

# Chapter 1

## THE BEGINNING

Philip Haldane and his sister lived in a little red-roofed house in a little red-roofed town. They had a little garden and a little balcony, and a little stable with a little pony in it—and a little cart for the pony to draw; a little canary hung in a little cage in the little bow-window, and the neat little servant kept everything as bright and clean as a little new pin.

Philip had no one but his sister, and she had no one but Philip. Their parents were dead, and Helen, who was twenty years older than Philip and was really his half-sister, was all the mother he had ever known. And he had never envied other boys their mothers, because Helen was so kind and clever and dear. She gave up almost all her time to him; she taught him all the lessons he learned; she played with him, inventing the most wonderful new games and adventures. So that every morning when Philip woke he knew that he was waking to a new day of joyous and interesting happenings. And this went on till Philip was ten years old, and he had no least shadow of a doubt that it would go on for ever. The beginning of the change came one day when he and Helen had gone for a picnic to the wood where the waterfall was, and as they were driving back behind the stout old pony, who was so good and quiet that Philip was allowed to drive it. They were coming up the last lane before the turning where their house was, and Helen said:

'To-morrow we'll weed the aster bed and have tea in the garden.'

'Jolly,' said Philip, and they turned the corner and came in sight of their white little garden gate. And a man was coming out of it—a man who was not one of the friends they both knew. He turned and came to meet them. Helen put her hand on the reins—a thing which she had always taught Philip was *never* done—and the pony stopped. The man, who was, as Philip put it to himself, 'tall and tweedy,' came across in front of the pony's nose and stood close by the wheel on the side where Helen sat. She shook hands with him, and said, 'How do you do?' in quite the usual way. But after that they whispered. Whispered! And

Philip knew how rude it is to whisper, because Helen had often told him this. He heard one or two words, 'at last,' and 'over now,' and 'this evening, then.'

After that Helen said, 'This is my brother Philip,' and the man shook hands with him—across Helen, another thing which Philip knew was not manners, and said, 'I hope we shall be the best of friends.' Pip said, 'How do you do?' because that is the polite thing to say. But inside himself he said, 'I don't want to be friends with *you*.'

Then the man took off his hat and walked away, and Philip and his sister went home. She seemed different, somehow, and he was sent to bed a little earlier than usual, but he could not go to sleep for a long time, because he heard the front-door bell ring and afterwards a man's voice and Helen's going on and on in the little drawing-room under the room which was his bedroom. He went to sleep at last, and when he woke up in the morning it was raining, and the sky was grey and miserable. He lost his collar-stud, he tore one of his stockings as he pulled it on, he pinched his finger in the door, and he dropped his tooth-mug, with water in it too, and the mug was broken and the water went into his boots. There are mornings, you know, when things happen like that. This was one of them.

Then he went down to breakfast, which tasted not quite so nice as usual. He was late, of course. The bacon fat was growing grey with waiting for him, as Helen said, in the cheerful voice that had always said all the things he liked best to hear. But Philip didn't smile. It did not seem the sort of morning for smiling, and the grey rain beat against the window.

After breakfast Helen said, 'Tea in the garden is indefinitely postponed, and it's too wet for lessons.'

That was one of her charming ideas—that wet days should not be made worse by lessons.

'What shall we do?' she said; 'shall we talk about the island? Shall I make another map of it? And put in all the gardens and fountains and swings?'

The island was a favourite play. Somewhere in the warm seas where palm trees are, and rainbow-coloured sands, the island was said to be—their own island, beautified by their fancy with everything they liked and wanted, and Philip was never tired of talking about it. There were times when he almost believed that the island was real. He was king of the island and Helen was queen, and no one else was to be allowed on it. Only these two.

But this morning even the thought of the island failed to charm. Philip straggled away to the window and looked out dismally at the soaked lawn and the dripping laburnum trees, and the row of raindrops hanging fat and full on the iron gate.

'What is it, Pippin?' Helen asked. 'Don't tell me you're going to have horrid measles, or red-hot scarlet fever, or noisy whooping-cough.'

She came across and laid her hand on his forehead.

'Why, you're quite hot, boy of my heart. Tell sister, what is it?'

'You tell *me*,' said Philip slowly.

'Tell you what, Pip?'

'You think you ought to bear it alone, like in books, and be noble and all that. But you *must* tell me; you promised you'd never have any secrets from me, Helen, you know you did.'

Helen put her arm round him and said nothing. And from her silence Pip drew the most desperate and harrowing conclusions. The silence lasted. The rain gurgled in the water-pipe and dripped on the ivy. The canary in the green cage that hung in the window put its head on one side and tweaked a seed husk out into Philip's face, then twittered defiantly. But his sister said nothing.

'Don't,' said Philip suddenly, 'don't break it to me; tell me straight out.'

'Tell you what?' she said again.

'What is it?' he said. 'I know how these unfortold misfortunes happen. Some one always comes—and then it's broken to the family.'

'*What* is?' she asked.

'The misfortune,' said Philip breathlessly. 'Oh, Helen, I'm not a baby. Do tell me! Have we lost our money in a burst bank? Or is the landlord going to put bailiffs into our furniture? Or are we going to be falsely accused about forgery, or being burglars?'

All the books Philip had ever read worked together in his mind to produce these melancholy suggestions. Helen laughed, and instantly felt a stiffening withdrawal of her brother from her arm.

'No, no, my Pippin, dear,' she made haste to say. 'Nothing horrid like that has happened.'

'Then what is it?' he asked, with a growing impatience that felt like a wolf gnawing inside him.

'I didn't want to tell you all in a hurry like this,' she said anxiously; 'but don't you worry, my boy of boys. It's something that makes me very happy. I hope it will you, too.'

He swung round in the circling of her arm and looked at her with sudden ecstasy.

'Oh, Helen, dear—I know! Some one has left you a hundred thousand pounds a year—some one you once opened a railway-carriage door for—and now I can have a pony of my very own to ride. Can't I?'

'Yes,' said Helen slowly, 'you can have a pony; but nobody's left me anything. Look here, my Pippin,' she added, very quickly, 'don't ask any more questions. I'll tell you. When I was quite little like you I had a dear friend I used to play with all day long, and when we grew up we were friends still. He lived quite near us. And then he married some one else. And then the some one died. And now he wants me to marry him. And he's got lots of horses and a beautiful house and park,' she added.

'And where shall I be?' he asked.

'With me, of course, wherever I am.'

'It won't be just us two any more, though,' said Philip, 'and you said it should be, for ever and ever.'

'But I didn't know then, Pip, dear. He's been wanting me so long——'

'Don't *I* want you?' said Pip to himself.

'And he's got a little girl that you'll like so to play with,' she went on. 'Her name's Lucy, and she's just a year younger than you. And you'll be the greatest friends with her. And you'll both have ponies to ride, and——'

'I hate her,' cried Philip, very loud, 'and I hate him, and I hate their beastly ponies. And I hate *you*!' And with these dreadful words he flung off her arm and rushed out of the room, banging the door after him—on purpose.

Well, she found him in the boot-cupboard, among the gaiters and goloshes and cricket-stumps and old rackets, and they kissed and cried and hugged each other, and he said he was sorry he had been naughty. But in his heart that was the only thing he was sorry for. He was sorry that he had made Helen unhappy. He still hated 'that man,' and most of all he hated Lucy.

He had to be polite to that man. His sister was very fond of that man, and this made Philip hate him still more, while at the same time it made him careful not to show how he hated him. Also it made him feel that hating that man was not quite fair to his sister, whom he loved. But there were no feelings of that kind to come in the way of the detestation he felt for Lucy. Helen had told him that Lucy had fair hair and wore it in two plaits; and he pictured her to himself as a fat, stumpy little girl, exactly like the little girl in the story of 'The Sugar Bread' in the old oblong 'Shock-Headed Peter' book that had belonged to Helen when she was little.

Helen was quite happy. She divided her love between the boy she loved and the man she was going to marry, and she believed that they were both as happy as she was. The man, whose name was Peter Graham, was happy enough; the boy, who was Philip, was amused—for she kept him so—but under the amusement he was miserable.

And the wedding-day came and went. And Philip travelled on a very hot afternoon by strange trains and a strange carriage to a strange house, where he was welcomed by a strange nurse and—Lucy.

'You won't mind going to stay at Peter's beautiful house without me, will you, dear?' Helen had asked. 'Every one will be kind to you, and you'll have Lucy to play with.'

And Philip said he didn't mind. What else could he say, without being naughty and making Helen cry again?

Lucy was not a bit like the Sugar-Bread child. She had fair hair, it is true, and it was plaited in two braids, but they were very long and straight; she herself was long and lean and had a freckled face and bright, jolly eyes.

'I'm so glad you've come,' she said, meeting him on the steps of the most beautiful house he had ever seen; 'we can play all sort of things now that you can't play when you're only one. I'm an only child,' she added, with a sort of melancholy pride. Then she laughed. "'Only" rhymes with "lonely," doesn't it?' she said.

'I don't know,' said Philip, with deliberate falseness, for he knew quite well.

He said no more.

Lucy tried two or three other beginnings of conversation, but Philip contradicted everything she said.

'I'm afraid he's very very stupid,' she said to her nurse, an extremely trained nurse, who firmly agreed with her. And when her aunt came to see her next day, Lucy said that the little new boy was stupid, and disagreeable as well as stupid, and Philip confirmed this opinion of his behaviour to such a degree that the aunt, who was young and affectionate, had Lucy's clothes packed at once and carried her off for a few days' visit.

So Philip and the nurse were left at the Grange. There was nobody else in the house but servants. And now Philip began to know what loneliness meant. The letters and the picture post-cards which his sister sent every day from the odd towns on the continent of Europe, which she visited on her honeymoon, did not cheer the boy. They merely exasperated



him, reminding him of the time when she was all his own, and was too near to him to need to send him post-cards and letters.

The extremely trained nurse, who wore a grey uniform and white cap and apron, disapproved of Philip to the depths of her well-disciplined nature. 'Cantankerous little pig,' she called him to herself.

To the housekeeper she said, 'He is an unusually difficult and disagreeable child. I should imagine that his education has been much neglected. He wants a tight hand.'

She did not use a tight hand to him, however. She treated him with an indifference more annoying than tyranny. He had immense liberty of a desolate, empty sort. The great house was his to go to and fro in. But he was not allowed to touch anything in it. The garden was his—to wander through, but he must not pluck flowers or fruit. He had no lessons, it is true; but, then, he had no games either. There was a nursery, but he was not imprisoned in it—was not even encouraged to spend his time there. He was sent out for walks, and alone, for the park was large and safe. And the nursery was the room of all that great house that attracted him most, for it was full of toys of the most fascinating kind. A rocking-horse as big as a pony, the finest dolls' house you ever saw, boxes of tea-things, boxes of bricks—both the wooden and the terra-cotta sorts—puzzle maps, dominoes, chessmen, draughts, every kind of toy or game that you have ever had or ever wished to have.

And Pip was not allowed to play with any of them.

'You mustn't touch anything, if you please,' the nurse said, with that icy politeness which goes with a uniform. 'The toys are Miss Lucy's. No; I couldn't be responsible for giving you permission to play with them. No; I couldn't think of troubling Miss Lucy by writing to ask her if you may play with them. No; I couldn't take upon myself to give you Miss Lucy's address.'

For Philip's boredom and his desire had humbled him even to the asking for this.

For two whole days he lived at the Grange, hating it and every one in it; for the servants took their cue from the nurse, and the child felt that in the whole house he had not a friend. Somehow he had got the idea firmly in his head that this was a time when Helen was not to be bothered about anything; so he wrote to her that he was quite well, thank you, and the park was very pretty and Lucy had lots of nice toys. He felt very brave and noble, and like a martyr. And he set his teeth to bear it all. It was like spending a few days at the dentist's.

And then suddenly everything changed. The nurse got a telegram. A brother who had been thought to be drowned at sea had abruptly come home. She must go to see him. 'If it costs me the situation,' she said to the housekeeper, who answered:

'Oh, well—go, then. I'll be responsible for the boy—sulky little brat.'

And the nurse went. In a happy bustle she packed her boxes and went. At the last moment Philip, on the doorstep watching her climb into the dog-cart, suddenly sprang forward.

'Oh, Nurse!' he cried, blundering against the almost moving wheel, and it was the first time he had called her by any name. 'Nurse, do—do say I may take Lucy's toys to play with; it *is* so lonely here. I may, mayn't I? I may take them?'

Perhaps the nurse's heart was softened by her own happiness and the thought of the brother who was not drowned. Perhaps she was only in such a hurry that she did not know what she was saying. At any rate, when Philip said for the third time, 'May I take them?' she hastily answered:

'Bless the child! Take anything you like. Mind the wheel, for goodness' sake. Good-bye, everybody!' waved her hand to the servants assembled at the top of the wide steps, and was whirled off to joyous reunion with the undrowned brother.

Philip drew a deep breath of satisfaction, went straight up to the nursery, took out all the toys, and examined every single one of them. It took him all the afternoon.

The next day he looked at all the things again and longed to make something with them. He was accustomed to the joy that comes of making things. He and Helen had built many a city for the dream island out of his own two boxes of bricks and certain other things in the house—her Japanese cabinet, the dominoes and chessmen, cardboard boxes, books, the lids of kettles and teapots. But they had never had enough bricks. Lucy had enough bricks for anything.

He began to build a city on the nursery table. But to build with bricks alone is poor work when you have been used to building with all sorts of other things.

'It looks like a factory,' said Philip discontentedly. He swept the building down and replaced the bricks in their different boxes.

'There must be something downstairs that would come in useful,' he told himself, 'and she did say, "Take what you like."'

By armfuls, two and three at a time, he carried down the boxes of bricks and the boxes of blocks, the draughts, the chessmen, and the box

of dominoes. He took them into the long drawing-room where the crystal chandeliers were, and the chairs covered in brown holland—and the many long, light windows, and the cabinets and tables covered with the most interesting things.

He cleared a big writing-table of such useless and unimportant objects as blotting-pad, silver inkstand, and red-backed books, and there was a clear space for his city.

He began to build.

A bronze Egyptian god on a black and gold cabinet seemed to be looking at him from across the room.

'All right,' said Philip. 'I'll build you a temple. You wait a bit.'

The bronze god waited and the temple grew, and two silver candlesticks, topped by chessmen, served admirably as pillars for the portico. He made a journey to the nursery to fetch the Noah's Ark animals—the pair of elephants, each standing on a brick, flanked the entrance. It looked splendid, like an Assyrian temple in the pictures Helen had shown him. But the bricks, wherever he built with them alone, looked mean, and like factories or workhouses. Bricks alone always do.

Philip explored again. He found the library. He made several journeys. He brought up twenty-seven volumes bound in white vellum with marbled boards, a set of Shakespeare, ten volumes in green morocco. These made pillars and cloisters, dark, mysterious, and attractive. More Noah's Ark animals added an Egyptian-looking finish to the building.

'Lor', ain't it pretty!' said the parlour-maid, who came to call him to tea. 'You are clever with your fingers, Master Philip, I will say that for you. But you'll catch it, taking all them things.'

'That grey nurse said I might,' said Philip, 'and it doesn't hurt things building with them. My sister and I always did it at home,' he added, looking confidently at the parlour-maid. She had praised his building. And it was the first time he had mentioned his sister to any one in that house.

'Well, it's as good as a peep-show,' said the parlour-maid; 'it's just like them picture post-cards my brother in India sends me. All them pillars and domes and things—and the animals too. I don't know how you fare to think of such things, that I don't.'

Praise is sweet. He slipped his hand into that of the parlour-maid as they went down the wide stairs to the hall, where tea awaited him—a very little tray on a very big, dark table.



'He's not half a bad child,' said Susan at her tea in the servants' quarters. 'That nurse frightened him out of his little wits with her prim ways, you may depend. He's civil enough if you speak him civil.'

'But Miss Lucy didn't frighten him, I suppose,' said the cook; 'and look how he behaved to her.'

'Well, he's quiet enough, anyhow. You don't hear a breath of him from morning till night,' said the upper housemaid; 'seems silly-like to me.'

'You slip in and look what he's been building, that's all,' Susan told them. 'You won't call him silly then. India an' pagodas ain't in it.'

They did slip in, all of them, when Philip had gone to bed. The building had progressed, though it was not finished.

'I shan't touch a thing,' said Susan. 'Let him have it to play with to-morrow. We'll clear it all away before that nurse comes back with her caps and her collars and her stuck-up cheek.'

So next day Philip went on with his building. He put everything you can think of into it: the dominoes, and the domino-box; bricks and books; cotton-reels that he begged from Susan, and a collar-box and some cake-tins contributed by the cook. He made steps of the dominoes and a terrace of the domino-box. He got bits of southernwood out of the garden and stuck them in cotton-reels, which made beautiful pots, and they looked like bay trees in tubs. Brass finger-bowls served for domes, and the lids of brass kettles and coffee-pots from the oak dresser in the hall made minarets of dazzling splendour. Chessmen were useful for minarets, too.

'I must have paved paths and a fountain,' said Philip thoughtfully. The paths were paved with mother-of-pearl card counters, and the fountain was a silver and glass ash-tray, with a needlecase of filigree silver rising up from the middle of it; and the falling water was made quite nicely out of narrow bits of the silver paper off the chocolate Helen had given him at parting. Palm trees were easily made—Helen had shown him how to do that—with bits of larch fastened to elder stems with plasticine. There was plenty of plasticine among Lucy's toys; there was plenty of everything.

And the city grew, till it covered the table. Philip, unwearied, set about to make another city on another table. This had for chief feature a great water-tower, with a fountain round its base; and now he stopped at nothing. He unhooked the crystal drops from the great chandeliers to make his fountains. This city was grander than the first. It had a grand tower made of a waste-paper basket and an astrologer's tower that was a photograph-enlarging machine.

The cities were really very beautiful. I wish I could describe them thoroughly to you. But it would take pages and pages. Besides all the things I have told of alone there were towers and turrets and grand staircases, pagodas and pavilions, canals made bright and water-like by strips of silver paper, and a lake with a boat on it. Philip put into his buildings all the things out of the doll's house that seemed suitable. The wooden things-to-eat and dishes. The leaden tea-cups and goblets. He peopled the place with dominoes and pawns. The handsome chessmen were used for minarets. He made forts and garrisoned them with lead soldiers.

He worked hard and he worked cleverly, and as the cities grew in beauty and interestingness he loved them more and more. He was happy now. There was no time to be unhappy in.

'I will keep it as it is till Helen comes. How she will *love* it!' he said.

The two cities were connected by a bridge which was a yard-stick he had found in the servants' sewing-room and taken without hindrance, for by this time all the servants were his friends. Susan had been the first—that was all.

He had just laid his bridge in place, and put Mr. and Mrs. Noah in the chief square to represent the inhabitants, and was standing rapt in admiration of his work, when a hard hand on each of his shoulders made him start and scream.

It was the nurse. She had come back a day sooner than any one expected her. The brother had brought home a wife, and she and the nurse had not liked each other; so she was very cross, and she took Philip by the shoulders and shook him, a thing which had never happened to him before.

'You naughty, wicked boy!' she said, still shaking.

'But I haven't hurt anything—I'll put everything back,' he said, trembling and very pale.

'You'll not touch any of it again,' said the nurse. 'I'll see to that. I shall put everything away myself in the morning. Taking what doesn't belong to you!'

'But you said I might take anything I liked,' said Philip, 'so if it's wrong it's your fault.'

'You untruthful child!' cried the nurse, and hit him over the knuckles. Now, no one had ever hit Philip before. He grew paler than ever, but he did not cry, though his hands hurt rather badly. For she had snatched up the yard-stick to hit him with, and it was hard and cornery.

'You are a coward,' said Philip, 'and it is you who are untruthful and not me.'

'Hold your tongue,' said the nurse, and whirled him off to bed.

'You'll get no supper, so there!' she said, angrily tucking him up.

'I don't want any,' said Philip, 'and I have to forgive you before the sun goes down.'

'Forgive, indeed!' said she, flouncing out.

'When you get sorry you'll know I've forgiven you,' Philip called after her, which, of course, made her angrier than ever.

Whether Philip cried when he was alone is not our business. Susan, who had watched the shaking and the hitting without daring to interfere, crept up later with milk and sponge-cakes. She found him asleep, and she says his eyelashes were wet.

When he awoke he thought at first that it was morning, the room was so light. But presently he saw that it was not yellow sunlight but white moonshine which made the beautiful brightness.

He wondered at first why he felt so unhappy, then he remembered how Helen had gone away and how hateful the nurse had been. And now she would pull down the city and Helen would never see it. And he would never be able to build such a beautiful one again. In the morning it would be gone, and he would not be able even to remember how it was built.

The moonlight was very bright.

'I wonder how my city looks by moonlight?' he said.

And then, all in a thrilling instant, he made up his mind to go down and see for himself how it did look.

He slipped on his dressing-gown, opened his door softly, and crept along the corridor and down the broad staircase, then along the gallery and into the drawing-room. It was very dark, but he felt his way to a window and undid the shutter, and there lay his city, flooded with moonlight, just as he had imagined it.

He gazed on it for a moment in ecstasy and then turned to shut the door. As he did so he felt a slight strange giddiness and stood a moment with his hand to his head. He turned and went again towards the city, and when he was close to it he gave a little cry, hastily stifled, for fear some one should hear him and come down and send him to bed. He stood and gazed about him bewildered and, once more, rather giddy. For the city had, in a quick blink of light, followed by darkness, disappeared. So had the drawing-room. So had the chair that stood close to the table. He could see mountainous shapes raising enormous heights in the distance, and the moonlight shone on the tops of them. But he himself seemed to be in a vast, flat plain. There was the softness of long grass

round his feet, but there were no trees, no houses, no hedges or fences to break the expanse of grass. It seemed darker in some parts than others. That was all. It reminded him of the illimitable prairie of which he had read in books of adventure.

'I suppose I'm dreaming,' said Philip, 'though I don't see how I can have gone to sleep just while I was turning the door handle. However——'

He stood still expecting that something would happen. In dreams something always does happen, if it's only that the dream comes to an end. But nothing happened now—Philip just stood there quite quietly and felt the warm soft grass round his ankles.

Then, as his eyes became used to the darkness of the plain, he saw some way off a very steep bridge leading up to a dark height on whose summit the moon shone whitely. He walked towards it, and as he approached he saw that it was less like a bridge than a sort of ladder, and that it rose to a giddy height above him. It seemed to rest on a rock far up against dark sky, and the inside of the rock seemed hollowed out in one vast dark cave.

And now he was close to the foot of the ladder. It had no rungs, but narrow ledges made hold for feet and hands. Philip remembered Jack and the Beanstalk, and looked up longingly; but the ladder was a very very long one. On the other hand, it was the only thing that seemed to lead anywhere, and he had had enough of standing lonely in the grassy prairie, where he seemed to have been for a very long time indeed. So he put his hands and feet to the ladder and began to go up. It was a very long climb. There were three hundred and eight steps, for he counted them. And the steps were only on one side of the ladder, so he had to be extremely careful. On he went, up and on, on and up, till his feet ached and his hands felt as though they would drop off for tiredness. He could not look up far, and he dared not look down at all. There was nothing for it but to climb and climb and climb, and at last he saw the ground on which the ladder rested—a terrace hewn in regular lines, and, as it seemed, hewn from the solid rock. His head was level with the ground, now his hands, now his feet. He leaped sideways from the ladder and threw himself face down on the ground, which was cold and smooth like marble. There he lay, drawing deep breaths of weariness and relief.

There was a great silence all about, which rested and soothed, and presently he rose and looked around him. He was close to an archway with very thick pillars, and he went towards it and peeped cautiously in. It seemed to be a great gate leading to an open space, and beyond it he

could see dim piles that looked like churches and houses. But all was deserted; the moonlight and he had the place, whatever it was, to themselves.

'I suppose every one's in bed,' said Philip, and stood there trembling a little, but very curious and interested, in the black shadow of the strange arch.



## Chapter 2

### DELIVERER OR DESTROYER

Philip stood in the shadow of the dark arch and looked out. He saw before him a great square surrounded by tall irregular buildings. In the middle was a fountain whose waters, silver in the moonlight, rose and fell with gentle plashing sound. A tall tree, close to the archway, cast the shadow of its trunk across the path—a broad black bar. He listened, listened, listened, but there was nothing to listen to, except the deep night silence and the changing soft sound the fountain made.

His eyes, growing accustomed to the dimness, showed him that he was under a heavy domed roof supported on large square pillars—to the right and left stood dark doors, shut fast.

'I will explore these doors by daylight,' he said. He did not feel exactly frightened. But he did not feel exactly brave either. But he wished and intended to be brave, so he said, 'I will explore these doors. At least I think I will,' he added, for one must not only be brave but truthful.

And then suddenly he felt very sleepy. He leaned against the wall, and presently it seemed that sitting down would be less trouble, and then that lying down would be more truly comfortable. A bell from very very far away sounded the hour, twelve. Philip counted up to nine, but he missed the tenth bell-beat, and the eleventh and the twelfth as well, because he was fast asleep cuddled up warmly in the thick quilted dressing-gown that Helen had made him last winter. He dreamed that everything was as it used to be before That Man came and changed everything and took Helen away. He was in his own little bed in his own little room in their own little house, and Helen had come to call him. He could see the sunlight through his closed eyelids—he was keeping them closed just for the fun of hearing her try to wake him, and presently he would tell her he had been awake all the time, and they would laugh together about it. And then he awoke, and he was not in his soft bed at home but on the hard floor of a big, strange gate-house, and it was not Helen who was shaking him and saying, 'Here—I say, wake up, can't

you,' but a tall man in a red coat; and the light that dazzled his eyes was not from the sun at all, but from a horn lantern which the man was holding close to his face.

'What's the matter?' said Philip sleepily.

'That's the question,' said the man in red. 'Come along to the guard-room and give an account of yourself, you young shaver.'

He took Philip's ear gently but firmly between a very hard finger and thumb.

'Leave go,' said Philip, 'I'm not going to run away.' And he stood up feeling very brave.

The man shifted his hold from ear to shoulder and led Philip through one of those doors which he had thought of exploring by daylight. It was not daylight yet, and the room, large and bare, with an arch at each end and narrow little windows at the sides, was lighted by horn lanterns and tall tapers in pewter candlesticks. It seemed to Philip that the room was full of soldiers.

Their captain, with a good deal of gold about him and a very smart black moustache, got up from a bench.

'Look what I've caught, sir,' said the man who owned the hand on Philip's shoulder.

'Humph,' said the captain, 'so it's really happened at last.'

'What has?' said Philip.

'Why, you have,' said the captain. 'Don't be frightened, little man.'

'I'm not frightened,' said Philip, and added politely, 'I should be so much obliged if you'd tell me what you mean.' He added something which he had heard people say when they asked the way to the market or the public gardens, 'I'm quite a stranger here,' he said.

A jolly roar of laughter went up from the red-coats.

'It isn't manners to laugh at strangers,' said Philip.

'Mind your own manners,' said the captain sharply; 'in this country little boys speak when they're spoken to. Stranger, eh? Well, we knew that, you know!'

Philip, though he felt snubbed, yet felt grand too. Here he was in the middle of an adventure with grown-up soldiers. He threw out his chest and tried to look manly.

The captain sat down in a chair at the end of a long table, drew a black book to him—a black book covered with dust—and began to rub a rusty pen-nib on his sword, which was not rusty.

'Come now,' he said, opening the book, 'tell me how you came here. And mind you speak the truth.'

'I *always* speak the truth,' said Philip proudly.

All the soldiers rose and saluted him with looks of deep surprise and respect.

'Well, nearly always,' said Philip, hot to the ears, and the soldiers clattered stiffly down again on to the benches, laughing once more. Philip had imagined there to be more discipline in the army.

'How did you come here?' said the captain.

'Up the great bridge staircase,' said Philip.

The captain wrote busily in the book.

'What did you come for?'

'I didn't know what else to do. There was nothing but illimitable prairie—and so I came up.'

'You are a very bold boy,' said the captain.

'Thank you,' said Philip. 'I do *want* to be.'

'What was your purpose in coming?'

'I didn't do it on purpose—I just happened to come.'

The captain wrote that down too. And then he and Philip and the soldiers looked at each other in silence.

'Well?' said the boy.

'Well?' said the captain.

'I do wish,' said the boy, 'you'd tell me what you meant by my really happening after all. And then I wish you'd tell me the way home.'

'Where do you want to get to?' asked the captain.

'The *address*,' said Philip, 'is The Grange, Ravelsham, Sussex.'

'Don't know it,' said the captain briefly, 'and anyhow you can't go back there now. Didn't you read the notice at the top of the ladder? Trespassers will be prosecuted. You've got to be prosecuted before you can go back anywhere.'

'I'd rather be persecuted than go down that ladder again,' he said. 'I suppose it won't be very bad—being persecuted, I mean?'

His idea of persecution was derived from books. He thought it to be something vaguely unpleasant from which one escaped in disguise—adventurous and always successful.

'That's for the judges to decide,' said the captain, 'it's a serious thing trespassing in our city. This guard is put here expressly to prevent it.'

'Do you have many trespassers?' Philip asked. The captain seemed kind, and Philip had a great-uncle who was a judge, so the word judges made him think of tips and good advice, rather than of justice and punishment.

'Many trespassers indeed!' the captain almost snorted his answer. 'That's just it. There's never been one before. You're the first. For years and years and years there's been a guard here, because when the town was first built the astrologers foretold that some day there would be a trespasser who would do untold mischief. So it's our privilege—we're the Polistopolitan guards—to keep watch over the only way by which a trespasser could come in.'

'May I sit down?' said Philip suddenly, and the soldiers made room for him on the bench.

'My father and my grandfather and all my ancestors were in the guards,' said the captain proudly. 'It's a very great honour.'

'I wonder,' said Philip, 'why you don't cut off the end of your ladder—the top end I mean; then nobody could come up.'

'That would never do,' said the captain, 'because, you see, there's another prophecy. The great deliverer is to come that way.'

'Couldn't I,' suggested Philip shyly, 'couldn't I be the deliverer instead of the trespasser? I'd much rather, you know.'

'I daresay you would,' said the captain; 'but people can't be deliverers just because they'd much rather, you know.'

'And isn't any one to come up the ladder bridge except just those two?'

'We don't know; that's just it. You know what prophecies are.'

'I'm afraid I don't—exactly.'

'So vague and mixed up, I mean. The one I'm telling you about goes something like this.

Who comes up the ladder stair? Beware, beware, Steely eyes and copper hair  
Strife and grief and pain to bear All come up the ladder stair.

You see we can't tell whether that means one person or a lot of people with steely eyes and copper hair.'

'My hair's just plain boy-colour,' said Philip; 'my sister says so, and my eyes are blue, I believe.'

'I can't see in this light;' the captain leaned his elbows on the table and looked earnestly in the boy's eyes. 'No, I can't see. The other prophecy goes:

From down and down and very far down The king shall come to take his own;  
He shall deliver the Magic town, And all that he made shall be his own.  
Beware, take care. Beware, prepare, The king shall come by the ladder stair.

'How jolly,' said Philip; 'I love poetry. Do you know any more?'

'There are heaps of prophecies of course,' said the captain; 'the astrologers must do *something* to earn their pay. There's rather a nice one:

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