

## *Piggy in the Middle*

Helen ran into the house from the garden when she heard her mother calling her name, only taking time to do three cartwheels on the way.

‘I know what Mother’s wanting,’ she grinned. ‘Our new nursemaid is coming this afternoon and she’ll want to tell us all the usual stuff about behaving.’

Bob, Helen’s older brother, was already sitting beside Mrs Roseveare when the girl crashed into the room. Their little sister, Jean, was on her knee.

‘Really, Helen,’ said her mother, ‘when are you going to develop some ladylike behaviour? Your entrance was more like a young pony cantering into its stable than a girl coming into a sitting room.’

Winking at his sister, Bob decided to delay the inevitable.

‘I think Mother’s right,’ he said. ‘You are like a pony.’

Helen, who loved her brother and tried very hard to please him, knew exactly what he was up to.

‘Ponies are lovely!’ she laughed. ‘I don’t mind a bit being told I’m like a pony.’

‘That’s all very well,’ Mother said, shaking her head. ‘But the fact is that you are a girl and doors

should be opened and gone through rather than treated as hurdles in a field.'

'I would love to have a pony!' said the girl eagerly.

But she was just a fraction too eager, and Mrs Roseveare suddenly realised that her clever children were up to their usual tricks. They were trying to keep her off the subject of new nursemaids and how not to behave when they came.

Bob and Helen knew they had gone a little too far a little too fast, and they settled down to 'the talk.'

'Now,' said Mother seriously. 'You can be the most delightful children, but sometimes – just sometimes – you forget yourselves and become little demons. My problem is that you often forget yourselves when a new nursemaid comes, with the result that she has hardly unpacked her bags before she starts packing them up again. This really will not do.'

Helen and Bob hung their heads.

'When your new nursemaid arrives this afternoon I want you to behave perfectly. Show her what delightful children you can be ... then keep it up. And whatever you do, don't play your awful tricks on her. Do you hear me?'

They heard.

'Children!' Mrs Roseveare's voice called out to the garden a few hours later.

The two youngsters answered straight away. They walked across the grass together and went quietly into the house where they were introduced to the young woman who had come to look after them.

‘You must be Bob,’ the nursemaid said, holding out her hand.

Bob shook it politely then took a step back.

‘So you must be Helen.’

The girl held out her hand and allowed it to be shaken.

‘I’m looking forward to getting to know you,’ the nursemaid told her young charges.

Mrs Roseveare decided that the introduction had gone well enough and should not be prolonged.

‘Out you go and play,’ she told the children.

Bob and Helen nearly forgot their manners when they were let loose, but remembered just in time.

‘Walk across the grass until we can’t be seen,’ Bob whispered.

And that’s what they did. But as soon as they were out of sight the pair of them fell into fits of giggles.

‘Did you like her?’ Helen asked.

‘She seemed just like all the others,’ answered Bob.

‘How long do you think she’ll stay?’ his sister wondered.

Bob laughed aloud as he kicked a chestnut into the air. ‘I suppose that rather depends on us. But I don’t think she’ll last more than a month.’

'A month's a long time if she turns out to be very strict,' worried Helen.

'If she's as strict as that,' her brother said darkly, 'we won't let her last that long.'

Not many weeks later Mrs Roseveare was once again looking for a new nursemaid, and she was none too pleased about it.

Yet again Bob and Helen were subjected to 'the talk', and this time it was given with great seriousness. Did they not know that they needed a nursemaid to look after them and their little sister, Jean? Did they not know that their parents struggled to find suitable young women? Did they not know that nursemaids cost money? Did they not know that there were many, many children in England in the 1930s who didn't have the privilege of having a nursemaid to look after them? And did they fully understand how disappointed their parents would be if the new nursemaid, who was just about to arrive, was to depart within a few short weeks?

In the face of the facts that were so clearly set out before them, both Bob and Helen had the good grace to feel ashamed. The problem was that baiting nursemaids had become a game with them, one that they enjoyed. The game was won when the young woman in question handed in her notice and began to pack her bags, and they had won every game so far.

But what the two energetic youngsters didn't know was that while they had won each game so far, they were about to lose the match. Enter Freda.

The weeks that followed were interesting. After they had recovered from the lecture they'd received from both their parents, Bob and Helen were up to their tricks once again. At first they just tried little things they thought might frighten or upset Freda. But the young woman, who was all of fourteen years old, was neither easily frightened nor given to being upset. Then the pair of them moved on to more serious tactics, none of which had the least effect on their new nursemaid! Were they losing their touch?

'I really believe that Freda and the children are going to get on,' Mrs Roseveare dared to say after two months had passed. 'The children seem to like her.'

Her husband put down his newspaper and considered the matter.

'You're quite right,' he said. 'We've had no tantrums from either the children or the nursemaid. Perhaps Freda is just who we've been waiting for.'

In the nursery Helen, Jean and Freda were involved in the serious business of making a birthday card for Bob. He had been given something to do in the garden so that the card could be made in secret.

'Can you keep a secret?' Helen asked.

Freda handed her the glue. 'Of course I can,' she replied. 'A nursemaid has to be able to keep secrets.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well,' said Freda, 'if you forget to behave and do something really silly, what should I do about it? Should I rush downstairs and tell your father and mother? Or should I tell you that you've been naughty, punish you, and forget about it?'

Helen's eyes lit up! Suddenly she knew why she and Bob had given up trying to get rid of their nearly-new nursemaid. Freda liked them and she knew how to keep a secret. She didn't tell Mother all the little things they did wrong! And when she punished them for being naughty, she then forgot all about it.

'I'm glad you can keep secrets,' Helen told her. 'May I tell you a secret?'

'Go on,' teased Freda. 'Tell me and see if I can keep it.'

Helen put her arms round Freda - splashing glue on to her apron as she did so - and told her that she liked her very much.

'Hurry up and get changed for bed,' Freda told the children a few evenings later, 'or your mother will be up before you're ready.'

There was a hurrying and a scurrying as Bob and Helen put on their night clothes and Freda finished bathing their sister.

'I can hear her coming!' giggled Helen, taking a run and a jump for bed.

Mother opened the door and came in smiling, enjoying the good feeling of a happy nursery and a contented nursemaid.

‘What have you been doing this evening?’ she asked Helen, stroking her long shiny hair.

‘I’ve brushed my hair a hundred times,’ the girl said, ‘and I’ve drawn a picture of the dog.’

‘May I see it?’ asked Mrs Roseveare.

Sitting down together on Helen’s bed, mother and daughter looked at the drawing and then both knelt down and prayed. Helen prayed first and then her mother asked the Lord to bless her. As the little girl scrambled into bed she felt a warm glow inside her. Much as she loved Freda, it was very special to have her mother come up every night in order that they could pray together.

When Mother had gone, and Freda had done the last of the night’s tidying and closed the bedroom door, there should have been silence and the soft noises of children sleeping. There was not.

‘Will you read me a story?’ asked a little voice.

That was a request Helen could rarely refuse. ‘Come in beside me and cuddle right down under the blankets.’

Instead of two children sleeping soundly, there was a torch-lit huddle as Helen found their place in a story book and began to read.

‘Listen,’ whispered Helen, ‘we’re coming to the exciting bit.’

Jean, her little sister, held her breath and waited to hear what would happen next to Peter Rabbit in the dangerous territory of Mr McGregor's garden!

Most nights after she had read her little sister a story, Helen lay for a while and thought. She tried to puzzle out the unfair things in her family life, the kind that happen in every single family. Why was she sometimes punished when she'd not done anything wrong? Why did the others not tell Mother when she was smacked for something they'd done? Why was Bob allowed to do things she couldn't do just because he was two-and-a-half years older? Why was Jean let off with things because she was a year and a half younger? In Helen's opinion being the middle one of three children was the worst thing to be. She wasn't special because she was the oldest, nor was she special because she was the youngest. In fact, she was just the piggy in the middle.

'What would I like most of all?' she sometimes wondered before she nodded off to sleep. In her heart Helen knew the answer. Her dearest wish was to be Bob's favourite sister, to be his very best friend. She worked out ways of pleasing him, games they could play, puzzles they could do. But whatever she did, Helen felt that her sweet little sister was his favourite and that everything she tried always went a little bit wrong. Poor Helen, if only she'd known it, part of the problem was that she tried far too hard.



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‘Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Helen, happy birthday to you!’ sang the family after breakfast one Sunday in September 1933.

‘Imagine you being eight years old,’ smiled Freda. ‘I’m quite sure you didn’t think I’d still be with you on your eighth birthday!’

By then Freda was so much loved and trusted that Bob and Helen had told her the mischievous things they had done to the nursemaids who had looked after them in the past. Helen opened her little birthday present and just knew this was going to be a good day. Mrs Roseveare took her two older children to church as usual and then they all went home for lunch. Sunday was often the only day her father spent at home and that made it feel special. Her birthday made it extra special.

After lunch the children went to Sunday School, which was held in the teacher’s home not far from where the Roseveares lived.

‘What are we going to do today?’ Bob asked, when they arrived.

The teacher took some papers from her desk.

‘I’ve collected special pictures for you to paste into your Missionary Prayer Books,’ she said.

‘What’s special about them?’ asked the birthday girl.

‘Look and see.’

Helen looked through the sheets of paper. 'They're all pictures of Indian children,' she said. 'Are we going to make Indian pages in our books?'

'We are indeed,' her teacher agreed.

The afternoon seemed to pass quickly as Helen looked at the different pictures: girls squatting on the ground helping their mothers to cook, boys playing. Then there were pictures of Indian men talking and women carrying loads of wood for their cooking fires.

'Tell me about Indian people,' said Helen, fascinated by the pictures.

'Some of them will have been to church and Sunday School today, just like you,' the Sunday School teacher explained. 'But many, many others have never heard about God.'

'Why not?' Bob asked, looking up from his Missionary Prayer Book.

'They've never heard about God because no-one has ever gone to tell them about him,' he was told. 'Much of India has never been visited by missionaries.'

Helen thought about this and felt sorry for the child whose picture she held in her hand. She looked into the child's dark eyes and tried to imagine what it would feel like never to have heard about God.

'I'm going to be a missionary when I grow up,' she told her teacher. 'That's what I want to be.'

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A few months later Helen was no longer piggy in the middle for she and Bob had another little sister. And, quite amazingly Freda, the nursemaid, was still there!

‘Where are we going?’ Helen asked her mother as she buttoned up her winter coat.

‘I’ll explain as we walk,’ Mrs Roseveare said, taking her by the hand.

Helen glowed at the thought of having Mother all to herself.

‘We’re going to church,’ her mother explained.

‘But it’s not Sunday,’ Helen puzzled aloud.

Mrs Roseveare smiled. ‘I know, but it’s still a special day. We’re going to thank God for Diana’s safe arrival.’

Helen thought of her little sister and smiled. She was very cute, especially when she was asleep.

Helen and her mother were shown into a side chapel of their church in Preston, the north of England town in which they lived at that time. The girl shivered. It was November and very, very cold. Looking round to see who all was there, Helen discovered that it was a private Communion service, and that only the minister taking it and one other man was present. Mother and daughter knelt side by side and Mrs Roseveare pointed to each word in the Prayer Book as it was read or said in order that Helen could follow the service.

'I wonder what that means,' the eight-year-old thought, when her mother's finger paused on the word 'oblation'.

Later, as they walked hand-in-hand on their way home, Helen remembered the word.

'What does oblation mean?' she asked.

Mrs Roseveare's grip tightened and her pace seemed to speed up. Something told the girl that she'd said the wrong thing, or perhaps interrupted her mother's thinking about the service. And a wave of sadness passed through her heart. Here she was having a special time with her mother and she had gone and spoiled it by asking what 'oblation' meant.

'I always spoil things,' she thought. 'I wish I could stop myself doing that. But I don't know how.'

Between home and church there was a little shop that sold all sorts of curious things.

'I love that shop,' she told Bob one day as they passed on their way to church. Helen ran ahead of the family in order to spend a minute looking in the window before the others caught up and she had to move on.

'Look at those!' she whistled. 'They're beautiful.'

Bob was not convinced that the bookends in the shape of angels were lovely at all!

'Please let nobody buy them,' Helen prayed week after week, as she saved her pocket money to buy the

angels for her mother's birthday. And it was always a great relief to find them still in the window each time she passed.

'How many times are you going to count your money?' Freda asked. 'It's not going to become more just by being counted, you know.'

'I know that,' laughed Helen. 'But I've nearly enough now. Do you think they'll still be there next week?'

Bob was just about to suggest that they would be sold, when Freda caught him with a warning look.

'I dare say they will,' the nursemaid said. 'If they've not sold over all these weeks, I imagine that they'll stay in the window for just a few days more.'

It was a very excited girl who went into the fascinating shop and bought the angel bookends for her mother's birthday, and Mrs Roseveare was pleased when her special day came round and she received them.

There were very few things Helen enjoyed more than a real rough and tumble game in the garden, the rougher the better.

'What kind of example are you to your little sisters?' Freda laughed. 'Even your brother doesn't get himself into the scrapes you do.'

Helen thought of her sisters – three of them now since the arrival of Frances, the latest and last baby of the family, and felt as though she was

a disappointment to them all. She had such a need to be liked, to be best at things, to be able to jump highest, run fastest, shout loudest and be first in the class. The truth is that the only person Helen usually let down was herself because, once again, she tried too hard. She really needed someone to sit her down and explain that she was loved just for being Helen Roseveare, not because of anything she could do or achieve or win. But nobody did.

‘Have you all done your homework?’ Helen’s teacher asked.

While most heads nodded, one or two children avoided looking at their teacher, a sure sign that their homework was not done well, or even not done at all.

‘Right,’ the woman said, ‘will those on the back row bring their homework to my desk. When I’ve checked it, the next row can come out. While you are waiting I want you to check through your eleven and twelve times tables ready for a test after playtime.’

There was a very quiet rumble of protest that the teacher decided to ignore.

‘Mary,’ the woman said crossly, as she looked at one exercise book, ‘how often have I told you to wash your hands before doing your homework?’

Mary’s head hung low.

‘I’m afraid I’ll have to write to your mother if you don’t do as you are told.’

Mary blushed deeply, mortified at the thought of the letter she might have to carry home to her mother. Not only would she get a row at school, but she’d be smacked at home too!

‘Next,’ the teacher said.

Helen stepped forward.

‘Thank goodness for the Helen Roseveares of this world. At least we don’t have eggy mathematics or gravy on grammar from you.’

Helen felt a warm glow inside her as each part of her homework received a red tick.

‘Good work!’ wrote the teacher at the bottom of the page. ‘Keep it up.’

Smiling, Helen picked up her homework book and turned to go back to her desk.

‘Next,’ said the teacher.

The warm glow lasted all morning, because Helen not only had all her homework right, she came first in the times tables test, as usual.

‘How long did you spend on your twelve times table?’ the teacher demanded.

Lucy looked down at her desk. ‘Please miss, half an hour.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ snapped the woman.

‘Half an hour,’ Lucy said more loudly.

'Well you're going to have to spend much longer than that to get it into that head of yours,' was the thoughtless reply. 'Look at Helen. She said it perfectly, and I'm sure she could have said it perfectly backwards too.'

Helen's warm glow began to fade. Yes, she knew she had said it perfectly. Yes, she probably could say it backwards too, even though she'd never tried that before. But the nine-year-old was honest enough with herself to know that she didn't have to try half as hard as Lucy when it came to mathematics. Working with numbers came quite naturally to her, while poor Lucy spent more time counting her fingers than she did writing the answers when the class did their maths lesson.

As Helen walked home from school that day, she had an honest think about things.

'It's not surprising that I'm good at maths when Father used to be a maths teacher. And he must have been very, very good because he's now an inspector who goes round different schools to see if teachers are doing their work well enough. But I'm not as good as Bob,' she thought. 'He's brilliant! I'm glad he's not in my class at school or I'd never be first!'