Opening extract from

Tennis Shoes

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CHAPTER I

HOW THEY GOT THE TENNIS HOUSE

THE Heaths lived at Tulse Hill. Their father was a doctor. He had not meant to be a doctor. He would have liked to have been a soldier; but in an accident he was shot through the leg. Unfortunately his leg was very badly hurt and he walked lame ever afterwards. Obviously soldiers have to have both their legs working properly, so he became a doctor instead. He was not the rich sort of doctor people go to see in Harley Street, paying five guineas a visit; but the sort that looks after large families. Dr. Heath quite understood about large families, having four children of his own.

Mrs. Heath was just the right sort of wife for a doctor. She always remembered what had been the matter with the patients, and asked after them when she met them out, and sent round flowers, and lent books when they were ill, and sometimes, when they were convalescent and had no garden, suggested they would get well quicker if they came and sat in hers. She had been very pretty when Dr. Heath married her, but being busy, and running in and out in all weathers, had made her skin rather rough, and anxious times over money had turned some of her hair grey. It did not matter about these things, because neither Dr. Heath nor the children would have anything about her different; they all thought her perfect as she was.

The four Heath children were called Jim, Susan, Nicolette, and David. Jim and Susan were twins. All

the children had different shades of red hair. They got this from their father and their grandfather who were red-headed. Grandfather was not red any more except in one little patch in his left eyebrow. Jim's hair was really only just red, many people would have called it sandy. Susan was the beauty of the family. Her hair was the lovely shade of red; it was long, and it curled. At parties and things like that it was combed out and worn loose, and people admired it, which she hated because she was shy. Ordinary days she wore it in two plaits. She was rather tall for her age and thin, and had reddish-brown eyes and a pink-and-white complexion. Nicolette, who was always called Nicky because Nicolette really is a mouthful when you are speaking in a hurry, had not nearly as nice hair as Susan's. It was a very orange red and it was straight. She wore it short, cut in a fringe. As soon as she was old enough to notice people at all she wished she looked like Susan. It seemed hardly fair that Susan should have both things, prettiness and curls. Prettiness she could have done without at a pinch, but she did grudge the curls. Curls are so easy to keep tidy. David had the sort of hair which made it absolutely certain that wherever he went in life he would be called 'Ginger.' Sometimes he was called Rogers after the film star. This sounded like a compliment but it was not meant as one, and he never thought it was. From the time he could speak at all well he had a passion for long words. He would spend hours looking them out in a dictionary. Sometimes he used the words in the right places, but not always.

Annie was the cook-general. Once, soon after Dr. and Mrs. Heath were married, a travelling circus left an acrobat behind in a hospital. She was the daughter of a trapeze artist. She had spent almost all her life in pink tights, jumping off into the air from one trapeze, catching her

father by the ankles as she went, turning a somersault, and landing on another trapeze. Then one day, when she was twenty-one, she missed her father's ankles, fell into the net at an awkward angle, and broke her left arm in about eight places. Dr. Heath was one of the people who helped to put it together again. He got fond of Annie while this was happening, and so he was the person chosen to tell her that her arm would always be stiff, she could never be a trapeze artist any more. Annie had stared at him in horror.

'Then what will I do, sir? I couldn't fancy a shooting-gallery at a fair or anything like that. Dad won't want me travelling along of him if I can't work in the act.'

'Well, can you cook?' Dr. Heath asked her.

'Cook!' She put an immense amount of expression into the word. 'If you had lived in a caravan and had to cook for eight on a small stove, you would say you could cook.'

'Well, then,' he suggested, 'we have no cook. How about you coming to us?'

So Annie came to the house on Tulse Hill. She was rather a rough-and-ready cook and never got away from a fondness for suggesting: 'How about a bit of tripe and onions?' People in the circus had liked tripe and onions. On the other hand, people in the circus had raged at her if they thought the food bad; so it was very easy to tell her something not very complimentary without hurting her feelings. This is not a usual feature in cooks and Mrs. Heath found it very endearing.

Annie never quite gave up thinking of herself as a trapeze artist. She generally announced the meals were ready by saying:

'Whoop, whoop, coming over.'

There was one other person in the Heath household and that was Miss Pinn. Lucy Pinn had been trained to

be a governess. While she was still training, but before she had ever had a situation, her mother, who was a widow, got ill and asked her to come home. For eleven years she stayed at home nursing her mother. In the end her mother died, but not before what money there was had been spent trying to get her well. It was not a very cheerful state of affairs for Lucy Pinn. No money, no work, and not a very good chance of getting work because as she had never had a situation she had never had a reference, and people are very tiresome about wanting references. Dr. Heath had looked after Mrs. Pinn and during the eleven years he had come to have a great respect for Lucy. It happened that when Mrs. Pinn died the house at Tulse Hill was desperately in need of someone else to look after it besides Annie, and he saw that here was a lovely way out for everybody. Miss Pinn should live with them, teach the children, and do anything else that turned up.

As a matter of fact, in the end she did no teaching at all. When the twins were eight, Susan was sent to St. Clair's College and Jim to a preparatory school at Eastbourne. Susan was so happy at St. Clair's that Nicky was sent to the kindergarten there before she was seven. David was only four at this time, so he did not need much teaching. The result was that Miss Pinn spent all her time doing 'anything else that turned up.' She did everything about the house that Annie did not do, which really was almost everything except the cooking. Sometimes, when Annie had what she called one of her 'sick 'eadicks,' which she said made her feel as though she was swinging on a trapeze upside-down with her stomach in her mouth, she did the cooking too. She spent all her spare time sewing. She looked very odd herself, for she considered that she was not worth dressing. Her skirts were generally longer behind than in front, and she usually

had a bow meant to be under her chin and actually under one ear. This lack of interest in her own clothes seemed to make her fonder of other people's. She spent hours poring over paper patterns in *Weldon's* and *Harper's Bazaar* or copying designs out of *Vogue*, in order that Susan and Nicolette should look smart. The only hours that she was smart herself were when she was letting in the patients. For this she wore a white coat which covered her up all over and made her look as though she were a nurse. By the time she had been in the house at Tulse Hill a month, she had dropped being Miss Pinn and was just Pinny to everybody, except Annie, who called her 'that Miss Pinn.'

The house at Tulse Hill was long and thin and Victorian. It had a porch and a flight of steps leading to the front gate. Annie said she would rather spend her days being the back end of a horse in the circus ring than clean those steps, but she did clean them every morning just the same. When Dr. and Mrs. Heath had first gone to live in the house Mrs. Heath had been in despair over it.

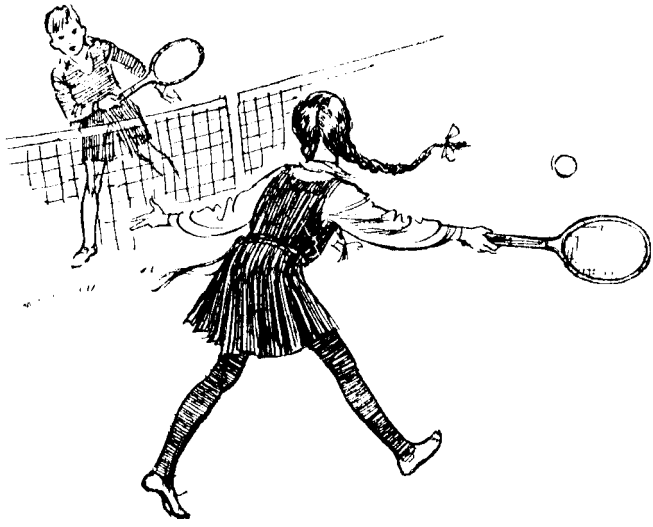
'Oh, Edward!' she said, for that was Dr. Heath's name. 'It's much too big for us. Three floors, and all that garden to keep up.'

Of course the house stopped feeling too big when the four children arrived, but it was always a difficult house to keep in order when there was not a great deal of money to spend. It seemed to need such a lot of carpet and so many curtains. Of course, carpets and curtains being expensive, the same ones went on year after year, except when they were taken up, or taken down, to be cleaned each spring. But they were a constant anxiety, and both Pinny and Mrs. Heath spent a lot of time on their knees darning holes, and a lot of time with their arms above their heads mending frayed borders.

When the twins were quite tiny Mrs. Heath had looked

after them herself and tried to do everything else as well, except the cooking and letting in the patients, which she left to Annie. This had worked fairly well until Nicky arrived. When she was born the twins were two and a bit, and it was almost impossible to keep an eye on them, wash and dress a baby, and do the work of a big house. Of course it ended in disaster. Jim got through the little gate at the top of the stairs and rolled down to the bottom and cut his head open and had to have four stitches put in. Annie got so confused with trying to help as well as do the cooking and the patients, that she went to the front door with a big bit of dough in her hand, which she left stuck on the door-handle. The dough came off on rather a grand patient as she was going out, and she was cross and went to another doctor. Nicky was left lying in her cot so long by herself that she got bored, rolled over, and stuck a safety-pin into her behind, which hurt so she cried until she almost had convulsions. In fact, the house was in a shocking muddle. Dr. Heath said they must have more help, and more help they had. They had Flossie, Maud, Elsie, Sybil, Doris, and a handy-boy called Fred. None of them stayed more than a few weeks, for none of them could get on with Annie. Annie said they were a poor lot of trash, who did not know a trapeze act from a conjuring trick. She said she was not having suchlike in the 'big top,' which was what she called her kitchen. It was no good Mrs. Heath pointing out that a servant did not really need to know how to turn somersaults in the air, and whatever she called it the kitchen was only a kitchen and not a circus tent, for Annie's only answer was: 'It's them or me.' Even if Pinny had been one-half as nice as she was, she could not have failed to have been a success, for when she came to the house it settled down.

The children were rather bright as a family. Susan was clever at lessons. She was always working with girls



at least a year older than herself. Jim was good at swimming. Nicky was not outstanding, she was only ordinarily intelligent, and she was lazy; she was generally about the oldest in her class at school and not at the top of it. David had a really good singing voice. They were all a bit ashamed of this in David, because he had to sing songs like *Cherry Ripe* at concerts in aid of charities and churches. He was always encored and was cocky for days afterwards. The others thought it would be a very good thing when his voice broke. There was one thing they were all good at, and that was tennis.

The children's grandfather, their father's father, had been first-class at tennis. In his day it had been an odd thing to be first-class at. Most people played pat-ball and were not ashamed of it. Their father had been good, too, but of course his leg injury put an end to his playing. It was when Susan and Jim were nine, Nicky nearly seven, and David four, that tennis first became important in their lives. They were staying with their grandfather. Pinny had taken them down to play in the garden. Their father had given the twins rackets for their last birthday, and

they were on the tennis-court playing a match of a sort. While they were in the middle of it their grandfather, father, and mother came out and sat and watched the game. Grandfather saw Jim serve a ball and Susan return it, and he stiffened like an old war-horse who smells gunpowder after many years.

'Edward, there's style about those two. What are you going to do about it?'

Dr. Heath nodded.

'I know. I've been watching them. Might put up a board in the garden at home and give them a bit of practice.'

Grandfather grunted.

'That's a bit like learning to swim a hundred miles from the sea. Couldn't they join a club where they can practise all the year round?'

Mrs. Heath made a face at her husband behind grandfather's back. The face was meant to say: 'Agree with him, but of course we can't afford it.' Grandfather said he was a little short-sighted but he never missed things like faces made behind his back.

'Now then, Mollie, I know what that face means. But where there's a will there's a way.'

The match between Jim and Susan came to an end. Jim had won. Susan had been winning, but her game had gone right off the moment she realized the grown-ups were watching. Grandfather got up and waved his stick at Pinny.

'Hi! Put Nicky and David on the court. I'm coming down to serve a few balls at 'em. He turned round and he winked at his son, as much as to say: 'Trust the old man to see if they're going to be any good.'

Neither Nicky nor David had played much. There was only a court when they were staying with grandfather and the only rackets were the ones that belonged to the

twins, and they were not often allowed to borrow them. They were enchanted to play a game with grandfather. Of course it was not a bit like tennis. Balls going all over the place and not very often over the net, but grandfather seemed pleased, and only stopped serving to them because Pinny said that schoolroom tea was ready.

When the children had gone in grandfather came back to his chair.

'Let 'em have a chance.' He raised his left eyebrow and the sun glinted on his little cluster of red hairs. 'I know it costs money, and things are a bit tight. But it's wonderful how you can save a bit. What you need is a money-box.' He nudged his daughter-in-law. 'That's true, eh, Mollie? Now what I shall do is to drive into Salisbury to-morrow. I saw something at old Burns the goldsmith's the other day. Just the thing. I'll be off and get it.'

He was as good as his word. The next morning there was the most tremendous bustle. Grandfather usually did not come down until about eleven, because of his heart being weak. This morning, however, he was standing in the hall at half-past ten with James, his manservant. James had a plaid rug over his arm. Grandfather never used a motor-car. Hibbert, the coachman, had been coachman to his father. He could never learn to drive a car as he was a very old man. Besides, he would never have tried, for he loved horses. 'Horses are good enough for me until old Hibbert goes,' grandfather always said; and Hibbert said: 'Master he be set on horses and so be I.' So it was the dog-cart that drew up at the front door.

Grandfather looked at the four children.

'How about a drive to Salisbury?' His eyes twinkled when he asked this because he knew they would say 'No.' Driving in the dog-cart meant going with their backs to the horses, and they were all sick that way round.

Instead of going they helped to tuck him in under his plaid rug beside Hibbert and they watched James get up on the back seat, and then they stood on the steps and waved good-bye.

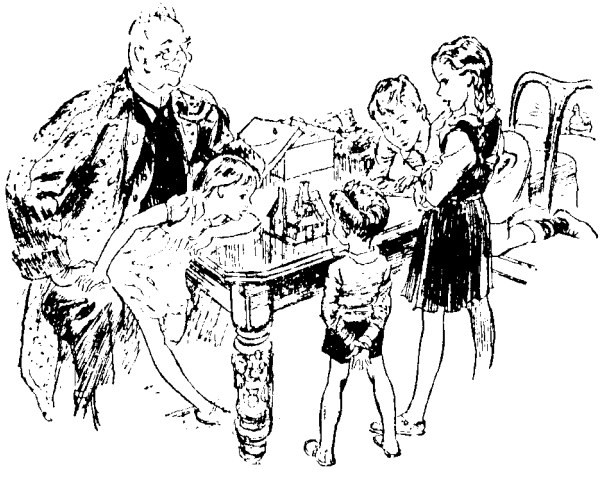
At half-past twelve grandfather came driving back. He climbed out of his seat carefully, then he turned to James.

'Give me that parcel.' He nodded to the children and took a square brown parcel from James. 'You come with me.' His look included Dr. and Mrs. Heath and Pinny. He marched into the dining-room with them all trailing behind. In the dining-room the table was being laid for lunch. Grandfather never cared about things like tables being laid, and he swept back the cloth. The cloth upset the salt-cellar. Susan was shocked to see that grandfather never bothered to throw salt over his left shoulder, so she did a little salt-throwing herself to keep ill-luck from him. Of course she did not believe that salt really brought ill-luck, but all the same it made her feel worried inside to see it upset and no precautions taken.

Grandfather, having made a space for himself on the table, sat down in his own chair which was a Hepplewhite and beautiful to look at. He took the carving-knife and cut the string of the parcel. First there was a layer of brown paper, then there was a cardboard box, and then tissue-paper. Grandfather's fingers were a little stiff with rheumatism. He took a tremendous time undoing the tissue-paper, but because of the stiffness and the rheumatism none of the children liked to say: 'Oh, do hurry up!' When the tissue-paper was undone that was not the end, for the thing itself was wrapped in a piece of cotton-wool. Even grandfather's slow fingers could not fumble much over cotton-wool. He pulled off the last piece and took out what he had bought. It was a little silver house.

They all took in their breath rather loudly. The little house was most beautifully made. It looked a cross

between the wolf-proof house the sensible pig built in Walt Disney's cartoon and something magic, rather like the witch's house in *Hänsel and Gretel.* The downstair rooms had bow-windows. There were eaves in the roof. The chimneys had a twisted look, as if they had been up a long time and had got rather blown about.



Grandfather looked at them all.

'Know what this is?'

The children examined the house more closely. They were not quite sure what grandfather meant. It was obviously a toy house made of silver. If he meant 'what was it for,' that was different. Susan thought it might be meant for a very tiny doll to live in. Jim hoped that perhaps it had works inside and would be a clock or perhaps that kind of musical-box that has a prickly thing that turns round and makes notes. Nicky suggested that perhaps the roof came off and it was full of chocolates. David said:

'Per'venture it's for my farm.'

Grandfather laughed so much at David trying to use

so long a word (for people at that date had not begun to get used to him being fond of long words) that he almost forgot the house. Then he remembered and showed them. He took hold of one of the chimneys and pulled it down. The children leant over his arm to see what it was. The chimney was on a hinge, and when it was pulled back there was a slot underneath. The house was a money-box. The front door had a real lock and grandfather had a tiny key which fitted it. When the front door was open it showed that inside the house was hollow. When you put money in the slot under the chimney it fell straight through to where the hall ought to be. When you wanted to get the money out again you opened the front door and pulled it out on to the front steps, or drive, or whatever you liked to think would be there. Grandfather let them see this happen. He opened his note-case and took out four one-pound notes.

'Here is a pound each, me dears.' He handed them round, and pulled back the chimney. 'Come on, twins, yours first.'

It was fun to see the notes come tumbling through, because although, of course, one part of you knew that the whole house was hollow, and that naturally if you put something in at the top it would drop to the bottom, the other half could not help thinking of the pound note sliding down the bedroom chimney and walking in a very dignified way to the door and along the passage and then, step by step, down the stairs to the hall.

'What's the money for?' Jim asked.

Grandfather pulled David between his knees.

'I was just going to tell you that. Years ago, when I was no bigger than Jim, I was given my first tennis-racket. It was a funny present, for where I lived there was no tennis-court. We had a house in a big London square, and Londoners, especially children, had no tennis-courts

or clubs in those days. I used to look at that racket and wish I could play with it. Of course I took it across to the square gardens and we used it for rounders and tip-and-run, but I always thought those games rather a come-down for a lordly thing like a tennis-racket.'

'Daddy gave Jim and me our rackets for our last birthday,' Susan put in.

'I know, my dear.' Grandfather lifted his left eyebrow at her and the red hairs on it stood out more stiffly even than usual; it was a way they had when he was interested in what he was saying. 'That's just the point. I have an idea that you might be some good at tennis. It's fun playing a game, however you play it; but to be first-class! That really is worth while. But games cost money, especially in London. That's why I bought you this money-box. It's where the savings can go which will keep you in rackets and balls and pay your subscription to a club.'

Jim looked at the front door.

'Will we always have to bring it down here when we want some money out of it?'

Grandfather held out the key to his son.

'No. I'm giving it to your father. Put it on your watch-chain, Edward.'

Nicky frowned at the house, with her head on one side.

'What I don't see,' she said at last, 'is, who except you is going to put the money in?'

Jim lifted the chimney and tried to look inside.

We know there are four pounds in. That's an awful lot of money. It will probably last years and years.'

Grandfather shook his head.

'Wish it would. Four pounds won't even stand the rackets and the balls. Then, later on, there'll be tournaments. If you're going to be any good at all, you must play in a tournament or two.'

'Tournaments!' They all stared at him.

'I say, do you mean proper ones with people watching?' Jim asked.

'That's right,' grandfather nodded. 'There's all sorts of expenses. Four pounds won't last long.'

'It won't, indeed!' Mrs. Heath agreed.

'I suggest'—grandfather fingered the box as though he were fond of it—'that everybody puts something in when they can.' He smiled down at David who was fiddling in his pockets. 'Even if it's only a farthing.'

'That's right.' Pinny felt the whole conversation was most admirable. 'A penny saved to-day is a pound to-morrow.'

'Not always,' Jim objected. 'I've had a penny since last Saturday. I saved it because it wasn't enough to buy anything I wanted, and it isn't a pound yet, it's still just a penny.'

Pinny smiled.

'It's been turned over so often in your pocket, Jim, that I'm afraid it's the rolling stone gathering no moss.'

'But rolling stones do,' Jim argued. 'I saw a stone once——'

'Never mind, son,' Dr. Heath interrupted. 'I think I heard the bell for your dinner.'

They all turned to go, then Susan came back.

'Thank you for the house, grandfather. What shall we call it?'

He looked at it thoughtfully.

'I don't know. What do you think?'

'"Bella Vista" is sweetly pretty,' Pinny suggested.

'It ought to have something to do with tennis or money,' Jim pointed out, trying not to show how stupid he thought Pinny's idea was.

Susan clasped her hands at the back of her neck, which was a way she had when she got an idea.

'Let's call it "The Tennis House."'

The other three came back to the table. They turned the house round to make sure the name would suit it. They moved the chimney and shook it to see that the notes were still inside.

David finished examining it first.

'I think "The Tennis House" is an admirable name.'

So 'The Tennis House' the money-box became.