

The Extra Day

by

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1. The Material.....	3
2. Fancy--Seed Of Wonder.....	6
3. Death Of A Mere Fact	19
4. Fact--Edged With Fancy	24
5. The Birth Of Wonder	35
6. The Growth Of Wonder.....	41
7. Imagination Wakes.....	46
8. Where Wonder Hides.....	54
9. A Priest Of Wonder	62
10. Fact And Wonder—Clash	69
11. Judy's Particular Adventure	78
12. Tim's Particular Adventure	91
13. Time Hesitates.....	101
14. Maria Stirs	106
15. "A Day Will Come"	120
16. Time Halts.....	127
17. A Day Has Come.....	132
18. Time Goes On Again.....	209
19. As Usual.....	212
20. But Differently	220

1. The Material

Judy, Tim, and Maria were just little children. It was impossible to say exactly what their ages were, except that they were just the usual age, that Judy was the eldest, Maria the youngest, and that Tim, accordingly, came in between the two.

Their father did his best for them; so did their mother; so did Aunt Emily, the latter's sister. It is impossible to say very much about these three either, except that they were just Father, Mother, and Aunt Emily. They were the Authorities-in-Chief, and they knew respectively everything there was to be known about such remote and difficult subjects as London and Money; Food, Health and Clothing; Conduct, Behaviour and Regulations, both general and particular. Into these three departments of activity the children, without realising that they did so, classed them neatly. Aunt Emily, besides the special duties assigned to her, was a living embodiment of No. While Father allowed and permitted, while Mother wobbled and hesitated, Aunt Emily shook her head with decision, and said distinctly No. She was too full of warnings, advice, and admonitions to get about much. She wore gold glasses, and had an elastic, pointed nose. From the children's point of view she must be classed as invalid. Somewhere, deep down inside them, they felt pity.

The trio loved them according to their just deserts; they grasped that the Authorities did their best for them. This "best," moreover, was done in different ways. Father did it with love and tenderness, that is, he spoilt them; Mother with tenderness and love, that is, she felt them part of herself and did not like to hurt herself; Aunt Emily with affectionate and worthy desire to see them improve, that is, she trained them. Therefore they adored their father, loved their mother, and thought highly--from a distance preferably--of their aunt.

This was the outward and visible household that an ordinary person, say, a visitor who came to lunch on Sunday after church, would have noticed. It was the upper layer; but there was an under layer too. There was Thompson, the old pompous family butler; they trusted him because he was silent and rarely smiled, winked at their mischief, pretended not to see them when he caught them in his pantry, and never once betrayed them. There was Mrs. Horton, the fat and hot-tempered family cook; they regarded her with excitement including dread, because she left juicy cakes (still wet) upon the dresser, yet denied them the entry into her kitchen. Her first name being Bridget, there was evidently an Irish strain in her, but there was probably a dash of French as well, for she was an excellent cook and recipe was her master-word--she pronounced it "recipee." There was Jackman, the nurse, a mixture of Mother and Aunt Emily; and there was Weeden, the Head Gardener, an evasive and mysterious personality, who knew so much about flowers and vegetables and weather that he was half animal, half bird, and scarcely a human being at all--vaguely magnificent in a sombre way. His power in his own department was unquestioned. He said little, but it "meant an awful lot"--most of which, perhaps, was not intended.

These four constituted the under layer of the household, concealed from visitors, and living their own lives apart behind the scenes. They were the Lesser Authorities.

There were others too, of course, neighbours, friends, and visitors, who dwelt outside the big iron gates in the Open World, and who entered their lives from various angles, some to linger, some merely to show themselves and vanish into mist again. Occasionally they reappeared at intervals, occasionally they didn't. Among the former were Colonel William Stumper, C.B., a retired Indian soldier who lived in the Manor House beyond the church and had written a book on Scouting; a nameless Station-Master, whom they saw rarely when they accompanied Daddy to the London train; a Policeman, who walked endlessly up and down the muddy or dusty lanes, and came to the front door with a dirty little book in his big hands at Christmas-time; and a Tramp, who slept in barns and haystacks, and haunted the great London Road ever since they had once handed him a piece of Mrs. Horton's sticky cake in paper over the old grey fence. Him they regarded with a special awe and admiration, not unmixed with tenderness. He had smiled so nicely when he said "Thank you" that Judy, wondering if there was any one to mend his clothes, had always longed to know him better. It seemed so wonderful. How could he live without furniture, house, regular meals--without possessions, in a word? It made him so real. It was "real life," in fact, to live that way; and upon Judy especially the impression was a deep one.

In addition to these occasional intruders, there was another person, an Authority, but the most wonderful Authority of all, who came into their lives a little later with a gradual and overwhelming effect, but who cannot be mentioned more definitely just now because he has not yet arrived. The world, in any case, speaking generally, was enormous; it was endless; it was always dropping things and people upon them without warning, as from a clear and cloudless sky. But this particular individual was still climbing the great curve below their horizon, and had not yet poked his amazing head above the edge.

Yet, strange to say, they had always believed that some such person would arrive. A wonderful stranger was already on the way. They rarely spoke of it--it was just a great, passionate expectancy tucked away in the deepest corner of their hearts. Children possess this sense of anticipation all the world over; grown-ups have it too in the form of an unquenchable, though fading hope: the feeling that some day or other a Wonderful Stranger will come up the pathway, knock at the door, and enter their lives, making life worth living, full of wonder, beauty, and delight, because he will make all things new.

This wonderful stranger, Judy had a vague idea, would be--be like at least--the Tramp; Tim, following another instinct, was of the opinion he would be a "soldier-explorer-hunter kind of man"; Maria, if she thought anything at all about him, kept her decision securely hidden in her tight, round body. But Judy qualified her choice by the hopeful assertion that he would "come from the air"; and Tim had a secret notion that he would emerge from a big, deep hole--pop out like a badger or a rabbit, as it were--and suddenly declare himself; while Maria, by her non-committal, universal attitude, perhaps believed that, if he came at all, he would "just come from everywhere at once." She believed everything, always, everywhere. But to assert that belief was to betray the existence of a doubt concerning it. She just lived it.

For the three children belonged to three distinct classes, without knowing that they did so. Tim loved anything to do with the ground, with earth and soil, that is, things that made holes and

lived in them, or that did not actually make holes but just grubbed about; mysterious, secret things, such as rabbits, badgers, hedgehogs, mice, rats, hares, and weasels. In all his games the "earth" was home.

Judy, on the other hand, was indubitably an air person--birds amazed her, filling her hungry heart with high aspirations, longings, and desires. She looked, with her bright, eager face and spidery legs, distinctly bird-like. She flitted, darted, perched. She had what Tim called a "tweaky" nose, though whether he meant that it was beak-like or merely twitched, he never stated; it was just "tweaky," and Judy took it as a compliment. One could easily imagine her shining little face peeping over the edge of a nest, the rest of her sitting warmly upon half a dozen smooth, pink eggs. Her legs certainly seemed stuck into her like pencils, as with a robin or a seagull. She adored everything that had wings and flew; she was of the air; it was her element.

Maria's passions were unknown. Though suspected of being universal, since she manifested no deliberate likes or dislikes, approving all things with a kind of majestic and indifferent omnipotence, they remained quiescent and undeclared. She probably just loved the universe. She felt at home in it. To Maria the entire universe belonged, because she sat still and with absolute conviction--claimed it.

2. Fancy--Seed Of Wonder

The country house, so ancient that it seemed part of the landscape, settled down secretively into the wintry darkness and watched the night with eyes of yellow flame. The thick December gloom hid it securely from attack. Nothing could find it out. Though crumbling in places, the mass of it was solid as a fortress, for the old oak beams had resisted Time so long that the tired years had resigned themselves to siege instead of assault, and the protective hills and woods rendered it impregnable against the centuries. The beleaguered inhabitants felt safe. It was a delightful, cosy feeling, yet excitement and surprise were in it too. Anything might happen, and at any moment.

This, at any rate, was how Judy and Tim felt the personality of the old Mill House, calling it Daddy's Castle. Maria expressed no opinion. She felt and knew too much to say a word. She was habitually non-committal. She shared the being of the ancient building, as the building shared the landscape out of which it grew so naturally. Having been born last, her inheritance of coming Time exceeded that of Tim and Judy, and she lived as though thoroughly aware of her prerogative. In quiet silence she claimed everything as her very own.

The Mill House, like Maria, never moved; it existed comfortably; it seemed independent of busy, hurrying Time. So thickly covered was it with ivy and various creepers that the trees on the lawn wondered why it did not grow bigger like themselves. They remembered the time when they looked up to it, whereas now they looked over it easily, and even their lower branches stroked the stone tiles on the roof, patched with moss and lichen like their own great trunks. They had come to regard it as an elderly animal asleep, for its chimneys looked like horns, it possessed a capacious mouth that both swallowed and disgorged, and its eyes were as numerous as those of the forest to which they themselves properly belonged. And so they accepted the old Mill House as a thing of drowsy but persistent life; they protected and caressed it; they liked it exactly where it was; and if it moved they would have known an undeniable shock.

They watched it now, this dark December evening, as one by one its gleaming eyes shone bright and yellow through the mist, then one by one let down their dark green lids. "It's going to sleep," they thought. "It's going to dream. Its life, like ours, is all inside. It sleeps the winter through as we do. All is well. Good-night, old house of grey! We'll also go to sleep."

Unable to see into the brain of the sleepy monster, the trees resigned themselves to dream again, tucking the earth closely against their roots and withdrawing into the cloak of misty darkness. Like most other things in winter they also stayed indoors, leading an interior life of dim magnificence behind their warm, thick bark. Presently, when they were ready, something would happen, something they were preparing at their leisure,

something so exquisite that all who saw it would dance and sing for gladness. They also believed in a Wonderful Stranger who was coming into their slow, steady lives. They fell to dreaming of the surprising pageant they would blazon forth upon the world a little later. And while they dreamed, the wind of night passed moaning through their leafless branches, and Time flew noiselessly above the turning Earth.

Meanwhile, inside the old Mill House, the servants lit the lamps and drew the blinds and curtains. Behind the closing eyelids, however, like dream-chambers within a busy skull, there were rooms of various shapes and kinds, and in one of these on the ground-floor, called Daddy's Study, the three children stood, expectant and a little shy, waiting for something desirable to happen. In common with all other living things, they shared this enticing feeling--that Something Wonderful was going to happen. To be without this feeling, of course, is to be not alive; but, once alive, it cannot be escaped. At death it asserts itself most strongly of all--Something Too Wonderful is going to happen. For to die is quite different from being not alive. This feeling is the proof of eternal life--once alive, alive for ever. To live is to feel this yearning, huge expectancy.

Daddy had taught them this, though, of course, they knew it instinctively already. And any moment now the door would open and his figure, familiar, yet each time more wonderful, would cross the threshold, close the door behind him, and ... something desirable would happen.

"I wish he'd hurry," said Tim impatiently. "There won't be any time left." And he glanced at the cruel clock that stopped all their pleasure but never stopped itself. "The motor got here hours ago. He can't STILL be having tea." Judy, her brown hair in disorder, her belt sagging where it was of little actual use, sighed deeply. But there was patience and understanding in her big, dark eyes. "He's in with Mother doing finances," she said with resignation. "It's Saturday. Let's sit down and wait." Then, seeing that Maria already occupied the big armchair, and sat staring comfortably into the fire, she did not move. Maria was making a purring, grunting sound of great contentment; she felt no anxiety of any kind apparently.

But Tim was less particular.

"Alright," he said, squashing himself down beside Maria, whose podgy form accommodated itself to the intrusion like a cat, "as long as Aunt Emily doesn't catch him on the way and begin explaining."

"She's in bed with a headache," mentioned Judy. "She's safe enough." For it was an established grievance against their mother's sister that she was always explaining things. She was a terrible explainer. She couldn't move without explaining. She explained everything in the world. She was a good soul, they knew, but she had to explain that she was a good soul. They rather dreaded her. Explanations took time for

one thing, and for another they took away all wonder. In bed with a headache, she was safely accounted for, explained.

"She thinks we miss her," reflected Tim. He did not say it; it just flashed through his mind, with a satisfaction that added vaguely to his pleasurable anticipation of what was coming. And this satisfaction increased his energy. "Shove over a bit," he added aloud to Maria, and though Maria did not move of her own volition, she was nevertheless shoved over. The pair of them settled down into the depths of the chair, but while Maria remained quite satisfied with her new position, her brother fussed and fidgeted with impatience born of repressed excitement. "Run out and knock at the door," he proposed to Judy. "He'll never get away from Mother unless we let him KNOW we're waiting."

Judy, kneeling on a chair and trying to make it sea-saw, pulled up her belt, sprang down, then hesitated. "They'll only think it's Thompson and say come in," she decided. "That's no good."

Tim jumped up, using Maria as a support to raise himself. "I know what!" he cried. "Go and bang the gong. He'll think it's dressing- time." The idea was magnificent. "I'll go if you funk it," he added, and had already slithered half way over the back of the chair when Judy forestalled him and had her hand upon the door-knob. He encouraged her with various instructions about the proper way to beat the gong, and was just beginning a scuffle with the inanimate Maria, who now managed to occupy the entire chair, when he was aware of a new phenomenon that made him stop abruptly. He saw Judy's face hanging in mid-air, six feet above the level of the floor. Her face was flushed and smiling; her hair hung over her eyes; and from somewhere behind or underneath her a gruff voice said sternly:

"What are you doing in my Study at this time of night? Who asked you in?"

The expected figure had entered, catching Judy in the act of opening the door. He was carrying her in his arms. She landed with a flop upon the carpet. The desired and desirable thing was about to happen. "Get out, you lump, it's Daddy." But Maria, accustomed to her brother's exaggerated language, and knowing it was only right and manly, merely raised her eyes and waited for him to help her out. Tim did help her out; half dragging and half lifting, he deposited her in a solid heap upon the floor, then ran to the figure that now dominated the dim, fire-lit room, and hugged it with all his force, making sounds in his throat like an excited animal: "Ugh! ugh! ugh!...!"

The hug was returned with equal vigour, but without the curious sounds; Maria was hugged as well and set upon her feet; while Judy, having already been sufficiently hugged, pushed the arm-chair closer up to the fire and waited patiently for the proper business of the evening to begin.

The figure, meanwhile, disentangled itself. It was tall and thin, with a mild, resigned expression upon a kindly face that years and care had lined before its time: old-fashioned rather, with soft, grey whiskers belonging to an earlier day. A black tail-coat adorned it, and the neck-tie was crooked in the turned-down collar. The watch-chain went from the waist-coat button to one pocket only, instead of right across, and one finger wore a heavy signet-ring that bore the family crest. It was obviously the figure of an overworked official in the Civil Service who had returned from its daily routine in London to the evening routine of its family in the country, the atmosphere of Government and the Underground still hanging round it. For sundry whiffs of the mysterious city reached the children's nostrils, bringing thrills of some strange, remote reality they had never known at first-hand. They busied themselves at once. While Tim unbuttoned the severe black coat and pulled it off, Judy brought a jacket of dingy tweed from behind a curtain in the corner, and stood on a chair to help the figure put it on. All knew their duties; the performance went like clockwork. And Maria sat and watched in helpful silence. There was a certain air about her as though she did it all.

"How they do spoil me, to be sure," the figure murmured to itself; "yet Mother's always saying that I spoil them. I wonder...!"

"Now you look decent at last," said Judy. "You smell like a nice rabbit."

"It's my shooting-coat." The figure cleared its throat, apparently on the defensive a little.

Tim and Judy sniffed it. "Rabbits and squirrels and earth and things," thought Tim.

"And flowers and burning leaves," said Judy. "It's his old garden-coat as well." She sniffed very audibly. "Oh, I love that smoky smell."

"It's the good old English smell," said the figure contentedly, while they put his neck-tie straight and arranged the pocket flaps for him. "It's English country--England."

"Don't other countries smell, then?" inquired Tim. "I mean, could any one tell you were English by your smell?" He sniffed again, with satisfaction. "Weeden's the same," he went on, without waiting for an answer, "only much stronger, and so's the potting shed."

"But yours is sweeter much," said Judy quickly. To share odours with an Authority like the Head Gardener was distinctly a compliment, but Daddy must come first, whatever happened. "How funny," she added, half to herself, "that England should have such a jolly smell. I wonder what it comes from?"

"Where does England come from?" asked Tim, pausing a moment to stare into the figure's face. "It's an island, of course--England--but--"

"A piece of land surrounded by water," began the figure, but was not allowed to finish. A chorus of voices interrupted:

"Make a story of it, please. There's just time. There's half an hour. It's nice and dark. Ugh! Something very awful or very silly, please...."

There followed a general scuffle for seats, with bitter complaints that he only had two pointed knees. Maria was treated with scant respect. There was also criticism of life--that he had no lap, "no proper lap," that it was too dark to see his face, that everybody in turn had got "the best place," but, chiefly, that there was "very little time." Time was a nuisance always: it either was time to go, or time to stop, or else there was not time enough. But at length quiet was established; the big arm-chair resembled a clot of bees upon a honeycomb; the fire burned dully, and the ceiling was thick with monstrous fluttering shadows, vaguely shaped.

"Now, please. We've been ready for ages."

A deep hush fell upon the room, and only a sound of confused breathing was audible. The figure heaved a long, deep sigh as though it suffered pain, paused, cleared its throat, then sighed again more heavily than before. For the moment of creation was at hand, and creation is not accomplished without much travail.

But the children loved the pause, the sigh, the effort. Not realising with what difficulty the stories were ground out, nor that it was an effort against time--to make a story last till help came from outside --they believed that something immense and wonderful was on the way, and held their breath with beating hearts. Daddy's stories were always marvellous; this one would be no exception.

Marvellous up to a point, that is: something in them failed. "He's trying," was their opinion of them; and it was the trying that they watched and listened to so eagerly. The results were unsatisfying, the effect incomplete; the climax of sensation they expected never came. Daddy, though they could not put this into words, possessed fancy only; imagination was not his. Fancy, however, is the seed of imagination, as imagination is the blossom of wonder. His stories prepared the soil in them at any rate. They felt him digging all round them.

He began forthwith:

"Once, very long ago--"

"How long?"

"So long ago that the chalk cliffs of England still lay beneath the sea--"

"Was Aunt Emily alive then?"

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