Molesworth Mrs.

The Boys and I: A Child's Story for Children

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I. OUR FIRST SORROW

"O, it is trouble very bad,
Which causes us to weep;
All last night long we were so sad,
Not one of us could sleep."

Sometimes they called us all three just "the boys." But I don't think that was fair. I may have been rather a *tom*boy, but I wasn't quite so bad as to be called a "boy." I was nine then – I mean I was nine at the beginning of the time I am going to tell you about, and now I am fourteen. Afterwards, I will tell you what put it into my head to write it down. If I told you now you wouldn't understand – at least not without my telling you things all out of their places – ends at the beginning, and middles at the end; and mother says it's an awfully bad habit to do things that way. It makes her quite vexed to see any one read the end of a book before they have

really got to it. There aren't many things that make her really vexed, but that's one, and another is saying "awfully," and I've just said it, or at least written it. And I can't score it through – I've promised not to score through anything, and just to leave it as it came into my head to write it all down.

I was nine that year, and Tom was seven, and little Racey six. I remember it quite well, for that year a lot of things happened. Tom and I had the measles, and how it was Racey didn't have them too I don't know, but he didn't. And just when we were getting better, the first very big thing that we had ever known about, happened. Papa was ordered to go to China! (I dare say it seems funny to you that we call him "papa" and mother "mother." I can't tell you how it was, but we always did it, and Tom and I used to like to hear Racey say "papa." He said it in such a sweet way, more like the way little French children say it.)

Papa wasn't a soldier, or a sailor, as you might think. He was something very clever, with letters after his name, and he had to go to China partly because of that. Now that I am big I understand about it, but I need not say exactly, because then you might find out who he was, and that wouldn't be nice. It would be like as if I thought we were cleverer or nicer than other people, and I don't think that – at least not in a stuck-up way, and *of course*, not at all about myself. It isn't any harm to think it a little about one's father or mother, I don't think, but of course not about one's-self.

I shall never forget the day I heard about papa's going away. I keep saying "papa's going away," because you see it had to do

with him, but it was even worse than his going, though that would have been bad enough. It was just as we were getting better of the measles, and we had been very happy all day, for mother had been telling us stories, and we had had quite a "feast" tea – sponge-cakes and ladies' bread and butter; and I had poured out the tea, for mother had put a little table on purpose close to my bed, and Racey had been the footman to wait upon Tom and give him all he wanted, as the table wasn't so near his bed as mine. Tom had fallen asleep – poor Tom, he had had the measles worse than I. I am so awfully strong, even though I'm only a girl, and boys always think themselves stronger. And little Racey had fallen asleep too, lying at the foot of my bed. He hadn't been kept away from us because of what Tom called the "affection" of the measles, for the old doctor said he had better get it too and have it over. But he didn't get it, and if ever I have children I shall not do that way with them. I'll try and keep them from having any illnesses at all, for I don't believe we're *forced* to have them. I think mother thought so too, but she didn't like to contradict the doctor; because he was so old she thought he must know best. And after all it didn't matter, as Racey didn't get the measles. I really must try to go straight on – I keep going back when other things come into my head, so it isn't so easy to write things down nicely as I thought it was.

Well, Tom was asleep – he looked so nice; he always does when he's asleep, he has such a white forehead, and such rosy cheeks, and pretty dark hair. I remember, because of what came

after, how pretty he looked that evening. And dear Racey – he looked so pretty too, though generally he isn't counted so nice-looking as Tom, for his hair is a *little* red, and he is rather too pale for a boy. Well, the boys were both asleep and I was *nearly* asleep, when I heard some one come into the room. I thought it was the nurse come to undress Racey and put him to bed properly, and as I was in that nice, only half-awake way when it's a great trouble to speak, I thought I'd pretend to be quite asleep, and so I did.

But it was not the nurse who came into the room – it was two people, not one, and I very soon found out, even without opening my eyes, who the two people were. They were papa and mother. They came in quite softly and sat down near the fire. It was the month of October, and rather cold.

"Are they all asleep, Marie?" said papa. I must tell you that though mother is quite English, her name is "Marie." I think it was because she had a French godmother, and I do think it is such a pretty name.

Mother glanced round at us.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice, "they are all asleep. Oh, Horace, my darlings!"

At first when I heard mother say "yes," I laughed a little to myself. I didn't mean to listen in any mean way, of course, and a comical idea came into my head that it was just like the ogre and his wife in the fairy tale. – "'Wife, are they all asleep?' said the ogre. 'All fast asleep,' said the ogre's wife." Only poor papa wasn't at all like an ogre, and *dear* mother wasn't a bit like the

ogre's wife, though she *was* much nicer than her husband. I was nearly laughing out loud when this fancy came into my head, but before I had time to laugh mother's next words quite changed my feeling, and all in a minute I got frightened somehow. It is so queer – isn't it? – how quickly fancies run through one's mind. The one about the ogre and his wife came into my head and out again between mother's saying "asleep," and "Oh, Horace." And then, all in a moment again, came a number of other fancies. Something must be the matter for mother to speak like that. What could it be? I thought of all sorts of things. Could papa have lost all his money? I had heard of such things, but I did not think I should mind it so very much. It would be rather nice to live in a cottage, and have no servants, and do the cooking and the washing ourselves, I thought; though very likely mother would not think so. Could anything have happened to Uncle Geoff? Oh no, it couldn't be that, for that would not make mother say "my darlings," in that way. And poor little mother had no near relations of her own whom she could have had bad news of to make her unhappy. What *could* be the matter? I was so frightened and anxious to hear more, that I really quite forgot I was doing wrong in listening, and when I heard mother give a sort of little sob, I got still more frightened. I have often wondered since that I did not jump out of bed and run to mother to see if I could comfort her, but a queer *stopped* sort of feeling seemed to have come over me. I could do nothing but listen, and though it is now so many years ago – five years ago! – I can remember all the

words I heard.

My father did not answer at first. Whatever was the matter, it seemed to have been something he did not find it easy to say any comforting words about. And mother spoke again.

"Oh, Horace, how *can* I leave them?"

"My poor Marie," said papa. "What is to be done? I cannot give it up – nor without you can I undertake it. Bertram would have got it if he had had a wife, but it is never given to an unmarried man."

"I know," said mother. "I know all you can say. It is just because there is nothing else to be done that I am so miserable. I cannot help it to-night – to-morrow I will try to be braver; but – oh, I have been so happy with them to-day, and so glad they were getting better and that dear little Racey had not got it – for whatever Dr. Nutt says, I cannot help being glad of that – oh, I have been so happy with them."

"Perhaps it was cruel of me to tell you to-night," said papa very sorry-ly.

"Oh no, it was much better," said mother, quickly. "There is so little time, and so much to settle. Besides, you couldn't have kept it from me, Horace. I should have been sure to find out there was something the matter. Tell me what is the latest we should have to go."

"Six or seven weeks hence. I don't think it could possibly be made later," said papa. And then he went on to explain things to mother, which at that time I couldn't understand (though I dare

say I should now), and therefore have forgotten – about the work he would have to do, and the money he would get, and all that.

But I had heard enough. My heart seemed as if it was going to stop. Mother going away – to have to live without mother – it didn't seem to me so much a grief, as an impossibility. I think I was rather a babyish child for my age in some ways. I was very fond of the boys, and I was very unhappy if ever I was away from them, but I don't think I had ever thought much about whether I loved anybody or not. And I know that sometimes people said I wasn't affectionate. Things hadn't happened to make me think about anything in any deep way. We had always lived in the same house – even in the same rooms – and we had had our breakfasts and dinners and teas with the same plates and cups and saucers, and mother had always been there, just like the daylight to us. I couldn't *fancy* being without her, and so just at first I couldn't tell if I was dreadfully unhappy or not. I was too startled to know. But I think in another moment I would have jumped out of bed and rushed to mother, if I hadn't heard just then something which I quite understood, and which I listened to with the greatest interest and curiosity.

"Yes," mother was saying, for, for a minute or two, you understand, I hadn't been listening. "Yes, I see no better plan. It isn't as if either you or I had had a mother or sisters to send them to. And as you say, with Geoffrey, their *health* will be thoroughly looked after, and he will be very kind to them, and we can depend on his telling us the truth about them. Anything is better than

sending them to strangers."

"That's what he said," replied papa. "He was quite full of it when I went to-day to tell him of this most unexpected proposal. He is so very eager for me to accept it that he would do anything. His house is large, much larger than he needs; and of course he knows more about children than most unmarried men, through seeing them so constantly when they are ill. And then, Marie, there is Partridge – that is a great thing."

"Yes," said mother, gently, but not very eagerly. I knew the tone of her voice when she spoke that way – I could feel that she was smiling a little – she always did when she didn't want to seem to disagree with papa and yet didn't quite agree with him, for papa always gets so eager about things, and is sure they'll all come right. "Yes," said mother, "I'm sure Partridge is very good and kind, but she's old, you know, Horace. Audrey and the boys must have a young nurse, besides – I wish Pierson were not going to be married."

Pierson was the nurse we had just then – she was going to be married in a fortnight, but we didn't much care. She had only been about a year with us, and we counted her rather a grumpy nurse. She always thought that we should catch cold if we ran into the garden without being all muffled up, or that we should break our necks even if we climbed *tiny* trees.

"I don't know," said papa. "She would never have got on with Partridge. A younger one would be better."

"Perhaps," said mother. But her tone had grown dreadfully

low and sad again. It almost seemed as if she could not speak at all. Only in a minute or two I heard her say again, still *worse* than before, "Oh, my darlings! Oh, Horace, I don't think I *can* bear it. Think of dear little Racey, and my pretty Tom, and poor Audrey – though I don't know that she is naturally so affectionate as the boys – think of them all, Horace – alone without us, and us *so* far away."

"I know," said papa, sadly. "I know it all. It is terribly hard for you. But let us try not to talk any more about it this evening. To-morrow you may feel more cheerful – I don't know about Audrey not being so affectionate as the boys," he added, after a little pause; "perhaps it is that she's older and more reserved. They are such little chaps. She's very good and motherly to them any way, and that's one comfort."

"Indeed it is," said mother. "She's a queer little girl, but she's very good to the boys. We must go down-stairs now," she went on, "and I must send Pierson to carry Racey to his own bed. I am so afraid of waking Audrey and Tom, perhaps I had better carry him myself."

She came towards my bed as she spoke, and after seeming to hesitate a little, stepped close up to the side. Poor mother! I didn't understand it then, but afterwards, when I thought over that strange evening, as I so often did, I seemed to know that she had been *afraid* of looking at us – that she could not bear to see our happy sleeping faces with what she knew, in her heart. It is funny, but lots of things have come to me like that. I have remembered

them in my mind without understanding them, like parrot words, with no meaning, and then long afterwards a meaning has come into them, and that I have never forgotten. It was a little that way with what I overheard that evening – the meaning that came into it all afterwards made such a mark on my mind that even though I may not have told you just exactly the words papa and mother said, I am sure I have told you the sense of them rightly.

Well, mother came up to my bedside and stood looking at us – Racey and me. I *fancied* she looked at Racey most – he was her "baby" you know, and I didn't mind even if sometimes it seemed as if she cared more for Tom and him than for me. They were such dear little boys to kiss, and they had such a pretty way of petting mother. I knew I hadn't such loving ways, and that sometimes it seemed as if I didn't care for mother – when I wanted to say nice words they wouldn't come. But I never minded a bit, however much mother petted the boys – I felt as if I was like her in that – we were like two mothers to them I sometimes pleased myself by fancying.

Mother stood looking at us. For a minute or two I still kept my eyes shut as if I were asleep. We often played with each other at that – "foxing," we used to call it. But generally we couldn't manage it because of bursting out laughing. To-night it wasn't *that* feeling that made it difficult for me to go on "foxing." It was quite a different one. Yet I was, too, a very little afraid of mother knowing I had been listening – it began to come into my mind that it was not a nice thing to do – a little like telling stories – and

I almost am afraid I should not have had courage to tell mother if it had not been that just then as she stood there looking at us I heard her give a little sob. *Then* I could bear it no longer. I jumped up in bed and threw my arms round her neck.

"Mother, mother," I cried, "I have *heard*. I wasn't really asleep. I didn't mean to listen, but I couldn't help it. Oh, mother, mother, are you going away? You *can't* go away – what should we do?"

Mother did not answer. She just held me close in her arms – very close, but without speaking. At last, after what seemed quite a long time, she said very softly,

"My poor little Audrey."

I pressed my arms still tighter round her.

"Mother," I said, "I heard you say something about me. Mother, I do love you – you said I wasn't affectionate, but I'm sure I love you."

"Poor little Audrey," she said again. "I am sorry you heard that. You must not think I meant that you don't love me. I cannot quite make you understand how I meant, but I did not mean that. And oh, Audrey, how glad I am to think that you love the boys so much. You are a very kind sister to them, and you do not know what a comfort it is to me just now to think of that."

"Do you mean because of your going away, mother?" I asked. "Will you *really* go away? Will it be for a long time, mother? As long as a month, or two months?"

"Yes," said mother, "quite as long as that I am afraid. But you

must go to sleep now, dear. You are not quite well yet, you know, and you will be so tired to-morrow if you don't have a good night. Try and not think any more about what you heard to-night; and to-morrow, or as soon as I can, I will tell you more."

"I did hear more," I said in a low voice, "I heard about our going to uncle Geoff's. Mother, is uncle Geoff nice?"

"Very," said mother. "But, Audrey, you must go to sleep, dear."

"Yes, mother, I will in one minute," I said. "But do tell me just one thing, *please* do."

Mother turned towards me again. She had just been preparing to lift Racey.

"Well, dear?" she said.

"I do *so* want to know what suits the boys would travel in," I said. "I have my big, long coat, but they haven't got such big ones. Mother, *don't* you think they should have new ulsters?"

Mother gave a little laugh that was half a sigh.

"Audrey," she said, "what a queer child you are! – But perhaps," she added to herself in a low voice, "perhaps it is as well."

I heard the words, and though I could not quite see that there was anything queer in my thinking about new ulsters for the boys, I did not tease mother any more about them just then. She kissed me again quite kindly, and then carried Racey away. He just woke up a very little as she lifted him, and gave a sort of cross wriggle – poor little boy, he had been so comfortably asleep. But

when he saw that it was mother who was lifting him, he left off being cross in one moment.

"Dear little muzzie," he said, and though he was too sleepy to open his eyes again, he puckered up his little red lips for a kiss. "Muzzie," was what the boys called mother sometimes for a pet name. It wasn't very pretty, but she didn't mind.

"My darling little Racey," she said, as she kissed him; and somehow the way she said "darling" made me wish just a little that I was Racey instead of myself. Yet I didn't think about it much. My fancy would go running on about going to uncle Geoff's, and the journey, and how I would take care of the boys and all that; and when I went to sleep I had such queer dreams. I thought uncle Geoff had a face like Pierson when she was cross, and that he wore a great big ulster buttoned all down the back instead of the front, because, he said, that was the fashion in China.

CHAPTER II.
REAL AND PLAY

"And I'll be Lady Fuss-aby,
And you shall be Miss Brown."

I woke very early the next morning – for after all it had not been at all late when I fell asleep. I woke very early, but Tom was awake before me, for when I looked across to his bed, even before I had time to say "Tom, are you awake?" very softly, to which if he was still feeling sleepy he sometimes answered, "No, I'm not" – before I had even time to say that, I saw that his bright dark eyes were wide open.

There was a night-light on the little table between our cots. Mother had let us have it since we were ill. By rights the cot I was sleeping in was Racey's, for I had a little room to myself, but Tom and I had been put together because of the measles. I could not have seen Tom's face except for the light, for it was still quite dark outside, just beginning to get a very little morning.

"Tom," I said softly, "do you know what o'clock it is?"

"Yes," said Tom, "I think it's six. Just as I woke I heard the stair clock striking. I only counted four, but in my sleep I'm sure there had been two."

"Tom," I said again.

"Well," said Tom.

"Tom," I repeated. "I wish you could come into my bed or that I could get into yours. I do so want to speak to you, and I don't like to speak loud for fear of Pierson hearing." Pierson slept in a little room next ours.

"Pierson's asleep," said Tom. "I heard her snoring a minute ago. We mustn't get into each other's beds. Mother said we must promise not, for fear of catching cold."

"I know, but it's a pity," I said. "Tom, do you know – oh, Tom, do you know?"

"What?" said Tom.

"Something so wonderful, I don't know if I should tell you, but mother didn't say I wasn't to. Tom, what should you say if we were to go away – a long way away in the railway?"

"I'd say it was vrezy nice," said Tom. "If it was all of us together, of course."

"Ah, but if it wasn't all of us – what would you say then?"

Tom stared at me.

"What do you mean, Audrey?" he said. "We always does go all away together, if we go away at all."

"Oh yes – going to the sea-side and like that. But I mean something quite different from that. Suppose, Tom, that you and me and Racey had to go away somewhere by ourselves, what would you think of that?"

Tom's dark eyes stared at me more puzzledly than before.

"Audrey," he said, "what *can* you mean?" He looked quite startled and frightened. "Audrey," he said, suddenly jumping out of bed, "I must get into your bed. I'm sure I won't catch cold, and I want to whisper to you."

I could not help making room for him in my cot, and then we put our arms round each other, and Tom said to me in a very low voice – "Audrey, do you mean that Racey and you and me are all going to *die*?"

Poor Tom, he looked so pitiful when he said that I was so sorry for him.

"Oh no, Tom dear. Of course I don't mean that. What could have made you think so?" I said.

"Because unless it was that I don't see how we *could* go away alone. Papa and mother would never let us. We're too little."

"I didn't mean that we'd really go alone in the railway," I explained, "somebody would go with us – Pierson perhaps, if she wasn't married. But still in a way it would be going away alone. Oh Tom, I have felt so funny all night – as if I *couldn't* believe it."

Then I told him what I had heard and what mother had told me; and all the time we held each other tight. We felt so strange – the telling it to Tom made it seem more real to me, and poor Tom seemed to feel it was real at once. When I left off speaking at last, he stared at me again with his puzzled-looking eyes, but he didn't seem as if he was going to cry.

"Audrey," he said at last, starting up, "don't you think if we were all to pray to God for papa and mother not to go away that

that would be the best plan?"

I didn't quite know what to say. I knew it was always a good thing to pray to God, but yet I didn't feel sure that it would stop papa and mother's going away. I was rather puzzled, but I didn't quite like to say so to Tom.

"Audrey," he said, jigging me a little, "speak, be quick. Wouldn't that be a good plan? Perhaps then a letter would come at breakfast to say they weren't to go – wouldn't they be pleased?"

"I don't know," I said at last. "I almost think, for some things, papa wants to go, and that it's a good thing for him, and if it's a good thing for him I dare say God wouldn't unsettle it."

"But if it isn't a good thing for *us*?" said Tom, "and it can't be a good thing for *us*– I'm sure God would unsettle it then."

I could not see it like that either.

"I shouldn't like to say it that way," I replied. "Don't you see that would be like saying papa would do something that wasn't good for us, and I shouldn't like to say that of papa – not even to God."

Tom lay down on the pillow again and gave a great sigh.

"I don't know what to do then," he said. "I am sure God would find out some way of making it right, and it's vrezy cross of you not to let me ask Him, Audrey. I don't believe you care a bit about them going away, and I know it has begun to break my heart already. When you told me first it began to thump so dreadfully fast, and then it gave a crack. I'm sure I felt it crack," and Tom began to cry.

It was dreadful to hear him talk like that. He didn't often cry. He wasn't a boy that cried for knocks and bumps at all, but just now he was rather weak with having been ill, and what he said about his heart quite frightened me. I don't know what I should have done, but just then Pierson opened the door of her room and began scolding us for talking so early in the morning. We were so afraid of her finding out that we were both in one bed, that we lay quite, quite still. Tom proposed to me in a whisper that we should begin to snore a little, but I whispered back that it would be no use as she had heard us talking just a minute before. And after grumbling a little more, Pierson shut the door and retired into her own room. Then Tom put his arms round me again and kissed me – his cross humours never lasted long; not like Racey's, who, though he was generally very good, once he *did* begin, went on and on and on till one didn't know what to do with him.

"I'm very sorry for calling you cross, Audrey," he said. "Perhaps we'd better wait and ask mother about it," and then we both kissed each other again, and somehow, though we were so very wide awake, all in a moment we went to sleep again and slept a good long while. For Pierson told us afterwards that what Tom had heard striking was only four o'clock after all.

When we woke again it was *real* morning – quite bright and sunny. And mother was standing beside the bedside, and little Racey beside her, looking very smooth and shiny with his clean pinafore and clean face and freshly brushed hair. Till I looked close at mother's face I could have fancied that all the strange

news I had heard the night before had been a dream – it did not seem the least possible that it could be true. But alas! her face told that it was. Her eyes looked as if she had not been asleep, and though she was smiling it was a sort of sad smiling that made me feel as if I couldn't help crying.

"Children," she said, "didn't you promise me not to get into each other's beds?"

We both felt rather ashamed.

"Yes, mother," I said, "I know you did, but – "

Tom interrupted me —

"Don't be vexed with Audrey, mother," he said, jumping up and throwing his arms round her neck, "it was most my fault. Audrey wanted to whisper to me. Oh mother," he went on, hugging mother closer and burying his round dark head on her shoulder, "oh mother, Audrey's *told* me."

Then without another word Tom burst into tears – not loud crying like when he was hurt or angry, but deep shaking sobbing as if his poor little heart was really breaking. And for a moment or two mother could not speak. She could only press him more tightly to her, trying to choke back the tears that she was afraid of yielding to.

Poor Racey stood staring in fear and bewilderment – his blue eyes quite ready to cry too, once he understood what it was all about. He gave a little tug to mother's dress at last.

"Muzzie, what's the matter?" he said.

Mother let go her hold of Tom and turned to Racey.

"Poor little boy," she said, "he is quite frightened. Audrey, I thought you would have understood I would tell the boys myself."

"Oh, I am so sorry," I exclaimed. "I wish I hadn't. But I did so want to speak to somebody about it, and Tom was awake – weren't you, Tom?"

"Yes, I was awake," said Tom. "Don't be vexed with Audrey, mother."

Mother didn't look as if she had the heart to be vexed with anybody.

"I daresay it doesn't matter," she said sadly. "But, Audrey, you need not say anything about it to Racey – it is better for him to find out about it gradually."

After that day things seemed to hurry on very fast. Almost immediately, papa and mother began to prepare for the great changes that were to be. Our house had a big ticket put up on the gate, and several times ladies and gentlemen came to look at it. Mother did not like it at all, I could see, though of course she was quite nice to the ladies and gentlemen, but the boys and I thought it was rather fun to have strange people coming into the house and looking at all the rooms, and we made new plays about it. I used to be the ladies coming to look, and Tom was the footman to open the door, and Racey, dressed up with one of my skirts, was mother, and sometimes Pierson, showing the ladies the rooms. Sometimes we pretended they were nice ladies, and then Racey had to smile and talk very prettily like mother, and sometimes they were cross fussy ladies, and then Racey had

to say "No, ma'am" – "I'm sure I can't say, ma'am," like Pierson in her grumpiest voice. And one day something very funny – at least long afterwards it turned out to be very funny – happened, when we were playing that way. I must tell you about it before I go on with the straight part of my story.

It was a wet day and no *real* ladies had been to see the house, so we thought as we had nothing to do we'd have a good game of pretence ones. Racey had to be Pierson this day (of course Pierson didn't *know* he was acting her), and we were doing it very nicely, for a dreadfully fussy lady had been only the day before and we had still got her quite in our heads. I – being the lady, you know – knocked at the nursery cupboard door, and when Tom the footman opened it, I stood pretending to look round the entrance hall.

"Dear me, what a *very* shabby vestibule," I said. "Not *near* so handsome as mine at Victoria Terrace – quite decries the house. Oh, young man," I went on, pretending to see Tom for the first time, "this house is to be sold, I hear? Its appearance is not what I'm accustomed to, but I may as well give a look round, as I'm here."

And so I went on, finding fault with the dining-room, drawing-room, &c. – Tom giving very short replies, except when a fit of laughter nearly choked him, till I was supposed to have reached the first floor where the imaginary Pierson took me in charge.

"You don't mean to say this is the *best* bedroom?" I said, "how *very* small!"

"Yes, ma'am, because you're so very fat. I daresay it *does* seem small to you," said Racey.

This brilliant inspiration set Tom and me off laughing so that we could hardly speak.

"Oh, Racey," I said, returning to my real character for a minute, "Pierson wouldn't really say that."

"She said she'd have *liked* to say it to that ugly lady yesterday," said Racey. "I heard her telling Banks so, on the stair." (Banks was the name of the real footman.) "She said, 'I'd like to tell that wat'" (Racey couldn't say "*f*" he always call *fat*, *wat*, and *feet*, *weet*) "'old woman that it's no wonder our rooms isn't big enough for *her*.' And Banks did so laugh."

"Well, go on, Audrey. Perhaps Racey'll think of some more funny things," said Tom.

So I proceeded with my inspection of the house.

"What very common papers!" I said, looking up at the walls with an imaginary eye-glass. "I am always accustomed to a great deal of gold on the papers. It lightens up so well."

"Yes, mum," replied Racey, rather intoxicated by his success, and now drawing wildly on his imagination, "yes, mum, I should think you was becustomed to walls that was made of gold all over, and – and – " hesitating how to make his sarcasm biting enough, "and floors made of diamonds and pessus stones, and – "

"Racey, hush," said Tom, "you're talking out of the Bible. Isn't he, Audrey?"

I was not quite prepared to give an opinion.

"Pierson doesn't talk like that, any way," I said, without committing myself. "Let's go on about there not being enough rooms for the servants. She did say that."

"And about her pet dogs," suggested Tom.

"Oh yes," I said, in the affected squeaky voice which we imagined to be an exact copy of the way of speaking of the lady who had taken such a hold on our fancy, "oh dear yes – I *must* have a very good room for my dear dogs. They are never allowed to sleep in a room without a fire, and I am so afraid this chimney smokes."

"No, mum, it's *me* that smokes, mum, not the chimney, mum. Sometimes I have a cigar, mum, in my room, mum, and a room that's good enough for me must be good enough for your dogs, mum," said Tom, the imaginary Banks.

We all three shouted with laughter at his wit, though poor Banks, the most modest of young men, whose only peculiarity was that in his nervousness he used to say "ma'am" or "sir" with every two words, would have been horrified if he had known how Tom was caricaturing him. We were still laughing when the door opened suddenly and mother with some *real* ladies, to whom she was showing the house, came in.

There were two ladies – a not very particular one, just rather nice, but we didn't notice her very much, and a much younger one whom we noticed in a minute. It was partly I think because of her pretty hair, which was that bright goldy kind that looks as if the sun was always shining on it. Mine is a *little* like that, but

not so bright as aun – oh, I forgot; you wouldn't understand. And her hair showed more because of her being all dressed in black – regular black because of somebody belonging to her being dead I mean. She came last into the room, of course that was right because she was youngest, and mother came in first to open the door like – I can remember quite well the way they all stood for a minute.

"This is the nursery, I see," said the nothing particular lady. "Well, with me it would not be that, as I have no children. But it would make a nice morning-room – it must be a bright room on a sunny day."

"Yes," said mother, "that is why we chose it for a nursery. It is a pity for you to see the house on such a dull day – it is such a bright house generally – we have liked it very much."

Mother spoke sadly – I knew the tone of her voice quite well. We all three had of course stopped playing and stood round listening to what was said. We must have looked rather funny – Racey with a skirt of mine and a white apron of Pierson's, Tom with a towel tied round him to look like Banks in the pantry, and I with an old shawl and a bonnet very much on one side, with a long feather, which we had got out of our "dressing-up" things. We were so interested in listening to mother and in looking at the ladies, particularly the golden-haired one, that we quite forgot what queer figures we were, till the young lady turned towards us.

"These are your little children," she said, with a smile – a rather sad smile – to mother. "They are playing at dressing-up,

I see."

"We're playing at ladies coming to see the house," I said, coming forward – I never was a shy child – "There have been such a lot of ladies."

Mother turned to the young lady.

"It is perhaps well that they should be able to make a play of it," she said.

"Yes," said the young lady very gently, "I remember being just the same as a child, when once my mother had to go away – to India it was – I was so pleased to see her new trunks and to watch all the packing. And now – how strange it seems that I could have endured the idea of her going – now that I shall never have her again!"

Her lip quivered, and she turned away. Mother spoke to her very, very kindly – the other lady, the nothing particular one was examining the cupboards in the room and did not notice.

"Have you lost your dear mother?" she – our mother, I mean – asked the young lady.

She could not speak for a moment. She just bowed her head. Then touching her dress she said in a sort of whisper, "Yes; quite lately. She died in London a fortnight ago. I have neither father nor mother now. I am staying for a while with my cousin."

Then, partly I think to hide the tears which would not be kept back, partly to help herself to grow calm again, she drew me to her and stroked my long hair which hung down my back below my queer bonnet.

"What is your name, dear?" she said.

"Audrey," I replied. "Audrey Mildred Gower is my long name," I added.

"'Audrey' is a very pretty name," said the young lady, still stroking my hair, "and Gower – that is not a very common name. Are you perhaps relations of Dr. Gower, of – Street?"

"That's Uncle Geoff," cried the boys and I.

"He is my husband's brother," said mother.

The young lady quite brightened up.

"Oh, how curious!" she said. "Dr. Gower was *so* kind to my mother," and again her pretty eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered.

Racey, staring at her, saw that something was the matter, though he had not the least idea what. He came close up to her, stumbling over his skirt and long apron on the way, and tugged her sleeve to catch her attention.

"Don't cry," he said abruptly. "We're going to live with Uncle Geoff. Perhaps he'd let you come too."

The young lady could not help smiling.

"Are they really going to live in London?" she said to mother. "Perhaps I shall see you again then some day. I know 'Uncle Geoff's' house very well."

But before there was time to say any more the other lady came back from her inspection, and began asking so many things about the house that the young lady's attention was quite taken up. And soon after they went away. Afterwards I remember mother said

she was sorry she had not asked the young lady's name. But we among ourselves fixed to call her "Miss Goldy-hair."

CHAPTER III.
THREE LITTLE TRAVELLERS

"What will she do for their laughter and plays,
Chattering nonsense, and sweet saucy ways?"

I will now try to go straight on with my story. But I cannot help saying I do not find it quite so easy as I thought. It is so very difficult to keep things in order and not to put in bits that have no business to come for ever so much longer. I think after this I shall always be even more obliged than I have been to people that write stories, for really when you come to do it, it isn't nearly so easy as you'd think, though to *read* the stories, it seems as if everything in them came just of itself without the least trouble.

I told you that after it was really settled and known, and all arranged about the goings away, things seemed to go on very fast. In one way they did and in one way they didn't – for now when I look back to it, it seems to me that that bit of time – the time when it was all quite settled to *be* and yet hadn't come – was very long. I hear big people say that children get quickly accustomed to anything. I think big people do too. We all – papa and mother, and the boys and I, and even Pierson and the other servants – got used to feeling something was going to come. We got used to

living with people coming to see the house, and every now and then great vans coming from the railway to take away packing-cases, and an *always* feeling that the day – the dreadful day – was going to come. Of course I cannot remember all the little particular things exactly, but I have a very clear remembrance of the sort of way it all happened, so though I may not be able to put down just the very words we said and all that, still it is telling it truly, I think, to put down as nearly as I *can* the little bits that make the whole. And even some of the littlest bits I can remember the most clearly – is not that queer? I can remember the dress mother had on the last morning, I can remember *just* how the scarf round her neck was tied, and how one end got rumpled up with the way Tom clung to her, and hugged and hugged her with his arms round her, so tight, that papa had almost to force him away.

But in my usual way I am going on too fast – at least putting things out of their places. I do not think I in the least understood then, what I do so well understand now, how terribly hard it must have been for mother to leave *us*; how much more dreadful her part of it was than any one else's. I must have seemed very heartless. I remember one day when she was packing books and music and odd things that she would not of course have taken with her just for a journey, I said to her, "Why, mother, what a lot of books you are taking! And all those table-covers and mats and things – you never take those when we go to the sea-side." Papa was standing by and mother looked up at him. "Need I take

them?" she said. "It is as if I were going to make a home out there, and oh, how can it ever be like a home? How could I wish it to be? The barer and less home-like the better I should like it."

Papa looked troubled.

"We have to think of appearances, you know," he said. "So many people will come to see you, and it would not do to look as if we took no interest in the place."

Mother said no more. She went on with her packing, and I think a good many big tears were packed among the things in that box.

I asked her one day how long she and papa would stay away. "Longer than we stay at the sea-side in summer?" I said. "Three months? – as long as that, mother? Any way you'll be home before our birthdays."

For, rather funnily, all our three birthdays came close together – all in one week. We thought it the most important time of the whole year, and we counted everything by the birthday week, and when mother didn't answer at once "Oh yes, we shall certainly be home by the birthday week," I felt quite astonished. But just then something or other put it out of my head, and I forgot to speak of it again. I can't think now how I could be so silly in some ways as I was then – it is so queer to remember.

Well – the day *did* come. We – the boys and I – were the first to leave our dear old home, even though our journey was to be such a short one – only three hours to London. Papa and mother were to start on *their* journey the next day, so we were not to see

them again. They had been at Uncle Geoff's the week before, seeing the rooms we were to have, and settling everything; and I think they thought it was better not to see us again, after we were in his house, but to get the parting over in our old home. I suppose they thought we would get over it more quickly if the journey and the newness of it all was to come after, and I daresay they were right.

I can't tell you about the saying good-bye. It was so bad for us, though we could not understand it at all properly of course, that for mother it must have been awful. And then fancy the long day after we had all left. The empty nurseries, the sort of *sound* of quietness through the house – the knowing we should never, never more be all together in the old happy way – that we should be changed *somehow* before she saw us again. For three years (and poor mother knew it would be three years) is a long time at our ages, Racey would have learnt to speak plain, and Tom would be such a big boy that he would have got out of the way of "hugging," perhaps, and Audrey even, that was me, you know, might have forgotten her a little – all these thoughts must have gone through mother's mind that dreadful afternoon, when papa had taken us to the station and seen us off to London under Pierson's care. Oh *poor* little mother, she has told me all about it since, and I must say if ever I am a big lady and have children of my own, I hope these dreadful havings to go away won't happen to me.

Well – we were in the train. Our eyes were so red that any

one might have seen something sad had happened to us, but we didn't care. Tom's eyes were the worst of all, and generally he would do anything rather than let his red eyes be seen; but to-day he didn't care, we were too full of being sorry to care whether people noticed our eyes or not. And at last when papa had kissed us all three once more for the very last time, reaching up to the railway-carriage window, and the boys and I holding him so tight that he was nearly choked; at last it was all over, all the last tiny endings of good-byes over, and we three were – it seemed to us as far as we could understand it in our childish way – alone in the world.

There was no one else in the railway-carriage – Pierson of course was with us – she had put off being married for two months, so that she could see us settled and get the new nurse into our ways, as she called it; she too had been crying, so that she was quite a fright, for her nose was all bumpy-looking with the way she had been scrubbing at it and her eyes. She was very kind to us; she took Racey on her knee, and let Tom and me sit close up to her; and if she had had three arms she would have put one round each of us I am sure.

"Poor dears!" she said, and then she looked so very sad herself that Tom and Racey took to comforting *her*, instead of expecting her to comfort them. I *was* sad really – three poor little things like us going away like that; away from everything we had ever known, away from our nice bright nursery, where everything a mother could do to make children happy our mother had done;

away from our dear little cots, where mother used to kiss us every night; and our little gardens where we had worked so happily in the summer; away to great big London, where among the thousand faces in the street there was not one we had ever seen before, where other little boys and girls had their fathers and mothers, while ours were going far, far away, to strange countries where they would find no little boys and girls like their own, no Audrey and Tom and Racey.

I thought of all this in a half-stupid way, while I sat in the railway-carriage with my arm round Tom's neck and my head leaning on Pierson's shoulder. We had never cared *very* much about Pierson, but now that she was the only thing left to us, we began to cling to her very much.

"I am so glad you've not gone away, Pierson," I said, and Pierson seemed very pleased, for I didn't very often say things like that.

"Poor dear Miss Audrey," she said in return. "Poor dear," seemed the only words she could think of to comfort us with. And then we all grew silent, and after a while it began to get dark, for the days were short now, and Tom and Racey fell asleep, just sobbing quietly now and then in their breathing – the way little children do, you know, after they have been crying a good deal; and I sat quite still, staring out at the gloomy-looking country that we were whizzing through, the bare trees and dull fields, so different from the brightness and prettiness of even a flat unpicturesque landscape on a *summer* day, when the sun lights

up everything, and makes the fresh green look still fresher and more tempting. And it seemed to me that the sky and the sun and all the outside things were looking dull because of our trouble, and that they were all sorry for us, and there seemed a queer nice feeling in thinking so.

And after a while I began making pictures to myself of what I would do to please mother while she was away; how I would be so good to Tom and Racey, and teach them to be so good too; how I would learn to be always neat, and how I would try to get on with music, which I didn't much like, but which mother was so fond of that she thought I would get to like it when I was bigger and had got over the worst part. And then I began thinking of the letters I would write to mother, and all I would say in them; and I wondered too to myself very much what Uncle Geoff would be like, for I had not seen him for some time, and I couldn't remember him properly at all; and I wondered what his house would be like, and what sort of a nursery we should have, and what our new governess would be like, and how everything in our new home would be. I went on wondering till I suppose my brain got tired of asking questions it couldn't answer, and without knowing that I was the least sleepy, I too fell fast asleep!

I was busy dreaming – dreaming that I was on board the ship with papa and mother, and that Uncle Geoff was a lady come to see the house; in my dream the ship seemed a house, only it went whizzing along like a railway, and that he had a face like Pierson's, and he would say "poor dear Miss Audrey," when

another voice seemed to mix in with my dreaming. A voice that said —

"Poor little souls – asleep are they – all three? Which of them shall I look after? Here nurse, you take the boys, and I'll lift out Miss Audrey."

And "Wake up, Miss Audrey, my dear. Wake up. Here's your uncle come himself to meet you at the station. I had no idea, sir, we were so near London, or I'd have had them all awake and ready," said Pierson, who never had all her ideas in order at once.

There was nothing for it but to wake up, though I was most unwilling to do so. I was not at all shy, but yet in the humour I was in then I felt disinclined to make friends with Uncle Geoff, and I wished he hadn't come to the station himself. He lifted me out, however, very kindly; and when I found myself standing on the platform, in the light of the lamps, I could not help looking up at him to see what he was like. I felt better inclined to like him when he put me down on my feet, for I had been afraid he was intending to carry me in his arms till he put me into the cab, and that would have offended me very much.

"Well, Audrey, and are you very tired?" he said kindly.

I looked up at him. He was not very tall, but very strong-looking, and had rather a stern expression, except when he smiled; but just now he *was* smiling. I remembered what mother had said to me about being very good with Uncle Geoff, and doing all he told me. So I tried to speak very nicely when I answered him.

"No, thank you, Uncle Geoff, I am not very tired, but I am rather sleepy; and I think the boys are very sleepy too."

"All right," said Uncle Geoff, "that is a trouble that can soon be cured. Here nurse," he went on, turning to Pierson, "I'll take Miss Audrey on with me in my carriage, which is waiting; but there is only room for two in it. So my man will get a cab for you and the boys and put the luggage on it."

Pierson was agreeing meekly, but I interfered.

"If you please, Uncle Geoff," I said, "mayn't I stay, and come in the cab too? I don't like to leave the boys, because mother says I'm *always* to take care of them now."

"Miss Audrey, my dear – " began Pierson, in reproof, but Uncle Geoff interrupted her. He did not seem at all vexed, but rather amused. I did not like that, I would almost rather he had been vexed.

"Never mind, nurse," he said. "I like children – and grown people too for that matter – to speak out. Of course you may stay and come in the cab if you would rather, Audrey. But in that case I fear I shall not see any more of you to-night. I have one or two serious cases," he went on, turning to Pierson, "and may be very late of coming home. But no doubt Mrs. Partridge will make you comfortable, and Audrey here seems a host in herself. Good-night, little people."

He stooped and kissed us – kindly but rather hurriedly – and then he put us all into a cab, and left the servant who was with him to come after with the luggage.

"It is better not to keep them waiting," he said to Pierson as we were driving away.

"Your uncle is very kind and considering," said Pierson; she always said "considering" for "considerate." "I wonder you spoke that way to him, Miss Audrey."

"I didn't speak any way to him," I said crossly. "I don't see that it was very kind to want to send me away from the boys. Mother told me I was to take care of them, and I'm going to do what she told me."

"And I'm sure if you're going to teach them to get into naughty tempers and to be so cross, they'd be better without you to take care of them," said Pierson.

That was her way; she always said something to make us more cross instead of saying some little gentle thing to smooth us as mamma did. Nobody ever made me so cross just in that kind of way as Pierson did. I am sometimes quite ashamed when I remember it. Just then I did not answer her again or say any more. I was too tired, and I felt that if I said anything else I should begin to cry again, and I didn't want Mrs. Partridge to see me with red eyes. Tom and Racey pressed themselves close to me in the cab, and Tom whispered, "Never mind, Audrey. Pierson's an ugly cross thing. We'll do what you tell us, always – won't we, Racey?"

And Racey said "Yes, always," and then, poor little boys, they both patted my hands and tried to comfort me. They always did like that when Pierson was cross, and I don't think she much liked

it, and I felt that it was rather a pity to vex her when she had meant to be kind, but still I didn't feel much inclined to make friends.

So we drove on —*what* a long way it seemed! We had never been in London before, and the streets and houses seemed as if they would never come to an end. It was a very wet evening; I dare say it looked much less dull and gloomy now than it had been earlier in the day, for the gas lighted up the streets, and the shops looked bright and cheerful. I could not but look at them with interest, what quantities there were, how nice it would have been to come to London with mother, and to have gone about buying lots of pretty things; but now it was quite different. And once when I saw from the cab-window a poor, but neatly-dressed little girl about my own size walking along by her mother, holding her hand and looking quite happy in spite of the rain, I felt so miserable I could do nothing but press more closely the two little hands that still lay in mine, and repeat to myself the promise I had made to mother. "Oh I *will* try to take care of them and make them happy and good till you come back," and there was a great deal of comfort in the thought, especially when I went on to make, as I was very fond of doing, pictures of papa and mother coming home again, and of them saying how good Tom and Racey were, and what great care I must have taken of them. I only wished – especially since she had spoken crossly to me – that it had not been settled for Pierson to stay with us. I felt so sure I could take better care of the boys than any one else.

But my thoughts and plans were interrupted by our stopping at

last. Uncle Geoff's house was in a street in which there were no shops. It was a dull-looking street at all times; to-night of course we could see nothing but just the house where we stopped. It looked big and dull to Tom and me as we went in; Racey, poor little fellow, didn't know anything about how it looked, for he had fallen asleep again and had to be carried in in Pierson's arms. The hall was a regular town house hall – you know the kind I mean – not like ours at home, which was nicely carpeted and had a pretty fireplace, where in winter there was always a bright fire to welcome you on first going in; the hall at Uncle Geoff's was cold and dull, with just oilcloth on the floor, and a stiff hall table and hat-stand, and stiff chairs; no flower-stands or plants about, such as mother was so fond of. And the servant that opened the door was rather stiff-looking too. She was the housemaid, and her name was Sarah. It was not generally she that had to open the door, but the footman had gone to the station you know, and perhaps Sarah was cross at having to open. And far back in the hall an oldish-looking person was standing, who came forward when she saw it was us. She was dressed in black silk, and she had a cap with lilac ribbons. She looked kind but rather fussy.

"And so these are the dear children," she said. "How do you do, little missy, and little master too; and the dear baby is asleep, I see? And how did you leave your dear papa and mamma?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Tom and I together. We squeezed each other's hands tight; we were determined not to cry before Mrs. Partridge, for we knew it must be her, and by the

way Tom squeezed my hand I quite understood that he had not taken a fancy to Mrs. Partridge, and I squeezed his again to say I hadn't either.

We hated being called master and missy, and of all things Racey hated being called "baby." Oh how angry he would have been if he had been awake! And then I didn't like her speaking of papa and mother in that sort of way, as if she would have liked us to say they were very ill indeed – she had such a whiney way of talking. But of course we were quite civil to her; we only squeezed each other's hands, and nobody could see that.

Mrs. Partridge opened a door on the right side of the hall. It led into the dining-room. A nice fire was burning there, but still it did not look cheerful – "not a bit," I said to myself again – that thought was *always* coming into my head – "not a bit like our dining-room at home." But still it was nice to see a fire, and Tom and I, still holding each other's hands, went up to it and stood on the rug looking at the pleasant blaze.

"You've had a cold journey I'm afraid," said Mrs. Partridge.

"Yes, ma'am, very," said Tom, who fancied she was speaking to him. He blinked his eyes as he looked up to her, for he had been asleep in the train, and coming into the light was dazzling.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Partridge at once, "what weak eyes he has! What do you do for them, nurse? He must take them of his mamma, for our young gentlemen always had lovely eyes."

"I'm sure he doesn't get ugly eyes from mother," I said indignantly. "Mother has beautiful eyes, and Tom has nice eyes

too. They're not weak."

"Deary me, deary me," exclaimed Mrs. Partridge, "what a very sharp-spoken young lady! I'm sure no offence was meant, only I was sorry to see little master's eyes so red. Don't they hurt you, my dear?"

"No thank you, ma'am," said Tom, still holding my hand very tight.

He didn't quite understand what had been said. He was a very little boy and very sleepy. I wondered what made him say "ma'am" to Mrs. Partridge, for of course he never did in speaking to ladies. I think it must have been some confused remembrance of our playing at ladies, for Mrs. Partridge had a sort of peepy way of talking, something like the way we did when we were pretending ladies.

Pierson had said nothing. I don't think *she* liked what the old housekeeper said about mother's eyes any better than I did, but she was vexed with me already, and more vexed still, I suppose, at my "answering back" Mrs. Partridge, and so she wouldn't speak at all.

Then Mrs. Partridge, who all the time *meant* to be very kind to us, you see, took us up-stairs to our rooms – they were on the second floor – above what is always the drawing-room floor in a London house, I mean, and they looked to the front. But to-night of course – I don't know if it is right for me to say "to-night," when I mean *that* night, but it is easier – we did not notice whether they looked to the front or not. All we did notice was that

in the one which was to be the day nursery the fire was burning cheerfully, and the table was neatly spread with a white cloth for tea.

Tom, who was looking very sad, sat down on a chair by the fire and pulled me close to stand by him.

"Audrey," he whispered, "I do feel so sad, and I don't like that Mrs. Partridge. Audrey, I can't eat any tea. I didn't think it would have been nearly so bad, mother's going away and us coming to London. I don't like London. I think it would have been much better, Audrey, if we had died – you and I when we had the measles."

And stooping down to kiss my poor little tired brother, I saw that two big tears were forcing themselves out of his eyes; in spite of all his trying to be manly, and not to let Mrs. Partridge see him crying, he could not keep them in any longer. I threw my arms round him and kissed his poor red eyes. "Horrid old woman," I said to myself, "to say he had ugly eyes." And a feeling came over me that I can hardly say in words, that I would put my arms round Tom and Racey and never let them go till mother came back again, and that *nobody* should dare to vex them or make them cry. I felt, in that minute, as if I had grown quite big and strong to take care of them – as if I were really their mother. I kissed him and kissed him, and tried to think of something to comfort him.

"Tom, dear," I said, "do come and have your things off, and try to take some tea. There are Bath buns, Tom," I added.

But Tom still shook his head.

"No thank you, Audrey," he said. "I can't eat anything – I can't indeed. It would have been better, Audrey, it would really, if you and I had died."

"But poor Racey," I said. "He would have been all alone – just fancy that."

"Perhaps they would have taken him with them," said Tom dreamily. Then he put his arms round me and leant his little round head on my shoulder.

"I'm glad I've got *you*, Audrey," he whispered, and in that there was some comfort. Still, altogether, I felt what he said was true; it was very sad for us.

CHAPTER IV.
THE AIR-GARDEN

"But children, good though they may be,
Must cry sometimes when they are sad."

It was not quite so bad the next morning. That is one good thing of being a child, I suppose – at least mother says so – things never are quite so bad the next morning!

We all slept very soundly; we had three nice little beds in one rather big room, which we thought a very good plan; and the first thing that woke me was feeling something bump down on the top of me all of a sudden. It was Racey. He looked quite bright and rosy, all his tiredness gone away; and then you know he was really such a *very* little boy – only five – that he could not be expected to remember very long about poor mother going away and all our trouble.

"Audrey," he said, in what he meant to be a whisper, but it was a very loud one, "Audrey, I don't want to wake Tom. Poor Tom's so tired. Audrey, let me get in 'aside you."

He had clambered out of his bed and into mine somehow; and though it was against rules to get into each other's beds – mother had had to make the rule because Tom and I got in the way of waking each other so dreadfully early to tell stories – I could not this first morning refuse to let the poor little thing get in under

the nice warm clothes to be cuddled.

"Oh dear, Racey, what cold little toes you've got," I said. "You haven't been running about without your slippers on, surely?"

"Just for a minute; don't tell Pierson," said Racey. "I wanted to look out of the window. Audrey, this is such a funny place – there's no trees and no garden – and lots and lots of windows. Is all the windows Uncle Geoff's?"

"Oh, no – there are lots of other people's houses here," I said. Poor little Racey had never been in a town before. "In London all the houses are put close together. You see, Racey, there are such a lot of people in London there wouldn't be room for all the houses they need if each had a garden."

"But some peoples has little gardens —*air* gardens," said Racey eagerly. "There's one I sawed out of the window."

"*Air* gardens! What do you mean, Racey?" I said.

"High up – up in the air," he explained. "Sticking up all of theirselves in the air."

"Oh, I know what you mean – you mean a little glass place for flowers," I said. "I've seen those – once I was in London before with mother, in a cab, when we were coming from Tonbridge Wells."

"*Were* you?" said Racey, greatly impressed. "Was Tom?"

"No, not Tom – only me. When we're dressed, Racey, I'd like to look out of the window at the air garden."

"Come *now*," said Racey. But I firmly refused to get out of bed till Pierson came, as it was one of the things mother had

particularly told me not to do – we had so often caught cold with running about like that. And it was a good thing we didn't, for just then Pierson came into the room looking rather cross, and if she had found us running about without our slippers on she'd have been crosser still.

"It's time to get up, Miss Audrey," she said in a melancholy tone, "past half-past-eight; though I'm sure no one would think so by the light. I hope you've had a good night – but – " as she suddenly caught sight of my little visitor, "whatever's Master Racey doing in your bed?"

Racey ducked down under the clothes to avoid being caught, and Pierson was getting still crosser, when fortunately a diversion of her thoughts was caused by Tom, who just then awoke.

"Oh dear!" he said with a great sigh, "oh dear! Will the ship have gone yet?"

He was hardly awake, but he sat up in bed, and his big sad eyes seemed to be looking about for something they could not find. Then with another sigh he lay down again. "I was dreaming," he said, "that we got a letter to say we were to go in the train again to South – South – that place where the ship goes from, and that Uncle Geoff was the man on the engine, and he kept calling to us to be quick or the ship would be gone. Oh dear, I wish it had been true!"

Poor Tom! Pierson forgot her crossness in trying to comfort him. Of us all I'm sure he was her favourite, even though he was very mischievous sometimes. We all went on talking about Tom's

dream till Pierson had got back into quite a good temper – a good temper to *us*, that is to say, for she at last confided to us what had made her so cross. She "couldn't abide that Mrs. Partridge," that was the burden of her song. "Stupid, fussy old thing," she called her, "going on about Master Tom's eyes last night. I dare say I shouldn't say so to you, Miss Audrey, but I can't help owning I *was* glad you spoke up to her as you did. She's that tiresome and interfering, – as if I didn't know my own work! I'll be sorry to leave you, my dears, when the time comes, which it will only too soon; but I can't say that there'd be peace for long if that stupid old woman was to keep on meddling."

We were all full of sympathy for Pierson, and indignant with Mrs. Partridge.

"Never mind, Pierson," we said, "we won't take any notice of her. We'll just do what *you* tell us."

So breakfast was eaten in the most friendly spirit, and after breakfast, our hands and faces being again washed, and our hair receiving a second smooth, we were taken down-stairs to be inspected by Uncle Geoff.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.