

P.L. Travers. Mary Poppins. *Odyssey*
Classic: Orlando, 1981 (1934).

CHAPTER

I

EAST WIND

IF YOU WANT to find Cherry-Tree Lane all you have to do is ask the Policeman at the cross-roads. He will push his helmet slightly to one side, scratch his head thoughtfully, and then he will point his huge white-gloved finger and say: "First to your right, second to your left, sharp right again, and you're there. Good-morning."

And sure enough, if you follow his directions exactly, you *will* be there—right in the middle of Cherry-Tree Lane, where the houses run down one side and the Park runs down the other and the cherry-trees go dancing right down the middle.

If you are looking for Number Seventeen—and it is more than likely that you will be, for this book is all about that particular house—you will very soon find it. To begin with, it is the smallest house in the Lane. And besides that, it is the only one that is rather dilapidated and needs a coat of paint. But Mr. Banks, who owns it, said to Mrs. Banks that she

could have either a nice, clean, comfortable house or four children. But not both, for he couldn't afford it.

And after Mrs. Banks had given the matter some consideration she came to the conclusion that she would rather have Jane, who was the eldest, and Michael, who came next, and John and Barbara, who were Twins and came last of all. So it was settled, and that was how the Banks family came to live at Number Seventeen, with Mrs. Brill to cook for them, and Ellen to lay the tables, and Robertson Ay to cut the lawn and clean the knives and polish the shoes and, as Mr. Banks always said, "to waste his time and my money."

And, of course, besides these there was Katie Nanna, who doesn't really deserve to come into the book at all because, at the time I am speaking of, she had just left Number Seventeen.

"Without by your leave or a word of warning. And what am I to do?" said Mrs. Banks.

"Advertise, my dear," said Mr. Banks, putting on his shoes. "And I wish Robertson Ay would go without a word of warning, for he has again polished one boot and left the other untouched. I shall look very lopsided."

"That," said Mrs. Banks, "is not of the least importance. You haven't told me what I'm to do about Katie Nanna."

"I don't see how you can do anything about her since she has disappeared," replied Mr. Banks, "But if it were me—I mean I—well, I should get somebody to put in the *Morning Paper* the news that Jane and Michael and John and Barbara Banks (to say nothing of their Mother) require the best possible Nannie at the lowest possible wage and at once. Then I should wait and watch for the Nannies to queue up outside the front gate, and I should get very cross with them for holding up the traffic and making it necessary for me to give the policeman a shilling for putting him to so much trouble. Now I must be off. Whew, it's as cold as the North Pole. Which way is the wind blowing?"

And as he said that, Mr. Banks popped his head out of the window and looked down the Lane to Admiral Boom's house at the corner. This was the grandest house in the Lane, and the Lane was very proud of it because it was built exactly like a ship. There was a flagstaff in the garden, and on the roof was a gilt weathercock shaped like a telescope.

"Ha!" said Mr. Banks, drawing in his head very quickly. "Admiral's telescope says East Wind. I thought as much. There is frost in my bones. I shall wear two overcoats." And he kissed his wife absent-mindedly on one side of her nose and waved to the children and went away to the City.



Now, the City was a place where Mr. Banks went every day—except Sundays, of course, and Bank Holidays—and while he was there he sat on a large chair in front of a large desk and made money. All day long he worked, cutting out pennies and shillings and half-crowns and threepenny-bits. And he brought them home with him in his little black bag. Sometimes he would give some to Jane and Michael for their money-boxes, and when he couldn't spare any

he would say, "The Bank is broken," and they would know he hadn't made much money that day.

Well, Mr. Banks went off with his black bag, and Mrs. Banks went into the drawing-room and sat there all day long writing letters to the papers and begging them to send some Nannies to her at once as she was waiting; and upstairs in the Nursery, Jane and Michael watched at the window and wondered who would come. They were glad Katie Nanna had gone, for they had never liked her. She was old and fat and smelt of barley-water. Anything, they thought, would be better than Katie Nanna—if not *much* better.

When the afternoon began to die away behind the Park, Mrs. Brill and Ellen came to give them their supper and to bath the Twins. And after supper Jane and Michael sat at the window watching for Mr. Banks to come home, and listening to the sound of the East Wind blowing through the naked branches of the cherry-trees in the Lane. The trees themselves, turning and bending in the half light, looked as though they had gone mad and were dancing their roots out of the ground.

"There he is!" said Michael, pointing suddenly to a shape that banged heavily against the gate. Jane peered through the gathering darkness.

"That's not Daddy," she said. "It's somebody else."

Then the shape, tossed and bent under the wind, lifted the latch of the gate, and they could see that it belonged to a woman, who was holding her hat on with one hand and carrying a bag in the other. As they watched, Jane and Michael saw a curious thing happen. As soon as the shape was inside the gate the wind seemed to catch her up into the air and fling her at the house. It was as though it had flung her first at the gate, waited for her to open it, and then had lifted and thrown her, bag and all, at the front door. The watching children heard a terrific bang, and as she landed the whole house shook.

"How funny! I've never seen that happen before," said Michael.

"Let's go and see who it is!" said Jane, and taking Michael's arm she drew him away from the window, through the Nursery and out on to the landing. From there they always had a good view of anything that happened in the front hall.

Presently they saw their Mother coming out of the drawing-room with a visitor following her. Jane and Michael could see that the newcomer had shiny black hair—"Rather like a wooden Dutch doll," whispered Jane. And that she was thin, with large feet and hands, and small, rather peering blue eyes.



*Holding her hat on with one hand and carrying
a bag in the other*

"You'll find that they are very nice children," Mrs. Banks was saying.

Michael's elbow gave a sharp dig at Jane's ribs.

"And that they give no trouble at all," continued Mrs. Banks uncertainly, as if she herself didn't really believe what she was saying. They heard the visitor sniff as though *she* didn't either.

"Now, about references——" Mrs. Banks went on.

"Oh, I make it a rule never to give references," said the other firmly. Mrs. Banks stared.

"But I thought it was usual," she said. "I mean—I understood people always did."

"A very old-fashioned idea, to *my* mind," Jane and Michael heard the stern voice say. "*Very* old-fashioned. *Quite* out of date, as you might say."

Now, if there was one thing Mrs. Banks did not like, it was to be thought old-fashioned. She just couldn't bear it. So she said quickly:

"Very well, then. We won't bother about them. I only asked, of course, in case *you—er—*required it. The nursery is upstairs——" And she led the way towards the staircase, talking all the time, without stopping once. And because she was doing that Mrs. Banks did not notice what was happening behind her, but Jane and Michael, watching from the top landing, had an excellent view of the extraordinary thing the visitor now did.

Certainly she followed Mrs. Banks upstairs, but not in the usual way. With her large bag in her hands she slid gracefully *up* the banisters, and arrived at the landing at the same time as Mrs. Banks. Such a thing, Jane and Michael knew, had never been done before. Down, of course, for they had often done it themselves. But up—never! They gazed curiously at the strange new visitor.

"Well, that's all settled, then." A sigh of relief came from the children's Mother.

"Quite. As long as *I'm* satisfied," said the other, wiping her nose with a large red and white bandanna handkerchief.

"Why, children," said Mrs. Banks, noticing them suddenly, "what are you doing there? This is your new nurse, Mary Poppins. Jane, Michael, say how do you do! And these"—she waved her hand at the babies in their cots—"are the Twins."

Mary Poppins regarded them steadily, looking from one to the other as though she were making up her mind whether she liked them or not.

"Will we do?" said Michael.

"Michael, don't be naughty," said his Mother.

Mary Poppins continued to regard the four children searchingly. Then, with a long, loud sniff that seemed to indicate that she had made up her mind, she said:

"I'll take the position."

"For all the world," as Mrs. Banks said to her husband later, "as though she were doing us a signal honour."

"Perhaps she is," said Mr. Banks, putting his nose round the corner of the newspaper for a moment and then withdrawing it very quickly.

When their Mother had gone, Jane and Michael edged towards Mary Poppins, who stood, still as a post, with her hands folded in front of her.

"How did you come?" Jane asked. "It looked just as if the wind blew you here."

"It did," said Mary Poppins briefly. And she proceeded to unwind her muffler from her neck and to take off her hat, which she hung on one of the bedposts.

As it did not seem as though Mary Poppins were going to say any more—though she sniffed a great deal—Jane, too, remained silent. But when she bent down to undo her bag, Michael could not restrain himself.

"What a funny bag!" he said, pinching it with his fingers.

"Carpet," said Mary Poppins, putting her key in the lock.

"To carry carpets in, you mean?"

"No. Made of."

"Oh," said Michael. "I see." But he didn't—quite.

By this time the bag was open, and Jane and Michael were more than surprised to find it was completely empty.

"Why," said Jane, "there's nothing in it!"

"What do you mean—nothing?" demanded Mary Poppins, drawing herself up and looking as though she had been insulted. "Nothing in it, did you say?"

And with that she took out from the empty bag a starched white apron and tied it round her waist. Next she unpacked a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a toothbrush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding armchair and a box of throat lozenges.

Jane and Michael stared.

"But I *saw*," whispered Michael. "It *was* empty."

"Hush!" said Jane, as Mary Poppins took out a large bottle labelled "One Tea-Spoon to be Taken at Bed-Time."

A spoon was attached to the neck of the bottle, and into this Mary Poppins poured a dark crimson fluid.

"Is that your medicine?" enquired Michael, looking very interested.

"No, yours," said Mary Poppins, holding out the spoon to him. Michael stared. He wrinkled up his nose. He began to protest.

"I don't want it. I don't need it. I won't!"

But Mary Poppins's eyes were fixed upon him, and Michael suddenly discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her. There was something strange and extraordinary about her—something that was frightening and at the same time most exciting. The spoon came nearer. He held his breath, shut his eyes and gulped. A delicious taste ran round his mouth. He turned his tongue in it. He swallowed, and a happy smile ran round his face.

"Strawberry ice," he said ecstatically. "More, more, more!"

But Mary Poppins, her face as stern as before, was pouring out a dose for Jane. It ran into the spoon, silvery, greeny, yellowy. Jane tasted it.

"Lime-juice cordial," she said, sliding her tongue deliciously over her lips. But when she saw Mary Poppins moving towards the Twins with the bottle Jane rushed at her.

"Oh, no—please. They're too young. It wouldn't be good for them. Please!"

Mary Poppins, however, took no notice, but with a warning, terrible glance at Jane, tipped the spoon towards John's mouth. He lapped at it eagerly, and by the few drops that were spilt on his bib, Jane and Michael could tell that the substance in the spoon this

time was milk. Then Barbara had her share, and she gurgled and licked the spoon twice.

Mary Poppins then poured out another dose and solemnly took it herself.

"Rum punch," she said, smacking her lips and corking the bottle.

Jane's eyes and Michael's popped with astonishment, but they were not given much time to wonder, for Mary Poppins, having put the miraculous bottle on the mantelpiece, turned to them.

"Now," she said, "spit-spot into bed." And she began to undress them. They noticed that whereas buttons and hooks had needed all sorts of coaxing from Katie Nanna, for Mary Poppins they flew apart almost at a look. In less than a minute they found themselves in bed and watching, by the dim light from the night-light, the rest of Mary Poppins's unpacking being performed.

From the carpet bag she took out seven flannel nightgowns, four cotton ones, a pair of boots, a set of dominoes, two bathing-caps and a postcard album. Last of all came a folding camp-bedstead with blankets and eiderdown complete, and this she set down between John's cot and Barbara's.

Jane and Michael sat hugging themselves and watching. It was all so surprising that they could find

nothing to say. But they knew, both of them, that something strange and wonderful had happened at Number Seventeen, Cherry-Tree Lane.

Mary Poppins, slipping one of the flannel nightgowns over her head, began to undress underneath it as though it were a tent. Michael, charmed by this strange new arrival, unable to keep silent any longer, called to her.

"Mary Poppins," he cried, "you'll never leave us, will you?"

There was no reply from under the nightgown. Michael could not bear it.

"You won't leave us, will you?" he called anxiously.

Mary Poppins's head came out of the top of the nightgown. She looked very fierce.

"One word more from that direction," she said threateningly, "and I'll call the Policeman."

"I was only saying," began Michael, meekly, "that we hoped you wouldn't be going away soon——" He stopped, feeling very red and confused.

Mary Poppins stared from him to Jane in silence. Then she sniffed.

"I'll stay till the wind changes," she said shortly, and she blew out her candle and got into bed.

"That's all right," said Michael, half to himself and half to Jane. But Jane wasn't listening. She was thinking about all that had happened, and wondering. . . .

And that is how Mary Poppins came to live at Number Seventeen, Cherry-Tree Lane. And although they sometimes found themselves wishing for the quieter, more ordinary days when Katie Nanna ruled the household, everybody, on the whole, was glad of Mary Poppins's arrival. Mr. Banks was glad because, as she arrived by herself and did not hold up the traffic, he had not had to tip the Policeman. Mrs. Banks was glad because she was able to tell everybody that *her* children's nurse was so fashionable that she didn't believe in giving references. Mrs. Brill and Ellen were glad because they could drink strong cups of tea all day in the kitchen and no longer needed to preside at nursery suppers. Robertson Ay was glad, too, because Mary Poppins had only one pair of shoes, and those she polished herself.

But nobody ever knew what Mary Poppins felt about it, for Mary Poppins never told anybody anything. . . .



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CHAPTER

9

JOHN AND BARBARA'S STORY

JANE AND MICHAEL had gone off to a party, wearing their best clothes and looking, as Ellen the housemaid said when she saw them, "just like a shop window."

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

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

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

"I say, move over! You're right in my eyes," said John in a loud voice.



"Sorry!" said the sunlight. "But I can't help it. I've got to get across this room somehow. Orders is orders. I must move from East to West in a day and my way lies through this Nursery. Sorry! Shut your eyes and you won't notice me."

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

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

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

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

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

John and Barbara looked up.

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

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

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

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

"Quiet!" exclaimed John, laughing heartily.

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

"That wasn't talking," said John. "I was——" He paused. "I mean, I had a pain."

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

"Well, Barbara B., anything for the old fellow to-day, eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

The Starling looked up.

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

The room was very quiet.

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

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

"I know," said John, playing a tune on his toes. "But I like to keep in practice. It *does* so amuse the

Grown-ups. Did you notice that Aunt Flossie nearly went mad with delight when I did it yesterday? ‘The Darling, the Clever, the Marvel, the Creature!’—didn’t you hear her saying all that?” And John threw his foot from him and roared with laughter as he thought of Aunt Flossie.

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

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

“Um,” agreed Barbara, thoughtfully pulling off her socks and putting them on again.

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

“I know,” said Barbara. “It’s astonishing. And Michael always insists—haven’t you heard him?—

that the Starling says ‘Wee-Twe—ee—ee!’ He seems not to know that the Starling says nothing of the kind, but speaks exactly the same language as we do. Of course, one doesn’t expect Mother and Father to know about it—they don’t know *anything*, though they *are* such darlings—but you’d think Jane and Michael would—”

“They did once,” said Mary Poppins, folding up one of Jane’s nightgowns.

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

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

“But—but how is it that they’ve forgotten it all?” said John, wrinkling up his forehead and trying to understand.

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

“Because they’ve grown older,” explained Mary Poppins. “Barbara, put on your socks at once, please.”

“That’s a silly reason,” said John, looking sternly at her.

“It’s the true one, then,” Mary Poppins said, tying Barbara’s socks firmly round her ankles.

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

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

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

The Twins sat up and looked at her.

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

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

The Starling jeered.

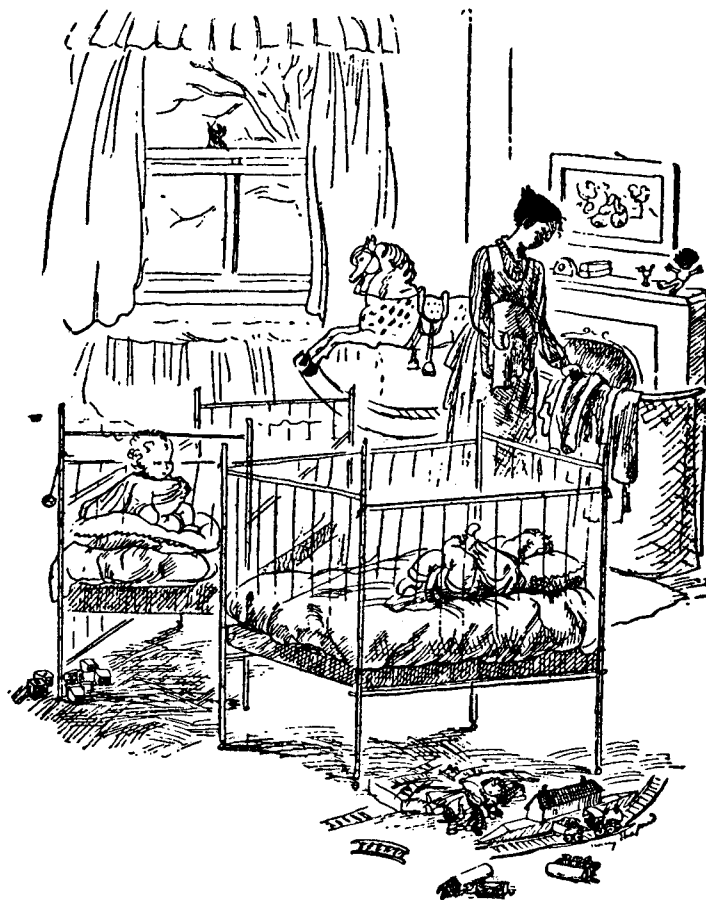
"I say you will," he insisted. "It isn't your fault, of course," he added more kindly. "You'll forget because you just can't help it. There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one—at the very latest—except, of course, Her." And he jerked his head over his shoulder at Mary Poppins.

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

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

John and Barbara were silent.

The Starling went on explaining.



"Huh!" said the Starling. "Look at 'em!"

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

"Here, you impertinence!" said Mary Poppins crossly, making a dart at him and flicking her apron in his direction. But the Starling leapt aside and flew up to the window-frame, whistling wickedly, well out of reach.

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

Mary Poppins snorted.

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly the door opened and in came Mrs. Banks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There, you see, Mary Poppins! They're quite good again. I can always comfort them. Quite good, quite

good," said Mrs. Banks, as though she were singing a lullaby. "And the teeth will soon be through."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bless my tail-feathers—listen to them!" shrieked the Starling, as he put his wings on his hips and roared with mirth. "As if they could help forgetting! Why, in a month or two—three at the *most*—they won't even know what my name is—silly cuckoos! Silly, half-grown, featherless cuckoos! Ha! Ha! Ha!" And with another loud peal of laughter he spread his speckled wings and flew out of the window. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

The Starling laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

"Ba-loo—ba-loo—ba-loo," murmured Barbara,

staring at the ceiling as she swallowed the last sweet crumb.

The Starling stared at her.

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

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

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

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



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

"So—it's happened," he said quietly to Mary Poppins.

She nodded.

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

"Oh, well—— I knew it would. Always told 'em

so. But they wouldn't believe it." He remained silent for a little while, staring into the cots. Then he shook himself vigorously.

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

"It'll seem funny without them, though. Always liked talking to them—so I did. I shall miss them."

He brushed his wing quickly across his eyes.

"Crying?" jeered Mary Poppins. The Starling drew himself up.

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



CHAPTER

IO

FULL MOON

ALL DAY LONG Mary Poppins had been in a hurry, and when she was in a hurry she was always cross.

Everything Jane did was bad, everything Michael did was worse. She even snapped at the Twins.

Jane and Michael kept out of her way as much as possible, for they knew that there were times when it was better not to be seen or heard by Mary Poppins.

"I wish we were invisible," said Michael, when Mary Poppins had told him that the very sight of him was more than any self-respecting person could be expected to stand.

"We shall be," said Jane, "if we go behind the sofa. We can count the money in our money-boxes, and she may be better after she's had her supper."

So they did that.

"Sixpence and four pennies—that's tenpence, and a halfpenny and a threepenny-bit," said Jane, counting up quickly.