

MASTER WILLIE

by Lucy Clifford

There was once a little boy called Willie. I never knew his other name, and as he lived far off behind the mountain, we cannot go to inquire. He had fair hair and blue eyes, and there was something in his face that, when you had looked at him, made you feel quite happy and rested, and think of all the things you meant to do by-and-by when you were wiser and stronger. He lived all alone with the tall aunt, who was very rich, in the big house at the end of the village. Every morning he went down the street with his little goat under his arm, and the village folk looked after him and said, "There goes Master Willie."

The tall aunt had a very long neck; on the top of it was her head, on the top of her head she wore a white cap. Willie used often to look up at her and think that the cap was like snow upon the mountain. She was very fond of Willie, but she had lived a great many years and was always sitting still to think them over, and she had forgotten all the games she used to know, all the stories she had read when she was little, and when Willie asked her about them, would say, "No, dear, no, I can't remember; go to the woods and play." Sometimes she would take his face between her two hands and look at him well while Willie felt quite sure that she was not thinking of him, but of someone else he did not know, and then she would kiss him, and turn away quickly, saying, "Go to the woods, dear; it is no good staying with an old woman." Then he, knowing that she wanted to be alone, would pick up his goat and hurry away.

He had had a dear little sister, called Apple-blossom, but a strange thing had happened to her. One day she over-wound her very big doll that talked and walked, and the consequence was quite terrible. No sooner was the winding-up key out of the doll's side than it blinked its eyes, talked very fast, made faces, took Apple-blossom by the hand,

saying, "I am not your doll any longer, but you are my little girl," and led her right away no one could tell whither, and no one was able to follow. The tall aunt and Willie only knew that she had gone to be the doll's little girl in some strange place, where dolls were stronger and more important than human beings.

After Apple-blossom left him, Willie had only his goat to play with; it was a poor little thing with no horns, no tail and hardly any hair, but still he loved it dearly, and put it under his arm every morning while he went along the street.

"It is only made of painted wood and a little hair, Master Willie," said the blacksmith's wife one day. "Why should you care for it; it is not even alive."

"But if it were alive, anyone could love it."

"And living hands made it," the miller's wife said. "I wonder what strange hands they were;--take care of it for the sake of them, little master."

"Yes, dame, I will," he answered gratefully, and he went on his way thinking of the hands, wondering what tasks had been set them to do since they fashioned the little goat. He stayed all day in the woods helping the children to gather nuts and blackberries. In the afternoon he watched them go home with their aprons full; he looked after them longingly as they went on their way singing. If he had had a father and mother, or brothers and sisters, to whom he could have carried home nuts and blackberries, how merry he would have been. Sometimes he told the children how happy they were to live in a cottage with the door open all day, and the sweet breeze blowing in, and the cocks and hens strutting about outside, and the pigs grunting in the styes at the end of the garden; to see the mother scrubbing and washing, to know that the father was working in the fields, and to run about and help and play, and be cuffed and kissed, just as it happened. Then they

would answer, "But you have the tall lady for your aunt, and the big house to live in, and the grand carriage to drive in, while we are poor, and sometimes have little to eat and drink; mother often tells us how fine it must be to be you."

"But the food that you eat is sweet because you are very hungry," he answered them, "and no one sorrows in your house. As for the grand carriage, it is better to have a carriage if your heart is heavy, but when it is light, then you can run swiftly on your own two legs." Ah, poor Willie, how lonely he was, and yet the tall aunt loved him dearly. On hot drowsy days he had many a good sleep with his head resting against her high thin shoulders, and her arms about him.

One afternoon, clasping his goat as usual, he sat down by the pond. All the children had gone home, so he was quite alone, but he was glad to look at the pond and think. There were so many strange things in the world, it seemed as if he would never have done thinking about them, not if he lived to be a hundred.

He rested his elbows on his knees and sat staring at the pond. Overhead the trees were whispering; behind him, in and out of their holes the rabbits whisked; far off he could hear the twitter of a swallow; the foxglove was dead, the bracken was turning brown, the cones from the fir trees were lying on the ground. As he watched, a strange thing happened. Slowly and slowly the pond lengthened out and out, stretching away and away until it became a river--a long river that went on and on, right down the woods, past the great black firs, past the little cottage that was a ruin and only lived in now and then by a stray gipsy or a tired tramp, past the setting sun, till it dipped into space beyond. Then many little boats came sailing towards Willie, and one stopped quite close to where he sat, just as if it were waiting for him. He looked at it well; it had a snow-white sail and a little man with a drawn-sword for a figure-head. A voice that seemed to come from nowhere asked--

"Are you ready, Willie?" Just as if he understood he answered back--

"Not yet,--not quite, dear Queen, but I shall be soon. I should like to wait a little longer."

"No, no, come now, dear child; they are all waiting for you." So he got up and stepped into the boat, and it put out before he had even time to sit down. He looked at the rushes as the boat cut its way through them; he saw the hearts of the lilies as they lay spread open on their great wide leaves; he went on and on beneath the crimson sky towards the setting sun, until he slipped into space with the river.

He saw land at last far on a-head, and as he drew near it he understood whither the boat was bound. All along the shore there were hundreds and hundreds of dolls crowding down to the water's edge, looking as if they had expected him. They stared at him with their shining round eyes; but he just clasped his little goat tighter and closer, and sailed on nearer and nearer to the land. The dolls did not move; they stood still, smiling at him with their painted lips, then suddenly they opened their painted mouths and put out their painted tongues at him; but still he was not afraid. He clasped the goat yet a little closer, and called out, "Apple-blossom, I am waiting; are you here?" Just as he had expected, he heard Apple-blossom's voice answering from the back of the toy-town--

"Yes, dear brother, I am coming." So he drew close to the shore, and waited for her. He saw her a long way off, and waved his hand.

"I have come to fetch you," he said.

"But I cannot go with you unless I am bought," she answered, sadly, "for now there is a wire spring inside me; and look at my arms, dear brother;" and pulling up her pink muslin sleeves, she showed him that they were stuffed with sawdust. "Go home, and bring the money to pay for me," she cried, "and then I can come home again." But the

dolls had crowded up behind, so that he might not turn his boat round. "Straight on," cried Apple-blossom, in despair; "what does it matter whether you go backwards or forwards if you only keep straight when you live in a world that is round?"

So he sailed on once more beneath the sky that was getting grey, through all the shadows that gathered round, beneath the pale moon, and the little stars that came out one by one and watched him from the sky.

I saw him coming towards the land of story-books. That was how I knew about him, dear children. He was very tired and had fallen asleep, but the boat stopped quite naturally, as if it knew that I had been waiting for him. I stooped, and kissed his eyes, and looked at his little pale face, and lifting him softly in my arms, put him into this book to rest. That is how he came to be here for you to know. But in the toy-land Apple-blossom waits with the wire spring in her breast and the sawdust in her limbs; and at home, in the big house at the end of the village, the tall aunt weeps and wails and wonders if she will ever see again the children she loves so well.

She will not wait very long, dear children. I know how it will all be. When it is quite dark to-night, and she is sitting in the leather chair with the high back, her head on one side, and her poor long neck aching, quite suddenly she will hear two voices shouting for joy. She will start up and listen, wondering how long she has been sleeping, and then she will call out--

"Oh, my darlings, is it you?" And they will answer back--

"Yes, it is us, we have come, we have come!" and before her will stand Willie and Apple-blossom. For the big doll will have run down, and the wire spring and the sawdust will have vanished, and Apple-blossom will be the doll's little girl no more. Then the tall aunt will look at them both and kiss them; and she will kiss the poor little goat

too, wondering if it is possible to buy him a new tail. But though she will say little, her heart will sing for joy. Ah, children, there is no song that is sung by bird or bee, or that ever burst from the happiest lips, that is half so sweet as the song we sometimes sing in our hearts--a song that is learnt by love, and sang only to those who love us.