

'My darlings, my darlings, you are happy here, aren't you?' and Carrie was more than frightened then, she was terrified. Terrified that Nick would say no, he wasn't happy at all, and that their mother would get out of the train and go back to the house and pack their things and take them away. After poor Auntie Lou had tried so hard to be nice!

But Nick looked gravely at their mother and then smiled, very sweetly, and said, 'Oh, I like it here very much. I don't ever want to go home again. I simply love Auntie Lou. She's the nicest person I've ever met in my whole life.'

CHAPTER FOUR



Nick had been born a week before Christmas. On his birthday Auntie Lou gave him a pair of leather gloves with fur linings and Mr Evans gave him a Holy Bible with a soft, red cover and pictures inside.

Nick said, 'Thank you, Mr Evans,' very politely, but without smiling. Then he put the Bible down and said, 'Auntie Lou, what lovely gloves, they're the best gloves I've ever had in my whole life. I'll keep them for ever and ever, even when I've grown too big for them. My tenth birthday gloves!'

Carrie felt sorry for Mr Evans. She said, 'The Bible's lovely too, you are lucky, Nick.' And later, when she and Nick were alone, 'It was kind of him, really. I expect when he was a little boy he'd rather have had a Bible for his birthday than anything else in the world, even a bicycle. So it was kind of him to think you might feel like that, too.'

'But I didn't want a Bible,' Nick said. 'I'd rather have had a knife. He's got some smashing knives in the shop on a card by the door. A Special Offer. I've been looking at them every day and hoping I'd get one and he knew that's what I was hoping. I looked at them and he saw me looking. It was just mean of him to give me a rotten old Bible instead.'

'Perhaps he'll give you a knife for Christmas,' Carrie said, though she doubted it, in her heart. If Mr Evans really knew Nick wanted a knife, he was unlikely to give him one. He thought it was bad for people to get what they wanted. 'Want must be your master,' was what he always said.

Carrie sighed. She didn't like Mr Evans, no one could, but Nick hated him so much made her dislike him less. 'He's getting us a goose for Christmas,' she said, 'that'll be nice, won't it? I've never had a goose.'

'I'd rather have a turkey!' Nick said.

The goose was to come from Mr Evans's older sister who lived outside the town and kept poultry. Nick and Carrie had never heard of her until now. 'She's a bit of an invalid,' Auntie Lou said. 'Bed-fast much of the time now. Poor soul, I think of her but I daren't go to see her. Mr Evans won't have it. Dilyls has made her bed and turned her back on her own people, is what he says,

and that's that. She married Mr Gotobed, the mine-owner, you see.'

The children didn't see but didn't like to ask. It made Auntie Lou nervous to be asked direct questions. So they said, 'Gotobed's a funny name, isn't it?'

'English, of course,' Auntie Lou said. 'That upset Mr Evans to start with! An Englishman *and* a mine-owner, too! She married him just after our dad was killed down the pit - dancing on our father's grave, was what Mr Evans called it. The Gotobeds were bad owners, you see; our dad was killed by a rock fall that would never have happened, Mr Evans says, if they'd taken proper safety precautions. Not that it was young Mr Gotobed's fault, *his* father was alive then, and in charge of the mine, but Mr Evans says all that family is tarred with the same brush, only thinking of profits. So it made him hard against Dilyls. Even now her husband's dead, he's not willing to let bygones be bygones.'

Though he was willing to accept a goose at Christmas, apparently. 'They're always fine birds,' Auntie Lou said - as if this was sufficient reason. 'Hepzibah Green rears them. She's good with poultry. Fine, light hand with pastry, too. You should taste her mince pies! Hepzibah looks after Dilyls *and* the place best she can. Druid's Bottom was a fine house once, though it's run down since Mr Gotobed passed on and Dilyls took bad. Needs

a man's eye, Mr Evans says, though he's not willing to give it, and Dilys won't ask, of course.' She sighed gently. 'They're both proud people, see?'

'Druid's Bottom,' Nick said, and giggled.

'Bottom of Druid's Grove,' Auntie Lou said. 'That's the cwm where the yew trees grow. Do you remember where we picked those blackberries up by the railway line? The deep cwm, just before the tunnel?'

Nick's eyes widened. He said, '*That dark place!*'

'It's the yews make it dark,' Auntie Lou said. 'Though it's a queer place, too. Full of the old religion still, people say - not a place to go after dark. Not alone, anyway. I know I'd not care to, though I wouldn't let Mr Evans hear me say it. Wicked foolishness, he calls that sort of talk. There's nothing to be afraid of on this earth he says, not for those who trust in the Lord.'

Carrie was excited; she loved old, spooky tales. 'I wouldn't be afraid of the Grove,' she boasted. 'Nick might be, he's a *baby*, but I'm not scared of anything. Can I come with you, Auntie Lou, when you go to fetch the goose?'

But as it turned out, she and Nick went alone. On what was, perhaps, the most important journey they ever made together.

They were due to go to Druid's Bottom two days before Christmas, but Auntie Lou was ill. She coughed

all morning and her eyes were red-rimmed. After midday dinner, Mr Evans came into the kitchen and looked at her, coughing over the sink. 'You're not fit to go out,' he said. 'Send the children.'

Auntie Lou coughed and coughed. 'I thought I'd go tomorrow instead. Hepzibah will know I'm not coming now it's getting so late. I'll be better tomorrow.'

'I'll want you in the shop, Christmas Eve,' Mr Evans said. 'The children can go. Earn their keep for a change.'

'It'll be a heavy goose, Samuel.'

'They can manage between them.'

There was a short silence. Auntie Lou avoided the children's eyes. Then she said, uneasily, 'It'll be dark before they get back.'

'Full moon,' Mr Evans said. He looked at the children, at Nick's horrified face, and then at Auntie Lou. She began to blush painfully. He said in a quiet and ominous voice, 'You've not been putting ideas in their heads, I do hope!'

Auntie Lou looked at the children, too. Her expression begged them not to give her away. Carrie felt impatient with her - no grown-up should be so weak and so silly - but she was sorry as well. She said innocently, 'What ideas, Mr Evans? Of course we'd love to go, we don't mind the dark.'

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'There's nothing *to* mind,' she said to Nick as they trudged along the railway line. 'What is there to be scared of? Just a few old trees.'

Nick said nothing; only sighed.

Carrie said, 'All that queer place stuff is just Auntie Lou being superstitious. You know how superstitious she is, touching wood and not walking under ladders and throwing salt over her shoulder when she's spilled some. I'm not surprised Mr Evans gets cross with her sometimes. She's so scared, she'd jump at her own shadow.'

But when they reached the Grove, Carrie felt a little less bold. It was growing dusk; stars were pricking out in the cold sky above them. And it was so quiet, suddenly, that their ears seemed to be singing.

Carrie whispered, 'There's the path down. By that stone.'

Nick's pale face glimmered as he looked up at her. He whispered back, 'You go. I'll wait here.'

'Don't be silly.' Carrie swallowed – then pleaded with him. 'Don't you want a nice mince pie? We might get a mince pie. And it's not far. Auntie Lou said it wasn't far down the hill. Not much more than five minutes.'

Nick shook his head. He screwed up his eyes and put his hands over his ears.

Carrie said coldly, 'All right, have it your own way. But it'll be dark soon and you'll be really scared then. Much more scared by yourself than you would be with me. Druids and ghosts coming to get you! Wild animals too – you don't *know!* I wouldn't be surprised if there were wolves in these mountains. But I don't care. Even if I hear them howling and snapping their jaws I shan't hurry.'

And she marched off without looking back. White stones marked the path through the yew trees and in the steep places there were steps cut in the earth and shored up with wood. She hadn't gone far when she heard Nick wailing behind her, 'Carrie, wait for me, *wait* ...' She stopped and he skidded into her back. 'Don't leave me, Carrie!'

'I thought it was you leaving *me*,' she said, making a joke of it, to comfort him, and he tried to laugh but it turned into a sob in his throat.

He hung on to the back of her coat, whimpering under his breath as she led the way down the path. The yew trees grew densely, some of them covered with ivy that rustled and rattled. Like scales, Carrie thought; the trees were like live creatures with scales. She told herself not to be stupid, but stopped to draw breath. She said, 'Do be quiet, Nick.'

'Why?'

'I don't know,' Carrie said. 'Something ...'

She couldn't explain it. It was such a strange feeling. As if there was something here, something *waiting*. Deep in the trees or deep in the earth. Not a ghost – nothing so simple. Whatever it was had no name. Something old and huge and nameless, Carrie thought, and started to tremble.

Nick said, 'Carrie ...'

'Listen.'

'What for?'

'Sssh ...'

No sound at first. Then she heard it. A kind of slow, dry whisper, or sigh. As if the earth were turning in its sleep. Or the huge, nameless thing were breathing.

'Did you hear?' Carrie said. 'Did you *hear*'?

Nick began to cry piteously. Silence now, except for his weeping.

Carrie said, dry-mouthed, 'It's gone now. It wasn't anything. There's nothing there, really.'

Nick gulped, trying hard to stop crying. Then he clutched Carrie. 'Yes there is! There is *now*!'

Carrie listened. It wasn't the sound she had heard before but something quite different. A queer, throaty, chuckling, gobbling sound that seemed to come from somewhere above them, higher up the path. They stood still as stone. The sound was coming closer.

'Run,' Carrie said. She began to run, stumbling. The big bag they had brought for the goose caught between her legs and almost threw her down but she recovered her balance, her feet slipping and sliding. She ran, and Nick ran behind her, and the creature, whatever it was, the gobbling *Thing*, followed them. It seemed to be calling to them and Carrie thought of fairy tales she had read – you looked back at something behind you and were caught in its spell! She gasped, 'Don't look back, Nick, whatever you do.'

The path widened and flattened as it came out of the Grove and she caught Nick's hand to make him run faster. Too fast for his shorter legs and he fell on his knees. He moaned, as she pulled him up, 'I can't, I can't, Carrie ...'

She said, through chattering teeth, 'Yes, you *can*. Not much farther.'

They saw the house then, its dark, tall-chimneyed bulk looming up, and lights in the windows. One light quite high up and one low down, at the side. They ran, on rubbery legs, through an open gate and across a dirt yard towards the lit window. There was a door but it was shut. They flung themselves against it.

Gobble-Gobble was coming behind them, was crossing the yard.

'Please,' Carrie croaked. 'Please.' Quite sure that it was too late, that the creature would get them.

But the door opened inward, like magic, and they fell through it to light, warmth, and safety.

CHAPTER FIVE



A warm, safe, lighted place.

Hepzibah's kitchen was always like that, and not only that evening. Coming into it was like coming home on a bitter cold day to a bright, leaping fire. It was like the smell of bacon when you were hungry; loving arms when you were lonely; safety when you were scared . . .

Not that they stopped being scared at once, that first, frightened time. They were indoors, it was true, but the door was still open. And the woman seemed in no hurry to close it and shut out the dangerous night; she simply stood, looking down at the children and smiling. She was tall with shining hair the colour of copper. She wore a white apron, the sleeves of her dress were rolled up, showing big, fair, freckled arms, and there was flour on her hands.

Carrie saw her, then the room. A big, stone-flagged