

The Tower Room
A story of the 1920s
By Elsie Locke

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Loma Mason did not remember her father, who was killed in the war at Gallipoli. She lived in a little country township with her mother. The people there were good to her mother and kept her busy with work as a dressmaker. It was a quiet valley with rough roads, where the farmers drove buggies but not a single motorcar.

One May, during the school holidays, Mrs Mason and Loma went to Auckland and stayed with Aunt Ada. Both Aunt Ada and her mother talked to Loma about the dangers of the city. If she wandered through the streets, she might be stopped by cheeky boys or drunks or strange men. A motorcar might come round a corner so fast, it could knock her over before she knew it was there.

These warnings were enough to make Loma feel very shy; but she was shy twice over because of something that the grown-ups didn't even notice.

At home, Loma was friends with everybody. Here in Auckland she tried to talk to the neighbourhood children, and told them about her pet rabbits., and about the bottomless lake where a stone would go down, and down, and down so that nobody knew where it went. And they looked at one another as if she wasn't even there, and called her "that queer backblocks kid".

It was safest to play by herself in the big house with the big garden.

Aunt Ada took in boarders, who were away at work all day. The house had wide verandahs and a steep red roof. Perched on top of it was an eight-sided tower room with a flagpole but no flag.

The stairs to the tower began in a kind of kitchen cupboard with a hook-on latch. If the door was left open, there was daylight as far as the landing. But after that the stairs turned a corner into black darkness, up to the trapdoor in the floor of the tower. Loma found it exciting to feel her way with her hands on the side walls, and to fling open the trapdoor into a blaze of light from the eight big windows.

Up in the tower, she kept a pile of drawing paper and pencils, paints and crayons. She could see in eight directions and was sure to find something happening to make a picture about: a fire engine and the smoke of a real fire, a dog fight, a tennis match, an old man with a white walking stick tapping the kerb, and the children playing hopscotch. Sometimes they looked up at her and pointed, but she could not guess what they were saying.

One day in the garden, Loma climbed into the puka tree with its leaves as big as dinner plates, and made a discovery. High up in the wall of the house was a window. It was lower than the tower, but much too high for any of the ordinary rooms. She stretched herself on the topmost branch to see inside, but behind it everything was dark.

She ran to Aunt Ada.

"I found a window behind the puka tree! What's it for, Auntie?"

"You haven't been climbing that tree!?" gasped Aunt Ada. "You'll fall down and break your neck. Don't you ever do that again, do you hear?"

"All right, I won't," stammered Loma. It was no use telling Auntie that back home she could climb anything, and the puka tree was easy, easy, easy. "But-the window?"

"That window isn't for little girls, either. You stay on the ground."

So-it was a mystery! Very carefully, when nobody was looking, Loma explored the house again and she couldn't find any place that the window belonged to. She would love to tell some of the other children, to ask them help her solve the mystery; but it wasn't any use trying to break into their games.

That night, she had dreams of dark places and she awoke to hear the rain pelting down.

"A good day for the shops," said Mrs Mason cheerfully. "I'll go in the tram and look at the fashions, and stock up with buttons and trimmings and dress patterns. You won't be doing the washing, after all, Ada."

"Oh yes, I will. And I'll have the clothes dry enough to iron by tonight, you'll see."

"How, Aunt Ada?" said Loma.

"Never you mind. How would you like to play the piano in the sitting room? You can have the chess men too," said Aunt Ada.

This was meant to be a special favour. All the same, Loma grew tired of picking out tunes with one finger and making up her own games with the chessmen. Even in the rain, it would be better in the tower room.

She found the cupboard door to the stairs standing open. She didn't give this a thought as she bounded up to the landing-and then she almost fell back again with fright.

There was a big black hole where the wall of the landing ought to be and behind it were white things, flapping and cluck-clucking towards her. Ghosts!

"Ohhh !" screamed Loma.

"Itll ortil eyetll," said a strange voice. "Itll onil arntll aidll."

"Go away!" yelled Loma.

The white things moved apart and between them came Aunt Ada, stepping from side to side with a wobble.

"It's all right," she repeated. "It's only Aunt Ada. I'm hanging the sheets and towels."

"You were talking funny," said Loma, feeling silly for being scared.

"I had pegs in my mouth, to save me bending down to the peg box. I have to watch where I put my feet, you see."

Loma didn't see at all. "What is that place, Auntie?"

"It's the attic, between the ceiling and the roof. The breeze blows through and dries the clothes beautifully. But it hasn't any proper floor and I have to stand on the beams. Ill step on the plaster, I might go through it and crash down into the kitchen."

"Can I come in? I could pass you the pegs."

"No!" said Aunt Ada. "With your short legs you'd be sure to step on the plaster. You keep out."

"Yes, Auntie," said Loma, feeling silly all over-again.

She felt better as soon as she was in the tower room. There was plenty to see even in the rain. Two women hurried by under a single red umbrella, like runners in a three-legged race. Branches of trees were waving in the wind like flags, and a bird landed on a telegraph wire to send the big drops scattering to the ground.

Round the nearby corner came a teenage boy riding a horse. He was holding a box in front of him. He looked awkward, as if he wasn't used to being on horseback, and the rain was in his face. A crumpled newspaper came blowing from a doorway and swished up against the horse's legs. The horse gave a whinny, shied, reared up and turned tail-and the boy with the box slid off its back.

"Look out!" cried Loma, although no one could possibly hear. For a moment, the boy's face was turned towards her and it wore such a look of surprise that it set her laughing, but then he rolled into the middle of the road and lay face down, quite still. Oh! He was hurt, he was unconscious!

Loma went down the stairs at top speed calling, "Auntie, Auntie!" Her brain was ringing with those warnings about motorcars. What if a motorcar came round that corner now! It would run over that boy before it could stop.

But Aunt Ada didn't hear. She had finished hanging the washing and gone to clean up the washhouse. She hadn't thought of Loma going on up to the tower and she'd closed the door to the stairs, and latched it. Loma shouted and banged on the door and nothing happened. Nobody was there to hear her.

It was pitch dark on the stairs when the door was closed. Loma began to sob. If she went back to the tower room, there was nothing she could do but watch, and that wasn't any help to anyone.

All the same, she stumbled up to the landing where the sheets were flapping and cluck-clucking. They looked even more ghostly when everything else was so black; and again they swept towards her on the wind.

The wind!

Why was there a wind? Aunt Ada had said that the breeze would dry the clothes, but where was the wind coming from?

"Oh!" said Loma out loud, as the answer flashed inside her brain. "It must be the window, the high-up, mystery window! And that's why Aunt Ada wouldn't tell me about it, because she doesn't want me in the attic. Well, she can't tell me now that I can't go in."

Loma knew exactly what she had to do and she had to do it quickly.

She would not even try to walk with her short legs astride, one on each beam, as Aunt Ada had done. She could balance perfectly on the fence-rails at home, and these beams were wider and smoother. True, it wasn't so easy with sheets and towels flapping in her face, but when she pushed them aside she could see a square of light ahead of her. Of course! The window!

On she went, balancing, balancing, pushing at the wet washing, until she could stretch her arms forward and touch the window. It was hinged at the top and a bar held it open at the bottom. The leaves of the puka tree were spread out below.

The opening was narrow and Loma couldn't see any way to make it wider. She held tight to the sill and the iron bar, and pushed herself through: she had to squeeze and squeeze. Her dress went up round her neck but nobody could see, with all those puka leaves around her, brushing her like wet flannels. Now she was through, and lowering her feet down, down, down. What if she couldn't reach the branch? Oh but she must, because she had stood on a branch and looked through the window. Touch wood! People said that for luck.

Yes, now there was wood under her bare feet and another branch for her to hold on to; but some of her hair was caught in the window bar; with a painful tug, she pulled it free.

The rest was easy. She scurried down the tree, over the lawn, through the gate and on to the road.

The boy was lying exactly where she had seen him last, with a pool of water gathering beside him and the noise of the rain and the wind above him. And Loma could hear something more: a clattering and a roaring. She was just in time. A motorcar was coming!

Loma leapt into the road in front of the boy, and waved her arms as the car took the corner in a swift curve. A black monster was roaring down upon her; she couldn't move, she couldn't run; she was squealing inside herself when the thing stopped a yard from her and a voice bawled:

"You crazy kid! Is that your idea of a joke?"
"I-am-not---crazy!" yelled Loma.

The noise brought people running from both sides of the street; even the old man with the white stick, in hurry for once, being led by a boy. They all began talking and pushing until a woman put them in order by saying loudly that she had been a nurse and knew what to do. When she touched the injured boy, he stirred a little, and murmured something about a horse.

"Bring him into the house," said the nurse. "You come too, girlie. Were you with him? Are you his sister?"

"No, she's not," said a girl about Loma's age. "She's that kid from the backblocks who sits up in the tower, spying on us."

"I do not!" Loma said angrily. "I sit up there painting pictures, that's what I do."

"You're always looking," said the girl rudely.

"I can't paint if I don't look at what I'm painting," retorted Loma.

A small boy broke in, 'What's it like up there? Do they let you take your friends up?"

"I don't know. I've never asked."

"Well, go and ask now," said another girl.

Somewhere behind her, Loma could hear a man saying that it was a brave thing to stop a motorcar that could have crushed the two of them as flat as a pancake. A voice from a distance was calling, "Jenny! Harry! Come in out of the rain at once!" but the children stayed on, clustered around Loma, talking about the tower room.

Aunt Ada had finished cleaning up the washhouse and was crossing the verandah when Loma came running up, wet to the skin, and followed by a troop of children of all sorts and sizes.

"These are my friends, Aunt Ada !" Loma said.

"Friends! A bedraggled lot, if you ask me," growled Aunt Ada. "And look at you! However did you get in such a state?"

It took a lot of explaining but, at the end, Aunt Ada came smiling. She made sure that all the children had dry clothes and clean feet; and next, she gave each one of them an apple; and then, she allowed them inside.

Up the dark staircase came the children, one following another. The landing echoed with their jokes about the "ghosts" that were flapping and cluck-clucking in the attic. There was more laughter when they had to squeeze back from the trapdoor to make room for the last boy in the line.

The rain was beating on the windows, but who cared! They were having fun, all together, up there with Loma, inside the tower room.