

Molesworth Mrs.

The Girls and I: A Veracious History



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

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CHAPTER I OURSELVES

I'm Jack. I've always been Jack, ever since I can remember at least, though I suppose I must have been called 'Baby' for a bit before Serena came. But she's only a year and a half younger than me, and Maud's only a year and a quarter behind her, so I can scarcely remember even Serena being 'Baby'; and Maud's always been so very grown up for her age that you couldn't fancy her anything but 'Maud.'

My real name isn't John though, as you might fancy. It's a much queerer name, but there's always been one of it in our family ever since some grandfather or other married a German girl, who called her eldest son after her own father. So we're accustomed to it, and it doesn't seem so queer to us as to other people. It's 'Joachim.' 'Jock' seems a better short for it than 'Jack,' doesn't it? and I believe mother once meant to call me 'Jock.' But when Serry and Maud came I *had* to be Jack, for with Anne and Hebe in front of me, and the two others behind, of course I was 'Jack-in-the-middle.' There's never been any more of us, and even if there had I'd have stayed Jack, once I'd got settled into it, you see.

I'm eleven. I'm writing this in the holidays; and if I don't get it finished before they're done I'll keep adding on to it till I've told all there is to tell.

It's a sort of comfort to me to write about everything, for one way and another I've had a good deal to put up with, all because of —*girls*. And I have to be good-tempered and nice just because they *are* girls. And besides that, I'm really very fond of them; and they're not bad. But no one who hasn't tried it knows in the least what it is to be one boy among a lot of girls, 'specially when some of them are rather boy-ey girls, and when you yourself are just a little perhaps – just a very little – the other way.

I don't think I'm a baby. Honestly I don't, and I'm not going to write down anything I don't *quite* think. But I do like to be quiet, and I like to have things tidy and regular. I like rules, and keeping to them; and I hate racket and mess. Anne, now, drives me nearly wild with her rushy, helter-skelter ways. You wouldn't think it, would you, considering that she's fourteen, and the eldest, and that she's been the eldest all her life? – eldests *should* be steady and good examples. And her name sounds steady and neat, doesn't it? and yet of all the untidy, unpunctual – no, I mustn't let myself go like that. Besides, it's quite true, as Hebe says, Anne has got a very good heart, and she's very particular in some *mind* ways; she never says a word that isn't quite true – she doesn't even exaggerate. I have noticed that rather tiresome, careless people often have very good hearts. I wish they could see how much nicer it would be for other people if they'd put some of their good hearts into their tiresome ways.

On the whole, it's Hebe that suits the best with me. She particular —*much* more particular than Anne, though not quite as particular as *I'd* like her to be, and then she is really awfully sweet. That makes her a little worrying sometimes, for she will take sides. If I am in a great state at finding our postage stamps all muddled, for instance – Anne and Hebe and I have a collection together, I am sorry to say – and *I* know who's been at them and say something – who could help saying something if they found a lot of carefully-sorted ones ready to gum in, all pitched into the unsorted box with Uncle Brian's last envelopeful that I haven't looked over? – up flies Hebe in Anne's defence.

'Poor Anne, she was in such a hurry, she never meant it'; or 'she only wanted to help you, Jack; she didn't know you had sorted these.'

Now, isn't that rather trying? For it makes me feel as if I was horrid; and if Hebe would just say, 'Yes, it *is* awfully tiresome,' I'd feel I had a sort of right to be vexed, and when you feel that, the vexedness often goes away.

Still, there's no doubt Hebe *is* sweet, and I daresay she flies up for me just as she does for the others when I am the one not there.

We're all very fond of Hebe. She and Serena are rather like each other; they have fair fluffy hair and rosy cheeks, but they're not a bit like each other in themselves. Serena is a terrible tomboy – worse than Anne, for she really never thinks at all. Anne does mean to think, but she does it the wrong way; she gets her head so full of some one thing that she forgets everything else, and then she's awfully sorry. But Serry just doesn't think at all, though she's very good-natured, and, of course, when it comes to really vexing or hurting any one, she's sorry too – for about a minute and a half!

And then there's Maud. It is very funny about Maud, the oddest thing about us, though we are rather a topsy-turvy family. Maud is only eight and a half, but she's the oldest of us all.

'She's that terrible old-fashioned,' mother's old nurse said when she came to pay us a visit once, 'she's scarce canny.'

They call *me* old-fashioned sometimes, but I'm nothing to Maud. Why, bless you (I learnt that from old nurse, and I like it, and nobody can say it's naughty to bless anybody), compared to Maud I'm careless, and untidy, and unpunctual, and heedless, and everything of these kinds that I shouldn't be. And yet she and I don't get on as well as Hebe and I do, and in some ways even not as well as Anne and I do. But Maud and Anne get on very well – I never saw anything like it. She tidies for Anne; she reminds her of things she's going to forget; she seems to think she was sent into the world to take care of her big sister. Anne is big – at least she's tall – tall and thin, and with rather smooth dark hair. My goodness! if she'd had fluffy hair like us three middle ones – for even mine is rather a bother, it grows so fast and is so curly – what *would* she have looked like? She seems meant to be neat, and till you know her, and go her all over pretty closely, you'd never guess how untidy she is – pins all over, even though Sophy is *always* mending her frocks and things. And Maud is dark too, though her hair is curly like ours; she's like a gipsy, people say, but she's not a bit gipsy in her *ways*– oh dear, no!

We live in London – mostly, that's to say. We've got a big dark old house that really belongs to grandfather, but he's so little there that he lets us use it, for father has to be in London a lot. We're always there in winter; that's the time grandfather's generally in France or Egypt, or somewhere warm. Now and then, if he's later of going away than usual, or sooner of coming back, he's with us a while in London. We don't like it much.

That sounds unkind. I don't mean to be unkind. I'm just writing everything down because I want to practise myself at it. Father writes books – very clever ones, though they're stories. I've read bits, but I didn't understand them much, only I know they're very clever by the fuss that's made about them. And people wonder how ever he gets time to write them with all the Government things he does too. He *must* be very clever; that's what put it in my head that *perhaps* some day I might be clever that way too. For I don't want to be either a soldier or a sailor, or a lawyer like father was before he got into Government things, and I'm sure I'm not good enough to be a parson, though I think I'd rather like it; and so sometimes I really get frightened that I'll be no good at anything at all, and a boy must be something.

I think father and mother would be pleased if I were a great writer.

And then we really have had some adventures: that makes it more interesting to make out a story about ourselves, for I think a book just about getting up and going to bed, and breakfast, and dinner, and tea, would be very stupid – though, all the same, in story-books I do like rather to know what the children have to eat, and something about the place they live in too.

To go back about grandfather. The reason we don't much like his being with us isn't exactly that we don't care for him. He's not bad. But father's his only child, and our grandmother died a good while ago, and I think she must have been a very giving-in sort of person, and that's bad training

for any one. When I'm grown up, *if* ever I marry, I shall settle with my wife before we start that she mustn't give in to me too much, and I'll stick to it once it's settled. For I've got rather a nasty temper, and I feel in me that if I was to get too much of my own way it would get horrid. It's perhaps because of that that it's been a good thing for me to have four sisters, for they're *nearly* as bad as four wives sometimes. I don't get too much of my own way at present, I can tell you.

I often think I'm rather like grandfather. P'raps if he'd had four sisters or a not-too-giving-in wife he'd have been better. Now, I hope that's not rude? I don't mean it to be; I'm rather excusing him. And I can't put down what isn't true, even though nobody should ever see this 'veracious history' – that's what I'm going to put on the title-page – except myself. And the truth is that grandfather expects everybody and everything to give in to him. Not *always* father, for he does see how grand and clever father is, and that he can't be expected to come and go, and do things, and give up things, just like a baby. But oh, as for poor little mums! – that's mother – her life's not her own when gran's with us. And it isn't that she's silly a bit. She's awfully sensible; something like Hebe and Maud mixed together, though to look at her she's more like Anne. It's real goodness makes *her* give in.

'He's getting old, dears, you know,' she says, 'and practically he's so very good to us.'

I'm not quite sure that I understand quite what 'practically' means. I think it's to do with the house – or the houses, for we've got two – and money. For father, though he's so clever, wouldn't be *rich* without grandfather, I don't think. Perhaps it means presents too. He – grandfather – isn't bad about presents. He never forgets birthdays or Christmases – oh dear, no, he's got an *awfully* good memory. Sometimes *some* of us would almost rather be worse off for presents if only he'd forget some other things.

I'm like him about remembering too. I think my mind is rather tidy, as well as my outside ways. I've got things very neat inside; I often feel as if it was a cupboard, and I like to know exactly which shelf to go to for anything I want. Mums says, 'That's all very well so far as it goes, Jack, but don't stop short at that, or you will be in danger of growing narrow-minded and self-satisfied.'

And I think I know what she means. There are some things now about Anne, for all her tiresome ways, that I know are *grander* than about me, or even perhaps than about Hebe, only Hebe's sweetness makes up for everything. But Anne would give anything in a moment to do any one a good turn. And I – well, I'd think about it. I didn't at all like having to tear up my nice pocket-handkerchief even the day we found the poor little boy with his leg bleeding so dreadfully in the Park, and Anne had hers in strips in a moment. And she'll lend her very best things to any one of us. And she's got feelings I don't understand. Beautiful church music makes her want so *dreadfully* to be good, she says. I *like* it very much, but I don't think I feel it that way. I just feel nice and quiet, and almost a little sleepy if it goes on a good while.

I was telling about our house in London. It's big, and rather grand in a dull sort of way, but dark and gloomy. Long ago, when they built big houses, I think they fancied it was the proper thing to make them dark. It's nice in winter when it's shut up for the night, and the gas lighted in the hall and on the staircases, and with the lamps in the dining-room and drawing-rooms and library – it is very warm and comfortable then, and though the furniture's old-fashioned, and not a pretty kind of old-fashioned, it looks grand in a way. But when the spring comes, and the bright days show up all the dinginess, poor mother, how she does sigh!

'I would so like to have a pretty house,' she says. 'The curtains are all so dark, you can scarcely see they're any colour at all, and those dreadful heavy gilt frames to the mirrors in the drawing-rooms! Oh, Alan' – Alan is father – 'don't you think gran would let us refurnish even the third drawing-room? I could make it a sort of boudoir, you know, and I could have my own friends in there in the daytime. The rooms don't look so bad at night.'

But father shakes his head.

'I'm afraid he wouldn't like it,' he says.

So I suppose even father gives in a good deal to gran.

Mums isn't a bit selfish. The brightest rooms in the house have always been ours. They're two floors over the drawing-rooms, which are really *very* big rooms. We have a nursery, and on one side of it a dressing-room – that's mine – and two other rooms, with two beds each for the girls. We do our lessons in the study – a little room in front of the dining-room, very jolly, for it looks to the front, and the street is wide, and we can see all the barrel-organs and monkeys, and Punch and Judys, and bands, when we're doing our lessons. I don't mean when we're *having* our lessons; that's different. My goodness! I'd like to see even Serry try to look out of the window when Miss Stirling is there! Miss Stirling's our governess. She comes, you know; she's not a living-in-the-house one, and she's pretty strict, so we like her best the way she is. But *doing* our lessons is when we're learning them. Most days, in winter anyway, we go a walk till four, or a quarter to, and then we learn for an hour, and then we have tea; and if we're not finished, we come down again till half-past six or so, and then we dress to go into the drawing-room to mums.

She nearly always dresses for dinner early, so we have an hour with her. The little ones, Serena and Maud, never have much to learn. It's Anne and Hebe and me. We all do Latin – I mean we three do. And twice a week Miss Stirling takes Anne and Hebe to French and German classes for 'advanced pupils.' I'm not an advanced pupil, so those mornings I work alone for two hours, and then I've not much to do in the evening those days. And Miss Stirling gives me French and German the days that the girls are at their music with Mrs. Meux, their music-teacher.

That's how we've done for a long time – ages. But next year I'm going to school.

I'm to go when I'm twelve. My birthday comes in November. It's just been; that's how I said 'I'm eleven,' not eleven and a quarter, or eleven and a half – just eleven. And I'm to go at the end of the Christmas holidays after that. I don't much mind; at least I don't think I do. I'll have more lessons and more games in a regular way, and I'll have less worries, anyway at first. For I shall be counted a small boy, of course, and I shan't have to look after others and be blamed for them, the way I have to look after the girls at home. It'll really be a sort of rest. I've had such a lot of looking after other people. I really have.

Mums says so herself sometimes. She even says I have to look after her. And it's true. She's awfully good – she's almost an angel – but she's a tiny bit like Anne. She's rather untidy. Not to look at, ever. She's as neat as a pin, and then she's very pretty; but she's careless – she says so herself. She so often loses things, because she's got a trick of putting them down anywhere she happens to be. Often and often I go to her room when she's dressing, and tap at the door and say —

'Have you lost something, mums?'

And ten to one she'll call back —

'Yes, my dear town-crier, I have.' ('My gloves,' or 'my card-case,' or 'my keys,' or, oh! almost anything.) 'But I wasn't worrying about it; I knew you'd find it, Jack.'

And Maud does find for Anne, just the same way, only *her* finding sometimes gets me into trouble. Just fancy that. If Anne loses something, and Maud is hunting away and doesn't find it all at once, they'll turn upon me – they truly will – and say —

'You *might* help her, Jack, you really might, poor little thing! It's no trouble to you to run up and down stairs, and she's so little.'

When that sort of thing happens, I do feel that I've got a rather nasty temper.

I've begun about losing things, because our adventures had to do with a very big losing. The first adventure came straight from it, and the rest had to do with it.

It's funny how things hang together like that. You think of something that's come, and you remember what made it happen, and then you go back to the beginning of *that*, and you see it came from something else; and you go on feeling it out like, till you're quite astonished to find what a perfectly different thing had started it all from what you would have thought.

I think this will be a good place for ending the first chapter, which isn't really like a story – only an explanation of us.

And in the next I'll begin about our adventures.

CHAPTER II

THE DIAMOND ORNAMENT

It was two years ago nearly; it was the end of February – no, I think it was a little way on in March. So I was only nine and a quarter, and Anne was about twelve, and all the others in proportion younger than they are now, of course. You can count their ages, if you like, though I don't know who 'you' are, or if there's ever going to be any 'you' at all. But it's the sort of thing I like to do myself when I read a story. I count all the people's ages, and the times they did things, and that things are said to have happened, and I can tell you that very often I find that authors make very stupid mistakes. I told father of this once, and I said I'd like to write and tell them. He laughed, but he called me a prig, which I didn't like, so I never have written to any of them.

That winter began early, and was very cold, but it went early too. So grandfather took it into his head to come back to England the end of February, for a bit, meaning to go on somewhere else – to Ireland, I think, where we have some relations – after he'd been in London a fortnight or so.

It all came – all that I've got to tell – of gran's returning from the hot place he'd been at, whichever it was, so much sooner than usual.

There was going to be a Drawing-room just about the end of the fortnight he was to be with us, and mums was going to it. She had fixed it a good while ago, because she was going to take some friends – a girl who'd got married to a cousin of father's, and another girl – to be presented. They were both rather pretty. We saw them in the morning, when they came for mums to take them. *I* thought the married one prettiest; she had nice laughing eyes. If ever I marry, I'd like a girl with laughing eyes; they look so jolly. The other one was rather cross, I thought, and so did Maud. But Anne said she was interesting-looking, as if she had a hidden sorrow, like in poetry. And after that, none of us quite dared to say she was only cross-looking. And she wasn't really cross; we found that out afterwards. It was only the way her face was made.

Her name was Judith, and the married one was Dorothea. We always call her that, as she's our cousin.

They were prettily dressed, both of them. All white. But Dorothea's dress went rather in creases. It looked too loose. I went all round her, ever so many times, peeping at it, though she didn't know, of course. I can tell when a dress fits, as well as anybody, because of helping to dress mums so often. Sometimes, for a change from the town-crier, mums calls me a man-milliner. I don't mind.

Judith's dress was all right. It was of silk, a soft kind, not near so liney as satin. I like it better. They were both very neat. No pins or hair-pins sticking out.

But mums looked prettiest. I can tell you how she was dressed, because she's not been at a Drawing-room since, for last spring and summer she got a cold or something both times she meant to go. By rights she should go every year, because of what father is. I hope she'll go next spring, for after that I shall be at school, and never able to see her, and I do love to look at her all grand like that. She says she doesn't know how she'll do without me for seeing she's all right.

Well, her dress was blue and pale pink, the train blue – a flowery pattern – and she had blue and pink bunches of feathers all sticking about it; no flowers except her nosegay, which was blushing roses tied with blue streamers.

She did look nice.

Her hair looked grander than usual, because of something she had never had in it before, and that was a beautiful diamond twisty-twirly thing. I have never seen a diamond brooch or pin quite like it, though I often look in the jewellers' windows.

She was very proud of it, though she'd only got the loan of it. I must go back a bit to tell you how she had got it.

A day or two before grandfather left, mums told him about the Drawing-room. If she had known he was going to be with us then, she wouldn't have fixed to go to it; for, as I have said, he takes up nearly all her time, especially when he's only there for a short visit. I suppose I shouldn't call it a visit, as it's his own house, but it seems the best word. And for her to be a whole day out, not in at luncheon, and a train-show at afternoon tea-time, would have been just what he doesn't like. But it couldn't be helped now, as others were counting on her, especially Mrs. Chasserton, our cousin's wife – that's Dorothea.

We were there – Anne, Hebe, and I – when mother told gran about it. We really felt rather frightened, but she said it so sweetly, I felt sure he *couldn't* be vexed. And he wasn't. He did frudge up his eyebrows – 'frudge' is a word we've made ourselves, it does do so well; we've made several – and they are very thick. Anne opened her mouth in a silly way she has, just enough to make him say, 'What are you gaping at, Miss Anne, may I ask?' but luckily he didn't notice. And Hebe squeezed my hand under the table-cloth. It was breakfast time. But in a minute he unfrudged his eyebrows, and then we knew it was over.

'Quite right, my dear Valeria,' he said. Valeria is mums' name; isn't it pretty? 'I am very glad for you to show attention to Dick's wife – quite right, as you are at the head of the family. As for Judith Merthyr – h-m – h-m – she's a strong-minded young woman, I'm told – don't care about strong-minded young women – wonder she condescends to such frivolity. And thank you, my dear, for your consideration for me. But it won't be needed. I must leave for Holyhead on Tuesday. They are expecting me at Tilly' something or other (I don't mean that gran said that, but I can't remember these long Irish names).

Tuesday was the day before the Drawing-room. I'm sure mums clapped her inside hands – that's another of our makings up – I know *we* did. For if gran had been there I don't believe we'd have got in to the train-show at all. And of course it's much jollier to be in the drawing-room in the afternoon, waiting for them to come back, and speaking to the people that are there, and getting a good many extra teas and sandwiches and cakes and ices, than just to see mums start in the morning, however pretty she looks.

Grandfather was really rather wonderful that day.

'What are you going to wear, my dear Valeria?' he asked mother.

She told him.

'H-m, h-m,' he said. He has different ways of h-ming. This time it was all right, not like when he spoke of Judy Merthyr. And actually a smile broke over his face.

The night before he was leaving he came into the drawing-room just before dinner-time, looking very smiley. He was holding something in his hand – a dark leather case.

'My dear child,' he said, and though we were all five there we knew he was speaking to mother. I like to hear mother called 'my dear child' – father does it sometimes – it makes her seem so nice and young. 'My dear child,' he said, 'I have got something here that I want you to wear in your hair at the Drawing-room. I cannot *give* it you out and out, though I mean you to have it some day, but I want to lend it you for as long as you like.'

And then he opened the case, mother standing close by, and all of us trying to peep too. It was the twisty-twirly diamond ornament. A sort of knot – big diamonds in the middle and littler ones in and out. It is awfully pretty. I never saw diamonds sparkle so – you can see every colour in them when you look close, like thousands of prisms, you know. It had a case on purpose for it, and there were pins of different shapes and sizes, so that it could be a brooch, or a hair-pin, or a hanging thing without a pin at all.

Mums *was* pleased.

'Oh, thank you, dear gran,' she said. 'It *is* good of you. Yes, indeed, I shall be proud to have such a lovely, splendid ornament in my hair.'

Then grandfather took it out of the case, and showed her all the different ways of fastening in the pins. They had little screws at their ends, and they all fitted in so neatly, it was quite interesting to see.

'You will wear it in your hair on Wednesday, no doubt,' he said. 'So I will fasten in the hair-pin – there, you see it screws quite firmly.'

And then he gave it to mother, and she took it upstairs and put it away.

The next night – grandfather had left that morning – father and mother were going out to dinner. Mother dresses rather early generally, so that she can be with us a little, but that night she had been busy, and she was rather late. She called us into her room when she was nearly ready, not to disappoint us, and because we always like to see her dressed. She had on a red dress that night, I remember.

Her maid, Rowley, had put out all the things on the toilet-table. When mums isn't in a hurry I often choose for her what she's going to wear – we spread all the cases out and then we settle. But to-night there wasn't time for that. Rowley had got out a lot of things, because she didn't know which mother would choose, and among them the new, grand, diamond thing of grandfather's.

'Oh,' said Anne – she and I were first at the toilet-table, – 'are you going to wear gran's ornament, mother?'

'No, of course not,' said mums. 'It's only for very grand occasions, and to-night is quite a small dinner. I've got on all the jewellery I need. But, Jack, do help me to fasten this bracelet, there's a good boy.' Rowley was fussing away at something that wasn't quite right in mother's skirt. Mother was rather impatient, and the bracelet was fidgety.

But at last I got it done, and Rowley stood up with rather a red face from tacking the sweepy, lacey thing that had come undone. Mums flew off.

'Good-night, dears,' she said. 'I haven't even time to kiss you. Father has gone down, and the carriage has been there ever so long.'

The girls called out 'good-night,' and Hebe and I ran to the top of the staircase to watch her go down. Then we went straight back to the nursery, and in a minute or two the three others came in. Maud was saying something to Anne, and Anne was laughing at her.

'Did you ever hear such a little prig as Maud?' she said. 'She's actually scolding me because I was looking at mums's jewels.'

'Anne made them all untidy,' said Maud.

'Well, Rowley'll tidy them again. She came back on purpose; she'd only gone down to put mother's cloak on,' said Anne carelessly.

'Anne,' said I rather sharply. You see I knew her ways, and mums often leaves me in charge. 'Were you playing with mother's jewels?'

'I was doing no harm,' said Anne; 'I was only looking at the way the pins fasten in to that big diamond thing. It's quite right, Jack, you needn't fuss. Rowley's putting them all away.'

So I didn't say any more.

And to-morrow was the Drawing-room day.

Mother looked beautiful, as I said. We watched her start with the two others, cousin Dorothea and Miss Merthyr. It was rather a cold day; they took lots of warm cloaks in the carriage. I remember hearing Judy – we call her Judy now – say,

'You must take plenty of wraps, Mrs. Warwick,' – that's mother. 'My aunt made me bring a fur cape that I thought I should not wear again this year; it would never do for you to catch cold.'

Mums does look rather delicate, but she isn't delicate really. She's never ill. But Judith looked at her so nicely when she said that about not catching cold, that the cross look went quite out of her face, and I saw it was only something about her eyebrows. And I began to think she must be rather nice.

But we didn't see her again. She did not get out of the carriage when they came back in the afternoon, but went straight home to her own house. Somebody of hers was ill there. Cousin Dorothea came back with mother, and three other ladies in trains came too, so there was rather a good show.

And everybody was laughing and talking, and we'd all had two or three little teas and several ices, and it was all very jolly when a dreadful thing happened.

I was standing by mother. I had brought her a cup of tea from the end drawing-room where Rowley and the others were pouring it out, and she was just drinking it, when I happened to look up at her head.

'Mums,' I said, 'why have you taken out gran's diamond thing? It looked so nice.'

Mums put her hand to her head – to the place where she knew she had put in the pin: of course it wasn't there, I wouldn't have made such a mistake.

Mums grew white – really white. I never saw her like that except once when father was thrown from his horse.

'Oh, Jack,' she said, 'are you sure?' and she kept feeling all over her hair among the feathers and hanging lacey things, as if she thought it must be sticking about somewhere.

'Stoop down, mums,' I said, 'and I'll have a good look.'

There weren't many people there just then – several had gone, and several were having tea. So mums sat down on a low chair, and I poked all over her hair. But of course the pin was gone – no, I shouldn't say the *pin*, for *it* was there; its top, with the screwy end, was sticking up, but the beautiful diamond thing was gone!

I drew out the pin, and mother gave a little cry of joy as she felt me.

'Oh, it's there,' she said, 'there after all –'

'No, dear,' I said quickly, 'it isn't. Look – it's only the pin.'

Mother seized it, and looked at it with great puzzle as well as trouble in her eyes.

'It's come undone,' she said, 'yet how could it have done? Gran fixed it on himself, and he's so very particular. There's a little catch that fastens it to the pin as well as the screw – see here, Jack,' and she showed me the catch, 'that *couldn't* have come undone if it was fastened when I put it on. And I *know* gran clicked it, as well as screwing the head in.'

She stared at me, as if she thought it *couldn't* be true, and as if explaining about it would make it come back somehow.

Several ladies came up, and she began telling them about it. Cousin Dorothea had gone, but these other ladies were all very sorry for her, and indeed any one would have been, poor little mother looked so dreadfully troubled.

One of them took up the pin and examined it closely.

'There's one comfort,' she said, 'it hasn't been *stolen*. You see it's not been cut off, and that's what very clever thieves do sometimes. They nip off a jewel in a crowd, quite noiselessly and in half a second, I've been told. No, Mrs. Warwick, it's dropped off, and by advertising and offering a good reward you may very likely get it back. But – excuse me – it was very careless of your maid not to see that it was properly fastened. A very valuable thing, I suppose it is?'

'It's more than valuable,' said poor mother. 'It's an heirloom, *quite* irreplaceable. I do not know how I shall ever have courage to tell my father-in-law. No, I can't blame my maid. I told her not to touch it, as the General had fastened it himself all ready. But how *can* it have come undone?'

At that moment Anne and Hebe, who had been having a little refreshment no doubt, came into the front drawing-room where we were. They saw there was something the matter, and when they got close to mother and saw what she was holding in her hand, for the lady had given it back to her, they seemed to know in a moment what had happened. And Anne's mouth opened, the way it does when she's startled or frightened, and she stood staring.

Then I knew what it meant.

CHAPTER III

WORK FOR THE TOWN-CRIER

'Oh, those girls,' I thought to myself; 'why did I leave them alone in mother's room with all her things about?'

But Anne's face made me feel as if I couldn't say anything – not before all those people; though of course I knew that as soon as she could see mother alone she would tell, herself. I was turning away, thinking it would be better to wait – for, you see, mother was not blaming any one else – when all of a sudden Maud ran up. She was all dressed up very nicely, of course; and she's a pretty little thing, everybody says, and then she's the youngest. So a lot of people had been petting her and making a fuss about her. Maud doesn't like that at all. She's not the least bit conceited or spoilt, and she really is so sensible that I think it teases her to be spoken to as if she was only a baby. Her face was rather red, I remember; she had been trying to get away from those ladies without being at all rude, for she's far too 'ladylike' to be rude *ever*. And now she ran up, in a hurry to get to her dear Anne as usual. But the moment she saw Anne's face she knew that something was wrong. For one thing, Anne's mouth was wide open, and I have told you about Anne's mouth. Then there was the pin in mother's hand, the hair-pin, and no top to it! And mums looking so troubled, and all the ladies round her.

'What is it?' said Maud in her quick way. 'Oh – is mums' brooch broken? Oh, Anne, you shouldn't have touched it!'

Everybody – mother and everybody – turned to Anne; I *was* sorry for her. It wasn't like Maud to have called it out, she is generally so careful; but you see she was startled, and she only thought the diamond thing was broken or loosened.

Anne's face grew scarlet.

'What do you mean, Maudie?' said mother. 'Anne, what does she mean?'

It was hard upon Anne, for it looked as if she hadn't been going to tell, and that wasn't at all her way. In another moment I daresay she would have blurted it out; but then, you see, she had hardly had time to take in that most likely she had caused the mischief, for she knew she hadn't *meant* to, and she quite thought she had left the pin just as firmly fastened as she had found it.

'Oh, mother,' she cried, 'I didn't think – I never meant – I'm sure I screwed it in again quite the same.'

'When did you touch it? I don't understand anything about it. Jack, what do Anne and Maud mean?' said poor mums, turning to me.

'It was my fault,' I said. 'I shouldn't have left any one in your room, with all your things about, and Rowley even not there.'

'And I did tell Anne not to touch the diamond brooch,' said Maud. For once she really seemed quite angry with Anne.

Then we told mother all there was to tell – at least Anne did, for she knew the most of course. She had been fiddling at the diamond thing all the time she was standing by the table, but no one had noticed her except Maud. For you remember mums was in a great hurry, and I was helping her to fasten her bracelet, and Rowley was fussing at her skirt, and then Hebe and I went half-way downstairs to see mother start. Oh dear, I did feel vexed with myself! Anne said she wanted to see how the ornament could be turned into different things; she had unscrewed the pin and unclicked the little catch, and then she had fixed in the other kind of pin to make it into a brooch, and she wanted to try the screw with a ring to it, to make it a hanging ornament, but Maud wouldn't let her stay. So she screwed in the hairpin again – the one that gran had fastened in himself. She meant to do it quite tight, but she couldn't remember if she clicked the little catch. And she was in a hurry, so no doubt she did it carelessly.

That was really about all Anne had to tell.

But it was plain that it had been her fault that the beautiful ornament was lost. It had dropped off. Mums didn't say very much to her: it wouldn't have done before all the visitors. They were very good-natured, and very sorry for mother. And several people said again what a good thing it was it was only *lost*, not stolen, for that gave ever so much more chance of finding it.

When all the people had gone, father came in. Mother had still her dress on, but she was looking very white and tired, and in a moment, like Maud, he saw there was something the matter.

He was very vexed, dreadfully vexed, only he was too good to scold Anne *very* much. And indeed it would have been difficult to do so, she looked such a miserable creature, her eyes nearly swollen out of her head with crying. And we were all pretty bad – even Serry, who never troubles herself much about anything, looked solemn. And as for me, I just couldn't forgive myself for not having stayed in mother's room and seen to putting away her jewel-cases, as I generally do.

Father set to work at once. First he made mother stand up in the middle of the room, and he called Rowley, and he and Rowley and I and Hebe shook out her train and poked into every little fluthery ruffle – there was a lot of fustled-up net inside the edge, just the place for the diamond thing to get caught in, and we made her shake herself and turn out her pocket and everything. But it was no use. Then – the poor little thing was nearly dead, she was so tired! – father made her go to take off her finery, telling Rowley to look over all the dress again when mother had got out of it. Then he and I went out together to the coach-house, first telling all the servants of the loss, and making them hunt over the hall and up and down the stairs; it was really quite exciting, though it was horrid too, knowing that father and mother were so vexed and Anne so miserable.

We found the coachman just washing the carriage. We got into it, and poked into every corner, and shook out the rugs, and just did everything, even to looking on the front-door steps behind the scraper, and in the gutter, and shaking out the roll of carpet that had been laid down. For father is splendid at anything like that; he's so practical, and I think I take after him. (I don't know but what I'd like best of all to be a private detective when I grow up. I'll speak to father about it some day.)

But all was no use, and when we came up to the drawing-room again there was mums in her crimson teagown, looking *so* anxious. It went to my heart to have to shake my head, especially when poor Anne came out of a corner looking like a dozen ghosts.

Still, we had rather a nice evening after all, though it seems odd. It was all thanks to father. He made us three come down to dinner with mums and him, 'To cheer your mother up a little,' he said, though I shouldn't have thought there was much cheering to be got out of Anne. In reality I think he did it as much for Anne's sake as for mums's. And Hebe was very sweet to Anne, for they don't *always* get on so very well. Hebe sometimes does elder sister too much, which is bad enough when one *is* elder sister, but rather too bad when one *isn't*, even if it is the real elder sister's own fault. But to-night Hebe sat close to Anne, holding her hand under the table-cloth, and trying to make her eat some pudding. (It was chocolate pudding, I remember, and mother gave us each some.)

And when dessert was on the table, and the servants had gone, father called Anne to him, and put his arm round her.

'My dear little girl,' he said, 'you must try to leave off crying. It only makes mother more troubled. I can't deny that this loss *is* a great vexation: it will annoy grandfather, and – well, there's no use telling you what you know already. But of course it isn't as bad as some troubles, and even though I'm afraid I can't deny that it has come through your fault, it isn't as bad as if your fault had been a worse one – unkindness, or untruthfulness, or some piece of selfishness.'

Anne hid her face on his shoulder, and sobbed and choked, and said something we couldn't hear.

'But still carelessness *is* a great fault, and causes troubles without end,' father went on. 'And in this case it was meddlesomeness too. I do hope –'

'Oh, father,' said Anne, looking up, 'I know what you're going to say. Yes, it *will* be a lesson to me: you'll see. I shall be quite different, and ever so much more thoughtful and careful from now.'

And of course she meant what she said.

But father looked grave still.

'My dear child, don't be too confident. You won't find that you can cure yourself all at once. The force of bad habit is almost harder to overcome in small things than in great: it is so unconscious.'

'Yes, father,' said Anne.

She understood what he said better than I did then; for she is really clever – much cleverer than I am about poetry and *thinking* sort of cleverness, though I have such a good memory. So I remembered what father said, and now I understand it.

After dinner we went up to the littlest drawing-room – the one mother wanted for so long to refurnish prettily. There was a fire, for it was only March, and mums sat in one of the big old armchairs close to it, and Anne and Hebe beside her. And father drew a chair to mums' writing-table, and wrote out several advertisements for the next morning's papers, which he sent off to the offices that very evening. Some were in the next morning, and some weren't; but it didn't much matter, for none of them did any good. Before he sent them he inquired of all the servants if they had looked everywhere he had told them to.

'There is just a chance of daylight showing it in some corner,' he said, when he had done all this, and come to sit down beside mums.

'I don't know that,' she said. 'This house is so dark by day. But, after all, the chance of its being here is very small.'

'Yes,' father said, 'I have more hope in the advertisements.'

'And,' mother went on, her voice sounding almost as if she was going to cry – I believe she kept it back a good deal for Anne's sake – 'if – if they don't bring anything, what about telling your father, Alan?' 'Alan' is father's name – 'Alan Joachim,' and mine is 'Joachim Gerald.'

Father considered.

'We must wait a little. It will be a good while before I quite give up hopes of it. And there's no use in spoiling gran's time in Ireland; for there's no doubt the news *would* spoil it – he's the sort of person to fret tremendously over a thing of the kind.'

'I'm afraid he is,' said mother, and she sighed deeply.

But hearing a faint sob from Anne, father gave mother a tiny sign, and then he asked us if we'd like him to read aloud a little sort of fairy story he'd been writing for some magazine. Of course we all said 'Yes': we're very proud if ever he offers to read us anything, even though we mayn't understand it very well; but this time we did understand it – Anne best of all, I expect. And when he had finished, it was time for us to go to bed.

We had had, as I told you, rather an extra nice evening after all, and father had managed to make poor mums more cheerful and hopeful.

It got worse again, however, the next day, when the hours went on, and there came no letter or telegram or anything about the lost treasure. For mother had got to feel almost sure the advertisements would bring some news of it. And father was very late of coming home. It was a dreadfully busy time for him just then. We were all in bed before he came in, both that night and the next I remember, for I know he looked in to say good-night to me, and to say he hoped we were all being as good as we could be to mums.

I think we were, and to Anne too, for we were nearly as sorry for her. I had never known her mind about anything so much, or for so long. Serry began to be rather tired of it.

'It's so awfully dull to see Anne going about with such a long face,' she said the second evening, when we were all sitting with mother. 'Mums herself doesn't look half so gloomy. Mums, do tell Anne not to be so cross; it can't be as bad for her as for you.'

'You're very unkind, Serry,' said Maud, bristling up for Anne; 'and, after all, I think you might feel a little sorry too. You joined Anne in looking over all mother's things that night, you know you did, and you only laughed when I said you'd left them in a mess.'

Serry only laughed now. She tossed back her fluffy hair – it's a way of hers, and I must say she looks very pretty when she does it.

'It's not my nature to fuss about things,' she said. 'It wouldn't suit my name if I did; would it, mums? And you are such a little preacher, Maud.'

It *was* funny to hear Maud. It's funny still, for she looks such a mite, but two years ago it was even funnier. For she was only six and a half then, though she spoke just as well as she does now. I can't remember ever hearing Maud talk babyishly.

'Don't begin quarrelling about it, my dear children,' said mother. 'That certainly won't do any good. And, Anne, you must just try to put it off your mind a little, as I am doing.'

'I *can't*,' said Anne. 'I've never been so long sorry about anything in my life. I didn't know any one *could* be. I dream about it all night, too – the most provoking dreams of finding it in all sorts of places. Last night I dreamt I found it in my teacup, when I had finished drinking my tea, and it seemed so dreadfully *real*, you don't know. I could scarcely help thinking it would be in my cup this morning at breakfast.'

'Oh,' said Serena, 'that was why you were staring at the dregs so, and sighing so dolefully.'

But Anne didn't pay any attention to her.

'Mother,' she said, 'you don't think it could *mean* anything – my dream, I mean? Could it be that we are to look all through the teacups in the pantry, for you know there were a great lot in the drawing-room that day, and it *might* have dropped into one that wasn't used, and got put away without being washed.'

Mums smiled a little.

'I'm afraid that's wildly improbable,' she said; 'but if you like to go downstairs and tell Barstow about your dream, you may. It may inspirit them all to go on looking, for I'm afraid they have given up hopes.'

Barstow is the butler. He's *very* nice, and he was with father since he – I mean, father – was a baby; he's been always with gran, or what he calls 'in the family.' He's only got one fault, and that is, he can't keep a footman. We've just had *shoals*, and now father and mother say they really can't help it, and Barstow must settle them for himself. Since they've said that, the last two have stayed rather longer.

But he's most exceedingly jolly to us. Mums says he spoils us, but I don't think he does, for he's very particular. Lots of footmen have been sent away because he didn't think they spoke properly for us to hear. He was terribly shocked one day when Serry said something was 'like blazes,' and still worse when he caught me pretending to smoke. He was sure James or Thomas had taught me, say what I would, and of course I was only humbugging.

I think mums sent Anne down to talk to old Barstow a bit, partly to cheer her up. Anne was away about ten minutes. When she came back she did look rather brighter, though she shook her head. She was holding a note in her hand.

'No,' she said; 'Barstow was very nice, and he made Alfred climb up to look at some cups on a high shelf that hadn't been used the Drawing-room day – they'd just been brought up in case the others ran short. But there was nothing there. At least – look, mother,' she went on, holding out the letter. 'Fancy, Alfred found *this* on the shelf. Barstow is so angry, and Alfred's dreadfully sorry, and I said I'd ask you to forgive him. It came that evening, when we were all in such a fuss, and he forgot to give it you. He was carrying down a tray and put the note on it, meaning to take it up to the drawing-room. And somehow it got among the extra cups.'

Mums took the note and began to open it.

'I haven't the heart to scold any one for being careless just now,' she said, and then she unfolded the letter and read it.

'I'm rather glad of this,' she said, looking up. 'And it is a good thing it was found, Anne, otherwise Mrs. Liddell would have thought me very rude. It is from her to say that the dancing class

begins again on – let me see – yes, it's to-morrow, Saturday, and she wants to know how many of you are coming. It's to be at her house, like last year. I must send her a word at once.'

Mrs. Liddell's house isn't far from ours, and it's very big. There's a room with no carpet on, where we dance. She likes to have the class at her house, because her children are awfully delicate, or, anyway, she thinks they are; and if it's the least cold or wet, she's afraid to let them go out. They come up to town early in the spring, and it suits very well for us to go to their class, as it's so near.

We rather like it. There's more girls than boys, of course – a lot – but I don't mind, because there are two or three about my size, and one a bit bigger, though he's younger.

We were not sorry to hear it was to begin again, and we all said to mums that she should let Maud come too. Maud had never been yet, and Serry had only been one year. Mums wasn't sure. Dancing is rather expensive, you know, but she said she'd ask father.

'The class is to be every Saturday afternoon, like last year,' she said. 'That will do very well.'

'But do persuade father to let Maud come too,' we all said.

It wasn't till afterwards that I thought to myself that I would look absurder than ever – the only boy to *four* sisters! It was bad enough the year before with three.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE DANCING CLASS

It's funny to think what came of our going to that first dancing class. If Anne hadn't run down to the pantry, the note wouldn't have been found – perhaps not for months, if ever. And though Mrs. Liddell would have written again the next week most likely, it wouldn't have been in time for us to go to the first class, and everything would have come different.

We did go – all five of us. Father was quite willing for Maud to come too. I think he would have said yes to anything mother asked just then, he was so sorry for her; and he was beginning himself, as the days went on, to feel less hopeful about the diamond ornament being found. And you see mums couldn't put it off her mind, as she kept telling Anne *she* should do, for it was quite dreadful to her to think of grandfather's having to hear about it. She was so really sorry for him to be vexed, for she had thought it so kind of him to lend it to her.

There were several children we knew at the dancing class. Some, like the little Liddells themselves, that we hadn't seen for a good long while, as they always stayed in the country till after Christmas, and some that we didn't know as friends, only just at the dancing, you see.

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