Beyond the Blue Hills

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Extract

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‘Come along, young Tina; it’s your turn. And remember the stone must go into the first square but your foot mustn’t.’

Tess and Tina had been sitting on the step of their aunt’s house, waiting for their turn on the hopscotch pitch and discussing their favourite subject, which was the life of the two little princesses. Tina loved to pretend that she was Margaret Rose, but now she stood up and went over to where her cousin Annie was impatiently holding out the flat stone that they used for hopscotch. Tess saw her little sister straighten the imaginary crown on top of her head before throwing the stone carefully into the first square. The child gave a prodigious hop to clear the square, skidded, teetered for a moment, and then put her right foot as well as her left down, disqualifying herself. Tess sighed, expecting her to argue when Annie shouted ‘Next’, but for once Tina took her dismissal meekly, though when Annie turned away she pulled a face, crossing her eyes and sticking her tongue out as far as it would go. Tess guessed that

this was because she thought hopscotch was a game far beneath the dignity of a royal princess, and preferred to return to her perch on the step so that she and Tess could continue their conversation. At least face-pulling wasn't too bad by Tina's usual standards, so Tess pretended to notice nothing.

'Phew!' Tina said, trotting over to her sister and carefully dusting the step before sitting down once more. 'Look, Tess, if we was to borrow next door's stirring cart, you could pretend to be one of those beautiful ponies what pull the royal carriage and I'd be Princess Margaret Rose, waving to the crowd on me way back home after a trip out.'

Tess smiled but shook her head. There must have been twenty children, of all ages and sizes, playing in the court, and she could just imagine the hoots of derision and rude remarks which would result if they played what most of the other kids would consider a sissy and snobby game. What was more, by pulling the cart round the court she would interfere with a game of footie, the hopscotch pitch, and a number of girls who were skipping to the well-known chant of *A house to let, Apply within, Next-door neighbour carry on*. She was opening her mouth to explain this to Tina when her mother appeared, hurrying into the court under the big stone arch, actually running, like a young girl. Tess's mouth dropped open; Mam was always so busy, so anxious, but right now she was smiling broadly. Her hair, which was curly like Tina's only very much darker, had not been pulled back as it usually was for work,

and Tess remembered that it was her mother's day off, so she had chosen to wear her hair loose for a change. But it was plain that something really nice must have happened for Laura's large, velvet brown eyes were shining with excitement, and as soon as she reached them she sat down heavily on the step of No. 2 regardless of her best coat, and hugged them hard.

'Oh, my little loves, you'll never guess what's happened this morning,' she said, her voice rising. 'I'm so excited and so happy! Just wait till I tell you!'

'Mammy, I'm the Princess Margaret Rose, and you don't go squeezin' princesses, nor rumplin' their curls, nor makin' them sit down on dusty old door-steps,' Tina said reproachfully. 'I bet you've knocked me crown all askew.' She put a hand up to her head, then gave a squeal of dismay. 'Oh, Mammy, you've knocked me bleedin' crown clear off. Now what'll I do?'

Tess waited for an eruption, for her mother hated to hear them swear, but instead Laura merely looked startled. 'Crown? What crown?' she asked. 'I didn't see no crown, queen.'

Tess gave a snort of amusement. 'You know what Tina is, Mam. It weren't a real crown, not even a paper one; it were just in her head, like.'

This remark made her mother giggle. 'In her head, not on her head,' she said, then gave Tess a smacking kiss on the cheek before standing up and pulling both girls to their feet. 'Sorry about the crown, Tina, me love, but I'm so excited I never gave a thought to

wharrever it was you were playing. I've got news for you, only I guess we'd better go indoors and find Aunt Millie, so I only have to tell my story once.'

As she spoke, she turned to go into her sister's house, but Tess said imploringly: 'Oh, Mam, tell us first! I know it's good news, so is it cakes for tea, or a trip to New Brighton? And it's my birthday quite soon – is it a party for all me friends?'

'No, it's better than all those things.' She lowered her voice. 'I've got a job in a shop on Heyworth Street and it includes a little flat above it. Oh, girls, I'm just so excited! You'll be able to go back to your old school, Tess, and of course Tina will go there too. It's right handy . . . and it will be grand to have a place of our own again. We shan't have much furniture at first, but I'll gradually buy some bits and pieces – second hand of course, from Paddy's Market – and Mr Mitchell says I can take the pair of you round any time, so you can see the flat for yourselves.'

'Oh, Mam, that's just so wonderful,' Tess breathed, feeling warmth rush into her cheeks. That very morning, she and Grandma Moffat had fallen out and poor Tess, who had been doing her best to carry a heavy tray through to the parlour for the two old ladies, had received a shouting at and a clack round the ear which had made her head ring. The slap had been delivered because she had not knocked on the door before entering the room; but how could I, Tess thought now, aggrieved, when both me hands were occupied with the tray? I did give the door a kick but Grandma Moffat didn't hear it – me plimsolls don't

make much noise – and when she slapped me and the tea rocked out of the mug she told Aunt Millie that she had been cross because of the spilt tea, and never mentioned me not knocking. Tess had been dreading her next encounter with the old lady but now, she thought, she could put up with all sorts, knowing that escape was at hand.

She knew what had really annoyed Grandma Moffat was the fact that the old woman had been standing in the middle of the room in her long, lace-fringed drawers, pulling one of her many petticoats down over her head. Usually, her breakfast tray was delivered by one of the older cousins. It appeared that she did not mind them seeing her in her underwear, but for some inexplicable reason – inexplicable to Tess, that was – she had felt foolish being caught out by a younger child and one, furthermore, who was not related to her.

Now, however, Tess dismissed all thoughts of Grandma Moffat. They were passing the parlour door and entering the kitchen, where Aunt Millie was carefully pouring tea from the big brown pot into three enamelled mugs, one for herself, no doubt, and one each for the old ladies now firmly ensconced in the parlour. She looked up as the Collinses entered and pulled a face at her sister. 'You look flushed, queen. If you're goin' to say our gran had no right to give poor little Tess a clack round the ear, then I know it, and I telled her so . . .' she was beginning, but Laura broke in.

'Millie, me daughter's not said a word because

she's been brought up not to be a tale-clat,' she said quickly. 'No, it's nothing like that. I've some news for you – and I think you'll be pleased for me if you'll listen just for a minute . . . oh, and since you're making tea, I'd be glad of a cup. I've run most o' the way back from Paddy's Market and I'm dry as a perishin' desert.'

'News?' Millie stood down the teapot and stared across at her sister. 'Go on then, spill the beans!'