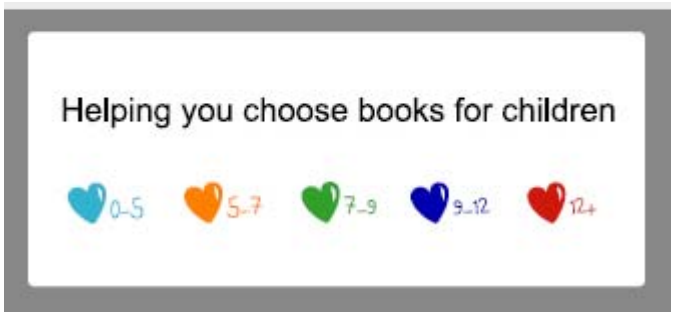
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opening extract from

Seventeen Times as High as the Moon

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Chapter One

This is the story of Polly, who lived in a shoe. You might think that a shoe is a very odd kind of place to live, and wonder why Polly lived there. But the fact is that Polly was one of the many daughters of the old woman who lived in a shoe, so she lived there because her mother did. And her mother lived there because she was a character in a nursery rhyme, and characters in nursery rhymes live where they are

told to live. So the little crooked man, for instance, lived in his little crooked house, and never once thought of complaining to the council, or of building another one.

You might know the nursery rhyme about Polly's mother. It begins like this:

There was an old woman
who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children,
she didn't know what to do.

From this you will see that Polly had many brothers and sisters. So many, in fact, that she had given up trying to count them, because they never stayed still long enough. The old shoe, which was really a kind of ankle boot, was so full of children that it was hard not to step on some of the smaller ones.

There were children in the cupboards, and under the beds. There were babies in the drawers, and under the stairs, and once, Polly had to rescue one from the oven, before it was lit.

Polly's mother had given up trying to feed such a huge family. Every evening, as the nursery rhyme goes on to say:

She gave them all broth
without any bread,
And whipped them all soundly
and sent them to bed.

You might think that this seems a little harsh. And in fact, Polly's mother was not such a bad mother as all that, though she did get quite fierce if any of the children tried to slip back for an extra bowl. This rarely happened, because none of them

actually liked broth. But, as Polly's mother said, if she tried to cook something that all her children liked, she would be there all day, because they all liked different things. And she did have a whip, though it was made of ribbon and string, and was there for show more than anything else. But when Polly's mother lost her temper, as she did every night, and started lashing her whip around, even the smallest children knew that it was time to scarper. They all ran away to their beds, where they lay awake hungry, or fell asleep dreaming about burgers and jelly.

Polly's mother might not have known what to do, but she knew how to moan.

"Oh, dearie, dearie me," she moaned. "Whatever am I going to do? What have I done to deserve all these children? Look – there's another one!" she said, as one of the triplets crawled out from behind the settee. "What are you doing there? And who are you, anyway? Are you sure you're mine?"

"Yes, Mother – it's Geoffrey," Polly said, rescuing the triplet, who was crawling towards the fire.

"Go away!" said his mother, as the little triplet started to eat her slipper.

"I think he's hungry," said Polly.

"There's nothing to eat but broth," snapped her mother. "Take him outside, Polly, and see if he finds his way back in. It's good exercise. I don't know – I'm sure I didn't have this

many children yesterday. They all look the same to me. And they all make more work for their poor old mother." She wiped a tear from the end of her nose onto her sleeve, then sank into her favourite seat by the fire, looking rather like a pile of unwashed laundry.

"Work, work, work," she said, as Polly returned from taking the little triplet outside. "I work my fingers to the bone – and what do I get? More children!"

She began noisily sucking the marrow from one of the bones she had taken from Mother Hubbard's dog, who was getting thinner and thinner, since Mother Hubbard's cupboard was still bare. Once she had sucked all the marrow out, she dropped it into the

cauldron full of broth and sighed. "When will it ever end?"

Polly knew her mother's moaning would end the same way it always did.

"Polly – put the kettle on," she said. "We'll all have tea."

So Polly, who was a good, helpful child, put the kettle on, and swept the hearth, and hung the cauldron of broth over the fire, and then went upstairs to stop a fight between the older triplets, and helped them to get ready for school. When she'd finished, her mother was still sitting in a heap by the fire.

"Day after day it's the same," she moaned. "More work – more children. And what thanks do I get? I'll be dead and buried before anyone thanks me.

Is that kettle ready yet, Polly? And have you fetched the eggs from the geese?"

Polly certainly felt that things went on the same, day after day. The shoe leaked through the holes where the laces went, and none of the younger children could ever find their clothes, or homework. Her older twin sisters could have been helpful, but they were too busy quarrelling about who had stolen whose hairbrush. Her big brothers were busy rolling the babies' prams downhill to see which baby got to the bottom first, and her oldest sister of all had shut herself in her room in a very bad mood indeed. But that was nothing new. Amanda was always in a very bad mood, so no one ever asked her to do anything.

"There's another leak," Polly's mother said, from the depths of her armchair. "Put a pan under it, Polly. And give the fire a poke – I'm cold."

Sometimes Polly wondered if her mother could actually remember anyone else's name. It was always, "Polly – do this!" or "Polly – fetch that!"

She was getting fed up with doing all the work, and with living in a leaky old shoe, where it rained inside even when it wasn't raining outside, because all the water gathered in the flap between the laces and poured in steadily. Polly had put pans and buckets under all the leaks, but if she didn't run round changing them all the time, they overflowed, or else someone knocked them over, so that the carpet was

always wet, and there was a permanent smell of damp shoe.

She was fed up, too, of having to wear everyone else's clothes, and of trying to find clothes in the morning for all her brothers and sisters. Every morning there was a scramble for the best clothes, and the slowest children wore a very odd assortment indeed – odd socks and shoes that didn't match, ripped shirts, and trousers over dresses that didn't fit.

It was hard work trying to keep any toys or books for her very own, and Polly, who was neat and tidy, got very cross when she found her toys scattered and broken. Polly's twin brother had huge pockets in his dungarees, and kept everything in

them, and he never took them off, even at bedtime, so that no one else could wear them. Because of this, and because no one could remember his real name, he was known simply as Pockets.

Polly and Pockets got on well, mostly, though really Polly thought he ought to wash *sometimes*. And Pockets was very good at staying out of the way when there was work to be done. He was always off out somewhere, training Incey Wincey spider to frighten Little Miss Muffet, or racing Jack and Jill up the hill.

But if one thing put Polly in a worse mood than anything else, it was sharing her bed with her younger brothers and sisters. On nights when

the moon shone as bright as day, they would all play outside together, except for Polly, who was too tired from all the work. Then they would wake her up when they came back in, and the youngest ones, who had nightmares, would climb into bed with Polly, and keep her awake. Polly's bed was in the one corner of the room where the rain didn't leak in, so as the night went on, more and more of her brothers and sisters would climb into bed with her, and sadly, very often, wet it for her.

Just once, Polly would have liked a good night's sleep all on her own in her very own bed. And now that she was getting older, she began to feel a little, well, critical, of her mother, and would lie awake asking herself questions such

as, "Why *does* she have so many children?" and, "Why *do* we have to live in a leaky old shoe?" But try as she might, she couldn't come up with any answers, and she would drift off to sleep eventually, trying to comfort herself with the thought that it would all be better tomorrow. But it never was.