These Little Ones

E. Nesbit

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"... Whoso shall offend one of these little ones ...it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea."

I. THE THREE MOTHERS

THE hearse and the mourning−coach went out at a demure foot−pace; they came back at a trot that was almost gay. It did not matter. The hearse was now only a smart empty showcase, bright with plate−glass and silvered fittings; and in the mourning−coach the mother sat alone.

This was the end.

When she should be once more in the empty house she might cry, scream, laugh, go mad. Nothing would make any difference. There was no one to be awakened. There was no white presence that must be lapped in silence and horrible flowers. The cook and the maids had brought the flowers. Her gift to the dead had been the silence.

They were talking about her in the warm, pleasant kitchen, where the fire glowed redly, and tea and toast scented the air.

"Poor soul," said the cook, "but she's borne up wonderful, I must say."

"Heartless," was the housemaid's epithet; and she added, "She might have cried a bit when they carried it out, if only for the look of the thing."

"You don't understand," said the cook heavily. "You'll see, she'll break down soon as ever she gets back from the burying. I shouldn't wonder if she was to go right off of her head, or something."

"Ain't she got never a friend to turn to, a time like this?" asked the cook's niece, who had dropped in to tea.

"Not a single one, if you'll believe me. It's my belief she's done something she hadn't ought, and this is a judgment on her. Sin always comes home to roost." So the housemaid.

"You be quiet with your texts," the cook admonished; "if you come to texts, people that live in glass houses shouldn't quote Scripture. I know more about you than you think, my lady."

The parlourmaid flushed and scowled.

"No, but," said the niece, "hasn't she really got e'er a friend?"

"Father dead," said the cook. "Mother in India 'long of her other friends. Husband burnt to death under her very nose, as you might say, just before the baby came. Only married a year when he was taken. And now the baby. Cruel hard, I call it."

"She tell you all that?" the housemaid sneered.

"Not she! Catch her telling us anything. She's a good mistress, she is, and quite the lady. Keeps herself **to** herself."

"Then how . . .?"

"She's got a book," said the cook, only very slightly embarrassed, "a die−airy, where you writes down what happens every day. I jest happened to glance into it one day I was doing the dining−room grate not knowing what it was, d'you see?"

"She'll marry again all right," said the niece.

"With that face?" said the housemaid.

The niece asked how she came to be like that, and the cook told her.

"It was the fire, what her good gentleman lost his life in. She was near done for herself. Wishes to God she had been in the book, I mean. Ah, she's had some trouble, she has." The written record of another woman's agony was poignant even in remembrance, and the cook sniffed. "Well, God help us all's what I say. There she is. I'll make her a nice cup of tea."

But the woman who had lost everything left the tea on the table in the dining−room, where the clock ticked, "Emp−ty, emp−ty, emp−ty," and wandered through the house. And still she kept silence. There was the room where the child had lived its cot, its soft woolly toys, its little gowns. And the room where it had lain dead, among the flowers and the silence, and the scent of camphor and eau de Cologne.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing, nothing. I suppose," she said, dry−eyed and detached, "I suppose I ought to cry. Or pray, perhaps?" She fell on her knees by the bed; it was an experiment.

But no tears came and no prayers. Only the insistent silence filled her ears and battered at her brain.

"Oh, my baby, my baby!" she said, and a sob caught in her throat. But she did not cry.

So then she got up from her knees like one with a purpose new−born, and went very quickly and quietly down the stairs and out at the front door. It slammed behind her.

"There! If she 'asn't gone out! To make away with herself, I shouldn't wonder," said the housemaid, in pleasant excitement.

"You oughter let the police know," said the niece.

"You leave her be," said the cook. "I don't know as it wouldn't be the best thing for her, poor thing. What's she got to live for?"

"I call that heathen, that's what I call it," said the housemaid; "it's sinful to make away with yourself, whatever goes wrong. It's our duty to bear whatever's laid upon us."

"Ah," said the cook, "it's easy enough to see **you've** never 'ad nothing to bear. If she comes back I'll make a excuse to go up and say a kind word. You see if I don't."

"I do wonder where she's gone, though," said the housemaid.

"It'll be in all the papers if she does make away with herself," the parlourmaid pointed out.

"If **you** ever get in the papers," said the cook, "it won't be for anything so 'armless and innocent. So now you know. I'd give a crown to be sure that she ain't come to no 'arm."

She had not come to any harm. Only after a blind treading of bleak pavements, and streets where an unkind wind blew, she had come to wide steps and lamps, a heavy swing−door through which a priest had just passed. She was not a Catholic, not even a Christian. The early days of her life had been too sweet for her to need peace; the later days too bitter for her to find it. But the gnawing chill of the December evening drove her, without any conscious will of hers, towards the shaft of light that had shown as the door opened. In there it would be warm and quiet. And it would not be the house where the child had lived and died.

She went up the steps, and as she went a hand touched her and some one spoke low in her ear.

"Lady, lady, won't you spare me a trifle? I 'aven't tasted food since yesterday morning so 'elp me God, I haven't!"

She turned. A woman stood beside her very shabby, very pale, with a horrible flattened hat and dreadful clothes. In her arms, under a shawl thin as a nun's veil, she held a baby.

"You're luckier than I am," said the woman, whose veil was on her face, and her eyes were greedy with the rounded outline under the shawl. "I haven't got my purse yes, here's a penny, loose in my pocket."

The voice of the policeman broke through the other woman's thanks such thanks for such a gift.

"Now, then, at it again!" he said. "You give me your name and address," he added sternly.

The woman muttered some formula.

"We can't 'ave you beggin' all over the place," he went on. "On the church steps and all. You'll 'ear of this again, I shouldn't wonder. 'Ere, you be off outer this! Hear?"

The woman with the child looked at him and crept away.

"Oh, don't!" said the mother who had no child. "You wouldn't prosecute her for that?"

"Course not, mum," the man reassured her. "But you 'ave to keep 'em up to the mark or you wouldn't be able to get into the church for the crowds of them there'd be. It's only encouraging them to give to beggars."

"I only gave her a penny," said the mother.

"Gin that's what it'll go in," said the majesty of the law.

She went into the church. It was almost dark, except for a brightness that shone between thick pillars far away to the right.

The altar rose up into shadows. The red light burned before the altar. Here and there a kneeling figure. She kneeled also. Here, perhaps, one might be able to cry; tears made things easier, people said. She herself had thought so once. But no tears came. And her agony was wound like a cord about and around her heart, so that she could not pray. She kneeled there a very long time. The great calm splendid silence, the atmosphere of devotion, the presence of a great love and understanding that filled it, gave to her tortured mind the rest that a couch in a darkened room might give to limbs strained with the rack and to eyes scorched by the flames that lick round the stake. Life was all torture still, but this was a breathing space. At first she thought of the woman on the steps the mother who had her child and envy and pity fought in her. She might get the address from the policeman and go and see the woman help, perhaps. No, no. It was all no use. What was the good of helping one woman in a world where any woman might at any moment have this to bear?

Gradually peace, like an incoming tide, lapped in small waves round her soul. Or the exhaustion of prolonged agony, calling itself peace. She could no longer think could hardly feel. Intense pain was becoming itself an anesthetic. The shadowy pillars seemed to move as shadows do, and the dim red light, hung between earth and heaven, swam before her eyes. A little more, it seemed, and she would forget everything.

But she roused herself. There was something in the world that she must not forget. Something beyond herself and her anguish. Her own mother. She must not forget. She was to her mother what that which she had lost had been to her. She rose and walked down the aisle. The soft yellow glow from behind the pillars seemed brighter than ever, to eyes that had rested so long on the twilight that surrounds the altar.

"I wonder what that light is!" she said, and was glad for her own mother's sake that she could still wonder about anything. She walked towards the light, and presently perceived that the light, coming from some unseen place, shone full on a picture no, a group of figures of wax or wood.

It was a rocky cave, as tradition tells that the stable was where Christ was born. Ivy wreathed the stones about. There was the straw, and the ox and the ass among it; also those two travellers for whom there was no room in the inn. They bent in adoration over the manger where the Hope of the World lay cradled.

Outside were the kneeling kings with their gifts, and the star−led shepherds, and beyond, in the deep eastern sky, the star that had led them.

It was the scene that has inspired Raphael and Correggio, set forth with ingenuous realism, as loving peasant children might have set it.

And the centre of it all that on which was concentrated the light of the lamps, and the light of love in the eyes of the Holy Mother, of the angels, the adoring kings, and the shepherds was the Child, the waxen image of the Child who was born and laid in a manger, the image which the Catholic Church sets up at Christmas to remind simple people how the King of Heaven came down and was a little child. The very simplicity of it made a more direct

appeal than could have been made by all the Raphaels and Correggios in the world. That wooden image of the Holy Mother bore on its face the light of love and joy the human mother herself had known and the shadow of a greater sorrow even than this of hers, which was greater than all sorrows in the world.

The mother who had no child found that she was kneeling again, her arms on the wooden rail worn smooth by the arms of the many who had knelt there to realise, at sight of this picture, the meaning of Christmas. There was no one kneeling there now but she. She felt herself alone among the kneeling shepherds and kings; and her eyes, like theirs, were turned on the Child.

The image was very lifelike. The Holy Child lay covered in soft, white draperies that showed only the little round head and one tiny hand. Just so, so many times, the mother had seen her baby sleep curled up, warm and safe in the kind firelight, her baby that now lay straight and white and cold in a very dark place, alone.

"My baby, my baby," she said, and hid her face. And then she knew that she was crying, and praying, too. The tears were hot and many, and the prayer was only a cry for help.

"Oh, God," she murmured, "help, help, help!" And again, and yet again: "Oh, God, help!"

All the dear memories of the past that made up the desolation of the present, she had put away because she could not bear to look at them; now she reached out her hands to them, clasped them, pressed the sharp thorns against her heart, that she might call for help from the lowest depths of her sorrow.

Her face was against the wooden rail, wet with her tears. She crouched there. Faith could move mountains. Perhaps it was true about miracles. If she only prayed hard enough, perhaps she might go home to find her baby asleep in his cot perhaps all this would be only a dream. No, that was nonsense, of course; but

"Oh, my baby, my baby! Oh, God, help!" she moaned, almost aloud.

And then the miracle happened. She never doubted but that it was a miracle. A little soft sound crept to her ears not a sigh, not a cry, not a sob the contented, crooning murmur that a little child makes at the end of sleep, the little lovely sound that had drawn her so often to the cot−side in the pleasant firelit room when life was there.

She looked round. No one had come in no happy mother with a baby in her arms, such as she had thought, from that soft sound, to find close behind her. She was all alone, with the Holy Family, and the shepherds, and the angels, and the kings.

She dried her eyes and listened. Again the little beautiful sound, and then... It was no fairy story, but the truth. The mother who had no child saw, in the crib, where pious folks had laid a waxen image, the movement of a living child. The little dark head stirred on the pillow, the little pink hands stretched out, the little arms thrust back the draperies, and amid the soft whiteness of them the child awoke, and smiled no cold image of the Divine infant, but a little, live, naked, human thing.

The human mother glanced round the quick glance of a hunted animal that reassures itself. Next moment she had crept under the wooden rail and caught up the baby.

Its limbs moved in slow softness as her own child's had moved. It lay contented against her, wrapped in the white woollen folds, and covered with her furs.

The wind was wild as she reached the swing−door; it tried to uncover the child, and blew great flakes of snow in the mother's face. She held the baby very closely.

She does not know how she got home. The next thing she remembers is pushing past the housemaid and carrying up those stairs, down which others had carried her baby, this new baby that was not hers.

"Brought home a baby? Say she's adopted it? Well, then, it's the best day's work she could ha' done, an' I'm going straight up to tell her so." So the cook goes, leaving the housemaid and the parlourmaid and the niece to sniff in concert.

Upstairs there is firelight and warmth, and two women worshipping a naked child.

And in the church much talk and wonder and grief for the bambino that has been stolen the little image of wood and wax so like life, that cost so much, and was so useful in reminding the faithful what the gift from Heaven was that came to a human mother on Christmas Day.

For three days the mother had fed her hungry heart on the miracle−baby; it was three days before she remembered that other mother and that other baby on the steps outside the church. Then she bestirred herself, found the policeman, and got from him the address that he had so severely noted.

"I doubt you'll not find it a deserving case, mum," he said. "I frightened her off this beat. Ain't been 'ere since. That shows she wasn't up to no good."

It was a narrow street, where the house doors are never shut, and the children play in the gutter with such toys as they have rags and bones and bits of broken wood. The door−posts are grimed to the level of a man's shoulder by the incoming and outgoing of tired people in greasy clothes. The stairs were foul, and a cold wind blew down them.

"Top floor," a dirty painted woman told her "top floor, left hand. But I fancy she's made a bolt that's what I think. She was stony, I know, and three weeks' owing. I did take 'er up a nice cup of tea yesterday, but I couldn't make no one hear. She ain't much class, anyhow."

It was the man on the second floor, the man without collar and without shoes, who broke the door open. He protested that it was agin the law. But the mother who had found the miracle−baby found for the man a pretty golden argument.

"Well, if you say so," he said; "but if there's any rumpus well, you're a lady, and you'll say it was you. An' if you don't, I shall see?"

"Yes, yes there won't be any fuss. It's all right. Only do make haste. I'm certain there's something wrong. And just feel how the wind blows under the door: The window must be open."

It was. And now the door hung crookedly from a broken hinge.

Of course, you have known all the time, as the mother knew, that the woman would be dead.

She was. Her empty arms outstretched, she lay very cold and stiff on a bed that was old iron and sacking. The casement window had blown open, and the snow had drifted half across the room, and lay in a frozen streak like a shaft of dead−white moonshine. You know all that. It shows itself. What you do not know, perhaps what at any rate the mother did not know who looked fearfully through the broken door is that it was this woman who had stolen the waxen Christ Child, stripped her own baby, and laid it, with who knows what desperate incoherence of hope and love and faith, in the holy manger, and had gone away hugging the waxen babe that could not feel the bitter night under that shawl, thin as a nun's veil.

She had taken the Christ Child home; she called it home, one supposes. And, once safely there, some scruple, some forgotten reverence, must have come to her.

For she had set up an altar in that bare place.

Over the old sugar−box that used to serve her for table she had laid the greenish shawl that was thin as a nun's veil. She had set the image of the new−born Saviour in a blue and white neckerchief that must have had to her the value of a relic, for it was clean, and its creases showed that it had long lain folded.

She had set up two candles in chipped beer bottles and lighted them. They must have burned bravely, illumining that shrine, till the wind thrust itself through the window and made everything dark and cold again.

And the last lean alms that Life had given she had spent on those two candles.

So the image of the Mother of God got back its bambino. And the mother who had no child got the miracle−baby. And the mother who made the shrine with her last coin and her last warmth and her last love− relic, got . . .

"Good thing for her she went off like she did," said the policeman. "She'd a got a month for nicking of that image, sure as I'm a sinner. Theft **an'** sacrullidge. It's serious, that is. Lucky let−off, I call it."

II. JOHN OF THE ISLAND

JOHN lived on an island. You will think that this was lucky for him because, of course, it is the dream of all children to live on an island. But it is poor fun to have everybody else's dreams come true instead of your own and John, having been born on the island, had twisted little dreams of his own about how lovely it must be to live on the mainland.

"It must feel so firm," said John.

He had the fixed idea that islands were supported by stalks underneath, like mushrooms, and could, like mushrooms, be gathered, supposing some one had a hand big enough, which, for anything John knew, some one might easily have. John had read all about giants.

He had read a great deal, for granny was very tired and feeble, and the old man who took care of the garden was very deaf and very cross, and the old woman who looked after the housework had no time to look after John. Of course, she saw to it that he had meals to eat and clothes to wear, but that was all.

Granny had taught him to read, and as soon as he had understood that reading was the way to get at stories for himself, instead of waiting till granny felt well enough to read them to him, he learned quickly. And then he read all the books on the shelf in the untidy parlour; there were only five: Somebody's "Missionary Journeys in Peru," "The Child's Guide to Knowledge," a hymn book, "The Gardener's Manual," and Mrs. Something−or−Other's Cookery Book.

He learned a good many of the hymns; his granny liked to hear him say them when she was not too tired. The gardening book would have been interesting if old Stemson would have let him try to carry out its hints on preparing mushroom beds and blanching cardoons. But he wouldn't. And Mrs. Stemson objected quite as strongly to his trying to cook "Sole àa la Normande" or "Eels en Matelotte" at her kitchen range.

"Then can't Stemson get me some other books when he goes across to get the eating things?" John asked; "it's no use for me to go on reading books that tell me how to do things if you won't let me do them."

"I never seen such a child," said Mrs. Stemson; "never satisfied! Why don't you play with your wooden horse like a good little boy?"

"I don't want to play with my wooden horse," said John firmly. "I want books to read in. I'll go and ask granny."

"You're not to bother your granny. If you must read, you must. Go along up to the attic. There's boxes and boxes of books there. Only don't you disturb nothing else, and come down again soon as ever you've chose your book."

He did not come down at all till she fetched him, and then it was tea−time.

He was sitting on the floor, leaning against an old hair−trunk, and all round him were piles of dusty books. He held "Gulliver's Travels" open in his hands, and, to be ready when he had finished that, he had his elbow on "Red Cotton Nightcap Country."

"Tea?" he said, looking up vacantly. "Oh yes! I wasn't thinking about tea!"

"You come along down to it directly minute," said Mrs. Stemson severely, "and no reading at meals, mind, with your buttery thumb into all them books, as was your ma's. I know your careless ways."

John was careless. Most boys are; but he would have given up reading altogether rather than willingly hurt one of the books that had been his dead mother's.

"Red Cotton Nightcap Country" didn't come up to its title; and when "Gulliver" was finished he found it dull in parts he searched the attic again. And this time he found the fairy book that taught him all about giants. It and a lot more books that he loved were in a little black box with a rounded top, and E.B. on the cover in round−headed brass nails.

It was in the fairy book that he read about Dick Whittington and about Puss in Boots.

"What's a cat like?" he asked Mrs. Stemson; for there was no cat on the island.

"Oh," said Mrs. Stemson readily, "a cat's like like a cat, you know."

"Very well," said John; "I'll ask granny."

"I'll be bound you would. Go and upset her with your silly questions, and her bronchitis as bad as can be, as it is. Just like a boy think of nobody but yourself."

"Granny likes me to ask her questions," he said.

"Not about cats."

"But why?"

"She can't abide to hear 'em named."

"But why?"

"Oh, go along with you do," said Mrs. Stemson; but John, with the quiet persistence that always overcame her in the end, declined to "go along."

"If you don't tell me," he said, "I shall ask my granny."

"Oh, if you will have it, it was a cat killed your poor ma."

"**Oh!**" said John, "they're wild beasts, then? Oh, how horrible"

He had turned quite pale, and was holding on to the corner of the dresser that she was scrubbing.

"Nonsense," she said, briskly soaping the brush. "Cats ain't wild beasts though they are a bit like little tigers, come to think of it, about the figure. Your ma there was some boys had thrown a cat in the river, and your ma was a trying to get it out, and she fell in and was drownded to death. That's all. And your granny, she somehow took a dislike to cats from that time."

"I don't see why," said John, the colour coming slowly back to his face; "it wasn't the cat's fault. If I ever meet a cat I shall be kind to it, because mother was."

John read all the books that seemed as if they would let him read them; and when he read stories of children and the way they played together, he longed to be in the book and in the games. But most of all he longed to meet a cat and be kind to it.

Granny's bronchitis got worse and worse, and every day Stemson used to row the boat over to the mainland, and the doctor used to come back in the boat. The first time the doctor came he looked at John as if he were sorry for him. "I wonder why," John said. The next time he came he looked at John as though he liked him. And, of course, John was pleased.

He would have liked to talk to the doctor about the books that he was always reading. He read them in the branches of the trees that grew near the house, he read them in bed, he read them on the doorstep in the sun, on the rocks when the tide was high, and on the sand when the tide was low.

But he and the doctor never talked to each other first, because John was too shy to begin, and, secondly, because Mrs. Stemson always came close behind the doctor as if she were trying to shoo him out of the house, as Stemson did the hens when they got into the garden.

And the doctor came every day, and John could only see his granny for a very few minutes at a time. And she looked more tired than ever.

Then one day Mrs. Stemson, by some odd chance, was not in the way, and the doctor stopped him in the garden and said:

"Little man, can't I bring you something from the mainland? Isn't there anything you'd like?"

"Big man," said John very seriously, for he was not accustomed to the way in which big people usually talk to little ones, "I only want a cat; but I shall never have that, of course."

"Why not?" said the doctor cheerfully, and next day he opened his coat and pulled out a little kitten. It was striped, and very like a tiger.

"Dear, dear, dear little thing," said John, taking it in his arms. "Oh, how good you are. May you be rewarded for your generosity!" He had read so many books that he sometimes talked like the people in them.

"You don't mean to say," said Mrs. Stemson, "that you've brought him a **cat** the missus being as she is about them? Well, water's plentiful. We shan't miss a pailful."

"You **shan't**!" said John, clutching the kitten, and paling with fury.

"Hush, hush!" said the doctor. "You won't say anything about the kitten to your granny, will you, old boy? Run along now."

"Of course not," said John indignantly, and ran.

The doctor sank his voice to a whisper as John turned the corner of the house. "It doesn't matter," he said; "it's only a question of hours now. The kitten will be a comfort to the little chap when when he knows."

And it was. When Mrs. Stemson told him a few days later, and very gently for her, that his granny had gone to be an angel, and when he had understood that it meant that he would not see her ever again until he was an angel too, the kitten's soft tabby fur was wet and streaked with his tears. He told the kitten how sorry he was that he hadn't always done exactly what his granny told him to do, and how he wished he'd been different. And the kitten mewed in sympathy, especially when John squeezed it too hard in the strength of his remorse. He had been a very good little boy, really; but the best of little boys have always something to be sorry for when the people they love have been "taken away to be angels." The kitten mewed, but it did not purr; it was not old enough.

"What's to become of the little chap?" asked the doctor later.

"His uncle owns the island now the missus is gone," said Mrs. Stemson. "He'll be down before long. He's wrote me as he'll provide for the boy; send him to an orphan's home, he says. A hard man Master George always was, and quarrelled with all the family. Thank goodness me and Stemson has saved enough in service to buy a little business and see a little life after all these years on this dull old island."

To John the island was very dull indeed, now that granny was not there any more, and Mrs. Stemson talked to him less than ever. When she refused to answer his questions he could not now say, "Very well, then; I'll ask granny." And she almost always refused. So he talked to the kitten.

"You know, pussy dear," he used to say, "we aren't doing anything we ought to be doing, like they do in the books. We aren't setting out to seek our fortunes, like the fairy−tale boys; and we aren't going to school, like the boys in the other kind of books. But we must just be very good till uncle comes. He'll be like the doctor, very kind and nice. And he'll tell us every single thing we ask him. He'll be of benevolent aspect, pussy, and the impress of his noble heart will be imprinted on his face; and he'll press me to his manly bosom, I shouldn't wonder."

But, when after some weeks the uncle did come, he was a heavy middle−aged man, with cold hard little blue eyes, a creased waistcoat, and a tight mouth that never smiled. He just nodded to John, and somehow, John did not want to ask him anything.

The uncle went all over the house and all over the island, and made notes in a black pocket−book. In the evening he sent for John, who came, with the kitten, as usual, on his shoulder.

"You've to go to school," he said, "next Tuesday. Be a good boy, and mind your books."

"I don't mind books at all," said John; "I love them. May I have a basket to put pussy in? I might lose her if I took her to school in my arms."

The uncle laughed, without smiling, which is very horrid to look at.

"A pail of water will do to put pussy in," he said. "They don't take in cats at that school."

"Have you done with me now?" John asked very quietly, but there was something in his tone that made the uncle say, "Come now, none of your sulks, my fine fellow."

John stood looking at his uncle till the silence grew uncomfortable.

"Yes; you may go," said the uncle suddenly, "and remember, no sulks."

"Very well," said John, and went.

That night as Mr. and Mrs. Stemson nodded over the kitchen fire, and the uncle nodded over the fire in the dining−room, a small figure in fluttering white crept down the stairs. It opened the kichen door suddenly.

"Drat the child," said Mrs. Stemson, starting violently; "get back to your bed; you'll catch your death."

"My pussy's ill," said John. "I know she is. She is at death's door."

"Fiddlestick−end with your pussy; off you go!" said Mrs. Stemson, and Mr. Stemson growled so fiercely that John went.

Fear is the only thing that can conquer fear. John's fear for his pussy's life was greater than his fear of his uncle.

He opened the parlour door. The uncle woke, and saw the small face made swollen and ugly by long weeping.

"Get back to bed," he said. "What do you mean disturbing the house like this?"

"My pussy " began John, brave with the courage of the great fear.

"I'll wring your pussy's neck in a minute," said the uncle.

John fled.

Next morning there was no John on the island.

They searched high, and they searched low. They searched the house and the garden and the rocks and the sand, but there wasn't so much as a hair of John to be seen, a breath of John to be heard. And the boat was at its moorings.

"He've drownded himself," said Mrs. Stemson, "that's what he've done. You was too 'ard on 'im, Stemson; I always told you so."

"'Ard yourself," said Stemson; "'e can't 'ave. Kids don't do things like that."

"You'd better go over to the mainland and tell the police," said the uncle. He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. Perhaps **he** had been too hard. But then, he had never understood children. He had always rather prided himself on not understanding children.

Stemson unchained the boat, and went.

The doctor was at his late breakfast. He had been up all night with a sick child. Something went past the window; something small and hurried. Then the door opened.

"It's me!" said John. "My pussy's ill. You're the doctor that cures people. I don't want my pussy to go and be an angel like my granny."

John's clothes were torn, his forehead had a lumpy blue bruise on it. His hands were scratched and bleeding, and hands and face were stained with tears and dirt and tar.

The doctor took the kitten and looked at it carefully.

"She seems all right," he said; "only rather frightened; and hungry, I expect."

He set down milk in a saucer in front of the fire. The kitten, after a scared glance to right and left, lapped eagerly.

John, holding by the corner of the table, stood, rather unsteady.

"You poor, dear little chap," said the doctor, and took John on his knee. It was pleasant to rest one's head on a firm shoulder.

"Some hot milk first; that's right. Now, tell me how you got here. See, pussy's all right."

"She wasn't, in the night," said John; "and every one was cruel, and said put her in pails; so I got up, and we hid in the boat's locker. Oh, it was so cold, even with my blanket, and pussy hated it; and she scratched me, and I bumped my head; but we stayed there, and then in the morning Stemson went over. He always goes to get the bread and things; and when he'd tied up the boat we got out, and ran to where the houses begin, and asked for you, and a woman told us, and so we came. And I don't at all mind pussy being an angel−cat, if I may go, too, and be an angel−little−boy. But I don't want her to go without me. And she **is** ill; just like granny was."

The doctor cuddled John more comfortably against his shoulder. He had no children of his own, but he had never prided himself on not understanding them.

"What made you think she was ill?" he asked gently.

"It was the dreadful noise she made," said John, beginning to sob; "a rattling in her chest; just like dear granny's bronchitis. And pussy did it in bed, and she did it in the locker, after a bit and oh oh oh you **must** make her well! she's doing it **now!**"

The cat, having fed and washed, had stretched herself in front of the fire. **She was purring!**

John sat up in bed when the doctor came in. It was the doctor's bed.

"It's quite true what you told me," he said; "she does sing because she's pleased. She does it when I stroke her. But why didn't she do it before?"

"She was too young," said the doctor. "John, how would you like to stay here and be my little boy? I've seen your uncle and he says you may."

"For always?" asked John; "and live with you on the solid land?"

"Yes."

"And you to fold me to your manly bosom like you did this morning?"

"Yes, my little chap, yes "

"And pussy to stay too?"

"Of course," said the doctor.

"Oh," said John, "my heart is full to overflowing. I know not how to thank you! I'd ever so much rather do that than go and be angels. Only when I do go you'll have to come too, and I'll be the best angel−little−boy that ever was; and you'll be an angel−doctor. I think you are now, really, almost; and pussy will be an angel−cat, because she'll be quite grown up by then. And we'll go and see granny and mother, and your mother too, if she's there. **Won't** they be pleased!"

"Yes," said the doctor; and he smiled and sighed at the same time. "Yes, my little son; we must try to get there."

"Oh," said John again, "am I going to be your little son? Now I know what 'transports of delight' means!" He hugged the doctor, and in the happy silence that followed the kitten purred heavily.

III. THE ASHPITS

BREAD and water, warmth and sleep. These are the needs of the body. The needs of the spirit are diverse. The chief spiritual need of a child is play, and with it a place to play in. Big grassy gardens, a stream to fish in, to paddle in, to adventure on and to dam, cellars wherein to play at prisoners, attics in which to play at distressed Royalists, hayfields to roll in, old trees to climb, bushes to cover the amateur brigand: these are the beginnings of the birthright of a child.

And Bert had none of these things. Instead he had what his mother called the Hashpits. His mother was very poor, but she did not live in a "crowded city slum, where only a strip of smoke−clouded sky shows pale between the high dirty houses." Life would have been gayer if she had, for such slums are not out of reach of the lighted streets, the barrel−organs, the changing picture−gallery of shop−windows, the come and go of excitement and event. She lived in a battered suburb, a place, not so long ago, good and green, where hawthorn was white in the hedges, and in the fields buttercups and dog−daisies and red field−sorrel stood up with the flowered grass for hay.

But now, rows and rows of ugly little houses, bricked and slated, have crept out from the town, and, like crawling yellow caterpillars, have eaten up the fresh green country. The houses are all alike, and all horrible, and the people in them have no time to be sorry that the green country has been eaten up. They have only time for two things, work and fear the fear that some day they will no longer be able to get work. Before that fear, hope and joy lie paralysed, as warm little live things are that meet the cold eyes of a serpent. Work and fear; for the men and women there is nothing else.

But the child had something else. He had play. And he had a place to play in.

Here and there, among the yellow brick caterpillars, lie, shrinking ashamed, deflowered bits of the country that are, as yet, not much more than half−ruined. They are called "Eligible Building Sites." On them grow scant patches of grass, nettles tall and fierce, a stunted May−tree or two with the yellow ground trampled hard round its half−uncovered roots. There the kindly coltsfoot comes in spring; the brave little pink convolvulus spreads its mantle over the bare dust, and there are elder−bushes that flower in June, and tall docks and dandelions, and stinking May−weed that has feathery leaves, and pretends to the other weeds that it is a daisy.

Loose bricks lie about, and old cans that held Heaven knows what of food, unsavoury and unnourishing. There are holes, like little ponds, full of dirty water, with torn paper and broken bottles at the edge, where real ponds wear their sweet trimming of water−mint and rushes. All these things are good to play with. But, best of all, is the ashpit, a great hollow where the dustcarts come and tip out their loud−sounding, sour−smelling hoards cinders and ashes and bones and bits of withered vegetables, potato peelings, filthy papers, matted hair and grease, dead cats, their poor fur flattened and damp, rotting scraps of oil−cloth, broken crockery all the loathsome excretions of congested civilisation.

This was the child's El−dorado, his land of treasure and joy. Here he spent every moment that could be filched from school or saved from home.

The child in the green garden, where the cedars are, and the old lawn and the clear stream, gets no treasures from any of these dearer to him than the ashpits yielded to Bert's eyes and hands. They were live hands quick, clever, sensitive through their dirt. And the eyes could see.

The full half of a china plate, with a blue bird on it, part of a rose−wreath, washed clean in one of the filthy puddles, and polished on the inside of his jacket who shall say what savour of Eden−fruit it gave to the margarine−smeared slabs that were Bert's daily bread? Or the cake−tin, but little the worse for that hole in the side, polished with mud and loving care; how bright a vase in which to plant a straggling woody−nightshade, uprooted near the biggest of the elders! There was a brass brooch, too, with a single "diamond" left out of its original seven, that fastened mother's jacket, and the one diamond shone all the more bravely for its loneliness. When the sky was blue and the sun shone on the ashpits a world of possible discoveries winked at the child from every shard of crockery, every curve of broken bottle.

"I am a gold digger," he said, "and it's all gold what I'm a−standing on; every bloomin' bit of it only I don't take the gold away. It's cheap 'ere; cheap as dirt. I only takes the extry fine fings see?"

It was to himself that he said it; there was no one else who would have understood.

He found many things in the ashpits. The most wonderful of them all he found on a Saturday. Father had come home drunk, quite early too, from the tinned−milk factory where he worked. Mother had said things. Father had hit her, and she had hit back with the lamp. Fortunately, it was not lighted, but, all the same, father had had to go to the doctor's to have his head tied up. Bert was cuffed by both not from malice, or because he had done anything wrong, but just because he happened to be there. The woody−nightshade had been knocked down and trampled upon. Mother had cried, and one of the neighbours had run for a little something in a bottle to help her get the better of it. Bert knew he was best out of the way, and the longer he stayed away the better. He went out sniffing, and wiping nose and eyes alike on the ragged cuff of his jacket. It left his face dirtier than before for the most part, yet clean in queer pinky streaks where the tears had been. He crept down the road, through the broken fence to the ashpits.

The place sparkled and allured in a thousand points of light, where the sun made beauty out of such material as man had left to it old sardine tins, shattered beer bottles, all things worthless and ugly.

"I wish," said Bert, sitting down on the ashes, and digging his broken heels into the moist softness of them, "I wish everyfink was different." Sometimes on Saturdays, when father was not drunk, there were halfpennies for little boys. The thought of these coloured the week. There had been none to−day. The chimneys of the factories rose up tall and straight. Whichever way you looked there were factories, and sheds all black and brown and grey. The ashes were grey, too, except where they were wet, and then they were rusty red. And the smell of decay and filth was keen and sickening. It did not sicken Bert. Nothing in his life smelt otherwise.

"What's the good," said the child, "me finding fings and all that?" he sniffed again. "I do wish " he said, and stopped short. For a kindly−looking old gentleman was standing close to him, looking down on him through beaming spectacles.

"What do you wish, my little man?" he asked.

"Nuffink," said Bert resolutely.

"Then what are you crying for?"

"Farver's out o' work," said the child, with perfect smoothness and a complete change of tone, "and muvver's been ill ever since the last baby come. And vere ain't nuffing to eat in the 'ouse, and no money for the doctor."

"Dear, dear," said the old gentleman sympathetically, "that's very sad. How did your father lose his job?"

"Along of a mate of his," said the child, all the tide of romance swelling the stream of words; "'e 'ad a down on farver, 'cause farver 'e reported him wunst to the foreman for langwidge. He said farver shirked 'is share when it come to shifting sleepers. Farver's on the railway."

"Sure it wasn't drink?" asked the old gentleman.

"Oh no, sir! Quite sure, sir. 'E's a Band of 'Ope, 'e is never tykes a drop week in week out; and muvver, she's the same,"

"And are your parents kind to you?"

"Kind as kind vey are. Never lifts a 'and to me whatever I does, and learns me my prayers and all."

"That's well," said the old gentleman. The creative impulse in the child passionately went out to meet its opportunity to make something a story "like as if things **was** different."

"We 'ad a little cottage wiv flowers all in ve garden. An potatoes. An beans on strings, with red flowers. An Sunday cloves, and meat from the bake−us every Sunday. An I 'ad a blue tie for to wear at Sunday school. An muvver she 'ad a red dress wiv a lace collar and flowers in 'er 'at. An everyfink. An a dog we kep. Carlo 'is name was. All black and curly. I useter ride on 'is back. An fowls."

"And then your father lost his work dear, dear!"

"Yes, sir. An so..." The tide swept on. Under the creative joy of the artist lay the speculation and desire of the child. Would the old josser be good for a halfpenny?

Quite a long talk they had. A full biography, jewelled with detail, rewarded the stranger's interest.

And the halfpenny. Would he? wouldn't he?

At long last the old gentleman's hand went to a side−pocket. He would! He would! It might even be a penny.

"Here," said the prim voice kindly enough, and the hand brought out a printed paper. "Give this to your father. It's called 'Room at the Top: a few words on Self−help.'"

"Ain't you got ne'er a copper," asked the child in a voice of honey, "to get a bit of bread wiv, sir?"

"Certainly not. I never give coppers. On principle. Your father can apply to the Charity Organisation Society."

The little sharp face changed as a dream changes, and the face was the face of Bert's father.

"Garn call yourself a gentleman," cried the child, snatching the tract out of the fat pale hand and tearing it across. "A gentleman? I'll tell yer what yer are." He did, with graphic directness, suited to the occasion and not to be printed.

"You're a very wicked little boy," said the Philanthropist angrily, and picked his way across the ashpit, resuming that quest for a short cut which had led him thus astray.

The child, still vociferously unprintable, dug his heels more deeply into the ashes, and the flood of his foul eloquence slackened, ebbed, ceased. Salt tears trickled down to his lips and washed them clean.

"I do wish," he sobbed, "I do wish everyfink was different."

He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

"Now you stop it, d'year?" he said presently. God had given him courage as well as imagination, enterprise, eyes clear enough to see beauty, and a heart big enough to hold love. "You go along an' find somefink. That's what you do. See? Somefink as Muvver'll like, or p'raps Farver, when they gets sober again."

He resolutely got on his legs, and looked afar over the wide stretch of his treasure ground.

A gleam of blue brightness beckoned him as sapphires might a queen. He followed. A bottle, pleasantly ribbed, with a pretty red label; a cork, too, unusual in his kingdom. He pulled the cork out with his teeth; sniffed.

"Smells like cough−drops," he said.

He liked cough−drops. And he had not had the halfpenny that sometimes happened on Saturdays.

He put out a little pink tongue to touch the lip of the bottle.

"Oh, crikey, ain't it 'ot!" he said. Then he smacked his lips. "But it's good, though. Don't it warm you all down yer chest, neiver?" He took another lick, put the bottle in his pocket, and resumed his search for treasure. Fate was kind to him that day. He found a bent brass buckle that would do for mother's hat a mud−coloured handkerchief with a hole in it. "I could wash that out proper," he said. Also an illustrated paper with a lot of clean pages in it, and a quite wonderfully pink cup with only the handle and a very little bit of the lip missing. Now and then he heartened himself for the search with a sip from the sweet but comforting bottle that was nearly half full. How could any one have thrown away such a treasure?

But something for father it was no good going home one could sleep quite well out here, and go home when "they" were themselves again; but something for father that, definitely, however sleepy one might be. And, even to this extreme, indulgent, Fate granted him "something for father" a briar pipe burnt down somewhat, but still,

the child knew, smokable.

It was under the biggest elder that he lay down, so that the last thing he saw before he shut his eyes was the green mat of leaves, starry with milk−white blossoms that oddshaped patches of sky showed through.

"I wish," said Bert, cramming his treasures under the ragged covert of his jacket lest they should be taken from him while he slept, "I wish everyfink was different."

Then his eyes closed. And presently everything **was** different.

It was quite late when his father, now only half−drunk, and driven by the mother's half−sober anxiety, came across the ashpits, his head horrible with bandages, to look for his little son.

"That you, young Bert?" he said; "you get up and come home long er me. Get up, I tell yer, or av I got ter kick ye up, ye blooming lazy little beggar?"

Bert did not move. The father kicked him. Not enough to disable.

"Get up, I tell you," he said; and then his dulled brain began to attend to what his foot had told him.

"Eh?" he said, "what's up? I ain't 'urt ye, yer silly little devil! What's to pay? Speak up, can't yer?"

But it was the silence that spoke.

The chill dew had fallen on the green and white of the elder, and on the child's face, and on the buckle and the pipe and the pink tea−cup that only lacked a handle.

Luckily, father was not too drunk to carry home the little shape. Young Bert was very light for his age.

"Considering his surroundings," said the coroner, heartening up a juryman who seemed somehow a little upset, "it was probably the best thing that could have happened to the child."

And all the time there are the green gardens, the lawns and the cedars, the streams and the hayfields. There are also the ashpits.

It was the best thing that could have happened to the child.

IV. HOW JAKE WENT HOME

IT is very difficult to believe all you hear, or even all you see, if you are the kind of person that really sees at all. But when things are printed, of course, they must be true, so you will find it quite easy to believe what I am going to tell you. I don't quite know what I **am** going to tell you, because no one has told me yet. But I know some one will.... Now see how oddly things turn out. Just as I had written that, I heard the prettiest voice in the world outside my window "Is there any one at home?" it called. I looked out carefully to see who it was, because, of course, it might have been the taxes, or the water−rate, or a bore in a bonnet. Instead of which it was the most beautiful of all the beautiful princesses I know, so I went out and sat with her on the low wall that divides my

garden from the white road where the pink convolvuluses make flat round patches among the wayside grass, and we watched the sheep go slowly by, for this is market−day in the town, and this is the story she told me.

The princess is not living in her kingdom at present, as you will have guessed from her coming to sit on my humble wall; she is in lodgings at the seaside. That was why her hair was hanging all dark and long over her royal shoulders, instead of being tidily tucked up under her crown, as it always is, when she is at home in her palace. It was also the reason why she carried a basket with strawberries in it, and a pat of butter and two penny buns, which would presently be somebody's lunch. And the story she told me was the story of the little boy who went home.

Jake Jenkins was his name, and he lived in a very nasty street in London Little Goodge Street that is, which is a turning out of Goodge Street, which turns out of the Tottenham Court Road, which turns out of Oxford Street, which is too proud to turn out of anything. Sutton Row the street was called where Jake lived, and it was one of those streets where the side−walk is always bordered with cabbage stalks and orange peel and crushed banana skins, instead of the clean green grass, with daisies in it, that all side−walks ought to be bordered with. And when the wind blew, instead of the brown bright fallen leaves or the bits of clean hay that blow about in country roads, pieces of crumpled, dirty torn paper were caught up and fluttered down the ugly grimy street, and in at people's dirty front doors. For in Sutton Row all the doors are always open, and the children sit on the doorsteps playing with bits of rag and rusty iron, and dirty brick and dead mice, and none of them ever have any pocket handkerchiefs.

Jake lived with his aunt, because he had no father and mother, and the aunt was not unkind to him; but she had not time to be very kind, because she had to work about fourteen hours a day, sewing strips of dyed rabbit−fur together, and the fluff used to get into her throat, so that she was always coughing. She got only about a shilling a day for this work, so that it was not easy for her to keep herself, let alone Jake. There was a big, dingy, untidy bed in the room, and a table, and a chair, whose cane seat had a hole in it, so that the broken canes stuck out underneath like the quills of a very untidy and careless porcupine. The black and brown fur used to lie all about on bed and table and chairs and floor, and the fluff got into Jake's throat, too, and made him cough, so that he liked to spend as much time as he could in the streets. In fine weather he used to look at the shops, and whiten the tip of his nose by pressing it against the windows of shops that sold things to eat.

One day, when the tip of his nose was feeling quite cold from so long being pressed against the glass, some one touched him on his little thin shoulder. He jumped, because he thought it was the policeman. In London, and especially if you are poor, there are quite a lot of things you mustn't do things that you would never think were wrong unless you had been told, and it is the policeman who tells you what these things are. But it wasn't the policeman this time; it was a lady with the most beautiful green eyes in the world. In fact, it was my princess.

"Are you hungry, dear?" she said.

"Yes," said Jake; because he was always.

Then the lady went into the shop and bought a penny bun, and a bath bun, and a cream bun, and gave them all to Jake in a paper bag; and she squeezed his little dirty hand, and said, "I wish you could have them every day, you poor dear little chap," and left him there so full of happiness that at first he felt he was too full to have room even for buns.

He recovered, however, and ate the penny bun first because it looked, and indeed was, the plainest. Then he ate nearly all the bath bun. And then he took one bite of the cream bun.

"Oh," said Jake, and his blue eyes were as round as saucers, "I didn't think there **could** be anything so good."

And then he finished the buns to the very last crumbs in the paper bag, and went to look in at the garden in Bloomsbury Square, and he looked through at the green grass and gravelled walks, and wished that he could find a garden where all the children could play, not just only the ones whose mothers had the keys of the cold iron gates.

"If I was always in a garden, and the lady to give me things to eat Oh, jimmimy!" said Jake.

After a long time he turned to go home, but his eyes were so full of green trees and green grass, and his mind was so full of cream buns and my princess that he did not look where he was going, and he did not care.

That was how it happened: that at the corner of Goodge Street a cab horse knocked him down with its big soft nose, and before he could pick himself up the cab wheel went over him, and they carried him to the Middlesex Hospital at the end of Goodge Street, and when he woke up he was in the loveliest bed you can imagine, and a very kind lady was leaning over him, and calling him "dear," just as my princess had done. In Sutton Row, you know, they do not call the children "dear," but quite different names, even when they mean to be kind.

Being in hospital is rather like being in heaven when you are a child who has always lived in Sutton Row. No one cuffs you, or pushes you roughly out of the way. There is no scolding. There are large clean beds that jump softly when you move, and you have a bed to yourself which Jake had never had before and things to eat nicer than you ever dreamed of chicken and rice pudding, and fish and mutton, and all the things some people get into the habit of turning their noses up at at nursery dinner. And there are toys to play with; real toys; soldiers and puzzles and bricks not just bits of rag and rusty iron and brick and dead mice.

Even if your legs do hurt rather badly, it is worth while to go to hospital when you have spent all your life in Sutton Row.

"I likes the eating and the drinking and the lying and the ladies and the everything," said Jake. "I wish I 'adn't never got to go 'ome no more."

But, unfortunately, nobody is allowed to stay on for ever in a hospital except, of course, the doctors and nurses.

"Me got to go 'ome again?" Jake asked. "Couldn't you let me stop on a bit? I wouldn't give no trouble. I could 'elp clean the floors and wash up and that."

The nurse laughed.

"All right, Tommy," she said all boys are called Tommy in the hospital when they're not called "dear"; "you aren't going home yet awhile. You're to go down to the sea, and get strong and well first."

"What sea?" asked Jake.

"**The** sea," said the nurse, who was rather in a hurry. "It's all blue water, you know, and there's sand to dig in, and all sorts of lovely things."

"Things to eat?" asked Jake, who had never had enough to eat in his life till he got run over.

"I should think so!" said the nurse gaily. "Meat every day, and cake and jam and milk; and strawberries, I shouldn't wonder."

Jake pondered these beautiful words, and that was why he did not cry quite so much as was expected when he was put into the cab that was to take him to the railway station. He cried quite as much as was good for him, however,

went to sleep in the train, and hardly woke up to know that he was being fed with sweet bread−and−milk, and put to sleep in a bed like the ones in the hospital. And, next day, there was the sand, wide and yellow and wonderfully clean, with yellow sea−poppies and sea−thistles growing on one side of it, and on the other the sea blue and smooth, and going on and on and on and on, for as far as you could see.

"And farther," said Jake to himself; "oh! very, very much farther."

He lay on the hot gold sand and looked at the hot gold sun, and the hot blue sky. He was very comfortable. He had a soft clean shirt to wear, and a soft clean sailor suit.

No one knows how comfortable clean soft clothes are, unless they have had to wear hard dirty ones all their lives, as Jake had done.

He was only six; but six years are very long in Sutton Row.

"I wish Sutton Row was like this 'ere," he said; and then the wonderful thing happened. My princess came to him quietly from nowhere, as it seemed and sat down on the sand and held out her dear arms to him.

"Why!" she said, "it's you!"

Jake owned that it was "me right enough."

"You're the little boy that "

"Yes," said Jake, and wriggled on to her lap, and put his head on the kindest shoulder in the world.

"But how did you get here?"

"Hospital," said Jake enthusiastically. "Both my legs broke along of a keb going over 'em. They've mended 'em up a bit, and they're going to get mended for good in this 'ere sandy−sea−place. I say, ain't these 'ere jist a bit of all right?" His thin sandy yellow claws played with her jingling bangles.

"So you're going to get well here?" said my princess.

Jake told her "Yes," with many other things.

The nurses in the hospital had been kind, kind, kind; but they had not nursed him on soft laps of smooth blue stuff; their caps were stiff, and their aprons, and they had not much time, anyhow, to nurse little boys.

"How soft and sweet you are," said Jake. "You smells like the flower−stalls in Goodge Street. Don't go away. I want to stay along er you."

"I'll come back," said the lady who is my princess. "I'm going into the sea now. I'm going to swim and see the seaweed floating like islands, and the fishes swimming, and all the little shells and stones on the bottom of the sea. And even a mermaid, perhaps, if I'm lucky."

"England's a island what we lives on. Sutton Court's part of it. I don't think much of islands," said Jake. "What's mermaids?"

The lady told him a little about mermaids.

"Are they kind and soft to sit on like you?" he asked.

"They're always kind, at least I feel sure they are," she said; "but they're cold and slippery. It's nicer to be nursed by land people. But they live in pearly houses under the sea, and no one is ever cross, or angry, or hungry, or unhappy there."

"I should like to go there," said Jake.

"Perhaps we'll go together some day," said my princess, and went to bathe.

After that every day she talked to him and told him stories, and built sand−castles with him, and gathered shells for him; and life became a perfectly beautiful thing to Jake, because the sea and the sky and the sand are so good and beautiful, and my princess is so beautiful and good.

So every day he grew stronger and stronger, and his face grew brown that had been so pale and lemon−coloured, and his blue eyes looked bluer than ever between their tanned lids. And he knew now the names of shells, and of the little sea−beasts that lie on the sand at low tide. And the sun shone every day and all day long.

Then quite suddenly the end came. He was cured, as far as he ever could be cured, and he must go back to Sutton Street, to make room for some other sick child to lie in his lovely, soft, white, clean bed, and eat the good things that he so liked to eat, and to be nursed on the warm beach by the lady who is the dearest in the world.

They told him quite kindly, and he only said:

"Must I really go home?"

And they said yes, he must, really.

"When?" said Jake.

And they said to−morrow.

That day, when the lady set him down on the warm sandy beach beside the castle she had built for him, and went off for her bathe, he did not sit still as usual, but went after her slowly, because of the broken legs that would never be quite the same as legs that no cab−wheels had ever gone over. He saw her go down the low, wooden pier in her white bathing−cloak, and at the end of the pier, where the deep water was, she cast down her white cloak, and stood up in her blue swimming−dress, and dived deep, deep into the water.

Jake crept along over the rough timber of the pier, that was warm to creeping hands and knees, and came to the place where the tar was wet with the splash of the green water that had covered his lady. She was swimming out to sea now; he could see the darkness of her hair in a long streak behind her as she swam.

Then he leaned over and looked down into the deeps of the water, but he could not see the shells at the bottom, nor the mermaids, and he wanted to see them.

"I think I will go and look," said Jake to himself, "if my lady's there; or perhaps they'll let me stay down there, along of her, and never go home no more. There must be lots of room at the bottom of the sea."

The water was cold as it closed over his head, and there was a humming in his ears like the snarling, moaning noise of London streets. Had he fallen asleep? Had they taken him home without waking.

"No, no," Jake tried to say; "I don't want to go home. I won't go home."

And he sank to the bottom of the sea, and through it, and the floor of the sea closed again behind him, and he was in another world. Have you never thought that the floor of this world may be the sky of another world, just as the floor of heaven is the same as our sky?

He fell right through the sea−floor, and out of the sky of that lower world on to its green meadows. And he did not hurt himself at all, because the big white birds that live there came and carried him down on wings as soft as the lap of any princess. They laid him down in a grassy green field where there were daisies. White May−bushes grew all about, and at the end of the field was a garden, with a red wall round it. There were trees leaning over the garden wall, and on the trees strawberries and cherries and bananas and lettuces and oranges were growing in rich profusion.

"Oh, my," said Jake, "if I only 'ad the key of the gate!" But when he got to the gate, which was exactly like the gates of the Square Gardens, he found that it was open, and he walked straight through. He went up the path, between plants covered with strange and beautiful things. Some of the shrubs had toys growing on them soldiers and boxes of bricks and puzzles, so that they looked like Christmas trees. He paused, entranced before the beautiful, half−opened buds of a tin−soldier bush, and it was hard to pass the tall tree among whose glossy leaves red and green indiarubber balls were glistening in dewy freshness. And a top−tree, whose fruit was falling to the ground with ripeness, held him for a moment. But he went on. He did not dare to pick any of the toys.

And presently he came to the house, which was queer but delightful. Gay−coloured curtains fluttered at the upper windows, which were all open. And all the lower windows were filled with nice things to eat, like the shops in Goodge Street. The door was wide open, and quickly some one in blue skirts came flying through it, and down the marble steps to meet him.

"Why! it's **you**!" said Jake, as arms went round him, arms that he knew.

"Yes, dear. Aren't you glad you've come home?" said my princess's voice.

"This ain't 'ome," said Jake.

"Oh yes, it is," said she; "and you're going to live here for ever my own little boy. Come along, let's go and pick strawberries."

The strawberries grew on tall trees, just like the ones in Bloomsbury Square; and my princess bent down the branches, so that Jake could gather them for himself. And she picked him a ball from the ball tree, and several buds from the tin−soldier tree, and they sat and enjoyed everything on the smooth lawn in the sunshine. There is a very nice sun in the under−sea world.

"Lor'," said Jake, "ain't it prime? But what about the coppers? Won't they run us in for setting about on the grass so free? Or p'r'aps you've got the key of the gate."

"There aren't any keys here," said my princess, at least, if it wasn't my princess, I don't know who it could have been; "nobody wants to lock up the grass or the strawberries, or the cakes. There's plenty for every one."

"Don't no one ever eat too much?" asked Jake, who, a week before, had had his lesson on this subject, illustrated by jam pudding.

"Oh no," the lady told him; "it's only when people aren't quite sure that there's plenty for every one that they take too much."

"And what do they do here; not work, do they?" Jake was thinking of the fluffy rabbit fur and his aunt's cough.

"Oh yes; **every one** works, and so every one gets work done early, and there is plenty of time to play. Look, there are the children coming out of school."

The children came up a grassy avenue, skipping and running and laughing and singing as they came. They all wore white smocks and leather belts, and their feet were bare and brown on the green grass. With them were grown−up people in clothes that looked comfortable as well as pretty, and none of the ladies had the kind of hat that looks crooked and as though it might blow off at any moment.

"Why!" cried Jake, very much surprised, "nobody looks cross!"

"Of course not," said the lady; "why should they? work−time's over, and now it's play−time, and presently it'll be sleepy−time. And then work−time again to−morrow. Look! they're coming to ask you to play with them!" Jake waited, thrilled with joy and pride.

A brown−eyed child came, smiling shyly and kindly, and took Jake by the hand, and led him away; and my princess sat on the marble steps of that beautiful house and watched the games till Jake, tired out with pleasure, came to fill her hands with the flowers he had gathered; and, sleepily happy, to lay his head in her lap.

"Work−time, play−time, sleepy−time," she said; "I shall just have time to tuck you up in bed, my own little boy, and then I must go."

"Go?" Jake was miserably awake in an instant. "You ain't going not without me?"

"I must," she said; "my work's not here, and I've got to go and do it. I shall come back to you some day. But every one here is kind. You'll be very happy here, dear."

"You ain't agoin' to go away not without me," said Jake, sniffing.

"You'll be very, very happy here; you know you will, don't you, dear?" she said, holding him close.

But Jake would say nothing but, "You ain't agoin' away not without me?" and he said it over and over again.

"But there's everything here that any one could want. Think of the strawberry trees!"

"I'd rather have you, a long sight," he said. "And you ain't agoin' away without me, are you?"

"Would you rather have me, even," said the lady, who was either my princess or nobody, "even if we had to live in the old world where so many people are unkind and stupid and dirty?"

"Couldn't you learn them to be clean like me?" said Jake, fingering his soft shirt proudly, "and kind like you?" he added, his arms round her neck.

"We might try. But if you can't do without me, Jake, we must go back, **now**. Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay here without me? Going back will hurt you rather badly, dear."

"Bad as my legs?"

"I don't know; worse perhaps."

"I don't care," said Jake stoutly, "only you said I was to be your own little boy."

"My own own little boy," said the lady, "for ever and ever. Now, shut your eyes, and I'll carry you, and try not to let the going back hurt you more than it must."

It did hurt though, horribly. And when the hurting was over Jake was in bed in a room with a window that looks over the sea such a pretty room Jake tells me and the dearest lady in the world had got her dear arms round him, and was looking at him, "with her eyes just like as if she'd been crying," Jake said.

"Your own own little boy," gasped Jake, and it was quite hard for him to speak at all.

"My very own," said my princess. And so he is.

I think I said that the most dear princess in the world told me this story, but, of course, she didn't. She only told me quite a little bit of it, and by the time she came to the end of that little bit her dear eyes looked just as Jake had said.

"You see," she said, "he'd never have tumbled into the sea if I hadn't told him that nonsense about mermaids. Because he went to look for them. So it was really all my fault. So, of course, he belongs to me now. Don't you see?" I said I did see, and we talked about other things. It was Jake who told me most of the story, of course, and I never asked him to explain the parts I didn't understand.

So Jake is now "very own little boy" to my princess, and he will grow up to be a prince, a very good and clever one, I think. Because, of course, he was a prince by birth, and now he has come home to his kingdom of love and happiness. It is an odd thing, considering that all little babies are born princes and princesses, that so few of them come to their kingdoms in this world. There must be a screw loose somewhere, don't you think?

V. THE DOG−DREAM

HE had come out of school with the rest the big, airy school, with pictures on the white walls, and windows large enough to show the changing shapes of clouds. It had been a good day; lessons had been easier than usual, and teacher had read them a story of some naughty little boys who had thrown a dog into the water and aimed stones at it, and about a good little boy who had saved its life; and of how the dog had loved him ever after. The other boys came out of school and went down the road shouting and larking. To Alf it seemed better to go home the longer way, by the high−railed tarry path through the gas−works, and to be, all the way, the hero of that story. He saw himself, proud and defiant, standing up to those naughty boys six at least; there must have been six teacher had said "a number of boys" standing up to them "determined," so the story had run, "to put an end to their cruel sport." He saw the number of boys "cowed by his brave demeanour." He saw the pond on the heath, he had instantly visualised that as the scene of the heroic act the pond by the Hare and Billet; saw himself wading into the water ankle−deep, knee−deep, then swimming he must learn to swim. He felt in a sudden thrill the rapture of the moment when he caught the dog; he pictured it acquiescing gratefully in the rescue, and swam back to shore with it in his arms. He heard the approving shouts of the crowd on the bank, even the lot of bad boys "applauding the noble bravery of their late enemy." The words stuck in his head. Perhaps because he had no words of his own. For Alf was a timid, silent mouse of a child. The contemplation of this imagined heroism stirred him to the core. And the dog, "loving him ever after" that opened a new heaven. He felt the warm, shaggy body between shirt and jacket; he would carry the dog about with him as Abe Toovey's father carried the bull−pup. He felt the cold, damp nose snuggled against his neck, the warm tongue licking his ears. The dog would love him ever after. And here he

lost himself in a higher heaven still. How he would love the dog. How he would teach it tricks, patiently, kindly. No beatings. He would save half his dinner for it, the half of breakfast and supper, too, if such were the needs of the beloved. The dream lasted till the end of the gas−works, there to break suddenly, like a soap−bubble.

His aunt would never let him keep a dog, never. But suppose he saw the dog drowning; what could he do? Save it, and desert it? Never! The problem routed the dream.

He got home late for tea, and his aunt "warmed his ears for him," a customary ritual, involving but slight and fleeting emotion on either side.

"Where you been, eh? Don't come no falsehoods over me, my man. Out with it; playing along of them dirty board school boys, I'll be bound. Which way did you come home?"

"Gas−works," said the child.

"What was you doing?"

"Nothink!"

"There you go," said the aunt, pushing his bread−and−butter across the clean brown and mauve of the oilcloth−covered table. "Nothing! That's you all over, that is. If you can't do nothing else, I should think you'd think about your blessings. Many a norphan hasn't got a kind aunt to come home to, nor yet a tea. How'd you like to be a workus' boy?"

Alf knew that his aunt kept a clean house and a clean name in a world where both were rare. He was grateful because he was not, as he well might have been, but for her, a workus' boy.

Yet all he found to say was "I dunno."

"There's gratitude," said the aunt, and sniffed.

Alf, silent, munched; drank gurglingly from a blue and white mug, put his arm across his chest in the place where, in the dream, the dog had lain. Speech was always strangely difficult to him.

He spoke when he was spoken to, not otherwise; and not then, if speaking could be avoided. But now, spurred by the dream, he spoke.

"I say, aunt," he said heavily.

"Well, what d'you say?" The aunt's amazement was softened by a feeling that perhaps Alf was "coming out."

"I wish I'd got a dawg."

"Bless and save us!" She looked round the kitchen, the cleanest, one supposes, in that street, probably in that district. "A dog? Any one offered to give you a dog?"

"No," said Alf.

"That's all right. Where'd you get the seven−and−six for the license?"

"I dunno," said Alf; and indeed he did not. The idea was new and unpleasant. How had he managed about that in the dream?

He spoke again, and still with effort.

"But s'pose I'd got the seven−and−six."

"Then it 'ud go to buy your new boots."

"I should like to 'ave a dawg."

"I dessay. And what about me, an' my clean floors, and jumping up on the furniture? Like it to sleep with you, p'r'aps?"

Alf made no answer to this bitter sarcasm. In point of fact, the idea had visited him as a beautiful possibility.

"If I 'ad a dawg," the child went on, trembling with the agitation of a conversation begun by himself, and with this new insistence of desire, "I'd never want no more pennies never no more, if I'd got a dawg."

"Go along with your dogs," said the aunt briskly. "You get your lesson against to−morrow, that's what you better do. And then go up to the heath and run about a bit. You're as white as paper and as thin as a rat in an ironmonger's. You don't never answer to your food, like some boys."

Something in the child's narrow face and large eyes caught at her as she took up the tea−tray, and she paused a moment.

"If we was in the country," she admitted, "I'd as lief as not you kep a dog. It could live in a bar'l in the yard. But in this bit of a place it ud turrify us; no bounds to it."

Alf knew that "in the country" where dogs were possible to turrify means to annoy. He had always had dreams ever since he could remember dreams of the farm in Kent that his aunt talked of, where the cherry orchards were, and the pears on the side of the house, "so you could pick 'em outer window." He had dreamed of being King of England, with ermine robes, so jolly for the winter; and a gold crown less convenient, perhaps. But now the dog−dream drove all other dreams away. The country well, the central figure there was comfortable, not heroic. Kings often did wrong, more often than not, the history books seemed to think. But the boy who rescued a dog in distress, this was the real hero the boy who did the Really Right Thing, did it bravely, and was rewarded by love given and returned.

He had not found it possible to love his aunt, and there was no one else in his world. In books boys loved their teachers. Alf was not in a book.

He took the dream to bed with him. Oh, if he could only have taken the dog−alive, warm, responsive, loving, and beloved!

The dream was there when he awoke he took it with him to school; and out of school played with it near all the water he could find. By the Ravensbourne and the Quaggy, by the ponds on the heath. Dogs he saw, a plenty, and boys. But the boys were just boys who played, and the dogs were happy, barking and splashing, bounding into the water of their own free, gay will, climbing out again with agile, blunt−clawed feet, to bedew the bank and the onlookers with the scattered spray of their shakings.

"If only I could have a chance," he said. Then the boys at school should see. "Cowardy custard," they called him, because he was appalled by the giant−stride, and "Miss Mum," because he had no words, and the swings made him sick. "I'd like them to be there when I pulled the dog out," he said, and pictured their faces. He had not learned to swim; the water did not seem deep enough to make that worth while. The chance to save the dog was what he longed for. And the chance came. Not exactly as he had pictured it. But then our chances seldom do.

It came one day by the little river, running full now, and swollen with two weeks of heavy summer rain. The child, haunting the waterside as usual, saw a boy, a well−dressed disagreeable−looking boy, dragging a rough brown dog by a string. The dog's long hair fell over eyes that looked wild terror and appeal.

"Go along in, then," cried the boy, and threw a stone; "hi! fetch it!"

The little dog cowered and pulled the string taut.

"Go in. Fetch it, then!" the boy repeated. And still the dog cowered, resistant.

"You little beast!" said the dog's master between set teeth, drew in the string, caught up the dog, and flung it far into the water.

Alf thrilled; made a step; stopped. The dog was swimming. Had the dog in the story been able to swim? It dragged itself ashore.

"Come here, sir!" shouted its master.

The little shrinking slave cowered and retreated.

"Come here, sir!" the master got his foot on the end of the string.

"I'll teach you to come when you're called," said the young slave−driver. He shortened the string, caught the dog by the neck, and Alf's heart thrilled to the anguished cries of the helpless little slave. It was a swagger−stick, such as soldiers carry a horrible stick, with cruel knobs on it.

"Stop it!" said a voice Alf did not know.

"Mind your own business," said the other, with, between the words, full stops that the blows made.

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"Stop it, I say!" said Alf in that new voice.

Only the sound of the stick against soft flesh and bones answered. And at each blow the dog cried out anew.

Then Alf snatched at the dog, got it, held it tight. The other boy was coming at him; he would take the dog away; would beat it again. Alf pushed; there was a cry, a splash, and Alf ran. He paused under the railway arch; there was no pursuit.

What was he to do?

He dared not take the dog home to his aunt. Perhaps Abe Toovey's father would keep it till he could think of a way to make his aunt see how much he wanted it. He buttoned the dog inside his coat the dream−detail he had loved best. The dog resisted till it felt the warmth of his breast, then it ceased to struggle, and presently, as he

walked, the cold nose was snuggled against his neck; the tip of a warm tongue caressed his ear.

The moment was the dearest the child had

ever known the first glimmers of the love, given and returned, that was to light the lamp of joy. A dream−jewel to be paid for by the whole dream−treasures of a life.

Before the magistrate next day, Alf, confused and dizzy with horror, heard how he had stolen a valuable Aberdeen terrier, had made a murderous assault on a harmless little boy, the son of an eminent solicitor, had tried to drown him, had induced a schoolfellow to hide the stolen property this a very damning clause with other offences.

He tried to say that the harmless little boy was cruel was beating the dog. All sorts of people sprang up to say how gentle, how noble, how truthful, how good to dumb animals the harmless little boy was.

"The dog is very much attached to my son," said the eminent solicitor, "if it could be produced in court ?"

The dog, at least, would bear witness for him. Alf's wide horror−filled eyes fixed on the door by which the copper had gone out

to fetch it. The dog would show before all the world that love which had thrilled through them both when the wet body had lain against the child's breast, the loving tongue had licked his ear.

Some one said, "Let the dog loose."

Alf leaned forward, breathless. The solicitor's little boy whistled, and the dog sprang to fawn, in this safe, dry place where was no river and no swagger−stick, on the hand that had hurt so hardly.

"You see," said the solicitor, waving a large pink hand.

Then, indeed, the child saw that he was alone. Even the dog... Face to face with this mighty unexplained machinery of policemen and angry grown−up people, he was dumb as any driven beast at the gate of the slaughter−house. He fought for words. There must be something he could say to make them understand. He was struggling in despair's deep waters, where words float out of reach before one can grasp them. He clutched at a spar.

"I wanted a dawg," he said, scowling to keep back the tears.

"Callous little ruffian," said the solicitor's wife.

"I wanted a dawg," he said again. "I told aunt I wanted a dawg."

Evidence of premeditation.

People told each other that this sort of child was a menace to society.

The court was a sea of white and pink faces; waves of blackness surged across it. "Reformatory" was the word that struck like a heavy club on a dark night.

The aunt says that the disgrace has broken her heart.

Something else was broken, too. Alf dreamed no more dreams.

Nobody's fault, of course, least of all the fault of the majesty of the law. Yet... that little, pitiful, dumb child; that irresistible tremendous imperturbable majesty. And under majesty's triumphant chariot wheels, the poor dreams, faded, crushed for ever in the filthy dust!

VI. THE CRIMINAL.

To a child who is dead **IT** was Christmas time. The house was alive with children, and filled with a rosy mist of open secrets. No one knew yet how could one help knowing what gifts, under loving, clumsy fingers, were growing ready for The Day. Only mother knew all the secrets. Most of them were locked in the drawing−room, whose blinds were drawn down, as though there were some one dead in the house, though no one thought of that then. In the drawing−room, too, were the presents that were not secrets the gifts of sweets and toys and clothes for the poor little children, who had no nice homes and kind mothers, the children whom, on Christ's birthday, at least, were remembered.

Every one was very busy; no one had leisure for play. You were very little, too

little to carry out any generous Christmas schemes of your own, and the others had no time to help you. You wandered about the house, bored and forlorn, and you wished there could be Christmas without all those locked doors, and things suddenly hidden when you came in this preoccupation of every one in preparations for what seemed a very long way off. They did not want you in the schoolroom nor in the parlour, and in the kitchen there was all the loud bustle of making ready for the great, greedy feast that marks the beginning of our religion.

So you went out, and looked at those windows whose blinds were drawn down, and you were always an adventurer you climbed up, and opened the window very cleverly with a knife that you took from the knife−box on the dresser when no one was looking. Then you pushed back the stiff holland of the blinds, and got in among the secrets. When your eyes became used to the yellow dusk that the blinds made, you saw the Christmas tree with its many colours

and faint glitterings in the dusk, and the little table with your name on it, and many beautiful things there that were to be yours when Christmas came. There were the tables of the others. There, also, on a chair, were the little bags of sweets that you yourself had helped to tie up with red wool for the poor little children with no nice homes and no kind mothers. There were a great many bags, and you looked at them and wished you were a poor little child, so that you might have one for your own. There were sweets on your own table, but you knew that it would be greedy to touch these before The Day. One of the red wool threads had caught in another and become untied, you presently saw; the sweets were naked between the muslin edges of the bag. A pink almond sweet lay almost outside. I wish you had not taken that pink almond sweet. It was very good, and you took another. Outside the locked door you heard feet and whisperings. You stood still, and your heart beat in your throat with as real

a suspense as comes to any leader of a forlorn hope any mountain climber on the summit of danger. The steps passed. Still you stayed there, and presently the bag was empty. The sweets tasted very good, but you wished you had not eaten them. Quite heart−brokenly you wished it, as one does wish such vain things, but not as I wish it now.

Of course, mother found out your crime quite soon; and when, with a strange, changed face, she questioned you, you lied. There was a pulsating, confused horror, then, of people who said they had seen you open the window; there was the red of the sweets on your hands, the stickiness on your little lips that lied and trembled. They said things to you about stealing and prison and thieves many words many times repeated. They told you how much worse it was to rob the little children, who had no nice homes and kind mothers, than it would have been to take

something from your sisters' tables or your own. And they told you how wicked it was to tell lies. And you had

no answer to give. You were very little, you had indeed done this thing, and you were sorry. They beat your little hands that had stolen, and they told you that it hurt them more than it hurt you. Then they put you in the schoolroom, and locked you in, and went away.

You heard the key turn, and you were left alone with your crime oh, my baby! your crime and your vain repentance quite alone. You held your burning, tingling hands to your guilty mouth, breathing on them to dull the pain. The tears ran down your dirty face, and there was no one to dry them. Your head ached with the torture of the ordeal by question it throbbed with the suddenness of all these happenings. So little a time ago you were at peace with every one; every one loved you; it was all so jolly. Now, your head ached; there was no kind shoulder to lean it on; you went on crying all alone. By−and−by, you heard people laugh on the stairs; you would have liked to kill them.

Presently you stopped crying, and went to the window to press your nose against the pane and look out over the desolated winter−garden.

All the remorse of the criminal was yours.

"If I had not done that, just that one thing, I should be like the others," you thought. And it had been so easy to do it. And the doing of it, that one little thing had cut away from your feet the firm ground of love on which so far you had confidently walked cut it away perhaps for ever. How should you know?

How did that day pass for you? It seemed as though it would never pass. They brought your dinner on a tray. You spoke, and they did not answer. You understood. No one would care to speak to such a wicked boy. You did not want the dinner; but presently you ate it. It was something to do. The mug was your own silver mug, that was always set at mother's side, where your place used to be before you did this thing, and cut yourself off from

all love and human companionship. You wondered whether you would be kept here to−morrow and to−morrow again always, and always alone. They had not set any term to your imprisonment.

Yet even in your prison your energy, your lively interest in life, did not wholly leave you. After awhile you looked round for "something to do." There were no pretty secrets in the schoolroom now all these had been carried away to leave a clear space for your punishment. But scattered scraps of bright silk and velvet from your sister's love−work lay all about, and there were crumpled paper−wrappings, and, mercifully forgotten, scissors. You must have "cut out" for a long time, there were so many snippings; and your paper men and women and boats covered half the table. And on the floor you made a pattern of diamonds and crosses with snippets of coloured silks and lumps of coal. Your mother saw them late that night and brushed them into the hearth to save the servants work in the morning. She did not

know, alas! across how many black nights that baby pattern would trace itself for her.

When you heard a hand on the door you stopped your industry; any one opening found you idle. You understood that your punishment was not meant to have any alleviations of invention, interest, occupation.

Now and again, through that endless day, the maid came in to mend the fire. She would, perhaps, in her ignorance, have spoken kindly to you, and you would have loved her for it, as a saint loves God; but your father and mother had seen to it that your punishment was not rendered ineffective by any folly of sympathy. This was to be a lesson to you.

"Lying and stealing," your parents told each other in the warm, lighted room where they sat together, "we **must** break him of them. Yes, dearest," they said, consoling each other, "it's dreadfully sad for him, poor little chap, but we **must** let it be a lesson to him, don't you see."

And they thought they saw.

When your mother went at your bedtime to give you the final lecture to rub it all in over again, and at the last to stoop to forgiveness and accept your breathless promises that you "never, never would again" she found you asleep on the hearthrug, your face incredibly dirty with tears and coaldust, and in your hands the hearth−brush, on which, with cotton−ends, you had hung little screws of crushed coloured silk. It had been a magic tree to your last waking thoughts, and when your dreams brought you to an orchard of trees even more richly enchanted it had, its use ended, fallen from your hands.

Your mother carried you to bed, and undressed you. You did not wake. She did not wake you even to wash you. The white sheets seemed then to matter not so much as your sleep. She is glad to remember that now. You did not wake; only when she kissed you, you reached up your dirty hands, from out of your sleep, and clasped her neck very closely.

She went down to your father and said, "Thank God, it's over. He's asleep. I do think it will be a lesson to him." And he also said, "Thank God it's over. It will be a lesson."

Was it a lesson, dear? Your mother has thought that you learned something that day in prison. She thinks now that your face, after that day, was not ever quite the same again. There was something in it that had not before been there the shadow of the agony of a human soul that has felt itself forsaken.

My son; my little son. Your mother knows all this now. How was it that she did not know it then? The house is very quiet, because all the other children grew up long ago, and went out into the world. The lamp has just been lighted, but the blinds are not drawn down now. Outside, the winter dusk is deepening the shadows in the garden where, in the days when the sun shone, you used to shout and play.

Do you remember, understand, forgive?

I do not think that you forgive or do not forgive. I do not believe that you remember now that quiet room which was your prison, the long hours when for the first time you knew yourself alone.

But you remember the sunny garden where you played, were noisy, were happy. You remember, perhaps, hours when your mother was not your gaoler; when she held you not in prison but in her arms that loved you hours when you were not alone.

These other things... it is your mother who has them to remember.

VII. THE LEFT−HANDED SWORD

HIS name was Hugh de Vere Coningsby Drelincourt, and he lived with his mother in a queer red−roofed house incoherently built up against the corner of the old castle that stands on the edge of the hill looking out over the marshes. Once the castle and the broad lands about it had all belonged to the Drelincourts, and they had kept great state there. But they had been loyal to King Charles, and much went then. Later Hugh's father had spent what was

left on lawyers, gaining nothing. And now only the castle itself was left, and some few poor fields. His mother was Lady Drelincourt by rights, and he himself, since his father was dead, was Sir Hugh, but there was no money to keep up the title, so she called herself plain Mrs. Drelincourt, and he was

just Hugh. They lived very simply and kept cows and pigs, and Hugh did lessons with his mother and was very happy. There was no money to send him to school, but he minded that less than his mother did. It was a pleasant little house, and all the furniture in it was old and very beautiful, carved oak and polished apple−wood, and delicate lovely glass and china. But there was often only bread and cheese to put on the china plates, and cold water from the well in the castle courtyard to fill the Venice glasses.

There were relics too an old silver bowl with raised roses round the brim, and a miniature or two, and a little sword that some boy Drelincourt had worn many many years ago. This sword Hugh had for his very own, and it hung over the mantelpiece in his bedroom. And the sword had been made for a left−handed little boy, because all the Drelincourts are left−handed.

Hugh used to wander about the old place, climb the old walls, and explore the

old passages, always dreaming of the days when the castle was noisy with men−at−arms, and gay with knights and ladies.

Now the wild grasses and wallflowers grew in the rugged tops of the walls, and the ways to the dungeons were choked with fern and bramble. And there was no sound but the cooing of pigeons and the hum of wild bees in the thyme that grew over the mounds beyond the moat.

"You spend all your time dreaming," his mother used to say, as she sat darning his stockings or mending his jackets, "and the castle comes through all your clothes."

"It comes through all everything," Hugh would say. "I wish I could see it as it was in the old days."

"You never will," said his mother, "and isn't it beautiful enough as it is? We've got a lovely home, my son, and we've got each other."

Then he would hug her and she would hug him, and he would try to pay more attention to his lessons, and not so much to the castle.

He loved his mother very much, and did many things to please her lessons and errands and work about the house; and once when she was ill, and a silly woman from the village came in to do the housework, he mounted guard on the stairs all day, so that the woman should not disturb his mother with silly questions about where the soda was kept, and what dusters she was to use.

So now he tried to think less of the castle; but for all his trying the castle filled his life with dreams. He explored it and explored, till he thought he knew every inch of it.

One wall of Hugh's bedroom was just the thick, uneven stones of the old castle wall, against which the house was built. They were grey with time, and the mortar was crumbling from between them; the fires he had in the room in the winter, when he had colds, dried the mortar and made it crumble more than ever. There was an arch in this wall that had been filled up, in

forgotten days, with heavy masonry. Hugh used to watch that arch, and wish it was a door that he could get through. He could not find the other side of it, though he had searched long and well.

"I expect it was only a cupboard," his mother said, as she peeled the potatoes or made the puddings; "I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

Hugh did not worry about it, but he never forgot it. And when the next winter he had one of those bad colds that made his mother so anxious, and caused him to be tormented with linseed poultices and water−gruel and cough−mixture and elder−flower tea, he had plenty of time to think, and he thought of the arch, and of nothing else.

And one night, when his mother had gone to bed, tired out with taking all sorts of care of him, he could not sleep, and he got out of bed and fingered the stones inside the arch as he had so often done before, to see if any one of them was loose. Before, none ever had been but now... oh, joy! one

was loose. The fire had dried the old mortar to mere dust that fell away as Hugh's fingers pulled at the stone weakly, because his cold had really been a very severe one. He put out all the strength he could, however, and pulled and tugged and twisted, and shifted the stone, till it was quite loose in its place, and at last, with the help of the poker, he prised it out, and difficultly put it on the floor.

He expected to see a dark hole, through which a cold wind would blow; but no cold wind blew, and curiously enough, the hole was not dark. There was a faint grey light, like the light of daylight in a room with a small window.

Breathless and eager, he pulled out another stone. Then his heart gave a jump and stood still. For he heard something moving on the other side of the arch not the wind or rustling leaves or creaking tree−boughs, but something **alive**. He was quite as brave as most boys, and, though his heart was going like a clock when you have wound it

up, and forgotten to put on the pendulum, had the courage to call out:

"Hullo! who's there?"

"Me," said a voice on the other side of the arch. "Who are you?"

"Who are you, if it comes to that?" Hugh asked cautiously.

"Sir Hugh de Drelincourt," said the voice from the hole in the wall.

"Bud thad's **b**y dabe," said Hugh with the cold in his head; and as he spoke another stone disappeared, and the hole was larger. Now in silence two pairs of hands worked at loosening the stones from the crumbling mortar.

"Ibe cobing through," said Hugh suddenly; "the hole's big edough."

And he caught the little sword from the wall, and he set his knee on the bottom of the hole and through he went.

Through into a little room whose narrow window showed the blue day−lit sky a room with not much in it but a bed, a carved stool, and a boy of his own age, dressed in

the kind of dress you see in the pictures of the little sons of Charles the First.

"Why, you're me!" the strange boy said, and flung his arms round him. And Hugh felt that he spoke the truth. Then a sudden great fear caught at him; he threw off the other boy, and turned to go back quickly into his own room, with the dancing firelight and the cough−mixture and the elder−flower tea.

And then a greater fear wiped out the first, as a great wave might wash out a tear−mark on the sea−sand. For the hole in the wall was no more there. All the wall was unbroken and straight and strongly stony. And the boy who had been so like him was there no longer. And he himself wore the laced breeches, the little handsome silk coat, the silk stockings and buckled shoes of that other boy. And at his side hung his own little left−handed sword.

"Oh, I'm dreaming," said Hugh. "That's all right. I wonder what I shall dream next!"

He waited. Nothing happened. Outside the sun shone, and a rainbow−throated pigeon perched in the window preened her bright feathers.

So presently he opened the heavy door and went down a winding−stair. At its foot was a door opening on the arched gateway that he knew so well. A serving−man in brown came to him as he passed through the door.

"You lazy young lie−a−bed," he said, "my lady has asked for you three times already "

"Where is my lady?" Hugh asked, without at all knowing that he was going to ask it.

"In her apartments, where any good son would have been with her," said the serving−man.

"Show me where," said Hugh.

The serving−man looked at him, and nodded to a group of men in armour who stood in the gatehouse.

"'Mazed," he said, touching his forehead,

"'mazed, with the cannons and the shoutings and the danger, and his father cold in the chapel, and... Come, lad," he said, and took Hugh's hand in his.

Hugh found himself led into a long, low room, with a square wooden pattern on the ceiling, pictures along one side, and windows along the other. A lady, with long curls, a low−necked dress, and a lace collar, was stooping over an open chest from which came the gleam of gold and jewels. She rose as his shoes pattered on the floor.

"My son," she said, and clasped him in her rich−clad arms, and her face, and her embrace, were the embrace and the face of his own mother, who wore blue cotton and washed the dishes in the little red−tiled castle house.

"All is lost," said the lady, drawing back from the embrace. "The wicked Roundheads have almost battered in the east wall. Two hours at least our men can keep them out. Your father's at peace, slain while you were asleep. All our wealth I must hide

it for you and for the upkeep of our ancient name. Ralph and Henry will see to it, while you and I read the morning prayers."

Hugh is quite sure that in that long pleasant gallery, with the morning sun gay in the square garden outside, he and his mother read the prayers, while some serving−men staggered out with chest upon chest of treasure.

"Now," his mother said, when the prayers were ended, "all this is in the vault beneath your bed−chamber. We will go there, and I will lie down a little on your bed and rest, for, indeed, I am weary to death. Let no man enter."

"No man shall enter. I will keep guard," said Hugh, "on the stairs without," and felt proudly for his little sword at his side.

When they had come to that little room he kissed the silk−clad lady that was his mother, and then took up his station on the stairs outside.

And now he began to hear more and more loudly the thunder of artillery, the

stamping and breathless shouting of fighting men. He sat there very still, and there was no sound from the chamber where his mother lay.

Long, very long, he waited there, and now there was no thought in him of its being a dream. He **was** Hugh de Drelincourt; the Roundheads were sacking his father's castle; his father lay in the chapel, dead, and his mother slept on the bed inside. He had promised that none should enter. Well, they should not.

And at long last came the clatter of mail on the stairs, and the heavy sound of great boots, and, one above another, heads in round steel caps, and shoulders in leather came round the newel of the little stair.

"A page−in−waiting," cried the first man; "where is your lady, my young imp?"

"My lady sleeps," Hugh found himself saying.

"We have a word for your lady's ears," said the round−capped man, trying to push past.

"Her ears are not to be soiled by your words," Hugh was surprised to hear himself say.

"Don't thou crow so loud, my young cockerel," the man said, "and stand back, and make room for thy betters."

The round caps and leather shoulders pushed upward, filling, crowding the staircase.

"Stand back!" they all cried, and the foremost drew a big sword, and pointed it, laughing, at the child.

"'Tis thou shalt stand back!" Hugh cried, and drew his own little left−handed blade. A great shout of laughter echoed in the narrow staircase, and some one cried, "Have a care, Jeremiah, lest he spit thee like a woodcock!"

Hugh looked at the coarse, laughing faces, and saw, without looking at it, the dear, quiet face that lay in the room behind him.

"You shall **not** speak to her!" he cried, and thrust furiously with the little sword. The thrust was too fierce. It carried him

forward on to the point of that big sword. There was a sharp pain in his side, a roaring in his ears: through it all he heard: "This for our pains; a dead woman and a little child slain!" Then the roaring over−powered everything the roaring and the pain, and to the sound of heavy feet that clattered down the stairs he went out of life, clutching to the last the little sword that had been drawn for Her.

He was clutching the iron edge of his bed, his throat was parched and stiff, and the pain in his side was a burning pain, almost unbearable. "Mother!" he called, "Mother, I've had such a dreadful dream, and my side does hurt so!"

She was there even as he called alive, living, tenderly caressing him. But not even in the comfort of her living presence, with the warmth of linseed poultices to the side that hurt, of warm lemon drink to the parched throat, could he tell a word of his dream. He has never told it to any one but me.

"Now let this be a lesson to you, my darling," his mother said; "you must **not** climb about in those windy walls and arches in this sort of weather. You're quite feverish. No wonder you've had bad dreams."

But the odd thing is that nothing will persuade Hugh that this was only a dream. He says he knows it all happened and, indeed, the history books say so too. Of course, I should not believe that he had gone back into the past, as he says, and seen Drelincourt Castle taken by the Roundheads, but for one curious little fact.

When Hugh got well of his pleurisy, for that was the name the doctors gave to the pain that came from a dream sword−wound in his side, he let his mother have no peace till she sent for Mr. Wraight, the builder at Dymchurch, and had all the stones taken out of that arch. And, sure enough, beyond it was a little room with a narrow window and no door. And the builder's men took up the stone floor, because nothing

else would satisfy the boy, and sure enough again, there was a deep vault, and in it, piled one on top of the other, chests upon chests of silver plate, and gold plate, and money, and jewels, so that now Lady Drelincourt can call herself by that gentle title, and Sir Hugh was able to go to Eton and to Oxford, where I met him, and where he told me this true tale.

And if you say that the mother of Hugh de Drelincourt, who died to defend his mother from the Roundheads, could not have been at all like the mother of little Hugh, who lived in the red−tiled castle house, and drank the elder−flower tea, and loved the left−handed sword that hung over his mantelpiece, I can only say, that mothers are very like mothers here, there, and everywhere else, all the world over, when all is said and done.

VIII. THOR AND THE HAMMER

Miranda's Story

ONCE upon a time there was a little girl who lived with her mother in a little house in the corner of a large park. The park really belonged to Lord Elstead, who lived in the big house with the hundred and fifteen windows, but the little girl enjoyed it much more than Lord Elstead did, because she was always playing in it, and he wasn't. At least if he did she never saw him. She used to meet him sometimes in the fine lime avenue, walking along with a stick. His hair was white, and his face was wrinkled and reddy−brown like an apple that has been kept over Christmas. When he met the little girl he used to say good−morning if she said it to him first, and once when it was her birthday he gave her a gold piece. She

often wondered how he knew it was her birthday. The little girl's mother said that she had never told him when the little girl's birthday was, and the little girl

I cannot go on like this. I thought at first I could write it like a story−book, but it is so dull, and writing "the little girl" every time instead of "me" and "I" is just silly. The gentle reader will now see that that little girl was me myself.

I always loved the park better than anything. I neyer cared a straw about going walks on roads silly straight things. I liked it all; the trees, and the deer, and the foreign cattle, as long as they did not come too close with their horns and the acorns and chestnuts and beechnuts and May−trees and buttercups and daisies and red sorrel. I used to think Elstead Park was the most lovely place in the world, and fit for a king. And I think so still, though what this story is about happened more than a year ago. I think I have a constant nature.

Ours was a jolly little house and we had

one servant, and mother gave me lessons herself, so there was no going to school. I think now that some little girls might have found it dull, but I never did, so I suppose I had a contented mind even when I was only nine. The only thing I wanted was some other little girls to play with.

What I am going to say began to happen the day I saw Lord Elstead sitting on one of the half−moon stone benches that are at the place where the two avenues cross. He looked like a greenish apple that day instead of like a ripe one as usual, so I said:

"Don't you feel well?"

And he said, "I'm better now."

I said, "Can I fetch anything for you? Would you like some Ody?"

"What?" was what he said. (Mother says you ought to say "What did you say?")

So I said, "Ody Klone, like mother has when her head aches?"

"No, thank you," he said.

I then sat down beside him in case he

was going to have a fit or anything, so that I could run for the men to take him home on a hurdle, and send the best horse in the stables to fetch the doctor. You should always try to be useful if you can. I was not very sorry for him till he kissed me and said, "You're a good, kind little girl," and then I was very sorry. So I said, "Shall I go along with you till you get to the Hall in case you feel green again?" And he said, "No, thank you, my dear. Run along now. I'm quite well. I must come down and see your mother to−morrow." And he kissed me again, and I went home.

And that was every word either of us remarked. I know, because I've tried again and again to remember if there was anything else, and however hard I try there never is.

Mother looked very odd when I told her he was coming to see her, and made me tell her exactly what him and me had both said. And I truthfully did, just like I've done to you.

And next morning she and Ellen turned

out the sitting−room and the hall not a once−a−week turn−out, but more like a wild, fleet spring cleaning, and by three it was all beautiful, and that nice turpentiny smell that means it's been the day for the room to be "done." Mother put on her best dress, and I had a clean pinny.

But Lord Elstead never came. Because he was dead. They found him dead in the library where all the wonderful brown powdery−looking books are. He was leaning on a table over an old desk that he used to use. It had belonged to his son that died in the wars in India, when he was quite young. I thought that was very touching, because my own daddy died in the Indian Frontier wars; and if you think it was silly of me all I can say is mother was as bad, for when she heard it she cried.

Mother seemed very restless and odd, and kept walking about the house and taking things up and putting them down just where they were before. She was like this until the day Lord Elstead was buried. But

when the bell tolled in that dreadful black way it does for funerals she pulled down all the blinds and sat down and began to cry. So, of course, I said what was it, and hugged her, and said, "Don't cry," like you have to when people are like that.

And she dried her eyes quite soon, because she is very brave like heroines and Joan of Arc, and said:

"Some one's sure to tell you if I don't, and I'd rather you heard it from me."

I said, "Heard what, mother?"

"We shall have to go away from here, Miranda," she said then; "and I don't know what will become of us!"

Then she took me on her lap and told me with suddenness that Lord Elstead was my grandfather, only he had quarrelled with her because his son married her, and it was really my daddy's desk he had died leaning on, and his son Charles was the same as my daddy, but my daddy's name was different because lord's sons don't have their father's names till they are dead the fathers, I mean.

And he had let mother have the little house and enough money to buy clothes, and things for us to eat, but he hadn't ever spoken to her, because it was through daddy wanting to marry mother that Lord Elstead had quarrelled with his son. As if it was mother's fault that she was so nice and dear that people wanted to marry her!

"And I did think he'd have left us something in his will," mother said; "but he hasn't, or I should have been asked to come and hear it read. And now all the property will go to Mr. Egbert he'll be Lord Elstead now, of course and **he'll** never let us have a penny of it."

I said, no; I didn't think he would. Because I'd seen Mr. Egbert quite often, and he was one of these fair, sleek, smooth people that I don't like, with little pig's eyes. They never like me either.

Then everything was very uncomfortable. Mr. Egbert, who was Lord Elstead now, sent word mother was to go in a month, and there was to be a sale at the Hall.

Mr. Egbert was going to let the Hall, and sell the furniture, and go and spend the money in Paris, and at a place called Bridge where he'd lost a lot of money before. Ellen told me this.

The day the sale began mother went away in the train to find a place for us to live in, aid before she went she said, "I should have liked to buy something at the sale, something that belonged to your father."

I said, "Why don't you, then, mother?" And she said because she was poor now, and must take care of every penny.

Then she kissed me, and I saw her out at the gate and watched her as far as the corner, so as to be ready to wave when she looked back for a last farewell, and then I went into the house and began to be most dreadfully unhappy.

I hadn't seen before that I was going to be taken away from the little house in the park, and from the park itself. But I did not cry. I thought I would try to think, instead, like people do in books, about ways

of making money. But it is much harder to think than you'd think it was. And the more I tried to think the more there wasn't anything to think of; and all the money I had in the world was the gold money−piece Lord Elstead

had given me.

So I went to the window and watched the people going up through the park to the sale, some in carts and some in carriages, and some on bikes, and some on their own large feet. I hated the way they trampled with them on the edges of the grass, not keeping well on the grass or quite on the drive as everybody knows you ought to do, especially when your feet are that size. And I hated to think of them going in and trampling on the polished floors, and perhaps sitting on the chairs with the gold backs that Ellen and I saw once when Lord Elstead was away, and we peeped in at the drawing−room window, that is at the end, close to where the big yew−hedge ends, so as to be convenient for getting away unseen if any one came along. And I hated, most

of all, to think of the furniture and the big chandelier with the crystal drops, and the pictures and books and everything being sold, perhaps to these people with the boots that didn't understand about grass edging.

Then Ellen came and said would I mind being left; her heart was set on going up to the Hall to have a look at the house and the furniture and all. "It's a thing I've often had a mind to," she said, "and now's me chance or never. And I never see a sale, and I'd like to be able to say I'd seen me lord's things sold."

So I said I didn't mind, and she went.

And then quite suddenly the great idea happened to me, and I just did that idea that very minute without stopping to think about whether I should or shouldn't. If you stop to think about a great idea, as often as not you never do it at all.

I washed my hands and face very nicely and brushed my hair, and put on my best summer dress, which was white, with little blue flowers on it, and my best hat; and

I got my white silk church−gloves out of mother's corner drawer. Then I got out the gold money−piece Lord Elstead had given me, and I tied it up in the corner of one of mother's best hankies; I thought she wouldn't mind just that once. Then I printed very big on an envelope: "Gone to the Sale," and I put it under the knocker and shut all the downstairs windows, and locked the doors back and front, and put the key under the water−butt like mother used to when me and her went out and Ellen hadn't come back yet from her errands. I was quite careful about everything. And then I went up to the Hall by a short cut over the grass and through the beech−wood. It brings you out by the stable−yard. There were a lot of people standing about, and the big front steps that are like terraces were dirty and littered with straw and bits of paper and string and all sorts of untidiness. I don't know how they got there. Mother says sales are always like that.

There were crowds of people there, all the ones I had seen going up along the grass edge, and many more who must have come by the other avenues. I went through the crowd, looking as prim as I could, so that they should think, "What a good little girl; of course she is looking for her relations," and not stop me to ask what I was doing there.

I think my heart must be like Ellen's, because what I had always wanted, too, was to see all over the Hall, and that day I did even the servants' bedrooms that open out of a passage that goes round like a hoop up in the dome at the top of the house. There were people everywhere, looking about, and the furniture was in the big rooms, but all the bronze things and Chinese vases and pictures and pretties were not there. And no one said anything to me, and I never saw Ellen at all, from beginning to end.

I looked all over the house, but I saw nothing that looked small enough for me to be able to buy even with my gold money−piece.

When I came down the stairs, which are marble and very like a fairy palace, I saw a fat shopkeeping−looking man I thought seemed kind, so I said to him, "Please, what have they done with the little things?" And he replied:

"They're a−sellin' of 'em now, missy, in the dining−room. Objects of Heart and Virtue."

"Are you going to buy any?" I said; and he said:

"No, I ain't on in that piece. Tables and chairs is what I'm after, and I see they won't come on till to−morrow. Where's the dining−room? Along there where you see the folks thick round the door like bees agoin' to swarm."

I walked right down the hall. It was like walking up to your pew in church, only your boots didn't seem so loud as they do on Sundays. And I asked the biggest of the outside bees if they were selling the little things in there.

He was a very kind man, and a farmer, I found out later.

"They are," he replied. "Are you looking for any one, my dear? Can I help you to find any one?"

So I said, "No, thank you." And then he said what I had been so afraid of some one saying:

"Then what are you doing all alone here?" I was very frightened then that they'd turn me out, so I said:

"It's open to everybody to−day, isn't it?"

He laughed, and said, "Yes, it was. But wouldn't mother be wondering where on earth her little gell had got to."

So then I saw he would be nice about it, and I said:

"I want to buy something at the sale for mother, because Lord Elstead that is dead was my grandfather, only he quarrelled with mother; but his son Charles that died in India was the same as my daddy that died there too, and mother wanted something that belonged to daddy, only we're poor now because Lord Elstead didn't leave us any money when he died, and Mr. Egbert

isn't the sort of person to give anything to any one. So you see."

But although I had explained it all so plainly he **didn't** see, and I had to say it all over several times before he said:

"By George! If that isn't a shame. Come on, me little dear; I'll get you into the front row, and we'll see if I can't keep the bidding down if you see any little thing you fancy."

He picked me up and carried me; I should be much too old for it now. He was nearly as big as a bull, so it was quite easy for him; and he got the people to move and let us in through the crowd, which was rather dusty, and smelt of people and everyday clothes like in church on a wet Wednesday evening.

The dining−room was full of people, and in the middle there was a big dinner−table and a carpet spread on it instead of a table−cloth; and at one end a little table and chair **on** the big table, and a man with a hammer knocking on the little table, and saying:

"Number one hundred and fifteen, a graceful group in bronze; girl taming a wild horse. Now, gentlemen, what offers?"

I remember that, because of there being the same number of windows in the Hall.

The man that was carrying me squeezed through the crowd till he got to the front, and then he stood me on the table and kept his big arm round me. Of course every one looked at me, and of course I must have felt shy with so many people looking at me. But I only remember feeling glad I had my best frock on.

The man with the hammer said, "That little lot for sale?" and every one laughed; but not at me, so I didn't mind. My man said, "The little lady's a buyer, sir; only put her here to get her level with the other buyers so as she can see how buying's done."

And then a lot of different people said very quickly indeed:

"Pound."

"Ten."

"Two."

"Ten."

"Three."

Then the hammer man, who I will now call Thor, because of the heathen god of that name, looked round about, and some of the people nodded, and he suddenly hammered with his hammer and said, "Twenty−two ten! Mr. Jacobs? Right," and the girl and the wild horse were lifted off, and a tortoiseshell and silver cabinet put up. Thor acted as before, and so did the buyers, and this went on with lots of things. I whispered to my man would all the things be as dear as this, and he said wait a bit.

So I waited, and looked over the heads of the people, and wished they weren't going to take all the beautiful things away. Silver candlesticks and trays and carved ivory chessmen and pagodas and mirrors with china roses for frames all sorts of lovely things, but everything costing more than twenty times my gold money−piece that I had got tight in my hand inside my pocket tied

up in one of mother's best hankies. And I got very tired.

Then at last the men who fetched and carried the beautiful things brought a little desk with brass corners, and Thor looked surprised and said something to his priest I mean the man who was writing at the table. The man whispered back and then Thor said:

"Gentlemen, a melancholy interest attaches to lot one hundred and seventy. It was this very desk, formerly the property of his deceased son, that the late Lord Elstead habitually wrote at and that he was pondering over at the time of his demise. A pair of exceptional Sheffield plate candlesticks will perhaps appeal to those who are insensible to merely sentimental associations. What shall we say for the desk and the candlesticks? A pound to begin, gentlemen?"

Then I saw I must be very quick before some one offered twenty pounds as usual, so I said:

"Please, may I have it?" Every one

laughed, but my man didn't; and I went on, "I've got a pound, and I want it for mother, because it was my daddy's, and Lord Elstead was my grandfather."

Thor whispered again to his priest, and the priest whispered back.

And a man near me said, "That's quite correct, sir," and all the village people that knew us nodded. So then Thor said, "Well, gentlemen, shall I knock it down to the little lady. It's not much out of such a fine collection. Shall we say "

"Oh, don't say ten, anybody," I called out, "because I've only got a gold pound, and I do so want the desk."

Then quite a lot of people called out, "Let the child have it," and a lot of others said it was a shame, so it was. And I held out my pound, and people passed it up to Thor, and passed the desk down to me, and the candlesticks.

And then I forgot that I had my best frock on, and I began to cry. I can't think what for.

My man was very kind. He said, "There, there. Think how pleased mother will be. And what a brave girl it is to come to a auction all on her own, and buy a lot like this at her own price."

I got my arms round his neck, and said in his ear, "Oh, I do want to go home." I didn't even say, "Thank you" to him for being so kind.

He got out, carrying me and the desk, and I carried the candlesticks.

And when we got into the hall there was mother, and she looked rather cross. She'd found the paper I left under the knocker and come after me.

She said, "Miranda, how could you be so naughty?"

And I did think it hard, when I'd only done it for her, and spent my very own money. But my man made it all right. He said I was a girl in a thousand, and made mother and me come into a little side−room where nobody was, only a table and some chairs and a big rolly−top desk

and an iron safe that locks thickly. It is the steward's room where he pays the wages. Then he said:

"Set you down, mum, and let little missy set down here in the big chair, and look at the pretty present she's bought you with her own money, a dear."

So I sat and looked at the candlesticks and the desk; and he talked to mother in significating whispers, like in books.

The candlesticks were dull, but I liked the desk, and I hoped mother would let me write on it sometimes if I ever had any little girl friend to write to. There was nothing in it, but there were places for ink and pens and so on, and three little brass knobs, quite tiny, just to ornament it. I was fidgetting with the brass knobs, and hoping mother wouldn't be cross long she generally isn't when she came quite suddenly and kissed me, and said, "Thank you, my own darling, foolish, dear one," and I sort of clutched at one of the knobs; and

something went "bang" in the desk, and a long narrow drawer jumped out at me from the desk's side.

So we all said, "Oh!"

There was nothing pretty in the drawer. If you expected it to be diamonds and pearls you are now more disappointed than I was, because I didn't expect anything. All there was in it was a folded paper. If grown−ups read this story they will guess what it was. If you are a child, you perhaps won't, any more than me.

I said, "Here's a letter or something, mummy," and she took it and opened it and read it. And then she showed it to my man, in such a queer way, as if she didn't want to, yet couldn't help it.

My man read it too, and his straw−coloured eyebrows went up and down like as if you were pulling them with elastic. And he laid the paper on the table, and he slapped one of his big knees with one of his big hands, and said:

"By George, now! I wouldn't have

missed it for twenty pound little missy she deserves it if ever a kid did, asking your pardon, mum, but I've got five of me own. Giving up her pound to please you! Talk of sprats to catch salmons," and a lot more nonsense, but very kind. Then he held out his hand to mother, and she took it in both hers. I never noticed before how different her hands were to his.

Mother licked her lips; she really did; with her tongue. She always told me not to, but she said afterwards, when I asked her, they were so dry she couldn't have spoken if she hadn't, and she said:

"It **is** all right?"

And my man said, "Right as rain, mum. I'm dead certain of it; and I wish you joy, you and the little un. I do, upon my Sam."

I don't know what his Sam was, because he was standing on the steward's room carpet; it had a pattern of violet roses, rather ugly. And mother had her arm round me all the time.

"I take it you'd like the sale stopped," he

said; and I said, "**I** would," and he laughed. Mother did something that I didn't know whether it was laughing or crying.

My man after this went straight back to where they were selling the Heart and Virtue, and I heard every word he said because the steward's room door was open and close to the dining−room which he couldn't get into, owing to the bees. He shouted:

"Hold hard, mister," and I heard the voice of Thor, which had been going on all the time, stop suddenly, and my man went on:

"That desk and candlesticks what the little lady bought, with her own only money it's got a new will in it, and it leaves this place and everything in it to her. And her mother in trust. No, sir; course I ain't kidding. This 'ere sale's got to stop. It's 'ard on the brokers, but them as knows the kiddie and her ma 'll give three cheers for the rightful heir."

They gave three cheers, and then Thor and some other men came in, and mother showed the paper, and my man took me out

on the terrace and told me to look out on the park, and said:

> "The woods and the glens and the towers that we see
> They all are belonging, dear baby, to thee."

I wasn't a baby, of course, but he meant to be kind; he said he had got the poetry out of the Glee Club for Male Voices, and he had never thought to see the day. Then he told me (not in poetry, which is difficult and you never know whether it means what it says) that Lord Elstead, who was my grandfather, had made a will and left the Hall and the park and a lot of money to me, and mother to take care of it for me till I was old enough.

So now the park is ours and the Hall and all the lovely things; and Mr. Egbert, with the fair−sleekness, has a house in London and quite a lot of money that was his mother's. And **we** shan't sell the beautiful things and live at Bridge, where you lose your money. We shall just stay on here, and love it all more and more and more. And because

there is much too much money for just us, mother is going to get some other little girls to come and live with us and play with me and be my sisters little girls that are poor like mother and me would have been if I hadn't bought that desk for mother with my golden money−piece. So I shall have plenty of other children now to play with.

Please don't think I think it was clever or good of me to think of getting the desk. It was not that at all. When you get an idea like I got, it is just like some one telling you to go and do it. And if you have any sense, you do, that's all. But you can't take any credit for it. And saying I deserved it was only just my farmer man's kindness.

P.S. I have got a white pony, and I have only fallen off nine times. When the little sisters are got they are going to have ponies, too, not white if they'd rather not, but just any colour they like, even sorrel, which is the ugliest colour in the world for a horse, I always think. Don't you?

IX. THE LITTLE CHAP

THE man was tired. He was tired, he told himself, of the whole damned show. For long enough, and too long now, the wings of life had dragged, broken, shedding gleaming feathers along the dusty high−road where, for others, flowers grew. For others the road led to the City of Dreams; to his feet, leaden as in nightmares one's feet are, the road was only the dust wherein he strove to advance to something, he knew not what, and, striving, failed always.

He was not ill the body did its work well enough. He never knew fatigue. Only despair he knew. She twisted her claws in among the roots of his heart, and pulled and pulled till he longed for the roots of life to sunder suddenly, and the whole sorry business be done with.

His rooms were haunted, not by strange ghosts with frank grievances of their own he could have welcomed them but by his own dead hopes and dreams. Life was a chain of cruel jests, and the merriest of them was the knowledge that once he too had been merry. The books that lined his walls looked sombre and forbidding to eyes that no longer loved them. In the gardens of Gray's Inn the rooks cawed to branches now wholly bare. For it was winter, and if there had ever been summer the man had forgotten it. The dark painted doors, two of them, shut from him the dark staircase. In his low ceiled rooms twilight hung veils like cobwebs. And it seemed to him that in all the world there was nothing that made the world worth while. If he had had friends, he had tired out their friendship. If he had had a love, her love had wearied of his ingratitudes and exactions. If, with the waning of the winter daylight, his life−lamp should also go out, none would be the loser, he least of all. Only his laundress

coming at her own time and season would be a little surprised, a little shocked perhaps even, to find It where she thought to find Him. But she would console herself with an orgy of sudden easy pilfering before she went away to

tell the men in blue that another man had grown tired of the game and gone out.

Yet "It looks a pleasant world enough," the man said the fire glowed deeply; a flicker of flame now and again lit up the glasses of his pictures and mirrored itself in the polish of his old mahogany, struck a warm note from the folds of his curtains and the backs of his books "a pleasant world and I hate it."

He had no need to work for money, and he had no heart to work for love. So he sat in the warm dusk and hated everything.

And the dusk deepened to a darkness that was like black velvet in the shadows of the room, and like grey velvet shot with gold in the oblong of the tall windows, because they looked out over the Inn Gardens, and were filled with the sky that is over London.

When it was quite dark he sat for a very long time very quiet in his chair, and remembered the colour of the fields that he had played in when he was a child, and the colour of the sky that had been over him, and the colour of the sun that he had seen rise over the orchard slopes at home, and how then he had not thought that life would be like this.

The fire fell together with a crash, and he stretched his arms and sighed, and got up out of his chair. And it was then that he heard the child crying. It was crying softly, with subdued snufflings and gurglings, and the sound came from beyond his door. On the oak stairs he found the child sitting, its head in the pitiable cap a man's cap with a peak leaned against the carved banisters. Its hands, black and red, were screwed up against its eyes. Its clothes were horrible. One garment was outlined with mangy fur, wet and slimy.

"Hullo, I say!" said the man. "Don't cry. What's the matter?"

"'M lost," said the child.

"But how did you get in here?"

"It's rainin' outside," said the child; sniffed, rubbed its fists once more in its eyes, and stopped crying.

"You got a fire," it said, turning bright eyes to the open door.

"Where's your mother?" he asked.

"She's lost me," said the child. "She said to stay there, and she'd come back. And she ain't come back."

"Stay **where**?" he asked.

"There," said the child. "I say, you do burn lots of coals."

He could not resist the second appeal.

"Come in," he said, and the child scrambled to its feet little feet, in unspeakable boots.

"I like you," it said. "You talk like my daddy used to."

The child squatted on the hearth−rug, and with perfect self−possession took off the dreadful cap and laid it on the fender to dry.

"It's me best," it explained.

The man and the child looked at each other. In the child's eyes a merry confidence

dawned slowly, like sunshine, and two smiles met.

"Do you ever," the man asked doubtfully, "have a bath?"

"Saturdays," the child answered promptly.

"Could you if I turned on the water for you could you give yourself a bath?"

"Course I could," it said, "if you was to soap me back."

He turned on the water for it, and he did soap its back.

He liked the child from the moment he saw its smile, but he did not love it until he had held its body in his arms.

He has never been able to remember whether it had dark hair or light hair; he does not know the colour of its eyes, but he knows that the eyes were bright and gay, that the wet hair curled in little rings as it dried by the fire, and that the little body, thin and fine as an ivory carving, was yet straight and beautiful. The jacket of his pyjamas made, with the sleeves rolled up, a garment warm and adequate.

He brought the child out of the bathroom, and set it on the Persian rug, where it crouched with the grace and self−possession of a cat that had always lived there.

"Comfy now?" he said, and remembered how they had asked him that, after the bath, when he was little, in the wooden house among the cherry orchards.

"Fine," said the child. "This coat's soft as soft. I wish mother was here. She'd wash out me clothes. I suppose **you** couldn't..."

The man actually hesitated a moment before saying, "No; I don't think I could."

"Well, never mind," it said cheerily.

"I'll buy some new clothes," he said.

"I say!"

Pause.

Then: "I ain't 'ad me tea," the child told the fire.

After that came cake and milk and bread and marmalade, crumbs on the Persian rug, and sticky fingers on the bright brass fenderrail.

"Mother was buying things for Christmas,"

said the child. "Nice things to eat, and candles too."

"I suppose," he said idly, "you don't know what Christmas means?"

"Oh, don't I!" said the child. "Shall I tell you my piece about it, what my daddy taught me?"

The child instantly and surprisingly scrambled on to the man's knees, folded its hands like the little images of the praying Samuel, and said in a pretty hushed voice, and an accent that was not its own:

"Upon the Christmas morn
The King of Heaven was born:
He came on earth to be
A little child like me.

The King of Heaven lay
Upon a bed of hay.
The wise men came to see
A little child like me.

Jesus, give peace and joy
To me, your little boy;
And let me learn to be
A little child like Thee!"

"Thank you, dear," said the man; and added lamely, "very nice indeed."

"My daddy made it up his own self, purpose for me," said the child, and threw his arms round the man's neck. "D'you know my daddy?" it asked. "He's been gone away a long time now."

The man would not look at the little corner of the blotted scroll of life that seemed to uncurl at the words. He would not question, would not speculate. Through and through him, back and forth like water lapping from rock to rock in a narrow channel, ran the warm wave of longing, of desire.

"If he were only mine! If the little chap were my own!"

And the thin arms hung round his neck like a necklace of price.

When the necklace loosened at the touch of sleep the man gathered the child in his arms very closely, and sat quiet, a long time, looking into the fire. And at last he laid the child in his own bed, and went out, to buy things for it.

He bought clothes and toys and pleasant sweet foods, and his fancy busied itself with

a life that should be quite different from any that he had known or dreamed of. For hours had gone by now since he had found the child in the cold shadows of the staircase, and the hope he had not dared to look at had grown to a strong certainty that bade him look in its face, unafraid, with glad eyes.

The mother had meant to lose the child. She would not come back. Certainly she would not come back. The child was his own. And what would he not make of his own what not do for it, be to it?

They had closed the gates of the Inn before he went out, and they opened to him as he returned. He looked up at the tall house where the child was. It looked, somehow, not the sort of house to which such a Christmas gift would come. His arms were full of lumpy parcels, and the stairs seemed longer than usual, but here, at last, was the black door with his name whitely painted on it. He had to set down all the parcels on the stairs while he found his key.

He threw all the parcels on the sofa and turned up a light. The fire had burned clear again. What a pleasant room it was for a child to wake up in! He would set out the food and the toys and the clothes, and then bring the child in and hold it in his arms till it woke to all the little intimate joys and surprises he had prepared for it. Moving very softly, so that the wakening should not come too soon, he unpacked toys and sweets and warm, pretty garments, and laid out everything on table and chairs. Then he turned up all the electric lights, and laid a match−flame to all the candles that never were lighted. The old furniture gave back the light as a mirror gives it. The things he had bought to please the child made spots of crude, incongruous colour on the background of the dark room, set in the low key of a life from which youth had long gone away.

The room being thus transfigured to the lit shrine of youth and love and the heart of

the child, he went to bring back in his arms the child itself.

And the child was not there. His bed lay smooth and neat: on its pillow, neatly folded, the garment that he had seen the child wear as, after the bath, it sat before his fire. The child was gone, its clothes were gone; there were no crumbs, he noticed now, on the Persian hearthrug. All was as though no child had ever been at all in those dark rooms.

Then the heart of the man was wild with anger and fierce resentment, as is the heart of a man robbed of his most precious treasure.

He searched wildly, displacing the ordered furniture, disarranging the folds of curtains and hangings, and, this being fruitlessly done, went out to search the stairs in their dark corners, and, later, the quiet quadrangles of the Inn.

But he did not find the child.

Then, the sense of loss deepening and intensifying within him, he found himself at

the police−station, asking somewhat wildly for a child that was lost a little child; no, he did not know its name, nor the colour of its eyes and hair; he had found it, and meant to keep it for his own, and now it was gone. He did not know its name, but it had bright eyes and curly hair and a very merry smile. It had worn an old cloth cap and a rag of a coat with mangy fur.

The policemen looked at him and at each other, and smiled furtively.

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir," one answered, to whom a silvery voice had spoken. "We'll keep a look−out, and let you know if we come across the little chap."

And when the man was gone back to that room where the toys and sweets and clothes had emptied themselves of meaning and value, the men in blue smiled more broadly still.

"We're so likely to come across the little chap, ain't we?" one said to the other, "seeing there's thousands and thousands of little chaps exactly like him? Bright

eyes, and curly hair, and a merry smile, and dressed in rags, and no father! Well, well!"

Perhaps it is because there are so many thousands that the man has never found the little chap again.

But he has found some of the others: and he knows more about buying clothes and sweets than he did on that first night. Only no other child could ever be the same as that one. No other child comes to such a desert with such a rose. And sometimes he wonders whether, after all... But he will never know. Or perhaps some day it may be that he will know. He thinks of that. Very often he thinks of it.

X. LUCY

THE other day an old gentleman was turning out an old desk; and in the drawer, politely termed secret, he found a withered rose that a girl had given him, and a bit of old ribbon that had been smart and brisk when she wore it. Also he found a little book, with a yellow morocco back, edged and clasped with a tarnished gilt a book that had nothing to do with the girl, who was nobody in particular, and whose name, even, he had forgotten long and long ago. But the little book he had not forgotten, because it was his first diary.

On the fly−leaf was written in the violet ink that does not fade,

TO DEAR PETER,

From Mamma with best love.

And the old gentleman remembered how,

in a velvet suit, with an embroidered collar, he had coaxed mamma to spend a shilling on that book at the fancy shop near Aunt Ingram's house the fancy shop which was also the toy−shop and the circulating library.

He read the entries they were not many. At nine years old one does not keep a diary for many days.

Aug. 15. Papa and mamma went to Switzerland. Mamma gaiv me this book. I am going to write in it evry day.

Aug. 17. I am staying at Aunt Ingram's.

Aug. 18. Tried to work in the garden. No good.

Aug. 19. I am afriad I am very wickid. But I did not mean to.

Aug. 21. It is wrong to make clay modles.

Aug. 24. Wicked agian. Am to go to school. Am sorry I am not good. I hope no one will read this.

Aug. 26. There is no one at school except me. Nothing happened.

Aug. 27. Nothing happened.

Aug. 28. There is nothing to do. I

wish the oathers were here. Nothing happened.

Aug. 29. Nothing happened. Saw L.

Aug. 30. Saw her again.

Aug. 31. L.

Sept. 1. L.

Sept. 2. L.

And so on for a fortnight. Then the entries ceased because mamma came back from Switzerland, and swept in, as, wrapped in dreams, he sat over a lonely bread−and−butter−and−cold−milk−in−a−mug tea. She swept in with violet silk flounces, and a white shawl with a Paisley border, and a lace veil to her bonnet; kissed him and hugged him, and put him to bed herself with many kisses. And next day he went into the garden. To the end of his life he never could remember what happened after that. The next thing he remembers is being at Brighton, very jolly, with the others. A second cousin once told him that after mamma took him away he was very ill with something which the second

cousin called brain−fever, and that the doctor had said he would have gone out of his mind, but for the child next door of whom in the wanderings of his fever he talked incessantly.

As the old gentleman looked at these entries in the first diary very crookedly and painfully written with one of these sharp styles of lead, ivory mounted, that were sold with that kind of book and would only, so to speak, strike on the box, the remembrance of the agony of which those faint scratchings were the record, came over him; and he remembered all about the Next Door Neighbours, and all that she was to him when he was not Peter Somebody, Esq., quite grown up, with an office in the city, all respectful clerks, and shiny mahogany; with money in both pockets, and able to choose which way he would go for a walk, and how long he would stay in the garden, and what he would have for meals, and who he would have to talk to but just Peter little Peter, who had no voice in any of these things,

Peter, who had to do as he was told, and be a good boy. As he held the yellow book in his hand, and smelt the faint musty scent of it, the old gentleman saw again the next−door house.

He used to call it the next−door house, but really the school front−door opened out of the flat face of a Georgian house, with wire blinds to the windows, straight on to the High Street. Whereas the front−door of the next−door house opened on to a garden, with a flagged path leading to a locked gate that opened into a side lane. The lane was twisted and interesting, with different kinds of houses and gardens, and most attractive summer−houses; the kind of place that you can make up stories about. Therefore, Peter was never allowed to walk that way. But the next−door house was close to the school garden, so that you could see the patterns on the curtains, and the white square of a transparency that in the day was just a white square, but at night when the lamp was lighted

became a beautiful soft, pencilly picture of a castle gate and six men in chains kneeling before a king. There was no one to tell Peter that it was the Burgesses of Calais surrendering to King Edward, and he only saw it once, on the first evening, when they forgot about him, and he strayed in the garden till it was quite dark, looking at everything, and afraid to touch anything, and crying every now and then because he was such a wicked boy and

nobody could ever love him. His aunt had explained this carefully to him before she sent him away to school.

Mamma she who gave the pocket−book with her best love had gone to Switzerland with papa, so that she might get quite well again, and Peter was left with an aunt, who had never had any children of her own.

At first he was so unhappy that he was quite good; that is to say he sat still, or went out for a walk, and did exactly as he was told and nothing else. But presently he grew happier one of the housemaids was

quite kind to him, when there was no one about and having grown happier he began to be busy. The old gardener was cutting down nettles in the paddock with a reaping hook. Peter got half a hoop of an old barrel out of the wood−shed and cut down nettles too; only he chose the large red and green kind that were in the garden. He worked vigorously, thinking how pleased Aunt Ingram would be.

When he had been jumped at from behind, had been shaken, and had had his ears boxed so that they burned and hurt even when he went to bed, he learned that the nettles he had cut down were not nettles at all, but were called Coalyusses; that they were very precious, and that he was a very naughty little boy.

Then he tried to make up for this unfortunate mistake by being more than usually polite, and, jumping up to open the door for his aunt, he caught his foot in a rug, and came heavily to the ground, bringing with him a thing called a Whatnot, covered with

cups and saucers that nobody ever used. Most of the cups and saucers were broken, and Peter's head had a lump on it like a large plum. He was quite glad to be sent to bed, that time.

Later, he wished to model with clay, and got a hard lump out of the garden; to soften it he washed it in the bath a new installation which interested Peter mightily and left the tap running. The hall ceiling was dripping like the roof of a stalactite cave before it was discovered that the clay had choked the waste−pipe of the newly fitted bath.

Things like this constantly happened, without Peter's at all meaning them to.

But the worst thing of all was also the last. Cheered by two whole days during which nothing regettable had occurred, he made a booby trap for his friend the housemaid a waste−paper basket, a paper bag with flour in it, some green plums, and so forth.

The drawing−room door was broad and

heavy, and the housemaid had not yet "done" the room. All things were propitious. But the first person to come into the room was not the housemaid. It was Snubs, his aunt's fat pug, who came quietly in without disturbing the booby trap, sniffed carelessly, and turned to go out. Just then Aunt Ingram, in gardening gloves and mushroom hat, passed the French window, glanced through it, and saw the booby trap. She opened the window and rushed in. Peter, from his hiding−place behind the door, saw what was coming, and ducked; the blow intended for his ear struck the door, closing it with violence; the booby trap discharged itself upon him and his aunt impartially. And Snubs poor Snubs on his hurried way out was caught in the closing door.

Peter cried a good deal over this. He really **was** sorry. He would have liked to show his respect for Snubs, whom he had not liked in life, by giving him a magnificent funeral, such as his mamma had given the canary that had died, with the cats in black

bows as chief mourners; but he was shut up in the spare bedroom, and they would not let him out, even for funerals.

It is dreadful to be shut up in a strange room all alone with your guilty conscience and your confused remorses and exonerations.

When his aunt came to him much later in the day he had fallen asleep on the floor. She awoke him to tell him austerely that he was to go to school at once.

"But it's holiday time," said Peter.

"Not for wicked little boys who kill poor innocent dogs, it isn't," said Aunt Isabel. "Miss Snape has kindly consented to receive you at once."

"To−night?" said Peter miserably.

"To−morrow. She has sent me an electric telegram. You can go to bed now. And be sure to say your prayers and ask for a new heart. Suppose you were to die tonight, where would you go?"

"I don't know," said Peter, quite truly.

"But **I** do. No," for Peter, with the

incurably forgiving spirit of the natural child, had moved towards her for the customary good−night kiss. "No. Nobody can love such a wicked little boy. Nobody would speak to you if they knew. You are almost the same as a murderer."

"I'm very, very sorry," said Peter; "I won't ever do it again."

"**I'll** take care of that," said Aunt Ingram; "and mind you say your prayers."

His prayers included an earnest request that God would make Snubs a good boy for ever and ever amen. He was very sleepy.

And next day they sent him to school. He went in the charge of the railway guard, a kind and friendly man, who made jokes and tried to cheer people up. Peter did cheer up until he remembered that if the guard knew about Snubs he would not speak to him any more. So then he left off being cheered up, and the guard thought he was tired and let him alone. And Peter wondered whether his crime showed in his face, and whether the guard had become so quiet

because he had somehow found out that this was the little boy who had killed a dog. Quite by accident, but still, killed a dog.

A strange servant, in a plaid shawl and a spoon bonnet, with a blue curtain to it, met him at a railway station a long way off, and took him through a town to a large, strange house. There was bread−and−butter and a blue mug of milk at the end of a long table, also a vague lady who kissed him as if she did not want to, and told him to be a good boy, and that he was to do exactly what Jane said. He never saw this lady again. Then he was sent into the garden to play, and forgotten. When they remembered him it was bedtime; and after that, an interval that seemed no interval ended in the awakening, in a brightly sunlit, bare−boarded attic room, to the awful sense of some crime committed and forgotten, then sudden but shameful remembrance. He was little better than a murderer. No one would speak to him if they knew. The old man, who turned out the desk the other day,

recalls, with a thrill of misery, that guilty awakening.

And now his whole duty was to do what Jane said. Jane said very little. She was quite kind, but he seldom saw her except at meals and bath times. She was a trusted servant, left in charge of the empty schoolhouse and the embarrassing little boarder. The other servants, the teachers, the pupils, even the schoolmistress who received Peter on that first evening, all were away on their holidays. Peter and Jane were alone in the house. And Jane had her own friends and her own affairs. Peter had neither.

Jane's friendships prospered best when Peter was out of the house. Consequently he was directed, for long hours, to play in the garden. He did not like the garden but then he did not like the house. Yet he liked either better than the "walks" straight up to the gates of Burleigh Park and back again. There were chains hanging from stone posts outside Burleigh Park, and Peter would have liked to swing on them;

but Jane was always in a hurry to get back.

"My orders is to take you a nice walk every day," she said; "and don't you forget I done it."

The house was gaunt and dusty. Empty schoolrooms, with black desks and low shiny benches. A good many of the rooms were locked up. There was plenty to eat, and Peter and Jane ate it together.

"Who lives next door?" he questioned, over the very first day's mutton.

"A old gent and 'is little girl."

"Couldn't I go and play with her?" Peter asked, who had always lived in the country and known everybody.

"Good gracious, no!" said Jane; "her grandfather thinks there's no one good enough for her to play with. That's what's the matter with **her**, I think. Pining away like, for want of cheerful company, that's what I say."

Jane, Peter decided, was not likely to pine away for any such want. Shouts of

laughter came to him that afternoon in the hot, parched garden, through the bars of the kitchen window.

At tea−time he began again. "The little girl isn't really pining away, is she, Jane?" he asked, through much thick bread−and−butter. They had meals in the kitchen to save trouble.

"She's white as a egg," said Jane; "coughs a lot or used to. Now she's lost her voice even for coughing. I can see her at the window most days. I did hear they was going to take her to the seaside, to try what that'll do for her. But you couldn't play with her anyway, Master Peter. Her grandfather wouldn't **let** her play with you."

Peter ate no more just then. It seemed quite certain that Jane now knew who had killed quite unintentionally, but still killed the pug. He got away as quickly as he could, and went out into the garden. There was a quiet, weedy corner, between the stables and the wall of the other house: face down among the bindweed and plantains and

the May−weed Peter lay, and wondered how he could have been so wicked, and whether such a stain would cling for ever, and he be pointed at, when he grew up, as the man that killed the dog when he was a little boy. It seemed that he had been at school a very long time. Already he knew the garden better than he had known Aunt Ingram's. It was a pleasant, old−fashioned garden, with the stable−yard only divided from it by a pretence of a privet hedge. But there were no grooms in the yard, and no horses in the stable. The coach−house door, however, was open. One could climb up that, and sit in the open window of the hay−loft. But what was the good? There was no one to see him do it. So he lay face down among the weeds, and cried, and wished that his mamma had not gone away.

Mamma was in Switzerland very far away hoping that her boy was good and happy. She had said she should hope that every day. Well, he wasn't. He wasn't either.

He never knew when he first became

aware that some one was looking at him. He felt it before he thought it was worth while to look up and see who it was. It couldn't be any one but Jane, and... well, if she saw that he had been crying she might take more notice of him. He knew well enough that she wouldn't scold him or call him a cry−baby. Children know this sort of thing with strange accuracy. So he lay there, and though the interest of wondering what Jane would say stopped his tears his shoulders still shook to his sobs. But Jane said nothing. So presently he rolled over, and Jane was not there at all. So then he sat up and looked round. No one was there, and he had been quite certain that some one was.

It was no use to begin crying again now, anyway. There was a vine growing up the stable wall; there were grapes high up. He would climb up and see if they were ripe. He would not take any; that would be stealing. But he did not climb. Suddenly he saw that it would not be worth while. He went and walked in the garden and picked flowers to

pieces and tasted the petals. The rose−leaves were nice to eat; so were the nasturtiums, but the sunflowers were horrid.

He went to bed early that night because Jane was going out to a party. He said his prayers twice over, and added a petition that was intended for a prayer: "Oh, please, dear God! oh, dear mamma! Oh do come and take me away from here!"

It was his last act of faith. On the morning of the second day he settled down into the desperate, quiet misery of a child alone, for whom there is no joyous past, no hopeful future, only the interminable intolerable present.

He spent nearly all his time in the garden, and he grew to hate it as men hate a prison. At first he had thought of writing to his mother and telling her. Telling her what? That he had been sent to school because he had killed not on purpose, but still killed Aunt Ingram's dog? Perhaps even mamma would not love him any more when she knew that.

Peter, an old man now, sitting musing, with the first diary in his hand, could draw you the plan of that garden, and tell you what flowers grew where indicate the exact whereabouts and numbers of the old sea−kale pots that the snails loved to hide in; distinguish the taste of the different petals, of the vine leaves, and of the unripe grapes; "for compared with 'murder almost'" stealing soon grew to seem nothing much, one way or the other. And eating is the first distraction that suggests itself to a child's boredom.

And as he went about the sense grew and grew on him of being watched, of there being some one else quite near. The loneliness of these three days left a mark on his soul that will never be effaced. It might have marked brain as well as soul but for the next−door neighbour.

He had been in that garden three long, long days, with intervals for sleep and food, and it seemed as though he must always have been there, where he first saw her at a window of the first floor of the next−door

house a pale little face, with large, dark eyes, and hair that hung in long, lean, black tresses. Some sort of shawl thing was wrapped round her, and she waved a hand like a white bird's claw, and smiled at him.

"Hullo!" he said, thrilling to the adventure; "you better?"

She smiled, and her lips moved, but she didn't answer. Then he remembered.

"Oh," he said, standing as close to the dividing wall as he could stand and still see her, "I forgot you'd lost your voice. I suppose you can't come out?"

She shook her head, still smiling.

"I'm so very glad to see you," said Peter; "they won't be angry with you for me talking to you, will they?"

Again a shake of the head and a movement of the lips. Peter, watching carefully, thought the lips said, "Don't tell."

"I won't," said Peter; "course I won't. Aren't you tired being up there?"

He is not sure now whether it was only fancy, or whether he really could tell by the

way her lips moved what she said. But at the time he had no doubt. Why should he have had? What she seemed to say was

"I used to be very very tired."

"Can I do anything for you?" was Peter's next question. And again the dark head shook with a "No, thank you," and it seemed to him that she added, "I used to like playing. I should like to see you play."

Under that inspiration Peter climbed the coach−house door, and sat in the opening of the hay−loft, swinging his legs.

She applauded with smiles, and softly clapping hands.

For the first time the call to "Come to bed, Master Peter," seemed to come too soon.

Next morning Peter woke early, with a thrill of joyous anticipation; there was oh, wonderful! something to look forward to. But then he remembered. There had been nothing in the little girl's face or voice or manner to show that she knew who he was, he, the malign hero of a murder story.

He dressed slowly, maturing a resolution of martyrdom.

When he went into the garden he almost wished that she might not be at the window. When he saw that she was not there he knew that he had only almost wished it. When next he looked up there she was, smiling and waving her hand that was like a bird−claw, and white.

With the help of two sea−kale pots and an old hurdle he achieved the ascent of the dividing wall, she the while smiling approval of his acrobatic feats. Then, not much more than a yard away from the window−sill, he told her all. It was very difficult, but he told her, quite plainly, exactly what sort of boy he was, how wicked, how very like a real murderer. And as he thought of Snubs he wept, though Snubs in life had not endeared himself to Peter.

The little girl was very nice to him. She said, "Never mind," and "I'm sure you didn't mean to," with other kind and consoling things.

Also she then told him, when he asked her, that her name was Lucy, and that she was eight years old. He never heard her voice, but one soon becomes expert in the silent language of the lips, especially if one has been very sad

and very lonely.

It is impossible to play with a person who sits for ever at a window, but it is easy to play **for** her. Peter played for Lucy all the plays that he had thought of and not cared to carry out. He spun a top for her, though August is not the proper season for tops. He played marbles quite big boys played marbles in those days and at each stroke of luck or skill looked up for her applause.

He sang to her the songs he had learned from his brothers and from the servants at home the fashionable ditties of this moment. "Slap bang, here we are again" and "The Captain with his Whiskers" and "The Perfect Cure," and Lucy, pale, but always smiling, applauded and encored. She never talked much, but she was one

of those people to whom one can tell everything. Peter told her more than he had ever told any one else. And different things. Things that he has never in all his life told to any one else.

And gradually the grim, echoing house, and Jane, and Jane's crinoline and her spoon bonnets and her friends, and even meal times and going to bed, began to seem vague and dream−like, and the only real thing in the world was Lucy the thin face at the window, with the lank hanks of hair hanging on each side of it, and the eyes that were interested in everything he did; the pale lips that always smiled and never said anything that was not kind.

He said nothing to Jane of the next− door neighbour. For a thousand reasons he could say nothing. Indeed, he now said hardly anything to Jane. She, on the contrary, began to talk more to him, and to take him out more, and to bring him into the kitchen when her friends were there.

He hated it. He wanted nothing but the garden now, the garden, and Lucy.

The only thing that seemed real, besides Lucy and the things he did when he was with her, were his dreams, which grew very real. In these he played with Lucy, inside the next−door house. Years afterwards he went into that house, and found his way about in it with his eyes shut. Every turn of it was familiar; yet he had never been in it before, except in dreams.

And the days went on and the dreams, and Peter ceased to wish that mamma would come and fetch him away. He ceased to wish that the others were there. He wished for nothing but Lucy, and Lucy was there. And he wished Jane would leave him alone and not bother so.

It was Jane, he learned from the second cousin long afterwards, who wrote to his mother. She lost her place for it, but mamma saw that she was in the end no loser, and Jane's letter brought mamma back from Switzerland. The letter remarked

that "this came hopping to find you well as it leaves me at presint, and it was her duty to say that Master Peter do not look above aff the sise he did wen he come, an dall pale an dall eyes, an dif I was you, dear Mam, I would take him or not long for this world, so no more at present from your bedent servt. JANE TRANSOME."

So mother came and kissed him and loved him and put him to bed, and that night he did not dream.

He went out into the garden next morning, while mother was packing his clothes, to say good−bye to Lucy. She was not at the window, and before she could appear Jane came after him.

"Come in, Master Peter," she said; "you're to have your hands and face washed and have a cup of milk and a nice piece of cake before you go."

"I want," said Peter there seemed now to be no reason for secrecy "I want to see the little girl next door."

"You'll not see her," said Jane, catching his hand. "Come along, do. Poor little thing. I thought I'd told you about her. Pined away for lack of company, that's what I shall always say."

"I want to see her," Peter repeated, and offered a dragging resistance to the hand of Jane.

"Don't I tell you you can't see her," Jane insisted; "she's dead."

Then a horror of great darkness came over Peter, and through it he remembers saying, "No, no, no, no," a great many times, and stamping with his boots on the garden path.

"But I tell you she is," Jane said. "Don't be so silly. She's dead right enough, poor little thing, and an angel by this time, I shouldn't wonder."

And still Peter dragged at Jane's hand till he had actually dragged her to the place from which Lucy's window could be seen. And the windows of the house were shuttered fast.

"There, you see," said Jane, "it's been shut up ever since they went away."

And again Peter said, "No."

"But I say yes," said Jane, exasperated. "She died at the seaside three days after they got her there. They shut the house up and took her away the day after you came; I thought I'd mentioned it. You come along, like a good boy now, and have your nice cake."

That is the end of what the little yellow−bound, gilt−bordered book brings back. After that nothing ... till it is Brighton; and being jolly with the others.