

Fun and Games

‘This hill seems to get steeper every day!’ Mum laughed. ‘Or perhaps it’s just that you’re growing too big to be pushed around in a pram, Oliver.’

Two-year-old Oliver certainly looked as though he could manage up the hill on his own sturdy legs, but in 1923 little children were pushed around in high prams much longer than they are today.

‘Let me help,’ said Patricia, who was all of four-and-a-half.

Lending all of her strength to the job, the girl helped her mother push the giggling Oliver right to the top of the hill.

‘Let’s run!’ she exclaimed, when they were over the top.

‘Let’s not bother,’ Mum said firmly. ‘We don’t want Oliver in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the hill.’

Patricia looked up at her mother and smiled.

‘Tell me that story, please,’ she said. ‘It’s my most favourite story of all.’

Mrs St. John remembered back to 1919 and was not sure if it was one of her favourite stories, even though it did have a happy ending.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘it all began far away on the other side of the world.’

Patricia held on to the handle of Oliver’s pram and listened to what her mother was saying. Although she had heard the story over and over again, sometimes when her mother told it she added little bits that the girl didn’t already know. It was something of a game for Patricia to find new facts each time it was told.

‘Your dad and I were missionaries in Brazil in South America. And that’s where your big brother and sister were born.’

‘I’m glad I wasn’t born there,’ Patricia replied. ‘Hazel and Farnham said that there were so many black beetles in the house that the legs of their beds had to sit inside tins of kerosene to keep the beetles from running all over their faces!’

‘Did they indeed!’ laughed her mother. ‘They must have heard that from Dad. But they’ve got it wrong, because that was in our first little home in Buenos Aires, and we lived there before either of them were born!’

Patricia looked rather sad about that for it was such a good story.

‘Do you want me to go on?’ asked Mum.

Suddenly remembering what she had asked her mother to tell her, the girl smiled and said that she did.

‘Dad travelled long distances in his work, often riding on horseback over high mountain passes to reach little villages where people didn’t know about the Lord.

Eventually Dad and another missionary decided that we should move to Brazil and set up a Bible School in Carangola. That was quite a move, I can tell you,' Mum recalled. 'Hazel was just the same age as Oliver is now and Farnham was only seven weeks old.'

Patricia grinned. 'Was that when you lived in the House of a Thousand Fleas?' she asked. 'Or have Hazel and Farnham got that wrong too?'

'No, that's right enough,' her mother responded. 'And what a good time we had there for a while. But Farnham became ill and he seemed not to be getting better at all, whatever I did for him. He had a very nasty disease called dysentery and the poor little lamb had very sore ears too. I'm afraid your brother wasn't a happy little boy at all. He just seemed to get thinner and paler as the days went past. By then the Bible School was open and Dad had been asked to go to even more remote places to start more Bible Schools.'

Patricia's mind was in far-away Brazil and her young heart wished that she had been born there ... fleas and all!

'Let's sit down for a minute,' suggested Mrs St. John. 'There's a bench just here and the sun is shining right on it.'

They sat down and let Oliver out of the pram to toddle on the grass for a while.

'What happened then?' Patricia asked, although she knew the whole story very well indeed.

‘Dad and I prayed about what we should do and felt that the Lord was showing us that we should return home to England for a time and that Dad should then go back to South America and I should live here with you children.’

‘But I wasn’t born then,’ said the girl.

‘I’m just coming to that,’ her mother assured her.

‘We came home by boat. It was so stormy. In fact, as we went through the Bay of Biscay there was such a storm blowing that I was sure you would be born in the middle of it!’

‘That would have been exciting!’ Patricia said.

Her mother ignored her!

‘Eventually we reached Southampton on the south coast of England, and booked into a little place for the night before heading back home to Malvern, where we thought you were to be born. You were due about four weeks later.’

‘We were so pleased to be back on dry land,’ Mum remembered, ‘that Dad decided we should all go for a walk to enjoy it. So he borrowed a big pram and put Farnham safely into it. Hazel, who was tired after the long journey, was put on top and we set out to investigate St Leonards, near Southampton, where we were staying. Dad was so proud to be pushing his children along the road, something he had never done before because the tracks around Carangola were not suitable for prams. But I’m afraid that he was not a very good pram driver!’

Patricia held her breath. She knew exactly what was coming.

‘When we reached the top of a hill, he and the pram got in a muddle and it went racing down the hill with your dad desperately hanging on with one hand. The inevitable happened. The pram eventually toppled and Hazel and Farnham were thrown to the ground. Thankfully, because it was February, they were warmly wrapped up and their clothes stopped them from being hurt, although you wouldn’t have known that from their screams!’

‘I suppose they were screaming because they got such a fright,’ suggested the girl.

‘And they weren’t the only ones who got a fright!’ Mum replied. ‘For, as you know, I got such a fright that you, Patricia Mary St. John, were born a few hours later!’

‘Do you know what I think is funniest about that story?’ the child asked.

‘No,’ admitted Mum.

‘I think it’s funny that you went into the hotel with two children and when you went away you had three!’

Mrs St. John laughed. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘I can’t remember whether the kind lady asked us to pay extra for you or not! But we did have to stay longer than just one night.’

Oliver toddled up to his sister.

‘Me want in,’ he said, pointing to his pram.

‘I suppose it’s time to be going,’ said Mum, lifting the little lad into the pram and clipping his straps safely to each side.

Patricia gave Oliver his fluffy pom-pom ball. ‘Mum and I will both hold on to your pram at the top of the hill so that it doesn’t run away, because we don’t want another new baby tonight.’

Mrs St. John looked very surprised at the thought.

‘No,’ she laughed out loud. ‘We certainly do not!’

Hazel, Farnham, Patricia and Oliver had a happy childhood at Malvern in England, where they lived with their mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Their home, a three-storey house called Holmesdale, often had other children visiting too.

‘Why don’t you have a daddy?’ a visitor asked Patricia one day.

‘I do have a daddy,’ she said. ‘It’s just that he doesn’t live with us all the time.’

The child was puzzled. ‘Why not?’ she asked.

Hazel, who had overheard the conversation, decided to come to her little sister’s rescue.

‘Our dad’s a missionary,’ she explained. ‘That means he goes to people who don’t know about the Lord Jesus Christ and tells them about the Saviour.’

‘But everybody knows about Jesus,’ the child said.

‘Everybody here does,’ Hazel agreed. ‘That’s why Dad’s in South America. Many people there don’t know about him at all.’

‘Does he come home at weekends?’ she was asked.

Hazel tried not to laugh at her young interrogator.

‘Come and let me show you where South America is,’ she said, leading the child to a globe of the world.

‘Look, here’s England, and we’re here,’ she said, using a pencil to point out Malvern. ‘Now,’ she went on, turning the globe round slowly, ‘that’s Brazil.’

‘It’s on the other side of the world!’ exclaimed the child.

Hazel nodded. ‘That’s why Dad doesn’t come home at weekends. But he does come home as often as he can. And it’s very exciting when he comes because he has so many stories to tell us.’

‘Have you ever been to visit your dad in Brazil?’

Laughing, Hazel explained that she’d been born there.

‘You can’t have been,’ said the child. ‘You don’t have black skin!’

It took some time for Hazel to explain that the children of white parents are white wherever in the world they are born, and that Brazilian people don’t have black skins anyway!

When Patricia was five years old she was sent away on a short holiday.

‘There’s a surprise for you when you go home,’ said Great Aunt Emmie.

Patricia’s eyes shone. ‘What kind of surprise?’

The old lady knew how to keep secrets.

‘I can’t tell you any more than that the surprise is something to play with and that it’s alive.’

That night, as the girl lay in bed, all sorts of pictures went through her mind.

‘I wonder if it’s a puppy,’ she thought, imagining herself playing on the grass with a friendly little dog. ‘Or it may be a kitten.’ Then her imagination produced a picture of a fluffy tabby kitten rolled up in a ball in the sun. And in the morning when she awoke, Patricia’s first thought was that the new lively toy was definitely a kitten. When she was taken home again, she rushed into the house asking to be shown where the kitten was.

‘Kitten?’ was her grandmother’s puzzled response. ‘You don’t have a kitten, dear,’ she said. ‘You have a new little brother. His name’s John.’

Not too long afterwards the family did get a kitten, which became a cat that produced kittens of its own. And they were born one night in Patricia’s bed while she was sound asleep! The St. John children also had rabbits, but they were not popular with the next door neighbours.

‘Really, Mrs St. John, I must protest about your children’s rabbits,’ said the taller of the two Miss Wheelers. ‘They have been in our garden yet again!’

‘I am sorry,’ Mum said soothingly, ‘I’m afraid they are very mischievous.’

The shorter Miss Wheeler, who had come with her sister to the door, shook her head in such a way that

Mum just knew she was thinking that the children were even more mischievous than their rabbits.

‘Please try to control them,’ said the taller Miss Wheeler. ‘They’ve eaten some of our cabbages.’

‘Of course I will,’ Mum promised, wondering how to keep her promise. It seemed that whatever they did the rabbits could find their way through the railings and into the next door garden.

Farnham and Patricia, who were cross at the Misses Wheeler for upsetting their mother, decided to pay their neighbours a visit.

‘Let’s wait until its dark,’ suggested Farnham to his young sister.

She nodded and grinned at the prospect of carrying out the plan they’d hatched when huddled up together in the cupboard at the top of the stairs.

‘Ready?’ asked Patricia, when her grandmother had closed the sitting-room curtains.

‘Ready,’ nodded Farnham.

The pair of them went into the kitchen as though they were going to do nothing more interesting than drink a glass of milk.

‘What are you two up to?’ asked the family cook. ‘You have mischief written all over your faces.’

Farnham grinned. ‘We’re just going out into the back garden,’ he said. ‘We won’t be long.’

Elsie looked at him long and hard before treating Patricia to the same stare, but neither gave anything away.

Two minutes later Elsie knew exactly what they were up to. From the garden next door came the yowling and screeching of two tom cats ... or two children pretending to be tom cats. Laughing at the noise, and at the cheek of the mischiefs, she continued washing the tea dishes. The noise grew louder and louder and louder.

‘Maybe I should bring the young scamps in,’ thought Elsie.

Just then, having had no response from the Misses Wheeler, Farnham and Patricia turned their attention to the Misses Heathcote, who stayed on their other side. Once again the eerie wails of tom cats were heard. Elsie decided that enough was enough. But just as she opened the back door she heard the next door’s kitchen window being pulled up.

‘Take that!’ the Misses Heathcote’s cook shouted out the window.

Correctly guessing what had happened, Elsie held the door open for two drenched children to race in, giggling fit to burst!

‘She really thought we were tom cats,’ Patricia said, laughing aloud as soon as the door was safely closed.

‘Did you hear us?’ asked Farnham.

‘I think everyone in Alexandra Road heard you,’ she replied. ‘Now, I suggest you get these wet clothes off and put on your night things before your grandmother discovers what you’ve been up to. She might have something to say about it.’

By the time Grandmother next saw Farnham and Patricia they were dry and ready for bed.

‘You’re dear children’ she said, as she wished them goodnight.

And Elsie, who was just finishing for the night, heard her, shook her head and smiled.

Great-grandmother, who was quite old and frail, spent most of her time in bed. Although she loved all the children, she and Oliver had a special friendship. One afternoon, Patricia’s mother was in the sitting room totally unable to speak. She was laughing so much.

‘What’s funny?’ asked Patricia.

Mum couldn’t answer a word!

Greatly puzzled, the girl waited . . . and waited until her mother had recovered herself enough to talk.

‘You know that Oliver loves sitting on Great-grandmother’s bed talking to her,’ said Mrs St. John. ‘Well, half an hour ago I left them looking at a picture book together. Of course, I knew Oliver would change the subject to trains as soon as I closed the door. He has trains on his brain, that young man.’

Patricia watched her mother’s face. She loved a good story, and any story her mother told was told well.

‘A few minutes ago I went back and you’ll never guess what I discovered.’

‘What?’ begged the girl. ‘What were they doing?’

‘Oliver had pulled three bedroom chairs out into the middle of the room and set them one behind the

other to make his very own train. He was sitting on the first one pretending to drive the engine and Great-grandmother was sitting on the middle one, with her long nightgown draped right down to the floor. She was bouncing gently up and down saying, “Puff puff, puff puff, puff puff!”

Patricia thought she had never heard anything funnier and couldn't wait to tell Hazel and Farnham.