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Opening extract from

Dindy and the Elephant

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Chapter One

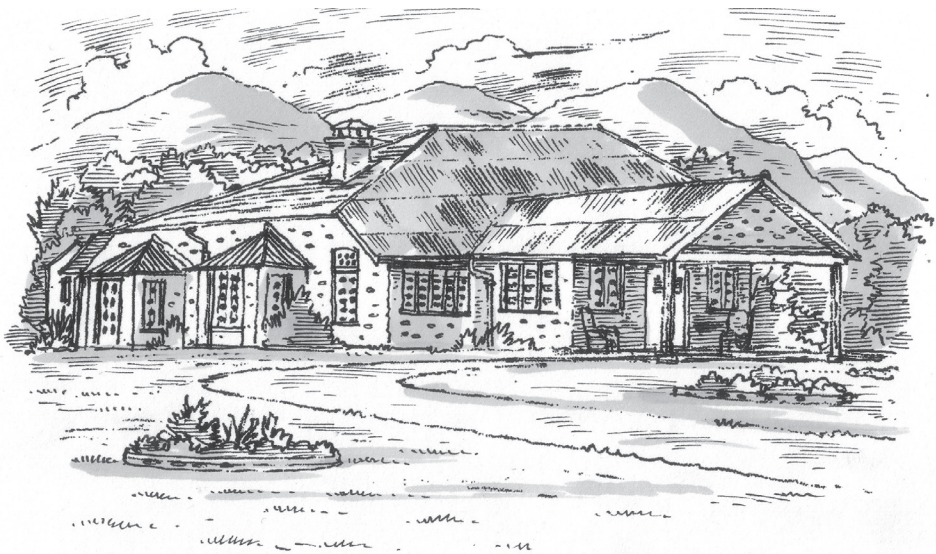
'Let's play Going to England,' said Pog.

Pog's my little brother. His real name's Derek, but everyone calls him Pog. Don't ask me why. (My real name's Margaret, but everyone calls me Dindy.)

'It's silly to play Going to England,' I said. 'It's horrible there. All bombsites and rationing and fog.'

'But I *want* to,' said Pog, pushing out his lower lip in the annoying way he does when he's about to cry.

I might as well explain straight away that we live in India, in the middle of a tea plantation. Our bungalow is on a little hill with tea bushes spreading away from it all around, and jungle on the hilltops above. The nearest town is Munnar, which takes ages to get to, even on Daddy's motorbike, and our nearest English neighbours are the Richardsons, who are on the next plantation miles away. So Pog and I are on our own all the time. There's no school for British children, so Mother does our lessons at home, when she feels like it, which is hardly ever.



Pog and I had played Going to England so many times that I was fed up with it. I was nine after all, and a bit old for Let's Pretend. So I looked around, trying to think of something else to do.

Mother was resting and didn't want to be disturbed, Krishna the cook was in a bad mood as usual and would have chased us out of the kitchen, and Shanti, our ayah, who had looked after us since we were born, had gone to Munnar to get some things for Mother.

Pog was looking at me with big eyes. Once he'd thought of playing Going to England, I knew he'd go on and on about it until I gave in. All he wanted

to do was wobble about pretending to walk up the gangway on to the ship, and go 'ooh' and 'ah' while he watched the bit of water between the ship and dock get wider and wider. After that, he'd spend ages marching up and down being the ship's captain and giving orders to the crew (me).

What Pog didn't know was that I thought about going to England all the time. Not to pretend. For real.

One of the main things about me is that I'm good at keeping still and being quiet. Grown-ups often think I'm not listening when they talk. But I *do*. And I hear things.

A week earlier, I'd overheard a conversation that had really made me worried.

It was just an ordinary evening except that Dr Dysart had come over for dinner. I liked Dr Dysart. He was always kind, even when he had to do awful things like cutting your tonsils out. He talked in a drawly, Scottish kind of voice. Daddy's got a Scottish accent too, because he comes from Glasgow.

I was sitting on the window seat, as out of sight as possible, with my legs curled up under me, pretending to read *The Secret Garden* but really

watching everyone out of the corner of my eye and listening as hard as I could.

'The Indians will have us out of India as soon as they can,' I heard Daddy say. 'They're talking about independence everywhere. Riots, demonstrations – they'll get their way. Soon too.'

Mother's face went red. She held out her glass and shook it to make Sunderam (that's the name of our bearer) fill it up again with gin. I hate it when Mother drinks too much. She goes stupid and giggly, and then she gets cross.

'Oh, Frank,' she said, hitching up the shoulder strap of her pink satin evening gown. 'Don't be silly. If the British leave India, everything will just fall apart. You know what children the natives are.'

I looked at Sunderam's face and saw it close up. I knew what he thought of Mother. I'd often heard him and Krishna talk about her when they forgot to close the kitchen door. Pog and I can understand everything the servants say to each other. Shanti taught us their language (Malayalam) before we could even speak English.

Dr Dysart put the tips of his fingers together and looked up at the ceiling.

'I don't like to contradict you, dear lady,' he said,

'but India will do very well without the British. My own colleague, Kumar, to take one example, is an excellent doctor. Rather impressive, as a matter of fact.'

Mother's face went even redder.

'Impressive? What on earth do you mean? Native doctors are all the same. Nothing but herbs and leaves and mumbo-jumbo.'

Dr Dysart frowned.

'Dr Kumar trained in Edinburgh, and he's better qualified than I am. A fine surgeon too.' He picked up his glass and took a gulp of whisky. 'Which brings me to my own bit of news. I'm pulling out, I'm afraid. Leaving India for good. The old ticker's been playing up for a while and a quiet retirement near my daughter in Stirling is what's in store for me.'

Daddy put his own drink down on the little table beside his chair so sharply that I thought he'd cracked the glass.

'Dysart! My dear fellow! I had no idea you had a heart condition. Not too serious, I hope?'

'But you can't go, Dr Dysart! You can't!' Mother was almost shouting. 'You can't leave us here without you! How will I manage? You're the only person who

understands my headaches, my spasms, my sleepless nights . . .'

I wasn't sure, but I thought that Dr Dysart was trying not to smile.

'There's nothing seriously wrong with you, Daphne, as I've told you many times. A little less gin, a little healthy exercise, some useful activity . . .'

'They'll be replacing you, I suppose?' said Daddy.

'Yes, of course.' Dr Dysart looked up at the ceiling again. 'Dr Kumar is taking over my practice. From next week, actually. He's a remarkable young man. I have every confidence in him.'

'An Indian? I wouldn't let him near me!' Mother almost shrieked. 'Frank, what are we going to do? Frank!'

Daddy shoved his chair back, scraping it noisily on the tiled floor as he stood up.

'We're going to have dinner,' he said shortly. 'Surely it's ready by now?' He turned to look at Sunderam, who was standing by the door, and was so still that he looked as if he'd been stuffed. 'Go and hurry them up in the kitchen, will you?'

Then he noticed me.

'Margaret! Why are you still up? Go and find Shanti and get her to put you to bed at once.'

I swung my legs off the window seat and went slowly towards the door, but as I opened it I heard Dr Dysart say, 'What about you and Daphne, Frank? Are you staying on? It'll be different here once the British leave. Have you thought of Kenya? I hear they're expanding the tea plantations in East Africa now.'

And Daddy said gloomily, 'No, it'll have to be England. It's time the bairns were at school. I'd try sheep farming in New Zealand, but Daphne wants London.'

As I went out, I heard Mother say crossly, 'Of course I do. After this ghastly place, I want a bit of *life*. Especially now we're being *abandoned* by our friends. I've persuaded Frank to start making enquiries at last.'

I shut the door as loudly as I dared.