

Molesworth Mrs.

# Miss Mouse and Her Boys



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# Molesworth Mrs. Miss Mouse and Her Boys

## CHAPTER I 'WHAT A LOT OF BOYS!'

It was before the days of sailor suits and knickerbockers. Nowadays boys would make great fun of the quaint little men in tight-fitting jackets, and trousers buttoning on above them, that many people still living can remember well, for it is not so very long ago after all.

And whatever the difference in their clothes, the boys of then were in themselves very like the boys of now – queer, merry, thoughtless fellows for the most part, living in the pleasant present, caring much less for the past or the future than their girl-companions, seldom taking trouble of any kind to heart, or if they did, up again like a cork at the first chance. But yet how dull the world, now as then, would be without them and their bats and balls, and pockets full of rubbish, and everlasting scrapes and mischief, and honest old hearts!

I always like to hear any one, young or old, man or woman or girl, say, as one often does hear said, 'I do love boys.'

There were five of them – of the Hervey boys. They began

at thirteen and ended at three, or began at three and ended at thirteen, if you like to put it that way. But when they were all together in the nursery, or playroom as they called it more often – to see them, still more to hear them, you would certainly have said there were at least ten – above all if a scrimmage of any kind was going on, for then the number of legs and arms all belonging to everybody apparently, seemed to be multiplied in an astonishing manner.

You would, I think, have sympathised with a small person, almost as small as three-years-old Ger, whose first word's when the door was opened were, in an awe-struck whisper,

'Oh, what a *lot* of boys.'

She was dressed in pale grey, grey all over, made rather long in the skirt, and she had a little drawn bonnet of the same colour – a quaint little figure; but we are used to quaint little figures of *her* kind now – fashions repeat themselves, wise people say; and so they do in some cases, though not in all. I cannot believe that boys will ever again be buttoned up and choked as they used to be, above all in summer, when their hot, red faces seemed on the point of bursting out of their 'nankeen' suits, held together by brass buttons.

But the little grey figure standing at the doorway of the Herveys' playroom was pretty as well as quaint, though the small face was pale, and the eyes just a quiet grey like the colour of her clothes, and her dark-brown hair cropped quite short.

She was holding on tightly to the hand of a young lady, and

as one of the scrimmagers caught sight of this same young lady, and immediately broke into a shout of welcome – 'Aunt Mattie – boys, don't you see Aunt Mattie?' and the noise became really deafening, our little girl squeezed the fingers she held still more firmly, and an *almost* frightened look crept into her eyes.

'Boys, boys,' exclaimed Aunt Mattie in turn, 'don't *you* see that – somebody you have never seen before is here? Do disentangle yourselves if you can – Archie, Hector – I can't tell which is which of you – and Ger, dear old Ger, as plump as ever, and – yes, that's right, Justin – you and Pat really should keep the pickles in order.'

Justin got red – redder even than he was already – as he pushed his way out of the scramble.

'If you knew what it was, auntie,' he said, in a tone half of despair, half of apology. 'The pickles get worse every day, and Pat's always asleep or nearly asleep over his books and plans. I really –'

'Well, never mind about that just now,' said his aunt. 'I must introduce you all properly,' and she led the little girl gently forward into the room, looking round for a seat, which was not so easy to find, as every chair was either upside down or else hoisted on to the top of another.

'I'll get you one down,' Archie called out when he saw the state of things. 'Get out of the way, Hec and Ger, can't you?'

But in getting out of the way, Hec tumbled over Ger, and Ger, who was really only a baby, though a very independent one,

kicked out at Hec, which he thought more manly than crying, though one or other he must have done, of course, to relieve his feelings. Whereupon Aunt Mattie, not seeming very surprised, though in her heart she was startled at the look in the big grey eyes under the shade of the grey bonnet, picked him up, still kicking, and plumped him down between herself and the little grey person, who by this time was seated beside her, two chairs having somehow been got at.

Ger was too surprised to go on kicking, *or* to cry. He just opened his mouth wide and stared. Then 'Aunt-ie,' he began slowly, in a tone of reproach, 'thoo –'

But he got no further.

'Ger,' said auntie gravely, 'I'm ashamed of you. You haven't even said "How do you do?" or shaken hands with this young lady. She isn't accustomed to see little boys fighting and kicking each other.'

'I diddun fight,' said Ger, 'I on'y kicked. Hec begunned.'

'I!' exclaimed Hec, ready to swell up with indignation like an angry turkey-cock, 'I– I were fetchin' a chair and –'

'Stop, boys,' said Aunt Mattie again. 'Now let's go on nicely. This is Ger, and he wants to be very polite now and shake hands – eh, Ger?'

Ger's round blue eyes were fixed on the small stranger.

'Her's not a young lady,' he said at last. 'Ger 'ud rather kith her.'

The little girl leaned forward at once, and kissed his firm,

plump cheek.

'Thoo ith tho thoft,' he said, and he stroked her cape and the chinchilla muff she was holding. 'I know – thoo's a *mouse*.'

He said the 's' quite plainly, for his lisp was a very changeable one, and already he was on the way to lose it altogether.

Everybody laughed. Ger liked the sound of the laugh – it was not making fun of him.

'Yeth,' he went on, 'uth'll call thoo' – with some effort – 'Mith Mouse.'

Miss Mouse leant forward a second time and kissed him again.

'You funny little boy,' she said. 'You may call me "Miss Mouse" if you please, but wouldn't you like to know my proper name?'

Ger shook his head.

'No thank thoo. I like Mith Mouse best.'

'But *we'd* like to know your real name,' said Archie. 'Wouldn't we – Justin and Hec, and – oh Pat's asleep over a book again, I suppose.'

'I'm not,' growled a voice from an opposite corner.

'Well then, behave properly. Come out of there, can't you? Aunt Mattie, make him.'

'Patrick,' said Aunt Mattie, and Pat got up and came slowly forward. He was not like Justin, and Hec, and Ger, who were all fair and ruddy; he was dark-haired and dark-eyed and pale, while Archie, the best-looking of the five, came between the two, for he had bright brown hair and merry hazel eyes.

'Now,' said Aunt Mattie, 'now, dear, you see them all – Ger, you have shaken hands with, or rather, kissed. Ger is three and three quarters, and his real name is Gervais. Hector is – let me see – six and a half – no, seven, just struck. Shake hands, Hec, if you're too big to be kissed.'

'I'm not,' said Hec, and he stretched up his rosy mouth to Miss Mouse, and then, like Ger, he stroked her chinchilla muff softly.

'And Archie,' Aunt Mattie proceeded. Archibald is nearly ten,' and Archie held out a rather grimy paw and shook hands heartily. 'Next comes Patrick, eleven past.' Pat's mouth was shut tight, and he only just touched the little girl's fingers. 'And, last and eldest, Justin, who is thirteen and – ' she hesitated.

'Thirteen and a quarter,' said Justin cheerily.

'Then,' said Miss Mouse, speaking almost for the first time, 'I come between Pat and Archie. I'm nine – nine past, my birthday was last Christmas.'

'Are you staying with Aunt Mattie?' asked Justin. 'When did you come? You weren't there on Sunday.'

The little girl turned to the young lady with a puzzled look.

'Don't they know?' she said in a half whisper.

Aunt Mattie smiled and shook her head slightly.

'Didn't your mother tell you that I was expecting a visitor, Justin?' she asked, turning to the eldest boy, who was now employing the time of waiting for his question to be answered by tilting another unfortunate chair as far back as he could get it to go without tumbling over.

'Expecting a visitor,' he repeated. 'Oh yes, she said something about – about – a girl, but I thought she meant somebody like you used to be, auntie, before you were married – a grown-up girl. And I forgot about it with her being away. Papa and mamma went away yesterday, you know, and – ' Over went the chair, its patience at an end, with a good clatter. The chairs in the playroom were pretty stout, as they needed to be.

'O Justin,' said Aunt Mattie, 'do be quiet for a minute and leave the chairs alone. How is it that you and Pat and Archie aren't at school this afternoon?'

'Half-holiday,' said Justin.

'Of course – I forgot,' Aunt Mattie replied, thinking to herself that if she had remembered what day it was, she would have chosen some quieter time for introducing her little guest to the Herveys. She had expected only to find the two younger ones with their nursery governess. 'Where is Miss Ward?' she went on.

'Got a headache,' said Hector. 'Leave off, Ger,' he went on. 'It's my turn,' for the two had been stroking the chinchilla muff with great satisfaction while Aunt Mattie had been speaking to the elder boys.

Ger gave a yell. Hec had nipped his fingers to make him give up his share of the muff. Miss Mouse's face grew red, and she very quietly took her hands out of the muff, and put it behind her, between her shoulders at the back of her chair, though without speaking. Aunt Mattie saw what she did and smiled to herself. Hector and Gervais only stared.

'If you will be quiet, Justin – you and Pat and Archie, I will explain about Rosamond,' and she put her arm round the little girl affectionately.

'Her's Mith Mouse, not Lotha – wubbish,' said Ger.

'Hold your – ' began Justin.

Ger shut his mouth up tight.

'Miss Mouse then,' said Aunt Mattie, 'is my niece, just as you are my nephews, only she's not your cousin.'

'Why not?' said Pat, suddenly waking up. This sounded rather like a riddle, or a puzzle of some kind, and Pat loved puzzles.

'Because she is Uncle Ted's niece – she is my niece now because I am married to Uncle Ted, but that doesn't make her your cousin.'

'Then she *isn't* your niece the same as we're your nephews,' said Pat, preparing for a good argument.

'Well, no, not exactly. But still she *is* my niece, just as much as Uncle Ted is your uncle, and you wouldn't like any one to say he is not your proper uncle, would you, for I know you are very fond of him?'

There was no reply to this for a moment or two. The boys *were* very fond of Uncle Ted, but yet the relationship was a little perplexing. They had never thought of it before, and even Pat felt that it might seem rude if he did not agree that Uncle Ted was as much an uncle as Aunt Mattie was an aunt.

It was Miss Mouse who came to the rescue.

'I know what,' she said, and her voice was very clear indeed,

'I know what, boys – we'll settle that I *am* to be your cousin, and that'll make it all right. Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie will be our uncle and aunt to all of us just the same, once we're cousins.'

'All right,' said Justin and Archie, who were longing to begin another scrimmage of some kind. 'All right,' said Pat, not quite so heartily, for he was disappointed of his argument with Aunt Mattie. 'All zight,' said Hec and Ger – Ger adding, 'but thoo'll be Mith Mouse *always*. Are thoo goin' to live here in thit houth?'

All the boys stopped short at this. It had never struck them till this moment that such a thing was possible. They had only thought of the little girl as just coming in to see them for a short time, as other children did now and then, and Rosamond herself looked up at her aunt in surprise at their not understanding. For she herself was an only child accustomed to hear a good deal more of the family plans than were the Hervey boys.

'Oh no,' she began to say, 'oh no, Ger, dear. I'm not going to live in your house. I've come to stay with Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie for a – for a long time,' and there was a slight tremble in her voice at the last words.

Aunt Mattie felt a little vexed at having to speak of what she knew must be sad for her young guest.

'I thought your mother had told you something,' she said, turning to Justin. 'Most likely she did, and that it was you who did not listen. You are so very scatter-brained. Rosamond's father and mother have gone to India, a few weeks ago, and she is going to stay with Uncle Ted and me till they come back again.'

The little girl's face had grown red while Aunt Mattie was speaking, and at the last few words she squeezed tightly the kind hand she had managed to get hold of.

'Oh,' said the boys, two or three of them at once, in a tone of some awe, and looking at Miss Mouse with increased respect. For India, and goings-to and comings-from there, were not nearly such every-day matters forty or fifty years ago as they are now.

'Will they come back thoon?' asked Ger, looking up in Rosamond's face with his innocent baby-blue eyes. 'I don't want them to, 'cos –' and here he suddenly stopped. 'Her's c'y'ing,' he announced to his brothers in a half whisper.

'No, I'm not,' said Miss Mouse in her clear voice. 'At least I'm not going to cry. I've promised I wouldn't.'

'Dear,' said Aunt Mattie, 'you can't help it a little, sometimes. No,' she went on, 'her papa and mamma can't come home for a good while. India is a long way off, you know. Why don't you want them to come back, Ger? It isn't very kind to say that.'

'Yeth, it is', said Ger, 'it's 'cos I want her to stay here. I like Mith Mouse.'

This made Rosamond smile through the tears which had nearly dried up already.

'I am glad of that,' said Aunt Mattie. 'For I want you all to be very kind to Rosamond, and make up to her for her papa and mamma being away.'

'Does she mind so much?' said Hec, poking his curly head very close under the grey bonnet. 'I don't think I would – not so

very much.'

'Cos you've got no feelings,' said Archie, pulling him back, 'and you're as rude as rude too. I say, Miss Mouse,' he went on, 'would you like to come out and see some of the animals?'

'What?' said Rosamond; 'do you mean Noah's Ark animals?'

Justin and Pat, though Pat was again in his corner with a book, both began to laugh, and Archie's indignation was now turned on them.

'You're ruder than Hec,' he said, 'cos he's little and you're big.'

'None of your impertinence,' began Justin, seconded by a growl from Pat. 'I'll teach you to meddle with –'

Aunt Mattie rose to her full height, and she was tall. Somehow her nephews struck her to-day in a new light. She had known they were wild and unruly, but the waves of expression that followed each other over Rosamond's face almost startled her – the child had never seen this rough side of boy-life, if indeed boy-life at all. Aunt Mattie felt as if she had made a mistake in bringing her into it, and almost ashamed of Justin and his brothers.

'Boys,' she said, speaking to the two elder ones, 'you may not like Archie's interfering, but what he says is perfectly true; you are both very rude, though perhaps you don't mean it. But you know very well how angry you'd be if any one laughed at *you*. I tell you plainly that unless you can be gentle and more polite I will take Rosamond away, and find other playfellows for her while she is living with your uncle and me.'

Pat said nothing, but Justin got red.

'Oh come now, auntie,' he said. 'You know very well we didn't mean it, and I don't believe Miss Mouse minds. Do you?' he went on, turning to Rosamond.

The little girl hesitated.

'I – I don't know,' she began, 'but,' as a bright idea struck her, 'I'd like to see your animals and then I'd understand.'

Justin turned to his aunt in triumph.

'There now,' he exclaimed, 'I told you so! Can't she come out with us now? You needn't *all* come,' he added to the others; 'I don't want the kids, but they'd get into mischief if we leave them here alone,' and he glanced at Hec and Ger doubtfully.

## CHAPTER II

### PAT AND PETS

Aunt Mattie smiled again to herself at Justin's last words. She felt very much inclined to say that in *her* opinion the two youngest boys were much less likely to get into mischief if left by themselves than under the elders' care. But just now, for Rosamond's sake, she thought it better to say nothing which would lead to any more discussions. So after a moment's thought she turned again to Justin.

'I will stay here with the little ones,' she said, 'if you take Rosamond out to see your pets –'

'Oh!' interrupted Miss Mouse. 'It's *pets* you mean! I didn't think of pets when you said "animals."'

"Pets" is a girl's word, you see,' said Justin loftily, for he was already quite getting over his aunt's snub.

'Now, Justin,' said Aunt Mattie quietly, 'I haven't finished. If you take Rosamond out, she is under your charge, you understand? You mustn't let the dogs jump on her, or let her be teased or frightened in any way.'

'All right,' said Justin. 'Come along, Miss Mouse.'

Rosamond got up and half timidly took the hand which the boy held out to her.

'I'm coming too,' said Archie, at which the little girl's face

brightened up.

'Don't till – ' began Justin, stopping short, however, when he caught his aunt's eye, for Aunt Mattie's control over the boys was no new thing.

'Yes,' she said. 'Archie may go too, certainly, and remember, both of you, that you are on your honour to have no squabbling or fighting of any kind while Rosamond is with you.'

The trio set off. Rosamond between the boys, holding a hand of each. Aunt Mattie smiling and nodding encouragingly, for there was still a half-frightened look on the little face.

'It is best,' thought she, 'to test them, for they are not bad boys at heart, and she is far from childish for her age. But if they are really too rough, our plan must be given up. I am very much afraid that Miss Ward is not a success. Patrick,' she said aloud, 'I didn't want to keep on finding fault this first time of Rosamond's seeing you all, but I must say to you, now that we are alone, that I am surprised at your not knowing that it is not polite to go on reading in a corner when any one comes to see you. It is not polite even to *me*.'

'I didn't know you'd come to see *me*,' said Pat gruffly, 'and I don't like girls.'

'I really don't care whether you like them or not,' said his aunt, getting rather angry in spite of herself, 'and that is not the question. The point is that you should and must behave like a gentleman to any visitors in your father's house, and I shall certainly insist on your doing so to any *I* bring here.'

Pat did not reply. He had left off reading, but he sat still, with the book open on his knees and a far from amiable look on his face.

Aunt Mattie felt troubled. Of all the boys, Pat, she well knew, was the most difficult to understand, but during the years that her home had been with her sister, Mrs. Hervey, she had come to be like a second mother to the children, and Pat, every one said, was more manageable by 'Miss Mattie' than by any one else. And now he was as sulky and disagreeable to her as ever he had been to old nurse, whom he was always fighting with, or to any one.

'Pat,' she said suddenly, 'come over here. Hec, you and Ger can go back to your own corner,' for there was one specially counted 'the kids', where the old toy cupboard stood, and where the elder ones were not allowed to interfere with them, on the principle that an Englishman's house is his castle, I suppose.

'Us diddun want to play with Jus and Pat,' said Ger, 'but they made us be "'orses.'"

'Never mind,' said Hector, 'Aunt Mattie won't let us be teased any more. We was tidyin' the cupboard,' he went on; 'it wanted tidyin' awful bad.' Hec was that very uncommon thing, a neat little boy.

So Mrs. Mattie and her nephew were as good as alone.

'Pat,' she began again, 'why are you so surly to me?'

Pat got red and mumbled something about 'not meaning.'

'But you must mean the words you say,' said his aunt. 'It wasn't kind or nice to tell me you hated – or "didn't like" – girls, when

I had brought my little niece to make friends with you all.'

Pat stood silent, but his face had softened a little.

'She'd not make friends with me,' he said, 'nobody does. She can make friends with Jus and Archie. Besides, what does it matter – she's not going to live here.'

'No, not exactly. But we have been thinking of planning for her to come here every day to have lessons with Miss Ward. And of course it would be nice for her to be friends with you all if she was so much here. On half-holidays, for instance, Justin and you could sometimes let her be with you and take part in your pleasures. There are lots of things that a little girl can join in, and she is a very sensible little girl as well as a sweet one.'

Pat shuffled about, first on one foot, then on the other. He did not want to vex his aunt, and he was rather pleased by her talking to him in this way, but he did not care to make friends with Miss Mouse, and he wanted to get back to his book.

'I'm not going to hurt her,' he said. 'I don't want to be rude to her, but it's no good humbugging. I don't like girls and I don't think I like anybody – not much. She'll be all right with Jus and Archie. Why don't you tell them to be nice to her?'

'Because,' said Aunt Mattie slowly, 'I want you all to be nice to her, and in some ways I had thought you would suit her the best, Pat. You are quieter than Jus and Archie, and little Rosamond has not been used to boys, or indeed to playfellows at all. And she is fond of reading, like you.'

'I'm always being scolded for reading,' grumbled Pat. 'It's

often that that Jus and I fight about, and then mamma takes for granted it's all my fault, and they call me surly and ill-natured and all that. And it's like that at school too – only –'

'Only what?' asked his aunt, delighted to get him to speak out to her in the old way.

'I – I didn't mind so much when – when *you* were here and I could tell you things,' said Pat. 'I've nobody now – nobody who cares. O auntie, I do so wish you hadn't gone and got married.'

Aunt Mattie's face had grown very kind and gentle. She had sometimes fancied that, little though he said about it, Pat really did care for her.

'I'm not so far away after all,' she said, 'and I'm sure you know that I'm always ready to talk to you, or to help you in any way I can.'

'Oh, but it's different,' said Pat. 'It's not like living in the house, and taking my part a little, and explaining to them – oh! it's quite different, and then – there's Uncle Ted –'

A little smile crept into Mattie's eyes at this; she had suspected more than once that Pat was rather jealous of his new uncle.

'Of course,' she said, 'I know it can't be quite the same, but it might be a good deal worse; I might have had to go to India, like Rosamond's father and mother. And if you knew Uncle Ted better, you would find him awfully kind and understanding about boys.'

Pat grunted.

'He likes the others, I know,' he said gloomily.

His aunt's face grew graver again. This touch of jealousy in Pat made her anxious about him.

'It is such a pity,' she said, 'that you get these ideas into your head – of people not liking you or liking the others better, and uncomfortable fancies of that kind.'

'They are *not* fancies,' said Pat; 'they are true.'

'Well, if they are true, make them not true,' was the reply. 'Try to be a little brighter and pleasanter to other people, especially to your own people, and see if that doesn't make a difference. Just *try*, for my sake, and as far as Rosamond is concerned I am sure you won't find the trying difficult.'

Pat did not speak. He stood there looking before him gravely. But the hard gloomy expression had gone, and after a while he said quietly,

'I *will* try, but, auntie – I'm not made right, somehow – I don't care for their animals and things like that, and I don't care much for games, and I *hate* ferreting!'

'You care for dogs,' said his aunt.

'Some,' he replied. 'I like clever, affectionate dogs. I don't care for those that think about nothing except hunting and chasing cats and making a row. I like a dog like your Flip, that sits beside you and understands when you want to be quiet.'

'Flip *is* a dear,' Aunt Mattie agreed. 'But, O Hec! what are you doing?' for at that moment a pile of toys came clattering down within an ace of Ger's head, from the top shelf of the cupboard, whereupon Ger set up a scream, though he was not the least

hurt, and the toys, being principally wooden bricks, were not hurt either.

Still peace was destroyed between the two little boys, and their aunt proposed that they should get their hats and go out with her and Pat to meet the others.

These 'others,' in the meantime, had been enjoying themselves more or less – very much as regarded the boys, Justin especially, for there was nothing he liked better than showing off his animals, and Archie's pleasure was only damped by his noticing signs of fear every now and then on Rosamond's part. She did her best to hide them, poor little girl, and to trust Justin's loud assurances that the growls of the puppies' mother were only meant for 'how do you do? so pleased to see you. Aren't the little people looking well?' or civil speeches of that kind, translated into dog-language, though these assurances were not quite in keeping with the quick way in which he pulled back her hand when she timidly stooped down to stroke one of the black-and-tan babies.

'I'll pick it up for you,' he said, and so he did, taking care first to shut the stable door on the anxious mother.

'It *is* a nice soft little thing,' said Miss Mouse, when she had got it safe in her arms, 'but – oh it's going to bite me,' and but for fear of hurting it, she would have got rid of master puppy in double-quick time.

'He won't really hurt you – it's only little snaps that do no harm,' said Archie; 'but I'll put him back again, and then p'raps

we'd better show her the rabbits and the pigeons —*they're* not frightening.'

'No,' agreed Rosamond, 'I'd like to see them very much.'

'And,' said Justin, forgetting his promise to his aunt, 'the ferrets – Tom Brick has got his ferrets here to-day, you know, Archie. They are going to have a good rat hunt to-morrow morning.'

'Ferrets,' said Rosamond innocently, 'what are they? I never heard of them. Are they nice and tame and pretty?'

'Oh lovely,' said Justin, beginning to laugh. 'They're the hideousest things there are. And if you get one up your sleeve – ugh – it does feel horrid. All the same they're splendid chaps for rats. I'd give anything to have a pair of my own, I can tell you.'

'I don't want to see them, thank you,' said the little girl. 'Do they eat rats? I don't like pets that eat each other.'

Justin laughed more loudly.

'Eat each other,' he repeated. 'Rats and ferrets don't eat each other. Besides, ferrets aren't like foxes – they're not fierce; they're jolly little beggars. I only wish I had a couple.'

'Oh, I say, Justin,' exclaimed Archie, 'I wouldn't call them not fierce. Why does Bob Crag muzzle his when he's going to catch rabbits with them?'

'Because they would eat rabbits if they were hungry. Rabbits would be nicer to eat than rats, I should think, though I daresay they'd eat rats too if they were ravenous – and they have to be ravenous when they're used for ridding, to make them eager, for

when they've had lots to eat they are sad lazy little beggars.'

'That's like snakes,' said Rosamond, with a small shudder. 'I'm sure I shouldn't like ferrets, Justin. Don't let's talk about them any more. Who is Bob Crag?'

'Oh, he's a boy,' said Justin, with some slight hesitation. 'He lives out on the moor with his grandmother.'

'You can see their cottage,' said Archie, 'from the top of the mound behind the paddock, such a queer, wild sort of place; we pass it on our way to the vicarage, when it's a fine day.'

'I'd like to see the moor,' said Rosamond, her eyes brightening.

'Come along then,' said Justin, 'it won't take us two minutes to run up the mound,' and off they set.

## CHAPTER III

# GUESTS AT TEA

Rosamond drew a long breath as they reached the top of the mound.

'Oh!' she said. 'I never saw a moor before. What a long, long way you can see!' and her eyes, full of wonder and pleasure, gazed before them over the brown expanse, broken here and there by patches of green or by the still remaining purple of the fast-fading heather; here and there, too, gleams of lingering gorse faintly golden, and the little thread-like white paths, sometimes almost widening into roads, crossing in all directions, brightened the effect of the whole. For it was autumn now – late autumn indeed – and the sun was well down on his evening journey.

The breeze blew freshly in the little girl's face.

'It's rather cold,' she said, 'but I like it.'

'You might have brought your muff,' said Archie; 'though I thought people only had muffs when it was real winter.'

Miss Mouse reddened a little.

'So they do,' she said, 'but mine is such a dear little one, so light and fluffy, and it was mamma's last present, so Aunt Mattie lets me take it out in the pony-carriage.'

Justin and Archie had, like all boys, a horror of tears, and the sad tone in Rosamond's voice made them quickly change the

subject.

'Has Aunt Mattie never driven you round by the moor before?' said Justin. 'She's so fond of it.'

'But I only came the day before yesterday, and her house is quite on the other side, not wild-looking like here.'

'Of course I know that,' said Justin. 'I think it's ever so much jollier up here. Indeed, *I* would like to live in a cottage on the moor itself. Fancy what fun it would be to race right out first thing in the morning when you woke up, and see all the creatures waking up too – rabbits scuttering about, and the wild birds, and the frogs, and rummy creatures like that, that live about the marshy bits!'

Rosamond looked up at him with some surprise and more sympathy in her eyes than she had yet felt for the eldest of her newly-adopted cousins.

'I know,' she said, 'it's like some fairy stories I've read.'

'Oh rubbish,' said Justin. 'If you want fairy stories you must go to Pat for them. His head's full of them.'

Miss Mouse felt a little hurt at Justin's rough way of speaking. Archie, always inclined to make peace, came to the rescue.

'You were asking about Bob Crag,' he said. 'That's where he lives.'

He pointed to a spot where a clump of bushes or stunted trees stood a little way back from one of the wider tracks which ran like white tapes across the moor. No house or cottage was to be seen, but a thin waft of smoke rose slowly from the middle of

the little planting.

'It's the queerest place you ever saw,' Archie went on. 'Papa says it's something like an Irish cabin, only cleaner and tidier, for Bob's old granny isn't dirty, though she's extremely queer, like her house. People say she's a gipsy, but she's lived there so long that no one is sure where she comes from. She's as old as old! I shouldn't wonder if she were really Bob's great-grandmother.'

'Has *he* always lived with her?' asked Rosamond. 'Fancy! *great-grandmother*.'

'I don't know,' said Archie; 'he's been there as long as I can remember.'

'And that's not very long,' said Justin, with the superiority of his four more years of life. '*You* can't remember more than six or seven years back at most, Archie! I can remember ten good, if not eleven. And Bob's two years older than I am. I should think he was about four or five when I first remember him. Nurse wouldn't let Pat and me stop to talk to him when we passed the cottage going a walk, he was such a queer, black-looking little creature. Old Nancy went away once for ever so long, and when she came back she brought this rum little chap with her, and the people about said he was as uncanny as she. Nobody's very kind to them, even now.'

'Poor things,' said Miss Mouse. 'They must be very dull and lonely.'

'They don't mind,' said Justin. 'Nance says she wouldn't stay if they had neighbours, and she's jolly glad to have no rent. Once

they tried to make her pay for her cottage, but papa got her off, and ever since then she'd do anything for us, and she always smiles and curtsies and blesses us in her way when we pass. Yes, she'd do anything for us, and so would poor old Bob.'

'Yes, but – ' began Archie, but stopped short, for Justin's eye was upon him.

'You're not to begin abusing Bob,' he said. 'It's not fair, *I* count him a friend of mine, whatever you do.'

Rosamond looked puzzled.

'Is he a naughty boy?' she said half timidly.

'No,' said Justin, 'I say he's not. He gets blamed for lots of things he doesn't deserve, just because he and old Nancy are strange and queer.'

'I'd like to see them,' said Rosamond. 'It *does* sound like a fairy story, and it looks like one. Won't you take me to their cottage some day?'

But before either Justin or Archie had time to reply, there came an interruption.

'They're whistling for us,' exclaimed Archie. 'Yes, it's Pat and Aunt Mattie coming across the paddock – and the little ones too. Isn't it nice to hear Aunt Mattie whistling just like she used to, when she lived here? Let's go back and meet them.'

'No,' said Justin, 'I'll stay here with Miss Mouse, and you run down to them, Archie. Most likely Aunt Mattie wants to come up here too. She always says there's a breeze up here almost as good as the sea.'

'I wish Aunt Mattie's house was near the moor too,' said Miss Mouse. 'Where is it you go to school, Justin, and how do you mean you only pass the Craggs' house on fine days?'

'Because when it's *awfully* rainy or snowy, or anything out of the common, we go in the pony-cart by the proper road, and when it's middling we go half-way by the moor, turning into the road a good bit before we come to Bob's. It's rather boggy land about there, and we get all muddy and wet unless it's really dry weather. We don't go to school, we go to Mr. Pierce's – at Whitcrow – two miles off – the *road* to Whitcrow crosses the road to Aunt Mattie's, farther on. You look out on your way home, and you'll see a signpost with Whitcrow on one of the spokes.'

'I'll ask auntie to show it me,' said Miss Mouse. 'O auntie,' she exclaimed, as the newcomers came within speaking distance, 'it is so nice up here looking over the moor.'

Her little face had got quite rosy. Aunt Mattie was pleased to see it, pleased too that Rosamond had evidently already begun to make friends with Justin – girl-despiser though he was.

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'I love the moor, and I am very glad you do. I love it all the year round, though it's pretty cold up here in winter, isn't it, boys?'

Pat came forward a little. He wanted to please his aunt by being nicer to Rosamond.

'It's *awfully* cold going to the vicarage some mornings,' he agreed, 'but there's some nice things in winter. Can you skate, Miss Mouse?'

The little girl shook her head.

'No, but I'd like very much to learn,' she replied.

'Then I'll teach you,' said Pat, his face getting a little red, for it was not certainly his way to put himself about to be amiable. And he had to suffer for it.

'How polite we are growing all of a sudden,' said Justin, with a laugh. But he could not mock at Pat's offer, for skating was the one thing of outdoor exercises in which the younger brother outshone the elder.

Aunt Mattie was quick to scent any approach to a quarrel.

'It must be getting near tea-time,' she said. 'Are you going to invite us to your schoolroom tea, Justin?'

'Oh yes, of course, if you like,' he answered, in a rather off-hand tone, 'or we could bring you a cup into the drawing-room; mamma often has it like that.'

For it was rather before the days of regular drawing-room 'afternoon' teas.

'Thank you,' replied his aunt. 'I should much rather have it in the schoolroom, and if Miss Ward isn't better, I can pour it out for you.'

'She's sure to be better by tea-time,' said Hec. 'She always is' – without much satisfaction in his voice.

But this did not alter Aunt Mattie's choice. To tell the truth, she thought it a good opportunity to see how things were going on in the schoolroom in her sister's absence.

Just then a bell sounded.

'That is the tea-bell,' said Archie. 'Come along. The first in the schoolroom to sit beside auntie.'

Off they set, all except little Gervais, but they had not gone many paces before Pat turned back again.

'What's the matter?' said his aunt, and then she felt sorry that she had said anything, when she saw it was an effort on the boy's part to behave politely to the ladies of the party.

'Oh,' he replied, rather gruffly, 'I think I had better carry Ger down till we get to the paddock.'

'No, you *san't*' said Ger ungratefully. 'Auntie, tell him he's not to,' for Pat was preparing to pick him up willy-nilly, and a roar would no doubt have been the consequence.

'I'll tell you what, Ger,' said Rosamond quickly, 'I'll take one hand and Pat one, and then we'll all run down together, and wait for auntie at the bottom.'

To this arrangement Ger condescended, and Aunt Mattie, as she followed the three more slowly, gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

'It's all quite true that her mother said of her,' she thought to herself. 'She's a dear little soul, full of tact and good feeling. I wonder why our boys are so very tiresome?'

For it was new to her to think of them as not *hers* as much as their parents'.

'I wonder if it's just that they *are* boys, or have we mismanaged them somehow or other? I did so hope that my being with Harriet since I grew up had been a real help to her, but it scarcely looks

like it. These boys are very troublesome.'

Tea was ready when they all got back to the house – tea and the dispenser of it, in the shape of Miss Ward, very meek and evidently rather sorry for herself, though her face brightened as she caught sight of Aunt Mattie and rose to greet her.

'I am sorry you have got a headache, Miss Ward,' said the young lady, 'I'm afraid you are rather subject to them.'

'N – no, I can't say that I am, or rather I never used to be, and I am particularly sorry to have had one to-day when Mrs. Hervey was away. But I daresay a cup of tea will put it all right – it often does,' replied the governess.

'Then why didn't you ask for one early in the day; I'm sure you could get it at any time,' said Aunt Mattie a little coldly. She was feeling rather irritated with Miss Ward for seeming so doleful, for she had come to them with the recommendation of being specially clever in managing boys. She was no longer very young, but active and capable, at least so she had appeared at first. She grew a little red as she replied,

'Oh! I don't want to give in to these headaches or to make any fuss about them.'

'Poor Mith Ward,' said little Ger, 'all-bodies would have headaches if naughty Jus throwed books at them!'

'Ger, Ger,' exclaimed Miss Ward; while up started Justin in a fury.

'I throw books at Miss Ward; what do you mean, you sneaking little tell-tale?' he exclaimed. 'No, you're worse than that, you are

a right-down story-teller.'

'He's not,' said Hec. 'You've done it *twicet*, Jus, you know you have.'

Justin was on the point of rushing off from his place to seize Hec, when Aunt Mattie turned to him.

'Be quiet, Justin,' she said, 'and behave like a gentleman. If not, you must leave the room.'

The old habit of obedience to his young aunt told, and Justin sat down again, though not without mutterings to himself.

'I don't want to spoil our tea-time,' said Aunt Mattie quietly, turning to Miss Ward,' but I think it would be best for you to explain what the little boys mean, and – what *you* mean, Justin.'

'I didn't mean to hurt Miss Ward,' said Justin, 'and it was settled that nothing more was to be said about it.'

'I don't think Hec and Ger were in the room when we settled that,' said Miss Ward, smiling a little. 'The facts are these, Mrs. Caryll. Justin meant to play a trick on Pat, some days ago – what they call a "book-trap" – some volumes balanced on the top of a door – you have heard of it, I daresay? – so that they fall on the head of the first person who goes into the room. Unluckily for me, I was that person, as I had to go into Pat's room unexpectedly. I did get a bad blow, but Justin was very sorry and promised never to do it again.'

'But you say that was some days ago,' said Aunt Mattie.

'Well, yes,' the governess allowed. 'This morning it was quite a different thing. Pat was not ready to go out when Justin wanted

him, or something of that kind, and Justin threw a book *at* his door, to make him hurry, I suppose, and again it hit *me*, as I was crossing the passage. And – and – somehow a very little thing seems to make my head ache lately.'

In her heart Aunt Mattie did not feel surprised.

'If what I have seen to-day goes on from morning till night, I am sure I don't wonder,' she thought to herself, as she turned again to Justin. But he stopped her before she had time to speak.

'Auntie,' he said, looking, and it is to be hoped, still more *feeling*, very much ashamed of himself – 'auntie, I *was* very sorry the books hit Miss Ward, especially this morning. But I didn't in the least mean it for her –'

'I should hope not, indeed,' interrupted Mrs. Caryll.

'And,' continued Justin, 'Miss Ward knows I didn't, and we had made it all up and nothing more would have been heard about it but for that little sneak, Hec.'

'You meant to have told your father and mother about it when they came home, surely?' said his aunt.

Justin reddened again, and muttered something about getting into scrapes enough without needing to *put* himself into them; remarks which Mrs. Caryll thought it wiser not to hear.

'Please don't say anything more about it,' said Miss Ward, speaking more decidedly than she had yet done. 'It is not often we have the pleasure of visitors at tea, and my head is really much better now. I am *sure* nothing of the kind will happen again, and – and – little Miss –'

'Mouth,' said Gervais quite gravely.

'Mouth?' repeated Miss Ward, looking very puzzled.

'No,' Hec corrected, '*Mouse*.'

'Miss Mouse,' she went on, 'will think us a party of –'

'Wild cats,' interrupted Archie.

And at this everybody burst out laughing, Miss Ward included, for she *was* very good-natured – and on the whole perhaps the laughing was the best thing that could have happened. Then Aunt Mattie had to explain that her little niece's name was not really 'Miss Mouse,' but Rosamond – Rosamond Caryll, as her father was Uncle Ted's brother – though the boys all joined, for once, in saying that *they* were always going to call her Miss Mouse, 'it suited her so well,' in which their governess agreed.

And tea went on peacefully and pleasantly on the whole, though Miss Mouse's eyes grew very round with surprise more than once at the pushes and thumps that passed between the boys, and the growls and snaps and mutterings, even though the five were decidedly on their best behaviour. Aunt Mattie did her utmost quietly to keep things smooth, and so did Miss Ward. But Aunt Mattie was feeling sorry and disappointed, though she tried not to show it.

'I think Pat might do so much to make things better,' she thought to herself. 'He is cleverer than Justin, who is just a great, rough, clumsy schoolboy, not bad at heart, but awfully careless and thoughtless. Pat is not thoughtless, but he keeps himself far too apart from his brothers; if he would try to interest himself in

their pleasures a little, he might get to have far more influence. I must speak to him again.'

And so she did. There was an opportunity for a little more talk when tea was over and before the pony-carriage came round. Pat was quick at noticing things, and he saw that his aunt's sweet face was less cheerful than usual.

'You're not vexed with me now, auntie,' he said, half wistfully. 'I know it was rather disgusting, that row at tea-time. Miss Mouse won't want to come much to see us.'

'I hope she will,' said Mrs. Caryll. 'Of course I was ashamed for her to hear of those quarrels between you and Justin, Pat. How is it you can't get on better with him? Archie does.'

'Archie's better tempered than me, I suppose,' said Pat, 'and then he daren't check Jus; he's a good bit younger, you see. And then they care for the same sort of things' —

'Ah yes, there's a good deal in that,' she said. 'If you could manage to show some interest in Justin's games and animals and all these things, instead of reading quite so much, you might win him by sympathy and really make home life happier.'

'It hasn't been very happy, lately, I know. And it worries mamma,' said Pat gruffly. 'Aunt Mattie, I'll try. But I wish you were here again.'

## CHAPTER IV

# WANTED – A SISTER

Aunt Mattie seemed rather absent-minded during the drive back – quite different from what she had been on their way to Moor Edge, which was the name of the boys' home. *Then* she had talked brightly and cheerfully, pointing out the places they passed – here a wood famed for the earliest primroses, there a cottage burnt down so long ago that no one could remember how it happened, though the dreary, blackened remains still stood, and amusing Rosamond as well with stories of 'the boys' and all their doings.

But the little girl was not sorry that now it was different. She was feeling tired and very puzzled. In one way the afternoon's visit had brought her a good deal of disappointment – her new friends were not at all what she had pictured them – at least – and then her mind went on to what it was that had disappointed and almost shocked her. She was too sensible a little woman to mind their being noisy and even rather rough. But – 'it wasn't a nice kind of noisiness,' she thought, 'they all seemed against each other, as if they were going to begin quarrelling every minute, even though they didn't quite. I'm very glad I live with Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie. I'd rather have no one to play with than be always afraid of quarrelling.'

Suddenly Mrs. Caryll glanced at her little companion, and it struck her that Rosamond's face was pale and that she was very silent.

'My dear,' she said, 'I don't mind the boys calling you Miss Mouse – it is a nice, funny little name – but I don't want you to grow *quite* into a mouse. I have not heard the faintest, tiniest squeak from you since we left Moor Edge.'

Rosamond smiled a little, but it was not a very bright smile.

'I – I thought you were thinking, auntie,' she said, 'and p'raps you were tired.'

'Just a scrap tired, I daresay,' said Aunt Mattie, 'and – yes I *was* thinking, but I shouldn't have forgotten you, my pet. Are *you* not tired?'

'I don't know, auntie,' the little girl replied. 'My head feels rather buzzy, I think. It gets like that sometimes when I've been in the railway and coming to see places and – and – I never played with such a lot of boys before, you see, auntie. I'm not becustomed to them yet,' and she could not keep back a tiny sigh.

It was repeated, though not to be heard, in Aunt Mattie's heart.

'I am dreadfully afraid I have made a great mistake,' thought the young lady to herself, 'in believing she could get on with them and be happy there. She is too delicate and fragile for them. I must arrange something different and not attempt her going there for lessons.'

But just as she was saying this to herself with a good deal of disappointment, Rosamond called out eagerly, with quite a

different tone in her voice.

'Auntie, auntie,' she said, 'is that the signpost with "Whitcrow" on one of the spokes? Justin told me to look out for it. They pass by here when they go to their lessons on rainy days. I mean they turn off here instead of going on to your house. Yes' – as her aunt drew in the pony and passed the signpost at a walk, to let the little girl have a good look at it, and at the road beyond – 'yes, that's it, "To W, h, i, t, – Whitcrow," quite plain. I wonder if Whitcrow once was White Crow, auntie? Do you think so? I'd like to see the house they go to school at – at least to lessons to. Can we drive that way some day?'

She was in a little flutter of interest and excitement. Mrs. Caryll looked at her with a smile.

'What funny creatures children are,' she thought to herself. 'A moment ago Rosamond was quite melancholy and depressed, as if the boys had really overwhelmed her, and now she is as bright as anything about them again.'

'Certainly, dear,' she said, her own spirits rising, 'I can show you Mr. Pierce's vicarage any day. What were you asking about Whitcrow? I don't think it ever struck me before that it may have come from White Crow. But a *white crow*, Rosamond, that would be a funny thing!'

'Yes,' said the little girl, laughing, 'when we always say "as black as a crow." But – I think I *have* heard of a white crow – or was it perhaps in a fairy story? I can't think.'

'We must ask Uncle Ted,' said her aunt. 'He knows all about

curious things like that – all about wild birds and country things. But why do you say when they go to their lessons on rainy days? They go every day.'

'Oh yes, of course,' Rosamond replied. 'But it's only on rainy days they go by the road,' and she explained to her aunt the different plans that Justin had explained to her.

'That is new since my time,' said Mrs. Caryll. 'They used to drive to Whitcrow every morning and walk back if it was fine – and on rainy days the pony-cart was put up at the rectory. On fine days the stable boy went with them and brought it back. I used very often to go to meet them in the afternoons across the moor.'

'Oh then,' said Rosamond eagerly, 'you know the cottage where Bob Crag lives and the queer old woman. I do so want to see her. Will you take me there some day?'

Her aunt hesitated.

'What have they been telling you about Bob and his grandmother?' she asked.

'Oh, only just about how queer they are, and that people aren't very kind to them, because they don't know where they come from and things like that, and I was wondering – I couldn't help wondering' – the little girl went on in a somewhat awe-struck tone of voice – 'if perhaps the old woman is a sort of a witch. I've never seen a witch, but I've read about them in fairy stories.'

'And is that why you so much want to go to see old Mrs. Crag,' said her aunt, half laughing.

'I don't quite know,' said Rosamond. 'Yes, I think it is partly.

It's a little frightening to think of, but frightening things are rather nice too sometimes – in a sort of fancying way, I mean. For there aren't really any witches now, are there, auntie?'

She was not quite sure of this all the same, for as she spoke, she crept a little closer to Mrs. Caryll. It was beginning to get dusk, and the part of the road along which they were then passing ran through a wood; at all times it was rather gloomy just here.

'Real witches,' repeated her aunt; 'of course not, though I daresay Pat could tell you stories by the dozen about them, and no doubt Bob's grandmother is a curious old body. Long ago I daresay she would have been called a witch. I don't think she is *quite* right in her head, and Bob is a wild, gipsy-like creature. I don't think their father and mother care for the boys to see much of him, though both he and his grandmother are devoted to them. Some day – ' but before Mrs. Caryll had time to say more, the sound of some one whistling in a peculiar way, two or three notes almost like a bird call, made her stop short.

'Why, that must be your uncle,' she exclaimed, 'coming to meet us,' and she whipped up the pony to make him go faster.

They were not far from home by this time, and when Uncle Ted, for he it was, got into the pony-cart beside them, there was no more talk between Aunt Mattie and her little niece.

'How are they all getting on at Moor Edge?' was the first thing he asked.

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