OUR MISS BOO

•

MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

APPLETON CENTURY

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a https://www.fadedpage.com administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at https://www.fadedpage.com.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Our Miss Boo
Date of first publication: 1940
Author: Margaret Lee Runbeck (1905-1956)
Date first posted: May 1, 2019
Date last updated: May 1, 2019
Faded Page eBook #20190502

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Mardi Desjardins, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

OUR MISS BOO

BY
MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
INCORPORATED
NEW YORK LONDON

COPYRIGHT, 1942, BY MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher.

The names of all characters used in this book
are purely fictitious. If the name of any
living person is used, it is simply a coincidence.

Copyright, 1940, 1941, by
Margaret Lee Runbeck

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To DOOLEY

Contents

THIS WISER YEAR	3
MEET MISS BOO	7
A BIRD’S NEST . . . A COOKIE . . . AND A DIME	15
WE HAVE SISTER NOW	23
NEW SHOES DAY	31
THE OLDEST TREE	39
LAFFIN’ FIT TO KILL	47
CHILD’S-EYE VIEW	55
ETHICS . . . AGED FOUR	63
THE EIGHT-EGG CAIKE	69
HOW TALL?	79
LILLIAM WRITES TO HER KIN-FOLKS	83
BABY-FISH AND THE MOON-BEANS	95
THE GRACKLES ARRIVE	99
MINIATURE	107
PEOPLE CHILDREN LIKE	115
ELEGY	121
THE LITTLE YELLOW STRING	127
LILLIAM IN ECLIPSE	133
THE ’MAGINARIES	143
THE WORM IN THE HEART OF EDEN	149
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM A HAT?	155
LILLIAM ERASES THE LOVE LETTER	161
THE TOYS	167
OKAY	177
THE PURSUIT OF . . . SOMETHING	181
LONG LIVE PEANUTBUTTER	189
JOSEPH SAID	195
HOW DOES “BUT” LOOK?	201
RICE AND VEILS AND TRUCK	209
FOUR NICKELS’ WORTH OF ANSWER	215
THE SUM	223

Our Miss Boo

This Wiser Year

To-day I had a letter from my friends in Denmark.

“You remember our rose garden,” it said. “Where it used to be, we have grown 450 pounds of potatoes.”

I sat there weeping for the roses, which we shall never see again, weeping and feeling guilty, because surely there are more vital things to weep about this year than roses which have given up their lives for potatoes.

Then I thought, “But . . . it is roses we are fighting for. The right to grow roses. And to give children’s parties, and to wear perfume, and to belong to family orchestras, if we wish. . . .” That cleared up something for me.

All last year I could barely write. I sat in stricken silence because it seemed flippant effrontery to write of daily happiness while in Europe people I loved suffered and died. So I sat day after day, giving up the very things which they are suffering and dying to keep.

But this is a wiser year.

We cannot close our eyes and forget. But we can keep them open and remember. And we can hold on to what is true in our living . . . the roses and the children, and school books, and joking, and music . . . and people kissing good-by in the morning, and coming home at night.

These are the things . . . the simple, small, tremendous things whose names, a few of them, are written in this book. It isn’t much; it’s only something to remember us by.

Meet Miss Boo

What we wanted, really, was a house, and not a baby.

But the architect drew her into the plans. He kept saying, “We’ll have these broad steps inside, twice as wide as usual, and six-inch risers instead of the customary eight-inch.”

“That’ll be nice,” we said vaguely.

“It’s much more gracious looking. Besides, it makes it so very nice for children.”

“Children?” we said to ourselves. “Maybe we ought to explain to him.”

He kept right at it, through the back-of-the-envelope-sketch stages on through the blue-prints, and when we found the land, our own marvelous rolling land, with shelves ready to accept our house which was to be built up and down hill on five levels, he said:

“What a woods for a child to grow up in!”

We kept talking about the rocks and the trees, and he kept talking about the child.

But the climax came while we were in Europe, leaving him with the earth and the blue-prints entirely in his hands. (He says he never did have such satisfactory clients. There is nothing that so harasses an architect giving birth to a house as the presence of the prospective owners. Much more bother, they tell me, than an expectant father, for he has to take what he gets, but owners keep thinking up bright new improvements.)

Well, anyway, he sent us a cable, saying that for so-much he could build a charming child’s suite in an otherwise wasted space at the top of our house.

So the sensible thing, of course, was to take advantage of this fine inspiration.

“Besides,” we said, not fooling each other one bit, “we might want to sell the house some day. And the next owners might like a child’s suite.”

When we came home and saw the house—not quite finished, but incredibly beautiful, like a boast made manifest—we saw exactly what the architect had meant. Everywhere you looked there was a place for a child, for a child of all ages progressively.

So, of course, we had to have Miss Boo.

That’s the story we tell her sometimes, and she loves it.

“And there I was, off somewhere waiting for you to make up your minds,” she says. “Waiting and waiting.” And I can see she pictures herself pacing up and down behind a closed door wild to get started on the exciting business of living.

Funny thing about a child that you’ve had with you for a few years. You can’t describe her. When you try, the little pictures of her all run together in what the movies call a montage. You can see her yellow high chair, and the photograph you had taken when she was six months old (when you honestly believed she had hair, until you realistically face the picture now). And you can remember how her solid little body felt, and the way she sat bolt upright and never would lie down in your arms and be a Madonna’s baby. You can remember her at one, and two, and three, and five, and to-day . . . but you cannot describe her, for she is not one but a hundred children.

She is all children. She is the eighteen-year-old girl I saw to-day, buying a piece of luggage with her mother. She is the infants I shall see in 1959.

They themselves know this. They know, until we dwarf their knowing, that all space belongs to them . . . and all time . . . and all people.

“Strangers,” Miss Boo said once, “are just your friends that you don’t know yet.”

Once you’ve loved a child, you love all children. You give away your love to one, and you find that by the giving you have made yourself an inexhaustible treasury.

So, if you’ll forgive me, I’ll not try to describe Miss Boo. I’ll tell you about her, a little, and you’ll have to see her for yourself. I hope you’ll see her many places, and in many children, your own, and others, whom you also need.

A BIRD'S NEST . . . A COOKIE . . . AND A DIME

Miss Boo is our Ambassador of Good Willingness. Next to inviting people to our house, she likes nothing so much as going around the neighborhood paying calls, for she is a social little being, gregarious as sunshine, unsnobbish as the rain.

This morning she is a walking synopsis of what has gone on in our house . . . attic-cleaning. She has on a sun-suit, hip boots, and lace mitts. There was a hat with cherries which went with the costume. But it kept sliding down over that little pink button of nose, and when a lady goes calling, she does want to see what's happening.

Going calling is half; bringing home things that have been given to her is the other half.

To-day there was a bird's nest, from the woman whose house turned its back on our road a hundred years ago. That's why she bought the house; she, too, is trying to turn her back on things. But Miss Boo wouldn't know about that.

"She likes birds," she said when she came home. "She says she likes 'em about as well as people. She said I laughed like a bird. *Do* they laugh? Maybe if you know them awfully well?"

And there was a cookie. ("Although I 'stinkly told her I wasn't to eat between meals.") That came from the six-foot-tall Jamaican cook who works for the people at the top of our hill.

Her eyes are smoldering carnelians in a face of carved cinnabar. She speaks with an English accent, and our postman says she has been homesick for ten years now. She gets no mail, he says, and certainly she has no acquaintances in this town of ours.

Except one four-year-old friend, who 'stinkly likes her cookies.

And last of all she had a dime. A dime hasn't yet become something magical that can turn into a subway ride, two lollipops, or a kite. A dime to her isn't the tenth part of a dollar, with all its dazzling possibilities; a dime is only a less-shiny button.

But this dime, when I look at it, is much more than a button. For I know

how much back-bending farm labor has gone into it. The farmer who gave it to her is a Swede, a gentle giant who learned his sizzling profanity at sea when he was a lad, and who talks about his land as if he were its mother.

“In the old country, in Varmland where Gösta Berling lived, we got along good without money,” he said to us last week, when we stopped for rhubarb and eggs. “But here a man must have some money. If I make forty dollars a month off my vegetables and flowers . . . why, I can live like a king.”

He looked lovingly across his field, and then he said softly, as if he didn’t want the land to hear any reproach, “Of course, I can’t make that much. But I will sometime . . . maybe.”

That’s where to-day’s dime came from. . . .

She’s sitting on the terrace steps now, with her precious, irrelevant loot.

“Maybe the neighbors don’t like having you call so early in the day?” we tactfully suggest.

“Oh, they do,” she says confidently. “I’m somebody they can give things to.” She doesn’t know she has found something profound, for she is four and everything is simple and fitting-together.

But suddenly we know why a child is important in a neighborhood. We see that giving is a necessity sometimes . . . more urgent, indeed, than having. There are things which cannot be said in any other way, except by the giving of some absurd little object. Whole wordless volumes surge into the heart at the sight of some one four years old coming up the path in rubber boots, with a handful of daisies clutched moistly in lace mitts.

Even casual dearness is suddenly inexpressibly more poignant because one knows that across the earth the dancing of children has stilled, and the little innocent laughter has sobered to a whisper in shadow. Forgotten mornings locked in the cash registers of humdrum hearts . . . children who were, long ago . . . children who now will never be born . . . absurd and solemn children with eyes as blue as delphinium petals . . . these and a thousand other fragments come to life when a little girl calls at the back door. There are things which must be said, and cannot be. And so one needs “somebody to give things to.”

To-day we have written five business letters and cleaned an attic. These have been good and useful deeds. But there are other jobs to be done, which only a child could do on an open-handed summer morning.

We Have Sister Now

When we opened the door, we thought there was nobody there because she and the night were the same color. And then we saw the pearly whites of her eyes, and her gleaming parenthesis of teeth, and we knew that a Smile and a Beseeching were standing out there in the darkness.

We found the switch and turned on the light, and she was a little thing, with a big suitcase. A little thing with a very small, very furry voice like a soft Virginia rabbit that had got lost up here in the Nawth.

“M’s Ames’ little girl say you-all lookin’ for a good maid,” she said.

“Oh, we are. At least . . . come in, won’t you?”

She came in, looking about seventeen and frightened to death. But more frightened of not getting a job than of speaking to us, even.

“I kin do anything, plain or fancy,” she said. “I kin arn ruffles real good, an’ I kin make kohn-bread, southern or nawthin, an’ I don’ min’ livin’ in the country an’ I like chilluns . . . an’ I’d work Sundays an’ I’d sleep anywheres. . . . She ran down then, not from any lack of abilities, but from lack of breath.

“What we’re really looking for,” I said doubtfully, “is a housekeeper. Somebody to take full charge of us.” I didn’t admit that we needed a home economics expert, a stern matriarch, and a soft-bosomed colored mammy, all rolled into one. And this combined, furthermore, with a chauffeur, private secretary, button-sewer-on, sock-mender, and party-planner.

“What we’ve always had,” I said faintly, “is a working housekeeper, who sort of takes charge.”

“I take chahge,” she said in a whisper. “I kin do *anything*.”

“Well, you’d better stay the night anyway,” I said. “How on earth did you get out here at this time of night?”

“I walked,” she said. “I heard you-all needed a good maid. I kin . . .”

She took a big breath and would have gone into another stanza, but I said, “Yes, I think you’d better stay the night anyway.”

We went into the kitchen, with some instinctive notion of meeting on common ground, I guess. Her eyes became two valentines when she looked at our kitchen. And it, I must say, warmed to her the way a candle seems to stand

on tiptoe to meet a light which is offered to it. It was love at first sight for both of them.

She touched the sink with chocolate ice-cream fingers, and she said to herself, forgetting me now, “I cert’n’y do like plantses on mah window-sill,” and she reached up in the cupboard and got a glass and watered the pots, which we’d forgotten, what with everything else we had to bear after Mrs. Kingsberry decided we were just too much for her.

“Well, you might as well stay the night,” I said again. But I knew she had moved in, and I’d just better get used to it.

“You don’t look very old,” I said helplessly.

“I’se thirty,” she said. “But God did my carryin’ for me and that he’ps me. Castin’ your burdens on de Lord makes you look young. An’ he don’t mind, ’cause nothing couldn’t make Him any older than He is.”

Very gently she wound up the kitchen alarm clock without even looking at it, and tucked it under her arm to take upstairs, as if she had wound that clock a thousand times.

“My name’s Lilliam,” she came back downstairs to tell me, “ef’n you should want me for anythin’.”

It wasn’t just her thin buckwheat cakes brought to our bedrooms at eight; it wasn’t just the cheerfulness of her face when she waked us, nor the way she had found the laundry and started the “arnin’ ” it wasn’t the ham roasting in spicy juiciness in the oven. It wasn’t any of these things alone that made us know she belonged to us . . . or we to her.

Mostly it was Miss Boo when they met that first morning. Boo came running into my room bringing amusements for the fifteen minutes we always have together: three fat books, a puzzle, two dolls, and a box of Christmas candy not yet opened on the first of February. Then, seeing the strange colored woman standing in the sunshine, looking eager and willing, she stopped.

They looked at each other, and neither of them spoke.

“This is our child, Lilliam,” I said, being careful of the “m.” “She has her breakfast at the little table in the kitchen.”

“ ’Deed, I done got the little table all set for her,” Lilliam said. “And I got some little bittie biscuits baked. Just her size. You come with me, Doll Baby.”

One side of the pact was made. But I held my breath, and for a wild moment I was afraid Boo was going to say something about that good black

face, for I think she had never seen a Negro before.

She looked up into that kind dark face, and then she laid down her armful of toys and went over and put her arms around the limp knees. The two of them stood there, realizing each other for all time to come, the lonely colored woman and the little blonde child.

“Why . . . I’ve got my Sister,” Boo said. “I’ve got my really truly Sister, and now I won’t have to have a make-believe sister any more!”

That’s how we knew we had our Sister. For her to take care of us, and for us to take care of her.

New Shoes Day

This is the day that stepped out of the calendar wearing new shoes. Of all new things that happen to a child, nothing is lovelier than new shoes. Grown-ups try to fathom the reason for this; but they cannot; they can only remember that it is so.

Watching her, so enchanted with those twin five-inch lengths of newness, I decide that their charm lies in:

A. Being two.

B. Being seeable in completeness and not in fragments like a new frock.

C. Being a part of one's self and yet separate.

These, to-day, have the added wonderfulness of rubber soles. One walks in whispers. Every room in the house must be walked in, experimentally. Upstairs, downstairs, attic, and basement.

One has the feet of bunnies, of rain falling on moss, of snow itself. One is in love with quietness to-day. Even the voice, usually a twittering, high, four-year-old voice, speaks little sentences which cling to the air like growing, down-shod vines. One wears rubber soles, in fact, from top to toe.

"You can hardly *hear* me," she says in ecstasy, coming boldly across the "imaginary line" which keeps her out of the workroom . . . usually. "You'd hardly know you had a child in the house."

"Hardly at all," I concede, as though I had not counted her approaching steps as doomfully as if they were Beethoven's footfalls of fate marching through the Fifth.

"Go play, darling," I say, trying to look undisturbed. "Go tie shoe-strings, perhaps."

Surprisingly enough, she goes. Tying shoe-strings is an advanced lesson in being-nearly-five. She has dressed herself for months; she can report what time it is when you send her upstairs to find out. ("The little hand says eleven, and the big hand says six.") She has solved many routine problems, but shoe-strings, unless a grown-up helps, still dangle.

But this morning . . . this giddy, New Shoes Morning . . . she masters the shoe-strings. She comes clumping helter-skelter downstairs—more like a torrent of ducks than of petals this time.

“I can tie a bow,” she cries triumphantly. “I can really tie a bow! Well, it isn’t a *square* bow,” she says honestly. “It’s a kind of three-cornered bow.” But it is a beginning. It is, in fact, a milestone—something to be celebrated. Even I, typewriter-tied though I am, see that this is a national holiday in our private country. So I put the hood over the typewriter, as though it were a garrulous parrot tucked away for the sake of silence, and I give in.

“What’s a day, more or less,” I say to myself defiantly. “When she’s grown up we’ll have plenty of quiet days. Beastly quiet days, with nobody four years old to interrupt!”

So Lilliam packs us a luncheon, and hardly is the last waxed paper snapped into creases before we unpack it again ravenously. We eat in the shadow of our own house, which is a fine place for picnics.

After luncheon we take what is somewhat leniently called our nap, lying in the shade of the hollyhocks, starched and pink against the summer sky. During naps we do not intrude on each other’s thinking; or if we must speak we rap first on the door of privacy.

“May I say something?” she asks politely in her new rubber-soled whisper.

“Just one remark,” I say sleepily, watching the big puddles of shadow which the hollyhock leaves throw across her face. A dragon-fly, glistening metallically, takes a stitch here and there in the sunshine. He, too, will baste this moment lightly in our memory . . . hers and mine.

“When I’m a big lady and have all my babies,” she says, sitting up in her earnestness, “I’m going to have a very big house, and you must come and live with us.”

“Thank you,” I say, thinking that it’s mornings like *this* that bring on things like *that*. “Well, I’ll consider it anyway.”

“We’ll build a room for you at the very top of the house, and you can shut the door when you want to work. I’ll teach all my babies not to disturve you.”

“I tried to teach you not to disturb me,” I say smilingly, “and look what came of it.” I can see from her thoughtful look that she intends doing better teaching than I. But she doesn’t bring out that point. She looks at her shoes blissfully.

“Well, I know what,” she says. “We’ll all wear rubber soles. And then we can disturve you so quietly you won’t even know it!”

The Oldest Tree

We don't have punishment in our house. But goodness knows what it is we *do* have. Theories, I guess.

We have a theory that regret without grief makes more intelligent discipline. Repentance of the intellect instead of the heart, is our aim; since the heart is a sensitive little instrument intended not for hammering nails, but for telling time forever.

In our code children aren't naughty; they're only silly and unwise. You decide (from consequences) that you've been unwise. But you're not utterly crushed about it, for you think more wisely when you are unclouded by sorrow. And the next day you do better. That's the theory.

Sometimes it works.

But always it requires great patience and nimbleness and sportsmanship . . . and all of these, it seems, on the part of the parent. Whatever else our method does, it certainly is going to develop the character of the parent.

But naughtiness is a fascinating weed. If you've seldom heard it mentioned in your own home, you get the idea that it's a thrilling luxury afforded only by the blissfully underprivileged.

Punishment, too, is one of the exciting adventures that you hear about in whispers from your friends. A mad, exuberant feud that embellishes the lives of some children. But not dull people like us, to whom nothing happens.

At least, that's my reluctant theory about our theory.

Well, anyway. It was nearly midnight, and as I came up to my bedroom, I glanced upstairs to the next level, and there, lying along the floor, was a thin thread of light under the door of the linen closet.

"Lilliam's forgotten the light again," I thought as I went up to turn it off.

But when I opened the door with its delicious waft of lavender and linen, there was something else. Some one four years old, but ancient in guilt. Standing on top of a laundry hamper, she had a smear of chocolate across one cheek, and a jaw full of sticky cream fondant. A half-demolished candy Easter egg, four months' stale, was sitting beside the fancy box in which it had been packed and forgotten.

"What *are* you doing?"

“I . . . I got hungry,” she said around the fondant.

“But you’ve been asleep for hours. And how did you know that disgusting egg was in here?”

“I . . . I look at it sometimes,” she murmured guiltily. “I look at it every single day. And now I got terribly hungry for it.”

It was the old tree of knowledge pattern, ludicrously small-scale.

I washed her off and she brushed her teeth grimly, and we had nothing at all to say. Until she was back in her bed again. Then I sat down in her small rocking chair and gave her the works.

“I really can’t understand it, Miss Boo,” I said, not at all truthfully.

“I splained it to you,” she said, and the point certainly went to her on that round. “Don’t let’s discuss about it any more, please.”

“Indeed we shall discuss it, “I said sternly. “You know we do everything possible for your good. And if there is anything that you think would be good for you, you have only to ask us and we’ll see.”

She yawned sleepily. All this was trite going. Old stuff.

“It’s never going to be necessary for you to deceive me about anything. You know that. You don’t have to sneak into closets to do things.”

Then I tried a new approach. A new grip on my audience, who was slipping away from me.

“You’re a reasonable human being,” I said. “*You* tell *me* what you think I ought to do about it.”

Interest flickered up. “Don’t let’s do anything,” she said with winsome cheerfulness.

But I was relentless. “Suppose you had a little girl whom you loved very much. You wanted her to be happy and well, and you did everything you could for her . . .”

“*I’d* give her lovely bath salts in her bath,” she said. “*I’d* let her put on nail polish sometimes. Just for fun.”

“Suppose your little girl got up from her bed without calling any one, and came down the stairs and slipped into the linen closet . . .”

“*I’d* keep her tied in bed,” she said reproachfully. “*I* wouldn’t want her to fall out, the dear little thing.”

“We kept you tied in,” I said, defending my standing jealously. “But now you’re big enough. . . . And suppose she took nasty old stale candy. What would you do to make her remember?”

She sat up in bed earnestly. Her viewpoint was suffused now with a righteous parent-indignation. She had thrown herself so utterly into the rôle that she had forgotten all policy.

“If I had a little girl that did such things . . . after I’d been so lovely to her, and given her a beautiful new bathrobe, and let her put powder on her tummy . . . if she got out of bed and ’ceeved me, why I’d turn her over my knee and *spank* her.”

The room was embarrassed by silence for a long moment. The whole thing had got pretty badly out of bounds, for both of us. She slid down into her bed, and I got up awkwardly.

“Well,” I said limply. “Good night, darling.”

“Good night,” she said, equally meek. “Don’t let’s us discuss about our children any more. Hmn?”

“All right,” I said. “Go to sleep now.”

Laffin' Fit to Kill

Don't think for a moment that Lilliam doesn't have any fun out of life. I wish I had half as much. And that you yourself did.

It didn't take her very long to find her own after she came to us. One minute she stepped in out of the night, knowing nobody at all, and not even very sure how to pronounce the name of our city (and even less of our state), and the next week, she had found a pretty good segment of friends for herself.

It began on her afternoon off. We drove her into town and wrote down our phone number and our address, and gave her a hand-drawn map of the way to everywhere. A mole could have followed our instructions.

"You know Boston isn't like the South," we warned her.

"Don' you worry about me," she said. "I'll git back, and if it ain't Thursday, it'll cert'n'y be Friday." But we were a little worried about her. Besides, by that time we had tasted her lemon pie.

She had a wonderful time. She met some people who had kin-folks in Georgia, and some more people who had lived in Florida.

"Bos'n jes lak the Souf," she explained to us, when she came home. For people as good as Lilliam, it *is* a little world, haloed with kindness.

From then on, she has led a complicated and ever widening social life. All week long Lilliam belongs to us, but Thursday belongs to Lilliam. Thursday morning she comes down to say good-bye to us, and to look in my long mirror to see if her slip shows, and I can't believe that this is our Lilliam. This might be Lilliam's daughter, but it certainly can't be that wise, silent woman who reads her Bible and goes to sleep at nine. This is a little somebody in a pert cupcake of a hat, impudently tipped over one eye; this is a svelte little chocolate wench with mighty nice ankles and very high heels.

"You behave yourself, Lilliam," I always say, when I look at her.

She understands me perfectly. She bats her eyelashes, and I think to myself, "Um-*humn*," and she says:

"Yas'm. I allus behaves myse'f good."

We never expect much of her on Friday. Too close to Thursday. She dreamily stretches out the breakfast dishwashing through half the morning, and we hear her singing to herself, and once in a while she laughs out loud and

mutters something like: “Um-*humn*, he sho’ nuff did!”

And we say to each other, “That’s Lilliam, laffin’ fit to kill.” And I must say we envy her.

Once in a while we happen out in the kitchen, and she’s humming and banging pans around merrily, and feeling mighty pleased about everything, and we lead her on to telling us what she did yesterday. She loves to tell, and it is a jumble of right nice people and right elegant food, and a boat ride and the lions at the zoo. Usually she interposes the story of the movie she invariably sees, so that you can’t tell, as you can’t tell when you talk to Miss Boo, which is real and which is ’maginary.

Sometimes I answer the phone and there will be a voice much more melodious, much more browned on both sides, and buttered to the edges, than any possessed by the men we know, and I’ll know it is one of Lilliam’s admirers, spending twenty cents to telephone out to the country to talk to her for three minutes.

Not that they get many words out of her! She’ll murmur dewy little nothings of surprise and pleasure, and you can’t be sure whether the conversation is still going on or not. But afterwards she goes back upstairs and sings, and laffs fit to kill.

Quite often she knows by some intuition when the telephone call is for her, before we answer it, and she says very roguishly:

“Um-*humn* . . . I reckon that’s mah brunette.”

She has, in fact, two brunettes. One flighty lad named Stevie, and something all wool and a yard wide named Harbert, as near as I can make out. The difference between them is that Harbert saves his money.

It’s Harbert we worry about. Stevie may glitter on Thursdays, but Thursdays are only one-seventh of Lilliam’s sensible being.

Child's-eye View

One of the first things you discover about a child is that he must be taught a kind of agreement in the conventions of seeing. Every once in a while you're staggered to suspect that perhaps they do not see what we see . . . as perhaps we do not see as other people see. Maybe there are variations. Maybe "round" to me is "square" to you, and what I call "black" is what you call "white." We have agreed arbitrarily upon the terminology, but perhaps the concepts are wide apart.

When children first attempt to draw pictures of themselves and other people, they begin with huge eyes. Finally they concede some kind of circle surrounding the eyes. Almost invariably then, when they are able to draw a little more, they venture upon legs. Without benefit of body, the legs sprout from beneath the chin, and arms grow from the same axis. You point out the fact of bodies, and they think it over and finally agree.

Size is another thing that puzzles them. What belongs to them is immensely large. But that is because they are measuring importance, and the dawning ego is the central fact of the universe. Our house is larger than any one else's house, because it is crammed with facts which occupy much mental space, whereas every one else's house is only a blur of other people's unimportant belongings.

Age they understand. There are but two classes of humans: children and people, the last innocent until proved guilty.

Our Miss Boo used to have an earnest greeting for strangers.

"Are you a boy or a man?" she used to ask people, and gray mustaches had nothing to do with it. Pompous people were men, and the rest were boys. I, I'm glad to say, was never mistaken for a lady.

Stout people are those who sit too close to you when they hold you on their laps. And stout people are the ones who invariably want to hold you on their laps. Thin people are the ones who don't seem to wear many clothes, and when they hug you it's like leaning against a picket fence.

Every one is smaller than usual when they don't feel well. Even twelve-year-old boys, who are probably the biggest people on earth.

Guests who bring presents when they come visiting are, unfortunately, much smaller than the gifts. (So we have a delicate rule in our house that gifts

will be withheld, so that better presence can be appreciated. But the flaw in this is that when gifts arrive by mail, they come from the generosity of Jim, the mailman, and a lovely man indeed.)

People are measured by undecipherable standards. The best talents are quite invisible to the grown-up eye. One of the most valuable persons in our town is the trash-man. He has one kind old wrinkled hand, and one hand which is a hook. Very nimble about hoisting trash-barrels up to his wagon. There isn't a child in the village who wouldn't leave father and mother to go with him.

When a very obnoxious offspring of some wealthy parents quite deservedly broke his leg, the surgeon who had been brought up by plane from his vacation had to wait to set the precious bone while the family chauffeur scoured the town to locate the trash-man to come and hold a hand.

Nobody over twelve can say what is his charm. Under twelve they don't bother saying. They just cry, "*Here comes Mr. Hanson!*" and they stand and watch him work, and he says a few words and they say a few, and then they watch him wistfully out of sight.

To us he just looks like an old man with whiskers, who doesn't say much. But maybe, like Jacob, they "see his face, and it is as the face of God."

Ethics . . . Aged Four

A child's business is an open yard, into which any passer-by may peer curiously. It is no house, not even a glass house. A child's reticence is a little white fence around her business, with a swinging, helpless gate through which grown-ups come in or go out, for there are no locks on your privacy when you're only four.

But once in a while the gate swings shut very sharply on a grown-up's fingers. . . .

Boo came home from Sunday School looking very demure. Looking like a package which I couldn't help prying into, to see if I could find the secret of such heavenly guilelessness and bliss.

So I pried.

"Well, did you have a nice Sunday School class?"

"Nope."

"But why not?"

"Only the sillies were there."

"Oh. Well, did you help Miss Watson take care of the sillies?"

"Nope."

"But, darling, why not?"

"Miss Watson wasn't there."

"Oh. Well, who *was* your teacher?"

"A lady named Miss Grahamcracker. She had lettuce on her hat."

"Oh. Well, did you help Miss Grahamcracker?"

"Nope."

"But, dear, why not?"

"She's supposed to help *us*. She knows *everything*."

She sits there rocking in her little chair looking utterly unimpudent and beatific. Looking like the secret of all goodness. So I, trying my best to learn what that wonderful thing *is* which they're born knowing, and which we finally rob them of, prod into her again.

“But you were good, I hope, Precious.”

“Yep,” she says indifferently. “I just pinched one child.”

“Oh. And did she pinch you back?”

She stops rocking and regards me with amazement that I should ever imagine such heresy.

“Of course not,” she says with pious reproach. “We were in *Sunday School*!”

The Eight-egg Caike

They say one way you can tell when you're beginning to get old (as if there were any doubt!) is that you enjoy looking backward. But that's not true. For I never saw any one who loved to dwell so reminiscently in her past as our Miss Boo.

When we tell our favorite stories, when we snuggle down together in a whispered conspiracy of two, almost invariably she says, "Tell me about when I was all little." No detail is too trivial. She is frankly her own favorite character. And the fascinating past is rivaled only by the glamorous future, when she will be All Big, and shall have innumerable babies, and drive an airplane and go to Vassar (in that sequence). And I must say I am as guilty as she in adoring this epic.

When we are really in an orgy of the All Little series, she almost always says, "And now tell me about when I had my tenth birthday party."

You see, we celebrated her tenth birthday when she was a year old. This is how it came about.

There was a very tiny house at the bottom of our hill, lived in with incredible neatness by a sparrow-like Englishwoman and her six well-mannered children. Her husband, so every one told you who mentioned them, drank. And how he fitted into the house, drunk or sober, I never could imagine, for he was a large whiskery ogre of a man. Just the thing, you can see, for a neighborhood fairy story.

One of their little girls, a blank minnow of a child named Gracie . . . probably after Gracie Fields . . . was discovered to have her birthday on the very day Miss Boo was somewhat unconcernedly preparing to celebrate her first one.

Obviously, Miss Boo cared nothing at all about her birthday, and Gracie, on the other hand, could barely sleep at night for imagining what it would be like to have a birthday party if you *could* have a birthday party. So, of course, we did just what you'd have done.

We estimated how many children our house would hold, and then we added seven or eight more. For a good rule for a successful party is too many people in too small a space. Then we got that number of ravishingly printed invitations, and we told Gracie that she could distribute them exactly as she

pleased. This gave her a week of popularity whose waves, five years later, are still breaking on her bleak little shore.

We tried to imagine what a homely little girl's idea of a party would be and we used that for a pattern. We decorated the house, and added lollipops, balloons and prizes, games, confetti, and favors until our heads swam.

The cakes I had planned to have baked by our own housekeeper, who was a lavish Frenchwoman whose most routine cakes looked like lingerie, and whose lingerie frothed like the frosting frills on a wedding-cake. We got all the ingredients and decorations in the house: sugar rosebuds, and candies, and stars. Bina was about to begin on it when suddenly she stopped.

"Wouldn't it be better," she said, "if Gracie's mother had a chance to bake the cake? Wouldn't it be something she could give to the party?"

"Of course," we said. At that very moment we heard our front door knocker, and there *was* Gracie's mother, looking timid and yet excited.

"*Would* you mind," she said, "if I baiked the caike? I do it real nahce, as you might sigh."

"Why, what a strange thing," we said. "We were just this minute coming down to ask you if you would! We've got everything here for it, but if you could help us out . . . we've just not had time. . . ."

She was dazzled by the ingredients. "*Ite* eggs in a caike!" she said. "Well, you *are* a one! It's pline you never baiked a caike. Well, never mind. Two are plenty."

We were abashed, but firm. This was to be a cake nobody ever could forget. "We want everything in it," we said. "Eight eggs, and this special flour." So we bundled up the ingredients, and she and Bina carried them down the hill.

It *was* a party. Beginning, as all children's parties do, with silence and paralysis, and ending in bedlam. One mirror broken, two children in tears, wet lollipops lost between the divan cushions, the child who unswallows before he can quite reach the bathroom, the child who loses the "set" out of her ring, the six o'clock child whose mother told her to wait until called for.

And at the very peak of it, Gracie's birthday caike carried in by Gracie's blushing mother, with all the candle flames bending and bowing like the crowns of heaven. Never was there such cake. It melted in the mouth, leaving only a memory of deliciousness. It was so ethereal, it was something you breathed rather than ate.

“We never tasted such cake,” we said to Gracie’s mother, and we hoped in our hearts that the eight eggs wouldn’t make her forever dissatisfied with her own limitations.

“Well, it’s pretty good,” she said with British modesty. “But I’ve baiked better. It should have been lahter.”

“If it were lighter, we couldn’t have kept it from floating to the ceiling.”

“Oh, you’re a proper one,” she said, going off into hysterical gales of appreciation.

She helped us wash up the dishes, and after she’d gone, she popped back in again.

“I’ll send Walter raht up with the flour,” she said.

“What flour?”

“Coo, you don’t suppose I used that special flour? I wouldn’t take a chance. And he’ll bring up the eggs, too.”

“Eggs? What eggs?”

“Coo, you don’t suppose I put all those eggs in my caike,” she said indignantly. “I always baike a two-egg caike. Unless I’m short at the time.”

The poor live on miracles. That’s one thing the impoverished rich never know anything about.

At the end of the story Miss Boo always says, “And now tell me about the magic ingreedgent.”

“What magic ingredient?” I look bewildered.

“*You* know. Instead of the eggs,” she reminds me.

“Oh, yes. . . . What *was* that, anyway?” I try to remember.

“You know,” she says. “It was love.”

How Tall?

One of our favorite people is Aunt Delicious. We like her because she never hurries. She lets us wear her bracelets and open her big pile of letters when she comes to stay with us. She gives us foreign stamps and we give them to little boys who then like us much better.

Aunt Delicious almost always sings us a little song about the camel with the wrinkled knees. She doesn't sing very loudly, but we can hear her, for she sits in Miss Boo's own rocking chair very close to the bed. Close enough so you can smell her lovely perfume.

She never pretends she is amused when she is not, and she doesn't talk coyly to a little girl, and she never asks silly questions the way some people do. She is herself; and we are ourselves; and that is enough for anybody.

We went to hear her sing this Spring. Four thousand other people had also come to hear her, and that surprised us, because we had no idea so many people knew Aunt Delicious.

"But what I didn't know really," Miss Boo said when we came home, "was how tall Aunt Delicious is."

"Tall, darling?"

"I thought we were about the same size . . . well, not exactly, but almost. *You know.*"

I did know, for Aunt Delicious is the size of every one who ever has seen her, small or large, old or young.

"But she's terribly tall."

"Not so very."

"Well, her feet were on the floor of the stage right beside the piano. And her voice was clear up high in the ceiling beside the bouquet of electric lights. That's how tall she really is, isn't she?"

Lilliam Writes to Her Kin-folks

We all knew Lilliam had something on her mind. We tried tactfully to find out what it was, but she hadn't anything to say. She just went around wrapped in silence, so that her face and even her skin—that burnished copper skin of hers—looked as if the light had gone out which burns inside her and shines out as from a lamp.

"Don't you feel well, Lilliam?"

"Yas'm. I feels elegant," she said gloomily. "But I'm thinkin'."

We wanted to help her. Lilliam does everything for us, and sometimes it seems to me we don't do anything at all for Lilliam.

"I wouldn't worry about anything," I said. "Probably when you get around to telling us about it, we can fix it. We can try anyway."

"Yas'm," Lilliam said, but you could see she was still a long way from getting around.

Miss Boo, in the helpless intuitive way of a child, tried to help also. She came in clutching a hot handful of dandelions.

"They're for you, Lilliam," she said. "You can do anything you want to with them."

Usually Lilliam takes such offerings as though they were not weeds but choicest flowers. Usually she arranges and rearranges them, and stands back and admires them while Boo basks in the beatitude of being a gift-giver.

But now Lilliam hardly looked at them.

"Thank you, Doll Baby," she said listlessly, and stuck them in a milk bottle.

"If you're worried about money . . ." I said the next morning.

"No'm," she said. "I don' need no money. Ain't nothin' I need." I thought to myself that this was true of Lilliam, and probably of not another human being I've ever encountered. And I saw all of a sudden what it means to inherit the earth.

I knew she would tell me eventually, so I could only wait. Sometimes in the afternoon, in that hyphen-hour between morning doing and dinner doing, Lilliam brings her Bible and sits with me before the fireplace in Miss Boo's

small arm-chair. She opens her Bible on her knees, and the clock ticks and the fire hums, and I think:

"There is no other person in the world who could sit with me like this, neither of us having anything to say, and yet saying all that is essential. There is such peace in this room. . . . I loved it before Lilliam came. But now it is complete."

I think that we are friends, she and I, and always will be friends, safe from any deception of words, or quarrels of taste, or divergence of opinion. I think that we love each other for what we are, not for what we think, or have, or do.

She reads her Bible, and she looks up at the beams of the ceiling as if she were listening, and she nods as if she heard. Sometimes she hands her shabby little book over to me; I read where her brown finger points. Always it is something beautiful and rich, and often it is something which only a poet would choose.

As I look at it, I think:

"Who *is* she, this mysterious black woman? She is some one who lives beyond time or space or ordinary measurements.

"It is always *now* for her, and she brushes around in the now as if she were sweeping a house. She goes back and forth into the past and the future as if they were rooms leading out of the present.

"And what is her age?" I think to myself. "She says she is thirty, but there are days when she is sixty and other days when she is an impish, wiry little pickaninny no older than Boo. They pack a lunch together and go out and eat too many blueberries off the bushes of our woods, and it is Boo who remembers finally that they'd better come home."

Heaven is closer to Lilliam than the conversation at our table as she moves about offering silver dishes of food, and silently filling water glasses. Moses and Daniel and the little Lord Jesus are her friends, and just missed being her contemporaries, for they, too, live neither in time nor in space.

Her very simplicity is a mystery to me. But there are no mysteries to Lilliam; there are only things which still remain in God's large pocket, to be taken out and explained later, when we are bigger chillun. . . .

All this week, when she was troubled about something, she never came in to sit with me. The house was still many times and I was alone, and she came to the library door and looked in, and I said, "Come in, Lilliam. It's nice in here."

She said, “No’m, thank you kindly,” and went away.

But at last she told me. She was baking a pie, and I went down into her domain and sat on her long-legged stool and we talked. It was a new pie, from a recipe we had never ventured on before, so I made that the immediate excuse.

“How does it sound?” I asked, as one expert to another.

“Receet sound *good*,” she said. “Sound rich and lighty.” She nodded sagely over the opened book. I took an apple from the still life she keeps arranged in the copper bowl on the kitchen desk, and I prattled along about the back door news: the milkman’s baby, the new grapevines from the Nursery brought over by Mr. Turnip. (Mr. Turnip calls himself that now, since Miss Boo started going over to the Turner Nurseries.) I hoped that after a while all this gentle gossiping would thaw out Lilliam’s trouble. And it did.

“I got me a old grief,” she said at last, when the pie, looking indeed rich and lighty, was finished. “I got me somethin’ I’se ashamed about. But I couldn’t ever he’p it.”

“Why don’t you tell me, Lilliam? Maybe it’s something I could help.”

“No’m,” she said. “Nobody couldn’t he’p this. This ain’t somethin’ that *is*, this is somethin’ that *ain’t*.”

“I see.”

She looked at me quickly, and she twisted her hands against her thin breast, and then her grief burst out of her.

“I cain’t read,” she said. “I ain’t never had no chance to learn.”

The room was silent with her shame. And my amazement.

“Why, Lilliam,” I said. “Of course you can read. You just now read that recipe for the pie . . . and you and I read together in the afternoons . . . dozens of times.”

“No’m,” she said, “I cain’t read. Nuffin except receets and the Bible. On’y things.” She turned away, and I knew that in a minute she’d have to scour a tear off her beloved work counter.

So . . . the cook book and the Bible; that was her whole vocabulary, all that print had ever meant to her. Words from cartons on the pantry shelves, laboriously matched to the symbols in the receet books . . . and yearned-for, miracle-given words from the Bible. . . .

Montaigne said, “Tell me what you read and I’ll tell you what you are,”

and I saw it in Lilliam as truest portraiture. Psalms and receeets, the rounded litany of living, of feeding of the soul and the body. Lilliam's whole unselfish glossary.

"Well, I know you can read all you need to," I said, brushing something out of my own eye. "Besides, you know things, Lilliam. Maybe you know a lot of the things the rest of us keep reading and reading to try and find out."

"Yas'm," she said, grateful but unconsoled. "Yas'm. I ain't complainin'. But it's on'y . . ."

"Only what?"

"It's on'y . . . I want to write a letter. 'Bout this time of year I allus write 'em a letter, telling 'em I'm getting along good."

"Why, heavens! Why couldn't I write it for you?" I said, gay with a sorrow so simply solved. "I've written thousands of letters. Why couldn't I write it for you, Lilliam?"

Then the light began shining again, and in a moment she had forgotten a little of her old shame, and she was telling me about the letter she wanted to write to her kin-folks in Georgia.

"They could have he'ped me when I was a little bittie girl," she said. "But they-all didn't bother thesselves. So I got me a job, and I never did have the chance. . . . But I wouldn't want to give them the satisfaction of thinkin' I couldn't write and read. I got along all right 'ithout 'em, and ain't no use of them thinkin' anything about it," she explained with dignity.

"No use at all," I said, "And what's more we'll write the letter on the typewriter. That'll show 'em, I guess, how well you got along without 'em!"

Lilliam looked as if a whole battery of lights had been turned on inside of her.

"Um-*hum*!" she said, and she went off into her irrational windstorm of mirth, and she laughed and laughed, all up and down her long sad bones. Partly she was laughing to make up for the last three days when her laughter had lain folded up and hidden away in the cellar of her being, and partly because she was allowing herself the sweet luxury of imagining their rightful envy and amazement when we sent down the typewritten letter.

"Um-*hum*!" she said. "They gwine pass that letter all up and down the street. They gwine brag about me. They gwine put on airs about me . . . skinny little no-count Lilliam they was always too uppety to bother thesselves about!"

Baby-fish and the Moon-beans

They're all poets when they're very young.

Everything is new and unwritten upon, and if you listen they tell you wonderful things.

Miss Boo had a rambling endless story about a droll character named Baby-fish.

Baby-fish's mother was always sending him out on adventures. But before he started out anywhere his mother would say:

"Come here, Baby-fish, and let me put on your little straw hat. . . ." And Boo would put a make-believe hat very jauntily on the side of *my* head. "And let me tie a neck-tight around your collar." And she'd nearly choke me with the neck-tight. "And let's see how your shoe-strings look, Baby-fish, and your mittens." And on my hands and feet those would go.

And if it was a cold morning the Mother would say, "And don't get your hands cold, Baby-fish. I think you'd better tuck them in your little white fur muffin."

There was another one I remember. A lamb, a very little lamb which she wanted terribly. So terribly that she imagined him.

"If I had a little lamb, I'd take such care of him. I'd tie him at night under the butternut tree. And he'd never get lost. And if he was hungry I'd say to him, 'Eat, my little lamb. Eat moon-beans and butternuts.' "

The Grackles Arrive

We have our own front page, as all people do who live in the country. It is the sky and the earth, with headlines new every morning. We wake to take in its news as city dwellers reach across thresholds for their newspapers.

It is good to have these headlines edited by the earth's own copy-desk. There are clash and drama and even catastrophe among the year's run of them, but they all add up to a balance and a huge symmetry reassuring for the hazardous little man-affairs to contemplate.

"Snapdragons bloom a week early."

"Frost arrives. Dahlias slain."

"Cutworms charged with subversive activity."

Our Miss Boo is usually up before any one else, having so much more to accomplish in a day, so often it is she who brings in the news.

But not usually as excitedly as she came in this morning, bursting in before I was quite awake.

"They're here . . . they've come again," she cried. Back of her words I could hear the huge threshing-machine sound, that rusty splintering noise that means only one thing, the Grackles.

It sounded as if the horizon were dragging a metal chain tight around us. The noise was coming from everywhere, from the very sky itself, as if all the hinges of the day were squeaking, as though some huge invisible gate were swinging back across the trees to let the blustering Autumn through.

So . . . they had come. Over the earth, over the square of sunshine on my bedroom floor, there were the swift shadows of them wheeling down from the sky. The earth had a rhythm of shadows across it, regular as the flickering retreat of telegraph poles from a train window. The very earth seemed to be traveling windily under the spinning spokes of the sky.

On some unsuspecting September morning all along the seacoast from Maine to Maryland, they come. And when they leave, you see that they have taken summer with them.

Boo says, "I remember them before. It couldn't have been last year . . . you held me up to the window. I must have been All Little."

I remember, too; and I remember her hard little body fluttering in my arms as if she would like to be up and away with them. I remember her two hands stretching out to them, and the dark excitement in her eyes, and the too-large, somehow frightening shadows of the birds passing across her little face. Frightening to me, but not to her, because she has found this a good world, and if there is any roughness at all, it is only the roughness of romping, and needs merely to be understood.

"They're in our trees," she cries now. "They're like great big blackberries." I put on slippers and run out on the terrace, and there I see why Amy Lowell once said of the grackles, "The smoothness of the morning is puckered with them."

There is a strange excitement about this converging of two worlds in our valley and on our hilltop. You feel irrationally proud that they have chosen your land. They transform it by their incredible numbers, and as you stand on the earth watching the sky dumping them down like tumbling fruit from some horn of plenty, your heart flutters with primitive elation.

You think wildly, "I'd like to be up and away myself. Why do I stay quietly? I belong to the wide high earth . . ."

Then your eye flicks across your child, and you see she is thinking it, too, and you put out your hand like a little reminding anchor to you both.

"We ought to do something for them," Boo says helplessly. Yes, light refreshments, entertainment—something to show our hospitality. But we can only stand and look at our laden trees, glistening and bristling with burnished purple and bronze and green, all metallic. They are such rakish, hobo birds, not demure and discreet like the others. They are shiny and sassy, carefree and irresponsible. You can't imagine them worrying about taxes and decorum as pigeons appear to do. Grackles look as if they believed the promises of politicians; grackles look as if they were on perpetual W.P.A.

Famous migrations, so we read in our encyclopedia, have run into hundreds of thousands. "Beyond any counting," it says largely. Yes, we can believe that, for even this small flight makes your bird baths seem silly toys. They take possession, unraveling your seed zinnias before your enthralled eyes. They try to rip away the roof gutters and they scold at you obscenely because the builder fastened them securely. They squawk with guttural ribaldry, making humorous remarks to each other about you. They are a flock of Ed Wynns and Jimmy Durantes, from the sound of it.

After the grackles have moved along, there flutters into our midst another flock. The flight of "whys." They, too, dart thick and fast across the

conversation, settling on hidden twigs and exploring strange regions. Unable to deal with them alone, I retreat to the encyclopedia.

“Which are they, good or bad?” Miss Boo asks, getting right down to brass facts, as children do.

“Well, both,” I say cautiously.

“Oh. Two sides to the story,” she says, reminding herself, for this is one of the things she’s reluctantly learning.

We weigh their case. They eat cutworms, and locusts. When Cape Cod was new, Town Clerks demanded a quota of grackles’ heads from any one wishing a marriage license. *But,* the case continues, later food had to be imported from “England and Pennsylvania” because the cutworms and locusts had destroyed the crops.

On the other hand, sometimes the grackles just skip the cutworms and locusts, and demolish the crops and fruit trees themselves.

“But taken all in all,” we read, “the Grackle is a valuable bird. The good he does is widely distributed; the harm is often concentrated.”

Miss Boo understands that. “Like children,” she says earnestly. “Sometimes they’re spilly and splashy. But mostly they’re nice to have.”

“Yes,” I agree. “Taken all in all, as the book says.”

And that’s the *way* to take things, children or grackles . . . all-in-all.

Miniature

It seems to me I've never wanted anything in my whole life the way I wanted a doll's house when I was a child. And that was the birthday they gave me the lovely dictionary, instead. Enough to curdle words for me forever!

So this birthday I gave Miss Boo a doll's house, and while I was locked in the attic, getting it ready, hour after rapt hour, before it was time for her to see it, I thought:

"Wouldn't it be just like one of life's minor ornerynesses, if what Boo really wants is a tool chest, or an ironing board, or a darling little ten-cent package of bath salts! Well, anyway, she's being given a doll's house. She and I."

It was made by a spinster who put into it a lot of her longing for a life-sized house. A hobby, she called it. It has electric lights, and *such* a kitchen, and *such* a nursery . . . and lace counterpanes in the bedrooms, and a fireplace with tiny logs and brass andirons, and carpeting on the stairs, and everything any one could wish for. And an inch-high cat besides.

To make the house a home in the most approved edgarguest manner, it has a family of little dolls, an august father, with a mustache and a derby to tip, a picture-book mother, a pair of twins, and a baby. And as if that weren't all anybody could want, it has besides, a sweet little dumply-looking maid with the tiniest possible basket that can slip on and off her arm when she goes marketing.

Well, I waited until nearly her birthday . . . twilight on birthday-eve. Then we brought it down from the attic and set it on the library floor before the fireplace, and lighted all the little electric lights, and called in Miss Boo.

She stood there silent, unable to believe the little rooms bursting with doll life. She had no word to say that was big enough to express it. But I knew. Not having had, yourself, makes you know so well. . . .

We left her then and went downstairs to greet some guests. We'd have left her, even if no guests had arrived, because there are times when privacy is not a privilege but a right. And surely the discovering of a whole new universe is one of those times.

We heard her upstairs talking and laughing to herself, and we knew that she had got wholesomely over her awe and was really playing. So after fifteen

minutes we went up to show our friends this wonder that had come upon us—a house within a house, more dramatic surely than any play within a play!

We said, “Oh,” and, “Ah,” and crouched upon the hearth rug beside her, and we tried not to ask too silly questions. She explained the rooms to us . . . by this time you could see she had practically invented the house herself. She had rearranged the furniture slightly, exactly as a woman would as soon as she had moved into a furnished house. An hour ago the house might have been my dream, but now it was her reality.

She said to our guests, dimpling with hospitality:

“I’d love to have you meet the Terwilliger family . . . that’s their name, Terwilliger.

“But the mother is giving the children a bath, and the father is taking a lovely nap with the maid.”

People Children Like

One of the most disconcerting problems with which parents must cope pops up with the people who “just love children.” There is nothing more unreciprocal than this kind of love. It’s as though an innate balance acted to keep the whole scene within some bounds of decent moderation, so that even the most affectionate child becomes formal and aloof with these effusive ones.

“But she huffs and puffs at me,” Miss Boo says justly when we half-heartedly try to sell her one of these, for gentle courtesy’s sake.

On the other hand, people who are indifferent to children are often embarrassingly fascinating to the young. Like an actress I know slightly who came to tea with us one afternoon.

“This is our child,” I said, not too fatuously. And then, seeing that more fatuousness was needed, I rounded out the introduction. “And this lovely lady, dear, is Miss Sylvia Cedric.”

Sylvia looked at Boo and at the mend in our divan’s slipcover in much the same way. She noticed them both, but she mentioned neither. So I said to Boo:

“You go along. Lilliam has your tea ready upstairs.”

I said to our guest, “Boo’s having cambric tea with nineteen dolls and a donkey.” Sylvia smiled weakly and said nothing, but shrugged out of her double fox scarf.

We talked about plays, but we were really talking about Sylvia. Half-way through our tea I heard small feet behind us, and I could see from Sylvia’s face that a blot had occurred on the perfectness of the moment. None of us spoke of it, but when I heard a tiny clanking I turned around and found our child wearing costume earrings, two on each absurd ear. She was trying to appear unconcerned, but her face was a white whisper of shyness. She looked afraid even to retreat until I smiled at her, and then she left noiselessly.

We talked about actors, but we were really talking about Sylvia. I heard a murmur of feet behind my chair, and the lovely stage of Sylvia’s face showed that an intruder was threatening the spotlight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Boo had put on her summer hat, and also a large tussie-mussie of violets somebody gave her to “play lady” with. But none of us mentioned the invasion, and it withdrew.

The afternoon wore on and finally we talked about actresses, and now we *were* talking about Sylvia and no beating about the bore.

This time when Boo came tiptoeing in she had on Lilliam’s day-off perfume, her own best housecoat, a white fur muff, and overshoes. But it all flopped dismally, for Sylvia only lowered her eyes with indulging painfulness.

“Well, I must be going,” she said. “I imagine you have things to do, my dear.” She looked antagonistically at Boo, and Boo crept upstairs.

We went toward the door gradually, saying what a lovely little talk we’d had, and would I come into town some afternoon and have tea with her.

But Boo, intrepid to the end, launched one more, attempt. Just as we were about to open the front door, she made one last breathless appearance. She put her little face around the bend of the stairway—the one the architect built especially for her—and to my horror I saw that she was wearing in that guileless little face of hers, a very smelly man’s pipe.

This time Sylvia . . . even Sylvia . . . couldn’t just ignore it.

“Well, good-bye,” she said, kissing me sympathetically. “I mustn’t keep you another minute. I imagine you’ve got to straighten out that . . . that *extraordinary* child.”

We closed the door, and our own house-peace settled down upon us. We smiled at each other. Distastefully Boo laid the pipe on the window-sill and came and sat on the bottom step within the circle of my arm. She looked worn and wan, for she had had a long and utterly frustrated afternoon.

“Well, anyway,” she said philosophically, “she said I was *strawdinary*.”

“But you’re not one bit extraordinary,” I told her. “You’re exactly like the rest of us, I’m afraid.”

Elegy

Every one said she was too young to understand. Fortunately it happened to her when she was so little that she would never remember. After all, she wasn't quite three, and there would always be plenty of other people to make up for her own mother's care.

They reorganized the household very efficiently. A nice person called Aunt Billy came from the West to take charge, and little Nancy hardly seemed to notice the difference. Custard was the same, and carrots; and spinach goes on forever. Sunbaths and swims and sleeping in a crib with a Teddy-bear . . . everything was the same. And at night Daddy came home and the two of them talked quietly, or played with heart-breaking noisiness.

We asked her over to our house for the day, and Boo yearned over her with all the palpable motherness that none of the rest of us ever dared display. Boo's hands kept straying out to touch her and pat her; Boo adored her so much it was agony. Even giving her everything—hair ribbons, the one telegram ever received, the third-from-favorite doll, the lovely perfume bottle—couldn't quite express it.

They had their nap together in the twin hammocks under the apple trees. Looking out the window toward the hammocks, I thought, with a surge of loving, that maybe we *should* have two children. Suddenly I noticed that only one hammock had the heavy curve of a fruit-laden bough. The other was blowing emptily in the wind.

"They're napping together," I said. "Bless their little hearts."

But when I went out in a little while with cookies and milk for the wake-up lunch, there was only Boo in the hammock, fast asleep from an excess of emotion.

"Where's Nancy?" I said, and I called and called, and suddenly I was frightened.

"She can't be far," I said. "After all, she's such a little thing, and she doesn't know this place."

We ran around looking and calling. But there was no Nancy anywhere.

"I know where she's gone," Boo said. "She's probably gone up into the woods. I said I'd take her up there after the nap."

We went running up the hill, along the hot sweet pine needles, both of us calling and not waiting for an answer.

“She can’t have got lost,” we kept saying to each other. But even Miss Boo was frightened.

We were within ten feet of her before we saw her. She couldn’t have helped hearing us call, but she wasn’t answering. She was lying in the low-growing, gracious arms of a huge yew tree, with her wide baby eyes looking up at us, and her little face full of a thing I shall never forget.

“Why, Nancy, what *are* you doing?” I said. “We called you, dear. You must have heard us.”

“I did,” she said. “I heard you a long, long time.”

“What are you doing?” I said, though something in me knew and hoped to have it denied.

She bent her face down into the branch, and the tree rocked her gently. There was such silence in our woods you’d have thought every twig and grass blade was standing on tiptoe to listen. Then she turned up her face and looked at me.

“This is the Mummy-tree,” she said. “It’s holding me on its lap.”

The Little Yellow String

I look in the shops, but I keep remembering how small and beautiful are the things that make real Christmas. Not objects to be wrapped in tinsel, nor put in boxes, nor put anywhere. They are the untagged gifts . . . a word, a moment lighted like a little star. They cannot be bought nor ordered, for they are “divine events” that happen in the heart.

Like the little yellow string. Paint has been kissed from a dozen dolls, games have worn out, and even books have gone on their way. Other delights which we do not even know yet will come and dazzle and go again. But the little yellow string was made of something imperishable.

She was small then, and full of delicious unexpectedness. We said, “Darling, what *do* you want us to give you for Christmas?”

She thought about it a while and then she said, “I want a little yellow string.”

“A string, Precious?”

“A yellow string, with a sled on it.”

That tickled us to pieces. We told all our friends about it. It became our family *bon mot*, with endless variations on the theme. One of us wanted a lovely shiny key—with a car that would fit it. Somebody else thought two little hands would be nice—attached to a diamond watch; and somebody else wanted three buttons—on a fur coat. You know how grown-ups can take one honest little bubble, and blow it up to make an armful of gaudy balloons!

That was the year we gave her the dolls’ dishes, and Button Eyes, the Teddy-bear, and the rocking horse, and the baby doll, and the fur mittens, and this and that and everything else you can imagine. Everything, in fact, except a little yellow string.

She got much too much, for any one so small and so complete in her innate amusements. But all of them, of course, were gifts that blessed the givers, and so were justified. After all, this was Christmas in a Grandfather’s house. She did her best to live up to all the giving, but she liked the pasteboard boxes better than the lovely building blocks, and she cherished the snowy cotton more than the handpainted dishes packed in it, and she thought the piano stool that whirled around was more fun than the Christmas tree that did nothing at all. But she did her inadequate best, and after a few days we drove up north

again, and Christmas was over for another year. Christmas was over and we had forgotten the little yellow string.

We drove into our own grounds just at twilight, and there was the benediction of new snow everywhere, and a young moon had turned our roof to silver, and the trees were dressed in ermine. We sat a moment and looked at it, so beautiful and still, so utterly New England. But she had scrambled out of the car and was tumbling through the snowdrifts like a golden-haired snowball.

"It's my Christmas," she was calling back to us. "It's my little yellow string, with a sled on it!"

And sure enough it was! Leaning against the door, as if it had always been there!

For a night and a day it remained a mystery. Where *could* it have come from?

Then somebody explained it. Three children, whom we hardly even know, had put their heads together . . . and their pennies. They had seen it in our general store, and it was such a tiny sled, and it *looked* like her.

So it stopped being a mystery and became a miracle. To us, of course, but not to her. She had asked for it, hadn't she? Well, *then*.

Lilliam in Eclipse

Our collaborating went on satisfactorily for several months. Sometimes a whole week's wages were sent to Georgia for some whim the kin-folks hinted about. I wrote to say Miss Lucetta May Bingley was my trusted friend and would, in my opinion, be a desirable member of the Congregational Colored Church. Once I had to complain about some hair pomade we had ordered by mail, and every week I addressed the insurance envelope.

I did very well with everything . . . until we came to love. But love nearly threw us both.

We knew the moment she went into the happy muddle. Her cooking collapsed first. The bottoms dropped out of two dinners, and the third day she dreamily began paring a potato and didn't stop until she came out the other end of a peck.

"What's come over her?" we asked each other.

"Spring, probably."

"Not Harbert, I hope. I always felt that thrifty lad meant us no good."

But it wasn't Harbert. And it wasn't Stevie.

For Lilliam came in, bringing her violet writing paper and asked me to write them each a letter.

"Jes say, in some nice polite way, that I don' want to bother with 'em," she said. "Say I'se busy. From now on. Ain't got no time."

"Why, Lilliam. What happened?"

"I got other things to do," she said mysteriously.

But, just as I feared, it wasn't other "things" but another man. He telephoned that night, and his voice was black plush.

"Please, Ma'am, if it wouldn't be too much bother to you, could I trouble you to allow me to speak to Lilliam?" he said unctuously.

When she talked to him, her voice was smaller than ever. Just a tiny heart quivering monosyllabically in the stillness.

"For goodness sake!" I said. "Who is he, Lilliam?"

"Oh, he's jes a big tall Somebody," she said demurely.

For the next few weeks there was no singing and laffin’ fit to kill on Friday mornings. There were no rambling mixed up stories about the elegant food and the real nice people. Now there was nothing but Joseph. And if he forgot to telephone for a few days, there was nothing at all.

She looked so dejected after a few days of his neglect, that I volunteered to help.

“You want me to write him any letters?” I said, shamelessly trying to find out about him.

“No’m,” she said. “I couldn’t deceive Joseph. Mebbe I’ll write him a letter myself. Mebbe.”

She took to shutting herself up in her room now during the afternoons, when she used to be out playing with Miss Boo, or walking over to the village to see sights.

“What on earth is she doing?” we asked each other worriedly.

“I think she’s sewing. She borrowed a needle.”

“That’s really bad,” we said. “That just couldn’t be worse.”

Finally she had to tell us. She was too happy to keep quiet about it. So she brought it down, and it was an antimacassar. Chair back to me. She was embroidering it. For Joseph, of course. It had a quaint, old fashioned lady and gentleman bowing to each other, and a motto underneath. Lilliam had nearly finished the motto in very neat little cross-stitches.

“Is this the letter?” I asked, and she nodded wordlessly, and squinted at it critically to make sure one small stitch wasn’t out of its place.

“He gwine lak it,” she said reverently. “Joseph certain’y do lak nice things.”

“He ought to like it,” I said. “I like it myself, Lilliam.”

“Sho’ nuff? You lak what it say?”

“Very much,” I said cheerlessly, for I could see the end of this story, and it meant no Lilliam for us. “Very appropriate.”

“Don’t say too much, do it?”

“No. Just the right amount.”

“It do, do it?” She looked at it again, and finally she took it away, and I . . . well, I was so engrossed in my own selfish worries about losing Lilliam, that I couldn’t even see that she wanted me to read the motto she had so patiently

embroidered.

She tried it on Boo. She showed the chair back to her, very craftily.

“Be nice when *you* can read, honey chile. ’Bout the on’y way you can fine out things, ain’t it?” Her dark eyes looked at me for confirmation over Boo’s goldenrod curls.

“I can read when I want to,” Boo said haughtily. “What’s it say?”

Lilliam was quiet. “*You* tell her,” she said to me, but still I didn’t understand.

“Not now, darling. You finish your spinach so you can go out in the sunshine,” I said, sounding smugly like a Mummy.

It took two weeks to finish it, because Lilliam is an embroiderer only in desire, not in experience. But at last it was done, down to the last stitch in the period at the end of the motto. Down to the last curlicue of the four hearts somewhat too eloquently flanking the motto.

Now it was Wednesday night, and to-morrow was the zero hour when she must present it to Joseph. She was moody and nervous all through serving dinner.

After dinner, she brought the chair back down to the playroom and though we had guests tuning up their violins for our fortnightly string quartet, she came in, abashed by her own boldness, but driven to it by necessity.

“Please, ma’am,” she said, “I thought Mr. Truman might lak to see my fancy work.” Billy Truman is one of her favorite people . . . he does make rather a fuss about her. But this was unheard of from timid Lilliam.

“Why, I certainly would,” he said, rising magnificently to the flattery. “Nothing I like better than a good piece of fancy work.”

He went over and took the chair back, and held it out admiringly. Lilliam, her two hands gripped in suffering, barely breathed with suspense. Her eyes, huge and dark, almost knelt in their earnestness.

“Mr. Truman, you lak what it say?” she asked in a whisper.

“Very much,” Billy said in his big reassuring voice. “Quite a sentiment, Lilliam.”

He started to hand it back to her, and Lilliam, her shame and her pride groveling down before the terrible necessity for knowing, said in a little gasp, “Mr. Truman, please, sir . . . lemme hear . . . how it sound . . . when you read it, please, sir.”

And then I knew that Lilliam did not know what it said.

Billy took it up again, and cleared his throat and beamed.

“Why, ‘Happy hearts make happy homes!’ ” he said. “Mighty nice sentiment.”

A slow smile broke over her dark face.

“Oh,” she said faintly. “Dat what it say, all right,” and she repeated the words softly, knowing at last after all those afternoons of patient cross-stitching. “Happy hearts make happy homes. . . . Thank you, please, sir.”

And I wanted to weep. This *was* a love letter, if ever one was written. And Joseph . . . what kind of man was he? And would he understand?

The ’Maginaries

She has lots of toys. Some of them we ourselves can see.

But you never know what kind of beast will come following her into your room, and you never can anticipate what there will be in an otherwise empty box when she brings it to you for a present.

Some of this motley company of ’Maginaries are only transients in our life, and others have been with us for years, and we may never outgrow them.

There’s the little girl, for instance, born the very day and moment Miss Boo was, somewhere away in some city we haven’t ever quite decided upon. Her name is Martha Divine, and we understand each other perfectly. Other children snatch toys from us . . . or won’t let us snatch toys from them, as the case may be; other children eat the frosting off our cake, or poke in the eyes of our dolls, or forget to invite us to their birthday parties. But Martha Divine never fails us. If she has any fault at all, it is that she is monotonously agreeable.

She is going to Vassar when we go, and heaven help the Committee on Admissions if they haven’t taken care of that matter, for it is at this point that we firmly expect Martha Divine to emerge in the flesh, and lead her own life. We’ve led it for her all this time. . . .

Tokay, too, we’ve had for quite a while. Tokay is ’maginary, but his leash is most soberly tangible. It was a little leather belt before Tokay claimed it. For two years Miss Boo has taken Tokay around on the end of this all-too-visible leash, and sometimes she stoops down and unhooks him, and he runs about yipping and snapping at people’s heels.

But he’s a most convenient dog. You can start out alone and suddenly find you’ve brought him with you. Without benefit of leash, of course. You can also put him in an envelope and send him to your grandfather, and the next day there he is under your bed, ready to play.

Another thing about Tokay. He can hear food. (Food may not be able to hear him, but he can hear food.) Grapes, according to Tokay, sound like a lot of little bells. And watermelon, cut in half and waiting in the grocer’s for somebody *please* to buy it, makes a kind of grunting noise like a turtle. String beans play something like a piano, and mushrooms, naturally, sound like white velvet umbrellas caught in an April shower.

We have to be careful what we say around Tokay. Tokay is sensitive.

“Don’t ever let him hear you say he’s ’maginary,” Miss Boo warns us tactfully. “He thinks he’s real, and I don’t want him to find out he’s only ’maginary.”

The Worm in the Heart of Eden

The first year I was officially hostess to Spring on our own land, I had to be in London for a little while. Blissfully homesick, I had a mystifying letter saying:

"Those beastly things have arrived right on our land. When you open the door you can hear the disgusting sound of their chewing."

I had to cable home to find out what they were, for I had left before the gipsy caterpillars had hatched out.

Every one who has ever owned a foot of land has said this, "For pity's sake, who took care of this land before we came? Who fought its battles before we bought it? And how in heck has it survived with all this going on?"

Nature, having turned it over to you, just lets go. The moment the ink is dry upon your deed, come the attackers.

"Well, *you* take care of it, if you're so smart," Nature says. "You think you own it? All right, then, *you* look after it."

So they arrive, the pests and the blights to prey upon your trees. And, hardly separable from them, the other pests and blights with sprays, powders, threats, and bills, to prey upon *you*. They show you pictures, hugely magnified, of the animals who are about to fell your innocent trees. They show you photographs of hillsides whose owners just didn't bother. You lie awake at night and worry about it; you ask other owners and they dismally say yes, they're afraid so. In the end, of course, you sign contracts and write checks, and the fight is on.

But how to explain the battle to a child. A child finds room on the earth for everything, since it is undeniably here. A child finds love enough for everything, particularly for the precious little cozy caterpillars, so still and gentle in their little furry pajamas. Bees you mustn't push, and baby birds and toads and even grasshoppers retreat from you in a widening radius. But caterpillars love you and walk upon you, and you return the love, but certainly not the walking upon.

"Besides," Miss Boo asks me, "didn't you ever hear of silkworms?"

"Indeed I have. But mostly now, we're wearing rayon. It's the machine age. We do practically everything with machines now, you know."

“Well, then! Maybe these are just nice little silkworms who haven’t got any work to do any more.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re not, dear. You go play. Play with dolls to-day, and let the creepies and crawlies alone. How about it?”

So she plays with dolls, but she thinks about the darling little caterpillars. And she evidently talks it over with acquaintances, and by night she knows a lot about it.

“These *aren’t* silkworms,” she tells me. “But I found out how silkworms make silk. Want me to tell you?”

“Yes indeedy.”

“Well, the silkworm spins a little raccoon. And then the Japanese put the little raccoon in very hot water. And either that kills the caterpillar, or else he dies. So then the Japanese unwind the raccoon . . .”

What Can You Expect from a Hat?

Spring hats are in bloom again. The ads say yes and the snow says no. But there will come a day when even the most conservative of us will decide that a Spring Hat is indicated.

Hats in these days are not, strictly speaking, wearing apparel. They are whims and caprices; they are jokes on one's self; they are wishful thinking visibly manifest. You wear them, this year, tipped well forward on your credulity. They disguise you . . . from yourself. For a while, anyway.

And no feminine wearer is too young to fall into this charming conspiracy between an absurd hat and an indulgent mirror.

Take, for instance, our little Miss Boo. She's had bonnets and berets and beanies. But this was to be her first hat. We talked about it for days. She thought she'd like it to have a feather. And how about a veil? After all, my hat had a veil!

Well . . . if not a veil, then could it have a streamer hanging down the back?

We got up early to go shopping for it. We were bold and exuberant hurrying along the street, but the moment we got within the plush-rugged silence of the Little Girl's Millinery Section, demureness settled upon us. Our voice was golden honey dropping from a silver spoon. The salesperson had a lot to say . . . very personal things about our hair and our new gloves. But we were so oppressed by good behavior that we could only murmur modestly.

She tried on the hats, and she was almost afraid to look in the mirror; you just couldn't quite believe what you saw there. Too wonderful, really . . . so . . . *stylish*. And there was a flower, as big as ten decimal points huddled together. And there was a broad blue streamer decorously descending to the waistline.

We carried it home in a little round box, about the size of a birthday cake. We walked carefully so we wouldn't jostle it. But on the train we simply couldn't help peeping inside, and there it was, napping blissfully among the tissue paper, and the little flower was even more beautiful than we had remembered.

It was a hat to be with us, in memory, when we are grandmothers and great-grandmothers and there will be other little girls to have hats bought for

them.

Naturally, it was to live on the top shelf of her own clothes closet, but to-day, since she *had* to take a nap, it perched on the bedpost.

“In case I should wake up and wonder where it was,” she explained apologetically. But to tell the truth, there wasn’t much going to sleep, and all the time the slow half hour was inching its way across the afternoon, we could hear a sleepy dialogue between a little girl and her first hat. At least there seemed to be two of them talking, for there was one voice which we know very well, and then there was another frilly little ruffle of reply. (She tells me it’s not called Talking to Yourself; it’s called Answering Yourself.)

But at last it was time to get up, and in the meantime “Practically-my-Uncle” had arrived, having been invited to come early and see the hat.

She couldn’t wait to change back into clothes and shoes. And besides, anything added to the hat would be sheer over-dressing. So she leaped out of bed and put on the hat with her pink flannel pajamas (the ones that have gloves for the feet). And sure enough the hat was all it had been when last she tried it on. It sat upon the curls so proudly; its streamer cascaded down the back so properly; the cluster of decimal points was all ready for nodding at acquaintances. It was, indeed, a hat which any one would admire. And downstairs was Practically-my-Uncle, the world’s most expert admirer.

But half-way down the stairs she stopped and hung back. Maybe she ought to carry it down in its darling little box, and let him hold it in his hand? (We know about that; we’ve been overcome with shyness ourselves, at times.)

“And besides,” she said earnestly, “suppose he doesn’t recognize me?”

Lilliam Erases the Love Letter

But Thursday came and went, and Joseph wasn't given his love letter.

We saw it, wrapped in tissue and tied with a blue bow, sitting on Lilliam's bureau after she had gone to the station.

"She couldn't have forgotten it," we said. "Not after all the work that has gone into it. She's lost her courage, probably."

She came home on the ten o'clock train, and let herself in the front door with her key, and didn't come into the living room to speak to us as she usually does, but slipped upstairs like a dark shadow. No chic chocolate somebody this, in a red cupcake hat, but a small black woman full of silence and sorrow.

"Did you have a good time, Lilliam?" we called.

"Yas'm," she said in D Minor. None of us could speak of Joseph.

After she had closed her door we said spuriously to each other, "Well, it's a good thing! She'll get him off her mind now, and settle down to being her old happy self."

In the night I woke, and saw the trees illumined as they are when a window is lighted in the ell of our house where Lilliam sleeps. I went down and tapped on her door.

"You all right?"

"Yas'm."

"May I come in?"

"Yas'm." I opened the door, and there she sat in the middle of her bed, wearing her high-necked nightgown. Her head was bent over something in her hands, and her upturned eyes were two black gulls in their white skies. She had her little manicure scissors, and she was snipping delicately, patiently picking out stitches from Joseph's fancy work.

"What on earth are you doing, child?"

"I got to thinkin'," she said. "I'se taking out the four hearts. Seems lak four hearts is kinda bold on a gemman's fancy work. Two hearts might be all right. But don't four seem kinda bold to you?"

She looked up into my face, stricken with seriousness, and I, too, was

serious, as I weighed the boldness of four hearts against two.

“I see what you mean,” I said. “He might look at it like that, of course.”

“They ain’t gwine show,” she said. “I’se getting those hearts out so they ain’t gwine show a bit.”

We talked a minute in intimate whispers, and I went back to my room, and I thought, “You can’t *keep* those four hearts from showing, you sweet little thing. They show right in your honest precious face!”

I went to sleep muttering once again, “I’d just like to get my hands on that Joseph!”

The Toys

Finally we admitted our real reason for giving her toys. It was because we just couldn't face our neighbors when they brought their children over to see us.

"Go up and let Miss Boo show you her toys," the mothers always said beguilingly to their own hanging-back offspring. And once or twice the visiting child said:

"But Boo *hasn't* any toys."

"Oh, nonsense, darling. Of course she has. Boo must have lovely toys."

Embarrassed for our child's rich poverty, we said: "Well, she *has* toys. But mostly we keep them put away in the attic." While we blundered on in explanation, we could see our neighbor putting it down as just one more very odd thing about us.

But she did have toys. The best in the world, for she found them for herself, and made them for herself, and the whole outdoors helped her, and the day and the night.

Sometimes I think a child needs nothing to play with beyond the great tolerant earth. Sometimes I think that's all we need ourselves, at the first and at the last. But it is too simple a wish . . . and too attainable . . . for us ever to pursue.

When she was a baby we did give her things, little bribes to lure her from her secret world into our more arduous one. Rattles and bells at first, to drown out the little silent things a baby always seems to be listening to, with her head tipped and her very eyes harkening.

We gave her toys, and she took them courteously, but we saw how clumsy was their make-believe, when she had all the magic of pretending at every finger tip. As if pretending needed any scenery or props! As if it needed anything but its own many-colored self for wonder working.

The earth gave her her best toys.

"They're so sweet," she used to say opening her little pink mitten of a hand to show us she wasn't squeezing them. "I can't tell which is sweeter, pussy-willows or patterkillers." She carried her fluffy little patterkillers around carefully in the pocket of her sun-suit, and I used to control my shuddering and

think:

“Every living thing has to feel love coming to it from somewhere. But surely nobody but a baby ever loved a caterpillar.”

Some toys she had inherited from our childhood . . . dandelion globes, to make wishes on, buttercups held under the chin to see if you like butter, lightning bugs in trees, and hollyhock dolls with their ballet skirts . . . all these we gave her from our own remembering.

And always a circus parade of visitors straggles across the land, and stops sometimes to get acquainted. We kept a turtle for a week by sheer enslavement of love (and chipped beef). We have had pets of all kinds, squirrels and birds and chipmunks. We have only one rule about them. *Word* of them may come into the house, but they themselves must stay outside.

“They have their place, and we have ours,” we say primly.

“Yes, but we go into theirs,” she answers reasonably.

“Don’t quibble, darling.”

Best of all our temporary pets was Squattie. He was a tree frog, and a very lethargic fellow. Bewildered, no doubt, by the prank Protective Coloration had played on him, because having been born accidentally in our white-painted tree seat, he looked as if he were caught in a blizzard, invisible everywhere else.

Miss Boo found him one day when we were having very proper people to tea. She kept coming in and calling me most politely.

“Could you come out a moment?” she kept saying.

“Not just now, darling.”

In a few minutes she was back again.

“I’d like very much to show you something,” she said gently.

“Later, dear. I’m enjoying guests now.”

She waited a few minutes. “This is a guest,” she said. “And besides he might not stay very long.”

“Oh, well, what is he?”

She came into the living room, damp and excited, with two tattoos of black earth on her knees where she had been kneeling to look him in the eye.

“It’s Squattie,” she said. “He’s my new friend. He’s bigger than a bug, and smaller than a nanimal. He doesn’t know which end is his face, and he’s got

legs like a fried chicken."

"Heavens!" I said. "How big *is* he?"

"Well . . . he's about as big as a baby stone," she said helplessly.

And that was Squattie. Who stayed and begat, and became a problem pet.

More and more each month now, I see her finding her toys in our world, instead of her own. I know that must be. Toys that make believe about our grown-up living are precious, too.

The tide is high with them in our house, and more come sweeping in all the time: dolls, washing machines and perfume bottles, kitchen utensils, pocketbooks and watering cans. They are everywhere in the house, and their paint rubs off on the best linen, and their springs break and hit you in the face, and they get left out in the rain, and in the dark sometimes people step on the things that have wheels. There's always some strange something-or-other on the back seat of the car, or sitting unexpectedly in our informally formal living room.

They're a nuisance, by and large. And I hardly ever come into a room and turn on a lamp without staring into the blank face of a rag doll, or at the furry rump of a toppled-over Teddy-bear. Then something takes me by the throat, and I think, "Dear God, how *do* people bear it who no longer have a child?"

Okay

I had to go away for a week on business, and when I came home, there she was with a new trick.

“Oh . . . so you say okay now,” I said doubtfully.

“Yes, but don’t worry about it,” she explained earnestly. “It’s only pertemporary for a little while. Okay?”

“Okay.”

It went on all summer. Some weeks Lilliam said blithely, “Why, he ain’t nothing but a frien’.” But she fooled neither herself nor us.

Miss Boo was going to school in the fall, and the air was full of talk about reading. Two of them in our house couldn’t read, but one of them was approaching the wonder.

I knew that Boo, and probably Lilliam also, thought it was some magic that would be given to her all in one piece. A kind of vaccination against ignorance. An inoculation of knowledge.

“How long it gwine tak to teach Boo to read?” Lilliam asked me.

“Oh, not very long, I guess. A few months, probably.”

“Little bittie gal lak that?” she said incredulously, and I could see the terrible, cheating hope spreading in her eyes. If Boo could learn to read, why maybe. . . .

“Why do you bother about it?” I said. “You’re perfect just the way you are. Perfect for you. Any one who knew you . . . who really knew you . . . wouldn’t care. There are so many people to do the reading and so few who can do the other things, the gentle, thoughtful things you do so well. So few people have educated hearts, Lilliam. So few people can read with their hearts the way you can. What does the other reading matter?”

“No’m,” she said disconsolately. “I just ain’t good enough for him.” And that was the short cut to the tragedy.

Then one day, the kitchen radio had an idea. She came running upstairs to tell me, too excited to be coherent.

“I’se gwine learn,” she said. “Man jes talkin’ on the radio about gettin’ a college education . . . you send a dollar and eighty-nine cents! Please come on down and he’p me fine out where-all to send it. . . .”

We went down, and she bent over the radio, listening with her heart in her eyes.

“Yeah-man . . . Praise be . . . bless you, Mistah,” she kept muttering, just as though she were listening to an impassioned deacon praying. And indeed it was a kind of revival-meeting appeal, with which he was oiling the air. At the end I could do no less than write down the address.

She walked over to the post-office that very afternoon and mailed a money order for the one eighty-nine that was going to transform her whole world.

Next morning . . . the very next morning . . . she was out waiting beside our mailbox when the postman arrived.

“Look agin, Mister Jim,” she said. “I got me a package comin’.”

I tried to warn her. “It’ll be just a book, Lilliam.”

“Yas’m,” she said. But I could see she expected a magic potion. Something to swallow, and then you’d be transformed with the radiance of education—and of eligibility!

“How long you think it gwine tak me?”

“Lilliam, why don’t you just tell Joseph what you’re doing,” I said. “He would probably enjoy helping you with it. He’d be proud of you, Lilliam, for trying.” You see, the thing is, Joseph graduated from high school. And his sister not only graduated, but she once had a letter printed in a newspaper.

So Lilliam looked at me as if I were deliberately trying to hurt her. She looked ashamed, as if I had suggested some monstrous immodesty.

At last the book came, and then our troubles began. The first chapter was on Algebra. I’ve never been very good at algebra myself, and you can only imagine the depths of frustration and futility into which the two of us sank, trying to sort out some sense among the *x*'s and *y*'s.

“Ef’n they mean numbers, whyn’t they *say* numbers?” Lilliam said, mildly reproachful. “I’se right good at numbers.”

So we finally skipped Algebra and went on to Grammar.

After a few afternoons I could see that, to Lilliam, Grammar would just go on being Grampa’s wife.

We read the book aloud and explained. We read it to ourselves and asked questions, and finally Lilliam said:

“Seems lak what this here book is talkin’ about is jes puttin’ on airs. What difference it make ef’n you say ‘It don’t’ or ef’n you say ‘It doesn’t’? You’re still contradictin’ either way. And contradictin’ ain’t polite. My mammy taught me I ought to say, ‘It don’t look to *me* lak it don’t.’ Contradictin’ ain’t polite. Or kind either, is it?”

So in the end we skipped Grammar and went on to Geography.

“This’ll be easy for me,” Lilliam said, when I finally made her understand

what geography was intended to cover. “I done lived all over this here land. Um-*humn*, this here’s gwine be somethin’ I know.”

But Lilliam was born in the State of Vaginger, and we now live in the State of Boston. These are the two facts she is personally sure of, so you can judge what luck geography had, going on from there.

But we didn’t give up. We suffered for weeks, getting lower and more discouraged all the time. Getting farther from being fit for the wonderful Joseph to look at . . . seriously.

And Joseph, meanwhile, shut off from all this anguish of soul, must have been bewildered about the invisible snag which had wrecked his romance.

“I think you ought to tell him,” I kept advising.

“No. I wouldn’t do him the dishonor of letting him know he was in love with somethin’ so ignorant,” she said, and she plucked the tears out of her eyes as if she loathed them, and threw them angrily on the floor as if they were hailstones.

“I’s gwine learn to read,” she said, choking with bitterness. “Or else I’se gwine out of his life. Clean out of it so he’ll never find out what happened to me.”

Long Live Peanutbutter

Sometimes I look in Miss Grover's narrow, kind little face, and I think to myself, "You may look just like a prim little schoolteacher to some people. But to me you're a heroine. For I know what you have to face every single day."

Peanutbutter sandwiches!

Twenty-two peanutbutter sandwiches, all wrapped in waxed paper, and tucked in twenty-two lovingly-packed lunch boxes. Every day, rain or shine, when Miss Grover wakes up in the morning she must know that at noon, when they all sit around and open their lunches, she's going to have to face the sight and the smell of twenty-two peanutbutter sandwiches.

There are twenty-three children in Miss Boo's class. Miriam is the other one. She's got something special the matter with her. She brings sliced raw carrots to school. Miss Boo says Miriam is Miss Grover's favorite child. I know why, all right. . . .

There is a peanutbutter conspiracy among them, the young. They agreed upon it just before they were born, evidently. It is the tightest monopoly known to industry. No advertising strategy brought it about; it is no triumph of salesmanship. But it has the small fry of the country in its fanatic grip. Ask any one of them on any street in the land what is his favorite food, and he'll tell you.

Peanutbutter sammiches!

We tried at first to break that clutch in our child's life. We asked more expert parents.

"Oh, you'll get used to it," they said. "I used to try to fight it at first. But I finally gave in."

"You mean . . . they all are slaves to this depraved taste?"

"Every one of them."

"Don't they ever get tired of it?"

"I never heard of one of them getting tired. Oh, probably when they're thirteen or fourteen. But I *have* seen them go right into college on peanutbutter."

"But every single day! It's so . . . well, it's so . . ."

“I know. It’s so much like peanutbutter.”

We said to each other, “It’s just that Boo doesn’t know the possibilities of taste. We’ll widen her dear little horizon.”

So we took her to luncheon in a big New York hotel, where they had a special children’s menu. All bunnies and fairies and merry jingles.

“You can have anything you want for luncheon, darling,” we said.

She said in her most angelic voice, “I’d like a nice peanutbutter sammich.”

“No. Let’s have something different to-day,” and we showed her the menu, and the head waiter came over and bent above us and said:

“Ah, I know. We have something very special for the young lady. It’s called the Mickey Mouse special. With milk, of course. And vanilla ice-cream.”

“And besides that,” she said, politely but firmly, “I want a nice . . .” We stopped her before she could say it.

“That’ll do very well,” we said to the head waiter. “We’ll have the lovely Mickey Mouse special.”

He wrote it down, and he snapped his fingers for a waiter, and turned it over to him. They hurried out and we sat there admiring the chandelier, and the other people’s hats, and saying, “My, isn’t it nice to lunch out occasionally?”

The waiter came rushing in, in that special unctuous way of waiters. There was the milk in the little silver pitcher, with a bunny holding the handle. And there was a mysterious plate, covered with a glinting silver dome.

“One Mickey Mouse special for the young lady,” the waiter said, very pleased with everything.

“What I really want,” she said shyly, “is a nice . . .”

“Now, darling,” I said warningly.

He whisked off the silver dome, beaming like a magician, and there . . .

Yep. Peanutbutter sammich.

Joseph Said

But it was Joseph himself who finally forced Lilliam to tell him the terrible truth.

She came home Thursday night frightened and in despair.

“Either I gotta learn to read, or Joseph decide he want to go into the Army,” she said, and in a garbled monotone she explained that Joseph said all right if she wouldn’t have him he gwine see if the Army would.

“An’ they sho-nuff will,” Lilliam said. “Anybody would have Joseph that got themse’f the chance!”

“Well, you stop worrying about it,” I said wearily. “You go in on Sunday and you tell him. You ask him right out if he would still want to marry you . . . knowing.”

You see, I had long ago abandoned trying to save Lilliam for us; now I wanted only to save her for herself.

Sunday, she did go in, frightened to pieces. Dressed in her best, even to the white satin underslip she had sanguinely bought last fall, just in case she ever did get to needing a trousseau.

“If he’s the kind of man you think he is, he’s not going to hold this nonsense against you, Lilliam,” I said stanchly, “*We’ve* liked you just as well since we found out, haven’t we?”

“Yas’m,” Lilliam said. “But you-all ain’t fixin to marry me.”

All that Sunday I had them on my mind. Maybe I myself should have asked Joseph to come out here and talk to me. The idea of my allowing that poor child to suffer all these weeks, without ever seeing what kind of person Joseph was. Probably big, good-looking trash, when you came right down to him.

It was twilight when she came home. I heard her open the door and come in, and I dropped what I was doing and ran downstairs to meet her. The hall was dark, and I couldn’t see her face. My own heart was pounding, and I said:

“Lilliam?”

“Yas’m, Missy.”

I said, “How are you?” Funny how women never ask each other about the

man, in terrible moments like this, but only “how are you,” knowing that will tell the quicker truth.

She said, “Joseph say, ’Lilliam, I guess mebbe you ’bout as much lak a little old brown angel as anythin’ else . . . Her voice trailed away in a feathery little chuckle.

“Yes?”

“And then Joseph say, ‘Honey, did you-all ever hear of any *edjicated* angels? Do the Bible tell about any angels sittin’ aroun’ readin’ newspapers? On’y thing angels kin read is receet books, and the Good Book!’ Joseph say, ‘You jes hush your mouf, honey.’ ”

Then I saw the light streaming from her face as if it were a window with all home behind it. And I knew at last what kind of man Joseph was.

How Does "But" Look?

At last they've got the idea across to her. Until she went to school a few weeks ago, she could read unhampered. She could read whole magazines, page after page, upside down or right-side up, it didn't matter.

She could read the hieroglyphics scrawled across tree trunks by growing; she could read sentences the wind scribbled in her sandbox, and the sepia symbols on the yellow sheet of rice pudding when Lilliam took it out of the oven.

She could read her own nimble scribbling. And I could read that, too, and sometimes we would sit all morning, I doing my writing and she doing hers, and we were enchanted and enamoured with the amazing things that came out.

Most of all she loved having me read her writing to her, and she would say, "Did *I* say that?" with such incredulous pride that I knew that for her at least, I am a poet and a raconteur without equal.

But now she is six, and the slower, surer ways of education are to be grappled with.

"But I *can* read," she told them impatiently when they brought up the subject in school. "I could read when I was only six inches tall."

Now she understands and is chastened at last and almost reconciled to the slower pedantry. Her patient little voice bumps along over the monosyllables as though they were cobblestones.

"Run, Jip, run," she reads obediently. "Jump, Tom, jump." Then she looks up at me and says regretfully, "I *did* so enjoy my own reading. I mean my used-to reading."

I try to explain the advantages of our accepted method, and she listens politely, and I know she is trying to make one more sacrifice for this clumsy logical world which we are asking her to accept in exchange for her slippery, shiny, delicious, private one.

But they have got the idea across to her at last. She came home and explained it to me.

"You see, everything has a shape. All the words," she said, "they're little pictures of themselves. They don't look like themselves, but anyway you get so you know them when you see them."

We don’t look like ourselves either, I want to explain to her. Some of us who are most frisky and whimsical spell out only sobriety in our appearance; some of us who are scribbled prettily, all curlicues and eyelashes, are really mathematicians underneath, or cooks or mechanics or mothers of large invisible families. No, we don’t look like ourselves either, but some way we get so we recognize each other.

Once she learned the idea, it became a little stamp without which nothing was valid. She had to try it on everything. She kept asking me to show her how Tree looks, and how Wagon, and we write the words, and we make a crude sketch beside it, for that is the newest method of association.

But yesterday we got into trouble with her logicalness. I’ve done that myself once in a while, before I learned that a lady must wear her logic like a girdle, where it doesn’t show.

“How does But look?” she asked the teacher. “I’d like to see a picture of But, please.”

The other children, always prepared for the onslaught of knowledge, sat quietly waiting to see But drawn on the blackboard.

“Well . . . these are the letters,” Miss Grover said, writing them in the stiff-legged printing they know at six.

“But how does it *look*?” she insisted. “I’d like to see its picture.”

“Well . . . it doesn’t look like anything,” Miss Grover said helplessly.

“But it must look like something,” Boo said. “Everything looks like something.”

Miss Grover is a resourceful teacher. When all authority fails, she turns her pupils back upon themselves. It’s something they might as well learn at six, for in the larger pantagraph, they’ll find it happening to them many times.

“Well, if you think it looks like something, you may draw it, dear.”

Boo tried all afternoon, and still it wasn’t quite right. She knew; you could see that. It was only her fingers that were inarticulate. But at last she got it, and it was so satisfactory to her that she didn’t even need to show it for confirmation. She folded up the paper and put it in her pocket and brought it home.

“*You* know how But looks, don’t you?” she said to me while we were taking off her rubbers.

“Vaguely,” I said.

“Well, this is the way it looks to me.” She unfolded the paper, and there were two bean-shaped objects, facing each other and joined, as though one might be regarding the other in a mirror. But one was green and one was red.

“*But* is two,” she explained, her wide eyes pleading that I agree. “They look alike but they’re opposite.”

I saw exactly what she meant. Similar, and yet, on the contrary, not at all. I knew exactly what she was trying to show, because I have been confounded by butness all my life. The simplest thought always bringing with itself its shadowy other-shape, alike and oppositely colored.

The minor butness that echoes from joy; the almost silent flute-notes above even sorrow.

Rice and Veils and Truck

So now we were to lose our Lilliam.

We couldn't make Miss Boo understand why Lilliam wanted to get married.

"But, dear, she wants to live with Joseph in a house, the way we do."

"She lives here with us," Boo said. "We all . . . why, we're a *family*!"

"Yes, of course. But she wants her own family. She probably wants a little baby. You know I've told you about babies. . . ."

"I know," she said drearily. "But she has me, hasn't she?"

The fact was, we felt pretty gloomy about it ourselves. As gloomy as you can allow yourself to feel about somebody else's utter happiness.

But finally Lilliam said the word that tossed the rainbow across Boo's sky.

Lilliam said, "Ef'n I'se gwine have a sure-nuff wedding, with rice and veils and all that truck . . . I want Miss Boo to be my bridesmaid."

That was pretty staggering, but we rallied.

"You mean flower girl," we suggested.

"Yas'm, yas'm. 'At what I mean. Flower girl."

"Well, we'll see."

Now that she and Joseph had made up their minds, there was no delaying.

"What we want wait for?" Lilliam said. "Our mindses done told us to go ahead."

And go ahead they did, at a lavish pace. From a modest beginning they kept adding to their list of guests to be invited, until it read like the directory of elite colored society. From a weekend in New York, their wedding trip kept expanding and expanding until it became a grand tour of the United States.

"Joseph say we ought to see Niagara Falls," Lilliam said. "He say people *expec'* you to see Niagara Falls. And co'se I allus did want to see me some cowboys. And then Joseph say he think it be nice if we go down and just whizz past my kin-folks. . . ."

What with Boo practising sprinkling rose petals as she minced down the

aisle, and Lilliam dreaming through the honeymoon geography . . . the house was no fit place for mere everyday people to live in.

But, as so often happens, good sense finally got everything whipped into shape, and the itinerary was curtailed, city by city, until they decided to stay right in Boston.

“What’s use us gallopin’ roun’?” Lilliam said. “I ain’t seen the State of Boston yet.”

The guest list, too, began shrinking name by name, and finally Lilliam came upstairs and said to me, “I ben thinkin’. What we want to have a lot of strangers starin’ at us for? Getting married is right sacred. We talked it over and bof our mindses tell us the same thing.”

“What’s that, Lilliam?”

“We don’ want no peoples. We jes want Joseph’s family and my family. . . .”

“Yes?”

“Jes my own family, you-all and my little Miss Boo.”

So that was Lilliam’s wedding.

Four Nickels' Worth of Answer

The house was empty then, emptier than you'd imagine. The oven was empty, and the cookie jar, and the refrigerator . . . and the morning air was empty of throaty little humming. Our hearts, full as they were of other things, had an empty Lilliam-sized spot in them.

"We'll have to settle down and find somebody to take her place," we said experimentally to each other. Just to hear each other deny that her place could be taken.

A succession of people-by-the-day paraded through the house, and we tried to accept them, and we said no doubt our figures would improve, eating tinned fruit instead of Lilliam's good cakes and pies.

There was the haughty housekeeper whose feelings were like a long invisible train you couldn't help tripping over; there was the art student who slapped the house together in an hour and disappeared with her paints; there was the houseman in the lovely starched jacket whom we all had to wait on hand and foot; there were the vague faceless Elsies and Roses and Marilyns who came, and broke dishes, and ran up long-distance calls, and finally went. But none of them was Lilliam.

"We're just silly to have got so dependent," we scolded ourselves. "Other people don't get into things like this."

Boo came in with patient proposals. "I know what. Why don't we build a kind of a little house . . . like a nice dog house, only much bigger . . . and 'vite Lilliam and her Tubbie to come and live in it?"

"No. That wouldn't do, quite. You run out and play now."

In a little while she was in again. "Maybe Lilliam's got a big house. Maybe it's *better* than ours. Maybe she'd take us in to live with her. Maybe *she'd* 'vite *us*."

Even the plantses on her kitchen window-sill missed her, and the rose bushes where she threw the tea leaves, and the geraniums where she buried the coffee grounds.

"I'll get down to business about finding some one," I said. "I'll draw up a nice advertisement. This time I'll ask for some one who can bring her life interest with her. A woman with a child, or a husband and wife, or two sisters . . ."

So I wrote and erased and wrote again, and it was a portrait of a domestic paragon. It ran into ten lines and cost quite a lot of money, and it could have been said in a three-syllabled word.

We ran the ad and waited. We stayed faithfully beside the telephone waiting. But no answer came.

Then at last it rang, and there, at the end of four nickels sliding down the toboggan on to a bell, was that little furry voice.

“Hello. This is Lilliam.”

“Oh, Lilliam, are you all right? We thought maybe you’d come out and see us.”

“Yas’m. I is comin’. I’se fixin’ to come to-morrow. Please, Ma’am, Joseph say . . .”

Joseph again! As if we hadn’t put up with enough from that home-wrecker, that robber of other peoples’ peace, that . . .

“Joseph say, Ma’am, could you-all use a good strong man? He say he lak to run a lawn mower right good, and he can keep a car real shiny, and his reg’lar job gits finished here in Boston ’bout three o’clock in the afternoon, and he could git a nice train out. . . .” She went into a breathless recital of abilities like the one which had introduced us in the beginning. “Joseph’s quiet, Ma’am. He wouldn’t tak up much room, and he’s right nice to have aroun’ . . .”

“Did you see our advertisement in the paper?”

“No’m. I jes got to thinkin’. An’ my mind tell me to call you-all up.”

“You mean, you’d like to come back here and live?”

“Yas’m,” she said. “I’se . . . I’se homesick.”

“Well, come right along,” I said. “We’re homesick, too.”

“Yas’m.”

And I couldn’t tell whether that little bubbling sound was Lilliam crying. Or me.

So now we have them both, and we have in our house that blessed, silent marriage of theirs that agrees with itself so perfectly, and cheers whatever heart knows how to see it.

You’ve heard parents fatuously saying, “No, we didn’t lose our child . . . we’ve just gained another. . . .”

Well, that’s us. And we hope it’s us forever.

The Sum

So now Miss Boo can write. Not as well as she could before they taught her, of course. But anybody can read it now; just anybody at all.

She came home with the knowledge fairly glittering all over her.

“I made you something in school to-day,” she said. “It’s supposed to be a surprise, but it’s really a calendar.”

“I need a calendar, darling.”

“I pasted it on,” she said. “Crooked. But you can read the numbers. And the little green thing that looks like a gumdrop is supposed to be a pine tree.”

“Are you supposed to save it for my birthday, or anything?”

“No. I’m supposed to give it to you when I want to. And I want to now.”

“That’s fine. Because I want it now myself.”

“But first,” she said, trying to sound casual, but getting quite pink with importance, “first I must write on it.”

So I said yes, she could sit at my desk, and yes, she could borrow my pencil, and I sat across the room with a book, and didn’t gaze at her too much. She sat on the edge of my desk chair, and bent her slender little neck in touching earnestness, and her absurd yellow curls, threaded with a black velvet ribbon, fell over her cheek and made a golden shadow across her brow.

Sitting there, in her plaid frock with the starched white pinafore, she was all the dolls I never had; she was the little girl that I, being straight-haired and homely, never could be.

Sitting there at my desk, unaware and precious, she outweighed all the unanswered questions, and the uselessness and sorrow, and I thought:

“Of all the dear sights in the world, nothing is so beautiful as a child when it is giving something. Any small thing it gives. A child gives the world to you . . . it opens the world for you as if it were a book you’d never been able to read. But when a gift must be found, it is always some absurd little thing, pasted on crooked . . . an angel looking like a clown. . . . A child has so little that it *can* give, because it never knows it has given you everything. . . .”

She said, “I’m writing what they taught me.”

“That’s splendid, dear.”

She wrote and wrote, not the noisy, carefree scribbling of a month ago, but painstaking, history-making inscribing. Her first writing at home.

“I’ve finished,” she said, still sitting there with her head bent. “I’m putting the calendar in the envelope.”

I thought, “She knows this is somehow important. Strange how a child should know the *first* was important; when nearly everything she does is for the first time. . . .”

Then she turned around, and her eyes were darker than they usually are, and she wanted to say something and didn’t know how to say it. So she said it very fast. Very fast indeed.

She said, “I’ve written your name on the envelope. Well, it’s not really your name . . . but it’s what they taught us in school. I’ve written ‘Mother.’ But you’ll know it means you. That’s all right, isn’t it?”

“That’s quite all right,” I said.

You see, I’m not really her mother.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected or standardised.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Peggy Bacon (1895-1987) have been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Our Miss Boo* by Margaret Lee Runbeck]