

A Little Princess

By

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Chapter 13: One of the Populace

The winter was a wretched one. There were days on which Sara tramped through snow when she went on her errands; there were worse days when the snow melted and combined itself with mud to form slush; there were others when the fog was so thick that the lamps in the street were lighted all day and London looked as it had looked the afternoon, several years ago, when the cab had driven through the thoroughfares with Sara tucked up on its seat, leaning against her father's shoulder. On such days the windows of the house of the Large Family always looked delightfully cozy and alluring, and the study in which the Indian gentleman sat glowed with warmth and rich color. But the attic was dismal beyond words. There were no longer sunsets or sunrises to look at, and scarcely ever any stars, it seemed to Sara. The clouds hung low over the skylight and were either gray or mud-color, or dropping heavy rain. At four o'clock in the afternoon, even when there was no special fog, the daylight was at an end. If it was necessary to go to her attic for anything, Sara was obliged to light a candle. The women in the kitchen were depressed, and that made them more ill-tempered than ever. Becky was driven like a little slave.

""Twarn't for you, miss," she said hoarsely to Sara one night when she had crept into the attic—""twarn't for you, an' the Bastille, an' bein' the prisoner in the next cell, I should die. That there does seem real now, doesn't it? The missus is more like the head jailer every day she lives. I can jest see them big keys you say she carries. The cook she's like one

of the under-jailers. Tell me some more, please, miss—tell me about the subt’ranean passage we’ve dug under the walls.”

“I’ll tell you something warmer,” shivered Sara. “Get your coverlet and wrap it round you, and I’ll get mine, and we will huddle close together on the bed, and I’ll tell you about the tropical forest where the Indian gentleman’s monkey used to live. When I see him sitting on the table near the window and looking out into the street with that mournful expression, I always feel sure he is thinking about the tropical forest where he used to swing by his tail from coconut trees. I wonder who caught him, and if he left a family behind who had depended on him for coconuts.”

“That is warmer, miss,” said Becky, gratefully; “but, someways, even the Bastille is sort of heatin’ when you gets to tellin’ about it.”

“That is because it makes you think of something else,” said Sara, wrapping the coverlet round her until only her small dark face was to be seen looking out of it. “I’ve noticed this. What you have to do with your mind, when your body is miserable, is to make it think of something else.”

“Can you do it, miss?” faltered Becky, regarding her with admiring eyes.

Sara knitted her brows a moment.

“Sometimes I can and sometimes I can’t,” she said stoutly. “But when I can I’m all right. And what I believe is that we always could—if we practiced enough. I’ve been practicing a good deal lately, and it’s beginning to be easier than it used to be. When things are horrible—just horrible—I think as hard as ever I can of being a princess. I say to myself, ‘I am a princess, and I am a fairy one, and because I am a fairy nothing can hurt me or make me uncomfortable.’ You don’t know how it makes you forget”— with a laugh.

She had many opportunities of making her mind think of something else, and many opportunities of proving to herself whether or not she was a princess. But one of the strongest tests she was ever put to came on a certain dreadful day which, she often thought afterward, would never quite fade out of her memory even in the years to come.

For several days it had rained continuously; the streets were chilly and sloppy and full of dreary, cold mist; there was mud everywhere—sticky London mud—and over everything the pall of drizzle and fog. Of course there were several long and tiresome errands to be done—there always were on days like this—and Sara was sent out again and again, until her shabby clothes were damp through. The absurd old feathers on her forlorn hat were more draggled and absurd than ever, and her downtrodden shoes were so wet that they could not hold any more water. Added to this, she had been deprived of her dinner, because Miss Minchin had chosen to punish her. She was so cold and hungry and tired that her face began to have a pinched look, and now and then some kind-hearted person passing her in the street glanced at her with sudden sympathy. But she did not know that. She hurried on, trying to make her mind think of something else. It was really very necessary. Her way of doing it was to “pretend” and “suppose” with all the strength that was left in her. But really this time it was harder than she had ever found it, and once or twice she thought it almost made her more cold and hungry instead of less so. But she persevered obstinately, and as the muddy water squelched through her broken shoes and the wind seemed trying to drag her thin jacket from her, she talked to herself as she walked, though she did not speak aloud or even move her lips.

“Suppose I had dry clothes on,” she thought. “Suppose I had good shoes and a long, thick coat and merino stockings and a whole umbrella. And suppose—suppose—just when I was near a baker’s where they sold hot buns, I should find sixpence—which belonged to nobody. Suppose if I

did, I should go into the shop and buy six of the hottest buns and eat them all without stopping.”

Some very odd things happen in this world sometimes.

It certainly was an odd thing that happened to Sara. She had to cross the street just when she was saying this to herself. The mud was dreadful—she almost had to wade. She picked her way as carefully as she could, but she could not save herself much; only, in picking her way, she had to look down at her feet and the mud, and in looking down—just as she reached the pavement—she saw something shining in the gutter. It was actually a piece of silver—a tiny piece trodden upon by many feet, but still with spirit enough left to shine a little. Not quite a sixpence, but the next thing to it—a fourpenny piece.

In one second it was in her cold little red-and-blue hand.

“Oh,” she gasped, “it is true! It is true!”

And then, if you will believe me, she looked straight at the shop directly facing her. And it was a baker’s shop, and a cheerful, stout, motherly woman with rosy cheeks was putting into the window a tray of delicious newly baked hot buns, fresh from the oven—large, plump, shiny buns, with currants in them.

It almost made Sara feel faint for a few seconds—the shock, and the sight of the buns, and the delightful odors of warm bread floating up through the baker’s cellar window.

She knew she need not hesitate to use the little piece of money. It had evidently been lying in the mud for some time, and its owner was completely lost in the stream of passing people who crowded and jostled each other all day long.

“But I’ll go and ask the baker woman if she has lost anything,” she said to herself, rather faintly. So she crossed the pavement and put her wet foot on the step. As she did so she saw something that made her stop.

It was a little figure more forlorn even than herself—a little figure which was not much more than a bundle of rags, from which small, bare, red muddy feet peeped out, only because the rags with which their owner was trying to cover them were not long enough. Above the rags appeared a shock head of tangled hair, and a dirty face with big, hollow, hungry eyes.

Sara knew they were hungry eyes the moment she saw them, and she felt a sudden sympathy.

“This,” she said to herself, with a little sigh, “is one of the populace—and she is hungrier than I am.”

The child—this “one of the populace”—stared up at Sara, and shuffled herself aside a little, so as to give her room to pass. She was used to being made to give room to everybody. She knew that if a policeman chanced to see her he would tell her to “move on.”

Sara clutched her little fourpenny piece and hesitated for a few seconds. Then she spoke to her.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

The child shuffled herself and her rags a little more.

“Ain’t I jist?” she said in a hoarse voice. “Jist ain’t I?”

“Haven’t you had any dinner?” said Sara.

“No dinner,” more hoarsely still and with more shuffling. “Nor yet no bre’fast—nor yet no supper. No nothin’.

“Since when?” asked Sara.

“Dunno. Never got nothin’ today—nowhere. I’ve axed an’ axed.”

Just to look at her made Sara more hungry and faint. But those queer little thoughts were at work in her brain, and she was talking to herself, though she was sick at heart.

“If I’m a princess,” she was saying, “if I’m a princess—when they were poor and driven from their thrones—they always shared— with the populace—if they met one poorer and hungrier than themselves. They always shared. Buns are a penny each. If it had been sixpence I could have eaten six. It won’t be enough for either of us. But it will be better than nothing.”

“Wait a minute,” she said to the beggar child.

She went into the shop. It was warm and smelled deliciously. The woman was just going to put some more hot buns into the window.

“If you please,” said Sara, “have you lost fourpence—a silver fourpence?” And she held the forlorn little piece of money out to her.

The woman looked at it and then at her—at her intense little face and draggled, once fine clothes.

“Bless us, no,” she answered. “Did you find it?”

“Yes,” said Sara. “In the gutter.”

“Keep it, then,” said the woman. “It may have been there for a week, and goodness knows who lost it. You could never find out.”

“I know that,” said Sara, “but I thought I would ask you.”

“Not many would,” said the woman, looking puzzled and interested and good-natured all at once.

“Do you want to buy something?” she added, as she saw Sara glance at the buns.

“Four buns, if you please,” said Sara. “Those at a penny each.”

The woman went to the window and put some in a paper bag.

Sara noticed that she put in six.

“I said four, if you please,” she explained. “I have only fourpence.”

“I’ll throw in two for makeweight,” said the woman with her good-natured look. “I dare say you can eat them sometime. Aren’t you hungry?”

A mist rose before Sara’s eyes.

“Yes,” she answered. “I am very hungry, and I am much obliged to you for your kindness; and” — she was going to add — “there is a child outside who is hungrier than I am.” But just at that moment two or three customers came in at once, and each one seemed in a hurry, so she could only thank the woman again and go out.

The beggar girl was still huddled up in the corner of the step. She looked frightful in her wet and dirty rags. She was staring straight before her with a stupid look of suffering, and Sara saw her suddenly draw the back

of her roughened black hand across her eyes to rub away the tears which seemed to have surprised her by forcing their way from under her lids. She was muttering to herself.

Sara opened the paper bag and took out one of the hot buns, which had already warmed her own cold hands a little.

“See,” she said, putting the bun in the ragged lap, “this is nice and hot. Eat it, and you will not feel so hungry.”

The child started and stared up at her, as if such sudden, amazing good luck almost frightened her; then she snatched up the bun and began to cram it into her mouth with great wolfish bites.

“Oh, my! Oh, my!” Sara heard her say hoarsely, in wild delight. “Oh my!”

Sara took out three more buns and put them down.

The sound in the hoarse, ravenous voice was awful.

“She is hungrier than I am,” she said to herself. “She’s starving.” But her hand trembled when she put down the fourth bun. “I’m not starving,” she said—and she put down the fifth.

The little ravening London savage was still snatching and devouring when she turned away. She was too ravenous to give any thanks, even if she had ever been taught politeness—which she had not. She was only a poor little wild animal.

“Good-bye,” said Sara.

When she reached the other side of the street she looked back. The child had a bun in each hand and had stopped in the middle of a bite to watch

her. Sara gave her a little nod, and the child, after another stare—a curious lingering stare—jerked her shaggy head in response, and until Sara was out of sight she did not take another bite or even finish the one she had begun.

At that moment the baker-woman looked out of her shop window.

“Well, I never!” she exclaimed. “If that young un hasn’t given her buns to a beggar child! It wasn’t because she didn’t want them, either. Well, well, she looked hungry enough. I’d give something to know what she did it for.”

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

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

“What did she say?” inquired the woman.

“Axed me if I was ‘ungry,” replied the hoarse voice.

“What did you say?”

“Said I was jist.”

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

The child nodded.

“How many?”

“Five.”

The woman thought it over.

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

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

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

“Are you hungry yet?” she said.

“I’m allus hungry,” was the answer, “but ‘t ain’t as bad as it was.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then they went in and shut the door.

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

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

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

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

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What Melchisedec Heard and Saw

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

The attic had been very still all the day after Sara had left it in the early morning. The stillness had only been broken by the pattering of the rain upon the slates and the skylight. Melchisedec had, in fact, found it rather dull; and when the rain ceased to patter and perfect silence reigned, he decided to come out and reconnoiter, though experience taught him that Sara would not return for some time. He had been rambling and sniffing about, and had just found a totally unexpected and unexplained crumb left from his last meal, when his attention was attracted by a sound on the roof. He stopped to listen with a palpitating heart. The sound suggested that something was moving on the roof. It was approaching the skylight; it reached the skylight. The skylight was being mysteriously opened. A dark face peered into the attic; then another face appeared behind it, and both looked in with signs of caution and interest. Two men were outside on the roof, and were making silent preparations to enter through the skylight itself. One was Ram Dass and the other was a young man who was the Indian gentleman's secretary; but of course Melchisedec did not know this. He only knew that the men were invading the silence and privacy of the attic; and as the one with the dark face let himself down through the aperture with such lightness and dexterity that he did not make the slightest sound, Melchisedec turned tail and fled precipitately back to his hole. He was frightened to death. He had ceased to be timid with Sara, and knew she would never throw anything but crumbs, and would never make any sound other than the soft, low, coaxing whistling; but strange men were dangerous things to remain near. He lay close and flat near the entrance of his home, just managing to peep through the crack with a bright, alarmed eye. How much he understood of the talk he heard I am not in the least able to say;

but, even if he had understood it all, he would probably have remained greatly mystified.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Coverlet dingy and worn, blanket thin, sheets patched and ragged,” he said. “What a bed for a child to sleep in—and in a house which calls

itself respectable! There has not been a fire in that grate for many a day,” glancing at the rusty fireplace.

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

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

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

Ram Dass made a modestly apologetic obeisance.

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

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

“I can move as if my feet were of velvet,” Ram Dass replied; “and children sleep soundly—even the unhappy ones. I could have entered this room in the night many times, and without causing her to turn upon

her pillow. If the other bearer passes to me the things through the window, I can do all and she will not stir. When she awakens she will think a magician has been here.”

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

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

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

“You can hang things on them,” he said.

Ram Dass smiled mysteriously.

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

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

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

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

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