

were babes, and she dropped you from her bundle, on her way here. But it is against the Jewelled Cat that she breathes the most hate, and it is very odd, but I love that cat more than I have ever loved anything else except you and the King. I feel as though I cannot give her up. Come now and see if you do not love her too. She is the most beautiful and the wisest and the best thing that lives."

Doris wondered very much to hear Poppie speak in so extravagant a manner of a cat, even if Puss did wear jewels, but she followed her willingly enough through a dark and winding passage, so narrow and low that in some parts they had to creep on hands and knees.

The place in which the King's cat was confined was a small cell, very different from the bright and cheerful kitchen which she had forsaken. You would expect her to be quite unhappy about the change in her circumstances, but, on the contrary, she came purring to the grated door, and seemed in very good spirits indeed.

"Oh," said Poppie, "if only we had the key that lies in the bird's nest! It will open any door at all."

"I have it, I have it," cried Doris, taking it from her pocket. "Make haste, Poppie, for I love Pussy too, so much that I can hardly wait to kiss her."

Poppie unlocked the grimy door forthwith, and the two children rushed in. They hugged Pussy to their heart's content, while in every way possible to a cat, she tried to show her delight in their caresses.

Their happiness was, all too soon, cut short in a very awful manner. Sounds of someone coming through the narrow passage could easily have been heard, but they were so much taken up with Puss that they paid no attention to anything else. The first thing that awakened them and a sense of their danger was the hoarse echo of Beldame Bleary's dreadful song: