

MIST OF MORNING

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CHAPTER I



HEADS for the front door, tails for the back!" David flipped a copper into the air and watched it fall with pretended calm. "Heads it is! Guess I would have gone to the front door anyway."

This was pure bluff, but it served to stiffen his courage. He knew it was no light thing for a small boy to ring the front door bell at the house of the Widow Ridley. Boys had tried it before, but they had only pulled the handle and then run away. It was another thing to stand one's ground and deliver a parcel, even when the parcel came from the minister and might be said to be under the protection of the church.

It was a breathlessly hot day. The shadows of the cedar trees lay like dark and pointing fingers over the close cut lawn. The house of the Widow Ridley slumbered in the heat, its wide green shutters closed. But behind those shutters——! David banged the iron gate and marched boldly up the gravelled walk. His hand was already upon the bell to pull it when the door flew open. It opened so silently and so swiftly that it seemed the very worst had happened and that the Widow Ridley would appear in person. But she didn't. The door-opener was not a terrible old woman with a hooked nose and a very useful cane but a little girl.

"You boy!" said the little girl. "What do you mean by coming to the front door? Go round to the back directly!"

"Don't have to!"

The antagonists observed each other warily.

What he saw was a thin, pale child, fantastically dressed, or rather draped, in a Persian shawl. A bright red handkerchief was wound, turban fashion, around her head. Her eyes were long and narrow, her chin delicately pointed and, at the present moment, much uplifted. For all her paleness she glowed against the dark background vivid as a flame.

What she saw was a freckled-faced little boy whose hair stood up in the centre, and who dared to grin.

"Go at once!" ordered Rosme, stamping her foot.

"Shan't. The minister sent me. Here's a parcel. Say, 'with a still wider grin, 'is this the whole circus or just the big tent? Don't you want someone to water the elephants?'"

Rosme closed the door. It was all she could do, and she intended to do it with quiet dignity. But the boy's grin was really maddening and doors have an uncanny way of divining the moods of humans. It banged.

"Now you've done it!" A tall, blonde girl who had started forward too late to prevent the bang threw a glance of reproachful wonder at the author of it. "Aunt will never sleep through that."