

“I do just,” said Nibs, hitting back.

“You see,” Wendy said complacently, “our heroine knew that the mother would always leave the window open for her children to fly back by; so they stayed away for years and had a lovely time.”

“Did they ever go back?”

“Let us now,” said Wendy, bracing herself for her finest effort, “take a peep into the future”; and they all gave themselves the twist that makes peeps into the future easier. “Years have rolled by; and who is this elegant lady of uncertain age alighting at London Station?”

“O Wendy, who is she?” cried Nibs, every bit as excited as if he didn’t know.

“Can it be—yes—no—it is—the fair Wendy!”

“Oh!”

“And who are the two noble portly figures accompanying her, now grown to man’s estate? Can they be John and Michael? They are!”

“Oh!”

“‘See, dear brothers,’ says Wendy, pointing upwards, “‘there is the window still standing open. Ah, now we are rewarded for our sublime faith in a mother’s love.’ So up they flew to their mummy and daddy; and pen cannot describe the happy scene, over which we draw a veil.”

That was the story, and they were as pleased with it as the fair narrator herself. Everything just as it should be, you see. Off we skip like the most heartless things in the world, which is what children are, but so attractive; and we have an entirely selfish time; and then when we have need of special attention we nobly return for it, confident that we shall be embraced instead of smacked.

So great indeed was their faith in a mother’s love that they felt they could afford to be callous for a bit longer.

But there was one there who knew better; and when Wendy finished he uttered a hollow groan.

“What is it, Peter?” she cried, running to him, thinking he was ill. She felt him solicitously, lower down than his chest. “Where is it, Peter?”

“It isn’t that kind of pain,” Peter replied darkly.

“Then what kind is it?”

“Wendy, you are wrong about mothers.”

They all gathered round him in affright, so alarming was his agitation; and with a fine candour he told them what he had hitherto concealed.