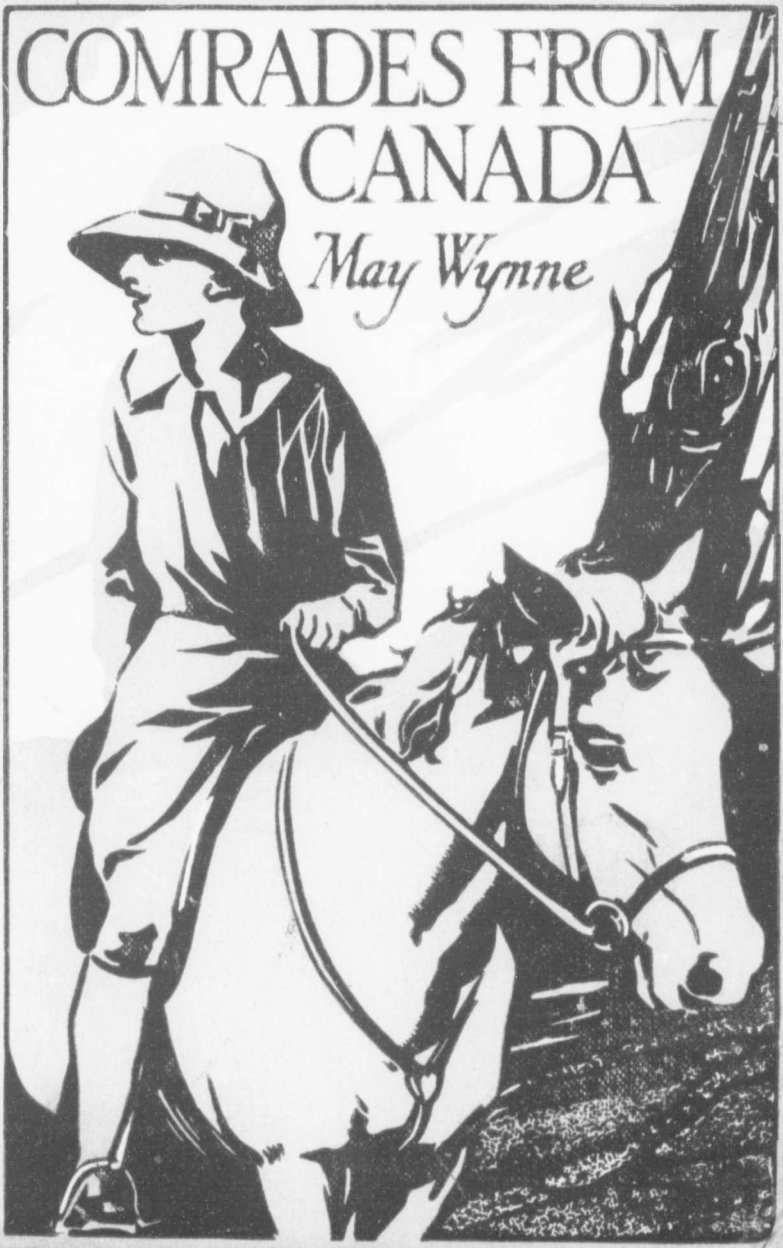
COMRADES FROM CANADA

May Wynne



COMRADES FROM CANADA

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JEAN AND BUNTY DID NOT SPEAK; THEY WERE BOTH FEELING TOO SORRY FOR THEMSELVES!

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COMRADES FROM CANADA

BY

MAY WYNNE

Author of "Stranded in Belgium"
"A Cousin from Canada"
"Phyllis in France"

Illustrated by John Campbell

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CHAPTER I

Terrible News

Robin is standing at the end of the long gallery looking out of the window. He is twelve years old, though he is not big for his age, and I think he is well-named, for there is something very like a robin about his bright brown eyes, his alert bearing, and his friendly ways. People sometimes say he is rather a wonderful little lad to be so cheery and boy-like, seeing that he lives alone in the big old Manor House with a guardian so grave and wrapped up in business as Mr. Trenman, the agent to Sir

Philip Garaton, who, ever since Robin can remember, has lived at Madleton Manor owing to his employer's absence abroad.

It almost seems to the village folk that Mr. Trenman is the Master of the Manor, since it is so long since they have seen Sir Philip or anyone belonging to him.

As for Robin, all that anyone knows of him is that Mr. Trenman calls him his nephew, and does not allow him to play at all with the boys of the village.

How those boys down there have pitied Robin! How often have they told themselves that *they* wouldn't stay for five minutes in that dingy old house with a stern uncle who is entirely occupied with the business of the estate.

But as a matter of fact Robin deserves no pity, for he is entirely happy.

The guardian, whom he calls Uncle Charles, is no bogy to him, as he appears to the village lads, but the kindest of friends who has taught him all his favourite lessons, and talked to him on all his favourite sub-

jects. In fact, the grave, silent man and the quiet little boy are the closest of friends, even though Robin does not tell Mr. Trenman his secrets, and has never found courage to ask the explanation of some secrets of his guardian which he would love to know.

It is a strange life for a boy, and perhaps it has made Robin unlike other boys; he is too fond of dreaming. Yet there is nothing he loves better than sport of all kinds. He rides, fishes, and swims, and hopes when he is fourteen that he will be allowed to shoot; for the rest, he thinks there is no place in the world like his beloved Manor, every nook and corner of which is dear to him. He is very fond of coming to this old picture-gallery, and wonders, as he looks at them, what all those dead-and-gone Garatons in their splendid dress and beauty felt like, and if they cared for their dear old home as he, little Robin Beldale, does.

There is only one part of the day Robin

does not like, and that is the mornings from nine till twelve, when he goes to a school for small boys on the other side of the village. He does not like school lessons, and, strange to say, he has no friends amongst his schoolfellows, who are fond of teasing him, calling him queer nicknames, and asking why he only comes for so short a time. Robin does not choose to tell those boys of the lovely lessons he has of an evening with Uncle Charles, and how he thinks Latin, botany, history, and science not like lessons at all.

"Master Robin," calls the voice of Hannah, "Master Robin!"

There are only two servants at the Manor, because nearly all the rooms are shut up, and neither Robin nor Mr. Trenman need much waiting on.

Hannah and Mrs. Wickles are rather old and sometimes crotchety; but they are fond of Robin, who is far more thoughtful than most boys, and never thinks of tramping about the house in muddy boots.

"Here I am, Hannah," says Robin, running to the gallery door; "do you want me?"

"It's Mr. Trenman who's sent for you to his room," pants Hannah. "You're to go at once, dearie."

Hannah never calls Mr. Trenman *Master*, because, you see, for many years she lived in the service of old Sir Aubrey Garaton, and sometimes she confides to Robin that she won't die happy till she sees a Garaton back at the old home.

"What's the matter, Hannah?" asks Robin. "You look so excited, and your voice is all quivery. Have you had a letter from your nephew?"

For Hannah has a dear nephew in far-off Australia, and is always excited when he writes to her.

But Hannah looks mysterious.

"It's news from over the water sure enough," says she, "but not from Albert. There! Mr. Trenman will be telling you about it."

This is still more puzzling. What has Uncle Charles to do with Hannah's looks and feelings?

Robin opens the door of what has always been called Mr. Trenman's "room". It is very bare and business-like, quite different from the Manor library, which is what Robin calls a beautiful room. Mr. Trenman's desk is littered with papers, and he himself is leaning back in his chair gazing into the fire, for the April evening is chilly.

Most people are afraid of Charles Trenman; they call him hard, stern, and unsympathetic, but they all agree that he is just, and that the Garaton family is lucky in its agent.

Robin has never found his guardian unsympathetic, and he comes at once to his side.

"Did you want me, Uncle Charles?" he asks. "You said there were to be no lessons this evening."

Mr. Trenman draws him to his side and

looks into the boy's face. He is a good-looking little lad, with fearless eyes, and a broad forehead. Mr. Trenman sighs and looks from Robin to the fire.

"No, Robin," he says, "there are to be no lessons this evening, but I want to talk to you. I have to tell you something which you will find very hard and sad, but I want you to be brave in meeting trial. You know we have often talked together about heroes, and you have told me you wanted to be as brave as they have shown themselves. So now is your chance. Sit down on your stool and listen to what I am going to say."

Robin obeyed. He did not ask questions, but his heart beat fast, and he had to clench his hands as if he were going to fight someone. It made him afraid, to think he might not be as brave as he had always hoped to be.

"You and I, Robin," said Mr. Trenman steadily, "have been very happy here in this old Manor, which in the past ten years

has become like home to us. Yes, ten years. You do not remember another home at all?"

"No, Uncle Charles," said Robin, his heart beating faster still. "I don't think there could be another home in the world like the Manor."

"But," went on Mr. Trenman, "you have always known it is *not* our home. I have only been a caretaker here for these ten years. Madleton Manor belongs, or rather belonged, to Sir Philip Garaton."

Robin nodded.

"Who went out to Africa. I know, though he has not got a portrait hanging in the gallery. You said he never cared for Madleton. I—I think he must be very stupid."

"Hush, Robin! Two months ago news reached us that Sir Philip was dead—that he had died of fever in Africa whilst elephant-shooting. We did not believe the story. Now it is proved. Sir Philip is dead, and his property, failing other heirs,

goes to his cousin, Richard Garaton, who has lived all his life in Canada."

"In Canada?" echoed Robin. "I'm rather g—glad, Uncle Charles, because he won't want to come here."

"Ah," said Mr. Trenman, "that is just what he does wish to do! He has cabled me that he and his family are returning to England at once. He has written full instructions. I shall probably get the letter by Saturday."

Robin laid his hand on the knee beside him.

"Uncle Charles," he cried, "oh, Uncle Charles! It doesn't mean we have to leave the Manor?"

Mr. Trenman's face grew very stern.

"Yes," he replied, "that is what it means. I shall have to move back to the agent's house where I lived ten years ago. Luckily it is empty, and I have furniture. We must arrange things at once, for I expect Sir Richard and his family will follow his letter after a few days."

Robin felt quite cold, even though he sat so near the fire.

Leave the Manor! Leave his darling, beloved home! Oh, it was impossible. He *couldn't* go away. He *couldn't* leave his beautiful home with its nooks, its crannies, its gallery, the library into which he loved to creep, the deep window seat on the staircase where he had sat and dreamed all his dreams. The pictures, the furniture, the little tower staircase, he loved them all; and then out-of-doors, would he no longer be able to fish in the stream? to ride Rollo, the old grey pony? to wander amongst the lawns and many paths? to look for nests in the woods? to——"

"Remember," said Mr. Trenman quietly, "the brave heroes about whom you have loved to read. You must be brave, Robin, or I shall find all my teaching wasted."

Robin stood up. He had meant to cry out, to talk, to say he would not leave the Manor, because no one, *no one* could love

it as he did, but those quiet words helped him to fight down some of this foolish rebellion.

Looking into his guardian's grave face, he understood that Uncle Charles was suffering too, and a great resolve came over him not to fail this kind friend.

"I think I'll run round the lawn very hard three times," he explained; "then may I come back and—and hear the rest? I'm not going to—to be stupid."

Mr. Trenman stooped to stir the fire.

"Well done, Robin!" was all he said; but Robin went out of the room resolved that he would be a hero.

He had to run round that lawn very, very hard at least six times before he could quite conquer the longing to cry as he had never wanted to cry before.

"Now I must go back," he told himself, as he stood panting by the old sundial. "It—it's going to want ever such a lot more fighting, but I won't give in. Uncle Charles is nearly as sad as I am,

th — though he couldn't be *quite*. Oh, dear, my darling home!"

He was looking at the old ivy-covered house with its quaint latticed windows and tower. He felt as if he wanted to put his arms round those bricks and cry out: "Mine! mine! it is my home!"

But it was not his home, and he must go right in now to Uncle Charles and hear about when they were going away and what they were going to do.

Mr. Trenman was waiting for his little companion's return. Robin was pale, but he held himself very straight, and came over at once to the hearth.

"Uncle Charles," he said, "I'm remembering about heroes, and I—I won't be a coward. I'll try to help. I—I shan't have to go away from you, shall I?"

Mr. Trenman's eyes brightened, and all the sternness faded from his face.

"Ah, Robin," he said, "that is more than repayment!" Then, seeing the little boy did not understand, he went on.

"No," he said, "we shall go to the agent's house. It is called Meadow View. You will go to school just the same, and we shall have our lessons of an evening. In fact, we need not change our routine at all; it only means that Meadow View will be our home instead of the Manor, and I shall have to find someone to look after us in place of Hannah and Mrs. Wickles, who will stay here."

Robin still fought his brave battle.

"When shall we go?" he asked.

"On Monday or Tuesday, I expect. It depends on Saturday's mail."

Robin came a little nearer.

"Uncle Charles," he asked suddenly, "haven't I anyone really belonging to me in all the world? Aren't you even a little bit my Uncle Charles?"

It was a funny thing that this evening of all evenings he should be able to ask that question, which he had wanted to ask for years and had never had the courage to put.

Now it seemed quite natural; yet he waited, wondering if he had really dared to say those words or not.

Mr. Trenman had turned towards his desk, and Robin could not see his face. He didn't think Uncle Charles wished him to see it, and when the latter spoke it was very, very slowly.

"No, Robin," said Mr. Trenman, "I am not your real uncle, but I am your guardian. When you were two years old my greatest friend brought you to me and asked me to take care of you for him, because your mother was dead. He himself was going abroad. He promised when he returned to tell me your real name and all about your—your relatives. But he never returned, Robin; he never let me know—and since then he has died. So you see you must be content with an old Uncle Charles who loves you quite as much as any real uncle could do."

Robin felt the tears stinging in his eyes. Was he terribly disappointed with this tale?

Had he hoped that when he did put that question he would hear of some unknown father, mother, brother, or sister, such as other boys had? If so, his loyalty made him stifle such regrets. He had never known father, mother, brother, or sister, but Uncle Charles had ever been the kindest of friends and guardians.

"I don't want to be anyone's boy but yours," he said simply. "And—and as long as we have each other we'll be happy, Uncle Charles—even at Meadow View."

Mr. Trenman was not demonstrative, and instead of putting his arms about Robin, or kissing him, he just laid his hand on his shoulder.

"That's right, Robin the hero," said he.

And Robin was content.

CHAPTER II

The Invaders

There was a letter with the Canadian stamp on it waiting for Mr. Trenman on Saturday morning, and Robin was glad that it was not opened till breakfast was over, and he had had time to escape from the room. He went right out to feed his pigeons and the ducks, and to give Rollo some sugar, but all the time he was waiting with a queer little feeling at his heart for Uncle Charles to call him.

But Uncle Charles did not call. Instead, he came out to where Robin stood leaning against the orchard rails watching Rollo.

"The letter came, Robin," said Mr. Trenman, "and we shall have to move in to Meadow View as soon as we can. Sir Richard and his family will arrive next

week. He has three children, he tells me, two boys and a girl. I hope they may be playfellows for you."

Robin bit his lip. All at once quite a new feeling came to him, not a good or a nice feeling at all, for it was quite unfair suddenly to dislike these other children who would call *his* home *their* home.

"I don't want playfellows," he said. "I shall have you and Dingo and Fluffy, that's enough. I—I suppose *they* will take my pigeons and ducks."

Mr. Trenman did not seem to hear.

"Alice Grefton is coming to look after us at Meadow View," he said. "You know Alice quite well, so it will not be like having a stranger, and of course you will have Dingo and Fluffy."

Dingo was Robin's Aberdeen terrier, and Fluffy was his cat. Robin did not feel like a hero, but much more like a rebel. He wished there had not been any children coming to the Manor. It made things much harder to think of other boys

playing in his favourite places, and having all that he had loved so well. He was sure they were horrid.

"I shall call them the invaders," he told Dingo as he lay presently in the orchard with his dog beside him. "They are horrid invaders, and we won't have anything to do with them, Dingo. We would like to drive them away and win back our own land—that means the Manor and this orchard and the farm and everything. Oh, Dingo, how I hate invaders!"

Robin had not much time, though, for confidences to Dingo. He had a great deal of packing up to do. Everything was a bustle. At least, so Hannah and Mrs. Wickles told him. There were new servants to engage, rooms to be opened, spring-cleaned, carpeted, and got ready; silver to be polished, ornaments to be washed; in fact, the work of a month to be crammed into a week. So Robin had to do his own packing, since even Hannah was too busy to speak to him. And, at

any rate, Robin would not have been able to talk to Hannah and Mrs. Wickles, because—just think of it!—they were *glad* the "invaders" were coming. Glad just because they happened to be Garatons, and the old house would blossom out again in all its splendour.

Mr. Trenman was quite as busy as Hannah. Perhaps he was far busier, but he did not talk about it as much; yet he had no time to teach Robin or even talk to him. So Robin was all alone in this bustling household to do his packing and prepare for departure.

Robin made a game of it—a sad game, of course, but it helped to make things easier.

This was a besieged country, and the invaders were drawing hourly nearer. Everyone was escaping from the enemy. He explained this to Dingo and Fluffy as he knelt to cord up a pile of specimen boxes in which he kept his collections.

"There's no hope for us, Dingo," he sighed; "the enemy is too strong for us.

They will soon be here, but we won't leave them anything we can carry away! I only wish I could pack the Manor into my portmanteau."

Meadow View was a very pretty little house close to the Manor woods, and from the window of his new bedroom Robin could see the chimneys of his old home.

"And the pigeons," he told Dingo, "the pigeons are the prisoners who live in captivity. I wish I could rescue them, but I don't love them as I do you and Fluffy."

Even though he would not be going a quarter of a mile away, Robin had to say good-bye to all his beloved haunts, and I am afraid that the last evening he spent in the old picture-gallery he quite forgot to be a hero.

"Good-bye!" he whispered to his friends of long-ago days. "You are all Garatons, and Garatons are coming to live here, but they can't love you better than I do. And —I believe I almost hate those other children."

The first night at Meadow View was a very sad night, but next morning, when Robin woke, he was full of good resolutions. He meant to be brave and not mope and whine like a coward. It was the right sort of weather to decide this, for who could mope when the sunshine laughed and danced everywhere, and all the woods were filling with singing birds?

So Robin put all his collections in order in the room Uncle Charles had given him, and, taking his butterfly net, went out in search of new specimens.

Holidays had begun. That was good. After the holidays he would have settled down better at Meadow View, and would not think it such a hardship to walk to Corfton School instead of riding there.

"I hope that if those other children try to ride Rollo he will kick them off," thought Robin as he stood by the stream fishing. He knew that the "invaders", as he always called them to himself, had arrived two days before, but, though he

could see the smoke busily curling from the red stacks of chimneys amongst the trees, he had seen no sign of the new-comers, so it made him start almost guiltily when, just after that wish about Rollo, he heard a whoop and a shout, and saw three children come racing along the opposite bank of the stream.

These must be the invaders!

Robin stood gripping his rod and staring hard at those others, who had stopped short at sight of him. Yes, these must be the invaders, and, in spite of his indignation against them, Robin could not help being interested. The eldest boy was about his own age, but far more sturdily built, with the bluest of blue eyes and fair curly hair. The girl was very like her brother, excepting that her hair was darker and hung in long curls, which at present were tumbled into a hopeless tangle. She was laughing, and smiled at Robin, who flushed to the roots of his hair. The younger boy was the smallest of the three, and not in the

least like the others; his face was freckled, his hair almost red, and his wide grey eyes had rather a sleepy look.

"Hallo!" called the bigger boy; "who are you? Come and play!"

He seemed quite jolly and friendly, but the invitation rather took Robin's breath away. These children—could they be the invaders? and, if so, were they allowed to invite strangers to play with them?

"Yes, do come," chimed in the girl, "three's such a bad number for Red Indians, and, besides, if you live here you'll be able to show us the best places. Come right over."

The bridge was quite close, a very crazy old bridge which threatened one day soon to fall to pieces. Robin still hesitated. "Are you——?" he began, but the smaller boy interrupted.

"I guess you're Robin," he said. "Hannah's told me about you. You used to live at the Manor, and I reckon you won't like us because we came."

The girl shook back her curls.

"We couldn't help coming," she retorted. "We don't even know yet if we wanted to come. Canada's jolly, and there was *some* fun on the ranch. Come over, Robin, *I* guess you wouldn't be so mean as to hate us without knowing us."

Robin blushed. He had never dreamed the invaders would talk like this. He had expected them to be, oh! so horridly proud and mocking, and to look down on him as a boy who belonged to no one. Perhaps they did not know that yet. But the girl's speech stung him, and he laid down his rod.

"I'll come," he said shortly. Perhaps the idea of a "Red Indian" game tempted him, perhaps he suddenly felt the need to play. He had never actually romped in his life. Or it may have been this unexpected friendliness of strangers.

"You are Robin, ain't you?" asked the little girl as he joined them. "Well then, I'm Jean, and Eric's the eldest by a year.

He's twelve, I'm eleven, and Bunty's ten. How old are you?"

"I'm twelve too," said Robin. "What a queer name Bunty is!"

Jean laughed. "Bunty's queer too," she declared, with no regard at all for Bunty's presence. "His real name's Humphrey, so he ought to be Humpty-dumpty; but Bunty suits him best, doesn't it, Bun?"

Bunty wriggled free of the hug his sister bestowed upon him.

"I'll have Robin on my side," said he. "And you bet you'll be a long time on your war-path, Miss Face-in-a-Mist."

"No," said Eric, who was evidently used to playing the leader, "that wouldn't be a fair game, because Robin here knows all the best places. We'd better take him as Cook's guide and chuck the war-path to-day; there's too much to be done. Come along."

Robin looked back at his fishing-rod; he was not at all sure that he cared to obey

this other boy; besides, the invaders could find their own "best places". It would be horrible to show all his pet haunts to strangers.

But already Jean had snatched at his hand. "It's real nice having found you," she cried gaily, "and I know we shall have some good games, same as in Canada. Can you ride?"

Robin felt a sharp stab of pain.

"There's Rollo in—in the stables," he said. "I used to ride him to school every day. He's a dear."

Jean gave his hand a squeeze. "It seems just mean," she whispered, "turning you out. Why can't you come back anyway, and live with us? There's lots of room."

"Of course I couldn't," replied Robin quickly. "Of *course* I couldn't. I'm Uncle Charles's boy. We—we——"

"Come on," shouted Eric, plunging down into the wood; "this is jolly. Come, Robin, and show me the best tree to climb.

You bet it won't be high enough for me."

There were many times during that morning's explorations when Robin would have given a great deal to leave his companions and run back to Meadow View. After all, these were the invaders, with whom he had meant to have nothing to do. These children had no right to have all that he had loved so dearly; no, they had no right. But Robin could not be remembering rights and wrongs in the very middle of a valiant crusade against a certain grim monster which howled and roared in the middle of a familiar wood, and he must needs go to the rescue of a captive princess.

"Hurrah!" said Eric, pausing at last in a spirited chase after the eel-like Bunty; "there's the gong. Come back to dinner, Robin, and we can come out again afterwards. We want to explore the barns and go over the farm; Dad said we were to keep in the gardens and woods this morning."

Robin shook his head; he didn't want to go to the Manor and see the invaders' parents. He was sure they were real bogies.

"Uncle Charles will be expecting me," he said, and ran off before the others joined in persuasions.

Mr. Trenman was in a great hurry over his luncheon that day—he and Sir Richard had a great deal to see to and discuss—and Robin, who understood when he was not expected to chatter, ate his cold mutton in silence, and wondered what the invaders would amuse themselves by playing that afternoon. Perhaps it would have been better if he had gone to the Manor.

"I like Bunty better than Eric," he thought; "and Jean's nice. I like her fluffy hair; but it's a pity she's a girl."

He was rather out of a job after dinner. He didn't feel in the mood for fishing and arranging his collections. The fact of the matter was that he had really liked that romp better than he had believed possible,

and he wanted to enjoy the new delight of companionship again. How queer it was! To *want* to play with the invaders. Robin gave himself an impatient wriggle. No! he would *not* go. He didn't mean to be ordered about by Eric, or act as guide to all his cherished haunts.

"Hallo!" said a voice from somewhere above him, and, looking up, Robin discovered Bunty looking down upon him from the bough of a beech tree. Bunty must have watched the squirrels climb to be able to get there, and he chuckled at sight of Robin's amazed face.

"I thought you'd gone to sleep," he said, swinging himself from branch to branch; "you stood still so long. I say! the others will be champing, won't they? They sent me to fetch you, but I saw a squirrel—and forgot."

He had such a droll way of screwing up his face that Robin had to laugh. "Are you fond of animals?" he asked. "So'm I."

Bunty beamed. "I'm going to collect

them," he explained; "it will be ever such fun. Dad's given me a shed. You see, he knows I'm always having ideas, and no one cares about my getting them into shape in the house. Once it was chemicals, and I guess I nearly raised the roof."

"And shall you keep animals in the shed?" asked Robin with interest. "What sort shall you have?"

Bunty pondered.

"The garden-boy has given me a white mouse," he said; "and I'm having a birthday soon. I shall buy a squirrel and some guinea-pigs, and I reckon I may find a hedgehog. Then there are rabbits, ferrets, and I wouldn't mind a magpie. Before it's done it'll be just a menagerie."

"Will Eric and Jean join too?" asked Robin.

Bunty shook his head.

"Rather not. P'raps it would be too slow for them. They like adventures. So do I, but I like my animals best—animals and stories."

Robin nodded. "When old Evans at the mill isn't busy," he said, "he tells me lovely stories. He believes in fairies, you know, and all sorts of hobgoblins. I love going up to the mill, and Uncle Charles does not mind that; but he never allows me to play with the village children.

"Queer!" said Bunty. "There was an Englishman out in Okotoks; he told us people were like that over here. He said, if people were rich, or could count up a dozen granddads, they thought they were better flesh an' blood than others. We don't understand that in Canada. But come and see my shed."

Robin was quite willing to do this. Bunty did not seem one bit an invader, and if the others were chums together, he and Bunty could be chums too.

Of course he knew Bunty's shed quite well, and they were soon busy giving it a grand clear out. There was plenty of hard work to be done, but Robin found it quite as interesting as romping.

Bunty did not talk much; he was too keen over his plans, and, besides, the dust was soon so thick that they must have swallowed far more than would have been pleasant had they chattered.

Boxes, old sacking, old flowerpots, broken pieces of wood, all sorts of queer odds and ends—all of them rare old rubbish—the boys piled in a corner near the orchard rails before they armed themselves with long brooms and pails of water to "scrub out".

When all was finished, and clean boxes filled with hay set round for the animals which were soon to make this their home, the old shed looked fine. At least, so Bunty said, and tucked his hand through Robin's arm, insisting he should come in to tea. Mr. Trenman never had tea, and Robin was to have had his every day with Alice; but it would be much nicer to have it with Bunty, and Robin had quite given up the idea that he was never going to set foot in the Manor again.

Jean and Eric were in the schoolroom when Bunty brought Robin in. The old "north bedroom" made a pleasant schoolroom, and already it was littered with children's possessions. Jean ran forward at once.

"I guess you're mean," said she. "Why didn't you come back to show us everything? Eric didn't know of that dandy little trap-door in the loft, and he fell right through. It spoilt our fun, because it gave him ever such a headache."

Eric frowned. He had a bump as big as a pigeon's egg on his forehead, and the pain made him cross, though, as a rule, he was quite a good-tempered boy.

"I've been helping Bunty with his shed," said Robin; "it's nice and clean now."

It was more than he was himself; but there was no one to lecture about grubby clothes. The girl who brought in tea was a stranger to Robin, and she only laughed when Bunty showed his torn coat.

"It wouldn't be you, Bunty, if you

weren't in a pickle," said she. "There! you wait till the governess comes, then you'll find a change."

Robin was puzzled. Hannah and Mrs. Wickles always called him "*Master* Robin". What a funny place Canada must be! But he thought Dinah looked nice, and he was glad there was no governess present. Jean seized the teapot and Eric helped himself to sardines, whilst Bunty cut Robin a very crooked slice of cake.

"Put jam on it," he urged; "there's a room full of jam downstairs, and that apricot stuff is good. I guess we've shocked the old cook some since we came."

Robin laughed. He could imagine the horror of Hannah and Mrs. Wickles. He was *rather* shocked himself. You see, he had always been such a little man instead of a little boy, having meals with Uncle Charles, and certainly never dreaming of putting jam on cake or eating sardines and rock buns!

Jean noticed his wonder and chuckled.

"Poor Robin!" she said; "I guess if we had a governess she would like you best. But this is holiday-time. What shall we do after tea?"

Jean always liked planning her games on ahead.

"I've thought of a ripping game," said Eric. "You wait. No, I shan't tell you now, and—— Bunty, pass the jam."

The door opened, and Robin jumped up. He guessed the lady who entered must be the invaders' mother, though she did not look a bit as he had pictured her. She was so much younger than he had supposed, for Robin had a funny idea that fathers and mothers must be very old—oh, far older than Uncle Charles! This mother was young-looking and pretty, with blue eyes like Eric and Jean. She kissed Robin very kindly.

"Ah," said she, "you are Mr. Trenman's little nephew, I know! I am so glad you are here. Bunty has always said

what a pity it was there were not four of them."

"I said so too, Mums," cried Jean; "and we like Robin. Oh, Mums, do come and have tea with us!"

"Not to-day, Miss Pickles. Oh, Jean! cake and jam? That is far too rich. I shall ask that nice old Hannah to come and preside if I find such a tea table again."

And away she hurried, smiling at Robin, but leaving the others rather glum.

"We don't want Hannah," decided Eric. "Wouldn't it be awful? Now let's go to the gallery. I want to show you my game."

Robin followed with Jean and Bunty. Jean had hold of his hand, and he felt that the little girl wanted to be friends too. Eric reached the gallery first.

"It's rather jolly, isn't it?" said he. "I don't mean all the fusty pictures, but the *floor*. Look how well we can slide."

He kicked off his shoes and was soon

flying down the length of the gallery, sliding along the polished floor.

Robin gasped.

The very idea of sliding in the old picture-gallery! He looked guiltily up at the portraits of dead-and-gone Garatons. He felt he wanted to tell them he was sorry. It didn't seem right that their room should be turned into a playground.

But Jean and Bunty were already following in Eric's track.

"Come on, Robin," cried Jean; "it's grand! Slide! Slide! Slide!"

They were already sliding back to him, laughing, merry, not caring in the least for the grave-eyed gentlemen and ladies who looked down on them.

Yet, after all, they were Garatons, and if they didn't mind waking that silent gallery with shouts and laughter, why should Robin?

"It's better than ice!" panted Jean. "One, two, three and away!"

Robin kicked off *his* shoes; he could

not resist the longing to join such fun, though he still felt ashamed to look up at his old-time friends.

Jean fell sprawling, with Bunty on the top of her. Eric was shouting that he was the express to Montreal, and warning everyone to get out of the way. Jean and Bunty rolled, scrambled up, and came sliding back to Robin.

"Why don't you come?" asked Jean. "It isn't naughty. That floor's been made slidy, I guess, just for our fun. Come with me."

So Robin came. He wondered at himself, but he took Jean's hand and was soon flying down the gallery as merrily as any of them.

It was no use to want to apologize to all the old Lady Anns and Sir Anthonys after that. No use to wonder if he were the same Robin who had spent hours and hours dreaming of knights and noble ladies over there on the window-seat. He had no right to be shocked at the invaders, for he

was enjoying himself every bit as much as they. Up and down, down and up, never tired of laughing, shouting, tumbling. It was a grand idea, so Jean and Bunty told Eric as they all tumbled at last on to Robin's window-seat.

"We'll do it every day," said Jean; "it's good exercise. I like it." And she shook back her curls.

"Hannah will be angry," replied Robin "She is so proud of the floor. She has a man up from the village every week to give it a polish. I—I don't expect your mother will let you play here."

"Mother won't mind," retorted Eric the restless. "She's a splendid sport, is our mother. You should have seen her rounding up the cattle when dad's been away. I reckon she'd rather have stayed in Canada than come over here. England's too small, and the people are so slow. They think too much of their stupid old ancestors—so 'Chaffy' the stockman said."

Robin reddened. Now that the fun was

over, he was still more ashamed of having romped under the very eyes of dead-and-gone Garatons.

"You ought to be proud of your ancestors," he retorted. "*I* should be anyway. Some of them were heroes."

Eric laughed. "Much good that does me," he mocked. "I'd rather be a hero myself. If ever I'm master of the Manor I shall sell the whole lot of these stupid portraits."

"Then you ought to be ashamed to say so," blazed Robin. "You—you ought to be proud of these other Garatons. You—you ought to want to copy them because you *are* a Garaton. You ought to be worthy of them."

"Bosh!" scoffed Eric, whose headache was naturally a good deal worse after the sliding. "I don't believe in that kind of twaddle. One person's as good as another, and I don't see why you should go on at me that way. *You're* not a Garaton. Why, Hannah says you don't even know who

your father is. She was telling mother so."

Robin was shaking with anger, and he would have hit out, forgetting in his rage all the rules of fighting, when a deep voice from the doorway startled them.

"Come here, Eric," it commanded, and there stood Sir Richard Garaton himself.

Eric had the grace to look ashamed.

"It's quite true," he muttered, obeying his father reluctantly. "And — and I wouldn't have said it if he hadn't been a duffer about ancestors."

Sir Richard did not say a word. He just laid his hand on his small son's shoulder and marched him off. The three left behind sat silent and subdued.

Jean was the first to speak.

"It does serve him right," she sighed, "only it seems a pity when we were having such fun. Don't go, Robin. I expect Eric will be sorry when he comes back, and then we can settle what we'll do tomorrow."

But Robin would not be persuaded. If Eric's father had not interfered I am afraid there might have been a fight between the two boys, for Robin had lost his temper quite as much as Eric.

"I wish I hadn't slid in the gallery," he told himself as he ran home to Meadow View, "and I shan't go near the Manor to-morrow. Eric's a real invader, and he's sure to want to pay me out if he gets punished. I shall go for a walk alone with Dingo."

He was quite glad that Uncle Charles was not home for supper. He did not want to relate how he had spent the day, and he went to bed early, there to dream that Bunty had locked him up in the spring-cleaned shed with all the Garaton ancestors, who had come to life and wished to punish him for daring to slide in their royal domain.

CHAPTER III

The Fun of the Fair

After all, Dingo did not get the chance of a quiet ramble with his little master next day; for hardly had Uncle Charles and Robin finished breakfast than there came the sound of scurrying feet on the gravel, and there was Eric, hatless and breathless. He held out his hand at once to Robin, smiling brightly.

"I'm sorry," he said, "awfully sorry. It was beastly of me, and Dad says you're quite right about ancestors. I shan't ever want to sell them now, and I shall try and find out all the brave things they did. Dad says I was coming very near to being a coward. I hate that, and I'm sorry. Can't we all four be chums?"

Robin shook hands, his heart warming. He thought Eric very brave to say all this. If he had had to make that apology he should have hated it. And Eric really seemed sorry.

"I'm glad you came," he confessed. "I didn't know playing games was such fun before."

Eric laughed. Having made his peace, he was in high good humour.

"You must have had a dull time," he said, "though Bunty says you have ripping collections. That would please old Bun. He loves collecting, especially if the things are alive. I left him bubbling with joy over a hedgehog which someone had given him."

"Don't you collect anything?" asked Robin.

Eric shook his head.

"Not properly. I start, and then the things get jumbled up, and I try something fresh. I hate any game which means sitting still. I always said I meant to be a cow-boy in the Far West, or a gold pros-

pector. But there's Jean! She's yelling. That's because we're going to the fair. I forgot that was one of the reasons I fetched you. There's a fair coming to the next village. They're having it on the green, so Hannah told us, and Mother says we may go. They don't have fairs in Canada, but they sound rather dandy."

Robin's eyes sparkled. He had forgotten all about the fair at Chilford.

"Yes," he said, "fairs are fun. Is Bunty coming?"

Of course he was! He wanted to see what it was all like. Tom, the garden-boy, told him there were coco-nuts to be got for those who could hit them.

Bunty had a splendid aim, and Robin took them all round at once to the booth where a crowd of village folk made very wide aims for those coco-nuts.

Bunty chuckled. "*Some* game!" said he. But the man who kept inviting people to take two aims for a penny soon stopped inviting Bunty.

It was "every time a coco-nut", and the man's face grew longer and longer as they came rattling up. Bunty was grinning from ear to ear.

"We'll have to send the donkey cart to fetch them away," he said, and the man, hearing this, began to protest.

"Now, young gent, stop it!" he pleaded, "ain't yer givin' the little 'uns a chance? Fair play's a jool, and I diden reckon on havin' a gent with a coco-nut eye, so to speak. Why, you must ha' got the best side of they monkeys what live in the Ekwater to show you the trick."

Everyone laughed, so did Bunty.

"I don't really want the coco-nuts," he said. "Only one for luck. I say, Jean, where's Eric?"

Eric had not got a "coco-nut eye", and he had soon grown tired of watching Bunty shying.

Jean and Robin looked round.

"He wanted to go to the swings," said Jean, "but he might have waited."

They made their way slowly to the swings, there was so much to see, so much to laugh at. Everyone was laughing, and that made it jolly.

"There he is," said Robin. "Just look."

They stood still to look. Of course they might have expected it, for Eric never could be content to do things like other people, and now he had got into a swing-boat all by himself, and was standing up pulling the ropes so that the clumsy old thing went higher, higher, higher.

I suppose Eric did not mean Bunty to be the only one to show how "Canada" did things; but in his case the "showing off" was dangerous and foolhardy. The proprietor of the boats had been called, and was urging on Eric to stop. The boy only laughed and pulled harder. It was marvellous how he kept his balance at all.

"Oh!" cried Jean. "Eric, stop! You'll be smashed."

The crowd began to gather, the owner

of the boats to threaten, but Eric still laughed. This was fun; and he had come to the fair to have fun. Higher, higher. It was very dangerous.

"You'll be killed, little sir," cried one of the crowd. "You'll be killed."

"You'll be killed," echoed others. "Stop him, someone."

But no one felt inclined to risk being knocked flat by that high-swinging boat.

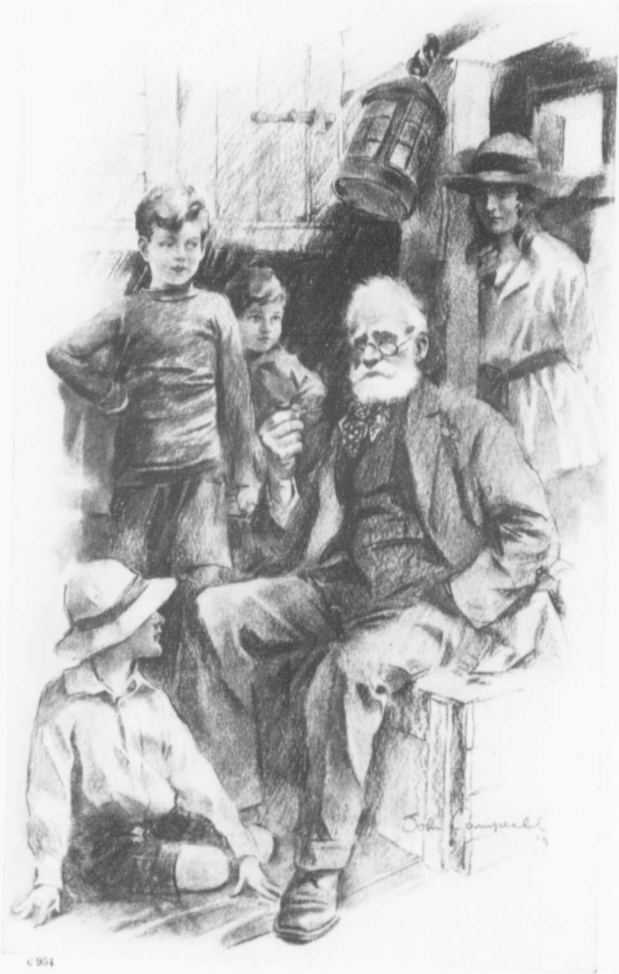
Eric laughed. "It's grand!" he shouted, and then, crack!—the rope had broken, and Master Eric was shot out over the heads of the crowd.

There was a general rush. I'm afraid not a very brave one, for everyone wanted to get out of the way in case the boy fell on them.

Bump! dump! down he came, as Jean, Bunty, and Robin ran forward.

Jean was terrified. "He *is* killed!" she moaned; "he *is* killed!"

"And no more than the young rascal deserves," retorted the boat proprietor,



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"IT WAS A HUNNERT YEARS AN' MORE AGONE"

who had just discovered that Eric was only stunned. "Thinks hisself a fine hero, no doubt, but if he was my lad I'd whack some better sense into him."

Eric had already recovered consciousness, but he felt horribly stiff and bruised.

"Let's get out of this," he urged glumly, as he staggered up and began to push through the gathered crowd. "What does everyone want to stand gaping for?"

I am afraid the bystanders did not give him very polite answers, and the children were all glad to escape back to their own domain.

Eric did not feel much like playing games for the rest of that day, and he thought it distinctly hard luck not to receive more sympathy from Mother or Dad. Jean had been inclined to regard poor Eric as a wounded hero, but Mother shook her head as she tied a bandage round her son's strained wrist.

"No," said she, "true heroes are those who perform some brave deed for the sake

of others. I don't think Eric was brave at all." Which in his heart of hearts Eric knew to be true.

Robin was the one to come to the rescue to-day.

"Shall we go to the mill?" he asked. "It is a jolly walk, and if old Evans is in a good temper he will tell us a story. I like the story of the mill best, and he tells it beautifully."

It was a very nice walk indeed to the mill, and if Eric had not felt "all joggled up", as he called it, he would have been climbing trees and getting into all sorts of mischief.

Old Evans was in, and not the least dismayed to see four children instead of one. He liked visitors when he was in a good temper, and he was very proud of his mill. That was the first thing to be explored. It was such a very, very old mill, hundreds of years old. No wonder it had a story.

Evans laughed as he patted the blackened beams.

"Us 'ud all be surprised if we knowed every story the old mill could tell," he declared. "Yes, yes, us 'ud all open our eyes. But come into my den, childer, and you shall hear the story of a brave little lass who did a very fine thing, for all she wasn't no bigger than the little maid here."

And he smiled over his big horn spectacles at Jean.

Old Evans's den was wonderfully snug, though he lived by himself and never had anyone to "do" for him. He and Sammy, the mongrel dog, were quite content to live here alone, with the woods and fields around, and the great black arms of the mill stretched shelteringly overhead.

"It was a hunnert years an' more agone," said old Evans, after insisting on his guests each taking a slice of his own home-made gingerbread, of which he was so proud. "A hunnert years or more, and the old mill was empty. Peter Grice, the miller, had marched away to the war and would never come back again. There was some

ugly tale goin' about in talk of the mill, an' it stood empty for years an' years.

"And then the folk got it into their head as Peter's mill was haunted by a bogle, an' no one would come anear it. One said as he heard a groanin', an' another was sure he heard a shoutin', and altogether the mill was gettin' a bad name when little Mary Wilmot came across by Buttercup Hollow, an', bein' late home, took the short cut by the mill. It was a hunnert year an' more ago, when folk had less sense, me dears, than they has now, an' so it was bravely done of one little lass to stand still an' listen when she heard a voice callin' from the mill. Of course Mary had heard all the tales of bogles, an' maybe, as she listened, her little legs willed it to run away across the water meadow. But Mary's heart was braver than her legs, an' she called back boldly to ask in Christ's name who was there, an' then, instead of being a ghost, she found it was Peter the Miller's son, who had come back wounded after

'scapin' from a French prison. Of course there's many little lassies who, hearin' this, would have made more an' more sure she was listenin' to a bogle; but Mary went right into the mill, an' there she finds young Wally Grice, whose wounded leg had burst out afresh, so that he haden been able to crawl to the village, an' if Mary haden been brave an' fearless o' foolish bogles the poor fellow would have starved to death, so helpless was he."

"And he was ever so grateful to Mary," added Robin, who knew every story of old Evans by heart. "And when she grew bigger he married her, and they lived in this very mill and were so happy."

"I like that sort of story," said Jean. "Most stories are all about boys being brave, and I'm sure girls are just as brave really."

They all laughed at this, but old Evans said it was quite true, and he was sure missie was a plucky one.

"I wish I could be a heroine," said Jean

on the way home; "it would be lovely. And you could be my brave knight, Robin. We'll make a play of it, shall we?"

So they made a play of it, and Jean was a heroine to her heart's delight, and Eric was a bogle, and Bunty half a dozen things rolled into one, whilst Robin made a valiant knight who slew everything that came in his way, and ended by marrying the heroine and living happily ever after.

CHAPTER IV

Farmer Dobbs's Bull

Bunty's birthday was on the 6th of June, and Robin heard a great deal about it for days beforehand. It appeared that, every time the children had a birthday, he or she was allowed by the others to be the chooser of all games and plays, as well as the selector of dinner.

Bunty did not take long about choosing his favourite dinner—it was to be duck and green peas with lots of apple sauce, and trifle. Eric, Jean, and Robin thought it a very clever choice, though Lady Garaton said they would have to run about a great deal afterwards or they would all feel ill.

Bunty declared no one had ever had such nice presents as he had on his birthday,

and Robin was sure he had never heard of such funny ones.

Mother and Dad gave him some Angora rabbits, Eric's offering consisted of two guinea-pigs, Jean gave a tame magpie, and Robin, whose pocket-money was very short, had to content himself with white mice.

"I like them quite as much as anything else," said Bunty, "their little pink eyes are so wise. See! Darwin the gardener has given me this old cage for them. My shed is quite a menagerie, now, isn't it?"

Bunty had a great idea of "arranging" things, and he took endless trouble with his pets.

"I believe if we didn't rout you out you would stay in this old place all day long," grumbled Eric, who did not approve of Bunty's choice of spring-cleaning his menagerie.

Bunty smiled. "Just pass me that wire, Jean," said he. "I'm going to give my Angoras a run all to themselves. Aren't

they too sweet? I shall call them Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

"Wouldn't they enjoy a nibble in the clover field?" said restless Eric. "Shall we take them there? We could easily catch them."

Bunty was not so sure, and stood stroking Tweedledum's long fur thoughtfully. He fancied his new pets would just as soon have a cabbage in their hutch.

But Jean and Eric were persuasive, and in the end rabbits, guinea-pigs, and hedgehog were taken for an airing.

It was much nicer in the sunny clover field than in the shed, and the "pets" were soon having the time of their lives.

"Hurrah!" cried Robin, "there's a Clouded Yellow," and away he went, cap in hand, after the coveted butterfly.

He had just pounced and missed it when the sound of horse hoofs was heard in the lane, and, lo! there was the angry face of Farmer Dobbs staring over the hedge.

Robin only then remembered that this

was Farmer Dobbs's meadow, and they had no right there.

Dobbs was one of the worst-tempered men in the neighbourhood, and he had a special grudge against the Manor folk, because Mr. Trenman had turned him out of Long Acre Farm some six months before; so now he bellowed angrily in threat.

Robin did not stop to hear what awful punishment would befall trespassers. He knew Uncle Charles would be very vexed if there was a "row" with old Dobbs, and back he went helter-skelter to the others.

"He's getting off his horse," he panted, "and if he sees the rabbits he'll be furious. I believe he's been drinking too. Let's bolt."

Eric frowned. "We might pretend he is a tribe of Zulus," said he, "and attack. What a wax he would be in!"

But Robin knew Farmer Dobbs too well to care for the idea. He might prove too violent a savage.

Bunty and Jean were chiefly concerned for the pets. Tweedledum and Tweedledee did not approve of leaving the clover field, and Dobbs was half across the meadow towards them by the time the animals were caught.

Eric slipped Peter, the hedgehog, into his pocket. He no longer wished to look on the farmer as a Zulu warrior, for old Dobbs's face was quite purple with anger, and he was shouting threats.

There was a stone wall to the right, and it would be quicker to scramble over that than to reach the gate. Deaf to the shouts of Farmer Dobbs, they fled, hugging rabbits and guinea-pigs in quite too loving embrace.

"I'd—no idea—" panted Jean, "that rabbits—were so heavy. Oh dear! Tweedledum nearly escaped."

"Hold him by his ears," urged Bunty. "Never mind his kicking. Here, give him to me. Now, over the wall with you."

I am glad to say Robin remembered his

old part of gallant knight, and waited to help poor Jean over that difficult wall.

"Come back!" roared Farmer Dobbs, much as the ogre of a fairy tale might have done. "Come back with ye!"

But the children were deaf, and the roar only made them run the faster.

"Wait a sec!" gasped Bunty. "Eric, can you take Twee——?"

"Come back!" yelled Farmer Dobbs. "Master Robin, doan't you remember the bull?"

No, Robin had forgotten him, but he remembered now, and the four children stood still.

There, by that clump of trees which encircled a pond, stood Farmer Dobbs's brown bull.

It was a splendid animal, deep-chested and powerful, but its temper was no better than that of most bulls, and its indignation against trespassers was quite as great as its master's.

At the present moment it was pawing the

ground, snorting, and, in fact, working itself up into a violent passion.

Then—it came.

Oh, oh, oh! Never would those young trespassers forget that awful moment of terror. Although their enemy was a good distance off, he seemed to be simply tearing over the ground, thick neck bent, tail erect, wicked little eyes gleaming. If ever an animal meant mischief, that animal was Farmer Dobbs's bull.

No one spoke, and for one long moment the children experienced what it meant to be "rooted" to the ground.

"Come back!" yelled old Dobbs. "He'll do you a mischuff."

No need to tell them that! Fear of Farmer Dobbs was completely forgotten. Eric had seized Jean's hand, Bunty was gripping hold of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but already the children could see only too clearly that the brown bull must arrive at the stone wall first.

Robin had charge of the guinea-pigs,

Snip and Snap, and now, without any thought of ceremony, he stuffed them into his pockets, whilst his brown eyes grew bright with purpose.

Had he not always wanted to be a brave knight and do daring deeds like those ancestral Garatons whom he loved so well? And now it really needed a hero to rescue Jean and the others from Farmer Dobbs's brown bull.

Robin swung round and looked towards their pursuer. On came the bull, rushing blindly on his prey. Robin flung up his arms, and, with the biggest yell he was capable of, ran back a little way towards the enemy.

Jean, Eric, and Bunty ran on. They were so breathless, so absorbed in their wish to reach that wall, that they really did not know what was happening.

But Farmer Dobbs did, and all the anger which the trespassers had roused melted away.

"He's a game 'un," muttered the old

man, "but it don't do to play up gammocks with Royal Bob," and he scrambled over the wall himself.

Meantime Robin had run a little way, made sure the bull saw him, and then dashed at full speed towards the trees and pond.

Eric and Bunty had got Jean safely over the wall, and were looking round for Robin. It was not till then that they saw what had happened.

Eric gave a shout, whilst his heart began to hammer. He was a brave boy, and, if he had thought of it, would have acted just as Robin had done; but his one idea had been to get Jean to safety, and he had not known how close the bull was behind them.

Now he looked in horror to see Robin racing for dear life towards the trees, with the brown bull in close pursuit.

Farmer Dobbs was in the field too, shouting to Robin to lie down; but I do not think Robin heard, for he only ran the faster.

But the children who stood watching could see only too clearly that the bull must be the winner in that race.

Eric began to clamber back over the wall, but Jean grabbed his coat and would not let him go; she had burst into frightened tears.

"You — you can't save Robin," she sobbed. "And—and you would only be k—killed yourself."

Bunty was running across the clover fields as fast as Tweedledum and Tweedledee would let him. Jean and Eric looked after him.

"He's gone to get help at the farm," said Eric. "That's splendid. Ev—everyone is helping but me."

Jean only clung the closer.

"If—you hadn't been taking care of me," she sobbed, "I should have been tossed, and—and, oh, Eric, you must go on taking care of me!"

That helped Eric a lot, and it was the kindest thing Jean could have said. Be-

sides, Eric had common sense enough to see that there was nothing left for him to do.

If only he had thought as Robin, or even Bunty, had thought.

"Lie down, lad, lie down!" yelled Farmer Dobbs. The old man was in a great state of mind, for it really seemed as if nothing could save Robin from those terrible horns.

But this time Robin did hear, or else his legs refused to race any longer, for he caught his foot in a tuft of grass and went over like a rabbit.

Jean always says it was the awfullest moment when Royal Bob, galloping headlong, seemed to trample right over the prostrate little figure. Jean shut her eyes and buried her face against Eric's shoulder. She *dared* not look.

There was a good deal of shouting now. Bunty had been lucky in finding some of the farm hands at once, and they had come running up, armed with pitchforks, &c. Farmer Dobbs shouted and yelled, the

men shouted and yelled, whilst Royal Bob bellowed more and more angrily, for he had gone blundering on into the trees round the pond before he discovered that that impudent little foe had escaped him.

Jean had to look up presently, whilst Eric could no longer stand still to watch, for had he not seen Bunty follow the men into the field? And, whilst the latter attended to Mr. Bull, Bunty ran to where Robin lay.

"Come on!" cried Eric, "come on! Farmer Dobbs's men are sure to have caught the bull. We must see if Robin is hurt."

It was very brave of Jean to follow over that stone wall, for she was not nearly so sure as Eric was that Royal Bob was a prisoner, and she could not help casting very anxious glances towards those trees, until, to her great relief, she saw the men come out leading the recaptured but still angry bull.

Bunty was helping Robin to get up.

"He was only stunned," said Bunty cheerfully, "and Snip and Snap are not squashed after all."

And he held up the small guinea-pigs, which must have had rather an alarming experience in Robin's pockets during that famous race.

Robin was looking very pale, and there was blood on his lip where he bit it in falling, but he smiled encouragingly at Jean, whose cheeks were still wet with tears.

"Oh, Robin!" cried the little girl, "oh, Robin, you're the bravest of us all. You were a *hero* like there are in books. And —oh, Robin, I *was* frightened!"

She flung her arms about Robin, laughing and crying, whilst Robin looked quite ashamed of himself, blushing guiltily under so much praise instead of showing any sort of conceit.

"It wasn't anything," he declared; "but, I say, isn't it late? It must be tea-time, and it is Bunty's birthday."

Jean and Bunty laughed at that, but Eric turned away impatiently. I am afraid, now that the danger was over, he was inclined to be a teeny bit jealous of Robin. You see, the truth of the matter was, he was angry with himself for not having thought of doing what Robin did.

And it added to those foolish little pangs when Farmer Dobbs met them on their way home. The old man was actually smiling as he held out his hand to Robin.

"Well done, little lad!" he cried. "I ain't any too good friends with that uncle of yours, but I'm ready to say as I envy him a spirity little nephew. I wouldn't ask to see better pluck in any of me own bairns than you showed just now, Master Robin. Never a thought of yourself, and ready to do what a grown man might not have undertook. If I see Mr. Trenman I'll be telling him all about it. It was well done, and these little masters and missie owe you thanks for savin' them from an ugly danger."

Jean shuddered. "We *are* grateful," she said. "We think Robin is a hero. It was—it was a dreadful adventure."

Bunty looked up at the farmer.

"We won't want to trespass again, Mr. Dobbs," he said. "So we hope you will forgive us; and please may I come and fetch my rabbits? I left them at your farm when I went to call the men."

The farmer chuckled as he led the way back to his house.

"If I knows a face when I sees it," the children heard him murmur, "that there Freckles is a regular bushel of mischief."

Which, Bunty said afterwards, was a most undeserved insult.

"But I've got Tweedledum and Tweedledee safe," he added, "so now let's go home to tea. I'd *almost* forgotten my birthday cake."

CHAPTER V

Foolish Eric

To give Eric his due, I must say that he did fight against that foolish jealousy which had come into his heart at Robin's success as a hero.

It really had been a splendid thing of Robin to do, and he deserved every bit of the praise he received, but that did not quite cure Eric of his foolishness. He liked Robin, and yet he would often have been glad if Jean and Bunty had not been so keen on having him always to play.

Perhaps it was just as well when Robin's holidays were over, and he began to go daily again to Corfton School. There had been some talk of Eric and Bunty going too, but their father had finally decided

that they should have a tutor, and that Jean should share lessons at present with her brothers.

"Eric is such an old dunce," smiled Sir Richard, "that he will need as much cramming with Latin and History as a Christmas goose needs stuffing. You will have to work very hard, my boy, if you are to go to Eton in two years' time."

Eric looked rather glum at this. He hated all lessons excepting those about minerals or botany.

"I don't see what a cow-boy needs with Greek or Latin," he grumbled.

"No," said Sir Richard quietly; "but the future owner of Madleton Manor requires a little knowledge of both, besides a great many other things, my boy, in which you are lacking. Amongst them, I am afraid, self-control and discipline."

Eric did not dare to say more, but he grumbled loudly to his beloved Jean.

"I wish to goodness that Uncle Philip hadn't died," he said, "or that he had

had a dozen sons. *I* don't want Madleton Manor; at least, I'd far rather have a big ranch out West and be a cow-boy."

Jean sighed. "But if you had a ranch you wouldn't be a cow-boy," said she; "and I'm not sure that *I* don't like England best. There aren't such nice woods or flowers in Canada, or such old, old places. Besides, we've got Robin in England, and he is nice. I like our games."

But Eric only kicked the gravel along the path; he was not liking the thought of all those lessons, still less did he enjoy the prospect of school. If he had stayed in Canada there would not have been nearly all this fuss about education.

"Robin's rather a little duffer after all," said he; "he actually likes lessons. His uncle gives him extra ones at home. I can just see myself doing that!"

Jean laughed merrily.

"No," she replied. "You would have to be very ill indeed before you wanted to do a lesson; but it's not fair to call Robin

a duffer, because he isn't—he's a good little sport, and he can ride and fish and do all that kind of thing."

"He likes reading," objected Eric, who had only been known to read two books in his life—*Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*.

"Well, there's no harm in that," retorted Jean; "but the truth is, you're grumpy because of what Father said, and you'd much better be honest and say so."

"I wish we hadn't come to England," said Eric.

"And I'm glad we have," said Jean; "but, as you're so silly, I shall go and help Bunty clean out his menagerie. He's got a goldfinch now, and it's awfully sweet."

Eric hunched his shoulders and went off down the village to ask Jem Grickleigh about a ferret he wanted to buy. Jem was not a very good companion, as Eric quite knew, but he was beginning rather to like going down the village and talking to the lads, who flattered him, and always

were ready to listen to Eric's rather boastful talk of his doings in Canada.

Jean and Bunty were never invited to go down the village when Eric went to meet these friends, and I don't think they would have gone in any case. Jean told Eric frankly that Dad would be vexed if he knew.

"Bosh!" retorted Eric. "We always joined with the boys on the ranch out in Okotoks—and, anyway, you'll be a sneak if you tell."

So Jean had not told, but she was sorry, for Eric was not quite so much *her* chum now as he had been in the old days.

"I can't think why he doesn't like England best," she told Bunty, who was cheerfully scrubbing the floor of his shed and transferring most of the dust and dirt on to his sailor suit. "Eric is always talking of Canada now, and I'm sure he was just as keen when we were out there to come to England."

"Never mind," said Bunty, who was not

one to worry about anything. "Leave Eric alone, and just open the cage for Snip and Snap to come for a run. Aren't they cute little beggars?"

Jean laughed. "You look like a wizard," said she, "with Perks on your shoulder. I wonder if he has ever stolen anything, like magpies do in stories."

"Robin promised to come up this afternoon," said Bunty; "it is a half-holiday, and we are going to the woods. You can come too, if Eric is still grumpy."

The woods around Madleton were full of delights just now—flowers, birds' nests, all sorts of wonders and discoveries for these Canadian-born children.

Eric certainly had not recovered his temper by luncheon-time. He looked moody and cross, and "cut off his nose to spite his face" by refusing a second helping of gooseberry fool. Jean lingered afterwards to ask humbly if he wanted to play at anything particularly; she was too loyal to her chum to leave him alone if he wanted

her. But Eric only turned his back and told her not to bother him, as he didn't want to play with kids.

This was dreadful! Eric had never been disagreeable like this before, but Jean supposed it was the thought of a double supply of lessons.

"Robin hasn't turned up," said Bunty when she joined him, "and it is two o'clock. I'm going to fish him up, or we shall waste all the afternoon. Are you coming?"

They went off together, and Jean would have been perfectly happy had it not been for Eric.

Robin was not in the house at Meadow View; Alice said he had gone off directly after dinner, she fancied in the direction of the lake.

"I think he'd been gettin' into some trouble with the master," added Alice. "Master Robin was havin' a long talkin'-to this mornin'; he didn't go to school at all. And I'm afraid he was cryin'."

Alice seemed quite distressed over it, for she and Robin were great friends, and I am sure Alice would never believe Robin could be really naughty.

Bunty and Jean were disappointed. If Robin did not join them their afternoon would be spoilt, for none but he understood where the different birds built their nests, or knew the names of the flowers.

"I expect Alice made a mistake," said Bunty hopefully. "Anyway, we'll go and look for him."

The lake lay on the outskirts of the wood, with a delightful cowslip field close by. Jean had her eye on that field as they climbed the stile, but the next moment cowslips and all else were forgotten, for there was Robin by the lake-side, his cap on the path near, whilst he lay face downwards, shaking with sobs.

Jean's first thought was that he had hurt himself, and she ran forward at once.

"Oh, Robin," she cried, "dear old Robin! What *is* the matter?"

Robin sat up with a jerk. He hated anyone to see him cry, and, as he dashed away his tears, he was wishing these "invaders" had never come to Madleton. He had begun to forget that wish till now, and he soon regretted it as Bunty and Jean knelt beside him, coaxing and sympathizing. They really *were* his friends, and Robin wanted friends badly just now in his loneliness.

"Tell us what is the matter?" urged Jean. "Has your uncle been cross?"

"Cross!" echoed Robin. "Oh no! Uncle Charles is *never* cross. He is kind as kind can be. But, oh dear, oh dear, he is going away—right away to Africa, and he says he can't take me."

"*What* a pity!" sympathized Bunty at once. "You might have seen a crocodile, and snakes, and a secretary-bird, and all sorts of splendid things."

"I'm glad he's not," retorted Jean. "I don't want Robin to go to those sort of places. But, Robin, why is your uncle

going? Is he staying away for a long time? And are you going to live at Meadow View all alone with Alice?"

"No," said Robin, scrubbing away the tears. "No. The other part is not quite so bad. Uncle Charles says that it is all arranged for me to come and stay at the Manor till he returns. But, oh, I wish——!"

Jean, however, interrupted by clapping her hands vigorously. "That's fine!" she cried. "Don't you think so, Bunty? That's not bad news at all, but good news. It will be lovely to have you, Robin. And will you not have to go to school every day? Will you have lessons with us and the tutor after the holidays?"

Robin nodded. "Yes, that part *is* nice," he agreed. "And I shall like being with all of you. But I can't bear Uncle Charles to be going away; he is so kind. We are such friends—real friends. I don't expect you can understand."

I don't think they could, for they could hardly picture what a strange, quiet life

Robin had led at the Manor without any sort of companion but the grave, stern gentleman whom Jean and Bunty thought rather alarming.

"It's a pity your Uncle Charles can't come to the Manor too," said Bunty. "I wonder why he is going to Africa. I wish he would bring me home a parrot or a snake, or——"

"A crocodile," added Jean scornfully, "in his pocket. You goose, Bunty! But don't cry any more, Robin. P'raps your uncle will get tired of Africa and come back soon."

"I don't think he is going to please himself," said Robin. "He called it very important business, but he did not say what the business was."

"Anyhow," replied Bunty, "*you* are coming to the Manor, which is altogether nice. You can share my menagerie, Robin. The animals are awfully fond of you, and it will be more fun doing it together."

Jean looked rather wistful. If Bunty

was going to take possession of Robin, and Eric no longer cared to chum with her, what would she have to do?

Did Robin understand this? He gave Jean's hand a friendly little squeeze.

"Yes," he said, "I think all things are much nicer done together; so now let's go and look for birds' nests and butterflies. Jean is the cleverest of us all in spotting the smaller nests."

Jean smiled. "You *are* nice, Robin," she said gratefully, then paused. "I wonder what Eric will say about your coming to live at the Manor," she added. "I hope he will be pleased."

"It doesn't matter anyway," said Bunty, "because three always was an odd number, and Robin and I can be quite happy amusing ourselves. Why, Robin, what is it?"

For Robin was swinging himself up into a tree in a great hurry.

"A missel-thrush's nest, or I'm a Dutchman," he called back. "I'll bring the eggs down in one sec."

And, by the time those grey, red-splashed eggs lay snug in Bunty's box, they had all forgotten to wonder what Eric would be saying to the prospect of Robin joining the schoolroom party at the Manor.

CHAPTER VI

Robin comes Home to the Manor

We all know how horrid it is to say good-bye to people we love. Robin was as miserable as his feathered namesake on a winter's day, as he watched Uncle Charles's preparations for departure.

It had been settled that Robin should go up to the Manor the night before. Alice was to remain at Meadow View, and her aunt and cousin were coming to stay with her. Robin was leaving most of his collections in his own "snuggery", as they were too heavy to be moved about.

"You needn't touch them at all, Alice," he kept telling her, "or you are sure to break something. I shall often be down

from the Manor to look at them, and I can do the dusting."

Alice laughed and promised; she was quite ready to let other people do what work they wanted to.

Robin was well aware that Uncle Charles would not wish him to cry over the leave-taking, and he had a big struggle with himself to get "brave" for the sad moment. It was a good thing really that Uncle Charles was so busy, for the farewells had to be cut very short. Sir Richard had sent the car down to fetch Robin and his luggage, and Robin was winking away one rebel tear which *would* show itself at the last moment, as he climbed into his seat beside the driver, waving good-bye to Uncle Charles, who stood on the door-step.

Jean and Bunty were waiting at the hall door to receive the visitor.

"Mother said we'd better not come down to Meadow View," said Jean. "You've got your old bedroom, Robin; Hannah said she was sure you would like it best."

Eric came sauntering along towards them; he was not quite so delighted as Jean and Bunty to welcome Robin, but that was because he was still in that contrary mood of his.

"I suppose Bunty will be keeping you in that shed of his all day now," he said. "I wish you all liked proper fun. What larks we could get up to."

"What sort of larks?" asked Jean. "You know we *do* like fun, Eric, and we like to play your games as well as ours."

Eric laughed. "Well," said he, "there are gipsies down in Welton Hollow, and they aren't half-bad. I've been talking to them. They have a lot of old horses, rather skin and bone, but if they had a feed of corn there'd be some life in them. Now, *I* was thinking if we hired those horses we might have ever such a joke on Rexton Common. There are a lot of cattle which are left to graze there, and we could pretend to be cow-boys and Red Indians and round up a few."

Jean began to laugh. She was a wild little hawk herself, and this sort of game very much appealed to her.

"Bunty could have old Rollo," said she; "but what about Robin?"

Robin flushed. He was not particularly keen about this game; but Eric was looking at him, and Robin, being sensitive to a fault, could read what that challenge meant. Eric wanted to see if he would be afraid to ride one of those gipsies' horses.

"I don't mind what I ride," he said desperately, "but I am afraid I don't know much about rounding-up cattle. I have never been in Canada."

Eric frowned. Was he disappointed that Robin had stood his test? He had quite expected the latter to say he would not join.

"We'll soon show you how to play," he said. "You can be Chief Red Hawk, and Bunty one of your braves. Jean and I will be cow-boys and stop your raiding."

It did sound quite a thrilling sort of game, and, if Robin's breath was some-

what taken away by its daring, he did not own it.

Eric, finding his suggestion received with favour, grew more amiable. "Come to the schoolroom," he said; "we'll have some jolly good fun."

Robin would have preferred to slip away to see Hannah and Mrs. Wickles, to "pay his respects" to his many friends amongst dead-and-gone Garatons in the picture-gallery, and to spend all the hours of gloaming tucked up in his beloved window-seat, dreaming those dear dreams which belonged to the old days when he and Uncle Charles were content in their quiet, jog-trot life together.

This Manor seemed somehow a new Manor—all bustle and busy-ness instead of quiet and peace.

The schoolroom was in a nice pickle. Poor Hannah! Robin guessed his old friend would be too disgusted even to put her nose inside the door.

Eric perched on the table, Jean on the

back of a chair, whilst Bunty sprawled full length on the floor and made love to Dingo, who, of course, had come "home" with his master.

"We must have some sort of dressing-up," said Eric, who was quite happy now he was laying down the law. "Robin and Bunty can visit the poultry yard and get all the feathers they can for their head-dresses. Jean and I can borrow two of those striped shirts of Dad's, and his Panama hats. Then we must get ropes for lassos."

"It won't hurt the cattle, will it?" asked Robin doubtfully.

Eric laughed. "They'll enjoy it," said he; "and I don't suppose, Chief Red Hawk, that you will get within ten yards of their horns. It's not so easy as it looks to throw a lasso."

"I'll help with the Indian head-dresses," said Jean. "What fun it will be! But are you sure the gipsies will lend their horses?"

"Of course they will," retorted Eric; "but it will have to be to-morrow or they will be moving on. As soon as breakfast is over we must take our things and some corn, get Rollo, and be off. Dad is riding over to Croxton, which is just as well. He might think it too Canadian a game."

"I don't see that it's naughty," argued Jean. "We shan't hurt anything; and the Common isn't private."

But, deep down in their hearts, each one of the four guessed what would be said of that "ripping game" should their elders hear about it.

The necessity for secrecy only added to the joyful thrill. They were like so many wary young scouts, dodging round this corner, listening here, creeping there; so you see they *must* have known that this new game was mischief or they would not have gazed so innocently into the pond when Hickson passed, or scuttled off so nimbly as soon as he had gone, to fetch the corn which was to rouse the gipsies'

skinny horses to the spirit of the game.

Rollo welcomed Robin with a joyful neigh, and Robin could not help regretting that he would not be able to ride his old pet. But Bunty was two years younger, and would certainly be too small to mount a real horse.

Jean was bubbling with excitement. She was so delighted that Eric seemed quite himself again, like the dear old Eric of a few weeks ago. After all, this *was* the best sort of game; they had all been too inclined to do what Bunty and Robin preferred.

The gipsies were highly amused when they saw the "cow-boys" and "Indians" appear stealthily from the wood. The hens had been most obliging in furnishing plenty of feathers, and Jean had sewn them round two crownless straw hats, so that they made fine head-dresses.

I don't know what Dad would have said to the use to which two of his new fancy shirts were being put, but Jean was sure

they were the very things for cow-boys!

The horses were very pleased with the first part of the programme, and soon finished the corn brought for them. Robin found the back of a big, bony, black steed very different from Rollo's comfortable saddle, but he was resolved to do his best to make the game a success.

"Whoop!" shouted the gipsies. "Whey—whoop!"

And the skinny horses—shaking their heads as much as to say: "This *is* a queer game!"—set off at a slouching trot up the lane and out on to the Common.

"Now then," shouted Eric, who was perched on a sad and sorry chestnut, which once, long ago, had been noted for ill-temper, "off you go, Red Hawk and company! Raid the valley and then look to yourselves. Long Bill and Canty Dick will soon be teaching you your lesson."

It was rather a queer sort of game, and somehow it did not work just as was intended. Robin tried to get his bony black

near to the quietly grazing cattle, but the bony black had no wish to go that way, and set off at a crab-like trot for a patch of common where the grass looked green and succulent.

Bunty was more successful and Rollo more intelligent; but the worst of it was that in throwing his lasso Bunty threw himself after it, and came sprawling into a gorse bush.

With shouts and yells the impatient "cow-boys" came on, whilst Bunty made haste to pick himself up with the best grace he could muster and go dashing in pursuit of Rollo, who had kicked up his heels and scampered off.

"Hi, Dick!" roared Long Bill; "there goes a Redskin. Shoot him down and then round up the herd."

Jean whacked her grey mare vigorously. She wanted to gallop heroically forward, but the grey did not like gorse prickles any better than Bunty, and promptly descended into the nearest ditch.

A shouting near told that the man set to watch the cattle was objecting to the attempts of the strangers on horseback to throw rope-ends round his cows' inoffensive horns, and even Eric could not altogether imagine that the brandisher of a thick stick was a Red Indian brave.

"Oh," cried Jean, "my horse is going to roll! Do come, Robin, and get it out of the ditch."

Bunty was out of sight, for Rollo had no fancy for the new game, and had gone galloping back to his stables.

"Now then, now then!" cried the cowkeeper, a one-eyed fellow with a limp. "Now then, what's all this? Them cows is to be left alone, or I'll be sendin' word round to the p'leece. Now then——!"

And, raising his stick, he brought it down heavily on the back of the once skittish chestnut which Eric bestrode.

Now the chestnut had eaten corn to-day, and perhaps the corn had brought back the memory of feasts and sins of other days.

The stinging pain of that blow helped still further to fire the ancient spirit. Down went his head, up went his heels, and away he galloped, carrying Eric, like John Gilpin of old, in the opposite direction from the one he wished to go.

The gipsies, who had come up from the lane to see the "sport", laughed till their sides ached, and, as "Long Bill" on his fiery chestnut galloped past them, one young imp rattled a frying-pan to add to the runaway's fears.

Away went the chestnut, away went Eric, not enjoying life one little bit! The grand game had been a failure, and everyone was laughing at him. Worst of all, after his much boasting about his riding, here he was being run away with by a gipsy's "old crock".

Bunty, having left Rollo in his stable, had come back to see how it fared with his "brother chief".

He found that both Jean and Robin had had enough of ditches, gorse bushes, and

gipsy steeds, and were in the act of handing back their horses to their owners.

But where was Eric? Where was he?

Jean was not nearly so anxious as Robin.

"He won't fall off," she said. "Eric has never fallen off a horse in his life. He is an awfully good rider, and the old chestnut can't run away far."

The gipsies, still laughing, wanted to know where the other little master had gone to. Jean did not like their open amusement. She felt they were all looking rather stupid, whilst the one-eyed man in charge of the cows never ceased grumbling. Meantime, the heroic Long Bill was finding that that half-sieve of corn was carrying his chestnut a long way. They had left the Common behind them and would soon be coming to Cutter's Hill. Cutter's Hill was one of the steepest in the county, and Eric knew enough about riding to be aware that, at their present pace, he and his steed would never reach the bottom of that hill in safety. In vain he tugged at the piece

of old rope which acted as bridle; in vain he shouted and called upon the chestnut to stop. Nearer, nearer—just as far as that turn and the hill would lie before them. Would the chestnut fall?—would he roll? —would——? Eric closed his eyes. He was afraid, for he was sure there was going to be a terrible accident, and——

Ah!

Two horsemen had rounded that corner first, and Sir Richard Garaton, who was riding home with a friend, was quick to realize the situation. He did not recognize the rider who bestrode that lean but still fiery chestnut, but he did know that a gallop down Cutter's Hill meant tragedy.

Reining in his own well-trained horse to the side of the road, he leaned forward and just succeeded in grasping the rope bridle.

Ah! The chestnut might try to rear, to plunge, to break loose, but he would never rid himself of that powerful grip. And possibly the flare of wickedness, inspired by the feed of corn, was dying out, for,

after a brief tussle, Sir Richard was the master. Only then did the latter recognize his son.

"Eric!" he exclaimed in amaze. "Eric! What does this mean? What mischief are you up to now? You thoughtless, tiresome boy. Do you know you have been near death? If I had not been here—— Great Scott! It does not bear thinking what might have happened! Thank Heaven I *was* here in time."

Eric was as white as the shirt he wore. All his bravado had vanished, and he did not answer his father at all as he half slipped, half fell from his horse.

Sir Richard saw that he was badly frightened, and waited till Eric had recovered from the first shock, then he spoke quite quietly but firmly. "Now get on your horse again, my boy," said he, "and ride back with me. No, I will see that the animal does not run away again."

"But, Dad——" began Eric, then paused. He knew his father meant to

insist. He knew he would be a coward if he refused; so, although his heart beat furiously at the thought of remounting that horrible horse, he scrambled back obediently into his seat. The chestnut gave his head a wicked toss, as much as to say: "Don't be too sure of my intentions." But no doubt he thought it better to drop back into his usual slow trot, since there was not likely to be another meal of corn coming for a long time!

Eric did not speak during that ride back, though he flushed up hotly when the gipsies, who had come in search of their property, laughed and joked about riding a fine race.

Sir Richard's friend left them at the Manor gates, and Eric walked slowly up the drive to the house, his father having told him to wait for his coming in the library. Poor Eric! He had expected to show himself to Robin, and to others too, in the light of a very fine fellow; but, instead, here he was, a very crestfallen, very foolish

little boy who had made everyone laugh, and some people blame him for what had been merely a senseless piece of mischief.

"But if Robin dares to make fun of me," thought Eric, as he clenched his hands, "I shall fight him—whatever Jean says."

But Robin had not the least wish to make fun of Eric, and when, after a long, grave talk with Dad, Eric joined the schoolroom party, it was to find ready sympathizers.

Jean had been crying to think of the danger poor Eric had been in. Bunty was arguing that if Eric was punished they all ought to be too, whilst Robin said very little, but took the first opportunity of finding Sir Richard and explaining that he, too, had been riding one of the gipsy horses.

Sir Richard laid his hand on the little boy's shoulder.

"You are just what your Uncle Charles says of you, my boy," said he, "true and loyal. I am very glad Eric and Bunty

should have you for a friend. I hope you are happy here."

Robin's eyes shone. "I should always be happy at the Manor," he replied simply. "It seems like my real home."

He wondered why Sir Richard sighed as he turned away.

CHAPTER VII

Jean gives her Confidence

There were many days now when Robin began to wonder what he could have done before the "invaders" came. He had not known then that he had ever been dull, but he was sure of it now! Of course, everything was quite different. He had hardly any time for dreaming in the old gallery window-seat; in fact he avoided the gallery altogether, unless he got the chance of going there alone to talk to the many friends of long ago.

He could not think why Eric, and even Jean and Bunty, cared so little for these brave ancestors of theirs. He had brought Bunty once to the gallery to show him his

favourites amongst gay cavaliers and lovely ladies, but Bunty had soon turned away, saying he did not care for pictures, and he didn't see why he should trouble himself about what his great-grandfathers had done, since he didn't particularly want to be like them, for they had all been soldiers, and he, Bunty, had the firm resolve to be a trapper in the wilds of Canada.

"I've read books about it," said Bunty. "And there was old Tocker, 'way in Alberta, who had been on the lone trail through Temagnani, and it must be a grand sport. I don't wonder at Eric getting bored stiff to think that now he'll have to live always in a house like this, and never have any adventures. Poor old Eric!"

Robin was disappointed. He had hoped Bunty would understand how splendid it was to belong to all those heroes of long ago, to feel that they were calling him comrade as he walked down his beloved gallery.

"I shall be a soldier," he said, "because General Gordon was a soldier, and Uncle Charles says he is a hero worth copying, and I think I should like to be a soldier, too, because my friends were."

And he looked lovingly up at the Anthonys, Philips, and Richards who belonged to this old home which was no longer his own.

Jean was the fish out of water during those summer weeks, and Mother must have guessed as much, for she gave the little girl a long strip of garden to tend and three Buff Orpington hens of her very own. Jean was intensely proud of her hens.

"They lay beautiful *brown* eggs," she told Robin, just as if no hens had ever laid brown eggs before. "And Dad is going to have one for his breakfast to-morrow. I am so proud."

Those poor hens were not going to be allowed much chance to lay their brown eggs in peace, for Jean spent hours of her

time hovering near in anxious impatience to hear the cackle.

Now that Jean had her own occupations, she did not miss Eric so much, and Robin was always kind in wanting her to join him and Bunty.

"We are making a new collection," said Robin. "Uncle Charles told me how to start it. It is all sorts of pressed flowers and ferns. We press them till they are quite dry, then gum them into a book with their English and Latin names and varieties. Uncle Charles says it is the nicest of all ways to learn Botany."

Jean was very interested but a little doubtful. She was still foolishly afraid that, if she joined Robin and Bunty, Eric would tell her she had deserted him.

"I wish we could all collect together," she said wistfully. "May I ask Eric?"

"Of course," said Robin heartily, "but I don't think he'll care for it. He likes rush-about games best, and I'm afraid we don't. Besides, he is always down at

"WHY, JEAN, WHAT IS THE MATTER?"

Whylie's Farm, or in the village with that boy Jem. I wish he wasn't friends with him. I know Uncle Charles did not like Jem or his elder brothers."

Jean sighed. "I never thought I should want to have lessons," she confessed, "but I believe I do now."

Then she went in search of Eric to ask if he would like an album to start a pressed-flower collection.

An hour later Robin found her huddled up on the stile leading to the wood, trying bravely to gulp down big sobs.

"Why, Jean," he cried, "what is the matter?" and he scrambled up on to the stile and flung his arm about her.

Jean clung to him.

"Oh, Robin," she cried, "I must tell someone even if it *is* being a sneak! They didn't tell me not to, but Eric was so unkind, and that bully of a Jem, oh! I could have *hit* him, only, of course, it would have been no use, and—and I know Eric oughtn't to go, he oughtn't."

Jean's tears flowed fast.

Robin was very gentle; he always was gentle with Jean, because, though she was quite unlike his dream of the beautiful princess of fairy tales, she was still a girl, and all his romances and love of chivalry told him he must be gentle and courteous to girls; and, of course, girls include even tomboys.

"Tell me, Jean," he urged, "and I'll help."

She smiled through her tears.

"I guess you will," she replied, "because you are *you*, and so you'll help though you won't want to."

And after that Robin knew that he would have to keep his promise come what might, since noble knights never failed their ladies.

"Go on," he said, digging the blade of his penknife into the wood of the stile, and half afraid to listen to what Jean had to say.

It was such a surprising thing too! Jean

had overheard Eric and his village friends talking of the grumpy under-gardeners who lived in a sort of shed called a "bothy" in the grounds of the Court. These gardeners had somehow or other managed to earn Jem a sound walloping from his father, and Jem had invited Eric to help him to pay the offenders out.

"They flatter Eric up," said Jean, "by telling him that, of course, having lived on a ranch, and rounded up cattle, he must be game for anything. I expect really they're making fun, because Eric isn't a very big boy, and that's why he believes those big boys. He makes believe he is as big as they, and I heard him promise to meet Jem at eight o'clock to-night, to go with him to the bothy and take revenge. When they saw me, Jem laughed ever so loud and horribly, and Eric sent me away in his crossest manner. He just hated seeing me, and I hated seeing Jem, who only laughed all the time and talked of the thing being 'blown';

and I'm telling you, Robin, because you *do* help, and you do want to stop Eric getting into trouble."

"Of course I do," agreed Robin; "it's all nonsense, that talk of revenge. I'm sure Jem is a real coward, and if Eric won't listen to me, I shall warn him that I must tell his father. I know Jem, and I expect he means to make a regular row, and there will be trouble. I hope Eric will let me explain."

Jean looked doubtful. "I'm afraid he won't," she sighed, "and everything will point to Eric being a ring-leader. Do tell me what we had better do?"

But, before Robin could think out a plan, Mrs. Garaton was heard calling to Jean, and she had to run off to answer the summons.

"Save Eric from getting into trouble," she whispered to Robin, "and you will be a darling. Oh, Robin, do save him, because—I love him so—and I guess I'm somehow afraid."

And Robin, who knew so much more of Jem and his companions than did Jean, guessed that there really was some cause for that fear.

CHAPTER VIII

Robin Speaks his Mind

It chanced that Bunty was in for a cold, which fact he had been carefully trying to conceal, lest he should be forbidden to go to his beloved shed. But at tea-time at least a dozen sneezes betrayed him, and Mother, who had come to have a cup of schoolroom tea, packed him off to bed with the prospect of onion gruel and a day spent indoors on the morrow. Eric was in uncertain spirits—one five minutes boisterous, the next cantankerous. Once Robin caught him making grimaces at Jean, as much as to say: "You *dare* tell."

Jean was pretending to be busy making a doll's frock, but I think there were some

very funny stitches put into it, for Jean was watching the clock. As a rule, the children went to bed at half-past eight, but it was not yet a quarter to eight when Eric got up.

"Good night!" he said shortly. "There's nothing to do; I shall clear."

Robin looked up from his book, and, as Jean glanced towards him, rose and followed Eric from the room. Poor Jean gave up all attempt at sewing and stuffed away that queer little frock into a bag.

"I hate dolls!" she whispered. "And—oh dear, how nasty everything is! I wish —*how* I wish—Eric were nice again."

He had been anything but nice to his faithful little chum to-day, and yet Jean was already half repenting having asked Robin's help.

Robin was not liking his job at all. He knew that there had always been something which prevented him and Eric being friends, but he could not quite think what it was. Anyhow, Eric was the only one

of the three little Garatons whom he looked on as an "invader".

Eric had been given the room in the tower at his own special request, and the boy had been at some trouble to make that room look what he called "jolly". There were Canadian photos, horse-shoes, stuffed birds and animals, queer Indian weapons, and quaint bark boats and knick-knacks made by the Indians of Canada.

Robin did not knock at the door, but went right in. Eric was thrusting a box of matches into his pocket. He had his cap on the back of his head and had put on his boots again. He scowled round at Robin.

"Who asked you to come in?" he asked

Robin leaned against the door.

"No one," he replied; "but I've come to ask you not to go out. Eric, you mustn't. It—it's not playing the game."

Eric himself was rather fond of that last expression.

"It's that sneak Jean!" blazed Eric.

"She tells you everything—little duffer! But you mind your own business—do you hear? It's nothing to do with you."

"Yes it is," replied Robin, "because I don't mean you to make Jean cry or that you should worry your nice mother. Besides, you don't know what a bad lot Jem is in with. He goes about with all the rowdies in the village. Alice told me so. You know, if your father knew, he would not allow you to speak to him again."

Eric was white with temper.

"You *are* a saint, I guess," he scoffed; "but you can just take yourself away from that door unless you want the biggest licking you ever had."

That fired Robin's spirit. Gentle as he usually was, he had a brave heart of his own, and he was ready now to face the angry Eric, who, though only a few months older, was so much bigger than he.

"I don't mind if I do fight you," he said, "but you are not going with Jem to the Court to-night. There is sure to be

trouble. And I won't let you call Jean a sneak either. She is awfully fond of you, and I think you're a beast to her."

"All right, you brat!" said Eric furiously. "I'll teach you your place. Daring to order me about and telling me what to say and do! Jem was quite right when he said you ought to be in the workhouse."

Robin did not flinch, though he had no colour left in his face. He saw that Eric was in too violent a passion to know what he said or did.

"You are not going out," he said. "And if you get past I shall go and tell your father."

"Sneak!" blazed Eric. "And won't I pay Jean out too. Talk of chums, indeed! I know what sort of chum I like best."

He rushed forward as he spoke and caught Robin by the shoulder. He had expected to drag him easily away from the door, but Robin was a tougher customer than he supposed, and in the struggle that followed the boys fell heavily to the ground,

knocking over a water-jug, the contents of which streamed over the floor.

"Let go!" panted Robin. "You'll have to! I—I shan't let you away! Don't be —a duffer—Eric!"

Before Eric could reply, the door opened and Lady Garaton came in. She had been in her bedroom on the landing below and had heard the sound of a heavy fall and had seen the wide spreading of water over her ceiling.

There lay Eric and Robin struggling together, but they were soon on their feet when they saw who had come into the room.

"Boys," said Lady Garaton gravely, "what does this mean? What are you fighting about?"

No answer. Robin was shaking with excitement. Eric looked sullen.

"Why, Eric!" said his mother, "why have you got your overcoat and boots on? It is bedtime; you cannot have been going out?"

Eric kicked his heel with his left foot, but did not reply.

"Robin," went on Lady Garaton, "I insist on an answer. Tell me at once what all this is about? I thought you were all such good friends."

"I'm not going to have Robin bossing me!" flared Eric. "He's a little sneak and a coward. Yes, Mums, I was going out; only just for a lark, and Robin stopped me."

"Eric," said his mother, "come with me to my room. Robin, I'm not going to blame you till I hear what all this means; but you must go straight to your room now and get into bed."

Robin almost felt he had been doing something naughty. Lady Garaton looked graver than he had ever seen her. He had come to be very fond of his "invader" mother, who was always so kind to him, and tears came to his eyes now as he turned away.

Jean was outside in the passage, but she

slipped back into the schoolroom as her mother and Eric passed. Then she came out to find Robin.

"What has happened?" she asked. "I saw mother go to your room. Oh, Robin, your chin is bleeding!"

"I knocked it against the fender," he explained; "it's nothing. I'm sure Eric won't go out to-night, Jean; besides, it is far too late now. Lady Garaton heard us fall, and came upstairs. Eric will have to tell what he has been doing, and that will be the end of his friendship with Jem. Now I must go to bed. I promised."

Robin went to bed, but not to sleep. He tossed and tossed about, crumpling the sheets and making his bed ever so uncomfortable. He was wondering whether he should try sleeping on the floor, when the door opened and Lady Garaton came in. The moonlight was peeping in from behind the blind and showed the soft sheen of her evening-gown. Robin thought how sad and how pretty she looked, and somehow

he grew envious of Jean and Eric and Bunty for having a mother like this, to be grieved and pleased with all they did.

He sat up in bed.

"Please," he said, "I'm awake; and is it all right?"

Eric's mother came and sat down on that tumbled bed and put her arm about Robin.

"My dear boy," she said. "My dear boy." And then she kissed him.

Robin thought that kiss one of the sweetest he had ever had. It made him ever so glad for what he had done. He was sure Eric's mother was pleased.

"Did Eric tell you?" he whispered.

"Yes, dear; thank God, Eric told me. I cannot thank you enough, Robin, for stopping him from going out with those bad companions; and how glad I am that I came upstairs when I did! Now you must go to sleep, dear, and I am sure to-morrow you will find Eric only too pleased to shake hands and be friends. I want

you to be friends *so* much. Eric could not have a better or braver chum. Will you try to be his friend, dear, even if it is not always easy?"

And Robin, feeling the tenderness of those kind mother-arms, was only too pleased to give the promise asked for.

Of course it would not be easy, and Robin could hardly believe that Eric would be ready to be friends to-morrow, but he went to sleep resolved to do his best to make Eric's mother happy, and to be a real friend to this most trying of his "invaders".

CHAPTER IX

Eric Shakes Hands

Eric and Robin did not meet next morning till breakfast-time. Robin had been up early writing a letter to Uncle Charles, which he had taken down afterwards to the post. He did not want to lose the mail.

Breakfast had begun by the time he got back, and, with a whisper of apology to Lady Garaton, he slipped into his place.

Bunty's cold seemed cured by the onion gruel, and he was trying to persuade his mother that the shed was the best place possible in which to be out of draughts. Eric was too busy putting treacle to his porridge to notice Robin, but Jean shot the latter a grateful look.

Robin was not the only one to be late for breakfast. Sir Richard's place was empty, that gentleman appearing just as porridge plates were being cleared away.

"I've been telling Dodson about the plums on the south wall," he told his wife; "they had better be brought in, and if they are not very ripe they will do for jam. By the way, Dodson was telling me there was trouble up at the Court last night."

Robin felt his heart give a bound; he dared not look up from the poached egg just set before him.

"At the Court?" echoed Lady Garaton. "Do you mean they had burglars?"

"No. It was some row between the gardeners in the bothy and a number of village lads. The latter came with fireworks and big sticks to play some practical joke, but, unfortunately, it ended in serious trouble. One of the younger gardeners had to be taken to the hospital, and two of the village boys—the ringleaders—have been arrested by the police and taken to

the lock-up. Dodson tells me there was a lot of spite and ill-feeling in the affair, and some of the boys had been drinking. I hope the ringleaders will be sent to a reformatory."

Robin had to look across at Eric now, but he looked away at once. Poor Eric was the picture of distress.

Lady Garaton had not told her husband about Eric's naughtiness, and she was sure now there would not be any need. As soon as the children had finished their breakfast she told them they might run away.

Bunty was the only one ignorant of the trouble which made the others so glum. He himself meant to make the best of a bad bargain, and, as he could not go to the shed, he went off to coax Dinah to bring him wood and tools to the schoolroom, so that he might make a new house for his white mice.

"Eric's gone out," whispered Jean, catching Robin's hand; "do go and find

him. I'm sure he was frightened to hear about Jem. Isn't it dreadful?"

"Yes, it is," replied Robin soberly. "Poor old Eric! I'll go and find him."

It took Robin nearly an hour before he discovered where Eric was hidden, and no wonder, for Eric had chosen the little top loft above the hay-loft, where the pigeons had their home.

Robin scrambled up through the trap-door, and there, sure enough, was Eric, huddled with chin on knees, looking the picture of misery. He blushed hotly at sight of Robin, and the two boys eyed each other in silence. Then Robin held out his hand.

"I'm so awfully glad you did not go last night," he said simply, "and I hope you don't think I'm mean or a sneak. I want to be friends."

It cost shy Robin a great deal to say this; he was so afraid Eric would flare up at him. But Eric did nothing of the kind. He just caught hold of Robin's hand and

shook it hard. It was all he could do to swallow down what he would have called "idiotic tears".

"Sneak?" he echoed. "No, you're a trump, Robin. I—I—did believe *that* last night, after Mums had been talking. She —she made me ashamed of myself, and I was going to tell you so this morning, only when Dad said at breakfast what had been happening up at the Court I—I forgot everything else. I—I can't bear to think of it, Robin. If it had not been for you I might have been in prison this morning."

And now the "idiotic tears" did come, in spite of all his efforts to stop them!

Robin was nearly as much distressed. He sat close by Eric's side, taking no notice of the indignant pigeons which fluttered and bustled about, as much as to say: "We don't want you stupid creatures up here!"

"Don't think about it," he urged. "You see, you weren't there, and it just serves

those others right to get into trouble when they did what they did. I am sure you would have come home at once when you saw what they were up to."

"Yes, I should," agreed Eric. "Jem told me they were only going to have a lark, and it could not have been a lark at all. But, oh, Robin, you don't know how ashamed I am of myself!"

And the poor boy's tears came more and more passionately.

Robin was ever so sorry, and did all he could to comfort, but Eric could not be comforted at first. Really that stormy cry did him a lot of good; it seemed to wash away a great many bitter, unkind thoughts and help Eric to see quite clearly how foolish and selfish he had been.

"I want to make up with Jean too," he said presently. "Will you fetch her, Robin? I don't want to come down till my eyes look better. People w—would see I had been crying."

So away went Robin, but before he left

the pigeon-loft he shook hands again with Eric, and they agreed that from to-day they would not be "stupid duffers", always finding fault with each other, but real good chums.

"All four of us," repeated Robin. "How funny it seems, when I used to say I never would be friends with any of you!"

Eric laughed at this. "Poor old Robin!" he said. "I can quite understand. I believe you love the Manor far more than any of us. I hope you will always live with us."

But Robin shook his head. "I would rather live with Uncle Charles than anyone," he replied loyally. "You see, he seems to be the only one really belonging to me. Now I *must* go and find Jean. She'll be in such a state of mind, and, now we've begun talking to each other, we might never want to leave off."

Jean was looking mournfully at her Buff Orpingtons when Robin found her.

"They have laid two brown eggs," she

said. "Do you think Eric would like them for his tea?"

She spoke as if Eric were ill, but Robin only laughed. "I'll tell you what," said he. "We'll ask Mrs. Wickles to give us two more eggs, and get leave to go for a picnic, and have boiled eggs, which we'll cook ourselves. We could have a ripping game—that's to say if Bunty's cold is well enough."

Jean's pretty face cleared.

"Then you *did* find Eric," she cried. "And you are friends? I am sure you must be, or you wouldn't have suggested that. Where is my darling old Eric? I want to find him at once."

She was off like the wind when Robin had told her, and Robin, left in charge of those two brown eggs, went his way to the coaxing of Mrs. Wickles with a broad smile on his face. It was such a jolly feeling to be friends with everyone, and he was as pleased as could be that he and Eric were going to be chums in future. What jokes

and what games they would have! And it would actually be far nicer than sitting in the old window-seat of the gallery, dreaming dreams of long ago, or collecting eggs and butterflies with no one to help.

"I love picnics," he told Mrs. Wickles brightly, as the old lady asked how her dearie was getting on, "and I am ever so glad that the invaders came after all."

Mrs. Wickles shook her head. She did not quite understand about invaders, but she knew all about picnics. "Which means coaxing rock cakes and 'Victory' sandwiches out of me, besides two eggs, Master Robin," she laughed. "But, bless me, we can be young but once! Jenny, lass, bring the hamper out of the scullery, and get me some clean kitchen paper. Ah! Master Robin, it's a pleasure to see you more like a child than ever you was before, and there, don't be breakin' of the eggs, and if you come down to the kitchen after your luncheon I'll have some cold tea for you to take too."

Robin flung his arms round the old woman's neck.

"You're a dear, Mrs. Wickles," he cried. "And, oh, I want to *sing* because I'm so happy!"

CHAPTER X

An Unlucky Picnic

That merry picnic in the summer woods was only one of the happy times Robin and the "invaders" enjoyed during those sunny July days.

It does seem a pity that the clouds of ill-temper and jealousy should ever cloud our skies when we can be so much happier without them. Eric was quite his old bright self, and Jean was radiant in having her dear chum back again. Bunty must have noticed there was magic somewhere, but he asked no questions. It was funny that Bunty should be so different from the others, and yet such friends too. Perhaps the reason was that the younger boy was not at all strong, and had never been so

good at rush-about games as the others. He easily caught cold, and had twice had nasty attacks of bronchitis. Yet, oh, *how* he hated to be fussed over or called delicate! And I am sure he never would have owned to feeling tired if he were ever so weary.

Mother, however, had given Jean and Eric a word of caution, and the elder ones were more thoughtful than of old in choosing games which would not be too tiring. They were all at present as keen as possible over the "flower and fern collection".

I am afraid Eric and Jean were a little too inclined to be desperately keen for a short time, and then to give up one thing for another. That was why they had no good collections.

But the sight of Robin's neat album of specimens inspired the spirit of rivalry, and the woods were ransacked for new or rare specimens of flowers and ferns.

"We ought to make some regular expeditions," said Eric. "It is no use rak-

ing about in the same old woods. Let's start to-day directly after luncheon and go in the direction of Felthorpe Moor."

The others were quite ready to agree, for Eric was still their leader, though he did not "boss" as he used to do.

Felthorpe Moor was not two miles distant, and luckily luncheon had been earlier than usual, as Sir Richard and Lady Garaton were going to see friends some way off.

"I hope it won't rain," said Jean. "It looks a teeny bit misty. I'll carry your coat for you, Bunty."

"I shan't put it on," he assured her. "I'm as hot as a pie. You needn't fuss, Jean. I've not got a scrap of my cold left."

So away they went, as happy and as eager as could be. Each had his or her own special tins and baskets, and every time a rare plant was discovered the finder set up a shout of triumph. It was just the sort of rivalry which is good, not real jealousy at all.

But at last Jean called a halt.

"It is going to be misty," said she, "and we ought to be going home. Bunty will only catch another cold."

"Bosh!" retorted Bunty. "You are as bad as Hannah. I wonder you don't wrap me in cotton-wool. Besides, it isn't a wet mist."

"We might go as far as Prescott Falls," urged Eric. "We should find some ripping ferns there, and we are quite close."

"Hurrah for the falls!" cried Bunty, and set off at a run to show how untired he was.

Jean was over-persuaded. She did not like to argue with Eric, and she knew he was very keen to go on. Robin said nothing, but he was ready to back Jean up if need be. In fact it was Robin who stopped five minutes later.

"It *is* a wet mist," he said. "It's going to be a regular fog, and Bunty hasn't even a coat."

"Bunty! Eric!" called Jean, for the

other boys—possibly guessing what was being said—had run on towards the falls.

Jean was very anxious.

"It is too bad of Eric," she said. "He knows Bunty is delicate, and this is just the sort of day to catch cold. We must make them come back."

Sooner said than done, for under the trees, which grew thickly around the falls, it was quite dry, and even Jean could not withstand the temptation to stay and pick some of the lovely ferns which grew so abundantly in the moss.

Eric, Robin, and Bunty were enthusiastic. Shout after shout of discovery was being raised. It seemed as if every rare and long-sought specimen were here.

"My tin box and my basket are full," said Eric. "Shall I help you, Jean?"

But Jean was already fastening down the lid of her basket.

"We simply must go home," she said. "I am sure when we get out of the wood we shall find it is raining."

"Bunty had better wear my jersey," said Robin. "I never catch cold. Uncle Charles says he believes I am cold-proof! And I'm quite warm."

Bunty could not say *he* was very warm, for his teeth were chattering.

"Though I'm not really cold," he protested.

It was not very wise to put Robin's damp jersey over Bunty's damp coat, but Jean was happier now, and kept saying she did not see why he should catch cold.

"We can make haste now," said Eric. "We'll make a law that no one is to stop even if he sees a rare plant. We might try a race, too, over the moor."

But, for all his pluck, Bunty could not manage that race, and when the others saw how he stumbled they stopped.

"We must give you a Sedan chair," said Eric. "Jean was quite right after all. We ought to have turned back when it grew misty."

Jean had to snap her lips very fast or she would have said: "I told you so!"

It was raining steadily in that business-like way which seems to say: "This is going on till morning."

"We look like a lot of draggled fowls," said Robin. "How nice it will be to get a good dry before the kitchen fire!"

"Ugh!" shivered Eric; "there's a little stream trickling down my back. You must be drenched, Robin."

Jean and Bunty did not speak; they were both feeling too sorry for themselves!

Mother herself met them at the hall door. She looked very anxious, and took Bunty off at once to his room, where a fire had been lighted and a hot bath prepared. Hannah looked after the other three, scolding them all in turn.

"It isn't as if every one of you didn't know as Master Bunty had a bronchitis chest," she declared; "it's a miracle if we don't have him in a high fever by morning. There, Miss Jean, it's no use cryin' over

spilt milk, though I did think you would have been more careful of Bunty."

"It wasn't Jean's fault," retorted Eric, "it was mine; and Bunty'll be all right. He often got wet through when we lived at Okotoks."

"Which this isn't no such place with a heathenish name!" was Hannah's last shaft as she went off to see how Bunty was feeling.

It was no use for Eric to say his little brother was sure to be all right, for, alas! old Hannah proved to be a true prophet. Next morning Bunty was in a burning fever yet shivering from cold, and when the doctor came he looked very grave. Bunty had a sharp attack of bronchitis, and he was already pulled down by a heavy cold.

It was another wet day. One of those dismal days which summer does sometimes give us. All the poor flowers hung their heads; in fact, the Canterbury bells and carnations were beaten quite flat. There

was no question about going out, and the very idea of romping never even occurred to restless Eric. It was miserable, though Jean bravely did her best to liven things by offering to read aloud to the boys whilst they carpentered.

"You might finish Bunty's house for the white mice," she suggested; "how pleased he would be!"

Eric and Robin were delighted. It was of Bunty they were thinking all the time, poor Bunty, who was so ill that a nurse was coming from London to sit up with him all night.

"And a good thing too," said Hannah, "or we should have the mistress ill next; she looks like a ghost this morning."

Eric struck violently at an unoffending nail, just to relieve his feelings. He felt that if Hannah were going to make remarks like that he should have to yell or scream or do something stupid.

A bell rang, and away went Hannah all of a bustle, as she loved to be, whilst Jean

got down a big book of fairy tales from the shelf.

"Shall we have 'Riquet with a Tuft'?" asked Jean, turning the pages listlessly; "and if you can't hear, just say, and I'll shout."

"Bunty can't hear the noise right away in his room, can he?" asked Robin, and Eric was on his feet at once.

"I'll go and see," said he.

The others waited, but Eric was a long time gone.

"I believe the doctor is here," said Robin, leaning as far from the window as he could. "Yes, there is his car. Perhaps Eric is waiting to hear what he says."

"I wish he'd make haste," said Jean. "Is that the doctor going, Robin? Oh, dear! what will he have said?"

The door opened slowly and Eric came in. He must have been crying, for his face was smudged by tears and dust, and his eyes brimmed again as he looked at the

others, and then went to the window-seat, burying his face in his arms.

"Is Bunty worse?" asked Robin. "Do tell us, Eric. Jean is frightened."

And he put his arm round Jean's neck, but the little girl slipped away and ran to her brother. "Eric," she cried, "what is it?"

Eric sat up. "I was in the passage," he said, "waiting to see Hannah or Dinah, when Dr. Wells came out from—from Bunty's room. Mother was with him, and they came right up the passage without seeing me. Mother looked awfully white, and she—she asked the doctor if Bunty were dangerously ill."

"Oh!" gasped Jean. "Not dangerous——"

"Yes," said Eric miserably; "and—and Dr. Wells said, 'I am afraid, Lady Garaton, you know my answer only too well. The little lad is dangerously ill, but, please God, he will pull through if only we can keep his strength up.'"

Neither Jean nor Robin spoke. It was

too dreadful. They had not believed old Hannah, but now that the doctor had said *this*—— What would happen?

"Poor Lady Garaton!" whispered Robin. "Can't we do anything to comfort her? Can't we do anything for Bunty?"

"We can pray that God will make him better," said Jean simply. "Mother would say that was the biggest help of all."

Eric gave a great sob. "I can't bear it," he cried, "I can't bear it! It was all my fault, because I would have my own way."

He jumped up and ran out of the room. Jean would have followed him, but Robin stopped her.

"Your mother is in the passage," he said. "I believe she will help Eric best."

Jean's lip quivered. "I want to help someone," she sighed, "and I can't do anything. I do—I do—I *do* wish we had not gone out yesterday."

It was an hour later when Lady Garaton came to the schoolroom. She found Robin

and Jean seated at the table trying to finish the house for the white mice, but they were soon at her side asking for news.

"The nurse from London has come," said the mother, "and I think Bunty is a little bit better; he seems more inclined to go to sleep. Nurse has promised that, when he wakes up, Jean shall come and see him. So you see, Jean, you will have to be a clever little nurse too."

Jean flushed with pleasure.

"And Eric?" she asked. "Poor, poor Eric, he is so very sad! He thinks it is his fault that Bunty is ill."

"I have seen Eric," said Mother, "and we have been in together to Bunty. Eric has gone now to the shed to look after all the animals. He has promised Bunty to take great care of them whilst he is ill. Poor little Bun was worrying over his pets, and Eric is comforted to know that his promise has helped him to go to sleep."

"That is just Mother's way," Jean said, when Lady Garaton had gone. "She

comes in when everything seems to have gone wrong, and before she leaves she has put everything straight. I wonder if all mothers are like that."

Robin sighed. "Mothers must be lovely things to have," he said, "and fathers must be nice too; but my Uncle Charles is as nice as a father. What I would like best is a mother."

"Did yours die when you were a weeny-wee?" asked Jean, but Robin shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied, and Jean knew he did not want to be questioned.

When Eric returned to the schoolroom he looked happier but very subdued. "Bunty is still asleep," he said, "and it is dinner-time. Hasn't it been a long morning? Just as if someone had taken a rolling-pin and rolled three out of one. I hope the afternoon won't be so long."

Perhaps Eric's mother guessed what her restless little son was feeling, for she had a suggestion for the afternoon.

"It is not raining now," she said, "and

if you put on your rain-coats you could go down to Meadow View. I know Robin has his collections there."

Jean was glad Mother did not suggest her going too; she was so afraid Bunty might wake and ask for her.

"I believe Mother wanted us to go to Meadow View for fear we might make too much noise in the house," said Eric to Robin as they crossed the park, "but I wouldn't. I don't think I shall ever want to play rampageous games again. I—I don't feel as if I should ever want to play any games."

Robin shook his head. "We shall have to think of some new games," said he, "for when Bunty gets better. I was thinking, Eric, if we could not make him a big surprise—for his menagerie, I mean. I believe we could be better carpenters than he if we tried, and there is plenty of wood in what Dawson calls the long shed. And if Dawson is in one of his best tempers he would help us."

"Help us how?" asked Eric. "What do you mean we should do?"

"First," said Robin, his face brightening over this new plan, "we could make a big double hutch for Tweedledum and Tweedledee; then we could fix up a partition for the guinea-pigs to run about in; and, if we had some wire-netting, we might even make a sort of aviary in the corner of the shed for his birds. I know how it could be made. And we would get a tiny tree in a big pot and put it in the middle for the birds to perch on. And if we could save enough money somehow we might buy him a pair of doves. Evans at the mill has a lot. I am sure he would sell some."

"Splendid!" cried Eric joyfully. "Robin, you're a trump and a brick. Hurrah! we'll work all the time, and Jean shall help. It's just fine. Couldn't we go back and begin now?"

But Robin thought they had better wait till to-morrow.

"For we shall find lots of useful odds and ends in my snuggery," said he, "and I will bring back my tools. It is a nuisance having to share when we both want to do the same job."

Eric was rather impatient. When an idea pleased him he wanted to begin all in a hurry. He was in a tremendous hurry now to please poor Bunty, and show how grieved he was for his thoughtlessness.

But, after all, it was a good thing they went to Meadow View, for Robin found even more useful things than he expected, and Alice, who always came to Robin's snuggery for a chat when the little boy called, said there was a roll of wire-netting in the shed which was of no use, as far as she could see, to anyone.

Eric and Robin returned home well laden. They carried the netting between them, and piled the centre of it with tools, wood, strips of linoleum, and an old wicker cage which they thought might be useful for the doves.

"I wish we could go and buy them to-morrow," sighed Eric; "they might all be sold. But I've spent every penny of my pocket-money, and so has Jean."

"I've got sixpence left," said Robin, "but that won't be nearly enough. A pair of nice doves like Evans's would be at least four shillings. I wonder if I sold some of my collection of eggs whether I could get the money."

But when Lady Garaton heard of Robin's splendid plan for pleasing Bunty, and the need of money for the doves, she had a much better idea.

"Dawson can set you a piece of weeding to do," she said, "and I will pay you each sixpence an hour for your work. It will be much more of a present if you earn it, won't it?"

And the three children quite agreed that she was right.

CHAPTER XI

Separation

Bunty's "getting better" seemed terribly slow to the anxious watchers, and there were some days when both the doctor and all who loved the little boy feared he might not get better at all. I really don't know what Eric would have done had it not been for Robin's suggestion about the shed. Whilst they were busy working over the hutch and aviary it did not seem possible Bunty would never see their work of love.

Jean and Robin, too, were very busy, and always trying to think of some new idea for the menagerie.

The weeding was soon finished. Eric was so vigorous that Dawson told him he

would pull up all the gravel of the path as well as the weeds, but the job was thoroughly done, and quite an important pile of weeds was made for Mother's inspection.

"Won't it be awful if Evans has no doves for sale?" sighed Eric, as they carried off their four shillings in triumph. "I wonder if anyone else keeps doves."

"We could get Bunty some fan-tail pigeons instead," suggested Jean.

But there was no need to worry, for Evans had a lovely pair of turtle doves for sale, and they were just four shillings, including a wooden cage to take them away.

"I love to listen to their cooing," said Jean. "It is so soft and sweet, as if they were saying 'I love you' all the time."

"And they're such a jolly colour," added Eric. "Bunty will be ever so pleased."

Old Evans was quite surprised that his visitors would not stay to try his gingerbread, and listen to stories of the mill.

"We wish we could," said Robin, "but you see this is only a business visit, Evans. When Bunty is quite well again I expect we shall often come with him, because he'll like to sit still and listen to the tales."

"I mean to do some more weeding," said Eric, "and then we can buy the fantails; they would look ripping in the aviary."

I think three sheds, at least, would have been needed had those three bought all that they wanted to for their darling Bun. Sir Richard laughingly suggested an elephant, when he heard that Eric had entreated to buy a lamb to live with the rest of the happy family.

One does not make hutches and aviaries, and spend hours at weeding, all in a day, and, before Bunty's shed was quite ready for its little master to see it, the blazing days of August had come.

Bunty seemed to have grown back into a very little boy indeed, at least so Eric and Jean thought, as they watched him being

carried downstairs and laid on the long chair under the cedar tree. It was Bunty's first day out, and the other children had decided to make a birthday of it, and came crowding round the chair to ask what he would like to do best. It was rather disappointing to find that Bunty did not want to do anything but just lie still.

"Though if you could bring Tweedledum and Tweedledee round to see me," he whispered, "I would love to stroke them."

"You wait till you see your shed!" laughed Eric, who wanted to persuade himself that now Bunty had been out of doors he would soon be quite well.

But Bunty looked a very long way off being quite well yet, and, to the others' disappointment, when the rabbits were brought their little master was almost too tired to care to stroke them.

"I hope Bunty will soon get fat," said Eric to Robin. "I don't like to look at his face, it has grown so wee."

Poor Eric! He was very disappointed to find that even coming out of doors did not mean that Bunty was well, and it took a great many days before the latter's little white face got any colour in it at all.

Bunty was very patient, yet even he began to ask wistfully when he was going to learn to walk again, and the next day there was a surprise for him in the shape of a dear little wicker chair on wheels, which Eric, Robin, or Jean could pull.

"You must be careful not to go too fast," Mother told Eric, "and then you can take Bunty out for one hour every day in his carriage. I know he will like to see the gardens and his beloved pets."

It was the pets Bunty longed to see, and Eric was in such a hurry to take him there that he nearly forgot Mother's caution, and, if it had not been for Jean and Robin, he might have tipped the little invalid out into the bushes as he whisked the chair round a corner.

"I believe Robin would be the best

bath-chair man," said Jean anxiously, and, for a wonder, Eric agreed.

You can't picture Bunty's delight when he discovered the surprise awaiting him in his shed. He flushed red enough even to please Eric, and his thin little legs quite shook with excitement as Jean and Eric helped him to "walk in and look round". Of course he fell in love with the doves on the spot, and wondered whether Mother would allow him to have them in his bedroom, so that he could listen to the sweet music of their cooing. Then there was the aviary—such a grand aviary, too; and were those dainty white fantails really his?

"Oh," cried Bunty joyously, "it was worth being ill to get such a s'prise as this! But I *do* wish Mother would let me sleep here; I should get well as quickly as could be if only I might. There's such a lot to see too. Look at that dinky tree and my sweet little Robsie singing amongst the branches."

"He's welcoming you," said Jean;

"and look how well Tweedledum and Tweedledee know you! All your pets are saying: 'Many happy returns of this nice day!'"

"It is the very nicest nice day," replied Bunty happily. "Oh, you darling doves! I don't want to go away from you one bit."

But Mother had just come to the door of the shed to say tea was ready, and Bunty had guessed right in thinking she would not quite agree about his getting well quickly by sleeping in this happy menagerie.

"You must get back some colour to those old, white cheeks first, laddie," she told him tenderly; "and put some fat on Mr. Skinny-bones, then you can come and play with your pets as much as you like."

"I wish I could go to sleep and wake up quite well," said Bunty. "I believe if I had a new pair of legs I should be well. Just now they will wobble so."

The visit to the shed had been a great

success in one way, but perhaps the excitement proved a little too tiring for Bunty, for he had to stay in bed the next day. Eric was quite down in the dumps about it. "It will be ages before he can climb trees again," he said, and everyone agreed with him. It was a few days after Bunty had been introduced to his doves and his beautiful shed that Lady Garaton had some news to tell.

She and Bunty and Jean were going away to the seaside for a whole month, but Eric and Robin were to remain at the Manor. The reason for this arrangement was that a friend had asked Lady Garaton to bring Bunty to stay at her beautiful seaside home, and, though Jean had been included in the invitation, the two other boys had not. Eric and Robin hid their disappointment very well. It would not have done to let Bunty see how sad they were not to be able to have fun—bathing, shrimping, shell-collecting, and all those delights—of which they had often heard,

but in which none of them had ever indulged.

"It would never do for us all to go to Barcombe," laughed Eric bravely, when Bunty's face clouded on hearing that they were not all to go together, "for we shall have the birds and animals to look after; besides, Robin and I mean to go on collecting as hard as we can. I've taken rather a fancy to butterflies and beetles, so we shall have lots to do."

It seemed strange that Robin and Eric should be the two to be left to amuse each other, and I am sure both boys were secretly glad that they had already agreed to be friends.

Jean "wobbled" between joyful thoughts of the seaside and regret at having to say good-bye to her chum.

"Of course Bunty won't be able to look for shells, or bathe, or go on the rocks," she said, "so perhaps it is a good thing you and Robin are not coming, Eric, for it might have made me selfish, wanting to go

with you when I ought to have been amusing Bun."

So they agreed that all was best as it was, and Sir Richard, who was very pleased to see how much better Eric was becoming at taking a disappointment, gave him a delightful "outfit" to start his butterfly and moth collection.

"But remember," he told Eric, "you must collect properly, and go on with what you begin. I shall not expect this time to hear that 'after all collecting is too much bother'."

Eric laughed. "I don't think I shall say that," he replied, "for Robin is too keen; he won't let me slack off."

And Sir Richard smiled. He thought Robin was the very best companion his unruly little son could have!

CHAPTER XII

The Secret

There was no mistake about it that the boys missed the others dreadfully. Eric could not remember his mother ever having gone away before, and Robin specially missed Jean, of whom he was very fond.

If it had not been for the collecting, I expect the forlorn little lads might have started quarrelling for want of anything better to do. But Eric was in his first enthusiasm over butterflies, caterpillars, and chrysalises, and the days glided by quietly enough.

"Uncle Charles will be home in September," Robin told Eric one day. "I have had a long letter from him. He seems

rather worried, and says he shall be glad to be back. I *am* pleased."

"Does that mean you will go back to live at Meadow View?" asked Eric disappointedly. "And will you go to Corfton School every day?"

"I don't think I shall go to Corfton," said Robin. "Uncle Charles says it has been arranged for me to come to the Manor every day to do lessons with you. I shall like that."

So did Eric, who had feared lessons would be very dull, since neither Jean nor Bunty would be his rivals.

Robin was delighted to think Uncle Charles was coming home, but he was not quite so sure how he should like returning to Meadow View. It would be almost dull in the evenings. But Robin was far too loyal even to let himself think of that. He would have Uncle Charles, and that was quite enough.

Robin often stole away in these days to the picture-gallery. He even invited Eric

to come too, and they chatted quite pleasantly about those old heroes, who somehow belonged to the Manor still.

"They seem alive to me," said Robin. "The house seems full of them. That is why I could never be dull here. I love them so."

Eric wriggled. "I ought to feel like that," he confessed, "but I don't. In Okotoks they don't seem to count ancestors much. Oh dear, I mustn't think about Canada or I shall turn grumpy! I wonder if you can possibly understand how I long to go back there one day, Robin, and ride over the prairie, and live on the ranch, and be jolly."

"I think we are quite jolly here," replied Robin, "now Bunty is better. And I'm afraid if I had my choice like you I would far rather have the Manor for my home than go to Canada. Perhaps it is because you know you can't that you want to go so badly."

Eric laughed. "Like the pig that has

to be pulled by its hind leg," he said. "Well, never mind. I'm just going down to Dawson's cottage to get a box he promised me. Are you coming?"

But Robin was in the middle of "setting" some rather stiff "specimens", and could not leave them.

Eric seemed to be a very long time gone. The butterflies were set, some flowers gummed into Bunty's album, and Robin had settled down to read a book of adventure without there being any signs of Eric.

What could have become of him? It was not far to Dawson's cottage, which stood at the entrance gates not *very* far from Meadow View. Robin closed his book and went to the window. It was getting dark. Could Eric have met with an accident? He seemed such a *very* long time that presently Robin put on his cap and went to look for him. He met Eric coming up the drive.

"I couldn't think where you had got

to," he said. "And haven't you even got the box?"

Eric laughed rather strangely. "I forgot all about it," he confessed. "Robin, I've had an adventure. Come along to the picture-gallery and I will tell you about it."

Robin was quite excited, and how sorry he was he had been too busy with that red under-wing to go with Eric!

It was dark in the picture-gallery. All the Garatons of other days were hidden from the view of the boys, who found their way to the wide window-ledge.

"The moon will soon be rising," said Eric, "and I came here because I wanted it to be a secret place. Sometimes I think Dinah's ears are a bit too sharp, though she said it was my impudence when I told her so. Anyway she won't come here."

"What sort of an adventure was it?" asked Robin. "I can't think."

"You never could guess," replied Eric. "And after all it is only the beginning of

an adventure. You will be in the next part. I believe you are going to have the best of it after all."

"Do hurry up!" urged Robin. "You are as bad as old Evans, who always wants to fill his pipe at the most exciting part of the story!"

"Well," said Eric, "you know I was going down to Dawson's cottage to get the box. I took the short cut by the plantation and passed close to Meadow View. I was just going to climb the rail, when I heard someone walking along behind me. He called 'Hi!' and I stopped."

"Oh!" gasped Robin. "Who could it have been?"

"I haven't the least little bit of an idea. He was a short man, and he wore sailor's clothes. He asked if my name was Robin Beldale, and then he said could I tell him where he would find Mr. Charles Trenman, as he had been to the house—I think he meant Meadow View—and could not get an answer. I told him my name was Eric

Garaton, and that you were my friend. He seemed awfully disappointed when he heard Mr. Trenman was in Africa. He said something about it being bad luck, only he used a swear word. I was going to climb over the rail again, but he wouldn't let me."

"'See here,' said he, 'I wouldn't trust no one in this but Mr. Trenman, and I know my pal wouldn't either. A man would cheat his own grandmother when it's a question of £ *s. d.* But if Mr. Trenman's not here I'd better see the little gentleman. Tom, he'll want to see the little gentleman. He's sick, is Tom; can't be moved, I reckon, for a day or so. You bring your pal along to see Tom, and maybe it'll be all right.'"

"I don't understand," said Robin; "it sounds like double Dutch. Are you sure that is what he said, Eric? Is it me he wants to see?"

"Yes, you. *Robin Beldale*; he repeated the name, and he said 'the little lad Mr.

Trenman had charge of.' Isn't it queer, Robin? And he made me promise ever so faithfully not to tell anyone but you."

"Where is he?" asked Robin. "Shall we go and find him now? I can't help being curious, can I? But I hope Uncle Charles won't mind."

"I don't see how he can. I think the man, or the men, want to give you a message for him. The sailor-man I saw says he will be just outside the gates at five o'clock to-morrow evening. We'll ask Dinah to let us have tea at half-past four. Oh dear, I hate waiting!"

So did Robin. He was bitterly disappointed to hear he was not to discover this secret till next day. He was very, very puzzled and very excited. Could this be part of the secret which even Uncle Charles did not know? Could these men know anything about who his parents were? The idea quite took Robin's breath away. He had been such a lonely little boy all his life, and though everyone had been so kind

he could not even say that Uncle Charles "belonged" to him.

Dinah was quite pleased to bring the schoolroom tea early. Hannah was away on her holiday, and there were no questions asked. Yet the two boys felt a curious thrill, not *exactly* as if they were doing something naughty, but rather as if they were setting out on a real adventure. Robin was the more excited of the two. He had not said anything to Eric of his hopes, for he had never talked to him of his unknown parents, but now he wanted first to be running on ahead and then stopping short, afraid to move another step. Supposing the sailor-man was not there, how dreadfully disappointed he would be!

But the sailor-man was waiting just where he had promised, and when he saw Robin he held out his hand.

"Tom'll be glad you come along," said he. "He's better again, an' as Mr. Trenman ain't here, he is goin' north."

This was all more double Dutch to the

boys, but they followed the stranger obediently to the house of old Nan Fearlie, just outside the village.

Old Nan was quite a character at Madleton, but all Robin knew of her was that she kept hens and smoked a pipe. She was not smoking now, for she was busy brewing tea, and took no notice of the man and his companions.

"You wait here," the sailor-man said to Eric. "Tom wants to see the other little lad alone."

Eric was disappointed. He wanted to hear what this strange secret was. But he went across to the window, as far from old Nan as possible, and waited. Nan muttered and grumbled, looked at the boy, looked at the door, and then took down her pipe from the chimney and began to smoke.

Eric watched her out of the corner of his eye. He thought she looked rather like an old witch out of one of the fairy tales. How exciting it must have been to live in

the days of witches, and how frightened he would have been had Mother Nan had power to change him into a frog or a beetle! He was just picturing Nan riding off on a broom-stick, with a red cloak over her shoulders, when Robin came back from that inner room.

Eric sprang forward.

Really Robin was white enough for this to have been indeed a witch's home. He seemed—well, not exactly frightened, but shaky. He was trembling, too, with excitement. The sailor-man followed him.

"Take care of the papers, little master!" Eric heard the latter say. "And don't forget the address. If I was you I'd say nothing to no one till Mr. Trenman is back."

"Come along, Robin!" said Eric impatiently, for he did not like the way the sailor-man eyed him. "We shall be awfully late. They may be looking for us."

Robin seemed like a boy in a dream.

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THE SAILOR-MAN WAS WAITING JUST WHERE HE HAD PROMISED

"Yes, come along," he said, then he held out his hand to the sailor-man.

"I want to thank you and your friend again for all your trouble," he added. "I am sure Uncle Charles will write as soon as he comes home."

"What *was* the secret?" asked Eric curiously as the boys ran back up the avenue. "You look awfully queer, Robin. Did the men frighten you?"

Robin's laugh was queer too. "Oh no!" he replied; "I wasn't frightened, but I'm joggling all over with excitement. It feels so funny, Eric, as if everything was turning upside down and getting into a jumble. But I'll tell you about it when we get home. We'll go to the picture-gallery again. That seems the right place for secrets."

"I can't imagine what it is," said Eric. "It almost seems like magic. Do you think it is going to be a real adventure, Robin?"

"I am quite sure it *is* an adventure,"

replied Robin, "the biggest that ever was; but we shan't quite understand about it till Uncle Charles comes home. Oh dear! How I wish he *were* home now!"

Eric was getting "curiouser and curiouser"; he pulled Robin along the passage to the gallery, for Robin seemed suddenly to want to dawdle.

It was not dark yet, but the old gallery was full of shadows. Robin was a teeny bit aggravating, for he *would* stop before the portrait of that favourite Tony Garaton of his, who was killed at Sedgemoor fighting for the Duke of Monmouth.

"I wonder," whispered Robin, "whether *you* know the secret, Captain Tony, and if you are glad."

"I believe you sometimes expect the pictures to walk out of their frames and answer you," laughed Eric; "but never mind the Garatons now. *I* want the secret."

"But the secret is about the Garatons," was Robin's startling reply. "All about them—and me."

CHAPTER XIII

Robin's Packet

"What do you mean?" asked Eric. "I don't understand."

Robin slipped his hand under his sailor blouse and pulled out a packet of papers. It was a very dirty packet, done up with lots of string and sealing-wax, and addressed to Charles Trenman, Esquire, at Madleton Manor.

Robin turned the packet over and over.

"If we could open that," he said, "it would tell us all the secret; but it will have to wait till Uncle Charles comes home. The man called Tom brought it all the way from Africa. He was Sir Philip Garaton's soldier-servant, and he always went everywhere with Sir Philip·

he was with him when he died. He told me Sir Philip was a fine gentleman, and that no one could want a kinder master; he said when he lay dying Sir Philip gave him this packet, and told him to bring it to Mr. Charles Trenman. 'And if you can't find him,' Sir Philip said, 'make enquiries for the little lad who goes by the name of Robin Beldale. Give him these papers, and see that he takes them to a trustworthy lawyer, always failing Mr. Trenman.' Sir Philip seemed not able to think of anything else, and when he was dying the man says he kept whispering my name: 'Robin, Robin'. And, when he died, Tom Wilford came straight away, but he got malarial fever, and was ill for weeks and weeks in a Zulu village. He says it was a wonder he ever got better, and he says he doesn't believe he ever should have if it had not been that he had this packet to bring."

Eric was quite awed, "It is like a fairy story," he said. "What *could* Sir Philip

have wanted you to have the packet for unless you belonged to him? Robin, do you think you can be Sir Philip's own boy?"

Robin jumped down from the window-seat and began walking up and down the gallery.

"I *had* thought of that," he replied; "but it would be too good to be true. It couldn't be true."

"I don't see why not," retorted Eric, "for you know you love all those old Garatons heaps better than I do. You love the Manor better too. You love all to do with the whole place. *I* think it would be splendid if you were Sir Philip's son. Then you could have the Manor when you grow up, and *I* could go back to Canada and be a rancher."

"*Don't!*" pleaded Robin. "It is that which makes me feel so joggly. To have the Manor as my *own* home. To know I had belonged to someone. But, Eric, please don't talk of it, because it can't

be true. Only, if it were, would you be angry at my having the Manor instead of you?"

Eric laughed. "I would be as pleased as Punch," he replied; "it's awful to think of living right here all one's life without excitement or adventure. I would far rather be a cow-boy in Canada or America than own a dozen manors."

"Shall we have to tell Sir Richard about the packet," asked Robin, who was still all of a tremble, "or shall we wait till Uncle Charles comes back?"

"I think you had better wait," said Eric. "It is just possible there was something in it which Uncle Philip did not want Dad to see. He never talked about him when he was dying."

So the mysterious packet was hidden away safely at the bottom of Robin's big black box, which had a padlock on it. For, as Eric said, it would not do to have Dinah or Hannah pokey-nosing after it.

I don't think either Eric or Robin slept very well that night, and I believe Robin was out of bed soon after midnight, creeping like a little burglar along to the picture-gallery. Although he kept telling himself Eric's guess was all nonsense, he could not help wanting to go and talk to his friends, the Anthonys, the Richards, the Anns, and the Philips of long ago, and to tell them in a breathless whisper that, after all, he might belong to them.

It was a good thing that Jean and Bunty came home at the end of the week, for though the two boys had "faithfully decided" not to talk of the mysterious packet, it would keep cropping up when they talked.

Jean and Bunty were not to be let into the secret.

"It seems rather mean," sighed Robin, "but it's kinder to them not to tell them. I would much rather not have known anything till I knew it all."

Bunty was looking quite fat and brown,

and no wonder, for he had been living on Devonshire cream and all sorts of lovely things, and spending long, happy days by the seashore. Jean had had lots of fun too, for there had been two other little girls at Sanford to play with, and one of them had often stayed to amuse Bunty whilst Jean and Stella went for a scramble over the rocks.

"I've brought you each a shell collection," Jean told Eric and Robin. "And *next* time we go to Sanford, Mother is going to take a bungalow and we shall all go. Won't that be lovely? I do wish you had both been with us. Sanford is the most adventurous place I've ever been to."

Eric and Robin laughed and looked at each other.

"Not nearly so adventurous as Madleton, eh, Robin?" said Eric, and Robin got very red and replied: "No, indeed," in such a way that Jean and Bunty became first curious and then rather cross, because the boys would not say any more.

"You've got a secret," said Jean, who was as sharp as a needle. "I call that too bad. Bunty and I have been thinking of every single thing to tell you, and you won't tell us anything."

"Oh yes, we will!" replied Eric. "We'll tell you all about Bunty's menagerie and the awful fight between Tweedledum and Snip, the Guinea pig, and you can see for yourself all we have done with collections, and I never once forgot your Buff Orpingtons or your garden—at least Robin saw to the garden."

Jean had to relent then, but of course she still knew there was a secret, and she felt rather injured at the boys' obstinacy in not telling it to her.

Bunty was not so curious, he was too happy at being back amongst his pets, and his sunny face alone was enough to drive away any little cloud between the other children.

Bunty was quite well again, so *he* said, but what Mother said was that he must be

careful; and even if Bunty would often have wished to forget this, three other people did not, and Eric was the most particular of all in not allowing his little brother to tire himself.

"Oh dear," sighed Jean one day to Robin, "I always wanted you and Eric to be friends, but not quite such friends as you are, because now you leave *me* out! About the secret, I mean. It must be a big one, for you and Eric seem to be so often bubbling over about something, just as if you had a laugh up your sleeve."

Robin hugged her.

"Never mind, Jean," he said. "One day very soon we shall be pulling that laugh down from our sleeves, then you will understand."

"I think now you are both very stupid," was Jean's downright reply.

Uncle Charles had written to Robin again. He expected to be home at Meadow View on the 21st of September. It was now the 19th, and only that morning

Sir Richard had been talking of the tutor.

"He is coming on the 24th," said Sir Richard, "and for the first term Jean is to have lessons with you boys. Bunty will only have lessons in the afternoon, as Dr. Wells wants him to be out of doors during the morning. If you three elder ones are very good, and give Mr. Pottle no trouble, Jean will be able to go on sharing lessons with you; but, of course, if you are too much of a handful, Jean will have to have a daily governess."

At this awful suggestion Jean looked so unhappy that all the boys promised her faithfully that they would never give poor Mr. Pottle one scrap of trouble. Sir Richard seemed rather amused at this, and it was too bad, wasn't it, for him to look so hard at Eric when he talked of "new brooms"?

"The day after to-morrow," Robin kept chanting as the four crossed the lawn towards the meadow where Rollo was shar-

ing a good feed with Obadiah the donkey, "the day after to-morrow, Eric."

Eric chuckled and said nothing.

"You tiresome boys!" scolded Jean, "but *I* don't care. Bunty and I will find our own secrets and not tell you."

"If it's the day after to-morrow," said Bunty, "it must be something to do with Mr. Trenman coming back and Robin going home to Meadow View."

"So it must," cried Jean. "Robin, you're a curly-tailed little piggy-wig to want to leave the Manor."

"He doesn't," retorted Eric. "The Manor——" then he clapped his hand over his mouth and ran off to capture Obadiah, whom they were going to harness to the luggage cart and drive over to Shelton woods to find some nuts.

"Silly billies," scoffed Jean, "we don't care for your stupid secrets! Nutting is the best fun, and if I find a good place I shall only share it with Bunty."

But Jean's bark was a great deal worse

than her bite, and she forgot all about secrets and grumpiness in the delight of pulling down great clusters of brown nuts, which went tumbling into the basket so ripe that they fell of their own accord out of their husks.

Robin had pleaded that he might return to Meadow View a few hours before Uncle Charles arrived, and, though Lady Garaton thought Mr. Trenman would much have preferred being alone for that first evening of bustle, she could not resist Robin's coaxing. Jean thought it quite unkind of Robin to be in such a hurry to get away.

"I believe you still look on us as invaders," she told him, and Eric, who overheard, laughed aloud. "And so we are," he retorted, running away so that Jean should not have time to ask what he meant.

Eric had quite made up his mind as to what the secret hidden in that packet to Mr. Trenman would disclose, but Robin

refused to believe in anything so wonderful.

"It can't be *that*," he kept repeating.

Hannah came up to pack Robin's boxes, and, of course, the first thing she asked for was the key of that padlock, so that she could turn out the little boy's "rubbish" and pack the black box properly.

Robin did not like this at all, and made Hannah quite cross by unlocking the padlock himself and then burrowing under the said rubbish for his treasure.

"Some mischief between you and Master Eric, I'll be bound," grumbled the old woman. "I wouldn't know you, Master Robin, for the same boy. Always so quiet as you was, almost too quiet as Mrs. Wickles and I used to say. But there ain't no such fault—more's the pity—to find with you now. I never did see such a bunch of pickles, and as for that poor tutor as is coming, I'm sorry for him."

Robin only laughed as he thrust the packet up under his jersey. Jerseys are

even nicer to use as pockets than sailor suits, and Robin and Eric always had rather a bulgy appearance when they wore theirs, for something or other was generally finding its way up those jerseys!

"Robin! Ro—bin!" shouted Jean. "Come and play robbers. Hurry up!"

"Bless me! No mistakin' as you're a boy same as others," groaned Hannah, as Robin took a flying leap over the portmanteau and went tumbling in haste downstairs; but Hannah had a smile on her face as she spoke, for she had a very soft corner in that old heart of hers for the lonely little lad who now seemed lonely no longer.

It was a splendid game of robbers, and the luncheon-bell was clanging before the robber den had been finally discovered by the soldiery, who came to carry the robbers off to justice.

"You take one hand and I'll take the other," said Eric to Jean, as he caught Bunty's hand, and off they all scampered.

Robin followed the other three. They had reached the garden door when Robin gave a little cry of dismay and stopped short.

"My parcel," he cried, feeling all over his jersey; "it has gone!"

CHAPTER XIV

A New Invader

Jean and Bunty stared.

"Your parcel?" asked Jean. "What parcel?"

But Eric was as dismayed as Robin.

"We must go and look for it," he cried; "Never mind if the mutton *is* hot. We can have bread and cheese to-day. Tell Mother, Jean, that Robin has lost something awfully important, and we simply can't come in till it is found."

Robin was already running back up the path, looking to right and left. Jean was not very pleased at having to go indoors, she would far rather have joined the search. But there was no help for it, though Mother had to speak more than

once about the big pieces Jean was popping into her mouth, and warn her not to gobble.

"Please, Mother," entreated Jean, "I don't want any rice pudding to-day. Do let me go and help the boys!"

"Very well," replied Mother, "you may go, for I am afraid if you eat the pudding as quickly as you did your mutton you will certainly choke. But another time I can't have all this rushing about at meal-times."

Jean ran round, gave her mother one big hug, and was off at a scamper across the garden, to the horror of old Hannah, who thought "Canadian ways" far too free and easy.

Robin and Eric were wandering about with very long faces. They could not find that most precious packet anywhere, and Robin was bitterly blaming himself for having put it in such an unsafe place.

"What *will* Uncle Charles say?" he kept repeating miserably.

"It must be somewhere," was the only comfort Eric could give.

But the somewhere was very hard to find, and though Jean joined eagerly in the search she met with no better success.

"Was it something belonging to Mr. Trenman?" asked Jean.

Robin groaned.

"It was the secret," he replied; "and—and if we do not find it it will *always* be a secret."

Jean tried not to be curious, but she did not find it easy. It seemed such a muddly kind of secret if Mr. Trenman had part in it.

Suddenly she gave a little cry, and set off in a great hurry towards the kitchen-garden.

"Where are you going?" called Eric, who had great faith in Jean as a searcher, and had often nicknamed her "Miss Sharp-eyes".

"The pea-sticks," cried Jean over her

shoulder; "don't you remember? The robber escaped there and the police chased him."

They had forgotten all about the pea-sticks, and followed Jean just as the little girl came wriggling back from amongst the great pile of sticks waving a small packet in triumph.

Robin pounced on it.

"You ripper!" he cried. "You absolute ripper! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" shouted Eric, and the two boys capered about so wildly that Jean began to pout.

"I never even waited for pudding," she protested; "and I found the packet. I think you might tell me your secret."

Robin stopped his antics and nodded to Eric. "You shall know just as much as we know, Jean," he replied; "you deserve it. You — you're the sportiest girl that ever was born."

And after that Jean did not mind *how* many twigs tore her curls as she wriggled

after the boys into the robber's den amongst those sticks.

When Robin had told his story, Jean sat open-mouthed and dumb with surprise. "I don't understand," she said; "how did Uncle Philip know about your being here?"

"Ah!" said Eric; "that is the secret we shall hear when Mr. Trenman has read those papers."

Jean turned impulsively to Robin and laid her grimy little hand on his. "Oh, poor Robin!" she cried. "I can't think how you *can* have waited so patiently. I'm so glad I didn't know before, or I think I should have burst."

Robin smiled. "That's just how I've been feeling sometimes," he replied simply.

If it had not been for Lady Garaton's reminder, neither of the boys would have remembered the loss of his dinner, but when they began to eat bread and cheese they soon discovered how hungry they were. It wasn't only just bread and cheese but Mrs. Wickles's beautiful home-made

butter, the fresh cucumber and vinegar, and the home-made loaf all brown crust and crunchiness, which were so good.

"We shan't want much tea," laughed Eric, "and I'm too lazy and too fat to play games. Let's go to the mill and ask old Evans for a story."

The three elder ones set off alone, for Mother wanted to take Bunty to see a friend. Perhaps she thought the drive in the car would be better for him than the walk to the mill, and for once the others were rather glad. They couldn't help giving all sorts of little runs and scampers to let off their excitement, and old Evans was called upon for one of his most exciting "pixie" stories before they could feel they would be able to sit still and listen.

I can't describe to you any better than Robin could have done what he felt like when the time came for him to return to Meadow View. Lady Garaton took him and his luggage down in the car. She wanted really to be quite sure that Alice

had got everything nice and ready for Mr. Trenman's return, but she was so pleasant about it that even Alice—who thought herself a very important person—could not be offended.

Eric and Jean had been promised that Robin would come up at once and tell them his great news, "even however late it is", and that was why Hannah had such difficulty in getting them off to bed.

"But he won't come now," sighed Jean. "I wonder, oh, I wonder, if he has forgotten his promise?"

But Robin had done nothing of the kind. As a matter of fact, Uncle Charles's train was late, and Robin himself had fallen asleep in the big chair in Mr. Trenman's study before the latter's arrival. And though he half-woke, wondering who was carrying him to bed, he was too far away in dreamland to tell his great news.

And it was not till breakfast at the Manor was nearly over that Eric gave a shout.

"Here they come!" he cried. "Here

are Robin and Mr. Trenman! Hurrah for the secret!"

And, forgetting everything and everybody, he dashed out of the room and was across the terrace in a twink to meet them.

Sir Richard looked vexed.

"I think it is time that tutor was here," said he; but Jean, who was nearly as excited as Eric, interrupted:

"Oh, Dad," she cried, "he couldn't help it! It is the secret!"

"Dear me!" said her father. "And what secret is this, pray, which makes young folk I know forget their manners?"

But before Jean could answer him the door opened and the parlour-maid came in to say that Mr. Trenman apologized for such an early visit, but could he see Sir Richard on very important business?

"Is that the secret too?" asked Bunty. 'Oh, Jean, no one told me there *was* a secret!"

Sir Richard and Lady Garaton had gone

together to the study, but Jean stopped to hug Bunty.

"Darling," she said, "*I* only knew there was a secret yesterday, and none of us know what it really is. But I believe Robin knows now. Let's go and hear!"

Robin and Eric were in the hall, and Jean only had to look at Robin's face to know that the secret was no longer a secret, and that it had made Robin very happy. She never had seen eyes shine with quite the look Robin's had in them. It was the shining of a great joy, which held awe in it too. He did not exactly seem excited, but he was pale.

"Jean and Bunty must come too," he said. "Yes, we are all going to the picture-gallery, because—because—oh, Jean, they do belong to me too after all!—the Anthonys and the Richards and the Anns. But it is Captain Tony who will be the gladdest of all to hear my news."

"What do you mean, Robin?" laughed Bunty. "You always talk as if the pictures

were alive. Has Dad given you some of them? I hope he has, and I wish we might always have the gallery to slide in."

But Bunty was the only one who chattered as the four children made their way up the wide staircase and along many passages till they came to Robin's window-seat.

The morning sun shone down, not only on the clustered heads of the children, but on the gay uniforms and dresses of the long-ago Garatons, who *may* have laughed and played too in this very gallery when they were boys and girls.

Robin's eyes had still the wonderful shine in them as he looked to where Captain Tony gazed down from the wall—a gay figure in his splendid dress.

"Yes," he said, "they belong to me. This is my home after all—so Uncle Charles says—and I'm not Robin Beldale, the little boy who belonged to no one at all, but Robin Anthony Garaton, Sir Philip's only son. He was my father, and—and—I'm so sorry he is dead, because I shall never

see him or my darling mother, who died when I was just a teeny little boy not two years old."

His voice quivered. He had always wanted a mother so badly.

And the other children sat round, looking at him in sheer amazement.

It was Jean who put her hand in his and squeezed it.

"*Poor* Robin!" she said, "but p'raps you'll be able to have her photograph now."

Eric sat back on his heels, his face flushed, his eyes shining.

"He's not *poor* Robin at all," he cried, "because if he is Uncle Philip's boy he will be *Sir* Robin instead of Dad being Sir Richard, and *he* will be the owner of the Manor and be rich, and—and after all, oh, Robin! how funny after all that we *were* nothing but invaders!"

Robin seemed to wake out of a dream. The others could never quite understand what a wonderful, wonderful thing this was

to him. He had dreamed all his dreams in this gallery. He had longed all his longings to belong to those many pictured friends who seemed to look down on him in such friendly fashion. The Anthonys, the Richards, the Anns and Jeans too, had all been such old and loved comrades of his lonely days. And now he was one of them—Robin Anthony Garaton.

But he had to rouse himself, because these three living Garatons had become more to him than even the dead ones. And he laughed as, after some minutes, he took in the meaning of Eric's words.

"Oh," he cried, "as if I should ever want you to go away!—at least not till you want to go, because Eric can't be a rancher till he is grown up. And Uncle Charles talked to me about it all. Uncle Charles was Sir Phil—I mean *my father's* greatest friend, and Sir—I mean my father—had meant to tell him all about his marriage with my mother, but there was a great deal of trouble which Uncle Charles says I would

not understand, so he went to Africa without saying. He meant soon to come back, but he didn't—and—and it was only when he was dying that he wrote. There's lots and lots that I'm to know when I'm older, but Uncle Charles says it will only make me love my father and my beautiful dead mother more than ever. The trouble was all someone else's fault, but that is over now, and Uncle Charles is going to give me a miniature of my mother, be—because he knew her quite well. And—oh—what *do* you all think of the secret?"

There was silence for a time, then Bunty chuckled.

"I'm pleased because everyone's pleased," said he. "Robin has found a dad, and a mother, and a nice home, and everything he wanted. Eric has got all he wanted too, and Jean and I are happy too because we like living here, and p'raps Robin will give me the long shed for my menagerie if it all belongs to him."

Eric nodded. "*I* call it ripping," said

he. "But will Dad and Mother be pleased?"

"I asked Uncle Charles," said Robin, "because they have been so kind, and I wouldn't take the Manor away from them if they wanted it, not for ever so. But Uncle Charles says that your father—who is *my* Uncle Richard now—has lots of money inherited from his aunt, and that he never was very anxious to take over this property, though Uncle Charles hopes he will live here for the present till I am grown up. So that is all right."

"Everything is all right," laughed Jean. "Come, Cousin Robin, and let us tell your ancestor, Captain Tony, right now, that you belong to him."

She caught Robin's hand, and, followed by Eric and Bunty, ran to stand before the portrait of Anthony Cyril Garaton.

"Captain Tony," she cried, "here is your great-great-great-nephew come to see you. You ought to know him quite well, much better than you do us, for he

loves you ever so, and we are only the 'invaders'. But you needn't call us that, because we are all chums — aren't we, Robin? and I think the Manor is the loveliest place possible."

The others laughed, but Robin flung back his head as he turned from the picture to look at his friends.

"And, after all," he added, "I shouldn't care even for the Manor, half or a quarter as much if the 'invaders' weren't here too!"

"Hurrah!" cried Bunty. "Let's go down and show Hannah and Dinah and Mrs. Wickles our new cousin, and then go and tell Dawson about the long shed."

It was Bunty who led the way to tell the grand news of the wonderful secret to everyone in and about Madleton. Robin and Jean were the last to leave the gallery.

Somehow Robin knew that Jean understood so much better than the boys, and, though he was very, very fond of Eric and Bunty, he loved Jean best.

Robin had turned to look back at the sunlit gallery and long line of portraits when he felt Jean's hand slipped into his.

"We'll come back presently, Jean," whispered Robin softly, "just you and I, to tell them how happy we are, and how we want always to live at the Manor. You won't want to go back to Canada like Bunty and Eric, will you, Jean?"

Jean laughed. "No," she replied, "I don't think so, but we won't think of the future. We'll just run down—and tell the others the story."

And Robin was only too happy to obey.