Chapter XXVI

‘It's Mother!’

THEIR belief in the Magic was an abiding thing. After the morning’s incantations Colin sometimes gave them Magic lectures.

‘I like to do it,’ he explained, ‘because when I grow up and make great scientific discoveries I shall be obliged to lecture about them and so this is practise. I can only give short lectures now because I am very young, and besides Ben Weatherstaff would feel as if he was in church and he would go to sleep.’

‘Th’ best thing about lecturin’,’ said Ben, ‘is that a chap can get up an’ say aught he pleases an’ no other chap can answer him back. I wouldn’t be agen’ lecturin’ a bit mysel’ sometimes.’

But when Colin held forth under his tree old Ben fixed devouring eyes on him and kept them there. He looked him over with critical affection. It was not so much the lecture which interested him as the legs which looked straighter and stronger each day, the boyish head which held itself up so well, the once sharp chin and hollow cheeks which had filled and rounded

out and the eyes which had begun to hold the light he remembered in another pair. Sometimes when Colin felt Ben's earnest gaze meant that he was much impressed he wondered what he was reflecting on and once when he had seemed quite entranced he questioned him.

'What are you thinking about, Ben Weatherstaff?' he asked.

'I was thinkin',' answered Ben, 'as I'd warrant tha's gone up three or four pound this week. I was lookin' at tha' calves an' tha' shoulders. I'd like to get thee on a pair o' scales.'

'It's the Magic and—and Mrs Sowerby's buns and milk and things,' said Colin. 'You see the scientific experiment has succeeded.'

That morning Dickon was too late to hear the lecture. When he came he was ruddy with running and his funny face looked more twinkling than usual. As they had a good deal of weeding to do after the rains they fell to work. They always had plenty to do after a warm deep sinking rain. The moisture which was good for the flowers was also good for the weeds which thrust up tiny blades of grass and points of leaves which must be pulled up before their roots took too firm hold. Colin was as good at weeding as any one in these days and he could lecture while he was doing it.

'The Magic works best when you work yourself,' he said this morning. 'You can feel it in your bones and muscles. I am going to read books about bones and muscles, but I am going to write a book about Magic. I am making it up now. I keep finding out things.'

It was not very long after he had said this that he laid down his trowel and stood up on his feet. He had been silent for several minutes and they had seen that he was thinking out lectures, as he often did. When he dropped his trowel and stood upright it seemed to Mary and Dickon as if a sudden strong thought had made him do it. He stretched himself out to his tallest height and he threw out his arms exultantly. colour glowed in his face and his strange eyes widened with joyfulness. All at once he had realized something to the full.

'Mary! Dickon!' he cried. 'Just look at me!'

They stopped their weeding and looked at him.

'Do you remember that first morning you brought me in here?' he demanded.

'I used to hate it because he was not fond of me. If he grew fond of me I think I should tell him about the Magic. It might make him more cheerful.'

When the nurse carried the tray down-stairs she slapped it down on the kitchen dresser so that Mrs Loomis, the cook, could see the highly polished dishes and plates.

'Look at that!' she said. 'This is a house of mystery, and those two children are the greatest mysteries in it.'

'If they keep that up every day,' said the strong young footman John, 'there'd be small wonder that he weighs twice as much to-day as he did a month ago. I should have to give up my place in time, for fear of doing my muscles an injury.'

That afternoon Mary noticed that something new had happened in Colin's room. She had noticed it the day before but had said nothing because she thought the change might have been made by chance. She said nothing to-day but she sat and looked fixedly at the picture over the mantel. She could look at it because the curtain had been drawn aside. That was the change she noticed.

'I know what you want me to tell you,' said Colin, after she had stared a few minutes. 'I always know when you want me to tell you something. You are wondering why the curtain is drawn back. I am going to keep it like that.'

'Why?' asked Mary.

'Because it doesn't make me angry any more to see her laughing. I wakened when it was bright moonlight two nights ago and felt as if the Magic was filling the room and making everything so splendid that I couldn't lie still. I got up and looked out of the window. The room was quite light and there was a patch of moonlight on the curtain and somehow that made me go and pull the cord. She looked right down at me as if she were laughing because she was glad I was standing there. It made me like to look at her. I want to see her laughing like that all the time. I think she must have been a sort of Magic person perhaps.'

'You are so like her now,' said Mary, 'that sometimes I think perhaps you are her ghost made into a boy.'

That idea seemed to impress Colin. He thought it over and then answered her slowly.

'If I were her ghost—my father would be fond of me,' he said.

'Do you want him to be fond of you?' inquired Mary.

Dickon was looking at him very hard. Being an animal charmer he could see more things than most people could and many of them were things he never talked about. He saw some of them now in this boy.

'Aye, that we do,' he answered.

Mary looked hard too, but she said nothing.

'Just this minute,' said Colin, 'all at once I remembered it myself—when I looked at my hand digging with the trowel—and I had to stand up on my feet to see if it was real. And it is real! I'm well—I'm well!'

'Aye, that tha' art!' said Dickon.

'I'm well! I'm well!' said Colin again, and his face went quite red all over.

He had known it before in a way, he had hoped it and felt it and thought about it, but just at that minute something had rushed all through him—a sort of rapturous belief and realization and it had been so strong that he could not help calling out.

'I shall live forever and ever and ever!' he cried grandly. 'I shall find out thousands and thousands of things. I shall find out about people and creatures and everything that grows—like Dickon—and I shall never stop making Magic. I'm well! I'm well! I feel—I feel as if I want to shout out something—something thankful, joyful!'

Ben Weatherstaff, who had been working near a rose-bush, glanced round at him.

'Tha' might sing th' Doxology,' he suggested in his dryest grunt. He had no opinion of the Doxology and he did not make the suggestion with any particular reverence.

But Colin was of an exploring mind and he knew nothing about the Doxology.

'What is that?' he inquired.

'Dickon can sing it for thee, I'll warrant,' replied Ben Weatherstaff.

Dickon answered with his all-perceiving animal charmer's smile.

'They sing it i' church,' he said. 'Mother says she believes th' skylarks sings it when they gets up i' th' mornin'.'

'If she says that, it must be a nice song,' Colin answered. ' I've never been in a church myself. I was always too ill. Sing it, Dickon. I want to hear it.'

Dickon was quite simple and unaffected about it. He understood what Colin felt better than Colin did himself. He understood by a sort of instinct so natural that he did not know it was understanding. He pulled off his cap and looked round still smiling.

'Tha' must take off tha' cap,' he said to Colin, 'an' so mun tha', Ben—an' tha' mun stand up, tha' knows.'

Colin took off his cap and the sun shone on and warmed his thick hair as he watched Dickon intently. Ben Weatherstaff scrambled up from his knees and bared his head too with a sort of puzzled half-resentful look on his old face as if he didn't know exactly why he was doing this remarkable thing.

Dickon stood out among the trees and rose-bushes and began to sing in quite a simple matter-of-fact way and in a nice strong boy voice:

> 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
> Praise Him all creatures here below,
> Praise Him above ye Heavenly Host,
> Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
> Amen.'

When he had finished, Ben Weatherstaff was standing quite still with his jaws set obstinately but with a disturbed look in his eyes fixed on Colin. Colin's face was thoughtful and appreciative.

'It is a very nice song,' he said. 'I like it. Perhaps it means just what I mean when I want to shout out that I am thankful to the Magic.' He stopped and thought in a puzzled way. 'Perhaps they are both the same thing. How can we know the exact names of everything? Sing it again, Dickon. Let us try, Mary. I want to sing it, too. It's my song. How does it begin? 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow'?'

And they sang it again, and Mary and Colin lifted their voices as musically as they could and Dickon's swelled quite loud and beautiful—and at the second line Ben Weatherstaff raspingly cleared his throat and at the third he joined in with such vigour that it seemed almost savage and when the 'Amen' came to an end Mary observed that the very same thing had happened to him which had happened when he found out that Colin was not a cripple—his chin was twitching and he was staring and winking and his leathery old cheeks were wet.

'I want my chair,' he said. 'Miss Mary and I are going to look at the part of the house which is not used. John can push me as far as the picture-gallery because there are some stairs. Then he must go away and leave us alone until I send for him again.'

Rainy days lost their terrors that morning. When the footman had wheeled the chair into the picture-gallery and left the two together in obedience to orders, Colin and Mary looked at each other delighted. As soon as Mary had made sure that John was really on his way back to his own quarters below stairs, Colin got out of his chair.

'I am going to run from one end of the gallery to the other,' he said, 'and then I am going to jump and then we will do Bob Haworth's exercises.'

And they did all these things and many others. They looked at the portraits and found the plain little girl dressed in green brocade and holding the parrot on her finger.

'All these,' said Colin, 'must be my relations. They lived a long time ago. That parrot one, I believe, is one of my great, great, great, great aunts. She looks rather like you, Mary—not as you look now but as you looked when you came here. Now you are a great deal fatter and better looking.'

'So are you,' said Mary, and they both laughed.

They went to the Indian room and amused themselves with the ivory elephants. They found the rose-coloured brocade boudoir and the hole in the cushion the mouse had left but the mice had grown up and run away and the hole was empty. They saw more rooms and made more discoveries than Mary had made on her first pilgrimage. They found new corridors and corners and flights of steps and new old pictures they liked and weird old things they did not know the use of. It was a curiously entertaining morning and the feeling of wandering about in the same house with other people but at the same time feeling as if one were miles away from them was a fascinating thing.

'I'm glad we came,' Colin said. 'I never knew I lived in such a big queer old place. I like it. We will ramble about every rainy day. We shall always be finding new queer corners and things.'

That morning they had found among other things such good appetites that when they returned to Colin's room it was not possible to send the luncheon away untouched.

'Now that I am a real boy,' Colin had said, 'my legs and arms and all my body are so full of Magic that I can't keep them still. They want to be doing things all the time. Do you know that when I waken in the morning, Mary, when it's quite early and the birds are just shouting outside and everything seems just shouting for joy—even the trees and things we can't really hear—I feel as if I must jump out of bed and shout myself. And if I did it, just think what would happen!'

Mary giggled inordinately.

'The nurse would come running and Mrs Medlock would come running and they would be sure you had gone crazy and they'd send for the doctor,' she said.

Colin giggled himself. He could see how they would all look—how horrified by his outbreak and how amazed to see him standing upright.

'I wish my father would come home,' he said. 'I want to tell him myself. I'm always thinking about it—but we couldn't go on like this much longer. I can't stand lying still and pretending, and besides I look too different. I wish it wasn't raining to-day.'

It was then Mistress Mary had her inspiration.

'Colin,' she began mysteriously, 'do you know how many rooms there are in this house?'

'About a thousand, I suppose,' he answered.

'There's about a hundred no one ever goes into,' said Mary. 'And one rainy day I went and looked into ever so many of them. No one ever knew, though Mrs Medlock nearly found me out. I lost my way when I was coming back and I stopped at the end of your corridor. That was the second time I heard you crying.'

Colin started up on his sofa.

'A hundred rooms no one goes into,' he said. 'It sounds almost like a secret garden. Suppose we go and look at them. You could wheel me in my chair and nobody would know where we went.'

'That's what I was thinking,' said Mary. 'No one would dare to follow us. There are galleries where you could run. We could do our exercises. There is a little Indian room where there is a cabinet full of ivory elephants. There are all sorts of rooms.'

'Ring the bell,' said Colin.

When the nurse came in he gave his orders.

'I never seed no sense in th' Doxology afore,' he said hoarsely, 'but I may change my mind i' time. I should say tha'd gone up five pound this week, Mester Colin—five on 'em!'

Colin was looking across the garden at something attracting his attention and his expression had become a startled one.

'Who is coming in here?' he said quickly. 'Who is it?'

The door in the ivied wall had been pushed gently open and a woman had entered. She had come in with the last line of their song and she had stood still listening and looking at them. With the ivy behind her, the sunlight drifting through the trees and dappling her long blue cloak, and her nice fresh face smiling across the greenery she was rather like a softly coloured illustration in one of Colin's books. She had wonderful affectionate eyes which seemed to take everything in—all of them, even Ben Weatherstaff and the 'creatures' and every flower that was in bloom. Unexpectedly as she had appeared, not one of them felt that she was an intruder at all. Dickon's eyes lighted like lamps.

'It's Mother—that's who it is!' he cried and he went across the grass at a run.

Colin began to move toward her, too, and Mary went with him. They both felt their pulses beat faster.

'It's Mother!' Dickon said again when they met half-way. 'I knowed tha' wanted to see her an' I told her where th' door was hid.'

Colin held out his hand with a sort of flushed royal shyness but his eyes quite devoured her face.

'Even when I was ill I wanted to see you,' he said, 'you and Dickon and the secret garden. I'd never wanted to see any one or anything before.'

The sight of his uplifted face brought about a sudden change in her own. She flushed and the corners of her mouth shook and a mist seemed to sweep over her eyes.

'Eh! dear lad!' she broke out tremulously. 'Eh! dear lad!' as if she had not known she were going to say it. She did not say, 'Mester Colin,' but just 'dear lad' quite suddenly. She might have said it to Dickon in the same way if she had seen something in his face which touched her. Colin liked it.

'Are you surprised because I am so well?' he asked.

She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled the mist out of her eyes.

'Aye, that I am!' she said; 'but tha'rt so like thy mother tha' made my heart jump.'

'Do you think,' said Colin a little awkwardly, 'that will make my father like me?'

'Aye, for sure, dear lad,' she answered and she gave his shoulder a soft quick pat. 'He mun come home—he mun come home.'

'Susan Sowerby,' said Ben Weatherstaff, getting close to her. 'Look at th' lad's legs, wilt tha'? They was like drumsticks i' stockin' two month' ago—an' I heard folk tell as they was bandy an' knock-kneed both at th' same time. Look at 'em now!'

Susan Sowerby laughed a comfortable laugh.

'They're goin' to be fine strong lad's legs in a bit,' she said. 'Let him go on playin' an' workin' in th' garden an' eatin' hearty an' drinkin' plenty o' good sweet milk an' there'll not be a finer pair i' Yorkshire, thank God for it.'

She put both hands on Mistress Mary's shoulders and looked her little face over in a motherly fashion.

'An' thee, too!' she said. 'Tha'rt grown near as hearty as our 'Lizabeth Ellen. I'll warrant tha'rt like thy mother too. Our Martha told me as Mrs Medlock heard she was a pretty woman. Tha'lt be like a blush rose when tha' grows up, my little lass, bless thee.'

She did not mention that when Martha came home on her 'day out' and described the plain sallow child she had said that she had no confidence whatever in what Mrs Medlock had heard. 'It doesn't stand to reason that a pretty woman could be th' mother o' such a fou' little lass,' she had added obstinately.

Mary had not had time to pay much attention to her changing face. She had only known that she looked 'different' and seemed to have a great deal more hair and that it was growing very fast. But remembering her pleasure in looking at the Mem Sahib in the past she was glad to hear that she might some day look like her.

Susan Sowerby went round their garden with them and was told the whole story of it and shown every bush and tree which had come alive. Colin walked on one side of her and Mary on the other. Each of them kept looking up at her comfortable rosy face, secretly curious about the delightful feeling she gave them—a sort of warm, supported feeling. It

So it occurred to him that this boy was learning to fly—or rather to walk. He mentioned this to his mate and when he told her that the Eggs would probably conduct themselves in the same way after they were fledged she was quite comforted and even became eagerly interested and derived great pleasure from watching the boy over the edge of her nest—though she always thought that the Eggs would be much cleverer and learn more quickly. But then she said indulgently that humans were always more clumsy and slow than Eggs and most of them never seemed really to learn to fly at all. You never met them in the air or on tree-tops.

After a while the boy began to move about as the others did, but all three of the children at times did unusual things. They would stand under the trees and move their arms and legs and heads about in a way which was neither walking nor running nor sitting down. They went through these movements at intervals every day and the robin was never able to explain to his mate what they were doing or trying to do. He could only say that he was sure that the Eggs would never flap about in such a manner; but as the boy who could speak robin so fluently was doing the thing with them, birds could be quite sure that the actions were not of a dangerous nature. Of course neither the robin nor his mate had ever heard of the champion wrestler, Bob Haworth, and his exercises for making the muscles stand out like lumps. Robins are not like human beings; their muscles are always exercised from the first and so they develop themselves in a natural manner. If you have to fly about to find every meal you eat, your muscles do not become atrophied (atrophied means wasted away through want of use).

When the boy was walking and running about and digging and weeding like the others, the nest in the corner was brooded over by a great peace and content. Fears for the Eggs became things of the past. Knowing that your Eggs were as safe as if they were locked in a bank vault and the fact that you could watch so many curious things going on made setting a most entertaining occupation. On wet days the Eggs' mother sometimes felt even a little dull because the children did not come into the garden.

But even on wet days it could not be said that Mary and Colin were dull. One morning when the rain streamed down unceasingly and Colin was beginning to feel a little restive, as he was obliged to remain on his sofa because it was not safe to get up and walk about, Mary had an inspiration.

have been no happiness even in that golden springtime air. But they all knew it and felt it and the robin and his mate knew they knew it.

At first the robin watched Mary and Colin with sharp anxiety. For some mysterious reason he knew he need not watch Dickon. The first moment he set his dew-bright black eye on Dickon he knew he was not a stranger but a sort of robin without beak or feathers. He could speak robin (which is a quite distinct language not to be mistaken for any other). To speak robin to a robin is like speaking French to a Frenchman. Dickon always spoke it to the robin himself, so the queer gibberish he used when he spoke to humans did not matter in the least. The robin thought he spoke this gibberish to them because they were not intelligent enough to understand feathered speech. His movements also were robin. They never startled one by being sudden enough to seem dangerous or threatening. Any robin could understand Dickon, so his presence was not even disturbing.

But at the outset it seemed necessary to be on guard against the other two. In the first place the boy creature did not come into the garden on his legs. He was pushed in on a thing with wheels and the skins of wild animals were thrown over him. That in itself was doubtful. Then when he began to stand up and move about he did it in a queer unaccustomed way and the others seemed to have to help him. The robin used to secrete himself in a bush and watch this anxiously, his head tilted first on one side and then on the other. He thought that the slow movements might mean that he was preparing to pounce, as cats do. When cats are preparing to pounce they creep over the ground very slowly. The robin talked this over with his mate a great deal for a few days but after that he decided not to speak of the subject because her terror was so great that he was afraid it might be injurious to the Eggs.

When the boy began to walk by himself and even to move more quickly it was an immense relief. But for a long time—or it seemed a long time to the robin—he was a source of some anxiety. He did not act as the other humans did. He seemed very fond of walking but he had a way of sitting or lying down for a while and then getting up in a disconcerting manner to begin again.

One day the robin remembered that when he himself had been made to learn to fly by his parents he had done much the same sort of thing. He had taken short flights of a few yards and then had been obliged to rest.

seemed as if she understood them as Dickon understood his 'creatures.' She stooped over the flowers and talked about them as if they were children. Soot followed her and once or twice cawed at her and flew upon her shoulder as if it were Dickon's. When they told her about the robin and the first flight of the young ones she laughed a motherly little mellow laugh in her throat.

'I suppose learnin' 'em to fly is like learnin' children to walk, but I'm feared I should be all in a worrit if mine had wings instead o' legs,' she said.

It was because she seemed such a wonderful woman in her nice moorland cottage way that at last she was told about the Magic.

'Do you believe in Magic?' asked Colin after he had explained about Indian fakirs. 'I do hope you do.'

'That I do, lad,' she answered. 'I never knowed it by that name but what does th' name matter? I warrant they call it a different name i' France an' a different one i' Germany. Th' same thing as set th' seeds swellin' an' th' sun shinin' made thee a well lad an' it's th' Good Thing. It isn't like us poor fools as think it matters if us is called out of our names. Th' Big Good Thing doesn't stop to worrit, bless thee. It goes on makin' worlds by th' million—worlds like us. Never thee stop believin' in th' Big Good Thing an' knowin' th' world's full of it—an' call it what tha' likes. Tha' wert singin' to it when I come into th' garden.'

'I felt so joyful,' said Colin, opening his beautiful strange eyes at her. 'Suddenly I felt how different I was—how strong my arms and legs were, you know—and how I could dig and stand—and I jumped up and wanted to shout out something to anything that would listen.'

'Th' Magic listened when tha' sung th' Doxology. It would ha' listened to anything tha'd sung. It was th' joy that mattered. Eh! lad, lad—what's names to th' Joy Maker,' and she gave his shoulders a quick soft pat again.

She had packed a basket which held a regular feast this morning, and when the hungry hour came and Dickon brought it out from its hiding place, she sat down with them under their tree and watched them devour their food, laughing and quite gloating over their appetites. She was full of fun and made them laugh at all sorts of odd things. She told them stories in broad Yorkshire and taught them new words. She laughed as if

she could not help it when they told her of the increasing difficulty there was in pretending that Colin was still a fretful invalid.

'You see we can't help laughing nearly all the time when we are together,' explained Colin. 'And it doesn't sound ill at all. We try to choke it back but it will burst out and that sounds worse than ever.'

'There's one thing that comes into my mind so often,' said Mary, 'and I can scarcely ever hold in when I think of it suddenly. I keep thinking suppose Colin's face should get to look like a full moon. It isn't like one yet but he gets a tiny bit fatter every day—and suppose some morning it should look like one—what should we do!'

'Bless us all, I can see tha' has a good bit o' play actin' to do,' said Susan Sowerby. 'But tha' won't have to keep it up much longer. Mester Craven'll come home.'

'Do you think he will?' asked Colin. 'Why?'

Susan Sowerby chuckled softly.

'I suppose it 'ud nigh break thy heart if he found out before tha' told him in tha' own way,' she said. 'Tha's laid awake nights plannin' it.'

'I couldn't bear any one else to tell him,' said Colin. 'I think about different ways every day. I think now I just want to run into his room.'

'That'd be a fine start for him,' said Susan Sowerby. 'I'd like to see his face, lad. I would that! He mun come back—that he mun.'

One of the things they talked of was the visit they were to make to her cottage. They planned it all. They were to drive over the moor and lunch out of doors among the heather. They would see all the twelve children and Dickon's garden and would not come back until they were tired.

Susan Sowerby got up at last to return to the house and Mrs Medlock. It was time for Colin to be wheeled back also. But before he got into his chair he stood quite close to Susan and fixed his eyes on her with a kind of bewildered adoration and he suddenly caught hold of the fold of her blue cloak and held it fast.

'You are just what I—what I wanted,' he said. 'I wish you were my mother—as well as Dickon's!'

All at once Susan Sowerby bent down and drew him with her warm arms close against the bosom under the blue cloak—as if he had been Dickon's brother. The quick mist swept over her eyes.

Chapter XXV

The Curtain

AND the secret garden bloomed and bloomed and every morning revealed new miracles. In the robin's nest there were Eggs and the robin's mate sat upon them keeping them warm with her feathery little breast and careful wings. At first she was very nervous and the robin himself was indignantly watchful. Even Dickon did not go near the close-grown corner in those days, but waited until by the quiet working of some mysterious spell he seemed to have conveyed to the soul of the little pair that in the garden there was nothing which was not quite like themselves—nothing which did not understand the wonderfulness of what was happening to them—the immense, tender, terrible, heart-breaking beauty and solemnity of Eggs. If there had been one person in that garden who had not known through all his or her innermost being that if an Egg were taken away or hurt the whole world would whirl round and crash through space and come to an end—if there had been even one who did not feel it and act accordingly there could