

The New Mother

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THE children were always called Blue Eyes and the Turkey and they came by the names in this manner. The elder one was like her dear father who was *far* away at sea, and when the mother looked up she would often say, 'Child, you have taken the pattern of your father's eyes'; for the father had the bluest of blue eyes, and so gradually his little girl came to be called after them. The younger one had once, while she was still almost a baby, cried bitterly because a turkey that lived near to the cottage, and sometimes wandered into the forest, suddenly vanished in the middle of the winter; and to console her she had been called by its name.

Now the mother and Blue-Eyes and the Turkey and the baby all lived in a lonely cottage on the edge of the forest. The forest was so near that the garden at the back seemed a part of it, and the tall fir-trees were so close that their big black arms stretched over the little thatched roof, and when the moon shone upon them their tangled shadows were all over the white-washed walls.

It was a long way to the village, nearly a mile and a half, and the mother had to work hard and had not time to go often herself to see if there was a letter at the post-office from the dear father, and so very often in the afternoon she used to send the two children. They were very proud of being able to go alone, and often ran half the way to the post-office. When they came back tired with the long walk, there would be the mother waiting and watching for them, and the tea would be ready, and the baby crowing with delight; and if by any chance there was a letter from the sea, then they were happy indeed. The cottage room was so cosy: the walls were as white as snow inside as well as out, and against them hung the cake-tin and the baking-dish, and the lid of a large saucepan that had been worn out long before the children could remember, and the fish-slice, all polished and shining as bright as silver. On one side of the fireplace, above the bellows hung the almanac, and on the other the clock that always struck the wrong hour and was always running down too soon, but it was a good clock, with a little picture on its face and

sometimes ticked away for nearly a week without stopping. The baby's high chair stood in one corner, and in another there was a cupboard hung up high against the wall, in which the mother kept all manner of little surprises. The children often wondered how the things that came out of that cupboard had got into it, for they seldom saw them put there.

'Dear children,' the mother said one afternoon late in the autumn, 'it is very chilly for you to go to the village, but you must walk quickly, and who knows but what you may bring back a letter saying that dear father is already on his way to England.' Blue-Eyes and the Turkey made haste and were soon ready to go. 'Don't be long,' the mother said, as she always did before they started. 'Go the nearest way and don't look at any strangers you meet, and be sure you do not talk with them.'

'No, mother, they answered; and then she kissed them and called them dear good children, and they joyfully started on their way.

The village was gayer than usual, for there had been a fair the day before, and the people who had made merry still hung about the street as if reluctant to own that their holiday was over.

'I wish we had come yesterday,' Blue-Eyes said to the turkey; 'then we might have seen something.'

'Look there,' said the Turkey, and she pointed to a stall covered with gingerbread; but the children had no money. At the end of the street, close to the Blue Lion where the coaches stopped, an old man sat on the ground with his back resting against the wall of a house, and by him, with smart collars round their necks, were two dogs. Evidently they were dancing dogs, the children thought, and longed to see them perform, but they seemed as tired as their master, and sat quite still] beside him, looking as if they had not even a single wag left in their tails.

'Oh, I do wish we had been here yesterday,' Blue-Eyes said again as they went on to the grocer's, which was also the post-office. The post-mistress was very busy weighing out half-pounds of coffee, and when she had time to attend to the children she only just said 'No letter for you to-day,' and went on with what she was doing. Then Blue-Eyes and the Turkey turned away

to go home. They went back slowly down the village street, past the man with the dogs again. One dog had roused himself and sat up rather crookedly with his head a good deal on one side, looking very melancholy and rather ridiculous; but on the children went towards the bridge and the fields that led to the forest.

They had left the village and walked some way, and then, just before they reached the bridge, they noticed, resting against a pile of stones by the wayside, a strange dark figure. At first they thought it was some one asleep, then they thought it was a poor woman ill and hungry and then they saw that it was a strange wild-looking girl, who seemed very unhappy, and they felt sure that something was the matter. So they went and looked at her and thought they would ask her if they could do anything to help her, for they were kind children and sorry indeed for any one in distress.

The girl seemed to be tall, and was about fifteen years old. She was dressed in very ragged clothes. Round her shoulders there was an old brown shawl, which was torn at the corner that hung down the middle of her back. She wore no bonnet, and an old yellow handkerchief which she had tied round her head had fallen backwards and was all huddled up round her neck. Her hair was coal black and hung down uncombed and unfastened, just anyhow. It was not very long, but it was very shiny, and it seemed to match her bright black eyes and dark freckled skin. On her feet were coarse gray stockings and thick shabby boots, which she had evidently forgotten to lace up. She had something hidden away under her shawl, but the children did not know what it was. At first they thought it was a baby, but when, on seeing them coming towards her she carefully put it under her and sat upon it, they thought they must be mistaken. She sat watching the children approach, and did not move or stir till they were within a yard of her; then she wiped her eyes just as if she had been crying bitterly, and looked up.

The children stood still in front of her for a moment, staring at her and wondering what they ought to do.

‘Are you crying?’ they asked shyly.

To their surprise she said in a most cheerful voice,
'Oh dear, no! quite the contrary. Are you?'

They thought it rather rude of her to reply in this way, for anyone could see that they were not crying. They felt half in mind to walk away; but the girl looked at them so hard with her big black eyes, they did not like to do so till they had said something else.

'Perhaps you have lost yourself?' they said gently.

But the girl answered promptly, 'Certainly not, Why, you have just found me. Besides,' she added, 'I live in the village.'

The children were surprised at this for they had never seen her before, and yet they thought they knew all the village folk by sight.

'We often go to the village,' they said, thinking it might interest her.

'Indeed,' she answered, That was all; and again they wondered what to do.

Then the Turkey, who had an inquiring mind, put a good straightforward question. 'What are you sitting on?' she asked.

'On a peardrum,' the girl answered, still speaking in a most cheerful voice, at which the children wondered, for she looked very cold and uncomfortable.

'What is a peardrum?' they asked.

I am surprised at your not knowing,' the girl answered. 'Most people in good society have one,' And then she pulled it out and showed it to them, It was a curious instrument, a good deal like a guitar in shape; it had three strings, but only two pegs by which to tune them. The third string was never tuned at all, and thus added to the singular effect produced by the village girl's music. And yet, oddly, the peardrum was not played by touching its strings, but by turning a little handle cunningly hidden on one side.

But the strange thing about the peardrum was not the music it made, or the strings, or the handle, but a little square box attached to one side. The box had a little flat lid that appeared to open by a spring. That was all the children could make out at first. They were most anxious to see inside the box, or to know what it contained, hut they thought it might look curious to say so.

'It really is a most beautiful thing, is a peardrum,' the girl said, looking at it, and speaking in a voice that was almost affectionate.

‘Where did you get it?’ the children asked.

‘I bought it,’ the girl answered.

‘Didn’t it cost a great deal of money?’ they asked.

‘Yes,’ answered the girl slowly, nodding her head, ‘it cost a great deal of money. I am very rich,’ she added.

And this the children thought a really remarkable statement, for they had not supposed that rich people dressed in old clothes, or went about without bonnets. She might at least have done her hair, they thought, but they did not like to say so.

‘You don’t look rich,’ they said slowly, and in as polite a voice as possible.

‘Perhaps not,’ the girl answered cheerfully,

At this the children gathered courage, and ventured to remark, ‘You look rather shabby’—they did not like to say ragged.

Indeed?’ said the girl in the voice of one who had heard a pleasant but surprising statement, ‘A little shabbiness is very respectable,’ she added in a satisfied voice. ‘I must really tell them this,’ she continued. And the children wondered what she meant. She opened the little box by the side of the peardrum, and said, just as if she were speaking to some one who could hear her, ‘They say I look rather shabby; it is quite lucky, isn’t it?’

‘Why, you are not speaking to any one!’ they said, more surprised than ever.

‘Oh dear, yes! I am speaking to them both,’

‘Both?’ they said, wondering.

‘Yes, I have here a little man dressed as a peasant, and wearing a wide slouch hat with a large feather, and a little woman to match, dressed in a red petticoat, and a white handkerchief pinned across her bosom. I put them on the lid of the box, and when I play they dance most beautifully. The little man takes off his hat and waves it in the air, and the little woman holds up her petticoat a little bit on one side with one hand, and with the other sends forward a kiss.’

‘Oh! let us see; do let us see!’ the children cried, both at once.

Then the village girl looked at them doubtfully.

‘Let you see!’ she said slowly. ‘Well, I am not sure that I can. Tell me, are you good?’

‘Yes, yes, they answered eagerly, ‘we are very good!’

‘Then it’s quite impossible, she answered, and resolutely closed the lid of the box.

They stared at her in astonishment.

‘But we are good,’ they cried, thinking she must have misunderstood them. ‘We are very good. Mother always says we are.’

‘So you remarked before,’ the girl said, speaking in a tone of decision.

Still the children did not understand,

‘Then can’t you let us see the little man and woman?’ they asked.

‘Oh dear, no!’ the girl answered. ‘I only show them to naughty children,’

‘To naughty children!’ they exclaimed.

‘Yes, to naughty children,’ she answered; ‘and the worse the children the better do the man and woman dance,’

She put the peardrum carefully under her ragged cloak, and prepared to go on her way.

‘I really could not have believed that you were good,’ she said, reproachfully, as if they had accused themselves of some great crime. ‘Well, good day.’

‘Oh, but do show us the little man and woman,’ they cried.

‘Certainly not. Good day,’ she said again.

‘Oh, but we will be naughty,’ they said in despair.

‘I am afraid you couldn’t,’ she answered, shaking her head. ‘It requires a great deal of skill, especially to be naughty well, Good day,’ she said for the third time. ‘Perhaps I shall see you in the village to-morrow.’

And swiftly she walked away, while the children felt their eyes fill with tears, and their hearts ache with disappointment.

‘If we had only been naughty,’ they said, ‘we should have seen them dance; we should have

seen the little woman holding her red petticoat in her hand, and the little man waving his hat. Oh, what shall we do to make her let us see them?’

‘Suppose,’ said the Turkey, we try to be naughty to-day; perhaps she would let us see them to-morrow.’

‘But, oh!’ said Blue-Eyes, ‘I don’t know how to be naughty; no one ever taught me.’

The Turkey thought for a few minutes in silence. ‘I think I can be naughty if I try,’ she said. ‘I’ll try to-night.’

And then poor Blue-Eyes burst into tears.

‘Oh, don’t be naughty without me!’ she cried. ‘It would be so unkind of you. You know I want to see the little man and woman just as much as you do. You are very, very unkind.’ And she sobbed bitterly.

And so, quarrelling and crying, they reached their home.

Now, when their mother saw them, she was greatly astonished, and, fearing they were hurt, ran to meet them.

‘Oh, my children, oh, my dear, dear children,’ she said; ‘what is the matter?’

But they did not dare tell their mother about the village girl and the little man and woman, so they answered, ‘Nothing is the matter; nothing at all is the matter,’ and cried all the more.

‘But why are you crying?’ she asked in surprise.

‘Surely we may cry if we like,’ they sobbed. ‘We are very fond of crying.’

‘Poor children!’ the mother said to herself. ‘They are tired, and perhaps they are hungry; after tea they will be better. And she went back to the cottage, and made the fire blaze until its reflection danced about on the tin lids upon the wall; and she put the kettle on to boil, and set the tea-things on the table, and opened the window to let in the sweet fresh air, and made all things look bright. Then she went to the little cupboard, hung up high against the wall, and took out some bread and put it on the table, and said in a loving voice ‘Dear little children, come and have your tea; it is all quite ready for you. And see, there is the baby waking up from her sleep; we

will put her in the high chair, and she will crow at us while we eat,’

But the children made no answer to the dear mother; they only stood still by the window and said nothing.

‘Come, children,’ the mother said again. ‘Come, Blue-Eyes, and come, my Turkey; here is nice sweet bread for tea.’

Then Blue-Eyes and the Turkey looked round, and when they saw the tall loaf, baked crisp and brown, and the cups all in a row, and the jug of milk, all waiting for them, they went to the table and sat down and felt a little happier; and the mother did not put the baby in the high chair after all, but took it on her knee, and danced it up and down and sang little snatches of songs to it, and laughed, and looked content, and thought of the father far away at sea, and wondered what he would say to them all when he came home again. Then suddenly she looked up and saw that the Turkey’s eyes were full of tears.

‘Turkey!’ she exclaimed, ‘my dear little Turkey! what is the matter? Come to mother, my sweet; come to own mother.’ And putting the Baby down on the rug, she held out her arms, and the Turkey, getting up from her chair, ran swiftly into them.

‘Oh, mother, she sobbed, ‘oh, dear mother! I do so want to be naughty.’

‘My dear child!’ the mother exclaimed.

‘Yes, mother,’ the child sobbed, more and more bitterly. ‘I do so want to be very, very naughty.’

And then Blue-Eyes left her chair also, and, rubbing her face against the mother’s shoulder, cried sadly. ‘And so do I, mother. Oh, I’d give anything to be very, very naughty.’

‘But, my dear children,’ said the mother, in astonishment, ‘why do you want to be naughty?’

‘Because we do; oh, what shall we do?’ they cried together.

‘I should be very angry if you were naughty. But you could not be, for you love me,’ the mother answered.

‘Why couldn’t we be naughty because we love you?’ they asked.

‘Because it would make me very unhappy; and if you love me you couldn’t make me unhappy.’

‘Why couldn’t we?’ they asked.

Then the mother thought a while before she answered; and when she did so they hardly understood, perhaps because she seemed to be speaking rather to herself than to them.

‘Because if one loves well,’ she said gently, ‘one’s love is stronger than all bad feelings in one, and conquers them. And this is the test whether love be real or false, unkindness and wickedness have no power over it.’

‘We don’t know what you mean,’ they cried; ‘and we do love you; but we want to be naughty.’

‘Then I should know you did not love me,’ the mother said.

‘And what should you do?’ asked Blue-Eyes.

‘I cannot tell. I should try to make you better,’

‘But if you couldn’t? If we were very, very, very naughty, and wouldn’t be good, what then?’

‘Then,’ said the mother sadly—and while she spoke her eyes filled with tears, and a sob almost choked her—‘then,’ she said, ‘I should have to go away and leave you, and to send home a new mother, with glass eyes and wooden tail.’

‘You couldn’t,’ they cried.

‘Yes, I could,’ she answered in a low voice; ‘but it would make me very unhappy, and I will never do it unless you are very, very naughty, and I am obliged.’

‘We won’t be naughty,’ they cried; ‘we will be good. We should hate a new mother; and she shall never come here.’ And they clung to their own mother, and kissed her fondly.

But when they went to bed they sobbed bitterly, for they remembered the little man and woman, and longed more than ever to see them; but how could they bear to let their own mother

go away, and a new one take her place?

II

‘Good-day,’ said the village girl, when she saw Blue-Eyes and the Turkey approach. She was again sitting by the heap of stones, and under her shawl the peardrum was hidden. She looked just as if she had not moved since the day before. ‘Good-day,’ she said, in the same cheerful voice in which she had spoken yesterday; ‘the weather is really charming.’

‘Are the little man and woman there?’ the children asked, taking no notice of her remark,

‘Yes; thank you for inquiring after them,’ the girl answered; ‘they are both here and quite well. The little man is learning how to rattle the money in his pocket, and the little woman has heard a secret—she tells it while she dances.’

‘Oh, do let us see,’ they entreated.

Quite impossible, I assure you,’ the girl answered promptly. ‘You see, you are good.

‘Oh! said Blue-Eyes, sadly; ‘but mother says if we are naughty she will go away and send home a new mother, with glass eyes and a wooden tail.’

‘Indeed,’ said the girl, still speaking in the same unconcerned voice, ‘that is what they all say.’

What do you mean?’ asked the Turkey

‘They all threaten that kind of thing. Of course really there are no mothers with glass eyes and wooden tails; they would be much too expensive to make,’ And the common sense of this remark the children, especially the Turkey, saw at once, but they merely said, half crying—

‘We think you might let us see the little man and woman dance.’

‘The kind of thing you would think,’ remarked the village girl.

‘But will you if we are naughty?’ they asked in despair.

‘I fear you could not be naughty—that is, really—even if you tried,’ she said scornfully.

‘Oh, but we will try; we will indeed,’ they cried; ‘so do show them to us.’

‘Certainly not beforehand,’ answered the girl, getting up and preparing to walk away.

‘But if we are very naughty to-night, will you let us see them tomorrow?’

‘Questions asked to-day are always best answered to-morrow, the girl said, and turned round as if to walk on. Good-day, she said blithely; ‘I must really go and play a little to myself; good-day,’ she repeated, and then suddenly she began to sing—

‘Oh, sweet and fair’s the lady-bird
And so’s the bumble-bee,
But I myself have long preferred
The gentle chimpanzee,
The gentle chimpanzee-e-e,
The gentle chim

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said, stopping, and looking over her shoulder; ‘it’s very rude to sing without leave before company. I won’t do it again.’

‘Oh, do go on,’ the children said.

‘I’m going,’ she said, and walked away.

‘No, we meant go on singing,’ they explained, ‘and do let us just hear you play,’ they entreated, remembering that as yet they had not heard a single sound from the peardrum.

‘Quite impossible,’ she called out as she went along. ‘You are good, as I remarked before. The pleasure of goodness centres in itself; the pleasures of naughtiness are many and varied. Good-day,’ she shouted, for she was almost out of hearing.

For a few minutes the children stood still looking after her, then they broke down and cried.

‘She might have let us see them,’ they sobbed.

The Turkey was the first to wipe away her tears.

‘Let us go home and be very naughty,’ she said; then perhaps she will let us see them tomorrow.’

‘But what shall we do?’ asked Blue-Eyes, looking up. Then together all the way home they planned how to begin being naughty. And that afternoon the dear mother was sorely distressed, for, instead of sitting at their tea as usual with smiling happy faces, and then helping her to clear away and doing all she told them, they broke their mugs and threw their bread and butter on the floor and when the mother told them to do one thing they carefully went and did another, and as for helping her to put away, they left her to do it all by herself, and only stamped their feet with rage when she told them to go upstairs until they were good.

‘We won’t be good,’ they cried. ‘We hate being good, and we always mean to be naughty. We like being naughty very much.’

‘Do you remember what I told you I should do if you were very very naughty?’ she asked sadly.

Yes, we know, but it isn’t true,’ they cried. ‘There is no mother with a wooden tail and glass eyes, and if there were we should just stick pins into her and send her away; but there is none.

Then the mother became really angry at last, and sent them off to bed, but instead of crying and being sorry at her anger they laughed for joy, and when they were in bed they sat up and sang merry songs at the top of their voices.

The next morning quite early, without asking leave from the mother, the children got up and ran off as fast as they could over the fields towards the bridge to look for the village girl. She was sitting as usual by the heap of stones with the peardrum under her shawl.

‘Now please show us the little man and woman,’ they cried, ‘and let us hear the peardrum. We were very naughty last night.’ But the girl kept the peardrum carefully hidden. ‘We were very naughty,’ the children cried again.

‘Indeed,’ she said in precisely the same tone in which she had spoken yesterday.

‘But we were,’ they repeated; ‘we were indeed.’

‘So you say,’ she answered. ‘You were not half naughty enough.’

‘Why, we were sent to Bed!’

‘Just so,’ said the girl, putting the other corner of the shawl over the pear drum. ‘If you had been really naughty you wouldn’t have gone; but you can’t help it, you see. As I remarked before, it requires a great deal of skill to be naughty well.’

‘But we broke our mugs, we threw our bread and butter on the floor, we did everything we could to be tiresome.’

‘Mere trifles,’ answered the village girl scornfully. ‘Did you throw cold water on the fire, did you break the clock, did you pull all the tins down from the walls, and throw them on the floor?’

‘No!’ exclaimed the children, aghast, ‘we did not do that.’

‘I thought not,’ the girl answered. ‘So many people mistake a little noise and foolishness for real naughtiness; but, as I remarked before, it wants skill to do the thing properly. Well, good-day,’ and before they could say another word she had vanished.

‘We’ll be much worse,’ the children cried, in despair. ‘We’ll go and do all the things she says; and then they went home and did all these things. They threw water on the fire; they pulled down the baking-dish and the cake-tin, the fish-slice and the lid of the saucepan they had never seen, and banged them on the floor; they broke the clock and danced on the butter; they turned everything upside down; and then they sat still and wondered if they were naughty enough. And when the mother saw all that they had done she did not scold them as she had the day before or send them to bed, but she just broke down and cried, and then she looked at the children and said sadly—

‘Unless you are good to-morrow, my poor Blue-Eyes and Turkey, I shall indeed have to go away and come back no more, and the new mother I told you of will come to you.’

They did not believe her; yet their hearts ached when they saw how unhappy she looked, and they thought within themselves that when they once had seen the little man and woman dance, they would be good to the dear mother for ever afterwards; but they could not be good now till

they had heard the sound of the peardrum, seen the little man and woman dance, and heard the secret told—then they would be satisfied.

The next morning, before the birds were stirring, before the sun had climbed high enough to look in at their bedroom window, or the flowers had wiped their eyes ready for the day, the children got up and crept out of the cottage and ran across the fields. They did not think the village girl would be up so very early, but their hearts had ached so much at the sight of the mother's sad face that they had not been able to sleep, and they longed to know if they had been naughty enough, and if they might just once hear the peardrum and see the little man and woman, and then go home and be good forever.

To their surprise they found the village girl sitting by the heap of stones, just as if it were her natural home. They ran fast when they saw her, and they noticed that the box containing the little man and woman was open, but she closed it quickly when she saw them and they heard the clicking of the spring that kept it fast.

'We have been very naughty,' they cried. 'We have done all the things you told us; now will you show us the little man and woman!' The girl looked at them curiously, then drew the yellow silk handkerchief she sometimes wore round her head out of her pocket, and began to smooth out the creases in it with her hands.

'You really seem quite excited,' she said in her usual voice. 'You should be calm; calmness gathers in and hides things like a big cloak, or like my shawl does here; for instance'; and she looked down at the ragged covering that hid the peardrum.

'We have done all the things you told us,' the children cried again, and we do so long to hear the secret'; but the girl only went on smoothing out her handkerchief.

'I am so very particular about my dress,' she said. They could hardly listen to her in their excitement.

'But do tell if we may see the little man and woman,' they entreated again. 'We have been so very naughty, and mother says she will go away to-day and send home a new mother if we are

not good.'

'Indeed,' said the girl, beginning to be interested and amused. 'The things that people say are most singular and amusing. There is an endless variety in language.' But the children did not understand, only entreated once more to see the little man and woman.

'Well, let me see,' the girl said at last, just as if she were relenting. 'When did your mother say she would go?'

But if she goes what shall we do?' they cried in despair. 'We don't want her to go; we love her very much. Oh! what shall we do if she goes?'

'People go and people come; first they go and then they come. Perhaps she will go before she comes; she couldn't come before she goes. You had better go back and be good,' the girl added suddenly; you are really not clever enough to be anything else; and the little woman's secret is very important; she never tells it for make-believe naughtiness.'

'But we did do all the things you told us,' the children cried, despairingly.

'You didn't throw the looking-glass out of the window, or stand the baby on its head.'

'No, we didn't do that,' the children gasped.

'I thought not,' the girl said triumphantly. 'Well, good-day. I shall not be here to-morrow. Good-day.'

'Oh, but don't go away,' they cried, 'We are so unhappy; do let us see them just once.'

'Well, I shall go past your cottage at eleven o'clock this morning,' the girl said. 'Perhaps I shall play the peardrum as I go by.'

'And will you show us the man and woman?' they asked.

'Quite impossible, unless you have really deserved it; make-believe naughtiness is only spoilt goodness. Now if you break the looking-glass and do the things that are desired——'

'Oh, we will,' they cried. 'We will be very naughty till we hear you coming.'

'It's waste of time, I fear,' the girl said politely; but of course I should not like to interfere with you. You see the little man and woman, being used to the best society, are very particular.

Good-day,' she said, just as she always said, and then quickly turned away, but she looked back and called out, 'Eleven o'clock, I shall be quite punctual; I am very particular about my engagements.'

Then again the children went home, and were naughty, oh, so very very naughty that the dear mother's heart ached, and her eyes filled with tears, and at last she went upstairs and slowly put on her best gown and her new sun-bonnet, and she dressed the baby all in its Sunday clothes, and then she came down and stood before Blue-Eyes and the Turkey, and just as she did so the Turkey threw the looking-glass out of the window, and it fell with a loud crash upon the ground.

'Good-bye, my children,' the mother said sadly, kissing them. 'Good-bye, my Blue-Eyes; good-bye, my Turkey; the new mother will be home presently. Oh, my poor children!' and then weeping bitterly the mother took the baby in her arms and turned to leave the house.

'But, mother,' the children cried, 'we are——' and then suddenly the broken clock struck half-past ten, and they knew that in half an hour the village girl would come by playing on the peardrum.

'But, mother, we will be good at half-past eleven, come back at half-past eleven,' they cried, 'and we'll both be good, we will indeed; we must be naughty till eleven o'clock. But the mother only picked up the little bundle in which she had tied up her cotton apron and a pair of old shoes, and went slowly out at the door. It seemed as if the children were spellbound, and they could not follow her. They opened the window wide and called after her— 'Mother! mother! oh, dear mother, come hack again! We will be good, we will be good now, we will be good for evermore if you will come back,' But the mother only looked round and shook her head, and they could see the tears falling down her cheeks.

'Come back, dear mother!' cried Blue-Eyes; but still the mother went on across the fields.

'Come back, come back!' cried the Turkey; but still the mother went on. Just by the corner of the field she stopped and turned, and waved her handkerchief, all wet with tears, to the children at the window; she made the baby kiss its hand; and in a moment mother and baby had vanished

from their sight.

Then the children felt their hearts ache with sorrow, and they cried bitterly just as the mother had done, and yet they could not believe that she had gone. Surely she would come back, they thought; she would not leave them altogether; but, oh, if she did—if she did—if she did. And then the broken clock struck eleven, and suddenly there was a sound—a quick, clanging, jangling sound, with a strange discordant one at intervals; and they looked at each other, while their hearts stood still, for they knew it was the peardrum. They rushed to the open window, and there they saw the village girl coming towards them from the fields, dancing along and playing as she did so. Behind her, walking slowly, and yet ever keeping the same distance from her, was the man with the dogs whom they had seen asleep by the Blue Lion, on the day they first saw the girl with the peardrum. He was playing on a flute that had a strange shrill sound; they could hear it plainly above the jangling of the peardrum. After the man followed the two dogs, slowly waltzing round and round on their hind legs.

‘We have done all you told us,’ the children called, when they had recovered from their astonishment. ‘Come and see; and now show us the little man and woman.’

The girl did not cease her playing or her dancing, But she called out in a voice that was half speaking half singing, and seemed to keep time to the strange music of the peardrum.

‘You did it all badly. You threw the water on the wrong side of the fire, the tin things were not quite in the middle of the room, the clock was not broken enough, you did not stand the baby on its head.’

Then the children, still standing spellbound by the window cried out, entreating and wringing their hands, ‘Oh, but we have done everything you told us, and mother has gone away. Show us the little man and woman now, and let us hear the secret.’

As they said this the girl was just in front of the cottage, but she did not stop playing. The sound of the strings seemed to go through their hearts. She did not stop dancing; she was already passing the cottage by. She did not stop singing, and all she said sounded like part of a terrible

song. And still the man followed her, always at the same distance, playing shrilly on his flute; and still the two dogs waltzed round and round after him—their tails motionless, their legs straight, their collars clear and white and stiff. On they went, all of them together.

‘Oh, stop!’ the children cried, ‘and show us the little man and woman now.’

But the girl sang out loud and clear, while the string that was out of tune twanged above her voice.

‘The little man and woman are far away. See, their box is empty.’

And then for the first time the children saw that the lid of the box was raised and hanging back, and that no little man and woman were in it.

‘I am going to my own land,’ the girl sang, ‘to the land where I was born. And she went on towards the long straight road that led to the city many many miles away.’

‘But our mother is gone, the children cried; our dear mother, will she ever come back?’

‘No,’ sang the girl; ‘she’ll never come back, she’ll never come back. I saw her by the bridge: she took a boat upon the river; she is sailing to the sea; she will meet your father once again, and they will go sailing on, sailing on to the countries far away.’

And when they heard this, the children cried out, but could say no more, for their hearts seemed to be breaking.

Then the girl, her voice getting fainter and fainter in the distance, called out once more to them. But for the dread that sharpened their ears they would hardly have heard her, so far was she away, and so discordant was the music.

‘Your new mother is coming. She is already on her way; but she only walks slowly, for her tail is rather long, and her spectacles are left behind; but she is coming, she is coming—coming—coming.’

The last word died away; it was the last one they ever heard the village girl utter. On she went, dancing on; and on followed the man, they could see that he was still playing, but they could no longer hear the sound of his flute; and on went the dogs round and round and round. On

they all went, farther and farther away, till they were separate things no more, till they were just a confused mass of faded colour, till they were a dark misty object that nothing could define till they had vanished altogether, —altogether and for ever.

Then the children turned, and looked at each other and at the little cottage home, that only a week before had been so bright and happy, so cosy and so spotless. The fire was out, and the water was still among the cinders; the baking-dish and cake-tin, the fish-slice and the saucepan lid, which the dear mother used to spend so much time in rubbing, were all pulled down from the nails on which they had hung so long, and were lying on the floor. And there was the clock all broken and spoilt, the little picture upon its face could be seen no more; and though it sometimes struck a stray hour, it was with the tone of a clock whose hours are numbered, And there was the baby's high chair, but no little baby to sit in it; there was the cupboard on the wall, and never a sweet loaf on its shelf; and there were the broken mugs, and the bits of bread tossed about, and the greasy boards which the mother had knelt down to scrub until they were white as snow. In the midst of all stood the children, looking at the wreck they had made, their hearts aching, their eyes blinded with tears, and their poor little hands clasped together in their misery.

'Oh, what shall we do?' cried Blue-Eyes. 'I wish we had never seen the village girl and the nasty, nasty peardrum.'

'Surely mother will come hack,' sobbed the Turkey. 'I am sure we shall die if she doesn't come back.'

'I don't know what we shall do if the new mother comes,' cried Blue-Eyes. 'I shall never, never like any other mother. I don't know what we shall do if that dreadful mother comes.'

'We won't let her in,' said the Turkey.

'But perhaps she'll walk in,' sobbed Blue-Eyes.

The Turkey stopped crying for a minute, to think what should be done.

'We will bolt the door,' she said, 'and shut the window; and we won't take any notice when she knocks.'

So they bolted the door, and shut the window, and fastened it. And then, in spite of all they

had said, they felt naughty again, and longed after the little man and woman they had never seen, far more than after the mother who had loved them all their lives. But then they did not really believe that their own mother would not come back, or that any new mother would take her place.

When it was dinner-time, they were very hungry, but they could only find some stale bread, and they had to be content with it.

‘Oh, I wish we had heard the little woman’s secret, cried the Turkey; ‘I wouldn’t have cared then.’

All through the afternoon they sat watching and listening for fear of the new mother; but they saw and heard nothing of her, and gradually they became less and less afraid lest she should come. Then they thought that perhaps when it was dark their own dear mother would come home; and perhaps if they asked her to forgive them she would. And then Blue-Eyes thought that if their mother did come she would be very cold, so they crept out at the back door and gathered in some wood, and at last, for the grate was wet, and it was a great deal of trouble to manage it, they made a fire. When they saw the bright fire burning, and the little flames leaping and playing among the wood and coal, they began to be happy again, and to feel certain that their own mother would return; and the sight of the pleasant fire reminded them of all the times she had waited for them to come from the post-office, and of how she had welcomed them, and comforted them, and given them nice warm tea and sweet bread, and talked to them. Oh, how sorry they were they had been naughty, and all for that nasty village girl! They did not care a bit about the little man and woman now, or want to hear the secret.

They fetched a pail of water and washed the floor; they found some rag, and rubbed the tins till they looked bright again, and, putting a footstool on a chair, they got up on it very carefully and hung up the things in their places; and then they picked up the broken mugs and made the room as neat as they could, till it looked more and more as if the dear mother’s hands had been busy about it. They felt more and more certain she would return, she and the dear little baby together, and they thought they would set the tea-things for her, just as she had so often set them

for her naughty children. They took down the tea-tray, and got out the cups, and put the kettle on the fire to boil, and made everything look as home-like as they could. There was no sweet loaf to put on the table, but perhaps the mother would bring something from the village, they thought. At last all was ready, and Blue-Eyes and the Turkey washed their eyes and their hands, and then sat and waited, for of course they did not believe what the village girl had said about their mother sailing away.

Suddenly, while they were sitting by the fire, they heard a sound as of something heavy being dragged along the ground outside, and then there was a loud and terrible knocking at the door. The children felt their hearts stand still. They knew it could not be their own mother, for she would have turned the handle and tried to come in without any knocking at all.

‘Oh, turkey!’ whispered Blue-Eyes, ‘if it should be the new mother, what shall we do?’

We won’t let her in, whispered the Turkey, for she was afraid to speak aloud, and again there came a long and loud and terrible knocking at the door.

‘What shall we do? oh, what shall we do?’ cried the children, in despair. ‘Oh, go away!’ they called out. ‘Go away; we won’t let you in; we will never be naughty any more; go away, go away!’

But again there came a loud and terrible knocking.

‘She’ll break the door if she knocks so hard,’ cried Blue-Eyes.

‘Go and put your back to it,’ whispered the Turkey, ‘and I’ll peep out of the window and try to see if it is really the new mother.’

So in fear and trembling Blue-Eyes put her back against the door, and the Turkey went to the window, and, pressing her face against one side of the frame, peeped out. She could just see a black satin poke bonnet with a frill round the edge, and a long bony arm carrying a black leather bag. From beneath the bonnet there flashed a strange bright light, and Turkey’s heart sank and her checks turned pale, for she knew it was the flashing of two glass eyes. She crept up to Blue-Eyes. ‘It is—it is—it is!’ she whispered, her voice shaking with fear, ‘it is the new mother! She

has come, and brought her luggage in a black leather bag that is hanging on her arm!’

‘Oh, what shall we do wept Blue-Eyes; and again there was the terrible knocking.

‘Come and put your Back against the door too, Turkey,’ cried Blue-Eyes; ‘I am afraid it will break.’

So together they stood with their two little backs against the door. There was a long pause. They thought perhaps the new mother had made up her mind that there was no one at home to let her in, and would go away, but presently the two children heard through the thin wooden door the new mother move a little and then say to herself—I must break open the door with my tail.’

For one terrible moment all was still, but in it the children could almost hear her lift up her tail, and then, with a fearful blow, the little painted door was cracked and splintered.

With a shriek the children darted from the spot and fled through the cottage, and out at the back door into the forest beyond. All night long they stayed in the darkness and the cold, and all the next day and the next, and all through the cold, dreary days and the long dark nights that followed.

They are there still, my children. All through the long weeks and months have they been there, with only green rushes for their pillows and only the brown dead leaves to cover them, feeding on the wild strawberries in the summer, or on the nuts when they hang green; on the blackberries when they are no longer sour in the autumn, and in the winter on the little red berries that ripen in the snow. They wander about among the tall dark firs or beneath the great trees beyond. Sometimes they stay to rest beside the little pool near the copse where the ferns grow thickest and they long and long, with a longing that is greater than words can say, to see their own dear mother again, just once again, to tell her that they’ll be good for evermore—just once again.

And still the new mother stays in the little cottage, but the windows are closed and the doors are shut, and no one knows what the inside looks like. Now and then, when the darkness has

fallen and the night is still, hand in hand Blue-Eyes and the Turkey creep up near to the home in which they once were so happy, and with beating hearts they watch and listen; sometimes a blinding flash comes through the window, and they know it is the light from the new mothers glass eyes, or they hear a strange muffled noise, and they know it is the sound of her wooden tail as she drags it along the floor.

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