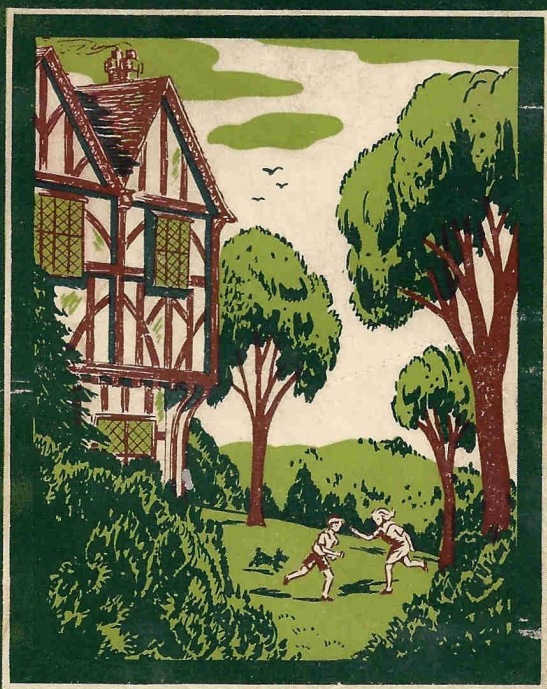


THE Very House



BY
MAZO DE LA ROCHE

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THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
OF CANADA, LIMITED
TORONTO

THE VERY HOUSE

BY
MAZO DE LA ROCHE

TORONTO: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF
CANADA LIMITED, AT ST. MARTIN'S HOUSE
1937

FOR
ESMÉE AND RENÉ

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The Very House

1

The Atlantic liner moved grandly down the St. Lawrence River, shaking out a proud white train on the glittering floor of the water. The shores spread fresh in their May greenness and far back to the north rose the dark-blue Laurentians. The white paint and brass of the ship sparkled in the morning sunlight. The officers looked alert, but the passengers, most of whom had spent a night on the train, pensive. Gillian and Diggory were quieter than usual. They were impressed by the vast arch of the sky, by the steady throbbing of the deck beneath them, and still more by the fact that they found themselves once again on a great ship on her way to the sea.

They had not forgotten their voyage out to Canada, though a long year of experiences lay between, a year in which he had grown from a baby of under three to a very small boy of almost four, and she danced her way from four and a half to that much past five. They remembered the earlier voyage, as though it were a dream. He remembered very well that he was seasick, for suffering made a deep impression on him. He had a dread that he might be seasick again. Gillian dreaded nothing. She was not sick last time and she would not be sick this time. She looked lingeringly at the other children on the deck. She wriggled her hand in Nurse's and said—"I want to play with those children, Nannie." But Nurse tightened her grasp. The time for familiarity had not arrived. She gave an appraising glance at a nurse with a baby in a pram and a small boy by the hand. She decided that they would do. She was not at all sure of the horde of sallow-faced children, with their mother, who already had taken bold possession of all the deck games in sight.

"Nannie"—Gillian tugged at her hand—"may we play?"

"See that little village? Isn't it pretty?"

The children stared at the white village clustered about the tapering spire of a church. All the way down the river they had seen little white villages and, up from the heart of each, that pointing spire. They gazed at it without enthusiasm.

"Is it Quebec?" asked Diggory, to be polite.

“Gracious, no! Don’t you remember Quebec, on the way over?”

“I was just going to say we saw Quebec on the way over,” averred Gillian.

“Yes. I was just going to say that, too,” added Diggory. He refused to be behind in anything.

Their mother and Karen came strolling down the deck. They lifted the children so they might see over the side down into the swift-moving depths of the river. The waves hurried, as though eager to touch each other.

“It is a long time,” said their mother. “It is a whole year. Do you think you will be able to remember it all?”

“I remember every bit of it,” replied Gillian.

“What do you remember?”

Gillian stared. All recollection was gone from her. She was poised between river and sky, her mind blank as a bird’s.

Diggory said—“I remember the farm.”

Gillian interrupted—“Oh yes, I remember the farm! I was just going to say I remember the farm. And I remember the lake and the different houses we lived in and all the aunts and uncles!”

“I was just going to say that,” said Diggory. “I don’t forget anything.”

At Quebec it was hot. The grown-ups went ashore and the children melted into one group. They raced up and down the deck in the blazing sun. Voices shouting in French came up from the docks. On the steep street a cassocked priest walked behind a string of boys wearing blue sashes. The ferries plied to and fro across the river. The Citadel raised its rocky front against the sky.

Now down the river, down the river in the sunset! The sea is waiting at the river’s mouth, a million waves hastening to dandle the ship. Now is the bustle of the bath. Now Diggory in his pale-blue dressing-gown marches down the white passage ahead of Nurse and Gillian. The stewardess surveys them from a doorway.

“A lovely pair,” she says. “They look like twins, he’s that tall for his age. Four, did you say?”

“Yes,” returns Nurse absently. “Do you think it is going to be rough?”

“Well, there may be a bit of a swell off the Banks,” says the stewardess easily. “But anything’s better than fog.”

Now they are in the bath together. The salty green water sends up a thick steam above them. It is so buoyant that they feel as light as two fish. They wallow in its depths, their white bodies gleaming. Diggory’s hair curls up in the steam. Gillian’s hair, very straight and fair, is pinned in a tiny bun at her nape. Nurse keeps warning her not to wet it. Moisture runs down the walls of the bathroom and Nurse’s expression becomes more and more doleful.

Now it is time to pull out the plug. Diggory begins to drag on the chain.

“No, no! It’s my turn!” shrieks Gillian. “It’s my turn to pull out the plug, Nannie!”

Diggory grips the chain. “It’s mine!” he shouts.

They struggle in the hot salt water. Some of it is dashed into Nurse’s face which is becoming a strange greenish colour. The floor of the bathroom heaves. The waves of the sea are now about the ship. The fog-horn sounds.

The door opens and the stewardess sticks in her head. “Can I be of any help?” she asks.

“A little air,” says Nurse faintly, and she stands Diggory on his feet in the bath.

The water is going down the pipe in a loud gurgle. Gillian kicks and splashes, making the most of it. Diggory stands, hands on chest, proud in his strength. The two women gaze at him.

“Did God make me?” he demands.

“Yes, indeed, my lamb,” says Nurse.

He looks down over himself complacently.

“What a clever God!” he exclaims.

The ship was ploughing her way through fog and grey tumbling waves. The chill of icebergs was on the air and, when the fog lifted for a space, their pale forms were seen, stern and still, against the sky. The fog-horn blew without ceasing. But the children thought of nothing but the life on board ship. They were caught up by it, swung into a new world. They recalled nothing of their old life.

Even Mother and Karen meant little to them. All that mattered was romping, playing games with the children from Mexico, the children from Canada, the children from anywhere and everywhere. Never before had they had so many children to play with.

Even when the fog had disappeared they were too absorbed to notice the change, but they liked the warm sunshine on the deck and it was pleasant to have Mummie and Karen stretched conveniently at hand, in deck-chairs, to throw oneself on occasionally for rest or for comfort after a fall.

Gone was the last glimpse of Labrador. Gone the sailing gulls. The last iceberg stood like a marble palace against the blue horizon. A whale was sighted. People stood with binoculars to their eyes, eager for one glimpse of his majesty. It was a thrill to see just one fin. The sight of a slippery shoulder sent a quiver of excitement along the rail where the watchers lounged.

Perhaps the whale was in a gay mood. Perhaps the imperious urge of the great life-giving force caused him to blaze forth into a boastful leap before the eyes of his mate in the green wave below. Up he sprang, clear of the water, and in mid-air gave himself a grand muscular convulsion as though he would display to an awestruck universe the vital power that was in him. Tons of flesh, of blubber, of oil, fluttered in the sun like brown satin. Then he was gone and the only sign of life on the ocean was a flight of Mother Carey's chickens skimming across the waves.

Diggory looked up into Karen's face.

"Did God make the whale?" he asked.

"Yes, He made the whale."

Diggory beamed. "He's clever with whales, too, isn't He?"

On and on the ship ploughed her way through the green furrows of the waves. On and on went the life of the ship, till the children began to forget all the old life of the land. They played games on the deck. They became as bold as the children from Mexico.

“If this goes on . . .” said Nurse, and she shook her head forebodingly.

Every afternoon children and grown-ups gathered for the horse-racing. All eyes followed the progress of the wooden horses along the deck.

“What number shall I put my money on?” asked Mummie of Gillian.

“Four,” said Gillian instantly.

Number four won.

“Splendid!” cried Mummie, pocketing her gains. “Useful child!”

“Me too!” cried Diggory. “Let me say what number!”

When the next race was about to begin Diggory was allowed to choose the horse.

“Three!” he said, and Mummie put her money on three. Three lost. Mummie looked sombrely at Diggory. His face flushed. “My horse won, didn’t it?”

“It didn’t!” shouted Gillian.

“It did!”

The bell rang. They were off again. This time Karen won at long odds. The children were elated.

Gillian was squeezed into a chair beside a sedate boy of eight from Montreal. He was her favourite on all the ship. She liked him even better than the steward who brought her such delicious food. And he liked her too. He held her hand as they walked along the deck. He gave her his toy balloon from the children’s party. He called for her at her cabin after the afternoon rest. Only once did they quarrel. They stood in the narrow passage between the long rows of cabin doors, staring hard at each other.

“I don’t like you any more,” he said.

“And I don’t like you.”

“I’ll not give you any more presents.”

“I’ll not give you any more, either.”

“You never did!”

“I did.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did so!”

“What did you give me?”

“I forget.”

“Oh—you never gave me anything.”

“I did. I gave you a pink balloon.”

“You—you—why, I gave *you* a pink balloon!” He stared at her dumbfounded. It was his first experience of feminine ingenuity. Tears filled his eyes.

She laughed gaily and hopped from one foot to the other. “I was joking!” she giggled, and he began to laugh too.

Soon they had forgotten all about their quarrel. They were as good friends as ever. But, when the moment of parting came, they were too much interested in the bustle of landing to give each other a passing thought. “Good-bye,” they said, and scarcely seemed to see each other.

There was only one for whom they felt any sentiment of warmth and that was for the man who hated children.

Oh, how he hated them and tried to avoid their noise and clamour! He told everybody that he couldn’t bear children and had the deck steward carry his chair to the remotest corner of the deck. There he could be seen wrapped in his rugs with his pile of books beside him, reading the latest thriller. He was a learned professor on holiday.

But, though he might be full of hate, his countenance unfortunately looked as though he were full of love, from his beaming brown eyes to his upturned mouth and large gentle hands. All the children instinctively sought out his retreat. They brought their toys there and romped about his chair. Their shouts and cries made it impossible for him to follow the fortunes of his villain. Over the edge of his handsome rug he glared at them in hate, and they ran to him and clasped his knees.

One day Diggory, refusing to hold to Nurse's hand, pitched headlong down the companion-way from the deck above. He might have been severely hurt had not the professor leaped like a large butterfly from the chrysalis of his rug and saved him. Then he had to endure Nurse's thanks, Diggory's mother's thanks, and the thanks of a circle of admiring ladies, while all the other children gathered closer about. Now, at the moment of farewell to the ship, Gillian waved a tiny hand to him.

"Good-bye," she called. "Have a nice time!"

"Good-bye, ki-ind man!" called Diggory.

The tender waited to take them ashore. Plymouth rose above its lovely harbour bright as a seashell in the blazing sun.

"Is it England?" asked Gillian.

"Yes, it is England," answered Mummie, and drew a deep breath of the air.

"I was just going to say that it was England!" observed Diggory.

Mummie and Karen and Nurse were distraught over the luggage. All the way across the harbour on the puffing tender, they kept counting the pieces, never getting the same number.

“There are eight trunks and seventeen small pieces,” declared Mummie.

Karen interrupted her almost hysterically. “No, no, there are *nine* trunks and *sixteen* small pieces. My new revelation is lost!”

Nurse, pointing in the heat, cried—“Where is the children’s trunk? Where—please let me count! One, two, three, four——”

Gillian continued wildly—“Five, six, seven, eight——”

“Yes,” interrupted Diggory. “I was just going to say eight!”

Looking back on the past Gillian remembered how, on all their travels, there had been this same fearful counting of luggage, always the apprehension of something lost. Her fair forehead puckered, her eyes were misty from the trouble that was in her heart. What if the trunk were really lost! What if they have nowhere to go and no clothes to wear! She clutched her mother’s hand, and, from that contact, renewed confidence in that powerful being strengthened her.

They were in the railway station. Newsboys were calling—“Newspapers! Newspapers!” The children they had played with on board ship looked like strangers. This was a new life.

Now they stood in a close group in front of the wicket. The man inside demanded money.

“Why, I’ve never heard of such a thing!” declared Mummie. “A tax! On British subjects! I’ve landed in every port in Britain, and never before——”

“It’s ridiculous!” said Karen, looking small and pale and fierce.

Nurse muttered to herself.

Mummie turned to her. “How much money have you, Nannie?”

Nurse produced her purse and the children stared fascinated while she took out her money and handed it to Mummie. She, in turn, gave most of it to the man behind the wicket.

As they turned away she said to Karen—"Money goes like water when you're travelling."

Karen replied sternly—"It wouldn't go so fast if you didn't give such reckless tips."

Gillian pictured money going like water. Running, running in a silver stream, like the water running out of the basin and gurgling down the drain. But where did money run to?

They stood by the great mound of their luggage in the Customs office waiting for the officials to inspect it.

"If he charges duty we are lost," said Mummie calmly.

Lost! Gillian heard the ominous-sounding words—charge—"that's what soldiers do"—duty—"minding what God tells you"—lost—but how could they be lost when they were all together?

The official was scrupulously examining the shabby suitcase of an old man from the third-class. There was a packet of tobacco wrapped in a flannel shirt. The old man was very much worried, very apologetic. It was a long time before he could convince the official that he was not a dangerous character carrying on an illicit trade in tobacco and drugs.

At last the figure of the law approached Mummie and cast a suspicious look at her possessions. She offered him a large bunch of keys and smiled ingratiatingly. But he drew back from them.

"Anything to declare?" he demanded, holding a board with printed words on it in front of her. She read the words with an air of almost idiotic innocence.

"Not a thing," she said.

"Not in all *them*?" He waved his hand dramatically toward the mound of luggage which seemed about to topple over.

Mummie urged the keys upon him, but he took a step backward.

Do open them, she said. "I wish you would open them."

"How long have you been away from England?" he asked.

"A year." Again she proffered the keys, but instead of taking them he began making marks with chalk on all the trunks and bags. Mummie grinned at Karen and the children. All was well.

Gillian gave a skip of joy.

Two porters and two taxi-cab drivers threw themselves upon the luggage. It was trundled into the open, mountainous, shabby, spattered with the labels of many bygone journeys. Nurse and the children were stowed into one overloaded taxi, Mother and Karen into another. Workmen mending the road, nursemaids pushing prams, sailors and butchers' boys, turned to stare after them.

Karen almost screamed as they laboriously ascended a hill. Mummie bent forward, as though she would add her strength to the motor's. Sturdy stone houses took the place of shops now. A green square appeared and, facing it, the hotel.

"What a pity!" exclaimed Karen, "that we didn't send word we were coming!"

Mummie agreed and went into the hotel. Karen, Nurse, and the children gazed after her long, lean figure anxiously.

"What if they won't take us in!" said Nurse.

The children's little faces were white discs at the car windows. What if no one would take them in!

"Shall we have to sleep in the street?" asked Diggory

"It will be strange to have no bed," said Gillian.

"Here she comes!" cried Karen.

Mummie appeared in the doorway followed by a benign-looking porter. The children knew by her face that all was well.

"Three lovely rooms!" she exclaimed. "A bath and a large garden at the back. Hop out, children!"

The porter was marvellously efficient. There was no trouble at all about getting the luggage taken upstairs. Great oak trees stood in the square. The grass was white with daisies. A blackbird dropped his grave sweet notes from one of the oaks.

Mummie showed Karen a half-crown lying on her palm. "That must do us till I can get money from the bank," she said.

Nurse came up, red-faced.

"We must have a bottle of milk of magnesia," she declared.

"How much is it?" asked Mummie.

“Two and six.”

Mummie put the half-crown into her hand.

It was beautiful, this waking up each morning in England. The children took it for granted, but to Mummie and Karen each waking was a delight. The familiar sweetness of the early morning, the pale gold sunlight, the singing of the blackbirds and thrushes, the stardust of daisies on the lawn before the hotel, the sturdy trees whose roots had clasped the rich soil for so many years.

It was an old-fashioned hotel, many of its guests elderly and permanent. They looked a little askance at the appearance of two small children. There was a retired naval officer at the next table, with a florid face and very white hair, who always wore red felt slippers and had an enormous appetite. His red slippers seemed a warning for quiet. He especially was intimidating to Mummie, Karen, and Nurse. Each time Diggory's clear pipe broke the stillness of the dining-room, they fixed their three pairs of eyes on him and exclaimed, in one breath—"Sh-h!"

He would lower his head in embarrassment till the golden wave on its top almost touched his boiled egg, but, the next instant, his voice piped out again. "Where are we going to live next? Are we going to live here forever?"

God forbid! the old gentleman's back said, as he spread three butter balls on one bit of toast.

But the children were favourites with the landlady and the maids, who were sated with retired naval officers and old ladies. They did their best to spoil Gillian and Diggory. They never had better teas than those which were carried out to the little garden behind the hotel. There were many flowers there and a rock garden and a goldfish pond purred over by a large Persian cat.

There was only one shadow on those first days and that was a dark one. The lack of money. No money could be got from the bank in Plymouth till word was received from London as to the substance of Mummie's account. Everything moved slowly, excepting Mummie's fears and temper which rose with each hour. Diggory's birthday was fast approaching and neither she nor Karen nor Nurse had money to buy him birthday presents nor a decorated birthday cake. There had been money only for the bottle of magnesia.

The birthday morning broke fair as a spring flower. Diggory four years old! He wore a pale-green smock and a Thames tunnel on top of his head. His brown eyes were glowing with expectancy but his family could not look him in the face. Then Mummie put on a brave front.

“Your presents will be here in an hour,” she said firmly. She and Karen went hurriedly to the bank.

“Any word from London?” Mummie demanded from the teller. There was no word but it would, without doubt, arrive that day!

“But it is my child’s birthday!” exclaimed Mummie pathetically. “And he is four years old!”

The teller admitted that this was hard. He said:

“I shall, on my own responsibility, advance you five pounds.”

It was glorious! With a pocketful of money Mummie and Karen sped along the narrow crowded streets, past women shopping with big baskets, past sailors back from long voyages, past cafés where people were drinking morning coffee, to the largest toy-shop. There was bought a real Devon milk-cart with two copper cans, a sailing-boat and a motor-launch. At the confectioner’s a cake was ordered with Diggory’s name and age in pink icing and two plump robins perched on a silvery bough. Four pink candles were bought to blaze above it.

It was a lovely birthday. The elders shared the cake and, when cigarettes were lighted, Mummie leaned back, stretched, and said—“What is the next thing to do?”

“Find a house,” returned Karen firmly. She set off for Cornwall the next day, alone.

Those who were left in the hotel could not keep their minds off her. Every short while someone exclaimed—“I wonder where Karen is now! Has she found a house for us, I wonder?” To pass the time Mummie decided that she would take the children to see the Hoe. Every English child should see the Hoe where Drake was playing at bowls when the Spanish Armada sailed into sight.

It was a day of light breezes and little clouds that only for an instant dimmed the blazing sun. They went through the stony winding streets, Mummie with Gillian by the hand, Nurse leading Diggory. He trundled his milk-cart behind him and liked the rattling of the cans when they crossed a cobbled road.

Plymouth Sound lay sparkling before them, three grey battleships rising sombrelly from its brightness. A salute was fired from one of them and Diggory asked:

“Why do they fire off the guns?”

“Some important person has gone on board,” said Mummie. “It is a salute.” “Then why didn’t they salute when I went on board?” he demanded.

All about them the gulls swung and uttered their whimpering cries.

“Why do they cry?” asked Diggory.

“They are hungry,” said Gillian.

“No,” he answered glumly, “they are seasick.”

Mummie took them to see the War Memorial. She read aloud to them the words engraved on the stone, surely the noblest engraved on any War Memorial. She read the words fervently and, when she had finished, Diggory began to scream. She thought—“I should not have read that to him. It is too much for him.”

Diggory screamed—“It’s Gillian! She’s taken one of my milk-cans and filled it with gravel!”

“There are two,” said Gillian. “I left one for you.”

“They are both mine,” he wailed, and a struggle for possession began.

People sitting or strolling about stared. The hot sun blazed. Mummie said to Nurse—“I shall leave the children with you and have a walk about the town.”

She stretched her long legs and soon had left them behind. She wandered through narrow winding streets into dark and narrow alleys smelling of dead fish. She explored half-timbered Elizabethan houses and talked to sailors and fishermen.

When she met the children and Nurse in the garden at tea, she asked:

“Well, and did you have a good time on the Hoe?”

“It was just one fight after another,” answered Nurse. “I expect it is the heat. People stared.”

Mummie stared at the two children whose rounded bare legs dangled against the rustic seat. They stared back, solemnly eating their bread and butter. Then all three smiled.

It was nearly dark when Karen came back. One look at her face was enough. She had found nothing. There was no place for them to go.

“It took two trains and a bus,” she said, “to get me there! And what a bus! The driver was also the carrier and he stopped at a hundred cottages to leave parcels or to pick them up. The bus was mounded with bags of vegetables, baskets of fruit, ducks in crates and kittens in hampers. There were fat old women, Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides. The road was awful, and when at last I got to the house it was perched on a cliff without a tree in sight and the furniture in it made me feel ill!”

“It sounded so lovely in the advertisement!” sighed Mummie.

“It’s no place for us,” said Karen.

“Then we have no house to go to,” sighed Nurse.

Gillian set down her mug of milk. A shadow darkened her eyes. The future loomed strange before her.

Mummie and Karen consulted more estate agents. One morning they set off early, in good spirits, for Land's End. All that day and the next and the next day and the next they visited houses and bungalows that were to be let. They walked miles on stone-paved Cornish roads but found nothing that they liked. They came back to the hotel, worn out.

“Have you found a house? Have you found a house?” from the children and an expectant, pleading look from Nurse.

“Nothing!” they groaned and sank into two chairs.

Bit by bit they unfolded the story of their journeying—how this house was all right but for that and how that house was all right but for this.

“The worst,” said Mummie, “was a diminutive bungalow stuck into the side of a cliff with every inch of garden overgrown by stuffy shrubs. The lady who lived there called it ‘Mai retreat.’ She was so very naice.”

The search now turned eastward to that part of Devon where they had once lived. Under the hot June sun Mummie and Karen explored winding lanes to investigate houses hidden behind tall hedges. They went from one seaside town to another and, one night, came back to the children with the joyful news that they had found a house at last. It was on the edge of a pretty village and overlooked the sea from a high cliff. It was the residence of a gentleman who was off on a fishing trip to Norway.

Nurse and the children sat drinking in all that was told of the house. From its front gate to the back wall of the garden, the grounds sloped up and up. It had a glorious view. The rooms were large and airy. There was a vegetable garden and a flower garden and a cook and a gardener. There was a dolls' house which Gillian might play with and grassy terraces where Diggory might roll. Oh, it was a wonderful house!

“The only difficulty is,” said Mummie, “that we cannot go into it for three weeks. But we're going to stay in a nice little hotel—just a little hotel on the sea front—the very place for children. We go there to-morrow.”

Gillian looked speculatively into her mother's face. “Is there lots of sand?” she asked.

Mummie returned the look with a rueful smile. "I'm afraid," she said, "that the beach is a bit stony."

"How big are the stones?" asked Diggory.

"About as big as my fist," answered Mummie, and she doubled a thin brown hand.

Next day the nine trunks and the seventeen small pieces of luggage came down in the lift. Two taxis were loaded at the door. The manager, the porters, the maids, and the hall boy came to the door to see them off. It was difficult for Gillian to believe that this expedition could be successfully carried through to safety in another hotel. Once again on the station platform the counting of luggage began.

"Nineteen—twenty—twenty-one—there are three pieces lost!"

"I have just counted and there are twenty-eight. There are two too many."

"Impossible! We have lost the hat-box!"

"My beautiful new revelation!"

"There it is—with the children's trunk on top of it."

"Count the trunks. One—two—three—four——"

The train whistled at the next curve.

The children were fresh in clean green smocks. They wore white thread gloves to protect their hands from the dirt of the train. They were so excited that they could not keep still. There was so much to see in the lovely Devon landscape. The thatched white cottages, the gardens alive with roses, the ponds alive with ducks. The red Devon cattle munching the lush Devon grass.

A lunch basket had been prepared for them at the hotel. The sandwiches were so good that the children quickly gobbled them up. Mother, Karen, and Nurse stayed their hunger with buns and cakes. When they changed trains large cups of coffee were bought for the grown-ups, but Nurse, who dared not drink coffee when she travelled, hid her cup under the seat where she sat. The children had bananas.

Everyone was tired when they reached the hotel on the chine. Luggage and all, they had done the last lap in a rattling bus with a nice old white-bearded man and his fat spaniel.

Now they were installed in two front rooms overlooking the sea.

Their mother hired a beach hut for them, the one at the end of a long row and nearest the great white cliff that towered at the end of the bay. The white cliff dominated all the scene. It shone against the blue sky in the sunlight, glimmered pale and austere in the storm. About its base was a tumble of black rocks encrusted with tiny shellfish or draped in seaweed, and dark little pools where crabs lurked or jelly-fish lay hidden in the foam.

To this hut every morning Nurse and the children made their way along the stony beach which the last tide had washed into a steep ridge. Diggory held fast to Nurse's hand, for his little feet were more likely to slip than Gillian's. They carried their buckets, their spades, and their crabbing nets. Once in the hut it was a joyous scramble to see who would be first undressed. Their bodies gleamed like two white slivers when they were in green bathing-suits and, bucket in hand and rope sandals on foot, they made for the sea.

Gillian's whiteness soon turned to gold, so that skin and hair were almost of a colour. Her eyes were very blue in her warmly tanned face. But Diggory, whose skin had the delicacy of a rose petal, suffered from sun-burn before he achieved the coat of tan, and a flock of freckles spread across his nose.

Diggory never tired of watching the sea-gulls, diving, dipping, resting on the waves when so they chose, with a look of bland self-confidence. If only he could fly and swoop like that! He spread his thin white arms and stumbled wildly across the stones.

More to be envied even than the gulls which sped with strong strokes of their wings were those that sailed effortless on the breeze.

"Look, look!" he cried. "That gull is not winging! It is just flowing along!"

One day, at the bottom of the cliff, they found a young gull that must have fallen from a ledge of rock to the beach. It was not hurt and had perched on a water-logged piece of wood, its pale brown breast pouted, its eyes watchful and very bright.

The children longed to help it. They carried food to it and watched anxiously to see it pick up the scraps. But it only stared and, when they ran

back later to see how it fared, the bread was still untouched.

Mummie agonized over the young gull. She clambered over the rocks with it in her hands looking imploringly at the older birds that circled about the cliffs. But they paid no heed to her except to jeer. They swept low on their broad wings, crying “Ya-ya! ag-ag-ag-ya!” Not one would own to the parentage of the fledgling. She carried it back to its perch on the log and urged the children to guard it.

When they and Nurse came home in the evening they said it was still there. It was still there the next day only more ruffled and its eyes less bright. That night there was a downpour of rain and the next morning the children found only a small heap of wet brown feathers.

The death of the young gull was not the only tragedy on the cliff that summer. Two dogs, romping on its brink, fell over and were dashed to death on the rocks beneath. Nurse held tightly to the children so that they should not join the boys who ran to see the poor broken bodies. A worse and darker tragedy happened still later when a young woman flung herself over the cliff and was killed. But the children heard nothing of that.

A gentleman visiting at the hotel took the children out in a rowing-boat. It was their first experience of small craft. Diggory sat very still looking at the flashing oars, the waves so ominously near him, but Gillian gave herself whole-heartedly to the new pleasure. The lapping of the waves against the side of the boat delighted her. She leant back, trailing a piece of seaweed from her hand, and singing one of her odd, made-up songs.

These make-ups of hers pleased her, but Diggory would give her a look of embarrassment with perhaps a tinge of envy in it. She would pick up a cigarette-card from the beach and, staring at it intently, would read:

“The tide will be high at eleven o’clock to-night—to-night will be to-morrow and to-morrow will be the next day—no interruptions for Jesus has made everything—made it out of one piece of rock—Lyme Regis—Charmouth—Branscombe—over the cliffs—twenty thousand and nine!”

He knew it was all make-up and he despised her for it but envied her.

But when he stared up at a passing aeroplane and shouted—“I want a ride! Please take me in!” he seemed to Gillian young and silly.

She had a way of calling him “young man.”

“Would you like an ice-cream cone, young man?” “Don’t cry, young man, I’ll carry your bucket for you.”

The three weeks at the small hotel soon passed and once more the luggage was mounded on the bus. It was carried up the steep drive-way to the new house. Everything was steep here. Up and up and up the lawns and garden rose. The very back of the garden was on a level with the chimneys.

Inside, the house was all airiness and open casements. French windows gave on to a rose-hung verandah. The children's day nursery was to be on the ground floor, with a worn leather couch for sliding on. The night nursery on the attic floor, with the finest view in all the house.

They explored the house and garden in wild excitement, trying to discover it all at once. After life on shipboard, after hotel life, how free, how spacious it was! And all theirs! A faint doubt shadowed Gillian's mind.

"How long shall we stay here?" she asked.

"Two months," answered Mother.

"And after that?"

"Heaven only knows!"

Gillian stared up at the bright arch of heaven that knew all things. But two months was a long time. At the end of it she would be much taller, stronger, and older. Now she and Diggory gave themselves wholly to the enjoyment of the present.

Beyond the white cliff the downs stretched, undulating in springy turf, high above the sea. A narrow path wound, sometimes dangerously near the edge, rising and dipping till at last it discovered the fishing hamlet of Bree. It hid in a narrow bay between two cliffs, its streets climbing steeply up their sides. A little stream hurried the length of the main street, gurgling beside the kerb, in concert with the gossip of the stout Devon wives who stood in their doorways.

It was a treat for the children to be taken to Bree to see the fishermen bring in their catch. As they crossed the field beyond which it lay, they could scarcely contain their excitement. Already the smell of the fish came to them. Already they heard the cries of the greedy gulls. They would begin to run along the edge of the cliff. But, when Bree actually lay below them, they stopped stock-still in new surprise each time they saw it.

There it lay, so complete, so secure, it seemed, against tempest or intrusion. Sea and sky were their deepest blue here, gulls their whitest. The sails of the fishing-boats showed dark red or tan. The mounds of fish lay gleaming silver on the stony beach. A girl in a gay jumper waited, basket on arm, while a fisherman cut open a long bright fish, its entrails falling, vermilion and blue, to be fought over by the gulls.

“Ga! Ga! Ga!” shrieked the gulls. “Ah, ya! Ya!”

A young gull snatched a red titbit and rose, in a panic of achievement, pursued by a snow-white adult. The pursuer caught one end of the prize and dragged it from the young one’s beak. Despoiled it dived downward, screaming:

“Ma! Ma! Ma!” it screamed “. . . Ah! Ma! Ma! Ga! Ga! Ga!”

The children and Mummie and Karen hurried down the steep path as though they feared the scene might vanish before they reached it.

A catch was just being turned out of a net. Glimmering, opalescent shades were painted on the wet fish. Some lay still but, now and again, a thrill ran through one and he was lifted by a convulsive movement above his fellows.

Diggory watched them, with a strange half-smile on his face. He did not know whether to be sad or happy. He held tightly to his mother’s hand but

Gillian tugged at Karen's.

"Come and see the capstan turning! Oh, I do want to see the capstan turning!"

They clambered over the stones to where a fishing-boat was being drawn up the beach. The keel grated over the shingle. The fishermen turned the capstan with heads bent and muscular shoulders moving under their jerseys. Gillian saw it as a picture but Diggory saw himself doing all these things.

A little crowd was collected about a burly man with trained mice. He brought them out of his pockets, out of the open front of his shirt, out of his trouser legs. They knew their names. He sent Jill up one sleeve and Jack up the other. They disappeared, passed each other somewhere on his fat body, and emerged from opposite sleeves. It was wonderful. It stretched one's mouth, from ear to ear, just to watch the mice. All the while the man talked to them in a rich cajoling voice. "Coom now, coom now, Jack! Oop ye go, Jill! What ails thee, lass?" He had walked all the way from Lancashire with his mice.

One mouse walked the tight-rope, stopping and raising itself on its fragile hind-legs when the man rang a little bell. Pennies were showered into his cap.

"If only I had mice like that," sighed Diggory, "I'd take them to bed with me. I'd teach them to dance. I'd take them all over the world."

"So should I!" said Gillian.

"No, you wouldn't! They'd be mine!"

"They wouldn't! They'd be half mine. The little brown one with the curly tail would be all mine."

Diggory gave a yell of rage. Mummie dragged them towards the row of deck-chairs on the verge of the water where people were having tea. Karen went straight to the tea-booth where bread and butter, Bath buns, jam rolls, and chocolate crisps were for sale. By the time Mummie had found the chair-man and hired four chairs, Karen reappeared carrying an enormous pot of tea, followed by a red-faced woman with a tray mounded with food, thick white cups, and mugs of milk.

The four settled down in delicious privacy to eat their tea, while the capstan creaked, the fishermen shouted, the mouse-man cajoled, the gulls shrieked, and the incoming tide rattled the stones ever nearer to their feet.

They were tired on the return across the cliff, but took time to descend into the hollow of a stubble field where gipsies were setting up their annual fair. Thin dark men with earrings had raised the red and white striped canopies beneath which you could glimpse the games, the various shies with their prizes of dolls, china mugs, mirrors, beads, and cocoanuts.

Mummie bought paper windmills on sticks for the children. They forgot their weariness and ran wildly down the steep path, holding them aloft toward the blue of the sky. The shadows were growing long and cool. The red sandstone cliffs beneath Seamouth had the richness of an Oriental carpet. The beach huts looked no larger than dolls' houses. And there among the trees they saw the roof of their own house!

One morning Gillian was told that she was to go to school. The announcement came from the powerful grown-up world without preliminary discussion, it seemed. It was simply stated, in an off-hand way, that Gillian was to go to school. There were only six weeks left in the term but six weeks in a delightful little class would do her a deal of good. To her, life seemed suddenly precarious, a thing of strangeness, hazard. Diggory was safe, still in the shadow of Nurse's skirts, but she stood on the brink of unguessed-of happenings. Her face was pensive as she was buttoned into her little coat, her fine, fair hair given a last brushing and the elastic of her hat settled beneath her chin. Diggory stared at her in wonder but with no envy. He thought how, for the first time in his life, he would have all the toys to himself, do just as he chose. He followed her when she went to kiss Mummie and Karen good-bye. He followed her to the gate of the drive, Nurse holding her fast by the hand as though she had suddenly become the little one. Nurse stroked her hair and yearned over her while Diggory stood aloof, adjusting himself to the new life.

The school was kept by the daughter of the vicar of a village three miles away. She called for several of the children each morning in her own car. Now Gillian was set on the front seat beside the vicar's daughter and looked up consideringly into the bright capable face. How quickly Nurse and Diggory, standing by the gate, grew small and disappeared. Gillian was whirled away from them in a strange car, beside a strange vicar's daughter. To the questions that were put to her she answered—"Yes, thank you," and "No, thank you," politely. But she was on her guard. She felt small and strange and on her guard.

The school was kept in a very old parish hall adjoining the churchyard. It had been built in Queen Elizabeth's time and the small leaded lights of the windows admitted only a pensive sunshine. The oak benches were massive and worn. Heavy dark beams supported the low ceiling, and the stone steps were hollowed from the passing of many feet. There were two classes, one in each end of the room, and Gillian was placed with the smallest children. She was sorry that the vicar's daughter was not to teach her and was afraid of the dark-browed assistant. Her eyes wandered through the casement to the little gravestones, bright in the sunshine, and she wondered what they were. She counted the heavy strokes of the clock in the church tower.

At home Diggory and Nurse went to the ivy-covered potting-shed where the cretonne bag that held the toys was hung. He liked the way it looked hanging there beside the strings of onions and bunches of dried lavender. He liked the dim shapes of the gardening tools, the shelf with the pots of paint and the strange, earthy smell. Through cracks in the shed ivy had pushed its way and hung in long pale tendrils in the gloom.

Nurse took down the cretonne bag and said:

“Now I shall put you on the verandah with these. You must be a good boy while I do my work.”

“Couldn’t I play in here?” he asked.

“In this musty hole? Bless me, no! You must be out in the sunshine and grow big and strong so you can go to school like Gillian.”

Diggory did not want to grow big and strong enough to go to school, but he obeyed, and Nurse set the bag of toys before him on the red-tiled floor of the verandah. When she was gone he took the bag by the bottom and lead soldiers, small wooden animals, tin locomotives, building bricks, and a hundred other treasures were tumbled out in a heap. He set about the work of building.

How quiet it was without Gillian—peaceful and quiet. He could do just as he liked. He took up her Mickey Mouse which she would never let him have, wound it, and watched it somersault its way across the tiles with a contemplative air. He talked softly to it and to the other toys.

A long time passed happily. Then he wondered what his mother was doing and trotted out on to the hot lawn and looked up at the balcony on to which the door of her study opened. He called to her in his clear little voice.

At first there was no answer. Then she came out and perched herself on the railing of the balcony, a cigarette between her lips.

“Hello!” he said.

“Hello! Are you all right?”

“Yes. Will you come down and play?”

“Not yet. I’ve work to do. I’ll come after a bit.”

“I’ve a surprise for you,” he said.

“Good. I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“It will be gone if you don’t come soon.”

When she had gone back to her study he wondered what the surprise was. He had said there was one and there must be one. He looked about him speculatively.

Overhead the ravens cawed. There were three of them—a dark remnant of the days when they were plentiful. Rooks were commonplace, but the three massive black birds, in their heavy flight, had haunted the white cliff for years, neither multiplying nor failing their trio.

“Ravens,” he muttered, “but she didn’t come soon enough.”

He must think of something, find something to please her. He wandered down the steep terraces to the shrubbery. There he discovered a little red toadstool. But, when he picked it up, it broke in his hand. Disappointment shadowed his eyes, which brightened again when he saw a plump white grub buried in the toadstool. He pulled it out and carried it carefully up the terraces and stood waiting with it curled in his palm, a tiny figure in a scarlet sun suit that left exposed his tender shoulders and limbs.

At last she came, long, thin, and eager.

“What’s the surprise?” she demanded.

He put the white grub into her hand.

With a horrified grimace she dropped it and scrubbed her palm on the grass.

“It’s horrible!” she gasped. “How could you?”

“Horrible,” he repeated blankly. “But it’s my surprise!” (He said “howwible” and “surpwise.”)

His face quivered and he peered anxiously among the grass blades for the grub. He extricated it and it lay, drawn into itself, on his palm.

“It was a great surprise,” said Mummie. “But I don’t like worms. Shall we find a nice leaf for it to sit on? Somewhere in the kitchen garden, eh?”

He agreed, and they set off, hand in hand.

The kitchen garden was baking in the sun. A delicate scent came from the ripening raspberries. The feathery carrot tops hung limp in the heat. A net hung over the raspberry canes to protect the fruit from the birds. In its mesh a dappled thrush was caught, its wings distorted, its delicate feet bound by the cord.

Mummie gave an exclamation as of pain and ran to help the bird. Diggory laid the grub carefully on a cabbage leaf before he joined her. He watched her thin deft hands fascinated as, mesh by mesh, wing by wing, claw by claw, the thrush was freed. For a second the garden held its breath. Then, with a glad, defiant cry, the thrush sprang upward and darted through the bright air. It flew into a pear tree.

“That’s good!” said Mummie, and began to run up the steep grass path.

“Wait,” cried Diggory, “till I fetch my worm!”

He hastened back but he was too late to save the worm. The thrush, weak from captivity, saw in the worm’s pale plumpness new vitamins for its need. It dropped lightly from the pear tree, just touched the cabbage leaf, and was gone.

Diggory plodded up the path. “Your old thrush,” he said, “ate my worm.”

“It wasn’t your worm,” Mummie answered. “You gave it to me.”

“You threw it away,” he objected.

“I wanted the thrush to have it.”

She took him in her arms and he snuggled against her, as they lay on the warm grass. Little green apples fell from the gnarled trees and bumped on their bodies.

Diggory began to roll. Over and over down the smooth grass; now face upturned to the sky, now nose pressed on to the earth. Far below he glimpsed the gardener with his barrow.

“I’m coming, Gardener!” he shouted.

“Bless ’ee,” said the gardener, “you’m a vine feller vur rollin’!”

Each morning when Gillian set off for school she looked fresh and sleek-haired, but when she was set down at the gate at one o'clock she was a dishevelled child, her hair rumped under her hat that was put on askew, her jacket buttoned up wrong, and the collar of her dress sticking out at the neck.

“What a school!” Nurse grumbled. “Can’t your teacher give you a hand with your clothes?”

“No,” answered Gillian gravely. “She’s a punishment teacher.”

She trudged up the drive and looked at the toys painstakingly arranged by Diggory.

“Were you playing with them all the morning?” she asked.

“Not all the morning.”

“Was Mummie playing with you?”

“Yes. . . . Did you play at school?”

“I learned to read.”

They looked wonderingly, almost suspiciously at each other across the gulf of separation. She collected her toys from the floor of the verandah and carried them indoors.

The other little girls at school owned umbrellas. “I am a schoolgirl,” said Gillian, “and I need an umbrella.” One was bought, silk, in stripes of blue and fawn. It was bought on a Friday, so there was no chance of taking it to school to-morrow, but if it rained she might carry it to the hut on the beach. With her whole soul she longed for rain. She could scarcely eat her tea for looking out of the window for the promise of a cloud. But a soft radiance gilded every leaf. The leaves looked almost as pretty as flowers. The sky was as clear as a glass bowl. She thought of nothing but rain, as she carried the umbrella by its smooth handle up and down the high white hall. It was bedtime and she was in her pink-flowered pyjamas, her hair, in two little pigtails, sticking out behind.

Diggory followed her, an expression of mingled pessimism and envy on his face. He disapproved and envied her and her umbrella.

“See how it opens and shuts!” Cleverly she raised and lowered it.

“Let me do it,” he said.

“You couldn’t possibly. You’re only four.”

“I could possibly. Let me try just once.” He took a firm hold of the umbrella.

“No, no! Stop it!”

There was a struggle. She smacked him. He roared. Nurse came running, red-faced, from the bathroom. “It’s a wonder,” she said, “that you didn’t get an eye poked out. I begin to wish the umbrella’d never been bought.” She hung it high on a hook, out of reach, and swept them both into the bath. Lathered and pink they succumbed to the delights of the warm water and the songs she sang to them.

Tucked into her bed under the sloping roof, Gillian thought, with deep warm certainty, of rain to-morrow . . . How it would fall and fall on the striped umbrella. She could hear the sharp patter of the raindrops on the lovely silk. She could see herself secure and dry while Diggory and Nurse stood out in the rain.

“I prayed for rain,” she said, in her decisive little voice.

“I heard you,” he answered grimly. “But God won’t do it.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t ask Him to.”

“Well, I asked Him to.”

“I asked Him not to.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did!”

“I heard you say your prayers, and you didn’t!”

“I whispered it afterward. I asked God and Jesus and Santa Claus. I whispered—Please don’t let it rain, to all of them.”

The setting sun glared redly in at the window. Diggory, in its light, looked small and frail and helpless, yet he had done this thing!

Gillian rolled over and over on her bed and kicked in rage. His bright dark eyes peered at her over the edge of the sheet.

She got up and pattered across the linoleum to the window. With the help of a chair she climbed to the broad sill and stood there looking out on the tranquil evening scene. Far below the garden lay cool and green. In the bird-bath a tiny finch splashed, sending up clear drops. Above the treetops the great white cliff rose against the pink-tinged sky. The wings of a gull circling above the house looked pink. Pink too was the small cloud near the horizon. Perhaps to-morrow the cloud would darken and rain would fall from it. She stared at it hopefully.

Diggory was clambering up beside her as fast as he could. She spread herself so that there should be no room for him, but he pushed his way on to the sill and stared out beside her.

“Come rain! Come rain! Come rain!” she chanted.

“Rain, rain, stay away!” he shouted.

They liked this duet so well that they kept it up till they heard Nurse’s feet thumping up the stairs. They scrambled down and ran towards their beds but she had seen them, heard them. She told them what she thought of them, tucked them up, and returned to her supper.

There was silence save for the chirping of a small bird in the ivy and the soothing lap of small waves on the beach.

Diggory raised his head and looked across at her. “Rain”—he began, but could go no further for laughing.

“Rain”—Gillian said, in a strangled voice, and tried to smother her laughter in the pillow.

Rain! The very word was excruciatingly funny. The very thought of rain sent them into fits of laughter. Nurse came up the stairs again, this time each footstep thumping with annoyance. She bent over each child in turn, scolding them, complaining of the Summer Time that kept children awake till such an hour. Diggory sniffed at her breath.

“Onions!” he shrieked. “You’ve been eating onions!”

Gillian pulled the sheet over her head and pressed her fists against her mouth. She controlled herself till Nurse had again reached the kitchen, then she threw the bed coverings aside and leapt to her feet. Her mouth was stretched in a half-mad smile. She put her hands on her hips and sprang up and down on one foot, kicking the other high. She did this alternately till she lost her balance and fell. Now they were both dancing on their mattresses.

The little iron beds creaked and groaned. A loose castor made a delightful rattling. Higher and higher they leaped. They felt that they could fly.

This time there was no doubt about Nurse's anger. She tucked them in firmly, and used the fiercest voice at her command. They both asked for drinks of water. After that they both asked for the chamber. They lay still then, sweet and comforted. The red had faded from the sky and a soft greyness dimmed the room. Still it was far from dark. It was possible, thought Gillian, that the greyness meant rain. She crept out of bed and went to the window. Lovely streaks of gold and amethyst and rose lay across the sea. The sky above looked solemn and cool, and into its pale space a little moon had sailed. Gillian looked long at it, well pleased.

Her hands felt hot and sticky. She thought she would dip them in the ewer which stood on the floor. One after the other she put them into the cool water till it reached her elbows. She felt good and kind. She went to Diggory and said:

“Would you like my cool hand laid on your face, young man?”

He nodded, looking up at her suspiciously. She laid her cool wet hands on his cheeks, pressing them gently. His features went into a funny little bunch as she pressed. He looked a different boy. She pressed harder and harder, making him a new face. He scowled and hit at her.

She trotted back to the washing-stand and dipped a wash-cloth into the jug. She longed to do something useful with water and a cloth. She thought she would wash the floor as she had seen cook do that morning. Just a little spot by the side of her own bed. The linoleum looked so nice when it was wet that she kept on and on, using more and more water from the jug, till the floor glistened and her feet and legs were wet.

“I give up!” said Nurse. “I give up! I can't do anything with you in this place. I shall tell your mother if I have any more trouble with you to-night!” She dried Gillian's feet and popped her into bed.

“It's enough to give anyone indigestion!” she muttered to herself as she thumped down the stairs.

Still it was not dark. A bright afterglow appeared from, it seemed, nowhere. The little moon paled beside it. Now Diggory got out of bed and mounted the sill. He stood there and sang of all he had done that day. Of all he would do to-morrow. He sang of the bird and the worm and the sea and the sand and the hammer he would own one day. He would hammer, hammer, hammer. . . . He beat on the window-frame with his fists.

Gillian now came and mounted the sill beside him. She sang even louder than he, her mouth wide open like a chorister's, her body swaying. She sang of nothing coherent, just lovely words, mounded up into a glittering pile.

Neither of them heard the soft step on the stair; neither of them heard the steps glide across the floor. They were not aware of the presence of authority till three sharp whacks came down on their seats and they were shot under the covers with a swift hand.

“Enough of this!” said their mother. “Enough! Enough!” and she slithered down the stairs in her sandals.

Oh, they felt so pure! So pure and good! Like cherub heads their two fair heads lay on the white pillows. They breathed goodness, docility, and love. The moonlight touched the ewer, the mirror, the brass knobs on the beds, to brightness. The beach stones moved under the incoming tide. The children slept.

“Do your two teachers look alike?” asked Karen of Gillian, as she was gathering roses in the garden.

“No,” answered Gillian, “they have different faces between them.”

If the expression she wanted was not at her command she invented one, swiftly, freely, in true Elizabethan fashion. Diggory had no such facility. When words eluded him he raised eyes and clenched hands to heaven, as though he would draw down help from there. But on occasion he could produce the pointed phrase, as when having said:

“You should not have climbed that wall. You have brought my heart into my mouth,” he replied:

“Spit it out, then.”

When Gillian found a stone embedded in seaweed, she exclaimed—“See how this seaweed has grasped a stone!”

When her mother teasingly held her tight in her arms, she cried—“Diggory, will you please peel Mummie off me?”

After a rain, she asked—“Why are the asters leaking?”

Of Diggory, who sometimes woke from his afternoon nap whining, she said:

“He did not sleep to-day, so I s’pose that’s why he woke in such a good temper.”

Now Karen moved slowly among the roses, cutting long-stemmed red and white ones and pink ones with golden hearts. She snipped off the dead and dying ones, leaving the prim, pointed buds. Gillian and Diggory followed her, admiring her deft movements. Her hair was bright in the sunshine. She wore striped beach pyjamas.

“I hope,” she said, “that you will never break off one of these dear little buds.” She touched them lovingly as she passed.

“No,” answered Gillian, “I shall just watch you arrange the flowers in the vases, so I shall know how to do it too.”

“I find flowers difficult to arrange,” said Diggory, knocking the top off a mushroom with his cricket bat.

Gillian danced toward him. "Let's play cricket!"

"All right. You bowl."

She hurled the coloured rubber ball wildly in his direction. Manfully he struck at it, lips compressed and forehead knit. At each pass she shrieked with laughter. She could not be made to take cricket seriously. But she wanted to bat. She wanted very much to bat.

"But you haven't bowled me out!" he shouted.

"I have!"

"You haven't!"

They struggled for the bat. Karen had gone into the house, so they fought undisturbed. High above, in the night nursery, they heard Nurse singing.

Now Gillian had the bat but she did not really want it. She stood shouldering it while Diggory lay prostrate, his legs kicking the grass despairingly, tears pressing between his tightly closed eyelids.

She hurled the bat in his direction. "Here, take it!" she said.

He kicked at it in violent rejection. "I won't have it! I won't have it!"

She sauntered to the rose-bed and pretended to pluck a rose. "I'm Karen. I'm gathering the roses."

He leaned on one elbow to watch her through blurred eyes. She flirted her way among the roses, sniffing the opening buds, and at last, to dazzle him, she picked one. He drew in a sharp breath of mingled admiration and apprehension. His bright eyes swept the windows. No one in sight.

"I'm Karen," said Gillian. "I'm gathering roses for a silver bowl."

Diggory got to his feet and trotted to the rose-bed. "I'm Karen, too," he said. "I'm gathering roses." He pulled off a bud without a stem.

"We can't both be Karen," she retorted angrily.

"I'm her, anyway!"

"You are not!"

"I am!"

"You're not the real Karen! She's in the house."

"No, she isn't. She's me."

“My Karen has gathered three roses.”

“Mine has gathered four.”

Faster and faster they pulled off the flower-heads. Pink and red petals were strewn on the grass.

Doubt assailed him. “Are you really going to put the roses in a silver bowl?” he asked.

“I think I’ll lay them under the laurels.”

“Me too. I shall lay mine under the laurels.”

They squatted together, their heads touching, in the green shade of the laurels. There Karen found them.

Relapsing into the vernacular of childhood she exclaimed—“I shall give each of you a good hit—if ever you do such a thing again.” She moaned as she gathered up the fragments.

They lolled, dewy-eyed and submissive, against her shoulders. They felt pure and good. Never, never would they do such a thing again!

They were in the beach hut that, in the late afternoon, seemed to have drawn under its sloping roof all the warmth and sea smells of the day. They were naked, their bodies still white but their limbs, shoulders, and faces tanned to a rich brown. In contrast their hair had become more silver than gold. Their swimming suits dripped on a line. Nurse was unpacking the tea-basket—a pile of buttered bread, half a Swiss roll, and three bananas. Two mugs stood by the thermos bottle of milk, and the water for Nurse’s tea had just begun to bubble on the little spirit-stove. The teapot, with its chipped spout, stood stolidly waiting.

Diggory picked up the bottle of spirits and shook it.

“Put that down at once!” ordered Nurse. “Do you want to have us all blown to bits?”

“Yes,” he said, “I’d like it. I’d gather seven basketfuls of fragments.”

“You might, of Nannie,” said Gillian, “but you wouldn’t make even one basketful.” She wrenched the bottle from him and stood it in a corner.

Nurse put bread and butter into their hands. They munched it, staring through the door, beyond which appeared for a moment a gaily painted beach boat paddled by a bronzed young man. A gull waddled over the stones toward the children, cocking an eye at their bread. He spread his wings and drifted seaward as someone approached.

It was Mummie. The children met her with a shout. Diggory took her hand and laid his cheek against it.

“Where have you been so long?” he asked.

“What’s that in your hand?” asked Gillian.

“I’ve been to Bree,” Mummie answered, sitting down in the doorway of the hut, “and here is a chocolate bar for you and a new walking-stick for myself. It cost me sixpence. Just feel what a lovely smooth crook it has!”

Four little brown paws flashed like minnows over the smooth wood.

Mummie helped herself to bread and butter and then said—“What do you suppose I saw at Bree? I saw a huge circus bill—Sanger’s Circus. We’re going to it.”

“When?”

“To-morrow!”

Of what good was the sea to them now? Of what use the once-loved hut! Nothing meant anything to them but Sanger’s Circus. Gillian could not eat for talking of it. Diggory stuffed down everything in sight, not knowing what he ate. On the way home, with the high red cliffs towering above him, he felt stronger, more adventurous, than ever before. He darted ahead of the others and up the steep slope of the sea wall, built to protect the base of the cliff. Like a bird he skimmed along its top. Gillian held fast to Mummie’s hand.

Mummie, who had run along the top of the wall on her way to the hut, almost cried out at the sight, but she set her teeth and muttered—“Don’t stop him! Don’t stop him! He’s got to be a man!”

Now the long flight of steps up the cliff side must be climbed. Up and up, farther from the sea, nearer the sky! Nurse, redder in the face, the children manfully stumping, Mummie sitting down when half-way up and declaring she could go no farther, then suddenly mounting the remaining steps in a run—and now they were safe at the top.

The yellow cat circled about their legs. Above the house the three ravens circled. “All like creatures in a circus ring,” thought Diggory.

He followed Mummie into the dim flagged kitchen. It was the cook general’s day out. Mummie was peering into the wire meat safe in search of something for supper.

“Will there be trained ponies in the circus, do you think?” he asked.

Mummie only made growling sounds as she rescued the butter from where it had been placed beside the kippers.

When he was in bed Diggory could think of nothing but the circus. Sea lions, Arab steeds and tigers, moved in strange procession behind his closed lids. Gillian was tired after the long day on the sunny beach and lay fast asleep. But he tossed on his pillow, his face flushed, his eyes bright.

Nurse came and laid her hand on his head. “What is it?” she asked. “Why can’t you sleep?”

“It’s the circus,” he murmured. “I keep seeing it.”

“Perhaps if you smell your lavender bag it will help you.” She took a little bag of lavender from under his pillow and put it into his hands.

He pressed his nose into it and drew a long breath.

“It doesn’t help me,” he said; “it smells of the circus.”

“Nonsense! How can you know what a circus smells like? You’ve never been to one.”

“Mummie has told me. It smells of wild animals and sawdust. So does the lavender bag.”

“You’d be a better boy if Mummie didn’t tell you so much!” But she looked at him proudly.

Gillian was almost as bad as he was. All the morning at school she thought of the circus. Looking out through the casements she saw graceful spangled ladies on beribboned steeds leaping lightly over the gravestones in the churchyard, clowns doing acrobatics among the yews. She stared blankly into her teacher’s face, knowing nothing, forgetting all she had been taught.

Then the hour came! Karen and Mummie were almost as excited as the children. All five, anxious and immaculate, waited in the blazing sun for the bus. Would it be late? Oh, would it never come at all? Would the circus begin and end without their seeing it?

The bus came, red and lumbering. They clambered in and seated themselves on the hot leather seats. Off they rolled down the road by the sea, past the bathing huts, past the vendors of periwinkles, through the village, and on to the circus grounds!

What a crowd was there! People scrambling out of buses, people hopping out of motor-cars, people jumping off motor cycles, people sliding off pedal cycles, people walking fast and leading children, all with one idea, to see the imprisoned wild beasts, to see the animals trained to do what they were never intended to do. On the thick yellow sunshine hung the heavy circus smell.

Vendors with barrows offered tepid pink and yellow drinks. The great circus tent loomed enormous, bulging, mysterious, like a strange chrysalis. Sanger’s Circus! Lord John Sanger’s Circus! Would they—could they, ever probe its mysteries?

Mummie was hesitating where the tickets were sold. The children gazed up wistfully into the heavy jowl of the ticket-seller. Surely he would let them in! Mummie was trying to find out what advantage there was in the most expensive seats. She could not find out but she took them. The magic turnstile opened to receive the children. They were safe in the tent.

“Why, oh, why, did I buy the five shilling seats?” mourned Mummie to Karen. “They are not a whit better than those at three shillings!”

“They have red carpet draped over them,” said Karen.

Mummie was relieved. “See the pretty red carpet, children,” she said.

But they saw nothing but the Ringmaster striding about, slapping the long whip against his boot, the painted clowns who danced into the ring. The band broke into a nerve-thrilling march.

Now four lions could be seen sauntering, with a loose, sullen gait, followed by their trainer whose pink, full-fleshed body was but scantily covered, and looked an all too tempting morsel for the lions. He strode after them masterfully with his great whip. All four mounted pedestals in the cage and faced the audience. Their massive, heavily maned heads moved restlessly on their muscular shoulders. They looked unspeakably sad and very cruel.

The trainer began to put them through their tricks. He drove them circling about the cage, leaping, bounding, in resentful submission. He sparred with the largest one, firing a revolver in its face. It showed its fangs in a feline snarl and its roars shook the tent.

Diggory gripped Mummie’s hand. His face was set in an odd smile. “Do you like it?” she asked.

He nodded. “Do you?”

She grinned and nodded her assent but she was almost frightened to death.

After that events piled themselves thick and fast in electric succession. One after another the performers came and went at the Ringmaster’s beck. Ponies, horses, sea-lions, elephants, acrobats took their magic parts in the performance.

Gillian’s laughter rang out at the clown’s tricks. She stood up, when the acrobats did their most daring feats, flying, in spirit, with them from one trapeze to another. When the red-haired clown called good-bye as he galloped off standing on the bare back of the white trick pony she waved her little hand to him and called clearly—“Good-bye! Good-bye!”

Surely the trained horses were the best! The ponies that danced with intricate steps about the ring, their long tails streaming, their eyes glowing, their little hooves making a soft thunder—the snow-white Algerian horse that posed as though in exquisite consciousness of his own beauty—the wild

bronchos ridden by the North American Whirlwind Riders—best of all; or perhaps best of all, Bonny Black Bess in Dick Turpin’s ride to York. The children held their breaths as the great mail coach lumbered on. They gasped at the drama of the hold-up, the pursuit of the robbers, the shots fired. Now there was Bonny Black Bess lying on the sawdust, her glossy body still as black marble, her eyes closed. Dead she was indeed, for she did not move when her great weight was lifted to a wooden sledge and drawn away, to solemn music, Dick Turpin weeping in the rear.

This might have left them sad but for the Grand Tableau at the end when all the performers reappeared in one dazzling group, including Bonny Black Bess.

The elephants made Mummie sad. Frankly she said that she could not enjoy the elephants at all. In their great grey wrinkled bulk they were so resigned, so prehistoric. All the way home she looked sad about the elephants.

The rain had come! Now, at last, she could use her new umbrella! She could carry it over her to the beach hut—heavenly—oh, heavenly!

She danced along, looking up into its silken dome, listening to the patter of raindrops on its top. “I feel glorious!” she cried.

“I don’t,” muttered Diggory, trudging behind in his mackintosh and sou’wester.

He grew more and more annoyed as they neared the hut. By the time they reached it he was in a temper. He sat down outside in the rain, the picture of grumpiness.

“I won’t get up in the morning,” he said. No one paid any attention to him.

His eyes rested on the dismal wet beach. He muttered—“I’ll eat stones.”

He picked up one and gritted his teeth on it but no one heeded him. Gillian was hanging her umbrella up to dry. “Glorious! I feel glorious!” she chanted.

She busied herself about the hut. She took the umbrella to the door, opened it, shook the rain drops from it, closed it and hung it up again, Diggory watching from under the brim of his sou’wester, with an air of complete pessimism.

“I’m going to act in our school entertainment,” she said. “You’ll not be allowed on the stage. I have a very difficult part.”

Between the new umbrella and the school closing she was full of importance. The days flew, each morning a new surprise, each flower a fresh delight. Her pleasure in words made her sometimes express herself poetically. She chanted her joy in the Autumn Crocuses:

“The heavenly raindrops fall on the Autumn crocus.
It presses its face to the earth,
And Jesus comes down
To say Amen.”

But, when her mother repeated this to her the next day, she had forgotten all about it and exclaimed: “Aren’t you silly!”

The day of the school closing she had her lunch at the vicarage with other children who lived too far away to go home. They sat at a long table with the two teachers, the Vicar and his wife. The other children were shy. They busied themselves with their stewed rhubarb and custard. But Gillian was not shy. She was experienced. She had seen the world. It needed only a little encouragement from the Vicar to draw her out. She told of perilous voyages by land and sea. She told of distant great rivers and orchards where the fruit fell and lay in golden heaps. She told of snowdrifts and toboggans and sleighs and Christmas trees standing out in the snow ablaze with twinkling lights. Food was nothing to her. She had an audience.

Mother, Karen, Nurse, and Diggory sat in an expectant row in the schoolroom. It was packed by the admiring families of the performers. Loud was the applause for the percussion band—the feeble tapping of the little drums, the faint clash of the cymbals, the tinkle of the triangle! The faces of the performers were as expressionless as eggs.

The little plays were acted, the little songs sung, but it was a bitter thing to Nurse to see how tidy the other children were and Gillian's frock all wrinkled and her fine hair standing up on her head like the down of a dandelion. Why had no one tidied the child? All the way home on the bus she mourned over Gillian's frock and hair.

Gillian held her school report tightly in her hands. She brought it to her mother that evening in the drawing-room. Now she was very tidy and more important than ever.

"This is my school report," she said. "It's the first one I've ever had and very good."

Mummie opened the official-looking document and read:

"Subject—*English*—Gillian has made good progress in reading in so short a time. A keen and appreciative listener.

Writing—Gillian has good manual control and she writes carefully.

Poetry—Gillian enjoys this subject when she listens."

Mummie looked over the edge of the report at Gillian.

"Why don't you always listen to poetry?"

"I don't know," answered Gillian.

Mummie read on:

“*Arithmetic*—Gillian’s knowledge is elementary for her age but she shows signs of developing a numerical sense.”

Mummie looked over the edge of the report.

“What is twice two?” she demanded.

“Five,” answered Gillian promptly.

Mummie read on.

“*Scripture*—Gillian has not shown much interest.”

“Why don’t you show much interest in Scripture?” asked Mummie.

“What is Scripture?” asked Gillian.

Mummie read on.

“*Hand Work*—Gillian works hard in construction and painting.”

“What have you constructed and painted?” she asked.

“I have made a pig out of plasticine,” answered Gillian, “and painted him pink.”

Mummie continued.

“*Geography*—Gillian shows keen interest in this subject.”

“Good!” exclaimed Mummie. “What is a cape?”

“What you wear when you go out to dinner,” answered Gillian.

“What town is the capital of England?”

“Exeter.”

Mummie continued.

“*Music*—Gillian is developing a sense of pitch. Her rhythm is very good.”

Deeply impressed, Mummie said, “Tell me something about pitch and rhythm.”

“I can turn two somersaults without stopping,” answered Gillian.

Mummie embraced her child. “It is an excellent report,” she said. “I see at the bottom that you have made yourself quite at home at school and that you contribute largely to its informal work and activities. I’m proud of you.”

Karen also embraced her. “We should do something,” she said, “to celebrate. What about a picnic on the High Cliff to-morrow?”

Like the tide stealing out, like the moon sinking down, like a gull gliding by, tire summer passed. The children made friends with other children, went to tea in their gardens. Mummie and Karen renewed old friendships, went to garden parties, sunbathed on the beach.

Glorious was the day when a neighbour, with peach trees trained against his garden wall, gave the children each a peach. They flew with them to show their mother.

“Look at mine!” cried Gillian. “It’s perfect! It’s beautiful!”

Diggory looked tenderly at the faint bruise on the damask cheek of his peach.

“Mine has just one little sore spot,” he said.

Now, once more, the seventeen small pieces of luggage and the nine trunks were piled on to the bus and carried along the sea road and up the steep hill of the little town of Lynd. There, overlooking the bay, was the small white hotel the children knew so well. The stout, red-faced landlord was an old friend to them, so were his boys, and the old ladies who lived there for the sake of the good cooking and the lovely air. From the windows, with their iron balconies, the children could see the Golden Cap rising out of the blue bay. Below lay the narrow winding road, the little shops with stone steps leading down into them, the rose-covered walls on which sleek cats dozed, the beach with its stretch of fine sands!

Every morning they set out, carrying their spades and buckets, down and down the steepness to the sea. As they walked along the stone cob, Gillian would break into song: “The sea! The sands—soon we’ll be running on the sands! Our feet will make little holes that fill up with water! My bucket will be running over!”

She would dart ahead and run into the fringe of foam.

All the morning they dug and paddled and splashed. At noon came the long hot climb up the hill to the hotel.

“When we were here before,” grumbled Diggory, “Nannie pushed me up this hill in my pram.”

“And hot work it was,” said Nurse.

“Now you must walk,” said Gillian sweetly, “and carry your bucket and spade.”

“I mustn’t,” he said, and threw them on the ground.

“Nannie will carry them, just this once,” said Nurse, “because he’s only four and very tired.”

Relieved of his load Diggory found a new strength. He was a soldier on the march. He was also a sergeant drilling a soldier. And never were orders better obeyed. Sometimes the soldier obeyed the orders before they were out of the sergeant’s mouth. He would right wheel. Then the sergeant would hurriedly shout—“Right wheel!”

He talked, as he marched, of how he was going to visit the King in his Palace. “I’m going to visit the King. I shall march in at the door and say good-morning, King, and the King will say, come and sit beside me on my Throne and tell me all about it.”

Gillian interrupted,—“Soldiers don’t talk on parade.”

“These soldiers do,” he insisted. “They march in where the King sits and tell him what they’ve been playing at. And if they begin telling him how naughty other soldiers are, he says,—‘No telling tales, please!’”

On rainy days they played at musical chairs in their mother’s bedroom, she making music on an upturned suitcase for a piano, Karen marching round and round the chairs with them. Or they blew bubbles from pipes, bubbles that floated out over the balcony toward the Golden Cap.

Diggory followed the flight of his with wondering eyes.

“See my bubble wind away!” he said.

But wet days got on their nerves. “I will!” “You shan’t!” “You’re a naughty boy!” “Horrid girl!”

“Your manners are becoming awful,” said Mummie. She gave them a lecture on politeness.

After a terrible row, Gillian said with pride—“All the time I fought, I said please!”

Chair on chair, suitcase on suitcase, they built shaky castles. Gillian climbed to the top and stood there chanting—“I’m the king of the castle!”

But when Diggory was lifted up in his turn he said, after a moment of shaky triumph—“Lift me down! I don’t like things that wobble under me!”

She had a hardihood. She had a judicial air. She said to him severely —“You get nothing by crying.”

Three weeks passed. Mother and Karen went to London on their mysterious doings. They came back with the news that a friend had let them have his house in Surrey while they looked about them.

“Does that mean that we are moving again?” asked Gillian.

“I hope it’s not so far,” said Diggory, “that I can’t take my best little pink shell with me.”

The old ladies, the landlord, his boys, the cook, and the waiter, came out to wave them good-bye. The children wore their best coats, their hair shone sleek in the sun. It was early morning. They were to have their lunch on the train. They were to ride on three trains. Now began again the counting of luggage. “Twenty-four—twenty-five—twenty-six—the Revelation is lost! Twenty-three—twenty-four—twenty-five—the suitcase with the broken lock is lost! Twenty-eight—twenty-nine—thirty—heavens!—There is one piece too many!”

Gillian sat with her gloved hands folded in her lap, her bare legs dangling. The throbbing of the train resolved itself into an almost threatening sequence of words. *Too much luggage, too much luggage, too much luggage, always, always, always, too much luggage!* The future opened before her, misty, boundless, except for the comforting shapes of Mummie, Karen, and Nurse. Far away in the distance loomed the new house they were going to. What was it like? Karen had said that it was surrounded by great shaggy heaths. What were heaths? There was a living sound to them. Were they some sort of animal? She pictured the house, dim, in a sinister twilight, surrounded by growling, shaggy heaths with glowing eyes. They prowled all about it, ready to spring if one but put one’s nose outside the door. Now the beat of the train came. *Shaggy heaths, shaggy heaths, too much luggage, shaggy heaths.*

Diggory could not sit still. An electric current through his nerves forced him ever to be on the move. He stood up staring out of the window. He sat himself down almost fiercely on the seat. He knelt on the seat. He struggled from Nurse’s restraining hand and was on his feet again, craning his neck in an effort to see the locomotive.

“And he used to be such a tranquil child,” sighed Mummie.

“He’s reached the wriggling stage,” said Nurse.

Diggory pushed his hand into Mummie’s and held her fingers tightly. “Who will cook my dinner in the new house?” he asked.

“There’s a very good cook, and a butler too. They go with the house.”

“Are they there now, waiting for us?”

“Yes.”

Gillian pictured the cook and the butler alone in the house while all about the shaggy heaths growled and waited.

She said—“The butler will be shocked when he sees all our luggage.”

“I expect he will,” sighed Mummie.

Perhaps he would refuse to let them in. Perhaps he would shut the door in their faces, leave them outside in the dark, alone with the shaggy heaths.

Too much luggage, too much luggage, shaggy heaths, shaggy heaths. Gillian’s chin sank on her breast, her hair fell over her face. She slept.

She was waked by Nurse putting her into her coat. She stood waveringly on her feet, scarcely conscious of where she was.

“This is the last change,” Nurse was saying comfortingly. “One more train and then we’re there!”

Gillian tottered from the train supported by Nurse. Diggory was already on the platform hopping about Mummie. Karen, a porter on either side, was counting the luggage. Gillian stared at it dreamily. *Too much luggage. . . . Too much luggage. . . .* In her hand she clutched the paper bag containing Mummie’s and Karen’s enormous beach hats. It had been her pride to have these in her charge. Now she scarcely knew what the bag contained. Still she grasped it firmly and, when Karen rejoined the group, asked:

“Is it all there?”

“Every blessed piece. I’ve never known a simpler journey.” With an air of complete satisfaction Karen lighted a cigarette.

Diggory was staring at a small boy eating sweets out of a paper bag. He wondered why he could not eat all the sweets he wanted to out of a paper bag. A rollicking look came into his eyes. He saw himself doing it. Saw himself hurling a banana-skin under the wheels of the train. He stood as straight as though a ramrod were down his back. He exchanged a look of

good fellowship with the guard who ran down the platform with a green flag. One day he too would have a real train of his own!

The taxi stopped in front of a house on the heath. The last train journey was over. They had arrived. It was dark except for an orange streak in the west. All the windows in the house were lighted. The little group waited anxiously at the front door, the dim mound of their luggage rising behind them, their weary faces turned toward the light of the open door.

In it stood a little old man, rather bent, with silvery hair and the face of a benign bishop. It was Dunn, the butler who “went with the house.”

Inside, the cook, Mrs. Smith, waited. Small and neat, her black hair sleek, a welcoming smile on her face. Such a tea was laid in the nursery! Such a dinner waiting under hot covers in the dining-room! A fox-terrier tumbled down the stairs and tore about the children, barking his welcome. All their troubles were over. They were in a new haven. There was nothing to fear! Replete with farmhouse bread and jam and scones and sandwich cake with chocolate filling, the children raised their voices and chanted of their bliss! In shelves all about their nursery were ranged the books belonging to the children of the house, who were now grown-up—or almost. There were cupboards and chests full of their toys all, all to be investigated on the morrow!

Hot water was sizzling into the bath. The window was dim with steam. The fox-terrier ran from room to room, nosing everything belonging to the new-comers. Mummie came in to say good-night.

“Happy, Babes?”

They flung their arms about her. The three rocked together in weary bliss.

The heaths turned out to be not at all frightening. They were indeed shaggy but it was the shagginess of bracken and heather. They were warm and inviting in the golden October days. They were patterned by winding paths that sometimes lost themselves in hazel copses or found their way to a stile and over it into a grassy meadow. Pheasants rose from the bracken when the children approached and showed their fine plumage in the yellow sunshine. A stream crossed the heath and was spanned by an old bridge. At that spot a family of gipsies had their caravan and the children passed by slowly so that they might see the glowing fire with the pot above it, the dark children playing among the heather, the grazing ponies.

Nurse hated the sight of the gipsies. "They shouldn't be allowed here," she grumbled. "I wish a policeman would come and send them off."

Diggory repeated this, in Nurse's very tone, to his mother. Her eyebrows flew up. She stared at him incredulously. "You would say that!" she cried. "About the poor gipsies whose only home is the heath! A policeman send them away! Hmph! If anyone should be sent away it should be us!" She walked excitedly about the room. "The heath belongs to the gipsies!"

"But we're not going to be sent away, are we?" he asked anxiously. "We like it here so much!"

"Well—" she muttered, "the gipsies may let us stay on—if we behave ourselves."

Nurse took pity on the lonely terrier and encumbered herself with him on the daily walks. He was a never-ending anxiety to her, for he fought with other dogs, chased hens and ducks, and barked at the heels of ponies which were being exercised on the paths. He liked the children but showed his liking strangely. When they romped he leaped about them barking, then would suddenly dart at the flying bare legs and seize an ankle in his teeth, holding on till shrieks brought Nurse to their help. Sometimes Dunn would come and carry him off, barking hysterically, to the kitchen.

While the children were being got ready for their walk he would sit shivering in the hall uttering whines which became yelps as they appeared on the stairs. He was in this state of nervous tension one day when it was too wet for even them to go out. But he knew the hour of the walk had arrived. Diggory came slowly down the stairs and eyed him pessimistically.

“What’s all the excitement about?” he asked. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Carrying a large book under his arm, he went into the sitting-room to find his mother. Already he and Gillian were bookish. When Gillian first saw this charming room with its soft warm colouring, she exclaimed—“What a beautifully bound room!”

Her speech was quick with originalities. “Eye-sights,” she explained to Diggory, “are things that live in your eyes. It’s very disagreeable when they go out.”

She said to her mother—“Please give me another kiss. Karen asked me for one and as I wanted to give her my very best one, I gave her the one you had given me.”

She liked to torment Diggory. She would open a book, gaze ecstatically at the page, exclaiming—“Oh, what a thrilling picture!” Then when he left his train to see she would slam the book shut.

His thoughts took a practical turn, “Jerry’s a lucky dog,” he declared. “He runs outdoors without dressing and goes to the lavatory wherever he wants.”

When November came Gillian began to count the days till her birthday. “In five days I shall be six. In four days I shall be six!” She could think and talk of nothing else. The presents she was to get—the weight of years she had attained blotted out all else. She seemed always flushed by excitement, always happily reaching out toward the day. But the night before her birthday she woke from her sleep crying bitterly. She looked up out of streaming eyes at the face bent over her, and exclaimed:

“To-morrow I shall be six!”

They had made friends with two little boys in a neighbouring house and so she had a tea-party. She and Diggory had lunch in the dining-room. She was very important as she stood straight behind her chair to say grace. She closed her eyes, then opened them again and looked admonishingly across the table at Diggory. “If you say Amen too soon, or one wrong word,” she warned, “you shall not have one of my chocolates.”

He flushed. He opened a slit of one brown eye and looked at her truculently, but he said his Grace correctly and his curt Amen chimed in with her reverently chanted one.

In the sitting-room Karen asked brightly:

“Shall we have some nice music, children? A very good soprano is going to sing a flower song and a lullaby.” She turned on the radio.

Gillian and Diggory listened politely to the Flower Song.

“It was very nice,” said Gillian, “but perhaps the Lullaby will be better.”

Then something went wrong on the air. Horrible static sounds began. Karen fiddled with the radio set but only ear-piercing shrieks came from it. By the time it was again working properly the song was finished.

“How disappointing!” said Karen. “We have missed the Lullaby.”

“She wasted all her time in screaming,” said Diggory disapprovingly.

It was a hazy, mild November. The heath put on warm russett and purple tones. The smoke from the gipsies' fire curled upward. By the side of the road their ponies grazed contentedly, their mongrel dog stretched his yellow length in the sun. In a common beside a group of cottages some boys were building a fire for Guy Fawkes night.

The children had never before heard of Guy Fawkes. Now his name was constantly on their lips. Why he was to be burned they did not know but they chanted: "Remember, remember, the Fifth of November!"

After their bath they were wrapped in their dressing-gowns and set on a broad window ledge overlooking the common. Oh, the strangeness and darkness of the night! Now indeed the shaggy heath seemed to become alive, to creep close to the house. Voices came out of the dark, mysterious and clear as distant bells. One of the gipsies' ponies neighed.

Then a rocket sailed into the sky, made a fiery downward curve and burst. It bloomed into bright-coloured flowers that hung a moment against the velvet sky, then left it darker than before. Others followed, soaring, curving, bursting, sometimes mingling their varied lights, sometimes falling like a single star.

Then the bonfire was lighted. Quick tongues of flame could be seen between the trees. There came sharp crackling sounds and the voices of the boys chanting—"Remember—remember——" and the flames raged about the effigy and turned the leaves of the oaks to bronze.

And yet—how soon the thought of it grew dim! Gillian's birthday—the magic drawing nearer of Christmas, like the approach of jingling sleigh bells—the comings and goings of Mummie and Karen, the talk of where they should live. For move they must! Half the children's play consisted of the complicated removing of mountains of toys from one part of the nursery to another—settling in, only to move on again.

This corner of the nursery was the South of France, that was Germany, that was Rome, that was Vienna! For so Mummie's mind flashed from one place to another. But Karen was loyal to Devon. When Mummie exclaimed—"The sea is so lovely at Guernsey—the rocks, the little bays—you'd love it, children!" Karen would say—"There's no place like Devon." When

Mummie would extol the beauties of the South of France, Karen would doggedly repeat—"There's no place like Devon."

Mummie would say—"Then there's Rome! And Vienna! Do you know, children, there's a Children's Art School there where they learn to do wonderful drawings, just by drawing the way they like best!"

"Let us go there," said Gillian.

"There's no place like Devon," said Karen.

"Do you want to go back there?" asked Mummie.

"No. It's too far from London."

"Where do you want to live, then?"

"I don't know."

But suddenly everything was settled. They were to live in Herefordshire. Mummie and Karen had fallen in love with a garden set among the hills with a westward view toward the mountains of Wales.

"Such a garden, children, you cannot imagine! Enormous trees and grassy slopes and winding paths leading into mysterious woods, and a pond with lilies and goldfish in it!"

"Is there a house?" asked Gillian. "We must have somewhere to sleep."

"I was just going to say that," added Diggory. "We must have somewhere to sleep."

"Oh, there's a big house," said Karen. "And a splendid big nursery with a view of the Herefordshire Beacon."

"What's a Beacon?" asked Diggory.

Karen looked at Mummie. "A beacon," said Mummie, "is just a different sort of hill—a very special sort of hill. This one has an ancient British Camp on it."

"What's that?" asked Gillian.

"You'll see when you get there," answered Mummie, a little impatiently. She turned to Nurse. "In the meantime there are a thousand things to do. We shall stay here till Christmas is over. You and the children will follow us in a week."

"Is the house far from the main road?" asked Nurse.

"A bus stops at the gate," answered Mummie.

“Is there electricity for my iron?”

“I’m afraid there’s just gas,” answered Mummie humbly.

“Humph!” said Nurse.

Now preparations for Christmas and preparations for moving were in full swing. Day after day the children crossed the heath with Karen, their arms loaded with Christmas packages, to the post office. They came back through the dusk with the sun a red ball on the horizon and Mummie watching for them at the drawing-room window and Jerry raging round them when the door was opened and Dunn beaming at them because he had laid a special tea for them, with jelly and little nut cakes.

“Now we must let Father Christmas know what you want,” said Mummie, pencil in hand and writing-pad on knee.

“I think I like to call him Santa Claus,” said Gillian. “It sounds more friendly.”

“Very well.”

“Dear Santa Claus” was written at the top of a page, and Mummie looked expectantly into Gillian’s eyes. But Gillian could not decide what she wanted. She was bewildered by the dazzling prospects of choice. “Let Diggory go first,” she said.

Diggory knew exactly what he wanted. Without ado he dictated his letter. “I’ll call him Santa Claus too.”

“DEAR SANTA CLAUS,

“Please a winding-up train. Goods truck and peoples. Please some animals for the train. A Noah’s Ark and Noah. Don’t forget railway lines. Please a necklace as well and a game of Ludo. A high-up landing station. A porter and a guard and engine-driver.

“Love from DIGGORY”

Gillian looked at him enviously. To know what one wanted and to know so clearly and well as that! She knew she wanted chocolates but that was all she could think of. She said:

“I’ll have just what Santa Claus brings me. But Diggory shouldn’t ask for a necklace. Boys don’t have necklaces.”

“I want one,” said Diggory stoutly. “You have a coral necklace and a pearl necklace and a blue glass necklace. I want one too.”

And he got one. One with green stones that well-became his fair skin, bright gold hair and brown eyes. He wore it without embarrassment as he sat in the lamplight painting in his book. Without embarrassment, too, he wore a cast-off pinafore of Gillian’s. But, clothed in these and finely made as he was, he never for a moment looked anything but a boy. And Gillian was all little girl. She was learning to knit. And now, bent over her knitting, the needles held firmly in her slender fingers, she was touching in her small gravity. Three rows a day was Nannie’s rule and three rows it had to be, though sometimes, when a stitch was dropped, there were tears.

“But it’s marvellous!” cried Mummie. “Now you can knit.”

“I can knit,” said Gillian, “and Nannie can knit, and our other Nannie could knit and sew beautifully as well, but you can’t do anything, can you, Mummie?”

Mummie hung her head. “Not much, I’m afraid,” she answered meekly.

It was mid-January and Mummie was walking slowly up the village street from the hotel to The Very House. She wore a mackintosh and an old felt hat, from the brim of which the cold mist fell in wintry drops. She walked with hands deep in pockets and stared straight ahead of her. On either side tall hedges shut in the grim, unfriendly-looking houses. Crowding conifers reared dank boughs toward a grey sky.

The big iron gate stood open and she passed through it and went to the edge of the lily pond where, under a thin layer of ice, the goldfish lay staring coldly back at her. About the brink red and white daisies showed their wet, ruffled heads. Mummie groaned and went toward the house.

The front door stood open and from every corner came sounds of hammering, sawing, dragging furniture about, smells of paint and wet plaster. She edged her way among packing-cases, barrels and step-ladders to the dining-room. There she found Karen talking to a man who was trying to re-create a crystal chandelier from the mass of crystals to which it had been reduced for storage. All about were empty barrels from which the china had been taken and piled on table and floor. In one corner was a great stack of books and in another a mound of apples. There was an inexpressible chill in the room and beyond the French windows dark wet boughs of the pine trees pressed on the rank greenness of the grass.

Mummie walked about examining belongings she had not seen for almost two years. She thought of the Devon Rectory where she had last seen them and said to Karen:

“When do you think we shall be settled?”

Karen gave a gesture of despair. “Never, at this rate! Nothing is ready for us! I have no faith in the plumber, the plasterer, or the paper-hanger.”

“What can I do to help?” asked Mummie.

“Get some order out of this chaos, if you can!”

“This will be a nice room when we are settled in. . . . Where did the apples come from?”

“A Christmas present. I believe there has been Christmas lately. Try one. They’re marvellous.”

Mummie bit into a shining red-skinned juicy apple. Life seemed more bearable. “Where are the children?” she asked.

“In the nursery shrieking with joy over the dolls’ house and train.”

Santa Claus had left these large toys at The Very House for the children. Now the chandelier almost fell down on the head of the man who was putting it together, as the children jumped up and down on the floor above. The crystals tinkled distraughtly.

Mummie smiled. “I’ll go up and see them for a moment.”

An apple might not be good for them at that hour, so she stood in the passage outside the nursery to finish hers before she went in. As she ate it she closed her eyes and saw a sunlit orchard glowing under an Indian summer sky. She saw the red fruit falling to the ground and carelessly collected in glowing pyramids. She saw the flame of reddening maples, the glimmering paleness of silver birches and heard the thin high chorus of the locusts’ song. A lake lay blue and peaceful, little golden leaves floating delicately on its surface.

A loud sound of hammering brought her to herself. She threw the core of the apple under a washing-stand and went into the nursery.

Spring had come; come with a flood of daffodils and wild cherry blossom and pale sunlight on the hills. Every day the children found new wild flowers in the garden. Even yet they had not explored all the wonders of it. There was a grass glade that had once been an old coaching-road. There was a thatched summer house with a weathercock on it. There were mysterious walks walled in by holly and rhododendrons. There was a rock garden where gay little Alpine flowers thrust out of the crevices and a magnolia tree reared its pointed white buds like candles waiting to be lighted. There was a kitchen garden with ancient peach and pear trees against the walls.

Mummie and Karen forgot, or happiness dimmed the memory of long months of discomfort and irritation from workmen who made mountains out of every molehill, forgot how the new distemping on walls had peeled off almost as soon as it was applied, how a fresh leak was always springing in the gas-pipes. Once more they were in a home of their own. Once more they had their own things about them.

And something new had come into their lives! A puppy! A little Scot! A Scottie as ever was! Black brindle, still a bit wobbly on his legs, with almond-shaped eyes bright as jewels.

He had come on a day in early March, brought in a car with his mother and sister that it might be seen what a handsome family he was bred from. But they did not look at all handsome when they arrived, for they had all been car sick—he sickest of all.

His breeder set him down on the grass after wiping his drooling muzzle. “You can see,” she said, “what a nice little chap he is.”

He squatted feebly, his round belly swaying, his legs bent, his tail drooping, and was sick again.

“Isn’t he!” exclaimed Mummie. “I can see that he’ll be handsome when he is himself again.” She knelt and stroked him. He gave his tail an apologetic wag and tried his legs to see if they would work. They would and he wobbled forward to Mummie’s knee.

He was named Dan after his Highland grandfather. In a short time he knew his name and had made himself at home. At home, that is, in the day-

time. At night he missed the warm litter among which he had snuggled. When Mummie had put him in the basket beside her bed he filled the house with his cries if she dared to leave the room. Even when he had her safe in bed he whimpered till she put her hand on him and gently patted him. When she withdrew her hand he whimpered but not so loudly, and again she felt for the basket. And so, the crying and the comforting continued till he slept.

At last confidence came to him. He grew sturdy in spirit as he was in body. This house was his home. These people were his to love and protect.

And how he loved the house! His basket, his sitting-room, and the cozy lawn shaded by the deodar tree, were realm enough for him. He did not want to go for walks. He would rock on his short legs through the front door at Mummie's heels, the picture of jolly importance, but let him once see the green arch of the weeping beeches, let him set eyes on the misty woodland beyond, and he would tuck in his tail and flee for the house. He would lie on his back on a rug before the fire, rolling his eyes pathetically, waving his infant paws in pleading. His house—his lovely house—do not take him away from it into the strange unknown!

The only thing to do was to carry him till he was well out of sight of it before you set him down on the path. Then he would trot along happily. But, if a gust of wind came, and moved the great branches above him or rustled the thorny holly leaves, back toward the house he would go, uttering cries of fear and never taking breath till he was safely inside the door. If the door were shut he would wobble back and forth along the drive giving anguished looks at the house till he was let in.

But even in those baby days he had a grand heart. Once, walking with Mummie, they met a white coach-dog trotting through the glade. It was the first time Dan had seen any dog but his mother and now he had forgotten her. With a yell of ferocity he bundled himself after the coach-dog which, startled, turned and ran.

Then, one evening just at dusk, having a stroll with Mummie and Karen, he saw his first rabbit at close quarters. He had had glimpses of them before, but this one hopped across his path, humping itself in the twilight, its great ears flapping.

As though a dozen pins were stuck in him, Dan uttered a succession of piercing cries and sped after the rabbit. He sped out of sight among the undergrowth and bracken.

“Danny! Danny!” His name echoed among the trees. The shadows were falling! It was dark, and they had not found him!

At last Mummie, looking over the hedge into the road, saw a little black figure running about in the moonlight. A motor-car was coming down the hill! He would be killed! Mummie threw herself over the wall and ran after him. She captured him as the car passed on.

Karen met her at the gate. “Are either of you hurt?”

For answer Dan nuzzled her cheek and Mummie showed an arm torn by holly.

In chasing the rabbit he had fallen through a hole in the hedge and on to the road.

He loved the car. He was alert for the sound of its leaving the garage and watched with impatience its progress along the drive. Simms had to be careful not to run over him. He pawed the step ecstatically till he was lifted in. Once inside he was a whirl of delight till the car started. Then his strength left him. He would yawn feebly and look as though he were going to be sick.

“Hold him up quickly,” Karen would cry, “and open the window wider! Give him more air!” Mummie would hold him up for air while his head rolled weakly and he yawned again. But nothing could damp his ardour for the car.

Simms made him a little wire run and a pretty little kennel within sight of the sun-room. Clean straw was put in the kennel. After the episode of falling through the hedge it was felt that there should be some place for restraining him.

Everyone admired the kennel, painted green as it was and just the right size for him. All the family assembled to see his triumphal entry into it. He was put inside the run and the gate shut on him. What a picture he made in there!

“Oh, what a darling little puppy!” cried Gillian.

“Now he’s got his own little house,” said Diggory.

With one ear upright and the other hanging Dan suspiciously examined the run. He put his head in at the door of the kennel. He put one paw in and stepped on the straw. Horrified, he withdrew it and ran to the other end of the yard. Frantically he began to tear at the wire netting. He yapped in anguish to rejoin his family.

“It’s the straw,” said Nurse. “Straw is horrid stuff and it has frightened him.”

“Of course it’s the straw,” agreed Mummie. “Someone fetch him a mat while I clear it out.”

She went into the run and, kneeling, began to pull out the straw. With a little growl of joy Dan flew at her, licked her face, bit it, then tumbled about on the straw, scattering it over the run.

Nurse came running with a clean mat. It was arranged attractively in the kennel and Mummie went outside the run to watch the result.

But Dan liked it even less than the straw. He sat down by the kennel and uttered quavering howls.

“He’s used to a cushion,” said Karen. “I’ll fetch him a cushion and lay him on it—then he’ll understand.”

All this was done but the puppy, now completely demoralized, blubbered at the mere sight of the cushion and tried to dig a hole beneath the kennel to hide himself in.

“What he needs,” said Mrs. Waddy, the cook, “is a bone. There’s nothing like a nice bone for cheering a dog up. I’ve just the thing in the larder.” She moved heavily into the house.

In utter dejection Dan peered out through the wire netting. When the bone was introduced to him he fell on it eagerly.

“It’s just as I thought!” said Mrs. Waddy triumphantly.

“I think he’d better be left to himself for a bit,” said Karen.

But as soon as he was left alone with the bone, he buried it, then proceeded to dig himself out of the run. He swaggered into the morning-room with nose and paws earthy and asked for a drink of tea which had just been brought in. The day was his.

He drank his tea from the silver slop-basin. He beamed up at Mummie and Karen. He trotted with an important air to the middle of the rug and made a puddle.

Gillian and Diggory were now beginning their education in earnest.

“Why, bless my whiskers!” exclaimed Mummie. “There are a thousand things which you ought to know and which you don’t.”

“What sort of things?” asked Gillian.

“Well—the multiplication tables and about King Canute and why water and oil won’t mix.”

“Why won’t they?” asked Gillian.

Mummie looked at her disapprovingly. “That’s what I’m sending you to school for—to find out.”

The school where Gillian now began to go was a large girls’ school. There were eighty girls there and she was the smallest. The school was in the nearest town and each morning out of the tumult of the nursery she emerged tiny and composed, carrying a bag containing her brush and comb, her pinafore and her Greek tunic and sandals for dancing.

Nurse held fast to Gillian’s hand and Simms brought the car along the drive.

“Wait! Wait!” cried Mummie, “Dan is out! Don’t open the gate!”

There was a wild search for Dan. He was found under the rhododendrons with one of Karen’s bedroom slippers. Thatcher the gardener laid down his rake and hastened to open the gate.

“Good-bye! Good-bye!” called Mummie. Hugging Dan to her, she threw kisses after Gillian.

Miss Bethune was coming up the drive. She came every morning to teach Diggory. She was very pale, very serious, and a born teacher. Diggory learned so fast that Mummie was almost frightened. He began to write with pen and ink, making bold true lines. And he not five!

Miss Bethune and Mummie talked about his marvellous progress, standing face to face, looking earnestly into each other’s eyes.

“The only danger,” said Miss Bethune, “is that he concentrates too intensely. It may injure his health.”

“Oh, he mustn’t do that!” cried Mummie.

“There are the Nature Study walks,” said Miss Bethune, “they will help to counteract the concentration.”

Twice a week there were the Nature walks. While the goldfish leaped from the pool, while the almond trees and the acacias blazed in beauty in the garden, and every sort of wildflower bloomed in the grounds and blackbirds sang in the wilderness, Diggory and Miss Bethune went out on to the road to look for Nature.

He came and laid a few limp bluebells in Mummie’s lap. “They’re Nature,” he said. “I’m studying it.”

Gillian announced—“I can count to ninety-nine but a hundred is much too difficult for me.”

She learned to recite poetry, enunciating her vowels distinctly as she heard her teacher do.

“Spring is coming! Spring is coming!
All about is fair,
Roses, lilies, daffodillys,
Joy is *everywhere!*”

She stuck her chest out proudly. She recited the poem twice if she were encouraged. Three times, if Mummie and Karen applauded loudly enough.

Diggory listened without enthusiasm. Her rapt smile, as she listened to her own voice, embarrassed him. With a perfunctory hand-clap he slid from his chair and said—“My turn now!”

Gillian curtsied, her hair falling over her face, and took the seat he had left. “Now,” she said encouragingly, “we shall see what the young man can do.”

He stood very straight, one sock up, the other about his ankle, his hair on end. He made a little bow and sang, in a sweet, husky voice, quite without tune:

“Where are you going, Billy-boy, Billy-boy,
Oh, where are you going, charming Billy?
I’m going to see my wife,
She’s the joy of my life,
But she’s a young thing and cannot leave her mother.”

He sang the song through.

Mummie, Gillian, and Karen clapped loudly. “Well done, little man!” said Gillian.

He was pleased but said gruffly—“I can’t sing very well.”

“We know by the words you say what tune you mean,” said Gillian.

There was a note of patronage in this which he did not like. To offset it, he remarked:

“I really *am* married.”

Well, if he were going to boast—

“So am I,” she said. “I was married yesterday and to-day I have a son of fourteen.”

He stared. “I was married day before yesterday,” he said, “and I have five sons. The youngest is ninety.”

They stood with Mummie looking up into the green world of a weeping beech. Its bole rose stately and smooth, with the glimmer of grey satin. Its boughs sprang outward and fell in a fountain of young leaves, arching over the path in a silken cascade. Gillian took one of the leaves in her hand and stroked it.

“It’s like the leaves of my new prayer-book,” she said.

Karen had given her one at Easter and it was her greatest treasure. She could pay the leaves of the beech tree no higher compliment.

They left the paths and went up the slope toward the part of the grounds they called “The Wilderness.” The grass of the slope had grown long and rising out of it like a thousand white and gold butterflies, daffodils and narcissus swayed in the April breeze.

At the top of the slope was a thatched summer house and on its roof a weather-vane. The cock was facing due south.

“A fair wind,” Mummie said. “We shall have a fine day. What shall we do?”

“Let’s go into The Wilderness,” said Gillian. She tugged at her mother’s hand.

“No. It’s still too wet in The Wilderness. Shall we go to the bench beside the sun-dial?”

“Yes,” Gillian agreed and, in one of her swift coinages of words, added:

“It’s a little bit wilderney there.”

They settled themselves on the bench. A blackbird whistled overhead. The puppy snuffled in a crevice of the paving about the sun-dial. Out of the crevice grew a tall columbine, its bud just ready to open in a tiny bell. A blue mist of violets lay on the grass.

Behind the bench rose a yew tree and in the darkness beneath it, half hidden by ivy, lay the stone head of a bearded man. No one knew where the head had come from but the children liked it for the way the ivy circled the head and for the mysterious smile.

“I like new words,” said Gillian. “I specially like the word villainous. It’s a lovely new word I’ve just come across.”

“It is rather nice,” said Mummie gravely.

“What things do you like best in the world?” asked Gillian.

“There are so many things I like I can’t choose at the moment. You tell me what you like best.”

Without hesitation Gillian answered:

“I like roses and violets and horses with huge hairy feet.”

There was silence for a space, then Diggory said:

“I like all sorts of horses. I’m going to buy one soon. I’m saving all my pennies.”

The children had lately been promoted to an allowance of tuppence a week each.

“Do you think,” he asked, “that I shall soon have enough to buy a racehorse? Like the ones I saw at the steeplechase?”

“I am afraid that you will not soon have money enough for that. Racing horses are very expensive.”

“But they’re not so large as working horses,” he said, his eyes fixed on her face. “They shouldn’t cost so much.”

“It’s the speed of the racehorses that makes them so expensive.”

He pondered on this and said—“Then they buy horses by speed and not by heavy.”

Gillian had sat still long enough. Her eager limbs strained toward motion. “Let’s hippity-hop!” she exclaimed, and gave no peace till all three, with Mummie in the middle holding tightly to hands, went skipping down the path toward the greenhouses.

They passed these and passed the stable, outside which stood an old carriage with rusting wheels, beneath the pink bloom of a hawthorn tree.

“Hippity-hop! Hippity-hop!” cried Gillian. “Now crack the whip! I want to be on the end.”

“You’ll be hurt,” warned Mummie.

But nothing else would do, so she took them to the smooth grass of the lawn and, with Diggory in the middle now and Gillian at the end, described

a swift semicircle.

Off flew Gillian, rolling over and over, down to the rhododendrons. She lay there in a heap, weeping softly.

“My turn now!” cried Diggory. “Me at the end of the whip now!”

“You see what it has done to Gillian,” said Mummie glumly.

“I don’t care! It can’t hurt me!” He gave her no peace.

Now he was on the end. Even swifter, even wilder than before ran Mummie. He stretched his legs desperately, clinging hard to Gillian’s hand. She had brushed away her tears and joined the game with renewed zest. But he could not stand the pace. Off he was hurled and lay huddled under the deodar tree, tears filling his eyes.

“I told you how it would be,” said Mummie, “But you would have it!” She lay down with her head on the grass and closed her eyes.

After a little they came and got astride her. “We’re feeling better,” they said. “Let’s go to see the goldfish.”

The cook's name was Mrs. Waddy. She had been cook at the hotel where the family had stayed while The Very House was being got ready for them. Somehow, as though by fateful attraction, she had cast off her moorings and drifted to The Very House. She was a slow-moving woman, with a love for bright colours and a broad, motherly smile. She gave a genial atmosphere to the dark brick-paved kitchen with its great built-in range, its rows of bells, some of which responded to the bell-pulls and some not, to the deep tree-shaded windows and the dim ceiling with its iron hooks from which, in the old days, sides of bacon and spiced beef had hung. But even her presence could not brighten the stone passage, out of which the larder, the pantry, the scullery, and the maids' sitting-room opened. This lay always in a chill gloom.

Mrs. Waddy began by coming in for the day and returning at night to her own cottage where her husband, who was the village postman, and their black dog Major lived. But by imperceptible degrees the postman and Major also drifted to The Very House. More and more often the postman's little figure could be seen trudging along the path to the kitchen door, with the old dog at his heels, till at last the three were permanently ensconced and Mr. Waddy went out only on his rounds. His postman's cap hung on a nail in the passage. Mummie said it gave her a fine feeling of resident officialdom to see it there.

Gillian and Diggory loved Mrs. Waddy. She had been a children's nurse before she had married Mr. Waddy and she retained the comforting cajoling ways of the good Nannie. She was ready, if need be, on Nurse's day out, to take charge of the children, to surrender her ample person as a field for romping, to permit unlimited jam at tea and untrammelled splashings in the bath.

Ivy, the house-parlourmaid, was a very different sort of person. She looked rather like a cod-fish. Her light eyes had a watery glare in them. She had a chilly-looking nose and no chin to speak of. Though she was only thirty, her shoulders were bent from work. Her chest was flat, her hands red and bony, with an iron clutch on brush or cloth. She cleaned, polished, and dusted all the morning, polished silver all the afternoon, appeared in immaculate black dress and snowy cap and apron to wait at table, drew every curtain, shut every window and bolted every door, as though she were

fortifying a city under siege, as soon as dusk fell. She was discreet and respectful with the family, but, in the kitchen, never stopped talking. There, at all hours, her hollow voice, like the voice of a deaf person, might be heard, talking endlessly, laughing hysterically, or quarrelling—if anyone was rash enough to risk an encounter. Mummie or Karen, passing the kitchen door would catch fragments of her talk. “And I said . . . and so I told her plain . . . and I cornered her . . . she hadn’t a word to say . . . she did look silly when I went for her!” It was always the same, Mrs. Waddy enduring with resignation, the postman listening with polite uninterest, Nurse shunning her like the plague, Mrs. Joy, the rosy little charwoman, hurrying back and forth at her bidding.

Mrs. Joy was an excellent worker, but she could not satisfy Ivy. Cleaning brass was beneath Ivy, but she knew exactly the limit of brightness that brass could take on and nothing less satisfied her. She peered with her cod-fish eyes into every crevice of fire-irons, candlesticks, and kettles. She followed Mrs. Joy about discovering cobwebs and diminutive wisps of dust, in her train. Mrs. Joy could not iron Ivy’s uniform, caps, and aprons, to satisfy her. Strive as she would, Ivy found fault with their appearance and at last asked to be allowed to send them to the laundry where they would be done more to her taste. Karen agreed to this. Karen agreed to everything that Ivy suggested, for never had she come across such a worker. Karen was eloquent on the subject of how Ivy’s face would light at the mere mention of silver polish, of how Ivy would never rest while anything in her province remained undone. Ivy’s breakages were the only flies in the ointment of her efficiency. Loud crashes followed her activities. She cleaned so well and so hard that she could dislodge iron grates from their position, break anthracite stoves like matchwood, and wrench beds asunder. She could prove that things guaranteed indestructible were all too fragile. But Karen was hypnotized by Ivy’s war on dirt. She sat back, smiling inanely, while Ivy scrubbed, polished, shattered and broke.

There were times when Ivy’s sense of order were inconvenient. Mummie and Karen found themselves locked out of the spare bedroom because their footsteps brushed the velvet pile of the carpet the wrong way. Ivy kept the key of the spare bedroom in the pocket of her starched uniform. She loved everything in the spare bedroom. It was so polished, so immaculate, that it seemed that no one of either sex was good enough to sleep in it. Day and night Ivy kept a hot-water bottle in the big four-poster for fear the mattress might become damp. It was a shrewd ray of sunlight that penetrated its dim greenness.

“She has the makings of an old family retainer,” said Karen, almost with tears in her eyes. “I shall keep her all my life. All one has to do is to let her have her own way—and she is so terribly unattractive that no man will ever look at her.”

But Karen was wrong. Ivy had been at The Very House only a fortnight when a red-cheeked young man appeared on the scene and Ivy announced that she had been engaged to him for some years.

“But we’re in no hurry to marry,” she said with her strange fishy smile. “We must save a bit first. We’ve no mind to start out poor. My young man respects me and I respect him and we aim for a respectable home.”

It appeared that she already had a large store of things for this home. She displayed, for Mrs. Waddy’s and the postman’s admiration, at least a dozen sofa cushion-covers, half a dozen “runners,” and many nightdress cases. These articles alone, appeared to her worthy of acquiring. Never a month passed but she bought a new runner, a new sofa cushion-cover, or a new nightdress case. Her room was overflowing with them. Only once did she vary from this set purpose. Then she ordered an eiderdown from the village seamstress. But, when the quilt was finished and the seamstress brought it to the kitchen, Ivy found fault with the lining. She found fault with it for one hour till the weeping seamstress took it away and Ivy returned triumphant to the collecting of cushion-covers, runners, and nightdress cases.

It was a pleasure to meet Thatcher, the young gardener, on one of the garden paths on a fine spring morning, his face beaming as though himself he had created the primroses that struck their gold in every corner of the grounds, the forget-me-nots that turned to heavenly blue the mounds of mould about the potting-shed, the very goldfish that leaped clear of the water in their April joy. The children would run to him and climb into his barrow and shout as he trundled them along the mossy paths.

He was called “the young gardener” because he had been the youngest of three working at The Very House more than forty years ago. Now he was nearing seventy but looked no more than middle-aged with his full-blooded broad face, his clear, dark-blue eyes and his thatch of only slightly grizzled brown hair that grew low on his forehead. He had been at work since he was a small boy. He had had no time for schooling but he had been through two wars, in army and navy. His brown arms were heavily tattooed. His broad shoulders were bent from digging in the earth, he walked stiffly, for he was a bit rheumatic. He spoke in a broad Herefordshire accent in a voice of

peculiarly rich and comforting quality. He and Karen talked about gardening.

“‘Marnin’, Miss,” he would greet her. “’Tis a fair marnin’. T’ wallflowers be lookin’ luvly. Thure’s a foine lot o’ young lettuces coomin’ on. L’ be rady fur table soon.”

Always Thatcher found something to praise, something to be proud of. If things went wrong, if sowings failed, he ignored the failure. Goodliness and kindness, as of rich, sun-warmed earth, beamed from his face. He was married and had reared a family of fine strong curly-headed young men and women. His youngest son sometimes came to help him when the grass in the “wilderness” grew long. Father and son would stand side by side, their scythes moving in unison, seldom speaking, leaving ridges of sweet-smelling grass behind them.

Each evening at five Thatcher came to the kitchen for tea. He drained many cups of strong tea with thick slices of bread and jam. Then his rich voice could be heard mingled with Ivy’s clack and Mrs. Waddy’s good-humoured laugh. The little postman, his rounds finished, joined the circle about the clean-scrubbed table.

Simms, the chauffeur, was a slight, alert man, much younger than Thatcher. When he was not busy with the car he helped Thatcher in the garden, mowing more briskly but with less power than the older man. He too had been through the War and had not come out of it so well as Thatcher. Thatcher’s untidiness with tools distressed him but nothing could change Thatcher. He worked steadily from morning to night doing things exactly as they had been done on the place when he came to it forty years before. There was a constant struggle between Karen and Thatcher on the subject of geraniums. She wanted fewer geraniums. “But,” he would say, in a bewildered tone, “us allus had geraniums in that their border.” And geraniums would appear, massive, big-leaved, fiery-blossomed, in fullest view.

Gillian and Thatcher were great friends. In her before-breakfast run she would stop to walk beside Thatcher as he moved slowly along the borders with his watering-can, to tell him of her plans for the day, to ask the names of flowers, to fill the can for him at the tap. Thatcher beamed down at her, as the big warm sun at a daisy. “Ah, her’s a grand little sowl,” he would say.

Diggory was filled with admiration for Simms. In the secrecy of the old coach-house Simms would stand on his head for Diggory’s pleasure. He would turn handsprings for him. And Simms could play the violin and the

cornet and the saxophone and the flute! There was almost no instrument that Simms could not play. He played the trombone in the town band. He was going to play at the King's Jubilee!

The King's Jubilee—over and over the children heard the charmed words. The King had reigned for twenty-five years. Now was his Jubilee. The children pictured it as something bright, tangible, that he could hold in his two hands. Mummie and Karen were going to London to see it. They would go to the door of the Palace and the King would come out, with the bright Jubilee in his hands, and show it to them. "But it is mine," he would say. "You may look at it but you mustn't touch!"

Gillian was working hard, knitting a scarf for Mummie to wear to see the Jubilee. It was of pale-green wool and was to be a yard long, but the day of departure came so fast that the scarf was barely long enough to pin across Mummie's throat with her gold hunting-crop pin, at the last moment.

Gillian looked at her with pride. There she stood in her travelling clothes, the woollen scarf around her throat. Warm May morning as it was, Mummie said she badly needed the scarf. Her throat was delicate and she would not have been able to go to the King's Jubilee without the protection of the scarf.

The day was clear as a glass ball. Inside the ball the world hung burnished, the Herefordshire Beacon in the middle of it, all set round with fruit trees in white and pink flower.

There was to be a great bonfire on the Beacon that night. On the highest hills, from John o' Groats to Land's End, beacons were to be lighted in honour of the King. There was to be a chain of fire across the country. Even if the fire was not lighted till ten o'clock the children were to be up to see it. If it were not till midnight they were to be up. All the long day this thought was in their minds.

But first there was the procession in the village to see. From London, Mummie had sent silver Jubilee medals with the King's head on them for the children to wear. Now that these were pinned on, Gillian could not keep still. She danced about, feeling the glow of the medal all through her. But Diggory marched gravely proud, his chest out, his head high. Mrs. Waddy held their two hands as they walked down the steep road. Ivy, clean as soap and starch could make her, chattered all the way. For once, she was in good humour with everyone. Nurse carried Danny. She was afraid to leave him at home, for dear knows what he would do. One thing was certain, he would

make half a dozen puddles and probably chew off the corner of a cushion or devour a book.

Now he sat up on her arm, soft and black, his infant head moving as she walked, his bright eyes staring at the new world. It was the first time he had been taken outside the gates.

The village street was full of people. The shops were closed and in the windows were pictures of the King and Queen. There were flags and bunting everywhere. The sun beat down hotly. The crowd jostled, but Mrs. Waddy held Gillian and Diggory closely and Nurse kept a firm hold on Danny. The children now met other children they knew and they formed a little group together waiting for the procession.

At last it came. Girl Guides—Boy Scouts—floats bearing symbolic figures, carts and horses decorated with spring flowers—ex-Service men with medals on their chests and, what filled the children with an almost unbearable pride, Simms walking with the band, trumpeting for all he was worth! Gillian could have shrieked for pride. Diggory did shriek—“Simms! Simms! We’re here! We see you!” Simms’ light eyes flashed at them above his inflated cheeks. From the height of his grandeur he saw them! There was no doubt whatever about it—Simms recognized them, acknowledged them as living under the same roof as himself!

In her excitement Nurse dropped Danny, and he scrambled among the many legs, almost to the edge of the procession but was captured by the cheery young Curate and returned safely.

How hot they were by the time they reached home! Mrs. Waddy was in a state of dither—Ivy was ready for a quarrel. Danny lay panting against Nurse’s breast. Gillian’s cheeks were blazing and Diggory’s eyes shone like dark jewels in his excited face. Mrs. Waddy put tea to brew before she took off her hat! The little postman trotted in and hung his heavy bag on the kitchen door with a deep sigh of relief. Thatcher came wiping his shaggy moustache with a tattooed hand and muttering—“Ay, ’twere a master heat! T’ foulk must be feelin’ it turrible up to Lunnon.” And last of all, Simms, the wonder, appeared, his bright horn under his arm, looking as cool as a cucumber.

When bedtime came there was no sleep in the children, but Nurse insisted that they should rest for a while. Gillian lay in her own little room staring out of the window with its pink curtains, into the depths of the sycamore tree. Its variegated leaves were as still as metal. They hung hotly bright with the red sun glinting behind them. From one of its great

horizontal boughs depended the swing. The swing was below her vision but it was clear in her mind's eye. She had herself chosen the very bough where it was to hang. Thatcher had produced the thick strong rope, made the broad smooth seat. Oh, lovely, lovely had been the moment when he had put her on it, when his broad hand on her back had set her in gentle motion. She had gone up and up. She had swayed smoothly back, looking down on Diggory from her height. Mummie had put her out of the swing and got into it herself. How she had swung! Not being pushed by anyone, just in some mysterious way working the swing herself, up and up till her long legs were almost touching the leaves and her head was on a level with Gillian's own, then up the other way, till she seemed to be standing in the air.

"Some day," thought Gillian, "I shall swing like that," and she pictured herself swooping like a bird in the swing while far below Mummie and Diggory stared at her in wonder.

Higher and higher went the swing, wilder and freer and farther, till the two faces below were no more than two daisy faces in the grass, till she swung far above the treetops, dreamy . . . floating . . . deliciously asleep.

The passage lay between her room and the night nursery where Diggory's cot stood beside Nurse's bed. His window gave on the east where the sky was the colour of a dove's wing, and over The Wilderness where the trees already held the twilight. In a beech tree a cuckoo was calling. Over and over again sounded the hollow sweetness of his notes.

Diggory lay listening, all his nerves sensitive to the slightest noise. He heard the rustling of ivy leaves as small birds moved pensively among them outside his window. He heard the distant bleat of a young lamb, the faint squeak of a mouse in the wall. Then came the cry of a rabbit as the ferret's teeth felt for its throat. He sat up in bed wondering, shivers of excitement running over him.

But now all was silent. A thick plushy silence was spread like a gloved hand over the house and grounds. He lay down again, feeling the quick movement of his heart in his breast, staring out into the blackness of a yew tree that rose like a pointed steeple against the dusk. He lay for a long while very still, waiting for the first flash of the Beacon light.

Then the cruel, whistling hoot of an owl cut the darkness as it swooped on a small adventuring bird. The ivy leaves moved tremblingly against his window.

Nurse came through the room, guarding a candle-flame inside her curved palm. Diggory sat upright.

“Is it here, Nannie? Is it time to get up?”

“Now what a child you are! Not asleep and it’s past nine! Do settle down and don’t worry. I’ll call you when it’s time to get up.” She bent over him soothingly.

He held her hand for a moment and closed his eyes. Then she went. He saw flickering light, as of a bonfire. What would it be like? Oh, what would it be like? Fire. . . . Fire blazing into the sky. . . . All the hilltops blazing for the King. . . . Now he could not lie still. He tossed from side to side, throwing the bed coverings from him. Was Gillian asleep, he wondered. “Gillian! Gillian!” he called, his voice sounding thin and high. The silence was thicker than ever.

The interminable time passed. Then faintly he heard a distant cheer far off among the hills. He heard voices calling in the house. He leaped from the bed and stood trembling in the middle of the room.

Now Nurse came carrying Gillian wrapped in a shawl. Mrs. Waddy came, and Ivy, all laughing, talking, excited. They pressed into the day nursery and threw wide the windows that looked toward the Beacon. The cool night air came in, heavy with the scent of white lilac.

A light quivered on the Beacon. It quivered as though uncertain of its power. Then it rose into a pillar. It spread. It sent up fiery triumphant tongues as it gained strength. Distant cheers came again. All the southern sky grew bright. Was the King watching? Was he glad?

Now Danny ran free in the garden, in and out of the house on his soft pads, out when he wanted to utter his throaty barks of warning at baker's boy or milkman, in when nature prompted him to squat and make a puddle. Each day he found the body of an unfledged bird, fallen from its nest or pushed out by a young cuckoo, and brought the fledgling in triumph to Mummie or Karen. There were always funerals for these. With sighs and moans Mummie dug graves in the flower borders with her hands and lined them with petals, the children dutifully trying to look sad but enjoying the strangeness and the mystery of these little deaths.

They were living in the garden in these hot bright days of early summer, dressed only in scarlet sun suits that showed their bodies growing long and slim and brown.

Gillian had been taken from school because of an outbreak of mumps, and Mummie had decided that they should both run wild till the autumn. Every day they found something new to explore in the garden, some new tree or flower to become friends with.

Karen, looking out of her window, saw an odd procession. Thatcher came first, besom in hand, Gillian following close behind him. Next Simms pushing a wheelbarrow, then Diggory drawing his cart, and last, Dan sturdily dragging a skipping-rope.

"Where are you going, children?" called Karen.

"To the swimming-pool," shouted Gillian. "Thatcher is cleaning it out! Simms will fill it with water! We're going there to sail our boats!"

Later Karen and Mummie found them there, Nurse sitting on a campstool knitting, the children barefooted, in and out of the shallow water, Dan peering fearfully over the brink at his own reflection.

Very earnestly Diggory manipulated his small sailing-boat. But Gillian preferred to wash the concrete sides of the pool with a bit of rag she had found. She talked incessantly of what she was doing and would do.

"I can spell pool!" she exclaimed.

"Spell it, then."

"P—" she began. "P—o—" she hesitated, then tried again: "P—o . . ."

Mummie formed her lips into double-o, prompting her.

“No, no,” said Gillian, “don’t help me! Just keep your own face.”

Gillian showed great courage when she was hurt. She shut her lips tightly and cried as little as possible, but Diggory showed no such fortitude. The sight of his own blood filled him with horror.

“You must be brave,” said Nurse, and she held up Gillian as a model.

At last one day he was very brave though he was quite badly hurt. He looked at the deep rasp on his knee and choked back the sobs.

“I want you to tell Gillian,” he said.

“That you were hurt?” asked Nurse.

“No—that I made no outcry. I thought she’d be interested to know that I made no outcry.”

His body fascinated him. “My knee is the hardest part of me,” he said, “but my face is very wobbly.”

Gillian loved new words and made an opportunity to use them. She said to him, when he was playing monkey tricks in the nursery—“You are a mountebank and I shall chastise you!”

Gillian liked to be helpful, liked to trot after Nurse putting things straight in the nursery, but order was anathema to Diggory. He left his toys scattered and expected his womenfolk to tidy up after him. One Sunday he refused to put them away and he was not allowed to go down to lunch with his mother and Karen. He watched Gillian being dressed with care, her hair being brushed till it shone, a new hair-ribbon being tied about her head. He was too proud to show how hurt he was. He and Nurse could hear sounds of laughter from the dining-room below while they ate their dinner. He said—“How peaceful it is without Gillian! They don’t sound very peaceful down there, all three talking at once!”

Every rose tree in the garden was in bloom for Diggory's birthday. The standard rose trees held their blooms up like rosy torches. The striped Lancaster and York roses in the sunk garden threw wide their petals. The climbing yellow rose, at the corner of the house, caught the first beams of sunshine and held them till dusk. The pink rambler that twined itself from post to post the length of the grass walk by the magnolia tree, urged its youngest bud to the service of this day. Diggory was five!

But he had never a glance for the roses. All he saw was the shining motor-car, just the right size for him, that stood before the front door when he was ceremoniously led there after breakfast. Everyone—Mummie, Karen, Gillian, Nurse, Mrs. Waddy, Ivy, Thatcher, and Simms—stood in wonder as he climbed into the car and pedalled it along the drive. A boy! Almost a man! The owner driver of a car!

He seemed to know by instinct how to steer it, how to back and turn in the smallest possible space. He never sounded the hooter needlessly but only when there was a crossing of paths. Yet, when at last he was persuaded to let Gillian have a turn, she was in a quiver of nerves.

“Save me! Save me!” she screamed as the car sped down the steep towards the lily pond.

She all but overthrew it when she tried to back and turn. With an ecstatic smile she constantly sounded the horn. Truly she had no way with mechanical things. She was a girl! A woman! “With all the faults and virtues of the sex!” cried Mummie, embracing her.

When Diggory's legs ached so that he could no longer move the pedals, he rubbed the already glittering car with the polisher Simms had given him. When he had polished it till his arms ached, he lay down on the ground beside it, fondling the wheels, looking up into the works. When at last the gravel grew unbearably hard, he rose and laid himself across the bonnet of the car, lolling there with a look of idiotic joy.

By afternoon he was able to take a mild interest in his other presents. But the interest was only half-hearted. Like one in a dream he suffered himself to be dressed for the party. He took the presents the other children brought him without a thank you.

“Thank you! Say thank you!” prompted Nurse, nudging him.

“Thank you very much,” he murmured, his eyes not on the proffered present but on the motor-car standing in all its beauty and power on the drive.

It was cruel, he felt, that he had to share it with his guests. He had to watch them, one after the other, great lumps of girls with frilly skirts, silly little scrabbling boys of four, clamber into it, steer it off the drive into the shrubbery, fall over each other trying to sound the hooter all at once. It was awful, but he bore it with dignity. He was glad when they went in to tea. He had a sudden hilarity when he cut his birthday cake with the five candles burning on it. He grew noisy and laughed at everything that was said.

But oh, the deep quiet joy when the party was over and he drove the car for the last time along the paths and finally into the stable, the puppy raging ecstatically about the moving wheels.

All day long Dan had raged about those wheels. Up and down the drive his small plump body had trundled beside their turning, while he gnashed and bit and strove to tear the rubber off the tyres. He was hoarse from barking. Now he too felt older and stronger because of the coming of the car. A new truculence shone out of his eyes. He had lost one of his first teeth against the tyre. With his tail at a gay angle, one ear cocked the other hanging, he swaggered after Diggory into the stable and saw the car established in one of the empty stalls.

The stable door swung to. They stood together in the cobbled yard. From the house came the sound of Nurse’s bell tinkling for bedtime. A thrush was singing in the pink hawthorn tree by the stable. Diggory squatted beside Dan and put his arms about his neck.

“It’s been a day of good joy,” he said. Danny grinned up at him, the gap in his teeth showing.

Uncle Rex and Aunt Sonia were coming to visit. These two lived in the children's minds surrounded by an effulgent nimbus. Their coming meant always a happy activity of expectation on the part of the grown-ups. They brought wonderful presents with them and showed an absorbed interest in everything the children did. Like two substantial fairies, they brought an atmosphere of magic with them.

"Now," said Mummie, "we must do something special for Uncle Rex and Aunt Sonia? What shall it be?"

"We could do a play," said Gillian.

"What sort of play?"

"The sort we often do with you. Just some pretending play."

"It must be a special play. I shall write one for you and Diggory."

"Good!" said Gillian. "Shall you write it this morning?"

"A play," said Mummie solemnly, "is a tremendous thing to write. You speak as though it were simply nothing. It may take me a very long time. In the first place, I have no idea how to write a play."

"It's very easy," said Diggory. "You just put down what the people say."

"What people?" asked Mummie.

"The people in the play."

"What play? This isn't even imagined yet."

"You write down what they say," said Gillian. "Then you imagine the people afterward. It's quite easy."

"Uncle Rex and Aunt Sonia are coming next week," said Diggory, "so you'd better hurry."

It was decided that the play should be about Alfred the Great and the burning of the cakes. It was a favourite story of Gillian's and, added to that, she liked everything to do with housewifery.

Somehow the play was written and rehearsals began. Nurse was invaluable as prompter. She sat, manuscript in hand, as serious as though a production for the West End were in progress, while Mummie, now filled

with hilarity, now with despair, pushed and harried the children through their parts.

Gillian consistently tried to act well, but, during the early part of the play, Diggory was limp and uninterested. He would loll, he would play with what was in his pockets, he would drop his staff with a clatter. But soon the feeling of his part would hold him and he would throw himself into it with fervour.

“He will never remember his lines!” Mummie cried in despair, as Nurse prompted him again and again.

“Ah yes, he will,” said Nurse soothingly. “He will be all right when the day comes.”

The day came swiftly, in brilliant heat. The garden drowsed in the sunlight. The goldfish hid beneath the water-lily pads. The children darted, like red flames, in their sun suits. Uncle Rex and Aunt Sonia came, beneficent, smiling, ready to be entertained.

And what presents they brought! A camera for Gillian and a Jubilee Procession with a gilt State coach for Diggory! They sat under the sycamore tree on the lawn drinking sherry and beaming at the children. They had two boys of their own and a thousand questions were asked about John and Martin.

Diggory had suddenly reached the stage of showing off. He got into his motor-car and came down the steep paths at breakneck speed, his face alight with daring. He turned corners on two wheels, making Aunt Sonia give a gasp of apprehension and bringing a delighted grin to Uncle Rex’s face.

When they went for a walk he rushed ahead to climb trees, balancing himself precariously to astonish the visitors.

“I’m afraid he’s going to break a limb one day,” said Sonia.

“He must be a boy,” answered Mummie.

Gillian did her share of showing off too. She wound herself up in the swing, then unwound in a dizzy whirl, her long hair falling to the grass. Uncle Rex swung her till her sandalled feet almost touched the sunny leaves of the sycamore.

The children forgot all about the play. It came almost as a shock when Mummie reminded them of it. It seemed impossible that something so heavy with responsibility should be demanded on a day so joyous and care-free.

Their faces were serious as Mummie and Nurse dressed them for the play. Gillian's costume was nothing more than an old-fashioned pinafore worn over one of her own muslin frocks, and a muslin kerchief fastened with a brooch. Her hair was done in a delicious little bun above her white nape. A tunic had been made for Diggory from a bright green silk jumper of Karen's. He wore a black velvet beret of Mummie's with a feather in it, and he carried a staff.

When they came downstairs the audience was seated. Karen had the properties in order—a low table and bench in front of the grate, a wooden bowl and spoon, and a baking-pan. A tall screen made a shield for the prompter and a back stage for the actors.

The audience of four sat with expectant smiles, Mummie very nervous.

Gillian comes from behind the screen and begins vigorously to stir imaginary batter. She wears kerchief and pinafore, her hair in a tiny bun on her nape.

GILLIAN: These are to be very delicious cakes. I have put treacle and currants and fresh eggs into them. When they are baked I shall cut them into pretty shapes. (*She begins to sing in a sweet voice, very much out of tune.*)

“I had a little nut-tree, nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg and a golden pear;
The King of Spain's daughter came to see me,
And all was because of my little nut-tree.
I skipped over water,
I danced over sea,
And all the birds in the air couldn't catch me.”

(As she finishes the song she puts the dough into the pan and sets it over the fire. The back view of her is comic as her dress is pulled up by the pinafore strings and her little round seat in frilly drawers is displayed. A tremor goes through the audience. Uncle Rex shakes in his chair and an hysterical smile broadens Aunt Sonia's face. But they restrain themselves. No faintest chuckle disturbs the actress. Nurse's voice is heard behind the screen, hoarse with anxiety: "Knock! It's time to knock!" The King's staff is heard to clatter to the floor.

There is a scuffling sound as it is recovered. Then a feeble knock sounds against the screen.)

GILLIAN: Who is there?

DIGGORY: May I come in?

GILLIAN: Who are you?

DIGGORY: A wanderer.

GILLIAN: (*going to the edge of the screen*): Did you say you are a pedlar? Have you pretty things to sell?

DIGGORY (*feebly*): I have nothing to sell.

GILLIAN (*severely*): Then what do you want?

DIGGORY (*still more feebly but now coming into view*): To hide from my enemies.

GILLIAN: You may hide here if you will watch my cakes.

(She grasps him firmly by the hand and leads him to the bench. He sits down, dropping his staff. She drags him to his feet again. "No, no, not that way! You're facing the wrong way!" She places him to her satisfaction and puts his staff into his hand.)

GILLIAN: Do not let my cakes burn. I have put treacle and currants and fresh eggs into them.

DIGGORY (*a little stronger but still somewhat subdued*): Thank you, my good woman. I will gladly watch your cakes.

(She goes off singing—"I had a little nut-tree," etc. He sits, head on hand, gazing despondently at the fire.)

DIGGORY: Where are my brave Knights, I wonder. I have not seen them since the last battle. I do wish they would come!

(He looks really pathetic. The audience gaze at him tenderly. She returns, very much pleased with herself and goes straight to her cakes.)

GILLIAN (*horrified*): Oh, what a stupid man! Oh, my beautiful cakes! They had treacle and currants and fresh eggs in them! (*She weeps, most realistically, her hands to her eyes. He watches her phlegmatically, making no comment.*)

(*She peeps at him anxiously between her fingers. Nurse's voice comes hoarsely from behind the screen. "Do not weep!" Diggory stares at the screen. "What?" "Do not weep!" His eyes move to Gillian's face. "She's not weeping. She's stopped." Mummie cries from the audience: "Go on weeping, Gillian!" Gillian weeps louder than ever; and it is a blessing she does for Uncle Rex and Aunt Sonia are at the point of suffocation.*)

DIGGORY (*in grand style*): Do not weep, my good woman! Dry your eyes! Here is a gold piece for you.

(*But he cannot find the gold piece, which is really a bright halfpenny, search as he will. Gillian finds it for him in his trousers pocket and he then proffers it to her in kingly fashion.*)

GILLIAN (*snatching the halfpenny*): But who are you to give gold pieces to poor folk?

DIGGORY (*proudly*): I am King Elfred.

(*"Alfred!" corrects Gillian.*)

DIGGORY: I am King Awlfred.

GILLIAN (*falling to her knees*): Ah, Sire, forgive me my boldness!

DIGGORY (*raising her*): You are forgiven. (*Then briskly with genuine curiosity.*) What shall you buy with the gold piece?

GILLIAN: A cow, two pigs, and a fine silk dress.

DIGGORY (*now in grand form*): A fine silk dress for a peasant woman!

(*He glares at her in righteous disapproval, then his face softens, he smiles and chucks her under the chin.*)

DIGGORY: You are very pretty! Buy your fine silk dress and be happy!

GILLIAN: Ah, thank you, Sire! You are a good King.

DIGGORY: Thank you for your hospitality, my good woman. Farewell!

(He gives her his hand and she kneels and kisses it. He drops his staff and attempts an exit.)

NURSE (*shooing him back*): Pick up your staff!

DIGGORY: My what?

NURSE: Your staff—your stick—pick it up!

DIGGORY: Oh yes!

(He runs back, picks up his staff, makes a little bow to the audience, and goes off.)

GILLIAN: Oh, how happy I am! Who cares for burnt cakes! Now I shall sing and dance and be happy for ever! (*Sings—“I had a little nut-tree, etc.” She dances, tripping lightly, smiling at the audience who vociferously applaud.*)

(Nurse pushes Diggory from behind the screen. “Go out and share the applause!” “What?” “Go out and bow!” “I did bow!” “They want to see you again!” He comes to Gillian’s side, his face pale beneath the velvet cap, and bows gravely.)

“It was splendid!” said Uncle Rex with Gillian on his knee.

“Marvellous!” agreed Aunt Sonia, her arm about Diggory.

“And the way I produced it!” cried Mummie.

“Yes, the way you produced it was amazing.”

“And even wrote it,” said Gillian.

“I did the stage setting,” said Karen.

Nurse’s face appeared from behind the screen.

“The prompter!” cried Uncle Rex. And there was more applause.

Dan was a bundle of vitality. From morning to night he scarcely knew how to express his gladness in being alive. When he was taken out of his basket in the morning he crouched, drawing himself close, his eyes dancing, then he sprang, circled, darted, crouched again, rushed at the most vulnerable thing in his proximity and worried it. And so from morning to night he added to the confusion and gaiety of The Very House.

His sense of importance was enormous. He swaggered from room to room with an air of truculent possessiveness. He ate whatever he could induce down his throat. Once when he was sick on the rug it was found that his sickness consisted of two lumps of coal, a bit of string, the leg of a lead soldier, the head of Ham, from the Noah's ark, and a safety-pin.

With all his geniality he had a violent temper. Mummie would hold him in her two hands, on a level with her face, and grin at him teasingly. For a moment he would grin back, showing his little pointed teeth, then he would begin to struggle. If she restrained him he would toss himself violently, turn his head away from her as though he hated the sight of her, slide his bright eyes toward her wickedly, then with an ear-splitting yell, endeavour to bite her nose off!

"You make him worse by teasing him," warned Karen.

"The darling!" said Mummie, and hugged him close. In an ecstasy of reconciliation he bit her ear. When he was put down he ran in dizzy circles about the room, throwing the rugs into disorder.

"It's impossible," said Karen, "to keep anything tidy since he came. Between children and dogs the house is always in disorder."

The next week Karen was given a three-months-old Cairn puppy for a present.

Karen scarcely knew whether or no to be pleased, but when the hamper in which he had made the long train journey was opened and she saw the timid quivering puppy inside, she was all gentleness.

"I do hope he and Dan will make friends!" said Mummie. She sat down on the settee with Dan on her knees, Karen sat opposite with the Cairn, all silky greyness, on hers. Dan's face lit up with astonishment. His nostrils

quivered. He wagged his tail and leant toward the Cairn. The Cairn uttered a warning growl surprisingly deep for his size.

Dan stiffened himself. Then, with a yell of rage, he hurtled through the air onto Karen's lap. The puppies rolled over together screaming.

For the next three days it was a tense struggle to keep them apart. Mummie and Karen went through the business of their life each with a belligerent puppy gripped under her arm, only daring to set them down in separate rooms. Then suddenly on the fourth day it was decided to put them together on the lawn. Dan lay down in front of the Cairn with a rollicking air. The Cairn, half his size, straddled him and they sniffed each other and the bond of friendship was established. From that moment Dan opened his heart wide to the Cairn. All that he owned was shared with him. He brought him his ball. When the Cairn had finished his dinner and ran to Dan's dish, the Scottie moved aside and made room for him. He had a grand heart and, once it was given, it was given in grave earnest.

The Cairn, who was now named Robbie, was swift to take advantage of this. As the evenings became cooler and the dog-basket was set in front of the open fire, Dan scrambled into it and Robbie was put on the fender stool. But his gentle glance rested on the basket and Dan curled so comfortably in it. He sprang lightly to the floor and stood staring into the basket. Dan opened one almond-shaped eye, and returned the stare with a look of troubled questioning. Then he closed the eye and curled himself more closely. Robbie got into the basket beside him. But he did not lie down. He just sat staring. Dan scrambled out of the basket and leaped onto the fender-stool. From that moment the basket was Robbie's.

It was not fair, said Karen, and she bought a new, a larger dog-basket for Dan. It was delightful to see them on the early autumn evenings, snuggled in their two nests in front of the bright fire.

But Robbie had an eye on the larger basket.

One evening he hopped out of his basket and stood staring at Dan. The almond-shaped eye opened, then determinedly closed. The hard black brindle body drew itself into a ball. Robbie did not get in beside him. He just sat and stared.

Dan got out of his basket and stretched, rolling his eyes at Mummie.

"You're a little fool," said Mummie.

He grinned deprecatingly. Robbie bounded, light as thistledown, into the larger basket and curled himself luxuriously. Dan scrambled into the small

basket.

But when it came to bones, he was not so amenable. He would rush across the lawn at Robbie with a shout of rage if he touched his bone. One day however, Robbie did get it. He had already buried his own and, when Dan had rushed after the baker's boy he snatched the bone and trotted toward The Wilderness with it to bury it also.

But Dan saw him and, like a thunderbolt, dashed across his path. Robbie trotted back to the lawn and sat down with the large bone in his mouth. Dan sat down near him staring fixedly at the bone.

After a little Robbie rose and trotted in the direction of the rose garden. Dan dashed after him and drove him back. After that Robbie walked majestically up and down the drive, holding the bone high, while Dan sat on guard.

At last Robbie rushed through the open door and up the two long flights of winding stairs to the top floor. Dan was close at his heels. They clinched, at first in rage, then in a fury of play.

Up and down the stairs they went, under beds, over settees, in and out of the house, leaving kicked-up rugs, crumpled covers and things generally upset in their wake.

Play easily turned to anger with Robbie. His little face, with eyes of seraphic sweetness, could turn in an instant to the sneering face of a gargoyle, his lips drawn back above his sharp teeth. His movements were swift as a bird's. At top speed he flowed rather than ran. When he was just a little older Dan would not be able to catch him. But now Dan could catch him.

In a wild rush he would catch him, perhaps by the downy hair on top of his head, throw him down, worry him into a romp. Sometimes Robbie did not want to romp. When he was dragged about he shut his eyes, became limp and uttered faint moans. But a final tweak inevitably roused him to resentment. He turned on the black tormentor who sped across the lawn triumphant and rollicking.

All over the house there were evidences of their presence. On the table at the back of the hall, outside the kitchen door, Mrs. Waddy laid the two fresh bones when they came from the butcher. They were laid on the blue plates, and never were they there for five minutes before Dan discovered them and sat gazing up with nostrils quivering.

Gillian and Diggory had made a friend, Mr. Tarrant, who owned much of the land in the neighbourhood. They were a little shy of him when they first met. Mr. Tarrant had a vigorous, even domineering personality, his piercing dark eyes, his short but formidable grey beard, the way he had of carrying his gun about with him, as though always ready to shoot. But he had a smile for the children. He often had sweets or nuts in his pockets. He and his red cocker spaniel were welcomed in the winding green lanes.

Mr. Tarrant would stare at Diggory and then at Mummie. "I hope you will not send that boy to school," he would say. "He has too much individuality. They'll make him just like the others."

Diggory would stare up, with an embarrassed smile, not knowing whether or no he wanted to go to school.

"They sent me to three different schools," Mr. Tarrant would go on, "and I hated them all. All three have since smashed and I hope I contributed to their downfall."

"I'm sure you did," agreed Mummie, and he would stride off triumphant, his gun over his shoulder, his spaniel at his heels.

Mr. Tarrant's father had been a famous engineer and he had once lived in The Very House. It was he who had built the Jubilee Drive that spanned the hills, in honour of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Evidences of him were in the gardens. When workless men came to him for help, he had set them to digging a tunnel beneath the grounds. Now its entrance was overrun by creepers; no one knew where it led. Sometimes the children ventured to peer into it, but a scurry of bats frightened them away.

There were too many owls and bats about The Very House. The owls killed the gay little songsters and the bats sometimes came into the house at night. No one was so much afraid of them as Mummie. Her room was on the top floor where she could look out on the treetops and the Beacon and the distant hills of Wales. Snug in her bed she would listen to the mysterious whisperings between the great sycamore and the Scotch firs, the aloof rustling of the lofty deodar. The deodar was the one tree she did not like. It was too greedy for sunshine. It was greedier even than she. No sooner was the sun well above the highest hill and sailing across the open sky, his brightness pouring down over house and garden, than the deodar tree began

to stretch long supple arms toward him. Before the dew was dried from the grass the green fingers of the deodar had marked the sun for her own. He struggled against her, peering through her dark draperies, casting her shadow from him on to the lawn, shooting his bright spears against the windows of the house, but he could not escape. She hugged him fast till late afternoon. Then, with a flourish of flame, he escaped her and sped toward the Black Mountains, pausing only to redden the trunk of the Scotch firs and gild the weathercock.

The long sunny summer passed. Twilight fell earlier. The children no longer lay awake for hours after they were put to bed, calling out to everyone who passed their doors—"Come and see me!" and "Come and see me first!"

Diggory looked enviously at Gillian when she won a florin at the Flower Show for the best vase of flowers shown by a child. They stood with Nurse in the hot tent banked with flower exhibits seeing nothing but the vase of sweet peas, forget-me-nots and rose-buds, arranged by Gillian with her name on a card tied to the vase.

It was hotter still in the tent where butter, jam, cakes, and bread were shown.

They gazed languidly at the exhibits as Nurse led them through the crowd. They yearned towards the side shows and the roundabouts whose blaring music shook the hot sunny air. At the cocoa-nut shy they encountered Mr. Tarrant who gave the cocoa-nut he had won to Diggory. Gillian must have one too! So Mr. Tarrant spent penny after penny till he had secured another for her. Holding the cocoanuts to their breasts, they trudged across the dusty grass toward the roundabout. They had a glimpse of Mummie and Karen arriving late and being stopped by the photographer, who took photographs for ninepence each and finished them on the spot. Mummie was facing him, feet rather too wide apart, a rather too wide smile; but Karen, with her sunshade, looked very nice. She waved to the children.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"To the roundabout!"

"We'll come too!" said Mummie.

She and Karen stood watching the children and Nurse go round and round in a chariot. The children would have liked to mount the zebra or the lion but Nurse was afraid they would fall off.

All about was the bustle and electric stir of the side shows. Gipsy women stood in the doorways of their caravans wheedling rustics into them to have their fortunes told. White-haired old colonels and benevolent elderly ladies were absorbed in gambling games. The Squire's lady was bowling for a sucking pig. Two fat negroes, in African dress, were playing on heathen instruments outside their show, while the white woman, married to one of them, expatiated loudly on their ability to eat fire, swallow knives, and walk on red-hot coals.

Oh, it was lovely! The children and Mummie and Karen stood in the thickest of the crowd gazing at the sweating negro players.

In a select enclosure Olde English Pageants were being produced. The sun beat hotly on the close rows of chairs. The children had got seats well to the front. The pageant of a famous Hereford Dragon was being enacted.

A prisoner who had been sentenced to death was told, in dumb show, that if he would slay the dragon which had been terrifying the countryside for many a year he would be set free. He agreed to the test and was armed with a lance. The populace stood goggle-eyed; the children gasped, as the green dragon, on eight human legs, advanced into the ring. The fight was terrible. The condemned man waved his lance. He ran forward and gingerly rapped the dragon on the nose. After some delay a wisp of smoke emerged from the dragon's nostrils. There was agitation among the eight legs that supported him and he sank feebly to the ground. The entire company danced round him. The condemned man was elevated and freed. The audience, on the verge of sunstroke, applauded mightily and made their way to the tea tent.

Home again, Gillian refused to put her florin into her money-box. She stood, tiny and determined, clutching it in her hand, her hands behind her back, her back to the wall.

Mummie and Nurse stared down at her aghast. They stared at each other in consternation. A child with a whole florin who would not put it into her money-box!

"But you must," said Nurse. "Else you'll go losing it."

"I won't put it in," said Gillian.

"But, darling," said Mummie, "think of how nice it will be to have a whole florin living in there with the pennies!"

Gillian shook her head. "I won't put it in," she said.

Mummie turned to Karen who had just come up. “Gillian won’t put her florin in her money-box,” she said.

“It will be lost before to-morrow at this time,” said Nurse.

Gillian smiled up at Karen. “I want to play with it,” she said. “I want to have it in my own room, on my bed, so I can play with it first thing in the mornings.”

“And so you shall!” exclaimed Karen. “You won the florin. The florin is yours. Why should you be forced to save it? I hate saving money.”

“Hmph, well, well, well, hmph,” grumbled Nurse. “I never heard of such a thing.” She went off to the nursery.

“Very well,” said Mummie meekly, “and if you lose the florin Karen shall give you another.”

“Karen had better give me one,” said Diggory, “I want to buy a horse.”

They were off to school! It was the most opportune, the most attractive, the most amazing little school. It had been built in a neighbour's garden for her own small son. It stood on a smooth lawn with flower borders all about, a dove-cote in the middle of the lawn, and white doves bowing and rookety-cooing to the children at their play. The school was complete in itself—one large room, with chairs and tables of the right size, a fireplace, and a lavatory and cloakroom.

Six children went to the school—curly-headed John Henry, for whom it was built; Elinor who had a mass of waving dark hair and a serious face that could unexpectedly flash into mirth; Margaret with her ready smile and hair that curled and rippled and spun itself into a golden crown for her; Barbara, brown-haired, brown-eyed, warm-tinted, vivid, who soon showed a talent for drawing and joyfully flew after all learning, as a bird after butterflies. There were Gillian and Diggory.

Mummie mourned over their floss-fine straight blonde hair. "Why haven't you curls?" she complained. "You set out in the morning with every hair in place, but your hair is so straight and so fine that when you come home you are a sight."

"I had curls once," said Diggory.

"Even I have curly hair," said Mummie.

"Yes, even you," said Gillian, and stroked it the wrong way.

They loved the school. They set off each morning, on either side of Nurse, along the drive, beyond the laurel hedges, past the stable and the run where Thatcher kept his poultry. Through the heavy moss-grown gate, into the lane and from there to the garden where the school stood. At noon Nurse called for them or Mummie came to fetch them, bringing the dogs, whose leads she fastened to the schoolroom door.

The children were school children. They began to say and do things in imitation of others. There was a new and unknown experience behind them each day when they returned home. They began to have superior ways with them. "Why, don't you know *that*?" and "Of *course*, that's the way we do it at school!" Diggory quoted the teacher. "Miss Mills says my hair needs cutting. She says if it isn't cut soon she'll plait it. . . ." "Hmph," retorted

Nurse. “Hmph. . . .” “Miss Mills says my shoelaces with the little knobs on the ends are silly. She says she’ll cut them off one day. . . .” Nurse and Mummie stared at one another. “Hmph, hmph, hmph. . . .”

There never were such tuneless children. They had learned only one tune—“Good King Wenceslaus”—and to it they sang “Three Blind Mice,” “Clementina,” “God Save the King,” and whatever songs they thought they could sing.

“It’s a judgment on me,” cried Mummie, “for the things I’ve said about crooners.”

Side by side the children stood, their faces like two daisy faces turned heavenward, their mouths open wide, while the tune of “Good King Wenceslaus” carried the words of song after song to the pained ears of their audience. Nurse stood, head forward, listening intently, trying hopefully to extract an appropriate note or two. Mummie, with an expression midway between hilarity and depression, hugged the radiator, for the weather had grown cold. The radiators at The Very House were never really hot, for the furnace that heated them stood outdoors and it had to overcome the cold air from the Cotswold hills, the cold air from the Malvern Hills and the cold air from the Welsh Mountains before it would even consider the cold of The Very House.

But though the children were tuneless they appreciated the music of others. They were full of pride in Simms’ accomplishments. They could talk of little else on Armistice Day but the fact that Simms was going to sound the Last Post at the Priory Church during the Memorial Service.

Mummie and Karen were proud too, as they sat among the congregation, when the solemn bugle-notes rang out from behind the chancel and they knew that Simms was producing them. The notes sounded mysterious, like a message from the dead, but Simms, when he came out of the church, and took his place in the car, looked just as usual.

Mummie and Karen were off to buy Gillian’s birthday present. She had asked for a doll’s pram. She had seen the very pram she wanted in a shop in Cheltenham. It was sprung like a baby’s pram. It was big enough for a baby. It was, alas, the most expensive one in the shop. But no other would do.

“Are you sure,” asked Mummie doubtfully, “that you want a doll’s pram? You don’t care very much for your dolls.”

“Yes, yes, please! I want it so badly!”

So the perambulator was bought and the birthday party dwindled to insignificance beside its glory. Up and down the nursery she wheeled it, giving the dolls and the teddy bear rides in turn.

“*Won't* it be exciting when I can take it out on the road!” she exclaimed to Diggory.

“It won't be exciting to me,” he returned, for he was not enthusiastic either about the pram or the birthday.

Danny loved the pram. He divided his time between it and Diggory's car, raging, growling, tearing at the tyres of each in turn. It was very disturbing. Mummie came to the window of her study and rapped on it fiercely.

“Am I to have no peace!” she cried.

The children brought the pram and the motor-car beneath her window. “What did you say?” they asked.

“Am I to have no peace?”

“Open the window, please; we can't hear you.”

She opened the window and they and the pups listened to what she had to say with innocent upturned faces. Then they tore along the drive, Dan barking at the tyres, Robbie barking at Dan, Mrs. Waddy coming to the door and shouting to all of them.

The puppies were fond of Mrs. Waddy. They liked her kitchen and they liked her. In fact, she was the only one whose call Robbie would obey. He would submit to any sort of handling. He was as docile as a lamb, but he would not come when he was called—except for Mrs. Waddy.

As the puppies developed, their different characteristics became more strongly marked. Robbie was a modern, easily bored, looking crushed if he could not have what he wanted at once; Dan, a solid Victorian, never giving up hope. Robbie was cat-like in his selection of comfortable spots; Dan sturdily lay down anywhere. In the room where they slept there was a hot-water pipe. On cold nights Robbie lay on the cushion nearest the pipe. On warm nights he chose the one farthest away. Dan took the one he rejected.

Robbie knew no shame. When he was discovered eating butter from the tea-table, he gracefully leaped to the floor, giving an unapologetic look at the intruder from under his movie-star eyelashes. Dan's power of abasing himself was unlimited. He crouched when Robbie was smacked. He lay flat on his back when he himself was smacked. But, when it was over, he shook himself and almost at once regained his good spirits.

How he enjoyed his walks! When the drawer where the leads were kept was opened he was always on the spot, eager, bustling, important. He thrust his head into the tartan collar. Every walk was a fresh adventure to him. Ears pricked, tail up, walking on his toes, he typified enjoyment and defiance. He was ready to fight anything from a St. Bernard to a Pekinese.

Yet how he had struggled against that collar when first he was introduced to it! He had rushed from spot to spot as though he were going to have a fit. Thrust his head into corners, buried it under sofa cushions, given himself indigestion and palpitation.

Robbie had never objected to his harness, once that he was captured and put into it! But he endured his walks rather than enjoyed them, wafting along the road like a grey moth; ears back, tail down, feet moving in delicate unison.

On Guy Fawkes night the sound of the sky rockets terrified him. He hid himself in The Wilderness and was lost for hours while all the household called him and sought to pierce the darkness with electric torches. Suddenly he appeared, as from nowhere, drifting into the beam from Nurse's torch and was carried in triumph by her to his despairing family.

A huge old pear tree stood on the knoll above the sun-dial. In the spring its ancient branches had been as white with bloom as any fruit tree in its prime. When autumn came it carried a weight of small sweet pears. Dan discovered these half-hidden in the long wet grass. He sniffed and liked the smell. He bit and liked the taste. He found another, still more mellow. Robbie sniffed Dan's mouth, liked the strange sweet smell, nosed among the wet grass blades, found a pear for himself. . . .

The greedy puppies presented themselves at walking time so rotund, so distended by pears, that their mistresses hardly knew them. They waddled rather than walked. They were too full for barks. During the walk they both were sick.

What had they found? Had they picked up something poisonous? What probings, what searchings took place!

The pups recovered. They seemed to feel better than ever. They had a shy, secretive air about them. They knew a thing or two worth knowing.

Next day they forgot all about the pear tree till nearly bedtime, but it was fun nosing about under the tree in the moonlight, hunting for ripe pears. If they were over-ripe it did not matter; they were even nicer.

That night they were sick in their room!

Day after day there was the same tale to tell of them. At last the truth was discovered. They were found by Karen (stalking them from behind shrubs) under the pear tree, with upturned muzzles, devouring the luscious fruit.

But it had been easier to discover the secret feasting than it now was to stop it. Twice a day Simms gathered the fruit. But he was no match for Dan and Robbie. Whenever they had a moment to spare they trotted to the pear tree and waited for a pear to fall.

Simms shook the tree. He climbed into it and reached what fruit was still left, but the old pear tree never failed the puppies and it was not till winter came that they must be satisfied with normal meals.

The two had strangely different expressions in their eyes. Robbie's look was almost human. Without effort he could commune with those he loved, seeming to understand their feelings. But he was self-centred, caring only for what concerned him.

The look in Dan's eyes had no human quality in it. It was a wondering, puzzled, yearning look, as though he tried with all his soul to understand human feelings but could not. Yet he was interested in all that went on in the house, trotting here and there, investigating, trying to understand. Robbie paid no attention to the children's games, but he would let them pull him about, carry him, to his fastidious discomfort, without complaint. A noisy game brought Dan into the midst of it with a shout, his eyes dancing, his tail gay. He would snatch their balls, their balloons, and dart away with them. But let the children take him by the scruff, let them hug him just a shade too warmly, and a blood-curdling growl broke from his barrel-like chest.

“I’ll poke her with a stick! I’ll have her tossed by a bull! I’ll give her nineteen pushes! I’ll throw her down a well!”

These threats come from Diggory’s infant mouth as he strides along the country road at Mummie’s side. The peaceful December scene spreads before him; the duck pond, with the ducks in quacking procession; the steep fields where four hunters graze and a flock of sheep raise their mild faces to peer at him as he passes; the gate where John Henry’s donkey brays for sugar; the holly trees scarlet with berries, the hills tawny beneath the blue sky, and—“I’ll poke her with a stick! I’ll have her tossed by a bull!”

The time was past when Diggory bent his head to Gillian’s tyranny. The eighteen months between them grew less important. Now he could do some things she dared not do. Now he made dire threats at her behind her back and even dared to fight her. He was almost as tall as she. People asked if they were twins.

In his heart he had a great admiration for her accomplishments. When he saw her pirouetting down the room at dancing class, the points of her ballet shoes skimming the smooth floor, he would whisper to Mummie—“She’s doing quite well, isn’t she?”

At this time it was her aim to keep, a very loose front tooth in its place till after the kindergarten entertainment. It was so loose that it wobbled whenever her tongue touched it. It became so loose that it wobbled when she breathed. Still it held its place. “I shall nip it out directly after the entertainment,” said Nurse; “but do try to keep it till then.”

“Come and play hide-and-seek!” shouted Diggory, swarming up Mummie’s back.

“I’ll do the counting-out,” cried Gillian.

“No, me!” shouted Diggory.

“I’ll do it myself,” said Mummie. She used the counting-out verse she had made for the children.

“Hodge, podge, flummery flan,
Higgler, peddler, muffin man,
Ragglety-Tagglety, Limerick-loo,
In comes Mickey Mouse,
Out go *you!*”

Always she counted in such a way that the children had the joy of hiding, while she was the one to seek.

Now she sat on the corner of the nursery table, swinging her foot and staring at the picture of the old square-rigger in full sail. She strained her ears to hear the sound of steps:

“Coo-coo! Coo-coo!” came Gillian’s voice.

Mummie began her prowling search.

They were not in the spare room. She investigated every corner. They were not in the study. She peered behind every curtain. They were not in the housemaid’s cupboard. They were not in Gillian’s room or the night nursery. They must be on the top floor!

Softly she crept up the stairs, two steps at a time. Then she heard them scampering up the stairs from the hall! She leapt toward the nursery door to head them off. She and Gillian collided. Gillian fell on her face. She rose, with flashing eyes and a gap in her mouth.

“Look,” she exclaimed, “what you’ve done! You’ve knocked out my tooth!”

Nurse and the children were walking in the rain along Tarrant's Drive. Mr. Tarrant himself, with two of his men, appeared before them at a bend of the Drive. He greeted the children jovially.

"Well, you *do* look jolly in your red macs and sou'westers! We're having a rabbit hunt with a ferret. Come and see!"

The children drew near, but timidly. One of the men opened a sack and took out a small greyish-white animal. It hung limp in his hands. He introduced it into the opening of a burrow. It glided in.

"Now," said Mr. Tarrant, looking along the barrel of his gun, "watch closely and see what happens. It will be fun."

"I don't like the looks of the ferret," said Gillian.

"He's not meant to be pretty," said Mr. Tarrant. "He's just useful."

Nurse took the children firmly by their hands. They stared round-eyed at the burrow. The man with the sack had an expectant grin on his face. Mr. Tarrant's keen eyes were fixed on his gun, which pointed toward the burrow.

Suddenly, as it seemed from the heart of the earth, out sprang a rabbit! Its eyes were starting, its legs extended in a graceful leap, its white scut upturned. There was a sharp explosion. The rabbit gave a convulsive leap, then fell at their feet, motionless. The man with the sack laughed.

"There," said Mr. Tarrant, "what do you think of that?"

"Why doesn't the rabbit move?" asked Gillian.

"Because it's dead! I shot it."

He picked up the rabbit by its hind-legs and put it into Diggory's hand. "It's a nice plump one. Take it home and have it cooked for your dinner."

"Say thank you to Mr. Tarrant," said Nurse.

Diggory carried the rabbit proudly. He felt its little feet, soft and warm, in his hand. Over and over again in his mind he saw it spring from the burrow, heard the shot, saw it fall. He looked down at it and saw the small red drops fall from its breast. He felt exalted and a little sick. He could scarcely wait to get home to show it to his mother. The rain was coming down hard.

Inside the hall Ivy was standing on a chair lighting the chandelier. Mummie and Robbie had that moment come in from the garden. Robbie was wet and Nurse went running for a towel to dry him. Gillian sat on the bottom step and began pulling off her goloshes. Cook came from the kitchen, holding the bowl in which was the Christmas pudding against her breast, and with her other hand waving her wooden spoon.

“The greengrocer has been!” she cried. “He’s left the gate open! Are the puppies both indoors?”

Dan was missing. Cook set down the mixing-bowl and ran into the rain calling: “Dan! Dan!”

Robbie began running in circles, yapping delightedly. Karen came in, her arms full of holly.

“The gate is open!” screamed Gillian, “Mrs. Waddy has gone after Dan! He’s lost!”

The rain dripped from the postman’s hat and cape. He stared into the hall expectant. The cook came running back, the wet Scottie in her hands. “Give me the towel,” she demanded in her good strong voice.

In her high parrot’s voice, Ivy shrieked above the din:

“The postman wants a ha’penny! The postman wants a ha’penny!”

“Thur’s a letter ’tis overweight,” apologized the postman.

Karen laid the holly beside the Christmas pudding and ran for her purse. Nurse came hastening with the towel, but Dan would have none of it. His bright eyes had spied the puppy biscuit lying in the silver dish with the visiting-cards. Loudly he spoke for it.

At last came the lull Diggory was waiting for. He held up the rabbit. “Mr. Tarrant gave me this. I saw it killed.”

“He’s to have it cooked for his dinner to-morrow,” said Nurse.

“I don’t think I want to eat it,” said Diggory. He went slowly up the stairs.

Upstairs he said—“I think I know what being dead is. You go to sleep and you try to wake up and—you can’t!”

Mr. Tarrant had given the children a tall young tree for Christmas. It stood in the corner of the dining-room nearest the conservatory. Through the glass doors could be seen the white and yellow and mauve and bronze heads of the chrysanthemums on their strong stems. The tree looked less lonely standing near these other growing things. There was communion between them.

But when Karen had decorated the tree, when she had draped glittering tinsel from bough to bough, hung gold and silver birds and fish and balanced a candle on every twig, no longer was any communion possible between growing things and the tree. Now it stood, proud and aloof, beautiful and remote, marked for gaiety and death.

Out in the storm the carol-singers raised their voices against the gale. Four little boys there were, with scarves round their necks and caps pulled low. “Noël—Noël——” they sang and stared at the dark ivy-covered front of the house, stared hopefully at the big black door with the brass knocker on it.

The tallest could just reach the knocker and timidly rapped. Mrs. Waddy put out her head.

“Three nights before Christmas!” she exclaimed, “and singing carols already!”

The little boys hung their heads.

Mrs. Waddy knocked on the door of the study.

“It’s carol-singers, madam,” she said apologetically.

Karen opened the little drawer of her desk.

“Give them a shilling!” said Mummie magnificently.

Karen sent them a shilling. There was silence.

But not for long. The children were having their bath, Ivy was laying the table for supper. The dogs were curled by the fire, the gale blew louder. But above it, loud and strong, came “There is a green hill far away” from the throats of six lusty youths and maidens.

Strongly they knocked at the door. This time Ivy went. She introduced her fish's face into the study.

"Carol-singers, 'm," she breathed heavily.

"How many are there?" asked Karen.

"Six, 'm."

"Give them two shillings!" cried Mummie enthusiastically.

Karen gave them two shillings but without enthusiasm. "It is too soon," she muttered.

But that was not the end. Barely had they settled down for the evening when there came another feeble chorus of "Noël—Noël." Again Mrs. Waddy went to the door. This time there were six little boys.

"A penny apiece," said Karen firmly. "No more." She counted out the pence.

When the little boys, after polite thanks were turning away, Mrs. Waddy saw that the first four little boys were there sheltering behind two new ones.

"I see you!" she exclaimed. "I see you, and don't come back again! Don't forget to shut the gate!" They scuttled down the drive.

Every half-hour a fresh lot of carol-singers appeared. The children could not sleep. They called to each other from their rooms. The dripping boughs of the larches and firs moved in the wind that was blowing across the hills from Wales. It was turning colder. A white rime was appearing on the grass and a film of ice on the pond. Between the breaking clouds the moon appeared lying on its back silvering their edges.

And so on the next night and the next, which was Christmas Eve, the carol-singers came in steady succession. There was almost no silver left in the house. The donations became less and less but it did not matter; the good tidings had spread that carol-singers were well rewarded at The Very House and their hopes were not quenched.

On Christmas Eve, when everyone was in bed, six stragglers from the village pub rolled up the road after closing time. They came through the iron gate, rolled up the steep curve of the drive and halted a bit bewildered before the door. There was whispered consultation. "What should they sing? 'Little Brown Jug'? 'Clementina'?" These they had been singing during the evening. "But these bean't carols! We ought to sing summat religious fur t' ladies. What about 'Widdicombe Fair'? Aye, that 'ud be grand!" Two of

them burst loudly into Widdicombe Fair. “Stop it! Stop it! That bean’t carol! What be carol, boys? ‘Good King Wenceslaus!’ Aye, aye, that be carol!” Lustily they burst into song all in different keys. All more or less hoarse.

The household woke with a start. There was something wild and strange about the singing. The children thought that robbers had come out of Wales, as in the olden days, and were shouting at the door.

“It’s just carol-singers,” Nurse reassured them. “We shall pay no attention to them.”

No one answered the door. The singers went on and on. Then impatient, the carollers began to pound loudly on the door. The pounding sounded frightening in the night, but to Nurse, generally so peaceable, it was enraging. In the dressing-gown she had got in Japan, her electric torch in her hand, she descended the stairs to the door. She faced it belligerently.

“Who is there?” she demanded.

“Genuine unemployed,” came the husky answer. “May us sing carols to you?”

“It’s a queer time to ask, when you’ve been shouting them for the past ten minutes,” she answered angrily. “How dare you wake people up at this hour? How dare you come pounding at people’s doors? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! No one wants to hear you sing. Go away!” She glared into the keyhole through which she was speaking.

“Can’t us sing carols, then?”

“Haven’t I told you, no? Go away!” The electric torch trembled in her hand.

Lugubriously they turned away. Arm in arm they rolled down the drive and through the gate. Mystified, troubled in spirit, resentful, they rolled down the road. Then one of them began to sing “Little Brown Jug” and they cheered up, joining fervently in the chorus.

The wind grew stronger. The clouds were all blown away. The moon had the sky to herself till the red rim of the sun showed above the rimy hill-top. Then a flock of little clouds like sheep returned from Wales to reflect the first red of the sunrise on their fleece.

Diggory had got a set of carpenter’s tools in his stocking. Now the joyful tap-tap of his hammer woke the house.

After Christmas and days of fog, came snow. First the lily pond froze, then snow fell on the ice till the goldfish were hidden, forgotten till Thatcher came with his spade and made a hole in it for them. They shouldered each other breathing at the hole, staring up at the children, then darting away in a flurry.

The snow came down steadily all one night. The children woke to find a new world, white and ethereal under the blue sky. Karen and Mummie were excited, for they had been born in a snowy, sunny country and they remembered their own childhood, their toboggans and sleighs.

“Oh, if only we had a sleigh!” cried Mummie.

“We might make a snow man,” said Karen.

“Where are the children?”

“Oh, walking, as usual. Always walking, walking! Let’s capture them and have a snow man!”

They captured the children and the snow man was begun, under Nurse’s disapproving eyes. Into the house she went, talking to herself.

Oh, the joy of it, rolling the huge snowball over and over, up and down the lawn, under the deodar tree whose great branches were powdered with white! The children’s cheeks turned from cream to pink, from pink to rosy red. Their breath came fast.

“It’s good for you,” said Mummie. “It pumps the blood through your bodies.”

“Blood!” said Diggory, aghast. “Are we full of blood, then?”

“Absolutely full,” said Mummie, “or ought to be.”

On to the body of the snow man was reared his head, a big head, with a noble brow, a jutting nose and a mouth in which they stuck a pine-cone for a cigar. The children danced round and round him scarcely able to wait till the next day when they could make him a wife.

For now they must go indoors. Nurse’s little bell had tinkled at the nursery window. How they resented the little bell that was always tinkling in on their pleasure!

Slowly, slowly they mounted the stairs, lingering to peer through the banisters to see Karen and Mummie brushing the snow from the pups, lingering to see Ivy hurrying past with a covered dish, anything to prolong the moment.

The pups had a new basket. Dan had so grown that one of a larger size was now chosen for him. There was a nice plump cushion in it. The two round baskets sat side by side in front of the fire.

The pups walked about them sniffing. They sniffed the agreeable scent of the old cushion and the less agreeable, stranger scent of the new. But they were sure they could soon change that.

Mummie took Dan by the middle and heaped him into the large basket.

“Nicey, nicey,” she cooed, “nice new basket!”

He stood wobbling in it as though he felt some strange danger lurking there. Feebly he began to clamber out. Robbie began to clamber in. Karen snatched him up.

“No, no,” she reproved. “Not for you! Nice little basket for Robbie!” She put him firmly in the little basket.

From under his long lashes he gave her a mulish look, got out of the basket and sprang to the settee. Mummie again placed Dan in the new basket.

Now he seemed to approve. He lay down in a comfortable ball showing just one almond-shaped bright eye.

Ivy stood primly by the door. “Lunch is on the table, ’m,” she breathed.

“We’ll be there directly,” said Karen. She took Robbie from the settee and laid him coaxingly in the small basket. Both pups immediately got out of both baskets and raised enquiring eyes to their mistresses.

“Nicey, nicey,” urged Mummie, squatting by the big basket.

Robbie lightly sprang into it.

“Not you!” She put him out and lifted Dan in.

With a look of horror Dan scrambled out and bundled himself dejectedly into the little basket. He pressed forepaws over eyes as in prayer. Airily Robbie leaped into the large basket.

He liked it. He beamed approval. He could stretch himself at full length in it. He lifted his head and over the rim of the basket gave an approving

glance at Dan in the little old basket. Then he lay down at peace.

Ivy gave a terrific bang on the gong in the hall. It was her afternoon out and she did not like a late lunch. The dogs leaped from their baskets and led the way to the dining-room, a subdued Mummie and Karen following them.

Everyone in The Very House was straining toward New Year's Day, the children longing for it to come, the grown-ups longing for it to be over. For there was to be a children's party on that day.

There had already been so many children's parties that Nurse was afraid that Gillian and Diggory would be worn out before their own came. But they were not. When New Year's Day came they chanted at breakfast—"We're having a party to-day! We're having a party to-day!"

"That's not the way to behave," reproved Nurse. "Eat your porridge properly and don't shout."

Gillian obeyed but Diggory began to giggle. He had lately reached the stage of laughing at nothing in particular, especially at meal-time. When reproved he would say—"But there is so much to laugh at!"

Now he went on and on and nothing could stop him.

But everyone in the house did not feel so gay. There had been a Christmas party in the kitchen with roast goose and plum pudding. Thatcher and Simms had brought their wives, Ivy her young man. There had been feasting and merriment. But now Thatcher had bronchitis; Mrs. Waddy had nose-bleed; Ivy, with an expression of gloom, had "turned out" the morning-room so that its furniture crowded the hall. Mrs. Joy, the rosy little woman who came in by the day, was scrubbing the tiles in the hall with door and windows wide open and a wet wind blowing through. Simms was building a fire in the drawing-room, where the chill was such that nothing short of a conflagration seemed equal to coping with it. The stove in the study was smoking its disapproval of the west wind. Mummie, with wrinkled brow and watering eyes, was writing there. In the pantry Karen salted almonds and stuffed dates. In the garden Nurse and the children sought Robbie. He had been lost for hours.

All through the country there were rains and floods. The sea behaved as though it would submerge this Island.

At the last minute Robbie was captured by Simms, dragged out of a rabbit-burrow, wet as a rat. At a second beyond the last minute Karen remembered that the gate had not been unlocked. She called to Ivy who was

doing her best to quarrel with Mrs. Waddy, and Ivy screamed to Simms. Simms ran to open the gate just as the first guests arrived.

Oh, the order of The Very House! The stately yet twinkling and inviting order! Tall flowers in vases, bright fires in grates, fresh candles on the Christmas-tree and presents for the children! Surely no house was ever in better order! Surely no tidier, more orderly family ever welcomed their guests. In the bathroom on the top floor the pups gnawed bones to comfort them for their exclusion.

The crystal chandelier was lighted. A hundred crimson candles shed their light on the small heads about the table. Gillian was important, sitting beside a boy of eleven, pulling a cracker with him, listening while he told her of his exploits at school.

After tea she marched behind him when they played at musical chairs. Breathless they flung themselves on the same chair. But he was gallant—he gave it up to her. She thought it would be nice if Diggory were a boy of eleven instead of a little brother always struggling to be her equal.

After the games there was to be a conjurer, a Captain Wilton. He was late and grown-ups and children grew more and more anxious as time went on. Then his jolly voice was heard. He came beaming into the room. The real excitement began.

Captain Wilton could do anything he chose. He could make a farthing hop about the table at his bidding. He could make a pine-cone grow into a little pine tree before the children's very eyes. He could cut off his thumb and put it on again, careless of gore. The children shrieked and shuddered their delight. The parents crowded in to see the conjuring. Outside there was rain and fog. Floods drenched the countryside. But inside The Very House there was magic.

They thought they were done with carol-singers, but that night, after Gillian and Diggory were in bed, they came again, singing "Noël—Noël ——" along the drive, lifting their white faces out of the darkness, being almost extinguished in the gale.

At Sunday dinner Gillian wore the gay cap she had got from a Christmas cracker, but beneath it her little face was pensive. Diggory did not wear his cap. He disliked anything on his head. Gillian brought a ha'penny and a farthing to Mummie for a present. "It's the last of my Christmas money," she explained, "and I thought perhaps you'd like it as you had to give so much to carol-singers."

All through lunch they asked questions about the war in Abyssinia.

“But why,” asked Mummie, “should you want to talk of nothing but war?”

“Well, you see,” Gillian explained, “this is the very first time we have been alive when there has been a war on.”

Sunday about they said grace. To-day it was her turn. She had a deep sense of devotion that was instinctive. When she folded her hands and bent her head she became grave, remote. She repeated the grace with reverence.

There was no reverence in Diggory. One eye was always tightly shut when he said grace but between the lids of the other a dark eye looked mischievously out. He gabbled his prayer disgracefully. But he would not have missed saying it when his turn came, and to-day, as Gillian repeated the words—“For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful,” he bent his head and listened with an air of satisfaction. He said:

“Gillian says grace one day and I say it the next. And so we shall go on for ever and ever.”

Above all things Gillian wanted to see the veterinary. With the exception of a visit to London this ambition shone bright and clear above all others. To see the “vet” and to go to town—these accomplished, she would be almost grown-up, a woman of experience!

He was so mysterious. He was so often spoken of, yet on the occasions when he had come to the house she had always been out. He knew all about dogs. He was consulted by telephone. His word was law.

Now, as she stood looking down on Dan who lay stretched on the settee in the sun-room, with Karen and Mummie sitting at either end looking troubled, the time had come when she was really to see the vet in the flesh.

She felt sorry for Dan, as he lay with twitching nostrils and anxious eyes. Still she could not have wished him well since because of his illness she was to see the vet.

The sweep, too, was at The Very House that day. To Gillian it seemed almost too good to be true—the sweep and the vet in one day!

Mummie and Karen seemed singularly unappreciative of these blessings. They had looked glum since the moment when Mrs. Waddy said that the chimney-sweep must come. All that morning they had been depressed by the sight of rugs rolled up and furniture swathed. The sweep himself, black as soot, with all his implements, moved them to no responsive pleasure. Now, with the visit from the vet in prospect, they looked even more downcast.

The lunch lay on the table uneaten. Ivy buzzed about eager to get on with the serving of it. Robbie sat unnoticed eating a corner of a sofa cushion.

A ring came at the door. “Run, Ivy, run! Thank goodness he’s here!” He came into the sun-room.

He was lean and shrewd and he had an Irish accent. He handled Dan with experienced hands. He gave him a sedative pill. Gillian stood close by, absorbing everything he did, seeing him as no ordinary man but a being important, powerful, glamorous.

When Nurse’s bell tinkled Gillian went up the stairs singing—

“I’ve seen the Vet!
I’ve seen the Vet!
First the sweep came—
Then the Vet came—
I’ve seen them both!
The sweep is black—
The Vet is white—
The sweep is serious—
The Vet is serious—
They both are kind!”

There was something primitive in Gillian.

Diggory’s joy was definite, personal. He knew just what had exalted him, though it might have appeared as nonsense to grown-ups. Gillian was swept up by feelings that gave her an hallucinated look. She scarcely knew what she was saying or doing. Dancing was the natural expression of her delight. It was as natural to her to dance as to a wild flower to toss on its stem.

One morning when spring was beginning to draw back the chill mists from the hills and the garden-slopes were sunny with daffodils, a strange old man came to The Very House. He was strongly built. He had a full, aquiline face and earrings in his ears. He carried an accordion which he played well. It was the day of the Spring Steeplechase and he would be there to play for the race crowds, but in the morning he went from house to house picking up what pence he could. He stood in the hall, accordion in hand, his bold eyes staring about.

The puppies, though they should now be called the dogs, for Dan was a year old and Robbie nearly so, had been carried, almost strangling with rage, to the kitchen by Mrs. Waddy and her niece Letty, who had come to take Ivy’s place. It had been no longer possible to endure Ivy.

Mummie said to Gillian—“Should you like to hear him play?”

Gillian nodded. She felt shy before this old man with the earrings. He eyed her boldly, his accordion poised.

“Very well,” said Mummie, “let us hear how you can play.”

He swung the accordion upward, following its flight with his bold eyes. He swung it low, bending over it with a brooding look. No sound came from it at first, then loudly the peal of church chimes filled the house. Up and

down the range of all the bells, in and out the intricacies of the changes, now low and fervently religious, now high and fierce and pagan.

Gillian stood rapt, her face upturned, her tiny pinafore with its fine lace edge fresh and jaunty, the little bow on her hair alert for what was to come.

“Now,” said the old musician, bending over her, “what do you think of that?”

“It was very nice, thank you.” Her cheeks flushed pink.

“Then—shall I play you a dance tune?”

“Yes, please.”

“Very well. Now, my little lady, you will hear the tune that will set your heart a-dancing. I’ve played it up and down the country, from Cumberland to Devon.”

He swayed to the swaying of the accordion, almost dancing to the tune that came so gaily. Gillian quivered with the desire to dance.

“May I?” she formed the words with her lips.

Mummie nodded.

Up and down the hall she danced, tripping, twirling, always on her toes! Her flying hair, every bit of her, sprang to dancing life. The old man’s eyes sparkled. He stared at her tripping feet, her tossing hair. He played faster and faster.

But when he stopped she seemed scarcely out of breath. She stood slim and still, looking up at him.

“Ay, but you can dance, little lady!” But the pleasure faded from his face. He began to tell of his troubles, how poaching was not so good as it had been and how playing at the races was being spoiled by tinned music, of how his old wife lay ill in the workhouse. Soon he was almost in tears, but he brightened when Mummie gave him a shilling and told him to go to the kitchen for a cup of cocoa.

“But wait,” she said, “till I get the dogs!”

The dogs were transferred from the kitchen to the morning-room. They made terrible growlings when they passed the old man in the hall. They tore at the door of the morning-room with screams of rage when they heard his laugh in the kitchen.

To control them was, in these days, from morning to night a problem. With the spring their energy, their capacity for mischief, their distrust of the world outside their garden wall, increased each day.

Every now and again they found a fresh opening under hedge or fence, went exploring and were lost for hours. Then Simms and Thatcher had to get more wire netting.

They slept in a room on the top floor, tumbling gleefully out of their baskets to greet the first-comer. Dan pranced, rocked like a hobby-horse, showed his teeth in a grin of welcome. Robbie lifted a coy fore-paw and talked in a growling intimate little voice of his pleasure in the reunion. All the way down the two flights of stairs he talked, stopping at each landing to roll on his back. Dan hurtled down the stairs like a black torpedo. Dire necessity spurred his short legs. But no matter what his necessity he would not pass over the door-sill till Robbie was at his side. Every day his devotion to Robbie increased. He could refuse him nothing but his good fresh bone. This he would defend with a savage yell.

They stood for a moment, in the early sunshine, gazing about them, looking for the first trouble. It took only a startling hopping across the lawn or a voice from the road to set them off. Across the emerald-green grass they would speed, Dan in bounds, Robbie in a savage grey streak, to gnash at the gate, to gnash at the milkman or whoever was the first to enter.

They circled about his unlucky legs through all the bends of the drive right to the kitchen door. Mrs. Waddy had so trained her ears that she could tell, by the venom of the barks, whether or not a probable bite was in prospect. When she thought expedient she hurried from the kitchen, leaving bacon and eggs to their fate, and moved heavily toward the approaching pandemonium.

She shouted the dogs' names, but it seemed only to increase their fury. On she marched, meanwhile telling the victim how harmless they were, how the quieter he kept the better for him. If he waved his cap or brandished his basket his trouser legs were the worse for it.

But the baker was clever. He brought an empty basket with him which he set on the gravel and, while they leaped on it, he sped on with his loaves. One day in a panic he set down the full basket. When he returned under Mrs. Waddy's protection, each puppy had carried his choice of a loaf to his favourite knoll. From here they beamed approval at the baker and were his friends from that day.

The milkman, hearing of this, covered his advance by setting a bottle of milk in the path. As he said, it did the milk no harm and it kept them busy. Mrs. Waddy was required to recover the bottle.

But how they loved Mrs. Waddy! What lambs they were to her! All the long way from the gate to the house she came, Dan gambolling about her skirts, Robbie languishing in her arms.

Shoulder to shoulder the dogs trotted the garden paths together, ears pricked, nostrils alert. The flick of a rabbit's scut among the shrubs galvanized them: Robbie in a low, growling frenzy of chase, Dan uttering ear-piercing shrieks.

The gardens were overrun by rabbits. Thatcher beamed his approval when the dogs captured one, but it was a different story when they chased his poultry.

They chased birds, they chased cats, they chased each other in mad circles round and round the lawn. Robbie took no interest in the activities of the family except as they affected himself, but Dan tried his best to understand all that went on, to take part in it when he could.

Some afternoons Mummie played hide-and-seek in the garden with the children. As they ran shouting Dan rollicked after them, caught their ankles in his teeth and held them fast. Mummie drove him off, but he darted back, harrying the three till they fell in a heap with him clambering over them.

April unfolded in a crescendo of blossoms. They spread their petals in the sunny spaces, they peered out from the dimmest corner of The Wilderness. There was so much work to be done in the garden that Thatcher and Simms could not keep up to it. Thatcher plodded about from early morning till dusk, his face serene, with a godlike content in this overflow of bloom.

The children had their own little gardens. Gillian planted hers with odds and ends given her by the men, but Diggory went to the seed-shed and chose the packets with the prettiest pictures, and emptied these in his plot.

Now they got up early in the morning and ran in the garden before breakfast. Gillian carried a ball that she tossed high and sometimes caught, or paraded her Japanese parasol. She walked beside Thatcher and his watering-pot, telling him of her plans for the day, asking the name of each new flower. And in the kitchen, over his pot of tea, he said of her, as he always did—"Ah, her's a grand little sowl!"

She loved all the growing things. Of the delicate, glossy leaves of the weeping beech she said—"They're as silky as the leaves in my new prayer-book." She could pay them no higher compliment.

Karen had given her a blue and gold prayer-book at Easter and, though she could not read it, she held it in her hands reverently and turned its pages as though she hoped to find in them some explanation of the mystery of life, of which she was becoming conscious.

Diggory felt no mystery in life. It was a nut to be cracked, a many-petalled flower to be investigated and strewn to the winds.

The excitements of the spring were three: the exhibition by the dancing class, the visit of Mac, an American boy, and Gillian's trip to London. About the three events flowed a ceaseless stream of questions.

At the entertainment Diggory pointed out Gillian in each gaily dressed group of dancers. "The smallest one is Gillian! There she is!" He was proud of her.

In June Mac came. He stood tall and straight beside his parents, smiling shyly at the children. He was twelve years old and on his first visit to England. Everything pleased him. As for sunshine, he had heard that English skies were cloudy but he had never seen better sunshine than this. The hills, the trees, the houses, Diggory's motor-car, Mac liked them all. He put Diggory in his motor-car and, kneeling on it behind him, sent it down the steep of the drive at a pace that made Diggory's hair rise with delight. He was not afraid. He trusted Mac. He trusted him with everything he had. So did Gillian.

They turned their best somersaults for Mac. Over and over across the lawn they went, planting their fair heads on the grass, hurling their bodies over, vying with each other. Mac looked on tolerantly.

Then with one effortless movement he stood on his head, legs stiff and straight in the air. Gillian and Diggory were speechless with awe and admiration. They would have done anything for Mac. He was a god.

He sat at nursery tea with them talking of all the places he would see, the things he would do; how he would take an English bicycle home with him. A well-mannered boy, Nurse said afterward. Before he left he gave them each an American dime which they saved to spend when they might visit America.

In all the preparations for going to town Gillian did not forget Mac. She wondered if she would see him there, if he would be too busy doing the things big boys did to notice her. He would probably go to the Zoo every day—to theatres every afternoon, with some time for the Tower of London.

The day came at last, the day which had held itself aloof, which seemed as though it would never come. Now it was here and Gillian felt unlike herself, a sense of strangeness in everything. Even Nurse and Diggory looked a little strange. She had not much appetite for her food.

Her things were neatly packed, oh, so well washed and ironed, and neatly laid in the suitcase! She and Mummie were in the car, smiling at each other! Mummie was lighting a cigarette and saying—"Well, we're off at last!"

Out of the little window at the back of the car they waved to Karen and Diggory standing in the doorway.

It was hot in the train. Gillian sat very straight, flushed and excited, staring out of the window. It was the first time she had gone away without Nurse. She felt almost grown-up.

They passed a field that had been ploughed but was now in grass. Under the fresh grass the furrows still lay definite. On them horses and cattle grazed.

“How happy they look!” exclaimed Mummie.

“They look very uncomfortable to me,” said Gillian, “walking on all those ups and downs.”

Aunt Kathy had lent them her flat. She was off to Switzerland but her son Ronald was still there. The hotel seemed enormous to Gillian, the flat mysterious, with cupboards and drawers full of things she could not guess at. Mummie’s glance followed hers. She said:

“While we are here we must not open a single drawer, peep in a single cupboard, for none of these things are ours.”

As she spoke she absent-mindedly opened a cigarette box and helped herself to a cigarette.

“Why, look at you!” said Gillian. “You’re taking things already!”

“I shall replace the cigarette,” answered Mummie haughtily. “Remind me before we leave.”

Nothing in the visit moved Gillian to a more serene pleasure than the meals. At breakfast she and Mummie sat opposite each other at the table in the living-room, while George, the waiter, in beautiful white jacket, spread the snowy cloth, set out the bacon, the marmalade, the toast and tea. Through the window they could see great buildings, hear the roar of the town.

They had their lunch in restaurants, surrounded by a sea of little tables where other people sat. Gillian stared, at them in wonder. Who were they? Where did they all come from? But she forgot them when the food came. The weather was hot and Mummie ordered delicious cold food—salmon salad and cucumber and tomatoes, very different from the hot nursery dinner. Every day they had ice-cream. Gillian never ate it without exclaiming—“What would Diggory say?” He seemed very far away, and scarcely larger than a doll.

Perhaps tea was the most exciting of all. “Well, and what will you have?” Mummie would ask, and she would answer “Chicken sandwiches and raspberry jelly, please.” It was always the same. And there she sat in state while George set out the food, the three-cornered sandwiches strewn with pretty cress, the red jelly, Mummie’s pot of tea.

What she left Mummie finished, waiting patiently for it, like Dan or Robbie. Mummie was always hungry in these days, for she was never still. Sometimes Mummie would have liked to sit still for a little, and would ask hopefully, after tea:

“Shall we read a little or play Ludo?”

But Gillian invariably answered:

“I can do those things at home. I should like to walk in St. James’s Park.”

“But we’ve been doing things all day long!”

“We haven’t walked in the Park.”

So off they would set, and Mummie would think—“It seems only yesterday that I wished she were old enough to come for a walk with me!”

“Aren’t the little green chairs pretty?” she would exclaim. “Shall we sit down?”

But Gillian cared only to sit in the little green chairs long enough to buy the tickets for them. With these in her possession, she was again ready for action.

She never tired of watching the swans and the fantastic pelicans. She carried biscuits to the gulls wheeling against the shining sky, to the little ducks diving beneath the bridge.

She was interested in people, too. After they had passed an old pensioner sunning himself on a bench, Mummie asked:

“Did you see his medals? And *what* a spiky moustache!”

“Yes,” answered Gillian. “I longed to touch the point with my finger, just once, but I knew it wouldn’t be polite.”

Even more she longed to play with the children who swarmed the public sand-piles and swings. She stood fascinated watching their noisy play. The mother of one group, a woman of enormous breadth and brazen lungs, shook her children and threatened them with a stick.

“She must be an odd sort of mother to have,” said Gillian, “but I suppose they’re used to her.”

They stood before Buckingham Palace watching the changing of the Guard. After that they walked along the little street behind the Palace so that Gillian might see where they once had lived.

They spent a long afternoon at the Zoo standing in the blazing heat in front of one cage after another. The lithe panther paused in his pascings to glare out at them.

“And a real spiteful look ’e ’as,” observed the woman beside them.

Mummie dragged Gillian away from the cage where the lion prowled over the hot asphalt, a look of wild misery in his eyes.

“Come away,” she said, “or I shall cry!”

“I shouldn’t like you to cry in the Zoo,” said Gillian. “Perhaps we’d better see the penguins. They’re funny.”

They were funny, disporting themselves on their cool green pool, screaming at each other and bowing courteously while they screamed.

The monkeys were funny too, best of all the baboon. “He’s charming,” said Gillian.

She decided that she would not have a ride on the elephant. He was too tall and teetery. “And I don’t like that rather dirty wrinkled cloth he’s covered with.”

She decided instead to ride on the tortoise and had her photograph taken on the Shetland pony and the llama. The llama smirked nicely for the picture, but Gillian, like all the other children, looked very serious.

“Smile, smile,” cajoled the photographer to each child in turn. “Give a nice happy smile for mother!”

And each child in turn achieved a self-conscious grimace.

Oh, it was hot walking round and round the Zoo! Afterwards Mummie and Gillian went into Regent’s Park and sat on the grass. They felt that they could sit there for ever but it was tea-time and they were hungry.

The flat was cool and restful, the chicken sandwiches and jelly delicious. Mummie finished her pot of tea, then scraped the jelly-dish clean.

“Now,” she exclaimed hopefully, “shall we just have a nice quiet time till your bath?”

"I should like to walk in the Park," said Gillian firmly.

"The Park!" repeated Mummie, on a note of despair. "But we've been walking all day!"

"Not in St. James's Park. I'd like to see the pelicans."

So they walked in the Park. The next morning Gillian had her photograph taken. She gave herself whole-heartedly to the ordeal, coming through it with less fatigue than Mummie. Returning in the taxi Mummie exclaimed—"Merciful heavens!"

"What's wrong?" asked Gillian.

"I forgot your hair-ribbon. You were photographed without your hair-ribbon!"

"Will it matter much?"

"It will matter to Karen. She bought a new one for it."

They were both subdued.

The next morning, walking in the Row, they met Mac and his mother. They could scarcely believe their eyes when their American friends came toward them smiling. Walking beside Mac, Gillian felt immensely important. She took long steps, looked up into his face, talked about stamp-collecting, the latest mechanical devices and the bicycle he was going to buy. She was proud and happy!

On the last day they went to the Russian Ballet at the Alhambra. The immensity of the place, the florid interior, the promise of the great curtain, awed her even before the ballet began. She was overpowered by the crash of the orchestra. She sat, with her hair sleek about her shoulders, motionless as a Dresden china figure.

When the curtain rose, disclosing the pale-green light of the forest, the poised, dreamlike figures of Les Sylphides, her breast heaved, her eyes widened, she looked almost as ethereal as they.

All through the dance she sat spellbound, only, when the exquisitely formed youth twirled the floating danseuse on high, did her lips pout in an approving smile.

In the interval she asked—"Was it really a man?"

"Yes, and a very strong man."

She sighed happily. "I didn't know men could dance."

Before her tranced eyes unfolded The Carnaval, Le Lac des Cygnes, the barbarous Prince Igor. Her cheeks turned from pink to scarlet. In the interval Mummie took her into the foyer and they had lemonade.

When Mummie was dressed for dinner she came to Gillian in her bath.

“Happy?” she asked.

But there was no need to ask. Bath and bed were a delight to Gillian in the flat. No Nurse to hurry her. No Diggory waiting his turn. The bath to herself. Soaping, soaping, soaping herself, splashing, rinsing, soaping again. . . . Her hair, in a little bun on her nape, got wetter and wetter.

“Tell me,” said Mummie, looking down at her, “what did you enjoy most at the Ballet?”

Without hesitation she answered:

“Having lemonade.”

Mummie glared at her. “You enjoyed the lemonade more than the Ballet!”

“Well, you see, I have never taken it through a straw before, sitting in a lounge with people walking up and down.”

“But you’ve never seen a Ballet before!”

“Not exactly. But I’ve danced in our dancing class exhibition. They managed the curtains better at the Alhambra. Watch me be a walrus. . . .”

At last it was time to go home! Ronald smiled down at Gillian as she stood in her little petticoat.

“Good-bye,” he said. “I wish I had seen more of you, but you were always asleep when I came home.”

She smiled up at him admiringly, but was a little shy. She had an eye to his and Aunt Kathy’s possessions.

Before they left the flat she reminded Mummie—“You have taken three cigarettes, two postage stamps, a glass of sherry, a safety-pin, and four ordinary pins.”

All the way home in the train she pictured her meeting with Diggory, her recital of her adventures in London. Would he be pleased with the calf’s-head that mooded? Would Nurse be pleased with the tablet of pink soap? She knew that Karen would be delighted by the red silk handkerchief with her initial in the corner.

Nurse and Diggory met them at the station. He came running along the platform in a man-o’-war suit, his trousers flapping against his white socks, his bright hair flying. They smiled at each other. They were shy. They would not speak.

At home she put the calf’s-head into his hand. Wondering, he turned it over. It mooded. He smiled.

“Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

But he was not thinking of toys. He could think of nothing but that Mummie was home again. Wherever she went he followed, rubbing his cheek against her.

“I shall not let you go away again,” he said. “You are always going away. Once you even went across the sea. But if you try that again, I shall pull you off the ship by the leg, drag you home and lock you up.”

But, when it was he who was to go away it was a different matter. Blithely he went about his preparations. For now it was July and he and Gillian were to go to the Welsh coast with Nurse.

Great were the preparations. Sailing-boats, buckets and spades had to be bought. Mummie took them to the toy-shop in Worcester to buy these with their own money. Gillian had five shillings and fourpence. He had four and elevenpence-halfpenny. The American dimes given them by Mac still remained in their savings banks.

Gillian chose an apple-green bucket with a picture of a cock on the side and a small wooden spade, light and comfortable. Diggory chose a hideous bucket, gaudy with a picture of Mickey Mouse, and a large sharp workmanlike spade. He marched along the street with this over his shoulder to the confectioner's, where they bought Bath buns for tea. His mouth watered when he thought of the lovely lumps of sugar in the buns. He could hardly wait for tea.

When they returned to where the car was waiting Simms met them with a rueful smile. He had backed the car onto a bicycle standing against the kerb and broken its wheel. The youth who owned the bicycle stood waiting sheepishly. Seven-and-six would mend it. Mummie extracted seven-and-sixpence from her purse and got into the car with a groan. The children dropped their spades and buckets with a clatter. Diggory sat on the buns.

All the way home Gillian wobbled a loose tooth with her tongue. "It's the tooth I could almost spit it out!" she said.

When the car stopped at the door and the dogs hurled themselves joyously into it Mummie embraced them. "Darlings!" she exclaimed.

The children clambered out. Simms gathered up the buckets and spades. Dan extracted a bun from the bag. Mummie saw the print of muddy paws on her skirt.

In the hall she met Karen and enquired eagerly—"Have you discovered where the smell of gas comes from?"

Karen shook her head. "The gas-man has been here all afternoon and he can't find out. He says he can smell it himself, so it must be pretty bad."

This smell of gas, concentrated in the dogs' room, had shadowed life at The Very House for a week. The dogs had to be moved to another room. Day after day the gas-man searched for the leak but the nauseating smell persisted.

Now Mummie, in despair, raced up the stairs two steps at a time. She went into the dogs' room. It was horrible in there. She would be sick if she stayed long. Holding her breath she prowled among trunks, hampers, and boxes.

Suddenly she halted. The smell was appalling. Surely, certainly, it came from this box! She opened the box and dragged out the beautiful white-and-green rubber boat she had bought in London for the children to take to the sea.

At arm's length she carried it, smelling horribly like escaping gas, to the cobbles at the back and flung it there.

She put her head into the morning-room where Karen was doing household accounts.

"I've discovered the leak!" she announced.

"Where is it?"

"I threw it out. May we have tea now?"

Mrs. Waddy went with the children to the sea for the day's outing, returning with Simms in the evening. Never did anyone enjoy a drive in the car more than Mrs. Waddy. All the way she admired the wild Welsh scenery. They stood silent for a moment when the sea stretched before them.

Gillian left the others and ran across the sands. She was so full of joy she did not know what to do with herself. She went down on her hands and knees and turned in circles and dug holes in the sand like a little dog.

Now came weeks of freedom by the sea, paddling, digging, searching for shrimps and star-fish, trying to swim. Barbara and her parents were in the same boarding-house. Gillian and Diggory loved Barbara's father. They liked Barbara's mother too, but her father was unique, he was wonderful! The fathers of their other friends were insignificant compared to him. Elinor's father was busy with his affairs. Margaret's father was in India. John Henry's father now and then gave them a humorous smile but always darted off again. But Barbara's father was the most satisfactory father imaginable. Oh, but he was powerful! He could swing you on to his shoulder as though you were a featherweight. He could swim with you on his back. He could make boats and catch fish and was always at hand, always smiling.

And so the weeks by the sea passed and Mummie and Karen, gathering baskets of pine-cones on the lawn, began to count the days till the children would be home.

"It seems a very long time," said Karen.

"Yes, it does seem a long time." Mummie tried to rub the pine pitch off her fingers but only succeeded in rubbing it in.

"Still, the days have flown."

"Indeed and they have flown."

"I hope they've had better weather than we have. These hills keep the air away."

"Yes, it's awful the way the hills keep the air away."

"But when we do have a wind it seems worse here than in most places."

"It's far worse here," said Mummie, "than anywhere."

Karen turned on her. "There is a moment," she observed, "when agreeableness becomes a vice."

Mummie stepped backward into the basket of pine-cones and upset it. The dogs leaped into the midst of them, scattering them far.

Along the drive Thatcher came trundling his barrow mounded with fresh-mown grass, the daisy-heads white among the soft-packed green spears.

"Marnin', 'm," said Thatcher, setting down the barrow. "It's a lovely marnin' fur growth."

"If it keeps on," said Mummie, "we shall be smothered in greenery."

Thatcher, with a shy smile, took a picture-postcard from his breast pocket. "'Tis from the little lady. Her said her'd write."

Mummie looked at the picture of the wild coast and read: "Dear Thatcher—We are very happy here. We have been shrimping but caught no shrimps. Love from Gillian."

Thatcher beamed as he returned the card to his pocket. "Her said her'd write," he murmured. He took his besom from the barrow and began to sweep dead leaves from the garden path.

A dreamy heavy silence lay on the countryside. The leaves of the trees hung thick and moist. Their trunks showed a covering of moss. The rhododendrons, the laurels, had grown to great size. The yews loomed darkly. The little new fish in the goldfish pond turned up their silver stomachs and died. There were almost no flowers. The rock garden was a smother of growth, its pool quite hidden in a tangle of irises and forget-me-nots. The exuberant tendrils of a wild rose barred the door of the garden-house; its thatch was rotting. The singing birds sang no more, but heavy-winged owls and wood pigeons moved darkly in The Wilderness. Day after day the rain clouds drifted in from Wales.

Certainly they were miserable creatures, this Cairn and this Scottie. They had ceased to play and did nothing but scratch. When they weren't actively scratching they lay rolling on their backs, on rugs or sofas, growling and groaning as they rolled. On examination it was found that they had red blotches all over them.

Mummie took three manuals about dogs from the bookshelves and perused them, searching for the cause of the symptoms.

“It appears,” she said to Karen, “that they have a very serious type of eczema. If it is not checked it may prove fatal.”

Karen looked horror-struck. “We must take them to the Vet at once,” she said.

Simms brought the car around and tenderly lifted the dogs into it. They lay, with heads lolling over the edge of the seat, too weak now even to scratch. The distance of six miles to the Veterinary seemed long.

Though an appointment had been made, the Vet was naturally out when they arrived. They carried the dogs through his little courtyard and up the steep stairs to his office. His house was a very old one of Elizabethan times.

The smell of disinfectant in the waiting-room seemed to revive the dogs. They trotted round and round the room sniffing in every corner. They investigated the smaller room beyond and began to pant with excitement. Dan lifted a leg against the side of the door. Robbie squatted on the mat. Humiliated Mummie and Karen turned to greet the Vet, who was heard mounting the stairs.

He came in, his face alight with shrewd kindness. He apologized for the delay. He had been attending a very sick cow.

The pups were delighted to see him in his own house. Indeed the excitement of this meeting, the intriguing smell of his office, were almost more than they could bear. They began to play furiously, romping round and round the room, snarling and yapping in delight.

Mummie raised her voice above the din and told the Vet of their symptoms. Above all other noise the Vet raised his North of Ireland voice and told Mummie about eczema. Round and round them the pups romped in happy play. Karen stood, controlling herself.

Finally the Vet caught up Robbie and laid him on the table. All through his thick grey brindle hairs he searched but could find no blemish. He set him down and caught up Dan, who showed his teeth in a grin, and began an intensive search over his sturdy frame. Mummie searched too. She searched frantically for spots of any sort but found none.

“Well,” said the Veterinary comfortingly, “it comes and it goes. This time it has evidently gone. What probably ails them is the midges and ticks and all, out of the grass. I’ll give ye several sorts of medicine and a washing powder.”

On the way home Mummie eulogized vets.

“How much nicer they are than doctors! They have no portentous bedside manner. They do not frighten you with horrible-sounding words. They do not perform unnecessary operations. They never make a superfluous visit in order to lengthen the bill. Happy is the sick animal compared to the sick man!”

“And the Veterinary might add,” said Karen, “that his patients are just as superior to the doctor’s patients as he is to the doctor.”

Diggory was in a state of almost unbearable excitement. He could control excitements created by the grown-ups but those engendered in his own mind swept him into a state of breathless incoherence. He was going to give a circus performance. Gillian could take part in the acts but the circus would be his—his alone. Formless, rich-coloured pictures were blown, in a hurricane of planning, through his tousled head.

For a beginning they must wear their Indian suits. The wigwam must be put up under the larch tree near the swing. It should be used by the performers. Chairs must be placed in a row for the audience. Could he get an audience? He ran from study to morning-room, from morning-room to kitchen, loudly advertising his circus. Gillian trotted after him, her fringed trousers flapping, the bright feathers on her Indian head-dress mingling with her hair. She was interested but a little aloof, a little dubious about the success of the enterprise. Cook promised to come. Letty promised to come, if her silver was polished in time. Nurse of course would be there. Thatcher and Simms promised nothing. Thatcher was pruning raspberry canes and Simms was hunting for rabbits in the kitchen garden. Mummie loudly declared that she would come, that she wanted a front seat, that she would not be satisfied unless there were lions and tigers! Karen not only promised to come but gave Diggory a handful of nuts to sell between acts and sixpence to each of the children for ice-cream. They were to buy it in tuppenny packets to sell to the audience.

Every afternoon at three the Ice-cream Man passed the gate at the end of the drive on his motor-cycle. On the ice-cream can, in large white letters, were the magic words—STOP ME.

How the children longed to stop him! They ran the steep length of the drive and perched on the grassy knoll above the gateway. They waited jubilant for the Ice-cream Man. Surely his head would be turned when he received a shilling from just one gateway. Across the drive the lily pond shone in the sun, under the lily pads the goldfish dozed in the cool water. Nurse came hurrying with a large plate for the ice-cream. She waited a while with the children, then went off to talk to Thatcher. The fishmonger's cart passed, then a motor-car or two, then a lorry. Gillian laid her sixpence on the grass and began to practise an acrobatic act for the circus. She bent her body this way and that, smiling happily. Diggory did not smile. He never took his

eyes from the direction from which the Ice-cream Man was to appear. The tall hedge hid the road except where the gate was. On this space Diggory fixed his eyes.

The road was very quiet. Nurse came and went again; twice Mummie went into the road to see if he were coming. At last there was the sound of a motor-cycle! The children ran to peer between the iron bars of the gate. But it was only the postman. He got off his cycle and came in with the letters.

“Oh, have you seen the Ice-cream Man?” cried Gillian.

Diggory could not speak. He clutched his sixpence in his hand and stared into the postman’s face.

The postman had not seen him but if he met him on the road he would certainly send him to The Very House.

Again the road was silent. Then, after a long while, four horses plodded up the hill drawing the trunk of an old oak tree festooned with ivy. Ordinarily this sight would have been pleasing to Diggory, but now he only looked dully at the horses. Gillian jumped up and down and shouted to him to look.

Now Mummie came a third time and asked:

“Have you got your money safely?”

Diggory showed his tight in his fist.

Gillian looked about vaguely. “I laid mine somewhere on the grass.”

Mummie looked horrified. “Sixpence on the grass!” she exclaimed. Down on hands and knees she went and began to scrabble through the grass. The sixpence was retrieved. Now she said—“I do think we had better have the circus without the ice-cream. You have been waiting here for more than an hour. We shall send to the village for ice-cream to-morrow. What do you say?”

Pensively the children agreed. Nurse came and collected the plate and the two sixpences and all four moved in the direction of the circus grounds.

The wigwam stood red and yellow against the background of greenery. Three kitchen chairs and two chairs from the sun-room awaited the audience. The bowl of nuts stood on a stone. Stirred by a sense of excitement Dan trotted in and out of the wigwam, examined the seating capacity of the auditorium and sniffed the nuts. Robbie was barking by the gate.

Mrs. Waddy came from making scones, her face hot and benign. Letty took her place. Nurse, with an air of proprietorship, seated herself. Last, Mummie and Karen dropped into the sun-room chairs, the former beginning to clap as soon as she was seated, the last reluctant to leave her book.

Diggory looked reprovingly at Mummy.

“It’s too soon to clap,” he said. “The circus hasn’t begun.”

“I want it to begin,” said Mummie in a shrill voice. “I’m a little girl just five and this is my first circus.”

Diggory looked dubious. “You must be good,” he said, “or you can’t stay.”

Mummie began to cry noisily. “But I want to stay! I want to hear the lions roar!”

“Very well, little girl, you shall,” put in Gillian. She got down on her knees and began to roar.

Diggory glared at her. “Get up! You’re not a lion till I tell you!”

“But the little girl wants to hear a lion roar.”

“This is my circus and you’re not a lion.”

Gillian got up sulkily. Mummie uttered plaintive hiccupping sounds.

“We all want to hear the lions,” said Mrs. Waddy encouragingly.

The children retired to the tent and after a little emerged on all-fours giving terrifying roars. They came straight towards Mummie, who drew up her feet and shrieked. Dan, overcome by excitement, attacked the lions in the rear, pulling at the seats of their trousers.

“Oo!” screamed Gillian. “He’s hurting me!”

“Ur-r-r!” roared Diggory, ignoring the attack.

Thrice they circled the ring, then retired to the wigwam.

Gillian was heard to say—“Now I’m a trained seal.”

“You aren’t,” came Diggory’s voice. “You don’t know what you are till I tell you. It’s my circus.”

“What am I, then?” she asked plaintively.

There was a long silence in which his dignity as ringmaster was reasserted, then he said:

“You’re a trained seal.”

Now she came out of the tent on elbows and knees. She had discarded her head-dress and her hair swept the grass. She propelled herself as though by fins, rearing up and facing the audience with a look of bovine curiosity.

Diggory watched her approvingly. He followed her, carrying a small wicker chair.

“Here,” he said masterfully, “balance this on your nose.” He endeavoured to find a foothold for the chair on the tiny nose.

The seal’s face contracted in pain but she bore it stoically and, with the aid of the ringmaster, the chair was precariously balanced. Then, fin over fin, she performed astonishing acrobatic feats and again retired to the wigwam. There was loud clapping.

Now two bucking bronchos galloped forth. Round and round they sped, their sandalled hoofs padding on the turf. They neighed. They tossed their heads. They leaped with powerful prancings into the air; Dan dashed after them barking at their heels. Robbie overturned the bowl of nuts. The female broncho bucked. The male collided with her and fell. He rose, howling his pain and resentment. Dan worried him by the ankle.

“It isn’t fair!” he yelled. “Gilly knocked me down! Now Dan’s biting me!”

Mummie led a deafening applause. The bronchos capered and hobbled into the wigwam.

A long interval followed. Fragments of a spirited argument were heard.

“I’m a tigress and you’re my little cub. I should be showing you off.”

“I’m not a cub! I’m the Ringmaster. You don’t know what you are till I tell you.”

“I do.”

“You don’t!”

“It’s my circus!”

“I can imagine better than you.”

“You can’t. We’ll do an Indian dance.”

“Good! Where are the tomahawks?”

“In the nursery. I’ll get them.”

Diggory appeared before the audience, master of himself and of the Ring. He made a little bow.

“I’m going for the tomahawks,” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute.” He trotted through the kitchen door out of sight.

What sun there had been disappeared under a bank of clouds that rose from the Welsh hills. Mrs. Waddy and Letty and Nurse shivered in their cotton dresses. Mummie hugged herself in her cardigan and lighted a cigarette. Karen took the dogs on her lap and snuggled them for warmth.

Then Gillian danced out of the wigwam twirling lightly on her toes. Gracefully she drifted over the grassy knoll, waving her hands, dipping like a bird in gentle flight. She had the Ring, the audience, to herself. She was the Queen of the Circus, now flying through paper hoops, now swooping on the swift trapeze. A happy smile curved her lips.

“Don’t she dance lovely!” breathed Letty.

“The darling!” said Mrs. Waddy.

Diggory appeared at the kitchen door, a tomahawk in either hand. Outrage darkened his face as he saw his minion, his trained seal, his female broncho, in full possession of the magic ring, disporting herself in her own conceited way before the audience. He hurled first one tomahawk then the other on to the cobbles. He gave a roar of rage.

“What’s the matter, dear?” cried Nurse.

He answered, in the whining voice he reserved for her—“Gillian’s doing everything all by herself and it’s *my* circus!”

“Never mind,” she soothed. “You come along and dance too.”

“Ah, we’d like to see a tomahawk dance,” said Mrs. Waddy.

Diggory clambered up the knoll and leaped into the ring. With his face close to Gillian’s he shouted:

“It’s acrobatics! You’re to turn somersaults.”

Intimidated by his fierceness, she stopped dancing and began to turn somersaults. Over and over she went in smooth circles. In fierce determination to outdo her, he somersaulted breathlessly across the ring, past the audience and down the slope towards the rose-garden. It was more than Dan, restrained by Karen, could bear: he broke away and pursued Diggory, harrying him with volcanic barkings and snatchings at his more vulnerable

points. The chill wind from Wales increased and brought with it a spatter of rain. The hall clock could be heard striking four.

Mrs. Waddy rose and smoothed down her apron. "Time for tea," she said.

"Thank God for that!" said Mummie.

Mummie and Karen rose from the tea-table. Dan and Robbie rose too, and stretched. They felt deliciously warm inside, for each had had a large drink of tea. They fixed their bright eyes on their mistresses to see what the next move was to be. It was to go into the garden where all was now quiet. The children were having their tea. Thatcher and Simms had gone into the kitchen for theirs.

Dan, with an enquiring look at Mummie, followed close after her, but Robbie lingered, his soft gaze resting on a mould of currant jelly that stood on a low table. When he was alone he leaped lightly to the sofa and placed his paws on the table. He began to lick the jelly.

The next moment there was a crash. The table overtopped and a blue lustre cup and saucer that had stood beside the jelly lay shattered on the floor.

A nervous shudder ran over his body. He sniffed the splintered china. He sniffed the jelly without appetite. Crawling on his belly, he left the room and followed the sound of voices into the garden. Some instinct told him that this was a disaster. He had never shown shame at being caught stealing food.

Down the drive he crept, grey as the gravel, and laid himself at Karen's feet.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked, looking down at him anxiously.

He rolled over on his back and feebly wagged his paws, his plumed tail quivered on the grass.

"He's done something terrible," said Mummie.

Karen flew to the morning-room and there Mummie found her mourning over the cup. Robbie crept on to the settee, hiding himself in his long hair as in sackcloth and ashes.

Long he lay there, with closed eyes, only faintly lifting a deprecating hind-leg when someone approached.

But even such self-abasement could not endure against the maniacal shrieks that came from Dan, who had sighted a rabbit in the shrubbery. In one electric movement Robbie uncurled himself and leapt toward the door.

A low growling was shaken from his throat. A grey streak he flew across the lawn. Dan's screams could now be heard far off in The Wilderness.

Robbie disappeared; the quavering screams subsided; there was a lovely silence. Then Sunday leapt in the pool and fled beneath the lily pads, pursued by some imaginary enemy. A finch, freed from summer cares, broke into tentative song. A small black figure, with tail erect and an air of prideful achievement, came out of the green shadows of the trees, padded across the lawn, entered the front door and, taking a few laps from the water-dish, sprang to the settee in the living-room, and curled up with head resting against the silk cushion. Hours passed before Robbie, quite worn out, returned.

When Mummie had the time and remembered to do it, she took the children to see an ancient abbey or cathedral. Better than any play they liked these excursions into the mysterious past. They wandered through dim aisles, stared in awe at tenth-century bishops stretched on their stone tombs, put out a finger to touch the greyhound lying at the feet of a richly cloaked earl and his lady, raised their faces toward the far-off vaulted roof.

Diggory was astonished to find the effigy of a baby on a tomb with its mother.

“But a child couldn’t die!” he said.

The idea distressed him. It was only for the old to die.

It was difficult for him to keep his voice down. Hushings hissed above his progress. When a little group of priests and worshippers were discovered in one of the small chapels, Gillian whispered:

“What are they doing?”

“Having a service,” answered Karen.

Diggory’s voice broke out. “A circus! Where is the circus?” He pulled on the restraining hand.

On these occasions it was the finishing touch to have tea at a tea-shop, with some especially rich cake. This dissipation, the relief from restraint, sent them home in great spirits. They sang over and over:

“From Wimbledon to Wumbledon is fourteen miles! From Wumbledon to Wimbledon is fourteen miles!”

When they passed a woman motorist in difficulties. Gillian remarked:

“Men generally drive cars better than women.”

“They’ve been driving longer,” said Diggory. “Men were made before women.”

His imagination was quick and vivid. He saw things highly coloured. When he made drawings his strokes were strong and free, the page covered with dragons, aeroplanes, deer, and blazing suns. When he painted, the colour was splashed on gorgeously. He would write a story printed in toppling capitals and illustrated it boldly. One was: “Once upon a time there

was a big river, so big that two monsters could live in it as well as two ships could. There was forty monsters.”

And on the page these monsters lived.

Gillian always drew the same picture, a neat little house with a garden path and a row of plants in bloom. She would spend more time in mixing the paints than in applying them.

There was a game of which the children never tired. It was the game of the Knock family. Gillian was Matilda, Diggory was Augustus, Mummie was Mrs. Knock. The fascinating thing about this family was that the children were beaten for good behaviour and rewarded for bad.

These perverted standards of behaviour were a never-ending delight to the children. Through the house the Knock family raged, beaten for well-doing, given imaginary presents for ill. They never tired of it.

“Let us be the Knocks!” they would cry. “Oh, do let’s be the Knocks!” till their mother wished that she had never thought of the insidious game.

Karen and Diggory were gathering brushwood and pine-cones for the winter. They were storing them in the thatched garden-house that Gillian called the “disrespectable one,” because it had an earth floor and its windows were smothered in ivy. But it made a good shelter for the brushwood and pine-cones. There they would lie till the short dark days when they would make a crackling blaze at the tea hour.

Nothing pleased Karen quite so much as gathering material for making a fire. Even gathering flowers was not so satisfying. Surely there was something of the gipsy in her! Diggory liked it too. He trudged sturdily at her side, drawing his cart already heaped high, stamping on dry branches with all his might to break them to the proper lengths. When the cart was full he would empty it in the garden-house and they would start afresh.

They talked of the different sorts of pine-cones, the different kinds of wood, of the cones that were long and shiny and closely packed, the cones that were short and wide-flung, the huge strong ones that were the shape of pineapples. Of the tough oak, the grey silken ash, the mossy larch, the sticky sweet-smelling fir. They found Thatcher scraping the moss from the paths. Thatcher never could keep up to the moss that formed on the paths. It sprang up overnight like a magic carpet. It was lovely to walk on, Karen and Diggory said.

They stopped their work long enough to go into the tomato house where the little round tomatoes hung thick beneath the glass. They each had one and laughed like conspirators as they ate. They went into the grape-house where the great grape-vine spread magnificently but could never ripen its fruit because of the yew tree that grew outside shading it from the sun. They each ate a grape and made sour faces.

They found Simms tending a bonfire of garden rubbish. It sent out a cloud of pungent smoke. For a moment Diggory wavered between Karen and Simms. Should he gather wood or help tend the bonfire?

He threw a pine bough on the fire, watched it crackle and blaze, exchanged a smile with Simms and ran after Karen. They went through the little gate into The Wilderness. There was more wood to be gathered here, more pine-cones, than anywhere else. Wood pigeons flapped from the trees, young rabbits scurried across their path, an owl sat, with his back against the trunk of a beech, peering down at them.

The cart was nearly full when Diggory saw Mummie in the distance. "I shall gather a great deal more before she comes," he said in a deep voice. "I shan't waste time going to meet her. I shan't look in her direction. She'll be terribly surprised when she sees what I've done. I shan't go to meet her." All the while he talked he collected brushwood feverishly. "I shan't go to meet her," he muttered.

But he could not forbear to glance over his shoulder to see how near she was. She was very near. The sight of her nearness was too much for him. He cast off his manhood and toddled towards her, bleating:

"Ma-ma!"

Down the frosty drive they galloped, Nurse galloping less agilely behind. They were off to school. Gillian wore the wrist-watch she had got on her birthday. Safe in her clothes cupboard hung the pink velvet party cloak and the tiny white fur muff she had got. High in the nursery cupboard was the box of chocolates Mr. Tarrant had given her. What a wonderful man he was! Down this selfsame drive, past this very goldfish pond, through this very gate he had galloped long ago—a little boy like Diggory! And now he had a gun and a grey beard and gave sweets to the children!

There he stood, at his own gate, his gun on his shoulder, shouting good-morning to the children.

“Don’t be too good at school!” he shouted. “Run away if they don’t treat you well! That’s what I did!” He was as splendid as the Knock family.

At school they were rehearsing for the Christmas entertainment. They were making decorations for the walls. They were making presents for the parents. They were learning songs and a play. Oh, it was hard to keep the Christmas secrets to one’s self. The children knelt, each on one of Mummie’s knees, and whispered, oh, so softly in her ears, what they were making for her. They whispered so softly that they hoped she would not hear but they just had to tell her.

“Lovely, lovely,” she breathed, “just what I’ve longed for—a knitted scarf and a blotter!”

They rocked together in bliss.

It seemed as though Christmas would never come, then it came tumbling, head over heels, in a whirl of Christmas cards and packets, all too fast. Gillian shed a tear or two over the knitted scarf and had to have a little help with it.

Mummie put the last toy into the stocking. It was a double-barrelled gun and she had to be careful that it did not interfere too disastrously with the harmonium, the little wooden traffic policeman or the china donkey. The foot of the stocking was distended by a box of chocolates and an orange. The stockings were a new pair of her own, lent because of their length. It was nearly midnight and the children were fast asleep.

Karen tiptoed into the room. She had just put the finishing touches on the Tree, and a bit of tinsel clung to her hair. "I have put five dozen candles on it," she said. "It will look lovely when it's lighted."

"Just see the stockings!" said Mummie.

"New ones!" exclaimed Karen. "You'll ruin them with that gun."

"The gun must go in."

Nurse came creaking in. She, too, declared—"The stockings will be surely torn, and never yet worn."

Reluctantly Mummie took out the gun and laid the bulging stockings across Nurse's arms. Nurse grasped the gun in her hand. The three smiled at each other as conspirators.

"For heaven's sake be careful not to wake them," warned Mummie.

Nurse nodded knowingly and creaked out.

The clock struck twelve.

"One cigarette," said Mummie, "and then bed. . . ."

It seemed to her that she had scarcely slept when the serenade began. She was startled. She opened her eyes and saw the grey square of the window and, in the distance, the black hump of the Beacon, with a cold greenish light beyond. On the other side of the hills the sun would be rising.

On the other side of the door the harmonium shrilled, the cymbals clashed.

The door was flung open. Gillian and Diggory marched in. They marched round the four-poster, shrilling, clashing, stamping. Mummie sat up in bed, her hair on end.

“Merry Christmas!” she cried.

They threw down their instruments. “Merry Christmas!” they shouted and clambered onto the bed. Four little ice-cold hands clutched her. Four hard little knees sought her tenderest parts.

“I have a double-barrelled gun,” cried Diggory, “and a policeman!”

“I have cymbals and bottles of scent and a doll’s carpet-sweeper and heaps of other things!” shrieked Gillian. “Come and see!”

It was long before Mummy found herself alone in her room, with time for wrapping Karen’s present. But, when it was wrapped, she found that she had got no special card for it, and she very much wanted a special card.

She searched desperately among what cards she had left. The only one that seemed at all appropriate bore the words “Merry Christmas, Old Friend,” and even that seemed a trifle odd for one with whom one had lived under the same roof all one’s life.

But, if Karen thought it was odd, she concealed the thought and said what a lovely card. She opened it and read inside:

“Across the space between us,
When the Christmas candles glow,
I send a hearty greeting
To a friend of long ago.”

“I hope you don’t think it’s inappropriate,” said Mummie wistfully.

“I think it’s perfectly lovely!” cried Karen, “and the present, too!”

Mummie was shamelessly fond of getting presents. Every time the postman’s double knock sounded in the days before Christmas she had been pleurably excited. Often she had rushed to the door before Letty could answer it, returning laden with packages.

But they were almost always addressed to the children. “Children!” she would call from the foot of the stairs, “Children, come and see!” And they would tumble down the stairs and tear open the packages.

How little they cared for fancy papers and ribbons! What the package contained was what mattered and they could not unwrap it in haste enough.

Post after post the Christmas parcels came in steady procession. Before the Christmas stockings, before the Christmas-tree, the children had presents and presents. From every party they went to, and they went to one every other day, they returned with fresh presents. They were in a whirl of

excitement. They were surprised but tolerant when presents came for Mummie and Karen.

Gleefully Mummie opened a large box addressed to her, the children, only faintly depressed, standing on either side. The outer wrappers fell off. Two boxes were revealed—one addressed to Gillian, one to Diggory!

“Why, of course, it’s for us after all!” they said, smugly pleased, and tore open the boxes.

Mummie said—“Bless my whiskers!” She lighted a cigarette and sank into the deepest chair.

By Christmas Night the children craved nothing but familiar animal excitement. Holding to Mummie’s hands they danced round and round the nursery chanting “Ring-a-ring-a-rosy!” The chant, the movement, were like a drink of cold water after much sweetness.

“The children aren’t half so thrilled by the Christmas-tree as I used to be,” complained Mummie.

“What can you expect?” said Karen, looking up from her task of pulling burrs out of Robbie’s tail. “They have ten toys to your one.”

“But the Tree!” cried Mummie. “That’s different. To me it was mysterious, almost frighteningly beautiful, yet Diggory hasn’t given it a glance since Christmas.”

“And to-morrow it comes down! Where Robbie collects this assortment of burrs I can’t imagine.”

Robbie nibbled her fingers that were twitching at his thick-plumed tail, but he rolled his eyes toward Mummie, who was secretly eating the last Christmas chocolate.

The sound of a small sob came from the stairway.

“It’s Diggory,” said Karen, relaxing her hold on Robbie. He leaped from her lap and sprang to the arm of the sofa. He sniffed the chocolate.

Mummie opened the door into the hall.

“Hello!” she said. “What’s this small sound I hear?”

“Nothing,” answered Diggory.

“Are you quite happy?”

“Yes.” He ran down the stairs and pressed his head against her side. She divided the remainder of the chocolate between him and Robbie.

Diggory ate his share but he did not smile.

“Nannie was taking down the Christmas greens,” he said, “and I wanted just one bough to make a Christmas-tree but she wouldn’t let me have it. She threw them all away.”

“But you had a Tree!” cried Karen. “A lovely Tree!”

“Shall we go now and look at it?” asked Mummie.

He shook his head. “I want to make a Tree of my own.”

“But the Tree in the dining-room is yours!”

“I didn’t decorate it. Karen decorated it.”

Mummie took him on her knee and joggled him violently. “I wish,” she said, “that I could joggle some common sense into you.”

“I want a Tree,” he answered firmly, “and to stick a lot of things on it by myself.”

“I have lots and lots of tinsel I will give you,” said Karen.

Mummie beamed from one to the other. She tried to find another chocolate but could not. A bark sounded from the drive. It was Dan demanding to come in.

“Whoof-whoof!” his round full voice came. It came confidently, cheerily, as though to say—“I know you’ll let me in the moment you hear me.” But if by chance he was not let in, he increased the volume of his demand and its frequency, till there was no denying him, but he never lost hope.

Robbie was different. Shivering, dejected, he would stand gazing up at the windows in despairing silence till at last a thin dry yelp was drawn from him. It penetrated the farthest corner. Someone always ran to open the door. Then he would drift in, lifting his feet daintily, bowing, glancing from under his long lashes.

Now Dan came, in an important jog-trot, his tail genially waving. He sniffed at each in turn as though to say—“All is well. I’m here.” He smelled the chocolate on Robbie and sniffed longingly. Robbie rolled his eyes and lifted his lip. Dan desisted. He thought he smelled something edible on the hearth and began an intensive search, but he knocked over the fire-irons and the clatter set him backing away in discomfiture, lifting an apologetic glance toward Mummie.

“Silly old man!” she said, and gathered him into her arms.

Diggory was pulling at Karen. “Do come and get me the tinsel!” he begged.

He was absorbed by the decorating of his tree. The afternoon was spent in making it beautiful. The nursery cupboards were ransacked for tiny toys to hang on it.

Gillian was a devoted second. In the last months a change had come over their relations. She who had been the boisterous ringleader, was becoming the admiring assistant in his enterprises. Her small hands folded in her lap, she sat through endless puppet performances, gazed credulously at conjuring

tricks out of a conjurer's box sent by Uncle Rex. Diggory was so impatient to perform them that he could scarcely bear to have them explained to him. Almost before the directions had been read to him, he would snatch the magic objects with—"I understand! I can do it myself!"—mount the box that was his platform, while his instructor hastily scrambled into a chair beside Gillian and became audience, bow deeply, his hand on his stomach, and begin:

"Ladies and gentlemen, do you see this ball in my hand. . . ."

Gillian had arranged her dolls in a neat row on their own sofa, facing the conjurer. Diggory's own doll, Monty, lay in a heap on the floor. So, he took part in all Diggory's games, a disreputable hanger-on but never miserable, always pink-faced, smiling, ready for anything.

Gillian's favourite doll, Billy, a handsome creature in a long-trousered blue suit, sat staring ceilingward, his expression all the more vacant because Diggory, in a too eager desire to feed him, had once pushed in his teeth. Intent as Gillian was on the performance, she observed Billy and was justly annoyed. She seized him by the head and turned his face toward the conjurer.

"You should be ashamed," she said, "to sit staring at the ceiling when I have bought one of the best seats for you!"

Patiently she and the dolls, Mummie, and Nurse gazed at the conjurer as he went through his tricks. His bow was gracious, his magic unmistakable, but, all the while he was holding something back—his favourite trick, the one with the wooden cup and magic ball—his supreme achievement.

But something had gone wrong. The attention of the audience was wavering. One of them was actually missing! A dreadful misgiving shook him. He wheeled and looked behind him.

Yes, there she was! There was Gillian, with the wooden cup, the magic ball, in her possession!

With the cup in one hand, the other hand on her heart, she bowed to what was left of the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began.

But she never finished. With his face pale in the gaslight, he gave a yell of outrage. He threw himself on her and tried to tear the cup from her hand. But she hung on.

“I wanted to do just one trick!” she explained, “just this one nice little trick.”

“It isn’t a little trick! It’s magic, and I shan’t let you touch it!”

They clinched. The cup fell to the floor. They began to thump each other.

“I think you might let her do just this one,” said Mummie.

“He is getting very selfish,” said Nurse.

The thumps grew harder.

“Very well,” said Mummie, “I shall go!”

In the passage she met Karen.

“He won’t let Gillian have one little turn with his conjurer’s set,” she complained.

“And why should he?” exclaimed Karen. “After all, it’s his and terribly important to him. The moment anyone else does tricks with it, the magic is gone.”

“True,” said Mummie, “true.”

Diggory stamped his way into the night nursery. He stamped to the corner where his clothes cupboard stood. “I shall go in here,” he said, in a choking voice, “and never come out again. I’d rather live in a cupboard than in a room with Gillian and Nannie.”

He climbed into the cupboard and banged the door after him. He buried his head in his dressing-gown and stamped. He stamped loudly, rhythmically, making a wall of noise between him and the world.

Little by little he grew calmer, his chest stopped heaving, his nerves relaxed. He put his hands deep in his trousers’ pockets and discovered a piece of chalk. He liked the feel of it in his hands and turned it over and over, thinking of pictures he would draw. He strained his ears to hear what was going on in the next room. Nurse and Gillian were playing dominoes. Let them play! He didn’t care. There was no magic in dominoes.

He opened the door of the cupboard a little way, enough to let a shaft of gaslight in. Fresh air came in, too, for the window was open, and the scent of the winter jasmine that grew against the wall. Everything was very quiet. He could hear the tick of the grandfather clock in the hall below.

He began to draw the picture of a deer on the wall of the cupboard. First he drew the round, strong body with the little tail sticking up, then the long,

swift legs, and last the big neck and proud head with towering antlers. He saw the deer like this as he boldly drew its outline and, when he had finished, it did indeed look like a deer.

He heard Nurse coming and dropped the chalk into his pocket. He peered at her through the crack of the door. He saw her turn back his bed and lay out his green pyjamas from their yellow silk case. Then she trudged to the bathroom to turn on the water for the bath. He could hear Gillian practising her Welsh dance. First came the sound of eight skipping steps, then the jaunty little stamp which she loved doing. He could picture her pleased look as she gave the little stamp, and he felt contemptuous. If it came to stamping he could show her a thing or two.

Nurse returned and came to the cupboard for his dressing-gown. They exchanged a look. Hers said: I hope I shall have no more tantrums from you. His: I'm willing to be civil if you'll not remind me of the past! He clambered down from the cupboard.

Gillian and he were both fast asleep when Mummie was passing the door and Nurse beckoned to her. The room was dim and Diggory's head was pale on the pillow.

"He's drawn a picture in the cupboard. I thought you'd like to see," said Nurse.

Mummie felt for the candlestick and took a match from it. She sheltered the lighted match in her hand and put her head into the cupboard.

"It's lovely!" she breathed, staring at the drawing. "Anyone would know it was a deer."

Diggory was as quick for exultation as for despair. To open his eyes in the morning, to see the day spread before him was enough to fill him with joy. In the dark winter mornings, while the hills were still hidden in mist, while the first notes of the birds came hesitatingly from the cold shadows of the firs, his deep little voice sounded clear and strong from his bed, chanting his pride of life.

Gillian and Diggory came down the stairs side by side to Sunday lunch. They carried their best embroidered bibs still hot from the iron. They always waited on either side of Nurse, in the ironing-room, on the top floor, while she hurriedly ironed the bibs. It was a ceremony to the children, they standing very still, in fresh clean dress and suit, watching the iron. But when the bibs were ready they caught them up, smooth and warm, and ran to see which would be first on the stairs.

There was still a feeling of Christmas in the hall. Twelfth Night, when the greenery must be taken down, had not yet arrived. Ivy was festooned on the banisters; branches of holly, bright with berries, pale mistletoe and scented pine boughs still kept their festive freshness. But the children felt neither festive nor fresh to-day. One party after another had left its mark on them. At the party, on the afternoon before, Gillian's innocent little stomach had coped valiantly with Christmas cake, meringues, and ice-cream, but to-day it was pensive. Diggory had been frightened by the conjurer who had, with a bicycle pump, drawn a glassful of milk from a little boy's head and had cut off his own finger. The little boy had apparently not been hurt, the conjurer had successfully replaced the finger, but Diggory had not felt well since. Neither of the children gave a glance to the Christmas-tree which still stood at one end of the long room.

They were docile while Karen and Letty tied on their bibs. Mummie was standing by the sideboard, carving. The children got on to their chairs.

"I don't want any meat or vegetables, thank you," said Diggory.

Mummie, carving-knife in hand, looked over her shoulder. "So—it's come to that!" she exclaimed. "I knew it would! What about you, Gillian?"

"A tiny bit of meat—a tiny bit of potato, but no artichokes or peas, please."

"Bless my whiskers!" said Mummie. "This is a delicate family."

"I am particularly hungry," said Karen. She alone made a good meal, for Mummie had no more appetite than her children. She pressed her hand to the back of her head.

"Why do you hold your head?" asked Diggory, pausing in his languid sipping of Bovril.

“To keep it from flying off,” said Mummie.

That was enough to set him laughing. He laid down his spoon and gave himself up to laughter. His pensive mood vanished. He wanted only to laugh—at everything—at nothing.

“Say more nonsense?” he begged.

Mummie said more nonsense and the meal became a riot.

When Letty brought the pudding they restrained themselves, all but Diggory.

“It is hard,” said Mummie, eyeing him reprovngly, “to have the village idiot in one’s home.”

But nothing quelled him. “Village idiot!” he repeated. “Oh, call me that again! I love it.”

In the morning-room the radio was turned on and Gillian danced. Mummie surreptitiously took a chocolate.

Diggory had become a dragon prowling behind the settee between the basket of pine-cones and the basket of peat. His growls were terrible. Even the noise of the radio could not drown them.

Up and down the room Gillian danced. Now she was a fairy tripping lightly on a mullein leaf, her arms moving like graceful wings. Now she twirled and dipped in the ballet. Now, as the music suggested, she was a buxom Scotch lassie, hand on hip, boldly jiggng, lightly stamping.

Dan looked over the edge of his basket to watch her. Robbie raised his tousled head from the cushion on the settee to give her a tolerant glance.

“Do you think,” asked Mummie, “that it is good to dance right after a meal?”

Her enunciation was not quite clear. The bonnie Scotch lass jogged very close to her and looked enquiringly into her face. The dragon ceased his growling and peered over the back of the settee. Dan clambered out of his basket and sniffed up at her. Robbie leaped from his cushion straight into her lap.

“You sound,” said Gillian, “as though you were eating something.”

“It smells like caramel,” said Diggory.

Mummie swallowed. “I was going to suggest,” she said, “that the dragon should do a dance now.”

“Very well,” he cried, “I’ll do a dance! I’ll do the best dance you ever saw. I’ll terrify you! I’ll horrify you! I shall be a dreadful sight.”

He climbed over the basket of peat and wrapped himself in the rug that lay on the end of the settee. Gillian curled up beside Mummie. Dan went back to his basket. Karen began to read aloud from Punch but no one heard her. Robbie lay down again. This time he put his tail on the cushion.

The music obligingly became wild and barbarous. The dragon pranced into the middle of the room. He curvetted, he stamped, he whirled in a ferocious frenzy. Nothing of him was visible beneath the fringed rug but his green shoes and the slim white legs above them. He pranced till he fell from exhaustion and lay in a growling heap. Then he was silent.

“Poor old dragon!” said Mummie. “He’s quite dead.”

Gillian looked sadly at the woolly mound. “Yes, quite, quite dead,” she repeated.

“How nice and quiet he is!” said Karen.

But he began to breathe heavily. He struggled to his feet. He rose. He fell. Again he rose. Once more he became a whirlwind of leapings and growlings.

Over and over again the disintegration and the resurrection took place. The audience became a little tired. Karen wanted to write a letter.

“Now you may run upstairs, children,” said Mummie briefly.

Diggory hurled the rug from his head. “But I haven’t *danced!*” he said. “Gillian danced and danced but I haven’t! Not once!”

“You were a dragon and a very good one.”

“But I wanted to *dance!*” His voice was choked by anguish.

“Still feeling the effects of too much party,” said Karen.

“I never *danced!*” he wailed.

“You did a great deal of stamping and growling,” said Gillian.

He glared at her.

Mummie saw a scene in preparation. “I think I shall go to my room and rest,” she said. She glided from the room. Gillian followed her.

Capably Gillian prepared the day bed in Mummie’s room, drew the curtains, tucked Mummie up in her dressing-gown beneath the eiderdown.

They heard Diggory ascend the stairs. They heard the explosion between him and Nurse. They heard Nurse carrying him to the night nursery and shutting him in by himself.

“Such a helpful little girl,” said Mummie, snuggling into the twilight warmth.

Gillian bent over her, kissed her, patted her shoulder reassuringly, tiptoed from the room.

Diggory scowled.

“If ever I could see something interesting when I went for a walk, I shouldn’t mind going,” he said.

“What a boy!” said Nurse, putting the jam on the highest shelf of the cupboard. “You ought to be happy to see the holly trees all covered by berries and the sheep in the meadows.”

“There’s nothing new about that,” said Diggory, and he lay down on the floor.

“Yesterday you saw men digging a drain,” continued Nurse. “And you saw a herd of young bullocks being driven along the road, and you counted twenty ducks on the duck pond.” She went to the clothes cupboard and brought out his leggings.

“That’s nothing,” he said, and he began to roll over and over.

“You ought to be ashamed,” said Nurse. “What is it you want to see?”

“I want to see soldiers changing guard at a castle! And a regiment of soldiers marching! And a boat on a river!” He began to yell.

Nurse went and looked down on him. “Here is your mackintosh,” she said, “and your gloves. Put them on while I fetch your goloshes.” She went downstairs to the cloakroom.

Tears filled his eyes. Through them he saw Gillian sitting on a doll’s sofa combing her hair with a little blue comb. She combed it till it stood up in a fine pale halo about her small heart-shaped face. She was singing “On the Isle of Capri” to the tune of “Good King Wenceslaus.”

Diggory kicked the floor violently and howled.

For the first time she noticed him. “Why are you crying?” she asked.

“I won’t go for a walk! I’d like to stay in this room and never go for another walk in my life!”

Neither had heard the flying feet on the stair. Now they suddenly saw their friend Barbara in the doorway, cheeks and eyes blazing with excitement.

“Hello!” she said breathlessly. “There’s a Hunt! You’re to come with us! Hurry up and get ready!”

Her mother appeared behind her in the doorway. “The Meet,” she said, “is at half-past ten. There’s not a moment to spare.”

Mummie came close behind her, very much afraid that her children would miss the Hunt. She snatched up Diggory from the floor and cast him on to his bed and began to button his leggings. As fast as she buttoned, the buttons unbuttoned themselves. He sprawled on the bed in a state of ecstasy.

Barbara’s mother was putting Gillian into her coat. Barbara was talking at the top of her high sweet voice. Nurse, returning with the goloshes, stood petrified by the sight before her.

“We’re going to see the Hunt!” screamed Gillian.

Mummie hurled Diggory at Nurse. “Button these leggings,” she said. “They won’t stay done for me, and he has as many legs as a centipede.”

Excitedly she began to brush Gillian’s hair.

“No!” shrieked Gillian, “it’s just been combed! There’s no time.” She warded off the brush.

Barbara’s mother’s hearty laugh rang out. Mummie embraced the children. “Have a good time!” she cried. . . .

They were packed into the motor-car.

“The dogs! Where are the dogs?” cried Karen. “*Is* the gate open? Where *are* the dogs?”

Simms came running with a wet dog under each arm.

“The towel?” cried Karen. “Where’s the towel?”

Mrs. Waddy came running from the kitchen, her face beaming. “I’ve had it warming by the stove,” she said, and held out her arms to Robbie, her darling.

He drooped under the rubbing, with a look of disdainful submission. When his fine grey coat stood all on end and he was set on his feet he ran and hid beneath the chintz chair, his luminous eyes peering out beneath the frill. He watched while Mummie snatched the towel from Mrs. Waddy, saw Dan rolled on to his back and rubbed dry. Then he came from his shelter leaped to the settee and lay down on his back.

He was pleased with himself now. He lay rolling, growling and grunting in physical well-being, throwing sidelong roguish glances at Dan.

Dan always had the towel at second-hand but he did not mind. He surrendered himself whole-heartedly to the joy of being rubbed. When Mummie's swift-moving hands touched a responsive nerve, one of his hind legs would kick in spasmodic bliss, he would lift his lip in a grin.

When he stood erect, like a moist teddy bear, he trotted to the settee and raised his muzzle to sniff Robbie. They kissed. Dan's tail stiffened, then wagged violently. He invited Robbie to play. Robbie wagged his tail but he was undecided. Dan sprang to the settee beside him. They stood, head to tail, sides touching. Dan grinned. They pranced. They stood upright, breast to breast, eye glowing into eye. Robbie clasped Dan about the neck; Dan gave an inexplicable yap of anger. They dropped to their four feet. Robbie gave a sidelong speculative glance at Dan.

Dan leapt to the floor and Robbie close after. Dan wheeled and they were nose to nose, tails vibrant, astonished. They pranced. They both loved and hated.

Dan caught Robbie in paws and teeth and threw him down. Robbie sprang up in fury that was half real, half pretence. He lifted his lip, showing his tiny teeth and pink gums. He looked beautiful and wicked.

Dan turned away, lay down on his side and began to fish with his paw for a bit of biscuit that was under the writing-desk.

Robbie got into his basket and curled himself into a ball.

Mummie draped the towel over the basket of pine-cones to dry and looked at her watch. "The morning is flying," she said.

The Meet was in a village on the far side of the Worcester Beacon. By the time the children arrived the narrow road was thronged by horses and hounds. Some of the riders wore pink coats but more were in tweeds. There were farmers on sturdy nags, children on ponies, boys on bicycles. The hunters stood, confident and haughty, sometimes sidling in impatience, sometimes exchanging a kiss. The owner of the public-house had carried a

drink to the Master of the Hunt, who, with raised elbow and tilted head, seemed to hold all in his power. The hounds, standing in the soft rain, lifted wistful eyes to his face, waved their tails.

Oh, would they never be off! The children leaned out of the car. Diggory asked a thousand questions. The high pipe of Barbara's voice never ceased. Gillian stared appraisingly from horse to horse, choosing her favourite.

At last a movement, gentle like the outgoing tide, carried them along the village street and on toward the fields. There were said to be three foxes in the wood they were headed for. The country road was muddy. The entrance to the fields muddier still.

There the country lay spread before them, in hills and vales, in meadow and wood. The irregular fields, enclosed by hedges, lay in blending shades of brown and purple and green. The vast hump of the Beacon had clothed itself in bracken and gorse. Shifting grey clouds showed now and again a glimpse of faint blue or sent down a spatter of rain.

All clambered out of the car. Nurse held fast to Diggory's hand. His voice rose shrill, asking questions. With the others who had come in cars and on bicycles, they trudged across the field and took up a position overlooking the wood. The hounds streamed into the wood. The huntsman's horn sounded.

Suddenly on the rainy air rose the cry of the hounds, plaintive and cruel. Suddenly their dappled shapes came like ghosts out of the wood. They stretched their legs, they cried plaintively, they flowed across the fields, the horses thudding after.

But what was it they pursued? The children strained their eyes to see. Their hearts beat quickly.

"Look! Look! There he is!"

"Over yonder! Sure enough, there he be!"

"He's in the ditch!"

"He's through the hedge!"

"The pack is after him!"

Diggory saw the flying form, lithe and swift. He saw the fox rippling across the field and the hounds flowing after him. Diggory's face was pale from excitement, his mouth tight shut.

A dense spinney lay before the fox. He strained toward it, the hounds always nearer, baying closer to his brush. He gained the shelter of the low-growing bushes.

There was silence. The hounds scattered. They sniffed the ground in and around the sheltering bushes. The riders drew rein and pressed their hats more firmly on their heads.

“Is it over?” asked Diggory.

Barbara’s mother beamed down at him.

“No, it has just begun!”

The horn sounded. The whip collected his hounds. The scent was lost.

But now a prowling bitch raised her muzzle and uttered a heart-piercing bay. It pierced the dappled pack to their very hearts. They closed about her and filled the air with their hungering notes. The liver-and-white pattern of them separated and melted together again as they ran here and there, sniffing the earth.

Now they were off, streaming back the way they had come, on the scent of another fox. The horses’ hoofs thudded on the wet ground. One after another in valiant procession they jumped the gate.

It was too much! It was too much joy to see them all coming back! Barbara and Diggory and Gillian were caught up, transfigured by excitement. Their little faces were quite changed.

Now they saw a rider thrown. He came down on his back with a thud, his mount, with flying rein, galloped on. The pink coat was plastered with mud but the man was running, running and swearing, after his horse.

He had all but caught it when a loose horse, a big colt that had been at pasture in the field, joined in the chase with loud whinnies. The man shouted and a pony, ridden by a small boy, reared and threw him. The boy lay still a moment, then scrambled to his feet. The pony began to crop the grass. The man caught his horse and mounted. The loose colt galloped along-side the Hunt whinnying, getting in everyone’s way. The horn sounded. Tally-ho! Tally-ho!

The fox doubled and fled back to the spinney. All the bright-coloured gallant confusion was re-enacted, as though for the delight of the children.

“They have killed!” came the word. Barbara’s mother looked sad. “I gave up hunting,” she said.

The rain came down harder. The children's feet were cold. The Hunt was trotting along a lane and out of sight.

"We must be getting home," said Nurse. "Remember, it's dancing-class day."

Dancing class! To count one's steps, to skip, to make bows—after *this*! Diggory hung his head as he trudged across the muddy field after the others. The chilblain on his fore-finger began to burn. He wished it were on his foot so he could not dance.

How quiet the garden looked! Little birds were beginning to sing faintly, with the thought of spring in their heads, though it was January. Big red and white daisies circled the goldfish pond. The thick strong figure of Thatcher came from among the trees, as though one of them had lifted its roots and achieved a kindly motion. His blue eyes beamed beneath his thatch of grizzled hair.

"Look," he said, and he took a child by each hand. "I've got summat to show you. Daffydilys comin' through."

And so they were! Up through the grass their strong green spears raised to boast of the gold they guarded! Thatcher beamed down at them, as though he had created them.

"Luvly, they are—and forward too."

Diggory frowned.

“If ever I could see something interesting when I went for a walk, I shouldn’t mind.”

“What is it that you want to see?” asked Nurse, laying out his coat and beret.

“Soldiers marching,” he said, “and a policeman taking robbers to gaol, and a river with a monster swimming in it and a castle with an ogre. Then I’d go walking without any disturbance.”

“You shall make no disturbance now,” said Nurse, and she counted how many buttons were off his leggings.

He lay down on the floor and began to roll.

Gillian was playing with her doll’s house. “It used to be called ‘Corner Cottage,’ ” she said, “but it’s been bought for an hotel. It is called ‘The Rose and the Crown.’ ”

Diggory rolled near enough to a small wooden locomotive to kick it in her direction.

She began to sing. Suddenly she began to sing in quite good tune:

“I had a little nut tree
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear!”

Nurse bustled about. “Come,” she said. “Both of you. Here are your coats and gloves.”

Diggory kicked with his heels on the floor. He said—“In another minute I’m going to scream.”

“What’s that you say?” demanded a voice at the door.

Mummie stood there, forcing her face into the semblance of the heavy parent.

“He’s behaving very badly,” told Nurse. “He’s turned against his walks. He lies on the floor, just as you see him. He says he’s going to kick and he

does. Then he says he's going to scream and he does."

"I haven't yet," muttered Diggory.

"Gillian has become such a good little girl," said Nurse.

"I have a wrist-watch," said Gillian. "I can tell the time when it's twelve o'clock and when it's one and when it's two and——"

Mummie took Diggory firmly by the hand and raised him to his feet. "Come with me," she said, and led him to the study. Gillian stared after him half enviously. He was getting all the attention.

Diggory went gently, with drooping head. His hand, deliciously small and firm and cool, lay inside Mummie's. She closed the door of the study.

"Why do you behave so badly?" she asked gently.

"I don't know."

"Do you like rolling on the floor?"

"Yes. I think I do. I like it better than going for walks where there's nothing to see."

Mummie sat down and took him on her knee. They laid their two foreheads together and looked into each other's eyes.

"What would you say," she asked, "if I told you that we are going away from The Very House?"

"To another house?"

"Yes. Near a Castle where you can see the Guard changing and soldiers marching and a river!"

"With monsters in it?"

"There may even be a monster." Strange visions moved through their two heads. Through hers passed a dim procession of moving vans winding their way down the drive, past the pool and the pines and the Scotch firs and the deodar, through the wide iron gate of The Very House, up the road past the stone wall with the holly hedge that Thatcher trimmed so beautifully, past The Wilderness and out of sight. . . .

Through Diggory's a bright river wound its way past regiments of scarlet-clad soldiers, and a Castle, from a window of which the King looked out. The King looked at a horrible monster swimming in the river but he was not afraid, for Diggory was there, sword in hand, to protect him.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Very House* by Mazo de la Roche]