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Author: Martha Young

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SOMEBODY'S LITTLE GIRL

by Martha Young

Dedication

To
Two Little Elizabeths:
Elizabeth Young
and
Elizabeth Magruder

SOMEBODY'S LITTLE GIRL

If I were just to tell the things that Bessie Bell remembered I should tell you some very strange things. Bessie Bell did not know whether she remembered them, or just knew them, or whether they just grew, those strange things in some strange country that never was anywhere in the world; for when Bessie Bell tried to tell about those strange things great grown wise people said: "No, no, Bessie Bell, there is nothing in the world like that."

So Bessie Bell just remembered and wondered.

She remembered how somewhere, sometime, there was a window where you could look out and see everything green, little and green, and always changing and moving, away, away—beyond everything little, and green, and moving all the time. But great grown wise folks said: "No, there is no window in all the world like that."

And once when some one gave Bessie Bell a little round red apple she caught her breath very quickly and her little heart jumped and then thumped very loudly (that is the way it seemed to her) and she remembered: Little apple trees all just alike, and little apple trees in rows all just alike on top of those and again on top of those until they came to a great row of big round red apples on top of all.

Rut great grown people said: "No, no, Bessie Bell, there are no apple trees in all the world like that."

And one time Bessie Bell was at a pretty house and somebody sat her on a little low chair and said: "Keep still, Bessie Bell."

She kept still so long that at last she began to be afraid to move at all, and she got afraid even to crook up her little finger for fear it would pop off loud,—she had kept still so long that all her round little fingers and her round little legs felt so stiff.

Then one, great grown person said: "She seems a very quiet child." And the other said: "She is a very quiet child—sometimes."

But just then Bessie Bell turned her head, and though her round little neck felt stiff it did not pop! —and she saw—something in a corner that was blue, green, and brown, and soft, and she forgot how afraid to move she was, and she forgot how stiff she thought she was, and she forgot how still she was told to be, and she jumped up and ran to the corner and cried out: "Pretty! Pretty! Pretty!"

One grown person took up the Thing that was blue, and green, and brown, and soft, and waved it to and fro, to and fro in front of Bessie Bell.

And Bessie Bell clapped her hands, and jumped for joy, and laughed, and cried: "Boo! boo! boo!"

And Bessie Bell ran right into the Thing that was blue, and green, and brown, and soft, and she threw out her round little arms and clasped them about the Thing that was blue, and green, and brown, and soft!

And she pulled it over her face, and she laughed and cried for joy—because she remembered—

But the great grown person who had brought Bessie Bell to the pretty house said: "Oh, Bessie Bell! Why, Bessie Bell! For shame, Bessie Bell! How could you do so to the beautiful peacock-feather-fly-brush!"

So Bessie Bell could only cry—and that very softly—and feel ashamed as she was bid, and forget what it was that she remembered.

Bessie Bell might have remembered one time when a great house was all desolate, and when nobody or nothing at all breathed in the whole great big house, but one little tiny girl and one great big white cat, with just one black spot on its tail.

The nurse that always had played so nicely with the tiny little girl was lying with her cheek in her hand over yonder.

The Grandmother who had always talked so much to the tiny little girl was not talking any more.

The tiny little girl was so sick that she only just could breathe quickly, just so—and just so—.

If Bessie Bell could remember that, it was only that she remembered the big white cat like a big soft dream. And she might have remembered how, now and then, the big cat put out a paw and touched the little girl's cheek, like a soft white dream-touch.

And that little girl had on a night-gown that was long, and soft, and white, and on that little white night-gown was worked, oh so carefully, in linen thread: "Bessie Bell."

Then the few people who walked about the world in Fever-time came in to that big house, and they took up that little tiny girl that breathed so softly and so quickly—just so!

And they read on her little white night-gown the words written with the linen thread: "Bessie Bell."

And they said: "Let us take this little girl with us."

They put a big soft white blanket around the little girl and walked out of the big house with her, someone carrying her in strong arms.

And the big white cat got down off the big white bed and rubbed himself against the bedpost, and went round and round the bed-post, and rubbed himself round and round the bed-post.

And the tiny little girl never saw the big house, or the big soft white cat any more.

And now when it happened that she remembered something, great grown people said: "No, no, Bessie Bell, there is nothing in the world like that."

So she just wondered and remembered, and almost forgot what it was that she did remember.

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Sister Mary Felice had all the little tiny girls playing in the sand: that was the place that was meant for the little girls to play in.

All the little girls had on blue checked aprons. All the aprons had straps and buttons behind.

For just one hour every day all the little tiny girls played in the sand, and while they played Sister Mary Felice sat on a willow-wrought bench and watched them play.

Then when that hour was exactly passed Sister Angela always came with a basket of netted canes, an Indian basket, on her arm. In the Indian basket were little cakes—such nice little cakes—always they had caraway seeds in them.

One day Sister Mary Felice said: "Sister Angela, did Sister Ignatius put too many caraway seeds in the cakes this time?"

Sister Angela said: "I think not, Sister Mary Felice. Will you try one?"

Sister Mary Felice said: "I thank you, Sister Angela."

Then Sister Mary Felice took one to try.

Then always Sister Angela, with the Indian basket on her arm, took all the little girls to the long back gallery that was latticed in.

On a low shelf close against the lattice sat a row of white basins.

Then all the little tiny girls washed their little tiny hands in the white basins. And while they washed their little tiny hands by twos and by threes together, two little girls washing their hands in one basin together, three little girls washing their hands together, they all oftentimes laughed together and said:

"Wash together!
And be friends forever!
Wash together!
And be friends forever!"

Then Sister Angela held a long pink checked towel in her hands while the little tiny girls came as their tiny hands were washed and wiped them on the pink checked towel.

Then if two little girls took hold of the pink checked towel at once they both laughed and sang:

"Don't wipe together,
Or we'll fight
Before night."

And the other little girls that were still washing their hands in the white basins on the low shelf by the back-gallery lattice sang over and over again:

"Wash together! We'll wash together!
And we'll be happy forever!"

When all the pink clean tiny hands were wiped dry, or as nearly dry as little girls do wipe tiny pink hands, on the pink checked towel held for them by Sister Angela, then Sister Angela hung the pink checked towel on the lowest limb of the arbor-vita tree. Then the little girls all ran to sit down in a row on the lowest step of the back gallery, with their little feet on the gravel below. Sister Angela walked the length of the row, and gave to each little girl in the row a sweet tiny cake, or maybe Sister Angela walked twice down the row and gave to each little girl two cakes, or sometimes maybe she walked three times down the row, and then each little girl had three cakes; but no one little girl ever had more than every other little girl.

Always Sister Angela sat a little way off from the row of the little girls. She always sat on a bench under the great magnolia-tree and watched the tiny girls as they ate their tiny cakes.

And always the pink checked towel waved itself ever so softly to and fro on the lowest limb of the arbor-vitae-tree, for that was the way that pink checked towels did to help to dry themselves after helping to dry so many little pink fingers. Often, so often, little brown sparrows came hopping to the gravel to pick up any tiny crumbs of cake that the little girls dropped, but you may be sure that they did not drop so very many, many little brown crumbs for little brown birds to find.

But if they were dropped, even if by rare chance were the crumbs so large as to be nearly as large as half of a cake—why then, that crumb had to stay for those little birds. It was the law! The law that the little girls had made for themselves, and nobody but themselves knew about that law—for the good of the birds. But no little girl cared to disobey that law of their own that nobody but themselves knew about, for if one had—how dreadful it would have been—no little girl would have played with her until—oh, so long, so long—until she might at last have been forgiven!

So all the little brown crumbs that the tiny little girls did drop, why the tiny little brown birds did pick up,—and they never said whether they liked caraway seeds or not!

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One day when the tiny little girls were all in a row eating cakes, Sister Angela, sitting on a bench under the magnolia, said quite suddenly: "Good morning!"

She rose up from her seat under the great magnolia.

Then the little brown birds fluttered up from the gravel.

Then all the little girls looked up.

There stood two pretty grown-up people.

And these two grown-up people had no soft white around their faces like the soft white around the face that Sister Angela wore, and they had no black veils, soft and long like the black veil that Sister Angela wore. And they had no little white crosses like the small white cross that Sister Angela wore on the breast of her soft black dress.

One of the pretty-grown up folks looked at one of the little tiny girls and said: "And what is her name?"

Sister Angela said: "Bessie Bell was written on her little white night-gown, done in linen thread."

And Sister Angela said: "Yes, we have always kept the little white night-gown."

And one of the pretty grown-up people said: "Yes, that was right. Always to keep the little white night-gown."

And the other grown-up person said: "And how comes that to be all that you know?"

Sister Angela said: "Because of the fever."

And the pretty one said: "The dreadful fever!"

Sister Angela said: "Yes. The dreadful fever. It often leaves none in a house, and even sometimes none in a whole neighborhood to tell the story."

If, as Sister Angela and the pretty grown person talked, there came to Bessie Bell any thought of a great silent house, and a big white cat, with just one bit of black spot on its tail, why if such a thought came to Bessie Bell it came only to float away, away like white thistle seed—drifting away as dreams drift.

When the two pretty grown ones had gone away, then Sister Angela had nodded her head at the row of little girls, so that they might know that they might go on eating their cakes, for of course the little girls knew that they must hold their cakes in their hands and wait, and not eat, when Sister Angela had shaken her head gently at them while she talked to the two pretty ones. The little brown birds seemed to know, too, that they could come back to the gravel to look for crumbs again.

Then, as the little girls were again eating their cakes, one little girl said: "Sister Angela, were they Sisters?"

Sister Angela said: "No, they are not Sisters."

Then another little girl asked: "Sister Angela, what were they, then?"

Sister Angela said: "They are only just ladies."

Then always after that Bessie Bell and the other little girls were glad when Only-Just-Ladies came to see them.

The sun shone nearly always, or it seemed to the little girls that it nearly always shone, out in that large garden where they could play the hour in the sand, and where they could spend one hour eating their cakes with their feet on the gravel, and where they could walk behind Sister Justina on all the shell-bordered walks around the beds (but they must not step on the beds)—just one hour. If a rain came it always did surprise them: those little girls were always surprised when it rained! and they did not know exactly what to do when it rained, though they knew almost always what to do when the sun shone. One day when it rained it happened that the little girls were all left over the one hour in the long room where all the rows and rows of the little arm-chairs sat, and where all the little girls learned to Count, and to say Their Prayers, and to Tell the Time, and to sing "Angels Bright," and to know the A B C blocks. Sister Theckla, who always stayed the one hour in that room, had gone to say to the Sisters that the one hour was over, and that it was raining, and what must the little girls do now?

While Sister Theckla was gone, all the little girls went to the windows, and all the tiny girls looked at the rain coming down, coming down in drops, so many drops; and so fast the drops came that they seemed to come in long strings of drops straight from the sky.

Then one little girl laughed and began to beat on the window by which she stood, to beat all over it as far as her little damp pink fingers could reach, and to say:

"Rain! Rain!
Go to Spain!
Rain! Rain!
Go to Spain!
Rain! Rain!
Go to Spain!"

And all the little girls thought that was so beautiful that they began to beat all over the windows, too, just as high and just as far as their little damp pink fingers could reach, and to sing as loud and as gaily as they could sing:

"Rain! Rain!
Go to Spain!"

Sister Theckla and Sister Angela came to the door of the room,—and they were so astonished that they could only look at one another and say to one another: "What do they mean? Where did they learn that?"

And the little girl who had taught the other little girls that much of the song remembered some more; and so she beat louder than ever on the window pane and said:

"Rain, rain, rain,
Go away!
And come another day!"

All the little girls laughed more than ever and sang louder than ever:

"Rain, rain, rain,
Go away!
Come again another day!"

Then Sister Angela looked at Sister Theckla and said: "Where did the child learn that, do you suppose?"

And Sister Theckla said: "She is older than the others. She must have learned it at home!"

And Sister Angela and Sister Theckla came into the room and they said: "See, now, what you have done to the windows!"

Sure enough, when the little girls looked at the windows the glass was all dim and blurred with little damp finger-prints!

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It was one day as the sun shone as it did shine most days, that the same little girl who knew how to sing that song when it rained was running on the shell-bordered walk, holding Bessie Bell's hand and running, when her little foot tripped up against Bessie Bell's foot,—and over Bessie Bell rolled on the walk with the shell border.

Then Bessie Bell cried and cried.

And Sister Mary Felice said: "Bessie Bell, where are you hurt?"

Bessie Bell did not know where she was hurt: she only knew that she was so sorry to have been so happy to be running, and then to roll so suddenly on the walk.

Then the little girl said: "She isn't hurt at all. She is just crying."

Sister Mary Felice said: "But you threw her down. You must tell her you are sorry."

Then the little girl said: "But I didn't mean to throw her down."

"But," Sister Mary Felice said, "you did trip her up, and you must beg her pardon."

Then Sister Theckla came to take all the little girls to the room where so many chairs sat in so many rows, and she too said: "Yes, you must beg her pardon."

Bessie Bell was listening so that she had almost stopped crying, but now when Sister Story Felice and Sister Theckla both said to the little girl, "Yes, you must beg pardon," then the little girl began to cry, too.

Then Bessie Bell grew so sorry again, she hardly knew why, or for what, that she began to cry again.

So then both Sisters said again: "Yes, you should beg pardon."

But the little girl still cried, and said, "But I didn't mean to trip her." Then she shook her head at Bessie Bell and said—because she just had to say it:

"I beg your pardon!
Grant me grace!
I hope the cat will scratch your face!"

Oh! Sister Mary Felice looked at Sister Theckla, and Sister Theckla looked at Sister Mary Felice—and they both said: "Where did she learn that?"

But Bessie Bell knew that the little girl did not mean to throw her down, so she said, "No, you didn't mean to do it."

She had thought she ought to say that, and she had been getting ready to say that before the little girl had been made to beg her pardon, and now that she had gotten ready she said: "No, you didn't mean to do it."

Then the little girl stopped crying, too, and ran and caught Bessie Bell's hand again and said to her again:

"I beg your pardon!
Grant me grace!
hope the cat won't scratch your face!"

So they went skipping down the walk together just as they had gone before. Then Sister Mary Felice and Sister Theckla both said: "Well! Well!"

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One time it came about that Bessie Bell lay a long time in her little white crib-bed, and she did not know why, and she did not care much why. She did not get up and play in the sand while Sister Mary Felice looked one hour at the little girls playing in the sand.

She scarcely wondered why she did not leave the crib-bed to sit on the long gallery-step in a row with all the other little girls, all with their feet on the gravel, and all eating the tiny cakes that Sister Ignatius made, while Sister Angela sat on the bench under the magnolia-tree and looked at the row of little girls.

If sometimes just at waking from fitful sleep in her crib-bed there came to her just a thought, or a remembrance, of a great big soft white cat that reached its paw out and softly touched her cheek, it came to her only like the touch of fancy in a big soft white dream.

Often Only-Just-Ladies came and talked over her little white crib with Sister Helen Vincula.

Bessie Bell's little fingers were no longer pink and round now; they lay just white, so white and small, on the white spread. And Bessie Bell did not mind how quiet she was told to be, for she was too tired to want to make any noise at all.

One day it happened that an Only-Just-Lady came and said: "Sister Helen Vincula, I want to give you a ticket to carry you away to the high mountain, and I want you to go to stay a month in my house on the mountain, and I want you to carry this little sick girl with you. And when you are there, Sister Helen Vincula, my bread-man will bring you bread, and my milk-man will bring you milk, and my market-man from the cove will bring you apples and eggs, and all the rest of the good things that come up the mountain from the warm caves."

"For," the Only-Just-Lady said, "I want this little sick girl to grow well again, and I want her little arms and legs and fingers to get round and pink again."

Bessie Bell thought that that was a very pretty tale that the Lady was telling, but she did not know or understand that that tale was about her. Then the Only-Just-Lady said, "Sister Helen Vincula, it will do you good, too, as well as this little girl to stay in the high mountains."

Not until all of Bessie Bell's little blue checked aprons, and all of her little blue dresses, and all of her little white petticoats, and all of her little white night-gowns, and even the tiny old night-gown with the linen thread name worked on it, had been put with all the rest of her small belongings into the old trunk with brass tacks in the leather, the old, old trunk that had belonged to Sister Helen Vincula, did Bessie Bell know that it was herself, little Bessie Bell, who was going away Somewhere.

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It was a very strange new world to Bessie Bell, that new world up on the High Mountain.

She did not think the grand views off the edge of the high mountain so strange. But she loved to look out on those views as she stood by Sister Helen Vincula on the gray cliff; Sister Helen Vincula holding her hand very fast while they both looked down into the valleys and coves. As the shadows of evening crept up to the cliff whereon they stood, and as those shadows folded round and round the points and coves, those points and caves lying below and beyond fold over fold, everything grew purple and violet.

Everything grew so purple, and so violet, and so great, and so wide that it seemed sometimes to the little girl, standing on the cliff by Sister Helen Vincula, that she was looking right down into the heart of a violet as great, as wide—as great, as wide—as the whole world.

But this did not seem so strange to Bessie Bell, for she yet remembered that window out of which one could see just small, green, moving things, and of which great grown people had told her, "No, Bessie Bell, there is no such window in all the world."

So in her own way she thought that maybe after awhile that the big, big violet might drift away, away, and great grown people might say, "No, Bessie Bell, there never was a violet in all the world like that."

It was the people—and all the people—of that new world that seemed so strange to Bessie Bell.

There were children, and children in all the summer cabins on that high mountain.

And those children did not walk in rows.

And those children did not do things by one hours.

And those children did not wash their hands in little white basins sitting in rows on long back gallery benches.

It was strange to Bessie Bell that those children did not sit in rows to eat tiny cakes with caraway seeds in them while Sister Angela sat on the bench under the great magnolia-tree and looked at the row of little girls.

It was so very strange to Bessie Bell that these children wore all sorts of clothes—all sorts! Not just blue dresses, and blue checked aprons.

And Bessie Bell knew, too, that those little girls in all sorts of clothes could not float away into that strange country of No-where and Never-was, where, too, the things that she remembered seemed to drift away—and to so nearly get lost, living only in dimming memory.

These little girls in all sorts of clothes were real, and sure-enough, and nobody could ever say of them, "There are no such little girls in the world," because sometimes when Bessie Bell would get to thinking, and thinking about the strangeness of them, she would almost wonder if she did not just remember them. When she would give one just a little pinch to see if that one was a real sure-enough little girl, why that little girl would say, "Don't." She would say "Don't!" just the same as a little girl in the row of little girls all with blue checked aprons would say "Don't," if you pinched one of them ever so little.

There were no Sisters on that high mountain. Sister Helen Vincula was the only Sister there. That seemed very strange to Bessie Bell.

One day the strangest thing of all so far happened.

One little girl called another little girl with whom she was playing, "Sister."

Bessie Bell laughed at that.

"Oh, she is not a Sister!" said Bessie Bell.

"Yes, she is; she is my sister!" said the little girl.

"No," said Bessie Bell, just as great grown people said to her when she remembered strange things, "No, there never was in the world a Sister like that!"

Then the smaller of the little girls who were playing together ran to the larger one, and caught hold of her hand, and they stood together in front of Bessie Bell—they both had long black curls, but Bessie Bell had short golden curls—and the smaller girl said: "Yes, she is my sister!"

And the larger girl said: "Yes, she is, too. She is my-own-dear-sister!"

The smaller little girl shook her black curls and said: "She is my own-dear-owny-downy-dear-sister!"

In all of her life Bessie Bell had never heard anything like that.

And all the other little girls who were playing joined in and said: "Bessie Bell doesn't know what she is talking about. Of course you are sisters. Everybody knows you are sisters!"

Bessie Bell was distressed to be told that she did not know what she was talking about—and she knew so much about Sisters.

So she began to cry, very softly.

Then she stopped crying long enough to say: "But I never saw Sisters like that before!"

Then she took up her crying again right where she left off.

Then a little boy—but he seemed a very large boy to Bessie Bell with his long-striped-stocking-legs—said to Bessie Bell: "No, Bessie Bell, they are not Sisters like Sister Helen Vincula and the Sisters that you know, but they are just what they say they are—just own dear sisters."

Then came to Bessie Bell that knowledge that we are often times slow in getting: she knew all of a sudden—that she did not know everything. She did not know all, even about Sisters.

Because, in all that she knew or remembered or wondered about, there was nothing at all about that strange thing that all the little children, but herself, knew so well about—"Own-dear-sisters."

Another strange thing came into her mind, brought into her mind partly by her ears, but mostly by her eyes: There were not in this new world on the high mountain—perhaps there were not after all so many anywhere as she had thought—there were not so many Sisters like Sister Helen Vincula (for was not Sister Helen Vincula the only Sister she had seen on the mountain?). There were not after all so many Sisters like Sister Angela; and Sister Mary Felice, who watched the little blue-checked-apron girls playing in the sand; and Sister Ignatius, who cooked the cakes with the caraway seeds in them; and Sister Theckla, who taught the little girls to Count and to Sing.

Why, the whole world, surely the up-on-the mountain-world, seemed full of Only-Just-Ladies.

Not just a Lady here and there, coming to visit with hats on, to talk a little to the Sisters, to look at the little girls with blue checked aprons on. But here they were coming and going all the time, moving about, and living in the cabins, walking everywhere with or without hats on, standing on the gray cliffs, and looking down—maybe into the heart of a worldwide violet there, off the edge of the cliff, such as Bessie Bell saw or fancied she saw.

So many Ladies.

Bessie Bell leaned against the little fluted post of the gallery to the cabin that she and Sister Helen Vincula lived in, and decided to herself that, strange as it was, yet was it true that the whole world was full of—Ladies.

There were yet stranger things for Bessie Bell to learn.

She had not for long played with those many little girls in all sorts of clothes, and with larger girls, and with boys,—some with short-striped-stocking-legs and some with long-striped-stocking-legs,—before she heard one child say: "Mama says she will take me to Sweet Fern Cave to-morrow."

Or perhaps it was another child who said: "Mama won't let me wade in the branch."

Or another child said: "Mama says I can have a party for all the little girls and boys on the mountain next Friday!"

Then another little child said: "My Mama has made me a beautiful pink dress, and I will wear that to your party."

Mama? My Mama?

Bessie Bell leaned against the little fluted post of the gallery to the cabin where she and Sister Helen Vincula lived, and thought a great deal about that.

And Bessie Bell wondered a great deal what that could mean: Mama? My Mama?

There were strange new things in this world.

Bessie Bell almost forgot to remember now, because every day was so full of such strange new things to know.

Mama? My Mama?

Bessie Bell did a great deal of thinking about that.

One day the little children were playing at building rock chimneys.

There was not much sand there for little children to play in, so that the children often built rock chimneys, and rock tables, and rock fences.

As they were playing one little girl suddenly left the playground and ran, calling: "Mama! Mama! Come here; come this way, and see the chimney we have built!"

Bessie Bell turned quickly from play and looked after the little girl who was running across the playground to where three ladies were standing.

The little girl caught the dress of one of the ladies, and came pulling at her dress and bringing her across the ground to see the stone chimney, and the little girl kept saying:

"Look, Mama! See, Mama! Isn't it a grand chimney? Won't it 'most hold smoke?"

Bessie Bell stood still with her little hands—they were beginning to be round pink little hands again, now—clasped in front of her and wondered.

"See, Mama! Look, Mama!" cried the little girl.

"Why does she say: Mama?" asked Bessie Bell, because she just wondered, and wondered—and she did not know.

"Because it is her Mama," said a child who had just brought two more rocks to put on the chimney.

"Oh," said Bessie Bell.

That lady who was the little girl's Mama looked much as all the ladies looked.

"Are all Ladies Mamas?" asked Bessie Bell.

She hoped the child who had brought the two rocks would not laugh, for Bessie Bell knew she would cry if she did.

The little girl did not laugh at all. She was trying so carefully to put the last rock on top of the stone chimney, she said: "No, Bessie Bell: some are Mamas, and some are only just Ladies."

There. There it was again: Only-Just-Ladies.

Bessie Bell wondered how to tell which were Mamas, and which were Ladies—just Ladies.

Very often after that day she watched those who passed the cabin where she and Sister Helen Vincula lived, and wondered which were Mamas—

And which were Ladies.

There was no rule of old or young by which Bessie Bell could tell.

Nor was it as one could tell Sisters from Just-Ladies by a way of dress. For Sisters, like Sister Helen Vincula, wore a soft white around the face, and soft long black veils, and a small cross on the breast of the dress: so that even had any not known the difference one could easily have guessed.

But for Ladies and Mamas there were none of these differences.

But Bessie Bell looked and looked and wondered, but her eyes brought to her no way of knowing.

Bessie Bell could at length think of only one way to find out the difference, and that was to ask—to let her ears help her eyes to bring to her some way of knowing.

One day, a dear old lady with white curls all around under her bonnet stopped near the playground and called Bessie Bell to her and gave her some chocolate candy, every piece of candy folded up in its own white paper.

Bessie Bell said: "Thank you, ma'am."

Then as the lady still stood by the playground Bessie Bell asked her: "Are you a Lady, ma'am?"

"I have been called so," said the lady, smiling down at Bessie Bell.

"Or are you a Mama?" asked Bessie Bell.

"Ah," said the lady; "I am a Mama, too, but all my little girls have grown up and left me."

Bessie Bell wondered how they could have done that, those little girls. But she saw, and was so glad to see, that this lady was very wise, and that she understood all the things that little girls wonder about.

But though there was a difference, a very great difference, between Mamas and Ladies it was very hard to tell—unless you asked.

One day a large fat lady took Bessie Bell on her lap. That was very strange to Bessie Bell—to sit on top of anybody.

And the lady made a rabbit, and a pony, and a preacher, all out of a handkerchief and her nice fat fingers. And then she made with the same handkerchief and fingers a Mama holding a Baby.

Then Bessie Bell looked up at her with her wondering eyes and asked: "Are you a Lady—"

"Bless my soul!" cried the lady. "Do you hear this child? And now, come to think of it, I don't know whether I am a lady or not—"

And the lady laughed until Bessie Bell felt quite shaken up.

"Or are you a Mama?" asked Bessie Bell, when it seemed that the lady was about to stop laughing.

"So that is it?" asked the lady, and she seemed about to begin laughing again.

"Yes, I am a Mama, and I have three little girls about as funny as you are."

Another time a lady passed by the cabin where Bessie Bell stood leaning against the little fluted white post of the gallery, and said:

"Good morning, Bessie Bell. I am Alice's Mama."

That made things so simple, thought Bessie Bell. This lady was a Mama. And she was Alice's Mama.

Bessie Bell wished that all would tell in that nice way at once whether they were Mamas or Just-Ladies.

The next lady who passed by the cabin also stopped to talk to Bessie Bell.

And Bessie Bell asked: "Are you a Mama or Only-Just-A-Lady?"

"I am only just a lady," the lady said, patting Bessie Bell's little tiny hand. And it was easy to see that, in Bessie Bell's mind, though Only-Just-Ladies were kind and sweet, Mamas were far greater and more important beings.

One night, when Sister Helen Vincula had put Bessie Bell to bed in the small bed that was not a crib-bed, though like that she had slept in before she had come to the high mountain, Bessie Bell still lay wide awake.

Her blue eyes were wide open and both of her pink little hands were above her head on the pillow. She was thinking, and thinking, and she forgot that she was thinking her thinking aloud, and she said:

"Alice has a mama. Robbie has a mama. Katie has a mama. Where is Bessie Bell's mama? Never mind: Bessie Bell will find a mama."

Then Sister Helen Vincula, who was wide awake, too, said:

"Ah me, ah me."

Bessie Bell said: "Sister Helen Vincula, did you call me?"

Sister Helen Vincula said:

"No, child: go to sleep."

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The next day was the day for Sister Helen Vincula and Bessie Bell to leave the high, cool mountain. They were to leave the little cabin where the lady had told them to live until they had gotten well again.

So when their leaving day came Sister Helen Vincula put a clean stiff-starched blue-checked apron on Bessie Bell, and they walked together to the Mall where the band was playing.

Bessie Bell was always so glad when Sister Helen Vincula took her to the Mall in the afternoon when the band played.

All the little children went every afternoon in their prettiest dresses to the Mall where the band played.

Because in the afternoon the band played just the sort of music that little girls liked to hear.

Every afternoon all the nurses came to the Mall and brought all the babies, and the nurses rolled the babies up and down the sawdust walks in the pretty baby-carriages, with nice white, and pink, and blue parasols over the babies' heads.

That afternoon Sister Helen Vincula stayed a long time with Bessie Bell, on the Mall, sitting by her on the stone bench and listening to the gay music, and looking at the children in their prettiest clothes, and at the nurses rolling the babies in the pretty carriages with the beautiful pink, and white, and blue parasols over the babies' heads.

Then Sister Helen Vincula said: "Bessie Bell, I am going across the long bridge to see some ladies and to tell them Good-bye, because we are going away tomorrow."

And Sister Helen Vincula said: "Now, will you stay right here on this stone bench till I come back for you?"

Bessie Bell said, "Yes, Sister Helen Vincula."

So Sister Helen Vincula went away across the long bridge to see the ladies and to tell them Good-bye.

Bessie Bell did not know much about going away, and she did not understand about it at all, so she did not care at all about it.

She just sat on the stone bench with her little pink hands folded on her blue checked apron, and looked at the children in their prettiest clothes, and at the babies, and at the parasols.

She loved so to look, and she loved so to listen to the pretty gay music that she did not notice that a lady had come to the stone bench, and had seated herself just where Sister Helen Vincula had sat before she went to see the ladies and to tell them Good-bye.

There were many other ladies on the Mall, and many ladies passed in their walk by the stone bench where Bessie Bell and the lady sat.

Everybody loved to come to the Mall in the afternoon when the band played. Everybody loved to hear the gay music. Everybody loved to see the children in their prettiest clothes, and to see all the nurses rolling the babies in the carriages with the pretty parasols.

And one of the ladies passing by looked over to the stone bench where Bessie Bell sat with her hands folded on her blue checked apron, and where the lady had seated herself just as Sister Helen Vincula had sat before she went across the long bridge.

And the lady said, as she passed by and looked: "Striking likeness."

Another lady with her said: "Wonderful!"

And another one with them said: "Impossible! But strange indeed—"

Bessie Bell did not notice what the ladies said, but because they looked so attentively to where she sat on the stone bench her attention was turned the way their eyes turned as they talked in low tones and looked attentively passing by.

So when they had passed by, Bessie Bell turned and looked to the other end of the bench where the lady sat.

Bessie Bell was so surprised at the first look that she hardly knew what to think.

The lady did not look like Sister Helen Vincula, oh, not at all; but the veil that she wore was soft and black like that that Sister Helen Vincula wore. The dress that the lady wore was black also, but it looked as if it were stiff and very crisp, and not soft like the dress that Sister Helen Vincula wore. Bessie Bell did not mean to be rude, but she reached out one tiny hand and took hold of the lady's dress, just a tiny pinch of it.

Yes, it was very crisp.

Then the lady turned and looked at Bessie Bell.

Then Bessie Bell was still more surprised, for there was something white under her veil. Not white all round the face like that Sister Helen Vincula wore, but soft crinkly white just over the lady's soft yellow hair.

Also on the breast of her black dress was a cross, but not white like the cross that Sister Helen Vincula wore. No, this cross was shining very brightly, and it was very golden in the sunlight,—and—somehow, somehow,—Bessie Bell knew just how that cross felt,—she knew without feeling it. She did not have to feel it as she had felt the dress.

Bessie Bell looked and thought. She thought this lady looked like a Sister—and yet there was a difference. She looked also like Just-A-Lady, and she also looked grand and important enough for a Mama.

Bessie Bell looked and thought, but she could not tell just exactly what this lady was.

It was best that she should ask, and then she would surely know.

So she asked: "Are you a Lady, ma'am?"

"I hope so, little girl," the lady said.

"I thought, maybe, you were a Sister," said Bessie Bell.

"No," said the lady.

"Like Sister Mary Felice, and Sister Angela, and Sister Helen Vincula," said Bessie Bell.

"No," said the lady.

"Are you a Mama, then?" asked Bessie Bell.

The lady looked as if she were going to cry.

But Bessie Bell could see nothing to cry about. The band was still playing ever so gaily, and all the little children looked so beautiful and so happy, all playing and running hither and thither on the sawdust walks, that it was good just to look at them.

But on the instant Bessie Bell remembered how sorrowful it was to cry when you could not understand things, so she quickly reached out her little pink hand and laid it on the lady's hand—just because she knew how sorrowful it felt to feel like crying and not to know.

"You see," said Bessie Bell gently, as she softly patted the lady's hand, "you see, you do look something like a Sister,—but," said Bessie Bell, "I believe you do look more like a Mama."

"Little girl," said the lady, "what do you mean?"

And she still looked as if she might cry.

"Yes," said Bessie Bell, for she had begun to think very hard, "Alice has a mama. Robbie has a mama. Lucy has a mama. Everybody has a mama. Never mind, Bessie Bell will find a mama—"

"Little girl," said the lady, "why do you say, Bessie Bell—?"

When the lady said that it seemed to Bessie Bell that she heard something sweet—something away off beyond what the band was playing, so she just clapped her hands and laughed out loud, and said over and over as if it were a little song:

"Bessie Bell! Bessie, Bessie, Bessie Bell!"

But the lady at her side looked down at the child as if she were afraid. Bessie Bell knew how sorrowful it was to be afraid, so she stopped patting her hands and laughing,—for she didn't know why she had begun to do it—and she laid her hand again on the lady's hand, just because she knew how sorrowful it was to be afraid.

But Bessie Bell could not see anything to be afraid of: the band was playing just as gaily as ever, and the children, and the nurses, and the babies, and the parasols were as gay as ever.

"Where is your mama?" asked the lady, taking fast hold of the little hand that patted her hand.

"Everybody has a mama—never mind—"

"But where is your mama?" asked the lady again.

Bessie Bell had begun to wonder and so had forgotten to answer.

"Child, where is your mama?" said the lady again, still holding fast to Bessie Bell's hand.

"But—I don't know," said Bessie Bell.

Then the lady looked as if she had begun to wonder, too, and she seemed to be looking away off; away off, but how closely she held Bessie Bell's hand—closer than Sister Angela, or Sister Theckla, or even Sister Helen Vincula, or Sister Justina—

Then Bessie Bell began to wonder still more, and to remember, as the lady held fast to her little fingers. She began to talk her thinking out loud, and she said: "Yes, there was a window—where everything was green, and, small, and moving—but Sister Justina said there was not any window like that in the whole world—"

The lady held Bessie Bell's hand very hard, and she said—softly, as if she, too, was talking her thinking aloud:

"Yes, there was a window like that in the world, for just outside the nursery-window there grew a Pride of China Tree, and it filled all the window with small, green, moving leaves—"

Then Bessie Bell just let the lady draw her up close, and she leaned up against the lady.

She felt so happy now, for she knew she had found the Wisest Woman in the world, for this lady knew the things that little girls only could remember. If she had thought about it she would have told the lady about the tiny apple-trees with the very, very small apples on them, and other rows of apple-trees over those, and other rows on top of those, and on top of all a row of big round red apples.

Then the lady might have said: Yes, there were apple-trees like that in the world, for all the nursery walls were papered like that, with a row of big round red apples at the top.

But Bessie Bell did not think of or remember that then; she just leaned up against the lady and swung one of her little feet up and down, back and forth, as she sat on the stone bench: she was so happy to have met the Wisest Woman in the world.

The people who passed by looked, and turned to look again, at the little girl in the stiff-starched, faded blue checked apron leaning up against the lady in the crisp, dull silk.

But Bessie Bell did not look at anybody who passed.

And the lady did not look at anybody who passed.

And the band kept on playing gay music.

It was not very long before Sister Helen Vincula came back from seeing the ladies across the long bridge, and from telling them Good-bye. As soon as she saw Bessie Bell leaning up against the lady she cried:

"Why, Bessie Bell!"

Bessie Bell said, "Sister Helen Vincula," and she knew she had done something wrong, but she could only wonder what.

But the lady said very quickly,—and she held Bessie Bell's hand even harder than before,—she said:

"Sister Helen Vincula, I must ask you something—"

Sister Helen Vincula and the lady talked a long time.

Bessie Bell did not listen very much to what they said.

She did not lean up against the lady now, but she sat close. Sister Helen Vincula did not seem to mind that.

She did not swing her foot to and fro now, but she still felt very contented and happy to have met the very Wisest Woman.

When she did listen a little she heard the lady say:

"There came news that my husband was ill in Mobile, and I feared that it was of the Dreadful Fever, and I hurried there so that I could get to him before the Dreadful Quarantines were put on. I felt all safe about the baby, for I left her with my mother and the faithful nurse who had been my nurse, too. But when the worst had come and was over,—and it was the Dreadful Fever,—then I tried to get back to my home; but I could not for many, many days, because the Dreadful Quarantines were on. Then at last I did get there—I slipped up secretly by water. All were gone. I could find no one who could tell me anything. I could find no one who knew anything. The house was wide open. There was no sign of life, but that the cat came and rubbed up against me, and walked round and round me. The Dreadful Fever was everywhere, and nobody could tell me anything; and I searched everywhere, always and always alone—there was no one to help me: everyone was trying to save from the Dreadful Fever—"

Bessie Bell did not know what all that was about, but she felt so sorry for the lady that she squeezed down ever so softly on her hand that held her own still so tightly.

Sister Helen Vincula wiped her eyes.

The lady kept looking away off, but still held Bessie Bell's hand in hers.

Then Sister Helen Vincula said: "We are going away to-morrow."

But the lady held fast to Bessie Bell's hand and said: "Not this little girl."

"Oh," said Sister Helen Vincula, "but she is in my charge, and so what can I do!"

And the lady said: "I cannot let her leave me—not ever."

But Sister Helen Vincula said: "Oh, madam, you do not know. No matter what we hope, we do not know—"

But the lady held still faster to Bessie Bell's hand.

"Oh," said Sister Helen Vincula, "I have a thought! Come to our cabin with me."

So they went.

And Bessie Bell walked between Sister Helen Vincula and the lady.

And they each held one of her little pink hands.

When they were at the cabin Sister Helen Vincula opened the old trunk with the brass tacks on it, and she went down to the very bottom of it, unpacking as she went. For the old trunk was almost entirely packed for the going away to-morrow. Then Sister Helen Vincula took out, from almost the bottom of the trunk, the little white night-gown that had "Bessie Bell" written on it with linen thread.

And Sister Helen Vincula laid the little white night-gown across the lady's lap.

Then the lady read the name written with the linen thread.

The lady said: "I worked this name with my own hands."

She drew Bessie Bell closer to her, and she said: "Sister Helen Vincula, can you doubt?"

Bessie Bell stood contentedly where the lady held her, and she looked first at the night-gown and then at the lady, then at Sister Helen Vincula. She did not know or care what it was all about—she scarcely wondered.

"Sister Helen Vincula," said the lady, "I know past all doubting that I worked this name. You believe that. Much more past all doubting do you not know—You must know—"

"Ah," said Sister Helen Vincula, "I hope with you." She reached for the little night-gown, and she smoothed it in her fingers. "Ah," she said, "the child has grown since she has been with us, so much, but the little gown—it looks—really smaller to me—"

But the lady was not listening to Sister Helen Vincula. She had her arms about Bessie Bell's shoulders and was looking into her face.

"I am glad I brought the little gown," Sister Helen Vincula was saying; "the child was so ill, so fearfully thin, I feared—it was only a fancy—I feared—"

"No, no, no," cried the lady, drawing Bessie Bell closer.

"Now nearly two years she has been with us," said Sister Helen Vincula.

"She was just old enough to be put to the table in a high chair," said the lady. "Ah, how she did laugh and crow and jump when her father took the peacock-feather-fly-brush from the maid, and waved it in front of her! She would seize the ends of the feathers, and laugh and crow louder than ever, and hide her laughing little face deep into the feathers—Ah me—"

But Bessie Bell said nothing, nor remembered anything. For she did not know that the lady was talking of something green, and blue, and soft, and brown.

And it was Sister Justina, and not Sister Helen Vincula, who had told her to be ashamed when she had cried: Pretty! Pretty! Pretty! as the something green, and blue, and soft, and brown was waved to and fro in front of her until she seized it and buried her little face in it for the joy—of remembering—

So Sister Helen Vincula did not know, and Bessie Bell did not remember, while the lady talked.

Only long after, when Bessie Bell grew much larger, it happened that whenever she saw an old-fashioned peacock-feather-fly-brush—at first, just for a second, she felt very glad; and then, just for a second, she felt very sorry; and she never knew or could remember why. She forgot after awhile how she had been so full of sorrow when Sister Justina said, Be Ashamed, and she could no longer remember why she was glad; only a feeling of both was left—and she could not tell how or why.

But the lady would not let Bessie Bell get far from her, and Bessie did not care to go far from her. She stood with her little pink hands folded, and looked up at the lady who held to her so closely.

Sister Helen Vincula said: "It was Sister Theckla who spent that summer with the sick, and it was Sister Theckla who brought the child to us. Can you not go home with us? Or I could write to you at once—"

"No," said the lady. "I will go. The child shall not leave me—'

"And we will talk to Sister Theckla, and she will tell us all that she knows, and then—God willing—we shall know all."

The lady said: "Yes, we will all go together. We will go at once."

And so it was that when Sister Theckla had told all that she knew, then the lady knew (as she always had said she had known), past all doubting, that Bessie Bell had really found what she most wished for.

But we do not know how long it was before Bessie Bell really understood that the Wisest Woman in the world, who knew what little girls had almost forgotten how to remember, was her own Mother.

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When all the people on the high, cool mountains heard about all that the lady knew, and all that Sister Theckla told, and all that Bessie Bell had found, they were all as glad as they could be.

And when the boy with the long-striped-stocking-legs heard all about it he said: "That is fine! Bessie Bell said that she would find a Mama--and she has!"