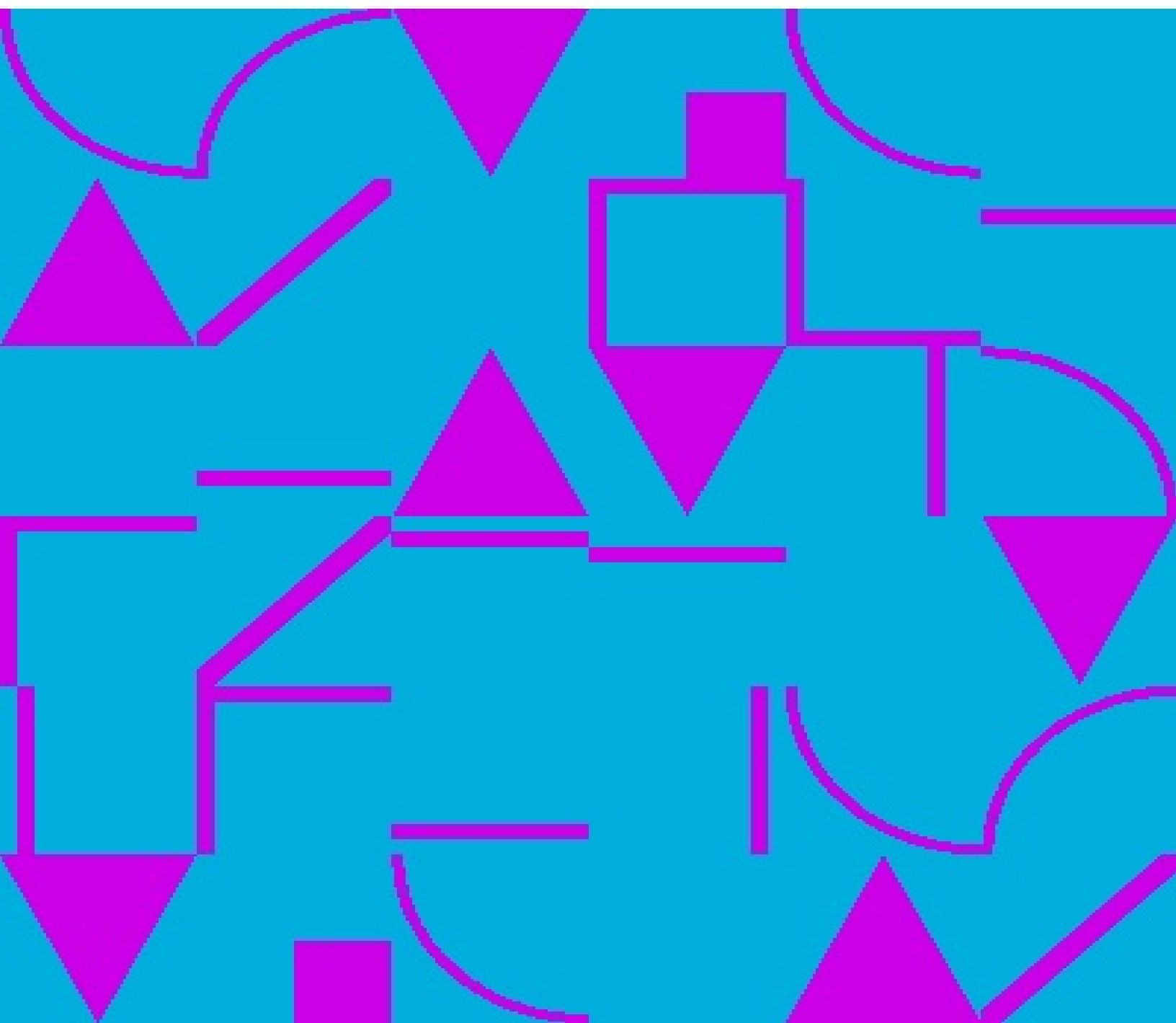


"Us," An Old Fashioned Story

Mrs. Molesworth



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CHAPTER I.

HOW THEY CAME TO BE "US."

"Blue were their eyes as the fairy-flax,
Their cheeks like the dawn of day."

LONGFELLOW.

A soft rather shaky sort of tap at the door. It does not all at once reach the rather deaf ears of the little old lady and tall, still older gentleman who are seated in their usual arm-chairs, one with his newspaper by the window, the other with her netting by the fire, in the exceedingly neat—neat, indeed, is no word for it—"parlour" of Arbitt Lodge. In what part of the country this queerly-named house was—is still, perhaps—to be found there is no particular reason for telling; whence came this same queer name will be told in good time. The parlour suited *its* name anyway better far than it would that of "drawing-room," which would be given it nowadays. There was a round table in the middle; there were high-backed mahogany chairs against the wall, polished by age and careful rubbing to that stage of dark shininess which makes even mahogany pleasant to the eye, and with seats of flowering silk damask whose texture must have been *very* good to be so faded without being worn; there were spindle-legged side-tables holding inlaid "papier-maché" desks and rose-wood work-boxes, and two or three carved cedar or sandal-wood cases of various shapes. And, most tempting of all to my mind, there were glass-doored cupboards in the wall, with great treasures of handleless teacups and very fat teapots, not to speak of bowls and jugs of every form and size; and everything, from the Indian box with the ivory chessmen to the china Turk with his long pipe of green spun-glass, sitting cross-legged on the high mantelpiece between a very sentimental lady and gentleman, also of china, who occupied its two ends,—*everything* was exactly and precisely in its own place, in what had been its own place ever since the day, now more than thirty years ago, when Grandpapa, the tall old gentleman, had retired from the army on half-pay and come to settle down at Arbitt Lodge for the rest of his life with Grandmamma and their son Marmaduke. A very small Marmaduke, for he was the only one left of a pretty flock who, one after the other, had but hovered down into the world for a year or two to spread their tiny wings and take flight again, leaving two desolate hearts behind them. And in this same parlour at Arbitt Lodge had *that* little Marmaduke learned to walk, and then to run, to gaze with admiring eyes on the treasures in the glass cupboards, to play bo-peep behind the thick silken curtains, even in *his* time faded to a withered-leaf green, to poke his tiny nose into the bowl of pot-pourri on the centre table, which made him sneeze just exactly as—ah! but I am forgetting—never mind, I may as well finish the sentence—just exactly as it made "us" sneeze now!

After the tap came a kind of little pattering and scratching, like baby taps, not quite sure of their own existence; then, had Grandpapa's and Grandmamma's ears been a very little sharper, they could not but have heard a small duel in words.

"*You*, bruvver, my fingers' bones is tired."

"I *told* you, sister," reproachfully, "us should always bring old Neddy's nose downstairs with us. They never hear *us* tapping."

Then a faint sigh or two and a redoubled assault, crowned with success. Grandmamma, whom after all

I am not sure but that I have maligned in calling her deaf—the taps were so very faint really!—Grandmamma looks up from her netting, and in a thin but clear voice calls out, "Come in!"

The door opens—then, after admitting the entrance of two small figures, is carefully closed again, and the two small figures, with a military salute from the boy, a bob, conscientiously intended for a curtsy, from the girl, advance a step or two into the room.

"Grandmamma," say the two high-pitched baby voices, speaking so exactly together that they sound but as one. "Grandmamma, it's '*us*.'"

Still no response. Grandmamma is not indifferent—far from it—but just at this moment her netting is at a critical stage impossible to disregard; she *thinks* to herself "wait a moment, my dears," and is quite under the impression that she has said it aloud; this is a mistake, but all the same "my dears" do wait a moment—several moments indeed, hand-in-hand, uncomplainingly, without indeed the very faintest notion in their faithful little hearts that there is anything to complain of—there are *some* lessons to be learnt from children long ago, I think,—while Grandmamma tries to secure her knots.

Look at them while they stand there; it is always a good plan to save time, and we have a minute or two to spare. They are so alike in size and colour and feature that if it had not been that one was a boy and the other a girl, there would have been no telling them apart. Before Duke was put into the first stage of boy-attire—what that exactly was in those days I confess I am not sure—they never *had* been told apart was the fact of the matter, till one day the brilliant idea struck Grandmamma of decorating little Pamela with a coral necklace. She little knew what she was about; both babies burst into howling distress, and were not to be quieted even when the unlucky beads were taken away; no, indeed, they only cried the more. Grandmamma and Nurse were at their wits' end, and Grandpapa's superior intelligence had at last to be appealed to. And not in vain.

"They must *each* have one," said Grandpapa solemnly. And so it had to be. In consequence of which fine sense of justice and firm determination on the part of the babies, they went on "not being told apart" till, as I said, the day came when Marmaduke's attire began to be cut after a different fashion, and by degrees he arrived at his present dignity of nankin suits complete. Such funny suits you would think them now—funnier even than Pamela's white frock, with its skirt to the ankles and blue-sashed waist up close under the arm-pits, for even if she walked in just as I describe her you would only call her "a Kate-Greenway-dressed little girl." But Marmaduke's light yellow trousers, buttoning up *over* his waistcoat, with bright brass buttons, and open yellow jacket to match, would look odd. Especially on such a very little boy—for he and Pamela, as they stand there with their flaxen hair falling over their shoulders and their very blue eyes gazing solemnly before them, wondering when either of the old people will think fit to speak to "*us*"—Pamela and he are only "six last birfday."

All this time Grandpapa is in happy—no, I won't say "happy," for the old gentleman is always, to give him his due, pleased to welcome the children to his presence, "at the right time and in the right manner," be it understood—in *complete* unconsciousness of their near neighbourhood. There was nothing to reveal it; they had not left the door open so as to cause a draught, for Grandpapa abhorred draughts; they were as still and quiet as two little mice, when mice *are* quiet that is to say. For often in the middle of the night, when my sleep has been disturbed by these same little animals who have been held up as a model for never disturbing any one, I have wondered how they gained this distinction! "When mouses is quiet, perhaps it's cos they isn't there," said a little boy I know, and the remark seems to me worthy of deep consideration.

Grandpapa was absorbed in his newspaper, for it was newspaper day for *him*, and newspaper day only came once a week, and when it—the paper, not the day—did come, it was already the best part of a week old. For it came all the way from London, and that not by the post, as we understand the word, but by the post of those days, which meant "his Majesty's mail," literally speaking, and his Majesty's mail took a very long time indeed to reach outlying parts of the country, for all the brave appearance, horses foaming, whips cracking, and flourishing of horns, not to say trumpets, with which it clattered over the stones of the "High Streets" of those days. And the paper—poor two-leaved, miserable little pretence that we should think it—cost both for itself and for its journey from London, oh so dear! I am afraid to say how much, for I should be sorry to exaggerate. But "those days" are receding ever farther and farther from us, and as I write it comes over me sadly that it is no use *now* to leave a blank on my page and say to myself, "I will ask dear such a one, or such an other. He or she will remember, and I will fill it in afterwards." For those dear ones of the last generation are passing from us—have already passed from us in such numbers that we who were young not so very long ago shall ere long find ourselves in their places. So I would rather not say what Grandpapa's newspaper cost, but certainly it was dear enough and rare enough for him to think of little else the day it came; and I don't suppose he would have noticed the two children at all, till Grandmamma had made him do so, had it not been that just as they were beginning to be a *little* tired, to whisper to each other, "Suppose us stands on other legs for a change," something—I don't know what—for his snuff-box had been lying peacefully in his waistcoat pocket ever since Dymock, his old soldier-servant, had brought in the newspaper—made him sneeze. And with the sneeze he left off looking at the paper and raised his eyes, and his eyes being very good ones for his age—much better in comparison than his ears—he quickly caught sight of his grandchildren.

"So ho!" he exclaimed, "and *you* are there, master and missy! I did not know it was already so late. Grave news, my love," he added, turning to Grandmamma; "looks like war again. The world is trying to go too fast," he went on, turning to his paper. "They are actually speaking of running a new mail-coach from London which should reach Sandlingham in three days. It is appalling,—why, I remember when I was young it took——"

"It is flying in the face of Providence, *I* should say, my dear," interrupted Grandmamma.

The two little faces near the door grew still more solemn. What strange words big people used!—what could Grandpapa and Grandmamma mean? But Grandpapa laid down his paper and looked at them again; Grandmamma too by this time was less embarrassed by her work. The children felt that they had at last attracted the old people's attention.

"We came, Grandpapa and Grandmamma, to wish you good-night," began Duke.

"And to hope you will bo'f sleep very well," added Pamela.

This little formula was repeated every evening with the same ceremony.

"Thank you, my good children," said Grandpapa encouragingly; on which the little couple approached and stood one on each side of him, while he patted the flaxen heads.

"I may call you 'my good children' to-night, I hope?" he said inquiringly.

The two looked at each other.

"Bruvver has been good, sir," said the little girl.

"Sister has been good, sir," said the little boy.

The two heads were patted again approvingly.

"But us haven't *bo'f* been good," added the two voices together.

Grandpapa looked very serious.

"Indeed, how can that be?" he said.

There was a pause of consideration. Then a bright idea struck little Marmaduke.

"I think perhaps it was *most* Toby," he said. "Us was running, and Toby too, and us felled down, and Toby barked, and when us got up again it was all tored."

"What?" said Grandpapa, still very grave.

"Sister's gown, sir."

"My clean white gown," added Pamela impressively; "but bruvver didn't do it. *He* said so."

"And sister didn't do it. *She* said so," stated Duke. "But Nurse said *one* of us had done it. Only I don't think she had thought of Toby."

"Perhaps not," said Grandpapa. "Let us hope it was Toby."

"Nevertheless," said Grandmamma, who had quite disengaged herself from her netting by this time, "Pamela must remember that she is growing a big missy, and it does not become big misses to run about so as to tear their gowns."

Pamela listened respectfully, but Grandmamma's tone was not alarming. The little girl slowly edged her way along from Grandpapa's chair to Grandmamma's.

"Did you never tear your gowns when you were a little missy, Grandmamma?" she inquired, looking up solemnly into the old lady's face. Grandmamma smiled, and looked across at her husband rather slily. He shook his head.

"Who would think it indeed?" he said, smiling in turn. "Listen, my little girl, but be sure you tell it again to no one, for it was a little bird told it to me, and little birds are not fond of having their secrets repeated. Once upon a time there was not a greater hoyden in all the countryside than your Grandmamma there. She swam the brooks, she climbed the trees, she tore her gowns——"

"Till at last my poor mother told the pedlar the next time he came round he must bring her a web of some stuff that *wouldn't* tear to dress me in," said Grandmamma; "and to this day I mind me as if it had been but last week of the cloth he brought. Sure enough it would neither tear nor wear, and oh how ugly it was! 'Birstle peas' colour they called it, and how ashamed I was of the time I had to wear it. 'Little miss in her birstle-peas gown' was a byword in the countryside. No, my Pamela, I should be sorry to have to dress you in such a gown."

"I'll try not to tear my nice white gowns," said the little girl; "Nurse said she would mend it, but it would take her a long time. Grandmamma," she went on, suddenly changing the subject, "what does a 'charge' mean, 'a great charge?'"

"Yes," said Marmaduke, who heard what she said, "'a *very* great charge.'"

Grandpapa's eyes grew brighter.

"Can they be speaking of a field of battle?" he said quickly. But Duke turned his large wistful blue eyes on him before Grandmamma had time to answer.

"No, sir," he said, in his slow earnest way, "it wasn't about battles; it was about *us*."

"She said *us* was that thing," added Pamela.

"Who said so?" inquired Grandmamma, and her voice was perhaps a little, a very little, sharp.

"Nurse said it," said Pamela. "It was when *us* had felled down, and the old woman was at the door of her house, and she asked if *us* was hurt, and Nurse was vexed, and then she said that."

"What old woman?" asked Grandmamma again.

"Her that makes the cakes," said Duke.

"Oh, Barbara Twiss!" said the old lady in a tone of relief. "Now, my dear children, kiss Grandpapa and kiss me, and say good-night. I will explain to you when you are bigger what Nurse meant. God bless you and give you a nice sleep till to-morrow morning!"

The two little creatures obeyed at once. No "oh, *mayn't* we stay ten minutes"'s, "just *five* minutes then, oh please"'s—so coaxingly urged, so hard to refuse—of the little ones of our day! No, Marmaduke and Pamela said their "good-nights" in dutiful fashion, stopping a moment at the door before leaving the room, there to execute the military salute and the miniature curtsy, and went off to bed, their curiosity still unsatisfied, as children's curiosity often had to remain in those times when "wait till you are big and then you will be told" was the regular reply to questions it was not easy or desirable to answer otherwise.

There was a moment's silence when they had left the room. Grandpapa's face was once more hidden in his newspaper; Grandmamma had taken up her netting again, but it did not go on very vigorously.

"I must warn Nurse," she said at last. "She means no harm, but she must be careful what she says before the children. She forgets how big they are growing, and how they notice all they hear."

"It was no great harm, after all," said Grandpapa, more than half, to tell the truth, immersed in his paper.

"Not as said to a discreet person like Barbara," replied Grandmamma. "But still—they have the right to all we can give them, the little dears, as long as we are here to give it. I could not bear them ever to have the idea that we felt them a burden."

"Certainly not," agreed Grandpapa, looking up for a moment. "A *burden* they can never be; still it is a great responsibility—a great charge, in one sense, as Nurse said—to have in our old age. For, do the best we can, my love, we cannot be to them what their parents would have been. Nor can we hope to be with them till we can see them able to take care of themselves."

"There is no knowing," said Grandmamma. "God is good. He may spare us yet some years for the little ones' sakes. And it is a mercy to think they have each other. It is always 'us' with them—never 'me.'"

"Yes," said Grandpapa, "they love each other dearly;" and as if that settled all the difficulties the future might bring, he disappeared finally into the newspaper.

Grandmamma, for her part, *meant* to disappear into her netting. But somehow it did not go on as briskly as usual. Her hands seemed to lag, and more than once she was startled by a tear rolling quickly down her thin soft old cheek—one of the slow-coming, touching tears of old age. She would have been sorry for Grandpapa to see that she was crying; she was always cheerful with him. But of that there was no fear. So Grandmamma sat and cried a little quietly to herself, for the children's innocent words had roused some sad thoughts, and brought before her some pictures of happy pasts and happy "might-have-beens."

"It is strange," she thought to herself, "very strange to think of—that we two, old and tired and ready to rest, should be here left behind by them all. All my pretty little ones, who might almost, some of them, have been grandparents themselves by this time! Left behind to take care of Duke's babies—ah, my brave boy, that was the hardest blow of all! The others were too delicate and fragile for this world—I learnt not to murmur at their so quickly taking flight. But he—so strong and full of life—who had come through all the dangers of babyhood and childhood, who had grown up so good and manly, so fit to do useful work in the world—was there no other victim for the deadly cholera's clutch, out there in the burning East?" and Grandmamma shuddered as a vision of the terrible scenes of a plague-stricken land, that she had more than once seen for herself, passed before her. "We had little cause to rejoice in the times of peace when they came. It would have seemed less terrible for him to be killed on the battlefield. Still—it was on the battlefield of duty. My boy, my own good boy! No wonder she could not live without him—poor, gentle little Lavinia, almost a child herself. Though if she had been but a little stronger,—if she could but have breasted the storm of sorrow till her youth came back again to her a little in the pleasure of watching these dear babies improving as they did,—she might have been a great comfort to us, and she would have found work to do which would have kept her from over-grieving. Poor Lavinia! How well I remember the evening they arrived—she and the two poor yellow shrivelled-up looking little creatures. I remember, sad at heart as we were—only two months after the bitter news of my boy's death!—Nurse and I could almost have found it in our hearts to laugh when the ayah unwrapped them for us to see. They were so like two miserable little unfledged birds! And poor Lavinia so proud of them, through her tears—what did she know of babies, poor dear?—and looking so anxiously to see what we thought of them. I *could* not say they were pretty—Duke's children though they were." And a queer little sound—half laugh, half sob—escaped from Grandmamma at the recollection. But it did not matter—Grandpapa was too deaf to hear. So she dried her eyes again quietly with her fine lavender-scented cambric pocket-handkerchief, and went on with her recollections all to herself. She seemed to see the two tiny creatures gradually—very gradually—growing plump and rosy in the sweet fresh English air, the look of unnatural old age that one sometimes sees in very delicate babies by degrees fading away as the thin little faces grew round and even dimpled; then came the recollection of the first toddling walk, when the two kept tumbling against each other, so that even the sad-eyed young widow could not help laughing; the first lisping words, which, alas, might not be the sweet baby names for father or mother—for by that time poor Lavinia had faded out of life, with words of whispered love and thankfulness to the grandparents so willing to do their utmost. But it was a sad little story at best, and even Grandmamma's brave old heart trembled when she thought that it might come to be sadder still.

"What would become of them if they were left *quite* alone in the world," she could not help saying to herself. "And though I am not so old as my dear husband by ten years, I cannot picture myself finding strength to live without him, nor would a poor old woman like me be much good to the young creatures if I did! But one must not lose courage, nor grieve about troubles before they come. For, after all, who would ever have believed these two poor fledglings would grow up to be two bonnie bairnies like Marmaduke and Pamela now!"

And for the last time that evening Grandmamma again wiped her eyes—though these tears were of thankfulness and motherly pride in the thought of the sweet and pretty children upstairs, who at that moment were kneeling in their little white nightgowns, one on each side of old Nurse, as they solemnly repeated after her the Lord's Prayer, and after that their own evening petitions that "God would bless dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma, and make 'us' very good children, and a comfort to them in their old age."



CHAPTER II.

BREAD AND MILK.

"Words which tenderness can speak
From the truths of homely reason."

WORDSWORTH.

Grandmamma would probably have spoken to Nurse the next day about being careful as to what she said before the children, had not the next day brought rather a commotion. Nurse was ill, which, old as she, too, was, rarely happened. It was a bad attack of rheumatism, and very likely its coming on had made her less patient than usual the day before. However that may have been, Grandmamma was far too sorry to see her suffering to say anything which might have troubled her, for she was already distressed enough at not being able to get up and go about as usual.

"Never mind, Nurse," said the children to console her, when a message had been brought from Grandmamma in the morning to say that Nurse was on no account to try to get up till the doctor had seen her, "us is going to be very good. Us can do all your work, and you can stay in bed till your legs is not cracked any more," for they had heard her complaining of her knees and ankles being "wracked" with pain.

On the whole I am afraid Duke and Pamela did not think Nurse's rheumatism altogether an "ill-wind," as they sat on their high chairs at breakfast at the nursery table.

"Shall you eat all yours up, bruvver?" asked Pamela, pointing to the bowl of bread and milk which Duke was discussing.

"Shall you?" asked Duke warily, before committing himself.

Pamela looked contemplatively at her bowl.

"I think I'll leave just a very little," she said. "Cook won't see. I wish the bowls wasn't *quite* so big."

"Cook wouldn't see if us left a great deal," said Duke insinuatingly, but Pamela looked shocked.

"That would be very naughty," she said. "*If* you leave a great deal, Duke, I'll have to put it in the cupboard myself."

Upon which mysterious hint Duke set to work valiantly. But he had a small appetite, and so had Pamela. It was almost the only remains of their having been such delicate little children, and perhaps if they had been *too* much given in to about eating, they would have ended by eating almost nothing at all, and being much less strong and well than they were. Nurse, who had come to them from a family of great strong boys and girls at a country rectory, had no patience with "fads and fancies;" and as, on the whole, the children had prospered wonderfully under her care and she was really good to them, Grandmamma did not often interfere, nor did it ever occur to them to complain, even though nowadays children would, I think, find some of old Nurse's rules very much to be complained of indeed. Of these one was, that if the children did not finish the bowl of bread and milk at breakfast it was put away in the nursery cupboard

and had to be eaten, cold and uninviting-looking as it had then become, before anything else at dinner-time. This was a sore trouble to the little brother and sister, more especially as if they did not finish the bread and milk they could not expect to have the treat waiting for them downstairs in the dining-room at Grandpapa's and Grandmamma's breakfast—of a cup of weak but sweet tea and a tiny slice of bread and butter or toast, with sometimes the tops of the old people's eggs, and at others a taste of honey, or marmalade, or strawberry jam, all daintily set out by Grandmamma's own little white hands!

So for every reason Duke and Pamela wished to eat up the bread and milk to the last spoonful. It was not that they did not like it—it was as good and nice as bread and milk could be, and they were not dainty. Only they could not eat so much! This morning they had not half finished when their appetites began to flag. Perhaps it was with the excitement of Nurse being absent—perhaps they chattered and "played" over their breakfast, not having her to keep them up to the mark—I can't say. But the bowls were still deplorably full, though the milk was no longer steaming, and the little squares of bread had lost their neat shape, and were all "squashy" together, when Duke threw down his spoon in despair.

"I can't eat any more, sister. I cannot try any more."

Pamela opened her lips to make some reproach; she was a very "proper" little girl, as you have probably discovered, but the words died away before they were uttered, as her eyes fell on her own bowl, and with a deep sigh she said:

"I'm afraid I can't finish mine either. And after us saying to Nurse about going to be so good."

Her blue eyes began to look very dewy. Duke, who could not bear to see his dear "sister" sad, spoke out (in Nurse's absence be it observed) valiantly—more so, it must be confessed, than was his wont.

"I don't see that it's naughty of us not to eat more when us isn't hungry for more. *I* think it would be like little pigs to eat more than they want. Little pigs would go on eating all day just 'cos they're too silly, and they've got nothing else to do."

"But," objected Pamela, "us haven't eaten as much as us *can*, Duke, for you know downstairs us *could* eat Grandmamma's treat. *I* could—I could snap it up in a minute, and the tea too, and yet I *can't* eat any more bread and milk!" and she gazed at the bowl with a puzzled as well as doleful expression. "I'm afraid—yes, I'm afraid, Duke, that us is dainty like Master Frederick and Miss Lucy in 'Amusing Tales.' And Nurse says it is so very naughty to be dainty when so many poor children would fink our bread and milk such a great treat."

"I'm sure I wish, then, they'd come and eat it," said Duke. "I'd be very glad to give it them."

His boldness quite took away his sister's breath, and she looked up at him in astonishment.

"*Bruvver!*" she said reproachfully.

"Well, there's nothing naughty in that. It would be much better than letting it all be wasted. And——" but just at that moment came a queer little sound at the door, which made Duke tumble off his high chair as fast as he could, and hurry to open it.

"It's Toby," he cried.

Toby, sure enough, it was—Toby with his little black nose and bright eyes gleaming from behind the overhanging shaggy hair, that no one *but* a Toby could have seen through without squinting—Toby, rather

subdued and meekly inquiring at first, as if not quite sure of his welcome, till—a glance round the room satisfying him that there was no one to dread, no one but his two dearly-beloved friends—his courage returned, and he rushed towards them with short yelps of delight, twisting about his furry little body, and wagging his queer short feathery tail, till one could not tell what was what of him, and almost expected to see him shake himself into bits!

"Toby, dear Toby!" cried the children, all their perplexities forgotten for the moment. "*How* clever of him—isn't it?—to come to see us this morning, just as if he knew us was alone. Dear Toby—but hush! don't make a noise, Toby, or Nurse may be vexed—are you so pleased to see us, Toby?"

Suddenly Duke separated himself from the group of three all rolling in a heap on the floor together and made for the table, and before Pamela could see what he was doing he was back again—his bowl, into which he had poured the contents of his sister's as well, in his hand, and in another moment Toby's nose was in the bowl too, to Toby's supreme content! It was done now—there was no stopping him till *he* had done. Aghast, and yet filled with admiration, Pamela could only express her feelings by the one word—"Bruvver!"

"Isn't it a good thought?" said Duke. "Why, he'll have finished it all in a minute, and nobody will ever know that it wasn't us. And nothing will have been wasted. There now," as Toby, having really made wonderfully quick work, lifted from the now empty bowl his hairy muzzle bespattered with remains of bread and milk, which he proceeded to lick away with his sharp bright-red tongue, with an air of the greatest satisfaction.

For a moment or two Pamela's face expressed nothing but approval. But gradually a little cloud stole over it.

"What shall us say if Grandpapa and Grandmamma ask if us have eaten all our bread and milk?" she said.

Duke considered.

"Us can say the bowls are quite empty. *That* won't be a story," and Pamela's face cleared again. Just then she had no time for second thoughts, for the sound of a bell ringing downstairs made both children start.

"Prayers," they exclaimed, and as they said the word a young housemaid put her face in at the door.

"Master Duke and Miss Pamela," she said, "Nurse says I'm to take you down to prayers. But you must come first to wash your hands and smooth your hair."

A very correct little couple presented themselves a few minutes later at the dining-room door, and after the salute and the curtsy, and wishing Grandpapa and Grandmamma "a very good morning," seated themselves one on each side of the old lady, while Grandpapa read from the prayer-book a few verses of the Bible, the Collect of last Sunday, and two or three prayers for the benefit of the whole family, including a row of neat, mostly elderly, servants near the door. Duke and Pamela listened attentively, their hands crossed on their knees, their eyes fixed on Grandpapa—no fidgetting or staring about or making signs to each other. Such things would probably have been severely punished.

And then came what was almost the happiest part of the day for "us,"—breakfast number two; that is, breakfast with Grandpapa and Grandmamma. With the greatest interest they watched to see what was to be given them. This morning there were no eggs, but there were some tempting little slices of toast, fresh

butter, and a glass dish of honey, clear as amber, with which materials Grandmamma proceeded to fabricate two delicious sandwiches, having already filled the little cups with weak, but, this morning, sugarless tea.

"No need to put sugar when you are eating honey. You would not taste it," she explained. "Now, then, is not that a nice little treat for my two good children?" and Duke and Pamela were eagerly drawing in their chairs when another question from Grandmamma suddenly reminded them of what they had for the time forgotten. "You ate your breakfast nicely upstairs, I hope? Did you finish all the bread and milk?"

Brother looked at sister and sister looked at brother. Both grew rosier than usual, but Grandmamma, though fairly quick of hearing, was somewhat near-sighted. Pamela touched Duke without the old lady seeing, and *looked* what he understood—"Let us tell, Duke." But Duke would not allow himself to think he did understand. The tea and the honey sandwiches were so tempting!

"The bowls were quite empty, Grandmamma," he said. And Grandmamma, who had wondered a little at their hesitation in answering, seemed relieved. For, kind as she was, "rules were rules," to Grandmamma's thinking; and, though it would have pained her more than the children, she would certainly have thought it right to send them upstairs treatless had the answer been different.

"That is well," she said cheerfully, and then the two climbed on to their chairs and drew their cups and plates close to them; while Grandmamma went round to her own end of the table, where—for she was a very tiny little old lady—she was almost hidden from view by the large silver tea-urn. She went on talking to Grandpapa, and the children set to work at what was before them. They were quite silent; not that they ever thought of really speaking, except when "spoken to," at their grandparents' table, but no little whispers or smiles passed between themselves as usual; they ate on solemnly, and *somehow*—how was it?—the honey sandwiches did not taste quite as delicious as they had expected. But though each had the same sort of disappointed feeling, neither said anything about it to the other.

After breakfast Grandpapa went off to his study, and Grandmamma rang the bell for Dymock, who carried away the big tea-urn, the silver hot-water dish in which was served Grandpapa's rasher of bacon, the knives and forks,—everything, in short, on the table except the cups and saucers and the rest of the china belonging to the breakfast-service. This china was very curious, and, to those who understood such things, very beautiful. Grandpapa had got it in his travels at some out-of-the-way place, and the story went that it had been made for some great Chinese lady—some "mandarin-ess," Grandmamma used to say in laughing, who had never allowed it to be copied. How it had been got from *her* I cannot say. It was very fine in quality, and it was painted all over with green dragons, with gilt tongues and eyes, and the edges of the cups and saucers were also gilt. There were large as well as small cups; the large ones, of course, were for breakfast, and the small ones for tea, but Grandmamma always kept out two of the latter for Duke and Pamela. In those days one never saw large cups of oriental china, and this was what made the service particularly uncommon, and Grandpapa had never been able to find out if the large ones were really Chinese or only imitation, copied from the smaller ones. If really Chinese, then the lady-mandarin was most likely an Englishwoman after all, who had had them specially made for her.

You will be surprised to hear that during the thirty or forty years during which Grandpapa and Grandmamma had daily used this precious china not a single piece had been broken, scarcely even chipped, though, by force of simple usage, the green dragons had grown less brilliant, and here and there the golden tongues and eyes had altogether disappeared, while the whole had grown soft and mellowed, so that a moment's glance was enough to show it was really *old* porcelain. And perhaps you will be still more surprised to learn how it was that these happy cups and saucers had escaped the usual fate of their

kind. It was because Grandmamma always washed them up herself! I think there was no part of the day more pleasant to "us" than when—Dymock having cleared away all that was his charge, and brought all that Grandmamma required from the pantry—the old lady established herself at one end of the table, with two bowls of beautifully white wood, and a jug of hot water before her, and a towel of fine damask in her hand, and set to work daintily to rinse out each cup and saucer in the first bowl, passing them then into the fresh water of the second, and wiping them—after they had stood to drip for a moment or two on a small slab of wood made for the purpose—most carefully with the little cloth. It was nice to watch her—her hands looked so white, and moved so nimbly, and—I had forgotten to mention that—looked so business-like with the brown holland cuffs braided in white which she kept for this occasion, and always put on, with the big holland apron to match, before she began operations. Yes, it had been a treat to "us" merely to watch her, and so you can fancy how very proud Duke and Pamela felt when she at length allowed them, each with a little towel, to wipe their own cups and saucers. They had been promoted to this for some months now, and no accident had happened; and on those days—few and far between, it must be allowed—on which they had not been found deserving of their breakfast number two, I think the punishment of not "helping Grandmamma to wash up" had been quite as great as that of missing the treat itself. For very often, while deftly getting through her task, Grandmamma would talk so nicely to the children, telling them stories of the time when she was a little girl herself, and of all the changes between those far-away days and "now"; of the strange, wonderful places she had visited with Grandpapa; of cities with mosques and minarets gleaming against the intense blue sky of the East in the too splendid, scorching sunshine that no one who has not seen it can picture to himself; of rides—weary endless rides—night after night through the desert; or voyages of months and months together across the pathless ocean. They would sit, the little brother and sister, staring up at her with their great solemn blue eyes, as if they would never tire of listening—how wonderfully wise Grandpapa and Grandmamma must be!—"Surely," said little Pamela one day with a great sigh, "surely Grandmamma must know *everything*;" while Duke's breast swelled with the thought that he too, like his father and grandfather before him, would journey some day to those distant lands, there, if need were, like them "to fight for the king." For there were times at which "bruvver" was quite determined to be a soldier, though at others—the afternoon, for instance, when the young bull poked his head through the hedge and shook it at him and Pamela, and Duke's toy-sword had unfortunately been left at home in the nursery—he did not feel quite so sure about it!

But on this particular morning the little pair were less interested and talkative than usual. They sat so quiet while Grandmamma made her arrangements that her attention was aroused.

"You are very silent little mice, this morning," she said. "Is it because poor Nurse is ill that you seem in such low spirits?"

Duke and Pamela looked at each other. It would have been so easy to say "yes," and Grandmamma would have thought them so kind-hearted and sympathising! Once one has swerved a little bit from the straight exact road and begun to go down-hill even in the least, it is so tempting to go on a little farther—so much less difficult than to stop short, or, still more, to try to go back again. But these children were so unused to say anything not quite true that they hesitated, and this hesitation saved them from making another step in the wrong direction.

"I wasn't finking of Nurse, Grandmamma," said Pamela at last in rather a low voice.

"Nor I wasn't neither," said Duke, taking courage by her example.

"That's all right, then," said Grandmamma cheerfully, not having noticed anything unusual in their tone. "Poor Nurse, we are sorry for her to be ill, but I don't think it will be anything very bad. And I am sure

you will try to be very good."

"Yes, Grandmamma," said the two voices together, but less confidently and more timidly than usual. This time their tone caught the old lady's attention.

"There's something on their minds," she said to herself. But she was a wise old lady, and thought it better to wait a while before trying to find out what it was.

"When I was a little girl," she began—and the children pricked up their ears—"when I was a little girl I remember once that our nurse was ill, or she had to go away to see some friend who was ill, and, as I was the eldest of several little brothers and sisters, I had to help to take care of them. I had always thought it would be very pleasant to be without a nurse, though we liked ours very well, and to be able to do just as we wished. But I shall never forget how pleased I was to see her come back again," and Grandmamma laughed a little at the recollection.

"Why were you so pleased, Grandmamma?" asked Pamela. "Had you done anyfing naughty?"

"*That* wouldn't have made Grandmamma pleased for her nurse to come back," said Duke; and a sudden thought of how "us" would have felt had Nurse come into the room just as Toby was licking up the last of the bread and milk made his face grow rosy.

"We had not meant to be naughty," said Grandmamma, "but we were not fit to manage for ourselves. Each of us wanted to do a different way, and we were like a flock of poor little sheep without a shepherd. You do not know, children, what a comfort it is to have rules one must obey."

"But big people don't have to obey," said Duke.

"Ah yes, they have; and when they try to think they have not, then it is that everything goes wrong with them;" and seeing by the look in the two little faces that they were still puzzled—"People have to *obey* all their lives if they want to be happy," she went on. "Long after they have no more nurses or fathers and mothers—or grandpapas and grandmamas," with a little smile, which somehow made the corners of Duke's and Pamela's mouths go down. "The use of all those when we are young is only to teach us what obeying means—to teach us to listen to the voice we should *always* obey——" and Grandmamma stopped a minute and looked at "us."

"God," said the two very solemnly.

"Yes; but God speaks to us in different ways, and we have to learn to know His voice. And the way of all in which we *most* need to know it is when it speaks to us in our own hearts—in ourselves. It would be a very poor sort of being good or obeying if it was only so long as somebody else was beside us telling us what to do and looking to see that we did it."

"Yes," said the two little voices together, lower and still more solemn.

"As, for instance, this morning if, just because Nurse was not with you, you had done anything you would not have done had she been there," said Grandmamma, looking keenly at the two flushed faces.

Another—"Yes, Grandmamma."

"Or," went on the old lady, speaking more slowly, "a worse kind of disobeying—the telling what is not really true; lots of people, big as well as little, do that, and sometimes they try to make *themselves* think, by all sorts of twistings and turnings, that they have not done so when their own hearts know they *have*."

For the voice inside us is *very* hard to silence or deceive—I think sometimes indeed it *never* is silenced, but that our ears grow deaf to it—that we make them so. But this is very grave talk for you, my dear children—too grave and difficult perhaps. I am getting so old that I suppose I sometimes forget how very young you are! And here come your own little cups and saucers, nicely rinsed out, and waiting to be wiped dry."

"Thank you, Grandmamma," said Duke.

"Fank you, Grandmamma," said Pamela.

And the two small pairs of hands set to work carefully at their daily task. But they did not speak or ask Grandmamma any questions, and somehow the old lady felt a little uneasy, for, even though they were on the whole quiet children, this morning there was a sort of constraint about them which she did not understand. And they, on their side, felt glad when the "washing-up" was over and Grandmamma sent them upstairs to their nursery, where they had lessons every morning for two hours with a young girl whose mother had a sort of dame school in the village.



CHAPTER III.
QUEER VISITORS.

"...they are what their birth
And breeding suffer them to be—
Wild outcasts of society."
Gypsies—WORDSWORTH.

Miss Mitten, the young governess, had not yet come when the children got to the nursery, though all was in order for her—the table cleared, the three chairs set round it ready. There was nothing to do but to get out the books and slates. Duke went to the window and stood there staring out silently; Pamela, who always liked to be busy, dragged forward a chair, meaning to climb on to it so as to reach up to the high shelf where the lesson things were kept. But, as she drew out the chair, something that had been hidden from view in a corner near which stood a small side-table caught her eye. She let go the chair, stooping down to examine this something, and in a moment a cry escaped her.

"Bruvver! oh, bruvver," she exclaimed, "just see! How can it have got brokened?" and she held up the bowl—or what had been the bowl rather—out of which Toby had gobbled up his unexpected breakfast,—broken, hopelessly broken, into several pieces!

In an instant Duke was beside her, and together they set to work to examine the damage, as if, alas! any examining could have made it better. It was far past mending, for, besides the two or three large pieces Pamela had seized, there lay on the ground a mass of smaller fragments, down to mere crumbs of china.

"*Toby* couldn't have done it, could he?" said Pamela. "He stayed in here when us went down to prayers."

"No, oh no! *Toby* couldn't have broken it," said Duke; "and even if he had, it would not have been his fault. He didn't put it down on the floor. It was near here he ate the bread and milk up—perhaps he rolled the bowl behind the table."

"And Biddy pushed the table against it when she was taking away the things. Yes, that must have been it," said Pamela. "Biddy couldn't have noticed there was only one bowl on the tray."

"Anyway she didn't look for it," said Duke. "She is very careless; Nurse often says so."

"But us can't put the blame on her," said Pamela. "Us *must* tell, Duke."

Duke had the pieces of china in his hand, and was carefully considering them.

"Will Grandmamma be vexed, do you think, sister?"

"Grandmamma doesn't like things being brokened," said Pamela. "And Nurse said one day these bowls was very good china."

"And Grandmamma will ask all about how it was broken," added Duke dolefully; "and then us'll have to tell about giving *Toby* our bread and milk, and oh, sister, I said the bowls was *quite* empty, to make her think *us* had emptied them!"

"I'm afraid Grandmamma will fink us is *very* naughty," agreed Pamela; "she'll fink us don't listen to that—that speaking inside us that she was telling us about,—for it's quite true, bruvver; I felt it was quite true when she was talking. It *does* speak. I heard it this morning when us was planning about not telling. Only I didn't listen," and the tears rolled slowly down the little girl's face.

"I heard it too, sister. Yes, it's quite true," said Duke, beginning to sob. "But I can't go and tell Grandmamma now. There's such a great deal to tell; it isn't only about Toby. It's about having said the bowls was empty," and Duke's sobs redoubled. "Supposing—supposing, sister, us didn't tell Grandmamma just this time, and us would never, *never* not listen to that speaking inside us again?"

Pamela hesitated. She stood quite quite still, her eyes gazing before her, but as if seeing nothing—she seemed to be listening.

"Bruvver," she said at last, "I can't tell you yet. I must fink. But I'm *almost* sure it's speaking now. I'm almost sure it's saying us must tell."

"Oh don't, don't, Pamela," cried poor Duke; "you mustn't say that. For I can't—I am sure I can't—tell Grandmamma. And you won't tell without me knowing, will you, sister?"

"For sure not," replied Pamela indignantly. "Us must do it togevver like always. But there's Miss Mitten coming—I hear her. Wait till after she's gone, bruvver, and then I'll tell you what I've been finking."

With this Duke was obliged to content himself. But he and Pamela took care to put away in a shelf of the toy cupboard, where they would not be seen, the remains of the broken bowl.

Miss Mitten had two very quiet and subdued little pupils that morning. She noticed Duke's red eyes, but, not being on very intimate terms with the children, for she was rather a formal young person, she said nothing about them. Only when lessons were quite finished she told her pupils they might tell their Grandmamma that they had been very good and attentive.

"Your good Grandmamma will be pleased to hear this," she said, "for she must be troubled about poor Nurse's being ill. I hope you will do your best to give her no trouble you can possibly avoid," and with these words Miss Mitten took her leave.

She had scarcely left when Biddy came to take the children out a walk, and after that it was their dinner-time, so that it was not till the afternoon that they found themselves quite alone and able to talk over their troubles. They had not seen Grandmamma since the morning, for she had gone out in the pony-carriage with Grandpapa to pay some visits, which in those days were *really* "morning calls"! and she had left word that after their dinner Duke and Pamela might play in the garden till she and Grandpapa came home.

"And when us sees them coming us'll ask Grandpapa to tell Walters to drive us round to the stable in the pony-carriage," said Duke, jumping up and down in great excitement, quite forgetting his troubles for the moment. But his forgetfulness did not last long. Biddy began looking about the room as if in search of something; she seemed vexed and uneasy.

"What's the matter, Biddy?" said Duke, stopping in the midst of his gymnastics.

"Have you seen one of the china bowls anywhere about, you or Miss Pamela, Master Duke?" asked the girl. "Cook is so angry with me, and she will have it I've broken it and won't tell," and poor Biddy looked ready to cry.

"Didn't you miss it when you took the tray down?" said Pamela, and Duke was astonished she could speak so quietly.

"No," replied Biddy, "and then I *was* at fault, for sure I gathered up the things quickly, and never

noticed there was but one bowl. And they must have been both there, for you both had your breakfast. The only thing I can think of is that some one took it out of the room after you were downstairs, master and missy," for it never occurred to Biddy to think Duke or Pamela would have concealed it had they broken the bowl, "but I'm afeared Cook will lay it all on me."

"Do you fink they cost much—bowls like these?" asked Pamela.

"Not so very much perhaps, but I don't think I've ever seen any quite like them in any shop. Besides, if even I could get to Sandle'ham to see, it's a thing I daren't do. It's one of your Grandmamma's strictest rules that if anything's broke we're to tell. And I'm sure if I had broke it I would tell."

"Perhaps Cook won't say anything more about it," said Duke, but Biddy shook her head.

"Not to-day perhaps. She's busy to-day, for two ladies and two gentlemen are coming to dinner. But she'll be very angry with me when she comes to send up your bread and milk to-morrow morning if so be as the bowl isn't there."

"Are there only two like that?" asked Pamela.

"Your Grandmamma has some others, I think, but they're kept locked up in a cupboard in the china closet," said Biddy dolefully. "I'd tell my mistress myself in a minute if I had broke it, but the worst is, it will seem as if I have broke it and won't tell, and that will make her very vexed with me. But you must make haste to go out into the garden, master and missy. It's such a fine day, and if you stayed here it might wake Nurse. She's just fallen asleep, and the doctor said she might be better to-morrow if she got some sleep."

"Out in the garden" to-day it was lovely, for though only April it was unusually bright and warm. And the garden of Arbitt Lodge matched the house. It was so quaint and neat, and yet such a very delightful garden to play in, full of queer little unexpected paths between high stiff hedges that quite hid such small people as "us," leading to tiny bits of lawn, where one was sure to find, if not a summer-house, at least a rustic bench in a nice corner beside some old tree whose foliage made a pleasant shade. Duke and Pamela had given names of their own to some of the seats and arbours, as they found this a great convenience for their games, especially that of paying visits. I think their favourite bench was one placed on what they called "the hill;" that was a part of the garden banked up very high against the wall, from which you could look down on the passers-by without being seen by them, and the name of this one was "Spy Tower." It was a nice place on a sunny day, for the high trees made it shady, and when they had no particular game they cared to play it was always amusing to watch who passed.

This afternoon they did not feel in good enough spirits to play, and almost without speaking they walked quietly in the direction of "the hill."

"Us can see when Grandpapa and Grandmamma are coming in time to run round and meet them at the gate," said Pamela, as they climbed up the bank.

"I don't think I want to see them coming, and I don't want them to see us," said Duke. "Sister, I am so midderable that I think if there was a big sea near here I would go into it and be drowned."

"Bruvver!" ejaculated Pamela.

"Yes, sister," he continued, "it would be the best thing. For if I was drowned quite dead, they'd all be so sorry that then you could tell them about the bowl, and Biddy would not be scolded. And—and—you

could say it was far most *my* fault, you know, for it was, and then they wouldn't be very angry with you. Yes," he repeated solemnly, "it would be the best thing."

By this time Pamela was completely dissolved in tears—tears of indignation as well as of grief.

"Bruvver," she began again, "how can you say that? Us has always been togevver. How can you fink I would *ever* say it was most your fault, not if you was ever so drowned. But oh, bruvver, don't frighten me so."

Duke's own tears were flowing too.

"There isn't any big sea near here," he said; "I only said if there was. It's just that I am so very midderable. I wish Nurse hadn't got ill."

"Oh, so do I," said Pamela fervently.

By this time they had reached Spy Tower. Pamela seated herself discreetly on the bench, though it was so much too high for her that her short legs dangled in the air. Duke established himself on the ground in front of her. It was a very still day—more like late summer than spring—hardly a leaf stirred, and in the distance various sounds, the far-off barking of a dog, the faint crowing and cackling of cocks and hens, the voices, subdued to softness, "of the village boys and girls at play," all mingled together pleasantly. The children were too young to explain to themselves the pleasant influences about them, of the soft sunshine and the cloudless sky, seen through the network of branches overhead, of the balmy air and sweet murmurs of bird and insect life rejoicing in the spring-time; but they felt them nevertheless.

"How very happy us would have been to-day if it hadn't been for the bowl being brokened," said Duke.

"No, it began before that," said Pamela. "It was the not telling Grandmamma. I fink that was the real naughty, bruvver. I don't *fink* Grandmamma would have minded so much us giving the bread and milk to Toby."

"Her wouldn't have given us any treat," objected Duke.

"Well, that wouldn't have mattered very much for once. And perhaps it would have been a good fink; *perhaps* Grandmamma would have told Cook not to send up quite so much, and——"

"Why do you say that *now*?" said Duke rather crossly; "it's only making it all worser and worser. I wish——"

But what Duke wished was never to be known, for just at that moment sounds coming down the lane, evidently drawing nearer and nearer, made him start up and peep out from behind the few thin low-growing shrubs at the top of the wall.

"Hush, sister," he said, quite forgetting that it was himself and not "sister" who had been speaking,—"there are *such* funny people coming down the lane. Come here, close by me; there, you can see them—don't they look funny?"

Pamela squeezed herself forward between Duke and a bush, and looked where he pointed to. A little group of people was to be seen making their way slowly along the lane. There were a man, two women, and two boys—the women with red kerchiefs over their heads, and something picturesque about their dress and bearing, though they were dirty and ragged. They, as well as the man, had very dark skins, black hair, and bright piercing eyes, and the elder of the two boys, a great loose-limbed fellow of sixteen or so,

was just like them. But the other boy, who did not look more than nine or ten, though his skin was tanned by the weather nearly as brown as his companion's, had lighter hair and eyes. He followed the others at a little distance, not seeming to attend to what they were saying, though they were all talking eagerly, and rather loudly, in a queer kind of language, which Duke and Pamela could not understand at all. The younger boy whistled as he came along, and he held a stout branch in his hand, from which, with a short rough knife, he was cutting away the twigs and bark. He did not seem unhappy though he looked thin, and his clothes hardly held together they were so ragged.

All these particulars became visible to the children, as the party of gipsies—for such they were, though of a low class—came nearer and nearer. I forgot to say that the sixth member of the party was a donkey, a poor half-starved looking creature, with roughly-made panniers, stuffed with crockery apparently, for basins and jugs and pots of various kinds were to be seen sticking out of them in all directions. And besides the donkey's load there was a good deal more to carry, for the man and the women and the big boy were all loaded with bundles of different shapes and sizes, and the little fellow had a sort of knapsack on his back. They would probably have passed on their way without dreaming of the two small people in Spy Tower up above their heads, had not Duke, suddenly catching sight of the donkey's burden, exclaimed loudly to Pamela:

"See, see, sister; they have jugs and dishes. Perhaps us could get a bowl like ours."

At the sound of the child's voice the man stopped short in what he was saying to his companions, and looked up.

"Good day, my little master, and my pretty missy too," he said in a smooth voice, not the least like the rather harsh tones in which he had been speaking a moment before in the strange language. "At your service, and is there anything I can do for you?"

"Oh the pretty dears," exclaimed one of the two women, while the other turned away with a rough laugh, muttering something the children could not distinguish the meaning of. "Oh the pretty dears! Like two sweet birds up in a nest. And wouldn't you like your fortunes told, my honeys?"

"I don't know what that means," replied Duke, feeling very valiant at the top of the wall. "I want to know if you've got any china bowls to sell—bowls for bread and milk, with little blue leaves running over them."

"To be sure, to be sure," said the man. "We've the very thing—it is strange, to be sure, that I should have just what the little master wants, isn't it?" he went on, turning to the woman.

"If the gentleman and lady could come down and look at them, they would see better," said she, seizing the panniers with a great show of getting out the crockery they contained.

"Us can't come down there," said Duke. "You must come in at the gate, and us will meet you at the back door."

The man and woman hesitated.

"Will the servants let us come so far, d'ye think?" asked the man. "Are there no dogs about? Must we say the little master and missy told us to come for that they want to buy a bowl?"

"Oh no," cried Pamela hastily, "that wouldn't do. The servants mustn't know."

The man glanced at the woman with a meaning look.

"To be sure, to be sure," she said. "Master and missy must please themselves. It's no business of the servants. Perhaps it's for a little present to their mamma they want one of our pretty bowls?"

"Us hasn't any mamma," said Duke, "and it isn't for a present, but still us doesn't want any one to know. Are you *sure* you've got any bowls just like ours?"

"Certain sure," said the woman; "you see we've such a many—if I was to get them all out you'd see. Yours is blue—with leaves all over it—we've some, sweet and pretty, with pink roses and green leaves."

"No, no," said the children, shaking their heads, "that wouldn't do. It must be just the same."

"And have you got it there, then?" asked the woman. "But that won't matter. You'll soon see what beauties ours are. And so cheap! Not to everybody of course as cheap as to you, but it isn't often we see so pretty spoken a little gentleman and lady as you. And you shall have them as cheap as we can give them."

"Then us must get our money-box," said Duke. "It's in the nursery cupboard. Will you go round to near the back gate," and he pointed in the direction he named, "and sister will go through the garden to meet you, and I'll run in for our money-box."

The man peered about him, and again a sort of meaning look passed between him and the woman.

"To be sure, to be sure," he said. "And pretty missy will wait with us till you come. But don't be long, master, for we've a weary way to go afore night."

"Poor things," said Pamela, "are you tired and hungry? I wish us could ask you to come in and rest, but you see Grandpapa and Grandmamma are out and Nurse is ill, and there's no one to ask."

"Dear me, what a pity!" said the woman. "To be sure we're tired and hungry, and it's not an easy business to unpack the panniers, but anything to please master and missy."

Just then the other woman, who had been standing apart with the big boy all this time, called out something in the same strange-sounding language. And, apparently forgetting the children's presence, the man roared out at her with such brutal roughness that Duke and Pamela shrank back trembling. The first woman hastened to reassure them.

"For shame, Mick," she said, and then with a laugh she turned to the children. "It's just a way he has. You must excuse him, master and missy. And if little master will go quick for the money-box it would be better. There won't be much in it, I suppose, but it isn't much we'd want to take."

"Oh but there's a great deal," said Duke. "One big guinea—that's between us, and two little ones, one each, and three shillings and a fourpenny of mine——"

"And five sixpences and seven pennies of mine," said Pamela.

"Who'd a-thought it?" said the woman admiringly. "I'd be pleased to see so much money for once."

"Well, I'll show it you," said Duke, and off he started. Pamela looked after him for a moment.

"Wouldn't it be better," she said to the woman, "if you saw a bit of the bowl, then you could find the ones like it in a minute?"

"What a clever missy!" exclaimed the woman, bent on flattery.

"Then I'll run after bruvver and fetch the bits," said Pamela, and, not heeding the woman's calling after her that there was no need to give herself the trouble, off she set too, overtaking Duke just before he reached the house.

"I've come after you!" she exclaimed, breathless; "I want to get the broken bits and then they'll see what the bowl was like. And, bruvver,"—and the little girl hesitated a little,—"*I was raver* frightened to stay alone wif those people. The man did speak so rough, didn't he?"

Duke had felt very brave on the top of the wall, and rather proud of himself for feeling so.

"You needn't be afraid when *I'm* there, sister," he said. "Besides they can't hurt us—us'll just buy the bowl and run back with it. Us needn't go farther than just by the back gate."

"Do you fink you should take *all* the money?" asked Pamela doubtfully. "It can't cost all that."

"I'll not take the gold guineas, then," said Duke. "At least," he went on, sorely divided between caution and the wish to show off his riches, "I'll only take *one*—just to let them see it. And one shilling and one sixpence to let them see, and all the pennies. You needn't be frightened, sister," he repeated encouragingly, as the two trotted across the garden again, "I won't let the man speak rude to *you*."



CHAPTER IV.

BABES IN A WOOD.

"Out of this wood do not desire to go;
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no."
Midsummer Night's Dream.

There was no one to be seen when they got to the back gate. The children stood and looked about—Pamela with the bits of broken crockery in her apron held up in front, Duke tightly clasping the precious money-box. They looked this way and that way, up the lane and down the lane, but could see nothing or nobody save Farmer Riggs' very old horse turned out at the side of the hedge, and two or three ducks who had perversely chosen to wander out to grub about in a small pool of stagnant water instead of gratefully enjoying their own nice clean pond, as Grandmamma's ducks might have been expected to do. At another time Duke and Pamela would certainly have chased the stray ducks home again, with many pertinent remarks on their naughty disobedience, but just now they had no thought or attention to give to anything but their own concerns.

A sudden feeling came over Pamela, and she turned to Duke.

"Bruvver," she said, "those people hasn't come. I fink they're not good people, and they won't come near the house. I daresay they're somewhere down the lane, not far off—but don't you *fink* perhaps us had better not look for them any more, but just go home, and when Grandmamma comes in tell her *everyfing*. Even if she is raver angry, wouldn't it be better, bruvver? I'm almost sure my little voice inside is telling me so," and Pamela stood for a moment with a look of intent listening on her face. "Yes, I'm sure that's what it's trying to say. Can you hear yours, bruvver?"

Duke looked undecided.

"I can't listen just now, sister," he replied. "I'm full of thinking how nice it would be to buy a bowl just the same, and take it in and give it to poor Biddy, and then she wouldn't be scolded. I don't think I'd mind telling Grandmamma once us had got the bowl. She'd be so pleased to have one the same."

"I fink she'd be most pleased for us to tell her everyfing," maintained Pamela stoutly.

And Duke, always impressed by her opinion, wavered, and no doubt he would have wavered back into the right way, had not, just at that moment, a low whistle been heard some way to the left down the lane; and, looking in the direction from whence it came, the little boy and girl caught sight of a head quickly poked out and as quickly drawn back again into the shade of the hedge. But not too quickly for them to have recognised the sharp black eyes and rough black hair of the gipsy pedlar.

Without replying to Pamela Duke darted off, and, though much against her will, the little girl felt she could not but follow him. Before they had quite reached the spot the head was poked out again.

"I've had to wait here for you, master and missy," said the man. "There were some farmers men down that way, round the corner," and he jerked his thumb—for he had by this time come out of his hole—in an

imaginary direction, "as said this were a private road, and they'd set dogs on us if we came on. I'm a peaceable fellow, and not fond o' fightin', so I'd just have gone on my way out of their road but for promisin' you to come round this way."

"It's very strange," said Duke; "I don't know what it means about a private road, but I know everybody always passes this way—that's why us likes Spy Tower so much, there's so many people passing."

"It's all along of our being poor folk," said the man; "there's no fair play for poor folk. But I'm one as keeps his word, so here I am. And the donkey and the missus are down the road there waiting—there's a little wood where we thought nobody would disturb us for a bit, if you and missy will come so far—the missus said she'd unpack the pots. But you must be quick—I dursn't hang about here, and if you can't come there's no more to be said," and he turned as if to go.

"Just wait one instant, please," said Pamela hastily, extracting one of the fragments from her apron; "just look at this. It's no use our going to see the bowls if you've none the same—do you fink you have any like this?"

The man pretended to start.

"Well, that is cur'ous," he said. "If my eyes is not deceivin' me, that's the very pattern we've a whole set on—the bowls shouldn't ought to be sold separate, but to oblige you we'll see what the missus will do," and again he turned to go.

The children looked at each other. They had never before in their lives been outside the gates alone; of this back road and where it led to they knew very little, as it was always on the other road—that leading to Sandlingham—that Nurse liked to walk. They did not remember the little wood the man spoke of, but they did not like to contradict him; then, if it was only such a little way, they could run back in a minute when they had got the bowl, and all would be right. So they took each other's hands and followed the man, who was already striding some steps in front down the lane, glancing behind him over his shoulder from time to time to see if the little couple had made up their minds.

A few minutes' quick walking on his part, necessitating something between a trot and a run on theirs, brought them out of the lane into the high road. Here the man stopped short for a moment and looked about him—the children supposed in search of his companions and the donkey. But there was no one and nothing to be seen.

"I don't think us can come any farther," said Duke rather timidly. The man turned round with a scowl on his face, but in a moment he had smoothed it away and spoke in the same oily tones.

"It's just a step farther," he said, "and I can take you a shorter way through the fields than the missus could go with the donkey. This way, master and missy," and he quickly crossed the road, still glancing up and down, and, climbing over a stile, stood beckoning for the children to follow.

They had never noticed this stile before; they had not the slightest idea where it led to, but somehow they felt more afraid now to turn back than to go on; and, indeed, it would not have been any use, for, had he cared to do so, the man could have overtaken them in a moment. The stile was hard for their short legs to climb, but they had a great dislike to the idea of his touching them, and would not ask for help. And once he had got them on the other side of it he seemed to feel he had them in his power, and did not take much notice of them, but strode on through the rough brushwood—for they were by this time in a sort of little coppice—as if he cared for nothing but to get over the ground as fast as possible. And still the two

followed him—through the coppice, across one or two ploughed fields, down a bit of lane where they had never been before, plunging at last into a wood where the trees grew thick and dark—a forest of gloom it seemed to Duke and Pamela—and all this time they never met a creature, or passed any little cottage such as they were accustomed to see on the cheerful Sandlingham road. The pedlar knew the country, and had chosen the least frequented way. Had they by any chance met a carriage or cart, even when crossing the high road, he would not have dared to risk being seen with the children, but in that case he would no doubt have hurried off, leaving them to find their way home as best they might. But no such good fortune having befallen them, on they trotted—hand-in-hand for the most part, though by this time several stumbles had scratched and bruised them, and their flying hair, flushed faces and tumbled clothes made them look very different from the little "master and missy" Biddy had sent out into the peaceful garden to play that sweet April afternoon.

Why they went on, they could not themselves have told. Often in after years, and when they had grown older and wiser, they asked themselves the question. It was not exactly fear, for as yet the man had not actually spoken roughly to them, nor was it altogether a feeling of shame at giving in—it was a mixture of both perhaps, and some strange sort of fascination that even very wise people might not find it easy to explain. For every time their steps lagged, and they felt as if they could go no farther, a glance over his shoulder of the man in front seemed to force them on again. And as the wood grew closer and darker this feeling increased. They felt as if they were miles and miles from home, in some strange and distant country they had never before seen or heard of; they seemed to be going on and on, as in a dream. And though poor little Pamela still, through all her stumbles and tumbles, held tightly up before her the corners of her apron, containing the bits of the unlucky bowl, and Duke, on his side, still firmly clutched his precious money-box, I do not believe either of them had by this time any very clear remembrance of why they were laden with these queer burdens, or what was the object of the strange and painful expedition.

And still on strode the piercing-eyed gipsy, as sure of his prey now apparently as a fowler who watches unmoved the fruitless struggles of some poor little birds in the net from which they have no chance of escaping.

It would be impossible to say how far they had gone—perhaps not so very far after all, though their panting breath and trembling little legs showed that the gipsy's purpose of tiring them out was pretty well accomplished—when at last a sharp cry from Pamela forced the pedlar to look round. She had caught her foot on a stone or a root, and fallen, and in falling one of the jagged bits of the broken crockery had cut her leg pretty deeply; the blood was already streaming from it, her little white sock was deeply stained, and she lay on the ground almost fainting with terror and pain.

"Stop that screaming, will ye?" said the man, and then, with a half return to his former tone, "There's nothing to cry about, missy. It's just a scratch—I'll tie it up with a bit of rag," and he began fumbling about in his dirty pockets as he spoke. "There's the donkey and the others waiting for us just five minutes farther;" and for once the gipsy spoke the truth. The way he had brought the children was in reality a great round, chosen on purpose to bewilder them, so that the rest of his party had been able to reach the meeting-place he had appointed very much more quickly by the road.

But Pamela, once thoroughly upset and frightened, was not to be so easily calmed down.

"No, no," she screamed, "I won't let him touch me. Go away, go away, you ugly man," she cried, pushing him back with her tiny hands when he tried to come near. "I *won't* let you touch me or carry me," for that now seemed to be the gipsy's intention, "leave me here with Duke; we don't want you any more."

The man's dark face grew darker with the scowl that came over it. For half a moment he seemed on the point of seizing Pamela in his arms in spite of her cries and resistance. But there was Duke too to be considered; Pamela alone it would be easy to cover up, so that her cries should not be heard; but he could not carry both, and if the boy ran after them screaming, or if he tried to run home, to ask for help—for "home" was really not far off—there was no knowing what trouble the anything but blessed "brats" might bring upon worthy Mick and his horde! So that respectable gentleman decided on different tactics.

"You're a very naughty little girl," he said—speaking, however, not roughly, but more as if Pamela's behaviour really shocked and hurt him. "After all the trouble I've give myself for you—a-goin' out of my road, and a-unpackin' all the pots and crocks down there, for to please you. Not even to let me tie up your foot or carry you to the missus for her to do it! Well, if you lie there till you bleed to death, it's no fault o' mine."

But Duke's presence of mind had returned by this time.

"I'll tie up her foot with my hankercher," he said, producing the little twelve-inch square of linen, which for a wonder he found in his pocket, on the whole much cleaner than could have been expected. And though he grew white and sick with the sight of the streaming blood, he managed without any opposition from his sister to strap it up after a fashion, the gipsy looking on in silence.

"You can go now, thank you," said Duke, his voice trembling in spite of himself. "Us don't mind about the bowl—it's too far to go. Us will tell Grandmamma all about it—Oh how I do wish us had told her at first," he broke off suddenly. "Please go," he went on again to the pedlar; "sister's frightened. I'll stay here with her till her foot's better, and then us'll go home."

"And how will ye do that, I'd like to know, my young master?" said the pedlar, and there was a mocking tone in his voice that made the boy look up at him with fresh alarm. "Ye're further from 'home' than ye think for. No, no; here ye'll have to stay till I fetch the donkey to carry you both. And to think of all that trouble and time lost for nothing."

"They'll give you something at home for bringing us back; they will indeed," said Duke. "Grandpapa and Grandmamma will be so pleased to see us safe again, I *know* they'll give you something," he repeated, while a sob rose in his throat at the thought that already perhaps dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma—never had they seemed so dear!—were wondering and troubled about their absence. And somehow he quite forgot that he himself could reward the gipsy, for in attending to Pamela's wounded foot he had laid down the money-box, and no longer remembered that he had it with him.

The gipsy grunted, and muttered something about "making sure" that Duke scarcely heard. Then he turned to go.

"I'm off for the donkey then. But mind you the stiller you stays in this here wood the better," he added impressively. "That's why I didn't like missy crying out so loud. It's a queer place—a *very* queer place. I'se warrant your Nurse never brought you this way when you were out a-walking."

"No, never," said Duke, startled, and even Pamela left off sobbing to stare up at him with her tearful blue eyes, as if fascinated by these mysterious hints.

"Ah, I thought not," he said, nodding his head. "Well, stay where you are, and make no sound whatsumnever, and no harm'll come to ye. But if you stir or speak even above a whisper," and he lowered his own voice, "there's no saying. There's beasts you never heard tell of in this wood—worstest of all,

snakes, that think nothing of twisting round a child and off with it for their supper afore one could cry out. But if you stop quite still they'll not find you out before I'm back with the donkey. It's about their time o' day for sleeping just now, I'm thinking," and with this crumb of consolation the cruel-hearted gipsy turned on his heel.

Words would fail me to describe the terror of the two poor little children: a cry of appeal to the pedlar to stay beside them, not to leave them to the dreadful creatures he spoke of, rose to their lips, but stopped there. For were they not almost as terrified of him as of the snakes? Pamela forgot all about her wounded foot, though it was growing stiff with pain, and the blood, which Duke's unskilful binding had not succeeded in checking, was still flowing in a way that would have alarmed more experienced eyes. It was cold too—and terror made them colder—for the evening was drawing on, and it was only April. Yet they dared not move—Pamela indeed could not have stood up—and so there they stayed, Duke crouched beside his sister, who lay almost at full length on the short tufty grass, among the roots and stumps, for just here a good deal of wood had been cut down. There was no fear of their moving—the shivers and sobs that they could not control added to their fears—they would have left off breathing even, if they could have managed it, rather than risk betraying their presence to the snakes!

But after some minutes—not more than five probably, though it seemed more like five hours—had passed the silence and strain grew unbearable to Duke. He peeped at Pamela; her eyes were closed, she looked so dreadfully white!—his heart gave such a thump that he looked round for a moment in terror, it seemed to him such a loud noise,—what could make her look so? Could the fear and the pain have killed her?

"Pamela," he whispered, in what he meant to be a very low whisper indeed; "Oh, sister, are you dead?"

Her eyelids fluttered a little, and she half opened them.

"No, bruvver; at least I don't fink so," she said, and her whisper was very faint without her trying to make it so, for she was really quite exhausted. "I wasn't sure a minute ago, but I fink now I'm only dying. But don't speak, for the snakes might hear."

"They're asleep, he said," returned Duke, with a sob of anguish at Pamela's words.

"But some might be awake. If it wasn't for that, oh, bruvver, you might run away, and perhaps you'd get safe home. Couldn't you *try*, bruvver?" and Pamela half raised herself on her arm.

"And leave *you*, sister!" cried Duke indignantly, forgetting to whisper; "how could you think I'd ever do such a thing? If I could *carry* you—oh what a pity it is I'm not much bigger than you!" "You couldn't carry *me*," said Pamela feebly, and her head sank back again; "and the snakes would hear us and catch us. But oh, bruvver, I'm afraid I'll be quite dead before the man comes back again, and yet I don't want him to come."

Almost in despair Duke sat up and looked round for any possibility of help. It was nearer than he thought; and yet when a voice, apparently a very little way off, called out, as if in answer to his unspoken appeal—

"I'm a-coming. Don't ye be afeared," he started with new terror.

"A snake!—Oh, sister, can it be a snake?" he cried wildly, for there was nothing to be seen.

"Snakes don't talk, as ever I heard on," said the voice again, and this time it was accompanied by a merry laugh, which brought great comfort to poor Duke. And in another moment the mystery was explained.

From behind some stubble a few yards off rose the figure of the young boy whom the children had seen walking behind the gipsies—whistling while he cut at a branch he held in his hand—from their point of observation in Spy Tower. His face was tanned and freckled by the sun, but his fair hair and bright blue eyes showed that he was not by birth one of the dark-skinned tribe; and something in the bright smile, showing a row of teeth as white and even as Duke's own, and in the cheerful voice, at once gained the little boy's confidence.



FROM BEHIND SOME STUBBLE A FEW YARDS OFF ROSE THE FIGURE OF THE YOUNG BOY WHOM THE CHILDREN HAD SEEN WALKING BEHIND THE GIPSIES—WHISTLING WHILE HE CUT AT A BRANCH HE HELD IN HIS HAND.—p. [74](#).

"I've been looking for ye," he said, speaking in a rather lower tone. "I knew he was a-going to bring ye round this way, so I hid in the bushes till I see'd him go by. And I crep' along on my hands and knees for fear he should look back. But he's out o' the way for a few minutes. It's only a bit of a step to where the others is, but he said something about the donkey, didn't he? It'll take him a bit to unload it. An' what's he been a-doing to ye?" he went on, glancing round till his eyes for the first time caught sight clearly of the little figure stretched on the ground. "He's never gone and dared to hit the little lady?" and the good-humoured face grew dark and almost fierce as he stooped down close to Pamela. She looked pitiable enough; her face had grown whiter and whiter, her eyes were still closed, and the blood from her foot had crept about her as she lay till it had soiled the frills of her little white skirts.

"No," said Duke; "no, it's her foot. The bits of the bowl cut it when she felled down. I tied it up with my hankercher, but it hasn't left off bleeding."

The boy did not speak, he was too busy examining the poor foot, which he handled so tenderly that Pamela did not shrink from his touch. At last he looked up.

"I say, master," he said, "we must have some water for this 'ere foot. Just you sit down where I am and

hold it so; it won't bleed so bad that way, and I'll get some water. There's some hard by," and he looked round. "If I had but something to fetch some in."

"There's my money-box," said Duke, with a sudden flash of recollection, "it would hold a little," and in his turn he looked round. But no money-box was to be seen. "Oh where can it be?" he cried. "I know I had it when sister felled."

"Was there summat in it?" asked the boy.

"Oh yes," replied Duke; "one of the little gold guineas, and one of my shillings, and one of sister's sixpennies, and all the pennies."

"Ah," said the boy, "then I'm afeared you've said good-bye to the lot o' them. Catch Mick let fish like that out of his net. But," he added—for Duke seemed to be stunned by the loss—"sit ye down, and I'll fetch what water I can in my cap, or we'll have missy's foot very bad, and that 'ud be worser than losin' the money."

He was back in a moment with water enough to soak the diminutive handkerchief, with which he gently bathed away some of the blood, so that he could see the wound. It was a bad cut, but it was not now bleeding so much. The little surgeon pressed the sides gently together, which made Pamela give a little scream of pain.

"Don't cry, missy dear," he said. "It'll not hurt so much when I've tied it up. Ye've not another hankerwich? I'd like to lay this one over the cut—it's nice and wet—and tie it on with summat else."

"I fink there's one in my pocket," said Pamela, and when Duke had extracted it, and with its help the poor foot was tied up much more scientifically than before, she sat up and looked about her, less white and miserable by a good deal, thanks to their new friend.

"What a nice boy you are," she said condescendingly. "What's your name? Is that—— ugly man" she was going to have said, but she hesitated, afraid of hurting the boy's feelings—"is the man your father?" and she dropped her voice.

"Bless yer, no," he replied with real fervency, "and that's one thing I'm thankful for. Mick my father; *no*, thank you, missy. My name's Tim, leastways so I'm called. Diana she says it's short for Timothy, but Tim's long enough."

"And who's Diana?" asked the children, beginning to forget their own troubles in curiosity.

"Her as he roared out at so—yonder—when you was up at the top o' the wall. She's a deal better than him and the missus is Diana. But listen, master and missy. He'll be back in a minute, and——"

"Oh let us run away before he comes! oh do help us to run away!" they exclaimed, all their terrors returning. "Us doesn't want the bowl now. Oh Tim, can't us all run away, quick, before he comes?"

And the two little creatures seized hold of their new friend's ragged jacket as if they felt that in him was their only chance of safety.



CHAPTER V.

TIM.

"Whose imp art thou with dimpled cheek,
And curly pate and merry eye?"

J. BAILLIE.

They were so excited, so eager to be off at once, that for a minute or two Tim could scarcely get them to listen to him. They had forgotten all about the snakes, or else their confidence in the boy as a protector was so great that they were sure he would defend them against every danger.

"Oh Tim, dear Tim, do let us go quick," they kept repeating.

"But master and missy," he explained at last when they would let him speak, "we can't. Don't you see Mick knows exactly where he left yer, and he'd be after us in a minute. There's nowhere near here where we could hide but what he'd find us. You'd only get me a beating, that 'ud be all about it. No, listen to me. P'raps Mick means to take yer home straight away, but if he doesn't we must wait a bit till I can find out what he's after. He's a deep one is Mick."

"Couldn't you run home quick to tell Grandpapa and Grandmamma where us is?" said Duke. "Grandpapa, and the coachman, and Dymock, and the gardener—they'd all come to fetch us."

"I dursn't," said Tim. "Not yet; Mick's a deep one. If he thought I'd run off to tell he'd——"

"What would he do?" they asked breathlessly.

"He'd hide away somehow. 'Twouldn't be so easy to find him. He'll be back in a moment too—I couldn't get off before he'd be after me. No; we must wait a bit till I see what he's after."

"Why haven't you runned away before?" asked Pamela. "If he's not your father, and if you don't like him."

"Nowhere to run to," said Tim simply. "It's not so bad for me. I'm used to it. It's not like you, master and missy. Diana and me, when you was up at the top o' the wall, we'd ha' done anything to stop you coming down."

"But, Tim," said Pamela, almost in a whisper "you don't mean that Mick's going to steal us away for always."

"No, no," said the boy, "he only wants to get some money for you. But we'll see in a bit. Just you stay there quiet till he comes, and don't you say you've seen me. I'll soon see you again; but he mustn't find me here."

They began to cry again when he left them, but he had not gone too soon; for in less than five minutes—by which time Tim had hidden himself some little way off—they heard the voice of the gipsy urging on the donkey over the rough ground. He seemed in a very bad temper, and Duke and Pamela shivered with fear.

"Oh I wish us had runned away," whispered Pamela, though, when she tried to lift herself up and found she could not put the wounded foot to the ground even so as to hobble, she felt that to escape would have been impossible. The gipsy scowled at them, but said nothing as he lifted first the boy and then the girl on to the donkey.

"There, now," he said, with a slight return to his falsely-smooth tones, "you'll be pleased at last, I should hope. To think of all the trouble we've had, the missus and me, a-unpacking of all the pots and

crocks for you to ride on the donkey."

"And are you going to take us straight home, then?" said Pamela, whose spirits had begun to revive.

"What, without the bowl?" exclaimed Mick, in pretended surprise, "when there's such a lot all set out on the grass in a row for you to see."

He spoke so naturally that both the children were deceived for the moment. Perhaps after all he was not so bad—even Tim had said *perhaps* he was going to take them home! They looked up at him doubtfully.

"If you don't mind, please," said Duke, "us'd rather go home. It doesn't matter about the bowl, for sister's foot's so sore and it's getting late. I'll give you all the money—oh please, where have you put my money-box?"

Greatly to his surprise, the gipsy pulled it out of some slouching inner pocket of his jacket and gave it to him.

"Here it is, master; but it'd a' been lost but for me—a-laying on the ground there."

Duke opened it.

"I'll give you——" he began again, but he suddenly stopped short. "The little gold guinea's not here," he cried, "only the shilling and the sixpence and the pennies."

"Must have rolled out on the ground if ever it was there," said Mick sullenly. "I never see'd it."

"It *was* there," cried Duke angrily. "Do you think I'd tell a story? I must go back and look for it. Let me down, I say, let me down."

Then Mick turned on him with a very evil expression on his face.

"Stop that, d'ye hear? Stop that," and he lifted his fist threateningly. "D'ye think I'm going to waste any more time on such brats and their nonsense? Catch me a-taking you home for you to go and say I've stolen your money, and get me put in prison by your grandpapas and grandmamas as likely as not," he went on in a half-threatening, half-whining tone.

Duke was going to answer, but Pamela pulled his sleeve.

"Be quiet, bruvver," she said in a whisper. "Tim said us must wait a bit."

Almost as she said the words a voice was heard whistling at a little distance—they were now out of the wood on a rough bridle path. Mick looked round sharply and descried a figure coming near them.

"What have you been about, you good-for-nothing?" he shouted. "Why didn't you stay with the others? You might have lent me a hand with the donkey and the brats."

Tim stood still in the middle of the path, and stared at them without speaking. Then he turned round and walked beside Mick, who was leading the donkey.

"What are ye a-doing with the little master and missy?" he asked coolly.

"Mind yer business," muttered the gipsy gruffly. Then he added in a louder tone, "Master and missy has

lost their way, don't ye see? They're ever so far from home. It was lucky I met them."

"Are ye a-going to take them home?" continued Tim.

"For sure, when I can find the time. But that won't be just yet a bit. There's the missus a-waiting for us."

And, turning a corner, they came suddenly in sight of the other gipsies—the two women and the big sulky-looking boy—gathered round a tree, the donkey's panniers and the various bundles the party had been carrying lying on the ground beside them. If the panniers had been unpacked and their contents spread out, as Mick had told the children, they had certainly been quickly packed up again. But there was no time for wondering about how this could be; the woman whom the pedlar called "the missus" came up to her husband as soon as she saw them, and said a few words hastily, and with a look of great annoyance, in the queer language she had spoken before, to which he replied with some angry expression which it was probably well the children did not understand.

"Better have done with it, I should say," said the other woman, who was much younger and nicer-looking, but still with a rather sullen and discontented face.

"That's just like her," said Mick. "What we'd come to if we listened to her talk it beats me to say."

"You've not come to much good by not listening to it," retorted Diana fiercely. But Tim, who had gone towards her, said something in a low voice which seemed to calm her.

"It's true—we'll only waste our time if we take to quarrelling," she said. "What's to be done, then?"

"We must put the panniers back, and the girl must sit between them somehow," said the man. "She can't walk—the boy must run beside."

So saying, he lifted both children off the donkey, not so gently but that Pamela gave a cry as her sore foot touched the ground. But no one except Duke paid any attention to her, not even Tim, which she thought very unkind of him. She said so in a low voice to Duke, but he whispered to her to be quiet.

"If only my foot was not sore, now us could have runned away," she could not help whispering again. For all the gipsies seemed so busy in loading themselves and the donkey that for a few minutes the children could have fancied they had forgotten all about them. It was not so, however. As soon as the panniers were fastened on again Mick turned to Pamela, and, without giving her time to resist, placed her again on the donkey. It was very uncomfortable for her; her poor little legs were stretched out half across the panniers, and she felt that the moment the donkey moved she would surely fall off. So, as might have been expected, she began to cry. The gipsy was turning to her with some rough words, when Diana interfered.

"Let me settle her," she said. "What a fool you are, Mick!" Then she drew out of her own bundle a rough but not very dirty checked wool shawl, with which she covered the little girl, who was shivering with cold, and at the same time made a sort of cushion for her with one end of it, so that she could sit more securely.

"Thank you," said Pamela, amidst her sobs; "but oh I hope it's not very far to home."

Mick stood looking on, and at this he gave a sneering laugh.

"It's just as well to have covered her up," he said. "Isn't there another shawl as'd do for the boy? Not

that it matters; we'll meet no one the road we're going. The sooner we're off the better."

He took hold of the bridle and set off as fast as he could get the donkey to go. Diana kept her place beside it, so that, even if Pamela had fallen off, it would only have been into the young woman's arms. Duke followed with Tim and the other woman, but he had really to "run," as Mick had said, for his short legs could not otherwise have kept up with the others. He was soon too out of breath to speak—besides, he dared not have said anything to Tim in the hearing of "the missus," of whom he was almost more afraid than even of Mick. And the only sign of friendliness Tim, on his side, dared show him was by taking his hand whenever he thought the woman would not notice. But, tired as he was already, Duke could not long have kept up; he felt as if he *must* have cried out, when suddenly they came to a turning in the road and the gipsy stopped.

"We'll get back into the wood this way," he said, without turning his head, and with some difficulty he managed to get the donkey across a dry ditch, and down a steep bank, when, sure enough, they found themselves again among trees. It was already dusk, and a very little way on in the wood it became almost dark. The gipsy went on some distance farther—obliged, however, to go very slowly; then at last he stopped.

"This'll do for to-night," he said. "I'm about sick of all this nonsense, I can tell ye. We might ha' been at Brigslade to-night if it hadn't been for these brats."

"Then do as I say," said Diana. "I'll manage it for you. Big Tony can carry one, and I the other."

But Mick only turned away with an oath.



"HERE'S SOME SUPPER FOR YOU. WAKE UP, AND TRY AND EAT A BIT. IT'LL DO YOU GOOD."—p. [89](#).

Big Tony was the name of the gipsy boy. He never spoke, and never seemed to take any interest in anything, for he was half-witted, as it is called; though Duke and Pamela only thought him very sulky and silent compared with the friendly little Tim. By this time they were too completely tired to think about anything—they even felt too stupid to wonder if they were on the way home or not—and when Diana

lifted Pamela off the donkey and set her down, still wrapped in the shawl, to lean with her back against a tree, Duke crept up to her, drawing a corner of the shawl round him, for he too was very cold by now, poor little boy—and sat there by his sister, both of them in a sort of half stupor, too tired even to know that they were very hungry!

They did fall asleep—though they did not know it till they were roused by some one gently pulling them.

"Here's some supper for you. Wake up, and try and eat a bit. It'll do you good," the gipsy Diana was saying to them; and when they managed to open their sleepy eyes, they saw that she had a wooden bowl in one hand, in which some hot coffee was steaming, and a hunch of bread in the other. It was not very good coffee, and neither Duke nor Pamela was accustomed to coffee of any kind at home, but it was hot and sweet, and they were so hungry that even the coarse butterless bread tasted good. As they grew more awake they began to wonder how the coffee had been made, but the mystery was soon explained, for at a short distance a fire of leaves and branches was burning brightly with a kettle sputtering merrily in the middle. And round the fire Mick and his wife and big Tony were sitting or lying, each with food in their hands; while a little nearer them Tim was pulling another shawl out of a bundle.

"Give it me here," said Diana, and then she wrapped it round Duke, drawing the other more closely about Pamela.

"Now you can go to sleep again," she said, seeing that the coffee and bread had disappeared. "It'll not be a cold night, and we'll have to be off early in the morning;" and then she turned away and sat down to eat her own supper at a little distance.

"Tim," whispered Duke; but the boy caught the faint sound and edged himself nearer.

"Tim," said Duke again, "is he not going to take us home to-night?"

"I'se a-feared not," replied Tim in the same tone.

A low deep sigh escaped poor Duke. Pamela, so worn out by the pain as well as fatigue she had suffered that she could no longer keep up, was already fast asleep again.

"When it's quite, quite dark," continued Duke, "and when Mick and them all are asleep, don't you think us might run away, Tim?"

Tim shook his head.

"Missy can't walk; and she's dead tired out, let alone her poor foot," he said. "You must wait a bit till she can walk anyway. Try to go to sleep, and to-morrow we'll see."

Duke began to cry quietly.

"I'm too midderable to sleep," he said. "And it's all my fault. Just look at sister, Tim. She's not even undressed, and she'll die—sleeping all night without any bed out in the cold. Oh, and it's all my fault!"

"Hush, hush, master!" said Tim, terrified lest the others should overhear them.

"What does he want to do with us? Why won't he take us home?" asked Duke.

Tim hesitated a moment.

"I thought at first it was just to get money for bringing of ye back," he said. "I've known him do that."

"But us would tell," said Duke indignantly. "Us would tell that he wouldn't let us go home."

"Ah, he'd manage so as 'twouldn't matter what you said," replied Tim. "He'd get some pal of his to find you like, and then he'd get the money back from him."

"What's a pal?" asked Duke bewildered.

"Another like hisself; a friend o' his'n," said Tim. "But that's not what he's after. I found out what it is. There's a show at some big place we're going to; and they want pretty little ones like you and little missy, to dress them up and teach them to dance, and to play all sort o' tricks—a-riding on ponies and suchlike, I daresay. I've seen them. And Mick'll get a good deal that way. I'd bet anything, and so'd Diana, that's what he's after."

"But us'd *tell*," repeated Duke, "us'd tell that he'd stoled us away, and they'd have to let us go home."

Again Tim shook his head.

"Those as 'ud pay Mick for ye wouldn't give much heed to aught you'd say," he answered. "And it'll maybe be a long way off from here—over the sea maybe."

"Then," said Duke, "then us *must* run away, Tim. And if you won't help us, us'll run away alone, as soon as ever sister's foot's better. Us *must*, Tim."

He had raised his voice in his excitement, so that Tim glanced anxiously in the direction of the fire. But Mick and his wife seemed to have fallen asleep themselves, or perhaps the wind rustling overhead among the branches prevented the child's little voice reaching them; they gave no signs of hearing. All the same it was best to be cautious.

"Master," said Tim solemnly, "I'm ready to help you. I said so to Diana, I did, as soon as ever I see'd what Mick was after, a-tempting you and missy with his nonsense about the bowl you wanted; there's no bowls like what you wanted among the crocks."

"Why didn't you call out to us and tell us not to come?" said Duke.

"I dursn't—and Mick'd have told you it was all my lies. And I never thought he was a-going to bring you right away neither. I thought he'd get money out of you like he does whenever he's a chance. But, master, if you're ever to get safe away you must do as I tell you, you must."

This was all the comfort poor Duke could get. In the meantime there was nothing to do but try to go to sleep and forget his troubles. There was not very much time to do so in, for long before it was really dawn the gipsies were up and astir, and by noon the little brother and sister were farther from "home" than they had ever been since the day when their poor young mother arrived at Arbitt Lodge with her two starved-looking fledglings, now nearly six years ago. For some miles from where they had spent the night Mick and his party joined a travelling caravan of their friends, all bound for the great fair of which Tim had spoken to Duke. And now it would have been difficult for even Grandpapa or Grandmamma to recognise their dear children. Their own clothes were taken from them, their white skin, like that of the princesses in the old fairy tales, was washed with something which, if not walnut juice, had the same effect, and they were dressed in coarse rough garments belonging to some of the gipsy children of the caravan. Still, on the whole, they were not unkindly treated—they had enough to eat of common food, and

Diana, who took them a good deal under her charge, was kind to them in her rough sulky way. But it was a dreadful change for the poor little things, and they would already have tried, at all risks, to run away, had it not been for Tim's begging them to be patient and trust to him.

All day long—it was now the third day since they had been stolen—the two or three covered vans or waggons which contained the gipsies and their possessions jogged slowly along the roads and lanes. Now and then they halted for a few hours if they came to any village or small town where it seemed likely that they could do a little business, either in selling their crockery or cheap cutlery, baskets, and suchlike, or perhaps in fortune-telling, and no doubt wherever they stopped the farm-yards and poultry-yards in the neighbourhood were none the better for it. At such times Duke and Pamela were always hidden away deep in the recesses of one of the waggons, so there was nothing they dreaded more than when they saw signs of making a halt. It was wretched to be huddled for hours together in a dark corner among all sorts of dirty packages, while the other children were allowed to run about the village street picking up any odd pence they could by playing tricks or selling little trifles out of the general repository. And the brother and sister were not at all consoled by being told that before long they should be dressed up in beautiful gold and silver clothes—"like a real prince and princess," said Mick, once when he was in a good humour—and taught to dance like fairies. For Tim's words had explained to them the meaning of these fine promises, and, though they said nothing, the little pair were far less babyish and foolish in some ways than the gipsies, who judged them by their delicate appearance and small stature, had any idea of. But still they were very young, and there is no telling how soon they would have begun to get accustomed to their strange life,—how soon even the remembrance of Grandpapa and Grandmamma and their pretty peaceful home, of Toby and Miss Mitten, of the garden and their little white beds, of Nurse and Biddy and Dymock, and all that had hitherto made up their world,—would have begun to grow dim and hazy, and at last seem only a dream, of which Mick, and the Missus and Diana, and the others, and the green lanes, with the waggons ever creeping along, and the coarse food and coarser talking and laughing and scolding, were the reality, had it not been for some fortunate events which opened out to them the hope of escape before they had learnt to forget they were in prison.

Tim was a great favourite in the gipsy camp. He was not one of them, but he did not seem to remember any other life; in any case he never spoke of it, and he was so much better tempered and obliging than the cruel, quarrelsome gipsy boys, that it was always to him that ran the two or three tiny black-eyed children when their mothers had cuffed them out of the way; it was always he who had a kind word or a pat on the head for the two half-starved curs that slunk along beside or under the carts. There was no mystery about his life—he was not a stolen child, and he could faintly remember the little cottage where he had lived with his mother before she died, leaving him perfectly friendless and penniless, so that he was glad to pick up an odd sixpence, or even less, wherever he could, till one day he fell in with Mick, who offered him his food and the chance of more by degrees, as he wanted a sharp lad to help him in his various trades—of pedlar, tinker, basket-maker, wicker-chair mender, etc., not to speak of poultry-stealing, orchard-robbing, and even child-thieving when he got a chance that seemed likely to be profitable.

Poor little Tim—he had learnt very scanty good in his short life! His mother, bowed down with care and sorrow—for her husband, a thatcher by trade, had been killed by an accident, leaving her with the boy of three years old and two delicate babies, who both died—had barely managed to keep herself and him alive by working in the fields, and she used to come home at night so tired out that she could scarcely speak to the child, much less teach him as she would have liked to do. Still on Sundays she always, till her last illness, managed to take him to church, and in her simple way tried to explain to him something of what he then heard. But he was only eight years old when she died, and, though he had not forgotten *her*, the memory of her words had grown confused and misty. For, in the four years since then, he had had no

companions but tramps and gipsies—till the day when Duke and Pamela were decoyed away by Mick, he had never exchanged more than a passing word or two with any one of a better class. And somehow the sight of their sweet innocent faces, the sound of their gentle little voices had at once gained his heart. Never had he thought so much of his mother, of his tiny brother and sister, who, he fancied, would have been about the size of the little strangers, as since he had been with them. And when he saw them looking shocked and frightened at the rough words and tones of the gipsies,—when Pamela burst out sobbing to see how dirty her face and hands were, and Duke grew scarlet with fury at the boys for throwing stones at the poor dogs,—most of all, perhaps, when the two little creatures knelt together in a corner of the van to say their prayers night and morning—prayers which now always ended in a sobbing entreaty "to be taken home again to dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma,"—a strange feeling rose in Tim's throat and seemed as if it would choke him. And he lay awake night after night trying to recall what his mother had taught him, wishing he knew what it meant to be "good," wondering if the Grandpapa and Grandmamma of whom the children so constantly spoke would perhaps take pity on him and put him in the way of a better sort of life, if he could succeed in helping the little master and missy to escape from the gipsies and get safe back to their own home.

For every day, now that he had seen more of the children, he understood better how dreadful it would be for them if wicked Mick's intentions were to succeed. But hitherto no opportunity of running away had offered—the children were far too closely watched. And Tim dared not take any one, not even Diana, into his confidence!

CHAPTER VI.

TOBY AND BARBARA.

"Missing or lost, last Sunday night."

THOMAS MOORE.

The chance for which Tim was hoping seemed slow of coming. He was always on the look-out for it; and, indeed, had he not been so Duke would have kept him up to his promise, for whenever he saw Tim alone for a moment he was sure to whisper to him, "How soon do you think us can run away?" And it was now the seventh day since the children had been carried off!

Pamela's foot was almost well. She could walk and even run without it hurting her. Diana had bound it up carefully, after putting on some ointment which certainly healed it very quickly. For, with all their ignorance and brutality, the gipsies were really clever in some ways. They had knowledge of herbs which had been handed down to them by their ancestors, and their fingers were skilful and nimble. And for their own sakes Mick and the Missus were anxious that their two pretty prisoners should not fall ill. So that, though dirty and uncared-for as far as appearance went, the little pair had not really suffered in health by their misfortunes.

It was partly, perhaps, owing to their innocent hopefulness, which kept up their spirits when, had they been wiser and older, they would have lost heart and grown ill with fear and anxiety.

They were now far enough from Sandlingham for Mick to feel pretty sure they would not be tracked. The actual distance they had travelled was not great, but a few miles in those days were really more than a hundred at the present time. For there were, of course, no railways; in many parts of the country the cross-roads were so bad that it was necessary and really quicker to make long rounds rather than leave "the king's highway." And—still more important, perhaps, in such a case—there were no telegraphs! No possibility for poor Grandpapa and Grandmamma—as there would be nowadays, *could* such a thing happen as the theft of little children—to send word in the space of an hour or two to the police all over the country. Indeed, compared with what it is in our times, the police hardly existed.

And everything was in the gipsies' favour. No one had seen them in the neighbourhood of Arbitt Lodge. They had not been on the Sandlingham high-road before meeting the children, and had avoided it on purpose after that. So, among the many explanations that were offered to the poor old gentleman and lady of their grandchildren's disappearance, though "stolen by gipsies" was suggested, it was not seriously taken up.

"There have been no gipsies about here for months past," said Grandpapa. "Besides, the children were in our own grounds—gipsies could not have got in without being seen—it is not as if they had been straying about the lanes."

Everything that could be done had been done. All the ponds in the neighbourhood had been dragged; the only dangerous place anywhere near—a sort of overhanging cliff over some unused quarries—had been at once visited; the quarries themselves searched in every corner—even though they were very meek-and-mild, inoffensive quarries, where it would have been difficult to hide even a little dog like

Toby. And all, as we of course know, had been in vain! There really seemed by the end of this same seventh day *nothing* left to do. And Grandpapa sat with bowed gray head, his newspaper unopened on the table beside him, broken down, brave old soldier though he was,—utterly broken down by this terrible blow. While Grandmamma slowly drew her arm-chair a little nearer than usual to the fire, for grief makes people—old people especially—chilly. All her briskness and energy were gone; her sweet old face was white and drawn, with no pretty pink flush in the cheeks now; her bright eyes were dimmed and paled by the tears they had shed, till now even the power of weeping seemed exhausted.

"I never thought—no, through all I never thought," she murmured to herself, so low that even if Grandpapa had been much sharper of hearing than he was her words could not have reached him,—"*I* never thought that a day would come when I should thank the Lord that my Marmaduke—yes, and poor little Lavinia too—had not lived to see their darlings the pretty creatures they had become! Yet now I am thankful—thankful for them to have been spared this anguish. Though, again, if they had been alive and well and able to take care of Duke and Pam, perhaps it would never have happened."

And once more—for the hundredth time, I daresay—poor Grandmamma began torturing herself by wondering in what she had erred—how could she have taken better care of the children?—was it her fault or Grandpapa's, or Nurse's, or Biddy's, or anybody's? There had been *something* the matter with Duke and Pam that last morning; they had had something on their little minds. She had thought so at the time, and now she was more than ever sure of it. What could it have been?

"I thought it best not to force their confidence, babies though they are," she reflected. "But perhaps if I had persuaded them very tenderly, they would have told me. Was I too severe and strict with them, the darlings? I meant to act for the best, but I am a foolish old woman—if only the punishment of my mistakes could fall on me alone! Ah dear, ah dear!—it would have been hard to lose them by death, but in that case I should have felt that they were going to their father and mother; while *now*—it is awful to picture where they may be, or what may have become of them! Oh Toby, is it you, you poor little dog?" for just at this moment Toby rubbed himself against her foot, looking up in her face with a sad wistful expression in his bright eyes. "Oh Toby, Toby," said Grandmamma, "I wonder if you could tell us anything to clear up this dreadful mystery if you could talk."

But Toby only wagged his tail—he was very sad too, but he had far too much self-respect *not* to wag his tail when he was kindly spoken to, however depressed he might be feeling—and looked up again, blinking his eyes behind their shaggy veil.

"Oh Toby," said poor Grandmamma again, as if she really did not know what else to say.

And Grandpapa, half ashamed of his own prostration, roused himself to try to say a cheering word or two.

"We must hope still, my love," he said. "To-morrow may bring news from the Central London Police Office, where the Sandlingham overseer has written to. He bade us keep up hope for a few days yet, we must remember."

"Only for a few days more," repeated Grandmamma. "And if those days bring nothing, what *are* we to think—what are we to do?"

"Upon my soul," said Grandpapa, "I do *not* know;" and with a heavy sigh he turned away again, glancing at the newspaper as if half inclined to open it, but without the heart to do so.

"Of course," he said, "if by any possibility they had fallen into kind hands, and it had occurred to any one to advertise about them, we should have known it before this. The police are all on the alert by now. If dishonest people have carried them off for the sake of a reward, they will find means of claiming it before long. The head-man at Sandlingham does not advise our offering a reward as yet. He says it might lead to more delay if they are in dishonest hands. Their captors would wait to see if more would not be offered—better let them make the first move, he says."

"To think of putting a price on the darlings, as if they were little strayed dogs!" exclaimed Grandmamma, lifting her hands.

Just at this moment the door opened, and Dymock came in. Grandmamma raised her face quickly, with a look of expectation—the door never opened in those sad days without her heart beating faster with the hope of possible tidings—but it as quickly faded again. Dymock had just the same melancholy expression; he still walked on tiptoe, and spoke in a muffled voice, as if he were entering a sick-room. This was his way of showing his sympathy, which really was most deep and sincere. But somehow it provoked Grandmamma, who was, it must be confessed, *rather* a quick-tempered old lady at all times, and at present her nerves were of course unusually irritated.

"Well, what is it, Dymock?" she said testily. "I wish you would not go about like a mute at a funeral. You make me think I don't know what."

"Beg pardon, ma'am, I'm sure," said Dymock humbly, but still in the same subdued way. He would not have taken offence just now at any remark of Grandmamma's; but he could not help speaking to her with a sort of respectful indulgence, as much as to say, "I know she can't help it, poor old lady," which Grandmamma found exceedingly aggravating. "Beg pardon. But it's Mrs. Twiss. If she could see you for a moment, ma'am?"

"Old Barbara!" exclaimed Grandmamma. "Is it possible that she—she is so shrewd and sensible—can she have heard anything do you think, Dymock?"

But Dymock shook his head solemnly.

"No, no, ma'am. It's not that. I'm very sorry if by my manner I raised any false hopes."

"That you certainly did not, my good Dymock," said the old lady grimly.

"But—would you see Mrs. Twiss, ma'am? She's going from home I believe."

"Going from home—she who never leaves her own cottage! Yes, I will see her," and in another moment the neat old woman was making her curtsy at the door.

"Come in, come in, Barbara," said Grandmamma. "And so you are off somewhere? How is that? Ah, if I were as strong and well as you, I think I would be tempted to set off on my travels to look for my lost darlings. It is the staying here waiting and doing nothing that is so dreadful, my good friend."

And Grandmamma's voice quavered with the last words. It was not the first time she had seen Barbara since the children's disappearance, for they were old friends, and the cake woman had hurried up to Arbitt Lodge at once on hearing of the sad trouble that had befallen its inmates, to express her concern and see if maybe she could be of any use.

"Yes, indeed, ma'am. I can well understand it," she said. "How you bear up as you do is just

wonderful. I'm sure I can't get it out of my mind for a moment. I keep seeing them as they passed by that last afternoon. Nurse was a bit vexed with them—missy's frock was torn and——"

"Yes," interrupted Grandmamma—Grandpapa seeing her occupied had at last made up his mind to open his newspaper—"Yes, I was thinking of that. They told us about it, and they asked what it meant to be 'a great charge;' they had heard Nurse say that to you. She is a good woman, I feel sure, Barbara, but perhaps she is a little too strict. I have got it so on my mind that they had some little trouble they did not like to tell about, and that that, somehow, has had to do with it all."

"You don't mean, ma'am, that such tiny trots as that would have run away on purpose?" said Barbara in surprise. "Oh no, they'd never have done that."

"No, I do not mean that exactly," said Grandmamma. "I do not think I know rightly what I mean. Dear, dear, I wish Dymock would keep Toby away," she added. "You don't know how he startles me—every time he comes close to me I fancy somehow it is the children," and Grandmamma looked so uneasy and nervous that Barbara quietly took up the little dog and put him out of the room. "And, Barbara, you had no reason for coming to see me? Except, of course—I was forgetting—that you are going away."

"Only for a few days, ma'am," Barbara replied. "I had a letter from my niece—leastways from her husband—the niece who lives over near Monkhaven—yesterday. She's been very ill, ma'am,—very ill indeed, and though she's getting better it would be a great comfort to her to see me, and maybe spirit her up a bit to get well quicker. So I'm just setting off—I've locked up my cottage and left the key next door. But I couldn't start without looking in again to see if maybe you had any news."

"No, no—nothing," replied Grandmamma. "And I feel as if I couldn't bear much more. I am breaking up, Barbara; a few days more will see the last of me, my old friend, if they bring no tidings."

Barbara's eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing.—She had exhausted all her attempts at comfort, all her "perhaps"s, and "maybe"s as to what had become of the children; and though she was a very cheerful and hopeful old woman, she was also very sympathising, and it made her dreadfully sad to see Grandmamma so changed and cast down.

"It goes to my heart, ma'am, to see you so," she got out at last. "I know there's nothing I can do, but all the same I wish I weren't going away just now, though the few days will soon be past."

"Yes," said Grandmamma, "they will certainly; and yet even two days seem an eternity just now. You see how foolish and weak I am growing, Barbara. I want every day to be over, and yet I cannot bear to have the days pass and to say to myself that the chances of any tidings are lessening and lessening. Soon it will be two weeks—it is already eight days. When it was only two days it did not seem so hopeless. But I must not keep you, Barbara. How do you mean to get to Monkhaven?"

"Farmer Carson is to give me a lift as far as Brigslade, and then I can walk the rest," said the sturdy old woman, "so good-day to you, ma'am, and, oh deary me, but I do hope there may be better news to hear when I come back on Friday," and with a cordial shake of the hand from Grandmamma, Barbara turned to go. But just then there came at the door a whining and scratching which made the old lady give a sigh of impatience.

"It is the dog again," she said. "He is so restless there is no keeping him quiet, and, though I am very fond of him, I really cannot bear the sight of him just now. I do wish he were away."

Grandmamma spoke so weariedly and seemed so nervous that Barbara felt more sorry for her than

ever. Suddenly an idea struck her.

"Would you let me take him with me, ma'am?" she said. "He knows me so well that I should have no trouble with him, and he'd be nice company on the walk from Brigslade."

Grandmamma hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Yes, take him, Barbara," she said. "He will be much happier with you, poor little dog. And till I have my darlings again,—and will that ever be, Barbara?—I really cannot bear to see or hear him. Yes, take him with you, poor little dog; and—and—keep him as long as you like—unless—unless there *do* come good news."

And thus it came to pass that Toby set out on his travels with Barbara Twiss, while poor Grandmamma shrank down again into her arm-chair by the fire, and Grandpapa tried to imagine he was reading his newspaper as usual.

What did poor Toby think of it all? His ideas had been very confused for some days, poor little dog. He could not make out what had become of the children. He sniffed about everywhere, once or twice barking with sudden delight when, coming upon some relic of his little master or mistress, such as Duke's old garden hat or Pamela's tiny parasol, he imagined for a moment or two that he had found them, only to creep off again with his tail between his legs in renewed disappointment when he discovered his mistake, all of which, it is easy to understand, had been very trying to poor Grandmamma, and no doubt to Toby himself. He did not understand what he was scolded for when he certainly meant no harm; he could not make out why Dymock gave him little shoves out of the way and Biddy bade him sharply be quiet when he, naturally enough, yelped at this inconsiderate treatment. And worst of all, when, after the most mature reflection, he took up his quarters on one of the two little white beds in the night nursery, deciding that there, sooner or later, his friends *must* return, was it not *too* bad that Nurse, hobbling about again after her rheumatic attack, which she had made much worse by fretting,—was it not *too* bad that she should unceremoniously dislodge him with never a "by your leave," or "with your leave"?

Toby shook himself and walked off in disgust.

"You very silly and stupid old woman," he said to her in his own mind, "if you only had the sense to understand *my* language, you would see that the only rational thing to do is to wait for Duke and Pam in a place where they are sure to come. And that is their beds. I have thought it out, I assure you. But there is no use trying to put reasonable ideas into human beings' heads. I might bark myself black in the face before any one could take in what I mean."

It was just after this that he had wandered away downstairs in search of a quiet corner; and on first entering the parlour Grandmamma spoke to him so kindly that he began to think of bestowing his company upon her for the rest of the day, especially as she was always installed near a good fire. Toby dearly loved a fire; even on a hot summer's day the kitchen fire had great attractions for him. But when Mrs. Twiss came in, and he, as was his duty and business of course, went to the door to see who it was, that officious Dymock shut him out again, and actually when he whined and scratched in the politest manner to be let in Grandmamma spoke crossly to him.

"Et tu, Brute!" thought Toby to himself. What was coming over the world?

On the whole he was not sorry to find himself trotting down the lane beside Barbara, whom he had a sincere regard for. She spoke to him with proper respect; she was not given to shoves like Dymock, or

sharp expressions like Nurse and Biddy, and when she called him to follow her, Toby willingly followed.

"You're to come along with me, poor doggie," she said. "You're only a worry to the good lady at present, and I'm pleased to have your company. Besides, who knows, you're a sharp dog, Toby, and you and I will keep our eyes and ears open, and you your nose as well, for that's a gift the more, you have, you doggies, nor us."

And so saying Barbara and her companion made their way to the cross-roads, a point well known in the country-side. For there a great finger-post served the double purpose of informing the traveller in four directions and of frightening many a country lad or lassie of a moonlight night, when it stood gaunt and staring like a gigantic skeleton, as everybody knows the meeting of cross-roads is at no time a canny spot.

Here Farmer Carson had promised to take up Barbara, for his home lay a mile or two out of the village, all of which she kindly explained to her little companion as they went along. She had a great habit of talking to herself, and she was so much alone that it was quite a treat to have "some one" to talk to, as she also informed Toby. He looked up at her with his bright eyes, from time to time wagging his tail, "for all the world like a Christian," thought Barbara, but nevertheless I am afraid he did not take in her information as fully as appeared. For when, after they had sat waiting for him for some minutes, the worthy farmer drove up with a cheery "Good morning, Mrs. Twiss," Toby had the impertinence to bark furiously at him and his most respectable old mare, as if they had not quite as good a right as he to the king's highway!

This, of course caught the farmer's attention.

"That's a knowing little chap you've got with you, neighbour Twiss," he said; "he favours the one at the Lodge, does he not?"

This naturally led to Barbara's explaining that he was the one at the Lodge in person, and then she and her friend beguiled the way by talking over the sad and mysterious disappearance of the children.

It was very sad, and very strange, the farmer agreed. Then he scratched his head with the hand that was not occupied with the reins.

"I've thought a deal about it," he said, "and I've come to think it's—as likely as not—gipsies after all."

Barbara started.

"But there's been none about," she said, "not for ever so long. The General"—the General was Grandpapa—"thought of that at the very first and asked all about. But there'd been none heard of, and heard of they always are pretty quick, and none so pleasantly, as you should know well, Mr. Carson."

"I do so, I do so," he agreed, nodding his head. "But they're a cunning lot. If they'd any reason for getting quick out of the way, they'd do it. All I can tell you is this, and I only heard it last night: one o' my men coming home what he calls a short-cut way saw traces of a fire down by Black Marsh; and he's certain sure the marks weren't there the day before the children disappeared. That was the last time he'd passed that way."

"And that's more nor a week past," said Barbara. "If it should be so,—if the gipsies have really got them,—they may be a long way off by now."

"Just so," said the farmer; "that's the worst of it. And no telling what road they've gone, neither. No; I'm

sadly afraid if it's been gipsies there's not much chance of seeing them again, unless they're tempted by the rewards. Pretty little creatures like that they can always make a good deal by, for those shows as goes about. And they're such babies—only four or five years old, aren't they? They'll soon forget where they come from and all."

"Nay," said Barbara, "they're small for their age, for they're six past. But they're not dull; no, indeed, they're very quick children. They'd not forget in a hurry."

Then she grew very silent. It made her terribly sad to think of the two tender little creatures in such hands; suddenly Toby, who had been quietly reposing at her feet, jumped up and gave a short sharp bark.

"What is it, Toby?" said Barbara, patting him.

Toby grunted a little, and then lay down again. The reason of his barking was that he had just discovered why old Barbara had brought him away on this journey. It was that *he* was to find the children—he quite understood all about it now, and wished to say so.



CHAPTER VII.
DIANA'S PROMISE.

"Oh, who can say
But that this dream may yet come true?"

THOMAS MOORE.

For some days the gipsy caravan had been making its way along a very lonely road; they had come across no towns at all and no large villages. They got over more ground now, for there was less temptation to linger. The truth was that Mick and the other heads of the party had in some way got news that the great fair to which they were bound was to begin sooner than they expected, and unless they hurried on they might not be there in time to take up a good position among the many strays and waifs of their kind always to be found at such places. There were ever so many ways in which they expected to turn a number of honest or dishonest "pennies" at this same fair. It was one of their regular harvest times. Mick and his friends always managed to do something in the way of horse-dealing on such occasions, and Diana, who was the best-looking of the younger gipsy-women, was thoroughly up to all the tricks of fortune-telling. Her cold haughty manners had often more success than the wheedling flatteries of the others. She *looked* as if she were quite above trickery of any kind, and no doubt the things she told were not altogether nonsense or falsehood. For she had learned to be wonderfully quick in reading the characters of those who applied to her, even in divining the thoughts and anxieties in their minds. And besides these resources the gipsies had a good show of baskets and brooms of their own manufacture to dispose of; added to which this year a hard bargain was to be driven with Signor Fribusco, the owner of the travelling circus, for the "two lovely orphans," whose description had already been given to him by some of the gipsy's confidantes, to whom Mick had sent word, knowing them to be in the Signor's neighbourhood.

Some of this Tim had found out by dint of listening to bits of conversation when he was supposed to be asleep. He grew more and more afraid as the days passed on and no chance of escape offered, for various things began to make him fear they were not very far from the town they were bound to. For one thing Mick's wife and Diana began to pay more attention to the two children's appearance. Their fair hair was brushed and combed every day, and their delicate skin was carefully washed with something that restored it almost to its natural colour; all of which had an ominous meaning for Tim.

"Diana is very kind now," said Pamela, one day when she and Duke had been allowed for once to run about a little with the other children. There certainly seemed small risk in their doing so, for the gipsies had encamped for the night on a desolate moor, where no human habitations of any kind were in sight, no passers-by to be feared.

"Yes," said Duke, who had hold of Tim's other hand; "she makes us nice and clean and tidy."

"And she's making a gown for me," said Pamela. "It's made of my own white gown, but she's sewing rows of red and blue and gold round it. And she says if Duke is good she's going to make him a red jacket. Isn't it kind of her? Do you know, Tim," she went on in a lower tone, "us has been thinking that perhaps they're meaning to take us home soon, and that they want us to look very nice. Do you think it's that, Tim? I'm sure Grandpapa and Grandmamma would be so pleased they'd give them lots of money if they took us back."

"I'm afeared it's not taking you home they're thinking of, missie," said Tim grimly.

"Then why don't you help us to run away, Tim?" said Duke impatiently. "I've asked you and asked you. I'm sure us might run away *now*—there's nobody looking after us."

"And where would we run to?" said Tim. "There's not a mortal house nor a tree even to be seen. Run away, indeed! We'd be cotched—cotched afore we'd run half a mile. And yet it's the very first time you've bin let run about a little. I'm ready enough to run away, but no good running away to be cotched again—it 'ud be worser nor ever."

"Then is us never to run away? Is us never to see Grandpapa, and Grandmamma, and Dymock, and Biddy, and Nurse, and Toby—oh, dear Toby!—and the garden, and the nursery, and our little beds, again?" said both children, speaking together and helping each other with the list of their lost blessings, and in the end bursting into tears.

Tim looked at them ruefully.

"Don't 'ee now, don't 'ee, master and missy," he said anxiously. "They'll see you've been crying, and they'll not let you out any more."

Duke and Pamela tried to choke down their sobs.

"Will you try to help us to run away, then, if us is very good—Tim, dear Tim, oh do," they said piteously. And Tim tried to soothe them with kind words and promises to do his best.

Poor fellow, he was only too ready to run away for his own sake as well as theirs. The feelings which had been stirred and reawakened by the children's companionship had not slumbered again; on the contrary, they seemed to gain strength every day. Every day he felt more and more loathing for his present life; every night when he tumbled into the ragged heap which was called his bed he said to himself more strongly that he *must* get away—he could not bear to think that his mother, looking down on him from the heaven in which she had taught him to believe, could see him the dirty careless gipsy boy he had become. It was wonderful how her words came back to him now—how every time he could manage to get a little talk with his new friends their gentle voices and pretty ways seemed to revive old memories that he had not known were there. And the thought of rescuing them,—of succeeding in taking them safe back to their own home,—opened a new door for him.

"Maybe," said Tim to himself, "the old gentleman and lady'd take me on as a stable-boy or such like if the little master and missie'd speak a word for me, as I'm sure they would. And I'm right down sure I'd try to do my best—anything to get away from this life."

Of course he could have got away by himself at any time much more easily than with the children. But till now, as he had told them, he had not cared to try it, for where had he to run to? And, besides, it was only since Duke and Pamela had been with the gipsies that the wish to return to a better kind of life had grown so very strong.

He sighed heavily as he stood on the desolate moor with his two little companions, for he felt what he would not say to them, how terribly difficult their escape would be.

Suddenly Pamela tugged at his arm.

"What is that shining down there, Tim?" she said, pointing over the moor, which sloped downwards at one side. "Is it a river?"

Tim looked where she directed, and his face brightened a little.

"'Tis the canal, missie," he said. "It comes past Monkhaven, and goes—I don't rightly know where to."

Maybe to that place we're going to, where the fair's to be. I once went a bit of a way on a canal—that was afore I was with Mick and his lot. There was a boy and his mother as was very good to me. I wish I could see them again, I do."

"But what *is* a canal, Tim," said Pamela. "Us has never seen one, and that down there looks like a silver thread—it shines like water."

"So it is water, missie—a canal's a sort of a river, only it goes along always quite straight. It doesn't go bending in and out like a real river, sometimes bigger and sometimes littler like."

"And how did you go on it," asked Duke. "And the boy and his mother? You couldn't walk on it if it was water—nobody can except Jesus in the big Bible at home. *He* walked on the top of the water."

"Did he really?" said Tim, opening his eyes. "I've heerd tell on him. He was very good to poor folk and such like, wasn't he? Mother telled me about him, tho' I thought I'd forgotten all she'd told me. But I remember the name now as you says it. And what did he walk on the top o' the water for, master?"

Duke looked a little puzzled.

"I don't quite remember, but I think it was to help some poor men when the sea was rough."

"No, no," said Pamela; "*that* was the time he felled asleep, and they woked him up to make the storm go away."

"I'm sure there was a storm the time he was walking on the water, too," said Duke; "there's the picture of it. When us goes in, sister, us'll get Grandmamma's picture-Bible and look"—but suddenly his voice fell, his eager expression faded. In the interest of the little discussion he had forgotten where they were, how far away from Grandmamma and her picture-Bible, how uncertain if ever they should see her or it again! Pamela understood.

"I wish Jesus would come and help us now," she said softly. "I'm sure us needs him quite as much as those men he was so kind to. Tell us about the canal, Tim."

"It's boats," replied Tim. "Long boats made just the right shape. And they've got rooms in them—quite tidy-like. The one that boy lived in along o' his mother was as nice as—as nice as nice. And then they go a-sailin' along—right from one end of the canal to the other."

"What for—just because they like it?"

"Oh no. They've all sorts of things they take about from one place to another—wood often and coal. But that wasn't a coal boat—it was nice and clean that one. And there's hosses as walks along the side of the canals, pullin' of the boats with ropes. It's a pleasant life enough, to my thinking—that's to say when they're tidy, civil-like folk. Some of them's awful rough—as rough as Mick and the Missus and all o' *them*."

Duke and Pamela listened with the greatest interest. They quite forgot to cry any more about their home in listening to what Tim told them.

"Oh, Tim," said Pamela, "I'll tell you what *would* be nice. If us and you could get one of those boats, and a horse to pull it, and go sailing away till we got home to Grandpapa and Grandmamma. That would be nice, wouldn't it, Tim?"

"Yes, missie," said Tim. "But is there canals near your place?"

Pamela's face fell.

"I don't know. I never thought of that," she said. "But I daresay there's one that goes to not far off from there. And Mick would never catch us then, would he, Tim? We'd go so fast, wouldn't we?"

"They don't go that fast—not canal boats," replied Tim. "Still I don't think as Mick'd ever think of looking for us there. That'd be the best of it."

But just then the rough voice of Mick himself was heard calling to them to come back; for they had wandered to some little distance from the other children, who were quarrelling and shouting near the vans.

"Come back you brats, will ye?" he roared. And the poor little things, like frightened sheep, followed by Tim, hurried back. Pamela shuddered at the sound of their jailor's voice in a way the boy could not bear to see. Mick had never yet actually struck her or her brother so as to hurt them; but Tim well knew that any day it might come to that.

"And a blow from his heavy hand—such a blow as he's given me many a time when he's been tipsy—would go near to killing them tender sort o' fairy-like critturs," said the boy to himself, shuddering in his turn. "He's been extra sober for a good bit, but onst he gets to the fair there's no saying."

And over and over again, as he was falling asleep, he asked himself what could be done,—how it would be possible to make their escape? Somehow the sight of the canal had roused a little hope in him, though he did not yet see how it could be turned to purpose.

"If we keeps it in sight, I'll see if I can't get near hand it some day and have a look at the boats, if there's any passing. Maybe there'd be some coming from where the fair is. And if there was any folk like them as was so good to me that time, they'd be the right sort for to help us."

And poor Tim had a most beautiful dream that night. He thought he himself and Duke and Pamela were sailing down a lovely stream in a boat shining like silver, and with sails of white striped with red and blue and gold, like the frock Diana was trimming for Pamela. They went so fast it was more like flying than sailing, and all of a sudden they met another boat in which were a lady and gentleman, whom he somehow knew at once were the Grandpapa and Grandmamma of the children's talk, though they were dressed so grandly in crimson robes, and with golden crowns on their heads like kings and queens, that he was frightened to speak to them; for he had nothing on but his ragged clothes. And just as Duke and Pamela were rushing towards them with joy, and he was turning away ashamed and miserable, wiping his tears with his jacket sleeve, a soft voice called to him not to be afraid but to come forward too. And looking up he saw a figure hovering over him, all white and shining like an angel. But when he looked at the face—though it was so beautiful—he knew he had seen it before. It was that of his poor mother; he knew at once it was she, though in life he could only remember her wan and worn and often weeping.

"Take courage, my boy—a new life is beginning for you. Have no fear."

And then, just as it seemed to him that little Pamela turned round, holding out her hand to lead him forward, he woke!

But his dream left a hopeful feeling in his heart. It was still very early morning and all his companions were asleep. Tim got up and very quietly crept out of the sort of one-sided tent, made by drawing a sail-

cloth downwards from the top of the van, where he and the other boys slept. He walked a little way over the rough moor, for there was no road, scarcely even a track, and looked down to where, in the clear thin morning light, the canal lay glittering below. Then he gazed over the waste in front. Which way would they be going? Would they skirt the canal more closely or branch off and strike away from it? Tim could not tell. But he resolved to keep his eyes and ears open and to find out.

All that day the gipsy vans jolted along the rough cart-track across the moor. They halted as usual at mid-day—but Tim could not get to speak to the twins at all. And then the caravan started again and went rumbling on till much later than usual, for, as Tim overheard from the gipsies' conversation, they were eager now to get to Crookford, where the fair was to be, as quickly as possible. When they at last stopped for the night it was almost dark; but the boy crept close up to the entrance of the waggon where he knew the children to be, and hid himself at the side, and, as he expected, the two little figures came timidly forward.

"Diana," they said softly, and he heard the girl answer not unkindly, but coldly, as was her way.

"Well, what now?"

"Mayn't us come out a little bit, even if it is dark? Us is so tired of being in here all day."

"And my head's aching," added Pamela.

Diana hesitated. A small fine rain—or perhaps it was only mist—was beginning to fall; but in spite of that she would probably have let them out a little had not Mick just then come forward.

"They want out a bit," she said. "They're tired like with being mewed up in there all day and never a breath of air—no wonder," and she made as if she were going to lift Pamela down the steps.

"Are you crazed, girl?" said the gipsy, pushing her back. "To let them out now in the chill of the evening, and it raining too—to have them catch their deaths of cold just as I've some chance of making up for all the trouble they've cost me. Fool that I was to be bothered with them. But you're not a-going to spoil all now—that I can tell ye."

Diana looked at him without speaking. She was not at all in the habit of giving in to him, but she knew that a quarrel terrified the children. She felt too, as she lifted her dark face to the clouded sky, that it was really raining, and she reflected that there might be truth in what Mick said so rudely.



"THEY WANT OUT A BIT," SHE SAID. "THEY'RE TIRED LIKE WITH BEING MEWED UP IN THERE ALL DAY AND NEVER A BREATH OF AIR—NO WONDER."—p. [132](#).

"I think it is too cold and damp for you," she said turning to the door where the two little white faces were looking out piteously. "Never mind," she added in a lower tone, "I'll come back in a minute, and we'll open the window to let some air in, and then I'll sing you to sleep."

Tim could scarcely believe his ears to hear the rough harsh Diana speaking so gently.

"If *she'd* help us," he thought to himself, "there'd be some chance then."

But he remained quite still, crouching in the shelter of the van—almost indeed under it—he was so anxious to hear more of Mick's plans if he could, for he noticed that the gipsy hung about while the girl was speaking to the children, as if he had something to say to her unheard by them.

They were so frightened of him that they drew back into the dark recesses of the van, and when they were no longer to be seen, Mick pulled Diana's sleeve to attract her attention.

"Just you listen to me, girl, will ye?" he said. "I'll stand none of your nonsense—thinking to queen it over us all. Now just listen to me."

Diana shook his hand off her arm.

"I'll listen if you'll speak civil, Mick," she said. "What is it you've got to say?"

She spoke quietly but sternly, and he seemed frightened. He had evidently been drinking more than of late, and Tim shuddered at the thought of what might happen if he were to get into one of his regular tipsy fits while the children were still there.

"It's along o' them childer," said Mick, though less roughly now. "You're a-spoiling of them, and I won't have it. To-morrow evening'll see us at Crookford, and the day after they're to be took to the Signor. Their looks'll please him—I'm not afeard for that; but I've gave him to understand that they're well broke in, and there'll be no trouble in teaching them the tricks and singin' and dancin' and all that. And he's to give me a

good sum down and a share of the profits. And if he's not pleased and they're turned back on my hands—well, it'll be *your* doing—that I can tell you, and you shall pay for it. So there—you know my mind."

He had worked himself up into rage and excitement again while he spoke, but Diana did not seem to care.

"What do you know of the man? will he be good to them?" she said coolly.

Mick gave a sneering laugh.

"He won't starve them nor beat them so as to spoil their pretty looks," he said. "They'll have to do what they're told, and learn quick what they've got to learn. You don't suppose childer like that 'ull pay for their keep if they're to be made princes and princesses of?"

"Then what did you steal them for? You do nothing but grumble about them now you've got them—why didn't you, any way, take them home after a bit and get something for your pains?"

"I thought o' doing so at the first," said Mick sulkily, as if forced to speak in spite of himself. "But they're sharper nor I thought for. No knowing what they'd ha' told. And when Johnny Vyse came by and told o' the fair, and the Signor sure to be ready to take 'em and pay straight for 'em, I see'd no use in running my head into a noose by taking 'em back and getting took myself for my pains. I've had enough o' that sort o' thing, as you might know."

"Let *me* take them home, then," said Diana suddenly. "I'll manage so as no blame shall fall on you—no one shall hear anything about you. And for myself I don't care. I'd almost as lief be in prison as not sometimes."

Mick stared at her.

"Are ye a-going out of yer mind?" he said, "or d'ye think I am? After all the trouble I've had with the brats, is it likely I'll send 'em home and lose all? It's too late now to try for a reward; they're sharp enough to tell they could have been took home long ago. But if the Signor isn't square with me, I may make something that way too—I can tell on *him* maybe. But I'll take care to get my reward and be out o' the way first. I'm not such a fool as you took me for after all, eh? And if you see what's for your good you'll do your best to help me, and you'll find I'll not forget you. One way or another I'm pretty sure to make a tidy thing of them."

Diana turned away, and for a moment or two there was silence. Tim's heart beat so fast he almost felt as if the gipsies would hear it. He could not see Diana's face, but he trembled with fear lest Mick's bribes should win her over. And when her words came it seemed as if his fears were to be fulfilled.

"You *are* a sharp one, Mick, and no mistake," she said, with a strange hard laugh. The gipsy was too muddled in his head to notice anything peculiar in her tone, and he took her answer for a consent.

"That's right. I thought ye'd hear reason," he said. And then he lurched off to his own quarters.

Diana stood where she was for a moment. Suddenly she raised her hands to her face, and Tim fancied he heard a smothered sob. Without stopping to think what he was risking, the boy crept out of the shadow where he had been hidden, and caught hold of her skirts just as she was turning to mount into the van where the children were.

"Diana," he said breathlessly, "I've heard all he said. You don't mean to take part with him, do you?"

You'll never help to sell those pretty babies like that? I'll do anything—anything you tell me—if you'll join with me to get them sent home."

In her turn Diana caught hold of him and held him fast.

"Tim," she said, "you want to get off yourself, and you'd do your best for them. I've seen it. But alone you'd never manage it. I'll help you, Tim. I won't have it on my conscience that I stood by and saw those innocents sold to such a life. If it had been to keep them a while longer with us, I mightn't have done anything, not just yet, not till I saw a chance. But whatever Mick and the others say, I won't see them taken away unless it is to go back to their own people."

"That's right, Diana," said Tim.

"And I'll help you. Keep your wits about you and be ready when I give the sign. Now get out of the way and take care. If Mick hadn't made himself stupid lately he'd have seen you were thinking of something. You mustn't say a word to the children; leave them to me," and again squeezing the boy's arm meaningly, she climbed up into the waggon, where the two little prisoners, tired of waiting for her, had fallen fast asleep.

Tim, for his part, tumbled into his so-called bed that night, with a wonderfully lightened heart, and his dreams were filled with the most joyous hopes.



CHAPTER VIII.

NEW HOPES.

"I am a friend to them and you."

Winter's Tale.

It was a good thing Tim had some new ground of hope, for otherwise the next day or two would have sadly distressed him. He never once could get near the children. And, what he found very strange, Diana herself seemed to be doing her utmost to keep him from them. Two or three times, especially when Mick or the Missus happened to be near, she roughly pushed him back when he was making his way to the door of the van, where Duke and his sister were. And at first the boy was not only surprised, but rather offended.

"What for will you not let me play with them a bit?" he said to her, half inclined to appeal to Mick, who did not interfere.

"They've no need of *you*—keep out of my way," Diana answered roughly, at which Mick and the others laughed as if it was a very good joke, for hitherto Diana had been always accused of "favouring" the boy.

Tim looked up resentfully. He had it on his tongue—for after all he was only a child—to say something which might have done harm never to be undone, for he could not understand Diana. But something in her face, as she looked at him steadily, stopped the words of reproach as they rose to his lips.

"You'll make an end of them, you will, if you keep them choked up in there all day," he said sullenly. "Why can't you let 'em out for a bit of a run with me, like you've done before?"

"I'll let them out when it suits me, and not before. It's none of your business," she replied, while adding in a lower tone that no one else could overhear: "I'd never have thought you such a fool, Tim;" and Tim, feeling rather small,—for he began to understand her a little,—walked off.

All this was at what they called dinner-time, when the vans generally halted for an hour or so and hitherto—even when they were travelling too quickly for the children to have walked beside for a change, as they had sometimes done when going slowly—Mick or Diana had always let them out at this hour for a breath of fresh air. But to-day, though it was beautifully fine and the sun was shining most temptingly, poor Duke and Pamela had to be content with the sight of it through the tiny little window in the side of the van, which Diana opened, and with such air as could get in by the same means. It was hot and stuffy inside, and their little heads ached with being jolted along, and with having had no exercise such as they were accustomed to. Still they did not look altogether miserable or unhappy, as they tried to eat the dinner the gipsy girl had brought them on a tin plate, from the quickly-lighted fire by the hedge, where the old hag who did the cooking for the party had been stewing away at a mess in a great pot. She ladled out the contents all round for the others, but Diana helped herself. She picked out the nicest bits she could see for the two little prisoners, and stood by them for a minute or two to see if they really were going to eat.

"I'll come back in a bit to see if it's all gone," she said, when she had seen them at work, "and remember what I said this morning. That'll help to make you eat hearty."

"Her's very kind," said Duke; but as he spoke he laid down the coarse two-pronged fork Diana had given him to eat with, and seemed glad of an excuse to rest in his labours for a while. "But I can't eat this, can you, sister?"

Pamela looked up—she had got a small bone in her fingers, at which she was trying to nibble.

"I'm pretending to be Toby eating a bone," she said gravely. "Sometimes it makes it seem nicer."

"I don't think so," said Duke. "It only makes it worser to think of Toby," and his voice grew very doleful, as if he were going to cry.

"Now don't, bruvver," said Pamela. "Let's think of what Diana said."

"What was it?" said Duke. "Say it again."

""Twas that, p'raps, if us was very good and did just ezactly what her tells us, us'd go somewhere soon, where us'd be very happy," said Pamela. "Where do you fink it can be, Duke? Us mustn't tell *nobody*, not even Tim; but I don't mind, for Diana said she thought Tim'd go too. Do you fink she meant" (and here poor little Pam, who had learnt unnatural caution already, glanced round her—as if any one could have been hidden in the small space of the van!—and lowered her voice)—"that she meant us was to go *home* again to dear Grandmamma and Grandpapa?"

Duke shook his head.

"No," he said, "they'll never send us home now. Mick'd be put in prison if he took us home. I know that. I heard what they was saying about it one day when they didn't know I was there. And it's too far away—it's a dreadful way away. We can never go home. I daresay Grandpapa and Grandmamma and everybody's dead by now," concluded Duke, who talked with a sort of reckless composure sometimes, altogether too much for Pamela, who burst into tears.

"Oh bruvver!" she cried between her sobs, "don't talk like that. I *fink* God's too good to have let dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma die. And us has said our prayers such many many times about going home. I'm sure Grandpapa would never put Mick in prison if us asked him not, and p'raps if Mick was sure of that he'd take us home. Oh don't you fink us might go and ask him," and she started up.

"Us can't promise it; Grandpapa'd *have* to do it. It'd be his *dooty*," said Duke sternly—his ideas on all subjects were very grim at present—"he'd have to stop Mick going and stealing away other children like he did us. And Diana said us mustn't speak to *nobody* about what she told us."

"I don't care about it if it isn't that us is going home," said Pamela, crying quietly. "I don't care about gold frocks like fairies and all that if dear Grandmamma and Grandpapa can't see us."

Duke looked at her gloomily.

"P'raps Diana meant us'd soon be going to heaven," he said at last. "I heard them saying us'd 'not stand it long,' and I know that means going to die."

"I don't care," sobbed Pamela again, "if Grandpapa and Grandmamma are dead, heaven'd be the best place for us to go to;" and regardless of all Diana had said to her about trying to eat and to keep up her spirits, the little girl let the tin plate, with the greasy meat and gravy, slip off her knees on to the floor, and, leaning her head on the hard wooden bench, she went off in a fit of piteous and hopeless sobbing. In a moment Duke's arms were around her, and he was kissing and hugging and doing his best to console her.

"Dear little sister," he cried, "don't be so *very* unhappy. It was very naughty of me to say dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma and everybody would be dead."

"And Toby," interrupted Pamela. "Did you mean Toby too?"

Duke considered.

"No, I don't think I meant Toby. He must be a good deal younger than Grandpapa and Grandmamma, and I don't think he'd be *quite* so unhappy about us as they'd be."

"If *I'd* been Toby I'd have come to look for us," said Pamela, crying now less violently. "Us could have wrote a letter and tied it to his collar, and then Grandpapa could have come to look for us. Toby can run so fast," and she was going on to describe what she would have done in Toby's place when the little door of the van opened and Diana reappeared. Her face clouded as she looked at the children.

"Crying again! Oh missie," she said reproachfully, "that's not good of you. You'll cry yourself ill, and then——" Diana in turn looked round and lowered her voice, "have you forgotten the secret I told you? You'll never get away where you'd like to be if you make yourself ill. And scarce a bite of dinner have you touched," she went on, looking at the bits of meat reposing beside the overturned plate.

Pamela lifted up her tear-swollen face and drew herself out of Duke's arms, to fling herself into Diana's.

"If us is going to die, it's no good eating," she said.

"Who said you was a-going to die?" exclaimed the gipsy girl.

"Duke and I was talking, and us thought p'raps heaven was the nice place you said us'd go to if us was good," replied Pamela.

Diana gave a little laugh, half sad and half bitter.

"It isn't here you'll learn much about going to *that* place," she said. "But that wasn't what I meant. Listen, master and missy; but, mind you, never you say one word,—now hush and listen," and in a very low voice she went on: "To-night we'll get to a big town where there's a fair. Mick's got it all settled to give you to a—a gentleman there, who'd dress you up fine and teach you to sing and to dance."

"Would he be kind to us?" asked both children eagerly. Diana shook her head.

"Maybe, and maybe not. That's just why I cannot stand by and see you given to him," said Diana, half as if speaking to herself. "It was a bad day's work when he took them," she went on. Then suddenly rousing herself: "Listen children, again," she said. "If that man as I'm speaking of comes to see you to-night, as he most likely will, you must, for my sake and your own, speak very pretty, and try to laugh and look happy and answer all he says. It's only for once. For to-morrow—I can't say for sure to-morrow—but I think it will be, and I can't say the time—I'm going to do my best to get you sent back to where you should never have been taken from." She stopped a moment as if to judge of the effect of her words. For an instant the children did not speak; they just stared at her with their blue eyes opened to their widest extent, their little white faces looking whiter than before, till gradually a rush of rosy colour spread over them, the blue eyes filled with tears, and both Duke and Pamela flung themselves into the gipsy girl's arms.

"*Home*, do you mean, Diana?" they said. "Home to our own dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma?"

"And Toby," added Duke.

"And Toby," echoed Pam.

Diana clasped them tight; her eyes, that for many a day had not shed a tear, were running over.

"Yes, home, my blessed darlings," she said.

"But you'll come with us" was the next idea. "You've been so good to us. Grandpapa'd never put *you* in prison, Diana."

They sat up now and looked at her anxiously.

"Perhaps not," she said, shaking her head nevertheless. "But I dursn't go with you. I must stay here to stop them going the right way after you for one thing. And then—you didn't know it, but, bad as he is, Mick's my brother. I dursn't get him into trouble."

"Mick's your bruvver!" repeated Pam; "the same as bruvver is to me. And he speaks so naughty to you, Diana. I don't fink he *can* be your bruvver. I fink you've made a mistake. Oh do come wif us, dear Diana. You and Tim."

"Yes for Tim, it'd be the best thing he could do, and the best chance for you to get safe home. But for me," and again Diana shook her head. "Let alone Mick, I'm only a poor wild gipsy girl," she said. "I couldn't take to your pretty quiet ways; no, it'd kill me. It's in the gipsy blood—we must for ever be on the go. It wasn't so bad long ago when father and mother was alive. Father was honest—he was a gentleman gipsy, he was. But Mick's another sort. If I could get away from him I would—but not so as to get him into trouble. I'll try some day to get among a better lot. There's bad and good among us, though you mightn't believe it. But here am I wasting time talking of myself, and I want to tell you all I'm thinking of. First, do you know the name of the village or town nearest where you live?"

"Sandle'ham," said the children.

"But is that near your home?" pursued Diana. The twins shook their heads. They didn't know.

"Us was there once," said Duke. "But it was a long time ago. It seemed a very far way."

"And is there no village nearer?"

"Yes, of course," said Pamela. "There's where Barbara Twiss and the butcher Live, and where the church is."

"And what's it called?"

"What's it called?" repeated the children. "Why, it's just called the village. It isn't called anything else."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Diana. "And it was all new country thereabouts to me. Well, there's nothing for it but to make for Sandle'ham, and once there Tim must go to the police."

At this dreadful word the children set up a shriek, but Diana quickly stopped them.

"Hush, hush!" she said, "you'll have them all coming to see what's the matter. The police won't hurt *you*, you silly children. They'd be your best friends if only they could find you. I'd rather have had nothing

to say to them, for fear they should get too much out of Tim, but I see no other way to get you safe home. But now we mustn't talk any more, only remember all I've said if that man comes. And to-morrow, when I give you the word, you must be ready," she went on impressively; "you won't be afraid with Tim. I'll do the best I can, but we'll have to trust a deal to Tim; and you must do just what he tells you, and never mind if it seems strange and hard. It's the only chance for them," she added to herself, with a strange longing in her beautiful dark eyes, as she again left them, "but if I could but have taken them safe back myself I'd have felt easier in my mind."

She put in her head again to warn the children not to try to speak to Tim, and if they must speak to each other to do so in a whisper.

But at first their hearts seemed too full to speak. They just sat with their arms round each other, too bewildered and almost stunned with the good news to take it in.

"Bruvver," said Pamela at last, "don't you fink it's because us has said our prayers such many many times?"

"P'raps," replied Duke.

"And you *don't* fink now what—you know what you said about Grandpapa and Grandmamma," said Pamela, her voice faltering.

Duke hesitated. He was not quite generous enough to own that his gloomy prophecies had been a good deal the result of his being tired and cross and contradictory. In his heart he had no misgiving such as he had expressed to Pamela—he had no idea that what he had said might really have been true.

"You *don't* fink so, bruvver?" persisted Pam.

"I daresay if us goes back very soon it'll make them better even if they are very ill. I think us had better put that in our prayers too—for us to get back to them so quick that there won't be time for them to get very ill. I wouldn't mind them being just a *little* ill, would you, sister? It'd be so nice to see them getting better."

"I'd *rather* they wasn't ill at all," said Pamela, "but I daresay God'll understand. Oh I *wish* it was to-morrow! don't you, bruvver?"

"Hush," said Duke. "Diana said us mustn't talk loud—and see, sister, they're going to put the horse in and go on again. Oh how tired I am of going along shaking like this all day! And don't you remember, sister, when us was little us used to think it would be so nice to live in a cart like a house, like this?"

"Us never thought how *nugly* it would be inside," said Pamela, glancing round the little square space in which they were with great dissatisfaction. And no wonder—the waggon was stuffed with bundles and packages of all shapes and sizes; on the sides hung dirty coats and cloaks belonging to some of the tribe, and the only pleasant object to be seen was a heap of nice clean-looking baskets and brooms, which had been brought in here, as the basket-cart was already filled to overflowing. For the gipsies expected to do a good trade in these things at the Crookford fair.

"I wish Diana would give us one of these nice baskets to take home—a present to Grandmamma," continued Pamela, as her glance fell upon them.

"You're very silly, sister," said Duke. "Don't you understand that us is going to *run away*, like Tim has

always been wanting. And Diana's going to help us to run away. Mick mustn't know and nobody, not till us is too far for them to catch us. I think it's a great pity Diana told you; you're too little to understand."

"I'm as big as you, bruvver, and my birfday's the same. You're very unkind to say I'm littler than you, and I *do* understand."

She spoke indignantly, but the last words ended in tears. Poor little people!—life in a gipsy caravan was not the sort of thing to improve their tempers. But the dispute was soon followed by a reconciliation, and then they decided it was better not to talk any more about what Diana had told them, but to "make plans" inside their heads about how nice it would be to go home again; how they would knock at the door so softly, and creep into the parlour where Grandmamma would be sitting by the fire with Toby at her feet, and Grandpapa at the table with the newspaper; and *how* they would hug them both! At which point you will see the plan making was no longer confined to the "inside of their heads."

"And Duke," added Pamela half timidly. "Us must tell all about the broken bowl. And us must always tell everything like that to Grandmamma."

"Yes," said Duke.

"I fink my voice that Grandmamma told us about *did* tell me to tell," pursued the little girl thoughtfully. "Didn't yours, bruvver?"

"I sometimes think it did," said Duke with unusual humility. "I think it must have been that I wouldn't listen. You would have listened, sister. It was much more my fault than yours. I shall tell *that*."

"No, no, it was bof our faults," said Pamela. "But I fink Grandpapa and Grandmamma will be so very pleased to have us that they won't care whose fault it was."

And then the two little creatures leant their heads each on the other's, and tried to keep themselves steady against the rough jolting, till by degrees—and it was the best thing they could have done—they both fell asleep, and were sleeping as peacefully as in their own white cots at home when, later in the afternoon, Diana got into the waggon again, and, rolling up an old shawl, carefully laid it as a pillow under the two fair heads. It was getting dusk by now, and the gipsies all disappeared into the vans, for they began to drive too quickly for it to be possible for them to keep up by walking alongside.

The gipsy girl sat there gazing at the two little faces she had learnt to love. She gazed at them with a deep tenderness in her dark eyes. She knew it was almost the last time she should see them, but it was not of that she was thinking.

"If I could but have taken them back myself and seen them safe!" she kept thinking. "But I daren't. With Tim no one will notice them much, but with me it'd be different. And it'd get Mick and the others into trouble, even if I didn't care for myself. It's safer for them too for me to stay behind. But how to get them safe out of Crookford! I must speak to Tim. And I don't care what Mick says or does after this. I'll never, *never* again have a hand in this kind of business; he may steal horses and poultry and what he likes, but I'll have no more to do with stealing children. If ill had come, or did come, to these innocent creatures I'd never know another easy moment."

CHAPTER IX.

CROOKFORD FAIR.

"And the booths of mountebanks,
With the smell of tan and planks."

LONGFELLOW.

The jolting had ceased, and it was quite dark before Duke and Pamela awoke. But through the little window of the van came twinkling lights, and as they sat up and looked about them they heard a good many unusual sounds—the voices of people outside calling to each other, the noise of wheels along stony roadways—a sort of general clatter and movement which soon told that the encampment for the night was not, as hitherto, on the edge of some quiet village or on a lonely moor.

"Bruvver," said Pamela, who had been the first to rouse up, "are you awake? What a long time us has been asleep! Is it the middle of the night, and what a noise there is."

Duke slowly collected his ideas. He did not speak, but he stood up on the bench and peeped out of the window.

"It must be that big place where there's a fair," he said. "Look, sister, there's lots and lots of carts and peoples. And over there do you see there's rows of little shops—that must be the fair."

He seemed rather excited, but Pamela, after one peep, would not look any more.

"No, no, bruvver," she said. "I am frightened. If it is the fair, that man will be coming that Diana told us about, and perhaps he'll take us before Diana and Tim can help us to run away. I'm too frightened."

But Duke had managed to get the window unhooked, and was now on tiptoe, stretching out his head as far as it would go.

"Oh sister," he exclaimed, drawing it in again, "*you should* see. It's such a big place, and such lots and lots of peoples, and such a noise. Oh do climb up here, sister, and look out."

But Pamela still cowered down in her corner. Suddenly they heard the well-known sound of the key in the door,—for when the children were alone in the van they were always locked in,—and turning to look, they saw Diana. She brought with her a bowl of milk and some bread, which the children were very glad of, as they had eaten so little at dinner, and she said nothing till they had finished it.

"Are you still sleepy?" she said then. "Would you like to go to bed or to come out a little with me?"

"Oh, to go out a little," said Duke; but Pamela crept up close to Diana.

"I don't want to go out," she said. "I'm frightened. But I don't want to stay here alone for fear that man should come. Can't you help us to run away now, before he comes? Oh please do, dear Diana."

Diana soothed her very kindly.

"Don't be frightened, missy dear," she said. "He won't be coming just yet. I think you'd better come out a little with me. You'll sleep better for it."

"And you won't take us to that man?" said Pamela half suspiciously.

Diana looked at her reproachfully.

"Missy, missy dear, would I do such a thing?"

"Sister, you know she wouldn't," said Duke.

"Then I'll come," said Pamela, and in another minute the two children, each with a hand of the gipsy girl, were threading their way through the lanes of vans and carts, half-completed booths, tethered horses and donkeys, men, women, and children of all kinds, which were assembled on the outskirts of Crookford in preparation for the great fair. Nobody noticed them much, though one or two gipsies loitering about, not of her own party, nodded at Diana as she passed as an old acquaintance, with some more or less rough joke or word of greeting. And those belonging to Mick's caravan did not seem surprised at seeing the children at freedom. This was what Diana wished, and it had been partly with this object, as well as to accustom Duke and Pamela a little to their present quarters, that she had managed to get leave to take them out a little, late as it was. It had seemed quite dark outside—looking through the window of the van—but in reality it was only dusk, though the lights moving about, the fires lit here and there in little stoves outside the booths, and the general bustle and confusion, made it a very bewildering scene. Pamela tried not to be frightened, but she clutched Diana's hand close, till suddenly, on turning a corner, they ran against a boy coming at full speed. It was Tim, and the little girl let go of Diana to spring to him with a cry of pleasure.

"Oh Tim, dear Tim," she cried, "us hasn't seen you for such a long time!"

"True enough, missy," he said cheerfully; and, looking at him more closely, both children noticed that he did look brighter and merrier than ever, little as he was in the habit of seeming sad. "It's all right," he went on, turning to Diana; "such a piece o' luck!"

"Come and tell me as soon as we come back," said the girl. "I'll be in the van putting them to bed. Mick's off—gone to look for the Signor. I'll try for them to be asleep when *they* come," and with these rather mysterious words Diana drew on the children, and Tim ran off with a nod.

They walked on till they got a little clear of the crowd, and on to a road evidently leading out of the town. It had grown darker, but the moon had risen, and by her light at some little distance the children saw the same silvery thread that they had noticed winding along below them from the high moorland some days before.

"That's the river where the boats are like houses—that Tim told us about," said Pamela.

"Yes," said Diana, "it's the canal. It comes right into the town over that way," and she pointed the left. "The boats take stone from hereabouts,—there's lots of quarries near Crookford. I wanted you to see it, for we've been thinking, Tim and me—it's more his thought than mine—that that'd be the best way for you to get away. Mick'll not be likely to think of the canal, and Tim's been down to see if there was any one among the boat-people as would take you. He used to know some of them not far from here. And the canal goes straight on to a place called Monkhaven, on the road to Sandle'ham. Did you ever hear of that place?"

The children shook their heads.

"Well, it can't be helped. That's as far as you can get by the canal. After that Tim must use his wits and look about him; and when you get to Sandle'ham I'm afraid there's no help for it—you'll have to ask the police to take you home."

"But Tim too?" said Pamela. "Tim's to go home with us."

"I hope so," said Diana. "I hope the old gentleman and lady will be good to him, poor boy! Tell them it

was none of *his* fault, your being stolen away—he's but a poor homeless waif himself; and even if so be as they could do nothing for him, he mustn't come back here. Mick'd be like to kill him."

"But Grandpapa and Grandmamma will be good to him. I *know* they will," said Duke and Pamela together. "They'd be good to you too, Diana," they added timidly.

But Diana again shook her head.

"That can't be," she said. "Still, when all this has blown over a bit, I'll try to hear of you some day. Tim'll maybe be able to let me know the name of the place where your home is."

"And you must come to see us. Oh yes, yes—you must, Diana!" said the children, dancing about with glee. The girl looked at them in some surprise; it was the first time she had seen them merry and light-hearted as they were at home, and it made her better understand how wretched their new life must have been for them to change them so.

"I'll try," she said; "but it doesn't much matter for that. The thing is for you to be safe at home yourselves."

Then she said it was time to go back. It was quite dark by now, and the children kept very close to her as they found themselves again in the rabble of the behind-the-scenes of the fair. People there too were beginning to shut up for the night, for most of them, poor things, had been working hard all day.

As they came up to where Mick's party had encamped, Diana said something in the queer language the children did not understand to some of the gipsies who were hanging about. Their answer seemed to relieve her.

"Come, children," she said; "you must be tired. I'll get you to bed as quick as I can; and try to get to sleep. It's the best thing you can do."—"They'll not be coming just yet, maybe," she added to herself, "if they've got to drinking over their bargain; so much the better perhaps. If only the children are asleep they'll perhaps be none the wiser, and I'll hear all there is to hear."

The preparing for bed was a different thing indeed from the careful washing, hair-brushing, and attiring in snow-white nightgowns that was called "undressing" "at home." All that Diana could manage in the way of washing apparatus was a rough wooden tub with cold water, a bit of coarse soap, and an old rag by way of a towel! And even this she had done more to please the children than because she saw any need for it. This evening she made no pretence of anything after taking off the children's outer clothes—Duke's nankin suit, now sadly soiled and dilapidated, and the old red flannel skirt and little shawl which had replaced Pamela's white frock. The frock was still in existence; but by Mick's orders Diana had trimmed it up gaudily for the child to make her appearance in to the Signor; so the little girl's attire was certainly very gipsy-like.

"Shall I have to go home to Grandmamma with this ugly old petticoat and no frock?" she asked, when Diana had taken off all her clothes down to her little flannel vest, and wrapped her up for the night in a clean, though old, cotton bedgown of her own. "And why have you taken off my chemise, Diana? I've kept it on other nights."

"I'm going to wash it," said Diana. "I'd like to send you back as decent as I *can*."

Pamela seemed satisfied. Then she and Duke knelt together at the side of the shake-down Diana called their bed, and said their prayers together and aloud. The gipsy girl had heard them before—several times

—but this evening she listened with peculiar attention, and when at the end the little creatures, after praying for dear Grandpapa and Grandmamma, and that God would please soon take them safe home again, went on to add a special petition for "dear Diana," who had been so kind to them, that she might be always good and happy, and that Mick and nobody should be unkind to her, the girl turned away her face to hide the tears which slowly welled up into her eyes.

"Good-night, dear Diana," said the two little voices, as she stooped to kiss them.

"Good-night, master and missy. Sleep well, and don't be frightened if you're wakened up. I'll be here." Then, as she was turning away, she hesitated. "Do you really think now," she said, "that it's any good praying for a wild gipsy girl like me?"

"Of course it is," said Pamela, starting up again. "Why shouldn't it be as much good for you as for any one? If you want to be good—and I think you are good, Diana—you can't help praying to God. For all the good comes from Him. That's what Grandmamma told us. And He puts little bits of His good into us."

Diana looked puzzled.

"Yes," persisted Pamela, nodding her head. "There's like a little voice that speaks inside us—that tells us when we're" (Pamela could use the word "we," as correctly as possible when speaking in general, not merely of Duke and herself) "naughty and when we're good."

In her turn Diana nodded her head.

"And the more we listen to it the plainer we hear it," added Pamela.

"Us didn't listen to it when us found that Toby had brokened the bowl," said Duke gravely. "At least I didn't, and it leaves off speaking when people doesn't listen."

Diana had long ago heard the story of the beginning of the children's troubles.

"Listening to it is almost like praying, you see, Diana," said Pamela. "And of course when we know all the good comes from God, it's only *sense* to pray to Him, isn't it?"

"I'll think about it," said the gipsy quietly. "Now go to sleep as fast as you can."

Easier in their innocent minds about their own affairs by a great deal than Diana was *for* them, the twins quickly followed her advice. But Diana dared not go to rest herself; in the first place she had a long talk with Tim in a corner where they could not be overheard, and then, finding that Mick had not yet come back, she hung about, terrified of his returning with the Signor, and frightening the poor children, without her being at hand.

"You'd best go to bed, I think," said Tim. "I 'spex he's got to drinking somewhere, and he won't be seen to-night."

"I dursn't," said Diana. "He might come any minute, and that man might want to carry them off in their sleep, so as to have no noise about it."

"But how could you stop him?" asked Tim, his merry face growing very sober.

"I'd do my best, and you must be ready, you know," she said.

"He'd be in a nice taking if he didn't find the Signor, or if *he* wanted to back out of it," said Tim.

"Not much fear of that," said Diana. "The Signor's too sharp; he'll soon see he couldn't get such a pretty pair once in twenty years. He's a man I shudder at; once he wanted me to join his show, but, bad and cruel as Mick is, I'd rather have to do with him. But hush, Tim, there they are! I hear Mick's voice swearing—they're coming this way. Run you off and hide yourself, but try to creep up to the van where the children are when they're gone, and I'll tell you what has to be done."

Tim disappeared with marvellous quickness. Diana rose to her feet and went forward a little, with a light in her hand, to meet her brother. He was accompanied, as she expected, by the Signor, and she saw in a moment that Mick was more than half drunk, and in a humour which might become dangerous at any moment.

"He's made him drunk," she said to herself, "thinking he'll drive a better bargain. He'd better have let him alone."

The Signor was a very small, dark, fat man—dressed, as he considered, "quite like a gentleman." He had bright, beady, twinkling eyes, and a way of smiling and grinning as if he did not think nature had made him enough like a monkey already, in which I do not think any one would have agreed with him!

"So here's your handsome sister, my friend Mick," he said, as he caught sight of Diana—"handsomer than ever. And you were coming to meet us, were you—very amiable I'm sure."

Mick, whose eyes were dazzled by the light, and who was too stupid to take in things quickly, frowned savagely when he saw the girl standing quietly before him.

"What are you waiting there for?" he said, with some ugly words. "There's no need of *you*. Get out of the way. I know where to find the childer. The Signor and I can manage our own affairs."

"Can you?" said Diana contemptuously. "Well, good-night, then. You'll waken them up and frighten them so that they'll scream for the whole fair to hear them. And how the Signor means to get them away quietly if they do so *I* can't say. There'd maybe be some awkward questions to answer as to how they came among us at all, if some of the people about should be honest, decent folk. And there are fools of that kind where you'd little look for them sometimes. However, it's no business of mine, as you say. Good-night," and she turned away.

The Signor turned to Mick with a very evil look in his face.

"Fool that *you* are," he muttered, but Mick only stared at him stupidly. The Signor caught his arm and shook him. "Are you going to let her go off?" he said. "You told me yourself she had looked after the brats and could do anything with them, and now you go and set her back up! She's fit to rouse the place out of spite, she is. And I can tell you I'm not going to get myself into trouble about these children you've made such a fuss about. I've not seen them yet, and rather than risk anything I'll be off," and he, in turn, seemed as if he were going off.

This roused Mick.

"Stay, stay—wait a bit," he said eagerly, "Diana," he called,—and as Diana was in reality only waiting behind a shed she soon appeared again,—"*I* were only joking. Of course it's for you to show the Signor the pretty dears—such care as she's had of them, so bright and merry as she's taught them to be, you wouldn't believe," he went on in a half whine. "It'll be a sore trouble to her to part with them—you'll have to think o' that, Signor. I've promised Diana we'd act handsome by *her*."

"Of course, of course," said the other, with a sneer. "Sure to be handsome doings where you and me's concerned, friend Mick. But where *are* the creatures? You're not playing me a trick after all, are you?" he went on, looking round as if he expected to see the children start up from the earth or drop down from the sky.

"This way," said Diana, more civilly than she had yet spoken, "follow me if you please—they're close by."

In another minute she was standing on the steps of the van with the key in the lock. Then suddenly she turned and faced the Signor.

"They're asleep," she said. "I kept them up and awake a long time, but I hadn't thought you'd be so late. I can wake them up if you like, and if they saw me there they wouldn't cry. But they'd be half asleep—there'd be no getting them to show off to-night. But of course it's as the Signor chooses."

He looked at her curiously. He was surprised to find her seemingly as eager as Mick that he should think well of the merchandise they were offering him for sale! He had rather expected the gipsy girl to set herself against the transaction, for he knew she disliked him, and that no money would have persuaded her herself to join his "troupe." But he was too low himself to explain anything in others except by the lowest motives. "She thinks she'll get something handsome out of me if she's civil about it," he said to himself. Seeing, however, that civility was to be the order of the day, he answered her with an extra quantity of grins.

"Quite of your opinion, my young lady. Better not disturb the little dears. Should like a look at them, however, with your kind assistance."

Diana said no more, but, unlocking and opening the door, stepped carefully into the van, followed by her companions—Mick remaining somewhat behind, probably because he could not have got quite into the recesses of the waggon without tumbling, and such sense as remained to him telling him he had better not make a noise. The van inside was divided in two—something after the manner of a bathing-machine, such as I daresay most children have often seen. The door in the middle was not locked, and Diana pushed it softly open; then, advancing with the light held high so as to show the children's faces without flaring painfully upon them, stood at one side and signed to the Signor to come forward. And he was too much startled and impressed—ugly, cold-hearted little wretch though he was—by the sight before him to notice the strange, half-triumphant, half-defiant expression on Diana's dark beautiful face.



"UPON MY WORD THEY ARE SOMETHING QUITE OUT OF THE COMMON," HE SAID;
"I WOULDN'T HAVE MISSED THEM FOR A GOOD DEAL. WHAT A KING AND
QUEEN OF THE PIGMIES, OR 'BABES IN THE WOOD,' THEY'D MAKE."—p. [173](#).

"There they are," it seemed to say, "and could anything be lovelier? *Wouldn't* you like to have them?"

They lay there—the delicate little faces flushed with "rosy sleep"—the fair fluffy hair like a golden shadow on the rough cushion which served as a pillow, each with an arm thrown round the other; they looked so like each other that even Diana was not sure which was which. No pair of fairies decoyed from their own country could have been prettier.

The Signor was startled into speaking the truth for once.

"Upon my word they are something quite out of the common," he said; "I wouldn't have missed them for a good deal. What a king and queen of the pigmies, or 'babes in the wood,' they'd make! I'll have to get something set up on purpose for them. And they're sharp at learning and speak plain you say?—at least he did," he added, turning round to look for Mick, who by this time had lurched up to the middle door of the van and was leaning on the lintel, looking in stupidly.

"Ay, they're sharp enough, and pretty spoken too," said Diana.

"Sharp and pretty spoken," echoed Mick.

"Then I'm your man," said the Signor; "I'll——"

But the girl interrupted him.

"There's one thing to be said," she began. "You must not think of letting them be seen hereabouts. You might get yourself and us too into trouble. It's too near where they come from."

The Signor held up his hands warningly.

"Hush," he said, "I don't want to know nothing of all that. They're two desolate orphans, picked up by you out of charity, and I take them to teach them a way of gaining a livelihood. That's all about it."

"Well, all the same, you can do nothing with them hereabouts," repeated Diana, anxious to gain time to put into execution the plans of escape. "You'd better leave them here quietly with us till after the fair. No one shall see them except those who've seen them already."

They were in the outer half of the van by now, for Diana, afraid of disturbing the children, had drawn back with the light, and the Signor had followed her.

At her last speech he turned upon her with sudden and angry suspicion.

"No, no," he said. "I'll have no tricks served me. Have you been putting your handsome sister up to this, Mick, you fool? You promised me the brats at once."

"Yes, at once. You shall have them at once when you pay me," said Mick, beginning to get angry in turn, "but not before. I don't want to keep them—not I; they're the pest of my life, they are, but I'll see my money or you shall never set eyes on them again."

And he looked so stolidly obstinate that the other man glanced at Diana as if for advice.

"You'd better have left him alone," she said in a low voice, contemptuously. "If you make him angry now he's not sober, there's no saying what he'll do."

The Signor began to be really afraid that his prey might slip through his hands. He turned to Diana.

"I'm one for quick work and no shilly-shallying," he said. "And I have Mick's word for it. He's signed a paper. I'll take care to get myself and you into no trouble, but I must have the children at once. Now listen, Mick. I'll be here to-morrow morning at say eight—well, nine o'clock, with the money. And you must have the children ready—and help me to take 'em off quietly, or—or—I don't want no bother," he added meaningly.

"All right," said Mick; "they'll be ready," and he followed the Signor down the steps of the van, Diana still holding the light.

"Nine o'clock," said the Signor once more, as if he depended more on the girl than on the man.

"At nine o'clock," she repeated, and she stood there till quite sure that the Signor had taken himself off, and that Mick had no intention of returning.

Then she blew out the light and crept softly in and out among the vans, tethered horses, etc., forming the gipsy caravan, till she came to the waggon where she knew Tim slept. He was wide awake, expecting her, and in answer to her whispered call said nothing till they had got some yards away.

"I think the other boys is asleep," he said, "but best make sure. Well, Diana?"

"You must go at once—no, not just at once, but as soon as the dawn breaks. That man's coming for them at nine, and once in his hands——!" Diana shook her head, and though she said no more the boy understood her, that then all hope of escape would be gone.

"I'll be ready," said Tim.

CHAPTER X.

A BOAT AND A BABY.

"And now I *have* a little boat."

Peter Bell.

The children were still sleeping when the first straggling feeble rays of dawn began to creep through the darkness. Diana stood at the door of the van and looked anxiously at the sunrise. Her experienced eye soon saw that it was going to be a fine day, and she gave a sigh of relief. She was still dressed as she had been the night before, for she had not slept, not lain down even—so great had been her fear of falling asleep—at all. She had spent all the dark hours in preparing for the flight of the little prisoners—all that her hands, untrained in such matters as sewing and mending, could do to make the twins appear in decent guise on their return to their own home had been done. And now all was ready. There was nothing to do but to wake them and explain to them what was before them. Tim was already up and off—for she had arranged with him to meet the children a little way out of the town, and he had tapped at the door of the van as he passed.

There was no one stirring among the queer inhabitants of the fair, as Diana remarked with satisfaction. Everything was perfectly still, and with a sigh the gipsy girl stepped up into the van again and went through to the inner part. Duke and Pamela were lying much as they had been the evening before. It seemed a pity to wake them, but it had to be done. Diana stooped down and gently shook Duke's arm.

"Master," she said,—"*master and missy*, you must wake up."

Duke opened his sleepy eyes and stared before him; Pamela, more quickly awakened, started up, crying:

"What is it, Diana? It isn't that naughty man come for us?"

"No, no," said the gipsy, glad to see that Pamela had her wits about her. "It is that Tim is ready to run away with you, as you've so often planned. And you must get up and dress as quick as you can before Mick or any one is awake, for the man will be coming this morning, and I must have you ever so far away before then."

Her words completely aroused both children. In an instant they were on their feet, nervously eager to be dressed and off. There was no question of baths *this* morning, but Diana washed their faces and hands well, and smoothed their tangled hair.

"I must make them as tidy as I can," she said to herself with a sob in her throat.

Duke saw with satisfaction that his nankin suit—which Diana had persuaded him not to wear the day before, having lent him a pair of trowsers of Tim's, which she had washed on purpose, and in which, doubled up nearly to his waist, he looked very funny—was quite clean; and Pamela, to her still greater surprise, found herself attired in a tidy little skirt and jacket of dark blue stuff, with a little hood of the same for her head.

"Why, what's this?" she said. "It's a new gown!"

"I made it," said Diana quietly. "I wanted you to look as tidy as I could. You'll tell them, missy dear—won't you?—that poor Diana did her best."

"Indeed us will," cried both together. But they did not know that the gipsy girl had cut up her one decent dress to clothe little Pamela.

"And shall us see Grandpapa and Grandmamma to-day?" they went on, hugging Diana in their joy as they spoke.

"Not to-day, nor to-morrow, but before long, I hope," she replied. And then, as they were eager to go, "Won't you say your prayers, master and missy, that you may come safe to your home; and," she added in a low voice, "ask God to show poor Diana how to be good?"

"Us will always pray for you, dear Diana," they said, after they had risen from their knees again, "and some day, you know, you *must* come and see us."

She did not answer, but, quickly lifting them down the steps of the waggon, locked the door and put the key in her pocket. Then, still without speaking,—the children seeming to understand they must be as quiet as possible,—she lifted Pamela in her arms, and Duke running beside, they had soon made their way out of the midst of the vans and carts and booths, all of whose owners were still asleep.

For even now it was barely dawn, and the air felt chilly, as is generally the case early of a May morning.

Diana walked so fast, though she had a big basket as well as a little girl in her arms, that Duke, though he would not have owned it, could scarcely keep up with her. But at last, just as he was beginning to feel he must cry mercy, she slackened her pace and began to look about her.

"He should be somewhere near," she said, more as if speaking to herself than to the children, and just then, with a sort of whoop, out tumbled Tim from the other side of a low hedge, where there was a dry ditch in which he had been comfortably lying.

"Hush!" said Diana, glancing round her.

"There's no need," said Tim; "there's not a soul within hearing. I needn't have come on before for that matter. No one saw us start."

"And which way do you go now?" asked the gipsy, setting Pamela down as she spoke, to the child's great satisfaction, though she had not liked to say to Diana that she was really too big to be carried.

"Straight on for about half a mile," answered the boy; "then there's a road to the right takes us straight to the canal. It's not light enough yet for you to see, but there's a little house close to the towing path over there, where the boats often stop the night when it's crowded in the town. That's where they're to be."

"All right," said Diana. "I'll go with you to the turn, and then I must get back as fast as I can."

"Let me carry the basket," said Tim. He had a bundle under his arm, but it was very light, for his possessions were few.

"What's in the basket?" asked Duke.

"All I could get," said Diana. "Some bread and eggs, and some oranges I bought last night. I thought you'd be glad of them maybe. And Tim, you have the money safe?"

Tim nodded his head.

In a few minutes they reached the road he had spoken of. In silence poor Diana kissed the three children and turned away, for she could not speak. But Duke and Pamela burst into tears.

"Oh if you would but come with us," they said over and over again. But Diana shook her head.

"You shouldn't cry, master and missy dear, to go to your own home. It was a wicked shame to take you from it, but I hope God will forgive me the little I had to do with it, for I've truly done my best to get you safe back. And you'll ask the kind gentleman and lady to be good to poor Tim, and put him in an honest way of life."

"Oh yes," sobbed the children. And then Diana kissed them again and resolutely turned away. But Tim ran after her.

"You don't think Mick'll beat you?" he said anxiously.

"He shan't have the chance," she answered scornfully. "No, no, Tim, I'll take care of myself. Be a good boy; getting away from us is the best thing could come to you. And some day maybe I'll have news of you, and you of me perhaps."

Tim hastened back to the children, but his merry face was sad and his heart heavy.

A short time brought them to the edge of the canal, and there sure enough a boat was moored. There was no one moving about the little house Tim had pointed out, but on board the canal boat two figures were to be seen—or rather three, for they were those of a young man and a younger woman with a baby in her arms; and in answer to a whistle from Tim the man came forward and called out cheerfully, "Good morning; is it all right?"

"All right," called back Tim, and then he turned to the children.

"We're going in this boat, master and missy. See, won't it be fine fun, sailing away along the canal?"

Pamela seemed a little frightened.

"You're sure he won't take us to that naughty man?" she said, holding Tim's hand tight.

"Bless you, no; it's to get away from him we're going in the boat. Peter—that's the name of the man there—Peter's promised to take us as far as he goes towards Sandle'ham. It's such a piece of luck as never was to have come across him; he's the cousin of the boy I told you of who let me stay in his boat when I was a little 'un."

"Oh," cried the children,— "oh yes, us remembers that story. It was a boy and his mother. And was it a boat just like this, Tim?"

"Not near so clean and tidy. This one's been all new painted, don't you see? It's as clean as clean. But we must be quick. Peter and I'll jump you in. He's all ready to start. There's the horse a-waiting."

Duke was quite content, but Pamela still hung back a little.

"Us has never been in a boat," she said.

"Come on," called out Peter, and the young woman with the baby came forward with a smile.

"You must look sharp," said Peter, in what was meant to be an encouraging tone. "The morning's getting on, you know," he added to Tim, "and if those folk down yonder took it in their heads to come this way it'd be awk'ard."

"I know," said Tim, and lifting Duke in his arms he handed him over to Peter, thinking Pamela would be sure to follow. So she was, for she would have gone after "bruvver" down the crater of Vesuvius itself I do believe, but she looked white and trembled, and whispered piteously,

"I am so frightened, Tim."

"But it's better than if Mick had cotched us, and you'd had to go to that Signor man, missy," said Tim encouragingly.

This appealed to Pamela's common sense, and in a few minutes she seemed quite happy. For Peter's wife introduced her to the baby, and as it was really rather a nice baby—much cleaner than one could have expected to find one of its species on a canal boat—the little girl soon found it a most interesting object of study. She had seldom seen little babies, and her pride was great when its mother proposed to her to hold it on her own knee, and even allowed her to pull off its socks to count for herself its ten little round rosy buttons of toes. The toes proved too much for Duke, who had hitherto stood rather apart, considering himself, as a boy, beyond the attractions of dolls and babies. But when Tim even—great grown-up, twelve years old Tim—knelt down to admire the tiny feet at Pamela's call, Duke condescended to count the toes one by one for himself, and to say what a pity it was Toby was not here—baby could ride so nicely on Toby's back, couldn't she? This idea, expressed with the greatest gravity, set Peter and his wife off laughing, and all five, or six if baby is to be included, were soon the best friends in the world.

"How nice it is here," said Pamela; "I'm not frightened now, Tim; only I wish Diana could have come. It's so much nicer than in the waggon. You don't think Mick will find out where us is, do you, Tim?" and a little shudder passed through her.

"Oh no, no; no fear," said Tim, but her words reminded him and Peter that they were by no means "out of the wood." Peter was far from anxious for a fight with the gipsies, whose lawless ways he knew well; and besides this, being a kind-hearted though rough fellow, he had already begun to feel an interest in the stolen children for their own sake; though no doubt his consent to take them as passengers had been won by the promises of reward Tim had not hesitated to hold out.

He and the boy looked at each other.

"We must be starting," said the bargeman, and he turned to jump ashore and attach the towing ropes to the patient horse. "You must keep them in the cabin for a while," he said to his wife. "They mustn't risk being seen till we're a long way out of Crookford."

Duke and Pamela looked up, but without clearly understanding what their new host said. And Tim, who saw that Peter's queer accent puzzled them, was not sorry. He did not want them to be frightened; he was frightened enough himself to do for all three, he reflected, and they were so good and biddable he could keep them quiet without rousing their fears. For, though he could not have explained his own feelings, it somehow went to the boy's heart to see the two little creatures already looking happier and more peaceful than he had ever seen them! Why should they not be quite happy? They were going to

Grandpapa and Grandmamma and Toby; they had no longer cruel Mick to fear; they had Tim to take care of them—only the thought of poor Diana left behind made them a little sad!

"It is so nice here," repeated Pamela, when Tim's words had completely reassured her. "But I'm rather hungry. Us hadn't any breakfast, you know, Tim. Mightn't us, have some of the bread in the basket."

"I've got some bread and some fresh milk," said Mrs. Peter. "I got the milk just before you came; the girl at the 'Rest'"—the 'Rest' was the little house where the canal boats stopped—"fetched it early."

"Oh, us would like some milk," said the children eagerly.

"Come into the cabin then, and you'll show me what you have in your basket," said the young woman; and thus the children were easily persuaded to put themselves in hiding.

The cabin was but one room, though with what in a house would have been called a sort of "lean-to," large enough to hold a bed. All was, of course, very tidy, but so much neater and, above all, cleaner than the gipsies' van that Duke and Pamela thought it delightful. The boat had been newly repaired and painted, and besides this, Peter's wife—though she could neither read nor write and had spent all her life on a canal boat—was quite a wonder in her love of tidiness and cleanliness.

"I'd like to live here always," said Pamela, whose spirits rose still higher when she had had some nice fresh milk and bread.

"Not without Grandpapa and Grandmamma," said Duke reproachfully.

"Oh no, of course not," said Pamela. "But there wouldn't be quite enough room for them in here, would there, Mrs. Peter?"

"I am afraid not," she replied. "You see there's only one bed. But we've made a nice place for you, master and missy, in here," and she drew back a clean cotton curtain in one corner, behind which, on a sort of settle, Peter and she had placed one of their mattresses so as to make a nice shake-down. "You'll sleep very well in here, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," exclaimed the children, "us will be very comfortable. What nice clean sheets!" continued Pamela; "it makes me fink of our white beds at home," and her voice grew rather doleful, as if she were going to cry.

"But you've no need to cry about your home *now*, missy dear," said Tim. "You're on the way there."

"Yes, how silly I am!" said Pamela. "I fink I forgot. It's such a long time ago since us slept in a nice clean bed with sheets. I wish it was time to go to bed now."

"I think it would be a very good plan if you and master was to take a little sleep. You must be tired getting up so early," suggested Mrs. Peter, devoutly hoping they would agree to let themselves be quietly stowed away behind the checked cotton curtain. For poor Mrs. Peter was dreadfully afraid of the gipsies, and her motive in agreeing to befriend Tim and the children was really far more the wish to save them from the hands they had fallen among than any hope of reward.

"I'd rather bury baby, bless her, any day, than think of her among such," she had said on hearing the story.

Duke and Pamela looked longingly at the "nice white sheets." They were both, to tell the truth, very

sleepy, but dignity had to be considered.

"It's only babies that go to bed in the day, Nurse says," objected Duke. "She said so one day that us got into our beds, and she said us had dirtied them with our shoes. Us had been playing in the garden."

"But you've no need to keep your shoes on," said Mrs. Peter. "And many a big person's very glad to take a sleep in the day, when they're tired and have been up very early maybe."

So at last the twins allowed themselves to be persuaded, and Mrs. Peter's heart, and Tim's too, for that matter, were considerably lighter when the curtain was drawn forward and no trace of the little passengers was to be seen. Tim, following the young woman's advice, curled himself up in a corner where he was easily hidden.

"And now," said Mrs. Peter, "I'll just go up on the deck as usual, so that if any boats pass us who know us by sight, they'll never think we've any runaways on board; though for my part I can't see as that Mick'd dare to make much stir, seeing as he might be had up for stealing them."

"It's not him I'm so much afeared of as that Signor," said Tim. "He's such a terrible sharp one, Diana says."

"But the perlice must be after the children by now," persisted Mrs. Peter. "And every one far and wide knows of Crookford Fair and the gipsies that comes to it."

"P'raps they've never thought of gipsies," said Tim; and in this, as we know, he was about right.

The day passed peacefully. They met several boats making for Crookford, who hailed them as usual, and they were overtaken by one or two others making their way more quickly, because towed by two horses. But whether or not there had been any inquiry among the canal people at Crookford after the children, Peter and his party were left unmolested, and the sight of his wife and baby as usual on the deck would have prevented any one suspecting anything out of the common.

It was late afternoon when the three—for Tim had slept as soundly as the others—awoke. At first, in their nest behind the curtain, Duke and Pamela could not imagine where they were—then the touch and sight of the clean sheets recalled their memory.

"Oh, bruvver, aren't you glad?" said Pamela. "I wonder what o'clock it is, and if we've come a long way. Oh, I'm so hungry! I wonder where Tim is!"

Up jumped the boy like a faithful hound at the sound of his own name.

"Here I am, missy," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I've been asleep too—it makes one sleepy, I think, the smooth way the boat slips along."

"Not like the jogging and jolting in the van," said Duke. "I'm hungry too, Tim," he added.

"Just stop where you are a bit while I go out on the deck and see," said the boy.

He made his way cautiously, peeping out before he let himself be seen. The coast was clear, however. Mrs. Peter was knitting tranquilly, baby asleep on her knee—Peter himself enjoying an afternoon pipe.

For it was already afternoon.

"You've had a good nap, all on you," said the young woman, smiling. "I thought you'd 'a wakened up for

your dinner. But I looked in two or three times and the little dears was sleeping like angels in a picture—so Peter and I we thought it would be a pity to disturb you. Had you so far to come this morning?

"Not far at all," said Tim. "I cannot think what made me so sleepy, nor master and missy neither. Perhaps it's the being so quiet-like here after all the flurry of getting off and thinking they'd be after us. It's not often I sleep past my dinner time."

"I've kep' it for you," said Mrs. Peter. "There's some baked 'taters hot in the pan, and maybe the little master and missy'd like one of their eggs."

"I'm sure they would," said Tim; "a hegg and a baked 'tater's a dinner for a king. And there's the oranges for a finish up."

And he skipped back merrily to announce the good news.

The dinner was thoroughly approved of by Duke and Pamela, and after they had eaten it they were pleased at being allowed to stay on the deck of the boat, and to run about and amuse themselves as they chose, for they had now left Crookford so far behind them that Peter and his wife did not think it likely any one would be coming in pursuit.

"They'd 'a been after us by now if they'd been coming," said Peter. "A horse'd have overtook us long afore this, and not going so very fast nayther."

The children had not enjoyed so much liberty for many weary days, and their merry laughter was heard all over the boat, as they played hide-and-seek with Tim, or paddled their hands in the clear water, leaning over the sides of the boat. For they were now quite out in the country, and the canal bore no traces of the dirt of the town. It was a very pretty bit of country too through which they were passing; and though the little brother and sister were too young to have admired or even noticed a beautiful landscape of large extent, they were delighted with the meadows dotted over with daisies and buttercups, and the woods in whose recesses primroses and violets were to be seen, through which they glided.



"I DO FINK WHEN US IS QUITE BIG AND CAN DO AS US LIKES, US MUST HAVE A BOAT LIKE THIS, AND ALWAYS GO SAILING ALONG."—p. [195](#).

"I do fink when us is quite big and can do as us likes, us must have a boat like this, and always go sailing along," said Pamela, when, half-tired with her play, she sat down beside the baby and its mother.

"But it isn't always summer, or beautiful bright weather like this, missy," said the young woman. "It's not such a pleasant life in winter or even in wet weather. Last week even it was sadly cold. I hardly durst let baby put her nose out of the cabin."

"Then us'd only sail in the boat in fine weather," said Pamela philosophically, to which of course there was nothing to be said.

The next two days passed much in the same way. The sunshine fortunately continued, and the children saw no reason to change their opinion of the charms of canal life, especially as now and then Peter landed them on the banks for a good run in the fields. And through all was the delightful feeling that they were "going home."

CHAPTER XI.

A SAD DILEMMA.

"Like children that have lost their way
And know their names, but nothing more."
Phæbe.

It was the last night on the canal. Early the next morning they would be at Monkhaven. The children were fast asleep; so were Peter and his wife and baby. Only Tim was awake. He had asked to stay on deck, as he was quite warm with a rug which Mrs. Peter lent him, and the cabin was full enough. It was a lovely night, and the boy lay looking at the stars overhead thinking, with rather a heavy heart. The nearer they got to the children's home the more anxious he became, not on their account but on his own. It would be so dreadful to be turned adrift again, and, in spite of all the little people's promises, he could not feel sure that the old gentleman and lady would care to have anything to say to him.

"I'm such a rough one and I've been with such a bad lot," thought the poor boy to himself while the tears came to his eyes. But he looked up at the stars again, and somehow their calm cheerful shining seemed to give him courage. He had been on the point of deciding that as soon as he was quite sure of the children's safety he would run away, without letting himself be seen at all, though where he should run to or what would become of him he had not the least idea! But the silvery light overhead reminded him somehow of his beautiful dream, for it illumined the boat and the water and the trees as if they were painted by fairy fingers.

"It's come right so far, leastways as far as a dream could be like to real things," he reflected. "I don't see why it shouldn't come right all through. Just to think how proud I'd be if they'd make me stable-boy, or gardener's lad maybe, and I could feel I were earning something and had a place o' my own in the world. That's what mother would 'a wished for me. 'Never mind how humble you are if you're earning your bread honest-like,' I've oft heard her say. Poor mother, she'd be glad to know I was out o' that lot anyway," and Tim's imagination pointed back to the gipsy caravan. "All, saving Diana—what a lot they are, to be sure! I'm sure and I hope she'll get out of it some day. 'Tis best to hope anyway, so I'll try not to be down-hearted," and again Tim glanced up at the lovely sky. "If I could but make a good guess now which of them there stars is heaven, or the way into it anyway, I'd seem to know better-like where poor mother is, and I'd look for it every night. I'm going to try to be a better lad, mother dear. I can promise you that, and somehow I can't help thinking things 'll come straighter for me."

And then Tim curled himself round like a dormouse, and shut up his bright merry eyes, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

He had kept awake later than he knew probably, for the next morning's sun was higher in the skies than he had intended it should be when a slight shake of his arm and a not unfriendly though rough voice awoke him. Up he jumped in a fright, for he had not yet got over the fear of being pursued.

"What's the matter?" he cried, but Peter—for Peter it was—soon reassured him.

"Naught's the matter," he said, "don't be afeared, but we're close to Monkhaven. I've got to go on to the

wharf, but that's out o' your way. I thought we'd best talk over like what you'd best do. I've been up early; I want to get to the wharf before it's crowded. So after you've had some breakfast, you and the little uns, what d'ye think of next?"

"To find the quickest road to Sandle'ham," said Tim; "that's the only place they can tell the name of near their home. Diana," he went on, "Diana thought as how I'd better go straight to the police at Monkhaven and tell them the whole story, only not so as to set them after Mick if I can help it. She said the police here is sure to know of the children's being stolen by now, and they'd put us in the way of getting quick to their home."

"I think she's right," said Peter. "I'd go with you myself, but my master's a sharp one, and I'd get into trouble for leaving the boat and the horse, even if he didn't mind my having took passengers for onst," he added, with a smile.

"No, no," said Tim, "I'll manage all right. Not that I like going to the police, but if so be as it can't be helped. And look here, Peter," he went on, drawing out of the inside of his jacket a little parcel carefully pinned to the lining, "talking of passengers, this is all I can give you at present. It was all Diana could get together, but I feel certain sure, as I told you, the old gentleman and lady will do something handsome when they hear how good you've been," and out of the little packet he gradually, for the coins were enveloped in much paper, produced a half-crown, three shillings, and some coppers.

Peter eyed them without speaking. He was fond of money, and even half-a-crown represented a good deal to him. But he shook his head.

"I'm not going to take nothing of that," he said; "you're not yet at your journey's end. I won't say but what I'd take a something, and gladly, from the old gentleman if he sees fit to send it when he's heard all about it. A letter'll always get to me, sooner or later, at the 'Bargeman's Rest,' Crookford. You can remember that—Peter Toft—that's my name."

"I'll not forget, you may be sure," said Tim. "It's very good of you not to take any, for it's true, as you say, we may need it. And so you think too it's best to go straight to the police at Monkhaven."

"I do so," said Peter, and thus it was settled.

There were some tears, as might have been expected, and not only on the children's part, when they came to say good-bye to Mrs. Peter and the baby. But they soon dried in the excitement of getting on shore again and setting off under Tim's care on the last stage of their journey "home."

"Is it a very long walk, do you think, Tim?" they asked. "Us knows the way a *long* way down the Sandle'ham road. Is that Sandle'ham?" as they saw the roofs and chimneys of Monkhaven before them.

"I wish it were!" said Tim. "No, that's a place they call Monkhaven, but it's on the road to Sandle'ham. Did you never hear tell of Monkhaven, master and missy?—think now."

But after "thinking" for half a quarter of the second, the two fair heads gave it up.

"No; us had never heard of Monkhaven. What did it matter? Us would much rather go straight home."

Then Tim had to enter upon an explanation. He did not know the nearest way to Sandle'ham, and they might wander about the country, losing their way. They had very little money, and it most likely was too far to walk. He was afraid to ask unless sure it was of some one he could trust; for Mick might have sent

word to some one at Monkhaven about them. Then after Sandle'ham, which way were they to go? There was but one thing to do—ask the police. The police would take care of them and set them on the way.

But oh, poor Tim! Little did he know the effect of that fatal word, and yet he had far more reason to dread the police than the twins could have. More than once he had only just escaped falling into its clutches, and all through his vagrant life he had of course come to regard its officers as his natural enemies. But he had put all that aside, and, strong in his good cause, was ready now to turn to them as the children's protectors. Duke and Pamela, on the contrary, who had no real reason for being afraid of the police, were in frantic terror; their poor little imaginations set to work and pictured "prison" as where they were sure to be sent to. They would rather go back to the gipsies, they would rather wander about the fields with Tim till they died—rather *anything* than go near the police. And they cried and sobbed and hung upon Tim in their panic of terror, till the poor boy was fairly at his wit's end, and had to give in so far as to promise to say no more about it at present. So they spent the early hours of the beautiful spring morning in a copse outside the little town, where they were quite happy, and ate the provisions Peter's wife had put up for them with a good appetite, thinking no more of the future than the birds in the bushes; while poor Tim was grudging every moment of what he felt to be lost time, and wondering where they were to get their next meal or find shelter for the night!

It ended at last in a compromise. Tim received gracious permission himself to go to the police to ask the way, provided he left "us" in the wood—"us" promising to be very good, not to stray out of a certain distance, to speak to no possible passers-by, and to hide among the brushwood if any suspicious-looking people came near.

And, far more anxious at heart than if he could have persuaded them to come with him, but still with no real misgiving but that in half an hour he would be back with full directions for the rest of their journey, Tim set off at a run in quest of the police office of Monkhaven. He was soon in the main street of the town, which after all was more like a big village—except at the end where lay the canal wharf, which was dirty and crowded and bustling—and had no difficulty in finding the house he was in search of. On the walls outside were pasted up posters of different sizes and importance—notices of new regulations, and "rewards" for various losses—but Tim, taking no notice of any of these, hastened to knock at the door, and eagerly, though not without some fear, stood waiting leave to enter.

Two or three policemen were standing or sitting about talking to each other. Tim's first knock was not heard, but a second brought one to the door.

"Please, sir," said the boy without waiting to be asked what he wanted, "could you tell me the nearest way to Sandle'ham? I'm on my way there—leastways to some place near-by there—there's two childer with me, sir, as has got strayed away from their home, and——"

"What's that he's saying?" said another man coming forward—he was the head officer evidently—"Tell us that again,"—"Just make him come inside, Simpkins, and just as well shut to the door," he added in a low voice. Tim came forward unsuspiciously. "Well, what's that you were saying?" he went on to Tim.

"It's two childer, sir," repeated Tim—"two small childer as has got strayed away from their home—you may have heard of it?—and I'm a-taking them back, only I'm not rightly sure of the way, and I thought—I thought, as it was the best to ax you, seeing as you've maybe heard——" but here Tim's voice, which had been faltering somewhat, so keen and hard was the look directed upon him, came altogether to an end; and he grew so red and looked so uneasy that perhaps it was no wonder if Superintendent Boyds thought him a suspicious character.

"Ah indeed!—just so—you thought maybe we'd heard something of some children as had *strayed*—*strayed*; not been decoyed away—oh not at all—away from their home. And of course, young man, *you'd* heard nothing. You, nor those that sent you, didn't know nothing of this here, I suppose?" and Boyds unfolded a yellow paper lying on the table and held it up before Tim's face. "This here is new to you, no doubt?"

Tim shook his head. The yellow paper with big black letters told him nothing. Even the big figures, "£20 Reward," standing alone at the top, had no meaning for him. "I can't read, sir," he said, growing redder than before.

"Oh indeed! and who was it then that told you to come here about the children to ask the way, so that you could take them home, you know, and get the reward all nice and handy? You thought maybe you'd get it straight away, and that we'd send 'em home for you—was that what father or mother thought?"

Tim looked up, completely puzzled.

"I don't know anything about a reward," he said, "and I haven't no father or mother. Di——" but here he stopped short. "Diana told me to come to you," he was going to have said, when it suddenly struck him that the gipsy girl had bid him beware of mentioning any names.

"Who?" said the superintendent sharply.

"I can't say," said Tim. "It was a friend o' mine—that's all I can say—as told me to come here."

"A friend, eh? I'm thinking we'll have to know some more about some of your friends before we're done with you. And where is these same children, then? You can tell us that anyway!"

"No," said Tim, beginning to take fright, "I can't. They'd be afeared—dreadful—if they saw one o' your kind. I'll find my own way to Sandle'ham if you can't tell it me," and he turned to go.

But the policeman called Simpkins, at a sign from his superior, caught hold of him.

"Not so fast, young man, not so fast," said Boyds. "You'll have to tell us where these there children are afore you're off."

"I can't—indeed I can't—they'd be so frightened," said Tim. "Let me go, and I'll try to get them to come back here with me—oh do let me go!"

But Simpkins only held him the faster.

"Shut him up in there for a bit," said Boyds, pointing to a small inner room opening into the one where they were,—*"shut him in there till he thinks better of it,"* and Simpkins was preparing to do so when Tim turned to make a last appeal. "Don't lock me up whatever you do," he said, clasping his hands in entreaty; "they'll die of fright if they're left alone. I'd rather you'd go with me nor leave them alone. Yes, I'll show you where they are if you'll let me run on first so as they won't be so frightened."

Simpkins glanced at Boyds—he was a kinder man than the superintendent and really sharper, though much less conceited. He was half inclined to believe in Tim.

"What do you say to that?" he asked.

But Boyds shook his head.

"There's some trick in it. Let him run on first—I daresay! The children's safe enough with those as sent him here to find out. No, no; lock him up, and I'll step round to Mr. Bartlemore's,"—Mr. Bartlemore was the nearest magistrate,—"and see what he thinks about it all. It'll not take me long, and it'll show this young man here we're in earnest. Lock him up."

Simpkins pushed Tim, though not roughly, into the little room, and turned the key on him. The boy no longer made any resistance or appeal. Mr. Boyds put on his hat and went out, and the police office returned to its former state of sleepy quiet so far as appearances went. But behind the locked door a poor ragged boy was sobbing his eyes out, twisting and writhing himself about in real agony of mind.

"Oh, my master and missy, why did I leave you? What will they be doing? Oh they was right and I was wrong! The perlice is a bad, wicked, unbelieving lot—oh my, oh my!—if onst I was but out o' here——" but he stopped suddenly. The words he had said without thinking seemed to say themselves over again to him as if some one else had addressed them to him.

"Out o' here," why shouldn't he get out of here? And Tim looked round him curiously. There was a small window and it was high up. There was no furniture but the bench on which he was sitting. But Tim was the son of a mason, and it was not for nothing that he had lived with gipsies for so long. He was a perfect cat at climbing, and as slippery as an eel in the way he could squeeze himself through places which you would have thought scarcely wide enough for his arm. His sobs ceased, his face lighted up again; he drew out of his pocket his one dearest treasure, from which night or day he was never separated, his pocket-knife, and, propping the bench lengthways slanting against the wall like a ladder, he managed to fix it pretty securely by scooping out a little hollow in the roughly-boarded floor, so as to catch the end of the bench and prevent its slipping down. And just as Superintendent Boyds was stepping into Squire Bartlemore's study to wait for that gentleman's appearance, a pair of bright eyes in a round sunburnt face might have been seen spying the land from the small window high up in the wall of the lock-up room of the police office. Spying it to good purpose, as will soon be seen, though in the meantime I think it will be well to return to Duke and Pamela all alone in the copse.

Tim had not been gone five minutes before they began to wonder when he would be back again. They sat quite still, however, for perhaps a quarter of an hour, for they were just a little frightened at finding themselves really alone. If Tim had turned back again I don't think he would have had much difficulty in persuading them to go with him, even to the dreadful police! But Tim never thought of turning back; he had too thoroughly taken the little people at their word.

After a while they grew so tired of waiting quietly that they jumped up and began to run about. Once or twice they were scared by the sounds of footsteps or voices at a little distance, but nobody came actually through the copse, and they soon grew more assured, and left off speaking in whispers and peeping timidly over their shoulders. At last, "Sister," said Duke, "don't you think us might go just a teeny weeny bit out of the wood, to watch if us can't see Tim coming down the road? I know which side he went."

"Us promised to stay here, didn't us?" replied Pamela.

"Yes; but us *would* be staying here," said Duke insinuatingly. "It's just to peep, you know, to see if Tim's coming. He'd be very glad, for p'raps he'll not be quite sure where to find us again, and if us goes a little way along the road he'd see us quicker, and if us can't see him us can come back here again."

"Very well," said Pamela, and, hand in hand, the two made their way out of the shelter of the trees and trotted half timidly a little way along the road. It felt fresh and bright after the shady wood; some way before them they saw rows of houses, and already they had passed cottages standing separately in their

gardens and a little to the right was a church with a high steeple. Had they gone straight on they would soon have found themselves in Monkhaven High Street, where, at this moment, Tim was shut up in the police office. But after wandering on a little way they got frightened, for no Tim was to be seen, and they stood still and looked at each other.

"P'raps this isn't the way he went after all," said Pamela. They had already passed a road to the left, which also led into the town, though less directly.

"He *might* have gone that way," said Duke, pointing back to this other road; "let's go a little way along there and look."

Pamela made no objection. The side road turned out more attractive, for a little way from the corner stood a pretty white house in a really lovely garden. It reminded them of their own home, and they stood at the gates peeping in, admiring the flower-beds and the nicely-kept lawn and smooth gravel paths, for the moment forgetting all about where they were and what had become of their only protector.

Suddenly, however, they were rudely brought back to the present and to the fears of the morning, for from where they were they caught sight of a burly blue-coated figure making his way to the front door from a side gate by which he had entered the garden; for this pretty house was no other than Squire Bartlemore's, and the tall figure was that of Superintendent Boyds. He could not possibly have seen them—they were very tiny, and the bushes as well as the railings hid them from the view of any one not quite close to the gates. But they saw *him*—that was enough, and more than enough.

"He's caught Tim and put him in prison," said Pamela, and in a terror-stricken whisper, "and now he's coming for *us*, bruvver;" and bruvver, quite as frightened as she, did not attempt to reassure her. Too terrified to see that the policeman was not coming their way at all, but was quietly striding on towards the house, they caught each other again by the hand and turned to fly. And fly they did—one could scarcely have believed such tiny creatures could run so fast and so far. They did not look which way they went—only that it was in the other direction from whence they had come. They ran and ran—then stopped to take breath and glance timidly behind them, and without speaking ran on again—till they had left quite half a mile between them and the pretty garden, and ventured at last to stand still and look about them. They were in a narrow lane—high hedges shut it in at each side—they could see very little way before or behind. But though they listened anxiously, no sound but the twittering of the birds in the trees, and the faint murmur of a little brook on the other side of hedge, was to be heard.

"He can't be running after us, I don't fink," said Pamela, drawing a deep breath.

"No," said Duke, but then he looked round disconsolately. "What can us do?" he said. "Tim will never know to find us here."

"Tim is in prison," said Pamela, "It's no use us going back to meet him. I know he's in prison."

"Then what can us do?" repeated Duke.

"Us must go home and ask Grandpapa to get poor Tim out of prison," said Pamela.

"But, sister, how can us go home? *I* don't know the way, do you?"

Pamela looked about her doubtfully.

"P'raps it isn't so very far," she said. "Us had better go on; and when it's a long way from the

policeman, us can ask somebody the road."

There seemed indeed nothing else to do. On they tramped for what seemed to them an endless way, and still they were in the narrow lane with the high hedges; so that, after walking for a very long time, they could have fancied they were in the same place where they started. And as they met no one they could not ask the way, even had they dared to do so. At last—just as they were beginning to get very tired—the lane quite suddenly came out on a short open bit of waste land, across which a cart-track led to a wide well-kept road. And this, though they had no idea of it, was actually the coach-road to Sandlingham; for—though, it must be allowed, more by luck than good management—they had hit upon a short cut to the highway, which if Tim had known of it would have saved him all his present troubles!

For a moment or two Duke and Pamela felt cheered by having at last got out of the weary lane. They ran eagerly across the short distance that separated them from the road, with a vague idea that once on it they would somehow or other see something—meet some one to guide them as to what next to do. But it was not so—there it stretched before them, white and smooth and dusty at both sides, rising a little to the right and sloping downwards to the left—away, away, away—to where? Not a cart or carriage of any kind—not a foot-passenger even—was to be seen. And the sun was hot, and the four little legs were very tired; and where was the use of tiring them still more when they might only be wandering farther and farther from their home? For, though the choice was not great, being simply a question of up-hill or down-dale, it was as bad as if there had been half a dozen ways before them, as they had not the least idea which of the two was the right one!

The two pair of blue eyes looked at each other piteously; then the eyelids drooped, and big tears slowly welled out from underneath them; the twins flung their arms about each other, and, sitting down on the little bit of dusty grass that bordered the highway, burst into loud and despairing sobs.



CHAPTER XII.

GOOD-BYE TO "US."

"And as the evening twilight fades away,
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day."
Morituri Salutamus.

By slow degrees their sobs exhausted themselves. Pamela leant her head against Duke and shut her eyes.

"I am so tired, bruvver," she said. "If us could only get some quiet place out of the sun I would like to lie down and go to sleep. Wouldn't you, bruvver?"

"I don't know," said Duke.

"I wonder if the birds would cover us up wif leaves," said Pamela dreamily, "like those little children long ago?"

"That would be if us was dead," said Duke. "Oh sister, you don't think us must be going to die!"

"I don't know," said Pamela in her turn.

Suddenly Duke raised himself a little, and Pamela, feeling him move, sat up and opened her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked, but he did not need to answer, for just then she too heard the sound that had caught Duke's ears. It was the barking of a dog—not a deep baying sound, but a short, eager, energetic bark, and seemingly very near them. The children looked at each other and then rose to their feet.

"Couldn't you fink it was Toby?" said Pamela in a low voice, though why she spoke so low she could not have said.

Duke nodded, and then, moved by the same impulse, they went forward to the middle of the road and looked about them, hand in hand. Again came the sharp eager bark, and this time a voice was heard as if soothing the dog, though they could not quite catch the words. But some one was near them—thus much seemed certain, and the very idea had comfort in it. Still, for a minute or two they could not make out where were the dog and its owner; for they did not know that a short way down the road a path ending in a stile crossed the fields from the village of Nooks to the high-road. And when, therefore, at but a few paces distant, there suddenly appeared a small figure, looking dark against the white dust of the road, frisking and frolicking about in evident excitement, it really seemed to the little brother and sister as if it had sprung out of the earth by magic. They had not time, however, to speak—hardly to wonder—to themselves before, all frisking and frolicking at an end, the shaggy ball was upon them, and, with a rush that for half a second made Pamela inclined to scream, the little dog flew at them, barking, yelping, almost choking with delight, flinging himself first on one then on the other, darting back a step or two as if to see them more distinctly and make sure he was not mistaken, then rolling himself upon them again all quivering and shaking with rapture. And the cry of ecstasy that broke from the twins would have gone to the heart of any one that loved them.

"Oh Toby, Toby!—bruvver—sister—it is, it is our own Toby. He has come to take us home. Oh dear, dear Toby!"



"OH TOBY, TOBY!—BRUVVER—SISTER—IT IS, IT IS OUR OWN TOBY, HE HAS COME TO TAKE US HOME. OH DEAR, DEAR TOBY!"—p. [220](#).

It *did* go to the heart of some one not far off. A quaintly-clad, somewhat aged, woman was slowly climbing the stile at the moment that the words rang clearly out into the summer air. "Oh Toby, *our* Toby!" and no one who had not seen it could have believed how nimbly old Barbara skipped or slid or tumbled down the steps on the road-side of the stile, and how, in far less time than it takes to tell it, she was down on her knees in the dust with a child in each arm, and Toby flashing about the trio, so that he seemed to be everywhere at once.

"My precious darlings!—my dear little master and missy!—and has old Barbara found you after all? or Toby rather. I thank the Lord who has heard my prayers. To think I should have such a delight in my old days as to be the one to take you back to my dearest lady! A sore heart was I coming along with—to think that I had heard nothing of you for all I had felt so sure I would. And oh, my darlings, where *have* you been, and how has it all come about?"

But a string of questions was the first answer she got.

"Have you come to look for us, dear Barbara? Did Grandpapa and Grandmamma send you, and Toby too? How did you know which way to come? And have you seen Tim? Did Tim tell you?"

"Tim, Tim, I know nought of who Tim is, my dearies," said Barbara, shaking her head. "If it's any one that's been good to you, so much the better. I've been at Nooks, the village hard by, for some days with my niece. I meant to have stayed but two or three nights, but I've been more nor a week, and a worry in my heart all the time not to get back home to hear if there was no news of you, and how my poor lady was. And to think if I *had* gone home I wouldn't have met you—dear—dear—but the ordering of things is wonderful!"

"And didn't you come to look for us, then? But why is Toby with you?" asked the children.

"He was worritting your dear Grandmamma. There was no peace with him after you were lost. And though I didn't rightly come to Monkhaven to look for you, I had a feeling—it was bore in on me that I'd maybe find some trace of you, and I thought Toby would be the best help. And truly I could believe he'd scented you were not far off—the worry he's been all this morning! A-barking and a-sniffing and a-listening like! I was in two minds as to which way I'd take this morning—round by Monkhaven or by the lane. But Toby he was all for the lane, and so I just took his way, the Lord be thanked!"

"He *knowed* us was here—he did, didn't he? Oh, darling Toby!" cried the twins.

But then Barbara had to be told all. Not very clear was the children's account of their adventures at first; for the losing of Tim and the vision of the policeman and the canal boat were the topmost on their minds, and came tumbling out long before anything about the gipsies, which of course was the principal thing to tell. Bit by bit, however, thanks to her patience, their old friend came to understand the whole. She heaved a deep sigh at last.

"To think that it was the gipsies after all."

But she made not many remarks, and said little about the broken-bowl-part of the story. It would be for their dear Grandmamma to show them where they had been wrong, she thought modestly, if indeed they had not found it out for themselves already. I think they had.

"Us is always going to tell Grandmamma *everything* now," said Pamela.

"And us is always going to listen to the talking of that little voice," added Duke.

But the first excitement over, old Barbara began to notice that the children were looking very white and tired. How was she ever to get them to Brigslade—a five miles' walk at least—where again, for she had chosen Brigslade market-day on purpose, she counted on Farmer Carson to give her a lift home? She was not strong enough to carry them—one at a time—more than a short distance. Besides she had her big basket. Glancing at it gave her another idea.

"I can at least give you something to eat," she said. "Niece Turwall packed all manner of good things in here," and, after some rummaging, out she brought two slices of home-made cake and a bottle of currant wine, of which she gave them each a little in a cup without a handle which Mrs. Turwall had thoughtfully put in. The cake and the wine revived the children wonderfully. They said they were able to walk "a long long way," and indeed there was nothing for it but to try, and so the happy little party set off.

The thought of Tim, however, weighed on their minds, and when Barbara had arrived at some sort of idea as to who he was, and what he had done, she too felt even more anxious about him. Even without prejudice it must be allowed that the police of those days were not what they are now, and Barbara knew that for a poor waif like Tim it would not be easy to obtain a fair hearing.

"And he won't be wanting to get that gipsy girl into trouble by telling on the lot of them, which will make it harder for the poor lad," thought the shrewd old woman, for the children had told her all about Diana. "But there's nothing to be done that I can see except to get the General to write to the police at Monkhaven." For Mrs. Twiss knew that Duke and Pam would be terribly against the idea of going back to the town and to the police office. And she herself had no wish to do so—she was not without some distrust of the officers of the law herself, and it would, too, have grieved her sadly not to have been the one to restore the lost children to their friends. Besides, Farmer Carson would be waiting for her at the cross roads, for "if by any chance I don't come back before, you may be sure I'll be there on Friday, next

market-day," she had said to him at parting.

"You don't think they'll put Tim in prison, do you?" asked Duke, seeing that the old woman's face grew grave when she had heard all.

"Oh no, surely, not so bad as that," she replied. "And even if we went back I don't know that it would do much good."

"Go back to where the policemen are," exclaimed the twins, growing pale at the very idea. "Oh please—*please* don't," and they both crept closer to their old friend.

"But if it would make them let Tim come wif us?" added Pamela, shivering, nevertheless. "I'd *try* not to be frightened. Poor Tim—he has been so good to us, us can't go and leave him all alone."

"But, my deary," said Barbara, "I don't rightly see what we can do for him. The police might think it right to keep us all there too—and I'm that eager to get you home to ease your dear Grandmamma and the General. I think it's best to go on and get your Grandpapa to write about the poor boy."

But now the idea of rescuing Tim was in the children's heads it was not so easy to get rid of it. They stood still looking at each other and at Mrs. Twiss with tears in their eyes; they had come by this time perhaps half a mile from where they had met their friends. The high-road was here shadier and less dusty, and it was anything but inviting to think of retracing the long stretch to Monkhaven, though from where they stood, a turn in the road hid it from them. All at once a whistle caught their ears—a whistle two or three times repeated in a particular way—Toby pricked up his ears, put himself in a very valiant attitude, and barked with a great show of importance, as much as to say, "Just you look out now, whoever you are. I am on guard now." But his bark did not seem to strike awe into the whistler, whoever he was. Again his note sounded clear and cheery. And this time, with a cry of "It's Tim, it's Tim," off flew Duke and Pam down the road, followed by Barbara—Toby of course keeping up a running accompaniment of flying circles round the whole party till at last the sight of his beloved little master and mistress hugging and kissing a bright-eyed, clean-faced, but sadly ragged boy was altogether too much for his refined feelings, and he began barking with real fury, flinging himself upon Tim as if he really meant to bite him.

Duke caught him up.

"Silly Toby," he cried, "it's Tim. You must learn to know Tim;" and old Barbara coming up by this time and speaking to the boy in a friendly tone, poor Toby's misgivings were satisfied, and he set to work to wagging his tail in a slightly subdued manner.

Then came explanations on both sides. Tim had to tell how he had slipped himself out through the window, narrow as it was, and how, thanks to an old water-butt and some loose bricks in the wall, he had scrambled down like a cat, and made off as fast as his legs would carry him to the place where he had left the children.

"And when you wasn't there I was fairly beat—I was," he said. "I knowed they hadn't had time to find you—perlice I mean—but I saw as you must have got tired waiting so long. So off I set till I met a woman who told me the way to the Sandle'ham road. I had a fancy you'd ask for it rather than come into the town if you thought they'd cotched me, and I was about right you see."

"Is this the Sandle'ham road? Oh yes, Barbara told us it was," said the children. "But us didn't know it was. Us just runned and runned when us saw the policeman, us was so frightened."

"But us *was* going back to try to get you out of prison if Barbara would have let us," added Pamela.

Then all about Barbara and Toby had to be explained, and a great weight fell from Tim's heart when he quite understood that the old woman was a real home friend—that there would no longer be any puzzle or difficulty as to how to do or which way to go, now that they had fallen in with this trusty protector.

"To be sure—well now this *are* a piece of luck, and no mistake," he repeated, one big smile lighting up all his pleasant face. But suddenly it clouded over.

"Then, ma'am, if you please, would it be better for me not to come no further? Would I be in the way, maybe?"

The children set up a cry before Barbara had time to reply.

"No, no, Tim; you *must* come. Grandpapa and Grandmamma will always take care of Tim, 'cos he's been so good to us—won't they, Barbara?"

Barbara looked rather anxious. Her own heart had warmed to the orphan boy, but she did not know how far she was justified in making promises for other people.

"I dursn't go back to Monkhaven," said Tim; "they'd be sure to cotch me, and they'd give it me for a-climbing out o' window and a-running away. Nor I dursn't go back to Mick. But you've only to say the word, ma'am, and I'm off. I'll hide about, and mayhap somehow I might get a chance among the boat-people. It's all I can think of; for I've no money—leastways this is master's and missy's, and you'd best take it for them," he went on, as he pulled out the little packet from the inside of his jacket which he had already vainly offered to Peter. "And about Peter, p'raps you'd say a word to the old gentleman about sending him something. He were very good to us, he were; and he can always get a letter that's sent to ——" but here the lump that had kept rising in the poor boy's throat all the time he was speaking, and that he had gone on choking down, got altogether too big; he suddenly broke off and burst out sobbing. It was too much—not only to have to leave the dear little master and missy, but to have to say good-bye to all his beautiful plans and hopes—of learning to be a good and respectable boy—of leading a settled and decent life such as mother—"poor mother"—could look down upon with pleasure from her home up there somewhere near the sun, in the heaven about which her child knew so little, but in which he still most fervently believed.

"I'm a great fool," he sobbed, "but I did—I did want to be a good lad, and to give up gipsying."

Barbara's heart by this time was completely melted, and Duke's and Pam's tears were flowing.

"Tim, dear Tim, you must come with us," they said. "Oh, Barbara, do tell him he's to come. Why, even Toby sees how good Tim is; he's not barking a bit, and he's sniffing at him to show he's a friend."

And Toby, hearing his own name, looked up in the old woman's face as if he too were pleading poor Tim's cause. She hesitated no longer.

"Come with us my poor boy," she said, "it'll go hard if we can't find a place for you somewheres. And the General and the old lady is good and kind as can be. Don't ye be a-feared, but come with us. You must help me to get master and missy home, for it's a good bit we have to get over, you know."

So Tim dried his eyes, and his hopes revived. And this time the little cavalcade set out in good earnest to make the best of their way to Brigslade, with no lookings back towards Monkhaven; for, indeed, their

greatest wish was to leave it as quickly as possible far behind them. They were a good way off fortunately before clever Superintendent Boyds and his assistants found out that their bird was flown, and when they did find it out they went after him in the wrong direction; and it was not till three days after the children had been safe at home that formal information, which doubtless *would* have been very cheering to poor Grandpapa, came to him that the police at Monkhaven were believed to be on the track!

How can I describe to you that coming home? If I could take you back with me some thirty years or so and let you hear it as I did then—direct from the lips of a very old lady and gentleman, who still spoke to each other as "brother" and "sister," whose white hair was of the soft silvery kind which one sees at a glance was *once* flaxen—oh how much more interesting it would be, and how much better it would be told! But that cannot be. My dear old friends long ago told the story of their childish adventure for the last time; though I am very sure nothing would please them better than to know it had helped to amuse for an hour or two some of the Marmadukes and Pamelas of to-day. So I will do my best.

It was a long stretch for the little legs to Brigslade; without Tim I doubt if poor old Mrs. Twiss and Toby would have got them there. But the boy was not to be tired; his strength seemed "like the strength of ten" Tims, thanks to the happy hopes with which his heart was filled. He carried Pamela and even Duke turn about on his back, he told stories and sang songs to make them forget their aching legs and smarting feet. And fortunately there still remained enough home-made cake and currant wine for every one to have a little refreshment, especially as Tim found a beautifully clear spring of water to mix with the wine when the children complained of thirst.

They got to the cross-roads before Farmer Carson, for Barbara was one of those sensible people who always take time by the forelock; so they rested there till the old gray mare came jogging up, and her master, on the look-out for one old woman, but not for a party of four—five I should say, counting Toby—could not believe his eyes, and scarcely his ears, when Mrs. Twiss told him the whole story. How they all got into the spring-cart I couldn't explain, but they did somehow, and the mare did not seem to mind it at all. And at last, late on that lovely early summer evening, Farmer Carson drew up in the lane at the back of the house; and, after helping the whole party out, drove off with a hearty Good-night, and hopes that they'd find the old gentleman and lady in good health, and able to bear the happy surprise.

It must be broken gently to them; and how to do this had been on Barbara's mind all the time they had been in the cart, for up till then she had been able to think of nothing but how to get the children along. They, of course—except perhaps that they were too tired for any more excitement—would have been for running straight in with joyful cries. But they were so subdued by fatigue that their old friend found no difficulty in persuading them to sit down quietly by the hedge, guarded by Tim, while she and Toby went in to prepare the way.

"For you know, my dearies, your poor Grandmamma has not been well and the start might be bad for her," she explained.

"But you're sure Grandmamma isn't *dead*?" said poor Pamela, looking up piteously in Barbara's face. "Duke was afraid she might be if us didn't come soon."

"But now you *have* come she'll soon get well again, please God," said Barbara, though her own heart beat tremulously as she made her way round by the back entrance.

It was Toby after all who "broke" the happy tidings. In spite of all Barbara could do—of all her "Hush, Toby, then,"s "Gently my little doggie,"s—he *would* rush in to the parlour as soon as the door was opened in such a rapture of joyful barking, tail wagging and rushing and dashing, that Grandmamma

looked up from the knitting she was trying to fancy she was doing in her arm-chair by the fire, and Grandpapa put down his five days' old newspaper which he was reading by the window, with a curious flutter of sudden hope all through them, notwithstanding their many disappointments.

"It is you, Barbara, back again at last," began Grandmamma. "How white you look, my poor Barbara—and—why, what's the matter with Toby? Is he so pleased to see us old people again?"

"He *is* very pleased, ma'am—he's a very wise and a very good feeling dog is Toby, there's no doubt. And one that knows when to be sad and—and when to be rejoiced, as I might say," said Barbara, though her voice trembled with the effort to speak calmly.

Something seemed to flash across the room to Grandmamma as Mrs. Twiss spoke—down fell the knitting, the needles, and the wool, all in a tangle, as the old lady started to her feet.

"Barbara—Barbara Twiss!" she cried. "What do you mean? Oh Barbara, you have news of our darlings? Marmaduke, my dear husband, do you hear?" and she raised her voice, "she has brought us news at last," and Grandmamma tottered forward a few steps and then, growing suddenly dazed and giddy, would have fallen had not Grandpapa and Barbara started towards her from different sides and caught her. But she soon recovered herself, and eagerly signed to Barbara to "tell." How Barbara told she never knew. It seemed to her that Grandmamma guessed the words before she spoke them, and looking back on it all afterwards she could recollect nothing but a sort of joyous confusion—Grandpapa rushing out without his hat, but stopping to take his stick all the same—Grandmamma holding by the table to steady herself when, in another moment, they were all back again—then a cluster all together—of Grandpapa, Grandmamma, Duke, Pamela and Barbara, with Nurse and Biddy, and Dymock and Cook, and stable-boys and gardeners, and everybody, and Toby everywhere at once. Broken words and sobs and kisses and tears and blessings all together, and Pamela's little soft high voice sounding above all as she cried—

"Oh, dear Grandmamma, *us* is so glad you are not dead. Duke was so afraid you might be."

And Tim—where was he?—standing outside in the porch, but smiling to himself—not afraid of being forgotten, for he had a trustful nature.

"It's easy to see as the old gentleman and lady is terrible fond of master and missy," he thought. "But they must be terrible clever folk in these parts to have writing outside of the house even," for his glance had fallen on the quaintly-carved letters on the lintel, "Niks sonder Arbitt." "I wonder now what that there writing says," he reflected.

But he was not allowed to wonder long. A few moments more and there came the summons his faithful little heart had been sure would come.

"Tim, Tim—where is Tim? Come and see our Grandpapa and our Grandmamma, Tim," and two pairs of little hot hands dragged him into the parlour.

It was not at all like his dream, but it was far grander than any room he had ever been in before, and never afterwards did the boy forget the strange sweet perfume which seemed a part of it all—the scent of the dried rose-leaves in the jars, though he did not then know what it was. But it always came back to him when he thought of that first evening—the beginning to him of a good and honest and useful life—when the tall old gentleman and the sweet little old lady laid their hands on his curly head and blessed him for what he had done and promised to be his friends.

They kept their promise well and wisely. Grandpapa took real trouble to find out what the boy was

best fitted for, and when he found it was for gardening, Tim was thoroughly trained by old Noble till he was able to get a good place of his own. He lived with Barbara in her neat little cottage, and in the evenings learned to read and write and cipher, so that before very long he could make out the letters in the porch, though Grandpapa had to be asked to tell their meaning.

"Nothing without work," was what they meant. They had been carved there by the old Dutchman who had built the farmhouse, afterwards turned into the pretty quaint "Arbitt Lodge."

"A good and true saying," added Grandpapa, and so the three children to whom he was speaking found it. For all three in their different ways worked hard and well, and when in my childhood I knew them as old people, I felt, even before I quite understood it, that "the Colonel," as he then had become, and his sweet white-haired sister deserved the love and respect they seemed everywhere to receive. And I could see that it was no common tie which bound to them their faithful servant Timothy, whose roses were the pride of all the country-side, when, after many years of separation, he came to end his life in their service, after Duke's "fighting days" were over and his widowed sister was, but for him, alone in the world.

One question may be asked. Did they ever hear of Diana again? Yes, though not till Tim had grown into a strapping young fellow, and the twins were tall and thin, and had long since left off talking of "us."

There came along the lanes one summer's day a covered van hung over at the back with baskets, such as the children well remembered. A good-humoured looking man was walking by the horse, a handsome woman was sitting by the door plaiting straw.

"Gipsies," cried the children, who were on their way to the village, and, big as they were, they were a little frightened when, with a cry, the woman jumped down and flew towards them.

"Master and missy, don't you know me? I'm Diana!" she exclaimed.

And Diana it was, though very much changed for the better. She had married one of her own tribe, but a very good specimen, and the husband and wife travelled about on their own account making their living "honestly," as she took care to tell. "For there's good and there's bad of us, and it's been my luck to get a good one. Thank God for it," she added, "for I've never forgot master and missy's pretty telling me even poor Diana might think God cared for her."

She was taken to see Grandpapa and Grandmamma of course, and they would have helped her and her husband to a settled life had they wished it. But no—gipsies they were, and gipsies they must remain. "It'd choke me to live inside four walls," said Diana, "and we must travel about so as we can see our own folk from time to time. But whenever we pass this way we'll come to see master and missy and Tim."

And so they did.

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