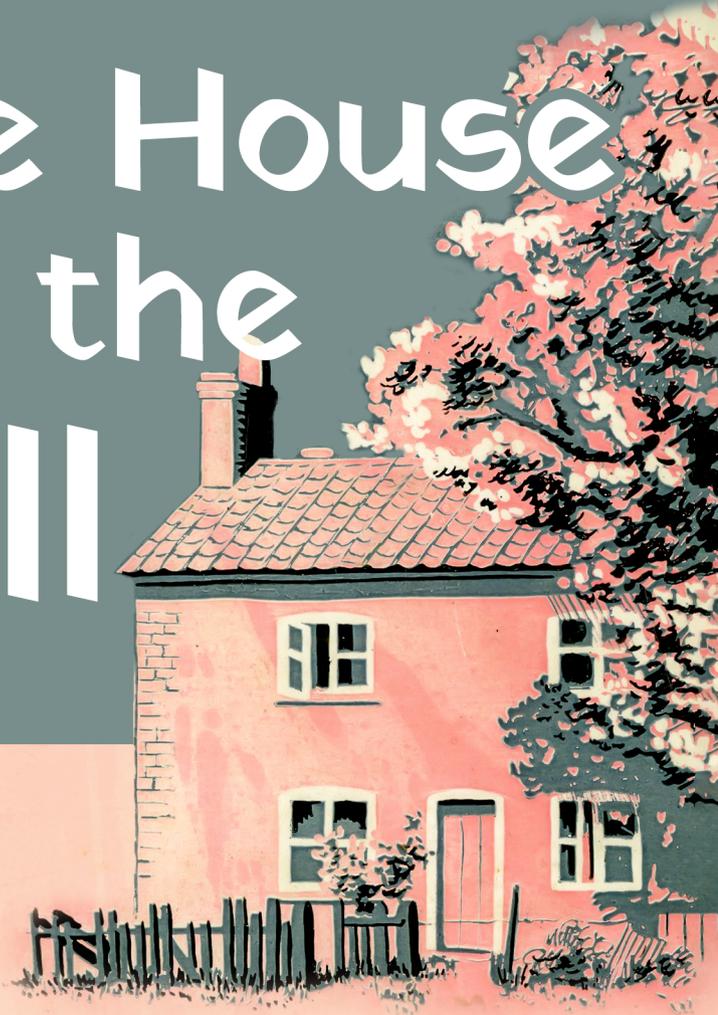




A vivid memoir of home, family, and freedom —one woman's choice to nurture her children's learning beyond the classroom

The House on the Hill



Joy Baker (Frances Wilding)

By the same author

Children in Chancery
Turn on the Sun

The House on the Hill

JOY BAKER



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The author with Christopher and Carol

The swallows are back at the House on the Hill
And the wind blows free
The sunlight is gold at the House on the Hill
And it shines for me
The flowers are in bud at the House on the Hill
And the birds all sing
The pear tree's in bloom at the House on the Hill
And our hearts take wing...

JOY BAKER

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR'S CHILDREN

The House on the Hill and its sequel *Turn on the Sun* tell the story of our lives when we did not go to school.

Our childhood had two very different sides. One is told in our mother's book *Children in Chancery*, where we were relentlessly pursued by the local education authorities. Court cases filled our growing years—long hours waiting in courtrooms, sometimes giving evidence ourselves, even being taken from our beds in the middle of the night while our mother was away. At just five to eight years old, we were followed by photographers, splashed across newspapers, and constantly under pressure from officials.

This book shows the other side—what our mother intended for us. We lived with her, a determined and unconventional woman, in an old farmhouse set in the middle of nowhere. When we first arrived, it had no running water, no electricity, and no toilet. But it was surrounded by rolling countryside and filled with life—cows and horses, turkeys and sheep (sometimes wandering into the house), along with our pets: dogs, cats, rabbits, and gerbils.

Our memories are of long summer days learning as needed, winter snowdrifts taller than ourselves, and evenings alive with beauty. Country life brought both its joys and challenges, alongside fairs, ballets, theatre visits, and agricultural shows—one of us even showed cows.

This was the life our mother envisioned for us, and it is the life we share in these pages.

THE CHILDREN

We are Seven

When my husband and I were on our honeymoon, we stayed at a cottage with a dear old lady of seventy, who had brought up a family of six children single-handed. Her husband had left her for another woman when she was expecting her sixth baby, and she had never heard from him since; her only comment on this treatment, looking back over the years, was, “I never blamed him. It was all the woman’s fault.”

When, thirteen years later, I was left in the same position, only with a seventh baby on the way, I could perhaps more reasonably make the same comment. For the woman in my case wore a black shroud, and her name was Death.

I had chosen for my engagement ring an opal, an iridescent sea-green stone set in a cluster of pearls, because I loved it on sight; but people to whom I showed it were horrified.

“Opals are unlucky,” they told me. “And pearls are for tears.”
Perhaps they are.

I married my husband—a journalist, twenty years older than myself—for the same reason; and I wore my opal and pearls for the thirteen years of my married life.

When my last baby was three months old, we were living in a rambling Georgian house in a quiet village. My husband had only just returned from an absence of several weeks in Ireland, and I had no warning of what was to come when he went to Eastbourne for the day to interview an eccentric elderly lady who kept dogs.

He returned that evening in a state of collapse, breathing painfully.

“One of my usual attacks of bronchitis,” he said. He had suffered from these periodically since a serious illness which had resulted in his being invalided out of the Army during the War.

I got him to bed and called the doctor, who looked grave and diagnosed bronchitis—and pneumonia. He left me with instructions to apply hot poultices to his back and chest, and to give M and B tablets every four hours, night and day.

I spent that night sleeping in a chair by my husband’s bedside, and waking with a start every hour or so. The doctor came again in the morning and said very little, but as he left he looked at me in a gently pitying way which I felt was tactless at the time, although I was to get used to it in the weeks ahead.

“Keep on with the same treatment,” he told me. “There is nothing else we can do.”

Late that evening my husband became unconscious. I telephoned the doctor, but he was out. The older children had gone to bed, and the two baby boys were asleep in their cots. Only the most un-reassuring sound of my husband’s laboured breathing reassured me that he was still alive. The night went on, and became a nightmare.

A cry from one of the babies took me down the passage to their room. When I came back I paused at the bedroom door. The painful breathing was quiet. A dreadful stillness filled the room, like a tangible thing, a presence not only in the room but beating against the dark windows outside. I went to the bedside and bent over my husband. I am not sure, but I think I screamed.

So we were seven; and I was somewhat shaken to find, working it out in the middle of the night some weeks later when I knew there was another baby on the way, that our average age amounted to eleven years.

Geoffrey, my second-in-command, aged twelve, tall and fair—or at least fair where his person was not smudged with tractor-grease, oil or mud, as was usually the case; his interest in farming being only equalled by his interest in words, and his ambition being to become a farmer or a barrister, or preferably both...

Steven, eleven, smaller and lighter-built, with straight brown hair and long dark lashes; as domesticated as Geoffrey was outdoor, with a love of colour and beauty, yet able to cook and serve a meal

or scrub a floor with fascinating neatness and efficiency—but he wanted to be an artist, so perhaps, I thought, it's a good thing he can cook and scrub floors...

Victoria, aged nine, with long flame-gold hair and only two ruling passions in her life, babies and horses; she could already look after the babies as well as I could, but I didn't see how I could ever provide her with a horse...

Helen, just eight, resembling Victoria only in the brilliant colour of her hair—but Helen's was a tangled mop of red-gold curls, all wind-tossed and wild, like Helen herself. We had a story in our family that when Helen was a baby the fairies took her away in the night and cast a spell on her, and we found her again the next morning sitting on a red toadstool, half child, half elf, which she has been ever since. She was such a complete contrast to Victoria that we called them Queen Victoria and Nell Gwynn...

Then Christopher, one year old, with silver-fair curls and the expressive sky-blue eyes of a very mischievous angel; and four-month-old Nicholas, with dark curls and midnight blue eyes, the most cuddly pink dumpling that was ever tickled, with two dimples nearly always in evidence and a very engaging small droop to his mouth when they weren't...

And then, of course, me—otherwise our average age would have been only eight.

It was no good worrying about it. We had been used to being on our own for long periods, since my husband's work had involved frequent absences from home; and now there we were, the seven of us; and I was faced with the expired tenancy of our present house which I could no longer afford, and the necessity of finding a new home without delay.

To find a home for a family of our size—plus our ten cats—at a low rent, seemed hopeless; for weeks I answered advertisements and viewed houses, without success, and with increasing urgency; and then someone told me that there was a house in a remote village, belonging to a local farmer, which was standing empty. I telephoned the farmer and asked him if he had a house to let.

"Not that I know of," he replied. I was about to ring off when he added, ... "Only that place up the drift that no one will live in..."

“That would be the one,” I said. “Is it available?”

“Yes, but you won’t want that,” he said. “I wanted it for a stockman, but no one will live up there...”

“But would you let it?” I persisted.

“You’d better go and look at it,” he said. “You’d have to put it in order yourself. But if you still want it, ring me again.”

So I found the House on the Hill; and we moved in at the spring of the year.

The House on the Hill was not originally called that at all; it was known locally as “That place of Potter’s up the drift.” I found my way to it with difficulty, after passing it twice without seeing it was there. It was considered so isolated that no one would live in it, and it had stood empty for years past; a small, compact old farmhouse, with the farm buildings, long since fallen into disuse, still grouped comfortably behind it, beside a pond and a group of willow trees. Cattle grazed round it; in fact, when I first saw it, they could and did put their heads through the many broken windows.

Local opinion had been horrified. “You’ll never stand living up there,” I was told. “It’s much too isolated—and they say there’s a ghost. The last tenant hanged himself in the barn!”

“Well, I don’t suppose he’ll hurt us,” I said.

“Right up that drift... Falling to pieces...” “Supposed to be haunted”—with these encouraging remarks in my ears I surveyed our future home. There was a fair-sized kitchen, with adjoining dairy; a large living-room with an enormous pantry opening out of it; and upstairs four bedrooms, opening off a minute landing at the top of stairs leading up from the living-room. Two ceilings were down, most of the windows were out; but the walls, about two feet thick, looked as if they had stood for centuries and would stand untouched for centuries more. A wildness of grass all round, coming even into the living-room through the front door; two steep fields between it and the nearest road, and no roadway across to it but “the drift,” with rough stones and long grass underfoot, and then a muddy track across the field where the cattle grazed. I looked at it all—and fell in love.

Some things had to be done before we moved in. We had a sink

put in the kitchen, with a pump on it piped from the well; we had the dairy converted into a bathroom, with a real bath, although it had to be filled with buckets; we had the ceilings put up and the windows put in, and a concrete path put down outside the back door. The landlord put a fence round where the garden had once been, so the cattle no longer looked through the windows—much to the children's disappointment!—and we took out the old copper in the kitchen and built a small larder cupboard in the corner where it had stood; and then we turned the old pantry into a nursery, where the babies could safely play.

Moving in presented problems. How do you get a houseful of furniture up a steep, muddy track? By tractor and trailer, the last occupants did, we were told. We compromised with a van, plus a horse and cart borrowed from a nearby farm standing by at the bottom of the drift to take things up the field, in case the van got stuck.

The weather, kindly, was dry; the sun shone; there were golden pendant catkins on the willow trees. Everything fitted in; and the pantry made a delightful nursery, its deep shelves filled with the children's toys and the floor space half-filled by Christopher's play-pen, under the low window where, by standing on his bath turned upside-down, he could look out at cattle grazing, moorhens swimming on the pond, and swallows winging overhead.

After the inevitable chaos of moving in, the silence of our isolation was a beautiful peace. I was awakened that first morning by birds chirruping outside my window, so close they seemed to be just over my head. A pair of turtle doves came and sat each morning on the chimney-pot, and cooed down my bedroom chimney; and Steven found he actually had a starling's nest in the tiles immediately above his head, where the ceiling sloped down to within a few feet from the floor, and he could lie and listen to the excited chirping of the baby birds every few minutes when the parents arrived with something to eat, only a few inches from his face.

We were in the middle of our first breakfast when I heard a thump at the back door and went to see who it was, leaving Steven to finish cooking the bacon. I opened the door and there on the threshold stood three large black pigs. Three fat old sows, apparently

quite glad to find the house occupied, and with every intention of coming in. I shut the door hastily, and called the family; despatched Geoffrey round our more immediate neighbours to discover the pigs' owner, and Helen to shoo them a little farther away from the door; and returned with Steven and Victoria to our own personal bacon. It was on the table when Geoffrey came back, accompanied by a boy from the nearest farm, and asked if he could help him drive the pigs home. He returned some time later, hungry and muddy.

So, a few minutes after, did the pigs.

I was occupied in driving them away from the back door again when there was a shout from Helen at the front window.

"Look! A man! Two men!"

So there were. Two men working in the ditch of the next field. We all stood and gazed.

"Real people. Up here!" we said.

"They're hedgerers and ditcherers," announced Helen, who frequently makes up words far more expressive than those in more regular use. "Can I go and help them?"

"When we've got rid of the pigs," I said.

"I know where they come from now," said Geoffrey, hastily finishing his breakfast. "I'll take them back."

Quiet again. Steven peeled potatoes for lunch, Victoria and I did the babies' washing, Helen hedgered and ditchered muddily but happily outside, and Christopher watched with great interest from his window.

Lunch was on the table when Geoffrey returned, and I got Helen in and persuaded her to wash off some of the more noticeable mud.

"I've been helping to fence in the pigs," Geoffrey explained. "What do we do this afternoon?"

"Go exploring," I said. "I want to find the station, and all I know is it's somewhere out at the back of us."

"Which do you call the back?" Geoffrey inquired.

A reasonable question, because our back door faced over the main approach to the house, which I called the front, while the front door looked out over fields and an even muddier, more deeply-rutted and overgrown "drift" known as "the loke," and leading to places then unknown.



Twelve-year-old Geoffrey



Eleven-year-old Steven



Nine-year-old Victoria



Eight-year-old Helen



Eighteen-month-old Christopher



The author with six-month-old Nicholas



The House on the Hill

"I mean the back way out of the front door," I said.

"I see," said Geoffrey, "past those cottages."

We were all intrigued by the cottages. We could see two chimneys sticking up through the trees only a little way up "the loke," but no sign of any inhabitants.

So after lunch, the four elder children set off, and I took Christopher for a walk in his push-chair down the road, and then settled down in the biggest arm-chair with four of our ten cats, and darned stockings until they returned.

"We found the station," they all informed me at once. "You go down the loke until you come to a road, and first we went left until we didn't come to anything but two houses, quite a long way down, and then we turned back and went right, and passed two farms, and down a hill past another farm, and the station is right at the bottom of the hill."

"And what about the cottages?" I said.

"Oh, they *aren't* cottages any more," said Steven. "The doors are all off and the staircases have fallen in and most of the inside walls and floors are down. No one could have lived there for years."

"And I thought they were our nearest neighbours," I said.

"But we found some palm," said Victoria, and held out a bunch of gold and silver, kitten soft.

"I think that's nicer than people," I said.

There was a scuffle and thump at the back door.

"Go and see what *that* is," I said to Geoffrey.

He came back laughing. "It's our nearest neighbours," he said. "I told them that fence wouldn't hold long. Shall I take them back again?"

"Yes, you'd better," I said, and Victoria and I started preparing tea, while Geoffrey and Steven and Helen set off down the field, driving three large black pigs.

Danger—Cattle Crossing

That was our first day at the House on the Hill. To begin with, the absence of any human neighbours did seem queer, if not actually particularly displeasing. We awarded points to members of the family who did meet a human being on our hill-top—one point for seeing one, and two for actually exchanging conversation; and we never saw any sign of the rumoured ghostly tenant in the barn—only the old farm implements, and our cats asleep in the straw.

Disadvantages there certainly were, but mostly ones that only needed getting used to. Schools were a long way away; but this appeared to me—and to the children—to be an advantage rather than the reverse, since I felt that any irregularities in their formal learning would be more than compensated for by the increased experience of tackling life hand-to-hand which they would gain from our new circumstances, and that this did in any case constitute a valuable part of their education. I had found throughout my own life that most of the things I was taught in school had never been of the slightest use to me, and I had always felt that a practical training in everyday things was of quite as much value to most children as the patchwork of subjects pushed into their minds in school. The education authorities, however, did not agree with my views, and there were continual verbal arguments and more or less acrimonious correspondence, and even an occasional appearance in the local Court; none of which did anything to alter either my views or those of the authorities.

Tradesmen's deliveries were no longer the straightforward matter they used to be. Our grocer drove his van up the field, unless it was

very wet—then he walked. The baker didn't like the idea of driving up—he had a new van. So we had a safe put up on the roadside at the bottom of the drift, and he left the bread there for us to collect. The milkman didn't like the idea of driving up either, visualizing his van overturned and hundreds of smashed milk bottles, and this presented us with the problem of getting eight pints of milk up the field daily; which we solved by getting the milkman to leave the milk in a crate, and using a barrow to bring it up the field.

It was obviously going to be impossible to get a coal lorry up the field—except in summer, when we shouldn't need to. We had nowhere to store a bulk delivery of coal, and couldn't fetch up hundredweight sacks from the road by tractor, as the last occupants had done. So we gave up the idea of using coal, and arranged to heat the house by oil. We found that a glowing paraffin fire in the sitting-room was just as warm as a real fire, and had the additional advantage that I only had to light it when I came down in the mornings, and, provided we remembered to keep it filled once a day, it never went out. There still remained the problem of getting the paraffin up the field; but our local supplier, like the grocer, drove up when it was fine, and carried up the five-gallon can when it was wet. And we could always fetch a gallon at a time from the shop.

Laundry presented an even odder problem, since the nearest stopping point of our local laundry was about half a mile down the road. This we got over by arranging to leave our laundry each week for collection in a cart-shed conveniently situated on the corner passed by the laundry van, and taking it to and fro on the barrow. No one seemed to find anything unusual in this, and we soon came to refer to the cart-shed as "the laundry" in ordinary conversation. When the farm it belonged to changed hands, it was a long time before I learned the name of the new owner, although I waved to his wife every time I went down with the barrow; and we simply referred to her as "Mrs Laundry."

People soon ceased to be everyday occurrences; but there were quite a lot of us, after all, and it never seemed to matter very much. Our neighbours were pigs, sheep, horses, and cows. Every evening during our first summer, the cows would start a procession from our field to the big field beyond the pond, passing our front win-

dows on the way. Outside the front windows were two large apple trees, and there the cows all stopped to have their evening back-scratch. Early in the mornings they went back past our windows again, and as I lay in bed I could hear their gentle breathing as they passed. It is one of the nicest ways I know of being awakened in the morning. Nicholas would lie in his cot and listen, chuckling, while Christopher watched through the bars of his cot. I think the animals were glad to have someone living in the house again.

They also continued to provide interest in ways that human neighbours seldom do. One morning I was hanging out the washing, while Steven and the girls took Christopher in his push-chair and picked hogweed for our landlord's rabbits, when I heard a persistent mooing coming from the fields behind the house. After a time it became impossible to ignore it, so I sent Geoffrey to investigate. He came back to say that one of "our" cows had broken through into a neighbouring field—and was calling frantically to the rest of them.

"If she isn't got back quickly, they'll all break through to join her," he pointed out. "But I can't get her back by myself."

It was a nice warm day and I'd just finished the washing.

"All right," I said. "I'll come and help."

I picked up a stick out of the hedge, and we set off down the big field. I hadn't been there before, and found it a lovely stretch of tussocky grass, with bushes and hummocks and little hills, and paths made by cattle and sheep—a perfect children's playground. To get through to the adjoining field, where the cow was, we had to go right to the bottom. Here there was a gap in the hedge, where crushed brambles and hoof-marks in the mud showed clearly where the cow had got through.

"We'll have to drive her back here," Geoffrey said. "There's no other way through the hedge."

The cow was walking distractedly up and down the hedge at the top end of the field.

Geoffrey and I pushed through the gap and started to walk up the field. Suddenly the cow caught sight of us, and putting her head down tore down the field towards us at considerable speed.

"It's a good thing you brought that stick," Geoffrey remarked calmly. "This cow is apt to be difficult and bad-tempered at times."

I looked apprehensively at the cow, which was now bearing down on us rapidly and with every appearance of animosity. I stood still.

“Look, Geoffrey,” I said, “do you mean to tell me you’ve brought me out here in my present condition to play toreador to a charging and angry cow?”

“Oh, I don’t think she’s dangerous,” said Geoffrey cheerfully. “She’s just bad-tempered when she gets upset.”

“I don’t see the distinction,” I said crossly; and made a dive for the hedge. It was a thorny, prickly one, and I backed into it with difficulty, while Geoffrey, much amused, stood guard over me with the stick.

The cow came upon us with a thunder of hooves—and rushed straight past. In point of fact, she didn’t even look at us, other than a glance in passing, but made straight for the gap in the hedge which we had been intending to drive her through. By the time Geoffrey had extricated me from the hedge—and removed sundry thorns from my clothes and hair—she had pushed her way back through the gap and rejoined the herd.

We walked back after her, with brambles still sticking into me at various points, and after scrambling through it again, did what we could to block up the gap in the hedge.

“Next time I go cow-chasing with you,” I told Geoffrey, “kindly tell me when you expect the cow to be bad-tempered *first*.”

“Well,” said Geoffrey pointedly, “she’s in calf—and they *do* get difficult then, don’t they?”

I couldn’t think of any adequate reply to this, except “Moo!”—and a newly sympathetic glance at the now quietly grazing cow, as we walked peacefully back up the hill to the house.

Rubella

It was late spring, and Geoffrey's birthday. We went to town for the day, and spent half an hour looking round the museum, following after a party of forty or so schoolchildren being taken round on a conducted tour.

Two weeks later, Geoffrey woke up feeling ill. I kept him in bed, but no definite symptoms became apparent until midday, when I found his chest and back covered in spots. I telephoned the doctor, whom we had not previously seen. He arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and demanded to know, very crossly, why I hadn't rung up before ten o'clock.

I replied that the spots hadn't developed until twelve noon, to which he replied that *all* calls for a doctor to visit should be made before ten o'clock in the morning.

Somewhat irritated, I responded that this would mean living through the looking-glass—first call the doctor, then develop the symptoms, and, of course, the actual illness comes last of all...

With this promising beginning we went upstairs to Geoffrey's room.

After an inspection the doctor announced, "German measles—there's a lot of it about," and added cheerfully, "You'll probably all get it—nothing to worry about—it's only serious during pregnancy."

I saw Geoffrey's face go white, and my mouth felt dry. I said stiffly, "I am pregnant." The doctor looked at me sharply. "How long?" "About two months."

"Well, you're almost certain to get it," he said. "If you do, we

shall have to see about terminating the pregnancy—you don't want to run the risk of having a deformed child."

But I do, I thought desperately. I want the child I'm carrying, and how can you be sure it will be deformed? It would be so dreadful never to know what you have destroyed—it might have *wanted* to live, even if there was something wrong with it—it might be a perfectly normal child—anyway surely it would be better to wait and *see*...

But the fear in Geoffrey's eyes hurt, and I only said, "Well, I haven't got it yet—and anyway," with a sudden gleam of hope—both Geoffrey and Steven *had* German measles when they were babies—can you have it twice?

"No—it must have been measles they had then," he responded infuriatingly. "There isn't a single case of measles in this area just now"—and I had no chance to suggest that there has to be a first case of everything anywhere, because he was by then half out of the back door. I watched him down the field with alternating anger and panic in my heart.

Geoffrey was waiting for me when I got back upstairs, with an agonized face. "Does it mean you'll get it and it will hurt the baby? Why does it? What will they have to do to it?"

"It doesn't mean anything really, darling," I soothed him as best I could. "I shan't get it, for a start—I never do get things—and I won't let them touch the baby if I do. It may be quite all right, they can't know, and anyway, I don't believe you have German measles—it looks much more like ordinary measles to me."

"That would be all right, wouldn't it?" he asked hopefully.

"Well—you would be much more ill, probably," I said, "but it would be all right for the baby."

He shut his eyes and turned his face into the pillow. "I hope it's measles," he said.

I went downstairs quickly, because I didn't want him to see I was crying...

The next day another doctor turned up—the doctor's assistant, a much younger man. He looked at Geoffrey, looked puzzled, and said, "This looks to me like ordinary measles—I've never seen a case of German measles like it."

“That’s what *I* said,” I told him triumphantly. “But yesterday the doctor insisted that it was.”

“Well, there’s a lot of German measles about, certainly,” he said. “That’s why he would think of that at first—but this doesn’t look like it to me—has the boy been out anywhere recently?”

I told him about the museum and the school party.

“Well, that’s probably where he got it,” he said.

“You mean you think it is ordinary measles then?” I asked.

“Well, I think so,” he replied. “But I can’t be sure yet—I’ll come again tomorrow. If the spots have gone by then, it’s German measles—but if they’re still as bad as this, it’s not.”

The next twenty-four hours seemed very long. When I woke the next morning I went in to Geoffrey. He was already awake—trying to look at his chest. Terrified, I looked—the spots were still there, and, if anything, they were worse.

“Well—you’ve still got them,” I said unsteadily. He lay there and smiled. “*Really?*” he said. “I thought I had, but I couldn’t see properly—how soon will the doctor come, so we’re sure?”

The doctor came mid-morning. He took one look.

“Oh, well, it’s measles all right,” he said.

Geoffrey listened to the verdict that he knew meant more suffering for him with shining eyes.

When the doctor had gone he said, “Even if you get it, it can’t hurt the baby now, can it?”

“No, darling, it *can’t*,” I said. And for the second time I had to go downstairs quickly to hide tears.

It seemed only fair that Geoffrey was not very ill with measles. After the first few days he improved steadily and had no complications, and he was allowed up on the seventh day.

Three days after he got up, I felt ill. I stayed in bed, only getting up to deal with essentials, while Victoria and Steven ran the household; but the next day I felt better, and I hadn’t any symptoms of anything that I could see, so I got up. That day Steven had a sore throat.

The next day Steven was in bed.

The day after that, Steven, Victoria, Helen, and I were all in

bed, and Geoffrey telephoned for the doctor. He came and took one look at us. We *all* had measles.

Geoffrey was left to look after the lot of us—and the babies.

The first days were not so bad, because none of us, except the babies, wanted anything to eat. Geoffrey went shopping, washed nappies, got his own meals, brought us glasses of water, administered our medicine after fetching it from the doctor's surgery, and fed the babies after bringing them to me to dress or change. He got up at six and went to bed at ten, and throughout the long day I never once called to him, which it seemed to me I had to do continually about something or other, without getting a cheerful response. The house seemed very quiet and I felt too ill to wonder very much what was happening to everyone else. Geoffrey brought me in periodical reports, mostly that the others were asleep. It was all like a very bad dream.

After a day or two we all got hungry. Geoffrey was no good at cooking except in a rough-and-ready masculine way, and he started worrying. So I put on a dressing-gown and he helped me downstairs and held me up while I prepared a chicken casserole. I got it into the oven and staggered back to bed. Two hours later Geoffrey served it, and I was encouraged by calls of appreciation from Steven. Geoffrey said the girls enjoyed it too, but Victoria ate very little.

That evening Geoffrey had to go to the doctor's surgery to fetch some medicine. He left us all comfortable and I was half asleep. Sounds on the landing woke me and I heard footsteps going down the stairs. I called out and a small voice answered me. It was Victoria going to the bathroom. Of course she shouldn't have done so and I blamed myself for being asleep when I should have stopped her. I called again anxiously, and heard footsteps returning. Then there was a slithering noise and a bump—and nothing more.

I got out of bed and ran downstairs. Victoria lay unconscious on the sitting-room floor.

I was shaking all over, and wasn't sure if I had enough strength to get back up the stairs myself, after using the energy of panic that had brought me down. But there was no one I could call and I couldn't just leave her lying there. Somehow I managed to pick