

This is almost, but not quite, the whole of the story about a remarkable, wise little girl. She was called Mary. Everything I will tell you here began when Mary went walking in her garden on one particular afternoon.

Mary was a little bit taller than the other girls her age and had brownish crinkly hair. She was quite thin, because she didn't always have exactly enough to eat. She liked honey and whistling and the colour blue and finding out.

She lived in a city filled with very many different kinds of people. Its very many different kinds of people made it a very wonderful place, full of interesting songs and stories, foods and clothes and conversations. Nevertheless, the people in charge of the city were not overly fond of people and so some of the apartments

in which the very many different kinds of people lived were often dry where they should have been wet, or wet where they should have been dry, or just cold and dark and supplied with especially listless electricity. In order to enjoy the sky, which was free to them and as large as can be, the people in the wet and dry houses would fly kites from their roofs. Some looked like birds of paradise, some looked like fish and some looked like wonderful serpents.

Other houses – like the ones owned by the people who ran the city – were luxurious and stretched into the sky with great towers much higher than the kites. These apartments contained beautiful pools to swim in, or to keep fish, or perhaps vast tanks containing large reptiles like crocodiles and blue iguanas. And they had larders as big as living-rooms and living-rooms as big as meadows and probably meadows in their basements that were as big as small counties with jewelled rollercoasters and golf courses made of cake.

Mary knew about all this. She knew about all kinds of things and was very clever. Standing in her garden – which was on a rooftop and a bit bigger than a big tablecloth – she could look one way and see the very many sad, tiny houses of the squashed-in people. If she looked the other way, she could see the tall, sparkling buildings full of crocodiles and meadows.

The building where she lived was only a little bit squashed. And its pipes only leaked on Mondays and Wednesdays and at weekends, and when they did her mother would put metal basins under the drips and the metal would ring like small bells – or maybe more exactly like small, wet bells – when the water hit them.

Mary's flat was just the right size for her mother and her father and herself – which was all there was. Sometimes she wanted a little brother or sister to play with, but then she would remember that a little sister might get jealous of her cleverness, or be interested in ballet dancing which would be noisy, or wood-carving which would be messy. Mary was sleeping in a bedroom that was supposed to be a store cupboard and if she had to share it with a sister then it would seem crowded. And maybe her new sister would snore, or have very long and pokey feet.

A little brother might eventually grow up and stop lying in his baby crib wriggling his fingers and might want to run about – and their garden was too small for running about. The people who were in charge of the city and who didn't very much like people hadn't made many parks for children to play in, or for adults to sit down in and eat ice cream and tell each other how wonderful their children were (or how terrible their children were, depending). Mary thought

the people who ran the city probably weren't interested in parks, because they could enjoy their own waterfalls and perhaps swim with their own crocodiles and make treehouses and swings in the thick rooftop forests she could see if she stared very hard all the way from her garden up to the shining towers.

People who came to visit the city would talk about it in the way that adults do in front of children, saying just what came into their heads and imagining that someone as small as Mary would not be able to understand them, or pay attention. They would say, 'This city is very interesting, but there are no flowers to smell here and that makes us tired.' Or they would say, 'Things here are very expensive and we cannot afford to buy tickets so that we can hear people sing, or listen to music and dance. And we are surprised by the price of large sandwiches.' Or else they would say things like, 'This city seems to want birds and not people. It is covered in edges and ledges and nooks and crooks for birds to enjoy and is full of food scraps that are small enough for beaks. It was built by people, but it would prefer birds.' And this is often true of cities. They need people to build them, but they prefer birds. This can make them sad places.

Mary thought that the visitors should come and have dinner with her parents and sniff in the nice

scents of soup – or maybe go and stand in her little garden and smell the roses in it. Or they could talk to the lady in the bread shop, who whistled and hummed while she fed the birds with breadcrumbs and also fed the people with bread because she liked both birds and people. Or they could watch the beautiful dancing of the kites. Or they could listen to the gentleman who sang almost all day on Sundays and who lived across Mary's street and who wore a vest instead of his shirt in summer. Any sensible and observant visitor would then see that they were in a friendly city filled with good things and happiness.

Mary liked the city and her garden. She could walk across the garden in six steps and walk from its top to its bottom in eight steps. On some afternoons she would take very tiny paces and this would allow the garden to seem twice the size and much more beautiful. The grown-ups she explained this to became confused.

They would tell her, 'The garden is the same size, no matter how many paces you squeeze into it.'

She would tell them, 'Not at all. The longer I take to cross the garden, the larger and more extremely wonderful it becomes, in the same way that ice cream becomes much more magnificent when you eat it very slowly with a little spoon.' As I said, the girl was very clever.

‘Then your ice cream will melt,’ said the grown-ups.

And Mary would shake her head and start to skip and hum a tune to herself, because grown-ups expect children to do such things and it pleases them much more than questions they can’t answer. She did not mention that if she stood perfectly still in her garden then it went on for ever, because she could never reach its end. That would have made the grown-ups frown.

This – as it happened – made the grown-ups the exact opposite of the little girl.

Anyway, as I said at the beginning, if you remember, this little girl called Mary was one day walking in her garden. She believed it was hers because she loved it. She believed that loving something should make it a part of you, in the way that your feet are a part of you. (And you would, of course, be very foolish not to love your feet – should you have any – because they can be quite useful.)

On this particular afternoon, which was a wintry Sunday, the girl was taking extra-tiny steps so that her garden stretched for miles, almost into other countries. This made the four rose bushes into four giant rose trees and the three flowerbeds into vast prairies and the tiny pond into an inland sea of impressive dimensions. Sadly, it still had no crocodiles.

The little girl put her hands in her pockets to keep them warm because she preferred this to wearing gloves. This was definitely not because she had lost her gloves, as her mother had suggested earlier. The girl also watched her breath appearing in ascending, steamy clouds, as if her body were somehow burning the dead leaves from autumn, or perhaps washing a large number of sheets and producing steam like a laundry. She was perfectly absorbed by what she was doing and so it took a while for her to notice that one of her ankles was feeling slightly unlike the other.

When she looked down to her left she saw that, snugly fitted around her neatly darned woollen stocking, a golden bangle had appeared. There were two jewels in the bangle that glittered, and from time to time the bangle itself seemed to shimmer, almost as if it were moving.

It was immensely handsome.

She knew this because it told her so. Because she was very sensible, the little girl had not yet acquired the silly habit of talking only to people and would happily address objects and animals that seemed to be in need of conversation or company. 'Good heavens,' she said to the bangle. And then, 'Where did you come from?' And after that, 'Hello.'

‘Hello,’ replied the bangle. ‘I am immensely handsome.’

‘Oh,’ said the girl. ‘Hello, Mr Handsome.’

The bangle rippled round her ankle and glistened and its two jewels gleamed like two pieces of jet or perhaps very dark rubies. ‘No, no. I am not called Immensely Handsome – that is just one of my many qualities. I am handsome, wise and agile. I also have a beautiful speaking voice. And I am extremely fast.’

At this point Mary thought that the bangle was also rather boastful and she interrupted it, even though it did have a very lovely speaking voice.

‘What is your name, then? And you don’t seem that fast to me.’

‘Oh, don’t I . . . ?’ And at once the bangle disappeared.

It moved so quickly that Mary was still listening to its delightful voice, chuckling to itself and left behind, while its body had gone somewhere further away. She had to search about before she saw the bangle hanging from one of the rose bushes’ branches. ‘Maybe you shouldn’t do that – the rose might not like it.’

‘Oh, the rose won’t mind me,’ said the bangle, grinning a tiny grin and swaying slightly. ‘I am the fastest thing you will ever meet,’ the bangle confided,

once again right there on her ankle and not even slightly out of breath.

‘That is impressive,’ admitted Mary.

‘I know.’

‘But what is your name?’

‘Maybe I will tell you in a while. You should always be careful about giving your name to anyone and not do it straight away.’

‘Well, if you won’t tell me your name, what kind of bracelet are you?’ Mary sat down very carefully under one of the rose bushes to look more closely at her talkative new friend.

‘I’m not.’ The bangle unfastened itself and – quickly, but not so quickly that Mary couldn’t watch – shifted its golden shape along until it was wound around her wrist a few times as if it were a bracelet after all.

‘Ah,’ Mary said, ‘I see.’

The bangle slid and wriggled and tickled until she was cupping most of it, neatly coiled in her palm, and the two flecks of colour which she had thought of as jewels were looking at her from a slender, gilded head.

The red jewels blinked like clever, tiny eyes. This was because they *were* clever, tiny eyes.

‘Yes,’ said the snake, ‘I am a snake.’ And he smiled

for an instant as much as someone can with no lips and flickered out an elegant bright red tongue that was forked at the end and licked the air around it. 'You taste of sweets and soap and being good.'

Mary stuck out her own tongue, but couldn't taste anything about the snake.

'I taste of nothing,' the snake told her. 'Aren't you afraid? People usually are afraid of snakes. When they see me they frequently run up and down and wave their arms and scream.'

'Would you like me to do that?'

'Not especially,' purred the snake. 'But shouldn't you be terribly afraid?'

'Why? Are you terribly frightening?'

The snake wagged his tongue and sampled the air again. 'Well, I could be . . . Snakes can be incredibly dangerous. Some of us crush large animals in our muscular convolutions and slowly swallow whole crocodiles, or maybe canoes, or canoes with people in them.'

'But you're only small.'

'I can get bigger.'

Mary thought this might be a lie, but she didn't want to hurt the snake's feelings.

The snake stretched up his little spine and raised his small head so that he could look straight at her.

He swayed his neck back and forth as if he were listening to music and stared into her blue eyes with his dark red eyes and his strange narrow pupils which were blacker than the back of a raven and which seemed to go on for ever if you concentrated on them and really paid attention. 'Some snakes can bite you once and fill you with enough poison to kill twenty men, fifty men, maybe even a hundred men.'

'I'm not a man,' said Mary. 'I'm a little girl.'

The snake blinked. 'You are being difficult. A snake could poison you even faster than a man because the poison would have less far to travel.'

Mary nodded. 'I know. Although I think even a very huge and ferocious snake might not kill a hundred men.'

'Definitely at least twenty.' The snake sounded slightly cross.

'But I have learned all the poisonous snakes and their stripes and their habits in case I travel to faraway lands and have adventures when I am older. Your kind of snake is not in any of my books about snakes. And I have read a lot.'

This was true – Mary had read a great many books about snakes. She had borrowed them from the library and taken notes.