Jimbo

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Chapter 1 "RABBITS"

Jimbo's governess ought to have known better—but she didn't. If she had, Jimbo would never have met with the adventures that subsequently came to him. Thus, in a roundabout sort of way, the child ought to have been thankful to the governess; and perhaps, in a roundabout sort of way, he was. But that comes at the far end of the story, and is doubtful at best; and in the meanwhile the child had gone through his suffering, and the governess had in some measure expiated her fault; so that at this stage it is only necessary to note that the whole business began because the Empty House happened to be really an Empty House—not the one Jimbo's family lived in, but another of which more will be known in due course.

Jimbo's father was a retired Colonel, who had married late in life, and now lived all the year round in the country; and Jimbo was the youngest child but one. The Colonel, lean in body as he was sincere in mind, an excellent soldier but a poor diplomatist, loved dogs, horses, guns and riding-whips. He also really understood them. His neighbours, had they been asked, would have called him hard-headed, and so far as a soft-hearted man may deserve the title, he probably was. He rode two horses a day to hounds with the best of them, and the stiffer the country the better he liked it. Besides his guns, dogs and horses, he was also very fond of his children. It was his hobby that he understood them far better than his wife did, or than any one else did, for that matter. The proper evolution of their differing temperaments had no difficulties for him. The delicate problems of child-nature, which defy solution by nine parents out of ten, ceased to exist the moment he spread out his muscular hand in a favourite omnipotent gesture and uttered some extraordinarily foolish generality in that thunderous, good-natured voice of his. The difficulty for himself vanished when he ended up with the words, "Leave that to me, my dear; believe me, I know best!" But for all else concerned, and especially for the child under discussion, this was when the difficulty really began.

Since, however, the Colonel, after this chapter, mounts his best hunter and disappears over a high hedge into space so far as our story is concerned, any further delineation of his wholesome but very ordinary type is unnecessary.

One winter's evening, not very long after Christmas, the Colonel made a discovery. It alarmed him a little; for it suggested to his cocksure mind that he did not understand *all* his children as comprehensively as he imagined.

Between five o'clock tea and dinner—that magic hour when lessons were over and the big house was full of shadows and mystery—there came a timid knock at the study door.

"Come in," growled the soldier in his deepest voice, and a little girl's face, wreathed in tumbling brown hair, poked itself hesitatingly through the opening.

The Colonel did not like being disturbed at this hour, and everybody in the house knew it; but the spell of Christmas holidays was still somehow in the air, and the customary order was not yet fully re-established. Moreover, when he saw who the intruder was, his growl modified itself into a sort of common sternness that yet was not cleverly enough simulated to deceive the really intuitive little person who now stood inside the room.

"Well, Nixie, child, what do you want now?"

"Please, father, will you—we wondered if——"

A chorus of whispers issued from the other side of the door:

"Go on, silly!"

"Out with it!"

"You promised you would, Nixie."

"... if you would come and play Rabbits with us?" came the words in a desperate rush, with laughter not far behind.

The big man with the fierce white moustaches glared over the top of his glasses at the intruders as if amazed beyond belief at the audacity of the request.

"Rabbits!" he exclaimed, as though the mere word ought to have caused an instant explosion. "Rabbits!"

"Oh, *please* do."

"Rabbits at this time of night!" he repeated. "I never heard of such a thing. Why, all good rabbits are asleep in their holes by now. And you ought to be in yours too by rights, I'm sure."

"We don't sleep in holes, father," said the owner of the brown hair, who was acting as leader.

"And there's still a nour before bedtime, *really*," added a voice in the rear.

The big man slowly put his glasses down and looked at his watch. He looked very savage, but of course it was all pretence, and the children knew it. "If he was *really* cross he'd pretend to be nice," they whispered to each other, with merciless perception.

"Well—" he began. But he who hesitates, with children, is lost. The door flung open wide, and the troop poured into the room in a medley of long black legs, flying hair and outstretched hands. They surrounded the table, swarmed upon his big knees, shut his stupid old book, tried on his glasses, kissed him, and fell to discussing the game breathlessly all at once, as though it had already begun.

This, of course, ended the battle, and the big man had to play the part of the Monster Rabbit in a wonderful game of his own invention. But when, at length, it was all over, and they were gathered panting round the fire of blazing logs in the hall, the Monster Rabbit—the only one with any breath at his command—looked up and spoke.

"Where's Jimbo?" he asked.

"Upstairs."

"Why didn't he come and play too?"

"He didn't want to."

"Why? What's he doing?"

Several answers were forthcoming.

"Nothing in p'tickler."

"Talking to the furniture when I last saw him."

"Just thinking, as usual, or staring in the fire."

None of the answers seemed to satisfy the Monster Rabbit, for when he kissed them a little later and said good-night, he gave orders, with a graver face, for Jimbo to be sent down to the study before he went to bed. Moreover, he called him "James," which was a sure sign of parental displeasure.

"James, why didn't you come and play with your brothers and sisters just now?" asked the Colonel, as a dreamy-eyed boy of about eight, with a mop of dark hair and a wistful expression, came slowly forward into the room.

"I was in the middle of making pictures."

"Where—what—making pictures?"

"In the fire."

"James," said the Colonel in a serious tone, "don't you know that you are getting too old now for that sort of thing? If you dream so much, you'll fall asleep altogether some fine day, and never wake up again. Just think what that means!"

The child smiled faintly and moved up confidingly between his father's knees, staring into his eyes without the least sign of fear. But he said nothing in reply. His thoughts were far away, and it seemed as if the effort to bring them back into the study and to a consideration of his father's words was almost beyond his power.

"You must run about more," pursued the soldier, rubbing his big hands together briskly, "and join your brothers and sisters in their games. Lie about in the summer and dream a bit if you like, but now it's winter, you must be more active, and make your blood circulate healthily,—er—and all that sort of thing."

The words were kindly spoken, but the voice and manner rather deliberate. Jimbo began to look a little troubled, as his father watched him.

"Come now, little man," he said more gently, "what's the matter, eh?" He drew the boy close to him. "Tell me all about it, and what it is you're

always thinking about so much."

Jimbo brought back his mind with a tremendous effort, and said, "I don't like the winter. It's so dark and full of horrid things. It's all ice and shadows, so—so I go away and think of what I like, and other places——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted his father briskly; "winter's a capital time for boys. What in the world d'ye mean, I wonder?"

He lifted the child on to his knee and stroked his hair, as though he were patting the flank of a horse. Jimbo took no notice of the interruption or of the caress, but went on saying what he had to say, though with eyes a little more clouded.

"Winter's like going into a long black tunnel, you see. It's downhill to Christmas, of course, and then uphill all the way to the summer holidays. But the uphill part's so slow that——"

"Tut, tut!" laughed the Colonel in spite of himself; "you mustn't have such thoughts. Those are a baby's notions. They're silly, silly, silly."

"Do you *really* think so, father?" continued the boy, as if politeness demanded some recognition of his father's remarks, but otherwise anxious only to say what was in his mind. "You wouldn't think them silly if you really knew. But, of course, there's no one to tell you in the stable, so you *can't* know. You've never seen the funny big people rushing past you and laughing through their long hair when the wind blows so loud. *I* know several of them almost to speak to, but you hear only wind. And the other things with tiny legs that skate up and down the slippery moonbeams, without ever tumbling off—they aren't silly a bit, only they don't like dogs and noise. And I've seen the furniture"—he pronounced it furchinur—"dancing about in the day-nursery when it thought it was alone, and I've heard it talking at night. I know the big cupboard's voice quite well. It's just like a drum, only rougher... ."

The Colonel shook his head and frowned severely, staring hard at his son. But though their eyes met, the boy hardly saw him. Far away at the other end of the dark Tunnel of the Months he saw the white summer sunshine lying over gardens full of nodding flowers. Butterflies were flitting across meadows yellow with buttercups, and he saw the fascinating rings upon the lawn where the Fairy People held their dances in the moonlight; he heard the wind call to him as it ran on along by the hedgerows, and saw the gentle pressure of its swift feet upon the standing hay; streams were murmuring under shady trees; birds were singing; and there were echoes of sweeter music still that he could not understand, but loved all the more perhaps on that account... .

"Yes," announced the Colonel later that evening to his wife, spreading his hands out as he spoke. "Yes, my dear, I *have* made a discovery, and an alarming one. You know, I'm rarely at fault where the children are concerned—and I've noted all the symptoms with unusual care. James, my dear, is an imaginative boy."

He paused to note the effect of his words, but seeing none, continued:

"I regret to be obliged to say it, but it's a fact beyond dispute. His head is simply full of things, and he talked to me this evening about tunnels and slippery moonlight till I very nearly lost my temper altogether. Now, the boy will never make a man unless we take him in hand properly at once. We must get him a governess, or something, without delay. Just fancy, if he grew up into a poet or one of these—these——"

In his distress the soldier could only think of horse-terms, which did not seem quite the right language. He stuck altogether, and kept repeating the favourite gesture with his open hand, staring at his wife over his glasses as he did so.

But the mother never argued.

"He's very young still," she observed quietly, "and, as you have always said, he's not a bit like other boys, remember."

"Exactly what I say. Now that your eyes are opened to the actual state of affairs, I'm satisfied."

"We'll get a sensible nursery-governess at once," added the mother.

"A practical one?"

"Yes, dear."

"Hard-headed?"

"Yes."

"And well educated?"

"Yes."

"And—er—firm with children. She'll do for the lot, then."

"If possible."

"And a young woman who doesn't go in for poetry, and dreaming, and all that kind of flummery."

"Of course, dear."

"Capital. I felt sure you would agree with me," he went on. "It'd be no end of a pity if Jimbo grew up an ass. At present he hardly knows the difference between a roadster and a racer. He's going into the army, too," he added by way of climax, "and you know, my dear, the army would never stand *that*!"

"Never," said the mother quietly, and the conversation came to an end.

Meanwhile, the subject of these remarks was lying wide awake upstairs in the bed with the yellow iron railing round it. His elder brother was asleep in the opposite corner of the room, snoring peacefully. He could just see the brass knobs of the bedstead as the dying firelight quivered and shone on them. The walls and ceiling were draped in shadows that altered their shapes from time to time as the coals dropped softly into the grate. Gradually the fire sank, and the room darkened. A feeling of delight and awe stole into his heart.

Jimbo loved these early hours of the night before sleep came. He felt no fear of the dark; its mystery thrilled his soul; but he liked the summer dark, with its soft, warm silences better than the chill winter

shadows. Presently the firelight sprang up into a brief flame and then died away altogether with an odd little gulp. He knew the sound well; he often watched the fire out, and now, as he lay in bed waiting for he knew not what, the moonlight filtered in through the baize curtains and gradually gave to the room a wholly new character.

Jimbo sat up in bed and listened. The house was very still. He slipped into his red dressing-gown and crept noiselessly over to the window. For a moment he paused by his brother's bed to make sure that he really was asleep; then, evidently satisfied, he drew aside a corner of the curtain and peered out.

"Oh!" he said, drawing in his breath with delight, and again "oh!"

It was difficult to understand why the sea of white moonlight that covered the lawn should fill him with such joy, and at the same time bring a lump into his throat. It made him feel as if he were swelling out into something very much greater than the actual limits of his little person. And the sensation was one of mingled pain and delight, too intense for him to feel for very long. The unhappiness passed gradually away, he always noticed, and the happiness merged after a while into a sort of dreamy ecstasy in which he neither thought nor wished much, but was conscious only of one single unmanageable yearning.

The huge cedars on the lawn reared themselves up like giants in silver cloaks, and the horse-chestnut—the Umbrella Tree, as the children called it—loomed with motionless branches that were frosted and shining. Beyond it, in a blue mist of moonlight and distance, lay the kitchen-garden; he could just make out the line of the high wall where the fruit-trees grew. Immediately below him the gravel of the carriage drive sparkled with frost.

The bars of the windows were cold to his hands, yet he stood there for a long time with his nose flattened against the pane and his bare feet on the cane chair. He felt both happy and sad; his heart longed dreadfully for something he had not got, something that seemed out of his reach because he could not name it. No one seemed to believe all the things he *knew* in quite the same way as he did. His brothers and sisters played up to a certain point, and then put the things aside as if they had only been assumed for the time and were not real. To him they were always real. His father's words, too, that evening had sorely puzzled him when he came to think over them afterwards: "They're a baby's notions... . They're silly, silly, silly." Were these things real or were they not? And, as he pondered, yearning dumbly, as only these little souls can yearn, the wistfulness in his heart went out to meet the moonlight in the air. Together they wove a spell that seemed to summon before him a fairy of the night, who whispered an answer into his heart: "We are real so long as you believe in us. It is your imagination that makes us real and gives us life. Please, never, never stop believing."

Jimbo was not quite sure that he understood the message, but he liked it all the same, and felt comforted. So long as they believed in one another, the rest did not matter very much after all. And when at last, shivering with cold, he crept back to bed, it was only to find through the Gates of Sleep a more direct way to the things he had been thinking about, and to wander for the rest of the night, unwatched and free, through the wonders of an Enchanted Land.

Jimbo, as his father had said, was an imaginative child. Most children are—more or less; and he was "more," at least, "more" than his brothers and sisters. The Colonel thought he had made a penetrating discovery, but his wife had known it always. His head, indeed, was "full of things,"—things that, unless trained into a channel where they could be controlled and properly schooled, would certainly interfere with his success in a practical world, and be a source of mingled pain and joy to him all through life. To have trained these forces, ever bursting out towards creation, in his little soul,—to have explained, interpreted, and dealt fairly by them, would perhaps have been the best and wisest way; to have suppressed them altogether, cleaned them out by the process of substitution, this might have succeeded too in less measure; but to turn them into a veritable rout of horror by the common method of "frightening the nonsense out of the boy," this was surely the very worst way of dealing with such a case, and the most cruel. Yet, this was the method adopted by the Colonel in the robust good-nature of his heart, and the utter ignorance of his soul.

So it came about that three months later, when May was melting into June, Miss Ethel Lake arrived upon the scene as a result of the Colonel's blundering good intentions. She brought with her a kind disposition, a supreme ignorance of unordinary children, a large store of self-confidence—and a corded yellow tin box.

Chapter

2 MISS LAKE COMES—AND GOES

The conversation took place suddenly one afternoon, and no one knew anything about it except the two who took part in it: the Colonel asked the governess to try and knock the nonsense out of Jimbo's head, and the governess promised eagerly to do her very best. It was her first "place"; and by "nonsense" they both understood imagination. True enough, Jimbo's mother had given her rather different instructions as to the treatment of the boy, but she mistook the soldier's bluster for authority, and deemed it best to obey him. This was her first mistake.

In reality she was not devoid of imaginative insight; it was simply that her anxiety to prove a success permitted her better judgment to be overborne by the Colonel's boisterous manner.

The wisdom of the mother was greater than that of her husband. For the safe development of that tender and imaginative little boy of hers, she had been at great pains to engage a girl—a clergyman's daughter—who possessed sufficient sympathy with the poetic and dreamy nature to be of real help to him; for true help, she knew, can only come from true understanding. And Miss Lake was a good girl. She was entirely well-meaning—which is the beginning of well-doing, and her principal weakness lay in her judgment, which led her to obey the Colonel too literally.

"She seems most sensible," he declared to his wife.

"Yes, dear."

"And practical."

"I think so."

"And firm and—er—wise with children."

"I hope so."

"Just the sort for young Jimbo," added the Colonel with decision.

"I trust so; she's a little young, perhaps."

"Possibly, but one can't get everything," said her husband, in his horse-and-dog voice. "A year with her should clean out that fanciful brain of his, and prepare him for school with other boys. He'll be all right once he gets to school. My dear," he added, spreading out his right hand, fingers extended, "you've made a most wise selection. I congratulate you. I'm delighted."

"I'm so glad."

"Capital, I repeat, capital. You're a clever little woman. I knew you'd find the right party, once I showed you how the land lay."