

XVIII

PETER'S GOAT

MAIMIE felt quite shy, but Peter knew not what shy was.

'I hope you have had a good night,' he said earnestly.

'Thank you,' she replied, 'I was so cosy and warm. But you'—and she looked at his nakedness awkwardly—'don't you feel the least bit cold?'

Now cold was another word Peter had forgotten, so he answered, 'I think not, but I may be wrong: you see I am rather ignorant. I am not exactly a boy; Solomon says I am a Betwixt-and-Between.'

'So that is what it is called,' said Maimie thoughtfully.

'That's not my name,' he explained, 'my name is Peter Pan.'

'Yes, of course,' she said, 'I know, everybody knows.'

You can't think how pleased Peter was to learn

that all the people outside the gates knew about him. He begged Maimie to tell him what they knew and what they said, and she did so. They were sitting by this time on a fallen tree; Peter had cleared off the snow for Maimie, but he sat on a snowy bit himself.

‘Squeeze closer,’ Maimie said.

‘What is that?’ he asked, and she showed him, and then he did it. They talked together and he found that people knew a great deal about him, but not everything, not that he had gone back to his mother and been barred out, for instance, and he said nothing of this to Maimie, for it still humiliated him.

‘Do they know that I play games exactly like real boys?’ he asked very proudly. ‘O Maimie, please tell them!’ But when he revealed how he played, by sailing his hoop on the Round Pond, and so on, she was simply horrified.

‘All your ways of playing,’ she said with her big eyes on him, ‘are quite, quite wrong, and not in the least like how boys play.’

Poor Peter uttered a little moan at this, and he cried for the first time for I know not how long. Maimie was extremely sorry for him, and lent him her handkerchief, but he didn’t know in the least

what to do with it, so she showed him, that is to say, she wiped her eyes; and then gave it back to him, saying, 'Now you do it,' but instead of wiping his own eyes he wiped hers, and she thought it best to pretend that this was what she had meant.

She said out of pity for him, 'I shall give you a kiss if you like,' but though he once knew, he had long forgotten what kisses are, and he replied, 'Thank you,' and held out his hand, thinking she had offered to put something into it. This was a great shock to her, but she felt she could not explain without shaming him, so with charming delicacy she gave Peter a thimble which happened to be in her pocket, and pretended that it was a kiss. Poor little boy! he quite believed her, and to this day he wears it on his finger, though there can be scarcely any one who needs a thimble so little. You see, though still a tiny child, it was really years and years since he had seen his mother, and I dare say the baby who had supplanted him was now a man with whiskers.

But you must not think that Peter Pan was a boy to pity rather than to admire; if Maimie began by thinking this, she soon found she was very much mistaken. Her eyes glistened with admira-

tion when he told her of his adventures, especially of how he went to and fro between the island and the Gardens in the Thrush's Nest.

'How romantic!' Maimie exclaimed, but this was another unknown word, and he hung his head thinking she was despising him.

'I suppose Tony would not have done that?' he said very humbly.

'Never, never!' she answered with conviction, 'he would have been afraid.'

'What is afraid?' asked Peter longingly. He thought it must be some splendid thing. 'I do wish you would teach me how to be afraid, Maimie,' he said.

'I believe no one could teach that to you,' she answered adoringly, but Peter thought she meant that he was stupid. She had told him about Tony and of the wicked thing she did in the dark to frighten him (she knew quite well that it was wicked), but Peter misunderstood her meaning and said, 'Oh, how I wish I was as brave as Tony!'

It quite irritated her. 'You are twenty thousand times braver than Tony,' she said; 'you are ever so much the bravest boy I ever knew.'

He could scarcely believe she meant it, but when he did believe he screamed with joy.

‘And if you want very much to give me a kiss,’ Maimie said, ‘you can do it.’

Very reluctantly Peter began to take the thimble off his finger. He thought she wanted it back.

‘I don’t mean a kiss,’ she said hurriedly, ‘I mean a thimble.’

‘What’s that?’ Peter asked.

‘It’s like this,’ she said, and kissed him.

‘I should love to give you a thimble,’ Peter said gravely, so he gave her one. He gave her quite a number of thimbles, and then a delightful idea came into his head. ‘Maimie,’ he said, ‘will you marry me?’

Now, strange to tell, the same idea had come at exactly the same time into Maimie’s head. ‘I should like to,’ she answered, ‘but will there be room in your boat for two?’

‘If you squeeze close,’ he said eagerly.

‘Perhaps the birds would be angry?’

He assured her that the birds would love to have her, though I am not so certain of it myself. Also that there were very few birds in winter. ‘Of course they might want your clothes,’ he had to admit rather falteringly.

She was somewhat indignant at this.

‘They are always thinking of their nests,’ he

said apologetically, 'and there are some bits of you'—he stroked the fur on her pelisse—'that would excite them very much.'

'They shan't have my fur,' she said sharply.

'No,' he said, still fondling it, however, 'no. O Maimie,' he said rapturously, 'do you know why I love you? It is because you are like a beautiful nest.'

Somehow this made her uneasy. 'I think you are speaking more like a bird than a boy now,' she said, holding back, and indeed he was even looking rather like a bird. 'After all,' she said, 'you are only a Betwixt-and-Between.' But it hurt him so much that she immediately added, 'It must be a delicious thing to be.'

'Come and be one, then, dear Maimie,' he implored her, and they set off for the boat, for it was now very near Open-Gate time. 'And you are not a bit like a nest,' he whispered to please her.

'But I think it is rather nice to be like one,' she said in a woman's contradictory way. 'And, Peter, dear, though I can't give them my fur, I wouldn't mind their building in it. Fancy a nest in my neck with little spotty eggs in it! O Peter, how perfectly lovely!'

But as they drew near the Serpentine, she shiv-

ered a little, and said, 'Of course I shall go and see mother often, quite often. It is not as if I was saying good-bye for ever to mother, it is not in the least like that.'

'Oh no,' answered Peter, but in his heart he knew it was very like that, and he would have told her so had he not been in a quaking fear of losing her. He was so fond of her, he felt he could not live without her. 'She will forget her mother in time, and be happy with me,' he kept saying to himself, and he hurried her on, giving her thimbles by the way.

But even when she had seen the boat and exclaimed ecstatically over its loveliness, she still talked tremblingly about her mother. 'You know quite well, Peter, don't you,' she said, 'that I wouldn't come unless I knew for certain I could go back to mother whenever I want to? Peter, say it.'

He said it, but he could no longer look her in the face.

'If you are sure your mother will always want you,' he added rather sourly.

'The idea of mother's not always wanting me!' Maimie cried, and her face glistened.

'If she doesn't bar you out,' said Peter huskily.

'The door,' replied Maimie, 'will always, always

be open, and mother will always be waiting at it for me.'

'Then,' said Peter, not without grimness, 'step in, if you feel so sure of her,' and he helped Maimie into the Thrush's Nest.

'But why don't you look at me,' she asked, taking him by the arm.

Peter tried hard not to look, he tried to push off, then he gave a great gulp and jumped ashore and sat down miserably in the snow.

She went to him. 'What is it, dear, dear Peter?' she said, wondering.

'O Maimie,' he cried, 'it isn't fair to take you with me if you think you can go back! Your mother'—he gulped again—'you don't know them as well as I do.'

And then he told her the woeful story of how he had been barred out, and she gasped all the time. 'But my mother,' she said, '*my* mother——'

'Yes, she would,' said Peter, 'they are all the same. I dare say she is looking for another one already.'

Maimie said aghast, 'I can't believe it. You see, when you went away your mother had none, but my mother has Tony, and surely they are satisfied when they have one.'

Peter replied bitterly, 'You should see the letters Solomon gets from ladies who have six.'

Just then they heard a grating *creak*, followed by *creak, creak*, all round the Gardens. It was the Opening of the Gates, and Peter jumped nervously into his boat. He knew Maimie would not come with him now, and he was trying bravely not to cry. But Maimie was sobbing painfully.

'If I should be too late,' she said in agony, 'O Peter, if she has got another one already!'

Again he sprang ashore as if she had called him back. 'I shall come and look for you to-night,' he said, squeezing close, 'but if you hurry away I think you will be in time.'

Then he pressed a last thimble on her sweet little mouth, and covered his face with his hands so that he might not see her go.

'Dear Peter!' she cried.

'Dear Maimie!' cried the tragic boy.

She leapt into his arms, so that it was a sort of fairy wedding, and then she hurried away. Oh, how she hastened to the gates! Peter, you may be sure, was back in the Gardens that night as soon as Lock-out sounded, but he found no Maimie, and so he knew she had been in time. For long he hoped that some night she would come back to

him ; often he thought he saw her waiting for him by the shore of the Serpentine as his bark drew to land, but Maimie never went back. She wanted to, but she was afraid that if she saw her dear Betwixt-and-Between again she would linger with him too long, and besides the ayah now kept a sharp eye on her. But she often talked lovingly of Peter, and she knitted a kettle-holder for him, and one day when she was wondering what Easter present he would like, her mother made a suggestion.

‘Nothing,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘would be so useful to him as a goat.’

‘He could ride on it,’ cried Maimie, ‘and play on his pipe at the same time.’

‘Then,’ her mother asked, ‘won’t you give him your goat, the one you frighten Tony with at night?’

‘But it isn’t a real goat,’ Maimie said.

‘It seems very real to Tony,’ replied her mother.

‘It seems frightfully real to me too,’ Maimie admitted, ‘but how could I give it to Peter?’

Her mother knew a way, and next day, accompanied by Tony (who was really quite a nice boy, though of course he could not compare), they went to the Gardens, and Maimie stood alone within a

fairy ring, and then her mother, who was a rather gifted lady, said—

*'My daughter, tell me, if you can,
What have you got for Peter Pan?'*

To which Maimie replied—

*'I have a goat for him to ride,
Observe me cast it far and wide.'*

She then flung her arms about as if she were sowing seed, and turned round three times.

Next Tony said—

*'If P. doth find it waiting here,
Wilt ne'er again make me to fear?'*

And Maimie answered—

*'By dark or light I fondly swear
Never to see goats anywhere.'*

She also left a letter to Peter in a likely place, explaining what she had done, and begging him to ask the fairies to turn the goat into one convenient for riding on. Well, it all happened just as she hoped, for Peter found the letter, and of course nothing could be easier for the fairies than to turn the goat into a real one, and so that is how Peter got the goat on which he now rides round

the Gardens every night playing sublimely on his pipe. And Maimie kept her promise, and never frightened Tony with a goat again, though I have heard that she created another animal. Until she was quite a big girl she continued to leave presents for Peter in the Gardens (with letters explaining how humans play with them), and she is not the only one who has done this. David does it, for instance, and he and I know the likeliest place for leaving them in, and we shall tell you if you like, but for mercy's sake don't ask us before Porthos, for were he to find out the place he would take every one of them.

Though Peter still remembers Maimie he is become as gay as ever, and often in sheer happiness he jumps off his goat and lies kicking merrily on the grass. Oh, he has a joyful time! But he has still a vague memory that he was a human once, and it makes him especially kind to the house-swallows when they visit the island, for house-swallows are the spirits of little children who have died. They always build in the eaves of the houses where they lived when they were humans, and sometimes they try to fly in at a nursery window, and perhaps that is why Peter loves them best of all the birds.

And the little house? Every lawful night (that is to say, every night except ball nights) the fairies now build the little house lest there should be a human child lost in the Gardens, and Peter rides the marches looking for lost ones, and if he finds them he carries them on his goat to the little house, and when they wake up they are in it, and when they step out they see it. The fairies build the house merely because it is so pretty, but Peter rides round in memory of Maimie, and because he still loves to do just as he believes real boys would do.

But you must not think that, because somewhere among the trees the little house is twinkling, it is a safe thing to remain in the Gardens after Lock-out time. If the bad ones among the fairies happen to be out that night they will certainly mischief you, and even though they are not, you may perish of cold and dark before Peter Pan comes round. He has been too late several times, and when he sees he is too late he runs back to the Thrush's Nest for his paddle, of which Maimie had told him the true use, and he digs a grave for the child and erects a little tombstone, and carves the poor thing's initials on it. He does this at once because he thinks it is what real boys would do, and you must have noticed the little stones, and that there are always

two together. He puts them in twos because they seem less lonely. I think that quite the most touching sight in the Gardens is the two tombstones of Walter Stephen Matthews and Phœbe Phelps. They stand together at the spot where the parish of Westminster St. Mary's is said to meet the parish of Paddington. Here Peter found the two babes, who had fallen unnoticed from their perambulators, Phœbe aged thirteen months and Walter probably still younger, for Peter seems to have felt a delicacy about putting any age on his stone. They lie side by side, and the simple inscriptions read

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David sometimes places white flowers on these two innocent graves.

But how strange for parents, when they hurry into the Gardens at the opening of the gates looking for their lost one, to find the sweetest little tombstone instead. I do hope that Peter is not too ready with his spade. It is all rather sad.