

WALTON O. F.

POPPY'S PRESENTS

O. Walton

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Mrs. O. F. Walton

Poppy's Presents

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE RED CLOAK

The great cathedral bell was striking twelve. Slowly and solemnly it struck, and as it did so people looked at their watches and altered their clocks, for every one in the great city kept time by that grave old bell. Every one liked to hear it strike; but the school children liked it best of all, for they knew that with the last stroke of twelve lessons would be over, and they would be able to run home to dinner.

'Good morning, children,' said Miss Benson, the mistress.

'Good morning, ma'am,' said the girls, and then they marched out like soldiers in single file. So quiet they were, so grave, so orderly they went, almost as solemnly as the old bell itself.

But only till they reached the school door. Then they broke up into a merry noisy crowd, running and shouting, chasing each other from side to side, jumping, hopping, and skipping as they went down the street.

'Oh dear, what a noise them children do make!' said old Mrs. North, as she got up and shut her cottage door.

But the noise soon died away, for the children were hungry, and they were hurrying home to dinner.

What is that little bit of red that we see in front of the crowd? It is a little girl in a scarlet cloak, and she is turning down a long straight road which leads into the heart of the city. Let us follow her and see where she is going. She is very tidily dressed; there is a clean white holland pinafore under the scarlet cloak, and although her shoes are old, they are well patched and mended. But she is turning into a very poor part of the city—the streets are getting narrower and more crowded, and they are getting darker, too, for the quaint, old-fashioned houses overhang the pavement, and so nearly meet overhead, that very little light or air can get into the dismal street below.

Still on and on goes the little red cloak. And now she is turning down a court on the left-hand side of the street. An open court it ought to be, with a row of houses on each side, and an open space in the middle; but it is not an open space to-day, for it is everybody's washing-day in Grey Friars Court, and long lines are stretched from side to side, and shirts and petticoats and stockings and all manner of garments are waving in the breeze.

The little red cloak threads her way underneath; sometimes the corner of a wet towel hits her in the face, sometimes she has to bend almost double to get underneath a dripping blanket or sheet. But she makes her way through them all, and passes on to the last house in that long dingy court, and as she does so she notices a little crowd of women standing by her mother's door. There is old Mrs. Smith leaning on her crutches, and Sarah Anne Spavin and her mother, and Mrs. Lee with her baby in her arms, and Mrs. Holliday, with Tommy and Freddy and Ann Eliza. And as she looks up she sees several faces looking out of the windows overhead.

What could be the matter? Had anything happened to her mother? Was her mother dead? That was her first thought, poor child. But nobody was looking particularly grave, and they laughed as they caught sight of the little red cloak coming under the white sheets and table-cloths.

'Why, here's Poppy!' said Mrs. Holliday, as she came up to them.

'Well, Poppy,' cried another, 'have you heard the news?'

'Your mother's got a present for you, Poppy,' said Sarah Anne Spavin; 'you'd better hurry in and have a look at it.'

'A present for me,' said the child; 'what is it?'

But the women only laughed and bade her go and see.

And the faces at the window overhead laughed too, and said there was such a thing as having too much of a good thing.

Poppy passed them all and went in, and then she heard her mother's voice calling to her to come upstairs. Her mother was in bed, and she beckoned Poppy to come up to her.

'Poppy, child,' she said, rather sorrowfully, 'I've got a present for you.'

Just what the neighbours had told her; and the child wondered more and more what this present could be. It was a very long time now since Poppy had had a present; she had never had one since her father went away, and it was six months since he had left them.

Poppy often wondered where he had gone. Her mother never talked about him now, and the neighbours shook their heads when he was mentioned, and said he was a bad man. But he had often brought Poppy a present on a Saturday night when he got his wages; sometimes he brought her a packet of sweets, sometimes an apple, and once a beautiful box of dolls' tea-things. But since he went away there had been no presents for Poppy. Her mother had had to work very hard to get enough money to pay the rent and to get bread for them to eat—there was no money to spare for anything else.

What could this present be, about which all the neighbours knew?

'Look here, Poppy,' said her mother; and she pointed to a little bundle of flannel lying on one side of the bed.

Poppy went round and peeped into it; and there she saw her present—a tiny baby with a very red face and a quantity of black hair, and with its little fists holding its small fat cheeks.

'Oh, what a beauty!' said Poppy, in an awestruck voice. 'Is it for me, mother?'

'Yes,' said the mother, with a sigh; 'it's for you, Poppy.'

'But that isn't all,' said old Mrs. Trundle, who was standing at the foot of the bed; 'that's only half your present, Poppy. Look here!'

And in her arms Poppy saw another bundle, and when she had opened it, lo and behold, what should there be but another little baby, also with a very red face and plenty of black hair, and with its little fists holding its fat cheeks!

'Two of them?' said Poppy, in amazement. 'Are you sure they are both for us, mother?'

'Yes, they are both for us,' said the poor woman; 'both for us, Poppy.'

'Who sent them?' asked the child.

'God sent them, poor little things!' said her mother, looking sorrowfully at the two little bundles.

'Are they God's presents to me?' asked Poppy.

'Yes, to you and to me, Poppy,' said her mother; 'there's nobody else to look after them.'

'Ay, you'll have your work set now, Poppy,' said old Mrs. Trundle.

But Poppy did not think of the work just then. Two dear little babies! And for her own! She was very very happy. She could scarcely eat any dinner, although Mrs. Lee took her across the court into her house, that she might get some with her children, and it was a great trial to her when her mother told her she must go back to school as usual.

'You'll get little enough schooling now, go while you may, Poppy,' she said.

The excitement in the court was not over when the child passed down it on her way to school.

The neighbours came to their doors when they caught sight of her red cloak, and some of them said, 'Poor Poppy!' and some of them shook their heads mournfully without saying anything. The child could not understand why they all pitied her so much. She thought they ought to be glad that such a nice present had come for her.

On her way to school Poppy passed under a curious old gateway, which had been built many hundred years ago, and which still stood in the old wall of the city. Under the shadow of this ancient

Bar was a shop—such a pretty shop Poppy thought it, and it was very seldom that she went under the gateway without stopping to look in at the window. For there, sitting in a row, and looking out at her, were a number of dolls—beautiful wax dolls with curly hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks. And Poppy had never had a wax doll of her own. Her only doll was an old wooden creature with no real hair, and with long straight arms; she could never even sit down, for her back and her legs would not bend, and when Poppy came home and looked at her after she had been gazing in the toy-shop window she thought her very ugly indeed.

One day when Poppy was standing under the Bar, a lady and a little girl came up to the shop. The little girl was just as tall as Poppy, and she stood beside her gazing at the row of dolls.

'I should like that one, mother,' she said; 'the one with yellow hair and a red necklace.'

That was Poppy's favourite too; *she* would have chosen that one, she said to herself.

The lady had gone into the shop and bought the doll, and Poppy watched the happy little girl walk away with it in her arms. And then poor Poppy went into a dark corner under the Bar, and cried a little to herself before she went on to school. If only *her* mother had money enough to buy her a wax doll!

But on the day Poppy's presents came she did not even stop for a moment to look at the wax dolls. What stupid creatures they seemed to her now! *Her* babies could open and shut their eyes, and none of these dolls could do that.

Her babies could move, and yawn, and cry, and kick; they were far better than dolls.

And mother said God had sent them! He must have known how much she had wanted one of those wax dolls, Poppy thought.

CHAPTER II

POPPY'S WORK

Poppy's work soon began in good earnest. Her mother had to go out to work, and whilst she was away there was no one but Poppy to take care of the babies. She liked her work very much at first. Their eyes were as blue as those of the wax dolls in the shop window, and their hair was quite as pretty.

But, as the days went by, Poppy could not help wishing that her babies would sometimes be as quiet as the row of dolls in the shop under the Bar. Poppy's babies were never quiet, except when they were asleep, and unfortunately it was very seldom that they were both asleep at the same time. Poor little Poppy! her small arms ached very often as she carried those restless babies, and sometimes she felt so tired she thought she must let them fall.

Oh, how they cried! Sometimes they went on hour after hour without stopping. And then at length, one baby would fall asleep quite tired out, but no sooner did its weary little cry cease than the other one would scream more loudly than before, and would wake it up again.

There was no end to Poppy's work. She was warming milk and filling bottles,—she was pacing up and down the room,—she was singing all the hymns she had learned at school to soothe them to sleep,—she was nursing and patting, and rocking her babies from morning till night.

Brave little Poppy! The tears would come in her eyes sometimes, when the babies were more cross than usual, and she would think how nice it would be to feel rested sometimes; she was always so tired now. But she never gave up her work; she would not have left her babies for the world; she loved them through it all.

Even when her mother came home in the evening Poppy's work was not finished. Poor tired mother, she came slowly and wearily up the court, and then sank down upon a chair just inside the door, almost too exhausted to speak.

'Give me the babies, Poppy darling,' she would say.

But Poppy knew that her mother had been standing all the day at a washing-tub, and that she was almost too tired to speak, and so she would say, 'Oh, I'll keep them a bit, mother; get a cup of tea first.'

And so the evening wore away, and bedtime came; the time when most little girls of Poppy's age get into soft, cosy beds, and sleep peacefully till the sunbeams wake them gently in the morning. But even at night Poppy's work was not over. One or other of the babies was crying nearly all the night, and sometimes both were crying together. Poppy used to see her poor mother pacing up and down, backwards and forwards on the bedroom floor, trying to hush one of the fretful children to sleep. And then she would creep out of bed and say, 'Give it to me, mother, you are so tired and so cold.'

And then Poppy would take her turn in that constant tramp, tramp across the floor, and at last, when the happy moment came, if it ever did come, in which both babies were worn out with crying and were laid asleep beside her mother, Poppy would creep cold and shivering into bed, and the night would seem all too short for her.

Yet, in spite of all the work the babies gave her, Poppy was very proud of her presents. And when her mother got out two white frocks which Poppy had worn when she was a baby, and dressed the poor little twins in them one Sunday afternoon, Poppy danced for joy.

'Don't they look lovely, mother?' she said.

'You must pray for them, Poppy, when we get to church,' said her mother. 'We are going to give them to God.'

'What will He do with them, mother?' said Poppy. 'He won't take them away, will He?'

'No,' said her mother, 'He won't take them away just yet; but I want them to belong to Him as long as they live, and then He'll take them home by-and-by.'

Poppy was very attentive at church that day. How pretty her babies looked as the clergyman took them in his arms! Her mother had been very anxious that they should have Bible names, and after much searching, and after many long talks with Poppy on the subject, she had fixed on Enoch and Elijah as the names for the little brothers.

Poppy was very happy that Sunday as she walked home with little Enoch in her arms. But when they got into the house, her mother sat down and burst into tears.

'What is it, mother dear?' said the child. 'Are you tired?'

'No, my dear, it isn't that,' she said. 'I'll tell you some time when the babies are asleep.'

They were asleep much sooner than usual that night; the fresh air had made them sleepy, and Poppy and her mother had a quiet evening.

'Tell me why you were crying, mother dear, when we came home from church.'

'Oh, Poppy!' said her mother, 'I don't know how to tell you, my poor little lassie.'

'What is it, mother? Do tell me.'

'You know you said God had sent a present for you, Poppy, when the babies came?'

'Yes—for me and you, mother,' said the child.

'Poppy,' said her mother, 'I think He's going to give you the biggest share of it. I think I'm going to die, Poppy, and leave you all. Oh! Poppy, Poppy, Poppy!' and she sobbed as if her heart would break.

Poppy felt as if she were dreaming, and could not understand what her mother was saying. Mrs. Byres, in the house opposite, had died a little time before, but then she had been ill in bed for many a month; and Mrs. Jack's little boy and girl had died, but then they had had a fever. Her mother could walk about, and could go out to work, and could look after the babies. How *could* she be going to die?

'I didn't like to tell you, Poppy,' her mother went on; 'but it is true, my darling, and it's better you should know before it comes.'

'But, mother, you are not ill, are you?' said the child; and as she said this she looked at her mother. Yes, she certainly did look very thin, and pale, and tired, as she sat by the fire.

'I'm failing fast, Poppy,' said her mother; 'wasting away. I've felt it coming on me a long time, dear—before your father went away. And last week I got a ticket for the dispensary, and the doctor said he couldn't do nothing for me; it was too late, he said. If it wasn't for you and the babies, Poppy, I would be glad to go, for I'm very, very tired.'

'Mother,' said Poppy, with a great sob, 'however will we get along without you?'

'I don't know,' said the poor woman. 'I don't know, Poppy; but the good Lord knows; and He *is* a good Lord, child. He's never failed me yet, and I know He'll help you—I know He will. Come to me, my darling.'

And the mother took her little girl in her arms, and held her to her bosom, and they had a good cry together.

But before very long the twins awoke, and Poppy and her mother began their work again.

CHAPTER III

A HOLIDAY

The next morning when Poppy woke she felt as if she had had a bad dream. Her mother's words the night before came back to her mind. 'I think I am going to die and leave you all.' It could not be true, surely! She raised herself in bed and looked round. Her mother was up already; she could hear her moving about downstairs, and she had lighted the fire, for Poppy could hear the sticks crackling in the grate. The twins were still asleep, lying in bed beside her, and the child peeped at their little peaceful faces, and stooped to kiss Elijah's tiny hand, which was lying on the coverlet of the bed. They knew nothing about it, poor little things. It could not be true, Poppy said to herself; her mother could not be going to die; she must have dreamt it all.

She crept out of bed very quietly, so as not to wake the babies, dressed herself, and went downstairs to help her mother to get breakfast ready. But she found everything done when she got into the kitchen, the cloth was on the table, and a cup for Poppy, and another for her mother, and two slices of bread, and two cups of tea.

'Oh, mother,' said Poppy, 'I didn't know I was so late.'

'You're going to have a holiday to-day, Poppy,' said her mother; 'do you know it's your birthday?' 'My birthday, mother?' repeated the child.

'Yes, you're nine years old to-day, my poor little lass,' said her mother; 'I reckoned that up as I was walking about with the babies last night, and I mean you to have a rest to-day; you've been a-toiling and a-moil-ing with them babies ever since they was born; it's time you had a bit of quiet and peace.'

'But you're poorly, mother,' said the child.

'No worse nor usual,' said her mother, 'and I've got no work to-day. Mrs. Peterson isn't going to wash till to-morrow, so you're to have a real quiet day, Poppy.'

But Poppy, like a good child, could not sit idle when she saw her mother working, and so in the afternoon, as soon as dinner was over, her mother sent her out for a walk, and told her not to come home till tea-time.

'There's Jack and Sally, they've got holidays, Poppy; get them to go with you,' she said.

Jack and Sally lived in a house on the opposite side of the court; they went to the same school to which Poppy had gone before the babies came, and they had always played together since they were tiny children.

So Poppy put on her scarlet cloak, and the three children started in fine spirits. It was such a bright, sunny day, and everything looked cheerful and happy. There had been a hard frost the night before, and the road was firm and dry under their feet, and the three children ran along merrily. They went a long way outside the walls till they came to a river, by the side of which was a small footpath following the river in all its windings, and leading across grassy fields, which in summer time were filled with wild flowers, and which were now covered with pure white snow.

Oh, how much Poppy enjoyed that walk! She had been so long shut up in that tiny house, she had so long been imprisoned like a wild bird in a small cage, that now, when she found herself free to run where she liked in the clear, frosty air, she felt full of life and spirits.

She had forgotten for a time the sorrow of the night before. All was so bright and beautiful around her, there was nothing to remind her of sickness or of death. She was very happy, and skipped along like a little wild goat.

They walked more slowly when they got into the city again, for they were tired with their long walk, and as they passed the great cathedral Jack proposed that they should go inside and rest for a little time on the chairs in the nave.

'There's lots of time yet, Poppy,' he said; 'it isn't tea-time, I'm sure.'

It was getting dark for all that, and the lamps were lighted in the cathedral. Jack took off his hat as he pushed open the heavy oaken door, and the little girls followed him. Service was going on in the choir, and they could hear the solemn tones of the organ pealing through the building, and with them came the sweet sound of many voices singing.

'Isn't it beautiful?' said Poppy; 'let us sit down and listen.'

They were very quiet until the service was over, and when the last Amen was sung, and the doors of the choir were thrown open for the people to leave, they got up to go home.

But as they were walking across the cathedral to the door which stood nearest the direction of their home, Jack suddenly stopped.

'Hullo, Poppy,' he whispered, 'look here,' and he pointed to a little door in the wall which stood ajar.

'What is it, Jack?' said both little girls at once; 'where does it go to? Is it a tomb?'

'Oh, no,' said Jack; 'it's the way folks go up to the top of the tower; you know we often see them walking about on the top; my father went up last Easter Monday. I always thought they kept it locked; let's go a bit of the way up, and see what it's like.'

'Oh, no, Jack,' said Sally; 'it looks so dark in there.'

'Don't be a silly baby, Sally,' he said. 'Poppy isn't afraid; are you, Poppy?'

'No,' said Poppy, in a trembling voice; 'no, I'm not frightened, Jack.'

'Come in then, quick,' said the boy; 'I'll go first, and you can follow me.'

'But isn't it tea-time?' said Poppy.

Jack did not stop to answer her; he led the way up the steep, winding stone steps, and the two little girls followed.

'Jack, Jack, stop a minute!' said Poppy, when they had wound round and round three or four times; 'I don't think we ought to go.'

'I believe you're frightened now, Poppy,' he said; 'I thought you'd more pluck than that! We won't go far. I just want to get to that place on the roof where we see the people stand when they're going up; it's only about half way to the top; come on, we shall soon be there!'

It took a longer time than Jack expected, however, for the steps were very steep, winding round and round like a corkscrew, and the children were tired, and could not climb quickly. They stood for a few moments on the roof outside and looked down into the city, but they could not see much, for it was getting very dark, and even Jack was willing to own that it was time to go home.

It did not take them quite so long to go down the steps as it had taken them to go up, but they were slippery and much worn in places, and the little girls felt very much afraid of falling, and were very glad when Jack, who was going first, said they were near the bottom.

But Poppy and Sally a moment afterwards were very much startled, for Jack gave a sudden cry of horror as he reached the bottom step.

The little door through which they had come was closed. Jack shook it, and hammered it with his fists, but he could not open it; it was locked, and they were prisoners in the tower. The verger who had the charge of the door had remembered that he had left it unfastened, and had turned the key in the lock soon after the children had entered the tower. No one had been near when they had crept inside, and so the verger had no idea that any one had gone up the steps.

'Oh! Jack, Jack, Jack, what shall we do?' said Poppy.

CHAPTER IV

A LONG NIGHT

Yes, they were locked in, there was no doubt about it!

'But don't cry, Poppy,' said Jack, as she burst into tears, 'we'll soon make them hear; the verger sits on that bench close by.'

Jack hammered with his fists on the door, and the sound echoed through the hollow building. Then the three children waited, and listened, hoping to hear the verger's footsteps approaching the door. And when some moments had passed and no one came, he knocked again, and once more they waited and listened. But it was all in vain; no one heard the rapping on the door, no one came to let the little prisoners out.

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