

Small Schoolgirl

The little girl raced along the pavement. One hand trying to hold together her unbuttoned grey coat, the other keeping the wide-brimmed hat on top of her head. All around her rose the tall, narrow houses of Old Haarlem town. They were crowded closely together, their steep roofs and crooked chimneys dark against a pearly sky.

School was over for another day. She was getting used to it, but it could never be as good as home. Her black-booted feet pounded along. Not far to go now. She clattered over the cobbles of the big market-square, with its beautiful old buildings, and then ran up another street.

There it was at last – the tall, thin corner-house, opposite the fur-shop. Past the bakers, the dress-shop and the optician's she sped, and there she was – puffing and panting outside her father's ground-floor shop, with its little white card which said 'ten Boom watches'. She peered through the window.

'Good – no customers!' she thought, and pushed open the door. The bell tinkled and her father looked up and smiled. He was standing by a glass-topped counter which was full of watches.

'Ah, Corrie!' he said, coming forward to welcome his daughter. Corrie always felt happy in this room full

of busily-ticking clocks and watches. She walked over to her father and snuggled up against him. She felt so safe with his strong arms round her, and liked the smell of his jacket, and the way his beard tickled her cheek when he kissed her. After a moment, he let her go and asked, 'Did you have a good day?'

'Yes, thank you, papa. I'm on a new reading book. Did you have lots of customers?'

'Not very many, Corrie, so I had time to work on this,' he said, picking up the watch he had been holding when she'd first come in, and looking at it with a pleased smile. Corrie had a look at it, too.

'It's beautiful, papa!' she exclaimed.

'It certainly is,' he agreed. 'And Mr Smit, the owner, will be very happy to have it back. He was told by a watchmaker in Amsterdam that it couldn't be mended, but it's working again now.'

Corrie wasn't at all surprised. Her papa was the best watchmaker in all Holland, she was certain.

She often watched him at work. Sometimes he would stop for a moment and say quietly, 'Lord, I have a problem with this watch. You understand watches better than I do. I ask you to help me now.' Then his big, gentle hands would pick up the tiny parts and lovingly, patiently put them together again.

The shop-bell tinkled and a man came in.

'See you later, papa,' Corrie called, as she walked to the back of the shop, while her father greeted his customer.

She went through the work-room quietly, so as not to disturb the apprentice busy at his bench, and into the hall. A girl, a little older than herself, was standing there, unbuttoning her coat.

‘Oh, hullo, Nollie!’ said Corrie, then she called out, ‘Mama, I’m back! Where are you?’

‘In the bedroom,’ a voice answered from above.

‘Better hang your coat up first,’ said Nollie, in a motherly tone. ‘And where’s your hat? Don’t tell me you’ve left it behind again?’

‘It probably came off when I was hugging papa. I’ll get it later,’ Corrie answered, casually. She wriggled out of her coat, flung it over a peg and made for the stairs. Behind her, Nollie tutted fondly and hung the garment up properly.

Corrie pounded up the narrow, twisting stairs, humming happily.

‘Really, Corrie!’ A severe voice just above put a stop to her progress and her song.

‘Sorry, Aunt Bep,’ the girl said, standing aside. Her aunt’s mouth was set in a thin, hard line. Her eyes looked bad-tempered. She walked past remarking, ‘When will you learn not to rush about the house? The Waller children never did.’

Corrie climbed the rest of the way to the first floor a little more slowly, then made for the small back bedroom.

At a desk below the window sat a woman with dark, wavy hair, a fine-boned face and large, sparkling blue

eyes. She turned her chair round as Corrie came in and the little girl ran into her arms and settled comfortably on her lap.

‘And how’s my youngest daughter?’

‘All right, thank you, mama. I did ten skips without stopping and the teacher said my writing was very neat!’

‘Good girl! Now, shall I tell you where I’ve been today? To visit Mrs van Dyer’s new baby daughter! She’s so sweet. I took her the shawl you used to wear when you were little, and some bootees Aunt Bep knitted.’

At the mention of her aunt, Corrie’s lively, interested expression changed to a scowl, and she exclaimed, ‘I’m sick of those Waller children!’

Her mother stroked her straight, brown hair and said soothingly, ‘I wouldn’t let them bother you, Corrie.’

‘Well, she’s always talking about them!’

‘I know, dear, but try to remember that my sister has had a hard life as a children’s nanny, and now that she is weak and sick, she needs our love and care.’

‘All right, I’ll try. Are you feeling all right today?’

‘Yes, thank you. Just a bit tired, so I might have a lie down in a minute. But I wanted to write a note on Mrs Beuker’s card. It’s her birthday tomorrow, so I’ll call round with a pot of Aunt Anna’s jam.’

Corrie felt suddenly very hungry.

‘I think I’ll see what’s cooking,’ she said, getting up and going towards the door.

‘All right, dear,’ said her mother, with a laugh.

Corrie clattered down the stairs to the ground floor.

‘Hullo, Aunt Anna,’ she said, breezing into the kitchen and over to the big, black stove, where her aunt, looking very flushed, was stirring something in a large cooking pot. Her sleeves were rolled up and a spotless apron was fastened round her wide waist.

She had come to help her sister, Cor, after the birth of Betsie, the oldest of the ten Boom children, and had stayed ever since.

‘Hungry, as usual, I suppose,’ she remarked, with a fond smile at her youngest niece.

‘Starving!’ answered Corrie. ‘This stew smells good!’

‘Keep an eye on it for me, please,’ said Aunt Anna, handing her the wooden spoon. Then she bustled across to the table and started chopping up vegetables. Corrie stirred the mixture in the pot, while watching her aunt’s skill with the big kitchen knife.

After a short silence she said, ‘I wish I could stay home and help you, instead of going to school!’

Her aunt laughed. ‘I miss you, too,’ she said. ‘it seems funny not having anyone to lick out my mixing bowls or asking questions. I still haven’t got used to the idea that you’re at school now. Seems like only yesterday that you were the tiny shivering mite I used to wrap up in my apron and carry round with me while I worked!’

Corrie grinned. She never grew tired of hearing how her aunt had made a cosy nest for her as a newborn baby.

'Glad you're making yourself useful, little sister,' said a gently teasing voice from the doorway.

Betsie! Corrie turned to beam at her pretty teenage sister with her chestnut waves and brown eyes.

'Hullo, Betsie,' said Aunt Anna. 'Is Willem back, too?'

'I think so, Aunt Anna. Would you like me to lay the table for you?'

'Yes, please. No visitors for a change, so that'll be nine, unless Jans decides to eat in her room.'

'Is she sick?' asked Betsie.

'No,' answered her aunt. 'It's just that she might be rather tired when she gets back from shopping.'

'Shopping!' echoed Betsie in dismay. 'I hope she's not buying hats or dresses for us!'

Corrie didn't mind what she wore as long as it was comfortable and didn't slow her down too much, but her sisters had their own ideas about clothes – and these were not the same as their aunt's!

'If Jans chooses to spend her money on you, be grateful,' Aunt Anna chided, gently. Betsie flushed and answered quickly. 'It's very generous of her, I know, but I wish she'd choose pretty, bright colours.'

'Perhaps she will,' said Corrie, hopefully, hating to see her sister upset. Betsie smiled at her, then went towards the door saying, 'Anyway, I'll lay for nine.'

‘Thank you,’ said Aunt Anna. She scooped up the vegetables, walked over to the cooking pot, and threw them in. Corrie handed the spoon back to her and watched her aunt mixing everything up while she thought about her mother’s third sister, Aunt Jans, who had moved into their two big front rooms on the second floor after her husband’s death.

‘She means to be kind and she’s clever,’ she thought, ‘but I wish she wasn’t so bossy. And the fuss she makes when she’s ill! Mama’s often sick, but she doesn’t fuss at all!’

‘I wonder if you and Nollie would mind fetching me some cheese from the shop?’ asked Aunt Anna.

‘Of course not,’ said Corrie, ‘I’ll go and find Nollie now.’ She went into the hall. A boy, a little younger than Betsie, was coming out of the workroom.

‘Do you know where Nollie is, Willem?’ Corrie asked him.

He looked up with rather a serious expression on his face and answered, ‘I think she’s in the alley.’ This was the space beside the house where the ten Boom children played, since they had no garden.

Corrie went to the side door and called out to Nollie, ‘Aunt Anna wants us to buy some cheese for her.’ Nollie was bouncing a ball.

‘Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty,’ she counted. Then she stopped bouncing and said, ‘All right.’

Corrie skipped along beside her sister. The pavements were fairly full of people walking about and

the streets were busy with bicycles. Now and then, the tinkling of their bells mingled with the clatter of hooves and the rumble of wheels, as the horse-drawn trolley buses moved along the street.

The girls bought a portion of golden cheese and started home. It was then that they noticed the little group of children obviously mocking someone.

They squirmed to the front to see who it was.

There stood 'crazy Thys' – as everyone called him. Corrie had often seen this backward boy ambling about the streets in his ragged clothes. Now he was standing still, looking bewildered and helpless as the children round him made unkind remarks and laughed at him.

Corrie felt very sad first of all and then angry.

'Stop it! Leave him alone!' she shouted.

There was a sudden silence. The children turned to stare at the speaker and saw a small girl with flashing blue eyes. Crazy Thys was looking at her, too. Then he walked over and kissed her. She was just thinking that he had a funny smell, when Nollie grabbed her by the hand and started pulling her away from the square.

'Hurry,' she shouted, dragging her little sister along the street as fast as she could.

They arrived home, and Nollie pulled her breathless companion inside, shouting, 'Quickly, everyone! Dirty Thys has kissed our Corrie. Come and wash her clean!'

Corrie now began to feel scared.

Aunt Jans was on her way down the stairs and she hurried towards her nieces and was joined by Aunt

Bep from the dining room. They took Corrie into the kitchen and scrubbed her cheeks, while asking Nollie what had happened.

The moment they let her go, the little girl ran upstairs to find her mother. She was lying down and Corrie climbed on to the bed, snuggled against her and poured out her story, adding, ‘Mamma, why was it wrong for crazy Thys to kiss me? They were all making fun of him.’

‘Dear Corrie,’ said her mother, stroking a flushed cheek, ‘Jesus has given you this love for poor Thys and others like him, and I’m glad. But sometimes people who haven’t come to love Jesus, do bad things. So it’s best not to get too close to them. Just pray for Thys.’

Corrie felt a bit better.

Soon it was time for the evening meal. When nine people were sitting round the oval dining room table, Corrie’s father closed his eyes and said, ‘Lord, we thank you for this food, and we ask that you will bless our Queen, and that the Lord Jesus will come again soon.’

Then the eating and the talking began. Corrie still felt a bit shaky inside, so she didn’t say much, but she managed to tuck into her plateful of stew.

‘Did you get your shopping done, Jans?’ asked Corrie’s mother. Betsie and Nollie exchanged glances.

‘Yes, thank you, Cor,’ her sister replied. ‘I bought myself a thick coat as well as a hat and scarf. So I hope

I won't get so many colds this winter through having to speak in draughty church halls!

Corrie saw her sisters looking very relieved, then Nollie remarked, 'Our teacher said a funny thing today. He said Holland's oldest enemy and best friend was water!'

'Quite right,' commented her father. 'Water makes Holland green and fertile.' Corrie nearly asked what 'fertile' meant, but then Willem said, 'And it's why there are so many good Dutch engineers and builders – so I think it's more of a friend than an enemy.'

'As long as it stays where we want it to and doesn't flood our land,' said Betsie.

'Talking of land,' put in Aunt Jans, who had been waiting rather impatiently for a chance to speak, 'have any of you seen those new houses on the edge of Haarlem?'

The conversation flowed on. Empty plates were cleared away and a delicious, fluffy lemon pudding was served and enjoyed.

'Another excellent meal, Anna,' said Corrie's father.

'Thank you, Casper,' said his sister-in-law.

Corrie watched her father taking down and opening the big, black family Bible. He handled it as though it were a very precious watch.

Tonight he opened it near the middle and read a psalm about not being afraid. He said a few words about it and prayed.

Corrie felt much better now. If God and papa said not to be afraid, that was good enough for her.

By bedtime she was her usual happy self. She shared a bedroom with Nollie on the third floor. There were four other little bedrooms up there, and Betsie, Willem, Aunt Bap and Aunt Anna had one each.

Corrie got into her nightie, then called down the banisters, 'I'm ready, papa.' By the time he had climbed up to her room, she was in bed, waiting for him to listen to her prayers.

He knelt down and she said, 'Dear Lord, bless mama and make her well and strong. And please bless papa and Betsie and Willem and Nollie and me, and the aunts and all our friends. And I also ask you to bless crazy Thys.'

Her father got up to kiss her and tuck her in.

'Goodnight, Corrie, I love you,' he said, putting a hand on her cheek.

She lay quite still, not wanting to lose the feel of his hand, while he went out of the room and down the stairs.

In a few moments, she fell happily asleep.