The Little Princess of Tower Hill

[ILLUSTRATED]

By

L. T. Meade

Illustrated by Murat Ukray

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Contents

CHAPTER I. _____ *8*

HER VERY YOUNG DAYS.

CHAPTER II. _____ *18*

FATHER'S SHORT VISITOR.

CHAPTER III. _____ *28*

SNUBBED.

CHAPTER IV. _____ *37*

THE STABLE CLOCK.

CHAPTER V. _____ *48*

THE EMPTY HUTCH.

CHAPTER VI. _____ *59*

JO'S ROOM.

CHAPTER VII. _____ *72*

IN VIOLET.

CHAPTER VIII. _____ *93*

CHOOSING HER COLORS.

CHAPTER IX. _____ *101*

A JOLLY PLAN.

CHAPTER X. _____ *112*

A GREAT FEAR.

CHAPTER XI. _____ *124*

GOING HOME.

CHAPTER XII. _____ *131*

IN THE WOOD.

CHAPTER XIII. _____ *142*

THANK GOD FOR ALL.

TOM, PEPPER, AND TRUSTY. _____ *148*

CHAPTER I. _____ 149
THE THREE FRIENDS.

CHAPTER II. _____ 152
WHY HE WAS CALLED TRUSTY.

CHAPTER III _____ 161
TOM AT WORK.

CHAPTER IV. _____ 168
IN TROUBLE.

CHAPTER V. _____ 172
THE TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER VI. _____ 180
TRUE TO HIS NAME.

BILLY ANDERSEN AND HIS TROUBLES. _____ *182*

CHAPTER I. _____ 182
BILLY'S BABY.

CHAPTER II. _____ 185
MORE TROUBLE.

CHAPTER III. _____ 191
TOM JONES' TRICK.

CHAPTER IV. _____ 198
WHAT IT MEANT.

CHAPTER V. _____ 200
BILLY'S ILLNESS.

CHAPTER VI. _____ 202
THE END OF HIS TROUBLES.

THE OLD ORGAN-MAN. _____ 209

CHAPTER I. _____ 209
PLAYING FOR LOVE.

CHAPTER II. _____ 214
A FRIEND IN NEED.

CHAPTER III. _____ 221
GLAD TIDINGS.

CHAPTER IV. _____ 225
AT LAST.



"I WILL KNOCK. YOU ARE TO SAY, 'PLEASE IS MRS. ROB-BINS IN?'"—

THE LITTLE PRINCESS

OF TOWER HILL.

By

L. T. MEADE,

Author of "A Sweet Girl Graduate," "The Lady of the Forest,"

"A World of Girls," "Polly", "The Palace Beautiful," etc.

WITH

TEN PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS.

CHAPTER I.

HER VERY YOUNG DAYS.



All the other children who knew her thought Maggie a wonderfully fortunate little girl. She was sometimes spoken about as the "Little Princess of Tower Hill," for Tower Hill was the name of her father's place, and Maggie was his only child. The children in the village close by spoke of her with great respect, and looked at her with a good deal of longing and also no slight degree of envy, for while they had to run about in darned and shabby frocks, Maggie could wear the

gayest and daintiest little dresses, and while they had to trudge sometimes even on little bare feet, Maggie could sit by her mother's side and be carried rapidly over the ground in a most delicious and luxurious carriage, or, better still, she might ride on her white pony Snowball, followed by a groom. The poor children envied Maggie, and admired her vastly, and the children of those people who, compared to Sir John Ascot, Maggie's father, might be considered neither rich nor poor, also thought her one of the most fortunate little girls in existence. Maggie was nearly eight years old, and from her very earliest days there had been a great fuss made about her. At the time of her birth bonfires had been lit, and oxen killed and roasted whole to be given away to the poor people, and Sir John and Lady Ascot did not seem at all disappointed at their baby being a girl instead of a son and heir to the old title and the fine old place. There was a most extraordinary fuss made over Maggie while she was a baby; her mother was never tired of visiting her grand nurseries and watching her as she lay asleep, or smiling at her and kissing her when she opened her big, bright blue eyes. The eyes in question were very pretty, so also was the little face, and the father and mother quite thought that there never was such a baby as their little Maggie. They had christened her Margarita Henrietta Villiers; these were all old family names, and very suitable to the child of proud old county folk. At least so Sir John thought, and his pretty young wife agreed with him, and she gave the servants strict directions that the baby was to be called Miss Margarita,

and that the name was on no account whatever to be abridged or altered. This was very fine as long as the baby could only coo or make little inarticulate sounds, but that will of her own, which from the earliest minutes of her existence Maggie had manifested, came fully into play as soon as she found the full use of her tongue. She would call herself Mag-Mag, and would not answer to Margarita, or pay the smallest heed to any summons which came to her in this guise, and so, simply because they could not help themselves, Sir John and Lady Ascot had almost virtually to rechristen their little daughter, and before she was two years old Maggie was the only name by which she was known.

Years passed, and no other baby came to Tower Hill, and every year Maggie became of a little more importance, and was made a little more fuss about, and as a natural consequence was a little more spoiled. She was a very pretty child; her hair was wavy and curly, and exquisitely fine; in its darkest parts it was nut-brown, but round her temples, and wherever the light fell on it, it was shaded off to the brightest gold; her eyes were large, and blue, and well open; her cheeks were pink, her lips rosy, and she had a saucy, never-me-care look, which her father and mother and the visitors who saw her thought wonderfully charming, but which now and then her nurse and her patient governess, Miss Grey, objected to. All things that money could buy, and all things that love could devise, were lavished at Maggie's feet. Her smallest wishes were instantly granted; the most expensive toys were purchased for her; the most valuable presents

were given to her day by day. "Surely," said the village children, "there can be no happier little girl in all the wide, wide world than our little princess. If there is a child who lives always, every day, in a fairy-land, it is Miss Maggie Ascot."

Maggie had two large nurseries to play in, and two nurses to wait upon her, and when she was seven years old a certain gentle-faced, kind-hearted Miss Grey arrived at Tower Hill to superintend the little girl's education. Then a schoolroom was added to her suit of apartments, and then also the troubles of her small life began. Hitherto everything had gone for Maggie Ascot with such smoothness and regularity, with such an eager desire on the part of every one around her not only to grant her wishes, but almost to anticipate them, that although nurse, and especially Grace, the undernurse, strongly suspected that Miss Maggie had a temper of her own, yet certainly Sir John and Lady Ascot only considered her a somewhat daring, slightly self-willed, but altogether charming little girl.

With the advent, however, of Miss Grey things were different. Maggie had taken the greatest delight in the furnishing and arranging of her schoolroom; she had laughed and clapped her hands with glee when she saw the pretty bookshelves being put up, and the gayly bound books arranged on them; and when Miss Grey herself arrived, Maggie had fallen quite in love with her, and had sat on her knee, and listened to her charming stories, and in fact for the first day or two would scarcely leave her new friend's side; but when

lessons commenced, Maggie began to alter her mind about Miss Grey. That young lady was as firm as she was gentle, and she insisted not only on her little pupil obeying her, but also on her staying still and applying herself to her new duties for at least two hours out of every day. Long before a quarter of the first two hours had expired, Maggie had expressed herself tired of learning to read, and had announced, with her usual charming frankness, that she now intended to run into the garden and pick some roses.

"I want to pick a great quantity of those nice white roses, and some of the prettiest of the buds, and when they are picked, I'll give them all to you, Miss Grey, darling," she continued, raising her fearless and saucy eyes to her governess' face. "Here you go, you tiresome old book," and the new reading-book was flung to the other side of the room, and Maggie had almost reached the door before Miss Grey had time to say:

"Pick up your book and return to your seat, Maggie dear. You forget that these are lesson hours."

"But I'm tired of lessons," said Maggie, "and I don't wish to do any more. I don't mean to learn to read—I don't like reading—I like being read to. I shan't ever read, I have quite made up my mind. How many roses would you like, Miss Grey?"



"I WANT TO PICK THOSE WHITE ROSES."—

"Not any, Maggie; you forget, dear, that Thompson, the gardener, told you last night you were not to pick any more roses at present, for they are very scarce just now."

"Well, what are they there for except for me to pick?" answered the spoiled child, and from that moment Miss Grey's difficulties began. Maggie's hitherto sunshiny little life became to her full of troubles—she could not take pleasure in her lessons, and she failed to see any reason for her small crosses. Miss Grey was kind, and conscientious, and painstaking, but she certainly did not understand the spoiled but warm-hearted little girl she was engaged to teach, and the two did not pull well together. Nurse petted her darling and sympathized with her, and remarked in a somewhat injudicious way to Grace that Miss Maggie's cheeks were getting quite pale, and that she was certain, positive sure, that her brain was being forced into over-ripeness.

"What's over-ripeness?" inquired Maggie as she submitted to her hair being brushed and curled for dinner, and to nurse turning her about with many jerks as she tied her pink sash into the most becoming bow—"what's over-ripeness, nursey, and what has it to say to my brain? That's the part of me what thinks, isn't it?"

"Yes, Miss Maggie dear, and when it's forced unnatural it gets what I call over-ripe. I had a nephew once whose brain went like that—he died eventual of the same cause, for it filled with water."

Maggie's round blue eyes regarded her nurse with a certain gleam of horror and satisfaction. Miss Grey had now been in the house for three months, and certainly the progress Maggie had made in her studies was not sufficiently remarkable to induce any one to dread evil consequences to her little brain. She trotted down to dinner, and took her usual place opposite her governess. In one of the pauses of the meal, her clear voice was heard addressing Sir John Ascot.

"Father dear, did you ever hear nurse talk of her nephew?"

"No, Mag-Mag, I can't say I have. Nurse does not favor me with much news about her domestic concerns, and she has doubtless many nephews."

"Oh, but this is the one who was over-ripe," answered Maggie, "so you'd be sure to remember about him father."

"What an unpleasant description, little woman!" answered Sir John; "an over-ripe nephew! Don't let's think of him. Have a peach, little one. Here is one which I can promise you is not in that state of incipient decay."

Maggie received her peach with a little nod of thanks, but she was presently heard to murmur to herself:

"I'm over-ripe, too. I quite 'spect I'll soon fill with water."

"What is the child muttering?" asked Sir John of his wife; but Lady Ascot nodded to her husband to take no notice of Maggie, and presently she and her governess left the room.

"My dear," said Lady Ascot to Sir John, when they were alone, "Miss Grey says that our little girl is determined to grow up a dunce—she simply won't learn, and she won't obey her; and I often see Maggie crying now, and nurse is not at all happy about her."

"Miss Grey can't manage her; send her away," pronounced the baronet shortly.

"But, my dear, she seems a very nice, good girl. I have really no reason for giving her notice to leave us—and—and—John, even though Maggie is our only little darling, I don't think we ought to spoil her."

"Spoil her! Bless me, I never saw a better child."

"Yes, my dear, she is all that is good and sweet to us, but she ought to be taught to obey her governess; indeed, I think we must not allow her to have the victory in this matter. If we sent Miss Grey away, Maggie would feel she had won the victory, and she would behave still more badly with the next governess."

"Tut! tut!" said Sir John. "What a worry the world is, to be sure! Of course the little maid must be taught discipline; we'd none of us be anywhere without it; eh, wife? I'll tell

you what, Maggie is all alone; she needs a companion. I'll send for Ralph."

"That is a good idea," replied Lady Ascot.

"Well, say nothing about it until I see if my sister can spare him. I'll go up to town to-morrow, and call and see her. Ralph will mold Maggie into shape better than twenty Miss Greys."

CHAPTER II.

FATHER'S SHORT VISITOR.



Ralph's mother was a widow. She had traveled on the Continent for a long time, but had at last taken a small house in London. Sir John intended week after week to go and see his sister, and week after week put off doing so, until it suddenly dawned upon him that Ralph's society might do his own little princess good. Sir John told his wife to say nothing to Maggie about her cousin's visit, as it was quite uncertain whether his mother would spare him, and he did not wish the little maid to be disappointed. Maggie, however, was a very sharp child, and she was much interested in sundry mysterious preparations which were taking

place in a certain very pretty bedroom not far from her own nurseries. A little brass bedstead, quite new and bright, was being covered with snowy draperies; and sundry articles which girls were not supposed to care about, but which, nevertheless, Maggie looked at with eyes of the deepest veneration and curiosity, were being placed in the room; among these articles might have been seen some cricket-bats, a pair of boxing-gloves, a couple of racket-balls, and even a little miniature gun. The little gun was harmless enough in its way; it had belonged to Sir John when a lad, but why was it placed in this room, and what did all these preparations mean? Maggie eagerly questioned Rosalie, the under-housemaid, but Rosalie could tell her nothing, beyond the fact that she was bid to make certain preparations in the room, and she supposed one of master's visitors was expected.

"He must be a very short man," said Maggie, laying herself down at full length on the little white bed, and measuring the distance between her feet and the bright brass bars at the bottom; "he'll be about half a foot bigger than me," and then she scampered off to Miss Grey.

"Father's visitor's room is all ready," she said. "How tall should you think he'd be, Miss Grey?"

"Dear me, Maggie, how can I tell? If the visitor is a man, he'll be sure to be somewhere between five feet and six feet; I can't tell you the exact number of inches."

"No, you're as wrong as possible," answered Maggie, clapping her hands. "There's a visitor coming to father, and of course he's a man, or he wouldn't be father's visitor, and he's only about one head bigger than me. He's very manly, too; he likes cricket, and racket, and boxing, and firing guns. His room is full of all those 'licious things. Oh, I wish I was a man too. Miss Grey, darling, how soon shall I be growed up?"

"Not for a long, long time yet. Now do sit straight, dear, and don't cross your legs. Sit upright on your chair, Maggie, like a little lady. Here is your hemming, love; I have turned down a nice piece for you. Now be sure you put in small stitches, and don't prick your finger."

These remarks and these little injunctions always drew a deep frown between Maggie's arched brows.

"Sewing isn't meant for rich little girls like me," she said. "I'm not going to sew when I grow up; I know what I'll do then. I know quite well; when I'm tired I'll sit in an easy-chair and eat lollipops, and when I'm not tired I'll ride on all the wildest horses I can find, and I'll play cricket, and fire guns, and fish, and—and—oh, I wish I was grown up."

Miss Grey, who was by this time quite accustomed to Maggie's erratic speeches, thought it best to take no notice whatever of her present remarks. Maggie would have liked her to argue with her and remonstrate; she would have pre-

ferred anything to the calm and perfect stillness of the governess. She was allowed to talk a little while she was at her hemming, and she now turned her conversation into a different channel.

"Miss Grey," she said, "which do you think are the best off, very rich little only children girls, or very poor little many children girls?"

"Maggie dear," replied her governess, "you are asking me, as usual, a silly question. The fact of a little girl being rich and an only child, or the fact of a little girl being poor and having a great many brothers and sisters, has really much less to do with happiness than people think. Happiness is a very precious possession, and sometimes it is given to people who look very pale and suffering, and sometimes it is denied to those who look as if they wanted for nothing."

"That's me," said Maggie, uttering a profound sigh. "I'm rich and I want for nothing, and I'm the mis'rable one, and Jim, the cripple in our village, is poor, and he hasn't got no nice things, and he's the happy one. Oh, how I wish I was Jim the cripple."

"Why, Maggie, you would not surely like to give up your dear father and mother to be somebody else's child."

"No, of course not. They'd have to be poor too. Mother would have to take in washing and father—I'm afraid father would have to put on ragged clothes, and go about begging

from place to place. I don't think Jim, the cripple, has any father, but I couldn't do without mine, so he'd have to be a beggar and go about from place to place to get pennies for mother and me. We'd be darling and poor, and we couldn't afford to keep you, Miss Grey, and I wouldn't mind that at all, 'cause then I need never do reading and hemming, and I'd be as ignoram as possible all my days."

Just at this moment somebody called Maggie, and she was told to put on her out-door things, and to go for a drive with her mother in the carriage.

Maggie was a very sharp little girl, and she could not help noticing a certain air of expectancy on Lady Ascot's face, and a certain brightening of her eyes, particularly when Maggie, in her usual impetuous fashion, asked eager questions about the very short gentleman visitor who was coming to stay with father.

"He's not four feet high," said Maggie. "I am sure I shall like him greatly; he'll be a sort of companion to me, and I know he must be very brave."

"Why do you know that, little woman?" asked Lady Ascot in an amused voice "Oh, 'cause, 'cause—his gun, and his fishing-tackle, and his boxing-gloves have been sent on already. Of course he must be brave and manly, or father would have nothing to say to him. But as he's only three inches taller than me, I'm thinking perhaps he'll be tired

keeping up with father's long steps, when they go out shooting together; and so perhaps he will really like to make a companion of me."

"I should not be surprised, Maggie—I should not be the least surprised, and now I'm going to tell you a secret. We are going at this very moment to drive to Ashburnham station to meet father and his gentleman visitor."

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Maggie, "and do you know the visitor? Have you seen him before? What is his name?"

"His name is Ralph, and though I have heard a great deal about him, it so happens I have never seen him."

"Mr. Ralph," repeated Maggie, softly; "it's a nice short name, and easy to remember. I think Mr. Ralph is a very good name indeed for father's little tiny gentleman visitor."

All during their drive to Ashburnham Maggie chattered, and laughed, and wondered. Her bright little face looked its brightest, and her merry blue eyes quite danced with fun and happiness. No wonder her mother thought her a most charming little girl, and no wonder the village children looked at the pretty and beautifully dressed child with eyes of envy and admiration!

When they reached Ashburnham station, Lady Ascot got out of the carriage, and taking Maggie's hand in hers, went on the platform. They had scarcely arrived there before the