but all giraffes did that.

‘I live on surprises,’ said the giraffe. ‘If I can’t get a proper supply of them my eyebrows come down.’

All the time it spoke it whispered into David’s ear, and tickled it.

‘Could you speak a little louder and a little farther off?’ he asked.

‘No, not possibly,’ said the giraffe. ‘My throat is so long, you see, that if I speak in the ordinary voice, it gets quite lost before it comes out of my mouth.’

David guessed this was another surprise, and remembered to jump.

‘That’s a good boy,’ said the giraffe approvingly. ‘Now I’ll tell you something else. I’ll dance with you when they’re ready.’

‘Oh, is it going to be a dance?’ asked David, who didn’t care about dancing.

‘Some of it is going to be a dance, and then the happy families give a concert, and then I should think there would be a battle. One never can tell for certain, but, with so many soldiers about, something of the sort is bound to happen. But the dance comes first, and I’ll be your partner.’

‘Oh, are you a lady?’ asked David.

‘I should think so. You never saw a gentleman like me, I’ll be bound.’

‘Yes, but then I never saw a lady like you either,’ said David.

‘Well, you see one now. I hope you can reverse well, otherwise we shall get terribly tangled up with the staircase. I feel like a corkscrew already.’

The door was suddenly thrown open, and David entered. The room seemed to have grown a good deal, and certainly when he talked to the Mint-man and the manager not long before, it hadn’t got a gallery at one end, and a large throne below it, as it had now. It was quite full of animals with either white ties or tiaras on, talking to each other about the weather. Up in the gallery were the Noah family, seated side by side at an immense piano, which they were all playing on simultaneously. All their heads were close together, for they had only one copy of music to play from, and they kept knocking off each other’s hats, and quarrelling as to when it was time to turn over the page. First of all Noah turned over, and Ham shouted out that he hadn’t got more than half-way down the page, and turned back again, and his mother said she had finished that page five minutes ago, and turned over two. Then they all grabbed at the book together, and tore the pages to bits with one hand while they went on playing with the other. Just as David came in, the book slipped down into the inside of the piano, and so they settled to go on playing by heart. As none of them knew how to read a single note of music, it made no difference whether there was any music there or not.

Below the gallery was the throne, all covered in chintz, and on the throne sat the elegant elephant. The legs of the giraffe were planted about the room, and the body of it went up through the staircase. The elephant still had the cap of the flying-corps on his head, so that David had no doubt that it was he who had been the pilot of one of the aeroplanes.

It seemed evident that the elephant was the host, and as David had been taught always to shake hands with his host when he went to a party, he sidled through the crowd of animals up to the throne.

‘How do you do?’ he said to the elephant.

‘I’m not doing anything at present,’ said the elephant, ‘but when I do, I shall do it very well. Who asked you to come?’

‘Nobody exactly,’ said David, feeling rather uncomfortable. ‘I—I understood I was to.’

‘Have you brought your card?’ asked the elephant.

David looked down and found he was in his sailor clothes again, and pulled a handful of cards out of his pocket.

‘Yes, I’ve got lots of them,’ he said, ‘and all yours too.’

‘Then introduce yourself,’ said the elephant.

‘I’m David Blaize,’ said David.

‘I knew that. Now introduce me, and there we are. In order to introduce me properly, you must say “Elegant Elephant” six times over without stopping, or squinting, or stuttering. Now begin.’

‘Elegant Elephant, Ephalent Egalent, Egaphent Elelant, Ephagant Legegant, Ephephant Ephegal, Egantel Ephantel,’ said David all in one breath.

There was an awful pause; the elephant’s mouth had dropped open, and he turned quite pale. All the Noahs stopped playing and leaned over the edge of the gallery, and several of their hats fell on to the floor. Then there came a dreadful silence, and you could have heard a pin-partridge drop.

‘Where did you learn to talk?’ asked the elephant in a faint voice.

‘I didn’t learn anywhere particular,’ said David. ‘It happened. But it’s dreadfully hard to say that six times. I don’t believe you could do it yourself.’

The elephant looked round in a frightened manner.

‘Change the subject,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Change the object, change places, change partners, change your money, change your socks, change the weather, change everything. But, whatever you do, change the subject.’

He was so distressed at the thought of having to say it, that David felt it would be very bad manners to insist upon it.

‘I was going to dance with the giraffe,’ he said. ‘Would you tell me how to do it, and where I’m to begin?’

The elephant grew blue again.

‘That’s a good boy,’ he said. ‘Begin as high up as you can. Take one leg first, and let the band play as loud as possible.’

This didn’t seem very promising, but David did as he was told, and put his arm round the foreleg of the giraffe that was nearest him, and began revolving about it. But he had hardly begun, when he found that he could shift his hands higher up the leg, and still higher, for he was growing in the most extraordinary manner. Soon his head began going up through the staircase, and he felt his arm round the giraffe’s waist. Still he grew, his head passed the second storey, and came up to the third, where it went into an attic where his partner’s head was. One foreleg of the giraffe and his own arm stuck out of the window, and they kept slowly revolving to the sound of the piano. They were getting fearfully tangled up with the banisters of the stairs, and presently they began to reverse, and unwound themselves again.

‘You dear creature,’ said the giraffe, ‘I thought you’d grow, though I wasn’t sure about it.’

‘I don’t feel very comfortable,’ said David. ‘And I’m so afraid we’re treading on all the animals below.’

‘I shouldn’t be a bit surprised,’ said the giraffe. ‘Don’t they crowd up one’s ankles, the rude things. We might stand straight up, I think now. Butt the roof with your head; that will give us more room.’

David did as he was told, and a shower of tiles fell round them. Some dropped down his jersey, and he could hear others clattering downstairs.

‘But aren’t we doing a lot of damage?’ asked David.

‘Quantities,’ said the giraffe. ‘Thump! There goes the staircase. I knew it would.’

They revolved faster and faster, and the stars spun round them. Far below was the village street, down which David could see all the animals scampering as hard as they could go from the ruined remains of the bank.

‘Who’ll pay for it?’ asked David breathlessly.

‘Why, you, of course, dear!’ said the giraffe. ‘How much money have you got?’

‘Four pounds,’ gasped David.

‘That’s plenty, I should think, though I’ve no head for figures,’ said the giraffe. ‘And you might give me the remainder for a surprise. It would keep me in hoofs and hoof-laces for weeks.’

David dances with the giraffe

‘I’ll give it you all, if we may only stop growing and dancing,’ said David. ‘And please don’t tickle my ear so when you whisper.’

‘I can’t help *your* tickling,’ whispered the giraffe. ‘Just as you couldn’t help *mine* if I began to tickle. Now I’ll give you a surprise. If I began tickling, we should both begin littling. But as long as I don’t tickle, we shan’t little. There!’

David could bear it no longer, and he instantly thrust his fingers into the giraffe’s ribs, and began tickling her. She gave a loud silly cackle, and he felt, to his intense joy, that they were getting littler.

‘Stop, stop!’ she whispered, but she couldn’t say much because she was laughing so, and presently David found himself sliding down the remains of the staircase, and back into the ballroom. His hands slipped down and down her foreleg, and soon he was his own size again, with those four great legs standing among the ruins.

But even as he looked at them, still panting with the exertion of growing and ungrowing again, he saw that they were not legs any more, but the four pillars of the porch of the house next door, which had been the girls’ school and was now the Happy Families’ Institute. As he stood there, the door was opened a foot or two, and a large mutton bone flew past his head.

Before it closed again, a hoarse voice from inside said:

‘I’ll just have time to have my second helping before the concert. That sirloin will do. Chuck it over here, you greedy!’

Now David did not want to intrude again without being definitely asked, but he had a sort of idea that though nobody had asked him to the animals’ ball, he had been expected all the same, indeed, that the whole thing had been got up for him. Probably it was the same case here, for the giraffe had said that the happy families’ concert was part of the programme for the evening, and, after all, the fact that quite a short while ago the High Street had been decorated with banners, on which was written ‘David Blaize, the fireman’s son,’ was a sort of invitation from the happy families to become one of them. Also he was tired with growing and ungrowing, and thought it would be very pleasant to sit down and listen to a little music.

So, though it was not the sign of great cordiality to be greeted at the door by a huge mutton bone thrown at your head, he thought it better to ring the bell—though it wasn’t a bell but a coal-scuttle hung on a chain, and underneath it was the instruction ‘Knock also.’ So he first rang the coal-scuttle and then knocked it.

It sounded as if all the dinner bells in the world had been pealed, and all the postmen in the world had come with letters. He felt quite ashamed of having made such a tumult, and, with the giraffe still in his mind, stood on tiptoe to get his mouth close to the bell, and whispered:

‘Hush, please: I had no idea you were so loud.’

The noise ceased at once, and dead silence succeeded. Then David heard a little clink come from the letter-box in the door, and he saw that the shutter of it had been raised, and that Mr. Chip the carpenter was looking at him. Then Master Dose the doctor’s son had a look, and David heard him giggling as he passed on to make room for Mr. Bones the butcher. After that there was a sound of whispering inside, and he tried hard not to hear what was being said. But the harder he tried, the more distinctly he heard it.

‘It doesn’t look a bit like him. Where’s his fire?’

‘I expect they’ve forgotten to mend it. It’s gone out.’

‘Stuff and nonsense: the fireman’s family put fires out themselves.’

‘But he hasn’t got a ladder or anything to show who he is.’

‘Nor a brass helmet. It can’t be the one.’

David tried to interest himself in other things, while he was being talked about like this. He found he was dressed in a sort of uniform with a sword by his side, and knee-breeches and a blue riband over his shirt, and a quantity of stars and medals on his coat. This discovery rather consoled him, for he evidently was expected at some party, since nobody dressed like this except for something grand. On the other hand, if they were expecting him to look like a fireman, it was no wonder they had their doubts about him, for he could not imagine putting out fires in this costume. But he had not long to wait, for the door flew open, and somebody inside called out in capital letters:

‘DAVID BLAIZE, THE FIREMAN’S SON.’

He entered a room, dazzlingly bright, with a stage at one end, and rows and rows of chairs, four on one side, and four on the other of a gangway that led up the centre. All the chairs were occupied, and all the occupiers had their backs to the stage, and were looking towards the door when he entered. Over each group of four chairs was suspended a banner, which bore the name of the happy family which occupied it. And every member of every happy family looked at him quite steadily.

David bowed a great many times, but nobody took the least notice, and there was nothing to be done but to stand still until something happened. Many of the banners were familiar to him: there was the Bones family of butchers, the Chip family of carpenters, the Bun family of bakers, the Dose family of doctors, and so on; but these were all in front rows. Behind them were a quantity of families, of whom he had never heard before. There was Mr. and Mrs. Funk, the bathers, and Mr. and Mrs. Fuss, the train-catchers; and Mr. and Mrs. Talk, the tiresomes; and Mr. and Mrs. Green, the cabbages. All these were complete strangers to David, and he felt shyer than he had been even when he had to introduce the elegant elephant to himself.

A heavy sigh came from every member of the old happy families whom David knew, and they all turned round in their seats and began talking to each other. On the other hand, the strange families began smiling at him, and, though he knew none of them, he felt grateful for their sign of friendliness, for it was a very lonely thing to go to a concert, which you supposed was given in your honour, and find all the people that you knew turned their backs on you.

Then a whole family suddenly left their seats and ran up to David, and began bowing and curtsying. They had come from a set of chairs called ‘Rhyme, the poets,’ and though David felt grateful to them for being so kind as to notice him, he was rather nervous because they might expect him to talk about poetry. They had all books under their arms, and pockets bulging with pencils and pens, and as they sat down round him, when they had finished bowing and curtsying, Master Rhyme put a large ink-bottle on the floor, and they all dipped their pens in it.

Then they all looked at each other, frowning, as if they were trying to think of something, and counting syllables on their fingers.

‘Ahem!’ said Miss Rhyme, clearing her throat. ‘This is the nicest of all days, because we welcome David Blaize. Go on, Pa.’

As soon as she had spoken, she opened her book, and began writing in it. The pages were already quite covered up with other writing, but she seemed not to mind that. She wrote with a pen, and put the tip of it into her mouth in order to get blacker marks out of it. Very soon her lips were all covered with ink, which she licked off when she had time. Usually she hadn’t.

Mr. Rhyme began writing and talking.

‘We saw at once that you were not one of the antiquated lot,’ he said. ‘Your turn, Ma.’

Mrs. Rhyme stopped counting on her fingers and frowning on her face, and took up a pencil in one hand and a pen in the other, and began writing with them both in her book. Sometimes she dipped them both in the ink, and then they both wrote ink, and sometimes she put them both in her mouth, and then one wrote pencil, the other nothing at all, because she had sucked the ink off. She seemed to be writing in shorthand, for it consisted of hooks and dashes and strokes and marks like footsteps in the snow.

‘It gives us all the utmost joy,’ she said, ‘to welcome here a human boy. They say your name is David Blaize, but it don’t matter what they says. The great thing is to stick to rhyme’—

‘And make up verses all the time,’ interrupted Master Rhyme, who began writing too. ‘We’re very pleased that you have *got* here.’

‘I’ve made a blot, and want the blotter,’ said Miss Rhyme. ‘Papa, don’t jog my elbow so, it stops my inspiration’s flow.’

David felt his head going round, and was in a perfect agony lest he should be expected to make poetry too, which he knew he was quite incapable of doing. But by this time the whole of the family were all writing together, and making poetry at the tops of their voices without paying the least attention to him or to each other. Blobs of ink were flying about everywhere, for they all tried to dip their pens and pencils in the ink-bottle together, and they kept stabbing each other’s fingers with their nibs, and wiping off the blots on to each other’s sleeves, or on to David’s white stockings, until

he thought he had never seen such a noisy and messy family. Besides, he had come to listen to a concert, which was probably going on all the time, if only he could hear it.

David and the Rhyme family

‘I wonder if we had better talk so much,’ he said. ‘I believe a concert is going on.’

‘It doesn’t rhyme, you silly ass,’ said Master Rhyme.

‘We couldn’t ever let that pass,’ said his sister.

‘I went and ate a few meringues,’ shouted Mrs. Ryhme, ‘and then threw twenty boomerangs.’

‘She threw them once, she threw them twice,’ screamed Mr. Rhyme. ‘She put the others on the ice. The cupboard wouldn’t hold them all, and so she nailed them on the wall. She put them safe there, all and sundry, intending to come back on Mondray.’

David couldn’t stand this any more, for there were much more amusing things going on. The good old families of butchers and doctors and bakers and sweeps were changing places with each other exactly as if they were being collected. Some voice said, ‘Mrs. Dose, the doctor’s wife,’ and Mrs. Dose left her seat and moved somewhere else. Then somebody said ‘Mr. Dose, the doctor,’ and another voice said, ‘I haven’t got him. . . . Mrs. Dose, the doctor’s wife. Thank you . . .’

David looked down at his own hand for a moment, and saw that Mr. and Mrs. Dose were both sitting there, and he supposed it must have been he who had asked for them. The cork of the bottle that Mrs. Dose carried was continually coming out, and she kept murmuring to herself, ‘It’s a glass stopper, I want, it is!’ Miss Bones was sitting there too. She had nearly finished the sirloin of beef she had asked for, and only a few shreds of meat were left on it.

‘Then have I collected you?’ asked David. ‘I can ask for all the rest, can’t I? Is nobody else playing?’

Miss Bones was sitting on his thumb. Somehow she looked quite life-size, and yet David did not feel any bigger than she. She was still gnawing her sirloin of beef, and tore off large pieces of gristle with her hands, just dropping them on David’s knee, or on the note-books of the Rhyme family who had got a good deal smaller, but were still sitting round him and writing.

Miss Bones sitting on David’s thumb

‘Collect yourself,’ she said. ‘You’ve got to collect yourself before you win. Where’s your father and mother, for instance? Ask for Mrs. Blaize, the fireman’s wife, and get her, and then we shall begin to believe in you.’

David felt that it was quite silly to mind whether Miss Bones believed in him or not. But he knew

that if he called out ‘Mother!’ or ‘Mrs. Blaize, the fireman’s wife,’ nothing whatever would happen. Yet somehow he had to account for Mrs. Blaize, the fireman’s wife, not being there.

‘My mother isn’t feeling very well,’ he said. ‘Perhaps she may have gone to sleep, and it would be a pity to disturb her.’

‘Mother malingering,’ announced Miss Bones contemptuously. ‘Where’s your father, then?’

David suddenly felt that this was a most ridiculous position. Hitherto he had always played with the happy families, and now they were playing with him. And they were so fierce and unkind, like wasps.

‘I can’t tell where my father is,’ he said. ‘I haven’t seen him all evening. And I’m getting so tired: mayn’t we stop?’

There was a sudden stir among the newer families, and Mr. Funk, the bather, ran up to him. He was dressed in a striped bathing-dress, and all his teeth chattered.

‘I believe you’re a Funk,’ he said. ‘I believe you belong to my family. I’m collecting you. Come on, Master Funk.’

‘I’m not Master Funk,’ said David indignantly. ‘Haven’t got him. My turn.’

Miss Bones threw the remains of her sirloin at the Rhymes. It fell in their ink-bottle and splashed them frightfully, but they were already so covered with ink that a little more didn’t matter. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and sidled a little nearer David.

‘That’s right: it’s your turn,’ she whispered. ‘Remember you’ve got me, Don’t ask for me.’

‘I shouldn’t think of it,’ said David. ‘What I want is the concert. I came here for a concert. I want to sit down and be quiet a little. Nobody knows all the things I’ve been doing.’

‘And nobody cares,’ said Miss Bones.

David felt tired of this contemptuous treatment, and stood up.

‘I won’t have any more rudeness,’ he said. ‘I can do what I choose with you all. I can put you all back in your case, and never open you again till you get mouldy, like the ones I left in the garden. If there’s no concert just tell me so, and I’ll go somewhere else.’

Miss Bones shouted out:

‘Mr. Bradshaw, the Time-table,’ and instantly there was a *Bradshaw* on her knee. ‘There’s the 11.29,’ she said. ‘You might catch it, or again you mightn’t. It all depends how you feel. If you feel in a hurry, you’ll miss it; if you feel calm, you may catch it. Will you have one taxi or two?’

‘Why should I have two?’ said David. ‘It’s only me.’

‘One taxi goes ten miles an hour, and two go twenty,’ said she. ‘And ten go a hundred, and a hundred go a thousand. Say what you can afford, and you can catch any train up, no matter how far it has gone.’

David had not really meant to go away by train at all, but somehow it seemed all settled for him, and instantly all the happy families began blowing on things, with piercing shrieks, to summon his taxi, or the hundred taxis, or however many they thought good for him. Miss Bones picked up her sirloin, and blew that, Mr. Chip the carpenter blew on his gimlet, Mrs. Dose blew her bottle, and Miss Bun her bun. Never since the flame-cats had mewed and squealed to accompany their dances, had David heard such a deafening noise. Quantities of steam appeared to come out of their instruments also, and soon the whole room was filled with it and whistlings. Then the steam began to clear again a little, though the whistling got no less, and whether or no David had come in a taxi, he had certainly arrived at a station.

CHAPTER V

There were huge piles of luggage all round David, as he saw when the steam cleared away a little. There were trunks, portmanteaux, dress-baskets, lunch-baskets, tea-baskets, gun-cases, golf-clubs, gladstone-bags, carpet-bags, despatch-cases, hat-boxes, collection-boxes, band-boxes, hampers, milk-cans, hold-alls, fish-baskets, safes, unsafes (the sort that fly open as you are getting into the train), Christmas boxes, rug-straps, and a sort of palisade of umbrellas and sticks on the top. All of them had green printed labels on, and wherever he turned, he saw that the labels were

DAVID BLAIZE, Esq.,
Passenger to Anywhere.

‘That’s no earthly use at all,’ thought David. ‘It doesn’t tell me where I’m going. And how did I get so much luggage?’

David and the cow porter on the pile of luggage

He began climbing up the wall of luggage that was made of the more solid pieces, when he heard somebody climbing up the other side.

'Hurrah, it's probably a porter,' he said to himself. 'Hi, porter!'

'I'm coming,' said a slow, placid voice. 'Moo! I'm coming.'

The first thing that came over the edge of the wall of luggage was the cap of a flying man, then two broken horns, then a mild hairy sort of face, the mouth of which went round and round.

'Oh, are you the cow and the other pilot?' asked David.

'Hush,' said the cow. 'I'm incognito, disguised as a porter, and collecting evidence.'

'What about?' asked David.

'Anything, as long as it's evidence. Don't give me away, and I'll help you. Is this all you've got? That's nothing to what people travel with now.'

'Yes, that's all,' said David. 'At least I suppose that's all.'

'You mayn't have less than a hundred pieces, and they must all weigh a hundred pounds each,' said the cow, referring to a blue paper of regulation which she carried. 'But I won't take no notice if you're a bit under weight.'

The cow had climbed up a little higher, and David could see she had a dark blue coat, with a red tie like the people at Waterloo.

'Perhaps I'd better get you out first,' said the cow. 'You seem sort of hemmed in. If you'll stop just where you are, I'll butt my way somewhere. Steady now, stop just where you are.'

David clung to the portmanteau which was on the top of the pile, and heard the cow retreat a few steps, and breathe heavily.

'Now, I'm coming,' she said, and next moment she charged through a weak part of the wall, which consisted only of lighter articles like dressing-cases and gun-cases and bags of golf-clubs. A lunch-basket had stuck on her horns, and she shook her head till it fell off with a great clatter of tin-plates and knives and forks.

'That was a good bit of evidence,' she said panting. 'What train are you going by?'

'The 11.29 I think,' said David.

The cow looked at the labels.

'That's all right then,' she said. 'That's the one that goes Anywhere. It's whistling loud still, so you've got heaps of time. There's more time than luggage.'

'But doesn't its whistling mean that it's just going off?' asked David. He had a firm idea in his mind that he *must* catch the 11.29, or the whole plan would go wrong.

'Not a bit of it, dearie,' said the cow. 'It whistles loudest when it's going to stop longest, and whistles faintest when it's going to stop shortest. Now if it was whistling soft, we should have to hurry. The moment it stops whistling altogether, then it's off, and you have to wait for the next. Usually there isn't a next, and then the trouble begins.'

'Then do they whistle all the time they stand still?' asked David.

'Naturally. When they go, there's something else to think about.'

She looked at him with a mild milky sort of eye. She was dressed in a large jacket, and a pair of trousers which covered her completely all but her face and her tail.

'And to think that I ever thought of tossing you,' she said. 'Well, bye-gones are gone-byes, and now I feel like a mother to you. Let's get going with your bits of luggage, or the train you're going to get will get gone.'

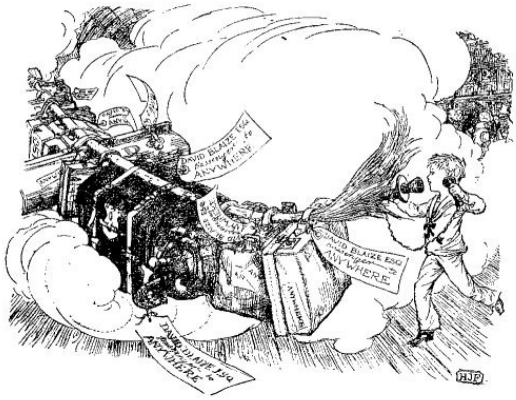
She took up four or five bags on her horns, put some of the lighter stuff like gun-cases and golf-clubs over her ears, and then turned her back to David.

'Just sling the rest on my tail,' she said. 'Stick it through the cords or through the handles. You just put it on.'

She moved backwards and forwards in the most obliging manner, while David put her tail through the handles of boxes and portmanteaux, just as you would string beads on to a thread. Her tail had a surprising sort of spring in it, and when he had put it through a cord or a handle, she gave it a little jerk, and the box hopped along it. Very soon all the heavy stuff was neatly strung on her tail, and she took up the sticks and umbrellas that lay about on the platform, in her mouth.

‘Now, all you’ve got to do is to hold on to the end of my tail,’ she said, ‘and off we go to the 11.29. There’s no more evidence about here.’

They threaded their way down miles of crowded platforms past train after train that was puffing and whistling to show that it wasn’t going yet. Occasionally one stopped whistling, on which all the doors slammed, and next moment there wasn’t any train there at all. There were a tremendous lot of people travelling; now and then in the crowd he got a glimpse of some one he knew like Miss Muffet, or the shoemaker, or members of the happy families, but for the most part they were all strangers. The cow’s head, wreathed in luggage, seemed miles away, but very soon David found there was a sort of telephone in her tail, and he talked to the end of it, asking whatever he wanted to know, and then put it to his ear. When she wished to speak to him a bell rang at the end of it.



David uses the telephone
in the cow porter’s tail

‘I haven’t got my ticket yet,’ said David.

‘Of course not. You don’t know where you’re going yet,’ said she. ‘Travellers by the Anywhere Express take their tickets when they’ve got there. Otherwise you might take a ticket say for France, and find yourself at Fiji, and the ticket wouldn’t be any use.’

‘Is the Anywhere Express likely to go abroad this time?’ asked David, who would have enjoyed that.

‘Nothing’s likely with the Anywhere Express. It never goes where you expect it to. It’s the unlikeliest thing that ever happened. But it always goes to lots of somewheres, which is why it’s the Anywhere. You see it takes hundreds of somewheres to make an Anywhere.’

‘Does it go every night?’ asked David.

‘It goes every day and every night,’ said the cow. ‘But it only goes from here when it has got here. I should think it was five or six years since it was here last. I saw it once when I was a calf.’

‘Then shan’t I get back here for five or six years?’ asked he.

‘Round about that, I should say. Here we are. It’s begun to whistle softly. You’ll take all your bits of things in the carriage with you, I suppose, and then you’ll have them handy, in case of being hungry or if it rains, or there’s a cricket match. Which glass do you go, dearie?’

‘Which glass?’ asked David.

‘Yes; there’s first glass, where you can see out of the windows, and second, where you can’t, and third, where there aren’t any windows at all, and very few doors. I always go second, because it’s ugly country hereabouts.’

‘But it might be pretty farther on,’ said David.

‘Please yourself, dearie,’ said the cow. ‘Here’s a beautiful carriage now. That’ll make a sweet home for you for five or six years.’

David followed the cow, when she had finished sticking in the door into the carriage. It was a large bare room with a quantity of hooks on the walls, and a small three-legged stool standing in the middle of it.

‘Now I’ll get rid of your luggage,’ said the cow.

She began tossing the pieces on her horns in the neatest manner on to the hooks. Then she switched her tail, and the portmanteaux and dress baskets and wine-cases and all the heavier things flew this way and that on to *their* hooks, or piled themselves in the corners.

David looked round his sweet little house with some dismay.

‘But if I get very sleepy, can’t I go to bed?’ he asked.

‘Why, of course you can,’ said the cow. ‘You can go to bed anywhere you like all over the floor, or you can hang yourself up to a hook, or get inside a portmanteau. And the motion will never disturb you, as it’s an empty-speed express.’

‘What’s that?’ asked David.

‘Why, a full-speed express goes as fast as it can, doesn’t it? And an empty-speed express goes as slow as it can. Hullo! It’s stopped whistling.’

The cow jumped out of the door, which immediately slammed to after her, and disappeared among the crowd on the platform. The train started at a great speed, so it seemed to David, but as it got going, it went slower and slower, until he could scarcely believe that it was moving at all. He felt rather lonely at the idea of spending five or six years in the train, but after all, if it moved so slowly, it would not be difficult to jump out. Unless he found another cow-porter, which didn’t seem likely, he would have to leave his luggage behind, but he would not really miss it much, since he had never had it before, and had not the slightest idea what it contained.

A pecking noise at the window attracted his attention, and he saw a crow sitting on the ledge

outside.

'Let me in,' it said. 'It's time to rest. I shall stop flying for the present.'

David let down the window, and the crow fluttered on to the floor.

'But if you stop flying, shall I become invisible?' he asked.

'Yes, of course. You're getting dim now. Pop! Now you've gone.'

David held up his hand in front of him, but he could see nothing at all of it. It must have been there, because when he touched the end of his nose with it, it felt quite solid. But he had certainly vanished for the present, for there was nothing whatever of him to be seen.

'I wish you wouldn't interfere with me like that,' he said. 'You wouldn't like it if I made you invisible.'

The crow had put its head under its wing, and tucked up one leg, and its voice sounded muffled.

'You seem to think,' it said, 'that everything is to be managed as you want it. But if you imagine I'm going to go on flying all night, without a rest, just in order to keep you visible, you make a mistake. You aren't so pretty as all that, my young fellah.'

'But you'll fly again before long, won't you?' asked David.

All the answer he got was:

'Haugh! Rumph, haugh! Rumph! Rumph!' for the crow had gone fast asleep, and was snoring.

David poked it with the place where his fingers usually were, to wake it, but it only snored louder and louder. Then he picked it up and shook it, but the only result was that its snoring became perfectly deafening.

'I'll drop it out of the window,' he said to himself,' and then it must fly.'

But this was no good, for the crow didn't even take its head from under its wing, or put its leg down, but fell quietly on to the ground below the window, without waking. Just then there came a bend in the line, and though the train was scarcely moving at all, it was soon out of sight.

'Well, there's no help for it,' thought David, 'and so I may as well go to sleep too. It seems to make one sleepy to be invisible.'

Then, so he supposed, he must have gone completely to sleep, for when the next thing happened, it was quite light. As he had been travelling since 11.29 P.M., it was perfectly obvious that it was now morning. For some reason he felt inclined to lick his hand and rub it behind his ears, but he remembered that only cats did that, and instead he drew his three-legged stool to the window and looked out. He found he was visible again, and supposed the crow must have begun flying.

The train seemed to be running very slowly round and round a field. Occasionally it stopped dead, and began to whistle, but usually it splashed quietly along, into puddles and out of puddles, without any lines in front of it. Sometimes they curved a little to avoid a tree, but they crushed their way through an ordinary hedge, and birds flew out scolding them and saying, 'I wish you would look where you are going.' Then a voice from the engine said, 'Sorry you *have* been troubled,' just like a young lady in the telephone exchange.

But the country seemed familiar to David, and presently he saw that the train was in a field just beyond the High Street of the village he had left at 11.29. It was slowly going back to it again, to a spot some fifty yards away from the place they had started from. Then it began to make a very sharp curve, in order to avoid a horse that was lying down in the field, and the engine came just opposite his window.

'A rare good run, David,' shouted the engine-driver. 'We shall stop at the hairdresser's in a minute now, if you want to have anything done.'

David had not had his hair cut lately, so this seemed rather a good opportunity.

'How long do we stop there?' he shouted.

'Two or three weeks. You'll just have time.'

In spite of the slowness with which they were moving, there was a tremendous rattle of wheels somewhere, and the noise seemed to come from overhead. Then looking up, he saw that there were hundreds of wheels all turning round. There were long bands hanging from them, and just then the engine began whistling to show it had stopped. Clouds of steam poured in through the carriage window and, as that cleared away, David saw that he was standing in the hairdresser's shop, and that underneath the wheels was sitting a row of old gentlemen having their heads brushed with circular brushes. Others were being shampooed, others were apparently having their heads painted, others were having breakfast, but they were all, without exception, absolutely bald.

There was a looking-glass in front of each of them, and David saw the face of a kind old gentleman in it. The looking-glasses were of the sort that stood on his mother's dressing-table, which showed your left-hand side where the bruise was, which came when you fell out of a tree, and your right-hand side, where a tooth had been taken out, and full face where both these things happened. And in each looking-glass was the reflection of a bald old gentleman, nodding and smiling at him.

After his solitary night in the train, David longed for a little conversation again, and he went to the nearest old gentleman, who was eating eggs and bacon, while the hairdresser scrubbed his head with the circular brush.

'Good morning, David,' said he. 'Have you had a good journey? The hard brush, please,' he added to the hairdresser. 'That doesn't do me any good. Aha, aha, that's better. And now I'll have a shampoo.'

David thought this rather an odd way of doing things, since you usually had your shampoo first, and your brushing afterwards, but the hairdresser didn't seem to mind. The old gentleman bent over the basin, with his eggs and bacon on his knee, and continued breakfasting.

'Boiling or freezing, sir?' asked the hairdresser.

'Boiling first and then freezing,' said the old gentleman, with his mouth full. 'No, freezing first and boiling afterwards. And where did you come from?' he asked David.

'From the house next the Bank, I think,' said David. 'I came by the 11.29.'

'A fine train,' said he, 'a very fine train. There's nothing slower anywhere.'

The hairdresser wrapped a towel round his head, and began drying it.

‘And what will you have on, sir?’ he asked.

The old gentleman considered a little.

‘I think a map of south-west London would be best,’ he said. ‘I’m going up there next week, and I don’t know my way about. It would be very tiresome to get lost. But if you give me a nice map of south-west London, with 25 Brompton Square marked in red, why, all I shall have to do, if I get lost, is to ring the nearest bell of the nearest house, and ask for a couple of looking-glasses.’

‘What for?’ asked David.

‘Why, I shall sit in front of one, and reflect the top of my head in the other. Then I shall see where I am, and where I want to go to. Send the geographer and the painter at once.’

This old gentleman got so interested in his map that he did not talk to David any more, and so he strolled on to the next one, who, so he learned, was going to Egypt, and was having a spider’s web painted on his head to keep the flies off. He, too, seemed to know David, which made it very pleasant.

‘And so you’ve come by the 11.29,’ he said. ‘A dangerous trip, because you go so slow that it’s almost impossible to stop in case of an accident. I leave for Egypt by the same train. I wonder if it would be wiser to have some fly papers as well. Or a picture of a mummy or two, to give me local colour.’

‘Whatever you please, sir,’ said the hairdresser.

‘Well, we can’t go wrong with a mummy. I think a mummy and a spider’s web, and leave out the fly-papers.’

The next old gentleman was having his own face painted in oils on the back of his head, and he put his finger on his lip, and beckoned with the other hand to David.

‘Is it like me?’ he whispered. ‘Give me your candid opinion. Don’t mind the artist.’

He nodded his head up and down, so that David should see his real face and his painted face.

‘Very like indeed,’ said David. ‘But what’s it for?’

He assumed an air of great secrecy.

‘You mustn’t tell anybody,’ he said. ‘Do you promise?’

‘Yes,’ said David.

‘Well, if I have my own face at the back of my head, it will be such a puzzle. People in the street will see me looking at them, as if I was coming towards them, and all the time I shall be going away. What do you think of that?’

‘It’s—it’s certainly very puzzling,’ said David.

‘Isn’t it? And then when I’m tired of going that way, I shall begin to walk backwards, and all the people the other side of me will think the same thing. In quite a short time nobody will know where I am. I shall always be going away when they think I’m coming, and when they think I’m coming I shall always be going away!’

‘But that’s the same thing, isn’t it?’ asked David.

He took no notice of this, and called out to the painter, who had R.A. embroidered on his collar.

‘Mind you put a cigarette in my mouth. And then this side will smoke a pipe. That’ll puzzle them worse than ever. It will, it will—won’t it?’ he said to David triumphantly.

The bald-headed men in the hairdresser’s
get up to catch the train

David could not understand what it was all about, but at that moment the door opened, and the cow looked in.

‘Passengers by the Bald Express to take their seats,’ she called. ‘All others to remain standing.’

Instantly there was a scene of the utmost confusion, and all the old gentlemen began running into each other. The worst of them was the one who had had his face painted on the back of his head, because nobody could possibly guess which way he was coming. But by degrees the room cleared, as the whistling of the engine, which had gone on all the time, grew fainter, and finally, when it stopped, David found himself quite alone. The sound of wheels going round overhead ceased, and its place was taken by a rumble that gradually got less. He ran out on to the platform, and there was the empty-speed express crawling out of the station, carrying the kind old gentlemen to Egypt and London S.W., and wherever the backward-forward one meant to puzzle people. He felt that it must be quite easy to catch it up, but the faster he ran the farther he got away from it. At last, perfectly breathless, he stopped, not quite certain whether he really wanted to catch it or not. He longed to know if the spider’s web would keep off the flies, or the map of London S.W. show the other old gentleman where he was, but, after all, there were so many different things to explore.

He began to run again, after he had got his breath, not after the train any more, but Anywhere. He felt that with every step he took he was getting lighter, and in a minute he was running on the very tips of his toes. Then his left foot didn't touch the ground at all, and then his right foot. He simply found himself running in the air.

CHAPTER VI

David gave a great kick with his left foot to make sure it wasn't touching anything. Certainly it touched nothing, but he felt the air stream swiftly by him. Then he kicked with his right foot, and the same thing happened.

'I do believe I'm flying,' said he aloud. 'Now there's a hedge coming. If I am really remembering how to fly, and if I kick downwards, I shall get over it.'

He made a sort of spring in the air, and bounded high over the hedge without even touching its topmost twigs.

'It's all quite easy,' he shouted. 'I must remember carefully how it's done. You run, and then you get on the tips of your toes, and then you run a little more, and then you're up. If you want to get higher you kick downwards. And I suppose if you want to go downwards, you just take a sort of little header.'

This answered perfectly. He had been learning to swim lately, and made a bob with his head, and spread his arms in front of him. Next moment he was within a foot or two of the ground, and kicked downwards again to bring himself up.

'Now I'll float,' he said, 'and see what happens.'

He spread his arms and legs out like a starfish, drew a long breath, and looked at the sky, as his father had taught him to do. This, too, succeeded, and he found himself motionless in the air, perhaps drifting a little in the morning wind.

'I'll go higher now,' he said. 'I'll just wander up to the top of the elm trees, and see what's going on there.'

How Canon and Mrs. Rook quarrelled over a stick

He had calculated his distance pretty well for a beginner, and a few downward kicks in the air brought him brushing against the topmost boughs of the elm that stood on the far side of the lake beyond the garden. It seemed to be spring-time, for there was a great commotion among the rooks, as he pushed the young green leaves aside and looked in. A pair of them were quarrelling as to which way a particular stick ought to be laid, one wanting it laid crossways, the other straight. They had lived for years before they came here in a cathedral close, and were always known as Canon and Mrs. Rook. But when they saw him, they stopped arguing.

'Why, bless me, you've remembered it at last,' said Canon Rook. 'And it doesn't make you feel giddy, does it?'

'Not a bit,' said David. 'It's the loveliest thing that ever happened. Why didn't you tell me before how to do it?'

'Bless you, we were telling you all day long,' said Mrs. Rook, 'but you always pretended to forget.'

Suddenly it struck David that he had known how to fly all his life, but had merely forgotten.'

'Why, of course, I knew all along,' he said. 'And shall I always be able to fly now?'

'Until the next time that you forget. But boys *are* forgetful creatures, you know,' said Mrs. Rook.

'So are girls,' said David. 'But I won't forget this time. And may I try to pass my flying certificate at once?'

'Why, certainly,' said Canon Rook, 'if we can get a committee together. Birds are a bit busy now that it's building time, but it's not every day that a boy comes up for his flying certificate, and I shouldn't wonder if they came. I'll go and call them.'

He flew up to the very topmost twig of the elm, and balanced himself there.

‘Urgent call—caw, caw,’ he shouted. ‘A young gentleman has just come up here to try for his flying certificate, if the committee will kindly attend. Urgent—caw, caw, caw,’ he repeated.

Instantly there was a chirping and calling of birds on all sides, from the other elms, and from the fields below, and the bushes and the lake. A pair of brown owls were the first to arrive from the ivy in the church tower, with their spectacles, without which they cannot see by day. Then came a cloud of finches: bull-finches, green-finches, haw-finches, and chaf-finches; and wood pigeons came cooing in, and a couple of jackdaws, who tried to talk to David in his own tongue, and thought they could do it very well indeed, though all they could say was ‘Jack’! Jays came screaming out of the wood, with nice fresh paint on the blue streaks on their wings, and woodpeckers tapped to know if they had come to the right elm, and there were nightingales learning the new tunes for the year, and blackbirds, already getting a little hoarse, singing the February tunes. Herons came clattering up from the lake, and teal and wild duck, and moorhens tried to join them, but they couldn’t fly as high as this, and only flapped about the lake, saying ‘Hear, hear! Hear, hear!’ A pheasant with burnished copper plates on his back, rocketed up, and a woodcock or two, flying ‘flip-flap, flip-flap,’ and swifts and martens cut circles and loops in the air. There was a nightjar who opened his mouth very wide, and made a sort of gargling noise instead of singing, and linnets, and robins which hadn’t finished dressing, and were still buttoning their red waistcoats, and, like a jewel flung through the early morning sunlight, a kingfisher came and perched on David’s shoulder. Larks left the tussocks of grass in the meadow below, and carolled their way upwards, and wild-eyed hawks sat a little apart, for fear they should be too much tempted at the sight of so many plump birds all assembled together. So they sat on another branch, and shut their mouths very tight, as if they were eating caramels, remembering that when a flying-committee is assembled it is considered very bad form to eat your fellow-members. There were freshly varnished starlings, and speckled thrushes, and hundreds of rude noisy sparrows, and, long before all the committee were assembled, half the elms in the rookery were crowded with birds, for the passing of a human candidate was a very unusual event indeed, and nobody wanted to miss it.

David felt rather frightened when the test for the birds’ flying certificate was explained to him, for, of course, that is a much stiffer examination than anything that happens to the young gentlemen in the flying corps. Not only had he got to do all the clumsy man-tricks which they perform with their aeroplanes, in which they don’t really fly, and are only flown with, but some bird-tricks as well, and to get his certificate he had to satisfy every single one of the committee, which now consisted of several thousand people. But Canon Rook, who, as he had summoned the committee, was chairman of it, told him not to be afraid.

‘You can remember all right,’ he said, ‘and besides, each bird who sets a question will show you first what you’ve got to do. Caw! Silence, please.’

But it took a long time to get silence this morning, for nesting was going on, and all the ladies were talking about the different linings for nests, and the best way of stitching and hemming them. Some said ‘mud,’ and some said ‘feathers,’ and some said ‘bits of things,’ and the kingfisher said, ‘Give me fish-bones.’ However, the birds round Canon Rook began calling ‘Silence’ too, and by degrees this spread until the whole committee was calling ‘Silence’ at the tops of their voices, and making far more noise than ever. But this was a step in the right direction, and soon the hubbub died down, and Canon Rook spoke again.

‘The candidate is David Blaize, a boy still quite unfledged, except on the top of his head,’ he said, ‘and his age is six.’

‘Rather old!’ cooed a wood pigeon.

‘Yes, but it’s better late than never,’ said Canon Rook, ‘and I’m sure we’re all very pleased that he has remembered how to fly at last. He’ll probably be a bit stiff from age, and you mustn’t expect too much. He will now please jump off, loop the loop twice, and return to his seat. Caw!’

David had often seen the airmen doing that, and he jumped off the bough and made two very neat loops without any difficulty, and returned again, brushing the hair out of his eyes.

‘Right, O!’ screamed the whole of the committee.

‘Spinning nose-dive!’ said Canon Rook.

David remembered that too. You had to put your head down, and spin like a dead leaf on a windless day. It made him a little giddy, but the committee were pleased with him, and only the owl said that his conscience would not allow him to pass that, since he did not call it flying at all, but falling. So all the rest chattered and screamed and sang at him till his spectacles fell off, which made his conscience get quite confused and forget what it wouldn’t allow him to do. Then followed the tail-slip, in which David stretched out his legs in front of him and held his toes in his fingers, so that he sat down in the air and slid backwards, just as if there wasn’t a chair there when he had expected one.

That finished the first part, and then all the committee began talking at once in order to settle what bird-tricks he should have to do. They were inclined to let him off rather easily, because it was considered a sporting thing for a boy to attempt the bird-test at all, and they made up their three thousand minds that, if he did one bird-trick perfectly, that would be enough. Then, when all the birds had shouted ‘Silence’ until they were quite hoarse, Canon Rook cleared his throat and spoke.

‘The bird-test is as follows—caw,’ he said. ‘The candidate will attempt to do the lark-trick, starting from the ground and returning to it again. Show him what he’s got to do, one of you larks.’

A lark dropped from the tree and crouched in a tussock of grass. Then it jumped off the ground and began mounting in a perpendicular line, rising very slowly and singing as it went.

When it had got to the top of its flight it hovered there, and slowly descended, still singing. About ten feet from the ground it stopped singing, and dropped plump into the tussock from which it had risen.

‘Candidate, please,’ said Canon Rook.

‘Must I sing too?’ asked David.

‘Of course that’s part of it,’ said the lark, still rather breathless. ‘Any one could do it without

singing.’

‘Strictly speaking, it’s not a singing competition,’ said Canon Rook. ‘Can you sing?’ he asked David.

David remembered how Noah had offered him a post to sing in opera in the ark, evenings and matinées, and, though no doubt birds were a more musical audience, he felt that it would be untrue, after that, to say he couldn’t sing.

‘Yes, I can sing,’ he said. ‘At least Noah thought so.’

‘I think he’d better have a try first,’ said the nightingale. ‘It would be awful if he sang very badly all the time, and we had to bear it till he got down again, as the committee mayn’t interrupt a candidate in the middle of a test.’

‘Sing a few bars, David,’ said Canon Rook.

It had been the tune of ‘Rule Britannia’ sung to the words,

‘Never do, never do,
Never, never, never do,’

that had pleased Noah so much, and David began to sing them again. But he had hardly sung the first line before the nightingale and the blackbirds and the thrushes and the other professional musicians all turned quite pale and swooned. They were gradually restored by being fanned with their friends’ wings, but they still trembled, and were floppity. Other birds were merely in shrieks of laughter, and David felt very much confused, till a corncrake perched on his knee and said:

‘You sang excellently, quite excellently: don’t mind them.’

But it was unanimously decided that David should not sing while he did the lark-flight, and he jumped off the bough, and stood in a privet-bush, which was to do duty for a tussock of grass, as he was too big for a tussock. In order to make his performance more life-like, it was settled that all the larks should sing together as he mounted and descended, stopping when he was three feet from the ground, for he was too heavy to drop from ten feet.

‘One, two, caw, three, off,’ said Canon Rook.

David gave a little spring in the air as he had seen the lark do, and began treading air with his feet, and beating gently downwards with his outspread fingers, and as he took flight it sounded in that still bright air as if all the larks in the world had begun to sing. He found he mounted rather too quickly at first, and so ceased treading air, using his hands alone. Slowly he mounted and the music of the larks entered his heart and made him feel happier than he had known it was possible to be. He gasped with pleasure as he rose, like when you sit in your bath on a cold evening, and pour the first spongeful of hot water down your back, only now it was spring and singing and flying that tingled all over him. He hung high above the tree-tops in the blue, and the earth was like one flower beneath him. Long he hovered there, and then with a sigh began slowly to descend. There was dead silence in the tree-tops where the committee sat, except for the singing of the larks, but he knew that hundreds of bright eyes were watching him, to see if he was really flying as larks fly.

David does the lark-flight

At length the topmost twigs of the privet-tree hit his foot, and he folded his hands across his chest and dropped.

Instantly the most tremendous hubbub of bird voices broke out, and the clapping of thousands of wings.

‘That’ll do,’ they all shouted. ‘It’s silly to have any more examination, especially since we’re all so busy. He’s a real lark, and as a lark’s a bird, he’s a bird-boy, and he can fly just as larks fly, so give him his certificate. Well done, David,’ and a whole cloud of birds began settling all over him.

‘Lift him up,’ they all chirped. ‘Don’t fly, David; we’re going to carry you. Keep your legs and arms still, or we’ll peck you. Carry him up. One, two, three—away we go. Lord, what a weight a boy is!’

Some took hold of his hair with their beaks, others grasped his clothes in their claws, others took

hold of his bootlaces, and with David lying back, laughing partly from joy, and partly because they tickled, they hoisted him up into the top bough of the elm again.

Canon Rook had already got out the flying certificate, and was signing his name to it, and when he had signed it he flapped his wings over it till the ink was dry.

'David Blaize,' he said. 'I have the pleasure of presenting you with a first-class bird-flying certificate. The meeting is adjourned.'

'Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah,' sang all the committee, and they rose in the air together, with the noise as of a gale blowing. 'Good-bye, David Blaize, you bird-boy. Don't forget your flying. Practise every day, old man!'

'Caw—about that stick,' said Mrs. Rook. 'I want it crossways, and crossways I'll have it, or I'll knock down the whole thing! Caw, caw, caw!'

The birds carry up David
to get his flying certificate

David saw he was not wanted any more; besides he belonged to them now, and understood how busy they were. So he put his precious certificate in his pocket and flew off, like a swift, without moving arms or legs and only balancing and turning in the air. You just had to move your head first, and all the rest followed. You *thought* what you wanted to do, and you were doing it. . . .

He spent an hour or two in the air, and then, as his arms were getting a little stiff with the new sort of exercise, and he was thirsty, he swooped down to the edge of the lake to get a drink and have a rest. As he touched ground a moorhen came out from under the bank, in an awful fright at a boy being there whom he hadn't seen coming. But then he opened his red mouth, laughed, and came splashing and flying back again.

'It's only the new bird-boy, my dear,' he said to his wife. 'I didn't recognise him at first. Tired of flying, David?'

David laughed.

'Only just for the minute,' he said. 'Oh, I'm having the nicest time I ever had since I came through the blue door. I am so thirsty, too!'

He lay down on the bank, with his head over the edge, and was scarcely surprised to find that the lake tasted like the most delicious lemonade, with ice and plenty of sugar. Then he lay back in the long grass, and listened to the birds talking, and the sap humming in the growing herbs. Just in front of him was the lake, and beyond that the garden of his own home and the house. But he was no longer afraid that he was back in the ordinary world again, though he was in the ordinary places. He had gone through the blue door, and his eyes and ears were opened to thousands of things he had never seen before in those familiar places. All the colours were infinitely brighter than they had ever been, and there were new sounds in the air, and new scents.

It was puzzling to know what time of the year it was (not that it mattered). Birds were building, so it should be spring, and yet the sun was as hot as any summer sun he had ever known, and some of the trees had turned red, as happened in the autumn, and the steep hill beyond the house was covered with dazzling white snow, so that he could toboggan if he liked. It seemed as if all the nicest things of all the seasons were gathered together into this one morning, and he wanted to look at them all, and explore the places he knew so well, which looked so much more lovely than he had ever known them. So presently, when he had rested, he flew across the lake in the manner of the moorhen, with his feet dabbling in the water, and landed on the lawn at the other side.

The flower-beds were absolutely covered with blossoms; not a trace of the dull brown earth was to be seen. Then a breeze came up from the lake, and set the flowers swinging on their stalks. But they did not swing quite in the ordinary way, for the stalks stopped still, and only the flowers themselves swung. Farther and farther they swung, this way and that, and then the sound of bells began to come out of them. The Canterbury bells and the campanulas began, because they were professional bells, but by degrees everything else joined in, lilies and roses and hollyhocks and lupins, and love-lies-a-bleeding, and every other flower that you can imagine, for they were all in blossom together this morning. Little tiny chimes, like the note of musical boxes, came from the violets, so soft that David had to put his ear among their leaves to hear them, and the loudest notes of all seemed to come from the sunflowers, but they were more like the clashing of big golden cymbals.

David listened a long time in a sort of ecstasy of pleasure, and then this pealing got somehow into his bones, and he had to do something joyful too. But as he could not make a bell of himself, he must throw himself into the air, and poise like a hawk hovering, flapping his arms all the time, and stopping in the same place, and then he skimmed away with arms quite still and stretched taut, and flew over the roof of his house so close that, the tips of his fingers touched one of the chimney-stacks. Then for a long while he made an eagle-flight, going in wide circles, without moving his arms, and mounting higher and higher till the earth grew small and dim below him, and the sound of the bell-flowers died away, and he seemed to be the only thing that existed in this great blue desert of air. Of all his adventures since he came through the blue door, this was the most delightful.

The sun had got low when he descended to earth again, and the flowers had ceased ringing in the garden-beds. Birds were still moving in the bushes, but none was flying now, for it was getting quite dark, and David felt that both the desire and the power of flying were leaving him, as was only natural when night came on. Once or twice he ran and jumped off the ground, but he could no longer tread the air properly: it was as if his feet broke through it. Or when he tried to mount slowly, like the lark, just dabbling the air down with his hands, his hands went through it instead of pressing it below him. But he was sure that he remembered the way to do it still, though it didn't seem quite as easy as it had this morning. However, if he was a bird-boy, he had to fly at bird-times, and not at night, and after falling rather heavily on the gravel-path, when he tried to do the swift-trick, he thought it better to give it up till morning.

He was not in the least sleepy, and he was sure that there were plenty of other adventures awaiting him. The only question was in which direction he should go to look for them. But his flying had made him thirsty again, and as the lake was so close it was worth while going down to it, to have another drink of that delicious lemonade before it got absolutely dark. So again he lay down on the bank, and was just going to drink, when he heard a tramp of feet, and, looking round, saw that the long gravel walk just behind him was entirely lined with soldiers; at least they were standing in two lines like soldiers, and they looked as if they had been put there on purpose, as soldiers do, not like a queue of people taking tickets, who look as if they had come there by accident. Then again in front of them, at the end of the line, was standing a very stout man in khaki, with a lot of ribands across him, so that if he was not a Brigadier-General, he certainly ought to have been one. Furthermore, on the lawn behind them were rows and rows of tents and a band was playing.

So David came to the conclusion that these were soldiers, and that he himself must be something, but he didn't at present know what it was. It began to get clearer in a minute.

The Brigadier-General saluted, and came down the bank towards David, who got up at once, and tried to forget he was thirsty. It was evident that something was going to happen without his having to go in search of it. Half-way down the bank, the Brigadier-General suddenly tripped over his own spurs, which were on the toes of his boots, and began rolling down into the lake. He fell into it with a loud splash, and all the soldiers behind began laughing.

'Silence in the ranks!' said David very grandly, turning round, for he knew that he must be somebody tremendous to have a Brigadier-General salute him.

There was a loud coughing sound from the lake, and a water-logged voice spluttered out:

'If your Grace would have the kindness to extend to me the tip of your Field-Marshal's baton, I should easily be able to get to land without the least risk of pulling your Grace in.'

That shed a fresh light on the situation, for David now knew that he was either a duke or an archbishop, and was also a field-marshal. He couldn't think of any archbishops who were field-marshals, but the names of the Duke of Marlborough and the Duke of Wellington instantly occurred to him as fitting the situation.

'I suppose I must be one of them,' thought David, 'unless I'm just Field-Marshal the Duke of Blaize, and if I was I should surely have known it before. But let me get my poor Brigadier-General out first.'

He found that he had under his arm a long pole like a fishing-rod, which was almost certainly his baton, and so he tied his handkerchief to the end of it, and began fishing for the Brigadier-General. It had got quite dark by now, and he could only just see a line of foam where the Brigadier-General was splashing about. Then there came a tug at his handkerchief, which bent his baton nearly double.

'Oh, I got a bite then,' said David excitedly.

'So did I, your Grace,' said the Brigadier-General. 'The fishes are biting my toes something awful. But there are spurs on them, and I think I've caught a pike.'

David fished again with renewed vigour, for now there was a chance of catching a brigadier-general and a pike all at one go, which was very sumptuous fishing.

'Look here,' he called out, 'if I catch you, and you've caught a pike, it's me who's caught the pike, isn't it?'

'That'll be settled by court-martial, your Grace,' said the voice from the darkness. 'Do put your baton a little lower.'

David felt very much inclined to say that he wouldn't go on fishing for him at all, unless he (the Brigadier-General) promised that he (David) should be considered to have caught not only him (the Brigadier-General), but also that he (David) should be allowed to claim the capture of the pike which he (the Brigadier-General) said that he (the Brigadier-General) had caught. But it was so difficult to express all this in terse soldierly language, that he decided to catch the Brigadier-General first, and settle the rest of it afterwards. Besides, if the Brigadier-General sank, David would have caught neither, and could very likely be court-martialled himself.

So he lowered the point of his baton, and soon got a better bite, and began towing him to land.

'Shall I gaff him, your Grace,' asked another officer, saluting David with both hands at once.

'No, I'm going to catch him all by myself,' said David, remembering how the footman had helped

him to catch a pike once, and how it hadn't been at all the same thing as having caught it unassisted. 'Get back into barracks at once.'

David brought his Brigadier-General alongside, and caught hold of something slippery which wriggled.

'That's the pike,' said a choking voice from the other end of the Brigadier-General. 'Lend a hand, your Grace, to a drowning soldier.'

David kept tight hold of the pike with one hand, put his baton over his shoulder, and began walking up the bank. The Brigadier-General came up out of the water with a loud pop, just as if a cork had been drawn.

'That's the ginger-beer, your Grace,' he said.

'Is it? It was lemonade this morning,' said David. 'This is an awfully strong pike. Turn up the light, somebody.'

David rescues the Brigadier-General

'That's all very well,' said a discontented voice from the ranks. 'But where is the blooming light? This is the darkest guard of honour I ever honoured.'

'There's a door in the ground,' said David, being jumped about by the pike. 'It's either water or light, but I can't remember which.'

'I've had enough water for the present,' said the Brigadier-General, shaking himself like a dog. He began with his head, and shook all down his body, and finished up with his sword.

There was a good deal of conversation going on in the ranks, and David determined to show himself an iron disciplinarian when the pike had finished bouncing him about. He kept tripping up in his sword, and his cocked hat, which he knew he had on his head, kept coming forward over his eyes, and rows on rows of medals jingled on his breast. The pike, of which he was resolved not to let go, had dragged him away into the flower-bed, and every now and then a bell jingled from the sleeping flowers.

'Oh, do let go,' said a whisper near him. 'I'm not a pike at all. How can you be so silly? I'm Miss Muffet's spider, and I was just skating along over the water, when that stupid spur caught me. I'm keeping her waiting, and I hate keeping a lady waiting.'

David let go at once, and he heard the spider canter away. At the same moment a stream of light shot up from the door in the ground, and putting his cocked-hat straight, he marched back to the guard of honour, with his baton, on the end of which fluttered his handkerchief, over his shoulder. He certainly had sailor-trousers on, but he was so covered with medals that he could not see what sort of coat he was wearing. It buttoned close round his neck, and he had an awful fear that it was the coat he had worn when errand-boy to the Bank. But there was no time to attend to that now, for his guard of honour were all yawning and looking bored, and his Brigadier-General was saluting, propping his elbow up with the other hand.

'If it will please your Grace to inspect the guard of honour,' he said, 'we can get to work on the plan of campaign, for there isn't a moment to waste!'

'Attention!' said David.

The Brigadier-General poked him in the side.

'They are at attention,' he whispered.

'I must have much more attention than that,' said David, beginning his inspection. 'What's this man doing with a toasting fork instead of a rifle, for instance?'

'If you please, your Grace, I was cooking sausages for your Grace's supper, when I was ordered out, and I hadn't time to put down my toasting fork nor nothing. It's cruel hard if a poor soldier——'

'Silence in the ranks!' said David.

Field-Marshal David inspects his guard of honour

The next one had got a croquet-mallet on his shoulder, the next a golf-club, and on the shoulder of the next was sitting a grey parrot, who pretended to sneeze loudly as David passed. The next had an umbrella, the next a pair of tongs; then came a judge in a wig, and a newspaper man who had folded a copy of the *Times* into a sort of lance. Altogether they were the oddest kind of guard of honour that David could imagine, and reminded him of some new sort of happy families. But then they might all be thinking that he was an equally curious sort of Field-Marshal, and so it was best, for the present, to pretend that everything was in order.

He came to the end of this very extraordinary line, and didn't know what to do next. But his Brigadier-General whispered to him, 'Say something nice, your Grace, and dismiss them. They know what to do.'

'It's all extremely nice,' said David in a loud firm voice, 'and I congratulate you on your fit and soldierly appearance. You are all dismissed. Good-night.'

The Brigadier-General gave a little sob.

'They will all remember your Grace's beautiful words till their dying day,' he said, as the men fell out. 'I dare say they won't have long to wait for *that*,' he added.

'Oh, do you expect a battle soon?' asked David.

'Your Grace shall see the maps that show the movement of the enemy for yourself,' said the Brigadier-General.

All the time they were threading their way through the tents on the lawn, and tripping over ropes and stepping into saucepans, and hitting their toes against shells, for the light from the door in the ground had gone out, and it was impossible to see what there was, or where you were going. The Brigadier-General's spurs got constantly caught in tent-ropes: when this happened he cut the rope with his sword, and the tent fell down flat. David thought this was rather a high-handed and hasty proceeding, but he daren't say much for fear of betraying some desperate ignorance, for it might be the privilege of Brigadier-Generals to cut any ropes they pleased.

Presently they came to a large square tent brilliantly lit inside, so that David could read the notice-board outside it, which said:

'Head and tail quarters of his Grace,' so he knew that this was his, and entered.

The tent smelled strongly of sausages, and no wonder, for one of the two tables was covered with them. The other was covered with maps. The rest of the furniture consisted of a small camp-bed, and a dressing-table, on which swords and tooth-brushes and medals and soap and bootlaces and cocked hats were lying about in the utmost confusion. A fire was burning brightly against the wall of the tent, which looked rather dangerous to David. It had already burned a hole right through the canvas behind it.

'I think that fire had better be put out,' he said to the Brigadier-General; 'it can't be very safe.'

The Brigadier-General blew at it as you would blow at a candle, and it went out instantly.

'And now we'll study the movements of the enemy,' said David, going to the map table.

He took up the first map that lay there, and found it all very clear, for it represented on a large scale the house and garden and lake and the village. There was a direction at the top stating, 'Route of the Enemy marked in red,' and David began to follow it.

It started from his house, which was odd, since he had never seen any trace of any enemy there, and went down the nursery passage till it came to a square marked 'Game cupboard, *alias* Miss Muffet's.' Then there was a gap and a note printed, 'Enemy movements hard to trace here. Possibly he flew.' And the red line began again in the village street close to the Bank. It went into the Bank and out again, crossed the road into the shoemaker's, and then went down the village street to the bridge. From there it returned to the Bank again. . . .

A terrible idea entered David's head. This was precisely the route he had taken himself after going through the blue door. He felt himself turn pale, and bent over the map again to make certain.

From the Bank the enemy had gone to the house next door, which was labelled 'Happy Families' Institute, *alias* Miss Milligan's School for young ladies, *alias* Station. Here enemy entrained.' From there his route passed through a field or two, and came to the hairdresser's, which was labelled 'Hairdresser's Junction.' After that it came to an end with the note. 'Enemy seen flying here at 8.34 A.M.'

David had no longer the slightest doubt that he was the enemy, and was now completely cut off in the middle of the camp of his foes. But then it puzzled him to know why they had made him their own Field-Marshal. Perhaps they didn't know he was the enemy, or perhaps they had made him

their Field-Marshal in order to lure him into this tent in the very middle of the camp. That seemed far the most likely explanation, and accounted for the guard of honour being so weird a collection of people. They were mocking him, or perhaps just putting him to the test, and seeing whether he knew anything whatever about soldiers. It must have been quite clear to them that he did not, and he could have kicked himself to think that he had gone wrestling with Miss Muffet's spider in the garden-bed when he ought to have been inspecting. He had thought it wonderfully grand to fly all day, and be a Field-Marshal as soon as it got dark, but now it seemed that there were penalties attached to greatness. Never had he or any other Field-Marshal been in so precarious a position.

He clearly had to escape, and to escape he had to be alone. He folded up the map.

'I have studied that thoroughly,' he said, 'and I want to be called at half-past seven in the morning. I will arrange the battle as soon as I have breakfasted.'

The Brigadier-General meantime had been eating sausages as hard as he could. He rapidly swallowed all that was in his mouth.

'Very good, your Grace,' he said. 'I will have the barbed wire put up round your Grace's headquarters.'

David reflected rapidly. It was far more likely that the barbed wire was intended to keep him in, rather than keep other people out. Of course he could get away by flying—at least he could have this morning, but he didn't feel quite so certain about it now. Still it would never do to let the Brigadier-General think he suspected anything, though he wished he had let the Brigadier-General drown.

'Make all the usual arrangements,' he said.

As soon as he had gone David sat down to think. He felt his heart beating very quickly, but the whole thing was so exciting that it could not be called really beastly.

'The plan is,' said he to himself, 'to make them believe I've gone to bed and don't know that they know that I'm the enemy. I must go to bed without going to bed.'

That was not so hard to manage. He took off his Field-Marshal's tunic with all its medals, and found, to his great relief, that he had his sailor clothes on below. So he stuffed a pillow into the tunic and buttoned it all the way down, and put it in his bed. Then he turned a sponge bag inside out so that it had the grey side outermost, put the sponge back in it, and laid it at the neck of the tunic with the Field-Marshal's cocked hat on the top. He could not spare his trousers for legs, so he rolled up two maps and placed them in the bed below the tunic, and covered the figure up to the waist with the bed-clothes.

Anyhow, there was the Field-Marshal in bed in his clothes, ready to spring up at the call of duty.

'That'll convince them if they look in that I've gone to bed,' said he, 'only it won't convince them so much if they see me as well. It's quite certain I must hide until I go away.'

He crept under the map-table, which had a cloth on it nearly coming to the ground, and thought of another thing to make them believe he was unsuspicious and asleep.

'I'll snore,' thought David, remembering how the crow had snored. 'Haw, caw, haw. Rumph, humph, haw! Haw haw-w-w-w-w. Rumph!'

He had hardly stopped when he heard whispering outside the tent.

'Yes, I peeped in,' said one voice, 'and there he was a-lying in his bed, an' you don't need to peep in to know he's lying there still, sleeping the last sleep he'll ever sleep on earth.'

'And the barbed wire's in place?' asked another voice.

'Yes. He couldn't get through if he was fifty Field-Marshals, and he isn't one.'

'Who is he then?' asked the first voice.

'Why, he's that little whipper-snapper as takes us out of our box and puts us back again, without a "with your leave," or "by your leave," nor anything. We'll put him in a box to-morrow, tight screwed down, too.'

'Just like his impudence to think himself a Field-Marshal,' said the second. 'Are we going to hang him first and shoot him next and behead him last, or t' other way about.'

'Makes no odds,' said the second. 'Eight o'clock to-morrow morning then, mate. Turn off the light in his tent, will you?'

David, under his table, shook with rage.

'The beastly fellows,' he whispered. 'And I've treated them very kindly, too. See if I don't melt them all down over the nursery fire!'

That was all very well, but it was still possible that he would be hung, shot, beheaded and buried first, and that was the business he had to attend to now. He was not anywhere near being able to get to the nursery fire, and in the meantime he was in a tent in the middle of the hostile camp, with any amount of barbed wire round him, and nothing to cut it with except a baton and some sausages.

'Oh, it's a horrid position,' thought David very seriously, 'but I must say it's exciting.'

When the whispers had died away he went very cautiously to the door-flap and peeped out. The moon had risen, and by its light he could see lumps and chunks of barbed wire piled up high right across the entrance, like a thicket of blackberry bushes without any leaves on. There was no possibility of getting out that way, and he walked round his tent, pressing quietly with his finger against the canvas, and always getting pricked by the barbed wire which evidently had been heaped up all round him. Then he came to the fire-place, where the fire had burned a hole in the canvas, before the Brigadier-General blew it out; and, looking cautiously out, he saw that there was a gap here between the hedges of barbed wire, for it had never occurred to anybody that he should get out right through the middle of the fire.

'That's the only chance,' thought David, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

He made a quantity of awful snore-noises again after that, and then very cautiously put his leg through the hole that the fire had burned in the canvas. Nobody interfered with it, and so he put the other leg through too, and presently stood outside his tent in a narrow alley between other tents. David had often sent himself to sleep by imagining himself escaping from positions of horrible danger, but now that it was necessary to escape without imagining anything, he felt extremely

wide-awake. Probably there would be sentries guarding the camp, past whom he must somehow slip, but here in the camp itself there was no sign of life. Once or twice he ran a few steps in the hope that he might remember how to fly, but he had no longer any idea now, in the middle of the night, how to tread air, or paddle with his hands, and he made up his mind that he must escape on his two feet. The ground was encumbered with tent-ropes, and the guard of honour appeared to have dropped all their accoutrements about, for golf-clubs and toasting forks and other irregular weapons lay around among trench mortars and machine-guns and the more usual apparatus of battle. Then he came across the grey parrot, who looked at him with suspicion, and immediately began walking away with its toes crossed, sneezing continuously. David went on more quickly and cautiously after that: it was more than possible that this horrid bird was spying on him. He never had considered parrots to be real birds, else they would not for ever be trying to make themselves sound like cats and dogs and Mabel the kitchenmaid.

He had come close to the gravel path by the lake where he had held his foolish inspection of the guard of honour, and where the camp ended, without seeing anybody, when suddenly he came upon a large letter, propped up against a rope and addressed to him. He knew quite well that this might be some trap, and that it might explode in his face when he opened it; but, on the other hand, it might be some valuable communication from the birds. So he bent down to pick it up, but hardly had he touched it when thousands and thousands of electric bells and gongs and watchmen's rattles went off all over the camp, and out of every tent there came the noise of people getting up and washing their faces, and brushing their teeth.

There was not a moment to lose, and without any attempt at concealing himself any more, he rushed across the gravel path, dodged a sentry, and ran down the bank to the edge of the lake. Since his Brigadier-General had fallen into the water (indeed, probably, in consequence of that), the fishes had put up their glass roof, and all over the lake below he saw the glimmer of their fires of red leaves.

'Oh, let me in,' he shouted, feeling like the pin-partridge on the ark. 'My awful soldiers are going to hang and behead me.'

Already the sentries were close upon him, when a trap-door opened in the roof, and David jumped down into it. He heard it clang to behind him, and knew he was safe.

CHAPTER VII

It was neither cold nor wet below the glass roof of the lake, for, as David already knew, when you are completely in the water, from your head to your heels, you never think of saying 'Oh, how wet it is!' and it is only when a piece of you is wet, like when you are washing your hands, or a snowball goes down your neck, that you think of wetness. Certainly also it was not cold, because there were so many red-leaf fires burning. Up overhead the moon shone very brightly through what David knew was ice to the ordinary world, but which it was much more correct to call fish-glass, and it made the most lovely lights in it, just as if all the diamond tiaras and emerald and ruby necklaces had been mashed up in the fish-glass.

'That's something to know,' he said to himself. 'When there's fish-glass on the lake, I shall make a hole in it and get underneath. What nonsense grown-up people talk! They all say it's dangerous to get under the ice—fish-glass, but it was the only safe thing to do. I suppose I'd better call on some fish and thank them for rescuing me.'

He began walking towards one of the red fires round which there were a lot of fish collected, but they all looked so very uninterested and solemn ('just as if they were hearing a sermon in church and not attending,' thought David), that he decided that he would explore a little first, and turned quickly off in another direction. At once he felt he was not walking any more, for his feet had come off the ground, and he was lying flat a few feet from the floor. This sensation was rather like losing your balance, and he made a sort of wriggle with his feet in order to recover it again. But instead of recovering his footing, he merely darted off at a great speed in a perfectly unexpected direction.

'Why, it's a sort of mad flying in the water,' he said to himself. 'O-oh, I see, it's swimming fish-fashion.'

This was a great discovery; he flicked his feet again, and plunged into a great thicket of water-trees that waved and swayed round him. Once more he kicked, but instead of darting forward again, he came to a dead stop, though he couldn't understand how he had kicked differently from before. Another kick made him spin round, and once again he kicked as he had kicked the first time, and flew out into the open.

'Take care where you're going,' said a thick, bored voice near him, and, turning round very cautiously lest he should fly off again, he saw an old brown trout, not looking at him exactly, but not looking anywhere else. One eye—the only one that David could see, in fact—seemed to be turned towards him rather than towards anything else, but it merely stared vacantly at him, as if it was painted there.

'I beg your pardon,' said David, 'but I don't seem to go where I want.'

The trout opened and shut its mouth once or twice without saying anything, and then it slewed round and turned its other eye upon him. Then it turned its back on him altogether, and took no further notice of him.

This was rather an unpromising beginning, but David was so eager to learn how to swim, fish-fashion, that he risked being snubbed.

'Could you spare me the time just to show me the sort of way it goes?' he asked.

'You wave yourself,' said the trout, 'and then you go. The sooner you go, the better I shall be pleased.'

David waved himself, and ran into the trout's tail.

'Don't do that,' said the trout, not the least angrily, but in the same bored manner. 'It's bad manners to hit anybody's tail. You're a very ill-bred sort of creature.'

'I'm very sorry,' said David. 'I didn't mean to hit you.'

'Then you did it without meaning,' said the trout, with its back to him, 'which is worse, because there's no sense in it, if it doesn't mean anything. I wish you would go away. Right away, I mean: none of your hanging about here. Get some low, coarse fish to teach you. I'm busy.'

David felt rather discouraged. He didn't know what adventure might happen next, or how soon it might happen, and he wanted to learn how to swim fish-fashion before something else took place. But he felt he could not face any more dull eyes just yet, which looked at you as if you didn't mean anything, and so he moved very cautiously away from this stupid old thing, for fear of butting it again, and began practising by himself. He found it was not so difficult as it seemed to be at first (which is the case with most things). The great point was to make up your mind first where you wanted to go to, and then look at the place and wave yourself, and he found that he usually went in that sort of direction, just as if there was something inside him that knew how to do it, if he only told it what he wanted. He passed a fish now and then, which took no notice whatever of him, and presently he found he was getting on so well that he wished to show off to somebody, so he returned in the direction of the trout that was so busy. There it was precisely as David had left it, doing nothing whatever except slowly opening and shutting its mouth, and staring at nothing at all. So David gave a tremendous kick in order to dash up to it in a real fish-boy-like manner, and, miscalculating his direction, ran violently into its nose.

'Don't go on doing that,' said the trout. 'You butt me here, and you butt me there, and you've got no self-control. It's very boring of you. Better go away. You needn't bother to come back any more, for ever. I shan't miss you at all. I only wish you had missed me.'

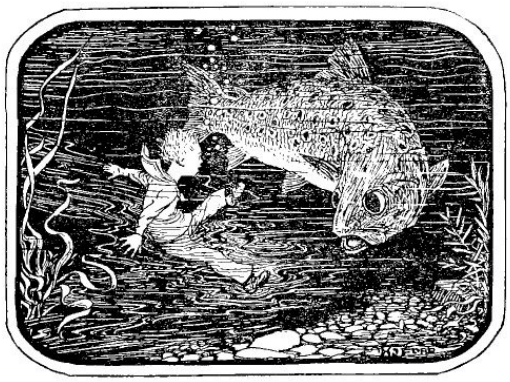
'I wish I had too,' said David. 'But I was getting on so nicely, and I wanted to show somebody.'

'And you're mudding everything up,' said the trout. 'So you'd better show somebody else, and not me. I don't care what you do, or where you go, so long as you don't do and go it here.'

David felt annoyed at this.

'Are all trout as rude as you?' he asked.

The trout opened its mouth two or three times, and each time David thought it was going to speak.



David and the trout

'Yes,' it said at length. 'All.'

'I should think you must get rather tired of each other's company then,' said David.

Again it seemed as if the trout was going to speak, and this time David counted that it opened and shut its mouth eleven times before it answered.

'We are,' it said. 'We're each of us tired of everybody else. But I'm most tired of you. I hate being interrupted when I'm busy, and I hate people running into my face. I never have liked it, and I don't mean to begin now.'

'Well, I've apologised for that,' said David. 'I can't do more.'

This time the trout opened and shut its mouth only nine times before it answered.

'Yes, you can,' it said. 'You can go away. I can't think why you don't.'

David was naturally a polite boy, but when any one was rude to him he could easily be rude back. He forgot all about his swimming fish-fashion.

'I don't believe you're a bit busy,' he said. 'You haven't done a thing since I was here before. You've just waved and stared.'

The trout looked at David with one eye, then moved his head and looked at him with the other.

'That's two things then,' it said.

'Yes, but that doesn't make you busy,' said David. 'You couldn't possibly be idler. That doesn't count.'

A faint gleam of intelligence came into that foolish face.

'I can count,' said the trout. 'One—two—four—three—nine and a half—a hundred. There!'

'You're quite wrong,' said David. 'It goes one—two—six—four. Let me see what does come after four?' he added, suddenly forgetting how to count himself.

'Nothing: that's the end,' said the trout. 'You needn't wait any longer. We've both finished. You may get down. Never mind about wiping your mouth or anything.'

'One—two—six—fourteen,' began David again, determined to get it right, when suddenly he was blown all sideways, as it were, by a tremendous draught of water, and the trout's tail whisked by his face. As for the trout itself, that one swish of its tail had carried it ten yards away, and it was

drifting back again with an enormous worm hanging out of its mouth. Its cheeks bulged with it, and its eyes stared so that David thought they would drop out. But in two or three gulps it managed to swallow the rest of the worm, and to David's great surprise it looked almost pleasant and winked at him.

'There!' it said. 'Now you know why I was so busy. I shall have a holiday for three minutes until I'm hungry again. Who are you, and what are you doing here, without being drowned? It's all very irregular.'

'I was a Field-Marshal last,' began David, rather proudly.

'What a stupid thing to be!' said the trout, 'especially as there aren't any fields here. And who asked you to come to my lake?'

'Nobody. I chose to come,' said David.

'Well, I choose next: I choose that you should go away. I believe you are a sort of caddis-worm, whom nobody likes.'

'No, I'm not,' said David. 'I'm a boy.'

'Then you can't be a Field-Marshal. That's one to me.'

'Are we playing a game?' he asked. 'Is it a sort of happy families?'

'No. Two to me. Go away. I've got to be busy again.'

'What you mean by being busy,' said David, 'is that you want to eat something.'

The trout's eye began to get glazed and vacant.

'Worms!' it said.

'I believe that's all you ever think about,' said David.

The stupid mouth began opening and shutting, and David began counting, rather relieved to find that he could do so again. The seventh time it opened the trout said:

'No, it isn't.'

'What else do you think about then?' asked David.

'Worms,' said the trout.

'But that's the same thing,' said David.

This time the trout opened and shut its mouth so often without saying anything at all that David felt that there was no use in waiting any longer for it to speak. Even when it did speak, too, it was almost stupider than when it didn't, and since he had come through the blue door he had met nobody so completely uninteresting. The groups round the fires looked just as hopeless, and he felt that he was only wasting his time. But he could not resist saying what he thought.

'You're much the stupidest thing I ever saw,' he said. 'I shall go away.'

'That's what I always wanted you to do,' said the trout. 'And mind you don't come back.'

David wondered whether fish might not be a little brighter at the top end of the lake where the stream flowed into it, and he waved his way up there. But even swimming fish-fashion had ceased to amuse him, for he did not want to do anything that fishes did.

'If I learned to swim like them,' he said to himself, 'I should grow like them perhaps, and that would be awful. I shall get out of the water altogether when I come to the end of the roof. They never put it up over the stream.'

By and by the roof got thinner, and when he came into the stream, he found, as he had expected, that there was no roof at all. He put his head up very cautiously for fear he was not far enough away from the camp, and that he might be pursued again, but found that a mist had come up, quite covering the lawn, though bugles were still sounding there, and he felt safe in landing on the far side of the stream, underneath the shelter of the bridge. The moonlight felt very warm and comfortable after the water, and the moment he stepped on to land he was quite dry again, if he had ever really been wet at all.

He had hardly taken his second foot out of the water when there was a great swirl in the stream behind him, and the head of a huge wicked pike snapped at his heel.

'You little wretch,' it said. 'How dare you come into my lake? If I had only known about you a minute sooner, I'd have eaten you up.'

David bounded up the bank. He had never seen anything so ugly and cruel.

'You beastly fish,' he said. 'If I had teeth like you, I should go to the dentist. I'm not frightened of you.'

He was terrified really, but when you are frightened, it is always comforting to say you're not.

'Yes, you are,' said the pike, snapping his jaws, and shouldering his way up through the shallow water. 'You daren't come down into the stream again.'

'I don't want to come into your muddy stream,' said David. 'I should if I wanted to. And for that matter you daren't come up here.'

'Yes, I dare,' said the pike, pushing farther up, till half his horrid body was out of the stream. 'And I'm coming too.'

David really didn't feel sure that he wasn't, for since he had got through the blue door, he had found that animals and soldiers and flowers could do all sorts of things that you wouldn't expect they were able to. So he made himself very dignified, and walked away from the stream, trying very hard not to hurry till he was out of sight of the pike.

'Coward, coward,' yelled the pike. 'You wait till I catch you.'

David felt pretty safe now, for he knew that he must be able to run on land as fast as a pike, but he continued to walk away, along by the hedge, till he had put a considerable distance between himself and the stream. It was not quite proper for a bird-boy and a Field-Marshal to run away from a fish, but this was such an awful fish. . . .

There were two signboards, he knew, in this field, one down by the river about fishing, and the other where there was a path across it, on which was the notice, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law.' He did not mind about that notice since both the field and the notice belonged to his father, but when he came to the second signboard and looked up at it, he felt suddenly frozen with terror, and his teeth chattered like Mr. Funk the bather. For instead of the

ordinary notice this was written up in large capitals:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE MARRIED
WITH THE UTMOST RIGOUR OF
THE LAW

‘Oh, what am I to do?’ thought poor David. ‘There’s a girl coming into it after all. I know she’ll spoil everything.’

He began running back towards the stream again, for he felt he would rather fight the pike than be married, but then he thought of those savage jaws and those dreadful teeth, and his legs simply would not take him any nearer the stream. They said ‘No!’ just as if they had spoken aloud. Between his mind that said that he had better face any danger sooner than be married, and his legs that said that they would go anywhere except towards the pike, he completely lost his head, and began running in circles round the field, saying to himself in a most determined voice:

‘I won’t be married, I won’t be eaten by the pike, I won’t be married to a pike, I won’t be eaten by anybody.’

Noah pursues David

So round and round he ran, though all the time there was nothing easier than to walk out of the gate and get away from the marriage-meadow altogether, for there was not a soul in sight nor any sound except that of the pike still calling ‘Coward! Coward!’ But David had quite lost his head, and such a simple thing as that never occurred to him at all. And then he saw that he wasn’t alone in the field, for there was a man in a hard hat and an ulster following him round and round. He was not running, but was sliding, and all the time he got nearer and nearer to David. All the time, too, David knew that he knew who it was, but he had forgotten, just as he had forgotten how to fly, or how to count when he was talking to that foolish trout. Nearer and nearer he crept, and David, looking round, saw that he was already extending a stiff wooden arm to catch him. When he saw that he was on the point of being caught, he recovered his wits and knew that all he had to do was to get away from the marriage-meadow at once. So, with redoubled speed, he bolted towards the side of the field nearest him, just outside which there stood a house with the door wide open. He didn’t care at all whether he was prosecuted for going into a house that wasn’t his own; all that mattered was to escape from this dreadful field where all trespassers were married.

In he rushed with the sliding figure close behind him, and the door banged to after them.

CHAPTER VIII

David was completely out of breath, and leaned against the wall to recover, while his pursuer did the same. He remembered who it was now.

‘Oh, it’s you, Noah!’ he panted. ‘I couldn’t remember who you were. Why did you run after me?’

Noah wiped his face with the edge of his ulster.

‘To catch you,’ said he. ‘What else should I run after you for? The point is: Why did you run away?’

David didn’t see why he should tell Noah that his legs had been running away from the pike, and his mind from being married. It had got nothing to do with Noah, and besides it was a slightly undignified confession.

‘I like running,’ he said. ‘I shall walk and run, and fly and swim, just as I choose.’

‘Hoity-toity!’ said Noah. ‘I expect that’ll be as *she* chooses.’

‘Whom do you mean by “she”?’ asked David quite cheerfully, for he had escaped from the awful meadow without being caught, and all risk of being married was over.

‘I can’t tell you yet,’ said Noah, ‘but you’ll soon know. I’m not certain who we have on our books this morning. Hark! There are the church-bells beginning. That’s for you.’

This all sounded rather mysterious, but he couldn’t ask Noah any more questions this moment, for he had gone inside a big cupboard in the wall, where he appeared to be dressing-up. While he

was doing this, David had a look round the room. There was a row of chairs against the wall and a big open fire-place, and in the centre a table on which were all sorts of writing materials, a large book on which was printed ‘Female Register,’ and a bottle of water and a glass. At each corner of the room was a pillar that looked as if it didn’t support the roof exactly, but went through it. Somehow this made David feel a little uncomfortable, for it reminded him of the giraffe at the animals’ ball. Also he saw that on the top of the paper in the writing-case were printed the words ‘Registry Office.’ He did not know what it meant, but it and the pillars in the corners of the room made him feel uneasy, as he felt before a thunderstorm.

There was a sound of whispering in the cupboard, and he heard Noah’s voice say:

‘I go in first: wait till I call you. One of you announce me.’

There was a short pause, and David distinctly heard the noise of somebody eating. Then a rather hoarse voice said:

‘I’ll have finished in a moment. I call that a good bit of meat.’

David guessed that this must be Miss Bones, though he could not imagine what she was doing here. It sounded like Miss Bones’s voice, and it also sounded like the sort of thing that Miss Bones said. Then the same voice said, just as if its mouth was full:

‘The Registrar,’ and a rude swallowing sound followed.

Noah came out of the cupboard. He had got a wig on, and some false whiskers and a lawyer’s gown. He seemed to have taken off his stand, for instead of sliding he stalked along with a very important air.

‘Oh, is it charades?’ said David. ‘Have I got to guess? I bet you I guess. It’s——’

‘Silence!’ said Noah very severely.

He came and sat down at the table, and began turning over the leaves of the book called ‘Female Register.’ Then he took a sip of water and spoke:

‘David Blaize, I believe,’ he said, ‘charged with trespass in the marriage-meadow. Speak up.’

‘I haven’t spoken at all yet,’ said David.

‘Then you’ve got nothing to say for yourself, I suppose?’ said Noah.

A brilliant idea struck David.

‘I’m not in the marriage-meadow now,’ he said. ‘How do you intend to prove I was there at all? It was only you who say you saw me, and you are only a person out of my own ark.’

Noah got up, and opened the door into the meadow. David could hear the pike still calling ‘Coward!’ He was coughing violently, having been so long in the air.

‘Pike!’ shouted Noah. ‘Come in, pike!’

David’s legs began to want to run somewhere.

‘No! shut the door,’ he said. ‘I was in the marriage-meadow, but I didn’t know.’

‘Go away, pike,’ said Noah, and shut the door. ‘Very well, then, that’s proved,’ he said. ‘The next thing to do is to see who’s on the books.’

He turned over the leaves.

‘Very small selection to-day,’ he said to David, ‘but some very pleasant clients among them. The names are as follows:

‘Number one, giraffe.’

‘Here,’ said a silly whisper from the top storey.

‘You’ve got to come in,’ said Noah.

The pillars at the corners of the room stirred uneasily, and David saw what they really were. Then there came a sound from upstairs as if banisters were breaking, and the mild surprised-looking face came down the chimney, upside-down, and covered with soot.

‘That’s all I can do at present unless I begin to walk,’ she whispered. ‘Why, it’s that boy again. I am surprised. May I jump?’

‘No, certainly not,’ said Noah. ‘Stop quite still, or you shan’t be married.’

The giraffe winked at David, and extended her neck a little, till her mouth was close to his ear.

‘Can you grow again?’ she asked. ‘If you can’t, it’s all rather ridiculous. You would always be in the cellar, and I in the attic. We should never meet, which would be so sad for you.’

‘Silence,’ said Noah. ‘Number two, Miss Bones, the butcher’s daughter.’

‘Here,’ said Miss Bones, coming out of the cupboard.

She had got something that looked like an ox-tail, and was munching it. She sat down on one of the chairs by the wall, and pointed with the end of the ox-tail at David.

David in the registry office

‘Is that it?’ she said in a tone of disgust. ‘Why, he’s a mere upstart. None of us know him.’

David felt furious at this.

‘If you don’t take care, I shall collect you,’ he said.

‘Silence,’ said Noah. ‘Number three, Miss Muffet.’

There was a rustling in the cupboard, and out came Miss Muffet.

‘Well, I never!’ she said. ‘If it isn’t the cheeky little rascal who tried to keep my kind good spider from me last night, thinking he was a pike. But as I’m on the books, I suppose there’s no help for it.’

‘That’s all,’ said Noah, closing the book with such a bang that Miss Bones dropped her ox-tail. ‘Now, David Blaize, it’s for you to choose.’

‘But I don’t choose any of them,’ said David, in a sort of agony. ‘I’m sure they’re all delightful, but I don’t want to be married. I didn’t come here for that; nobody understands. My house wouldn’t hold a giraffe to begin with——’

‘Build another storey,’ whispered the giraffe in his ear, ‘and you can probably grow. You did before. I don’t mind marrying you.’

‘But I mind marrying you very much,’ said David. ‘You can’t do anything but whisper and waltz.’

‘No, but I can learn,’ whispered the giraffe. ‘I was always considered the cleverest of the family.’

‘Then they must have been a very stupid family,’ said David.

‘Hush!’ said Noah severely.

‘I shan’t hush,’ said David.

The giraffe began to cry.

‘I thought you had such a kind face,’ she whispered, ‘but you don’t seem to care for me. If you only built a storey or two on to your house, and took out the staircase, and grew a great deal, we might be quite happy. You must be patient and grow.’

‘Oh, shut up,’ said Miss Bones, seizing the water-bottle on the table. She drank out of the mouth of it in a very rude manner, and spilt a quantity of it. ‘He doesn’t want you, and you don’t want him, and you’re only shamming. But what’s the matter with me?’

David turned on her.

‘The matter with you is,’ he said, ‘that you’re always eating raw meat. I’d sooner be eaten by the pike than see you eat all day and night.’

Miss Bones put the ox-tail into her mouth again.

‘So that’s that,’ she mumbled. ‘There’s no accounting for tastes.’

Miss Muffet cleared her throat and coughed, holding her hand up to her mouth in the most genteel way.

‘That leaves me,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be married, as I told you before. But if you’ll beg my dear spider’s pardon, and he says there’s room for you on the tuffet, I’ll forgive you, and you may sleep in the bathing-machine. There! And you can ride the stuffed horse whenever you like.’

The registrar had been drawing pictures of David on the blotting-paper.

‘When I have counted ten,’ he said. ‘You’ve got to choose. If you don’t, I shall choose for you. What’s that?’ he added, looking up at the window.

A large mild face was pressed against the glass, and there was the cow outside, moving her mouth round and round, and breathing so heavily against the window that it was almost impossible to see out. Then the glass gave way under the pressure of her nose, and she put her head into the room.

‘Moo! Put my name down,’ she said. ‘I’m incognito, so call me a porter.’

‘You’re too late for this morning,’ said Noah.

‘No, I’m not,’ said the cow.

‘You are,’ said Noah angrily. ‘Don’t interrupt. One—two—three—four——’

The cow breathed heavily into the room.

‘Why, it’s the boy who went Anywhere,’ she said, seeing David. ‘I never thought the express called here, dearie.’

David ran across to that kind, mild creature.

‘Oh, do knock the whole place down,’ he said. ‘They want to marry me, and it’s all so beastly. Butt at it, as you did at my luggage.’

‘Five—six,’ said Noah.

‘All right, dearie,’ said the cow, shaking bits of broken glass from her ears. ‘You just get behind the door, and I’ll see to them all. But you must promise not to go milking me again.’

‘Never, never,’ shrieked David. ‘But be quick; he’s counted six already.’

‘Seven—eight,’ said Noah.

The cow backed into the village street, and David saw her tail fly up with a spring. She put her head down, and came galloping towards the house, and he ran behind the door.

‘Nine—ten!’ said Noah. ‘Choose, or be chosen for.’

At that moment the cow’s head crashed into the wall below the window. Miss Muffet gave one faint scream, and said, ‘Spider, dear!’ Miss Bones whirled her ox-tail round her head like a sling, and, intending to hit the cow, hit Noah the most awful slap on his false whiskers, which fell off. The giraffe’s head went up the chimney with a pop and a shower of soot descended into the room.

‘Now, run, dearie,’ said the cow to David. ‘Run for your life. The whole lot of them will be after you.’

David had no thought but to get back to the blue door, and into his bedroom again, and as the shortest way was across the marriage-meadow, and over the bridge, and up the garden path, and in at the garden door, and up the stairs, and past the game-cupboard, he no longer cared what enemies he might meet on his way. The pike might have come up into the meadow, and the soldiers might be on the lawn, but nothing mattered except to get back to the blue door by the shortest possible route.

All the adventure of being a Field-Marshal was nothing to this.

So out he ran, and there, on the threshold, was the pike, which had flopped its way all across the meadow when Noah called it, and it gave a fearful snap at David, and pulled off one of his shoes. The other stuck in a piece of marshy land near the bridge, but he didn’t stop for that, and just ran and ran.

Behind him he heard a noise growing louder every minute: there were lions roaring and elephants trumpeting, and marbles rolling, and sounds of gimlets and hammers that showed the happy families were on his track, and whistles from engines, and bells ringing as if the whole village had caught fire, or was just going to have dinner; and when he came to the bridge, he heard bugles and drums in the camp, and the fat voice of the Brigadier-General giving orders. The stupid trout had put its head through the ice, and was shouting, ‘Here he comes,’ and a machine-gun began peppering away, and a huge cannon-ball flew by him. Mixed up in this he heard the canter of the spider, and the parrot sneezing, and the hoarse voice of Miss Bones shrieking ‘My papa will make cutlets of him, and I’ll eat him.’

Then from the elms there came a sound of cawing, and from the bushes a sound of twittering, and chirping from the long garden wall. He had never heard so much bird-noise, even at the meeting of the flying committee.

‘It’s the birds,’ thought David. ‘If they’re against me, I’m done!’

For one moment he stood quite still, feeling that it was no use to go on if the birds, too, were his enemies. But then he heard a whistle of wings close above him, and a voice said:

‘Fly in their faces, and confuse them. There’s a trout down there, kingfisher, giving the alarm. Go and peck him.’

David runs for home

David wasted no more time, except to call out, ‘Thanks awfully, birds,’ and ran on up the garden-

path. He could see jays settling on the tents, and woodpeckers tapping to see if they had come to the right place, and on he ran till he came to the garden door. It was open, and he rushed up the stairs, and felt his way past the game-cupboard, for it was quite dark here, and turned the corner into the nursery passage where the flame-cats had danced.

But now there were no flame-cats here, unless one tiny glimmer of light on the wall was the remains of one, and he had to grope his way—and, oh, how long it seemed—to the end of the passage, where he remembered that the blue door was. He had left the key hanging up on a nail beside it, but now he could not remember which side it was, and as he groped for it, he knocked down the bottle which had something to do with the electric light. As it gurgled away on the floor, he remembered that he had shaken it, to shock the flame-cats and made them stop dancing, and now he felt for it at his feet, meaning to shake it, and get the electric light to flare out again, so that he might find the key of the blue door. But the stopper had come out, and it was empty, and when he shook it nothing whatever happened.

Meantime the pursuit had got much nearer, and he could hear that a lion or two, and some soldiers had come to the garden door.

'He went in here,' roared a lion. 'I can smell him.'

Then the Brigadier-General spoke.

'Bring up the machine-guns,' he said, 'and rake the passage from end to end. Then advance in open order.'

David heard the bullets rattling against the wall of the passage at the corner, and knew that when they had turned that, he would be exposed to their full fire again. There was no cover of any sort or kind; when once they had advanced to the corner, he had nowhere left to go, unless he could find the key of the door.

Then he heard the voice of the Brigadier-General when the firing stopped.

'Up the stairs and right turn,' he said. 'Then open fire again. I'm behind you, so don't be afraid.'

David pressed his hands to his head, and squeezed it to see if there was a single idea left in it. There was just one.

'Oh, flame-cats,' he said. 'I *did* stop shocking you when you asked me. Do show a light just for a minute.'

Then the one little glimmer on the wall began to grow brighter, and he saw it was the eye of a flame-cat. Then another eye lit up, as if a gas-lighter in the street had turned it on, and after that the apricot-and-poppy-coloured tabby appeared. 'Set to partners,' it said, and disappeared again, like water running out of the hole at the bottom of a basin. But in that moment's light, David had found the key and fitted it into the lock of the blue door.

'There's just time to take the key with me,' he said, and pulled the door open. Before he had shut it after him, and locked it again, he heard a voice say 'Fire,' and there was a tremendous explosion.

He had fallen forward on his bed, and the pillow went with a soft thump on to the floor. But tight clenched in his hand was the golden key, and the door was shut and locked behind him.

David reaches home

David didn't remember having taken off his sailor clothes and put on his pyjamas, but here he was in them now, and his sailor clothes were in a heap on the floor, and the light of the dawn was coming in through his windows. He felt tremendously sleepy, but before he turned round to get under his bed-clothes, he opened his hand to look at the golden key. But there was no key there: it was only the pin-partridge.

For the moment he was horribly disappointed, but almost instantly he cheered up again.

'It doesn't matter a bit!' he said. 'I know how to get through the door now. Oh, what an exciting night. I wonder——'

But before he knew what he wondered he fell fast asleep.

When he went down to breakfast next morning, he found his father and mother already there. One was munching toast, and the other was reading the paper, in their dull way.

'Good morning, David,' said his mother. 'You're rather late, darling.'

His father stopped munching toast for a second.

'Did the birds awake you, too, David?' he said. 'I never heard such a noise as there was about dawn.'

‘I heard them,’ said David. ‘I went to sleep again afterwards.’

Just think! That was all that the grown-up people knew about those lovely adventures. David had never felt so sorry for them. Poor things.

And then his mother began reading the paper again, and his father asked her if anything had happened.

‘If anything has happened!’ thought David, a little bit aloud.

‘What did you say, darling?’ asked his mother.

‘Oh, nothing,’ said David. ‘I was only thinking.’

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.
Some illustrations moved to facilitate page layout.

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