

John and Barbara's Story



Jane and Michael had gone off to a party, wearing their best clothes and looking, as Ellen the housemaid said when she saw them, “just like a shop window:”

All the afternoon the house was very quiet and still, as though it were thinking its own thoughts, or dreaming perhaps.

Down in the kitchen Mrs Brill was reading the paper with her spectacles perched on her nose. Robertson Ay was sitting in the garden busily doing nothing. Mrs Banks was on the drawing-room sofa with her feet up. And the house stood very quietly around them all, dreaming its own dreams, or thinking perhaps.

Upstairs in the nursery Mary Poppins was airing the clothes by the fire, and the sunlight poured in at the window, flickering on the white walls, dancing over the cots where the babies were lying.

“I say, move over! You’re right in my eyes,” said John in a loud voice.

“Sorry!” said the sunlight. “But I can’t help it. I’ve got to get across this room somehow.

Orders is orders. I must move from East to West in a day and my way lies through this Nursery. Sorry! Shut your eyes and you won’t notice me.”

The gold shaft of sunlight lengthened across the room. It was obviously moving as quickly as it could in order to oblige John.

“How soft, how sweet you are! I love you,” said Barbara, holding out her hands to its shining warmth.

“Good girl,” said the sunlight approvingly, and moved up over her cheeks and into her hair with a light, caressing movement. “Do you like the feel of me?” it said, as though it loved being praised.

“Dee-licious!” said Barbara, with a happy sigh.

“Chatter, chatter, chatter! I never heard such a place for chatter. There’s always somebody talking in this room,” said a shrill voice at the window.

John and Barbara looked up.

It was the Starling who lived on the top of the chimney.

“I like that,” said Mary Poppins, turning round quickly. “What about yourself? All day long—yes, and half the night, too, on the roofs and telegraph poles. Roaring and screaming and shouting—you’d talk the leg off a chair, you would. Worse than any sparrer, and that’s the truth.”

The Starling cocked his head on one side and looked down at her from his perch on the window frame.

“Well,” he said, “I have my business to attend to. Consultations, discussions, arguments, bargaining. And that, of course, necessitates a certain amount of — er — quiet conversation—”

“Quiet!” exclaimed John, laughing heartily.

“And I wasn’t talking to you, young man,” said the Starling, hopping down on to the window sill. “And *you* needn’t talk — anyway. I heard you for several hours on end last Saturday week. Goodness, I thought you’d never stop — you kept me awake all night.”

“That wasn’t talking,” said John. “I was—” He paused. “I mean, I had a pain.”

“Humph!” said the Starling, and hopped on to the railing of Barbara’s cot. He sidled along it until he came to the head of the cot. Then he said in a soft, wheedling voice:

“Well, Barbara B., anything for the old fellow today, eh?”

Barbara pulled herself into a sitting position by holding on to one of the bars of her cot.

“There’s the other half of my arrowroot biscuit,” she said, and held it out in her round, fat fist.

The Starling swooped down, plucked it out of her hand and flew back to the windowsill. He began nibbling it greedily.

"Thank you!" said Mary Poppins, meaningly, but the Starling was too busy eating to notice the rebuke.

"I said 'Thank you!' " said Mary Poppins a little louder.

The Starling looked up.

"Eh — what? Oh, get along, girl, get along. I've no time for such frills and furbelows." And he gobbled up all but the last crumbs of his biscuit.

The room was very quiet.

John, drowsing in the sunlight, put the toes of his right foot into his mouth and ran them along the place where his teeth were just beginning to come through.

"Why do you bother to do that?" said Barbara, in her soft, amused voice that seemed always to be full of laughter. "There's nobody to see you."

"I know," said John, playing a tune on his toes. "But I like to keep in practice. It *does* so amuse the Grown-ups. Did you notice that Aunt Flossie nearly went mad with delight when I did it yesterday? 'The Darling, the Clever, the Marvel, the Creature!'—didn't you hear her say all that?" And John threw his foot from him and roared with laughter as he thought of Aunt Flossie.

"She liked my trick, too," said Barbara complacently. "I took off both my socks and she said I was so sweet she would like to eat me. Isn't it funny — when I say I'd like to eat something I really mean it. Biscuits and Rusks and the knobs of beds and so on. But Grown-ups never mean what they say, it seems to me. She couldn't have *really* wanted to eat me, could she?"

"No. It's only the idiotic way they have of talking," said John. "I don't believe I'll ever understand Grown-ups. They all seem so stupid. And even Jane and Michael are stupid sometimes."

"Um," agreed Barbara, thoughtfully pulling off her socks.

"For instance," John went on, "they don't understand a single thing we say. But, worse than that, they don't understand what *other* things say. Why, only last Monday I heard Jane remark that she wished she knew what language the Wind spoke."

"I know," said Barbara. "It's astonishing. And Michael always insists — haven't you heard him? — that the Starling says 'Wee-Twe — ee — ee!' He seems not to know that the Starling says nothing of the kind, but speaks exactly the same language as we do. Of course, one doesn't expect Mother and Father to know about it — they don't know *anything*, though they *are* such darlings — but you'd think Jane and Michael would—"

"They did once," said Mary Poppins, folding up one of Jane's nightgowns.

"What?" said John and Barbara together in very surprised voices. "Really? You mean they understood the Starling and the Wind and—"

"And what the trees say and the language of the sunlight and the stars — of course they did! *Once*," said Mary Poppins.

"But—how is it that they've forgotten it all?" said John, wrinkling up his forehead and trying to understand.

"Aha!" said the Starling knowingly, looking up from the remains of his biscuit. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Because they've grown older," explained Mary Poppins. "Barbara, put on your socks at once, please."

"That's a silly reason," said John, looking sternly at her.

"It's the true one, then," Mary Poppins said, tying Barbara's socks firmly round her ankles.

"Well, it's Jane and Michael who are silly," John continued. "I know I shan't forget when I get older."

"Nor I," said Barbara, contentedly sucking her finger.

"Yes, you will," said Mary Poppins firmly.

The Twins sat up and looked at her.

"Huh!" said the Starling contemptuously. "Look at 'em! They think they're the World's Wonders. Little miracles — I *don't* think! Of course you'll forget — same as Jane and Michael."

"We *won't*," said the Twins, looking at the Starling as if they would like to murder him.

The Starling jeered.

"I say you will," he insisted. "It isn't your fault, of course," he added more kindly. "You'll forget because you just can't help it. There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one — at the very latest — except, of course, Her." And he jerked his head over his shoulder at Mary Poppins.

"But why can she remember and not us?" said John.

"A-a-a-h! She's different. She's the Great Exception. Can't go by *her*," said the Starling, grinning at them both. John and Barbara were silent.

The Starling went on explaining.

"She's something special, you see. Not in the matter of looks, of course. One of my own day-old chicks is handsomer than Mary P. ever was—"

"Here, you impertinence!" said Mary Poppins crossly, making a dart at him and flicking her apron in his direction.

But the Starling leapt aside and flew up to the window frame, whistling wickedly, well out of reach.

"Thought you had me that time, didn't you?" he jeered and shook his wing-feathers at her. Mary Poppins snorted.

The sunlight moved on through the room, drawing its long gold shaft after it. Outside a light wind had sprung up and was whispering gently to the cherry trees in the Lane.

"Listen, listen, the wind's talking," said John, tilting his head on one side. "Do you really mean we won't be able to hear *that* when we're older, Mary Poppins?"

"You'll hear all right," said Mary Poppins, "but you won't understand." At that Barbara began to weep gently. There were tears in John's eyes, too. "Well, it can't be helped. It's how things happen," said Mary Poppins sensibly.

"Look at them, just look at them!" jeered the Starling. "Crying fit to kill themselves! Why, a starling in the egg's got more sense. Look at them!"

For John and Barbara were now crying piteously in their cots — long-drawn sobs of deep unhappiness.

Suddenly the door opened and in came Mrs Banks.

"I thought I heard the babies," she said, Then she ran to the Twins. "What is it, my darlings? Oh, my Treasures, my Sweets, my Love-birds, what is it? Why are they crying so, Mary Poppins? They've been so quiet all afternoon — not a sound out of them. What can be the matter?"

"Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. I expect they're getting their teeth, ma'am," said Mary Poppins, deliberately not looking in the direction of the Starling.

"Oh, of course—that must be it," said Mrs Banks brightly.

"I don't want teeth if they make me forget all the things I like best," wailed John, tossing about in his cot.

"Neither do I," wept Barbara, burying her face in her pillow.

"My poor ones, my pets — it will be all right when the naughty old teeth come through," said Mrs Banks soothingly, going from one cot to the other.

"You don't understand!" roared John furiously. "I don't *want* teeth."

"It won't be all right, it will be all *wrong*!" wailed Barbara to her pillow:

"Yes—yes. There—there. Mother knows—Mother understands. It will be all right when the teeth come through," crooned Mrs Banks tenderly.

A faint noise came from the window. It was the Starling hurriedly swallowing a laugh. Mary Poppins gave him one look. That sobered him, and he continued to regard the scene without the hint of a smile.

Mrs Banks was patting her children gently, first one and then the other, and murmuring words that were meant to be reassuring. Suddenly John stopped crying. He had very good manners, and he was fond of his Mother and remembered what was due to her. It was not *her* fault, poor woman, that she always said the wrong thing. It was just, he reflected, that she did not understand. So, to show that he forgave her, he turned over on his back, and very dolefully, sniffing back his tears, he picked up his right foot in both hands and ran his toes along his open mouth.

"Clever One, oh, Clever One," said his Mother admiringly. He did it again and she was very pleased.

Then Barbara, not to be outdone in courtesy, came out of her pillow and with her tears still wet on her face, sat up and plucked off both her socks.

"Wonderful girl," said Mrs Banks proudly, and kissed her.

"There, you see, Mary Poppins! They're quite good again. I can always comfort them. Quite good, quite good," said Mrs Banks, as though she were singing a lullaby. "And the teeth will soon be through."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mary Poppins quietly; and smiling to the Twins, Mrs Banks went out and closed the door.

The moment she had disappeared the Starling burst into a peal of rude laughter.

"Excuse me smiling!" he cried. "But really — I can't help it. What a scene! *What* a scene!"

John took no notice of him. He pushed his face through the bars of his cot and called softly and fiercely to Barbara:

"I *won't* be like the others. I tell you I won't. They," he jerked his head towards the Starling and Mary Poppins, "can say what they like. I'll never forget, *never!*"

Mary Poppins smiled, a secret, I-know-better-than-you sort of smile, all to herself.

"Nor I," answered Barbara. "Ever."

"Bless my tail-feathers—listen to them!" shrieked the Starling, as he put his wings on his hips and roared with mirth.

"As if they could help forgetting! Why, in a month or two — three at the *most*—they won't even know what my name is— silly cuckoos! Silly, half-grown featherless cuckoos! Ha! Ha! Ha!" And with another loud peal of laughter he spread his speckled wings and flew out of the window.

It was not very long afterwards that the teeth, after much trouble, came through as all teeth must, and the Twins had their first birthday.

The day after the birthday party the Starling, who had been away on holiday at Bournemouth, came back to Number Seventeen, Cherry Tree Lane.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo! Here we are again!" he screamed joyfully, landing with a little wobble upon the windowsill.

"Well, how's the girl?" he enquired cheekily of Mary Poppins, cocking his little head on one side and regarding her with bright, amused, twinkling eyes.

"None the better for *your* asking," said Mary Poppins, tossing her head.

The Starling laughed.

"Same old Mary R," he said. "No change out of *you*! How are the other ones — the cuckoos?" he asked, and looked across at Barbara's cot.

"Well, Barbarina," he began in his soft, wheedling voice, "anything for the old fellow today?"

"Be-lah-belah-belah-belah!" said Barbara, crooning gently as she continued to eat her arrowroot biscuit.

The Starling, with a start of surprise, hopped a little nearer.

"I said," he repeated more distinctly, "is there anything for the old fellow today, Barbie dear?"

"Ba-loo — ba-loo — ba-loo!" murmured Barbara, gazing up at the ceiling as she swallowed the last sweet crumb.

The Starling stared at her.

"Ha!" he said suddenly, and turned and looked enquiringly at Mary Poppins. Her quiet glance met his in a long look.

Then with a darting movement the Starling flew over to John's cot and alighted on the rail. John had a large woolly lamb hugged close in his arms.

"What's my name? What's my name? What's my name?" cried the Starling in a shrill anxious voice.

"Er-umph!" said John, opening his mouth and putting the leg of the woolly lamb into it.

With a little shake of the head the Starling turned away.

“So — it’s happened,” he said quietly to Mary Poppins.

She nodded.

The Starling gazed dejectedly for a moment at the Twins. Then he shrugged his speckled shoulders.

“Oh, well — I knew it would. Always told ’em so. But they wouldn’t believe it.” He remained silent for a little while, staring into the cots. Then he shook himself vigorously.

“Well, well. I must be off. Back to my chimney. It will need a spring-cleaning, I’ll be bound.” He flew on to the window-sill and paused, looking back over his shoulder.

“It’ll seem funny without them, though. Always liked talking to them—so I did. I shall miss them.”

He brushed his wing quickly across his eyes.

“Crying?” jeered Mary Poppins. The Starling drew himself up.

“Crying? Certainly not. I have — er — a slight cold, caught on my return journey — that’s all. Yes, a slight cold. Nothing serious.” He darted up to the windowpane, brushed down his breast-feathers with his beak and then, “Cheerio!” he said perkily, and spread his wings and was gone...