Molesworth Mrs.

Peterkin

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Molesworth M.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
WHAT *CAN* HAVE BECOME OF HIM?

We were all at tea in the nursery. All except him. The door burst open and James put his head in.

'If you please, Mrs. Brough,' he began, – 'Mrs. Brough' is the servants' name for nurse. Mamma calls her 'Brough' sometimes, but we always call her 'nurse,' of course, – 'If you please, Mrs. Brough, is Master Peterkin here?'

Nurse looked up, rather vexed. She doesn't like burstings in.

'Of course not, James,' she said. 'He is out driving with his mamma. You must have seen them start.'

'It's just that,' said James, in his silly way. 'It's his mamma that wants to know.'

And then we noticed that James's face was much redder than usual. It may have been partly that he had run upstairs very fast, for he is really very good-natured, but it looked as if he was rather in a fuss, too.

Nurse sat very bolt up in her chair, and *her* face began to get queer, and her voice to get vexeder. Lots of people get cross when they are startled or frightened. I have noticed it.

'What do you mean, James? Please to explain,' she said.

'I can't stop,' he said, 'and I don't rightly understand, myself. His mamma sent Master Peterkin home before her, half-an-hour ago or more, but he hasn't come in, not as I've seen, nor nobody else, I'm afraid. So where he's got to, who can say?'

And James turned to go.

Nurse stopped him, getting up from her place as she spoke.

'Was he in the carriage?' she asked.

'Of course not. Beckett would have seen him in, all right, if he had been,' said James, in a very superior tone. 'He was to run home by himself a bit of a way, as I take it,' he added, as he hurried off at last.

'I must go downstairs to your mamma,' said nurse. 'Miss Blanchie, my dear, will you look after Miss Elvira, and see that she doesn't spill her tea?'

'*Nursie*,' said Elvira, in a very offended tone, 'you know I never spill my tea now.'

'Not since the day before yesterday,' I was beginning to say, but I didn't. For I thought to myself, if there was any real trouble about Peterkin, it wouldn't be at all a good time to tease each other. I don't think Elf – that's Elvira's pet name – had understood about him being lost. Indeed, I don't think I had quite taken it in myself, till I saw how grave the two eldest ones were looking.

'Clem,' I said, 'do you think there can really be anything the matter?'

Clement is the eldest of us all, and he is always the one we go to first if we are in any trouble. But he is sometimes rather slow; he is not as quick and clever as Blanche, and she often puts him down at first, though she generally comes round to his way in the end. She answered for him now, though I hadn't spoken to her.

'How can there not be something the matter?' she said sharply. 'If Peterkin has been half-an-hour or an hour, perhaps, wandering about the streets, it shows he has at least lost his way, and who knows where he's got to. I wish you wouldn't ask such silly questions, Giles.'

Then, all of a sudden, Elf burst out crying. It may have been partly Blanche's sharp tone, which had startled her, and made her take more notice of it all.

'Oh, Clem, Clem,' she wailed, 'could he have been stolened?'

'No, no, darling,' said Clement, dabbing her face with his pocket-handkerchief. 'There are kind policemen in the streets, you know. They wouldn't let a little boy like Peterkin be stolen.'

'But they does take little boys to pison,' said Elf. 'I've see'd them. It's 'cos of that I'm frightened of them for Peterkin.'

That was not quite true. She had never thought of policemen till, unluckily, Clem spoke of them in his wish to comfort her. She did not mean to say what was not true, of course, but there never was such a child as Elf for arguing, even then when she was only four years old. Indeed, she's not half as bad now that she is eight, twice as old, and I often tell her so. Perhaps that evening it wasn't a bad thing, for the talking about policemen stopped her crying, which was even worse than her arguing, once she started a good roar.

'It's just because of that, that I'm so frightened about dear sweet little Peterkin,' she repeated.

'Rubbish, Elf,' I began, but Clem looked at me and I stopped.

'You needn't be frightened that Peterkin will be taken to prison, Elfie,' he said in his kind, rather slow way. 'It's only naughty little boys that the policemen take to prison, and Peterkin isn't naughty,' and then he wiped Elf's eyes again, and she forgot to go on crying, for just then nurse came upstairs. *She* was not actually crying, of course, but she did look very worried, so Clem and Blanche's faces did not clear up at all. Nor did mine, I suppose. I really did not know what to think, I was waiting to see what the others thought, for we three younger ones looked up to Clement and Blanche a good deal, and we still do. They are twins, and they seem to mix together so well. Blanche is quick and clever, and Clement is awfully sensible, and they are both very kind, though Clem is the gentlest. They are nearly sixteen now, and I am thirteen past, so at the time I am writing about they were twelve and I was going to be ten my next birthday, and Peterkin was eight and Elvira five. I won't say much about what sort of a boy Peterkin was, for as my story is mostly about him and the funny things he did and thought, it will show of itself.

He *was* a funny child; a queer child in some ways, I mean, and he still is. Mamma says it is stupid to say 'funny' when we mean queer or odd, but I think it says it better than any other word, and I am sure other children will think so too.

Blanche was the first to speak to nurse.

'Is mamma really frightened about Peterkin, nurse?' she asked. 'Tell us what it is.'

But nurse had caught sight of her darling pet baby's red eyes.

'Miss Blanchie,' she said, 'I asked you to look after Miss Elvira, and she's been crying.'

'You asked me to see that she didn't spill her tea, and she hasn't spilt it. It's some nonsense she has got in her head about policemen taking strayed children to prison that she has been crying about,' replied Blanche, rather crossly.

'I only wish,' began nurse, but the rest of her sentence she mumbled to herself, though I heard part of it. It was wishing that the policemen *had* got Peterkin safely.

'Of course, your poor mamma is upset about it,' she went on, though I could see she did not want to say very much for fear of Elf's beginning to cry again. 'It was this way. Your mamma had to go round by Belton Street, and she did not want to keep Master Peterkin out so late to miss his tea, so she dropped him at the corner of Lindsay Square, and told him to run home. It's as straight as straight can be, and he's often run that far alone. So where he's got to or gone to, there's no guessing.'

'And what is mamma doing?' asked Blanche.

'She has sent Mr. Drew and James off in different directions,' said nurse, 'and she has gone herself again in the carriage to the station, as it's just time for your papa's train, and he will know what more to do.'

We did not live in London then; papa went up and down every day from the big town by the sea where our home was. Clement thinks perhaps I had better not say what town it is, as some people might remember about us, and I *might* say things that would vex them; so I won't call it anything,

though I must explain that it is not at all a little place, but quite big enough for any one to lose their way in, if they were strangers. But Peterkin wasn't a stranger; and the way he had to come was, as nurse said, as straight as straight.

We all listened with grave faces to what nurse told us. Suddenly Clement got up – I can't say 'jumped up,' for he was always rather slow.

'Nurse,' he said, 'mamma's out, so I can't ask her leave. But I've got an idea about Peterkin. Will you give me leave to go out for half-an-hour or so? I promise you I won't go far, but I would rather not tell you where I want to go, as it may be all nonsense.'

Nurse looked at him doubtfully. She trusted Clem the most of us all, I know, and she had good reason to do so, for he was and is very trustworthy. And it was nice of him to ask her leave, considering he was twelve years old and quite out of the nursery, except that he still liked having tea there when he came in from school every evening.

'Well, Master Clement,' said nurse, 'I don't quite know. Supposing you go out and don't get back as soon as you expect? It would be just a double fright for your poor mamma.'

'Let me go too!' I exclaimed, and I jumped up so suddenly that I made all the cups rattle and nearly threw over the table altogether. 'Then if anything stops Clem getting back quickly, I can run home and explain. Anyway you'd be more comfortable if you knew the two of us were on the hunt together. You don't mind my coming, do you, Clem?'

'No,' said Clem, 'but do let's go.'

'And you won't be long?' pleaded nurse.

Clem shook his head.

'I don't think we can be – not if there's anything in my idea', he called out, as we ran off.

We didn't take a minute to pull on our coats, which were hanging in the hall. I daresay I should never have thought of mine at all, if Clem hadn't reminded me, even though it was late in November and a cold evening. And as soon as we were outside and had set off at a good pace, I begged Clem to tell me what his idea was, and where we were going to look for Peterkin.

'It's the parrot,' he replied; 'the parrot in Rock Terrace.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said. 'I never heard of a parrot, and I don't know where Rock Terrace is.'

'Nonsense,' said Clem, stopping for a moment. 'You must have forgotten.'

'I haven't indeed,' I said.

'Not about the parrot that Peterkin has been dreaming of ever since we passed it on Saturday, when we were out with mamma – next door to old Mrs. Wylie's?' Clem exclaimed.

'No,' I repeated. 'I wasn't with you that day, and – '

'No more you were,' said Clem.

'And,' I went on, 'I don't know where Mrs. Wylie lives, though I've often seen her herself at our house. And you know, Clement, that's just like Peterkin. If he's got anything very much in his head, he often doesn't speak of it, except to any one who knows about it already.'

'He hasn't said very much about it, even to me,' said Clement. 'But, all the same, I know he has got it tremendously in his head.'

'How do you mean? Is he making up fairy stories about it?'

'Perhaps! You see he had never heard a parrot speaking. I'm not sure if he knew they ever did. But he wanted very much to see it again, and it just came into my mind all at once, that if he had a chance he might have run round there and lost his way. I don't suppose he *meant* to when mamma told him to go home. It may just have struck him when he got to the corner of Lindsay Square.'

I did not answer. We were walking so fast that it was not easy to go on speaking. But I did think it was very clever of Clement to have thought of it. It was so like Peterkin.

Clement hurried on. It was quite dark by now, but the lamps were lighted, and Clem seemed quite sure of his way. In spite of feeling rather unhappy about Peterkin, I was enjoying myself a little.

I did not think it possible that he was really badly lost, and it was very exciting to rush along the streets after dark like this, and then I could not help fancying how triumphant we should feel if we actually found him.

It was not very surprising that I did not know where Rock Terrace was, or that I had never even heard of it. It was such a tiny little row of such tiny houses, opening out of one corner of Lindsay Square. The houses were rather pretty; at least, very neat-looking and old-fashioned, with a little bit of garden in front, and small iron gates. They looked as if old maids lived in them, and I daresay there were a good many.

Clement hurried along till he was close to the farther off end. Then he stopped short, and for the first time seemed at a loss.

'I don't know the number,' he said, 'but I'm sure it was almost the end house. And – yes – isn't that a big cage on the little balcony, Giles? Look well.'

I peeped up. The light of the lamps was not very good in Rock Terrace.

'Yes,' I said. 'It is a big cage, but I can't see if there's a bird in it.'

'Perhaps they take him in at night,' said Clement. Then he looked up again at the balconies.

'Let me see,' he went on, 'which side is Mrs. Wylie's? Mamma went in at the – ' but before he had time to finish his sentence his doubts were set at rest – his doubts and all our fears about Peterkin. For the door on the left of the parrot's home opened slowly, letting out what seemed, in contrast with the darkness outside, a flood of light, just within which, in the small hall or lobby of the miniature house, stood two figures – the one, that of a short thin old lady with white hair, dressed all in black; the other, a short fat little boy in a thick coat – our missing Peterkin!

They were speaking to each other most politely.

'So pleased to have seen you, my dear,' said Mrs. Wylie. 'Give my love to your dear mamma. I will not forget about the parrot, you may be sure. He shall have a proper invitation. And – you are quite certain you can find your way home? Oh, dear! – that poor child must have been bemoaning herself again! Polly always knows.'

And as we stood there, our minds scarcely made up as to what we should do, we heard a queer croaking voice, from inside the house on the right of Mrs. Wylie – the parrot's voice, of course, calling out —

'I'm so tired, Nana; I'm so tired. I won't be good; no, I won't.'

Mrs. Wylie and Peterkin both stood silent for a moment, listening. So did we. Then Clement opened the gate and ran up the two or three steps, I following him.

'Peterkin!' he exclaimed, 'mamma has been so frightened about you.'

And Peterkin turned round and looked up in his face with his big blue eyes, apparently quite astonished.

'Has mamma come back?' he said. 'I've only been here for a minute or two. I just wanted to look at the parrot.'

Mrs. Wylie was a quick-witted old lady. She took it all in, in a moment.

'Dear, dear!' she said. 'I am afraid it is my fault. I saw the dear boy looking up at the parrot next door when I came in from my stroll round to the pillar-box with a letter, and he told me he was one of Mrs. Lesley's little sons, and then we got talking. But I had no idea his mamma would be alarmed. I am afraid it has been much more than a few minutes. I *am* sorry.'

It was impossible to say anything to trouble the poor old lady: she looked as if she were going to cry.

'It will be all right now,' said Clement. 'Mamma will be so delighted to see him safe and sound. But we had better hurry home. Come along, Peterkin.'

But nothing would make Peterkin forget his good manners. He tugged off his sailor cap again, which he had just put on, and held out his hand, for the second or third time, I daresay, as he and his

old lady had evidently been hobnobbing over their leave-takings for some minutes before we made our appearance.

'Good-bye!' he said; 'and thank you very much. And I'll ask mamma to let me come whenever you fix the day for the parrot. And please tell me all he tells you about the little girl. And – thank you very much.'

They were the funniest pair. She so tiny and thin and white, with bright dark eyes, like some bird's, and Peterkin so short and sturdy and rosy, with his big dreamy ones looking up at her. She was just a little taller than he. And suddenly I saw his rosy face grow still rosier; crimson or scarlet, really. For Mrs. Wylie made a dash at him and kissed him, and unluckily Peterkin did not like being kissed, except by mamma and Elf. His politeness, however, stood him in good stead. He did not pull away, or show that he hated it, as lots of fellows would have done. He stood quite still, and then, with another tug at his cap, ran down the steps after Clem and me.

Clement waited a moment or two before he spoke. It was his way; but just now it was a good thing, as Mrs. Wylie did not shut the door quite at once, and everything was so quiet in that little side street, in the evening especially, that very likely our voices would have carried back to her. I, for my part, was longing to shake Peterkin, though I felt very inclined to burst out laughing, too. But I knew it was best to leave the 'rowing' to Clem.

'Peterkin,' he began at last, 'I don't know what to say to you.'

Peterkin had got hold of Clem's hand and was holding it tight, and he was already rather out of breath, as Clem was walking fast – very fast for him – and he has always been a long-legged chap for his age, thin and wiry, too; whereas, in those days – though, thank goodness, he is growing like a house on fire *now*– Peterkin was as broad as he was long. So to keep up with Clement's strides he had to trot, and that sort of pace soon makes a kid breathless, of course.

'I – I never thought mamma'd be flightened,' he managed to get out at last. He had been a long time of saying his 'r's' clearly, and now they still all got into 'l's' if he was bothered or startled. 'I never thought she'd be flightened.'

'Then you were a donkey,' I burst out, and Clement interrupted me.

'How could she not have been frightened?' he went on. 'She told you to run straight home, which wouldn't have taken you five minutes, and you have been at least an hour.'

'I thought it wouldn't be no farther to come this way,' replied Peterkin, 'and I only meant to look at the pallot one minute. And it would have been very lu —*rude* not to speak to the old lady, and go into her house for a minute when she asked me. Mamma always says we mustn't be rude,' said Peterkin, plucking up some spirit.

'Mamma always says we must be *obedient*' replied Clement, severely.

Then he relapsed into silence, and his quick footsteps and Peterkin's short trotty ones were the only sounds.

'I believe,' I couldn't help murmuring, half to myself, half to Peterkin – 'I believe you've got some rubbish in your head about the parrot being a fairy. If I were mamma I'd stop your – ' but at that I stopped *myself*. If Clement had heard me he would have been down upon me for disrespectfulness in saying to a baby like Pete what I thought mamma should or should not do; and I didn't care to be pulled up by Clement before the little ones.

Peterkin was as sharp as needles in some ways. He guessed the end of my unfinished sentence.

'No,' he half whispered, 'mamma'd *never* stop me reading faily stolies – you know she wouldn't, Gilly, and it's velly unkind of you to say so.'

'I didn't say so,' I replied.

'Be quiet, both of you,' said Clem, 'and hurry on,' for we had slackened a little.

But in spite of the breathlessness of the pace, I heard another gasp from Peterkin —

'It *is* velly like the blue-bird,' were the words I distinguished.

And 'I knew I was right,' I thought to myself triumphantly.

CHAPTER II
FOUND

The carriage was standing waiting at our own house when we got there. And there was some bustle going on, for the front door was not shut, and we could see into the hall, which of course was brightly lighted up.

Papa was there, speaking to some one; he had his hat on, as if he was just coming out again. And – yes – it was Drew he was speaking to, and James too, I think – but behind them was poor mamma, looking so dreadfully unhappy. It did make me want to shake Peterkin again.

They did not see us as quickly as we saw them, for it was dark outside and they were all talking: papa giving directions, I fancy.

So they did jump when Clem – hurrying for once – rushed up the steps, dragging Peterkin after him.

'We've found him – we've found him!' he shouted. 'In with you, Pete: show yourself, quick.'

For mamma had got quite white, and looked as if she were going to faint or tumble down in some kind of a fit; but luckily before she had time for anything, there was that fat boy hugging and squeezing her so tight that she'd have been clever to move at all, though if she *had* tumbled down he would have made a good buffer.

'Oh, mamma, mamma – oh, mummy,' he said, and by this time he was howling, of course, 'I never meant to flighten you. I never did. I thought I'd been only five minutes, and I thought it was nearly as quick home that way.'

And of course mamma didn't scold him! She hugged him as if he'd been lost for a year, and as if he was the prodigal son and the good brother mixed up together.

But papa looked rather stern, and I was not altogether sorry to see it.

'Where have you been, Peterkin?' he said. And then he glanced up at us two – Clem and me – as Peterkin seemed too busy crying to speak. 'Where has he been?' papa repeated. 'It was very clever of you to find him, I must say.'

And mamma's curiosity began to awaken, now that she had got old Pete safe in her arms again. She looked up with the same question in her face.

'Where – ' she began.

And I couldn't help answering.

'It was all Clem's idea,' I said, for it really was only fair for Clem to get some praise. 'He thought of the parrot.'

'The *parrot*', mamma repeated, growing more puzzled instead of less.

'Yes,' said Clement. 'The parrot next door to Mrs. Wylie's. Perhaps you don't remember, mamma. It was the day Peterkin and I were out with you – Giles wasn't there – and you went in to Mrs. Wylie's and we waited outside, and the parrot was in a cage on the balcony, and we heard it talk.'

'Yes,' said Peterkin, 'he *talked*,' as if that was an explanation of everything.

Mamma's face cleared.

'I think I do remember something about it,' she said. 'But I have never heard you mention it since, Peterkin?'

'No,' said Peterkin, getting rather red.

'He has spoken of it a little to me,' said Clement; 'that's how I knew it was in his mind. But Peterkin often doesn't say much about what he's thinking a lot about. It's his way.'

'Yes,' said Peterkin, 'it's my way.'

'And have you been planning all these days to run off to see the parrot again?' asked mamma. I wasn't quite sure if she was vexed or not, but *I* was; it seemed so queer, queer as Pete often was, for him not to have confided in somebody.

But we were mistaken.

'No, no, truly, mamma,' he said, speaking in a much more determined way now, and shaking his curly head. 'I didn't ever think of it till after I'd got out of the calliage and I saw it was the corner of the big square where the little houses are at one end, and then I only meant to go for one minute. I thought it was nearly as quick that way, and I ran fast. I never meant to flighten you, mamma,' he repeated again, his voice growing plaintive. 'I wasn't planning it a bit all these days. I only kept thinking it *were* like the blue-bird.'

The last sentence was almost in a whisper; it was only a sort of honesty that forced him to say it. As far as Clement and I were concerned, he needn't have said it.

'I knew he'd got some fairy-story rubbish in his head,' I muttered, but I don't think Peterkin heard me, though papa and mamma did; for I saw them glance at each other, and papa said something under his breath, of which I only caught the words 'getting too fanciful,' and 'schoolboy,' which made mamma look rather unhappy again.

'I don't yet understand how old Mrs. Wylie got mixed up in it all,' said papa.

'She lives next door to the parrot,' said Clem, and we couldn't help smiling at the funny way he said it.

'And she saw me when she was coming back from the post, and she was very kind,' Peterkin went on, taking up the story again, as the smile had encouraged him. 'She 'avited me to go in, up to her drawing-room, so that I could hear him talking better. And he said lots of things.'

'Oh yes, by the bye,' I exclaimed, 'there was something about a little girl, Mrs. Wylie said. What was it, Pete?'

But Peterkin shut up at this.

'I'll tell you the next time I go there. Mummy, you will let me go to see that old lady again, won't you?' he begged. 'She was so kind, and I only thought I'd been there five minutes. Mayn't I go again to see her?'

'*And* the parrot,' said mamma, smiling. She was sharp enough to take in that it was a quarter for Mrs. Wylie and three quarters for the parrot that he wanted so to go back to Rock Terrace. 'Well, you must promise never to pay visits on your own account again, Peterkin, and then we shall see. Now run upstairs to the nursery as fast as you can and get some tea. And I'm sure Clem and Giles will be glad of some more. I hope poor nurse and Blanche and Elfie know he is all right,' she added, glancing round.

'Yes, ma'am. I took the liberty of going up to tell the young ladies and Mrs. Brough, when Master Peterkin first returned,' said James in his very politest and primmest tone.

'That was very thoughtful of you,' said mamma, approvingly, which made James get very red.

We three boys skurried upstairs after that. At least I did. Clement came more slowly, but as his legs were long enough to take two steps at a time, he got to the top nearly as soon as I did, and Peterkin came puffing after us. I was rather surprised that Blanche and Elf had been content to stay quietly in the nursery, considering all the excitement that had been going on downstairs, and I think it was very good of Blanche, for she told me afterwards that she had only done it to keep Elvira from getting into one of her endless crying fits. They always say Elf is such a nervous child that she can't help it, but *I* think it's a good bit of it cross temper too.

Still she is rather growing out of it, and, after all, that night there was something to cry about, and there might have been worse, as nurse said. She had been telling the girls stories of people who got lost, though she was sensible enough to make them turn up all right at the end. She can tell very interesting stories sometimes, but she keeps the *best* ones to amuse us when we are ill, or when mamma's gone away on a visit, or something horrid like that has happened.

They all three flew at Peterkin, of course, and hugged him as if he'd been shipwrecked, or putting out a fire, or something grand like that. And he took it as coolly as anything, and asked for his tea, as if he deserved all the petting and fussing.

That was another of his little 'ways,' I suppose.

Then, as we were waiting for the kettle to boil up again to make fresh tea, if you please, for his lordship – though Clem and I were to have some too, of course, and we did deserve it – all the story had to be told over for the third or fourth time, of the parrot, and old Mrs. Wylie meeting Pete as she came in, and his thinking he'd only been there about five minutes, and all the rest of it.

'And what did the Polly parrot talk about?' asked Elf. She had a picture of a parrot in one of her books, and some rhymes about it.

'Oh,' answered Peterkin,' he said, "How d'ye do?" and "Pretty Poll," and things like that.'

'He said queerer things than that; you know he – ' I began. I saw Pete didn't want to tell about the parrot copying the mysterious child that Mrs. Wylie had spoken of, so I thought I'd tease him a bit by reminding him of it. I felt sure he had got some of his funny ideas out of his fairy stories in his head; that the little girl – for Mrs. Wylie had spoken of a 'her' – was an enchanted princess or something like that, and I wasn't far wrong, as you will see. But I didn't finish my sentence, for Peterkin, who was sitting next me, gave me a sort of little kick, not to hurt, of course, and whispered, 'I'll tell you afterwards.' So I felt it would be ill-natured to tease him, and I didn't say any more, and luckily the others hadn't noticed what I had begun. Blanchie was on her knees in front of the fire toasting for us, and Elf was putting lumps of sugar into the cups, to be ready.

Pete was as hungry as a hunter, and our sharp walk had given Clem and me a fresh appetite, so we ate all the toast and a lot of plum-cake as well, and felt none the worse for it.

And soon after that, it was time to be tidied up to go down to the drawing-room to mamma. Peterkin and Elvira only stayed half-an-hour or so, but after they had gone to bed we three big ones went into the library to finish our lessons while papa and mamma were at dinner. Sometimes we went into the dining-room to dessert, and sometimes we worked on till mamma called us into the drawing-room: it all depended on how many lessons we'd got to do, or how fast we had got on with them. Clement and Blanche were awfully good about that sort of thing, and went at it steadily, much better than I, I'm afraid, though I could learn pretty quickly if I chose. But I did not like lessons, especially the ones we had to do at home, for in these days Clem and I only went to a day-school and had to bring books and things back with us every afternoon. And besides these lessons we had to do at home for school, we had a little extra once or twice a week, as we had French conversation and reading on half-holidays with Blanche's teachers, and they sometimes gave us poetry to learn by heart or to translate. We were not exactly *obliged* to do it, but of course we didn't want Blanche, who was only a girl, to get ahead of us, as she would very likely have done, for she did grind at her lessons awfully. I think most girls do.

It sounds as if we were rather hard-worked, but I really don't think we were, though I must allow that we worked better in those days, and learnt more in comparison, than we do now at – I won't give the name of the big school we are at. Clement says it is better not – people who write books never do give the real names, he says, and I fancy he's right. It is an awfully jolly school, and we are as happy as sand-boys, whatever that means, but I can't say that we work as Blanche does, though she does it all at home with governesses.

That part of the evening – when we went back to the drawing-room to mamma, I mean – was one of the times I shall always like to remember about. It is very jolly now, of course, to be at home for the holidays, but there was then the sort of 'treat' feeling of having got our lessons done, and the little ones comfortably off to bed, and the grown-up-ness.

Mamma looked so pretty, as she was always nicely dressed, though I liked some of her dresses much better than others – I don't like her in black ones at all; and the drawing-room was pretty, and then there was mamma's music. Her playing was nice, but her singing was still better, and she used to

let us choose our favourite songs, each in turn. Blanche plays the violin now, very well, they say, and mamma declares she is really far cleverer at music than she herself ever was; but for all that, I shall never care for her fiddle anything like mamma's singing; if I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget it.

It is a great thing to have really jolly times like those evenings to think of when you begin to get older, and are a lot away from home, and likely to be still less and less there.

But I must not forget that this story is supposed to be principally about Peterkin and his adventures, so I'll go on again about the night after he'd been lost.

He and I had a room together, and he was nearly always fast asleep, like a fat dormouse, when I went up to bed. He had a way of curling himself round, like a ball, that really did remind you of a dormouse. I believe it kept him from growing; I really do, though I did my best to pull him out straight. He didn't like that, ungrateful chap, and used to growl at me for it, and I believe he often pretended to be asleep when he wasn't, just to stop me doing it; for one night, nurse had come in to know what the row was about, and though she agreed with me that it was much better for him to lie properly stretched at his full length, she said I wasn't to wake him up because of it.

But if he was generally fast asleep at night when I came to bed, he certainly made up for it by waking in the morning. I never knew anything like him for that. I believe he woke long before the birds, winter as well as summer, and then was his time for talking and telling me his stories and fancies. Once I myself was well awake I didn't mind, as it was generally rather interesting; but I couldn't stand the being awakened ages before the time. So we made an agreement, that if I didn't wake him up at night, he'd not bother me in the morning till I gave a sign that I was on the way to waking of myself. The sign was a sort of snort that's easy to make, even while you're still pretty drowsy, and it did very well, as I could lie quiet in a dreamy way listening to him. He didn't want me to speak, only to snort a little now and then till I got quite lively, as I generally did in a few minutes, as his stories grew more exciting, and there came something that I wanted him to alter in them.

That night, however, when I went up to bed there was no need to think of our bargain, for Peterkin was as wide awake as I was.

'Haven't you been to sleep yet?' I asked him.

'Not exactly,' he said. 'Just a sort of half. I'm glad you've come, Gilley, for I've got a lot of things in my head.'

'You generally have,' I said, 'but *I'm* sleepy, if you're not. That scamper in the cold after you, my good boy, was rather tiring, I can tell you.'

'I'm very sorry,' said he, in a penitent tone of voice, 'but you know, Giles, I never meant to – '

'Oh, stop that!' I exclaimed; 'you've said it twenty times too often already. Better tell me a bit of the things in your head. Then you can go to sleep, and dream them out, and have an interesting story ready for me in the morning.'

'Oh, but – ' objected Pete, sitting up in bed and clasping his hands round his knees, his face very red, and his eyes very blue and bright, 'they're not dreamy kind of things at all. There's really something very misterist – what is the proper word, Gilley?'

'"Mysterious," I suppose you mean,' I said.

'Yes, misterous,' repeated he, 'about what the parrot said, and I'm pretty sure that old lady thinks so too.'

'Didn't she explain about it, at all?' I asked him. I began to think there *was* something queer, perhaps, for Peterkin's manner impressed me.

'Well, she did a little,' he replied. 'But I'd better tell you all, Gilley; just what I first heard, before she came up and spoke to me, you know, and – '

Just then, however, there came an interruption.

Mamma put her head in at the door.

'Boys,' she said, 'not asleep yet? At least *you* should be, Peterkin. You didn't wake him, I hope, Giles?'

I had no time for an indignant 'No; of course, not,' before Pete came to my defence.

'No, no, mummy! I was awake all of myself. I wanted him to come very much, to talk a little.'

'Well, you must both be rather tired with all the excitement there has been,' mamma said. 'So go to sleep, now, and do your talking in the morning. Promise, – both of you – eh?'

'Yes,' we answered; 'word of honour, mamma,' and she went away, quite sure that we would keep our promise, which was sealed by a kiss from her.

Dear little mother! She did not often come up to see us in bed, for fear of rousing us out of our 'beauty' sleep, but to-night she had felt as if she must make sure we were all right after the fuss of Peterkin's being lost, you see.

And of course we were as good as our word, and only just said 'Good-night!' to each other; Pete adding, 'I'll begin at the beginning, and tell you everything, as soon as I hear your first snort in the morning, Giles.'

'You'd better wait for my second or third,' I replied. 'I'm never very clear-headed at the first, and I want to give my attention, as it's something real, and not one of your make-ups,' I said. 'So, good-night!'

It is awfully jolly to know that you are trusted, isn't it?

CHAPTER III
AN INVITATION

I slept on rather later than usual next morning. I suppose I really was tired. And when I began to awake, and gradually remembered all that had happened the night before, I heartily wished I hadn't promised Peterkin to snort at all.

I took care not to open my eyes for a good bit, but I couldn't carry on humbugging that I was still asleep for very long. Something made me open my eyes, and as soon as I did so I knew what it was. There was Pete – bolt upright – as wide awake as if he had never been asleep, staring at me with all his might, his eyes as round and blue as could be. You know the feeling that some one is looking at you, even when you don't see them. I had not given one snort, and I could not help feeling rather cross with Peterkin, even when he exclaimed —

'Oh, I am so glad you're awake!'

'You've been staring me awake,' I said, very grumpily. 'I'd like to know who could go on sleeping with you wishing them awake?'

'I'm very sorry if you wanted to go on sleeping,' he replied meekly. He did not seem at all surprised at my saying he had wakened me. He used to understand rather queer things like that so quickly, though we counted him stupid in some ways.

'But as I am awake you can start talking,' I said, closing my eyes again, and preparing to listen.

Pete was quite ready to obey.

'Well,' he began, 'it was this way. Mamma didn't want me to be late for tea, so she stopped at the end of that big street – a little farther away than Lindsay Square, you know – '

'Yes, Meredith Place,' I grunted.

'And,' Pete went on, 'told me to run home. It's quite straight, if you keep to the front, of course.'

'And you did run straight home, didn't you?' I said teasingly.

'No,' he replied seriously, but not at all offended. 'When I got to the corner of the square I looked up it, and I remembered that it led to the funny little houses where Clem and I had seen the parrot. So, almost without settling it in my mind, I ran along that side of the square till I came to Rock Terrace. I ran *very* fast – '

'I wish I'd been there to see you,' I grunted again.

'And I thought if I kept round by the back, I'd get out again to the front nearly as soon – running all the way, you see, to make up. And I'd scarcely got to the little houses when I heard the parrot. His cage was out on the balcony, you know. And it is very quiet there – scarcely any carts or carriages passing – and it was getting dark, and I think you hear things plainer in the dark; don't you think so, Gilley?'

I did not answer, so he went on.

'I heard the parrot some way off. His voice is so queer, you know. And when I got nearer I could tell every word he said. He kept on every now and then talking for himself – real talking – "Getting cold. Polly wants to go to bed. Quick, quick." And then he'd stop for a minute, as if he was listening and heard something I couldn't. *That* was the strange part that makes me think perhaps he isn't really a parrot at all, Giles,' and here Pete dropped his voice and looked very mysterious. I had opened my eyes for good now; it was getting exciting.

'What did he say?' I asked.

'What you and Clement heard, and a lot more,' Peterkin replied. 'Over and over again the same – "I'm so tired, Nana, I won't be good, no I won't."'

'Yes, that's what we heard,' I said, 'but what was the lot more?'

'Oh, perhaps there wasn't so *very* much more,' said he, consideringly. 'There was something about "I won't be locked up," and "I'll write a letter," and then again and again, "I won't be good, I'm so tired." That was what you and Clement heard, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' I said.

'And one funny thing about it was that his voice, the parrot's, sounded quite different when he was talking his own talking, do you see? – like "Pretty Poll is cold, wants to go to bed" – from when he was copying the little girl's. It was always croaky, of course, but *squeakier*, somehow, when he was copying her.'

Peterkin sat up still straighter and looked at me, evidently waiting for my opinion about it all. I was really very interested, but I wanted first to hear all he had in his head, so I did not at once answer.

'Isn't it very queer?' he said at last.

'What do you think about it?' I asked.

He drew a little nearer me and spoke in a lower voice, though there was no possibility of any one ever hearing what he said.

'P'raps,' he began, 'it isn't *only* a parrot, or p'raps some fairy makes it say these things. The little girl might be shut up, you see, like the princess in the tower, by some *bad* fairy, and there might be a *good* one who wanted to help her to get out. I wonder if they ever do invite fairies to christenings now, and forget some of them,' he went on, knitting his brows, 'or not ask them, because they are bad fairies? I can't remember about Elf's christening feast; can you, Gilley?'

'I can remember hers, and yours too, for that matter,' I replied. 'You forget how much older I am. But of course it's not like that now. There are no fairies to invite, as I've often told you, Pete. At least,' for, in spite of my love of teasing, I never liked to see the look of distress that came over his chubby face when any one talked that sort of common sense to him, 'at least, people have got out of the way of seeing them or getting into fairy-land.'

'But we *might* find it again,' said Peterkin, brightening up.

And I didn't like to disappoint him by saying I could not see much chance of it.

Then another idea struck me.

'How about Mrs. Wylie?' I said. 'Didn't she explain it at all? You told her what you had heard, didn't you? Yes, of course, she heard some of it herself, when we were all three standing at the door of her house.'

'Well,' said Peterkin, 'I was going to tell you the rest. I was listening to the parrot, and it was much plainer than *you* heard, Gilley, for when you were there you only heard him from down below, and I was up near him – well, I was just standing there listening to him, when that old lady came up.'

'I know all about that,' I interrupted.

'No, you don't, not nearly all,' Peterkin persisted. He could be as obstinate as a little pig sometimes, so I said nothing. 'I was just standing there when she came up. She looked at me, and then she went in at her own gate, next door to the parrot's, you know, and then she looked at me again, and spoke over the railings. She said, "Are you talking to the parrot, my dear?" and I said, "No, I'm only listening to him, thank you"; and then she looked at me again, and she said, "You don't live in this terrace, I think?" And I said, "No, I live on the Esplanade, number 59." Then she pulled out her spectacles – long things, you know, at the end of a turtle-shell stick.'

'Tortoise-shell,' I corrected.

'Tortoise-shell,' he repeated, 'and then she looked at me again. "If you live at 59," she said, "I think you must be one of dear Mrs. Lesley's little sons," and I said, "That's just what I am, thank you." And then she said, "Won't you come in for a few minutes? You can see the Polly from my balcony, and it is getting cold for standing about. Are you on your way home from school?" So I thought it wouldn't be polite not to go in. She was so kind, you see,' and here his voice grew 'cryey' again, 'I never thought about mamma being flightened, and I only meant to stay a min – '

'Shut up about all that,' I interrupted. 'We've had it often enough, and I want to hear what happened.'

'Well,' he said, quite briskly again, 'she took me in, and up to her drawing-room. The window was a tiny bit open, and she made me stand just on the ledge between it and the balcony, so that I could see the parrot without his seeing me, for she said if he saw me he'd set up screeching and not talk sense any more. He knows when people are strangers. The cage was close to the old lady's end of the balcony, so that I could almost have touched it, and then I heard him say all those queer things. I didn't speak for a good while, for fear of stopping him talking. But after a bit he got fidgety; I daresay he knew there was somebody there, and then he flopped about and went back to his own talking, and said he was cold and wanted to go to bed, and all that. And somebody inside heard him and took him in. And then – ' Pete stopped to rest his voice, I suppose. He was always rather fond of resting, whatever he was doing.

'Hurry up,' I said. 'What happened after that?'

'The old lady said I'd better come in, and she shut up the window – I suppose she felt cold, like the parrot – and she made me sit down; and then I asked her what made him say such queer things in his squeakiest voice; and she said he was copying what he heard, for there was a little girl in the *next* house – not in his own house – who cried sometimes and seemed very cross and unhappy, so that Mrs. Wylie often is very sorry for her, though she has never really seen her. And I said, did she think anybody was unkind to the little girl, and she said she hoped not, but she didn't know. And then she seemed as if she didn't want to talk about the little girl very much, and she began to ask me about if I went to school and things like that, and then I said I'd better go home, and she came downstairs with me and – I think that's all, till you and Clement came and we all heard the parrot again.'

'I wonder what started him copying the little girl again, after he'd left off,' I said.

'P'raps he hears her through the wall,' said Pete. 'P'raps he hears quicker than people do. Yes,' he went on thoughtfully, 'I think he must, for the old lady has never heard exactly what the little girl said. She only heard her crying and grumbling. She told me so.'

'I daresay she's just a cross little thing,' I said. 'And I think it was rather silly of Mrs. Wylie to let you hear the parrot copying her. It's a very bad example. And you said Mrs. Wylie seemed as if she didn't want to talk much about her.'

'I think she's got some plan in her head,' said Peterkin, eagerly, 'for she said – oh, I forgot that – she said she was going to come to see mamma some day very soon, to ask her to let me go to have tea with her. And I daresay she'll ask you too, Gilley, if we both go down to the drawing-room when she comes.'

'I hope it'll be a half-holiday, then,' I said, 'or, anyway, that she will come when I'm here. It is very funny about the crying little girl. Has she been there a long time? Did your old lady tell you that?'

Peterkin shook his head.

'Oh no, she's only been there since Mrs. Wylie came back from the country. She told me so.'

'And when was that?' I asked, but Pete did not know. He was sometimes very stupid, in spite of his quickness and fancies. 'It's been long enough for the parrot to learn to copy her grumbling,' I added.

'That wouldn't take him long,' said Peterkin, in his whispering voice again, '*if* he's some sort of a fairy, you know, Gilley.'

This time, perhaps, it was a good thing he spoke in a low voice, for at that moment nurse came in to wake us, or rather to make us get up, as we were nearly always awake already, and if she had heard the word 'fairy,' she would have begun about Peterkin's 'fancies' again.

Some days passed without our hearing anything of the parrot or the old lady or Rock Terrace. We did not exactly forget about it; indeed, it was what we talked about every morning when we awoke. But I did not think much about it during the day, although I daresay Pete did.

So it was quite a surprise to me one afternoon, about a week after the evening of all the fuss, when, the very moment I had rung the front bell, the door was opened by Pete himself, looking very important.

'She's come,' he said. 'I've been watching for you. She's in the drawing-room with mamma, and mamma told me to fetch you as soon as you came back from school. Is Clem there?'

'No,' I said, 'it's one of the days he stays later than me, you know.'

Peterkin did not seem very sorry.

'Then she's come just to invite you and me,' he said. 'Clement *is* too big, but she might have asked him too, out of polititude, you know.'

He was always fussing about being polite, but I don't think I answered her in that way.

'Bother,' I said, for I was cross; my books were heavier than usual, and I banged them down; 'bother your politeness. Can't you tell me what you're talking about? Who is "she" that's in the drawing-room? I don't want to go up to see her, whoever she is.'

'Giles!' said Peterkin, in a very disappointed tone. 'You can't have forgotten. It's the old lady next door to the parrot's house, of course. I told you she meant to come. And she's going to invite us, I'm sure.'

In my heart I was very anxious to go to Rock Terrace again, to see the parrot, and perhaps hear more of the mysterious little girl, but I was feeling rather tired and cross.

'I must brush my hair and wash my hands first,' I said, 'and I daresay mamma won't want me without Clement. She didn't say me alone, did she?'

'She said "your brothers,"' replied Peterkin, 'but of course you must come. And she said she hoped "they" wouldn't be long. So you must come as you are. I don't think your hands are very dirty.'

It is one of the queer things about Peterkin that he can nearly always make you do what he wants if he's really in earnest. So I had to give in, and he went puffing upstairs, with me after him, to the drawing-room, when, sure enough, the old lady was sitting talking to mamma.

Mamma looked up as we came in, and I saw that her eyes went past me.

'Hasn't Clement come in?' she asked, and it made me wish I hadn't given in about it to Pete.

'No, mamma,' I said. 'It's one of his late days, you know. And Peterkin made me come up just as I was.'

I felt very ashamed of my hair and crushed collar and altogether. I didn't mind so much about my hands; boys' hands *can't* be like ladies'. But Mrs. Wylie was so awfully neat – she might have been a fairy herself, or a doll dressed to look like an old lady. I felt as clumsy and messy as could be. But she was awfully jolly; she seemed to know exactly how uncomfortable it was for me.

'Quite right, quite right,' she said. 'For I must be getting back. It looks rather stormy, I'm afraid. It was very thoughtful of you both, my dear boys, to hurry. I should have liked to see Mr. Clement again, but that must be another time. And may we fix the day now, dear Mrs. Lesley? Saturday next we were talking of. Will you come about four o'clock, or even earlier, my dears? The parrot stays out till five, generally, and indeed his mistress is very good-natured, and so is her maid. They were quite pleased when I told them I had some young friends who were very interested in the bird and wanted to see him again. So you shall make better acquaintance with him on Saturday, and perhaps – ' but here the old lady stopped at last, without finishing her sentence.

Nevertheless, as each of us told the other afterwards, both Peterkin and I finished it for her in our own minds. We glanced at each other, and the same thought ran through us – had Mrs. Wylie got some plan in her head about the little girl?

'It is very kind indeed of you, Mrs. Wylie,' said mamma. 'Giles and Peterkin will be delighted to go to you on Saturday, won't you, boys?'

And we both said, 'Yes, thank you. It will be very jolly,' so heartily, that the old lady trotted off, as pleased as pleased.

Of course, I ran downstairs to see her out, and Pete followed more slowly, just behind her. She had a very nice, rather stately way about her, though she was so small and thin, and it never suited Pete to hurry in those days, either up or down stairs; his legs were so short.

We were very eager for Saturday to come, and we talked a lot about it. I had a kind of idea that Mrs. Wylie had said something about the little girl to mamma, though mamma said nothing at all to us, except that we must behave very nicely and carefully at Rock Terrace, and not forget that, though she was so kind, Mrs. Wylie was an old lady, and old ladies were sometimes fussy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.