

The Doll's House – Pre-Intermediate Level

When dear old Mrs Hay went back to town after staying with the Burnells she sent the children a large doll's house. Aunt Beryl told the man who brought it to leave it in the courtyard. There it stayed, sitting on two wooden boxes. It was safe from the weather, for it was summer. And perhaps the smell of paint would have gone off by the time it had to be taken in. For, really, the smell of paint coming from it was quite enough to make anyone seriously ill.

When the packaging was taken off, there stood the Doll's house. It was painted dark green and the two little chimneys, stuck on to the roof, were painted red and white. The door was bright yellow and looked like a little piece of candy. It had four windows, real windows, and tiny steps in front of the door.

But wonderful, wonderful little house! Who could possibly mind the smell. It was part of what made it so special, part of the newness.

“Open it quickly, someone!”

The catch at the side was stuck fast. Pat opened it with his pocket-knife, and the front of the house swung back like a door. There you were, able to look at one and the same moment into the living room and dining room, the kitchen and the two bedrooms. That is the way for a house to open! Why don't all houses open like that? How much more exciting than looking

through the front door and seeing a hat stand and two umbrellas! That is, isn't it, what you really want to know about a house when you put your finger on the door bell.

"Oh!" The Burnell children sounded as though they couldn't believe what they saw. It was too wonderful; it was too much for them. They had never seen anything like it in their lives. All the rooms were wall papered. There were pictures on the walls, painted on the paper, with gold frames. Red carpet covered all the floors other than the kitchen. There were large red chairs in the living room, green in the dining room. There were tables, beds with real blankets and pillows, a baby's bed, a stove, a cupboard with tiny plates and a big jug. But what Kezia liked more than anything, what she liked frightfully, was the lamp. It stood in the middle of the dining room table, an very beautiful little golden lamp with a white globe. It was even filled all ready for lighting, though, of course, you couldn't light it. But there was something inside that looked like oil and moved when you shook it.

The father and mother dolls sat in the living room, with arms and legs stuck out as though they had fallen down. Their two little children were sleeping upstairs. They were really too big for the doll's house and didn't look as though they should be there. But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, "I live here." The lamp was real.

The Burnell children could not walk to school fast enough the next morning. They could not wait to tell

everybody, to describe, to say how proud they were, about their doll's house before the school bell rang.

"I'm to tell," said Isabel, "because I'm the oldest. And you two can talk more about it after. But I'm to tell first."

There was nothing to answer. Isabel always told them what to do, but she was always right. And Lottie and Kezia knew very well the powers that went with being the oldest. They walked through the thick grass along the edge of the road edge and said nothing.

"And I'm to choose who's to come and see it first. Mother said I might."

Their mother had said that while the doll's house stood in the courtyard they might ask the girls at school, two at a time, to come and look. Not to stay to tea, of course, or to come walking about through the house. But just to stand quietly in the courtyard while Isabel pointed out the beauties, and Lottie and Kezia looked pleased.

Although they walked as fast as they could, the bell had begun to ring by the time they reached school. They only just had time to take off their hats and get into line before names were called. Isabel tried to make up for it by looking very important. She said quietly to the girls near her, "Got something wonderful to tell you at play time."

Play time came and the girls of her class were all around Isabel. They nearly fought to put their arms around her, to walk away with her, to say nice things

to her and be her special friend. She held quite a court under the huge trees at the side of the play ground. Pushing each other and laughing, the little girls were all up close to her.

The only two who stayed outside the group were the two who were always outside, the little Kelveys. They knew better than to come anywhere near the Burnells.

The school the Burnell children went to was not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen if there had been any choice. But there was none. It was the only school for miles. And because of this all the girls of the neighbourhood, daughters of the Judge, the doctor, the shop-keeper, and nearby farmers, were forced to mix together. Not to speak of there being the same number of rude, unpleasant little boys as well.

But the line had to be drawn somewhere. It was drawn at the Kelveys. Many of the children, including the Burnells, were not allowed even to speak to them. They walked past the Kelveys with their heads in the air. And as the Burnells set the fashion in many things, no one else would talk to the Kelveys. Even the teacher had a special voice for them. And she had a special smile for the other children when Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with some common looking flowers she had picked from the side of the road.

They were the daughters of a small, energetic woman who worked hard all day going about from house to get washing that she would do at home in the evening. This was bad enough. But where was Mr Kelvey? Nobody knew for certain. But everybody said he was

in prison. So they were the daughters of a washerwoman and a prisoner. Very nice company for other people's children! And they looked it.

Why Mrs Kelvey made them look so different was hard to understand. The truth was that they were dressed in "bits" given to her by the people for whom she worked.

Lil, for example, was a large girl with nothing special about her other than the big brownish spots on her face. She came to school in a dress made from the Burnells' green table cloth, with large red sleeves from the Logans' curtains. Her hat was once owned by Miss Lecky who ran the post office. It was turned up at the back and had a large red feather on the side. What a little boy she looked! It was impossible not to laugh.

And her little sister, our Else, wore a long white dress that looked a little like a night dress, and little boy's boots. But whatever our Else wore she would have looked strange. She was a short, very thin child with short hair and very large, serious eyes. Nobody had ever seen her smile, and it was unusual for her to speak. She went through life walking with Lil, holding on to a piece of her skirt. Where Lil went, our Else followed. In the school play ground, on the road going to and from school, there was Lil walking in front and our Else holding on behind. When she wanted anything, or when she was tired, our Else pulled on the dress, and Lil stopped and turned round. The Kelveys never failed to understand each other.

Now they stood on the outside of the group of little girls; you couldn't stop them listening. One of the group turned around with a look on their face that showed she did not like. Lil, as usual, gave her silly, embarrassed smile. Our Else only looked.

And Isabel's voice, so very proud, went on telling. The carpet caused a lot of interest, but so did the beds with real blankets and pillows, and the stove.

When she finished Kezia broke in. "You've forgotten the lamp, Isabel."

"Oh, yes," said Isabel, "and there's a tiny little lamp, all made of yellow glass, with a white globe that stands on the dining room table. You couldn't tell it from a real one."

"The lamp's best of all," cried Kezia. She thought Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp. But nobody was listening to her. Isabel was choosing the two who were to come back with them that afternoon and see it. She chose Emmie Cole and Lena Logan. But when the others knew that they would all be able to see it, they couldn't be nice enough to Isabel. One by one they put an arm around her and walked off together. They had something to say to her which they did not want other people to hear. "Isabel's my friend."

The little Kelveys moved away forgotten. There was nothing more for them to hear.

Days passed, and as more children saw the doll's house, the fame of it grew. It became the one subject, the thing everyone wanted to talk about. The one

question was, "Have you seen Burnells' doll's house? Oh, isn't it lovely!" "Haven't you seen it? Oh dear! "

Even the lunch hour was given up to talking about it. The little girls sat under the trees eating their sandwiches while always, as near as they could get, sat the Kelveys. "Mother," said Kezia, "can't I ask the Kelveys just once?"

"Certainly not, Kezia."

"But why not?"

"Run away, Kezia; you know quite well why not."

At last everybody had seen it but them. On that day the subject was talked about less often. It was lunch hour and the children stood together under the trees. As they looked at the Kelveys eating, always by themselves, always listening, they started to talk about them.

"Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up," Emmie Cole said quietly to the others.

"Oh! How terrible!" said Isabel Burnell, and she made eyes at Emmie.

Emmie nodded to Isabel as she'd seen her mother do. "It's true. It's true!" she said.

Then Lena Logan's little eyes opened wide. "Shall I ask her?" she said.

"No you won't," said Jessie May.

"Why, I'm not frightened," said Lena. "Watch! Watch me! Watch me now!" And she walked slowly over to

the Kelveys, laughing quietly to herself behind her hand.

Lil looked up from her lunch. She put the rest quickly away. Our Else stopped eating. The other girls had stopped talking. What was coming now?

“Is it true you’re going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?” laughed Lena.

Lil did not answer, and gave her silly, embarrassed smile. She didn’t seem to mind the question at all. What a win for Lena! The other girls began to laugh quietly.

Lena couldn’t stand not being answered. “Yes, and your father’s in prison!” she said, in a voice designed to hurt the Kelveys.

This was such a wonderful thing to have said that the little girls ran away in a body. They were deeply, deeply excited, and feeling very happy about what had happened. Someone found a long rope, and they began skipping. And never did they skip so high, or run in and out so fast, as on that morning.

In the afternoon Pat called for the Burnell children and drove them home. There were visitors. Isabel and Lottie, who liked visitors, went upstairs to change out of their school uniforms. But Kezia went out at the back. Nobody was about and she began to swing on one of the big white gates of the courtyard. Looking along the road, she saw the shapes of two people far away. They grew bigger; they were coming towards her. Now she could see that one was in front and one

close behind. Now she could see that they were the Kelveys. Kezia stopped swinging. She got off the gate as if she was going inside, then stopped. The Kelveys came nearer. Kezia climbed back onto the gate. She had made up her mind, and swung out.

“Hello,” she said to the passing Kelveys.

They were so surprised that they stopped. Lil gave her silly smile. Our Else just looked.

“You can come and see our doll’s house if you want to,” said Kezia. But at that Lil turned red and shook her head quickly.

“Why not?” asked Kezia.

“Your mother told our mother that you weren’t to speak to us,” said Lil sadly.

“Oh, well,” said Kezia. She didn’t know what to say. “It doesn’t matter. You can come and see our doll’s house all the same. Come on. Nobody’s looking.”

But Lil shook her head still harder.

“Don’t you want to?” asked Kezia.

Suddenly there was a pull at Lil’s skirt. She turned round. Our Else was looking at her with big, hopeful eyes. She wanted to go. For a moment Lil looked at our Else as if she wasn’t sure what to do. But then our Else pulled her skirt again. She started to walk. Kezia led the way. Like two little lost cats they followed across the courtyard to where the doll’s house stood.

“There it is,” said Kezia.

For a moment no one moved. Lil breathed loudly; our Else was still as stone.

“I’ll open it for you,” said Kezia kindly. She opened it up and they looked inside.

“There’s the living room and the dining room, and that’s the...”

“Kezia!”

Oh, what a fright they got!

“Kezia!”

It was Aunt Beryl’s voice. They turned round. At the back door stood Aunt Beryl, looking as if she couldn’t believe what she saw.

“How could you ask the little Kelveys into the courtyard?” she said in a cold, very angry voice. “You know as well as I do, you’re not allowed to talk to them.”

She stepped into the courtyard and waved them away as if they were chickens. “Run away, children, run away at once,” she called, cold and proud. “And don’t come back again. Off you go now!”

They did not need telling twice. Lil’s face turned red with shame. She put an arm around our Else like a mother and, walking like this, they crossed the big courtyard and went out through the white gates.

“You are a very naughty girl for not doing as you have been told!” Aunt Beryl said sharply to Kezia, as she noisily closed the doll’s house.

Aunt Beryl had had a bad day. A frightening letter had come from Willie Brent. It said that if she did not meet him that evening, he'd come to the front door and ask the reason why! But now that she had frightened those little rats of Kelveys away and angrily told Kezia how bad she had been, her heart felt lighter. That terrible pressure was gone. She went back to the house happily.

When the Kelveys were where the Burnells could no longer see them, they sat down to rest by the side of the road. Lil's face was still red. She took off the hat with the feather and held it on her knee. Dreamily they looked over the fields, past the stream, to the group of trees where Logan's cows stood waiting to be milked.

What were their thoughts? Soon our Else moved up closer to her sister, but now she had forgotten the angry woman. She put out a finger and touched her sister's feather; she smiled her rare smile.

"I saw the little lamp," she said, softly.

Then both were silent once more.