

# White Boots

NOEL STREATFEILD was born on Christmas Eve in 1885. She was the second daughter of the Bishop of Lewes, and grew up a strong-willed and difficult child (a story she tells in *A Vicarage Family*). From an early age she was determined to become an actor, and indeed attended the Academy of Dramatic Art, before performing for nine years in the West End and abroad.

It was a sudden decision to become an author, and at first she wrote only for adults. In 1936, however, she wrote *Ballet Shoes*, her most famous book, and two years later won the prestigious Carnegie Medal for *The Circus is Coming*. She then planned to write children's and adult novels alternately, but her success as a children's author made this impossible.

Although Noel had no children herself, she never failed to supply the kind of book that children wanted to read. She put this down to the fact that she could remember very vividly being a child herself, and that she had a "blotting-paper memory"!

## *Why You'll Love This Book* *by Cathy Cassidy*

When I was growing up, books were an escape, a passport to a whole new world. Nothing very exciting ever seemed to happen to me, but I could open the pages of a book and imagine myself as a ballerina or an ice-skater or a lonely orphan at a strict boarding school... and I loved that! Books seemed like a kind of real-life magic to me, back then.

*Ballet Shoes* was the first Noel Streatfield book I read and loved, so when I discovered *White Boots*, I devoured that too. The story is not just about Harriet learning to skate, but her friendship with rich, spoilt skating star Lalla Moore. It explores the themes of jealousy, loyalty and dependency within a friendship, things I now write about in my own books! Friendship is something that matters to all of us, whatever our age, but it takes hard work and determination to make a friendship strong, as Harriet and Lalla find out.

I loved the ice-skating background of *White Boots* – as a child I had never been on the ice at all, and that whole world of cute little skating dresses and white boots seemed impossibly cool and glam. I never did get the hang of ice-skating, even as an adult, but I still love to watch those who can and dream of what might have been!

Re-reading *White Boots* again now, I was fascinated to find it was written in 1951, just 11 years before I was born... yet as a child, the time and setting of the book seemed very distant. Again, it was another world to me – a post-war world of genteel poverty, with nannies and governesses and nurseries. I was fascinated. It couldn't have been more different from my own life, and I think

that 21st century readers will feel the same... some things have changed so much, yet some not at all!

Apart from the romance of the skating scenes, some of my favourite parts of the book were those with Harriet's brothers – they were kind, practical, lively boys who welcomed Lalla into their lives. I especially liked Alec, and his shopkeeper friend Mr Pulton who tells him to follow his dreams. That's a message that has always stayed with me – and one that crops up in just about every book I write.

*White Boots* is a little slice of the past, which still captures my imagination, and its themes of friendship, family and staying true to yourself are timeless...

### *Cathy Cassidy*

Cathy Cassidy is a bestselling author of fun and feisty real-life stories for girls, including *Dizzy*, *Indigo Blue*, *Lucky Star*, *Ginger Snaps* and the *Chocolate Box Girls* series. Cathy wrote and illustrated her first book at 8 years old for her little brother and has been writing and drawing ever since. She has worked as an editor on *Jackie* magazine, a teacher and as agony aunt on *Shout* magazine. She lives in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland with her husband, two children, three cats, two rabbits and a mad hairy lurcher called Kelpie.

# *White Boots*

NOEL STREATFEILD

Illustrated by Piers Sanford



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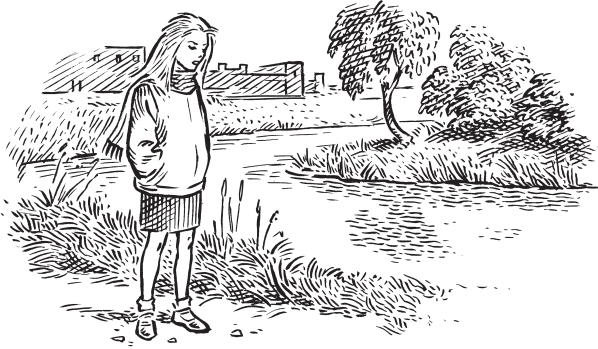
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## *Chapter One*

### THE JOHNSONS

EVEN WHEN THE last of the medicine bottles were cleared away and she was supposed to have “had” convalescence, Harriet did not get well. She was a thin child with big brown eyes and a lot of reddish hair that did not exactly curl, but had a wiriness that made it stand back from her face rather like Alice’s hair in “Alice in Wonderland”. Since her illness Harriet had looked all eyes, hair and legs and no face at all, so much so that her brothers Alec, Toby and Edward said she had turned into a daddy-long-legs. Mrs Johnson, whose name was Olivia, tried to scold the boys for teasing Harriet, but her scolding was not very convincing, because inside she could not help feeling that if a daddy-long-legs had a lot of hair and big eyes it would look very like Harriet.

Harriet’s father was called George Johnson. He had a shop.

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It was not a usual sort of shop, because what it sold was entirely dependent on what his brother William grew, shot or caught. There had been a time when the Johnson family were rich. They had owned a large house in the country, with plenty of land round it, and some fishing and shooting. The children's great-grandfather had not been able to afford to live in the big house, so he had built himself a smaller house on the edge of his property and let the big house. When his eldest son, the children's grandfather, came into the property he could not afford to live even in the new smaller house, so he brought up the children's father, and their Uncle William, in the lodge by the gates. But when he was killed in a motor accident and the children's Uncle William inherited the property he was so poor he could not afford to live even in the lodge, so he decided the cheapest plan would be to live in two rooms in the house on the edge of the property that his grandfather had built, and to let the lodge. When he had thought of this he said to his brother George, the children's father, "I tell you what, young feller me lad"... he was the sort of man who spoke that way... "I'll keep a nice chunk of garden and a bit of shootin' and fishin' and I'll make the garden pay, and you can have the produce, trout from the river, and game from the woods, and keep a shop in London and sell it, and before you can say Bob's me Uncle you'll be a millionaire."

It did not matter how often anyone said Bob's your Uncle for George did not become a millionaire. Uncle William had



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not married, and lived very comfortably in his two rooms in the smaller house on the edge of his estate, but one reason why he lived so comfortably was that he ate the best of everything that he grew, caught or shot. The result of this was that George and Olivia and the children lived very leanly indeed on the proceeds of the shop. It was not only that William ate everything worth eating, which made life so hard for them, but people who buy things in shops expect to go to special shops for special things, and when they are buying fruit they do not expect to be asked if they could do with a nice rabbit or a trout, especially when the rabbit and the trout are not very nice, because the best ones have been eaten by an Uncle William. The children's father was an optimist by nature, and he tried not to believe that he could be a failure, or that anything that he started would not succeed in the end; also he had a deep respect and trust for his brother William. "Don't let's get downhearted, Olivia," he would say, "it's all a matter of time and educating the public. The public can be educated to anything if only they're given time." Olivia very seldom argued with George, she was not an arguing sort of person and anyway she was very fond of him, but she did sometimes wonder if they would not all starve before the public could be taught to buy old, tired grouse, which had been too tough for Uncle William, when what they had come to buy was vegetables.

One of the things that was most difficult for Olivia, and indeed for the whole family, was that what would not sell had

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to be eaten. This made a great deal of trouble because Uncle William had a large appetite and seldom sent more than one of any kind of fish or game, and the result was that the family meals were made up of several different kinds of food, which meant a lot of cooking. "What is there for lunch today, Olivia?" George would ask, usually adding politely: "Sure to be delicious." Olivia would answer, "There's enough rabbit for two, there is a very small pike, there is grouse but I don't really know about that, it seems to be very, very old, as if it had been dead a long time, and there's sauerkraut. I'm afraid everybody must eat cabbage of some sort today, we've had over seven hundred from Uncle William this week and it's only Wednesday."

One of the worst things to Harriet about having been ill was that she was not allowed to go to school, and her mother would not let her help in the house.

"Do go out, darling, you look so terribly thin and spindly. Why don't you go down to the river? I know it's rather dull by yourself but you like watching boats go by."

Harriet did like watching boats go by and was glad that her father had chosen to have his shop in outer London in a part through which ran the Thames, so she could see boats go by. But boat watching is a summer thing, and Harriet had been unlucky in that she was ill all the summer and was putting up with the getting-well stage in the autumn, and nobody, she thought, could want to go and look at a river in the autumn. In the summer their bit of the Thames was full of pleasure boats, and

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there were flowers growing on the banks, but now in October it was cold and sad and grey-looking, and only occasionally a string of barges or a small motor launch came by. But it was no good telling her mother about the river being dull; for one thing her mother knew it already and would only look sad when she was reminded of it, and for another her mother heard all the doctor said about fresh air and she did not; besides she was feeling so cotton-woolish and all-overish that she had not really got the energy to argue. So every day when it was not raining she went down by the river and walked drearily up and down the towpath, hugging her coat round her to keep out the wind, wishing and wishing that her legs would suddenly get strong and well again so that she could go back to school and be just ordinary Harriet Johnson like she had been before she was ill.

One particularly beastly day, when it looked every minute as if it was going to rain and never quite did, she was coming home from the river feeling and looking as blue as a lobelia, when a car stopped beside her.

“Hallo, Harriet. How are you getting on?”

Harriet had been so deep in gloom because she was cold and tired that she had not noticed the car, but as he spoke she saw Dr Phillipson, who ordered the fresh air, and quite suddenly everything she had been thinking about cotton-wool legs and fresh air and not going to school came over her in a wave and she did what she would never have done in the ordinary way, she told the doctor exactly what she thought of his treatment.

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“How would you be if you were made to walk up and down a river in almost winter, all by yourself, getting colder and colder, and bored-er and bored-er, with absolutely nothing to do, and not allowed to stop indoors for one minute because you’d been ill and your doctor said you’d got to have fresh air? I feel simply terrible, and I shouldn’t think I’ll ever, ever get well again.”

The doctor was a nice, friendly sort of man and clever-looking. Usually he was too busy to do much talking, but this time he seemed in a talking mood. He opened the door of his car and told Harriet to hop into the seat beside him, he had got a visit or two to do and then he would take her home.

“I must say,” he agreed, “you do look a miserable little specimen; I hoped you’d pick up after that convalescent home the hospital sent you to.”

Harriet looked at him sadly, for she thought he was too nice to be so ignorant.

“I don’t see why I should have got better at that convalescent home.”

“It’s a famous place.”

“But it’s at the top of a cliff, and everything goes on at the bottom of the cliff, sea-bathing and the sands and everything nice like that. I could never go down because my legs were too cotton-woolish to bring me back.”

The doctor muttered something under his breath which sounded like “idiots”, then he said:

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“Haven’t you any relations in the country that you could go and stay with for a bit?”

“No, we’ve only Uncle William; he’s only got two rooms and use of a bathroom and one of his two rooms is his kitchen. He shoots and catches and grows the things Daddy sells in the shop. Mummy says it’s a pity he wouldn’t have room for me because he eats all the best things, so all that food would do me good, but I don’t think it would because I’m not very hungry.”

The doctor thought about Harriet’s father’s shop and sighed. He could well believe Uncle William ate the best of everything for the shop looked as if he did. All he said was:

“You tell your father and mother I’ll be along to have a talk with them this evening.”

Since she had been ill Harriet was made to go to bed at the same time as Edward, which was half-past six. This was a terrible insult, because Edward was only just seven, whereas she was nearly ten, so when Dr Phillipson arrived, only Alec and Toby were up. The Johnsons lived over the shop. There was not a great deal of room for a family of six. There was a kitchen-dining room, there was a sitting room, one bedroom for the three boys, a slip of a room for Harriet and a bedroom for George and Olivia. When Dr Phillipson arrived Olivia was in the kitchen cooking the things George had not sold, Alec and Toby were doing their homework at one side of the table in the sitting room, while on the other side their father tried to work out the accounts. The days when their father did the accounts were bad

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days for Alec's and Toby's homework, because accounts were not their father's strong point.

"Alec, if I charge ninepence each for four hundred cabbages, and twopence a pound for four dozen bundles of carrots, three and sixpence each for eight rabbits, and thirty shillings for miscellaneous fish, and we've only sold a quarter of the carrots, half the cabbages, one of the rabbits, and all the fish but three, but we've made a very nice profit on mushrooms, how much have I earned?"

Toby, who was eleven and had what his schoolmaster called a mathematical brain, was driven into a frenzy by these problems of his father's. He was short-sighted, and had to wear spectacles, and a piece of his sandy-coloured hair was inclined to stand upright on the crown of his head. When his father asked questions about the finance of the shop, his eyes would glare from behind his spectacles, and the piece of hair on the crown of his head would stand bolt upright like a guardsman on parade. He would be in such a hurry to explain to his father that he could not present a mathematical problem in that form that his first words fell out on top of each other.

"But-Father-you-haven't-told-Alec-the-price of the mushrooms on which the whole problem hangs, nor the individual prices of the fish."

It was in the middle of one of these arguments that Olivia brought Dr Phillipson in. In spite of having to cook all the things Uncle William sent which would not sell, Olivia succeeded in

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looking at all times as if she was a hostess entertaining a very nice and amusing house party. In the kitchen she always wore an overall but underneath she had pretty clothes; they were usually very old because there was seldom money for new clothes, but she had a way of putting them on and of wearing them which seemed to say, "Yes, isn't this pretty? How lucky I am to have nice clothes and time to wear them." As she ushered Dr Phillipson into the sitting room it ceased to be full of George, Alec and Toby all arguing at the tops of their voices, and of Alec's and Toby's school books, and George's dirty little bits of paper on which he kept his accounts, and she was showing a guest into a big, gracious drawing room.

"Dr Phillipson's come to talk to us about Harriet."

The Johnson children were properly brought up. Alec and Toby jumped to their feet murmuring, "Good evening, sir," and Alec gave the doctor a chair facing George.

The doctor came straight to the point.

"Harriet is not getting on. Have you any relations in the country you could send her to?"

George, though he only had two, offered the doctor a cigarette.

"But of course, my dear fellow, my brother William has a splendid place, love to have her."

The doctor was sure George would not have many cigarettes so he said he preferred to smoke his own. Olivia signalled to Alec and Toby not to argue.

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“It’s quite true, Dr Phillipson, my brother-in-law William would love to have Harriet, but unfortunately he has only got two rooms, and he’s very much a bachelor. All my relations live in South Africa. We have nowhere to send Harriet or, of course, we would have sent her long ago.”

The doctor nodded, for he felt sure this was true. The Johnsons were the sort of people to do almost more than was possible for their children.

“It’s not doing her any good hanging about by the river at this time of year.”

Toby knew how Harriet felt.

“What she would like is to go back to school, wouldn’t she, Alec?”

Alec was very like his mother; he had some of her elegance and charm, but as well he had a very strongly developed strain of common sense. He could see that Harriet in her present daddy-long-legs stage was not really well enough for school.

“That’s what she wants, but she’s not fit for it, is she?”

“No, she needs to exercise those legs of hers. Do they do gymnasium or dancing at her school?”

“Not really,” said Olivia. “Just a little ballroom dancing once a week and physical exercises between classes, you know the sort of thing.”

The doctor turned to George.

“Would your finances run to sending her to a dancing school or a gymnasium? It would have to be a good one



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where they knew what they were doing.”

George cleared his throat. He hated that kind of question, partly because he was a very proud father who wanted to give his children every advantage, and who, except when he was asked direct questions by doctors, tried to pretend he did give them most advantages.

“I don’t think I could manage it just now. My father left me a bit, and Olivia will come into quite a lot some day, but just now we’re mainly dependent on the shop, and November’s a bit of an off-season. You see, my brother William...” His voice tailed away.

The doctor, who knew about the shop, felt sorry and filled in the pause by saying “Quite.” Then suddenly he had an idea.

“I’ll tell you what. How about skating? The manager of the rink is a patient of mine. I’ll have a word with him about Harriet. I’m sure he’d let her in for nothing. There’d be the business of the boots and skates, but I believe you can hire those.”

Alec nodded.

“You can. I think skating’s a good idea. If you can get your friend to give her a pass we’ll manage the boots and skates.”

The doctor got up.

“Good. Well, I’ve got to go and see the manager of the rink tomorrow; I’ll have a word with him; if he says yes I’ll arrange to pick Harriet up and drop her off and introduce her to him. It’s no distance, she could have a lot of fun there, plenty of kids,

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I imagine, go, it's a big, airy place and she can tumble about on the ice and in no time we'll see an improvement in those leg muscles."

George showed the doctor to the door. While he was out of the room Olivia said in a whisper:

"Alec, whatever made you say it would be all right about the skates and boots? What do you suppose they cost?"

Toby answered.

"We know what it cost because we went that time Uncle William packed that goose by mistake. They're two shillings a session."

Olivia never lost her air of calm, but she did turn surprised eyes on Alec. He was usually the sensible, reliable one of the family, not at all the sort of person to say they could manage two shillings a day when he knew perfectly well they would be hard put to it to find threepence a day. Alec gave her a reassuring smile.

"It's all right. I'll find it, there's a lot of delivering and stuff will want doing round Christmas and in the meantime I saw a notice in old Pulton's window. He wants a boy for a paper round."

Olivia flushed. It seemed to her a miserable thing that Harriet's skates and boots had to be earned by her brother instead of by her father and mother.

"I wonder if I could get something to do? I see advertisements for people wanted, but they always seem to be wanted at the

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same time as I'm wanted here."

Alec laughed.

"Don't be silly, Mother, you know as well as I do you couldn't do any more than you do."

Toby had been scowling into space; now he leant across to Alec.

"How much do you suppose boots and skates cost? If a profit can be made on hiring out a pair of boots and skates at two shillings a session, how much would it cost to buy a second-hand pair outright?"

Alec was doodling on his blotting paper.

"With what?"

At that moment George came back.

"Nice fellow Phillipson, he says this skating will be just the thing for Harriet. It's this skates' and boots' money that's worrying me. Do you suppose we could do any good if we opened a needlework section, Olivia?"

He was greeted by horrified sounds from Olivia, Alec and Toby. Olivia got up and put her arms round his neck.

"I adore you, George, but you are an unpractical old idiot. You haven't yet educated the public to come to you for trout, and be prepared at the same time to buy a bag of half-rotten apples, so how do you think you're going to lure them on to supposing they would also like six dusters and an overall?"

Alec looked up from his doodling.

"What sort of needlework did you mean, Dad?"

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George looked worried.

“Certainly not dusters and overalls. I seem to remember my grandmother doing some very charming things, fire-screens I believe they were.”

Olivia laughed.

“I’m not much of a needlewoman, and I can promise you even if I were to start today it would be two years before you would have even one fire-screen, so I think you can count the needlework department out.”

Alec put a bundle of newspapers under the arm of the figure he was doodling.

“It’s all right, Dad, I’m going to tide us over to start with by a newspaper round. Old Pulton wants somebody.”

Toby had been doing some figures on paper.

“If a newspaper boy is paid two shillings an hour, reckoning one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening daily for six days, with one hour on Sunday at double time, how long would it take him to earn second-hand boots and skates at a cost of five pounds?”

Alec said:

“If a boy and a half worked an hour and a half for a skate and a half...”

Olivia saw Toby felt fun was being made of a serious subject.

“I’m afraid, Toby, you’re going to grow up to be a financier, one of those people who goes in for big business with a capital ‘B’.”

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Alec finished his drawing.

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing, we could do with some money in our family. If you were thinking, Toby, I might get Mr Pulton to advance five pounds for my services, it wouldn’t work because I might get ill or something and you’re too young to be allowed to do it.”

“That’s right, darling,” Olivia agreed. “It wouldn’t be practical anyway to buy boots because Harriet’s growing, and probably the moment Alec had bought her the boots they’d be too small. Feet grow terribly fast at her age, especially when you’ve been ill. I wonder if she’s awake?”

George got up.

“I’ll go and see. If she is I’ll bring her down. It’ll cheer her up to know what’s planned for her.”

Harriet was awake, and so was Edward. Edward was the good-looking one; his hair was not sandy like the rest of his family, but bright copper, his eyes were enormous with greenish lights in them. Strangers stopped to speak to Edward in the road just because they liked looking at him, and Edward took shameless pleasure in his popularity.

“It’s disgusting,” Alec often told him. “You’re a loathsome show-off.”

Edward was always quite unmoved, and merely tried to explain.

“I didn’t ask to be good-looking, but I like the things being good-looking gives me. I was the prince in the play at

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school.” Toby, when he heard that, had made noises as if he were being sick. “All right, make noises if you like, but I did like being the prince. There was special tea afterwards, for the actors, with ices.”

“But you can’t like people cooing and gurgling at you,” Toby always protested.

Edward seemed to consider the point.

“I don’t know. There’s you and Alec off to school and nobody knows you’ve been, and nobody cares. There’s me walks up the same street and everybody knows. I think it’s duller to be you.”

“It’s no good,” Alec would say to Toby, “wasting our breath on the little horror.”

“Just a born cad,” Toby would agree.

But Edward was neither a horror nor a cad, he was just of a very friendly disposition, a person who liked talking and being talked to. Already, although he had only been seven for one month, he had a good idea of the sort of people he liked talking to and the sort of people he did not. He was explaining this to Harriet when George came up to fetch her.

“It’s those silly sort of ladies with little dogs I don’t like, and people like bus conductors I do like.”

George went into Edward’s room.

“You’re supposed to be asleep, my son. Turn over and I’ll tuck you in. I’m taking Harriet downstairs.”

Edward sat up.

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“What for? She’s supposed to be in bed and asleep too.”

George pushed Edward down.

“We’ve got something to tell her.” He could feel Edward rising up under his hand to protest that he would like to be told too. “Not tonight, old man, I dare say Harriet’ll tell you tomorrow.”

It was a cold night, so George not only made Harriet put on her dressing-gown but he rolled her up in an eiderdown and carried her down to the sitting room. Harriet was surprised to find herself downstairs. She looked round at her family with pleasure.

“Almost it’s worth being sent to bed with Edward to be got up again and brought downstairs. What did Dr Phillipson say?”

Olivia thought how terribly thin Harriet’s face looked, sticking out of a bulgy eiderdown. It made her speak very gently.

“He wants you to take up skating, darling.”

Nothing could have surprised Harriet more. She had been prepared to hear that she was to go for rides on the top of a bus, or do exercises every morning, but skating was something she had never thought about. George stroked her hair.

“Dr Phillipson is arranging for you to get in free.”

Alec said:

“So the only expense will be the hiring of your skates and boots, and that’s fixed.”

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Toby looked hopefully at Harriet for some sign that she was working out the cost of skates and boots, but Harriet never worked out the cost of anything. She just accepted there were things you could afford and things you could not.

“When do I start?”

Olivia was thankful Harriet seemed pleased.

“Tomorrow, darling, probably, but you aren’t going alone, the doctor’s going to take you.”

Harriet tried to absorb this strange turn in her affairs. She knew absolutely nothing about skating; then suddenly a poster for an ice show swam into her mind. The poster had shown a girl in a ballet skirt skating on one foot, the other foot held high above her head, her arms outstretched. Thinking of this picture Harriet was as startled as if she had been told that tomorrow she would start to be a lion tamer. Could it be possible that she, sitting on her father’s knee rolled in an eiderdown, would tomorrow find herself standing on one leg with the foot of the other over her head? These thoughts brought her suddenly to more practical matters.

“What do I wear to skate, Mummy?”

Olivia mentally ran a distracted eye over Harriet’s wardrobe. She had grown so long in the leg since her illness. There was her school uniform, but that wanted letting down. There were her few frocks made at home. There was the winter party frock cut down from an old dinner dress which had been part of her trousseau. Dimly Olivia connected skating and dancing.



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“I don’t know, darling, do you think the brown velvet?”

Harriet thought once more of the poster.

“It hasn’t got pants that match, and they would show.”

“She must match,” said Toby. “She’ll fall over a lot when she’s learning.”

Olivia got up.

“I must go and get our supper. I think tomorrow, darling, you must just wear your usual skirt and jersey; if you find that’s wrong we’ll manage something else by the next day.”

George stood up and shifted Harriet into a carrying position.

“Come up to bed, Miss Cecilia Colledge.”

Harriet’s skating ceased to be a serious subject and became funny. Olivia, halfway to the kitchen, turned to laugh.

“My blessed Harriet, what is Daddy calling you? It’s only for exercise, darling.”

Alec drew a picture of Harriet on his blotting paper: she was flat on her back with her legs in the air. Under it he wrote, “Miss Harriet Johnson, Skating Star.”

Toby gave Harriet’s pigtails a pull.

“Queen of the Ice, that’s what they’ll call you.”

George had a big rumbling laugh.

“Queen of the Ice! I like that. Queen of the Ice!”

Harriet wriggled.

“Don’t laugh, Daddy, it tickles.”

But when she got back to bed Harriet found that either

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the laughing or the thought of skating next day had done her good. Her legs were still cotton-woolish but not quite as cotton-woolish as they had been before her father had fetched her downstairs. Queen of the Ice! She giggled. The giggle turned into a gurgle. Harriet was asleep.