

A Melody in Silver eBook

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Contents

A Melody in Silver eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	10
Page 5.....	12
Page 6.....	14
Page 7.....	15
Page 8.....	17
Page 9.....	19
Page 10.....	21
Page 11.....	23
Page 12.....	25
Page 13.....	27
Page 14.....	29
Page 15.....	31
Page 16.....	32
Page 17.....	34
Page 18.....	36
Page 19.....	38
Page 20.....	40
Page 21.....	42
Page 22.....	44



Page 23..... 46
Page 24..... 48
Page 25..... 50
Page 26..... 52
Page 27..... 54
Page 28..... 56
Page 29..... 57
Page 30..... 59
Page 31..... 61
Page 32..... 63
Page 33..... 65
Page 34..... 67
Page 35..... 69
Page 36..... 71



Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
THE LOST CAUSE		1
CHAPTER II		4
CHAPTER III		5
CHAPTER IV		7
CHAPTER V		11
CHAPTER VI		13
CHAPTER VII		16
CHAPTER VIII		18
CHAPTER IX		21
CHAPTER X		23
CHAPTER XI		25
CHAPTER XII		27
CHAPTER XIII		30
CHAPTER XIV		34



Page 1

THE LOST CAUSE

David had a suspicion. He did not know it was that, but that is what it was. He suspected that Mother thought he was a good little boy, and he suspected that she thought Mitchell Horrigan was a bad little boy. Perhaps Mother had a suspicion, too; she might have suspected that it was Mitch who had put a certain notion into David's head—a notion which had to do with pants. Only you must not call them pants; they are "trouvers."

But it doesn't really matter in the least what they are called. Mitch had them. He also had the measles once. David did not know whether it was the measles part or the pants part that made Mitch a bad little boy. All David knew about it was that if he invited Mitch into the yard to climb trees and give swimming lessons in the high grass, it usually happened that Mother could think of some important business for her little boy to do in the house. It was surprising how many important matters there were for David to do in the house every time Mitch came into the yard to play. She might want to show him something, and perhaps it would be a turn-over that she wanted to show him, a delicious little half-grown pie stuffed with strawberries or with cherries.

If Mitch were waiting out under the trees, the toothsome bit of pastry was always a very peculiar kind. Mother believed in generosity, but generosity with limitations. Strawberry turn-over was not good for Mitch. Mother was positive that it was not good for him. That seemed a little singular to David, for he had never noticed anything wrong with Mitch. It does not seem credible that a boy who owns a real Indian bow 'n' arrow, which shoots so high he can knock the eye out of an angel with it, should yet be so foolish as to have a bad stomach.

David had never seen any of the one-eyed angels that Mitch had knocked down out of heaven with his Indian bow 'n' arrow. Mitch was not the kind to show all of his treasures. He didn't even show his bow 'n' arrow. He kept it hid, so that if the police ever found out about it they could not get it away from him. If they wanted to arrest him for having it, that would be all right, but they should not get hold of his Indian bow 'n' arrow.

The thing you liked about Mitch was that he was so reasonable. One's faith in him would never be shaken unless one were to try his recipe for getting trouvers. In theory it was a sound recipe. Mitch, who had reached trouvers and understood the mightiness of the achievement, could vouch for the sure result of his prescription. It was guaranteed to cure the dress-habit in seven days. At first, though, Mitch would not tell how the great honor of pants had been bestowed upon him. He was then too important even to say, "Hello, kid!" For a time he did not deign to notice anybody, and when he did notice anybody it was only to pretend that David was nothing but a little girl.



Page 2

"I am not, neither."

David filed his protest between the palings of the fence. But it was no use. He might protest, he might cross his heart and hope to die, but still the boy on the other side of the fence would not believe.

"Are, too," Mitch would say.

Then a startled look, an appealing, hopeless fear suddenly abashed the little boy in the dainty white dress. As he shook the ringlets out of his eyes he asked, earnestly:

"Why, then, am I a girl?"

Here, you see, was another case like the bow 'n' arrow. Mitch did not have to tell all he knew. He only got proud and spat through his teeth and said, "Why?" right back at David.

Such a question, you must agree, may be illuminating, but is not satisfying. The meaning of it seems a bit indefinite and lonesome, but if you are a little boy with ringlets it has meaning enough. It hurts mightily. But Mitch was still not satisfied.

"Dear Little Curly Locks," he said with contemptible sweetness, "oo mustn't get oo dress dirty."

Then did David's fists clench defiantly, and he said an awful swear.

"Dresses!" he exclaimed derisively; "that's all you know about it. They're kilts!"

This defense was not convincing, for there is no good way, once you think of it, to prove that a dress is a dress and that a kilt is a kilt. The only way, I fear, to settle such a controversy is to hit the other boy with a brick. Only David did not have a brick. What he did have was a confused feeling that Mitch was right. For might it not be true, this horrible thing about being a girl? What if David was that, and couldn't ever get over it?

Now, Mitch, since you are at last in trauvers, here is the time to prove to this ignominious comrade of yours that in you are the instincts of a gentleman. Why don't you show David that there may be a chance for him after all? It would be proper for you to remind him that you yourself used to wear dresses, but of course you will make sure to speak of the disgrace as a thing of many years ago.

But there is no need, Mitch, in counseling David to go to extremes. It is quite unnecessary to inform him that the way to pants is a very simple matter. I dread to think that you are telling him to tear his kilts "all to splinters." Of course that can be done. You hook the skirt over a paling in the fence; then you jump, and sometimes, David, it hurts when you hit the ground. But what matter? You are fighting in a noble cause.



Mother will be so astonished! She will see how desperately you have outgrown your kilts.

Only she did not see it. She picked the splinters out of David's hands—cruel splinters from the fence—and she was very sorry for her little boy. And as for the dresses, it was no great matter about them. She would make other dresses for her David.

And that is why Mitchell Horrigan's recipe for pants is not a good recipe. Even at the end of a week David could not report much progress. Finally he had to acknowledge himself defeated. He then bore the dishonor of kilts with what manfulness he could and with a creed which was recited something like this:

Page 3

“We don’t care to play with Mitch any more, do we, Mother?”

Or again:

“We don’t care nothing about trouters, do we, Mother?”

Sometimes David would ask with husky heroism:

“Curls is all right for little boys, is they not?”

David was angry with Mitch; David was never going to speak to Mitchell Horrigan any more. His resolution was so strong that he hurried away to tell Mitch about it, but when the boy actually appeared, it was hard to remember why one should be angry with him. His brown feet came flapping along the stone walk, and in his hand was a freshly whittled stick that made an animated clatter when he drew it along the fence. There was that in the reckless abandonment of Mitch which did not help David to tell him that he was too mean and disgraceful to be spoken to. And besides, his feelings might be hurt if one were to tell him that. So, as Mitch came nearer and nearer, David felt guiltier and guiltier, and presently he was surprised to hear himself asking rather abjectly:

“You isn’t mad at me, is you, Mitch?”

Trouvers ignored the humble salutation. He took out his knife and began to whittle ceremoniously upon the stick.

“What you making?” David asked tentatively.

“Nothin’ much,” said Mitch, with the air of a man who has invented steamships and flying machines. “Only a tiger trap.”

David knew better. David knew that Mitch, in his insufferable conceit, was merely whittling to show off his new knife. So, pressing his red mouth between two white palings of the fence, David declared in a strong voice:

“I have a bigger knife than that.”

The assertion was boldly made, but when Mitch asked to see the knife, David decided not to show it.

“Bigness don’t count,” said Mitch. “It’s the steel.”

He breathed upon the blade to test its quality. Every boy knows that if the film of moisture is quick to vanish, there can be no question about the superlative merit of the knife.



“Where did you get it?”

David was eager to know that, but Mitch decided that he must be going. He hadn't time to stay here any longer. He intimated that he had important business to look after. He was going to make a kite ten feet tall, and, with the snobbishness of a plutocrat, he went strutting away. He was almost beyond earshot when he volunteered this brief information:

“My father, he guv it to me.”

Had David heard correctly? Did Mitch say “father”? The little boy had never thought of such an article as a father except as something which belongs to a story book. Fathers were common enough in the story books; they were men, but until this moment David had never thought of them as being desirable. It now appeared that they were good for something. Mitch Horrigan had one. He actually kept a father, and the father gave him fine presents.



Page 4

Reflecting upon all this, David became a very quiet little boy. There seemed to be nothing interesting for him to do. He had no appetite for supper, and in his face was the look of one who dreams of such mighty things as troupers, and a hair-cut, and a brand-new knife. And when, at last, it came time to kiss Mother good-night, he turned appealing eyes upon her, and asked with trembling lips:

“Why don’t I never have no fav-ver?”

CHAPTER II

RUE AND ROSEMARY

They are not easy to take, siestas aren’t. They are the word for going to sleep in the daytime when you would rather not. Sometimes you have to take medicine with them, and nearly always you feel that you must have a drink of milk. It is so easy to discover that you are thirsty, and besides, it usually gives you a chance to stay awake a little while longer. Frequently you find that you don’t care as much for the milk as you thought you did, but in one way there is always a satisfaction in it. If you have a looking-glass, you can see the white mustache the drink has left on your lip. Another satisfaction is that if Mother forgets to bring your milk in the mug you like best, you can send her right back for it.

If David wants to be particularly polite he sometimes asks Mother to tell him her story about the young man with the mustache. She has one that is tremendous dull because there are so many thinking places in it. “And then—and then—” Mother will say, and after that the story doesn’t get on worth anything. The worst about it is that it always takes such a long while for her to reach the part which tells of the time when the young man started to raise a mustache.

“How did he start?” David never fails to ask.

“By not shaving his lip.”

It is now that David feels of his white lip with the tip of his red tongue and then stoutly declares:

“I have not shaved *my* lip.”

“It was brown, like your hair,” says Mother, “and when it was about half-grown it began to curl up at the ends. The boys made fun of it, but it was very beautiful and ever so soft and fine.”

“Truly, was it?” asks David, and then something blooms pink in Mother’s cheeks. That is the one interesting thing about her story, and up to that point he can always stand her



narrative very well; for he is always watching for the pretty pinkness. But when that is gone, his interest goes too. It seems very ordinary to him that this young man should have studied mechanics and become a great engineer and invented things, and made discoveries.

Now, if he had ever been shipwrecked, or if he had ever been eaten up by bears, or if he had fought Indians, or done some other notable thing with a scare in it, why, *that* would be worth talking about. But why tell so much about a young man who had done none of these things? Why speak of the way she had encouraged him and helped him and studied with him? You can see for yourself that it was a very stupid tale.



Page 5

It was clever of David, though, to have her tell him the story, for then she would sometimes forget that her little boy was not having his siesta. To show her that he was trying to keep up an interest he would now and then ask a question, as, for example, when she spoke of the honors the young man had won at college.

“Could he spit through his teeth?” David would inquire, and it was always a sad thing to him that this was not one of the young man’s accomplishments. A very disappointing chap, to be sure.

“Do you know, my little boy,” Mother would say in a strange, soft voice, “do you know that your eyes are as bright as his eyes used to be, and that—”

“It’s a nice story,” David would say courageously, and like as not, while Mother was still talking about the handsome young man with the mustache, her little boy would fall fast asleep.

It is good, David, that you do not hear the story that is hid away in the thinking places; it is good that you do not know the worn look which sometimes comes into Mother’s face and crowds from it all the pretty pinkness that you love to see. You will never know that other look which was often in Mother’s face before you came to nestle in her arms and frighten it away. You have done well, brave soldier-man, for now I am right sure she does not wonder any more why the day should have come when the one she had helped so much should have forgotten the help and been thankless for all the love that she had given him.

CHAPTER III

THE WORLD’S END

Sometimes, when David was working hard on his siesta, Mother would tell him that he was to whistle as soon as the Sand Man came. But even that doesn’t always help. You have to ask so many times to make sure that the Sand Man *hasn’t* come, and after you have been told repeatedly that you are not yet asleep it makes you discouraged. You know, too, that you mustn’t cheat; it’s not fair to whistle until you actually see the Sand Man.

Hardly anything is so wearing on a little boy as to wait. This is especially true of siesta-time, when there are always such a number of interesting things going on outside. Through the shutter’s chink the yellow sunshine comes squirting into the room—such amazing sunshine, just as it is on circus day! Only to think of what great events must be in progress while you and Mother lie here together in the darkened room, and toss hopelessly in the dreadful throes of trying to get through with your siesta!



One of the mean things about it is that neither side of the pillow has any cool spot. You turn it over once more and once more, and yet once more again, but it is no use. It is utterly impossible to cuddle down and obey orders and go to sleep like a brave soldier-man. The more you try it the more squirmy and itchy you feel; for at such a time one is usually fretted by the repeated ticklings of some bothersome fly. He will sneak along the edge of the pillow and rub his hands together in front of him, and then he's ready. Down he swoops upon your nose, hitting it precisely in the same place where he lit before.



Page 6

It is easy for Mother to say, "Go to sleep, now," but what bad shift a little boy will sometimes make of his siesta!

There came a day in June when David believed he never in this world could get through with it. He heard the chuck and drowsy clack of the sprinkling-wagon as it ponderously advanced upon its lazy way; he heard the almost whispered clucking of a mother-hen who was calling her chicks to come shuffle with her in the cool loose earth under the shade of the crooked old apple-tree, and presently there came a time when the out-of-doors was all so still that even the falling of a shadow would have made a sound.

David was right sure of that. There was such mystery, such an unwonted sense of unreality a-quiver in this silence, that he wanted, very much, to learn what it was all about. Then, ever and ever so cautiously, he slipped down off the bed. His dimpled toes went patting daintily across the polished floor, and presently he had stolen forth upon a great adventure. His eyes narrowed; he winked rapidly; so dazed he was with the sunshine and the strangeness of a world that had never looked like this before.

He had found out where summer is. It was here in Mother's garden, and you knew it was, for you could feel it in the stillness, and you could see it in the sleepiness of blossoms that drowsed and drooped and hung their lazy heads in the languishing sweetness of good air and golden sunshine. It was all very strange and very dear to David. The sky had never before been so blue, and never so big nor deep nor cool, and the ground was pleasantly warm and nice. As the seeded grass touched his ankles he could feel warm shivers run over his legs, delightful thrills which came to him this day for the first time. He had found out where summer is.

David paused, and listened, and heard nothing. The whole world was listening. By and by a honey-burdened bumblebee began talking to himself; you couldn't quite understand what he said because he mumbled and bumbled so. David knew he was such a very tired and sleepy bumblebee that nobody could understand what he was talking about; and besides, he wasn't nearly so wonderful as a big butterfly that balanced with blazing wings upon a nodding rose.

He was too heavy for the wee, sweet flower. David was right sure the butterfly should have rested less heavily there, for pretty soon the bonnie bloom came all apart and began to fall. One after another the crimson petals slipped away, and dipped and floated and came falling and falling down. David was confident that he could hear the warm whisper of them as they fell, so in tune he was with the summer and the sunshine, out here in Mother's garden.



Page 7

It was good he had stolen forth into the ardent glory of the noon-time, for if he had not he never would have learned about the place where the world stops. Only a few of us have found out about that place. You don't think about it at all, and then, pretty soon, you *do* think about it. The way David learned of it was a new way. He laid him down upon the petunia bed—dear, old-fashioned flowers, lavender and pink and white, that peeped between the palings of the white fence—he laid him down and smelled deep the good, queer smell of them, and like the flowers themselves, he, too, peeped between the bars into the vast world which lay beyond. And that is how he learned of the place where the world stops.

Down a long, long lane—down there, a little way past the cottonwood tree, where the lane quits going on, that is where the world stops. You know that is the place because of the awesomeness that comes to you. The old cottonwood stands sentinel over that region of the Great Beyond. So tall and big and still he is that if you look at him awhile you will get the strange feeling of things. High up in the glossy leaves one can sometimes hear a little pattery sound, finer than the crinkle of tissue paper—a pretty little sound like a quiet sprinkle of cooling rain. When he does that he is whispering to the clouds that bring the freshness of the summer shower.

Beyond him, down there where the world stops, is the place where the clouds go to sleep after their long, slow journeyings across the deep, sweet blue of the sky.

“What does my little boy see with his two big, shining eyes? And what does my little boy hear?”

It was Mother's voice above him that was thus humbly asking admission into the strange world he had found, and so well she knew it was marvelous fine, this world of his, that she snuggled his cheek against *her* cheek, and tried and tried, in her poor, grown-up way, to understand all the pretty things the great silent tree was whispering to the clouds.

“Is it there?” she asked very softly and very earnestly. “Is it down there that the clouds go to sleep?”

And they remained together, these two, side by side, thinking about the sweet go-to-bed place of the clouds. A silence which was new to them, a cool and reposeful silence, had come upon them and held them. They were conversing in a language which has no words. It was a melody in silver—the spirit of motherhood, the soul of childhood blending into music, bringing them nearer, deepening their love and making it more dear to them.

They understood each other, that woman and that little boy. They did not move. David had taken hold of Mother's hand, and he held to it while they kept on looking down there, afar off, where the great silent tree was softly whispering to the summer clouds.

CHAPTER IV

DEAD SEA FRUIT



Page 8

“Why don’t I never have no fav-ver?”

Often David asked that question; upon awakening and upon going to bed he was pretty sure to make inquiries that were never satisfactorily answered. And now, one morning, it was a decided relief to Mother to have him ask something else. With eager questioning he said:

“Am I?”

Early, very early, he had awakened her to ask her that, for he had been told, on going to bed, that when the day should come again he would be four years old. Twice in the night he had asked if he was It; so when the dawn at last showed with a lovely pinkness in the lacy folds of the curtains, and the note of a far-away meadow-lark called him into the glory of birthday happiness, he wanted to be very certain that this famous period of his life had actually come.

Before demanding if it were quite true, he lay still awhile and thought about it. He looked at Mother’s face, and snuggled his fingers into the fairy foam of her nightgown, but the face and the fairy foam at her throat had not changed in the least. They were just the same as they had been yesterday and the day before and the day before that.

It was very strange. He had supposed that when a little boy is four years old, his life would be somehow—different. That is why he was still in doubt; he was not at all sure about being four years old. He would wake up Mother and then, if he was It, she would make him feel that he was.

Her reassurance, though, was not nearly so satisfying as he had hoped.

“Yes, dear; it’s your birthday. Now go to sleep awhile, my pretty.”

David lay very still, but he did not go to sleep. By and by he asked rather uneasily:

“What do you do first?”

“What do you mean, little boy?”

“Little? *Am* I little?”

“Of course you’re growing,” Mother told him.

But David would not be deceived. Already the suspicion had come to him that there was nothing grand about being four years old. It was not a success; it was a failure, and his one hope now rested in Dr. Redfield, for this was the morning when the Doctor had promised to waylay the little boy.

“How does *that* begin?” David asked. He could not think what it was that began.

“How does *what* begin?” Mother inquired.

And that was not nice nor reasonable of her. Mothers are made to answer questions, not to ask questions, and they are so discouraging when they can't understand about being waylaid! David felt abused, but he decided to have one more try at her. Then, if she didn't give him satisfaction, he would know that Four Years Old was all a humbug. As he looked longingly into her face, his words faltered, as though he were again expecting disappointment.

“Will he—will he wear his big, shiny hat when he does it?”

Into Mother's face came a puzzled, half knowing look. She recalled the admiration inspired in a certain little boy by a certain abominable top hat that a certain doctor had once worn to a certain annual meeting of the State Medical Society. But this was the extent of her knowledge.



Page 9

“When he does what?” she asked.

The little boy’s lip trembled, and he turned away his face. He saw it wasn’t any use. Mother didn’t understand; she evidently hadn’t tried. It was plain that he was not four years old; he was only three. It is very hard on little boys to be only that old when they have made up their minds to be four. So, when David was being dressed, he suffered all the while with a severe case of what is commonly called pouts, but which in reality is something much sadder.

“My, my!” said Mother, as she drew a stocking over the pink toes of his right foot, “one mustn’t look like that on his birthday.”

“It is not my birthday,” he said, not impertinently, but politely and woefully.

Even a pair of new shoes did not prove that this was his birthday, and yet they helped to prove it. One gets them at such times as Christmas and birthdays, and such a delightful squeak was in these shoes that David could scarcely eat his breakfast for wanting to walk about in them. If a circus should come to town, he would now be ready for it; he had the shoes. And besides, there were tassels on them—wonderful tassels. It is much easier to be a brave soldier-man if they have tassels.

Do you know what it is to be a brave soldier-man? Well, to be that, one must be kind and sweet and unselfish and do right. And doing right is doing mostly what you don’t want to do. To wash a lot—that is right; to keep your fingers out of the pie—that is right; to keep your hands from spilling mucilage on the cat’s back—that is right. If you make dents with a tack-hammer in Mother’s piano, that is not right; that is a surprise.

The only safe way of doing right is to think of what you would rather do, and then do something else. But often this is such hard work that sometimes one doesn’t care much about being a brave soldier-man.

For all that, it’s jolly fine to have soldier shoes. They came to David in time to save his faith in the business of being four years old. It now began to have a glad feel about it, and he walked perkily to the garden’s edge, and like a new Columbus about to discover a fresh world, climbed up experimentally and sat on the gate-post.

He was not at all sure that this was a proper place to get waylaid, but something monstrous fine would of course happen before long; there could be no doubt about that. How people would be astonished when they came along and found that he had grown to be four years old!

Who would be the first, he wondered, to be shocked and surprised at him? While he was thinking of that, his eyes suddenly brightened with excitement. The street-sprinkler, the dear old street-sprinkler, was coming! David’s heart beat faster as he listened to the



slow creak and clacking oscillation of the heavy wheels. Then came the damp, dusty, good smell which always brought to him such a sense of mysterious romance! No prince out of a fairy



Page 10

story could be more marvelous to him than the coatless driver up there on the seat under his great canvas umbrella that had advertisements printed on it. Always when the street-sprinkler passed, David had watched it covetously, and now was his chance. He would proclaim himself. He would not have to wish—and wish—and wish any more about it. That proud place up there by the driver was for him. He didn't doubt it in the least; he called; he called lustily; he kicked his new shoes against the fence-post and called:

“Here I am! See, right down here!”

But will you believe it, now? The driver didn't look at him. Perhaps the lazy clamor of the wagon and the hissing sound of the steadily gushing water made too big a noise for the voice of such a little boy to be heard.

Do you call that any way for the street-sprinkler man to act? But of course there might be some good reason for such criminal behavior. David remembered that he hadn't consulted any fairy godmother about it; long since he would have done so, only he could never catch any fairy godmothers hanging around. They were always busy somewhere else. Even Mother herself had failed to introduce him to any competent, respectable fairy godmothers. She was all right on telling about them; she was strong on that, but somehow they never seemed to know when they were wanted. That is their great fault; they are so unreliable. Once let them get loose from a Cinderella book, and their business system is always defective.

How, then, can a little boy expect to accomplish any miracles like riding on the street-sprinkler? It is not reasonable; David himself decided that it wasn't, and he concluded to try something more feasible, something that looked simple and easy and more natural. Next time he would do better. Why shouldn't he? When one is four years old, nearly anything ought to be possible. All he had to do was to await another opportunity, and then pounce down on it.

This time, though, it was slow in coming, and when it did come it didn't look much like an opportunity. It was too easy. In shape it was a very ragged man with a very dirty face and a very red nose and a very greasy hat. He came by, a-munching on an apple, a big apple, a crispy-sounding apple, a shiny ripe and luscious apple. How cool it would feel in a little boy's hands if he were to hold it tight and then take a big, sweet, juicy bite out of it!

Should David accept the remainder of the man's apple? No, that would not be right; little boys must not be greedy. Just the teeniest, weeniest, wee bite would be quite sufficient for him.



But, heigh-ho and alack-aday! the dirty-faced man and the red-nosed man and the man with the greasy hat passed slouchily on, a-munching and a-crunching of his apple.

That was enough. David cast himself down from the fence-post of deception and was off for the house, his arm before his eyes, and his new shoes creaking dolorously. He must find refuge in Mother's lap; she must help him to soothe away his hurt; he must have solace for this wretched failure of great hopes.



Page 11

But before reaching her, David suddenly found himself seized by some mysterious force which sent him floating into space. Back and forth he swam like, a pendulum, and when he alighted, it was on a man's shoulder, and the man was Dr. Redfield.

"You're not hurt, are you?" he asked.

David would not be comforted. He struggled to the ground.

"What's the use?" he demanded between sobs. "What's the use of being four years old?"

CHAPTER V

THE MUG OF WOE

"New shoes! Where in the world did we get new shoes?"

Dr. Redfield was the first to rightly appreciate the grandeur of them, and he was delighted to hear how they could squeak. Land sakes! but they were wonderful. Greatly astonished he was, and so swollen with pride was the little boy that he didn't care—not so very much—even if his old friend had failed to put on his top hat.

"Are you going to do it?"

That was David's first question. He was rather anxious, because he did not believe that this big comrade of his had come properly attired to waylay anybody.

"Surely I am."

The Doctor was prompt, but puzzled. He didn't know *what* he was going to do. Then, for a space, man and boy looked at each other inquiringly. They were both waiting and they were both wondering.

"Has it begun to start yet?"

There was expectancy in David's voice.

"You mean, I suppose—that is—"

"Yes, yes! *You* know!" David gravely wagged his head.

The Doctor took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"If you were a little more definite—not quite so vague and uncertain," he hopelessly suggested.



It was then that a sudden inspiration saved the day for him. He began to talk in a big and solemn voice.

“I perceive, sir,” he said, “that you have reached the age for being waylaid. You are four years old, and by an ancient decree of all the Medes and Persians, that makes you my prisoner, to hold in hostage until that ungracious dame, your mother, shall subscribe unto me suitable and sufficient ransom.”

David clapped his hands gleefully.

“Go on!” he demanded. “Go on! Now what?”

“Well, when you have all that said to you, it means that if you find a doctor skulking about within ten feet of you, it is then your perfect right to press him into your service. If you command him to give you a ride on his back, he will have to do it. It’s undignified and he doesn’t believe in it, but that’s where you have him at your mercy. He *has* to obey; he has to go any place you tell him to go. If you say he must take you to a toy shop, that settles it. He has no choice in the matter. He *has* to do it. That is always the rule when a little boy is four years old.”

Page 12

David also learned that there is another peculiar thing about it. In circumstances like this a little boy has the right, when he arrives at the toy shop, to choose for himself the thing he wants to buy. No grown-up will interfere with his judgment; the law won't allow it. The trouble is that it is pretty hard for him to make up his mind. When there is such a great array of drums and swords and soldiers' caps and guns and bears that jump, it is not an easy thing to select the toy that will please him most of all.

Why not buy a train of cars and a track to run it on? But if he bought that, then how could he get along without a jumping-jack that threw up its arms and legs when you pulled the string? And if he took the jumping-jack, then what about an iron savings bank with a monkey on top that shook his head with thanks when you dropped the money in? Lovely things, all of them, but David put them from him. He did it with decision, but with a nervous haste which told of wavering courage.

Such things were not for him. They are only for boys who are not soldier-men. And besides, they might cost too much. If the price went higher than five cents David would be lost, for many precepts had been forced upon him in regard to the waste of money, and the value people put on it, and the way they have to work for it. So thus far the nickel had marked the very summit of his financial transactions.

All the same, a strange wistfulness came into David's eyes when he put aside poor jumping-jack. Such a dear of a jumping-jack he was! You could have kissed the jolly red paint of him, and the pretty toy bank was a thing to hug tight under your arm. That is why the little boy's voice was such a weak and far-away voice when he presently asked:—

“Would two five centses get him, do you think?”

“When it's your birthday,” said the Doctor, “it's all right to spend three five centses.”

Here, then, was David's chance. The jumping-jack was almost his, when his shoes squeaked a warning. Thus suddenly was he reminded that he was a brave little soldier-man. He now saw that such a purchase would be ridiculous. Something serviceable is what he must have, something that Mother would like and want him to keep. No silly toys for him! But, oh, if only the Doctor would insist a little on the jumping-jack!

David turned reluctantly away; he choked down the queerness in his throat and firmly laid hands on a gilt-rimmed mustache cup. His lips twitched and his eyes winked, but the look in his face was the look of a soldier-man. No intervention from the Doctor could shake his determination.

With coaxing insinuation the Doctor said, “We haven't seen all the things, you know.”

Hope kindled in David's eyes.



“Maybe,” he said with enthusiasm, “maybe this costs more than three five centses. Does it?”

“Wouldn’t you rather have a drum?” asked the salesman.



Page 13

No, indeed; David would not have a drum.

“Or a sword?” asked the Doctor.

“No, thanks,” the words came with husky politeness.

The cup was the thing for him; it would please Mother. She would be so glad about the cup!

Here, again, was disappointment. She didn't seem pleased with it—not nearly so pleased as she should have been. But never mind, little boy; every generous heart is quick to forget the unselfish kindness that is in it, and you yourself will not be slow to forget this foolish sacrifice you have made for love of one who has made many a sacrifice for you. She has made them, little boy, in love, and forgotten them in love, and that, David, is the beautiful thing in loving.

CHAPTER VI

“FAV-VER”

When David is an early bird it is great fun to show Mother what a sluggard she is. He calls to her to let her know it is getting-up time, and then she is so amazed! She cannot understand how it is possible for her little boy to get awake almost as soon as the robins do. Sometimes she asks if he is sure he is awake, and he tells her he is sure of it, and then she believes him.

Only this morning she did not ask that, and this morning there was no smile in her eyes. A strange intentness had taken all the summer look out of her face, and there were no kisses on her lips; for he had troubled her with that repeated demand of his to be supplied with a father.

“Whose boy,” she asked hesitatingly, “whose boy are you?”

David returned her steadfast gaze with a queer, impish wisdom. He sat up in bed and fixed his eyes upon her.

“Whose boy?” he slowly repeated. “Why, I'm fav-ver's boy.”

“Have you a father?” asked the woman.

“If you get one for me I have.”

“David,” she said, more serious than was usual with her, “if you had one I should want him to look like you.... Here, little boy, here, in your face I see your father.”



The woman had moulded her cool hands to David's smooth, soft cheeks, and was looking wistfully into the eyes of her little boy. But abruptly he struggled free from her; he slipped to the floor, mounted on a chair in front of the chiffonier and peeped excitedly into the mirror. A long time he looked at the tousle-headed reflection that looked earnestly back at him. He frowned, and the boy in the glass frowned, too. He was a great disappointment, that boy; he wasn't the teeniest bit like any father that ever was. He was only a child in a white nighty.

David faced about; he got down off the chair, and he turned his accusing eyes upon Mother. She had fooled her little boy; she had told him a wrong story, and it was woful disillusionment.

"You cannot see him, David," she said, "because you have no picture of him in your heart."

Well, then, did Mother have such a picture? If she did, why could she not show him that picture? And please, Mother, where did she keep that heart where the picture was?



Page 14

Yes, to be sure, she had such a picture, but it was not of David's father; it was of someone else, for she had never seen David's father. In her heart was still another picture: it was a memory which had to do with the sad nativity of her little boy. So sad an event it was that she had left off being a head nurse at the hospital, in order to become a mother by proxy.

David might some day come to know that there was a foggyish, bachelor doctor who was almost a father in the same sort of way—almost, but not quite, for the child had been left not to him, but to her. A home, likewise, was her inheritance, a very pretty little home and all else that had once belonged to the real mother of the little boy.

A brave death she had died, that kinless widow at the hospital. And how could it have been otherwise, when so large a faith was hers in the nurse whose arm had gone lovingly around her, and whose voice, many and many a time, had given comfort and had known finally how to smooth the way to death?

But it was the Doctor's hand, not the hand of the nurse, that had gently closed the mother's eyes upon her last long sleep; and it was he, not the nurse, who had turned wofully away, and stared and stared and stared out of the window.

Grave pictures were these that Mother kept in her heart, and David was not to know how much he troubled her when he fell to questioning; and that is why, in the midst of his endless inquiries, he was wont to encounter the Great Never Mind.

Do you know what that is? It is a condition of soul common to all mothers who have little boys that want to know things.

The worst of it is that one is expected to understand when he is never to mind and when he *is* to mind. They are not the same thing; they are twins, and they are so hard to tell apart, and so disagreeable, and act so much alike that only an expert can tell which is which.

But Mother was an expert. She knew when you must and when you mustn't; she had a talent for it. She also had a gift for telling David that she would see. If he wanted to go swimming with Mitch Horigan in the creek near town, she said she would see about it, but somehow she never did get it seen about.

That was one great difference between her and Dr. Redfield. He did not say he would see; if given half a chance he always *did* see, and there was something so magical about him that one felt he was good for a miracle most any time. For all that, it was hard to ask him for anything, for when in his presence one always felt so queer and bashful and overpowered with the strange medicine smells which were such a big part of him. Yet David now felt that no boy has any right to hope for a father if he hasn't spirit enough to ask for one. So firmly convinced of this was the little boy that early in the

morning he made up his mind as to what he would do. It was something very daring and very naughty. He was going to run away.



Page 15

He did it, too, and the awfulness of it got into his throat; for the Doctor lives farther away from David's house than China is. It is almost at the end of things, and the little boy did not know whether he could find it. What was even worse, he presently did not know whether he could get back home again. He had crept through the fence and run and run, and then walked and walked, and now he had decided that he didn't care much about going on. Some other time would do as well; to-morrow would be all right. This did not feel like a lucky day; some other day would be luckier.

David felt very virtuous. It seemed to him that he had not meant to run away at all. He was not a bad little boy; he was a good little boy, but he soon began to feel annoyed; for the way home didn't have any straightness to it; the way home began to get more and more crooked, and the houses began to seem strange and unfriendly; they stared at him rudely, and none of them looked either like home or like the Doctor's house.

The sad thing was that he had only one way to tell which was the Doctor's house, and that was a wrong way. He was looking for a yellow dog that scratched his head with his toenails and knocked his elbow on the board-walk when he did it. Such a dog once lay in front of the Doctor's house. So now, as David kept going and going on, he was looking out for a yellow dog that should knock with his elbow when he scratched his head with his toenails. Once a black dog did it, but that was stupid of him; he needn't try to fool David.

After a long, long while a great tiredness came upon the little boy, and there was such a grinding ache in him that he knew hungry-time had come. He passed a bakeshop that breathed out a warm, steamy fragrance, and in the window there was a great pan of red-brown doughnuts dusted over with powdered sugar. As the smell was like the smell of the bakeshop near home, and as the doughnuts looked the same, David instantly plucked up courage. He hurried on, confident that he would soon be climbing up into Mother's lap. It was some time, though, before he found a house with a white paling, and he was distrustful of the house; it had no curtains, and it scowled so. He decided to experiment first with the fence-post. Maybe the house would look more reasonable, and maybe things would feel different if he were to climb up on the fence-post. So presently, when he was perched above the gate, he closed his eyes and began kicking his heels as he did when at home.

This was another experiment; for every boy knows that you cannot hope to see any fairies or any fairy godmothers unless you take them by surprise. David, for his part, frequently gave them to understand that he wasn't looking. He would shut his eyes tight and kick his feet to prove that he was minding his own business. If they saw him like that, maybe they wouldn't care if he was so close to them. After convincing them that his intentions were honorable, he would suddenly pop open his eyes to catch them at their tricks.



Page 16

Once he almost saw them. The tulip bed had seemed to dance in the sunlight like a whirlpool of scarlet and yellow fire; then it stopped abruptly, but the blossoms still nodded and stirred, even after the wild dance was done. He was confident that he had come very near to seeing the fairies, but now he did not want to see them. They had done something to the house where Mother lived, and he wanted them to undo it. He would not look. They would please understand that this time he did not mean to deceive them.

“Cross my heart,” he murmured very solemnly, and gave the pledge.

But it did no good. They would not undo the queer things they had done to the house. They were spiteful and mean, and not to be trusted. The house remained without trees and vines, a scowling, ugly thing. The garden had no shrubs; the seeded grass was matted down and yellow, like hay, and there were bald places where the gray ground was showing through.

They did not know, those foolish fairy folk, of the courage and the faith that may be in the heart of a little boy. They might be stubborn if they chose; they might keep him waiting, but in the end they would not abuse his patience. All would come right. Only it did take such a long, long while for it to get that way! Hungry-time is very hard on little boys when they are waiting for things to come right, and it was so hard on David that twice he called aloud for Mother. A wooden echo, sent back from barns and sheds, dolefully repeated the last syllable of his cry. It was sad mockery, but David held doggedly to his belief that finally things would come right. His hands closed rigidly upon the sides of the fence-post, and from beneath the tight-shut eyelids slow tear-drops were squeezing out.

It was so that Dr. Redfield found him. With medicine-case in hand, the physician had come down the walk from the desolate, scowling house. As he seized the child in his arms, and as he felt the small arms of David go about his neck, the word that greeted him was “Fav-ver!”

CHAPTER VII

AS A FOUNTAIN IN THE DESERT

The magic that is in the touch of a little boy! There is nothing like it to drive out the weariness from a heart that knows it must not grow too tired. So now, when Dr. Redfield left the house where he had been, it meant much to him that there should be such a welcome awaiting him at the gate. It was a gray and worn smile, but still a smile that answered the child’s unexpected greeting, and as the wee arms went tight about the man’s neck he asked no questions; he merely said:—



“I wish I were, little boy—I wish I were your father. We would have a rest, wouldn't we? We would take time to know each other.”

As he said this there came into the Doctor's face the same look which he had just seen in the eyes of the father and mother who were trusting to him to save their little boy. Many times other fathers and other mothers had made that mute appeal to him, and he had done what he could for them. He had done all that could be done. He was doing it to-day, and he had been doing it every day these past eight weeks that had been as twenty years to him.



Page 17

For a scourge had come, and the city was trembling in the fear of it. Again Duck Town was responsible. Duck Town always was responsible. Every spring when the floods came, and Mud Creek spread itself out over the prairie, only the ducks of Duck Town were secure. Then, when the waters subsided, there came malaria, or perhaps something worse, from the musty cellars that could not be drained. The settlement lay in the bottoms, where the wretched dwellings of the poor stood huddled together as if in whispered conspiracy about some black contagion of a deadlier malice than any that had yet struck terror to the hearts of men.

Several years ago it was typhoid fever that had helped many people to move out of Duck Town. A very badly behaved disease it was. It came right up into the city and went stalking brazenly into the most stately homes along the wooded avenues and beautiful boulevards.

Next after the ravages of typhoid came diphtheria in its most malignant form, and this time—Heaven help us!—this time scarlet fever had come. And this time, as before, there were competent physicians to receive the plague; there were specialists and careful nurses with snowy aprons and pretty caps.

But not in Duck Town. Down there the people knew a man whom they called the Old Doctor. He was not old, not really; it was merely that he had the manner of a veteran. He browbeat them shamefully, as was perfectly proper for an old doctor; he bullied them a great deal, and scolded, and called names, and worked for them, and did not know how to sleep. That made them fear and respect him, but goodness knows what made them love him. They did, though—feared, respected, and loved the man.

Only he could not teach them to be sanitary. He knew their names, their silly Russian names and their silly Polish names; he knew their Slavic and their Bohemian names, but their language he did not know, and all the hygiene they could learn was to call for him when sickness and trouble came to them.

“Keep clean,” he would say. “Drain your cellars; air out and keep clean; do try to keep clean!”

But how could they do that? Four big families in one small house do not help much to keep one small house both clean and sanitary. Dr. Redfield knew that, and he swore at Duck Town for a vile and filthy hole. So did the people swear at Duck Town, and many of them suddenly stopped living there. For, despite the strength and courage of their champion; despite the potency of drugs; despite the sleepless nights and days spent in fighting disease, the deadly contagion grew and spread.

Dr. Redfield had gone through epidemics before, but never one like this, and now his energy was gone. For the first time in his life the impulse had come upon him to own defeat and surrender. Other men, younger doctors than he, should take up the fight. As

for him, he could not battle against such odds. He would give it up; he would go away. He would take this little boy with him and begin to live.



Page 18

"I'll do it," he said, pressing David's face against his hollow and unshaven cheek. "I'll do it, little boy; I will be your father."

Then David asked encouragingly:

"Is it your picture that Mother keeps in her heart?"

"No, David; not mine, I'm afraid."

This was a sad blow to the little boy. A very solemn look came into his face.

"You won't do," he said, "unless you can get your picture into Mother's heart."

For a second time Dr. Redfield smiled, and then he asked:

"How did you get here?"

David did not answer the question; perhaps he did not hear what was said to him. A thoughtful look had come into his face, and presently he was asking, with great earnestness in his voice:

"Why have I got curls for? Why don't I have troupers? Why don't I have warts on me?"

Dr. Redfield was walking hand in hand with the little boy at his side. They were going toward the place where the horse and buggy stood waiting, and as they strode along the little boy kept falling over his chubby legs. It was hard for him to go so fast, for he was very tired, and besides, he was looking up into the man's face.

"Warts aren't nice for little boys," said Dr. Redfield. "You and I don't want them on *us*, do we?"

"Don't I, please?" said David, very earnestly. Then he wanted to know if he could not be born in Indiana. That is where Mitch Horrigan had been born, and he was always bragging about it. But the Doctor didn't seem to be in a conversational humor. He made no reply to David's request, and that vexed the little boy. He suddenly let go of the man's hand and stood still. Then the Doctor stopped, too, and asked what was wrong. It was now that David closed his fist upon his thumbs and frowned savagely.

"I am not," he declared; "I am not neither a girl, am I?"

The reply of his big friend was consoling, but not satisfying, and it was some time before the man again felt the little, soft fist in his hand and saw the little boy looking wistfully up into his face.

"If only I had a few of them, Fav-ver Doctor," said David, "only just a few little warts!"



CHAPTER VIII

THE GONE-AWAY LADY

Proud business for David! Sitting on the edge of the seat of the buggy, he was holding the reins very tight. One must always do that if he does not want the horse to kick and run away. Not knowing that the horse was tied to the hitching-post, David was fulfilling his mission with ceremony, and when Dr. Redfield appeared from the door of a drug shop across the way, the little boy called to him gayly:—

“He didn’t run away, did he? I held him all right, didn’t I?”

Dr. Redfield had been absent long enough to use the telephone in notifying Miss Eastman, whom David knew only by the sweeter name of Mother, that her little boy had been waylaid and would probably not be home to luncheon. She was not permitted to know that the pretty rogue had run away, but the man himself strongly suspected the truth. For some time, though, he charitably refrained from speaking of the matter. In fact, three important events in David’s life took place before the painful subject was broached.



Page 19

To eat at the Doctor's table, and wholly without the assistance of a high chair—that was one of the events; another was a hair-cut, and the third—Everybody, salute! David is in trauvers!

He and his big friend both admired them immensely, and it was in the little shabby, out-at-the-elbow doctor's office that David had been helped to put them on. After he had strutted for a while his Fav-ver said to him:—

“What fun, David; what fun you must have had in running away!”

“Oh,” the little boy replied, “I didn't go far. I got scart and hurried back to Mother.”

The Doctor looked wryly at his guest. He knew David had not gone home after running away.

“Did you see Mother after you went back?” he asked.

“No, I didn't see her.”

“But you are sure you went back?”

“It didn't *feel* back,” said David.

“You couldn't have been mistaken about going back?”

“No.”

“In what part of town were you when I found you on the fence-post?”

“Home,” said David.

“Why were you crying?”

“I was feeling bad.”

“And why was that?”

“I was scart.”

“Of what?”

“Everything was so mixed up.”

“You ran away, though, didn't you? And you did not see Mother after you went back?”



David nodded, and the Doctor got to his feet with a suddenness that knocked over his chair.

“Good gracious!” he exclaimed, consulting his watch. “It’s been four hours since you saw Mother, and she may think something has happened to you. She may think you have been run over by horses—that you have been hurt and can never come home to her any more.”

What was to be done about it? Dr. Redfield wanted to know that; David wanted to know that. The man crinkled up his forehead: he rose and began to walk the floor, and David’s eyes did not leave his face.

“What are we to do?” the Doctor asked, and by and by he added, “If you see a policeman I hope you will tell him you are not lost and that you did not think of making so much trouble when you ran away. But what about Mother? Maybe she, too, has been looking everywhere for you.”

The Doctor sat down and wiped his face, and then got up and began to walk about once more. You could see that he was very much distressed, but not more distressed than David. In sad perplexity they stared at each other. After everything had grown very still in the room, the little boy suddenly exclaimed in an awed voice:—

“Let’s go home!”

“Well said!” the Doctor called out, and David flew for his hat; they started for the stairs, the little boy clinging desperately to the man’s hand.

“Wait!” the Doctor exclaimed. They had stopped abruptly before reaching the steps. “Why don’t we telephone? If we do that, it won’t keep Mother waiting so long.”

It was now that David’s eyes began to gleam. He clapped his hands; he laughed and he danced. He was going to put Mother’s heart at rest about him. She would not be troubled any more. She would know he was safe.



Page 20

After the message had gone, it was easy to see in David's face that he was glad he had not run away very far. Fav-ver Doctor had not blamed him, but Fav-ver Doctor had made him understand how much trouble it makes when little boys run away.

"That's what it was all about," said David.

"You mean, I suppose—"

"Fairies don't like it if I run off. That's why they changed things around so. I hardly knew the house; it was fixed so queer."

"Yes," the Doctor assented, "it looked shocking queer. How did you ever know the place?"

"They didn't change the fence much," said David, and the man now recognized the one point of similitude between that desolate home down in Duck Town and the House of Joy where David lived.

So grim was the contrast that the Doctor winked uneasily, for it brought him back to a problem he had thought settled. He had really meant to take a vacation. He was so tired; no one knew quite, how very tired he was, and he had thought that for a brief while he was justified in leaving the fight to some one else. He only wanted a week or so—a little chance to live, to play with this little boy, and perhaps be happy! Yet, after all, dared he leave those people to other hands when they were counting so on him, and had so little else to count upon? What, he asked, would she, the Gone-Away Lady, have counseled him to do?

Rather nervously he sought the eyes of a miniature on top of his desk, and as he looked into the eyes of that sweet-faced woman, the old comfort he always used to see in them when he had stood most in need of strength, was no longer there. "In the face of so much misery," they seemed to say, "how can you think of forsaking the field?"

It was not a picture of David's mother; no, it was a likeness that had ever kept the Doctor's heart alive to gracious thoughts and gentle ways; it was the portrait of her who had not lived to be his wife, and a habit had come to him of fancying in the eyes of his patients something of the same beautiful look that was in the miniature. Particularly he had done so when David's mother was struggling hard not to go away from her little boy, and often, since then, the Doctor had compared the face of the picture with that of the child; and to-day, as he was wont to do, he took the dainty bit of porcelain in his hand to see if he could not trace, feature by feature, the likeness he so loved to imagine.

The way of this was very interesting to David. He stood by the Doctor's chair and leaned his elbows on the knees of his friend, with his plump chin in the wee, white hands.



“Is it your mother?” he questioned.

The Doctor smiled.

“No, David, but she would have been a good mother.”

“Who is it?”

“It is some one,” the Doctor slowly replied, “who would have loved you very, very much.”

“Where is she now?”

“She went away, little boy; years ago, David, she went away from me.”



Page 21

"I never saw her," said the child.

"No, David, we cannot see her, but if we keep our hearts open and our lives all sweet and clean, we can be sure she is not far away."

The little boy had listened attentively, but he could not understand, and after careful examination of the picture, he presently asked:

"When is she coming back again?"

Dr. Redfield had nothing further to tell. He crossed the room, and hastily replaced the miniature upon the top of the high desk.

CHAPTER IX

THE CRIME OF DAVID

It is not pleasant to be a criminal; it hurts. David knew he was one, and although he did not know what crime he had committed, he imagined that he was now being punished for it. The idea came to him on account of the way the Doctor was acting. The man had gently replaced the miniature upon the top of the desk, and afterward he stood motionless, sunk deep in revery. The little boy was trying to guess what he had done. It must be very, very wrong, or else Fav-ver Doctor wouldn't be standing there like that. He would talk and take notice. David knew this was so, but, try as he might, he could not think what sin he was guilty of. It was a great puzzle, and, in truth, David was frequently puzzled in the same way. For the laws which grown-ups have for little boys are so much like any other kind of laws that it is hard to get any justice out of them.

Without knowing what it was, David keenly felt his disgrace. The glory of being in the Doctor's house; the glory of sitting at table in an ordinary chair; the glory of a hair-cut, and even the glory of trauvers—each of these mighty events was now shorn of its charm. Everything had grown sadly commonplace; for there can be no satisfaction in achieving greatness, if one is so soon to be forgotten. So now, with the passing of every instant, things were growing more and more solemn.

Doubtless the chair on which David was sitting was partly to blame. It was such a slippery seat that if one didn't hold on tight he would be sure to slide right off. There were stickery things in it, too, for the hair-cloth was getting all worn out.

The little boy sat politely on the stickery things and waited. If he waited long enough, maybe Fav-ver Doctor would smile at him as Mother always did. At the present time, though, one could hardly believe that there were ever any smiles in Fav-ver Doctor's face—he was looking so hard and so long at nothing at all.



Everything in the room was feeling lonesome and guilty and bad; and worst of all was the clock. It was a big, upright, colonial clock, and its counting of time was done with deep and stately deliberation. If he would only strike the hour, that would help. David remembered with what dignity the clock could strike. The brazen reverberations of each stroke always lingered awhile before the next one came, and then, when all of them had been struck, and the last ringing beat had throbbed and swooned into a whisper, and died, one always felt that other strokes would follow. One looked for them, and waited for them, but they did not come. To-day nothing seemed to come but the regular, echoing, church-like tick-tock, and to-day there was no diversion of any kind; there was only a large, dark, depressing awesomeness.

Page 22

It is very scary for a little boy when he feels himself grown to be such a criminal. Immense periods of time seem to be slipping away, but he doesn't know at all whether he is getting to be really and truly a man, or whether he is getting littler and littler. There is always the fear of diminishing, because one would so like to be grown up, and when one is such a bad little boy, how can he expect ever to be grown up? David felt himself slipping and slipping. He was slipping back into three-years-old. From that he would go into two-years-old, and before very long he would be only one. He knew it was coming on. There was a tingling flush going down his back, a cold current, like ants with frozen feet. Maybe it was only perspiration, but how was a little boy to know that? He was gasping with excitement when he suddenly called out: "Here I am!"

The idea was that the Doctor should instantly seize him and save him from being dissolved into empty air. But no sooner had David called than he was overcome with shame. At first he was astonished that his voice should really be *his* voice. There was no change in it—not the slightest—and he now saw that he had only fooled himself. That is why he was ashamed. He was so ashamed that he began to cry.

That would not do at all. Fav-ver Doctor said it wouldn't, and he was so distressed about it that he offered David the rare privilege of wearing his watch. At any other time the little boy would have been mightily set up over the honor, but at such a time as this no distinction of any sort was for him. He did not deserve it. He had disgraced himself too much for that, and he pushed the watch from him. He kicked his feet against the chair and rudely exclaimed:

"Don't want your watch!"

In some ways Dr. Redfield was not different from most of us. So many years had passed since he was a little boy that he had forgotten that what appears to be only sullenness may in reality be something quite different. Perhaps if he had been more like his normal self instead of being a very tired and a very irritable doctor he would not have considered it necessary to regard David with the eye of stern discipline. But however that may be, the man pivoted suddenly upon his heel and marched out of the room, leaving the little boy alone to brood at his leisure upon the sad impropriety of being rude.

David wanted to go with the Doctor, but the man would have nothing to do with any little boy who cries without any reason for crying and is saucy besides. David could not go. David must sit still on that chair and must not get up.

"I don't like you," the child called out.

Then, as soon as the door was shut upon him, he became a very angry little boy. He pounced from his seat and began to walk heavily up and down the room. He stamped his feet; he shut his teeth together and he kicked the chair where he had been sitting.

He had not been fairly dealt with, and now, as Mitch Horrigan would say, he was going to be just as rotten bad as ever he could.

Page 23

But it was useless to stamp so loud and clench his fists. There was no one to hear him and there was no one to see him. Neither was there any satisfaction in knocking over a chair. The outlook was utterly hopeless. There didn't seem to be any good way of being bad.

Presently, though, David had an inspiration. He would get hold of the picture the Doctor had talked about so foolishly. David would get it and have a look at it. Surely that would be very naughty indeed. David was confident of that, for the Doctor had been so extremely nice in handling the little miniature.

Only there was one great difficulty which stood in the way of this famous campaign of badness. David encountered this difficulty when he had dragged a chair in front of the high desk. Even by standing on the chair he was not tall enough to reach the picture; even by standing tippy-toe he could not reach it. There was left but the one alternative—he must jump for it, but when he did that he knocked it off. It fell with a loud clack to the floor and broke in two.

Then terror seized the heart of David. He did not mean to break the lady; honestly he did not, and now—oh, oh!—what was to be done? The little boy did not have much time to think about it. He heard a heavy tread on the stairs and knew the Doctor was coming.

Perhaps it would do to say that the picture had fallen off itself and got broken, or maybe it would be better to say that the fairies had done it, or maybe—

Now, at last, David knew the thing to do, and did it. When the Doctor came into the room the little boy was sweetly but not serenely in his place. He was sitting upright in his chair, as though he had not stirred a hair's breadth during the man's absence, but in the eyes of David was a feverish lustre, and the little body of him was all of a tremble.

"I didn't understand about the crying," Dr. Redfield announced, and he was very humble. It did not seem odd to him that he should come to confessional before this little boy. He believed that he had judged too hastily, and he was come to make it right. "Maybe you were lonesome," he said. "Maybe you wanted Mother."

David said nothing, and the Doctor went on with that wistful tenderness which comes to us when we feel we have not been just with those we love.

"You *do* like me, don't you, David?"

But the little boy could not answer; he was crying so.



CHAPTER X

THE NIP OF GUILT

Little David was not well; little David was hot and red.

After he had been gently laid in the crib he turned restlessly, and from time to time a gasping sob shook his whole body, for he had cried himself to sleep. He had fallen into a fitful slumber while in the Doctor's buggy, and had not awakened when carried into the house.

"A little feverish," said Mother, as she pressed her cool hand upon his forehead.



Page 24

The Doctor said nothing, but in his eyes, as he bent over the little boy, there was something sinister. It was his fighting face, and it was saying to David:

“You shall not be sick, little boy. I won’t have it.”

All the weariness of the man was gone; all his dreary discouragement was gone. He stood erect, a soldier ready to do battle against disease which for these past weeks had been choking out the life of little children.

As the Doctor hurried away he was upbraiding himself for having been absent from his patients not less than three whole hours. Gross negligence, this! He had no right to play so long with David, and now he would not take the time to tell Miss Eastman of all the great things they had been doing.

But indeed no words of explanation were required to tell her of one thing that had been done. Without any assistance she soon discovered a substantial reason why her little boy was so restless, and this reason proved to be a miniature. She found the two pieces of it hid away in his blouse at the very place where they would be most uncomfortable to lie upon. But even after she had relieved David of this source of trouble, he still turned and tossed and talked in his sleep.

She could not understand what he was saying, but the face painted on porcelain seemed easily understood. How, Miss Eastman asked herself, had he come by that picture? Who had given it to her little boy, and what had he been told about the beautiful face?

An impulse had suddenly come upon the woman to hide it away, or better yet, to destroy it utterly. But there was no time for that. As if from an electric shock, David had flounced over on his side, and now he sprung bolt upright. Confused emotions struggled in his face; his hands searched his blouse, and as they failed to find what they were searching for, there came such a look of terror into his eyes that Mother instantly produced the miniature.

“Who is it, dear?” she asked.

With the same sort of agility which had come to him when he had heard the Doctor’s footstep on the stair, David seized the pieces of porcelain, and with fumbling eagerness he slipped them back into his blouse.

“It’s mine!” he called out. He scowled fiercely, as though expecting some one to dispute his claim.

“Where did you get it?”

“Up there,” he said.



“Up where?”

Again the little boy was silent, but Mother insisted on more definite information. Three times she asked how he had come into possession of the picture before he would speak again. When he did so he scowled more heavily than at first, and exclaimed:

“I won’t not tell you!”

“But why, David; why not tell Mother about it?”

The child evaded a direct reply.

“Doctor will be mad at me,” he said.

“Did he give it to you?”

The little boy nodded.



Page 25

“Did he say you were not to tell me?”

Again the little boy nodded.

“Did he tell you who it was?”

Now that the wrong story was so well started, David was inspired to make it a good one. To do that he would use part of the truth, but unfortunately he could not recall much of what Dr. Redfield had said about the picture. There was but one word that had stood out prominently in the talk, and that was the word “Mother.” It was a relief to David to remember that, and he blurted out his information with cruel finality.

“This,” he said, holding the pieces of the miniature together, “is mother.”

“But how can you have two mothers?” Miss Eastman inquired, with a smile that was not a good smile. “Tell me, David, tell me whose mother am I?”

“You?” he asked with puzzled anxiety. Then he stopped short. It is not easy to steal pictures and tell wrong stories about them. He did not know what to do. Everything was against him, and he began to cry again.

It was now that Miss Eastman passionately seized the little boy in her arms.

“Don’t you believe that!” she exclaimed, her words throbbing with the hurt he had given her. “I am your mother, David—I!”

CHAPTER XI

APOTHEOSIS

After declaring that she alone was David’s mother, Miss Eastman was called away to the telephone. It was Dr. Redfield inquiring anxiously about the little boy. Pulse normal, temperature normal, no symptoms of any sort, she told the physician, but she could scarcely control her voice to answer his questions. There was a tightness in her throat, and she spoke with crisp brevity, instead of detailing anything of what had passed between her and David.

When she had hung up the receiver and gone back to the child, she took him in her lap and tried to entertain him with a book of “Mother Goose” jingles, turning the pages slowly and concealing her emotion under the silliness of the nursery rhymes. In the midst of her comical recital about Jack and Jill who went up the hill, she suddenly exclaimed:

“What great fun it was to be with Doctor!”



No matter how much she might try to divert her little boy, he was only indifferently amused; but presently he remembered something which, for the time being, caused him to forget the broken and pilfered miniature.

“Mother,” he exulted, “Mother, I got ’em! They have pockets—deep pockets. You don’t hardly know me, do you?”

David began strutting up and down the room; he stood still, with legs wide apart, and then dug his fists deep into his pockets.



Page 26

Of course mother was astounded. It required only a little make-believe on her part to indicate that this was some strange boy whom she had never seen before. The surprising change in him had impressed her so disagreeably that she had been in no mood to speak of it. Even as she had taken off the wide-brimmed sailor hat, when David reached the house in Dr. Redfield's arms, she had made no comment on the close-cropped, flaxen head. She had of course remarked each detail of the little boy's altered appearance, but what she had seen even more clearly was the look in the man's face when he had told her that her little boy was not well. It was this that she had seen at a glance, and it was this that she had taken deeply to heart, but now she diligently tried to enter into the spirit of trouters.

All of a sudden the earnest look in David's face was swept away by a smile. His little legs began to dance; his hands danced, and his piping laughter danced best of all. Making a prancing dash for Mother's skirts, he demanded that she smell the good, barber smell of his hair. But she laughed such a queer laugh, as she gathered him up in her arms, that the gleefulness suddenly went out of him.

"I'm afraid," she said, "I'm afraid there's not enough left of your hair to smell."

The suspicion came to David that Mother was not glad. Instead of applauding his fine hair-cut, she had a silly way of asking what had been done with the curls.

This is the way mothers act sometimes when they want to be downright discouraging. David showed how he felt about it by asking if supper wouldn't soon be ready, and throughout the meal he bore himself with dignity. Although it is not easy to pass the rolls when one's arms are so short and the plate is so large and wobbly, the little boy was sure that to-night he was reaching a surprising distance across the table. Surely Mother must have been impressed with this new and astonishing length of arm.

When it came bed-time, David felt it would be weakness on his part, now that he was almost grown to be a man, to allow Mother to continue her absurd habit of sitting beside him while he went to sleep. He told her very delicately that in the future she need not go to so much trouble. He was resolved not to be such a nuisance. Hereafter he would always go to sleep all by himself.

But in beginning this practice he did not think it advisable to take off his trousers. Perhaps he would not feel so man-grown if he took them off; perhaps the kilts-and-blouse feeling would come on him in the night, unless he were consciously secure in knickerbockers.

"I—I couldn't keep them on, could I, Mother?" The question came plaintively, from the very depths of his desire.



“But, David,” said Mother, “if you wear them out by sleeping in them, then how are you to get any more? And besides, don’t you think they need a rest as well as you?”

Anybody could see the logic of that. David reluctantly permitted his trousers to be taken off, and he was particularly eager to see that they should have honorable treatment. He had a misgiving that Mother did not know where they should properly be stowed for the night, and his doubt thus found expression:



Page 27

“Where does Doctor put his?”

The result of the question was not satisfying. David found that he had brought up suddenly at the never-mind period. But his close-cropped head leaned out over the edge of the crib; and his eager eyes attentively regarded the floppy little legs of trauvers as they were folded over the back of a chair. Then came a sigh of resignation, and the shorn head was plumped down resolutely upon the pillow.

For the first time in many months he forgot to make a little smacky sound with his lips as a suggestion to Mother that she might have a kiss. Evidently such a matter was now of no importance, nor did he hold out his arms to her. All such childish ways as that had been put aside, and perhaps that is why a wistful look came into Mother’s face.

After she had left David in the big, dark room, she took up some dull-blue linen from her sewing-table. Only a short while ago she had been stitching upon this apparel for her baby—a foolish little dress, all edged about with a narrow lace braid.

Mother sat down by the shaded lamp and slipped a finger into her thimble. But her needle, which in the afternoon had glanced and glinted swiftly, as the dainty braid was being fastened into place, somehow refused to do its work. The little blue suit fell from her hands; the thimble rolled across the floor.

Hers was the bereavement which comes to every mother. It comes upon her suddenly, leaving her surprised, wondering, and full of foolish little fears that in the boyhood of her boy she may not hold so big a place as was given her to hold through all his babyhood.

Where was the child of yesterday? Who had stolen from Mother and her little boy the elfin charm and the sweet wonderland which, for so long a time, had been his and hers together? Gone, as it must always go, when the little one of to-day goes speeding on and still on into the dust and weary prose of the hurrying years.

CHAPTER XII

LIGHT

Leaving Mrs. Wilson, a neighbor and friend, in care of the house while David slept, Miss Eastman set out for Dr. Redfield’s office. In her face was determination; in her hand a broken miniature. The gentleman was to be called upon to explain, if he could, why he had given that picture to her little boy.

“I have been his mother now for four years,” she meant to tell the Doctor. “I have tried to be a good mother; I have tried my best. Why, then, should you even suggest to him that I am not really his mother? If you have done that I must tell you that I do not think it just. And, besides, I must ask you to make no further additions to his wardrobe without



first consulting me. He does not look like my little boy any more. You have cut off his curls. You said nothing to me about it; you merely cut them off. I did not want you to do that. I would not have consented to it, and I should like you to understand that hereafter he is to be solely in my care, or not at all.”



Page 28

As she rehearsed these words in her mind, Miss Eastman went hurrying through the streets. Twilight had set in, close and sultry, with low grumbings of thunder, and there was that stillness in the air, that strange sense of waiting, which precedes the storm. Gray, scarf-like films were speeding across the black-purple sky, and were suddenly rent by a zig-zag quiver of blue-white fire. The trees along the walk flamed green, and then were dark again, and overhead a flight of pigeons clove the air with a rushing of swift wings. An instant later a whirling litter of straws, flapping newspapers, and dust came swishing down the pavement, and with the coming of this first strong gust of wind was a noise of slamming doors and the sound of windows being quickly lowered. With the swift and vigorous whiff of storm came the good, cooling smell of rain.

Miss Eastman paid no heed. She was too indignant and too hurt to think much about so trifling a matter as a shower, and when she reached the house of Dr. Redfield it further exasperated her that she should be kept waiting upon his doorstep. Twice, and a third time, she gave the bell an energetic pull, but no one answered. The gush of water from the roof tinkled loudly in the tin drain-pipes, but throughout the dwelling there was a tomb-like silence. Presently, though, Miss Eastman heard a “squadgy” tread that was steadily drawing nearer. When the door was at last cautiously opened she caught a glimpse of the housekeeper, the discreet and red-faced Mrs. Botz. As the shiny countenance leisurely appeared, the woman revealed two flour-coated fingers pressed upon her heavy lips.

“Herr Doctor iss maybe gone to sleep already,” she whispered; then she laughed a wheezy chuckle that shook her ponderous bust. She pointed up the hallway to something under the light of the oil lamp which much resembled a fat rag doll. The queer object was shaking with strange contortions in the place where the hall-bell should have hung. “I play him one good trick, ain’t it?” she added. “Mit a towel I tie up the bell-knocker—zo!” She illustrated with her flour-dusted hands. “Den I wrap him round like one sore foot. *Hoffentlich*, nopody vill vake him up if he iss sleeping.”

“But why, Mary, why should he be asleep? Is he so tired, then?”

“Ach, mein lieber Gott! Do you not know? It iss Duck Town. Vonce more yet a funeral. I know from his face it is this time maybe one little schildt. He carry them in his eyes, the little schildren, unt he is coming home, unt he say nudding; he cannot eat, unt zo I know vot iss it.”

Although this announcement went to Miss Eastman’s heart, it was not sufficient to outweigh her resolution. She would speak plainly to him. Glancing toward the office, she saw that a dim light was shining from an open door into the hallway.

“I think I shall have to go in,” she said to Mrs. Botz, and started for the office.



Page 29

Miss Eastman's determination was firmly fixed. Dr. Redfield must understand once for all that hers was the exclusive guardianship over David, and with that unwavering idea in her mind she looked into the room. She saw him seated under the shade of the lamp in his faded green house-robe, his shoulders more stooped than formerly, his shaggy head sunk forward, and a greater weariness in his face than she had ever seen in it before.

All at once, as she stood looking at him, her grievances dwindled into pettiness. The words she had come to speak were dumb upon her lips, forgotten in a womanly impulse to go to him, to put her arms about that tired head, and to hold it as though he were nothing more than a little boy. So, presently, when he glanced up, it did not seem at all strange that she should be asking:—

"How is it down there? Very bad?"

One would have thought she had accused him of surrender. He turned upon her with fierce irritability.

"Who says we're not getting on?" he demanded. "Who says—who says nothing can do any good?"

He grasped the sides of the chair and struggled to his feet. He stood erect like a general, his eyes suddenly lighting up with the fire of inflexible will. Then he was seized with a trembling fit, and sank back in his chair. He rubbed his hands over his gray face; he clenched his fingers, and the knuckle of his thumb went to his eye and got wet in doing it. And it was all so awkward, and so boyish, and so funny, this movement of his fist and the tear-drop on his thumb, that Miss Eastman would have laughed if she had not been crying.

"Who was it, Doctor—who was it that died to-day?"

He told her who it was, and she could not believe him.

"Jim Lehman's child? Not Emma—surely not little Emma Lehman? How is that possible? Such a very short time ago it seems since I was lending her story-books! She couldn't speak English at all when she first came to school."

"You knew her, then?"

"Knew her? She was the only one who cried when I told them I would not teach school any more. She gave me a present once—a woeful, comical Christmas present, a big, clean-washed, smooth potato. That was all she had to give, and she had tied colored strips of tissue paper about it to make it good enough."



Miss Eastman inquired about other children, one by one, as though calling the roll. At first he evaded her questioning, giving such vague and equivocal replies that presently she clearly understood the situation.

“It is epidemic,” she said, “and you have been keeping this from me. How long since it began?”

“The worst is over,” he answered, with something of the old heartiness that made the sick take courage even in their hour of darkest trial. But he was reluctant to talk much of conditions in Duck Town; and presently, during a lull in the conversation, Miss Eastman laid the pieces of the broken miniature on the table before him.



Page 30

“Was this David's mother?” she asked.

As the man took up the two parts of the broken portrait he glanced apprehensively toward the top of his desk. The picture which used to stand there was gone.

“Where did you get this?” he questioned.

“As soon as they get into trousers they get into mischief,” she replied, and again she asked whether that was a picture of the little boy's mother.

With gentle fingers Dr. Redfield fitted the parts of the picture together, sorrowfully shook his head over them, and then, as a wan smile creased his tired face, he said:—

“David asked me if she was *my* mother. Has the little rogue been claiming her for *his*?”

Miss Eastman slowly answered: “She does look a little like—”

“Yes,” the doctor interrupted, “more than that, I should say—more than a little like David's mother. From the first time I saw that poor dear woman I thought so, and yet I was never quite sure that my fancy had not created the resemblance. It was an unaccountable likeness, and yet so strong a one that it meant much, very much to me.”

“I must take this home again,” she said, “for to-morrow David is to bring it back to you. He must tell you all about it—how he got into trouble. We shall come early in the morning, and he will stay here with Mrs. Botz, while I go with you.”

“Go with me?” The bushy eyebrows of Dr. Redfield raised with inquiring astonishment.

“You cannot go on forever like this,” she replied. “You must let others help. I think I can be rather useful down there in Duck Town. I shall be here early in the morning to go with you.”

The Doctor said nothing. He merely clasped the woman's hand in his two hands, and the look in his face was the look of that little boy called David, when somebody has been good to him.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUBSTITUTE

To Mrs. Wilson, the neighbor who had spent the better part of two hours with David, Miss Eastman was saying, “*Must you go?*”



Surely it is conclusive proof of superior intelligence in womankind that any of the sex can understand when she is wanted and when she is not wanted, although the idea in either case is conveyed in precisely the same words.

Miss Eastman, for her part, was honestly grateful to Mrs. Wilson for having remained with David during the early part of the evening, but now Mrs. Wilson could go home and come again another day. Miss Eastman did not say that; of course not! What she did say was, "*Must you go?*"

Mrs. Wilson saw she must. This, however, did not prevent her from apologizing for her departure, and on the door-step still another important subject was to be considered: the kindness of Mrs. Wilson in staying with David. Mrs. Wilson averred that such trifles were not to be spoken of. It was nothing at all. It had been no trouble, indeed it had not; it had been a pleasure. Mrs. Wilson said she believed in being neighborly.



Page 31

Finally, when the merits of being neighborly had been exhaustively commented upon, the women again made preparation to bid each other good-evening.

“Come over and see us.”

“Yes, thank you, I shall.”

“Come over any time.”

“Yes, I shall, thank you, and *you* come over. Don’t wait for me. I hardly go any place.”

Mrs. Wilson was moving her broad and well-intentioned person sidewise down the porch steps, which still shone wet in the broad white light of the moon, already looking serenely out through the changeful interstices of the breaking storm clouds. Miss Eastman watched her safely to the bottom step, but I regret to say that she went into the house even before her neighbor had disappeared down the glistening front walk.

Alone at last! She sighed with relief, and in the darkness of the silent house she stole to the door of David’s room that she might listen there with some slight motherly apprehension, and then peep in at the little white figure on the bed, where the moonlight lay asleep.

Behold David, not greatly changed in looks. The cutting away of his curls did not make such a difference in him as Mother had supposed. He was as charming to her; he was as much her own little boy as though no meddling hands had even been laid upon him. In size he was quite the same, and, as Mother stood peering in at him, she presently heard a small, far-away voice. In it was the whispered awe of a child who feels the bigness of the night about him and the strangeness of silvery moonbeams on his face.

“Mother!”

The queerness of everything was so very big that the little boy’s voice almost got lost in it.

“Yes, David, Mother is here.”

“Are you coming to bed?”

“Do you want me to come?”

“I got trouters,” he said. But there was no pride in this announcement; there was a touch of disappointment. For how is it possible to have trouters and at the same time to call babyishly for your mother?



“Yes, David, you have them.” A pause. The little boy was sitting up, with a bare foot held meditatively in his hand. A wee, forlorn figure of a child he was, who seemed to be listening to the silence of the room. And by and by he was asking dispiritedly:—

“You aren’t—you aren’t afraid, are you, Mother?”

“How can I be afraid when I have a soldier-man to look out for me? Are you afraid?”

No, indeed; David was not afraid. He flopped suddenly back upon the bed, and resolutely turned his face to the wall. Mother need not sit by him.

So she went back to her chair and rocked quietly, and thought of a little child who was struggling hard to be more than a little child. Later, as she was preparing to go to bed, she heard the wee, sweet voice of him asking ruefully if she were not—maybe—a little lonesome.

“I’m afraid so, dear,” she reluctantly admitted.



Page 32

One could see that this made a difference. If she was really lonesome she might now come into the bedroom; she might sit by David; she might even tell him a story if she wanted to.

"If you do," he said, "it won't matter to-night. It will help you to get use-ter to having me all grown up."

In the trail of soft radiance across the pillow Mother could see how wide open were the eyes of her little boy, but not long after she had drawn a chair to the bedside the drowsy lids began to droop.

"If you're real lonesome I'll hold your hand," said David, and he went to sleep still holding her hand.

Before he was awake the next day she stood looking at her little boy in the darkness of early morning, and she lighted the gas in order to have a better look at him. According to an unvarying custom, there was one wee fist cuddled under his cheek—a wretched insurgent of a fist that had ever disdained all orders to abide under the coverlet. Often in the night Mother had bowed over the tiny sleeper to press her lips upon the plump, smooth wrist before lifting the pretty arm to tuck it softly away into the quilted warmth of the bed. And during such a time it was her wont to listen, in the fear that is never far away from the heart of motherhood, to know if his breathing was quite regular and sweet. It sometimes happened, when she felt the tickling thrill of his ringlets against her cheek, that she would want to wake him up instantly to ask if he was not a dear.

But now had come a time when she felt no impulse to rouse him. The touch of curls upon her cheek she would not feel any more. They were gone, and that baby of hers was gone. When he presently awoke, his greeting was characteristic of his altered condition. He did not call to her, he did not crow with laughter of good feeling and fine health. He merely sat up and solemnly whispered:—

"Trovers!"

Mother assured him that they were not a dream. He could get up now and put them on, for presently he and she would be setting out to see their old friend, Dr. Redfield.

Little David did not instantly hop out of bed, as she had supposed he would. Little David sat very still. He looked at Mother and at the floor. Then he suddenly lay down again and turned his face to the wall.

"You want to put them on, don't you?"

Mother seemed greatly puzzled. She waited, but David did not move. He said nothing. It was as though he had grown suddenly deaf.



“You had a fine time yesterday, didn’t you?” she asked, but David did not reply. He flattened himself against the wall. And Mother added: “It was great fun, wasn’t it?—to go to the barber shop with Doctor and afterward to get trouters?”

There was no sign of life in the little boy, until presently his foot began to wiggle. By degrees he turned over and slowly sat up.



Page 33

Mother did not seem to see him; she was seated at a low table strewn with toilet articles that sparkled under the rays of the gas-jet. She was dressing her hair, and her arm swung in long, even strokes; from time to time she paused to wind something from the teeth of the white comb about her fingers, which she afterwards tucked deftly into a small wicker box beneath the tilted mirror. In the meantime David was looking at her with a very long face, and by and by he slid quietly off the bed and went to her, pressing himself against her knees.

“What else,” she inquired, “did Dr. Redfield give you?”

David did not answer. He pushed his face deep into Mother’s lap.

“Didn’t Doctor give you something else?”

“No.”

The word came with smothered indistinctness, but its meaning was unmistakable.

“What, nothing?”

David raised his head and caught hold of Mother’s hand. He had grown very red in the face.

“Then what about the picture?” she asked, giving no heed to his embarrassment.

“Where did you get that?”

Both of David’s fists were now clinging fast to the woman’s hand.

“Mother,” he said, “I just took it.”

“Oh, dear me!”

“Mother, I knocked it down. It broke. I took it.”

A sudden silence had got hold of the room. The little boy’s head sank once more into Mother’s lap and he shook with silent sobs. A moist warmth went through her skirt and was felt upon her knee.

“This is hard on the Doctor,” she said, and her voice was firm, but her hand gently stroked her little boy’s hair. “He let you look at the picture, and now it is spoiled. He had only the one, and can never get another like it. You broke it, and you took it from him. We cannot mend it; it is done for. My, my! what are we to do?”

David’s arms went tight about Mother’s knees. In mute anguish he clung to her, pleading for help without saying a word.



“If only we had another picture!” Mother suggested.

Would—would that do?

All of a sudden David had stopped crying. With the wet, shiny, tear-trails across his cheeks he looked up.

“Mother!” His eyes were wide open. “In your drawer,” he said, but his voice was so small he could hardly make himself heard, “in your drawer there is one—a fine picture!”

“Is there?” Eagerness was in Mother’s tone; hopefulness was in Mother’s look, but the look vanished and left nothing but disappointment in her eyes. She had remembered a little golden locket in a drawer of the chiffonier, a locket that held the handsome face of a young man. She had never shown the picture to her little boy, and was not aware that he knew anything about it.

“That will never do,” she told David. “It does not belong to you, and it cannot be given away. It must be kept always. People care a great deal for—some pictures. They have a meaning which is often one of the very best things life can ever have. If you should be taken from me, and if I should still have your picture, that would be almost the best thing I could have. You see how it is. If some one should take the picture, I could never get another that would mean so much to me.”



Page 34

They began to walk up and down the room. The little boy was clinging to Mother's hand and he kept tangling his pink feet in the folds of his night dress, while his tearful eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the earnest face above him.

"Mother!" he suddenly called out, "where's my scrap-book?"

David had found a way. He and Mother hurried to the bookcase. In great haste they rummaged the shelves; magazines were pushed aside; pamphlets and papers were pushed aside—Good! Here it was, that scrapbook. Wild with excitement David began thumbing the pages; he laughed; he tore some of the leaves. Then he pounced down upon his chief treasure, a picture which Mitch Horrigan had wanted to buy with some strips of tin, a broken Jew's harp, and a wad of shoemaker's wax.

A great masterpiece, this. To the eyes of childhood nothing could be more beautiful. It was a pink and pensive cow with a slight clerical expression, a very dignified animal, caught in the act of sedately skipping the rope.

"Splendid!" Mother exclaimed.

"Yes," David answered, gasping with relief. Then he chuckled in triumph, and Mother did, too. When the picture had been detached from the page the little boy held it tenderly in his hands. Nothing must happen to it until it could be used in making things right with the Doctor.

There had been so much excitement over the cow, so much delight over securing a sacrifice to take the place of the Broken Lady, that when Mother began to dress her little boy she imagined that all thought of trousers had gone from him. But it was not so. With prompt disfavor he regarded the blue suit of kilts edged with lacy braid, and although there was reluctance in Mother's heart, she began to look for the missing knickerbockers.

Every mother must come to it. She must help us tug and pull at the clumsy things even if there comes something to tug and pull at her heart. What matter if there be a voice within her that is crying out to the child of yesterday to linger yet a little longer in the dear winsomeness that will so soon be gone? Call as you will, poor mother; your boy will not heed you now, for the way to manhood is long to travel, and we men-children cannot wait until you, with your pretty dreams, are willing to have us go.

CHAPTER XIV

SKY BLOSSOMS



David had learned a trick of loudly clacking his heels upon the walk to make it seem that he was no longer a little boy. With the picture held firmly in his hands he went strutting proudly at Mother's side when they fared forth this early morning for the Doctor's house.

The street was very still and smelled of yesterday's rain. In the moist hush and semi-darkness which precedes the dawn, the buildings were all silent and buried in mystery, and they gave back a distinct replication of David's footstep. In response to his question as to what other little boy was out of bed so early, Mother answered:—



Page 35

“That is no one, David. What you hear is an echo.”

“Why can’t I see Echo?”

“One never does see him.”

“Is he a fairy?”

“Rather.”

Here ended the conversation. And now, as Mother and Son trudged onward in silence, a strange feeling came upon the little boy, for the world at this hour was so new to him. A distant milk wagon, resembling a block of shadow on wheels, went clattering over the pavement, and from time to time a man smoking a pipe and carrying a tin pail would pass by with long, swinging strides.

The upper air looked different, too. At one place a tall church spire, topped by a copper cross, was blazing with sunshine, and certain windows of the high buildings also began to flame. A pink cloud lay asleep in the blue lap of heaven, and there was a single star, like a pale drop of fire, that trembled up there as though it were about to fall.

“What is that for?” asked David.

“What do you mean, my son?”

“Up there, Mother—see! It is a queer eye. It winks at us.”

“One of the flowers of heaven, little boy; that’s what it is.”

“Did you ever have any?”

“Oh, no, David, because they are so hard to get.”

Miss Eastman felt that in the serene beauty of the morning there was something vaguely troubling. To think that all this loveliness of the clear dawn, all this freshness of the sweet air which to her and to David meant the joy of an exquisite fairyland, could yet mean to others only the beginning of another day of sorrow, of death, and squalid misery! How could it be possible that the children of Duck Town, those who should be as happy to-day and as full of health as this little boy of hers, were still held fast in the grip of terrifying disease?

All the same, it was not a pleasant prospect to think of leaving David with Dr. Redfield’s housekeeper. As Miss Eastman considered the situation she was suddenly seized with cowardice. She did not want to go on to assist in the fight against contagion; she



wanted to turn back, and she began to walk more slowly, loitering, regretting her resolution and seeking a pretext to retreat.

For all that, she presently arrived at the Doctor's house, and at the door-step she was greeted by Mrs. Botz, who appeared with a gay shawl over her head and a letter in her hand.

"Zo early yet!" the housekeeper exclaimed. "You yust save me some troubles. Herr Doctor say I am pleased to take you his letter."

"He wasn't expecting me, then?"

"Ich weiss nicht."

"He's waiting, isn't he? He hasn't gone, I hope."

"Ja, Herr Doctor he iss vendt."

"Oh, that is too bad!" Miss Eastman exclaimed with outward regret, with inward gratification. Her heroic purpose to help in the routing of disease from Duck Town had at least been postponed.

She tore open the envelope which Mrs. Botz had given her, as she began to read the brief communication, a slight puff of wind stirred the wet maple boughs overhead. From the drenched leaves a wee shower of liquid sparks came flashing down about her and the little boy. Some of these pattering drops were caught in the soft mesh of Miss Eastman's hair, where they trembled like rare jewels and scattered the morning sunlight into rainbow gleams.



Page 36

"There they are Mother—sky-blossoms!" David called out. He clapped his hands gayly; he was greatly excited. "They have fallen down out of heaven, and you have caught some of them."

Mother said not a word. She seized David in her arms. Her eyes were wide open; they were as bright as the raindrops, and she was breathing ever so fast.

"This letter," she said, "this letter, little boy, is for you. Listen, David, only listen.... No; let us wait until we get home before we read our letters."

When, presently, they were safely back in the House of Happiness, this is what Mother read to her little boy on her lap:—

"To Mr. David Eastman.

"ESTEEMED SIR:—If you are in need of a father, I would like the job. Will you please file my application? And will you please ask your mother if you may have me? Ask her, David, if I may not live at your house. Tell her, David—tell her, my little boy, that I will be a good husband to her, and love her always."

The child took the written page from Mother's hand and looked at it knowingly.

"I have a letter too," she said, but she could scarcely speak; she was trembling so, and it seemed ever so hard for her to breathe.

But indeed and indeed, hers was not a letter to be proud of. It glowered; it smelled like a drug shop; it told her plainly that Duck Town was no business of hers; it told her to stay at home, to mind her own affairs and to go on being a good mother to her little boy. But one sentence, the one at the end, was quite different.

"Tell me," it said, "for I need very much to know; tell me whether David has not put my picture into your heart."

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