

Molesworth Mrs.

# Great Uncle Hoot-Toot



Mrs. Molesworth

**Great Uncle Hoot-Toot**

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# Molesworth Mrs. Great Uncle Hoot-Toot

*"... what we have we prize not to the worth  
Whiles we enjoy it; but being lack'd and lost,  
Why then we rack the value."*

**– *Much Ado about Nothing.***

## CHAPTER I.

### THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE

"That's Geoff, I'm sure," said Elsa; "I always know his ring. I do hope – " and she stopped and sighed a little.

"What?" said Frances, looking up quickly.

"Oh, nothing particular. Run down, Vic, dear, and get Geoff to go straight into the school-room. Order his tea at once. I *don't* want him to come upstairs just now. Mamma is so busy and worried with those letters."

Vic, a little girl of nine, with long fair hair and long black legs, and a pretty face with a bright, eager expression, needed no second bidding. She was off almost before Elsa had finished speaking.

"What a good child she is!" said Frances. "What a clever, nice boy she would have made! And if Geoff had been a girl, perhaps he would have been more easily managed."

"I don't know," said Elsa. "Perhaps if Vicky had been a boy she would have been spoilt and selfish too."

"Elsa," said Frances, "I think you are rather hard upon Geoff. He is like all boys. Everybody says they are more selfish than girls, and then they grow out of it."

"They grow out of showing it so plainly, perhaps," replied Elsa, rather bitterly. "But you contradict yourself, Frances. Just a moment ago you said what a much nicer boy Vic would have made. All boys aren't like Geoff. Of course, I don't mean that he is really a bad boy; but it just comes over me now and then that it is a *shame* he should be such a tease and worry, boy or not. When mamma is anxious, and with good reason, and we girls are doing all we can, why should Geoff be the one we have to keep away from her, and to smooth down, as it were? It's all for her sake, of course; but it makes me ashamed, all the same, to feel that we are really almost afraid of him. There now – " And she started up as the sound of a door, slammed violently in the lower regions, reached her ears.

But before she had time to cross the room, Vicky reappeared.

"It's nothing, Elsa," the child began eagerly. "Geoff's all right; he's not cross. He only slammed the door at the top of the kitchen stair because I reminded him not to leave it open."

"You might have shut it yourself, rather than risk a noise to-night," said Elsa. "What was he doing at the top of the kitchen stair?"

Vicky looked rather guilty.

"He was calling to Phœbe to boil two eggs for his tea. He says he is so hungry. I would have run up to tell you; but I thought it was better than his teasing mamma about letting him come in to dinner."

Elsa glanced at Frances.

"You see," her glance seemed to say.

"Yes, dear," she said aloud to the little sister, "anything is better than that. Run down again, Vicky, and keep him as quiet as you can."

"Would it not be better, perhaps," asked Frances, rather timidly, "for one of us to go and speak to him, and tell him quietly about mamma having had bad news?"

"He wouldn't rest then till he had heard all about it from herself," said Elsa. "Of course he'd be sorry for her, and all that, but he would only show it by teasing."

It was Frances's turn to sigh, for in spite of her determination to see everything and everybody in the best possible light, she knew that Elsa was only speaking the truth about Geoffrey.

Half an hour later the two sisters were sitting at dinner with their mother. She was anxious and tired, as they knew, but she did her utmost to seem cheerful.

"I have seen and heard nothing of Geoff," she said suddenly. "Has he many lessons to do to-night? He's all right, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," said Frances. "Vic's with him, looking out his words. He seems in very good spirits. I told him you were busy writing for the mail, and persuaded him to finish his lessons first. He'll be coming up to the drawing-room later."

"I think mamma had better go to bed almost at once," said Elsa, abruptly. "You've finished those letters, dear, haven't you?"

"Yes – all that I can write as yet. But I must go to see Mr. Norris first thing to-morrow morning. I have said to your uncle that I cannot send him particulars till next mail."

"Mamma, darling," said Frances, "do you really think it's going to be very bad?"

Mrs. Tudor smiled rather sadly.

"I'm afraid so," she said; "but the suspense is the worst. Once we really *know*, we can meet it. You three girls are all so good, and Geoff, poor fellow – he *means* to be good too."

"Yes," said Frances, eagerly, "I'm sure he does."

"But 'meaning' alone isn't much use," said Elsa. "Mamma," she went on with sudden energy, "if this does come – if we really do lose all our money, perhaps it will be the best thing for Geoff in the end."

Mrs. Tudor seemed to wince a little.

"You needn't make the very worst of it just yet, any way," said Frances, reproachfully.

"And it would in one sense be the hardest on Geoff," said the mother, "for his education would have to be stopped, just when he's getting on so well, too."

"But – " began Elsa, but she said no more. It was no use just then expressing what was in her mind – that getting on well at school, winning the good opinion of his masters, the good fellowship of his companions, did not comprise the whole nor even the most important part of the duty of a boy who was also a son and a brother – a son, too, of a widowed mother, and a brother of fatherless sisters. "I would almost rather," she said to herself, "that he got on less well at school if he were more of a comfort at home. It would be more manly, somehow."

Her mother did not notice her hesitation.

"Let us go upstairs, dears," she said. "I *am* tired, but I am not going to let myself be over-anxious. I shall try to put things aside, as it were, till I hear from Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot. I have the fullest confidence in his advice."

"I wish he would take it into his head to come home," said Frances.

"So do I," agreed her mother.

They were hardly settled in the drawing-room before Vic appeared.

"Elsa," she whispered, "Geoff sent me to ask if he may have something to eat."

"Something to eat," repeated Elsa. "He had two eggs with his tea. He can't be hungry."

"No – o – But there were anchovy toasts at dinner – Harvey told him. And he's so fond of anchovy toasts. I think you'd better say he may, Elsa, because of mamma."

"Very well," the elder sister replied. "It's not right – it's always the way. But what are we to do?"

Vicky waited not to hear her misgivings, but flew off. She was well-drilled, poor little soul.

Her brother was waiting for her, midway between the school-room and dining-room doors.

"Well?" he said, moving towards the latter.

"Yes. Elsa says you may," replied the breathless little envoy.

"Elsa! What has she to do with it? I told you to ask mamma, not Elsa," he said roughly.

He stood leaning against the jamb of the door, his hands in his pockets, with a very cross look on his handsome face. But Victoria, devoted little sister though she was, was not to be put down by any cross looks when she knew she was in the right.

"Geoff," she said sturdily, "I'll just leave off doing messages or anything for you if you are *so* selfish. How could I go teasing mamma about anchovy toasts for you when she is so worried?"

"How should I know she is busy and worried?" said Geoff. "What do you mean? What is it about?"

"I don't know. At least I only know that Elsa and Francie told me that she *was* worried, and that she had letters to write for the ship that goes to India to-morrow."

"For the Indian mail you mean, I suppose," said Geoff. "What a donkey you are for your age, Vic! Oh, if it's only that, she's writing to that old curmudgeon; *that's* nothing new. Come along, Vicky, and I'll give you a bit of my toasts."

He went into the dining-room as he spoke, and rang the bell.

"Harvey'll bring them up. I said I'd ring if I was to have them. Upon my word, Vic, it isn't every fellow of my age that would take things so quietly. Never touching a scrap without leave, when lots like me come home to late dinner every night."

"Elsa says it's only middle-class people who let children dine late," said Vic, primly, "*I* shan't come down to dinner till I'm *out*."

Geoffrey burst out laughing.

"Rubbish!" he said. "Elsa finds reasons for everything that suits her. Here, Vicky, take your piece."

Vicky was not partial to anchovy toasts, but to-night she was so anxious to keep Geoff in a good humour, that she would have eaten anything he chose to give her, and pretended to like it. So she accepted her share, and Geoff munched his in silence.

He was a well-made, manly looking boy, not tall for his years, which were fourteen, but in such good proportion as to give promise of growing into a strong and vigorous man. His face was intended by nature to be a very pleasing one. The features were all good; there was nobility in the broad forehead, and candour in the bright dark eyes, and – sometimes – sweetness in the mouth. But this "sometimes" had for long been becoming of less and less frequent occurrence. A querulous, half-sulky expression had invaded the whole face: its curves and lines were hardening as those of no young face should harden; the very carriage of the boy was losing its bright upright fearlessness – his shoulders were learning to bend, his head to slouch forward. One needed but to glance at him to see that Geoffrey Tudor was fast becoming that most disagreeable of social characters, a grumbler! And with grumbling unrepressed, and indulged in, come worse things, for it has its root in that true "root of all evil," selfishness.

As the last crumbs of the anchovy toasts disappeared, Geoff glanced round him.

"I say, Vic," he began, "is there any water on the sideboard? Those things are awfully salt. But I don't know that I'm exactly thirsty, either. I know what I'd like – a glass of claret, and I don't see why I shouldn't have it, either. At my age it's really too absurd that –"

"What are you talking about, Geoff?" said Elsa's voice in the doorway. "Mamma wants you to come up to the drawing-room for a little. What is it that is too absurd at your age?"

"Nothing in particular – or rather everything," said Geoff, with a slight tone of defiance. There was something in Elsa's rather too superior, too elder-sisterly way of speaking that, as he would have expressed it, "set him up." "I was saying to Vic that I'd like a glass of claret, and that I don't see why I shouldn't have it, either. Other fellows would help themselves to it. I often think I'm a great donkey for my pains."

Elsa looked at him with a strange mixture of sadness and contempt.

"What will he be saying next, I wonder?" her glance seemed to say.

But the words were not expressed.

"Come upstairs," she said. "Vicky has told you, I know, that you must be *particularly* careful not to tease mamma to-night."

Geoff returned her look with an almost fierce expression in the eyes that could be so soft and gentle.

"I wish you'd mind your own business, and leave mother and me to ourselves. It's your meddling puts everything wrong," he muttered.



But he followed his elder sister upstairs quietly enough. Down in the bottom of his heart was hidden great faith in Elsa. He would, had occasion demanded it, have given his life, fearlessly, cheerfully, for her or his mother, or the others. But the smaller sacrifices, of his likes and dislikes, of his silly boyish temper and humours – of "self," in short, he could not or would not make. Still, something in Elsa's words and manner this evening impressed him in spite of himself. He followed her into the drawing-room, fully *meaning* to be good and considerate.

## CHAPTER II.

### "MAYN'T I SPEAK TO YOU, MAMMA?"

That was the worst of it – the most puzzling part of it, rather, perhaps we should say – with Geoffrey. He *meant* to be good. He would not for worlds have done anything that he distinctly saw to be wrong. He worked well at his lessons, though to an accompaniment of constant grumbling – at home, that is to say; grumbling at school is not encouraged. He was rather a favourite with his companions, for he was a manly and "plucky" boy, entering heartily into the spirit of all their games and amusements, and he was thought well of by the masters for his steadiness and perseverance, though not by any means of naturally studious tastes. The wrong side of him was all reserved for home, and for his own family.

Yet, only son and fatherless though he was, he had not been "spoilt" in the ordinary sense of the word. Mrs. Tudor, though gentle, and in some ways timid, was not a weak or silly woman. She had brought up her children on certain broad rules of "must," as to which she was as firm as a rock, and these had succeeded so well with the girls that it was a complete surprise as well as the greatest of sorrows to her when she first began to see signs of trouble with her boy. And gradually her anxiety led her into the fatal mistake of spoiling Geoffrey by making him of too much consequence. It came to be recognized in the household that his moods and humours were to be a sort of family barometer, and that all efforts were to be directed towards the avoidance of storms. Not that Geoff was passionate or violent. Had he been so, things would have sooner come to a crisis. He was simply *tiresome* – tiresome to a degree that can scarcely be understood by those who have not experienced such tiresomeness for themselves. And as there is no doubt a grain of the bully somewhere in the nature of every boy – if not of every human being – what this tiresomeness might have grown into had the Fates, or something higher than the Fates, not interposed, it would be difficult to exaggerate.

The cloudy look had not left Geoff's face when he came into the drawing-room. But, alas! it was nothing new to see him "looking like that." His mother took no notice of it.

"Well, Geoff?" she said pleasantly. "How have you got on to-day, my boy?"

He muttered something indistinctly, which sounded like, "Oh, all right;" then catching sight of Elsa's reproachful face, he seemed to put some constraint on himself, and, coming forward to his mother, kissed her affectionately.

"Are you very tired to-night, mamma?" he said. "Must I not speak to you?"

Mrs. Tudor *was* very tired, and she knew by old experience what Geoff's "speaking" meant – an hour or more's unmitigated grumbling, and dragging forward of every possible grievance, to have each in turn talked over, and sympathized about, and smoothed down by her patient hand. Such talks were not without their effect on the boy; much that his mother said appealed to his good sense and good feeling, though he but seldom gave her the satisfaction of seeing this directly. But they were very wearing to *her*, and it was carrying motherly unselfishness too far to undertake such discussion with Geoff, when she was already worn out with unusual anxiety.

She smiled, however, brightly enough, in reply to his questions. It cheered her to see that he could consider her even thus much.

"Of course I can speak to you, Geoff. Have you anything particular to tell me?"

"Lots of things," said the boy. He drew forward a chair in which to settle himself comfortably beside his mother, darting an indignant glance at his sisters as he did so. "Humbugging me as usual about mamma – anything to keep me away from her," he muttered. But Elsa and Frances only glanced at each other in despair.

"Well," said Mrs. Tudor, resignedly, leaning back in her chair.

"Mamma," began Geoffrey, "there must be something done about my pocket-money. I just can't do with what I've got. I've waited to speak about it till I had talked it over with some of the other fellows. They nearly all have more than I."

"Boys of your age – surely not?" interposed Mrs. Tudor.

"Well, *some* of them are not older than I," allowed Geoff. "If you'd give me more, and let me manage things for myself – football boots, and cricket-shoes, and that sort of thing. The girls" – with cutting emphasis – "are always hinting that I ask you for too many things, and *I* hate to be seeming to be always at you for something. If you'd give me a regular allowance, now, and let me manage for myself."

"At your age," repeated his mother, "that surely is very unusual."

"I don't see that it matters exactly about age," said Geoff, "if one's got sense."

"But have you got sense enough, Geoff?" said Frances, gently. "I'm three years older than you, and I've only just begun to have an allowance for my clothes, and I should have got into a dreadful mess if it hadn't been for Elsa helping me."

"Girls are quite different," said Geoff. "They want all sorts of rubbishing ribbons and crinolines and flounces. Boys only need regular necessary things."

"Then you haven't any wants at present, I should think, Geoff," said Elsa, in her peculiarly clear, rather aggravating tones. "You were completely rigged out when you came back from the country, three weeks ago."

Geoff glowered at her.

"Mamma," he said, "will you once for all make Elsa and Frances understand that when I'm speaking to you they needn't interfere?"

Mrs. Tudor did not directly respond to this request.

"Will you tell me, Geoff," she said, "what has put all this into your head? What things are you in want of?"

Geoff hesitated. Fancied wants, like fancied grievances, have an annoying trick of refusing to answer to the roll-call when distinctly summoned to do so.

"There's lots of things," he began. "I *should* have a pair of proper football boots, instead of just an old common pair with ribs stuck on, you know, like I have. All the fellows have proper ones when they're fifteen or so."

"But you are not fifteen."

"Well, I might wait about the *boots* till next term. But I do really want a pair of boxing-gloves dreadfully," he went on energetically, as the idea occurred to him; "you know I began boxing this term."

"And don't they provide boxing-gloves? How have you managed hitherto?" asked his mother, in surprise.

"Oh, well, yes – there *are* gloves; but of course it's much nicer to have them of one's own. It's horrid always to seem just one of the lot that can't afford things of their own."

"And if you are *not* rich – and I dare say nearly all your schoolfellows are richer than you" – said Elsa, "is it not much better not to sham that you are?"

"Sham," repeated Geoff, roughly. "Mamma, I do think you should speak to Elsa. – If you were a boy – " he added, turning to his sister threateningly. "I don't want to sham about anything; but it's very hard to be sent to a school when you can't have everything the same as the others."

A look of pain crept over Mrs. Tudor's tired face. Had she done wrong? Was it another of her "mistakes" – of which, like all candid people, she felt she had made many in her life – to have sent Geoff to a first-class school?

"Geoff," she said weariedly, "you surely do not realize what you cause me when you speak so. It was almost my principal reason for settling in London seven years ago, that I might be able to

send you to one of the best schools. We could have lived more cheaply, and more comfortably, in the country; but you would have had to go to a different class of school."

"Well, I wish I had, then," said Geoff, querulously. "I perfectly hate London; I have always told you so. I shouldn't mind what I did if it was in the country. It isn't that I want to spend money, or that I've extravagant ideas; but it's too hard to be in a false position, as I am at school – not able to have things like the other fellows. You would have made *me* far happier if you had gone to live in the country and let me go to a country school. I *hate* London; and just because I want things like other fellows, I'm scolded."

Mrs. Tudor did not speak. She looked sad and terribly tired.

"Geoff," said Elsa, putting great control on herself so as to speak very gently, for she felt as if she could gladly shake him, "you must see that mamma is very tired. Do wait to talk to her till she is better able for it. And it is getting late."

"Do go, Geoff," said his mother. "I have listened to what you have said; it is not likely I shall forget it. I will talk to you afterwards."

The boy looked rather ashamed.

"I haven't meant to vex you," he said, as he stooped to kiss his mother. "I'm sorry you're so tired."

There was silence for a moment after he had left the room.

"I am afraid there is a mixture of truth in what he says," said Mrs. Tudor, at last. "It has been one of the many mistakes I have made, and now I suppose I am to be punished for it."

Elsa made a movement of impatience.

"Mamma dear!" she exclaimed, "I don't think you would speak that way if you weren't tired. There isn't any truth in what Geoff says. I don't mean that he tells stories; but it's just his incessant grumbling. He makes himself believe all sorts of nonsense. He has everything right for a boy of his age to have. I know there are boys whose parents are really rich who have less than he has."

"Yes, indeed, mamma; Elsa is right," said Frances. "Geoff is insatiable. He picks out the things boys here and there may have as an exception, and wants to have them all. He has a perfect genius for grumbling."

"Because he is always thinking of himself," said Elsa. "Mamma, don't think me disrespectful, but would it not be better to avoid saying things which make him think himself of such consequence – like telling him that we came to live in town principally for *his* sake?"

"Perhaps so," said her mother. "I am always in hopes of making him ashamed, by showing how much *has* been done for him."

"And he does feel ashamed," said Frances, eagerly. "I saw it to-night; he'd have liked to say something more if he hadn't been too proud to own that he had been inventing grievances."

"Things have been too smooth for him," said Elsa; "that's the truth of it. He needs some hardships."

"And as things are turning out he's very likely to get them," said Mrs. Tudor, with a rather wintry smile.

"Oh, mamma, forgive me! Do you know, I had forgotten all about our money troubles," Elsa exclaimed. "Why don't you tell Geoff about them, mamma? It's in a way hardly fair on him; for if he knew, it *might* make him understand how wrong and selfish he is."

"I will tell him soon, but not just yet. I do not want to distract his mind from his lessons, and I wish to be quite sure first. I think I should wait till I hear from your great-uncle."

"And that will be – how long? It is how many weeks since Mr. Norris first wrote that he was uneasy? About seven, I should say," said Elsa.

"Quite that," said her mother. "It is the waiting that is so trying. I can do nothing without Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's advice."

That last sentence had been a familiar one to Mrs. Tudor's children almost ever since they could remember. "Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot" had been a sort of autocrat and benefactor in one, to the family. His opinions, his advice had been asked on all matters of importance; his approval had been held out to them as the highest reward, his displeasure as the punishment most to be dreaded. And yet they had never seen him!

"I wish he would come home himself," said Elsa. "I think Geoff would be much the better for a visit from him," she added, with a slight touch of sharpness in her tone.

"Poor Geoff!" said her mother. "I suppose the truth is that very few women know how to manage boys."

"I don't see that," said Elsie. "On the contrary, a generous-natured boy is often more influenced by a woman's gentleness than by a man's severity. It is just that, that I don't like about Geoff. There is a want of generous, chivalrous feeling about him."

"No," said Frances. "I don't quite agree with you. I think it is there, but somehow not awakened. Mamma," she went on, "supposing our great-uncle did come home, would he be dreadfully angry if he found out that we all called him 'Hoot-Toot'?"

"Oh no," said her mother, smiling; "he's quite used to it. Your father told me he had had the trick nearly all his life of saying 'Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!' if ever he was perplexed or disapproving."

"What a *very* funny little boy he must have been!" exclaimed both the girls together.

## CHAPTER III. AN UNLOOKED-FOR ARRIVAL

The next few days were trying ones for all the Tudor family. The mother was waiting anxiously for further news of the money losses, with which, as her lawyers told her, she was threatened; the sisters were anxious too, though, with the bright hopefulness of their age, the troubles which distressed their mother fell much more lightly on them: *they* were anxious because they saw *her* suffering.

Vicky had some misty idea that something was wrong, but she knew very little, and had been forbidden to say anything to Geoff about the little she did know. So that of the whole household Geoff was the only one who knew nothing, and went on living in his Fool's Paradise of having all his wants supplied, yet grumbling that he had nothing! He was in a particularly tiresome mood – perhaps, in spite of themselves, it was impossible for his sisters to bear with him as patiently as usual; perhaps the sight of his mother's pale face made him dissatisfied with himself and cross because he would not honestly own that he was doing nothing to help and please her. And the weather was very disagreeable, and among Geoff's many "hates" was a very exaggerated dislike to bad weather. About this sort of thing he had grumbled much more since his return from a long visit to some friends in the country the summer before, when the weather had been splendid, and everything done to make him enjoy himself, in consequence of which he had come home with a fixed idea that the country was always bright and charming; that it was only in town that one had to face rain and cold and mud. As to fog, he had perhaps more ground for his belief.

"Did you ever see such beastly weather?" were his first words to Vicky one evening when the good little sister had rushed to the door on hearing Geoff's ring, so that his majesty should not be kept waiting an unnecessary moment. "I am perfectly drenched, and as cold as ice. Is tea ready, Vic?"

"Quite ready – at least it will be by the time you've changed your things. Do run up quick, Geoff. It's a bad thing to keep on wet clothes."

"Mamma should have thought of that before she sent me to a day-school," said Geoff. "I've a good mind just *not* to change my clothes, and take my chance of getting cold. It's perfect slavery – up in the morning before it's light, and not home till pitch dark, and soaked into the bargain."

"Haden't you your mackintosh on?" asked Vicky.

"My mackintosh! It's in rags. I should have had a new one ages ago."

"Geoff! I'm sure it can't be so bad. You've not had it a year."

"A year. No one wears a mackintosh for a year. The buttons are all off, and the button-holes are burst."

"I'm sure they can be mended. Martha would have done it if you'd asked her," said Vic, resolving to see to the unhappy mackintosh herself. "I know poor mamma doesn't want to spend any extra money just now."

"There's a great deal too much spent on Elsa and Frances, and all their furbelows," said Geoff, in what he thought a very manly tone. "Here, Vicky, help me to pull off my boots, and then I must climb up to the top of the house to change my things."

Vicky knelt down obediently and tugged at the muddy boots, though it was a task she disliked as much as she could dislike anything. She was rewarded by a gruff "Thank you," and when Geoff came down again in dry clothes, to find the table neatly prepared, and his little sister ready to pour out his tea, he did condescend to say that she was a good child! But even though his toast was hot and crisp, and his egg boiled to perfection, Geoff's pleasanter mood did not last long. He had a good many lessons to do that evening, and they were lessons he disliked. Vicky sat patiently, doing her best to help him till her bedtime came, and he had barely finished when Frances brought a message that he was to come upstairs – mamma said he was not to work any longer.

"You have finished, surely, Geoff?" she said, when he entered the drawing-room.

"If I had finished, I would have come up sooner. You don't suppose I stay down there grinding away to please myself, do you?" replied the boy, rudely.

"Geoff!" exclaimed his sisters, unwisely, perhaps.

He turned upon them.

"I've not come to have you preaching at me. Mamma, will you speak to them?" he burst out. "I hate this life – nothing but fault-finding as soon as I show my face. I wish I were out of it, I do! I'd rather be the poorest ploughboy in the country than lead this miserable life in this hateful London."

He said the last words loudly, almost shouting them, indeed. To do him justice, it was not often his temper got so completely the better of him. The noise he was making had prevented him and the others from hearing the bell ring – prevented them, too, from hearing, a moment or two later, a short colloquy on the stairs between Harvey and a new-comer.

"Thank you," said the latter; "I don't want you to announce me. I'll do it myself."

Geoff had left the door open.

"Yes," he was just repeating, even more loudly than before, "I hate this life, I do. I am grinding at lessons from morning to night, and when I come home this is the way you treat me. I – "

But a voice behind him made him start.

"Hoot-toot, young man," it said. "Hoot-toot, hoot-toot! Come, I say, this sort of thing will never do. And ladies present! Hoot – "

But the "toot" was drowned in a scream from Mrs. Tudor.

"Uncle, dear uncle, is it you? Can it be you yourself? Oh, Geoff, Geoff! he is not often such a foolish boy, uncle, believe me. Oh, how – how thankful I am you have come!"

She had risen from her seat and rushed forward to greet the stranger, but suddenly she grew strangely pale, and seemed on the point of falling. Elsa flew towards her on the one side, and the old gentleman on the other.

"Poor dear!" he exclaimed. "I have startled her, I'm afraid. Hoot-toot, hoot-toot, silly old man that I am. Where's that ill-tempered fellow off to?" he went on, glancing round. "Can't he fetch a glass of water, or make himself useful in some way?"

"I will," said Frances, darting forward. Geoffrey had disappeared, and small wonder.

"I am quite right now, thank you," said Mrs. Tudor, trying to smile, when Elsa had got her on to the sofa. "Don't be frightened, Elsa dear. Nor you, uncle; it was just the – the start. I've had a good deal to make me anxious lately, you know."

"I should think I did – those idiots of lawyers!" muttered the old man.

"And poor Geoff," she went on; "I am afraid I have not paid much attention to him lately, and he's felt it – foolishly, perhaps."

"Rubbish!" said Uncle Hoot-Toot under his breath. "Strikes me he's used to a good deal too much attention," he added as an aside to Elsa, with a quick look of inquiry in his bright keen eyes.

Elsa could hardly help smiling, but for her mother's sake she restrained herself.

"It will be all right now you have come home, dear uncle," Mrs. Tudor went on gently. "How was it? Had you started before you got my letters? Why did you not let us know?"

"I was on the point of writing to announce my departure," said the old gentleman, "when your letter came. It struck me then that I could get home nearly as quickly as a letter, and so I thought it was no use writing."

"Then you know – you know all about this bad news?" said Mrs. Tudor falteringly.

"Yes; those fellows wrote to me. *That* was right enough; but what they meant by worrying you about it, my dear, I can't conceive. It was quite against all my orders. What did poor Frank make me your trustee for, if it wasn't to manage these things for you?"

"Then you think, you hope, there may be something left to manage, do you?" asked Mrs. Tudor, eagerly. "I have been anticipating the very worst. I did not quite like to put it in words to these poor

children" – and she looked up affectionately at the two girls; "but I have really been trying to make up my mind to our being quite ruined."

"Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" said her uncle. "No such nonsense, my dear. I shall go to Norris's to-morrow morning and have it out with him. Ruined! No, no. It'll be all right, you'll see. We'll go into it all, and you have nothing to do but leave things to me. Now let us talk of pleasanter matters. What a nice, pretty little house you've got! And what nice, pretty little daughters! Good girls, too, or I'm uncommonly mistaken. They're comforts to you, Alice, my dear, eh?"

"The greatest possible comforts," answered the mother, warmly. "And so is little Vic. You haven't seen her yet."

"Little Vic? Oh, to be sure – my namesake." For Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's real name, you must know, was Mr. Victor Byrne. "To be sure; must see her to-morrow; Vic, to be sure."

"And Geoffrey," Mrs. Tudor went on less assuredly. "Geoff is doing very well at school. You will have a good report of him from his masters. He is a steady worker, and –"

"But how about the *home* report of him, eh?" said Mr. Byrne, drily. "There's two sides to most things, and I've rather a weakness for seeing both. Never mind about that just now. I never take up impressions hastily. Don't be afraid. I'll see Master Geoff for myself. Let's talk of other things. What do these young ladies busy themselves about? Are they good housekeepers, eh?"

Mrs. Tudor smiled.

"Can you make a pudding and a shirt, Elsa and Frances?" she asked. "Tell your uncle your capabilities."

"I could manage the pudding," said Elsa. "I think the days for home-made shirts are over."

"Hoot-toot, toot-toot!" said Mr. Byrne; "new-fangled notions, eh?"

"No, indeed, Great-Uncle Hoot –" began Frances, eagerly. Then blushing furiously, she stopped short.

The old gentleman burst out laughing.

"Never mind, my dear; I'm used to it. It's what they always called me – all my nephews and nieces."

"Have you a great many nephews and nieces besides us?" asked Elsa.

Mr. Byrne laughed again.

"That depends upon myself," he said. "I make them, you see. I have had any quantity in my day, but they're scattered far and wide. And – there are a great many blanks, Alice, my dear, since I was last at home," he added, turning to Mrs. Tudor. "I don't know that any of them was ever quite such a pet of mine as this little mother of yours, my dears."

"Oh!" said Elsa, looking rather disappointed; "you are not our real uncle, then? I always thought you were."

"Well, think so still," said Mr. Byrne. "At any rate, you must treat me so, and then I shall be quite content. But I must be going. I shall see you to-morrow after I've had it out with that donkey Norris. What a stupid idiot he is, to be sure!" and for a moment Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot looked quite fierce. "And then I must see little Vic. What time shall I come to-morrow, Alice?"

"Whenever you like, uncle," she said. "Will you not come and stay here altogether?"

"No, thank you, my dear. I've got my own ways, you see. I'm a fussy old fellow. And I've got my servant – my blackamoor. He'd frighten all the neighbours. And you'd fuss yourself, thinking I wasn't comfortable. I'll come up to-morrow afternoon and stay on to dinner, if you like. And just leave the boy to me a bit. Good night, all of you; good night."

And in another moment the little old gentleman was gone.

The two girls and their mother sat staring at each other when he had disappeared.

"Isn't it like a dream? Can you believe he has really come, mamma?" said Elsa.

"Hardly," replied her mother. "But I am very thankful. If only Geoff will not vex him."



Elsa and Frances said nothing. They had their own thoughts about their brother, but they felt it best not to express them.

## CHAPTER IV. FOOLISH GEOFF

"Is he like what you expected, Elsa?" asked Frances, when they were in their own room.

"Who? Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot? I'm sure I don't know. I don't think I ever thought about what he'd be like."

"Oh, I *had* an idea," said Frances. "Quite different, of course, from what he really is. I had fancied he'd be tall and stooping, and with a big nose and very queer eyes. I think I must have mixed him up with the old godfather in the 'Nutcracker of Nuremberg,' without knowing it."

"Well, he's not so bad as that, anyway," said Elsa. "He looks rather shrivelled and dried up; but he's so very neat and refined-looking. Did you notice what small brown hands he has, and such *very* bright eyes? Isn't it funny that he's only an adopted uncle, after all?"

"I think mamma had really forgotten he wasn't our real uncle," said Frances. "Elsa, I am very glad he has come. I think poor mamma has been far more unhappy than she let us know. She does look so ill."

"It's half of it Geoff," said Elsa, indignantly. "And now he must needs spoil Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's arrival by his tempers. Perhaps it's just as well, however. 'By the pricking of my thumbs,' I fancy Geoff has met his master."

"Elsa, you frighten me a little," said Frances. "You don't think he'll be very severe with poor Geoff?"

"I don't think he'll be more severe than is for Geoff's good," replied Elsa. "I must confess, though, I shouldn't like to face Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot if I felt I had been behaving badly. How his eyes can gleam!"

"And how he seemed to flash in upon us all of a sudden, and to disappear almost as quickly! I'm afraid there's something a little bit uncanny about him," said Frances, who was very imaginative. "But if he helps to put all the money troubles right, he will certainly be like a good fairy to us."

"Yes; and if he takes Geoff in hand," added Elsa. "But, Frances, we must go to bed. I want to make everything very nice to-morrow; I'm going to think about what to have for dinner while I go to sleep."

For Elsa was housekeeper – a very zealous and rather anxious-minded young housekeeper. Her dreams were often haunted by visions of bakers' books and fishmongers' bills; to-night curry and pilau chased each other through her brain, and Frances was aroused from her first sweet slumbers to be asked if she would remember to look first thing to-morrow morning if there was a bottle of chutney in the store-closet.

At breakfast Geoff came in, looking glum and slightly defiant. But he said nothing except "Good morning." He started, however, a little, when he saw his mother.

"Mamma," he said, "are you not well? You look so very pale."

The girls glanced up at this. It was true. They had not observed it in the excitement of discussing the new arrival, and the satisfaction of knowing it had brought relief to Mrs. Tudor's most pressing anxieties.

"Yes, mamma dear. It is true. You do look very pale. Now, you must not do anything to tire yourself all day. We will manage everything, so that Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot shall see we are not silly useless girls," said Elsa.

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