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“As Lights in the World”

It was bedtime. Murray and David sat curled on the big bed in their pajamas while Dad read to them as he did every evening. But tonight was different from any other night because it was the last time. Tomorrow Murray was going to boarding school by plane, hurtling away into the blue all by himself to be met by his grandmother at the other end. David was not quite sure how his brother felt about it.

Of course Murray had been very grand and boastful, and when the school uniform arrived David had felt green with envy. But now Murray sat very straight and still, cross-legged on the bed, his thin young face flushed pink, his fair hair standing up in spikes because he had just had a bath. His hands were clasped tightly together and his eyes fixed rather sadly on his father. Dad too seemed to be very much aware that tomorrow Murray would be leaving them.

“I’ll give you four minutes to see if you can learn that verse by heart,” said Dad, handing the Bible to Murray. “I want you to remember it all the time you are at school.” And because David disliked being forgotten, he butted his head under Murray’s elbow like a little goat and tried to learn it too. The words were rather long and difficult but Dad had just been explaining what they meant. It was Philippians 2:15: “That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.”

There was dead silence for four minutes by the clock. Murray’s lips moved silently while David puffed and wriggled. He wished they could hurry up because they were going to have a last-night feast, and Mother and Joan were ready; he could hear them whispering in the next room. But at last Murray handed the book back and repeated the verse perfectly without a mistake because he was ten. David joined in where he could because he was only eight. He would be nine in a couple of months.

A few minutes later they were ready to join Mother and Joan in the living room. They all sat down on a rug around a little table about nine inches high. It was a delicious feast: salted peanuts, cookies, orange soda, and french-fried potatoes—in fact all the things Murray liked best; and because he would not be with them for Christmas, they lit a candle in the middle and turned out the lights, and for a quarter of an hour they were all safe and together in the charmed circle of candlelight. The

children were as merry as could be, and none of them guessed that Mother and Dad, who seemed merry too, were thinking in their hearts: *This is the last time that we shall ever be quite like this. When we see Murray again he will have learned so much about the world beyond the candlelight; perhaps he will feel too old to enjoy little feasts in his pajamas.*

It had come to an end at last because Joan’s curly head was nodding and the candle had burned low. They washed their sticky fingers, brushed their teeth, and jumped into bed. Mother knelt long beside Murray, talking in a low whisper while David, who had been hastily tucked in and kissed, lay wondering whether he would be glad or sad when his time came the following year.

In the morning everything was a rush and bustle as they had to get to the airport by half-past eight, and it was a long way out of town. Dad, who was a doctor, had to say good-bye while they were still having breakfast, for he had to go over to the hospital; so it was just David, Joan, and Murray, all huddled together in the front seat because no one wanted to be so far away as the back seat, as Mother drove out to the plane. Ragbag the puppy wanted to come too, but he did not understand airport regulations and was better left at home.

It was very hot on the concrete area where they waited. The plane was there, all ready, a beautiful silver creature with blue propellers. On any other day they would all have been thrilled, but today the minutes seemed to be running away; they just could not be stopped.

The awful part, thought David, was that Murray seemed to have shrunk. In his ordinary clothes, his khaki shorts and T-shirt, he had seemed a large, strong boy with fine, strong muscles. But in his new gray trousers and black and red sports coat, bought slightly too large to allow for growth, and the school cap that came down over his eyes, he looked like a perfect shrimp. David could hardly believe his smallness, dressed up in those generous-sized new clothes. He thought, *Whatever will I look like next year?*

The voice from the loudspeaker began telling the passengers to board the plane. Murray, rather pale, flung his arms around his mother's neck and clung to her just for a moment. Then he kissed the top of Joan's head, squeezed David's hand, and was gone, running across the asphalt after the other passengers, clutching his attaché case and passport, his new raincoat trailing on the ground. Neither hand was free to mop up the tears that were streaming down his face. He got smaller and smaller, until he disappeared altogether inside the silver body of the plane. They saw the stewardess stoop down and speak kindly to him, and a moment later he reappeared at a window and waved. He had wanted a window seat very badly, and he had found a handkerchief, so no doubt he felt better. A few minutes later the propellers began to turn and the great machine moved majestically down the runway, turned, stopped, came back with a rush and a roar, and rose to the blue. David knew that Murray wasn't crying now. He would be watching those wings and propellers and had probably, just for the moment, forgotten all about everybody.

But down on the hot asphalt it was lonely and flat. Mother’s eyes were brimming with tears, and David had a strange ache in his chest. Only Joan, who was fat and impervious to sorrow, was jumping up and down on the weighing machine, enjoying herself. They went back to the car and drove home almost silently through the hot countryside from which all traces of green had vanished—nothing but cracked clods blistering under the burning blue; and David was saying to himself, *I don’t even care if it’s a jet or a comet! I don’t want to go away alone like that and not see Mother for a year—Oh! why do we have to live in another country? Why can’t we all go home to England and see Murray again at Christmas?*

He suddenly could not imagine why they had not all thought of this beautiful, simple plan before. It seemed so easy. He thought about it all the way home, sticking his head out of the window, liking the breath of the hot wind on his brown cheeks. He did not mind that Mother did not talk, for he knew her thoughts were far up in the blue sky somewhere above the sea. Joan did not mind either. She had climbed into the back and was jogging up and down singing a song that had no tune or rhythm—just happy words.

They swung through the big double gates of the hospital compound and went across to the house. It was cool and shady indoors, and they all sat down in the kitchen and had a snack to comfort themselves. And when they were all settled with milk and cookies, David suddenly leaned his elbows on the table and said, “Mother, I don’t want to go away from you to another

country. Couldn't Dad be a doctor in England now, and then we could come to you every holiday, and you could come and see us on Saturdays? It was so nice in England, don't you remember, Mother? Then we could all be together always. You ask him, Mother."

David's mother did not answer for quite a long time. Joan lolled against her shoulder, and Mother rested her chin on the brown curls.

"We can't do that, David," she said at last. "You see, we were sent here like soldiers are sent by their king. A missionary is a person who is sent."

"Sent for what?" asked David.

"To tell people who don't know that God loves them and that Jesus died to save them, and to show them what a Christian should be like. Jesus died for all these people but none of them know it yet. We've got to tell them and show them the way."

"Couldn't you do that in England?" pleaded David. "Oh, Mother, do ask God to send you to England. I don't want to go away so far."

"But there are lots of churches and Christians in England," said his mother, "and anyone who really wants to know can buy a Bible and read it. If everyone stayed in England it would be like having lots and lots of candles all burning together in one corner of a big dark house and all the rest of the house pitch-dark. The darker the place the more it needs the light, and although we hate your leaving us, Dad and I are glad that

we were sent to such a very dark place. There are hundreds of towns and villages out here where the people can't read and have never heard of Jesus as Saviour at all. That is why Dad and the nurses work so hard. If there weren't a hospital, the people wouldn't come, and if they didn't come they would never hear.”

“Lots of little candles!” repeated David brightly. “That's like Murray's text last night. Do you know it, Mother—about a crooked and 'averse' nation, and shining like lights in the world? Dad taught it to me and Murray last night. Mother, can children be missionaries?”

“Certainly,” she answered. “The most important part of a missionary's work is to show what a Christian should be like: as different as light from darkness. When you play with the other children, remember that. Show them that a Christian is kind when others are cruel and selfish, and truthful when others tell lies, and self-controlled when others lose their temper. They will soon wonder why, and perhaps you might even get a chance to tell them. But always show them first. A light is made to be seen.”

There was a rustle in the passageway, and a little, brown, thin face with dark eyes and black curly hair peeped around the door. It was Waffi, their next-door neighbor, and David looked at him with a new sort of interest. Up to now they had played with the neighbor children but always together. Murray had been the leader and David had followed, just one of the gang. Now he realized that he must stand on his own feet and find

his own playmates because although he was very fond of Joan, she was too small to count. There would never again be anyone like Murray, but perhaps he and Waffi could have some fun together. Waffi was about his own age, as far as anyone could remember, and quick-witted and adventurous. The language he sometimes used was most interesting too, although fortunately David could not understand quite all he said.

Black eyes met blue eyes in a long cautious stare. David turned to his mother.

“Can I go to play with Waffi?” he asked. “And can we play on the beach?”

Mother glanced down at the shingly beach surrounding the little bay at the bottom of the turf slope. “Yes,” she answered, “down there, where I can see you, and I’ll ring the dinner bell over the fence a quarter of an hour before dinner time. Ragbag can go with you.”

It was fun slithering down the path that led to the bay. David in his sandals was no more nimble than Waffi barefoot. Ragbag barked with relief. He had felt that something had been very wrong with the family, going off like that and leaving him tied to the doorknob! They had all smelled as though they were in low spirits and, anyhow, where was Murray? But scampering down to the beach like this seemed cheerful and ordinary again. Ragbag leaped in the air and snapped at a butterfly.

The beach below the house was a lovely place. The water was warm and shallow, and lazy waves lapped on little hot rocks. It was a wild deserted strip of coast and hardly anyone

came here except fishermen, for the proper beach, with miles of smooth sand and hundreds of people and bathing huts, was around the headland. But little boys, who did not mind the steepness of the cliff, liked this beach better, for there were rocks sticking far out into the water and exciting little creeks and caves which no one but boys knew about. David's father sometimes came down with them on his day off, and he and Murray and David would swim out in goggles and hunt for winkles on the boulders underwater. Winkles are delicious boiled in salt water, extracted with a pin, sprinkled with vinegar, and eaten with bread and butter.

“Let's go out to the end of that rock,” said Waffi, “and climb right around to the other side. The tide is out and we can almost stand in that funny little creek.”

David flung away his sandals and left Ragbag to guard them, for Ragbag disliked rock-climbing. When a wave jumped at him there was nothing to do but retreat because if he jumped back he fell into the water, and that sort of fight was no fun at all. But David and Waffi loved it, and, clinging with their fingers and toes, they clambered along the ledges where the sea anemones clung and the water came gurgling up in the crevices. It was a still day, and there was not a soul to be seen from headland to headland.

David loved this rock. There was a great cleft at the end of it into which he could swim at high tide and paddle at low tide. The jaggedness of the creekbed made the waves rather rough and he had never seen fishermen out on the end of it. He

thought it was his very own creek because he had discovered it. He had shown it, as a favor, to Murray and Waffi. Sometimes he missed his footing clambering along the slippery sides and fell into the sea, but that did not matter in the least, for David could swim like a fish.

He had reached the place where the rock divided, and peered downward into the creek. Then he gave a sharp little exclamation of indignant surprise.

An iron ring had been hammered into the rock, and a small boat lay chained between the boulders.

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