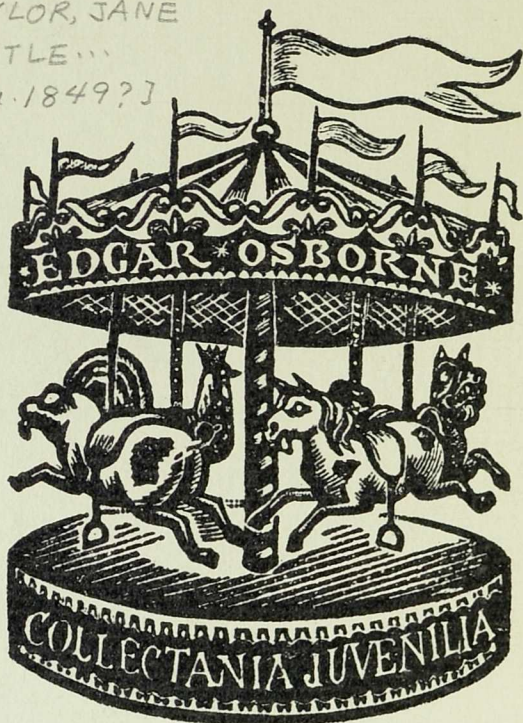


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The Little Wanderers.

By Jane Taylor

Stanford Rivers: Sept. 20. 1849

WHAT a happy time for children is a bright summer evening, when they can frolic in the fields enjoying the soft sunlight without its noonday heat! they resemble thus the sportive swarms of gnats which are seen at this time chasing one another in the yellow sunbeam; for children seem often as gay and free from thought as these their insect companions.

It was on just such an evening during the month of July that a romping troop of children, laughing as they went, had wandered from their homes, which were in the outskirts of a town in Suffolk, till they had gradually assembled in a meadow at a little distance from it. This meadow was now gaily decked with wild flowers; the pink and lilac mallow grew here in abundance, with the delicate little germander speedwell. The wild geranium also had just begun to appear in the hedges, among the tall majestic ferns, and their roots were covered by the ground-ivy which spread its tendrils in every direction over the sheltered banks. On one side of this broad mead lay an extent of rising ground, the soil of which favoured the growth of the hairbell, the wild thyme, and several of those

minute and curious flowers usually found on heath land. On another side meandered a little rivulet, and above it rose rather a high and steep embankment, covered with ivy and other creeping plants, also a few pale straggling wild flowers which sought the light they could so scantily obtain in this shaded place. The entwined roots and stems of some young trees served greatly to strengthen this embankment, which was crowned by a magnificent hedge of yellow broom. Through the branches of the trees appeared the gable end of an antique looking farm-house, and so unlike any other dwelling in the neighbourhood was it, that various had been the conjectures formed as to its past history.

Merrily and joyously did these little children frolic and amuse themselves in this pleasant meadow; some were gathering flowers and watching the little grey moths alternately hovering over and resting upon the blades of grass; others were chasing one another up and down the grassy slope and rolling on the heathery turf, while another group might be seen deeply interested in watching the first flight of a kite, which with difficulty rose in the slight evening breeze. They were all so happy, and had found so many unusually pleasant games this evening, that they had not observed that the sun had already set some time. A blended hue of yellow and green tinged the sky, in which two or three pale stars were just visible; the last rosy cloud had faded away, and one golden pathway was left in the west as the last remnant of sunset.

The curfew, which in this good old town is yet

tolled, had sounded, and the children at length, wearied of play, were beginning to saunter home, when suddenly it was observed that a little darling brother, who had been one of the blithest in the party, was not among them. At first his name was slightly called by one or two of his companions, then more loudly, and at last very loudly and tremblingly by his sister Margaret, who was about two years older than himself. The name of Willie then seemed to resound through the meadow as the call rose from their many voices, and an echo from a neighbouring grove was the only answer. It was suggested that perhaps Willie had concealed himself in some hidden nook, and that very soon he might be seen to burst from his hiding-place, laughing to find how he had alarmed them; this idea served for a time to comfort Margaret, but at length her little heart gave way, and the tears would no longer be restrained. A party immediately set out to seek the little playmate in different directions, but their efforts were useless, for nowhere was he to be discovered; and returning troubled and disheartened they cast a despairing glance toward the grim-looking old house above them, in hope that its inmates might give them assistance; but it seemed in the dusky light, with its gable ends and tall chimneys, only to give a stern reply, and though in a further window they perceived a light, yet it was beyond their reach and out of sound of their little voices. Sorrowfully they looked upon each other, and thought of their homes and of Willie's home, and what his poor father and mother would say

when they heard of the disaster which had so unaccountably befallen them. They resolved to return without further delay and tell the sad story, and then more effective aid might be procured for the search; but it was not without difficulty that poor Margaret could be persuaded to leave the spot where she yet believed her dear little brother must be, and though all was dark and silent she wished very much to remain a little longer and call him only a few times more.

With troubled hearts they turned homeward, frequently giving a look behind as they pressed on, till the cheerful sound of the church bells, which at this time were ringing merrily, gave them courage, and quickening their pace they soon reached Margaret's door. There they found her mother, who, thinking that her children had stayed out much beyond their usual time, was preparing to go in search of them: the sight of the party had given relief to her fears, when Margaret sprang forward, and hiding her little face in her apron, said in a low, heart-broken voice, "Oh, mother! dear little Willie's lost." "What, Margaret! and have you come home *without* him?" said her alarmed mother; "surely, child, you have not *left* him in the fields *alone*,"—and it was some minutes before her agitated feelings would allow her to listen to any thing they had to say. The neighbours soon collected round, and they with the father and mother, the former having just returned from his work, set out with the children for a renewed search. A feeling of uncertain joy came over

the heart of the poor mother when the children exclaimed, "This is the meadow where we played," and they pressed forward hopefully. Every field and hedge around was searched, and the boy's name was repeatedly vociferated, but without reply. A sudden recollection of the gypsies, by whom this neighbourhood is much frequented, increased their agitation, and the anxious parents now tortured their minds with the thought, that their child had in all probability been secretly enticed away by a party of this wandering people, and soon might be perhaps beyond recovery. Their useless search they soon abandoned, and called to aid the town crier, who now at midnight perambulated the dim, scantily lighted town with his well-known bell; vainly did he pace the deserted streets, and soothing probably to the slumbers of many an inhabitant was the sound of his regular and repeated ringings, for no one appeared with tidings of the little fugitive.

And now the day had dawned, and a bank of amber-coloured clouds prepared the way for sunrise. The whole atmosphere seemed illuminated with a rosy hue, which was reflected in the river and its many rivulets; and then the glorious sun dispersing the amber clouds as it rose, changed them to streaks of gold over the horizon. Hay-making was not yet over in this part of the country, and in some of the fields the grass lay in unturned ridges sparkling with dew, and fragrant with clover and other flowers. The honey-suckle and wild rose showed their greatest charms in this early morning light, and the little

meek bird's-eye looked forth from the tangled grass by the wayside, content with its own minuter beauties.

The haymakers and other labourers had long dispersed to their different employments, and a shepherd who lived on the border of a neighbouring wood, had just left his cottage to see that his sheep were safe at the close of the brief summer night. There were the gentle creatures; some peacefully lying down, while others had commenced their morning repast.

The shepherd was attracted to one spot, where several were clustered together, and to his great astonishment, he observed in the midst of them a little child quietly sleeping. This was the *lost Willie*; his round ruddy cheek was nestled on the soft wool of the sheep, his arm thrown round the neck of one of them, and his fair curly hair mingled with its shaggy coat; at his feet lay another of his innocent companions, and in his little hand he grasped some flowers. The child breathed softly, and his sleep appeared deep and undisturbed, while the two silent tranquil creatures looked like sentinels only waiting their young master's summons to rise from their resting places. The shepherd looked on in silence for some moments, scarcely wishing to awake the boy, and to disturb so unusual and pretty a scene. In a few minutes Willie's hand moved, the flowers fell, his little arm loosed its hold of the neck of his woolly friend, and in so doing touched the bell fastened round its neck; this soft sound roused him to consciousness, and opening his bright eyes he looked up first at the blue sky,

then around a this many companions, and at last, with a soft inquiring gaze, on the calm, kind face of the shepherd, who immediately recognised the child as one whose countenance was familiar to him, and taking him in his arms, asked if he would go home with him to his little cottage, where he should have some breakfast, after which he said he would take him to his own home; for the shepherd knew it well, and also knew the name of his parents. The boy yet bewildered and scarcely knowing whether this was not part of his dream, asked distressfully for his mother and Margaret, saying, "Why did they go away? Take me to them—take me home. Where is my home? Where are they all gone?" The shepherd, however, was able at last to calm him, and he was willing to accompany him to the cottage.

The way they took led through several pleasant meadows and a little wood, composed chiefly of young beech trees and hornbeams, the branches of which meeting overhead, now threw a chequered light on the path beneath. This wood was the favourite resort of the shepherd's children, when they would ramble among the brushwood to gather primroses and violets, and it was their delight a little later in the year to find the wild hyacinth, which, loving the shade, adorned the wood for many days with its blue blossoms. In turning down a narrow side-path, the shepherd espied his two little girls, Mary and Gertrude, who had come to meet him, and who, not expecting their father's return so soon, were surprised at his sudden appearance thus with a

little stranger. The story was soon told, and they, pleased and amused, ran on first to acquaint their mother with the news. Willie and the shepherd found her waiting for them at the little garden gate, and ready with a kind welcome ; she took Willie into the cottage, and placing a stool for him to the table, soon supplied him with bread and milk.

This comfortable repast, and the cheerful sight of the cottage party, made Willie so happy, that he almost forgot he was not at his father's table ; and his little bright innocent face, and childlike prattle, quite won the hearts of the shepherd and his family. "I did not mean," Willie said, after a little silence, "to run away from Margaret ; where is she ? and where's the sheep with the bell round its neck ? I gave it some grass, and it took it out of my hand, and I said, 'Good bye, pretty sheep, Margaret is waiting for me ;' and then the bell tinkled, and I thought it said, 'Come away, come away, Willie,' and then I went a long way off with the sheep, where I had never been before, and it got quite dark, and I did not know where I was, and I could not think where my home was." "And now you shall very soon see your home again, my boy," said the shepherd, who remembering his poor parents, was unwilling to detain Willie and thus prolong their painful suspense ; so when breakfast was concluded, the shepherd, according to his promise, was ready to conduct Willie to his own home, and after he had taken leave of his kind hostess and her children, they both set off together to recross the fields through which they

had passed an hour ago. They were not long in arriving at the town, and the shepherd, who was well acquainted with the different turnings, soon brought Willie to the door of his home.

At this delightful sight the parents, lately so dejected, scarcely knew at first how sufficiently to express their pleasure, and fondly embracing their precious child, they inquired earnestly where he had passed the night.

Margaret just now made her appearance, her tearful face instantly changing to one of surprise and joy as she led into the room the little tottering, unconscious looking Janet, too young to have missed her brother. And then the shepherd told his story, and Margaret said she thought she had never been so happy before. The parents expressed their gratitude several times, and as the shepherd left them he said he hoped Margaret would soon come and see his Mary and Gertrude, who lived in the cottage by the wood.

We must hope that when Willie repeated his evening prayer at the close of this day, and again used those words which have been taught and commanded us by our blessed Lord, that he remembered that his heavenly Father *had* delivered him from earthly evil during the last night, and had granted him refreshing sleep, even in the chill evening air. How many evils might have befallen a little child, thus exposed alone in the open fields! but God, who watches over all his creatures, and remembers the frailest flower, shows a tender love and compassion for children; and those especially enjoy the sunshine of his

favour, whose hearts are ever lifted up to him in grateful love. Why, then, should they fear any danger while underneath are the everlasting arms? But what we should dread far more than any adversities which may happen to the body, are all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul, and which so grievously deform the heart as often to render our prayers our sins.

How devoutly should we pray that we may be delivered from *this* kingdom of evil, where Satan the tempter holds the rule, and would ever lead us astray from the Saviour. The child who, with the eye of humble faith and prayer looks to Christ and would be following him, finds acceptance; and he who uttered the gracious words, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of *such* is the kingdom of heaven," discovers those that are his, bears the lambs in his arms, carries them in his bosom, and at last leads them to that safe and happy home where they shall dwell for evermore.

"BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL.

"CHILD, ere thou wander forth to play,
Thy Lord's own words be duly said,
That thou from sin and danger dread
Deliver'd be to-day. §

"The spirit dark that works within,
Will whisper evil to thy heart,
Will turn thee from the better part,
And tempt thy soul to sin.

"Thou canst not tell what danger near,
What sorrow never dream'd before,
This one short day may have in store,
What sudden pain or fear. §

- “ As I have seen a boat go down
In quiet waters suddenly,
When not a wave was on the sea,
Nor in the sky a frown.
- “ But happy still in all distress,
The child that to his Father flies,
The heart that on its God relies
For strength and holiness.
- “ God’s glorious angels watch him round,
God’s Spirit on his soul is shed ;
In vain the tempter’s snares are spread,
He walks on guarded ground.
- “ Why should he dread misfortune’s blast ?
Why should he tremble at the foe,
Or fear for pain, or shame or woe ?
His heart is anchor’d fast.
- “ Like lily flower that to and fro
Is toss’d upon the waters wide,
What cares it for the changeful tide ?
Its root is firm below.”

"As I have near a boat go down
 In quiet waters gently,
 When but a wave was on the sea,
 For in the sky a fever."

"But how will I in all distress,
 The child that in the water lies,
 The heart that on the bed lies,
 For strength and holiness."

"God's glorious angels watch him round,
 And spirits on his soul are shed;
 In vain the tempter's snares are spread,
 He walks on ground."

"Why should he dread the tempter's blast?
 Why should he tremble at the foe,
 Or fear for pain, or shame, or loss?
 His heart is anchored fast."

"Like the lily flower that to and fro
 Is tossed upon the water wide,
 What care is for the changeful tide?
 Its root is firm below."

