her way to relate her visions to her secret friends. Being sad one night, I lay close to the open skylight and listened. The vision she related told what this miserable room might be if it had comforts in it. She seemed to see it as she talked, and she grew cheered and warmed as she spoke. Then she came to this fancy; and the next day, the Sahib being ill and wretched, I told him of the thing to amuse him. It seemed then but a dream, but it pleased the Sahib. To hear of the child's doings gave him entertainment. He became interested in her and asked questions. At last he began to please himself with the thought of making her visions real things.'

'You think that it can be done while she sleeps? Suppose she awakened,' suggested the secretary; and it was evident that whatsoever the plan referred to was, it had caught and pleased his fancy as well as the Sahib Carrisford's.

'I can move as if my feet were of velvet,' Ram Dass replied; 'and children sleep soundly—even the unhappy ones. I could have entered this room in the night many times, and without causing her to turn upon her pillow. If the other bearer passes to me the things through the window, I can do all and she will not stir. When she awakens she will think a magician has been here.'

He smiled as if his heart warmed under his white robe, and the secretary smiled back at him.

'It will be like a story from the Arabian Nights,' he said. 'Only an Oriental could have planned it. It does not belong to London fogs.'

They did not remain very long, to the great relief of Melchisedec, who, as he probably did not comprehend their conversation, felt their movements and whispers ominous. The young secretary seemed interested in everything. He wrote down things about the floor, the fireplace, the broken footstool, the old table, the walls—which last he touched with his hand again and again, seeming much pleased when he found that a number of old nails had been driven in various places.

'You can hang things on them,' he said.

Ram Dass smiled mysteriously.

'Yesterday, when she was out,' he said, 'I entered, bringing with me small, sharp nails which can be pressed into the wall without blows from a hammer. I placed many in the plaster where I may need them. They are ready.'

The Indian gentleman's secretary stood still and looked round him as he thrust his tablets back into his pocket.

'I think I have made notes enough; we can go now,' he said. 'The Sahib Carrisford has a warm heart. It is a thousand pities that he has not found the lost child.'

'If he should find her his strength would be restored to him,' said Ram Dass. 'His God may lead her to him yet.'

Then they slipped through the skylight as noiselessly as they had entered it. And, after he was quite sure they had gone, Melchisedec was greatly relieved, and in the course of a few minutes felt it safe to emerge from his hole again and scuffle about in the hope that even such alarming human beings as these might have chanced to carry crumbs in their pockets and drop one or two of them.

'You seem to know a great deal about her,' the secretary said.

'All her life each day I know,' answered Ram Dass. 'Her going out I know, and her coming in; her sadness and her poor joys; her coldness and her hunger. I know when she is alone until midnight, learning from her books; I know when her secret friends steal to her and she is happier—as children can be, even in the midst of poverty—because they come and she may laugh and talk with them in whispers. If she were ill I should know, and I would come and serve her if it might be done.'

'You are sure no one comes near this place but herself, and that she will not return and surprise us. She would be frightened if she found us here, and the Sahib Carrisford's plan would be spoiled.'

Ram Dass crossed noiselessly to the door and stood close to it.

'None mount here but herself, Sahib,' he said. 'She has gone out with her basket and may be gone for hours. If I stand here I can hear any step before it reaches the last flight of the stairs.'

The secretary took a pencil and a tablet from his breast pocket.

'Keep your ears open,' he said; and he began to walk slowly and softly round the miserable little room, making rapid notes on his tablet as he looked at things.

First he went to the narrow bed. He pressed his hand upon the mattress and uttered an exclamation.

'As hard as a stone,' he said. 'That will have to be altered some day when she is out. A special journey can be made to bring it across. It cannot be done tonight.' He lifted the covering and examined the one thin pillow.

'Coverlet dingy and worn, blanket thin, sheets patched and ragged,' he said. 'What a bed for a child to sleep in—and in a house which calls itself respectable! There has not been a fire in that grate for many a day,' glancing at the rusty fireplace.

'Never since I have seen it,' said Ram Dass. 'The mistress of the house is not one who remembers that another than herself may be cold.'

The secretary was writing quickly on his tablet. He looked up from it as he tore off a leaf and slipped it into his breast pocket.

'It is a strange way of doing the thing,' he said. 'Who planned it?'

Ram Dass made a modestly apologetic obeisance.

'It is true that the first thought was mine, Sahib,' he said; 'though it was naught but a fancy. I am fond of this child; we are both lonely. It is

skylight itself. One was Ram Dass and the other was a young man who was the Indian gentleman's secretary; but of course Melchisedec did not know this. He only knew that the men were invading the silence and privacy of the attic; and as the one with the dark face let himself down through the aperture with such lightness and dexterity that he did not make the slightest sound, Melchisedec turned tail and fled precipitately back to his hole. He was frightened to death. He had ceased to be timid with Sara, and knew she would never throw anything but crumbs, and would never make any sound other than the soft, low, coaxing whistling; but strange men were dangerous things to remain near. He lay close and flat near the entrance of his home, just managing to peep through the crack with a bright, alarmed eye. How much he understood of the talk he heard I am not in the least able to say; but, even if he had understood it all, he would probably have remained greatly mystified.

The secretary, who was light and young, slipped through the skylight as noiselessly as Ram Dass had done; and he caught a last glimpse of Melchisedec's vanishing tail.

'Was that a rat?' he asked Ram Dass in a whisper.

'Yes; a rat, Sahib,' answered Ram Dass, also whispering. 'There are many in the walls.'

'Ugh!' exclaimed the young man. 'It is a wonder the child is not terrified of them.'

Ram Dass made a gesture with his hands. He also smiled respectfully. He was in this place as the intimate exponent of Sara, though she had only spoken to him once.

'The child is the little friend of all things, Sahib,' he answered. 'She is not as other children. I see her when she does not see me. I slip across the slates and look at her many nights to see that she is safe. I watch her from my window when she does not know I am near. She stands on the table there and looks out at the sky as if it spoke to her. The sparrows come at her call. The rat she has fed and tamed in her loneliness. The poor slave of the house comes to her for comfort. There is a little child who comes to her in secret; there is one older who worships her and would listen to her forever if she might. This I have seen when I have crept across the roof. By the mistress of the house—who is an evil woman—she is treated like a pariah; but she has the bearing of a child who is of the blood of kings!'

Chapter 15

The Magic

WHEN Sara had passed the house next door she had seen Ram Dass closing the shutters, and caught her glimpse of this room also.

'It is a long time since I saw a nice place from the inside,' was the thought which crossed her mind.

There was the usual bright fire glowing in the grate, and the Indian gentleman was sitting before it. His head was resting in his hand, and he looked as lonely and unhappy as ever.

'Poor man!' said Sara. 'I wonder what you are supposing.'

And this was what he was 'supposing' at that very moment.

'Suppose,' he was thinking, 'suppose—even if Carmichael traces the people to Moscow—the little girl they took from Madame Pascal's school in Paris is NOT the one we are in search of. Suppose she proves to be quite a different child. What steps shall I take next?'

When Sara went into the house she met Miss Minchin, who had come downstairs to scold the cook.

'Where have you wasted your time?' she demanded. 'You have been out for hours.'

'It was so wet and muddy,' Sara answered, 'it was hard to walk, because my shoes were so bad and slipped about.'

'Make no excuses,' said Miss Minchin, 'and tell no falsehoods.'

Sara went in to the cook. The cook had received a severe lecture and was in a fearful temper as a result. She was only too rejoiced to have someone to vent her rage on, and Sara was a convenience, as usual.

'Why didn't you stay all night?' she snapped.

Sara laid her purchases on the table.

'Here are the things,' she said.

The cook looked them over, grumbling. She was in a very savage humour indeed.

'May I have something to eat?' Sara asked rather faintly.

'Tea's over and done with,' was the answer. 'Did you expect me to keep it hot for you?'

Sara stood silent for a second.

'I had no dinner,' she said next, and her voice was quite low. She made it low because she was afraid it would tremble.

'There's some bread in the pantry,' said the cook. 'That's all you'll get at this time of day.'

Sara went and found the bread. It was old and hard and dry. The cook was in too vicious a humour to give her anything to eat with it. It was always safe and easy to vent her spite on Sara. Really, it was hard for the child to climb the three long flights of stairs leading to her attic. She often found them long and steep when she was tired; but tonight it seemed as if she would never reach the top. Several times she was obliged to stop to rest. When she reached the top landing she was glad to see the glimmer of a light coming from under her door. That meant that Ermengarde had managed to creep up to pay her a visit. There was some comfort in that. It was better than to go into the room alone and find it empty and desolate. The mere presence of plump, comfortable Ermengarde, wrapped in her red shawl, would warm it a little.

Yes; there Ermengarde was when she opened the door. She was sitting in the middle of the bed, with her feet tucked safely under her. She had never become intimate with Melchisedec and his family, though they rather fascinated her. When she found herself alone in the attic she always preferred to sit on the bed until Sara arrived. She had, in fact, on this occasion had time to become rather nervous, because Melchisedec had appeared and sniffed about a good deal, and once had made her utter a

Chapter 14

What Melchisedec Heard and Saw

On this very afternoon, while Sara was out, a strange thing happened in the attic. Only Melchisedec saw and heard it; and he was so much alarmed and mystified that he scuttled back to his hole and hid there, and really quaked and trembled as he peeped out furtively and with great caution to watch what was going on.

The attic had been very still all the day after Sara had left it in the early morning. The stillness had only been broken by the pattering of the rain upon the slates and the skylight. Melchisedec had, in fact, found it rather dull; and when the rain ceased to patter and perfect silence reigned, he decided to come out and reconnoitre, though experience taught him that Sara would not return for some time. He had been rambling and sniffing about, and had just found a totally unexpected and unexplained crumb left from his last meal, when his attention was attracted by a sound on the roof. He stopped to listen with a palpitating heart. The sound suggested that something was moving on the roof. It was approaching the skylight; it reached the skylight. The skylight was being mysteriously opened. A dark face peered into the attic; then another face appeared behind it, and both looked in with signs of caution and interest. Two men were outside on the roof, and were making silent preparations to enter through the

repressed squeal by sitting up on his hind legs and, while he looked at her, sniffing pointedly in her direction.

'Oh, Sara,' she cried out, 'I am glad you have come. Melchy WOULD sniff about so. I tried to coax him to go back, but he wouldn't for such a long time. I like him, you know; but it does frighten me when he sniffs right at me. Do you think he ever WOULD jump?'

'No,' answered Sara.

Ermengarde crawled forward on the bed to look at her.

'You DO look tired, Sara,' she said; 'you are quite pale.'

'I AM tired,' said Sara, dropping on to the lopsided footstool. 'Oh, there's Melchisedec, poor thing. He's come to ask for his supper.'

Melchisedec had come out of his hole as if he had been listening for her footstep. Sara was quite sure he knew it. He came forward with an affectionate, expectant expression as Sara put her hand in her pocket and turned it inside out, shaking her head.

'I'm very sorry,' she said. 'I haven't one crumb left. Go home, Melchisedec, and tell your wife there was nothing in my pocket. I'm afraid I forgot because the cook and Miss Minchin were so cross.'

Melchisedec seemed to understand. He shuffled resignedly, if not contentedly, back to his home.

'I did not expect to see you tonight, Ermie,' Sara said. Ermengarde hugged herself in the red shawl.

'Miss Amelia has gone out to spend the night with her old aunt,' she explained. 'No one else ever comes and looks into the bedrooms after we are in bed. I could stay here until morning if I wanted to.'

She pointed toward the table under the skylight. Sara had not looked toward it as she came in. A number of books were piled upon it. Ermengarde's gesture was a dejected one.

'Papa has sent me some more books, Sara,' she said. 'There they are.'

Sara looked round and got up at once. She ran to the table, and picking up the top volume, turned over its leaves quickly. For the moment she forgot her discomforts.

'Ah,' she cried out, 'how beautiful! Carlyle's French Revolution. I have SO wanted to read that!'

'I haven't,' said Ermengarde. 'And papa will be so cross if I don't. He'll expect me to know all about it when I go home for the holidays. What SHALL I do?'

Sara stopped turning over the leaves and looked at her with an excited flush on her cheeks.

'Look here,' she cried, 'if you'll lend me these books, *I'll* read them—and tell you everything that's in them afterward—and I'll tell it so that you will remember it, too.'

'Oh, goodness!' exclaimed Ermengarde. 'Do you think you can?'

'I know I can,' Sara answered. 'The little ones always remember what I tell them.'

'Sara,' said Ermengarde, hope gleaming in her round face, 'if you'll do that, and make me remember, I'll—I'll give you anything.'

'I don't want you to give me anything,' said Sara. 'I want your books—I want them!' And her eyes grew big, and her chest heaved.

'Take them, then,' said Ermengarde. 'I wish I wanted them—but I don't. I'm not clever, and my father is, and he thinks I ought to be.'

Sara was opening one book after the other. 'What are you going to tell your father?' she asked, a slight doubt dawning in her mind.

'Oh, he needn't know,' answered Ermengarde. 'He'll think I've read them.'

Sara put down her book and shook her head slowly. 'That's almost like telling lies,' she said. 'And lies—well, you see, they are not only wicked—they're VULGAR. Sometimes'—reflectively—'I've thought perhaps I might do something wicked—I might suddenly fly into a rage and kill Miss Minchin, you know, when she was ill-treating me—but I COULDN'T be vulgar. Why can't you tell your father *I* read them?'

'He wants me to read them,' said Ermengarde, a little discouraged by this unexpected turn of affairs.

'He wants you to know what is in them,' said Sara. 'And if I can tell it to you in an easy way and make you remember it, I should think he would like that.'

'He'll like it if I learn anything in ANY way,' said rueful Ermengarde. 'You would if you were my father.'

Then they went in and shut the door.

'Did you see,' said Janet to Nora, as they went back to the room—'the little-girl-who-is-not-a-beggar was passing? She looked all cold and wet, and I saw her turn her head over her shoulder and look at us. Mamma says her clothes always look as if they had been given her by someone who was quite rich—someone who only let her have them because they were too shabby to wear. The people at the school always send her out on errands on the horridest days and nights there are.'

Sara crossed the square to Miss Minchin's area steps, feeling faint and shaky.

'I wonder who the little girl is,' she thought—'the little girl he is going to look for.'

And she went down the area steps, lugging her basket and finding it very heavy indeed, as the father of the Large Family drove quickly on his way to the station to take the train which was to carry him to Moscow, where he was to make his best efforts to search for the lost little daughter of Captain Crewe.

Sara found some comfort in her remaining bun. At all events, it was very hot, and it was better than nothing. As she walked along she broke off small pieces and ate them slowly to make them last longer.

'Suppose it was a magic bun,' she said, 'and a bite was as much as a whole dinner. I should be overeating myself if I went on like this.'

It was dark when she reached the square where the Select Seminary was situated. The lights in the houses were all lighted. The blinds were not yet drawn in the windows of the room where she nearly always caught glimpses of members of the Large Family. Frequently at this hour she could see the gentleman she called Mr Montmorency sitting in a big chair, with a small swarm round him, talking, laughing, perching on the arms of his seat or on his knees or leaning against them. This evening the swarm was about him, but he was not seated. On the contrary, there was a good deal of excitement going on. It was evident that a journey was to be taken, and it was Mr Montmorency who was to take it. A brougham stood before the door, and a big portmanteau had been strapped upon it. The children were dancing about, chattering and hanging on to their father. The pretty rosy mother was standing near him, talking as if she was asking final questions. Sara paused a moment to see the little ones lifted up and kissed and the bigger ones bent over and kissed also.

'I wonder if he will stay away long,' she thought. 'The portmanteau is rather big. Oh, dear, how they will miss him! I shall miss him myself—even though he doesn't know I am alive.'

When the door opened she moved away—remembering the sixpence—but she saw the traveller come out and stand against the background of the warmly-lighted hall, the older children still hovering about him.

'Will Moscow be covered with snow?' said the little girl Janet. 'Will there be ice everywhere?'

'Shall you drive in a drosky?' cried another. 'Shall you see the Czar?'

'I will write and tell you all about it,' he answered, laughing. 'And I will send you pictures of muzhiks and things. Run into the house. It is a hideous damp night. I would rather stay with you than go to Moscow. Good night! Good night, duckies! God bless you!' And he ran down the steps and jumped into the brougham.

'If you find the little girl, give her our love,' shouted Guy Clarence, jumping up and down on the door mat.

'It's not your fault that— ' began Sara. She pulled herself up and stopped rather suddenly. She had been going to say, 'It's not your fault that you are stupid.'

'That what?' Ermengarde asked.

'That you can't learn things quickly,' amended Sara. 'If you can't, you can't. If I can—why, I can; that's all.'

She always felt very tender of Ermengarde, and tried not to let her feel too strongly the difference between being able to learn anything at once, and not being able to learn anything at all. As she looked at her plump face, one of her wise, old-fashioned thoughts came to her.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'to be able to learn things quickly isn't everything. To be kind is worth a great deal to other people. If Miss Minchin knew everything on earth and was like what she is now, she'd still be a detestable thing, and everybody would hate her. Lots of clever people have done harm and have been wicked. Look at Robespierre— '

She stopped and examined Ermengarde's countenance, which was beginning to look bewildered. 'Don't you remember?' she demanded. 'I told you about him not long ago. I believe you've forgotten.'

'Well, I don't remember ALL of it,' admitted Ermengarde.

'Well, you wait a minute,' said Sara, 'and I'll take off my wet things and wrap myself in the coverlet and tell you over again.'

She took off her hat and coat and hung them on a nail against the wall, and she changed her wet shoes for an old pair of slippers. Then she jumped on the bed, and drawing the coverlet about her shoulders, sat with her arms round her knees. 'Now, listen,' she said.

She plunged into the gory records of the French Revolution, and told such stories of it that Ermengarde's eyes grew round with alarm and she held her breath. But though she was rather terrified, there was a delightful thrill in listening, and she was not likely to forget Robespierre again, or to have any doubts about the Princesse de Lamballe.

'You know they put her head on a pike and danced round it,' Sara explained. 'And she had beautiful floating blonde hair; and when I think of her, I never see her head on her body, but always on a pike, with those furious people dancing and howling.'

It was agreed that Mr St John was to be told the plan they had made, and for the present the books were to be left in the attic.

'Now let's tell each other things,' said Sara. 'How are you getting on with your French lessons?'

'Ever so much better since the last time I came up here and you explained the conjugations. Miss Minchin could not understand why I did my exercises so well that first morning.'

Sara laughed a little and hugged her knees.

'She doesn't understand why Lottie is doing her sums so well,' she said; 'but it is because she creeps up here, too, and I help her.' She glanced round the room. 'The attic would be rather nice—if it wasn't so dreadful,' she said, laughing again. 'It's a good place to pretend in.'

The truth was that Ermengarde did not know anything of the sometimes almost unbearable side of life in the attic and she had not a sufficiently vivid imagination to depict it for herself. On the rare occasions that she could reach Sara's room she only saw the side of it which was made exciting by things which were 'pretended' and stories which were told. Her visits partook of the character of adventures; and though sometimes Sara looked rather pale, and it was not to be denied that she had grown very thin, her proud little spirit would not admit of complaints. She had never confessed that at times she was almost ravenous with hunger, as she was tonight. She was growing rapidly, and her constant walking and running about would have given her a keen appetite even if she had had abundant and regular meals of a much more nourishing nature than the unappetizing, inferior food snatched at such odd times as suited the kitchen convenience. She was growing used to a certain gnawing feeling in her young stomach.

'I suppose soldiers feel like this when they are on a long and weary march,' she often said to herself. She liked the sound of the phrase, 'long and weary march.' It made her feel rather like a soldier. She had also a quaint sense of being a hostess in the attic.

'If I lived in a castle,' she argued, 'and Ermengarde was the lady of another castle, and came to see me, with knights and squires and vassals riding with her, and pennons flying, when I heard the clarions sounding outside the drawbridge I should go down to receive her, and I should spread feasts in the banquet hall and call in minstrels to sing and play and relate romances. When she comes into the attic I can't spread feasts, but I can tell stories, and not let her know disagreeable things. I dare say

well, she looked hungry enough. I'd give something to know what she did it for.'

She stood behind her window for a few moments and pondered. Then her curiosity got the better of her. She went to the door and spoke to the beggar child.

'Who gave you those buns?' she asked her. The child nodded her head toward Sara's vanishing figure.

'What did she say?' inquired the woman.

'Axed me if I was 'ungry,' replied the hoarse voice.

'What did you say?'

'Said I was jist.'

'And then she came in and got the buns, and gave them to you, did she?'

The child nodded.

'How many?'

'Five.'

The woman thought it over.

'Left just one for herself,' she said in a low voice. 'And she could have eaten the whole six—I saw it in her eyes.'

She looked after the little draggled far-away figure and felt more disturbed in her usually comfortable mind than she had felt for many a day.

'I wish she hadn't gone so quick,' she said. 'I'm blest if she shouldn't have had a dozen.' Then she turned to the child.

'Are you hungry yet?' she said.

'I'm allus hungry,' was the answer, 'but 't ain't as bad as it was.'

'Come in here,' said the woman, and she held open the shop door.

The child got up and shuffled in. To be invited into a warm place full of bread seemed an incredible thing. She did not know what was going to happen. She did not care, even.

'Get yourself warm,' said the woman, pointing to a fire in the tiny back room. 'And look here; when you are hard up for a bit of bread, you can come in here and ask for it. I'm blest if I won't give it to you for that young one's sake.'