

ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

THE PHOENIX

AND THE

CARPET

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The Phoenix and the Carpet

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E. Nesbit
The Phoenix and the Carpet

TO

My Dear Godson

HUBERT GRIFFIT

Hand his sister

MARGARET

TO HUBERT

Dear Hubert, if I ever found
A wishing-carpet lying round,
I'd stand upon it, and I'd say:
'Take me to Hubert, right away!'
And then we'd travel very far
To where the magic countries are
That you and I will never see,
And choose the loveliest gifts for you, from me.
But oh! alack! and well-a-day!
No wishing-carpets come my way.
I never found a Phoenix yet,
And Psammeads are so hard to get!
So I give you nothing fine—
Only this book your book and mine,
And hers, whose name by yours is set;
Your book, my book, the book of Margaret!

E. NESBIT

DYMCHURCH September, 1904

CHAPTER 1. THE EGG

It began with the day when it was almost the Fifth of November, and a doubt arose in some breast—Robert's, I fancy—as to the quality of the fireworks laid in for the Guy Fawkes celebration.

'They were jolly cheap,' said whoever it was, and I think it was Robert, 'and suppose they didn't go off on the night? Those Prosser kids would have something to snigger about then.'

'The ones *I* got are all right,' Jane said; 'I know they are, because the man at the shop said they were worth thribble the money—'

'I'm sure thribble isn't grammar,' Anthea said.

'Of course it isn't,' said Cyril; 'one word can't be grammar all by itself, so you needn't be so jolly clever.'

Anthea was rummaging in the corner-drawers of her mind for a very disagreeable answer, when she remembered what a wet day it was, and how the boys had been disappointed of that ride to London and back on the top of the tram, which their mother had promised them as a reward for not having once forgotten, for six whole days, to wipe their boots on the mat when they came home from school.

So Anthea only said, 'Don't be so jolly clever yourself, Squirrel. And the fireworks look all right, and you'll have the eightpence that your tram fares didn't cost to-day, to buy something more with. You ought to get a perfectly lovely Catharine wheel for eightpence.'

'I daresay,' said Cyril, coldly; 'but it's not *YOUR* eightpence anyhow—'

'But look here,' said Robert, 'really now, about the fireworks. We don't want to be disgraced before those kids next door. They think because they wear red plush on Sundays no one else is any good.'

'I wouldn't wear plush if it was ever so—unless it was black to be beheaded in, if I was Mary Queen of Scots,' said Anthea, with scorn.

Robert stuck steadily to his point. One great point about Robert is the steadiness with which he can stick.

'I think we ought to test them,' he said.

'You young duffer,' said Cyril, 'fireworks are like postage-stamps. You can only use them once.'

'What do you suppose it means by "Carter's tested seeds" in the advertisement?'

There was a blank silence. Then Cyril touched his forehead with his finger and shook his head.

'A little wrong here,' he said. 'I was always afraid of that with poor Robert. All that cleverness, you know, and being top in algebra so often—it's bound to tell—'

'Dry up,' said Robert, fiercely. 'Don't you see? You can't TEST seeds if you do them ALL. You just take a few here and there, and if those grow you can feel pretty sure the others will be—what do you call it?—Father told me—"up to sample". Don't you think we ought to sample the fire-works? Just shut our eyes and each draw one out, and then try them.'

'But it's raining cats and dogs,' said Jane.

'And Queen Anne is dead,' rejoined Robert. No one was in a very good temper. 'We needn't go out to do them; we can just move back the table, and let them off on the old tea-tray we play toboggans with. I don't know what YOU think, but *I* think it's time we did something, and that would be really useful; because then we shouldn't just HOPE the fireworks would make those Prossers sit up—we should KNOW.'

'It WOULD be something to do,' Cyril owned with languid approval.

So the table was moved back. And then the hole in the carpet, that had been near the window till the carpet was turned round, showed most awfully. But Anthea stole out on tip-toe, and got the tray when cook wasn't looking, and brought it in and put it over the hole.

Then all the fireworks were put on the table, and each of the four children shut its eyes very tight and put out its hand and grasped something. Robert took a cracker, Cyril and Anthea had Roman

candles; but Jane's fat paw closed on the gem of the whole collection, the Jack-in-the-box that had cost two shillings, and one at least of the party—I will not say which, because it was sorry afterwards—declared that Jane had done it on purpose. Nobody was pleased. For the worst of it was that these four children, with a very proper dislike of anything even faintly bordering on the sneakish, had a law, unalterable as those of the Medes and Persians, that one had to stand by the results of a toss-up, or a drawing of lots, or any other appeal to chance, however much one might happen to dislike the way things were turning out.

'I didn't mean to,' said Jane, near tears. 'I don't care, I'll draw another—'

'You know jolly well you can't,' said Cyril, bitterly. 'It's settled. It's Medium and Persian. You've done it, and you'll have to stand by it—and us too, worse luck. Never mind. YOU'LL have your pocket-money before the Fifth. Anyway, we'll have the Jack-in-the-box LAST, and get the most out of it we can.'

So the cracker and the Roman candles were lighted, and they were all that could be expected for the money; but when it came to the Jack-in-the-box it simply sat in the tray and laughed at them, as Cyril said. They tried to light it with paper and they tried to light it with matches; they tried to light it with Vesuvian fusees from the pocket of father's second-best overcoat that was hanging in the hall. And then Anthea slipped away to the cupboard under the stairs where the brooms and dustpans were kept, and the rosiny fire-lighters that smell so nice and like the woods where pine-trees grow, and the old newspapers and the bees-wax and turpentine, and the horrid an stiff dark rags that are used for cleaning brass and furniture, and the paraffin for the lamps. She came back with a little pot that had once cost sevenpence-halfpenny when it was full of red-currant jelly; but the jelly had been all eaten long ago, and now Anthea had filled the jar with paraffin. She came in, and she threw the paraffin over the tray just at the moment when Cyril was trying with the twenty-third match to light the Jack-in-the-box. The Jack-in-the-box did not catch fire any more than usual, but the paraffin acted quite differently, and in an instant a hot flash of flame leapt up and burnt off Cyril's eyelashes, and scorched the faces of all four before they could spring back. They backed, in four instantaneous bounds, as far as they could, which was to the wall, and the pillar of fire reached from floor to ceiling.

'My hat,' said Cyril, with emotion, 'You've done it this time, Anthea.'

The flame was spreading out under the ceiling like the rose of fire in Mr Rider Haggard's exciting story about Allan Quatermain. Robert and Cyril saw that no time was to be lost. They turned up the edges of the carpet, and kicked them over the tray. This cut off the column of fire, and it disappeared and there was nothing left but smoke and a dreadful smell of lamps that have been turned too low.

All hands now rushed to the rescue, and the paraffin fire was only a bundle of trampled carpet, when suddenly a sharp crack beneath their feet made the amateur firemen start back. Another crack—the carpet moved as if it had had a cat wrapped in it; the Jack-in-the-box had at last allowed itself to be lighted, and it was going off with desperate violence inside the carpet.

Robert, with the air of one doing the only possible thing, rushed to the window and opened it. Anthea screamed, Jane burst into tears, and Cyril turned the table wrong way up on top of the carpet heap. But the firework went on, banging and bursting and spluttering even underneath the table.

Next moment mother rushed in, attracted by the howls of Anthea, and in a few moments the firework desisted and there was a dead silence, and the children stood looking at each other's black faces, and, out of the corners of their eyes, at mother's white one.

The fact that the nursery carpet was ruined occasioned but little surprise, nor was any one really astonished that bed should prove the immediate end of the adventure. It has been said that all roads lead to Rome; this may be true, but at any rate, in early youth I am quite sure that many roads lead to BED, and stop there—or YOU do.

The rest of the fireworks were confiscated, and mother was not pleased when father let them off himself in the back garden, though he said, 'Well, how else can you get rid of them, my dear?'

You see, father had forgotten that the children were in disgrace, and that their bedroom windows looked out on to the back garden. So that they all saw the fireworks most beautifully, and admired the skill with which father handled them.

Next day all was forgotten and forgiven; only the nursery had to be deeply cleaned (like spring-cleaning), and the ceiling had to be whitewashed.

And mother went out; and just at tea-time next day a man came with a rolled-up carpet, and father paid him, and mother said—

‘If the carpet isn’t in good condition, you know, I shall expect you to change it.’ And the man replied—

‘There ain’t a thread gone in it nowhere, mum. It’s a bargain, if ever there was one, and I’m more’n ‘arf sorry I let it go at the price; but we can’t resist the lydies, can we, sir?’ and he winked at father and went away.

Then the carpet was put down in the nursery, and sure enough there wasn’t a hole in it anywhere.

As the last fold was unrolled something hard and loud-sounding bumped out of it and trundled along the nursery floor. All the children scrambled for it, and Cyril got it. He took it to the gas. It was shaped like an egg, very yellow and shiny, half-transparent, and it had an odd sort of light in it that changed as you held it in different ways. It was as though it was an egg with a yolk of pale fire that just showed through the stone.

‘I MAY keep it, mayn’t I, mother?’ Cyril asked.

And of course mother said no; they must take it back to the man who had brought the carpet, because she had only paid for a carpet, and not for a stone egg with a fiery yolk to it.

So she told them where the shop was, and it was in the Kentish Town Road, not far from the hotel that is called the Bull and Gate. It was a poky little shop, and the man was arranging furniture outside on the pavement very cunningly, so that the more broken parts should show as little as possible. And directly he saw the children he knew them again, and he began at once, without giving them a chance to speak.

‘No you don’t’ he cried loudly; ‘I ain’t a-goin’ to take back no carpets, so don’t you make no bloomin’ errer. A bargain’s a bargain, and the carpet’s puffik throughout.’

‘We don’t want you to take it back,’ said Cyril; ‘but we found something in it.’

‘It must have got into it up at your place, then,’ said the man, with indignant promptness, ‘for there ain’t nothing in nothing as I sell. It’s all as clean as a whistle.’

‘I never said it wasn’t CLEAN,’ said Cyril, ‘but—’

‘Oh, if it’s MOTHS,’ said the man, ‘that’s easy cured with borax. But I expect it was only an odd one. I tell you the carpet’s good through and through. It hadn’t got no moths when it left my ‘ands—not so much as an hegg.’

‘But that’s just it,’ interrupted Jane; ‘there WAS so much as an egg.’

The man made a sort of rush at the children and stamped his foot.

‘Clear out, I say!’ he shouted, ‘or I’ll call for the police. A nice thing for customers to ‘ear you a-coming ‘ere a-charging me with finding things in goods what I sells. ‘Ere, be off, afore I sends you off with a flea in your ears. Hi! constable—’

The children fled, and they think, and their father thinks, that they couldn’t have done anything else. Mother has her own opinion.

But father said they might keep the egg.

‘The man certainly didn’t know the egg was there when he brought the carpet,’ said he, ‘any more than your mother did, and we’ve as much right to it as he had.’

So the egg was put on the mantelpiece, where it quite brightened up the dingy nursery. The nursery was dingy, because it was a basement room, and its windows looked out on a stone area with a rockery made of clinkers facing the windows. Nothing grew in the rockery except London pride and snails.

The room had been described in the house agent's list as a 'convenient breakfast-room in basement,' and in the daytime it was rather dark. This did not matter so much in the evenings when the gas was alight, but then it was in the evening that the blackbeetles got so sociable, and used to come out of the low cupboards on each side of the fireplace where their homes were, and try to make friends with the children. At least, I suppose that was what they wanted, but the children never would.

On the Fifth of November father and mother went to the theatre, and the children were not happy, because the Prossers next door had lots of fireworks and they had none.

They were not even allowed to have a bonfire in the garden.

'No more playing with fire, thank you,' was father's answer, when they asked him.

When the baby had been put to bed the children sat sadly round the fire in the nursery.

'I'm beastly bored,' said Robert.

'Let's talk about the Psammead,' said Anthea, who generally tried to give the conversation a cheerful turn.

'What's the good of TALKING?' said Cyril. 'What I want is for something to happen. It's awfully stuffy for a chap not to be allowed out in the evenings. There's simply nothing to do when you've got through your homers.'

Jane finished the last of her home-lessons and shut the book with a bang.

'We've got the pleasure of memory,' said she. 'Just think of last holidays.'

Last holidays, indeed, offered something to think of—for they had been spent in the country at a white house between a sand-pit and a gravel-pit, and things had happened. The children had found a Psammead, or sand-fairy, and it had let them have anything they wished for—just exactly anything, with no bother about its not being really for their good, or anything like that. And if you want to know what kind of things they wished for, and how their wishes turned out you can read it all in a book called *Five Children and It* (It was the Psammead). If you've not read it, perhaps I ought to tell you that the fifth child was the baby brother, who was called the Lamb, because the first thing he ever said was 'Baa!' and that the other children were not particularly handsome, nor were they extra clever, nor extraordinarily good. But they were not bad sorts on the whole; in fact, they were rather like you.

'I don't want to think about the pleasures of memory,' said Cyril; 'I want some more things to happen.'

'We're very much luckier than any one else, as it is,' said Jane. 'Why, no one else ever found a Psammead. We ought to be grateful.'

'Why shouldn't we GO ON being, though?' Cyril asked—'lucky, I mean, not grateful. Why's it all got to stop?'

'Perhaps something will happen,' said Anthea, comfortably. 'Do you know, sometimes I think we are the sort of people that things DO happen to.'

'It's like that in history,' said Jane: 'some kings are full of interesting things, and others—nothing ever happens to them, except their being born and crowned and buried, and sometimes not that.'

'I think Panther's right,' said Cyril: 'I think we are the sort of people things do happen to. I have a sort of feeling things would happen right enough if we could only give them a shove. It just wants something to start it. That's all.'

'I wish they taught magic at school,' Jane sighed. 'I believe if we could do a little magic it might make something happen.'

'I wonder how you begin?' Robert looked round the room, but he got no ideas from the faded green curtains, or the drab Venetian blinds, or the worn brown oil-cloth on the floor. Even the new carpet suggested nothing, though its pattern was a very wonderful one, and always seemed as though it were just going to make you think of something.

'I could begin right enough,' said Anthea; 'I've read lots about it. But I believe it's wrong in the Bible.'

‘It’s only wrong in the Bible because people wanted to hurt other people. I don’t see how things can be wrong unless they hurt somebody, and we don’t want to hurt anybody; and what’s more, we jolly well couldn’t if we tried. Let’s get the Ingoldsby Legends. There’s a thing about Abra-cadabra there,’ said Cyril, yawning. ‘We may as well play at magic. Let’s be Knights Templars. They were awfully gone on magic. They used to work spells or something with a goat and a goose. Father says so.’

‘Well, that’s all right,’ said Robert, unkindly; ‘you can play the goat right enough, and Jane knows how to be a goose.’

‘I’ll get Ingoldsby,’ said Anthea, hastily. ‘You turn up the hearthrug.’

So they traced strange figures on the linoleum, where the hearthrug had kept it clean. They traced them with chalk that Robert had nicked from the top of the mathematical master’s desk at school. You know, of course, that it is stealing to take a new stick of chalk, but it is not wrong to take a broken piece, so long as you only take one. (I do not know the reason of this rule, nor who made it.) And they chanted all the gloomiest songs they could think of. And, of course, nothing happened. So then Anthea said, ‘I’m sure a magic fire ought to be made of sweet-smelling wood, and have magic gums and essences and things in it.’

‘I don’t know any sweet-smelling wood, except cedar,’ said Robert; ‘but I’ve got some ends of cedar-wood lead pencil.’

So they burned the ends of lead pencil. And still nothing happened.

‘Let’s burn some of the eucalyptus oil we have for our colds,’ said Anthea.

And they did. It certainly smelt very strong. And they burned lumps of camphor out of the big chest. It was very bright, and made a horrid black smoke, which looked very magical. But still nothing happened. Then they got some clean tea-cloths from the dresser drawer in the kitchen, and waved them over the magic chalk-tracings, and sang ‘The Hymn of the Moravian Nuns at Bethlehem’, which is very impressive. And still nothing happened. So they waved more and more wildly, and Robert’s tea-cloth caught the golden egg and whisked it off the mantelpiece, and it fell into the fender and rolled under the grate.

‘Oh, crikey!’ said more than one voice.

And every one instantly fell down flat on its front to look under the grate, and there lay the egg, glowing in a nest of hot ashes.

‘It’s not smashed, anyhow,’ said Robert, and he put his hand under the grate and picked up the egg. But the egg was much hotter than any one would have believed it could possibly get in such a short time, and Robert had to drop it with a cry of ‘Bother!’ It fell on the top bar of the grate, and bounced right into the glowing red-hot heart of the fire.

‘The tongs!’ cried Anthea. But, alas, no one could remember where they were. Every one had forgotten that the tongs had last been used to fish up the doll’s teapot from the bottom of the water-butt, where the Lamb had dropped it. So the nursery tongs were resting between the water-butt and the dustbin, and cook refused to lend the kitchen ones.

‘Never mind,’ said Robert, ‘we’ll get it out with the poker and the shovel.’

‘Oh, stop,’ cried Anthea. ‘Look at it! Look! look! look! I do believe something IS going to happen!’

For the egg was now red-hot, and inside it something was moving. Next moment there was a soft cracking sound; the egg burst in two, and out of it came a flame-coloured bird. It rested a moment among the flames, and as it rested there the four children could see it growing bigger and bigger under their eyes.

Every mouth was a-gape, every eye a-goggle.

The bird rose in its nest of fire, stretched its wings, and flew out into the room. It flew round and round, and round again, and where it passed the air was warm. Then it perched on the fender. The children looked at each other. Then Cyril put out a hand towards the bird. It put its head on one

side and looked up at him, as you may have seen a parrot do when it is just going to speak, so that the children were hardly astonished at all when it said, 'Be careful; I am not nearly cool yet.'

They were not astonished, but they were very, very much interested.

They looked at the bird, and it was certainly worth looking at. Its feathers were like gold. It was about as large as a bantam, only its beak was not at all bantam-shaped. 'I believe I know what it is,' said Robert. 'I've seen a picture.'

He hurried away. A hasty dash and scramble among the papers on father's study table yielded, as the sum-books say, 'the desired result'. But when he came back into the room holding out a paper, and crying, 'I say, look here,' the others all said 'Hush!' and he hushed obediently and instantly, for the bird was speaking.

'Which of you,' it was saying, 'put the egg into the fire?'

'He did,' said three voices, and three fingers pointed at Robert.

The bird bowed; at least it was more like that than anything else.

'I am your grateful debtor,' it said with a high-bred air.

The children were all choking with wonder and curiosity—all except Robert. He held the paper in his hand, and he KNEW. He said so. He said—

'I know who you are.'

And he opened and displayed a printed paper, at the head of which was a little picture of a bird sitting in a nest of flames.

'You are the Phoenix,' said Robert; and the bird was quite pleased.

'My fame has lived then for two thousand years,' it said. 'Allow me to look at my portrait.' It looked at the page which Robert, kneeling down, spread out in the fender, and said—

'It's not a flattering likeness... And what are these characters?' it asked, pointing to the printed part.

'Oh, that's all dullish; it's not much about YOU, you know,' said Cyril, with unconscious politeness; 'but you're in lots of books.'

'With portraits?' asked the Phoenix.

'Well, no,' said Cyril; 'in fact, I don't think I ever saw any portrait of you but that one, but I can read you something about yourself, if you like.'

The Phoenix nodded, and Cyril went off and fetched Volume X of the old Encyclopedia, and on page 246 he found the following:—

'Phoenix—in ornithology, a fabulous bird of antiquity.'

'Antiquity is quite correct,' said the Phoenix, 'but fabulous—well, do I look it?'

Every one shook its head. Cyril went on—

'The ancients speak of this bird as single, or the only one of its kind.'

'That's right enough,' said the Phoenix.

'They describe it as about the size of an eagle.'

'Eagles are of different sizes,' said the Phoenix; 'it's not at all a good description.'

All the children were kneeling on the hearthrug, to be as near the Phoenix as possible.

'You'll boil your brains,' it said. 'Look out, I'm nearly cool now;' and with a whirr of golden wings it fluttered from the fender to the table. It was so nearly cool that there was only a very faint smell of burning when it had settled itself on the table-cloth.

'It's only a very little scorched,' said the Phoenix, apologetically; 'it will come out in the wash. Please go on reading.'

The children gathered round the table.

'The size of an eagle,' Cyril went on, 'its head finely crested with a beautiful plumage, its neck covered with feathers of a gold colour, and the rest of its body purple; only the tail white, and the eyes sparkling like stars. They say that it lives about five hundred years in the wilderness, and when advanced in age it builds itself a pile of sweet wood and aromatic gums, fires it with the wafting of

its wings, and thus burns itself; and that from its ashes arises a worm, which in time grows up to be a Phoenix. Hence the Phoenicians gave—'

'Never mind what they gave,' said the Phoenix, ruffling its golden feathers. 'They never gave much, anyway; they always were people who gave nothing for nothing. That book ought to be destroyed. It's most inaccurate. The rest of my body was never purple, and as for my—tail—well, I simply ask you, IS it white?'

It turned round and gravely presented its golden tail to the children.

'No, it's not,' said everybody.

'No, and it never was,' said the Phoenix. 'And that about the worm is just a vulgar insult. The Phoenix has an egg, like all respectable birds. It makes a pile—that part's all right—and it lays its egg, and it burns itself; and it goes to sleep and wakes up in its egg, and comes out and goes on living again, and so on for ever and ever. I can't tell you how weary I got of it—such a restless existence; no repose.'

'But how did your egg get HERE?' asked Anthea.

'Ah, that's my life-secret,' said the Phoenix. 'I couldn't tell it to any one who wasn't really sympathetic. I've always been a misunderstood bird. You can tell that by what they say about the worm. I might tell YOU,' it went on, looking at Robert with eyes that were indeed starry. 'You put me on the fire—' Robert looked uncomfortable.

'The rest of us made the fire of sweet-scented woods and gums, though,' said Cyril.

'And—and it was an accident my putting you on the fire,' said Robert, telling the truth with some difficulty, for he did not know how the Phoenix might take it. It took it in the most unexpected manner.

'Your candid avowal,' it said, 'removes my last scruple. I will tell you my story.'

'And you won't vanish, or anything sudden will you?' asked Anthea, anxiously.

'Why?' it asked, puffing out the golden feathers, 'do you wish me to stay here?'

'Oh YES,' said every one, with unmistakable sincerity.

'Why?' asked the Phoenix again, looking modestly at the table-cloth.

'Because,' said every one at once, and then stopped short; only Jane added after a pause, 'you are the most beautiful person we've ever seen.' 'You are a sensible child,' said the Phoenix, 'and I will NOT vanish or anything sudden. And I will tell you my tale. I had resided, as your book says, for many thousand years in the wilderness, which is a large, quiet place with very little really good society, and I was becoming weary of the monotony of my existence. But I acquired the habit of laying my egg and burning myself every five hundred years—and you know how difficult it is to break yourself of a habit.'

'Yes,' said Cyril; 'Jane used to bite her nails.'

'But I broke myself of it,' urged Jane, rather hurt, 'You know I did.'

'Not till they put bitter aloes on them,' said Cyril.

'I doubt,' said the bird, gravely, 'whether even bitter aloes (the aloe, by the way, has a bad habit of its own, which it might well cure before seeking to cure others; I allude to its indolent practice of flowering but once a century), I doubt whether even bitter aloes could have cured ME. But I WAS cured. I awoke one morning from a feverish dream—it was getting near the time for me to lay that tiresome fire and lay that tedious egg upon it—and I saw two people, a man and a woman. They were sitting on a carpet—and when I accosted them civilly they narrated to me their life-story, which, as you have not yet heard it, I will now proceed to relate. They were a prince and princess, and the story of their parents was one which I am sure you will like to hear. In early youth the mother of the princess happened to hear the story of a certain enchanter, and in that story I am sure you will be interested. The enchanter—'

'Oh, please don't,' said Anthea. 'I can't understand all these beginnings of stories, and you seem to be getting deeper and deeper in them every minute. Do tell us your OWN story. That's what we really want to hear.'

‘Well,’ said the Phoenix, seeming on the whole rather flattered, ‘to cut about seventy long stories short (though *I* had to listen to them all—but to be sure in the wilderness there is plenty of time), this prince and princess were so fond of each other that they did not want any one else, and the enchanter—don’t be alarmed, I won’t go into his history—had given them a magic carpet (you’ve heard of a magic carpet?), and they had just sat on it and told it to take them right away from every one—and it had brought them to the wilderness. And as they meant to stay there they had no further use for the carpet, so they gave it to me. That was indeed the chance of a lifetime!’

‘I don’t see what you wanted with a carpet,’ said Jane, ‘when you’ve got those lovely wings.’

‘They ARE nice wings, aren’t they?’ said the Phoenix, simpering and spreading them out. ‘Well, I got the prince to lay out the carpet, and I laid my egg on it; then I said to the carpet, “Now, my excellent carpet, prove your worth. Take that egg somewhere where it can’t be hatched for two thousand years, and where, when that time’s up, some one will light a fire of sweet wood and aromatic gums, and put the egg in to hatch;” and you see it’s all come out exactly as I said. The words were no sooner out of my beak than egg and carpet disappeared. The royal lovers assisted to arrange my pile, and soothed my last moments. I burnt myself up and knew no more till I awoke on yonder altar.’

It pointed its claw at the grate.

‘But the carpet,’ said Robert, ‘the magic carpet that takes you anywhere you wish. What became of that?’

‘Oh, THAT?’ said the Phoenix, carelessly—‘I should say that that is the carpet. I remember the pattern perfectly.’

It pointed as it spoke to the floor, where lay the carpet which mother had bought in the Kentish Town Road for twenty-two shillings and ninepence.

At that instant father’s latch-key was heard in the door.

‘OH,’ whispered Cyril, ‘now we shall catch it for not being in bed!’

‘Wish yourself there,’ said the Phoenix, in a hurried whisper, ‘and then wish the carpet back in its place.’

No sooner said than done. It made one a little giddy, certainly, and a little breathless; but when things seemed right way up again, there the children were, in bed, and the lights were out.

They heard the soft voice of the Phoenix through the darkness.

‘I shall sleep on the cornice above your curtains,’ it said. ‘Please don’t mention me to your kinsfolk.’

‘Not much good,’ said Robert, ‘they’d never believe us. I say,’ he called through the half-open door to the girls; ‘talk about adventures and things happening. We ought to be able to get some fun out of a magic carpet AND a Phoenix.’

‘Rather,’ said the girls, in bed.

‘Children,’ said father, on the stairs, ‘go to sleep at once. What do you mean by talking at this time of night?’

No answer was expected to this question, but under the bedclothes Cyril murmured one.

‘Mean?’ he said. ‘Don’t know what we mean. I don’t know what anything means.’

‘But we’ve got a magic carpet AND a Phoenix,’ said Robert.

‘You’ll get something else if father comes in and catches you,’ said Cyril. ‘Shut up, I tell you.’

Robert shut up. But he knew as well as you do that the adventures of that carpet and that Phoenix were only just beginning.

Father and mother had not the least idea of what had happened in their absence. This is often the case, even when there are no magic carpets or Phoenixes in the house.

The next morning—but I am sure you would rather wait till the next chapter before you hear about THAT.

CHAPTER 2. THE TOPLESS TOWER

The children had seen the Phoenix-egg hatched in the flames in their own nursery grate, and had heard from it how the carpet on their own nursery floor was really the wishing carpet, which would take them anywhere they chose. The carpet had transported them to bed just at the right moment, and the Phoenix had gone to roost on the cornice supporting the window-curtains of the boys' room.

'Excuse me,' said a gentle voice, and a courteous beak opened, very kindly and delicately, the right eye of Cyril. 'I hear the slaves below preparing food. Awaken! A word of explanation and arrangement... I do wish you wouldn't—'

The Phoenix stopped speaking and fluttered away crossly to the cornice-pole; for Cyril had hit out, as boys do when they are awakened suddenly, and the Phoenix was not used to boys, and his feelings, if not his wings, were hurt.

'Sorry,' said Cyril, coming awake all in a minute. 'Do come back! What was it you were saying? Something about bacon and rations?'

The Phoenix fluttered back to the brass rail at the foot of the bed.

'I say—you ARE real,' said Cyril. 'How ripping! And the carpet?'

'The carpet is as real as it ever was,' said the Phoenix, rather contemptuously; 'but, of course, a carpet's only a carpet, whereas a Phoenix is superlatively a Phoenix.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Cyril, 'I see it is. Oh, what luck! Wake up, Bobs! There's jolly well something to wake up for today. And it's Saturday, too.'

'I've been reflecting,' said the Phoenix, 'during the silent watches of the night, and I could not avoid the conclusion that you were quite insufficiently astonished at my appearance yesterday. The ancients were always VERY surprised. Did you, by chance, EXPECT my egg to hatch?'

'Not us,' Cyril said.

'And if we had,' said Anthea, who had come in in her nightie when she heard the silvery voice of the Phoenix, 'we could never, never have expected it to hatch anything so splendid as you.'

The bird smiled. Perhaps you've never seen a bird smile?

'You see,' said Anthea, wrapping herself in the boys' counterpane, for the morning was chill, 'we've had things happen to us before;' and she told the story of the Psammead, or sand-fairy.

'Ah yes,' said the Phoenix; 'Psammeads were rare, even in my time. I remember I used to be called the Psammead of the Desert. I was always having compliments paid me; I can't think why.'

'Can YOU give wishes, then?' asked Jane, who had now come in too.

'Oh, dear me, no,' said the Phoenix, contemptuously, 'at least—but I hear footsteps approaching. I hasten to conceal myself.' And it did.

I think I said that this day was Saturday. It was also cook's birthday, and mother had allowed her and Eliza to go to the Crystal Palace with a party of friends, so Jane and Anthea of course had to help to make beds and to wash up the breakfast cups, and little things like that. Robert and Cyril intended to spend the morning in conversation with the Phoenix, but the bird had its own ideas about this.

'I must have an hour or two's quiet,' it said, 'I really must. My nerves will give way unless I can get a little rest. You must remember it's two thousand years since I had any conversation—I'm out of practice, and I must take care of myself. I've often been told that mine is a valuable life.' So it nestled down inside an old hatbox of father's, which had been brought down from the box-room some days before, when a helmet was suddenly needed for a game of tournaments, with its golden head under its golden wing, and went to sleep. So then Robert and Cyril moved the table back and were going to sit on the carpet and wish themselves somewhere else. But before they could decide on the place, Cyril said—

'I don't know. Perhaps it's rather sneakish to begin without the girls.'

‘They’ll be all the morning,’ said Robert, impatiently. And then a thing inside him, which tiresome books sometimes call the ‘inward monitor’, said, ‘Why don’t you help them, then?’

Cyril’s ‘inward monitor’ happened to say the same thing at the same moment, so the boys went and helped to wash up the tea-cups, and to dust the drawing-room. Robert was so interested that he proposed to clean the front doorsteps—a thing he had never been allowed to do. Nor was he allowed to do it on this occasion. One reason was that it had already been done by cook.

When all the housework was finished, the girls dressed the happy, wriggling baby in his blue highwayman coat and three-cornered hat, and kept him amused while mother changed her dress and got ready to take him over to granny’s. Mother always went to granny’s every Saturday, and generally some of the children went with her; but today they were to keep house. And their hearts were full of joyous and delightful feelings every time they remembered that the house they would have to keep had a Phoenix in it, AND a wishing carpet.

You can always keep the Lamb good and happy for quite a long time if you play the Noah’s Ark game with him. It is quite simple. He just sits on your lap and tells you what animal he is, and then you say the little poetry piece about whatever animal he chooses to be.

Of course, some of the animals, like the zebra and the tiger, haven’t got any poetry, because they are so difficult to rhyme to. The Lamb knows quite well which are the poetry animals.

‘I’m a baby bear!’ said the Lamb, snuggling down; and Anthea began:

‘I love my little baby bear,
I love his nose and toes and hair;
I like to hold him in my arm,
And keep him VERY safe and warm.’

And when she said ‘very’, of course there was a real bear’s hug.

Then came the eel, and the Lamb was tickled till he wriggled exactly like a real one:

‘I love my little baby eel,
He is so squidglety to feel;
He’ll be an eel when he is big—
But now he’s just—a—tiny SNIG!’

Perhaps you didn’t know that a snig was a baby eel? It is, though, and the Lamb knew it.

‘Hedgehog now-!’ he said; and Anthea went on:

‘My baby hedgehog, how I like ye,
Though your back’s so prickly-spiky;
Your front is very soft, I’ve found,
So I must love you front ways round!’

And then she loved him front ways round, while he squealed with pleasure.

It is a very baby game, and, of course, the rhymes are only meant for very, very small people—not for people who are old enough to read books, so I won’t tell you any more of them.

By the time the Lamb had been a baby lion and a baby weazel, and a baby rabbit and a baby rat, mother was ready; and she and the Lamb, having been kissed by everybody and hugged as thoroughly as it is possible to be when you’re dressed for out-of-doors, were seen to the tram by the boys. When the boys came back, every one looked at every one else and said—

‘Now!’

They locked the front door and they locked the back door, and they fastened all the windows. They moved the table and chairs off the carpet, and Anthea swept it.

‘We must show it a LITTLE attention,’ she said kindly. ‘We’ll give it tea-leaves next time. Carpets like tea-leaves.’

Then every one put on its out-door things, because as Cyril said, they didn’t know where they might be going, and it makes people stare if you go out of doors in November in pinafores and without hats.

Then Robert gently awoke the Phoenix, who yawned and stretched itself, and allowed Robert to lift it on to the middle of the carpet, where it instantly went to sleep again with its crested head tucked under its golden wing as before. Then every one sat down on the carpet.

‘Where shall we go?’ was of course the question, and it was warmly discussed. Anthea wanted to go to Japan. Robert and Cyril voted for America, and Jane wished to go to the seaside.

‘Because there are donkeys there,’ said she.

‘Not in November, silly,’ said Cyril; and the discussion got warmer and warmer, and still nothing was settled.

‘I vote we let the Phoenix decide,’ said Robert, at last. So they stroked it till it woke. ‘We want to go somewhere abroad,’ they said, ‘and we can’t make up our minds where.’

‘Let the carpet make up ITS mind, if it has one,’ said the Phoenix.

‘Just say you wish to go abroad.’

So they did; and the next moment the world seemed to spin upside down, and when it was right way up again and they were ungiddy enough to look about them, they were out of doors.

Out of doors—this is a feeble way to express where they were. They were out of—out of the earth, or off it. In fact, they were floating steadily, safely, splendidly, in the crisp clear air, with the pale bright blue of the sky above them, and far down below the pale bright sun-diamonded waves of the sea. The carpet had stiffened itself somehow, so that it was square and firm like a raft, and it steered itself so beautifully and kept on its way so flat and fearless that no one was at all afraid of tumbling off. In front of them lay land.

‘The coast of France,’ said the Phoenix, waking up and pointing with its wing. ‘Where do you wish to go? I should always keep one wish, of course—for emergencies—otherwise you may get into an emergency from which you can’t emerge at all.’

But the children were far too deeply interested to listen.

‘I tell you what,’ said Cyril: ‘let’s let the thing go on and on, and when we see a place we really want to stop at—why, we’ll just stop. Isn’t this ripping?’

‘It’s like trains,’ said Anthea, as they swept over the low-lying coast-line and held a steady course above orderly fields and straight roads bordered with poplar trees—‘like express trains, only in trains you never can see anything because of grown-ups wanting the windows shut; and then they breathe on them, and it’s like ground glass, and nobody can see anything, and then they go to sleep.’

‘It’s like tobogganing,’ said Robert, ‘so fast and smooth, only there’s no door-mat to stop short on—it goes on and on.’

‘You darling Phoenix,’ said Jane, ‘it’s all your doing. Oh, look at that ducky little church and the women with flappy cappy things on their heads.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said the Phoenix, with sleepy politeness.

‘OH!’ said Cyril, summing up all the rapture that was in every heart. ‘Look at it all—look at it—and think of the Kentish Town Road!’

Every one looked and every one thought. And the glorious, gliding, smooth, steady rush went on, and they looked down on strange and beautiful things, and held their breath and let it go in deep sighs, and said ‘Oh!’ and ‘Ah!’ till it was long past dinner-time.

It was Jane who suddenly said, ‘I wish we’d brought that jam tart and cold mutton with us. It would have been jolly to have a picnic in the air.’

The jam tart and cold mutton were, however, far away, sitting quietly in the larder of the house in Camden Town which the children were supposed to be keeping. A mouse was at that moment tasting the outside of the raspberry jam part of the tart (she had nibbled a sort of gulf, or bay, through the pastry edge) to see whether it was the sort of dinner she could ask her little mouse-husband to sit down to. She had had a very good dinner herself. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

‘We’ll stop as soon as we see a nice place,’ said Anthea. ‘I’ve got threepence, and you boys have the fourpence each that your trams didn’t cost the other day, so we can buy things to eat. I expect the Phoenix can speak French.’

The carpet was sailing along over rocks and rivers and trees and towns and farms and fields. It reminded everybody of a certain time when all of them had had wings, and had flown up to the top of a church tower, and had had a feast there of chicken and tongue and new bread and soda-water. And this again reminded them how hungry they were. And just as they were all being reminded of this very strongly indeed, they saw ahead of them some ruined walls on a hill, and strong and upright, and really, to look at, as good as new—a great square tower.

‘The top of that’s just the exactly same size as the carpet,’ said Jane. ‘I think it would be good to go to the top of that, because then none of the Abby-what’s-its-names—I mean natives—would be able to take the carpet away even if they wanted to. And some of us could go out and get things to eat—buy them honestly, I mean, not take them out of larder windows.’

‘I think it would be better if we went—’ Anthea was beginning; but Jane suddenly clenched her hands.

‘I don’t see why I should never do anything I want, just because I’m the youngest. I wish the carpet would fit itself in at the top of that tower—so there!’

The carpet made a disconcerting bound, and next moment it was hovering above the square top of the tower. Then slowly and carefully it began to sink under them. It was like a lift going down with you at the Army and Navy Stores.

‘I don’t think we ought to wish things without all agreeing to them first,’ said Robert, huffishly. ‘Hullo! What on earth?’

For unexpectedly and greyly something was coming up all round the four sides of the carpet. It was as if a wall were being built by magic quickness. It was a foot high—it was two feet high—three, four, five. It was shutting out the light—more and more.

Anthea looked up at the sky and the walls that now rose six feet above them.

‘We’re dropping into the tower,’ she screamed. ‘THERE WASN’T ANY TOP TO IT. So the carpet’s going to fit itself in at the bottom.’

Robert sprang to his feet.

‘We ought to have—Hullo! an owl’s nest.’ He put his knee on a jutting smooth piece of grey stone, and reached his hand into a deep window slit—broad to the inside of the tower, and narrowing like a funnel to the outside.

‘Look sharp!’ cried every one, but Robert did not look sharp enough. By the time he had drawn his hand out of the owl’s nest—there were no eggs there—the carpet had sunk eight feet below him.

‘Jump, you silly cuckoo!’ cried Cyril, with brotherly anxiety.

But Robert couldn’t turn round all in a minute into a jumping position. He wriggled and twisted and got on to the broad ledge, and by the time he was ready to jump the walls of the tower had risen up thirty feet above the others, who were still sinking with the carpet, and Robert found himself in the embrasure of a window; alone, for even the owls were not at home that day. The wall was smoothish; there was no climbing up, and as for climbing down—Robert hid his face in his hands, and squirmed back and back from the giddy verge, until the back part of him was wedged quite tight in the narrowest part of the window slit.

He was safe now, of course, but the outside part of his window was like a frame to a picture of part of the other side of the tower. It was very pretty, with moss growing between the stones and little

shiny gems; but between him and it there was the width of the tower, and nothing in it but empty air. The situation was terrible. Robert saw in a flash that the carpet was likely to bring them into just the same sort of tight places that they used to get into with the wishes the Psammead granted them.

And the others—imagine their feelings as the carpet sank slowly and steadily to the very bottom of the tower, leaving Robert clinging to the wall. Robert did not even try to imagine their feelings—he had quite enough to do with his own; but you can.

As soon as the carpet came to a stop on the ground at the bottom of the inside of the tower it suddenly lost that raft-like stiffness which had been such a comfort during the journey from Camden Town to the topless tower, and spread itself limply over the loose stones and little earthy mounds at the bottom of the tower, just exactly like any ordinary carpet. Also it shrank suddenly, so that it seemed to draw away from under their feet, and they stepped quickly off the edges and stood on the firm ground, while the carpet drew itself in till it was its proper size, and no longer fitted exactly into the inside of the tower, but left quite a big space all round it.

Then across the carpet they looked at each other, and then every chin was tilted up and every eye sought vainly to see where poor Robert had got to. Of course, they couldn't see him.

'I wish we hadn't come,' said Jane.

'You always do,' said Cyril, briefly. 'Look here, we can't leave Robert up there. I wish the carpet would fetch him down.'

The carpet seemed to awake from a dream and pull itself together. It stiffened itself briskly and floated up between the four walls of the tower. The children below craned their heads back, and nearly broke their necks in doing it. The carpet rose and rose. It hung poised darkly above them for an anxious moment or two; then it dropped down again, threw itself on the uneven floor of the tower, and as it did so it tumbled Robert out on the uneven floor of the tower.

'Oh, glory!' said Robert, 'that was a squeak. You don't know how I felt. I say, I've had about enough for a bit. Let's wish ourselves at home again and have a go at that jam tart and mutton. We can go out again afterwards.'

'Righto!' said every one, for the adventure had shaken the nerves of all. So they all got on to the carpet again, and said—

'I wish we were at home.'

And lo and behold, they were no more at home than before. The carpet never moved. The Phoenix had taken the opportunity to go to sleep. Anthea woke it up gently.

'Look here,' she said.

'I'm looking,' said the Phoenix.

'We WISHED to be at home, and we're still here,' complained Jane.

'No,' said the Phoenix, looking about it at the high dark walls of the tower. 'No; I quite see that.'

'But we wished to be at home,' said Cyril.

'No doubt,' said the bird, politely.

'And the carpet hasn't moved an inch,' said Robert.

'No,' said the Phoenix, 'I see it hasn't.'

'But I thought it was a wishing carpet?'

'So it is,' said the Phoenix.

'Then why—?' asked the children, altogether.

'I did tell you, you know,' said the Phoenix, 'only you are so fond of listening to the music of your own voices. It is, indeed, the most lovely music to each of us, and therefore—'

'You did tell us WHAT?' interrupted an Exasperated.

'Why, that the carpet only gives you three wishes a day and YOU'VE HAD THEM.'

There was a heartfelt silence.

'Then how are we going to get home?' said Cyril, at last.

'I haven't any idea,' replied the Phoenix, kindly. 'Can I fly out and get you any little thing?'

‘How could you carry the money to pay for it?’

‘It isn’t necessary. Birds always take what they want. It is not regarded as stealing, except in the case of magpies.’

The children were glad to find they had been right in supposing this to be the case, on the day when they had wings, and had enjoyed somebody else’s ripe plums.

‘Yes; let the Phoenix get us something to eat, anyway,’ Robert urged— (‘If it will be so kind you mean,’ corrected Anthea, in a whisper); ‘if it will be so kind, and we can be thinking while it’s gone.’

So the Phoenix fluttered up through the grey space of the tower and vanished at the top, and it was not till it had quite gone that Jane said—

‘Suppose it never comes back.’

It was not a pleasant thought, and though Anthea at once said, ‘Of course it will come back; I’m certain it’s a bird of its word,’ a further gloom was cast by the idea. For, curiously enough, there was no door to the tower, and all the windows were far, far too high to be reached by the most adventurous climber. It was cold, too, and Anthea shivered.

‘Yes,’ said Cyril, ‘it’s like being at the bottom of a well.’

The children waited in a sad and hungry silence, and got little stiff necks with holding their little heads back to look up the inside of the tall grey tower, to see if the Phoenix were coming.

At last it came. It looked very big as it fluttered down between the walls, and as it neared them the children saw that its bigness was caused by a basket of boiled chestnuts which it carried in one claw. In the other it held a piece of bread. And in its beak was a very large pear. The pear was juicy, and as good as a very small drink. When the meal was over every one felt better, and the question of how to get home was discussed without any disagreeableness. But no one could think of any way out of the difficulty, or even out of the tower; for the Phoenix, though its beak and claws had fortunately been strong enough to carry food for them, was plainly not equal to flying through the air with four well-nourished children.

‘We must stay here, I suppose,’ said Robert at last, ‘and shout out every now and then, and some one will hear us and bring ropes and ladders, and rescue us like out of mines; and they’ll get up a subscription to send us home, like castaways.’

‘Yes; but we shan’t be home before mother is, and then father’ll take away the carpet and say it’s dangerous or something,’ said Cyril.

‘I DO wish we hadn’t come,’ said Jane.

And every one else said ‘Shut up,’ except Anthea, who suddenly awoke the Phoenix and said—

‘Look here, I believe YOU can help us. Oh, I do wish you would!’

‘I will help you as far as lies in my power,’ said the Phoenix, at once. ‘What is it you want now?’

‘Why, we want to get home,’ said every one.

‘Oh,’ said the Phoenix. ‘Ah, hum! Yes. Home, you said? Meaning?’

‘Where we live—where we slept last night—where the altar is that your egg was hatched on.’

‘Oh, there!’ said the Phoenix. ‘Well, I’ll do my best.’ It fluttered on to the carpet and walked up and down for a few minutes in deep thought. Then it drew itself up proudly.

‘I CAN help you,’ it said. ‘I am almost sure I can help you. Unless I am grossly deceived I can help you. You won’t mind my leaving you for an hour or two?’ and without waiting for a reply it soared up through the dimness of the tower into the brightness above.

‘Now,’ said Cyril, firmly, ‘it said an hour or two. But I’ve read about captives and people shut up in dungeons and catacombs and things awaiting release, and I know each moment is an eternity. Those people always do something to pass the desperate moments. It’s no use our trying to tame spiders, because we shan’t have time.’

‘I HOPE not,’ said Jane, doubtfully.

‘But we ought to scratch our names on the stones or something.’

'I say, talking of stones,' said Robert, 'you see that heap of stones against the wall over in that corner. Well, I'm certain there's a hole in the wall there—and I believe it's a door. Yes, look here—the stones are round like an arch in the wall; and here's the hole—it's all black inside.'

He had walked over to the heap as he spoke and climbed up to it—dislodged the top stone of the heap and uncovered a little dark space.

Next moment every one was helping to pull down the heap of stones, and very soon every one threw off its jacket, for it was warm work.

'It IS a door,' said Cyril, wiping his face, 'and not a bad thing either, if—'

He was going to add 'if anything happens to the Phoenix,' but he didn't for fear of frightening Jane. He was not an unkind boy when he had leisure to think of such things.

The arched hole in the wall grew larger and larger. It was very, very black, even compared with the sort of twilight at the bottom of the tower; it grew larger because the children kept pulling off the stones and throwing them down into another heap. The stones must have been there a very long time, for they were covered with moss, and some of them were stuck together by it. So it was fairly hard work, as Robert pointed out.

When the hole reached to about halfway between the top of the arch and the tower, Robert and Cyril let themselves down cautiously on the inside, and lit matches. How thankful they felt then that they had a sensible father, who did not forbid them to carry matches, as some boys' fathers do. The father of Robert and Cyril only insisted on the matches being of the kind that strike only on the box.

'It's not a door, it's a sort of tunnel,' Robert cried to the girls, after the first match had flared up, flickered, and gone out. 'Stand off—we'll push some more stones down!'

They did, amid deep excitement. And now the stone heap was almost gone—and before them the girls saw the dark archway leading to unknown things. All doubts and fears as to getting home were forgotten in this thrilling moment. It was like Monte Cristo—it was like—

'I say,' cried Anthea, suddenly, 'come out! There's always bad air in places that have been shut up. It makes your torches go out, and then you die. It's called fire-damp, I believe. Come out, I tell you.'

The urgency of her tone actually brought the boys out—and then every one took up its jacket and fanned the dark arch with it, so as to make the air fresh inside. When Anthea thought the air inside 'must be freshened by now,' Cyril led the way into the arch.

The girls followed, and Robert came last, because Jane refused to tail the procession lest 'something' should come in after her, and catch at her from behind. Cyril advanced cautiously, lighting match after match, and peering before him.

'It's a vaulting roof,' he said, 'and it's all stone—all right, Panther, don't keep pulling at my jacket! The air must be all right because of the matches, silly, and there are—look out—there are steps down.'

'Oh, don't let's go any farther,' said Jane, in an agony of reluctance (a very painful thing, by the way, to be in). 'I'm sure there are snakes, or dens of lions, or something. Do let's go back, and come some other time, with candles, and bellows for the fire-damp.'

'Let me get in front of you, then,' said the stern voice of Robert, from behind. 'This is exactly the place for buried treasure, and I'm going on, anyway; you can stay behind if you like.'

And then, of course, Jane consented to go on.

So, very slowly and carefully, the children went down the steps—there were seventeen of them—and at the bottom of the steps were more passages branching four ways, and a sort of low arch on the right-hand side made Cyril wonder what it could be, for it was too low to be the beginning of another passage.

So he knelt down and lit a match, and stooping very low he peeped in.

'There's SOMETHING,' he said, and reached out his hand. It touched something that felt more like a damp bag of marbles than anything else that Cyril had ever touched.

‘I believe it IS a buried treasure,’ he cried.

And it was; for even as Anthea cried, ‘Oh, hurry up, Squirrel—fetch it out!’ Cyril pulled out a rotting canvas bag—about as big as the paper ones the greengrocer gives you with Barcelona nuts in for sixpence.

‘There’s more of it, a lot more,’ he said.

As he pulled the rotten bag gave way, and the gold coins ran and span and jumped and bumped and chinked and clinked on the floor of the dark passage.

I wonder what you would say if you suddenly came upon a buried treasure? What Cyril said was, ‘Oh, bother—I’ve burnt my fingers!’ and as he spoke he dropped the match. ‘AND IT WAS THE LAST!’ he added.

There was a moment of desperate silence. Then Jane began to cry.

‘Don’t,’ said Anthea, ‘don’t, Pussy—you’ll exhaust the air if you cry. We can get out all right.’

‘Yes,’ said Jane, through her sobs, ‘and find the Phoenix has come back and gone away again—because it thought we’d gone home some other way, and—Oh, I WISH we hadn’t come.’

Every one stood quite still—only Anthea cuddled Jane up to her and tried to wipe her eyes in the dark.

‘D-DON’T,’ said Jane; ‘that’s my EAR—I’m not crying with my ears.’

‘Come, let’s get on out,’ said Robert; but that was not so easy, for no one could remember exactly which way they had come. It is very difficult to remember things in the dark, unless you have matches with you, and then of course it is quite different, even if you don’t strike one.

Every one had come to agree with Jane’s constant wish—and despair was making the darkness blacker than ever, when quite suddenly the floor seemed to tip up—and a strong sensation of being in a whirling lift came upon every one. All eyes were closed—one’s eyes always are in the dark, don’t you think? When the whirling feeling stopped, Cyril said ‘Earthquakes!’ and they all opened their eyes.

They were in their own dingy breakfast-room at home, and oh, how light and bright and safe and pleasant and altogether delightful it seemed after that dark underground tunnel! The carpet lay on the floor, looking as calm as though it had never been for an excursion in its life. On the mantelpiece stood the Phoenix, waiting with an air of modest yet sterling worth for the thanks of the children.

‘But how DID you do it?’ they asked, when every one had thanked the Phoenix again and again.

‘Oh, I just went and got a wish from your friend the Psammead.’

‘But how DID you know where to find it?’

‘I found that out from the carpet; these wishing creatures always know all about each other—they’re so clannish; like the Scots, you know—all related.’

‘But, the carpet can’t talk, can it?’

‘No.’

‘Then how—’

‘How did I get the Psammead’s address? I tell you I got it from the carpet.’

‘DID it speak then?’

‘No,’ said the Phoenix, thoughtfully, ‘it didn’t speak, but I gathered my information from something in its manner. I was always a singularly observant bird.’

It was not till after the cold mutton and the jam tart, as well as the tea and bread-and-butter, that any one found time to regret the golden treasure which had been left scattered on the floor of the underground passage, and which, indeed, no one had thought of till now, since the moment when Cyril burnt his fingers at the flame of the last match.

‘What owls and goats we were!’ said Robert. ‘Look how we’ve always wanted treasure—and now—’

‘Never mind,’ said Anthea, trying as usual to make the best of it. ‘We’ll go back again and get it all, and then we’ll give everybody presents.’

More than a quarter of an hour passed most agreeably in arranging what presents should be given to whom, and, when the claims of generosity had been satisfied, the talk ran for fifty minutes on what they would buy for themselves.

It was Cyril who broke in on Robert's almost too technical account of the motor-car on which he meant to go to and from school—

'There!' he said. 'Dry up. It's no good. We can't ever go back. We don't know where it is.'

'Don't YOU know?' Jane asked the Phoenix, wistfully.

'Not in the least,' the Phoenix replied, in a tone of amiable regret.

'Then we've lost the treasure,' said Cyril. And they had.

'But we've got the carpet and the Phoenix,' said Anthea.

'Excuse me,' said the bird, with an air of wounded dignity, 'I do SO HATE to seem to interfere, but surely you MUST mean the Phoenix and the carpet?'

CHAPTER 3. THE QUEEN COOK

It was on a Saturday that the children made their first glorious journey on the wishing carpet. Unless you are too young to read at all, you will know that the next day must have been Sunday.

Sunday at 18, Camden Terrace, Camden Town, was always a very pretty day. Father always brought home flowers on Saturday, so that the breakfast-table was extra beautiful. In November, of course, the flowers were chrysanthemums, yellow and coppery coloured. Then there were always sausages on toast for breakfast, and these are rapture, after six days of Kentish Town Road eggs at fourteen a shilling.

On this particular Sunday there were fowls for dinner, a kind of food that is generally kept for birthdays and grand occasions, and there was an angel pudding, when rice and milk and oranges and white icing do their best to make you happy.

After dinner father was very sleepy indeed, because he had been working hard all the week; but he did not yield to the voice that said, 'Go and have an hour's rest.' He nursed the Lamb, who had a horrid cough that cook said was whooping-cough as sure as eggs, and he said—

'Come along, kiddies; I've got a ripping book from the library, called *The Golden Age*, and I'll read it to you.'

Mother settled herself on the drawing-room sofa, and said she could listen quite nicely with her eyes shut. The Lamb snuggled into the 'armchair corner' of daddy's arm, and the others got into a happy heap on the hearth-rug. At first, of course, there were too many feet and knees and shoulders and elbows, but real comfort was actually settling down on them, and the Phoenix and the carpet were put away on the back top shelf of their minds (beautiful things that could be taken out and played with later), when a surly solid knock came at the drawing-room door. It opened an angry inch, and the cook's voice said, 'Please, m', may I speak to you a moment?'

Mother looked at father with a desperate expression. Then she put her pretty sparkly Sunday shoes down from the sofa, and stood up in them and sighed.

'As good fish in the sea,' said father, cheerfully, and it was not till much later that the children understood what he meant.

Mother went out into the passage, which is called 'the hall', where the umbrella-stand is, and the picture of the 'Monarch of the Glen' in a yellow shining frame, with brown spots on the Monarch from the damp in the house before last, and there was cook, very red and damp in the face, and with a clean apron tied on all crooked over the dirty one that she had dished up those dear delightful chickens in. She stood there and she seemed to get redder and damper, and she twisted the corner of her apron round her fingers, and she said very shortly and fiercely—

'If you please ma'am, I should wish to leave at my day month.' Mother leaned against the hatstand. The children could see her looking pale through the crack of the door, because she had been very kind to the cook, and had given her a holiday only the day before, and it seemed so very unkind of the cook to want to go like this, and on a Sunday too.

'Why, what's the matter?' mother said.

'It's them children,' the cook replied, and somehow the children all felt that they had known it from the first. They did not remember having done anything extra wrong, but it is so frightfully easy to displease a cook. 'It's them children: there's that there new carpet in their room, covered thick with mud, both sides, beastly yellow mud, and sakes alive knows where they got it. And all that muck to clean up on a Sunday! It's not my place, and it's not my intentions, so I don't deceive you, ma'am, and but for them limbs, which they is if ever there was, it's not a bad place, though I says it, and I wouldn't wish to leave, but—'

'I'm very sorry,' said mother, gently. 'I will speak to the children. And you had better think it over, and if you REALLY wish to go, tell me to-morrow.'

Next day mother had a quiet talk with cook, and cook said she didn't mind if she stayed on a bit, just to see.

But meantime the question of the muddy carpet had been gone into thoroughly by father and mother. Jane's candid explanation that the mud had come from the bottom of a foreign tower where there was buried treasure was received with such chilling disbelief that the others limited their defence to an expression of sorrow, and of a determination 'not to do it again'. But father said (and mother agreed with him, because mothers have to agree with fathers, and not because it was her own idea) that children who coated a carpet on both sides with thick mud, and when they were asked for an explanation could only talk silly nonsense—that meant Jane's truthful statement—were not fit to have a carpet at all, and, indeed, **SHOULDN'T** have one for a week!

So the carpet was brushed (with tea-leaves, too) which was the only comfort Anthea could think of, and folded up and put away in the cupboard at the top of the stairs, and daddy put the key in his trousers pocket. 'Till Saturday,' said he.

'Never mind,' said Anthea, 'we've got the Phoenix.'

But, as it happened, they hadn't. The Phoenix was nowhere to be found, and everything had suddenly settled down from the rosy wild beauty of magic happenings to the common damp brownness of ordinary November life in Camden Town—and there was the nursery floor all bare boards in the middle and brown oilcloth round the outside, and the bareness and yellowness of the middle floor showed up the blackbeetles with terrible distinctness, when the poor things came out in the evening, as usual, to try to make friends with the children. But the children never would.

The Sunday ended in gloom, which even junket for supper in the blue Dresden bowl could hardly lighten at all. Next day the Lamb's cough was worse. It certainly seemed very whoopy, and the doctor came in his brougham carriage.

Every one tried to bear up under the weight of the sorrow which it was to know that the wishing carpet was locked up and the Phoenix mislaid. A good deal of time was spent in looking for the Phoenix.

'It's a bird of its word,' said Anthea. 'I'm sure it's not deserted us. But you know it had a most awfully long fly from wherever it was to near Rochester and back, and I expect the poor thing's feeling tired out and wants rest. I am sure we may trust it.'

The others tried to feel sure of this, too, but it was hard.

No one could be expected to feel very kindly towards the cook, since it was entirely through her making such a fuss about a little foreign mud that the carpet had been taken away.

'She might have told us,' said Jane, 'and Panther and I would have cleaned it with tea-leaves.'

'She's a cantankerous cat,' said Robert.

'I shan't say what I think about her,' said Anthea, primly, 'because it would be evil speaking, lying, and slandering.'

'It's not lying to say she's a disagreeable pig, and a beastly blue-nosed Bozwoz,' said Cyril, who had read *The Eyes of Light*, and intended to talk like Tony as soon as he could teach Robert to talk like Paul.

And all the children, even Anthea, agreed that even if she wasn't a blue-nosed Bozwoz, they wished cook had never been born.

But I ask you to believe that they didn't do all the things on purpose which so annoyed the cook during the following week, though I daresay the things would not have happened if the cook had been a favourite. This is a mystery. Explain it if you can. The things that had happened were as follows:

Sunday.—Discovery of foreign mud on both sides of the carpet.

Monday.—Liquorice put on to boil with aniseed balls in a saucepan. Anthea did this, because she thought it would be good for the Lamb's cough. The whole thing forgotten, and bottom of saucepan burned out. It was the little saucepan lined with white that was kept for the baby's milk.

Tuesday.—A dead mouse found in pantry. Fish-slice taken to dig grave with. By regrettable accident fish-slice broken. Defence: ‘The cook oughtn’t to keep dead mice in pantries.’

Wednesday.—Chopped suet left on kitchen table. Robert added chopped soap, but he says he thought the suet was soap too.

Thursday.—Broke the kitchen window by falling against it during a perfectly fair game of bandits in the area.

Friday.—Stopped up grating of kitchen sink with putty and filled sink with water to make a lake to sail paper boats in. Went away and left the tap running. Kitchen hearthrug and cook’s shoes ruined.

On Saturday the carpet was restored. There had been plenty of time during the week to decide where it should be asked to go when they did get it back.

Mother had gone over to granny’s, and had not taken the Lamb because he had a bad cough, which, cook repeatedly said, was whooping-cough as sure as eggs is eggs.

‘But we’ll take him out, a ducky darling,’ said Anthea. ‘We’ll take him somewhere where you can’t have whooping-cough. Don’t be so silly, Robert. If he DOES talk about it no one’ll take any notice. He’s always talking about things he’s never seen.’

So they dressed the Lamb and themselves in out-of-doors clothes, and the Lamb chuckled and coughed, and laughed and coughed again, poor dear, and all the chairs and tables were moved off the carpet by the boys, while Jane nursed the Lamb, and Anthea rushed through the house in one last wild hunt for the missing Phoenix.

‘It’s no use waiting for it,’ she said, reappearing breathless in the breakfast-room. ‘But I know it hasn’t deserted us. It’s a bird of its word.’

‘Quite so,’ said the gentle voice of the Phoenix from beneath the table.

Every one fell on its knees and looked up, and there was the Phoenix perched on a crossbar of wood that ran across under the table, and had once supported a drawer, in the happy days before the drawer had been used as a boat, and its bottom unfortunately trodden out by Raggett’s Really Reliable School Boots on the feet of Robert.

‘I’ve been here all the time,’ said the Phoenix, yawning politely behind its claw. ‘If you wanted me you should have recited the ode of invocation; it’s seven thousand lines long, and written in very pure and beautiful Greek.’

‘Couldn’t you tell it us in English?’ asked Anthea.

‘It’s rather long, isn’t it?’ said Jane, jumping the Lamb on her knee.

‘Couldn’t you make a short English version, like Tate and Brady?’

‘Oh, come along, do,’ said Robert, holding out his hand. ‘Come along, good old Phoenix.’

‘Good old BEAUTIFUL Phoenix,’ it corrected shyly.

‘Good old BEAUTIFUL Phoenix, then. Come along, come along,’ said Robert, impatiently, with his hand still held out.

The Phoenix fluttered at once on to his wrist.

‘This amiable youth,’ it said to the others, ‘has miraculously been able to put the whole meaning of the seven thousand lines of Greek invocation into one English hexameter—a little misplaced some of the words—but—

‘Oh, come along, come along, good old beautiful Phoenix!’

‘Not perfect, I admit—but not bad for a boy of his age.’

‘Well, now then,’ said Robert, stepping back on to the carpet with the golden Phoenix on his wrist.

‘You look like the king’s falconer,’ said Jane, sitting down on the carpet with the baby on her lap. Robert tried to go on looking like it. Cyril and Anthea stood on the carpet.

‘We shall have to get back before dinner,’ said Cyril, ‘or cook will blow the gaff.’

‘She hasn’t sneaked since Sunday,’ said Anthea.

‘She—’ Robert was beginning, when the door burst open and the cook, fierce and furious, came in like a whirlwind and stood on the corner of the carpet, with a broken basin in one hand and a threat in the other, which was clenched.

‘Look ‘ere!’ she cried, ‘my only basin; and what the powers am I to make the beefsteak and kidney pudding in that your ma ordered for your dinners? You don’t deserve no dinners, so yer don’t.’

‘I’m awfully sorry, cook,’ said Anthea gently; ‘it was my fault, and I forgot to tell you about it. It got broken when we were telling our fortunes with melted lead, you know, and I meant to tell you.’

‘Meant to tell me,’ replied the cook; she was red with anger, and really I don’t wonder—‘meant to tell! Well, *I* mean to tell, too. I’ve held my tongue this week through, because the missus she said to me quiet like, “We mustn’t expect old heads on young shoulders,” but now I shan’t hold it no longer. There was the soap you put in our pudding, and me and Eliza never so much as breathed it to your ma—though well we might—and the saucepan, and the fish-slice, and—My gracious cats alive! what ‘ave you got that blessed child dressed up in his outdoors for?’

‘We aren’t going to take him out,’ said Anthea; ‘at least—’ She stopped short, for though they weren’t going to take him out in the Kentish Town Road, they certainly intended to take him elsewhere. But not at all where cook meant when she said ‘out’. This confused the truthful Anthea.

‘Out!’ said the cook, ‘that I’ll take care you don’t;’ and she snatched the Lamb from the lap of Jane, while Anthea and Robert caught her by the skirts and apron. ‘Look here,’ said Cyril, in stern desperation, ‘will you go away, and make your pudding in a pie-dish, or a flower-pot, or a hot-water can, or something?’

‘Not me,’ said the cook, briefly; ‘and leave this precious poppet for you to give his deathercold to.’

‘I warn you,’ said Cyril, solemnly. ‘Beware, ere yet it be too late.’

‘Late yourself the little popsey-wopsey,’ said the cook, with angry tenderness. ‘They shan’t take it out, no more they shan’t. And—Where did you get that there yellow fowl?’ She pointed to the Phoenix.

Even Anthea saw that unless the cook lost her situation the loss would be theirs.

‘I wish,’ she said suddenly, ‘we were on a sunny southern shore, where there can’t be any whooping-cough.’

She said it through the frightened howls of the Lamb, and the sturdy scoldings of the cook, and instantly the giddy-go-round-and-falling-lift feeling swept over the whole party, and the cook sat down flat on the carpet, holding the screaming Lamb tight to her stout print-covered self, and calling on St Bridget to help her. She was an Irishwoman.

The moment the tipsy-topsy-turvy feeling stopped, the cook opened her eyes, gave one sounding screech and shut them again, and Anthea took the opportunity to get the desperately howling Lamb into her own arms.

‘It’s all right,’ she said; ‘own Panther’s got you. Look at the trees, and the sand, and the shells, and the great big tortoises. Oh DEAR, how hot it is!’

It certainly was; for the trusty carpet had laid itself out on a southern shore that was sunny and no mistake, as Robert remarked. The greenest of green slopes led up to glorious groves where palm-trees and all the tropical flowers and fruits that you read of in *Westward Ho!* and *Fair Play* were growing in rich profusion. Between the green, green slope and the blue, blue sea lay a stretch of sand that looked like a carpet of jewelled cloth of gold, for it was not greyish as our northern sand is, but yellow and changing—opal-coloured like sunshine and rainbows. And at the very moment when the wild, whirling, blinding, deafening, tumbling upside-downness of the carpet-moving stopped, the children had the happiness of seeing three large live turtles waddle down to the edge of the sea and disappear in the water. And it was hotter than you can possibly imagine, unless you think of ovens on a baking-day.

Every one without an instant's hesitation tore off its London-in-November outdoor clothes, and Anthea took off the Lamb's highwayman blue coat and his three-cornered hat, and then his jersey, and then the Lamb himself suddenly slipped out of his little blue tight breeches and stood up happy and hot in his little white shirt.

'I'm sure it's much warmer than the seaside in the summer,' said Anthea. 'Mother always lets us go barefoot then.'

So the Lamb's shoes and socks and gaiters came off, and he stood digging his happy naked pink toes into the golden smooth sand.

'I'm a little white duck-dickie,' said he—a little white duck-dickie what swims,' and splashed quacking into a sandy pool.

'Let him,' said Anthea; 'it can't hurt him. Oh, how hot it is!'

The cook suddenly opened her eyes and screamed, shut them, screamed again, opened her eyes once more and said—

'Why, drat my cats alive, what's all this? It's a dream, I expect.

Well, it's the best I ever dreamed. I'll look it up in the dream-book to-morrow. Seaside and trees and a carpet to sit on. I never did!'

'Look here,' said Cyril, 'it isn't a dream; it's real.'

'Ho yes!' said the cook; 'they always says that in dreams.'

'It's REAL, I tell you,' Robert said, stamping his foot. 'I'm not going to tell you how it's done, because that's our secret.' He winked heavily at each of the others in turn. 'But you wouldn't go away and make that pudding, so we HAD to bring you, and I hope you like it.'

'I do that, and no mistake,' said the cook unexpectedly; 'and it being a dream it don't matter what I say; and I WILL say, if it's my last word, that of all the aggravating little varmint—' 'Calm yourself, my good woman,' said the Phoenix.

'Good woman, indeed,' said the cook; 'good woman yourself' Then she saw who it was that had spoken. 'Well, if I ever,' said she; 'this is something like a dream! Yellow fowls a-talking and all! I've heard of such, but never did I think to see the day.'

'Well, then,' said Cyril, impatiently, 'sit here and see the day now. It's a jolly fine day. Here, you others—a council!' They walked along the shore till they were out of earshot of the cook, who still sat gazing about her with a happy, dreamy, vacant smile.

'Look here,' said Cyril, 'we must roll the carpet up and hide it, so that we can get at it at any moment. The Lamb can be getting rid of his whooping-cough all the morning, and we can look about; and if the savages on this island are cannibals, we'll hook it, and take her back. And if not, we'll LEAVE HER HERE.'

'Is that being kind to servants and animals, like the clergyman said?' asked Jane.

'Nor she isn't kind,' retorted Cyril.

'Well—anyway,' said Anthea, 'the safest thing is to leave the carpet there with her sitting on it. Perhaps it'll be a lesson to her, and anyway, if she thinks it's a dream it won't matter what she says when she gets home.'

So the extra coats and hats and mufflers were piled on the carpet. Cyril shouldered the well and happy Lamb, the Phoenix perched on Robert's wrist, and 'the party of explorers prepared to enter the interior'.

The grassy slope was smooth, but under the trees there were tangled creepers with bright, strange-shaped flowers, and it was not easy to walk.

'We ought to have an explorer's axe,' said Robert. 'I shall ask father to give me one for Christmas.'

There were curtains of creepers with scented blossoms hanging from the trees, and brilliant birds darted about quite close to their faces.

‘Now, tell me honestly,’ said the Phoenix, ‘are there any birds here handsomer than I am? Don’t be afraid of hurting my feelings—I’m a modest bird, I hope.’

‘Not one of them,’ said Robert, with conviction, ‘is a patch upon you!’

‘I was never a vain bird,’ said the Phoenix, ‘but I own that you confirm my own impression. I will take a flight.’ It circled in the air for a moment, and, returning to Robert’s wrist, went on, ‘There is a path to the left.’

And there was. So now the children went on through the wood more quickly and comfortably, the girls picking flowers and the Lamb inviting the ‘pretty dickies’ to observe that he himself was a ‘little white real-water-wet duck!’

And all this time he hadn’t whooping-coughed once.

The path turned and twisted, and, always threading their way amid a tangle of flowers, the children suddenly passed a corner and found themselves in a forest clearing, where there were a lot of pointed huts—the huts, as they knew at once, of SAVAGES.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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