

An excerpt from
The Lark in the Morn
by Elfrida Vipont

1. OVER THE WALL

'KIT! Kit! Where are you, you impossible child?'

'Here.'

'Where?'

'Bedroom'

'What are you doing?'

'Reading.'

'Have you done your homework and your practicing?'

'Need I do any moldy practicing? I had a lesson yesterday.'

'Of course you must practice, silly! If you're too lazy to do any work, how do you expect your father to go on paying for your music lessons?'

'I don't! I wish he wouldn't!'

'Kit! You ungrateful child! Come downstairs at once and bring your homework with you.'

'I've done everything except the arithmetic.'

'Then bring that. Be quick, or you'll not be ready when Pony and Helen come.'

Laura Haverard stood in the hall at Thornley Mays, impatiently awaiting her small cousin. The child was always exasperatingly slow. Otherwise she might have been able to help with the spring-cleaning, but as it was, Laura was only too thankful to get her out of the way. Laura herself was very efficient. She prided herself on her orderly methods, but somehow or other she could never instill them into Kit. And if she pressed her too hard, there would only be a tantrum to cope with on top of everything else. Laura hated it when Kit indulged in tantrums. It was such a waste of time. However, if only she could hustle her into finishing her homework, the child would be able to run off and play for the rest of the morning, leaving her free to get on with her work.' For goodness' sake hurry up!' she urged.

Kit came slowly down the stairs with a book under each arm. She looked very untidy, Laura thought. She herself could spring-clean all morning without getting so much as a hair out of place, and her blue overall was as neat as it was becoming. She pulled the child towards her and straightened the collar of her blouse, but what was the use of tidying her up when she never seemed to take any pride in her appearance? She sighed expressively and pushed Kit into the dining-room. 'Come along and let's see you start,' she said.

Kit sat down at the table and reluctantly opened her books. There were only three sums left.

'Measure a room at home and give its area in square feet—'

'You'd better do that now, with my tape-measure,' suggested Laura helpfully.

'Done it.'

'Already? Which room did you measure?'

'Pantry—six feet by four.'

'Lazy kid! You don't take a scrap of interest in your work, do you? Now, hurry up, or you'll not be able to go out with Pony and Helen.'

Kit wrote 'Answer' with a flourish and turned round in her chair. 'But we're not going out. It's our Saturday to play here. Don't you remember?'

'No, dear, I don't. And even if it is, you know I can't possibly have you all here today.'

'But Laura, we can't change everything now. I do think—it's so jolly unfair—'

'Why don't you go for a nice walk instead?' suggested Laura hurriedly, trying to avert a storm.

'It's such a lovely day! You can leave a note for me at Mrs. Campion's, and those books for your father at Joseph Garth Fenwick's.'

'Why can't you leave your own silly notes? I don't want—'

'Oh, but you do! And you can play your game, or whatever it is, in the park afterwards. That will be ever so much nicer than being here. Hurry up with that last sum—it's two pounds, fourteen and threepence, if you want to know. I'll let you off your practicing, for once. Run along and ask Martha for some cake.'

'All right.' Kit shrugged her shoulders as she scribbled down the answer. Arguing with Laura was a waste of time. So were sums. And at least she had got rid of her practicing. She slammed the door as she left the dining-room—'Go back again and shut the door quietly,' called Laura from her spring-cleaning—slid along the freshly polished hall and pushed through the green baize door into the kitchen. There was nobody there. The big ginger cat was dozing in front of the fire with his paws tucked cosily in, and tiny motes of dust were dancing sleepily in the broad sunbeams which streamed through the window. The kitchen was a comfy sort of place, thought Kit, much comfier than the drawing-room. It was the only room in the house that had never been changed since her mother's death, so Martha had told her. Even Laura was not allowed to touch it. It was a large, square room, with an old-fashioned range and ample shelves and cupboards: her mother's photograph hung in the place of honor over the dresser. Kit looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, and then sat down on the edge of the spotless deal table, swinging her legs and humming a little tune to herself. Perhaps, after all, it wouldn't be a bad idea to go for a walk. Suddenly the kettle boiled over and Martha came storming in.

Martha Ridyard was a handsome woman, tall, grey-haired and keen-eyed. She had come to Thornley Mays as general servant from the Kitson household at Manningleigh, when Janey Kitson married Professor Haverard. She had always been devoted to Janey. For many years she had ruled the house, not to mention the Professor and his wife, and the three little boys, Richard, Thomas and Miles, who had followed one another in swift succession. When some years later Kit was born, and the children were left motherless, Martha had stood by them staunchly: Janey's children could have had no more faithful guardian. The Professor's niece, Laura Haverard, had come to keep house for him and bring up the family, but one way and another that seemed to make very little difference to Martha.

She entered now in a whirlwind, first to sweep the kettle off the fire and then to seize upon Kit.

'Cake? And what do you want with cake, this time of a morning?' she thundered.

'It's to take out with us. It's our Saturday to play here and Laura won't let us. Isn't she a beast, Martha?'

'Now, don't let me hear you talk like that about Miss Laura. I'll not have it, and well you know it. But it's a shame not to let you play here. You wouldn't be a bit of trouble in the garden. See here, I'll give you each a bit of my bread pudding. I only baked it yesterday.'

Martha's bread pudding contained more raisins to the square inch than any of the confections which passed for cake in the dining-room. Kit brightened as she pocketed her trophies. 'You're a good sort, Martha,' she said. 'Sorry I was cross. Hullo, there's Laura calling me. Pony and Helen must have come. Good-bye, and thanks awfully.'

Pony and Helen were standing in the hall, talking 'company talk.' 'Oh no, Miss Haverard, we don't mind a bit. It's perfectly all right.'

Kit grinned at them secretly as she pulled on her blazer. 'Come on, you two. Good-bye, Laura. I'll not be late for dinner.'

The front door closed with a bang, and the three ran down to the gate and swung upon it in a meditative row. Pony was the eldest, tall and brown and nearing her teens; Helen the next, bespectacled and clever. Kit, a thin slip of a child, would be twelve in June.

'It's a beastly shame!' she muttered, as they swung to and fro. 'But what could I do? Laura's always like that when it's spring-cleaning.'

'Let's get the errands done first,' suggested Helen, 'and then go and play in the fields by the Hall.'

'Good for you, Helen,' cried Pony, jumping back on to the path. 'Come on!'

It was a point of honor with the three never to use the gate, unless compelled to do so by the restraining presence of their elders. Pushing through the murky shrubbery of smutty laurels and rhododendrons, they scrambled on to the parapet of the wall, whence they jumped down, one by one, and so set off, arm in arm, down Thornley Rise, the old main street of Thornley.

There were still elderly people living who referred to Thornley as 'the village,' but to all intents and purposes it was now part of the great manufacturing city of Chesterham, though some of the features of the old village still lingered. There was the old Hall at the bottom of the main street, with the Home Farm behind, bravely struggling in the soot-laden atmosphere. At the top of the Rise was the old church, and beyond, on the high road to Chesterham, stood the coaching inn, with horse-mount and trough and ample stable-yard, and the weather-beaten sign of the Four-in-Hand creaking in the breeze. Of course the city would win in the end. It was already stretching long covetous fingers across it, surrounding it with tall chimneys which blotted out the blueness from its skies, and sending noisy tram-cars clanging down the Rise under the very windows of the stolid old houses, but meanwhile Thornley stubbornly survived.

Belonging to the old Hall were a few starved-looking fields with a muddy stream running through them. It was a good place for a game when their errands were done. 'Look!' cried Kit, as they came to a low bridge over the stream. 'Look yonder. Black Nigel hath betrayed us.'

A blue-clad butcher's boy was cycling carelessly down the path, his hand on his hip and a grass stalk between his teeth. Pony looked at him keenly, shading her eyes with her hand. 'Redcoats,' she muttered. 'Quick, under the bridge!' She was Prince Charlie, of course: she was always the Prince when they played Highlanders.

Under the bridge they crept, the black mud squelching through their sandals. The butcher's boy was followed by a couple of gossiping women with their prams. 'Canst hear the rumble of their baggage wagons?' whispered Kit, when they had passed out of hearing. 'Do let's get out of this. It's beastly smelly, and my feet are sopping wet.'

Cautiously they emerged from their hiding-place. There was nobody in sight. 'Too soon, Angus, too soon,' yelled Pony. 'Here comes the rearguard.'

A furious fight took place at each end of the bridge. The air was thick with imaginary foes. The Redcoats were wiped out, of course: they always were. But the Prince and his followers crawled out on to the grass in a dire condition. For a few minutes their drooping figures lay prone and spent, until at length Pony jumped up impatiently. 'Now, it's six months afterwards and we're all better,' she cried. 'What about that cake, Kit? Angus, hast thou a bannock in thy sporran?'

They followed the stream through three fields, each of which held possibilities of adventure. The first was given over to grass, and there they attacked a fortress at the gate, by swarming up an old elm tree and dropping down upon the enemy with fearsome yells. Blackened from head to

foot by the sooty bark, they pressed forward to the next field, only to find an army of Redcoats in possession. They crept along the narrow pathway, speaking in stifled whispers for fear of wary sentinels, until they reached the gate and climbed over it cautiously, without a sound. The last field raised high hopes, for two old cart-horses were grazing in one corner. These, however, flatly refused to figure as faithful steeds, whereupon the three adventurers, finding their iron-shod hoofs somewhat formidable at close range, denounced them roundly as Sassenachs and swore that they would ride no 'treacherous southron mounts.'

Pony turned away and, flinging her imaginary plaid about her shoulders, led the others on to where the stream flowed through a gap in the wall into the park, once part of the grounds of Thornley Old Hall. The gap was protected by spiked railings and barbed wire, but the wall, though forbidding, looked scalable. 'This is our last chance of escape,' said Prince Charlie firmly.

'We are ready, sire,' rejoined Helen stoutly. 'Only you'd better get up first, Pony. You're biggest.'

Tense silence reigned for a few minutes until, grubbier than ever, the three comrades sat along the top of the wall and inspected the surrounding country. Immediately before them was a copse of stunted trees, through which they could see the level greenness of the park, crossed and re-crossed by gravel paths and patched by flower beds. Beyond rose the gabled roof of the old Hall, half-hidden by poplars, and beyond that they could just see the spire of the church at the top of the Rise. The striking of the church clock broke in upon their meditations. One. 'One o'clock!' shrieked Pony, leaping from the wall. 'I shall be late for dinner and it's chicken.' Helen jumped down after her with a rueful smile on her face. 'It's all right for you, but I shall get into no end of a row.'

Kit did not follow them. It was a big jump and she dreaded it. A cold feeling crept over her, till it seemed as if she had been sitting up there alone for ages.

'Come on, silly, jump!' commanded Pony.

Kit looked down at her friend for a moment. Obviously she was getting impatient. Her upper lip was beginning to curl, and that always meant trouble for somebody. Yet it wasn't anything to do with her really. Kit wasn't bound to follow her. In the angle of the wall, a little farther on, stood a gnarled hawthorn tree. If only she could manage to keep her balance on the sharp-edged coping stone, she could reach it, swing herself into the upper branches, and scramble down. That would mean a new tree climbed, and it would be her own way, not Pony's. Why shouldn't she go her own way, after all?

'I'm coming! Wait a jiff!' she cried. Her feet gripped the coping stone unerringly.

'Look out, Kit! You'll fall,' warned Helen.

'No, I shan't,' laughed Kit, as she reached her goal in triumph. 'This is a good tree, but no end prickly.'

Pony eyed her enviously, but a little anxiously. It would never do for Kit to start taking the lead. 'Quick, lest the Redcoats find us!' she cried, and they were back in the story-world again. Swiftly they raced across the park, sheltering behind the trees at every sign of a disguised Redcoat, on to the great gates, and beyond to the foot of the Rise. Pony and Helen wheeled to the left, after hasty farewells, and Kit went on alone, instinctively dodging passers-by as suspected Sassenachs. As she reached the gate, the dinner gong sounded noisily. Laura was waiting for her on the front doorstep.

'Late again, Kit, and filthy dirty,' she exclaimed. 'Whatever do Mrs. Cray and Mrs. Edgington say, I should like to know? Run upstairs at once and wash yourself. Your father's waiting.'

But Kit's thoughts were still far away, roving over the Highlands of Scotland with her chief,

while in the background lurked the disturbing memory of that loneliness on the top of the wall.

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