

The door closed. Lina hurried into her own home to report.

A messenger was sent round at once, but young Mrs. Lovett begged to be allowed to keep Minnie for a little while. So a clean pinafore was sent and Minnie stayed on with her neighbours, and, I think, had tea with cake and jam, and certainly enjoyed herself thoroughly, captivating her charming hostess by her clever chat and bright social instincts, while Lina had bread and "scrapes" (as bread thinly buttered was popularly called) and very watery tea up in the nursery.

Minnie came back delighted with her new connection, who had shown her wonderful scrap-books and pictures.

Very friendly relations were established between the newly married Lovetts and the little Molletts. Lina too was asked to tea, and remembers the scrap-books to this day.

One picture especially impressed both her and Minnie lastingly; it represented a bad man, committing a wicked murder.

He thinks he is alone—but an immense and awful Eye is watching him.

On through a series of strange efforts to hide, the Eye pursues him, until he is brought to justice.

Mrs. Lovett kindly explained the meaning of this to us, and it would often recur to our mental view when the candle was put out and we were tucked up for quiet rest.

The father's parents owned a country house in Buckinghamshire to which the little grandchildren were often invited.

Here were joys indeed!

There were lawns in Goldhill, spreading trees and gardens.

There were roses and lavender, fluffy chicks and ducklings.

There was "Shag," a pony you could ride round and round the fields; there were kind aunts and little cousins—and in the vegetable garden were bees—on whose strange doings "Bassett" the gardener would discourse while you listened awestruck, and there were ants, whom you could watch working—surreptitiously feeding them with biscuit crumbs—a proceeding Bassett disapproved of, "for they do a deal of mischief, Miss!"

Here in Goldhill Minnie spent many happy days, and here was her home for years.

She was the darling of her grandmother and of her aunts—of these Aunt Jane was her ideal to the end of her life.

Another charming resort, to which the sisters were often invited, was in Northfleet, Kent, the home of their father's old tutor, Mr. Sheer—a clever student of natural science and friend of their mother's brother, Dr. Berthold Seemans, the botanist.

The latter's little daughter Hildegard also lived with the Sheers and became the adopted sister of the little Molletts.

Mr. and Mrs. Sheer were exceedingly kind to their small guests, but both believed in constant and suitable occupation for children.

So at stated hours Minnie, Hildegard and Lina were settled round a large deal table in a sunny room, overlooking the garden.

Each child had a paint-box, paper, paint-brushes, a glass of water, a rag and the stern recommendation not to suck the brush.

"Paints are poison, you know!"

Industriously Minnie, Hildegard and Lina produced their early art-work in happy concentration, drawing subjects that suited their fancy (a system, by the by, supposed to be absolutely modern by the young things of 1930!).

Minnie at this period leant to "harems," possibly under the influence of the Arabian nights.

Anyhow, as Minnie drew harems we all followed lead.

We too drew and coloured *harems*—beautiful ladies in bloomers, lounging on cushioned settees in marble halls, in the midst of which fountains played, while slaves, black and gaudily garbed, handed round refreshments or fanned the idlers.

Minnie prompted and corrected, where our total ignorance of local customs and colouring in the regions of harems made such aid imperative.

Never were academicians, preparing for certain triumphs in an official exhibition, happier or more inspired than we were upon our fancies, especially as Mr. Sheer shared with Plato the pleasing theory, that "the best is hardly good enough for children," and provided us with limitless foolscap, whereas at home old envelopes were considered quite good enough for the children's "scribbles," and a half sheet of letter-paper was a nursery treasure.

No Abblett had arisen to champion the cause of the infant genius. No Royal School of Drawing fostered their or her primitive essays in art. Children's scribbles were "litter," and their proper place the waste-paper basket.

"And don't mess more than you can help."

Not so at the Sheers!

Here was the rapture of roaming over a whole sheet of outspread foolscap—and more at hand! This rapture was suddenly interrupted by Hildegard.

"I am going to die," she remarked quite calmly, "I sucked my paint-brush!"

Minnie and Lina stopped painting and regarded the victim.

Minnie was the first to recover from the shock.

"What colour was it you sucked?" she asked.

"Green," replied Hildegard.

"Yes," said Minnie, "that is the most poisonous of all."

Hilda (as she was generally called) acquiesced. "I shall go to heaven," she hopefully observed, "and there I shall play with the angels, but before I go I must make my will. People always do before they die. It is the proper thing to do."

For Hildegard had been carefully taught and respected social duties all through life.

"I shall leave Minnie my big wax doll. Lina will have my doll's house and my paints."

I do not know if the spirit of a Borgia had passed into the little Molletts, but I do know that they thought with a thrill of that beautiful doll and perfect doll's house. They confessed to this unrepentantly a lifetime later.

"I shall die in the night," Hilda said. "Don't tell anyone. I don't want to fuss. Let's go on painting."

And they did, until called to put away their things and wash their hands for tea. All three kept the dreadful secret and went to rest as usual, perhaps kissing Hilda rather more demonstratively than on former occasions—*for the last time!*

Next morning Minnie and Lina were up early, thinking of their cousin playing with the angels, and also of the beautiful toys she would not want in heaven—when, down the staircase, in rosy health, tripped Hildegard, joyous and fresh! No doll!—no doll's house!—but still pleasant compensations: "Paints were not deadly, whatever grown-ups might say!" Also Hilda could help build a house on the waste land at the end of the garden.

Hie and away, to work at it after breakfast!

The hut was built, under Minnie's direction, as usual. Four large branches were the pillars of the house, and, oh! the work of making them stand at all!

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)