

COPPERTOP

“The Adventures of a Quaint Child”

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Harold Gaze

Illustrated by The Author

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COPPERTOP

Affectionately inscribed to my little friend

CELIA HALL

Without whom there would have been no

COPPERTOP



CHAPTER I.

IN THE OLD FOUR-POSTED BED

SHE sat up in the big four-poster and listened to the wind as it blew round the house.

A 'possum on the roof uttered a plaintive gurgling cry, which sent a little shiver down her back, and she snuggled under the bedclothes, thankful for their cosy protection.

But to-night the old bed felt less “snuggly” than usual, and she had a strange “I-wonder-what-will-happen-next” feeling, which would not allow her to sleep. It was such a night as witches love, when they fly about on broomsticks, and you feel sure-as-sure there is a black cat with green, staring eyes, hiding behind the burnt log in the chimney corner.

Even the old colonial house, with its new slated roof and the strange terracotta gargoyles—that Coppertop was certain-sure had moved several times since they were first put up there—shook and shuddered in the bitter south wind which blew down from the ranges.

“Oh, I’m just too lonesome!” sighed Coppertop, “if the old wind won’t stop whooling round the house, I simply don’t know what I’ll do.”

Celia Anagusta Sinclair—for that was her real name—was rather a lonely little girl at the best of times, as her father and mother were obliged to spend many months of the year in far-

away India, and left their little ten-year-old daughter in the charge of Mrs. Grudge, the housekeeper; and it must be confessed that she and “Miss Celia” were not always the best of friends.

Mrs. Grudge could not abide a nickname, and never used the term “Coppertop” by which the child was known to everyone else; she was of the old school, stern and strict, and had come out in the early days from Home. She could not understand “these colonials,” she would say, and Coppertop’s cheeks would glow and her auburn plaits would seem to grow even more coppery, for she was an Australian bred and born, and proud of it, too, and simply hated to be called one of “these colonials.”

The old four-posted bed had come out from Home, too, but it had a very different spirit from that of dour Mrs. Grudge; it was old, and massive and beautiful, with richly carved legs—which, of course, Mrs. Grudge couldn’t boast of—and it seemed to whisper of old rose gardens, and ivy-clad towers, and quaint, sleepy, thatched cottages, and knights in armour, and May-day revels, and, most of all, of security and comfort.

“I wouldn’t care one bit if only Mummie and Daddy were here,” sighed the child; “the old wind could blow as hard as it liked. I wouldn’t care if it blew away the house, and the old clock, and Mrs. Grudge. Oh, if only it would—and left just Mummie and Daddy and me, all alone in the dear old bed, cuddling tight.”

Coppertop threw her little freckled arms round the soft, bulgy pillow, and tried to “’magine” that it really was so; but still the wind howled, and the rain pattered on the windowpane.

“Oh, I’m tired of ’magine! I wish they were really-truly here. I believe I shall hate that horrid old India soon, for keep-

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ing them away. Well, perhaps I won't quite hate it, but I wish it were here, then they'd be here too, and so would Simla and the beautiful Taj Mahal."

"But if India were here, where would Here be? Oh, it's awfully muddling," she added.

Then her face brightened up, and plunging one hand under the pillow she brought out a very crumpled letter, a letter that had been hugged and kissed till it was scarcely readable.

Screwing up her grey eyes, Coppertop read it, word by word, keeping her place with a wet finger with which she had just flicked away a tear:

My Dearest Child,—

I am writing this letter to you from our bungalow at Simla—the one in which you stayed two years ago—do you remember?

I am sitting on the verandah, looking out over the mountains, and thinking of you, my darling, oh, so hard, that I believe I can almost see you, dancing through the long grass in the orchard, and climbing the trees, to see if the green apples are not too hard for your strong little teeth. And, dear, you really must not eat green apples, they are not good for little girls—it is so much better to let them grow into big, rosy ones.

Daddy is lying in the deck-chair under the punkah, and the breeze from it is making his hair stand up in queer little tufts—you would laugh so to see it—and he is snoring! Snoring so loudly that I thought it was the punkah. He is sound asleep, and dreaming, I expect, of his darling little girl in far-away Australia.

And now for some beautiful news! We are coming back to our little girl. Daddy has applied for his leave, and we may sail quite, quite soon.

I expect we shall go to England first, and then back again, through the Canal, and see the Pyramids and the Arab donkey-boys, and the camels. Take care of that little bronze camel Daddy gave you—don't lose it, dear.

And try to be good to Mrs. Grudge, and do as she tells you.

How I am longing to give you a big, big hug.

Good-bye, my own darling child.

MUMMIE.

P.S.—Daddy will write next mail.

When she came to the last line Coppertop's lips trembled, and two big tears rolled down her cheeks. It was just that "Big, big hug" that she was wanting this very minute.

"Of course," she said to herself, "I've got Tibbs and Kiddi-wee, and although they're only 'maginary brothers, they do get terrifkly real at times, and I've got this pudgy little bronze camel—Miss Smiler—but they don't make up for Mummie and Daddy, and it seems so long waiting for them to come."

She sat lost in thought for some minutes, then she yawned and lay back on the pillow. The candle winked and spluttered and sent huge shadows dancing upon the walls and ceiling with each flicker. Coppertop wished dreamily that she could be a shadow too, and tried to imagine just how it would feel to be dancing upon the ceilings, and growing suddenly large and small, and long or short, as the shadows seemed to do.

"It's a regular witches' dance!" she exclaimed. And as she said this, there came a nervous tap-tap at the door.

Coppertop lay very still, with a wildly-beating heart, wondering if she had really heard a tap on the door or not.

Coppertop

Then a voice said:

“Miss Celia! Are you awake?” It was Jane, the maid, who spoke, but in a voice so hushed and mysterious that it sent a shiver down the child’s back.

“I—I suppose so,” replied Coppertop, sitting up in bed to make quite sure. “What is it, Jane?”

Jane opened the door cautiously, and continued in a hushed voice—

“I hardly think I ought to tell you, seeing it’s so late.”

“Tell me what?” asked the child in an excited whisper.

“They’re coming home, miss. Mrs. Grudge has had a telegram to say Captain and Mrs. Sinclair will be here to-morrer mornin’, being the first of December!”

“GOOD GRACIOUS!” cried Coppertop. And bounding out of bed she dragged the nervous maid into the room by her apron.

“Mummie and Daddy coming home!” she cried, “absolutely really-truly! Eeeeeugh!” and Coppertop gave a shrill squeal of delight, and capered madly about the room.

“Oh, hush, miss! If Mrs. Grudge should hear us. I never ought to have told you, only I simply couldn’t ’elp it. You’ll be that excited you’ll never sleep a wink. Lor, here she is!”

And at the sound of someone coming along the passage, Jane beat a hasty retreat.

Coppertop wanted to rush after her and pour out a string of burning questions—but on second thoughts she remembered Mrs. Grudge, and drew back; it would never do to get Jane into trouble.

But whatever would she do? How could she ever get through the long night with all this excitement bottled up inside her?

“I believe I shall positively explode!” she muttered, as she clambered back into the old bed.

For what seemed long, long ages she lay and tossed from side to side. The night would never pass! The solemn “Tick-tock! Tick-tock!” of the grandfather clock outside her door told her so.

“Never-never! Never-never! NEVER-NEVER!” it seemed to say.

Her head burned upon the pillow, which seemed to grow larger and larger, till it almost smothered her. She turned it over to the cool side, and closed her eyes tightly.

“Never-never! Never-never!” ticked the old clock.

A sudden gust of wind shook the window, followed by the patter of raindrops on the pane.

“That doesn’t sound much like the first of December,” she thought, and shivered a little as it came again.

“Whatever shall I do if it isn’t a fine day to-morrow? Why, I must have a fine day for Mummie and Daddy to arrive on—a real scrumptious, warm, December day.”

The more she thought about it the more important it seemed. “It would be dreadful if it wasn’t even fine.”

She sat up in bed to consider this all-important question, and as she did so, a large Book of Travels which she had been reading fell on to the floor with a loud thump.

Coppertop jumped. Then, bending over the edge of the big bed to pick up the Book, she noticed, to her great surprise, that

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it had risen of its own accord, and was walking sedately over to the window.

“That’s awfully strange!” exclaimed Coppertop.



“If a Book of Travels can’t move about a bit, who can?”

“Not a bit,” replied the Book without turning round. “I must improve my circulation somehow! And if a book of travels can’t move about a bit, who can, I should like to know?”



“Come along,” cried Tibbs.