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DAVID BLAIZE AND THE BLUE DOOR

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Ever since he was four years old, and had begun to think seriously, as a boy should, David Blaize had been aware that there was a real world lying somewhere just below the ordinary old thing in which his father and mother and nurse and the rest of the fast-asleep grown-up people lived. Boys began to get drowsy, he knew, about the time that they were ten, though they might still have occasional waking moments, and soon after that they went sound asleep, and lost all chance of ever seeing the real world. If you asked grown-ups some tremendously important question, such as 'Why do the leaves fall off the trees when there is glass on the lake?' as likely as not they would begin talking in their sleep about frost and sap, just as if that had got anything to do with the real reason. Or they might point out that it wasn't real glass on the lake, but ice, and, if they were more than usually sound asleep, take a piece of the lake-glass and let you hold it in your fingers till it became water. That was to show you that what you had called glass was really frozen water, another word

for which was ice. They thought that it was very wonderful of them to explain it all so nicely, and tell you at great length that real glass did not become water if you held it in your fingers, which you must remember to wash before dinner. Perhaps they would take you to the nursery window when you came in from your walk, and encourage you to put your finger on the pane in order to see that glass did not become water. This sort of thing would make David impatient, and he asked, 'Then why don't you put ice in the window, and then you could boil it for tea in the kettle?' And if his nurse wanted to go to sleep again, she would say, 'Now you're talking nonsense, Master David.'

Now that was the ridiculous thing! Of course he was talking nonsense just to humour Nannie. He was helping her with her nonsense about the difference between ice and glass. He had been wanting to talk sense all the time, and learn something about the real world, in which the fish put a glass roof on their house for the winter as soon as they had collected enough red fire-leaves to keep them warm until the hot weather came round again. That might not be the precise way in which it happened, but it was something of that sort. Instead of pinching herself awake, poor sleepy Nannie went babbling on about ice and glass and sap and spring, in a way that was truly tedious and quite beside the real point.

Yet when the sleepy things tried to awake to the real world, they could not get their grown-up dreams out of their heads. Sometimes his mother would come up to the nursery before

he went to bed, and take him on her knee, which was a soft, comfortable place, and tell him a story, which often began quite well and seriously. David always asked that the electric light should be put out first, because then the flame-cats would come out of their holes, and play puss-in-the-corner all over the nursery. They always helped the story to seem true and serious, for they were real, only the electric light must be put out first, because it gave them shocks, and naturally you could not play when you were being shocked. He knew that to be true even in the sleepy grown-up world, because once when his mother was playing with him, he had put out his tongue at Nannie when she came to say it was bed-time, and his mother couldn't play any more, because she was shocked. That was why the flame-cats must have the electric light put out.

Well, there were the flame-cats dancing (sometimes they had a ball instead of puss-in-the-corner), and here was he very comfortable and wide-awake, and sometimes, as I have said, the story began quite well, with an air of truth and reality about it. There was a little green man with whiskers who lived in the pear-tree, and washed his hands with Pears' soap. Or there was a red-faced old woman who lived in the apple-tree, and kept a sharp look-out for dumplings coming round the corner, for these were her deadliest enemies, and pulled pieces off her, and made them into apple-dumplings. Sometimes they pulled her nose off when they caught her or a finger or two which never grew again till next spring, and often, if spring was late,

from going to sleep again after Nannie Equinox had called him, there was practically nothing left of her. So when the regiment of dumplings came round the corner, Grandmamma Apple-tree hid in the grass, and pretended she was Mr. Winfall, the tailor, who had made David's new sailor clothes. Then Colonel Dumpling would stumble over her, and sometimes he did not know whether she was Grandmamma Appletree or Mr. Winfall. So he began very politely, like a subscription paper with a half-penny stamp in case it proved to be Mr. Winfall, who had the habit of eating Colonel Dumpling whenever he saw him, and often some privates as well, cleared his throat and said in his best suetty voice:

'Dear Sir or Madam.'

He never got further than that because, if it proved to be Mr. Winfall, Mr. Winfall ate him whether he had an apple inside or not, and if it was Grandmamma Apple-tree, she was so indignant, as every proper female should be at being taken for a man, that she began abusing Colonel Dumpling in a red voice if she was ripe, and a green one if she wasn't, and gave the whole show away. So she lost an arm or a leg if there were many people in the house, or a finger or two if father and mother were alone, and Colonel Dumpling said to his regiment:

'Attention! Slow fatigue March! Right-about Kitchen Turn!'

Now all this sort of thing was clearly true, and belonged to the real world, but too often, unfortunately, David's mother got grown-up and sleepy again, and began talking the most dreadful

nonsense. A little girl with golden hair and blue eyes made her unwelcome presence known by singing, or a baby would be found underneath a gooseberry bush (David always hoped that it got frightfully pricked), or a sweet lovely fairy would fly in, just when everything was getting on so nicely, and make rubbish out of it. He was too polite to let his mother know how boring she had become, and so whenever the golden-haired little girl or the sweet fairy appeared, he would try to go on with Colonel Dumpling's part of the story in his own mind, or watch the flame-cats getting tired as the fire burned low.

Nannie was not so good at stories, but she had flashes of sense, as when, one night, when David preferred to sit up in bed instead of lying down to go to sleep, she hinted that a black man *might* possibly come down the chimney, unless he put his head properly on the pillow. David knew that it was not likely, for it would have to be a very small man indeed, and fireproof, but there was some glimmering of a real idea in it. So he was not the least frightened, and asked, with interest, if he would be like bacon or beef before he got through the fire. This exploded any sense there might have been in Nannie's original idea at once, because she threatened to go downstairs and tell his mother if he wouldn't lie down. A very poor ending to the black man coming down the chimney! Nannie clearly knew nothing about him really if she so quickly got sleepy and talked about fetching his mother. Nobody grown-up ever woke to the real world for more than a minute or two at a time, except perhaps his father, who spent so many hours in a

big room called 'The Laboratory.' There he seemed to dabble in realities, for he could put a fragment of something on the water, and it began to blaze, or he could mix a powder out of certain bottles, and when it was lit it burned with so red a flame that his father looked as if he was illuminated inside like a turnip-ghost. Or he could, by another mixture, produce a smell that he said was 'Tincture of Rotten Eggs' and was really made of the ghosts of bad eggs ground up and exorcised. But then, poor man, he got grown-up, and when, subsequently, David wanted to know what the ghosts of bad eggs looked like when they were exercised, he muttered in his sleep something about sulphuretted hydrogen.

David was now just 'turned six,' as Nannie expressed it, and knew that he had only about four years more in front of him before he began to lapse into that drowsy state of grown-uppishness which begins when boys are ten or thereabouts, and lasts, getting worse and worse, till they are twenty or seventy or anything else. If he was going to find the real world of which he caught glimpses now and then, he must do so without losing much time. There was probably a door into it, and for a long time he had hoped that it was the door in the ground by the lake. But one day he had found that door open, and it was an awful disappointment to see that it only contained a tap and a round opening, to which presently the gardener fixed a long curly pipe. When he turned the tap, the pipe gave some jolly chuckling noises, and began to stream with water at its far end. That was very delightful, and consoled David a little for the

disappointment.

Then one night he had a clue. He had just lain down in his bed, when he heard a door beginning to behave as doors do when they think they are quite alone, and nobody is looking. Then, as you know, they unlatch themselves, and begin walking to and fro on their hinges, hitting themselves against their frames. This often happened to the nursery door when he came downstairs in the morning, after he was quite sure he had shut it. His mother therefore sent him up to shut it again, and sure enough the door was always open, having undone itself to go for a walk on its hinges. But on this night he thought that the sound of the door came from under his pillow, but he very carelessly fell asleep just as he was listening in order to make sure, and the next thing he knew was that Nannie was telling him it was morning. Again, on the very next night he had only just put his head on the pillow when the door began banging. It sounded muffled, and there was no doubt this time that it came from under his pillow. He sat up in bed, broad awake, and pulled his pillow away. By the light of the flame-cats who were dancing to-night, he could see the smooth white surface of his bolster, but, alas, there was no door there.

David was now quite sure that somewhere under his pillow was the door he was looking for. One time he had allowed himself to go to sleep before finding it, and the other time he had got too much awake. So on the third night he took the pin-partridge to bed with him, in the hope that it would keep him just awake enough, by pricking him with the head of its pin-leg. The pin-

partridge had, of course, come out of Noah's Ark, and in the course of some terrible adventures had lost a leg. So Nannie had taken a pin, and driven it into the stump, so that it could stand again. The pin-leg was rather longer than the wooden one, which made the partridge lean a little to one side, as if it was listening to the agreeable conversation of the animal next it.

Sure enough, on this third night, David had only just lain down, with the pin-partridge in one hand, and the pin ready to scratch his leg to keep him just awake enough, when the door began banging again, just below his pillow. He listened a little while, pressing the pin-head against his calf so that it hurt a little, but not enough to wake him up hopelessly, and moved his head about till he was sure that his ear was directly above the door. Then very quietly he pushed his pillow aside, and there, in the middle of his bolster was a beautiful shining blue door with a gold handle, swinging gently to and fro, as if it was alone. He got up, pushed it open and entered. For fear of some dreadful misfortune happening, like finding his mother on the other side of it, who might send him back to shut it, he closed it very carefully and softly. He found that there was a key hanging up on the wall beside it, and to his great joy it fitted the keyhole. He locked it, and put the key back on its nail, so that when he came back he could let himself out, and in the meantime nobody could possibly reach him.

CHAPTER II

The passage into which the blue door opened was very like the nursery passage at home, and it was certainly night, because the flame-cats were dancing on the walls, which only happened after dark. Yet there was no fire burning anywhere, which was rather puzzling, but soon David saw that these were real cats, not just the sort of unreal ones which demanded a fire to make them dance at all. Some were red, some were yellow, some were emerald green with purple patches, and instead of having a band or a piano to dance to, they all squealed and purred and growled, making such a noise that David could not hear himself speak. So he stamped his foot and said 'Shoo!' at which the dance suddenly came to an end, and all the cats sat down, put one hind-leg in the air, and began licking themselves.

'If you please,' said David, 'will you tell me where to go next?'

Every cat stopped licking itself, and looked at him. Some cat behind him said:

'Lor! it's the boy from the nursery.'

David turned round. All the cats had begun licking themselves again, except a large tabby, only instead of being black and brown, it was the colour of apricot jam and poppies.

'Was it you who spoke?' said David.

'Set to partners!' said the tabby, and they all began dancing again.

'Shoo, you silly things,' said David, stamping again. 'I don't want to stop your dancing, except just to be told where I'm to go, and what I'm to do if I'm hungry.'

The dancing stopped again.

'There is a pot of mouse-marmalade somewhere,' said the tabby, 'only you mustn't take more than a very little bit. It's got to last till February.'

'But I don't like mouse-marmalade,' said David.

'I never said you did,' said the tabby. 'Where's the cook?'

'Gone to buy some new whiskers,' said another. 'She put them too close to the fire, which accounts for the smell of burning.'

'Then all that can be done is to set to partners, and hope for the best,' said the tabby.

'If any one dances again,' said David, 'before you tell me the way, and where I shall find a shop with some proper food in it, not mousey, I shall turn on the electric light.'

'Fiddle-de-dee!' said the tabby, and they all began singing at the top of their voices.

'Hey diddle-diddle
The cat and the fiddle.'

David was getting vexed with them all, and he looked about for the electric light. But there were no switches by the door, as there ought to have been, but only a row of bottles which he knew came out of his father's laboratory. But the stopper in one

of them was loose, and a fizzing noise came out of it. He listened to it a minute, with his ear close to it, and heard it whispering, '*It's me! it's me! it's me!*'

'And when he's got, it, he doesn't know what to do with it!' said the tabby contemptuously.

David hadn't the slightest idea. He was only sure that the bottle had something to do with the electric light, and he took it up and began shaking it, as Nannie did to his medicine bottle. To his great delight, he saw that, as he shook it, the cats grew fainter and fainter, and the passage lighter and lighter.

The tabby spoke to him in a tremulous voice.

'You're shocking us frightfully,' she said. 'Please, don't. You may have all the mouse-marmalade as soon as the cook comes back with her whiskers. She's been gone a long time. And if you don't like it, you really know where everything else is. There's the garden outside, and then the lake, and then the village. It's all just as usual, except that everything is real here. But whatever you do, don't shock us any more.'

The passage had grown quite bright by now, and there were only a few of the very strongest cats left. So, as he was a kind boy, he put down the bottle again, which began fizzing and whispering:

'*Pleased to have met you: pleased to have met you: pleased to have met you.*'

'I don't know why you couldn't have told me that at first,' said David to the tabby.

'Nor do I. It was my poor head. The dancing gets into it, and makes it turn round and square, one after the other. May we go on?'

The cats began to recover as he stopped shaking the bottle, and he walked on round the corner where the game cupboard stood against the wall. All the games were kept there, the Noah's Ark, and the spillikins, and the Badminton, and the Happy Families, and the oak-bricks, and the lead soldiers; and, as usual, the door of it was slightly open, because, when all the games were put away, even Nannie could not shut it tight. To-night there was an extraordinary stir going on in it, everything was slipping about inside, and, as David paused to see what was happening, a couple of marbles rolled out. But, instead of stopping on the carpet, they continued rolling faster and faster, and he heard them hopping downstairs in the direction of the garden door.

'I don't want to play games just yet,' he said to himself, 'when there is so much to explore, but I must see what they are doing.'

He opened the door a little wider, and heard an encouraging voice, which he knew must be Noah's, come from inside.

'That's right,' it said; 'now we can see what we're doing. Is my ulster buttoned properly this time, missus? Last night, when you buttoned it for me, you did it wrong, you did, and I caught cold in my ankle, I did. It's been sneezing all day, it has.'

'I never saw such trouble as you men are,' said Mrs. Noah. 'Get up, you silly, and don't sit on Shem's hat. I've been looking for it everywhere.'

David stooped down and looked in. He had a sort of idea that he was invisible, and wouldn't disturb anybody. There was the ark, with all its windows open, and the family were dressing. It consisted of two compartments, in the second of which lived the animals, one on the top of each other right up to the roof. There was no door in it, but the roof lifted off. At present it was tightly closed and latched, and confused noises of lions roaring and elephants trumpeting and cows mooing, dogs barking, and birds singing came from inside. Sometimes there was ordinary talk too, for the animals had all learned English from David as well as knowing their own animal tongue, and the Indian elephant spoke Hindustanee in addition. He was slim and light blue, and was known as the 'Elegant Elephant,' in contrast to a stout black one who never spoke at all. All this David thought that he and Nannie had made up, but now he knew that it was perfectly true. And he stood waiting to see what would happen next.

The hubbub increased.

'If that great lamb would get off my chest,' said the elegant elephant, 'I should be able to get up. Why don't they come and open the roof?'

'Not time yet,' said the cow. 'The family are still dressing. But it's a tight fit to-night. I'm glad the pin-partridge isn't here scratching us all.'

'Where's it gone?' said the elephant.

'David took it to bed; more fool he,' said the cow.

'He couldn't be much more of a fool than he is,' grunted the

pig. 'He knows nothing about us really.'

At this moment David heard an irregular kind of hopping noise coming down the passage, and, just as he turned to look, the pin-partridge ran between his legs. It flew on to the roof of the ark, and began pecking at it.

'Let me in,' it shouted. 'I believe it's the first of September. What cads you fellows are not to let me in!'

'You always think it's the first of September,' said the cow. 'Now look at me; I'm milked every day, which must hurt me much more than being shot once.'

'Not if it's properly done,' said the partridge. 'I know lots of cows who like it.'

'But it's improperly done,' said the cow. 'David knows less about milking than anybody since the flood. You wait till I catch him alone, and see if I can't teach him something about tossing.'

This sounded a very awful threat, and David, who knew that it was best to take cows as well as bulls by the horns, determined on a bold policy.

'If I hear one word more about tossing, I shan't let any of you out,' he said.

There was dead silence.

'Who's that?' said the cow in a trembling voice, for she was a coward as well as a cow.

'It's me!' said David.

There was a confused whispering within.

'We can't stop here all night.'

'Say you won't toss him.'

'You can't anyhow, because your horns are both broken.'

'Less noise in there,' said Noah suddenly, from the next compartment.

The cow began whimpering.

'I'm a poor old woman,' she said, 'and everybody's very hard on me, considering the milk and butter I've given you.'

'Chalk and water and margarine,' said the pin-partridge, who had been listening with his ear to the roof. 'Do say you won't toss him. I can't see him, but he's somewhere close to me.'

'Very well. I won't toss him. Open the roof, boy.'

David was not sure that Noah would like this, as he was the ark-master, but he felt that his having said that he would keep the roof shut unless the cow promised, meant that he would open it if she did, and so he lifted the roof about an inch.

At that moment Noah's head appeared. He was standing on Shem's head, who was standing on Ham's head, who was standing on Japheth's head, who was standing on his mother's head. They always came out of their room in this way, partly in order to get plenty of practice in case of fire, and partly because they couldn't be certain that the flood had gone down, and were afraid that if they opened the door, which is the usual way of leaving a room, the water might come in. When Noah had climbed on to the top of the wall, he pulled Shem after him, who pulled Ham, who pulled Japheth, who pulled Mrs. Noah, and there they all stood like a row of sparrows on a telegraph wire, balancing themselves

with great, difficulty.

'Who's been meddling with my roof?' asked Noah, in an angry voice. 'I believe it's that pin-partridge.'

The pin-partridge trembled so violently at this that he fell off the roof altogether, quite forgetting that he could fly. But the moment he touched the ground, he became a full-sized partridge.

'No, I didn't,' he said. 'There's that boy somewhere about, but I can't see him. He got through the blue door to-night.'

David now knew that he was invisible, but though it had always seemed to him that it must be the most delicious thing in the world to be able to be visible or invisible whenever you chose, he found that it was not quite so jolly to have become invisible without choosing, and not to have the slightest idea how to become visible again. It gave him an empty kind of feeling like when he was hungry long before the proper time.

'The cats saw me,' he said, joining in, for he knew if he couldn't be seen, he could be heard.

'Of course they did,' said Noah, 'because they can see in the dark when everything is invisible. That's why they saw you. You needn't think that you're the only thing that is invisible. I suppose you think it's grand to be invisible.'

'When I was a little boy,' said Ham, 'I was told that little boys should be seen and not heard. This one is heard and not seen. I call that a very poor imitation of a boy. I dare say he isn't a real one.'

'I've been quite ordinary up to now,' said David. 'It seems to

have come on all of a sudden. And I don't think it's at all grand to be invisible. I would be visible this minute if I knew how.'

'I want to get down,' said Mrs. Noah, swaying backwards and forwards because her stand was broken.

'You'll get down whether you want to or not, ma,' said Shem irritably, 'if you go swaying about like that. Don't catch hold of me now. I've got quite enough to do with keeping my balance myself.'

'Why don't you get down?' asked David, who wanted to see what would happen next.

'I haven't seen the crow fly yet,' said Noah. 'We can't get down till the crow has flown.'

'What did the crow do?' asked David.

'It didn't. That's why we're still here,' said Japheth.

'Some people,' said Noah, 'want everything explained to them. When the cock crows it shows it's morning, and when the crow flies it shows it's night. We can't get down until.'

'But what would happen if you did get down?' said David.

'Nobody knows,' said Noah. 'I knew once, and tied a knot in my handkerchief about it, so that I could remember, but the handkerchief went to the wash, and they took out the knot. So I forgot.'

'If you tied another knot in another handkerchief, wouldn't you remember again?' asked David.

'No. That would not be the same knot. I should remember something quite different, which I might not like at all. That

would never do.'

'One, two, three,' said Mrs. Noah, beating time, and they all began to sing:

'Never do, never do,
Never, never, never do.'

Most of the animals in the ark joined in, and they sang it to a quantity of different tunes. David found himself singing too, but the only tune he could remember was 'Rule Britannia,' which didn't fit the words very well. By degrees the others stopped singing, and David was left quite alone to finish his verse feeling rather shy, but knowing that he had to finish it whatever happened. When he had done, Noah heaved a deep sigh.

'That is the loveliest thing I ever heard in my life,' he said. 'Are you open to an engagement to sing in the ark every evening? Matinées of course, as well, for which you would have to pay extra.'

This was a very gratifying proposal, but David did not quite understand about the paying.

'I should have to pay?' he asked.

'Why, of course. You'd have to pay a great deal for a voice like that. You mustn't dream of singing like that for nothing. It would fill the ark.'

'I should say it would empty it,' said Mrs. Noah snappishly.

'I don't know if I'm rich enough,' said David, not taking any

notice of this rude woman.

'Go away at once then,' said Mrs. Noah. 'I never give to beggars.'

Just then there was a tremendous rattle from the ark, as if somebody was shaking it.

'It's the crow,' shouted Ham. 'The crow's just going to fly. Get out of the way, boy.'

The crow forced its way through the other animals, balanced itself for a moment on the edge of the ark, and flew off down the passage, squawking. The moment it left the ark it became ordinary crow-size again, and at the same moment David suddenly saw his one hand still holding up the lid of the ark, and knew that he had become visible. That was a great relief, but he had no time to think about it now, for so many interesting things began happening all at once. The Noah family jumped from the edge of the ark, and the moment their stands touched the ground, they shot up into full-sized human beings, with hats and ulsters on, and large flat faces with two dots for eyes, one dot for a nose, and a line for a mouth. They glided swiftly about on their stands, like people skating, and seemed to be rather bad at guiding themselves, for they kept running into each other with loud wooden crashes, and into the animals that were pouring out of the ark in such numbers that it really was difficult to avoid everybody. Occasionally they were knocked down, and then lay on their backs with their eyes winking very quickly, and their mouths opening and shutting, like fish out of water, till somebody

picked them up.

David got behind the cupboard door to be out of the way of the animals and all the other things that came trooping from the shelves. Luckily the nursery passage seemed to have grown much bigger, or it could never have held everybody, for the animals also shot up to their full size as soon as they left the ark. But they kept their colours and their varnish and though David had been several times to the Zoological Gardens, there was nothing there half so remarkable as the pale blue elephant or the spotted pigs, to take only a few examples. Every animal here was so much brighter in colour, and of course their conversation made them more interesting. On they trooped with the Noahs whirling in and out, towards the steps to the garden door, and when they were finished with, the 'Happy Families,' all life-size, too, followed them. There were Mrs. Dose, the doctor's wife, with her bottle, and Miss Bones, the butcher's daughter, gnawing her bone in a very greedy manner, and Master Chip, the carpenter's son, with his head supported in the pincers. He had no body, you will remember, and walked in a twisty manner, very upright and soldier-like, on the handles of them. The lead soldiers followed them with the band playing, and the cannons shooting peas in all directions, only the peas were as big as cannon-balls, and shot down whole regiments of their own men, and many of the hindmost of the happy families. But nobody seemed to mind, but picked themselves up again at once. Often the whole band was lying on their backs together, but they never ceased playing

for a moment. The battledores and shuttlecocks came next, the shuttlecocks hitting the battledores in front of them, which flew down the passage high over the heads of the soldiers, and waited there, standing on their handles till the shuttlecocks came up and hit them again. After this came David's clockwork train, which charged into everything that was in its way, and cut a lane for itself through soldiers, happy families, and animals alike. It had a cow-catcher in front of the engine, which occasionally picked people up, instead of running over them, and when David saw it last, before it plunged down the stairs, it had Mr. Soot, the chimney-sweep, and the Duke of Wellington, and the llama all lying on it, jumbled up together, and kicking furiously.

While he was watching this extraordinary scene, the cupboard doors banged to again, and he saw that there was a large label on one of them: —

NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT BY PRESENTING

YOUR CALLING-CARD
AND VERY LITTLE THEN

And on the other was this:

NO BOTTLES OR FOLLOWERS OR ANYTHING ELSE

RING ALSO

David studied this for a minute or two. He did not want to go in, but he wanted to know how. He hadn't got a calling-card – at least he never had before he came through the blue door, but so many odd things had happened since, that he was not in the least surprised when he put his hand in his pocket to find it quite full of calling-cards, on which was printed his name, only it was upside down. So he naturally turned the card upside down to get the name un-upside-down, but, however he turned it, his name was still upside down. If he looked at it very closely as he turned it, he could see the letters spin round like wheels, and it always remained like this:

The other trouser-pocket was also quite full of something, and he drew out of it hundreds of other calling-cards. On one was printed 'The Elegant Elephant, R.S.V.P.,' on another 'Master Ham, P.P.C.,' on another 'The Duke of Wellington, W.P.,' on another 'The Engine Driver, R.A.M.C.,' on another 'Miss Battledore, W.A.A.C.' Everybody had been calling on him.

'Whatever am I to do?' thought David. 'Shall I have to return

all these calls? It will take me all my time, and I shall see nothing. Besides' – and he looked round and saw that the passage was completely empty, and had shrunk to its usual size again – 'Besides, I don't know where they've all gone.'

He looked at the cupboard doors again, and found that they had changed while he had been looking at the cards. They were now exactly like the big front door at home, which opened in the middle, and had a hinge at each side. In front of it was a doormat, in the bristles of which was written

GO AWAY

Now David was the sort of boy who often wanted to do something, chiefly because he was told not to, in order to see what happened, and this doormat made him quite determined to go in. It was no use trying the left-hand side of the door, partly because neither bottles nor followers nor anything was admitted, and partly because you had to ring also, and there wasn't any bell. But there seemed just a chance of getting in by the right-hand part of the door, and he went up to it and knocked. To his great surprise he heard a bell ring inside as soon as he had knocked, which seemed to explain 'ring also.' The bell did not sound like an electric bell, but was like the servants' dinner bell. As soon as it had stopped, he heard a voice inside the door say very angrily:

'Give me my tuffet at once.'

There was a pause, and David heard the noise of some

furniture being moved, and the door flew open.

'What's your name?' said the butler. 'And have you got a calling-card?'

David gave him one of his cards, and he looked at it and turned it upside down.

'It's one of them dratted upside-downers,' he said, 'and it sends the blood to the head something awful.'

He gave a heavy sigh, and bent down and stood on his head.

'Now I can read it,' he said. 'Are you David or Blaize? If David, where's Blaize, and if Blaize, where's David?'

'I'm both,' said David.

'You can't be both of them,' said the butler. 'And I expect you're neither of them. And why didn't you go away?'

'You've given me too much curds,' said a voice behind the door. 'I've told you before to find some way to weigh the whey. It's a curd before. Take it away!'

'That must be Miss Muffet,' thought David. 'There's a girl creeping into it after all. I wonder if she makes puns all the time. I wish I hadn't knocked.'

'No, I'm rationed about puns,' said Miss Muffet, as if he had spoken aloud, 'and I've had my week's allowance now. But a margin's allowed for margarine. Butter – margarine,' she said in explanation.

'I saw that, said David.

'No, you didn't: you heard it. Now, come in and shut the door, because the tuffet's blowing about. And the moment you've shut

the door, shut your eyes too, because I'm not quite ready. I'll sing to you my last ballad while you're waiting. I shall make it up as I go along.'

Accordingly David shut the door, and then his eyes, and Miss Muffet began to sing in a thin cracked voice:

'As it fell out upon a day
When margarine was cheap,
It filled up all the grocers' shops
In buckets wide and deep.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
Matilda bought a heap.

And it fell out upon a day
When margarine was dear,
Matilda bought a little more
And made it into beer.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
It tasted rather queer.

As it fell out upon a day
There wasn't any more;
Matilda took her bottled beer
And poured it on the floor.
Ah, well-a-day! ah, ill-a-day!
And that was all I saw.'

'Poor thing!' said Miss Muffet. 'Such a brief and mysterious

career. Now you may open your eyes.'

David did so, and found himself in a large room, with all the furniture covered up as if the family was away. The butler was still standing on his head, squinting horribly at David's card, and muttering to himself, 'He can't be both, and he may be neither. He may be either, but he can't be both.' In the middle of the room was a big round seat, covered with ribands which were still blowing about in the wind, and on it was seated a little old lady with horn spectacles, eating curds and whey out of a bowl that she held on her knees.

'Come and sit on the tuffet at once,' she said, 'and then we'll pretend that there isn't room for the spider. Won't that be a good joke? I like a bit of chaff with my spider. I expect the tuffet will bear, won't it? But I can't promise you any curds.'

'Thank you very much,' said David politely, 'but I don't like curds.'

'No more do I,' said Miss Muffet. 'I knew we should agree.'

'Then why do you eat them?' asked David.

'For fear the spider should get them. Don't you adore my tuffet? It's the only indoor tuffet in the world. All others are out-door tuffets. But they gave me this one because most spiders are out-of-door spiders. By the way, we haven't been introduced yet. Where's that silly butler?'

'Here,' said the butler. He was lying down on the floor now, and staring at the ceiling.

'Introduce us,' said Miss Muffet. 'Say Miss Muffet, David

Blaize – David Blaize, Miss Muffet. Then whichever way about it happens, you're as comfortable as it is possible to be under the circumstances, or even above them, where it would naturally be colder.'

'I don't quite see,' said David.

'Poor Mr. Blaize. Put a little curds and whey in your eyes. That's the way. Dear me, there's another pun.'

'You made it before,' said David.

'I know. It counts double this time. But as I was saying, a little curds and whey – oh! it's tipped up again. What restless things curds are!'

She had not been looking at her bowl, and for several minutes now a perfect stream of curds and whey had been pouring from it over her knees and along the floor, to where the butler lay. He was still repeating, 'Miss Muffet, David Blaize – David Blaize, Miss Muffet.' Sometimes, by way of variety, he said, 'Miss Blaize – David Muffet,' but as nobody attended, it made no difference what he said.

'It always happens when I get talking,' she said. 'And now we know each other, I may be permitted to express a hope that you didn't expect to find me a little girl?'

'No, I like you best as you are,' said David quickly.

'It isn't for want of being asked that I've remained Miss Muffet,' said she. 'And it isn't from want of being answered. But give me a little pleasant conversation now and then, and one good frightening away every night, and I'm sure I'll have no quarrel

with anybody; and I hope nobody hasn't got none with me. How interesting it must be for you to meet me, when you've read about me so often. It's not nearly so interesting for me, of course, because you're not a public character.'

'Does the spider come every night, or every day, whatever it is down here?' asked David.

'Yes, sooner or later,' said Miss Muffet cheerfully, 'but the sooner he comes, the sooner I get back again, and the later he comes the longer I have before he comes. So there we are.'

She stopped suddenly, and looked at the ceiling.

'Do my eyes deceive me?' she whispered, 'or is that the s – ? No; my eyes deceive me, and I thought they would scorn the action, the naughty things. Perhaps you would like to peep at my furniture underneath the sheets. It will pass the time for you, but be ready to run back to the tuffet, when you hear the spider coming. Really, it's very tiresome of him to be so late.'

David thought he had never seen such an odd lot of furniture. Covered up in one sheet was a stuffed horse, in another a beehive, in another a mowing-machine. They were all priced in plain figures, and the prices seemed to him equally extraordinary, for while the horse was labelled 'Two shillings a dozen,' and the mowing-machine 'Half a crown a pair,' the beehive cost ninety-four pounds empty, and eleven and sixpence full. David supposed the reason for this was that if the beehive was full, there would be bees buzzing about everywhere, which would be a disadvantage.

'When I give a party,' said Miss Muffet, 'as I shall do pretty

soon if the spider doesn't come, and take all the coverings off my furniture, the effect is quite stupendous. Dazzling in fact, my dear. You must remember to put on your smoked spectacles.'

David was peering into the sheet that covered the biggest piece of furniture of all. He could only make out that it was like an enormous box on wheels, and cost ninepence. Then the door in it swung open, and he saw that it was a bathing-machine. On the floor of it was sitting an enormous spider.

'Does she expect me?' said the spider hoarsely. 'I'm not feeling very well.'

David remembered that he had to run back to the tuffet, but it seemed impolite not to ask the spider what was the matter with it. It had a smooth kind face, and was rather bald.

'My web caught cold,' said the spider. 'But I'll come if she expects me.'

David ran back to the tuffet.

'He's not very well,' he said, 'but he'll come if you expect him.'

'The kind good thing!' said Miss Muffet. 'Now I must begin to get frightened. Will you help me? Say "Bo!" and make faces with me in the looking-glass, and tell me a ghost story. Bring me the looking-glass, silly,' she shouted to the butler.

He took one down from over the chimney-piece, and held it in front of them, while David and Miss Muffet made the most awful faces into it.

'That's a beauty,' said Miss Muffet, as David squinted, screwed up his nose, and put his tongue out. 'Thank you for that

one, my dear. It gave me quite a start. You are really remarkably ugly. Will you feel my pulse, and see how I am getting on. Make another face: I'm used to that one. Oh, I got a beauty then: it terrified me. And begin your ghost story quickly.'

David had no idea where anybody's pulse was, so he began his ghost story.

'Once upon a time,' he said, 'there was a ghost that lived in the hot-water tap.'

'Gracious, how dreadful!' said Miss Muffet. 'What was it the ghost of?'

'It wasn't the ghost of anything,' said David. 'It was just a ghost.'

'But it must have been "of" something,' said Miss Muffet. 'The King is the King of England, and I'm Miss Muffet of nothing at all. But you must have an "of." '

'This one hadn't,' said David firmly. 'It was just a ghost. It groaned when you turned the hot water on, and it squealed when you turned it off.'

'This will never do,' said Miss Muffet. 'I'm getting quite calm again, like a kettle going off the boil. Make another face. Oh, now it's too late!'

There came a tremendous cantering sound behind them, and Miss Muffet opened her mouth and screamed so loud that her horn spectacles broke into fragments.

'Here he comes!' she said. 'O-oh, how frightened I am!'

She gave one more wild shriek as the spider leaped on to the

tuffet, and began running about the room with the most amazing speed, the spider cantering after her. They upset the bathing-machine, and knocked the stuffed horse down, they dodged behind the butler, and sent the beehive spinning, and splashed through the curds and whey, which formed a puddle on the floor. Then the door through which David had entered flew open, and out darted Miss Muffet with the spider in hot pursuit. Her screaming, which never stopped for a moment, grew fainter and fainter.

The butler gave an enormous yawn.

'Cleaning up time,' he said, and took a mop from behind the door, and dipped it into the pool of curds and whey. When it was quite soaked, he twisted it rapidly round and round, and a shower of curds and whey deluged David. As it fell on him, it seemed to turn to snow. It was snowing heavily from the roof too, and snow was blowing in through the door. Then he saw that it wasn't a door at all, but the opening of a street, and that the walls were the walls of houses. It was difficult to see distinctly through the snowstorm, but he felt as if he knew where he was.

CHAPTER III

The snow cleared as swiftly as it had begun, and David saw that he was standing in the High Street of the village near which he lived. It was all quite ordinary, and he was afraid that he had somehow been popped back through the blue door during the snowstorm, and was again in the stupid dull world. Just opposite him was the post and telegraph office, and next to that the bank, and beyond that the girls' school. There were the same old shops too, Mr. Winfall the tailor's, and the confectioner's and the bootmaker's, and at the bottom of the street was the bridge over the river.

'Well, if I am back in the world again,' said David, 'it would be a pity to let all this good snow go to waste without its being tobogganed on. I'll go home, I think, and get my toboggan. I wonder how they did it.'

He started to go down the street to the bridge across which was the lane which presently passed by the bottom of the field beyond the lake, on the other side of which was the garden, where was the summer-house in which he had left his toboggan yesterday. But he happened to look a little more closely at the bootmaker's shop, and instead of the card in the window which said, 'Boots and shoes neatly repaired,' there was another one on which was written 'Uncles and Aunts recovered and repaired.'

'I suppose they recover them when they're lost, and repair

them when they're found,' thought David. 'But it's not a bit usual.'

He found it no more usual when he looked at the girls' school, for instead of the brass plate on which was written 'Miss Milligan's school for Young Ladies,' he saw written there 'Happy Families' Institute,' and in the window of the bank a notice 'Sovereigns are cheap to-day.'

'I'll go in there at once,' thought David, 'and buy some. I wonder how much money I've got.'

He found four pennies in his pocket, and went in with them to the bank. The manager was there talking in a low voice to a very stout gentleman with a meat-chopper in his hand, whom David knew to be the Mint-man from London, just as certainly as if he had had it written all over him. What made it absolutely sure was the fact that sovereigns kept oozing out of his clothes and dropping on the floor. There was quite a pile of them round his feet, which the porter who opened the door to David kept sweeping up, and putting down his neck again.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.