

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott  
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel  
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil  
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London  
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer  
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup  
Mommsen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff  
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt  
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier  
Garschin Defoe Hebbel Hegel Kussmaul Herder  
Damaschke Descartes Schopenhauer George  
Wolfram von Eschenbach Darwin Dickens Grimm Jerome Rilke Bebel Proust  
Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot  
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy  
Storm Casanova Lessing Tersteegen Gilm Gryphius  
Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates  
Brentano Claudius Schiller Bellamy Schilling Kralik Gibbon Tschchow  
Katharina II. von Rußland Gerstäcker Raabe Gleim Vulpius  
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Morgenstern Goedicke  
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Kleist  
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Mörike Musil  
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus  
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus  
Navarra Aurel Musset Lamprecht Kind Kirchhoff Hugo Moltke  
Nestroy Marie de France  
Nietzsche Nansen Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht  
Marx Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz Ringelntz  
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# **That Old-Time Child, Roberta**

Sophie Fox Sea

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**"Must I look so when I die? Boo-oo!" "I'll cross my heart, Lil Mis-  
sus, 'twuz dem drefful men dat sed 'Boo-oo!"**

[View Illustration Enlarged](#)



# "THAT OLD-TIME CHILD, ROBERTA"

HER HOME-LIFE ON THE FARM

BY SOPHIE FOX SEA

Louisville

Printed by John P. Morton and Company

1892

TO MY REVERED AND BELOVED FRIEND,  
Mrs. Preston Pope,  
I DEDICATE THIS CHILD'S STORY. IT WAS SHE WHOSE  
LOVE OF  
CHILDREN FIRST SUGGESTED IT, AND WHOSE WORDS OF  
KIND APPRECIATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT HAVE  
BEEN TO ME "AS APPLES OF GOLD IN  
PICTURES OF SILVER."



## "THAT OLD-TIME CHILD, ROBERTA."

Roberta Marsden, or Lil Missus, as the negroes called her, for the opening of my story dates back several years before the Civil War began, lived on a country place in Kentucky. She was a beautiful child, and despite a few foibles that all flesh is heir to, such a really lovable one that she was fairly worshiped by mother, aunt and uncle, and every one of the negroes, from old Caleb, the testy and ancient coachman, to the veriest pickaninny, who thought it a great feat to catch hold with grimy fingers to the fluttering strings of the little girl's white apron when she came among them at Christmas and on other occasions to distribute sweets and more substantial tokens.

It was a great wonder that the child was not utterly spoiled. But it seemed that her nature reflected the love lavished on her as a mirror the face that looks into it.

Aunt Betsy declared she did not have one selfish bone in her whole body.

I think the reason of that was, there were so many about her looking to her for comfort in some way, that when little more than a baby in years she fell into the habit of thinking of and caring for others almost as a woman would.

Aunt Betsy was a rheumatic, and always ailing, and the child could not remember the time when her beautiful, patient mamma was not very, very sad. Although she smiled often on her little daughter, it seemed as if there were tears right behind the smiles, just like rain-drops shining through the rays of the sun. And when she crept close to her at night she could feel the long lashes sweep her cheek, and they were so often wet.

The negroes on the place, especially the older ones, would grumble out their aches and pains to the child, as if they thought she had the gift of healing. And indeed she had, in her way.

For when old Squire split his foot open with an ax, they lived so far in the country they couldn't get a physician every time it needed attention, and her kind, brave mamma undertook to dress the wound herself every morning. She would let the deft little fingers

squeeze a sponge full of tepid water over the cut as many times as it was necessary, then hold the scissors and bandages, and help in other ways. And old Squire said the tender, compassionate little face "ho'ped 'im as much as Miss July did."

Those that need sympathy intuitively know where to get it. It's just like the flowers reaching out for sun and dew.

I expect the city children who read this story feel very sorry for Roberta because she lived in the country. But they needn't be, for she was never lonely and scarcely ever idle. The older negroes on the place said she was like "ole missus" (that was her grandmother) in her ways. And among other things they told about the old lady, to show how stirring she was and what a manager, was her method of arousing the household to their duties in the beginning of the week: "Wake up! wake up! I say. To-day's Monday, to-morrow's Tuesday, next day's Wednesday, next day's Thursday, then comes Friday, and Saturday will be here before you know it, and nothing done."

Roberta didn't belong to any "mite society" nor the "little busy bees," where city children are trained to think of and help the poor, and she didn't wear the badge of the "Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals," as many children do nowadays. Indeed I don't expect she ever heard there was such a society. But she was instrumental nevertheless in doing a great deal of real practical good. O, how her eyes did flash when she saw animals mistreated. She made beds for the cats and beds for the dogs; and when any of the milkers struck the cows while they were milking them, if she was near about, she would say, "Mamma says good milkers are always gentle with the cows, for they won't give down their milk unless you treat them kindly. And anybody can tell by the quantity of milk you get whether you are good to them or not. If I was a cow I wouldn't give down my milk if you struck me and hollered at me."

So she made the cruel milkers ashamed of themselves often. And she practically established a foundling asylum for little motherless lambs and calves; raised them herself on the bottle just like they were babies.

"O, you tootsey weetsy darlin'," I've heard her say to a bright-eyed, gentle lamb, her especial delight. The little creature would run

to her and bleat by way of telling her it was hungry, and when she had fed it it would rub its pretty head against her knee and look love at her, just as I have seen babies look love at their mothers.

And, my! how she did fuss over the little negro children when they were sick! It just kept her busy bringing them gourds of fresh water from the spring and watching the well ones to see that they didn't purloin the dainties she brought the sick. She actually learned how to sew, making clothes for the pickaninnies.

And you just ought to have seen her when any of the fathers and mothers whipped their children severely. She would fly down to the cabin, tear the pickaninnies away and trot them up to the big house, and pet them until they were willing to take another whipping to get the good things she gave them.

"She's jes de very spi't ob her par," old Squire would say on those occasions; "Dat's jest de way hees eyes useter flash out at Mis Betsy when she cum 'twix' him an Mis July."

O, I wish I could make the little children who read this story see, as I have seen it, the country place where Roberta Marsden was raised.

On either side fields of golden-tasseled corn, rustling in the breeze and shimmering in the sunlight, many of the stalks so entwined with morning-glories, pink, white, blue, and variegated, one could almost believe fairies had been there and arrayed the yellow silken-haired corn babies for some festival, so crowned and garlanded they were. In front of the house were wooded slopes, where the birds sang their love songs and chattered noisily in bird language all the day long. Those woodlands might have been called a primeval forest, for the trees were truly there in the earliest memory of the oldest living resident of the county.

It used to puzzle me to understand how the birds knew when it was time to wake up and begin their matin songs, for it was so like night there. Roberta, who was an early riser and withal a child of poetic imagination, used to say "that the fairies woke them up." She declared she saw a little glittering thing, with wings and wand of silver, alight on the tops of the trees and peep through at the Darbys and Joans of the bird tribe. And she was sure it must have told them

it was time to wake up; for soon would begin a low twitter that swelled louder and louder, as bird after bird joined in until every family of birds was represented. From the back porch of the house could be seen a range of blue misty hills, that Roberta called brides. They were often enveloped in white filmy folds, like bridal veils, and one might catch glimpses of the river from there also gliding along between banks of green.

A giant's great glittering eye she called that; the trees on the hills above the giant's brows, and the ferns and grasses growing on either bank were upper and lower lashes. With a little encouragement Roberta would have been a genuine poet.

But Aunt Betsy took such a literal view of things, she was constantly saying to Mrs. Marsden:

"That child's imagination will get away with her, Julia, if you don't check it. It will, indeed."

And she had a way of making the child repeat over and over again descriptions of things that had struck her fancy, and cutting here and there until the description didn't seem applicable at all to the places she had seen.

"I feel just like the old woman in Mother Goose, Auntie," Roberta would say, her eyes full of vexed tears, "when she woke up on the king's highway and found her petticoats were cut off."

"But truth is truth, child," said Aunt Betsy.

Aunt Betsy's intensely realistic temperament could not understand that fine, exquisite perception God had given the little girl, which enabled her to see beauty that others, differently organized, would never see, nor, believe was there.

The house, where four generations of Mrs. Marsden's family had lived, was home-like, but quaint and unpretentious. It had a very solid look and was in thorough repair, for the family were thrifty and well-to-do always. Luxuriant vines of the Virginia creeper grew on the sides of the house and around the pillars of the porches. Wandering tendrils hung from the eaves and crept in the second-story windows. There was a wild-brier rose there that had been planted by Mrs. Marsden's grandmother. It partook somewhat of

the nature of the old lady; nothing could keep it from doing its duty. It filled the air with fragrance in its season, and was a mass of delicate pink flower cups.

Inside of the old house were many little nooks, and each nook haunted by the spirit of some legendary story. As is the case in all houses where successive generations of the same family have lived and died, ghostly visitants came at certain times, so the negroes said, rang bells softly at dead of night, tipped across the floor with but the echo of a step, jostled medicine bottles together and did many curious things. Roberta, brave as she was and sensible as she was, would actually cover up her head with the bedclothes, and nearly smother for fear she would hear the bells and ghostly steps.

Mam' Sara was the only one of the negroes who didn't believe in ghosts. "No, indeed, honey," she would say to Roberta, "daid fo'ks don' never cum bak. If they gits ter Heaven, they don' wan'er, and if they gits ter de udder place they can't. The devil won' never let 'em git away from him, kase he's wuk so hard ter git 'em."

The part of the house of most interest to Roberta was the parlor, where were stored the heir-looms of the family, a spinet with all the ivory worn off the keys, two pier-glasses with brass claws for feet, and a clock so tall and big she actually hid in it once when she was playing "hide and go seek" with some little visitors, who said they had seen a clock "larger."

Roberta was a very amiable child, but old Squire said she "wuz techus erbout sum things." And the old clock must have been one of the things.

The chairs were brought from Virginia on the backs of mules, and the covers on them embroidered by the little girl's grandmother. The same busy hands that superintended the manufacture of those piles of linen sheets stored away in the presses above stairs, and the counterpanes woven with the American eagle in the center, bunches of hollyhocks and sweet pea in the corners, and trumpet vines running along the edges.

The paper on the walls of the parlor was a curiosity. It was imported from England many, many years before Roberta's mother was born, because her grandfather saw a room somewhere, I think

in Baltimore, that had similar paper, and he took such a fancy to it he ordered some from the same place. The paper was wrought in great panels, with life-size figures of orientals in the center. They were terrible looking men, the children thought. They had swarthy skins and beards down to their waists, and fierce eyes that flashed out beneath their turbans with a fe-fo-fi-fum look.

Those fierce eyes were the cause of no little alarm, I can assure you, when darkness swooped down upon Roberta and Polly and Dilsy, playing Lady-come-to-see in the old parlor in childlike unconsciousness of the passage of time. Polly, the imp, would always insist upon singing "Lady Jane Grey," as they tiptoed backward out of the room. They did not dare to look away, for fear those terrible men would fly at them when they were not looking and throttle them with their long, bony fingers, so they joined hands and sung as they tiptoed backward:

Lady Jane Grey, she went to church for to pray;  
She went to the stile and there rested awhile;  
She went to the door and there rested a little more;  
She went up the aisle and there rested awhile;  
She looked up; she looked down;  
She saw a corpse lie on the ground;  
She said to the sexton, must I look so  
When I die? Boo, boo!

Now when they came to the last part it was always Polly who stretched open her eyes till they looked like an owl's great round eyes, and jumped at Roberta and Dilsy and hollered "Boo, boo!" Although they knew it was coming they were awfully scared, and would break loose and run, screaming like mad things, into the sitting-room, really believing the orientals were after them. They had made believe it so many times, and Polly had said so many times, "I'll cross my heart, Lil Missus, 'twuz dem drefful men dat sed 'boo-oo'; I seed thar lips muven; you don' ketch me in thar no mo'," they had come to really believe it. They had heard the story of the children who played wolf, and a wolf did sure enough come and devour them. As many times as they had played Lady Jane Grey they were always worse scared the last time than ever before.

The sitting-room was a cozy place when they got there, panting for breath after their fright in the parlor.

In one of the deep window recesses Roberta had set up her entire doll family to housekeeping. She was very fond of her dolls. The mother instinct in her was developed very early. She had wax dolls and china dolls and rag dolls. Mrs. Marsden painted features on the rag dolls, and they looked very natural. There was Miss Prim and Miss Slim, Mrs. Jolly and Mrs. Folly, Miss Snappy and Miss Happy, named from their different expressions. Roberta had the quaintest way of talking to her dolls. She had caught some of Aunt Betsy's old-time ideas:

"Straighter, my dears, straighter. One's spine should never touch the back of a chair," and, "Don't rest your elbows on the table while you are eating; my great-grandmother used to keep cushions stuffed with pins to slip under the children's elbows," etc.

Her favorite dolls were the figures cut out of the fashion plates of Godey's Lady's Book. She was an artist with her fingers, if there was a pair of scissors in them. So she took sheets of different colored tissue-paper, cut dresses, and fitted them nicely on her dolls. Each doll had a variety.

I believe she thought her dolls looked cosier at the dinner-table than anywhere else, and she kept them sitting there a great deal. Sometimes Polly, who seemed born to make trouble, would roll her eyes at the dolls and say, "You iz de greedes' things. Whar iz you gwiner to put it?"

Then, of course, Roberta would feel obliged to take some notice of their sitting at the table so long: "Come, get down now, dears. Little ladies should *not* appear greedy."

Roberta was very much like some mothers of real children, who will wink at what their little ones do at one time, and, if a neighbor drops in at another, who is not of the same way of thinking, scold the poor children for doing those very things they had winked at before. But Roberta did not have it in her heart to scold anybody much, not even that impish Polly, who would go around after she had provoked her little mistress beyond endurance, sniffing and singing in a dolorous tone,

Whar she goes en how she fars,  
Nobody knows en nobody kyars.

and invariably wind up by getting the very playthings she wanted from Roberta as a peace offering.

I must not forget to tell you about Roberta's Sunday School for little negro children. If the child didn't always keep perfect order and make the headway she would have liked, it wasn't because she didn't try. Her whole heart was in the work. She really was very intelligent, and Aunt Betsy said, "If there was such a thing as anybody being born in this world a Christian, she believed Roberta was." I think she must have had the germ of object teaching—that is the fad now—in her nature, she could paint such vivid mental pictures to convey an idea. Once she was telling Polly about God's punishment of sinners, and Polly said, "Lawdy, Lil Missus, I feel dem blazes creepen' all over me dis minit." She had a great deal to contend with, almost as much as Mrs. Marsden had, in getting the older negroes to come in to prayers. Nine times out of ten, when she rang the bell for them Sunday morning, Squire would put his head in the door and say:

"Mis July, dat deviles hoss dun played me dat same trick ergin. He dun lade down in de mud en roll ober en ober. 'T will take me clar up ter de time to start ter chech ter git dat mud orf him, en hard wurk at dat. Dat hoss knows ez well when Sad-day night comes ez you duz. Jes' de way he dun las' week when I hetch him in de plow: lay down en groan lak he sick enuff ter die, ter keep fum worken'; en half hour arfter I turn him luse frolerken lak er colt—jes' kicken' up his heels, I kin tell you."

"Why not drive some of the others, Uncle Squire, so you can come in to prayers?"

"I dun turn em all out, en dey's gorn, de Lord unly knows whar. If I'd unly know'd it en time now. But I'll show 'im—I'll show 'im. I gwiner be mity solid wid 'im, en mebbe heel larn arfter while dat he aint his own master."

At other times it was a mule.

"Mis July, dat mule dun tore down dat rock fence ergin. I bounter fix it or de stock will git out en go orf, you knows dat ez well az I duz. Dat mule's yours, en you kin do what you please wid him, but ef he 'longter me I'd sell him de fus chance I git. Dat mule nuff ter mek er man strike hees gran-daddy."

Now, it was a well-known fact that Mrs. Marsden had tried several times to sell the mule, and old Squire had always declared "the mule was the most valuable animal on the place, and it was just giving him away to sell him at the price offered."

Polly was Squire's granddaughter, and inherited his want of reverence for sacred things. She was very, very trying, especially on one occasion I will tell you about.

Roberta gathered the children together, took her Catechism and primer, and went down to the summer-house. She noticed that Polly's expression was sulky, and that she was rolling her eyes at Dilsy. But Polly was always tormenting Dilsy. Dilsy was a little hunchback negro, that everybody but Polly felt sorry for and tried to turn the soft side of life to.

Roberta was not much discouraged by Polly's actions, still she knew it was a great deal pleasanter to teach her when she was in a good humor, and concluded to resort to a strategy to mollify her.

The child was a close observer of nature, and knew how indispensable to germinate seed was a mellow, rightly prepared soil, and what service sunshine and timely rainfalls were to growing crops. So she intuitively drew an analogy in her childish way between the soil the plow-man turns over and the human heart.

Now, if there was one thing that Polly delighted in more than another it was the game of "Chick-a-mie, chick-a-mie, craney-crow."

So the children joined hands and moved around and around in a circle, singing:

"Chick-a-mie, chick-a-mie, craney-crow,  
Went to the well to wash my toe,  
When I got back my chickens was gone.  
What o'clock is it, old Buzzard?"

Then they would fly around looking for the chickens. At least all of them but Polly would. Polly always took the part of old Buzzard, so she could flop down in Dilsy's seat, although she knew she would have to get right up.

Somehow, that evening Roberta's strategy did not seem to have accomplished its object, judging from Polly's expression. Still she hoped for the best. Polly was the biggest, so she always begun with her.

"Who made you, Polly?"

No answer immediately; then,

"Dunno fur sarten, spec' 't wuz Gord."

A lump gathered in the child's throat. Her bump of reverence was so largely developed it distressed her to see a want of it in others; she said "it hurt her feelings."

She passed it by, however, and ventured on another.

"What else did God make?"

"Dunno fur sarten, never seed 'im wuken'."

"For shame, Polly! God made all things. Say 'God made all things.'"

"No, never. Never made Dilsy thar. Dilsy nuffin' but er scrap he throw'd erway when he got fru cutten' out de grow'd-up ones."

"For shame, Polly! Don't you know everybody has to be little and grow up."

"No, never! Adam and Eve wuz born'd grow'd up."

"Well, that was because they were the first people on earth, and there was nobody to be papa and mamma for 'em, and take care of 'em, when they were little."

"Dat's like Dilsy thar. Dilsy never had no daddy."

"Well, Polly, you haven't answered my question yet. Say 'God made all things.'"

"No, never! God never made mammy's twins—no mo' dan he made Dilsy thar. Dey iz prezak like dem monkeys I seed de time I went en town ter de circus."

Now Polly was not an impartial judge of the twins, for she had been installed as their nurse, and she hated to nurse.

"For shame, Polly! Those nice little babies. And then, besides, as God made all things, he made monkeys too, of course."

"No, never! You can't make me berleeve dat. Gord nerver wase hees valerbél time maken' monkeys."

That was the "last straw that broke the camel's back." After trying so hard to be patient, and especially as she knew it was nothing but pure contrariness in Polly, for only the Sunday before she had answered every question correctly, and added some pious interpolations exceedingly gratifying to her young teacher.

So she got up, went to her refractory pupil, and lifted her forefinger by way of giving emphasis to her words.

But Polly, recognizing that her little mistress's temperature was rising, felt a proportionate rise in her own, rolled her eyes till nothing but the whites were visible, and stuck her lower lip out.

It would be impossible to conceive of a creature uglier or more aggravating looking than Polly, when she did that way.

In a flash, down came Roberta's little soft pink palm on her cheek.

Mrs. Marsden happened to be passing on her way to the quarters to visit a sick servant, and witnessed the performance. She was amused, but worried too, that Roberta had allowed herself to be so provoked, for it almost made a farce of the whole thing; and she knew how much in earnest her little daughter really was. The child's flushed cheeks and flashing eyes brought back, O so vividly! another face and another pair of flashing orbs so like hers. There were tears in Mrs. Marsden's eyes when she went in the summer-house and took her seat on the bench that circled around it.

"Did you strike Polly, daughter?"

"Yes 'em, Mamma."

"What did you strike her for, daughter?"

"She wouldn't say her lesson, Mamma, and she knew it all the time. And she rolled her eyes at me so, and stuck out her lip and looked so ugly, I just couldn't help it, that's all."

"I am sorry, daughter, that you gave way to your temper so. For remember, you are only the sower that plants the seed, and God takes care of all the rest. If you really try to teach Polly, and she won't be taught, you mustn't make a personal thing of it, but just leave it with God. Then, again, daughter, unless you practice self-control, teaching others is a farce. I know Polly has been very trying, indeed. But I want you to show a real forgiving spirit, as one should always show when one is working for the Master. I want you to tell Polly you are sorry you struck her. For you are sorry, I know—I see it in your face."

A kind of staccato snuffle was heard in the direction of Polly.

Roberta gave another look at the surly, unprepossessing countenance, then said, in a low voice:

"I will, Mamma, if you will let me hide my face in your lap while I am saying it."

"But why hide your face in my lap, daughter?"

"Because—because—Mamma—I am afraid—if she looks at me as she did before, that I will slap her again. I don't believe I could keep from it this evening; I am all out of sorts."

Afterwards that observation of Polly's, "Dilsy never had no daddy," caused Roberta no little thought. Really, she was no better off than Dilsy, she reasoned, for of course the child did not take in the full significance of the imp's meaning. Nobody ever told her that her papa was dead. Indeed she had been taught to pray for him every night. She felt sure he was living. But, where? Why did he not come home and pet her, like other little girls' papas she knew—pet her, and make her beautiful, sad mother smile sometimes. For it seemed to the child that she grew sadder and sadder all the time. There was nobody she could talk to about him, for her mamma's eyes filled with tears at any chance allusion to him. Aunt Betsy nearly snapped her head off when she asked her a question, and Uncle Squire, chatty as he was upon every other subject, would squint his eyes in a knowing way, puff out his cheeks, and answer,