

Marshall Emma

A Flight with the Swallows: or, Little Dorothy's Dream



Emma Marshall

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CHAPTER I DOROTHY'S DREAM

In a deep window seat, hidden by crimson curtains from the room beyond, a little girl was curled up, looking out upon a trim garden, where the first autumn leaves were falling one September afternoon. The view was bounded by a high wall, and above the wall, the east end of Coldchester Cathedral stood up a dark mass against the pale-blue sky. Every now and then a swallow darted past the window, with its forked tail and whitish breast; then there was a twittering and chirping in the nests above, as the swallows talked to each other of their coming flight. Little Dorothy was an only child; she had no brothers and sisters to play with; thus she made playmates of her two fluffy kittens, who were lying at her feet; and she made friends of the twittering swallows and the chattering jackdaws, as they flew in and out from the cathedral tower, and lived in a world of her own.

The position of an only child has its peculiar pleasures and privileges; but I am inclined to think that all little girls who have brothers and sisters to play with are more to be envied than little Dorothy. To be sure, there was no one to want Puff and Muff but herself; no one to dispute the ownership of Miss Belinda, her large doll; no one to say it was her turn to dust and tidy Barton Hall, the residence of Miss Belinda; no one to insist on his right to spin a top or snatch away the cup and ball just when the critical moment came, and the ball was at last going to alight on the cup.

Dorothy had none of these trials; but then she had none of the pleasures which go with them; for the pleasure of giving up your own way is in the long run greater than always getting it; and it is better to have a little quarrel, and then "make it up" with a kiss and confession of fault on both sides, than never to have any one to care about what *you* care for, and no one to contradict you!

As little Dorothy watched the swallows, and listened to their conversation above her head, she became aware that some one was in the drawing-room, and was talking to her mother.

She was quite hidden from view, and she heard her name.

"But how can I take little Dorothy?"

"Easily enough. It will do her no harm to take flight with the swallows."

"You don't think *she* is delicate?" she heard her mother exclaim, in a voice of alarm. "Oh, Doctor Bell, you don't think Dorothy is delicate?"

"No, she is very well as far as I see at present, but I think her life is perhaps rather too dreamy and self-absorbed. She wants companions; she wants variety."

Dr. Bell knew he was venturing on delicate ground.

"Dorothy is very happy," Mrs. Acheson said, "very happy. Just suppose San Remo does not suit her, does not agree with her; then think of the journey!"

"My dear madam, the journey is as easy in these days as if you could fly over on the backs of the swallows – easier, if anything. You ask my serious advice, and it is this, that you lose no time in starting for San Remo or Mentone."

"San Remo is best," said Mrs. Acheson, "for I have a friend who has a house there, and she will be there for the winter."

"Very well; then let me advise you to be quick in making your preparations. I shall call again this day week, and expect to find you are standing, like the swallows, ready for flight. Look at them now on the coping of the old wall, talking about their departure, and settling."

When Dr. Bell was gone, Mrs. Acheson sat quietly by the fire, thinking over what he had said. She had tried to persuade herself that her cough was better, that if she kept in the house all the winter it would go away. She had felt sure that in this comfortable room, out of which her bed-room opened, she must be as well as in Italy or the south of France. Dr. Bell was so determined to get his own way, and it was cruel to turn her out of her home. And then Dorothy, little Dorothy! how hard it would be for her to leave Puff and Muff, and her nursery, and everything in it. And what was to be done about Nino, the little white poodle, and —

A host of objections started up, and Mrs. Acheson tried to believe that she would make a stand against Dr. Bell, and stay in Canon's House all the winter.

Meantime little Dorothy, who had been lying curled up as I have described, had heard in a confused way much of what Dr. Bell said. "A flight with the swallows." The swallows, her uncle, Canon Percival, had told her, flew away to sunshine and flowers; that the cold wind in England gave them the ague, and that they got all sorts of complaints, and would die of hunger, or cramp, or rheumatism if they stayed in England!

"As easy a journey as if you were on a swallow's back," the doctor had said; and Dorothy was wondering who could be small enough to ride on a swallow's back, when she heard a tap at the window, a little gentle tap.

"Let me in, let me in," said a small voice, which was like a chirp or a twitter, rather than a voice.

And then Dorothy turned the old-fashioned handle which closed the lower square of the lattice window, and in came the swallow. She recognised it as one she knew – the mother-bird from the nest in the eaves.

"Come to the sunny South," it said. "Come to the sunny South."

"I can't, without mother," Dorothy said.

"Oh yes, you can. Get on my back."

"I am much too big. I am nearly eight years old."

The swallow twittered, and it sounded like a laugh.

"You are not too big; just get on."

And then the swallow turned its tail towards little Dorothy; and, to her surprise, she saw her hands were tiny hands as she put them round the swallow's neck, and tucked a pair of tinier feet under its wings.

"Are you ready?" said the swallow.

"I don't know. Stop – I –"

But in another minute she was flying through the air on the swallow's back. Over the great cathedral tower, over the blue hills, away, away. Presently there was water beneath, dancing and sparkling in the western sunshine; then there were boats and ships, looking so tiny. Everything did look so small. Then it grew dark, and Dorothy was asleep – she felt she was asleep – and presently the swallow put her down on something very soft, and there was a great light, and she sat up and found herself, not in the sunny South, but on her mother's knee by the bright fire in the drawing-room.

"Why, Dorothy, you are quite cold," her mother said. "I did not know you were curled up in the window seat, and so fast asleep."

"Why, mother," said Dorothy, rubbing her eyes and giving a great yawn, "I thought I was flying off to the sunny South with the swallows. How funny!" she exclaimed. "It was, after all, a dream! I heard Dr. Bell talking about your taking flight with the swallows, and then I thought I got ever so wee and tiny, and then the old mother-swallow carried me off. *Are you going to fly off with the swallows, mother, to the sunny South?*"

CHAPTER II

PREPARATION

"Well, Dorothy Dormouse!" exclaimed Canon Percival, when he came into the drawing-room after dinner that evening.

"Don't call me Dorothy Dormouse, Uncle Crannie."

"Oh, but we call people what they are; and when little girls roll up into a ball, and sleep away their time, they are like nothing so much as – dormice."

"Mother has been telling you at dinner all about my dream, Uncle Crannie. I know she has, else how do you know?"

"Oh, perhaps one of the swallows told me. I say, Dorothy, I have to talk seriously to you for once. I am not joking this time."

Dorothy looked up in her uncle's face, and saw that he really did look grave – almost sad.

"Before mother comes into the room, I want to tell you that Dr. Bell thinks her cough is a bad cough, and that Coldchester is not the right place for her to live in during the winter months. So poor Uncle Crannie will be left alone all the long winter, and you must go with mother and Ingleby to the sunny South – to Italy; think of that!"

"I don't want to go," said Dorothy. "I mean – I mean I don't want to leave Puff and Muff and old Nino, and –"

"Poor old Uncle Crannie; but, my dear little niece, this is not a question of what you *like* or what you *want*. It is a question of what is *right* to do. Perhaps, little Dorothy, neither mother nor I have taught you enough the meaning of the word duty. It means, what you owe to others of service or love. Now, you owe it to your mother to be as merry and happy as a bird; and, after all, many little girls would jump for joy to be off to San Remo."

Dorothy was silent. "How long will it take to get there," she asked – "to the sunny South?"

"Well, you won't go quite as fast as the swallows, but I daresay we shall get there in less than a week; it depends upon the weather, and upon how your mother bears the journey. You must ask God to-night to bless your dear mother, and to make you a very good, helpful little daughter to her. Will you do this?"

"Yes," Dorothy said – "yes, Uncle Crannie. Why won't you stay with us there all the time?"

"Well! the cathedral might run away if I was not here to prevent it; and what would the old Canons do if I deserted them?"

"You are the young Canon, I know," Dorothy said. "Ingleby says that's what you are called."

"Ah!" said the Canon, rubbing his bald head, "there are degrees of comparison, and I am afraid it is old, older, olderer, and oldest, in the cathedral chapter. But I wanted to tell you that at San Remo you will have playfellows – nice little girls and boys, who are living there with their grandmother; and that is what we cannot find for you in Coldchester."

"I don't want any little girls and boys," Dorothy said. "I shan't play with them."

"Oh, nonsense! you will learn to play with them – Hoodman Blind, and Tom Tickler's ground; won't that be jolly?"

Dorothy made no response, and her mother coming into the room, with her shawl wrapped closely round her, she slipped down from her uncle's knee and took up her position at her mother's feet, with one of the kittens in her lap, saying —

"Read, mother; please read."

"Your mother can't read to-night, Dorothy," said the Canon, who had taken up the *Times*. "She has coughed so much to-day, and is very hoarse."

Dorothy pouted, and her mother, clearing her throat, said —

"Oh, I will try to finish the chapter we left unfinished last night. That will not hurt me."

It was a pity that Dorothy was so seldom denied anything. It was simply that there was no absolute necessity for refusing her what she asked, and she had no idea yet that giving up her own will was a sweet gift the youngest child may offer to her Father in heaven – the Father of the dear Lord Jesus Christ, who offered Himself in life and in death for the sinful, sad world He came to save. So Mrs. Acheson finished the chapter of the story, and then it was time for Dorothy to go to bed, for Ingleby appeared at the door, and said it was past eight o'clock, and much too late for a little girl to be in the drawing-room.

I daresay you wish to know what Dorothy was like, and as she goes up the wide staircase of Canon's House, she makes a very pretty picture. She had long, silky, fair hair, which was not frizzed and crimped, but hung down to her waist, and even below it, with soft, curled ends.

As Ingleby had no other child to look after, it was natural that she should bestow much pains on Dorothy's appearance. She wore a pretty white cashmere frock, with a wide rose-coloured sash, her black silk stockings fitted her legs precisely, and her dainty shoes had pretty buckles.

Puff and Muff had been sent to bed downstairs, and only old Nino was allowed to come into the nursery. He was a favoured dog, and slept at the foot of his little mistress's bed.

Dorothy went slowly upstairs, heedless of Ingleby's repeated "Come, my dear, come!" And when at last they had reached the nursery, Dorothy seated herself in the old rocking-chair, put her head back, and swinging gently backwards and forwards, said seriously, almost solemnly —

"Jingle" – it was her pet name for her faithful nurse – "I hate 'playmates,' as Uncle Crannie calls them. If I go to the sunny South, I shall not play with any one."

"Well, that will be very uncivil, my dear, though, to be sure, you are an odd child, for when the little Miss Thompsons and Master Benson came to tea on your last birthday, it did not seem to make you happy."

"It made me miserable," said Dorothy. Then, with a sudden impulse, she got up, and throwing her arms round her old friend's neck, she said, "I want nobody but you and mother, and Puff and Muff, and Nino."

Ingleby was certainly flattered by her darling's preference, and took her on her knee and undressed her as if she were seven months, instead of nearly eight years old, and brushed and combed the silky hair with great pride and pleasure. Dorothy's face was rather too thin and colourless for childhood; but her features were regular, and her large, blue eyes, shaded by dark lashes, were really beautiful.

"She is too much of a little woman," the Miss Thompsons' mother said; "the child wants companions, and to be roused from her dreams;" while Master Benson went away from the birthday party declaring it was slow and stupid, and that Dorothy was a stiff starched little thing, and he longed to shake her!

Dorothy could not remember her father; he had died when she was scarcely a year old, and just at that time her uncle, Canon Percival, went to live in Canon's House, at Coldchester, and invited his sister to come and take up her abode there, with her little girl, and Ingleby, her nurse.

Canon Percival was a bachelor, and till Dorothy came he had never had much to do with children. His friends pitied him, and said that for the most part children were noisy and troublesome, and that he would find the peace of his house disturbed. But Dorothy – Dorothy Dormouse, as he liked to call her – set these preconceived notions at defiance. She was quiet and gentle, and she and her uncle Cranstone – Crannie, as she called him – were great friends. She would sit on one of the red leather chairs by her uncle, at his great writing table, and draw pictures by the hour of birds, and butterflies, and flowers, and portraits, too – of Miss Belinda, and Puff and Muff, and even of her uncle himself. Then she would walk with him to the service in the cathedral, and sit demure and quiet while the prayers were said and the organ rolled its waves of music overhead.

The Canon's little niece was a great favourite with the old vergers, though they would say, one to the other, that she was too wise and knowing for a little one.

"It all comes of being with old people. There ain't enough of young life about her. It's a thousand pities she has not some playmate."

So it seemed, you see, a general opinion that Dorothy wanted companions; and when she got to the sunny South the companions were ready for her.

But it took some time to prepare for flight. People can get to the south of France and Italy very quickly, it is true; but they are not like the swallows, who don't want any luggage, and fly with no encumbrance.

Ingleby's preparations were very extensive indeed, and Dorothy had also a great deal in hand. She had to put Barton Hall in order, for one thing, and to put up a notice on the door that this house was to let furnished. Then Belinda had to have a little travelling ulster and warm hat, like her mistress's, and Puff and Muff had to be settled comfortably in their new quarters; for though they did not sleep in the nursery, they were there all day, and were carried about the house by their little mistress, while Nino trotted behind. The preparations were an amusement to Dorothy, and she began to feel that if anything prevented her going to the sunny South, she would feel sorry and disappointed after all!

Ingleby grew more and more serious as the time drew near. She murmured a good deal about "foreign parts," and once Dorothy felt sure she heard her say something about going away to die. Could these words possibly refer to her mother? Poor little girl! She had lived so securely with her mother, and had never been accustomed to think of her as apart from her own comfort and pleasure, that a sharp pain shot through her heart as she heard Ingleby's murmured words.

Once, too, when Ingleby thought she was asleep in the inner nursery, she heard her talking in low tones to the housemaid.

"The child has no notion that her mamma is so ill. Childlike!" said Ingleby.

"Well, I don't call it childlike," was the reply. "Miss Dorothy is not childlike; she is just eaten up with herself."

"She is as dear a lamb as you could find anywhere," said Ingleby, wrathfully; "a dear, sweet lamb. I suppose you like rampaging, noisy children, like your own brothers and sisters in your mother's farmhouse?"

"I like children," said Susan, bravely, "to think of other folks a little, as well as themselves. But there! it's not the poor child's fault; everyone in the house spoils her, and you are the worst of all, Mrs. Ingleby."

"I tell you what, Susan, I'd advise you, as a friend, to mind your own business. If you are such a blind bat as not to see what Miss Dorothy is – well, I am sorry for you, and I can't help it."

"I did not mean any offence, I am sure," said Susan, as she left the nursery. "As I said, it's not the child's fault; but it would be hard lines for her if she lost her mamma, and you too, Mrs. Ingleby."

A few minutes later, Ingleby was startled by the appearance of a little white figure in the doorway.

"Jingle," she said, in a low, choking voice, "is – my – mamma so very ill? I want to know."

"Ill? why, no. She has got a cough which shakes her rather. But, bless your little heart – don't, Miss Dorothy, my sweet, don't."

For, in a passion of weeping, Dorothy had thrown herself into her nurse's arms.

"Am I such a spoiled child? – am I, Jingle?"

"You are a dear little creature; nothing could spoil you. There, there; let me put you back to bed. Don't cry."

But Dorothy did cry, and when Ingleby had left her at last, she buried her face in the pillow, saying over to herself —

"Oh, is my mamma so ill? Will she die? Will she die? And I am such a spoiled child. Oh dear, oh dear! I never thought of it before – never, never."

There are times when many older people than little Dorothy catch suddenly, as it were, a glimpse of their true selves, and are saddened at the sight, with what results for the future depends upon the means they take to cure themselves of their faults.

There is but one way for the children and for those who have left childhood far behind – only one way – to watch and pray, lest they enter into temptation.

CHAPTER III

OFF AND AWAY

The excitement of preparation for departure is always infectious, and, however much Mrs. Acheson and little Dorothy had at first disliked the idea of leaving home for the winter, before the actual day for saying good-bye arrived, they were both in a measure reconciled to the coming change.

Dorothy had packed a large box, with things she *must* take, and Ingleby, glad she should be so amused, did not prevent her, as she really ought to have done; for such a strange medley as that box contained had surely scarcely ever been collected for transportation across the Channel: paint-boxes; new and old picture-books, coloured by her own hand; Belinda's wardrobe – an extensive one; pencils; india-rubber; her desk; her workbox (which last, by-the-bye, was seldom used); her "Little Arthur's History" and "Mrs. Markham's History;" boxes of dominoes and draughts; magnetic ducks and geese and fish; and many more things of the like kind, which would take me far too long to enumerate.

When the luggage stood in the hall on the morning of departure, Canon Percival shrugged his shoulders, and gave a low whistle. "As I am courier," he said, "and must look after the luggage, I am rather alarmed to see so many boxes. What is that old box with brass nails, Ingleby?"

"Oh, that is Miss Dorothy's, sir; she packed it herself."

"With toys, I suppose, and rubbish. No, I shall not be answerable for that. If we take Nino and Belinda, that must suffice."

Ingleby looked doubtful. "The best way will be, sir, to get it carried into the servants' hall before the poor child comes down; she is breaking her heart, as it is, over Puff and Muff."

"Nonsense!" said Canon Percival, impatiently. "Dorothy must be more reasonable; we have spoilt her long enough."

Ingleby dreaded a scene, and began to drag away the box into a remote region behind the red baize door, hoping to get it out of sight, and out of mind, before Dorothy and her mother appeared.

She had just succeeded, and was returning breathless, when Dorothy, with Belinda in her arms and Nino toddling behind, came downstairs.

The luggage was packed on a fly, and Mrs. Acheson, Dorothy, and Canon Percival drove to the station in the carriage. All the servants were gathered in the hall, and were saying good-bye, with many wishes that Mrs. Acheson would come back soon quite well. A little telegraph boy, with his bag strapped across his shoulder, came gaily up to the door. Then he took out of his bag the dark orange envelope which often sends a thrill of fear through the hearts of those whose nearest and dearest ones are separated from them, and handed it to Canon Percival.

"A paid answer, sir," said the messenger.

And Canon Percival, after scanning the few words, took out his pencil and wrote —

"Yes, with pleasure."

"What is it, Cranstone? nothing wrong?"

"Oh no, only that our travelling party is to be enlarged in London. Little Irene Packingham is to spend the winter at San Remo with her grandmother, and the telegram is from Mrs. Baker, the child's schoolmistress, saying Lady Burnside had telegraphed to her to communicate with me."

"How very odd not to write! It must be a sudden determination."

"Yes; but we shall not get to Paddington, much less to San Remo, if we dawdle about here any longer; come, make haste."

They were off at last, and at the station several friends appeared, who came to wish them a safe journey. Ingleby and the footman had got the luggage labelled and in the van; and Dorothy and her mother were comfortably seated in a first-class carriage, while Canon Percival stood by the door, exchanging a few last words with a gentleman; and then the guard came up with the familiar question

– "Any more going?" Canon Percival jumped in, and they were gliding quietly out of the station and leaving Coldchester far behind.

For the convenience of early crossing the English Channel the next morning, the party were to sleep at the Charing Cross Hotel; and here, under the charge of one of Mrs. Baker's governesses, little Irene Packingham was waiting for them.

Dorothy's curiosity had been roused when her mother told her of a little travelling companion, but the two children stood looking at each other, shy and speechless, while Canon Percival and Mrs. Acheson were engaged talking to the governess.

She was a prim, stiff-looking, elderly woman, who was the useful governess in Mrs. Baker's school. She only taught the little girls, looked after the servants, and met girls at the station, or, as in this instance, accompanied one who was leaving the school.

"Irene has not been very well of late," Miss Pearce was saying; "and Colonel Packingham seems to have written to Lady Burnside that he wished her to spend the rest of the term till after the Christmas holidays at San Remo. Mrs. Baker had a letter from Lady Burnside, requesting us to prepare Irene to start with you to-morrow morning. It is very short notice, but I hope she has her things all right."

After a few more words of a like kind, Miss Pearce said she must hasten back to St. John's Wood, and bade her little charge good-bye.

"Good-bye, Irene; I hope you will be a very good girl, and give no trouble; you have your keys in your pocket, and mind you keep the comforter well round your neck on the boat."

Then a kiss was exchanged, not a very warm one on either side, and Miss Pearce departed.

Rooms had been engaged on the upper floor of the big hotel through which so many people pass coming and going from the Continent. The party went up in a lift, which was a great novelty to Dorothy, who all this time had not spoken a single word to Irene.

A little bedroom next the one which had been arranged by Ingleby for her mistress was found for Irene. And in a very independent, methodical way she began to lay aside her hat and jacket, take out her keys, and unlock her small travelling-bag.

Dorothy, who had seated herself by the window, and was looking down into the square below, watching with deep interest the rapid passing and re-passing of cabs and carriages in and out the station, did not invite any conversation.

The contrast between the two children was a very strong one, such as we generally notice between those who from their babyhood have been, as it were, little citizens of the world, and those who have been brought up, as Dorothy had been till nearly her eighth birthday, with every care and every luxury, in a happy, quiet home.

Irene was tall for her age – nearly ten; and she had a determined expression on her face, as if she knew there were rough places and troubles to meet in her daily life, and that she had set herself to overcome them. She had heard a murmur of Ingleby's – "Another child to look after on the journey." And she was determined to give no trouble; she had no long hair to smooth and comb, for her hair was cut short, and her plain blue serge dress was quite free from any adornment. After Dorothy had done with the square, she turned to watch Irene's movements, and regarded her companion with a mingled wonder, and a feeling that was certainly not admiration.

Presently Dorothy called to Ingleby in the next room —

"When are you coming to undress me, Jingle? and when are we to have our tea?"

"I'll come directly, but I am busy getting your mamma's things put for the night; she must go to bed early, and so must you."

"Where's mother?" was the next question asked.

"In the sitting-room opposite."

"I want to go to her."

"Wait a few minutes; she is lying on the sofa, and I want her to rest."

"Where's Belinda to sleep, and Nino?"

"Dear me," said Ingleby, impatiently, "I don't know; here's the cork come out of your mamma's eau-de-Cologne flask, and everything in the travelling basket is soaked. Dear, dear!"

Dorothy now began to snatch at the buttons of her travelling ulster, and threw off the scarf round her neck.

"Let me help you," said Irene. "I am quite ready."

Dorothy was not very gracious, and as Irene tugged at the sleeves of the ulster, a lock of the silky hair caught in a button, and Dorothy screamed —

"Oh, don't! you hurt me. Oh, Jingle!"

Ingleby came running in at the cry of distress, and began to pity and console.

"I am very sorry," Irene said, moving away to the window, where, through the gathering haze of tears, she saw the gas-lights beginning to start out all round the square below.

A sense of desolation oppressed her; and she wished – oh, how she wished she had stayed at Mrs. Baker's! At first it had seemed delightful to go to grannie, but now she thought anything was better than being where she was not wanted. She was roused by Ingleby's voice —

"You are to have tea in the sitting-room with Mrs. Acheson. The Canon is gone out to dine at St. Paul's Deanery; and as soon as you have had your tea, you are to go to bed."

Dorothy, shaking back her beautiful hair, ran away to a room at the end of the passage, never thinking of Irene, who followed her with the same uneasy sense of "not being wanted" which is hard for us all to bear.

CHAPTER IV

NINO

Mrs. Acheson roused herself to talk to the little girls, and was kindly anxious that Irene should not feel strange and unhappy. But Irene was not a child to respond quickly, and Mrs. Acheson could but contrast her with her own little Dorothy, who was so caressing and tender in her ways, and had a gentle voice, while Irene had a quick, decided way of speaking.

"Have you been unwell long, my dear?" Mrs. Acheson asked.

"I have had a cough, and – and father does not wish me to keep a cough, because of mother."

"You don't remember your mother?"

"No. I have a stepmother, you know, and two little brothers."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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