

Molesworth Mrs.

Five Minutes' Stories



Mrs. Molesworth
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Five Minutes' Stories

ABDALLAH THE UNHAPPY

A GREAT many years ago there dwelt in a city of the East, of which you have never heard the name, a wise and holy man. He was highly esteemed by his fellow citizens, for he was kind and benevolent, never refusing good counsel to those in earnest to profit by it, so that by degrees the fame of his sagacity spread far and wide, and many came from great distances to consult him.

One day he was sitting in front of his modest dwelling, enjoying the soft breeze that stirred the trees hard by, reading from time to time short passages of an ancient volume open upon his knees, when a shadow fell across its pages, and looking up, he perceived that a stranger stood before him, who saluted him with the greatest respect and courtesy. The sage returned the customary greetings, and then inquired in what he could be of service to the new-comer.

"Father," said the stranger, "I have journeyed far to ask your advice. My quest is summed up in few words, What can I do to be happy?"

The wise man looked at him searchingly. He was a handsome man in the prime of life, richly dressed, healthy and vigorous. His appearance would have been most prepossessing but for a melancholy and discontented expression of countenance – there was no genial smile about the mouth, no kindly light in the eyes.

"What have you tried?" inquired the sage.

"Everything," replied the stranger. "Yet without foolish prodigality and excess. I have sought to surround myself with beauty and refinement, for my wealth is inexhaustible. I have dipped deep into learning, for my abilities are, I am told, considerable; I have even of late in a sort of despair tried to find content in enjoyment of less elevated kinds, such as seems to satisfy many men. But all was useless – eating and drinking, and such physical gratifications could do nothing for one who had sought in vain satisfaction in the perfection of music, of painting and sculpture – nay, more, who had found in the severest of studies but weariness and disappointment."

"You have been too changeable and impatient, my son," said the sage. "Try again – I do not say return to the lower pleasures of which you speak, but devote yourself more exclusively to the fine arts. Travel far and wide and visit whatever is beautiful. One year from now, return, and tell me the result."

Abdallah bowed and departed. The year passed, and again he stood before the sage, despondent as formerly.

"In vain. I have exhausted myself in travel. I have seen all the world has to show. I am more miserable than ever."

"Turn then again to study. Shut yourself up with your books. Work your hardest and see if therein you cannot find contentment. If you succeed I shall not expect to see you again."

But some days before the year had elapsed, there once more stood Abdallah. He had grown thin and pale, his eyes told of midnight vigils, but their expression was no happier.

"It is useless," he said. "I have followed your advice. But I am not as other men. *Nothing* brings happiness to me. There is but one thing to do, but first I would ask your permission. Let me make an end of myself."

The sage frowned.

"It must be as you say," he replied after some moments' silence. "You are perhaps so constituted that happiness is impossible for you. If so, resignation is all that remains. But I cannot at once sanction your desire to quit this life. I must reflect upon it during a year. In the meantime consider the struggle as given up; think no more of your unhappy fate, but as you are about to die, use the time that remains,

to some purpose, by spending it for others. You are the one wretched exception – so be it. Spend your time, your strength and your wealth in making some others – ordinary human beings – happier, so that at least some few tears may be dropped on your grave. Return in a year, and I will then authorize you to put an end to yourself."

And Abdallah again bowed and withdrew, somewhat consoled by the thought that one year would see the last of his wretched existence, that even the wisest of men recognised him as cut off from the common lot.

The year passed. But no Abdallah returned. It was not till some weeks after the appointed time that he appeared hastening eagerly towards the sage's dwelling. He was no longer thin or pale, his dress was much less rich than formerly, but seemed nevertheless to show his handsome figure to all the greater advantage, his bearing was upright, his step springing – there was a smile on his lips, a beautiful, kindly light in his dark eyes.

"Forgive me, father, for my delay," he cried. "I could not believe the time had passed. This year has seemed to fly."

"And you are ready to part with your life?" asked the sage.

Tears rushed to Abdallah's eyes.

"If the sacrifice could be of use to others, yes, father, I am ready," he replied. "But for myself, no, a thousand times no. I have found the secret of happiness. In ministering to others, in forgetfulness of self, I have found my own blessedness. Life is to me now the most precious of gifts – my wealth, my strength, nay the very learning, the very cultivation I found so disappointing when unshared, I now esteem most highly as increasing my capacities for doing good. Life is beautiful – O good father, let me live."

And the wise man lifting his hands in benediction on the head of the happy Abdallah, bade him go in peace, having entered upon the one only path of endless and eternal blessedness.

FIFINE AND HER CAT

FIFINE was walking quietly up and down the garden path, her big cat, Mimi, in her arms. From time to time she talked to Mimi, asking her questions or telling her the thoughts passing through her mind, and when Mimi purred, Fifine was quite satisfied that the cat was agreeing with her. When she did not purr, and gave no signs of attending, Fifine would give her a little shake, or even a pinch, which naturally made Mimi squeak, and was supposed to mean she was *not* this time of the same opinion as Fifine. This had happened more than usual this morning, for Fifine was in a rather irritable humour. She was not feeling pleased with herself, and nothing makes little girls, and big people, too, more uncomfortable than this.

Suddenly, from a little distance came a well-known voice.

"Fifine, my child," it said, "you have not come to the little gate to wish me good morning," and looking up, Fifine saw a tall figure, all dressed in black, standing some way down the path. It was her kind friend and neighbour, the old *curé* or village clergyman, whose house was at the other side of the high garden wall. In general Fifine was delighted to see him, but this morning she walked towards him slowly, making a sort of pretence that Mimi was too heavy for her.

"Where is Madeleine?" said the clergyman, his voice sounding grave. Madeleine was Fifine's sister, and two years older. "She is not ill? Why is she not with you?"

"She – she is in the house," she replied. She had glanced up for a moment in his face, but the serious look in his eyes, generally so kind and gentle, made her quickly turn hers down again.

"You will not tell me why she is not playing with you as usual, I see," he went on very gravely. "Shall *I* tell *you*? It is because her little sister got into a passion with her, really for no reason at all. Would one believe it – this little sister slapped and knocked Madeleine, and called her many naughty names? No wonder Madeleine stays in the house."

Fifine forgot her shame in astonishment. She stared up in the old gentleman's face, both her eyes and her mouth wide open.

"How do you know?" she exclaimed. "We were in the house – in our own room. No one was there, and I know, sir, Madeleine has not seen you this morning; besides," and here Fifine looked down again, "Madeleine would not tell."

"No, you are right, Madeleine would not tell, and did not tell. A little bird told me, my poor Fifine, and it was sad news for him to carry this lovely morning," and shaking his head, the *curé* turned and walked slowly away.

"A little bird indeed," repeated five years old Fifine to herself contemptuously. "That is what they tell babies. I know better. A little bird only means 'somebody' told. Besides, there are no nests on that side of the house. Who could it be? Mimi, tell me, don't be stupid now. Who do you think it was?" and as Mimi made no reply, Fifine shook her, which drew forth a plaintive squeak and a struggle to get out of her mistress's arms. This made Fifine still more angry. She flung Mimi down, the poor cat – for a worm will turn – glowered up at her, with a rather ugly look in her green eyes, and slunk off.

"I have it," exclaimed Fifine. "You nasty, mean, spiteful cat. It was you who told. I remember you were on the window-sill, and then I didn't see you any more, till I found you out here in the garden coming back from your visit next door, no doubt! Ah, you may pretend it wasn't you. You can't speak, but you can tell things all the same, and *Monsieur le curé* is clever enough to understand. Why, he has often told me he can understand what his old dog Platon says by the way he wags his tail. You, too, were the only person who saw me hit Madeleine. Mean cat; *but I shall punish you*," and off dashed the indignant Fifine in pursuit of Mimi.

The summer day passed quickly. Sweet-tempered Madeleine soon forgot the offence she was only too ready to forgive, and in merry play with some little friends, the troubles of the morning were quickly out of mind. Tired with fun and excitement, Fifine fell asleep the moment her head touched

the pillow. She had slept several hours when she suddenly woke. It was quite dark – the very middle of the summer night – at first not a sound broke the silence. Then faintly, but distinctly, came through the half-opened window a low piteous wail – again and again. Fifine sat up to listen. There was no sound from the larger room next door, where Madeleine slept beside the nurse. No one was awake but Fifine, and again, and again came that pitiful mew. Yes, it was a mew, and up jumped Fifine at last.

The *curé* had sat up late that evening, reading, his window open to the pleasant night-air. He closed his book at last, and was turning to put out the lamp, when a little sound made him look round. There, at the low window, stood a little white-robed, bare-footed figure, sobbing bitterly.

"Oh, sir, oh, sir, come and let Mimi out. I shut her into the tool-house, because I thought she had told you about my hitting Madeleine, and I can't get her out, and she will die of hunger – my poor Mimi – since yesterday morning she has had nothing to eat, and nobody is awake but you. I have come all alone in the dark. I forgot all about her," and the sobs redoubled.

In five minutes the kind *curé* had managed to open the door which the gardener had locked, and Mimi was safe in Fifine's arms.

"And suppose it was *not* Mimi who told me?" said the good old man as he carried the little girl home again.

"I *was* naughty, but I didn't mean to leave Mimi all day. You said it was a little bird, sir, but I know that is only baby-talk."

"Yes, my child, and I am sorry I did not tell you who it really was. It was your dear mamma, my Fifine, who overheard your fit of temper and asked me to speak to you seriously. Will this be a lesson to you? See what angry temper leads to – hurting your sister, and nearly killing your poor cat."

"Forgive me, I will try to be better; indeed I will," sobbed Fifine.

"And ask God to help you, my dear little girl," said the kind *curé*, as he bade her good-night.

THE LONG LADDER

THE sun had set, and the deep blue darkness of a summer night was creeping over the sky. One by one the stars came out, and little Max stood by the window gazing up at them in admiration. He had never before seen so many, for it was long past his usual bed-time, and he had been allowed to sit up late for a great treat, as it was his birthday. Inside the room his mother was reading by a little table on which stood a lamp, but the curtains were drawn across the windows, and Max had crept behind them, so that the bright light inside did not prevent his seeing the infinitely brighter ones, that up there, millions and millions of miles away, came sparkling out one after the other, as if the sky lamp-lighter were slowly going his errands. Max felt as if he could stand there for ever, watching. But there came the summons.

"Max, my boy. You must go to bed now."

"Yes, mamma," and the small figure crept out and held up its face for a good-night kiss. Then "mamma," he began, hesitatingly.

"Well, Max," and mamma raised her eyes again for a moment from her book. It was a very interesting book, and mamma had had her little boy with her all day, and had done her best to make him happy. Perhaps she was a little tired, and felt that she had earned some rest for herself.

"Mamma, is it God that puts them all there?" he asked. "All the little stars?" and he pointed towards the window.

"Yes, dear. You know it is. It is God that does everything good and pretty and kind – up there and down here too."

"Him makes the flowers in the garden," observed Max.

"Yes, dear, you know He does," answered mamma, her eyes turning back to her book again. "Good-night, Maxie."

"Good-night, mamma. But mamma –"

"Well, dear," without looking up this time.

"I was just thinking, when Him's *done* down here, you know, and wants to go up there again, what a *very* long ladder Him must need."

"Yes, of course," said mamma, quite lost in her story by now.

"I wonder," continued Max, "I wonder if Him ever leaves it in the garden after Him's gone up – after Him has been doing the flowers, you know, mamma."

"I daresay – yes, very likely. Now *do* go, Max."

"Does you really think so, mamma?" and Max's eyes, which had begun to look as if the dustman had been passing by, grew bright and eager again. "I'll look and see if I can't find it then, some day," he said to himself, as he climbed up-stairs. For Max felt sure that whatever mamma said must be true. And wonderful dreams came to the little four-year-old man that night – dreams compared with which, all that Jack found at the top of his famous bean-stalk would have seemed nothing.

The next morning brought unlooked-for disappointment to the little fellow, for it was rainy and stormy. No going out for Max – he must stay quietly in the nursery. And he looked so very sad about it that mamma was a little surprised: he was usually so cheerful and contented.

"You had plenty of running about yesterday, Maxie," she said. "We cannot expect it always to be fine. To-morrow will be sunny again very likely," and at this Max brightened up again.

"Him will bring the ladder then, perhaps," he said to himself.

Mamma proved a true prophet, "To-morrow" was a lovely day. So lovely that she and Max's father drove away to some distance, leaving word that they would not be back till the evening.

"Good-bye, darling. Be a good boy. Nurse will let you play in the garden all the afternoon," were their last words to the happy little face waving good-bye from the window.

But late that evening when they returned, they were met by a crowd of white-faced frightened servants, with a sad story to tell. "Master Max was not to be found. They had hunted up and down —*everywhere*. He was playing in the garden beside nurse, and she just left him for an instant to fetch her work, and when she came back he was gone – she gave the alarm at once, and ever since they had been searching." But in vain. Yet where could he be? There was no pond into which he could have fallen – no high bank even, over which he could have rolled.

The garden was the safest there could be, many a score of times had Max played there alone, though within view of the nursery windows; nurse could not be blamed. No one, nothing, was to blame. It was a mystery!

The father and mother looked at each other with anguish in their eyes. It was growing late. How could they live through the night with the thought of their darling out alone in the darkness? And where?

"Oh, *where* can he be?"

Suddenly the mother looked up – yes, there were the stars coming out again one after the other, as if nothing were the matter; just as they had done two evenings before when little Max had been gazing at them from behind the curtains. What was it he had been saying in his funny little way? The half-heard words rushed back to her memory.

"Williams," she said to the gardener, "is there a ladder anywhere about?"

They all stared at her. Yes, he had left one – a very high one – against a tree. There were some branches he was lopping off, but he had "never thought for to – "

She did not wait, but rushed off to where he pointed, and breathless, speechless, signed for some one to ascend it. Max's father of course. And then came a joyful cry.

"I have him. Up here fast asleep, like a bird in its nest."

Yes, there he was, coiled among the branches, unconscious of his fearful peril.

"I found God's ladder," he said, "but when I got to the top, Him wasn't there. So I waited till Him came to light the candles to ask Him to let me peep into heaven, mamma. But I was going to come down again – Mamma dear, why is you crying?"

A FOUR-FOOTED GENTLEMAN

OPEN the door, quick, Sybil. Don't you see my hands are full? What a stupid you are! Yes, that'll do. Now you can shut it after me."

And Archie came forward to the table where his aunt was sitting, a large tray spread over with specimens of seaweed that he had been drying and arranging, in his hands.

"Since when, have 'if you please' and 'thank you,' gone out of fashion, may I ask, Archie?" said his aunt.

The boy grew very red, but he laughed good-humouredly.

"I didn't mean to be rude," he said. "But Sybil doesn't mind. Do you, Sybil?"

"No," replied the little girl. "Archie isn't ever really unkind like some boys. Still I think it *is* nice when people thank you and speak politely to each other. But still, of course, Archie is only a boy."

"And can a boy not be a gentleman, do you think, Sybil? What do you say about it yourself, Archie?"

"Oh, I know I *should*," he replied rather shamefacedly, "but you see, Auntie, I forget, or else even if I don't forget, it doesn't seem worth while."

"Be true to your instincts, my boy. Civility and gentleness are *always* 'worth while.' Above all, from man to woman, or boy to girl. And gratitude even for the smallest service is always the sign of a fine nature. That reminds me – "

"Of what? Do tell us, Auntie;" said both children, pricking up their ears.

"Of a little adventure of mine the other day. It is nothing of a story, so don't expect one;" for the word "adventure" had evidently caught their attention. "But it was so pretty and touching, it struck me very much, and made me think how often we might, with benefit, take example by our humble brethren – even in *manners*, children."

"Do you mean poor people?" said Sybil doubtfully. "I know some are very good and nice – some *quite* poor children even. But a good many are very rough and rude, Auntie?"

"Yes, and there is much more excuse for them, of course, if they are so, for often they have not been taught better. But I was not thinking of people or children at all just then, Sybil. The little 'gentleman' whose manners I admired so much was a – " She stopped again and smiled, while Archie and Sybil looked up in perplexity.

"A *what*, Auntie?"

"A little *dog*, my dears! – Yes, you may well look surprised. Listen and I will tell you all about it. I was going from my own house to a friend's a few days ago, walking leisurely, for I was in no hurry, and had not far to go. It was a quiet time of the day, and not many people were about. I had made my way across our own square and some short way down a street opening out of it when my attention was caught by the sight of a little dog wandering along in an uneasy, rather aimless manner. He was alone evidently, for there was no one in sight whom he could be following – an errand boy or two, a postman and I, were, I think, the only passers-by at the time. And he was far too aristocratic a little dog to have anything to do with butchers' or bakers' boys. He was very pretty and well cared for; his soft, flossy coat had evidently been recently washed and combed, and there was a general air of healthiness and prosperity about him, though he was neither over-fat nor pampered-looking. But just now he was clearly in trouble. He ran a few steps and then looked round him irresolutely; his bright eyes glanced all about him anxiously. I wondered what was the matter and stopped short half intending to pat him or speak to him, when suddenly, seeming to catch sight of me for the first time, he made the first advances by trotting up to me and sniffing me in an inquiring manner. He liked what he saw of me; for he gave a little quick friendly bark, and then, wagging his tail, looked up at me appealingly, ran on a few steps and then stopped short, looking back to see if I were following him, and when I did so, again he barked, again he ran on a few steps, and stood looking back wagging

his tail. It was as plain as any spoken words; he was asking me to do him a service. And thus he led me down the street, round a corner, and a few steps along another row of houses, where he stopped in front of a door, looking and wagging his tail, without going on further. Nobody could have failed to understand him.

"Here is my home, kind lady. I have got shut out, please to ring the bell for me.'

"I rang of course, and very quickly the door was opened, and in he rushed, and, satisfied that he was all right, I was turning away, when – this is the point of my story – I heard a bustle and fuss just inside the closing door, my friend's bark, rather vehement this time, a voice in remonstrance 'what *can* he want?' then the door opened and out he sprang again. He looked round eagerly, and as soon as he saw me stood still on the doorstep, gave a quick cheerful little bark, wagging his tail with the greatest energy the while, and with still another 'bow-wow,' turned round and ran in quietly. It was the plainest 'thank you ma'am for being so kind,' that ever was spoken in dog or any language. Now *don't* you call that behaving like a gentleman?"

"Yes indeed," said the children heartily, and Archie, whose trayful was ready for some other process by this time, turned to Sybil with deference.

"Please, Sybil, will you kindly open the door?"

She did so, and he disappeared, but in a moment his voice was again heard begging for re-admittance.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I have come back again to say 'thank you.' If I *had* a tail to wag I could do so."

But though they got some fun out of it, I don't think Auntie's anecdote did Master Archie any harm.

THE BAD FAIRY

THERE *is* a bad fairy in this house. I don't care what you say. There *must* be. Here have I been hours hunting everywhere for my silver whistle. I *know* I had it yesterday evening, and I haven't been out since, and we can't play at our hunt in the wood without it. And they're all waiting for us. It's too bad – it *is*," and Leonard stamped about the room, flinging everything topsy-turvy in his vain search.

"And my umbrella, and my sleeve stud," said David, his two years older brother. "They have *completely* disappeared. Upon my word, Leonard, I think you're right, this house is bewitched."

"Master Leonard, please, here's your whistle. Cook found it just now lying beside the pump in the garden."

"There now – didn't I say so? It *must* be a bad fairy. Was I near the pump in the garden last night? How did the whistle get there, if it wasn't bewitched?" said Leonard, as he and David hurried off.

It was true he had not been near the pump, but he had left the whistle among some flowers on the nursery table, and "baby," as his six-years old sister was called, had thrown it into the basket with the remains of her nosegays. What more easy than for the heavy whistle to drop out of the lightly made open wicker work, as the nursemaid was carrying the withered flowers and leaves to throw away? David's umbrella, had he known it, was at that moment reposing in the pew-opener's care among various "lost and strayed" articles at church; and the sleeve stud was safely ensconced in a mouse-hole behind the chest of drawers on which it had been carelessly laid, to be flung off again in a frantic hunt for some fish hooks, whose disappearance no doubt Leonard explained in the same way.

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