"PRINCESS" BAB.

BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT.

"I guess she's pretty enough," said Jack. "If she is like Aunt Dalrymple, she is; and papa says she is like Aunt Dalrymple, Bab."

Bab, who sat on a low stool by the fire, with her slender little crutches lying at her feet, did not speak for a minute or two, but looked into the hollow of red coals very seriously. She felt rather dubious about this new visitor who was coming; but, in her conscientious old-fashioned way, she would not have hinted at her fear for the world. She would not for the world say a word to Jack that might prejudice him against their Cousin Regie; but she could not help hoping that Mrs. Dalrymple's daughter was not quite like her mother.

"I hope that she isn't exactly like Aunt Dalrymple, Jack dear," she said, directly, laying quiet emphasis on the word "exactly."

Jack—or "Prince John," as they sometimes called him—went on rolling his ball of string.

"Well, of course she won't be exactly like Aunt Dalrymple, you know. She'll be younger and not so big, but she will be like her for all that. I say, Bab, didn't Aunt Dalrymple have lots of money?"

Bab nodded her small mouse-colored head.

"She is the grandest person I know," she said, after awhile. "Jack, I do wonder if she is a good woman."

"She's good enough," said Jack. "She's as good as most people. What made you ask?"

"I was wondering," Bab answered, staidly. "But how good is 'good enough,' Jack?"

"There you are again," Jack cried, "asking questions! You are always asking questions that nobody can answer. How's a fellow to know how good it is? I never saw such a girl. It's as bad as mental arithmetic."

Bab's affectionate eyes were raised deprecatingly. She did not mean to ask queer questions, and somehow her questions never sounded queer to herself; and yet they so often puzzled people, particularly papa and Jack.

"I didn't know I was saying anything odd," she said, apologetically.

"But you were," said Jack: "and you always are. You have such old-fashioned notions, Bab. Papa says you have, and so did Aunt Dalrymple, when she was here."

Bab made him no reply. She never quarreled with Jack—she loved him too well for that. And then, was he not her charge, notwithstanding his greater age? Her queer old-fashioned ways had made a little woman of her, at least: and that perhaps was why, when her mother had died, two years before, she had left Prince John to her to be taken care of and helped. But she was old-fashioned, there was no denying that. Everybody said so, and Jack only accepted public opinion. It was Bab's great trouble that she was old-fashioned, and not like anybody else. She even looked old-fashioned, with her small pale face and mouse-colored eyes and small light figure.

"Bab is not like anyone else," her father would say, looking up from his books, when she entered a room: "she makes no noise."

And she rarely did; and, though she liked to hear her father say so, she always wished he would not begin with reminding her that she was not like other people. Since her mother's death, the three had lived together as before, and Bab had taken quite as much care of her father and Prince John as if she had been twenty, instead of twelve. She had poured out the tea, and tried to remember everything that her father might have forgotten to tell the housekeeper. She had taken care that no one interfered with his papers, and had always stood by while the chambermaid dusted the study. She had been cheerful and sweet-tempered in her manner, and had always tried to behave to visitors just as she had seen her mother do. And, as for Jack—well, she had waited on him when he was exacting, and had never murmured. She had learned to make tails for his kites and sails for his toy-ships. She had lent him her books, and tried to assist him with his lessons: and, she had loved him with all her heart.

But now somebody else was coming. Mrs. Dalrymple was her mother's sister, and now, after traveling for three years, was obliged to accompany her husband to India; and, as the climate did not agree with Regina, she was to stay at home with her cousins. But Aunt Dalrymple was not at all like Bab's mother. She was a proud handsome woman, and had thought the child more old-fashioned than anyone else did, and had told her so; and, in the end, Bab had learned to be a little afraid of her,

and a little afraid of Regie's proving like her. But there was no use in troubling beforehand!

"It is seven o'clock, Jack," she said, after a moment, glancing at the timepiece; "and she will be here at half-past. Perhaps I had better go and see if tea is ready to be brought in."

Prince John thrust his ball of string into his pocket, thereby making a large lump appear, and then threw himself into an armchair.

"I wish you would, Bab," he said: "I'm awfully hungry."

"Awfully hungry?" Bab began, picking up her crutches. "I wonder if—"

And there she stopped, being fearful of wounding Jack's feeling by wondering whether it was correct to say "awfully hungry." She stopped a great many "wonders" for such womanly little reasons, and so she stopped this one, and fluttered out of the room on her crutches as lightly as a bird.

Perhaps she found some small preparation yet to make; at any rate, she did not return again until the rolling of wheels in the street aroused Jack from a light nap.

The next minute, the door was thrown open and they came in—Bab, her father, and an easy-looking little lady in a blue traveling-dress, who could be no other than Regie Dalrymple, and whom Jack thought the loveliest creature he had ever seen in his life. Her dress was such a pretty bright color, and her eyes matched it so beautifully; her blonde hair was so long and wavy and bright—and, altogether, she was so bright herself that it was no wonder Master Jack was charmed. She was almost like a princess, he thought—like the Princess Roseleaf or the Princess Goldenlocks. What a contrast there was between her and Bab!

He thought of this more than ever when, after they had greeted each other, Bab took Regie upstairs to remove her wrappings: the poor little halting figure showing to such a disadvantage beside the other's lithe straight form and somewhat haughty carriage.

But, by the time the wrappings were removed, Bab had found her fear realized. She had discovered that Regie was very like her mamma indeed. She had Mrs. Dalrymple's coldly-curious half-patronizing manner, and the first words she spoke on entering the bed-room sounded so like her that they made Bab catch her breath shrinkingly.

"You're lame, ain't you?" she said, looking at the little crutch-supported figure.

"I have been lame ever since I was a baby," Bab answered, in her staid way. "I never walked in my life."

Miss Regie stared at her again.

"Didn't you?" she said. "How queer!"

"That was queer," Bab thought, secretly. "It was queer to make such a speech as that. Oh, dear! she is exactly like Mrs. Dalrymple, quite as grand, and quite as"—rude, she was going to add, but she paused even in the thought, for fear that it might not be quite respectful to even think in such a strain about a grown-up lady.

"You haven't got a maid, I suppose," was Regie's next speech. "Mamma said you did everything for yourself. She said"—with a little laugh—"that you were as old as the hills."

Bab's countenance fell. Even this little girl knew that she was not like other people. But she managed to hide her discomfort.

"We have plenty of servants," she said, "but I don't need much waiting on, so I don't call any one of them my maid. I think I would rather do things for myself."

"Would you?" said Regie, with positive amazement. "Dear me! I wouldn't. I never did my own hair in my life, and I should think you would need a maid more than I do, because you are lame."

To the last part of this speech, Bab made no reply.

"If you will sit down," she said, "I dare say I can brush your hair for you, and to-night I will tell the chambermaid to wait upon you."

Regie sat down complacently. She was accustomed to taking people's services as a right, and it did not occur to her that it might be awkward for Bab to prop herself upon her crutches and use her hands. But Bab did it. She was used to doing many things people wondered her lameness did not interfere with, and so she managed to brush out Miss Regie's fair hair and tie it with its blue ribbon very nicely.

Tea was awaiting them when they got back to the parlor, and Jack was awaiting them too. He was getting very hungry, and the muffins and quince-preserves on the table had aroused his appetite. But neither muffins nor preserves interfered with his admiring Regina very much and contrasting her again with Bab, who sat at the head of the table and poured out the tea as usual. He did not think it was at all ungrateful to admire his pretty cousin's fair supercilious face so much more than he did Bab's quiet ways and sweet patience. He did not often think the part was, and he was so accustomed to Bab's self-sacrifice that he forgot that it was self-sacrifice at all.

"Your cousin is so old-fashioned," Regie said to him, after tea was over. "But she is very good-natured. It is a pity she is lame, isn't it? But you are very fond of her, I suppose."

"Yes," answered Jack, "of course I'm fond of her. She is queer and old in her ways, but she's real good to a fellow. I wish she wasn't lame, though. She can't go out with me you see."

Poor little Bab! She found herself very much neglected, that evening. Jack and their visitor chattered incessantly. Regie was inclined to be very talkative, and had really a great deal to talk about. Her three years of travel had rendered her very self-possessed, and she had seen so much in her wanderings that Jack began to regard her as not only the prettiest but also the cleverest girl he had ever seen. Bab had always staid at home, and, though she had read a great deal for a little girl, she was rather apt to be silent on the subject of what she knew. But Regie was not. She told them about everything she had seen, perhaps feeling some triumph in her greater experience. She told them about the Louvre, and the Tuileries, and the great Column Vendome, in Paris; she had been to Venice, and seen the gondolas and palaces; she had been to Norway, and seen the funny little Norwegian children, in their wooden shoes and queer caps; she had been here and there and everywhere, and was quite willing to relate her adventures. So Bab sat in her corner and listened. They did not talk to her very much, she found. Jack had no eyes for anyone but Regie, and Regie cared for nobody but herself.

"It's because I'm so odd and old-womanish," Bab sighed, softly. "It is because I am not like anybody else. I wonder if it would be wicked to wish to be like other people. I am glad Jack likes Regie, though."

And Jack certainly did like Regie.

"She's just the nicest girl I ever saw," he said, when Bab came down again, after having taken her to her room. "She's almost as good as a boy. It was just as interesting as Robinson Crusoe to hear her tell about those queer places. She can always go out with me when you are tired, can't she? She can ride your pony, you know, Bab."

Bab balanced her ring of keys thoughtfully on her finger as she answered him:

"Yes, Jack dear," she said. "She can ride my pony. Feather is very gentle, and—and I'm glad you like Regie, Jack."

But, when Jack was gone too and she was alone in the room for a few minutes, she felt almost lonely. They had seemed to forget her so entirely, and she had been all in all to Jack before.

"But I mustn't be foolish," she said to herself, with quaint gravity; "and it would be very foolish to be jealous of Regie, because she is so pretty and bright. The Lord made her so, and the Lord made me, and mamma always said the Lord knew best."

But, though she tried hard to be content and as fond of Regie as possible, her trouble did not end here. She found herself not only almost, but quite, lonely in the days that followed. It seemed that Jack had no thought for anyone but his cousin; and then, too, Regina was by no means a pleasant girl. She cared for nobody but herself, and for nothing but her own pleasure. She was vain and selfish and unamiable, and, but for Bab's patience, would have quarreled a hundred times. She took possession of Feather, and borrowed her little hostess's books, and did not take good care of them; she was not particularly truthful, and she made Jack believe that Bab was not exactly kind to her. Still Jack was as fond of her as ever. She was so pretty and strong, she could ride so fast and walk so far, and, in the end, it almost appeared that he did not care for Bab at all. Once or twice he spoke crossly to her, and he never stopped to think that she was lonely when he and Regie were out enjoying themselves. But Bab bore it all bravely.

"I am trying to be a peacemaker," she would say. "I am bearing things because I want to be as good as mamma was. She never got out of patience with people, and I mustn't."

So things went on for some time; but at last came a day of deliverance, though it came through a great deal of pain, as good often does.

The two ponies were at the door, one day, and Jack stood in the hall, cracking his whip and waiting for his cousin, when the postman came up the steps and handed in a letter directed to Regie herself. It was from one of her mother's friends, who wrote from her country-house, inviting the little girl to pay her a long visit. But, when Regie had read the letter, she looked doubtful.

"I don't think I shall go," she said. "It's quite as nice here, and, besides, I don't believe Flora Leith has a pony. I can make some excuse, can't I, Jack?" So the letter was laid aside, and the ponies cantered away, and the last that Bab saw, as they turned the corner, was the fluttering of the selfish little princess's blue habit.

"It was rather ungrateful in her to speak that way," Bab said to herself. "I wonder if she would care for Jack much, if he was sick or had no pony." She swung herself back into the parlor, and sat down to work on a pair of slippers she was embroidering for her father, and, in the busy attention she was forced to give to the stitches, she almost forgot her trouble.

But she had not been seated more than half an hour when she heard the clatter of horses' feet coming rapidly up the street, and she looked out of the window and saw Jack's pony all alone, without rider and with his bridle hanging loose.

She threw down her work then and caught up her crutches, but she did not go to the door at once; she had presence of mind enough, in her terror, to remember that it was Jack she cared for, and not the pony. She almost flew, in her light way, to the kitchen.

"Jack's pony has come back without him," she said, to the first servant she met. "I am afraid he has been thrown, and there was no one with him but Miss Regie. You had better follow them as fast as you can, Francis."

But, before Francis could reach the street, a crowd of people turned the corner, carrying poor Prince John, with a great red gash on his forehead and one arm hanging loose. Regie was with them, and rode along by the side, trembling and crying aloud.

Bab had no eyes for her. She could only see Jack's white face and closed eyes.

"My room is the nearest," she said, when he was brought in. "Carry him there, please; and, Francis, go for Doctor Craig."

She did not tremble or cry, though she was as pale as Jack himself, and she did not ask any questions. It was Bab who knew where there was cloth for bandages when the doctor came, and it was Bab who made them and stood by the bed, while the big cut was dressed and the poor hanging arm set.

"You are a brave little woman," said the doctor, when all was over. "I am not afraid to leave Master Jack in your care."

And it was Bab who sat in the darkened room all day, and even all night, and who did everything so much better and more gently than anyone else could; and it was Bab who would not leave poor Jack when he was hot with fever, and knew nobody, and talked about Regie, praising her and wishing that Bab was more like her.

But, downstairs, Regie was getting lonely and cross. She did not like to go out alone, and reading tired her; so, at the end of a few days, she came to her little cousin and told her that she had decided to accept Mrs. Leith's invitation.

"But—" hesitated Bab, looking at her very seriously, "I thought that, when Jack was well enough to know us, he would want to see you, and you would be better able to amuse him than I am."

"Oh, no," returned Regie, quickly; "he wouldn't care. He always said he liked you to be with him when he was ill, and—and, besides, it will be so long before he is well, and—and it is so dull."

So, while Jack lay unconscious, Miss Regie carried her pretty face and bright ways to a more agreeable place: and Bab said nothing about it; but, after she was gone, went back to Jack's room, and took better care of him than ever.

Still, it was a long time before he was even well enough to know people; it was nearly three weeks before his mind was quite clear, for the blow upon his head had given the poor boy an attack of brain-fever.

However, one fine morning, at the end of the three weeks, Master Jack opened his eyes to see a familiar little halting figure moving noiselessly about the room, on a pair of slender little black crutches, and he called to this little figure in a weak strange voice.

"Bab!" he said. "I say, Bab, come here!"

Bab turned round-about, hurriedly, looking quite pale with joy and surprise.

"Why, Jack dear," she said, "you know me again, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Jack, with two tears running down his cheeks, for some reason or another; "I know you and I love you, Bab."

"I can't tell how I found out—whether I dreamed it or not," he said, a few days after, when he was strong enough to be allowed to talk; "but I knew somehow that Regie had gone away, and I believe I always knew that it was Bab who was taking care of me, though I never could say anything to her that I wanted to say. It's you who are the princess, Bab, and I never loved you so much in my life before. I never did, Bab." And he moved his curly head to lay it on her hand, and cried again for very gratitude and penitence.

And for the first time Bab cried a little too, but it was only for joy.

"And you won't mind my old-fashioned ways, will you, Jack?" she said. "I can't help it, you know, and I believe I was made so."

"Mind them?" cried Jack. "I love them—they're the nicest ways in the world, Bab, and they ain't old-fashioned, either; they are new-fashioned, and that is why people don't understand them. No one else has ways like them. I shall never have any princess but you, Bab, again."

And he never did; for, even when he was a grown-up gentleman, with little children of his own to take care of, there was no princess who seemed so dear and sweet and true, to any of them, as his wife, the "Princess" Bab.