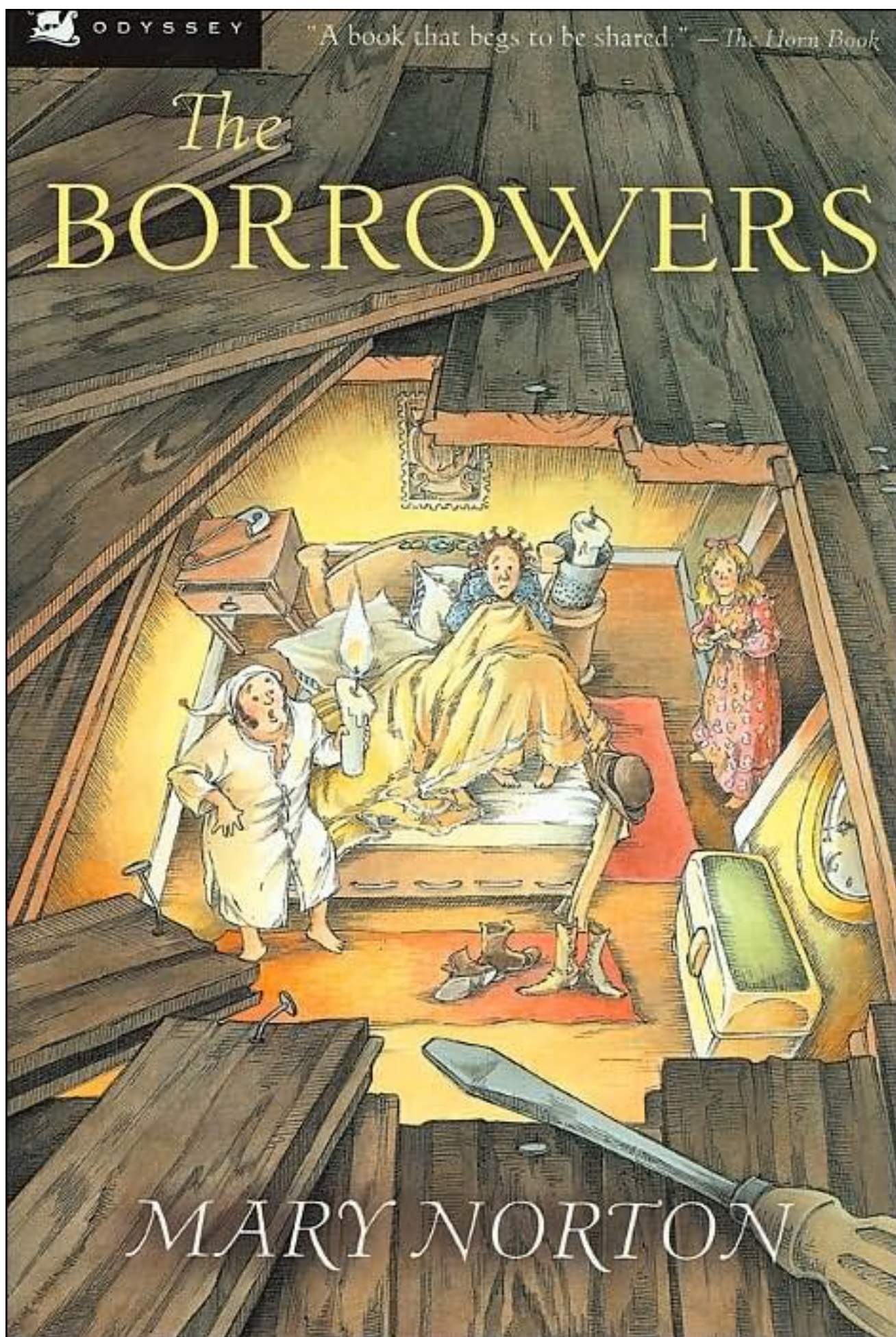




ODYSSEY

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The BORROWERS



MARY NORTON

Chapter One

Mrs. May lived in two rooms in Kate's parents' house in London; she was, I think, some kind of relation. Her bedroom was on the first floor, and her sitting room was a room which, as part of the house, was called "the breakfast-room." Now breakfast-rooms are all right in the morning when the sun streams in on the toast and marmalade, but by afternoon they seem to vanish a little and to fill with a strange silvery light, their own twilight; there is a kind of sadness in them then, but as a child it was a sadness Kate liked. She would creep in to Mrs. May just before tea-time and Mrs. May would teach her to crochet.

Mrs. May was old, her joints were stiff, and she was-not strict exactly, but she had that inner certainty which does instead. Kate was never "wild" with Mrs. May, nor untidy, nor self-willed; and Mrs. May taught her many things besides crochet: how to wind wool into an egg-shaped ball; how to run-and-fell and plan a darn; how to tidy a drawer and to lay, like a blessing, above the contents, a sheet of rustling tissue against the dust.

"Where's your work, child?" asked Mrs. May one day, when Kate sat hunched and silent upon the hassock. "You mustn't sit there dreaming. Have you lost your tongue?"

"No," said Kate, pulling at her shoe button, "I've lost the crochet hook." They were making a bed-quilt-in woolen squares: there were thirty still to do. "I know where I put it," she went on hastily; "I put it on the bottom shelf of the bookcase just beside my bed."

"On the bottom shelf?" repeated Mrs. May, her own heedle flicking steadily in the firelight. "Near the floor?"

"Yes," said Kate, "but I looked on the floor. Under the rug. Everywhere. The wool was still there though. Just where I'd left it."

"Oh dear," exclaimed Mrs. May lightly, "don't say they're in this house too!"

"That what are?" asked Kate.

"The Borrowers," said Mrs. May, and in the half light she seemed to smile.

Kate stared a little fearfully. "Are there such things?" she asked after a moment.

"As what?"

"As people, other people, living in a house who... borrow things?"

Mrs. May laid down her work. "What do you think?" she asked.

"I don't know," Kate said, pulling hard at her shoe button. "There can't be. And yet"-she raised her head—"and yet sometimes I think there must be."

"Why do you think there must be?" asked Mrs. May.

"Because of all the things that disappear. Safety pins, for instance. Factories go on making safety pins, and every day people go on buying safety pins and yet, somehow, there never is a safety pin just when you want one. Where are they all? Now, at this minute? Where do they go to? Take needles," she went on. "All the needles my mother ever bought-there must be hundreds-can't just be lying about this house."

"Not lying about the house, no," agreed Mrs. May.

"And all the other things we keep on buying. Again and again and again. Like pencils and match boxes and sealing-wax and hairpins and drawing pins and thimbles—"

"And hat pins," put in Mrs. May, "and blotting paper."

"Yes, blotting paper," agreed Kate, "but not hat pins."

"That's where you're wrong," said Mrs. May, and she picked up her work again. "There was a reason for hat pins."

Kate stared. "A reason?" she repeated. "I mean-what kind of a reason?"

"Well, there were two reasons really. A hat pin is a very useful weapon and"-Mrs. May laughed suddenly- "but it all sounds such nonsense and"-she hesitated—"it was so very long ago!"

"But tell me," said Kate, "tell me how you know about the hat pin. Did you ever see one?"

Mrs. May threw her a startled glance. "Well, yes—" she began.

"Not a hat pin," exclaimed Kate impatiently, "a-what-ever-you-called-them-a Borrower? "

Mrs. May drew a sharp breath. "No," she said quickly, "I never saw one."

"But someone else saw one," cried Kate, "and you know about it. I can see you do!"

"Hush," said Mrs. May, "no need to shout!" She gazed downwards at the upturned face and then she smiled and her eyes slid away into distance. "I had a brother—" she began uncertainly.

Kate knelt upon the hassock. "And he saw them!"

"I don't know," said Mrs. May, shaking her head, "I just don't know!" She smoothed out her work upon her knee. "He was such a tease. He told us so many things-my sister and me-impossible things. He was killed," she added gently, "many years ago now, on the North-West Frontier. He became colonel of his regiment. He died what they call 'a hero's death'..."

"Was he your only brother?"

"Yes, and he was our little brother. I think that was why"-she thought for a moment, still smiling to herself- "yes, why he told us such impossible stories, such strange imaginings. He was jealous, I think, because we were older -and because we could read better. He wanted to impress us; he wanted, perhaps, to shock us. And yet"-she looked into the fire—"there was something about him-perhaps because we were brought up in India among mystery and magic and legend-something that made us think that he saw things that other people could not see; sometimes we'd know he was teasing, but at other times-well, we were not so sure..." She leaned forward and, in her tidy way, brushed a fan of loose ashes under the grate, then, brush in hand, she stared again at the fire. "He wasn't a very strong little boy: the first time he came home from India he got rheumatic fever. He missed a whole term at school and was sent away to the country to get over it. To the house of a great-aunt. Later I went there myself. It was a strange old house..." She hung up the brush on its brass hook and, dusting her hands on her handkerchief, she picked up her work. "Better light the lamp," she said.

"Not yet," begged Kate, leaning forward. "Please go on. Please tell me—"

"But I've told you."

"No, you haven't. This old house-wasn't that where he saw - he saw... ?"

Mrs. May laughed. "Where he saw the Borrowers? Yes, that's what he told us... what he'd have us believe. And, what's more, it seems that he didn't just see them but that he got to know them very well; that he became part of their lives, as it were; in fact, you might almost say that he became a borrower himself..."

"Oh, do tell me. Please. Try to remember. Right from the very beginning!"

"But I do remember," said Mrs. May. "Oddly enough I remember it better than many real things which have happened. Perhaps it was a real thing. I just don't know. You see, on the way back to India my brother and I had to share a cabin-my sister used to sleep with our governess -and, on those very hot nights, often we couldn't sleep; and my brother

would talk for hours and hours, going over old ground, repeating conversations, telling me details again and again-wondering how they were and what they were doing and—"

"They? Who were they-exactly?"

"Homily, Pod, and little Arrietty."

"Pod?"

"Yes, even their names were never quite right. They imagined they had their own names-quite different from human names-but with half an ear you could tell they were borrowed. Even Uncle Hendreary's and Eggletina's. Everything they had was borrowed; they had nothing of their own at all. Nothing. In spite of this, my brother said, they were touchy and conceited, and thought they owned the world."

"How do you mean?"

"They thought human beings were just invented to do the dirty work-great slaves put there for them to use. At least, that's what they told each other. But my brother said that, underneath, he thought they were frightened. It was because they were frightened, he thought, that they had grown so small. Each generation had become smaller and smaller, and more and more hidden. In the olden days, it seems, and in some parts of England, our ancestors talked quite openly about the 'little people.'"

"Yes," said Kate, "I know."

"Nowadays, I suppose," Mrs. May went on slowly, "if they exist at all, you would only find them in houses which are old and quiet and deep in the country-and where the human beings live to a routine. Routine is their safeguard. They must know which rooms are to be used and when. They do not stay long where there are careless people, or unruly children, or certain household pets.

"This particular old house, of course, was ideal-although as far as some of them were concerned, a trifle cold and empty. Great-Aunt Sophy was bedridden, through a hunting accident some twenty years before, and as for other human beings there was only Mrs. Driver the cook, Crampfurl the gardener, and, at rare intervals, an odd housemaid or such. My brother, too, when he went there after rheumatic fever, had to spend long hours in bed, and for those first weeks it seems the Borrowers did not know of his existence.

"He slept in the old night-nursery, beyond the schoolroom. The schoolroom, at that time, was sheeted and shrouded and filled with junk-odd trunks, a broken sewing-machine, a desk, a dressmaker's dummy, a table, some chairs, and a disused pianola-as the children who had used it, Great-Aunt Sophy's children, had long since grown up, married, died, or gone away. The night-nursery opened out of the schoolroom and, from his bed, my brother could see the oil painting of the battle of Waterloo which hung above the schoolroom fireplace and, on the wall, a corner cupboard with glass doors in which was set out, on hooks and shelves, a doll's tea-service-very delicate and old. At night, if the schoolroom door was open, he had a view down the lighted passage which led to the head of the stairs, and it would comfort him to see, each evening at dusk, Mrs. Driver appear at the head of the stairs and cross the passage carrying a tray for Aunt Sophy with Bath Oliver biscuits and the tall, cut-glass decanter of Fine Old Pale Madeira. On her way out Mrs. Driver would pause and lower the gas jet in the passage to a dim, blue flame, and then he would watch her as she stumped away downstairs, sinking slowly out of sight between the banisters.

"Under this passage, in the hall below, there was a clock, and through the night he would hear it strike the hours. It was a grandfather clock and very old. Mr. Frith of Leighton Buzzard came each month to wind it, as his father had come before him and his great-uncle before that. For eighty years, they said (and to Mr. Frith's certain knowledge), it had not stopped and, as far as anyone could tell, for as many years before that. The great

thing was-that it must never be moved. It stood against the wainscot, and the stone flags around it had been washed so often that a little platform, my brother said, rose up inside.

"And, under this clock, below the wainscot, there was a hole..."

Chapter Two

It was Pod's hole—the keep of his fortress; the entrance to his home. Not that his home was anywhere near the clock: far from it—as you might say. There were yards of dark and dusty passageway, with wooden doors between the joists and metal gates against the mice. Pod used all kinds of things for these gates—a flat leaf of a folding cheese-grater, the hinged lid of a small cash-box, squares of pierced zinc from an old meat-safe, a wire fly-swatter... "Not that I'm afraid of mice," Homily would say, "but I can't abide the smell." In vain Arrietty had begged for a little mouse of her own, a little blind mouse to bring up by hand—"like Egglestina had had." But Homily would bang with the pan lids and exclaim: "And look what happened to Egglestina!" "What," Arrietty would ask, "what did happen to Egglestina?" But no one would ever say.

It was only Pod who knew the way through the intersecting passages to the hole under the clock. And only Pod could open the gates. There were complicated clasps made of hairpins and safety pins of which Pod alone knew the secret. His wife and child led more sheltered lives in homelike apartments under the kitchen, far removed from the risks and dangers of the dreaded house above. But there was a grating in the brick wall of the house, just below the floor level of the kitchen above, through which Arrietty could see the garden—a piece of graveled path and a bank where crocus bloomed in spring; where blossom drifted from an unseen tree; and where later an azalea bush would flower; and where birds came—and pecked and flirted and sometimes fought. "The hours you waste on them birds," Homily would say, "and when there's a little job to be done you can never find the time. I was brought up in a house," Homily went on, "where there wasn't no grating, and we were all the happier for it. Now go off and get me the potato."

That was the day when Arrietty, rolling the potato before her from the storehouse down the dusty lane under the floor boards, kicked it ill-temperedly so that it rolled rather fast into their kitchen, where Homily was stooping over the stove.

"There you go again," exclaimed Homily, turning angrily; "nearly pushed me into the soup. And when I say 'potato' I don't mean the whole potato. Take the scissor, can't you, and cut off a slice."

"Didn't know how much you wanted," mumbled Arrietty, and Homily, snorting and sniffing, unhooked the blade and handle of half a pair of manicure scissors from a nail on the wall, and began to cut through the peel.

"You've ruined this potato," she grumbled. "You can't roll it back now in all that dust, not once it's been cut open."

"Oh, what does it matter?" said Arrietty. "There are plenty more."

"That's a nice way to talk. Plenty more. Do you realize," Homily went on gravely, laying down the half nail scissor, "that your poor father risks his life every time he borrows a potato?"

"I meant," said Arrietty, "that there are plenty more in the storeroom."

"Well, out of my way now," said Homily, bustling around again, "whatever you meant—and let me get the supper."

Arrietty wandered through the open door into the sitting room. Ah, the fire had been lighted and the room looked bright and cozy. Homily was proud of her sitting room: the walls had been papered with scraps of old letters out of waste-paper baskets, and Homily had arranged the handwriting sideways in vertical stripes which ran from floor to ceiling. On the walls, repeated in various colors, hung several portraits of Queen Victoria as a girl; these were postage stamps, borrowed by Pod some years ago from the stamp box on the desk in the morning room. There was a lacquer trinket box, padded inside and with the lid

open, which they used as a settle; and that useful stand-by—a chest of drawers made of match boxes. There was a round table with a red velvet cloth, which Pod had made from the wooden bottom of a pill box supported on the carved pedestal of a knight from the chess set. (This had caused a great deal of trouble upstairs when Aunt Sophy's eldest son, on a flying mid-week visit, had invited the vicar for "a game after dinner." Rosa Pickhatchet, who was housemaid at the time, gave in her notice. After she had left other things were found to be missing, and no one was engaged in her place. From that time onwards Mrs. Driver ruled supreme.) The knight itself—its bust, so to speak—stood on a column in the corner, where it looked very fine, and lent that air to the room which only statuary can give.

Beside the fire, in a tilted wooden bookcase, stood Arrietty's library. This was a set of those miniature volumes which the Victorians loved to print, but which to Arrietty seemed the size of very large church Bibles. There was Bryce's Tom Thumb Gazetteer of the World, including the last census; Bryce's Tom Thumb Dictionary, with short explanations of scientific, philosophical, literary, and technical terms; Bryce's Tom Thumb Edition of the Comedies of William Shakespeare, including a foreword on the author; another book, whose pages were all blank, called Memoranda; and, last but not least, Arrietty's favorite Bryce's Tom Thumb Diary and Proverb Book, with a saying for each day of the year and, as a preface, the life story of a little man called General Tom Thumb, who married a girl called Mercy Lavinia Bump. There was an engraving of their carriage and pair, with little horses the size of mice. Arrietty was not a stupid girl. She knew that horses could not be as small as mice, but she did not realize that Tom Thumb, nearly two feet high, would seem a giant to a Borrower.

Arrietty had learned to read from these books, and to write by leaning sideways and copying out the writings on the wall. In spite of this, she did not always keep her diary, although on most days she would take the book out for the sake of the saying which sometimes would comfort her. Today it said: "You may go farther and fare worse," and, underneath: "Order of the Garter, instituted 1348." She carried the book to the fire and sat down with her feet on the hob.

"What are you doing, Arrietty?" called Homily from the kitchen.

"Writing my diary."

"Oh," exclaimed Homily shortly.

"What did you want?" asked Arrietty. She felt quite safe; Homily liked her to write; Homily encouraged any form of culture. Homily herself, poor ignorant creature, could not even say the alphabet. "Nothing. Nothing," said Homily crossly, banging away with the pan lids; "it'll do later."

Arrietty took out her pencil. It was a small white pencil, with a piece of silk cord attached, which had come off a dance program, but, even so, in Arrietty's hand, it looked like a rolling-pin.

"Arrietty!" called Homily again from the kitchen.

"Yes?"

"Put a little something on the fire, will you?"

Arrietty braced her muscles and heaved the book off her knees, and stood it upright on the floor. They kept the fuel, assorted slack and crumbled candle-grease, in a pewter mustard-pot, and shoveled it out with the spoon. Arrietty trickled only a few grains, tilting the mustard spoon, not to spoil the blaze. Then she stood there basking in the warmth. It was a charming fireplace, made by Arrietty's grandfather, with a cogwheel from the stables, part of an old cider-press. The spokes of the cogwheel stood out in starry rays, and the fire itself nestled in the center. Above there was a chimney-piece made from a

small brass funnel, inverted. This, at one time, belonged to an oil lamp which matched it, and which stood, in the old days, on the hall table upstairs. An arrangement of pipes, from the spout of the funnel, carried the fumes into the kitchen flues above. The fire was laid with match-sticks and fed with assorted slack and, as it burned up, the iron would become hot, and Homily would simmer soup on the spokes in a silver thimble, and Arrietty would broil nuts. How cozy those winter evenings could be. Arrietty, her great book on her knees, sometimes reading aloud; Pod at his last (he was a shoemaker, and made button-boots out of kid gloves—now, alas, only for his family); and Homily, quiet at last, with her knitting.

Homily knitted their jerseys and stockings on black-headed pins, and, sometimes, on darning needles. A great reel of silk or cotton would stand, table high, beside her chair, and sometimes, if she pulled too sharply, the reel would tip up and roll away out of the open door into the dusty passage beyond, and Arrietty would be sent after it, to re-wind it carefully as she rolled it back.

The floor of the sitting room was carpeted with deep red blotting paper, which was warm and cozy, and soaked up the spills. Homily would renew it at intervals when it became available upstairs, but since Aunt Sophy had taken to her bed Mrs. Driver seldom thought of blotting paper unless, suddenly, there were guests. Homily liked things which saved washing because drying was difficult under the floor; water they had in plenty, hot and cold, thanks to Pod's father who had tapped the pipes from the kitchen boiler. They bathed in a small tureen, which once had held p&te de foie gras. When you had wiped out your bath you were supposed to put the lid back, to stop people putting things in it. The soap, too, a great cake of it, hung on a nail in the scullery, and they scraped pieces off. Homily liked coal tar, but Pod and Arrietty preferred sandalwood.

"What are you doing now, Arrietty?" called Homily from the kitchen.

"Still writing my diary."

Once again Arrietty took hold of the book and heaved it back on to her knees. She licked the lead of her great pencil, and stared a moment, deep in thought. She allowed herself (when she did remember to write) one little line on each page because she would never—of this she was sure—have another diary, and if she could get twenty lines on each page the diary would last her twenty years. She had kept it for nearly two years already, and today, 22nd March, she read last year's entry: "Mother cross." She thought a while longer then, at last, she put ditto marks under "mother," and "worried" under "cross."

"What did you say you were doing, Arrietty?" called Homily from the kitchen.

Arrietty closed the book. "Nothing," she said.

"Then chop me up this onion, there's a good girl. Your father's late tonight..."

Chapter Three

Sighing, Arrietty put away her diary and went into the kitchen. She took the onion ring from Homily, and slung it lightly round her shoulders, while she foraged for a piece of razor blade. "Really, Arrietty," exclaimed Homily, "not on your clean jersey! Do you want to smell like a bit-bucket? Here, take the scissor—"

Arrietty stepped through the onion ring as though it were a child's hoop, and began to chop it into segments.

"Your father's late," muttered Homily again, "and it's my fault, as you might say. Oh dear, oh dear, I wish I hadn't—"

"Hadn't what?" asked Arrietty, her eyes watering. She sniffed loudly and longed to rub her nose on her sleeve.

Homily pushed back a thin lock of hair with a worried hand. She stared at Arrietty absently. "It's that tea cup you broke," she said.

"But that was days ago—" began Arrietty, blinking her eyelids, and she sniffed again.

"I know. I know. It's not you. It's me. It's not the breaking that matters, it's what I said to your father."

"What did you say to him?"

"Well, I just said—there's the rest of the service, I said—up there, where it always was, in the corner cupboard in the schoolroom."

"I don't see anything bad in that," said Arrietty as, one by one, she dropped the pieces of onion into the soup.

"But it's a high cupboard," exclaimed Homily. "You have to get up by the curtain. And your father at his age—" She sat down suddenly on a metal-topped champagne cork. "Oh, Arrietty, I wish I'd never mentioned it!"

"Don't worry," said Arrietty, "Papa knows what he can do." She pulled a rubber scent-bottle cork out of the hole in the hot-water pipe and let a trickle of scalding drops fall into the tin lid of an aspirin bottle. She added cold and began to wash her hands.

"Maybe," said Homily. "But I went on about it so. What's a tea cup! Your Uncle Hendreary never drank a thing that wasn't out of a common acorn cup, and he's lived to a ripe old age and had the strength to emigrate. My mother's family never had ijiothing but a little bone thimble which they shared around. But it's once you've had a tea cup, if you see what I mean..."

"Yes," said Arrietty, drying her hands on a roller towel made out of surgical bandage.

"It's that curtain," cried Homily. "He can't climb a curtain at his age—not by the bobbles!"

"With his pin he could," said Arrietty.

"His pin! I led him into that one too! Take a hat pin, I told him, and tie a bit of name-tape to the head, and pull yourself upstairs. It was to borrow the emerald watch from Her bedroom for me to time the cooking." Homily's voice began to tremble. "Your mother's a wicked woman, Arrietty. Wicked and selfish, that's what she is!"

"You know what?" exclaimed Arrietty suddenly.

Homily brushed away a tear. "No," she said wanly, "what?"

"I could climb a curtain."

Homily rose up. "Arrietty, you dare stand there in cold blood and say a thing like that!"

"But I could! I could! I could borrow! I know I could!"

"Oh!" gasped Homily. "Oh, you wicked heathen girl! How can you speak so!" and she crumpled up again on the cork stool. "So it's come to this!" she said.

"Now, Mother, please," begged Arrietty, "now, don't take on!"

"But don't you see, Arrietty..." gasped Homily; she stared down at the table at loss for words and then, at last, she raised a haggard face. "My poor child," she said, "don't speak like that of borrowing. You don't know—and, thank goodness, you never will know"—she dropped her voice to a fearful whisper—"what it's like upstairs..."

Arrietty was silent. "What is it like?" she asked after a moment.

Homily wiped her face on her apron and smoothed back her hair. "Your Uncle Hendreary," she began, "Eggleton's father—" and then she paused. "Listen!" she said. "What's that?"

Echoing on the wood was a faint vibration—the sound of a distant click. "Your father!" exclaimed Homily. "Oh, look at me! Where's the comb?"

They had a comb: a little, silver, eighteenth-century eyebrow comb from the cabinet in the drawing room upstairs. Homily ran it through her hair and rinsed her poor red eyes and, when Pod came in, she was smiling and smoothing down her apron.