The Extra Day

Algernon Blackwood

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Chapter

1 THE MATERIAL

Judy, Tim, and Maria were just little children. It was impossible to say exactly what their ages were, except that they were just the usual age, that Judy was the eldest, Maria the youngest, and that Tim, accordingly, came in between the two.

Their father did his best for them; so did their mother; so did Aunt Emily, the latter's sister. It is impossible to say very much about these three either, except that they were just Father, Mother, and Aunt Emily. They were the Authorities-in-Chief, and they knew respectively everything there was to be known about such remote and difficult subjects as London and Money; Food, Health and Clothing; Conduct, Behaviour and Regulations, both general and particular. Into these three departments of activity the children, without realising that they did so, classed them neatly. Aunt Emily, besides the special duties assigned to her, was a living embodiment of No. While Father allowed and permitted, while Mother wobbled and hesitated, Aunt Emily shook her head with decision, and said distinctly No. She was too full of warnings, advice, and admonitions to get about much. She wore gold glasses, and had an elastic, pointed nose. From the children's point of view she must be classed as invalid. Somewhere, deep down inside them, they felt pity.

The trio loved them according to their just deserts; they grasped that the Authorities did their best for them. This "best," moreover, was done in different ways. Father did it with love and tenderness, that is, he spoilt them; Mother with tenderness and love, that is, she felt them part of herself and did not like to hurt herself; Aunt Emily with affectionate and worthy desire to see them improve, that is, she trained them. Therefore they adored their father, loved their mother, and thought highly—from a distance preferably—of their aunt.

This was the outward and visible household that an ordinary person, say, a visitor who came to lunch on Sunday after church, would have noticed. It was the upper layer; but there was an under layer too. There was Thompson, the old pompous family butler; they trusted him because he was silent and rarely smiled, winked at their mischief, pretended not to see them when he caught them in his pantry, and never once betrayed them. There was Mrs. Horton, the fat and hot-tempered family cook; they regarded her with excitement including dread, because she left juicy cakes (still wet) upon the dresser, yet denied them the entry into her kitchen. Her first name being Bridget, there was evidently an Irish strain in her, but there was probably a dash of French as well, for she was an excellent cook and *recipe* was her

master-word—she pronounced it "recipee." There was Jackman, the nurse, a mixture of Mother and Aunt Emily; and there was Weeden, the Head Gardener, an evasive and mysterious personality, who knew so much about flowers and vegetables and weather that he was half animal, half bird, and scarcely a human being at all—vaguely magnificent in a sombre way. His power in his own department was unquestioned. He said little, but it "meant an awful lot"—most of which, perhaps, was not intended.

These four constituted the under layer of the household, concealed from visitors, and living their own lives apart behind the scenes. They were the Lesser Authorities.

There were others too, of course, neighbours, friends, and visitors, who dwelt outside the big iron gates in the Open World, and who entered their lives from various angles, some to linger, some merely to show themselves and vanish into mist again. Occasionally they reappeared at intervals, occasionally they didn't. Among the former were Colonel William Stumper, C.B., a retired Indian soldier who lived in the Manor House beyond the church and had written a book on Scouting; a nameless Station-Master, whom they saw rarely when they accompanied Daddy to the London train; a Policeman, who walked endlessly up and down the muddy or dusty lanes, and came to the front door with a dirty little book in his big hands at Christmas-time; and a Tramp, who slept in barns and haystacks, and haunted the great London Road ever since they had once handed him a piece of Mrs. Horton's sticky cake in paper over the old grey fence. Him they regarded with a special awe and admiration, not unmixed with tenderness. He had smiled so nicely when he said "Thank you" that Judy, wondering if there was any one to mend his clothes, had always longed to know him better. It seemed so wonderful. How could he live without furniture, house, regular meals—without possessions, in a word? It made him so real. It was "real life," in fact, to live that way; and upon Judy especially the impression was a deep one.

In addition to these occasional intruders, there was another person, an Authority, but the most wonderful Authority of all, who came into their lives a little later with a gradual and overwhelming effect, but who cannot be mentioned more definitely just now because he has not yet arrived. The world, in any case, speaking generally, was enormous; it was endless; it was always dropping things and people upon them without warning, as from a clear and cloudless sky. But this particular individual was still climbing the great curve below their horizon, and had not yet poked his amazing head above the edge.

Yet, strange to say, they had always believed that some such person would arrive. A wonderful stranger was already on the way. They rarely spoke of it—it was just a great, passionate expectancy tucked away in the deepest corner of their hearts. Children possess this sense of

anticipation all the world over; grown-ups have it too in the form of an unquenchable, though fading hope: the feeling that some day or other a Wonderful Stranger will come up the pathway, knock at the door, and enter their lives, making life worth living, full of wonder, beauty, and delight, because he will make all things new.

This wonderful stranger, Judy had a vague idea, would be—be like at least—the Tramp; Tim, following another instinct, was of the opinion he would be a "soldier-explorer-hunter kind of man"; Maria, if she thought anything at all about him, kept her decision securely hidden in her tight, round body. But Judy qualified her choice by the hopeful assertion that he would "come from the air"; and Tim had a secret notion that he would emerge from a big, deep hole—pop out like a badger or a rabbit, as it were—and suddenly declare himself; while Maria, by her non-committal, universal attitude, perhaps believed that, if he came at all, he would "just come from everywhere at once." She believed everything, always, everywhere. But to assert that belief was to betray the existence of a doubt concerning it. She just lived it.

For the three children belonged to three distinct classes, without knowing that they did so. Tim loved anything to do with the ground, with earth and soil, that is, things that made holes and lived in them, or that did not actually make holes but just grubbed about; mysterious, secret things, such as rabbits, badgers, hedgehogs, mice, rats, hares, and weasels. In all his games the "earth" was home.

Judy, on the other hand, was indubitably an air person—birds amazed her, filling her hungry heart with high aspirations, longings, and desires. She looked, with her bright, eager face and spidery legs, distinctly bird-like. She flitted, darted, perched. She had what Tim called a "tweaky" nose, though whether he meant that it was beak-like or merely twitched, he never stated; it was just "tweaky," and Judy took it as a compliment. One could easily imagine her shining little face peeping over the edge of a nest, the rest of her sitting warmly upon half a dozen smooth, pink eggs. Her legs certainly seemed stuck into her like pencils, as with a robin or a seagull. She adored everything that had wings and flew; she was of the air; it was her element.

Maria's passions were unknown. Though suspected of being universal, since she manifested no deliberate likes or dislikes, approving all things with a kind of majestic and indifferent omnipotence, they remained quiescent and undeclared. She probably just loved the universe. She felt at home in it. To Maria the entire universe belonged, because she sat still and with absolute conviction—claimed it.

Chapter

2 FANCY--SEED OF WONDER

The country house, so ancient that it seemed part of the landscape, settled down secretively into the wintry darkness and watched the night with eyes of yellow flame. The thick December gloom hid it securely from attack. Nothing could find it out. Though crumbling in places, the mass of it was solid as a fortress, for the old oak beams had resisted Time so long that the tired years had resigned themselves to siege instead of assault, and the protective hills and woods rendered it impregnable against the centuries. The beleaguered inhabitants felt safe. It was a delightful, cosy feeling, yet excitement and surprise were in it too. Anything *might* happen, and at any moment.

This, at any rate, was how Judy and Tim felt the personality of the old Mill House, calling it Daddy's Castle. Maria expressed no opinion. She felt and knew too much to say a word. She was habitually non-committal. She shared the being of the ancient building, as the building shared the landscape out of which it grew so naturally. Having been born last, her inheritance of coming Time exceeded that of Tim and Judy, and she lived as though thoroughly aware of her prerogative. In quiet silence she claimed everything as her very own.

The Mill House, like Maria, never moved; it existed comfortably; it seemed independent of busy, hurrying Time. So thickly covered was it with ivy and various creepers that the trees on the lawn wondered why it did not grow bigger like themselves. They remembered the time when they looked up to it, whereas now they looked over it easily, and even their lower branches stroked the stone tiles on the roof, patched with moss and lichen like their own great trunks. They had come to regard it as an elderly animal asleep, for its chimneys looked like horns, it possessed a capacious mouth that both swallowed and disgorged, and its eyes were as numerous as those of the forest to which they themselves properly belonged. And so they accepted the old Mill House as a thing of drowsy but persistent life; they protected and caressed it; they liked it exactly where it was; and if it moved they would have known an undeniable shock.

They watched it now, this dark December evening, as one by one its gleaming eyes shone bright and yellow through the mist, then one by one let down their dark green lids. "It's going to sleep," they thought. "It's going to dream. Its life, like ours, is all inside. It sleeps the winter through as we do. All is well. Good-night, old house of grey! We'll also go to sleep."

Unable to see into the brain of the sleepy monster, the trees resigned themselves to dream again, tucking the earth closely against their roots and withdrawing into the cloak of misty darkness. Like most other things in winter they also stayed indoors, leading an interior life of dim magnificence behind their warm, thick bark. Presently, when they were ready, something would happen, something they were preparing at their leisure, something so exquisite that all who saw it would dance and sing for gladness. They also believed in a Wonderful Stranger who was coming into their slow, steady lives. They fell to dreaming of the surprising pageant they would blazon forth upon the world a little later. And while they dreamed, the wind of night passed moaning through their leafless branches, and Time flew noiselessly above the turning Earth.

Meanwhile, inside the old Mill House, the servants lit the lamps and drew the blinds and curtains. Behind the closing eyelids, however, like dream-chambers within a busy skull, there were rooms of various shapes and kinds, and in one of these on the ground-floor, called Daddy's Study, the three children stood, expectant and a little shy, waiting for something desirable to happen. In common with all other living things, they shared this enticing feeling—that Something Wonderful was going to happen. To be without this feeling, of course, is to be not alive; but, once alive, it cannot be escaped. At death it asserts itself most strongly of all—Something Too Wonderful is going to happen. For to die is quite different from being not alive. This feeling is the proof of eternal life—once alive, alive for ever. To live is to feel this yearning, huge expectancy.

Daddy had taught them this, though, of course, they knew it instinctively already. And any moment now the door would open and his figure, familiar, yet each time more wonderful, would cross the threshold, close the door behind him, and ... something desirable would happen.

"I wish he'd hurry," said Tim impatiently. "There won't be any time left." And he glanced at the cruel clock that stopped all their pleasure but never stopped itself. "The motor got here hours ago. He can't STILL be having tea." Judy, her brown hair in disorder, her belt sagging where it was of little actual use, sighed deeply. But there was patience and understanding in her big, dark eyes. "He's in with Mother doing finances," she said with resignation. "It's Saturday. Let's sit down and wait." Then, seeing that Maria already occupied the big armchair, and sat staring comfortably into the fire, she did not move. Maria was making a purring, grunting sound of great contentment; she felt no anxiety of any kind apparently.

But Tim was less particular.

"Alright," he said, squashing himself down beside Maria, whose podgy form accommodated itself to the intrusion like a cat, "as long as Aunt

Emily doesn't catch him on the way and begin explaining."

"She's in bed with a headache," mentioned Judy. "She's safe enough." For it was an established grievance against their mother's sister that she was always explaining things. She was a terrible explainer. She couldn't move without explaining. She explained everything in the world. She was a good soul, they knew, but she had to explain that she was a good soul. They rather dreaded her. Explanations took time for one thing, and for another they took away all wonder. In bed with a headache, she was safely accounted for, explained.

"She thinks we miss her," reflected Tim. He did not say it; it just flashed through his mind, with a satisfaction that added vaguely to his pleasurable anticipation of what was coming. And this satisfaction increased his energy. "Shove over a bit," he added aloud to Maria, and though Maria did not move of her own volition, she was nevertheless shoved over. The pair of them settled down into the depths of the chair, but while Maria remained quite satisfied with her new position, her brother fussed and fidgeted with impatience born of repressed excitement. "Run out and knock at the door," he proposed to Judy. "He'll never get away from Mother unless we let him KNOW we're waiting."

Judy, kneeling on a chair and trying to make it sea-saw, pulled up her belt, sprang down, then hesitated. "They'll only think it's Thompson and say come in," she decided. "That's no good."

Tim jumped up, using Maria as a support to raise himself. "I know what!" he cried. "Go and bang the gong. He'll think it's dressing- time." The idea was magnificent. "I'll go if you funk it," he added, and had already slithered half way over the back of the chair when Judy forestalled him and had her hand upon the door-knob. He encouraged her with various instructions about the proper way to beat the gong, and was just beginning a scuffle with the inanimate Maria, who now managed to occupy the entire chair, when he was aware of a new phenomenon that made him stop abruptly. He saw Judy's face hanging in mid-air, six feet above the level of the floor. Her face was flushed and smiling; her hair hung over her eyes; and from somewhere behind or underneath her a gruff voice said sternly:

"What are you doing in my Study at this time of night? Who asked you in?"

The expected figure had entered, catching Judy in the act of opening the door. He was carrying her in his arms. She landed with a flop upon the carpet. The desired and desirable thing was about to happen. "Get out, you lump, it's Daddy." But Maria, accustomed to her brother's exaggerated language, and knowing it was only right and manly, merely raised her eyes and waited for him to help her out. Tim did help her out; half dragging and half lifting, he deposited her in a solid heap upon the floor, then ran to the figure that now dominated the dim, fire-lit room,

and hugged it with all his force, making sounds in his throat like an excited animal: "Ugh! ugh! ugh!... !"

The hug was returned with equal vigour, but without the curious sounds; Maria was hugged as well and set upon her feet; while Judy, having already been sufficiently hugged, pushed the arm-chair closer up to the fire and waited patiently for the proper business of the evening to begin.

The figure, meanwhile, disentangled itself. It was tall and thin, with a mild, resigned expression upon a kindly face that years and care had lined before its time: old-fashioned rather, with soft, grey whiskers belonging to an earlier day. A black tail-coat adorned it, and the neck-tie was crooked in the turned-down collar. The watch-chain went from the waist-coat button to one pocket only, instead of right across, and one finger wore a heavy signet-ring that bore the family crest. It was obviously the figure of an overworked official in the Civil Service who had returned from its daily routine in London to the evening routine of its family in the country, the atmosphere of Government and the Underground still hanging round it. For sundry whiffs of the mysterious city reached the children's nostrils, bringing thrills of some strange, remote reality they had never known at first-hand. They busied themselves at once. While Tim unbuttoned the severe black coat and pulled it off, Judy brought a jacket of dingy tweed from behind a curtain in the corner, and stood on a chair to help the figure put it on. All knew their duties; the performance went like clockwork. And Maria sat and watched in helpful silence. There was a certain air about her as though she did it all.

"How they do spoil me, to be sure," the figure murmured to itself; "yet Mother's always saying that *I* spoil them. I wonder... !"

"Now you look decent at last," said Judy. "You smell like a nice rabbit."

"It's my shooting-coat." The figure cleared its throat, apparently on the defensive a little.

Tim and Judy sniffed it. "Rabbits and squirrels and earth and things," thought Tim.

"And flowers and burning leaves," said Judy. "It's his old garden-coat as well." She sniffed very audibly. "Oh, I love that smoky smell."

"It's the good old English smell," said the figure contentedly, while they put his neck-tie straight and arranged the pocket flaps for him. "It's English country—England."

"Don't other countries smell, then?" inquired Tim. "I mean, could any one tell you were English by your smell?" He sniffed again, with satisfaction. "Weeden's the same," he went on, without waiting for an answer, "only much stronger, and so's the potting shed."

"But yours is sweeter *much*," said Judy quickly. To share odours with an Authority like the Head Gardener was distinctly a compliment, but Daddy must come first, whatever happened. "How funny," she added,

half to herself, "that England should have such a jolly smell. I wonder what it comes from?"

"Where *does* England come from?" asked Tim, pausing a moment to stare into the figure's face. "It's an island, of course—England—but—"

"A piece of land surrounded by water," began the figure, but was not allowed to finish. A chorus of voices interrupted:

"Make a story of it, please. There's just time. There's half an hour. It's nice and dark. Ugh! Something very awful or very silly, please... ."

There followed a general scuffle for seats, with bitter complaints that he only had two pointed knees. Maria was treated with scant respect. There was also criticism of life—that he had no lap, "no proper lap," that it was too dark to see his face, that everybody in turn had got "the best place," but, chiefly, that there was "very little time." Time was a nuisance always: it either was time to go, or time to stop, or else there was not time enough. But at length quiet was established; the big arm-chair resembled a clot of bees upon a honeycomb; the fire burned dully, and the ceiling was thick with monstrous fluttering shadows, vaguely shaped.

"Now, please. We've been ready for ages."

A deep hush fell upon the room, and only a sound of confused breathing was audible. The figure heaved a long, deep sigh as though it suffered pain, paused, cleared its throat, then sighed again more heavily than before. For the moment of creation was at hand, and creation is not accomplished without much travail.

But the children loved the pause, the sigh, the effort. Not realising with what difficulty the stories were ground out, nor that it was an effort against time—to make a story last till help came from outside — they believed that something immense and wonderful was on the way, and held their breath with beating hearts. Daddy's stories were always marvellous; this one would be no exception.

Marvellous up to a point, that is: something in them failed. "He's trying," was their opinion of them; and it was the trying that they watched and listened to so eagerly. The results were unsatisfying, the effect incomplete; the climax of sensation they expected never came. Daddy, though they could not put this into words, possessed fancy only; imagination was not his. Fancy, however, is the seed of imagination, as imagination is the blossom of wonder. His stories prepared the soil in them at any rate. They felt him digging all round them.

He began forthwith:

"Once, very long ago—"

"How long?"

"So long ago that the chalk cliffs of England still lay beneath the sea—"

"Was Aunt Emily alive then?"

"Or Weeden?"

"Oh, much longer ago than that," he comforted them; "so long, in fact, that neither your Aunt Emily nor Weeden were even thought of—there lived a man who—"

"Where? What country, please?"

"There lived a man in England—"

"But you said England was beneath the sea with the chalk cliffs."

"There lived a man in a very small, queer little island called Ingland, spelt 'Ing,' not 'Eng,' who—"

"It wasn't *our* England, then?"

"On a tiny little island called Ingland, who was very lonely because he was the only human being on it—"

"Weren't there animals and things too?"

"And the only animals who lived on it with him were a squirrel who lived in the only tree, a rabbit who lived in the only hole, and a small grey mouse who made its nest in the pocket of his other coat."

"Were they friendly? Did he love them awfully?"

"At first he was very polite to them only, because he was a civil servant of his Government; but after a bit they became so friendly that he loved them even better than himself, and went to tea with the rabbit in its hole, and climbed the tree to share a nut-breakfast with the squirrel, and—and—"

"He doesn't know what to do with the mouse," a loud whisper, meant to be inaudible, broke in upon the fatal hesitation.

"And went out for walks with the mouse when the ground was damp and the mouse complained of chilly feet. In the pocket of his coat, all snug and warm, it stood on its hind legs and peered out upon the world with its pointed nose just above the pocket flap—"

"Then he liked the mouse best?"

"What sort of coat was it? An overcoat or just an ordinary one that smelt? Was that the only pocket in it?"

"It was made of the best leaves from the squirrel's tree, and from the rabbit's last year's fur, and the mouse had fastened the edges together neatly with the sharpest of its own discarded whiskers. And so they walked about the tiny island and enjoyed the view together—"

"The mouse couldn't have seen much!"

"Until, one day, the mouse declared the ground was ALWAYS wet and was getting wetter and wetter. And the man got frightened."

"Ugh! It's going to get awful in a minute!" And the children nestled closer. The voice sank lower. It became mysterious.

"And the wetter it got the more the man got frightened; for the island was dreadfully tiny and—"

"Why, please, did it get wetter and wetter?"

"THAT," continued the man who earned his living in His Majesty's Stationery Office by day, and by night justified his existence offering the raw material of epics unto little children, "that was the extraordinary

part of it. For no one could discover. The man stroked his beard and looked about him, the squirrel shook its bushy tail, the rabbit lifted its upper lip and thrust its teeth out, and the mouse jerked its head from side to side until its whiskers grew longer and sharper than ever—but none of them could discover why the island got wetter and wetter and wetter—"

"Perhaps it just rained like here."

"For the sky was always blue, it never rained, and there was so little dew at night that no one even mentioned it. Yet the tiny island got wetter every day, till it finally got so wet that the very floor of the man's hut turned spongy and splashed every time the man went to look out of the window at the view. And at last he got so frightened that he stayed indoors altogether, put on both his coats at once, and told stories to the mouse and squirrel about a country that was always dry—"

"Didn't the rabbit know anything?"

"For all this time the rabbit was too terrified to come out of its hole at all. The increasing size of its front teeth added to its uneasiness, for they thrust out so far that they hid the view and made the island seem even smaller than it was—"

"I like rabbits, though."

"Till one fine day—"

"They were all fine, you said."

"One finer day than usual the rabbit made a horrible discovery. The way it made the discovery was curious—may seem curious to us, at least—but the fact is, it suddenly noticed that the size of its front teeth had grown out of all proportion to the size of the island. Looking over its shoulder this fine day, it realised how absurdly small the island was in comparison with its teeth—and grasped the horrid truth. In a flash it understood what was happening. The island was getting wetter because it was also getting—*smaller*!"

"Ugh! How beastly!"

"Did it tell the others?"

"It retired half-way down its hole and shouted out the news to the others in the hut."

"Did they hear it?"

"It warned them solemnly. But its teeth obstructed the sound, and the windings of its hole made it difficult to hear. The man, besides, was busy telling a story to the mouse, and the mouse, anyhow, was sound asleep at the bottom of his pocket, with the result that the only one who caught the words of warning was—the squirrel. For a squirrel's ears are so sharp that it can even hear the grub whistling to itself inside a rotten nut; and it instantly took action."

"Ah! IT saved them, then?"

"The squirrel flew from the man's shoulder where it was perched, balanced for a second on the top of his head, then clung to the ceiling

and darted out of the window without a moment's delay. It crossed the island in a single leap, scuttled to the top of the tree, peered about over the diminishing landscape, and—"

"Didn't it see the rabbit?"

"And returned as quickly as it went. It bustled back into the hut, hopping nervously, and jerking its head with excitement. In a moment it was perched again on the man's shoulder. It carefully kept its bushy tail out of the way of his nose and eyes. And then it whispered what it had seen into his left ear."

"Why into his left ear?"

"Because it was the right one, and the other had cotton wool in it."

"Like Aunt Emily!"

"What did it whisper?"

"The squirrel had made a discovery, too," continued the teller, solemnly.

"Goodness! That's two discoveries!"

"But what *did* it whisper?"

In the hush that followed, a coal was heard falling softly into the grate; the night-wind moaned against the outside walls; Judy scraped her stockinged foot slowly along the iron fender, making a faint twanging sound. Breathing was distinctly audible. For several moments the room was still as death. The figure, smothered beneath the clotted mass of children, heaved a sigh. But no one broke the pause. It was too precious and wonderful to break at once. All waited breathlessly, like birds poised in mid-air before they strike ... until a new sound stole faintly upon the listening silence, a faint and very distant sound, barely audible as yet, but of unmistakable character. It was far away in the upper reaches of the building, overhead, remote, a little stealthy. Like the ominous murmur of a muffled drum, it had approach in it. It was coming nearer and nearer. It was significant and threatening.

For the first time that evening the ticking of the clock was also audible. But the new sound, though somewhat in league with the ticking, and equally remorseless, did not come from the clock. It was a human sound, the most awful known to childhood. It was footsteps on the stairs!

Both the children and the story-teller heard it, but with different results. The latter stirred and looked about him, as though new hope and strength had come to him. The former, led by Tim and Judy, broke simultaneously into anxious speech. Maria, having slept profoundly since the first mention of the mouse in its cosy pocket, gave no sign at all.

"Oh, quick! quick! What did the squirrel whisper in his good right ear? What was it? DO hurry, please!"

"It whispered two simple words, each of one syllable," continued the reanimated figure, his voice lowered and impressive. "It said—*the sea*!"

The announcement made by the squirrel was so entirely unexpected that the surprise of it buried all memory of the disagreeable sound. The children sat up and stared into the figure's face questioningly. Surely he had made a slight mistake. How could the sea have anything to do with it? But no word was spoken, no actual question asked. This overwhelming introduction of the sea left him poised far beyond their reach. His stories were invariably marvellous. He would somehow justify himself.

"The Sea!" whispered Tim to Judy, and there was intense admiration in his voice and eyes.

"From the top of its tree," resumed the figure triumphantly, "the squirrel had seen what was happening, and made its great discovery. It realised why the ground was wetter and wetter every day, and also why the island was small and growing smaller. For it understood the awful fact that—the sea was rising! A little longer and the entire island would be under water, and everybody on it would be drowned!" "Couldn't none of them swim or anything?" asked Judy with keen anxiety.

"Hush!" put in Tim. "It's what did they *do?* And who thought of it first?"

The question last but one was chosen for solution.

"The rabbit," announced the figure recklessly. "The rabbit saved them; and in saving them it saved the Island too. It founded Ingland, this very Ingland on which we live to-day. In fact, it started the British Empire by its action. The rabbit did it."

"How? How?"

"It heard the squirrel's whisper half-way down its hole. It forgot about its front teeth, and the moment it forgot them they, of course, stopped growing. It recovered all its courage. A grand idea had come to it. It came bustling out of its hiding-place, stood on its hind legs, poked its bright eyes over the window-ledge, and told them how to escape. It said, 'I'll dig my hole deeper and we'll empty the sea into it as it rises. We'll pour the water down my hole!'"

The figure paused and fixed his eyes upon each listener in turn, challenging disapproval, yet eager for sympathy at the same time. In place of criticism, however, he met only silence and breathless admiration. Also—he heard that distant sound *they* had forgotten, and realised it had come much nearer. It had reached the second floor. He made swift and desperate calculations. He decided that it was *just* possible ... with ordinary good luck ...

"So they all went out and began to deepen the rabbit's hole. They dug and dug and dug. The man took off both his coats; the rabbit scraped with its four paws, using its tail as well—it had a nice long tail in those days; the mouse crept out of his pocket and made channels with its little pointed toes; and the squirrel brushed and swept the water in with its bushy, mop-like tail. The rising sea poured down the ever- deepening

hole. They worked with a will together; there was no complaining, though the rabbit wore its tail down till it was nothing but a stump, and the mouse stood ankle-deep in water, and the squirrel's fluffy tail looked like a stable broom. They worked like heroes without stopping even to talk, and as the water went pouring down the hole, the level of the sea, of course, sank lower and lower and lower, the shores of the tiny island stretched farther and farther and farther, till there were reaches of golden sand like Margate at low tide, and as the level sank still lower there rose into view great white cliffs of chalk where before there had been only water—until, at last, the squirrel, scampering down from the tree where it had gone to see what had been accomplished, reported in a voice that chattered with stammering delight, 'We're saved! The sea's gone down! The land's come up!'"

The steps were audible in the passage. A gentle knock was heard. But no one answered, for it seemed that no one was aware of it. The figure paused a moment to recover breath.

"And then, and then? What happened next? Did they thank the rabbit?"

"They all thanked each other then. The man thanked the rabbit, and the rabbit thanked the squirrel, and the mouse woke up, and—"

No one noticed the slip, which proved that their attention was already painfully divided. For another knock, much louder than before, had interrupted the continuation of the story. The figure turned its head to listen. "It's nothing," said Tim quickly. "It's only a sound," said Judy. "What did the mouse do? Please tell us quickly."

"I thought I heard a knock," the figure murmured. "Perhaps I was mistaken. The mouse—er—the mouse woke up—"

"You told us that."

The figure continued, speaking with greater rapidity even than before:

"And looked about it, and found the view so lovely that it said it would never live in a pocket again, but would divide its time in future between the fields and houses. So it pricked its whiskers up, and the squirrel curled its tail over its back to avoid any places that still were damp, and the rabbit polished its big front teeth on the grass and said it was quite pleased to have a stump instead of a tail as a memento of a memorable occasion when they had all been nearly drowned together, and—they all skipped up to the top of the high chalk cliffs as dry as a bone and as happy as—"

He broke off in the middle of the enormous sentence to say a most ridiculous and unnecessary thing. "Come in," he said, just as though there was some one knocking at the door. But no single head was turned. If there was an entry it was utterly ignored.

"Happy as what?"

"As you," the figure went on faster than ever. "And that's why England to-day is an island of quite a respectable size, and why everybody

pretends it's dry and comfortable and cosy, and why people never leave it except to go away for holidays that cannot possibly be avoided."

"I beg your pardon, sir," began an awful voice behind the chair.

"And why to this day," he continued as though he had not heard, "a squirrel always curls its tail above its back, why a rabbit wears a stump like a pen wiper, and why a mouse lives sometimes in a house and sometimes in a field, and—"

"I beg your pardon, sir," clanged the slow, awful voice in a tone that was meant to be heard distinctly, "but it's long gone 'arf-past six, and—"

"Time for bed," added the figure with a sound that was like the falling of an executioner's axe. And, as if to emphasise the arrival of the remorseless moment, the clock just then struck loudly on the mantelpiece—seven times.

But for several minutes no one stirred. Hope, even at such moments, was stronger than machinery of clocks and nurses. There was a general belief that somehow or other the moment that they dreaded, the moment that was always coming to block their happiness, could be evaded and shoved aside. Nothing mechanical like that was wholly true. Daddy had often used queer phrases that hinted at it: "Some day—A day is coming—A day will come"; and so forth. Their belief in a special Day when no one would say "Time" haunted them already. Yet, evidently this evening was not the momentous occasion; for when Tim mentioned that the clock was fast, the figure behind the chair replied that she was half an hour overdue already, and her tone was like Thompson's when he said, "Dinner's served." There was no escape this time.

Accordingly the children slowly disentangled themselves; they rose and stretched like animals; though all still ignored the figure behind the chair. A ball of stuff unrolled and became Maria. "Thank you, Daddy," she said. "It was just lovely," said Judy. "But it's only the beginning, isn't it?" Tim asked. "It'll go on to-morrow night?" And the figure, having escaped failure by the skin of its teeth, kissed each in turn and said, "Another time—yes, I'll go on with it." Whereupon the children deigned to notice the person behind the chair. "We're coming up to bed now, Jackman," they mentioned casually, and disappeared slowly from the room in a disappointed body, robbed, unsatisfied, but very sleepy. The clock had cheated them of something that properly was endless. Maria alone made no remark, for she was already asleep in Jackman's comfortable arms. Maria was always carried.

"Time's up," Tim reflected when he lay in bed; "time's always up. I do wish we could stop it somehow," and fell asleep somewhat gratified because he had deliberately not wound up his alarum-clock. He had the delicious feeling—a touch of spite in it—that this would bother Time and muddle it.

Yet Time, as a monster, chased him through a hundred dreams and thus revenged itself. It pursued him to the very edge of the daylight,

then mocked him with a cold bath, lessons, and a windy sleet against the windows. It was "time to get up" again.

Yet, meanwhile, Time helped and pleased the children by showing them its pleasanter side as well. It pushed them, gently but swiftly, up the long hill of months and landed them with growing excitement into the open country of another year. Since the rabbit, mouse, and squirrel first woke in their hearts the wonder of common things, they had all grown slightly bigger. Time tucked away another twelve months behind their backs: each of them was a year older; and that in itself was full of a curious and growing wonder.

For the birth of wonder is a marvellous, sweet thing, but the recognition of it is sweeter and more marvellous still. Its growth, perhaps, shall measure the growth and increase of the soul to whom it is as eyes and hands and feet, searching the world for signs of hiding Reality. But its persistence—through the heavier years that would obliterate it—this persistence shall offer hints of something coming that is more than marvellous. The beginning of wisdom is surely— Wonder.

Chapter

3 DEATH OF A MERE FACT

There was a man named Jinks. In him was neither fancy, imagination, nor a sign of wonder, and so he—died.

But, though he appears in this chapter, he disappears again so quickly that his being mentioned in a sentence all by himself should not lead any one astray. Jinks made a false entry, as it were. The children crossed him out at once. He became illegible. For the trio had their likes and dislikes; they resented liberties being taken with them. Also, when there was no one to tell them stories, they were quite able to amuse themselves. It was the inactive yet omnipotent Maria who brought about indirectly the obliteration of Mr. Jinks.

And it came about as follows:

Maria was a podgy child of marked individuality. It was said that she was seven years old, but *she* declared that eight was the figure, because some uncle or other had explained, "you're in your eighth year." Wandering uncles are troublesome in this kind of way. Every time her age was mentioned she corrected the informant. She had a trick of moving her eyes without moving her head, as though the round face was difficult to turn; but her big blue eyes slipped round without the least trouble, as though oiled. The performance gave her the sly and knowing aspect of a goblin, but she had no objection to that, for it saved her trouble, and to save herself trouble—according to nurses, Authorities, and the like—was her sole object in existence.

Yet this seemed a mistaken view of the child. It was not so much that she did not move unnecessarily as that it was not necessary for her to move at all, since she invariably found herself in the middle of whatever was going on. While life bustled anxiously about her, hurrying to accomplish various ends, she remained calm and contented at the centre, completely satisfied, mistress of it all. And her face was symbolic of her entire being; whereas so many faces seem unfinished, hers was complete—globular like the heavenly bodies, circular like the sun, arms and legs unnecessary. The best of everything came to her *because* she did not run after it. There was no hurry. Time did not worry her. Circular and self-sustaining, she already seemed to dwell in Eternity.

"And this little person," one of these inquisitive, interfering visitors would ask, smiling fatuously; "how old is she, I wonder?"

"Seven," was the answer of the Authority in charge.

Maria's eyes rolled sideways, and a little upwards. She looked at the foolish questioner; the Authority who had answered was not worth a glance.

"No," she said flatly, with sublime defiance, "I'm more. I'm in my eighth year, you see."

And the visitor, smiling that pleasant smile that makes children distrust, even dislike them, and probably venturing to pinch her cheek or pat her on the shoulder into the bargain, accepted the situation with another type of smile—the Smile-that-children-expect. As a matter of fact, children hate it. They see through its artificial humbug easily. They prefer a solemn and unsmiling face invariably. It's the latter that produces chocolates and sudden presents; it's the stern-faced sort that play hide-and-seek or stand on their heads. The Smilers are bored at heart. They mean to escape at the first opportunity. And the children never catch their sleeves or coattails to prevent them going.

"So you're in your eighth year, are you?" this Smiler chuckled with a foolish grin. He patted her cheek kindly. "Why, you're almost a grown-up person. You'll be going to dinner-parties soon." And he smiled again. Maria stood motionless and patient. Her eyes gazed straight before her. Her podgy face remained expressionless as dough.

"Answer the kind gentleman," said the Authority reprovingly.

Maria did not budge. A finger and thumb, both dirty, rolled a portion of her pinafore into a pointed thing like a string, distinctly black. She waited for the visitor to withdraw. But this particular visitor did not withdraw.

"*I* knew a little girl—" he began, with a condescending grin that meant that her rejection of his advances had offended him, "a little girl of about your age, who—"

But the remainder of the rebuke-concealed-in-a-story was heard only by the Authority. For Maria, relentless and unhumbugged, merely walked away. In the hall she discovered Tim, discreetly hiding. "What's *he* come for?" the brother inquired promptly, jerking his thumb towards the hall.

Maria's eyes just looked at him.

"To see Mother, I suppose," he answered himself, accustomed to his sister's goblin manners, "and talk about missions and subshkiptions, and all that. Did he give you anything?"

"No, nothing."

"Did he call us bonny little ones?" His face mentioned that he could kill if necessary, or if his sister's honour required it.

"He didn't *say* it."

"Lucky for him," exclaimed Tim gallantly, rubbing his nose with the palm of his hand and snorting loudly. "What *did* he say, then—the old Smiler?"

"He said," replied Maria, moving her head as well as her eyes, "that I wasn't really old, and that he knew another little girl who was nicer than me, and always told the truth, and—"

"Oh, come on," cried Tim, impatiently interrupting. "My trains are going in the schoolroom, and I want a driver for an accident. We'll put the Smiler in the luggage van, and he'll get smashed in the collision, and *all* the wheels will go over his head. Then he'll find out how old you really are. We'll fairly smash him."

They disappeared. Judy, who was reading a book on the Apocalypse, in a corner of the room, looked up a moment as they entered.

"What's up?" she asked, her mind a little dazed by the change of focus from stars, scarlet women, white horses, and mysterious "Voices," to dull practical details of everyday existence. "What's on?" she repeated.

"Trains," replied Tim. "We're going to have an accident and kill a man dead."

"What's he done?" she inquired.

"Humbugged Maria with a lot of stuff—and gave her nothing—and didn't believe a single word she told him."

Judy glanced without much interest at the railway laid out upon the floor, murmured "Oh, I see," and resumed her reading of the wonderful book she had purloined from the top shelf of a neglected bookcase outside the gun-room. It absorbed her. She loved the tremendous words, the atmosphere of marvel and disaster, and especially the constant suggestion that the end of the world was near. Antichrist she simply adored. No other hero in any book she knew came near him.

"Come and help," urged Tim, picking up an engine that lay upon its side. "Come on."

"No, thanks. I've got an Apocalypse. It's simply frightfully exciting."

"Shall we break *both* legs?" asked Maria blandly, "or just his neck?"

"Neck," said Tim briefly. "Only they must find the heart beneath the rubbish of the luggage van."

Judy looked up in spite of herself. "Who is it?" she inquired, with an air of weighing conflicting interests.

"Mr. Jinks." It was Maria who supplied the information.

"But he's Daddy's offiss-partner man," Judy objected, though without much vim or heat.

Maria did not answer. Her eyes were glued upon the other engine.

"All black and burnt and—full of the very horridest diseases," put in Tim, referring to the heart of the destroyed Mr. Jinks beneath the engine.

He glanced up enticingly at his elder sister, whom he longed to draw into the vindictive holocaust.

"He said things to Maria," he explained persuasively, "and it's not the first time either. Last Sunday he called me 'his little man,' and he's never given me a single thing since ever I can remember, years and years ago."

Then Judy remembered that he invariably kissed her on both cheeks as though she was a silly little child.