

Goldilocks

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"I'm not playing any more after I'm it," she announced, tragically. "I wouldn't play now, only I'm it."

The twins stared at her. "Aw, you got up this game," sputtered Billy. "I wouldn't be a quitter when I'd gone and started a game."

She turned her back mechanically and began counting with an aching throat, "Fifteen-fifteen—" Unconquerable tears forced themselves through her tightly closed eyelids. When the game was over she refused to give any explanation, but stalked stiffly into the house and upstairs to her bedroom.

Her fingers were shaking as she turned the key and listened. Nobody was following her. Standing with her back to the door she gazed straight across the room to the dressing-table mirror. With the blessed unconsciousness of childhood she had never thought very much about her actual appearance. Her birdlike glances at the mirror had been to gaze proudly at the pretty frills Aunt Remson fashioned, or to scowl at the prim collars Aunt Vance always bought. But now, for the first time, she was facing with desperate eyes a somebody she had

"Dear Lord," she sobbed, crouching on the bedside rug, "it isn't fair—not a bit fair! You didn't have a right to let me grow so homely that he couldn't love me. It isn't fair at all!"

Presently she heard the twins pounding on her door. "We're playing millinery store!" shrieked Elsa. "Come on out and trim hats! We found elegant trimmin's up in the attic!"

She opened the door slowly. They looked sharply at the traces of her grief and demanded its reason. "My tooth ached," she lied, bravely, and then sucked remorsefully at her molar to rouse a tiny hole to action so it would not be a lie.

Elsa promptly put her grimy fingers to her cherubic mouth and drew forth an elastic string of gum (which she rolled knowingly in her smudgy palm. "Stuff it in good and hard," she admonished, holding it out to her cousin. "Don't go and tell mamma, 'cause the new dentist hurts somethin' fierce. I'm never going to tell on a tooth again as long as I live!"

The twins were fearfully and wonderfully arrayed as became real milliners, in sweeping skirts and elaborate bodices. Elsa was adorned with a gorgeous necklace which, in its humbler, prehistoric days, had begun existence as a brass curtain chain. Eloise's jewels were more simple, but quite as effective. From a lengthy green ribbon about her neck there dangled a queer-looking locket. "It's ole black tin, I guess. I play it's a vanerty box, only it won't open," she scolded, "not even when you bite it."

But when Mrs. Remson sought for them at supper-time she caught at the "vanerty box" with an exclamation of surprise.

"It's Fred's old gutta-percha locket," she explained to her sister-in-law. "He wore it on his first watch-fob and we used to tease him so about it." She flicked her thumb-nail at the spring fastening as the children crowded eagerly about her. The locket flew open.

"And I found that!" breathed Eloise in awe-stricken delight. "I found it right in that old yellow box! Oh, my soul!"

"Who is the pretty lady?" asked Rosa shyly.

Aunt Remson put the locket gently into the girl's hand. "It's your mother, sweetheart," she said.

Rosa's fingers closed swiftly over it as she fled. Upstairs once more, crouching on the bedside rug again, she gazed rapturously at her treasure. The locket was fat and thick, and under the dusty glass shone a queer old tintype. The cheeks were tinted very pink, the hair very yellow. It was not stringy-looking hair; it was wonderful curly hair. The eyes smiled; the lips smiled; Rosa smiled back at them happily.

"Oo-oh, aren't you sweet!" she murmured, hugging her hands to her heart so tightly that the locket hurt her. "Oo-oh, you are so sweet!"

She looked at it again, drawing long, happy breaths. This was a very much nicer mother than the faded photograph with tired eyes that hung on Aunt Remson's wall. In the other side of the locket, pressed under the glass, was a curl of yellow hair tied with a bit of blue ribbon. On the little oval paper was written in very small letters: "To Frederick, from Goldilocks."

Rosa looked at the curl even longer than she had stared at the picture. At supper, as she slid into her chair, her eyes were shining. Aunt Remson smiled understandingly. She did not mention the locket. But Aunt Vance, sipping her cup of substitute coffee, remembered.

"Rosa, what did you do with that picture?" she asked sternly. "It ought not to get lost again, seeing your mother's dead. Ben, did you know the children found a picture of Rosalie to-day? Tintype—in gutta-percha. I think you ought to put it in your safe until Frederick comes."

For the third time in that awful day Rosa fled to her room. Elsa dropped her fork in amazement. "Aren't you going to make her behave, mamma?" she asked. "She is so rude to-day. She jumps off like a squirrel."

In the twilight, with Aunt Remson's hand on the stringy-looking hair, she stopped her sobbing.

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"Daughter, I want you to come out."

never seen before. Somebody with straggling hair, with a stubby little nose, with freckles and awkward teeth, and with eyes so big and sorrowful that she hid her face in her hands and wept.

As she groped for a handkerchief her fingers touched the leather case that held her father's picture. The sobs grew quieter for a moment as she looked through her streaming tears at the beloved face, but a new misery was crowding fast upon her first grief. A great pity for the unhappy father of so ugly a daughter possessed her. It seemed to her that all the sorrow of those mournful eyes, all the sadness of that smileless mouth, meant that he grieved because he was ashamed of his unlovely child.

On the wall beside her was the calendar with the days checked off with tiny dots so the others could not see and laugh. Only last night she had fallen asleep tingling with delight as she counted the days until she could hear the deep tones of his dear voice and feel the swift touch of his lips as he kissed her. And all those beautiful dreams of the time when they should live together were dying as she stared at the picture. He would never want her—he didn't want her now!

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