

“Two Little Red Shoes”

By Bessie Kyffin-Taylor

All my life, or at least as far back as I can remember, empty houses have always had an irresistible attraction for me, though uninhabited gardens are almost as attractive. I cannot call the gardens empty, though people may be absent, for a garden is never really empty—spring, summer or winter—there is always life in a garden! Spring! and the singing of mating birds. Summer! hot, drowsy summer days, with the ceaseless hum of millions of insects; just to lie listening, in what most people call silence, though it is a silence fraught with countless sounds. Winter! the most still, has its sounds and life.

A notice board inevitably draws my footsteps nearer to an empty house, the more weather-worn the “To Let” the greater the attraction.

My infatuation for empty houses has led me into curious situations at times, and has often been the source of very real pleasure and interest. Occasionally I have had unpleasant episodes; but, on the whole, happy hours predominated. Long years ago my prying tendencies had about them the elements of a game of “Let’s pretend,” for in imagination dwelt in one or other of those silent, houses, always with a tender lover by my side: I used to choose my drawing-rooms, and furnish them—I chose my nurseries, and peopled them with little people; my colour schemes were many and very varied, and in this way I passed many happy hours—so happy indeed, that those hours spent in empty houses were more my real life, than the other.

Years have passed, and part of my game has come true—only part of it—for my colour schemes were somehow never attainable in a work-a-day, practical world, and there were other parts of my day-dreams, and they, too, remained “day-dreams.” In spite of passing years, in spite of work, in spite of all, I have never outgrown my fondness for empty houses and uninhabited gardens, and to this day I am known to visit a tenantless house, light a fire, from a hidden store of coal and wood, seat myself in an old broken-down chair, and there, in the silence—a silence unbroken by the ring of telephone or any other bells—I dream my dreams and revel in unbroken solitude—with every nerve at rest, sure in the knowledge that none can disturb my peace, since none know my whereabouts—I have said strange episodes have befallen me at times—one so strange as to be almost unbelievable—yet let those explain who can!

A long hot summer was drawing to an end—a summer of almost tropical heat, which had left the earth parched and brown, green lawns looked like brown felt, and people had at last given up in despair the sprinkling of water in their thirsty gardens—it seemed waste of energy and water, the flowers were too thirsty—so were left to droop and fade away almost before they were fully out; leaves tumbled off trees while yet green, simply because they were sun-baked and dry. Even the birds waited about expecting some thoughtful human creature to give them a dish of water to drink and play in.

Most people had gone either to the sea or hills, certainly all who could afford it had fled, and those unfortunate ones whom work or duties chained to the towns, were deserving of pity, as they toiled through the hours of day, returning, in what they tried to call the cool of the evening, to their dried-up bits of garden, or suffocating rooms. I was one of those unlucky ones—doomed to stay in town until the end of August, after which I was free—Free! with a little sum of money at my disposal to squander as and where I pleased. For some reason it pleased me to save that bit of money and *not* spend it in train travelling other than one short journey, for I had long ago

made up my mind that when next the Fates were sufficiently kind as to leave me in undisputed possession of our happy home, and granted me a few days' freedom from the daily round—the common task, I would spend that time in pursuance of my favourite pastime—the hunting out and getting into uninhabited houses and gardens—I already knew of one such house, and had long made up my mind to inspect it—so, on this first day of my freedom, I made a parcel of some food, a book, some paper and pencils, and donning old garments, I set forth. A short train journey and a long walk landed me at a pair of massive old iron gates—they were shut, and, to my intense disappointment, padlocked! I peered through them up a long grassy drive, with high banks of rhododendrons on each side—the drive was not newly grass-grown, it had always been a grass drive—and straight ahead at the far end of it, stood the house—I meant to reach it, I intended to get inside, and I was not going to be daunted by a merely padlocked gate—even though the said gate was too high to climb, and, moreover, had spikes at the top. I wandered on past the gates and spotted a thin part of the close thorn hedge, where the paling behind had rotted and given way. Through this thinned hedge I scrambled, and over the broken paling, but didn't intend to spoil my approach that way, so crept back inside the fence until I reached the gates. “So much for your padlock,” I thought, as I started triumphantly to march up the length of that old grassy drive—odd little paths branched off it from time to time, leading I knew not whither, and all of them were grass; gravel or paving of any kind was unknown. As I neared the house, I found myself thinking what a silent place it must have been to dwell in, with all the approaches of soft turf, no sound of feet or wheels would be heard, such silence would have pleased me well.

Probably most people would have gone straight to the house and peered in at the windows. I did not. I sat down on the short turf, under the shadow of a giant copper beech tree, and stared at those many blank windows, looking down on me, as if they were so many eyes. It has always been my way to approach those things which please me in a lingering kind of manner, as if, like the children do, I tried to make them last longer. I felt like this as I sat gazing at the house I had long waited to inspect, but having attained my desire, I lingered, even though longing to get inside.

It was a dull, red brick house, with many windows, but all flat—not a “bay” window or jutting corner anywhere—only the front door broke the monotony, it having a curious porch—two sides glass, with a heavy oak door in the-centre. The bell-pull attracted my eye next, it was a heavy copper chain, and green with age in many places—the handle, a horse-shoe—of rusty iron. I wondered if that had been the original, or whether some inmate, with a tendency to superstition, had hung it there.

From my comfortable seat, I let my gaze wander to and fro from window to window, trying to picture the rooms within, yet still putting off my attempt to enter—no thought of being unable to do so entered my mind, for by some means or other I intended to accomplish what to me was a definite purpose. I would eat my lunch first, I decided, then find a way indoors, and later, as it grew cooler, wander in the garden. It was gloriously still there under the beech tree, so still, that I grew drowsy, and all but fell asleep (that would waste time, I thought), so roused myself with an effort, and drew nearer to the house. I believe in my heart I feared being foiled in my desire, and that was one reason why I delayed, but time, relentless always, was passing along, and I must really make a start.

I peered through the windows to the right of the door.

“Oh! Lovely!” I exclaimed, and hurriedly peeped in those on the other side of the door. “What a contrast,” I thought, I *must* get in; so almost ran round the back of the house in my eagerness.

Window after window I tried in vain, but at last caught sight of one with a broken hasp. This, by using a penknife, and sharp-edged stone, I raised sufficiently to get my fingers in and lift it up, then, jumping on to the sill, I crept through, closing the 'window softly behind me. I found myself in a big lofty kitchen—minus furniture of any kind, though oddly enough two little dish covers still hung on the walls. From there I wandered along a stone passage, which had many doors—I don't mean doors opening on to them, but heavy doors across them—every few yards—as if the dwellers in the house had intended cutting off all sound from the kitchen premises being heard in other parts of the house—the end door was cedar wood, and as I closed it, I realised that the living rooms seemed quite in another world. I entered the room to the right of the front door, the room which had caused me to exclaim “lovely!” when I peered through its windows. It certainly was a beautiful room—long and low—with walls of white and gold, with a frieze of laughing cupids driving each other with chains of pink roses. This room was likewise devoid of furniture, except for two very small chairs—one upholstered in faded blue, the other in tatters of pink. I smiled, and supposed they were too small to bother to remove, probably the little folks to whom they had once belonged had long since out-grown them. I loved the laughing cupids, and pictured the gay revels they must have looked down upon before the pink of their roses faded. There was another door leading from this room—it was slightly ajar—so I peeped in before continuing my wandering on the other side of the front door. I say at once, emphatically and decidedly, I did not like it. It was a small, round room—with three windows, none of which one could see through without getting on to a chair; the walls were slate coloured, the floor was stone, there wasn't a fire-place, but pushed against the wall were two little high wooden stools, and to each stool was attached a long, thin steel chain. I didn't like it. The stools looked as if two small dogs might have been fastened there, and made to sit still. I left it hurriedly and entered the room on the other side of the front door. This had quite a lot of furniture in it, and, to my amazement, many toys—there was a dappled, well-worn rocking-horse—not one of the modern apologies for a rocking-horse, the thing on patent springs which only wobbles to and fro in perfect safety—oh! no, *this* was a real old-fashioned gee, which *really* rocked, until you were rather in danger of slipping over its scanty tail, or sliding forward to grasp its cocked-up ears; there was a broken doll, too, with what had once been a pretty face, not a monstrosity, or fat policeman with a red nose or hideous golliwog; there was a battered engine, some bricks, and on the hearth a little pair of scarlet shoes. I picked these up and fell to wondering what little atom had worn them—someone had once had happy times in this room of toys I thought. I had spent a long time in the few rooms I had prowled through, and already long shadows were dimming the bright glare of the sun. I glanced at my watch, and decided I would move to the garden, the house was beginning to feel chilly—that odd chilliness of a house long tenantless and fireless. I would come again to-morrow, and then explore upstairs, but now would just have one peep at the garden, then trot homewards. The room of toys held me somehow, and I was loth to leave it and the little red shoes! I had a wild desire to put those in my pocket, surely no one would miss them, and I—oh! well—I liked to handle them and imagine the wee soft pink feet that they had covered. It couldn't be stealing, I argued, for by the dust on them they must have been long lying unthought of, besides, I would bring them back to-morrow—but just for to-night I wanted them—so I took them in my hand as I strolled from the room, to commence retracing my steps along the corridor of many doors.

Just as I closed the door behind me I heard a sound—a sound that always had the power to arrest my steps—I heard a long-drawn whimpering cry of a little child!

“Then there *is* a caretaker, and family,” I said, aloud. “How stupid of me not to have thought of it, and looked more carefully before I made the house so very much my own.”

I went on through another door, and I heard the cry again. I was closer to the sound, or was it nearer to me? I hurried a little, slipping the little red shoes into my pocket for safety. I did not want to be called a thief—beside, I would bring them back to-morrow. I passed through the last door before the kitchen, and again a long, whimpering cry broke the silence, so close to me, so close, I felt as if I had but to stretch out my hand to touch that troubled, little child. I quickened my steps, raised the window, and slipped through, fully intending to explore the back premises to discover the whereabouts of the worthy caretaker and her fractious child. I stood for an instant when safely through the window, and as I stood there, I heard, distinctly, unmistakably, the whimpering cry and the soft tapping of tiny baby fingers on the window pane, tapping as if they could scarcely reach, but tapping insistently and clearly, and always, always, the same little, wailing cry.

I turned away, satisfied that either in rooms above or below, I should next day stumble upon the caretaker, but, though unafraid, I was not by any means sure that I could so easily explain away those persistent, tapping baby fingers.

I travelled home in a thoughtful mood, for though I had enjoyed my day, the memory of those deserted toys lingered in my mind.

Of my home life I need not speak, it was just the usual routine of most women, the everlasting ordering of meals, and the doing of the hundred and one small duties which go to make up the everyday life of the everyday woman, therefore my return home and usual humdrum evening was got through as countless others are—perhaps mine were, at least in the opinion of some folks, duller than the evenings of others, because some of my ideas happened to be different—for instance, I much preferred the silence of my own sanctum with my books and odds and ends to spending an evening in the company of a few other people, with our noses buried in packs of cards, oblivious of all other interests save to win. Cards never attracted me, there is always so much that is more worth while. An evening of music does appeal to me, but people are forgetting how to play and sing, and so I stay at home, dreaming my dreams in my leisure hours of peace.

To-night, as I sat by my open window, watching the stars peep out, I pondered much on the old empty house. The little scarlet shoes lay on the table at my side, and often I picked them up, trying to picture their wee owner—how old was “she”? for it must have been a girl I was sure—was she fair or dark? where had she gone? and why had her little shoes been left behind? I looked at them carefully; they were not much worn although the tiny soles showed that they had done some running about. She must have been the owner of the broken dome, but who then was the owner of the engine? All my questioning left me no wiser, so I resolved to go early to bed, bent on an early start in the morning, to visit my “House of Mystery,” as I called it.

True to my resolve, I was up and away betimes, reaching my house while the dew was still on the grass, part of the house was still in the shadow, the birds were still busy over their morning toilets, otherwise the place looked as silent and deserted as before.

I sat down for a few moments under the copper beech to rest and make up my mind whether to make straight for my window, and go on with my prowl from where I left off, or to try if I could unearth the caretaker. I had a wish to interview the crying baby, who rather spoiled my departure on the previous evening. A sudden thought decided me. I would first hunt up the caretaker, with a view to gaining some sort of permission to prowl as I liked, when and where I liked, it would be worrying if I were turned out, as I might very well be, unless armed with a permit of some kind, and knowing the rules of the game, I ventured to think a promised pound of tea or toy for

the baby would in all likelihood grant me a free pass. To this end I would inspect all the back premises first, make my peace with the good lady, and then spend the whole long day in the garden, reserving the house for a wet day or a day too cold for the garden.

Having made up my mind, I proceeded towards the back of the house. There were three or four doors, one labelled "Tradesmen." A useless label I always found, for they inevitably used any other door save the one so marked—our own side door bore a similar inscription, but it never prevented a long line of errand boys tramping past the front of the house, bearing their milk cans, butcher's baskets, or loaves of bread in full view of all and sundry.

I peeped into many out-houses, coal-shed, boot room—I even found the stable yard, but most of the doors there were broken or off the hinges, as if these places had long been known as domiciles for tramps. I was able to see through every window, at the back of the house, every room was empty, dusty and tenantless, not a sound or sign of life was to be heard, so I arrived at the conclusion that the worthy caretaker lived at a distance, only paying occasional visits, and must just have come upon the scene as I was leaving last evening. Then the chances were I should be left in peace to-day.

The house attracted me, and for a moment I wavered, but the garden called, so I would adhere to my plan, leaving the house for another visit. I would just pop in, replace the little "stolen"—or, as I preferred—"borrowed" red shoes, and then return to the garden.

"Oh, how stupid!" I suddenly exclaimed, aloud, "I have come without the little shoes, I have left them on my dressing table. Well, they are safe, and no one will miss them, and I can bring them to-morrow. I need not enter my window, I can go straight to the garden and explore," but would go to the front door, and start from there. This I did, wandering away to the right, down a winding grassy path, with high bushes on each side interspersed with overhanging laburnums, the golden glory of them had long since departed, but their waving graceful foliage mingling with the darker glossiness of the rhodies, was cool and refreshing.

Quite suddenly the grassy path widened and led me down three rough, stone steps on to a little lawn, closed in with a riotous wilderness of late roses—climbing roses chiefly, but of the old-fashioned kind—I saw a friend of my childhood, a little, squashed-looking white rose, I never knew its name, nor do I now, but it grows in profusion, the buds are just tinged with pale coral, and when open, the little rose is white; with a faint, soft scent—pale pink, monthly roses mingled with them, also crimson peonies and tall, blue larkspurs, while old-fashioned sweet-williams and pansies formed a border, or what once had been a border.

At one side of the lawn was a grassy bank, and opposite to it a huge cedar tree, with a rough, wooden seat below it, or rather the remains of a seat. The shut-in-ness of it, the silence of it, together with the riot of colour and indescribable sweetness of the many flower scents, made me pause enraptured, yet sad to think so much loveliness should be wasting unseen, unknown. I sat down at the foot of the bank, leaning against it, facing the path I had just come down, and closed my eyes with a sense of complete restfulness and peace.

I may have dozed there in the heavily-scented air, or perhaps I was tired, without realising it, but I had probably been lying there an hour, or more, when I suddenly sat up, with the distinct feeling of being no longer alone. I was right, though for the moment I could not see anyone, and yet I heard soft movements. I can't describe them, it was like the passing and repassing of soft footsteps, *little footsteps*, near me. I found myself staring, and then—ah! me—it seems both impossible and useless to describe—yet perchance, some day, someone may read this and believe—I saw two little children, hand in hand, trotting along in the busy little way children have when on affairs entirely their own. Past me they trotted—a tiny boy in a sailor suit,

bareheaded, with clustering curls round a pale, resolute little face—and by his side, a dainty wee girl in white, bare headed, as he was, but with a golden, silky down covering her tiny head. He wore sturdy little brown shoes—she was barefooted—and at times, as I watched them, she pointed with tiny, dimpled fingers to her little bare toes, and seemed half inclined to cry.

No other thought occurred to me in those first few moments except that they had somehow strayed in from somewhere, and—watched them, fascinated, *though I never heard them speak!*

Presently they sat down still intent on each other, and for the first time it struck me how utterly oblivious they were to me.

They were so sweet and lovely, I wanted to run to them, catch them in my arms, and cover them with kisses. Should I try and catch their attention, I wondered—perhaps they would play with me, but I would watch them a little longer first.

Slowly the little lad got up as if listening, and then a change came over the little faces, a dreadful heart-breaking change—and a look of awful fear was in each face—the wee girl stumbled to her feet, and began to cry—I could see, but I could hear no sound—and then, with pale cheeks and trembling little limbs, they started to cross the lawn.

I could not endure it. What had frightened them? I must help them, I sprang to my feet; they reached the tree of white roses by the beginning of the path, just as I came up to them, and as I reached them, putting out my hand to hold them—*they were not there!*

Then, and then only, did I realise that my dream children were dream children indeed. Children from another world, still visiting this one—if, indeed, they had ever really left it!

I sank down, half-faint, and wholly bewildered, and for a long time I lay with my eyes hidden, and feeling unable to stir; I managed to pull myself together after a while, and glanced at my watch. I was four o'clock, the same hour at which I left yesterday when those tapping baby fingers on the window beat themselves into my brain.

I would go, I felt I could not, dare not, venture to the house, but I was determined, though a little shaken, that I would come back. I must, some power compelled me, and I knew I should return.

I reached home again and went at once to my room. There were the wee scarlet shoes just as I had left them, but I handled them in a different spirit, for, vividly before my eyes, I saw those tiny, bare feet, and the odd little pucker of the baby lips as the small girl pointed down to them.

“Very well, baby, you shall have them back, never fear!” For now I felt brave again, and intended to see more of my dream children.

I went to bed wondering what the next day would bring forth.

I suppose I was a bit unnerved, for I passed a restless night, only falling asleep as the dawn came, so sleeping later than my wont, and I woke to find a dull, grey morning, a sobbing wind, and threatening-looking clouds overhead, no trace of sun or blue sky—such is our dear English climate! But, such as it is, I love it in all or most of its moods. To-day it suited me. I would journey to my “House of Mystery” and spend the hours indoors. I am not braver than other women, indeed, am a veritable coward over many things, but I am *not* greatly alarmed by the supernatural.

I suppose because of my unchanging belief in a life hereafter, and a very firm faith that those we love, who have passed over, are very, very near us, and not as some would have it, out of our ken for all time, and so, though I have a natural dread of things not understandable, I still was not afraid, certainly not sufficiently afraid to prevent my visiting my dream children at least once more.

I reached the house on this my third visit shortly after one o'clock, and went straight to the window, raised it, and crept through. I had a kind of feeling that if I saw my babies it would not be until four o'clock. Little did I guess what was in store for me, or even I, good as my nerves were, would have gone gladly a hundred miles in another direction.

The house was very still, very silent, as I moved about, my footsteps seemed to make the sounds of a giant at least.

Slowly I wended my way upstairs, through room after room—all had been beautiful, artistic, and varied in colour and design. At last I reached a large, airy room, done in shades of blue, and this room had brass rods before the large window.

"Night nursery," I murmured, and I noticed two small hard-looking beds. Strange, I thought, in all this vast place, just two little things left in various rooms—two little beds, two little dish covers, two little wooden stools, in that horrid room downstairs, what did it mean?

What can have been the story of this house, for story there had been, of that I felt sure. Maybe some little children had died here, or, was it that they had lived, and then gone elsewhere, leaving their little belongings behind them? No! that could not be right, for, almost unwillingly, I was forced to admit that those little beings I had seen and heard were not of this world, nor were they the children of my imagination; so that hidden story was apparently to remain hidden unless—unless—I had the courage and will power to unearth it. Will power I had, I knew that, but courage? Ah! that was a different story, and I felt that a certain amount might be needed in the face of what I had already seen. Resolutely I had made up my mind I would continue to visit the house, trying to take things calmly, trusting nothing would happen to try my powers of endurance too severely.

The garden did not look so attractive to-day, rain had fallen off and on all morning, beating down the few late flowers, making muddy puddles on the grassy paths, and I did not feel as if I dared to venture as far as the shut-in lawn. I would prowl about indoors, I decided, though to tell the truth, the place was eerie in the chill gloom of this wet day, now and then a moaning wind howled through keyholes and chinks. Sometimes a far-off door slammed to, making me jump, or the sound of a rattling window echoed through the empty rooms, the trees made the house dark, too, lacking the brilliant sunshine of previous days, when I revelled in exploring both house and grounds. However, here I was, and here I intended to remain, at least for another hour or two.

This night nursery, as I called it, was anything but an attractive room, so I decided to leave it and pursue my investigations elsewhere, so merely glanced round it as I wandered towards the door, pausing, as I did so, to look at the two little beds. I felt one of them, and was shocked to feel the hardness of it; for though fully made, even to pillows and blankets, all was of the poorest description, the bedding itself almost like wood, so hard was it.

"Poor babies!" I murmured, "if their sweet, little bodies had been obliged to rest on them." I found it difficult to picture those lovely little people as I saw them in the sunny garden, sleeping uneasily on such hard beds. The room chilled me, and I was glad to leave it, though I paused uncertainly at the door, wondering whether to go further amongst the upstairs-rooms or go down again. It was curious the attraction the toy-room held for me. I liked to look at the toys, picturing the games and frolics of the little tones amongst them; moreover, I had the wee scarlet shoes in my pocket, ready to replace, but first I intended to watch if they were still missed. So, I only gave a passing glance into one or two other rooms on my way to the staircase. All were empty, dusty, cold and faded, though once, as in the rooms below, the decorations must have been beautiful, one large, airy room particularly charmed me, especially the ceiling—hand-painted, apparently—a dull, cream ground with tiny, naked babies flying about, holding up pale blue

ribbons, all of them gathered, so to speak, by one baby of a larger size in the centre, who held in his wee hands the ends of the ribbons almost as if driving a team of other babies. What held my attention was the exquisite beauty of the child faces; truly, this house had held one lover of children at any rate. I stayed a little while in that room, sitting on the broad window sill, happy with my fancies amongst those pretty babies. The room, I imagined, was just over the “toy-room,” judging from the view from the window, so perhaps this was the room of their mother. Perhaps she rested her where her quick ear could catch the sound of little voices in the room beneath. Happy mother! and happy babies. Was she a mother in the old, real meaning of the word—someone to whom the children could go always sure of sympathy for woes and joy in their joy. Mothers like that are rare to-day, they have not time. Children weary them, pet dogs are so much less trouble.

This room, with its painted babies, was filling my eyes with useless tears; I felt I was losing time, sitting brooding here of things, which, after all, were probably “Direction that I could not see,” so, with a lingering look at the lovely, laughing faces, I quietly stepped away, wending my way back along the long corridor, to the head of the staircase, where there was a quaintly-carved white gate. The babies again, I thought, as I paused beside the gate, noticing that on the top of it was fixed a little silver bell which gave out a sweet deep-toned ring, as the gate was touched, evidently once inside the gate, the bell was a signal if it was opened again; probably for mischief, sometimes a tiny hand would shake the gate, calling instantly some person, maybe nurse, or mother, quickly to gather in the straying baby. I sighed again as I went down the stairs. So far to-day the house had been singularly quiet. I was glad in a way, yet somehow disappointed. I wanted my babies. Very well, then—the toy-room should be my next room. Softly I opened the door, almost feeling as if I should catch them at their play, but all was silent. I would wait, so went quietly to where an old, much-used rocking-chair stood. No fancy affair this, but a solid yellow, wood chair, with big cane seat and back, and large rockers, the right sort of chair in which to rock tired kiddies. I sat down in it and silently waited. I knew I *was* waiting—it is one thing to merely sit down to rest—it is quite another to sit down to wait—wait—for something—or someone, not knowing what or for whom. I tried to read a little book I had put in my pocket, but my eyes refused to keep on the page, and my ears seemed awaiting sounds. They came at last—the sounds—not the babies, sounds that made me spring from my chair and listen, listen! with thumping heart and cold terror gripping me!

Scream after scream, rang through the silence—piercing shrill, the screams of a little child—no, of little children—not the screams one hears in a nursery, when squabbles occur; not the screams of rage or vexation of thwarted wishes, or bed-time orders, but the awful heart-rending screams of children in dire pain and terror. I could have screamed also, merely hearing them, and yet I felt powerless to move or stir, my limbs refused their office. I could only stand shuddering. Two more piteous cries reached my ears, and then silence, but only for a brief space, as suddenly the door was flung violently open and two small, naked figures fell rather than walked into the room—fell, as if pushed in, and the door swiftly banged to—the bang brought me mere or less to my senses, and I stared horror-stricken, aghast—the two little figures were my sunny smiling children of the garden; but oh! the pity of it, their little faces smiled no longer, tears coursed down each baby face, as they stood clinging together, tremblingly; their lovely, little bodies covered with marks as of a lash or stick, weals and cuts which showed like blood; even across their wee legs were hideous marks.

Even now, as I look back after many years, I find it difficult to believe those little figures were not “real,” so real did they appear to me. I wanted to go to them, to kneel beside them, soothing,

comforting, but something—was it their absolute unconsciousness of my presence, I wonder—kept me still, and watching, slowly their sobbing ceased, as still trembling they moved together to where an old-fashioned sofa stood. I saw them, with difficulty, drag their little, sore and battered bodies up on to it, and cower down under the old, worn blanket, flung on it; I saw them, arms round each other, fair head and dark, close, close together; I saw the quivering limbs grow still, as I heard little moans die away on their lips, and then I saw a soft, unearthly light hover for one instant over the old couch, and then—I was alone, the sofa empty—the room silent! For a long time I stood staring, and then I knew my first feeling was one of intense relief, that those little, ill-used babies were *not* real—though my heart was aching, sickeningly, at what must once have been; my second feeling was one of stern resolve to know and fathom, to punish, if not too late, the author of such misery. Poor little babies! What had been their fate, and why?

Slowly my wits resumed their balance, and my nerves lost some of the strain. I ventured near the sofa, half-expecting to see the little faces, but only the worn, old blanket lay on the sofa; so, stepping swiftly to the fireside. I knelt down, and taking the little shoes from my pocket, I laid them gently in the spot from whence I had taken them, and, for the first time, glanced at my watch. Five minutes past four! “The usual time,” I murmured. “How strange it all is, yet there are those whose fixed and unalterable belief is that *if* there ever are “ghosts” seen, it can only be at midnight!” How little such people know!

Evidently, then, I had been the witness of varied visions of these little ones—the story of their little lives was rapidly unfolding before me. I had *heard* them on the first afternoon, when I took the little shoes; I had *seen* them happy in the garden on my second visit, and to-day, my third visit, I had *seen* them tortured, torn. Should I see them again, I wondered, or was this last awful scene the final one! At any rate, I felt I should not see them again to-day, so prepared to take my leave.

I had just reached the hall, when the sound of a heavy groan fell on my ears—a groan and a sound of a moving chair. Nothing unearthly about that, I thought, though why I was so sure of it I could not tell. The moving chair brought the caretaker to my mind, probably groaning at having to come at all, I thought, but, anyway, I will track her for once. Again something moved. “The other front room,” I murmured, as I bravely went towards it, and opened the door. It was empty, but the door leading from it into the little, horrible room, where the two little stools were, was slightly ajar. I hated the thought of entering it, but felt compelled to do so; as I neared it, moving as softly as I could, I heard strange words and mutterings. I had just reached the door when the words—

“My God! is there no peace?” uttered in a man’s voice, arrested my steps, and then, in louder tones—

“Help, oh, help!”

Instantly I pushed the door open.

“Well,” I said.

A gaunt, misshapen figure rose suddenly—a man with long, white beard and hair, eyes sunken and burning, fixed themselves upon me, as with a shriek, he yelled—

“Yes, yes, the well! That is it, the well, it is there they are. Who are you? How did you find out? Oh, God! my sin is found out, my punishment is upon me—I confess—I confess. There, take it, take it, it is all there; too late, too late for reparation, make proper use of it, take it,” and he flung a heavily-sealed packet almost in my face, and then—swiftly pulling out a small phial from his coat pocket, he raised it to his mouth, and ere I could stay his hand, had drunk the contents, and, raising his hand upwards, said—

“God forgive me—pardon—I have atoned,” and fell forward, face downwards, on the stone floor.

I need not dwell upon the horror I went through, when, in my headlong flight from the house, I stumbled blindly to the nearest police officer, and there, with hurried breath, I told of my visits to the empty house, by way of passing idle hours, and of my suddenly coming upon this man, with my exclamation—“Well?” which apparently startled him into giving up his guilty secret. I did *not* deem it necessary to tell of the little children, at least not to police, because they would, if not openly grin and deride me, most certainly have suggested to the nearest medical man that a young woman who moons about empty houses and sees ghosts was not a fit person to be unattended, so I kept my “dream babies” to myself, and one other.

To my unspeakable annoyance, I was dragged into the affair, and forced to give evidence as to the finding of the man and of his subsequent act—the taking his own life.

The sealed packet, being addressed to “The person who found him out,” was, therefore, proved to belong to me, and to my unfortunate self fell the task of reading and making it known, and later, carrying out the instructions contained therein.

The confession of a man apparently driven to it by awful fear was a terrible thing to read, and for this story need only be put briefly—

“I write this my confession,” he wrote, “as the one atonement I can make for a sin which has rendered my life and the life of my son a living torture. I have travelled by land and sea, I have visited many strange lands, I have done all that mind could plan or money achieve, in a vain attempt to deaden the relentless voice of conscience or dull the sound of children weeping, which rings in my ears daylight or dark. Sleep is a friend unknown to me, save only drugged sleep. Joy or happiness I have never known.

“If the sun shines, I remember the Sunny Garden and the children at play, ready to tremble if they heard my voice or that of my son.

“If it rains, I remember the punishment room, where we tortured those innocent little ones. Nowhere can I rest, Oh, God! save in my grave, and only then, if I atone—”

He relates how he was left by his brother, then in India, as Guardian to these children of his, and how he and his son Roger made up their minds from the first to get the vast sum of money, left to the children, into their own hands; and, as later evidence proved, they treated the children with systematic cruelty, though no one suspected it—their torturing of them always taking place during late afternoon or evening hours, but during the day, when people were about, money was lavished upon the children, and a certain amount of care taken of them.

In his confession, he relates how he and his wretched son used to fasten the children to two high stools in the dismal room, and whip them until the blood ran from their little bodies. There was no one to shield them; his son and their nurse, as evil as himself, aided him in his cruelty, having been promised a large sum as soon as the children were safely disposed of.

The father of the children was killed in some Frontier trouble, soon after his return to his regiment, and the shock of his death reduced their mother to a helpless invalid who seldom left her own rooms, believing her little ones were in good hands.

They were always taken to see her at noon—their nurse watching them evilly, having threatened them with punishment if they “told tales.”

Systematic cruelty was dealt out to these hapless babes, day by day, until one day, they were beaten so vilely, that both died from shock, and were found on the old couch in the toy-room clasped in each other’s arms—dead.

Here his confession reaches frenzy, as he adds—

Together my son and I took the bodies we had so ill-used and flung them, into the old disused well in the sunk garden, where, I am certain, their spirits will haunt us all our days.

We told their mother that gipsies seen in the neighbourhood must have stolen them, and pretended to try and find them, and use every available means, unavailingly. This added grief killed the poor lady, leaving us to enjoy—if we could—our ill-gotten gains.

My miserable son was killed in a motor accident, soon after, and I—God knows!—a miserable haunted creature, roam the earth seeking peace and finding none.”

And finally, the hand of fate drew him back to the scene of his crime, and he endeavoured to make reparation by leaving the vast fortune he now possessed—

“To benefit some children in whatsoever manner the finder of this confession shall decide.”

Many years have gone by, and a beautiful “Home for Convalescent Children” has taken the place of my “House of Mystery.” Upstairs, in gay, cheery rooms, are long rows of little, white beds. Downstairs, in the “Room of Toys,” are still more toys, and little tots in dainty, blue overalls play, and grow strong and well.

In the “Punishment Room,” now called “Matron’s Room,” sits a sunny-faced, gentle lady, ever ready to help her little ones, and adored by her nurses.

In the sunk garden are swings and couches, and many games. One corner of the garden has been opened out, and a high, grass mound made there; on it is an exquisite white marble Angel, holding in her arms two tiny children—that is all. No names or dates are given—simply “In memory of two children.”

Only once has the old story been brought vividly to my memory. I was visiting the Home, and the night nurse, a sweet motherly woman, asked me—

“Was there ever a story about this house, ma’am?”

“Why, nurse?” I asked.

“Oh, it may be fancy, ma’am,” she replied, “but once or twice I thought I heard a little child crying, but all my little ones were asleep, and at times I’ve heard tiny pattering feet when none of my babies were out of their beds; and once, ma’am, a woman brought a tiny girl here, and the little thing had on a pair of wee scarlet shoes. That night, I heard soft, baby laughter and little chuckles of glee, and though I, myself, put those little shoes in a safe place, they had been moved by the morning, but this was before the beautiful white angel was put in the garden ma’am, just about the time the gardeners filled in that unsafe old well. I have not heard anything since then.”

I gave no explanation, I could not, I only said—

“If all the babies sleep in peace nurse, all is well.”