

“He is not really our father,” John answered. “He didn’t even know how a father does till I showed him.”

This was grumbling. “We complain of John,” cried the twins.

Tootles held up his hand. He was so much the humblest of them, indeed he was the only humble one, that Wendy was specially gentle with him.

“I don’t suppose,” Tootles said diffidently, “that I could be father.”

“No, Tootles.”

Once Tootles began, which was not very often, he had a silly way of going on.

“As I can’t be father,” he said heavily, “I don’t suppose, Michael, you would let me be baby?”

“No, I won’t,” Michael rapped out. He was already in his basket.

“As I can’t be baby,” Tootles said, getting heavier and heavier, “do you think I could be a twin?”

“No, indeed,” replied the twins; “it’s awfully difficult to be a twin.”

“As I can’t be anything important,” said Tootles, “would any of you like to see me do a trick?”

“No,” they all replied.

Then at last he stopped. “I hadn’t really any hope,” he said.

The hateful telling broke out again.

“Slightly is coughing on the table.”

“The twins began with mammee-apples.”

“Curly is taking both tappa rolls and yams.”

“Nibs is speaking with his mouth full.”

“I complain of the twins.”

“I complain of Curly.”

“I complain of Nibs.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” cried Wendy, “I’m sure I sometimes think that children are more trouble than they are worth.”

She told them to clear away, and sat down to her workbasket: a heavy load of stockings and every knee with a hole in it as usual.

“Wendy,” remonstrated Michael, “I’m too big for a cradle.”

“I must have somebody in a cradle,” she said almost tartly, “and you are the littlest. A cradle is such a nice homely thing to have about a house.”

While she sewed they played around her; such a group of happy faces and dancing limbs lit up by that romantic fire. It had become a very familiar