

"When's my birthday, Jack?" asked Pussy, looking up into his face.

"Next Whit Monday, and you'll be nine then—don't forget!"

Pussy nodded, and moved her lips rapidly, saying over and over to herself, "Next Whit Monday, and I'll be nine years old."

Pussy could not go to school as her brothers did, nor did she learn at home; her mother had once or twice tried to teach her the alphabet, but although she would repeat the letters obediently enough, she could never remember them, and Mrs. Sibberton gave up the attempt with a sigh. Walter had one day called his sister a dunce, but she had cried so bitterly, and Jack took him to task with such severity, he never ventured to say such a thing again.

Pussy stayed with her mother through the long days, amusing herself with her toys, but never making a noise as other children do. She was a great comfort to her parents, in spite of her affliction; if her mother were looking sad she would put her arms about her neck, trying to comfort her by loving kisses, as she had done when a mere baby. Pussy was a baby still in all but years.

When the boys came in from school one afternoon they were talking of Whitsuntide and the holidays they would have then—a whole week.

"And we can take Pussy out in the pram, can't we, mother?" said Jack. "Won't that be nice, Puss, to look for flowers?"

Her face lit up with pleasure, for she dearly loved flowers, it was one of her greatest treats when Jack took her out in the old shaketty perambulator she had never outgrown (for Pussy could not walk).

"You must not forget to tell dad as Whit Monday'll be your birthday," said Walter.

Her brothers did not forget it if she did. When their father came in from work, Ben, Harry, and Walter exclaimed in a breath, "Whit Monday's our Pussy's birthday?"

"Is it?" he replied, taking her in his arms; "how old will the little woman be then?"

"Next Whit Monday and I'll be nine years old," she answered promptly.

He sighed, but asked again, "And what would you like on your birthday? Another doll, eh? Why you have a lot more than you can play with now, haven't you? But never mind, we'll see." And, as the boys said, "Dad's 'we'll see' meant she'd get it."

Whit Monday came—a warm, glorious day, and Pussy's face was bright with joy when Jack dragged out the old perambulator, and with his mother's help seated her in it, her birthday gift—a golden-haired doll—cuddled lovingly in her arms. But as her mother stooped to kiss her, Pussy felt a tear on her cheek, and glancing up into her face saw that she was looking sad.

"Mother's crying," she said gravely, as Jack pushed off.

"Yes, I knows why," and Ben nodded his head wisely, "dad's gone to club, you know."

"You shut up!" was Jack's inelegant rejoinder.

"I shan't! I knows that's what's the matter. Didn't I hear her say she wished they'd hold the club dinner anywhere but at a public-house?"

"Dad has his dinner there, don't he?" asked Harry with interest.

"Yes, and supper; he won't be home till ever so late I expect. I know that's what's upset mum."

"What's a club?" inquired Harry, after a pause. Ben did not reply, so Jack explained. Pussy listened intently, but did not seem to understand his meaning. Her face had clouded when she saw her mother's tears, but she soon forgot them in the unusual treat of a day in the lanes and woods, and the merriment of her brothers.

"Come to cricket, Jack?" shouted a young companion as they passed a meadow where he, with a number of others, was playing; but, although this was his favorite pastime, Jack resolutely shook his head. He must not desert Pussy. The boys seemed to vie with each other in paying her attentions. It was a happy day, and one they always remembered.

They had brought their dinner with them, and a reed that it was ever so much nicer eaten in the woods than at home.

The sun was setting by the time they reached home, and Pussy had grown a little tired, but she looked eagerly round the room.

"Where's dad?"

"He isn't come home yet, my darling." Mrs. Sibberton could not help the sad tone in which she spoke.

"What's to be done with your flowers, Puss?" asked Ben.

She eagerly held out her hands for them.

"Let's put 'em in water for you, Pussy," said Jack, "they'll wither if we don't."

She watched them while they did it, as she ate her supper. It was difficult to find jars, mugs, and jugs enough to hold all her treasures, but with their mother's help all were put in water at last. Mrs. Sibberton did not regard the flowers with favor, they "littered up the place so," and but for Pussy's sake she would not have had them indoors; but she could not bear to deprive her of them.

It was very late before Mr. Sibberton came home. The children had been in bed and asleep for hours; but Pussy seemed restless, and her mother was watching by her side. Alas! the father had been drinking heavily, and the strong liquor had made him irritable and quarrelsome, and his loud, angry voice awakened Pussy. She looked up into his face with an expression of terror, then covered among the bedclothes. Mrs. Sibberton saw it, and tried to quiet the intoxicated man, and at length induced him to go to bed. But when she returned to Pussy she found her sobbing bitterly. She soothed and comforted her tenderly, and presently she again fell asleep.

The next day the poor child had a dim recollection of something unusual having taken place, and the whole scene came over her when her father took her on his knee that evening, and she turned from him, holding out her arms to her mother with a piteous cry.

"Why, why, Pussy, what's the matter? Come to dad, my pet!"

But she only shrank the farther from him. The boys looked on in wonder; but their mother said, in a cold tone, "You frightened her last night."

A flush of shame overspread his face, but by dint of much coaxing and the promise of a new toy, he overcame Pussy's reluctance and installed her on his knee.

But Ben was determined to get at the bottom of the mystery. How had father frightened Puss? He asked her this at the first opportunity, but she was so terrified at the recollection that Jack, her champion, interfered.

"He'd had a drop too much at the club, I daresay, so don't you bother her, Ben."

"Was he drunk, d'ye think?" asked Walter, with wide-open eyes.

"Daresay he was, and you just let Puss alone."

The day after this Pussy was taken ill—very ill, and soon the boys were told that they must lose their little sister. Oh, how they cried about it! how they wanted to keep her! Harry waylaid the doctor and told him he *must* make her well. Pussy was just as quiet and patient as ever, she did not suffer very much; and one night, while her brothers were sleeping, she was called away.

Jack was the first up in the morning; the strange stillness of the house alarmed him; he hurried to the room where Pussy lay. How white and still she was. Oh, could she be dead! He bent and kissed her, her brow was icy. He gave a wild, heart-broken cry, and his mother came into the room. Although her eyes were red she was quite calm. She had a long talk with Jack; she told him that it would be wrong and selfish to grieve too bitterly for Pussy—that their loss meant heaven for her. She knew how sorely the child would be missed—no one better—but she could not be sorry the poor stricken darling had been called first.

"What did she say last?" sobbed Jack, child as he was, longing to hear her dying words.

"She was thinking of her birthday," answered his mother. "I heard her say to herself, 'Next Whit Monday, and I shall be nine.'"

Pussy's work was done. Yes, even she, weak as she was in both body and intellect, had had a work to do; the boys would not have been so gentle and thoughtful had it not been for her influence, while her father owed her a great deal. He could never forget the single occasion which she had shrunk from him, nor did he feel quite sure in his own mind that the fright he had given her had nothing to do with her illness. From this time he gave up the use of intoxicants altogether, and the children were also taught to do without them.

Pussy had faded with her flowers. How she was missed at home! But her friends knew that she was waiting for them where she would never "forget things" more, and "where the inhabitants never say I am sick."—*Louie S.*