

THE CHILDREN OF MOUNT PYB

BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN

THE doctor leaned forward, pointing with his stethoscope to the noble sweep of valley, shelving downward to the silver writhings of the Chinken River, then up again to Mount Pyb and the clouds.

"Across the river, and beyond that field of rye. Then a sheep-pasture on the left, just at the edge of the wood. Got the sheep-pasture?"

I got it; the wabbling hurry of sheep being like no other motion even at that distance.

"Now the grove of sugar-maples—and that's the Taney farm. The red speck is the barn and the white speck is the house. If you had a glass there'd be a black speck for old Miss Taney and another for her cat."

He hesitated, and when he resumed there was something abrupt and troubled in his manner.

"I was the one who gave her that cat. Might just as well have been a gray one, only I didn't stop to think. She's rather hump-backed, and so of course the cat likes to get up on her shoulders. We live in Cotton Mather's time here. Ghosts and witches—psychic stuff. Our people, especially the French, don't stand the combination of Miss Taney and her cat very well. I make it a point to look in when I can. You ought to get out. Go over and look at her sweet peas." He rose, stuffing his stethoscope into his pocket. "She's got bushels of them and likes to give them away."

"I might go after supper," I said. "It's light until nine."

At that his face was brighter than at any time since he had come in. "I'll be around for you," he said.

His little car sputtered up before the

door at about seven, while the sunshine, though level, was still at its full brightness. We passed the river by the state road, but almost at once had to turn into a narrow ribbon of yellow sand, where the car complained and threatened grievously until we slid aside into a broad, closely nibbled pasture. We headed across this for half a mile toward a high stone wall. At this wall we halted. I looked at my medical man with question and reproach.

"It's high time," he said, "for you to be taking some exercise. I'll help you over. Tin Lizzie will stand."

"Have I improved so much since yesterday?" said I, preparing to climb. "Then you were telling me to sit around the verandas and drink milk while I let people wait on me."

He was quite undisturbed.

"I hadn't seen the old lady then," he answered. "She was pretty low in her mind when I came up here last night. You see— Well, to tell the truth, some boys had been tormenting her cat. Didn't hurt it much, but bothered her considerably, and, though she's pretty deaf, I shouldn't wonder if something they said carried. I'm going to kill a few of those young demons as soon as I get around to it, but in the mean time I want her chirked up a bit. This isn't enough exercise to hurt a sick hen."

I climbed the stone wall without further comment. Thence we dived under the branches of an orchard and came rather suddenly upon the sagging porch, where, upon the steps, Miss Taney was sitting, her cat upon her shoulders as the doctor had foretold.

"How are you, Aunt Mitty?" he boomed, deafening me in the effort to

pierce her deafness. "Here's Mrs. Benton, a patient of mine. She needs chirking up and I thought you could show her your sweet peas. I've got to go on to make another call. You ladies can visit for an hour or so till you hear Tin Lizzie honk."

The little creature gave me a long appraising look from the biggest and loneliest black eyes I have ever seen. Her face was wrinkled over every part of its surface in tiny lines like a shrunken winter apple, and some of the bright color of long-past youth had been caught and held in its crumpled surface. The wig was pathetically evident, shiny and black, almost metallic, and a little askew, so that a wisp of soft white hair emerged and curled over her ear.

The cat's golden eyes, its round face cheek by cheek with hers, looked at me as intently as her black ones. I seemed to understand something of the valley's attitude.

"I don't know as I'm dressed fit to see company," said Miss Taney, shyly. Yet her attire, silken and rustling, spoke loudly of careful preparation for company.

"I'm a little deaf," she remarked, when the doctor had left us together. I contrived to throw into my nod and smile that, although I was surprised and sympathetic, really it was a matter of little consequence to people of superior intelligence like herself.

"A little hard of hearing. I guess I'm getting old. If you'd like some sweet peas, you can follow the smell around to the side and pick as many as you like. I'm feeling kind of stiff in the joints tonight. Once I get down, I don't get up very easy."

There was a weakness in the old voice and a tremulousness of the veined hands that made me understand the doctor's solicitude. My heart grew hot as my imagination rehearsed that lightly sketched scene with the cruel boys. The cat's splendid eyes met mine with something that was like friendly understanding.

"Here are matters," I understood him to say, "that should not all be left to the discretion of a cat, however intelligent, though I do what I may."

Throwing into my smile to Miss Taney as much interest in sweet peas and gratitude for her offer as I was able, I went around to the side, following a smell so poignantly sweet, so drowsily eloquent of the spirit of midsummer, that the little patch of weed-surrounded garden into which I entered seemed hardly adequate to explain it.

Indeed, the sweet-pea bed was no more than ten feet long, but, though the strangling weeds stood tall all about it, they had not entered the charmed spot. The pink and purple flowers had bravely taken up the fight in their own behalf, and, reaching over, had met their foes half-way, drawing their tendrils tightly about the green heads of dock and pig-weed.

I gathered a double handful, purple, pink, blue, and returned with them to Miss Taney, making elaborate pantomime of appreciation, whereat she seemed pleased, but in a faint, far-off way. With pain I understood that Miss Taney was feeling, this evening, that she was about through with her sweet peas.

The shadow of the opposite mountain was climbing the slope behind us. The road by which I had come was engulfed, then the pasture, and the trunks of the apple-trees, though the tops remained alight for some time longer. It found us on the porch and crept swiftly over our knees, up to our lips and eyes, and so no more, though by turning about we could see from the eastern end of the porch how Mount Pyb was still ablaze.

Miss Taney shifted so that her gaze was full upon it, where its foot ran down almost into the field of rye.

"I guess I'm growing old," she said again.

When she moved the cat arched his back, yawned, and leaped down. He limped slightly from his experiences with the boys, but disregarded it heroically. With the coming of the shadow he was

waking up. He took a position in front of us, putting his ears forward alertly, watching the invisible life in the grass.

"The mountain," observed Miss Taney, "hain't changed much in eighty year. That field there, Farmer Tobin had it in rye just the same as now, eighty year ago this summer. Great-granther of Farmer Tobin as is now. I remember because I went through it, time I got lost up the mountain. Leastways," she mused, "they called it being lost and I didn't contradict. Children weren't allowed to contradict when I was young. I was spry and healthy as a child. There wa'n't no sign then my shoulders was going bad. Afterward I was sick a spell."

As the shadow, having covered us in, crept up the mountain also, a small wind sprang up, and all the voices of the grass and forest awoke, first one by one, then chorus after chorus, in full cry, as rhythmic as though kept in order by some invisible baton. Deep within the mountain's heart a solitary whippoorwill began. Miss Taney, in spite of her deafness, took an attitude of listening.

"Used to be a whippoorwill sang all night. I'm too deaf to hear him now. Eighty year ago I used to hear him. Time I was lost I got quite clost to him. He was tame as anything with the other children. But me, I acted so foolish. If I'd been content to stay longer maybe he'd have come to me, too."

She sighed and with the sigh I felt the twentieth-century dusk dissolve into the dusk of eighty years ago. The cat, crouching belly to earth and forgetful of his lame paw, ran swiftly into the long grass. An owl hooted and swift bats darted about our heads with eldritch squeakings. Without further preamble, Miss Taney told me her story. I judged she had thus told it to herself every night for eighty years. Whether she had ever before spoken it aloud to a listener I do not know, but I think not, and that I am the only one who has ever known what happened up on the mountain when a little child of seven fled there—eighty years ago.

"I don't know how old I was when I first saw the children, but I know 'twas before I could walk very steady and the field was in hay. I got lost in it one day and moused around in it, kind of whimpering till I heard sounds of children playing. I went toward 'em and came out to the edge of the field where there's rocks and bushes and the mountain begins to go up. There wasn't nobody around, after all, and I was pretty sleepy and, there being some soft, short grass there, the kind that grows in dark circles, I cuddled down in it and went to sleep. When I woke up there was a girl and boy looking at me. They was real pretty children. I'd never seen 'em before, but I liked 'em real well. I was such a little thing I couldn't talk much or understand, but they seemed having an argument. Girl wanted to take me off with them; boy didn't seem to think they'd ought. He had his way that time and they took me back the way I'd come, through the hay, me holding a hand of each. I guess my mother 'd been worried. She spanked me.

"When I was crying about having been spanked I looked and they was peeking at me out of the edge of the hay, looking like they was crying, too.

"After that I used to see 'em 'most every day. Somehow we never talked together like what you'd call talking, though I used to understand 'em and they understood me. I began to go to school when I was four and there was a piece of lonely road where I used to be afraid of cows and cross dogs. One day I did meet a cow there and she put down her horns at me. I was so scared I couldn't move, and the boy he come out and she run. After that they used to see me through that piece regular. Having such good times with them, I didn't mind so much not being able to make friends with the children at the school. I was the littlest and not very strong. I'd 'a' been real lonesome if it hadn't been for the children from the mountain.

"I wasn't more than six when my father died and my mother married

again. My stepfather was a drinking man, hard on animals and humans. I guess she was pretty sorry after she done it. I was awful scared of him. Children don't have to *do* anything to get punished by that kind of man. Queer the way some folks act. You'd think the devil was in 'em. Time I run away I was seven, a mite of a thing. Him, he was big as a house and strong as a bull. There was rye in the field same as now, and I legged through it fast as I could pelt, him after me.

"I saw the children waiting right in that same round patch of grass. Leaning toward me, they was, and waving to me to hurry. I ran, and when I got there they took me one by each hand and we just scooted up that mountain like anything. When we got up on a clift where we could look down and see the farm and everything spread out I could make him out fallen all across that patch of grass like as if he'd tripped on something. Me, I was scared I'd done something wicked, but they laughed and clapped their hands like it was a good joke, and took me by the hands and we went on. I mistrusted my mother wouldn't have permitted me, but 's long 's I was up there, anyway, I thought I might 's well keep on and see where the children lived."

Here Miss Taney hesitated, her fingers pleating the fabric of her apron with embarrassment.

"I dunno," she went on, at last, "how to describe the sort of place there was up there. You'd likely think I was making it up if I tried. They wa'n't no gipsies. We had a nice dinner. Not like any food I ever see, but real tasty. In the afternoon they took me to their school. They had a nice teacher." Her voice grew shyer and more reluctant.

"It wasn't 'rithmetic nor g'ography they was studying, nor yet reading and spelling, yet it seemed easy to understand and real interestin'. Only now I disremember what it was all about. No, I can't remember the least thing.

"When it come along teatime I was beginning to get homesick. I didn't eat

much, though they had nice things. After tea they was going to play games, but 'twas getting late and I was sleepy and wanting my ma. They wanted me to go to bed in their house, but, no, I wouldn't. Wouldn't do anything. You know how contrary children can be. I begun to cry, and somebody"—Miss Taney hesitated as though feeling for some further description of the one in authority—"some grown-up person," was all she brought forth, "said if I wasn't going to be happy there I'd have to go back. The girl she began to cry at letting me go, and the boy acted like he wanted to cry. He didn't want me to go no more than she did. He was a good-looking boy. I 'ain't never seen anybody since that reminded me of him. He didn't say much, but 'twas plain enough how he felt about my goin'.

"Well, the upshot was they took me down to the edge of the mountain. They wouldn't come up to the door—just kissed me good-by and left me at the same patch of grass where I'd seen 'em first.

"I hadn't taken but about a step when I begun to think about my stepfather and decided I wanted to stay with them, after all, instead of going home, but they'd gone awful quick. I called to 'em and ran into the woods a piece, but it was awful dark and they didn't answer, so I got scared the bears would get me and ran toward the kitchen window light fast 's I could.

"There was neighbors in and my mother was settin' in her rocker with her best dress and white apron on. Just as I come up the path she got up and come to the door again, shadin' her eyes to look, one of the neighbors holdin' her by the arm kind of comfortin'. The light shone out on me standin' there, scared to come in, my eyes, she used to tell me, shinin' like a deer's in the light of a camp-fire.

"She jumped for me and begun to cry like I never see the beat. I thought I was goin' to get a whippin', but she never touched me. She never laid hand on me in punishment after that day.

"Seems my stepfather was dead. They'd found him out at the foot of the mountain and thought he'd fell over the clift, but it must 'a' been some kind of fit. He was a real violent man and red-faced. I guess it was a fit. And they'd been thinkin' I was dead, too. Some thought maybe he'd killed me before he fell. They'd been looking for me all over the mountain, firin' guns and the like. I guess I didn't hear because I was so busy playin'.

"I never seen them children since. Before my back got bad I used to go all over the mountain, looking. Sometimes when I sit here looking up the mountain like this I get a notion they must still be up there somewhere, and not old, neither. Being old is queer. Times I don't feel old myself. More as if I was shut up in a shell, and if I could shuck it off I'd come out young.

"Often I've tried to remember what it was they was learning to that school. I went to district school after I got back, but there never seemed no meanin' in the things they taught. I didn't get on. So I 'ain't never had much education. Other children, they picked on me, too."

Tin Lizzie's horn blew, and a moment after the doctor came toward us through a galaxy of fireflies.

Before joining us he went around to the sweet-pea bed and brought back, with gestures of satisfaction, a large bunch of sweet peas, and, having helped her up, gave her his arm into the house, lit her lamp, brought in wood for morning, and stood over her while she ate some bread and milk and took medicine that he poured out. He was loath to leave her and so was I. The mountain was so huge and she so small and lonely. And who could tell what the boys would do next? Her eyes, as she accepted his petting, glowed like an elf's with pleasure.

At last he bellowed good-night to her and I kissed her cheek.

"We'll both come to-morrow," he shouted.

She smiled oddly, but made no reply. We could not be sure that she had heard.

On our way home, we planned spiritedly in her behalf. I believe I was even more perturbed about her than the doctor. I dreamed of her when I finally slept, confusing in some unintelligible manner the child of seven, with Miss Taney at eighty-seven. The sweet peas that I had brought home with me dominated the dream, and when I woke out of it before dawn, the whippoorwills seemed busy with the same theme and the whole night curiously alive, a tangle of invisible threads of activity. I thought once I saw a light moving about the Taney farm, and was troubled, until it resolved itself into a near-by firefly.

The doctor came for me at nine o'clock. I had prepared a basket of delicacies carefully chosen to indicate not charity, but courtesy, and with these I placed my own luncheon, since I intended spending the day there.

It was a hot midsummer morning. A light haze hung in the air and the birds were still. When Tin Lizzie fell silent at the stone wall there was no sound anywhere except the dry whir of grasshoppers. Miss Taney was nowhere in sight, and the door stood open.

"No use knocking or calling," said he. "You go in. I'll see if she's outside."

The house was in rigid order—braided mats, grandfather's clock ticking slowly like a meditative footfall, rush-bottom chairs, old china—everything expressive of Miss Taney.

No, not entirely in order, for on the dining-table lay a great quantity of sweet peas, already drooping from lack of water. Nor were they merely thrown down there.

Have you ever seen a feast of strange objects set forth by children at their play?

There were three heaps of blossoms ruthlessly snipped from their stems, one heap of pink and white, one of purple, one of purple and red, and three of Miss Taney's plates were set about the table—tiny plates, just what children would love for a party. On one of these plates a few blossoms were scattered.

I could make nothing out of it, though I stared at it and about the room while the clock ticked long seconds.

A partly open door revealed her bedroom, and with a feeling of growing anxiety I pushed it wider.

There was only the round print of her head on the pillow, the covers turned back as though she had just risen, but her neat shoes, primly toeing out, stood at the bed's foot, and a black-and-white calico, such as I should have expected Miss Taney to assume for morning wear, was arranged precisely over a chair. But Miss Taney was not the person to leave her bed unaired and unmade till ten o'clock in the morning, and a chill of foreboding was already settling about my heart when my eye lit upon an object which set my pulses racing. This was Miss Taney's black wig hanging beside the mirror. Wherever she was she might easily be wearing shoes or dress unaccounted for by the tally of her wardrobe, but not another wig, nor was it possible for her to have left her house voluntarily without it.

"She doesn't seem to be about," said the doctor.

I turned quickly. He also was eying the wig with anxiety and dismay.

"You stay here," he directed, when our glances had met in silent and alarmed consultation. I heard him going through the house, poking around the attic, then burrowing among hollow-sounding barrels in the cellar.

When he came up he stopped to tell me he was going about the farm again, and he puckered his forehead and shook his head over the little feast of fading sweet peas on the dining-room table.

"Seemed sane enough last night," he muttered. He sighed heavily as he went out, this time, I knew, to pay special attention to the barn, an old well, and the cistern, to weedy fence-corners and patches of low growth.

I saw him from the window contemplating thoughtfully the field of rye, and then he entered it at the angle which

would take him by the shortest way to the mountain's foot.

He came back hurriedly.

"I'm going after some valley men," said he. "It doesn't seem possible, but I believe she has strayed up there. I found this"—he showed me a wilting spray of sweet peas—"in a patch of grass at the edge of the field, and some one had broken through the rye no later than last night."

It was plain enough now, I thought, with tears—and following so logically upon the story of her childhood she had told me! All these years she had been longing for those dream children. Eighty years! And telling me the story had brought it back too plainly. In a dream she had thought that she found them at last, and had followed them—to her death, first feasting them after childhood's custom with flowers.

I stayed there all that summer day, but she did not come. Neither did the cat appear, and in this I found some comfort, for it seemed certain that wherever she had gone she had one living companion.

I saw the valley men go by, and, thoughtfully attentive, enter the field.

But although, forgetful of suspicion and gossip, and grown suddenly neighborly and kind, they searched the mountain to its peak and back again with all the woodcraft they possessed, they did not find her that day—nor any day.

When it was very dark, the doctor came for me, and for a while, loath to leave the house with its mystery unexplained, we sat on the step as we had sat with her the evening before.

I told him something of the story she had given me, and he nodded his head in sad confirmation of my theory.

One of the searchers came out of the woods, a shadowy figure which we watched keenly as it drew near through the rye. Behind him a whip-poorwill was loud and joyous. He joined us and sat down dispiritedly on the lowest step.

"If there's a inch of old Pyb we 'ain't gone over I'll eat it," said he. "Damned if I don't think the old girl's flew off on a broomstick just like folks said she could if she had a mind. She ain't up there, nohow. We run into some city folks. At least their young uns. Couldn't seem to come across their folks, though I don't see how we could miss 'em, either, going over everything the way we did. I'd 'a' spanked them little cusses if I could 'a' caught 'em. Yes, sir! I'd 'a' give 'em something they couldn't buy at the store. Just laughing and poking fun when I asked them where their pa was and if they'd seen anything of a poor old woman lost on the mountain. Seemed to think 'twas best joke they'd ever heard. They had a black cat with 'em was the spit 'n' image of Miss Taney's cat, but they wouldn't answer when I asked 'em where they got it. The black-eyed one was the worst. Pretty as a picture and the blackest eyes I ever see in any head

except Miss Taney's. The others was tow-heads."

In spite of his anger he chuckled at some specific memory of their naughtiness.

"I'd sure like to 'a' got hold of that black one for about a minute."

The whippoorwill had stopped his tumult while the man was speaking. Almost there was a listening silence. At the end of the report he broke out directly overhead, sweet and triumphant. The deep-throated chuckle at the beginning of his note was clearer than I had ever heard it.

"G-whippoorwill!—G-whippoorwill!"

Then, as though he had been an elfin messenger and had accomplished his mission, we saw him for a moment dark against the sky, returning to the mountain, and at intervals heard his note more faintly until it blended indistinguishably with the rest of the summer night's chorus.