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Five Little Peppers and their Friends

Margaret Sidney

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Margaret Sidney

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-6297-7

www.tredition.com

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To

my daughter Margaret, who to her friends embodies "Polly Pepper" in her girlhood, I dedicate most lovingly this book.

PREFACE.

There were so many interesting friends of the Five Little Peppers, whose lives were only the faintest of outlines in the series ending when Phronsie was grown up, that a volume devoted to this outer circle has been written to meet the persistent demand.

Herein the author records many happenings that long ago Ben and Polly, Joel and David told her. And even Phronsie whispered some of it confidentially into the listening ear. "Tell about Rachel, please," she begged; and Margaret Sidney promised to write it all down some day.

And that day seems to have arrived in which it all should be recorded and the promise fulfilled. For the Five Little Peppers loved their friends very dearly, and were loyal and true to them. And hand in hand, the circle widening ever, they lived and loved as this history records.

MARGARET SIDNEY.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, PHRONSIE, SITTING DOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STAIRS?"

FIVE-O'CLOCK TEA

"BUT THIS IS TEN DOLLARS," SAID JOEL

"ON, LARRY," SAID MISS TAYLOR GENTLY, BENDING OVER HIM

"YES, SIR," CALLED JOEL BACK, FROM THE ALCOVE

THE UNLUCKY OAR WAS SEIZED BY THE TRIUMPHANT CREW

"I USED TO PLAY WITH IT," SHE SAID SOFTLY

HE STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LITTLE SHOP

I

A FIVE-O'CLOCK TEA

"I wish," said Phronsie slowly, "that you'd come in, little girl."

"Can't." The girl at the gate peered through the iron railings, pressing her nose quite flat, to give the sharp, restless, black eyes the best chance.

"Please do," begged Phronsie, coming up quite close; "I very much wish you would."

"Can't," repeated the girl on the outside. "Cop won't let me."

"Who?" asked Phronsie, much puzzled and beginning to look frightened.

"Perlice." The girl nodded briefly, taking her face away from the iron railings enough to accomplish that ceremony. Then she plastered her nose up against its support again, and stared at Phronsie with all her might.

"Oh," said Phronsie, with a little laugh that chased away her fright, "there isn't any big policeman here. This is Grandpapa's garden."

"'Tain't, it's the perliceman's; everything's the perliceman's," contradicted the girl, snapping one set of grimy fingers defiantly.

"Oh, no," said Phronsie, softly but very decidedly, "this is my dear Grandpapa's home, and the big policeman can't get in here, ever."

"Oh, you ninny!" The girl staring at her through the railings stopped a minute to laugh, covering both hands over her mouth to smother the sound. "The perlice can go everywhere they want to. I guess some of 'em's in heaven now, spyin' round."

Phronsie dropped the doll she was carrying close to her bosom, to concentrate all her gaze up toward the sky, in wide-eyed amazement that allowed her no opportunity to carry on the conversation.

"An' I couldn't no more get into this 'ere garden than I could into heaven," the girl on the outside said at last, to bring back the blue eyes to earth, "so don't you think it, you. But, oh, my, don't I wish I could, though!"

There was so much longing in the voice that Phronsie brought her gaze down from the policemen in their heavenly work to the eyes staring at her. And she clasped her hands together tightly, and hurried up to lay her face against the big iron gate and close to that of the girl.

"He won't hurt you, the big policeman won't," she whispered softly. "I'll take hold of your hand, and tell him how it is, if he gets in. Come."

"Can't," the girl was going to say, but her gaze rested upon the doll lying on the grass where it fell from Phronsie's hand. "Lawks! may I just have one good squint at that?" she burst out.

"You may hold it," said Phronsie, bobbing her head till her yellow hair fell over her flushed cheeks.

The gate flew open suddenly, nearly overthrowing her; and the girl, mostly all legs and arms, dashed through, picking up the doll to squeeze it to her neck so tightly that Phronsie rushed up, quite alarmed.

"Oh, don't," she cried, "you'll frighten her. I'll tell her how it is, and then she'll like you."

"I'll make her like me," said the girl, with savage thrusts at the doll, and kissing it all over.

"Oh, my, ain't you sweet!" and she cuddled it fiercely in her scrawny neck, her tangled black hair falling around its face.

"Oh, dear!" wailed Phronsie, standing quite still, "she's my child, and she's dreadfully frightened. Oh, please, little girl, don't do so."

"She's been your child forever, and I've never had a child." The girl raised her black head to look sternly at Phronsie. "I'll give her back; but she's mine now."

"Haven't you ever had a child?" asked Phronsie, suddenly, two or three tears trailing off her round cheeks to drop in the grass, and she drew a long breath and winked very fast to keep the others back.

"Not a smitch of one," declared the other girl decidedly, "an' I'm a-goin' to hold this one, and pretend I'm its mother."

Phronsie drew a long breath, and drew slowly near.

"You may," she said at last.

The new mother didn't hear, being hungrily engaged in smoothing her child's cheeks against her own dirty ones, first one side of the face and then the other, and twitching down the dainty pink gown, gone awry during the hugging process, and alternately scolding and patting the little figure. This done, she administered a smart slap, plunged over to the nearest tree, and set the doll with a thud on the grass to rest against its trunk.

"Sit up like a lady," she commanded.

"Oh, don't!" cried Phronsie, quite horror-stricken, and running over on distressed feet. "She's my child," she gasped.

"No, she's mine, an' I'm teachin' her manners. I ain't through pretendin' yet," said the girl. She put out a long arm and held Phronsie back.

"But you struck her." Phronsie lifted a pale face, and her blue eyes flashed very much as Polly's brown ones did on occasion.

The new mother whirled around and stared at her.

"Why, I had to, just the same as you're licked when you're bad," she said, in astonishment.

"What's 'licked'?" asked Phronsie, overcome with curiosity, yet keeping her eyes on her child, bolt upright against the tree.

"Why, whipped," said the girl, "just the same as you are when you're bad."

Phronsie drew a long breath.

"I've never been whipped," she said slowly.

"Oh, my Lord!" The girl tumbled down to the grass and rolled over and over, coming up suddenly to sit straight, wipe her tangled black hair out of her eyes, and stare at Phronsie. "Well, you are a reg'lar freak, you are," was all she could say.

"What's a 'freak'?" asked Phronsie, actually turning her back on her child to give all her attention to this absorbing conversation, with its most attractive vocabulary.

"It's—oh, Jumbo!" and over she flopped again, to roll and laugh. "Well, there!" and she jumped to her feet so quickly she nearly overthrew Phronsie, who had drawn closer, unable to miss a bit of this very strange proceeding. "Now I'm through pretending an' I haven't got any child, an' you may have her back." She wrung her grimy hands together, and turned her back on the object of so much attention. "Take her, quick; she's yours."

Phronsie hurried over to the doll, sitting up in pink loveliness against the tree, knelt down on the grass, and patted her with gentle hand, and smoothed down her curls. A curious sound broke in upon her work, and she looked up and listened. "I must go back," she whispered to her child, and in a minute she was running around the figure of the girl, to stare into her face.

"Ow—get out!" cried the girl crossly, and she whirled off, pulling up her ragged dress to her face.

"I thought I heard you cry," said Phronsie in a troubled voice, and following her in distress.

"Phoo!" cried the girl, snapping her fingers in derision, and spinning around on the tips of her toes, "'twas the cat."

"No," said Phronsie decidedly, and shaking her head, "it couldn't be the cat, because she doesn't hardly ever cry, and besides she isn't here"—and she looked all around—"don't you see she isn't?"

"Well, then, 'twas that bird," said the girl, pointing up to a high branch.

"Ain't you green, not to think of him!"

"I don't *think* it was the bird," said Phronsie slowly, and peering up anxiously, "and he doesn't cry again, so I 'most know he couldn't have cried then."

"Well, he will, if you wait long enough," said the girl defiantly.

"Chee, chee, chee," sang the bird, with delicious little trills, and shaking them out so fast his small throat seemed about to burst with its efforts.

"There, you see he couldn't cry," began Phronsie, in a burst of delight; "you see, little girl," and she hopped up and down in glee.

"He's got the 'sterics, an' he'll cry next, like enough," said the girl.

"What's 'the 'sterics!'" asked Phronsie, coming out of her glee, and drawing nearer. "Oh, I see some tears," and she looked soberly up into the thin, dirty face, and forgot all about her question.

"No, you don't, either." The girl twitched away angrily. "There ain't never no tears you could see on me; 'twas the cat or the bird. Ain't you green, though! You're green as that grass there," and she spun round and round, snapping her fingers all the while.

Phronsie stood quite still and regarded her sorrowfully.

"Don't you believe I cried!" screamed the girl, dashing up to her, to snap her fingers in Phronsie's face; "say you don't this minute."

"But I think you did," said Phronsie. "Oh, I'm very sure you did, and you may hold my child again, if you only won't cry any more," and she clasped her hands tightly together. The other girl started and ran toward the big iron gate.

"Oh, don't!" Phronsie called after her, and ran to overtake the flying feet. "Please stay with me. I like you; don't go."

The girl threw her head back as if something hurt her throat, then leaned her face against the iron railings and stuck her fingers in her ears.

"Don't! lemme alone! go 'way, can't you!" She wriggled off from Phronsie's fingers. "I'll lick you if you don't lemme be!"

"I wish you'd play with me," said Phronsie, having hard work to keep out of the way of the flapping shoes all down at the heel, "and

you may have Clorinda for your very own child as long as you stay—you may really."

"Ow! see here!" Up came the girl's face, and with a defiant sweep of her grimy hands she brushed both cheeks. "Do you mean that, honest true, black and blue?"

"Yes," said Phronsie, very much relieved to see the effect of her invitation, "I do mean it, little girl. Come, and I'll tell Clorinda all how it is."

"I'm goin' outside to walk up and down a bit. Bring on your doll."

"But you must come here," said Phronsie, moving off slowly backward over the grass. "Come, little girl" — holding out her hand.

"Now I know you didn't mean it," said the girl scornfully. "You wouldn't let me touch that nasty old doll of yours again for nothin' you wouldn't," she shrilled at her.

"Oh, yes, I would," declared Phronsie, in great distress; "see, I'm going to get her now," and she turned around and hurried over the grass to pick Clorinda off from her resting-place and run back. "There, see, little girl," she cried breathlessly, thrusting the doll into the dirty hands; "take her now and we'll go and play."

For answer, the girl clutched the doll and sped wildly off through the gateway.

"Oh!" cried Phronsie, running after with pink cheeks and outstretched arms, "give me back my child; stop, little girl."

But there was no stop to the long, thin figure flying down the path on the other side of the tall hedge. It was a back passage, and few pedestrians used the path; in fact, there were none on it this afternoon, so the children had it all to themselves. And on they went, Phronsie, with but one thought — to rescue her child from the depths of woe such as being carried off by a strange mother would produce — blindly plunging after.

At last the girl with the doll stopped suddenly, flung herself up against a stone fence, and drew a long breath.

"Well, what you goin' to do about it?" she cried defiantly, clutching the doll with a savage grip.