Molesworth Mrs.

Little Miss Peggy: Only a Nursery Story

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Содержание

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"Would I could paint the serious brow,
The eyes that look the world in face,
Half-questioning, doubting, wondering how
This happens thus, or that finds place."

My Opposite Neighbour.

CHAPTER I
A BREAKFAST PARTY

"Henry was every morning fed
With a full mess of milk and bread."

Mary Lamb.

"No," said Peggy to herself, with a little sigh, "the naughty clouds has covered it up to-day. I can't see it."

"Miss Peggy," came nurse's voice from the other side of the room, "your breakfast's waiting. Come to the table, my dear, and stand quiet while Master Thor says the grace."

Nurse spoke kindly, but she meant what she said. Peggy turned slowly from the window and took her place among her brothers. She, and Thorold and Terence, the two oldest boys, sat opposite nurse, and beside nurse was Baby, who required a great deal of room to himself at table, baby though he was. He had so many things to do during a meal, you see, which grown-up children think quite unnecessary. He had to drum with a spoon, first in one fat hand and then in the other; he had to dip his crust first in nurse's cup of tea and next in Hal's jug of milk to see which tasted best, and there would have been no fun in doing either if he hadn't had to stretch a long way across; and besides all this he felt really obliged now and then to put his feet upon the table for a change, one at a time, of course. For even he, clever as he was, could not have got both together out of the bars of his chair without toppling over. Nurse had for some time past been speaking about beginning "to break Master Baby in," but so far it had not got beyond speaking, and she contented herself with seating him beside her and giving him a good quarter of the table to himself, the only objection to which was that it gave things in general a rather lopsided appearance.

At the two ends sat Baldwin and Hal. Hal's real name, of course, was Henry, though he was never called by it. Baldwin, on the contrary, had no short name, partly perhaps because mamma thought "Baldie" sounded so ugly, and partly because there was something about Baldwin himself which made one not inclined to shorten his name. It suited him so well, for he was broad and comfortable and slow. He was never in a hurry, and he gave you the feeling that you needn't be in a hurry either. There was plenty of time for everything, for saying the whole of his name as well as for everything else.

That made a lot of brothers, didn't it? Five, counting baby, and to match them, or rather not to match them – for five and one are not a match at all – only one little girl! She wondered about it a good deal, when she had nothing else more interesting to wonder about. It seemed so very badly managed that she should have five brothers, and that the five brothers should only have one sister each. It wasn't always so, she knew. The children at the back had plenty of both brothers and sisters; she had found that out already. But I must not begin just yet about the children at the back; you will hear about them in good time.

There was a nice bowl of bread-and-milk at each child's place, and as bread-and-milk is much better hot than cold, it was generally eaten up quickly. But this morning, even after the grace was said, and the four brothers who weren't baby had got on very well with theirs, Peggy sat, spoon in hand, gazing before her and not eating at all.

"What's the matter, Miss Peggy?" said nurse, when she had at last made Baby understand that he really *wasn't* to try to put his toes into her tea-cup, which had struck him suddenly as a very beautiful thing to do; "you've not begun to eat. Are you waiting for the sugar or the salt, or can't you fix which you want this morning?"

For there was a very nice and interesting rule in that nursery that every morning each child might choose whether he or she would have salt or sugar in the bread and milk. The only thing was that they had to be quick about choosing, and that was not always very easy.

Peggy looked up when nurse spoke to her.

"Peggy wasn't 'toosing," she said. Then she grew a little red. "*I* wasn't 'toosing," she went on. For Peggy was five – five a good while ago – and she wanted to leave off baby ways of talking. "I was wondering."

"Well, eat your breakfast, and when you've got half-way down the bowl you can tell us what you were wondering about," said nurse.

Peggy's spoon, already laden, continued its journey to her mouth. But when it got there, and its contents were safely deposited between her two red lips, she gave a little cry.

"Oh!" she said, "it doesn't taste good. There's no salt or sugar."

"'Cos you didn't put any in, you silly girl," said Thor. "I saw, but I thought it'd be a good lesson. People shouldn't wonder when they're eating."

"Peggy wasn't eating; she was only going to eat," said Terry. "Never mind, Peg-top. Thor shan't tease you. Which'll you have? Say quick," and he pulled forward the sugar-basin and the salt-cellar in front of his sister.

"Sugar, pelease," said Peggy. "It's so 'told this morning."

At this Thor burst out laughing.

"What a Peggy-speech," he said. "Sugar's no warmer than salt."

"Yes," said Baldwin, solemnly, from the other end of the table. "'Tis. There's sugar in toffee and in jam, and they're hot, leastways they're hot to be made. And there's salt in ices, for mamma said they're made with salt."

"What rubbish!" said Thor. "Nurse, isn't it rubbish? And when did you ever see ices, I'd like to know, Baldwin?"

"I did," Baldwin maintained. "Onst. But I'll not tell you when, if you say rubbish."

"It is rubbish all the same, and I'll prove it," said Thor. "You know that nice smooth white sugar on the top of bridescake? – well, they ice that to put it on – I know they do. Don't they, nurse?"

"They call it icing, to be sure," nurse replied. "But that's no proof that ices themselves mayn't be made with salt, Master Thor, for when you come to think of it ices have sugar in them."

"To be sure they have," Thor cried, triumphantly. "Nurse has proved it – that sugar's no warmer than salt," which was not what nurse had intended to say at all.

But now Peggy, who all this time had been steadily eating, looked up again.

"Peggy was wondering," she said, "what's clouds. Is clouds alive?"

Thor was all ready with his "you silly girl" again, but this time Terry was before him.

"They can't be alive," he said. "They've got no hands, or feet, or mouths, and noses, and eyes, and – "

"They *has* noses," said Peggy, eagerly. "Peggy's seen them, and they has wings – the little ones has wings, they fly so fast. And p'raps they has got proper faces on their other sides, to look at the sun with. I've seen shiny bits of the other sides turned over."

"Yes," said Baldwin, solemnly again, as if that settled it, "so has I."

"But they're not alive, Peggy, they're really not. They fly because the wind blows them," said Terence.

"Oh!" said Peggy, with a deep-drawn breath, "I see. Then if we all blowed very hard at the window, if we all blowed together, couldn't we blow them away? I do so want to blow them away when they come over my hills."

But when she had said this she grew very red, just as if she had told something she had not meant to tell, and if any one had looked at her quite close they would have seen that there were tears

in her eyes. Fortunately, however, no one had noticed her last words, for Thorold and Terence too had burst out laughing at the beginning of her speech.

"Fancy us all blowing out of the window together," they said. And they began puffing out their cheeks and pretending to blow very hard, which made them look so funny that Peggy herself burst out laughing too.

"I'll tell you what," said Thor, when they were tired of laughing, "that reminds me of soap-bubbles, we haven't had any for such a time. Nurse, will you remember to let us have them the first wet half-holiday? Mamma'll let us if you will."

"And the pipes?" said nurse. "There was six new got the last time, and they were to last, certain sure till the next time, and then – "

"Oh I know," said Thor, "we took them to school and never brought them back. Never mind – we'll get some more from old Mother Whelan. She always keeps lots. We'll keep our halfpennies for two Saturdays – that'll do. But we must be going, Terry and Baldwin. *I'm* all ready."

And he jumped up as he spoke, and pulled his satchel of books from under his chair, where he had put them to be all ready. Baldwin slowly got down from his place, for he was not only broad, but his legs were very short, and came up to nurse to be helped on with his little overcoat, while Terence began rushing about the room in a fuss, looking for one of his books, which as usual couldn't be found at the last minute.

"I had it just before breakfast, I'm *sure* I had," he went on repeating. "I haven't finished learning it, and I meant to look it over. Oh dear, what shall I do?"

The nursery party was too accustomed to Terry's misfortunes to be much upset by them. Peggy sat still for a moment or two considering. Then she spoke.

"Terry," she said, "look in Baby's cot."

Off flew Terence, returning in triumph, grammar in hand.

"I'll learn it on the way to school. How did you know it was there, Peggy?"

"I sawed you reaching over to kiss Baby when you comed in to ask nurse for a new shoe-lace this morning," said Peggy, with great pride.

"Good girl," said Terence, as he slammed the door and rushed downstairs to overtake his two brothers.

The nursery seemed very quiet when the three big boys had gone. Quiet but not idle; there was always a great deal to do first thing of a morning, and Peggy had her own share of the doing to see to. She took off her own breakfast pinafore and put on a quite clean one – one that looked quite clean anyway, just as if it had never been on, even though it had really been used two or three times. Peggy called it her "prayers pinafore," and it always lasted a whole week, as it was only worn to go down to the dining-room for five or ten minutes. Then she washed her hands and stood still for nurse to give a tidying touch to her soft fair hair, though it really didn't need it, – Peggy's hair never looked messy, – and then she took off Hal's over pinafore which he wore on the top of his blouse at meal-times, and helped him to wash his hands, by which time nurse and baby were also ready, and the little procession set off on their journey. If the prayers bell had not sounded yet, or did not sound as they made their way down, nurse would stop at mamma's door and tap, and the answer was sure to be "Come in." Then nurse would go on downstairs with Baby, and Peggy and Hal would trot in to see mamma, and wait a moment or two till she was ready. She was almost always nearly ready, unless she was very, very tired; and in that case she would tell them to go downstairs and come up and see her again after prayers, as she was going to have breakfast in bed. They rather liked these days, though of course they were sorry for mamma to be so tired, but it was very interesting to watch her having her breakfast, and generally one or two dainty bits of toast and marmalade would find their way to the two little mouths.

It was only since last winter that mamma had been so often tired and not able to get up early. Before then she used always to come up to the nursery to see her six children at breakfast, and prayers

were early enough for the three boys to stay for them, instead of having them at school. For mamma was not at all a "lazy" mother, as you might think if I did not explain. But last winter she had been very ill indeed, so ill that papa looked dreadfully unhappy, and the boys had to take off their boots downstairs so as not to make any noise when they passed her door, and the days seemed very long to Peggy and Hal, worst to Peggy of course, for Hal was still so little that almost all his life belonged to the nursery. It was during that time that Peggy first found out the white spot on the hill, which I am going to tell you about, for she used to climb up on the window-sill and sit there looking out at whatever there was to see for hours at a time.

This morning mamma was evidently not tired, for just as the children got to the landing on to which her door opened, out she came.

"Well, darlings," she said, "there you are! Have the boys got off to school all rightly, nurse?"

"Oh yes, ma'am," nurse was beginning, but Peggy interrupted her.

"Terry loosed his book, mamma dear, and Peg —*I* founded it; I knewed where it was 'cos I used my eyes like you said."

"That was a very good thing," said mamma. She had talked to Peggy about using her eyes a good deal, for Peggy had rather a trick of going to sleep with her eyes open, like many children, and it becomes a very tiresome trick if it isn't cured, and makes one miss a great many chances of being useful to others, and of enjoying pleasant things one's self. "Poor Terry – I wish he wasn't so careless. Where was his book this time?"

"In such a funny place, mamma dear," said Peggy. "In Baby's cot," and at the sound of his name Baby crowed, which made both Peggy and Hal burst out laughing, so that mamma had to hold their hands firmly to prevent their tumbling down stairs.

After prayers were over nurse took Baby and Hal away, but papa said Peggy might stay for a few minutes.

"I've scarcely seen you the last day or two, old woman," he said; "you were fast asleep when I came home. What have you been about?"

"About," Peggy repeated, looking puzzled.

"Well – what have you been doing with yourself?" he said again.

"I've been doing nothing with *myself*," Peggy replied, gravely. "I've done my lessons and my sewing, and I've used my eyes."

"Well, and isn't all that yourself?" asked papa, who was rather a tease. "You've done your sewing with your fingers and your lessons with your mind, and you've used your eyes for both – mind, fingers, eyes – those are all parts of yourself."

Peggy spread out her two hands on the table and looked at the ten pink fingers.

"Them's my fingers," she said, "but I don't know where that other thing is – that what thinks. I'd like to know where it is. Papa, can't you tell me?"

There came a puzzled look into her soft gray eyes – mamma knew that look; when it stayed long it was rather apt to turn into tears.

"Arthur," she said to Peggy's papa, "you're too fond of teasing. Peggy dear, nobody can see that part of you; there are many things we can't ever see, or hear, or touch, which are real things all the same."

Peggy's face lightened up again. She nodded her head softly, as if to say that she understood. Then she got down from her chair and went up to her father to kiss him and say good-bye.

"Going already, Peg!" he said. "Don't you like papa teasing you?"

"I don't mind," said Peggy, graciously; "you're only a big boy, papa. I'm going 'cos nurse wants me to keep Baby quiet while she makes the beds."

But when she got round to the other side of the table to her mother, she lingered a moment.

"Mamma," she whispered, "*it's* not there this morning – Peggy's fairy house. It's all hided up. Mamma – "

"Well, darling?"

"Are you *sure* it'll come back again?"

"Quite sure, dear. It's only hidden by the clouds, as I've told you before. You know you've often been afraid it was gone, and it's always come again."

"Yes, to be sure," said Peggy. "What a silly little girl I am, mamma dear."

And she laughed her own little gentle laugh. I can't tell how it was that Peggy's little laugh used sometimes to bring tears to her mother's eyes.

When she got up to the nursery again she found she was very much wanted. Nurse was in the night nursery which opened into the day one, and looked out to the back of the house just as the other looked to the front. And Baby was sitting on the hearth-rug, with Hal beside him, both seeming far from happy.

"Baby's defful c'oss, Peggy," said poor Hal.

And Baby, though he couldn't speak, pouted out his lips and looked very savage at Hal, which of course was very unreasonable and ungrateful of him, as Hal had been doing everything he could to amuse him, and had only objected to Baby pulling him across the floor by his curls.

"Oh Baby," said Peggy, "that isn't good. Poor Hal's hair – see how you've tugged it."

For Baby was still grasping some golden threads in his plump fists.

"Him sinks zem's feaders," said Hal, apologetically. He was so fond of Baby that he couldn't bear any one to say anything against him except himself.

"But Baby must learn hairs isn't feathers," said Peggy, solemnly. "And it isn't good to let him pull the feathers out of his parrot either, Hal," she continued, "for some day he might have a *live* parrot, and then it would be cooel, and the parrot would *bite* him – yes it would, Baby."

This was too much for Baby. He drew the corner of his mouth down, then he opened it wide, very wide, and was just going to roar when Peggy threw her arms round him and kissed him vigorously.

"He's sorry, Hal – dear Baby – he's so very sorry. Kiss him, Hal. Let's all kiss together," and the three soft faces all met in a bunch, which Baby found so amusing that instead of continuing his preparations for a good cry, he thought better of it, and went off into a laugh.

"That's right," said Peggy. "Now if you'll both be very good boys I'll tell you a story. Just wait a minute till I've tooked off my prayers pinafore."

She jumped up to do so. While she was unfastening it her eyes moved to the window; she gave a little cry and ran forward. The day was clearing up, the sun was beginning faintly to shine, and the clouds were breaking.

"Mamma was right," exclaimed Peggy, joyfully; "I can see it – I can see it! I can see my white house again, my dear little fairy house."

She would have stayed there gazing out contentedly half the morning if her little brothers had not called her back.

"Peggy," said Hal, plaintively, "do tum. Baby's pulling Hal's 'air adain."

"Peggy's coming, dear," said the motherly little voice.

And in another moment they were settled on the hearth-rug – Baby on Peggy's lap – on, and off it too, for it was much too small to accommodate the whole of him; Hal on the floor beside her, his curly head leaning on his sister's shoulder in blissful and trustful content.

CHAPTER II
THE WHITE SPOT ON THE HILL

"O reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! you would find
A tale in everything.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but, should you think,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it."

W. Wordsworth.

"Telling stories," when the teller is only five and some months old, and the hearers one and a quarter and three, is rather a curious performance. But Peggy was well used to it, and when in good spirits quite able to battle with the difficulties of amusing Hal and Baby at the same time. And these difficulties were not small, for, compared with Baby, Hal was really "grown-up."

It is all very well for people who don't know much about tiny children to speak of them all together, up to – six or seven, let us say – as "babies," but we who think we *do* know something about them, can assure the rest of the world that this is an immense mistake. One year in nursery arithmetic counts for ten or even more in *real* "grown-up" life. There was a great difference between Peggy and Hal for instance, but a still greater between Hal and Baby, and had there been a new baby below him again, of course it would have been the greatest of all. Peggy could not have explained this in words, but she knew it thoroughly all the same, and she had learnt to take it into account in her treatment of the two, especially in her stories telling. In reality the story itself was all for Hal, but there was a sort of running accompaniment for Baby which he enjoyed very much, and which, to tell the truth, I rather think Hal found amusing too, though he pretended it was for Baby's sake.

This morning her glance out of the window had made Peggy feel so happy that the story promised to be a great success. She sat still for a minute or two, her arms clasped round Baby's waist, gently rocking herself and him to and fro, while her gray eyes stared before her, as if reading stories in the carpet or on the wall.

"Peggy," said Hal at last, giving her a hug – he had been waiting what he thought a very long time – "Peggy, 'do on – no, I mean begin, p'ease."

"Yes, Hal, d'reckly," said Peggy. "It's coming, Hal, yes, now I think it's comed. Should we do piggies first, to please Baby before we begin?"

"Piggies is *so* silly," said Hal, disdainfully.

"Well, we'll kiss him instead – another kiss all together, he does so like that;" and when the kissing was over – "now, Baby dear, listen, and p'raps you'll understand *some*, and if you're good we'll have piggies soon."

Baby gave a kind of grunt; perhaps he was thinking of the pigs, but most likely it was just his way of saying he would be very good.

"There was onst," Peggy began, "a little girl who lived in a big house all by herself."

"Hadn't she no mamma, or nurse, or – or – brudders?" Hal interrupted.

"No, not none," Peggy went on. "She lived quite alone, and she didn't like it. The house was as big as a – as a church, and she hadn't no bed, and no chairs or tables, and there was very, *very* high stairs."

"Is there stairs in churches?" asked Hal.

Peggy looked rather puzzled.

"Yes, I think there is," she said. "There's people high up in churches, so there must be stairs. But I didn't say it *were* a church, Hal; I only said as big as a church. And the stairs was for Baby – you'll hear – p'raps there wasn't *reelly* stairs. Now, Baby; one day a little piggy-wiggy came up the stairs – one, two, three," and Peggy's hand came creeping up Baby's foot and leg and across his pinafore and up his bare arm again, by way of illustrating piggy's progress, "and when he got to the top he said 'grumph,' and poked his nose into the little girl's neck" – here Peggy's own nose made a dive among Baby's double chins, to his exceeding delight, setting him off chuckling to himself for some time, which left Peggy free to go on with the serious part of the story for Hal's benefit – "and there was a window in the big house, and the little girl used to sit there always looking out."

"Always?" asked Hal again. "All night too? Didn't her ever go to bed?"

"She hadn't no bed, I told you. No, she didn't sit there all night, 'cos she couldn't have see'd in the dark. Never mind about the night. She sat there all day, always looking out, 'cos there was something she liked to see. If I tell you you won't tell nobody what it was, will you. Hal?"

Hal looked very mystified, but replied obediently,

"No, won't tell nobody," he said.

"Well, then, I'll tell you what it was. It was a – " But at this moment Baby, having had enough of his own meditations, began to put in a claim to some special attention. The piggy had to be summoned and made to run up and down stairs two or three times before he would be satisfied and allow Peggy to proceed.

"Well, Peggy?" said Hal eagerly.

"It was a – " Oh dear, interrupted again! But this time the interruption was a blessing in disguise. It was nurse come to fetch Baby for his morning sleep.

"And thank you, Miss Peggy, my dear, for keeping him so nice and good. I heard you come up, and I knew they'd be all right with you," she said, as she walked away with Baby, who was by no means sure that he wanted to go.

"Now," said Hal, edging closer to Peggy, "we'll be comfable. Go on, Peggy – what she sawed."

"It was a hill – far, far away, neely as far as the sky," said Peggy in a mysterious tone. "When the sun comed she could see it plain – the hill and what was there, but when the sun goed she couldn't. There was a white spot on the hill, Hal, and that white spot was a lovely white cottage. She knowed it, though she'd never see'd it."

"How did she know it?"

"Her mam – no, that's wrong, she hadn't no mamma – well, never mind, *somebody*'d told her."

"Were it *God?*" asked Hal, in an awestruck whisper.

"I don't know. No, I don't think so. I think it's a little naughty to say that, Hal. No, dear, don't cry," for signs of disturbance were visible in Hal's round face. "You didn't mean, and it isn't never naughty when we don't mean, you know. We'll go on about the little girl. She knowed it was a lovely cottage, and she wanted *very* much, as much as could be, to go there, for the big house wasn't pretty, and it was dark, nearly black, and the cottage was all white."

"Her house wasn't as nice as *zit*, were it? Zit house isn't b'ack," said Hal.

"No," said Peggy, doubtfully. "*It* wasn't as nice as this, but the white house was much prettier than this."

"How?" asked Hal.

"Oh!" said Peggy, letting her eyes and her fancy rove about together, "I think it was beautiful all over. It was all shiny white; the walls was white, and the carpets was white, and the tables and the chairs was white – all shiny and soft like – like – "

"Baby's best sash," suggested Hal.

"Well, p'raps – that'll do. And there was a cow and chickens and sheep, and a kitchen where you could make cakes, and a garden with lots of flowers and strawberries – "

"All white?" asked Hal.

"No, of course not. Strawberries couldn't be white, and flowers is all colours. 'Twas the *droind-room* that was all white."

"And the milk and the eggs. Zem *is* white," said Hal, triumphantly.

"Very well. I didn't say they wasn't. But the story goes on that the little girl didn't know how to get there; it was so far and so high up. So she sat and cried all alone at the window."

"All alone, *poor* little girl," said Hal, with deep feeling. "Kick, Peggy, kick, I'm 'doing to cry; make it come right *kick*. The crying's just coming."

"Make it wait a minute. I can't make it come right all so quick," said Peggy. "It's going to come, so make the crying wait. One day she was crying d'edful, worst than never, 'cos the sun had goned, and she couldn't see the white cottage no more, and just then she heard something saying, 'mew, mew,' and it was a kitten outside the window, and it was just going to fall down and be killed."

"That's not coming right. I *must* cry," said Hal.

"But she opened the window – there now, you see – and she pulled the kitten in, so it didn't fall down, and it was so pleased it kissed her, and when it kissed her it turned into a fairy, and it touched her neck and made wings come, and then it opened the window again and flewed away with the little girl till they came to the white cottage, and then the little girl was quite happy for always."

"Did the fairy stay with her always?" asked Hal.

"No; fairies never does like that. They go back to fairyland. But the little girl had nice milk and eggs and cakes, and she made nosegays with the flowers, and the sun was *always* shining, so she was quite, *quite* happy."

"Her couldn't be happy all alone," said Hal. "I don't like zat story, Peggy. You haven't made it nice at all. It's a nonsense story."

Hal wriggled about and seemed very cross. Poor Peggy was not so much indignant as distressed at failing in her efforts to amuse him. What was the matter? It couldn't be that he was getting sleepy – it was far too early for his morning sleep.

"It isn't a nonsense story," she said, and she glanced towards the window as she spoke. Yes, the sun was shining brightly, the morning clouds had quite melted away; it was going to be a fine day after all. And clear and white gleamed out the spot on the distant hill which Peggy loved to gaze at! "Come here, Hal," she said, getting on to her feet and helping Hal on to his, "come with me to the window and you'll see if it's a nonsense story. Only you've never to tell nobody. It's Peggy's own secret."

Hal forgot his crossness in a minute; he felt so proud and honoured. Peggy led him to the window. It was not a very pretty prospect; they looked out on to a commonplace street, houses on both sides, though just opposite there was a little variety in the shape of an old-fashioned, smoke-dried garden. Beyond that again, more houses, more streets, stretching away out into suburbs, and somewhere beyond all that again the mysterious, beautiful, enchanting region which the children spoke of and believed in as "the country," not really so far off after all, though to them it seemed so.

And above the tops of all the houses, clear though faint, was now to be seen the outline of a range of hills, so softly gray-blue in the distance that but for the irregular line never changing in its form, one could easily have fancied it was only the edge of a quickly passing ridge of clouds. Peggy, however, knew better.

"See, Hal," she said, "over there, far, far away, *neely* in the sky, does you see that bluey hill?"

Of course he saw, agreeing so readily that Peggy was sure he did not distinguish rightly, which was soon proved to be the case by his announcing that "The 'ill were sailing away."

"No, no, it isn't," Peggy cried. "You've mustooked a cloud, Hal. See now," and by bringing her own eyes exactly on a level with a certain spot on the glass she was able to place his correctly, "just

over that little bubble in the window you can see it. Its top goes up above the bubble and then down and then up again, and it never moves like the clouds – does you see now, Hallie dear?"

"Zes, zes," said Hal, "but it's a *wenny* little 'ill, Peggy."

"No, dear," his sister explained. "It only looks little 'cos it's so far away. *You* is too little to understand, dear, but it's true that it's a big hill, neely a mounting, Hal. Mamma told me."

"Oh," said Hal, profoundly impressed and quite convinced.

"Mountings is *old* hills, or big hills," Peggy continued, herself slightly confused. "I don't know if they is the papas and mammas of the little ones, but I think it's something like that, for onst in church I heard the clergymunt read that the little hills jumped for joy, so they must be the children. I'll ask mamma, and then I'll tell you. I'm not quite sure if he meaned the same kind, for these hills never jumps – that's how mamma told me to know they wasn't clouds."

"Zes," said Hal, "but go on about the secret, Peggy. Hal doesn't care about the 'ills."

"But the secret's *on* the hills," replied Peggy. "Look more, Hal – does you see a teeny, *teeny* white spot on the bluey hill? Higher up than the bubble, but not at the top quite?"

Hal's eyes were good and his faith was great.

"Zes, zes," he cried. "I does see it – kite plain, Peggy."

"Well, Hallie," Peggy continued, "*that's* my secret."

"Is it the fairy cottage, and is the little girl zere now?" Hal asked, breathlessly.

Peggy hesitated.

"It is a white cottage," she said. "Mamma told me. She looked at it through a seeing pipe."

"What's a seeing pipe?" Hal interrupted.

"I can't tell you just now. Ask mamma to show you hers some day. It's too difficult to understand, but it makes you see things plain. And mamma found out it was reelly a cottage, a white cottage, all alone up on the hill – isn't it sweet of it to be there all alone, Hallie? And she said I might think it was a fairy cottage and keep it for my own secret, only I've telled you, Hal, and you mustn't tell nobody."

"And is it all like Baby's best sash, and are there cakes and f'owers and cows?" asked Hal.

"I don't know. I made up the story, you know, Hal, to please you. I've made lots – mamma said I might. But I've never see'd the cottage, you know. I *daresay* it's beautiful, white and gold like the story, that's why I said it. It does so shine when the sun's on it – look, look, Hal!"

For as she spoke the sunshine had broken out again more brilliantly; and the bright, thin sparkle which often dazzles one between the showers in unsettled weather, lighted up that quarter of the sky where the children were gazing, and, to their fancy at least, the white spot caught and reflected the rays.

"Oh zes, I see," Hal repeated. "But, Peggy, I'd like to *go* zere and to see it. Can't we go, Peggy? It would be so nice, nicer than making up stories. And do you think – oh do you think, Peggy, that p'raps there's *pigs* zere, real pigs?"

He clasped his hands entreatingly as he spoke. Peggy must say there were pigs. Poor Peggy – it was rather a comedown after her fairy visions. But she was too kind to say anything to vex Hal.

"I thought you said pigs was silly," she objected, gently.

"Playing pigs to make Baby laugh is silly," said Hal, "and pigs going to market and stayin' at 'ome and roast beefin', is *d'edful* silly. But not real pigs."

"Oh well, then, *you* may think pigs if you like," said Peggy. "I don't think I will, but that doesn't matter. You may have them in the cottage if you like, only you mustn't tell Thor and Terry and Baldwin about it."

"I won't tell, on'y you *might* have them too," said Hal discontentedly. "You're not kind, Peggy."

"Don't let's talk about the cottage any more, then," said Peggy, though her own eyes were fixed on the far-off white spot as she spoke. "I think p'raps, Hallie, you're *rather* too little to care about it."

"I'm not," said Hal, "and I do care. But I do like pigs, real pigs. I sawed zem in the country."

"You can't remember," said Peggy. "It's two whole years since we was in the real country, Hallie, and you're only three and a half. I know it's two years. I heard mamma say so to papa, so you wasn't two then."

"But I did see zem and I do 'amember, 'cos of pictures," said Hal.

"Oh yes, dear, there is pictures of pigs in your scrap-book, I know," Peggy agreed. "You get it now and we'll look for them."

Off trotted Hal, returning in a minute with his book, and for a quarter of an hour or so his patient little sister managed to keep him happy and amused. At the end of that time, however, he began to be cross and discontented again. Peggy did not know what to make of him this morning, he was not often so difficult to please. She was very glad when nurse came in to say it was now *his* time for his morning sleep, and though Hal grumbled and scolded and said he was not sleepy she carried him off, and Peggy was left in peace.

She was not at a loss to employ herself. At half-past eleven she usually went down to mamma for an hour's lessons, and it must be nearly that time now. She got her books together and sat looking over the one verse she had to learn, her thoughts roving nevertheless in the direction they loved best – away over the chimneys and the smoke; away, away, up, up to the fairy cottage on the distant hill.

CHAPTER III
"THE CHILDREN AT THE BACK"

"It seems to me if I'd money enough,
My heart would be made of different stuff;
I would think about those whose lot is rough."

Mrs. Hawtrey.

These children's home was not in a very pretty place. In front, as I have told you, it looked out on to a rather ugly street, and there were streets and streets beyond that again – streets of straight, stiff, grim-looking houses, some large and some small, but all commonplace and dull. And in and out between these bigger streets were narrower and still uglier ones, scarcely indeed to be called streets, so dark and poky were they, so dark and poky were the poor houses they contained.

The street immediately behind the children's house, that on to which its back windows looked out, was one of these poorer ones, though not by any means one of the most miserable. And ugly though it was, Peggy was very fond of gazing out of the night nursery window on to this street, especially on days when it was "no use," as she called it to herself, looking out at the front; that meant, as I daresay you can guess, days on which it was too dull and cloudy to see the distant hills, and above all the white spot, which had taken such hold on her fancy. For she had found out some very interesting things in that dingy street. Straight across from the night nursery window was a very queer miserable sort of a shop, kept by an old Irishwoman whose name was Mrs. Whelan. It is rather absurd to call it a shop, though it was a place where things were bought and sold, for the room in which these buyings and sellings went on was Mrs. Whelan's kitchen, and bedroom, and sitting-room, and wash-house, as well as her shop! It was on the first floor, and you got up to it by a rickety staircase – more like a ladder indeed than a staircase, and underneath it on the ground-floor lived a cobbler, with whom Mrs. Whelan used to quarrel at least once a day, though as he was a patient, much enduring man, the quarrels never went farther than the old Irishwoman's opening her window and shouting down all manner of scoldings to the poor fellow, of which he took no notice.

On Sundays the cobbler used to tidy himself up and go off to church "like a gentleman," the boys said. But Mrs. Whelan, alas, never tidied herself up, and never went to church, and though she made a great show of putting a shutter across that part of the window which showed "the shop," nurse had more than once shaken her head when the children were dressing for church, and told them not to look over the way, she was sadly afraid the shutting or shuttering up was all a pretence, and that Mrs. Whelan made a good penny by her Sunday sales of tobacco and pipes to the men, or maybe of sugar, candles, or matches to careless housekeepers who had let their stock run out too late on Saturday night.

She was rather a terrible-looking old woman; she always wore a short bed-gown, that is, a loose kind of jacket roughly drawn in at the waist, of washed-out cotton, which never looked clean, and yet somehow never seemed to get much dirtier, a black stuff petticoat, and a cap with flapping frills which quite hid her face unless you were very near her, and she was generally to be seen with a pipe in her mouth. Her voice was both loud and shrill, and when she was in a temper you could almost hear what she said, though the nursery window was shut. All the neighbours were afraid of her, and in consequence treated her with great respect. But like most people in this world, she had some good about her, as you will hear.

Good or bad, the children, Peggy especially, found Mrs. Whelan very interesting. Peggy had never seen her nearer than from the window, and though she had a queer sort of wish to visit the

shop and make closer acquaintance with the old crone, she was far too frightened of her to think of doing so really. The boys, however, had been several times inside Mrs. Whelan's dwelling, and used to tell wonderful stories of the muddle of things it contained, and of the old woman herself. They always bought their soap-bubble pipes there, "three a penny," and would gladly have bought some of the toffee-balls and barley-sugar which were also to be had, if this had not been strictly forbidden by mamma, in spite of their grumbling.

"It isn't so *very* dirty, mamma," they said, "and you get a lot more for a penny than in a proper shop."

But mamma would not give in. She knew what Mrs. Whelan was like, as she used sometimes to go over herself to talk to the poor old woman, but that, of course, was a different matter.

"I don't much like your going there at all," she would say, "but it pleases her for us to buy some trifles now and then."

But in her heart she wished very much that they were not obliged to live in this dreary and ugly town, where their poor neighbours were rarely the sort of people she could let her children know anything of. Mamma, in *her* childhood, had lived in that fairyland she called "the country," and so had papa, and they still looked forward to being there again, though for the present they were obliged to make the best of their home in a dingy street.

It seemed much less dull and dingy to the children than to them, however. Indeed I don't think the children ever thought about it at all. The boys were busy at school, and found plenty of both work and play to make the time pass quickly, and Peggy, who might perhaps have been a little dull and lonely in her rather shut-up life, had her fancies and her wonders – her interesting things to look at both at the front and the back of the house, and mamma to tell all about them to! And this reminds me that I have not yet told you what it was she was *most* fond of watching from the night nursery window. It was not Mrs. Whelan or the cobbler; it was the tenants of the third or top story of the rickety old house – the family she always spoke of to herself as "the children at the back."

Such a lot of them there were. It was long before Peggy was able to distinguish them "all from each other," as she said, and it took her longer still to make names by which she could keep a clear list in her head. The eldest looked to her quite grown-up, though in reality she was about thirteen; she was a big red-cheeked girl, though she lived in a town; her arms were red too, poor thing, especially in winter, for they were seldom or never covered, and she seemed to be always at work, scrubbing or washing, or running out to fetch two or three of the little ones in from playing in the gutter. Peggy called her "Reddy," and though it was the girl's red cheeks and arms which made her first choose the name, in a while she came to think of it as meaning "ready" also, for Peggy did not know much about spelling as yet, and the thought in her mind of the look of the two words was the same. For a good while Peggy fancied that Reddy was the nurse or servant of the family, but one day when she said something of the kind to her own nurse she was quickly put right.

"Their servant, my dear! Bless you, no. How could they afford to keep a servant; they've hard enough work to keep themselves, striving folk though they seem. There's such a many of them, you see, and mostly so little – save that big girl and the sister three below her, there's none really to help the mother. And the cripple must be a great charge."

"What's the cripple, nursey?" Peggy asked.

"Why, Miss Peggy, haven't you noticed the white-faced girl on crutches? You must have seen her dragging up and down in front of the house of a fine day."

"Oh yes," said Peggy, "but I didn't know that was called cripple. And she's quite little; she's as little as me, nurse!"

"She's older than she looks, poor thing," said nurse – "maybe oldest of them all."

This, however, Peggy could not believe. She fixed in her own mind that "Crippley" came after the two boys who were evidently next to Reddy – she did not give the boys names, for they did not interest her as much as the girls. Having so many brothers of her own and no sister, it seemed to her

as if a sister must be the very nicest thing in the world, and of all the children at the back, the two that she liked most to watch were a pair of little girls about three years older than herself, whom she named "The Smileys," "Brown Smiley" and "Light Smiley" when she thought of them separately, for though they were very like each other, the colour of their hair was different. They were very jolly little girls, poorly clad and poorly fed though they were, taking life easily, it seemed – too easily in the opinion of their eldest sister Reddy, and the sister next above them – between them and Crippley, according to Peggy's list. This sister was the only one whose real name Peggy knew, by hearing it so frequently shouted after her by the mother and Reddy. For this child, "Mary-Hann," was rather deaf, though it was not till long afterwards that Peggy found this out.

"Mary-Hann" was a patient stupid sort of girl, a kind of second in command to Reddy, and she was like Reddy in appearance, except that she was several sizes smaller and thinner, so that even supposing that her arms were as red as her sister's they did not strike one in the same way.

Below the Smileys came another boy, who was generally to be seen in their company, and who, according to Peggy, rejoiced in the name of "Tip." And below Tip were a few babies, in reality I believe never more than three, during the years through which their little over-the-way neighbour watched them. But even she was obliged to give up hopes of classifying the babies, for there always seemed to be *a* baby about the same age, and one or two others just struggling into standing or rather tumbling alone, and for ever being picked up by Reddy or her attendant sprite Mary-Hann.

Such were Peggy's "children at the back." And many a dull day when it was too rainy to go a walk, and too cloudy to be "any use" to gaze out at the front of the house, did these poor children, little as they guessed it, help to make pass more quickly and pleasantly for the sisterless maiden. Many a morning when Hal and Baby were asleep and nurse was glad to have an hour or so for a bit of ironing, or some work of the kind down in the kitchen – for my Peggy's papa and mamma were not rich and could not keep many servants, so that nurse, though she was plain and homely in her ways, was of far more use than a smarter young woman to them – many a morning did the little girl, left in the night nursery in charge of her sleeping brothers, take up her stand at the window which overlooked Mrs. Whelan's and the cobbler and the Smileys with all their brothers and sisters. There was always something new to see or to ask nurse to explain afterwards. For ever so long it took up Peggy's thoughts, and gave much conversation in the nursery to "plan" how the ten or eleven children, not to speak of the papa and mamma, *could* all find place in two rooms. It kept Peggy awake at night, especially if the weather happened to be at all hot or close, to think how *very* uncomfortable poor Reddy and Crippley and Mary-Hann and the Smileys must be, all sleeping in one bed as nurse said was too probably the case. And it was the greatest relief to her mind, and to nurse's too, I do believe, to discover by means of some cautious inquiries of the cobbler when nurse took him over some of the boys' boots to mend, that the family was not so short of space as they had feared.

"They've two other rooms, Miss Peggy, as doesn't show to the front," said nurse, "two attics with sloping windows in the roof to their back again. And they're striving folk, he says, as indeed any one may see for theirselves."

"Then how shall we plan it now, I wonder," said Peggy, looking across to the Smileys' mansion with new respect. But nurse had already left the room, and perhaps, now she was satisfied their neighbours were not quite so much to be pitied, would scarcely have had patience to listen to Peggy's "wonderings" about them. So the little girl went on to herself —

"I should think the downstairs room is the papa's and mamma's and the teeniest baby's, and perhaps Crippley sleeps there, as she's ill, like me when I had the hooping-cough and I couldn't sleep and mamma kept jumping up to me. And then the big boys and Tip has one room – 'ticks,' nurse calls the rooms with windows in the roof. I think I'd like to sleep in a 'tick' room; you must see the stars so plain without getting up; and – and – let me see, Reddy and Mary-Hann and the Smileys and the old babies – no, that's too many – and I don't know how many old babies there is. We'll say *one*– if there's another it must be a boy and go in the boys' tick – and that makes Reddy and Mary – "

"Miss Peggy, your mamma's ready for your lessons," came the housemaid's voice at the door, and Peggy hurried off. But she was rather in a brown study at her lessons that morning. Mamma could not make her out at all, till at last she shut up the books for a minute and made Peggy tell her where her thoughts were wool-gathering.

"Not so very far away, mamma dear," said Peggy, laughing. She never could help laughing when mamma said "funny things like that." "Not so very far away. I was only wondering about the children at the back."

She called them always "the children at the back" when she spoke of them – for even to mamma she would have felt shy of telling her own names for them. And then she went on to repeat what nurse had heard from the cobbler. Mamma agreed that it was very interesting, and she too was pleased to think "the children at the back's house," as Peggy called it, was more commodious than might have been expected. But still, even such interesting things as that must not be allowed to interfere with lessons, Peggy must put it all out of her head till they were done with, and then mamma would talk about it with her.

"Only, mamma," said Peggy, "I don't know what com – commo – that long word you said, means."

"I should not have used it, perhaps," said mamma. "And yet I don't know. If we only used the words you understand already, you would never learn new ones – eh, Peggy! Commodious just means large, and not narrow and squeezed up."

Peggy nodded her head, which meant that she quite understood, and then the lessons went on smoothly again.

When they were over, mamma talked about poor people, especially about poor children, to Peggy, and explained to her more than she had ever done before about what being poor really means. It made Peggy feel and look rather sad, and once or twice mamma was afraid she was going to cry, which, of course, she did not wish her to do. But Peggy choked down the crying feeling, because she knew it would make her mother sorry and would not do the poor people any good.

"Mamma," she said, "it *neely* makes me cry, but I won't. But when I'm big can't I do something for the children at the back?"

"They won't be children then, Peggy dear. You may be able to do something for them without waiting for that. I'll think about it. I don't fancy they are so *very* poor. As I have been telling you, there are many far poorer. But I daresay they have very few pleasures in their lives. We might try to think of a little sunshine for them now and then."

"The Smile – " began Peggy, but she stopped suddenly, growing red – "the littler ones do play a good deal in the gutter, mamma dear," she said, anxious to state things quite fairly; "but I don't think that's *very* nice play, and the sun very seldom shines there. And Red – the big ones, mamma dear, and the one that goes on – I can't remember the name of those sticks."

"Crutches," said mamma.

"Yes, crutches —*her* never has no plays at all, I don't think. She'd have more sunshine at the 'nother side of our house, mamma dear."

Mamma smiled. Peggy did not understand that mamma did not mean "sunshine" exactly as she took it; she forgot, too, that of actual sunshine more fell on the back street than she thought of. For it was only on dull or rainy days that she looked out much on the children at the back. On fine days her eyes were busy in another direction.

"I'll think about it," said mamma. So Peggy for the present was satisfied.

This talk about the Smileys and the rest of them had been a day or two before the morning on which we first saw Peggy – the morning that Thor tried so to make fun of her about choosing sugar in her bread and milk, because it was cold. Mamma had not said any more about the children at the back, and this particular morning Peggy herself was not thinking very much about them. Her head

was running a good deal on the white cottage and all her fancies about it, and she was feeling rather disappointed that she had not succeeded better in amusing Hal by her stories.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.