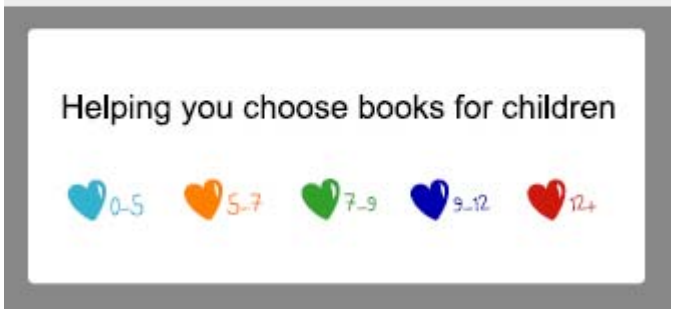
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opening extract from

The Borrowers

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Chapter One



It was Mrs May who first told me about them. No, not me. How could it have been me – a wild, untidy, self-willed little girl who stared with angry eyes and was said to crunch her teeth? Kate, she should have been called. Yes, that was it – Kate. Not that the name matters much either way: she barely comes into the story.

Mrs May lived in two rooms in Kate's parents' house in London; she was, I think,

some kind of relation. Her bedroom was on the first floor, and her sitting-room was a room which, as part of the house, was called 'the breakfast-room'. Now breakfast-rooms are all right in the morning when the sun streams in on the toast and marmalade, but by afternoon they seem to vanish a little and to fill with a strange silvery light, their own twilight; there is a kind of sadness in them then, but as a child it was a sadness Kate liked. She would creep in to Mrs May just before tea-time and Mrs May would teach her to crochet.

Mrs May was old, her joints were stiff, and she was – not strict exactly, but she had that inner certainty which does instead. Kate was never 'wild' with Mrs May, nor untidy, nor self-willed; and Mrs May taught her many things besides crochet: how to wind wool into an egg-shaped ball; how to run-and-fell and plan a darn; how to tidy a drawer and to lay, like a blessing, above the contents, a sheet of rustling

tissue against the dust.

'Why so quiet, child?' asked Mrs May one day, when Kate was sitting hunched and idle upon the hassock. 'What's the matter with you? Have you lost your tongue?'

'No,' said Kate, pulling at her shoe button, 'I've lost the crochet hook . . .' (they were making a bed-quilt – in woollen squares: there were thirty still to do), 'I know where I put it,' she went on hastily; 'I put it on the bottom shelf of the book-case just beside my bed.'

'On the bottom shelf?' repeated Mrs May, her own needle flicking steadily in the firelight. 'Near the floor?'

'Yes,' said Kate, 'but I looked on the floor. Under the rug. Everywhere. The wool was still there though. Just where I'd left it.'

'Oh dear,' exclaimed Mrs May lightly, 'don't say they're in this house too!'

'That what are?' asked Kate.

'The Borrowers,' said Mrs May, and in

the half-light she seemed to smile.

Kate stared a little fearfully. 'Are there such things?' she asked after a moment.

'As what?'

Kate blinked her eyelids. 'As people, other people, living in a house who . . . borrow things?'

Mrs May laid down her work. 'What do you think?' she asked.

'I don't know,' said Kate, looking away and pulling hard at her shoe button. 'There can't be. And yet' – she raised her head – 'and yet sometimes I think there must be.'

'Why do you think there must be?' asked Mrs May.

'Because of all the things that disappear. Safety-pins, for instance. Factories go on making safety-pins, and every day people go on buying safety-pins and yet, somehow, there never is a safety-pin just when you want one. Where are they all? Now, at this minute? Where

do they go to? Take needles,' she went on. 'All the needles my mother ever bought – there must be hundreds – can't just be lying about this house.'

'Not lying about the house, no,' agreed Mrs May.

'And all the other things we keep on buying. Again and again and again. Like pencils and match-boxes and sealing-wax and hair-slides and drawing-pins and thimbles –'

'And hat-pins,' put in Mrs May, 'and blotting-paper.'

'Yes, blotting-paper,' agreed Kate, 'but not hat-pins.'

'That's where you're wrong,' said Mrs May, and she picked up her work again. 'There was a reason for hat-pins.'

Kate stared. 'A reason?' she repeated. 'I mean – what kind of a reason?'

'Well, there were two reasons really. A hat-pin is a very useful weapon and' – Mrs May

laughed suddenly – 'but it all sounds such nonsense and' – she hesitated – 'it was so very long ago!'

'But tell me,' said Kate, 'tell me how you *know* about the hat-pin. Did you ever see one?'

Mrs May threw her a startled glance. 'Well, yes –' she began.

'Not a hat-pin,' exclaimed Kate impatiently, 'a – whatever-you-called-them – a Borrower?'

Mrs May drew a sharp breath. 'No,' she said quickly, 'I never saw one.'

'But someone else saw one,' cried Kate, 'and you know about it. I can see you do!'

'Hush,' said Mrs May, 'no need to shout!' She gazed downwards at the upturned face and then she smiled and her eyes slid away into distance. 'I had a brother –' she began uncertainly.

Kate knelt upon the hassock. 'And he saw them!'

'I don't know,' said Mrs May, shaking her

head, 'I just don't know!' She smoothed out her work upon her knee. 'He was such a tease. He told us so many things – my sister and me – impossible things. He was killed,' she added gently, 'many years ago now on the North-West Frontier. He became colonel of his regiment. He died what they call "a hero's death" . . .'

'Was he your only brother?'

'Yes, and he was our little brother. I think that was why' – she thought for a moment, still smiling to herself – 'yes, why he told us such impossible stories, such strange imaginings. He was jealous, I think, because we were older – and because we could read better. He wanted to impress us; he wanted, perhaps, to shock us. And yet' – she looked into the fire – 'there was something about him – perhaps because we were brought up in India among mystery and magic and legend – something that made us think that he saw things that other people could not see; sometimes we'd know he was teasing,

but at other times – well, we were not so sure . . .' She leaned forward and, in her tidy way, brushed a fan of loose ashes under the grate, then, brush in hand, she stared again at the fire. 'He wasn't a very strong little boy: the first time he came home from India he got rheumatic fever. He missed a whole term at school and was sent away to the country to get over it. To the house of a great-aunt. Later I went there myself. It was a strange old house . . .' She hung up the brush on its brass hook and, dusting her hands on her handkerchief, she picked up her work. 'Better light the lamp,' she said.

'Not yet,' begged Kate, leaning forward. 'Please go on. Please tell me –'

'But I've told you.'

'No you haven't. This old house – wasn't that where he saw – he saw . . .?'

Mrs May laughed. 'Where he saw the Borrowers? Yes, that's what he told us . . . what

he'd have us believe. And, what's more, it seems that he didn't just see them but that he got to know them very well; that he became part of their lives, as it were; in fact, you might almost say that he became a Borrower himself . . .'

'Oh, *do* tell me. Please. Try to remember. Right from the very beginning!'

'But I do remember,' said Mrs May. 'Oddly enough I remember it better than many real things which have happened. Perhaps it was a real thing. I just don't know. You see, on the way back to India my brother and I had to share a cabin – my sister used to sleep with our governess – and, on those very hot nights, often we couldn't sleep; and my brother would talk for hours and hours, going over old ground, repeating conversations, telling me details again and again – wondering how they were and what they were doing and –'

'They? Who were they – exactly?'

'Homily, Pod, and little Arrietty.'

'Pod?'

'Yes, even their names were never quite right. They imagined they had their own names – quite different from human names – but with half an ear you could tell they were borrowed. Even Uncle Hendreary's and Eggletina's. Everything they had was borrowed; they had nothing of their own at all. Nothing. In spite of this, my brother said, they were touchy and conceited, and thought they owned the world.'

'How do you mean?'

'They thought human beings were just invented to do the dirty work – great slaves put there for them to use. At least, that's what they told each other. But my brother said that, underneath, he thought they were frightened. It was because they were frightened, he thought, that they had grown so small. Each generation had become smaller and smaller, and more and more hidden. In the olden days, it seems, and in some parts of England, our ancestors

talked quite openly about the "little people".'

'Yes,' said Kate, 'I know.'

'Nowadays, I suppose,' Mrs May went on slowly, 'if they exist at all, you would only find them in houses which are old and quiet and deep in the country – and where the human beings live to a routine. Routine is their safeguard: it is important for them to know which rooms are to be used and when. They do not stay long where there are careless people, unruly children, or certain household pets.

'This particular old house, of course, was ideal – although as far as some of them were concerned, a trifle cold and empty. Great Aunt Sophy was bedridden, through a hunting accident some twenty years before, and as for other human beings there was only Mrs Driver the cook, Crampfurl the gardener, and, at rare intervals, an odd housemaid or such. My brother, too, when he went there after rheumatic fever, had to spend long hours in

bed, and for those first weeks it seems the Borrowers did not know of his existence.

'He slept in the old night-nursery, beyond the schoolroom. The schoolroom, at that time, was sheeted and shrouded and filled with junk – odd trunks, a broken sewing-machine, a desk, a dressmaker's dummy, a table, some chairs, and a disused pianola – as the children who had used it, Great Aunt Sophy's children, had long since grown up, married, died, or gone away. The night-nursery opened out of the schoolroom and, from his bed, my brother could see the oil-painting of the battle of Waterloo which hung above the schoolroom fireplace and, on the wall, a corner cupboard with glass doors in which was set out, on hooks and shelves, a doll's tea-service – very delicate and old. At night, if the schoolroom door was open, he had a view down the lighted passage which led to the staircase, and it would comfort him to see, each evening at dusk, Mrs Driver

appear at the head of the stairs and cross the passage carrying a tray for Aunt Sophy with Bath Oliver biscuits and the tall, cut-glass decanter of Fine Old Pale Madeira. On her way out Mrs Driver would pause and lower the gas jet in the passage to a dim, blue flame, and then he would watch her as she stumped away downstairs, sinking slowly out of sight between the banisters.

'Under this passage, in the hall below, there was a clock, and through the night he would hear it strike the hours. It was a grandfather clock and very old. Mr Frith of Leighton Buzzard came each month to wind it, as his father had come before him and his great-uncle before that. For eighty years, they said (and to Mr Frith's certain knowledge), it had not stopped and, as far as anyone could tell, for as many years before that. The great thing was – that it must never be moved. It stood against the wainscot, and the stone flags around it had been

washed so often that a little platform, my brother said, rose up inside.

'And, under this clock, below the wainscot, there was a hole . . .'