

HOLLOW  
TREE  
HOUSE

# HOLLOW TREE HOUSE

Enid  
Blyton

Lutterworth  
Press

Enid Blyton

BARBARA C. FREEMAN



**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* Hollow Tree House

*Date of first publication:* 1945

*Author:* Enid Blyton (1897-1968)

*Date first posted:* June 19, 2019

*Date last updated:* June 19, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190636

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# HOLLOW TREE HOUSE

Enid Blyton

First published in 1945 by Lutterworth Press.  
Text from the 1987 Beaver edition.

## Contents

1	Cross Aunt Margaret	<a href="#"><u>7</u></a>
2	Two Pounds for the Treat	<a href="#"><u>14</u></a>
3	A Day by the Sea	<a href="#"><u>22</u></a>
4	Three Children—and Barker	<a href="#"><u>29</u></a>
5	In the Heart of the Wood	<a href="#"><u>36</u></a>
6	The Old Hollow Tree	<a href="#"><u>43</u></a>
7	Exciting Plans	<a href="#"><u>51</u></a>
8	Moving-in Day	<a href="#"><u>58</u></a>
9	A Lovely Tree-House	<a href="#"><u>66</u></a>
10	Trouble with Aunt Margaret	<a href="#"><u>73</u></a>
11	In Disgrace	<a href="#"><u>79</u></a>
12	A Peculiar Sunday	<a href="#"><u>86</u></a>
13	A Dreadful Shock	<a href="#"><u>93</u></a>
14	In the Middle of the Night	<a href="#"><u>101</u></a>
15	An Exciting Home	<a href="#"><u>108</u></a>
16	Where is Angela?	<a href="#"><u>116</u></a>
17	Barker Changes Hands	<a href="#"><u>123</u></a>
18	A Narrow Escape	<a href="#"><u>130</u></a>
19	An Anxious Time	<a href="#"><u>137</u></a>
20	Barker is Good Medicine	<a href="#"><u>144</u></a>
21	Angela Tells a Story	<a href="#"><u>151</u></a>

## CHAPTER ONE

### CROSS AUNT MARGARET

Two children stood outside the kitchen door of their home, and listened. From inside came the sound of a scolding voice.

‘You’ve sat in that chair and slept for two whole hours, you lazy thing! You go out and bring me in some wood!’

‘She’s in a bad temper again,’ said Peter to his sister Susan. ‘It’s no good asking her today.’

The children went away from the kitchen door and sat down on a pile of logs in a corner of the garden. Susan looked at Peter.

‘Well, if we don’t ask soon, we shan’t be able to go,’ she said. ‘We’ve got to take the money tomorrow.’

Peter and Susan lived with their Aunt Margaret and their Uncle Charlie. They dimly remembered a time when they had lived with someone pretty and merry—their mother, who had died when they were very small. Then they had gone to live with their aunt and uncle.

They were afraid of Aunt Margaret. She was bad-tempered and spiteful, with a scolding tongue. Uncle Charlie was afraid of her, too. He was a lazy, good-tempered man, who could never keep a job for long, and that made Aunt Margaret crosser still.

Peter was eleven, and Susan was nine. It was easy to see that they were brother and sister, for they had the same deep blue eyes and black wavy hair—very like their uncle’s. They looked unhappy now. If only Aunt Margaret would let them, they could have a fine treat—but if she happened to feel extra bad-tempered, they would have to go without the treat.

‘Everyone else in the school is going, simply *everyone*,’ said Susan. ‘A whole day by the sea! Think of it! And all for a pound.’

‘I know. I wish we had a pound each, then we could go without asking Aunt Margaret,’ said Peter. ‘We never have even ten pence pocket money, as other children do. It’s only when Uncle gives us ten pence on the sly that we ever have anything to spend. And then, if Aunt Margaret finds it, she takes it away!’

‘Well, Peter, we simply must ask about the school treat tonight,’ said Susan. ‘If we don’t take the money tomorrow, our teacher won’t buy a ticket for us—and we shan’t be able to go. We’re the only ones who haven’t taken the money yet.’

Still the scolding voice came out from the open kitchen door.

‘Sitting there with the newspaper in front of you all day long! Lost your job again—and no wonder! The only thing you’re ever on time for is your meals. What with you to look after, and your tiresome nephew and niece, I’m just about fed up!’

There was the bang of an iron on the table as Aunt Margaret spoke. She was ironing, and the children could tell by the bangs of the iron what a bad temper she was in.

They waited for a while. Then their uncle came out with a sulky look on his face. He caught sight of the two children.

‘One of these days I shall walk right out of this house and never come back!’ he said to them. ‘There’s no peace in this place at all! Nag—nag—nag, all day long.’

‘Uncle—I suppose you couldn’t possibly let us have a pound each, could you?’ said Peter, rather hopelessly, for when his uncle had no job, he usually had no money either.

‘A pound each! Whatever for?’ asked Uncle Charlie.

‘To go to the school treat,’ said Susan eagerly. ‘It’s a whole day by the sea!’

‘I haven’t a pound for myself, let alone for you!’ said her uncle, dipping his hands into his pocket. He brought up a few pence, and that was all. ‘Your aunt takes all she can get. Better ask *her*!’

He went off down the lane, and the children watched him. They liked him, but they did not admire him. He was so lazy and weak, and even when he got a good job, he lost it through being late in the mornings, or being careless. Perhaps Aunt Margaret might have been a bit better-tempered if Uncle Charlie had been a finer man.

Suddenly their aunt came to the door and saw them. ‘Now what are you idling out there for?’ she called out, in her usual sharp voice. ‘Susan, come on in and help me with the ironing. Peter, get me some wood. If you think I’m going to let you grow up lazy and good-for-nothing like your uncle, you’re wrong.’

That wasn’t a fair thing to say, because neither Peter nor Susan was lazy. They worked well at school and were top of their classes. At home they did plenty of odd jobs for their aunt, and did them well.

Susan went indoors with a sigh. It was hot and ironing would make her feel much hotter. Peter went to get the wood that his uncle had forgotten to take in. He was always doing things that his uncle had forgotten to do, or was too lazy to do.

Bang, bang, bang, went the iron. Aunt Margaret was still in a bad temper. Susan said nothing. She began to iron the handkerchiefs and fold them neatly. Then she took the towels to iron. She was a good little worker. She did her best

hoping that Aunt Margaret would feel pleased with her. Then perhaps she might ask her aunt if they could go to the school treat.

Peter made up the fire, and filled the wood-box. Then he stood near the two ironers, wondering if he dared to ask for the two pounds now.

‘What are you standing there for, doing nothing?’ said his aunt, sharply. ‘Want to get something out of me, I suppose! Well, what is it?’

Aunt Margaret was clever at reading people’s thoughts. Peter knew he would have to ask her now.

‘Well, Aunt—you see, it’s the school treat tomorrow and our teacher is taking us all to the sea for a day,’ he began. ‘Our tickets are only a pound, and that pays for our tea as well. We have to take our own dinner. Everybody’s going, every boy and girl in the school. So Susan and I wondered if we could go too.’

Bang, bang, went the iron angrily, and Peter’s heart sank. ‘And where are you going to get the two pounds from?’ said his aunt.

‘Well—we thought perhaps you could spare them just this once,’ said Peter. ‘Or perhaps you could spare *one* pound, Aunt Margaret—for Susan to go. She has never seen the sea, and I have.’

‘Oh no, Peter—I couldn’t bear you to be the only one in all the school left behind!’ cried Susan.

BANG, went the iron. And then Aunt Margaret began one of her tiresome scoldings.

‘Two pounds! With your lazy uncle out of work again! And me working and slaving hard to make money to keep all four of us! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Peter Frost, and you too, Susan!’

Peter opened his mouth to speak, but his aunt swept on, banging the iron down at the end of each sentence.

‘It was a bad day for me when I married that lazy uncle of yours! And what does he do when his silly little sister dies, but bring you along here and tell me it’s our duty to look after you! Says he to me, “Their father’s dead, and now their mother’s gone, poor little orphans! We’ve no children of our own, Margaret,” he says, “so we’ll do our best by these!” And he too lazy to earn a penny to keep you!’

‘Aunt Margaret!’ began Peter, ‘it *was* kind of you to take us in—and we’ll both do our best when we’re grown-up to pay you back the money you’ve spent on us.’

Bang, bang, bang! Aunt Margaret snorted as she ironed.

‘Yes, I’ve heard tales like that before, from your uncle. You’ll be like him, when you grow up—there’s no good in your family. I don’t know why he brought you here, when you could have gone into some good children’s home. I didn’t want you. But I’ve put up with you for a good many years now, and

paid out good money for you—and now you have no better sense than to ask me for pounds to go off on a treat!’

Susan was crying. ‘Don’t keep saying you don’t want us,’ she sobbed. ‘It’s awful not be wanted. I’m glad you didn’t let us go to a home for children. We really and truly will pay you back some day for all you’ve spent on us.’

‘Oh, go on out of doors if you’re going to cry all over the ironing,’ said her aunt, impatiently, but she looked a little ashamed of herself. Susan slipped out at once, and Peter followed her.

They went out of the gate and crossed to the wood that stretched for some miles over the countryside. They sat down on a bank of grass and Peter put his arm round Susan.

‘Don’t cry, kid,’ he said. ‘What’s the use? We know Aunt Margaret doesn’t want us and never did. But at any rate she gives us a home.’

‘It’s not a proper home,’ said Susan, wiping her eyes. ‘Proper homes aren’t like ours. Think of Angela’s home Peter—or Hilda’s—or Tom’s.’

Peter thought of them. Yes, they were homes, proper homes, no doubt about that. But then, there was a mother in each home, who loved the children there, and did not mind how much trouble and money she spent on them.

There was love in those homes, too. The children loved their parents, and the parents loved their children. Susan thought of how Hilda always ran to kiss her mother when she got back from school. She remembered how Joan’s father picked her up and put her on his shoulder when he came home from work. She thought of how Tom always rushed home to tell his mother about school.

‘I wish our mother hadn’t died,’ she said. ‘Oh, Peter, I do want a proper home and a mother.’

‘Well—we’re just unlucky about that,’ said Peter, and he put his arm round Susan again and gave her a squeeze. ‘But anyway, we’ve got each other, and that’s something. One day I’ll make a fine home for you, Susan.’

‘I know you will,’ said Susan. ‘You’re a darling. But I want a proper home *now*, while I’m little, with a mother in it. Somebody who will welcome me when I come home from school, and somebody who will come and see me when I’m in bed and say good night.’

‘Oh, Susan, you know that’s impossible,’ said Peter.

‘Well, when I say my prayers at night, I always put that in,’ said Susan, in an obstinate little voice.

‘What do you put in?’ said Peter, puzzled.

‘I ask for a proper home and a mother,’ said Susan. ‘I keep on and on asking God for those. He can do everything, can’t He?’

‘Well—He might think He *has* given you a proper home, with Uncle Charlie, and He has given you Aunt Margaret instead of a mother,’ said Peter.

Susan looked scornfully at her brother. ‘God knows quite well what I



mean,' she said. 'I'm sure He wouldn't make a mistake like that. One day you'll see. He'll give me what I ask.'

'You're still a baby,' said Peter, with a sigh. 'It's no good asking and wishing for what's impossible, Susan. We must make the best of what we've got.'

## CHAPTER TWO

### TWO POUNDS FOR THE TREAT

The sound of someone singing in a little high voice came through the wood. Susan wiped her eyes for the last time and sat up straight.

‘It must be Angela,’ she said. ‘It sounds like her.’

A girl of about Susan’s age came down a little path towards them. She was very pretty, and her blue, flowery frock suited her beautifully. She had a mop of silky gold hair and blue eyes, though not such a deep blue as those of the other two children.

‘Hallo, Sue, hallo, Peter!’ she said. ‘I wondered if I should see you today.’

Angela was lucky. She had all the things that Susan hadn’t got and wanted so badly. She had a pretty, loving mother, a strong, clever father, a lovely house and garden, and a family of the loveliest dolls Susan had ever seen.

But Angela was not spoilt. Her mother was too sensible and too kind-hearted to spoil Angela and make her think she was wonderful. She tried to make Angela share her things with others who hadn’t so many, and she tried to teach her to be as kind as she herself was.

And Angela was kind. Everyone liked her, not because she was pretty and dainty, or because she had plenty of toys, but because she was merry and kindly, always friendly to everyone. Susan adored her, and her most precious possession was a little doll from Angela’s dolls’ house, that Angela had given her for her birthday.

Angela did not go to the village school. She had a governess, Miss Blair, who taught her each morning. Susan and Peter had met Angela at the Sunday School they all went to. She was in their class.

One afternoon the story had been about the boy with the loaves and fishes, and how pleased he had been when Jesus had, by a miracle, made his simple meal into enough food for thousands of people.

When it was finished Angela had beamed at the teacher. ‘That’s my favourite Bible story,’ she said. ‘My very favourite. I often imagine what that boy must have felt like when Jesus took his picnic basket and fed all the crowd from it! I expect he rushed home to tell his mother all about it.’

Susan had joined in at once. ‘Oh, it’s *my* favourite story, too. And my next favourite is about the little boy who had sunstroke, and the old man cured him and gave him back to his mother.’

‘I don’t know that one,’ Angela had said. ‘Will you walk home with me and tell me?’

So the three children had walked home together, and Susan had told the story of the little boy who had sunstroke and died. She had found the story for Angela in her Bible, so that she could read it herself. All the children liked the miracle stories, and thought they were full of magic.

‘We could act some of those stories, couldn’t we?’ said Angela, when they stood outside the gate of her home. ‘I love acting and pretending. Oh, do let’s act some of them. We could easily act the boy with sunstroke. You could be the boy, Peter, and I could be Elisha, and Susan could be the poor mother.’

And so a friendship had been begun between the three children, and many a time had they met in the wood and acted all the stories they loved, out of any book they happened to be reading.

Angela had no brothers or sisters, and was a lonely little girl. She had a great imagination and loved pretending. Susan and Peter were great pretenders, too. Angela made their pretence games very real, because her mother let her borrow old curtains or rugs to dress up in.

‘I like you and Peter best of all the village children,’ Angela said to them. ‘You like to play the same games as I do. The others laugh at me if I want them to dress up and act. Let’s be friends, shall we? Real friends, I mean. I haven’t any brothers or sisters, and I’d love to pretend you are my sister and brother. You’re lucky to have each other.’

‘And you’re lucky to have a mother,’ said Susan, at once. ‘Your mother is lovely. She hardly ever scolds, does she? And she’s always so kind. You must love her a lot!’

‘I do,’ said Angela. ‘Well, if you will pretend to be my brother and sister, you will have to share my mother. She likes you, and she says you can come and play with me when you like.’

The children had told Angela about their Aunt Margaret, and had warned her of her bad temper. But Angela, used to being loved and made much of, hadn’t believed that their aunt would be anything but nice to her.

However, after one or two undeserved scoldings Angela had decided to keep away from the bad-tempered woman, and now the children only met in the wood, or at Angela’s own home.

They were pleased to see her that afternoon, as she came through the trees to find them. She saw Susan’s red eyes at once.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, sitting down beside her. ‘Been getting into trouble with your aunt again? I do think she’s horrid.’

Peter told her what their aunt had said—that she hadn’t wanted them, and grudged every penny spent on them. Then he told her about the two pounds they had to take to school the next day, if they wanted to go to the seaside.

‘Well, that’s easy,’ said Angela, jumping up. ‘I’m sure I’ve got more than that in my money-box at home. I’ll go and get it for you.’

‘No, Angela,’ said Peter. ‘We can’t take your money. Thank you all the same—you’re always so generous. But we just can’t take it.’

‘Why not?’ said Angela. ‘Aren’t I your friend? You’re being silly.’

‘I would take it if I thought I could pay you back,’ said Peter. ‘But I know I can’t.’

‘No, we couldn’t take your money, Angela,’ said Susan, who, badly as she wanted the pound, thought the same as Peter. ‘We could never, never pay it back.’

‘I don’t want you to, silly,’ said Angela, beginning to look indignant. ‘What’s two pounds, anyway?’

‘An awful lot, to us,’ said Peter. ‘It’s just that we don’t like taking money for nothing, Angela. If we could do something in return for it, we would take it.’

‘Well—I know what you could do!’ said Angela, cheering up. ‘You know those lovely little baskets you make from the rushes that grow by the stream? Well, will you make me some of those for Mummy’s sale of work next week? I can fill them with raspberries from the garden and she can sell them. The money is to go towards building a new hospital in the next town so it’s a good cause, isn’t it? You would help Mummy to make a lot of money if you let me buy the baskets and fill them with raspberries.’

Susan’s eyes shone. This did seem a very good way out. She turned to Peter, who still looked a bit doubtful. ‘Peter! Let’s make the baskets, and fill them with wild raspberries ourselves. We know where plenty grow. We’ll charge Angela ten pence a basket, and her mother can sell them for fifty pence each. So we would help her to make a lot of money.’

‘All right,’ said Peter. ‘We would really be earning the two pounds then, and I don’t mind that.’

‘Good,’ said Angela. ‘I’ll get the money now, and you can make the baskets in time for the sale of work, and fill them with wild raspberries the day before.’

She sped off. Susan took Peter’s arm and gave it a tight squeeze. She was overjoyed. She had so few treats, and a day by the sea seemed marvellous to her.

‘Angela’s a sport,’ said Peter. ‘We’ll make our very, very best baskets for her, Sue. We might as well make one or two now while we are waiting for her. Come on down to the stream.’

They picked the long narrow leaves they needed for weaving the little baskets, and then sat down to work. Both children were clever with their fingers, and soon two neat little baskets began to take shape.

Angela soon appeared again, rather out of breath. ‘Here you are,’ she said, and held out two pounds. ‘One for each of you. I hope you will have a good

day tomorrow. Oh, you've begun on the baskets already—aren't they sweet?"

'Thank you,' said Peter, putting the money carefully into his pocket. He wondered whether or not to tell his aunt they were going to the school treat after all. He decided that he wouldn't. She might make him give up the two pounds to her!

'We'll just go, and say nothing to Aunt Margaret about it,' he said to Susan. 'Save up your supper tonight, Susan, if you get any, and we'll have it for our dinner tomorrow. I daren't ask Aunt Margaret for sandwiches in case she guesses we've got the money to go tomorrow.'

'I've got to go now,' said Angela. 'Miss Blair wants me to do something with her. See you at Sunday School, if I don't see you before! Goodbye and have a lovely time!'

'Goodbye, and thanks very much,' said Peter. Susan walked with her a little way, then ran back to Peter, who was finishing off his basket very neatly with a strong little handle.

'What fun! We're really going tomorrow!' said Susan, her blue eyes shining with joy. 'Oh, Peter—what is the sea really like?'

'You'll soon find out,' said Peter. There—that basket is finished. I'll hide it somewhere, and put yours away too. Look—under this thick bush would be a good place.'

He hid the two little baskets, and then they went back to their aunt's cottage. Aunt Margaret was now sitting outside in the garden, mending. She did everything very fast, even darning, and her needle seemed to fly in and out. She looked up as the children came along.

'There's some weeding to be done,' she began, as soon as she saw them. 'You'll just have time to do it before you go to bed. Do it well, or there'll be no supper for you.'

'Yes, Aunt Margaret,' said Susan, meekly, feeling that she didn't mind how much weeding she did, now that she was sure of having a treat the next day. They set to work with a will, and not even their aunt could find fault with the way they weeded that onion bed!

'You'll find your supper in the larder, on the blue plate,' said Aunt Margaret, when they had finished. 'Eat it, and go to bed.'

Their uncle had not come back. He sometimes stayed away for hours, to be out of reach of his wife's sharp tongue. Peter and Susan went indoors and opened the larder door. On a plate were two thick sandwiches of bread and cheese.

They were hungry, but they knew they must save the bread and cheese for the next day's dinner. Keeping an eye on their aunt through the window, they quickly took a newspaper and wrapped up the two sandwiches. Peter stuffed them into his school bag.

‘We’ll take a bottle of water too,’ he said, and filled an old lemonade bottle at the tap. That went into his bag with the sandwiches.

‘Now let’s go up to bed before Aunt begins to ask awkward questions!’ said Peter. ‘Mind you don’t say one single word about the treat at breakfast, Susan!’

Up to bed they went. Peter hid his two pounds under his pillow. It was too precious even to leave in his shorts pocket! It meant a whole day by the sea for both of them.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A DAY BY THE SEA

Susan awoke feeling very excited. It was early, but she couldn't go to sleep again. She wished she had a nice clean frock to wear. All the other children would be sent off looking nice by their mothers.

'That's just it,' thought Susan. 'Mothers do anything for their children. It's awful if you haven't got a mother. If I had a mother I'd love her every minute of the day, and she'd love me and be proud of me, the way Angela's mother is of her. I do want a mother and proper home. I'll have to keep on and on praying about it. Our Sunday School teacher said last time that God does answer prayers, and He does do miracles even now. I wish He would do one for me. Perhaps I don't deserve one, though. Perhaps you have to be awfully good to have a miracle done for you.'

Aunt Margaret's voice came in through the door. 'It's time to get up, Susan. Go down and lay the breakfast-table, and tell Peter to light the fire.'

The children certainly earned their keep at their aunt's for they did a great many jobs for her. She would have kept Susan home all day long to work for her, if she hadn't known that the school teacher would ask Peter where she was. Susan dressed quickly, and ran downstairs to lay the breakfast.

Peter lighted the fire, and both children looked in delight at the sunny day outside. 'It's going to be fine,' said Peter. 'Isn't that good? The sea will be as blue as forget-me-nots.'

'Sh! Here comes Aunt Margaret,' whispered Susan.

They had breakfast. Their uncle was lost in his newspaper, and looked sulky. He glanced at the children, and wished he had two pounds to give to them. He was fond of them—but not fond enough to go out and work hard and keep his jobs.

Aunt Margaret made a few remarks to him about going off to look for work as soon as breakfast was finished. He scowled at her.

'Nagging for breakfast, nagging for dinner, nagging for tea,' he said. 'I tell you, one of these days I'll walk out and never come back!'

'It's a pity you don't,' said Aunt Margaret. 'There'd be one mouth less for me to feed.'

The children said nothing. It was always safer to keep quite quiet when Aunt Margaret was cross. They were longing to get away to school. Peter could feel the precious two pounds almost burning a hole in his pocket. Aunt Margaret didn't know about them, so she couldn't take them away and stop

them going to the sea for the day!

But Susan, who dreaded her aunt's sharp, piercing eyes, almost felt as if she might be able to see through Peter's shorts into his pockets, and spy the money there. She fidgeted to get up from the table and go.

'For goodness' sake, Susan, what's the matter with you this morning?' said Aunt Margaret at last. 'Stop fidgeting. Be off to school before I slap you!'

Susan shot off at once, and pretended not to hear when her aunt shouted to her to come back and put her chair away. Peter came out soon after, his school bag on his back and a broad grin on his face.

'Aunt can't make out why we're not moaning and groaning because we can't go to the school treat!' he said. 'We ought to have looked sad and sorrowful. You nearly gave the game away, you looked so excited, Sue.'

'I can't help it,' said Susan, and skipped off beside Peter. 'I feel so happy. A whole day's holiday by the sea! A train-ride first—and then the sea—and paddling. And we'll find some shells and seaweed.'

Then a thought struck her, and she turned to Peter, looking scared.

'What will Aunt Margaret say when we don't go home to dinner?'

'She'll guess where we are all right,' said Peter. 'She'll think our school teacher paid for us to go to the sea, I expect. We mustn't tell her we got the money from Angela.'

'It's horrid not be able to be honest with Aunt Margaret,' said Susan. 'Oh, Peter, I wish we needn't deceive her. But we can't help it, can we?'

'We're not doing any harm,' said Peter. 'We shall be earning money by ourselves by making the baskets. We are not robbing Aunt Margaret of it. Still, it *would* be nice if we could trust her and tell her everything.'

The whole school was excited. Every child was going. They marched off to the station with the three teachers. Susan went with her class, and Peter went with his.

As they waited on the platform, who should come along but their Aunt Margaret with her shopping-basket! Susan saw her first and stared in horror. She pulled at Peter's arm.

'Quick! Hide somewhere! Aunt may see us as she passes the station.'

'The train is just coming in—there's no time to hide,' said Peter. 'Come on, get in before she sees us.'

Just as they were climbing into a carriage their aunt saw them. She stared in surprise, and then looked most annoyed. Who had paid for them? Where had they got the money? She hurried round to get to the platform and the children sat back in the carriage with beating hearts.

'Oh, train, do go, oh, train, do go!' cried Susan to herself. 'Quick, before Aunt Margaret comes!'

Her aunt came on to the platform, and called loudly. 'Peter! Susan!'



The train gave a jolt, and began to move. Aunt Margaret ran alongside, trying to find the carriage with the children in it. But the train went too fast for her. Before she came to their carriage the children were well beyond the platform, and were safe!

‘We’re really off!’ said Peter, thankfully. ‘She can’t catch us now, Sue.’

It was a lovely day. The sea was far far bigger than Susan had thought it could be, and was as blue as the sky. She loved the little white-edged waves that seemed to spill foamy white lace round her feet. Everything was lovely.

The two children were so hungry at dinner-time that their two cheese sandwiches disappeared in a trice. Their teacher saw what a poor lunch they had brought, and asked them to help with hers.

‘I seem to have brought too much,’ she said, and the children believed her, gobbling up more sandwiches and cake in delight. Then off they wandered again to paddle and hunt for shells and seaweed.

Peter found some lovely shells, and Susan pulled a long frond of brown, shiny seaweed from a rock. ‘It’s like a brown ribbon,’ she said. ‘I shall take it home and hang it up. I shall feel it every morning. If it’s wet, I shall know we shall have wet weather. If it’s dry, then the weather will be fine.’

Tea was lovely, and there was plenty of it. Then, after one hour of wandering along the edge of the waves, it was time to take the train for home.

Then the lovely day began to be spoilt for Susan and Peter, because they couldn’t help wondering what their aunt would have to say to them.

‘Let’s say our teacher paid for us,’ said Susan.

‘That’s a lie,’ said Peter. ‘You know we shouldn’t tell lies, Susan. We can’t possibly say that. We’ll just say we earned the money ourselves. That’s quite true.’

They were very silent as the train sped homewards. It was horrid to be going home to someone they were so afraid of.

‘I’ll give Aunt Margaret some of my shells,’ said Peter. ‘Perhaps that will please her.’

‘Well—I can’t give her my seaweed,’ said Susan, who had tied it round her waist. ‘I want it too much myself. Anyway I’m sure she wouldn’t like it.’

There were many mothers at the station to meet their children. Susan looked round at them. There was Tom’s nice fat mother, smiling all over her face as usual. And Jack’s little mother, not much bigger than he was, waving to him as the train came in. And Ronnie’s mother, looking anxiously for her boy, hoping he hadn’t got lost.

There was no one to meet Susan and Peter. They thanked their teacher for a lovely day, and then walked slowly home. Their feet got slower and slower as they came near to their aunt’s cottage. They stood in the garden, hardly daring to go in.

Then door flew open and Aunt Margaret stood there, her eyes angry and sharp, and her thin-lipped mouth set in a straight line.

‘So you’ve come home at last! And where did you get the money from to go with, I should like to know? You got it out of your uncle, didn’t you? Ah, I’ve told him what I thought of him, giving you money that he keeps from me! You bad children, deceiving me, and making him deceive me too, and tell me lies!’

‘Uncle didn’t give us any money,’ said Peter, in surprise. ‘We did ask him, but he said he only had a few pence. Oh, I hope you didn’t nag at him, Aunt, because he really *didn’t* give us the money. He didn’t tell you a lie when he told you he hadn’t given us the money.’

‘Well, where *did* you get it from then?’ cried his aunt. ‘You just tell me, before I go to your teacher and find out!’

‘Please don’t go and make a fuss at school,’ begged Susan. ‘We earned the money, Aunt Margaret. We earned it ourselves, we really did.’

‘You *earned* two whole pounds and didn’t give it to me!’ said her aunt, speaking as if she was immensely astonished. ‘When you know your uncle is out of work and I’ve hardly any money left! You earn two pounds and don’t tell me a word about it! Ungrateful, mean children! I’ve a good mind to say I won’t keep you a week more! I’ve a good mind to pack you off to a children’s home somewhere and be rid of you. Go up to bed, before I whip you!’

The children ran upstairs, each getting a good slap as they passed their angry aunt. Susan whispered in fear to Peter.

‘She won’t really send us to a children’s home, will she? She won’t really get rid of us? Oh, Peter, it was such a lovely day we had—and now it’s all spoilt!’

‘No it isn’t. We’ll never forget the yellow sands and the blueness of the sea, and the feel of the water on our feet,’ said Peter. ‘Nothing can spoil that. Hurry up and wash and clean your teeth and say your prayers, Sue. You’re tired, and you look half asleep already!’

They were soon both in bed. Susan fell asleep almost at once, but Peter lay awake for some time. He heard his uncle come in. He heard his aunt’s complaining voice and guessed she was telling his uncle about their ingratitude in daring to keep for themselves money they had earned.

‘We must remember to finish making all those baskets for Angela,’ thought Peter, closing his eyes. I’ll make some tomorrow. Goodness, what a lovely day we’ve had!’

He fell asleep, while his aunt’s voice below went on and on and on. It seemed to change into the sound of the sea, and Peter dreamt peacefully of the waves breaking on the shore. What fun they had had, what fun!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THREE CHILDREN—AND BARKER

Peter slipped into Susan's room very early the next morning. 'Susan! Listen! We'd both better give Aunt Margaret the shells and seaweed we brought back. If we don't try to put her in a good temper she will scold all day long. It's Saturday, so we shan't be able to get away to school.'

'All right,' said Susan, sleepily. She looked at the seaweed hanging down from a knob on her chest of drawers. It was such a nice piece. She didn't want to give it away at all.

Aunt Margaret was still in a bad temper. She was angry with the children for deceiving her, she was angry to think they had managed to get the two pounds and wouldn't tell her where they had got it, and she was angry because she had accused Uncle Charlie of giving it to them when he hadn't. It put her in the wrong, and she didn't like that.

'Now,' said Uncle Charlie, setting the newspaper up in front of him at the breakfast table. 'Now, Margaret, just you hold your tongue this morning. The children have told you I didn't give them the money, so you wasted your breath yesterday telling me I did! Let's have a little peace.'

'Aunt Margaret, here are some shells I brought back for you,' said Peter, and he put a handful of pretty little shells beside his aunt's plate. Susan came up with the seaweed.

'And here's a lovely bit of seaweed,' she said, trying to smile at her aunt.

'Do you think that seaweed and shells can make up for being mean, deceitful children?' said her aunt, in a scornful voice. She got up from the table, taking the shells and seaweed with her. To the children's horror, she went to the kitchen range, lifted up the round lid from the top of the fire, and stuffed their seaweed and shells into the flames below!

'Oh, Aunt Margaret! I did so like my seaweed!' cried Susan, tears coming into her eyes as she heard it sizzling in the fire. 'If you don't want it, you might have let me keep it.'

'Hold your tongue!' said her aunt, in the kind of voice that meant a slap would soon be coming. 'I don't want to see either of you today. You can take your lunch and tea and get out. Don't come back till bedtime.'

Nobody said anything more. Uncle Charlie read the paper, then folded it up and went out. The children washed up the breakfast things, and hung around wondering if their aunt was going to give them their picnic dinner and tea. She kept them waiting for a good while, and then cut sandwiches of bread and

cheese and bread and jam.

She slapped them down on the table. 'I hope you're ashamed of yourselves,' she said. 'Here am I giving you a home and being a mother to you, when there's little enough to feed you on—and the first time you earn a bit of money you keep it for yourselves.'

'It's not a home, and you aren't being a mother!' said Susan, before she could stop herself. Peter gave her a sharp nudge. It was silly to say things like that to Aunt Margaret.

'One of these days I'll turn you out!' began Aunt Margaret, fiercely. But the children fled, taking their sandwiches with them. They felt that they could not bear to listen to another word.

They went to the wood and waited for Angela to come. If Miss Blair let her, she would come, they knew. And very soon she did. Susan cried out in delight when she saw her.

'Oh, you've brought Barker! Oh, darling Barker, I'm so pleased to see you!'

Barker was a puppy of seven months, a black spaniel with melting brown eyes, drooping ears and a plummy black tail. He belonged to Angela and she loved him with all her heart.

'I've brushed his silky coat well today. Doesn't it shine beautifully?' said Angela, proudly. 'Barker, show how you can shake hands. Shake hands, now!'

Barker sat down, and put up his left paw, cocking his head on one side in a very knowing way.

'Oh, no, Barker, no,' said Angela. 'The other paw, please!'

Barker obligingly put up the other paw and Angela shook it. 'How do you do?' she said.

'Woof, woof,' answered Barker, in a polite voice.

'Isn't he clever?' said Susan. 'Barker, shake hands with *me* now!'

Barker did so, first with one paw and then the other. The children thought he was wonderful. They all loved him and felt sure he was the nicest dog in the world. He often played with them and entered into their pretend games, being a horse, or a dragon, or a tiger, whatever it was they wanted.

'Has he been naughty lately?' asked Susan, holding one of Barker's droopy ears in her hand.

'Yes, awfully,' said Angela, looking rather sad. 'I wish he wasn't. I know Mummy won't keep him if he goes on being so awfully naughty.'

'What has he done?' asked Peter.

'Well, he got on Mummy's bed last night and chewed the top of her eiderdown to pieces,' said Angela. 'And this morning he went into the larder and somehow got a steak pie off the shelf and ate it all. Cook was so angry she said she would give notice and go.'

‘Oh, Barker, Barker, can’t you be good?’ said Susan, looking into the spaniel’s big brown eyes. ‘You *look* so very, very good—doesn’t he, Peter? Barker, do you want to lose your lovely home and darling mistress? Because you will, if you go on being naughty.’

‘It’s just mischief really,’ said Angela. ‘But he ought to be growing up a bit now, and be sensible. He can’t go on behaving badly. Barker, you made *me* sad the other day when you chewed Josephine’s arm off! That was very bad, wasn’t it?’

‘Woof,’ agreed Barker, putting a paw out, as if shaking hands would make things better.

‘And you chewed the chimneys off my dolls’ house,’ said Angela. ‘You are a very chewy dog. But no matter what you did to my things I’d never, never send you away. It’s only serious when you do mischief to other people. I’m sure if you steal things from the larder again you’ll get a whipping. And you won’t like that, you know.’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, looking solemn.

‘He understands every word,’ said Peter, tickling Barker’s sides. ‘Angela, we’ve got our dinner and tea with us. We haven’t got to go back home at all today. Can’t you get Miss Blair to let you bring your dinner and tea out, too, and we could really do a bit of exploring in the wood? We could go quite a long way into it.’

‘We might get lost,’ said Susan, opening her eyes wide in fright at the thought.

The children looked back into the wood. It was a very big one, and the trees seemed very thick and dark behind them. People *had* been lost in the wood. Once even Peter had been lost when he had gone in just a little way, and it was by luck that he had found the right path again.

Angela’s eyes lighted up in the way they always did when she got a good idea.

‘I know! We’ll go right into the heart of the woods today, for miles and miles! But we won’t lose our way because we’ll use the idea we read of in that story the other day! You know—where they tied silver string to a tree, and then unravelled the ball as they walked to the middle of the wood. Then, when they wanted to find their way out, they only had to follow the string back again!’

‘I say! That *would* be a good idea!’ said Peter, sitting up. ‘We could act that story. We could act that we were escaping through the wood, and had gone to hide from our enemies—and used the string to get out of the wood when our enemies had gone! Shall we?’

‘Oh yes!’ said the girls, and Angela jumped up. ‘I’ll go and ask Miss Blair if I can have my dinner and tea in the woods with you—and I’ll get the very

biggest ball of string I can find. I know Daddy keeps some big ones in a cupboard off the hall. I'll ask him if I can have one.'

'That will be fun,' said Susan. 'While you are gone we'll make one or two baskets, Angela. We mustn't forget we have twenty to make altogether.'

'Leave Barker with us,' said Peter. 'He can look for rabbits.'

But Barker wouldn't stay. Where Angela went he had to go too. He loved her as much as she loved him. So off the two went together, Barker close to Angela's flying heels.

'We'll get the rushes from the stream,' said Peter, getting up. 'Angela won't be back for an hour, I should think. We can make a few baskets in that time. You've still got to make a handle for your first one, too, haven't you?'

Peter brought back some rushes, and the two set to work on more baskets. They were glad to think they need not go back to their aunt till bedtime. They knew how their uncle felt, too, when he went out of the house and didn't come back for hours. What a pity Aunt Margaret had such a bad temper and such a sharp tongue!

They worked hard, and soon three or four pretty little baskets, light yet strong, lay on the grass beside them.

'When they are filled with wild raspberries they will look lovely,' said Peter. 'It was a good idea of Angela's. There are plenty of raspberries deeper in the wood.'

'Won't it be thrilling to go right into the heart of the wood?' said Susan. 'We've never done that before. It's a very, very big wood, isn't it, Peter?'

'Oh yes,' said Peter. 'Maybe no one has ever gone right into the middle of it, Susan. Perhaps we shall be the very first ones!'

Susan felt a delicious shiver creep down her back. Woods were mysterious. You didn't know what you might find in the very heart of them.

'I suppose there aren't any witches nowadays, are there?' said Susan.

Peter shook his head. 'No. We shan't find any witches' cottages in this wood, so don't expect that, Susan! We might find an old woodcutter's cottage, but that's about all. There won't be any paths either, further in—only little rabbit paths. But we shall have old Barker with us, so you needn't be afraid.'

'I'm *not* afraid!' said Susan, indignantly. 'I'm never afraid when I'm with you. I wouldn't be afraid of a witch either.'

'Well, I don't expect we shall find anything very thrilling really,' said Peter, finishing off a basket. 'Just more and more trees, thicker and thicker together, and the sunlight peeping here and there, lying like golden freckles on the ground. That's all.'

Almost an hour went by, and then they heard Angela's excited voice.

'Where are you? Here I am! I've got my dinner and tea, and I've got the most enormous ball of string you ever saw! I've remembered to bring a bone

for Barker, too. And I've got some ginger beer for everyone!

'Oh good!' said Peter, pleased. 'Mind my baskets, Barker! Take your big paws off that one! Well, are we ready to explore? Come on, then!'

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IN THE HEART OF THE WOOD

Angela had an enormous packet of food, and three bottles of ginger beer.

‘What *have* you brought?’ said Peter, looking in astonishment at the package in the school-bag on Angela’s shoulder.

‘Oh—egg sandwiches, tomatoes and a bit of salt, jam tarts and cherry cake!’ said Angela. ‘Enough for all of us. I know what your mean old aunt is like—she’s probably given you stale bread and left-over cheese!’

This was quite true. Peter and Susan looked at Angela gratefully. She always thought of sharing everything with them. Now they really would have a fine picnic. Peter took the bag from Angela.

‘I’ll carry everything,’ he said. ‘My goodness, what’s that smell?’

‘Only Barker’s bone,’ said Angela. ‘Wrapped up in that bit of paper. He likes them smelly. If they aren’t smelly enough he buries them till they are. He nearly got shut up in his kennel just before I came back. He was naughty again.’

‘What did he do?’ asked Susan.

‘He found Miss Blair’s bedroom slippers and chewed the heel off one,’ said Angela. ‘Miss Blair was awfully cross, because they were new ones.’

Susan looked anxiously at Barker. ‘You really will have to turn over a new leaf,’ she said. ‘You’ll be given away to the milkman or the postman or someone, if you don’t. You wouldn’t like to be given away, would you?’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, and wagged his tail. He offered Susan a paw.

‘He keeps wanting to shake hands with everyone now,’ said Angela. ‘He put his paw out to the cat, too, and she hissed at him.’

They all laughed. Barker was very funny, and very lovable. Even his naughty ways seemed lovable to the children, though grown-ups thought differently.

‘Well, we’d better make a start,’ said Peter. ‘My goodness, that certainly is an enormous ball of string. Angela! There must be miles of string on it, it’s so thin and yet so strong. Just what we want.’

‘Now we tie the beginning of it to a tree, don’t we,’ said Angela. ‘And we hold the ball as we walk into the wood—and let the string unwind behind us. It will be fun. We’ll take turns at it.’

They set off into the wood. They purposely left the path and wandered into the wilder parts, knowing that with the string to guide them safely back, they could not get lost. It was exciting.



‘I don’t expect anyone but rabbits has been here before,’ said Susan, looking round at the whispering trees. ‘Let me have the ball of string now, Angela. I’d like to have a turn.’

Angela gave it to Susan. Susan marched along, letting the thin string unravel from the ball behind her. She looked back and saw the strand running waist-high around tree-trunks and bushes.

‘I feel as if I’m really in a story now,’ she said. ‘Peter, Angela—we’re escaping from our enemies. Talk quietly, in case they are just behind us. Crouch down if you hear anything.’

‘Barker, keep to heel,’ whispered Angela. ‘Our enemies are upon us!’

A green woodpecker suddenly flew through the trees, laughing loudly as he always did. At once the children dived below a bush and lay there quietly.

‘The call of the enemy!’ said Peter, peering round the bush. ‘I hear him! Come on, into the heart of the wood before he appears again!’

It was fun, pretending like that. They went on and on. The trees grew closer together. Not so much sunlight came through. Sometimes the ground was bare beneath the trees, sometimes there was thin green grass. There was a whispering noise all round when a breeze blew.

‘It’s getting mysterious,’ whispered Susan. ‘Here, Peter, you take the string now. It’s your turn. We must have left miles of it behind us.’

They walked for an hour or two, and then came to a little clearing. There was a patch of grass where no trees grew. The sun shone down and made it golden. The children ran to it gladly, happy to feel the warm sun again.

‘This is where we’ll have our picnic,’ said Peter, lying in the warm sun. ‘I’m hungry now. Oh, Barker, don’t lick my nose away! Sue, this must be almost the heart of the wood! What a nice little place to find.’

‘It feels kind of magic,’ said Susan, and she sat down in the middle. Angela flopped down beside her. Barker went to the bag and sniffed at it. He tried to paw out his bone.

‘Wait, Barker,’ said Peter. ‘Let us have a little rest before we have our dinner. Lie down and keep still for a minute.’

But that was impossible for Barker. He wandered round, sniffing here and there, and then barked loudly.

‘Sh! You’ll tell our enemies where we are!’ said Susan. ‘Be quiet!’

Barker barked again. He wanted his bone. Peter groaned and reached for the bag. ‘You are a most impatient dog,’ he said. ‘Well, here you are. Wait till I take the paper off! Barker, WAIT!’

The sight of the things in the bag made Peter want his own dinner. So he handed out the packets to Angela and they all began to eat their dinner. It certainly was a nice one. Tomatoes dipped in salt were delicious, Susan thought. The cherry cake was lovely, too. Miss Blair had cut three very big

slices. There was chocolate as well, in three bars.

‘Don’t undo the sandwiches marked “T”,’ said Angela ‘We must keep those for this afternoon. They’re for our tea. There’s some more cherry cake, I think.’

‘We’ll have one and a half bottles of ginger beer now,’ said Peter. ‘And keep the rest for teatime. Barker, take your bone right away, please. It smells awful!’

Barker was enjoying his smelly bone. He chewed it and gnawed it, he sucked out bits of marrow and he licked every scrap of meat on it. It was a good bone. Barker made a fine meal off it and then wondered what to do with the rest.

‘He’s going to save up some for his tea,’ said Susan, watching Barker wander off with his bone. ‘He’s going to find some safe place to bury it. Isn’t he funny?’

Peter poured out the ginger beer into a cardboard cup. It was lovely.

‘It gets up my nose somehow,’ said Susan. ‘Not the ginger beer—the fizzy part. It prickles my nose.’

‘That’s what I like,’ said Angela. She collected the bits of paper, and put them neatly into the bag. Neither she nor the others ever left bits about. They couldn’t bear to spoil the woods or the fields by leaving orange peel or paper or tins behind them. They even collected other people’s left-behind rubbish and buried it, rather than have it lying about the places they loved.

They lay down on their backs, and let the warm sun play on their faces and bare legs. They felt sleepy.

‘Let’s have a nap,’ said Peter. ‘I don’t expect our enemies would ever find us here!’

‘We’ll go into a magic sleep,’ said Susan, shutting her eyes tightly. She yawned. ‘The magic is working in me. I’m full of sleep.’

‘Where’s Barker?’ said Angela, sitting up and looking round. ‘Barker! Barker!’

A bark came from somewhere near. Angela lay down again. ‘He’ll come when he’s finished burying that bone, I suppose. I only hope he won’t wake us all up by licking our faces like he sometimes does.’

It wasn’t long before the children were asleep. They slept for about half an hour, then Angela woke up with a jump. What had woken her?

She sat up. The others were still asleep. Angela was about to lie down again when a doleful sound came to her ears.

It was Barker howling dismally! ‘Wooooh! Woooo-ooooh!’

‘Barker! What’s the matter?’ shouted Angela. The others woke up suddenly. Peter sat up at once.

‘What’s up?’ he said to Angela, seeing her startled face.

‘It’s Barker. Listen,’ said Angela. The whining and yelping began again, and Peter stood up.

‘Hope he hasn’t got caught in a trap,’ he said. ‘Come on—we must find him.’

‘The string, the string,’ said Susan, as they ran to the edge of the clearing. ‘Let’s get that, or we may get lost. We might not be able to find our way back to this clearing!’

‘Quite right,’ said Peter and ran to pick up the ball of string, which was now very small indeed. They set off in the direction of Barker’s whines.

‘Wooooo-ooooh! Wooooo-ooooh!’ went on Barker, sounding curiously muffled.

‘Has he gone down a rabbit-hole and got stuck, do you think?’ said Angela, anxiously.

‘Shouldn’t think so,’ said Peter. ‘All I hope is he hasn’t got his poor paw into a trap. Those traps are such cruel things. They cause the most dreadful pain.’

They set off in the direction of the howls. They went between the thick-set trees, and then stood still and listened.

‘Over there,’ said Peter, as the howling began again. ‘Round this clump of trees.’

They ran round the trees, and then all three stopped in amazement. In front of them was one of the biggest trees they had ever seen!

‘It’s an oak tree,’ said Peter. ‘An enormous old oak tree—hundreds of years old, I should think. Look at its great trunk—twenty people could stand inside it, easily!’

It certainly was a strange old tree. Its trunk was enormous, and the tree itself rose tall and sturdy. But some of its branches were dead. The tree was so old that it was dying bit by bit.

‘The howling comes from that tree, surely,’ said Peter, and he stepped towards it. As soon as he spoke, Barker set up a terrific whining again, and there came the noise of scratching and jumping.

‘He’s in the tree! That’s where he is!’ cried Susan. ‘Barker, Barker, are you in this old tree?’

‘Woof, woof!’ came a joyful bark. Now that he knew the children were near at hand, Barker felt sure he would soon be rescued. ‘Wooooof!’

The children looked at the enormous trunk. ‘It must be hollow inside,’ said Peter. ‘It sounds as if Barker is in the middle of it. No wonder his barks and yelps sounded so muffled. Barker, how did you get in?’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, and scratched hard somewhere.

‘Get out where you got in, silly,’ said Angela. But Barker didn’t know where he had got in.

‘We’ll have to get him out somehow,’ said Peter. ‘But goodness knows how!’

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE OLD HOLLOW TREE

‘Let’s walk all round the tree,’ said Susan. ‘I expect Barker must have crept in at a hole somewhere with his bone. He may have thought that it would be a fine hiding-place, inside this tree!’

They began to walk round the vast trunk. They found a small hole at last, at the bottom of the trunk. Peter poked a stick inside.

‘Barker! Barker! See this stick! You must have got in at this hole, so you can get out by it. Come on, Barker!’

But evidently Barker had some reason for not getting out of the hole. He sat inside the tree and howled dismally again.

‘Isn’t he silly?’ said Angela. ‘Why can’t he come out when we show him the way? Barker, don’t be an idiot! Here, Barker, come along! Good dog, Barker!’

Another long howl came from the tree. An idea struck Peter.

‘Perhaps he has hurt himself—or got stuck. Maybe we had better climb up the tree and see if there is any way of getting down to rescue him.’

They all looked up into the big oak tree. It would not be very difficult to climb. ‘I’ll go up,’ said Peter. ‘Give me a shove, Sue.’

He was soon up on the big lowest branch. He climbed up a little higher, and then looked down, trying to find out if there was any way into the middle of the tree. It must surely be hollow, if Barker had managed to get there!

But he could see no way in, so he climbed higher still. When he next looked down he gave a cry of surprise. He could see right down into the hollow trunk of the great tree! It had rotted away through many long years, and now the old tree was really nothing but a dying shell, still putting out leaves on its many great boughs—but fewer and fewer each year.

‘Susan! Angela! The whole of the tree is hollow! It’s as big as a room. And the branches up here are so big and broad that I can lie on them easily without falling off! We could almost have a house in this tree!’

A howl came up to him. Barker wanted to be rescued and couldn’t imagine why the children were so long about it.

‘All right, Barker. I can see how to get to you now,’ said Peter.

‘You be careful you don’t find yourself a prisoner inside the tree too!’ called Angela’s voice, anxiously. ‘I once read a story about someone who got inside a hollow tree and couldn’t get out again. They almost starved to death before anyone found them. Be careful, Peter.’

‘You bet,’ answered Peter, cheerfully. ‘Well, here I go—sliding down and down—right into the old hollow tree!’

The girls heard a thud and knew that Peter had landed right in the middle of the tree. Then there came a loud collection of delighted barks from Barker, who was evidently flinging himself on Peter in joy.

‘What is it like in there?’ called Susan, who was longing to explore the tree herself.

‘Weird!’ shouted back Peter, his voice sounding muffled. ‘I tell you it’s as big as a room inside here. We could play house here easily. It’s the most wonderful hiding-place in the world! Get down, Barker, you idiot. Let me look round.’

‘Is it dark in there?’ yelled Angela.

‘Very,’ said Peter. ‘But as far as I can make out, it’s quite dry—and really awfully big. Can you hear me knocking against the trunk?’

A sound like a woodpecker tapping on dead wood came to the ears of the listening girls. ‘Yes! Of course we can hear you!’ cried Angela. ‘We’re coming up the tree, Peter, and we’ll jump down too.’

‘Wait till I make sure I can get out all right,’ said Peter. He looked up, seeing the daylight above him, filtering through the branches of the great tree. He tried to swing himself up, but it was difficult.

‘I think I can just manage it,’ he said, ‘but we’ll have to bring a rope if we are going to play inside the tree. Then we can fasten it to a branch above and haul ourselves up.’

‘Peter, can you see where Barker got in?’ called Angela. ‘You’ll never be able to get him out if you have to climb up yourself. You’ll want both your hands.’

‘Yes, I shall,’ said Peter. ‘All right, I’ll hunt around a bit, on my hands and knees. Oh, Barker, get off my back, I’m not playing tigers! Hallo, here’s some sort of hole. He must have got in by that. But a dead bough has fallen across it, so he couldn’t squeeze out. I’ll move it.’

Peter dragged away the dead bough. He pushed Barker’s nose to the hole. ‘Now you can get out, Barker. Go on, go to the girls, quickly!’

Barker sniffed round the hole, then decided it was possible to squeeze through. To the girls’ delight they saw his black nose appear, then his drooping ears, and finally his whole body, complete with wagging tail.

They patted him. ‘Were you playing a game of hide-and-seek, silly?’ asked Susan. ‘No, I don’t want to keep on shaking hands with you. You should only do that when you meet people or say goodbye to them.’

They went to the other side of the tree to watch Peter. He had managed to get out of the hollow trunk now, and was climbing up high.

‘There’s a simply marvellous view over the wood!’ he called to the girls.

‘Come on up and see!’

So up they both went, for they were good tree-climbers. Poor Barker was left whining below. He couldn’t climb trees.

They sat about three quarters of the way up the tree and looked out. The wind blew and the tree shook. The children liked it.

‘It’s like being on a ship,’ said Susan. ‘When the tree shakes in the wind, it’s like a ship rolling on the waters. It’s a lovely feeling.’

‘We must be exactly in the heart of the wood,’ Angela said. ‘You can see the tops of trees wherever you look. This great old oak tree stands up high above all the others, I wonder how old it is.’

‘Look,’ said Susan, suddenly. ‘There’s a hole in this branch, here—and a bigger hole still over there. Like little cupboards. We could hide things here.’

‘We could play here, and make ourselves a tree-house,’ said Angela, her eyes gleaming. ‘It’s big enough to live in. The summer holidays will begin next week, and Miss Blair will go home. We shall be able to play together all day, and pretend heaps of things. We could come here every day and make it our own secret tree-house.’

‘Oh yes. It would be a simply wonderful secret!’ said Susan, who loved secrets. ‘We wouldn’t tell anyone. It would be our own house. Couldn’t we bring things here? I’ve got an old rug I could bring. And Peter’s got a stool he made himself. And we could have a box for a table.’

‘Well, I’ve got *lots* of things I could bring!’ cried Angela. ‘You know that little play-house in our garden that Daddy had built for me? Well, I could bring some of the furniture here! We could put it inside the tree and make a proper house there. It would be lovely!’

‘We could put a rug down for a carpet. And Susan, you’ve got a dolls’ teaset, haven’t you?’ said Peter, getting excited too. ‘We could have that for meals.’

‘No, that would be too small,’ said Angela, who knew the little tin teaset quite well. ‘I’ll bring some of the old nursery china. Miss Blair put it away when Mummy gave me some new things for Christmas. It’s got a teapot and everything.’

‘We could keep some of the things in these holes in the branches,’ said Susan, putting her hand into one. ‘I suppose the owls have used them for nests. They shall be our cupboards.’

‘That branch down there, the very broad one, would make a fine couch where it forks from the trunk,’ said Peter. ‘We could put a rug over it and call it our couch.’

It was all very thrilling. To have a house of their own for the holidays, a house in a tree! What could be more fun? They could hardly wait to furnish it.

‘The front door can be where we drop down into the middle of the tree,’

said Susan. 'The back door is the hole that Barker uses.'

Everyone laughed. Barker, down below, gave a whine. He didn't like being left out of things like this.

'What about a lamp? It's dark down there,' said Peter.

'Candles, of course!' said the two girls, together. And Angela added, 'Oh, think of sitting down in our tree-house by the light of candles! It would be like a dream—sitting in the middle of a tree in the heart of a wood, all by ourselves. Nobody would guess where we were. It's the most exciting thing we've ever thought of. We've often pretended to play house but this time it will be real!'

The girls climbed lower down and peered into the hollow heart of the tree. It looked dark and mysterious. The wind blew and the leaves whispered.

'They are saying "A house for you, a house for you!"' said Susan. And it really did almost sound like that!

'Let's have our tea up here in the tree, shall we?' said Peter. 'It's fine up here. We can pretend we are in a rolling ship, looking out for pirates. The tops of the green trees we can see can be the green ocean! I'll go down and get the food.'

'Tell Barker to find his bone and have his tea, too,' called Angela. 'It's a pity he can't come up here, but even if we could carry him, which we can't, he'd probably fall down and hurt himself.'

Barker was most indignant when Peter fetched the tea, addressed a few loving words to him, and then disappeared up the tree once more, leaving poor Barker behind. He whined loudly and scratched on the tree-trunk vigorously with his front paws. But it was impossible to take him up the tree.

The children divided the jam sandwiches and cake. They stood the ginger-beer bottles in one of the 'cupboards'. It was nice to see them there.

'We shall be able to make lovely plans all this week and next, till holidays begin,' said Peter. 'We'll collect everything we can for our tree-house. I've thought of lots of things already. My old clock, for instance. It would make it seem awfully like a house if we hear it ticking away down there.'

'Oooh yes,' said Susan. 'And I could bring one of my dolls and leave her here to caretake for us when we're not here. And we could bring a few books too.'

'And I'll bring some biscuits in a tin and some sweets in a jar,' said Angela. 'We shall always be glad of something to eat, I expect.'

They talked until it was time to go back. Then down the tree they went to find the string that would lead them safely back again. Barker was overjoyed to have them down on the ground with him once more.

'Down, Barker, down!' said Angela. 'Home we go! Where's the string? Here it is. I'd never find my way home without it!'



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### EXCITING PLANS

Before they set off home Peter tied the string firmly to a small tree at the edge of the little clearing. Then it could not slip about, and they would find the way back to the hollow tree whenever they wanted to. Taking hold of the thin brown string that ran twisting through the trees, Peter led the way home.

It was true that they would never have found the way back without help of this kind. There was no path to follow, nothing to guide them at all. It was evening time now, and the sun hardly came through the trees at all, for it lay low in the west. Peter ran his hand along the string and followed it the way it went.

The girls did not bother to touch the string. They followed Peter, and Barker ran here and there, sniffing at rabbit-holes, but never getting very far behind.

‘I’m a bit tired of running my hand along the string,’ said Peter at last. ‘Susan, you have a turn.’

So Susan let herself be guided by the string and on they all went. Once Susan saw a flower she didn’t know and left the string to pick it—and then, when she looked for the string again to guide her on her way, she couldn’t find it!

‘Oh dear—where is it?’ she cried. ‘I’m sure it went round this tree!’

But it didn’t. In a panic the other two searched for the string too, but it was very difficult to find it in the fading light. They looked at one another in fright.

‘I say! Now what are we going to do?’ said Peter.

‘Susan, you are an idiot, really! You might have had more sense than to let go the string. It’s an awfully difficult thing to see once you’ve let go.’

‘I know. I’m awfully sorry,’ said poor Susan, almost in tears. ‘I just didn’t think.’

They hunted about a little more—but it was Barker who really found it after all! He was sniffing about for rabbits and suddenly got one leg caught in the string, which, just there, had fallen rather low. He tugged, and set the whole bush in motion, as the string pulled against it.

‘There it is—round Barker’s leg! Look!’ yelled Angela. ‘Oh, Barker, what a clever dog you are!’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, modestly, and held out a paw. Everyone shook hands with him. They thought he deserved it.

Peter took the string himself. He felt that it was safest with him! Off they

went again, and at last came into the part of the wood they knew. They said goodbye there.

‘It’s been a simply lovely day,’ said Angela. ‘I shall look forward to our house in the tree, won’t you? I shall think about it in bed tonight. It will be a lovely thing to go to sleep on!’

‘Goodbye, Barker. Be good,’ said Susan, patting him. ‘Look, Angela, he knows he must shake hands when he says goodbye. He’s putting out his paw so politely—only it’s the wrong one again!’

Angela ran home, and Peter and Susan made their way back to their aunt’s cottage. They wished they were Angela, going back to a mother and father who would welcome her, and love to hear all she had to tell them—though she would not talk about their secret house, they knew. That was a very special secret, shared by the three of them and Barker.

‘You’re late enough!’ said their Aunt Margaret when they got in. ‘There’s no supper for you tonight, unless you want bread and margarine.’

But the two children had feasted well on Angela’s food and were not hungry. They said good night and went up to bed, secretly glad that they were late and did not need to sit up and be with their bad-tempered aunt.

Susan tried to keep awake to think about the tree-house. She imagined she was there, cosily inside, with a little candle flickering beside her. She imagined the trees in the wood outside, whispering together, while she sat in the oak tree, listening. Nobody would know where she was. How lovely it would be to have a place like that for themselves!

Peter thought about it too, and so did Angela. Barker remembered his bone, which he had unfortunately left there! He whined, and Angela patted him.

Never mind! He could always get the bone when he wanted it. He knew the way. He didn’t need to follow the string like the children. He could follow his nose.

The next day was Sunday. The church bells rang and people walked across the fields to the little stone church. Aunt Margaret didn’t go. Nor did Uncle Charlie. Peter often thought that perhaps if they did go, Uncle Charlie might get some strength in him to find work and keep it, and Aunt Margaret might be ashamed of her unkindness and her sharp tongue.

The school teacher always went, and any child who wanted to could go with her and sit in her pew. Angela went with her father and mother, and, if Peter and Susan were in good time, they were allowed to go in with them, and sit with Angela. If not, they saw her at Sunday School.

They sat beside her that afternoon, in their Sunday School class. The little ones had chosen the first hymn, which was the very short one that Angela said for her grace at mealtimes.

‘Thank you for the world so sweet,  
Thank you for the food we eat.  
Thank you for the birds that sing,  
Thank you, God, for everything!’

Angela heard Susan whispering something under her breath at the end of the little hymn. She looked surprised. ‘What did you say, Susan?’ she whispered.

‘I said, “And thank you specially, God, for our tree-house!” ’ whispered back Susan. The teacher looked at her and she stopped talking. She had thought almost all the day of that lovely tree-house!

The children walked home together. Barker was not there, because he was very disturbing at Sunday School. He would go round the walls sniffing at the mouse holes, giving excited little barks when he smelt a particularly exciting smell. So now he was left at home; but he always came to meet them.

‘He won’t today, though,’ said Angela, sadly, ‘He got one of his naughty fits this morning, and dug up all the flowers in the front beds. Daddy was furious. He whipped him and put him in the kennel for the rest of the day. I expect he was really only looking for yesterday’s bone, but you’d think he would remember he left it in the wood, wouldn’t you?’

‘When can we next go to the woods together?’ asked Susan eagerly. ‘We break up on Thursday. When does Miss Blair go, Angela?’

‘She goes on Thursday too,’ said Angela. ‘But not till the evening. So I shan’t be free till Friday. We’ll go on Friday—and take lots of things with us! Won’t it be fun? Don’t you get into trouble with your Aunt Margaret, you two, because we simply must go to our tree-house the very first day we can!’

The days went swiftly by, and the end of the term came. Aunt Margaret hated the holidays. She said the children were always around the place, getting under her feet, and making themselves nuisances. As a matter of fact, they were really very good, amused themselves well, and always did anything she asked them to, cheerfully and willingly.

‘Holidays again!’ she said on Thursday, when they came home early, laden with their term’s books. ‘It always seems to be holidays. Now I suppose I’ll have you on top of me all day long! What with your uncle always at home too, I do have a time!’

‘Well, Aunt, we’ll try not be a nuisance,’ said Peter, cheerfully. ‘We’ll go off to the woods and play every day if you like, after we’ve done any jobs you want us to do.’

‘Yes, I’m the only one in this house that does any work!’ grumbled their aunt. ‘Your uncle doesn’t do more than two days’ work a month, and you play all day.’

The children said nothing. Aunt Margaret was never satisfied with anything, that was plain. If they were about the house she said they got under her feet. If they went off to the wood, she said they were like their uncle and left her to do all the work. There was no pleasing her!

The children looked about for things they could take to the tree-house; the old rug, a few sacks, very ragged and holey; the little stool Peter had once made, and his clock; an old saucepan with half the handle gone; the bit of old candle left on a shelf in the shed; a mug without a handle.

‘Nothing very much—but it will all help,’ said Peter.

‘Anyway, Angela will be able to bring a nice lot of things,’ said Susan. ‘She’s got plenty.’

‘Yes. But we must do our share too,’ said Peter. ‘We can’t bring much, but we must take what we can. I shan’t feel as if it’s our house, if we don’t take something towards it too.’

‘I’m going to take my picture,’ said Susan, suddenly. ‘The one that hangs over my mantelpiece.’

‘What—the one of Jesus in the manger, with the shepherds looking at him?’ said Peter. ‘You can’t. Aunt would miss it.’

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s mine, my very own,’ said Susan. ‘My own mother gave it to me when I was a baby. You know she did. You said you remembered her giving it to me, though I’ve forgotten.’

‘Well, she did,’ said Peter, ‘and of course it’s yours. But I don’t think you ought to take it.’

‘I’m going to,’ said Susan, obstinately. ‘I want it in our tree-house. It’s my favourite picture, and it would look lovely hanging on the trunk-wall of our house. I’ll take a nail too to hang it up by. I’ll use the heel of my shoe to hammer the nail in.’

The little girl was pleased when she thought of her picture hanging on the wall of the tree-house, shining in the light of a candle there. It would feel very cosy and homey and real. She felt that whatever else she took, she simply *must* take her own picture.

The children gathered together their few things and hid them at the back of the old shed. Aunt Margaret was always poking about, and they did not want her to find the things and ask questions. She must never know about the tree house!

‘I shan’t take my picture off the wall till tomorrow,’ said Susan. ‘Not that Aunt Margaret will see it’s gone! I do my own bedroom, and except for poking her nose in to see I’ve done it properly, she never comes in.’

‘I wonder what Angela will bring,’ said Peter. ‘She always has such good ideas. I hope she’ll bring some matches. I daren’t ask Aunt Margaret for any. We can’t light the candle without matches.’

They went off to bed feeling excited. They were to meet Angela at ten o'clock, in the usual place in the wood. They had not seen her the day before, because it was her mother's sale of work and Angela had been helping. They had given her their twenty little rush baskets, filled with delicious wild raspberries. Angela had been very pleased.

'Mummy will love them! You *are* clever! We shall make a lot of money out of these.'

Friday morning came at last. The children did everything their aunt set them to do, keeping their eyes on the clock. At last it was time to go. They rushed to the shed and got their things, and Susan ran upstairs to fetch her picture.

'Now—off to the tree-house again!' said Peter, stuffing everything into an old sack. 'We'll have a good time there today, Susan, won't we!'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MOVING-IN DAY

Angela was waiting for them in the place they usually met. She looked very excited. She was wearing blue shorts and a blouse, instead of a dress.

‘I told Mummy I was going tree-climbing, and she got me these shorts!’ she cried, as soon as she saw the others. She danced towards them. ‘I feel like a boy. Isn’t my mother a sport?’

Susan thought that she was indeed. She wondered what Aunt Margaret would say if she, Susan, asked her for shorts to wear, to go tree-climbing!

‘You look great,’ said Peter. ‘My word, Angela, what *have* you brought with you! And what’s Barker got on his back?’

Barker was not looking very happy. He did not come to greet the children as usual. He stood quite still with his tail drooping behind him. He had a package tied on his back.

‘I thought Barker ought to help as well, and carry his own luggage,’ said Angela. ‘I’ve packed up some biscuits for him, and a ball, and wrapped them in one of his own little rugs. I tied them on his back for him to carry. But you don’t like it, do you, Barker?’

Barker whined, and stood looking up at the three children pleadingly, from loving brown eyes.

‘It’s not at all heavy, really,’ said Angela, looking at the package, ‘but when he runs it sort of slips sideways and hangs under his tummy, and he doesn’t like that. Still, look what *I* had to carry!’

Peter and Susan looked. Angela had a great package tied on her back, and two baskets full of things. ‘You certainly have brought a lot!’ said Peter please. ‘What fun it will be arranging everything.’

‘I’ve brought my musical box—the one that plays six different tunes when you wind it up,’ said Angela. ‘I thought it would sound lovely when we are sitting inside the tree. I expect you think it’s a silly thing to bring, but I couldn’t help wanting it.’

The others didn’t think it was silly. They thought it was a lovely idea. ‘I brought my clock,’ said Peter. ‘And Sue brought her picture. I hope Aunt Margaret doesn’t miss them!’

‘Shan’t we have fun arranging everything?’ cried Angela, picking up her two baskets. ‘Peter, you’ll have to follow the string, because I haven’t a single hand to use!’

‘Give me one of the baskets,’ said Peter. ‘And if you like to untie the

enormous package off your back, I'll carry that, too. You can take my bundle. It's not nearly so heavy.'

'Oh no, thank you,' said Angela. 'I like carrying it. But you can take one of the baskets. That would be a help. Now, Barker, are you ready? Come on, then. Look a bit more cheerful, do! And remember, you're still in disgrace!'

'Why, what's he done now?' asked Susan.

'He got into the hen-run and chased all the hens,' said Angela. 'He must have squeezed through a hole under the wire. The gardener was very angry, and told Daddy. I can't think why Barker doesn't get a bit of sense. He's a darling, but he's awfully stupid sometimes. He must know he'll get into trouble if he chases the hens. I've told him so heaps of times.'

Barker trotted along sedately, cocking one eye up at Angela as she spoke his name. He knew he was still in disgrace. His package suddenly slipped off his back, slid down and hung under his tummy. He stopped and gave a howl.

'Susan, put it right for him, will you?' said Angela. 'You can't tie it too tightly because it hurts him.'

They went very slowly through the wood, for they were all heavily laden. But it didn't matter. They were excited and happy. They had a tree house to go to. They were going to furnish it that very day and make it their own!

'This is our moving-in day!' said Susan, happily, and that made the others laugh. 'Well, it is! We're moving into our new home. Tree-House, Heart of the Wood. That's our new address.'

'It would be funny if a postman delivered a letter to us at that address,' said Angela. 'Barker, you can't go down rabbit-holes with that parcel on your back!'

Peter was following the string carefully. What a good idea that string was! None of them would ever have found their way back to the old hollow tree without it.

'Look—isn't that the little clearing where we had our picnic last time,' called Angela at last. 'Yes, it is. We're there! Hurrah! My back is just about breaking. What about having a rest and something to eat before we do any moving in?'

This seemed a very good idea to everyone, Barker as well. Peter untied the package from his back, and Barker at once put out a paw to shake hands. Then he sat down, hung out his long pink tongue and panted.

'You're not so out of breath as all that!' said Angela, taking off her own big parcel. 'You'd better go and find the bone you left behind yesterday. But if you get stuck in the tree again, you can just stay there!'

It wasn't dinner-time yet. The children ate a bun each, and then decided to wait for another hour before they had their real meal. They felt rested now, and wanted to go to their tree and begin making it a real place to live in.

They picked up their things, followed the string between the trees a little way and came again to the enormous old oak tree. They stood still and looked at it. It waved its leaves and whispered.

‘It’s welcoming us!’ said Susan. ‘Oh my, what’s that?’

It was a little red squirrel darting down the trunk of the tree, his bushy tail outspread behind him. He stopped and looked at the children out of bright black eyes. Then, to Susan’s great delight, he bounded over to her, and sniffed at the package she held.

‘Oh, he’s quite tame!’ she said. ‘You dear little thing! Peter, do you think he lives in our tree-house—in one of those holes? Won’t it be fun to have a squirrel living with us?’

Barker ran at the little red creature with a bark. He was jealous. Angela scolded him as the squirrel bounded up the trunk of a nearby tree at once.

‘Barker! That’s a friend of ours! Friend, friend, friend! You know what that word means quite well. Don’t you dare to frighten him again.’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, sadly. He was always getting into trouble these days! He sat down and looked mournful, the squirrel peered down from a branch, and then sat up like a monkey. The children loved him.

‘Come on—we can’t stand here all day,’ said Peter at last. ‘There’s plenty to do! First of all we’ll climb the tree and haul everything up.’

‘We ought to have brought a rope!’ said Angela, ‘I forgot about that!’

‘Well, I didn’t,’ said Peter, and he undid a rope from round his waist. ‘I’ve got a good strong one. First we’ll use it to haul up our parcels one by one—and then we’ll use it to help ourselves down by, into the tree. I’ll go up first, and tie one end to a branch.’

Up he went, and took the rope with him. He tied one end firmly to a branch, and let down the other end. ‘Tie the biggest package on the end!’ he called. ‘Be sure you make a proper knot, that won’t slip. Susan, you do it. I’ve taught you how to.’

Susan tied a firm knot. ‘Ready!’ she called, and Peter hauled on the rope. Up went the big package, swinging between the branches. Peter hauled it on to the broad branch he was on, settled it there firmly, and then let down the rope again.

Up came all the things in bundles, and at last none was left. Angela and Susan climbed the tree, leaving Barker whining below and scraping at the trunk, trying to climb up himself.

Peter had everything on the broad branch. They peered down into the mysterious, hollow heart of the old tree. ‘You go down first, Peter,’ said Susan. ‘Then we’ll let down the parcels to you. Then we’ll both come down, and we’ll light one or two candles, and arrange all our goods!’

It was very thrilling. The children felt happy as they worked. Peter slid



down into the hollow trunk and called up to the girls.

‘I’m ready! Swing down the first lot on the rope. Not too quickly, or you’ll have it on my head.’

Down came the bundles, one after another, and Peter caught them deftly as they entered the hole in the trunk. He put them on one side, and then called up again.

‘Now you come on down, you two. The rope will help you. Hang on to it, feel about with your feet, and let yourself slide down where you can. It’s quite easy really.’

Angela came first, hanging on to the rope, slipping and sliding down into the hollow of the tree. She stood beside Peter, excited. Then came Susan. The three of them hugged one another in delight.

‘We’re in our tree-house for the first time! Peter, light a candle!’

‘I haven’t any matches,’ said Peter. ‘Did you bring any, Angela?’

Angela had brought two boxes, and a whole bundle of big candles! Peter was pleased. ‘We shan’t want my little broken bit of candle after all,’ he said. ‘Which bundle are your candles in, Angela!’

‘In the big basket,’ said Angela, and felt about for it. ‘Ah—here it is—and here is the bundle of candles—and the matches, too.’

Peter took a candle from the bundle. He took a match from the box, struck it, and lighted the tip of the big candle. A little flame came on the wick, and flared up into a big one. Peter held up the candle and the three looked round their tree-house.

It was quite big! It was round in shape, of course, and the walls were brown and rough. The ground they were standing on was quite dry. The tree did not smell musty at all, which was a good thing. About three feet above their heads was the hole down which they had come. Daylight filtered down there, but not very much of it, for green leaves took away the brightness and made the daylight, too, seem green.

‘It’s exciting, isn’t it?’ said Susan, taking a deep breath, and looking all round. ‘There’s really plenty of room for us all—and, oh, look, here comes Barker in at the back door!’

Sure enough, there was Barker, squeezing in at the small hole in the bottom of the trunk. He came panting in, thrilled to find the children there. He licked their bare legs, and then sniffed solemnly round.

‘It’s mysterious and secret,’ said Angela. ‘Here we are, quite hidden, and no one in the world knows where we are. It’s the finest secret we’ve ever had.’

The candle flickered, and shadows jumped round the hollow trunk. ‘Let’s begin to arrange everything now,’ said Angela. ‘I’m longing to make this tree-room look homey and cosy. Let’s undo the bundles.’

So they began. Moving into a tree-house was indeed fun. The three

children had never been so happy in their lives!

## CHAPTER NINE

### A LOVELY TREE-HOUSE

They found a little woody shelf sticking out from one side of the tree-trunk, and they decided to make it their mantelpiece. Angela had brought a little wooden candlestick and they put the candle into it, and then balanced it carefully on the rough little 'shelf'.

'Now we'll unpack,' said Angela. They set to work to undo their packages, and soon the floor was strewn with all kinds of things.

The picture went up on the 'wall'. Susan hammered the nail into the wood with the heel of her shoe, and then proudly hung the picture there. The candlelight flickered on it, and it looked fine. Peter wound up his clock and set it on the mantelpiece. 'Tick-tock, tick-tock,' it went, and the three children listened in delight.

'It seems to have got a much louder tick inside this tree than it ever had at home,' said Peter.

A bundle of rags and cushions was placed at one side of the tree. 'Just to sit on when we want to,' said Angela. 'We don't want beds, because we shan't sleep here, worse luck!'

'Ooh—wouldn't it be exciting if we *did* sleep here!' said Susan. 'Think of snuggling down in the middle of this tree, all by ourselves, and going to sleep hearing the owls hooting outside in the wood, and little mice scratching around!'

'It would be lovely,' agreed Angela. 'Barker, stop coming in and out of the back door! Do make up your mind whether you want to be indoors or out! You keep upsetting things.'

'Here's *my* old rug,' said Peter, spreading it out. 'It's rather holey, but fairly thick. Let's use it for a carpet, shall we? The floor of the tree is a bit messy with twigs and dead leaves and things.'

So the 'carpet' was laid over the floor of the tree. It looked fine. Peter set his stool down at one side. 'I think we'd really better use the stool as a table, till we get a box or something,' he said. 'We can sit on the floor, and put anything we want to on the stool.'

'Here's my little musical box,' said Angela, and put it on the mantelpiece beside the clock. 'There's just room for it. Oh look, you others—there's a funny place in the wall of the tree, just here, that would do for a cupboard. I'll put the candles and matches in there.'

'Fancy having a cupboard down here, too,' said Susan, joyfully. 'And we

can put things in the two cupboards upstairs in the tree, too—you remember the holes we found!’

‘This is really a most convenient tree,’ said Peter. ‘Ah, Angela, you’ve brought a lovely lot of crockery—mugs and plates and a teapot and a jug. And here’s a kettle, too. Surely you don’t imagine we can boil water inside this tree! We might set it on fire.’

‘Well, we all know how to make a fire of twigs,’ said Angela, ‘and I thought we might like to boil a kettle sometimes outside in the wood, and then make tea for ourselves!’

‘I wish we could really live here!’ said Susan, arranging her old doll on the heap of cushions. ‘Rosebud, you are *really* to live here! You are to caretake here when we go home, and see that no one comes in who oughtn’t to.’

‘Idiot!’ said Peter, and laughed.

‘Here’s a tin of biscuits, a jar of sweets and box of chocolate,’ said Angela, unpacking them. ‘Not to eat now—to store away here so that we shall always be able to have a meal if we want one. And here are three bottles of lemonade.’

‘You think of everything!’ said Peter, in admiration. ‘Gracious—you’ve even brought books to read!’

‘And snap cards and Ludo!’ said Angela. ‘You see, it might rain sometimes when we’re here, and we might have to be in the tree for hours—so we shall want something to do.’

At last everything was unpacked and arranged. The children looked round their tree-house, really thrilled. It looked like a small, rather dark room, crowded with all kinds of things. The clock ticked loudly, and the candle flickered, making shadows jump all around.

‘Now we’ll have our dinner,’ said Angela, happily. ‘Our first meal in our tree-house home! Lovely!’

‘It’s a bit hot in here,’ said Peter. ‘Do you think it would be better to have it outside, Angela?’

‘Oh *no*!’ cried the two girls at once. ‘We *must* have our first meal indoors, Peter!’

Barker squeezed in at the hole, bringing with him the bone he had left behind the week before. He was very pleased with himself. He set the bone down on the carpet and wagged his tail.

‘Pooh! It’s smellier now,’ said Susan. ‘I think Barker had better have his dinner outside, don’t you, Angela?’

So Barker was pushed out, but he came back again at once, bringing the bone with him. ‘It’s no good, he’ll keep on coming in,’ said Angela. ‘Let’s undo our lunch and have it now, shall we? I’m awfully hungry.’

They undid the food packages and had a lovely lunch. It certainly *was* hot inside the tree, but it was such fun that nobody really minded. They ate

sandwiches and cake hungrily, and drank lemonade. They used the little stool as a table, and themselves sat on cushions or chairs. The clock ticked away merrily.

‘I bet nobody has ever had a house like this before,’ said Peter, looking round. ‘This tree must be very, very old, to have rotted away like this. It’s only a shell, really. It’s surprising that it can put out any leaves at all! I suppose there is still sap in that bit over there—the solid piece, look.’

‘What’s sap?’ asked Susan.

‘Oh—a kind of life-juice that runs up trees and makes leaves and twigs grow,’ said Peter. ‘You saw those dead branches, didn’t you? Well, no sap goes to those—only to the live ones. I’ll have another sandwich, please. No, Barker, not you. You hurry up and finish that smelly bone. For goodness’ sake don’t bury it any more.’

Barker took his bone outside and came back without it. Evidently he *had* buried it! Anyway, the tree-house smelt nicer without it. Barker cuddled up to Angela and she hugged him.

‘Nicest dog in the world!’ she said. ‘I don’t know what I should do without you, I really don’t!’

‘Does he still sleep on your bed?’ asked Peter.

Angela nodded. ‘He’s not supposed to. He has an old rug on my window-sill and is supposed to sleep there—but when he hears Mummy and Daddy safely in their bedroom at nights, he jumps off and leaps up on to my feet. He likes to cuddle into the bend of my knees if he can.’

‘I wish we had a dog like Barker,’ said Susan. ‘I suppose you’ll never get tired of him, Angela? If you did, you could give him to us.’

‘I shall never, never get tired of him,’ said Angela at once. ‘It would break my heart to part with him. Nobody knows how I love Barker. I haven’t any brothers or sisters, so I love him like a brother, instead.’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, and licked her lovingly.

‘He understands,’ said Peter, patting him. ‘I think he’s a lovely dog, even if he is awfully naughty. I love his silky soft coat and lovely droopy ears, and soft brown eyes. I wonder what he thinks of our tree-house.’

‘He probably thinks we’ve come to live in a kind of big wooden kennel!’ said Susan, with a giggle. ‘He may wonder why we haven’t brought straw to put down in it.’

‘Everybody finished?’ said Peter. ‘Well, let’s go up into the tree and get a breath of fresh air, shall we? We could take up a rug or two and spread them on that enormously broad branch, and lie there for a rest. The wind is blowing quite strongly, and we could pretend we were on a ship, rolling over the sea.’

They went up one by one, helping themselves up by hauling on the rope. Peter took a couple of rugs on his shoulders.

They climbed to the big broad branch, and just where it joined the main trunk they spread their two rugs. Then they settled down on them to rest.

It was lovely up there. It had been a bit stuffy in the tree-hollow, but up here it was fresh and breezy, though the breeze was warm. They liked the way the branch swayed about. It really did feel like a boat at sea.

Angela closed her eyes and fell asleep. So did Susan. Peter lay awake, looking up through the green leaves, glimpsing bits of blue sky between them as they moved. He heard Barker whining softly below.

They had tea up in the boughs of the old tree. Peter went down into the hollow to fetch it. He came up very quickly, and they all munched jam sandwiches. 'We left the candle burning,' said Peter. 'I blew it out. You know, the room inside the tree looked awfully exciting when I slipped down the rope into it. You'd have liked it!'

'We're very lucky,' said Angela. 'It's a most wonderful secret.'

'Yes. I don't feel now as if I shall mind a bit when Aunt Margaret scolds us,' said Susan. 'I shall just think of my beautiful tree-house, and she can scold all she likes!'

'Look—there's the red squirrel again!' suddenly said Peter, nodding his head cautiously to the right. The others looked. Sure enough, there was the squirrel, his bright eyes looking inquiringly at them. He was sitting on the branch, his tail upright behind him, his front paws held up beneath his chin. His fur gleamed chestnut red in the sun.

Angela held out a bit of biscuit. The squirrel ran to it, took it in its paw and nibbled it. 'Is this your tree, red squirrel?' asked Angela softly. The squirrel went on nibbling the biscuit. Then he ran to one of the holes that the children meant to use as cupboards, and jumped inside it.

'Oh—that must be his own hole,' said Susan. 'It is his tree! Now he's peeping out at us. Isn't he sweet? Red squirrel, I hope you don't mind sharing your tree with us. We will share our biscuits with you whenever you come.'

After a bit they climbed down the tree and played games in the clearing. Barker played too. He loved any ball game because he was quicker than anyone at getting a rolling ball. He loved being chased for it.

Angela at last looked at her watch. 'Oh dear! It's really time for me to go,' she said. 'We'll come back tomorrow. Just let's climb down into our house once more, and light a candle and sit there to get the feel of it. We might wind up my musical box and have a tune.'

So they quickly went to their house, lighted a candle, and Angela wound up the little musical box. They sat there in the candlelight, listening. The music tinkled out high and clear, like fairy music. It sounded quite loud in the little tree-room.

'Lovely!' said Angela. 'Now we must go. Goodbye, little tree-house—'

we'll come back to you as soon as ever we can! Goodbye!'

Then off they all went through the wood, following the string. What a wonderful day they had had!

## CHAPTER TEN

### TROUBLE WITH AUNT MARGARET

Peter and Susan found their aunt and uncle out when they got home. They were glad. Now they would not have to answer any awkward questions about what they had been doing, and where they had been.

They took books and read quietly till their bedtime. Then they looked in the larder. Yes, on the blue plate were some sandwiches for their supper. They ate them and went up to bed, glad not to have seen their bad-tempered aunt.

‘I shall lie and think about our tree-house, and how lovely it looks in the candlelight,’ said Susan. ‘Peter, there’s one thing it hasn’t got, that all houses have.’

‘What?’ said Peter.

‘A little window,’ said Susan. ‘Do you think we could possibly make one?’

‘Well—the walls of the tree are very thick and solid,’ said Peter, doubtfully. ‘I don’t think we could, Sue.’

‘Well, the part where Barker goes in and out is awfully crumbly,’ said Susan. ‘We might perhaps find a crumbly bit in the walls, Peter, and scrape it away to make a little window. It wouldn’t matter how tiny it was. Then we could look out of it when we wanted to, and see what was going on in the wood.’

‘It would be lovely if we could,’ Peter agreed. ‘A window in a tree! It sounds like a fairy-tale, doesn’t it, Susan!’

‘Yes. I could hang a little curtain over it,’ said Susan, dreamily. ‘Do you think we could put a pane of glass in, Peter?’

‘Well, wait till we get a hole for a window!’ said Peter. ‘As a matter of fact, a hole would be a good idea, it would let a little fresh air in. We wouldn’t put glass there at all. That’s the only fault I have to find with the room inside the tree—it’s stuffy when we’re all there, and the candle is burning.’

‘If we had a window to let in the daylight we wouldn’t need the candle so much,’ said Susan. ‘Oh, I wish Angela was here so that we could talk about it to her. I’m sure she’d like a window too. Fancy peeping out into the wood through it!’

‘Other people might see us then,’ said Peter. ‘We’d have to make a little outside curtain of moss or something, so that we could draw it down over the window if ever anyone came that way. We must never, never let anyone into our secret.’

The idea of a mossy curtain filled Susan with joy. She lay and thought



about it for a long time, calling out to Peter every now and again. Then there came the sound of footsteps down below, and the children were quiet. Their aunt's scolding voice filled the little cottage. Clearly Uncle Charlie was in trouble again.

The children could not help hearing everything. It was plain that Uncle Charlie had been after a job, with Aunt Margaret at his elbow to make sure he got it—but it was equally clear that it was not a job he liked, because it meant getting up too early in the morning.

‘I could have had a later shift,’ he kept saying. ‘I’ll have to leave here at half-past five to get there on time. If I’d had the later shift they offered me I could have started at half-past eight.’

‘Well, the early shift means more money, doesn’t it?’ scolded Aunt Margaret. ‘We’ve been short so long that you might as well make up for it now and bring in as much money as you can. I’ve had to go out to work every morning myself to get money to keep you all, while you’ve been out of work. I’m not going to do it any more. You’ll just start out at half-past five each day, on time, and you’ll keep that job if I have to go to the foreman to see you do!’

Susan stuffed her fingers in her ears and thought again of her tree-house. Why did Aunt Margaret always scold so much? Susan thought of a text she had heard at Sunday School a few weeks back. ‘Love one another.’ Aunt Margaret couldn’t love Uncle Charlie, or she would help him, not scold him all the time. She didn’t love Susan or Peter either. If you loved somebody you wanted to help them and be a comfort to them. Susan thought that ‘Love one another’ ought to be put into every home—then people would be happy there.

She fell asleep and dreamt of the tree-house and the little musical box playing its tinkling tunes. Peter dreamt of it too, and in his dreams the tree-house rocked like a boat. Angela dreamt of it, with Barker on her feet, snoring a little as he lay with his nose pushed into Angela’s knees.

Next morning there was a great clatter in the house about five o’clock. It was Aunt Margaret getting up to see that Uncle Charlie had his breakfast and set off to his new job in time. Again the scolding voice came up the stairs.

‘If I hadn’t woken up you’d have overslept as usual. Why didn’t you set the alarm? I told you.’

‘It’s broken, I think,’ said Uncle Charlie, stuffing bread and ham into his mouth. ‘The bell won’t ring.’

Aunt Margaret fiddled about with the clock, but the alarm bell would not ring. Peter, lying comfortably in bed, listening to the talk downstairs, suddenly had a shock.

‘Well, never mind!’ he heard his aunt say. ‘There’s a little alarm clock in Peter’s room. I’ll set that tomorrow morning.’

‘Gracious!’ thought Peter. ‘I’ll have to bring that clock back today

somehow. I hope I can bring it back before Aunt sees it is gone. What bad luck that she should want it just now!’

He made up his mind to go off to the tree-house just after breakfast and get the clock. But he couldn’t because Aunt Margaret suddenly took it into her head to say that she wanted both children to clean out the old shed for her!

‘Couldn’t we do it tomorrow?’ begged Peter. ‘Oh no—tomorrow’s Sunday. Well, Monday then.’

‘That’s right. Try to put off doing a job of work, just like your uncle!’ said Aunt Margaret, grimly. ‘You’ll do as you’re told, and clean out that shed today. I want the windows cleaned inside and out too, and all the rubbish burnt at the bottom of the garden.’

There was nothing for it but to do what they were told. There was no chance even to go and tell Angela to get the clock. Peter told Susan in a low voice, and the little girl looked worried.

‘Oh dear—if Aunt misses your clock, she may go into my bedroom too, and see if anything is missing there. Oh, Peter—we won’t tell her we’ve taken them to the tree-house, will we?’

‘Of course not,’ said Peter. ‘That’s to be an absolute secret, Susan. You must never tell about that.’

They set to work to clean the shed. They did it thoroughly, for they were good little workers, and certainly did not take after their lazy uncle. Instead, they were like their mother, who had been a good and hard worker in all she did.

Nothing was said about the clock that morning. The children breathed sighs of relief when they went in to their dinner, and saw that Aunt Margaret looked fairly amiable.

There was quite a nice dinner too, and the children enjoyed it. It was plain that now Uncle Charlie had a job again, things would be better all round. How they hoped he would keep his job!

They washed up the dinner things, wondering if their aunt would let them go off for the afternoon now.

‘Can we have the afternoon to play, as we worked all morning?’ asked Peter at last.

‘Yes,’ said Aunt Margaret, ‘but be back by teatime. I shall want you to fetch something from the village for me then.’

The children got up to go, very thankfully. Then they got a shock.

‘Oh—before you go, run upstairs, Peter, and bring me down the alarm clock in your room,’ said his aunt. ‘Uncle’s is broken, so we must use yours. Go along and get it.’

Peter simply didn’t know what to do or say. He stared at his aunt and she rapped impatiently on the table.

‘Well don’t stand there staring at me! Go and get it! Anyone would think you didn’t know what a clock was!’

Peter turned and went upstairs with Susan. They stood in his bedroom, looking desperately at one another.

‘What shall we say!’ whispered Peter. ‘Quick, what shall we say!’

‘Say it isn’t here,’ said Susan. ‘That’s quite true. It *isn’t* here.’

There didn’t seem anything else to say. Their aunt’s voice came sharply up the stairs.

‘What are you doing? Bring the clock down at once!’

‘It isn’t here!’ called Peter.

There was a silence. ‘But it *must* be there!’ cried his aunt. ‘I saw it only a few days ago. Use your eyes. It’s on the mantelpiece.’

‘But it isn’t, Aunt Margaret!’ shouted Susan. ‘It really isn’t.’

Their aunt came running impatiently up the stairs. She glanced at the mantelpiece. The clock certainly wasn’t there! It was ticking away in the tree-house, but she couldn’t know that! She stared around the room. There was no clock to be seen anywhere.

‘Well, it *was* there,’ she said. ‘I suppose your uncle’s put it into our room. I’ll see.’

She went to look, but the clock was not there either, of course. She came out, puzzled.

‘What’s happened to it?’ she said. She suddenly swung round on Peter and made him jump. ‘Have you broken it and hidden it away! Now you tell me the truth.’

‘No, Aunt Margaret, I haven’t broken it,’ said Peter, honestly.

‘Nor have I,’ said Susan. ‘We would have told you if we had.’

This was true and their aunt knew it. The children always told the truth. She felt sure they had not broken it. Then where was it?

Feeling more and more puzzled she went into Peter’s room again and looked in the cupboard there. No clock! The children watched her, feeling full of dismay. This was dreadful! If only they had had time to go to the tree-house and get the clock before Aunt Margaret missed it! It was very bad luck that their uncle’s clock should have suddenly gone wrong just then.

‘It may be in *your* room, Susan,’ said Aunt Margaret, and went in there. Susan stared in horror. Now maybe her aunt would notice that the picture was gone! Whatever would she say to that? Aunt Margaret looked all round the room. No clock anywhere. Then she gazed at the wall over the mantelpiece, and a puzzled look came over her face. She frowned.

‘There’s something missing,’ she said. ‘Yes—that picture! Whatever has happened to the picture?’

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### IN DISGRACE

The children stared in silence at their astonished aunt. They couldn't think of a word to say.

'Well! Have you lost your tongues?' she asked sharply. 'Didn't you hear what I said? Where's the picture? Has that got broken too?'

'No,' said Susan. 'It's not broken any more than the clock is, Aunt Margaret.'

'Then where is it?' said Aunt Margaret. The children looked at her in despair. They couldn't possibly, possibly tell her about the tree-house, and how the picture hung on the wall, and the clock ticked joyfully on the funny little mantelpiece.

Aunt Margaret lost her temper. She caught hold of Susan and shook her hard. The little girl gasped. Peter tried to stop his aunt, and she slapped him roughly.

'Now you just tell me where those things are!' she said. 'If you don't tell me at once, you'll go to bed for the rest of the day! Taking my things like this and not letting me know it!'

'We wouldn't have taken them if they had been yours,' said Peter. 'The clock was mine. It belonged to my mother. And the picture was Susan's. We brought them with us when we came here. They were ours, not yours.'

This speech made Aunt Margaret even more angry.

'So you *have* taken them! Where are they? How dare you take things out of the house?'

'Aunt Margaret, we only took them because they were ours,' said Peter.

'I know what you've done with them!' said Aunt Margaret, a sudden thought striking her. 'You've sold them! That's how you got the two pounds for going to the sea, wasn't it? I might have guessed it was something like that. You bad, deceitful children.'

'We didn't get our two pounds through selling the picture and the clock,' said Peter. 'We only took them yesterday.'

'Where did you take them?' demanded his aunt. The children would not say. They stared at her, not saying a word. She pushed Susan into her room, and Peter into his, and slammed the doors shut.

'Now you can just stay in your bedrooms till you tell me where you have taken my things!' she cried, and locked the doors. They heard her footsteps going downstairs, sounding sharp and angry.

Peter went to his door and put his mouth to the lock. 'Susan! I'm glad you didn't tell our secret. I thought you might be afraid and tell.'

'I was afraid, but I wasn't going to tell,' said Susan, with tears in her voice. 'Peter, isn't she unkind? Surely it isn't wrong to take our own things!'

'No, it isn't,' said Peter. 'Oh dear! I wonder how long Aunt will keep us here! If only she'd let us out we'd go and get back the picture and the clock, and give them to her, even though they're not hers.'

Their aunt came up at teatime. She unlocked Peter's door and came in. 'Well!' she said. 'Are you ready to tell me where the picture and the clock are?'

'I'll bring them back if you'll let me go and get them, Aunt Margaret,' said poor Peter.

'I want to know where you've hidden them, and why,' said his aunt. 'I still believe you've sold them.'

'Well, I haven't,' said Peter. 'And they're not exactly hidden either. We just wanted them for something, that's all, so we took them. We can bring them back at once.'

'I want to know where you've *put* them,' said his aunt, obstinately. She was really puzzled and bewildered as to why the children had taken such queer things away, and where they had put them. She could not bear their defiance and she meant to find out what she wanted to know.

But Peter wouldn't say anything more, and Susan, though she cried bitterly, would not give away the secret of the tree-house. In the end her aunt slammed and locked the bedroom doors again and went downstairs.

'No tea,' groaned Peter. 'I'm hungry, aren't you?'

'Angela will wonder whatever has happened to us,' said Susan. 'Listen—surely that is Barker whining!'

She got out of bed and went to the window. Down below in the little garden was Barker. Angela was at the front door, looking a little scared, for she was afraid of the children's aunt.

Aunt Margaret opened the door. 'Please, can I speak to Peter and Susan?' the children heard her ask, in her clear voice.

'No. They're in disgrace,' they heard their aunt say. 'They're in bed. And I don't think your mother would like you to play with them any more. They're bad children. They have taken some of my things, and they won't tell me where they have put them.'

'What things?' asked Angela, after a pause. It was clear to the listening children that Angela guessed it was the things they had taken to the tree-house.

'Oh, never you mind,' said Aunt Margaret. 'You go home and tell your mother I don't want you to play with those two naughty children any more. They're not to be trusted.'

The door shut loudly. At once Peter called down to Angela in a low voice.

‘Angela! I’m writing a note to you. Wait about a little, and I’ll throw it down. I can’t say much or Aunt will hear me.’

Angela looked up and nodded. She walked off down the lane with Barker. Peter scribbled a hurried note, then felt in his shorts pocket for something to weight it with. He found a big stone with a hole in, that he had been keeping for luck. He wrapped the note round it and looked out of the window.

He saw Angela coming back down the lane. He took careful aim and threw the note with the stone. It landed neatly at her feet, almost startling Barker out of his wits! He growled, and jumped back. Then he pounced on the note.

‘No, Barker, no. That’s for me,’ said Angela, and pushed him away. She opened the note and read it.

*‘Dear Angela,*

Aunt missed the clock and the picture, and because we wouldn’t tell her where we had taken them, she has locked us up in our bedrooms. We’ve had no tea, and I don’t expect we shall have any supper either! We’ll come and see you as soon as we can. You’d better not come here again, in case Aunt tells your mother you mustn’t play with us. Wasn’t our day in the tree-house lovely! I don’t know whether we’ll see you at Sunday School tomorrow or not.

*Love from Susan and Peter.’*

Angela looked up at the window and waved. Then she set off down the lane with Barker. She ran almost all the way home. She burst into the kitchen where Harriet the cook was busy baking.

‘Oh, Harriet, could you possibly give me any food for two poor hungry little children?’ she begged. ‘Please, please do! They may starve if I don’t give them something.’

‘Good gracious!’ said Harriet. ‘Who are they?’

‘You don’t know them,’ said Angela. ‘But they are very, very nice children. Please could you give me something to take to them? I know Mummy would let me if she was in, but she’s out.’

Harriet was kind-hearted. Keeping a strict eye on Barker, who was standing on his hind legs trying to sniff at the new buns on the table, she made up a little parcel of biscuits and buns. There you are,’ she said. ‘And don’t you give any to that bad dog of yours, Miss Angela!’

‘Oh no, of course not,’ said Angela. ‘But he isn’t a bad dog, really, Harriet, only mischievous. He hasn’t been very bad today.’

‘Hm! *Hasn’t* he!’ said Harriet, scornfully. ‘It wasn’t Barker who took my

sausages, I suppose! And it wasn't Barker who took my scullery mat outside and chewed the ends off? And it wasn't Barker who got my knitting off the chair and ran off with it? Oh no—it must have been the cat!

'Oh dear—did he really do all those things?' said Angela, upset. 'He didn't tell me! He just comes in looking so good. Barker, why must you be so naughty?'

Barker put out a paw, but Angela wouldn't shake it.

'No,' she said. 'I don't shake hands with bad dogs. Only with good ones. I shall leave you at home now, instead of taking you with me.'

So poor, naughty Barker was put in his kennel, and left there, whining, while Angela set off once more to the cottage where Peter and Susan lived. She carried with her the bag of goodies.

Peter's window was at the side of the cottage. Taking great care not to get in sight of the front windows, in case Aunt Margaret should look out and see her, the little girl stole underneath Peter's window.

She whistled. Nobody came. She whistled again. Still nobody came. She picked up a pebble, took careful aim, and threw it up to the window. Instead of rattling against the pane it flew in through the opening at the top and landed with a thud on the wooden floor. Peter sat up, startled. He saw the stone and ran to the window.

'Sh!' called Angela, in a low voice. 'I've brought you something. Open your window as wide as you can, and catch. I've got biscuits and buns for you. Tell Susan.'

She threw the biscuits and buns up one by one and giggled as Peter managed to catch them. She had a good aim, and not one fell back into the garden. Then she threw Susan some. The children were delighted. They stood at the window, eating, feeling very much better.

'I must go! I can hear your aunt,' called Angela quietly, and ran off. Peter and Susan finished the rest of their cakes and biscuits and got back into bed. They felt very much happier! The cakes were lovely, warm from the oven.

After a while their doors were opened and in came their aunt again. The children pretended to be asleep. They did not want any more questions. They lay with their faces in their pillows, pretending. Their aunt was surprised. She had expected them to be hungry and sorry. She glanced round the room where Susan slept, and her eyes saw something on the floor. She bent to pick it up.

It was crumbs of cake! Aunt Margaret stared in amazement. 'Cake!' she said aloud. 'Now where did you get *that* from?'

Susan trembled. What bad luck to leave a crumb or two! Why hadn't she been careful to see there was none?

'Where did you get cake from?' demanded her aunt, shaking her, and making her turn round. But how could Susan or Peter give Angela away? Once

again they would say nothing, and once again their angry aunt marched downstairs, making up her mind that whatever happened she would find out these secrets! How dare they defy her like this? Well, she would show them what a mistake it was to defy her—*she* would soon bring them to their senses!



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### A PECULIAR SUNDAY

The next morning was horrid, and it shouldn't have been, because it was Sunday. Usually the children liked Sundays. They liked the sound of the church bells, they liked seeing everyone in their best clothes, and they liked putting on their best clothes themselves. They always looked forward to going to Sunday School, too.

Aunt Margaret meant to keep them in bed until they had told her where they had put the picture and the clock. She took a miserable breakfast up to them, looking as black as thunder.

But Uncle Charlie, who was home for the day, had something to say about this punishment. He really was fond of the two children, and he liked them to be happy when they could. He was most astonished to find they were to be kept in their bedrooms all day.

'Well, I won't have it,' he said, putting down the newspaper he always seemed to be reading. 'What if they *have* taken the picture and clock? It's just some childish prank. After all, they were theirs. They weren't yours.'

'How do I know they won't start taking my things, too?' cried Aunt Margaret, angry that her husband should take the children's side. 'This sort of thing has got to be stopped. I won't have them growing up dishonest little thieves.'

Uncle Charlie banged his hand on the table, and lost his temper, too. 'I won't have you saying things like that! They won't grow up dishonest or bad. They're my only sister's children, and she brought them up well till she died. Didn't they come here able to say their prayers at night, and knowing all kinds of lovely tales? Children like that don't grow up bad.'

'Oh, I know you think they're perfect,' said Aunt Margaret. 'They're not. They're bad and defiant and deceitful.'

'That's not what their teachers say when I meet them,' said Uncle Charlie. 'They say they're two of the best children in the school. You've never tried to love them, or even to like them. You're a hard-hearted spiteful woman!'

The children heard the two angry voices and trembled in their bedrooms. It was awful to hear grown-ups quarrelling like that. Now what would happen?

Aunt Margaret was very angry indeed. She began to scold Uncle Charlie in a loud, never-ending voice, and he could hardly get a word in. In the end he got up and went upstairs. He unlocked the two bedroom doors and called to the children.

‘You can come out. It’s Sunday and I won’t have you treated like this on that day, whatever you deserve on other days.’

The children didn’t very much want to come out and face Aunt Margaret, but they had to. They slipped downstairs, feeling scared.

‘There’ll be no dinner today!’ said their aunt, grimly. ‘I’m not going to cook for any of you!’

‘Get your hats and we’ll go out to dinner,’ said Uncle Charlie. Without a word the children got their hats. Aunt Margaret said nothing. She was beaten this time, and knew it. But the children knew she would pay them back some time or other! It didn’t do to defeat Aunt Margaret.

They had dinner at a little inn with their uncle, after a long walk. He seemed angry and sad.

‘I brought you to my home thinking I was doing a good thing by you,’ he said, suddenly. ‘But I’d have done better to have sent you off to some children’s home or orphanage. You would have been happier there.’

‘No, we wouldn’t,’ said Susan at once. She had a great fear of being sent away to strangers. Uncle Charlie wasn’t very admirable, but at least he was their uncle, was fond of them and meant well.

‘Maybe Aunt Margaret will be happier now you have work again, Uncle,’ said Peter.

‘Oh, I’ll lose this job like I lose all the others,’ said his uncle. ‘Don’t you grow up like me, Peter. You work hard and do your best, as your mother did. I’m not going to stand this much longer. I shall go away, out of it all!’

‘Oh no, Uncle!’ cried Susan, scared. ‘Don’t leave us. I couldn’t bear to live alone with Aunt Margaret.’

‘Well, we’ll see,’ said Uncle Charlie. Susan felt worried. Did Uncle Charlie really mean it? Perhaps he didn’t. He had often said he would go off, and he never had. But suppose he did? What would happen to her and Peter, left alone with a sour and spiteful aunt who didn’t in the least want them? It was a dreadful thought.

They walked back after dinner, and went to Sunday School. Angela was delighted to see them. She sat next to Susan and squeezed her arm. ‘Cheer up!’ she whispered. ‘You look so miserable.’

Susan was miserable. When the time for praying came, she said some special prayers of her own.

‘Dear God, don’t let Uncle go away and leave us to Aunt Margaret,’ she prayed. ‘You see everything, so You can see that she doesn’t love us or want us. I keep asking You to give me a home and a mother. It’s not a very unusual thing to want if you’re a little girl—so couldn’t You give it to me? I know I’ve got a home now, but it isn’t a happy one—still, I could put up with it if You don’t let Uncle go away, till You give me a real one.’

Peter looked at Susan's earnest face and guessed what she was praying. Poor Susan! She couldn't have what she wanted, Peter was sure, but she still went on asking for it. She still believed God could give it to her. Peter looked at Angela's happy face, and thought how lucky she was. She had everything she wanted—except a brother and sister!

The children went home with Angela, who asked her mother if the three of them might have tea in the garden. There wasn't time to go to the tree-house, and Peter and Susan didn't want to go home to their aunt just then. They enjoyed tea in the garden, and told Angela all that had happened.

'I think it's your aunt that ought to be punished, not you!' said Angela, indignantly. 'I wish I could go back with you, and send her to bed and lock her in.'

'Woof,' said Barker, agreeing. The others giggled. It was funny to imagine Angela locking their aunt into her room. Peter rolled on to his back, laughing, Barker went over and licked his nose vigorously.

'Oh, Barker, don't! Now I shall have to use my clean hanky to wipe off your lick, said Peter, sitting up. Barker put out a paw to shake. Peter eyed him sternly.

'Are you a good dog today, or not? Angela says we're not to shake paws with you unless you've been good.'

'He has been *fairly* good, for him,' said Angela, so Peter shook hands with Barker. 'He's only chewed up two things—my white socks and a bit of my bedroom carpet.'

'Well, I shall only shake one paw with you, not two,' said Peter, as Barker held up the other paw to shake. 'You're fairly good, but not very good, Barker.'

At last the children had to go home, though they still dreaded it. 'Still, Uncle Charlie may be home now,' said Peter, cheering up. 'Come on, Sue. I'll look after you!'

They went back and stood outside the cottage to see how things were. What a blessing. Aunt Margaret had a friend in! She never scolded them when there was anyone there. She always pretended to be kind and sweet to them then. That was lucky.

'Well, my dears,' said Aunt Margaret, as they went in. 'Did you have a nice time? I suppose you went to tea with Angela after Sunday School?'

'Yes, Aunt Margaret,' said Peter. 'We'd better go up to bed now, hadn't we?'

'There's some supper for you in the larder,' said his aunt, still in a gracious voice, put on for the benefit of her visitor. The children went to get their supper, said goodnight and ran thankfully up the stairs.

'What a bit of luck!' said Peter, sitting on Susan's bed to eat his supper. 'I

don't like Mrs Wilson very much, but I'm always pleased to see her here! Aunt goes all sweet and generous when anyone is here!'

'I say—I hope Uncle Charlie manages to wake himself at five o'clock tomorrow morning!' said Susan suddenly, feeling alarmed. 'He hasn't got a clock to wake him!'

'I'll try and wake up myself,' said Peter. Then tomorrow we'll go and fetch back the clock for him. I would never have taken it if I had known it would be wanted.'

But alas, the next morning Peter didn't wake up at five o'clock, and neither did Susan. Uncle Charlie didn't either—and, oh dear, neither did Aunt Margaret! The whole household slept peacefully till seven o'clock, when Peter awoke. He heard the church clock beginning to strike. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven!

'My goodness!' said Peter, and jumped out of bed. 'I wonder if Uncle is gone!'

He peeped cautiously into his uncle's bedroom, and saw him asleep there! He called loudly.

'Uncle! Aunt! It's seven o'clock!'

They awoke, and Aunt Margaret leapt out of bed in a trice. But even though he knew how late he was Uncle Charlie wouldn't hurry! That was so like him. No wonder Aunt Margaret felt like shaking him, thought Peter!

With scolding and grumbling Aunt Margaret got her husband out of the house, and would not even let him stop to have any breakfast. Then she turned on the children.

'Now see what has happened! All because of you your uncle has gone late to work—he'll lose his job if he does that!'

'It wasn't our fault,' said Peter.

'Yes, it was. You stole that clock, just when I wanted it,' raged his aunt.

'I didn't steal it, it was mine,' said Peter. 'I wanted to go and get it on Saturday but you locked me up. I'll go and get it today.'

'You tell me where it is and *I'll* go and get it,' said his aunt.

Peter was silent. Susan stared with wide eyes first at her brother, then at her aunt.

'Now, don't defy me again,' said Aunt Margaret, looking grim. 'You tell me where you've hidden it. That's all I want to know. Then if, as your uncle says, it's just a silly, childish prank, I'll get it and say no more about it.'

'I can't tell you where it is,' said Peter. 'It's a secret.'

'How can it be a secret!' cried his aunt. 'Now you just tell me, or you'll be very sorry.'

'I'll go and get it myself, Aunt, but I can't tell you where it is, because it's not only *my* secret,' said Peter. 'It's someone else's too.'

‘If you don’t tell me where it is, you won’t be allowed out of this house,’ said his aunt. ‘So just you hurry up and tell me. I’m not going to be defied by a boy like you. Clear away and wash up, both of you—and when you’ve thought better of it, come and tell me what I want to know.’

The children cleared away and washed up in silence. This was dreadful. They couldn’t give away their lovely secret—but how could they get the clock if Aunt Margaret didn’t allow them to leave the house?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### A DREADFUL SHOCK

The next few days were miserable. The children didn't dare to disobey their aunt and go to the secret tree-house to get the clock. How they longed to go there and play!

'It's too bad to think that we've got such a wonderful place of our own, that nobody knows about, and yet we can't go and play there,' said Peter.

They had meant to ask Angela to go and get the clock for them, but she had gone away for a few days to an aunt of hers—a very different aunt from Aunt Margaret though!

'She's an aunt that fusses Angela, and gives her presents, and lets her choose what she wants for pudding each day,' said Peter. 'I must say I think Angela is a lucky girl. I wonder if Barker is behaving himself.'

The children missed Angela. If only she had been at home, she would have been able to come and talk to them over the fence, or they might have slipped out for five minutes to play with Barker. It was annoying to have Angela away just as they were kept to the house!

Aunt Margaret was very grim those days. She hardly spoke to them. She hardly spoke to Uncle Charlie either, but he was glad about this! She set Peter and Susan all kinds of jobs to do, and by the time Thursday came the whole garden was weeded, for they had worked so hard in it.

On Tuesday morning Aunt Margaret had wakened in time to get Uncle Charlie off to work. But nobody had woken on Wednesday until half-past seven, and the same happened on Thursday. Uncle Charlie didn't seem to mind. He hated having to get up so early, and the children heard him say many times that he wanted a later shift of work, not such an early one.

Then on Friday Uncle Charlie came home and said he had lost his new job!

'Because you were late nearly every morning, I suppose,' said Aunt Margaret, in her usual grim voice. 'Well, you can thank your precious nephew for that! He stole the clock so that you couldn't wake at the right time.'

'You can't blame the boy for it, and I won't have you saying that,' said Uncle Charlie. 'He wanted to go and fetch the clock, wherever he had hidden it, but you wouldn't let him. Oh, you go about making things hard and difficult for all of us, don't you? There's no comfort or peace or love in this home. I'm clearing out!'

'You've said that many times before,' said Aunt Margaret. 'But you never do clear out. You'd rather stay on and let *me* go out and do cleaning, to feed

you and the two children!’

‘Well, I’m going this time,’ said Uncle Charlie. ‘One of the men I work with has told me of a job up north. I’m going up there. I’ll send you money when I have it.’

Susan was listening with scared eyes. She flung herself on her uncle. ‘You’re not to go. You’re not to leave us. We don’t want to be left with Aunt Margaret. Take us with you! We’ll be so good, Uncle Charlie, really we will!’

‘I can’t take you with me,’ said Uncle Charlie. ‘I know I oughtn’t to go and leave you in this miserable home, but I’m a weak man and I can’t stand it any longer. I’m going!’

That was a dreadful weekend. Uncle Charlie packed his few things. Susan cried and cried. Even Peter had to blink back tears. Nobody could help liking Uncle Charlie, although he was weak and foolish in so many ways. Aunt Margaret either scolded or sulked. The children couldn’t make out if she wanted their uncle to go or not.

On Monday he went carrying a big bag with him. ‘Maybe you’ll never see me again!’ he said to Aunt Margaret, ‘and maybe it’ll be a good thing for you if you don’t. Take care of the children and treat them well—or as well as you know how. I’ll send what money I can.’

The children went with him to the bus, Susan sobbing bitterly. He was the only kindness in the home, the only bit of love they knew. It was dreadful to think that now they would be left alone with their bad-tempered aunt.

He got on the bus. It started off, and they waved goodbye. Still wiping her eyes, Susan took Peter’s hand and they went back to the cottage, dreading to see their aunt, and to hear her sharp tongue.

She said nothing for a little while. Then she told them something that gave them a shock.

‘Well, I’m going too! I’m not living here with two bad children, having to go out cleaning to keep them! As if your uncle would send me any money! He won’t send a penny, I know that. So I’m going to my sister’s—and you’re going to the children’s home in the next town!’

Peter and Susan stared at Aunt Margaret in horror. ‘No, Aunt, no!’ cried Susan, and actually went to her aunt and held her arm. ‘No! Don’t do that. We’ll be so good. We’ll do everything you want us to. And as soon as we can we’ll earn money to pay you back for keeping us.’

‘You’ve brought it on yourselves,’ said Aunt Margaret, shaking off the little girl. ‘I’ve written to the matron of the home. Someone is coming to fetch you on Wednesday. Then I shall let this place to a friend of mine, go to my sister’s, and take a nice job somewhere near. I shall be happy when I don’t have to bother about a bad husband and two deceitful children.’

‘Aunt Margaret, don’t send us away,’ said Peter, looking very pale. ‘I

know that children's home is supposed to be good one—but we don't want to go to strangers. We'd rather have a home here with you, even if we don't like each other very much. But if only you'd be a bit kinder, we would love you. You don't seem to want us to love you.'

'I'm not arguing with you about what I'm going to do,' said Aunt Margaret, slamming the oven door. 'My mind is made up. I've got rid of your uncle, and I'll soon be rid of you too. You go on Wednesday. And don't expect me to come and see you because I shan't. I never knew two worse children than you in my life!'

Susan fled upstairs, sobbing. Peter followed. The whole thing was a great shock to them. Uncle Charlie had gone—and now they were to go too. Peter put his arms round Susan, and they both wept together. Susan clung to Peter. He cried so seldom that it made things seem even more terrible to see tears pouring down his cheeks.

'If only I was old enough to earn my living!' said Peter, wiping his tears away with the back of his hand. 'Then I would make a little loving home for you, Susan, and everything would be all right. It's awful to be a child and not be able to earn anything. I seem to be such a long time growing up.'

Susan couldn't bear to see her big brother cry. She hugged him. 'Don't cry,' she said. 'After all, we'll be together. They *do* let the boys and girls live together, don't they, Peter? Oh, Peter, I'm so unhappy.'

'So am I, Sue,' said Peter, desperately. 'More unhappy for you than I am for myself. There's no one we can turn to.'

'I wish Jesus was alive, then we would both go to Him and tell Him our troubles,' said Susan. 'People did, when He was on the earth, didn't they, Peter? He would have put things right somehow.'

'Well—He isn't on the earth any longer, but we know He'll listen to our troubles and help us in some way,' said Peter, suddenly cheering up. 'We can always pray, can't we? Let's pray now, in a low voice so that Aunt Margaret can't hear.'

They knelt down together by the bed, Peter with his arm round his little sister. It was funny kind of prayer because Susan kept adding a bit to what Peter said. They told about their unhappiness, and asked for help. When they had finished they felt much happier.

'You do think Jesus heard us, don't you?' said Susan, anxiously. 'You don't think He might have been busy about something more important than us?'

'He's always listening,' said Peter. 'You know how He always listened to everyone when He was here on the earth and even when He was tired, and His disciples tried to keep people away from Him, He still listened. He can't have changed.'



They bathed their red eyes, smiled at one another, and went downstairs.

‘Can we go and see Angela and tell her we are going away?’ asked Peter, thinking it would be good for Susan to get out for a bit.

His aunt nodded. ‘I don’t care what you do. Now that I’m going to get rid of you at last you can do what you like. You can do your packing tomorrow. Matron is coming to fetch you first thing on Wednesday morning.’

Their hearts sank into their boots again. They couldn’t believe it was true. But it did really seem as if it was going to happen, this thing they had dreaded for so long. They went out to the gate with miserable faces.

‘Cheer up, Sue,’ said Peter, taking her arm. ‘We’ll go and see Barker and Angela. After all, we know *they* will come and see us when we are in the home, even if nobody else does.’

‘I don’t *want* to go to a home,’ said Susan, her eyes spilling over with tears again. ‘I’m afraid.’

‘We’ll tell Angela all about it,’ said Peter, thinking it would be nice to hear someone comforting them and trying to cheer them up. It would be lovely to see old Barker again too. They hadn’t seen him for a long time.

Angela had just come back home. Her luggage was being unpacked, and she was running round the house and garden to see everything again. It was lovely to come home after being away!

Her mother had given her a grand welcome. Her father had left her a box of chocolates and a book, and had told her mother to tell her he would give her a special hug when he came home that night. Harriet had made her a lovely cake. There were fresh flowers in her room. Oh, how good it was to be home!

She and Barker went round the garden to see the hens, the bees and the goldfish in the pond. ‘Isn’t it lovely to be back again?’ Angela kept saying to Barker. ‘Aren’t we lucky to have a home like this, Barker? Now you really will be good, won’t you? You weren’t very good when you were away, you know—but you *must* be good now you’re back. No, don’t walk on that bed. Come here, bad dog!’

Just then the two of them saw Peter and Susan coming up the drive. Angela rushed to them, and Barker capered round in joy.

‘Peter! Sue! How did you know I was back? Oh, I’ve missed you dreadfully! Have you been to the tree-house? Did you see the red squirrel? What does it all look like? I kept thinking of you sitting down in that dear little tree-room!’

Susan and Peter looked at Angela’s happy, flushed face. Something in their faces alarmed her. She caught hold of Susan’s hand.

‘Something’s happened, hasn’t it? What is it? Why do you look so sad? Quick, tell me?’

Peter told Angela everything. They sat down on a little shady lawn, and

Angela listened in dismay.

‘But you *can’t* go, you can’t!’ she said. ‘Just when we’ve got that lovely tree-house too! Oh, Peter—oh, Sue! This is the worst thing that could have happened! I can’t do without you. I love you both, you know I do. You can’t go!’

‘We’ve got to,’ said Peter, sadly. ‘We’ll have to leave our lovely tree-house to you, Angela—and to Barker. You must play there alone, and tell us about it in letters. We shall be lonely and sad, away in a children’s home among strangers.’

And then Angela’s face suddenly brightened, and she cried out loudly, ‘I’ve got an idea! Oh, I’ve got such a wonderful idea!’

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

The others stared at her in surprise. Barker leapt to his feet and ran round excitedly. He always got excited when Angela cried out like that.

‘What do you mean? What idea have you got?’ asked Peter.

‘Well—you must run away—you mustn’t go off to the home!’ cried Angela.

‘But where can we run to?’ said Peter.

‘Oh, how silly you are! To the tree-house, of course!’ cried Angela, her face red and excited. ‘I’m sure that’s why we found the lovely tree-house—so that you could live there when this happened!’

‘But—but—how *could* we live there?’ said Peter, astonished.

‘We could, we could?’ shouted Susan, her eyes shining like stars. ‘Of course we could. Haven’t we taken everything there? We could sleep there easily—and nobody, nobody would know where we were!’

‘They could hunt for weeks and not find you,’ said Angela, hardly able to speak for excitement.

‘But what about food?’ said Peter.

‘I’ll bring you some each day,’ said Angela. ‘And I’ll take some money out of my money-box and buy you lots of tins of food too, so that you’ll have a store. Oh, you’ll have a *wonderful* time, Peter and Susan—fancy living in the tree-house and sleeping there all night. It would be the most marvellous adventure in the world.’

‘We will, we will, won’t we, Peter?’ cried Susan, her heart beating fast at the thought. ‘We needn’t go to that home, we needn’t go to strangers. We’ll live in our lovely tree-house, and have Angela and Barker and the squirrel to play with, and we’ll be so happy!’

‘But people will look for us. We shall get into dreadful trouble, I expect,’ said Peter. ‘I don’t see how we can.’

‘Oh, Peter, don’t be silly! You can quite easily, with me to help you,’ said Angela. ‘And *let* people look for you! They’ll never find you! I shan’t say a word, of course. It will be a real adventure. You know you’ve always wanted an adventure. Well, here’s one, a great big one—surely you are not going to say no to it?’

Peter didn’t want to say no. The idea of going to live in the tree-house was so thrilling. He looked at the two excited girls.

‘All right,’ he said, and smiled. ‘We’ll run away to the tree-house. But

when?’

‘Oh, *Peter!*’ said Susan, squeezing his arm. ‘Oh it’s too exciting for words!’

‘You said that your aunt told you you must pack your things tomorrow,’ said Angela. ‘Well, pack them—and tomorrow night, when the moon is up, creep out of the house with your bags—and go to the tree-house!’

‘What—in the middle of the night!’ said Susan, thrilled. ‘Oh, Angela—what a marvellous idea! Will you be there too?’

‘No. But I’ll come the next day with lots of food,’ promised Angela. ‘I’d better not creep out and join you in your escape, because, if anyone misses me that night, they’ll guess I’ve been with you, and it would be difficult for me not to say anything.’

‘Don’t tell anyone you’ve seen us today, and don’t come and see us tomorrow,’ said Peter. ‘Then no one will think you know anything about it. Oh, Angela—you’ll come and play with us each day, won’t you?’

‘I’m terribly happy now,’ said Susan, and she rolled over and played with Barker. ‘What a wonderful idea of yours, Angela! You know, we said a prayer to Jesus and begged Him not to let us go to the home—but we never thought this would be the way out. It’s marvellous.’

‘Woof,’ said Barker, and gave her his paw.

‘I’m sure he understands about it all,’ said Susan, shaking his paw solemnly. ‘Barker, you shall be the tree-house dog! Won’t we have fun?’

‘We’d better go now, before anyone knows we’ve been to see Angela,’ said Peter, getting up. ‘Come on, Sue. Well, Angela, you know our plans. We’ll pack our things tomorrow, and then, when the moon is up, and we can see our way, we’ll go to the wood, follow the string, and go to the tree-house. We’ll sleep there, and wait for you to come the next day.’

‘There are biscuits and chocolate there, and some lemonade,’ said Angela, remembering. ‘You can make your breakfast off those. I’ll bring what I can later. Goodbye and good luck!’

Feeling much happier the two children went off home together. What a thrilling secret they had now! Susan could hardly help dancing for joy.

‘You’d better not look so happy, Sue,’ said Peter, with a grin. ‘Aunt Margaret will be sure that we are up to something if you look like that!’

‘I can’t help it,’ said Susan, trying to make her face solemn. But they needn’t have worried. Their aunt was far too busy cleaning up the cottage and putting away things in the loft to bother about them or the look on their faces. She meant to leave on the Wednesday too, and there was a lot to be done.

The next day the children packed their things. They had very few. Susan put her clothes into a bag with her few toys, and Peter put his into another bag.

‘I hope you haven’t packed anything of *mine*,’ said Aunt Margaret, who

seemed determined to think they were not honest. ‘Susan, did you put your shoes in first, as I told you?’

‘Yes, Aunt Margaret,’ said Susan, meekly. She looked at her sour-faced aunt and was glad that she was not going to be with her any more. What a pity Aunt had not been kind and loving! The children would have loved her then, and they would all have been happy. A home wasn’t a home without love.

‘Matron will be here at nine o’clock, and you will catch the twenty-past nine bus with her,’ said Aunt Margaret. ‘I’m going to my sister’s, in Hilling, as I told you. You can write to me if you like, but don’t expect me to come and see you.’

‘No, Aunt Margaret,’ said Peter. ‘I hope you’ll be happy at your sister’s. Will you tell Uncle Charlie where we are so that he can come and see us sometimes, if ever he comes back?’

‘Matron has written to tell him you are going to her home,’ said Aunt Margaret. ‘He is your guardian, so he has to know. It’ll be a shock to him. Serve him right for going off like that!’

‘Why did you ask Aunt Margaret to let Uncle Charlie know about the home, so that he could come and see us?’ whispered Susan, puzzled. ‘You know we won’t be there.’

‘I know. But supposing we’re found and have to go, I’d like Uncle Charlie to know where we are,’ whispered back Peter. ‘Don’t look so alarmed, silly. I don’t suppose we *shall* be found—but you never know!’

‘What are you whispering about?’ demanded Aunt Margaret. ‘You know that’s rude, to whisper when other people are in the room.’

Luckily she didn’t insist on an answer, so the children said nothing. They kept on looking at the clock, longing for the hours to go so that they might go to bed and wait for darkness. Then—ah, then—their adventure would begin!

Bedtime did come at last. They went to bed thankfully, saying a polite good night to their aunt for the last time. She was ironing, and they heard the familiar bump-bump-bump of the iron as they lay in bed.

‘You go to sleep, Sue,’ said Peter, in a low voice. ‘I’ll keep awake. You needn’t be afraid I shall oversleep till the morning.’

‘Oh, Peter, it would be so dreadful if you did, wouldn’t it?’ said Susan, thinking of the coming of the matron at nine o’clock. ‘I feel worried in case you do. I’ll keep awake, too.’

But she didn’t. She fell fast asleep, and Peter heard her regular breathing as he lay in bed, waiting. He heard his aunt come upstairs to her bedroom. He heard her getting ready for bed. He heard the bed creak as she got into it.

He lay and looked out of the window. The moon would be up soon. About midnight it would give enough light to see by. He watched it coming up behind the trees, and the church clock struck eleven.

The moon rose higher and cleared the trees. Peter's bedroom was brilliant with moonlight. He lay still until he heard the church clock strike twelve. Then he got up very softly, and padded into Susan's room.

He shook her gently. She woke up sleepily and rubbed her eyes. 'Sue! It's time to go to the tree-house,' whispered Peter, in her ear. 'Don't make a sound! We mustn't wake Aunt up, whatever we do.'

In great excitement Susan got up very quietly and dressed herself. Her fingers were trembling and she had to leave half her buttons undone. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was escaping to the tree-house in safety.

'Are you ready?' whispered Peter. 'Then come on. Our bags are downstairs.'

They crept downstairs, holding their breath every time a stair creaked. At last they were in the moonlit kitchen. They picked up their bags. They were not very heavy.

They looked round the kitchen for the last time. They hadn't been very happy in the cottage, yet they felt quite sad to leave it, knowing they would never come back. They were going to the tree-house—to live there for ever, Susan thought! Peter wasn't so sure. But still, they could live there for quite a time.

They stole out of the back door, and closed it very softly behind them. Then down the path to the lane they went, carrying their bags. No one saw them go. No one heard them. The big full moon shone down on the two little figures hurrying away to their big adventure.

They walked quickly to the wood. Nobody was about at all. They meant to hide in the hedge if they saw anyone. A barn owl screeched and made them jump. A hedgehog scurried in the ditch, and they wondered what it was.

They came to the wood and hurried to the part where the string began. 'I hope we'll be able to find it all right,' panted Peter. 'It's a bit shadowy among the trees. Isn't the moon bright tonight, Susan? It makes the shadows awfully black.'

They came to the place where the string began. They felt about for it, and at last found it. How glad they were! It was their only way of getting to the tree-house.

'I'll go first and you keep close behind me,' said Peter. 'Your bag isn't too heavy, is it? I must have one hand for my bag and the other for the string, or I'd carry both bags now.'

'I'm all right,' said Susan, her heart beating fast. 'Go on. I want to get to our tree-house. I'll feel safe then. Go on, Peter, quickly!'

They followed the string for a long, long way—and then at last they came to the little clearing—and beyond it was the tree-house! How joyful they were!

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### AN EXCITING HOME

The old tree looked strange in the moonlit night. It was full of black shadows, and it looked more enormous than it really was. It rose up, vast and black, flecked with silver moonbeams. Susan gave a gasp.

‘Peter! It looks awfully mysterious—as if it might be magic. Do you think it is?’

‘Well, it’s a beautiful, magical night,’ said Peter, setting down his bag. ‘I feel as if anything might happen on a night like this!’

‘We’re really back at the tree at last,’ said Susan. ‘I wish Angela was here—and Barker, too.’

‘Yes. Wouldn’t they love it?’ said Peter. ‘Well, come along, Sue. We’d better get to bed.’

‘To bed—inside the tree-house!’ said Susan, joyfully. ‘It’s too good to be true. No more horrid, unkind Aunt Margaret—no going off to the children’s home—only the dear old tree-house, and Angela and Barker—and the red squirrel.’

The squirrel was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was asleep in his hole. The children looked up at the tree, wondering if they could see how to climb it in the moonlit night. Peter thought they could.

He went up first, and then helped Susan. They left their bags on the ground, but Peter undid them, and took out their brushes and combs, and their night things. He said it wasn’t any good bringing a toothbrush or flannel, because there was no water to use.

‘Then how shall we wash while we’re here?’ said Susan. ‘We must wash sometimes, Peter!’

‘Oh, we may find a stream or a pool,’ said Peter. ‘Come on, up we go.’

They found the rope that hung down to the middle of the tree and, holding on to it, slithered down into the dark hollow.

‘Goodness! It’s *really* dark this time!’ said Susan, half-scared. ‘Light the candle, Peter.’

Peter felt for the odd little mantelpiece and found the matches. He struck one and lighted the candle. At once things became more cheerful, and the candle-flame shone clearly, lighting up the queer little room.

‘There’s my picture on the wall,’ said Susan, pleased. ‘Your clock wants winding up, Peter. It’s stopped.’

‘I’ll wind it,’ said Peter, and he did. He set it back on the mantelpiece. Its

cheerful, loud ticking pleased them both.

‘Now we’ll get undressed,’ said Peter, ‘and put on our night things. We’ll cuddle up on the rugs and cushions Angela brought.’

They undressed and got into pyjamas and nightdress. They brushed their hair well, and knelt down on the rug to say their prayers. Susan said a very special one, because she was so happy about not going to the children’s home.

Then they lay down together on the rugs and cushions. ‘It’s quite warm,’ said Peter, ‘we shan’t need a covering. Susan, isn’t it awfully exciting to be here at night in the tree-house?’

‘Awfully,’ said Susan, cuddling up to him. ‘Are you going to let the candle burn all night, Peter?’

‘Only if you don’t want to be left in the dark,’ said Peter.

‘I’d like to be in the dark,’ said Susan. ‘I don’t mind a bit so long as you’re near me. It would make it more exciting.’

Peter got up and blew out the candle. He felt his way back to the rugs.

The two children lay there, thrilled and happy. Nobody in the world knew where they were, except Angela. They were well hidden. Aunt Margaret couldn’t find them. What a good thing they hadn’t told her about the tree-house!

‘It’s lovely, isn’t it?’ said Susan, with a happy sigh. ‘Oh—what’s that, Peter?’

‘An owl,’ said Peter, sleepily, for he had been awake all evening. ‘It can’t come in here, and anyway it won’t hurt you. Good night, Sue darling. Sleep well in our tree-house!’

Peter could not keep awake. He was soon sound asleep, but Susan lay awake, thinking. Outside was the moonlit wood. If she lay with her head in a certain place, she could peep up through the hole, and spy a silvery moonbeam on some leaves. Otherwise the hole was dark. It was the most exciting night she had ever spent.

Owls hooted again out in the wood. A scratching noise came—perhaps it was a fieldmouse or a little vole. Susan listened, but she wasn’t a bit afraid. Everything was lovely, and she was very happy.

She fell asleep at last, and she and Peter slept peacefully all night through. Daylight came filtering down the hollow of the tree, but they did not wake. Something else came down the hollow, too—the little red squirrel! He had heard people in the night, and he had come to see who they were, now that it was daytime.

He leapt lightly into the tree-room, and looked round. He saw the two children asleep. He ran to Susan, and bounded over her body. She woke up with a jump.

‘Oh—what’s that? Where am I?’ she said, and sat up. Then she knew. She



remembered everything, and she shook Peter to wake him.

‘Peter! Wake up! We’re in the tree-house, and the red squirrel has come to see us. Wake up, do!’

Peter awoke, too, and sat up, yawning. He lighted the candle on the mantelpiece and looked at the clock.

‘Past eight o’clock!’ he said in surprise. ‘I guess Aunt Margaret is wondering where we can be! She’ll be up now and looking for us! What a surprise she’ll get!’

‘Let’s have biscuits and chocolate and give the red squirrel a nibble, too,’ said Susan, beginning to dress. ‘Oh, Peter, isn’t this lovely? I did like waking up in the tree-house. Didn’t you? Wait a bit, squirrel—don’t go away. You’re to have breakfast with us.’

‘We’ll have to see if we can make a little window in the trunk of the tree,’ said Peter, dressing. ‘I don’t like doing everything by candlelight. We’ll try to make one after breakfast, Susan.’

‘Oooh, yes,’ said Susan, delighted. ‘With a curtain of moss or leaves. Here are the biscuits, Peter—and the chocolate. Oh, look the squirrel has smelt the biscuits already! He’s sniffing round the packet—isn’t he lovely?’

‘We’ll go up the tree and have our breakfast,’ said Peter. ‘Come on—I want some fresh air. It’s hot in here. Our bed wasn’t very comfortable either—I vote we see if we can find some heather somewhere, and make a nice springy bed with it. Angela might bring us some.’

They climbed the tree, taking the chocolate and biscuits with them. They sat on the broad branch, with the squirrel beside them. He was quite tame, and nibbled a biscuit eagerly.

‘The lemonade is in the cupboard, just near you,’ said Susan. So Peter got a bottle out of the hole, and took off the top. It was a funny breakfast, but they enjoyed it. The sun shone down, and the wind swayed the branch a little. Everything looked fresh and new in the wood, and the children felt happy.

‘When will Angela come?’ asked Susan, impatiently. ‘I want to tell her all about last night.’

They had to wait till eleven o’clock before Angela and Barker came. Angela had left immediately after breakfast, and had hurried fast, but even so she couldn’t get there any sooner.’

‘Peter! Susan!’ she called, as soon as she came in sight of the tree. ‘Are you there?’

They ran out from the trees, delighted to see Angela and Barker. Angela had her arms full, and had a big parcel on her back, too. Barker once more carried a package which had slipped down under his tummy.

‘Oh, you got here safely!’ cried Angela, full of joy. ‘Good! I’ve brought stacks of food for you. It’s jolly heavy. Help me get this off my back, Peter.’

There certainly was 'stacks of food' as Angela said. She had brought two loaves of bread, some butter, jars of potted meat, jam, packets of biscuits, tins of meat and sardines, fruit and milk, and goodness knows what besides! Peter and Susan stared in amazement.

'Enough to last you for ages!' said Angela. 'I bought most of it with my own money, but Harriet gave me my picnic dinner and tea, and I made her give me an awful lot. Are you hungry? I bet you didn't find that biscuits and chocolate made a very lasting breakfast.'

'They didn't,' said Peter. 'Let's have something to eat now, while I tell you our tale!'

So they feasted on sardines and bread and butter, and Peter and Susan told how they had run off in the moonlight. Angela had not been near their aunt's cottage so she did not know what had happened there when Aunt Margaret had discovered they were missing.

'Anyway, who cares!' she said. 'We've got a perfectly lovely home for you, and I can bring you all the food we want. Did you sleep well in the tree?'

'Yes,' said Peter, 'but our bed seemed a bit hard. We must try to find some heather to put under the rugs. That will make it softer. Barker, that's two whole sandwiches of mine you've had! Without even asking, too! Are there any sardines left, Angela!'

'Two,' said Angela. 'Have them. Barker is a greedy pig. He had an enormous breakfast, because he ate the cat's as well as his own. Look out—he'll eat those sardines, too, if you don't watch.'

'It was a bit stuffy in the tree-house,' said Peter. 'We think we'll try and make a window in the trunk.'

'What a marvellous idea!' said Angela. She jumped up. 'Let's do it at once. Then you won't have to keep lighting the candle, will you?'

They all went to the tree. Peter banged on it, round the trunk, up and down. It sounded very hollow, of course. One piece felt very rotten. Peter banged hard on it. It felt softer than the rest.

'Help me bang here,' he said to the others. 'I believe we could make a hole here.'

After a lot of banging and scraping and pushing a big piece of the trunk fell away and dropped inside the tree! There you are!' said Peter, delighted. 'There's our window. Let's make it a bit bigger.'

They made it about eight inches wide and six inches high. They couldn't make it any bigger, because round the window the tree was too solid. It was only that piece that was rotten.

Peter climbed down inside the tree, and grinned out at the girls. They laughed. It was funny to see his face looking out through the hole. 'It makes an awful lot of difference to the room inside,' said Peter. 'It's quite light now, and

it won't be nearly so stuffy. But we'll have to drape it somehow from outside, in case anyone came by and noticed it. You never know if some rambler might come wandering through the heart of the wood.'

They pulled a spray up from a bush below, and draped it across the hole, so that a branch of leaves hid the window. Anyone from inside could push it aside, or pull it across.

'There! A leafy curtain!' said Susan, pleased. 'I guess we're the only people in all the world that have a room in a tree, with a window in the trunk and curtain for it made of leaves.'

'It's so exciting,' said Angela, with a happy sigh. And it certainly was!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### WHERE IS ANGELA?

The children spent a very happy day indeed. The red squirrel played with them, and soon made friends with Barker, who seemed to think it was some kind of friendly cat. They had plenty to eat and drink, the sun was warm, and there was always the big tree to go and sit in, or slip down into.

‘Let’s see if we can find some heather for our beds tonight,’ said Peter, when teatime came. ‘There’s some more string left, isn’t there, Angela? We could use it so that we wouldn’t get lost, and go a bit further into the wood.’

So, unravelling the rest of the string, they set off to see if they could find a clear space where heather grew. But heather does not grow in a thick wood, so they were unlucky.

‘Still, I know what we can use,’ said Peter, looking round the glen they were in. ‘We can use the fronds of bracken! They would be nice and soft. We could strip off the tough stalks, and pile the fronds under our rugs. They would be nice and springy.’

They wandered about the glen, pulling the fronds of bracken. Susan suddenly put up her head and listened.

‘Surely I can hear water?’ she said. The others listened, too. Yes, it did sound like water. They hurried to where the sound came from. Susan gave a cry of delight.

‘A little stream—going into a pool! Oh look, you others, isn’t it lovely?’

It was lovely. A very clear little stream ran from between the trees into a small round pool, which was fringed with rushes. The ground was rather marshy around it. The stream flowed out at the other end of the pool.

‘This is our washing pool!’ cried Susan, in joy. ‘I wondered where we could wash. Peter, let’s wash now.’

So they washed, without soap or flannel or towel. They used their hankies to dry themselves, and smiled at one another in delight. They even had a washing pool! What fun.

‘This stream is very clear,’ said Peter, examining it. ‘I believe we could use the water for drinking.’

‘No, don’t do that,’ said Angela. ‘Mummy says water out of streams or rivers ought always to be boiled. We can easily boil some. We’ve got a kettle. We could make a fire and boil water whenever we want to. Then we can have tea or cocoa to drink!’

‘Ooooh, yes,’ said Susan. She sat down by the edge of the small green

pool, and listened to the tinkling of the stream that flowed in and out of it. 'I'm so happy. This is a lovely place—a home to live in—a red squirrel to play with—a pool to wash in—a stream to give us drinking water. Oh, Peter, let's live here for ever!'

Peter didn't see how they could possibly live in the woods in the cold winter-time, but he didn't say so, because the two girls looked so happy. Time enough to think of difficulties when they came!

Barker drank noisily from the pool. 'It's funny that animals can drink from the dirtiest of puddles without getting ill,' said Susan, watching him. 'Oh, Barker—you've slipped in! Angela, get hold of him!'

Barker liked the pool. He waded about in it and then came out and shook himself so violently that hundreds of silvery drops flew all over the children.

'Barker, do that on the other side of the pool!' cried Angela. 'You've got very bad manners.'

'Woof,' said Barker, and held out a paw. He seemed to think that shaking hands was the best way of saying he was sorry.

'I'll have to go soon,' said Angela with a sigh. 'It takes a bit of time to get through the wood. It's a long way in, you know. I wish I could stay here with you and sleep in the tree-house. Oh, how I wish I could! But I don't see how I ever can—Mummy would never say yes.'

'I wish you could stay with us, too,' said Susan. 'It's so lovely to cuddle down inside the tree-house.'

'You're very lucky,' said Angela. 'Luckier than I am! Fancy having a home like yours, inside a big tree, with a window in the trunk to look out of. I really do think you are lucky.'

For once in a way Susan too thought she was luckier than Angela. They walked back to the old tree, following the string. 'I *must* go,' said Angela, sadly. 'I really must. Mummy will begin to worry about me if I don't. Goodbye. I'll come tomorrow and bring some more food.'

Susan and Peter watched Angela go off with Barker, following the string. The sun was going down. It slanted between the trees, and the wood grew shadowy. A robin sang a little song somewhere. The squirrel ran up to Susan's shoulder. It really was the friendliest little thing.

'Let's climb up to the top of the tree with a book and some supper,' said Peter. 'We can easily see to read up there. What book do you want, Sue? I'll go down into the tree and get the one you want.'

Susan told him. He swung himself up into the tree and then down into the hollow. He found the books, and then went to the little window. He looked through it and called Susan.

'Hallo, Sue! Here I am, looking out of the window!'

Susan looked, and laughed. She went to the 'window' and looked inside

the tree. It was dark, but she could just make out the things in the hollow. It looked exciting in there. Sort of magic, Susan thought.

‘I’ll pull the curtain over,’ said Susan, and dragged the leafy spray across to hide the window. She heard Peter scrambling up the tree, and climbed up to join him. They sat as high up as they could, eating biscuits, reading their books in the slanting rays of the sun. The wind blew a little, and the leaves rustled and whispered. It was fun to sit up there and look down on the green tops of all the other trees. Certainly their oak was a giant!

They went down to bed when the sun disappeared. It was quite dark in the tree, but not so stuffy as it usually was. ‘That’s because we’ve got an open window!’ said Peter, pleased.

‘We ought to wash and clean our teeth, now that we’ve got a washing pool,’ said Susan.

‘I brought some water from the stream in the old saucepan,’ said Peter. ‘We can use that. We’ve got towels in the bags we packed. I’ll get one out. We forgot about unpacking them.’

‘We can store some of them in the cupboards up the tree,’ said Susan. Peter had lighted the candle and the little room looked homey and cosy. They undressed, washed in the old saucepan, dried themselves, brushed their hair, said their prayers, and then cuddled down on the rugs. They had put bracken fronds under them, and their bed was now much softer.

Peter blew the candle out. A tiny puff of air kept coming in at the window. It was delicious. The two children soon fell asleep, for their day in the open air had made them tired.

They did not wake till quite late the next morning, for it was so dark in the hollow of the tree. Peter’s clock ticked away. Seven o’clock. Eight o’clock! Goodness knows how long the children would have slept if the little red squirrel hadn’t come scampering down again to see if there was any breakfast about!

The children awoke and sat up, yawning. The squirrel chattered a little, and bounded back up the tree. ‘Gracious, it’s past eight o’clock!’ said Susan, peering at the clock in the daylight that came through the window. ‘We must get up, Peter.’

‘No hurry,’ said Peter, lazily. ‘Nothing to get up for till we’re ready. This bed is jolly comfortable now.’

Susan made him get up for she was hungry. They thought they would go to the pool and wash before they dressed properly.

‘We might even bathe,’ said Peter. ‘Come on!’

They went to the pool and stepped into the water. It was rather cold, but delicious. They dipped themselves right in, shouting and gasping. Then they dried themselves with a towel, and ran to the little clearing, where the sun

shone down warmly. They had their breakfast there, with the little red squirrel.

‘You know, we could make some more of those little baskets, from the rushes round our washing pool,’ said Peter. ‘We could give them to Angela, so that when her mother has another sale of work, she would have plenty to sell. That would be a little return for all the food Angela has brought. We can’t pay for it in money, but we could pay for some of it that way.’

‘Oh yes!’ said Susan, eagerly. ‘That would be something to do, too. We can’t do nothing all day long! What’s the time now, Peter? Is it nearly time for Angela to come?’

‘Yes, nearly,’ said Peter. ‘I don’t think she can possibly get here before eleven o’clock. It’s a quarter to now. We’ve just got time to go to the pool again and get some rushes to make baskets. Come on.’

So off they went and soon collected a fine supply of tough, narrow-bladed rushes, just right for weaving little baskets. By the time they got back to the clearing, it was gone eleven o’clock.

They settled down to make the baskets till Angela came. The time went on. Twelve o’clock came and no Angela. Half-past twelve. No Angela.

Peter felt worried. What could be happening? Why hadn’t Angela come? He hoped that her mother hadn’t said she wasn’t to go out for the day today. But she never did say that because as long as Barker was with Angela her mother didn’t mind her spending the day picnicking somewhere.

One o’clock came. No Angela. ‘We’d better have our dinner,’ said Peter, who was feeling terribly hungry. ‘What shall we have?’

‘Sardine sandwiches, bread and butter and jam, and some apricots out of a tin,’ said Susan at once. ‘There’s no lemonade left. We’ll boil some water and make some cocoa, shall we? We’ll make enough for Angela, too, in case she comes.’

Susan fetched some water from the stream. Peter built a fire of dry twigs and lighted it. The kettle was put on to boil. Blue smoke rose up and drifted away among the tops of the trees.

‘I wish Angela was here,’ said Susan, who missed her and Barker very much. ‘These are lovely sandwiches, aren’t they, Peter? I’m awfully hungry.’

They ate a good dinner, and then made cocoa with the water out of the kettle, some tinned milk and cocoa-powder. It tasted delicious. They kept some in a jug for Angela.

‘It’s half-past two,’ said Peter, looking worried. ‘*Why* doesn’t Angela come, I wonder?’

Three o’clock came, but still they were alone. At a quarter to four, when they had almost given her up, they heard the noise of someone coming, and they heard Barker’s voice, too.

‘Here they are!’ cried Peter, and jumped to his feet. ‘Angela! Where have

you been all this time!’

Angela appeared, with Barker at her heels. She carried more packages of food. She tried to smile at them—but, to their horror, the smile broke in half, and her mouth went down. Big tears gushed out of her eyes, and a sob came welling up. Her eyes were red, and her face was tear-stained.

‘Angela! What’s the matter? What has happened?’ cried Susan, in alarm, and ran to her friend. ‘Oh, Angela, you look dreadful. Do, do tell us what’s the matter! Don’t sob like that. Whatever can have happened?’



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### BARKER CHANGES HANDS

Angela couldn't say a word for some time. She was dreadfully upset, and poor Barker leaned himself against her, his melting brown eyes looking as if they would be full of tears soon, too. His tail was right down.

Susan and Peter both put their arms round Angela, Susan was frightened. What could have made Angela so unhappy?

'It's Barker,' she sobbed, at last. 'He's been so very naughty that Daddy says he's got to go. He says he's got to go today, this very evening.'

'Oh, *Angela!*' cried Peter and Susan, in dismay. 'You *can't* let Barker go! What has he done?'

'He climbed on to the chair in Daddy's study and chewed up a whole lot of papers on the desk,' wept Angela. 'He didn't know they were terribly important papers that Daddy had been working on for months. He just chewed them all into bits. Then he was sick.'

'Oh dear!' said Peter. 'Why can't he be good? He's such a very, very dear dog, and has such lovely ways. Angela, I'm sure your father didn't mean it if he said he was to go away. Surely your mother wouldn't let him go?'

'She will. She says Daddy's right,' said poor Angela. 'She says she's given Barker hundred and hundreds of chances, and he's getting worse instead of better. So tonight Daddy is going to take him over to our old gardener and give him to him. But he won't be kind to him, I know he won't.'

'Oh, Angela—and you love him so,' said Susan, with tears in her eyes.

'I do,' said Angela. 'You don't know how sweet he is—how he licks me when I'm lonely and want company—and how he snuggles up to the bend in my knees at night—and how he looks up at me and almost smiles when we go off for a walk together.'

Thinking of these things that Barker did made Angela cry again. The others looked at her in despair. They couldn't imagine the days without dear old Barker. He was one of them. He was their firm and faithful friend, their dear companion and playmate. It was unthinkable that he was to go.

They all sat together, patting Barker and trying to comfort him for he seemed as upset as any of them. He looked up miserably out of sad dark eyes.

'You see, I shall never see him again if he goes to our old gardener, because he lives miles away now,' said Angela, despairingly. 'Daddy said I could give him to somebody if I liked, but there was no one I knew who would take him and be kind to him.'

The same thought struck Susan and Peter at the same moment. It was such a big thought that neither of them could speak for a minute. Then Peter blurted out what he had suddenly thought of.

‘Angela! We’ll have him! He’s the tree-house dog, isn’t he? Leave him with us—and you’ll be able to see him every single day! He’ll still be your dog, of course—but he won’t live with you, that’s all. He won’t be able to sleep on your bed—but at any rate he’ll see you every day, and you’ll see him!’

Angela’s eyes shone. Her tears stopped. She gazed at Peter in the utmost delight, and then she gave him such a bear-hug that he gasped.

‘Peter! That’s the most wonderful idea in the world! Will you really have him here? Oh, isn’t that marvellous? I can tell Daddy I’ve done as he said, and given Barker away to friends.’

‘I thought of that idea, too,’ said Susan, and she hugged Barker. ‘Barker, it’s all right. Don’t look sad any more. You’ll be with us, and you’ll see Angela every day.’

Barker cheered up at once. His tail wagged. He barked and leapt up at Peter and Susan, trying to lick their faces. Then he rolled over and lay on his back with all four legs in the air.

‘He understands. See how pleased he is,’ said Susan. ‘But Barker—you ought to try and turn over a new leaf now and be a good dog. You have made Angela very unhappy because she really thought she was going to lose you.’

Barker looked serious again. Angela rubbed her eyes hard with a dirty little hanky, which was quite wet through. Everything was all right again.

‘Oh, I feel better now,’ she said. ‘Barker will be quite safe with you, even if he does anything naughty. I will bring plenty of food for him each day.’

‘We kept some cocoa for you that we made ourselves,’ said Susan. ‘We built a fire and boiled a kettle. You have the cocoa, Angela. It will make you feel better. We’ll boil the kettle again, and make some more for all of us, if you like.’

‘I’ve brought some gorgeous fruit cake,’ said Angela, suddenly feeling hungry. ‘I didn’t have any dinner at all, so let’s have tea now. Oh dear, I cried and I cried, and I couldn’t come to you this morning because all the time I was begging first Daddy and then Mummy to let me keep darling Barker.’

‘Poor old Angela,’ said Peter. He undid the package of food Angela had brought. There was tea enough for six people there! ‘Chocolate biscuits, too!’ said Susan, ‘Oooh, lovely.’

Angela had a little news to tell them of their Aunt Margaret. ‘I heard Harriet talking about it,’ she said. ‘Your aunt was furious when she found you had run away. At first she was going to shut up the house and go to her sister’s and not bother about you at all. But the matron of the home, who came to fetch

you yesterday, said she couldn't do that. She said she must tell the police and they would look for you.'

'Gracious!' said Susan, in alarm. 'The police! Why should they look for us?'

'To find you, I suppose,' said Angela. 'I heard Harriet say you were too young to look after yourselves, and you'd have to be found. So your Aunt Margaret told the police. That's all I know.'

'Oh dear!' groaned Susan. 'I don't want people hunting for us. We're happy here. Why can't they leave us alone? Do you think they'll come to the woods, Angela?'

'I should think so,' said Angela. 'They know you were fond of going to them. Nobody has asked me any questions about you, which is lucky.'

'We'll have to keep a good look-out, that's all,' said Peter. 'There's one thing—old Barker will growl like anything if he hears someone. He'll warn us all right.'

'We'll have to pop down into our tree-house and hide if anyone comes,' said Susan. 'No one would ever think of children being there. We can keep quite quiet. And we must remember to draw the curtain across the window!'

Angela felt rather sad that night when she left them, because she had to leave Barker behind. He couldn't understand it. The other two held his collar firmly while Angela left. He whined and yelped and barked, and got very angry. But at last he understood that he was to stay with them.

'We'd better put him into the tree-house and stop up the hole he gets in and out by, in case he rushes after Angela,' said Peter. 'It would be awful if he did that, and Angela's father found him and gave him away to their old gardener.'

So they made Barker go in at the 'back door' of the tree, and then Peter stopped it up on the inside by placing one of their bags across it very firmly.

'Sorry, Barker, but you'll have to stay put till you know that you mustn't run away,' said Peter, firmly. Barker was puzzled and cross about it, but he soon settled down, and fell asleep with his nose between his paws.

'Nobody has come to the woods to look for us today, thank goodness,' said Peter, as he and Susan bent down to the pool to wash themselves that evening. 'I wonder if they will tomorrow. We shall have to keep a sharp look-out.'

They went to the tree-house and slipped down into the cosy hollow as usual. It really did seem like home to them now. The clock ticked away on the funny ledge. The picture shone in the candlelight. Barker welcomed them, and made himself quite a nuisance, running round and round.

'Don't, Barker, dear,' said Susan. 'There isn't room for gambollings and caperings in here. Now lie down like a good dog.'

Barker crept over to them when they were half asleep on the rugs. Soon he was safely cuddled into the bend of Peter's knees. Peter liked it.

‘I know Angela will miss you tonight,’ he said to Barker. ‘You feel so nice and comfy there. Don’t wriggle too much or you’ll wake me. Good night, Sue. Good night, Barker.’

There was silence in the tree-house except for the soft breathing of the three of them and the ticking of Peter’s clock. They all slept soundly till the morning, and again a little breeze came in at the ‘window’ and kept away the stuffiness that Peter did not like.

Angela came the next day, looking quite happy again. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘I told Daddy and Mummy I had given Barker to some children I knew and they didn’t ask any questions. They just said they would give me a kitten. As if a kitten could possibly make up for a dog like Barker!’

Barker gave Angela an uproarious welcome. She might have been away for a year, the way he leapt around her and tried to lick every bit of her.

‘He’s been as good as gold,’ said Susan. ‘He hasn’t tried to chew one single thing. And when we washed this morning he got into the pool and bathed, too. He’s a darling.’

They had their dinner as usual in the little warm clearing. Suddenly, in the middle of it, Barker rose to his feet, and growled.

‘What’s the matter, silly?’ said Angela. ‘It’s only the red squirrel. Lie down and eat your bone.’

The red squirrel was up in a tree nearby, watching with bright black eyes, ready to leap down if anyone offered him a titbit.

‘Barker doesn’t growl at the squirrel now,’ said Peter, looking puzzled. ‘He knows him so well. I say—I hope it isn’t anyone coming through the wood!’

‘Perhaps it’s the police—come to look for us!’ said Susan, going pale. ‘Oh, do you think it is?’

Everyone listened, but they could hear nothing except the wind in the trees and a laughing woodpecker. Barker lay down after a bit, and stopped growling, but he seemed to be listening all the time and would not gnaw his bone any more.

The children went on with their picnic. Then suddenly Barker leapt to his feet again, and growled so fiercely that the little red squirrel fled in fright up to the top of the tree. At the same time the sound of distant voices came on the breeze that blew through the wood.

‘It is somebody!’ cried Peter. ‘It is. I can hear their voices. It must be people hunting for us. Quick, we’d better all get into the tree, Barker too. I hope he won’t growl like this all the time, or he’ll give the game away.’

They picked up their picnic things hurriedly, and made for the big oak tree. Up they went, found the rope, and let themselves down into the hollow, Angela too. Barker came in at the back door, which was promptly barricaded by Peter, so that he couldn’t get out. He still growled.

‘Now you must all keep as quiet as mice,’ ordered Peter. ‘You too, Barker. Stop him growling, Angela. This is a very serious moment. I’m going to keep watch out of the window, and as soon as I see anyone I’ll draw down the green sprays of leaves to hide it. Now—quiet!’

Barker stopped growling. The two girls huddled together on the rugs, hardly daring to breathe. The clock sounded very loud. Peter peeped out of the window.

The voices came nearer, and then there came the sound of people making their way through the trees. ‘They’re coming,’ said Peter, and pulled the spray of leaves over the window. ‘Quiet, everyone.’

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### A NARROW ESCAPE

Through the window he had seen a group of people coming, all men. One of them was the village policeman. Peter knew him quite well. It was plain they were searching the woods for the missing children.

‘Hallo! What’s this!’ cried one man, and held up Barker’s bone. He had left it there. ‘A bone. How did that get here?’

‘Some dog brought it, I expect,’ said another man. ‘The two children haven’t a dog. It can’t be anything to do with them.’

‘Well, look here—here’s the top off a ginger-beer bottle!’ said another man. ‘That looks like children, doesn’t it? I’ve a feeling they’re hiding somewhere here. Separate and beat round for half a mile or so. Maybe we’ll come across them. How they get food beats me! As far as we know they didn’t take any with them.’

‘Good thing we’re tidy children and didn’t leave our litter about,’ whispered Peter. He looked out through the window again, and then hurriedly dropped back on the rugs. ‘There’s a man just outside! Don’t make a sound.’

Angela badly wanted to cough. She kept swallowing the cough down, and went almost purple in the face. Susan was trembling with fright and excitement. She held Peter’s hand tightly. Peter was almost trembling, too. They were so near to the searchers, so very near!

The man outside leaned against the big oak tree, took his pipe out of his pocket, filled it with tobacco and began to light it, puffing hard. The smoke drifted in at the tree-window!

Angela wanted to cough again. Barker heard the man moving, and it was too much for him. He gave a low and fierce growl. The man stopped puffing at his pipe and looked round in surprise.

‘Sounded like a dog!’ he muttered. The children heard what he said, and gripped Barker hard. But Barker could not be stopped growling. He growled again.

‘Here’s a funny thing!’ called the pipe-smoking man to another nearby. ‘I can hear a dog growling quite near—but bless me if I can see one at all!’

‘You’re imagining it,’ said the other man, with a laugh. ‘There’s no dog around here!’

‘Yes, but listen,’ said the first man, standing up very straight. ‘That is a dog growling! Sounds as if it comes from this very tree!’

‘You don’t really think there’s a dog shut up in that tree, do you?’ said the

second man, laughing. But he, too, looked puzzled when Barker's growl came again, sounding quite clear.

The children were in despair. They held Barker's mouth tightly shut, but he seemed to be able to growl in his throat, without opening his mouth.

'Maybe there's a hollow in the tree,' said the man. 'It's big enough!'

The children heard this remark in the greatest horror. The next thing would be the men climbing out to see if the tree really *was* hollow!

Peter suddenly took hold of Barker and pushed him vigorously out of the hole, which was on the opposite side of the tree to where the men stood. Barker at once ran round the tree, bared his teeth at the two men, and growled so ferociously that they backed away in alarm.

'There's the dog—but he couldn't have been in any tree!' said the man with the pipe. 'What a bad tempered creature! Who does he belong to?'

'Don't know,' said the other man. 'Let's look at his collar and see his name and address.'

'Oh dear—now they'll find his address, and tell Daddy, and he'll guess I've given Barker to someone in the wood and they'll put two and two together and know it's you!' whispered Angela, in despair.

But Barker would not allow the men to touch him. He growled again, and his white teeth looked so sharp that the men decided not to go near him.

'Come on,' said the man with his pipe. 'He's just wandered into the wood by himself, I reckon. Half wild, I should think, by his behaviour.'

Barker did not go with them when they left. He stood looking after them till they were out of sight, still growling angrily. Peter peeped out of the tree-window, and saw with relief that there was no one about.

'They're gone, for the moment,' he whispered. 'Angela, do you think you'd better slip home while it's safe? They've gone past here now, and you'll be able to get through the wood without being seen. You don't want to be questioned, because if you were you'd find it awfully difficult not to give us away. You can't tell lies about us.'

'Well, I'll go now then,' agreed Angela. 'My goodness, I was afraid old Barker had given us away properly! I suppose it was really impossible for him to stop growling when he knew our enemies were so near. It was a good idea of yours to push him out of the tree, Peter. That man really was beginning to guess our secret!'

'This is much too exciting,' said poor Susan, who felt quite sick now that the man had safely gone. 'Angela, do go before the men come back. We'll look out for you tomorrow.'

'I may not be able to come till teatime tomorrow,' said Angela, climbing up the rope. 'I've got one of my aunties coming to lunch, and I'm sure Mummy won't let me go out picnicking if she's there. Look out for me at

teatime. Call Barker, Peter, or he'll follow me.'

Peter whistled to Barker, very softly. Barker pushed his way in at the hole. Peter stopped up the hole, and looked out of the tree-window to watch Angela leave. 'Goodbye!' he said. 'See you tomorrow!'

Angela sped through the wood, following the string as usual. Peter sat down on the rug with Susan and Barker. It was fairly light in the tree, but not enough to read.

'Let's climb up into the top branches of the tree with our books,' said Susan. We shall be able to see or hear if anyone comes near. Anyway, Barker will growl and warn us.'

So up they went with their books, and spent a very pleasant time being rocked about in the boughs by the strong wind. It wasn't quite so warm as it had been and big clouds were blowing up.

'Looks like rain tomorrow,' said Peter. 'It will be rather exciting being down in the tree-house with the rain pattering all around. We'll play Ludo with Angela then.'

When the searchers went back through the wood they did not go very near the tree-house. Barker heard them and growled fiercely again, but they were not near enough to hear him. Peter saw two or three men in the distance, and he and Susan climbed very quickly and quietly down to the hollow. But nothing happened. No one came.

The next day dawned rather stormy-looking. The trees swung about, and the leaves rustled loudly. 'I'm sure there's rain coming,' said Peter, at dinner-time. 'I hope Angela won't get caught in it.'

Teatime came, but Angela didn't arrive. 'She may have been kept late,' said Peter. 'Perhaps she had to see her aunt off, or something.'

They waited till five o'clock for Angela and then had their tea. They boiled some water to make tea to drink for there was not any lemonade or ginger beer left.

The rain began. It pattered on the leaves of the trees and made a great noise. Susan and Peter retired to the tree-house, lighted the candle, and waited for Angela to come. But she didn't.

'I suppose she wasn't allowed to go out because it looked like rain,' said Peter. 'Well, she's sure to come tomorrow. My goodness, what a storm now! That was thunder, wasn't it?'

It was. A great crash sounded almost overhead and then the rain came down even more strongly than before. One or two drops pattered down into the hollow tree, and made Susan jump.

'One fell on my head!' she said. 'Goodness, is that lightning?'

It was. It tore the sky in half, and lighted up the inside of the tree far more brightly than twenty candles! Susan cuddled close to Peter. Neither of them



was afraid of a storm, but it seemed rather creepy to be sitting inside a tree when thunder and lightning crashed and flashed around.

‘I’m glad Angela didn’t come,’ said Peter. ‘She might have been caught in this. I expect she didn’t even start out.’

But Angela *had* started out! She had set off about a quarter to four, with a lovely tea for them all. She had not even thought it might rain. She slipped off, and ran to the wood. She found the string and began to follow it. But halfway to the tree-house, the string was broken! Angela stared at the broken end in surprise. What had happened?

‘I suppose those men broke it when they were hunting for Susan and Peter,’ she thought. ‘Yes, that’s what must have happened. Bother! Now I must find the other broken end. It will take me ages.’

She didn’t find it. It had slipped away into the bushes, and no matter how Angela hunted she could not find the rest of the string that would lead her safely to the tree-house.

‘Well, I think I know the way now without the string,’ said Angela. ‘I’ve been often enough. I’m sure I know the way!’

So, very foolishly, the little girl set off through the wood without being guided by the string. And, very soon, she knew she was lost!

She stood still in dismay. She didn’t know which way to go. She was in a part of the wood where she had never been before. She knew she was. There was an old stump of a tree she had never seen before.

‘Now I’m lost,’ said Angela. ‘I mustn’t get frightened. I’ll try to make my way back.’

So she turned herself around and went in another direction. Then something wet and cold fell on her head—it was raining.

‘Bother, bother, bother!’ said Angela. ‘Now I shall get awfully wet. I wish I had brought my mac. I wish I was in the tree-house with Peter and Susan. But I’m lost, and the rain is getting worse and worse. The wood is so dark I can hardly see where I am going.’

Poor Angela! She wandered on and on, like a babe in the wood, not knowing where she was going but always hoping she would see the tree-house in front of her. Then the storm broke over the wood, and the little girl cowered down against a tree, listening to the rolls of thunder, and watching the brilliant lightning.

The storm went on for a long time. Angela was tired and wet and cold. She shivered. She was very miserable and longed for Barker.

‘Barker!’ she shouted. ‘Barker! Come to me! I’m shouting and whistling for you. Barker, I want you! I never get lost when I’m with you. Barker, Barker!’

But Barker was too far away to hear, snuggled up in the tree-house. Angela

called and called, and then wandered on again, so tired that her feet would hardly walk straight. She sneezed several times, and shivered.

‘I’m getting a cold,’ she said. Then she began to cry from fright and tiredness. ‘I want Barker! Barker, why don’t you come and rescue me? I’m lost, and I want to be found.’

But nobody came to rescue Angela. At last, tired out, she sank down under a bush, and her eyes closed. But all the time she talked in a little high voice. ‘Dear God, I do want Barker to come. Won’t You send someone to find me? You look after the sparrows, so please look after me, too. I do want Barker to come.’

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### AN ANXIOUS TIME

When Angela did not come back that night, her mother and father were frantic with worry.

‘What has happened to Angela? Where could she be?’ her mother said, a hundred times. She kept going to the door to look for her.

‘It’s pouring with rain, and there is a storm blowing up. Did she take a mackintosh?’ said her father.

‘No. She just slipped off as she was, after she had said goodbye to her auntie,’ said her mother. ‘She must have gone to the woods as usual—by herself, because she no longer has Barker to be with her.’

‘Good gracious! She ought not to go wandering off alone in the woods without Barker now,’ said Angela’s anxious father. ‘She might easily get lost. I always felt she was all right with Barker. He could be very fierce at times, and he adored Angela.’

‘I wish we hadn’t said he was to go, now,’ said Angela’s mother. ‘I’m sure she’s gone to the woods. We had better go and hunt for her. Get the gardener to come too, and our next door neighbour. He knows the woods well.’

The storm was crashing loudly when the little party set off. They were all very worried about Angela. She must be caught somewhere in that dreadful storm. But where, oh where could she be?

They went into the wet woods. They followed this path and that path. They left the paths and hunted here, there and everywhere. They called and shouted, growing more and more despairing as the night went on. Each of them had a torch, and the beams gleamed on dripping wet trees and bushes.

Once the party came fairly near to the tree-house. Their shouts awoke Barker, who was lying in the crook of Peter’s knees. He raised his head and growled loudly.

Peter woke up. ‘What’s the matter, Barker? It’s only the rain. Don’t be silly.’

Susan awoke, too. The children lay and listened to the pattering of the raindrops all around, and now and again there was a plop as one fell into the hollow. It was cosy there in the tree, listening to the rain all around.

Barker heard shouts again and he leapt up and growled so fiercely that he almost frightened Susan. ‘What’s the matter with him?’ she said. ‘Be quiet, Barker. It’s silly to growl at the rain.’

‘Listen and see if we can hear anything beyond the rain,’ said Peter.

‘Maybe it’s someone lost in the wood.’

But the rain drowned every other noise, and the two children could hear nothing. They settled down again, listening contentedly to the pitter-patter of the steady rain outside. They were safe and dry and warm in the tree. It was a lovely place to be.

Barker settled down, too. The shouts were no longer to be heard. The searchers had gone another way. ‘Angela!’ they shouted. ‘Angela! Where are you?’

But no Angela answered. She was lost under a bush, soaking wet, half asleep and half awake, beginning to feel very ill.

And then at last, by pure chance, her father shone his torch down, and saw Angela’s little foot sticking out from the bush! He stared in amazement, and then swung his torch so that he saw the huddled little girl crouching under the bramble sprays. He gave a shout.

‘I’ve found her! She’s here! Come and help me with her.’

Angela’s mother came running, stumbling over the floor of the wood. The gardener came and the next door neighbour. They lifted poor Angela from her shelter, and looked at her. Her eyes were shut. She was talking, but she didn’t know what she said. She had caught a terrible chill, and was very ill already.

‘Poor little girl! She’s wet through,’ said her mother, almost in tears. ‘Take off her wet frock—tear it off—and wrap her round in this warm coat. You carry her, Daddy.’

As quickly as they could they took Angela back home through the wood. Maybe they would have been lost themselves, in the darkness, if the man next door had not been with them. He knew the woods very well indeed, and guided them the right way home, his torch shining steadily before them.

Angela was put to bed in warm clothes. The doctor was called to see her. She was in such a high fever that she did not know what she was saying.

‘She’s been out in the pouring rain, in all that storm, for hours and hours,’ said her mother, wiping away her tears. ‘All alone, too. How I wish we had never said Barker must go away. If he had been with her this wouldn’t have happened.’

‘Who is Barker?’ said the doctor. ‘I notice she keeps saying his name.’

‘He was her dog,’ said her mother. ‘But he was such a bad dog we made Angela give him away. She was very fond of him, so I expect that’s why she keeps talking of him now. But she doesn’t know what she is saying, poor child. She keeps talking about Peter and Susan, too. Those are the little children who ran away, you know. She used to know them. People have been looking for them but they haven’t been found.’

‘It’s a good thing you found Angela when you did,’ said the doctor, packing his things away in his bag. ‘She will be very ill tomorrow—

dangerously ill, I am afraid.'

This was terrible news. Angela's mother did not go to bed all that night. She sat by Angela's bed, holding the hot little hand, and sometimes putting her own cool hand on Angela's burning forehead.

Peter and Susan would have been very worried if they had known what had happened to Angela. But they didn't. They wondered where she was the next day when she didn't come. They looked out for her all day long, and so did Barker. But there was no sign of her. Barker got so restless that Peter was afraid he would run away through the wood to find Angela. So he had to cut off a bit of the rope that hung down the tree and tie Barker up to a small birch tree. Barker was angry. He barked loudly and whined most piteously.

'Sorry, old fellow,' said Peter, patting him. 'But if you *did* go back to Angela's house, you would find yourself given away to someone you wouldn't like—and Angela would never see you again. So you must be patient.'

It was a lonely day without Angela. The children went on with their basket-making, and made a great many. They put them in one of the tree 'cupboards', stacked neatly on top of one another.

They read, sitting in the topmost branches of the big tree. They bathed. They took Barker for a walk on the rope-lead, and he was as good as gold after a bit. He looked at them mournfully out of his big sad eyes, but he didn't try to run away.

When teatime came the two children gave Angela up. Peter was very worried. 'I simply can't think why she doesn't come,' he said. 'Do you suppose her mother has forbidden her to come without Barker?'

'Oh dear, I didn't think of that,' said Susan, dismayed. 'But surely she would come just once to tell us? What shall we do for food, if she doesn't come?'

'Oh—she's sure to come!' said Peter, pretending to be far more certain than he felt. 'We won't worry till tomorrow. It's a good thing we've got Barker for company—though I expect Angela is missing him dreadfully.'

That day came to an end at last, and the children went to bed in the tree-house, feeling rather sad, but hoping that everything would be all right the next day.

'Perhaps Angela has had another aunt to see her, or has had to go and see somebody with her mother,' said Peter as they settled down. 'We'll see her tomorrow, I expect!'

But they didn't. The next day dragged on without any friendly Angela coming through the woods, bringing all kinds of delicious food. The bread was eaten and so were the biscuits and cake. Now there was nothing left but a jar of potted meat, and a few tins.

'This is getting serious,' thought Peter, as he opened one of the tins.

‘Angela knows we would soon be short of food. She must be ill!’

She was indeed ill, very ill. She had a terrible cough, and such a high fever that she still did not know what she was saying. She talked without ceasing of Barker.

‘I want you, Barker,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you come? Don’t you love me any more? You know I’m lost and lonely, but you don’t come. Where have you gone? Don’t go away from me. Barker, where are you?’

Then her hands would feel over the bed for Barker, but, of course he wasn’t there. Her mother could not bear to hear her calling for the dog, and see her feeling for him.

‘If only we knew where Barker was!’ she said. ‘We’ve asked everyone in the village, but not a single child knows anything about Barker—and yet I’m sure Angela said she had given him to some children. If we knew where he was I’d get him back for her.’

‘It would be a wonderful thing if you could,’ said the doctor, gravely. ‘It might save her life. She is so worried and anxious about this lost dog of hers that her anxiety is preventing her from taking a turn for the better.’

Angela’s mother wept. Barker was such a bad dog—but if only she could find him now, she felt she wouldn’t mind what he did. It was a mystery, the way he had disappeared with no one knowing anything about him.

Angela’s little high voice went on and on. ‘Barker, let’s go for a walk, shall we? Don’t lick me all over! Barker, where are you? Oh, don’t keep going away from me! I do want Barker. Peter, Susan, what have you done with Barker? Have you taken him away from me? Have you hidden him in the tree-house?’

‘What’s this tree-house she is talking of?’ said the doctor. ‘If only she could answer our questions—but she doesn’t even hear what we say. What is this tree-house?’

Angela’s mother didn’t know. She couldn’t even ask Peter and Susan if they knew, either, because they had disappeared, and no one knew where they were, although a search had been made for them for days. Where *could* Barker be? If only they knew!

That night Angela was at her worst. She was so weak that she could hardly speak. But still she whispered about Barker and Peter and Susan, and the tree-house. She would not have given the secret away if she had known what she was saying, but she didn’t. Her mother held her hand anxiously and watched her.

How many, many prayers she said for her much-beloved little daughter! There was nothing else she could do now but pray, and ask for help for the desperately ill child.

The doctor came into the room and stood looking down at Angela, who tossed and turned on her pillows. ‘If only we could find this dog she worries

about!’ he said. ‘She might have a chance. Where can he be! If we could get hold of him tonight, she might rally—but as it is, her anxiety is killing her. Barker, Barker, Barker—how she must have loved that dog!’

Barker was far away in the tree-house with Peter and Susan. They, too, had had another anxious day, worrying about Angela. What *could* have happened to her? What was going to happen to them, too, when they had no more food? Would they have to give themselves up and go off in great disgrace to the children’s home?

Peter sighed and tried to settle down and go to sleep, but Barker wouldn’t let him. Barker would *not* go to sleep. Barker sat and howled as if his heart was breaking!

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### BARKER IS GOOD MEDICINE

Peter and Susan could not imagine what was wrong with Barker. ‘Why does he howl like that?’ said Susan, stroking him and patting him. ‘Barker, don’t. Have you got a pain?’

Barker howled again, putting his head into the air and making a most piteous noise.

‘He’s crying,’ said Susan, putting her arms round him. ‘He is, Peter. He’s really crying. That’s how dogs cry. He’s crying for Angela.’

‘But why should he be so upset tonight?’ said Peter, puzzled. ‘He didn’t do this even on the very first night Angela left him here. It’s only tonight he’s so miserable.’

Barker ran to the hole in the tree, but Peter had blocked it up so that he couldn’t get out at night. The dog scraped hard, frantically trying to escape. He howled again and again.

‘He wants to go to Angela,’ said Susan, pulling him back. ‘Peter—you don’t suppose Angela is ill—or in danger, do you?’

‘She might be ill,’ said Peter. ‘And that might be why she hasn’t come at all.’

‘Yes—she must be ill,’ said Susan. ‘And, oh, Peter, Barker knows it! He does, he does! Dogs know an awful lot without being told. He knows Angela wants him, and so he’s howling for her, and wants to go to her.’

Peter couldn’t help feeling that Susan might be right. They both knew that Barker adored Angela, and Angela loved Barker with all her heart. It might quite well be that Barker knew there was something wrong with Angela, and wanted to go to her.

Peter lighted the candle and looked at the clock ticking away on the ledge. ‘It’s nearly half-past ten,’ he said. ‘Awfully late. I don’t know what to do. We can’t let Barker go off by himself—because if there’s nothing wrong with Angela, he may be caught and given away. And if we go with him ourselves to find out, we may be caught!’

‘And given away, too!’ said Susan. ‘Oh dear—what are we to do? Peter, I’m quite, quite sure Angela is ill, and Barker wants to go to her. It would make Angela feel better if she saw Barker. We’d better not think of ourselves. We’d better take Barker and go and find Angela.’

‘Yes. I think you’re right,’ said Peter, giving Susan a hug. ‘You’re a dear. Even though you know it may mean that we’re caught and given away, as you



call it, you want to go and help Angela. All right—we'll go now. It's dark, but we've got a torch and we can follow the string by running it through our hands as we walk. We'd better keep Barker on that bit of rope or he'll run off.'

They blew out the candle, climbed up the tree, and went down to the 'back door' at the foot. Peter pushed away the bag he had blocked the hole with, and let Barker come out. But he held on to the bit of rope, so that Barker could not rush off.

It was dark in the wood. Susan took Peter's hand, feeling a bit scared, and wishing there was a moon as there had been on the night they first went to the wood to live. Peter's torch shone steadily ahead. He found the string and began to run it through his fingers.

It was strange, going through the dark wood, with Barker pulling at his lead and panting as if he had been running for miles. He seemed to know they were going to find Angela for he had stopped howling.

Suddenly Peter gave a cry of dismay. 'The string is broken just here! Bother! I shall never find the other end in the dark!'

They looked all over the place, but they could not find where the string went on again. They looked at one another in despair. Barker whined.

'Peter—surely Barker would know the way and take us safely out of the wood?' said Susan, suddenly. 'Dogs know the way much better than we do. I'm sure Barker would know it without any string to guide him.'

'Yes. I expect he would,' said Peter. 'Well, go on, boy—you lead us, and we'll follow. But whatever you do don't get lost in this wood at night!'

Barker had no intention of getting lost. Didn't his nose tell him the right path, without any possible mistake? Of course it did! Barker could find the way blindfold if only he had his nose to help him. He put it to the ground and eagerly led the way, panting again with excitement.

The children followed—and to their joy Barker took them safely right out of the wood and on to the road they knew so well. Soon they were half-running to Angela's house, pulled hard by the eager Barker. He gave little yelps of excitement as he went. He was near Angela! He would soon see her, surely he would!

He turned in at the gates and they all went up the drive. Barker led them straight to the front door. Now the children were in a fix. What should they do? You can't visit people at past midnight, and bang on the front door!

'There's a light in Angela's bedroom!' whispered Susan, who knew which room Angela had. 'Look—up there. I wonder if she's awake.'

Before they could do anything, the front door opened, and out came the doctor, who meant to go home and get some sleep. He walked straight into the two surprised children! He caught hold of them and held them tightly.

'Now—what's this?' he said sternly. 'What are you doing here at this time

of night? I shall hand you over to the police!’

‘Oh don’t! Oh, please let us go!’ said Peter. ‘We only came to see Angela—and now Barker’s escaped! He’s gone into the house!’

‘*Barker!*’ said the doctor, astonished. ‘Did you say *Barker!* Bless me, was that Barker shooting into the hall like that? Where did he come from? My word, we must get him before he goes off again. We must take him to Angela at once. You come along. We’ve got to sort this out. Coming to the house at this time of night! Most peculiar.’

He pulled the two children indoors. They were frightened. He took them into a study, where Angela’s father sat, trying to read, anxious and sad. He stared in amazement at the two scared children.

‘Do you know who these children are?’ demanded the doctor. ‘I found them on your front doorstep just now—complete with Barker, the dog we’ve wanted for days!’

‘Barker! Is he back?’ cried Angela’s father, amazed. ‘Where is he?’

He was in the one place he longed to be, of course—Angela’s bedroom. He had fled upstairs, and had made his way quietly to his little mistress’s room. The door was ajar. Barker put his nose to the crack and opened it a little wider. He could see Angela lying in bed.

With a joyful bark he flung himself across the room and on to the bed. He covered Angela’s face with wet licks. He whined with happiness, and cuddled himself against her with the utmost joy.

Angela opened her eyes. She smiled a little for the first time since she had been ill. ‘Why, Barker!’ she said. ‘Dear, darling Barker. You’ve come at last. Now I’m happy. Dear, dear Barker.’

Barker sensed that there was something wrong with his beloved little mistress. He stopped licking her. He stopped flinging himself about. He lay down quietly against her, giving a little whine of happiness now and again. Angela’s hand found his head, and began to smooth down his long, droopy ears.

‘I’ve missed you so,’ she said. ‘Stay with me, Barker.’

Barker did stay with her. When Angela’s mother and father and the doctor came to her room, she was fast asleep, with Barker beside her. Angela had a smile on her face, and she looked better already.

‘He’s saved her life,’ said the doctor. ‘He came just in time to help her to turn the corner. Leave him there. He will be her best medicine now. I think she’ll be all right.’

Barker wagged a polite tail at the company, but he did not get off Angela’s bed. He had feeling that nobody would turn him off. His little doggy heart was happy and at peace. He had found the person he loved best in the world, and that was all that mattered to him.

Angela's mother was crying. It seemed as if she could not stop. She tried to smile at the doctor through her tears. He patted her arm.

'Don't worry any more,' he said. 'She'll be all right now. It was a miracle that dog arriving this evening. Now hadn't you better come along and see who came with the dog—two poor scared little creatures, very anxious to know about Angela!'

Angela's mother was surprised. She went downstairs with the doctor and her husband, and there, sitting on the edges of chairs in the study, were Peter and Susan, rather white and very scared.

'Peter! Susan! How is it you are here?' said Angela's mother in amazement. 'Where have you been? Everyone has been hunting for you. And how was it you brought Barker?'

Susan began to cry. Angela's mother took her on her knee, and the little girl cuddled against her, thinking how lucky Angela was to have such a mother as this.

'Don't cry,' said Angela's mother. 'I'm so happy tonight that I don't want anyone to cry. Angela was very, very ill—but now that she has got Barker back again, she will be better.'

'Oh—we wondered if she was ill, because she didn't come to the tree-house,' said Susan.

'The tree-house! Angela kept talking of the tree-house!' said the doctor. 'What is this tree-house?'

The children said nothing for a minute. Then Peter spoke.

'Well—it's a secret really. But I suppose it won't be a secret any more. It's a house in a big old hollow tree. It belongs to me and Susan and Angela—and Barker, of course, and the red squirrel. We had such fun there.'

'And when we ran away we went to live there, and Angela helped us and brought us food,' said Susan, thinking that it couldn't possibly matter telling such a nice kind mother as Angela's. 'Then when Angela didn't come and didn't come, and Barker got sad and howled, we thought he must feel that there was something wrong with Angela—so we came with him here.'

'I'm very glad you did,' said Angela's mother. 'I haven't enough words to tell you how glad I am. We have been wondering where Barker was.'

'You won't give him away to that old gardener, will you?' asked Susan, anxiously. 'It will break Angela's heart now she has got him back again. She does love him so.'

'I know,' said Angela's mother. 'No, I won't give him away to anyone. He shall stay with Angela, however naughty he is.'

'What shall we do tonight!' asked Peter. 'We don't know the way back to the tree-house, because the guiding string is broken—so we—'

'As if I'd let you go back there, all in the darkness!' cried Angela's mother.

She turned to her husband. ‘We must keep these children for a few days, mustn’t we? We can’t possibly hand them over to that aunt of theirs—or to the children’s home. We must see what can be done for them. Angela will love to have them to play with her as soon as she is well enough to sit up. This must be your home for a little while, Peter and Susan!’

‘*Oh!*’ cried Susan, in joy. ‘There *couldn’t* be anything nicer than that!’

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### ANGELA TELLS A STORY

It was lovely to go to bed in Angela's home. Lovely to know that Angela was better, and that Barker wasn't very far off—and lovely to have Angela's pretty mother coming to tuck them up and kiss them both.

'This is what I always wanted,' said Susan, smiling in delight. 'You can't think how often I've prayed for a real mother like you and a real home like this. I shall only have you for a few days, but it will be lovely.'

It was lovely. The children were allowed to see Angela for two minutes the next day. She was much better, but very weak, and tears sprang to her eyes almost every minute. She smiled at Peter and Susan.

'Thank you for bringing Barker back,' she whispered. 'Even though you knew you might be caught, you brought him back for me!'

The two children were shocked to see such a thin, white-faced Angela. Barker lay proudly on her bed, thumping his tail at them. He had not done one single naughty thing yet.

Angela's mother told the police that the two children had been found, and that she was keeping them for a few days. She loved Susan, and she thought Peter was a fine boy, straight and truthful and kind. She loved the way he looked after his little sister, Susan.

'They're two of the nicest children I've ever known,' she told her husband. 'If Angela had had a brother and a sister, I should like them to have been like Peter and Susan. I'm glad Angela chose them as her friends.'

Her husband looked at her. 'Yes,' he said, 'I, too, think they would have made a good brother and sister for Angela—and I don't see any reason why they shouldn't be!'

'Why—what do you mean?' said Angela's mother, in surprise.

'Well—these children have no home, and the only one they had was a miserable one,' said her husband. 'We are rich, and our little girl is an only child, which is not good for her. Why can't we take these two orphans for our own, and give them a home and people to love? Their aunt would not care what happened to them, and their uncle is weak and shiftless. I am sure he would agree to this.'

Angela's mother thought about it for a long time. Then she nodded her head. 'Yes,' she said, 'I think you are right. These children deserve to have kindness and love, and we will give it to them. We will talk it over with Angela first, and you must get in touch with their uncle.'

Uncle Charlie came down to talk the matter over, and the two children were delighted to see him, though they had no idea why he had come. He now had a good job, and, away from Aunt Margaret's scolding tongue, was keeping it, so he said.

'She's ill,' he told the children. 'She fell off a ladder at her sister's and hurt her back. I hardly knew her when I went to see her yesterday, she was so quiet. You must go and see her, too. She's glad enough of company now when she's on her back.'

'I don't want to go and see her,' said Susan at once. 'She doesn't deserve us to go and see her!'

'Ah now, don't you make yourself as spiteful as your aunt well knows how to be!' said Uncle Charlie. 'That's not the way to teach her better, is it now? You be kind to her when she's in pain and trouble, and maybe you'll soften that hard heart of hers.'

'Yes. We'll go and see her,' said Peter. 'Of course we will—if there's time before we go to the children's home, Uncle Charlie. I suppose your job isn't good enough for you to take us back with you, up north, is it?'

'No. But maybe there'll be something better for you than that,' said Uncle Charlie, and this answer puzzled the two children very much.

Angela went into raptures when her mother and father suggested to her that Peter and Susan should come and live with her, and be her brother and sister. She could hardly believe her ears!

'Mummy!' she said, almost pushing Barker off the bed in her excitement. 'Do you mean it? Oh, I'd love it! That's been the only thing I've ever been sad about—not having any brothers and sisters. Oh, *what* will Peter and Susan say?'

'Would you like to tell them?' said her mother. 'We'll leave it to you to break the news to them!'

'When can I tell them?' demanded Angela, who was now so much better that she could sit up for an hour or two on end. 'Today?'

'Now, if you like,' said her mother. 'I'll send them in.'

So she went to find Peter and Susan. 'Angela wants you,' she said, and they ran off to her bedroom. They went in quietly, smiles all over their faces, and were careful not to bump against the bed. Barker greeted them with a joyful bark. He lived in Angela's room, of course, and only left it to go for short walks with Peter and Susan.

'Do you want us, Angela?' said Peter. 'Do you want us to play a game with you?'

'No,' said Angela, her eyes shining excitedly. 'I want to tell you a story—a story with a happy ending.'

'A true one, or a made-up one?' asked Susan.

‘A true one,’ said Angela. ‘Listen.’

Susan and Peter sat on the bed and listened. Barker listened too, his nose on his paws, his eyes on Angela.

‘Once upon a time,’ began Angela, ‘there were two children who lived with a horrid, bad-tempered aunt. And once upon a time there was little girl without brothers or sisters.’

‘It sounds like us and you,’ said Susan.

‘Don’t interrupt,’ said Angela. ‘Well, these three children became friends, and they did a lot of lovely things together. They had a wonderful dog . . .’

‘Called Barker,’ said Susan.

‘And they all used to play together in a secret house in a tree,’ said Angela. ‘Well, one day the two children ran away from their horrid aunt, and went to live in the tree-house together, and the other little girl brought them food. I must tell you that the runaway little girl used to pray and pray for a real mother and a real home, because her mother was dead.’

‘Why are you telling us a story about ourselves?’ said Peter. ‘We know it all!’

‘No, you don’t. You don’t know the ending,’ said Angela, ‘and I do. You wait!’

‘What ending?’ asked Susan, puzzled.

‘Listen and you’ll see,’ said Angela. ‘Well, the two children lived in the tree-house and the other little girl brought them food, and left them her dog. Then one day the other little girl fell ill, and she badly, badly wanted her dog . . .’

‘And the two children brought him,’ put in Susan, who seemed determined to tell the story too.

‘Yes, and the little girl got better, and everyone was glad,’ said Angela. ‘And the little girl’s mother said, “This daughter of ours has no brother or sister. Why shouldn’t we ask the two children to stay here always, and be her brother and sister?” So they did, and it was lovely, and they had a real mother and a real home after all!’

There was a silence. ‘That was a good ending,’ said Peter. ‘A lovely one. But it’s not a true one.’

‘It is, it is!’ cried Angela. ‘Mummy says you can live here with me, and share her and my home with me, if you’d like to. Would you like to? Your uncle says you can.’

Peter and Susan stared at Angela as if they could not believe their ears. Live with Angela! Share her mother? Have her beautiful home for their own? Why, it couldn’t possibly be true!

‘Is it true?’ said Susan, at last, in a funny low voice. ‘Do you mean it?’

‘Yes, I mean it,’ said Angela, and she gave Susan a hug. ‘So you see the

ending of my story is a real one, isn't it! Oh, Peter, oh, Susan—think what fun we'll have together playing in the tree-house again! Maybe Mummy will let me stay a night in it with you, if Barker is with us!

But the tree-house didn't interest Peter and Susan much just then. They stared at one another, hardly able to believe that they were not going to be turned out and sent away to strangers.

'Oh, Peter!' said Susan, with happy tears spilling out of her eyes. 'Oh, Peter! It's what I've always prayed for—and now my prayer is answered, isn't it? You laughed at me, I know—you said I could never have a real mother and a proper home. But we've got one now. Fancy having Angela's mother for ours! We couldn't possibly, possibly have a nicer one.'

Just at that moment Angela's mother came into the room, and heard what Susan said. She was pleased. She kissed Susan and gave her a hug.

'And I couldn't possibly have a nicer family than Angela, Peter and Susan!' she said. 'We'll all be happy together, won't we, and love one another and help one another always?'

It was a very happy moment. They were all half-laughing and half-crying. Barker couldn't understand it. He held out his paw to Angela's mother, and she shook it. Then he held it out to Angela, and then to the other two.

'Barker thinks we ought to shake hands on it!' said Angela, laughing. 'Good dog! You'll like having Peter and Susan as well as me, won't you?'

'Woof,' said Barker, and he thumped his tail on the bed. He gave Angela a very loving look.

'But he says he'll always love you best, Angela,' said Susan, seeing the look. 'Always and always. He's your very own dog, and you're his very own mistress. And you're a very, very good dog now, aren't you, Barker!'

'Woof,' said Barker again, quite agreeing.

That was a happy day—the first of many like it, with the children feeling it was their own home, and that Angela's mother was loving them, as well as Angela.

They live with Angela still, and, on holidays, you can guess where they all go. Yes—to the tree-house, hidden deep in the woods. And there they have as much fun as ever they did before.

As for Barker, he is a changed dog. He has never done anything really bad since he went back to Angela when she was ill. And now we must shake hands with him and say goodbye. 'Woof,' he says, and puts out a polite paw. 'Come and see us at the tree-house whenever you can!'

We would if we could, Barker—*how* we wish we could!



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.  
[The end of *Hollow Tree House* by Enid Blyton]