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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Content Note

This adaptation is based on a historical literary work. It may contain expressions, attitudes, or depictions that some readers may consider inappropriate or offensive by today's standards. Such elements have been retained or reflected where necessary in order to preserve the historical and literary character of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: The Open Window; The Story-Teller; The Lumber Room; Sredni Vashtar; Tobermory; The Unrest-Cure; The She-Wolf; The Toys of Peace; Laura
Author: Saki

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Saki, *Selected Short Stories by Saki* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

CONTENTS

The Open Window

Part 1

"My aunt will come down soon, Mr. Nuttel," said the young girl. She was fifteen years old, but she spoke as if she were much older. She sat quite calmly and looked at him without fear or shyness. "Until she comes, you will have to talk with me."

Framton Nuttel tried to answer in the right way. He wanted to say something polite about the girl, but he did not want to sound as if he were too pleased that the aunt was absent. This kind of visit was difficult for him. He had come to the country because he was supposed to rest his nerves, but now he was sitting in a strange room with a strange young girl, and he felt no more peaceful than before.

His sister had made him come to this quiet place. Before he left home, she had spoken to him very firmly. "I know what will happen," she had said. "You will go there, hide yourself in your room, and speak to no one. Then your nerves will become worse, not better. I will give you letters to some people I know there, so that you will have to visit them."

Framton had not liked the plan, but he had accepted it. His sister had once stayed near this village, at the rectory, about four years earlier. She still remembered a few people in the neighbourhood, or at least she said she remembered them. "Some of them were quite nice, I think," she had told him, though she had not sounded very sure.

Now Framton had one of those letters with him. It was for Mrs. Sappleton, the aunt of the calm young girl who sat opposite him. He wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton belonged to the group of "quite nice" people. He also wondered whether formal visits to people he did not know could really help a man whose nerves were weak. To him, the cure already felt almost as tiring as the illness.

The room was quiet for a short time. Framton tried to look comfortable, though he did not feel comfortable at all. The girl seemed to study him with cool interest, as if she were deciding what sort of person he was. At last she spoke again,

choosing the moment when the silence had lasted just long enough to become uncomfortable.

“Do you know many people here?” she asked. Her voice was polite, but there was something sharp and watchful behind it. She did not ask the question like a child who only wanted to make conversation. She asked it as if the answer might be useful to her.

“Hardly anyone,” said Framton. He was glad to have a simple question to answer. “My sister stayed here some years ago, at the rectory. That was about four years back. She gave me letters of introduction to some people in the area.”

He heard his own voice as he said this, and he knew he did not sound very happy about it. He had not wanted to spend his afternoons calling on strangers. He had wanted rest, quiet, and perhaps a little kindness. Instead, he had to explain himself again and again, like a schoolboy sent to new relations.

The girl did not smile in a childish way. She did not look bored either. She seemed more interested than before. “Then you know almost nothing about my aunt?” she asked.

“Only her name and address,” Framton admitted. This was the truth, and it made him feel rather helpless. He knew nothing about Mrs. Sappleton’s family, habits, or situation. He did not even know whether she was married or a widow.

As he sat there, he looked around the room and tried to guess more about the house. There were small signs that men lived there, though he could not say exactly what gave him that idea. Perhaps it was the way the room was arranged, or a few things that did not seem to belong only to women. He began to feel that he should have asked his sister for better information before coming.

Vera, the young girl, watched him quietly. Framton did not know that she had already learned something important about him. He knew no one in the house well. He knew nothing about her aunt. He had come with only a letter and a weak hope that country visits might help his nerves.

Part 2

Vera's eyes moved for a moment toward the large window. It was not an ordinary small window, but a wide glass door that opened straight onto the lawn. It stood open, though the afternoon was already growing cool. Beyond it, Framton could see the grass, the trees, and the quiet light of the October day.

"Her great sadness happened just three years ago," said Vera. Her voice became lower as she spoke. "That was after your sister stayed here, so of course she would not know about it." She looked at Framton with a serious face. "You may wonder why we keep that window open at this time of year."

Framton looked at the open window again. Until that moment he had thought it was only open because the day was not very cold. Now it seemed to have a different meaning. The quiet lawn outside no longer looked simply peaceful. "It is rather warm for October," he said carefully, "but does the window have something to do with the sadness you mentioned?"

Vera nodded slowly. "Three years ago today, her husband and her two young brothers went out through that window," she said. "They were going shooting for the day. They often went that way, across the lawn and then out toward the moor. They were going to a wet place where they liked to shoot birds."

She paused, and Framton waited. He did not want to seem too eager, but he could not stop listening. The girl's calm manner made the story feel worse, not better. She spoke as if every detail had been told in the house many times before.

"They never came back," Vera continued. "That summer had been terribly wet. Places on the moor that were usually safe had become dangerous. While they were crossing it, the ground suddenly gave way under them. Her husband, her two brothers, and the little brown spaniel were all lost in the bog."

Framton felt a cold, unpleasant feeling move through him. The country had seemed quiet and safe to him, almost too quiet. He had not imagined death hiding in such a place. "How terrible," he said, because he had to say something.

"The worst part," said Vera, "was that their bodies were never found." Her voice changed now. It was no longer so calm. It shook a little, as if the story had suddenly become too real even for her. "Poor Aunt still thinks they will come back one day. She thinks they will walk in through that window, just as they always

did.”

Framton looked again at the open window. It now seemed wrong that it should stand there so wide and still. He imagined three men walking out through it in good spirits, with the dog running near them. Then he imagined the same window waiting day after day, evening after evening, for people who would never return.

“That is why the window is kept open every evening until it is almost dark,” Vera said. “Poor Aunt has told me so many times how they looked when they went out. Her husband had his white raincoat over his arm. Her youngest brother, Ronnie, was singing a silly line to tease her, because she hated it. He always sang, ‘Bertie, why do you jump?’ when he wanted to annoy her.”

Vera looked toward the lawn again, and Framton followed her eyes without meaning to. The grass outside was still empty. Nothing moved there except the soft evening light. Yet the room seemed to have become less safe, as if the open window had brought the sad story inside.

“Sometimes,” Vera said, “on quiet evenings like this, I almost feel that they will come back.” She spoke very softly now. “I can almost see them walking across the lawn, her husband with the white coat, the two brothers beside him, and the little brown dog behind them. I know it is foolish, but sometimes I feel they will all come in through that window.”

She stopped suddenly. A small shiver passed through her body, and she turned her face away from the window. Framton sat very still. He had come to this house to make a polite visit, but now he felt trapped inside another person’s grief. The open window waited beside them, quiet and empty, while the light outside slowly faded.

Part 3

The silence did not last long. Mrs. Sappleton came into the room with quick, friendly movements and a bright smile. “I am so sorry I am late,” she said. “I hope Vera has been amusing you.” She sat down and looked toward the open window at once, as if that part of the room mattered more than anything else.

Framton tried to answer politely, but his mind was still full of Vera's story. "She has been very interesting," he said, though the word seemed weak and strange. He wanted to look away from the window, but his eyes kept returning to it. Mrs. Sappleton's cheerful face made him feel even more uneasy.

"I hope you do not mind the open window," Mrs. Sappleton said. "My husband and my brothers will come back soon from shooting, and they always come in this way. They have been out in the wet ground today, so they will make a terrible mess on my carpets." She spoke lightly, as if this were a common small trouble in the house.

Framton gave a stiff little smile. He could not decide what to think. The woman's words fitted too perfectly with Vera's sad story, but her voice was not the voice of a person speaking of the dead. It was the voice of someone expecting muddy boots, noise, and ordinary family life.

Mrs. Sappleton went on talking about the shooting. She spoke about birds, the weather, and the ground outside. To Framton, the subject was painful and almost frightening. He made a strong effort to move the talk to something safer, and so he began to speak about his health.

"The doctors agree that I need complete rest," he said. "They have told me to avoid all excitement. They have also told me not to do much physical exercise. At the same time, they do not agree about what I should eat, so that part is still rather difficult."

Mrs. Sappleton did not seem very interested in his illness. Her eyes kept moving past him to the open window and the lawn beyond it. She gave small polite answers, but Framton felt that she was not really listening. He became more nervous, because his carefully prepared talk about his nerves was not helping him at all.

Suddenly Mrs. Sappleton's face became bright. "Here they are at last!" she cried. "Just in time for tea. And look at them. They are covered with mud up to their eyes." Her voice was full of welcome and ordinary pleasure.

Framton turned a little in his chair and looked at Vera. The girl was staring through the open window. Her face had changed completely. Her eyes were wide

with horror, and she looked past him as if she had seen something that no living person should see.

Framton slowly turned toward the window. Across the lawn, in the fading light, three figures were walking toward the house. One of them carried a white coat over his arm. A tired little brown spaniel came behind them. As they came nearer, a young voice began to sing a foolish line: “Bertie, why do you jump?”

Framton did not wait to hear more. He seized his hat and stick and rushed out of the room. He ran through the front hall, out of the front door, and down the drive as fast as he could go. A man on a bicycle had to turn sharply into the hedge to avoid him.

The three men came in through the open window a moment later. “Here we are, my dear,” said Mrs. Sappleton’s husband. “It is rather muddy outside, but most of it is dry mud.” He looked around the room. “Who was that man who ran away as we came up?”

“A very strange man, a Mr. Nuttel,” said Mrs. Sappleton. “He could only talk about his illnesses, and then he rushed away without saying good-bye. You would think he had seen a ghost.” She sounded annoyed, but also puzzled.

“I expect it was the spaniel,” said Vera calmly. She had recovered from her look of terror at once. “He told me he was terribly afraid of dogs. Once, in India, a group of wild dogs chased him into a graveyard. He had to spend the night in a newly dug grave, while the dogs stood above him and growled. That would be enough to make anyone lose their nerve.”

Mrs. Sappleton and the others accepted this explanation with surprise. The little brown spaniel moved about the room, quite unaware that he had been made part of another story. Vera sat quietly, with the same calm face she had worn at the beginning of the visit. Making up stories at a moment’s notice was her special gift.

The Story-Teller

Part 1

It was a hot afternoon, and the railway carriage felt even hotter than the air outside. The train moved on slowly, and the next stop was still nearly an hour away. Inside the carriage were two little girls, one little boy, their aunt, and a man who did not know them. The aunt sat in one corner, and the man sat in the opposite corner, but the children seemed to fill the whole carriage.

The children were not quiet for more than a few seconds at a time. The aunt also spoke often, but most of her words began with "Don't." The children's questions almost always began with "Why?" The man in the corner said nothing, but his silence did not mean that he was peaceful. He heard every word, and each new question seemed to make the hot carriage smaller.

"Don't, Cyril, don't," said the aunt. The little boy was hitting the seat with his hand, and each hit sent a small cloud of dust into the air. The dust floated in the hot light and made the carriage feel even more unpleasant. The aunt looked tired, but she tried to sound gentle. "Come and look out of the window," she said.

Cyril moved to the window, but he did not move with much interest. He looked out for a moment, and then he found something new to ask about. "Why are those sheep being taken out of that field?" he asked. He spoke as if the answer mattered very much. The aunt looked out too, though she clearly had no real answer ready.

"I expect they are being taken to another field," she said. "Perhaps there is more grass there." Cyril looked again at the field they had just passed. "But there is a lot of grass in that field," he said. "There is nothing else but grass. Why do they need another field?"

"Perhaps the grass in the other field is better," said the aunt. She spoke weakly, because she knew this was not a good answer. Cyril was not satisfied. "Why is it better?" he asked at once. His voice was clear, quick, and full of the special strength that children have when they find a question adults cannot answer.

"Oh, look at those cows!" cried the aunt suddenly. She spoke as if the cows

were a rare and wonderful sight. In fact, the train had already passed many fields with cows in them. The man in the corner noticed this, and his face became harder. He thought the aunt was trying to escape from the question, and she was not doing it well.

Cyril did not forget the question. “Why is the grass in the other field better?” he asked again. The aunt had no useful answer. She looked out of the window, then back at the children, and then down at her hands. The man in the corner began to look very annoyed, and the aunt decided that he must be a cold and unkind man.

Then the smaller girl began to repeat a line from a poem. She knew only the first line, but this did not stop her. She said it again and again in a soft, steady voice. To the man, it felt as if someone had asked her to repeat the same line two thousand times without stopping. He looked at the aunt twice, and then he looked at the emergency cord, as if even that might be better than listening any longer.

The aunt saw that something had to be done. She gathered the children toward her end of the carriage and tried to make her voice sound warm and secret. “Come over here and listen to a story,” she said. The children came slowly, without much hope. It was clear that they did not think their aunt was a very good story-teller.

Part 2

The aunt began her story in a low voice. She seemed to think that a low voice would make the story more exciting. It did not. She told them about a little girl who was very good, who always did the right thing, and who was liked by everyone because of her goodness.

The children listened, but not with much interest. They interrupted her again and again with loud questions. The aunt tried to continue, but each question made her story weaker. At last she explained that the good little girl was saved from a mad bull by some people who liked her very much.

“Would they not have saved her if she had not been good?” asked the older girl. She asked exactly the question that the man in the corner had wanted to ask. The aunt looked troubled. Her story had reached the place where it was supposed

to teach a lesson, but the lesson did not seem very strong.

"Yes, I suppose they would have saved her," said the aunt. "But I do not think they would have run quite so fast if they had not liked her so much." This answer did not satisfy anyone. It did not satisfy the children, and it did not satisfy the man in the corner either.

"That is the stupidest story I have ever heard," said the older girl, with complete honesty. Cyril agreed at once. He said he had stopped listening after the first part because it was so stupid. The smaller girl did not say anything, but she had already begun repeating her favourite line again in a soft voice.

The aunt felt hurt and angry. She had tried to do her duty, and the children had shown no thanks. Then the man in the corner spoke for the first time. "You do not seem to be very successful as a story-teller," he said.

The aunt sat up more stiffly. "It is very difficult to tell stories that children can understand and enjoy," she said. Her voice was cold. She did not like being judged by a stranger, especially by a stranger who had been looking annoyed for most of the journey.

"I do not agree," said the man. The aunt's face became sharper. "Perhaps you would like to tell them a story," she said. The words were meant as a challenge, but the children accepted them at once. "Tell us a story," said the older girl.

The man began without moving from his corner. "Once upon a time," he said, "there was a little girl named Bertha. She was extraordinarily good." At once the children's interest began to fade. They had heard too many stories about good children, and they expected this one to be just as dull as the aunt's story.

"She always did what she was told," the man continued. "She always told the truth. She kept her clothes clean, learned her lessons perfectly, and was polite to everyone. She even ate milk puddings as if they were sweet cakes."

"Was she pretty?" asked the older girl. The man looked at the children and answered calmly. "Not as pretty as any of you," he said, "but she was horribly good." This phrase changed everything. The children looked more interested at once, because goodness sounded different when it was called horrible.

The man went on. Bertha was so good that she won three medals. One was for

obedience, one was for always being on time, and one was for good behaviour. She wore the medals on her dress every day. When she walked, they clicked against each other, so everyone could hear how good she was.

"Horribly good," repeated Cyril, with pleasure. The story was now much better than the aunt's story. It had something strange in it, and it sounded as if something might actually happen. Even the aunt listened, though she did not want to show too much interest.

Everyone in Bertha's town heard about her goodness. At last the Prince of the country heard about her too. He decided that, because Bertha was such a wonderfully good child, she could walk once a week in his beautiful park. No other children were allowed there, so this was a very great honour.

"Were there sheep in the park?" asked Cyril. "No," said the man. "There were no sheep." Of course Cyril asked why. The aunt almost smiled, because she thought the man had now been caught by the same kind of question that had troubled her.

But the man answered at once. "There were no sheep because the Prince's mother had once had a dream. In the dream, her son would be killed by a sheep or by a clock falling on him. So the Prince kept no sheep in his park and no clocks in his palace."

The children accepted this answer with deep interest. "Was the Prince killed by a sheep or by a clock?" asked Cyril. "He is still alive," said the man, "so we do not know yet." Then he added that there were no sheep in the park, but there were many little pigs. Some were black with white faces, some were white with black spots, some were grey, and some were white all over.

Part 3

The man stopped for a moment, so the children could imagine the park. It was clearly a much better park than the aunt's story had offered them. It had no sheep, no clocks, many pigs, and a Prince with a strange family dream. The children waited for more, and even the repeated poem had stopped.

“Bertha was sorry that there were no flowers,” the man continued. “Before she went into the park, she had promised her aunts that she would not pick the Prince’s flowers. She had promised with tears in her eyes, because she wanted everyone to know how good she was. So she felt rather foolish when she found that there were no flowers at all.”

“Why were there no flowers?” asked one of the girls. This time the question came with real interest. The man answered at once. “Because the pigs had eaten them all. The gardeners had told the Prince that he could have pigs or flowers, but not both. The Prince chose pigs.”

The children thought this was an excellent choice. They liked a Prince who understood what was really interesting. The aunt did not say anything, but she looked less sure of herself than before. The man went on with the story, and the carriage seemed quieter and cooler because everyone was listening.

There were many other wonderful things in the park. There were ponds with gold fish, blue fish, and green fish. There were trees with bright birds that could say clever things at once. There were tiny birds that hummed the popular songs of the day as they moved in the air.

Bertha walked up and down and enjoyed everything very much. She thought, “If I were not so very good, I would not be allowed to come into this beautiful park.” As she walked, her three medals knocked against one another. The sound reminded her again and again that she was very good.

Then a wolf came into the park. It was a large wolf, with a rough coat and pale grey eyes. It had come to catch a pig for its supper. When the little pigs saw it, they ran away in every direction, squealing loudly as they went.

Bertha was terribly afraid. She ran as fast as she could and hid in some thick bushes. The bushes were called myrtle bushes, and their smell was so strong that the wolf could not smell Bertha clearly. She stayed very still, and for a little while it seemed that the wolf would not find her. She was so frightened that she hardly breathed.

The wolf came close to the bushes and sniffed. It looked to the right and to the left, but it could not see the little girl. Bertha thought again of her goodness. She

was proud, even while she was afraid. She thought that perhaps her goodness would save her.

But then her medals moved against one another. They made a small clicking sound. The wolf stopped at once and listened. Bertha tried to hold herself still, but the medals clicked again, and the wolf knew where she was.

The wolf pushed its nose into the bushes and pulled Bertha out. Her three medals had shown the wolf where to find her. The wolf ate her, all except her shoes, a few pieces of her clothes, and the three medals for goodness. So Bertha's goodness did not save her at all.

"Were any of the little pigs killed?" asked Cyril. The man shook his head. "No," he said. "They all escaped." The children were deeply pleased by this answer. It made the story even better.

"The story began badly," said the smaller girl, "but it had a beautiful ending." Cyril agreed. He said it was the most beautiful story he had ever heard. The older girl said it was the only story she had ever heard that was beautiful and frightening at the same time.

The aunt looked very shocked. "That is not a proper story to tell young children," she said. "You have weakened years of careful teaching." Her voice was sharp, because she knew the children would remember this story much better than they remembered hers.

The man gathered his things as the train neared the station. "At least I kept them quiet for ten minutes," he said. He stepped out of the carriage when the train stopped. As he walked away, he thought that the children would probably trouble their aunt for a long time, asking her to tell them an improper story.

The Lumber Room

Part 1

The children were going to the sands at Jagborough as a special treat. Nicholas was not going with them, because he was in trouble. That morning he had refused to eat his bread and milk. He had said there was a frog in it, and the older people had told him that this was impossible.

Nicholas had gone on saying that there was a frog in the bowl. He had even described its colour and its marks. The important thing was that there really was a frog in the bread and milk. Nicholas knew this very well, because he had put it there himself.

The adults spoke for a long time about how wrong it was to put a frog into good food. Nicholas listened, but this was not the part that mattered to him. What mattered was that the adults had been completely sure there was no frog, and they had been completely wrong. He did not want them to forget that fact.

"You said there could not be a frog in my bread and milk," he repeated. "But there was a frog in my bread and milk." He said this more than once, because it was the strongest part of his case. He had found safe ground, and he did not mean to leave it.

So his boy cousin, his girl cousin, and his younger brother were taken to Jagborough sands without him. His younger brother was not very interesting, but he was still allowed to go. The aunt had arranged the trip quickly, because she wanted Nicholas to feel what he had lost. She often did this when one child was in trouble.

If one child behaved badly, that child suddenly lost some wonderful pleasure. If all the children behaved badly together, the aunt would suddenly remember a circus in a nearby town. It would be a very fine circus, with more elephants than anyone could count. Of course, because of their bad behaviour, they would not be allowed to go.

The aunt expected Nicholas to cry when the others left. But Nicholas did not

cry at all. The only crying came from his girl cousin, who hurt her knee while climbing into the carriage. She cried loudly, and the happy trip began in a rather unhappy way.

"How she cried," said Nicholas cheerfully, as the carriage drove away. The children inside did not look as joyful as children going to the sea should look. The aunt tried to answer him as if everything were still pleasant. "She will soon forget it," she said. "They will have a beautiful afternoon running about on the sands."

"Bobby will not enjoy it much," said Nicholas. "He will not run much either. His boots hurt him, because they are too tight." The aunt turned to him sharply and asked why Bobby had not told her. Nicholas answered with calm satisfaction. "He told you twice, but you were not listening."

This was another hard truth, and the aunt did not like it. Nicholas added that she often failed to listen when children told her important things. The aunt did not want to continue this subject. She looked at him with authority and said, "You are not to go into the gooseberry garden."

"Why not?" asked Nicholas. "Because you are in disgrace," said the aunt. Nicholas did not think this was a very good reason. He felt that a person could be in disgrace and in a gooseberry garden at the same time.

His face became stubborn, and the aunt thought she understood him. She believed he now wanted to enter the gooseberry garden only because she had forbidden it. This pleased Nicholas, though he did not show it. In fact, the gooseberry garden was not his real aim at all.

The gooseberry garden had two doors, and once a small boy entered it, he could hide among the fruit bushes and tall plants. The aunt had other things to do that afternoon, but she stayed near the garden. She worked among the flowers and bushes, keeping both doors in sight. She had few ideas, but when she fixed her mind on one idea, she held it tightly.

Nicholas helped her believe what she wanted to believe. Once or twice he moved quietly toward one of the garden doors, as if he were trying not to be seen. Each time the aunt saw him, and each time she became more sure of her own cleverness. Nicholas never truly meant to enter the gooseberry garden, but it was

useful for him that she should think so.

Part 2

After Nicholas had made his aunt quite sure that he wanted the gooseberry garden, he slipped back into the house. He moved quickly, because this was the real part of his plan. In the library there was a chair, and above the chair there was a shelf. On that shelf lay a large, important-looking key.

Nicholas already knew what the key opened. It opened the lumber room, the most secret and interesting room in the house. Children were never allowed to enter it, and questions about it were never answered. This made the room much more wonderful in Nicholas's mind.

He stood on the chair and reached up for the key. It felt heavy and serious in his hand. He had not used many keys before, but he had not left this matter to chance. For several days he had practised with the schoolroom key, learning how to put a key into a lock and turn it properly.

The lock of the lumber-room door was stiff. For a moment Nicholas thought the key might not turn. Then it moved, slowly but surely, and the door opened. Nicholas stepped inside, and he entered a new world.

The gooseberry garden now seemed small and ordinary. The lumber room was much better. It was large, quiet, and rather dark, with only one high window to let in light. That window looked out over the very garden which his aunt was guarding so carefully.

The room was full of things that no one used but that no one had thrown away. His aunt was the kind of person who believed that beautiful things were safer if they were never touched. So the rooms where children lived were plain and dull, while this hidden room held many treasures. Nicholas felt that he had found the true heart of the house.

The first thing that caught his eyes was a framed piece of tapestry. It had perhaps been made to stand in front of a fire, but to Nicholas it was not furniture. It was a story. He sat down on a dusty roll of bright cloth and began to study every

part of the picture.

In the tapestry, a huntsman stood in a thick wood. He had just shot a stag with an arrow. The stag was very close to him, so Nicholas did not think the shot had been especially difficult. Two spotted dogs were springing forward, ready to join the hunt now that the arrow had been fired.

That part was easy to understand, but there was a more serious matter in the picture. Did the huntsman see what Nicholas could see? Four wolves were running through the trees toward him. Perhaps there were more wolves hidden behind the leaves, and Nicholas felt almost sure there were.

The huntsman had only two arrows left. He might shoot one wolf, and perhaps another, but what would happen then? His dogs looked brave, but there were only two of them. Nicholas sat there for many happy minutes, thinking about the danger and deciding whether the man and the dogs could possibly escape.

After a while, other treasures asked for his attention. There were strange candlesticks shaped like snakes, twisted and dark and exciting. There was also a teapot shaped like a china duck, with its open beak ready to pour the tea. Nicholas thought of the nursery teapot and felt that it was hopelessly dull.

Then he found a carved wooden box. Inside it were layers of soft, sweet-smelling cotton. Between the layers were small brass figures: bulls with humped backs, peacocks, and strange little creatures that looked almost like goblins. They were delightful to see, and even more delightful to hold.

In one corner he saw a large square book with plain black covers. At first it did not look very promising, but Nicholas opened it and found coloured pictures of birds. They were not ordinary birds like the few he saw in the garden or on walks. These were great, bright, strange birds from a world much larger than the world his aunt allowed him to know.

There were herons, kites, toucans, golden pheasants, and many other birds whose names and shapes seemed wonderful to him. Nicholas looked at a mandarin duck and began giving it a life story in his mind. He imagined where it lived, what it liked, and what kind of adventures it might have. The quiet room became full of colour, water, wings, and faraway places.

Then his aunt's voice came from outside. She was calling his name from the gooseberry garden. She had noticed that he had disappeared, and she had decided that he must have entered the garden after all. Now she was searching among the fruit bushes and tall plants, quite sure that he was hiding there.

"Nicholas, Nicholas!" she called sharply. "Come out at once. It is no use hiding there. I can see you all the time." Her voice was angry, but it was also wrong, and that made Nicholas smile.

It was probably the first smile that room had seen for many years. Nicholas did not answer. He stayed inside the secret room, surrounded by pictures, colours, and hidden treasures. Outside, his aunt guarded the wrong place and called to a boy who was not there.

Part 3

Nicholas did not stay in the lumber room too long. He knew that secret pleasures were safest when they were not stretched too far. When his aunt's angry calls changed into a sharp cry for help, he closed the bird book carefully. Then he put it back in its corner and shook a little dust over it, so that it would look just as it had looked before.

He left the room quietly and locked the door behind him. The key turned more easily now, and this pleased him. He carried it back to the library, stood on the chair, and put it exactly where he had found it. By the time he walked out into the front garden, his face was calm and empty of guilt.

His aunt was still calling, but now her voice came from the other side of the wall. It was not the voice of someone giving orders from a safe place. It was the voice of someone who had met trouble and did not like it. Nicholas walked slowly, as if he had all the time in the world.

"Who is calling?" he asked. He asked this in a clear, innocent voice. He already knew who was calling, but he also knew that questions could be useful. Adults used questions in that way, and Nicholas had learned from them.

"It is me," came the answer from inside the gooseberry garden. "Did you not

hear me? I was looking for you, and I slipped into the rain-water tank. There is no water in it, thank goodness, but the sides are slippery and I cannot get out. Bring the little ladder from under the cherry tree."

Nicholas stood still and thought about this. The little ladder was in the forbidden garden. He had been told very clearly not to go there. It would be a pity, he felt, to forget such a strong order at the very moment when it could be useful.

"I was told I must not go into the gooseberry garden," he said. His voice was serious. It was the voice of a child who was trying very hard to obey. This was not a voice his aunt had expected to hear from him.

"I told you not to go in," said the voice from the tank, now more impatient than before. "Now I am telling you that you may go in. Come at once and bring the ladder." The voice tried to be commanding, but it was difficult to command from the bottom of a tank.

"Your voice does not sound like Aunt's voice," said Nicholas. "Perhaps you are the Devil, trying to make me disobey. Aunt often says the Devil tries to make me do wrong. She also says I usually listen to him, but this time I will not."

"Do not talk nonsense," said the prisoner in the tank. "Go and fetch the ladder." The words were sharp, but Nicholas could hear that she was worried. He knew that she could not climb out alone, and that made the situation very different from ordinary family life.

"Will there be strawberry jam for tea?" Nicholas asked. He asked the question as if it had just come into his mind. In fact, it was a careful question, because he remembered the day before very well. He remembered what his aunt had said, and he remembered what he himself had seen in the store cupboard.

"Yes, yes, of course there will be strawberry jam," said the aunt. She said it quickly, because she wanted the ladder. In her own mind, she had already decided that Nicholas would certainly have no jam at all. But Nicholas did not need to know her thoughts; he only needed to hear her words.

"Now I know you are the Devil," cried Nicholas happily. "Yesterday Aunt said there was no strawberry jam. But I know there are four jars in the store cupboard, because I looked. Aunt does not know they are there, so you cannot be Aunt."

This was a rare and wonderful moment. Nicholas was able to speak to his aunt as if she were the Devil, and she could not easily punish him for it while she was still in the tank. But he also understood that such moments should not be enjoyed for too long. A person who keeps too much pleasure in one place may lose it suddenly.

So Nicholas walked away, making enough noise with his feet to show that he was leaving. He did not bring the ladder. A little later, the kitchen maid came into the garden to look for parsley. She heard the aunt's calls and helped to get her out of the tank.

Tea that evening was very quiet. The trip to Jagborough had not been a success, because the tide had been high when the children arrived, and there had been no sands to run on. Bobby's tight boots had made him cross for the whole afternoon. The girl cousin had begun the trip with a hurt knee, and the others had not found much joy by the sea.

The aunt was silent too. She had spent thirty-five minutes in the rain-water tank, and she felt that this was a deep wrong done to her by the world. Nicholas also was silent, but for a different reason. His mind was still in the lumber room, with the huntsman, the two dogs, and the wolves that were coming through the trees.

Sredni Vashtar

Part 1

Conradin was ten years old, and the doctor said he would probably not live for five more years. The doctor spoke in a soft, serious way, but Conradin did not care much about him. Mrs. de Ropp cared, and that mattered much more. She was Conradin's cousin and guardian, and in his small world she had nearly all the power.

To Conradin, Mrs. de Ropp stood for everything that was hard, dull, and unpleasant. She stood for medicine, rules, quiet rooms, careful food, and long empty hours. He felt that one day these things might press down on him until he could not fight them any longer. But he still had his imagination, and that had kept him alive inside.

Mrs. de Ropp would not have said that she disliked Conradin. She would have said that she was only doing what was good for him. But she did not find this duty painful. In fact, she seemed to take a quiet pleasure in stopping the few things that made him happy.

Conradin hated her with a deep and steady hate. He was careful not to show it, because he was weak and she was strong. He had very few pleasures, but they became sweeter because he knew she would not like them. In the secret country of his mind, she was never allowed to enter.

The garden outside the house was not a happy place. Many windows looked down on it, and any window might open suddenly with an order. Someone might tell him not to touch something, not to stand there, not to stay out too long, or to come in for medicine. Even the fruit trees seemed useless to him, because he was not allowed to pick the fruit.

But in one forgotten corner of the garden there was an old tool shed. It stood partly hidden behind dark bushes, and most people did not think about it. To Conradin, it was the most important place in the world. Sometimes it was like a playroom, and sometimes it was like a holy place.

Inside the shed, Conradin filled the dark corners with people and stories from his own mind. He made up whole worlds there, because the real world gave him so little. But the shed did not hold only dreams. It also held two living creatures, and these were his secret treasures.

In one corner lived a rough-looking Houdan hen. She was not beautiful, but Conradin loved her because he had so little else to love. He gave her the kind of feeling that other children might give to friends, pets, or brothers and sisters. In the dry, dusty shed, she was a living sign that something belonged to him.

Farther back in the darker part of the shed stood a large wooden cage. It was divided into two parts, and one part had strong iron bars. Inside it lived a large polecat-ferret, a long, quick animal with sharp teeth. A friendly butcher's boy had once secretly brought it there for Conradin, in exchange for the money Conradin had saved and hidden.

Conradin was afraid of the ferret, but he loved having it there. Its sharp body, bright eyes, and dangerous teeth made it different from everything in Mrs. de Ropp's world. It was not soft, safe, or obedient. It was fierce and alive, and its secret presence gave Conradin a dark kind of joy.

Above all, Mrs. de Ropp must never know about it. Conradin did not think of her as his cousin when he was in the shed. In his mind, he called her the Woman, as if she were not a person but a force against him. The ferret belonged to a secret world where the Woman had no place.

One day Conradin gave the ferret a name. He did not know exactly where the name came from. It seemed to rise out of the dark shed, out of fear, anger, and hope. The name was Sredni Vashtar, and after that day the ferret was no longer only an animal.

Part 2

From that time, the shed became more than a hiding place. Every Thursday, when the air inside was dim and dusty, Conradin went to the wooden cage as if he were entering a secret church. Mrs. de Ropp took him to a real church once a week,

but that place meant almost nothing to him. Her religion seemed to him cold, safe, and full of rules, just like everything else that belonged to her.

Sredni Vashtar was different. He was not gentle or patient. He had sharp teeth, quick feet, and bright dangerous eyes. Conradin felt that this was the kind of power he needed, because his own life was full of weakness. In front of the cage, the sick boy could feel strong for a little while.

Conradin made small ceremonies for him. In spring and summer, he brought red flowers and put them near the cage. In winter, he brought red berries instead. The colour mattered to him, because Sredni Vashtar was a fierce god, and red seemed to belong to him.

On special days, Conradin brought powdered nutmeg and placed it before the cage. This was a more serious offering, because the nutmeg had to be stolen from the house. That made it better. A gift taken secretly from the Woman's world was much more pleasing than a gift that was easy to get.

The special days did not come by any regular calendar. Conradin chose them when something important happened. Once Mrs. de Ropp had terrible toothache for three days, and Conradin held a festival for all three days. He almost made himself believe that Sredni Vashtar had caused the pain.

If the toothache had lasted one day longer, there would have been no nutmeg left. This troubled Conradin a little, but not too much. For those three days, the Woman had suffered, and that was enough. It was one of the few times when the world seemed to move in the right direction.

The Houdan hen was never part of this secret religion. Conradin had already decided that she had a different belief. He did not really know what that belief meant, but he liked the sound of it because it seemed unusual and not too respectable. Anything not respectable had some value for him, because Mrs. de Ropp stood for all respectable things.

After a time, Mrs. de Ropp began to notice that Conradin spent many hours near the old shed. This did not please her. She did not like any pleasure that she had not chosen for him, and she trusted nothing that belonged to his own secret life. "It is not good for you to go down there in all weather," she said one morning.

Conradin did not answer. He had learned that answering usually gave her more power. A few days later, at breakfast, she looked at him over the table and spoke in her usual calm voice. “The hen has been sold,” she said. “She was taken away last night.”

For a moment Conradin felt as if the room had become empty of air. The hen had not been beautiful, but she had been his. She had been a living friend in a world where friendship was rare. Mrs. de Ropp looked at him closely, waiting for tears or anger, because then she could speak to him about self-control and proper behaviour.

Conradin gave her nothing. He sat still and said no word at all. His face became very white, and perhaps even Mrs. de Ropp felt a small doubt when she saw it. At tea that afternoon, there was toast on the table, though she usually said toast was bad for him and too much trouble to make.

“I thought you liked toast,” she said, with a hurt voice, when he did not touch it. She wanted him to understand that she had been kind. She wanted him to feel thankful, or at least to seem thankful. Conradin looked at the toast and then looked away.

“Sometimes,” he said. That was all. He would not let her buy his sadness with toast. The empty corner in the shed was stronger than the plate on the tea table.

That evening, Conradin went to the shed again. The place was the same, but it was not the same. One corner was empty now, and the emptiness seemed to look back at him. The hen was gone, and the Woman had touched his secret world.

He stood before the cage of Sredni Vashtar. Usually he sang words of praise to him, but that evening he did not sing in the old way. His throat hurt, and he had to hold back a sob. He looked at the dark cage and spoke very softly.

“Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar,” he said. He did not say what the thing was. A god should know. Conradin felt that if he had to explain it, the prayer would become smaller and weaker.

After that evening, the same prayer came again and again. At night, in the dark of his bedroom, he whispered it under the bedclothes. In the evening, in the dim shed, he whispered it before the cage. “Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar,” he

said, and each time the words carried all his hate, grief, and hope.

Part 3

The next few days passed slowly. Conradin still went to the shed when he could, but he knew that the Woman was watching him more closely. She had already taken the hen, and now he feared that she would find the greater secret too. Each visit to Sredni Vashtar felt more dangerous, and therefore more holy.

One morning Mrs. de Ropp told him that he must not go out. “You have been coughing,” she said, though Conradin had not coughed more than usual. “You will stay indoors today.” Her voice was calm, but Conradin heard another meaning under it. She had made a decision.

After breakfast, she left him in the sitting room and went away. Conradin sat by the window and looked out toward the garden. He could not see the door of the shed clearly, but he could see the path that led to it. His hands lay cold and still on his knees.

A little later, Mrs. de Ropp appeared on the path. She was walking toward the shed. In one hand she held the key that Conradin had hidden so carefully. She must have searched his room and found it while he was kept inside.

Conradin’s heart beat very hard, but his body did not move. The Woman had crossed the last line. She had taken the hen, and now she was going to enter the place of Sredni Vashtar. For a moment Conradin felt weak with fear, but then the old prayer rose inside him.

“Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar,” he whispered. He said it again and again, very softly. He did not ask for mercy. He did not ask to be saved. He asked only for the one thing that the god should already understand.

Mrs. de Ropp reached the shed and opened the door. She went inside. The door closed behind her, and the garden became quiet again. Conradin watched the shed as if the whole world had become that one dark little building.

Time passed. It may have been only a few minutes, but to Conradin it seemed much longer. He tried to hear something, but the window and the distance kept

the shed silent. The silence was so deep that it seemed to press against his face.

Then he thought he heard a sharp cry. It was not long, and it was not clear. It ended almost as soon as it began. Conradin did not move. His lips kept forming the words of the prayer, though now he hardly knew whether he was speaking them or only thinking them.

The shed door opened. Something long and low came out into the daylight. It was Sredni Vashtar. He moved down the path with his quick, soft steps, and his body looked full of life and power.

For a moment the ferret stopped in the sunlight. There was a dark wet mark around his mouth and throat. Then he went on across the garden and disappeared into the bushes. Conradin watched him go, and a great stillness filled him.

Sredni Vashtar had done the one thing. Conradin did not shout or laugh. His happiness was too deep and strange for that. He only leaned back in his chair and felt the world become wide and free around him.

A maid came into the room and said that tea was ready. Conradin turned his head slowly. “Is there toast?” he asked. His voice was quiet and polite, as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Yes, Master Conradin,” said the maid. “There is toast.” She looked toward the door, perhaps wondering why Mrs. de Ropp had not come in. Then she went away again, and Conradin followed her to the tea table.

He sat down and took a piece of toast. He spread butter on it carefully, watching the yellow butter melt into the hot bread. In the hall, voices began to rise. A servant had gone to the shed, and now the house had learned what was there.

Someone screamed, and someone else ran for help. There were quick steps, frightened voices, and a terrible confusion outside the room. Conradin heard it all, but he did not hurry. He took another bite of toast and enjoyed it slowly.

At last a servant came in, white-faced and shaking. She looked at Conradin as if she did not know what to say to a child. Behind her, the house was full of fear and movement. Conradin lifted his eyes from his plate.

“Who will tell Master Conradin?” the servant whispered to another voice

outside the door. Conradin did not ask what had happened. He already knew. He only reached for another piece of toast, while Sredni Vashtar, the great god, had gone free into the world.

Tobermory

Part 1

It was a cold, wet afternoon near the end of August. Lady Blemley's guests were gathered around the tea table, because there was very little else to do. The weather was poor, the season was dull, and no one could go out to hunt or shoot anything interesting. Usually such an afternoon would have made people tired and restless, but today every face was turned toward Mr. Cornelius Appin.

Mr. Appin had not seemed important when he first came to stay. Someone had told Lady Blemley that he was clever, so she had invited him with mild hope. But for several days no one had discovered what kind of cleverness he had. He was not funny, not handsome, not good at games, and not able to arrange little plays or amusements.

Until that afternoon, he had been only Mr. Appin, a quiet guest with a rather empty name. Then, during tea, he made a statement so strange that everyone stopped talking. He said he had made a discovery greater than almost any modern invention. He said he had found a way to teach animals to speak like human beings.

Sir Wilfrid Blemley looked at him with open doubt. "Do you really ask us to believe this?" he said. "Do you mean that you can teach animals human speech, and that dear old Tobermory is your first successful pupil?" Tobermory was the Blemleys' cat, and until then no one had thought of him as anything more dangerous than a clever house cat.

Mr. Appin did not look ashamed or uncertain. "I have worked on this problem for seventeen years," he said. "Only in the last eight or nine months have I begun to succeed. I have tried with many animals, but lately I have worked mostly with cats. Cats are very intelligent, and they live close to us while still keeping their wild nature."

He spoke with the calm pride of a man who has waited a long time for people to admire him. "Among cats, as among people, one sometimes finds a mind that is far above the others," he continued. "When I met Tobermory a week ago, I saw

at once that he was such a cat. With him, I have reached the end of my work."

The room was silent for a moment. No one quite wanted to laugh, because Mr. Appin was too serious. But no one believed him either. Clovis looked as if he had formed a very rude word with his lips, though he did not say it clearly enough for the others to hear.

Miss Resker asked, "Do you mean that you have taught Tobermory to say simple little sentences?" She spoke as if this would already be a great surprise. A cat that could say "milk" or "come here" would have been enough for most people. But Mr. Appin looked at her with patient disappointment.

"No, Miss Resker," he said. "That is how one teaches very small children or very slow learners. Once the first step has been solved with a truly intelligent animal, such slow methods are not needed. Tobermory can speak our language correctly."

This time Clovis said something more clearly, but it was not a word of belief. Sir Wilfrid was more polite, but his face showed the same feeling. Lady Blemley decided that the easiest way to end the matter was to bring in the cat. "Perhaps we had better have Tobermory here and judge for ourselves," she said.

Sir Wilfrid went to find him. The guests settled back into their chairs, expecting some kind of clever trick. They imagined that Mr. Appin would throw his voice, or that some hidden person would speak for the cat. They were ready to be amused, but not ready to be convinced.

A minute later Sir Wilfrid returned. His face had lost much of its colour, and his eyes were wide with real excitement. He dropped into a chair and said, "It is true." The others sat forward at once, because this was not the face of a man pretending to be surprised.

"I found him asleep in the smoking room," Sir Wilfrid said quickly. "I called to him and told him to come for his tea. He opened his eyes in the usual way, and I told him not to keep us waiting. Then he answered me, in a perfectly natural voice, that he would come when he chose. I nearly jumped out of my skin."

The room broke into noise at once. Everyone began speaking, asking questions, and looking at Mr. Appin with new fear and interest. Mr. Appin sat silently and

enjoyed the first great success of his discovery. For the first time since he had arrived, he was the most important person in the room.

In the middle of this noise, Tobermory entered. He walked softly across the room with his usual smooth step. He did not look excited, proud, or surprised. He looked exactly like a cat who had entered many rooms before and had never thought much of the people in them.

At once the room became quiet. It was strange to face a house cat as if he were another guest at tea. Everyone knew that Tobermory had teeth and claws, and now he also had words. Lady Blemley was the first to speak. “Would you like some milk, Tobermory?” she asked in a voice that was not quite steady.

“I do not mind,” said Tobermory. His tone was flat and careless. A small shiver passed through the listeners, because the voice was real and ordinary, and that made it more frightening. Lady Blemley poured milk into a saucer, but her hand shook a little and some of the milk spilled.

“I am afraid I have spilled some of it,” she said, trying to sound pleasant. Tobermory looked at the milk, then at the carpet. “It is not my carpet,” he answered. After that, no one knew what to say for several seconds.

Part 2

Miss Resker was the first person brave enough to speak after that. She used the kind voice she might have used with a poor person on a visit. “Was it very difficult to learn our language, Tobermory?” she asked. Tobermory looked straight at her for a moment, then looked away toward the middle of the room.

It was clear that he did not plan to answer boring questions. This made the silence even more difficult. A cat that could speak was strange enough, but a cat that could refuse to speak was worse. The guests began to understand that Tobermory had not become a clever pet. He had become a dangerous guest.

Mavis Pellington tried next. “What do you think of human intelligence?” she asked weakly. She laughed a little after the question, but no one joined her. Tobermory turned his head toward her with cold interest.

“Whose intelligence do you mean?” he asked. The words were simple, but they landed heavily in the room. Mavis tried to keep smiling. “Mine, for example,” she said.

“That puts me in a difficult position,” said Tobermory. He did not sound difficult or embarrassed at all. “When Lady Blemley was thinking of inviting you here, Sir Wilfrid said you were the least clever woman he knew. He said there was a difference between being kind to guests and taking care of people who could not think.”

Mavis’s smile disappeared. Lady Blemley made a small shocked sound, but Tobermory went on. “Lady Blemley answered that this was exactly why you should be invited,” he said. “She said you might be foolish enough to buy their old motor-car. The car is known in the house as the car that goes uphill if someone pushes it.”

Lady Blemley tried to protest at once. She said Tobermory had misunderstood something, or perhaps he had heard only part of a conversation. But her protests did not help very much. That very morning, she had told Mavis that the old car would be excellent for her place in Devonshire.

Major Barfield saw that Mavis was in trouble and tried to change the subject. He did it in the worst possible way. “And what about your little friendship with the tortoiseshell cat at the stables?” he asked, with a loud laugh. The moment he had said it, everyone knew it was a mistake.

Tobermory looked at him with deep dislike. “One does not usually talk about private matters in public,” he said. “But from what I have seen of your own behaviour since you came to this house, I think you would not like me to change the subject to your private matters.”

The Major’s face changed at once. He had wanted to embarrass the cat, but the cat had embarrassed him instead. More than that, everyone in the room suddenly felt that the danger was not only for Mavis or the Major. Tobermory had been in the house for days. He had walked under windows, through rooms, along passages, and near doors that people thought were safely closed.

Lady Blemley tried to take control again. “Would you like to go and see if the

cook has your dinner ready?" she asked quickly. In fact, it was much too early for Tobermory's dinner, but no one cared about that. They only wanted him out of the room before he said more.

"Thank you," said Tobermory. "But not so soon after tea. I do not want to die of stomach trouble." Sir Wilfrid gave a nervous laugh. "Cats have nine lives, you know," he said, trying to make the room feel lighter.

"Perhaps," said Tobermory. "But only one liver." The answer was calm, exact, and unpleasantly final. Sir Wilfrid stopped laughing. The others looked at the cat with a new kind of fear.

Mrs. Cornett turned sharply to Lady Blemley. "Adelaide, do you mean to let that cat go and talk about us in the servants' hall?" she asked. Her voice was almost a whisper, but everyone heard it. The thought passed through the room like cold air.

The servants' hall was bad enough. The village would be worse. Other houses would be worse still. If Tobermory began repeating what he had heard, there would be no safe place left for any of them.

People began remembering where Tobermory liked to walk. There was a narrow ledge outside many of the bedroom windows, and Tobermory often walked there. Everyone had thought he was watching birds. Now they wondered what else he had seen and heard.

Mrs. Cornett looked especially uncomfortable. She spent a long time at her dressing table, and she did not want a talking cat to describe the process. Miss Scrawen also looked annoyed. She wrote very passionate poems, but lived a very proper life, and she did not necessarily want people to know how proper she was.

Bertie van Tahn became very pale. He was only seventeen, but he already had a reputation for bad behaviour and had no wish to hear Tobermory improve on it. Odo Finsberry did worse. He got up suddenly and left the room, though leaving so fast made him look even more guilty than if he had stayed.

Clovis was the only person who looked calm. Inside, however, he was thinking quickly. He wondered whether one could buy a box of expensive mice and offer them to Tobermory as payment for silence. It was not a noble plan, but in that

room it seemed almost practical.

Agnes Resker could not bear to be ignored for long, even in a crisis. She lifted her head and said dramatically, “Why did I ever come here?” It was the kind of question people ask when they want sympathy. Unfortunately for her, Tobermory answered it.

“From what you said to Mrs. Cornett on the croquet lawn yesterday, you came for the food,” he said. “You said the Blemleys were the dullest people you knew, but that they had an excellent cook. You said that without the cook, they would have great trouble getting anyone to stay here twice.”

Agnes turned red and then white. “That is not true,” she cried. “Mrs. Cornett will tell you it is not true.” But Tobermory was not finished. He looked at Mrs. Cornett with the same cold calm.

“Mrs. Cornett repeated your words later to Bertie van Tahn,” he said. “She said you would go anywhere if you could get four good meals a day. Then Bertie said—” Tobermory stopped suddenly.

He had seen something outside the open window. A large yellow tomcat from the rectory was moving through the bushes toward the stable yard. In an instant, Tobermory forgot the frightened humans around the tea table. He sprang through the open window and disappeared outside, leaving the room full of half-spoken fears and unfinished insults.

Part 3

When Tobermory vanished through the window, the room did not become peaceful. It became louder and more frightened. Everyone turned on Mr. Appin at once, because he was the person who had made this terrible thing possible. A few minutes earlier, he had been a great man of science. Now he looked like a man who had brought a dangerous animal into a nursery and forgotten to close the door.

“You must stop this at once,” said Lady Blemley. “You must do something before he tells the servants everything.” Her voice shook with anger and fear. She was not thinking now of Mr. Appin’s discovery, or of science, or of fame. She was

thinking of dinner tables, bedroom windows, garden chairs, and all the careless words that might soon come back to destroy people.

Mr. Appin tried to defend himself. “You must understand the importance of what has happened,” he said. “For the first time, an animal has been taught to use human speech. This is a discovery that may change our whole idea of the animal world.” But no one in the room was in the mood to welcome a new idea of the animal world.

Mrs. Cornett spoke more sharply than anyone. “Can Tobermory teach other cats?” she demanded. “That is what we need to know first. Can he go out now and teach that yellow cat from the Rectory to talk? Can he teach every cat in the village?”

The question struck everyone with fresh horror. One talking cat had already been more than enough. A whole village of talking cats would be impossible to live with. People imagined cats on walls, cats under tables, cats outside windows, and cats walking softly into rooms with all the secrets of the neighbourhood in their heads.

Mr. Appin looked unhappy. “It is possible that Tobermory may have begun to teach the stable cat,” he said slowly. “They seem to be close friends. But I do not think he can have taught many others yet. The process needs time, intelligence, and careful attention.”

“That is no comfort at all,” said Mrs. Cornett. “The stable cat is quite enough.” She turned to Lady Blemley. “Adelaide, Tobermory may have been a favourite pet, and he may be a very valuable animal now. But you must agree that both he and the stable cat must be destroyed at once.”

Lady Blemley pressed her hands together. For a moment, she looked almost hurt by the idea. Tobermory had been part of the house for years, and until that afternoon she had thought of him with affection. But affection was weak when set against fear, and fear was now ruling the room.

“Do you think I have enjoyed the last fifteen minutes?” she said bitterly. “My husband and I were fond of Tobermory. At least, we were fond of him before this horrible power was put into him. Now, of course, there is only one thing to do. He

must be killed as soon as possible."

Sir Wilfrid had been thinking in a practical way. He was ashamed, angry, and afraid, but he could still make a plan. "We can put poison in the scraps he always gets at dinner," he said. "That will be the simplest way. As for the stable cat, I will go and drown it myself."

There was a small movement of discomfort around the room, but no one strongly objected. Only Mr. Appin looked shocked. Sir Wilfrid went on, because he wanted the matter settled quickly. "The coachman will be angry about losing the stable cat," he said, "but I can tell him that both cats have a very catching skin disease. I will say we are afraid it may spread to the dogs."

This lie seemed unpleasant but useful, and useful things were now welcome. The guests had stopped thinking about kindness to animals. They were thinking about their own safety. In their minds, Tobermory had changed from a house pet into a walking store of danger.

Mr. Appin rose a little from his chair, then sat down again. He looked almost ill. "But my great discovery!" he cried. "After all my years of work and study, after all my experiments, you cannot simply destroy the result in an afternoon."

"You may continue your experiments somewhere else," said Mrs. Cornett. "Try the cows at the farm. They are kept under better control. Or try the elephants at the Zoological Gardens. People say elephants are very intelligent, and at least they do not creep under bedroom windows and behind chairs."

This answer did not comfort Mr. Appin. His whole life's work had reached its great moment, and the world's first response was a plan to poison the speaker. He had imagined praise, fame, and perhaps a place in history. Instead, he was being told that his pupil must die before dinner.

Clovis watched him with interest. The situation was cruel, but also very clear. A discovery that might make people wiser was one thing. A discovery that might repeat private conversations was quite another. Society could forgive many dangers, but it could not forgive a truthful cat.

Around the room, the guests began making their own private plans. Some decided never again to speak freely in a room where an animal was present. Some

thought of letters they had written, doors they had left open, and windows they had forgotten to close. The house, which had seemed ordinary that morning, now seemed full of listening places.

Lady Blemley rang for a servant, then changed her mind and did not give an order. It was too soon to call attention to the matter. The servants must not be allowed to guess that anything was wrong. If Tobermory reached the servants' hall before dinner, the damage might already be beyond control.

Mr. Appin sat silent, crushed by the hatred of the room. He had entered tea as a dull guest and had become, for a few bright minutes, a man of wonder. Now he had fallen lower than before. His wonderful success had become a social disaster, and every frightened face around him told him the same thing.

Part 4

Dinner that evening was a very uncomfortable meal. Tobermory did not appear, and no one knew whether to feel safe or more afraid. Every sound outside the room made someone look toward the door. The servants moved in and out as usual, but the guests watched their faces closely, trying to see whether they already knew anything.

Lady Blemley had arranged the poisoned food, but the plan could not work while Tobermory stayed away. This made the waiting worse. It was one thing to plan a quiet death for a dangerous cat. It was another thing to imagine that cat walking freely through the dark, perhaps speaking to servants, villagers, or other cats.

The talk at dinner was thin and nervous. People tried to speak about ordinary things, but ordinary things had lost their power. A cat under a window, a cat near a door, or a cat in the garden now seemed more important than politics, weather, or books. No one wanted to say too much, because they had all learned a lesson too late.

Clovis gave the only really cheerful opinion of the evening, though it did not cheer anyone. "He is probably at the local newspaper office now," he said. "He

may be telling them the first part of his life story. If so, it will be the great news of the day." After offering this comfort, he went to bed.

The others followed him slowly, one by one. No one slept very well. Some people left their windows shut, though the night was close and heavy. Others lay awake and imagined a soft step outside the bedroom door.

In the morning, the servants brought early tea to the rooms. In every room they were asked the same question, and in every room they gave the same answer. Tobermory had not come back. The news did not bring peace, because an absent Tobermory was almost worse than a present one.

Breakfast was even more unpleasant than dinner. People looked tired, pale, and angry. They had begun to dislike one another more openly, because each person knew that the others knew too much. Mr. Appin sat in deep misery, for his great success had turned into a nightmare.

Before breakfast ended, a gardener came in with serious news. Tobermory had been found dead in the bushes. The body was brought in, and it was clear what had happened. There were bites on his throat, and yellow fur was caught in his claws.

The big yellow cat from the Rectory had killed him in a fight. For a moment, no one spoke. Then a great silent relief moved through the room. Tobermory was dead, and with him died the worst danger that had ever entered Lady Blemley's house.

The relief did not make the guests kind or cheerful. It only made them eager to leave. By midday, most of them had gone from the Towers. They carried away their bags, their secrets, and a strong wish never again to meet a talking animal.

After lunch, Lady Blemley recovered enough strength to write a very angry letter to the Rectory. In the letter, she spoke of the death of her valuable pet. She did not explain why the pet had recently become dangerous to the peace of every drawing room in the county. Some truths were still better left unsaid.

Tobermory had been Mr. Appin's only successful pupil. He was never to have another. A few weeks later, the newspapers reported that an Englishman had been killed by an elephant in the Dresden Zoological Garden. The elephant had not

seemed bad-tempered before, but the Englishman had apparently been troubling it.

The name of the dead man was not printed correctly in every newspaper. Some papers called him Oppin, and others called him Eppelin. But all of them gave his first name as Cornelius, and that was enough for the people who had known him.

Clovis read the news and understood it at once. “If he was trying to teach German verbs to the poor animal,” he said, “then he deserved what happened to him.” It was a hard ending for Mr. Appin, but no one at the Towers felt that the world had lost a useful gift.

The Unrest-Cure

Part 1

In the railway carriage opposite Clovis, there was a strong, heavy travelling bag on the rack. It had a neat label tied to it, and the label said, “J. P. Huddle, The Warren, Tilfield, near Slowborough.” Below the bag sat the owner of the name. He looked as solid, careful, and ordinary as the bag itself.

Mr. Huddle was travelling with a friend, and the two men spoke quietly together. Their talk was not exciting. They spoke of garden flowers that were late, and of measles at the Rectory. They spoke in the calm voices of people who did not expect anything surprising to happen to them, and who would not welcome it if it did.

Clovis sat across from them and seemed to be paying no attention. But Clovis often listened best when he appeared to be least interested. The train moved through the quiet country, and Mr. Huddle’s careful voice went on. After a while, the talk became more personal.

“I do not know how it has happened,” Mr. Huddle said to his friend, “but I seem to have become old before my time. I am not much over forty, but I feel as if I have settled into middle age very deeply. My sister is the same. We like everything in our life to happen exactly as it usually happens.”

His friend looked at him with polite interest. Mr. Huddle continued, because he had now found a subject close to his heart. “We like things to be in their proper places,” he said. “We like meals, letters, visits, and household matters to come at the proper time. If something changes without reason, it troubles us.”

This seemed to Clovis a very sad way of living. But Mr. Huddle did not speak as if he thought it sad. He spoke as if he were describing a difficult but respectable illness. His face was serious, and his voice showed that even small changes could become important events at The Warren.

“For example,” Mr. Huddle said, “a thrush has built its nest for years in the same tree on the lawn. This year it has built in the ivy on the garden wall. My

sister and I have said very little about it, but I think we both feel the change is unnecessary. It is even a little annoying."

"Perhaps it is a different thrush," said his friend. This was a simple and reasonable answer. But Mr. Huddle did not find it comforting. In fact, it seemed to make the matter worse.

"We have thought of that," he said. "And I believe that gives us even more reason to be annoyed. We do not feel that we want a change of thrush at our time of life. Yet we are not really old enough for such things to trouble us so much."

His friend sat back and looked at him thoughtfully. "What you need," he said, "is an unrest-cure." Mr. Huddle turned the words over in his mind, as if they were both strange and dangerous. "An unrest-cure?" he repeated. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"People take rest-cures when they have suffered from too much worry and too much active life," said the friend. "You have the opposite trouble. You have had too much quiet, too much order, and too much peace. You need something that will shake your life out of its smooth path."

Mr. Huddle looked doubtful. He was not sure he liked the sound of being shaken out of anything. His life might be dull, but it was his own dullness, and he had arranged it carefully. "But where would a person go for such a cure?" he asked.

The friend considered the question with more imagination than kindness. "There are several possibilities," he said. "You might stand for election in a place where everyone hated your opinions. You might visit a very dangerous part of Paris and try to do good work there. You might give lectures in Berlin proving that German music was not really German. Or you might travel inside Morocco."

Mr. Huddle looked more and more unhappy as each idea was offered. None of these cures sounded suitable for a man who disliked a change of thrush. His friend then added the most important point. "But to be truly useful, an unrest-cure should be tried at home. How one would arrange it, I have no idea."

At those words, Clovis became fully awake in spirit, though his body hardly moved. His visit to an elderly relation near Slowborough had promised almost no amusement. Now, suddenly, the journey had given him something better than

amusement. It had given him an opportunity.

The train was slowing as it came near the station. Mr. Huddle and his friend began to gather their things, and the travelling bag was taken down from the rack. Clovis looked once more at the label, though he had already read it carefully. “J. P. Huddle, The Warren, Tilfield, near Slowborough.”

Before the train stopped, Clovis took out a pencil. On the clean white edge of his shirt cuff, he wrote the address in small, careful letters. He did not smile while he wrote it. But if Mr. Huddle had seen his face at that moment, he might have felt that the change of thrush was not the only change coming into his life.

Part 2

Two mornings later, Mr. Huddle entered his sister’s morning room at the wrong hour. This was a serious thing in that house. Miss Huddle was reading Country Life, and that was exactly what she always did at that time, on that day, in that room. But Mr. Huddle had a telegram in his hand, and telegrams were not ordinary interruptions.

In the Huddle household, a telegram seemed almost like an act of nature. It came from outside the careful order of life and had to be obeyed. Mr. Huddle held the small orange paper as if it were hot. Miss Huddle put down her magazine and looked at him with alarm.

The message said that the Bishop was examining a confirmation class in the neighbourhood. Because of measles at the Rectory, he could not stay there. He therefore asked for the Huddles’ hospitality, and he was sending his secretary to arrange everything.

“I scarcely know the Bishop,” said Mr. Huddle. “I have spoken to him only once.” He sounded like a man who had made one small mistake long ago and was now being punished for it. Miss Huddle was also deeply disturbed, but she recovered first.

“We can curry the cold duck,” she said. This was a brave sentence. Cold duck was not meant to become curry that day, and the household rules did not welcome

sudden changes. But a Bishop was coming, and even the Huddles understood that a Bishop must be fed.

Mr. Huddle did not answer, but he looked at his sister with gratitude. In that look, he thanked her for being strong at a terrible moment. Their peaceful home had already been shaken, and the secretary had not even arrived.

Almost at once, the parlour-maid came in. “A young gentleman to see you,” she said. Brother and sister looked at each other. “The secretary,” they murmured together. At once they made their faces serious and guarded, as if every stranger must first prove that he had a right to exist.

The young man who entered was not at all what Mr. Huddle expected a Bishop’s secretary to be. He was too well dressed, too calm, and much too sure of himself. He looked more like a young prince than a church worker. If Mr. Huddle had looked more carefully at the people in the train two days earlier, he might have recognized Clovis.

“You are the Bishop’s secretary?” Mr. Huddle asked, becoming more respectful because he was less sure of himself. The young man gave him a cool look. “His private secretary,” said Clovis. “You may call me Stanislaus. My other name does not matter.”

This answer did not make the Huddles feel safer. Names usually mattered to them very much. A person whose other name did not matter seemed to belong to a difficult and dangerous world. Clovis went on before they could ask more.

“The Bishop and Colonel Alberti may come for lunch,” he said. “I shall be here in any case.” This sounded less like a visit and more like a royal order. Miss Huddle looked quickly toward her brother, and Mr. Huddle looked toward the door, as if the cold duck had suddenly become a national problem.

“The Bishop is examining a confirmation class nearby, is he not?” Miss Huddle asked. She wanted to hold on to the one ordinary fact in the matter. Clovis answered darkly, “On the surface, yes.” Then he asked for a large map of the neighbourhood.

The map was brought, and Clovis bent over it with deep attention. He studied roads, fields, houses, and paths as if he were planning something much more

serious than a Bishop's lunch. The Huddles watched him in silence. The quiet room, the ordered furniture, and the safe morning light no longer seemed able to protect them.

Before long, another telegram arrived. This one was addressed not to Mr. Huddle, but to Prince Stanislaus, care of The Warren. Miss Huddle's face became paler when she heard the word "Prince." Mr. Huddle looked as if life had suddenly moved far beyond his powers.

Clovis opened the telegram and read it quickly. "The Bishop and Alberti will not be here until late in the afternoon," he announced. Then he returned to the map as if nothing unusual had happened. He did not explain who Alberti was, why a prince was in their house, or why a Bishop's visit needed such secrecy.

Lunch was not a cheerful meal. Clovis ate well enough, but he did not encourage conversation. The Huddles sat carefully, trying to behave correctly while not knowing what correctness now required. The curried duck appeared, and even that brave dish could not make the table feel normal.

At the end of the meal, Clovis suddenly smiled in a warm and brilliant way. He thanked Miss Huddle for a delightful lunch and kissed her hand with great seriousness. Miss Huddle did not know whether this was beautiful manners or very improper behaviour. She only knew that she had a headache beginning, though it was not her usual day for one.

Soon afterward, Clovis asked the way to the nearest telegraph office. Then he went out down the carriage drive, leaving the house behind him in a state of heavy expectation. Mr. Huddle and his sister did not say much. Too many things had already happened, and none of them had happened at the proper time.

Part 3

About two hours later, Mr. Huddle met Clovis again in the hall. The young man had returned from the telegraph office and looked perfectly calm. Mr. Huddle was not calm. The afternoon had been moving through too many strange events, and he wanted at least one clear answer.

“When will the Bishop arrive?” he asked. Clovis looked at him as if the question were almost careless. “He is already in the library with Alberti,” he said. Mr. Huddle stared at him. “But why was I not told? I did not know he had come.”

“No one knows he is here,” said Clovis. “The quieter we keep the matter, the better. And you must not disturb him in the library. Those are his orders.” Mr. Huddle felt the floor of his own house become less safe under his feet. The library, which had always been a room for books and quiet reading, had suddenly become a secret centre of danger.

“But what is all this mystery?” he asked. “And who is Alberti? And will the Bishop not have tea?” Clovis gave him a dark look. “The Bishop is not interested in tea,” he said. “The Bishop is interested in blood.”

“Blood?” gasped Mr. Huddle. He had thought the morning’s telegram had been the worst possible shock. Now he saw that it had only been the beginning. Clovis lowered his voice and spoke as if he were sharing a great historical secret. “Tonight will be a great night in the history of the Church,” he said. “We are going to kill every Jew in the neighbourhood.”

Mr. Huddle almost cried out. “Kill the Jews? Do you mean there is a general rising against them?” Clovis shook his head. “No,” he said. “It is the Bishop’s own idea. He is in the library now, arranging all the details.” This answer was so terrible that for a moment Mr. Huddle could not find words.

“But the Bishop is known as a kind and tolerant man,” he said at last. “Exactly,” said Clovis. “That is why the effect will be so great. Everyone will be shocked.” Mr. Huddle could believe that part at once. He saw newspapers, public anger, trials, shame, and his own quiet house named in every report.

“He will be hanged,” said Mr. Huddle. “A motor is ready to take him to the coast,” said Clovis. “A steam yacht is waiting there.” Mr. Huddle’s mind moved weakly from one horror to another. “But there are not thirty Jews in the whole neighbourhood,” he protested.

“We have twenty-six on our list,” said Clovis, looking at some notes. “That will make the work easier and more complete.” Mr. Huddle was now far beyond ordinary fear. “You cannot mean Sir Leon Birberry,” he said. “He is one of the

most respected men in the county."

"He is on the list," said Clovis carelessly. "We have men we can trust, so we do not need much local help. But some Boy Scouts are helping us too." Mr. Huddle looked at him in horror. "Boy Scouts?" he repeated. "Yes," said Clovis. "When they understood there would be real killing, they were even more eager than the men."

"This will be a stain on the twentieth century," cried Mr. Huddle. Clovis nodded. "And your house will be the place where the stain begins," he said. "Half the newspapers in Europe and America will print pictures of it. I have already sent photographs of you and your sister to two papers. I also sent a drawing of the staircase, because much of the killing will probably happen there."

Mr. Huddle could hardly breathe. "There are no Jews in this house," he said. "Not at present," said Clovis. At that moment Mr. Huddle suddenly found a little courage. "I shall go to the police," he shouted.

"That would be difficult," said Clovis. "There are ten armed men hidden in the shrubbery. They have orders to shoot anyone who leaves the house without my signal. Another group is near the front gate. The Boy Scouts are watching the back of the house."

Just then a motor horn sounded from the drive. Mr. Huddle rushed to the hall door like a man hoping to wake from a bad dream. Outside was Sir Leon Birberry, sitting in his motor-car. "I got your telegram," said Sir Leon. "What is the matter?"

"Telegram?" said Mr. Huddle, though by now the word felt almost cursed. Sir Leon showed him the message. It said that he must come to The Warren at once, and it was signed with Mr. Huddle's name. In a flash of terror, Mr. Huddle understood what Clovis had done.

"Come in at once," he cried. He pulled the astonished Sir Leon into the house and looked fearfully toward the shrubbery. Tea had just been placed in the hall, but Mr. Huddle no longer cared about tea, order, or proper manners. He dragged Sir Leon upstairs, and soon the whole household had been called to the upper floor for safety.

Clovis alone remained below at the tea table. The supposed plotters in the

library were clearly too busy with their terrible plans to drink tea or eat toast. A little later, the front-door bell rang, and Clovis opened it. Mr. Paul Isaacs, the shoemaker and parish councillor, stood there, because he too had received an urgent invitation to The Warren.

With terrible politeness, Clovis led this new prisoner to the top of the stairs. Mr. Huddle was waiting there, pale and shaking. The group upstairs now had another person to protect, and another reason to fear the unseen men in the library, the shrubbery, and the back of the house.

Then came a long, awful time of waiting. Once or twice Clovis went outside and walked toward the shrubbery. Each time he returned and went into the library, as if he were reporting to the Bishop. Once he brought the evening letters to the people upstairs with perfect politeness, which somehow made the whole situation worse.

After another short absence, Clovis came halfway up the stairs with news. “The Boy Scouts misunderstood my signal,” he said. “They have killed the postman. I have not had much practice in this sort of thing. Another time I shall do better.” The housemaid, who was engaged to marry the evening postman, began to cry loudly.

“Remember that your mistress has a headache,” said Mr. Huddle weakly. Miss Huddle’s headache had, in fact, become much worse. Clovis hurried downstairs again, then returned from the library with another message. “The Bishop is sorry to hear that Miss Huddle has a headache,” he said. “He has ordered that no guns should be used near the house if possible. Any killing inside the grounds will be done with knives. The Bishop says a man may be a gentleman as well as a Christian.”

That was the last they saw of Clovis. It was nearly seven o’clock, and his elderly relation expected him to dress for dinner. But though he had left the house forever, the fear he had created stayed behind. Through the long night, every sound on the stairs and every movement of wind in the bushes seemed to carry danger.

At about seven the next morning, the gardener’s boy and the early postman

finally proved that the ordinary world still existed. There had been no massacre, no Bishop, no Alberti, and no armed men in the shrubbery. Clovis, meanwhile, was already on an early train back toward town. “I do not suppose they will feel grateful,” he thought, “for the unrest-cure.”

The She-Wolf

Part 1

Leonard Bilsiter was the kind of person who did not find ordinary life interesting enough. Because the real world did not satisfy him, he liked to talk about hidden powers and strange forces. Children often make private worlds for themselves, but they usually keep those worlds mostly to themselves. Leonard was different, because he wanted other people to listen and believe.

His talk about secret powers might have stayed rather empty if chance had not helped him. He had once travelled across Eastern Europe with a friend who had business in Russia. During the journey back, a great railway strike stopped them far from the usual routes. Leonard had to wait for a couple of days at a small station, and there he met a man who sold harness and metal goods.

This man knew many odd stories from distant traders and country people. While they waited at the station, he told Leonard some of these stories. Leonard returned to England with many memories of the strike, but he also returned with something he called Siberian magic. At first he spoke about it in a mysterious way, as if he knew much more than he could safely say.

For a week or two, he enjoyed keeping silent about the details. But silence is hard when no one is asking enough questions. Soon he began to explain that this hidden force gave great powers to the few people who understood it. His aunt, Mrs. Hoops, helped his reputation by telling people that he had once changed a vegetable marrow into a wood pigeon before her eyes.

Some people believed this, or half believed it, because they liked strange stories. Others thought Mrs. Hoops had a very strong imagination. Still, by the time Leonard arrived at Mary Hampton’s house-party, he had become famous in a small way. People were not sure whether he was a wonder-worker or a fool, but in either case he was something to talk about.

Leonard liked this attention. At dinner and after dinner, he often spoke of unseen forces and rare powers. His aunt helped him whenever she could, by

asking questions that made him sound more mysterious. He did not give clear proof of anything, but he gave many dark hints.

At lunch on the day after he arrived, Mary Hampton looked at him with a bright smile. “I wish you would change me into a wolf, Mr. Bilsiter,” she said. Her husband, Colonel Hampton, looked up in surprise. “My dear Mary, I did not know you wanted that.”

“A she-wolf, of course,” said Mary. “It would be too confusing to change my sex as well as my kind.” She spoke as if she were arranging a small change in the dinner plan. Several people laughed, but Leonard did not laugh.

“I do not think one should joke about such things,” he said. He tried to sound serious and powerful. Mary only smiled again. “I am not joking,” she said. “But do not do it today. We have just enough people for bridge, and it would spoil one of the tables if I became a wolf before evening.”

Leonard looked severe. “We understand these hidden forces only imperfectly,” he said. “They should be approached with respect, not with mockery.” After that, the subject was dropped at the table. But it was not dropped in Clovis Sangrail’s mind.

Clovis had sat unusually quiet during the talk about magic. After lunch he found Lord Pabham and drew him away into the billiard room. Lord Pabham kept many wild animals at his park, and Clovis knew this. He also knew that a person with wild animals could sometimes be useful.

“Do you have a she-wolf in your collection?” Clovis asked. “I mean one with a fairly good temper.” Lord Pabham thought for a moment. “There is Louisa,” he said. “She is a fine timber-wolf. I got her two years ago in exchange for some Arctic foxes. She is quite gentle, as wolves go.”

Clovis listened with careful interest. “Would you lend her to me tomorrow night?” he asked. He asked the question as calmly as if he were asking for a tennis racket. Lord Pabham stared at him, because people did not usually borrow wolves for an evening.

“Tomorrow night?” said Lord Pabham. Clovis nodded. “Wolves are night animals, so late hours will not hurt her,” he said. “One of your men could bring

her here after dark. With a little help, he could hide her in the conservatory just when Mary Hampton leaves it."

For a moment Lord Pabham still looked puzzled. Then he understood, and his face broke into laughter. "So that is your game," he said. "You are going to do a little Siberian magic of your own. Does Mary know about this?"

"Mary has promised to help," said Clovis. "That is, if you can answer for Louisa's temper." Lord Pabham looked amused and confident. "I will answer for Louisa," he said.

By the next day, more guests had arrived at the house. This gave Leonard a larger audience, and he became more willing than ever to speak about secret forces and powers beyond ordinary understanding. He did not know that a plan had already been made around him. While he talked about magic, Clovis waited quietly for the right moment to show him a different kind of power.

Part 2

That evening Leonard had everything he wanted. The house-party was larger now, and after dinner the guests gathered in the drawing room. Coffee was served, cards were waiting in the next room, and everyone had time to listen before the games began. Leonard used this time well. He spoke about hidden forces, old wisdom, and powers that most people could not understand.

Mrs. Hoops watched him with proud excitement. She liked hearing her nephew speak, but she wanted more than words. Words were interesting, but a real wonder would be much better. She looked around at the guests and saw that some were listening politely, while others were only waiting to be amused.

"Leonard," she said at last, "why do you not do something to convince them? Change something into another shape. He can do it, you know, if he chooses." She turned toward the others with great confidence, as if she had offered them a rare gift.

Several guests joined in at once. Mavis Pellington begged him to show them something. Others laughed and asked for a little proof. Even those who did not

believe in him were quite ready to enjoy a trick. Leonard felt that he had been pushed into a difficult place.

"Has anyone here," he asked slowly, "a small coin or some little object of no value?" He tried to sound calm, but this was not the great opening Mrs. Hoops had hoped for. It sounded like the beginning of an ordinary trick, and Clovis did not let the moment pass.

"You are surely not going to make coins disappear," said Clovis. His voice was gentle, but it was also full of contempt. "That would be rather simple after all this talk of great hidden powers." A few people smiled, and Leonard's face became stiff.

Mary Hampton rose and crossed toward the conservatory. She was going to give the macaws some pieces of fruit from the dessert dishes. As she walked, she looked back at Leonard. "I still think it is unkind of you not to follow my suggestion," she said. "You really should turn me into a wolf."

Leonard lifted his head with solemn importance. "I have already warned you," he said, "that these powers must not be treated in a mocking spirit." Mary laughed from the edge of the conservatory. "I do not believe you can do it," she said. "I dare you to do it if you can. I defy you to turn me into a wolf."

As she said the last words, she disappeared behind a group of plants. Large green leaves and flowering bushes hid her from the room. For a second, nothing happened. Leonard began to say her name in a severe voice, but he never finished the sentence.

A sudden cold movement of air seemed to pass through the drawing room. At the same moment, the macaws in the conservatory began to scream wildly. Their sharp cries cut through the room and made several people jump up from their chairs. Colonel Hampton turned at once toward the plants.

"Mary," he cried, "what is the matter with those birds?" But before anyone could answer, Mavis Pellington screamed even louder than the macaws. Her cry sent the whole company out of their seats. People turned, stepped back, and stared toward the conservatory in helpless fear.

Among the ferns and flowers stood a grey animal. It was large, lean, and

dangerous-looking. Its eyes watched the room with cold interest, and its body stood partly hidden by the plants. To the frightened guests, it seemed to have come straight out of the place where Mary Hampton had vanished.

For a moment no one spoke clearly. There were small cries, broken questions, and nervous movements. Some people moved behind chairs. Others stood still, as if moving might make the beast spring. Leonard stood with his mouth open, looking more terrified than any of the people who had not claimed to know magic.

Mrs. Hoops recovered first, though she recovered only enough to panic more loudly. “Leonard!” she screamed. “Turn it back into Mrs. Hampton at once. It may attack us at any moment. Turn it back!” Her voice shook, and her hands moved wildly in the air.

“I—I do not know how,” said Leonard. His words came out weakly. He looked at the wolf as if it had appeared to punish him personally. All his talk of hidden powers had left him, and he now seemed like a small frightened man in a room with a real wild animal.

Colonel Hampton turned on him in anger. “You have taken the terrible liberty of turning my wife into a wolf,” he shouted, “and now you say you cannot turn her back?” His face was red, and he looked ready to attack Leonard rather than the wolf.

“I assure you,” Leonard cried, “I did not turn Mrs. Hampton into a wolf. Nothing was farther from my mind.” This was true, but it did not help him. At that moment truth had very little strength against appearances.

“Then where is she?” demanded Colonel Hampton. “And how did that animal get into the conservatory?” Leonard had no answer. He could only look from the Colonel to the wolf and back again.

Clovis spoke with perfect politeness. “Of course we must accept your word that you did not turn Mrs. Hampton into a wolf,” he said. “But you must admit that things look rather bad for you.” This calm remark made Leonard’s position even worse.

Mavis Pellington was almost crying with fear. “Are we going to stand here talking while that beast is ready to tear us to pieces?” she said. The wolf took one

slow step forward, and several people moved backward at once.

Colonel Hampton looked toward Lord Pabham. “You know something about wild animals,” he said. “Can you do anything?” Lord Pabham studied the wolf with a serious face. This was not difficult for him, since he knew Louisa very well, but he played his part carefully.

“The wild animals I know usually come with proper papers from dealers,” he said. “Or they are born in my own collection. I have never before had to deal with an animal that walks out of an azalea bush after a hostess has disappeared.” The guests did not find this very comforting.

He looked at the animal again and continued in a thoughtful voice. “Still, from what one can see, it appears to be a well-grown female timber-wolf.” Mavis gave another sharp cry. “Never mind what kind of wolf it is,” she said. “Can you get it away?”

Lord Pabham picked up a piece of sugar from his coffee saucer. “Most wolves I have known are very fond of sugar,” he said. He threw the piece gently toward Louisa. The wolf caught it neatly, and a long breath of relief moved through the room.

A wolf that ate sugar seemed a little less terrible than a wolf that might eat people. Lord Pabham took another piece and held it where Louisa could see it. The wolf’s eyes followed his hand. The guests watched in silence, still afraid, but now full of desperate hope.

Part 3

Lord Pabham moved slowly toward the door with the piece of sugar in his hand. Louisa followed him, stepping softly across the carpet. Everyone watched the wolf with fixed eyes, afraid that one sudden movement might change her mind. But Louisa cared more about the sugar than about the frightened guests.

When Lord Pabham reached the door, he stepped out into the hall. Louisa followed him without trouble. For a few seconds, no one in the drawing room moved. Then, when the grey body had really disappeared, the whole room seemed

to breathe again.

The relief did not last long. As soon as the wolf was gone, everyone rushed toward the conservatory. They pushed past one another and looked behind the plants, under the tables, and near the bird cages. The macaws were still upset, but Mary Hampton was nowhere to be seen.

“The door is locked on the inside,” said Clovis. He had moved quickly and quietly, and as he spoke he turned the key in the conservatory door as if he had only just tested it. The others saw the locked door and became even more confused. If Mary had not gone out that way, then where had she gone?

Everyone turned toward Leonard. The look on their faces was not friendly. A few minutes earlier, he had been speaking about hidden powers as if they belonged to him. Now the company seemed ready to believe that one of those powers had worked in the worst possible way.

“If you have not turned my wife into a wolf,” said Colonel Hampton, “will you kindly explain where she is? She could not have gone through a locked door. I will not ask you how a North American timber-wolf appeared in the conservatory, but I have a right to ask what has happened to Mrs. Hampton.”

Leonard lifted both hands in helpless protest. “I did not do it,” he said again and again. “I know nothing about it. I did not change Mrs. Hampton into anything.” But each denial only sounded weaker than the last. His frightened face did not help him.

Mrs. Hoops looked almost as angry as the others, though Leonard was her own nephew. She wanted him to be wonderful, but she did not want him to leave a hostess in the shape of a wolf. “Leonard,” she cried, “if this is your doing, you must undo it at once. If it is not your doing, use your powers to make it right.”

“I have no powers over this,” Leonard said miserably. That was the most dangerous answer he could have given. It made his earlier talk seem either false or useless, and neither possibility helped him. The room received his words with a cold murmur of disbelief.

Mavis Pellington moved toward the door with a face of deep injury. “I refuse to remain another hour in this house,” she said. “One does not come to a house-

party in order to be shut up with wolves and strange powers." Her words gave others a new fear: what was the proper thing to do when the hostess had become, or seemed to have become, an animal?

Mrs. Hoops took up the question at once. "If our hostess has really disappeared from human form," she said, "none of the ladies can properly remain here. I absolutely refuse to be looked after by a wolf." She spoke with the force of someone defending society itself.

"It is a she-wolf," said Clovis gently. This did not make Mrs. Hoops any calmer. It did, however, make several people look at him with irritation, which was something Clovis was able to bear without pain.

The argument about what should be done next had only begun when the door opened suddenly. Mary Hampton entered the room, looking cross and rather confused. She did not look like a person who had just been a wolf, but she did look like a person who had been treated very oddly.

"Someone has put me under a spell," she said sharply. "I found myself in the game larder, of all places, and Lord Pabham was feeding me sugar. I dislike being put under spells. Also, the doctor has told me not to eat sugar."

The whole company stared at her. Colonel Hampton hurried to her side, half relieved and half angry. In a few confused sentences, the others told her what had happened in the drawing room. They explained how she had disappeared among the plants, how the wolf had appeared, and how Leonard had not been able to bring her back.

Mary listened with growing excitement. "Then you really did turn me into a wolf, Mr. Bilsiter?" she cried. She seemed much more pleased by the idea than her husband was. If Leonard had been clever enough at that moment, he might have taken the credit and escaped in glory.

But Leonard had already denied everything too many times. He had destroyed his own chance. He could only shake his head weakly and say once more that he had done nothing. No one admired him for this honesty, because no one felt sure that it was honesty.

Then Clovis stepped quietly into the empty place that Leonard had left. "It was

I who took that liberty," he said. His voice was modest, but not too modest. "You see, I lived for two years in north-eastern Russia, and I know more than a tourist usually knows about the magic of that region."

Everyone turned toward him. Leonard stared at him with horror and hate. Clovis continued calmly, as if explaining a small social mistake. "One does not like to talk about these powers," he said. "But when one hears a great deal of nonsense spoken about them, one is sometimes tempted to show what they can really do."

Mrs. Hoops opened her mouth, but no words came out. Leonard's face had become dark with anger. All evening he had been trying to build a great name for himself, and now Clovis had taken both the wonder and the victory. Worse still, Leonard could not challenge him without reminding everyone of his own failure.

Mary Hampton looked delighted. Colonel Hampton looked less delighted, but his wife was human again, and that made anger difficult to organize. Lord Pabham returned to the room with a calm face and did not explain too much. Louisa, he reported, had been safely removed.

"May I have some brandy?" Clovis asked, sinking a little into a chair. "The effort has left me rather faint." This final touch was almost too much for Leonard. If he could truly have changed Clovis into some small insect and stepped on him, he would have done it with great pleasure.

But Leonard could do nothing. His Siberian magic had become a joke, his reputation had fallen apart, and his aunt could no longer tell the story of the vegetable marrow with quite the same pride. Clovis, meanwhile, accepted the brandy with quiet seriousness. The house-party had been given a miracle, and the miracle had been arranged with a wolf, some sugar, and a very steady face.

The Toys of Peace

Part 1

"Harvey," said Eleanor Bope, giving her brother a piece cut from a London morning newspaper, "please read this. It is about children's toys. It says almost exactly what we have been saying about children, teaching, and influence."

Harvey took the paper and began to read. The article said that some people had serious doubts about giving boys toy soldiers, guns, and warships. It admitted that boys often liked fighting and all the bright signs of war. But it argued that adults should not make this love stronger by giving it shape in the nursery.

The article went on to describe a coming exhibition for children's welfare. At this exhibition, a Peace Council planned to show a different kind of toy. Instead of small soldiers, there would be small civilians. Instead of guns, there would be ploughs, work tools, and other signs of peaceful life.

The display would also show a painted picture of the Peace Palace at The Hague. In front of it, children and parents would see toys connected with work, public life, and good citizenship. The writers hoped that toy makers would learn from the idea and begin to sell peace toys in ordinary shops.

Harvey put the cutting down and looked thoughtful. "The idea is interesting," he said. "It is also very well meant. But whether it would really work with children is another question." He did not speak unkindly, but his voice was not full of hope.

"We must try," said Eleanor at once. She did not want the idea to remain only an article in a newspaper. "You are coming to us at Easter, and you always bring the boys some toys. This will be a perfect chance to begin the experiment."

Harvey looked at her with the face of a man who has been given an honour he does not much want. Eleanor went on before he could refuse. "Go through the toy shops and buy small models and figures connected with peaceful life," she said. "They should show useful work, public service, and the ordinary duties of good citizens."

She spoke with growing warmth, because the plan seemed clearer to her as she

explained it. “Of course, you must not just give them the toys and leave them alone,” she said. “You must explain the idea to the children. You must make them interested in the new way of playing.”

Then she remembered an earlier failure and became more serious. “Their Aunt Susan sent them a toy called the Siege of Adrianople,” she said. “That toy needed no explanation at all. They knew the uniforms, the flags, and even the names of the commanders.”

Harvey smiled slightly, but Eleanor did not smile. “One day I heard them using very ugly words,” she continued. “They told me they were Bulgarian orders. Perhaps they were, but I took the toy away from them all the same.”

To Eleanor, this proved the danger of war toys. They entered the children’s minds too easily. They needed no help from adults. If a peaceful idea was to enter those same minds, it would have to be placed there with care and firmness.

“Your Easter presents must give their minds a new direction,” she said. “Eric is not even eleven yet, and Bertie is only nine and a half. They are still at an age when good influence can make a real difference.”

Harvey was silent for a moment. He did not dislike his nephews, but he knew something about boys. He also knew something about the family from which these boys had come, and that made him doubtful about the power of peaceful toys.

“There is such a thing as old instinct,” he said. “You must remember that. There are family habits too. One of their great-uncles fought very hard at Inkerman, and I believe he was praised for it in official reports.”

Eleanor did not look pleased, but Harvey continued. “And their great-grandfather once broke all the hot houses of his Whig neighbours after the great Reform Bill was passed. A family with that kind of past may not become gentle only because we give the children a model wash-house and a few little farmers.”

Eleanor looked at him firmly. She did not like jokes when she was thinking about moral improvement. Harvey saw that he would not escape the task by making light of it. His sister had decided, and in family life, that often counted more than reason.

“Still,” he said at last, “as you say, the boys are young. I will do my best.” He

folded the newspaper cutting and gave it back to her. In his own mind, however, he wondered whether peace could really be put into a cardboard box and handed to two lively boys at Easter.

Part 2

On Easter Saturday, Harvey opened a large red cardboard box in front of the boys. Eric and Bertie watched him with bright, eager eyes. Eleanor had told them that their uncle had brought them the newest kind of toy. Because of this, their hopes had become very high.

Eric was almost sure the box held soldiers from Albania. Bertie thought it might be something even better. The boys whispered to each other while Harvey worked at the lid. They imagined uniforms, flags, guns, horses, and perhaps a camel corps from a faraway country.

“There may be Arabs on horses,” Eric whispered. “Or Albanians. They have fine uniforms, and they fight all day. They even fight at night when there is a moon.” Bertie listened with deep interest. This was exactly the kind of present they understood.

When the lid came off, the first thing they saw was a mass of curled paper. That was a good sign. The most exciting toys were often packed with curled paper, and the boys leaned closer. Harvey pushed the paper aside and took out a square, plain-looking building.

“It is a fort!” cried Bertie at once. Eric shook his head with better information. “No, it is the palace of the Mpret of Albania,” he said. “It has no windows, so people passing by cannot shoot at the royal family.” He looked proud of this explanation.

“It is not a fort,” said Harvey quickly. “And it is not a palace. It is a town dust-bin.” The boys stared at him. This was a difficult beginning. Harvey hurried on. “The rubbish of the town is collected there, instead of lying about and hurting people’s health.”

The boys said nothing. They had expected a place that could be attacked or

defended. Instead, they had received a place for rubbish. Harvey tried to look cheerful and useful as he put it on the table.

Next he took out a small lead figure of a man in black clothes. “This,” he said, “is John Stuart Mill. He was an important civilian. He wrote about political economy.” Eric looked at the little figure and then at his uncle. “Why?” asked Bertie.

Harvey paused. “Because he wanted to,” he said at last. “He thought it was a useful thing to do.” Bertie made a small sound that showed he did not understand anyone wanting to do such a thing. Eric had already begun to look back into the box, hoping for something better.

Another square building came out. This one had windows and chimneys, but it still did not look very exciting. “This,” said Harvey, “is a model of the Manchester branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association.” The name was long, and neither boy seemed grateful for it.

“Are there any lions?” asked Eric suddenly. He had been reading about ancient Rome and Christians, and he thought lions might naturally belong with them. Lions would certainly improve the present. Harvey answered firmly, “There are no lions.”

He continued taking things from the box. “Here is Robert Raikes, who started Sunday schools,” he said. “Here is a town wash-house. These little round things are loaves baked in a clean public bakehouse. This figure is a health inspector. This one is a district councillor. This one is an official of the Local Government Board.”

“What does he do?” asked Eric, now sounding tired. Harvey did not have a very exciting answer. “He sees to matters connected with his department,” he said. Even to Harvey, the sentence sounded weak. To the boys, it sounded like the end of hope.

More objects followed. There was a small box with a slit in the top. Harvey explained that it was a ballot-box, used for putting votes into at election time. “What do people put into it at other times?” asked Bertie. “Nothing,” said Harvey.

Then came peaceful tools: a wheelbarrow, a hoe, some poles, a beehive, and a

ventilator for sewers. Harvey named them carefully, trying to give each one its proper value. He also found another building and at first thought it was a second dust-bin. Then he corrected himself and said it was a school of art and public library.

After that came more famous peaceful figures. “This is Mrs. Hemans, a poet,” said Harvey. “And this is Rowland Hill, who helped create penny postage. This is Sir John Herschel, an important man of science.” He was trying hard now, because the boys’ faces had become flatter and flatter.

Eric looked at the figures on the table. They were toys, because adults said they were toys. But he could not see how anyone was supposed to play with them. “Are we meant to play with these people?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Harvey. “They are toys, and toys are meant to be played with.” Eric asked the plain and difficult question. “But how?”

Harvey had been afraid of this question. He thought quickly. “You might make two of them stand for Parliament,” he said. “You could have an election. The votes would be put into the ballot-box, and then someone would count them.”

At once the boys began to brighten. “With rotten eggs?” cried Eric. “And fights? And broken heads?” Bertie joined him eagerly. “And bleeding noses, and everyone very drunk?” The election had suddenly become interesting.

“Nothing of the kind,” said Harvey. He spoke quickly, before the election became a battle. “It would be a quiet and proper election. The Mayor would count the votes. Then each candidate would thank him and say the contest had been fair and pleasant.”

The boys looked at him with complete disappointment. Harvey pressed on bravely. “Then they would part with friendly words and respect for each other. That would be a good game for you. I never had such toys when I was young.”

“I do not think we will play with them just now,” said Eric. His voice held no excitement at all. “Perhaps we should do some of our holiday work. It is history this time. We have to learn about the Bourbon period in France.”

Harvey did not like this change of subject either. History was full of danger. Eric went on. “We have to know about Louis the Fourteenth. I already know the

names of all the main battles." Harvey saw at once that this would not do.

"There were some battles in his reign, of course," he said carefully. "But I think people made them sound bigger than they really were. News was not very good in those days. Generals could make a small fight sound like a great battle."

The boys listened, but not with much trust. Harvey tried to pull Louis away from war. "Louis was really famous as a gardener," he said. "He made the gardens at Versailles very beautiful, and people copied them in many countries." This was true enough to be useful, but not strong enough to defeat the battles in Eric's mind.

"Do you know anything about Madame Du Barry?" Eric asked. "Did she have her head cut off?" Harvey avoided the question. "She was also interested in gardens," he said. "I believe a rose was named after her." Then he decided that enough teaching had been done for the moment. "You had better play for a while," he said, "and leave your lessons until later."

Part 3

Harvey left the boys in their room and went to the library. He wanted to give them time to find a proper use for the new toys. At the same time, he was not sure that such a use could be found. The toys had been chosen with care, but they did not seem to carry much life in them.

He sat in a chair and thought about children's books. Perhaps, he thought, the real trouble was history. Children were always being given kings, wars, murders, prisons, and battles. If history books could be written without all those things, perhaps boys would begin to think more peacefully.

But the idea became difficult almost at once. Some periods of history would become very thin if the battles were taken away. The Wars of the Roses would be hard to explain. The age of Napoleon would nearly disappear. The Thirty Years' War would leave a very large empty space.

Still, Harvey tried to be hopeful. Children might be taught to admire printing, farming, clean water, good roads, and public libraries. They might learn more about new machines and less about armies. Perhaps, at a very young age, their

minds could be turned away from blood and flags.

After half an hour or so, Harvey decided to return to the boys' room. He wanted to see whether the peace toys had begun their quiet work. As he came near the door, he heard Eric speaking in a strong voice of command. Bertie's voice joined in from time to time, eager and helpful.

Harvey stopped outside the door and listened. "That one is Louis the Fourteenth," Eric was saying. "The one in short trousers. Uncle said he started Sunday schools, but he will have to be Louis. He does not look much like him, but we can paint him later."

"We can give him a purple coat from my paintbox," said Bertie. "And red heels," said Eric. "That will make him much better. The woman Uncle called Mrs. Hemans can be Madame de Maintenon. She begs Louis not to go on the expedition, but he will not listen."

Harvey looked through the doorway without showing himself. The peaceful figures had already changed their lives completely. Robert Raikes was no longer a Sunday-school reformer. Mrs. Hemans was no longer a poet. John Stuart Mill had also lost his connection with political economy.

"Louis takes Marshal Saxe with him," Eric continued. "We shall pretend that they have thousands of soldiers. The password is 'Qui vive?' and the answer is 'L'état c'est moi.' That was one of Louis's favourite things to say." Bertie nodded with deep respect, though he probably did not understand the French words at all.

The town dust-bin had changed too. The boys had made little holes in it, so that pretend guns could point out from inside. It was now the great fortress of Manchester. A public health toy had become a military stronghold in less than an hour.

"They land at Manchester in the middle of the night," said Eric. "A secret helper gives them the keys of the fortress. Then Louis orders his soldiers to surround the Young Women's Christian Association and take everyone inside." His face shone with interest. This was clearly much better than a peaceful election.

"Once I get them back to the Louvre, the girls are mine," Eric said in a grand voice, speaking for Louis. Then he took up the figure of Mrs. Hemans again. "She

says, ‘Never!’ and stabs Marshal Saxe through the heart.”

“He bleeds terribly,” cried Bertie. This part pleased him very much. He took the red ink and splashed it freely over John Stuart Mill, who was now Marshal Saxe. Some of the ink also ran across the table, but Bertie did not seem to think this was a problem.

Eric continued with even greater excitement. “Then the soldiers rush in and punish everyone. They are very fierce. A hundred girls are killed, and the rest are dragged away to the French ships.” Bertie emptied more red ink over the building that Harvey had so carefully named only a short time before.

The Manchester branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association now looked as if it had been through a terrible battle. The ballot-box lay on its side. The health inspector had lost all peaceful meaning. The wheelbarrow seemed to have become part of the army’s supplies.

“Louis says, ‘I have lost a Marshal, but I do not go home with nothing,’” Eric announced. The words were full of victory. Bertie moved the captured figures toward the edge of the table, where the French ships were supposed to be waiting. There were no ships among the peace toys, but this did not trouble him.

Harvey moved away from the door without entering the room. He did not want to stop the game, because stopping it would prove nothing. The boys had not misunderstood the toys. They had understood them in their own way, which was much more powerful than his way.

He went to find Eleanor. She was sitting with a calm face, perhaps already imagining the boys learning public duty and gentle citizenship. Harvey stood near her and spoke without any long explanation. “Eleanor,” he said, “the experiment has failed. We have begun too late.”

Laura

Part 1

"You are not really dying, are you?" Amanda asked. Her voice was anxious, but it also had the tone of someone who hoped the answer would be convenient. Laura was lying quietly, but her eyes were very much alive. Illness had weakened her body, but it had not softened her tongue.

"The doctor has given me permission to live until Tuesday," said Laura. She spoke as if the doctor had given her a small social invitation that she might or might not accept. Amanda stared at her in distress. "But today is Saturday," she said. "That is serious."

"I do not know whether it is serious," said Laura. "It is certainly Saturday." Amanda looked hurt by this answer. "Death is always serious," she said. Laura turned her head a little on the pillow and looked at her friend with faint amusement.

"I never said that I was going to die," Laura answered. "I suppose I am going to stop being Laura. But I shall go on being something. An animal, perhaps." Amanda did not like this at all, but Laura went on before she could stop her.

"You see, if a person has not been very good in this life, she is born again as something lower," Laura said. "And when I think about it, I have not been very good. I have been small-minded, unkind, and ready to take revenge when life gave me a good reason."

"Life never gives anyone a good reason for that," Amanda said quickly. She wanted to sound firm and moral. Laura's eyes brightened a little, as if Amanda had offered exactly the answer she wanted. "I must say," Laura replied, "that Egbert is a very good reason."

Amanda looked offended at once. Egbert was her husband, and she could not easily accept him as a reason for bad behaviour. "I do not see what is wrong with Egbert," she said. Laura did not hurry to answer. She seemed to enjoy arranging her thoughts.

"Perhaps the wrongness has been mine," Laura said calmly. "Egbert has only

helped it grow. For example, he made a thin, unhappy little noise for a whole evening because I took the collie puppies from the farm out for a run." Amanda lifted her head. She remembered this matter very well.

"They chased his young speckled Sussex chickens," Amanda said. "They drove two sitting hens off their nests. They also ran all over the flower beds. You know how much Egbert cares about his chickens and his garden."

"He did not need to talk about it all evening," said Laura. "And he did not need to say, 'Let us say no more about it,' just when I was beginning to enjoy the argument. That was when one of my small acts of revenge became necessary." A smile moved across her tired face.

Amanda looked at her with fear. "What did you do?" she asked. Laura's smile became more open. "The next day I turned the whole family of speckled Sussex into his seedling shed," she said. "Two of the hens pretended they were laying eggs at the time, but I was firm."

"How could you?" Amanda cried. "We thought it was an accident." Laura did not seem sorry. "That is because you are kind-hearted," she said. "Or because accidents are easier to live with than explanations." She rested for a moment, but her mind was still moving quickly.

"So you see," Laura continued, "I have some reason to think that I shall come back as a lower animal. But I have not been completely bad. I think I may be allowed to be a nice animal, something lively and graceful, with a love of fun." She looked pleased by the idea. "Perhaps I shall be an otter."

Amanda tried to imagine Laura as an otter and failed. "I cannot imagine you as an otter," she said. "Well," said Laura, "I do not suppose you can imagine me as an angel either." Amanda was silent. She could not.

"An otter's life might be very pleasant," Laura said. "There would be fish to eat, and water to swim in, and a fine, thin, quick body. Instead of waiting for trout to come to the surface, one could go down into their own homes and take them there. That seems much more sensible."

"But think of the otter hounds," Amanda said. "Think how terrible it would be to be hunted, driven about, and finally killed." Laura did not look as frightened as

Amanda hoped. “It might be rather exciting,” she said. “At least half the neighbourhood would be watching.”

Amanda gave a tired sigh. “I wish you would be serious,” she said. “You really ought to be serious if you are only going to live until Tuesday.” Laura closed her eyes for a moment, but she was not asleep. “Perhaps Tuesday is a very serious day,” she said softly. “But I may not wait for it.”

In fact, Laura did not wait for Tuesday. She died on Monday. Amanda was deeply upset, though not only in the way people are expected to be upset when a friend dies. Laura’s death came at an awkward time, just when the house was full of plans for guests, golf, fishing, and the rhododendrons at their best.

Part 2

After Laura’s death, Amanda went to speak with Sir Lulworth Quayne. He was her uncle-in-law, and he had known Laura for a long time. Amanda felt she needed someone to hear how difficult the situation had become. “It is terribly upsetting,” she said. “I have asked quite a number of people to come for golf and fishing, and the flowers are just at their best.”

Sir Lulworth did not seem shocked by this way of speaking. He knew Amanda, and he had known Laura too. “Laura was always inconsiderate,” he said. “She was born during Goodwood week, when there was an ambassador staying in the house, and the man hated babies.” Amanda was not sure whether this was meant as comfort, but she accepted it as conversation.

“She had the strangest ideas,” Amanda continued. “Do you know if there was any madness in her family?” Sir Lulworth thought for a moment. “Madness? No, I never heard of any. Her father lives in West Kensington, but apart from that he is quite sensible.”

Amanda lowered her voice. “She had an idea that she was going to be born again as an otter.” Sir Lulworth did not laugh. This made Amanda feel less certain that the idea was impossible. He only looked thoughtful, as if Laura might be able to make trouble even after death.

“People talk about being born again quite often now,” he said. “Even here in the West, one hears the idea. I would not call it madness by itself. And Laura was such an unusual person in this life that I would be careful about saying what she could or could not do in another one.”

Amanda looked at him quickly. She was the kind of person whose opinions were easily shaped by the people near her. If Sir Lulworth had laughed, she might have laughed too. But because he spoke seriously, her own fear began to grow.

“Do you think she really might have passed into an animal?” she asked. Sir Lulworth did not have time to answer. At that moment Egbert came into the breakfast room, looking as if something terrible had happened. Laura’s death alone would not have been enough to give him that face.

“Four of my speckled Sussex have been killed,” he cried. “The very four I was going to send to the show on Friday. One was dragged away and eaten in the middle of my new carnation bed. I have spent so much money and time on that bed.”

Amanda sat very still. Egbert went on, too upset to notice her face. “My best chickens and my best flower bed were chosen for destruction,” he said. “It is almost as if the animal knew exactly how to do the most damage in the shortest time.” His voice shook with anger and grief.

“Was it a fox?” Amanda asked. She tried to make the question sound ordinary. Sir Lulworth looked interested. “It sounds more like a polecat,” he said. But Egbert shook his head at once.

“No,” he said. “There were marks of webbed feet everywhere. We followed the tracks down to the stream at the bottom of the garden. It was clearly an otter.” Amanda looked quickly across at Sir Lulworth, then looked away again.

Egbert was too upset to eat breakfast. He went out to give orders about making the poultry yard stronger. As soon as he was gone, Amanda spoke in a low and shocked voice. “I think she might at least have waited until the funeral was over.”

Sir Lulworth looked quite calm. “It is her own funeral, you know,” he said. “It is a difficult question how much respect one should show to one’s own dead body.” Amanda did not find this comforting. The idea of Laura as an otter was becoming

more real and more improper at the same time.

The next day, the family went to the funeral. While they were away, the otter came again. This time, all the remaining speckled Sussex were killed. The animal seemed to have crossed much of the lawn and several flower beds on its way back to the stream.

When the family returned, Egbert's anger became fierce. The strawberry beds in the lower garden had also been damaged. He looked at the ruined places, the broken plants, and the empty poultry yard. To him, this was not a mystery of the next life. It was a plain attack on his property.

"I shall have the otter hounds here as soon as possible," he said. Amanda felt a cold fear at once. If the otter was Laura, then Egbert was speaking of hunting Laura down. If it was not Laura, the idea was still unpleasant, but not nearly as terrible.

"No, you must not," Amanda cried. "You cannot even think of such a thing. I mean, it would not be right so soon after a funeral in the house." She knew the reason sounded weak, but it was the best reason she could safely give.

"It is necessary," said Egbert. "Once an otter begins this kind of thing, it will not stop." Amanda tried another answer. "Perhaps it will go somewhere else now that there are no chickens left." Egbert looked at her with suspicion. "One would think you wanted to protect the creature," he said.

Amanda quickly looked away. "There has been so little water in the stream lately," she said. "It does not seem very sporting to hunt an animal when it has so little chance to hide." Egbert almost lost patience. "I am not thinking about sport," he said. "I want that animal killed as soon as possible."

Part 3

Amanda's resistance did not remain strong for long. On the following Sunday, while the family was at church, the otter came into the house itself. It found its way to the larder and stole half a salmon. Then it dragged the fish into Egbert's studio and tore it into shining pieces on the Persian rug.

This was too much even for Amanda. Until then, she had tried to think of the otter as a sad and difficult problem. Now it had entered the house, taken food, and chosen Egbert's own room for the damage. The action had a personal feeling, and that was exactly what frightened her.

Egbert stood over the ruined rug in a state of deep anger. "Soon we shall have it hiding under our beds," he said. "It will bite pieces out of our feet while we sleep." Amanda wanted to tell him not to be foolish, but the words did not come easily. From what she knew of Laura, this did not seem impossible.

The otter hounds were asked to come. This time Amanda could not find a strong enough reason to stop the plan. She still disliked it deeply, but her fear of the otter had begun to mix with her fear for it. If the animal really was Laura, Amanda did not want it killed. But she also did not want Laura hiding under beds and attacking people's feet.

On the evening before the hunt, Amanda walked alone beside the stream. The light was low, and the water moved quietly between the banks. She looked at the dark places under the roots and stones, wondering whether the otter was near. She did not call it by name, because that would have made the fear too clear.

Instead, she tried to make the sounds of hounds. She hoped the noise might frighten the otter away before the real hounds came. The sounds she made were not very good, and anyone listening would not have understood her purpose. Some people later said kindly that she must have been practising animal sounds for a village entertainment.

The next day, Amanda did not go out with the hunt. She stayed at home, waiting for news. Waiting was almost worse than seeing. Every sound from outside made her listen, and every quiet moment gave her mind more space to imagine what might be happening near the stream.

In the afternoon, her friend and neighbour Aurora Burret came to the house. Aurora had been out with the hunt, and she looked full of fresh air and news. She did not understand Amanda's fear, so she spoke brightly, as people do after a successful day outdoors.

"It is a pity you were not there," Aurora said. "We had quite a good day. We

found the otter at once, in the pool just below your garden." Amanda's hands tightened. She tried to ask her question calmly, but her voice was very low.

"Did you kill it?" she asked. Aurora did not notice the pain in the question. "Yes," she said. "A fine she-otter. Your husband was bitten rather badly when he tried to catch it by the tail." She said this almost cheerfully, because a bite was part of the story of the day.

Amanda sat very still. "A she-otter," she repeated, though perhaps she did not mean to speak aloud. The words seemed to close around her. Laura had spoken of being an otter, and now the dead animal was female.

Aurora continued, still not understanding. "Poor beast," she said. "I felt quite sorry for it. When it was killed, it had such a human look in its eyes." She stopped and laughed a little, as if she were about to say something silly. "Do you know who that look reminded me of?"

Amanda did not answer. Her face had changed so much that Aurora suddenly became alarmed. The name that Aurora had almost spoken did not need to be spoken. Amanda already heard it in her mind.

"My dear, what is the matter?" Aurora cried. But Amanda could not answer her. The room, the garden, the stream, and the dead otter all seemed to come together in one terrible thought. A moment later, she was seriously ill with shock, and for some time she could not return to ordinary life.

Part 4

Amanda's illness after the hunt was serious, but it did not last forever. After some time, she was able to sit up, speak quietly, and take interest in ordinary things again. Egbert decided that a change of place would be good for her. So he took her to the Nile Valley, where the warm light and strange scenes might help her forget the trouble at home.

The change did help her. Little by little, Amanda's mind became calmer. The dead otter began to seem less like Laura and more like an ordinary animal that had found an easy way to get food. She told herself that fear and grief had made

her imagine too much. The house in England, the stream, the ruined chickens, and Aurora's words now seemed far away.

In Egypt, Amanda began to feel almost herself again. The wide river, the hot sky, and the busy hotel life gave her new things to think about. Egbert was still Egbert, but even his small troubles seemed easier to bear in a new country. Amanda's usual gentle nature returned, and she no longer looked for signs of Laura in every animal or sound.

One evening in a Cairo hotel, Amanda was dressing slowly for dinner. She was taking her time, because she felt peaceful and well. From the next room came a sudden storm of angry words in Egbert's voice. The voice was certainly his, but the words were far stronger than the words he usually used.

Amanda did not become frightened at once. In fact, she almost laughed. Egbert was often upset by small household accidents, and in a hotel there were many chances for such accidents. She went on with her dressing for a moment, then called through the open door.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "What has happened?" Her voice was light and amused. She expected to hear that a button was missing, or that a servant had put the wrong clothes in the wrong place. She did not expect any answer that could reach back to Laura.

Egbert's voice came from the dressing room, full of helpless anger. "The little beast has thrown all my clean shirts into the bath!" he shouted. "Just wait until I catch you, you little—" His next words were broken by more angry sounds and movement.

Amanda stood still. Something in the words "little beast" touched an old fear in her mind. She tried to keep her voice steady. "What little beast?" she asked. She could still have laughed, but now the laugh was caught somewhere inside her.

Egbert came to the doorway, red-faced and furious. "A little beast of a naked Nubian boy," he said. "A small brown boy, running about as if the whole hotel belonged to him." He was still too angry about the shirts to notice Amanda's face. To him, the matter was simple. Clean shirts had been put into bath water, and someone must be punished.

To Amanda, it was not simple at all. In the room of her memory, Laura's voice seemed to speak again. Laura had said that after being an otter, she might perhaps return in human shape, something simple and wild, perhaps a little Nubian boy. Amanda had tried to forget that part of the conversation, but now it came back clearly and coldly.

She sat down suddenly. The warm hotel room, the Cairo evening, and the sound of Egbert's anger moved far away from her. The otter had been killed, but perhaps Laura had not ended there. Perhaps she had only changed again and found another way to trouble Egbert.

Egbert was still talking about the bath, the shirts, and the boy, but Amanda could hardly hear him. She saw Laura's tired smile, heard her light voice, and remembered how easily she had spoken of revenge. The peace that Egypt had brought her broke at once. After that evening, Amanda became seriously ill again.