

CHAPTER IV

NAUGHTY CHILDREN LAND

It was an extraordinary looking place. Kitty thought it was the queerest place she had ever seen. It had a tumbled-about, pulled-about appearance, for the ground was all in mounds and holes, and the roots of the trees bulged bare from the sides of the banks. Presently there came a sound of screaming and shouting. Above these dismal cries Kitty fancied she heard the sound of smacking.

“Is that Naughty Children Land?” she asked.

Her play-fellow did not answer.

She turned to look for him, but the queer creature was gone. Kitty was alone. “Extraordinary!” muttered Kitty. “It must be Naughty Children Land,” she continued. It was not at all difficult to get into

Naughty Children Land; just a step down a bank, a jump over a ditch, and Kitty was in it.

She made a few steps forward. The ground was covered with broken toys. Battered, smashed, noseless, eyeless, hairless dollies; tops without a spin



in them; whips without handles, drums without heads; torn picture-books, blotted copy-books, mangled lesson-books, their pages miserably fluttering about.

Queer dull little birds, with one feather only for a tail, flew here and there, uttering melancholy chirps. "Tweet-tweet!" they cried. "Hi-ss-hiss" shrieked a cat, making an *∞* of his thin body, and waving a tail that appeared to have been pulled and pulled

till it was more like a bell-rope than anything else.

But what attracted Kitty's attention was a group of little girls, sitting with their shoulders up to their ears, their chins in their hands, their hair falling over their eyes. They would have been very pretty but for their frowning eyebrows, their puckered foreheads; their tumbled hair, their under-lips, that had stuck out so long that now they always stuck out. Every now and then these dismal children gave a big spiteful sob, and their faces were smeared with dirty tears.

"What is the matter? Why do you look so miserable?" asked Kitty.

At first the woebegone children drew down their eyebrows more closely, and stuck their under-lips further out. Then in a sing-song sob-broken voice, raising their shoulders still nearer to their ears, burying their chins deeper in their hands, making wryer faces, they sang in a chorus:

"Yes we can, we shall, we will.

Who's to make us smile and play?

No—we must be wretched still.

Sulky are we?—So you say.
No we will not, no we shall not,
No we will not laugh or play.



“Do we mope and do we scowl?
What a lot you seem to know.
P'r'aps you'd like to hear us howl;
Pray, if you don't like it—go.
No we will not, no we shall not,
No we will not laugh or play.”

“If it suits us best to mutter,
Lift the shoulders, hang the head;
All that you will hear us utter
Is what we’ve already said.
No we will not, no we shall not,
No we will not laugh or play.”

“Well, I never heard of anyone yet liking to be miserable all the day long,” said Kitty with a smile that grew broader and broader as she looked at the dismal, dejected group. But they took no further notice of her. She stood hesitating and watching. Should she jump back over the ditch and go to look for that elf, or should she go on?

The children still kept up their doleful chant.

“I am sure I shall find the naughtiest child in this place,” thought Kitty, “and I should so like to see it. Of course I’ll find my way back. It will be quite easy. Those broken toys will guide me, and those little girls,” she went on, with a twinkle in her eyes, “who are determined to be wretched will still be here. They do not seem inclined to run away.”

Kitty walked on. Certainly it was the most

extraordinary place that could be imagined. Through the trees she could see houses. All the windows seemed to have broken panes; fat, cross children looked out; the gardens seemed to be a tangle of thistles and weeds.

More broken toys, more blotted copy-books, more torn picture-books; everywhere weeping, howling, shouting. She could see no one here; probably all were sitting at home crying. It was as if everybody was crying in the place. There were plaintive cries, and angry cries, and lazy, nothing-else-to-do cries. There were cries like old street organs that had lost the beginnings and ends of their tunes, and still went round and round, "*piano, crescendo, piano, crescendo,*" as the music-books have it. There were cries like bagpipes in a rage, shrill, blustering, furious; there were cries like bagpipes that had caught a cold and were going to sneeze.

Kitty's blue eyes twinkled as she listened to these weepings. "Those children ought all to be whipped and put to bed," she said severely. "That would brighten them up."

Through that chorus of cries she distinguished barks—not jovial, satisfied, inquisitive barks—but snarls, and growls, and angry frightened yappings. She heard fierce mews and hissings also—every now and then lean cats ran along at full speed, their ears lying back, their eyes full of a wild hunted light.

“Pussy, pussy!” said Kitty softly as a black creature dashed past her.



It whisked up a tree, and glared at her with eyes like green lanterns. Kitty thought of the pussy at home, of his sleek fur coat, of his comfortable ways.

“Pussy, pussy!” she said again in her most winning voice.

“Hi—ss!” answered the cat, ruffling up all his fur and glaring at her spitefully.

“A most unamiable, disagreeable cat! He ought to be whipped and put to bed also,” said Kitty, and she marched on with an offended air.

Birds which looked as if they were always moulting watched her as she passed, presenting a most dejected appearance with their heads very much on one side.

“Poor birdies—birdies!” whispered Kitty softly.

At the first step she made in their direction they flew off with as much flutter as their feeble wings could make.

“I wonder have I grown *horrid* to look at, that they are all so frightened of me!” muttered Kitty. She felt her cheeks, her nose. Her nose seemed to be the same round little nose inclined to point upwards, her cheeks felt plump and soft.

All at once something cold dropped on the nape of her neck, just behind her ear. Kitty put up her hand and took hold of a goggle-eyed frog. “Oh, oh, oh!” she cried with a shiver, throwing it away.

“Ha, ha, ha!” shouted a little boy, dancing round and round.

He was the queerest little lad she had ever seen. He had short legs, and a queer little fat figure, and

queer little pointed ears, queer little curls fell over his forehead, and he had queer yellow eyes.



He looked so funny, putting one in mind of something between a monkey, a squirrel, and a boy, that Kitty after a moment began to laugh. It

seemed to her that Cousin Charlie might look like that at his very naughtiest.

“Make friends,” said the boy, stopping his dance. “Give me a kiss.”

“Certainly not,” answered Kitty; “but *perhaps* I may shake hands with you.”

She put out her hand, cautiously watching the boy, who had a gleam in his eyes she did not quite like. He approached with a hop and a jump.

“There’s a sweet for you,” he cried, depositing a spider on Kitty’s palm.

“Oh, oh, oh!” she shivered, gathering herself into a little trembling mass of disgust, skipping about and shaking her finger tips to make sure she had dropped the spider.

The boy laughed louder and louder; that was evidently his idea of fun.

“You are the disagreeablest, mischievouslest boy,” said Kitty, turning away, and trying to make her words sound as long and severe as she could. “You deserve to be where you are, in Naughty Children Land. I am going to leave it.”

She blinked her eyes to prevent the tears from falling. She would not for all the world that the boy should see he had made her cry.

As she turned away he sang lustily after her:

“Up and down, and round and round,
Turn to left and turn to right,
Never will the way be found
By weary walking day and night.”

Kitty pretended not to hear. She walked back the way she fancied she had come. Before, behind, on every side of her stretched the tumbled-about land, and every untidy side looked exactly like the other. Was she really going only round and round? Presently she found herself standing once more close to the queer little boy. There were a number of other children about the place now. They were having high games, throwing each other into a duckweed pond, full of frogs that loudly croaked their vexation; or they were trying to make each other slip into a bed of nettles, or sit down on a wasp's nest.

Bu—uzz! bu—uzz! went the wasps in a rage.

The children laughed louder and louder, till they fairly screamed with merriment.

The queer little boy sat by himself, striking one stone against another. Out of the dark, dull stones the sparks flew, golden and beautiful. As they flew up he laughed.

“Listen, I’ll tell you a secret,” he said, winking one yellow eye at Kitty. “I am practicing to set the world on fire.”

“The world—on—fire!” she repeated quite breathless.

The queer boy nodded his head.

“Listen; the sparks will catch the trees in the wood. There will be a hiss, a flame. How the people will run, scamper, and tumble! They will tumble about like ninepins in their fright; and how their hair will catch fire! But the flames will run faster. Hurrah, what a bonfire that will be!”

He sprang to his feet, he leaped about, swinging his arms; his teeth flashed. Kitty thought he looked like a small tiger.

“But you would be burned yourself,” she said, with a gleam in her eyes.

“Oh, I am brave! I don’t mind pain!” said the boy, beginning to strike the stones once more with a fine flourish. Bang went the uplifted stone down upon his thumb, and hit it with a great thump. The boy set up a roar, like that of forty cross babies.

“Oh! o-oh! O-o-o-h-h! Daddy Coax—Da-addy Coax!” he shouted, flinging down the stones and running off with all the speed of his legs.

“Daddy Coax! I wonder who Daddy Coax is? It sounds a nice name!” thought Kitty. Then she continued: “Setting the world on fire! with the dear little birds, and the pussies, and the faithful dogs in it! And there would be the old people, and the cripple children who can’t run!”

The thought of Johnnie seemed to knock at her heart, yet she did not remember distinctly. She seemed to hear the eager, uneven thump of his crutch. Again her little heart ached with the confused sense of pain. She walked on faster.

She made her way towards a wood that seemed

the only pretty spot near. As she approached it she nearly fell over a wee girl who was kneeling, watching a lovely butterfly with wings like quivering flowers, twinkling and hovering near the ground. As it rested to stretch its bright body for a moment,



down came the clenched little fist and crushed the happy winged creature.

“Oh, how could you?” cried Kitty.

“Don’t you love to kill flies and butterflies and see them wiggle?” asked the child. She was so small

she could not speak plain yet; but her bright black eyes twinkled, and she showed her wicked little teeth.

Before Kitty could answer she heard the tramp of small feet running. The next moment she was surrounded by a crowd of children, who cried: "Come along, come along! We are going to rob a nest. There are two newborn birds with yellow beaks, and there are three blue-speckled eggs. The mother bird is sitting on them. The father bird is watching. We'll kill him with a stone."

"We'll blow the eggs and string them for a necklace," cried a girl.

"I won't come!" exclaimed Kitty indignantly. "How can you be so wicked?"

A pitiless hand seized hers. It was so strong in its unkindness it pulled her along.

"Let me go! let me go!" entreated Kitty as the cruel children pushed and pulled her.

Run she must; run with the children. Oh! the cruel children, with hands strong to hurt, with feet nimble to give pain, with shrill voices to jeer and mock.

Presently Kitty saw a hedge, and in it a pretty nest, so cunningly built. It lay among the fresh green leaves. A baby prince could not have a daintier cradle, set among shadier curtains, than had those callow birds. The father bird was fluttering above uttering cries of reproach. A thousand other birds were singing; Kitty understood their song.

They sang of their love for their pretty nestlings, of their pride in the nest they built in the sweet spring weather.

“Twe—et! twe—et! bur—rrr!” sang the father bird, with all his heart in his throat. “Shame upon the boys and girls who find sport in robbing the homes we and our mates make so patiently!”

“Twe—et! twe—et! Save my little ones,” piteously cried the mother bird.

Her head showed just above the border of the nest. Brave mother bird! she did not stir as the children came nearer. Out of the green twilighty hedge her watching eyes shone wistfully. Kitty thought they turned upon her. Their light seemed to burn into her heart.

“Twe—et! twe—et! Save my little ones! save my little ones!” entreated the mother bird.

Then Kitty sprang from the children. She placed



herself between them and that part of the hedge where stood the nest. She defended its approach

with all her might. She waved her brave little arms like the sails of a windmill in a tempest, pushing down the children as they came. Pitiful little arms, eager to comfort, not to hurt. The father bird did his best to help in the battle. He flew against the invaders. He fluttered his wings in their faces. He pecked at their noses, at their hair.

“Twe—et, bu—urr, bu—urr! Shame, shame!” he cried louder and louder.

The mother bird kept up that piteous twe—et.

This touching little noise, that sounded between a sob and a prayer to be delivered from the cruel children, seemed to give Kitty strength. But what could she do against so many? Alone against a crew of spoilers!—She shut her eyes as the children dragged her from the place she had defended. She heard them clambering through the hedge and the crack of the twigs. She heard the sorrow of all the birds—the screech of the father, the wail of the mother. Then came a wild hurrah! and she knew the children had their hands on the nest. The hurrah stopped all of a sudden.

Kitty looked up. Two severe-looking old dames, carrying birch rods, had suddenly appeared on the scene.

Whack, whack! went the rods.

“Oh, oh, oh! Daddy Coax! Daddy Coax!” cried the children, running away. They might be very brave laying siege to birds’ nests; but they could not run away fast enough from these birch rods.

The stern-looking old ladies pounced upon the leaders of the gang, and held them firmly tucked under their arms. Kitty saw the black-eyed child who liked to kill “fies” and “butterfies.”

As she stood looking, the severe dames suddenly disappeared, carrying off the children as they vanished.

“Extraordinary!” muttered Kitty, rubbing her eyes.

She looked to the right, to the left; they were gone! “I can’t understand it! They were here a moment ago—and who is Daddy Coax? How shall I find out where he lives?”