

EDITH NESBIT

THE WONDERFUL
GARDEN OR THE THREE
CS

ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

**The Wonderful Garden
or The Three Cs**

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CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING

It was Caroline's birthday, and she had had some very pleasant presents. There was a blotting-book of blue leather (at least, it looked like leather), with pink and purple roses painted on it, from her younger sister Charlotte; and a paint-box – from her brother Charles – as good as new.

'I've hardly used it at all,' he said, 'and it's much nicer than anything I could have bought you with my own money, and I've wiped all the paints clean.'

'It's lovely,' said Caroline; 'and the beautiful brushes, too!'

'Real fitch,' said Charles proudly. 'They've got points like needles.'

'Just like,' said Caroline, putting them one after the other into her mouth, and then holding them up to the light.

Besides the paint-box and the blotting-book, a tin-lined case had come from India, with a set of carved chess-men from father, and from mother some red and blue scarves, and, most glorious of imaginable gifts, a leopard-skin.

'They will brighten the play-room a little,' said mother in her letter. And they did.

Aunt Emmeline had given a copy of *Sesame and Lilies*, which is supposed to be good for girls, though a little difficult when you are only twelve; and Uncle Percival had presented a grey leather pocket-book and an olive-wood paper-knife with 'Sorrento' on the handle. The cook and housemaid had given needle-book and pin-cushion; and Miss Peckitt, the little dressmaker who came to the house to make the girls' dresses, brought a small, thin book bound in red, with little hard raised spots like pin-heads all over it, and hoped Miss Caroline would be kind enough to accept.

'The book,' said Miss Peckitt, 'was mine when a child, and my dear mother also, as a young girl, was partial to it. Please accept it, Miss, with my humble best wishes.'

'Thanks most awfully,' said Caroline, embracing her.

'Thank you,' said Miss Peckitt, straightening her collar after the sudden kiss. 'Quite welcome, though unexpected; I *had* a bit of southernwood given to me this morning, which, you will find in the book, means a surprise.'

And it did, for the book was *The Language of Flowers*. And really that book was the beginning of this story, or, at least, if it wasn't that book, it was the other book. But that comes later.

'It's ripping,' said Caroline. 'I do like it being red.'

The last present was a very large bunch of marigolds and a halfpenny birthday-card, with a gold anchor and pink clasped hands on it, from the boy who did the boots and knives.

'We'll decorate our room,' said Charlotte, 'in honour of your birthday, Caro. We've got lots of coloured things, and I'll borrow cook's Sunday scarf. It's pink and purple shot silk – a perfect dream! I'll fly!'

She flew; and on her return they decorated their room.

You will perhaps wonder why they were so anxious to decorate their room with coloured things. It was because the house they lived in had so little colour in it that it was more like a print of a house in a book – all black and white and grey, you know – than like a house for real people to live in. It was a pale, neat, chilly house. There was, for instance, white straw matting on the floors instead of warm, coloured carpets; and on the stairs a sort of pale grey cocoa-nut matting. The window curtains were of soft cotton, and were palely lavender; they had no damask richness, no gay flowery patterns.

The walls were not papered, but distempered in clean pale tints, and the general effect was rather like that of a very superior private hospital. The fact that the floors were washed every week with Sanitas gave a pleasing wood-yard scent. There were no coloured pictures in the house – only brown copies of great paintings by Raphael and Velazquez and people like that.

The Stanmore children lived here because their father and mother were in India and their other relations in New Zealand – all except old Uncle Charles, who was their mother's uncle and who had quarrelled with, or been quarrelled with by, their father and mother in bygone years.

The owners of the house, whose name was Sandal, were relations of some sort – cousins, perhaps. Though they were called Uncle Percival and Aunt Emmeline they were not really those relations.

There was one thing about this so-called aunt and uncle – they were never cross and seldom unjust. Their natures seemed to be pale and calm like the colours of their house; and though the children had meat every day for dinner, Mr. and Miss Sandal never had anything but vegetables, and vegetables are said to be calming.

Now India is a highly-coloured country, as you may have noticed in pictures, and the Stanmore children felt faded in that grey house. And that is why they loved colour so much, and made so much fuss about the leopard-skin and the Indian embroideries and the marigold flowers and the little old red book and the wreath of gold forget-me-nots outside it encircling the words *Language of Flowers*.

'When Aunt Emmeline sees how beautiful it is she'll want to have the whole house scarved and leoparded, I shouldn't wonder,' said Charlotte, hanging the pink scarf over a picture of a blind girl sitting on an orange, which is called 'Hope.'

'I don't suppose so,' said Caroline. 'I asked her once what old Uncle Charles's house was like, that mother said was so beautiful, and she said it was far too full of things, and somewhat imperfectly ventilated.'

'It's a pity Uncle Charles was quarrelled with, *I* think,' said Charlotte. 'I shouldn't at all have minded going to stay with him. I expect really he likes nice little girls. I wonder what the row was all about, and why they didn't all kiss and be friends before the sun went down upon – like *we're* told to?'

I cannot tell you what the row was about, for I know no more than you do, or than Charlotte did. And you must have noticed that grown-up people's quarrels are very large and most mysterious. When you quarrel with your brothers or sisters it is always about some simple thing – as, for instance, who left your paint-brushes in the water, or who forgot your *Water Babies* out in the hayfield, or whether it was you who upset the gum over your brother's map, or walked on the doll's house sofa that day when you all upset it scrapping, and the furniture was put back in a hurry. Anyhow, your quarrels are soon over, because quarrelling is so uncomfortable, and, besides, you have most likely been taught, as Charlotte had, that you must not let the sun go down upon your wrath. But with grown-up people it is different. They seem sometimes to have forgotten about the sun not going down, and their quarrels last on and on and on for weeks and months and years, till you would think that they must have forgotten what the fuss was all about. But they don't, and when Aunt Jane comes to tea you will still hear fragments about how Uncle William behaved, and what a pity it was about Edward acting as he did. If the grown-ups notice you, they will tell you to run away and play. You will never hear what the quarrel was about, and if you did you wouldn't understand, and if you understood you'd probably think it was a silly fuss about nothing, and wonder how they could have kept it up all these years – for it is as likely as not that Uncle William did that unfortunate behaving of his many many years ago, and that Edward acted in that extraordinary way long before you were born. The only thing you can find out for certain about these grown-up quarrels is that they seem to be always about money, or about people having married people that their relations didn't want them to marry.

No doubt you will have noticed all this, and you will perhaps have noticed as well that if you suddenly speak of a person, that person very often turns up almost at once. So that when Charlotte

said, 'I wish Uncle Charles had not been quarrelled with,' it would have occasioned you no surprise if Uncle Charles had suddenly walked up to the front door.

But this did not happen. But some one walked up to the front door. It was the postman.

Caroline rushed out to see if there were any more birthday-cards for her. It was now the beginning of the summer holidays, but some of the girls at the High School might possibly have remembered her birthday. So she rushed out, and rushed into Aunt Emmeline, who must have been hurt, because afterwards Caroline's head was quite sore where it had banged against Aunt Emmeline's mother-of-pearl waist-buckle. But Aunt Emmeline only said:

'Gently, my child, gently,' which, as Caroline said later, was worse than being scolded, and made you feel as if you were elephants. And there weren't any birthday-cards for her, either.

All the letters were for Miss Sandal. And just as the leopard-skin had been spread on the floor she came to the door of the children's room with one of the letters in her hand.

'I have a surprise for you,' she said.

'Do come in and sit down,' said Caroline. That was another nice thing about Aunt Emmeline. She always treated the children's room as though it really was the children's room, and expected to be treated as a visitor when she came into it. She never sat down without being asked.

'Thank you,' she now said, and sat down. 'The surprise is that you are going into the country for your holidays.'

There was a silence, only broken by Charles, and he only said:

'We needn't have bothered about decorating the room.'

'Oh, is this decoration?' Miss Sandal asked, as though she thought pink scarves might get on to picture-frames and leopard-skins on to floors, or marigolds on to mantelpieces, just by accident or untidiness.

'I may say that I have known for some time that this was likely to happen – but the letter which has just come makes everything settled. You are to go the day after to-morrow.'

'But *where*?' Caroline asked. And Miss Sandal then uttered the memorable and unusual words, 'Did you ever hear of your Great-Uncle Charles?'

'The one that was quarrelled with?' said Charles.

'I did not know you knew of that. Yes. The quarrel is now at an end, and he has invited you to spend your holidays at the Manor House.'

There was a deep silence, due to the children's wanting to shout 'Hooray!' and feeling that it would not be manners.

'I thought you'd be pleased,' said Miss Sandal. 'It is considered a very beautiful house, and stands in a park.'

'Are you going, Aunt Emmeline?' Caroline asked.

'No, dear. Only you children are invited. You will be quiet and gentle, won't you, and try to remember that your Great-Uncle Charles is a quiet student, and not used to children. You will have a great deal of liberty, and I hope you will use it well. You have never been on a visit before without – without some one to remind you of – to tell you –'

'Oh, that's all right, Aunt Emmie,' said Charlotte. 'But who'll sew on our buttons and mend our stockings?'

'There is a housekeeper, of course,' said Miss Sandal. 'I shall pack your things to-morrow; and if you will decide what toys you would like to take with you, I will pack them too.'

'Yes,' said Caroline, still feeling it polite not to look pleased. 'Thank you, Aunt Emmeline.'

'I hope he'll like us,' said Charles. 'He ought to when we're all named after him. I say, couldn't we all pretend to be called something else? It's bad enough now; but it'll be awful when there's an Uncle Charles in the house as well as all us. I say, Aunt Emmie, are we to call him "Great"?''

'He means Great-Uncle Charles,' Caroline explained. 'I expect we'd better call him plain "Uncle," hadn't we?'

‘He wouldn’t like being called “plain,”’ said Charles.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Caroline, still a prey to politeness. ‘He won’t mind what little boys call him.’

‘I bet he would if I called him the sort of things you call me. Silly yourself!’

‘Children! children!’ said Miss Sandal. ‘I thought you’d be so pleased.’

‘We *are*,’ said Caroline. ‘Only won’t you be rather dull without us? That’s why we don’t seem so glad as you seem to think we ought to seem.’

Miss Sandal smiled, which made her long, whitey-brown-paper-coloured face look much prettier.

‘Thank you, Caroline. Your Uncle Percival and I are also about to take a holiday. We are going to Switzerland, the Italian Lakes, and to Venice. You may be as happy as you like without worrying about us.’

And it was then that the three children felt that politeness and sincerity might meet in a heartfelt shout of ‘Hooray!’

‘I shall take the leopard-skin and all my other presents,’ said Caroline.

‘And I shall take the draughts and the spilikins,’ said Charlotte.

‘Mother said there were draughts made of ebony and ivory with lions’ heads and mother-of-pearl spilikins in the drawing-room when she was a little girl,’ Caroline reminded her.

‘I shall take every single thing I’ve got, and my cricket set as well,’ said Charles.

CHAPTER II

THE MANOR HOUSE

You can imagine the packing, the running up and down stairs, the difficulty of choosing what to leave behind – for that is, after all, what it comes to when you are going away, much more than the difficulty of choosing what you will take with you. Miss Sandal, surrounded by heaps of toys and books – far too large to have been got into the trunks, even if all the clothes had been left out – at last settled the question by promising to send on, by post or by carrier, any little thing which had been left behind and which the children should all agree was necessary to their happiness. ‘And the leopard-skin takes so much room,’ she said, ‘and I believe there are wild-beast-skins as well as stuffed animals at your uncle’s house.’ So they left the leopard-skin behind too. There was a good deal of whispered talk and mystery and consulting of books that morning, and Aunt Emmeline most likely wondered what it was all about. But perhaps she didn’t. She was very calm. Anyway, she must have known when, as the cab drew up in front of the door, the three children presented themselves before her with bouquets in their hands.

‘They are for you,’ said all three at once.

Then Charlotte presented Aunt Emmeline with a bunch of balm from the garden.

‘It means sympathy,’ she said; ‘because, of course, it’s nice of you to say so, but we know that those geography places you’re going to can’t be *really* as nice as Uncle Charles’s.’

Charles’s bouquet was of convolvulus. ‘It means dead hope,’ he explained; ‘but it’s very pretty, too. And here’s this.’ He suddenly presented a tiny cactus in a red pot. ‘I bought it for you,’ he said; ‘it means, “Thou leavest not.”’

‘How charming of you!’ said Aunt Emmeline, and turned to Caroline, who was almost hidden behind a huge bunch of ivy and marigolds.

‘The ivy means friendship,’ said Caroline, ‘and the marigolds don’t count. I only put them because they are so goldy-bright. But if they *must* count, then they mean cruelty – Fate’s, you know, because you’re not coming. And there’s a purple pansy in among it somewhere, because that means, “I think of you.”’

‘Thank you very, very much,’ said Aunt Emmeline. ‘I can’t tell you how pleased I am. It is very sweet of you all.’

This floral presentation gave a glow and glory to their departure. At the very last moment Caroline leaned out of the window to say:

‘Oh, Aunt Emmeline, when Miss Peckitt comes to finish those muslin frocks that you’re going to send us, *would* you try to manage to give her a Canterbury bell from me? She’ll know what it means. But in case she doesn’t, it’s gratitude – in the book. And we’ll put flowers in our letters expressing our feelings. Good-bye.’

Uncle Percival took them to the station and —

But why should I describe a railway journey? You know exactly what it is like. I will only say that it was very dusty, and so sunny that the children wanted the blinds down, only a very tailor-made lady with a cross little grey dog said ‘No.’ And you know how black your hands get in the train, and how gritty the cushions are, and how your faces get black too, though you are quite certain you haven’t touched them with your hands. The one who got the little bit of the engine in its eye was Charles that time. But some one always gets it, because some one always puts its head out of the carriage window, no matter what the printed notices may say. You know all this. What you don’t know is what happened at the junction where, carefully attended by the guard, they changed trains. They had to wait for some time, and when they had looked at the bookstall – which was small and dull, and almost entirely newspapers – they looked at the other people who had to wait too. Most of them were

of dull appearance; but there was one tall gentleman who looked, they all agreed, exactly like Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield*.

‘And he’s got David with him, too,’ said Charlotte. ‘Look!’

The Murdstone gentleman, having bought the *Athenæum*, the *Spectator*, and a seven-penny reprint of the works of Marcus Aurelius, had gone to a bench on which sat a sulky-looking boy. He spoke to the boy, and the boy answered. And the gentleman walked off.

‘He’s gone to have a bun all by himself,’ said Charles. ‘Selfish pig!’

‘I say, let’s sit down on the bench. You sit next him, Charles. Perhaps he’d talk to us.’ This was Caroline’s idea.

They did; and ‘he,’ who was, of course, the sulky boy, did speak to them. But not till they’d spoken to him. It was Charles who did it.

‘Are you going on in this next train?’ he said, ‘because, if you are, we can get into your carriage. We shall be company for you.’

‘What’s the good?’ said the boy, unexpectedly; ‘it’ll only make it worse afterwards.’

‘What worse?’

‘The being alone.’

‘Well, anyhow,’ said Caroline, coming round to sit on the other side of him, ‘you’re not alone now. What’s up? Who is *he*?’

‘He’s a schoolmaster. I should have thought you could have seen that.’

‘We thought he was like Mr. Murdstone.’

‘He is,’ said the strange boy; ‘exactly.’

‘Oh,’ said Charlotte joyously, ‘then you’ve read *David*. I say!’

They were all delighted. There is no bond like the bond of having read and liked the same books. A tide of friendliness swept over the party, and when they found that he had also read *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, and *Hereward the Wake*, as well as E. Nesbit’s stories for children in the *Strand Magazine*, they all felt that they had been friends for years.

‘But tell us all about it, quick, before *he* comes back,’ urged Charles. ‘Perhaps we could help you – bring you jam tarts and apples with a rope ladder or something. We are yours to the death – you won’t forget that, will you? And what’s your name? And where do you live? And where are you going? Tell us all about it, quick!’ he urged.

Then out it all came. The strange boy’s name was Rupert Wix, and he was at a school – not half bad the school was – and old Filon – he was the classical chap – was going to take Rupert and two other chaps to Wales for the holidays – and now the other chaps had got measles, and so had old Filon. And old Mug’s brother – his name wasn’t really Mug, of course, but Macpherson, and the brother was the Rev. William Macpherson – yes, that was him, the Murdstone chap – he was going to take Rupert to his beastly school in the country.

‘And there won’t be any other chaps,’ said Rupert, ‘because, of course, it’s vac – just old Mug’s beastly brother and me, for days and weeks and years – until the rest of the school comes back. I wish I was dead!’

‘Oh, don’t!’ said Caroline; ‘how dreadful! They’ve got scarlet fever at *our* school, that’s why our holidays have begun so early. Do cheer up! Have some nut-chocolate.’ A brief struggle with her pocket ended in the appearance of a packet – rather worn at the edges – the parting gift of Aunt Emmeline.

‘Is old Mug’s brother as great a pig as he looks?’ Charles asked, through Rupert’s ‘Thank-yous.’

‘*Much* greater,’ said Rupert cordially.

‘Then I know what I’d do,’ said Charlotte. ‘I’d run away from school, like a hero in a book, and have some adventures, and then go home to my people.’

‘That’s just it,’ said Rupert. ‘I haven’t got anywhere to run to. My people are in India. That’s why I have to have my hols at a beastly school. I’d rather be a dog in a kennel – much.’

‘Oh, so would I,’ said Charlotte. ‘But then I’d almost rather be a dog than anything. They’re such dears. I do hope there’ll be dogs where we’re going to.’

‘Where’s that?’ Rupert asked, more out of politeness than because he wanted to know.

‘I’ll write it down for you,’ said Caroline, and did, on a page of the new grey leather pocket-book Uncle Percival had given her. ‘Here, put it in your pocket, and you write and tell us what happens. Perhaps it won’t be so bad. Here he comes – quick!’

She stuffed the paper into Rupert’s jacket pocket as the tall Murdstone-like figure advanced towards them. The three children left Rupert and walked up the platform.

‘I’m glad we gave him the chock,’ said Charles, and the word was hardly out of his mouth before a cold, hard hand touched his shoulder (and his cheek as he turned quickly) and a cold, hard voice said:

‘Little boy, I do not allow those under my charge to accept sweetmeats from strange children, especially dirty ones.’

And with that the Murdstone gentleman pushed the chocolate into Charles’s hand and went back to his prey.

‘Beast! Brute! Beast!’ said Charles.

After this it was mere forlorn-hopishness and die-on-the-barricade courage, as Charlotte said later, that made the children get into the same carriage with Rupert and his captor. They might as well have saved themselves the trouble. The Murdstone gentleman put Rupert in a corner and sat in front of him with a newspaper very widely opened. And at the next station he changed carriages, taking Rupert by the hand as though he had been, as Charles put it, ‘any old baby-girl.’

But as Rupert went out Caroline whispered to him:

‘You get some borage and eat it,’ and Rupert looked ‘Why?’

‘Borage gives courage, you know,’ she said, too late, for he was whisked away before he could hear her, and they saw him no more.

They talked about him, though, till the train stopped at East Farleigh, which was their station.

There was a waggonette to meet them and a cart for their luggage, and the coachman said he would have known Caroline anywhere, because she was so like her mother, whom he remembered when he was only gardener’s boy; and this made every one feel pleasantly as though they were going home.

It was a jolly drive, across the beautiful bridge and up the hill and through the village and along a mile or more of road, where the green hedges were powdered with dust, and tufts of hay hung, caught by the brambles from the tops of passing waggons. These bits of hay made one feel that one really was in the country – not just the bare field-country of the suburb where Aunt Emmeline and Uncle Percival lived, where one could never get away from the sight of red and yellow brick villas.

And then the boy who was driving the luggage cart got down and opened a gate; and they drove through and along a woodland road where ferns and blossoming brambles grew under trees very green and not dusty at all.

From the wood they came to a smooth, green, grassy park dotted with trees, and in the middle of it, standing in a half-circle of chestnuts and sycamores, was the house.

It was a white, bow-windowed house, with a balcony at one end, and a porch, with white pillars and two broad steps; and the grass grew right up to the very doorsteps, which is unusual and very pretty. There was not a flower to be seen – only grass. The waggonette, of course, kept to the drive, which ran round to a side door – half glass.

And here Mrs. Wilmington the housekeeper received them. She was a pale, thin person – quite kind, but not at all friendly.

‘I don’t think she has time to think of anything but being ladylike,’ said Charlotte. ‘She ought to wear mittens.’

This was while they were washing their hands for tea.

‘I suppose if you’re a housekeeper you have to be careful people don’t think you’re a servant,’ said Caroline. ‘What drivel it is! I say, isn’t this something like?’

She was looking out of the bow window of the big room spread with a blue rose-patterned carpet, at the green glory of the park, lying in the sun like another and much more beautiful carpet with a pattern of trees on it.

Then they went down to tea. Such a house – full of beautiful things! But the children hadn’t time to look at them then, and I haven’t time to tell you about them now.

I will only say that the dining-room was perfect in its Turkey-carpet-and-mahogany comfort, and that it had red curtains.

‘Will you please pour the tea, Miss Caroline?’ said Mrs. Wilmington, and went away.

‘I’m glad we haven’t got to have tea with *her*, anyway,’ said Charles.

And then Uncle Charles came in. He was not at all what they expected. He could not have been what anybody expected. He was more shadowy than you would think anybody could be. He was more like a lightly printed photograph from an insufficiently exposed and imperfectly developed negative than anything else I can think of. He was as thin and pale as Mrs. Wilmington, but there was nothing hard or bony about him. He was soft as a shadow – his voice, his hand, his eyes.

‘And what are your names?’ he said, when he had shaken hands all round.

Caroline told him, and Charles added:

‘How funny of you not to know, uncle, when we’re all named after you!’

‘Caroline, Charles, Charlotte,’ he repeated. ‘Yes, I suppose you are. I like my tea very weak, please, with plenty of milk and no sugar.’

Caroline nervously clattered among the silver and china. She was not used to pouring out real tea for long-estranged uncles.

‘I hope you will enjoy yourselves here,’ said Uncle Charles, taking his cup; ‘and excuse me if I do not always join you at meals. I am engaged on a work – I mean I am writing a book,’ he told them.

‘What fun!’ said every one but Caroline, who had just burnt herself with the urn; and Charles added:

‘What’s it about?’

‘Magic,’ said the Uncle, ‘or, rather, a branch of magic. I thought of calling it “A Brief Consideration of the Psychological and Physiological Part played by Suggestion in So-called Magic.”’

‘It sounds interesting; at least I know it would if I knew anything about it,’ said Caroline, trying to be both truthful and polite.

‘It’s very long,’ said Charles. ‘How would you get all that printed on the book’s back?’

‘And don’t say “so-called,”’ said Charlotte. ‘It looks as if you didn’t believe in magic.’

‘If people thought I believed in magic they wouldn’t read my books,’ said Uncle Charles. ‘They’d think I was mad, you know.’

‘But why?’ Charlotte asked. ‘We aren’t mad, and we believe in it. Do you know any spells, uncle? We want awfully to try a spell. It’s the dream of our life. It is, really.’

The ghost of a smile moved the oyster-shell-coloured face of Uncle Charles.

‘So you take an interest in magic?’ he said. ‘We shall have at least that in common.’

‘Of course we do. Every one does, only they’re afraid to say so. Even servants do. They tell fortunes and dreams. Did you ever read about the Amulet, or the Phoenix, or the Words of Power? Bread and butter, please,’ said Charles.

‘You have evidently got up the subject,’ said Uncle Charles. ‘Who told you about Words of Power?’

‘It’s in *The Amulet*,’ said Charlotte. ‘I say, uncle, do tell us some spells.’

‘Ah!’ Uncle Charles sighed. ‘I am afraid the day of spells has gone by – except, perhaps, for people of your age. *She* could have told you spells enough – if all the stories of her are true.’

He pointed to a picture over the mantelpiece – a fair-haired, dark-eyed lady in a ruff.

‘She was an ancestress of ours,’ he said; ‘she was wonderfully learned.’

‘What became of her?’ Charlotte asked.

‘They burned her for a witch. It is sometimes a mistake to know too much,’ said the Uncle.

This contrasted agreeably with remembered remarks of Uncle Percival and Aunt Emmeline, such as ‘Knowledge is power’ and ‘There is no darkness but ignorance.’

The children looked at the lady in the white ruff and black velvet dress, and they liked her face.

‘What a shame!’ they said.

‘Yes,’ said the Uncle. ‘You see she’s resting her hand on two books. There’s a tradition that those books contain her magic secret. I used to look for the books when I was young, but I never found them – I never found them.’ He sighed again.

‘*We’ll* look, uncle,’ said Charlotte eagerly. ‘*We may* look, mayn’t we? Young heads are better than old shoulders, aren’t they? At least, that sounds rude, but you know I mean two heads are better than yours – No, that’s not it. Too many cooks spoil the – No, that’s not it either. We wouldn’t spoil anything. Too many hands make light work. *That’s* what I meant.’

‘Your meaning was plain from the first,’ said the Uncle, finishing his tea and setting down his cup – a beautiful red and blue and gold one – very different from Aunt Emmeline’s white crockery. ‘Certainly you may look. But you’ll respect the field of your search.’

‘Uncle,’ said Caroline, from behind the silver tea-tray, ‘your house is the most lovely, splendid, glorious, beautiful house we’ve ever seen, and –’

‘We wouldn’t hurt a hair of its head,’ said Charles.

Again the Uncle smiled. ‘Well, well,’ he said, and faded away like a shadow.

‘We’ll find those books or perish,’ said Charlotte firmly.

‘*Ra-ther*,’ said Charles.

‘We’ll look for them, anyway,’ said Caroline. ‘Now let’s go and pick an ivy leaf and put it in a letter for poor dear Aunt Emmeline. I’ll tell you something.’

‘Well?’ said the others.

‘This is the sort of house I’ve always dreamed of when it said luxury – in books, you know.’

‘Me too,’ said Charlotte.

‘*And me*,’ said Charles.

CHAPTER III

THE WONDERFUL GARDEN

It was very glorious to wake up the next morning in enormous soft beds – four-posted, with many-folded silk hangings, and shiny furniture that reflected the sunlight as dark mirrors might do. And breakfast was nice, with different sorts of things to eat, in silver dishes with spirit-lamps under them, – bacon and sausages and scrambled eggs, and as much toast and marmalade as you wanted; not just porridge and apples, as at Aunt Emmeline’s. There were tea and coffee and hot milk. They all chose hot milk.

‘I feel,’ said Caroline, pouring it out of a big silver jug with little bits of ivory between the handle and the jug to keep the handle from getting too hot, ‘I feel that we’re going to enjoy every second of the time we’re here.’

‘Rather,’ said Charles, through sausage. ‘Isn’t Uncle Charles a dear,’ he added more distinctly. ‘I dreamed about him last night – that he painted his face out of the paint-box I gave Caro, and then we blew him out with the bellows to make him fatter.’

‘And did it?’ Caroline asked.

‘He burst,’ said Charles briefly, ‘and turned into showers of dead leaves.’

There was an interval of contented silence. Then —

‘What shall we do first?’ said Charles. And his sisters with one voice answered, ‘Explore, of course.’

And they finished their breakfast to dreams of exploring every hole and corner of the wonderful house.

But when they rang to have breakfast taken away it was Mrs. Wilmington who appeared.

‘Your uncle desired me to say that he thinks it’s healthy for you to spend some hours in the hopen —open air,’ she said, speaking in a small distinct voice. ‘He himself takes the air of an afternoon. So will you please all go out at once,’ she ended in a burst of naturalness, ‘and not come ’ome, home, till one o’clock.’

‘Where are we to go?’ asked Charlotte, not pleased.

‘Not beyond the park and grounds,’ said the housekeeper. ‘And,’ she added reluctantly, ‘Mr. Charles said if there was any pudding you liked to mention —’

A brief consultation ended in, ‘Treacle hat, please’; and when Mrs. Wilmington had minced off, they turned to each other and said:

‘The brick!’

‘The old duck!’ and

‘Something like an uncle.’

Then they went out, as they had been told to do. And they took off their shoes and stockings, which they had not been told to do – but, on the other hand, had not been told not to – and walked barefooted in the grass still cool and dewy under the trees. And they put on their boots again and explored the park, and explored the stable-yard, where a groom was rubbing bright the silver buckles of the harness and whistling as he rubbed. They explored the stables and the harness-room and the straw-loft and the hay-loft. And then they went back to the park and climbed trees – a little way, because though they had always known that they would climb trees if ever they had half a chance, they had not, till now, had any chance at all.

And all the while they were doing all this they were looking – at the back of their minds, even when they weren’t doing it with the part you think with – for the garden.

And there wasn’t any garden!

That was the plain fact that they had to face after two hours of sunshine and green out-of-doors.

‘And I’m certain mother said there was a garden,’ Caroline said, sitting down suddenly on the grass; ‘a beautiful garden and a terrace.’

‘Perhaps the Uncle didn’t like it, and he’s had it made not garden again – “Going back to Nature” that would be, like Aunt Emmeline talks about,’ Charles suggested.

‘And it’s dreadful if there’s no garden,’ said Caroline, ‘because of the flowers we were going to send in letters. Wild flowers don’t have such deep meanings, I’m certain.’

‘And besides we haven’t seen any wild flowers,’ said Caroline. ‘Oh, bother!’

‘Never mind,’ Charles said, ‘think of exploring the house – and finding the book, perhaps. We’ll ask the Elegant One, when we go in, why there isn’t a garden.’

‘We won’t wait till then,’ said Charlotte; ‘let’s go and ask that jolly man who’s polishing the harness. He looked as if he wouldn’t mind us talking to him.’

‘It was him drove us yesterday,’ Charles pointed out.

So they went as to an old friend. And when they asked William why there wasn’t a garden he answered surprisingly and rather indignantly:

‘Ain’t they shown you, Miss? Not a garden? There ain’t a garden to beat it hereabouts. Come on, I’ll show you.’

And, still more surprisingly, he led the way to the back door.

‘We aren’t to go indoors till dinner-time,’ said Caroline; ‘and besides, we *should* like to see the garden – if there really is one.’

‘Of course there is one, Miss,’ said William. ‘She’ll never see you if you’re quick. She’ll be in her room by now – at her accounts and things. And the Master’s never about in these back parts in the morning.’

‘I suppose it’s a lock-up garden and he’s going to get the key,’ said Charles in a whisper. But William wasn’t.

He led them into a whitewashed passage that had cupboards and larders opening out of it and ended in a green baize door. He opened this, and there they were in the hall.

‘Quick,’ he said, and crossed it, unlatched another door and held it open. ‘Come in quiet,’ he said, and closed the door again. And there they all were in a little square room with a stone staircase going down the very middle of it, like a well. There was a wooden railing round three sides of the stairway, and nothing else in the room at all, except William and the children.

‘A secret staircase,’ said Charlotte. ‘Oh, it can’t be, really. How *lovely!*’

‘I daresay it was a secret once,’ said William, striking a match and lighting a candle that stood at the top of the stairs in a brass candlestick. ‘You see there wasn’t always these banisters, and you can see that ridge along the wall. My grandfather says it used to be boarded over and that’s where the joists went. They’d have a trap-door or something over the stairway, I shouldn’t be surprised.’

‘But what’s the stair for? – Where does it *go*? Are we going down?’ the children asked.

‘Yes, and sharp too. Nobody’s supposed to go this way except the Master. But you’ll not tell on me. I’ll go first. Mind the steps, Miss. They’re a bit wore at the edges, like.’

They minded the steps, going carefully down, following the blinking, winking, blue and yellow gleam of the candle.

There were not many steps.

‘Straight ahead now,’ said William, holding the candle up to show the groined roof of a long straight passage, built of stone, and with stone flags for the floor of it.

‘How perfectly ripping!’ said Charlotte breathlessly. ‘It *is* brickish of you to bring us here. Where does it go to?’

‘You wait a bit,’ said William, and went on. The passage ended in another flight of steps – up this time, – and the steps ended in a door, and when William had opened this every one blinked and shut their eyes, for the doorway framed green leaves with blue sky showing through them, and —

‘Ere’s the garden,’ said William; and here, indeed, it was.

‘There’s another door the other end what the gardeners go in and out of,’ said William. ‘I’ll get you a key sometime.’

The door had opened into a sort of arch – an arbour, for its entrance was almost veiled by thick-growing shrubs.

‘Oh, thank you,’ said Caroline; ‘but when did they make this passage, and what for?’

‘They made that passage when the folks in the house was too grand to go through the stable-yard and too lazy to go round,’ said William. ‘There’s no stable-yard way now,’ he added. ‘So long! I must be getting back, Miss. Don’t you let on as I brought you through.’

‘Of course not,’ every one said. Charles added, ‘But I didn’t know the house was as old as secret passages in history times.’

‘It’s any age you please,’ said William; ‘the back parts is.’

He went back through the door, and the children went out through the leafy screen in front, into the most beautiful garden that could be, with a wall. I like unwallled gardens myself, with views from the terraces. From this garden you could see nothing but tall trees and – the garden itself.

The lower half was a vegetable garden arranged in squares with dwarf fruit-trees and flower-borders round them, like the borders round old-fashioned pocket-handkerchiefs. Then about half-way up the garden came steps – stone balustrades, a terrace, and beyond that a flower garden with smooth green turf paths, box-edged, a sundial in the middle, and in the flower-beds flowers – more flowers than I could give names to.

‘How perfectly perfect!’ Charlotte said.

‘I do wish I’d brought out my *Language Of!*’ said Caroline.

‘How awfully tidy everything is!’ said Charles in awe-struck tones.

It was.

There was nowhere an imperfect leaf, a deformed bud, or a misshapen flower. Every plant grew straight and strong, and with an extraordinary evenness.

‘They look like pictures of plants more than like real ones,’ said Caroline quite truly.

An old gardener was sweeping the terrace steps, and gave the children ‘Good morning.’

They gave it back, and stayed to watch him. It seemed polite to say something before turning away. So Caroline said:

‘How beautifully everything grows here.’

‘Ay,’ said the old man, ‘it do. Say perfect and you won’t be far out.’

‘It’s very clever of you,’ said Charlotte. ‘Ill weeds don’t grow in a single place in *your* garden.’

‘I don’t say as I don’t do something,’ said the old man, ‘but seems as if there was a blessing on the place – everything thrives and grows just-so. It’s the soil or the aspick, p’raps. I dunno. An’ I’ve noticed things.’

‘What things?’ was the natural question.

‘Oh, just things,’ the gardener answered shortly, and swept away to the end of the long steps.

‘I say’ – Caroline went after him to do it – ‘I say, may we pick the flowers?’

‘In moderation,’ said the gardener, and went away.

‘I wonder what he’d call moderation,’ said Charles; and they discussed this question so earnestly that the dinner-bell rang before they had picked any flowers at all.

The gate at the end of the garden was open, and they went out that way. Over the gate was a stone with words and a date. They stopped to spell out the carved letters:

HERE BE DREAMES

1589

RESPICE FINEM

Caroline copied the last two words in the grey-covered pocket-book; and when Mrs. Wilmington came in to carve the mutton, Caroline asked what the words meant.

‘I never inquired,’ said the housekeeper. ‘It must be quite out of date now, whatever it meant once. But you must have been in the garden to see that. How did you get in?’

An awkward question. There was nothing for it but to say:

‘By the secret passage.’ And Charles said it.

‘No one uses that but your uncle,’ said Mrs. Wilmington, ‘and you were requested to keep out of doors till dinner-time.’

She shut her mouth with a snap and went on carving.

‘Sorry,’ said Caroline.

‘Granted,’ said Mrs. Wilmington, but not cordially; and having placed two slices of mutton on each plate went away.

‘It *is* jolly having meals by ourselves,’ said Charlotte; ‘only I wish she wasn’t cross.’

‘We ought to be extra manner-y, I expect, when we’re by ourselves,’ said Caroline. ‘May I pass you the salt, Charles?’

‘No, you mayn’t,’ said Charles. ‘Thank you, I mean; but there’s one at each corner. That’s one each for us, and one over for –’

‘For *her*.’ Charlotte pointed to the picture of the dark-eyed, fair-haired lady.

‘Let’s put a chair for her,’ said Charlotte, ‘and pretend she’s come to dinner. Then we shall have to behave like grown-up people.’

‘I never can remember about behaving,’ said Charles wearily; ‘such a lot of things – and none of them seem to matter. Why shouldn’t you drink with your mouth full? It’s your own mouth.’

‘And eating peas with your knife. I think it would be as good as conjuring, doing it without cutting yourself’ – Charlotte tried to lift the peas from her plate with her knife – ‘let alone the balancing,’ she added, as they rolled off among the mutton.

‘Don’t,’ said Caroline. ‘She’s looking at you. Charles, you’re the only gentleman, worse luck – I wish I was a boy – put a chair for her.’

And a large green-seated chair, whose mahogany back was inlaid with a brass scroll pattern, was wheeled to the empty space on the fourth side of the table.

‘Now we must none of us look at her – in the picture, I mean. And then we can’t be sure that she isn’t sitting in that chair,’ said Caroline.

After dinner Caroline looked up ‘Remorse’s regret’ in *The Language of Flowers*. It was agreed that Mrs. Wilmington had better have a bouquet.

‘Brambles,’ Caroline said, her finger in the book, ‘they’re Remorse – but they wouldn’t make a very comfortable nosegay. And Regret’s verbena, and I don’t even know what it is.’

‘Put pansies with the brambles,’ said Charlotte; ‘that’ll be thoughts of remorse.’

So the housekeeper, coming down very neat in her afternoon dress of shiny black alpaca, was met by a bunch of pansies.

‘To show we think we’re remorseful about the secret stairs,’ said Charlotte; ‘and look out, because the brambles are the remorse and they prick like Billy-o!’

Mrs. Wilmington smiled, and looked quite nice-looking.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I am sure you will remember not to repeat the fault.’

Which wasn’t the nicest way of receiving a remorse bouquet; but, then as Charlotte said, perhaps she couldn’t help not knowing the nice ways. And anyhow, she seemed pleased, and that was the great thing, as Charlotte pointed out.

Then, having done something to please Mrs. Wilmington, they longed to do something to please some one else, and the Uncle was the only person they could think of doing anything to please.

‘Suppose we arranged all the books in the dining-room bookcase, in colours, – all the reds together and all the greens, and the ugly ones all on a shelf by themselves,’ Charlotte suggested. And the others agreed. So that the afternoon flew by like any old bird, as Caroline put it; and when tea came, and the floor and sofa and chairs were covered with books, and one shelf was gay with red books and half a shelf demure in green —

‘Your uncle isn’t coming in to-day,’ said Mrs. Wilmington, ‘and I’m sure it’s just as well. *What* a mess! Here, let me put them back, and go and wash your hands.’

‘We’ll put them back,’ the children said, but in vain. They had to go to wash their hands, and Mrs. Wilmington continued to put the books back all the time they were having tea. Patiently and carefully she did it, not regarding the colours at all, and her care and her patience seemed to say, more loudly than any words she could have spoken, ‘Yes; there you sit, having your nice tea, and I cannot have *my* tea, because I have to clear up after you. But I do not complain. No.’

They would have much rather she had complained, of course. But they couldn’t say so.

CHAPTER IV IN THESSALONIANS

Now you may say it was Chance, or you may say it was Fate; or you may say it was Destiny, or Fortune; in fact, you may say exactly what you choose. But the fact remains unaltered by your remarks.

When Mrs. Wilmington placed a fat brown volume of sermons on the shelf and said, 'There, that's the last,' she, quite without meaning it, said what was not true. For when tea was over the children found that the fat sermon-book had *not* been the last. The last was *Shadoxhurst on Thessalonians*, a dull, large book, and Mrs. Wilmington had not put it back in its place because she had not seen it. It was, in fact, lying on the floor, hidden by the table-cloth. If Charles had not happened to want his handkerchief, and gone down to look for it on the floor – its usual situation when it was needed – they would not have seen the book either.

Charles picked up *Thessalonians*, and the cover 'came off in his hand,' as the handles of cups do in the hands of washing-up maids.

What was inside the cover fell on the floor with a thump, and Caroline picked *that* up.

'*Shadoxhurst on Thessalonians*,' Charles read from the cover.

'This isn't,' said Caroline, looking at what had been inside. 'It's – I say! Suppose it was the book –'

She looked up at the picture.

It was certainly *like* the painted book.

'Only it hasn't any brass clasps,' said Caroline; 'but look – it *used* to have clasps. You can see the marks where they used to go.'

You could.

'Glory!' cried Charlotte. 'Fancy finding it the very first day! Let's take it to Uncle Charles.'

'Perhaps it isn't it,' suggested Charlotte. 'Then he'd be furious perhaps.'

'We'll soon see.' Charles reached out a hand. 'Let's have a squint. It ought to be all magic and Abracadabra and crossed triangles like in *Ingoldsby Legends*.'

'I'll have first look any way,' said Caroline. 'I found it.'

'I found it,' said Charles. 'You only picked it up.'

'You only dropped it. Oh, *bother*–' she had opened the book, and now let her hands fall, still holding it.

'Bother what?' asked the others.

'It isn't English. It's French or Latin or something. Isn't that *just* like things! Here, you can look.'

Charles took the book. 'It's Latin,' he said. 'I could read it if I knew a little more Latin. I can read some of it as it is. I know *quam*, or *apud*, and *rara*. Let's take it to the Uncle.'

'Oh *no*,' said Caroline. 'Let's find out what it is, first.'

It was not easy to find out. The title-page was missing, and *quam*, *apud*, and *rara*, though quite all right in their way, gave but little clue to what the book was about.

'I wish we'd some one we could ask,' said Charles. 'I don't suppose the Wilmington knows any Latin. I don't suppose she knows even *apud* and *quam* and *rara*. If we had the Murdstone chap handy he could tell us, I suppose.'

'I'm glad we haven't,' Charlotte said. 'I don't suppose he'd tell us. And he'd take it away. I say. I suppose there's a church somewhere near. And a clergyman. *He'd* know.'

'Of course he would,' Caroline said with returning brightness. 'Let's go and ask him.'

Half an hour later the children, coming down a deep banked lane, saw before them the grey tower of the church, with elm-trees round it, standing among old gravestones and long grass.

A white faced house stood on the other side of the churchyard.

‘I suppose the clergyman lives there,’ said Caroline. ‘Please,’ she said to a pleasant-looking hook-nosed man who was mending the churchyard wall, and whistling ‘Blow away the morning dew’ as he slapped on the mortar and trimmed off the edges with a diamond-shaped trowel, ‘please, does the clergyman live in that house?’

‘He does,’ said the man with the trowel. ‘Do you want him?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Caroline.

‘Well, here he is,’ said the man with the trowel. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Do you mean to say that you’re *It?*— the clergyman, I mean, – I beg your pardon,’ said Caroline; and the man with the trowel said, ‘At your service.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Caroline again, very red as to her ears. ‘I thought you were a working man.’

‘So I am, thank God,’ said the man with the trowel. ‘You see we haven’t much money to spare. The parish is so poor. So we do any little repairs ourselves. Did you ever set a stone? It’s awfully jolly. The mortar goes on so nicely, and squeezes out pleasantly. Like to try?’ he asked Charles.

Of course they all liked to try. And it was not till each had laid a stone and patted it into place, and scraped off the mortar, and got thoroughly dusty and dirty and comfortable, that any one remembered why they had come.

‘Oh, this?’ said the clergyman – for so I must call him, though anything less clergyman-like than he looked in his mortar-stained flannels and blue blazer you can’t imagine. ‘It looks interesting. Latin,’ he said, opening it carefully, for his hands were very dirty.

‘Yes,’ said Charles with modest pride. ‘I told them it was. I saw *rara* and *quam* and *apud*.’

‘Quite so,’ said the clergyman; ‘*rara, quam, and apud*. Words of Power.’

‘Oh, do *you* know about Words of Power?’

‘Rather! Do you?’

‘Rather!’ they said. And if anything had been needed to cement this new friendship well, there it was.

‘Look here,’ said the clergyman. ‘If you’ll just wait while I wash my hands I’ll walk up with you. And I’ll look through the book and report to you to-morrow.’

‘But what’s it about?’

‘About?’ said he, turning the leaves delicately with the least mortared of his fingers. ‘Oh, it’s about spells and charms and things.’

‘How perfectly too lovely,’ said Charlotte. ‘Oh, do read us *one*— just only *one*.’

‘Right O,’ was the response of this unusual clergyman, and he read: “‘The seed of the fern if pulverised” – pounded – smashed, you know, – “and laid upon the eyes at the twelfth hour” – midnight, you know – at least I think that’s it – “last before the feast of St. John” – that’s to-morrow by the way – “shall give to the eyes thus doctored” – treated – dealt with, you know, – “the power to see that which is not to be seen.” It means you’ll see invisible things. I say I *must* wash. I feel the dirt soaking into my bones. Will you wait?’

The children looked at each other. Then Charlotte said:

‘Look here. Don’t think we don’t like you. We do – awfully. But if you walk up with us will you feel bound to tell uncle about the book? Because it’s a secret. He’s looking for a book, and we think perhaps this is it. But we don’t want to tell him till we’re quite sure.’

‘I found it inside Somebody-or-other-quite-dull on Thessalonians, you know,’ said Charles, ‘and I saw it was Latin because of *quam* and –’

‘My dear sir – and ladies,’ said the agreeable clergyman, ‘I am the soul of honour. I would perish at the stake before I would reveal a centimetre of your least secret. Trust me to the death.’

And off he went.

‘What a different clergyman,’ said Charles; ‘he is just like anybody else – only nicer.’

‘He said thank God,’ Caroline reminded him; ‘he said it like being in church too, not like cabmen and people in the street.’

‘He said “Thank God he was a working man,”’ said Charlotte. ‘I wonder what he meant.’

‘I shall ask him some day,’ said Caroline, ‘when we know him better.’

But any one who had met the party as they went talking and laughing up the hill would have thought they had known each other for long enough, and could hardly know each other any better than they did.

Charles was dreaming of mortaring the Murdstone man securely into a first-class railway carriage, and tapping him on the head with a brass trowel which was also a candlestick, when he was awakened by a pinch given gently. At the same moment a hand was laid on his mouth, and a whisper said:

‘Hist! – not a word.’

‘Shut up,’ said Charles, recognising at once the voice of his sister Charlotte. ‘I’m asleep. Don’t be a duffer. Go to bed.’

‘No, but,’ said Charlotte in the dark, ‘Caroline and I have been talking about the fern-seed. And we’re going to try it – putting it on our eyes, I mean. To see whether we can see invisible things.’

‘Silly,’ said Charles briefly.

‘All right. Only don’t say we didn’t ask you to join in.’

‘There isn’t any fern-seed,’ objected Charles.

‘Yes, there is. Mrs. Wilmington’s got some in the room they call the housekeeper’s room. Under a bell-glass. Stupid little ferns; but I expect the seed’s all right. Caro saw them when she went in to ask the Wilmington if we might get up at seven instead of half-past because of everything being so new and lovely. She meant because of the charm-book, of course. And she saw the ferns then.’

‘Are you *really* going to?’ asked Charles, warm in bed.

‘Yes,’ said Charlotte in a take-it-or-leave-it tone.

‘Oh, very well,’ said Charles; ‘only don’t forget I told you it was silly rot. And of course nothing will happen. I was right about the Latin, you know.’

‘Here’s your dressing-gown,’ said Charlotte, who had been feeling for it in the mahogany wardrobe. ‘You can scabble for your shoes with your feet; I suppose they’re beside the bed. Hurry up.’

Charles got up, grumbling gently. It was not to be expected that he would feel the same about this wild fern-seed idea as his sisters, who had thought and talked of nothing else for more than three hours, and had had to pinch each other to keep awake. Still, he got up, and they all went down to Mrs. Wilmington’s room, which was warm and seemed full of antimacassars, china ornaments, and cheerfully-bound copies of the poets – the kind that are given for birthday presents and prizes, beautiful outside, and inside very small print on thin paper that lets the printing on the other side show through. Charlotte found this out as they waited, by the light of their one candle, for it to be twelve o’clock.

Caroline was plucking fronds of fern, carefully, so that the lack of them should not disfigure the plants.

‘It’s all duffing,’ said Charles. ‘Don’t forget I said so. And how are you going to pound the beastly stuff? You’ll wake the Wilmington and the Uncle and the whole lot if you pound.’

‘I thought,’ said Caroline, hesitating with the fern-fronds in her hand, and her little short pig-tail sticking out like a saucepan handle, as Charles put it later, ‘I thought – it sounds rather nasty, but it isn’t really, you know, if you remember it’s all *you* – I thought we might *chew* them. Each do our own, you know, and put them on our eyes like a poultice. I know you hated it when Aunt Emmeline chewed the lily leaves and put them on your thumb when you burnt it,’ she told Charles, ‘but then *her* chewing is quite different from you doing it.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Charles; ‘it’s only a bit more of your nonsense. Give us the beastly seeds.’

‘They won’t come off the leaves,’ said Caroline. ‘We shall have to chew the lot.’

‘In for a penny, in for a sheep,’ said Charlotte cheerfully. ‘I mean we may as well be hanged for a pound as a lamb. I mean –’

‘I know what you mean,’ Caroline interrupted. ‘Here you are. It’s just on twelve. Chew for all you’re worth, and when the Wilmington’s clock begins to strike put it on your eyes. And when it’s struck six of them take it off. Yes. I’ve thought about it all. I’m sure that’s right. Now, then, chew.’

‘I hope it’s not poison,’ said Charles; ‘you’ll remember I told you –’

‘Of course it isn’t,’ said Caroline. ‘I’ve often licked ferns, and I’m not dead. I say – I daresay nothing will happen – but think how silly we should feel if we hadn’t tried it. And this is the only night. He said so.’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Charles. ‘At any rate, if we do it you can’t be always saying we ought to have.’

‘Chew,’ said Charlotte; and the clock began to strike.

‘One, two, three, four, five, six,’ said Mrs. Wilmington’s highly ornamented pink china clock; and each child thrust a little bunch of fern fronds into its mouth.

‘Seven,’ said the clock.

‘Now,’ said Caroline.

And each child... But you picture the scene.

‘Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, purr,’ said the clock, and said no more.

‘I don’t like to take it off,’ said Charlotte, her hands to her eyes. ‘Suppose we *did* see something.’

‘We shan’t,’ said Charles.

‘You must,’ said Caroline.

‘Oh, well,’ said Charlotte, and took away the little poultice of chewed fern from each eye.

‘There’s nothing,’ she said.

‘I knew there wouldn’t be,’ said Charles. ‘Perhaps another time you’ll know I’m right.’

‘Never mind,’ said Caroline. ‘We did it. So we can’t keep bothering about what might have happened if we had. Let’s go to bed. It was decent of you to try, Charles, when you didn’t want to so much – Oh!’

‘What?’ said the others.

‘Poisoned,’ said Charles gloomily. ‘I knew it wasn’t safe. I expect you chewed harder than we did, and – Oh!’

Charlotte had already said her ‘Oh.’ And now all three children were staring straight before them at the window. And there, where a moment ago was just black bare outside night, was a face – a white face with wide dark eyes.

‘It’s true,’ gasped Caroline, ‘it is true – the fern-seed does –’

‘It’s not true,’ said Charles stoutly, his eyes on the face.

‘Oh, but it is,’ said Charlotte. ‘Oh, what’s going to happen now?’

And each child felt that the fern-seed had done what no one had, in the deep heart, believed that it would do, and that their eyes now gazed – seeing – upon the unseen.

‘I wish we hadn’t,’ said Charles. ‘I told you not to.’

The lips of the face outside moved, as though it were speaking.

‘No,’ cried Charlotte. ‘I don’t *want* it to be true.’

A hand was raised – a hand outside the window. Would it knock at the window? The fern-seed only made you see the unseen, not hear the unheard. If the hand knocked at the window – and plainly it was going to knock, – if the hand knocked, would they hear it?

The hand knocked.

CHAPTER V

THE MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

Now, the fern-seed was only warranted to show the invisible, not to make the unhearable heard. If there should be no sound when that raised hand tapped at the window, then the children would know that the fern-seed was doing what it was warranted to do by the Latin book. If, on the other hand, the hand tapped and made, in tapping, the usual noise produced by a common tapper, then one of two things might be true. Either the fern-seed was stronger than the Latin book bargained for, and was able to make people hear the unhearable even if they did not cover their ears with the charm that had covered their eyes, or else the fern-seed spell was all nonsense and the face outside the window was a real person's face and the hand was a real person's hand, and the tap that was coming on the window was a really-tap that would sound hard and rattly on the glass of the window, as taps sound when fingers of bone and flesh make them.

All the children felt quite sure that they were not at all sure whether they wanted the face to be the face of a real person, or whether they wished it to be the Invisible made visible by fern-seed. But when the hand tapped at the window and a sound came to the children within – a sound quite distinct, and just the noise you or I might make if we tapped at a window and didn't want every one in the house to hear us – the children, though startled, no longer felt any doubt as to what they wished that face to be.

'It's only a real person,' whispered Charles, and sighed deeply.

'It's only a boy,' said Caroline. 'What does he want?'

'It's that Rupert chap we saw in the train,' said Charlotte.

Every one breathed much more freely, and they all smiled and nodded towards the window; and the face nodded back, but it did not smile.

'He must have run away,' said Charles, 'like I told him to.'

'It wasn't you; it was me,' said Charlotte promptly.

'I like this much better than its being invisible people,' said Charles, changing the subject a little. 'This is something *like* an adventure.'

'We shouldn't have had it without coming down for the fern-seed,' Caroline reminded him. And again they all nodded and smiled. The face outside moved its lips. It was saying something, but they could not hear what it said.

'It *is* that Rupert boy,' Caroline insisted; 'and he's run away to *us*. What larks!'

And again she nodded, and so did Charles. But Charlotte said, 'Don't let's go on nodding like Chinese pagodas. Of course, it wants to come in.' And at once the others saw that this was the case.

'He can't get in here,' Charlotte said; and, indeed, to have moved that table on which the fern-filled bell-glass stood surrounded by unhappy-looking little ferns in little dry pots, with bits of old tumbler arched protectively over them, would have been dangerous, and probably noisy. And, unless they removed the ferny difficulties, it was quite plain that the window could not be opened.

'The morning-room is next door – Mrs. Wilmington called it that,' said Caroline. 'It's a French window. She said so. It opens all right. I know how the fastenings go.'

'Why "French"?' asked Charlotte, eager for information even at that exciting moment, while Caroline was trying to explain to the face by signs that if it would just go along till it came to a French window it would find some one ready to let it in. 'Why "French"?'

'Because it's like a door,' said Charles, joining in the sign-message. 'Everything in France is the opposite of here. They say "we" for "yes," and "two" is "you," and "four" is an "oven." Silly, I call it.'

'Hush!' whispered Caroline. 'Tread softly, and don't tumble over the wolf-skins.'

Candle-bearing, the little procession passed along to the morning-room. The face had understood the signs. At any rate, there it was, framed in glass panes; and when the French window, which was, indeed, just like a door, was opened, there was the face, as well as the hands, arms, legs, body, and feet, of Rupert, the platform boy, or somebody exactly like him.

‘Come in,’ said Caroline, holding the door open. And Charlotte added, ‘Fear nothing! We will baffle your pursuers. We are yours to the death.’

He came in, a drooping dusty figure, and the French window, which had permitted itself to be opened with the most gentle and noiseless submission, now, in closing, uttered what was little less than a tactless squawk.

‘Fly!’ whispered Caroline, swiftly turning the handle that fastened it. ‘But your boots will betray us.’

Flight was the only thing, you see, and they had to risk the boots. Yet Rupert in his flight was noiseless as the others, who were all bath-slippered, and therefore shod with – if you were only reasonably careful and looked where you were going – the shoes of silence.

When the whole party was safe in Charles’s room, with the door shut, they blew out the candles and stood holding each other and their breaths as they listened in the dark for what they fully expected to hear – the opening click of Mrs. Wilmington’s lock, the opening creak of Mrs. Wilmington’s door, the approaching rustle of Mrs. Wilmington’s gown, the mincing amazement of Mrs. Wilmington’s voice.

But all was still – still as the inside of a palm-house, which, as no doubt you know, is very much quieter than most of the few quiet places in this noisy world.

The four fugitives let their breaths go cautiously, and again held them. And still the silence wrapped them round, thick and unbroken as the darkness in which they stood.

‘It’s all right,’ whispered Caroline at last. ‘Light up.’

Fortunately, each silver candlestick had its box of safety-matches in a silver holder fastened to its handle by a silver chain. This does happen in really well-managed houses. The candles were lighted.

‘We are saved,’ said Charlotte dramatically.

‘You came up like a mouse,’ said Caroline to Rupert, – ‘a quiet mouse.’

It was then seen that Rupert’s boots were not on his feet, but in his hand, very muddy, and tied together by frayed boot-laces.

‘I took them off,’ he explained, ‘when I got into your park. My feet hurt so, and the grass was so soft and jolly. Oh, I am so tired – and hungry!’ His voice broke a little, and if he had not been a boy I think he would have cried.

‘Get on to the bed,’ said Charlotte, with eager friendliness, ‘and lie down. You be a wounded warrior and we’ll be an Arab oasis that you’ve come to. That’s the tent of the sheikh,’ she added, as Charles gave the weary Rupert a ‘leg up’ and landed him among the billows of the vast feather-bed. ‘Repose there, weary but honoured stranger. Though but humble Arabs, we are hospitable to strangers. We will go and slay a desert deer for you.’

‘There are lots of biscuits in the sideboard in the dining-room,’ said Caroline. ‘I’ll stay with the wounded – or else you can stay and I’ll go with whichever doesn’t.’

Though it was the middle of the night no one even thought of being sleepy. Perhaps it was the excitement of this most real adventure, or perhaps the seeds of the fern have an awakening effect. At any rate, the three C.’s were as ready to begin a new game as though it had been ten o’clock in the morning of the first day of the holidays, instead of half-past twelve of a night that wasn’t any night in particular except the Eve of St. John.

Charlotte and Charles set off, important and tip-toeing, on a biscuit-hunt, and Caroline, like a good little nurse, fetched a basin and sponge and washed the face of the stranger, taking no notice of his objections that he was not a baby, and earnestly hoping that in her long dressing-gown she looked at least a little like an Arab maiden ministering to a Feringhee warrior.

‘Now I’m going to wash your weary feet, if you will stick them out over the side of the bed,’ she said. ‘They always do in Saracen countries; and if you think it’s like a baby I’ll call it dressing your wounds.’

She brought a chair and a basin of water very carefully, and a big sponge, and then she peeled off Rupert’s stockings and bathed his tired, swollen feet with great care and gentleness. And if a little of the water did go on the bed – well, you can’t think of everything all in a minute, and she did put a towel under his legs afterwards.

‘That’s jolly,’ said the wounded knight, more graciously.

‘You are terribly wounded,’ said Caroline comfortingly. ‘You must have been fighting dragons or walking over red-hot ploughshares, or perhaps it was a pilgrimage with peas in your shoes. We play pilgrims sometimes, with cockles in our hats and pilgrims’ staffs – only we always pretend the peas. I think it’s quite fair to pretend the shoes, don’t you?’

When the others came back from their hunting, with a good ‘bag’ (it was a tin, really) of biscuits, the Saracen maiden greeted them with —

‘Hist! The stranger sleeps. Let’s pretend he’s fainted, and we’ll rouse him with a skin of wine. Get some water in the tooth-mug. And where are the biscuits?’

‘We might as well have turbans,’ said Charlotte, hastily twining a bath-towel round her head. ‘All really Arab maidens are turbaned Turks.’

‘Let’s make it more tent-like before we wake him,’ Charles suggested, drawing the curtains round two sides of the four-poster; ‘and we might put the candles out of sight and pretend they’re Arabian knights’ lanterns.’

‘Or put them in a line on the chest, and let them be the sun rising over the sands of the desert,’ said Charlotte, putting the three candlesticks in a row.

When all was arranged, the three towel-turbaned children climbed into the tent and looked at the wounded knight, who lay asleep, looking very tired indeed, his feet still wrapped in the towel and his head half fallen off the pillow.

‘Let him sleep a little longer,’ said Caroline, ‘ere we rouse him to eat of the flesh of the deer which my brothers have brought to the wigwam for the benefit of the poor pale-face.’

‘We’re not Indians, silly,’ said Charlotte. ‘We’re Arabs, and I could do with a bit of the flesh of the deer myself, if you come to that.’

‘So could I,’ said Charles, his turban over one eye. ‘It’s jolly not being asleep. They say you get sleepy and cross if they let you sit up – but look at us.’

‘Yes, look at us,’ the others agreed, and ate the best mixed biscuits in a contented silence, broken only by the sound of crunching.

The familiar sensation of biscuit in the mouth seemed somehow to calm the excitement of the three C.’s.

The adventures of the night, which had seemed, as they happened, not so very wonderful, now began to appear more surprising, and at the same time more real. And the silence which biscuit-eating demands (unless you are prepared to behave really badly and talk with your mouth full and have the crumbs all over the place) was favourable to reflection – a friend to thought.

‘Do you know,’ said Caroline at last – ‘pass the mug, please – do you know, I don’t at all know what we’re going to do with him.’

‘I was just thinking that,’ said Charlotte.

‘So was I,’ said Charles.

‘But I’ve been thinking – ’

‘So have I,’ said the other two together.

‘What?’ asked Caroline, stopping short.

‘What you have,’ said Charlotte, and Charles repeated her words.

‘Then I needn’t tell you what I thought,’ said Caroline briefly.

I think they were all getting, perhaps, a little sleepy – or the effect of the fern-seed was wearing off.

‘Oh, don’t be crabby,’ Charlotte said. ‘We only meant we didn’t see what on earth we could do with him. I suppose he must sleep with Charles. There’s lots of room.’ She leaned back on a pillowy bunch of featherbed and closed her eyes.

‘No, you don’t,’ said Caroline firmly, pulling her sister up again into a sitting position by a limp arm. ‘I could go to sleep myself if it comes to that. Take your turban off. It’ll cool your sleepiness.’

‘I said’ – Charlotte spoke very slowly and distinctly, as people do when they are so sleepy they aren’t quite sure whether they can speak at all – ‘I said, “Let him sleep with Charles.”’

‘Oh yes!’ said Caroline. ‘And be found in the morning when they call us, and taken alive and delivered back to the Murdstone man. No, we must hide him, and wake him before they call us. I can always wake up if I bang my head the right number of times on the pillow before I go to sleep.’

Charlotte was nodding happily.

‘Get up!’ said Caroline, exasperated. ‘Get up! Get down! Get off the bed and stand on your feet. Now, then, Charles!’

But Charles was deeply slumbering, with his mouth very much more open than it ought to have been.

‘That’s it!’ said Caroline, as Charlotte responded to her pull. ‘That’s it. It’s just you and me! Women always have to do the work of the world! Aunt Emmeline said so once. She said it’s not “Men must work and women must weep”; it’s “Men must talk and women must work.” Come on and give me a hand.’

‘All right. I’m awake now,’ said Charlotte cheerfully. ‘I’ve been biting my tongue all that awful time you’ve been talking. What’s the idea?’

‘We’ll make him an upper berth, like in ships,’ Caroline explained, ‘and then we’ll wake him up and water him and biscuit him and explain things, and get Charles into bed and all traces concealed. It’ll be just you and me that did it. That’s glory, you know.’

‘Oh, *do* stop talking,’ said Charlotte. ‘I’ll do anything you like, only stop talking.’

There was a great mahogany wardrobe in the room, with a mahogany hanging-cupboard at each side, and between the mahogany cupboards a space with mahogany drawers below and mahogany shelves above. And the shelves were like shallow drawers or deep trays, and you could pull them in and out. There was nothing on the shelves but clean white paper, and on each shelf a little bag made of white muslin and filled with dried lavender, which smelt very sweet through the fine mesh of the muslin.

The girls took out two of the trays and hid them under the bed. This left as much space above the lowest tray and the highest as they leave you on a steamer between the upper and lower berths. The girls made up a shake-down bed with blankets and pillows, and when all was ready they woke the boys gently and firmly by a damp sponge on the forehead and a hand over the mouth in case the sleeper should wake up yelling.

But both boys woke quietly. Charles had just enough wakefulness to submit to being got out of his overcoat and slippers and bundled into bed, but Rupert was thoroughly awake – ate biscuit, drank water, and understood exactly where and how he was to spend what was left of the night, as well as why he was to spend it there and thus.

He got into the wardrobe by means of a chair. The girls took away the chair and almost shut the doors of the wardrobe.

‘We’ll have a grand council to-morrow,’ said Charlotte. ‘Don’t be anxious. Just remember we’re yours to the death, like I told you on the platform.’

‘It was *me* said that,’ said Charles, almost in his sleep.

‘And don’t move out of here, whatever you do,’ said Caroline. ‘I shall come quite early, and we’ll hide you somewhere. I expect I shall think of something in my sleep. I often do. Good night.’

‘Good night,’ said Rupert, in the wardrobe. ‘I say! You are bricks – and you won’t let them catch me?’

‘Of course not,’ said the three C.’s confidently. (Charles said it quite in his sleep.)

Five minutes later the others were sleeping as soundly as Charles, and out Tonbridge way the Murdstone man and his groom and his gardener and the local Police were still looking for Rupert with anxious feelings, with lanterns that flickered yellow in the pale grey of dawn.

CHAPTER VI

HUNTED

I don't know exactly how it happened. Perhaps Caroline was too sleepy to bump her head seven times on the pillow before she went to sleep. Or perhaps that excellent spell cannot always be relied upon to work. At any rate, none of the children woke till Jane came to draw up the blinds and let the half-past seven sunshine into their rooms.

Then Caroline woke quite thoroughly, looked at her little watch, and leaped out of bed.

'What's the hurry, Miss?' asked Jane, as Caroline stood, a little unsteadily, in the middle of the room, rubbing her eyes and yawning. 'It hasn't but just gone the half-hour.'

'I was dreaming,' said Caroline; and when Jane was gone she shook Charlotte and said, 'I say! *Did* anything happen last night?'

'No,' said Charlotte, behaving like a dormouse.

Caroline caught up her dressing-gown and crept along to Charles's room. He was sitting up in bed, looking wildly at the wardrobe. Its doors were open, and there was nothing on the shelves (which were all in their proper places) except clean paper and little bags of lavender that smelt sweet through their white muslin veils.

'Whatever's happened?' asked Caroline, fearing the worst.

'Oh, nothing,' said Charles, rather crossly. 'Only I had a silly dream, and when I woke up I thought it was true, and of course it wasn't.'

'I thought it was a dream, too, when I first woke. And Charlotte says nothing happened last night. What did you dream?'

He told her a little.

'But I dreamed all that, too,' said Caroline anxiously. 'About the fern-seed and Rupert, and our playing Arab Saracens and hunting the biscuits. We *couldn't* both dream the same thing. Where did you put the biscuits in your dream – what was left of them?'

'You put them on the dressing-table.'

'Well, they aren't there now,' said she.

'Then it *was* a dream,' said he; 'and we both dreamed it.'

The two looked at each other blankly.

'I dreamed I dressed his wounds – sponged his feet, I mean,' she added, after a pause full of doubt. 'The mud was thick – if it wasn't a dream it'll be in the basin.'

But Jane knew her duty too well for there to be anything in the basin except a bright brass can of hot water with a clean towel laid neatly across it.

'Well, the fern-seed did something, anyhow, if it only made us both dream like that,' said Caroline. But Charles wanted to know how she knew they hadn't dreamed the fern-seed as well.

'Oh, you get dressed,' said his sister shortly, and went to her own dressing.

Charlotte, when really roused, owned that she remembered Rupert's coming. But, if he had come, he had gone and left no trace. And it is rare for boys to do that.

The children agreed that it must have been a dream, after the eating of the fern-seed, for all of them, for some reason that I can't understand, agreed that the fern-seed eating, at any rate, was real.

Breakfast seemed less interesting than usual, and when, after the meal, Mrs. Wilmington minced a request to them to go out for the morning, 'the same as you were requested to do yisterday,' they went with slow footsteps and boots strangely weighty.

'Let's get out of sight of the house,' said Charlotte heavily.

They went away beyond the shrubbery, to the wood where there were oak-trees and hazels and dog-wood and silver birches and here and there a black yew, with open bracken-feathered glades

between. Here they found a little glade between a honeysuckle and a sweet chestnut and a hazel thicket, flattened the bracken, and sat down amid the sweet scent of it.

‘To hold a council about the wonderful dream we’ve all of us had,’ said Caroline slowly.

But the council, if it could be called one, was brief and languid.

‘I’d rather think first,’ said Caroline. And the others said so would they.

‘I could think better with my head on your lap, Caro,’ Charles said.

And Charlotte murmured, ‘Bunch the fern up closer under my back, Caro.’

And when the sun came over the top of the sweet chestnut it fell upon a warm and comfortable heap of children asleep.

You really can’t stay up all night, or even dream that you stay up, and then hold important councils next day just as though nothing had happened.

When the children awoke, because the sun had crept up over the sweet chestnut and was shining straight into their eyes, everything looked different and much more interesting.

‘I tell you what,’ said Charlotte. ‘Let’s do fern-seed again.’

‘It’s only on the eve of –’ Charles began, but Charlotte interrupted.

‘The seed goes on when once you’ve planted it – chewed it, I mean. I’m certain it does. If we don’t *see* anything, we may *dream* something more.’

‘There wouldn’t be time for a really thick dream before dinner,’ Charles objected.

‘Never mind! Let’s try. If we are late for dinner we’d tell the truth and say that we fell asleep in the woods. There’s such heaps of fern here it would be simply silly not to try.’

There was something in this. Fern-seed was chewed once more. Bracken, I have heard really well-educated people say, is not a fern at all, but it seemed a fern to them. And it certainly did its best to act up to what was expected of it. For when the three removed the little green damp pads from their eyes and blinked at the green leaves, there in the thick of them was Rupert, looking at them between the hazel thicket and the honeysuckle – a real live Rupert, and no dream-nonsense about him.

‘*Was* it a dream last night?’ they all asked him, in an eager chorus. ‘When you came to the window?’

‘Of course it wasn’t,’ he said flatly. ‘Only I was so afraid of being nabbed. So I got out early and put the shelves back and the pillows on the bed, and I took the biscuits; I thought you wouldn’t mind –’

‘Not a bit. Rather not’ – chorus of polite hospitality.

‘And I got out of your dressing-room window and down the ivy; it was quite easy. And I cut across the grass and in under those fancy sort of fir-trees, the ones that drag their branches – you know – in the avenue. And I saw you come out, but the place was all thick with gardeners and people. So I waited till their dinner-bell rang, and then I crept out here, and I was just going to say “Hi!” when you stuck that green stuff on your eyes. It looks nasty. What did you do it for?’

They told him.

‘That’s rummy,’ he said, sitting among them quite at his ease, with one hand in his pocket. ‘Because I knew fern-seed *made* you invisible – it says so in Shakespeare, you know, – and I ate a bit coming along, just on the chance it might be some good – so that no one should see me, you know – and nobody *did* till you did. So,’ he went on more slowly, ‘perhaps I was *really* invisible until you put the fern-seed on your eyes.’

‘What a perfectly splendid idea!’ cried Charlotte. ‘Because that makes it all true. We were most awfully sick when we thought it had only just made us dream. I say! Do, now, do tell us how you ran away and why – and what you’re going to do, and everything.’

‘I thought,’ Rupert answered carelessly, ‘of running away to sea. But it’s a long way to the coast. I would much rather stop here with you. Couldn’t you hide me in a log-hut or something, like a runaway slave? Just till they stopped looking for me. And I could write to my father in India and ask him to let me stay here instead of with old Mug’s brother. Couldn’t you hide me till the answer came?’

‘We could try,’ said Charles, a little doubtfully.

But Charlotte said, 'Of course we can – we will! Only, why are you so different? You seem miles older than you were when we saw you on the platform.'

'*You'd* look miles older if you'd locked your master in his study and then done a bunk – and been running and hiding for half a day and a night,' said Rupert, a little crossly.

'But what did he *do* to you?' they asked.

'Well, you saw what he was like in the train.'

'But you seemed so frightened of him. I wonder you dared to run away.'

'That wasn't funk – in the train. That was just suppressed fury,' Rupert explained tranquilly. 'I was wondering where I should run to if I had to run. And then I did have to run – like Billy-o! And when I saw the name on a sign-post I remembered what you'd said about "true to the death" – and I kept behind the hedges, because I wasn't sure about the fern-seed being any good, and I got up a tree and I saw you go by, and when you came back with the parson I just followed on quietly till I got to outside your house. I hoped you'd come out, but you didn't. And I hid under one of those fancy firs, and then, I suppose, I went to sleep, and when I woke up there was a light in a window, and I went towards it, stupid, like a bird. You know how sparrows come out of the ivy if you show a light?'

They didn't.

'Well, they do. And then I saw you monkeying about. I *was* glad, I tell you. And I tapped on the window, and – you know the rest,' he ended, like a hero in a book.

'But what did the Murdstone man *do* to you?' Charlotte insisted on knowing.

'He was playing up for a row from the very first,' said Rupert; 'and when we got to his beastly house that night' – Rupert lowered his voice and spoke in a tone of deep disgust and bitterness – 'he gave me bread and milk to eat. Bread and milk – with a teaspoon! And when I said I'd rather not, he said I must learn to eat what was set before me. And he talked about discipline and showed me a cane. He said he was glad there were no other little boys there – little boys! – because he could devote himself entirely to breaking me in.'

'Beast!' said Charlotte.

'He thought I was a muff of a white rabbit,' said Rupert; 'but he knows the difference now.'

I hope you will not think base scorn of Charles and Caroline when I own that they were both feeling a little uncomfortable in the presence of this young desperado. Fern-seed is all very well, and so is the idea of running away from school, but that any master should really be so piglike as to make running away necessary – this came too near to the really terrible for them to feel quite easy about it.

'He must be like the Spanish Inquisition,' said Charlotte indignantly. 'Why isn't he put in prison now there are proper laws?'

But Charles and Caroline still felt that it was less likely that the Murdstone man should be so hateful than that Rupert should be drawing long-bows to excuse his running away. If he had been timid and miserable they would have believed him more. As it was, he was easy when he wasn't defiant.

You know that feeling – when you are not quite sure of some one you want to be kind to – when you can't be quite certain that if you believe what they say you won't be being unjust to somebody else. It is a hateful feeling. There is nothing more miserable than not being able to trust some one you want to trust. You know, perhaps, what that sensation is? Rupert, at any rate, must have known it, and must have known that the others were feeling it, for he suddenly pulled his hand out from his pocket.

'Look here, then,' he said. 'But – no, I don't blame you. I know it's not the sort of thing you'd expect to be true. Yes. He did it. The first night. About the bread and milk. Came and did it after I was in bed. With a ruler.'

'It' was a blue bruise and a slight red graze across the back of the hand that, till now, had been hidden.

'I believed you – without that,' said Charlotte, with hot cheeks. 'I know there are people like that. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.'

'We do believe you,' said Caroline earnestly. 'Who said we didn't?'

And Charles said, 'Of course we do – what nonsense! We'll bring you a paper and pencil and an envelope, and you can write to your father. And we *will* conceal you.'

'Right O!' said Rupert. 'Hush!'

They hushed, and, Rupert pointing through the blue gap between the oak and the honeysuckle, their eyes followed the pointing of his finger. A figure was coming up the drive – a figure in blue.

'Go and see what it is,' whispered Rupert, 'but don't let on.'

'I'll go,' said Charlotte, jumping up.

'But what'll you say if they ask you what you've come in for?' Charles asked.

'I shall say I've come in to fetch you a pocket-handkerchief,' said Charlotte witheringly, 'because you wanted one so badly. You always do.'

She went.

'Look here,' said Caroline, once more thrilling to the part of the protecting Saracen maiden. 'Suppose they're after you? Let's cover you up with leaves and bracken, so that your tweediness won't show through the trees if they look – and bracken over your head. Creep through the bracken; don't crush it more than you can help.'

Rupert was entirely hidden when Charlotte returned, very much out of breath, from an unexpected part of the wood.

'I came round,' she whispered, 'to put them off the scent.'

'Who?' asked Rupert, under the leaves.

'The Police,' said Charlotte, with calm frankness and a full sense of the tremendous news she was bringing. 'They're inquiring after *you*. They've traced you to Hadlow.'

'What did they say at the house?'

'They said they hadn't seen you, but the Police might search the grounds.'

'What did you say?'

'I wasn't asked,' said Charlotte demurely. 'But I'll tell you what I did say. You lie mouse-still, Rupert; it's all right. I'm glad you're buried, though.'

'What *did* you say?'

'I said,' Charlotte answered, glowing with the pride of a successful strategist – 'I said we'd help them to search! Come on, the three C.'s. Round the back way! *We'll* help them to search for their runaway boy – so we will! And when they've gone we'll bring you something to eat – something really nice – not just biscuits. Don't you worry. The three C.'s *are* yours to the death.'

CHAPTER VII

BEING DETECTIVES

If you are Jack Delamere, the Boy Detective who can find out all secrets by himself, pretending to be a French count, a young lady from the provinces, or a Lincolnshire labourer with a cold in his head, and in those disguises pass unrecognised by his nearest relations and by those coiners and smugglers to whom in his ordinary clothes he is only too familiar, – if you can so alter your voice that your old school-fellows believe you to be, when dressed for the part, an Italian organ-grinder or a performing bear —

I am sorry, this sentence is too much for me. I give it up. What I was going to say was that persons accustomed to the detective trade, or, on the other hand, persons who are used to keeping out of the way of detectives, no doubt find it easy to play a part and to look innocent when they are guilty, and ignorant when of course all is known to them. But when you are not accustomed to playing a part in a really serious adventure – not just a pretending one – you will find your work cut out for you. This was what Charles and Caroline felt.

It was all very well for Charlotte to have arranged that they should help the Police to look for Rupert, and the other two said cordially that it was very clever of her to have thought of it, and they all started together for the side door where the policeman was still talking to Mrs. Wilmington. But their feet seemed somehow not to want to go that way; they went more and more slowly, and when they were half-way to the house, Caroline said:

‘I don’t think I will. I don’t know how. I should do something silly and give the show away. I shall say I’m too tired.’

‘You *are* too bad,’ said Charlotte, exasperated. ‘I go and lay all the plans and then you funk.’

‘I don’t,’ said Caroline. And so anxious was she not to have to play the part of pretending to look for Rupert when all the time she knew where he was, that she added humbly, ‘Don’t be snarky. I’m only saying I’m not clever enough. I’m not so clever as you, that’s all.’

I am sorry to say that Charlotte only answered ‘Rats!’ and added, ‘I suppose Charles is going to cry off next?’ She did not think he was: she just said it. And Charles most unexpectedly answered:

‘I think I’d rather not, if you don’t mind.’

Charlotte stamped her foot. ‘Oh, all right!’ she said; ‘but for goodness’ sake come on. They’ll think there’s something up.’ And they walked on.

‘Look here,’ said Caroline suddenly, ‘I *will* pretend to help. It was only that I was so awfully afraid they’d find him. Only if I disappear, you’ll understand it’s just because I felt sillier than I could bear. You help too, Charles. I’m sure you can – only don’t pretend too much. I shouldn’t talk much except asking questions, if I were you.’

‘Right O!’ said Charlotte.

And Charles said, ‘Oh, well, only if I give it away without meaning to, don’t blame me.’

And by this time they were quite near the house, by whose side door of many-coloured glass the group of talking grown-ups awaited them. Mrs. Wilmington was there with her handkerchief over her head. And William and the gardener’s boy and the gardener, and a tall stout young man with fat red hands who was the Police.

‘I can’t and won’t,’ Mrs. Wilmington was saying. ‘The Master’s orders is – are – that he’s not to be disturbed in the mornings on any pretence – not if the house was on fire. I couldn’t face him with this vulgar tale of runaway boys. I give you leave to search for him,’ she said in proud refined accents. ‘I’m quate competent to take *that* upon me; quate.’

The Police turned from her to the children, who said ‘Good morning!’ – all but Charlotte, who had said it before.

‘Good morning to *you*,’ said the Police, ‘and so you young ladies and gents is going to join the search-party?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Caroline.

‘What’ll you do with him if you catch him?’ Caroline asked abruptly.

‘Send him to gaol, in course,’ said the Police, winking at William. ‘An’ you’re all going to help the law in the execution of its duty. And very useful I daresay you’ll be,’ he added affably, ‘knowing the place and what not. Now see here,’ he went on, condescending to them in a way which, it was remarked later, was like his cheek; ‘let’s have a game of play, make-believe, you know. Let’s pretend this runaway lad is a friend of yours’ (a cold shiver ran down three youthful backs; for a moment it seemed that all was discovered, but the Police went on, still playfully) – ‘a friend of yours, and you and him has settled to play a little game of hide-and-seek. And he’s He. Now where,’ he ended, more affably almost than they could bear, – ‘where would you look first?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Charles miserably.

‘Oh! just anywhere,’ said Charlotte.

But Caroline said slowly, ‘I should look in the wood over there,’ and pointed straight to the spot where Rupert lay buried in fern and leaves.

‘Right you are,’ said the Police, delighted to have got a suggestion. ‘Then here goes.’

Charlotte dared not look at her sister lest her face should show her detestation of this traitorous act. Charles put his hands in his pockets to express indifference, and decided not to whistle for fear of overdoing his part. He told himself that he never would have believed it of Caro – never.

And now Caroline was speaking again, looking confidingly up into the large patronising face of the Police.

‘That’s where I should look,’ she was saying, ‘if we were playing hide-and-seek. But as it is – You see we’ve been there all the morning, and he couldn’t have come into the wood without our hearing him, you know. Have you tried the other wood, beyond the garden? And the thatched summer-house? And the lodge that isn’t used? Over by the other gates, you know.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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