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Angela Brazil

Collected Works

Series Fifteen

The Collected Works of

ANGELA BRAZIL

(1868-1947)

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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

The Collected Works of

ANGELA BRAZIL

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Collected Works of Angela Brazil

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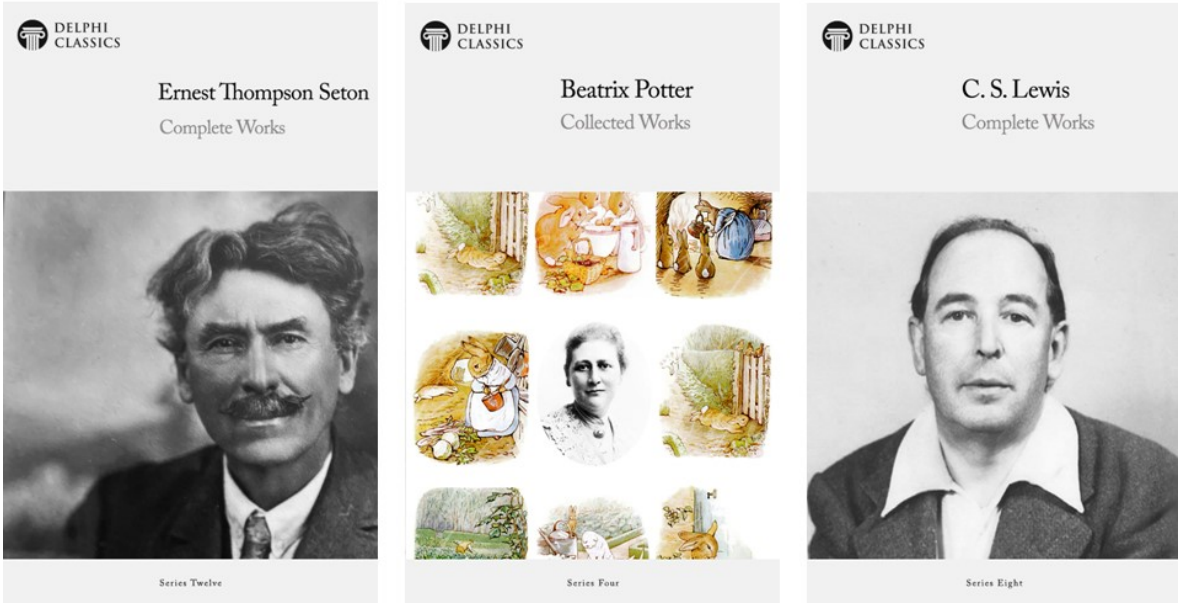

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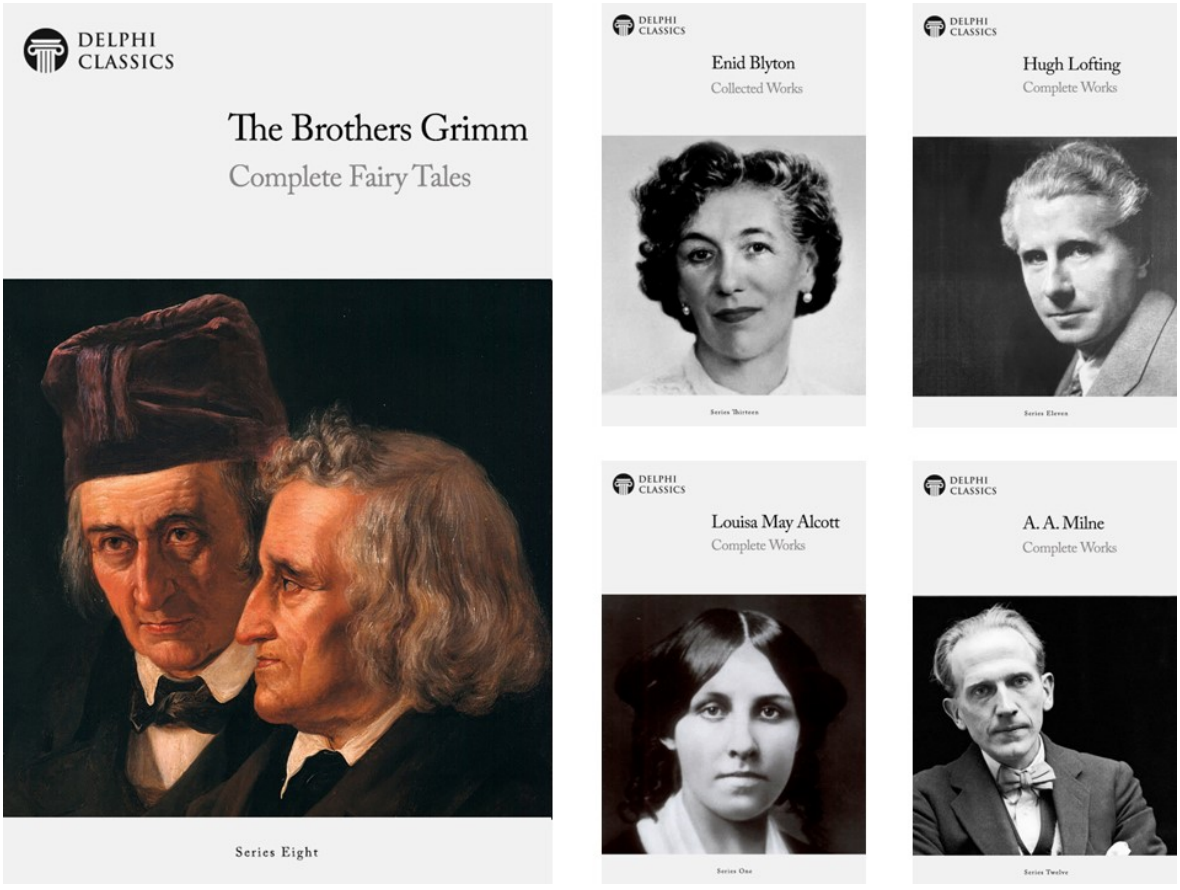


The Novels

Preston, a city on the north bank of the River Ribble in Lancashire, 1904 — Angela Brazil's birthplace

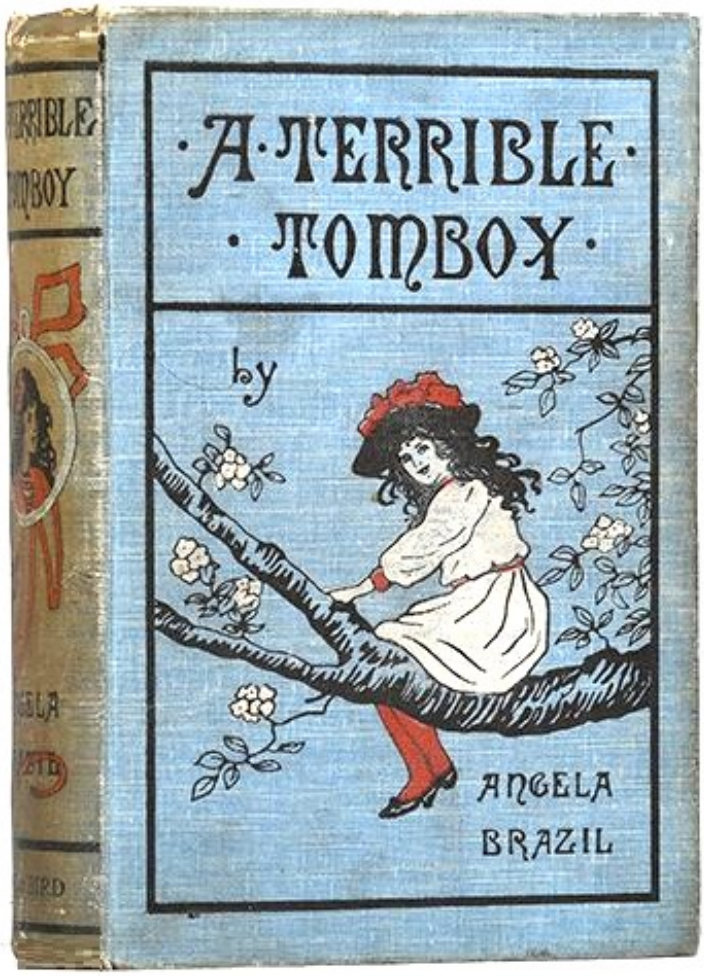
1 West Cliff in Broadgate — the birthplace

A Terrible Tomboy (1904)

One of the first British writers of 'modern schoolgirls' stories, Angela Brazil was born in Preston, Lancashire in 1868, the youngest of four children, to Clarence Brazil and Angelica McKinnel. Clarence had a prosperous career as a mill manager and provided well for the family financially. However, he was a distant and emotionally absent father who confined his parenting to emphasising the importance of religious instruction. By contrast, his wife Angelica, the daughter of a shipping line owner, was an attentive mother that encouraged her children to pursue an interest in a diverse set of subjects and helped them to be creative and intellectually curious.

A Terrible Tomboy was Brazil's first published novel, although she had previously released a book of children's plays in 1899 entitled *The Mischievous Brownie*. While Brazil had enjoyed writing since she was very young, she did not pursue a literary career until she was in her mid-thirties. *A Terrible Tomboy* was first published in 1904 in London by Gay and Bird. The first edition featured illustrations by the author and her older sister, Amy Brazil. In her debut novel, she borrowed from her own experiences and recollections as a child. The central character Peggy is depicted as a spirited, lively and energetic child; she enjoys daring physical activities and mischievous adventures that were typically associated with boys rather than girls. Over the course of the novel, she learns to navigate between her daring nature and the desires of her loving, but disapproving family.

Brazil as a young lady, c. 1910



The first edition

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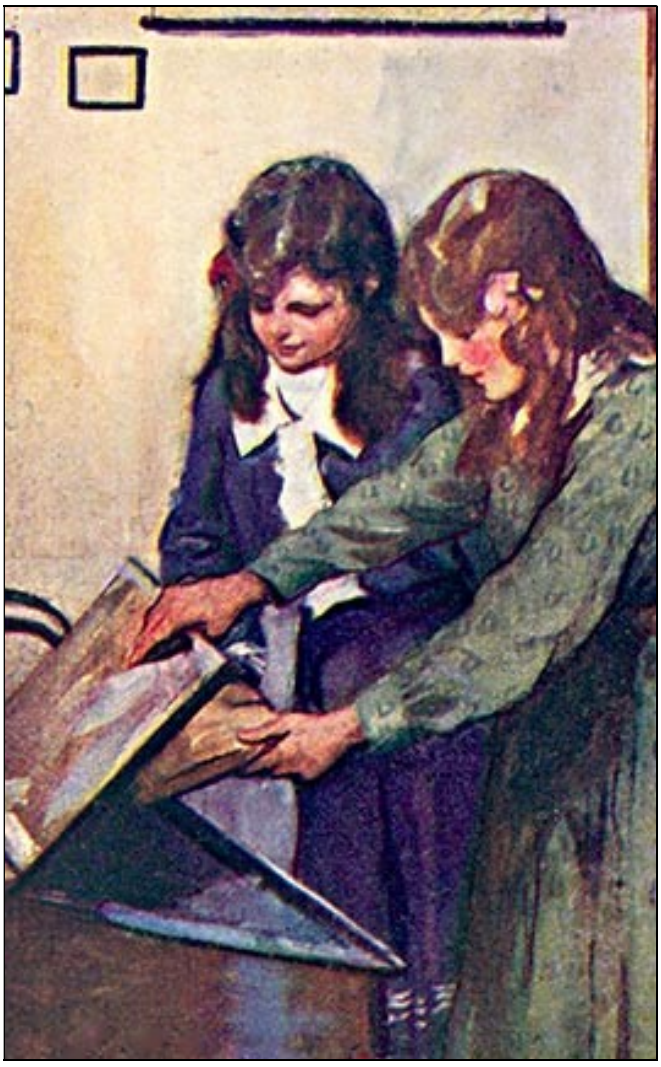

An early frontispiece: "See, I'll put it just on the top in front."

CHAPTER I. PEGGY AT HOME

‘Good sooth! I know not be she wench or swain;Her face proclaims her one, her deeds the other!’

‘PEGGY! PEGGY! where are you? Peggy! Aunt Helen wants you! Oh, Peggy, do be quick! Wherever are you hiding?’

Getting no response to her calls, the speaker, a pretty fair-haired girl of fifteen, flung her brown holland cooking-apron over her head, and ran out across the farmyard into the lightly-falling rain. She peeped into the cart-shed, where the hens were scratching about among the loose straw. Certainly Peggy was not there. She searched in the kitchen garden, but there was nothing to be seen except the daffodils nodding their innocent heads under the gooseberry-bushes. Round through the orchard she sped, bringing down a shower of cherry-blossom as she brushed against the low-growing trees, and greatly disturbing a robin, who was feeding a young family in a hole in the ivy, but without any sign of the truant. Here and there Lilian ran, hunting in all Peggy’s favourite haunts — now peeping into a hollow yew-tree, now peering at the top of a ladder, now rummaging in the tool-shed, then back through the sand-quarry into the stack-yard, where there was a very good chance that the young lady might be hidden away in some snug little hole among the hay; but though Lilian got a tolerable amount of hay-seed into her hair, her efforts were fruitless, and she was just turning away, hot and out of breath, to give up the useless search, when the sound of a low, chuckling laugh attracted her to the barn.

The door was slightly ajar, and she peeped in.

On the floor among the straw sat a little boy of between eight and nine years old, gazing with rapturous delight into the rafters of the roof. Following the direction of his eyes, Lilian glanced up, and beheld a sight which made her gasp with horror. The barn was a very large one, and was spanned by a great cross-beam, which ran across the whole length from one end to another. Mounted on this, fully fifteen feet above the ground, a small girl was slowly walking along, her gray eyes bright with excitement, her brown curls flying in wild disorder, and her arms stretched out on either side to balance herself as she went on her perilous journey.

Lilian gazed at her spellbound; she did not dare to speak or move, lest by some mischance the frail little figure should lose its nerve and come crashing down on to the stone floor below.

The child herself, however, did not seem to be troubled with the slightest fear, for she walked on as steadily as if the beam had been a plain turnpike road, giving a shout of triumph as she reached the cross-bar, and slid down the ladder on to the ground.

‘Hurrah! hurrah!’ cried Bobby, clapping his hands in an ecstasy of admiration.

Peggy turned round with a radiant face.

‘It’s perfectly easy!’ she exclaimed; ‘I could do it over again. Now, Bobby, you come up and try!’

But here Lilian’s pent-up excitement and wrath burst forth.

‘For shame, Peggy!’ she cried. ‘If you want to break your own neck, you shan’t break Bobby’s, at any rate! Don’t you know what a horribly dangerous thing you have been doing? And the idea of your walking along there with your boot-lace dangling down in that way! You are really getting too old for these silly tricks; one can’t look after you like a baby. Aunt Helen *would* be angry if she heard of this!’

Peggy sat down on the bottom rung of the ladder. The triumph had faded from her face, and left something not nearly so pleasant to look at behind.

'All right,' she said defiantly; 'go along and tell Aunt Helen if you like! I don't care!'

'Peggy, how horrid you are! Do I ever tell? Didn't I wash and iron your pinafore yesterday, when you fell into the pig-trough, and nobody even suspected? I call you right-down mean to go saying things like that!' And Lilian's pretty face flushed quite pink with righteous indignation.

Peggy had the grace to look rather ashamed of herself.

'No, Lil, you're a dear; you don't tell tales,' she said; 'and I haven't forgotten about the pinafore.'

'Promise me, then, that you won't go playing such mad pranks again, and leading Bobby into them, too?'

'All right — anything for a quiet life.'

'But promise, properly.'

'There! On my honour, I will never walk along that beam again, or let Bobby do it either. Will that suit you?'

Lilian heaved a sigh of relief, for whatever might be Peggy's sins and misdeeds, her word, once given, was not lightly broken.

'I've been looking for you everywhere,' she said. 'Aunt Helen sent me to fetch you in at once, and I've been such a long time in finding you. I'm afraid she'll be ever so cross.'

'What does she want me for?'

'To darn your stockings. Oh, Peggy, how could you go and hide all those pairs away under the dressing-table? It was really silly, for you might have known Aunt Helen would be sure to hunt them out; and now she's fearfully angry about it, and says you'll have to sit and mend away till they're all finished; and she won't let me help you, either.'

Peggy sighed philosophically.

'I suppose I shall have to come,' she said, getting up and shaking the straw out of her hair. 'Never mind; I'd really rather mend them all in one big heap than in a lot of little horrid pottering times; it spoils one's Saturdays so!'

'Aunt Helen said if I found Bobby he was to come in too, and learn his Latin,' continued Lilian, looking round. But that youth had prudently disappeared at the first hint of Saturday duties, and was nowhere to be seen.

Peggy chuckled.

'I'm afraid you won't find him,' she remarked; 'and it's no use looking. He's got the most lovely hiding-place in the world that he goes to when he doesn't want to be told to come in. I only found it out by accident myself, and I promised wild horses shouldn't wrench the secret from me. Come along; we may as well go and get the scolding over.'

And the young lady tossed back her tangled locks, shook her fist at the anticipated pile of darning; then, putting on an air of chastened and becoming meekness, as being most likely to soothe Aunt Helen's wrath, she marched sturdily into the house.

It was a beautiful old home into which Peggy entered, half castle, half farmhouse, with an air of having seen better days about it. The quaint timbered house, with its carved gables and red-tiled roof, was built in at one end into a kind of square tower or keep, with tiny turret windows and winding staircase, getting just a little ruinous in places, but held firmly together by masses of ivy, which clung round it like a green mantle. Beyond the tower lay the remains of an abbey, more ancient than the keep.

Most of it had been carried away to build the large barns and stables, but the foundations could still be plainly traced, with here and there part of a wall thickly covered with ivy, the ruins of a shattered column, a delicate little piece of window tracery, or a few steps of corkscrew staircase. There were rows and heaps of mossy stones covered with nettles and elder-bushes, with patches of green grass in between, where the cows grazed and the pigeons flew about, cooing gently. In the ivy the jackdaws were always busy, and the children had many a perilous climb trying to reach the coveted nests. The earliest primroses grew here, and beds of sweet violets under the ruined walls, and there were so many turns and corners and sheltered nooks that it made the grandest play-place in the world for anyone who loved a game at hide-and-seek.

On the other side of the house stretched the garden — such a sweet, old-fashioned garden, where roses, lilies, and gillyflowers were all mixed up with the currants and gooseberries and cabbages. It was somewhat neglected, it is true, but perhaps it looked none the less picturesque for that, and certainly no one would be disposed to quarrel with the beautiful ripe strawberries and the sweet little yellow gooseberries with the hairy skins, or the big red plums that hung upon the old brick walls.

Inside the house was large and roomy, with rambling passages and odd little windows in unexpected corners. There was a large oak staircase, with wide, shallow steps, leading to a panelled gallery, where hung swords, and rusty armour, and moth-eaten tapestry, and many an ancient relic of the past; while in the best bedroom was a great carved four-post bed, hung with faded yellow curtains, where Queen Elizabeth herself was said to have slept in much state for two nights on her journey from Shrewsbury to Wrexham.

The big drawing-room had been shut up for many years; the Queen-Anne chairs and china-cabinets were swathed in wrappers, and the ornaments put away in boxes; but sometimes the children would steal in and open the shutters to look at the portraits which hung upon the oak-panelled walls — stately gentlemen with wigs and lace frills, whose eyes seemed to follow you about the room; haughty dames with powdered hair and patches; stiff little girls in hoops and mittens, and pretty young ladies attired as shepherdesses or classic goddesses, with cupids and nymphs in the background.

The little blue drawing-room, which was always used instead, was a far more cheery apartment, with its sunny French window and fresh muslin curtains, and the blue chintz covers on the chairs. But of all the rooms I think the quaintest was the kitchen. It was by far the oldest part of the house; the great beams of the roof, roughly hewn out with an axe and black with age, had been a portion of the ancient castle, and so had the mullioned windows, with their deep, old-fashioned seats and diamond panes, filled with green, uneven glass. It looked a cheerful place, with its polished-oak dressers and shining brasses, and on a winter's evening, when the shutters were closed and the settle drawn close to the fire, it seemed the cosiest spot in the world; and Peggy and Bobby would often escape from the sober atmosphere of the dining-room to pull their little stools into the ingle nook, and listen to Nancy's wonderful tales of ghosts and goblins, which seemed twice as thrilling when the wind was howling like a banshee in the chimney, and rattling the doors till they could fancy that spirit fingers were tapping on the panels, and only waiting a chance to catch them in the dark passages, and sent such cold shivers running down their backs that they grew almost too frightened to go to bed.

Below the house the meadow sloped down to a river, where a stone bridge led to the village, with its pretty thatched cottages and Norman church, whose square tower

stood up like a beacon for the surrounding country; and away in the distance, tier upon tier, rose the Welsh mountains, fading from green to purple or from purple to misty mauve, till the last were lost in the hazy blue of the sky.

Gorswen Abbey, as Peggy's home was called, had been an important place in its time, and an air of sleepy grandeur seemed still to hang about the old walls, as if sometime it might rouse itself from its lethargy and take its part in the world again.

No one could remember when Vaughans had not lived at the Abbey. There were tombs in memory of them in a side transept of the church — stalwart Crusaders, lying with legs crossed and meek hands folded in prayer; stout Elizabethan squires and their dames, with ruffs round their necks, and rows of prim little kneeling children beneath them; full-faced Jacobean worthies in curled wigs, with sculptured cherubs weeping over extinguished torches; and there was a high old pew with a carved canopy over it, and an escutcheon bearing a coat of arms with a dragon on it, which, when Peggy was very little, she had always associated with the dragon in the Book of Revelation, and had an uneasy feeling that its eye was upon her all service time, and if she did not behave properly it might come down in great wrath and devour her.

There had been Vaughans who fought in the Wars of the Roses, Vaughans who threw in their lot with King Charles and helped to beat Cromwell at Atherton Moor, Vaughans who had joined the Young Pretender's force, and had lost their heads as their reward. There was no end to the stories which the children could sometimes cajole out of old David, the farm-help, who had all the family history at his finger-ends.

But they had been a happy-go-lucky, spendthrift race, loving to ride to hounds and to entertain liberally better than to look after their affairs. Little by little the fine property had been wasted away, till, when Peggy's father succeeded to the estate, he found it to consist of scarcely more than the old house with the surrounding farm and woodlands, together with such a multitude of debts, mortgages, and other encumbrances, that it was truly a barren heritage. Robert Vaughan, however, was a man of strong will and much determination. Some of the grit of the old Crusaders was left in his blood, and instead of taking his solicitor's advice, and selling the place for what it would fetch, he resolved to farm the land himself, and by using every care and economy to free the property, and raise it to its former level in the county. He worked in his own fields, ploughing, harvesting, and reaping, toiling harder than any of his labourers, and living in as plain a manner as possible.

To those friends who thought he lost caste thereby he had always the same argument — that he saw no reason why the cultivation of fields should counteract the habits of refinement and good breeding to which he had been reared; that in the colonies educated gentlemen set to work to labour with their hands, and are thought none the worse of: so why not in England, where land is good and markets are plentiful, especially when it involved the keeping of a fine old property which had been in the family for so many hundreds of years?

Fortune, however, had been against him. Several bad seasons and a spell of disease among the cattle had made all the difference between profit and loss, and at the time this story begins Robert Vaughan realized that any unusual run of ill luck might bring matters to a crisis, and render vain the struggle of so many years. The children, however, knew little of the shadow which haunted their home, for they lived as yet in that happy thoughtless paradise which is the inheritance of true childhood, where a new rabbit in the hutch or an extra treat on a holiday is of far more importance than any grown-up affair.

Their mother had faded so early from their young lives that she was scarcely more than a tender memory, and her place had been taken by dear, pretty Aunt Helen, father's younger sister, who did her best to train them up in the way they should go. Aunt Helen fondly imagined herself to be a great disciplinarian, but her own lively youth was still such a recent remembrance that her eyes were wont to twinkle and the corners of her mouth to twitch in the middle of her severest scoldings, and the children always had a feeling that so long as they did not do anything rude or wrong, or run into any very imminent danger, their escapades were secretly condoned by their aunt, who admired pluck and spirit, however much she might feel it incumbent upon her to lecture them.

Gentle Lilian gave little trouble, and Bobby, Aunt Helen often declared, would be easy enough to manage alone; but where Peggy led he was always sure to follow, and the end was generally mischief of some sort or other.

The worst of it was poor Peggy really did not mean to be naughty; she was so eager, so active, so full of overflowing and impetuous life, with such restless daring and abounding energy, that in the excitement of the moment her wild spirits were apt to carry her away, simply because she never stopped to think of consequences. She had always a hundred projects on hand, each one of which she was ready to pursue with unflagging zeal and that absorbing interest which is the secret of true enjoyment.

'Let her alone,' the Rector, who rejoiced in Peggy, was wont to say. 'Don't prune her too hard, for it is sometimes the side-shoots that bear the best flowers, after all. She is like a young growing plant — a little too much leaf at present, but I see a grand promise of blossom, and she'll turn out a fine woman in the end.'

Happily both her father and Aunt Helen shared his views, and, knowing Peggy's generous, affectionate nature, were able to lead her more by love than severity (for with human hearts it is often like the fable of the sun and the wind: they will respond to a kindly touch, while harshness will only make them sullen and obstinate), and they further held the opinion that it is better for a child to have many interests and much energy, even though these qualities prove a little troublesome, than to grow up clipped to the prim pattern of those who may have outlived their enthusiasms.

Such natures as Peggy's taste life to the full; for them it is never a stale or worthless draught. Each moment is so keenly lived that time flies by on eager wings, and though there may be stormy troubles sometimes, as a rule the spirit dwells, like the swallows, in an upper region of joy, which is scarcely dreamt of by those who cannot soar so high.

CHAPTER II. BIRDS'-NESTING

'The busy birds with nice selection cullSoft thistle-down, gray moss, and scattered wool;Far from each prying eye the nest prepare,Formed of warm moss and lined with softer hair.'

Peggy and Bobby sat at the top of a high apple-tree in a cunning little seat just where one bough crossed another, and, bending up, formed a kind of armchair with a back to it. Below them the pink apple-blossom spread like a rosy cloud against the bluest of skies, and a blackbird in a neighbouring bush was trilling his loudest.

Easter had fallen late, so that the children's spring holidays were not yet over when the first early delightful days of May brought a foretaste of the coming summer. Peggy and Bobby were out the whole day long, following their father about the farm, riding on the slow plough-horses, helping to drive the sheep, or bringing home the cows from the pasture, sowing seeds in their little gardens, and generally revelling in the delicious freedom.

Sometimes Lilian would join them, but more often she was busy indoors, helping her aunt and Nancy, the maid, and learning the mysteries of housekeeping and dairy-minding; for she was growing quite a nice little companion to Aunt Helen, and becoming so useful that Nancy declared they should scarcely know what to do without her when the term began again.

'What shall we do this afternoon?' said Bobby, leaning back among the branches in a way that would have brought Aunt Helen's heart to her mouth if she had not long ago come to the conclusion that small boys have nine lives, like a cat.

'I don't know,' replied Peggy, idly picking off bits of twig, and throwing them at the old gander, which had strayed underneath.

'Then let's go birds'-nesting. You can't think how dreadfully I want to find a cuckoo's egg. Arthur Hill has one at school, and he's so proud of it, he wouldn't change it though a boy offered him five sticks of mint-rock and a pea-shooter. I'm sure we ought to get one about here: I've heard such lots of cuckoos lately. We'll look in every nest we find.'

'All right, we'll go down the meadows by the river into the hazel-wood.'

'No, no! Up the hill, over the gorse common, and down the yew-tree lane.'

'You won't find any nests up there!'

'Yes, I shall!'

'I tell you you won't!'

'And I tell you I shall!'

'You were only eight last January, and I shall be twelve in November, so I ought to know best!' said Peggy crushingly.

'I don't care if you're a hundred!' replied Bobby with scorn. 'Joe was up there last night, and he found twelve nests, and, what's more, he told me just where they all are.'

'Then, why couldn't you say so at first? Are you sure you can find them?'

'Certain; and one of them's a long-tailed tit's, with ever so many eggs in it. Do you want to go down by the river now?'

'No,' replied Peggy, giving in graciously. 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and if Joe really found the nests up there, it's worth while going to see.'

Bobby climbed down in triumph, for Peggy so generally took the lead that it was sweet for once to get his own way. He was rather a gentle little boy, ready as a rule to follow at Peggy's bidding, and to make a lively second to any scheme she might have in hand. Aunt Helen sometimes thought the two must have got changed, and that Peggy should have been the boy and Bobby the girl; for though the latter was not without courage, it was certainly Peggy who had the most of that enterprising spirit which is generally thought a characteristic of the masculine mind.

Though she would not have minded being a genuine boy, Peggy had the greatest objection to be called a tomboy — a term of reproach that had been hurled at her head from her earliest infancy by indiscriminating friends.

'If they meant anything nice by it, I shouldn't care,' she complained. 'But they don't, for a tomboy is a horrid, rough sort of creature who isn't fit to be either a boy or a girl. It's too bad that I can't even do useful things without people howling at me. Mrs. Davenport looked perfectly shocked when I harnessed the pony, though I told her Joe was milking, and there was no one else to come and do it; and when old Mr. Cooper saw me help Father to drive cows down the pasture, he popped out with "Miss Tomboy" at once, though he did say afterwards I was the right sort of girl. People didn't call Joan of Arc and Grace Darling tomboys, though they did other things besides stay at home and darn stockings. Why can't I climb trees and jump fences, and enjoy myself like boys do, and yet be a thorough girl all the same?'

To do Peggy justice, I think she was right, for though she delighted in outdoor life, she was in no sense a rough or ill-mannered child, and loved pretty things and dainty ways as well as quieter Lilian; but it was a case of a dog with a bad name, for however indignantly she might remonstrate, people had got into the habit of dubbing her 'tomboy,' and at that valuation she seemed likely to remain.

The walk which Bobby had proposed this afternoon was somewhat of a scramble, for the country rose behind the Abbey into undulating hills, which were fairly steep, though not so high as the Welsh mountains, and were covered for the most part with gorse and rough grass, where the sheep and young bullocks were turned out to graze. It was rather a stiff pull up to the common, but the Vaughans were as accustomed to climbing as mountain goats, and would have thought it far more wearisome to walk the length of a London street.

Half-way up was a spot very dear to the children's hearts. At a turn of the road a great slab of Welsh slatestone lay at a sloping angle, shelving down for a distance of about twenty feet, and with its surface so flat and even, and so smooth and polished by the weather, that it made a natural sliding-board, down which it was delightful to toboggan at full speed. It seemed expressly formed for the enjoyment of small boys and girls, for as it lay across a corner, you had only to walk up the road to get to the top, then settling yourself firmly with feet straight in front, you let go, and slid like a bolt from an arrow down — down — till you found your feet on the road again, and could climb up once more and repeat the performance.

Of course, it was not very nice for the backs of boots and knickerbockers, and frocks and pinafores were apt to get sadly torn if they caught on a projecting angle; but what child ever thought of clothes when a twenty-foot slide might be enjoyed? Certainly not Peggy or Bobby, whose well-worn garments were generally made of the stoutest and most serviceable materials.

They spent quite half an hour at this enthralling pastime, till a very persistent cuckoo in a little copse over the hedge recalled them to the principal object of their ramble.

'Come along!' shouted Peggy. 'We're wasting time!'

‘Let’s take the short cut,’ cried Bobby, hopping nimbly over the fence into the meadow, where the kingcups were lying, such a bright mass of gold in the sunshine that you might have thought the stars had fallen from the sky and were shining in the fields instead. Little rabbits scuttled away before them into the hedgerows, and a cock pheasant, disturbed in his afternoon nap, flew with a great whir into the coppice close by. Two fields brought them out on to the common, where the gorse was a blaze of colour and the bees were busy buzzing among the sweet-smelling blossom.

‘Joe said there was a yellowhammer’s nest just there, close by the elder-bush,’ said Bobby.

‘All right,’ said Peggy; ‘you take one side of the tree, and I’ll take the other.’

A few minutes’ search resulted in a delighted ‘S’sh!’ from Bobby, for on a little ledge of rock under an overhanging tussock of grass was the cosiest, cunningest nest in the world, and the yellowhammer herself sat on it, looking at them with her bright little eyes, half undecided whether to stay or to fly away in alarm.

Peggy crept up as quietly as a mouse. Though the children were very anxious to find nests, it was not in any spirit of ruthless robbery. Mr. Vaughan was a keen naturalist, and had taught them to watch the birds in their haunts, but disturb them as little as possible, taking an occasional egg for their collection, but only when there were so many in the nest that it would not be missed.

‘Isn’t she stunning?’ whispered Bobby. ‘And how tight she sits!’

But a human voice was too much for the yellowhammer, and she flew like a dart into the gorse-bushes.

‘Five eggs,’ said Peggy, ‘but not one of them a cuckoo’s. You don’t want one, do you, Bobby?’

‘No, I’ve got three at home. I had five, but I swopped two of them with Frank Wilson for a redstart’s.’

‘Come along, then; she’ll soon fly back when we’re gone; I believe she is watching us out of the elder-tree. Where did Joe say the long-tailed tits had built?’

‘Right in the middle of a gorse-bush, just on the top of the mound where the goat was tethered last year. He calls them bottle-tits, but it’s just the same thing, Father says. Whew! isn’t the grass scratchy on your legs!’

‘Horrid! My boots are full of prickles. I shall have to take them off soon. It’s so deep here, it’s scratching my very nose. Oh, look, Bobby! There goes one of the tits! I saw just where she flew from. Oh, here it is! See, isn’t it just the prettiest little nest that ever was?’

The tit’s nest would certainly have gained the prize if all the birds had been asked to take part in a building competition. It was made of the softest moss and lichens, fashioned together in the shape of a bottle with the neck downwards; for the tit must have some place in which to bestow her long tail, and she builds her home to suit her person.

Peggy thrust a cautious finger through the tiny opening in the side.

‘It’s full of eggs!’ she exclaimed; ‘I should think there must be seven or eight. I’ll take two, one for you and one for me. They’re the smallest you ever saw, and so warm. I hope they’ll blow easily.’

Bobby had brought a box full of sheep’s wool in his pocket, to hold anything they might find, so Peggy laid the eggs in with great pride, for bottle-tits were rare in that neighbourhood, and they had long wished to find such a treasure. Joe had certainly not misled them, and Bobby’s memory, though defective as regarded Latin declensions and historical facts, was unerring where it was a case of locating birds’-nests.

He found three thrushes' nests low down in the elder-bushes, all filled with gaping yellow mouths, the pretty little chaffinch's up in the ivy-tree, with only two speckly eggs as yet, and Jenny Wren's household, hidden away in a bank, full of so many children that she surely resembled the old woman who lived in a shoe, and it was a marvel how she could remember which little chirping atom she had fed last. The robin had built early and her brood had flown and left the empty nest; but two blackbirds were sitting in the hawthorn-hedge, and flew away with cries of indignation and distress.

The cuckoos were still calling loudly in the distance.

'Tiresome things!' said Bobby; 'if they would only build nests like other birds, one might have a chance of finding them.'

'"In April the cuckoo comes,In May she'll stay,In June she changes her tune,In July she prepares to fly,Come August, go she must,"'

quoted Peggy.

'But you haven't said it all,' put in Bobby.

'"And if the cuckoo stays till September,It's as much as the oldest man can remember."'

'I wish the rhymes would tell us where she lays her eggs,' said Peggy.

She was poking about in the mossy bank as she spoke, when a hedge-sparrow flew out from the low bushes above almost straight into her face. It did not take Peggy long to find the neat little nest of twisted twigs and grass woven into the fork of a branch. There were four lovely blue eggs inside, and a slightly larger one of a greenish-gray colour. Peggy flushed all over with excitement.

'Bobby, Bobby!' she screamed, 'come here, quick! I do believe I have found a cuckoo's egg!'

There seemed little doubt about it, for the egg really looked quite different to the others; so the treasured find was safely put away in the small box, to be shown to Joe, who was wise in such lore, though he only knew the birds by their country names, and had never heard of such a science as ornithology. Quite elated with their success, the children hunted down the lane, searching in every bush and hedgerow, but they found nothing but a few last year's nests, full of acorns and dead leaves.

They came out by Betsy Owen's cottage — a little low, whitewashed, tumble-down building, standing in the midst of a neglected garden, with a very forlorn and deserted air about it.

'Joe says no doubt there'd be lots of nests in the ivy there,' confided Bobby, peeping through the hedge. 'But he wouldn't go in and see, not if you gave him five pounds for it.'

'Why not?' demanded Peggy.

'Because old Betsy's a witch, and you never know what she might do if you made her angry. John Parker and Evan Williams took some sticks from her hedge last autumn, and she came out in a rage, and crossed her fingers at them, and in six weeks John broke his leg, and Evan had sore eyes all the winter. And once Joe and another boy were coming home very late at night past the cottage, and they saw a bright light, and just as they reached the gate it went out, and they heard a most fearful shriek, and they were so frightened they ran all the way home.'

'What nonsense!' said Peggy. 'I expect the old woman was blowing out her candle to go to bed, and a screech-owl flew over their heads. Joe would have run away from

his own shadow. But if you're afraid, stay outside in the lane, for I'm going in to see if there's a nest in that ivy; it looks such a likely place. I don't believe anyone's in the cottage, either, for the door's shut.'

But Bobby much resented such a slur on his manly courage, and insisted upon being the one to climb the ivy-covered chimney. He crept quietly round to the back of the cottage, and swung himself up by the thick stems, feeling in every little hole where he could lay his hand. The large old chimney was so wide at the top that he found he could peep right down it, as if he were looking into a well, and could see a good piece of the hearth underneath, with a small fire of sticks burning under a large, three-legged iron pot, and the old woman sitting close by on a low stool, smoking a short clay pipe.

Betsy Owen was a withered, cross-grained old dame, who by dint of the knowledge of the uses of some simple herbs and a good deal of cunning, had contrived to establish a reputation something between a witch and a quack doctor. People came to her from remote farms to have warts charmed away or the toothache cured; she dressed burns and wounds, and concocted lotions for sore eyes and bad legs. Her one room was hung all round with plants in various stages of drying, and she was always ready to prescribe a remedy for an ailing cow or a sick child, generally at much profit to herself, whatever might be the benefit to the sufferer. She was bending over her iron pot now, stirring the concoction with a long-handled spoon. Bobby could see her quite plainly in the fire light, and could catch the curious aromatic smell which rose up from the smouldering wood. I do not know what prompted him — probably the love of mischief which dwells in all small boys — but he picked up a loose piece of mortar which was lying on the roof, and dropped it suddenly down the chimney. It fell plump into the iron pot with a loud, hissing sound.

Out rushed Betsy from the cottage, scolding furiously. Down dropped Bobby from the chimney, and was through a hole in the hedge and away down the lane as fast as his sturdy legs could carry him. Peggy had been waiting in the garden, and, before she could realize what had happened, she found herself seized and shaken violently by the angry old woman.

'I'll larn yer to come into other folk's places and drop stones down decent body's chimleys!' shrieked Betsy. 'Be off with yer, yer ill-mannered young good-for-naught; and if ever I catch yer here again, yer'll get such a hidin' yer won't forget it for a month!'

Peggy was so amazed by the suddenness of the attack that for the moment she offered no resistance; but, finding a storm of blows descending on her head like hail, she managed to squirm out of Betsy's ungentle grasp, and fled after Bobby down the lane, followed by a shower of epithets from the gate, where the old woman stood shaking her fist until long after the children were out of sight.

When they judged themselves to be at a safe distance the pair sat down on a fence to get their breath, and talk over their adventure.

'We're in for it now,' laughed Peggy. 'She was so fearfully angry I'm sure Joe would say she'd bewitched us!'

'Yes, he'll be in a great state of mind when we tell him. He'll quite expect us to break our arms or legs or necks or something before long!'

'You'll do that without her if you try to swing head downwards on one leg like that,' said Peggy; for Bobby was executing some marvellous gymnastics on the top rail of the fence.

He came down feet foremost, however, and they sauntered off along the road to the old water-mill, where the miller's man was slinging a sack of flour on to a patient

donkey who stood, with drooping ears, eyeing the burden which he must carry up far into the mountains, while his mistress, a little black-eyed Welshwoman, poured forth a torrent of gossip in high-pitched tones.

The wheel was standing idle, and the children went down the slippery steps to the pool below. It was cool and dark there, for the trees grew low over the stream, and the water, escaping from the race above, poured down by the side of the wheel in a foaming cataract. A dipper was hopping about from stone to stone in the centre of the stream, pruning her sleek feathers, and calling her lively 'chit, chit' to her mate. Peggy grasped Bobby by the arm.

'Keep still,' she whispered. 'Let us watch her. Perhaps she may have a nest somewhere close by.'

All unconscious of her audience, the little bird jerked her short tail, dived rapidly into the water, and, emerging at the other side of the pool, flew suddenly into the green, moss-grown wall which overhung the mill-wheel.

'That's her nest,' cried Bobby. 'Oh, don't you see it? It looks just like a great lump of moss; you can hardly tell it from the wall, only I see a little round hole at the bottom. What a shame it's in such a horrid place! We can never get it up there.'

'Yes, we can,' replied Peggy stoutly. 'I'm going up.'

'But how?'

'Up the mill-wheel, of course, stupid! No, you're not coming too. You climbed the chimney, and it's my turn. Just hold my hat, and I'll manage all right, you'll see!'

It was a slippery climb, for the wheel was green with slime, and it needed a long step to get from one blade to the other; but Peggy was utterly fearless, and she had soon pulled herself to the top. Balanced there, she could easily reach to the nest, which was only a few feet away from her. Out flew the dipper in a panic, and in went Peggy's fingers.

'Three eggs, Bobby — lovely white eggs! Look! I think I shall take this one, at any rate.'

She held out her hand to show her prize, but at that instant the mill-wheel began to turn, and she was whirled from the dizzy summit down — down — into the dark pool below.

Bobby's agonized shrieks brought out the miller's man, who, dashing into the stream, caught the child just as she rose to the surface, and before she had drifted into the swifter current further on. It was a very forlorn and draggled Peggy which he laid upon the bank, but she was game to the last.

'I haven't broken the egg,' she gasped out, with the water streaming from her hair.

'Better thank the Lord you're not drowned, miss,' said the miller's man, looking ruefully at his own wet garments. 'Let me take you into the house, and Mrs. Griffiths'll get you some dry clothes to your back; you'll catch your death of cold sitting there.'

Peggy essayed to get up and walk, but she was such a very water-logged vessel that to hasten matters her rescuer picked her up in his arms, and bore her off like a sack of flour.

Stout old Mrs. Griffiths was sitting knitting in the chimney-corner, but she jumped up in a hurry when John carried in his dripping burden.

'Sakes alive!' she screamed, 'what is it? Is she dead? Lay her out on the parlour sofa. Sarah Grace, run for the parish nurse and the Rector — quick!'

But Peggy's voluble tongue assuring her that she was very much alive, and only in need of drying, she soon hustled that young lady upstairs, and out of her wet clothes. Ten minutes later Peggy sat on the settle by the kitchen fire, an odd little figure,

attired in Sarah Grace's Sunday jacket over Mrs. Griffiths' best red flannel petticoat, and a steaming glass of hot elder wine in her hand.

'Just to keep you from catching cold, miss; and Master Bobby must have one too, bless his heart! He's as white as my apron, and small wonder, after seeing his sister half drowned!'

End of Sample