

Five Little Peppers & Five Children and It

SUNSHINE SERIES

MARGARET SIDNEY
EDITH NESBIT

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&
Five Children and It

Margaret Sidney
Edith Nesbit

Libraries of Hope

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& Five Children and It

Sunshine Series

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Contents

FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS 1
A Home View 3
Making Happiness for Mamsie 12
Mamsie's Birthday 25
Trouble for the Little Brown House 33
More Trouble 48
Hard Days for Polly 59
The Cloud Over the Little Brown House 72
Joel's Turn 78
Sunshine Again 83
A Threatened Blow 93
Safe 98
New Friends 101
Phronsie Pays a Debt of Gratitude 117
A Letter to Jasper 121
Jolly Days 134
Getting a Christmas for the Little Ones 146
Christmas Bells! 158
Education Ahead 170
Brave Work and The Reward 184
Polly Is Comforted 188
Phronsie 195
Getting Ready for Mamsie and the Boys 208
Which Treats of a Good Many Matters 225
Polly's Dismal Morning 241

Polly's Big Bundle 249
FIVE CHILDREN AND IT 269
Beautiful as the Day 271
Golden Guineas 293
Being Wanted 314
Wings 337
No Wings 359
A Castle and No Dinner 370
A Siege and Bed 385
Bigger Than the Baker's Boy 397
Grown-up 419
Scalps 435
The Last Wish 451

FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS
and How They Grew

By Margaret Sidney



CHAPTER I
A Home View

The little old kitchen had quieted down from the bustle and confusion of midday; and now, with its afternoon manners on, presented a holiday aspect, that as the principal room in the brown house, it was eminently proper it should have. It was just on the edge of the twilight; and the little Peppers, all except Ben, the oldest of the flock, were enjoying a "breathing spell," as their mother called it, which meant some quiet work suitable for the hour. All the "breathing spell" they could remember however, poor things; for times were always hard with them nowadays; and since the father died, when Phronsie was a baby, Mrs. Pepper had had hard work to scrape together money enough to put bread into her children's mouths, and to pay the rent of the little brown house.

But she had met life too bravely to be beaten down now. So with a stout heart and a cheery face, she had worked away day after day at making coats, and tailoring and mending of all descriptions; and she had seen with pride that couldn't be concealed, her noisy, happy brood growing up around her, and filling her heart with comfort, and making the little brown house fairly ring with jollity and fun.

"Poor things!" she would say to herself, "they haven't had any bringing up; they've just scrambled up!" And then she would set her lips together tightly, and fly at her work faster than ever. "I must get schooling for them some way, but I don't see how!"

Once or twice she had thought, "Now the time is coming!" but it never did: for winter shut in very cold, and it

took so much more to feed and warm them, that the money went faster than ever. And then, when the way seemed clear again, the store changed hands, so that for a long time she failed to get her usual supply of sacks and coats to make; and that made sad havoc in the quarters and half-dollars laid up as her nest egg. But—"Well, it'll come sometime," she would say to herself; "because it must!" And so at it again she would fly, brisker than ever.

"To help mother," was the great ambition of all the children, older and younger; but in Polly's and Ben's souls, the desire grew so overwhelmingly great as to absorb all lesser thoughts. Many and vast were their secret plans, by which they were to astonish her at some future day, which they would only confide—as they did everything else—to one another. For this brother and sister were everything to each other, and stood loyally together through "thick and thin."

Polly was ten, and Ben one year older; and the younger three of the "Five Little Peppers," as they were always called, looked up to them with the intensest admiration and love. What *they* failed to do, couldn't very well be done by anyone!

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Polly as she sat over in the corner by the window helping her mother pull out basting threads from a coat she had just finished, and giving an impatient twitch to the sleeve, "I do wish we could ever have any light—just as much as we want!"

"You don't need any light to see these threads," said Mrs. Pepper, winding up hers carefully, as she spoke, on an old spool. "Take care, Polly, you broke that; thread's dear now."

"I couldn't help it," said Polly, vexedly; "it snapped; everything's dear now, it seems to me! I wish we could have—oh! ever an' ever so many candles; as many as we wanted. I'd light 'em all, so there! and have it light here one night, anyway!"

"Yes, and go dark all the rest of the year, like as anyway," observed Mrs. Pepper, stopping to untie a knot. "Folks who



do so never have any candles," she added, sententiously.

"How many'd you have, Polly?" asked Joel, curiously, laying down his hammer, and regarding her with the utmost anxiety.

"Oh, two hundred!" said Polly, decidedly. "I'd have two hundred, all in a row!"

"Two hundred candles!" echoed Joel, in amazement. "My whockety! what a lot!"

"Don't say such dreadful words, Joel," put in Polly, nervously, stopping to pick up her spool of basting thread that

was racing away all by itself; "tisn't nice."

"Tisn't worse than to wish you'd got things you haven't," retorted Joel. "I don't believe you'd light 'em all at once," he added, incredulously.

"Yes, I would too!" replied Polly, recklessly; "two hundred of 'em, if I had a chance; all at once, so there, Joey Pepper!"

"Oh," said little Davie, drawing a long sigh. "Why, 'twould be just like heaven, Polly! but wouldn't it cost money, though!"

"I don't care," said Polly, giving a flounce in her chair, which snapped another thread; "oh dear me! I didn't mean to, mammy; well, I wouldn't care how much money it cost, we'd have as much light as we wanted, for once; so!"

"Mercy!" said Mrs. Pepper, "you'd have the house afire! Two hundred candles! who ever heard of such a thing!"

"Would they burn?" asked Phronsie, anxiously, getting up from the floor where she was crouching with David, overseeing Joel nail on the cover of an old box; and going to Polly's side she awaited her answer patiently.

"Burn?" said Polly. "There, that's done now, mamsie dear!" And she put the coat, with a last little pat, into her mother's lap. "I guess they would, Phronsie pet." And Polly caught up the little girl, and spun round and round the old kitchen till they were both glad to stop.

"Then," said Phronsie, as Polly put her down, and stood breathless after her last glorious spin, "I do so wish we might, Polly; oh, just this very one minute!"

And Phronsie clasped her fat little hands in rapture at the thought.

"Well," said Polly, giving a look up at the old clock in the corner; "deary me! it's half-past five; and most time for Ben to come home!"

Away she flew to get supper. So for the next few moments nothing was heard but the pulling out of the old table into the middle of the floor, the laying the cloth, and all the other

bustle attendant upon the being ready for Ben. Polly went skipping around, cutting the bread, and bringing dishes; only stopping long enough to fling some scraps of reassuring nonsense to the two boys, who were thoroughly dismayed at being obliged to remove their traps into a corner.

Phronsie still stood just where Polly left her. *Two hundred candles!* oh! what could it mean! She gazed up to the old beams overhead, and around the dingy walls, and to the old black stove, with the fire nearly out, and then over everything the kitchen contained, trying to think how it would seem. To have it bright and winsome and warm! to suit Polly—"*oh!*" she screamed.

"Goodness!" said Polly, taking her head out of the old cupboard in the corner, "how you scared me, Phronsie!"

"Would they *ever* go out?" asked the child gravely, still standing where Polly left her.

"What?" asked Polly, stopping with a dish of cold potatoes in her hand. "What, Phronsie?"

"Why, the candles," said the child, "the ever-an'-ever so many pretty lights!"

"Oh, my senses!" cried Polly, with a little laugh, "haven't you forgotten that! Yes—no, that is, Phronsie, if we could have 'em at all, we wouldn't *ever* let 'em go out!"

"Not once?" asked Phronsie, coming up to Polly with a little skip, and nearly upsetting her, potatoes and all—"not once, Polly, truly?"

"No, not forever-an'-ever," said Polly; "take care, Phronsie! there goes a potato; no, we'd keep 'em always!"

"No, you don't want to," said Mrs. Pepper, coming out of the bedroom in time to catch the last words; "they won't be good tomorrow; better have them tonight, Polly."

"Ma'am!" said Polly, setting down her potato dish on the table, and staring at her mother with all her might—"have *what,* mother?"

"Why, the potatoes, to be sure," replied Mrs. Pepper;



"didn't you say you better keep them, child?"

"'Twasn't potatoes—at all," said Polly, with a little gasp; "'twas—dear me! here's Ben!" For the door opened, and Phronsie, with a scream of delight, bounded into Ben's arms.

"It's just jolly," said Ben, coming in, his chubby face all aglow, and his big blue eyes shining so honest and true; "it's just jolly to get home! supper ready, Polly?"

"Yes," said Polly; "that is—all but—" and she dashed off for Phronsie's eating apron.

"Sometime," said Phronsie, with her mouth half full, when the meal was nearly over, "we're going to be awful rich; we are, Ben, truly!"

"No?" said Ben, affecting the most hearty astonishment; "you don't say so, Chick!"

"Yes," said Phronsie, shaking her yellow head very wisely at him, and diving down into her cup of very weak milk and water to see if Polly had put any sugar in by mistake—a proceeding always expectantly observed. "Yes, we are really, Bensie, very dreadful rich!"

"I wish we could be rich now, then," said Ben, taking another generous slice of the brown bread; "in time for mamsie's birthday," and he cast a sorrowful glance at Polly.

"I know," said Polly; "oh dear! if we only *could* celebrate it!"

"I don't want any other celebration," said Mrs. Pepper, beaming on them so that a little flash of sunshine seemed to hop right down on the table, "than to look round on you all; I'm rich now, and that's a fact!"

"Mamsie don't mind her five bothers," cried Polly, jumping up and running to hug her mother; thereby producing a like desire in all the others, who immediately left their seats and followed her example.

"Mother's rich enough," ejaculated Mrs. Pepper; her bright, black eyes glistening with delight, as the noisy troop filed back to their bread and potatoes; "if we can only keep

together, dears, and grow up good, so that the little brown house won't be ashamed of us, that's all I ask."

"Well," said Polly, in a burst of confidence to Ben, after the table had been pushed back against the wall, the dishes nicely washed, wiped, and set up neatly in the cupboard, and all traces of the meal cleared away; "I don't care; let's try and get a celebration, somehow, for mamsie!"

"How are you going to do it?" asked Ben, who was of a decidedly practical turn of mind, and thus couldn't always follow Polly in her flights of imagination.

"I don't know," said Polly; "but we *must* some way."

"Phoh! that's no good," said Ben, disdainfully; then seeing Polly's face, he added kindly: "let's think, though; and perhaps there'll be some way."

"Oh, I know," cried Polly, in delight; "I know the very thing, Ben! let's make her a cake; a big one, you know, and —"

"She'll see you bake it," said Ben; "or else she'll smell it, and that'd be just as bad."

"No, she won't either," replied Polly. "Don't you know she's going to help Mrs. Henderson tomorrow; so there!"

"So she is," said Ben; "good for you, Polly, you always think of everything!"

"And then," said Polly, with a comfortable little feeling at her heart at Ben's praise, "why, we can have it all out of the way splendidly, you know, when she comes home—and besides, Grandma Bascom'll tell me how. You know we've only got brown flour, Ben; I mean to go right over and ask her now."

"Oh, no, you mustn't," cried Ben, catching hold of her arm as she was preparing to fly off. "Mammy'll find it out; better wait till tomorrow; and besides Polly—" And Ben stopped, unwilling to dampen this propitious beginning. "The stove'll act like everything, tomorrow! I know 'twill; then what'll you do!"

"It *sha'n't!*" said Polly, running up to look it in the face; "if it does, I'll shake it; the mean old thing!"

The idea of Polly's shaking the lumbering old black affair, sent Ben into such a peal of laughter that it brought all the other children running to the spot; and nothing would do but they must one and all, be told the reason. So Polly and Ben took them into confidence, which so elated them that half an hour after, when long past her bedtime, Phronsie declared, "I'm not going to bed! I want to sit up like Polly!"

"Don't tease her," whispered Polly to Ben, who thought she ought to go; so she sat straight up on her little stool, winking like everything to keep awake.

At last, as Polly was in the midst of one of her liveliest sallies, over tumbled Phronsie, a sleepy little heap, upon the floor.

"I want—to go—to bed!" she said; "take me—Polly!"

"I thought so," laughed Polly, and bundled her off into the bedroom.

CHAPTER II
Making Happiness for Mamsie

And so, the minute her mother had departed for the minister's house next morning, and Ben had gone to his day's work, chopping wood for Deacon Blodgett, Polly assembled her force around the old stove, and proceeded to business. She and the children had been up betimes that morning to get through with the work; and now, as they glanced around with a look of pride on the neatly swept floor, the dishes all done, and everything in order, the moment their mother's back was turned they began to implore Polly to hurry and begin.

"It's most 'leven o'clock," said Joel, who, having no work to do outside, that day, was prancing around, wild to help along the festivities; "it's most 'leven o'clock, Polly Pepper! you won't have it done."

"Oh, no; 'tisn't either, Joe;" said Polly, with a very flushed face, and her arms full of kindlings, glancing up at the old clock as she spoke; "tisn't but quarter of nine; there, take care, Phronsie! you can't lift off the cover; do help her, Davie."

"No; let me!" cried Joel, springing forward; "it's my turn; Dave got the shingles; it's my turn, Polly."

"So 'tis," said Polly; "I forgot; there," as she flung in the wood, and poked it all up in a nice little heap coaxingly. "It can't help but burn; what a cake we'll have for mamsie!"

"It'll be so big," cried Phronsie, hopping around on one set of toes, "that mamsie won't know what to do, will she, Polly?"

"No, I don't believe she will," said Polly, gayly, stuffing in

more wood; "Oh, *dear!* there goes Ben's putty; it's all come out!"

"So it has," said Joel, going around back of the stove to explore; and then he added cheerfully, "it's bigger'n ever; oh! it's an awful big hole, Polly!"

"Now, whatever shall we do!" said Polly, in great distress; "that *hateful* old crack! and Ben's clear off to Deacon Blodgett's!"

"I'll run and get him," cried Joel, briskly; "I'll bring him right home in ten minutes."

"Oh, no, you must not, Joe," cried Polly in alarm; "it wouldn't ever be right to take him off from his work; mamsie wouldn't like it."



"What will you do, then?" asked Joel, pausing on his way to the door.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Polly, getting down on her knees to examine the crack; "I shall have to stuff it with paper, I s'pose."

"'Twon't stay in," said Joel, scornfully; "don't you know you stuffed it before, last week?"

"I know," said Polly, with a small sigh; and sitting down on the floor, she remained quite still for a minute, with her two black hands thrust out straight before her.

"Can't you fix it?" asked Davie, soberly, coming up; "then we can't have the cake."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Polly, springing up quickly; "don't be afraid; we're going to *have* that cake! There, you ugly old thing, you!" (this to the stove) "see what you've done!" as two big tears flew out of Phronsie's brown eyes at the direful prospect; and the sorrowful faces of the two boys looked up into Polly's own, for comfort. "I can fix it, I most know; do get some paper, Joe, as quick as you can."

"Don't know where there is any," said Joel, rummaging around; "it's all tore up; 'xcept the almanac; can't I take that?"

"Oh dear, no!" cried Polly; "put it right back, Joe; I guess there's some in the woodshed."

"There isn't either," said little Davie, quickly; "Joel and I took it to make kites with."

"Oh dear," groaned Polly; "I don't know what we shall do; unless," as a bright thought struck her, "you let me have the kites, boys."

"Can't," said Joel; "they're all flew away; and torn up."

"Well, now, children," said Polly, turning round impressively upon them, the effect of which was heightened by the extremely crocky appearance she had gained in her explorations, "we must have some paper, or something to stop up that old hole with—some way, there!"

"I know," said little Davie, "where we'll get it; it's upstairs;" and without another word he flew out of the room, and in another minute he put into Polly's hand an old leather boot-top, one of his most treasured possessions. "You can chip it," he said, "real fine, and then 'twill go in."

"So we can," said Polly; "and you're a real good boy, Davie, to give it; that's a splendid present to help celebrate for mamsie!"

"I'd a-given a boot-top," said Joel, looking grimly at the precious bit of leather which Polly was rapidly stripping into little bits, "if I'd a-hed it; I don't have anything!"

"I know you would, Joey," said Polly, kindly; "there now, you'll stay, I guess!" as with the united efforts of the two boys, cheered on by Phronsie's enthusiastic little crow of delight, the leather was crowded into place, and the fire began to burn.

"Now, boys," said Polly, getting up, and drawing a long breath, "I'm going over to Grandma Bascom's to get her to tell me how to make the cake; and you must stay and keep house."

"I'm going to nail," said Joel; "I've got lots to do."

"All right," said Polly, tying on her hood; "Phronsie'll love to watch you; I won't be gone long," and she was off.

"Grandma Bascom," wasn't really the children's grandmother; only everybody in the village called her so by courtesy. Her cottage was over across the lane, and just a bit around the corner; and Polly flew along and up to the door, fully knowing that now she would be helped out of her difficulty. She didn't stop to knock, as the old lady was so deaf she knew she wouldn't hear her, but opened the door and walked in. Grandma was sweeping up the floor, already as neat as a pin; when she saw Polly coming, she stopped, and leaned on her broom.

"How's your ma?" she asked, when Polly had said "good morning," and then hesitated.

"Oh, mammy's pretty well," shouted Polly into the old lady's ear; "and tomorrow's her birthday!"

"Tomorrow'll be a bad day!" said grandma. "Oh, don't never say that. You mustn't borrow trouble, child."

"I didn't," said Polly; "I mean—it's her *birthday,* grandma!" this last so loud that grandma's cap border vibrated perceptibly.

"The land's sakes 'tis!" cried Mrs. Bascom, delightedly; "you don't say so!"

"Yes," said Polly, skipping around the old lady, and giving her a small hug; "and we're going to give her a surprise."

"What is the matter with her eyes?" asked grandma, sharply, turning around and facing her; "she's been a-sewin' too stiddy, hain't she?"

"A *surprise!"* shouted Polly, standing upon tiptoe, to bring her mouth on a level with the old lady's ear; "a *cake,* grandma, a big one!"

"A *cake!"* exclaimed grandma, dropping the broom to settle her cap, which Polly in her extreme endeavors to carry on the conversation, had knocked slightly awry; "well, that'll be fine."

"Yes," said Polly, picking up the broom, and flinging off her hood at the same time; "and, oh! won't you please tell me how to make it, grandma!"

"To be sure; to be sure;" cried the old lady, delighted beyond measure to give advice; "I've got splendid receets; I'll go get 'em right off," and she ambled to the door of the pantry.

"And I'll finish sweeping up," said Polly, which grandma didn't hear; so she took up the broom, and sent it energetically, and merrily flying away to the tune of her own happy thoughts.

"Yes, they're right in here," said grandma, waddling back with an old tin teapot in her hand—"goodness, child! what a dust you've kicked up! that ain't the way to sweep." And she took the broom out of Polly's hand, who stood quite still in

mortification.

"There," she said, drawing it mildly over the few bits she could scrape together, and gently coaxing them into a little heap; "that's the way; and then they don't go all over the room.

"I'm sorry," began poor Polly.

"'Tain't any matter," said Mrs. Bascom kindly, catching sight of Polly's discomfited face; "tain't a mite of matter; you'll sweep better next time; now let's go to the cake;" and putting the broom into the corner, she waddled back again to the table, followed by Polly, and proceeded to turn out the contents of the teapot, in search of just the right "receet."

But the right one didn't seem to appear; not even after the teapot was turned upside down and shaken by both grandma's and Polly's anxious hands. Every other "receet" seemed to tumble out gladly, and stare them in the face—little dingy rolls of yellow paper, with an ancient odor of spice still clinging to them; but all efforts to find this particular one failed utterly.

"Won't some other one do?" asked Polly, in the interval of fruitless searching, when grandma bewailed and lamented, and wondered, "where I could a put it!"

"No, no, child," answered the old lady; "now, where do you s'pose 'tis!" and she clapped both hands to her head, to see if she could possibly remember; "no, no, child," she repeated. "Why, they had it down to my niece Mirandy's weddin'—'twas just elegant! light as a feather; and 'twan't rich either," she added; "no eggs, nor—"

"Oh, I couldn't have *eggs;*" cried Polly, in amazement at the thought of such luxury; "and we've only brown flour, grandma, you know."

"Well, you can make it of brown," said Mrs. Bascom, kindly; "when the raisins is in 'twill look quite nice."

"Oh, we haven't any raisins," answered Polly.

"Haven't any raisins!" echoed grandma, looking at her

over her spectacles; "what are you goin' to put in?"

"Oh—cinnamon," said Polly, briskly; "we've got plenty of that, and—it'll be good, I guess, grandma!" she finished, anxiously; "anyway, we must have a cake; there isn't any other way to celebrate mamsie's birthday."

"Well, now," said grandma, bustling around; "I shouldn't be surprised if you had real good luck, Polly. And your ma'll set ever so much by it; now, if we only could find that receet!" and returning to the charge she commenced to fumble among her bits of paper again; "I never shall forget how they eat on it; why, there wasn't a crumb left, Polly!"

"Oh, dear," said Polly, to whom "Mirandy's wedding cake" now became the height of her desires; "if you only can find it! can't I climb up and look on the pantry shelves?"



"Maybe 'tis there," said Mrs. Bascom, slowly; "you might try; sometimes I do put things away, so's to have 'em safe."

So Polly got an old wooden chair, according to direction, and then mounted up on it, with grandma below to direct, she handed down bowl after bowl, interspersed at the right intervals with cracked teacups and handleless pitchers. But at the end of these explorations, "Mirandy's wedding cake" was further off than ever.

"Tain't a mite o' use," at last said the old lady, sinking down in despair, while Polly perched on the top of the chair and looked at her; "I must a-give it away."

"Can't I have the next best one, then?" asked Polly, despairingly, feeling sure that "Mirandy's wedding cake" would have celebrated the day just right; "and I must hurry right home, please," she added, getting down from the chair, and tying on her hood; "or Phronsie won't know what to do."

So another "receet" was looked over, and selected; and with many charges, and bits of advice not to let the oven get too hot, etc., etc., Polly took the precious bit in her hand, and flew over home.

"Now, we've got to—" she began, bounding in merrily, with dancing eyes; but her delight had a sudden stop, as she brought up so suddenly at the sight within, that she couldn't utter another word. Phronsie was crouching, a miserable little heap of woe, in one corner of the mother's big calico-covered rocking chair, and crying bitterly, while Joel hung over her in the utmost concern.

"What's the matter?" gasped Polly. Flinging the "receet" on the table, she rushed up to the old chair and was down on her knees before it, her arms around the little figure. Phronsie turned, and threw herself into Polly's protecting arms, who gathered her up, and sitting down in the depths of the chair, comforted her as only she could.

"What is it?" she asked of Joel, who was nervously begging Phronsie not to cry; "now, tell me all that's happened."

"I was a-nailing," began Joel; "oh dear! don't cry, Phronsie! do stop her, Polly."

"*Go on,*" said Polly, hoarsely.

"I was a-nailing," began Joel, slowly; "and—and—Davie's gone to get the peppermint," he added, brightening up.

"Tell me, Joe," said Polly, "all that's been going on," and she looked sternly into his face; "or I'll get Davie to," as little Davie came running back, with a bottle of castor oil, which in his flurry he had mistaken for peppermint. This he presented with a flourish to Polly, who was too excited to see it.

"Oh, no!" cried Joel, in intense alarm; "Davie isn't going to! I'll tell, Polly; I will truly."

"Go on, then," said Polly; "tell at once;" (feeling as if somebody didn't tell pretty quick, she should tumble over.)

"Well," said Joel, gathering himself up with a fresh effort, "the old hammer was a-shaking and Phronsie stuck her foot in the way—and—I couldn't help it, Polly—no, I just couldn't, Polly."

Quick as a flash, Polly tore off the little old shoe, and well-worn stocking, and brought to light Phronsie's fat little foot. Tenderly taking hold of the white toes, the boys clustering around in the greatest anxiety, she worked them back and forth, and up and down. "Nothing's broken," she said at last, and drew a long breath.

"It's there," said Phronsie, through a rain of tears; "and it hurts, Polly;" and she began to wiggle the big toe, where around the nail was settling a small black spot.

"Poor little toe," began Polly, cuddling up the suffering foot. Just then, a small and peculiar noise struck her ear; and looking up she saw Joel, with a very distorted face, making violent efforts to keep from bursting out into a loud cry. All his attempts, however, failed; and he flung himself into Polly's lap in a perfect torrent of tears. "I didn't—mean to—Polly," he cried; "'twas the—ugly, old hammer! *oh dear!*"

"There, there, Joey, dear," said Polly, gathering him up in the other corner of the old chair, close to her side; "don't feel bad; I know you didn't mean to," and she dropped a kiss on his stubby black hair.

When Phronsie saw that anybody else could cry, she stopped immediately, and leaning over Polly, put one little fat hand on Joel's neck. "Don't cry," she said; "does your toe ache?"

At this, Joel screamed louder than ever; and Polly was at her wit's end to know what to do; for the boy's heart was almost broken. That he should have hurt Phronsie! the baby, the pet of the whole house, upon whom all their hearts centered—it was too much. So for the next few moments, Polly had all she could do by way of comforting and consoling him. Just as she had succeeded, the door opened, and Grandma Bascom walked in.

"Settin' down?" said she; "I hope your cake ain't in, Polly," looking anxiously at the stove, "for I've found it;" and she waved a small piece of paper triumphantly towards the rocking chair as she spoke.

"Do tell her," said Polly to little David, "what's happened; for I can't get up."

So little Davie went up to the old lady, and standing on tiptoe, screamed into her ear all the particulars he could think of, concerning the accident that had just happened.

"Hey?" said grandma, in a perfect bewilderment; "what's he a-sayin', Polly—I can't make it out."

"You'll have to go all over it again, David," said Polly, despairingly; "she didn't hear one word, I don't believe."

So David tried again; this time with better success. And then he got down from his tiptoes, and escorted grandma to Phronsie, in flushed triumph.

"Land alive!" said the old lady, sitting down in the chair which he brought her; "you got pounded, did you?" looking at Phronsie, as she took the little foot in her ample hand.

"Yes'm," said Polly, quickly; "twasn't anyone's fault; what'll we do for it, grandma?"

"Wormwood," said the old lady, adjusting her spectacles in extreme deliberation, and then examining the little black and blue spot, which was spreading rapidly, "is the very best thing; and I've got some to home—you run right over," she said, turning round on David, quickly, "an' get it; it's a-hangin' by the chimbley."

"Let me; let me!" cried Joel, springing out of the old chair, so suddenly that grandma's spectacles nearly dropped off in fright; "oh! I want to do it for Phronsie!"

"Yes, let Joel, please," put in Polly; "he'll find it, grandma." So Joel departed with great speed; and presently returned, with a bunch of dry herbs, which dangled comfortingly by his side, as he came in.

"Now I'll fix it," said Mrs. Bascom, getting up and taking off her shawl; "there's a few raisins for you, Polly; I don't want 'em, and they'll make your cake go better," and she placed a little parcel on the table as she spoke. "Yes, I'll put it to steep; an' after it's put on real strong, and tied up in an old cloth, Phronsie won't know as she's got any toes!" and grandma broke up a generous supply of the herb, and put it into an old tin cup, which she covered up with a saucer, and placed on the stove.

"Oh!" said Polly; "I can't thank you! for the raisins and all—you're so good!"

"They're awful hard," said Joel, investigating into the bundle with Davie, which, however, luckily the old lady didn't hear.

"There, don't try," she said cheerily; "an' I found cousin Mirandy's weddin' cake receet, for—"

"Did you?" cried Polly; "oh! I'm so glad!" feeling as if that were comfort enough for a good deal.

"Yes, 'twas in my Bible," said Mrs. Bascom; "I remember now; I put it there to be ready to give John's folks when they



come in; they wanted it; so you'll go all straight now; and I must get home, for I left some meat a-boilin'." So grandma put on her shawl, and waddled off, leaving a great deal of comfort behind her.

"Now, says I," said Polly to Phronsie, when the little foot was snugly tied up in the wet wormwood, "you've got to have one of mamsie's old slippers."

"Oh, ho," laughed Phronsie; "won't that be funny, Polly!"

"I should think it would," laughed Polly, back again, pulling on the big cloth slipper, which Joel produced from the bedroom, the two boys joining uproariously, as the old black thing flapped dismally up and down, and showed strong

symptoms of flying off. "We shall have to tie it on."

"It looks like a pudding bag," said Joel, as Polly tied it securely through the middle with a bit of twine; "an old black pudding bag!" he finished.

"Old black pudding bag!" echoed Phronsie, with a merry little crow; and then all of a sudden she grew very sober, and looked intently at the foot thrust out straight before her, as she still sat in the chair.

"What is it, Phronsie?" asked Polly, who was bustling around, making preparations for the cake making.

"Can I *ever* wear my new shoes again?" asked the child, gravely, looking dismally at the black bundle before her.

"Oh, yes; my goodness, yes!" cried Polly; "as quick again as ever; you'll be around again as smart as a cricket in a week—see if you aren't!"

"Will it go on?" asked Phronsie, still looking incredulously at the bundle, "and button up?"

"Yes, indeed!" cried Polly, again; "button into every one of the little holes, Phronsie Pepper; just as elegant as ever!"

"Oh!" said Phronsie; and then she gave a sigh of relief, and thought no more of it, because Polly had said that all would be right.

CHAPTER III
Mamsie's Birthday

"Run down and get the cinnamon, will you, Joey?" said Polly; "it's in the 'Provision Room.'"

The "Provision Room" was a little shed that was tacked onto the main house, and reached by a short flight of rickety steps; so called, because as Polly said, "'twas a good place to keep provisions in, even if we haven't any; and besides," she always finished, "it sounds nice!"

"Come on, Dave! then we'll get something to eat!"

So the cinnamon was handed up, and then Joel flew back to Davie.

And now, Polly's cake was done, and ready for the oven. With many admiring glances from herself, and Phronsie, who with Seraphina, an extremely old but greatly revered doll, tightly hugged in her arms was watching everything with the biggest of eyes from the depths of the old chair, it was placed in the oven, the door shut to with a happy little bang, then Polly gathered Phronsie up in her arms, and sat down in the chair to have a good time with her and to watch the process of cooking.

There was a bumping noise that came from the "Provision Room" that sounded ominous, and then a smothered sound of words, followed by a scuffling over the old floor.

"Boys!" called Polly. No answer; everything was just as still as a mouse. *"Joel and David!"* called Polly again, in her loudest tones.

"Yes," came up the crooked stairs, in Davie's voice.

"Come up here, right away!" went back again from Polly. So up the stairs trudged the two boys, and presented them-

selves rather sheepishly before the big chair.

"What was that noise?" she asked; "what have you been doing?"

"'Twasn't anything but the pail," answered Joel, not looking at her.

"We had something to eat," said Davie, by way of explanation; "you always let us."

"I know," said Polly; "that's right, you can have as much bread as you want to; but what you been doing with the pail?"

"Nothing," said Joel; "'twouldn't hangup, that's all."

"And you've been bumping it," said Polly; "oh! Joel, how could you! You might have broken it; then what would mamsie say?"

"I didn't," said Joel, stoutly, with his hands in his pockets, "bump it worse'n Davie, so there!"

"Why, Davie," said Polly, turning to him sorrowfully, "I shouldn't have thought *you* would!"

"Well, I'm tired of hanging it up," said little Davie, vehemently; "and I said I wasn't a-goin' to; Joel always makes me; I've done it for two million times, I guess!"

"Oh, dear," said Polly, sinking back into the chair, "I don't know what I ever shall do; here's Phronsie hurt; and we want to celebrate tomorrow; and you two boys are bumping and banging out the bread pail, and—"

"Oh! we won't!" cried both of the children, perfectly overwhelmed with remorse; "we'll hang it right up."

"I'll hang it," said Davie, clattering off down the stairs with a will.

"No, *I* will!" shouted Joel, going after him at double pace; and presently both came up with shining faces, and reported it nicely done.

"And now," said Polly, after they had all sat around the stove another half-hour, watching and sniffing expectantly, "the cake's done!—dear me! it's turning black!"

And quickly as possible Polly twitched it out with energy,

and set it on the table.

Oh, dear; of all things in the world! The beautiful cake over which so many hopes had been formed, that was to have given so much happiness on the morrow to the dear mother, presented a forlorn appearance as it stood there in anything but holiday attire. It was quite black on the top, in the center of which was a depressing little dump, as if to say, "My feelings wouldn't allow me to rise to the occasion."

"Now," said Polly, turning away with a little fling, and looking at the stove, "I hope you're satisfied, you old thing; you've spoiled our mamsie's birthday!" and without a bit of warning, she sat right down in the middle of the floor and began to cry as hard as she could.

"Well, I never!" said a cheery voice, that made the children skip.

"It's Mrs. Beebe; oh, it's Mrs. Beebe!" cried Davie; "see, Polly."

Polly scrambled up to her feet, ashamed to be caught thus, and whisked away the tears; the others explaining to their new visitor the sad disappointment that had befallen them; and she was soon oh-ing, and ah-ing enough to suit even their distressed little souls.

"You poor creeters, you!" she exclaimed at last, for about the fiftieth time. "Here, Polly, here's some posies for you, and—"

"Oh, thank you!" cried Polly, with a radiant face, "why, Mrs. Beebe, we can put them in here, can't we? the very thing!"

And she set the little knot of flowers in the hollow of the cake, and there they stood and nodded away to the delighted children, like brave little comforters, as they were.

"The very thing!" echoed Mrs. Beebe, tickled to death to see their delight; "it looks beautiful, I declare! and now, I must run right along, or pa'll be worrying;" and so the good woman trotted out to her waiting husband, who was impatient to be

off. Mr. Beebe kept a little shoe shop in town; and always being of the impression if he left it for ten minutes that crowds of customers would visit it. He was the most restless of companions on any pleasure excursion.

"And Phronsie's got hurt," said Mrs. Beebe, telling him the news, as he finished tucking her up, and started the old horse.

"Ho? you don't say so!" he cried; *"whoa!"*

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Beebe; "how you scat me, pal what's the matter?"

"What?—the little girl that bought the shoes?" asked her husband.

"Yes," replied his wife, "she's hurt her foot."

"Sho, now," said the old gentleman; "that's too bad," and he began to feel in all his pockets industriously; "there, can you get out again, and take her that?" and he laid a small piece of peppermint candy, thick and white, in his wife's lap.

"Oh, yes," cried Mrs. Beebe, good-naturedly, beginning to clamber over the wheel.

So the candy was handed in to Phronsie, who insisted that Polly should hold her up to the window to thank Mr. Beebe. So amid nods, and shakings of hands, the Beebes drove off, and quiet settled down over the little brown house again.

"Now, children," said Polly, after Phronsie had made them take a bite of her candy all around, "let's get the cake put away safe, for mamsie may come home early.

"Where'll you put it?" asked Joel, wishing the world was all peppermint candy.

"Oh—in the cupboard," said Polly, taking it up; "there, Joe, you can climb up, and put it clear back in the corner, oh! wait; I must take the posies off, and keep them fresh in water;" so the cake was finally deposited in a place of safety, followed by the eyes of all the children.

"Now," said Polly, as they shut the door tight, "don't you go to looking at the cupboard, Joey, or mammy'll guess



something."

"Can't I just open it a little crack, and take one smell when she isn't looking?" asked Joel; "I should think you might, Polly; just *one*."

"No," said Polly, firmly; "not one, Joe; she'll guess if you do." But Mrs. Pepper was so utterly engrossed with her baby when she came home and heard the account of the accident, that she wouldn't have guessed if there'd been a dozen cakes in the cupboard. Joel was consoled, as his mother assured him in a satisfactory way that she never should think of blaming him; and Phronsie was comforted and coddled to her heart's content. And so the evening passed rapidly and happily away; Ben smuggling Phronsie off into a corner, where she told him all the doings of the day—the disappointment of the cake,



and how it was finally crowned with flowers; all of which Phronsie, with no small pride in being the narrator, related gravely to her absorbed listener. "And don't you think, Bensie," she said, clasping her little hand in a convincing way over his two bigger, stronger ones, "that Polly's stove was *very* naughty to make poor Polly cry?"

"Yes, I do," said Ben, and he shut his lips tightly together.

To have Polly cry, hurt him more than he cared to have Phronsie see.

"What are you staring at, Joe?" asked Polly, a few minutes later, as her eyes fell upon Joel, who sat with his back to the cupboard, persistently gazing at the opposite wall.

"Why, you told me yourself not to look at the cupboard," said Joel, in the loudest of stage whispers.

"Dear me; that'll make mammy suspect worse'n anything else if you look like that," said Polly.

"What did you say about the cupboard?" asked Mrs. Pepper, who caught Joe's last word.

"We can't tell," said Phronsie, shaking her head at her mother; "cause there's a ca—"

"*Ugh!*" and Polly clapped her hand on the child's mouth; "don't you want Ben to tell us a story?"

"Oh, yes!" cried little Phronsie, in which all the others joined with a whoop of delight; so a most wonderful story, drawn up in Ben's best style, followed till bedtime.

The first thing Polly did in the morning, was to run to the old cupboard, followed by all the others, to see if the cake was safe; and then it had to be drawn out, and dressed anew with the flowers, for they had decided to have it on the breakfast table.

"It looks better," whispered Polly to Ben, "than it did yesterday; and aren't the flowers pretty?"

"It looks good enough to eat, anyway," said Ben, smacking his lips.

"Well, we tried," said Polly, stilling a sigh; "now, boys, call mamsie; everything's ready."

Oh! how surprised their mother appeared when she was ushered out to the feast, and the full glory of the table burst upon her. Her delight in the cake was fully enough to satisfy the most exacting mind. She admired and admired it on every side, protesting that she shouldn't have supposed Polly could possibly have baked it as good in the old stove; and then she cut it, and gave a piece to every child, with a little posy on top. Wasn't it good, though! for like many other things, the cake proved better on trial than it looked, and so turned out to be really quite a good surprise all around.

"Why can't I ever have a birthday?" asked Joel, finishing the last crumb of his piece; "I should think I might," he added, reflectively.

"Why, you have, Joe," said Ben; "eight of 'em."

"What a story!" ejaculated Joel; "when did I have 'em? I

never had a cake; did I, Polly?"

"Not a cake-birthday, Joel," said his mother; "you haven't got to that yet."

"When's it coming?" asked Joel, who was decidedly of a matter-of-fact turn of mind.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Pepper, laughing; "but there's plenty of time ahead."

CHAPTER IV
Trouble for the Little Brown House

"Oh, I do wish," said Joel, a few mornings after, pushing back his chair and looking discontentedly at his bowl of mush and molasses, "that we could ever have something new besides this everlasting old breakfast! Why can't we, mammy?"

"Better be glad you've got that, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper, taking another cold potato, and sprinkling on a little salt; "folks shouldn't complain so long as they've anything to eat."

"But I'm so tired of it—same old thing!" growled Joel; "seems as if I sh'd turn into a meal-bag or a molasses jug!"

"Well, hand it over, then," proposed Ben, who was unusually hungry, and had a hard day's work before him.

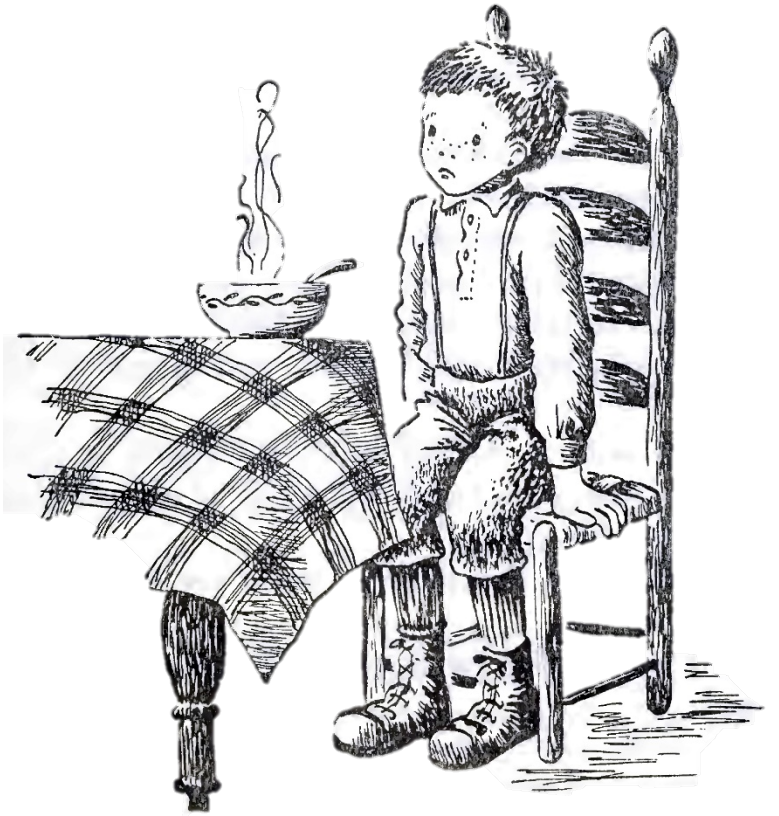
"No," said Joel, alarmed at the prospect, and putting in an enormous mouthful; "it's better than nothing."

"Oh, dear," said little Phronsie, catching Joel's tone, "it isn't nice; no, it isn't." And she put down her spoon so suddenly that the molasses spun off in a big drop, that trailed off the corner of the table, and made Polly jump up and run for the floorcloth.

"Oh, Phronsie," she said, reprovingly; "you ought not to. Never mind, pet," as she caught sight of two big tears trying to make a path in the little molasses-streaked face, "Polly'll wipe it up."

"Sha'n't we ever have anything else to eat, Polly?" asked the child, gravely, getting down from her high chair to watch the operation of cleaning the floor.

"Oh, yes," said Polly, cheerfully, "lots and lots—when our ship comes in."



"What'll they be?" asked Phronsie, in the greatest delight, prepared for anything.

"Oh, I don't know," said Polly; "ice cream for one thing, Phronsie, and maybe, little cakes."

"With pink on top?" interrupted Phronsie, getting down by Polly's side.

"Oh, yes," said Polly, warming with her subject; "ever and ever so much pink, Phronsie Pepper; more than you could eat!"

Phronsie just clasped her hands and sighed. More than she could eat was beyond her!

"Hoh!" said Joel, who caught the imaginary bill of fare,

"that's nothing, Polly. I'd speak for a plum-puddin'."

"Like the one mother made us for Thanksgiving?" asked Polly, getting up and waiting a minute, cloth in hand, for the answer.

"Yes, sir," said Joel, shutting one eye and looking up at the ceiling, musingly, while he smacked his lips in remembrance; "wasn't that prime, though!"

"Yes," said Polly, thoughtfully; "would you have 'em all like that, Joe?"

"Every one," replied Joe, promptly; "I'd have seventy-five of 'em."

"Seventy-five what?" asked Mrs. Pepper, who had gone into the bedroom, and now came out, a coat in hand, to sit down in the west window, where she began to sew rapidly. "Better clear up the dishes, Polly, and set the table back—seventy-five what, Joel?"

"Plum-puddings," said Joel, kissing Phronsie.

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Pepper; "you don't know what you're saying, Joel Pepper; the house couldn't hold 'em!"

"Wouldn't long," responded Joel; "we'd eat 'em."

"That would be foolish," interposed Ben; "I'd have roast beef and fixings—and oysters—and huckleberry pie."

"Oh, dear," cried Polly; "how nice, Ben! you always do think of the very best things."

But Joel phoohed and declared he wouldn't waste his time "over old beef; he'd have something like!" And then he cried:

"Come on, Dave, what'd you choose?"

Little Davie had been quietly eating his breakfast amid all this chatter, and somehow thinking it might make the mother feel badly, he had refrained from saying just how tiresome he had really found this "everlasting breakfast" as Joel called it. But now he looked up eagerly, his answer all ready. "Oh, I know," he cried, "what would be most beautiful! toasted bread—white bread—and candy."

"What's candy?" asked Phronsie.

"Oh, don't you know, Phronsie," cried Polly, "what Mrs. Beebe gave you the day you got your shoes—the pink sticks; and—"

"And the peppermint stick Mr. Beebe gave you, Phronsie," finished Joel, his mouth watering at the remembrance.

"That day, when you got your toe pounded," added Davie, looking at Joel.

"Oh!" cried Phronsie; "I want some now, I do!"

"Well, Davie," said Polly, "you shall have that for breakfast when our ship comes in then."

"Your ships aren't ever coming," broke in Mrs. Pepper, wisely, "if you sit there talking—folks don't ever make any fortunes by wishing."

"True enough," laughed Ben, jumping up and setting back his chair. "Come on, Joe; you've got to pile today."

"Oh, dear," said Joel, dismally; "I wish Mr. Blodgett's wood was all a-fire."

"Never say that, Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, looking up sternly; "it's biting your own nose off to wish that wood was a-fire—and besides it's dreadfully wicked."

Joel hung his head, for his mother never spoke in that way unless she was strongly moved; but he soon recovered, and hastened off for his jacket.

"I'm sorry I can't help you do the dishes, Polly," said David, running after Joel.

"I'm going to help her," said Phronsie; "I am."

So Polly got the little wooden tub that she always used, gave Phronsie the well-worn cup-napkin, and allowed her to wipe the handleless cups and cracked saucers, which afforded the little one intense delight.

"Don't you wish, Polly," said little Phronsie, bustling around with a very important air, nearly smothered in the depths of a big brown apron that Polly had carefully tied under her chin, "that you didn't ever-an'-ever have so many

dishes to do?"

"Um—maybe," said Polly, thoughtlessly. She was thinking of something else besides cups and saucers just then; of how nice it would be to go off for just one day, and do exactly as she had a mind to in everything. She even envied Ben and the boys who were going to work hard at Deacon Blodgett's woodpile.

"Well, I tell you," said Phronsie, confidentially, setting down a cup that she had polished with great care, "I'm going to do 'em all tomorrow, for you, Polly—I can truly; let me now, Polly, *do.*"

"Nonsense!" said Polly, giving a great splash with her mop in the tub, ashamed of her inward repinings. "Phronsie, you're no bigger than a mouse!"

"Yes, I am," retorted Phronsie, very indignantly. Her face began to get very red, and she straightened up so suddenly to show Polly just how very big she was that her little head came up against the edge of the tub—over it went! a pile of saucers followed.

"There now," cried Polly, "see what you've done!"

"Ow!" whimpered Phronsie, breaking into a subdued roar; "oh, Polly! it's all running down my back."

"Is it?" said Polly, bursting out into a laugh; "never mind, Phronsie, I'll dry you."

"Dear me, Polly!" said Mrs. Pepper, who had looked up in time to see the tub racing along by itself towards the "Provision Room" door, a stream of dishwater following in its wake, "she will be wet clear through; do get off her things, quick."

"Yes'm," cried Polly, picking up the tub, and giving two or three quick sops to the floor. "Here you are, Pussy," grasping Phronsie, crying as she was, and carrying her into the bedroom.

"Oh, dear," wailed the child, still holding the wet dish towel; "I won't ever do it again, if you'll only let me do 'em all

tomorrow."

"When you're big and strong," said Polly, giving her a hug, "you shall do 'em every day."

"May I really?" said little Phronsie, blinking through the tears, and looking radiant.

"Yes, truly—every day."

"Then I'll grow right away, I will," said Phronsie, bursting out merrily; and she sat down and pulled off the well-worn shoes, into which a big pool of dishwater had run, while Polly went for dry stockings.

"So you shall," said Polly, coming back, a big piece of gingerbread in her hand; "and this'll make you grow, Phronsie."

"O-o-h!" and Phronsie's little white teeth shut down quickly on the comforting morsel. Gingerbread didn't come often enough into the Pepper household to be lightly esteemed.

"Now," said Mrs. Pepper, when order was restored, the floor washed up brightly, and every cup and platter in place, hobnobbing away to themselves on the shelves of the old corner cupboard, and Polly had come as usual with needle and thread to help mother—Polly was getting so that she could do the plain parts on the coats and jackets, which filled her with pride at the very thought—"now," said Mrs. Pepper, "you needn't help me this morning, Polly: I'm getting on pretty smart; but you may just run down to the parson's, and see how he is."

"Is he sick?" asked Polly, in awe.

To have the parson sick, was something quite different from an ordinary person's illness.

"He's taken with a chill," said Mrs. Pepper, biting off a thread, "so Miss Huldy Folsom told me last night, and I'm afraid he's going to have a fever."

"Oh, dear," said Polly, in dire distress; "whatever'd we do, mammy!"

"Don't know, I'm sure," replied Mrs. Pepper, setting her stitches firmly; "the Lord'll provide. So you run along, child, and see how he is."

"Can't Phronsie go?" asked Polly, pausing half-way to the bedroom door.

"Well, yes, I suppose she might," said Mrs. Pepper, assentingly.

"No, she can't either," said Polly, coming back with her sun-bonnet in her hand, and shutting the door carefully after her, "cause she's fast asleep on the floor."

"Is she?" said Mrs. Pepper; "well, she's been running so this morning, she's tired out, I s'pose."

"And her face is dreadfully red," continued Polly, tying on her bonnet; "now, what'll I say, mammy?"

"Well, I should think 'twould be," said Mrs. Pepper, replying to the first half of Polly's speech; "she cried so. Well, you just tell Mrs. Henderson your ma wants to know how Mr. Henderson is this morning, and if 'twas a chill he had yesterday, and how he slept last night, and—"

"Oh, ma," said Polly, "I can't ever remember all that."

"Oh, yes, you can," said Mrs. Pepper, encouragingly; "just put your mind on it, Polly; 'tisn't anything to what I used to have to remember—when I was a little girl, no bigger than you are."

Polly sighed, and feeling sure that something must be the matter with her mind, gave her whole attention to the errand; till at last after a multiplicity of messages and charges not to forget any one of them, Mrs. Pepper let her depart.

Up to the old-fashioned green door, with its brass knocker, Polly went, running over in her mind just which of the messages she ought to give first. She couldn't for her life think whether "if 'twas a chill he had yesterday?" ought to come before "how he slept?" She knocked timidly, hoping Mrs. Henderson would help her out of her difficulty by telling her without the asking. All other front doors in Badgertown

were ornaments, only opened on grand occasions, like a wedding or a funeral. But the minister's was accessible alike to all. So Polly let fall the knocker, and awaited the answer.

A scuffling noise sounded along the passage; and then Polly's soul sank down in dire dismay. It was the minister's sister, and not gentle little Mrs. Henderson. She never could get on with Miss Jerusha in the least. She made her feel as she told her mother once—"as if I don't know what my name is." And now here she was; and all those messages.

Miss Jerusha unbolted the door, slid back the great bar, opened the upper half, and stood there. She was a big woman, with sharp black eyes, and spectacles—over which she looked—which to Polly was much worse, for that gave her four eyes.

"Well, and what do you want?" she asked.

"I came to see—I mean my ma sent me," stammered poor Polly.

"And who is your ma?" demanded Miss Jerusha, as much like a policeman as anything; "and where do you live?"

"I live in Primrose Lane," replied Polly, wishing very much that she was back there.

"I don't want to know where you live, before I know who you are," said Miss Jerusha; "you should answer the question I asked first; always remember that."

"My ma's Mrs. Pepper," said Polly.

"Mrs. who?" repeated Miss Jerusha.

By this time Polly was so worn that she came very near turning and fleeing, but she thought of her mother's disappointment in her, and the loss of the news, and stood quite still.

"What is it, Jerusha?" a gentle voice here broke upon Polly's ear.

"I don't know," responded Miss Jerusha, tartly, still holding the door much as if Polly were a robber; "it's a little girl, and I can't make out what she wants."



"Why, it's Polly Pepper!" exclaimed Mrs. Henderson, pleasantly. "Come in, child." She opened the other half of the big door, and led the way through the wide hall into a big, old-fashioned room, with painted floor, and high, old sideboard, and some stiff-backed rocking chairs.

Miss Jerusha stalked in also and seated herself by the window, and began to knit. Polly had just opened her mouth to tell her errand, when the door also opened suddenly and

Mr. Henderson walked in.

"*Oh!*" said Polly, and then she stopped, and the color flushed up into her face.

"What is it, my dear?" and the minister took her hand kindly, and looked down into her flushed face.

"You are not going to have a fever, and be sick and die!" she cried.

"I hope not, my little girl," he smiled back, encouragingly; and then Polly gave her messages, which now she managed easily enough.

"There," broke in Miss Jerusha, "a cat can't sneeze in this town but everybody'll know it in quarter of an hour."

And then Mrs. Henderson took Polly out to see a brood of new little chicks, that had just popped their heads out into the world; and to Polly, down on her knees, admiring, the time passed very swiftly indeed.

"Now I must go, ma'am," she said at last, looking up into the lady's face, regretfully, "for mammy didn't say I was to stay."

"Very well, dear; do you think you could carry a little pat of butter? I have some very nice my sister sent me, and I want your mother to share it."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am!" cried Polly, thinking, "how glad Davie'll be, for he does so love butter! only—"

"Wait a bit, then," said Mrs. Henderson, who didn't seem to notice the objection. So she went into the house, and Polly went down again in admiration before the fascinating little puff-balls.

But she was soon on the way, with a little pat of butter in a blue bowl, tied over with a clean cloth; happy in her gift for mammy, and in the knowledge of the minister being all well.

"I wonder if Phronsie's awake," she thought to herself, turning in at the little brown gate; "if she is, she shall have a piece of bread with lots of butter."

"*Hush!*" said Mrs. Pepper, from the rocking chair in the



middle of the floor. She had something in her arms. Polly stopped suddenly, almost letting the bowl fall.

"It's Phronsie," said the mother, "and I don't know what the matter is with her; you'll have to go for the doctor, Polly, and just as fast as you can."

Polly still stood, holding the bowl, and staring with all her might. *Phronsie sick!*

"Don't wake her," said Mrs. Pepper.

Poor Polly couldn't have stirred to save her life, for a minute; then she said—"Where shall I go?"

"Oh, run to Dr. Fisher's; and don't be gone long."

Polly set down the bowl of butter, and sped on the wings of the wind for the doctor. Something dreadful was the matter, she felt, for never had a physician been summoned to the hearty Pepper family since she could remember, only when the father died. Fear lent speed to her feet; and soon the doctor came, and bent over poor little Phronsie, who still lay in her mother's arms, in a burning fever.

"It's measles," he pronounced, "that's all; no cause for alarm; you ever had it?" he asked, turning suddenly around on Polly, who was watching with wide-open eyes for the verdict.

"No, sir," answered Polly, not knowing in the least what "measles" was.

"What shall we do!" said Mrs. Pepper; "there haven't any of them had it."

The doctor was over by the little old table under the window, mixing up some black-looking stuff in a tumbler, and he didn't hear her.

"There," he said, putting a spoonful into Phronsie's mouth, "she'll get along well enough; only keep her out of the cold." Then he pulled out a big silver watch. He was a little thin man, and the watch was immense. Polly for her life couldn't keep her eyes off from it; if Ben could only have one so fine!

"Polly," whispered Mrs. Pepper, "run and get my purse; it's in the top bureau drawer."

"Yes'm," said Polly, taking her eyes off, by a violent wrench, from the fascinating watch; and she ran quickly and got the little old stocking-leg, where the hard earnings that staid long enough to be put anywhere, always found refuge. She put it into her mother's lap, and watched while Mrs. Pepper counted out slowly one dollar in small pieces.

"Here sir," said Mrs. Pepper, holding them out towards the doctor; "and thank you for coming."

"Hey!" said the little man, spinning round; "that dollar's the Lord's!"

Mrs. Pepper looked bewildered, and still sat holding it out. "And the Lord has given it to you to take care of these children with; see that you do it." And without another word he was gone.

"Wasn't he good, mammy?" asked Polly, after the first surprise was over.

"I'm sure he was," said Mrs. Pepper. "Well, tie it up again, Polly, tie it up tight; we shall want it, I'm sure," sighing at her little sick girl.

"Mayn't I take Phronsie, ma?" asked Polly.

"No, *no,*" said Phronsie. She had got mammy, and she meant to improve the privilege.

"What is 'measles' anyway, mammy?" asked Polly, sitting down on the floor at their feet.

"Oh, 'tis something children always have," replied Mrs. Pepper; "but I'm sure I hoped it wouldn't come just yet."

"*I* sha'n't have it," said Polly, decisively; "I know I sha'n't! nor Ben—nor Joe—nor—nor Davie—I guess," she added, hesitatingly, for Davie was the delicate one of the family; at least not nearly so strong as the others.

Mrs. Pepper looked at her anxiously; but Polly seemed as bright and healthy as ever, as she jumped up and ran to put the kettle on the stove.

"What'll the boys say, I wonder!" she thought to herself, feeling quite important that they really had sickness in the house. As long as Phronsie wasn't dangerous, it seemed quite like rich folks; and she forgot the toil, and the grind of poverty. She looked out from time to time as she passed the window, but no boys came.

"I'll put her in bed, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, in a whisper, as Phronsie closed her eyes and breathed regularly.

"And then will you have your dinner, ma?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, "I don't care—if the boys come."

"The boys'll never come," said Polly, impatiently; "I don't believe—why! here they are now!"

"Oh, dear," said Joel, coming in crossly, "I'm so hungry—oh—butter! where'd you get it? I thought we never should get here!"

"I thought so too," said Polly. "Hush! why, where's Ben?"

"He's just back," began Joel, commencing to eat, "and Davie; something is the matter with Ben—he says he feels funny."

"*Something the matter with Ben!*" repeated Polly. She dropped the cup she held, which broke in a dozen pieces.

"Oh, whocky!" cried Joel; "see what you've done, Polly Pepper!"

But Polly didn't hear; over the big, flat door-stone she sped, and met Ben with little David, coming in the gate. His face was just like Phronsie's! And with a cold, heavy feeling at her heart, Polly realized that this was no play.

"Oh, Ben!" she cried, flinging her arms around his neck, and bursting into tears; "*don't!* please—I wish you wouldn't; Phronsie's got 'em, and that's enough!"

"Got what?" asked Ben, while Davie's eyes grew to their widest proportions.

"Oh, measles!" cried Polly, bursting out afresh; "the *hatefullest, horridest measles!* and now you're taken!"

"Oh no, I'm not," responded Ben, cheerfully, who knew what measles were; "wipe up, Polly; I'm all right; only my head aches, and my eyes feel funny."

But Polly, only half-reassured, controlled her sobs; and the sorrowful trio repaired to mother.

"Oh, dear!" ejaculated Mrs. Pepper, sinking in a chair in dismay, at sight of Ben's red face; "whatever'll we do now!"

The prop and stay of her life would be taken away if Ben should be laid aside. No more stray half or quarter dollars would come to help her out when she didn't know where to turn.

Polly cleared off the deserted table—for once Joel had all the bread and butter he wanted. Ben took some of Phronsie's medicine, and crawled up into the loft, to bed; and quiet settled down on the little household.

"Polly," whispered Ben, as she tucked him in, "it'll be hard buckling-to now, for you, but I guess you'll do it."

CHAPTER V
More Trouble

"Oh, dear," said Polly to herself, the next morning, trying to get a breakfast for the sick ones out of the inevitable mush; "everything's just as bad as it can be! they can't ever eat this; I wish I had an *ocean* of toast!"

"Toast some of the bread in the pail, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper.

She looked worn and worried; she had been up nearly all night, back and forth from Ben's bed in the loft to restless, fretful little Phronsie in the big four-poster in the bedroom; for Phronsie wouldn't get into the crib. Polly had tried her best to help her, and had rubbed her eyes diligently to keep awake, but she was wholly unaccustomed to it, and her healthy, tired little body succumbed—and then when she awoke, shame and remorse filled her very heart.

"That isn't nice, ma," she said, glancing at the poor old pail, which she had brought out of the "Provision Room." "Old brown bread! I want to fix 'em something nice."

"Well, you can't, you know," said Mrs. Pepper, with a sigh; "but you've got butter now; that'll be splendid!"

"I know it," said Polly, running to the corner cupboard where the precious morsel in the blue bowl remained; "whatever should we do without it, mammy?"

"Do *without* it!" said Mrs. Pepper; "same's we *have* done."

"Well, 'twas splendid in Mrs. Henderson to give it to us, anyway," said Polly, longing for just one taste; "seems as if 'twas a year since I was there—oh, ma!" and here Polly took up the thread that had been so rudely snapped; "don't you think, she's got ten of the prettiest—yes, the sweetest little

chickens you ever saw! Why can't we have some, mammy?"

"Costs money," replied Mrs. Pepper. "We've got too many in the house to have any *outside.*"

"Oh, dear," said Polly, with a red face that was toasting about as much as the bread she was holding on the point of an old fork; "we never have had *anything.* There," she added at last; "that's the best I can do; now I'll put the butter on this little blue plate; ain't that cunning, ma?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, approvingly; "it takes you, Polly." So Polly trotted first to Ben, up the crooked, low stairs to the loft; and while she regaled him with the brown toast and butter, she kept her tongue flying on the subject of the little chicks, and all that she saw on the famous Henderson visit. Poor Ben pretended hard to eat, but ate nothing really; and Polly saw it all, and it cut her to the heart—so she talked faster than ever.

"Now," she said, starting to go back to Phronsie; "Ben Pepper, just as soon as you get well, *we'll* have some chickens—so there!"

"Guess we sha'n't get 'em very soon," said Ben, despondently, "if I've got to lie here; and, besides, Polly, you know every bit we can save has *got* to go for the new stove."

"Oh, dear," said Polly, "I forgot that; so it has; seems to me everything's giving out!"

"You can't bake any longer in the old thing," said Ben, turning over and looking at her; "poor girl, I don't see how you've stood it so long."

"And we've been stuffing it," cried Polly merrily, "till 'twon't stuff anymore."

"No," said Ben, turning back again, "that's all worn out."

"Well, you must go to sleep," said Polly, "or mammy'll be up here; and Phronsie hasn't had her breakfast either."

Phronsie was wailing away dismally, sitting up in the middle of the old bed. Her face pricked, she said, and she was rubbing it vigorously with both fat little hands, and then



crying worse than ever.

"Oh me! oh my!" cried Polly; "how you look, Phronsie!"

"I want my mammy!" cried poor Phronsie.

"Mammy can't come now, Phronsie dear; she's sewing. See what Polly's got for you—butter: isn't that *splendid!"*

Phronsie stopped for just one moment, and took a mouthful; but the toast was hard and dry, and she cried harder than before.

"Now," said Polly, curling up on the bed beside her, "if you'll stop crying, Phronsie Pepper, I'll tell you about the cunningest, yes, the *very* cunningest little chickens you ever saw. One was white, and he looked just like this," said Polly, tumbling over on the bed in a heap; "he couldn't stand up straight, he was so fat."

"Did he *bite?"* asked Phronsie, full of interest.

"No, he didn't bite *me,"* said Polly; "but his mother put a bug in his mouth—just as I'm doing you know," and she broke off a small piece of the toast, put on a generous bit of butter, and held it over Phronsie's mouth.

"Did he swallow it?" asked the child, obediently opening her little red lips.

"Oh, *snapped* it," answered Polly, "quick as ever he could, I tell you; but 'twasn't good like this, Phronsie."

"Did he have *two* bugs?" asked Phronsie, eying suspiciously the second morsel of dry toast that Polly was conveying to her mouth.

"Well, he would have had," replied Polly, "if there'd been bugs enough; but there were nine other chicks, Phronsie."

"Poor chickies," said Phronsie, and looked lovingly at the rest of the toast and butter on the plate; and while Polly fed it to her, listened with absorbed interest to all the particulars concerning each and every chick in the Henderson hen coop.

"Mother," said Polly, towards evening, "I'm going to sit up with Ben tonight; say I may, do, mother."

"Oh no, you can't," replied Mrs. Pepper; "you'll get worn

out; and then what shall I do? Joel can hand him his medicine."

"Oh, Joe would tumble to sleep, mammy," said Polly, "the first thing—let me."

"Perhaps Phronsie'll let me go tonight," said Mrs. Pepper, reflectively.

"Oh, no she won't, I know," replied Polly, decisively; "she wants you all the time."

"*I* will, Polly," said Davie, coming in with an armful of wood, in time to hear the conversation. "I'll give him his medicine, mayn't I, mammy?" and David let down his load, and came over where his mother and Polly sat sewing, to urge his rights.

"I don't know," said his mother, smiling on him. "Can you, do you think?"

"Yes, *ma'am!*" said Davie, straightening himself up.

When they told Ben, he said he knew a better way than for Davie to watch; he'd have a string tied to Davie's arm, and the end he'd hold in bed, and when 'twas time for medicine, he'd pull the string, and that would wake Davie up!

Polly didn't sleep much more on her shake-down on the floor than if she *had* watched with Ben; for Phronsie cried and moaned, and wanted a drink of water every two minutes, it seemed to her. As she went back into her nest after one of these travels, Polly thought: "Well, I don't care, if nobody else gets sick; if Ben'll only get well. Tomorrow I'm goin' to do mammy's sack she's begun for Mr. Jackson; it's all plain sewin', just like a bag; and I can do it, I know—" and so she fell into a troubled sleep, only to be awakened by Phronsie's fretful little voice: "I want a drink of water, Polly, I *do*."

"Don't she drink awfully, mammy?" asked Polly, after one of these excursions out to the kitchen after the necessary draught.

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper; "and she mustn't have any more; 'twill hurt her." But Phronsie fell into a delicious sleep after

that, and didn't want anymore, luckily.

"Here, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper, the next morning, "take this coat up to Mr. Peterses; and be sure you get the money for it."

"How'll I get it?" asked Joe, who didn't relish the long, hot walk.

"Why, tell 'em we're sick—Ben's sick," added Mrs. Pepper, as the most decisive thing; "and we must have it; and then wait for it."

"'Tisn't pleasant up at the Peterses," grumbled Joel, taking the parcel and moving slowly off.

"No, no, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, "you needn't do that," seeing Polly take up some sewing after doing up the room and finishing the semi-weekly bake; "you're all beat out with that tussle over the stove; that sack'll have to go till next week."

"It can't, mammy," said Polly, snipping off a basting thread; "we've got to have the money; how much'll he give you for it?"

"Thirty cents," replied Mrs. Pepper.

"Well," said Polly, "we've got to get all the thirty centses we can, mammy dear; and I know I can do it, truly—try me once," she implored.

"Well." Mrs. Pepper relented, slowly.

"Don't feel bad, mammy dear," comforted Polly, sewing away briskly; "Ben'll get well pretty soon, and then we'll be all right."

"Maybe," said Mrs. Pepper; and went back to Phronsie, who could scarcely let her out of her sight.

Polly stitched away bravely. "Now if I do this good, mammy'll let me do it other times," she said to herself.

Davie, too, worked patiently out of doors, trying to do Ben's chores. The little fellow blundered over things that Ben would have accomplished in half the time, and he had to sit down often on the steps of the little old shed where the tools were kept, to wipe his hot face and rest.



"Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, "hadn't you better stop a little? Dear me! How fast you sew, child!"

Polly gave a delighted little hum at her mother's evident approval.

"I'm going to do 'em all next week, mammy," she said; "then Mr. Atkins won't take 'em away from us, I guess."

Mr. Atkins kept the store, and gave out coats and sacks of coarse linen and homespun to Mrs. Pepper to make; and it was the fear of losing the work that had made the mother's heart sink.

"I don't believe anybody's got such children as I have," she said; and she gave Polly a motherly little pat that the little daughter felt clear to the tips of her toes with a thrill of delight.

About half-past two, long after dinner, Joe came walking in, hungry as a beaver, but flushed and triumphant.

"Why, where have you been all this time?" asked his

mother.

"Oh, Joe, you *didn't* stop to play?" asked Polly, from her perch where she sat sewing, giving him a reproachful glance.

"Stop to play!" retorted Joe, indignantly; "no, I guess I didn't! I've been to Old Peterses."

"*Not all this time!*" exclaimed Mrs. Pepper.

"Yes, I have too," replied Joel, sturdily marching up to her. "And there's your money, mother;" and he counted out a quarter of a dollar in silver pieces and pennies, which he took from a dingy wad of paper, stowed away in the depths of his pocket.

"Oh, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper, sinking back in her chair and looking at him; "what do you mean?"

Polly put her work in her lap, and waited to hear.

"Where's my dinner, Polly?" asked Joel; "I hope it's a big one."

"Yes, 'tis," said Polly; "you've got lots today, it's in the corner of the cupboard, covered up with the plate—so tell on, Joe."

"That's elegant!" said Joel, coming back with the well-filled plate, Ben's and his own share.

"*Do* tell us, Joey," implored Polly; "mother's waiting."

"Well," said Joel, his mouth half full, "I waited—and he said the coat was all right; and—and—Mrs. Peters said 'twas all right; and Mirandy Peters said 'twas all right; but they didn't any of 'em say anythin' about payin', so *I* didn't think 'twas all right—and—and—can't I have some more butter, Polly?"

"No," said Polly, sorry to refuse him, he'd been so good about the money; "the butter's got to be saved for Ben and Phronsie."

"Oh," said Joe, "I wish Miss Henderson would send us some more, I *do!* I think she might!"

"For shame, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper; "she was very good to send this, I think; now what else did you say?" she asked.

"Well," said Joel, taking another mouthful of bread, "so I waited; you told me to, mother, you know—and they all went to work; and they didn't mind me at all, and—there wasn't anything to look at, so I sat—and sat—Polly, can't I have some gingerbread?"

"No," said Polly, "it's all gone; I gave the last piece to Phronsie the day she was taken sick."

"Oh, dear," said Joel, "everything's gone."

"Well, do go on, Joe, *do.*"

"And—then they had dinner; and Mr. Peters said, 'Hasn't that boy gone home yet?' and Mrs. Peters said, 'no'—and he called me in, and asked me why I didn't run along home; and I said, Phronsie was sick, and Ben had the squeezles—"

"The *what?*" said Polly.

"The *squeezles,*" repeated Joel, irritably; "that's what you said."

"It's measles, Joey," corrected Mrs. Pepper; "never mind, I wouldn't feel bad."

"Well, they all laughed, and laughed, and then I said you told me to wait till I did get the money."

"Oh, Joe," began Mrs. Pepper, "you shouldn't have told 'em so—what did he say?"

"Well, he laughed, and said I was a smart boy, and he'd see; and Mirandy said, 'do pay him, pa, he must be tired to death'—and don't you think, he went to a big desk in the corner, and took out a box, and 'twas full most of money—*lots!* oh! and he gave me mine—and—that's all; and I'm tired to death." And Joel flung himself down on the floor, expanded his legs as only Joel could, and took a comfortable roll.

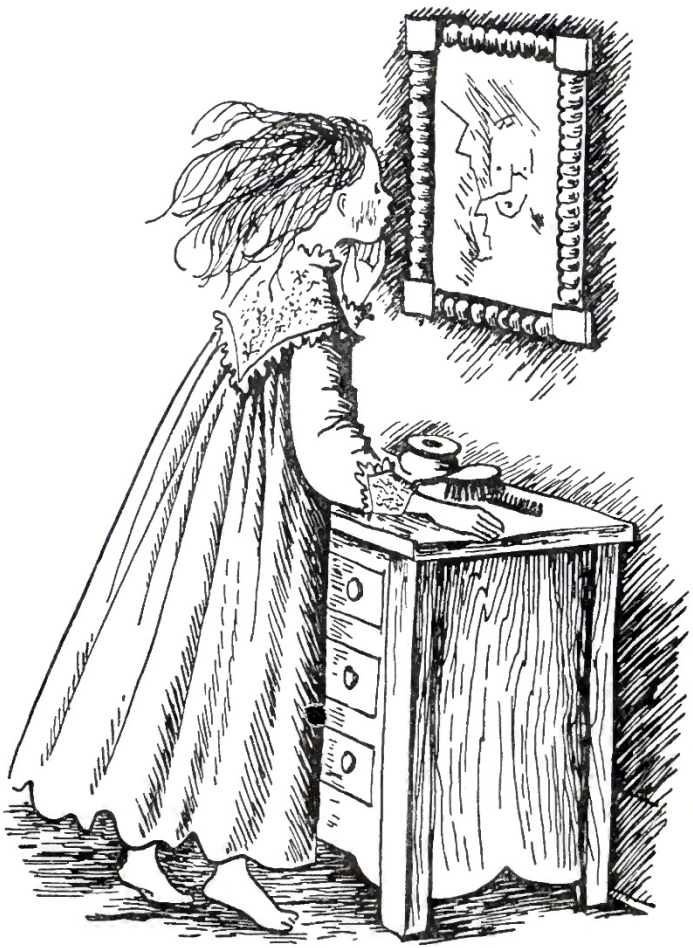
"So you must be," said Polly, pityingly, "waiting at those Peterses."

"Don't ever want to *see* any more Peterses," said Joel; "never, never, *never!*"

"Oh, dear," thought Polly, as she sewed on into the

afternoon, "I wonder what does all my eyes! feels just like sand in 'em;" and she rubbed and rubbed to thread her needle. But she was afraid her mother would see, so she kept at her sewing. Once in a while the bad feeling would go away, and then she would forget all about it. "There now, who says I can't do it! that's most done," she cried, jumping up, and spinning across the room, to stretch herself a bit, "and tomorrow I'll finish it."

"Well," said Mrs. Pepper, "if you can do that, Polly, you'll



be the greatest help I've had yet."

So Polly tucked herself into the old shake-down with a thankful heart that night, hoping for morning.

Alas! when morning did come, Polly could hardly move. The measles! what should she do! A faint hope of driving them off made her tumble out of bed, and stagger across the room to look in the old cracked looking glass. All hope was gone as the red reflection met her gaze. Polly was on the sick list now!

"I *won't* be sick," she said; "at any rate, I'll keep around." An awful feeling made her clutch the back of a chair, but she managed somehow to get into her clothes, and go groping blindly into the kitchen. Somehow, Polly couldn't see very well. She tried to set the table, but 'twas no use. "Oh, dear," she thought, "whatever'll mammy do?"

"Hulloa!" said Joel, coming in, "what's the matter, Polly?" Polly started at his sudden entrance, and, wavering a minute, fell over in a heap.

"Oh ma! ma!" screamed Joel, running to the foot of the stairs leading to the loft, where Mrs. Pepper was with Ben; "something's taken Polly! and she fell; and I guess she's in the wood-box!"

CHAPTER VI
Hard Days for Polly

"Ma," said David, coming softly into the bedroom, where poor Polly lay on the bed with Phronsie, her eyes bandaged with a soft old handkerchief, "I'll set the table."

"There isn't any table to set," said Mrs. Pepper, sadly; "there isn't anybody to eat anything, Davie; you and Joel can get something out of the cupboard."

"Can we get whatever we've a mind to, ma?" cried Joel, who followed Davie, rubbing his face with a towel after his morning ablutions.

"Yes," replied his mother, absently.

"Come on, Dave!" cried Joel; "we'll have a breakfast!"

"We mustn't," said little Davie, doubtfully, "eat the *whole*, Joey."

But that individual already had his head in the cupboard, which soon engrossed them both.

Dr. Fisher was called in the middle of the morning to see what was the matter with Polly's eyes. The little man looked at her keenly over his spectacles; then he said, "When were you taken?"

"This morning," answered Polly, her eyes smarting.

"Didn't you feel badly before?" questioned the doctor. Polly thought back; and then she remembered that she had felt very badly; that when she was baking over the old stove the day before her back had ached dreadfully; and that, somehow, when she sat down to sew, it didn't stop; only her eyes had bothered her so; she didn't mind her back so much.

"I thought so," said the doctor, when Polly answered. "And those eyes of yours have been used too much; what has

she been doing, ma'am?" He turned around sharply on Mrs. Pepper as he asked this.

"Sewing," said Mrs. Pepper, "and everything; Polly does everything, sir."

"Humph!" said the doctor; "well, she won't again in one spell; her eyes are very bad."

At this a whoop, small but terrible to hear, came from the middle of the bed; and Phronsie sat bolt upright. Everybody started; while Phronsie broke out, "Don't make my Polly sick! oh! *please* don't!"

"Hey!" said the doctor; and he looked kindly at the small object with a very red face in the middle of the bed. Then he added, gently, "We're going to make Polly well, little girl; so that she can see splendidly."

"Will you, *really?"* asked the child, doubtfully.

"Yes," said the doctor; "we'll try hard; and you mustn't cry; 'cause then Polly'll cry, and that will make her eyes very bad; *very* bad indeed," he repeated, impressively.

"I won't cry," said Phronsie; "no, not one bit." And she wiped off the last tear with her fat little hand, and watched to see what next was to be done.

And Polly was left, very rebellious indeed, in the big bed, with a cooling lotion on the poor eyes, that somehow didn't cool them one bit.

"If 'twas anythin' but my eyes, mammy, I could stand it," she bewailed, flouncing over and over in her impatience; "and who'll do all the work now?"

"Don't think of the work, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper.

"I can't do anything *but* think," said poor Polly.

Just at that moment a queer noise out in the kitchen was heard.

"Do go out, mother, and see what 'tis," said Polly.

"I've come," said a cracked voice, close up by the bedroom door, followed by a big black cap, which could belong to no other than Grandma Bascom, "to set by you a spell; what's

the matter?" she asked, and stopped, amazed to see Polly in bed.

"Oh, Polly's taken," screamed Mrs. Pepper in her ear.

"*Taken!*" repeated the old lady, "what is it—a fit?"

"No," said Mrs. Pepper; "the same as Ben's got; and Phronsie; the *measles.*"

"The measles, has she?" said grandma; "well, that's bad; and Ben's away, you say."

"No, he isn't either," screamed Mrs. Pepper, "he's got them, too!"

"Got two *what?*" asked grandma.

"*Measles!* he's got the measles too," repeated Mrs. Pepper, loud as she could; so loud that the old lady's cap trembled at the noise.

"Oh! the dreadful!" said grandma; "and this girl too?" laying her hand on Phronsie's head.

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, feeling it a little relief to tell over her miseries; "all three of them!"

"*I* haven't," said Joel, coming in in hopes that grandma had a stray peppermint or two in her pocket, as she sometimes did; "and I'm not going to, either."

"Oh, dear," groaned his mother; "that's what Polly said; and she's got 'em bad. It's her eyes," she screamed to grandma, who looked inquiringly.

"Her eyes, is it?" asked Mrs. Bascom; "well, I've got a receet that cousin Samanthy's folks had when John's children had 'em; and I'll run right along home and get it," and she started to go.

"No, you needn't," screamed Mrs. Pepper; "thank you, Mrs. Bascom; but Dr. Fisher's been here; and he put something on Polly's eyes; and he said it mustn't be touched."

"Hey?" said the old lady; so Mrs. Pepper had to go all over it again, till at last she made her understand that Polly's eyes were taken care of, and they must wait for time to do the rest.

"You come along of me," whispered grandma, when at last

her call was done, to Joel who stood by the door. "I've got some peppermints to home; I forgot to bring 'em."

"Yes'm," said Joel, brightening up.

"Where you going, Joe?" asked Mrs. Pepper, seeing him move off with Mrs. Bascom; "I may want you."

"Oh, I've got to go over to grandma's," said Joel briskly; "she wants me."

"Well, don't be gone long then," replied his mother.

"There," said grandma, going into her "keeping-room" to an old-fashioned chest of drawers; opening one, she took therefrom a paper, from which she shook out before Joe's delighted eyes some red and white peppermint drops. "There now, you take these home; you may have some, but be sure you give the most to the sick ones; and Polly—let Polly have the biggest."

"She won't take 'em," said Joel, wishing he had the measles. "Well, you try her," said grandma; "run along now." But it was useless to tell Joel that, for he was halfway home already. He carried out grandma's wishes, and distributed conscientiously the precious drops. But when he came to Polly, she didn't answer; and looking at her in surprise he saw two big tears rolling out under the bandage and wetting the pillow.

"I don't want 'em, Joe," said Polly, when he made her understand that "twas peppermints, real peppermints;" "you may have 'em."

"Try one, Polly; they're real good," said Joel, who had an undefined wish to comfort; "there, open your mouth."

So Polly opened her mouth, and Joel put one in with satisfaction.

"Isn't it good?" he asked, watching her crunch it.

"Yes," said Polly, "real good; where'd you get 'em?"

"Over to Grandma Bascom's," said Joel; "she gave me lots for all of us; have another, Polly?"

"No," said Polly, "not yet; you put two on my pillow where

I can reach 'em; and then you keep the rest, Joel."

"I'll put three," said Joel, counting out one red and two white ones, and laying them on the pillow; "there!"

"And I want another, Joey, *I do,*" said Phronsie from the other side of the bed.

"Well, you may have one," said Joel; "a red one, Phronsie; yes, you may have two. Now come on, Dave; we'll have the rest out by the wood-pile."

How they ever got through that day, I don't know. But late in the afternoon carriage wheels were heard; and then they stopped right at the Peppers' little brown gate.

"Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, running to the bedroom door, "it's Mrs. Henderson!"

"Is it?" said Polly, from the darkened room, "oh! I'm so glad! is Miss Jerushy with her?" she asked, fearfully.

"No," said Mrs. Pepper, going back to ascertain; "why, it's the parson himself! Deary! how we look!"

"Never mind, mammy," called back Polly, longing to spring out of bed and fix up a bit.

"I'm sorry to hear the children are sick," said Mrs. Henderson, coming in, in her sweet, gentle way.

"We didn't know it," said the minister, "until this morning—can we see them?"

"Oh yes, sir," said Mrs. Pepper; "Ben's upstairs; and Polly and Phronsie are in here."

"Poor little things!" said Mrs. Henderson, compassionately; "hadn't you better," turning to the minister, "go up and see Ben first, while I will visit the little girls?"

So the minister mounted the crooked stairs; and Mrs. Henderson went straight up to Polly's side; and the first thing Polly knew, a cool, gentle hand was laid on her hot head, and a voice said, "I've come to see *my* little chicken now!"

"Oh, ma'am," said Polly, bursting into a sob, "I don't care about my eyes—only mammy—" and she broke right down.

"I know," said the minister's wife, soothingly; "but it's for

you to bear patiently, Polly—what do you suppose the chicks were doing when I came away?" And Mrs. Henderson, while she held Polly's hand, smiled and nodded encouragingly to Phronsie, who was staring at her from the other side of the bed.

"I don't know, ma'am," said Polly; "please tell us."

"Well, they were all fighting over a grasshopper—yes, ten of them."

"Which one got it?" asked Polly in intense interest; "oh! I hope the white one did!"

"Well, he looked as much like winning as any of them," said the lady, laughing.

"Bless her!" thought Mrs. Pepper to herself out in the kitchen, finishing the sack Polly had left; "*she's* a parson's wife, *I* say!"

And then the minister came down from Ben's room, and went into the bedroom; and Mrs. Henderson went upstairs into the loft.

"So," he said kindly, as after patting Phronsie's head he came over and sat down by Polly, "this is the little girl who came to see me when I was sick."

"Oh, sir," said Polly, "I'm *so* glad you wasn't!"

"Well, when I come again," said Mr. Henderson, rising after a merry chat, "I see I shall have to slip a book into my pocket, and read for those poor eyes."

"Oh, thank *you!*" cried Polly; and then she stopped and blushed.

"Well, what is it?" asked the minister, encouragingly.

"Ben loves to hear reading," said Polly.

"Does he? well, by that time, my little girl, I guess Ben will be downstairs; he's all right, Polly; don't you worry about him—and I'll sit in the kitchen, by the bedroom door, and you can hear nicely."

So the Hendersons went away. But somehow, before they went, a good many things found their way out of the old-

fashioned chaise into the Peppers' little kitchen.

But Polly's eyes didn't get any better, with all the care; and the lines of worry on Mrs. Pepper's face grew deeper and deeper. At last, she just confronted Dr. Fisher in the kitchen, one day after his visit to Polly, and boldly asked him if they ever could be cured. "I know she's—and there isn't any use keeping it from me," said the poor woman—"she's going to be stone-blind!"

"My good woman," Dr. Fisher's voice was very gentle; and he took the hard, brown hand in his own—"your little girl will *not* be blind; I tell you the truth; but it will take some time to make her eyes quite strong—time, and rest. She has strained them in some way, but she will come out of it."

"Praise the Lord!" cried Mrs. Pepper, throwing her apron over her head; and then she sobbed on, "and thank you, sir—I can't ever thank you—for—for—if Polly was blind, we might as well give up!"

The next day, Phronsie, who had the doctor's permission to sit up, only she was to be kept from taking cold, scampered around in stocking feet in search of her shoes, which she hadn't seen since she was first taken sick.

"Oh, I want on my very *best* shoes," she cried; "can't I, mammy?"

"Oh, no, Phronsie; you must keep *them* nice," remonstrated her mother; "you can't wear 'em every day, you know."

"'Tisn't every day," said Phronsie, slowly; "it's only *one* day."

"Well, and then you'll want 'em on again tomorrow," said her mother.

"Oh, no, I won't!" cried Phronsie; "never, no more tomorrow, if I can have 'em today; *please,* mammy dear!"

Mrs. Pepper went to the lowest drawer in the high bureau, and took therefrom a small parcel done up in white tissue paper. Slowly unrolling this before the delighted eyes of the

child, who stood patiently waiting, she disclosed the precious red-topped shoes which Phronsie immediately clasped to her bosom.

"My own, *very* own shoes! *whole* mine!" she cried, and trudged out into the kitchen to put them on herself.

"Hulloa!" cried Dr. Fisher, coming in about a quarter of an hour later to find her tugging laboriously at the buttons—"new shoes! I declare!"



"My own!" cried Phronsie, sticking out one foot for inspection, where every button was in the wrong buttonhole, "and they've got red tops, too!"

"So they have," said the doctor, getting down on the floor beside her; "beautiful red tops, aren't they?"

"Be-*yew*-ti-ful," sang the child delightedly.

"Does Polly have new shoes every day?" asked the doctor in a low voice, pretending to examine the other foot.

Phronsie opened her eyes very wide at this.

"Oh, no, she don't have anything, Polly don't."

"And what does Polly want most of all—do you know? see if you can tell me." And the doctor put on the most alluring expression that he could muster.

"Oh, I know!" cried Phronsie, with a very wise look.

"There now," cried the doctor, "you're the girl for me! to think you know! so, what is it?"

Phronsie got up very gravely, and with one shoe half on, she leaned over and whispered in the doctor's ear:

"A *stove!*"

"A *what?*" said the doctor, looking at her, and then at the old, black thing in the corner, that looked as if it were ashamed of itself; "why, she's got one."

"Oh," said the child, "it won't burn; and sometimes Polly cries, she does, when she's all alone—and I see her."

"Now," said the doctor, very sympathetically, "that's too bad; that is! and then what does she do?"

"Oh, Ben stuffs it up," said the child, laughing; "and so does Polly too, with paper; and then it all tumbles out quick; oh! just as quick!" And Phronsie shook her yellow head at the dismal remembrance.

"Do you suppose," said the doctor, getting up, "that you know of any smart little girl around here, about four years old and that knows how to button on her own red-topped shoes, that would like to go to ride tomorrow morning in my carriage with me?"

"Oh, I do!" cried Phronsie, hopping on one toe; "it's *me!*"

"Very well, then," said Dr. Fisher, going to the bedroom door, "we'll lookout for tomorrow, then."

To poor Polly, lying in the darkened room, or sitting up in the big rocking chair—for Polly wasn't really very sick in other respects, the disease having all gone into the merry brown eyes—the time seemed interminable. Not to *do* anything! The very idea at anytime would have filled her

active, wide-awake little body with horror; and now, here she was!

"Oh, dear, I *can't* bear it!" she said, when she knew by the noise in the kitchen that everybody was out there; so nobody heard, except a fat, old black spider in the corner, and he didn't tell anyone!

"I *know* it's a week," she said, "since dinnertime! If Ben were only well, to talk to me."

"Oh, I say, Polly," screamed Joel at that moment running in, "Ben's a-comin' down the stairs!"

"Stop, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper; "you shouldn't have told; he wanted to surprise Polly."

"Oh, is he!" cried Polly, clasping her hands in rapture; "mammy, can't I take off this horrid bandage, and *see* him?"

"Dear me, no!" said Mrs. Pepper, springing forward; "not for the world, Polly! Dr. Fisher'd have our ears off!"

"Well, I can hear, anyway," said Polly, resigning herself to the remaining comfort; "here he is! oh, Ben!"

"There," said Ben, grasping Polly, bandage and all; "now we're all right; and say, Polly, you're a brick!"

"Mammy told me not to say that the other day," said Joel, with a very virtuous air.

"Can't help it," said Ben, who was a little wild over Polly, and besides, he had been sick himself, and had borne a good deal too.

"Now," said Mrs. Pepper, after the first excitement was over, "you're so comfortable together, and Phronsie don't want me now, I'll go to the store; I must get some more work if Mr. Atkins'll give it to me."

"I'll be all right now, mammy, that Ben's here," cried Polly, settling back into her chair, with Phronsie on the stool at her feet.

"I'm goin' to tell her stories, ma," cried Ben, "so you needn't worry about us."

"Isn't it funny, Ben," said Polly, as the gate clicked after



the mother, "to be sitting still, and telling stories in the daytime?"

"Rather funny!" replied Ben.

"Well, do go on," said Joel, as usual, rolling on the floor, in a dreadful hurry for the story to begin. Little David looked up quietly, as he sat on Ben's other side, his hands clasped tight together, just as eager, though he said nothing.

"Well; once upon a time," began Ben delightfully, and launched into one of the stories that the children thought perfectly lovely.

"Oh, Bensie," cried Polly, entranced, as they listened with bated breath, "however do you think of such nice things!"

"I've had time enough to think, the last week," said Ben, laughing, "to last a lifetime!"

"Do go on," put in Joel, impatient at the delay.

"Don't hurry him so," said Polly, reprovingly; "he isn't strong."

"Ben," said David, drawing a long breath, his eyes very big— "did he *really* see a bear?"

"No," said Ben; "oh! where was I?"

"Why, you said Tommy heard a noise," said Polly, "and he *thought* it was a bear."

"Oh, yes," said Ben; "I remember; 'twasn't a—"

"Oh, *make* it a bear, Ben!" cried Joel, terribly disappointed; "don't let it be not a bear."

"Why, I can't," said Ben; "twouldn't sound true."

"Never mind, *make* it sound true," insisted Joel; "you can make anything true."

"Very well," said Ben, laughing; "I suppose I must."

"Make it *two* bears, Ben," begged little Phronsie.

"Oh, no, Phronsie, that's too much," cried Joel; "that'll spoil it; but make it a *big* bear, do Ben, and have him bite him somewhere, and most kill him."

"Oh, Joel!" cried Polly, while David's eyes got bigger than ever.

So Ben drew upon his powers as storyteller, to suit his exacting audience, and was making his bear work havoc upon poor Tommy in a way captivating to all, even Joel, when, "Well, I declare," sounded Mrs. Pepper's cheery voice coming in upon them, "if this isn't comfortable!"

"Oh, mammy!" cried Phronsie, jumping out of Polly's arms, whither she had taken refuge during the thrilling tale, and running to her mother who gathered her baby up, "we've had a bear! *a real, live bear, we have!* Ben made him!"

"Have you!" said Mrs. Pepper, taking off her shawl, and laying her parcel of work down on the table, "now, that's nice!"

"Oh, mammy!" cried Polly, "it does seem so good to be all together again!"

"And I thank the Lord!" said Mrs. Pepper, looking down on her happy little group; and the tears were in her eyes—"and children, we ought to be very good and please Him, for He's been so good to us."

CHAPTER VII
The Cloud Over the Little Brown House

When Phronsie, with many crows of delight, and much chattering, had gotten fairly started the following morning on her much anticipated drive with the doctor, the whole family excepting Polly drawn up around the door to see them off. Mrs. Pepper resolved to snatch the time and run down for an hour or two to one of her customers who had long been waiting for a little "tailoring" to be done for her boys.

"Now, Joel," she said, putting on her bonnet before the cracked looking glass, "you stay along of Polly; Ben must go up to bed, the doctor said; and Davie's going to the store for some molasses; so you and Polly must keep house."

"Yes'm," said Joel; "may I have somethin' to eat, ma?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper; "but don't you eat the new bread; you may have as much as you want of the old."

"Isn't there *any* molasses, mammy?" asked Joel, as she bade Polly goodbye! and gave her numberless charges "to be careful of your eyes," and "not to let a crack of light in through the curtain," as the old green paper shade was called.

"No; if you're very hungry, you can eat bread," said Mrs. Pepper, sensibly.

"Joel," said Polly, after the mother had gone, "I *do* wish you could read to me."

"Well, I can't," said Joel, glad he didn't know how; "I thought the minister was comin'."

"Well, he was," said Polly, "but mammy said he had to go out of town to a consequence."

"A *what!*" asked Joel, very much impressed.

"A con—" repeated Polly. "Well, it began with a *con*—

and I am sure—yes, *very* sure it was consequence."

"That must be splendid," said Joel, coming up to her chair, and slowly drawing a string he held in his hand back and forth, "to go to consequences, and everything! When I'm a man, Polly Pepper, *I'm* going to be a minister, and have a nice time, and go—just everywhere!"

"Oh, Joel!" exclaimed Polly, quite shocked; "you couldn't be one; you aren't good enough."

"I don't care," said Joel, not at all dashed by her plainness, "I'll be good then—when I'm a big man; don't you suppose, Polly," as a new idea struck him, "that Mr. Henderson *ever* is naughty?"

"No," said Polly, very decidedly; "never, *never,* NEVER!"

"Then, I don't want to be one," said Joel, veering round with a sigh of relief, "and besides I'd rather have a pair of horses like Mr. Slocum's, and *then* I could go everywheres, I guess!"

"And sell tin?" asked Polly, "just like Mr. Slocum?"

"Yes," said Joel; "this is the way I'd go—Gee-*whop!* gee-*whoa!*" and Joel pranced with his imaginary steeds all around the room, making about as much noise as any other four boys, as he brought up occasionally against the four-poster or the high old bureau.

"Well!" said a voice close up by Polly's chair, that made her skip with apprehension, it was so like Miss Jerusha Henderson's—Joel was whooping away behind the bedstead to his horses that had become seriously entangled, so he didn't hear anything. But when Polly said, bashfully, "I can't see anything, ma'am," he came up red and shining to the surface, and stared with all his might.

"I came to see you, little girl," said Miss Jerusha severely, seating herself stiffly by Polly's side.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Polly, faintly.

"Who's this boy?" asked the lady, turning around squarely on Joel, and eying him from head to foot.

"He's my brother Joel," said Polly.

Joel still stared.

"Which brother?" pursued Miss Jerusha, like a census taker.

"He is next to me," said Polly, wishing her mother was home; "he's nine, Joel is."

"He's big enough to do something to help his mother," said Miss Jerusha, looking him through and through. "Don't you think you might do something, when the others are sick, and your poor mother is working so hard?" she continued, in a cold voice.

"I *do* something," blurted out Joel, sturdily, "lots and lots!"

"You shouldn't say 'lots," reproved Miss Jerusha, with a sharp look over her spectacles, "'tisn't proper for boys to talk so; what do you do all day long?" she asked, turning back to Polly, after a withering glance at Joel, who still stared.

"I can't do anything, ma'am," replied Polly, sadly, "I can't see to do anything."

"Well, you might knit, I should think," said her visitor, "it's dreadful for a girl as big as you are to sit all day idle; I had sore eyes once when I was a little girl—how old are you?" she asked, abruptly.

"Eleven last month," said Polly.

"Well, I wasn't only nine when I knit a stocking; and I had sore eyes, too; you see I was a very little girl, and—"

"Was you ever little?" interrupted Joel, in extreme incredulity, drawing near, and looking over the big square figure.

"Hey?" said Miss Jerusha; so Joel repeated his question before Polly could stop him.

"Of course," answered Miss Jerusha; and then she added, tartly, "little boys shouldn't speak unless they're spoken to. Now," and she turned back to Polly again, "didn't you ever knit a stocking?"

"No, ma'am," said Polly, "not a *whole* one."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Jerusha; "did I ever!" And she raised her black mitts in intense disdain. "A big girl like you never to knit a stocking! to think your mother should bring you up so! and—"

"She didn't bring us up," screamed Joel, in indignation, facing her with blazing eyes.

"Joel," said Polly, "be still."

"And you're very impertinent, too," said Miss Jerusha; "a good child *never* is impertinent."

Polly sat quite still; and Miss Jerusha continued:

"Now, I hope you will learn to be industrious; and when I come again, I will see what you have done."



"You aren't ever coming again," said Joel, defiantly; "no, *never!*"

"Joel!" implored Polly, and in her distress she pulled up her bandage as she looked at him; "you know mammy'll be so sorry at you! Oh, ma'am, and" she turned to Miss Jerusha, who was now thoroughly aroused to the duty she saw before her of doing these children good, "I don't know what is the reason, ma'am; Joel never talks so; he's real good; and—"

"It only shows," said the lady, seeing her way quite clear for a little exhortation, "that you've all had your own way from infancy; and that you don't do what you might to make your mother's life a happy one."

"Oh, ma'am," cried Polly, and she burst into a flood of tears, "please, *please* don't say that!"

"And I say," screamed Joel, stamping his small foot, "if you make Polly cry you'll *kill* her! Don't Polly, *don't!*" and the boy put both arms around her neck, and soothed and comforted her in every way he could think of. And Miss Jerusha, seeing no way to make herself heard, disappeared feeling pity for children who would turn away from good advice.

But still Polly cried on; all the pent-up feelings that had been so long controlled had free vent now. She really couldn't stop! Joel, frightened to death, at last said, "I'm going to wake up Ben."

That brought Polly to; and she sobbed out, "Oh, no, Jo—ey—I'll stop."

"I will," said Joel, seeing his advantage; "I'm going, Polly," and he started to the foot of the stairs.

"No, I'm done now, Joe," said Polly, wiping her eyes, and choking back her thoughts—"oh, Joe! I *must* scream! My eyes aches so!" and poor Polly fairly writhed all over the chair.

"What'll I do?" said Joel, at his wits' end, running back, "do you want some water?"

"Oh, no," gasped Polly; "doctor wouldn't let me; oh! I wish mammy'd come!"

"I'll go and look for her," suggested Joel, feeling as if he must do something; and he'd rather be out at the gate, than to see Polly suffer.

"That won't bring her," said Polly; trying to keep still; "I'll try to wait."

"Here she is now!" cried Joel, peeping out of the window; "oh! goody!"

CHAPTER VIII
Joel's Turn

"Well," Mrs. Pepper's tone was unusually blithe as she stepped into the kitchen—"you've had a nice time, I suppose—what in the world!" and she stopped at the bedroom door.

"Oh, mammy, if you'd been here!" said Joel, while Polly sat still, only holding on to her eyes as if they were going to fly out; "there's been a big woman here; she came right in—and she talked awfully! and Polly's been a-cryin', and her eyes ache dreadfully—and—"

"Been crying!" repeated Mrs. Pepper, coming up to poor Polly. "Polly been crying!" she still repeated.

"Oh, mammy, I couldn't help it," said Polly; "she said —" and in spite of all she could do, the rain of tears began again, which bade fair to be as uncontrolled as before. But Mrs. Pepper took her up firmly in her arms, as if she were Phronsie, and sat down in the old rocking chair and just patted her back.

"There, there," she whispered, soothingly, "don't think of it, Polly; mother's got home."

"Oh, mammy," said Polly, crawling up to the comfortable neck for protection, "I ought not to mind; but 'twas Miss Jerusha Henderson; and she said—"

"What *did* she say?" asked Mrs. Pepper, thinking perhaps it to be the wiser thing to let Polly free her mind.

"Oh, she said that we ought to be doing something; and I ought to knit, and—"

"Go on," said her mother.

"And then Joel got naughty; oh, mammy, he never did so

before; and I couldn't stop him," cried Polly, in great distress; "I really couldn't, mammy—and he talked to her; and he told her she wasn't ever coming here again."

"Joel shouldn't have said that," said Mrs. Pepper, and under her breath something was added that Polly even failed to hear—"but no more she isn't!"



"And, mammy," cried Polly—and she flung her arms around her mother's neck and gave her a grasp that nearly choked Mrs. Pepper, "ain't I helpin' you *some*, mammy? Oh!

I wish I could do something big for you? Ain't you happy, mammy?"

"For the land's sakes!" cried Mrs. Pepper, straining Polly to her heart, "whatever has that woman—whatever *could* she have said to you? Such a girl as you are, too!" cried Mrs. Pepper, hugging Polly, and covering her with kisses so tender, that Polly, warmed and cuddled up to her heart's content, was comforted to the full.

"Well," said Mrs. Pepper, when at last she thought she had formed between Polly and Joel about the right idea of the visit, "well, now we won't think of *it*, ever anymore; 'tisn't worth it, Polly, you know."

But poor Polly! and poor mother! They both were obliged to think of it. Nothing could avert the suffering of the next few days, caused by that long flow of burning tears.

"Nothing feels good on 'em, mammy," said Polly, at last, twisting her hands in the vain attempt to keep from rubbing the aching, inflamed eyes that drove her nearly wild with their itching, "there isn't any use in trying anything."

"There *will* be use," energetically protested Mrs. Pepper, bringing another cool bandage, "as long as you've got an eye in your head, Polly Pepper!"

Dr. Fisher's face, when he first saw the change that the fateful visit had wrought, and heard the accounts, was very grave indeed. Everything had been so encouraging on his last visit, that he had come very near promising Polly speedy freedom from the hateful bandage.

But the little Pepper household soon had something else to think of more important even than Polly's eyes, for now the heartiest, the jolliest of all the little group was down—Joel. How he fell sick, they scarcely knew, it all came so suddenly. The poor, bewildered family had hardly time to think, before delirium and, perhaps, death stared them in the face.

When Polly first heard it, by Phronsie's pattering downstairs and screaming: "Oh, Polly, Joey's dre-ad-ful sick,

he *is!*" she jumped right up, and tore off the bandage.

"Now, I *will* help mother! I *will*, so *there!*" and in another minute she would have been up in the sick room. But the first thing she knew, a gentle but firm hand was laid upon hers; and she found herself back again in the old rocking chair, and listening to the Doctor's words which were quite stern and decisive.

"Now, I tell you," he said, "you must *not* take off that bandage again; do you know the consequences? You will be blind! and then you will be a care to your mother all your life!"

"I shall be blind, anyway," said Polly, despairingly; "so 'twon't make any difference."

"No; your eyes will come out of it all right, only I did hope," and the good doctor's face fell—"that the other two boys would escape; but," and he brightened up at sight of Polly's forlorn visage—"see you do *your* part by keeping still."

But there came a day soon when *everything* was still around the once happy little brown house—when only whispers were heard from white lips; and thoughts were fearfully left unuttered.

On the morning of one of these days, when Mrs. Pepper felt she could not exist an hour longer without sleep, kind Mrs. Beebe came to stay until things were either better or worse.

Still the cloud hovered, dark and forbidding. At last, one afternoon, when Polly was all alone, she could endure it no longer. She flung herself down by the side of the old bed, and buried her face in the gay patched bed quilt.

"Dear God," she said, "*make* me willing to have anything," she hesitated—"yes, *anything* happen; to be blind forever, and to have Joey sick, only make me good."

How long she stayed there she never knew; for she fell asleep—the first sleep she had had since Joey was taken sick. And little Mrs. Beebe coming in found her thus.

"Polly," the good woman said, leaning over her, "you poor,

pretty creeter, you; I'm goin' to tell you somethin'—there, there, just to think! Joel's goin' to get well!"

"Oh, Mrs. Beebe!" cried Polly, tumbling over in a heap on the floor, her face, as much as could be seen under the bandage, in a perfect glow, "Is he, *really?*"

"Yes, to be sure; the danger's all over now," said the little old lady, inwardly thinking—"If I *hadn't* a-come!"

"Well, then, the Lord wants him to," cried Polly, in rapture; "don't he, Mrs. Beebe?"

"To be sure—to be sure," repeated the kind friend, only half understanding.

"Well, I don't care about my eyes, then," cried Polly; and to Mrs. Beebe's intense astonishment and dismay, she spun round and round in the middle of the floor.

"Oh, Polly, *Polly!*" the little old lady cried, running up to her, "*Do* stop! The doctor wouldn't let you! He wouldn't really, you know! It'll all go to your eyes."

"I don't care," repeated Polly, in the middle of a spin; but she stopped obediently; "seems as if I just as soon be blind as not; it's so beautiful Joey's going to get well!"

CHAPTER IX
Sunshine Again

But as Joel was smitten down suddenly, so he came up quickly, and his hearty nature asserted itself by rapid strides toward returning health; and one morning he astonished them all by turning over suddenly and exclaiming:

"I want something to eat!"

"Bless the Lord!" cried Mrs. Pepper, "now he's going to live!"

"But he *mustn't* eat," protested Mrs. Beebe, in great alarm, trotting for the cup of gruel. "Here, you pretty creeter you, here's something nice." And she temptingly held the spoon over Joel's mouth; but with a grimace he turned away.

"Oh, I want something to *eat!* Some gingerbread or some bread and butter."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Beebe. "Gingerbread!" Poor Mrs. Pepper saw the hardest part of her trouble now before her, as she realized that the returning appetite must be fed only on strengthening food; for where it was to come from she couldn't tell.

"The Lord only knows where we'll get it," she groaned within herself.

Yes, He knew. A rap at the door, and little David ran down to find the cause.

"Oh, mammy," he said, "Mrs. Henderson sent it—see! see!" And in the greatest excitement he placed in her lap a basket that smelt savory and nice even before it was opened. When it was opened, there lay a little bird delicately roasted, and folded in a clean napkin; also a glass of jelly, crimson and clear.

"Oh, Joey," cried Mrs. Pepper, almost overwhelmed with joy, "see what Mrs. Henderson sent you! now you can eat fit for a king!"

That little bird certainly performed its mission in life; for as Mrs. Beebe said, "It just touched the spot!" and from that very moment Joel improved so rapidly they could hardly believe their eyes.

"Hoh! I haven't been sick!" he cried on the third day, true to his nature. "Mammy, I want to get up."

"Oh, dear, no! you mustn't, Joel," cried Mrs. Pepper in a fright, running up to him as he was preparing to give the bedclothes a lusty kick; "you'll send 'em in."

"Send what in?" asked Joel, looking up at his mother in terror, as the dreadful thought made him pause.

"Why, the measles, Joey; they'll all go in if you get out."

"How they goin' to get in again, I'd like to know?" asked Joel, looking at the little red spots on his hands in incredulity; say, ma!

"Well, they will," said his mother, "as you'll find to your sorrow if you get out of bed."

"Oh, dear," said Joel, beginning to whimper, as he drew into bed again, "when can I get up, mammy!"

"Oh, in a day or two," responded Mrs. Pepper, cheerfully; "you're getting on so finely you'll be as smart as a cricket! Shouldn't you say he might get up in a day or two, Mrs. Beebe?" she appealed to that individual who was knitting away cheerily in the corner.

"Well, if he keeps on as he's begun, I shouldn't know what to think," replied Mrs. Beebe. "It beats all how quick he's picked up. I never see anything like it, I'm sure!"

And as Mrs. Beebe was a great authority in sickness, the old, sunny cheeriness began to creep into the brown house once more, and to bubble over as of yore.

"Seems as if 'twas just good to live," said Mrs. Pepper, thankfully once, when her thoughts were too much for her. "I

don't believe I shall ever care how poor we are," she continued, "as long as we're together."

"And that's just what the Lord meant, maybe," replied good Mrs. Beebe, who was preparing to go home.

Joel kept the house in a perfect uproar all through his getting well. Mrs. Pepper observed one day, when he had been more turbulent than usual, that she was "almost worn to a thread."

"Twasn't anything to take care of you, Joe," she added, "when you were real sick, because then I knew where you were; but—well, you won't ever have the measles again, I s'pose, and that's some comfort!"

Little David, who had been nearly stunned by the sickness that had laid aside his almost constant companion, could express his satisfaction and joy in no other way than by running every third minute and begging to do something for him. And Joel, who loved dearly to be waited on, improved every opportunity that offered; which Mrs. Pepper observing, soon put a stop to.

"You'll run his legs off, Joel," at last she said, when he sent David the third time down to the woodpile for a stick of just the exact thickness, and which the little messenger declared wasn't to be found. "Haven't you any mercy? You've kept him going all day, too," she added, glancing at David's pale face.

"Oh, mammy," panted David, "don't; I love to go. Here Joe, is the best I could find," handing him a nice smooth stick.

"I know you do," said his mother; "but Joe's getting better now, and he must learn to spare you."

"I don't want to spare folks," grumbled Joel, whittling away with energy; "I've been sick—real sick," he added, lifting his chubby face to his mother to impress the fact.

"I know you have," she cried, running to kiss her boy; "but now, Joe, you're most well. Tomorrow I'm going to let you go downstairs; what do you think of that!"

"Hooray!" screamed Joel, throwing away the stick and

clapping his hands, forgetting all about his serious illness, "that'll be prime!"

"Aren't you too sick to go, Joey?" asked Mrs. Pepper, mischievously.

"No, I'm not sick," cried Joel, in the greatest alarm, fearful his mother meant to take back the promise; "I've never been sick. Oh, mammy! you know you'll let me go, won't your?"

"I guess so," laughed his mother.

"Come on, Phron," cried Joel, giving her a whirl.

David, who was too tired for active sport, sat on the floor and watched them frolic in great delight.

"Mammy," said he, edging up to her side as the sport went on, "do you know, I think it's just good—it's—oh, it's so frisky since Joe got well, isn't it, mammy?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Pepper, giving him a radiant look in return for his; "and when Polly's around again with her two eyes all right—well, I don't know what we shall do, I declare!"

"Boo!" cried a voice, next morning, close to Polly's elbow, unmistakably Joel's.

"Oh, Joel Pepper!" she cried, whirling around, "Is that really you!"

"Yes," cried that individual, confidently, "it's I; oh, I say, Polly, I've had fun upstairs, I tell you what!"

"Poor boy!" said Polly, compassionately.

"I wasn't a poor boy," cried Joel, indignantly; "I had splendid things to eat; oh, my!" and he closed one eye and smacked his lips in the delightful memory.

"I know it," said Polly, "and I'm so glad, Joel."

"I don't suppose I'll ever get so many again," observed Joel, reflectively, after a minute's pause, as one and another of the wondrous delicacies rose before his mind's eye; "not unless I have the measles again—say, Polly, can't I have 'em again?"

"Mercy, no!" cried Polly, in intense alarm, "I hope not."

"Well, I don't," said Joel, "I wish I could have 'em sixty—

no—two hundred times, so there!"

"Well, mammy couldn't take care of you," said Ben; "you don't know what you're sayin', Joe."

"Well, then, I wish I could have the things without the measles," said Joel, willing to accommodate; "only folks won't send 'em," he added, in an injured tone.

"Polly's had the hardest time of all," said her mother, affectionately patting the bandage.

"I think so too," put in Ben; "if my eyes were hurt I'd give up."

"So would I," said David; and Joel, to be in the fashion, cried also, "I know I would;" while little Phronsie squeezed up to Polly's side, "And I, too."

"Would what, Puss?" asked Ben, tossing her up high. "Have good things," cried the child, in delight at understanding the others, "I would really, Ben," she cried, gravely, when they all screamed.

"Well, I hope so," said Ben, tossing her higher yet. "Don't laugh at her, boys," put in Polly; "we're all going to have good times now, Phronsie, now we've got well."

"Yes," laughed the child from her high perch; "we aren't ever goin' to be sick again, ever—anymore," she added impressively.

The good times were coming for Polly—coming pretty near, and she didn't know it! All the children were in the secret; for as Mrs. Pepper declared, "They'd have to know it; and if they were let into the secret they'd keep it better."

So they had individually and collectively been entrusted with the precious secret, and charged with the extreme importance of "never letting anyone know," and they had been nearly bursting ever since with the wild desire to impart their knowledge.

"I'm afraid I shall tell," said David, running to his mother at last; "oh, mammy, I don't dare stay near Polly, I do want to tell so bad."

"Oh, no, you won't, David," said his mother encouragingly, "when you know mother don't want you to; and besides, think how Polly'll look when she sees it."

"I know," cried David in the greatest rapture, "I wouldn't tell for all the world! I guess she'll look nice, don't you mother?" and he laughed in glee at the thought.

"Poor child! I guess she will!" and then Mrs. Pepper laughed too, till the little old kitchen rang with delight at the accustomed sound.

The children all had to play "clap in and clap out" in the bedroom while it came; and "stage coach," too—"anything to make a noise," Ben said. And then after they got nicely started in the game, he would be missing to help about the mysterious thing in the kitchen, which was safe since Polly couldn't see him go on account of her bandage. So she didn't suspect in the least. And although the rest were almost dying to be out in the kitchen, they conscientiously stuck to their bargain to keep Polly occupied. Only Joel would open the door and peep once; and then Phronsie behind him began. "Oh, I see the sto—" but David swooped down on her in a twinkling, and smothered the rest by tickling her.

Once they came very near having the whole thing pop out. "Whatever is that noise in the kitchen?" asked Polly, as they all stopped to take breath after the scuffle of "stage coach." "It sounds just like grating."

"I'll go and see," cried Joel, promptly; and then he flew out where his mother and Ben and two men were at work on a big, black thing in the corner. The old stove, strange to say, was nowhere to be seen! Something else stood in its place, a shiny, black affair, with a generous supply of oven doors, and altogether such a comfortable, home-like look about it, as if it would say—"I'm going to make sunshine in this house!"

"Oh, Joel," cried his mother, turning around on him with very black hands, "you haven't told!"

"No," said Joel, "but she's hearin' the noise, Polly is."

"Hush!" said Ben, to one of the men.

"We can't put it up without some noise," the man replied, "but we'll be as still as we can."

"Isn't it a big one, ma?" asked Joel, in the loudest of stage whispers, that Polly on the other side of the door couldn't have failed to hear if Phronsie hadn't laughed just then.

"Go back, Joe, do," said Ben, "play tag—anything," he implored, "we'll be through in a few minutes."

"It takes forever!" said Joel, disappearing within the bedroom door. Luckily for the secret, Phronsie just then ran a pin sticking up on the arm of the old chair, into her finger; and Polly, while comforting her, forgot to question Joel. And then the mother came in, and though she had ill-concealed hilarity in her voice, she kept chattering and bustling around with Polly's supper to such an extent that there was no chance for a word to be got in.

Next morning it seemed as if the "little brown house," would turn inside out with joy.

"Oh, mammy!" cried Polly, jumping into her arms the first thing, as Dr. Fisher untied the bandage, "my eyes are *new!* Just the same as if I'd just got 'em! Don't they *look* different?" she asked, earnestly, running to the cracked glass to see for herself.

"No," said Ben, "I hope not; the same brown ones, Polly."

"Well," said Polly, hugging first one and then another, "everybody looks different through them, anyway."

"Oh," cried Joel, "come out into the kitchen, Polly; it's a great deal better out there."

"May I?" asked Polly, who was in such a twitter looking at everything that she didn't know which way to turn.

"Yes," said the doctor, smiling at her.

"Well, then," sang Polly, "come mammy, we'll go first; isn't it just lovely—oh, MAMMY!" and Polly turned so very pale, and looked as if she were going to tumble right over, that Mrs. Pepper grasped her arm in dismay.

"*What is it?*" she asked, pointing to the corner, while all the children stood round in the greatest excitement.

"Why," cried Phronsie, "it's a *stove*—don't you know, Polly?" But Polly gave one plunge across the room, and before anybody could think, she was down on her knees with her arms flung right around the big, black thing, and laughing and crying over it, all in the same breath!

And then they all took hold of hands and danced around it like wild little things; while Dr. Fisher stole out silently—and Mrs. Pepper laughed till she wiped her eyes to see them go.

"We aren't ever goin' to have any more burnt bread," sang Polly, all out of breath.

"Nor your back isn't goin' to break anymore," panted Ben, with a very red face.

"Hooray!" screamed Joel and David, to fill any pause that might occur, while Phronsie gurgled and laughed at everything just as it came along. And then they all danced and capered again; all but Polly, who was down before the precious stove examining and exploring into ovens and everything that belonged to it.

"Oh, ma," she announced, coming up to Mrs. Pepper, who had been obliged to fly to her sewing again, and exhibiting a very crocky face and a pair of extremely smutty hands, "it's most all ovens, and it's just splendid!"

"I know it," answered her mother, delighted in the joy of her child. "My! how black you are, Polly!"

"Oh, I wish," cried Polly, as the thought struck her, "that Dr. Fisher could see it! Where did he go to, ma?"

"I guess Dr. Fisher has seen it before," said Mrs. Pepper, and then she began to laugh. "You haven't ever asked where the stove came from, Polly."

And to be sure, Polly had been so overwhelmed that if the stove had really dropped from the clouds it would have been a small matter of astonishment to her, as long as it had come;



that was the main thing!

"Mammy," said Polly, turning around slowly, with the stove-lifter in her hand, "did Dr. Fisher bring that stove?"

"He didn't exactly *bring* it," answered her mother, "but I guess he knew something about it."

"Oh, he's the splendidest, *goodest* man!" cried Polly, "that ever breathed! Did he *really* get us that stove?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, "he would; I couldn't stop him. I don't know how he found out you wanted one so bad; but he said it must be kept as a surprise when your eyes got well."

"And he saved my eyes!" cried Polly, full of gratitude. "I've got a stove and two new eyes, mammy, just to think!"

"We ought to be good after all our mercies," said Mrs. Pepper thankfully, looking around on her little group. Joel was engaged in the pleasing occupation of seeing how far he could run his head into the biggest oven, and then pulling it out to exhibit its blackness, thus engrossing the others in a perfect hubbub.

"I'm going to bake my doctor some little cakes," declared Polly, when there was comparative quiet.

"Do, Polly," cried Joel, "and then leave one or two over."

"No," said Polly; "we can't have any, because these must be very nice. Mammy, can't I have some white on top, just once?" she pleaded.

"I don't know," dubiously replied Mrs. Pepper; "eggs are dreadful dear, and—"

"I don't care," said Polly, recklessly; "I must just once for Dr. Fisher."

"I tell you, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, "what you might do; you might make him some little apple tarts—most everyone likes them, you know."

"Well," said Polly, with a sigh, "I s'pose they'll *have* to do; but *sometime,* mammy, I'm going to bake him a big cake, so there!"

CHAPTER X
A Threatened Blow

One day, a few weeks after, Mrs. Pepper and Polly were busy in the kitchen. Phronsie was out in the "orchard," as the one scraggy apple tree was called by courtesy, singing her rag doll to sleep under its sheltering branches. But "Baby" was cross and wouldn't go to sleep, and Phronsie was on the point of giving up, and returning to the house, when a strain of music made her pause with dolly in her apron. There she stood with her finger in her mouth, in utter astonishment, wondering where the sweet sounds came from.

"Oh, Phronsie!" screamed Polly, from the back door, "where are—oh, here, come quick! it's the beau-ti-fullest!"

"What is it?" eagerly asked the little one, hopping over the stubby grass, leaving poor, discarded "Baby" on its snubby nose where it dropped in her hurry.

"Oh, a monkey!" cried Polly; "do hurry! the sweetest little monkey you ever saw!"

"What is a monkey?" asked Phronsie, scurrying after Polly to the gate where her mother was waiting for them.

"Why, a monkey's—a—monkey," explained Polly, "I don't know any better'n that. Here he is! Isn't he splendid!" and she lifted Phronsie up to the big post where she could see finely.

"O-oh! ow!" screamed little Phronsie, "see him, Polly! just see him!"

A man with an organ was standing in the middle of the road playing away with all his might, and at the end of a long rope was a lively little monkey in a bright red coat and a smart cocked hat. The little creature pulled off his hat, and with one

long jump coming on the fence, he made Phronsie a most magnificent bow. Strange to say, the child wasn't in the least frightened, but put out her little fat hand, speaking in gentle tones, "Poor little monkey! come here, poor little monkey!"

Turning up his little wrinkled face, and glancing fearfully at his master, Jocko began to grimace and beg for something to eat. The man pulled the string and struck up a merry tune, and in a minute the monkey spun around and around at such a lively pace, and put in so many queer antics that the little audience were fairly convulsed with laughter.

"I can't pay you," said Mrs. Pepper, wiping her eyes, when at last the man pulled up the strap whistling to Jocko to jump up, "but I'll give you something to eat; and the monkey, too, he shall have something for his pains in amusing my children."

The man looked very cross when she brought him out only brown bread and two cold potatoes.

"Haven't you got nothin' better'n *that?*"

"It's as good as we have," answered Mrs. Pepper.

The man threw down the bread in the road. But Jocko thankfully ate his share, Polly and Phronsie busily feeding him; and then he turned and snapped up the portion his master had left in the dusty road.

Then they moved on, Mrs. Pepper and Polly going back to their work in the kitchen. A little down the road the man struck up another tune. Phronsie who had started merrily to tell "Baby" all about it, stopped a minute to hear, and—she didn't go back to the orchard!

About two hours after, Polly said merrily:

"I'm going to call Phronsie in, mammy; she must be awfully tired and hungry by this time."

She sang gayly on the way, "I'm coming, Phronsie, coming—why, where!—" peeping under the tree.

"Baby" lay on its face disconsolately on the ground—and the orchard was empty! Phronsie was gone!



"It's no use," said Ben, to the distracted household and such of the neighbors as the news had brought hurriedly to the scene, "to look anymore around here—but somebody must go toward Hingham; he'd be likely to go that way."

"No one could tell where he *would* go," cried Polly, wringing her hands.

"But he'd change, Ben, if he thought folks would think he'd gone there," said Mrs. Pepper.

"We must go *all* roads," said Ben, firmly; "one must take the stage to Boxville, and I'll take Deacon Brown's wagon on the Hingham road, and somebody else must go to Toad Hollow."

"I'll go in the stage," screamed Joel, who could scarcely see out of his eyes, he had cried so; "I'll find—find her—I know."

"Be spry, then, Joe, and catch it at the corner!"

Everybody soon knew that little Phronsie Pepper had gone off with "a cross organ man and an awful monkey!" and in the course of an hour dozens of people were out on the hot, dusty roads in search.

"What's the matter?" asked a testy old gentleman in the stage, of Joel who, in his anxiety to see both sides of the road at once, bobbed the old gentleman in the face so often as the stage lurched, that at last he knocked his hat over his eyes.

"My sister's gone off with a monkey," explained Joel, bobbing over to the other side, as he thought he caught sight of something pink that he felt sure *must* be Phronsie's apron. "Stop! stop! there she is!" he roared, and the driver, who had his instructions and was fully in sympathy, pulled up so suddenly that the old gentleman flew over into the opposite seat.

"Where?"

But when they got up to it Joel saw that it was only a bit of pink calico flapping on a clothesline; so he climbed back and away they rumbled again.

The others were having the same luck. No trace could be found of the child. To Ben, who took the Hingham road, the minutes seemed like hours.

"I *won't* go back," he muttered, "until I take her. I *can't* see mother's face!"

But the ten miles were nearly traversed; almost the last hope was gone. Into every thicket and lurking place by the roadside had he peered—but no Phronsie! Deacon Brown's horse began to lag.

"*Go on!*" said Ben hoarsely; "oh, dear Lord, *make* me find her!"

The hot sun poured down on the boy's face, and he had

no cap. What cared he for that? On and on he went. Suddenly the horse stopped. Ben doubled up the reins to give him a cut, when "WHOA!" he roared so loud that the horse in very astonishment gave a lurch that nearly flung him headlong. But he was over the wheel in a twinkling, and up with a bound to a small thicket of scrubby bushes on a high hill by the roadside. Here lay a little bundle on the ground, and close by it a big, black dog; and over the whole, standing guard, was a boy a little bigger than Ben, with honest gray eyes. And the bundle was Phronsie!

"Don't wake her up," said the boy, warningly, as Ben, with a hungry look in his eyes, leaped up the hill, "she's tired to death!"

"She's my sister!" cried Ben, "*our Phronsie!*"

"I know it," said the boy kindly; "but I wouldn't wake her up yet if I were you. I'll tell you all about it," and he took Ben's hand which was as cold as ice.



CHAPTER XI
Safe

"It's all right, Prince," the boy added, encouragingly to the big dog who, lifting his noble head, had turned two big eyes steadily on Ben. "He's all right! lie down again!"

Then, flinging himself down on the grass, he told Ben how he came to rescue Phronsie.

"Prince and I were out for a stroll," said he. "I live over in Hingham," pointing to the pretty little town just a short distance before them in the hollow; "that is," laughing, "I do this summer. Well, we were out strolling along about a mile below here on the crossroad; and all of a sudden, just as if they sprung right up out of the ground, I saw a man with an organ, and a monkey, and a little girl, coming along the road. She was crying, and as soon as Prince saw that, he gave a growl, and then the man saw us, and he looked so mean and cringing I knew there must be something wrong, and I inquired of him what he was doing with that little girl, and then she looked up and begged so with her eyes, and all of a sudden broke away from him and ran towards me screaming—'I want Polly!' Well, the man sprang after her; then I tell you—" here the boy forgot his caution about waking Phronsie—"we went for him, Prince and I! Prince is a noble fellow," (here the dog's ears twitched very perceptibly) "and he kept at that man; oh! how he bit him! till he had to run for fear the monkey would get killed."

"Was Phronsie frightened?" asked Ben; "she's never seen strangers."

"Not a bit," said the boy, cheerily; "she just clung to me like everything—I only wish she was my sister," he added

impulsively.

"What were you going to do with her if I hadn't come along?" asked Ben.

"Well, I got out on the main road," said the boy, "because I thought anybody who had lost her, would probably come through this way; but if somebody hadn't come, I was going to carry her in to Hingham; and the father and I'd had to contrive some way to do."

"Well," said Ben, as the boy finished and fastened his bright eyes on him, "somebody did come along; and now I must get her home about as fast as I can for poor mammy—and Polly!"

"Yes," said the boy, "I'll help you lift her; perhaps she won't wake up."

The big dog moved away a step or two, but still kept his eye on Phronsie.

"There," said the boy, brightly, as they laid the child on the wagon seat; "now when you get in you can hold her head; that's it," he added, seeing them both fixed to his satisfaction. But still Ben lingered.

"Thank you," he tried to say.

"I know," laughed the boy; "only it's Prince instead of me," and he pulled forward the big black creature, who had followed faithfully down the hill to see the last of it. "To the front, sir, there! We're coming to see you," he continued, "if you will let us—where do you live?"

"Do come," said Ben, lighting up, for he was just feeling he couldn't bear to look his last on the merry, honest face; "anybody'll tell you where Mrs. Pepper lives."

"Is she a Pepper?" asked the boy, laughing, and pointing to the unconscious little heap in the wagon; "and are you a Pepper?"

"Yes," said Ben, laughing too. "There are five of us besides mother.

"Jolly! that's something like! Goodbye! Come on, Prince!"

Then away home to mother! Phronsie never woke up or turned over once till she was put, a little pink sleepy heap, into her mother's arms. Joel was there, crying bitterly at his forlorn search. The testy old gentleman in the seat opposite had relented and ordered the coach about and brought him home in an outburst of grief when all hope was gone. And one after another they all had come back, disheartened, to the distracted mother. Polly alone, clung to hope!

"Ben *will* bring her, mammy; I *know* God will let him," she whispered.

But when Ben did bring her, Polly, for the second time in her life, tumbled over with a gasp, into old Mrs. Bascom's lap.

Home and mother! Little Phronsie slept all that night straight through. The neighbors came in softly, and with awestruck visages stole into the bedroom to look at the child; and as they crept out again, thoughts of their own little ones tugging at their hearts, the tears would drop unheeded.

CHAPTER XII
New Friends

Up the stairs of the hotel, two steps at a time, ran a boy with a big, black dog at his heels. "Come on, Prince; soft, now," as they neared a door at the end of the corridors.

It opened into a corner room overlooking "the Park," as the small open space in front of the hotel was called. Within the room there was sunshine and comfort, it being the most luxurious one in the house, which the proprietor had placed at the disposal of this most exacting guest. He didn't look very happy, however—the gentleman who sat in an easy chair by the window; a large, handsome old gentleman, whose whole bearing showed plainly that personal comfort had always been his, and was, therefore, neither a matter of surprise nor thankfulness.

"Where have you been?" he asked, turning around to greet the boy who came in, followed by Prince.

"Oh, such a long story, father!" he cried, flushed; his eyes sparkling as he flung back the dark hair from his forehead. "You can't even guess!"

"Never mind now," said the old gentleman, testily; "your stories are always long; the paper hasn't come—strange, indeed, that one must needs be so annoyed! do ring that bell again."

So the bell was pulled; and a porter popped in his head.

"What is it, sir?"

"The *paper,*" said the old gentleman, irritably; "hasn't it come yet?"

"No, sir," said the man; and then he repeated, "taint in yet, please, sir."

"Very well—you said so once; that's all," waving his hand; then as the door closed, he said to his son, "That pays one for coming to such an out-of-the-way country place as this, away from papers—I never will do it again."

As the old gentleman, against the advice of many friends who knew his dependence on externals, had *determined* to come to this very place, the boy was not much startled at the decisive words. He stood very quietly, however, until his father finished. Then he said:

"It's too bad, father! supposing I tell you my story? Perhaps you'll enjoy hearing it while you wait—it's really quite newspaperish."

"Well, you might as well tell it now, I suppose," said the old gentleman; "but it is a great shame about that paper! to advertise that morning papers are to be obtained—it's a swindle, Jasper! a complete swindle!" and the old gentleman looked so very irate that the boy exerted himself to soothe him.

"I know," he said; "but they can't help the trains being late."

"They shouldn't *have* the trains late," said his father, unreasonably. "There's no necessity for all this prating about 'trains late.' I'm convinced it's because they forgot to send down for the papers till they were all sold."

"I don't believe that's it, father," said the boy, trying to change the subject; "but you don't know how splendid Prince has been, nor—"

"And then *such* a breakfast!" continued the old gentleman.

"My liver certainly will be in a dreadful state if these things continue!" And he got up, and going to the corner of the room, opened his medicine chest, and taking a box of pills therefrom, he swallowed two, which done, he came back with a somewhat easier expression to his favorite chair.

"He was just *splendid*, father," began the boy; "he went for

him, I tell you!"

"I hope, Jasper, your dog has not been doing anything violent," said the old gentleman. "I must caution you; he'll get you into trouble some day; and then there'll be a heavy bill to pay; he grows more irritable every day."

"*Irritable!*" cried the boy, flinging his arms around the dog's neck, who was looking up at the old gentleman in high disdain. "He's done the most splendid thing you ever saw! Why, he saved a little girl, Father, from a cross old organ man, and he drove that man—oh! you ought to have seen him run!"

And now that it was over, Jasper put back his head and laughed long and loud as he remembered the rapid transit of the musical pair.

"Well, how do you know she wasn't the man's daughter?" asked his father, determined to find fault someway. "You haven't any business to go around the country setting your dog on people. I shall have an awful bill to pay some day, Jasper—an awful bill!" he continued, getting up and commencing to pace up and down the floor in extreme irritation.

"Father," cried the boy, half laughing, half vexed, springing to his side, and keeping step with him, "we found her brother; he came along when we were by the side of the road. We couldn't go any further, for the poor little thing was all tired out. And don't you think they live over in Badgertown, and—"

"Well," said the old gentleman, pausing in his walk, and taking out his watch to wonder if that paper would ever come, "she had probably followed the organ man; so it served her right after all."

"Well, but father," and the boy's dark eyes glowed, "she was such a cunning little thing! she wasn't more than four years old; and she had such a pretty little yellow head; and she said so funny— 'I want Polly.'"

"Did she?" said the old gentleman, getting interested in spite of himself; "what then?"

"Why, then, sir," said Jasper, delighted at his success in diverting his thoughts, "Prince and I waited—and waited; and I was just going to bring her here to ask you what we should do, when—"

"Dear me!" said the old gentleman, instinctively starting back as if he actually saw the forlorn little damsel, "you needn't ever bring such people here, Jasper! I don't know what to do with them, I'm sure!"

"Well," said the boy, laughing, "we didn't have to, did we, Prince?" stroking the big head of the dog who was slowly following the two as they paced up and down, but keeping carefully on the side of his master; "for just as we really didn't know what to do, don't you think there was a big wagon came along, drawn by the ricketiest old horse, and a boy in the wagon looking both sides of the road, and into every bush, just as wild as he could be, and before I could think, hardly, he spied us, and if he didn't jump! I thought he'd broken his leg—"

"And I suppose he just abused you for what you had done," observed the old gentleman, petulantly; "that's about all the gratitude there is in *this* world."

"He didn't seem to see me at all," said the boy. "I thought he'd eat the little girl up."

"Ought to have looked out for her better then," grumbled the old gentleman, determined to find fault with somebody.

"And he's a splendid fellow, I just know," cried Jasper, waxing enthusiastic; "and his name is Pepper."

"Pepper!" repeated his father; "no nice family ever had the name of *Pepper!*"

"Well, I don't care," and Jasper's laugh was loud and merry; *"he's* nice anyway—*I know;* and the little thing's nice; and I'm going to see them—can't I, father?"

"Dear me!" said his father; "how can you, Jasper? You do

have the strangest tastes I ever saw!"

"It's dreadful dull here," pleaded the boy, touching the right string; "you know that yourself, father, and I don't know any boys around here; and Prince and I are so lonely on our walks—do permit me, father!"

The old gentleman, who really cared very little about it, turned away, muttering, "Well, I'm sure I don't care; go where you like," when a knock was heard at the door, and the paper was handed in, which broke up the conversation, and restored good humor.

The next day but one, Ben was out by the woodpile, trying to break up some kindlings for Polly who was washing up the dishes, and otherwise preparing for the delights of baking day.

"Hulloa!" said a voice he thought he knew.

He turned around to see the merry-faced boy, and the big, black dog who immediately began to wag his tail as if willing to recognize him.

"You see I thought you'd *never* look round," said the boy with a laugh. "How's the little girl?"

"Oh! you have come, really," cried Ben, springing over the woodpile with a beaming face. "Polly!"

But Polly was already by the door, with dishcloth in hand. "This is my sister, Polly," began Ben—and then stopped, not knowing the boy's name.

"I'm Jasper King," said the boy, stepping upon the flat stone by Polly's side; and taking off his cap, he put out his hand. "And this is Prince," he added.

Polly put her hand in his, and received a hearty shake; and then she sprang over the big stove, dishcloth and all, and just flung her arms around the dog's neck.

"Oh, you splendid fellow, you!" said she. "Don't you know we all think you're as good as gold?"

The dog submitted to the astonishing proceeding as if he liked it, while Jasper, delighted with Polly's appreciation, beamed down on them, and struck up friendship with her on

the instant.

"Now, I must call Phronsie," said Polly, getting up, her face as red as a rose.

"Is her name Phronsie?" asked the boy with interest.

"No, it's Sophronia," said Polly, "but we call her Phronsie."



"What a very funny name," said Jasper, "Sophronia is, for such a little thing—and yours is Polly, is it not?" he asked, turning around suddenly on her.

"Yes," said Polly; "no, not truly Polly; it's Mary, my real name is—but I've always been Polly."

"I like Polly best, too," declared Jasper, "it sounds so nice."

"And his name is Ben," said Polly.

"Ebenezer, you mean," said Ben, correcting her.

"Well, we call him Ben," said Polly; "it don't ever seem as

if there was any Ebenezer about it."

"I should think not," laughed Jasper.

"Well, I must get Phronsie," again said Polly, running back into the bedroom, where that small damsel was busily engaged in washing "Baby" in the basin of water that she had with extreme difficulty succeeded in getting down on the floor. She had then, by means of a handful of soft soap, taken from Polly's soap bowl during the dishwashing, and a bit of old cotton, plastered both herself and "Baby" to a comfortable degree of stickiness.

"Phronsie," said Polly—"dear me! what you doing? the big dog's out there, you know, that scared the naughty organ man; and the boy—" but before the words were half out, Phronsie had slipped from under her hands, and to Polly's extreme dismay, clattered out into the kitchen.

"Here she is!" cried Jasper, meeting her at the door. The little soapy hands were grasped, and kissing her—"Ugh!" he said, as the soft soap plentifully spread on her face met his mouth.

"Oh, Phronsie! you shouldn't," cried Polly, and then they all burst out into a peal of laughter at Jasper's funny grimaces.

"She's been washing 'Baby,'" explained Polly, wiping her eyes, and looking at Phronsie who was hanging over Prince in extreme affection. Evidently Prince still regarded her as his especial property.

"Have you got a baby?" asked Jasper. "I thought *she* was the baby," pointing to Phronsie.

"Oh, I mean her littlest dolly; she always calls her 'Baby,'" said Polly. "Come, Phronsie, and have *your* face washed, and a clean apron on."

When Phronsie could be fairly persuaded that Prince would not run away during her absence, she allowed herself to be taken off; and soon re-appeared, her own, dainty little self. Ben, in the meantime, had been initiating Jasper into the mysteries of cutting the wood, the tool house, and all the

surroundings of the "little brown house." They had received a re-enforcement in the advent of Joel and David, who stared delightedly at Phronsie's protector, made friends with the dog, and altogether had had such a thoroughly good time, that Phronsie, coming back, clapped her hands in glee to hear them.

"I wish mammy was home," said Polly, polishing up the last cup carefully.

"Let me put it up," said Jasper, taking it from her, "it goes up here, don't it, with the rest?" reaching up to the upper shelf of the old cupboard.

"Yes," said Polly.

"Oh, I should think you'd have real good times!" said the boy, enviously. "I haven't a single sister or brother."

"Haven't you?" said Polly, looking at him in extreme pity. "Yes, we do have real fun," she added, answering his questioning look; "the house is just brimful sometimes, even if we are poor."

"We aren't poor," said Joel, who never could bear to be pitied. Then, with a very proud air, he said in a grand way, "At any rate, we aren't going to be, long, for something's coming!"

"What *do* you mean, Joey?" asked Ben, while the rest looked equally amazed.

"Our ships," said Joel confidently, as if they were right before their eyes; at which they all screamed!

"See Polly's stove!" cried Phronsie, wishing to entertain in her turn. "Here 'tis," running up to it, and pointing with her fat little finger.

"Yes, I see," cried Jasper, pretending to be greatly surprised; "it's new, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the child; "it's very all new; four yesterdays ago!"

And then Polly stopped in sweeping up and related, with many additions and explanations from the others, the history



of the stove, and good Dr. Fisher (upon whom they all dilated at great length), and the dreadful measles, and everything. And Jasper sympathized, and rejoiced with them to their hearts content, and altogether got so very home-like, that they all felt as if they had known him for a year. Ben neglected his work a little, but then visitors didn't come every day to the Peppers; so while Polly worked away at her bread, which she was "going to make like biscuits," she said, the audience gathered in the little old kitchen was in the merriest mood, and enjoyed everything to the fullest extent.

"Do put in another stick, Bensie dear," said Polly; "this bread won't be fit for anything!"

"Isn't this fun, though!" cried Jasper, running up to try the oven; "I wish I could ever bake," and he looked longingly at the little brown biscuits waiting their turn out on the table.

"You come out some day," said Polly, sociably, "and we'll all try baking—mammy'd like to have you, I know," feeling sure that nothing would be too much for Mrs. Pepper to do for the protector of little Phronsie.

"I will!" cried Jasper, perfectly delighted. "You can't think how awfully dull it is out in Hingham!"

"Don't you *live* there?" asked Polly, with a gasp, almost dropping a tin full of little brown lumps of dough she was carrying to the oven.

"Live there!" cried Jasper; and then he burst out into a merry laugh. "No, *indeed!* I hope not! Why, we're only spending the summer there, Father and I, in the hotel."

"Where's your mother?" asked Joel, squeezing in between Jasper and his audience. And then they all felt instinctively that a very wrong question had been asked.

"I haven't any mother," said the boy, in a low voice.

They all stood quite still for a moment; then Polly said, "I wish you'd come out sometime; and you may bake—or anything else," she added; and there was a kinder ring to her voice than ever.

No mother! Polly for her life, couldn't imagine how anybody *could* feel without a mother, but the very words alone smote her heart; and there was nothing she wouldn't have done to give pleasure to one who had done so much for them.

"I wish you could see our mother," she said, gently. "Why, here she comes now! oh, mamsie, dear," she cried. "Do, Joe, run and take her bundle."

Mrs. Pepper stopped a minute to kiss Phronsie—her baby was dearer than ever to her now. Then her eye fell on Jasper, who stood respectfully waiting and watching her with great interest.

"Is this," she asked, taking it all in at the first glance—the boy with the honest eyes as Ben had described him—and the big, black dog—"is this the boy who saved my little girl?"

"Oh, ma'am," cried Jasper, "*I* didn't do much; 'twas Prince."

"I guess you never'll know how much you *did* do," said Mrs. Pepper. Then looking with a long, keen gaze into the boy's eyes that met her own so frankly and kindly: "I'll trust him," she said to herself; "a boy with those eyes can't help but be good."

"Her eyes are just the same as Polly's," thought Jasper, "just such laughing ones, only Polly's are brown," and he liked her on the spot.

And then, somehow, the hubbub ceased. Polly went on with her work, and the others separated, and Mrs. Pepper and Jasper had a long talk. When the mother's eyes fell on Phronsie playing around on the floor, she gave the boy a grateful smile that he thought was beautiful.

"Well, I declare," said Jasper, at last, looking up at the old clock in the corner by the side of the cupboard, "I'm afraid I'll miss the stage, and then father never'll let me come again. Come, Prince."

"Oh, don't go," cried Phronsie, wailing. "Let doggie stay! Oh, *make* him stay, mammy!"

"I can't, Phronsie," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling, "if he thinks he ought to go."

"I'll come again," said Jasper, eagerly, "if I may, ma'am."

He looked up at Mrs. Pepper as he stood cap in hand, waiting for the answer.

"I'm sure we should be glad if your father'll be willing," she added; thinking, proudly, "My children are an honor to anybody, I'm sure," as she glanced around on the bright little group she could call her own. "But be sure, Jasper," and she laid her hand on his arm as she looked down into his eyes, "that you father is willing, that's all."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," said the boy; "but he will be, I guess, if he feels well."

"Then come on Thursday," said Polly; "and can't we bake something then, mammy?"

"I'm sure I don't care," laughed Mrs. Pepper; "but you won't find much but brown flour and meal to bake with."

"Well, we can pretend," said Polly; "and we can cut the cakes with the heart-shape, and they'll do for anything."

"Oh, I'll come," laughed Jasper, ready for such lovely fun in the old kitchen; "look out for me on Thursday, Ben!"

So Jasper and Prince took their leave, all the children accompanying them to the gate; and then after seeing him fairly started on a smart run to catch the stage, Prince scampering at his heels, they all began to sing his praises and to wish for Thursday to come.

But Jasper didn't come! Thursday came and went; a beautiful, bright, sunny day, but with no signs of the merry boy whom all had begun to love, nor of the big black dog. The children had made all the needful preparations with much ostentation and bustle, and were in a state of excited happiness, ready for any gale. But the last hope had to be given up, as the old clock ticked away hour after hour. And at last Polly had to put Phronsie to bed, who wouldn't stop crying enough to eat her supper at the dreadful

disappointment.

"He *couldn't* come, I know," said both Ben and Polly, standing staunchly up for their new friend; but Joel and David felt that he had broken his word.

"He promised," said Joel, vindictively.

"I don't believe his father'd let him," said Polly, wiping away a sly tear; "I know Jasper'd come, if he could."

Mrs. Pepper wisely kept her own counsel, simply giving them a kindly caution:

"Don't you go to judging him, children, till you know."

"Well, he *promised,"* said Joel, as a settler.

"Aren't you ashamed, Joel," said his mother, "to talk about anyone whose back is turned? Wait till he tells you the reason himself."

Joel hung his head, and then began to tease David in the corner, to make up for his disappointment.

The next morning Ben had to go to the store after some more meal. As he was going out rather dismally, the storekeeper, who was also postmaster, called out, "Oh, halloa, there!"

"What is it?" asked Ben, turning back, thinking perhaps Mr. Atkins hadn't given him the right change.

"Here," said Mr. Atkins, stepping up to the post office department, quite smart with its array of boxes and official notices, where Ben had always lingered, wishing there might be *sometime* a letter for him—or some of them. "You've got a sister Polly, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Ben, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, she's got a letter," said the postmaster, holding up a nice big envelope, looking just like those that Ben had so many times wished for. That magic piece of white paper danced before the boy's eyes for a minute; then he said—

"It can't be for her, Mr. Atkins; why, she's *never* had one."

"Well, she's got one now, sure enough," said Mr. Atkins; "here 'tis, plain enough," and he read what he had no need to

study much as it had already passed examination by his own and his wife's faithful eyes: "'Miss Polly Pepper, near the Turnpike, Badgertown'—that's her, isn't it?" he added, laying it down before Ben's eyes. "Must be a first time for everything, you know, my boy!" and he laughed long over his own joke; "so take it and run along home." For Ben still stood looking at it, and not offering to stir.

"If you say so," said the boy, as if Mr. Atkins had given him something out of his own pocket; "but I'm afraid 'tisn't for Polly." Then buttoning up the precious letter in his jacket, he spun along home as never before.

"Polly! Polly!" he screamed. "Where is she, mother?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Pepper, coming out of the bedroom. "Dear me! is anybody hurt, Ben?"

"I don't know," said Ben, in a state to believe anything, "but Polly's got a letter."

"Polly got a letter!" cried Mrs. Pepper; "what do you mean, Ben?"

"I don't know," repeated the boy, still holding out the precious letter; "but Mr. Atkins gave it to me; where *is* Polly?"

"I know where she is," said Joel; "she's upstairs." And he flew out in a twinkling, and just as soon reappeared with Polly scampering after him in the wildest excitement.

And then the kitchen was in an uproar as the precious missive was put into Polly's hand; and they all gathered around her, wondering and examining, till Ben thought he would go wild with the delay.

"I wonder where it did come from," said Polly, in the greatest anxiety, examining again the address.

"Where does the postmark say?" asked Mrs. Pepper, looking over her shoulder.

"It's all rubbed out," said Polly, peering at it "you can't see anything."

"Do *open* it," said Ben, "and then you'll find out."

"But p'raps 'tisn't for me," said Polly, timidly.

"Well, Mr. Atkins says 'tis," said Ben, impatiently; "here, I'll open it for you, Polly."

"No, let her open it for herself, Ben," protested his mother.

"But she *won't,*" said Ben; "do *tear* it open, Polly."

"No, I'm goin' to get a knife," she said.

"I'll get one," cried Joel, running up to the table drawer; "here's one, Polly."

"Oh, dear," groaned Ben; "you never'll get it open at this rate!"

But at last it was cut; and they all holding their breath, gazed awe-struck, while Polly drew out the mysterious missive.



"What *does* it say?" gasped Mrs. Pepper.

"Dear Miss Polly," began both Ben and Polly in a breath. "Let Polly read," said Joel, who couldn't hear in the confusion.

"Well, go on Polly," said Ben; *"hurry!"*

"'Dear Miss Polly, I was so sorry I couldn't come on Thursday—'"

"Oh, it's Jasper! it's Jasper!" cried all the children in a breath.

"I told you so!" cried Ben and Polly, perfectly delighted to find their friend vindicated fully—"*there!* Joey Pepper!"

"Well, I don't care," cried Joe, nothing daunted, "he *didn't* come, anyway—do go on, Polly."

"'I was *so* sorry I couldn't come—'" began Polly.

"You read that," said Joel.

"I know it," said Polly, "but it's just lovely; 'on Thursday; but my father was sick, and I couldn't leave him. If you don't mind I'll come again—I mean I'll come some other day, if it's just as convenient for you, for I do *so want* the baking, and the nice time. I forgot to say that I had a cold, to,' (here Jasper had evidently had a struggle in his mind whether there should be two o's or one, and he had at last decided it, by crossing out one) but my father is willing I should come when I get well. Give my love to all, and especially remember me respectfully to your mother. Your friend,

"'JASPER ELYOT KING.'"

"Oh, *lovely! lovely!*" cried Polly, flying around with the letter in her hand; "so he is coming!"

Ben was just as wild as she was, for no one knew but Polly just how the new friend had stepped into his heart. Phronsie went to sleep happy, hugging "Baby."

"And don't you think, Baby, dear," she whispered sleepily, and Polly heard her say as she was tucking her in, "that Jasper is *really* comin'; really—and the big, be-you-ti-ful doggie, too!"

CHAPTER XIII
Phronsie Pays a Debt of Gratitude

"And now I tell you," said Polly, the next day, "let's make Jasper something; can't we, ma?"

"Oh, *do! do!*" cried all the other children, "*let's;* but what'll it be, Polly?"

"I don't know about this," interrupted Mrs. Pepper; "I don't see how you could get anything to him if you could make it."

"Oh, we could, mamsie," said Polly, eagerly, running up to her; "for Ben knows; and he says we can do it."

"Oh, well, if Ben and you have had your heads together, I suppose it's all right," laughed Mrs. Pepper, "but I don't see how you can do it."

"Well, we can, mother, truly," put in Ben. "I'll tell you how, and you'll say it'll be splendid. You see Deacon Blodgett's goin' over to Hingham, tomorrow; I heard him tell Miss Blodgett so; and he goes right past the hotel; and we can do it up real nice—and it'll please Jasper so—do, mammy!"

"And it's real dull there, Jasper says," put in Polly, persuasively; "and just think, mammy, no brothers and sisters!" And Polly looked around on the others.

After that there was no need to say anything more; her mother would have consented to almost any plan then.

"Well, go on, children," she said; "you may do it; I don't see but what you can get 'em there well enough; but I'm sure I don't know what you can *make.*"

"Can't we," said Polly—and she knelt down by her mother's side and put her face in between the sewing in Mrs. Pepper's lap, and the eyes bent kindly down on her—"make

some little cakes, real cakes I mean? now don't say no, mammy!" she said, alarmed, for she saw a "no" slowly coming in the eyes above her, as Mrs. Pepper began to shake her head.

"But we haven't any white flour, Polly," began her mother.

"I know," said Polly; "but we'll make 'em of brown, it'll do, if you'll give us some raisins—you know there's *some* in the bowl, mammy."

"I was saving them for a nest egg," said Mrs. Pepper; meaning at some future time to indulge in another plum pudding that the children so loved.

"Well, do give 'em to us," cried Polly; "do, ma!"

"I want 'em for a plum pudding sometime," said Mrs. Pepper.

"*Ow!*—" and Joel with a howl sprung up from the floor where he had been trying to make a cart for "Baby" out of an old box, and joined Mrs. Pepper and Polly. "No, don't give 'em away, ma!" he screamed; "let's have our plum pudding—now, Polly Pepper, you're a-goin' to bake up all our raisins in nasty little cakes—and—"

"Joey!" commanded Mrs. Pepper, *"hush!* what word did you say!"

"Well," blubbered Joel, wiping his tears away with his grimy little hand, "Polly's—a-goin'—to give—"

"I should rather you'd *never* have a plum pudding than to say such words," said Mrs. Pepper, sternly, taking up her work again. "And besides, do you think what Jasper has done for you?" and her face grew very white around the lips.

"Well, he can have plum puddings," said Joel, whimpering, "forever an' ever, if he wants them—and—and—"

"Well, Joey," said Polly, "there, don't feel bad," and she put her arms around him, and tried to wipe away the tears that still rolled down his cheeks. "We won't give 'em if you don't want us to; but Jasper's sick, and there isn't anything for

him to do, and—" here she whispered slyly up into his ear, "don't you remember how you liked folks to send *you* things when you had the measles?"

"Yes, I know," said Joel, beginning to smile through his tears; "wasn't it fun, Polly?"

"I guess *'twas,*" laughed Polly back again, pleased at the return of sunshine. "Well, Jasper'll be just as pleased as you were, 'cause we love him and want to do somethin' for him, he was so good to Phronsie."

"I will, Polly, I will," cried Joel, completely won over; "do let's make 'em for him; and put 'em in thick; oh! thick as you can;" and determined to do nothing by halves, Joel ran generously for the precious howl of raisins, and after setting it on the table, began to help Polly in all needful preparations.

Mrs. Pepper smiled away to herself to see happiness restored to the little group. And soon a pleasant hum and bustle went on around the baking table, the center of attraction.

"Now," said Phronsie, coming up to the table and standing on tiptoe to see Polly measure out the flour, "I'm a-goin' to bake something for my sick man, I *am.*"

"Oh, no, Phronsie, you can't," began Polly.

"Hey?" asked Joel, with a daub of flour on the tip of his chubby nose, gained by too much peering into Polly's flour bag. "What did she say, Polly?" watching her shake the clouds of flour in the sieve.

"She said she was goin' to bake something for Jasper," said Polly. "There," as she whisked in the flour, "now that's done."

"No, I didn't say Jasper," said Phronsie; "I didn't *say* Jasper," she repeated, emphatically.

"Why, what did you say, Pet?" asked Polly, astonished, while little Davie repeated, "What did you say, Phronsie?"

"I said my sick *man,*" said Phronsie, shaking her yellow head; "poor sick man."

"Who *does* she mean?" said Polly in despair, stopping a

moment her violent stirring that threatened to overturn the whole cake bowl.

"I guess she means Prince," said Joel. "Can't I stir, Polly?"

"Oh, no," said Polly; "only one person must stir cake."

"Why?" asked Joel; "why, Polly?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Polly, "cause 'tis so; never mind now, Joel. Do you mean Prince, Phronsie?"

"*No,* I don't mean Princey," said the child decisively; "I mean my sick *man.*"

"It's Jasper's father, I guess she means," said Mrs. Pepper over in the corner; "but what in the world!"

"Yes, yes," cried Phronsie, perfectly delighted at being at last understood, and hopping on one toe; "my sick man."

"I *shall* give up!" said Polly, tumbling over in a chair, with the cake spoon in her hand, from which a small sticky lump fell on her apron, which Joel immediately pounced upon and devoured. "*What do* you want to bake, Phronsie?" she gasped, holding the spoon sticking up straight, and staring at the child.

"A gingerbread boy," said the child, promptly; "he'd like that best; poor, sick man!" and she commenced to climb up to active preparations.

CHAPTER XIV
A Letter to Jasper

"Mamsie, what *shall* we do?" implored Polly of her mother.

"I don't know," said her mother; "however did that get into her head, do you suppose?"

"I am sure I can't tell," said Polly, jumping up and beginning to stir briskly to make up for lost time. "P'r'aps she heard us talking about Jasper's having to take care of his sick father, and how hard it must be to be sick away from home."

"Yes," said Phronsie, "but he'll be glad to see my gingerbread boy, I guess; poor, sick man."

"Oh, Phronsie," cried Polly, in great distress, "you aren't ever going to make a 'gingerbread boy' today! See, we'll put in a cunning little cake for Mr. King—full of raisins, Phronsie; won't that be lovely!" and Polly began to fill a little scalloped tin with some of the cake mixture.

"N-no," said the child, eying it suspiciously; "that isn't like a 'gingerbread boy,' Polly; he'll like that best."

"Mamsie," said Polly, "we *can't* let her make a dreadful, horrid 'gingerbread boy' to send Mr. King! he never'll let Jasper come here again."

"Oh, let her," cried Joel; "she can bake it, and Dave an' I'll eat it," and he picked up a raisin that had fallen under the table and began crunching it with great gusto.

"That wouldn't be fair," said Polly, gloomily. "Do get her off from it, mammy."

"Phronsie," said Mrs. Pepper, going up back of the child, who sat patiently in her high chair waiting for Polly to let her begin, "hadn't you rather wait and give your 'gingerbread boy' to Jasper for his father, when he comes?"

"Oh, no, no," cried Phronsie, twisting in her chair in great apprehension, "I want to send it now, I *do*."

"Well, Polly," said her mother, laughing, "after all it's best, I think, to let her; it can't do any harm anyway—and instead of Mr. King's not letting Jasper come, if he's a sensible man that won't make any difference; and if he isn't, why, then there'd be sure to something come up sometime to make trouble."

"Well," said Polly, "I suppose she's got to; and perhaps," as a consoling idea struck her, "perhaps she'll want to eat it up herself when it's done. Here, Phronsie," giving her a handful of the cake mixture, which she stiffened with flour to the right thickness, "there, you can call that a 'gingerbread boy;' see, won't it make a beautiful one!"

"You needn't think," said Mrs. Pepper, seeing Phronsie's delighted face, and laughing as she went back to her work, "but what that gingerbread boy'll go?"

When the little cakes were done, eight of them, and set upon the table for exhibition, they one and all protested that they never saw so fine a lot. Polly was delighted with the praise they received, and her mother's commendation that she was "growing a better cook every day." "How glad Jasper'll be, won't he, mamsie?" said she.

The children walked around and around the table, admiring and pointing out the chief points of attraction, as they appeared before their discriminating eyes.

"I should choose that one," said Joel, pointing at one which was particularly plummy, with a raisin standing up on one end with a festive air, as if to say, "there's lots of us inside, you better believe!"

"I wouldn't," said Davie, "*I'd* have that—that's cracked so pretty."

"So 'tis," said Mrs. Pepper; "they're all as light as a feather, Polly."

"But my 'gingerbread boy'," cried Phronsie, running

eagerly along with a particularly ugly looking specimen of a cake figure in her hand, "is the be-yew-tifullest, isn't it, Polly?"

"Oh, dear," groaned Polly, "it looks just awfully, don't it, Ben!"

"Hoh, hoh!" laughed Joel in derision; "his leg is crooked, see Phronsie—you better let Davie an' me have it."

"No, *no,*" screamed the child in terror; "that's my sick man's 'gingerbread boy,' it *is!*"

"Joe, put it down," said Ben. "Yes, Phronsie, you shall



have it; there, it's all safe;" and he put it carefully into Phronsie's apron, when she breathed easier.

"And he hasn't but one eye," still laughed Joel, while little Davie giggled too.

"He did have two," said Polly, "but she punched the other in with her thumb; don't, boys," she said, aside, "you'll make her feel bad; do stop laughing. Now, how'll we send the things?"

"Put 'em in a basket," said Ben; "that's nicest."

"But we haven't got any basket," said Polly, "except the potato basket, and they'd be lost in that."

"Can't we take your work basket, mamsie?" asked Ben; "they'd look so nice in that."

"Oh," said Mrs. Pepper, "that wouldn't do; I couldn't spare it, and besides, it's all broken at the side, Ben; that don't look nice."

"Oh, dear," said Polly, sitting down on one of the hard wooden chairs to think, "I *do* wish we had things nice to send to sick people." And her forehead puckered up in a little hard knot.

"We'll have to do 'em up in a paper, Polly," said Ben; "there isn't any other way; they'll look nice in anything, 'cause they *are* nice," he added, comfortingly.

"If we only had some flowers," said Polly, "that would set 'em off."

"You're always a-thinkin' of flowers, Polly," said Ben. "I guess the cakes'll have to go without 'em."

"I suppose they will," said Polly, stifling a little sigh. "Where's the paper?"

"I've got a nice piece upstairs," said Ben, "just right; I'll get it."

"Put my 'gingerbread boy' on top," cried Phronsie, handing him up.

So Polly packed the little cakes neatly in two rows, and laid the 'gingerbread boy' in a fascinating attitude across the

top.

"He looks as if he'd been struck by lightning!" said Ben, viewing him critically as he came in the door with the paper.

"Be still," said Polly, trying not to laugh; "that's because he baked so funny; it made his feet stick out."

"Children," said Mrs. Pepper, "how'll Jasper know where the cakes come from?"

"Why, he'll know it's us," said Polly, "of course; 'cause it'll make him think of the baking we're going to have when he gets well."

"Well, but you don't say so," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling; "'tisn't polite to send it this way."

"Whatever'll we do, mammy!" said all four children in dismay, while Phronsie simply stared. "Can't we send 'em at all?"

"Why yes," said their mother; "I hope so, I'm sure, after you've got 'em baked; but you might answer Jasper's letter I should think, and tell him about 'em, and the 'gingerbread boy'."

"Oh dear," said Polly, ready to fly, "I *couldn't* mamsie; I *never* wrote a letter."

"Well, you never had one before, did you?" said her mother, composedly biting her thread. "Never say you can't, Polly, 'cause you don't know what you can do till you've tried."

"You write, Ben," said Polly, imploringly.

"No," said Ben, "I think the nicest way is for all to say somethin', then 'twon't be hard for any of us."

"Where's the paper," queried Polly, "coming from, I wonder!"

"Joel," said Mrs. Pepper, "run to the bureau in the bedroom, and open the top drawer, and get a green box there."

So Joel, quite important at the errand, departed, and presently put the designated box into his mother's hand.

"There, now I'm going to give you this," and she took out a small sheet of paper slightly yellowed by age; but being gilt-edged, it looked very magnificent to the five pairs of eyes directed to it.

"Now Ben, you get the ink bottle and the pen, and then go to work."

So Ben reached down from the upper shelf in the cupboard the ink bottle, and a pen in a black wooden penholder.

"Oh, mamsie," cried Polly, "that's where Phronsie bit it off when she was a baby, isn't it?" holding up the stubby end where the little ball had disappeared.

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, "and now you're going to write about her 'gingerbread boy' with it—well, time goes, to be sure." And she bent over her work again, harder than ever. Poor woman! If she could only scrape together enough money to get her children into school—that was the earnest wish of her heart. She *must* do it soon, for Ben was twelve years old; but with all her strivings and scrimpings she could only manage to put bread into their mouths, and live from day to day. "I know I ought to be thankful for that," she said to herself, not taking time even to cry over her troubles. "But oh, the learning! they *must* have that!"

"Now," said Polly, "how'll we do it Ben?" as they ranged themselves around the table, on which reposed the cakes; "you begin."

"How *do* folks begin a letter?" asked Ben in despair, of his mother.

"How did Jasper begin his?" asked Mrs. Pepper back again. "Oh," cried Polly, running into the bedroom to get the precious missive. "'Dear Miss Polly'—that's what it says."

"Well," said Mrs. Pepper, "then you'd better say, 'Dear Mister Jasper'—or you might say, 'Dear Mr. King.'"

"Oh, dear!" cried Polly, "that would be the father then—s'pose he should think we wrote to *him!*" and Polly looked

horror-stricken to the last degree.

"There, there 'tis," said Ben: "'Dear Mister Jasper'—now what'll we say?"

"Why, say about the cakes," replied Polly.

"And the 'gingerbread boy'," cried Phronsie. "Oh, tell about him, Polly, *do*."

"Yes, yes, Phronsie," said Polly, "we will—why, tell him how we wish he could have come, and that we baked him some cakes, and that we *do* so want him to come just as soon as he can."

"All right!" said Ben; so he went to work laboriously; only his hard breathing showing what a hard task it was, as the stiff old pen scratched up and down the paper.

"There, that's done," he cried at length in great satisfaction, holding it up for inspection.

"Oh, I do wish," cried Polly in intense admiration, "I could write so nice and so fast as you can, Ben."

"Read it, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, in pride.

So Polly began: "'Dear Mister Jasper we were all dreadfully sorry that you didn't come and so we baked you some cakes.'—You didn't say anything about his being sick, Ben."

"I forgot it," said Ben, "but I put it in farther down—you'll see if you read on."

"'Baked you some cakes—that is, Polly did, for this is Ben that's writing.'"

"You needn't said that, Ben," said Polly, dissatisfied; "we all baked 'em, I'm sure. 'And just as soon as you get well we do want you to come over and have the baking. We're real sorry you're sick—boneset's good for colds.'"

"Oh, Ben!" said Mrs. Pepper, "I guess his father knows what to give him."

"And oh! the bitter stuff!" cried Polly, with a wry face. "Well, it's hard work to write," said Ben, yawning. "I'd rather chop wood."

"I wish I knew how," exclaimed Joel, longingly.



"Just you try every day; Ben'll teach you, Joe," said his mother, eagerly, "and then I'll let you write."

"I will!" cried Joe; "then, Dave, you'll see how I'll write—I tell you!"

"And I'm goin' to—ma, can't I?" said Davie, unwilling to be outdone.

"Yes, you may, be sure," said Mrs. Pepper, delighted; "that'll make a man of you fast."

"Oh, boys," said Polly, lifting a very red face, "you joggle the table so I can't do anything."

"I wasn't jogglin'," said Joel; "the old thing tipped. Look!" he whispered to Davie, "see Polly, she's writing crooked."

So while the others hung around her and looked over her shoulder while they made their various comments, Polly finished her part, and also held it up for inspection.

"Let us see," said Ben, taking it up.

"It's after, 'boneset's good for colds,'" said Polly, puckering up her face again at the thought.

"We most of us knew you were sick—I'm Polly now—because you didn't come; and we liked your letter telling us so. Oh, Polly! we weren't glad to hear he was sick!" cried Ben, in horror.

"I didn't say so!" cried Polly, starting up. "Why, Ben Pepper, I never said so!" and she looked ready to cry.

"It sounds something like it, don't it, mammy?" said Ben, unwilling to give her pain, but appealing to Mrs. Pepper.

"Polly didn't mean it," said her mother consolingly; "but if I were you, I'd say something to explain it."

"I can't put anything in now," said poor Polly; "there isn't any room nor any more paper either—what *shall* I do! I told you, Ben, I couldn't write." And Polly looked helplessly from one to the other for comfort.

"Yes, you can," said Ben; "there, now I'll show you: write it fine, Polly—you write so big—little bits of letters, like these."

So Polly took the pen again with a sigh. "Now he won't think so, I guess," she said, much relieved, as Ben began to read again.

"I'll begin yours again," Ben said: "We most of us knew you were sick because you didn't come, and we liked your letter telling us so because we'd all felt so badly, and Phronsie cried herself to sleep—' (that's good, I'm sure.) 'The "gingerbread boy" is for your father—please excuse it, but Phronsie would make it for him because he is sick. There isn't any more to write, and besides I can't write good, and Ben's tired. From all of us.'"

"Why, how's he to know?" cried Ben. "That won't do to sign it."

"Well, let's say from Ben and Polly then," said Polly; "only all the others want to be in the letter."

"Well, they can't write," said Ben.

"We might sign their names for 'em," suggested Polly.

"Here's mine," said Ben, putting under the "From all of us" a big, bold "Ben."

"And here's mine," echoed Polly, setting a slightly crooked "Polly" by its side.

"Now Joe, you better let Ben hold your hand," said Polly, warningly. But Joel declaring he could write had already begun, so there was no hope for it; and a big drop of ink falling from the pen, he spattered the "J" so that no one could tell what it was. The children looked at each other in despair.

"Can we ever get it out, mammy?" said Polly, running to Mrs. Pepper with it.

"I don't know," said her mother. "How could you try it, Joe?"

"I didn't mean to," said Joel, looking very downcast and ashamed. "The ugly old pen did it!"

"Well," said Polly, "it's got to go; we can't help it." But she looked so sorrowful over it that half the pleasure was gone for Ben; for Polly wanted everything just right, and was very particular about things.

"Now, Dave." Ben held his hand, and "David" went down next to Joel.

But when it was Phronsie's turn, she protested that Polly, and no one else, must hold her hand.

"It's a dreadful hard name to write—Phronsie is," said Polly, as she guided Phronsie's fat little hand that clung faithfully to the stubby old pen. "There, it's over now," she cried; "and I'm thankful! I wouldn't write another for anything!"

"Read it all over now, Ben," cried Mrs. Pepper, "and don't speak, children, till he gets through."

"Don't it sound elegant!" said Polly, clasping her hands, when he had finished. "I didn't think we ever could do it so nice, did you, Ben?"

"No, indeed, I didn't," replied Ben, in a highly ecstatic frame of mind. "Now—oh! what'll we do for an envelope?" he asked in dismay.

"You'll have to do without that," said Mrs. Pepper, "for there isn't any in the house—but see here, children," she added, as she saw the sorry faces before her—"you just fold up the letter, and put it inside the parcel; that'll be just as good."

"Oh dear," said Polly; "but it would have been splendid the other way, mammy—just like other folks!"

"You must make believe this is like other folks," said Mrs. Pepper, cheerily, "when you can't do any other way."

"Yes," said Ben, "that's so, Polly; tie 'em up quick's you can, and I'll take 'em over to Deacon Blodgett's, for he's goin' to start early in the morning."

So after another last look all around, Polly put the cakes in the paper, and tied it with four or five strong knots, to avoid all danger of its undoing.

"He never'll untie it, Polly," said Ben; "that's just like a girl's knots!"

"Why didn't you tie it then?" said Polly; "I'm sure it's as good as a boy's knots, and they always muss up a parcel so." And she gave a loving, approving little pat to the top of the package, which, despite its multitude of knots, was certainly very neat indeed.

Ben, grasping the pen again, "here goes for the direction."

"Deary, yes!" said Polly. "I forgot all about that; I thought 'twas done."

"How'd you s'pose he'd get it?" asked Ben, coolly beginning the "M."

"I don't know," replied Polly, looking over his shoulder; "s'pose anybody else *had* eaten 'em up, Ben!" And she turned pale at the very thought.

"There," said Ben, at last, after a good many flourishes, "now *'tis* done! You can't think of another thing to do to it,

Polly!"

"Mamsie, see!" cried Polly, running with it to Mrs. Pepper, "isn't that fine! 'Mr. Jasper E. King, at the Hotel Hingham.'"

"Yes," said Mrs. Pepper, admiringly, to the content of all the children, "I should think it was!"

"Let me take it in my hand," screamed Joel, reaching eagerly up for the tempting brown parcel.

"Be careful then, Joe," said Polly, with an important air. So Joel took a comfortable feel, and then Davie must have the same privilege. At last it was off, and with intense satisfaction the children watched Ben disappear with it down the long hill to Deacon Blodgett's.

The next day Ben came running in from his work at the deacon's.

"Oh, Polly, you had 'em!" he screamed, all out of breath. "You had 'em!"

"Had what?" asked Polly in astonishment. "Oh, Bensie, what *do* you mean?"

"Your flowers," he panted. "You sent some flowers to Jasper."

"Flowers to Jasper!" repeated Polly, afraid Ben had gone out of his wits.

"Yes," said Ben; "I'll begin at the beginning. You see, Polly, when I went down this morning, Betsey was to set me to work. Deacon Blodgett and Mrs. Blodgett had started early, you know; and while I was a-cleanin' up the woodshed, as she told me, all of a sudden she said, as she stood in the door looking on, 'Oh, Ben, Mis' Blodgett took some posies along with your parcel.' *'What?'* said I; I didn't know as I'd heard straight. *'Posies,* I said,' says Betsey; 'beautiful ones they were, too, the best in the garding. I heard her tell Mr. Blodgett it would be a pity if that sick boy couldn't have some flowers, and she knew the Pepper children were crazy about 'em, so she twisted 'em in the string around the parcel, and there they stood up and looked *fine,* I tell you, as they drove away.' So,

Polly!"

"Bensie Pepper!" cried Polly, taking hold of his jacket, and spinning him round, "I told you so! I *told* you so!"

"I know you did," said Ben, as she gave him a parting whirl, "an' I wish you'd say so about other things, Polly, if you can get 'em so easy."

CHAPTER XV
Jolly Days

"Oh Ben," cried Jasper, overtaking him by a smart run as he was turning in at the little brown gate one morning three days after, "do wait."

"Halloa!" cried Ben, turning around, and setting down his load—a bag of salt and a basket of potatoes—and viewing Jasper and Prince with great satisfaction.

"Yes, here I am," said Jasper. "And how I've run; that fellow on the stage was awful slow in getting here—oh, you're so good," he said and his eyes, brimful of gladness, beamed on Ben. "The cakes were just prime, and 'twas great fun to get your letter."

"Did you like it?" asked Ben, the color up all over his brown face—

"Like it!" cried Jasper. "Why 'twas just splendid; and the cakes were royal! Isn't Polly smart though, to bake like that!" he added admiringly.

"I guess she is," said Ben, drawing himself up to his very tallest dimensions. "She knows how to do everything, Jasper King!"

"I should think she did," responded the boy quickly. "I wish she was my sister," he finished longingly.

"Well, I don't," quickly replied Ben, "for then she wouldn't be mine; and I couldn't think of being without Polly! Was your father angry about—about—'the gingerbread boy'?" he asked timidly, trembling for an answer.

"Oh dear," cried Jasper, tumbling over on the grass, "don't, *don't!* I shan't be good for anything if you make me laugh! oh! wasn't it funny;" and he rolled over and over,

shaking with glee.

"Yes," said Ben, immensely relieved to find that no offence had been taken. "But she would send it; Polly tried not to have her, and she most cried when Phronsie was so determined, cause she said your father never'd let you come again—"

"'Twas just lovely in Phronsie," said the boy, sitting up and wiping his eyes, "but oh it was so funny! You *ought* to have seen my father, Ben Pepper."

"Oh, then he *was* angry," cried Ben.

"No indeed he wasn't!" said Jasper; "don't you think it! do you know it did him lots of good, for he'd been feeling real badly that morning, he hadn't eaten any breakfast, and when he saw that gingerbread boy—" here Jasper rolled over again with a peal of laughter—"and heard the message, he just put back his head, and he laughed—why, I never heard him laugh as he did then! The room shook all over; and he ate a big dinner, and all that afternoon he felt as good as could be. But he says he's coming to see the little girl that baked it for him before we go home."

Ben nearly tumbled over by the side of Jasper at these words—"*Coming to see us!*" he gasped.

"Yes," said Jasper, who had scarcely got over his own astonishment about it, for if the roof had suddenly whisked off on to the church steeple, he couldn't have been more amazed than when he heard his father say cheerily: "Well, Jasper my boy, I guess I shall have to drive over and see your little girl, since she's been polite enough to bake me this," pointing to the wild-looking "gingerbread boy."

"Come in and tell 'em about it," cried Ben, radiantly, picking up his potatoes and salt. "It's all right, Polly!" he said in a jubilant voice, "for here's Jasper, and he'll tell you so himself."

"*Hush!*" said Jasper warningly, "don't let Phronsie hear; well, here's my pet now," and after bobbing lovingly to the

others, with eyes beaming over with fun, he caught up the little girl who was screaming—"Oh, here's Jasper! and my be-yew-ti-ful doggie!"

"Now Phronsie," he cried, "give me a kiss; you haven't any soft soap today, have you? no; that's a good, nice one, now; your 'gingerbread boy' was just splendid!"

"Did he *eat* it?" asked the child in grave delight.

"Well—no—he hasn't eaten it yet," said Jasper, smiling on the others; "he's keeping it to look at, Phronsie."

"I should think so!" groaned Polly.

"Never mind, Polly," Ben whispered; "Jasper's been a-tellin' me about it; his father liked it—he did truly."

"*Oh!*" said Polly, "I'm so glad!"

"He had eyes," said Phronsie, going back to the charms of the "gingerbread boy."

"I know it," said Jasper admiringly; "so he did."

"Rather deep sunk, one of 'em was," muttered Ben.

"And I'll bake you one, Jasper," said the child as he put her down; "I will very truly—some day."

"Will you," smiled Jasper; "well then," and there was a whispered conference with Phronsie that somehow sent that damsel into a blissful state of delight. And then while Phronsie monopolized Prince, Jasper told them all about the reception of the parcel—how very dull and forlorn he was feeling that morning, Prince and he shut up indoors—and how his father had had a miserable night, and had eaten scarcely no breakfast, and just at this juncture there came a knock at the door, "and" said Jasper, "your parcel walked in, all dressed up in flowers!"

"They weren't our flowers," said Polly, honestly. "Mrs. Blodgett put 'em on."

"Well she couldn't have, if you hadn't sent the parcel," said Jasper in a tone of conviction.

Then he launched out into a description of how they opened the package—Prince looking on, and begging for one

of the cakes.

"Oh, didn't you give him one?" cried Polly at this. "Good old Prince!"

"Yes I did," said Jasper, "the biggest one of all."

"The one I guess," interrupted Joel, "with the big raisin on top."

Polly spoke up quickly to save any more remarks on Joel's part. "Now tell us about your father—and the 'gingerbread boy.'"

So Jasper broke out with a merry laugh, into this part of the story, and soon had them all in such a gale of merriment, that Phronsie stopped playing out on the doorstep with Prince, and came in to see what the matter was.

"Never mind," said Polly, trying to get her breath, just as Jasper was relating how Mr. King set up the "gingerbread boy" on his writing table before him, while he leaned back in his chair for a hearty laugh.

"And to make it funnier still," said Jasper "don't you think, a little pen-wiper he has, made like a cap, hanging on the pen-rack above him, tumbled off just at this very identical minute right on the head of the 'gingerbread boy,' and there it stuck!"

"*Oh!*" they all screamed, "if we could only have seen it."

"What was it?" asked Phronsie, pulling Polly's sleeve to make her hear.

So Jasper took her in his lap, and told how funny the "gingerbread boy" looked with a cap on, and Phronsie clapped her hands, and laughed with the rest, till the little old kitchen rang and rang again.

And then they had the baking! And Polly tied one of her mother's ample aprons on Jasper, as Mrs. Pepper had left directions if he should come while she was away; and he developed such a taste for cookery, and had so many splendid improvements on the Peppers' simple ideas, that the children thought it the most fortunate thing in the world that he came;

and one and all voted him a most charming companion.

"You could cook a Thanksgiving dinner in this stove, just as easy as not," said Jasper, putting into the oven something on a little cracked plate that *would* have been a pie if there were any center; but lacking that necessary accompaniment, probably was a short cake. "Just as easy as not," he repeated with emphasis, slamming the door, to give point to his remarks.

"No, you couldn't either," said Ben at the table with equal decision; "not a bit of it, Jasper King!"

"Why, Ben Pepper?" asked Jasper, "that oven's big enough! I should like to know why not?"

"'Cause there isn't anything to cook," said Ben coolly, cutting out a piece of dough for a jumble; "we don't keep Thanksgiving."

"Not keep Thanksgiving!" said Jasper, standing quite still; *"never had a Thanksgiving!* Well, I declare," and then he stopped again.

"Yes," answered Ben; "we had one once; 'twas last year—but that wasn't much."

"Well then," said Jasper, leaning over the table, "I'll tell you what I should think you'd do—try Christmas."

"Oh, that's always worse," said Polly, setting down her rolling pin to think—which immediately rolled away by itself off from the table.

"We never had a Christmas," said little Davie reflectively; "what are they like, Jasper?"

Jasper sat quite still, and didn't reply to this question for a moment or two.

To be among children who didn't like Thanksgiving, and who "never had seen a Christmas," and "didn't know what it was like," was a new revelation to him.

"They hang up stockings," said Polly softly.

How many, many times she had begged her mother to try it for the younger ones; but there was never anything to put

in them, and the winters were cold and hard, and the strictest economy only carried them through.

"Oh!" said little Phronsie in horror, "are their feet in 'em, Polly?"

"No dear," said Polly; while Jasper instead of laughing, only stared. Something requiring a deal of thought was passing through the boy's mind just then. "They *shall* have a Christmas!" he muttered, "I know father'll let me." But he kept his thoughts to himself; and becoming his own gay, kindly self, he explained and told to Phronsie and the others, so many stories of past Christmases he had enjoyed, that the interest over the baking soon dwindled away, until a horrible smell of something burning brought them all to their senses.



"Oh! The house is burning!" cried Polly. "Oh get a pail of water!"

"'Tisn't either," said Jasper, snuffing wisely; "Oh! I know—I forgot all about it—I do beg your pardon." And running to the stove, he knelt down and drew out of the oven, a black, odorous mass, which with a crestfallen air he brought to Polly.

"I'm no end sorry I made such a mess of it," he said, "I meant it for

you."

"'Tisn't any matter," said Polly kindly.

"And now do you go on," cried Joel and David both in the same breath, "all about the tree, you know."

"Yes, yes," said the others; "if you're not tired, Jasper."

"Oh, no," cried their accommodating friend, "I love to tell about it; only wait—let's help Polly clear up first."

So after all traces of the frolic had been tidied up, and made nice for the mother's return, they took seats in a circle and Jasper regaled them with story and reminiscence, till they felt as if fairy land were nothing to it!

"How did you ever live through it, Jasper King," said Polly, drawing the first long breath she had dared to indulge in. "Such an *elegant* time!"

Jasper laughed. "I hope I'll live through plenty more of them," he said merrily. "We're going to sister Marian's again, Father and I; we always spend our Christmas there, you know, and she's to have all the cousins, and I don't know how many more; and a tree—but the best of all, there's going to be a German carol sung by choir boys—I shall like that best of all."

"What are choir boys?" asked Polly who was intensely fond of music.

"In some of the churches," explained Jasper, "the choir is all boys; and they do chant, and sing anthems perfectly beautifully, Polly!"

"Do you play on the piano, and sing?" asked Polly, looking at him in awe.

"Yes," said the boy simply; "I've played ever since I was a little fellow, no bigger'n Phronsie."

"Oh, Jasper!" cried Polly, clasping her hands, her cheeks all aflame—"do you mean to say you do *really and truly play on the piano?*"

"Why yes," said the boy, looking into her flashing eyes. "Polly's always crazy about music," explained Ben; "she'll drum on the table, and anywhere, to make believe it's a

piano."

"There's Dr. Fisher going by," said Joel, who, now that they had gotten on the subject of music, began to find prickles running up and down his legs from sitting so still. "I wish he'd stop."

"Is he the one that cured your measles—and Polly's eyes?" asked Jasper running to the window. "I want to see him."

"Well there he is," cried Ben, as the doctor put his head out of the gig and bowed and smiled to the little group in the window.

"He's just lovely," cried Polly, "oh! I wish you knew him."

"If father's sick again," said Jasper, "we'll have him—he looks nice, anyway—for father don't like the doctor over in Hingham—do you know perhaps we'll come again next summer; wouldn't that be nice!"

"Oh!" cried the children rapturously; "do come, Jasper, *do!*"

"Well, maybe," said Jasper, "if father likes it and sister Marian and her family will come with us; they do some summers. You'd like little Dick, I know," turning to Phronsie. "And I guess all of you'd like all of them," he added, looking at the group of interested listeners. "They wanted to come this year awfully; they said—'Oh Grandpapa, do let us go with you and Jappy, and— '"

"*What!*" said the children.

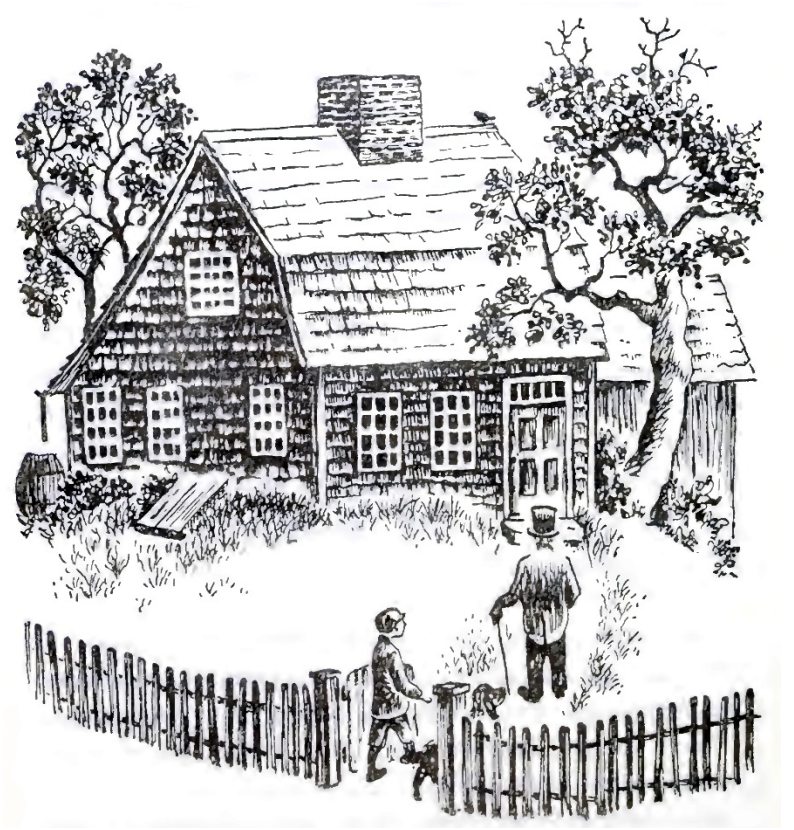
"Oh," said Jasper with a laugh, "they call me Jappy—it's easier to say than Jasper; ever so many people do for short. You may if you want to," he said looking around on them all.

"How funny!" laughed Polly, "But I don't know as it is any worse than Polly or Ben."

"Or Phronsie," said Jappy. "Don't *you* like Jappy?" he said, bringing his head down to her level, as she sat on the little stool at his feet, content in listening to the merry chat.

"Is that the same as Jasper?" she asked gravely.

"Yes, the very same," he said.



When they parted—Jappy and the little Peppers were sworn friends; and the boy, happy in his good times in the cheery little home, felt the hours long between the visits that his father, when he saw the change that they wrought in his son, willingly allowed him to make.

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Pepper one day in the last of September—as a carriage drawn by a pair of very handsome horses, stopped at their door, "here comes Mr. King I do believe; we never looked worse'n we do today!"

"I don't care," said Polly, flying out of the bedroom. "Jappy's with him, mamma, and it'll be nice I guess. At any rate, Phronsie's clean as a pink," she thought to herself looking at the little maiden, busy with "baby" to whom she

was teaching deportment in the corner. But there was no time to "fix up;" for a tall, portly gentleman, leaning on his heavy gold cane, was walking up from the little brown gate to the big flat-stone that served as a step. Jasper and Prince followed decorously.

"Is this little Miss Pepper?" he asked pompously of Polly, who answered his rap on the door. Now whether she was little "Miss Pepper" she never had stopped to consider.

"I don't know sir; I'm Polly." And then she blushed bright as a rose, and the laughing brown eyes looked beyond to Jasper, who stood on the walk, and smiled encouragingly.

"Is your mother in?" asked the old gentleman, who was so tall he could scarcely enter the low door. And then Mrs. Pepper came forward, and Jasper introduced her, and the old gentleman bowed, and sat down in the seat Polly placed for him. And Mrs. Pepper thanked him with a heart overflowing with gratitude, through lips that would tremble even then, for all that Jasper had done for them. And the old gentleman said—"Humph!" but he looked at his son, and something shone in his eye just for a moment.

Phronsie had retreated with "baby" in her arms behind the door on the new arrival. But seeing everything progressing finely, and overcome by her extreme desire to see Jappy and Prince, she began by peeping out with big eyes to observe how things were going on. Just then the old gentleman happened to say, "Well, where is my little girl that baked me a cake so kindly?"

Then Phronsie, forgetting all else but her "poor sick man," who also was "Jasper's father," rushed out from behind the door, and coming up to the stately old gentleman in the chair, she looked up pityingly, and said, shaking her yellow head, "Poor, sick man, was my boy good?"

After that there was no more gravity and ceremony. In a moment, Phronsie was perched upon old Mr. King's knee, and playing with his watch; while the others, freed from all

restraint, were chatting and laughing happily, till some of the cheeriness overflowed and warmed the heart of the old gentleman.

"We go tomorrow," he said, rising, and looking at his watch. "Why, is it possible that we have been here an hour! There, my little girl, will you give me a kiss?" and he bent his handsome old head down to the childish face upturned to his confidingly.

"Don't go," said the child, as she put up her little lips in grave confidence. "I do like you—I *do!*"

"Oh, Phronsie," began Mrs. Pepper.

"Don't reprove her, madam," said the old gentleman, who liked it immensely. "Yes, we go tomorrow," he said, looking around on the group to whom this was a blow they little expected. They had surely thought Jasper was to stay a week longer.

"I received a telegram this morning, that I must be in the city on Thursday. And besides, madam," he said, addressing Mrs. Pepper, "I think the climate is bad for me now, as it induces rheumatism. The hotel is also getting unpleasant; there are many annoyances that I cannot put up with; so that altogether, I do not regret it."

Mrs. Pepper, not knowing exactly what to say to this, wisely said nothing. Meantime, Jappy and the little Peppers were having a sorry time over in the corner by themselves.

"Well, I'll write," cried Jasper, not liking to look at Polly just then, as he was sure he shouldn't want anyone to look at him, if he felt like crying. "And you must answer 'em all."

"Oh, we will! we will!" they cried. "And Jappy, do come next summer," said Joel.

"If Father'll only say yes, we will, I tell you!" he responded eagerly.

"Come, my boy," said his father the third time; and Jasper knew by the tone that there must be no delay.

Mr. King had been nervously putting his hand in his

pocket during the last few moments that the children were together; but when he glanced at Mrs. Pepper's eyes, something made him draw it out again hastily, as empty as he put it in. "No, 'twouldn't do," he said to himself; "she isn't the kind of woman to whom one could offer money."

The children crowded back their tears, and hastily said their last goodbye, some of them hanging on to Prince till the last moment.

And then the carriage door shut with a bang, Jasper giving them a bright parting smile, and they were gone.

And the Peppers went into their little brown house, and shut the door.

CHAPTER XVI
Getting a Christmas for the Little Ones

And so October came and went. The little Peppers were very lonely after Jasper had gone; even Mrs. Pepper caught herself looking up one day when the wind blew the door open suddenly, half expecting to see the merry whole-souled boy, and the faithful dog come scampering in.

But the letters came—and that was a comfort; and it was fun to answer them. The first one spoke of Jasper's being under a private tutor, with his cousins; then they were less frequent, and they knew he was studying hard. Full of anticipations of Christmas himself, he urged the little Peppers to try for one. And the life and spirit of the letter was so catching, that Polly and Ben found their souls fired within them to try at least to get for the little ones a taste of Christmastide.

"Now, mammy," they said at last, one day in the latter part of October, when the crisp, fresh air filled their little healthy bodies with springing vitality that must bubble over and rush into something, "we don't want a Thanksgiving—truly we don't. But may we try for a Christmas—just a *little* one," they added, timidly, "for the children?" Ben and Polly always called the three younger ones of the flock "the children."

To their utter surprise, Mrs. Pepper looked mildly assenting, and presently she said, "Well, I don't see why you can't try; 'twon't do any harm, I'm sure."

You see Mrs. Pepper had received a letter from Jasper, which at present she didn't feel called upon to say anything about.

"Now," said Polly, drawing a long breath, as she and Ben stole away into a corner to "talk over" and lay plans, "what does it mean?"

"Never mind," said Ben; "as long as she's given us leave I don't care what it is."

"I neither," said Polly, with the delicious feeling as if the whole world were before them where to choose; "it'll be just *gorgeous,* Ben!"

"What's that?" asked Ben, who was not as much given to long words as Polly, who dearly loved to be fine in language as well as other things.

"Oh, it's something Jappy said one day; and I asked him, and he says it's fine, and lovely, and all that," answered Polly, delighted that she knew something she could really tell Ben.

"Then why not *say* fine?" commented Ben, practically, with a little upward lift of his nose.

"Oh, I'd know, I'm sure," laughed Polly. "Let's think what'll we do for Christmas—how many weeks are there, anyway, Ben?" And she began to count on her fingers.

"That's no way," said Ben, "I'm going to get the Almanac." So he went to the old clock where hanging up by its side, was a "Farmer's Almanac."

"Now, we'll know," he said, coming back to their corner. So with heads together they consulted and counted up till they found that eight weeks and three days remained in which to get ready.

"Dear me!" said Polly. "It's most a year, isn't it, Ben?"

"'Twon't be much time for us," said Ben, who thought of the many hours to be devoted to hard work that would run away with the time. "We'd better begin right away, Polly."

"Well, all right," said Polly, who could scarcely keep her fingers still, as she thought of the many things she should so love to do if she could. "But first, Ben, what let's do?"

"Would you rather hang up their stockings?" asked Ben, as if he had unlimited means at his disposal; "or have a tree?"

"Why," said Polly, with wide open eyes at the two magnificent ideas, "we haven't got anything to put in the stockings when we hang 'em, Ben."

"That's just it," said Ben. "Now, wouldn't it be better to have a tree, Polly? I can get that easy in the woods, you know."

"Well," interrupted Polly, eagerly, "we haven't got anything to hang on that, either, Ben. You know Jappy said folks hang all sorts of presents on the branches. So I don't see," she continued, impatiently, "as that's any good. We can't do anything, Ben Pepper, so there! There isn't anything to do anything with," and with a flounce Polly sat down on the old wooden stool, and folding her hands looked at Ben in a most despairing way.

"I know," said Ben, "we haven't got much."

"We haven't got anything," said Polly, still looking at him.

"Why, we've got a tree," replied Ben, hopefully.

"Well, what's a tree," retorted Polly, scornfully. "Anybody can go out and look at a tree outdoors."

"Well, now, I tell you, Polly," said Ben, sitting down on the floor beside her, and speaking very slowly and decisively, "we've got to do something 'cause we've begun; and we might make a tree real pretty."

"How?" asked Polly, ashamed of her ill-humor, but not in the least seeing how anything could be made of a tree. "How, Ben Pepper?"

"Well," said Ben, pleasantly, "we'd set it up in the corner—"

"Oh, no, not in the corner," cried Polly, whose spirits began to rise a little as she saw Ben so hopeful. "Put it in the middle of the room, *do!*"

"I don't care where you put it," said Ben, smiling, happy that Polly's usual cheerful energy had returned, "but I thought—'twill be a little one, you know, and I thought 'twould look better in the corner."

"What else?" asked Polly, eager to see how Ben would dress the tree.

"Well," said Ben, "you know the Henderson boys gave me a lot of corn last week."

"I don't see as that helps much," said Polly, still incredulous. "Do you mean hang the cobs on the branches, Ben? That would be just dreadful!"

"I should think likely," laughed Ben. "No, indeed, Polly Pepper! But if we should pop a lot, oh! a bushel, and then we should string 'em, we could wind it all in and out among the branches, and—"

"Why, wouldn't that be pretty?" cried Polly. "Real pretty—and we can do that, I'm sure."

"Yes," continued Ben; "and then, don't you know, there's some little candle ends in that box in the Provision Room, maybe mammy'd give us them."

"I don't believe but she would," cried Polly; "twould be just like Jappy's if she would! Let's ask her now—this very same minute!"

And they scampered hurriedly to Mrs. Pepper, who to their extreme astonishment, after all, said "yes," and smiled encouragingly on the plan.

"Isn't mammy good?" said Polly, with loving gratitude, as they seated themselves again.

"Now we're all right," exclaimed Ben, "and I tell you we can make the tree look perfectly *splendid,* Polly Pepper!"

"And I'll tell you another thing, Ben," Polly said, "oh! something elegant! You must get ever so many hickory nuts; and you know those bits of bright paper I've got in the bureau drawer? Well, we can paste them on to the nuts and hang 'em on for the balls Jappy tells of."

"Polly," cried Ben, "it'll be such a tree as never was, won't it?"

"Yes; but dear me," cried Polly, springing up, "the children are coming! Wasn't it good, grandma wanted 'em to come

over this afternoon, so's we could talk! Now *hush!*" as the door opened to admit the noisy little troop.

"If you think of any new plan," whispered Ben, behind his hand, while Mrs. Pepper engaged their attention, "you'll have to come out into the woodshed to talk after this."

"I know it," whispered Polly back again; "oh! we've got just heaps of things to think of, Bensie!"

Such a contriving and racking of brains as Polly and Ben set up after this! They would bob over at each other, and smile with significant gesture as a new idea would strike one of them, in the most mysterious way that, if observed, would drive the others almost wild. And then, frightened lest in some hilarious moment the secret should pop out, the two conspirators would betake themselves to the woodshed as before agreed on. But Joel, finding this out, followed them one day—or, as Polly said, tagged—so that was no good.

"Let's go behind the woodpile," she said to Ben, in desperation; "he can't hear there, if we whisper real soft."

"Yes, he will," said Ben, who knew Joel's hearing faculties much better. "We'll have to wait till they're a-bed."

So after that, when nightfall first began to make its appearance, Polly would hint mildly about bedtime.

"You hustle us so!" said Joel, after he had been sent off to bed for two or three nights unusually early.

"Oh, Joey, it's good for you to get to bed," said Polly, coaxingly; "it'll make you grow, you know, real fast."

"Well, I don't grow a-bed," grumbled Joel, who thought something was in the wind. "You and Ben are going to talk, I know, and wink your eyes, as soon as we're gone."

"Well, go along, Joe, that's a good boy," said Polly, laughing, "and you'll know some day."

"What'll you give me?" asked Joel, seeing a bargain, his foot on the lowest stair leading to the loft, "say, Polly?"

"Oh, I haven't got much to give," she said, cheerily; "but I'll tell you what, Joey—I'll tell you a story every day that you



go to bed."

"Will you?" cried Joe, hopping back into the room. "Begin now, Polly, begin now!"

"Why, you haven't been to bed yet," said Polly, "so I can't till tomorrow."

"Yes, I have—you've made us go for three—no, I guess fourteen nights," said Joel, indignantly.

"Well, you were *made* to go," laughed Polly. "I said if you'd go good, you know; so run along, Joe, and I'll tell you a nice one tomorrow."

"It's got to be long," shouted Joel, when he saw he could get no more, making good time up to the loft.

To say that Polly, in the following days, was Master Joel's slave, was stating the case lightly. However, she thought by her storytelling she got off easily, as each evening saw the boys drag their unwilling feet to-bedward, and leave Ben and

herself in peace to plan and work undisturbed. There they would sit by the little old table, around the one tallow candle, while Mrs. Pepper sewed away busily, looking up to smile or to give some bits of advice; keeping her own secret meanwhile, which made her blood leap fast, as the happy thoughts nestled in her heart of her little ones and their coming glee. And Polly made the loveliest of paper dolls for Phronsie out of the rest of the bits of bright paper; and Ben made windmills and whistles for the boys; and a funny little carved basket with a handle, for Phronsie, out of a hickory nut shell; and a new pink calico dress for Seraphina peered out from the top drawer of the old bureau in the bedroom, whenever anyone opened it—for Mrs. Pepper kindly let the children lock up their treasures there as fast as completed.

"I'll make Seraphina a bonnet," said Mrs. Pepper, "for there's that old bonnet string in the bag, you know, Polly, that'll make it beautiful."

"Oh, do, mother," cried Polly, "she's been wanting a new one awfully."

"And I'm going to knit some mittens for Joel and David," continued Mrs. Pepper; "cause I can get the yarn cheap now. I saw some down at the store yesterday I could have at half price."

"I don't believe anybody'll have as good a Christmas as we shall," cried Polly, pasting on a bit of trimming to the gayest doll's dress; "no, not even Jappy."

An odd little smile played around Mrs. Pepper's mouth, but she said not a word, and so the fun and the work went on.

The tree was to be set up in the Provision Room; that was finally decided, as Mrs. Pepper showed the children how utterly useless it would be to try having it in the kitchen.

"I'll find the key, children," she said, "I think I know where 'tis, and then we can keep them out."

"Well, but it looks so," said Polly, demurring at the prospect.

"Oh, no, Polly," said her mother; "at any rate it's *clean.*"

"Polly," said Ben, "we can put evergreen around, you know."

"So we can," said Polly, brightly; "oh, Ben, you do think of the *best* things; we couldn't have had *them* in the kitchen."

"And don't let's hang the presents on the tree," continued Ben; "let's have the children hang up their stockings; they want to, awfully—for I heard David tell Joel this morning before we got up—they thought I was asleep, but I wasn't—that he did so wish they could, but, says he, 'Don't tell mammy, 'cause that'll make her feel bad.'"

"The little dears!" said Mrs. Pepper, impulsively; "they shall have their stockings, too."

"And we'll make the tree pretty enough," said Polly, enthusiastically; "we shan't want the presents to hang on; we've got so many things. And then we'll have hickory nuts to eat; and perhaps mammy'll let us make some molasses candy the day before," she said, with a sly look at her mother.

"You may," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling.

"Oh, goody!" they both cried, hugging each other ecstatically.

"And we'll have a frolic in the Provision Room afterwards," finished Polly; "oh! ooh!"

And so the weeks flew by—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight! till only the three days remained, and to think the fun that Polly and Ben had had already!

"It's better'n a Christmas," they told their mother, "to get ready for it!"

"It's too bad you can't hang up *your* stockings," said Mrs. Pepper, looking keenly at their flushed faces and bright eyes; "you've never hung 'em up."

"That isn't any matter, mamsie," they both said, cheerily; "it's a great deal better to have the children have a nice time—oh, won't it be elegant! P'r'aps we'll have ours next year!"



For two days before, the house was turned upside down for Joel to find the biggest stocking he could; but on Polly telling him it must be his own, he stopped his search, and bringing down his well-worn one, hung it by the corner of the chimney to be ready.

"You put yours up the other side, Dave," he advised.

"There isn't any nail," cried David, investigating.

"I'll drive one," said Joel, so he ran out to the tool house, as one corner of the woodshed was called, and brought in the hammer and one or two nails.

"Phronsie's a-goin' in the middle," he said, with a nail in

his mouth.

"Yes, I'm a-goin' to hang up my stockin'," cried the child, hopping from one toe to the other.

"Run get it, Phronsie," said Joel, "and I'll hang it up for you."

"Why, it's two days before Christmas yet," said Polly, laughing; "how they'll look hanging there so long."

"I don't care," said Joel, giving a last thump to the nail; "we're a-goin' to be ready. Oh, dear! I wish 'twas tonight!"

"Can't Seraphina hang up her stocking?" asked Phronsie, coming up to Polly's side; "and Baby, too?"

"Oh, let her have part of yours," said Polly, "that'll be best—Seraphina and Baby, and you have one stocking together."

"Oh, yes," cried Phronsie, easily pleased; "that'll be best." So for the next two days, they were almost distracted; the youngest ones asking countless questions about Santa Claus, and how he possibly could get down the chimney, Joel running his head up as far as he dared, to see if it was big enough.

"I guess he can," he said, coming back in a sooty state, looking very much excited and delighted.

"Will he be black like Joey?" asked Phronsie, pointing to his grimy face.

"No," said Polly; "he don't ever get black."

"Why?" they all asked; and then, over and over, they wanted the delightful mystery explained.

"We never'll get through this day," said Polly in despair, as the last one arrived. "I wish 'twas tonight, for we're all ready."

"Santy's coming! Santy's coming!" sang Phronsie, as the bright afternoon sunlight went down over the fresh, crisp snow, "for it's night now."

"Yes, Santa is coming!" sang Polly; and "Santa Claus is coming," rang back and forth through the old kitchen, till it

seemed as if the three little old stockings would hop down and join in the dance going on so merrily.

"I'm glad mine is red," said Phronsie, at last, stopping in the wild jig, and going up to see if it was all safe, "cause then Santy'll know it's mine, won't he, Polly?"

"Yes, dear," cried Polly, catching her up. "Oh, Phronsie! you *are* going to have a Christmas!"

"Well, I wish," said Joel, "I had my name on mine! I know Dave'll get some of my things."

"Oh, no, Joe," said Mrs. Pepper, "Santa Claus is smart; he'll know yours is in the left-hand corner."

"Will he?" asked Joel, still a little fearful.

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Mrs. Pepper, confidently. "I never knew him to make a mistake."

"Now," said Ben, when they had all made a pretense of eating supper, for there was such an excitement prevailing that no one sat still long enough to eat much, "you must every one fly off to bed as quick as ever can be."

"Will Santa Claus come faster then?" asked Joel.

"Yes," said Ben, "just twice as fast."

"I'm going, then," said Joel; "but I ain't going to sleep, 'cause I mean to hear him come over the roof; then I'm going to get up, for I do so want a squint at the reindeer!"

"I am, too," cried Davie, excitedly. "Oh, do come, Joe!" and he began to mount the stairs.

"Good night," said Phronsie, going up to the center of the chimneypiece, where the little red stocking dangled limpsily, "lift me up, Polly, do."

"What you want to do?" asked Polly, running and giving her a jump. "What you goin' to do, Phronsie?"

"I want to kiss it good night," said the child, with eyes big with anticipation and happiness, hugging the well-worn toe of the little old stocking affectionately. "I wish I had something to give Santa, Polly, I *do!*" she cried, as she held her fast in her arms.

"Never mind, Pet," said Polly, nearly smothering her with kisses; "if you're a good girl, Phronsie, that pleases Santa the most of anything."

"Does it?" cried Phronsie, delighted beyond measure, as Polly carried her into the bedroom, "then I'll be good always, I *will!*"

CHAPTER XVII
Christmas Bells!

In the middle of the night Polly woke up with a start.

"What in the world!" said she, and she bobbed up her head and looked over at her mother, who was still peacefully sleeping, and was just going to lie down again, when a second noise out in the kitchen made her pause and lean on her elbow to listen. At this moment she thought she heard a faint whisper, and springing out of bed she ran to Phronsie's crib—it was empty! As quick as a flash she sped out into the kitchen. There, in front of the chimney, were two figures. One was Joel, and the other, unmistakably, was Phronsie!

"What are you doing?" gasped Polly, holding on to a chair.

The two little nightgowns turned around at this.

"Why, I thought it was morning," said Joel, "and I wanted my stocking. Oh!" as he felt the toe, which was generously stuffed, "give it to me, Polly Pepper, and I'll run right back to bed again!"

"Dear me!" said Polly; "and you, too, Phronsie! Why, it's the middle of the night! Did I ever!" and she had to pinch her mouth together tight to keep from bursting out into a loud laugh. "Oh, dear, I shall laugh! Don't look so scared, Phronsie, there won't anything hurt you." For Phronsie who, on hearing Joel fumbling around the precious stockings, had been quite willing to hop out of bed and join him, had now, on Polly's saying the dire words "in the middle of the night," scuttled over to her protecting side like a frightened rabbit.

"It never'll be morning," said Joel taking up first one cold toe and then the other; "you *might* let us have 'em now, Polly, *do!*"



"No," said Polly sobering down; "you can't have yours till Davie wakes up, too. Scamper off to bed, Joey, dear, and forget all about 'em—and it'll be morning before you know it."

"Oh, I'd rather go to bed," said Phronsie, trying to tuck up her feet in the little flannel nightgown, which was rather short, "but I don't know the way back, Polly. Take me, Polly,

do," and she put up her arms to be carried.

"Oh, *I* ain't a-goin' back alone, either," whimpered Joel, coming up to Polly, too.

"Why, you came down alone, didn't you?" whispered Polly, with a little laugh.

"Yes, but I thought 'twas morning," said Joel, his teeth chattering with something beside the cold.

"Well, you must think of the morning that's coming," said Polly, cheerily. "I'll tell you—you wait till I put Phronsie into the crib, and then I'll come back and go halfway up the stairs with you."

"I won't never come down till it's mornin' again," said Joel, bouncing along the stairs, when Polly was ready to go with him, at a great rate.

"Better not," laughed Polly, softly. "Be careful and not wake Davie nor Ben."

"I'm *in,*" announced Joel, in a loud whisper; and Polly could hear him snuggle down among the warm bedclothes. "Call us when 'tis mornin', Polly."

"Yes," said Polly, "I will; go to sleep."

Phronsie had forgotten stockings and everything else on Polly's return, and was fast asleep in the old crib. The result of it was that the children slept over, when morning did really come; and Polly had to keep her promise, and go to the foot of the stairs and call—

"MERRY CHRISTMAS! oh, Ben! and Joel! and Davie!"

"Oh!—oh!—ooh!" and then the sounds that answered her, as with smothered whoops of expectation they one and all flew into their clothes!

Quick as a flash Joel and Davie were down and dancing around the chimney.

"Mammy! Mammy!" screamed Phronsie, hugging her stocking, which Ben lifted her up to unhook from the big nail, "Santy did *come,* he *did!*" and then she spun around in the middle of the floor, not stopping to look in it.

"Well, open it, Phronsie," called Davie, deep in the exploring of his own; "Oh! isn't that a splendid windmill, Joe?"

"Yes," said that individual, who, having found a big piece of molasses candy, was so engaged in enjoying a huge bite that, regardless alike of his other gifts or of the smearing his face was getting, he gave himself wholly up to its delights.

"Oh, Joey," cried Polly, laughingly, "molasses candy for breakfast!"

"That's *prime!*" cried Joel, swallowing the last morsel. "Now I'm going to see what's this—oh, Dave, see here! see here!" he cried in intense excitement, pulling out a nice little parcel which, unrolled, proved to be a bright pair of stout mittens. "See if you've got some—look quick!"

"Yes, I have," said David, picking up a parcel about as big. "No, that's molasses candy."

"Just the same as I had," said Joel; "do look for the mittens. P'r'aps Santa Claus thought you had some—oh, dear!"

"Here they are!" screamed Davie. "I *have* got some, Joe, just exactly like yours! See, Joe!"

"Goody!" said Joel, immensely relieved; for now he could quite enjoy his to see a pair on Davie's hands, also. "Look at Phron," he cried, "she hasn't got only half of her things out!"

To tell the truth, Phronsie was so bewildered by her riches that she sat on the floor with the little red stocking in her lap, laughing and cooing to herself amid the few things she had drawn out. When she came to Seraphina's bonnet she was quite overcome. She turned it over and over, and smoothed out the little white feather that had once adorned one of Grandma Bascom's chickens, until the two boys with their stockings, and the others sitting around in a group on the floor watching them, laughed in glee to see her enjoyment.

"Oh, dear," said Joel, at last, shaking his stocking; "I've got all there is. I wish there were forty Christmases coming!"

"I haven't!" screamed Davie; "there's something in the toe."

"It's an apple, I guess," said Joel; "turn it up, Dave."

"'Tisn't an apple," exclaimed Davie, "tisn't round—it's long and thin; here 'tis." And he pulled out a splendid long whistle on which he blew a blast long and terrible, and Joel immediately following, all quiet was broken up, and the wildest hilarity reigned.

"I don't know as you'll want any breakfast," at last said Mrs. Pepper, when she had got Phronsie a little sobered down.

"I do, I do!" cried Joel.

"Dear me! after your candy?" said Polly.

"That's all gone," said Joel, tooting around the table on his whistle. "What are we going to have for breakfast?"

"Same as ever," said his mother; "it can't be Christmas all the time."

"I wish 'twas," said little Davie; "forever and ever!"

"Forever an' ever," echoed little Phronsie, flying up, her cheeks like two pinks, and Seraphina in her arms with her bonnet on upside down.

"Dear, dear," said Polly, pinching Ben to keep still as they tumbled down the little rickety steps to the Provision Room, after breakfast. The children, content in their treasures, were holding high carnival in the kitchen. "Suppose they should find it out now—I declare I *should* feel most awfully. Isn't it *elegant?*" she asked, in a subdued whisper, going all around and around the tree, magnificent in its dress of bright red and yellow balls, white festoons, and little candle ends all ready for lighting. "Oh, Ben, did you lock the door?"

"Yes," he said. "That's a mouse," he added, as a little rustling noise made Polly stop where she stood back of the tree and prick up her ears in great distress of mind. "'Tis elegant," he said, turning around in admiration, and taking in the tree which, as Polly said, was quite "gorgeous," and the evergreen branches twisted up on the beams and rafters, and

all the other festive arrangements. "Even Jappy's isn't better, I don't believe!"

"I wish Jappy was here," said Polly with a small sigh.

"Well, he isn't," said Ben; "come, we must go back into the kitchen, or all the children will be out here. Look your last, Polly; 'twon't do to come again till it's time to light up."

"Mammy says she'd rather do the lighting up," said Polly. "Had she?" said Ben, in surprise; "oh, I suppose she's afraid we'll set somethin' a-fire. Well, then, we shan't come in till we *have* it."

"I can't bear to go," said Polly, turning reluctantly away; "it's most beautiful—oh, Ben," and she faced him for the five-hundredth time with the question, "is your Santa Claus dress all safe?"

"Yes," said Ben, "I'll warrant they won't find that in one hurry! Such a time as we've had to make it!"

"I know it," laughed Polly; "don't that cotton wool look just like bits of fur, Ben?"

"Yes," said Ben, "and when the flour's shaken over me it'll be Santa himself."

"We've got to put back the hair into mamsie's cushion the first thing tomorrow," whispered Polly anxiously, "and we mustn't forget it, Bensie."

"I want to keep the wig awfully," said Ben. "You did make that just magnificent, Polly!"

"If you could see yourself," giggled Polly; "did you put it in the straw bed? and are you sure you pulled the ticking over it smooth?"

"Yes, *sir,*" replied Ben, "sure's my name's Ben Pepper! If you'll only keep them from seeing me when I'm in it till we're ready—that's all I ask."

"Well," said Polly a little relieved, "but I hope Joe won't look."

"Come on! they're a-comin'!" whispered Ben; "quick!"

"Polly!" rang a voice dangerously near; so near that Polly,

speeding over the stairs to intercept it, nearly fell on her nose.

"Where you been?" asked one.

"Let's have a concert," put in Ben; Polly was so out of breath that she couldn't speak. "Come, now, each take a whistle, and we'll march round and round and see which can make the biggest noise."

In the rattle and laughter which this procession made all mystery was forgotten, and the two conspirators began to breathe freer.

Five o'clock! The small ones of the Pepper flock, being pretty well tired out with noise and excitement, all gathered around Polly and Ben, and clamored for a story.

"Do, Polly, do," begged Joel. "It's Christmas, and 'twon't come again for a year."

"I can't," said Polly, in such a twitter that she could hardly stand still, and for the first time in her life refusing, "I can't think of a thing."

"I will then," said Ben; "we must do something," he whispered to Polly.

"Tell it good," said Joel, settling himself.

So for an hour the small tyrants kept their entertainers well employed.

"Isn't it growing awful dark?" said Davie, rousing himself at last, as Ben paused to take breath.

Polly pinched Ben.

"Mammy's a-goin' to let us know," he whispered in reply. "We must keep on a little longer."

"Don't stop," said Joel, lifting his head where he sat on the floor. "What you whisperin' for, Polly?"

"I'm not," said Polly, glad to think she hadn't spoken.

"Well, do go on, Ben," said Joel, lying down again.

"Polly'll have to finish it," said Ben; "I've got to go upstairs now."

So Polly launched out into such an extravagant story that they all, perforce, *had* to listen.

All this time Mrs. Pepper had been pretty busy in her way. And now she came into the kitchen and set down her candle on the table. "Children," she said. Everybody turned and looked at her—her tone was so strange; and when they saw her dark eyes shining with such a new light, little Davie skipped right out into the middle of the room. "What's the matter, mammy?"

"You may all come into the Provision Room," said she.

"What for?" shouted Joel, in amazement; while the others jumped to their feet, and stood staring.

Polly flew around like a general, arranging her forces. "Let's march there," said she; "Phronsie, you take hold of Davie's hand, and go first."

"I'm goin' first," announced Joel, squeezing up past Polly. "No, you mustn't, Joe," said Polly decidedly; "Phronsie and David are the youngest."

"They're *always* the youngest," said Joel, falling back with Polly to the rear.

"*Forward!* MARCH!" sang Polly. "Follow mamsie!"

Down the stairs they went with military step, and into the Provision Room. And then, with one wild look, the little battalion broke ranks, and tumbling one over the other in decidedly unmilitary style, presented a very queer appearance!

And Captain Polly was the queerest of all; for she just gave one gaze at the tree, and then sat right down on the floor, and said, "OH! OH!"

Mrs. Pepper was flying around delightedly, and saying, "Please to come right in," and "How do you do?"

And before anybody knew it, there were the laughing faces of Mrs. Henderson and the Parson himself, Doctor Fisher and old Grandma Bascom; while the two Henderson boys, unwilling to be defrauded of any of the fun, were squeezing themselves in between everybody else, and coming up to Polly every third minute, and saying, "There—aren't

you surprised?"

"It's Fairyland!" cried little Davie, out of his wits with joy; "Oh! aren't we in Fairyland, ma?"

The whole room was in one buzz of chatter and fun; and everybody beamed on everybody else; and nobody knew what they said, till Mrs. Pepper called, "*Hush!* Santa Claus is coming!"

A rattle at the little old window made everybody look there, just as a great snow white head popped up over the sill.

"*Oh!*" screamed Joel, "'*tis Santy!*"

"He's a-comin' in!" cried Davie in chorus, which sent Phronsie flying to Polly. In jumped a little old man, quite spry for his years; with a jolly, red face and a pack on his back, and flew into their midst, prepared to do his duty; but what should he do, instead of making his speech, "this jolly Old Saint—" but first fly up to Mrs. Pepper, and say—"*Oh, mammy how did you do it?*"

"It's Ben!" screamed Phronsie; but the little Old Saint didn't hear, for he and Polly took hold of hands, and pranced around that tree while everybody laughed till they cried to see them go!

And then it all came out!

"*Order!*" said Parson Henderson in his deepest tones; and then he put into Santa Claus' hands a letter, which he requested him to read. And the jolly Old Saint, although he was very old, didn't need any spectacles, but piped out in Ben's loudest tones:

"Dear Friends—A Merry Christmas to you all! And that you'll have a good time, and enjoy it all as much as I've enjoyed my good times at your house, is the wish of your friend,

"JASPER ELYOT KING"

"Hurrah for Jappy!" cried Santa Claus, pulling his beard;



and "Hurrah for Jasper!" went all around the room; and this ended in three good cheers—Phronsie coming in too late with her little crow—which was just as well, however!

"Do your duty now, Santa Claus!" commanded Dr. Fisher as master of ceremonies; and everything was as still as a mouse!

And the first thing she knew, a lovely brass cage, with a dear little bird with two astonished black eyes dropped down into Polly's hands. The card on it said: *"For Miss Polly Pepper, to give her music every day in the year."*

"Mammy," said Polly; and then she did the queerest thing of the whole! she just burst into tears! "I never thought I should have a bird for *my very own!"*

"Hulloa!" said Santa Claus, "I've got something myself!"

"Santa Claus' clothes are too old," laughed Dr. Fisher, holding up a stout, warm suit that a boy about as big as Ben would delight in.

And then that wonderful tree just rained down all manner of lovely fruit. Gifts came flying thick and fast, till the air seemed full, and each one was greeted with a shout of glee, as it was put into the hands of its owner. A shawl flew down on Mrs. Pepper's shoulders; and a work basket tumbled on Polly's head; and tops and balls and fishing poles, sent Joel and David into a corner with howls of delight!

But the climax was reached when a large wax doll in a very gay pink silk dress, was put into Phronsie's hands, and Dr. Fisher, stooping down, read in loud tones: *"For Phronsie, from one who enjoyed her Gingerbread Boy."*

After that, nobody had anything to say! Books jumped down unnoticed, and gay boxes of candy. Only Polly peeped into one of her books, and saw in Jappy's plain hand—*"I hope we'll both read this next summer."* And turning over to the title page, she saw "A Complete Manual of Cookery."

"The best is to come," said Mrs. Henderson in her gentle way. When there was a lull in the gale, she took Polly's hand,

and led her to a little stand of flowers in the corner concealed by a sheet—pinks and geraniums, heliotropes and roses, blooming away, and nodding their pretty heads at the happy sight—Polly had her flowers.

"Why didn't we know?" cried the children at last, when everybody was tying on their hoods, and getting their hats to leave the festive scene, "how *could* you keep it secret, mammy?"

"They all went to Mrs. Henderson's," said Mrs. Pepper; "Jasper wrote me, and asked where to send 'em, and Mrs. Henderson was so kind as to say that they might come there. And we brought 'em over last evening, when you were all abed. I couldn't have done it," she said, bowing to the Parson and his wife, "if 'twasn't for their kindness—never, in all this world!"

"And I'm sure," said the minister, looking around on the bright group, "if we can help along a bit of happiness like this, it is a blessed thing!"

And here Joel had the last word. "You said 'twan't goin' to be Christmas always, mammy. I say," looking around on the overflow of treasures and the happy faces—"it'll be just *forever!*"

CHAPTER XVIII
Education Ahead

After that they couldn't thank Jasper enough! They tried to, lovingly, and an elaborate letter of thanks, headed by Mrs. Pepper, was drawn up and sent with a box of the results of Polly's diligent study of Jasper's book. Polly stripped off recklessly her choicest buds and blossoms from the gay little stand of flowers in the corner, that had already begun to blossom, and tucked them into every little nook in the box that could possibly hold a posy. But as for thanking him enough!

"We can't do it, mammy," said Polly, looking around on all the happy faces, and then up at Cherry, who was singing in the window, and who immediately swelled up his little throat and poured out such a merry burst of song that she had to wait for him to finish. "No, not if we tried a thousand years!"

"I'm a-goin'," said Joel, who was busy as a bee with his new tools that the tree had shaken down for him, "to make Jappy the splendidest box *you* ever saw, Polly! I guess that'll thank him!"

"Do," cried Polly; "he'd be so pleased, Joey."

"And I," said Phronsie, over in the corner with her children, "I'm goin' to see my poor sick man sometime, Polly, I *am!*"

"Oh, dear!" cried Polly, whirling around, and looking at her mother in dismay. "She'll be goin' tomorrow! Oh, no, Phronsie, you can't; he lives miles and miles away—oh, ever so far!"

"Does he live as far as the moon?" asked little Phronsie,

carefully laying Seraphina down, and looking up at Polly, anxiously.

"Oh, I don't know," said Polly, giving Cherry a piece of bread, and laughing to see how cunning he looked. "Oh, no, of course not, but it's an *awful* long ways, Phronsie."

"I don't care," said Phronsie, determinedly, giving the new doll a loving little pat, "I'm goin' sometime, Polly, to thank my poor sick man, yes, I am!"

"You'll see him next summer, Phronsie," sang Polly skipping around the kitchen, "and Jappy's sister Marian, the lovely lady, and all the boys. Won't that be nice?" and Polly stopped to pat the yellow head bending in motherly attentions over her array of dolls.

"Ye-es," said Phronsie, slowly; "the whole of 'em, Polly?"

"Yes, indeed!" said Polly, gayly; "the whole of 'em, Phronsie!"

"Hooray!" shouted the two boys, while Phronsie only gave a long sigh, and clasped her hands.

"Better not be looking for summer," said Mrs. Pepper, "until you do your duty by the winter; *then* you can enjoy it," and she took a fresh needleful of thread.

"Mamsie's right," said Ben, smiling over at her. And he threw down his book and jumped for his cap. "Now for a good chop!" he cried, and snatching a kiss from Phronsie, he rushed out of the door to his work, whistling as he went.

"Warn't Mr. Henderson good, Ma," asked Polly, watching his retreating figure, "to give Ben learning?"

"Yes, he was," replied Mrs. Pepper, enthusiastically. "*We've* got a parson, if anybody has in *this* world!"

"And Ben's learning," said Polly, swelling with pride, as she sat down by her mother, and began to sew rapidly, "so that he'll be a big man right off! Oh, dear," as a thought made her needle pause a minute in its quick flying in and out.

"What is it, Polly?" Mrs. Pepper looked keenly at the troubled face and downcast eyes.

"Why—" began Polly, and then she finished very slowly, "I shan't know anything, and Ben'll be ashamed of me."

"Yes, you will!" cried Mrs. Pepper, energetically, "you keep on trying, and the Lord'll send some way; don't you go to bothering your head about it now, Polly—it'll come when it's time."

"Will it?" asked Polly, doubtfully, taking up her needle again.

"Yes, indeed!" cried Mrs. Pepper, briskly; "come fly at your sewing; that's *your* learning now."

"So 'tis," said Polly, with a little laugh. "Now let's see which'll get their seam done first, mamsie?"

And now letters flew thick and fast from the city to the little brown house, and back again, warming Jasper's heart, and filling the tedious months of that winter with more of jollity and fun than the lad ever enjoyed before; and never was fun and jollity more needed than now; for Mr. King, having nothing to do, and each year finding himself less inclined to exercise any thoughtful energy for others, began to look at life something in the light of a serious bore, and accordingly made it decidedly disagreeable for all around him, and particularly for Jasper who was his constant companion. But the boy was looking forward to summer, and so held on bravely.

"I do verily believe, Polly," he wrote, "that Badgertown'll see the gayest times it ever knew! Sister Marian wants to go, so that's all right. Now, hurrah for a good time—it's surely coming!"

But alas! for Jasper! as spring advanced, his father took a decided aversion to Hingham, Badgertown, and all other places that could be mentioned in that vicinity.

"It's a wretched climate," he asserted, over and over; "and the foundation of all my ill feelings this winter was laid, I'm convinced, in Hingham last summer."

No use to urge the contrary; and all Jasper's pleadings

were equally vain. At last, sister Marian, who was kind-hearted to a fault, sorry to see her brother's dismay and disappointment said, one day, "Why not have one of the children come here? I should like it very much—do invite Ben."

"I don't want Ben," said Jasper gloomily, "I want Polly." He added this in much the same tone as Phronsie's when she had rushed up to him the day she was lost, declaring, "I want Polly!"

"Very well, then," said sister Marian, laughing, "I'm sure I didn't mean to dictate which one; let it *be* Polly then; yes, I should prefer Polly myself, I think, as we've enough boys now," smiling to think of her own brood of wide awake youngsters.

"If you only will, father, I'll try to be ever so good!" said Jasper, turning suddenly to his father.

"Jasper needs some change," said sister Marian kindly, "he really has grown very pale and thin."

"*Hey!*" said Mr. King, sharply, looking at him over his eyeglasses. "The boy's well enough; well enough!" But he twisted uneasily in his chair, all the same. At last he flung down his paper, twitched his fingers through his hair two or three times, and then burst out—

"Well, why don't you send for her? I'm sure I don't care—I'll write myself, and I had better do it now. Tell Thomas to be ready to take it right down; it must get into this mail."

When Mr. King had made up his mind to do anything, everybody else must immediately give up their individual plans, and stand out of the way for him to execute his at just that particular moment! Accordingly Thomas was dragged from his work to post the letter, while the old gentleman occupied the time in pulling out his watch every third second until the slightly-out-of-breath Thomas reported on his return that the letter did get in. Then Mr. King settled down satisfied, and everything went on smoothly as before.

But Polly didn't come! A grateful, appreciative letter, expressed in Mrs. Pepper's own stiff way, plainly showed the determination of that good woman not to accept what was such a favor to her child.

In vain Mr. King stormed, and fretted, and begged, offering every advantage possible—Polly should have the best foundation for a musical education that the city could afford; also lessons in the schoolroom under the boys' private tutor—it was all of no avail. In vain sister Marian sent a gentle appeal, fully showing her heart was in it; nothing broke down Mrs. Pepper's resolve, until, at last, the old gentleman wrote one day that Jasper, being in such failing health, really depended on Polly to cheer him up. That removed the last straw that made it "putting one's self under an obligation," which to Mrs. Pepper's independent soul, had seemed insurmountable.

And now, it was decided that Polly was *really* to go! and pretty soon all Badgertown knew that Polly Pepper was going to the big city. And there wasn't a man, woman, or child but what greatly rejoiced that a sunny time was coming to one of the chicks in the little brown house. With many warm words, and some substantial gifts, kind friends helped forward the "outing." Only one person doubted that this delightful chance should be grasped at once—and that one was Polly herself!

"I *can't*," she said, and stood quite pale and still, when the Hendersons advised her mother's approval, and even Grandma Bascom said, "Go." "I can't go and leave mammy to do all the work."

"But don't you see, Polly," said Mrs. Henderson, drawing her to her side, "that you will help your mother twice as much as you possibly could here, by getting a good education? Think what your music will be; only think, Polly!"

Polly drew a long breath at this and turned away.

"Oh, Polly!" cried Ben, though his voice choked, "if you give this up, there never'll be another chance," and the boy put his arm around her, and whispered something in her ear.

"I know," said Polly quietly—and then she burst out, "oh, but I can't! 'tisn't right."

"Polly," said Mrs. Pepper—and never in all their lives had the children seen such a look in mamsie's eyes as met them then; "it does seem as if my heart would be broken if you didn't go!" And then she burst out crying, right before them all!

"Oh mammy," cried Polly, breaking away from everybody, and flinging herself into her arms. "I'll go—if you think I ought to. But it's too good! Don't cry—don't, mammy dear," and Polly stroked the careworn face lovingly, and patted the smooth hair that was still so black.

"And, Polly," said Mrs. Pepper, smiling through her tears, "just think what a comfort you'll be to me, and us all," she added, taking in the children who were crowding around Polly as the center of attraction. "Why, you'll be the making of us," she added hopefully.

"I'll do *something,*" said Polly, her brown eyes kindling, "or I shan't be worthy of you, mammy."

"O, you'll do it," said Mrs. Pepper, confidently, "now that you're going."

But when Polly stepped into the stage, with her little hair trunk strapped on behind, containing her one brown merino that Mrs. Henderson had made over for her out of one of her own, and her two new ginghams, her courage failed again, and she astonished everybody, and nearly upset a mild-faced old lady who was in the corner placidly eating doughnuts, by springing out and rushing up through the little brown gate, past all the family, drawn up to see her off. She flew over the old flat door-stone, and into the bedroom, where she flung herself down between the old bed and Phronsie's crib, in a sudden torrent of tears. "I *can't* go!" she sobbed—"oh I *can't!*"

"Why, Polly!" cried Mrs. Pepper, hurrying in, followed by Joel and the rest of the troops at his heels. "What are you thinking of!"

"Think of by-and-by, Polly," put in Ben, patting her on the back with an unsteady hand, while Joel varied the proceedings by running back and forth, screaming at the top of his lungs, "The stage's going! Your trunk'll be taken!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mrs. Pepper, "do stop it somebody! There, Polly, come now! Do as mother says!"

"I'll try again," said poor Polly, choking back her sobs, and getting on her feet.

Then Polly's tears were wiped away, her hat straightened, after which she was kissed all round again by the whole family, Phronsie waiting for the last two, and then was helped again into the stage, the bags and parcels, and a box for Jappy, which, as it wouldn't go into the trunk, Joel had insisted Polly should carry in her hand, were again piled around her, and Mr. Tisbett mounted to his seat, and with a crack of the whip, bore her safely off this time.

The doughnut lady, viewing poor Polly with extreme sympathy, immediately forced upon her acceptance three of the largest and sugariest.

"Twill do you good," she said, falling to, herself, on another with good zeal. "I always eat 'em, and then there ain't any room for homesickness!"

And away, and away, and away they rumbled and jumbled to the cars.

Here Mr. Tisbett put Polly and her numerous bundles under the care of the conductor, with manifold charges and explicit directions, to see her safely into Mr. King's own hands. He left her sitting straight up among her parcels, her sturdy little figure drawn up to its full height, and the clear brown eyes regaining a little of their dancing light; for although a dreadful feeling tugged at her heart, as she thought of the little brown house she was fast flying away from, there was something else; our Polly had begun to realize that now she was going to "help mother."

And now they neared the big city, and everybody began



to bustle around, and get ready to jump out, and the minute the train stopped, the crowd poured out from the cars, making way for the crowd pouring in, for this was a through train.

"All *aboard!*" sang the conductor. "Oh my senses!" springing to Polly; "I forgot you—*here!*"

But as quick as a flash he was pushed aside, and a bright, boyish figure dashed up.

"Oh, Polly!" he said in such a ringing voice! And in another second, Polly and her bag, and the bundle of cakes and apples that Grandma Bascom had put up for her, and Joel's box, were one and all bundled out upon the platform, and the train whizzed on, and there Mr. King was fuming up and down, berating the departing conductor, and speaking his

mind in regard to all the railroad officials he could think of. He pulled himself up long enough to give Polly a hearty welcome; and then away again he flew in righteous indignation, while Jasper rushed off into the baggage room with Polly's check.

However, every now and then, turning to look down into the little rosy face beside him, the old gentleman would burst forth, "Bless me, child! I'm glad you're here, Polly!—how could the fellow forget when—"

"Oh well, you know," said Polly, with a happy little wriggle under her brown coat, "I'm here now."

"So you are! So you are!" laughed the old gentleman suddenly; "Where can Jasper be so long."

"They're all in the carriage," answered the boy skipping back. "Now, father! Now Polly!"

He was fairly bubbling over with joy and Mr. King forgot his dudgeon and joined in the general glee, which soon became so great that travelers gave many a glance at the merry trio who bundled away to Thomas and the waiting grays.

"You're sure you've got the right check?" asked Mr. King, nervously, getting into a handsome coach lined with dark green satin, and settling down among its ample cushions with a sigh of relief.

"Oh yes," laughed Jasper; "Polly didn't have anyone else's check, I guess."

Over through the heart of the city, down narrow, noisy business streets, out into wide avenues, with handsome stately mansions on either side—they flew along.

"Oh," said Polly; and then she stopped, and blushed very hard.

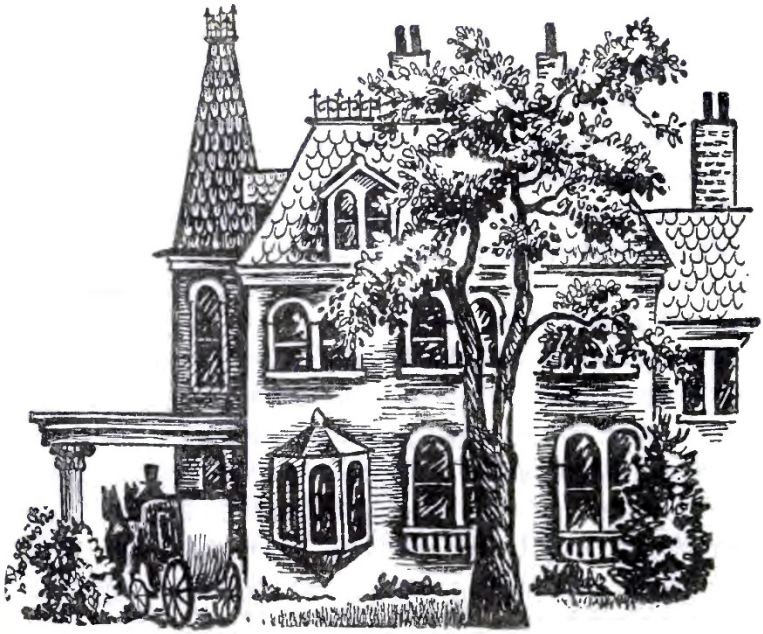
"What is it, my dear?" asked Mr. King, kindly.

Polly couldn't speak at first, but when Jasper stopped his merry chat and begged to know what it was, she turned on him, and burst out, "You *live* here?"

"Why, yes," laughed the boy; "why not?"

"Oh!" said Polly again, her cheeks as red as two roses, *"it's so lovely!"*

And then the carriage turned in at a brown stone gateway, and winding up among some fine old trees, stopped before a large, stately residence that in Polly's eyes seemed like one of the castles of Ben's famous stories. And then Mr. King got out, and gallantly escorted Polly out, and up the steps, while Jasper followed with Polly's bag which he couldn't be persuaded to resign to Thomas. A stiff waiter held the door open—and then, the rest was only a pleasant, confused jumble of kind welcoming words, smiling faces, with a background of high spacious walls, bright pictures, and soft elegant hangings, everything and all inextricably mixed—till Polly herself seemed floating—away—away, fast to the Fairyland of her dreams; now, Mr. King was handing her around, like a precious parcel, from one to the other—now Jasper was bobbing in and out everywhere, introducing her on



all sides, and then Prince was jumping up and trying to lick her face every minute—but best of all was, when a lovely face looked down into hers, and Jasper's sister bent to kiss her.

"I am *very* glad to have you here, little Polly." The words were simple, but Polly, lifting up her clear brown eyes, looked straight into the heart of the speaker, and from that moment never ceased to love her.

"It was a good inspiration," thought Mrs. Whitney to herself; "this little girl is going to be a comfort, I know." And then she set herself to conduct successfully her three boys into friendliness and good fellowship with Polly, for each of them was following his own sweet will in the capacity of host, and besides staring at her with all his might, was determined to do the whole of the entertaining, a state of things which might become unpleasant. However, Polly stood it like a veteran.

"This little girl must be very tired," said Mrs. Whitney, at last with a bright smile. "Besides I am going to have her to myself now."

"Oh, no, no," cried little Dick in alarm; "why, she's just come; we want to see her."

"For shame, Dick!" said Percy, the eldest, a boy of ten years, who took every opportunity to reprove Dick in public; "she's come a great ways, so she ought to rest, you know."

"You wanted her to come out to the greenhouse yourself, you know you did," put in Van, the next to Percy, who never would be reproved or patronized, "only she wouldn't go."

"You'll come down to dinner," said Percy, politely, ignoring Van. "Then you won't be tired, perhaps."

"Oh, I'm not very tired now," said Polly, brightly, with a merry little laugh, "only I've never been in the cars before, and—"

"Never been in the cars before!" exclaimed Van, crowding up, while Percy made a big round O with his mouth, and little Dick's eyes stretched to their widest extent.

"No," said Polly simply, "never in all my life."

"Come, dear," said sister Marian, rising quickly, and taking Polly's hand; while Jasper, showing unmistakable symptoms of pitching into all the three boys, followed with the bag.

Up the broad oak staircase they went, Polly holding by Mrs. Whitney's soft hand, as if for dear life, and Jasper tripping up two steps at a time, in front of them. They turned after reaching the top, down a hall soft to the foot and brightly lighted.

"Now, Polly," said sister Marian, "I'm going to have you here, right next to my dressing room; this is your nest, little bird, and I hope you'll be very happy in it."

And here Mrs. Whitney turned up the gas, and then, just because she couldn't help it, gathered Polly up in her arms without another word. Jasper set down the bag on a chair, and came and stood by his sister's side, looking down at her as she stroked the brown wavy hair on her bosom.

"It's so nice to have Polly here, sister," he said, and he put his hand on Mrs. Whitney's neck; and then with the other hand took hold of both of Polly's chubby ones, who looked up and smiled; and in that smile the little brown house seemed to hop right out, and bring back in a flash all the nice times those eight happy weeks had brought him.

"Oh, 'twas so perfectly splendid, sister Marian," he cried, flinging himself down on the floor by her chair. "You don't know what good times we had—does she, Polly?" and then he launched out into a perfect shower of "Don't you remember this?" or "Oh, Polly! you surely haven't forgotten that!" Mrs. Whitney good naturedly entering into it and enjoying it all with them, until, warned by the lateness of the hour, she laughingly reminded Jasper of dinner, and dismissed him to prepare for it.

When the three boys saw Polly coming in again, they welcomed her with a cordial shout, for one and all, after careful measurement of her, had succumbed entirely to Polly;

and each was unwilling that the others should get ahead of him in her regard.

"This is your seat, Polly," said sister Marian, touching the chair next to her own.

Thereupon a small fight ensued between the little Whitneys, while Jasper looked decidedly discomfited.

"Let Polly sit next to me," said Van, as if a seat next to him was of all things most to be desired.

"Oh, no, I want her," said little Dick.

"Pshaw, Dick! you're too young," put in Percy. "You'd spill the bread and butter all over her."

"I wouldn't either," said little Dick, indignantly, and beginning to crawl into his seat; "I don't spill bread and butter, now Percy, you know."

"See here," said Jasper, decidedly, "she's coming up here by father and me; that is, sister Marian," he finished more politely, "if you're willing."

All this while Polly had stood quietly watching the group, the big, handsome table, the bright lights, and the well-trained servants with a curious feeling at her heart—what were the little-brown-house-people doing?

"Polly shall decide it," said sister Marian, laughing. "Now, where will you sit, dear?" she added, looking down on the little quiet figure beside her.

"Oh, by Jappy, please," said Polly, quickly, as if there *could* be no doubt; "and kind Mr. King," she added, smiling at him.

"That's right; that's right, my dear," cried the old gentleman, pleased beyond measure at her honest choice. And he pulled out her chair, and waited upon her into it so handsomely that Polly was happy at once; while Jasper, with a proud toss of his dark, wavy hair, marched up delightedly, and took the chair on her other side.

And now, in two or three minutes it seemed as if Polly had always been there; it was the most natural thing in the world that sister Marian should smile down the table at the

bright-faced narrator, who answered all their numerous questions, and entertained them all with accounts of Ben's skill, of Phronsie's cunning ways, of the boys who made fun for all, and above everything else of the dear mother whom they all longed to help, and of all the sayings and doings in the little brown house. No wonder that the little boys forgot to eat; and for once never thought of the attractions of the table. And when, as they left the table at last, little Dick rushed impulsively up to Polly, and flinging himself into her arms, declared, "I love you!—and you're my sister!" Nothing more was needed to make Polly feel at home.

"Yes," said Mrs. Whitney, and nodded to herself in the saying, "it was a good thing; and a comfort, I believe, has come to this house this day!"

CHAPTER XIX
Brave Work and The Reward

And on the very first morrow came Polly's music teacher!

The big drawing room, with its shaded light and draped furniture, with its thick soft carpet, on which no footfall could be heard, with all its beauty and loveliness on every side was nothing to Polly's eyes, only the room that contained the piano!

That was all she saw! And when the teacher came he was simply the Fairy (an ugly little one, it is true, but still a most powerful being) who was to unlock its mysteries, and conduct her into Fairyland itself. He was a homely little Frenchman, with a long, curved nose, and an enormous black moustache, magnificently waxed, who bowed elaborately, and called her "Mademoiselle Pep-paire;" but he had music in his soul, and Polly couldn't reverence him too much.

And now the big piano gave out new sounds; sounds that told of a strong purpose and steady patience. Every note was struck for mother and the home brood. Monsieur Tourtelotte, after watching her keenly out of his little black eyes, would nod to himself like a mandarin, and the nod would be followed by showers of extra politeness, as his appreciation of her patient energy and attention.

Every chance she could get, Polly would steal away into the drawing room from Jappy and the three boys and all the attractions they could offer, and laboriously work away over and over at the tedious scales and exercises that were to be stepping stones to so much that was glorious beyond. Never had she sat still for so long a time in her active little life; and now, with her arms at just such an angle, with the stiff, chubby

fingers kept under training and restraint—well, Polly realized, years after, that only her love of the little brown house could ever have kept her from flying up and spinning around in perfect despair.

"She likes it!" said Percy, in absolute astonishment, one day, when Polly had refused to go out driving with all the other children in the park, and had gone resolutely, instead, into the drawing room and shut the door. "She likes those hateful old exercises and she don't like anything else."

"Much you know about it," said Jappy; "she's perfectly aching to go, now Percy Whitney!"

"Well, why don't she then?" said Percy, opening his eyes to their widest extent.

"Cause," said Jasper, stopping on his way to the door to look him full in the face, "she's commenced to learn to play, and there won't *anything* stop her."

"I'm going to try," said Percy, gleefully. "I know lots of ways I can do to try, anyway."

"See here, now," said Jasper, turning back, "you let her alone! Do you hear?" he added, and there must have been something in his eye to command attention, for Percy instantly signified his intention not to tease this young music student in the least.

"Come on then, old fellow," and Jasper swung his cap on his head, "Thomas will be like forty bears if we keep him waiting much longer."

And Polly kept at it steadily day after day; getting through with the lessons in the schoolroom as quickly as possible to rush to her music, until presently the little Frenchman waxed enthusiastic to that degree that, as day after day progressed and swelled into weeks, and each lesson came to an end, he would skip away on the tips of his toes, his nose in the air, and the waxed ends of his moustache, fairly trembling with delight, "Ah, such patience as Mademoiselle Pep-paire has! I know no other such little Americane!"



"I think," said Jasper one evening after dinner, when all the children were assembled as usual in their favorite place on the big rug in front of the fire in the library, Prince in the middle of the group, his head on his paws, watching everything in infinite satisfaction, "that Polly's getting on in music as I never saw anyone do; and that's a fact!"

"I mean to begin," said Van, ambitiously, sitting up straight and staring at the glowing coals. "I guess I will tomorrow," which announcement was received with a perfect shout—Van's taste being anything rather than of a musical nature.

"If you do," said Jappy, when the merriment had a little subsided, "I shall go out of the house at every lesson; there won't anyone stay in it, Van."

"I can bang all I want to, then," said Van, no ways disturbed by the reflection, and pulling one of Prince's long ears, "you think you're so big, Jappy, just because you're thirteen."

"He's only three ahead of me, Van," bristled Percy, who never could forgive Jappy for being his uncle, much less the still greater sin of having been born three years earlier than himself.

"Three's just as bad as four," said Van.

"Let's tell stories," began Polly, who never could remember such goings on in the little brown house; "we must each tell one," she added with the greatest enthusiasm, "and see which will be the biggest and the best."

"Oh, no," said Van, who perfectly reveled in Polly's stories, and who now forgot his trials in the prospect of one, "You tell, Polly—you tell alone."

"Yes, do, Polly," said Jasper; "we'd rather."

So Polly launched out into one of her gayest and finest; and soon they were in such a peal of laughter, and had reached such heights of enjoyment, that Mr. King popped his head in at the door, and then came in, and took a seat in a big rocking chair in the corner to hear the fun go on.

"Oh, dear," said Van, leaning back with a long sigh, and wiping his flushed face as Polly wound up with a triumphant flourish, "how ever do you think of such things, Polly Pepper?"

"That isn't anything," said Jappy, bringing his handsome face out into the strong light; "why, it's just nothing to what she has told time and again in the little brown house in Badgertown;" and then he caught sight of Polly's face, which turned a little pale in the firelight as he spoke; and the brown eyes had such a pathetic droop in them that it went to the boy's very heart.

Was Polly homesick? and so soon!

CHAPTER XX
Polly Is Comforted

Yes, it must be confessed. Polly was homesick. All her imaginations of her mother's hard work, increased by her absence, loomed up before her, till she was almost ready to fly home without a minute's warning. At night, when no one knew it, the tears would come racing over the poor, forlorn little face, and would not be squeezed back. It got to be noticed finally; and one and all redoubled their exertions to make everything twice as pleasant as ever!

The only place, except in front of the grand piano, where Polly approached a state of comparative happiness, was in the greenhouse.

Here she would stay, comforted and soothed among the lovely plants and rich exotics, rejoicing the heart of Old Turner the gardener, who since Polly's first rapturous entrance, had taken her into his good graces for all time.

Every chance she could steal after practice hours were over, and after the clamorous demands of the boys upon her time were fully satisfied, was seized to fly on the wings of the wind, to the flowers.

But even with the music and flowers the dancing light in the eyes went down a little; and Polly, growing more silent and pale, moved around with a little droop to the small figure that had only been wont to fly through the wide halls and spacious rooms with gay and springing step.

"Polly don't like us," at last said Van one day in despair. "Then, dear," said Mrs. Whitney, "you must be kinder to her than ever; think what it would be for one of you to be away from home even among friends."

"I'd like it first rate to be away from Percy," said Van, reflectively; "I wouldn't come back in three, no, six weeks."

"My son," said his mamma, "just stop and think how badly you would feel, if you really couldn't see Percy."

"Well," said Van, and he showed signs of relenting a little at that; "but Percy is perfectly awful, mamma, you don't know; and he feels so smart too," he said vindictively.

"Well," said Mrs. Whitney, softly, "let's think what we can do for Polly; it makes me feel very badly to see her sad little face."

"I don't know," said Van, running over in his mind all the possible ways he could think of for entertaining anybody, "unless she'd like my new book of travels—or my velocipede," he added.

"I'm afraid those wouldn't quite answer the purpose," said his mamma, smiling—"especially the last; yet we must think of something."

But just here Mr. King thought it about time to take matters into his hands. So, with a great many chucklings and shruggings when no one was by, he had departed after breakfast one day, simply saying he shouldn't be back to lunch.

Polly sat in the drawing room, near the edge of the twilight, practicing away bravely. Somehow, of all the days when the home feeling was the strongest, this day it seemed as if she could bear it no longer. If she could only see Phronsie for just one moment! "I shall *have* to give up!" she moaned. "I can't bear it!" and over went her head on the music rack.

"Where is she?" said a voice over in front of the piano, in the gathering dusk—unmistakably Mr. King's.

"Oh, she's always at the piano," said Van. "She must be there now, somewhere," and then somebody laughed. Then came in the loudest of whispers from little Dick, "Oh, Jappy, what'll she say?"

"*Hush!*" said one of the other boys; "do be still, Dick!"

Polly sat up very straight, and whisked off the tears quickly. Up came Mr. King with an enormous bundle in his arms; and he marched up to the piano, puffing with his exertions.

"Here, Polly, hold your arms," he had only strength to gasp. And then he broke out into a loud burst of merriment, in which all the troop joined, until the big room echoed with the sound.

At this, the bundle opened suddenly, and—out popped Phronsie!

"Here I'm! I'm here, Polly!"

But Polly couldn't speak; and if Jasper hadn't caught her just in time, she would have tumbled over backward from the stool, Phronsie and all!

"Aren't you glad I've come, Polly?" asked Phronsie, with



her little face close to Polly's own.

That brought Polly to. "Oh, *Phronsie!*" she cried, and strained her to her heart; while the boys crowded around, and plied her with sudden questions.

"Now you'll stay," cried Van; "say, Polly, won't you."

"Weren't you awfully surprised?" cried Percy; "say, Polly, *awfully?*"

"Is her name Phronsie," put in Dick, unwilling to be left out, and not thinking of anything else to ask.

"Boys," whispered their mother, warningly, "she *can't* answer you; just look at her face."

And to be sure, our Polly's face was a study to behold. All its old sunniness was as nothing to the joy that now transfigured it.

"*Oh!*" she cried, coming out of her rapture a little, and springing over to Mr. King with Phronsie still in her arms. "Oh, you are the dearest and best Mr. King I ever saw! but how *did you make mammy let her come?*"

"Isn't he splendid!" cried Jasper in intense pride, swelling up. "Father knew how to do it."

But Polly's arms were around the old gentleman's neck, so she didn't hear. "There, there," he said soothingly, patting her brown, fuzzy head. Something was going down the old gentleman's neck, that wet his collar, and made him whisper very tenderly in her ear, "don't give way now, Polly; Phronsie'll see you."

"I know," gasped Polly, controlling her sobs; "I won't—only—I *can't* thank you!"

"Phronsie," said Jasper quickly, "what do you suppose Prince said the other day?"

"What?" asked Phronsie in intense interest slipping down out of Polly's arms, and crowding up close to Jasper's side. "What did he, Jasper?"

"Oh-ho, how funny!" laughed Van, while little Dick burst right out, "*Japser!*"

"Be still," said Jappy warningly, while Phronsie stood surveying them all with grave eyes.

"Well, I asked him, 'Don't you want to see Phronsie Pepper, Prince?' And do you know, he just stood right upon his hind legs, Phronsie, and said: '*Bark! yes, Bark! Bark!*'"

"Did he *really,* Jasper?" cried Phronsie, delighted beyond measure; and clasping her hands in rapture, "all alone by himself?"

"Yes, all alone by himself," asserted Jasper, vehemently, and winking furiously to the others to stop their laughing; "he did now, truly, Phronsie."

"Then mustn't I go and see him now, Jasper? yes, pretty soon *now?*"

"So you must," cried Jasper, enchanted at his success in amusing; "and I'll go with you."

"Oh, no," cried Phronsie, shaking her yellow head. "Oh no, Jasper; I must go by my very own self."

"There Jap, you've caught it," laughed Percy; while the others screamed at the sight of Jasper's face.

"Oh Phronsie!" cried Polly, turning around at the last words; "how *could* you!"

"Don't mind it, Polly," whispered Jasper; "twasn't her fault."

"Phronsie," said Mrs. Whitney, smilingly, stooping over the child, "would you like to see a little pussy I have for you?"

But the chubby face didn't look up brightly, as usual: and the next moment, without a bit of warning, Phronsie sprang past them all, even Polly, and flung herself into Mr. King's arms, in a perfect torrent of sobs. "Oh! let's *go back!*" was all they heard!

"Dear me!" ejaculated the old gentleman, in the utmost amazement; "and such a time as I've had to get her here too!" he added, staring around on the astonished group, none of whom had a word to say.

But Polly stood like a statue! All Jasper's frantic efforts at

comfort, utterly failed. To think that Phronsie had left her for anyone!—even good Mr. King! The room seemed to buzz, and everything to turn upside down—and just then, she heard another cry—"Oh, I *want* Polly, I *do!*"

With a bound, Polly was at Mr. King's side, with her face on his coat, close to the little tear-stained one. The fat, little arms unclasped their hold, and transferred themselves willingly to Polly's neck; and Phronsie hugged up comfortingly to Polly's heart, who poured into her ear all the loving words she had so longed to say.

Just then there was a great rush and a scuffling noise; and something rushed up to Phronsie *"Oh!"* And then the next minute, she had her arms around Prince's neck, too, who was jumping all over her and trying as hard as he could, to express his overwhelming delight.

"She's the cunningest little thing I ever saw," said Mrs. Whitney, enthusiastically, afterward, aside to Mr. King. "Such lovely yellow hair, and such exquisite brown eyes—the combination is very striking. How did her mother ever let her go?" she asked impulsively, "I didn't believe you *could* persuade her, father."

"I didn't have any fears, if I worked it rightly," said the old gentleman complacently. "I wasn't coming without her, Marian, if it could possibly be managed. The truth is, that Phronsie had been pining for Polly to such an extent, that there was no other way but for her to *have* Polly; and her mother was just on the point, although it almost killed her, of sending for Polly—as if we should have let her go!" he cried in high dudgeon; just as if he owned the whole of the Peppers, and could dispose of them all to suit his fancy! "So you see, I was just in time; in the very nick of time, in fact!"

"So her mother was willing?" asked his daughter, curiously.

"Oh, she couldn't help it," cried Mr. King, beginning to walk up and down the floor, and beaming as he recalled his

successful strategy; "there wasn't the smallest use in thinking of anything else. I told her 'twould just stop Polly from ever being a musician if she broke off now—and so 'twould, you know yourself, Marian, for we should never get the child here again, if we let her go now; and I talked—well, I had to talk *some;* but, well—the upshot is I *did* get her, and I *did* bring her—and here she is!" And the old gentleman was so delighted with his success, that he had to burst out into a series of short, happy bits of laughter, that occupied quite a space of time. At last he came out of them, and wiped his face vigorously.

"And to think how fond the little girl is of you, father!" said Mrs. Whitney, who hadn't yet gotten over her extreme surprise at the old gentleman's complete subjection to the little Peppers: he, whom all children had by instinct always approached so carefully, and whom everyone found it necessary to conciliate!

"Well, she's a nice child," he said, "a *very* nice child; and," straightening himself up to his fullest height, and looking so very handsome, that his daughter could not conceal her admiration, "I shall always take care of Phronsie Pepper, Marian!"

"So I hope," said Mrs. Whitney; "and father, I do believe they'll repay you; for I do think there's good blood there; these children have a look about them that shows them worthy to be trusted."

"So they have: so they have," assented Mr. King, and then the conversation dropped.

CHAPTER XXI
Phronsie

Phronsie was toiling up and down the long, oak staircase the next morning; slowly going from one step to the other, drawing each little fat foot into place laboriously, but with a pleased expression on her face that only gave some small idea of the rapture within. Up and down she had been going for a long time, perfectly fascinated; seeming to care for nothing else in the world but to work her way up to the top of the long flight, only to turn and come down again. She had been going on so for some time, till at last, Polly, who was afraid she would tire herself all out, sat down at the foot and begged and implored the little girl, who had nearly reached the top, to stop and rest.

"You'll be tired to death, Phronsie!" she said, looking up at the small figure on its toilsome journey. "Why you must have gone up a million times! Do sit down, pet; we're all going out riding, Phronsie, this afternoon; and you can't go if you're all tired out."

"I won't be tired, Polly," said Phronsie, turning around and looking at her, "*do* let me go just once more!"

"Well," said Polly, who never could refuse her anything, "just once, Phronsie, and then you must stop."

So Phronsie kept on her way rejoicing, while Polly still sat on the lowest stair, and drummed impatiently on the stair above her, waiting for her to get through.

Jappy came through the hall and found them thus. "Halloa, Polly!" he said, stopping suddenly; "what's the matter?"

"Oh, Phronsie's been going so," said Polly, looking up at



the little figure above them, which had nearly reached the top in delight, "that I can't stop her. She has really, Jappy, almost all the morning; you can't think how crazy she is over it."

"Is that so?" said Jasper, with a little laugh. "Hulloa, Phronsie, is it nice?" and he tossed a kiss to the little girl, and then sat down by Polly.

"Oh," said Phronsie, turning to come down, "it's the be-yew-tiflest place I ever saw, Jasper! the very be-yew-tiflest!"

"I wish she could have her picture painted," whispered Jasper, enthusiastically. "Look at her now, Polly, quick!"

"Yes," said Polly, "isn't she sweet!"

"*Sweet!*" said Jasper. "I should think she *was!*"

The sunlight through an oriel window fell on the childish face and figure, glinting the yellow hair, and lighting up the radiant face, that yet had a tender, loving glance for the two who waited for her below. One little foot was poised, just in the act of stepping down to the next lower stair, and the fat hand grasped the polished railing, expressive of just enough caution to make it truly childish. In after years Jasper never thought of Phronsie without bringing up this picture on that April morning, when Polly and he sat at the foot of the stairs, and looked up and saw it.

"Where's Jap?" called one of the boys; and then there was a clatter out into the hall.

"What are you doing?" and Van came to a full stop of amazement and stared at them.

"Resting," said Jappy, concisely, "what do you want, Van?"

"I want you," said Van, "we can't do anything without you, Jappy; you know that."

"Very well," said Jasper, getting up. "Come on, Polly, we must go."

"And Phronsie," said Van, anxiously, looking up to Phronsie, who had nearly reached them by this time, "we want her, too."

"Of course," said Polly, running up and meeting her to give her a hug; "*I* don't go unless she does."

"Where are we going, Polly?" asked Phronsie, looking back longingly to her beloved stairs as she was borne off.

"To the greenhouse, chick!" said Jasper, "to help Turner; and it'll be good fun, won't it, Polly?"

"What is a greenhouse?" asked the child, wonderingly. "All green, Jasper?"

"Oh, dear me," said Van, doubling up, "*do* you suppose she thinks it's painted green?"

"It's green inside, Phronsie, dear," said Jasper, kindly, "and that's the best of all."

When Phronsie was really let loose in the greenhouse she thought it decidedly best of all; and she went into nearly as much of a rapture as Polly did on her first visit to it.

In a few moments she was cooing and jumping among the plants, while old Turner, staid and particular as he was, laughed to see her go.

"She's your sister, Miss Mary, ain't she?" at last he asked, as Phronsie bent lovingly over a little pot of heath, and just touched one little leaf carefully with her finger.

"Yes," said Polly, "but she don't look like me."

"She is like you," said Turner, respectfully, "if she don't look like you; and the flowers know it, too," he added, "and they'll love to see her coming, just as they do you."

For Polly had won the old gardener's heart completely by her passionate love for flowers, and nearly every morning a little nosegay, fresh and beautiful, came up to the house for "Miss Mary."

And now nobody liked to think of the time, or to look back to it, when Phronsie hadn't been in the house. When the little feet went pattering through halls and over stairs, it seemed to bring sunshine and happiness into everyone's heart just to hear the sounds. Polly and the boys in the schoolroom would look up from their books and nod away brightly to each other, and then fall to faster than ever on their lessons, to get through the quicker to be with her again.

One thing Phronsie always insisted on, and kept to it pertinaciously—and that was to go into the drawing room with Polly when she went to practice, and there, with one of her numerous family of dolls, to sit down quietly in some corner and wait till she got through.

Day after day she did it, until Polly, who was worried to think how tedious it must be for her, would look around and say, "Oh, childie, do run out and play."

"I want to stay," Phronsie would beg in an injured tone; "please let me, Polly."

So Polly would jump and give her a kiss, and then, delighted to know that she was there, would go at her practicing with twice the vigor and enthusiasm.

But Phronsie's chief occupation, at least when she wasn't with Polly, was the entertainment and amusement of Mr. King. And never was she very long absent from his side, which so pleased the old gentleman that he could scarcely contain himself, as with a gravity befitting the importance of her office, she would follow him around in a happy contented way, that took with him immensely. And now-a-days, no one ever saw the old gentleman going out of a morning, when Jasper was busy with his lessons, without Phronsie by his side, and many people turned to see the portly figure with the handsome head bent to catch the prattle of a little sunny-haired child, who trotted along, clasping his hand confidingly. And nearly all of them stopped to gaze the second time before they could convince themselves that it was really that queer, stiff old Mr. King of whom they had heard so much.

And now the accumulation of dolls in the house became something alarming, for Mr. King, observing Phronsie's devotion to her family, thought there couldn't possibly be too many of them; so he scarcely ever went out without bringing home one at least to add to them, until Phronsie had such a remarkable collection as would have driven almost any other child nearly crazy with delight. She, however, regarded them something in the light of a grave responsibility, to be taken care of tenderly, to be watched over carefully as to just the right kind of bringing up; and to have small morals and manners taught in just the right way.

Phronsie was playing in the corner of Mrs. Whitney's little boudoir, engaged in sending out invitations for an elaborate tea party to be given by one of the dolls, when Polly rushed in with consternation in her tones, and dismay written all over

her face.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mrs. Whitney, looking up from her embroidery.

"Why," said Polly, "how *could* I! I don't see—but I've forgotten to write to mamsie today; it's Wednesday, you know, and there's Monsieur coming." And poor Polly looked out in despair to see the lively little music teacher advancing towards the house at an alarming rate of speed.

"That is because you were helping Van so long last evening over his lessons," said Mrs. Whitney; "I am so sorry."

"Oh, no," cried Polly honestly, "I had plenty of time—but I forgot 'twas mamsie's day. What *will* she do!"

"You will have to let it go now till the afternoon, dear; there's no other way; it can go in the early morning mail."

"Oh, dear," sighed Polly, "I suppose I must." And she went down to meet Monsieur with a very distressed little heart.

Phronsie laid down the note of invitation she was scribbling, and stopped to think; and a moment or two after, at a summons from a caller, Mrs. Whitney left the room.

"I know I ought to," said Phronsie to herself and the dolls, "yes, I know I had; mamsie will feel, oh! so bad, when she don't get Polly's letter; and I know the way, I do, truly."

She got up and went to the window, where she thought a minute; and then, coming back, she took up her little stubby pencil, and bending over a small bit of paper, she commenced to trace with laborious efforts and much hard breathing, some very queer hieroglyphics that to her seemed to be admirable, as at last she held them up with great satisfaction.

"Goodbye," she said then, getting up and bowing to the dolls who sat among the interrupted invitations, "I won't be gone but a little bit of one minute," and she went out determinedly and shut the door.

Nobody saw the little figure going down the carriage drive, so of course nobody could stop her. When Phronsie got

to the gateway she looked up and down the street carefully, either way.

"Yes," she said, at last, "it was down here, I'm *very* sure, I went with grandpa," and immediately turned down the wrong way, and went on and on, grasping carefully her small, and by this time rather soiled bit of paper.

At last she reached the business streets; and although she didn't come to the post office, she comforted herself by the thought—"it must be coming soon. I guess it's round this corner."

She kept turning corner after corner, until, at last, a little anxious feeling began to tug at her heart; and she began to think—"I wish I *could* see Polly—"

And now, she had all she could do to get out of the way of the crowds of people who were pouring up and down the thoroughfare. Everybody jostled against her, and gave her a push. "Oh dear!" thought Phronsie, "there's *such* a many big people!" and then there was no time for anything else but to stumble in and out, to keep from being crushed completely beneath their feet. At last, an old huckster woman, in passing along, knocked off her bonnet with the end of her big basket, which flew around and struck Phronsie's head. Not stopping to look into the piteous brown eyes, she strode on without a word. Phronsie turned in perfect despair to go down a street that looked as if there might be room enough for her in it. Thoroughly frightened, she plunged over the crossing, to reach it!

"*Look out!*" cried a ringing voice. "*Stop!*"

"The little girl'll be killed!" said others with bated breath, as a powerful pair of horses whose driver could not pull them up in time, dashed along just in front of her! With one cry, Phronsie sprang between their feet, and reached the opposite curbstone in safety!

The plunge brought her up against a knot of gentlemen who were standing talking on the corner.


STOVES

"What's this!" asked one, whose back being next to the street, hadn't seen the commotion, as the small object dashed into their midst, and fell up against him.

"Didn't you see that narrow escape?" asked a second, whose face had paled in witnessing it. "This little girl was nearly killed a moment ago—careless driving enough!" And he put out his hand to catch the child.

"Bless me!" cried a third, whirling around suddenly, "Bless me! you don't say so! why—" With a small cry, but gladsome and distinct in its utterance, Phronsie gave one look—"Oh, *grandpa!"* was all she could say.

"Oh! *where*—" Mr. King couldn't possibly have uttered another word, for then his breath gave out entirely, as he caught the small figure.

"I went to the post office," said the child, clinging to him in delight, her tangled hair waving over the little white face, into which a faint pink color was quickly coming back. "Only it wouldn't come; and I walked and walked—where is it, grandpa?" And Phronsie gazed up anxiously into the old gentleman's face.

"She went to the post office!" turning around on the others fiercely, as if they had contradicted him—"Why, my child, what were you going to do?"

"Mamsie's letter," said Phronsie, holding up for inspection the precious bit, which by this time, was decidedly forlorn, "Polly couldn't write; and mamsie'd feel so bad not to get one—she would really" said the child, shaking her head very soberly, "for Polly said so."

"And you've been—oh! I can't *think* of it," said Mr. King, tenderly taking her up on his shoulder, "well, we must get home now, or I don't know *what* Polly will do!" And without stopping to say a word to his friends, he hailed a passing carriage, and putting Phronsie in, he commanded the driver to get them as quickly as possible to their destination.

In a few moments they were home. Mr. King pushed into

the house with his burden. "Don't anybody know," he burst out, puffing up the stairs, and scolding furiously at every step, "enough to take better care of this child, than to have such goings on!"

"What is the matter, Father?" asked Mrs. Whitney, coming up the stairs, after him. "What has happened out of the way?"

"*Out of the way!*" roared the old gentleman, irascibly, "Well, if you want Phronsie racing off to the post office by herself, and nearly getting killed, poor child! Yes, Marian, I say nearly killed!" he continued.

"What *do* you mean?" gasped Mrs. Whitney.

"Why, where have you been?" asked the old gentleman, who wouldn't let Phronsie get down out of his arms, under any circumstances; so there she lay, poking up her head like a little bird, and trying to say she wasn't in the least hurt, "Where's everybody been not to know she'd gone?" he exclaimed, "Where's Polly—and Jasper—and all of 'em?"

"Polly's taking her music lesson," said Mrs. Whitney. "Oh, Phronsie darling!" and she bent over the child in her father's arms, and nearly smothered her with kisses.

"'Twas a naughty horse," said Phronsie, sitting up straight and looking at her, "or I should have found the post office; and I lost off my bonnet, too," she added, for the first time realizing her loss, putting her hand to her head; "a bad old woman knocked it off with a basket—and now mamsie won't get her letter!" and she waved the bit, which she still grasped firmly between her thumb and finger, sadly towards Mrs. Whitney.

"Oh, dear," groaned that lady, "how could we talk before her! But who would have thought it! Darling," and she took the little girl from her father's arms, who at last let her go, "don't think of your mamma's letter; we'll tell her how it was," and she sat down in the first chair that she could reach; while Phronsie put her tumbled little head down on the kind

shoulder and gave a weary little sigh.

"It was so long," she said, "and my shoes hurt," and she thrust out the dusty little boots, that spoke pathetically of the long and unaccustomed tramp.

"Poor little lamb!" said Mr. King, getting down to unbutton them. "What a shame!" he mumbled pulling off half of the buttons in his frantic endeavors to get them off quickly.

But Phronsie never heard the last of his observations, for in a minute she was fast asleep. The tangled hair fell off from the tired little face; the breathing came peaceful and regular, and with her little hand fast clasped in Mrs. Whitney's she slept on and on.

Polly came flying upstairs, two or three at a time, and humming a scrap of her last piece that she had just conquered.

"Phronsie," she called, with a merry little laugh, "where —"

"Hush!" said Mr. King, warningly, and then just because he couldn't explain there without waking Phronsie up, he took hold of Polly's two shoulders and marched her into the next room, where he carefully closed the door, and told her the whole thing, using his own discretion about the very narrow escape she had passed through. He told enough, however, for Polly to see what had been so near them; and she stood there so quietly, alternately paling and flushing as he proceeded, till at last, when he finished, Mr. King was frightened almost to death at the sight of her face.

"Oh, goodness me, Polly!" he said, striding up to her, and then fumbling around on the table to find a glass of water. "You are not going to faint, are you? Phronsie's all well now, she isn't hurt in the least, I assure you; I assure you—where is a glass of water! Marian ought to see that there's some here—that stupid Jane!" and in utter bewilderment he was fussing here and there, knocking down so many things in general, that the noise soon brought Polly to, with a little gasp.

"Oh, don't mind me, dear Mr. King—I'm—all well."

"So you are," said the old gentleman, setting up a toilet bottle that he had knocked over, "so you are; I didn't think you'd go and tumble over, Polly, I really didn't," and he beamed admiringly down on her.

And then Polly crept away to Mrs. Whitney's side where she threw herself down on the floor, to watch the little sleeping figure. Her hand was gathered up, into the kind one that held Phronsie's; and there they watched and watched and waited.

"Oh, dear," said Phronsie, suddenly, turning over with a little sigh, and bobbing up her head to look at Polly; "I'm so hungry! I haven't had anything to eat in ever an' ever so long, Polly!" and she gazed at her with a very injured countenance.

"So you must be," said Mrs. Whitney, kissing the flushed little face. "Polly must ring the bell for Jane to bring this little bird some crumbs."

"Can I have a great many?" asked Phronsie, lifting her eyes, with the dewy look of sleep still lingering in them, "as many as two birdies?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Whitney, laughing; "I think as many as *three* little birdies could eat, Phronsie."

"Oh," said Phronsie, and leaned back satisfied, while Polly gave the order, which was presently followed by Jane with a well-filled tray.

"Now," said Jappy, when he heard the account of the adventure, "I say that letter ought to go to your mother, Polly."

"Oh," said Polly, "it would scare mamsie most to death, Jappy!"

"Don't tell her the whole," said Jasper, quickly, "I didn't mean that—about the horses and all that—but only enough to let her see how Phronsie tried to get it to her."

"And I'm going to write to your brother Joel," said Van, drawing up to the library table; "I'll scare *him,* Polly, I guess;

he won't tell your mother."

"Your crow-tracks'll scare him enough without anything else," said Percy, pleasantly, who really could write very nicely, while Polly broke out in an agony:

"Oh, no, Van, you mustn't! you mustn't!"

"If Van does," said Jasper, decidedly, "it'll be the last time he'll write to the 'brown house,' I can tell him; and besides, he'll go to Coventry." This had the desired effect.

"Let's all write," said Polly.

So a space on the table was cleared, and the children gathered around it, when there was great scratching of pens, and clearing of ideas; which presently resulted in a respectable budget of letters, into which Phronsie's was lovingly tucked in the center; and then they all filed out to put it into the letterbox in the hall, for Thomas to mail with the rest in the morning.

CHAPTER XXII
Getting Ready for Mamsie and the Boys

"And I'll tell you, Marian, what I am going to do."

Mr. King's voice was pitched on a higher key than usual; and extreme determination was expressed in every line of his face. He had met Mrs. Whitney at the foot of the staircase, dressed for paying visits. "Oh, are you going out?" he said, glancing impatiently at her attire. "And I'd just started to speak to you on a matter of great importance! Of the greatest importance indeed!" he repeated irritably, as he stood with one gloved hand resting on the balustrade.

"Oh, it's no matter, Father," she replied pleasantly; "if it's really important, I can postpone going for another day, and —"

"Really important!" repeated the old gentleman irascibly. "Haven't I just told you it's of the *greatest importance?* There's no time to be lost; and with my state of health too, it's of the utmost consequence that I shouldn't be troubled. It's very bad for me; I should think you would realize that, Marian."

"I'll tell Thomas to take the carriage directly back," said Mrs. Whitney stepping to the door. "Or stay, Father; I'll just run up and send the children out for a little drive. The horses ought to be used too, you know," she said lightly, preparing to run up to carry out the changed plan.

"Never mind that now," said Mr. King abruptly. "I want you to give me your attention *directly."* And walking towards the library door, getting a fresh accession of impatience with every step, he beckoned her to follow.

But his progress was somewhat impeded by little Dick—or rather, little Dick and Prince, who were standing at the top

of the stairs to see Mrs. Whitney off. When he saw his mother retrace her steps, supposing her yielding to the urgent entreaties that he was sending after her to stay at home, the child suddenly changed his "Goodbyes" to vociferous howls of delight, and speedily began to plunge down the stairs to welcome her.

But the staircase was long, and little Dick was in a hurry, and besides, Prince was in the way. The consequence was, nobody knew just how, that a bumping noise struck into the conversation that made the two below in the hall look up quickly, to see the child and dog come rolling over the stairs at a rapid rate.

"Zounds!" cried the old gentleman. "Here, Thomas, *Thomas!*" But as that individual was waiting patiently outside the door on the carriage box, there was small hope of his being in time to catch the boy, who was already in his mother's



arms, not quite clear by the suddenness of the whole thing, as to how he came there.

"Oh! oh! Dicky's hurt!" cried somebody up above—followed by everyone within hearing distance, and all came rushing to the spot to ask a thousand questions all in the same minute.

There sat Mrs. Whitney in one of the big carved chairs, with little Dick in her lap, and Prince walking gravely around and around him with the greatest expression of concern on his noble face. Mr. King was storming up and down, and calling on everybody to bring a "bowl of water, and some brown paper; and *be quick!*" interpolated with showers of blame on Prince for sitting on the stairs, and tripping people up! While Dick meanwhile was laughing and chatting, and enjoying the distinction of making so many people run, and of otherwise being the object of so much attention!

"I don't think he was sitting on the stairs, Father," said Jasper, who, when he saw that Dicky was really unhurt, began to vindicate his dog. "He never does that; do you Sir?" he said patting the head that was lifted up to him, as if to be defended.

"And I expect we shall all be killed someday, Jasper," said Mr. King, warming with his subject; and forgetting all about the brown paper and water which he had ordered, and which was now waiting for him at his elbow, "just by that creature."

"He's the noblest—" began Jasper, throwing his arms around his neck; an example which was immediately followed by the Whitney boys, and the two little Peppers. When Dick saw this, he began to struggle to get down to add himself to the number.

"Where's the brown paper?" began Mr. King, seeing this and whirling around suddenly. "Hasn't anybody brought it yet?"

"Here 'tis sir," said Jane, handing him a generous supply. "Oh, I don't want to," cried little Dick in dismay, seeing his grandfather advance with an enormous piece of paper, which

previously wet in the bowl of water, was now unpleasantly clammy and wet—"oh, no, I don't want to be all stuck up with old horrid wet paper!"

"Hush, dear!" said his mamma, soothingly. "Grandpapa wants to put it on—there—" as Mr. King dropped it scientifically on his head, and then proceeded to paste another one over his left eye.

"And I hope they'll all drop off," cried Dick, savagely, shaking his head to facilitate matters. "Yes, I do, every single one of 'em!" he added, with an expression that seen under the brown bits was anything but benign.

"Was Prince on the stairs, Dick?" asked Jasper, coming up and peering under his several adornments. "Tell us how you fell!"

"No," said little Dick, crossly, and giving his head another shake. "He was up in the hall—oh, dear, I want to get down," and he began to stretch his legs and to struggle with so much energy, that two or three pieces fell off, and landed on the floor to his intense delight.

"And how did you fall then?" said Jasper, perseveringly. "Can't you remember, Dicky, boy?"

"I pushed Princey," said Dick, feeling, with freedom from some of his encumbrances, more disposed for conversation, "and made him go ahead—and then I fell on top of him—that's all."

"I guess Prince has *saved* him, father," cried Jasper, turning around with eyes full of pride and love on the dog, who was trying as hard as he could to tell all the children how much he enjoyed their caresses.

And so it all came about that the consultation so summarily interrupted was never held. For, as Mrs. Whitney was about retiring that evening, Mr. King rapped at her door, on his way to bed.

"Oh," he said popping in his head, in response to her invitation to come in, "it's nothing—only I thought I'd just

tell you a word or two about what I've decided to do."

"Do you mean what you wanted to see me about this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Whitney, who hadn't thought of it since. "Do come in, father."

"It's no consequence," said the old gentleman; "no consequence at all," he repeated, waving his hand emphatically, "because I've made up my mind and arranged all my plans—it's only about the Peppers—"

"The Peppers?" repeated Mrs. Whitney.

"Yes. Well, the fact of it is, I'm going to have them here for a visit—the whole of them, you understand; that's all there is to it. And I shall go down to see about all the arrangements—Jasper and I—day after tomorrow," said the old gentleman, as if he owned the whole Pepper family inclusive, and was the only responsible person to be consulted about their movements.

"Will they come?" asked Mrs. Whitney, doubtfully.

"Come? of course," said Mr. King, sharply, "there isn't any other way; or else Mrs. Pepper will be sending for her children—and of course you know, Marian, we couldn't allow *that*—well, that's all; so good night," and the door closed on his retreating footsteps.

And so Polly and Phronsie soon knew that mamsie and the boys were to be invited! And then the grand house, big as it was, didn't seem large enough to contain them.

"I declare," said Jasper, next day, when they had been laughing and planning till they were all as merry as grigs, "if this old dungeon don't begin to seem a little like 'the little brown house,' Polly."

"'Twon't," answered Polly, hopping around on one toe, followed by Phronsie, "till mamsie and the boys get here, Jasper King!"

"Well, they'll be here soon," said Jappy, pleased at Polly's exultation over it, "for we're going tomorrow to do the inviting."

"And Polly's to write a note to slip into Marian's," said Mr. King, putting his head in at the door. "And if you want your mother to come, child, why, you'd better mention it as strong as you can."

"I'm going to write," said Phronsie, pulling up after a prolonged skip, all out of breath. "I'm going to write, and beg mamsie dear. *Then* she'll come, I guess."

"I guess she will," said Mr. King, looking at her. "You go on, Phronsie, and write; and that letter shall go straight in my coat pocket alone by itself."

"Shall it?" asked Phronsie, coming up to him, "and nobody will take it out till you give it to mamsie?"

"No, nobody shall touch it," said the old gentleman, stooping to kiss the upturned face, "till I put it into her own hand."

"Then," said Phronsie, in the greatest satisfaction, "I'm going to write this very one minute!" and she marched away to carry her resolve into immediate execution.

Before they got through they had quite a bundle of invitations and pleadings; for each of the three boys insisted on doing his part, so that when they were finally done up in an enormous envelope and put into Mr. King's hands, he told them with a laugh that there was no use for Jappy and himself to go, as those were strong enough to win almost anybody's consent.

However, the next morning they set off, happy in their hopes, and bearing the countless messages, which the children would come up every now and then to entrust to them, declaring that they had forgotten to put them in the letters.

"You'd had to have had an express wagon to carry the letters if you had put them all in," at last cried Jasper. "You've given us a bushel of things to remember."

"And oh! don't forget to ask Ben to bring Cherry," cried Polly, the last minute as they were driving off although she

had put it in her letter at least a dozen times; "and oh, dear! of course the flowers can't come."

"We've got plenty here," said Jasper. "You would not know what to do with them, Polly."

"Well, I do wish mamsie would give some to kind Mrs. Henderson, then," said Polly, on the steps, clasping her hands anxiously, while Jasper told Thomas to wait till he heard the rest of the message, "and to grandma—you know Grandma Bascom; she was so good to us," she said impulsively. "And, oh! don't let her forget to carry some to dear, *dear* Dr. Fisher; and don't forget to give him our love, Jappy; *don't* forget that!" and Polly ran down the steps to the carriage door, where she gazed up imploringly to the boy's face.

"I guess I won't," cried Jasper, "when I think how he saved your eyes, Polly! He's the best fellow I know!" he finished in an impulsive burst.

"And don't let mamsie forget to carry some in to good old Mr. and Mrs. Beebe in town—where Phronsie got her shoes, you know; that is, if mamsie can," she added, remembering how very busy her mother would be.

"I'll carry them myself," said Jasper; "we're going to stay over till the next day, you know."

"O!" cried Polly, radiant as a rose, "will you, really, Jappy? You're *so* good!"

"Yes, I will," said Jasper, "everything you want done, Polly; anything else?" he asked, quickly, as Mr. King, impatient to be off, showed unmistakable symptoms of hurrying up Thomas.

"Oh, no," said Polly, "only do look at the little brown house, Jasper, as much as you can," and Polly left the rest unfinished. Jasper seemed to understand, however, for he smiled brightly as he said, looking into the brown eyes, "I'll do it all, Polly; every single thing." And then they were off.

Mamsie and the boys! could Polly ever wait till the next afternoon that would bring the decision?

Long before it was possibly time for the carriage to come back from the depot, Polly, with Phronsie and the three boys, who, improving Jasper's absence, had waited upon her with the grace and persistence of cavaliers of the olden time, were drawn up at the old stone gateway.

"Oh, dear," said Van with an impatient fling; "they never will come!"

"Won't they, Polly?" asked Phronsie, anxiously, and standing quite still.

"Dear me, yes," said Polly, with a little laugh, "Van only means they'll be a good while, Phronsie. They're *sure* to come some time."

"Oh!" said Phronsie, quite relieved; and she commenced her capering again in extreme enjoyment.

"I'm going," said little Dick, "to run down and meet them." Accordingly off he went, and was immediately followed by Percy, who started with the laudable desire of bringing him back; but finding it so very enjoyable, he stayed himself and frolicked with Dick, till the others, hearing the fun, all took hold of hands and flew off to join them.

"Now," said Polly, when they recovered their breath a little, "let's all turn our backs to the road; and the minute we hear the carriage we must whirl round; and the one who sees 'em first can *ask* first 'Is mamsie coming?"

"All right," cried the boys.

"Turn round, Dick," said Percy, with a little shove, for Dick was staring with all his might right down the road. And so they all flew around till they looked like five statues set up to grace the sidewalk.

"Suppose a big dog *should* come," suggested Van, pleasantly, "and snap at our backs!"

At this little Dick gave a small howl, and turned around in a fright.

"There isn't any dog coming," said Polly. "What does make you say such awful things, Van?"

"I hear a noise," said Phronsie; and so they all whirled around in expectation. But it proved to be only a market wagon coming at a furious pace down the road, with somebody's belated dinner. So they all had to whirl back again as before. The consequence was that when the carriage *did* come, nobody heard it.

Jasper, looking out, was considerably astonished to see, drawn up in solemn array with their backs to the road, five children, who stood as if completely petrified.

"What in the world!" he began, and called to Thomas to stop, whose energetic *"Whoa!"* reaching the ears of the frozen line, caused it to break ranks, and spring into life at an alarming rate.

"Oh, is she coming Jappy? *Is* she? *Is* she?" they all screamed together, swarming up to the carriage door, and over the wheels.

"Yes," said Jasper looking at Polly.

At that, Phronsie made a little cheese and sat right down on the pavement in an ecstasy.

"Get in here, all of you;" said Jasper merrily; "help Polly in first. For shame Dick! Don't scramble so."

"Dick always shoves," said Percy, escorting Polly up with quite an air.

"I don't either," said Dick; "you pushed me awful, just a little while ago," he added indignantly.

"Do say awfully," corrected Van, crowding up to get in. "You leave off your -lys so," he finished critically.

"I don't know anything about any lees," said little Dick, who, usually so good natured, was now thoroughly out of temper; "I want to get in and go home," and he showed evident symptoms of breaking into a perfect roar.

"There," said Polly, lilting him up, "there he goes! Now—one, two, three!" and little Dick was spun in so merrily that the tears changed into a happy laugh.

"Now then, bundle in, all the rest of you," put in Mr. King,

who seemed to be in the best of spirits. "That's it; go on, Thomas!"

"When are they coming?" Polly found time to ask in the general jumble.

"In three weeks from tomorrow," said Jasper. "And everything's all right, Polly! and the whole of them, Cherry and all, will be here then!"

"Oh!" said Polly.

"Here we are!" cried Van, jumping out almost before the carriage door was open. "Mamma; mamma," he shouted to Mrs. Whitney in the doorway, "the Peppers are coming, and the little brown house too!—everything and everybody!"

"They are!" said Percy, as wild as his brother; "and everything's just splendid! Jappy said so."

"Everything's coming," said little Dick, tumbling up the steps—"and the bird—and—and—"

"And mamsie!" finished Phronsie, impatient to add her part—while Polly didn't say anything—only looked.

Three weeks! "I *can't* wait!" thought Polly at first, in counting over the many hours before the happy day would come. But on Jasper's suggesting that they should all do something to get ready for the visitors, and have a general trimming up with vines and flowers beside—the time passed away much more rapidly than was feared.

Polly chose a new and more difficult piece of music to learn to surprise mamsie. Phronsie had aspired to an elaborate pin cushion, that was nearly done, made of bits of worsted and canvas, over whose surface she had wandered according to her own sweet will, in a way charming to behold.

"I don't know what to do," said Van in despair, "cause I don't know what she'd like."

"Can't you draw her a little picture?" asked Polly. "She'd like that."

"Does she like pictures?" asked Van with the greatest interest.

"Yes indeed!" said Polly, "I guess you'd think so if you could see her!"

"I know what *I* shall do," with a dignified air said Percy, who couldn't draw, and therefore looked down on all Van's attempts with the greatest scorn. "And it won't be any old pictures either," he added.

"What is it, old fellow?" asked Jasper, "tell on, now, your grand plan."

"No, I'm not going to tell," said Percy, with the greatest secrecy, "until the very day."

"What will *you* do, sir?" asked Jasper, pulling one of Dick's ears, who stood waiting to speak, as if his mind was made up, and wouldn't be changed for anyone!

"I shall give Ben one of my kitties—the littlest and the best!" he said, with heroic self-sacrifice.

A perfect shout greeted this announcement.

"Fancy Ben going round with one of those awful little things," whispered Jappy to Polly, who shook at the very thought.

"Don't laugh! oh, it's dreadful to laugh at him, Jappy," she said, when she could get voice enough.

"No, I *sha'n't* tell," said Percy, when the fun had subsided; who, finding that no one teased him to divulge his wonderful plan, kept trying to harrow up their feelings by parading it.

"You *needn't* then," screamed Van, who was nearly dying to know. "I don't believe it's so very dreadful much, anyway."

"What's yours, Jappy?" asked Polly, "I know yours will be just splendid."

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Jasper, smiling brightly, "but as I didn't know what better I could do, I'm going to get a little stand, and then beg some flowers of Turner to fill it, and—"

"Why, that's *mine!*" screamed Percy, in the greatest disappointment. "That's just what I was going to do!"

"Hoh, hoh!" shouted Van; "I thought you wouldn't tell, Mr. Percy! hoh, hoh!"

"Hoh, hoh!" echoed Dick.

"Hush," said Jappy. "Why, Percy, I didn't know as you had thought of that," he said kindly. "Well, then, you do it, and I'll take something else. I don't care as long as Mrs. Pepper gets 'em."

"I didn't *exactly* mean that," began Percy; "mine was roots and little flowers growing."

"He means what he gets in the woods," said Polly, explaining; "don't you, Percy?"

"Yes," said the boy. "And then I was going to put stones and things in among them to make them look pretty."

"And they will," cried Jasper. "Go ahead, Percy, they'll look real pretty, and then Turner will give you some flowers for the stand, I know; I'll ask him tomorrow."

"Will you?" cried Percy, "that'll be fine!"

"Mine is the best," said Van, just at this juncture; but it was said a little anxiously, as he saw how things were prospering with Percy; "for my flowers in the picture will always be there, and your old roots and things will die."

"What will yours be, then, Jappy?" asked Polly very soberly. "The stand of flowers would have been just lovely! and you do fix them so nice," she added sorrowfully.

"Oh, I'll find something else," said Jappy, cheerfully, who had quite set his heart on giving the flowers. "Let me see—I might carve her a bracket."

"Do," cried Polly, clapping her hands enthusiastically. "And do carve a little bird, like the one you did on your father's."

"I will," said Jasper, "just exactly like it. Now, we've got something to do, before we welcome the 'little brown house' people—so let's fly at it, and the time won't seem so long."

And at last the day came when they could all say—Tomorrow they'll be here!

Well, the vines were all up; and pots of lovely climbing ferns, and all manner of pretty green things had been arranged

and re-arranged a dozen times till everything was pronounced perfect; and a big green "Welcome" over the library door, made of laurel leaves, by the patient fingers of all the children, stared down into their admiring eyes as much as to say, "I'll do *my* part!"

"Oh, dear," said Phronsie, when evening came, and the children were, as usual, assembled on the rug before the fire, their tongues running wild with anticipation and excitement, "I don't mean to go to bed at all, Polly; I don't truly."

"Oh, yes, you do," said Polly laughing; "then you'll be all fresh and rested to see mammy when she does come."

"Oh, no," said Phronsie, shaking her head soberly, and speaking in an injured tone. "I'm not one bit tired, Polly; not one bit."

"You needn't go yet, Phronsie," said Polly. "You can sit up half an hour yet, if you want to."

"But I don't want to go to bed at all," said the child anxiously, "for then I may be asleep when mamsie comes, Polly."

"She's afraid she won't wake up," said Percy, laughing. "Oh, there'll be oceans of time before they come, Phronsie."

"What is oceans," asked Phronsie, coming up and looking at him, doubtfully.

"He means mamsie won't get here till afternoon," said Polly, catching her up and kissing her; "then I guess you'll be awake, Phronsie, pet."

So Phronsie allowed herself to be persuaded, at the proper time, to be carried off and inducted into her little nightgown. And when Polly went up to bed, she found the little pin cushion, with its hieroglyphics, that she had insisted on taking to bed with her, still tightly grasped in the little fat hand.

"She'll roll over and muss it," thought Polly; "and then she'll feel bad in the morning. I guess I'd better lay it on the bureau."

So she drew it carefully away, without awaking the little

sleeper, and placed it where she knew Phronsie's eyes would rest on it the first thing in the morning.

It was going on towards the middle of the night when Phronsie, whose exciting dreams of mamsie and the boys wouldn't let her rest quietly, woke up; and in the very first flash she thought of her cushion.

"Why, where—" she said, in the softest little tones, only half awake, "why, Polly, where is it?" and she began to feel all around her pillow to see if it had fallen down there.

But Polly's brown head with its crowd of anticipations and busy plans was away off in dreamland, and she breathed on and on perfectly motionless.

"I guess I better," said Phronsie to herself, now thoroughly awake, and sitting up in bed, "not wake her up. Poor Polly's tired; I can find it myself, I know I can."

So she slipped out of bed, and prowling around on the floor, felt all about for the little cushion.

"'Tisn't here, oh, no, it isn't," she sighed at last, and getting up, she stood still a moment, lost in thought. "Maybe Jane's put it out in the hall," she said, as a bright thought struck her. "I can get it there," and out she pattered over the soft carpet to the table at the end of the long hall, where Jane often placed the children's playthings over night. As she was coming back after her fruitless search, she stopped to peep over the balustrade down the fascinating flight of stairs, now so long and dark. Just then a little faint ray of light shot up from below, and met her eyes.

"Why!" she said in gentle surprise, "they're all downstairs! I guess they're making something for mamsie—I'm going to see."

So, carefully picking her way over the stairs with her little bare feet, and holding on to the balustrade at every step, she went slowly down, guided by the light, which, as she neared the bottom of the flight, she saw came from the library door.

"Oh, isn't it funny!" and she gave a little happy laugh.

"They won't know I'm comin'!" and now the soft little feet went pattering over the thick carpet, until she stood just within the door. There she stopped perfectly still.

Two dark figures, big and powerful, were bending over something that Phronsie couldn't see, between the two big windows. A lantern on the floor flung its rays over them as they were busily occupied; and the firelight from the dying coals made the whole stand out distinctly to the gaze of the motionless little figure.

"*Why!* what are you doing with my grandpa's things?"

The soft, clear notes fell like a thunderbolt upon the men.

With a start they brought themselves up, and stared—only to see a little white-robed figure, with its astonished eyes



uplifted with childlike, earnest gaze, as she waited for her answer.

For an instant they were powerless to move; and stood as if frozen to the spot, till Phronsie, moving one step forward, piped forth:

"Naughty men, to touch my dear grandpa's things!"

With a smothered cry one of them started forward with arm uplifted; but the other sprang like a cat and intercepted the blow.

"Stop!" was all he said. A noise above the stairs—a rushing sound through the hall! Something will save Phronsie, for the household is aroused! The two men sprang through the window, having no time to catch the lantern or their tools, as Polly, followed by one and another, rushed in and surrounded the child.

"What!" gasped Polly, and got no further.

"STOP, THIEF!" roared Mr. King, hurrying over the stairs. The children, frightened at the strange noises, began to cry and scream, as they came running through the halls to the spot. Jasper rushed for the men servants.

And there stood Phronsie, surrounded by the pale group. "'Twas two naughty men," she said, lifting her little face with the grieved, astonished look still in the big brown eyes, "and they were touching my grandpa's things, Polly!"

"I should think they were," said Jasper, running over amongst the few scattered tools and the lantern, to the windows, where, on the floor, was a large table cover hastily caught up by the corners, into which a vast variety of silver, jewelry, and quantities of costly articles were gathered ready for flight. "They've broken open your safe, Father!" he cried in excitement, "See!"

"And they put up their hand—one man did," went on Phronsie. "And the other said 'Stop!'—Oh, Polly, you hurt me!" she cried, as Polly, unable to bear the strain any longer, held her so tightly she could hardly breathe.

"Go on," said Jasper, "how did they look?"

"All black," said the child, pushing back her wavy hair and looking at him, "very all black, Jasper."

"And their faces, Phronsie?" said Mr. King, getting down on his old knees on the floor beside her. "Bless me! Somebody else ask her, I *can't* talk!"

"How did their faces look, Phronsie, dear?" asked Jasper, taking one of the cold hands in his. "Can't you think?"

"Oh!" said Phronsie—and then she gave a funny little laugh, "two big holes, Jasper, that's all they had!"

"She means they were masked," whispered Jasper.

"What did you get up for?" Mrs. Whitney asked. "Dear child, what made you get out of bed?"

"Why, my cushion pin," said Phronsie looking worried at once. "I couldn't find it, and—"

But just at this, without a bit of warning, Polly tumbled over in a dead faint.

And then it was all confusion again.

And so, on the following afternoon, it turned out that the Peppers, about whose coming there had been so many plans and expectations, just walked in as if they had always lived there. The greater excitement completely swallowed up the less!

CHAPTER XXIII
Which Treats of a Good Many Matters

"Phooh!" said Joel a few mornings after the emptying of the little brown house into the big one, when he and Van were rehearsing for the fiftieth time all the points of the eventful night, "phooh! If I'd been here they wouldn't have got away, I guess!"

"What would *you* have done?" asked Van, bristling up at this reflection on their courage, and squaring up to him. "What would you have done, Joel Pepper?"

"I'd a-pitched right into 'em—like—everything!" said Joel valiantly; "and a-caught 'em! Yes, every single one of the Bunglers!"

"The *what?*" said Van, bursting into a loud laugh.

"The Bunglers," said Joel with a red face. "That's what you said they were, anyway," he added positively.

"I said *Burglars,*" said Van, doubling up with amusement, while Joel stood, a little sturdy figure, regarding him with anything but a sweet countenance.

"Well anyway, I'd a-caught 'em, so there!" he said, as Van at last showed signs of coming out of his fit of laughter, and got up and wiped his eyes.

"How'd you have caught 'em?" asked Van, scornfully surveying the square little country figure before him. "You can't hit any."

"Can't?" said Joel, the black eyes flashing volumes, and coming up in front of Van. "You better believe I can, Van Whitney!"

"Come out in the backyard and try then," said Van hospitably, perfectly delighted at the prospect, and flying

alone towards the door. "Come right out and try."

"All right!" said Joel, following sturdily, equally delighted to show his skill.

"There," said Van, taking off his jacket, and flinging it on the grass, while Joel immediately followed suit with his little homespun one. "Now we can begin perfectly splendid! I won't hit hard," he added patronizingly, as both boys stood ready.

"Hit as hard as you've a-mind to," said Joel, "I'm a-going to."

"Oh, *you* may," said Van politely, "because you're company. All right—now!"

So at it they went. Before very many minutes were over, Van relinquished all ideas of treating his company with extra consideration, and was only thinking how he could possibly hold his own with the valiant little country lad. Oh, if he could only be called to his lessons—*anything* that would summon him into the house! Just then a window above their



heads was suddenly thrown up, and his mamma's voice in natural surprise and distress called quickly: "Children what *are* you doing? Oh, Van, how could you!"

Both contestants turned around suddenly. Joel looked up steadily. "We're a-hitting, ma'am; he said I couldn't, and so we came out and—"

"Oh, Vanny," said Mrs. Whitney reproachfully, "to treat a little guest in this way!"

"I wanted to," said Joel cheerfully; "twas great fun. Let's begin again, Van!"

"We mustn't," said Van, readily giving up the charming prospect, and beginning to edge quickly towards the house. "Mamma wouldn't like it you know. He hits splendidly, Mamma," he added generously, looking up. "He does really."

"And so does Van," cried Joel, his face glowing at the praise. "We'll come out every day," he added slipping into his jacket, and turning enthusiastically back to Van.

"And perhaps he *could* have pitched into the Burglars," finished Van, ignoring the invitation, and tumbling into his jacket with alarming speed.

"I *know* I could!" cried Joel, scampering after him into the house. "If I'd only a-been here!"

"Where's Ben?" said Van, bounding into the hall, and flinging himself down on one of the chairs. "Oh dear, I'm so hot! Say, Joe, where *do* you s'pose Ben is?"

"I don't know," replied Joel, who didn't even puff.

"I saw him a little while ago with master Percy," said Jane, who was going through the hall.

"There now! and they've gone off somewhere," cried Van in extreme irritation, and starting up quickly. "I *know* they have. Which way did they go, Jane? And how long ago?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Jane carelessly, "half an hour maybe; and they didn't go nowhere as I see, at least they were talking at the door, and I was going upstairs."

"Right here?" cried Van, and stamping with his foot to

point out the exact place; "at *this* door, Jane?"

"Yes, yes," said Jane; "at that very door," and then she went into the dining room to her work.

"Oh dear me!" cried Van, and flying out on the veranda, he began to peer wildly up and down the drive. "And they've gone to some splendid place, I know, and wouldn't tell us. That's just like Percy!" he added vindictively, "He's *always* stealing away! Don't you see 'em, Joel? Oh, do come out and look!"

"'Tisn't any use," said Joel coolly, sitting down on the chair Van had just vacated, and swinging his feet comfortably; "they're miles away if they've been gone half an hour. I'm goin' upstairs," and he sprang up, and energetically pranced to the stairs.

"They aren't up*stairs!*" screamed Van, in scorn, bounding into the hall. "Don't go; I know that they've gone down to the museum!"

"The *what?*" exclaimed Joel, nearly at the top, peering over the railing. "What's that you said—what is it?"

"A *museum,*" shouted Van, "and it's a perfectly elegant place, Joel Pepper, and Percy knows I like to go; and now he's taken Ben off; and he'll show him all the things! And they'll all be old when I take him—and—and—oh! I hope the snakes will bite him!" he added, trying to think of something bad enough.

"Do they have snakes there?" asked Joel, staring.

"Yes, they *do,*" snapped out Van. "They have *everything!*"

"Well, they shan't bite *Ben!*" cried Joel in terror. "Oh! do you suppose they *will?*" and he turned right straight around on the stairs, and looked at Van.

"No," said Van, "they won't bite—what's the matter, Joe?"

"Oh, they *may,*" said Joel, his face working, and screwing both fists into his eyes; at last he burst right out into a torrent of sobs. "Oh, don't let 'em Van—*don't!*"

"Why, they *can't,*" said Van in an emphatic voice, running up the stairs to Joel's side, frightened to death at his tears.

Then he began to shake his jacket sleeve violently to bring him back to reason, "Wait Joe! oh, do stop! oh, dear, what *shall* I do! I tell you, they *can't* bite," he screamed as loud as he could into his ear.

"You said—you—hoped—they—would," said Joel's voice in smothered tones.

"Well, they *won't* anyway," said Van decidedly. "Cause they're all stuffed—so there now!"

"Ain't they alive—nor anythin'?" asked Joel, bringing one black eye into sight from behind his chubby hands.

"No," said Van, "they're just as dead as anything, Joel Pepper—been dead years! And there's old crabs there too, old dead crabs—and they're just lovely! Oh, *such* a lots of eggs as they've got! And there are shells and bugs and stones—and an *awful* old crocodile, and—"

"Oh, dear!" sighed Joel, perfectly overcome at such a vision, and sitting down on the stairs to think. "Well, mamsie'll know where Ben is," he said, springing up. "And then I tell you Van, we'll just tag 'em!"

"So *she* will," cried Van. "Why didn't we think of that before? I wanted to think."

"I did," said Joel. "That was where I was goin'."

Without any more ado they rushed into Mrs. Pepper's big, sunny room, there to see, seated at the square table between the two large windows, the two lost ones bending over what seemed to be an object of the greatest importance, for Polly was hanging over Ben's shoulder with intense pride and delight, which she couldn't possibly conceal, and Davie was crowded as near as he could get to Percy's elbow.

Phronsie and little Dick were perched comfortably on the corner of the table, surveying the whole scene in quiet rapture; and Mrs. Pepper with her big mending basket, was ensconced over by the deep window seat just on the other

side of the room, underneath Cherry's cage, and looking up between quick energetic stitches, over at the busy group, with the most placid expression on her face.

"*Oh!*—what you doin'?" cried Joel, flying up to them. "Let us see, *do* Ben!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Van, squeezing in between Percy and Ben.

"Don't—" began Percy. "There, see, you've knocked his elbow and spoilt it!"

"Oh no, he hasn't," said Ben, putting down his pencil, and taking up a piece of rubber. "There, see it all comes out—as good as ever."

"Isn't it just *elegant?*" said Percy in the most pleased tone, and wriggling his toes under the table to express his satisfaction.

"Yes," said Van, craning his neck to get a better view of the picture, now nearly completed, "It's perfectly splendid. How'd you do it, Ben?"

"I don't know," replied Ben with a smile, carefully shading in a few last touches. "It just drew itself."

"Tisn't anything to what he *can* do," said Polly, standing up as tall as she could, and beaming at Ben, "He used to draw most beautiful at home."

"Better than this?" asked Van, with great respect and taking up the picture, after some demur on Percy's part, and examining it critically. "I don't believe it, Polly."

"Phooh; he did!" exclaimed Joel, looking over his shoulder at a wonderful view of a dog in an extremely excited state of mind running down an interminable hill to bark at a locomotive and train of cars whizzing along a curve in the foreground. "Lots better'n that! Ben can do *anything!*" he added, in an utterly convincing way.

"Now give it back," cried Percy, holding out his hand in alarm. "I'm going to ask mamma to have it framed; and then I'm going to hang it right over my bed," he finished, as Van

reluctantly gave up the treasure.

"Did you draw all the time in the little brown house?" asked Van, lost in thought. "How I wish I'd been there!"

"Dear, no!" cried Polly with a little skip, turning away to laugh. "He didn't have hardly *any* time, and—"

"Why not?" asked Percy.

"'Cause there was things to *do,*" said Polly. "But sometimes when it rained, and he couldn't go out and work, and there wasn't anything to do in the house—then we'd have—oh!" and she drew a long breath at the memory, "such a time, you can't think!"

"Didn't you wish it would *always* rain?" asked Van, still gazing at the picture.

"Dear, no!" began Polly.

"I didn't," broke in Joel, in horror. "I wouldn't a-had it rain for *anything!*—only once in a while," he added, as he thought of the good times that Polly had spoken of.

"'Twas nice outdoors," said little Davie, reflectively; "and nice inside, too." And then he glanced over to his mother, who gave him a smile in return. "And 'twas nice *always.*"

"Well," said Van, returning to the picture, "I do wish you'd tell me how to draw, Ben. I can't do anything but flowers," he said in a discouraged way.

"Flowers aren't anything," said Percy, pleasantly. "That's girls' work; but dogs and horses and cars—those are just *good!*"

"Will you, Ben?" asked Van, looking down into the big blue eyes, so kindly turned up to his.

"Yes, *indeed* I will," cried Ben, "that is, all I know; 'tisn't much, but everything I can, I'll tell you."

"Then I can learn, can't I?" cried Van joyfully.

"Oh, tell me too, Ben," cried Percy, "will you? I want to learn too."

"And me!" cried Dick, bending forward, nearly upsetting Phronsie as he did so. "Yes, say I may, Ben, *do!*"

"You're too little," began Percy. But Ben nodded his head at Dick, which caused him to clap his hands and return to his original position, satisfied.

"Well, I guess we're going to, *too,*" said Joel. "Dave an' me; there isn't anybody goin' to learn without us."

"Of course not," said Polly, "Ben wouldn't leave you out, Joey."

Phronsie sat quite still all this time, on the corner of the table, her feet tucked up under her, and her hands clasped in her lap, and never said a word. But Ben looking up, saw the most grieved expression settling on her face, as the large eyes were fixed in wonder on the faces before her.

"And there's my pet," he cried in enthusiasm, and reaching over the table, he caught hold of one of the little fat hands. "Why we couldn't think of getting along without her! She shall learn to draw—she *shall!"*

"Really, Bensie?" said Phronsie, the sunlight breaking all over the gloomy little visage, and setting the brown eyes to dancing. "Real, true, splendid pictures?"

"Yes, the splendidest," said Ben, "the very splendidest pictures, Phronsie Pepper, you ever saw!"

"Oh!" cried Phronsie; and before anyone knew what she was about, she tripped right into the middle of the table, over the papers and everything, and gave a happy little whirl!

"Dear me, Phronsie!" cried Polly catching her up and hugging her; "you mustn't dance on the table."

"I'm going to learn," said Phronsie, coming out of Polly's embrace, "to draw whole pictures, all alone by myself—Ben said so!"

"I know it," said Polly, "and then you shall draw one for mamsie—you shall!"

"I will," said Phronsie, dreadfully excited; "I'll draw her a cow, and two chickens, Polly, just like Grandma Bascom's!"

"Yes," whispered Polly, "but don't you tell her yet till you get it done, Phronsie."

"I won't," said Phronsie in the loudest of tones—but putting her mouth close to Polly's ear. "And then she'll be so s'prised, Polly! won't she?"

Just then came Jasper's voice at the door. "Can I come in?"

"Oh, do, Jappy," cried Polly, rushing along with Phronsie in her arms to open the door. "We're so glad you've got home!"

"So am I," said Jasper, coming in, his face flushed and his eyes sparkling; "I thought Father never would be through downtown, Polly!"

"We're going to learn to draw," said Percy, over by the table, who wouldn't on any account leave his seat by Ben, though he was awfully tired of sitting still so long, for fear somebody else would hop into it. "Ben's going to teach us."

"Yes, he is," put in Van, bounding up to Jasper and pulling at all the buttons on his jacket he could reach, to command attention.

"And us," said Joel, coming up too. "You forgot us, Van."

"The whole of us—every single one in this room," said Van decidedly, "all except Mrs. Pepper."

"Hulloa!" said Jasper, "that is a class! Well, Professor Ben, you've got to teach me then, for I'm coming too."

"*You?*" said Ben, turning around his chair, and looking at him; "I can't teach *you* anything, Jappy. You know everything already."

"Let him come, anyway," said Polly, hopping up and down.

"Oh, I'm coming, Professor," laughed Jasper. "Never you fear, Polly; I'll be on hand when the rest of the class comes in!"

"And Van," said Mrs. Pepper, pausing a minute in her work, and smiling over at him in a lull in the chatter—"I think flowers are most beautiful!" and she pointed to a little framed picture on the mantel, of the bunch of buttercups and one

huge rose that Van had with infinite patience drawn, and then colored to suit his fancy.

"Do you?" cried Van, perfectly delighted; and leaving the group he rushed up to her side. "Do you *really* think they're nice, Mrs. Pepper?"

"Of course I do," said Mrs. Pepper briskly, and beaming on him; "I think everything of them, and I shall keep them as long as I live, Van!"

"Well, then," said Van, very much pleased, "I shall paint you ever so many more—just as many as you want!"

"Do!" said Mrs. Pepper, taking up her work again. "And I'll hang them every one up."

"Yes, I will," said Van; "and I'll go right to work on one tomorrow. What you mending our jackets for?" he asked abruptly as a familiar hole caught his attention.

"Because they're torn," said Mrs. Pepper cheerfully, "an' they won't mend themselves."

"Why don't you let Jane?" he persisted. "She always does them."

"Jane's got enough to do," replied Mrs. Pepper, smiling away as hard as she could, "and I haven't, so I'm going to look around and pick up something to keep my hands out of mischief as much as I can, while I'm here."

"Do you ever get into mischief?" asked little Dick, coming up and looking into Mrs. Pepper's face wonderingly. "Why, you're a big woman!"

"Dear me, yes!" said Mrs. Pepper. "The bigger you are, the more mischief you can get into. You'll find *that* out, Dickey."

"And then do you have to stand in a corner?" asked Dick, determined to find out just what were the consequences, and reverting to his most dreaded punishment.

"No," said Mrs. Pepper laughing. "Corners are for little folks; but when people who know better, do wrong, there aren't any corners they *can* creep into, or they'd get into them pretty quick!"

"I wish," said little Dick, "you'd let me get into your lap. *That* would be a nice corner!"

"Do, mamsie," said Polly, coming up, "that's just the way I used to feel; and I'll finish the mending."

So Mrs. Pepper put down her work, and moved the big basket for little Dick to clamber up, when he laid his head contentedly back in her motherly arms with a sigh of happiness. Phronsie regarded him with a very grave expression. At last she drew near: "I'm tired; do, mamsie, take me!"

"So mamsie will," said Mrs. Pepper, opening her arms, when Phronsie immediately crawled up into their protecting shelter, with a happy little crow.

"Oh, now, tell us a story, Mrs. Pepper," cried Van; "*please, please* do!"

"No, no;" exclaimed Percy, scuttling out of his chair, and coming up, "let's talk of the little brown house. Do tell us what you used to do there—that's best."

"So 'tis!" cried Van; "ALL the nice times you used to have in it! Wait just a minute, do." And he ran back for a cricket which he placed at Mrs. Pepper's feet; and then sitting down on it, he leaned on her comfortable lap, in order to hear better.

"Wait for me too, till I get a chair," called Percy, starting. "Don't begin till I get there."

"Here, let me, Percy," said Ben; and he drew forward a big easy chair that the boy was tugging at with all his might.

"Now *I'm* ready, too," said Polly, setting small finishing stitches quickly with a merry little flourish, and drawing her chair nearer her mother's as she spoke.

"Now begin, please," said Van, "all the nice times you know."

"She couldn't tell *all* the nice times if she had ten years to tell them in, could she, Polly?" said Jasper.

"Well, in the first place then," said Mrs. Pepper, clearing

her throat, "the little brown house had *got to be,* you know, so we made up our minds to make it just the *nicest* brown house that ever was!"

"And it was!" declared Jasper, with an emphatic ring to his voice. "The *very nicest place in the whole world!"*

"Oh dear," broke in Van enviously; "Jappy's always said so. I wish we'd been there, too!"

"We didn't want anybody but Jappy," said Joel not very politely.

"Oh Joey, for shame!" cried Polly.

"Jappy used to bake," cried little Davie; "an' we all made pies; an' then we sat round an' ate 'em, an' then told stories."

"Oh what fun!" cried Percy. "Do tell us!"

So the five little Peppers and Jasper flew off into reminiscences and accounts of the funny doings, and Mrs. Pepper joined in heartily till the room got very merry with the glee and enthusiasm called forth; so much so, that nobody heard Mrs. Whitney knock gently at the door, and nobody answering, she was obliged to come in by herself.

"Well, well," she cried, merrily, looking at the swarm of little ones around Mrs. Pepper and the big chair. "You *are* having a nice time! May I come and listen?"

"Oh, if you will, sister," cried Jasper, springing off from his arm of the chair, while Ben flew from the other side, to hurry and get her a chair.

Percy and Van rushed too, knocking over so many things that they didn't help much; and little Dick poked his head out from Mrs. Pepper's arms when he saw his mamma sitting down to stay and began to scramble down to get into her lap.

"There now," said Mrs. Whitney, smiling over at Mrs. Pepper, who was smiling at her. "You have your baby, and I have mine! Now children, what's it all about? What has Mrs. Pepper been telling you?"

"Oh, the little brown house," cried Dicky, his cheeks all a-flame. "The *dearest* little house mamma! I wish I could live



in one!"

"Twouldn't be the same without the Peppers in it," said Jasper. "Not a bit of it!"

"And they had such perfectly *elegant* times," cried Percy, enviously, drawing up to her side. "Oh, you can't think, mamma!"

"Well now," said his mamma, "do go on, and let *me* hear some of the nice times."

So away they launched again, and Mrs. Whitney was soon enjoying it as hugely as the children, when a heavy step sounded in the middle of the room, and a voice spoke in *such* a tone that everybody skipped.

"Well, I should like to know what all this means! I've been all over the house, and not a trace of anybody could I find."

"Oh Father!" cried Mrs. Whitney. "Van, dear, get up and get grandpapa a chair."

"No, no!" said the old gentleman, waving him off impatiently. "I'm not going to stay; I must go and lie down. My head is in a bad condition today; very bad indeed," he added.

"Oh!" said Phronsie, popping up her head and looking at him. "I must get right down."

"What's the matter, Phronsie?" asked Mrs. Pepper, trying to hold her back.

"Oh, but I *must,*" said Phronsie, energetically wriggling. "My poor sick man wants me, he does." And flying out of her mother's arms, she ran up to Mr. King, and standing on tiptoe, said softly, "I'll rub your head, grandpa dear, poor sick man; yes I *will."*

"And you're the best child," cried the old gentleman, catching her up and marching over to the other side of the room where there was a lounging chair. "There now, you and I, Phronsie, will stay by ourselves. *Then* my head will feel better."

And he sat down and drew her into his arms.

"Does it ache *very* bad?" said Phronsie, in a soft little voice. Then reaching up she began to pat and smooth it gently with one little hand, "*Very* bad, dear grandpa?"

"It won't," said the old gentleman, "if you only keep on taking care of it, little Phronsie."

"Then," said the child, perfectly delighted, "I'm going to take all care of you, grandpa, *always!"*

"So you shall, so you shall!" cried Mr. King, no less delighted than she was. "Mrs. Pepper!"

"Sir?" said Mrs. Pepper, trying to answer, which she couldn't do very well surrounded as she was by the crowd of little chatterers. "Yes, Sir; excuse me what is it, sir?"

"We've got to come to an understanding about this thing," said the old gentleman, "and I can't talk much today, because my headache won't allow it."

Here the worried look came into Phronsie's face again, and she began to try to smooth his head with both little hands.

"And so I must say it all in as few words as possible," he continued.

"What is it, sir?" again asked Mrs. Pepper, wonderingly.

"Well, the fact is, I've got to have somebody who will keep this house. Now Marian, not a word!" as he saw symptoms of Mrs. Whitney's joining in the conversation. "You've been good; just as good as can be under the circumstances; but Mason will be home in the fall, and then I suppose you'll have to go with him. Now *I,*" said the old gentleman, forgetting all about his head, and straightening himself up suddenly in the chair, "am going to get things into shape, so that the house will be kept for all of us; so that we can come or go. And how can I do it better than to have the Peppers—you, Mrs. Pepper, and all your children—come here and live, and—"

"Oh, father!" cried Jasper, rushing up to him; and flinging his arms around his neck, he gave him such a hug as he hadn't received for many a day.

"Goodness, Jasper!" cried his father, feeling of his throat. "How can you express your feelings so violently! And, besides, you interrupt."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Jasper, swallowing his excitement, and trying to control his eagerness.

"Do you say yes, Mrs. Pepper?" queried the old gentleman impatiently. "I must get this thing fixed up today. I'm really too ill to be worried ma'am."

"Why sir," stammered Mrs. Pepper, "I don't know what to say. I couldn't think of imposing all my children on you, and—"

"Imposing! Who's talking of *imposing!"* said Mr. King in a

loud key. "I want my house kept; will you live here and keep it? That is the question."

"But sir," began Mrs. Pepper again, "you don't think—"

"I *do* think; I tell you, ma'am, I *do* think," snapped the old gentleman. "It's just because I *have* thought that I've made up my mind. Will you do it Mrs. Pepper?"

"What are you goin' to do, mamsie?" asked Joel quickly.

"I don't know as I'm going to do *anything* yet," said poor Mrs. Pepper, who was almost stunned.

"To come here and live!" cried Jasper, unable to keep still any longer—and springing to the children. "Don't you want to, Joe?"

"To live!" screamed Joel. "Oh whickety, yes! Do ma, do come here and live—do!"

"To live?" echoed Phronsie, over in the old gentleman's lap. "In this be-*yew*-ti-ful place? Oh, *oh!"*

"Oh, *mamsie!"* that was all Polly could say.

And even Ben had his arms around his mother's neck, whispering "Do" into her ear, while little Davie got into her lap and teased her with all his might.

"What *shall* I do!" cried the poor woman. "Did ever anybody see the like?"

"It's the very best thing you could possibly do," cried the old gentleman. "Don't you see it's for the children's advantage? They'll get such educations, Mrs. Pepper, as you want for them. And it accommodates me immensely. What obstacle can there be to it?"

"If I was only sure 'twas best?" said Mrs. Pepper doubtfully.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Pepper," said Mrs. Whitney, laying her hand on hers. "Can you doubt it?"

"Then," said Mr. King, getting up, but still holding on to Phronsie, "we'll consider it settled. This is your home, children," he said, waving his hand at the five little Peppers in a bunch. And having thus summarily disposed of the whole business, he marched out with Phronsie on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXIV
Polly's Dismal Morning

Everything had gone wrong with Polly that day. It began with her boots.

Of all things in the world that tried Polly's patience most were the troublesome little black buttons that originally adorned those useful parts of her clothing, and that were fondly supposed to be there when needed. But they never were. The little black things seemed to be invested with a special spite, for one by one they would hop off on the slightest provocation, and go rolling over the floor, just when she was in her most terrible hurry, compelling her to fly for needle and thread on the instant. For one thing Mrs. Pepper was very strict about—and that was, Polly should do nothing else till the buttons were all on again, and the boots buttoned up firm and snug.

"Oh dear!" said Polly, sitting down on the floor, and pulling on her stockings. "There now, see that hateful old shoe, mamsie!" And she thrust out one foot in dismay.

"What's the matter with it?" said Mrs. Pepper straightening the things on the bureau. "You haven't worn it out already, Polly?"

"Oh no," said Polly, with a little laugh. "I hope not yet, but it's these dreadful *hateful* old buttons!" And she twitched the boot off from her foot with such an impatient little pull, that three or four more went flying under the bed. "There now—there's a lot more. I don't care! I wish they'd all go; they might as well!" she cried, tossing that boot on the floor in intense scorn, while she investigated the state of the other one.



"Are they *all* off?" asked Phronsie, pulling herself up out of a little heap in the middle of the bed, and leaning over the side, where she viewed Polly sorrowfully. "*Every* one, Polly?"

"No," said Polly, "but I wish they were, mean old things; when I was going down to play a duet with Jasper! We should have had a good long time before breakfast. Oh, mayn't I go just once, mamsie? Nobody'll see me if I tuck my foot under the piano; and I can sew 'em on afterwards—there'll be plenty of time. Do, just *once*, mamsie!"

"No," said Mrs. Pepper firmly, "there isn't any time but *now*. And piano playing isn't *very* nice when you've got to stick your toes under it to keep your shoes on."

"Well then," grumbled Polly, hopping around in her stocking feet, "where *is* the work basket, mamsie? Oh—here

it is on the window seat." A rattle of spools, scissors and necessary utensils showed plainly that Polly had found it, followed by a jumble of words and despairing ejaculations as she groped hurriedly under chairs and tables to collect the scattered contents.

When she got back with a very red face, she found Phronsie, who had crawled out of bed, sitting down on the floor in her little nightgown and examining the boot with profound interest.

"I can sew 'em, Polly," she said, holding up her hand for the big needle that Polly was trying to thread—"I can now truly; let me, Polly, do!"

"Dear no!" said Polly with a little laugh, beginning to be very much ashamed. "What could you do with your little mites of hands pulling this big thread through that old leather? There, scamper into bed again; you'll catch cold out here."

"Tisn't *very* cold," said Phronsie, tucking up her toes under the nightgown, but Polly hurried her into bed, where she curled herself up under the clothes, watching her make a big knot. But the knot didn't stay; for when Polly drew up the long thread triumphantly to the end—out it flew, and away the button hopped again as if glad to be released. And then the thread kinked horribly, and got all twisted up in disagreeable little snarls that took all Polly's patience to unravel.

"It's because you're in such a hurry," said Mrs. Pepper, who was getting Phronsie's clothes. And coming over across the room she got down on one knee, and looked over Polly's shoulder. "There now, let mother see what's the matter."

"Oh dear," said Polly, resigning the needle with a big sigh, and leaning back to take a good stretch, followed by Phronsie's sympathizing eyes; "they *never'll* be on! And there goes the first bell!" as the loud sounds under Jane's vigorous ringing pealed up over the stairs. "There won't be time

anyway, *now!* I wish there wasn't such a thing as shoes in the world!" And she gave a flounce and sat up straight in front of her mother.

"Polly!" said Mrs. Pepper sternly, deftly fastening the little buttons tightly into place with quick, firm stitches, "better be glad you've got them to sew at all. There now, here they are. *Those* won't come off in a hurry!"

"Oh, mamsie!" cried Polly, ignoring for a moment the delights of the finished shoe to fling her arms around her mother's neck and give her a good hug. "You're just the splendidest, *goodest* mamsie in all the world. And I'm a hateful, cross old bear, so I am!" she cried remorsefully, buttoning herself into her boots. Which done, she flew at the rest of her preparations and tried to make up for lost time.

But 'twas all of no use. The day seemed to be always just racing ahead of her, and turning a corner, before she could catch up to it, and Ben and the other boys only caught dissolving views of her as she flitted through halls or over stairs.

"Where's Polly?" said Percy at last, coming with great dissatisfaction in his voice to the library door. "We've called her, I guess a million times, and she *won't* hurry."

"What do you want to have her do?" asked Jasper, looking up from the sofa where he had flung himself with a book.

"Why, she said she'd make Van and me our sails you know," said Percy, holding up a rather forlorn looking specimen of a boat, but which the boys had carved with the greatest enthusiasm, "and we want her now."

"Can't you let her alone till she's ready to come?" said Jasper quickly. "You're always teasing her to do something," he added.

"I *didn't* tease," said Percy indignantly, coming up to the sofa, boat in hand, to enforce his words. "She said she'd *love* to do 'em, so there, Jasper King!"

"Coming! coming!" sang Polly over the stairs, and

bobbing into the library, "Oh—here you are, Percy! I couldn't come before; mamsie wanted me. Now, says I, for the sails." And she began to flap out a long white piece of cotton cloth on the table to trim into just the desired shape.

"*That* isn't the way," said Percy, crowding up, the brightness that had flashed over his face at Polly's appearance beginning to fade. "Hoh! those won't be good for anything—those ain't *sails.*"

"I haven't finished," said Polly, snipping away vigorously, and longing to get back to mamsie. "Wait till they're done; then they'll be good—as good as can be!"

"And it's bad enough to have to make them," put in Jasper, flinging aside his book and rolling over to watch them, "without having to be found fault with every second, Percy."

"They're too big," said Percy, surveying them critically, and then looking at his boat.

"Oh, that corner's coming off," cried Polly cheerfully, giving it a sharp cut that sent it flying on the floor. "And they won't be too big when they're done, Percy, all hemmed and everything. There," as she held one up for inspection, "that's just the way I used to make Ben's and mine, when we sailed boats."

"Is it?" asked Percy, looking with more respect at the piece of cloth Polly was waving alluringly before him. "Just exactly like it, Polly?"

"Yes," said Polly, laying it down again for a pattern—"oh, how *does* this go—oh—that's it, there—yes, this is just *exactly* like Bensie's and mine—that was when I was ever so little; and then I used to make Joel's and Davie's afterwards and —"

"And were *theirs* just like this?" asked Percy, laying his hand on the sail she had finished cutting out.

"*Pre-*cisely," said Polly, with a pin in her mouth. "Just as like as two peas, Percy Whitney."

"Then I like them," cried Percy, veering round and

regarding them with great satisfaction—as Van bounded in with a torrent of complaints, and great disappointment in every line of his face.

"Oh now, that's too bad!" he cried, seeing Polly fold up the remaining bits of cloth, and pick up the scraps on the floor. "And you've gone and let her cut out every one of 'em, and never told me a word! You're a mean, old hateful thing, Percy Whitney!"

"Oh *don't!*" said Polly, on her knees on the floor.

"I forgot—" began Percy, "and she cut 'em so quick—and—"

"And I've been waiting," said Van, in a loud wrathful key, "and waiting—and *waiting!*"

"Never mind, Van," said Jasper consolingly, getting off from the sofa and coming up to the table.

"They're done and done beautifully, aren't they?" he said, holding up one.

But this only proved fresh fuel for the fire of Van's indignation.

"And you shan't have 'em, so!" he cried, making a lunge at the one on the table, "for I made most of the boat, there!"

"Oh no, you didn't!" cried Percy in the greatest alarm, hanging on to the boat in his hand. "I cut—all the keel—and the bow—and—"

"Oh dear!" said Polly, in extreme dismay, looking at Jasper. "Come, I'll tell you what I'll do, boys."

"What?" said Van, cooling off a little, and allowing Percy to edge into a corner with the beloved boat and one sail. "What will you, Polly?"

"I'll make you another pair of sails," said Polly groaning within herself as she thought of the wasted minutes, "and *then* you can see me cut 'em, Van."

"Will you *really,*" he said, delight coming all over his flushed face.

"Yes, I will," cried Polly, "wait a minute till I get some



more cloth." And she started for the door.

"Oh now, that's too bad!" said Jasper. "To have to cut more of those tiresome old things! Van, let her off!"

"Oh no, I won't! I won't!" he cried in the greatest alarm, running up to her as she stood by the door. "You *did* say so, Polly! You *know* you did!"

"Of course I did, Vanny," said Polly, smiling down into his eager face, "and we'll have a splendid pair in just—one—minute!" she sang.

And so the sails were cut out, and the hems turned down and basted, and tucked away into Polly's little work basket ready for the sewing on the morrow. And then Mr. King came

in and took Jasper off with him; and the two Whitney boys went up to mamma for a story; and Polly sat down in mamsie's room to tackle her French exercise.

CHAPTER XXVI
Polly's Big Bundle

The room was very quiet; but presently Phronsie strayed in, and seeing Polly studying, climbed up in a chair by the window to watch the birds hop over the veranda and pick up worms in the grass beside the carriage drive. And then came Mrs. Pepper with the big mending basket, and ensconced herself opposite by the table; and nothing was to be heard but the "tick, tick" of the clock, and an occasional dropping of a spool of thread, or scissors, from the busy hands flying in and out among the stockings.

All of a sudden there was a great rustling in Cherry's cage that swung in the big window on the other side of the room. And then he set up a loud and angry chirping, flying up and down, and opening his mouth as if he wanted to express his mind, but couldn't, and otherwise acting in a very strange and unaccountable manner.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Pepper, "what's that?"

"It's Cherry," said Polly, lifting up her head from "Fasquelle," "and—oh, dear me!" and flinging down the pile of books in her lap on a chair, she rushed across the room and flew up to the cage and began to wildly gesticulate and explain and shower down on him every endearing name she could think of.

"What is the matter?" asked her mother, turning around in her chair in perfect astonishment. "What upon earth, Polly!"

"How *could* I!" cried Polly, in accents of despair, not heeding her mother's question. "Oh, mamsie, will he die, do you think?"

"I guess not," said Mrs. Pepper, laying down her work and coming up to the cage, while Phronsie scrambled off from her chair and hurried to the scene. "Why, he does act queer, don't he? P'raps he's been eating too much?"

"*Eating!*" said Polly, "oh mamsie, he hasn't had *anything.*" And she pointed with shame and remorse to the seed-cup with only a few dried husks in the very bottom.

"Oh, Polly," began Mrs. Pepper; but seeing the look on her face, she changed her tone for one more cheerful. "Well, hurry and get him some now; he'll be all right, poor little thing, in a minute. There, there," she said, nodding persuasively at the cage, "you pretty creature you! So you sha'n't be starved."

At the word "starved," Polly winced as though a pin had been pointed at her.

"There isn't any, mamsie, in the house," she stammered; "he had the last yesterday."

"And you forgot him today?" asked Mrs. Pepper, with a look in her black eyes Polly didn't like.

"Yes'm," said poor Polly in a low voice.

"Well, he must have something right away," said Mrs. Pepper, decidedly. "*That's* certain."

"I'll run right down to Fletcher's and get it," cried Polly.

"Twon't take me but a minute, mamsie; Jasper's gone, and Thomas, too, so I've got to go," she added, as she saw her mother hesitate.

"If you could wait till Ben gets home," said Mrs. Pepper, slowly. "I'm most afraid it will rain, Polly."

"Oh, no, mamsie," cried Polly, feeling as if she could fly to the ends of the earth to atone, and longing beside for the brisk walk down town. Going up to the window she pointed triumphantly to the little bit of blue sky still visible. "There, now, see, it *can't* rain yet awhile."

"Well," said Mrs. Pepper, while Phronsie, standing in a chair with her face pressed close to the cage, was telling

Cherry through the bars "not to be hungry, please *don't!*" which he didn't seem to mind in the least, but went on screaming harder than ever! "And besides, 'tisn't much use to wait for Ben. Nobody knows where he'll get shoes to fit himself and Joe and Davie, in one afternoon! But be sure, Polly, to hurry, for it's getting late, and I shall be worried about you."

"Oh, mamsie," said Polly, turning back just a minute, "I know the way to Fletcher's just as easy as *anything.* I *couldn't* get lost."

"I know you do," said Mrs. Pepper, "but it'll be dark early on account of the shower. Well," she said, pulling out her well-worn purse from her pocket, "if it does sprinkle, you get into a car, Polly, remember."

"Oh, yes, I will," she cried, taking the purse.

"And there's ten cents for your bird seed in that pocket," said Mrs. Pepper, pointing to a coin racing away into a corner by itself.

"Yes'm," said Polly, wild to be off.

"And there's a five-cent piece in that one for you to ride up with," said her mother, tying up the purse carefully. "Remember, for you to ride *up* with. Well, I guess you better ride up *anyway*, Polly, come to think, and then you'll get home all the quicker."

"Where you going?" asked Phronsie, who on seeing the purse knew there was some expedition on foot, and beginning to clamber down out of the chair. "Oh, I want to go too, I *do.* Take me, Polly!"

"Oh, no. Pet, I can't," cried Polly, "I've got to hurry like everything!"

"I can hurry too," cried Phronsie, drawing her small figure to its utmost height, "oh, so fast, Polly!"

"And it's ever so far," cried Polly, in despair, as she saw the small under lip of the child begin to quiver. "Oh, dear me, mamsie, what *shall* I do!"

"Run right along," said Mrs. Pepper, briskly. "Now, Phronsie, you and I ought to take care of Cherry, poor thing."

At this Phronsie turned and wiped away two big tears, while she gazed up at the cage in extreme commiseration.

"I guess I'll give him a piece of bread," said Mrs. Pepper to herself. At this word "bread," Polly, who was half way down the hall, came running back.

"Oh, mamsie, *don't,*" she said. "It made him sick before, don't you know it did—so fat and stuffy."

"Well, hurry along then," said Mrs. Pepper, and Polly was off.

Over the ground she sped, only intent on reaching the bird store, her speed heightened by the dark and rolling bank of cloud that seemed to shut right down suddenly over her and envelop her warningly.

"It's good I've got the money to ride up with," she thought to herself, hurrying along through the busy streets, filled now with anxious crowds homeward rushing to avoid the threatening shower. "Well, here I am," she said with a sigh of relief, as she at last reached Mr. Fletcher's big bird store.

Here she steadily resisted all temptations to stop and look at the new arrivals of birds, and to feed the carrier pigeons who seemed to be expecting her, and who turned their soft eyes up at her reproachfully when she failed to pay her respects to them. Even the cunning blandishments of a very attractive monkey that always had entertained the children on their numerous visits, failed to interest her now. Mamsie would be worrying, she knew; and besides, the sight of so many birds eating their suppers out of generously full seed cups, only filled her heart with remorse as she thought of poor Cherry and his empty one.

So she put down her ten cents silently on the counter, and took up the little package of seed, and went out.

But what a change! The cloud that had seemed but a cloud when she went in, was now fast descending in big

ominous sprinkles that told of a heavy shower to follow. Quick and fast they came, making everybody fly to the nearest shelter.

"I don't care," said Polly to herself, holding fast her little package. "I'll run and get in the car—*then* I'll be all right."

So she went on with nimble footsteps, dodging the crowd, and soon came to the corner. A car was just in sight—that was fine! Polly put her hand in her pocket for her purse, to have it all ready—but as quickly drew it out again and stared wildly at the car, which she allowed to pass by. Her pocket was empty!

"Oh, dear," she said to herself, as a sudden gust of wind blew around the corner, and warned her to move on, "now what *shall* I do! Well, I must hurry. Nothing for it but to run now!"

And secretly glad at the chance for a good hearty run along the hard pavements, a thing she had been longing to do ever since she came to the city, Polly gathered her bundle of seed up under her arm, and set out for a jolly race. She was enjoying it hugely, when—a sudden turn of the corner brought her up against a gentleman, who, having his umbrella down to protect his face, hadn't seen her till it was too late.

Polly never could tell how it was done; but the first thing she knew she was being helped up from the wet, slippery pavement by a kind hand; and a gentleman's voice said in the deepest concern:

"I beg your pardon; it was extremely careless in me."

"It's no matter," said Polly, hopping up with a little laugh, and straightening her hat. "Only—" and she began to look for her parcel that had been sent spinning.

"What is it?" said the gentleman, bending down and beginning to explore, too, in the darkness.

"My bundle," began Polly. "Oh, dear!"

No need to ask for it now! There lay the paper wet and torn, down at their feet. The seed lay all over the pavement,



scattered far and wide even out to the puddles in the street. And not a cent of money to get anymore with! The rain that was falling around them as they stood there sent with the sound of every drop such a flood of misery into Polly's heart!

"What was it, child?" asked the gentleman, peering sharply to find out what the little shiny things were.

"Birdseed," gasped Polly.

"Is that all?" said the gentleman with a happy laugh. "I'm very glad."

"*All!*" Polly's heart stood still as she thought of Cherry, stark and stiff in the bottom of his cage, if he didn't get it soon. "Now," said the kind tones, briskly, "come, little girl, we'll make this all right speedily. Let's see—here's a bird store. Now, then."

"But, sir—" began Polly, holding back.

Even Cherry had better die than to do anything her mother wouldn't like. But the gentleman already had her in the shop, and was delighting the heart of the shopkeeper by ordering him to do up a big package of all kinds of seed. And then he added a cunning arrangement for birds to swing in, and two or three other things that didn't have anything to do with birds at all. And then they came out on the wet, slippery street again.

"Now, then, little girl," said the gentleman, tucking the bundle under his arm, and opening the umbrella; then he took hold of Polly's hand, who by this time was glad of a protector. "Where do you live? For I'm going to take you safely home this time where umbrellas can't run into you."

"*Oh!*" said Polly, with a little skip. "Thank you sir! It's up to Mr. King's; and—"

"*What!*" said the gentleman, stopping short in the midst of an immense puddle, and staring at her, "Mr. *Jasper* King's?"

"I don't know sir," said Polly, "what his other name is. Yes it *must* be Jasper; that's what Jappy's is, anyway," she added with a little laugh, wishing very much that she could see Jappy

at that identical moment.

"Jappy!" said the stranger, still standing as if petrified. "And are there little Whitney children in the same house!"

"Oh, yes," said Polly, raising her clear, brown eyes up at him. The gas lighter was just beginning his rounds, and the light from a neighboring lamp flashed full on Polly's face as she spoke, showing just how clear and brown the eyes were. "There's Percy, and Van, and little Dick—oh, he's so cunning!" she cried, impulsively.

The gentleman's face looked very queer just then; but he merely said:

"Why, you must be Polly?"

"Yes, sir, I am," said Polly, pleased to think he knew her. And then she told him how she'd forgotten Cherry's seed, and all about it. "And oh, sir," she said, and her voice began to tremble, "Mamsie'll be so frightened if I don't get there soon!"

"I'm going up there myself, so that it all happens very nicely," said the gentleman, commencing to start off briskly, and grasping her hand tighter. "Now, then, Polly."

So off they went at a very fast pace; she, skipping through the puddles that his long, even strides carried him safely over, chattered away by his side under the umbrella, and answered his many questions, and altogether got so very well acquainted that by the time they turned in at the old stone gateway, she felt as if she had known him for years.

And there, the first thing they either of them saw, down in a little corner back of the tall evergreens, was a small heap that rose as they splashed up the carriage drive, and resolved itself into a very red dress and a very white apron, as it rushed impulsively up and flung itself into Polly's wet arms:

"And I was so tired waiting, Polly!"

"Oh dear me, Phronsie!" cried Polly, huddling her up from the dark, wet ground. "You'll catch your death! What will mamsie say!"

The stranger, amazed at this new stage of the proceedings,

was vainly trying to hold the umbrella over both, till the procession could move on again.

"Oh!" cried Phronsie, shaking her yellow head decidedly, "they're all looking for you, Polly." She pointed one finger solemnly up to the big carved door as she spoke. At that Polly gathered her up close and began to walk with rapid footsteps up the path.

"Do let me carry you, little girl," said Polly's kind friend persuasively, bending down to the little face on Polly's neck.

"Oh, no, no, no!" said Phronsie, at each syllable grasping Polly around the throat in perfect terror, and waving him off with a very crumpled, mangy bit of paper, that had already done duty to wipe off the copious tears during her anxious watch. "Don't let him, Polly, *don't!*"

"There sha'n't anything hurt you," said Polly, kissing her reassuringly, and stepping briskly off with her burden, just as the door burst open, and Joel flew out on the veranda steps, followed by the rest of the troop in the greatest state of excitement.

"Oh, whickety! she's come!" he shouted, springing up to her over the puddles, and crowding under the umbrella. "Where'd you get Phronsie?" he asked, standing quite still at sight of the little feet tucked up to get out of the rain. And without waiting for an answer he turned and shot back into the house proclaiming in stentorian tones, "Ma, Polly's come—an' she's got Phronsie—an' an *awful* big man—and they're out by the gate!"

"*Phronsie!*" said Mrs. Pepper, springing to her feet, "why, I thought she was upstairs with Jane."

"Now, somebody," exclaimed old Mr. King, who sat by the library table vainly trying to read a newspaper, which he now threw down in extreme irritation as he rose quickly and went to the door to welcome the wanderers, "*somebody* ought to watch that poor child, whose business it is to know where she is! She's caught her death-cold, no doubt, no doubt!"

Outside, in the rain, the children revolved around and around Polly and Phronsie, hugging and kissing them, until nobody could do much more than breathe, not seeming to notice the stranger, who stood quietly waiting till such time as he could be heard.

At last, in a lull in the scramble, as they were dragging Polly and her burden up the steps, each wild for the honor of escorting her into the house, he cried out in laughing tones:

"Isn't anybody going to kiss *me,* I wonder!"

The two little Whitneys, who were eagerly clutching Polly's arms, turned around; and Percy rubbed his eyes in a puzzled way, as Joel said, stopping a minute to look up at the tall figure:

"We don't ever kiss strangers—mamsie's told us not to."

"For shame, Joey!" cried Polly, feeling her face grow dreadfully red in the darkness, "the gentleman's been so kind to me!"

"You're right, my boy," said the stranger, laughing and bending down to Joel's upturned, sturdy countenance, at the same instant that Mrs. Pepper flung open the big door, and a bright, warm light fell straight across his handsome face. And then—well, then Percy gave a violent bound, and upsetting Joel as he did so, wriggled his way down the steps—at the same time that Van, on Polly's other side, rushed up to the gentleman:

"Papa—oh, *papa!"*

Polly, half way up the steps, turned around, and then, at the rush of feeling that gathered at her heart, sat right down on the wet slippery step.

"Why, Polly Pepper!" exclaimed Joel, not minding his own upset. "You're right in all the slush—mother won't like it, I tell you!"

"Hush!" cried Polly, catching his arm, "he's come—oh, Joel—he's *come!"*

"Who?" cried Joel, staring around blindly, "who, Polly?"

Polly had just opened her lips to explain, when Mr. King's portly, handsome figure appeared in the doorway. "Do come in, children—why—good gracious, Mason!"

"Yes," cried the stranger, lightly, dropping his big bundle and umbrella as he passed in the door, with his little sons clinging to him. "Where is Marian?"

"Why didn't you write?" asked the old gentleman, testily. "These surprises aren't the right sort of things," and he began to feel vigorously of his heart. "Here, Mrs. Pepper, be so good as to call Mrs. Whitney."

"*Pepper! Pepper!*" repeated Mr. Whitney, perplexedly.

"She's coming—I hear her upstairs," cried Van Whitney. "Oh, let me tell her!" He struggled to get down from his father's arms as he said this.

"No, I shall—I heard her first!" cried Percy. "Oh, dear me! Grandpapa's going to!"

Mr. King advanced to the foot of the staircase as his daughter, all unconscious, ran down with a light step, and a smile on her face.

"*Has* Polly come?" she asked, seeing only her father. "Yes," replied the old gentleman, shortly, "and she's brought a big bundle, Marian!"

"*A big bundle?*" she repeated wonderingly, and gazing at him.

"A *very* big bundle," he said, and taking hold of her shoulders he turned her around on—her husband.

So Polly and Phronsie crept in unnoticed after all.

"I wish Ben was here," said little Davie, capering around the Whitney group, "an' Jappy, I do!"

"Where are they!" asked Polly.

"Don't know," said Joel, tugging at his shoe string. "See—aren't these prime!" He held up a shining black shoe, fairly bristling with newness, for Polly to admire.

"Splendid," she cried heartily; "but where *are* the boys?"

"They went after you," said Davie, "after we came home

with our shoes."

"No, they didn't," contradicted Joel, flatly; and sitting down on the floor he began to tie and untie his new possessions. "When we came home Ben drew us pictures—lots of 'em—don't you know?"

"Oh, yes," said Davie, nodding his head, "so he did; that was when we all cried 'cause you weren't home, Polly."

"He drawed me a be-*yew*-tiful one," cried Phronsie, holding up her mangy bit; "see, Polly, see!"

"That's the little brown house," said Davie, looking over her shoulder as Phronsie put it carefully into Polly's hand.

"It's all washed out," said Polly, smoothing it out, "when you stayed out in the rain."

Phronsie's face grew very grave at that.

"Bad, naughty old rain," she said, and then she began to cry as hard as she could.

"Oh dear, don't!" cried Polly in dismay, trying her best to stop her, "oh, Phronsie, do stop!" she implored, pointing into the next room whence the sound of happy voices issued, "they'll all hear you!"

But Phronsie in her grief didn't care, but wailed on steadily.

"Who is it anyway?" cried Joel, tired of admiring his precious shoes, and getting up to hear them squeak, "that great big man, you know, Polly, that came in with you?"

"Why, I thought I told you," said Polly, at her wit's end over Phronsie. "It's Percy and Van's father, Joey!"

"Whockey!" cried Joel, completely stunned, "*really* and truly, Polly Pepper?"

"Really and truly," cried Polly, bundling Phronsie up in her arms to lay the little wet cheek against hers.

"Then I'm going to peek," cried Joel, squeaking across the floor to carry his threat into execution.

"Oh, you mustn't, Joe!" cried Polly, frightened lest he should. "Come right back, or I'll tell mamsie!"

"They're all comin' in, anyway," cried little Davie, delightedly, and scuttling over to Polly's side.

"And here are the little friends I've heard so much about!" cried Mr. Whitney coming in amongst them. "Oh, you needn't introduce me to Polly—she brought me home!"

"They're *all* Pepperses," said Percy, waving his hand, and doing the business up at one stroke.

"Only the best of 'em isn't here," observed Van, rather ungallantly, "*he* draws perfectly elegant, papa!"

"I like Polly best, I do!" cried little Dick, tumbling after.

"*Peppers!*" again repeated Mr. Whitney in a puzzled way.

"And here is Mrs. Pepper," said old Mr. King, pompously drawing her forward, "the children's mother, and—"

But here Mrs. Pepper began to act in a very queer way, rubbing her eyes and twisting one corner of her black apron in a decidedly nervous manner that, as the old gentleman looked up, he saw with astonishment presently communicated itself to the gentleman opposite.

"Is it," said Mr. Whitney, putting out his hand and grasping the hard, toil-worn one in the folds of the apron, "is it cousin Mary?"

"And aren't you cousin John?" she asked, the tears in her bright black eyes.

"Of all things in this world!" cried the old gentleman, waving his head helplessly from one to the other. "Will *somebody* have the extreme goodness to tell us what all this means?"

At this the little Peppers crowded around their mother, and into all the vacant places they could find, to get near the fascinating scene.

"Well," said Mr. Whitney, sitting down and drawing his wife to his side, "it's a long story. You see, when I was a little youngster, and—"

"You were *John* Whitney *then,*" put in Mrs. Pepper, slyly. "That's the reason I never knew when they were all talking of

Mason Whitney."

"John Whitney I was," said Mr. Whitney, laughing, "or rather, Johnny and Jack. But Grandmother Mason, when I grew older, wanted me called by my middle name to please grandfather. But to go back—when I was a little shaver, about as big as Percy here—"

"Oh, papa!" began Percy, deprecatingly. To be called "a little shaver" before all the others!

"He means, dearie," said his mamma, reassuringly, "when he was a boy like you. Now hear what papa is going to say."

"Well, I was sent up into Vermont to stay at the old place. There was a little girl there; a bright, black-eyed little girl. She was my cousin, and her name was Mary Bartlett."

"Who's Mary Bartlett?" asked Joel, interrupting.

"There she is, sir," said Mr. Whitney, pointing to Mrs. Pepper, who was laughing and crying together.

"Where?" said Joel, utterly bewildered. "I don't see any Mary Bartlett. What does he mean, Polly?"

"I don't know," said Polly. "Wait, Joey," she whispered, "he's going to tell us all about it."

"Well, this little cousin and I went to the district school, and had many good times together. And then my parents sent for me, and I went to Germany to school; and when I came back I lost sight of her. All I could find out was that she had married an Englishman by the name of Pepper."

"Oh!" cried all the children together.

"And I always supposed she had gone to England for despite all my exertions, I could find no trace of her. Ah, Mary," he said reproachfully, "why didn't you let me know where you were?"

"I heard," said Mrs. Pepper, "that you'd grown awfully rich, and I couldn't."

"You always were a proud little thing," he said laughing. "Well, but," broke in Mr. King, unable to keep silence any longer, "*I'd* like to inquire, Mason, why you didn't find all this

out before, in Marian's letters, when she mentioned Mrs. Pepper?"

"She didn't ever mention her," said Mr. Whitney, turning around to face his questioner, "not as *Mrs. Pepper*—never once by name. It was always either 'Polly's mother,' or 'Phronsie's mother.' Just like a woman," he added, with a mischievous glance at his wife, "not to be explicit."

"And just like a man," she retorted, with a happy little laugh, "not to *ask* for explanations."

"I hear Jappy," cried Polly, in a glad voice, "and Ben—oh, good!" as a sound of rushing footsteps was heard over the veranda steps, and down the long hall.

The door was thrown suddenly open, and Jasper plunged in, his face flushed with excitement, and after him Ben, looking a little as he did when Phronsie was lost, while Prince squeezed panting in between the two boys.

"Has Polly got—" began Jasper.

"Oh, yes, I'm here," cried Polly, springing up to them; "oh, Ben!"

"She has," cried Joel, disentangling himself from the group, "don't you see, Jappy?"

"She's all home," echoed Phronsie, flying up. "Oh, Ben, do draw me another little house!"

"And see—see!" cried the little Whitneys, pointing with jubilant fingers to their papa, "see what she brought!"

Jasper turned around at that—and then rushed forward.

"Oh, brother Mason!"

"Well, Jasper," said Mr. Whitney, a whole wealth of affection beaming on the boy, "how you have stretched up in six months!"

"Haven't I?" said Jasper, laughing, and drawing himself up to his fullest height.

"He's a-standin' on tiptoe," said Joel critically, who was hovering near. "I most know he is!" and he bent down to examine the position of Jasper's heels.

"Not a bit of it, Joe!" cried Jasper, with a merry laugh, and setting both feet with a convincing thud on the floor.

"Well, anyway, I'll be just as big," cried Joel, "when I'm thirteen, so!"

Just then a loud and quick rap on the table made all the children skip, and stopped everybody's tongue. It came from Mr. King.

"Phronsie," said he, "come here, child. I can't do anything without you," and held out his hand. Phronsie immediately left Ben, who was hanging over Polly as if he never meant to let her go out of his sight again, and went directly over to the old gentleman's side.

"Now, then!" He swung her upon his shoulder, where she perched like a little bird, gravely surveying the whole group. One little hand stole around the old gentleman's neck, and patted his cheek softly, which so pleased him that for a minute or two he stood perfectly still so that everybody might see it.

"Now, Phronsie, *you* must tell all these children so that they'll understand—say everything just as I tell you, mind!"

"I will," said Phronsie, shaking her small head wisely, "every single thing."

"Well, then, now begin—"

"Well, then, now begin," said Phronsie, looking down on the faces with an air as much like Mr. King's as was possible, and finishing up with two or three little nods.

"Oh, no, dear, that isn't it," cried the old gentleman, "I'll tell you. Say, Phronsie, 'you are all cousins—every one.'"

"You are all cousins—every one," repeated little Phronsie, simply, shaking her yellow head into the very middle of the group.

"Does she *mean* it, grandpapa? Does she *mean* it?" cried Percy, in the greatest excitement.

"As true as *everything?*" demanded Joel, crowding in between them.

"As true as—truth!" said the old gentleman solemnly,



patting the child's little fat hand. "So make the most of it."

"Oh!" said Polly, with a long sigh. And then Jasper and she took hold of hands and had a good spin!

Joel turned around with two big eyes on Percy.

"We're *cousins!"* he said.

"I know it," said Percy, "and so's Van!"

"Yes," said Van, flying up, "and I'm cousin to Polly, too—that's best!"

"Can't *I* be a cousin?" cried little Dick, crowding up, with two red cheeks. "Isn't anybody going to be a cousin to me, too?"

"Everybody but Jasper," said the old gentleman, laughing heartily at them. "You and I, my boy," he turned to his son, "are left out in the cold."

At this a scream, loud and terrible to hear, struck upon them all, as Joel flung himself flat on the floor.

"Isn't Jappy—our—cousin? I—want—Jappy!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed the old gentleman, in the greatest alarm, "what is the matter with the boy! Do somebody stop him!"

"Joel," said Jasper, leaning over him, and trying to help Polly lift him up. "I'll tell you how we'll fix it! I'll be your

brother. That's best of all—brother to Polly, and Ben and the whole of you—then we'll see!"

Joel bolted up at that, and began to smile through the tears running down the rosy face.

"Will you, *really?*" he said, "just like Ben—and everything?"

"I can't be as good as Ben," said Jappy, laughing, "but I'll be a real brother like him."

"Phoo—phoo! Then I don't care!" cried Joel wiping off the last tear on the back of his chubby hand. "Now I guess we're better'n *you,*" he exclaimed with a triumphant glance over at the little Whitneys, as he began to make the new shoes skip at a lively pace up and down the long room.

"Oh, dear!" they both cried in great distress.

"Now, papa, Jappy's going to be Joey's brother—and he isn't anything but *our* old uncle! Make him be ours more, papa, do!"

And then Polly sprang up.

"Oh! oh—deary me!" And she rushed out into the hall and began to tug violently at the big bundle, tossed down in a corner. "Cherry'll die—Cherry'll die!" she cried, "Do somebody help me off with the string!"

But Polly already had it off by the time Jasper's knife was half out of his pocket, and was kneeling down on the floor scooping out a big handful of the seed.

"Don't hurry so, Polly," said Jasper, as she jumped up to fly upstairs. "He's had some a perfect age—he's all right."

"*What!*" said Polly, stopping so suddenly that two or three little seeds flew out of the outstretched hand and went dancing away to the foot of the stairs by themselves.

"Oh, I heard him scolding away there when I first came home," said Jasper, "so I just ran down a block or two, and got him some."

"Is that all there is in that big bundle?" said Joel in a disappointed tone, who had followed with extreme curiosity

to see its contents. "Phoo!—that's no fun—old birdseed!"

"I know," said Polly with a gay little laugh, pointing with the handful of seed into the library, "but I shouldn't have met the other big bundle if it hadn't have been for *this,* Joe!"

FIVE CHILDREN AND IT

By Edith Nesbit





The Psammead

CHAPTER I
Beautiful as the Day

The house was three miles from the station, but, before the dusty hired hack had rattled along for five minutes, the children began to put their heads out of the carriage window and say, "Aren't we nearly there?" And every time they passed a house, which was not very often, they all said, "Oh, *is* this it?" But it never was, till they reached the very top of the hill, just past the chalk quarry and before you come to the gravel pit. And then there was a white house with a green garden and an orchard beyond, and mother said, "Here we are!"

"How white the house is," said Robert.

"And look at the roses," said Anthea.

"And the plums," said Jane.

"It is rather decent," Cyril admitted.

The Baby said, "Wanty go walky;" and the hack stopped with a last rattle and jolt.

Everyone got its legs kicked or its feet trodden on in the scramble to get out of the carriage that very minute, but no one seemed to mind. Mother, curiously enough, was in no hurry to get out; and even when she had come down slowly and by the step, and with no jump at all, she seemed to wish to see the boxes carried in, and even to pay the driver, instead of joining in that first glorious rush round the garden and orchard and the thorny, thistly, briery, brambly wilderness beyond the broken gate and the dry fountain at the side of the house. But the children were wiser, for once. It was not really a pretty house at all; it was quite ordinary, and mother thought it was rather inconvenient, and was quite annoyed at there being no shelves, to speak of, and hardly a cupboard in



That first glorious rush round the garden.

the place. Father used to say that the ironwork on the roof and coping was like an architect's nightmare. But the house was deep in the country, with no other house in sight, and the children had been in London for two years, without so much as once going to the seaside even for a day by an excursion train, and so the White House seemed to them a sort of Fairy Palace set down in an Earthly Paradise. For London is like prison for children, especially if their relations are not rich.

Of course there are the shops and theatres, and entertainments and things, but if your people are rather poor you don't get taken to the theatres, and you can't buy things out of the shops; and London has none of those nice things

that children may play with without hurting the things or themselves—such as trees and sand and woods and waters. And nearly everything in London is the wrong sort of shape—all straight lines and flat streets, instead of being all sorts of odd shapes, like things are in the country. Trees are all different, as you know, and I am sure some tiresome person must have told you that there are no two blades of grass exactly alike. But in streets, where the blades of grass don't grow, everything is like everything else. This is why many children who live in the towns are so extremely naughty. They do not know what is the matter with them, and no more do their fathers and mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, tutors, governesses, and nurses; but I know. And so do you, now. Children in the country are naughty sometimes, too, but that is for quite different reasons.

The children had explored the gardens and the outhouses thoroughly before they were caught and cleaned for tea, and they saw quite well that they were certain to be happy at the White House. They thought so from the first moment, but when they found the back of the house covered with jasmine, all in white flower, and smelling like a bottle of the most expensive perfume that is ever given for a birthday present; and when they had seen the lawn, all green and smooth, and quite different from the brown grass in the gardens at Camden Town; and when they found the stable with a loft over it and some old hay still left, they were almost certain; and when Robert had found the broken swing and tumbled out of it and got a bump on his head the size of an egg, and Cyril had nipped his finger in the door of a hutch that seemed made to keep rabbits in, if you ever had any, they had no longer any doubts whatever.

The best part of it all was that there were no rules about not going to places and not doing things. In London almost everything is labelled "You mustn't touch," and though the label is invisible it's just as bad, because you know it's there,



Cyril had nipped his finger in the door of a hutch.

or if you don't you very soon get told.

The White House was on the edge of a hill, with a wood behind it—and the chalk quarry on one side and the gravel pit on the other. Down at the bottom of the hill was a level plain, with queer-shaped white buildings where people burnt lime, and a big red brewery and other houses; and when the big chimneys were smoking and the sun was setting, the valley looked as if it was filled with golden mist, and the limekilns and hop-drying houses glimmered and glittered till they were like an enchanted city out of the *Arabian Nights*.

Now that I have begun to tell you about the place, I feel

that I could go on and make this into a most interesting story about all the ordinary things that the children did—just the kind of things you do yourself, you know, and you would believe every word of it; and when I told about the children's being tiresome, as you are sometimes, your aunts would perhaps write in the margin of the story with a pencil, "How true!" or "How like life!" and you would see it and would very likely be annoyed. So I will only tell you the really astonishing things that happened, and you may leave the book about quite safely, for no aunts and uncles either are likely to write "How true!" on the edge of the story. Grown-up people find it very difficult to believe really wonderful things, unless they have what they call proof. But children will believe almost anything, and grown-ups know this. That is why they tell you that the earth is round like an orange, when you can see perfectly well that it is flat and lumpy; and why they say that the earth goes round the sun, when you can see for yourself any day that the sun gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night like a good sun as it is, and the earth knows its place, and lies as still as a mouse. Yet I daresay you believe all that about the earth and the sun, and if so you will find it quite easy to believe that before Anthea and Cyril and the others had been a week in the country they had found a fairy. At least they called it that, because that was what it called itself; and of course it knew best, but it was not at all like any fairy you ever saw or heard of or read about.

It was at the gravel pits. Father had to go away suddenly on business, and mother had gone away to stay with Granny, who was not very well. They both went in a great hurry, and when they were gone the house seemed dreadfully quiet and empty, and the children wandered from one room to another and looked at the bits of paper and string on the floors left over from the packing, and not yet cleared up, and wished they had something to do. It was Cyril who said—

"I say, let's take our spades and dig in the gravel pits. We

can pretend it's seaside."

"Father says it was once," Anthea said; "he says there are shells there thousands of years old."

So they went. Of course they had been to the edge of the gravel pit and looked over, but they had not gone down into it for fear father should say they mustn't play there, and it was the same with the chalk quarry. The gravel pit is not really dangerous if you don't try to climb down the edges, but go the slow safe way round by the road, as if you were a cart.

Each of the children carried its own spade, and took it in turns to carry the Lamb. He was the baby, and they called him that because "Baa" was the first thing he ever said. They called Anthea "Panther," which seems silly when you read it, but when you say it, it sounds a little like her name.

The gravel pit is very large and wide, with grass growing round the edges at the top, and dry stringy wildflowers, purple and yellow. It is like a giant's washbowl. And there are mounds of gravel, and holes in the sides of the bowl where gravel has been taken out, and high up in the steep sides there are the little holes that are the little front doors of the little bank martins' little houses.

The children built a castle, of course, but castle building is rather poor fun when you have no hope of the swishing tide ever coming in to fill up the moat and wash away the drawbridge, and, at the happy last, to wet everybody up to the waist at least.

Cyril wanted to dig out a cave to play smugglers in, but the others thought it might bury them alive, so it ended in all spades going to work to dig a hole through the castle to Australia. These children, you see, believed that the world was round, and that on the other side the little Australian boys and girls were really walking wrong way up, like flies on the ceiling, with their heads hanging down into the air.

The children dug and they dug and they dug, and their hands got sandy and hot and red, and their faces got damp

and shiny. The Lamb had tried to eat the sand, and had cried so hard when he found that it was not, as he had supposed, brown sugar, that he was now tired out, and was lying asleep in a warm fat bunch in the middle of the half-finished castle. This left his brothers and sisters free to work really hard, and the hole that was to come out in Australia soon grew so deep that Jane, who was called Pussy for short, begged the others to stop.

"Suppose the bottom of the hole gave way suddenly," said she, "and you tumbled out among the little Australians, all the sand would get in their eyes."

"Yes," said Robert; "and they would hate us, and throw stones at us, and not let us see the kangaroos, or opossums, or bluegums, or Emu Brand birds, or anything."

Cyril and Anthea knew that Australia was not quite so near as all that, but they agreed to stop using the spades and to go on with their hands. This was quite easy, because the sand at the bottom of the hole was very soft and fine and dry, like sea-sand. And there were little shells in it.

"Fancy it having been wet sea here once, all sloppy and shiny," said Jane, "with fishes and conger eels and coral and mermaids."

"And masts of ships and wrecked Spanish treasure. I wish we could find a gold doubloon, or something," Cyril said.

"How did the sea get carried away?" Robert asked.

"Not in a pail, silly," said his brother.

"Father says the earth got too hot underneath, as you do in bed sometimes, so it just hunched up its shoulders, and the sea had to slip off, like the blankets do us, and the shoulder was left sticking out, and turned into dry land. Let's go and look for shells; I think that little cave looks likely, and I see something sticking out there like a bit of wrecked ship's anchor, and it's beastly hot in the Australian hole."

The others agreed, but Anthea went on digging. She always liked to finish a thing when she had once begun it. She

felt it would be a disgrace to leave that hole without getting through to Australia.

The cave was disappointing, because there were no shells, and the wrecked ship's anchor turned out to be only the broken end of a pick axe handle, and the cave party were just making up their minds that sand makes you thirstier when it is not by the seaside, and someone had suggested that they all go home for lemonade, when Anthea suddenly screamed—

"Cyril! Come here! Oh, come quick—It's alive! It'll get away! Quick!"

They all hurried back.

"It's a rat, I shouldn't wonder," said Robert. "Father says they infest old places—and this must be pretty old if the sea



Anthea suddenly screamed, "It's alive!"

was here thousands of years ago"—

"Perhaps it is a snake," said Jane, shuddering.

"Let's look," said Cyril, jumping into the hole. "I'm not afraid of snakes. I like them. If it is a snake I'll tame it, and it will follow me everywhere, and I'll let it sleep round my neck at night."

"No, you won't," said Robert firmly. He shared Cyril's bedroom. "But you may if it's a rat."

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Anthea; "it's not a rat, it's *much* bigger. And it's not a snake. It's got feet; I saw them; and fur! No—not the spade. You'll hurt it! Dig with your hands."

"And let *it* hurt *me* instead! That's so likely, isn't it?" said Cyril, seizing a spade.

"Oh, don't!" said Anthea. "Squirrel, *don't*. I—it sounds silly, but it said something. It really and truly did"—

"What?"

"It said, 'You let me alone.'"

But Cyril merely observed that his sister must have gone off her head, and he and Robert dug with spades while Anthea sat on the edge of the hole, jumping up and down with hotness and anxiety. They dug carefully, and presently everyone could see that there really was something moving in the bottom of the Australian hole.

Then Anthea cried out, "*I'm* not afraid. Let me dig," and fell on her knees and began to scratch like a dog does when he has suddenly remembered where it was that he buried his bone.

"Oh, I felt fur," she cried, half laughing and half crying. "I did indeed! I did!" when suddenly a dry husky voice in the sand made them all jump back, and their hearts jumped nearly as fast as they did.

"Let me alone," it said. And now everyone heard the voice and looked at the others to see if they had heard it too.

"But we want to see you," said Robert bravely.

"I wish you'd come out," said Anthea, also taking courage.

"Oh, well—if that's your wish," the voice said, and the sand stirred and spun and scattered, and something brown and furry and fat came rolling out into the hole, and the sand fell off it, and it sat there yawning and rubbing the ends of its eyes with its hands.

"I believe I must have dropped asleep," it said, stretching itself.

The children stood round the hole in a ring, looking at the creature they had found. It was worth looking at. Its eyes were on long horns like a snail's eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat's ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur; its legs and arms were furry too, and it had hands and feet like a monkey's.

"What on earth is it?" Jane said. "Shall we take it home?"

The thing turned its long eyes to look at her, and said—

"Does she always talk nonsense, or is it only the rubbish on her head that makes her silly?"

It looked scornfully at Jane's hat as it spoke.

"She doesn't mean to be silly," Anthea said gently; "we none of us do, whatever you may think! Don't be frightened; we don't want to hurt you, you know."

"Hurt *me*!" it said. "*Me* frightened? Upon my word! Why, you talk as if I were nobody in particular." All its fur stood out like a cat's when it is going to fight.

"Well," said Anthea, still kindly, "perhaps if we knew who you are in particular we could think of something to say that wouldn't make you angry. Everything we've said so far seems to have done so. Who are you? And don't get angry! Because really we don't know."

"You don't know?" it said. "Well, I knew the world had changed—but—well, really—Do you mean to tell me seriously you don't know a Psammead when you see one?"

"A Sammyadd? That's Greek to me."

"So it is to everyone," said the creature sharply. "Well, in plain English, then, a *Sand-fairy*. Don't you know a Sand-fairy when you see one?"

It looked so grieved and hurt that Jane hastened to say, "Of course I see you are, *now*. It's quite plain now one comes to look at you."

"You came to look at me, several sentences ago," it said crossly, beginning to curl up again in the sand.

"Oh—don't go away again! Do talk some more," Robert cried. "I didn't know you were a Sand-fairy, but I knew directly I saw you that you were much the wonderfullest thing I'd ever seen."

The Sand-fairy seemed a shade less disagreeable after this.

"It isn't talking I mind," it said, "as long as you're reasonably civil. But I'm not going to make polite conversation for you. If you talk nicely to me, perhaps I'll answer you, and perhaps I won't. Now say something."

Of course no one could think of anything to say, but at last Robert thought of "How long have you lived here?" and he said it at once.

"Oh, ages—several thousand years," replied the Psammead.

"Tell us about it. Do."

"It's all in books."

"*You* aren't!" Jane said. "Oh, tell us everything you can about yourself! We don't know anything about you, and you *are* so nice."

The Sand-fairy smoothed his long rat-like whiskers and smiled between them.

"Do please tell!" said the children all together.

It is wonderful how quickly you get used to things, even the most astonishing. Five minutes before, the children had had no more idea than you had that there was such a thing as a Sand-fairy in the world, and now they were talking to it as though they had known it all their lives.

It drew its eyes in and said—

"How very sunny it is—quite like old times! Where do you get your Megatheriums from now?"

"What?" said the children all at once. It is very difficult always to remember that "what" is not polite, especially in moments of surprise or agitation.

"Are Pterodactyls plentiful now?" the Sand-fairy went on.

The children were unable to reply.

"What do you have for breakfast?" the Fairy said impatiently, "and who gives it to you?"

"Eggs and bacon, and bread and milk, and porridge and things. Mother gives it to us. What are Mega-what's-its-names and Ptero-what-do-you-call-thems? And does anyone have them for breakfast?"

"Why, almost everyone had Pterodactyl for breakfast in my time! Pterodactyls were something like crocodiles and something like birds—I believe they were very good grilled. You see, it was like this: of course there were heaps of Sand-fairies then, and in the morning early you went out and hunted for them, and when you'd found one it gave you your wish. People used to send their little boys down to the sea-shore in the morning before breakfast to get the day's wishes, and very often the eldest boy in the family would be told to wish for a Megatherium, ready jointed for cooking. It was as big as an elephant, you see, so there was a good deal of meat on it. And if they wanted fish, the Ichthyosaurus was asked for—he was twenty to forty feet long, so there was plenty of him. And for poultry there was the Plesiosaurus; there were nice pickings on that too. Then the other children could wish for other things. But when people had dinner parties it was nearly always Megatheriums; and Ichthyosaurus, because his fins were a great delicacy and his tail made soup."

"There must have been heaps and heaps of cold meat left over," said Anthea, who meant to be a good housekeeper someday.

"Oh no," said the Psammead, "that would never have done. Why, of course at sunset what was left over turned into stone. You find the stone bones of the Megatherium and things all over the place even now, they tell me."

"Who tell you?" asked Cyril; but the Sand-fairy frowned and began to dig very fast with its furry hands.

"Oh, don't go!" they all cried; "tell us more about when it was Megatheriums for breakfast! Was the world like this then?"

It stopped digging.

"Not a bit," it said; "it was nearly all sand where I lived, and coal grew on trees, and the periwinkles were as big as tea trays—you find them now; they're turned into stone. We Sand-fairies used to live on the seashore, and the children used to come with their little flint spades and flint pails and make castles for us to live in. That's thousands of years ago, but I hear that children still build castles on the sand. It's difficult to break yourself of a habit."

"But why did you stop living in the castles?" asked Robert.

"It's a sad story," said the Psammead gloomily. "It was because they *would* build moats to the castles, and the nasty wet bubbling sea used to come in, and of course as soon as a Sand-fairy got wet it caught cold, and generally died. And so there got to be fewer and fewer, and, whenever you found a fairy and had a wish, you used to wish for a Megatherium, and eat twice as much as you wanted, because it might be weeks before you got another wish."

"And did *you* get wet?" Robert inquired.

The Sand-fairy shuddered. "Only once," it said; "the end of the twelfth hair of my top left whisker—I feel the place still in damp weather. It was only once, but it was quite enough for me. I went away as soon as the sun had dried my poor dear whisker. I scurried away to the back of the beach, and dug myself a house deep in warm dry sand, and there I've been ever since. And the sea changed its lodgings afterwards. And

now I'm not going to tell you another thing."

"Just one more, please," said the children. "Can you give wishes now?"

"Of course," said it; "didn't I give you yours a few minutes ago? You said, 'I wish you'd come out,' and I did."

"Oh, please, mayn't we have another?"

"Yes, but be quick about it. I'm tired of you."

I daresay you have often thought what you would do if you had three wishes given you, and have despised the old man and his wife in the black pudding story, and felt certain that if you had the chance you could think of three really useful wishes without a moment's hesitation. These children had often talked this matter over, but, now the chance had suddenly come to them, they could not make up their minds.

"Quick," said the Sand-fairy crossly. No one could think of anything, only Anthea did manage to remember a private wish of her own and Jane's which they had never told the boys. She knew the boys would not care about it—but still it was better than nothing.

"I wish we were all as beautiful as the day," she said in a great hurry.

The children looked at each other, but each could see that the others were not any better looking than usual. The Psammead pushed out his long eyes, and seemed to be holding its breath and swelling itself out till it was twice as fat and furry as before. Suddenly it let its breath go in a long sigh.

"I'm really afraid I can't manage it," it said apologetically; "I must be out of practice."

The children were horribly disappointed.

"Oh, *do* try again!" they said.

"Well," said the Sand-fairy, "the fact is, I was keeping back a little strength to give the rest of you your wishes with. If you'll be contented with one wish a day among the lot of you I daresay I can screw myself up to it. Do you agree to that?"

"Yes, oh yes!" said Jane and Anthea. The boys nodded. They did not believe the Sand-fairy could do it. You can always make girls believe things much easier than you can boys.

It stretched out its eyes farther than ever, and swelled and swelled and swelled.

"I do hope it won't hurt itself," said Anthea.

"Or crack its skin," Robert said anxiously.

Everyone was very much relieved when the Sand-fairy, after getting so big that it almost filled up the hole in the sand, suddenly let out its breath and went back to its proper size.

"That's all right," it said, panting heavily. "It'll come easier tomorrow."

"Did it hurt much?" said Anthea.

"Only my poor whisker, thank you," said he, "but you're a kind and thoughtful child. Good day."

It scratched suddenly and fiercely with its hands and feet, and disappeared in the sand.

Then the children looked at each other, and each child suddenly found itself alone with three perfect strangers, all radiantly beautiful.

They stood for some moments in silence. Each thought that its brothers and sisters had wandered off, and that these strange children had stolen up unnoticed while it was watching the swelling form of the Sand-fairy. Anthea spoke first—

"Excuse me," she said very politely to Jane, who now had enormous blue eyes and a cloud of russet hair, "but have you seen two little boys and a little girl anywhere about?"

"I was just going to ask you that," said Jane. And then Cyril cried—

"Why, it's *you*! I know the hole in your pinafore! You *are* Jane, aren't you? And you're the Panther; I can see your dirty handkerchief that you forgot to change after you'd cut your thumb! The wish *has* come off, after all. I say, am I as handsome as you are?"

"If you're Cyril, I liked you much better as you were

before," said Anthea decidedly. "You look like the picture of the young chorister, with your golden hair; you'll die young, I shouldn't wonder. And if that's Robert, he's like an Italian organ grinder. His hair's all black."

"You two girls are like Christmas cards, then—that's all—silly Christmas cards," said Robert angrily. "And Jane's hair is simply carrots."

It was indeed of that Venetian tint so much admired by artists.

"Well, it's no use finding fault with each other," said Anthea; "let's get the Lamb and lug it home to dinner. The servants will admire us most awfully, you'll see."

Baby was just waking up when they got to him, and not one of the children but was relieved to find that he at least was not as beautiful as the day, but just the same as usual.

"I suppose he's too young to have wishes naturally," said Jane. "We shall have to mention him specially next time."

Anthea ran forward and held out her arms.

"Come, then," she said.

The Baby looked at her disapprovingly, and put a sandy pink thumb in his mouth. Anthea was his favourite sister.

"Come, then," she said.

"G'way 'long!" said the Baby.

"Come to own Pussy," said Jane.

"Wants my Panty," said the Lamb dismally, and his lip trembled.

"Here, come on, Veteran," said Robert, "come and have a yidey on Yobby's back."

"Yah, narky narky boy," howled the Baby, giving way altogether. Then the children knew the worst. *The Baby did not know them!*

They looked at each other in despair, and it was terrible to each, in this dire emergency, to meet only the beautiful eyes of perfect strangers, instead of the merry, friendly, commonplace, twinkling, jolly little eyes of its own brothers and

sisters.

"This is most truly awful," said Cyril when he had tried to lift up the Lamb, and the Lamb had scratched like a cat and bellowed like a bull! "We've got to *make friends* with him! I can't carry him home screaming like that. Fancy having to make friends with our own baby!—it's too silly."

That, however, was exactly what they had to do. It took over an hour, and the task was not rendered any easier by the fact that the Lamb was by this time as hungry as a lion and as thirsty as a desert.

At last he consented to allow these strangers to carry him home by turns, but as he refused to hold on to such new acquaintances he was a dead weight, and most exhausting.

"Thank goodness, we're home!" said Jane, staggering through the iron gate to where Martha, the nursemaid, stood at the front door shading her eyes with her hand and looking



The baby did not know them!

out anxiously. "Here! Do take Baby!"

Martha snatched the Baby from her arms.

"Thanks be, *he's* safe back," she said. "Where are the others, and whoever to goodness gracious are all of you?"

"We're *us*, of course," said Robert.

"And who's Us, when you're at home?" asked Martha scornfully.

"I tell you it's *us*, only we're beautiful as the day," said Cyril. "I'm Cyril, and these are the others, and we're jolly hungry. Let us in, and don't be a silly idiot."

Martha merely dratted Cyril's impudence and tried to shut the door in his face.

"I know we *look* different, but I'm Anthea, and we're so tired, and it's long past dinnertime."

"Then go home to your dinners, whoever you are; and if our children put you up to this play acting you can tell them from me they'll catch it, so they know what to expect!" With that she did bang the door. Cyril rang the bell violently. No answer. Presently cook put her head out of a bedroom window and said—

"If you don't take yourselves off, and that precious sharp, I'll go and fetch the police." And she slammed down the window.

"It's no good," said Anthea. "Oh, do, do come away before we get sent to prison!"

The boys said it was nonsense, and the law of England couldn't put you in prison for just being as beautiful as the day, but all the same they followed the others out into the lane.

"We shall be our proper selves after sunset, I suppose," said Jane.

"I don't know," Cyril said sadly; "it mayn't be like that now—things have changed a good deal since Megatherium times."

"Oh," cried Anthea suddenly, "perhaps we shall turn into

stone at sunset, like the Megatheriums did, so that there mayn't be any of us left over for the next day."

She began to cry, so did Jane. Even the boys turned pale. No one had the heart to say anything.

It was a horrible afternoon. There was no house near where the children could beg a crust of bread or even a glass of water. They were afraid to go to the village, because they had seen Martha go down there with a basket, and there was a local constable. True, they were all as beautiful as the day, but that is a poor comfort when you are as hungry as a hunter and as thirsty as a sponge.

Three times they tried in vain to get the servants in the White House to let them in and listen to their tale. And then Robert went alone, hoping to be able to climb in at one of the back windows and so open the door to the others. But all the windows were out of reach, and Martha emptied a toilet jug of cold water over him from a top window, and said—

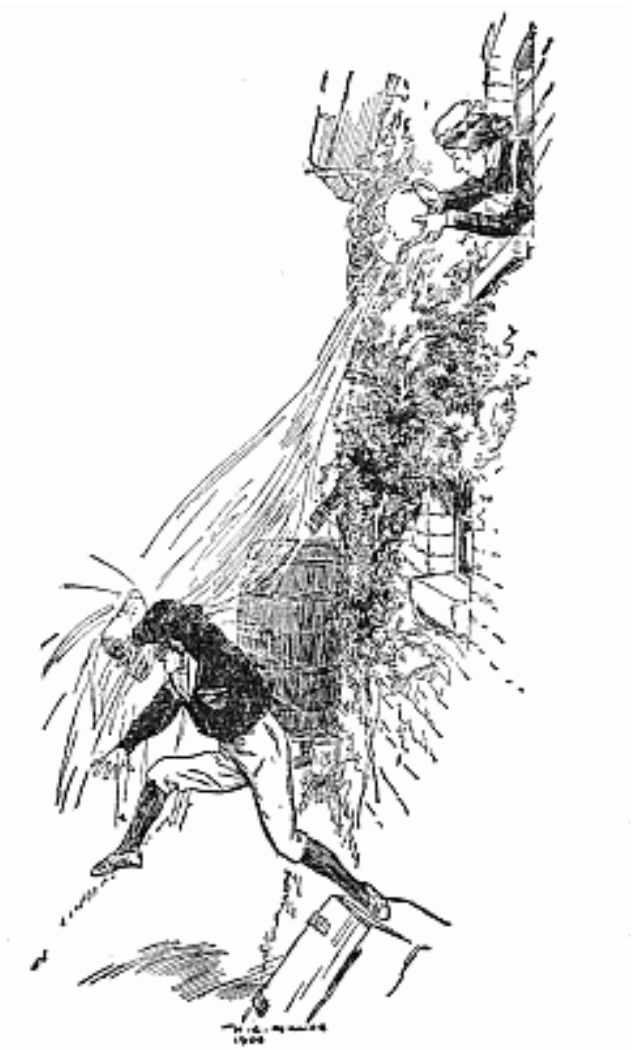
"Go along with you, you nasty little Eye-talian monkey."

It came at last to their sitting down in a row under the hedge, with their feet in a dry ditch, waiting for sunset, and wondering whether, when the sun *did* set, they would turn into stone, or only into their own old natural selves; and each of them still felt lonely and among strangers, and tried not to look at the others, for, though their voices were their own, their faces were so radiantly beautiful as to be quite irritating to look at.

"I don't believe we *shall* turn to stone," said Robert, breaking a long miserable silence, "because the Sand-fairy said he'd give us another wish tomorrow, and he couldn't if we were stone, could he?"

The others said "No," but they weren't at all comforted.

Another silence, longer and more miserable, was broken by Cyril's suddenly saying, "I don't want to frighten you girls, but I believe it's beginning with me already. My foot's quite dead. I'm turning to stone, I know I am, and so will you in a minute."



Martha emptied a toilet jug of cold water over him.

"Never mind," said Robert kindly, "perhaps you'll be the only stone one, and the rest of us will be all right, and we'll cherish your statue and hang garlands on it."

But when it turned out that Cyril's foot had only gone to sleep through his sitting too long with it under him, and when it came to life in an agony of pins and needles, the others were quite cross.

"Giving us such a fright for nothing!" said Anthea.

The third and miserablest silence of all was broken by Jane. She said—

"If we *do* come out of this all right, we'll ask the Sammyadd to make it so that the servants don't notice anything different, no matter what wishes we have."

The others only grunted. They were too wretched even to make good resolutions.

At last hunger and fright and crossness and tiredness—four very nasty things—all joined together to bring one nice thing, and that was sleep. The children lay asleep in a row, with their beautiful eyes shut and their beautiful mouths open. Anthea woke first. The sun had set, and the twilight was coming on.

Anthea pinched herself very hard, to make sure, and when she found she could still feel pinching she decided that she was not stone, and then she pinched the others. They, also, were soft.

"Wake up," she said, almost in tears for joy; "it's all right, we're not stone. And oh, Cyril, how nice and ugly you do look, with your old freckles and your brown hair and your little eyes. And so do you all!" she added, so that they might not feel jealous.

When they got home they were very much scolded by Martha, who told them about the strange children.

"A good-looking lot, I must say, but that impudent."

"I know," said Robert, who knew by experience how hopeless it would be to try to explain things to Martha.

"And where on earth have you been all this time, you naughty little things, you?"

"In the lane."

"Why didn't you come home hours ago?"

"We couldn't because of *them*," said Anthea.

"Who?"

"The children who were as beautiful as the day. They kept us there till after sunset. We couldn't come back till they'd gone. You don't know how we hated them! Oh, do, do give us some supper—we are so hungry."

"Hungry! I should think so," said Martha angrily; "out all day like this. Well, I hope it'll be a lesson to you not to go picking up with strange children—down here after measles, as likely as not! Now mind, if you see them again, don't you speak to them—not one word nor so much as a look—but come straight away and tell me. I'll spoil their beauty for them!"

"If ever we *do* see them again we'll tell you," Anthea said; and Robert, fixing his eyes fondly on the cold beef that was being brought in on a tray by cook, added in heartfelt undertones—

"And we'll take jolly good care we never *do* see them again."

And they never have.

CHAPTER II
Golden Guineas

Anthea woke in the morning from a very real sort of dream, in which she was walking in the Zoological Gardens on a pouring wet day without an umbrella. The animals seemed desperately unhappy because of the rain, and were all growling gloomily. When she awoke, both the growling and the rain went on just the same. The growling was the heavy regular breathing of her sister Jane, who had a slight cold and was still asleep. The rain fell in slow drops on to Anthea's face from the wet corner of a bath towel out of which her brother Robert was gently squeezing the water, to wake her up, as he now explained.

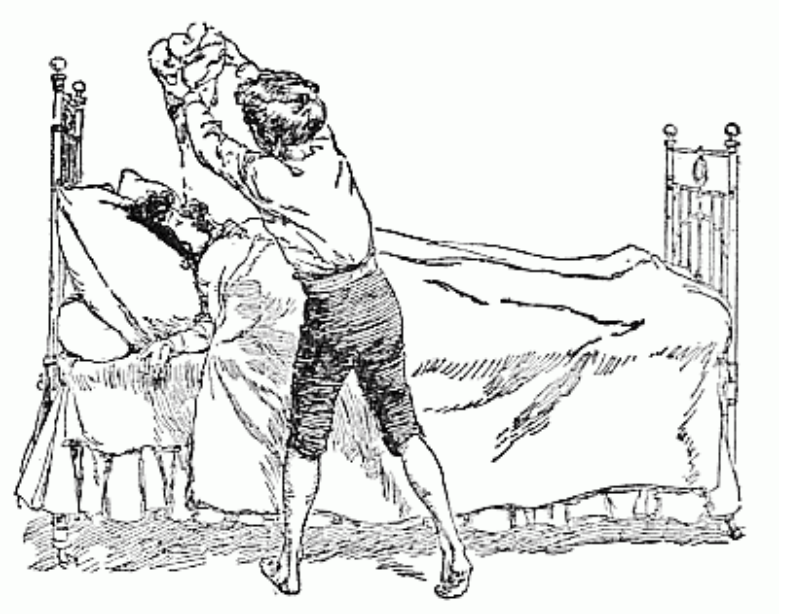
"Oh, drop it!" she said rather crossly; so he did, for he was not a brutal brother, though very ingenious in apple pie beds, booby traps, original methods of awakening sleeping relatives, and the other little accomplishments which make home happy.

"I had such a funny dream," Anthea began.

"So did I," said Jane, wakening suddenly and without warning. "I dreamed we found a Sand-fairy in the gravel pits, and it said it was a Sammyadd, and we might have a new wish every day, and"—

"But that's what *I* dreamed," said Robert; "I was just going to tell you—and we had the first wish directly it said so. And I dreamed you girls were donkeys enough to ask for us all to be beautiful as day, and we jolly well were, and it was perfectly beastly."

"But *can* different people all dream the same thing?" said Anthea, sitting up in bed, "because I dreamed all that as well



The rain fell in slow drops on to Anthea's face.

as about the Zoo and the rain; and Baby didn't know us in my dream, and the servants shut us out of the house because the radiantness of our beauty was such a complete disguise, and"—

The voice of the eldest brother sounded from across the landing.

"Come on, Robert," it said, "you'll be late for breakfast again—unless you mean to shirk your bath as you did on Tuesday."

"I say, come here a second," Robert replied; "I didn't shirk it; I had it after brekker in father's dressing room because ours was emptied away."

Cyril appeared in the doorway, partially clothed.

"Look here," said Anthea, "we've all had such an odd dream. We've all dreamed we found a Sand-fairy."

Her voice died away before Cyril's contemptuous glance.

"Dream?" he said; "you little sillies, it's *true*. I tell you it all

happened. That's why I'm so keen on being down early. We'll go up there directly after brekker, and have another wish. Only we'll make up our minds, solid, before we go, what it is we do want, and no one must ask for anything unless the others agree first. No more peerless beauties for this child, thank you. Not if I know it!"

The other three dressed, with their mouths open. If all that dream about the Sand-fairy was real, this real dressing seemed very like a dream, the girls thought. Jane felt that Cyril was right, but Anthea was not sure, till after they had seen Martha and heard her full and plain reminders about their naughty conduct the day before. Then Anthea was sure.

"Because," said she, "servants never dream anything but the things in the Dream-book, like snakes and oysters and going to a wedding—that means a funeral, and snakes are a false female friend, and oysters are babies."

"Talking of babies," said Cyril, "where's the Lamb?"

"Martha's going to take him to Rochester to see her cousins. Mother said she might. She's dressing him now," said Jane, "in his very best coat and hat. Bread-and-butter, please."

"She seems to like taking him too," said Robert in a tone of wonder.

"Servants *do* like taking babies to see their relations," Cyril said; "I've noticed it before—especially in their best clothes."

"I expect they pretend they're their own babies, and that they're not servants at all, but married to noble dukes of high degree, and they say the babies are the little dukes and duchesses," Jane suggested dreamily, taking more marmalade. "I expect that's what Martha'll say to her cousin. She'll enjoy herself most frightfully."

"She won't enjoy herself most frightfully carrying our infant duke to Rochester," said Robert; "not if she's anything like me—she won't."

"Fancy walking to Rochester with the Lamb on your back!" said Cyril in full agreement.

"She's gone by the carrier's cart," said Jane. "Let's see them off, then we shall have done a polite and kindly act, and we shall be quite sure we've got rid of them for the day."

So they did.

Martha wore her Sunday dress of two shades of purple, so tight in the chest that it made her stoop, and her blue hat with the pink cornflowers and white ribbon. She had a yellow lace collar with a green bow. And the Lamb had indeed his very best cream-coloured silk coat and hat. It was a smart party that the carrier's cart picked up at the Cross Roads. When its white tilt and red wheels had slowly vanished in a swirl of chalk dust—

"And now for the Sammyadd!" said Cyril, and off they went.

As they went they decided on the wish they would ask for. Although they were all in a great hurry they did not try to climb down the sides of the gravel pit, but went round by the safe lower road, as if they had been carts.

They had made a ring of stones round the place where the Sand-fairy had disappeared, so they easily found the spot. The sun was burning and bright, and the sky was deep blue—without a cloud. The sand was very hot to touch.

"Oh—suppose it was only a dream, after all," Robert said as the boys uncovered their spades from the sand heap where they had buried them and began to dig.

"Suppose you were a sensible chap," said Cyril; "one's quite as likely as the other!"

"Suppose you kept a civil tongue in your head," Robert snapped.

"Suppose we girls take a turn," said Jane, laughing. "You boys seem to be getting very warm."

"Suppose you don't come putting your silly oar in," said Robert, who was now warm indeed.

"We won't," said Anthea quickly. "Robert dear, don't be so grumpy—we won't say a word, you shall be the one to speak to the Fairy and tell him what we've decided to wish for. You'll say it much better than we shall."

"Suppose you drop being a little humbug," said Robert, but not crossly. "Look out—dig with your hands, now!"

So they did, and presently uncovered the spider-shaped brown hairy body, long arms and legs, bat's ears and snail's eyes of the Sand-fairy himself. Everyone drew a deep breath of satisfaction, for now of course it couldn't have been a dream.

The Psammead sat up and shook the sand out of its fur.

"How's your left whisker this morning?" said Anthea politely.

"Nothing to boast of," said it; "it had rather a restless night. But thank you for asking."

"I say," said Robert, "do you feel up to giving wishes today, because we very much want an extra besides the regular one? The extra's a very little one," he added reassuringly.

"Humph!" said the Sand-fairy. (If you read this story aloud, please pronounce "humph" exactly as it is spelt, for that is how he said it.) "Humph! Do you know, until I heard you being disagreeable to each other just over my head, and so loud too, I really quite thought I had dreamed you all. I do have very odd dreams sometimes."

"Do you?" Jane hurried to say, so as to get away from the subject of disagreeableness. "I wish," she added politely, "you'd tell us about your dreams—they must be awfully interesting"—

"Is that the day's wish?" said the Sand-fairy, yawning.

Cyril muttered something about "just like a girl," and the rest stood silent. If they said "Yes," then goodbye to the other wishes they had decided to ask for. If they said "No," it would be very rude, and they had all been taught manners, and had learned a little too, which is not at all the same thing. A sigh of relief broke from all lips when the Sand-fairy said—

"If I do, I shan't have strength to give you a second wish; not even good tempers, or common sense, or manners, or little things like that."

"We don't want you to put yourself out at all about *these* things, we can manage them quite well ourselves," said Cyril eagerly; while the others looked guiltily at each other, and wished the Fairy would not keep all on about good tempers, but give them one good scolding if it wanted to, and then have done with it.

"Well," said the Psammead, putting out his long snail's eyes so suddenly that one of them nearly went into the round boy's eye of Robert, "let's have the little wish first."

"We don't want the servants to notice the gifts you give us."

"Are kind enough to give us," said Anthea in a whisper.

"Are kind enough to give us, I mean," said Robert.

The Fairy swelled himself out a bit, let his breath go, and said—

"I've done *that* for you—it was quite easy. People don't notice things much, anyway. What's the next wish?"

"We want," said Robert slowly, "to be rich beyond the dreams of something or other."

"Avarice," said Jane.

"So it is," said the Fairy unexpectedly. "But it won't do you much good, that's one comfort," it muttered to itself. "Come—I can't go beyond dreams, you know! How much do you want, and will you have it in gold or notes?"

"Gold, please—and millions of it"—

"This gravel pit full be enough?" said the Fairy in an offhand manner.

"Oh *yes*"—

"Then go out before I begin, or you'll be buried alive in it."

It made its skinny arms so long, and waved them so frighteningly, that the children ran as hard as they could

towards the road by which carts used to come to the gravel pits. Only Anthea had presence of mind enough to shout a timid "Good morning, I hope your whisker will be better tomorrow," as she ran.

On the road they turned and looked back, and they had to shut their eyes, and open them very slowly, a little bit at a time, because the sight was too dazzling for their eyes to be able to bear. It was something like trying to look at the sun at high noon on Midsummer Day. For the whole of the sand pit was full, right up to the very top, with new shining gold pieces, and all the little bank martins' little front doors were covered out of sight. Where the road for carts wound into the gravel pit the gold lay in heaps like stones lie by the roadside, and a great bank of shining gold shelved down from where it lay flat and smooth between the tall sides of the gravel pit. And all the gleaming heaps was minted gold. And on the sides and edges of these countless coins the midday sun shone and sparkled, and glowed and gleamed till the quarry looked like the mouth of a smelting furnace, or one of the fairy halls that you see sometimes in the sky at sunset.

The children stood with their mouths open, and no one said a word.

At last Robert stooped and picked up one of the loose coins from the edge of the heap by the cart road, and looked at it. He looked on both sides. Then he said in a low voice, quite different to his own, "It's not sovereigns."

"It's gold, anyway," said Cyril. And now they all began to talk at once. They all picked up the golden treasure by handfuls and let it run through their fingers like water, and the chink it made as it fell was wonderful music. At first they quite forgot to think of spending the money, it was so nice to play with. Jane sat down between two heaps of the gold, and Robert began to bury her, as you bury your father in sand when you are at the seaside and he has gone to sleep on the beach with his newspaper over his face. But Jane was not half

buried before she cried out, "Oh stop, it's too heavy! It hurts!"

Robert said "Bosh!" and went on.

"Let me out, I tell you," cried Jane, and was taken out, very white, and trembling a little.

"You've no idea what it's like," said she; "it's like stones on you—or like chains."

"Look here," Cyril said, "if this is to do us any good, it's no good our staying gasping at it like this. Let's fill our pockets and go and buy things. Don't you forget, it won't last after sunset. I wish we'd asked the Sammyadd why things don't turn to stone. Perhaps this will. I'll tell you what, there's a pony and cart in the village."

"Do you want to buy that?" asked Jane.

"No, silly,—we'll *hire* it. And then we'll go to Rochester and buy heaps and heaps of things. Look here, let's each take as much as we can carry. But it's not sovereigns. They've got a man's head on one side and a thing like the ace of spades on the other. Fill your pockets with it, I tell you, and come along. You can talk as we go—if you *must* talk."

Cyril sat down and began to fill his pockets.

"You made fun of me for getting father to have nine pockets in my suit," said he, "but now you see!"

They did. For when Cyril had filled his nine pockets and his handkerchief and the space between himself and his shirt front with the gold coins, he had to stand up. But he staggered, and had to sit down again in a hurry.

"Throw out some of the cargo," said Robert. "You'll sink the ship, old chap. That comes of nine pockets."

And Cyril had to do so.

Then they set off to walk to the village. It was more than a mile, and the road was very dusty indeed, and the sun seemed to get hotter and hotter, and the gold in their pockets got heavier and heavier.

It was Jane who said, "I don't see how we're to spend it all. There must be thousands of pounds among the lot of us.



He staggered, and had to sit down again in a hurry.

I'm going to leave some of mine behind this stump in the hedge. And directly we get to the village we'll buy some biscuits; I know it's long past dinnertime." She took out a handful or two of gold and hid it in the hollows of an old hornbeam. "How round and yellow they are," she said. "Don't you wish they were made of gingerbread and we were going to eat them?"

"Well, they're not, and we're not," said Cyril. "Come on!"

But they came on heavily and wearily. Before they reached the village, more than one stump in the hedge concealed its little hoard of hidden treasure. Yet they reached the village with about twelve hundred guineas in their pockets. But in spite of this inside wealth they looked quite ordinary outside, and no one would have thought they could have more than a half-crown each at the outside. The haze of heat, the blue of the wood smoke, made a sort of dim misty cloud over the red roofs of the village. The four sat down heavily on the first bench to which they came. It happened to be outside the Blue Boar Inn.

It was decided that Cyril should go into the Blue Boar and ask for ginger beer, because, as Anthea said, "It was not wrong for men to go into beer saloons, only for children. And Cyril is nearer being a man than us, because he is the eldest." So he went. The others sat in the sun and waited.

"Oh, how hot it is!" said Robert. "Dogs put their tongues out when they're hot; I wonder if it would cool us at all to put out ours?"

"We might try," Jane said; and they all put their tongues out as far as ever they could go, so that it quite stretched their throats, but it only seemed to make them thirstier than ever, besides annoying everyone who went by. So they took their tongues in again, just as Cyril came back with ginger beer.

"I had to pay for it out of my own money, though, that I was going to buy rabbits with," he said. "They wouldn't change the gold. And when I pulled out a handful the man just laughed and said it was card counters. And I got some sponge cakes too, out of a glass jar on the bar counter. And some biscuits with caraways in."

The sponge cakes were both soft and dry and the biscuits were dry too, and yet soft, which biscuits ought not to be. But the ginger beer made up for everything.

"It's my turn now to try to buy something with the

money," Anthea said; "I'm next eldest. Where is the pony cart kept?"

It was at The Chequers, and Anthea went in the back way to the yard, because they all knew that little girls ought not to go into the bars of beer saloons. She came out, as she herself said, "pleased but not proud."

"He'll be ready in a brace of shakes, he says," she remarked, "and he's to have one sovereign—or whatever it is—to drive us into Rochester and back, besides waiting there till we've got everything we want. I think I managed very well."

"You think yourself jolly clever, I daresay," said Cyril moodily. "How did you do it?"

"I wasn't jolly clever enough to go taking handfuls of money out of my pocket, to make it seem cheap, anyway," she retorted. "I just found a young man doing something to a horse's legs with a sponge and a pail. And I held out one sovereign, and I said—'Do you know what this is?' He said 'No,' and he'd call his father. And the old man came, and he said it was a spade guinea; and he said was it my own to do as I liked with, and I said 'Yes'; and I asked about the pony cart, and I said he could have the guinea if he'd drive us into Rochester. And his name is S. Crispin. And he said, 'Right oh.'"

It was a new sensation to be driven in a smart pony trap along pretty country roads; it was very pleasant too (which is not always the case with new sensations), quite apart from the beautiful plans of spending the money which each child made as they went along, silently of course and quite to itself, for they felt it would never have done to let the old innkeeper hear them talk in the affluent sort of way in which they were thinking. The old man put them down by the bridge at their request.

"If you were going to buy a carriage and horses, where would you go?" asked Cyril, as if he were only asking for the

sake of something to say.

"Billy Peasemarsh, at the Saracen's Head," said the old man promptly. "Though all forbid I should recommend any man where it's a question of horses, no more than I'd take anybody else's recommending if I was a-buying one. But if your pa's thinking of a rig of any sort, there ain't a straighter man in Rochester, nor civiller spoken, than Billy, though I says it."

"Thank you," said Cyril. "The Saracen's Head."

And now the children began to see one of the laws of nature turn upside down and stand on its head like an acrobat. Any grown-up person would tell you that money is hard to get and easy to spend. But the fairy money had been easy to get, and spending it was not only hard, it was almost impossible. The trades people of Rochester seemed to shrink, to a trades person, from the glittering fairy gold ("furrin money" they called it, for the most part).

To begin with, Anthea, who had had the misfortune to sit on her hat earlier in the day, wished to buy another. She chose a very beautiful one, trimmed with pink roses and the blue breasts of peacocks. It was marked in the window, "Paris Model, three guineas."

"I'm glad," she said, "because it says guineas, and not sovereigns, which we haven't got."

But when she took three of the spade guineas in her hand, which was by this time rather dirty owing to her not having put on gloves before going to the gravel pit, the black-silk young lady in the shop looked very hard at her, and went and whispered something to an older and uglier lady, also in black silk, and then they gave her back the money and said it was not current coin.

"It's good money," said Anthea, "and it's my own."

"I daresay," said the lady, "but it's not the kind of money that's fashionable now, and we don't care about taking it."

"I believe they think we've stolen it," said Anthea,

rejoining the others in the street; "if we had gloves they wouldn't think we were so dishonest. It's my hands being so dirty fills their minds with doubts."

So they chose a humble shop, and the girls bought cotton gloves, the kind at a shilling, but when they offered a guinea the woman looked at it through her spectacles and said she had no change; so the gloves had to be paid for out of Cyril's money with which he meant to buy rabbits and so had the green imitation crocodile-skin purse at nine-pence which had been bought at the same time. They tried several more shops, the kinds where you buy toys and perfume and silk handkerchiefs and books, and fancy boxes of stationery, and photographs of objects of interest in the vicinity. But nobody cared to change a guinea that day in Rochester, and as they went from shop to shop they got dirtier and dirtier, and their hair got more and more untidy, and Jane slipped and fell down on a part of the road where a water cart had just gone by. Also they got very hungry, but they found no one would give them anything to eat for their guineas.

After trying two baker shops in vain, they became so hungry, perhaps from the smell of the cake in the shops, as Cyril suggested, that they formed a plan of campaign in whispers and carried it out in desperation. They marched into a third baker shop—Beale was his name—and before the people behind the counter could interfere each child had seized three new penny buns, clapped the three together between its dirty hands, and taken a big bite out of the triple sandwich. Then they stood at bay, with the twelve buns in their hands and their mouths very full indeed. The shocked baker's man bounded round the corner.

"Here," said Cyril, speaking as distinctly as he could, and holding out the guinea he got ready before entering the shops, "pay yourself out of that."

Mr. Beale snatched the coin, bit it, and put it in his pocket.



Mr. Beale snatched the coin, bit it, and put it in his pocket.

"Off you go," he said, brief and stern like the man in the song.

"But the change?" said Anthea, who had a saving mind.

"Change!" said the man, "I'll change you! Hout you goes; and you may think yourselves lucky I don't send for the police to find out where you got it!"

In the Gardens of the Castle the millionaires finished the buns, and though the curranty softness of these were delicious, and acted like a charm in raising the spirits of the party, yet even the stoutest heart quailed at the thought of venturing to sound Mr. Billy Peasemarsh at the Saracen's Head on the subject of a horse and carriage. The boys would have given up the idea, but Jane was always a hopeful child, and Anthea generally an obstinate one, and their earnestness

prevailed.

The whole party, by this time indescribably dirty, therefore betook itself to the Saracen's Head. The yard-method of attack having been successful at The Chequers, was tried again here. Mr. Peasemarsh was in the yard, and Robert opened the business in these terms—

"They tell me you have a lot of horses and carriages to sell." It had been agreed that Robert should be spokesman, because in books it is always gentlemen who buy horses, and not ladies, and Cyril had had his go at the Blue Boar.

"They tell you true, young man," said Mr. Peasemarsh. He was a long lean man, with very blue eyes and a tight mouth and narrow lips.

"We should like to buy some, please," said Robert politely.

"I daresay you would."

"Will you show us a few, please? To choose from."

"Who are you a-kiddin of?" inquired Mr. Billy Peasemarsh. "Was you sent here of a message?"

"I tell you," said Robert, "we want to buy some horses and carriages, and a man told us you were straight and civil spoken, but I shouldn't wonder if he was mistaken"—

"Upon my sacred!" said Mr. Peasemarsh. "Shall I trot the whole stable out for your Honour's worship to see? Or shall I send round to the Bishop's to see if he's a nag or two to dispose of?"

"Please do," said Robert, "if it's not too much trouble. It would be very kind of you."

Mr. Peasemarsh put his hands in his pockets and laughed, and they did not like the way he did it. Then he shouted "Willum!"

A stooping ostler appeared in a stable door.

"Here, Willum, come and look at this 'ere young dook! Wants to buy the whole stud, lock, stock, and bar'l. And ain't got tuppence in his pocket to bless hisself with, I'll go bail!"

Willum's eyes followed his master's pointing thumb with

contemptuous interest.

"Do 'e, for sure?" he said.

But Robert spoke, though both the girls were now pulling at his jacket and begging him to "come along." He spoke, and he was very angry; he said—

"I'm not a young duke, and I never pretended to be. And as for tuppence—what do you call this?" And before the others could stop him he had pulled out two fat handfuls of shining guineas, and held them out for Mr. Peasemarsh to look at. He did look. He snatched one up in his finger and thumb. He bit it, and Jane expected him to say, "The best horse in my stables is at your service." But the others knew better. Still it was a blow, even to the most desponding, when he said shortly—

"Willum, shut the yard doors;" and Willum grinned and went to shut them.

"Good afternoon," said Robert hastily; "we shan't buy any horses now, whatever you say, and I hope it'll be a lesson to you." He had seen a little side gate open, and was moving towards it as he spoke. But Billy Peasemarsh put himself in the way.

"Not so fast, you young off-scouring!" he said. "Willum, fetch the pleece."

Willum went. The children stood huddled together like frightened sheep, and Mr. Peasemarsh spoke to them till the pleece arrived. He said many things. Among other things he said—

"Nice lot you are, aren't you, coming tempting honest men with your guineas!"

"They *are* our guineas," said Cyril boldly.

"Oh, of course we don't know all about that, no more we don't—oh no—course not! And dragging little gells into it, too. 'Ere—I'll let the gells go if you'll come along to the pleece quiet."

"We won't be let go," said Jane heroically; "not without

the boys. It's our money just as much as theirs, you wicked old man."

"Where'd you get it, then?" said the man, softening slightly, which was not at all what the boys expected when Jane began to call names.

Jane cast a silent glance of agony at the others.

"Lost your tongue, eh? Got it fast enough when it's for calling names with. Come, speak up! Where'd you get it?"

"Out of the gravel pit," said truthful Jane.

"Next article," said the man.

"I tell you we did," Jane said. "There's a fairy there—all over brown fur—with ears like a bat's and eyes like a snail's, and he gives you a wish a day, and they all come true."

"Touched in the head, eh?" said the man in a low voice; "all the more shame to you boys dragging the poor afflicted child into your sinful burglaries."

"She's not mad; it's true," said Anthea; "there *is* a fairy. If I ever see him again I'll wish for something for you; at least I would if vengeance wasn't wicked—so there!"

"Lor' lumme," said Billy Peasemarsh, "if there ain't another on 'em!"

And now Willum came back, with a spiteful grin on his face, and at his back a policeman, with whom Mr. Peasemarsh spoke long in a hoarse earnest whisper.

"I daresay you're right," said the policeman at last. "Anyway, I'll take 'em up on a charge of unlawful possession, pending inquiries. And the magistrate will deal with the case. Send the afflicted ones to a home, as likely as not, and the boys to a reformatory. Now then, come along, youngsters! No use making a fuss. You bring the gells along, Mr. Peasemarsh, sir, and I'll shepherd the boys."

Speechless with rage and horror, the four children were driven along the streets of Rochester. Tears of anger and shame blinded them, so that when Robert ran right into a passerby he did not recognize her till a well-known voice said,

"Well, if ever I did! Oh, Master Robert, whatever have you been a-doing of now?" And another voice, quite as well known, said, "Panty; want go own Panty!"

They had run into Martha and the Baby!

Martha behaved admirably. She refused to believe a word of the policeman's story, or of Mr. Peasemarsh's either, even when they made Robert turn out his pockets in an archway and show the guineas.

"I don't see nothing," she said. "You've gone out of your senses, you two! There ain't any gold there—only the poor child's hands, all over dirt, and like the very chimbley. Oh that I should ever see the day!"

And the children thought this very noble of Martha, even if rather wicked, till they remembered how the Fairy had promised that the servants should never notice any of the fairy gifts. So of course Martha couldn't see the gold, and so was only speaking the truth, and that was quite right, of course, but not extra noble.

It was getting dusk when they reached the police station. The policeman told his tale to an inspector, who sat in a large bare room with a thing like a clumsy nursery fender at one end to put prisoners in. Robert wondered whether it was a cell or a dock.

"Produce the coins, officer," said the inspector.

"Turn out your pockets," said the constable.

Cyril desperately plunged his hands in his pockets, stood still a moment, and then began to laugh—an odd sort of laugh that hurt, and that felt much more like crying. His pockets were empty. So were the pockets of the others. For of course at sunset all the fairy gold had vanished away.

"Turn out your pockets, and stop that noise," said the inspector.

Cyril turned out his pockets, every one of the nine which enriched his suit. And every pocket was empty.

"Well!" said the inspector.



They had run into Martha and the Baby!

"I don't know how they done it—artful little beggars! They walked in front of me the 'ole way, so as for me to keep my eye on them and not to attract a crowd and obstruct the traffic."

"It's very remarkable," said the inspector, frowning.

"If you've done a-browbeating of the innocent children," said Martha, "I'll hire a private carriage and we'll drive home to their papa's mansion. You'll hear about this again, young man!—I told you they hadn't got any gold, when you were pretending to see it in their poor helpless hands. It's early in the day for a constable on duty not to be able to trust his own eyes. As to the other one, the less said the better; he keeps the Saracen's Head, and he knows best what his liquor's like."

"Take them away, for goodness' sake," said the inspector crossly. But as they left the police station he said, "Now then!" to the policeman and Mr. Peasemarsh, and he said it twenty times as crossly as he had spoken to Martha.

* * * * * *

Martha was as good as her word. She took them home in a very grand carriage, because the carrier's cart was gone, and, though she had stood by them so nobly with the police, she was so angry with them as soon as they were alone for "trapesing into Rochester by themselves," that none of them dared to mention the old man with the pony cart from the village who was waiting for them in Rochester. And so, after one day of boundless wealth, the children found themselves sent to bed in deep disgrace, and only enriched by two pairs of cotton gloves, dirty inside because of the state of the hands they had been put on to cover, an imitation crocodile skin purse, and twelve penny buns, long since digested.

The thing that troubled them most was the fear that the old gentleman's guinea might have disappeared at sunset with all the rest, so they went down to the village next day to apologize for not meeting him in Rochester, and to *see*. They found him very friendly. The guinea had not disappeared, and



He said, "Now then!" to the policeman and Mr. Peasemarsh

he had bored a hole in it and hung it on his watch chain. As for the guinea the baker took, the children felt they *could* not care whether it had vanished or not, which was not perhaps very honest, but on the other hand was not wholly unnatural. But afterwards this preyed on Anthea's mind, and at last she secretly sent twelve postage stamps by post to "Mr. Beale, Baker, Rochester." Inside she wrote, "To pay for the buns." I hope the guinea did disappear, for that baker was really not at all a nice man, and, besides, penny buns are seven for sixpence in all really respectable shops.

CHAPTER III
Being Wanted

The morning after the children had been the possessors of boundless wealth, and had been unable to buy anything really useful or enjoyable with it, except two pairs of cotton gloves, twelve penny buns, an imitation crocodile-skin purse, and a ride in a pony cart, they awoke without any of the enthusiastic happiness which they had felt on the previous day when they remembered how they had had the luck to find a Psammead, or Sand-fairy, and to receive its promise to grant them a new wish every day. For now they had had two wishes, Beauty and Wealth, and neither had exactly made them happy. But the happening of strange things, even if they are not completely pleasant things, is more amusing than those times when nothing happens but meals, and they are not always completely pleasant, especially on the days when it is cold mutton or hash.

There was no chance of talking things over before breakfast, because everyone overslept itself, as it happened, and it needed a vigorous and determined struggle to get dressed so as to be only ten minutes late for breakfast. During this meal some efforts were made to deal with the question of the Psammead in an impartial spirit, but it is very difficult to discuss anything thoroughly and at the same time to attend faithfully to your baby brother's breakfast needs. The Baby was particularly lively that morning. He not only wriggled his body through the bar of his high chair, and hung by his head, choking and purple, but he seized a tablespoon with desperate suddenness, hit Cyril heavily on the head with it, and then cried because it was taken away from him. He put his fat fist

in his bread-and-milk, and demanded "nam," which was only allowed for tea. He sang, he put his feet on the table—he clamoured to "go walky." The conversation was something like this—

"Look here—about that Sand-fairy— Look out!—he'll have the milk over."

Milk removed to a safe distance.

"Yes—about that Fairy— No, Lamb dear, give Panther the narky poon."

Then Cyril tried. "Nothing we've had yet has turned out— He nearly had the mustard that time!"

"I wonder whether we'd better wish— Hullo!—you've done it now, my boy!" And in a flash of glass and pink baby-paws, the bowl of golden carp in the middle of the table rolled on its side and poured a flood of mixed water and goldfish into the Baby's lap and into the laps of the others.

Everyone was almost as much upset as the goldfish; the Lamb only remaining calm. When the pool on the floor had been mopped up, and the leaping, gasping goldfish had been collected and put back in the water, the Baby was taken away to be entirely re-dressed by Martha, and most of the others had to change completely. The pinafores and jackets that had been bathed in goldfish-and-water were hung out to dry, and then it turned out that Jane must either mend the dress she had torn the day before or appear all day in her best petticoat. It was white and soft and frilly, and trimmed with lace, and very, very pretty, quite as pretty as a frock, if not more so. Only it was *not* a frock, and Martha's word was law. She wouldn't let Jane wear her best frock, and she refused to listen for a moment to Robert's suggestion that Jane should wear her best petticoat and call it a dress.

"It's not respectable," she said. And when people say that, it's no use anyone's saying anything. You'll find this out for yourselves someday.

So there was nothing for it but for Jane to mend her frock.

The hole had been torn the day before when she happened to tumble down in the High Street of Rochester, just where a water-cart had passed on its silvery way. She had grazed her knee, and her stocking was much more than grazed, and her dress was cut by the same stone which had attended to the knee and the stocking. Of course the others were not such sneaks as to abandon a comrade in misfortune, so they all sat on the grass-plot round the sundial, and Jane darned away for dear life. The Lamb was still in the hands of Martha having its clothes changed, so conversation was possible.

Anthea and Robert timidly tried to conceal their inmost thought, which was that the Psammead was not to be trusted; but Cyril said—

"Speak out—say what you've got to say—I hate hinting, and 'don't know,' and sneakish ways like that."

So then Robert said, as in honour bound, "Sneak yourself—Anthea and me weren't so goldfishy as you two were, so we got changed quicker, and we've had time to think it over, and if you ask me"—

"I didn't ask you," said Jane, biting off a needleful of thread as she had always been strictly forbidden to do. (Perhaps you don't know that if you bite off ends of cotton and swallow them they wind tight round your heart and kill you? My nurse told me this, and she told me also about the earth going round the sun. Now what is one to believe—what with nurses and science?)

"I don't care who asks or who doesn't," said Robert, "but Anthea and I think the Sammyadd is a spiteful brute. If it can give us our wishes I suppose it can give itself its own, and I feel almost sure it wishes every time that our wishes shan't do us any good. Let's let the tiresome beast alone, and just go and have a jolly good game of forts, on our own, in the chalk pit."

(You will remember that the happily situated house where these children were spending their holidays lay between a

chalk quarry and a gravel pit.)

Cyril and Jane were more hopeful—they generally were.

"I don't think the Sammyadd does it on purpose," Cyril said; "and, after all, it *was* silly to wish for boundless wealth. Fifty pounds in two-shilling pieces would have been much more sensible. And wishing to be beautiful as the day was simply donkeyish. I don't want to be disagreeable, but it *was*. We must try to find a really useful wish, and wish it."

Jane dropped her work and said—

"I think so too, it's too silly to have a chance like this and not use it. I never heard of anyone else outside a book who had such a chance; there must be simply heaps of things we could wish for that wouldn't turn out Dead Sea fish, like these two things have. Do let's think hard and wish something nice, so that we can have a real jolly day—what there is left of it."

Jane darned away again like mad, for time was indeed getting on, and everyone began to talk at once. If you had been there you could not possibly have made head or tail of the talk, but these children were used to talking "by fours," as soldiers march, and each of them could say what it had to say quite comfortably, and listen to the agreeable sound of its own voice, and at the same time have three-quarters of two sharp ears to spare for listening to what the others said. That is an easy example in multiplication of vulgar fractions, but, as I daresay you can't do even that, I won't ask you to tell me whether $3/4 \times 2 = 1\text{-}1/2$, but I will ask you to believe me that this was the amount of ear each child was able to lend to the others. Lending ears was common in Roman times, as we learn from Shakespeare; but I fear I am getting too instructive.

When the frock was darned, the start for the gravel pit was delayed by Martha's insisting on everybody's washing its hands—which was nonsense, because nobody had been doing anything at all, except Jane, and how can you get dirty doing nothing? That is a difficult question, and I cannot answer it

on paper. In real life I could very soon show you—or you me, which is much more likely.

During the conversation in which the six ears were lent (there were four children, so *that* sum comes right), it had been decided that fifty pounds in two-shilling pieces was the right wish to have. And the lucky children, who could have anything in the wide world by just wishing for it, hurriedly started for the gravel pit to express their wishes to the Psammead. Martha caught them at the gate, and insisted on their taking the Baby with them.

"Not want him indeed! Why, everybody 'ud want him, a duck! With all their hearts they would; and you know you promised your ma to take him out every blessed day," said Martha.

"I know we did," said Robert in gloom, "but I wish the Lamb wasn't quite so young and small. It would be much better fun taking him out."

"He'll mend of his youngness with time," said Martha;



The lucky children ... hurriedly started for the gravel pit.

"and as for smallness, I don't think you'd fancy carrying of him anymore, however big he was. Besides he can walk a bit, bless his precious fat legs, a ducky! He feels the benefit of the new-laid air, so he does, a pet!"

With this and a kiss, she plumped the Lamb into Anthea's arms, and went back to make new pinafores on the sewing machine. She was a rapid performer on this instrument.

The Lamb laughed with pleasure, and said, "Walky wif Panty," and rode on Robert's back with yells of joy, and tried to feed Jane with stones, and altogether made himself so agreeable that nobody could long be sorry that he was of the party.

The enthusiastic Jane even suggested that they should devote a week's wishes to assuring the Baby's future, by asking such gifts for him as the good fairies give to Infant Princes in proper fairytales, but Anthea soberly reminded her that as the Sand-fairy's wishes only lasted till sunset they could not ensure any benefit to the Baby's later years; and Jane owned that it would be better to wish for fifty pounds in two-shilling pieces, and buy the Lamb a three-pound fifteen rocking horse, like those in the big stores, with a part of the money.

It was settled that, as soon as they had wished for the money and got it, they would get Mr. Crispin to drive them into Rochester again, taking Martha with them if they could not get out of taking her. And they would make a list of things they really wanted before they started. Full of high hopes and excellent resolutions, they went round the safe slow cart road to the gravel pits, and as they went in between the mounds of gravel a sudden thought came to them, and would have turned their ruddy cheeks pale if they had been children in a book. Being real live children, it only made them stop and look at each other with rather blank and silly expressions. For now they remembered that yesterday, when they had asked the Psammead for boundless wealth, and it was getting ready to fill the quarry with the minted gold of bright guineas—

millions of them—it had told the children to run along outside the quarry for fear they should be buried alive in the heavy splendid treasure. And they had run. And so it happened that they had not had time to mark the spot where the Psammead was, with a ring of stones, as before. And it was this thought that put such silly expressions on their faces.

"Never mind," said the hopeful Jane, "we'll soon find him."

But this, though easily said, was hard in the doing. They looked and they looked, and, though they found their seaside spades, nowhere could they find the Sand-fairy.

At last they had to sit down and rest—not at all because they were weary or disheartened, of course, but because the Lamb insisted on being put down, and you cannot look very carefully after anything you may have happened to lose in the sand if you have an active baby to look after at the same time. Get someone to drop your best knife in the sand next time you go to the seashore and then take your baby brother with you when you go to look for it, and you will see that I am right.

The Lamb, as Martha had said, was feeling the benefit of the country air, and he was as frisky as a sandhopper. The elder ones longed to go on talking about the new wishes they would have when (or if) they found the Psammead again. But the Lamb wished to enjoy himself.

He watched his opportunity and threw a handful of sand into Anthea's face, and then suddenly burrowed his own head in the sand and waved his fat legs in the air. Then of course the sand got into his eyes, as it had into Anthea's, and he howled.

The thoughtful Robert had brought one solid brown bottle of ginger beer with him, relying on a thirst that had never yet failed him. This had to be uncorked hurriedly—it was the only wet thing within reach, and it was necessary to wash the sand out of the Lamb's eyes somehow. Of course the ginger hurt horribly, and he howled more than ever. And, amid his

anguish of kicking, the bottle was upset and the beautiful ginger beer frothed out into the sand and was lost forever.

It was then that Robert, usually a very patient brother, so far forgot himself as to say—

"Anybody would want him, indeed! Only they don't; Martha doesn't, not really, or she'd jolly well keep him with her. He's a little nuisance, that's what he is. It's too bad. I only wish everybody *did* want him with all their hearts; we might get some peace in our lives."

The Lamb stopped howling now, because Jane had suddenly remembered that there is only one safe way of taking things out of little children's eyes, and that is with your own soft wet tongue. It is quite easy if you love the Baby as much as you ought to do.

Then there was a little silence. Robert was not proud of himself for having been so cross, and the others were not proud of him either. You often notice that sort of silence when someone has said something it ought not to—and everyone else holds its tongue and waits for the one who oughtn't to have said it is sorry.

The silence was broken by a sigh—a breath suddenly let out. The children's heads turned as if there had been a string tied to each nose, and somebody had pulled all the strings at once.

And everyone saw the Sand-fairy sitting quite close to them, with the expression which it used as a smile on its hairy face.

"Good morning," it said; "I did that quite easily! Everyone wants him now."

"It doesn't matter," said Robert sulkily, because he knew he had been behaving rather like a pig. "No matter who wants him—there's no one here to—anyhow."

"Ingratitude," said the Psammead, "is a dreadful vice."

"We're not ungrateful," Jane made haste to say, "but we didn't *really* want that wish. Robert only just said it. Can't you

take it back and give us a new one?"

"No—I can't," the Sand-fairy said shortly; "chopping and changing—it's not business. You ought to be careful what you *do* wish. There was a little boy once, he'd wished for a Plesiosaurus instead of an Ichthyosaurus, because he was too lazy to remember the easy names of everyday things, and his father had been very vexed with him, and had made him go to bed before tea time, and wouldn't let him go out in the nice flint boat along with the other children—it was the annual school treat next day—and he came and flung himself down near me on the morning of the treat, and he kicked his little prehistoric legs about and said he wished he was dead. And of course then he was."

"How awful!" said the children all together.

"Only till sunset, of course," the Psammead said; "still it was quite enough for his father and mother. And he caught it when he woke up—I tell you. He didn't turn to stone—I forget why—but there must have been some reason. They didn't know being dead is only being asleep, and you're bound to wake up somewhere or other, either where you go to sleep or in some better place. You may be sure he caught it, giving them such a turn. Why, he wasn't allowed to taste Megatherium for a month after that. Nothing but oysters and periwinkles, and common things like that."

All the children were quite crushed by this terrible tale. They looked at the Psammead in horror. Suddenly the Lamb perceived that something brown and furry was near him.

"Poof, poof, poofy," he said, and made a grab.

"It's not a pussy," Anthea was beginning, when the Sand-fairy leaped back.

"Oh, my left whisker!" it said; "don't let him touch me. He's wet."

Its fur stood on end with horror—and indeed a good deal of the ginger beer had been spilt on the blue smock of the Lamb.



"Poof, poof, poofy," he said, and made a grab.

The Psammead dug with its hands and feet, and vanished in an instant and a whirl of sand.

The children marked the spot with a ring of stones.

"We may as well get along home," said Robert. "I'll say I'm sorry; but anyway if it's no good it's no harm, and we know where the sandy thing is for tomorrow."

The others were noble. No one reproached Robert at all. Cyril picked up the Lamb, who was now quite himself again, and off they went by the safe cart road.

The cart road from the gravel pits joins the road almost directly.

At the gate into the road the party stopped to shift the Lamb from Cyril's back to Robert's. And as they paused a very smart open carriage came in sight, with a coachman and a groom on the box, and inside the carriage a lady—very grand indeed, with a dress all white lace and red ribbons and a parasol all red and white—and a white fluffy dog on her lap with a red ribbon round its neck. She looked at the children, and particularly at the Baby, and she smiled at him. The children were used to this, for the Lamb was, as all the servants said, a "very taking child." So they waved their hands politely to the lady and expected her to drive on. But she did

not. Instead she made the coachman stop. And she beckoned to Cyril, and when he went up to the carriage she said—

"What a dear darling duck of a baby! Oh, I *should* so like to adopt it! Do you think its mother would mind?"

"She'd mind very much indeed," said Anthea shortly.

"Oh, but I should bring it up in luxury, you know. I am Lady Chittenden. You must have seen my photograph in the illustrated papers. They call me a Beauty, you know, but of course that's all nonsense. Anyway"—

She opened the carriage door and jumped out. She had the wonderfullest red high heeled shoes with silver buckles. "Let me hold him a minute," she said. And she took the Lamb and held him very awkwardly, as if she was not used to babies.

Then suddenly she jumped into the carriage with the Lamb in her arms and slammed the door, and said, "Drive on!"

The Lamb roared, the little white dog barked, and the coachman hesitated.

"Drive on, I tell you!" cried the lady; and the coachman did, for, as he said afterwards, it was as much as his place was worth not to.

The four children looked at each other, and then with one accord they rushed after the carriage and held on behind. Down the dusty road went the smart carriage, and after it, at double quick time, ran the twinkling legs of the Lamb's brothers and sisters.

The Lamb howled louder and louder, but presently his howls changed by slow degrees to hiccupy gurgles, and then all was still, and they knew he had gone to sleep.

The carriage went on, and the eight feet that twinkled through the dust were growing quite stiff and tired before the carriage stopped at the lodge of a grand park. The children crouched down behind the carriage, and the lady got out. She looked at the Baby as it lay on the carriage seat, and hesitated.

"The darling—I won't disturb it," she said, and went into



At double quick time, ran the twinkling legs of the Lamb's brothers and sisters

the lodge to talk to the woman there about a setting of eggs that had not turned out well.

The coachman and footman sprang from the box and bent over the sleeping Lamb.

"Fine boy—wish he was mine," said the coachman.

"He wouldn't favour *you* much," said the groom sourly; "too 'andsome."

The coachman pretended not to hear. He said—

"Wonder at her now—I do really! Hates kids. Got none

of her own, and can't abide other folkses'."

The children, crouched in the white dust under the carriage, exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"Tell you what," the coachman went on firmly, "blowed if I don't hide the little nipper in the hedge and tell her his brothers took 'im! Then I'll come back for him afterwards."

"No, you don't," said the footman. "I've took to that kid so as never was. If anyone's to have him, it's me—so there!"

"Stop your talk!" the coachman rejoined. "You don't want no kids, and, if you did, one kid's the same as another to you. But I'm a married man and a judge of breed. I knows a first-rate yearling when I sees him. I'm a-goin' to 'ave him, an' least said soonest mended."

"I should 'a' thought," said the footman sneeringly, "you'd a'most enough. What with Alfred, an' Albert, an' Louise, an' Victor Stanley, and Helena Beatrice, and another"—

The coachman hit the footman in the chin—the footman hit the coachman in the waistcoat—the next minute the two were fighting here and there, in and out, up and down, and all over everywhere, and the little dog jumped on the box of the carriage and began barking like mad.

Cyril, still crouching in the dust, waddled on bent legs to the side of the carriage farthest from the battlefield. He unfastened the door of the carriage—the two men were far too much occupied with their quarrel to notice anything—took the Lamb in his arms, and, still stooping, carried the sleeping baby a dozen yards along the road to where a stile led into a wood. The others followed, and there among the hazels and young oaks and sweet chestnuts, covered by high strong scented brake-fern, they all lay hidden till the angry voices of the men were hushed at the angry voice of the red-and-white lady, and, after a long and anxious search, the carriage at last drove away.

"My only hat!" said Cyril, drawing a deep breath as the sound of wheels at last died away. "Everyone *does* want him



The next minute the two were fighting

now—and no mistake! That Sammyadd has done us again! Tricky brute! For any sake, let's get the kid safe home."

So they peeped out, and finding on the right hand only lonely white road, and nothing but lonely white road on the left, they took courage, and the road, Anthea carrying the sleeping Lamb.

Adventures dogged their footsteps. A boy with a bundle of faggots on his back dropped his bundle by the roadside and asked to look at the Baby, and then offered to carry him; but Anthea was not to be caught that way twice. They all walked on, but the boy followed, and Cyril and Robert couldn't make

him go away till they had more than once invited him to smell their fists. Afterwards a little girl in a blue-and-white checked pinafore actually followed them for a quarter of a mile crying for "the precious Baby," and then she was only got rid of by threats of tying her to a tree in the wood with all their pocket handkerchiefs. "So that bears can come and eat you as soon as it gets dark," said Cyril severely. Then she went off crying. It presently seemed wise, to the brothers and sisters of the Baby who was wanted by everyone, to hide in the hedge whenever they saw anyone coming, and thus they managed to prevent the Lamb from arousing the inconvenient affection of a milkman, a stone-breaker, and a man who drove a cart with a paraffin barrel at the back of it. They were nearly home when the worst thing of all happened. Turning a corner suddenly they came upon two vans, a tent, and a company of gypsies encamped by the side of the road. The vans were hung all round with wicker chairs and cradles, and flower-stands and feather brushes. A lot of ragged children were industriously making dust-pies in the road, two men lay on the grass smoking, and three women were doing the family washing in an old red watering can with the top broken off.

In a moment every gipsy, men, women, and children, surrounded Anthea and the Baby.

"Let me hold him, little lady," said one of the gipsy women, who had a mahogany-coloured face and dust-coloured hair; "I won't hurt a hair of his head, the little picture!"

"I'd rather not," said Anthea.

"Let *me* have him," said the other woman, whose face was also of the hue of mahogany, and her hair jet-black, in greasy curls. "I've nineteen of my own, so I have"—

"No," said Anthea bravely, but her heart beat so that it nearly choked her.

Then one of the men pushed forward.

"Swelp me if it ain't!" he cried, "my own long-lost cheild!

Have he a strawberry mark on his left ear? No? Then he's my own babby, stolen from me in hinnocent hinfancy. 'And 'im over—and we'll not 'ave the law on yer this time."

He snatched the Baby from Anthea, who turned scarlet and burst into tears of pure rage.



He snatched the baby from Anthea

The others were standing quite still; this was much the most terrible thing that had ever happened to them. Even being taken up by the police in Rochester was nothing to this. Cyril was quite white, and his hands trembled a little, but he made a sign to the others to shut up. He was silent a minute, thinking hard. Then he said—

"We don't want to keep him if he's yours. But you see he's

used to us. You shall have him if you want him"—

"No, no!" cried Anthea—and Cyril glared at her.

"Of course we want him," said the women, trying to get the Baby out of the man's arms. The Lamb howled loudly.

"Oh, he's hurt!" shrieked Anthea; and Cyril, in a savage undertone, bade her "stop it!"

"You trust to me," he whispered. "Look here," he went on, "he's awfully tiresome with people he doesn't know very well. Suppose we stay here a bit till he gets used to you, and then when it's bedtime I give you my word of honour we'll go away and let you keep him if you want to. And then when we're gone you can decide which of you is to have him, as you all want him so much."

"That's fair enough," said the man who was holding the Baby, trying to loosen the red neckerchief which the Lamb had caught hold of and drawn round his mahogany throat so tight that he could hardly breathe. The gypsies whispered together, and Cyril took the chance to whisper too. He said, "Sunset! We'll get away then."

And then his brothers and sisters were filled with wonder and admiration at his having been so clever as to remember this.

"Oh, do let him come to us!" said Jane. "See, we'll sit down here and take care of him for you till he gets used to you."

"What about dinner?" said Robert suddenly. The others looked at him with scorn. "Fancy bothering about your beastly dinner when your br—I mean when the Baby"—Jane whispered hotly. Robert carefully winked at her and went on—

"You won't mind my just running home to get our dinner?" he said to the gipsy; "I can bring it out here in a basket."

His brothers and sisters felt themselves very noble and despised him. They did not know his thoughtful secret inten-

tion. But the gypsies did in a minute.

"Oh yes!" they said; "and then fetch the police with a pack of lies about it being your baby instead of ours! D'jever catch a weasel asleep?" they asked.

"If you're hungry you can pick a bit along of us," said the light-haired gypsy woman, not unkindly. "Here Levi, that blessed kid'll howl all his buttons off. Give him to the little lady, and let's see if they can't get him used to us a bit."

So the Lamb was handed back; but the gypsies crowded so closely that he could not possibly stop howling. Then the man with the red handkerchief said—

"Here, Pharaoh, make up the fire; and you girls see to the pot. Give the kid a chanst." So the gypsies, very much against their will, went off to their work, and the children and the Lamb were left sitting on the grass.

"He'll be all right at sunset," Jane whispered. "But, oh, it is awful! Suppose they are frightfully angry when they come to their senses! They might beat us, or leave us tied to trees, or something."

"No, they won't," Anthea said ("Oh, my Lamb, don't cry anymore, it's all right, Panty's got oo, duckie"); "they aren't unkind people, or they wouldn't be going to give us any dinner."

"Dinner?" said Robert; "I won't touch their nasty dinner. It would choke me!"

The others thought so too then. But when the dinner was ready—it turned out to be supper, and happened between four and five—they were all glad enough to take what they could get. It was boiled rabbit, with onions, and some bird rather like a chicken, but stringier about its legs and with a stronger taste. The Lamb had bread soaked in hot water and brown sugar sprinkled on the top. He liked this very much, and consented to let the two gipsy women feed him with it, as he sat on Anthea's lap. All that long hot afternoon Robert and Cyril and Anthea and Jane had to keep the Lamb amused

and happy, while the gypsies looked eagerly on. By the time the shadows grew long and black across the meadows he had really "taken to" the woman with the light hair, and even consented to kiss his hand to the children, and to stand up and bow, with his hand on his chest—"like a gentleman"—to the two men. The whole gypsy camp was in raptures with him, and his brothers and sisters could not help taking some pleasure in showing off his accomplishments to an audience so interested and enthusiastic. But they longed for sunset.

"We're getting into the habit of longing for sunset," Cyril whispered. "How I do wish we could wish something really sensible, that would be of some use, so that we should be quite sorry when sunset came."

The shadows got longer and longer, and at last there were no separate shadows anymore, but one soft glowing shadow over everything; for the sun was out of sight—behind the hill—but he had not really set yet. The people who make the laws about lighting bicycle lamps are the people who decide when the sun sets; she has to do it too, to the minute, or they would know the reason why!

But the gypsies were getting impatient.

"Now, young uns," the red-handkerchief man said, "it's time you were laying of your heads on your pillowses—so it is! The kid's all right and friendly with us now—so you just hand him over and get home like you said."

The women and children came crowding round the Lamb, arms were held out, fingers snapped invitingly, friendly faces beaming with admiring smiles; but all failed to tempt the loyal Lamb. He clung with arms and legs to Jane, who happened to be holding him, and uttered the gloomiest roar of the whole day.

"It's no good," the woman said, "hand the little poppet over, miss. We'll soon quiet him."

And still the sun would not set.

"Tell her about how to put him to bed," whispered Cyril;



He consented to let the two gypsy women feed him.

"anything to gain time—and be ready to bolt when the sun really does make up its silly old mind to set."

"Yes, I'll hand him over in just one minute," Anthea began, talking very fast, "but do let me just tell you he has a warm bath every night and cold in the morning, and he has a crockery rabbit to go into the warm bath with him, and little Samuel saying his prayers in white china on a red cushion for the cold bath; and he hates you to wash his ears, but you must; and if you let the soap get into his eyes, the Lamb"—

"Lamb kyes," said he—he had stopped roaring to listen.

The woman laughed. "As if I hadn't never bath'd a babby!" she said. "Come—give us a hold of him. Come to 'Melia, my precious"—

"G'way, ugsie!" replied the Lamb at once.

"Yes, but," Anthea went on, "about his meals; you

really *must* let me tell you he has an apple or banana every morning, and bread and milk for breakfast, and an egg for his tea sometimes, and"—

"I've brought up ten," said the black ringleted woman, "besides the others. Come, miss, 'and 'im over—I can't bear it no longer. I just must give him a hug."

"We ain't settled yet whose he's to be, Esther," said one of the men.

"It won't be you, Esther, with seven of 'em at your tail a'ready."

"I ain't so sure of that," said Esther's husband.

"And ain't I nobody, to have a say neither?" said the husband of 'Melia.

Zillah, the girl, said, "An' me? I'm a single girl—and no one but 'im to look after—I ought to have him."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Shut your mouth!"

"Don't you show me no more of your imperence!"

Everyone was getting very angry. The dark gipsy faces were frowning and anxious looking. Suddenly a change swept over them, as if some invisible sponge had wiped away these cross and anxious expressions, and left only a blank.

The children saw that the sun really *had* set. But they were afraid to move. And the gypsies were feeling so muddled because of the invisible sponge that had washed all the feelings of the last few hours out of their hearts, that they could not say a word.

The children hardly dared to breathe. Suppose the gypsies, when they recovered speech, should be furious to think how silly they had been all day?

It was an awkward moment. Suddenly Anthea, greatly daring, held out the Lamb to the red-handkerchief man.

"Here he is!" she said.

The man drew back. "I shouldn't like to deprive you, miss," he said hoarsely.

"Anyone who likes can have my share of him," said the other man.

"After all, I've got enough of my own," said Esther.

"He's a nice little chap, though," said Amelia. She was the only one who now looked affectionately at the whimpering Lamb.

Zillah said, "If I don't think I must have had a touch of the sun. *I* don't want him."

"Then shall we take him away?" said Anthea.

"Well—suppose you do," said Pharaoh heartily, "and we'll say no more about it!"

And with great haste all the gypsies began to be busy about their tents for the night. All but Amelia. She went with the children as far as the bend in the road—and there she said—

"Let me give him a kiss, miss—I don't know what made us go for to behave so silly. Us gypsies don't steal babies, whatever they may tell you when you're naughty. We've enough of our own, mostly. But I've lost all mine."

She leaned towards the Lamb; and he, looking in her eyes, unexpectedly put up a grubby soft paw and stroked her face.

"Poor, poor!" said the Lamb. And he let the gypsy woman kiss him, and, what is more, he kissed her brown cheek in return—a very nice kiss, as all his kisses are, and not a wet one like some babies give. The gypsy woman moved her finger about on his forehead as if she had been writing something there, and the same with his chest and his hands and his feet; then she said—

"May he be brave, and have the strong head to think with, and the strong heart to love with, and the strong arms to work with, and the strong feet to travel with, and always come safe home to his own." Then she said something in a strange language no one could understand, and suddenly added—

"Well, I must be saying 'so long'—and glad to have made your acquaintance." And she turned and went back to her

home—the tent by the grassy roadside.

The children looked after her till she was out of sight. Then Robert said, "How silly of her! Even sunset didn't put *her* right. What rot she talked!"

"Well," said Cyril, "if you ask me, I think it was rather decent of her"—

"Decent?" said Anthea; "it was very nice indeed of her. I think she's a dear"—

"She's just too frightfully nice for anything," said Jane.

And they went home—very late for tea and unspeakably late for dinner. Martha scolded, of course. But the Lamb was safe.

"I say—it turned out we wanted the Lamb as much as anyone," said Robert, later.

"Of course."

"But do you feel different about it now the sun's set?"

"*No*," said all the others together.

"Then it's lasted over sunset with us."

"No, it hasn't," Cyril explained. "The wish didn't do anything to *us*. We always wanted him with all our hearts when we were our proper selves, only we were all pigs this morning; especially you, Robert." Robert bore this much with a strange calm.

"I certainly *thought* I didn't want him this morning," said he. "Perhaps I *was* a pig. But everything looked so different when we thought we were going to lose him."

And that, my dear children, is the moral of this chapter. I did not mean it to have a moral, but morals are nasty forward beings, and will keep putting in their oars where they are not wanted. And since the moral has crept in, quite against my wishes, you might as well think of it next time you feel piggy yourself and want to get rid of any of your brothers and sisters. I hope this doesn't often happen, but I daresay it has happened sometimes, even to you!

CHAPTER IV
Wings

The next day was very wet—too wet to go out, and far too wet to think of disturbing a Sand-fairy so sensitive to water that he still, after thousands of years, felt the pain of once having his left whisker wetted. It was a long day, and it was not till the afternoon that all the children suddenly decided to write letters to their mother. It was Robert who had the misfortune to upset the ink well—an unusually deep and full one—straight into that part of Anthea's desk where she had long pretended that an arrangement of mucilage and cardboard painted with Indian ink was a secret drawer. It was not exactly Robert's fault; it was only his misfortune that he chanced to be lifting the ink across the desk just at the moment when Anthea had got it open, and that that same moment should have been the one chosen by the Lamb to get under the table and break his squeaking bird. There was a sharp convenient wire inside the bird, and of course the Lamb ran the wire into Robert's leg at once; and so, without anyone's meaning to do it the secret drawer was flooded with ink. At the same time a stream was poured over Anthea's half-finished letter.

So that her letter was something like this—

"DARLING MOTHER, I hope you are quite well, and I hope Granny is better. The other day we...."

Then came a flood of ink, and at the bottom these words in pencil—

"It was not me upset the ink, but it took such a time

clearing up, so no more as it is post-time.—From your loving daughter "ANTHEA."

Robert's letter had not even been begun. He had been drawing a ship on the blotting paper while he was trying to think of what to say. And of course after the ink was upset he had to help Anthea to clean out her desk, and he promised to make her another secret drawer, better than the other. And she said, "Well, make it now." So it was post-time and his letter wasn't done. And the secret drawer wasn't done either.

Cyril wrote a long letter, very fast, and then went to set a trap for slugs that he had read about in the *Homemade Gardener*, and when it was post-time the letter could not be found, and it was never found. Perhaps the slugs ate it.

Jane's letter was the only one that went. She meant to tell her mother all about the Psammead—in fact they had all meant to do this—but she spent so long thinking how to spell the word that there was no time to tell the story properly, and it is useless to tell a story unless you *do* tell it properly, so she had to be contented with this—

"MY DEAR MOTHER DEAR, We are all as good as we can, like you told us to, and the Lamb has a little cold, but Martha says it is nothing, only he upset the goldfish into himself yesterday morning. When we were up at the sand pit the other day we went round by the safe way where carts go, and we found a"—

Half an hour went by before Jane felt quite sure that they could none of them spell Psammead. And they could not find it in the dictionary either, though they looked. Then Jane hastily finished her letter—

"We found a strange thing, but it is nearly post-time, so no more at present from your little girl,

"JANE.

"P.S. If you could have a wish come true what would you have?"

Then the postman was heard blowing his horn, and Robert rushed out in the rain to stop his cart and give him the letters. And that was how it happened that, though all the children meant to tell their mother about the Sand-fairy, somehow or other she never got to know. There were other reasons why she never got to know, but these come later.

The next day Uncle Richard came and took them all to Maidstone in a wagonette—all except the Lamb. Uncle Richard was the very best kind of uncle. He bought them toys at Maidstone. He took them into a shop and let them all choose exactly what they wanted, without any restrictions about price, and no nonsense about things being instructive. It is very wise to let children choose exactly what they like, because they are very foolish and inexperienced, and sometimes they will choose a really instructive thing without meaning to do so. This happened to Robert, who chose, at the last moment, and in a great hurry, a box with pictures on it of winged bulls with men's heads and winged men with eagles' heads. He thought there would be animals inside, the same as on the box. When he got it home it was a Sunday puzzle about ancient Nineveh! The others chose in haste, and were happy at leisure. Cyril had a model engine, and the girls had two dolls, as well as a china tea set with forget-me-nots on it, to be "between them." The boys' "between them" was bow and arrow.

Then Uncle Richard took them on the beautiful Medway in a boat, and then they all had tea at a beautiful confectioner's and when they reached home it was far too late to have any wishes that day.

They did not tell Uncle Richard anything about the Psammead. I do not know why. And they do not know why.

But I daresay you can guess.

The day after Uncle Richard had behaved so handsomely was a very hot day indeed. The people who decide what the weather is to be, and put its orders down for it in the newspapers every morning, said afterwards that it was the hottest day there had been for years. They had ordered it to be "warmer—some showers," and warmer it certainly was. In fact it was so busy being warmer that it had no time to attend to the order about showers, so there weren't any.

Have you ever been up at five o'clock on a fine summer morning? It is very beautiful. The sunlight is pinky and yellowy, and all the grass and trees are covered with dew-diamonds. And all the shadows go the opposite way to the way they do in the evening, which is very interesting and makes you feel as though you were in a new other world.

Anthea woke at five. She had made herself wake, and I must tell you how it is done, even if it keeps you waiting for the story to go on.

You get into bed at night, and lie down quite flat on your little back, with your hands straight down by your sides. Then you say "I *must* wake up at five" (or six, or seven, or eight, or nine, or whatever the time is that you want), and as you say it you push your chin down on your chest and then whack your head back on the pillow. And you do this as many times as there are ones in the time you want to wake up at. (It is quite an easy sum.) Of course everything depends on your really wanting to get up at five (or six, or seven, or eight, or nine); if you don't really want to, it's all of no use. But if you do—well, try it and see. Of course in this, as in doing Latin proses or getting into mischief, practice makes perfect.

Anthea was quite perfect.

At the very moment when she opened her eyes she heard the black-and-gold clock down in the dining room strike eleven. So she knew it was three minutes to five. The black-and-gold clock always struck wrong, but it was all right when

you knew what it meant. It was like a person talking a foreign language. If you know the language it is just as easy to understand as English. And Anthea knew the clock language. She was very sleepy, but she jumped out of bed and put her face and hands into a basin of cold water. This is a fairy charm that prevents your wanting to get back into bed again. Then she dressed, and folded up her night dress. She did not tumble it together by the sleeves, but folded it by the seams from the hem, and that will show you the kind of well-brought-up little girl she was.

Then she took her shoes in her hand and crept softly down the stairs. She opened the dining room window and climbed out. It would have been just as easy to go out by the door, but the window was more romantic, and less likely to be noticed by Martha.

"I will always get up at five," she said to herself. "It was quite too awfully pretty for anything."

Her heart was beating very fast, for she was carrying out a plan quite her own. She could not be sure that it was a good plan, but she was quite sure that it would not be any better if she were to tell the others about it. And she had a feeling that, right or wrong, she would rather go through with it alone. She put on her shoes under the iron verandah, on the red-and-yellow shining tiles, and then she ran straight to the sand pit, and found the Psammead's place, and dug it out; it was very cross indeed.

"It's too bad," it said, fluffing up its fur as pigeons do their feathers at Christmas time. "The weather's arctic, and it's the middle of the night."

"I'm so sorry," said Anthea gently, and she took off her white pinafore and covered the Sand-fairy up with it, all but its head, its bat's ears, and its eyes that were like a snail's eyes.

"Thank you," it said, "that's better. What's the wish this morning?"

"I don't know," she said; "that's just it. You see we've been

very unlucky, so far. I wanted to talk to you about it. But—would you mind not giving me any wishes till after breakfast? It's so hard to talk to anyone if they jump out at you with wishes you don't really want!"

"You shouldn't say you wish for things if you don't wish for them. In the old days people almost always knew whether it was Megatherium or Ichthyosaurus they really wanted for dinner."

"I'll try not to do so," said Anthea, "but I do wish"—

"Look out!" said the Psammead in a warning voice, and it began to blow itself out.

"Oh, this isn't a magic wish—it's just—I should be so glad if you'd not swell yourself out and nearly burst to give me anything just now. Wait till the others are here."

"Well, well," it said indulgently, but it shivered.

"Would you," asked Anthea kindly—"would you like to come and sit on my lap? You'd be warmer, and I could turn the skirt of my frock up around you. I'd be very careful."

Anthea had never expected that it would, but it did.

"Thank you," it said; "you really are rather thoughtful." It crept on to her lap and snuggled down, and she put her arms round it with a rather frightened gentleness. "Now then!" it said.

"Well then," said Anthea, "everything we have wished has turned out rather horrid. I wish you would advise us. You are so old, you must be very wise."

"I was always generous from a child," said the Sand-fairy. "I've spent the whole of my waking hours in giving. But one thing I won't give—that's advice."

"You see," Anthea went on, "it's such a wonderful thing—such a splendid, glorious chance. It's so good and kind and dear of you to give us our wishes, and it seems such a pity it should all be wasted just because we are too silly to know what to wish for."

Anthea had meant to say that—and she had not wanted

to say it before the others. It's one thing to say you're silly, and quite another to say that other people are.

"Child," said the Sand-fairy sleepily, "I can only advise you to think before you speak"—

"But I thought you never gave advice."

"That piece doesn't count," it said. "You'll never take it! Besides, it's not original. It's in all the copybooks."

"But won't you just say if you think wings would be a silly wish?"

"Wings?" it said. "I should think you might do worse. Only, take care you aren't flying high at sunset. There was a little Ninevite boy I heard of once. He was one of King Sennacherib's sons, and a traveler brought him a Psammead. He used to keep it in a box of sand on the palace terrace. It was a dreadful degradation for one of us, of course; still the boy *was* the Assyrian King's son. And one day he wished for wings and got them. But he forgot that they would turn into stone at sunset, and when they did he fell on to one of the winged lions at the top of his father's great staircase; and what with *his* stone wings and the lion's stone wings—well it's not a very pretty story! But I believe the boy enjoyed himself very much till then."

"Tell me," said Anthea, "why don't our wishes turn into stone now? Why do they just vanish?"

"*Autre temps autres mœurs*," said the creature.

"Is that the Ninevite language?" asked Anthea, who had learned no foreign language at school except French.

"What I mean is," the Psammead went on, "that in the old days people wished for good solid everyday gifts—Mammoths and Pterodactyls and things—and those could be turned into stone as easy as not. But people wish such high-flying fanciful things nowadays. How are you going to turn being beautiful as the day, or being wanted by everybody, into stone? You see it can't be done. And it would never do to have two rules, so they simply vanish. If being beautiful as the

day *could* be turned into stone it would last an awfully long time, you know—much longer than you would. Just look at the Greek statues. It's just as well as it is. Goodbye. I *am* so sleepy."

It jumped off her lap—dug frantically, and vanished.

Anthea was late for breakfast. It was Robert who quietly poured a spoonful of molasses down the Lamb's frock, so that he had to be taken away and washed thoroughly directly after breakfast. And it was of course a very naughty thing to do; yet it served two purposes—it delighted the Lamb, who loved above all things to be completely sticky, and it engaged Martha's attention so that the others could slip away to the sand pit without the Lamb.

They did it, and in the lane Anthea, breathless from the hurry of that slipping, panted out—

"I want to propose we take turns to wish. Only, nobody's to have a wish if the others don't think it's a nice wish. Do you agree?"

"Who's to have first wish?" asked Robert cautiously.

"Me, if you don't mind," said Anthea apologetically. "And I've thought about it—and it's *wings*."

There was a silence. The others rather wanted to find fault, but it was hard, because the word "wings" raised a flutter of joyous excitement in every breast.

"Not so dusty," said Cyril generously; and Robert added, "Really, Panther, you're not quite such a fool as you look."

Jane said, "I think it would be perfectly lovely. It's like a bright dream of delirium."

They found the Sand-fairy easily. Anthea said—

"I wish we all had beautiful wings to fly with."

The Sand-fairy blew himself out, and next moment each child felt a funny feeling, half heaviness and half lightness, on its shoulders. The Psammead put its head on one side and turned its snail eyes from one side to the other.

"Not so bad," it said dreamily. "But really, Robert, you're

not quite such an angel as you look." Robert almost blushed.

The wings were very big, and more beautiful than you can possibly imagine—for they were soft and smooth, and every feather lay neatly in its place. And the feathers were of the most lovely mixed changing colours, like the rainbow, or iridescent glass, or the beautiful scum that sometimes floats on water that is not at all nice to drink.



The Sand-fairy blew himself out.

"Oh—but how can we fly?" Jane said, standing anxiously first on one foot and then on the other.

"Look out!" said Cyril; "you're treading on my wing."

"Does it hurt?" asked Anthea with interest; but no one answered, for Robert had spread his wings and jumped up, and now he was slowly rising in the air. He looked very awkward in his knickerbocker suit—his boots in particular hung helplessly, and seemed much larger than when he was standing in them. But the others cared but little how he looked—or how they looked, for that matter. For now they all spread out their wings and rose in the air. Of course you all know what flying feels like, because everyone has dreamed about flying, and is seems so beautifully easy—only, you can

never remember how you did it; and as a rule you have to do it without wings, in your dreams, which is more clever and uncommon, but not so easy to remember the rule for. Now the four children rose flapping from the ground, and you can't think how good the air felt as it ran against their faces. Their wings were tremendously wide when they were spread out, and they had to fly quite a long way apart so as not to get in each other's way. But little things like this are easily learned.

All the words in the English Dictionary, and in the Greek Lexicon as well, are, I find, of no use at all to tell you exactly what it feels like to be flying, so I will not try. But I will say that to look *down* on the fields and woods instead of *along* at them, is something like looking at a beautiful live map, where, instead of silly colours on paper, you have real moving sunny woods and green fields laid out one after the other. As Cyril said, and I can't think where he got hold of such a strange expression, "It does you a fair treat!" It was most wonderful and more like real magic than any wish the children had had yet. They flapped and flew and sailed on their great rainbow wings, between green earth and blue sky; and they flew over Rochester and then swerved round towards Maidstone, and presently they all began to feel extremely hungry. Curiously enough, this happened when they were flying rather low, and just as they were crossing an orchard where some early plums shone red and ripe.

They paused on their wings. I cannot explain to you how this is done, but it is something like treading water when you are swimming, and hawks do it extremely well.

"Yes, I daresay," said Cyril, though no one had spoken. "But stealing is stealing even if you've got wings."

"Do you really think so?" said Jane briskly. "If you've got wings you're a bird, and no one minds birds breaking the commandments. At least, they may *mind*, but the birds always do it, and no one scolds them or sends them to prison."

It was not so easy to perch on a plum tree as you might



They flew over Rochester.

think, because the rainbow wings were so *very* large; but somehow they all managed to do it, and the plums were certainly very sweet and juicy.

Fortunately, it was not till they had all had quite as many plums as were good for them that they saw a stout man, who looked exactly as though he owned the plum trees, come hurrying through the orchard gate with a thick stick, and with one accord they disentangled their wings from the plum laden branches and began to fly.

The man stopped short, with his mouth open. For he had seen the boughs of his trees moving and twitching, and he had said to himself, "Them young varmint—at it again!" And he had come out at once, for the lads of the village had taught him in past seasons that plums want looking after. But when he saw the rainbow wings flutter up out of the plum tree he felt that he must have gone quite mad, and he did not like the feeling at all. And when Anthea looked down and saw his mouth go slowly open, and stay so, and his face become green and mauve in patches, she called out—

"Don't be frightened," and felt hastily in her pocket for a three penny-bit with a hole in it, which she had meant to hang on a ribbon round her neck, for luck. She hovered round the unfortunate plum owner, and said, "We have had some of your plums; we thought it wasn't stealing, but now I am not so sure. So here's some money to pay for them."

She swooped down toward the terror stricken grower of plums, and slipped the coin into the pocket of his jacket, and in a few flaps she had rejoined the others.

The farmer sat down on the grass, suddenly and heavily.

"Well—I'm blessed!" he said. "This here is what they call delusions, I suppose. But this here three penny"—he had pulled it out and bitten it—"*that's* real enough. Well, from this day forth I'll be a better man. It's the kind of thing to sober a chap for life, this is. I'm glad it was only wings, though. I'd rather see the birds as aren't there, and couldn't be, even



The farmer sat down on the grass suddenly and heavily.

if they pretend to talk, than some things as I could name."

He got up slowly and heavily, and went indoors, and he was so nice to his wife that day that she felt quite happy, and said to herself, "Law, whatever have a-come to the man!" and smartened herself up and put a blue ribbon bow at the place where her collar fastened on, and looked so pretty that he was kinder than ever. So perhaps the winged children really did do one good thing that day. If so, it was the only one; for really there is nothing like wings for getting you into trouble. But, on the other hand, if you are in trouble, there is nothing like wings for getting you out of it.

This was the case in the matter of the fierce dog who sprang out at them when they had folded up their wings as small as possible and were going up to a farm door to ask for a crust of bread and cheese, for in spite of the plums they were soon just as hungry as ever again.

Now there is no doubt whatever that, if the four had been ordinary wingless children, that black and fierce dog would have had a good bite out of the brown-stockinged leg of Robert, who was the nearest. But at its first growl there was a flutter of wings, and the dog was left to strain at his chain and stand on his hind-legs as if he were trying to fly too.

They tried several other farms, but at those where there were no dogs the people were far too frightened to do anything but scream; and at last, when it was nearly four o'clock, and their wings were getting miserably stiff and tired, they alighted on a church-tower and held a council of war.

"We can't possibly fly all the way home without dinner *or* tea," said Robert with desperate decision.

"And nobody will give us any dinner, or even lunch, let alone tea," said Cyril.

"Perhaps the clergyman here might," suggested Anthea. "He must know all about angels"—

"Anybody could see we're not that," said Jane. "Look at Robert's boots and Squirrel's plaid necktie."

"Well," said Cyril firmly, "if the country you're in won't *sell* provisions, you *take* them. In wars I mean. I'm quite certain you do. And even in other stories no good brother would allow his little sisters to starve in the midst of plenty."

"Plenty?" repeated Robert hungrily; and the others looked vaguely round the bare leads of the church-tower, and murmured, "In the midst of?"

"Yes," said Cyril impressively. "There is a larder window at the side of the clergyman's house, and I saw things to eat inside—custard pudding and cold chicken and tongue—and pies—and jam. It's rather a high window—but with wings"—

"How clever of you!" said Jane.

"Not at all," said Cyril modestly; "any born general—Napoleon or the Duke of Marlborough—would have seen it just the same as I did."

"It seems very wrong," said Anthea.

"Nonsense," said Cyril. "What was it Sir Philip Sidney said when the soldier wouldn't give him a drink?—'My necessity is greater than his.'"

"We'll club together our money, though, and leave it to pay for the things, won't we?" Anthea was persuasive, and very nearly in tears, because it is most trying to feel enormously hungry and unspeakably sinful at one and the same time.

"Some of it," was the cautious reply.

Everyone now turned out its pockets on the lead roof of the tower, where visitors for the last hundred and fifty years had cut their own and their sweethearts' initials with penknives in the soft lead. There was five-and-seven-pence halfpenny altogether, and even the upright Anthea admitted that that was too much to pay for four people's dinners. Robert said he thought eighteen-pence.

And half-a-crown was finally agreed to be "handsome."

So Anthea wrote on the back of her last term's report, which happened to be in her pocket, and from which she first tore her own name and that of the school, the following letter:—

"DEAR REVEREND CLERGYMAN, We are very hungry indeed because of having to fly all day, and we think it is not stealing when you are starving to death. We are afraid to ask you for fear you should say 'No,' because of course you know about angels, but you would not think we were angels. We will only take the necessities of life, and no pudding or pie, to show you it is not greediness but true starvation that makes us make your larder stand and deliver. But we are not highwaymen by trade."

"Cut it short," said the others with one accord. And Anthea hastily added—

"Our intentions are quite honourable if you only knew.



Every one now turned out his pockets

And here is half-a-crown to show we are sinseer and grateful.

"Thank you for your kind hospitality.

"FROM US FOUR."

The half-crown was wrapped in this letter, and all the children felt that when the clergyman had read it he would understand everything, as well as anyone could who had not even seen the wings.

"Now," said Cyril, "of course there's some risk; we'd better fly straight down the other side of the tower and then flutter low across the churchyard and in through the shrubbery. There doesn't seem to be anyone about. But you never know. The window looks out into the shrubbery. It is embowered in foliage, like a window in a story. I'll go in and get the things. Robert and Anthea can take them as I hand them out through the window; and Jane can keep watch—her eyes are sharp—and whistle if she sees anyone about. Shut up, Robert! She can whistle quite well enough for that, anyway. It ought not to be a very good whistle—it'll sound more natural and birdlike. Now then—off we go!"

I cannot pretend that stealing is right. I can only say that on this occasion it did not look like stealing to the hungry four, but appeared in the light of a fair and reasonable business transaction. They had never happened to learn that a tongue—hardly cut into—a chicken and a half, a loaf of bread, and a syphon of soda water cannot be bought in the stores for half-a-crown. These were the necessaries of life, which Cyril handed out of the larder window when, quite unobserved and without hindrance or adventure, he had led the others to that happy spot. He felt that to refrain from jam, apple pie, cake, and mixed candied peel, was a really heroic act—and I agree with him. He was also proud of not taking the custard pudding—and there I think he was wrong—because if he had taken it there would have been a difficulty about returning the dish; no one, however starving, has a



These were the necessities of life.

right to steal china pie-dishes with little pink flowers on them. The soda water syphon was different. They could not do without something to drink, and as the maker's name was on it they felt sure it would be returned to him wherever they might leave it. If they had time they would take it back themselves. The man appeared to live in Rochester, which would not be much out of their way home.

Everything was carried up to the top of the tower, and laid down on a sheet of kitchen paper which Cyril had found on the top shelf of the larder. As he unfolded it, Anthea said, "I don't think *that's* a necessity of life."

"Yes, it is," said he. "We must put the things down somewhere to cut them up; and I heard father say the other day people got diseases from germans in rainwater. Now there must be lots of rainwater here—and when it dries up the germans are left, and they'd get into the things, and we should all die of scarlet fever."

"What are Germans?"

"Little waggly things you see with microscopes," said Cyril, with a scientific air. "They give you every illness you can think of. I'm sure the paper was a necessary, just as much as the bread and meat and water. Now then! Oh, I'm hungry!"

I do not wish to describe the picnic party on the top of the tower. You can imagine well enough what it is like to carve a chicken and a tongue with a knife that has only one blade and that snapped off short about halfway down. But it was done. Eating with your fingers is greasy and difficult—and paper dishes soon get to look very spotty and horrid. But one thing you *can't* imagine, and that is how soda water behaves when you try to drink it straight out of a syphon—especially a quite full one. But if imagination will not help you, experience will, and you can easily try it for yourself if you can get a grown-up to give you the syphon. If you want to have a really thorough experience, put the tube in your mouth and press the handle

very suddenly and very hard. You had better do it when you are alone—and out of doors is best for this experiment.

However you eat them, tongue and chicken and new bread are very good things, and no one minds being sprinkled a little with soda water on a really fine hot day. So that everyone enjoyed the dinner very much indeed, and everyone ate as much as it possibly could: first, because it was extremely hungry; and secondly, because, as I said, tongue and chicken and new bread are very nice.

Now, I daresay you will have noticed that if you have to wait for your dinner till long after the proper time, and then eat a great deal more dinner than usual, and sit in the hot sun on the top of a church-tower—or even anywhere else—you become soon and strangely sleepy. Now Anthea and Jane and Cyril and Robert were very like you in many ways, and when they had eaten all they could, and drunk all there was, they became sleepy, strangely and soon—especially Anthea, because she had gotten up so early.

One by one they left off talking and leaned back, and before it was a quarter of an hour after dinner they had all curled round and tucked themselves up under their large soft warm wings and were fast asleep. And the sun was sinking slowly in the west. (I must say it was in the west, because it is usual in books to say so, for fear careless people should think it was setting in the east. In point of fact, it was not exactly in the west either—but that's near enough.) The sun, I repeat, was sinking slowly in the west, and the children slept warmly and happily on—for wings are cozier than eider-down quilts to sleep under. The shadow of the church-tower fell across the churchyard, and across the Vicarage, and across the field beyond; and presently there were no more shadows, and the sun had set, and the wings were gone. And still the children slept. But not for long. Twilight is very beautiful, but it is chilly; and you know, however sleepy you are, you wake up soon enough if your brother or sister happens to be up first



The children were fast asleep.

and pulls your blankets off you. The four wingless children shivered and woke. And there they were—on the top of a church-tower in the dusky twilight, with blue stars coming out by ones and twos and tens and twenties over their heads—miles away from home, with three shillings and three-halfpence in their pockets, and a doubtful act about the necessities of life to be accounted for if anyone found them with the soda water syphon.

They looked at each other. Cyril spoke first, picking up the syphon—

"We'd better get along down and get rid of this beastly thing. It's dark enough to leave it on the clergyman's

doorstep, I should think. Come on."

There was a little turret at the corner of the tower, and the little turret had a door in it. They had noticed this when they were eating, but had not explored it, as you would have done in their place. Because, of course, when you have wings and can explore the whole sky, doors seem hardly worth exploring.

Now they turned towards it.

"Of course," said Cyril "this is the way down."

It was. But the door was locked on the inside!

And the world was growing darker and darker. And they were miles from home. And there was the soda water syphon.

I shall not tell you whether anyone cried, nor, if so, how many cried, nor who cried. You will be better employed in making up your minds what you would have done if you had been in their place.

CHAPTER V
No Wings

Whether anyone cried or not, there was certainly an interval during which none of the party was quite itself. When they grew calmer, Anthea put her handkerchief in her pocket and her arm round Jane, and said—

"It can't be for more than one night. We can signal with our handkerchiefs in the morning. They'll be dry then. And someone will come up and let us out"—

"And find the syphon," said Cyril gloomily; "and we shall be sent to prison for stealing"—

"You said it wasn't stealing. You said you were sure it wasn't."

"I'm not sure *now*" said Cyril shortly.

"Let's throw the thing away among the trees," said Robert, "then no one can do anything to us."

"Oh yes,"—Cyril's laugh was not a light-hearted one—"and hit some chap on the head, and be murderers as well as—as the other thing."

"But we can't stay up here all night," said Jane; "and I want my tea."

"You *can't* want your tea," said Robert; "you've only just had your dinner."

"But I *do* want it," she said; "especially when you begin talking about stopping up here all night. Oh, Panther—I want to go home! I want to go home!"

"Hush, hush," Anthea said. "Don't, dear. It'll be all right, somehow. Don't, don't"—

"Let her cry," said Robert desperately; "if she howls loud enough, someone may hear and come and let us out."

"And see the soda water thing," said Anthea swiftly. "Robert, don't be a brute. Oh, Jane, do try to be a man! It's just the same for all of us."

Jane did try to "be a man"—and reduced her howls to sniffs.

There was a pause. Then Cyril said slowly, "Look here. We must risk that syphon. I'll button it up inside my jacket—perhaps no one will notice it. You others keep well in front of me. There are lights in the clergyman's house. They've not gone to bed yet. We must just yell as loud as ever we can. Now all scream when I say three. Robert, you do the yell like a railway engine, and I'll do the coo-ee like father's. The girls can do as they please. One, two, three!"

A four-fold yell rent the silent peace of the evening, and a maid at one of the Vicarage windows paused with her hand on the blind-cord.

"One, two, three!" Another yell, piercing and complex, startled the owls and starlings to a flutter of feathers in the belfry below. The maid flew from the Vicarage window and ran down the Vicarage stairs and into the Vicarage kitchen, and fainted as soon as she had explained to the manservant and the cook and the cook's cousin that she had seen a ghost. It was quite untrue, of course, but I suppose the girl's nerves were a little upset by the yelling.

"One, two, three!" The Vicar was on his doorstep by this time, and there was no mistaking the yell that greeted him.

"Goodness me," he said to his wife, "my dear, someone's being murdered in the church! Give me my hat and a thick stick, and tell Andrew to come after me. I expect it's the lunatic who stole the tongue."

The children had seen the flash of light when the Vicar opened his front door. They had seen his dark form on his doorstep, and they had paused for breath, and also to see what he would do.

When he turned back for his hat, Cyril said hastily—

"He thinks he only fancied he heard something. You don't half yell! Now! One, two, three!"

It was certainly a whole yell this time, and the Vicar's wife flung her arms round her husband and screamed a feeble echo of it.

"You shan't go!" she said, "not alone. Jessie!"—the maid unfainted and came out of the kitchen, "send Andrew at once. There's a dangerous lunatic in the church, and he must go immediately and catch him."

"I expect he *will* catch it too," said Jessie to herself as she went through the kitchen door. "Here, Andrew," she said, "there's someone screaming like mad in the church, and the missus says you're to go along and catch it."

"Not alone, I don't," said Andrew in low firm tones. To his master he merely said, "Yis sir."

"You heard those screams?"

"I did think I noticed a sort of something," said Andrew.

"Well, come on, then," said the Vicar. "My dear, I *must* go!" He pushed her gently into the sitting room, banged the door, and rushed out, dragging Andrew by the arm.

A volley of yells greeted them. Then as it died into silence Andrew shouted, "Hullo, you there! Did you call?"

"Yes," shouted four faraway voices.

"They seem to be in the air," said the Vicar. "Very remarkable."

"Where are you?" shouted Andrew; and Cyril replied in his deepest voice, very slow and loud—

"CHURCH! TOWER! TOP!"

"Come down, then!" said Andrew; and the same voice replied—

"*Can't! Door locked!*"

"My goodness!" said the Vicar. "Andrew, fetch the stable lantern. Perhaps it would be as well to fetch another man from the village."

"With the rest of the gang about, very likely. No, sir; if

this 'ere ain't a trap—well, may I never! There's cook's cousin at the back door now. He's a keeper, sir, and used to dealing with vicious characters. And he's got his gun, sir."

"Hullo there!" shouted Cyril from the church-tower; "come up and let us out."

"We're a-coming," said Andrew. "I'm a-going to get a policeman and a gun."

"Andrew, Andrew," said the Vicar, "that's not the truth."

"It's near enough, sir, for the likes of them."

So Andrew fetched the lantern and the cook's cousin; and the Vicar's wife begged them all to be very careful.

They went across the churchyard—it was quite dark now—and as they went they talked. The Vicar was certain a lunatic was on the church-tower—the one who had written the mad letter, and taken the cold tongue and things. Andrew thought it was a "trap"; the cook's cousin alone was calm. "Great cry, little wool," said he; "dangerous chaps is quieter." He was not at all afraid. But then he had a gun. That was why he was asked to lead the way up the worn, steep, dark steps of the church-tower. He did lead the way, with the lantern in one hand and the gun in the other. Andrew went next. He pretended afterwards that this was because he was braver than his master, but really it was because he thought of traps and he did not like the idea of being behind the others for fear someone should come softly up behind him and catch hold of his legs in the dark. They went on and on, and round and round the little corkscrew staircase—then through the bell-ringers' loft, where the bell-ropes hung with soft furry ends like giant caterpillars—then up another stair into the belfry, where the big quiet bells are—and then on up a ladder with broad steps—and then up a little stone stair. And at the top of that there was a little door. And the door was bolted on the stair side.

The cook's cousin, who was a gamekeeper, kicked at the door, and said—

"Hullo, you there!"

The children were holding on to each other on the other side of the door, and trembling with anxiousness—and very hoarse with their howls. They could hardly speak, but Cyril managed to reply huskily—

"Hullo, you there!"

"How did you get up there?"

It was no use saying "We flew up," so Cyril said—

"We got up—and then we found the door was locked and we couldn't get down. Let us out—do."

"How many of you are there?" asked the keeper.

"Only four," said Cyril.

"Are you armed?"

"Are we what?"

"I've got my gun handy—so you'd best not try any tricks," said the keeper. "If we open the door, will you promise to come quietly down, and no nonsense?"

"Yes—oh YES!" said all the children together.

"Bless me," said the Vicar, "surely that was a female voice?"

"Shall I open the door, sir?" said the keeper. Andrew went down a few steps, "to leave room for the others" he said afterwards.

"Yes," said the Vicar, "open the door. Remember," he said through the keyhole, "we have come to release you. You will keep your promise to refrain from violence?"

"How this bolt do stick," said the keeper; "anyone 'ud think it hadn't been drawed for half a year." As a matter of fact it hadn't.

When all the bolts were drawn, the keeper spoke deep-chested words through the keyhole.

"I don't open," said he, "till you've gone over to the other side of the tower. And if one of you comes at me I fire. Now!"

"We're all over on the other side," said the voices.

The keeper felt pleased with himself, and owned himself



The keeper spoke deep-chested words through the keyhole.

a bold man when he threw open that door, and, stepping out into the leads, flashed the full light of the stable lantern on the group of desperadoes standing against the parapet on the other side of the tower.

He lowered his gun, and he nearly dropped the lantern.

"So help me," he cried, "if they ain't a pack of kiddies!"

The Vicar now advanced.

"How did you come here?" he asked severely. "Tell me at once."

"Oh, take us down," said Jane, catching at his coat, "and we'll tell you anything you like. You won't believe us, but it

doesn't matter. Oh, take us down!"

The others crowded round him, with the same entreaty. All but Cyril. He had enough to do with the soda water syphon, which would keep slipping down under his jacket. It needed both hands to keep it steady in its place.

But he said, standing as far out of the lantern light as possible—

"Please do take us down."

So they were taken down. It is no joke to go down a strange church-tower in the dark, but the keeper helped them—only, Cyril had to be independent because of the soda water syphon. It would keep trying to get away. Halfway down the ladder it all but escaped. Cyril just caught it by its spout, and as nearly as possible lost his footing. He was trembling and pale when at last they reached the bottom of the winding stair and stepped out on to the stones of the church-porch.

Then suddenly the keeper caught Cyril and Robert each by an arm.

"You bring along the gells, sir," said he; "you and Andrew can manage them."

"Let go!" said Cyril; "we aren't running away. We haven't hurt your old church. Leave go!"

"You just come along," said the keeper; and Cyril dared not oppose him with violence, because just then the syphon began to slip again.

So they were marched into the Vicarage study, and the Vicar's wife came rushing in.

"Oh, William, *are* you safe?" she cried.

Robert hastened to allay her anxiety.

"Yes," he said, "he's quite safe. We haven't hurt them at all. And please, we're very late, and they'll be anxious at home. Could you send us home in your carriage?"

"Or perhaps there's a hotel near where we could get a carriage," said Anthea. "Martha will be very anxious as it is."

The Vicar had sunk into a chair, overcome by emotion

and amazement.

Cyril had also sat down, and was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees because of the soda water syphon.

"But how did you come to be locked up in the church-tower?" asked the Vicar.

"We went up," said Robert slowly, "and we were tired, and we all went to sleep, and when we woke up we found the door was locked, so we yelled."

"I should think you did!" said the Vicar's wife. "Frightening everybody out of their wits like this! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

"We *are*," said Jane gently.

"But who locked the door?" asked the Vicar.

"I don't know at all," said Robert, with perfect truth. "Do please send us home."

"Well, really," said the Vicar, "I suppose we'd better. Andrew, put the horse to, and you can take them home."

"Not alone, I don't," said Andrew to himself.

And the Vicar went on, "let this be a lesson to you"— He went on talking, and the children listened miserably. But the keeper was not listening. He was looking at the unfortunate Cyril. He knew all about poachers, of course, so he knew how people look when they're hiding something. The Vicar had just got to the part about trying to grow up to be a blessing to your parents, and not a trouble and disgrace, when the keeper suddenly said—

"Arst him what he's got there under his jacket;" and Cyril knew that concealment was at an end. So he stood up, and squared his shoulders and tried to look noble, like the boys in books that no one can look in the face of and doubt that they come of brave and noble families, and will be faithful to the death, and he pulled out the syphon and said—

"Well, there you are, then."

There was silence. Cyril went on—there was nothing else for it—

"Yes, we took this out of your larder, and some chicken and tongue and bread. We were very hungry, and we didn't take the custard or jam. We only took bread and meat and water—and we couldn't help its being soda kind—just the necessaries of life; and we left half-a-crown to pay for it, and we left a letter. And we're very sorry. And my father will pay a fine and anything you like, but don't send us to prison. Mother would be so vexed. You know what you said about not being a disgrace. Well, don't you go and do it to us—that's all! We're as sorry as we can be. There!"

"However did you get up to the larder window?" said Mrs. Vicar.

"I can't tell you that," said Cyril firmly.

"Is this the whole truth you've been telling me?" asked the clergyman.

"No," answered Jane suddenly; "it's all true, but it's not the whole truth. We can't tell you that. It's no good asking. Oh, do forgive us and take us home!" She ran to the Vicar's wife and threw her arms round her. The Vicar's wife put her arms round Jane, and the keeper whispered behind his hand to the Vicar—

"They're all right, sir—I expect it's a pal they're standing by. Someone put 'em up to it, and they won't peach. Game little kids."

"Tell me," said the Vicar kindly, "are you screening someone else? Had anyone else anything to do with this?"

"Yes," said Anthea, thinking of the Psammead; "but it wasn't their fault."

"Very well, my dears," said the Vicar, "then let's say no more about it. Only just tell us why you wrote such an odd letter."

"I don't know," said Cyril. "You see, Anthea wrote it in such a hurry, and it really didn't seem like stealing then. But afterwards, when we found we couldn't get down off the church-tower, it seemed just exactly like it. We are all very

sorry"—

"Say no more about it," said the Vicar's wife; "but another time just think before you take other people's tongues. Now—some cake and milk before you go home?"

When Andrew came to say that the horse was put to, and was he expected to be led alone into the trap that he had plainly seen from the first, he found the children eating cake and drinking milk and laughing at the Vicar's jokes. Jane was sitting on the Vicar's wife's lap.

So you see they got off better than they deserved.

The gamekeeper, who was the cook's cousin, asked leave to drive home with them, and Andrew was only too glad to have someone to protect him from that trap he was so certain of.

When the wagonette reached their own house, between the chalk quarry and the gravel pit, the children were very sleepy, but they felt that they and the keeper were friends for life.

Andrew dumped the children down at the iron gate without a word.

"You get along home," said the Vicarage cook's cousin, who was a gamekeeper. "I'll get me home on shanks' mare."

So Andrew had to drive off alone, which he did not like at all, and it was the keeper that was cousin to the Vicarage cook who went with the children to the door, and, when they had been swept to bed in a whirlwind of reproaches, remained to explain to Martha and the cook and the housemaid exactly what had happened. He explained so well that Martha was quite amicable the next morning.

After that he often used to come over and see Martha, and in the end—but that is another story, as dear Mr. Kipling says.

Martha was obliged to stick to what she had said the night before about keeping the children indoors the next day for a punishment. But she wasn't at all ugly about it, and agreed to

let Robert go out for half an hour to get something he particularly wanted.

This, of course, was the day's wish.

Robert rushed to the gravel pit, found the Psammead, and presently wished for—

But that, too, is another story.

CHAPTER VI
A Castle and No Dinner

The others were to be kept in as a punishment for the misfortunes of the day before. Of course Martha thought it was naughtiness, and not misfortune—so you must not blame her. She only thought she was doing her duty. You know, grown-up people often say they do not like to punish you, and that they only do it for your own good, and that it hurts them as much as it hurts you—and this is really very often the truth.

Martha certainly hated having to punish the children quite as much as they hated to be punished. For one thing, she knew what a noise there would be in the house all day. And she had other reasons.

"I declare," she said to the cook, "it seems almost a shame keeping of them indoors this lovely day; but they are that audacious, they'll be walking in with their heads knocked off some of these days, if I don't put my foot down. You make them a cake for tea tomorrow, dear. And we'll have Baby along of us soon as we've got a bit forrard with our work. Then they can have a good romp with him, out of the way. Now, Eliza, come, get on with them beds. Here's ten o'clock nearly, and no rabbits caught!"

People say that in Kent when they mean "and no work done."

So all the others were kept in, but Robert, as I have said, was allowed to go out for half an hour to get something they all wanted. And that, of course, was the day's wish.

He had no difficulty in finding the Sand-fairy, for the day was already so hot that it had actually, for the first time, come out of its own accord, and was sitting in a sort of pool of soft

sand, stretching itself, and trimming its whiskers, and turning its snail's eyes round and round.

"Ha!" it said when its left eye saw Robert; "I've been looking for you. Where are the rest of you? Not smashed themselves up with those wings, I hope?"

"No," said Robert; "but the wings got us into a row, just like all the wishes always do. So the others are kept indoors, and I was only let out for half an hour—to get the wish. So please let me wish as quickly as I can."

"Wish away," said the Psammead, twisting itself round in the sand. But Robert couldn't wish away. He forgot all the things he had been thinking about, and nothing would come into his head but little things for himself, like candy, a foreign stamp album, or a knife with three blades and a corkscrew. He sat down to think better of things the others would not have cared for—such as a football, or a pair of leg-guards, or to be able to lick Simpkins Minor thoroughly when he went back to school.

"Well," said the Psammead at last, "you'd better hurry up with that wish of yours. Time flies."

"I know it does," said Robert. "*I* can't think what to wish for. I wish you could give one of the others their wish without their having to come here to ask for it. Oh, *don't*!"

But it was too late. The Psammead had blown itself out to about three times its proper size, and now it collapsed like a pricked bubble, and with a deep sigh leaned back against the edge of the sand-pool, quite faint with the effort.

"There!" it said in a weak voice; "it was tremendously hard—but I did it. Run along home, or they're sure to wish for something silly before you get there."

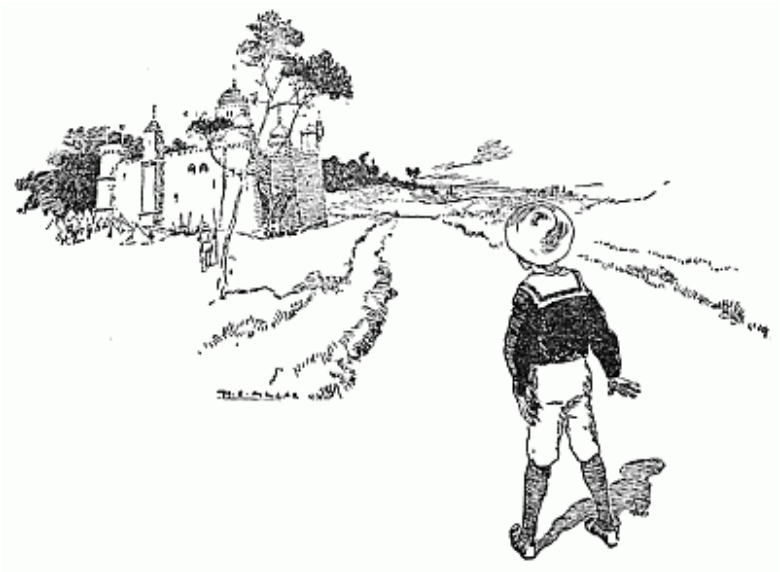
They were—quite sure; Robert felt this, and as he ran home his mind was deeply occupied with the sort of wishes he might find they had wished in his absence. They might wish for rabbits, or white mice, or chocolate, or a fine day tomorrow, or even—and that was most likely—someone might

have said, "I do wish to goodness Robert would hurry up." Well, he *was* hurrying up, and so they would have had their wish, and the day would be wasted. Then he tried to think what they could wish for—something that would be amusing indoors. That had been his own difficulty from the beginning. So few things are amusing indoors when the sun is shining outside and you mayn't go out, however much you want to do so.

Robert was running as fast as he could, but when he turned the corner that ought to have brought him within sight of the architect's nightmare—the ornamental ironwork on the top of the house—he opened his eyes so wide that he had to drop into a walk; for you cannot run with your eyes wide open. Then suddenly he stopped short, for there was no house to be seen. The front garden railings were gone too, and where the house had stood—Robert rubbed his eyes and looked again. Yes, the others *had* wished—there was no doubt about it—and they must have wished that they lived in a castle; for there the castle stood, black and stately, and very tall and broad, with battlements and lancet windows, and eight great towers; and, where the garden and the orchard had been, there were white things dotted like mushrooms. Robert walked slowly on, and as he got nearer he saw that these were tents, and men in armour were walking about among the tents—crowds and crowds of them.

"Oh!" said Robert fervently. "They *have*! They've wished for a castle, and it's being besieged! It's just like that Sand-fairy! I wish we'd never seen the beastly thing!"

At the little window above the great gateway, across the moat that now lay where the garden had been but half an hour ago, someone was waving something pale dust-coloured. Robert thought it was one of Cyril's handkerchiefs. They had never been white since the day when he had upset the bottle of "Combined Toning and Fixing Solution" into the drawer where they were. Robert waved back, and immediately felt



There the castle stook, black and stately.

that he had been unwise. For this signal had been seen by the besieging force, and two men in steel caps were coming towards him. They had high brown boots on their long legs, and they came towards him with such great strides that Robert remembered the shortness of his own legs and did not run away. He knew it would be useless to himself, and he feared it might be irritating to the foe. So he stood still—and the two men seemed quite pleased with him.

"By my halidom," said one, "a brave varlet this!"

Robert felt pleased at being *called* brave, and somehow it made him *feel* brave. He passed over the "varlet." It was the way people talked in historical romances for the young, he knew, and it was evidently not meant for rudeness. He only hoped he would be able to understand what they said to him. He had not been always able quite to follow the conversations in the historical romances for the young.

"His garb is strange," said the other. "Some outlandish treachery, belike."

"Say, lad, what brings thee hither?"

Robert knew this meant, "Now then, youngster, what are you up to here, eh?"—so he said—

"If you please, I want to go home."

"Go, then!" said the man in the longest boots; "none hindereth, and nought lets us to follow. Zooks!" he added in a cautious undertone, "I misdoubt me but he beareth tidings to the besieged."

"Where dwellest thou, young knave?" inquired the man with the largest steel cap.

"Over there," said Robert; and directly he had said it he knew he ought to have said "Yonder!"

"Ha—sayest so?" rejoined the longest boots. "Come hither, boy. This is matter for our leader."

And to the leader Robert was dragged forthwith—by the reluctant ear.

The leader was the most glorious creature Robert had ever seen. He was exactly like the pictures Robert had so often admired in the historical romances. He had armour, and a helmet, and a horse, and a crest, and feathers, and a shield and a lance and a sword. His armour and his weapons were all, I am almost sure, of quite different periods. The shield was thirteenth century, while the sword was of the pattern used in the Peninsular War. The cuirass was of the time of Charles I., and the helmet dated from the Second Crusade. The arms on the shield were very grand—three red running lions on a blue ground. The tents were of the latest brand approved of by our modern War Office, and the whole appearance of camp, army, and leader might have been a shock to some. But Robert was dumb with admiration, and it all seemed to him perfectly correct, because he knew no more of heraldry or archeology than the gifted artists who usually drew the pictures for the historical romances. The scene was indeed "exactly like a picture." He admired it all so much that he felt braver than ever.



Robert was dragged forthwith – by the reluctant ear.

"Come hither, lad," said the glorious leader, when the men in Cromwellian steel caps had said a few low eager words. And he took off his helmet, because he could not see properly with it on. He had a kind face, and long fair hair. "Have no fear; thou shalt take no scathe," he said.

Robert was glad of that. He wondered what "scathe" was, and if it was nastier than the medicine which he had to take

sometimes.

"Unfold thy tale without alarm," said the leader kindly. "Whence comest thou, and what is thine intent?"

"My what?" said Robert.

"What seekest thou to accomplish? What is thine errand, that thou wanderest here alone among these rough men-at-arms? Poor child, thy mother's heart aches for thee e'en now, I'll warrant me."

"I don't think so," said Robert; "you see, she doesn't know I'm out."

The leader wiped away a manly tear, exactly as a leader in a historical romance would have done, and said—

"Fear not to speak the truth, my child; thou hast nought to fear from Wulfric de Talbot."



He wiped away a manly tear.

Robert had a wild feeling that this glorious leader of the besieging party—being himself part of a wish—would be able to understand better than Martha, or the gypsies, or the policeman in Rochester, or the clergyman of yesterday, the true tale of the wishes and the Psammead. The only difficulty was that he knew he could never remember enough "quothas" and "beshrew me's," and things like that, to make his talk sound like the talk of a boy in a historical romance. However, he began boldly enough, with a sentence straight out of *Ralph de Courcy; or, The Boy Crusader*. He said—

"Grammercy for thy courtesy, fair sir knight. The fact is, it's like this—and I hope you're not in a hurry, because the story's rather a breather. Father and mother are away, and when we went down playing in the sand pits we found a Psammead."

"I cry thee mercy! A Sammyadd?" said the knight.

"Yes, a sort of—of fairy, or enchanter—yes, that's it, an enchanter; and he said we could have a wish every day, and we wished first to be beautiful."

"Thy wish was scarce granted," muttered one of the men-at-arms, looking at Robert, who went on as if he had not heard, though he thought the remark very rude indeed.

"And then we wished for money—treasure, you know; but we couldn't spend it. And yesterday we wished for wings, and we got them, and we had a ripping time to begin with"—

"Thy speech is strange and uncouth," said Sir Wulfric de Talbot. "Repeat thy words—what hadst thou?"

"A ripping—I mean a jolly—no—we were contented with our lot—that's what I mean; only, after we got into an awful fix."

"What is a fix? A fray, mayhap?"

"No—not a fray. A—a—a tight place."

"A dungeon? Alas for thy youthful fettered limbs!" said the knight, with polite sympathy.

"It wasn't a dungeon. We just—just encountered

undeserved misfortunes," Robert explained, "and today we are punished by not being allowed to go out. That's where I live,"—he pointed to the castle. "The others are in there, and they're not allowed to go out. It's all the Psammead's—I mean the enchanter's fault. I wish we'd never seen him."

"He is an enchanter of might?"

"Oh yes—of might and main. Rather!"

"And thou deemest that it is the spells of the enchanter whom thou hast angered that have lent strength to the besieging party," said the gallant leader; "but know thou that Wulfric de Talbot needs no enchanter's aid to lead his followers to victory."

"No, I'm sure you don't," said Robert, with hasty courtesy; "of course not—you wouldn't, you know. But, all the same, it's partly his fault, but we're most to blame. You couldn't have done anything if it hadn't been for us."

"How now, bold boy?" asked Sir Wulfric haughtily. "Thy speech is dark, and eke scarce courteous. Unravel me this riddle!"

"Oh," said Robert desperately, "of course you don't know it, but you're not *real* at all. You're only here because the others must have been idiots enough to wish for a castle—and when the sun sets you'll just vanish away, and it'll be all right."

The captain and the men-at-arms exchanged glances at first pitying, and then sterner, as the longest-booted man said, "Beware, my noble lord; the urchin doth but feign madness to escape from our clutches. Shall we not bind him?"

"I'm no more mad than you are," said Robert angrily, "perhaps not so much—Only, I was an idiot to think you'd understand anything. Let me go—I haven't done anything to you."

"Whither?" asked the knight, who seemed to have believed all the enchanter story till it came to his own share in it. "Whither wouldst thou wend?"

"Home, of course." Robert pointed to the castle.

"To carry news of succor? Nay!"

"All right, then," said Robert, struck by a sudden idea; "then let me go somewhere else." His mind sought eagerly among the memories of the historical romance.

"Sir Wulfric de Talbot," he said slowly, "should think foul scorn to—to keep a chap—I mean one who has done him no hurt—when he wants to cut off quietly—I mean to depart without violence."

"This to my face! Beshrew thee for a knave!" replied Sir Wulfric. But the appeal seemed to have gone home. "Yet thou sayest sooth," he added thoughtfully. "Go where thou wilt," he added nobly, "thou art free. Wulfric de Talbot warreth not with babes, and Jakin here shall bear thee company."

"All right," said Robert wildly. "Jakin will enjoy himself, I



"Oh, do, do, do, do, do!" said Robert.

think. Come on, Jakin. Sir Wulfric, I salute thee."

He saluted after the modern military manner, and set off running to the sand pit, Jakin's long boots keeping up easily.

He found the Fairy. He dug it up, he woke it up, he implored it to give him one more wish.

"I've done two today already," it grumbled, "and one was as stiff a bit of work as ever I did."

"Oh, do, do, do, do, *do!*" said Robert, while Jakin looked on with an expression of open-mouthed horror at the strange beast that talked, and gazed with its snail's eyes at him.

"Well, what is it?" snapped the Psammead, with cross sleepiness.

"I wish I was with the others," said Robert. And the Psammead began to swell. Robert never thought of wishing the castle and the siege away. Of course he knew they had all come out of a wish, but swords and daggers and pikes and lances seemed much too real to be wished away. Robert lost consciousness for an instant. When he opened his eyes the others were crowding round him.

"We never heard you come in," they said. "How awfully jolly of you to wish it to give us our wish!"

"Of course we understood that was what you'd done."

"But you ought to have told us. Suppose we'd wished something silly."

"Silly?" said Robert, very crossly indeed. "How much sillier could you have been, I'd like to know? You nearly settled *me*—I can tell you."

Then he told his story, and the others admitted that it certainly had been rough on him. But they praised his courage and cleverness so much that he presently got back his lost temper, and felt braver than ever, and consented to be captain of the besieged force.

"We haven't done anything yet," said Anthea comfortably; "we waited for you. We're going to shoot at them through these little loopholes with the bow and arrows uncle

gave you, and you shall have first shot."

"I don't think I would," said Robert cautiously; "you don't know what they're like near to. They've got *real* bows and arrows—an awful length—and swords and pikes and daggers, and all sorts of sharp things. They're all quite, quite real. It's not just a—a picture, or a vision or anything; they can *hurt us*—or kill us even, I shouldn't wonder. I can feel my ear all sore yet. Look here—have you explored the castle? Because I think we'd better let them alone as long as they let us alone. I heard that Jakin man say they weren't going to attack till just before sundown. We can be getting ready for the attack. Are there any soldiers in the castle to defend it?"

"We don't know," said Cyril. "You see, directly I'd wished we were in a besieged castle, everything seemed to go upside down, and when it came straight we looked out of the window, and saw the camp and things and you—and of course we kept on looking at everything. Isn't this room jolly? It's as real as real!"

It was. It was square, with stone walls four feet thick, and great beams for ceiling. A low door at the corner led to a flight of steps, up and down. The children went down; they found themselves in a great arched gatehouse—the enormous doors were shut and barred. There was a window in a little room at the bottom of the round turret up which the stair wound, rather larger than the other windows, and looking through it they saw that the drawbridge was up and the portcullis down; the moat looked very wide and deep. Opposite the great door that led to the moat was another great door, with a little door in it. The children went through this, and found themselves in a big courtyard, with the great grey walls of the castle rising dark and heavy on all four sides.

Near the middle of the courtyard stood Martha, moving her right hand backwards and forwards in the air. The cook was stooping down and moving her hands, also in a very curious way. But the oddest and at the same time most

terrible thing was the Lamb, who was sitting on nothing, about three feet from the ground, laughing happily.

The children ran towards him. Just as Anthea was reaching out her arms to take him, Martha said crossly, "Let him alone—do, miss, when he *is* good."

"But what's he *doing*?" said Anthea.

"Doing? Why, a-setting in his high chair as good as gold, a precious, watching me doing of the ironing. Get along with you, do—my iron's cold again."

She went towards the cook, and seemed to poke an invisible fire with an unseen poker—the cook seemed to be putting an unseen dish into an invisible oven.

"Run along with you, do," she said; "I'm behindhand as it is. You won't get no dinner if you come a-hindering of me like this. Come, off you goes, or I'll pin a discloth to some of your tails."

"You're *sure* the Lamb's all right?" asked Jane anxiously.

"Right as ninepence, if you don't come unsettling of him. I thought you'd like to be rid of him for today; but take him, if you want him, for gracious' sake."

"No, no," they said, and hastened away. They would have to defend the castle presently, and the Lamb was safer even suspended in midair in an invisible kitchen than in the guardroom of the besieged castle. They went through the first doorway they came to, and sat down helplessly on a wooden bench that ran along the room inside.

"How awful!" said Anthea and Jane together; and Jane added, "I feel as if I was in a lunatic asylum."

"What does it mean?" Anthea said. "It's creepy; I don't like it. I wish we'd wished for something plain—a rocking horse, or a donkey, or something."

"It's no use wishing *now*," said Robert bitterly; and Cyril said—

"Do be quiet; I want to think."

He buried his face in his hands, and the others looked

about them. They were in a long room with an arched roof. There were wooden tables along it, and one across at the end of the room, on a sort of raised platform. The room was very dim and dark. The floor was strewn with dry things like sticks, and they did not smell nice.

Cyril sat up suddenly and said—

"Look here—it's all right. I think it's like this. You know, we wished that the servants shouldn't notice any difference when we got wishes. And nothing happens to the Lamb unless we specially wish it to. So of course they don't notice the castle or anything. But then the castle is on the same place where our house was—is, I mean—and the servants have to go on being in the house, or else they *would* notice. But you can't have a castle mixed up with our house—and so *we* can't see the house, because we see the castle; and they can't see the castle, because they go on seeing the house; and so"—

"Oh, *don't*," said Jane; "you make my head go all swimmy, like being on a roundabout. It doesn't matter! Only, I hope we shall be able to see our dinner, that's all—because if it's invisible it'll be unfeelable as well, and then we can't eat it! I *know* it will, because I tried to feel if I could feel the Lamb's chair and there was nothing under him at all but air. And we can't eat air, and I feel just as if I hadn't had any breakfast for years and years."

"It's no use thinking about it," said Anthea. "Let's go on exploring. Perhaps we might find something to eat."

This lighted hope in every breast, and they went on exploring the castle. But though it was the most perfect and delightful castle you can possibly imagine, and furnished in the most complete and beautiful manner, neither food nor men-at-arms were to be found in it.

"If you'd only thought of wishing to be besieged in a castle thoroughly garrisoned and provisioned!" said Jane reproachfully.

"You can't think of everything, you know," said Anthea.

"I should think it must be nearly dinnertime by now."

It wasn't; but they hung about watching the strange movements of the servants in the middle of the courtyard, because, of course, they couldn't be sure where the dining room of the invisible house was. Presently they saw Martha carrying an invisible tray across the courtyard, for it seemed that, by the most fortunate accident, the dining room of the house and the banqueting hall of the castle were in the same place. But oh, how their hearts sank when they perceived that the tray *was* invisible!

They waited in wretched silence while Martha went through the form of carving an unseen leg of mutton and serving invisible greens and potatoes with a spoon that no one could see. When she had left the room, the children looked at the empty table, and then at each other.

"This is worse than anything," said Robert, who had not till now been particularly keen on his dinner.

"I'm not so very hungry," said Anthea, trying to make the best of things, as usual.

Cyril tightened his belt ostentatiously. Jane burst into tears.

CHAPTER VII
A Siege and Bed

The children were sitting in the gloomy banqueting hall, at the end of one of the long bare wooden tables. There was now no hope. Martha had brought in the dinner, and the dinner was invisible, and unfeelable too; for, when they rubbed their hands along the table, they knew but too well that for them there was nothing there *but* table.

Suddenly Cyril felt in his pocket.

"Right, *oh*!" he cried. "Look here! Biscuits."

Somewhat broken and crumbled, certainly, but still biscuits. Three whole ones, and a generous handful of crumbs and fragments.

"I got them this morning—cook—and I'd quite forgotten," he explained as he divided them with scrupulous fairness into four heaps.

They were eaten in a happy silence, though they had an odd taste, because they had been in Cyril's pocket all the morning with a hank of tarred twine, some green fir cones, and a ball of cobbler's wax.

"Yes, but look here, Squirrel," said Robert; "you're so clever at explaining about invisibleness and all that. How is it the biscuits are here, and all the bread and meat and things have disappeared?"

"I don't know," said Cyril after a pause, "unless it's because *we* had them. Nothing about *us* has changed. Everything's in my pocket all right."

"Then if we *had* the mutton it would be real," said Robert. "Oh, don't I wish we could find it!"

"But we can't find it. I suppose it isn't ours till we've got

it in our mouths."

"Or in our pockets," said Jane, thinking of the biscuits.

"Who puts mutton in their pockets, goose-girl?" said Cyril. "But I know—at any rate, I'll try it!"

He leaned over the table with his face about an inch from it, and kept opening and shutting his mouth as if he were taking bites out of air.

"It's no good," said Robert in deep dejection. "You'll only— Hullo!"

Cyril stood up with a grin of triumph, holding a square piece of bread in his mouth. It was quite real. Everyone saw it. It is true that, directly he bit a piece off, the rest vanished; but it was all right, because he knew he had it in his hand though he could neither see nor feel it. He took another bite from the air between his fingers, and it turned into bread as he bit. The next moment all the others were following his example, and opening and shutting their mouths an inch or so from the bare-looking table. Robert captured a slice of mutton, and—but I think I will draw a veil over the rest of this painful scene. It is enough to say that they all had enough mutton, and that when Martha came to change the plates she said she had never seen such a mess in all her born days.

The pudding was, fortunately, a plain suet one, and in answer to Martha's questions the children all with one accord said that they would *not* have molasses on it—nor jam, nor sugar—"Just plain, please," they said. Martha said, "Well, I never—what next, I wonder!" and went away.

Then ensued another scene on which I will not dwell, for nobody looks nice picking up slices of suet pudding from the table in its mouth, like a dog.

The great thing, after all, was that they had had dinner; and now everyone felt more courage to prepare for the attack that was to be delivered before sunset. Robert, as captain, insisted on climbing to the top of one of the towers to reconnoitre, so up they all went. And now they could see all

round the castle, and could see, too, that beyond the moat, on every side, tents of the besieging party were pitched. Rather uncomfortable shivers ran down the children's backs as they saw that all the men were very busy cleaning or sharpening their arms, re-stringing their bows, and polishing their shields. A large party came along the road, with horses dragging along the great trunk of a tree; and Cyril felt quite pale, because he knew this was for a battering ram.

"What a good thing we've got a moat," he said; "and what a good thing the drawbridge is up—I should never have known how to work it."

"Of course it would be up in a besieged castle."

"You'd think there ought to have been soldiers in it, wouldn't you?" said Robert.

"You see you don't know how long it's been besieged," said Cyril darkly; "perhaps most of the brave defenders were killed early in the siege and all the provisions eaten, and now there are only a few intrepid survivors—that's us, and we are going to defend it to the death."

"How do you begin—defending to the death, I mean?" asked Anthea.

"We ought to be heavily armed—and then shoot at them when they advance to the attack."

"They used to pour boiling lead down on besiegers when they got too close," said Anthea. "Father showed me the holes on purpose for pouring it down through at Bodiam Castle. And there are holes like it in the gate tower here."

"I think I'm glad it's only a game; it *is* only a game, isn't it?" said Jane.

But no one answered.

The children found plenty of strange weapons in the castle, and if they were armed at all it was soon plain that they would be, as Cyril said, "armed heavily"—for these swords and lances and crossbows were far too weighty even for Cyril's manly strength; and as for the longbows, none of the children

could even begin to bend them. The daggers were better; but Jane hoped that the besiegers would not come close enough for daggers to be of any use.

"Never mind, we can hurl them like javelins," said Cyril, "or drop them on people's heads. I say—there are lots of stones on the other side of the courtyard. If we took some of those up? Just to drop on their heads if they were to try swimming the moat."

So a heap of stones grew apace, up in the room above the gate; and another heap, a shiny spiky dangerous-looking heap, of daggers and knives.

As Anthea was crossing the courtyard for more stones, a sudden and valuable idea came to her.

She went to Martha and said, "May we have just biscuits for tea? We're going to play at besieged castles, and we'd like the biscuits to provision the garrison. Put mine in my pocket, please, my hands are so dirty. And I'll tell the others to fetch theirs."

This was indeed a happy thought, for now with four generous handfuls of air, which turned to biscuits as Martha crammed it into their pockets, the garrison was well provisioned till sundown.

They brought up some iron pots of cold water to pour on the besiegers instead of hot lead, with which the castle did not seem to be provided.

The afternoon passed with wonderful quickness. It was very exciting; but none of them, except Robert, could feel all the time that this was real deadly dangerous work. To the others, who had only seen the camp and the besiegers from a distance, the whole thing seemed half a game of make-believe, and half a splendidly distinct and perfectly safe dream. But it was only now and then that Robert could feel this.

When it seemed to be tea time the biscuits were eaten, with water from the deep well in the courtyard, drunk out of

horns. Cyril insisted on putting by eight of the biscuits, in case anyone should feel faint in stress of battle.

Just as he was putting away the reserve biscuits in a sort of little stone cupboard without a door, a sudden sound made him drop three. It was the loud fierce cry of a trumpet.

"You see it *is* real," said Robert, "and they are going to attack."

All rushed to the narrow windows.

"Yes," said Robert, "they're all coming out of their tents and moving about like ants. There's that Jakin dancing about where the bridge joins on. I wish he could see me put my tongue out at him! Yah!"

The others were far too pale to wish to put their tongues out at anybody. They looked at Robert with surprised respect. Anthea said—

"You really *are* brave, Robert."

"Rot!" Cyril's pallor turned to redness now, all in a minute. "He's been getting ready to be brave all the afternoon. And I wasn't ready, that's all. I shall be braver than he is in half a jiffy."

"Oh dear!" said Jane, "what does it matter which of you is the bravest? I think Cyril was a perfect silly to wish for a castle, and I don't want to play."

"It *isn't*"—Robert was beginning sternly, but Anthea interrupted—

"Oh yes, you do," she said coaxingly; "it's a very nice game, really, because they can't possibly get in, and if they do the women and children are always spared by civilized armies."

"But are you quite, quite sure they *are* civilized?" asked Jane, panting. "They seem to be such a long time ago."

"Of course they are." Anthea pointed cheerfully through the narrow window. "Why, look at the little flags on their lances, how bright they are—and how fine the leader is! Look, that's him—isn't it, Robert?—on the gray horse."

Jane consented to look, and the scene was almost too pretty to be alarming. The green turf, the white tents, the flash of pennoned lances, the gleam of armour, and the bright colours of scarf and tunic—it was just like a splendid coloured picture. The trumpets were sounding, and when the trumpeters stopped for breath the children could hear the cling-clang of armour and the murmur of voices.

A trumpeter came forward to the edge of the moat, which now seemed very much narrower than at first, and blew the longest and loudest blast they had yet heard. When the blaring noise had died away, a man who was with the trumpeter shouted—

"What ho, within there!" and his voice came plainly to the garrison in the gatehouse.

"Hullo there!" Robert bellowed back at once.

"In the name of our Lord the King, and of our good lord and trusty leader Sir Wulfric de Talbot, we summon this castle to surrender—on pain of fire and sword and no quarter. Do ye surrender?"

"*No*" bawled Robert; "of course we don't! Never, *Never, NEVER!*"

The man answered back—

"Then your fate be on your own heads."

"Cheer," said Robert in a fierce whisper. "Cheer to show them we aren't afraid, and rattle the daggers to make more noise. One, two, three! Hip, hip, hooray! Again—Hip, hip, hooray! One more—Hip, hip, hooray!" The cheers were rather high and weak, but the rattle of the daggers lent them strength and depth.

There was another shout from the camp across the moat—and then the beleaguered fortress felt that the attack had indeed begun.

It was getting rather dark in the room above the great gate, and Jane took a very little courage as she remembered that sunset *couldn't* be far off now.

"The moat is dreadfully thin," said Anthea.

"But they can't get into the castle even if they do swim over," said Robert. And as he spoke he heard feet on the stair outside—heavy feet and the clang of steel. No one breathed for a moment. The steel and the feet went on up the turret stairs. Then Robert sprang softly to the door. He pulled off his shoes.

"Wait here," he whispered, and stole quickly and softly after the boots and the spur-clank. He peeped into the upper room. The man was there—and it was Jakin, all dripping with moat-water, and he was fiddling about with the machinery which Robert felt sure worked the drawbridge. Robert banged the door suddenly, and turned the great key in the lock, just as Jakin sprang to the inside of the door. Then he tore downstairs and into the little turret at the foot of the tower where the biggest window was.

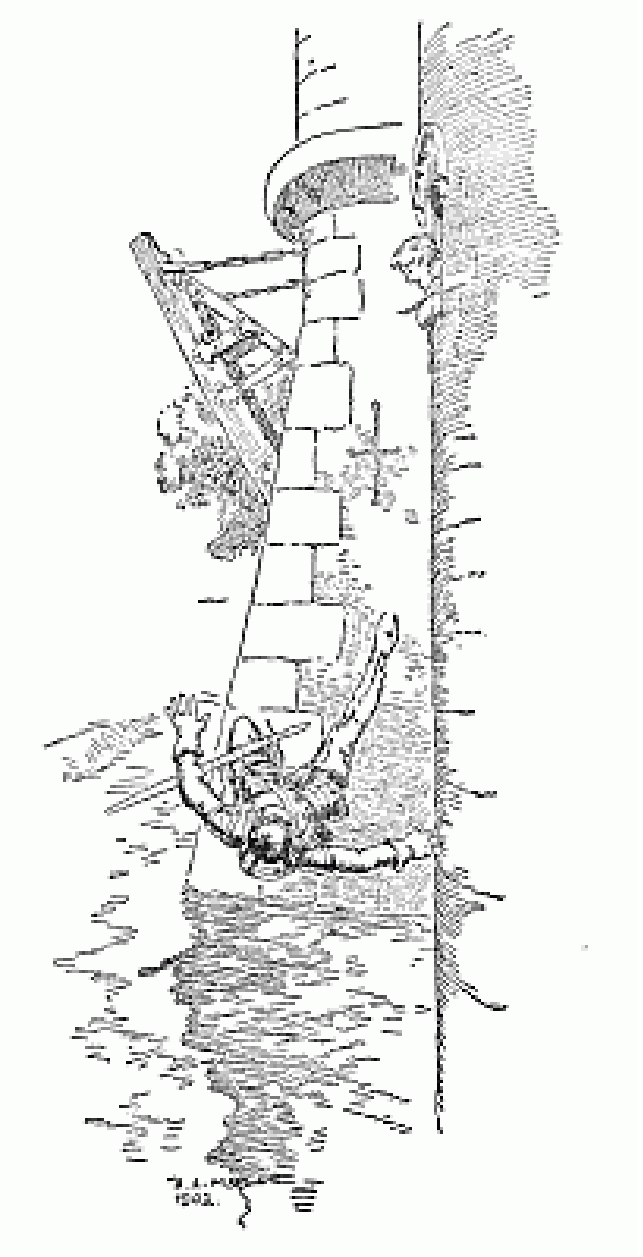
"We ought to have defended *this*!" he cried to the others as they followed him. He was just in time. Another man had swum over, and his fingers were on the window-ledge. Robert never knew how the man had managed to climb up out of the water. But he saw the clinging fingers, and hit them as hard as he could with an iron bar that he caught up from the floor. The man fell with a splash into the moat-water. In another moment Robert was outside the little room, had banged its door and was shooting home the enormous bolts, and calling to Cyril to lend a hand.

Then they stood in the arched gate-house, breathing hard and looking at each other.

Jane's mouth was open.

"Cheer up, Jenny," said Robert—"it won't last much longer."

There was a creaking above, and something rattled and shook. The pavement they stood on seemed to tremble. Then a crash told them that the drawbridge had been lowered to its place.



The man fell with a splash into the moat-water.

"That's that beast Jakin," said Robert. "There's still the portcullis; I'm almost certain that's worked from lower down."

And now the drawbridge rang and echoed hollowly to the hoofs of horses and the tramp of armed men.

"Up—quick!" cried Robert—"let's drop things on them."

Even the girls were feeling almost brave now. They followed Robert quickly, and under his directions began to drop stones out through the long narrow windows. There was a confused noise below, and some groans.

"Oh dear!" said Anthea, putting down the stone she was just going to drop out, "I'm afraid we've hurt somebody!"

Robert caught up the stone in a fury.

"I should hope we *had*!" he said; "I'd give something for a jolly good boiling kettle of lead. Surrender, indeed!"

And now came more tramping and a pause, and then the thundering thump of the battering ram. And the little room was almost pitch dark.

"We've held it," cried Robert, we *won't* surrender! The sun *must* set in a minute. Here—they're all jawing underneath again. Pity there's no time to get more stones! Here, pour that water down on them. It's no good, of course, but they'll hate it."

"Oh dear!" said Jane, "don't you think we'd better surrender?"

"Never!" said Robert; "we'll have a parley if you like, but we'll never surrender. Oh, I'll be a soldier when I grow up—you just see if I don't. I won't go into the Civil Service, whatever anyone says."

"Let's wave a handkerchief and ask for a parley," Jane pleaded. "I don't believe the sun's going to set tonight at all."

"Give them the water first—the brutes!" said the bloodthirsty Robert. So Anthea tilted the pot over the nearest leadhole, and poured. They heard a splash below, but no one below seemed to have felt it. And again the ram battered the great door. Anthea paused.

"How idiotic," said Robert, lying flat on the floor and putting one eye to the lead-hole. "Of course the holes go straight down into the gatehouse—that's for when the enemy has got past the door and the portcullis, and almost all is lost. Here, hand me the pot." He crawled on to the three-cornered



Anthea tilted the pot over the nearest lead-hole.

window-ledge in the middle of the wall, and, taking the pot from Anthea, poured the water out through the arrow-slit.

And as he began to pour, the noise of the battering ram and the trampling of the foe and the shouts of "Surrender!"

and "De Talbot forever!" all suddenly stopped and went out like the snuff of a candle; the little dark room seemed to whirl round and turn topsy-turvy, and when the children came to themselves there they were, safe and sound, in the big front bedroom of their own house—the house with the ornamental nightmare iron-top to the roof.

They all crowded to the window and looked out. The moat and the tents and the besieging force were all gone—and there was the garden with its tangle of dahlias and marigolds and asters and later roses, and the spiky iron railings and the quiet white road.

Everyone drew a deep breath.

"And that's all right!" said Robert. "I told you so! And, I say, we didn't surrender, did we?"

"Aren't you glad now I wished for a castle?" asked Cyril.

"I think I am *now*," said Anthea slowly. "But I wouldn't wish for it again, I think, Squirrel dear!"

"Oh, it was simply splendid!" said Jane unexpectedly. "I wasn't frightened a bit."

"Oh, I say!" Cyril was beginning, but Anthea stopped him.

"Look here," she said, "it's just come into my head. This is the very first thing we've wished for that hasn't got us into a row. And there hasn't been the least little scrap of a row about this. Nobody's raging downstairs, we're safe and sound, we've had an awfully jolly day—at least, not jolly exactly, but you know what I mean. And we know now how brave Robert is—and Cyril too, of course," she added hastily, "and Jane as well. And we haven't got into a row with a single grown-up."

The door was opened suddenly and fiercely.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," said the voice of Martha, and they could tell by her voice that she was very angry indeed. "I thought you couldn't last through the day without getting up to some mischief! A person can't take a breath of air on the front doorstep but you must be emptying the water jug on their heads! Off you go to bed, the lot of you,

and try to get up better children in the morning. Now then—don't let me have to tell you twice. If I find any of you not in bed in ten minutes I'll let you know it, that's all! A new cap, and everything!"

She flounced out amid a disregarded chorus of regrets and apologies. The children were very sorry, but really it was not their faults.

You can't help it if you are pouring water on a besieging foe, and your castle suddenly changes into your house—and everything changes with it except the water, and that happens to fall on somebody else's clean cap.

"I don't know why the water didn't change into nothing, though," said Cyril.

"Why should it?" asked Robert. "Water's water all the world over."

"I expect the castle well was the same as ours in the stable yard," said Jane. And that was really the case.

"I thought we couldn't get through a wish-day without a row," said Cyril; "it was much too good to be true. Come on, Bobs, my military hero. If we lick into bed sharp she won't be so furious, and perhaps she'll bring us up some supper. I'm jolly hungry! Good night, kids."

"Good night. I hope the castle won't come creeping back in the night," said Jane.

"Of course it won't," said Anthea briskly, "but Martha will—not in the night, but in a minute. Here, turn round, I'll get that knot out of your pinafore strings."

"Wouldn't it have been degrading for Sir Wulfric de Talbot," said Jane dreamily, "if he could have known that half the besieged garrison wore pinafores?"

"And the other half knickerbockers. Yes—frightfully. Do stand still—you're only tightening the knot," said Anthea.

CHAPTER VIII
Bigger Than the Baker's Boy

"Look here," said Cyril. "I've got an idea."

"Does it hurt much?" said Robert sympathetically.

"Don't be a jackanape! I'm not humbugging."

"Shut up, Bobs!" said Anthea.

"Silence for the Squirrel's oration," said Robert.

Cyril balanced himself on the edge of the water-butt in the backyard, where they all happened to be, and spoke.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen—and women—we found a Sammyadd. We have had wishes. We've had wings, and being beautiful as the day—ugh!—that was pretty jolly beastly if you like—and wealth and castles, and that rotten gipsy business with the Lamb. But we're no forrarder. We haven't really got anything worth having for our wishes."

"We've had things happening," said Robert; "that's always something."

"It's not enough, unless they're the right things," said Cyril firmly. "Now I've been thinking"—

"Not really?" whispered Robert.

"In the silent what's-its-names of the night. It's like suddenly being asked something out of history—the date of the Conquest or something; you know it all right all the time, but when you're asked it all goes out of your head. Ladies and gentlemen, you know jolly well that when we're all rotting about in the usual way heaps of things keep cropping up, and then real earnest wishes come into the heads of the beholder"—

"Hear, hear!" said Robert.

"—of the beholder, however, stupid he is," Cyril went on.

"Why, even Robert might happen to think of a really useful wish if he didn't injure his poor little brains trying so hard to think.—Shut up, Bobs, I tell you!—You'll have the whole show over."

A struggle on the edge of a water-butt is exciting but damp. When it was over, and the boys were partially dried, Anthea said—

"It really was you began it, Bobs. Now honour is satisfied, do let Squirrel go on. We're wasting the whole morning."

"Well then," said Cyril, still wringing the water out of the tails of his jacket, "I'll call it pax if Bobs will."

"Pax then," said Robert sulkily. "But I've got a lump as big as a cricket ball over my eye."

Anthea patiently offered a dust-coloured handkerchief, and Robert bathed his wounds in silence. "Now, Squirrel," she said.

"Well then—let's just play bandits, or forts, or soldiers, or any of the old games. We're dead sure to think of something if we try not to. You always do."

The others consented. Bandits was hastily chosen for the game. "It's as good as anything else," said Jane gloomily. It must be owned that Robert was at first but a half-hearted bandit, but when Anthea had borrowed from Martha the red-spotted handkerchief in which the keeper had brought her mushrooms that morning, and had tied up Robert's head with it so that he could be the wounded hero who had saved the bandit captain's life the day before, he cheered up wonderfully. All were soon armed. Bows and arrows slung on the back look well; and umbrellas and cricket stumps through the belt give a fine impression of the wearer's being armed to the teeth. The white cotton hats that men wear in the country nowadays have a very brigandish effect when a few turkey's feathers are stuck in them. The Lamb's mail cart was covered with a red-and-blue checked tablecloth, and made an admirable baggage wagon. The Lamb asleep inside it was not at all

in the way. So the banditti set out along the road that led to the sand pit.

"We ought to be near the Sammyadd," said Cyril, "in case we think of anything suddenly."

It is all very well to make up your minds to play bandit—or chess, or ping-pong, or any other agreeable game—but it is not easy to do it with spirit when all the wonderful wishes you can think of, or can't think of, are waiting for you round the corner. The game was dragging a little, and some of the bandits were beginning to feel that the others were disagreeable things, and were saying so candidly, when the baker's boy came along the road with loaves in a basket. The opportunity was not one to be lost.

"Stand and deliver!" cried Cyril.

"Your money or your life!" said Robert.

And they stood on each side of the baker's boy. Unfortunately, he did not seem to enter into the spirit of the thing at all. He was a baker's boy of an unusually large size. He merely said—

"Chuck it now, d'ye hear!" and pushed the bandits aside most disrespectfully.

Then Robert lassoed him with Jane's skipping rope, and instead of going round his shoulders, as Robert intended, it went round his feet and tripped him up. The basket was upset, the beautiful new loaves went bumping and bouncing all over the dusty chalky road. The girls ran to pick them up, and all in a moment Robert and the baker's boy were fighting it out, man to man, with Cyril to see fair play, and the skipping rope twisting round their legs like an interesting snake that wished to be a peacemaker. It did not succeed; indeed the way the boxwood handles sprang up and hit the fighters on the shins and ankles was not at all peacemaking. I know this is the second fight—or contest—in this chapter, but I can't help it. It was that sort of day. You know yourself there are days when rows seem to keep on happening, quite without your meaning

them to. If I were a writer of tales of adventure such as those which used to appear in *The Boys of England* when I was young of course I should be able to describe the fight, but I cannot do it. I never can see what happens during a fight, even when it is only dogs. Also, if I had been one of these *Boys of England* writers, Robert would have got the best of it. But I am like George Washington—I cannot tell a lie, even about a cherry tree, much less about a fight, and I cannot conceal from you that Robert was badly beaten, for the second time that day. The baker's boy blacked his other eye, and being ignorant of the first rules of fair play and gentlemanly behaviour, he also pulled Robert's hair, and kicked him on the knee. Robert always used to say he could have licked the baker if it hadn't been for the girls. But I am not sure. Anyway, what happened was this, and very painful it was to self-respecting boys.

Cyril was just tearing off his coat so as to help his brother in proper style, when Jane threw her arms round his legs and began to cry and ask him not to go and be beaten too. That "too" was very nice for Robert, as you can imagine—but it was nothing to what he felt when Anthea rushed in between him and the baker's boy, and caught that unfair and degraded fighter round the waist, imploring him not to fight anymore.

"Oh, don't hurt my brother anymore!" she said in floods of tears. "He didn't mean it—it's only play. And I'm sure he's very sorry."

You see how unfair this was to Robert. Because, if the baker's boy had had any right and chivalrous instincts, and had yielded to Anthea's pleading and accepted her despicable apology, Robert could not, in honour, have done anything to him at any future time. But Robert's fears, if he had any, were soon dispelled. Chivalry was a stranger to the breast of the baker's boy. He pushed Anthea away very roughly, and he chased Robert with kicks and unpleasant conversation right down the road to the sand pit, and there, with one last kick,



He pulled Robert's hair.

he landed him in a heap of sand.

"I'll larn you, you young varmint!" he said, and went off to pick up his loaves and go about his business. Cyril, impeded by Jane, could do nothing without hurting her, for she clung round his legs with the strength of despair. The baker's boy went off red and damp about the face; abusive to the last, he called them a pack of silly idiots, and disappeared round the corner. Then Jane's grasp loosened. Cyril turned away in silent dignity to follow Robert, and the girls followed him, weeping without restraint.

It was not a happy party that flung itself down in the sand beside the sobbing Robert. For Robert was sobbing—mostly with rage. Though of course I know that a really heroic boy is always dry-eyed after a fight. But then he always wins, which had not been the case with Robert.

Cyril was angry with Jane; Robert was furious with Anthea; the girls were miserable; and not one of the four was pleased with the baker's boy. There was, as French writers say,

"a silence full of emotion."

Then Robert dug his toes and his hands into the sand and wriggled in his rage. "He'd better wait till I'm grown-up—the cowardly brute! Beast!—I hate him! But I'll pay him out. Just because he's bigger than me."

"You began," said Jane incautiously.

"I know I did, silly—but I was only jollying—and he kicked me—look here"—

Robert tore down a stocking and showed a purple bruise touched up with red.

"I only wish I was bigger than him, that's all."

He dug his fingers in the sand, and sprang up, for his hand had touched something furry. It was the Psammead, of course—"On the look-out to make sillies of them as usual," as Cyril remarked later. And of course the next moment Robert's wish was granted, and he was bigger than the baker's boy. Oh, but much, much bigger! He was bigger than the big policeman who used to be at the crossing at the Mansion House years ago—the one who was so kind in helping old ladies over the crossing—and he was the biggest man *I* have ever seen, as well as the kindest. No one had a foot-rule in its pocket, so Robert could not be measured—but he was taller than your father would be if he stood on your mother's head, which I am sure he would never be unkind enough to do. He must have been ten or eleven feet high, and as broad as a boy of that height ought to be. His suit had fortunately grown too, and now he stood up in it—with one of his enormous stockings turned down to show the gigantic bruise on his vast leg. Immense tears of fury still stood on his flushed giant face. He looked so surprised, and he was so large to be wearing a turned down collar outside of his jacket that the others could not help laughing.

"The Sammyadd's done us again," said Cyril.

"Not us—*me*," said Robert. "If you'd got any decent feeling you'd try to make it make you the same size. You've no



"The Sammyadd's done us again," said Cyril.

idea how silly it feels," he added thoughtlessly.

"And I don't want to; I can jolly well see how silly it looks," Cyril was beginning; but Anthea said—

"Oh, *don't*! I don't know what's the matter with you boys today. Look here, Squirrel, let's play fair. It is hateful for poor old Bobs, all alone up there. Let's ask the Sammyadd for another wish, and, if it will, I do really think we ought all to be made the same size."

The others agreed, but not gaily; but when they found the

Psammead, it wouldn't.

"Not I," it said crossly, rubbing its face with its feet. "He's a rude violent boy, and it'll do him good to be the wrong size for a bit. What did he want to come digging me out with his nasty wet hands for? He nearly touched me! He's a perfect savage. A boy of the Stone Age would have had more sense."

Robert's hands had indeed been wet—with tears.

"Go away and leave me in peace, do," the Psammead went on. "I can't think why you don't wish for something sensible—something to eat or drink, or good manners, or good tempers. Go along with you, do!"

It almost snarled as it shook its whiskers, and turned a sulky brown back on them. The most hopeful felt that further parley was vain.

They turned again to the colossal Robert.

"What ever shall we do?" they said; and they all said it.

"First," said Robert grimly, "I'm going to reason with that baker's boy. I shall catch him at the end of the road."

"Don't hit a chap smaller than yourself, old man," said Cyril.

"Do I look like hitting him?" said Robert scornfully. "Why, I should *kill* him. But I'll give him something to remember. Wait till I pull up my stocking." He pulled up his stocking, which was as large as a small bolster-case, and strode off. His strides were six or seven feet long, so that it was quite easy for him to be at the bottom of the hill, ready to meet the baker's boy when he came down swinging the empty basket to meet his master's cart, which had been leaving bread at the cottages along the road.

Robert crouched behind a haystack in the farmyard, that is at the corner, and when he heard the boy come whistling along he jumped out at him and caught him by the collar.

"Now," he said, and his voice was about four times its usual size, just as his body was four times its, "I'm going to teach you to kick boys smaller than you."

He lifted up the baker's boy and set him on the top of the haystack, which was about sixteen feet from the ground, and then he sat down on the roof of the barn and told the baker's boy exactly what he thought of him. I don't think the boy heard it all—he was in a sort of trance of terror. When Robert



He lifted up the baker's boy and set him on top of the haystack.

had said everything he could think of, and some things twice over, he shook the boy and said—

"And now get down the best way you can," and left him.

I don't know how the baker's boy got down, but I do know that he missed the cart and got into the very hottest of hot water when he turned up at last at the bakehouse. I am sorry for him, but after all, it was quite right that he should be taught that boys mustn't use their feet when they fight, but their fists. Of course the water he got into only became hotter when he tried to tell his master about the boy he had licked and the giant as high as a church, because no one could possibly believe such a tale as that. Next day the tale was believed—but that was too late to be of any use to the baker's boy.

When Robert rejoined the others he found them in the garden. Anthea had thoughtfully asked Martha to let them have dinner out there—because the dining room was rather small, and it would have been so awkward to have a brother the size of Robert in there. The Lamb, who had slept peacefully during the whole stormy morning, was now found to be sneezing, and Martha said he had a cold and would be better indoors.

"And really it's just as well," said Cyril, "for I don't believe he'd ever have stopped screaming if he'd once seen you, the awful size you are!"

Robert was indeed what a draper would call an "out-size" in boys. He found himself able to step right over the iron gate in the front garden.

Martha brought out the dinner—it was cold veal and baked potatoes, with sago pudding and stewed plums to follow.

She of course did not notice that Robert was anything but the usual size, and she gave him as much meat and potatoes as usual and no more. You have no idea how small your usual helping of dinner looks when you are many times your proper size. Robert groaned, and asked for more bread. But Martha would not go on giving more bread forever. She was in a hurry, because the keeper intended to call on his way to

Benenhurst Fair, and she wished to be smartly dressed before he came.

"I wish *we* were going to the Fair," said Robert.

"You can't go anywhere that size," said Cyril.

"Why not?" said Robert. "They have giants at fairs, much bigger ones than me."

"Not much, they don't," Cyril was beginning, when Jane screamed "Oh!" with such loud suddenness that they all thumped her on the back and asked whether she had swallowed a plum-stone.

"No," she said, breathless from being thumped, "it's—it's not a plum-stone. It's an idea. Let's take Robert to the Fair, and get them to give us money for showing him! Then we really *shall* get something out of the old Sammyadd at last!"

"Take me, indeed!" said Robert indignantly. "Much more



It was a strange sensation being wheeled in a pony-carriage by a giant.

likely me take you!"

And so it turned out. The idea appealed irresistibly to everyone but Robert, and even he was brought round by Anthea's suggestion that he should have a double share of any money they might make. There was a little old pony cart in the coach house—the kind that is called a governess-cart. It seemed desirable to get to the Fair as quickly as possible, so Robert—who could now take enormous steps and so go very fast indeed—consented to wheel the others in this. It was as easy to him now as wheeling the Lamb in the mail cart had been in the morning. The Lamb's cold prevented his being of the party.

It was a strange sensation being wheeled in a pony-carriage by a giant. Everyone enjoyed the journey except Robert and the few people they passed on the way. These mostly went into what looked like some kind of standing-up fits by the roadside, as Anthea said. Just outside Benenhurst, Robert hid in a barn, and the others went on to the Fair.

There were some swings, and a hooting-tooting blaring merry-go-round, and a shooting gallery and Aunt Sallies. Resisting an impulse to win a cocoanut, or at least to attempt the enterprise, Cyril went up to the woman who was loading little guns before the array of glass bottles on strings against a sheet of canvas.

"Here you are, little gentleman!" she said. "Penny a shot!"

"No, thank you," said Cyril, "we are here on business, not on pleasure. Who's the master?"

"The what?"

"The master—the head—the boss of the show."

"Over there," she said, pointing to a stout man in a dirty linen jacket who was sleeping in the sun; "but I don't advise you to wake him sudden. His temper's contrairy, especially these hot days. Better have a shot while you're waiting."

"It's rather important," said Cyril. "It'll be very profitable to him. I think he'll be sorry if we take it away."

"Oh, if it's money in his pocket," said the woman. "No kid now? What is it?"

"It's a *giant*."

"You *are* kidding?"

"Come along and see," said Anthea.

The woman looked doubtfully at them, then she called to a ragged little girl in striped stockings and a dingy white petticoat that came below her brown frock, and leaving her in charge of the "shooting gallery" she turned to Anthea and said, "Well, hurry up! But if you *are* kidding, you'd best say so. I'm as mild as milk myself, but my Bill he's a fair terror and"—

Anthea led the way to the barn. "It really *is* a giant," she said. "He's a giant little boy—in a suit like my brother's there. And we didn't bring him up to the Fair because people do stare so, and they seem to go into kind of standing-up fits when they see him. And we thought perhaps you'd like to show him and get pennies; and if you like to pay us something, you can—only, it'll have to be rather a lot, because we promised him he should have a double share of whatever we made."

The woman murmured something indistinct, of which the children could only hear the words, "Swelp me!" "balmy," and "crumpet," which conveyed no definite idea to their minds.

She had taken Anthea's hand, and was holding it very firmly; and Anthea could not help wondering what would happen if Robert should have wandered off or turned his proper size during the interval. But she knew that the Psammead's gifts really did last till sunset, however inconvenient their lasting might be; and she did not think, somehow, that Robert would care to go out alone while he was that size.

When they reached the barn and Cyril called "Robert!" there was a stir among the loose hay, and Robert began to come out. His hand and arm came first—then a foot and leg. When the woman saw the hand she said "My!" but when she

saw the foot she said "Upon my word!" and when, by slow and heavy degrees, the whole of Robert's enormous bulk was at last disclosed, she drew a long breath and began to say many things, compared with which "balmy" and "crumpet" seemed quite ordinary. She dropped into understandable English at last.

"What'll you take for him?" she said excitedly. "Anything in reason. We'd have a special van built—leastways, I know where there's a second-hand one would do up handsome—what a baby elephant had, as died. What'll you take? He's soft, ain't he? Them giants mostly is—but I never see—no, never! What'll you take? Down on the nail. We'll treat him like a king, and give him first-rate grub and a doss fit for a bloomin' dook. He must be dotty or he wouldn't need you kids to cart him about. What'll you take for him?"

"They won't take anything," said Robert sternly. "I'm no more soft than you are—not so much, I shouldn't wonder. I'll come and be a show for today if you'll give me," he hesitated at the enormous price he was about to ask, "if you'll give me fifteen shillings."

"Done," said the woman, so quickly that Robert felt he had been unfair to himself, and wished he had asked thirty. "Come on now—and see my Bill—and we'll fix a price for the season. I dessay you might get as much as two pounds a week reg'lar. Come on—and make yourself as small as you can for gracious' sake!"

This was not very small, and a crowd gathered quickly, so that it was at the head of an enthusiastic procession that Robert entered the trampled meadow where the Fair was held, and passed over the stubby yellow dusty grass to the door of the biggest tent. He crept in, and the woman went to call her Bill. He was the big sleeping man, and he did not seem at all pleased at being awakened. Cyril, watching through a slit in the tent, saw him scowl and shake a heavy fist and a sleepy head. Then the woman went on speaking very fast.

Cyril heard "Strewth," and "biggest draw you ever, so help me!" and he began to share Robert's feeling that fifteen shillings was indeed far too little. Bill slouched up to the tent and entered. When he beheld the magnificent proportions of Robert he said but little, "Strike me pink!" were the only words the children could afterwards remember, but he produced fifteen shillings, mainly in sixpences and coppers, and handed it to Robert.

"We'll fix up about what you're to draw when the show's over tonight," he said with hoarse heartiness. "Lor' love a duck! You'll be that happy with us you'll never want to leave us. Can you do a song now—or a bit of a breakdown?"

"Not today," said Robert, rejecting the idea of trying to sing "As once in May," a favourite of his mother's, and the only song he could think of at the moment.

"Get Levi and clear them bloomin' photos out. Clear the tent. Stick out a curtain or suthink," the man went on. "Lor', what a pity we ain't got no tights his size! But we'll have 'em before the week's out. Young man, your fortune's made. It's a good thing you came to me, and not to some chaps as I could tell you on. I've known blokes as beat their giants, and starved 'em too; so I'll tell you straight, you're in luck this day if you never was afore. 'Cos I'm a lamb, I am—and I don't deceive you."

"I'm not afraid of anyone beating me," said Robert, looking down on the "lamb." Robert was crouched on his knees, because the tent was not big enough for him to stand upright in, but even in that position he could still look down on most people. "But I'm awfully hungry—I wish you'd get me something to eat."

"Here, 'Becca," said the hoarse Bill. "Get him some grub—the best you've got, mind!" Another whisper followed, of which the children only heard, "Down in black and white—first thing tomorrow."

Then the woman went to get the food—it was only bread

and cheese when it came, but it was delightful to the large and empty Robert; and the man went to post sentinels round the tent, to give the alarm if Robert should attempt to escape with his fifteen shillings.

"As if we weren't honest," said Anthea indignantly when the meaning of the sentinels dawned on her.

Then began a very strange and wonderful afternoon.

Bill was a man who knew his business. In a very little while, the photographic views, the spyglasses you look at them through so that they really seem rather real, and the lights you see them by, were all packed away. A curtain—it was an old red-and-black carpet really—was run across the tent. Robert was concealed behind, and Bill was standing on a trestle-table outside the tent making a speech. It was rather a good speech. It began by saying that the giant it was his privilege to introduce to the public that day was the eldest son of the Emperor of San Francisco, compelled through an unfortunate love affair with the Duchess of the Fiji Islands to leave his own country and take refuge in England—the land of liberty—where freedom was the right of every man, no matter how big he was. It ended by the announcement that the first twenty who came to the tent door should see the giant for threepence apiece. "After that," said Bill, "the price is riz, and I don't undertake to say what it won't be riz to. So now's yer time."

A young man with his sweetheart on her afternoon out was the first to come forward. For this occasion his was the princely attitude—no expense spared—money no object. His girl wished to see the giant? Well, she should see the giant, even though seeing the giant cost threepence each and the other entertainments were all penny ones.

The flap of the tent was raised—the couple entered. Next moment a wild shriek from the girl thrilled through all present. Bill slapped his leg. "That's done the trick!" he whispered to 'Becca. It was indeed a splendid advertisement

of the charms of Robert.

When the young girl came out she was pale and trembling, and a crowd was round the tent.

"What was it like?" asked a farmhand.



When the girl came out she was pale and trembling.

"Oh!—horrid!—you wouldn't believe," she said. "It's as big as a barn, and that fierce. It froze the blood in my bones. I wouldn't ha' missed seeing it for anything."

The fierceness was only caused by Robert's trying not to laugh. But the desire to do that soon left him, and before sunset he was more inclined to cry than laugh, and more inclined to sleep than either. For, by ones and twos and threes, people kept coming in all the afternoon, and Robert had to shake hands with those who wished it, and to allow himself to be punched and pulled and patted and thumped, so that people might make sure he was really real.

The other children sat on a bench and watched and waited, and were very bored indeed. It seemed to them that this was the hardest way of earning money that could have been invented. And only fifteen shillings! Bill had taken four times that already, for the news of the giant had spread, and trades-people in carts, and gentlepeople in carriages, came from far and near. One gentleman with an eyeglass, and a very large yellow rose in his buttonhole, offered Robert, in an obliging whisper, ten pounds a week to appear at the Crystal Palace. Robert had to say "No."

"I can't," he said regretfully. "It's no use promising what you can't do."

"Ah, poor fellow, bound for a term of years, I suppose! Well, here's my card; when your time's up come to me."

"I will—if I'm the same size then," said Robert truthfully.

"If you grow a bit, so much the better," said the gentleman.

When he had gone, Robert beckoned Cyril and said—

"Tell them I must and will have a rest. And I want my tea."

Tea was provided, and a paper hastily pinned on the tent. It said—

CLOSED FOR HALF AN HOUR
WHILE THE GIANT GETS HIS TEA

Then there was a hurried council.

"How am I to get away?" said Robert.

"I've been thinking about it all the afternoon."

"Why, walk out when the sun sets and you're your right size. They can't do anything to us."

Robert opened his eyes. "Why, they'd nearly kill us," he said, "when they saw me get my right size. No, we must think of some other way. We *must* be alone when the sun sets."



"When your time's up, come to me."

"I know," said Cyril briskly, and he went to the door, outside which Bill was smoking a clay pipe and talking in a low voice to 'Becca. Cyril heard him say—"Good as havin' a fortune left you."

"Look here," said Cyril, "you can let people come in again in a minute. He's nearly finished tea. But he *must* be left alone when the sun sets. He's very queer at that time of day, and if he's worried I won't answer for the consequences."

"Why—what comes over him?" asked Bill.

"I don't know; it's—it's sort of a *change*," said Cyril candidly. "He isn't at all like himself—you'd hardly know him. He's very queer indeed. Someone'll get hurt if he's not alone about sunset." This was true.

"He'll pull round for the evening, I s'pose?"

"Oh yes—half an hour after sunset he'll be quite himself again."

"Best humour him," said the woman.

And so, at what Cyril judged was about half an hour before sunset, the tent was again closed "whilst the giant gets his supper."

The crowd was very merry about the giant's meals and their coming so close together.

"Well, he can pick a bit," Bill owned. "You see he has to eat hearty, being the size he is."

Inside the tent the four children breathlessly arranged a plan of retreat.

"You go *now*," said Cyril to the girls, "and get along home as fast as you can. Oh, never mind the pony cart; we'll get that tomorrow. Robert and I are dressed the same. We'll manage somehow, like Sydney Carton did. Only, you girls *must* get out, or it's all no go. We can run, but you can't—whatever you may think. No, Jane, it's no good Robert going out and knocking people down. The police would follow him till he turned his proper size, and then arrest him like a shot. Go you must! If you don't, I'll never speak to you again. It was

you got us into this mess really, hanging round people's legs the way you did this morning. *Go*, I tell you!"

And Jane and Anthea went.

"We're going home," they said to Bill. "We're leaving the giant with you. Be kind to him." And that, as Anthea said afterwards, was very deceitful, but what were they to do?

When they had gone, Cyril went to Bill.

"Look here," he said, "he wants some ears of corn—there's some in the next field but one. I'll just run and get it. Oh, and he says can't you loop up the tent at the back a bit? He says he's stifling for a breath of air. I'll see no one peeps in at him. I'll cover him up, and he can take a nap while I go for the corn. He *will* have it—there's no holding him when he gets like this."

The giant was made comfortable with a heap of sacks and an old tarpaulin. The curtain was looped up, and the brothers were left alone. They matured their plan in whispers. Outside, the merry-go-round blared out its comic tunes, screaming now and then to attract public notice.

Half a minute after the sun had set, a boy came out past Bill.

"I'm off for the corn," he said, and mingled quickly with the crowd.

At the same instant a boy came out of the back of the tent past 'Becca, posted there as sentinel.

"I'm off after the corn," said this boy also. And he, too, moved away quietly and was lost in the crowd. The front door boy was Cyril; the back door was Robert—now, since sunset, once more his proper size. They walked quickly through the field, along the road, where Robert caught Cyril up. Then they ran. They were home as soon as the girls were, for it was a long way, and they ran most of it. It was indeed a *very* long way, as they found when they had to go and drag the pony cart home next morning, with no enormous Robert to wheel them in it as if it were a mail cart, and they were babies and

he was their gigantic nursemaid.

* * * * * *

I cannot possibly tell you what Bill and 'Becca said when they found that the giant had gone. For one thing, I do not know.

CHAPTER IX
Grown-up

Cyril had once pointed out that ordinary life is full of occasions on which a wish would be most useful. And this thought filled his mind when he happened to wake early on the morning after the morning after Robert had wished to be bigger than the baker's boy, and had been it. The day that lay between these two days had been occupied entirely by getting the governess-cart home from Benenhurst.

Cyril dressed hastily; he did not take a bath, because tin baths are so noisy, and he had no wish to rouse Robert, and he slipped off alone, as Anthea had once done, and ran through the dewy morning to the sand pit. He dug up the Psammead very carefully and kindly, and began the conversation by asking it whether it still felt any ill effects from the contact with the tears of Robert the day before yesterday. The Psammead was in good temper. It replied politely.

"And now, what can I do for you?" it said. "I suppose you've come here so early to ask for something for yourself—something your brothers and sisters aren't to know about, eh? Now, do be persuaded for your own good! Ask for a good fat Megatherium and have done with it."

"Thank you—not today, I think," said Cyril cautiously. "What I really wanted to say was—you know how you're always wishing for things when you're playing at anything?"

"I seldom play," said the Psammead coldly.

"Well, you know what I mean," Cyril went on impatiently. "What I want to say is: won't you let us have our wish just when we think of it, and just where we happen to be? So that we don't have to come and disturb you again," added the

crafty Cyril.

"It'll only end in your wishing for something you don't really want, as you did about the castle," said the Psammead, stretching its brown arms and yawning. "It's always the same since people left off eating really wholesome things. However, have it your own way. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Cyril politely.

"I'll tell you what," said the Psammead suddenly, shooting out its long snail's eyes, "I'm getting tired of you—all of you. You have no more sense than so many oysters. Go along with you!"

And Cyril went.

"What an awful long time babies *stay* babies," said Cyril after the Lamb had taken his watch out of his pocket while he wasn't noticing, and with coos and clucks of naughty rapture had opened the case and used the whole thing as a garden spade, and when even immersion in a wash basin had failed to wash the mould from the works and make the watch go again. Cyril had said several things in the heat of the moment; but now he was calmer, and had even consented to carry the Lamb part of the way to the woods. Cyril had persuaded the others to agree to his plan, and not to wish for anything more till they really did wish it. Meantime it seemed good to go to the woods for nuts, and on the mossy grass under a sweet chestnut tree the five were sitting. The Lamb was pulling up the moss by fat handfuls, and Cyril was gloomily contemplating the ruins of his watch.

"He does grow," said Anthea. "Doesn't 'oo, precious?"

"Me grow," said the Lamb cheerfully, "me grow big boy, have guns' an' mouses—an'—an'" Imagination or vocabulary gave out here. But anyway it was the longest speech the Lamb had ever made, and it charmed everyone, even Cyril, who tumbled the Lamb over and rolled him in the moss to the music of delighted squeals.

"I suppose he'll be grown-up someday," Anthea was

saying, dreamily looking up at the blue of the sky that showed between the long straight chestnut leaves. But at that moment the Lamb, struggling gaily with Cyril, thrust a stout-shod little foot against his brother's chest; there was a crack!—the innocent Lamb had broken the glass of father's second-best Waterbury watch, which Cyril had borrowed without leave.



He opened the case and used the whole thing as a garden spade.

"Grow up someday!" said Cyril bitterly, plumping the Lamb down on the grass. "I daresay he will—when nobody wants him to. I wish to goodness he would"—

"*Oh*, take care!" cried Anthea in an agony of apprehension. But it was too late—like music to a song her words

and Cyril's came out together—

Anthea—"Oh, take care!"

Cyril—"Grow up now!"

The faithful Psammead was true to its promise, and there, before the horrified eyes of its brothers and sisters, the Lamb suddenly and violently grew up. It was the most terrible moment. The change was not so sudden as the wish-changes usually were. The Baby's face changed first. It grew thinner and larger, lines came in the forehead, the eyes grew more deep-set and darker in colour, the mouth grew longer and thinner; most terrible of all, a little dark mustache appeared on the lip of one who was still—except as to the face—a two-year-old baby in a linen smock and white open-work socks.

"Oh, I wish it wouldn't! Oh, I wish it wouldn't! You boys might wish as well!"

They all wished hard, for the sight was enough to dismay the most heartless. They all wished so hard, indeed, that they felt quite giddy and almost lost consciousness; but the wishing was quite vain, for, when the wood ceased to whirl round, their dazed eyes were riveted at once by the spectacle of a very proper-looking young man in flannels and a straw hat—a young man who wore the same little black mustache which just before they had actually seen growing upon the Baby's lip. This, then, was the Lamb—grown-up! Their own Lamb! It was a terrible moment. The grown-up Lamb moved gracefully across the moss and settled himself against the trunk of the sweet chestnut. He tilted the straw hat over his eyes. He was evidently weary. He was going to sleep. The Lamb—the original little tiresome beloved Lamb often went to sleep at odd times and in unexpected places. Was this new Lamb in the grey flannel suit and the pale green necktie like the other Lamb? or had his mind grown-up together with his body?

That was the question which the others, in a hurried council held among the yellowing brake-fern a few yards from the sleeper, debated eagerly.

"Whichever it is, it'll be just as awful," said Anthea. "If his inside senses are grown-up too, he won't stand our looking after him; and if he's still a baby inside of him how on earth are we to get him to do anything? And it'll be getting on for dinnertime in a minute."

"And we haven't got any nuts," said Jane.

"Oh bother nuts!" said Robert, "but dinner's different—I didn't have half enough dinner yesterday. Couldn't we tie him to the tree and go home to our dinner and come back afterwards?"

"A fat lot of dinner we should get if we went back without the Lamb!" said Cyril in scornful misery. "And it'll be just the same if we go back with him in the state he is now. Yes, I know it's my doing; don't rub it in! I know I'm a beast, and not fit to live; you can take that for settled, and say no more about it. The question is, what are we going to do?"

"Let's wake him up, and take him into Rochester or Maidstone and get something to eat at a baker's shop," said Robert hopefully.

"Take him?" repeated Cyril. "Yes—do! It's all my fault—I don't deny that—but you'll find you've got your work cut out for you if you try to take that young man anywhere. The Lamb always was spoilt, but now he's grown-up he's a demon—simply. I can see it. Look at his mouth."

"Well then," said Robert, "let's wake him up and see what *he'll* do. Perhaps *he'll* take *us* to Maidstone and stand treat. He ought to have a lot of money in the pockets of those extra-special pants. We *must* have dinner, anyway."

They drew lots with little bits of brake fern. It fell to Jane's lot to waken the grown-up Lamb.

She did it gently by tickling his nose with a twig of honeysuckle. He said "Bother the flies!" twice, and then opened his eyes.

"Hullo, kiddies!" he said in a languid tone, "still here? What's the giddy hour? You'll be late for your grub!"



She did it gently by tickling his nose with a twig of honeysuckle.

"I know we shall," said Robert bitterly.

"Then cut along home," said the grown-up Lamb.

"What about your grub, though?" asked Jane.

"Oh, how far is it to the station, do you think? I've a sort of a notion that I'll run up to town and have some lunch at the club."

Blank misery fell like a pall on the four others. The Lamb —alone—unattended—would go to town and have lunch at a club! Perhaps he would also have tea there. Perhaps sunset would come upon him amid the dazzling luxury of club-land, and a helpless cross sleepy baby would find itself alone amid unsympathetic waiters, and would wail miserably for "Panty" from the depths of a club arm chair! The picture moved Anthea almost to tears.

"Oh no, Lamb ducky, you mustn't do that!" she cried incautiously.

The grown-up Lamb frowned. "My dear Anthea," he said, "how often am I to tell you that my name is Hilary or St. Maur or Devereux?—any of my baptismal names are free to my little brothers and sisters, but *not* 'Lamb'—a relic of foolishness and far-off childhood."

This was awful. He was their elder brother now, was he? Well of course he was, if he was grown-up—since they weren't. Thus, in whispers, Anthea and Robert.

But the almost daily adventures resulting from the Psammead's wishes were making the children wise beyond their years.

"Dear Hilary," said Anthea, and the others choked at the name, "you know father didn't wish you to go to London. He wouldn't like us to be left alone without you to take care of us. Oh, deceitful thing that I am!" she added to herself.

"Look here," said Cyril, "if you're our elder brother, why not behave as sich and take us over to Maidstone and give us a jolly good blowout, and we'll go on the river afterwards?"

"I'm infinitely obliged to you," said the Lamb courteously, "but I should prefer solitude. Go home to your lunch—I mean your dinner. Perhaps I may look in about tea time—or I may not be home till after you are in your beds."

Their beds! Speaking glances flashed between the wretched four. Much bed there would be for them if they went home without the Lamb.

"We promised mother not to lose sight of you if we took you out," Jane said before the others could stop her.

"Look here, Jane," said the grown-up Lamb, putting his hands in his pockets and looking down at her, "little girls should be seen and not heard. You kids must learn not to make yourselves a nuisance. Run along home now—and perhaps, if you're good, I'll give you each a penny tomorrow."

"Look here," said Cyril, in the best "man to man" tone at his command, "where are you going, old man? You might let Bobs and me come with you—even if you don't want the girls."

This was really rather noble of Cyril, for he never did care much about being seen in public with the Lamb, who of course after sunset would be a baby again.

The "man to man" tone succeeded.

"I shall run over to Maidstone on my bike," said the new Lamb airily, fingering the little black mustache. "I can lunch at The Crown—and perhaps I'll have a pull on the river; but I can't take you all on the machine—now, can I? Run along home, like good children."

The position was desperate. Robert exchanged a despairing look with Cyril. Anthea detached a pin from her waistband, a pin whose withdrawal left a gaping chasm between skirt and bodice, and handed it furtively to Robert—with a grimace of the darkest and deepest meaning. Robert slipped away to the road. There, sure enough, stood a bicycle—a beautiful new one. Of course Robert understood at once that if the Lamb was grown-up he *must* have a bicycle.

This had always been one of Robert's own reasons for wishing to be grown-up. He hastily began to use the pin—eleven punctures in the back tire, seven in the front. He would have made the total twenty-two but for the rustling of the yellow hazel-leaves, which warned him of the approach of the others. He hastily leaned a hand on each wheel, and was rewarded by the "whish" of the what was left of air escaping

from eighteen neat pin-holes.

"Your bike's run down," said Robert, wondering how he could so soon have learned to deceive.

"So it is," said Cyril.

"It's a puncture," said Anthea, stooping down, and standing up again with a thorn which she had got ready for the purpose.



There, sure enough, stook a bicycle.

"Look here."

The grown-up Lamb (or Hilary, as I suppose one must now call him) fixed his pump and blew up the tire. The punctured state of it was soon evident.

"I suppose there's a cottage somewhere near—where one could get a pail of water?" said the Lamb.

There was; and when the number of punctures had been made manifest, it was felt to be a special blessing that the

cottage provided "teas for cyclists." It provided an odd sort of tea-and-hammy meal for the Lamb and his brothers. This was paid for out of the fifteen shillings which had been earned by Robert when he was a giant—for the Lamb, it appeared, had unfortunately no money about him. This was a great disappointment for the others; but it is a thing that will happen, even to the most grown-up of us. However, Robert had enough to eat, and that was something. Quietly but persistently the miserable four took it in turns to try and persuade



The punctured state of it was soon evident.

the Lamb (or St. Maur) to spend the rest of the day in the woods. There was not very much of the day left by the time he had mended the eighteenth puncture. He looked up from the completed work with a sigh of relief, and suddenly put his tie straight.

"There's a lady coming," he said briskly, "for goodness' sake, get out of the way. Go home—hide—vanish somehow! I can't be seen with a pack of dirty kids." His brothers and sisters were indeed rather dirty, because, earlier in the day, the Lamb, in his infant state, had sprinkled a good deal of garden soil over them. The grown-up Lamb's voice was so tyrant-like, as Jane said afterwards, that they actually retreated to the back garden, and left him with his little mustache and his flannel suit to meet alone the young lady, who now came up the front garden wheeling a bicycle.

The woman of the house came out, and the young lady spoke to her—the Lamb raised his hat as she passed him—and the children could not hear what she said, though they were craning round the corner and listening with all their ears. They felt it to be "perfectly fair," as Robert said, "with that wretched Lamb in that condition."

When the Lamb spoke, in a languid voice heavy with politeness, they heard well enough.

"A puncture?" he was saying. "Can I not be of any assistance? If you could allow me?"

There was a stifled explosion of laughter and the grown-up Lamb (otherwise Devereux) turned the tail of an angry eye in its direction.

"You're very kind," said the lady, looking at the Lamb. She looked rather shy, but, as the boys put it, there didn't seem to be any nonsense about her.

"But oh," whispered Cyril, "I should have thought he'd had enough bicycle-mending for one day—and if she only knew that really and truly he's only a whiny-piny, silly little baby!"

"He's *not*," Anthea murmured angrily. "He's a dear—if people only let him alone. It's our own precious Lamb still, whatever silly idiots may turn him into—isn't he, Pussy?"

Jane doubtfully supposed so.

Now, the Lamb—whom I must try to remember to call St. Maur—was examining the lady's bicycle and talking to her with a very grown-up manner indeed. No one could possibly have supposed, to see and hear him, that only that very morning he had been a chubby child of two years breaking other people's Waterbury watches. Devereux (as he ought to be called for the future) took out a gold watch when he had mended the lady's bicycle, and all the hidden onlookers said "Oh!"—because it seemed so unfair that the Baby, who had only that morning destroyed two cheap but honest watches, should now, in the grown-upness to which Cyril's folly had raised him, have a real gold watch—with a chain and seals!

Hilary (as I will now term him) withered his brothers and sisters with a glance, and then said to the lady—with whom he seemed to be quite friendly—

"If you will allow me, I will ride with you as far as the Cross Roads; it is getting late, and there are tramps about."

No one will ever know what answer the young lady intended to give to this gallant offer, for, directly Anthea heard it made, she rushed out, knocking against a swill pail, which overflowed in a turbid stream, and caught the Lamb (I suppose I ought to say Hilary) by the arm. The others followed, and in an instant the four dirty children were visible beyond disguise.

"Don't let him," said Anthea to the lady, and she spoke with intense earnestness; "he's not fit to go with anyone!"

"Go away, little girl!" said St. Maur (as we will now call him) in a terrible voice.

"Go home at once!"

"You'd much better not have anything to do with him," the now reckless Anthea went on. "He doesn't know who he

is. He's something very different from what you think he is."

"What do you mean?" asked the lady, not unnaturally, while Devereux (as I must term the grown-up Lamb) tried vainly to push Anthea away. The others backed her up, and she stood solid as a rock.

"You just let him go with you," said Anthea, "you'll soon see what I mean! How would you like to suddenly see a poor little helpless baby spinning along downhill beside you with its feet up on a bicycle it had lost control of?"

The lady had turned rather pale.

"Who are these very dirty children?" she asked the grown-up Lamb (sometimes called St. Maur in these pages).

"I don't know," he lied miserably.

"Oh, Lamb! how *can* you?" cried Jane, "when you know perfectly well you're our own little baby brother that we're so fond of. We're his big brothers and sisters," she explained, turning to the lady, who with trembling hands was now turning her bicycle towards the gate, "and we've got to take care of him. And we must get him home before sunset, or I don't know whatever will become of us. You see, he's sort of under a spell—enchanted—you know what I mean!"

Again and again the Lamb (Devereux, I mean) had tried to stop Jane's eloquence, but Robert and Cyril held him, one by each leg, and no proper explanation was possible. The lady rode hastily away, and electrified her relatives at dinner by telling them of her escape from a family of dangerous lunatics. "The little girl's eyes were simply those of a maniac. I can't think how she came to be at large," she said.

When her bicycle had whizzed away down the road, Cyril spoke gravely.

"Hilary, old chap," he said, "you must have had a sunstroke or something. And the things you've been saying to that lady! Why, if we were to tell you the things you've said when you are yourself again, say tomorrow morning, you wouldn't ever understand them—let alone believe them! You

trust to me, old chap, and come home now, and if you're not yourself in the morning we'll ask the milkman to ask the doctor to come."

The poor grown-up Lamb (St. Maur was really one of his Christian names) seemed now too bewildered to resist.

"Since you seem all to be as mad as the whole worshipful company of hatters," he said bitterly, "I suppose I *had* better take you home. But you're not to suppose I shall pass this over. I shall have something to say to you all tomorrow morning."

"Yes, you will, my Lamb," said Anthea under her breath, "but it won't be at all the sort of thing you think it's going to be."

In her heart she could hear the pretty, soft little loving voice of the baby Lamb—so different from the affected tones of the dreadful grown-up Lamb (one of whose names was Devereux)—saying, "Me love Panty—wants to come to own Panty."

"Oh, let's go home, for goodness' sake," she said. "You shall say whatever you like in the morning—if you can," she added in a whisper.

It was a gloomy party that went home through the soft evening. During Anthea's remarks Robert had again made play with the pin and the bicycle tire, and the Lamb (whom they had to call St. Maur or Devereux or Hilary) seemed really at last to have had his fill of bicycle mending. So the machine was wheeled.

The sun was just on the point of setting when they arrived at the White House. The four elder children would have liked to linger in the lane till the complete sunsetting turned the grown-up Lamb (whose Christian names I will not further weary you by repeating) into their own dear tiresome baby brother. But he, in his grown-upness, insisted on going on, and thus he was met in the front garden by Martha.

Now you remember that, as a special favour, the

Psammead had arranged that the servants in the house should never notice any change brought about by the wishes of the children. Therefore Martha merely saw the usual party, with the baby Lamb, about whom she had been desperately anxious all the afternoon, trotting beside Anthea, on fat baby legs, while the children, of course, still saw the grown-up Lamb (never mind what names he was christened by), and Martha rushed at him and caught him in her arms, exclaiming—

"Come to his own Martha, then—a precious poppet!"

The grown-up Lamb (whose names shall now be buried in oblivion) struggled furiously. An expression of intense horror and annoyance was seen on his face. But Martha was stronger than he. She lifted him up and carried him into the house. None of the children will ever forget that picture. The neat grey-flannel-suited grown-up young man with the green necktie and the little black mustache—fortunately, he was slightly built, and not tall—struggling in the sturdy arms of Martha, who bore him away helpless, imploring him, as she went, to be a good boy now, and come and have his nice bremmink! Fortunately, the sun set as they reached the doorstep, the bicycle disappeared, and Martha was seen to carry into the house the real live darling sleepy two-year-old Lamb. The grown-up Lamb (nameless henceforth) was gone forever.

"Forever," said Cyril, "because, as soon as ever the Lamb's old enough to be bullied, we must jolly well begin to bully him, for his own sake—so that he mayn't grow up like *that*."

"You shan't bully him," said Anthea stoutly, "not if I can stop it."

"We must tame him by kindness," said Jane.

"You see," said Robert, "if he grows up in the usual way, there'll be plenty of time to correct him as he goes along. The awful thing today was his growing up so suddenly. There was no time to improve him at all."

"He doesn't want any improving," said Anthea as the voice of the Lamb came cooing through the open door, just as she had heard it in her heart that afternoon—

"Me loves Panty—wants to come to own Panty!"



The grown-up Lamb struggled.

CHAPTER X
Scalps

Probably the day would have been a greater success if Cyril had not been reading *The Last of the Mohicans*. The story was running in his head at breakfast, and as he took his third cup of tea he said dreamily, "I wish there were Red Indians in England—not big ones, you know, but little ones, just about the right size for us to fight."

Everyone disagreed with him at the time and no one attached any importance to the incident. But when they went down to the sand pit to ask for a hundred pounds in two-shilling pieces with Queen Victoria's head on, to prevent mistakes—which they had always felt to be a really reasonable wish that must turn out well—they found out that they had done it again! For the Psammead, which was very cross and sleepy, said—

"Oh, don't bother me. You've had your wish."

"I didn't know it," said Cyril.

"Don't you remember yesterday?" said the Sand-fairy, still more disagreeably. "You asked me to let you have your wishes wherever you happened to be, and you wished this morning, and you've got it."

"Oh, have we?" said Robert. "What is it?"

"So you've forgotten?" said the Psammead, beginning to burrow. "Never mind; you'll know soon enough. And I wish you joy of it! A nice thing you've let yourselves in for!"

"We always do somehow," said Jane sadly.

And now the odd thing was that no one could remember anyone's having wished for anything that morning. The wish about the Red Indians had not stuck in anyone's head. It was

a most anxious morning. Everyone was trying to remember what had been wished for, and no one could, and everyone kept expecting something awful to happen every minute. It was most agitating; they knew from what the Psammead had said, that they must have wished for something more than usually undesirable, and they spent several hours in most agonizing uncertainty. It was not till nearly dinnertime that Jane tumbled over *The Last of the Mohicans*, which had of course, been left face downwards on the floor, and when Anthea had picked her and the book up she suddenly said, "I know!" and sat down flat on the carpet.

"Oh, Pussy, how awful! It was Indians he wished for—Cyril—at breakfast, don't you remember? He said, 'I wish there were Red Indians in England,'—and now there are, and they're going about scalping people all over the country, as likely as not."

"Perhaps they're only in Northumberland and Durham," said Jane soothingly. It was almost impossible to believe that it could really hurt people much to be scalped so far away as that.

"Don't you believe it!" said Anthea. "The Sammyadd said we'd let ourselves in for a nice thing. That means they'll come *here*. And suppose they scalped the Lamb!"

"Perhaps the scalping would come right again at sunset," said Jane; but she did not speak so hopefully as usual.

"Not it!" said Anthea. "The things that grow out of the wishes don't go. Look at the fifteen shillings! Pussy, I'm going to break something, and you must let me have every penny of money you've got. The Indians will come *here*, don't you see? That Spiteful Psammead as good as said so. You see what my plan is? Come on!"

Jane did not see at all. But she followed her sister meekly into mother's bedroom.

Anthea lifted down the heavy water jug—it had a pattern of storks and long grasses on it, which Anthea never forgot.

She carried it into the dressing room, and carefully emptied the water out of it into the bath. Then she took the jug back into the bedroom and dropped it on the floor. You know how a jug always breaks if you happen to drop it by accident. If you happen to drop it on purpose, it is quite different. Anthea dropped that jug three times, and it was as unbroken as ever. So at last she had to take her father's boot-tree and break the jug with that in cold blood. It was heartless work.

Next she broke open the missionary-box with the poker. Jane told her that it was wrong, of course, but Anthea shut her lips very tight and then said—



She broke open the missionary-box with the poker.

"Don't be silly—it's a matter of life and death."

There was not very much in the missionary-box, only seven-and-fourpence, but the girls between them had nearly four shillings. This made over eleven shillings, as you will easily see.

Anthea tied up the money in a corner of her pocket handkerchief. "Come on, Jane!" she said, and ran down to the farm. She knew that the farmer was going into Rochester that afternoon. In fact it had been arranged that he was to take the four children with him. They had planned this in the happy hour when they believed that they were going to get that hundred pounds, in two-shilling pieces, out of the Psammead. They had arranged to pay the farmer two shillings each for the ride. Now Anthea hastily explained to him that they could not go, but would he take Martha and the Baby instead? He agreed, but he was not pleased to get only half-a-crown instead of eight shillings.

Then the girls ran home again. Anthea was agitated, but not flurried. When she came to think it over afterwards, she could not help seeing that she had acted with the most far-seeing promptitude, just like a born general. She fetched a little box from her corner drawer, and went to find Martha, who was laying the cloth and not in the best of tempers.

"Look here," said Anthea. "I've broken the water jug in mother's room."

"Just like you—always up to some mischief," said Martha, dumping down a salt-cellar with a bang.

"Don't be cross, Martha dear," said Anthea. "I've got enough money to pay for a new one—if only you'll be a dear and go and buy it for us. Your cousins keep a china-shop, don't they? And I would like you to get it today, in case mother comes home tomorrow. You know she said she might perhaps."

"But you're all going into town yourselves," said Martha.

"We can't afford to, if we get the new jug," said Anthea;

"but we'll pay for you to go, if you'll take the Lamb. And I say, Martha, look here—I'll give you my Liberty box, if you'll go. Look, it's most awfully pretty—all inlaid with real silver and ivory and ebony, like King Solomon's temple."

"I see," said Martha, "no, I don't want your box, miss. What you want is to get the precious Lamb off your hands for the afternoon. Don't you go for to think I don't see through you!"

This was so true that Anthea longed to deny it at once. Martha had no business to know so much. But she held her tongue.

Martha set down the bread with a bang that made it jump off its trencher.

"I *do* want the jug got," said Anthea softly. "You *will* go, won't you?"

"Well, just for this once, I don't mind; but mind you don't get into none of your outrageous mischief while I'm gone—that's all!"

"He's going earlier than he thought," said Anthea eagerly. "You'd better hurry and get dressed. Do put on that lovely purple frock, Martha, and the hat with the pink cornflowers, and the yellow-lace collar. Jane'll finish laying the cloth, and I'll wash the Lamb and get him ready."

As she washed the unwilling Lamb and hurried him into his best clothes, Anthea peeped out of the window from time to time; so far all was well—she could see no Red Indians. When with a rush and a scurry and some deepening of the damask of Martha's complexion she and the Lamb had been got off, Anthea drew a deep breath.

"*He's* safe!" she said, and, to Jane's horror, flung herself down on the floor and burst into floods of tears. Jane did not understand at all how a person could be so brave and like a general, and then suddenly give way and go flat like an air balloon when you prick it. It is better not to go flat, of course, but you will observe that Anthea did not give way till her aim

was accomplished. She had got the dear Lamb out of danger—she felt certain that the Red Indians would be round the White House or nowhere—the farmer's cart would not come back till after sunset, so she could afford to cry a little. It was partly with joy that she cried, because she had done what she meant to do. She cried for about three minutes, while Jane hugged her miserably and said at five-second intervals, "Don't cry, Panther dear!"

Then she jumped up, rubbed her eyes hard with the corner of her pinafore, so that they kept red for the rest of the day, and started to tell the boys. But just at that moment cook rang the dinner bell, and nothing could be said till they had been helped to minced beef. Then cook left the room, and Anthea told her tale. But it is a mistake to tell a thrilling tale when people are eating minced beef and boiled potatoes. There seemed somehow to be something about the food that made the idea of Red Indians seem flat and unbelievable. The boys actually laughed, and called Anthea a little silly.

"Why," said Cyril, "I'm almost sure it was before I said that, that Jane said she wished it would be a fine day."

"It wasn't," said Jane briefly.

"Why, if it was Indians," Cyril went on,—"salt, please, and mustard—I must have something to make this mush go down, if it was Indians, they'd have been infesting the place long before this—you know they would. I believe it's the fine day."

"Then why did the Sammyadd say we'd let ourselves in for a nice thing?" asked Anthea. She was feeling very cross. She knew she had acted with nobility and discretion, and after that it was very hard to be called a little silly, especially when she had the weight of a burglared missionary-box and about seven-and-fourpence, mostly in coppers, lying like lead upon her conscience.

There was a silence, during which cook took away the mincy plates and brought in the pudding. As soon as she had

retired, Cyril began again.

"Of course I don't mean to say," he admitted, "that it wasn't a good thing to get Martha and the Lamb out of the way for the afternoon; but as for Red Indians—why, you know jolly well the wishes always come that very minute. If there was going to be Red Indians, they'd be here now."

"I expect they are," said Anthea; "they're lurking amid the undergrowth, for anything you know. I do think you're most unkind."

"Indians almost always *do* lurk, really, though, don't they?" put in Jane, anxious for peace.

"No, they don't," said Cyril tartly. "And I'm not unkind, I'm only truthful. And I say it was utter rot breaking the water jug; and as for the missionary-box, I believe it's a treason crime, and I shouldn't wonder if you could be hanged for it, if any of us was to split"—

"Shut up, can't you?" said Robert; but Cyril couldn't. You see, he felt in his heart that if there *should* be Indians they would be entirely his own fault, so he did not wish to believe in them. And trying not to believe things when in your heart you are almost sure they are true, is as bad for the temper as anything I know.

"It's simply idiotic," he said, "talking about Indians, when you can see for yourself that it's Jane who's got her wish. Look what a fine day it is—*OH!*—"

He had turned towards the window to point out the fineness of the day—the others turned too—and a frozen silence caught at Cyril, and none of the others felt at all like breaking it. For there, peering round the corner of the window, among the red leaves of the Virginia creeper, was a face—a brown face, with a long nose and a tight mouth and very bright eyes. And the face was painted in coloured patches. It had long black hair, and in the hair were feathers!

Every child's mouth in the room opened, and stayed open. The pudding was growing white and cold on their plates. No

one could move.

Suddenly the feathered head was cautiously withdrawn, and the spell was broken. I am sorry to say that Anthea's first words were very like a girl.

"There, now!" she said. "I told you so!"

The pudding had now definitely ceased to charm. Hastily wrapping their portions in a *Spectator* of the week before the week before last, they hid them behind the crinkled paper stove ornament, and fled upstairs to reconnoitre and to hold a hurried council.

"Pax," said Cyril handsomely when they reached their mother's bedroom. "Panther, I'm sorry if I was a brute."

"All right," said Anthea; "but you see now!"

No further trace of Indians, however, could be discerned from the windows.

"Well," said Robert, "what are we to do?"

"The only thing I can think of," said Anthea, who was now generally admitted to be the heroine of the day, "is—if we dressed up as like Indians as we can, and looked out of the windows, or even went out. They might think we were the powerful leaders of a large neighbouring tribe, and—and not do anything to us, you know, for fear of awful vengeance."

"But Eliza, and the cook?" said Jane.

"You forget—they can't notice anything," said Robert. "They wouldn't notice anything out of the way, even if they were scalped or roasted at a slow fire."

"But would they come right at sunset?"

"Of course. You can't be really scalped or burned to death without noticing it, and you'd be sure to notice it next day, even if it escaped your attention at the time," said Cyril. "I think Anthea's right, but we shall want a most awful lot of feathers."

"I'll go down to the hen house," said Robert. "There's one of the turkeys in there—it's not very well. I could cut its feathers without it minding much. It's very bad—doesn't

seem to care what happens to it. Get me the cutting-out scissors."

Earnest reconnoitring convinced them all that no Indians were in the poultry yard. Robert went. In five minutes he came back—pale, but with many feathers.

"Look here," he said, "this is jolly serious. I cut off the feathers, and when I turned to come out there was an Indian squinting at me from under the old hen coop. I just brandished the feathers and yelled, and got away before he could get the coop off top of himself. Panther, get the coloured blankets off our beds, and look slippy, can't you?"

It is wonderful how like an Indian you can make yourself with blankets and feathers and coloured scarves. Of course none of the children happened to have long black hair, but there was a lot of black calico that had been bought to cover schoolbooks with. They cut strips of this into a sort of fine fringe, and fastened it round their heads with the amber-coloured ribbons off the girls' Sunday dresses. Then they stuck turkeys' feathers in the ribbons. The calico looked very like long black hair, especially when the strips began to curl up a bit.

"But our faces," said Anthea, "they're not at all the right colour. We're all rather pale, and I'm sure I don't know why, but Cyril is the colour of putty."

"I'm not," said Cyril.

"The real Indians outside seem to be brownish," said Robert hastily. "I think we ought to be really *red*—it's sort of superior to have a red skin, if you are one."

The red ochre cook uses for the kitchen bricks seemed to be about the reddest thing in the house. The children mixed some in a saucer with milk, as they had seen cook do for the kitchen floor. Then they carefully painted each other's faces and hands with it, till they were quite as red as any Red Indian need be—if not redder.

They knew at once that they must look very terrible when

they met Eliza in the passage, and she screamed aloud. This unsolicited testimonial pleased them very much. Hastily telling her not to be a goose, and that it was only a game, the four blanketed, feathered, really and truly Redskins went boldly out to meet the foe. I say boldly. That is because I wish to be polite. At any rate, they went.

Along the hedge dividing the wilderness from the garden was a row of dark heads, all highly feathered.

"It's our only chance," whispered Anthea. "Much better than to wait for their blood-freezing attack. We must pretend like mad. Like that game of cards where you pretend you've got aces when you haven't. Fluffing they call it, I think. Now then. Whoop!"

With four wild war-whoops—or as near them as white children could be expected to go without any previous practice—they rushed through the gate and struck four warlike attitudes in face of the line of Red Indians. These were all about the same height, and that height was Cyril's.

"I hope to goodness they can talk English," said Cyril through his attitude.

Anthea knew they could, though she never knew how she came to know it. She had a white towel tied to a walking stick. This was a flag of truce, and she waved it, in the hope that the Indians would know what it was. Apparently they did—for one who was browner than the others stepped forward.

"Ye seek a pow-wow?" he said in excellent English. "I am Golden Eagle, of the mighty tribe of Rock-dwellers."

"And I," said Anthea, with a sudden inspiration, "am the Black Panther—chief of the—the—the—Mazawattee tribe. My brothers—I don't mean—yes, I do—the tribe—I mean the Mazawattees—are in ambush below the brow of yonder hill."

"And what mighty warriors be these?" asked Golden Eagle, turning to the others.

Cyril said he was the great chief Squirrel, of the Moning



"Ye seek a pow-wow?" he said.

Congo tribe, and, seeing that Jane was sucking her thumb and could evidently think of no name for herself, he added, "This great warrior is Wild Cat—Pussy Ferox we call it in this land—leader of the vast Phiteezi tribe."

"And thou, valorous Redskin?" Golden Eagle inquired suddenly of Robert, who, taken unawares, could only reply that he was Bobs—leader of the Cape Mounted Police.

"And now," said Black Panther, "our tribes, if we just whistle them up, will far outnumber your puny forces; so resistance is useless. Return, therefore, to your land, O brother, and smoke pipes of peace in your wampums with your

squaws and your medicine-men, and dress yourselves in the gayest wigwams, and eat happily of the juicy fresh-caught moccasins."

"You've got it all wrong," murmured Cyril angrily. But Golden Eagle only looked inquiringly at her.

"Thy customs are other than ours, O Black Panther," he said. "Bring up thy tribe, that we may hold pow-wow in state before them, as becomes great chiefs."

"We'll bring them up right enough," said Anthea, "with their bows and arrows, and tomahawks and scalping-knives, and everything you can think of, if you don't look sharp and go."

She spoke bravely enough, but the hearts of all the children were beating furiously, and their breath came in shorter and shorter gasps. For the little real Red Indians were closing up round them—coming nearer and nearer with angry murmurs—so that they were the centre of a crowd of dark cruel faces.

"It's no go," whispered Robert. "I knew it wouldn't be. We must make a bolt for the Psammead. It might help us. If it doesn't—well, I suppose we shall come alive again at sunset. I wonder if scalping hurts as much as they say."

"I'll wave the flag again," said Anthea. "If they stand back, we'll run for it."

She waved the towel, and the chief commanded his followers to stand back. Then, charging wildly at the place where the line of Indians was thinnest, the four children started to run. Their first rush knocked down some half-dozen Indians, over whose blanketed bodies the children leaped, and made straight for the sand pit. This was no time for the safe easy way by which carts go down—right over the edge of the sand pit they went, among the yellow and pale purple flowers and dried grasses, past the little bank martins' little front doors, skipping, clinging, bounding, stumbling, sprawling, and finally rolling.

Yellow Eagle and his followers came up with them just at the very spot where they had seen the Psammead that morning.

Breathless and beaten, the wretched children now awaited their fate. Sharp knives and axes gleamed round them, but worse than these was the cruel light in the eyes of Golden Eagle and his followers.

"Ye have lied to us, O Black Panther of the Mazawattees —and thou, too, Squirrel of the Moning Congos. These also, Pussy Ferox of the Phiteezi, and Bobs of the Cape Mounted Police, these also have lied to us, if not with their tongues, yet by their silence. Ye have lied under the cover of the Truce-flag of the Pale-face. Ye have no followers. Your tribes are far away—following the hunting trail. What shall be their doom?" he concluded, turning with a bitter smile to the other Red Indians.

"Build we the fire!" shouted his followers; and at once a dozen ready volunteers started to look for fuel. The four children, each held between two strong little Indians, cast despairing glances round them. Oh, if they could only see the Psammead!

"Do you mean to scalp us first and then roast us?" asked Anthea desperately.

"Of course!" Redskin opened his eyes at her. "It's always done."

The Indians had formed a ring round the children, and now sat on the ground gazing at their captives. There was a threatening silence.

Then slowly, by twos and threes, the Indians who had gone to look for firewood came back, and they came back empty-handed. They had not been able to find a single stick of wood for a fire! No one ever can, as a matter of fact, in that part of Kent.

The children drew a deep breath of relief, but it ended in a moan of terror. For bright knives were being brandished all

about them. Next moment each child was seized by an Indian; each closed its eyes and tried not to scream. They waited for the sharp agony of the knife. It did not come. Next moment they were released, and fell in a trembling heap. Their heads did not hurt at all. They only felt strangely cool! Wild war-whoops rang in their ears. When they ventured to open their eyes they saw four of their foes dancing round them with wild leaps and screams, and each of the four brandished in his hand a scalp of long flowing black hair. They put their hands to their heads—their own scalps were safe! The poor untutored savages had indeed scalped the children. But they had only, so to speak, scalped them of the black calico ringlets!

The children fell into each other's arms, sobbing and laughing.

"Their scalps are ours," chanted the chief; "ill-rooted were their ill-fated hairs! They came off in the hands of the victors—without struggle, without resistance, they yielded their scalps to the conquering Rock-dwellers! Oh, how little a thing is a scalp so lightly won!"

"They'll take our real ones in a minute; you see if they don't," said Robert, trying to rub some of the red ochre off his face and hands on to his hair.

"Cheated of our just and fiery revenge are we," the chant went on, "but there are other torments than the scalping-knife and the flames. Yet is the slow fire the correct thing. O strange unnatural country, wherein a man may find no wood to burn his enemy!—Ah for the boundless forests of my native land, where the great trees for thousands of miles grow but to furnish firewood wherewithal to burn our foes. Ah, would we were but in our native forest once more!"

Suddenly like a flash of lightning, the golden gravel shone all-round the four children instead of the dusky figures. For every single Indian had vanished on the instant at their leader's word. The Psammead must have been there all the time. And it had given the Indian chief his wish.

* * * * * *

Martha brought home a jug with a pattern of storks and long grasses on it. Also she brought back all Anthea's money.

"My cousin, she gave me the jug for luck; she said it was an odd one what the basin of had got smashed."

"Oh, Martha, you are a dear!" sighed Anthea, throwing her arms round her.

"Yes," giggled Martha, "you'd better make the most of me while you've got me. I shall give your ma notice directly minute she comes back."

"Oh, Martha, we haven't been so *very* horrid to you, have



Bright knives were being brandished all about them.

we?" asked Anthea, aghast.

"Oh, it isn't that, miss." Martha giggled more than ever. "I'm a-goin' to be married. It's Beale the gamekeeper. He's been a-proposin' to me off and on ever since you come home from the clergyman's where you got locked up on the church-tower. And today I said the word an' made him a happy man."

* * * * * *

Anthea put the seven-and-fourpence back in the missionary-box, and pasted paper over the place where the poker had broken it. She was very glad to be able to do this, and she does not know to this day whether breaking open a missionary-box is or is not a hanging matter!

CHAPTER XI (AND LAST)
The Last Wish

Of course you, who see above that this is the eleventh (and last) chapter, know very well that the day of which this chapter tells must be the last on which Cyril, Anthea, Robert, and Jane will have a chance of getting anything out of the Psammead, or Sand-fairy.

But the children themselves did not know this. They were full of rosy visions, and, whereas on the other days they had often found it extremely difficult to think of anything really nice to wish for, their brains were now full of the most beautiful and sensible ideas. "This," as Jane remarked afterwards, "is always the way." Everyone was up extra early that morning, and these plans were hopefully discussed in the garden before breakfast. The old idea of one hundred pounds in modern florins was still first favourite, but there were others that ran it close—the chief of these being the "pony-each" idea. This had a great advantage. You could wish for a pony each during the morning, ride it all day, have it vanish at sunset, and wish it back again next day. Which would be an economy of litter and stabling. But at breakfast two things happened. First, there was a letter from mother. Granny was better, and mother and father hoped to be home that very afternoon. A cheer arose. And of course this news at once scattered all the before breakfast wish ideas. For everyone saw quite plainly that the wish of the day must be something to please mother and not to please themselves.

"I wonder what she *would* like," pondered Cyril.

"She'd like us all to be good," said Jane primly.

"Yes—but that's so dull for us," Cyril rejoined; "and

besides, I should hope we could be that without sand-fairies to help us. No; it must be something splendid, that we couldn't possibly get without wishing for."

"Look out," said Anthea in a warning voice; "don't forget yesterday. Remember, we get our wishes now just wherever we happen to be when we say 'I wish.' Don't let's let ourselves in for anything silly—today of all days."

"All right," said Cyril. "You needn't talk so much."

Just then Martha came in with a jug full of hot water for the teapot—and a face full of importance for the children.

"A blessing we're all alive to eat our breakfast!" she said darkly.

"Why, whatever's happened?" everybody asked.

"Oh, nothing," said Martha, "only it seems nobody's safe from being murdered in their beds nowadays."

"Why," said Jane as an agreeable thrill of horror ran down her back and legs and out at her toes, "*has* anyone been murdered in their beds?"

"Well—not exactly," said Martha; "but they might just as well. There's been burglars over at Peasemarsh Place—Beale's just told me—and they've took every single one of Lady Chittenden's diamonds and jewels and things, and she's a-goin out of one fainting fit into another, with hardly time to say 'Oh, my diamonds!' in between. And Lord Chittenden's away in London."

"Lady Chittenden," said Anthea; "we've seen her. She wears a red-and-white dress, and she has no children of her own and can't abide other folkses'."

"That's her," said Martha. "Well, she's put all her trust in riches, and you see how she's served. They say the diamonds and things was worth thousands of pounds. There was a necklace and a river—whatever that is—and no end of bracelets; and a tarrer and ever so many rings. But there, I mustn't stand talking and all the place to clean down afore your ma comes home."

"I don't see why she should ever have had such lots of diamonds," said Anthea when Martha had flounced off. "She was not at all a nice lady, I thought. And mother hasn't any diamonds, and hardly any jewels—the topaz necklace, and the sapphire ring daddy gave her when they were engaged, and the garnet star, and the little pearl brooch with great-grandpapa's hair in it—that's about all."

"When I'm grown-up I'll buy mother no end of diamonds," said Robert, "if she wants them. I shall make so much money exploring in Africa I shan't know what to do with it."

"Wouldn't it be jolly," said Jane dreamily, "if mother could find all these lovely things, necklaces and rivers of diamonds and tarrers?"

"*Ti—aras*," said Cyril.

"Ti—aras, then—and rings and everything in her room when she came home. I wish she would"—

The others gazed at her in horror.

"Well, she *will*," said Robert; "you've wished, my good Jane—and our only chance now is to find the Psammead, and if it's in a good temper it *may* take back the wish and give us another. If not—well—goodness knows what we're in for!—the police of course, and— Don't cry, silly! We'll stand by you. Father says we need never to be afraid if we don't do anything wrong and always speak the truth."

But Cyril and Anthea exchanged gloomy glances. They remembered how convincing the truth about the Psammead had been once before when told to the police.

It was a day of misfortunes. Of course the Psammead could not be found. Nor the jewels, though every one of the children searched the mother's room again and again.

"Of course," Robert said, "*we* couldn't find them. It'll be mother who'll do that. Perhaps she'll think they've been in the house for years and years, and never know they are the stolen ones at all."

"Oh yes!" Cyril was very scornful; "then mother will be a

receiver of stolen goods, and you know jolly well what *that's* worse than."

Another and exhaustive search of the sand pit failed to reveal the Psammead, so the children went back to the house slowly and sadly.

"I don't care," said Anthea stoutly, "we'll tell mother the truth, and she'll give back the jewels—and make everything all right."

"Do you think so?" said Cyril slowly. "Do you think she'll believe us? Could anyone believe about a Sammyadd unless they'd seen it? She'll think we're pretending. Or else she'll think we're raving mad, and then we shall be sent to the mad house. How would you like it?"—he turned suddenly on the miserable Jane, "how would you like it, to be shut up in an iron cage with bars and padded walls, and nothing to do but stick straws in your hair all day, and listen to the howlings and ravings of the other maniacs? Make up your minds to it, all of you. It's no use telling mother."

"But it's true," said Jane.

"Of course it is, but it's not true enough for grown-up people to believe it," said Anthea.

"Cyril's right. Let's put flowers in all the vases, and try not to think about the diamonds. After all, everything has come right in the end all the other times."

So they filled all the pots they could find with flowers—asters and zinnias, and loose-leaved late red roses from the wall of the stable yard, till the house was a perfect bower.

And almost as soon as dinner was cleared away mother arrived, and was clasped in eight loving arms. It was very difficult indeed not to tell her all about the Psammead at once, because they had got into the habit of telling her everything. But they did succeed in not telling her.

Mother, on her side, had plenty to tell them—about Granny, and Granny's pigeons, and Auntie Emma's lame tame donkey. She was very delighted with the flowery-

boweryness of the house; and everything seemed so natural and pleasant, now that she was home again, that the children almost thought they must have dreamed the Psammead.



She was clasped in eight loving arms.

But, when mother moved towards the stairs to go up to her bedroom and take off her bonnet, the eight arms clung round her just as if she only had two children, one the Lamb

and the other an octopus.

"Don't go up, mummy darling," said Anthea; "let me take your things up for you."

"Or I will," said Cyril.

"We want you to come and look at the rose tree," said Robert.

"Oh, don't go up!" said Jane helplessly.

"Nonsense, dears," said mother briskly, "I'm not such an old woman yet that I can't take my bonnet off in the proper place. Besides I must wash these black hands of mine."

So up she went, and the children, following her, exchanged glances of gloomy foreboding.

Mother took off her bonnet—it was a very pretty hat, really, with white roses in it—and when she had taken it off she went to the dressing table to do her pretty hair.

On the table between the ring stand and the pin cushion lay a green leather case. Mother opened it.

"Oh, how lovely!" she cried. It was a ring, a large pearl with shining many-lighted diamonds set round it. "Wherever did this come from?" mother asked, trying it on her wedding finger, which it fitted beautifully. "However did it come here?"

"I don't know," said each of the children truthfully.

"Father must have told Martha to put it here," mother said. "I'll run down and ask her."

"Let me look at it," said Anthea, who knew Martha would not be able to see the ring. But when Martha was asked, of course she denied putting the ring there, and so did Eliza and cook.

Mother came back to her bedroom, very much interested and pleased about the ring. But, when she opened the dressing table drawer and found a long case containing an almost priceless diamond necklace, she was more interested still, though not so pleased. In the wardrobe, when she went to put away her "bonnet," she found a tiara and several brooches,

and the rest of the jewellery turned up in various parts of the room during the next half-hour. The children looked more and more uncomfortable, and now Jane began to sniff.

Mother looked at her gravely.

"Jane," she said, "I am sure you know something about this. Now think before you speak, and tell me the truth."

"We found a Fairy," said Jane obediently.

"No nonsense, please," said her mother sharply.

"Don't be silly, Jane," Cyril interrupted. Then he went on desperately. "Look here, mother, we've never seen the things before, but Lady Chittenden at Peasmarsh Place lost all her



"We found a fairy," said Jane obediently.

jewellery by wicked burglars last night. Could this possibly be it?"

All drew a deep breath. They were saved.

"But how could they have put it here? And why should they?" asked mother, not unreasonably. "Surely it would have been easier and safer to make off with it?"

"Suppose," said Cyril, "they thought it better to wait for—for sunset—nightfall, I mean, before they went off with it. No one but us knew that you were coming back today."

"I must send for the police at once," said mother distractedly. "Oh, how I wish daddy were here!"

"Wouldn't it be better to wait till he *does* come?" asked Robert, knowing that his father would not be home before sunset.

"No, no; I can't wait a minute with all this on my mind," cried mother. "All this" was the heap of jewel cases on the bed. They put them all in the wardrobe, and mother locked it. Then mother called Martha.

"Martha," she said, "has any stranger been into my room since I've been away? Now, answer me truthfully."

"No, mum," answered Martha; "leastways, what I mean to say"—

She stopped.

"Come," said her mistress kindly, "I see someone has. You must tell me at once. Don't be frightened. I'm sure *you* haven't done anything wrong."

Martha burst into heavy sobs.

"I was a-goin' to give you warning this very day, mum, to leave at the end of my month, so I was—on account of me being going to make a respectable young man happy. A gamekeeper he is by trade, mum—and I wouldn't deceive you—of the name of Beale. And it's as true as I stand here, it was your coming home in such a hurry, and no warning given, out of the kindness of his heart it was, as he says, 'Martha, my beauty,' he says—which I ain't, and never was, but you know

how them men will go on—'I can't see you a-toiling and a-moiling and not lend a 'elping 'and; which mine is a strong arm, and it's yours Martha, my dear,' says he. And so he helped me a-cleanin' of the windows—but outside, mum, the whole time, and me in; if I never say another breathing word it's gospel truth."

"Were you with him the whole time?" asked her mistress.

"Him outside and me in, I was," said Martha; "except for fetching up a fresh pail and the leather that that slut of a Eliza'd hidden away behind the mangle."

"That will do," said the children's mother. "I am not pleased with you, Martha, but you have spoken the truth, and that counts for something."

When Martha had gone, the children clung round their mother.

"Oh, mummy darling," cried Anthea, "it isn't Beale's fault, it isn't really! He's a great dear; he is, truly and honourably, and as honest as the day. Don't let the police take him, mummy! Oh, don't, don't, don't!"

It was truly awful. Here was an innocent man accused of robbery through that silly wish of Jane's, and it was absolutely useless to tell the truth. All longed to, but they thought of the straws in the hair and the shrieks of the other frantic maniacs, and they could not do it.

"Is there a cart hereabouts?" asked the mother feverishly. "A trap of any sort? I must drive in to Rochester and tell the police at once."

All the children sobbed, "There's a cart at the farm, but, oh, don't go!—don't go!—oh, don't go!—wait till daddy comes home!"

Mother took not the faintest notice. When she had set her mind on a thing she always went straight through with it; she was rather like Anthea in this respect.

"Look here, Cyril," she said, sticking on her hat with long sharp violet-headed pins, "I leave you in charge. Stay in the

dressing room. You can pretend to be swimming boats in the bath, or something. Say I gave you leave. But stay there, with the door on the landing open; I've locked the other. And don't let anyone go into my room. Remember, no one knows the jewels are there except me, and all of you, and the wicked thieves who put them there. Robert, you stay in the garden and watch the windows. If anyone tries to get in you must run and tell the two farm men that I'll send up to wait in the kitchen. I'll tell them there are dangerous characters about—that's true enough. Now remember, I trust you both. But I don't think they'll try it till after dark, so you're quite safe. Goodbye, darlings."

And she locked her bedroom door and went off with the key in her pocket.

The children could not help admiring the dashing and decided way in which she had acted. They thought how useful she would have been in organising escape from some of the tight places in which they had found themselves of late in consequence of their ill-timed wishes.

"She's a born general," said Cyril, "but *I* don't know what's going to happen to us. Even if the girls were to hunt for that old Sammyadd and find it, and get it to take the jewels away again, mother would only think we hadn't looked out properly and let the burglars sneak in and get them—or else the police will think *we've* got them—or else that she's been fooling them. Oh, it's a pretty decent average ghastly mess this time, and no mistake!"

He savagely made a paper boat and began to float it in the bath, as he had been told to do.

Robert went into the garden and sat down on the worn yellow grass, with his miserable head between his helpless hands.

Anthea and Jane whispered together in the passage downstairs, where the coconut matting was—with the hole in it that you always caught your foot in if you were not careful.

Martha's voice could be heard in the kitchen, grumbling loud and long.

"It's simply quite too dreadfully awful," said Anthea. "How do you know all the diamonds are there, too? If they aren't, the police will think mother and father have got them, and that they've only given up some of them for a kind of desperate blind. And they'll be put in prison, and we shall be branded outcasts, the children of felons. And it won't be at all nice for father and mother either," she added, by a candid after-thought.

"But what can we *do*?" asked Jane.

"Nothing—at least we might look for the Psammead again. It's a very, *very* hot day. He may have come out to warm that whisker of his."

"He won't give us any more beastly wishes today," said Jane flatly. "He gets crosser and crosser every time we see him. I believe he hates having to give wishes."

Anthea had been shaking her head gloomily—now she stopped shaking it so suddenly that it really looked as though she were pricking up her ears.

"What is it?" asked Jane. "Oh, have you thought of something?"

"Our one chance," cried Anthea dramatically; "the last lone-lorn forlorn hope. Come on."

At a brisk trot she led the way to the sand pit. Oh, joy!—there was the Psammead, basking in a golden sandy hollow and preening its whiskers happily in the glowing afternoon sun. The moment it saw them it whisked round and began to burrow—it evidently preferred its own company to theirs. But Anthea was too quick for it. She caught it by its furry shoulders gently but firmly, and held it.

"Here—none of that!" said the Psammead. "Leave go of me, will you?"

But Anthea held him fast.

"Dear kind darling Sammyadd," she said breathlessly.

"Oh yes—it's all very well," it said; "you want another wish, I expect. But I can't keep on slaving from morning till night giving people their wishes. I must have *some* time to myself."

"Do you hate giving wishes?" asked Anthea gently, and her voice trembled with excitement.

"Of course I do," it said. "Leave go of me or I'll bite!—I really will—I mean it. Oh, well, if you choose to risk it."

Anthea risked it and held on.

"Look here," she said, "don't bite me—listen to reason. If you'll only do what we want today, we'll never ask you for another wish as long as we live."

The Psammead was much moved.

"I'd do anything," it said in a tearful voice. "I'd almost burst myself to give you one wish after another, as long as I held out, if you'd only never, never ask me to do it after today. If you knew how I hate to blow myself out with other people's wishes, and how frightened I am always that I shall strain a muscle or something. And then to wake up every morning and know you've *got* to do it. You don't know what it is—you don't know what it is, you don't!" Its voice cracked with emotion, and the last "don't" was a squeak.

Anthea set it down gently on the sand.

"It's all over now," she said soothingly. "We promise faithfully never to ask for another wish after today."

"Well, go ahead," said the Psammead; "let's get it over."

"How many can you do?"

"I don't know—as long as I can hold out."

"Well, first, I wish Lady Chittenden may find she's never lost her jewels."

The Psammead blew itself out, collapsed, and said, "Done."

"I wish," said Anthea more slowly, "mother mayn't get to the police."

"Done," said the creature after the proper interval.

"I wish," said Jane suddenly, "mother could forget all about the diamonds."

"Done," said the Psammead; but its voice was weaker.

"Would you like to rest a little?" asked Anthea considerately.

"Yes, please," said the Psammead; "and, before we go any further, will you wish something for me?"

"Can't you do wishes for yourself?"

"Of course not," it said; "we were always expected to give each other our wishes—not that we had any to speak of in the good old Megatherium days. Just wish, will you, that you may never be able, any of you, to tell anyone a word about *Me*."

"Why?" asked Jane.

"Why, don't you see, if you told grown-ups I should have no peace of my life. They'd get hold of me, and they wouldn't wish silly things like you do, but real earnest things; and the scientific people would hit on some way of making things last after sunset, as likely as not; and they'd ask for a graduated income tax, and old-age pensions, and manhood suffrage, and free secondary education, and dull things like that; and get them, and keep them, and the whole world would be turned topsy-turvy. Do wish it! Quick!"

Anthea repeated the Psammead's wish, and it blew itself out to a larger size than they had yet seen it attain.

"And now," it said as it collapsed, "can I do anything more for you?"

"Just one thing; and I think that clears everything up, doesn't it, Jane? I wish Martha to forget about the diamond ring, and mother to forget about the keeper cleaning the windows."

"It's like the 'Brass Bottle,'" said Jane.

"Yes, I'm glad we read that or I should never have thought of it."

"Now," said the Psammead faintly, "I'm almost worn out.

Is there anything else?"

"No; only thank you kindly for all you've done for us, and I hope you'll have a good long sleep, and I hope we shall see you again someday."

"Is that a wish?" it said in a weak voice.

"Yes, please," said the two girls together.

Then for the last time in this story they saw the Psammead blow itself out and collapse suddenly. It nodded to them, blinked its long snail's eyes, burrowed, and disappeared, scratching fiercely to the last, and the sand closed over it.

"I hope we've done right?" said Jane.

"I'm sure we have," said Anthea. "Come on home and tell the boys."



It burrowed, and disappeared, scratching fiercely to the last.

Anthea found Cyril glooming over his paper boats, and told him. Jane told Robert. The two tales were only just ended when mother walked in, hot and dusty. She explained that as she was being driven into Rochester to buy the girls' autumn school dresses the axle had broken, and but for the narrowness of the lane and the high soft hedges she would have been thrown out. As it was, she was not hurt, but she had had to walk home. "And oh, my dearest dear chicks," she said, "I am simply dying for a cup of tea! Do run and see if the water boils!"

"So you see it's all right," Jane whispered. "She doesn't remember."

"No more does Martha," said Anthea, who had been to ask after the state of the kettle.

As the servants sat at their tea, Beale the gamekeeper dropped in. He brought the welcome news that Lady Chittenden's diamonds had not been lost at all. Lord Chittenden had taken them to be re-set and cleaned, and the maid who knew about it had gone for a holiday. So that was all right.

"I wonder if we ever shall see the Psammead again," said Jane wistfully as they walked in the garden, while mother was putting the Lamb to bed.

"I'm sure we shall," said Cyril, "if you really wished it."

"We've promised never to ask it for another wish," said Anthea.

"I never want to," said Robert earnestly.

They did see it again, of course, but not in this story. And it was not in a sand pit either, but in a very, very, very different place. It was in a— But I must say no more.