

A Letter to the Reader of this Book

During the war my niece, Nicolette, was given a party frock and shoes from America. A lovely frock of the sort that nobody had because of clothes rationing. Blue organdie over a silk slip. It was Nicolette's first long frock and she could hardly wait for the right occasion to put it on. But no occasion turned up. There was at that time almost no transport. So little heating that if it was a winter party something warmer than organdie would have to be worn. Food was difficult, and every grown-up person too busy to arrange a party of the making-do sort it would have to have been. The frock hung in the cupboard, and hung in the cupboard. A most depressing place for a first long party frock. Worst of all, Nicolette grew. Even the most optimistic person had to wonder, if

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there ever was a party, would the frock be too short and too tight?

I am glad to say that Nicolette did wear the frock. If it was a bit tight it did not show. She looked exactly as somebody of thirteen ought to look at a party. But I remember the months of anxiety when the frock hung in the cupboard. How awful to have been Nicolette. How many more girls had party frocks and shoes sent them from abroad and no party? So, for Nicolette in England, and the givers of the party frock and shoes in America, I wrote this book.

Noel Steadford

I. The Parcel

THE PARCEL came while the family were having breakfast. It caused confusion because, although it was marked 'unsolicited gift', the postman had to have a lot of money before he would deliver it. Mrs Miggs, who came in to help with the housework, had not arrived, so Miss Lipscombe, who was boiling instruments in the surgery, answered the bell. Miss Lipscombe had, when she was younger, been Matron in charge of a workhouse. People say to Matrons, 'Yes, Matron', whenever they speak, which makes it difficult for Matrons when they retire. If for years and years people have said 'Yes, Matron' in respectful tones it is hard to get accustomed to people saying a plain 'No'. To make up for all the

respectful ‘Yes, Matrons’ that she did not get, Miss Lipscombe made a favour of everything that she did in the hope that people would remember how important she was. That was why it was awkward that it was she who answered the postman’s ring.

The family were sitting round the table eating breakfast, which that day was cereal and sausages. They heard Miss Lipscombe say, ‘Nonsense. No parcel is worth so much. No, I certainly can’t disturb the doctor at breakfast.’ Mr Bins, the postman, could not be heard at first, but presently he lost his temper and then his voice roared into the dining room. ‘I’ve no time for argufying with you. I’ve got work to do, if you haven’t.’ At the breakfast table the children looked at each other in a hopeful sort of way. Mr Bins was a very old friend, and he had said the one thing that was absolutely certain to make Miss Lipscombe angry. Doctor Andrews got up.

‘I had better save bloodshed.’ He opened the dining-room door and called out in a casual voice, as though he had not heard the argument going on, ‘Morning, Bins.’

The dining-room door being open the children could hear everything. Miss Lipscombe and Mr

Bins talked at the same time. Mr Bins said he was not going to be put about by a cantankerous female that didn't know her place. Miss Lipscombe said what the world was coming to she didn't know when creatures like Bins could so far forget themselves. Then Doctor Andrews cut in:

'Sorry you've been taken from your work, Miss Lipscombe, perhaps you would get my instruments packed. I shall be off in a minute.' And to Mr Bins, 'What's the damage?'

There was a pause after that. Obviously money was being paid out. Then Mr Bins said, 'Good morning, Doctor.'

As soon as the money was paid all the family, from Mrs Andrews down to Benjamin, thought about the parcel.

Mrs Andrews wondered whether it was for her. Could it possibly have some of that glorious flannel in it that made shirts for the boys?

John knew it was not for him but wondered about the stamps. He collected Dominions only. He hoped it was from Canada and had a very expensive stamp on it. He had only started his collection in the summer just before his first term at Marlborough, and it was not up to much yet.

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Selina prayed hard that it was for her. It might be because she had a godmother in America. It was true that her godmother did not usually send presents for proper occasions. She never remembered Selina's birthday was in October. If a present came now, even though it was late, it would look like a present for Christmas. All the same, just once she might have kept an occasion for a change. She sent lovely presents when she did send them. Selina hoped, if it was a present, it had in it something like sweets that could be shared round, because, on the whole, she got more parcels than anybody else in the family, and that made things a bit awkward when you were just a cousin and everybody else were brothers and sisters.

The twins, Christopher and Sally, had an especial interest in the parcel. They guessed it came from America and was for them. It might say 'unsolicited gift', but they knew that they had written a letter to Uncle Bill in Washington, which, if it had got past the censor, would mean that Uncle Bill had been shopping. Christopher wanted skates. He wanted skates so badly that he dreaded a cold winter because he had not any. When it comes to not wanting ice and snow things are pretty bad. The maddening thing was

he had saved the money to buy skates, but there were no new ones being made, and none of his size were ever advertised for sale second-hand. He had not exactly asked for skates in his letter to Uncle Bill, but he had said, 'It would be pretty decent if there was ice this Christmas, if I had any skates, but there are none made now.' Sally felt she could no longer live without silk tights. She had written, 'There is a chance that I may dance the lead in the ballet we do at school at Easter, if I had silk tights which I have not. There are no silk tights at all here now.' Later on in the letter they had said, 'We have saved enough money to pay for skates and tights when we can get anyone to get them for us.' They were a little nervous about saying this as it was the sort of thing the censor might stop, but, on the other hand, they did not want Uncle Bill to think he was expected to fork out the money, because he had only his pay as a Colonel and their father said that did not go far in Washington.

Phoebe hoped there was material in the parcel that Mum would make into a party frock for her. She had no proper party frock. She had expected to come into Sally's pink one by now, but Sally remained so terribly small for twelve and a half.

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It was particularly sickening this Christmas that she had not got a party frock because she had a party to wear one at. It was the only party this year and was for children of ten or under. It was all very well for Mum to say she looked a pet in that cream thing; she looked simply awful in that cream thing. It was much too short and much too tight, and other children who were nine and a half did not wear, for best, a dress which their sister had worn five years before.

Augustus had not paused in his eating while Miss Lipscombe and Mr Bins were arguing about the parcel, but, as he ate, little quick pictures of what might be in the parcel jumped in and out of his brain. Once a parcel had come from Australia with sort of crystallized fruits in it, at least that was what Mum had called them. There had been gorgeous parcels from America from Selina's godmother, with enormous sweets on the end of little sticks. Once there had been a parcel from Canada with a great tin of nuts in it. He did not know what to hope was in this parcel. He just saw a nice mixture of what had come in other parcels.

Benjamin had taken advantage of the parcel distracting everybody's attention to hum, which he was not allowed to do at table. He made little

words to his humming. 'It's a 'normous parcel. It's a present for Benjamin. It's full to the very top of ice cream.'

Doctor Andrews came back into the dining room. He was carrying a large box done up in brown paper. He held it out to Selina.

'It's for you, niece. It says, "Miss Selina Cole, unsolicited gift." I hope it's something you want because there was three pounds, eighteen shillings, and fourpence to pay.'

Mrs Andrews nearly dropped the teapot.

'Three pounds, eighteen shillings, and fourpence! Good gracious, Jim!' She turned to Selina. 'I hope it's something useful, darling, after the Customs charging all that much.'

The doctor sat down and went on with his breakfast.

'I hope it's something she likes.'

Selina read the declaration form. She looked up, her eyes shining.

'It's a dress and shoes. Oh, Aunt Ann, I do hope it's velvet. I think I want a red velvet dress almost more than anything else in the world.'

Mrs Andrews laughed.

'Put the parcel in the armchair until after breakfast, darling. I know it seems awful to be expected to

wait to open it, but you can't risk getting sausage on to a new dress, and you easily might sitting next to Benjamin.'

Benjamin stopped humming. He had a hoarse, deep voice for somebody of four. He leant across to his mother.

'My dear! I never upset my food.'

His mother pulled his plate closer to him.

'Not more than once a day; eat up, old man.'

It was hard for Selina to swallow the rest of her breakfast. Nobody, however hungry they are, could be really interested in breakfast when a parcel marked 'New dress' is lying unopened in the armchair in the corner. Especially a person who has not had a new dress for a year because of needing an overcoat, shoes, a gym tunic, and underclothes. It was hard to sit still and not fidget while the others finished eating. Uncle Jim was very strict about sitting still. He was so often called away in the middle of a meal to attend to a patient that he was afraid his children would think that was the normal way to behave. He would never let anybody get up for any reason at all until the last person had finished eating, and he never allowed them to say, 'For goodness' sake hurry up.' If anyone fidgeted he just took

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longer before he got up himself, or would let Aunt Ann get up, to show that the meal was over. Fortunately for Selina the surgery bell rang just as Augustus, who was always slow, finished drinking his milk. The doctor got up and breakfast was over.

Aunt Ann helped Selina untie the string. All the family wanted to help pull off the brown paper but Aunt Ann held them back.

‘Don’t be mean. It’s Selina’s parcel.’

Inside was a box. It was tied up in the lovely way Americans tie up parcels, with yards and yards of fine scarlet and green ribbon. When that ribbon was taken off the box and the lid lifted there was a card lying on top of tissue paper. The card said: ‘I have just remembered that you are now ’tweenage, and must be ready for this. I hope you’ll have a good time in it.’ Selina laid the card on one side and lifted the tissue paper. There lay the frock. She held it by its shoulders and gaped at it, and so did everybody else. It was long. Down to the ground. Cream organdie over a cream satin slip. It had ruched square shoulders and short puffed sleeves. After a moment Phoebe said in a whisper:

‘There’s still things left in the box.’

Selina undid three smaller parcels. In the two biggest were one each of a pair of satin shoes, and in the other was a blue sash for the frock and a blue bow to wear in her hair. Aunt Ann seemed to find all this glory too much for her legs. She sat down suddenly.

‘Selina, my pet, your godmother has the most inflated ideas about what is worn in English villages at the end of a long war.’

Sally took the sash from Selina and put it round herself. She turned to her mother.

‘She’ll have to wear it fairly soon or she’ll have outgrown it, and then it’ll come on to me.’

Mrs Andrews was looking sadly at the frock. If only it had been made of velvet or serge or something useful.

‘Even if it passed on to you, darling, what could you wear it for?’

Phoebe spoke very fast, her words falling over each other.

‘If nobody ever is going to wear it, couldn’t it, oh couldn’t it be cut short and me wear it for the party next week?’

John saw how aghast Selina looked at the suggestion. He gave Phoebe’s curls a tug.

‘The present was for Selina, not you. Of course she’ll wear it.’

Selina was grateful to John, but she did not think he quite appreciated the position.

‘When?’

John turned to his mother.

‘Isn’t somebody getting married or anything like that? It could be worn as a bridesmaid.’

Sally stroked the blue sash.

‘Everybody who was going to be married has been married, and anyway, you can’t just say “I’ve got a frock, can I be a bridesmaid?”’ She turned suddenly to her mother, her eyes shining. ‘I tell you what, couldn’t we give a party so’s she could wear it?’

Mrs Andrews looked miserable.

‘Oh, I do wish we could, but who would come to it? You see, the sort of party for that frock would be an evening one, a dance, and nobody could get here in the evening. There isn’t a bus after seven. That’s why the Smiths’ little party next week for people under ten is in the afternoon, and even then it’s been an awful job to get twelve children together.’

John did not care if he never went to a dance, but he did feel it was pretty sickening for Selina

to get a present that she could never use. He knew just how he would feel if somebody gave him a motorbike and it had to stop in the garage.

‘Selina’s got to wear it. We’ll have to think of a way. Can I have the stamp, Selina?’

Selina was trying on the shoes. Even with wool stockings they looked gloriously partyish. She felt so low that she could only nod. Mrs Andrews got up.

‘If anything they’re too big, which is a comfort. Rack your brains, darlings. Perhaps together you can think of something.’

Christopher was so disappointed about the skates that he had not until that moment thought about Selina. Now, looking at her feet, he felt sorry for her. Suppose it had been skates, and then there was never any ice.

‘Let’s think until teatime and then after tea let’s have a family committee. Everybody must have an idea by five o’clock.’

Mrs Andrews went towards the door. A family committee did not include her or the doctor. It was a thing held by the children. Selina had been counted as family since she had come to live with her Andrews cousins.

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‘It’s getting late, we may as well get the chores done. Twins, it’s your day for clearing the table; don’t forget, when you’ve swept up the crumbs, to give them to the birds. I found a whole lot on the floor yesterday. Selina, when you’ve finished helping with the bedrooms write a nice thank-you letter to your godmother.’ She glanced anxiously towards the window. ‘I do hope Mrs Miggs is coming.’

The frock and shoes were back in the box. Selina folded the brown paper. Sally picked up the string and wound it into a little skein.

‘Cheer up, Selina, we’ve never had a family committee yet when we didn’t think of something.’

Christopher was piling the breakfast plates together.

‘Five o’clock in the schoolroom, and everybody’s got to come with an idea.’

2. The Committee

THE SCHOOLROOM was only called the schoolroom when the family remembered. It had always been the nursery. When John was eleven he had asked some boys to tea one Saturday afternoon, and without thinking he had said, 'Come up and play in the nursery.' On Monday when he went to school he found lots of boys saying, and even singing, 'Andrews Major plays in a nursery.' This was such a humiliation that John had to speak to his father about it. Doctor Andrews spoke to Mrs Andrews and it was decided that in future the nursery was to be called the schoolroom.

The family met in the schoolroom at five o'clock as arranged. It was a bit difficult for them to be

there at the right time because tea was at half past four and at five o'clock they were still sitting round the table. Augustus and Benjamin took a long time over their tea. It was the last meal they had before going to bed, and they seemed to remember this, filling up cracks in their insides with slice after slice of bread and jam. Phoebe also ate a good deal at teatime, but she did not need to eat as much as Augustus and Benjamin because she had a cup of cocoa and a slice of bread and margarine when she went to bed. John, Selina, Christopher, and Sally, who were going to have a proper supper at half past seven, got very bored watching Phoebe, Augustus, and Benjamin eat. Tea was the one meal that the doctor and Mrs Andrews did not eat with their family. Mrs Andrews said, 'I was brought up to have tea in the drawing room, darlings, a very uncomfortable meal which none of you would like, but it's the one bit of civilization, as I knew it, left to me so I'm clinging to it.'

The rule about nobody fidgeting or getting up until the last person had finished eating officially existed in the schoolroom as well as the dining room, but in the schoolroom it was not so strictly kept. Sally, as the eldest girl of the Andrews family, was in charge at teatime, with John and Christopher

to back her up. Nobody actually got out of their chairs until tea was over, but there was a good deal of 'Hurry up, Slowcoach.' 'Did anyone ever see a tortoise eat a buttercup?' 'Augustus, we don't want to sit here all night, if you do.' It was actually ten minutes past five before Christopher and Sally had cleared the table and John was sitting at the head of it with a piece of paper to take down the minutes, and the meeting could begin. John wrote 'Committee', and the date at the top of the paper, 'December 30th, 1944', and underneath that 'Ideas'. He looked round the table to make sure everybody was attending.

'I shall put our ideas down, starting with Selina and going down to Benjamin and finishing with me, and then we'll all vote on the best one.' He looked at Selina. 'You first.'

Although Selina had lived with the cousins for five years and five months, she still felt a little odd with them. They were quicker than she was, or at least they seemed quicker. As a family they got interested in things very fast, and had a vivid, exciting way of doing what they did. Even ordinary things, like making beds and washing up, they did not do in an ordinary, dull way. They had hair inclined to curl and they were all dark, varying

degrees of darkness, from Phoebe, whose hair was almost black and who had enormous brown eyes, to John, who was brown-haired. Selina had straight hair; it was not fair and it was not dark. When it was first washed it had red lights in it, but usually it looked just plain mouse-colour. She had grey-green eyes, and a pale face with high cheekbones, and she was very thin. The Andrews family had bright-coloured cheeks and eyes which danced and sparkled, and very red lips. Sometimes, when it was cold weather and Selina's nose was red, or when it was hot and she looked even paler than usual, she would think that to outsiders, seeing her beside her cousins, she must look rather like something that had been left out all night in the rain. All the cousins were, as a rule, nice to her, but sometimes she was conscious they thought her dull. It made her put forward ideas with diffidence. It made her answer John now in a nervous voice.

‘I wondered if, perhaps, at Easter, when it's fine, we could get up a dance to be held out of doors – or perhaps . . .’ she looked round and saw that nobody looked enthusiastic, ‘or perhaps it would have to be in the summer holidays when it's light later. We could have the gramophone, I thought, with that loudspeaker that they use for book drives

and things. Perhaps some of the Americans would come over from the camp. We could charge to come to the dance and give the money to a charity . . . ?

The cousins' faces were so unresponsive that her voice tailed away.

Christopher said:

'Well, of . . .'

Sally said:

'I think . . .'

Phoebe said:

'If it's got to be a . . .'

Augustus said:

'I can't . . .'

John held up his hand.

'No criticisms until we've got all the ideas down. Benjamin, don't hum. People don't at meetings.' He looked at Christopher. He was five minutes older than Sally. 'Well?'

Christopher folded his arms and leant on the table.

'I was thinking that last year when the Women's Institute had that fair and exhibition they had a baby show. We might suggest to them that this year, instead of babies, they had a show for the best decorated bicycle. Selina could wear her

frock and get her bicycle up in bows to match, or something.’

As John had said there was to be no criticism until all the ideas were written down nobody spoke, but Sally and Phoebe gave Christopher such scornful looks it was as good as speaking, and Selina’s expression of horror was just like words. You could see her mind saying, ‘My organdie on a bicycle!’ John paid no attention to any of their faces. He wrote down Christopher’s suggestion and looked at Sally.

Sally spoke so fast that her words fell over each other.

‘I’ve thought of a ballet.’ John’s ruling there was to be no criticism or not, this was more than any of them could stand. For every suitable and unsuitable occasion Sally thought of a ballet. There were rude noises all round the table. Sally looked proud. ‘There’s no need to be hateful. It’s an awfully good idea, really. A girl goes to sleep and dreams, and while she’s dreaming she sees the pictures in the room come to life, history pictures, like Queen Elizabeth and Charles the Second, and all those sort of people. In the end she wakes up and finds it’s only a dream. Selina would be the girl, of course, who dreamt; there

wouldn't be any dancing as she can't dance much, but she could wear her dress.'

Phoebe was so eager to explain her idea that she could hardly wait until John had written down Sally's.

'I think that sometime when there are lots of people about Selina should put on the dress and stand on a tub or something, and then the dress could be raffled.' She looked at Selina's horrified face. 'We'd choose a time when there were lots of people about so they could see you in the frock.' She turned back to John. 'I think the raffle tickets oughtn't to be very expensive, because everybody hasn't much pocket money.'

John wrote down this suggestion and looked without much hope at Augustus.

'Have you any ideas?'

'Could she wear it to church?'

John scribbled down the word 'Church', then laid down his pencil.

'Benjamin won't have any ideas so I'll give you mine.'

Benjamin sat up. He beat on the table with his fist.

'I have got an idea. It's a lovely idea. I thought we could borrow a pony and have a circus and

Selina could be the lady who jumps through a hoop like in my book.'

John took up his pencil again and pretended to write this down. Actually he only wrote down 'Circus'. Then he leant back in his chair.

'Here's mine. When I was out this afternoon I met Colonel Day. He says they're going to sell the Abbey. He said, as they've got no children, there is no point in keeping it on; it's going to be sold this autumn. I said wouldn't he mind it going, and he said yes, because the Days have lived there for generations and it's old and all that, but now there's no one to look after it, so he and Mrs Day would be much more comfortable in a cottage. After I said goodbye to him I was thinking about the Abbey, and suddenly I wondered if we could borrow the garden and do a show there for charity next summer. I'd thought of any old show where Selina could wear her frock, but when Sally was talking about her ballet, I had another idea. Why shouldn't we do a pageant and let Selina be the girl who dreamed it, like in Sally's ballet?'

There was a pause while everybody took this idea in. Selina's eyes were shining.

'Who will write the pageant?'

Phoebe sprawled across the table.

‘I will, if you like. I’m awfully good at poetry. I wrote a poem about a violet last term. I think it’s beautiful:

“You tell me stories of the present,
Yes, and things that shall be yet,
I would take thee as my model,
Modest little violet.”’

There were unpleasant sounds all round the table. Phoebe stuck her chin up. ‘There’s no need to pretend to be sick. I write very good poetry for nine and a half, everybody says so, and if I don’t write the pageant I’d like to know who else will. None of you write poetry as far as I know.’

It was not much good trying to silence Phoebe by squashing her. Almost every day they did try and silence her that way, but it never worked because she was of an unsquashable nature. The only real way to finish an argument was to make her see reason. John said patiently:

‘Why should the pageant be written in poetry?’

Phoebe hesitated. She had never seen a play in a real theatre and John and Selina had. She had always thought plays were written in poetry, but

from the way John spoke he might be going to put her in the wrong and she hated that.

‘When we saw those plays at the Village Institute they were all in poetry, and that Shakespeare is a sort of poetry.’

John had Phoebe exactly where he wanted her.

‘You’re talking about something you know nothing about. You were too young to go to plays before the war, so you’ve never seen one, but I’ve seen *Treasure Island* and that wasn’t poetry. You saw *Peter Pan* and *Where the Rainbow Ends*, Selina, were they in poetry?’

Selina tried to remember.

‘I’m sure they weren’t. The only thing I ever saw that was in a sort of poetry was *Dick Whittington*. I think it was all poetry, anyway it finished up in poetry, “And now we’ve had enough of this and that. Let’s say farewell to Whittington and Cat.”’

John turned back to Phoebe.

‘You see, they’re not written in poetry. Except pantomimes and we’re not doing one of those.’

Sally had been dreaming, during the argument, about her ballet. She was wondering how much talking there’d got to be and how much dancing

she could squeeze in. In the pause, as John finished speaking, she burst out:

‘How much writing has there got to be?’

Christopher jumped because he had a good idea.

‘I say, I know what we’ll do. Let’s have a pageant with four scenes in it, and let’s each write our own. John can write one, Sally one, me one, Phoebe one, and Selina can write her bits at the beginning and the end about the girl.’

‘One would think,’ said Augustus, ‘that people might remember other people who are sitting at the table.’

Sally, who was next to him, gave him an affectionate nudge.

‘Don’t be an ass. You know it takes you simply ages to write “Dear Granny, thank you for the present, love, Augustus.” It would take you weeks and weeks to write down a scene in a pageant.’

Christopher was so aflame with his idea he hated being interrupted.

‘Anyway I hadn’t forgotten Augustus. What I was going to say was that each of us, when we write our scene, should write parts for any of the others which they need, and particularly for Augustus and Benjamin.’

‘They’d be very useful,’ Phoebe pointed out. ‘They could be the children in every scene. We could dress Benjamin up as a little girl.’

Benjamin’s face grew red.

‘My dear, nobody will be able to dress me up as a little girl.’

‘Nor,’ added Augustus, ‘is anybody going to make me wear white socks.’

John behaved like a proper chairman. He tapped on the table.

‘Who is going to see Colonel Day about the Abbey?’

This called for thought. Christopher summed up the position.

‘He likes you, he lets you fish there, but he’s more likely to say yes to Phoebe. It’s Phoebe that he always says he wishes was his daughter.’

‘Gosh!’ Sally exclaimed. ‘He wouldn’t say it if he knew her.’

John spoke quickly to prevent an argument.

‘I don’t think Phoebe can go alone if it’s important. How would it be if Phoebe and I went together?’

Phoebe pushed her hair back with a proud gesture.

‘One way and another you’ve all been very unpleasant and I don’t think I will go.’

‘Right,’ said John. ‘You come, Selina; after all, it’s your pageant.’

Phoebe had not expected this. She kicked at the table leg.

‘Well, I don’t want Colonel Day to say no, so perhaps . . .’

John, looking like a director at a board meeting, drew his piece of paper nearer to him.

‘I think that’s all. We’re going to do a pageant. We want to do it at the Abbey. Selina and I will ask Colonel Day for permission. Christopher, Sally, Phoebe, and I will write a scene each, and Selina will write the bits at the beginning and the end where she wears her frock and shoes. We’ve all, except Selina, got to write in parts for Augustus and Benjamin. I think we ought to ask Colonel Day if we can do it right at the end of the summer holidays. That means we’ve got the rest of these holidays and next term to write the scenes, and the Easter holidays to give out the parts and plan what we’re going to wear. Then all the summer holidays we can rehearse.’

Selina leant forward.

‘Don’t you think we ought to ask Aunt Ann and Uncle Jim if we may do it? And what are we

going to do it for? I mean, there would be tickets and people paying.'

Everybody sat up at this. They all had a pet charity. John fancied the Air Force Benevolent. Christopher and Sally Naval War Libraries; Selina thought it should be the Red Cross; Augustus was a strong supporter of Our Dumb Friends' League. Benjamin misunderstood the argument and said, 'I've got five pennies in my moneybox.'

John wrote the charities down.

'Let's show the list to Dad and Mum and let them decide. It'll make them keen on the pageant to choose what it's going to help.'

Christopher nodded.

'I think Selina's right, but oughtn't we to find out about having the Abbey before we ask Dad and Mum about the pageant?'

Sally said:

'If we don't do it at the Abbey I don't quite know where we'd do it; we haven't got a place here to make a stage and there isn't room at the vicarage. The Abbey grounds would be just perfect. Do you think that if Phoebe is going to be sensible she might go with John to Colonel Day? He doesn't know Selina very well.'

Selina felt grateful to Sally. It would be so awful if Colonel Day said no just because she asked badly.

‘It would be better.’

They looked at Phoebe. Phoebe was torn. She would have liked to have been grand and said ‘Go and see about the silly old pageant yourselves,’ but she wanted to be the person to arrange it. She compromised by looking haughty but saying fairly nicely:

‘All right. I’ll go.’

John pretended to be busy with his sheet of paper. Actually all he did was to draw a bomber.

‘That’s all then. Except which comes first. Dad and Mum or Colonel Day.’

‘Well,’ said Sally, ‘Mum is likely to argue a bit. She’ll think the clothes are going to be a nuisance.’

‘I should think she wouldn’t mind if we promised to do them all ourselves,’ Christopher pointed out. ‘After all, they know we’re thinking of some way for Selina to wear her frock and shoes. I should think they’d be jolly thankful we don’t want to give a dance, because this doesn’t mean eating anything.’

Selina felt that as the pageant was being planned entirely so that she could wear her frock and

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shoes she was going to be held partially responsible for it.

‘I do think we ought to ask them first.’

John got up.

‘All right, we’ll tackle Mum now. And Dad after the surgery. Meeting’s over.’

Phoebe looked at Selina.

‘You better be careful, my girl. The end of August’s an awful long way off. You watch out you don’t grow. I’d be sorry for you but I couldn’t help laughing if by the time we did the pageant you found the shoes were tight and the frock wouldn’t meet.’

3. Asking at Home

IT WAS not until suppertime that there was a chance to tackle the doctor and Mrs Andrews. The moment the meeting was over the family rushed over the house looking for Mrs Andrews, but she had gone on her bicycle over to the farm with whom they were rationed to fetch the eggs. Phoebe, Augustus, and Benjamin had to go to bed without knowing whether there was going to be a pageant or not. Augustus and Benjamin did not mind, but Phoebe was furious. When Selina and Sally had bathed and tucked up Augustus and Benjamin, and came to fetch her to bed, she was in a bad mood. She made one excuse after another to loiter.

Sally said:

‘Oh, hurry up, do.’

Phoebe raised her eyebrows.

‘Speak to me once more like that and I’ll take another half hour.’ In the end she was got into bed but still under protest. As Selina and Sally were leaving the room she spoke in a spitting-cat voice. ‘All right, ask them when I’m not there and you’ll see what’ll happen. You’ll make an awful mess of it and they’ll say no.’

At first it looked as if Phoebe’s words were only too true. Mrs Andrews’s bicycle had punctured and she only got back just before supper. Nobody feels their best when they have sat at the side of the road mending a bicycle puncture. Doctor Andrews was particularly tired. He had seen more patients than usual at his evening surgery. Just as he was thankfully showing the last of them out Miss Lipscombe had said:

‘Mrs Peters isn’t so well. Her boy says her pains are awful and could you see her tonight?’

Doctor Andrews had made a grunting noise.

‘I bet that fool of a woman has eaten a large meal, and how she thinks she’s going to get over food poisoning if she doesn’t stick to my diet I don’t

know.' Then he had looked at Miss Lipscombe. 'You pass the Peterses' cottage on your way home, could you pop in and see what's wrong?'

Miss Lipscombe had given a martyred sigh.

'I suppose I never need any rest,' and then she had added, 'And just as I was looking forward to a nice little bit of supper before a warm fire.'

Doctor Andrews knew that if he annoyed Miss Lipscombe he would never find anyone else to help him, so he had been forced to smile, though he did not feel like it. He had patted her shoulder and said:

'All right, I'll go.'

Having to be nice to Miss Lipscombe when he did not feel nice, and having to go out again after supper had made him on edge. He was not in a good mood when he came in to supper.

When there is something that all the family want to ask the grown-ups about there is a good deal of nudging and looking at each other, each look saying, 'You start.' 'No, you.' In the end Doctor Andrews caught one of these nudges as he was passing a plate of spam.

'What's the excitement?'

It was Christopher's nudge at Sally the doctor had noticed, so one of them had to answer. Sally had been dreaming of her ballet ever since the