



CHRISTMAS-TREE LAND
AND
A CHRISTMAS POSY

• • MRS • •
MOLESWORTH'S
STORIES
~
for CHILDREN
~

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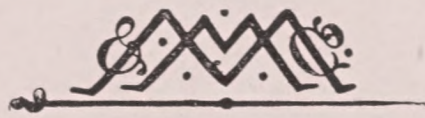




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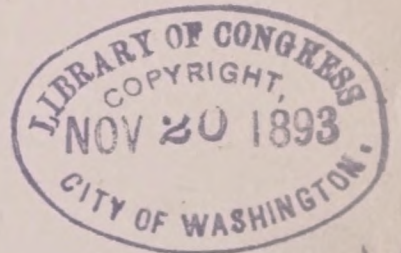
A CHRISTMAS POSY

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF "CARROTS," "GRANDMOTHER DEAR," "TELL ME A STORY"

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER CRANE



New York
MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND LONDON

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THE WHITE CASTLE

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER CRANE

New York
MACMILLAN AND CO.

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CHRISTMAS-TREE LAND.

CHAPTER I.

THE WHITE CASTLE.

“The way was long, long, long, like the journey in a fairy tale.”

MISS FERRIER.

IT was not their home. That was easy to be seen by the eager looks of curiosity and surprise on the two little faces inside the heavy travelling carriage. Yet the faces were grave, and there was a weary look in the eyes, for the journey had been long, and it was not for pleasure that it had been undertaken. The evening was drawing in, and the day had been a somewhat gloomy one, but as the light slowly faded, a soft pink radiance spread itself over the sky. They had been driving for some distance through a flat monotonous country; then, as the ground began to rise, the coachman relaxed his speed, and the children, without knowing it, fell into a half slumber.

It was when the chariot stopped to allow the horses breathing time that they started awake and looked around them. The prospect had entirely changed. They were now on higher ground, for the

road had wound up and up between the hills, which all round encircled an open space — a sort of high up valley, in the centre of which gleamed something white. But this did not at first catch the children's view. It was the hills rising ever higher and higher, clothed from base to summit with fir-trees, innumerable as the stars on a clear frosty night, that struck them with surprise and admiration. The little girl caught her breath with a strange thrill of pleasure, mingled with awe.

“Rollo,” she said, catching her brother's sleeve, “it is a land of Christmas trees!”

Rollo gazed out for a moment or two without speaking. Then he gave a sigh of sympathy.

“Yes, Maia,” he said; “I never could have imagined it. Fancy, only fancy, if they were all lighted up!”

Maia smiled.

“I don't think even the fairies themselves could do that,” she answered.

But here their soft-voiced talking was interrupted. Two attendants, an elderly man and a young, rosy-faced woman, whose eyes, notwithstanding her healthy and hearty appearance, bore traces of tears, had got down from their seat behind the carriage.

“Master Rollo,” — “My little lady,” they said, speaking together; “yonder is the castle. The coachman has just shown it to us. This is the first sight of it.”

“The white walls one sees gleaming through the trees,” said the girl pointing as she spoke. “Marc cannot see it as plainly as I.”

“My eyes are not what they were,” said the old servant apologetically.

“I see it,” — “and so do I,” exclaimed Rollo and Maia. “Shall we soon be there?”

“Still an hour,” replied Marc; “the road winds about, he says.”

“And already we have been so many, many hours,” said Nanni, the maid, in doleful accents.

“Let us hope for a bright fire and a welcome when we arrive,” said old Marc cheerfully. “Provided only Master Rollo and Miss Maia are not too tired, *we* should not complain,” he added reprovingly, in a lower voice, turning to Nanni. But Maia had caught the words.

“Poor Nanni,” she said kindly. “Don’t be so sad. It will be better when we get there, and you can unpack our things and get them arranged again.”

“And then Marc will have to leave us, and who knows how they will treat us in this outlandish country!” said Nanni, beginning to sob again.

But just then the coachman looked round to signify that the horses were rested, and he was about to proceed.

“Get up, girl — quickly — get up,” said Marc, reserving his scolding, no doubt, till they were again in

their places and out of hearing of their little master and mistress.

The coachman touched up his horses; they seemed to know they were nearing home, and set off at a brisk pace, the bells on their harness jingling merrily as they went.

The cheerful sound, the quicker movement, had its effect on the children's spirits.

"It is a strange country," said Maia, throwing herself back among the cushions of the carriage, as if tired of gazing out. "Still, I don't see that we need be so very unhappy here."

"Nor I," said Rollo. "Nanni is foolish. She should not call it an outlandish country. That to *us* it cannot be, for it is the country of our ancestors."

"But so long ago, Rollo," objected Maia.

"That does not matter. We are still of the same blood," said the boy sturdily. "We must love, even without knowing why, the place that was home to them—the hills, the trees—ah, yes, above all, those wonderful forests. They seem to go on for ever and ever, like the stars, Maia."

"Yet I don't think them as *pretty* as forests of different kinds of trees," said Maia thoughtfully. "They are more *strange* than beautiful. Fancy them always, always there, in winter and summer, seeing the sun rise and set, feeling the rain fall, and the snowflakes flutter down on their branches, and yet never moving, never changing. I wouldn't like to be a tree."

“But they *do* change,” said Rollo. “The branches wither and then they sprout again. It must be like getting new clothes, and very interesting to watch, I should think. Fancy how funny it would be if our clothes grew on us like that.”

Maia gave a merry little laugh.

“Yes,” she said; “fancy waking up in the morning and looking to see if our sleeves had got a little bit longer, or if our toes were beginning to be covered! I suppose that’s what the trees talk about.”

“Oh, they must have lots of things to talk about,” said Rollo. “Think of how well they must see the pictures in the clouds, being so high up. And the stars at night. And then all the creatures that live in their branches, and down among their roots, — the birds, and the squirrels, and the field-mice, and the —”

“Yes,” interrupted Maia; “you have rather nice thoughts sometimes, Rollo. After all, I dare say it is not so very stupid to be a tree. I should like the squirrels best of all. I do love squirrels! Can you see the castle any better now, Rollo? It must be at your side.”

“I don’t see it at all just now,” said Rollo, after peering out for some moments. “I’m not sure but what it’s got round to *your* side by now, Maia.”

“No, it hasn’t,” said Maia. “It couldn’t have done. It’s somewhere over there, below that rounded hill-top — we’ll see it again in a minute, I dare say.”

Ah, see, Rollo, there's the moon coming out! I do hope we shall often see the moon here. It would be so pretty — the trees would look nearly black. But what are you staring at so, Rollo?"

Rollo drew in his head again.

"There must be somebody living over there," he said. "I see smoke rising — you can *hardly* see it now, the light is growing so dim, but I'm sure I did see it. There must be a little cottage there somewhere among the trees."

"Oh, how nice!" exclaimed Maia. "We must find it out. I wonder what sort of people live in it — gnomes or wood-spirits, perhaps? There couldn't be any real *people* in such a lonely place."

"Gnomes and wood-spirits don't need cottages, and they don't make fires," replied Rollo.

"How do *you* know?" and Rollo's answer was not quite ready. "I dare say gnomes like to come up above sometimes, for a change; and I dare say the wood-spirits are cold sometimes, and like to warm themselves. Anyway I shall try to find that cottage and see who does live in it. I hope she will let us go walks as often as we wish, Rollo."

"She — who?" said the boy dreamily. "Oh, our lady cousin! Yes, I hope so;" but he sighed as he spoke, and this time the sigh was sad.

Maia nestled closer to her brother.

"I think I was forgetting a little, Rollo," she said. "I can't think how I could forget, even for a moment,

all our troubles. But father wanted us to try to be happy.”

“Yes, I know he did,” said Rollo. “I am very glad if you can feel happier sometimes, Maia. But for me it is different; I am so much older.”

“Only two years,” interrupted Maia.

“Well, well, I *feel* more than that older. And then I have to take care of *you* till father comes home; that makes me feel older too.”

“I wish we could take care of each other,” said Maia; “I wish we were going to live in a little cottage by ourselves instead of in Lady Venelda’s castle. We might have Nanni just to light the fires and cook the dinner, except the creams and pastry and cakes — *those* I would make myself. And she might also clean the rooms and wash the dishes — I cannot bear washing dishes — and all the rest we would do ourselves, Rollo.”

“There would not be much else to do,” said Rollo, smiling.

“Oh yes, there would. We should need a cow, you know, and cocks and hens; those we should take care of ourselves, though Nanni might churn. You have no idea how tiring it is to churn; I tried once at our country-house last year, and my arms ached so. And then there would be the garden; it must be managed so that there should always, all the year round, be strawberries and roses. Wouldn’t that be charming, Rollo?”

“Yes; but it certainly couldn’t be done out of fairyland,” said the boy.

“Never mind. What does it matter? When one is wishing one may wish for anything.”

“Then, for my part, I would rather wish to be at our own home again, and that our father had not had to go away,” said Rollo.

“Ah, yes!” said Maia; and then she grew silent, and the grave expression overspread both children’s faces again.

They had meant to look out to see if the white-walled castle was once more within sight, but it was now almost too dark to see anything, and they remained quietly in their corners. Suddenly they felt the wheels roll on to a paved way; the carriage went more slowly, and in a moment or two they stopped.

“Can we have arrived?” said Maia. But Rollo, looking out, saw that they had only stopped at a postern. An old man, bent and feeble, came out of an ivy-covered lodge, round and high like a lighthouse, looking as if it had once been a turret attached to the main building, and pressed forward as well as he could to open the gate, which swung back rustily on its hinges. The coachman exchanged a few words in the language of the country, which the children understood but slightly, and then the chariot rolled on again, slowly still, for the road ascended, and even had there been light there would have been nothing to see but two high walls, thickly covered

with creeping plants. In a moment or two they stopped again for another gate to be opened — this time more quickly — then the wheels rolled over smoother ground, and the coachman drew up before a doorway, and a gleam of white walls flashed before the children's eyes.

The door was already open. Marc and Nanni got down at the farther side, for a figure stood just inside the entrance, which they at once recognised as that of the lady of the house come forward to welcome her young relatives. Two old serving-men, older than Marc and in well-worn livery, let down the ladder of steps and opened the chariot door. Rollo got out, waited a moment to help his sister as she followed him, and then, leading her by the hand, bowed low before their cousin Venelda.

“Welcome,” she said at once, as she stooped to kiss Maia's forehead, extending her hand to Rollo at the same time. Her manner was formal but not unkindly. “You must be fatigued with your journey,” she said. “Supper is ready in the dining-hall, and then, no doubt, you will be glad to retire for the night.”

“Yes, thank you, cousin,” said both children, and then, as she turned to show them the way, they ventured to look up at their hostess, though they were still dazzled by the sudden light after the darkness outside. Lady Venelda was neither young nor old, nor could one well imagine her ever to have

been, or as ever going to be, different from what she was. She was tall and thin, simply dressed, but with a dignified air as of one accustomed to command. Her hair was gray, and surmounted by a high white cap, a number of keys attached to her girdle jingled as she went; her step was firm and decided, but not graceful, and her voice was rather hard and cold, though not sharp. Her face, as Rollo and Maia saw it better when she turned to see if they were following her, was of a piece with her figure, pale and thin, with nothing very remarkable save a well-cut rather eagle nose and a pair of very bright but not tender blue eyes. Still she was not a person to be afraid of, on the whole, Rollo decided. She might not be very indulgent or sympathising, but there was nothing cruel or cunning in her face and general look.

“You may approach the fire, children,” she said, as if this were a special indulgence; and Rollo and Maia, who had stood as if uncertain what to do, drew near the enormous chimney, where smouldered some glowing wood, enough to send out a genial heat, though it had but a poor appearance in the gigantic grate, which looked deep and wide enough to roast an ox.

Their eyes wandered curiously round the great room or hall in which they found themselves. It, like the long corridor out of which opened most of the rooms of the house, was painted or washed over

entirely in white — the only thing which broke the dead uniformity being an extraordinary number of the antlered heads of deer, fastened high up at regular intervals. The effect was strange and barbaric, but not altogether unpleasing.

“What quantities of deer there must be here!” whispered Maia to her brother. “See, even the chairs are made of their antlers.”

She was right. What Rollo had at first taken for branches of trees rudely twisted into chair backs and feet were, in fact, the horns of several kinds of deer, and he could not help admiring them, though he thought to himself it was sad to picture the number of beautiful creatures that must have been slain to please his ancestors' whimsical taste in furniture; but he said nothing, and Lady Venelda, though she noticed the children's observing eyes, said nothing either. It was not her habit to encourage conversation with young people. She had been brought up in a formal fashion, and devoutly believed it to be the best.

At this moment a bell clanged out loudly in the courtyard. Before it had ceased ringing the door opened and two ladies, both of a certain age, both dressed exactly alike, walked solemnly into the room, followed by two old gentlemen, of whom it could not be said they were exactly alike, inasmuch as one was exceedingly tall and thin, the other exceedingly short and stout. These personages the children came after-

wards to know were the two ladies-in-waiting, or *dames de compagnie*, of Lady Venelda, her chaplain, and her physician. They all approached her, and bowed, and curtsyed; then drew back, as if waiting for her to take her place at the long table before seating themselves. Lady Venelda glanced at the children.

“How comes it?” she began, but then, seeming to remember something, stopped. “To be sure, they have but just arrived,” she said to herself. Then turning to one of the old serving-men: “Conduct the young gentleman to his apartment,” she said, “that he may arrange his attire before joining us at supper. And you, Delphine,” she continued to one of the ancient damsels, who started as if she were on wires, and Lady Venelda had touched the spring, “have the goodness to perform the same office for this young lady, whose waiting-maid will be doubtless in attendance. For this once,” she added in conclusion, this time addressing the children, “the repast shall be delayed for ten minutes; but for this once only. Punctuality is a virtue that cannot be exaggerated.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other; then both followed their respective guides.

“Is my lady cousin angry with me?” Maia ventured timidly to inquire. “We did not know — we could not help it. I suppose the coachman came as fast as he could.”

“Perfectly, perfectly, Mademoiselle,” replied Delphine in a flutter. Poor thing, she had once been French — long, long ago, in the days of her youth, which she had well-nigh forgotten. But she still retained some French expressions and the habit of agreeing with whatever was said to her, which she believed to show the highest breeding. “Of course Mademoiselle could not help it.”

“Then why is my cousin angry?” said Maia, again looking up with her bright brown eyes.

“My lady Venelda angry?” repeated Delphine, rather embarrassed how to reconcile her loyalty to her patroness, to whom she was devotedly attached, with courtesy to Maia. “Ah, no! My lady is never angry. Pardon my plain speaking.”

“Oh, then, I mistook, I suppose,” said Maia considerably relieved. “I suppose some people seem angry when they’re not, till one gets to know them.”

And then Maia, who was of a philosophic turn of mind, made Nanni hurry to take off her wraps and arrange her hair, that she might go down to supper: “for I’m dreadfully hungry,” she added, “and it’s very funny downstairs, Nanni,” she went on. “It’s like something out of a book, hundreds of years ago. I can quite understand now why father told us to be so particular always to say ‘our lady cousin,’ and things like that. Isn’t it funny, Nanni?”

Nanni’s spirits seemed to have improved.

“It is not like home, certainly, Miss Maia,” she

replied. "But I dare say we shall get on pretty well. They seem very kind and friendly downstairs in the kitchen, and there was a very nice supper getting ready. And then, I'm never one to make the worst of things, whatever that crabbed old Marc may say."

Maia was already on her way to go. She only stopped a moment to glance round the room. It was large, but somewhat scantily furnished. The walls white, like the rest of the house, the floor polished like a looking-glass. Maia's curtainless little bed in one corner looked disproportionately small. The child gave a little shiver.

"It feels very cold in this big bare room," she said. "I hope you and Rollo aren't far off."

"I don't know for Master Rollo," Nanni replied. "But this is *my* room," and she opened a door leading into a small chamber, neatly but plainly arranged.

"Oh, that's very nice," said Maia, approvingly. "If Rollo's room is not far off, we shall not feel at all lonely."

Her doubts were soon set at rest, for, as she opened the door, Rollo appeared coming out of a room just across the passage.

"Oh, that's your room," said Maia. "I didn't see where you went to. I was talking to Mademoiselle Delphine. I'm so glad you're so near, Rollo."

"Yes," said Rollo. "These big bare rooms aren't like our rooms at home. I should have felt rather lonely if I'd been quite at the other end of the house."

Then they took each other's hand and went slowly down the uncarpeted white stone staircase.

"Rollo," said Maia, nodding her head significantly as if in the direction of the dining-hall, "do you think we shall like her? Do you think she's going to be kind?"

Rollo hesitated.

"I think she'll be kind. Father said she would. But I don't think she cares about children, and we'll have to be very quiet, and all that."

"The best thing will be going long walks in the woods," said Maia.

"Yes, if she'll let us," replied Rollo doubtfully.

"Well, I'll tell you how to do. We'll show her we're awfully good and sensible, and then she won't be afraid to let us go about by ourselves. Oh, Rollo, those lovely Christmas-tree woods! We can't feel dull if only we may go about in the woods!"

"Well, then, let's try, as you say, to show how very good and sensible we are," said Rollo.

And with this wise resolution the two children went in to supper.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE FIR-WOODS.

. . . . "Gloomy shades, sequestered deep,
. . . . whence one could only see
Stems thronging all around." . . .

KEATS.

SUPPER was a formal and stately affair. The children were placed one on each side of their cousin, and helped to such dishes as she considered suitable, without asking them what they liked. But they were not greedy children, and even at their own home they had been accustomed to much more strictness than is *nowadays* the case, my dear children, for those were still the days when little people were expected to be "seen but not heard," to "speak when they were spoken to," but not otherwise. So Rollo and Maia were not unduly depressed, especially as there was plenty of amusement for their bright eyes in watching the queer, pompous manners of Lady Venelda's attendants, and making notes to discuss together afterwards on the strange and quaint china and silver which covered the table, and even in marvelling at the food itself, which, though all good, was much of it perfectly new to them.

Now and then their hostess addressed a few words

to them about their journey, their father's health when they had left him, and such things, to which Rollo and Maia replied with great propriety. Lady Venelda seemed pleased.

"They have been well brought up, I see. My cousin has not neglected them," she said in a low voice, as if speaking to herself, which was a habit of hers. Rollo and Maia exchanged signals with each other at this, which they had of course overheard, and each understood as well as if the other had said it aloud, that the meaning of the signals was, "That is right. If we go on like this we shall soon get leave to ramble about by ourselves."

After supper Lady Venelda told the children to follow her into what she chose to call her retiring-room. This was a rather pretty room at the extreme end of the long white gallery, but unlike that part of the castle which the children had already seen. The walls were not white, but hung with tapestry, which gave it a much warmer and more comfortable look. One did not even here, however, get rid of the poor deer, for the tapestry all round the room represented a hunting-scene, and it nearly made Maia cry, when she afterwards examined it by daylight, to see the poor chased creatures, with the cruel dogs upon them and the riders behind lashing their horses, and evidently shouting to the hounds to urge them on. It was a curious subject to have chosen for a lady's boudoir, but Lady Venelda's tastes were guided

by but one rule — the most profound respect and veneration for her ancestors, and as they had seen fit thus to decorate the prettiest room in the castle, it would never have occurred to her to alter it.

She seated herself on an antlered couch below one of the windows, which by day commanded a beautiful view of the wonderful woods, but was now hidden by rather worn curtains of a faded blue, the only light in the room coming from a curiously-shaped oil lamp suspended from the ceiling, which illumined but here and there parts of the tapestry, and was far too dim to have made it possible to read or work. But it was not much time that the lady of the castle passed in her bower, and seldom that she found leisure to read, for she was a very busy and practical person, managing her large possessions entirely for herself, and caring but little for the amusements or occupations most ladies take pleasure in. She beckoned to the children to come near her.

“You are tired, I dare say,” she said graciously. “At your age I remember the noble Count, my father, took me once a journey lasting two or three days, and when I arrived at my destination I slept twelve hours without awaking.”

“Oh, but we shall not need to sleep as long as that,” said Rollo and Maia together. “We shall be quite rested by to-morrow morning;” at which the Lady Venelda smiled, evidently pleased, even though they had spoken so quickly as *almost* to interrupt her.

“That is well,” she said. “Then I shall inform you of how I propose to arrange your time, at once, though I had intended giving orders that you should not be awakened till eight o’clock. At what hour do you rise at home?”

“At seven, lady cousin,” said Rollo.

“That is not very early,” she replied. “However, as it is but for a time that you are confided to my care, I cannot regulate everything exactly as I could wish.”

“We would like to get up earlier,” said Maia hastily. “Perhaps not *to-morrow*,” she added.

“I will first tell you my wishes,” said Lady Vendela loftily. “At eight o’clock prayers are read to the household in the chapel. You will already have had some light refreshment. At nine you will have instruction from Mademoiselle Delphine for one hour. At ten the chaplain will take her place for two hours. At twelve you may walk in the grounds round the house for half an hour. At one we dine. At two you shall have another hour from Mademoiselle Delphine. From three to five you may walk with your attendants. Supper is at eight; and during the evening you may prepare your tasks for the next day.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. It was not so very bad; still it sounded rather severe. Rollo took courage.

“If we get up earlier and do our tasks, may we stay out later sometimes?” he inquired.

“Sometimes — if the weather is very fine and you have been very industrious,” their cousin replied.

“And,” added Maia, emboldened by this success, “may we sometimes ramble alone all about the woods? We do so love the woods,” she continued, clasping her hands.

Now, if Lady Venelda herself had a weakness, it was for these same woods. They were to her a sort of shrine dedicated to the memory of her race, for the pine forest of that country had been celebrated as far back as there was any record of its existence. So, though she was rather startled at Maia’s proposal, she answered graciously still :

“They are indeed beautiful, my child. Beautiful and wonderful. There have they stood in their solemn majesty for century after century, seeing generation after generation of our race pass away while yet they remain. They and I alone, my children. I, the last left of a long line!”

Her voice trembled, and one could almost have imagined that a tear glittered in her blue eyes. Maia, and Rollo too, felt very sorry for her.

“Dear cousin,” said the girl, timidly touching her hand, “are we not a little *little*, relations to you? Please don’t say you are all alone. It sounds so very sad. Do let Rollo and me be like your little boy and girl.”

Lady Venelda smiled again, and this time her face really grew soft and gentle.

“Poor children,” she said, in the peculiar low voice she always used when speaking to herself, and apparently forgetting the presence of others, “poor children, they too have suffered. They have no mother!” Then turning to Maia, who was still gently stroking her hand: “I thank you, my child, for your innocent sympathy,” she said, in her usual tone. “I rejoice to have you here. You will cheer my solitude, and at the same time learn no harm, I feel sure, from the associations of this ancient house.”

Maia did not quite understand her, but as the tone sounded kind, she ventured to repeat, as she kissed her cousin’s hand for good-night, “And you will let us ramble about the woods if we are very good, won’t you? And *sometimes* we may have a whole holiday, mayn’t we?”

Lady Venelda smiled.

“All will depend on yourselves, my child,” she said.

But Rollo and Maia went upstairs to bed very well satisfied with the looks of things.

They *meant* to wake very early, and tried to coax Nanni to promise to go out with them in the morning before prayers, but Nanni was cautious, and would make no rash engagements.

“*I* am very tired, Miss Maia,” she said, “and I am sure you must be if you would let yourself think so. I hope you will have a good long sleep.”

She was right. After all, the next morning Rollo and Maia had hardly time to finish their coffee and

rolls before the great bell in the courtyard clanged for prayers, and they had to hurry to the chapel not to be too late. Prayers over, they were taken in hand by Mademoiselle Delphine, and then by the old chaplain, till, by twelve o'clock, when they were sent out for a little fresh air before dinner, they felt more sleepy and tired than the night before.

“I don't care to go to the woods now,” said Maia dolefully. “I am so tired — ever so much more tired than with lessons at home.”

“So am I,” said Rollo. “I don't know what is the matter with me,” and he seated himself disconsolately beside his sister on a bench overlooking the stiff Dutch garden at one side of the castle.

“Come — how now, my children?” said a voice beside them; “why are you not running about, instead of sitting there like two old invalids?”

“We are so tired,” said both together, looking up at the new-comer, who was none other than the short, stout old gentleman who had been introduced to them as Lady Venelda's physician.

“Tired; ah, well, to be sure, you have had a long journey.”

“It is not only that. We weren't so tired this morning, but we've had such a lot of lessons.” “Mademoiselle Delphine's French is very hard,” said Maia; “and Mr. — I forget his name — the chaplain says the Latin words quite differently from what I've learnt before,” added Rollo.

The old doctor looked at them both attentively.

“Come, come, my children, you must not lose heart. What would you say to a long afternoon in the woods and no more lessons to-day, if I were to ask the Lady Venelda to give you a holiday?”

The effect was instantaneous. Both children jumped up and clapped their hands.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. — Doctor,” they said, for they had not heard his name. “Yes, that is just what we would like. It did not seem any good to go to the woods for just an hour or two. And, oh, Mr. Doctor, do ask our cousin to give us one holiday a week — we always have that at home. It is so nice to wake up in the morning and know there are *no* lessons to do! And we should be so good all the other days.”

“Ah, well,” said the old doctor, “we shall see.”

But he nodded his head, and smiled, and looked so like a good-natured old owl, that Rollo and Maia felt very hopeful.

At dinner, where they took their places as usual at each side of their cousin, nothing was said till the close. Then Lady Venelda turned solemnly to the children:

“You have been attentive at your lessons, I am glad to hear,” she said; “but you are doubtless still somewhat tired with your journey. My kind physician thinks some hours of fresh air would do you good. I therefore shall be pleased for you to spend

all the afternoon in the woods — there will be no more lessons to-day.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” repeated the children, and Maia glanced at her cousin with some thought of throwing her arms round her and kissing her, but Lady Venelda looked so very stiff and stately that she felt her courage ebb.

“It is better only to kiss her when we are alone with her,” she said afterwards to Rollo, in which he agreed.

But they forgot everything except high spirits and delight when, half an hour later, they found themselves with Nanni on their way to the longed-for woods.

“Which way shall we go?” said Maia; and indeed it was a question for consideration. For it was not on one side only that there were woods, but on every side, far as the eye could reach, stretched out the wonderful forests. The white castle stood on raised ground, but in the centre of a circular valley, so that to reach the outside world one had first to descend and then rise again; so the entrance to the woods was sloping, for the castle hill was bare of trees, which began only at its base.

“Which way?” repeated Rollo; “I don’t see that it matters. We get into the woods every way.”

“Except over there,” said Maia, pointing to the road by which they had come, gleaming like a white ribbon among the trees, which had been thinned a little in that direction.

“Well, we don’t want to go there,” said Rollo, but before he had time to say more Maia interrupted him.

“Oh, Rollo, let’s go the way that we saw the little cottage. No, I don’t mean that we saw the cottage, but we saw the smoke rising, and we were sure there was a cottage. It was—let me see—” and she tried to put herself in the right direction; “yes, it was on my left hand—it must be on that side,” and she pointed where she meant.

Rollo did not seem to care particularly about the real or imaginary cottage, but as to him all roads were the same in this case, seeing all led to the woods, he made no objection, and a few minutes saw the little party, already in the shade of the forest, slowly making their way upwards. It was milder than the day before; indeed, for early spring it was very mild. The soft afternoon sunshine came peeping through the branches, the ground was beautifully dry, and their steps made a pleasant crackling sound, as their feet broke the innumerable little twigs which, interspersed with moss and the remains of last year’s leaves, made a nice carpet to walk on.

“Let us stand still a moment,” said Maia, “and look about us. “How delicious it is! *What* flowers there will be in a little while! Primroses, I am sure, and violets, and later on periwinkle and cyclamen, I dare say.”

A sigh from Nanni interrupted her.

“What is the matter?” said the children.

“I am so tired, Miss Maia,” said poor Nanni. “I haven’t got over the journey, and I was so afraid of being late this morning that I got up I don’t know how early—they told me in the kitchen that their lady was so angry if any one was late. I think if I were to sit down on this nice mossy ground I should really go to sleep.”

“*Poor* Nanni!” said Maia, laughing. “Well, do sit down, only I think you’d better not go to sleep; you might catch cold.”

“It’s beautifully warm here among the trees, somehow,” said Nanni. Well, then, shall I just stay here and you and Master Rollo play about? You won’t go far?”

“You *would* get a nice scolding if we were lost,” said Rollo mischievously.

“Don’t tease her, Rollo,” said Maia; adding in a lower tone, “If you do, she’ll persist in coming with us, and it will be such fun to run about by ourselves.” Then turning to Nanni, “Don’t be afraid of us, Nanni; we shan’t get lost. You may go to sleep for an hour or two if you like.”

The two children set off together in great glee. Here and there among the trees there were paths, or what looked like paths, some going upwards till quite lost to view, some downwards,—all in the most tempting zigzag fashion.

“I should like to explore all the paths one after the other, wouldn't you?” said Maia.

“I expect they all lead to nowhere in particular,” said Rollo, philosophically.

“But we want to go somewhere in particular,” said Maia; “I want to find the cottage, you know. I am sure it must be *somewhere* about here.”

“Upwards or downwards — which do you think?” said Rollo. “I say, Maia, suppose you go downwards and I upwards, and then we can meet again here and say if we've found the cottage or had any adventures, like the brothers in the fairy tales.”

“No,” said Maia, drawing nearer Rollo as she spoke; “I don't want to go about alone. You know, though the woods are so nice they're *rather* lonely, and there are such queer stories about forests always. There must be queer people living in them, though we don't see them. Gnomes and brownies down below, very likely, and wood-spirits, perhaps. But I think about the gnomes is the most frightening, don't you, Rollo?”

“I don't think any of it's frightening,” he replied. But he was a kind boy, so he did not laugh at Maia, or say any more about separating. “Which way shall we go, then?”

“Oh, we'd better go on upwards. There can't be much forest downwards, for we've come nearly straight up. We'd get out of the wood directly.”

They went on climbing therefore for some way,

but the ascent became quickly slighter, and in a short time they found themselves almost on level ground.

“We can’t have got to the top,” said Rollo. “This must be a sort of ledge on the hillside. However, I begin to sympathise with Nanni—it’s nice to get a rest,” and he threw himself down at full length as he spoke. Maia quickly followed his example.

“We shan’t do much exploring at this rate,” she said.

“No,” Rollo agreed; “but never mind. Isn’t it nice here, Maia? Just like what father told us, isn’t it? The scent of the fir-trees is so delicious too.”

It was charmingly sweet and peaceful, and the feeling of mystery caused by the dark shade of the lofty trees, standing there in countless rows as they had stood for centuries, the silence only broken by the occasional dropping of a twig or the flutter of a leaf, impressed the children in a way they could not have put in words. It was a sort of relief when a slight rustle in the branches overhead caught their attention, and looking up, their quick eyes saw the bright brown, bushy tail of a squirrel whisking out of sight.

Up jumped Maia, clapping her hands.

“A squirrel, Rollo, did you see?”

“Of course I did, but you shouldn’t make such a

noise. We might have seen him again if we'd been quite quiet. I wonder where his home is."

"So do I. *How* I should like to see a squirrel's nest and all the little ones sitting in a row, each with a nut in its two front paws! *How* nice it would be to have the gift of understanding all the animals say to each other, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," said Rollo, but he stopped suddenly. "Maia," he exclaimed, "I believe I smell burning wood!" and he stood still and sniffed the air a little. "I shouldn't wonder if we're near the cottage."

"Oh, do come on, then," said Maia eagerly. "Yes — yes; I smell it too. I hope the cottage isn't on fire, Rollo. Oh, no; see, it must be a bonfire," for, as she spoke, a smouldering heap of leaves and dry branches came in sight some little way along the path, and in another moment, a few yards farther on, a cottage actually appeared.

Such an original-looking cottage! The trees had been cleared for some distance round where it stood, and a space enclosed by a rustic fence of interlaced branches had been planted as a garden. A very pretty little garden too. There were flower-beds in front, already gay with a few early blossoms, and neat rows of vegetables and fruit-bushes at the back. The cottage was built of wood, but looked warm and dry, with deep roof and rather small high-up windows. A little path, bordered primly by a thick growing mossy-like plant, led up to the door, which

was closed. No smoke came out of the chimney, not the slightest sound was to be heard. The children looked at each other.

“What a darling little house!” said Maia in a whisper. “But, Rollo, do you think there’s anybody there? Can it be *enchanted*, perhaps?”

Rollo went on a few steps and stood looking at the mysterious cottage. There was not a sound to be heard, not the slightest sign of life about the place; and yet it was all in such perfect order that it was impossible to think it deserted.

“The people must have gone out, I suppose,” said Rollo.

“I wonder if the door is locked,” said Maia. “I am *so* thirsty, Rollo.”

“Let’s see,” Rollo answered, and together the two children opened the tiny gate and made their way up to the door. Rollo took hold of the latch; it yielded to his touch.

“It’s not locked,” he said, looking back at his sister, and he gently pushed the door a little way open. “Shall I go in?” he said.

Maia came forward, walking on her tiptoes.

“Oh, Rollo,” she whispered, “*suppose* it’s enchanted, and that we never get out again.”

But all the same she crept nearer and nearer to the tempting half-open door.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS COTTAGE.

“ ‘ A pretty cottage ’tis indeed,’
Said Rosalind to Fanny,
‘ But yet it seems a little strange,
I trust there’s naught uncanny.’ ”

THE WOOD-FAIRIES.

ROLLO pushed a little more, and still a little. No sound was heard — no voice demanded what they wanted; they gathered courage, till at last the door stood sufficiently ajar for them to see inside. It was a neat, plain, exceedingly clean, little kitchen which stood revealed to their view. Rollo and Maia, with another glance around them, another instant’s hesitation, stepped in.

The floor was only sanded, the furniture was of plain unvarnished deal, yet there was something indescribably dainty and attractive about the room. There was no fire burning in the hearth, but all was ready laid for lighting it, and on the table, covered with a perfectly clean, though coarse cloth, plates and cups for a meal were set out. It seemed to be for three people. A loaf of brownish bread, and a jug filled with milk, were the only provisions to be seen. Maia stepped forward softly and looked longingly at the milk.

“Do you think it would be wrong to take some, Rollo?” she said. “I *am* so thirsty, and they must be nice people that live here, it looks so nice.” But just then, catching sight of the three chairs drawn round the table, as well as of the three cups and three plates upon it, she drew back with a little scream. “*Rollo*,” she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling, half with fear, half with excitement, “I do believe we’ve got into the cottage of *the three bears*.”

Rollo burst out laughing, though, to tell the truth, he was not quite sure if his sister was in fun or earnest.

“Nonsense, Maia!” he said. “Why, that was hundreds of years ago. You don’t suppose the bears have gone on living ever since, do you? Besides, it wouldn’t do at all. See, there are two smaller chairs and one arm-chair here. Two small cups and one big one. It’s just the wrong way for the bears. It must be two children and one big person that live here.”

Maia seemed somewhat reassured.

“Do you think I may take a drink of milk, then?” she said. “I *am* so thirsty.”

“I should think you might,” said Rollo. “You see we can come back and pay for it another day when they’re at home. If we had any money we might leave it here on the table, to show we’re honest. But we haven’t any.”

“No,” said Maia, as she poured out some milk,

taking care not to spill any on the table-cloth, "not a farthing. Oh, Rollo," she continued, "*such* delicious milk! Won't you have some?"

"No; I'm not thirsty," he replied. "See, Maia, there's another little kitchen out of this — for washing dishes in — a sort of scullery," for he had opened another door as he spoke.

"And, oh, Rollo," said Maia, peering about, "see, there's a little stair. Oh, *do* let's go up."

It seemed a case of "in for a penny, in for a pound." Having made themselves so much at home, the children felt inclined to go a little farther. They had soon climbed the tiny staircase and were rewarded for their labour by finding two little bedrooms, furnished just alike, and though neat and exquisitely clean, as plain and simple as the kitchen.

"Really, Rollo," said Maia, "this house might have been built by the fairies for us two, and see, isn't it odd? the beds are quite small, like ours. I don't know where the big person sleeps whom the arm-chair and the big cup downstairs are for."

"Perhaps there's another room," said Rollo, but after hunting about they found there was nothing more, and they came downstairs again to the kitchen, more puzzled than ever as to whom the queer little house could belong to.

"We'll come back again, the very first day we can," said Maia, "and tell the people about having taken the milk," and then they left the cottage, care-

fully closing the door and gate behind them, and made their way back to where they had left Nanni. It took them longer than they had expected — either they mistook their way, or had wandered farther than they had imagined. But Nanni had suffered no anxiety on their account, for, even before they got up to her, they saw that she was enjoying a peaceful slumber.

“Poor thing!” said Maia. “She must be very tired. I never knew her so sleepy before. Wake up, Nanni, wake up,” she went on, touching the maid gently on the shoulder. Up jumped Nanni, rubbing her eyes, but looking nevertheless very awake and good-humoured.

“Such a beautiful sleep as I’ve had, to be sure,” she exclaimed.

“Then you haven’t been wondering what had become of us?” said Rollo.

“Bless you, no, sir,” replied Nanni. “You haven’t been very long away, surely? I never did have such a beautiful sleep. There must be something in the air of this forest that makes one sleep. And such lovely dreams! I thought I saw a lady all dressed in green — dark green and light green, — for all the world like the fir-trees in spring, and with long light hair. She stooped over me and smiled, as if she was going to say something, but just then I awoke and saw Miss Maia.”

“And what do you think *we’ve* seen?” said Maia. “The dearest little cottage you can fancy. Just like

what Rollo and I would like to live in all by ourselves. And there was nobody there; wasn't it queer, Nanni?"

Nanni was much impressed, but when she had heard all about the children's adventure she grew a little frightened.

"I hope no harm will come of it," she said. "If it were a witch's cottage;" and she shivered.

"Nonsense, Nanni," said Rollo; "witches don't have cottages like that,—all so bright and clean, and delicious new milk to drink."

But Nanni was not so easily consoled. "I hope no harm may come of it," she repeated.

By the lengthening shadows they saw that the afternoon was advancing, and that, if they did not want to be late for dinner, they must make the best of their way home.

"It would not do to be late to-day — the first time they have let us come out by ourselves," said Maia sagely. "If we are back in very good time perhaps Lady Venelda will soon let us come again."

They *were* back in very good time, and went down to the dining-hall, looking very fresh and neat, as their cousin entered it followed by her ladies.

"That is right," said Lady Venelda graciously.

"You look all the better for your walk, my little friends," said the old doctor. "Come, tell us what you think of our forests, now you have seen the inside of them."

“They are lovely,” said both children enthusiastically. “I should like to *live* there,” Maia went on; “and, oh, cousin, we saw the dearest little cottage, so neat and pretty! I wonder who lives there.”

“You went to the village, then,” Lady Venelda replied. “I did not think you would go in that direction.”

“No,” said Rollo, “we did not go near any village. It was a cottage quite alone, over that way,” and he pointed in the direction he meant.

Lady Venelda looked surprised and a little annoyed.

“I know of no cottage by itself. I know of no cottages, save those in my own village. You must have been mistaken.”

“Oh, no, indeed,” said Maia, “we could not be mistaken, for we —”

“Young people should not contradict their elders,” said Lady Venelda freezingly, and poor Maia dared say no more. She was very thankful when the old doctor came to the rescue.

“Perhaps,” he said good-naturedly, “perhaps our young friends sat down in the forest and had a little nap, in which they *dreamt* of this mysterious cottage. You are aware, my lady, that the aromatic odours of our delightful woods are said to have this tendency.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. “That’s true,” the look seemed to say, for the old doctor’s words made them think of Nanni’s beautiful dream. Not that *they* had been asleep, oh, no, that was impossible.

Everything about the cottage had been so real and natural. And besides, as Maia said afterwards to Rollo, "People don't dream *together* of exactly the same things at exactly the same moment, as if they were reading a story-book," with which Rollo of course agreed.

Still, at the time, they were not sorry that their cousin took up the doctor's idea, for she had seemed so very vexed before he suggested it.

"To be sure," she replied graciously; "that explains it. I have often heard of that quality of our wonderful woods. No doubt—tired as they were too—the children fell asleep without knowing it. Just so; but young people must never contradict their elders."

The children dared not say any more, and, indeed, just then it would have been no use.

"She would not have believed anything we said about it," said Maia as they went upstairs to their own rooms. "But it isn't nice not to be allowed to tell anything like that. *Father* always believes us."

"Yes," said Rollo thoughtfully. "I don't quite understand why Lady Venelda should have taken us up so about it. I don't much like going back to the cottage without leave—at least without telling her about it, and yet we *must* go. It would be such a shame not to pay for the milk."

"Yes," said Maia, "and they might think there had been *robbers* there while they were out. Oh, we must go back!"

But their perplexities were not decreased by what Nanni had to say to them.

“Oh, Master Rollo and Miss Maia!” she exclaimed, “we should be *very* thankful that no harm came to you this afternoon. I’ve been speaking to them in the kitchen about where you were, and, oh, but it must be an uncanny place? No one knows who lives there, though ’tis said about ’tis a witch. And the queer thing is, that ’tis but very few that have ever seen the cottage at all. Some have seen it and told the others about it, and when they’ve gone to look, no cottage could they find. Lady Venelda’s own maid is one of those who was determined to find it, but she never could. And my Lady herself was so put out about it that she set off to look for it one day, — for no one has a right to live in the woods just hereabout without her leave, — and she meant to turn the people, whoever they were, about their business. But ’twas all for no use. She sought far and wide; ne’er a cottage could she find, and she wandered about the woods near a whole day for no use. Since then she is that touchy about it that, if any one dares but to mention a cottage hereabouts, save those in the village, it quite upsets her.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other, but something made them feel it was better to say little before Nanni.

“So I do beg you never to speak about the cottage to my Lady,” Nanni wound up.

“We don’t want to speak about it to her,” said Rollo dryly.

“And you won’t want to go there again, I do hope,” the maid persisted. “Whatever would I do if the witch got hold of you and turned you perhaps into blue birds or green frogs, or something dreadful? Whatever *would* your dear papa say to me? Oh, Miss Maia, do tell Master Rollo never to go there again.”

“Don’t be afraid,” said Maia; “we’ll take care of ourselves. I can quite promise you we won’t be turned into frogs or birds. But don’t talk any more about it to-night, Nanni. I’m *so* sleepy, and I don’t want to dream of horrible witches.”

And this was all the satisfaction Nanni could get.

But the next morning Rollo and Maia had a grand consultation together. They did not like the idea of not going to the cottage again, for they felt it would not be right not to explain about the milk, and they had besides a motive, which Nanni’s strange story had no way lessened — that of great curiosity.

“It would be a shame not to pay for the milk,” said Rollo. “I should feel uncomfortable whenever I thought of it.”

“So should I,” said Maia; “even more than you, for it was I that drank it! And I do *so* want to find out who lives there. There *must* be children, I am sure, because of the little beds and chairs and cups, and everything.”

“If they are all for children, I don’t know what there is for big people,” said Rollo. “Perhaps they’re some kind of dwarfs that live there.”

“Oh, what fun!” said Maia, clapping her hands. “Oh, we *must* go back to find out!”

She started, for just as she said the words a voice behind them was heard to say, “Go back; go back where, my children?”

They were walking up and down the terrace on one side of the castle, where Mademoiselle Delphine had sent them for a little fresh air between their lessons, and they were so engrossed by what they were talking of that they had not heard nor seen the old doctor approaching them. It was his voice that made Maia start. Both children looked rather frightened when they saw who it was, and that he had overheard what they were saying.

“Go back where?” he repeated. “What are you talking about?”

The children still hesitated.

“We don’t like to tell you, sir,” said Rollo frankly. “You would say it was only fancy, as you did last night, and we *know* it wasn’t fancy.”

“Oh, about the cottage?” said the old doctor coolly. “You needn’t be afraid to tell me about it, fancy or no fancy. Fancy isn’t a bad thing sometimes.”

“But it *wasn’t* fancy,” said both together; “only we don’t like to talk about it for fear of vexing our

cousin, and we don't like to go back there without leave, and yet we *should* go back."

"Why should you?" asked their old friend.

Then Maia explained about the milk, adding, too, the strange things that Nanni had heard in the servants' hall. The old doctor listened attentively. His face looked quite pleased and good-humoured, and yet they saw he was not at all inclined to laugh at them. When they had finished, to the children's surprise he said nothing, but drew out a letter from his pocket.

"Do you know this writing?" he said.

Rollo and Maia exclaimed eagerly, "Oh, yes; it is our father's. Do you know him? Do you know our father, Mr. Doctor?"

"I have known him," said the old man, quietly drawing the contents out of the cover, "I have known him since he was much smaller than either of you is now. It was by my advice he sent you here for a time, and see what he gave me for you."

He held up as he spoke a small folded paper, which had been inside the other letter. It bore the words: "For Rollo and Maia — to be given them when you think well." "I think well now," he went on, "so read what he says, my children."

They quickly opened the paper. There was not much written inside — just a few words:

"Dear children," they were, "if you are in any difficulty, ask the advice of my dear old friend and

adviser, the doctor, and you may be sure you will do what will please your father."

For a moment or two the children were almost too surprised to speak. It was Rollo who found his voice first.

"Give us your advice now, Mr. Doctor. May we go back to the cottage without saying any more about it to Lady Venelda?"

"Yes," said the old doctor. "You may go anywhere you like in the woods. No harm will come to you. It is no use your saying any more about the cottage to Lady Venelda. She cannot understand it because she cannot find it. If you can find it you will learn no harm there, and your father would be quite pleased for you to go."

"Then do you think we may go soon again?" asked the children eagerly.

"You will always have a holiday once a week," said the doctor. "It would not be good for you to go *too* often. Work cheerfully and well when you are at work, my children. I will see that you have your play."

CHAPTER IV.

FAIRY HOUSEKEEPING.

“Neat, like bees, as sweet and busy,

.
Aired and set to rights the house ;
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat —
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat.”

Goblin Market.

THE next few days passed rather slowly for the children. There was no talk of another expedition to the woods. And they had a good many lessons to do, so that short walks in the grounds close round the castle were all they had time for. They only saw the old doctor at meal-times, but he always smiled at them, as if to assure them he was not forgetting them, and to encourage them to patience.

There was one person who certainly did not regret the children's not returning to the woods, and that person was Nanni. What she had heard from the servants about the mysterious cottage had thoroughly frightened her; she felt sure that if they went there again something dreadful would happen to them, and yet she was so devoted to them that, however terrified, she would never have thought of not following them wherever they chose to go. But, as day after day went by, and no more was said

about it, she began to breathe freely. Her distress was therefore the greater when, one afternoon just six days after the last ramble, Rollo and Maia rushed upstairs after their lessons in the wildest spirits.

“Hurrah for the doctor!” shouted Rollo, and Maia was on the point of joining him, till she remembered that if they made such a noise Lady Venelda would be sending up to know what was the matter.

“We’re to have a whole holiday to-morrow, Nanni,” they explained, “and we’re going to spend it in the woods. You’re to come with us, and carry something in a basket for us to eat.”

“Very well, Miss Maia,” replied Nanni, prudently refraining from mentioning the cottage, in hopes that they had forgotten about it, “that will be very nice, especially if it is a fine day, but if not, of course you would not go.”

“I don’t know that,” said Rollo mischievously; “green frogs don’t mind rain.”

“Nor blue birds,” added Maia. “They could fly away if they did.”

At these fateful words poor Nanni grew deadly pale. “Oh, my children,” she cried; “oh, Master Rollo and Miss Maia, don’t, I beg of you, joke about such things. And oh, I entreat you, don’t go looking for that witch’s cottage. Unless you promise me you won’t, I shall have to go and tell my Lady, however angry she is!”

“No such thing, my good girl,” said a voice at the

door. "You needn't trouble your head about such nonsense. Rollo and Maia will go nowhere where they can get any harm. I know everything about the woods better than you or those silly servants downstairs. Lady Venelda would only tell you not to interfere with what didn't concern you if you went saying anything to her. Go off to the wood with your little master and mistress without misgivings, my good girl, and if the air makes you sleepy don't be afraid to take a nap. No harm will come to you or the children."

Nanni stood still in astonishment—the tears in her eyes and her mouth wide open, staring at the old doctor, for it was he, of course, who had followed the children upstairs and overheard her remonstrances. She looked so comical that Rollo and Maia could scarcely help laughing at her, as at last she found voice to speak.

"Of course if the learned doctor approves I have nothing to say," she said submissively; though she could not help adding, "and I only hope no harm will come of it."

Rollo and Maia flew to the doctor.

"Oh, that's right!" they exclaimed. "We are so glad you have spoken to that stupid Nanni. She believes all the rubbish the servants here speak."

The doctor turned to Nanni again.

"Don't be afraid," he repeated. "All will be right, you will see. But take my advice, do not say

anything to the servants here about the amusements of your little master and mistress. Least said soonest mended. It would annoy Lady Venelda for it to be supposed they were allowed to go where any harm could befall them."

"Very well, sir," replied Nanni, meekly enough, though she still looked rather depressed. She could not help remembering that before he left, old Marc, too, had warned her against too much chattering.

The next morning broke fine and bright. The children started in the greatest spirits, which even Nanni, laden with a basket of provisions for their dinner, could not altogether resist. And before they went, Lady Venelda called them into her boudoir, and kissing them, wished them a happy holiday.

"It's all that nice old doctor," said Maia. "You see, Rollo, she hasn't told us not to go to the cottage — he's put it all right, I'm sure."

"Yes, I expect so," Rollo agreed; and then in a minute or two he added: "Do you know, Maia, though of course I don't believe in witches turning people into green frogs, or any of that nonsense, I do think there's *something* funny about that cottage."

"What sort of something? What do you mean?" asked Maia, looking intensely interested. "Do you mean something to do with fairies?"

"I don't know — I'm not sure. But we'll see," said Rollo.

"If we can find it!" said Maia.

“I’m *sure* we shall find it. It’s just because of that that I think there’s something queer. It must be true that some people can’t find it.”

“Naughty people?” asked Maia apprehensively. “For you know, Rollo, we’re not always *quite* good.”

“No, I don’t mean naughty people. I mean more people who don’t care about fairies and wood-spirits, and things like that—people who call all that nonsense and rubbish.”

“I see,” said Maia; “perhaps you’re right, Rollo. Well, anyway, that won’t stop *us* finding it, for we certainly do care *dreadfully* about fairy things, don’t we, Rollo? But what about Nanni?” she went on, for Nanni was some steps behind, and had not heard what they were saying.

“Oh, as to Nanni,” said Rollo coolly, “I shouldn’t wonder if she took a nap again, as the old doctor said. Anyway, she can’t interfere with us after *his* giving us leave to go wherever we liked.”

They stopped a little to give Nanni time to come up to them, and Rollo offered to help her to carry the basket. It was not heavy, she replied, she could carry it quite well alone, but she still looked rather depressed in spirits, so the children walked beside her, talking merrily of the dinner in the woods they were going to have, so that by degrees Nanni forgot her fears of the mysterious cottage, and thought no more about it.

It was even a more beautiful day than the one,

now nearly a week ago, on which they had first visited the woods. There was more sunshine to-day, and the season was every day farther advancing; the lovely little new green tips were beginning to peep out among the darker green which had already stood the wear and tear of a bitter winter and many a frosty blast.

“How pretty the fir-trees look!” said Maia. “They don’t seem the least dim or gloomy in the sunshine, even though it only gets to them in little bits. See there, Rollo,” she exclaimed, pointing to one which got more than its share of the capricious gilding. “Doesn’t it look like a *real* Christmas-tree?”

“Like a lighted-up one, you mean,” said Rollo. “It would be a very nice Christmas-tree for a family of giants, and if I could climb up so high, I’d be just about the right size for the angel at the top. Let’s spread our table at the foot of this tree — it looks so nice and dry. I’m sure, Nanni,” he went on, “you’ll be glad to get rid of your basket.”

“It’s not heavy, Master Rollo,” said Nanni; “but, all the same, it *is* queer how the minute I get into these woods I begin to be so sleepy — you’d hardly believe it.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other with a smile, but they said nothing.

“We’d better have our dinner anyway,” observed Rollo, kneeling down to unfasten the basket, of which the contents proved very good indeed.

“What fun it is, isn’t it?” said Maia, when they had eaten nearly as much cold chicken and bread, and cakes and fruit as they wanted. “What fun it is to be able to do just as we like, and say just what we like, instead of having to sit straight up in our chairs like two dolls, and only speak when we’re spoken to, and all that — how nice it would be if we could have our dinner in the woods every day!”

“We’d get tired of it after a while, I expect,” said Rollo. “It wouldn’t be nice in cold weather, or if it rained.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Maia. “I’d build a warm little hut and cover it over with moss. We’d live like the squirrels.”

“How do you know how the squirrels live?” said Rollo.

But Maia did not answer him. Her ideas by this time were off on another flight — the thought of a little hut had reminded her of the cottage.

“I want to go farther into the wood,” she said, jumping up. “Come, Rollo, let’s go and explore a little. Nanni, you can stay here and pack up the basket again, can’t you?”

“Then you won’t be long, Miss Maia,” began Nanni, rather dolefully. “You won’t —”

“We won’t get turned into green frogs, if that’s what you’re thinking of, Nanni,” interrupted Rollo. “Do remember what the old doctor said, and don’t worry yourself. We shall come to no harm. And

as you're so sleepy, why shouldn't you take a nap as you did the other day? Perhaps you'll dream of the beautiful lady again."

Nanni looked but half convinced.

"It's not *my* fault, anyway," she said. "I've done all I could. I may as well stay here, for I know you like better to wander about by yourselves. But I'm not going to sleep — you needn't laugh, Master Rollo, I've brought my knitting with me on purpose," and she drew out a half stocking and ball of worsted with great satisfaction.

The children set off. They were not sure in what direction lay the cottage, for they had got confused in their directions, but they had a vague idea that by continuing upwards, for they were still on sloping ground, they would come to the level space where they had seen the smoke of the burning leaves. They were not mistaken, for they had walked but a very few minutes when the ground ceased to ascend, and looking round they felt sure that they recognised the look of the trees near the cottage.

"This way, Rollo, I am sure," said Maia, darting forward. She was right — in another moment they came out of the woods just at the side of the cottage. It looked just the same as before, except that no fire was burning outside, and instead, a thin column of smoke rose gently from the little chimney. The gate of the little garden was also open, as if inviting them to enter.

“They must be at home, whoever they are,” said Rollo. “There is a fire in the kitchen, you see, Maia.”

Maia grew rather pale. Now that they were actually on the spot, she began to feel afraid, though of what she scarcely knew. Nanni’s queer hints came back to her mind, and she caught hold of Rollo’s arm, trembling.

“Oh, Rollo,” she exclaimed, “suppose it’s true? About the witch, I mean — or suppose they have found out about the milk and are very angry?”

“Well, we can’t help it if they are,” replied Rollo sturdily. “We’ve done the best thing we could in coming back to pay for it. You’ve got the little purse, Maia?”

“Oh, yes, it’s safe in my pocket,” she said. “But —”

She stopped, for just at that moment the door of the cottage opened and a figure came forward. It was no “old witch,” no ogre or goblin, but a young girl — a little older than Maia she seemed — who stood there with a sweet, though rather grave expression on her face and in her soft dark eyes, as she said gently, “Welcome — we have been expecting you.”

“Expecting us?” exclaimed Maia, who generally found her voice more quickly than Rollo; “how can you have been expecting us?”

She had stepped forward a step or two before her brother, and now stood looking up in the girl’s face

with wonder in her bright blue eyes, while she tossed back the long fair curls that fell round her head. Boys are not very observant, but Rollo could not help noticing the pretty picture the two made. The peasant maiden with her dark plaits and brown complexion, dressed in her short red skirt, and little loose white bodice fastened round the waist with a leather belt, and Maia with a rather primly-cut frock and frilled tippet of flowered chintz, such as children then often wore, and large flapping shady hat.

“How can you have been expecting us?” Maia repeated.

Rolla came forward in great curiosity to hear the answer.

The girl smiled.

“Ah!” she said, “there are more ways than one of knowing many things that are to come. Waldo heard you had arrived at the white castle, and my godmother had already told us of you. Then we found the milk gone, and —”

Rollo interrupted this time. “We were so vexed,” he said, “not to be able to explain about it. We have wanted to come every day since to —” “To pay for it,” he was going to say, but something in the girl’s face made him hesitate.

“Not to pay for it,” she said quickly, though smiling again, as if she read his words in his face; “don’t say that. We were so glad it was there for



ROLLO COULD NOT HELP NOTICING THE PRETTY PICTURE THE TWO MADE.

you. Besides, it is not ours — Waldo and I would have nothing but for our godmother. But come in — come in — Waldo is only gone to fetch some brushwood, and our godmother, too, will be here soon.”

Too surprised to ask questions — indeed, there seemed so many to ask that they would not have known where to begin — Rollo and Maia followed the girl into the little kitchen. It looked just as neat and dainty as the other day — and brighter too, for a charming little fire was burning in the grate, and a pleasant smell of freshly-roasted coffee was faintly perceived. The table was set out as before, but with the addition of a plate of crisp-looking little cakes or biscuits, and in place of *two* small cups and saucers there were *four*, as well as the larger one the children had seen before. This was too much for Maia to behold in silence. She stopped short, and stared in still greater amazement.

“Why!” she exclaimed. “You don’t mean to say — why, just fancy, I don’t even know your name.”

“Silva,” replied the girl quietly, but with an amused little smile on her face.

“Silva,” continued Maia, “you *don’t* mean to say that you’ve put out those two cups for *us* — that you knew we’d come.”

“Godmother did,” said Silva. “She told us yesterday. So we’ve been very busy to get all our work

done, and have a nice holiday afternoon. Waldo has nothing more to do after he's brought in the wood, and I baked these little cakes this morning and roasted the coffee. Godmother told us to have it ready early, so that there'll be plenty of time before you have to go. Oh, here's Waldo!" she exclaimed joyfully.

Rollo and Maia turned round. There, in the doorway stood a boy, his cap in his hand, a pleasant smile on his bright ruddy face.

"Welcome, my friends," he said, with a kind of gravity despite his smile.

He was such a nice-looking boy — just about as much bigger than Rollo as Sylva was bigger than Maia. You could have told at once that they were brother and sister — there was the same bright and yet serious expression in their eyes; the same healthy, ruddy complexion; the same erect carriage and careless grace in Waldo in his forester's clothes as in Silva with her pretty though simple peasant maiden dress. They looked what they were, true children of the beautiful woods.

"Thank you," said Rollo and Maia, after a moment's hesitation. They did not know what else to say, Silva glanced at them. She seemed to have a curious power of reading in their faces the thoughts that were passing in their minds.

"Don't think it strange," she said quickly, "that Waldo calls you thus 'my friends,' and that we both

“speak to you as if we had known you for long. We know we are not the same as you—in the world, I mean, we could not be as we are here with you, but this is not the world,” and here she smiled again—the strange, bright, and yet somehow rather sad smile which made her face so sweet—“and so we need not think about it. Godmother said it was best only to remember that we are just four children together, and when you see her you will feel that what she says is always best.”

“We don’t need to see her to feel that we like you to call us your friends,” exclaimed Rollo and Maia together. The words came from their hearts, and yet somehow they felt surprised at being able to say them so readily. Rollo held out his hand to Waldo, who shook it heartily, and little Maia going close up to Silva said softly, “Kiss me, please, dear Silva.”

And thus the friendship was begun.

The first effect of this seemed to be the setting loose of Maia’s tongue.

“There are so many things I want to ask you,” she began. “May I? Do you and Waldo live here alone, and have you always lived here? And does your godmother live here, for the other day when we went all over the cottage we only saw two little beds, and two little of everything, except the big chair and the big cup and saucer. And what—”

Here Rollo interrupted her.

“Maia,” he said, “you really shouldn’t talk so fast. Silva could not answer all those questions at once if she wanted; and perhaps she doesn’t want to answer them all. It’s rude to ask so much.”

Maia looked up innocently into Silva’s face.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” she said, “only you see I can’t help wondering.”

“We don’t mind your asking anything you like,” Silva replied. “But I don’t think I *can* tell you all you want to know. You’ll get to see for yourself. Waldo and I have lived here a long time, but not *always!*”

“But your godmother,” went on Maia; “I do so want to know about her. Does *she* live here? Is it she that the people about call a witch?” Maia lowered her voice a little at the last word, and looked up at Rollo apprehensively. Would not he think speaking of witches still ruder than asking questions? But Silva did not seem to mind.

“I dare say they do,” she said quietly. “They don’t know her, you see. I don’t think she would care if they did call her a witch. But now the coffee is ready,” for she had been going on with her preparations meanwhile, “will you sit round the table?”

“We are not very hungry,” said Rollo, “for we had our dinner in the wood. But the coffee smells so good,” and he drew in his chair as he spoke. Maia, however, hesitated.

“Would it not be more polite, perhaps,” she said to Silva, “to wait a little for your godmother? You said she would be coming soon.”

“She doesn’t like us to wait for her,” said Silva. “We always put her place ready, for sometimes she comes and sometimes she doesn’t — we never know. But she says it is best just to go on regularly, and then we need not lose any time.”

“I don’t think I should like that way,” said Maia. “Would you, Rollo? If father was coming to see us, I would like to know it quite settledly ever so long before, and plan all about it.”

“But it isn’t quite the same,” said Silva. “Your father is far away. Our godmother is never very far away — it is just a nice feeling that she may come any time, like the sunshine or the wind.”

“Well, perhaps it is,” said Maia. “I dare say I shall understand when I’ve seen her. How very good this coffee is, Silva, and the little cakes! Did your godmother teach you to make them so nice?”

“Not exactly,” said Silva; “but she made me like doing things well. She made me see how pretty it is to do things rightly — *quite* rightly, just as they should be.”

“And do you always do things that way?” exclaimed Maia, very much impressed. “I don’t; I’m very often dreadfully untidy, and sometimes my exercise-books are full of blots and mistakes. I wish I had had your godmother to teach me, Silva.”

“Well, you’re going to have her now. She teaches without one knowing it. But *I’m* not perfect, nor is Waldo! Indeed we’re not — and if we thought we were it would show we weren’t.”

“Besides,” said Waldo, “all the things we have to do are very simple and easy. We don’t know anything about the world, and all we should have to do and learn if we lived there.”

“Should you like to live there?” asked Maia. Both Waldo and Silva hesitated. Then both, with the grave expression in their eyes that came there sometimes, replied, “I don’t know;” but Waldo in a moment or two added, “If it had to be, it would be right to like it.”

“Yes,” said Silva quietly. But something in their tone made both Rollo and Maia feel puzzled.

“I do believe you’re both half fairies,” exclaimed Maia with a little impatience; “I can’t make you out at all.”

Rollo felt the same, though, being more considerate than his little sister, he did not like to express his feelings so freely. But Waldo and Silva only laughed merrily.

“No, no, indeed we’re not,” they said more than once, but Maia did not seem convinced by any means, and she was going on to maintain that no children who *weren’t* half fairies could live like that by themselves and manage everything so beautifully, when a slight noise at the door and a sudden look of pleasure on Silva’s face made her stop short and look round.

“Here she is,” exclaimed Waldo and Silva together. “Oh, godmother, darling, we are so glad.

And they have come, Rollo and Maia have come, just as you said."

And thus saying they sprang forward. Their godmother stooped and kissed both on the forehead.

"Dear children," she said, and then she turned to the two strangers, who were gazing at her with all their eyes.

"*Can* it be she the silly people about call a witch?" Maia was saying to herself. "It *might* be, and yet I don't know. *Could* any one call her a witch?"

She was old — of that there was no doubt, at least so it seemed at the first glance. Her hair was perfectly white, her face was very pale. But her eyes were the most wonderful thing about her. Maia could not tell what colour they were. They seemed to change with every word she said, with every new look that came over her face. Old as she was they were very bright and beautiful, very soft and sweet too, though not the sort of eyes — Maia said afterwards to Rollo — "that I would like to look at me if I had been naughty." Godmother was not tall; when she first came into the little kitchen she seemed to stoop a little, and did not look much bigger than Silva. And she was all covered over with a dark green cloak, almost the colour of the darkest of the foliage of the fir-trees.

"One would hardly see her if she were walking about the woods," thought Maia, "except that her face and hair are so white, they would gleam out like snow."

CHAPTER V.

THE STORY OF A KING'S DAUGHTER.

“Gentle and sweet is she ;
As the heart of a rose is her heart,
As soft and as fair and as sweet.”

LILIPUT LECTURES.

GODMOTHER turned to the little strangers. The two pairs of blue eyes were still fixed upon her. *Her* eyes looked very kind and gentle, and yet very “seeing,” as she caught their gaze.

“I believe,” thought Maia, “that she can tell all we are thinking ;” and Rollo had something of the same idea, yet neither of them felt the least afraid of her.

“Rollo and Maia, dear children, too,” she said, “we are so pleased to see you.”

“And we are very pleased to be here,” said they ; “but —” and then they hesitated.

“You are puzzled how it is I know your names, and all about you, are you not ?” she said, smiling. “I puzzle most children at first ; but isn’t it rather nice to be puzzled ?”

This was a new idea. Thinking it over, they began to find there was something in it.

“I think it *is*,” both replied, smiling a little.

“If you knew all about everything, and could see through everything, there wouldn't be much interest left. Nothing to find out or to fancy. Oh, what a dull world!”

“Are we to find out or to fancy *you?*” asked Maia. She spoke seriously, but there was a little look of fun in her eyes which was at once reflected in godmother's.

“Whichever you like,” she replied; “but, first of all, you are to kiss me.”

Rollo and Maia both kissed the soft white face. It was *so* soft, and there seemed a sort of fresh, sweet scent about godmother, as if she had been in a room all filled with violets, only it was even nicer. She smiled, and from a little basket on her arm, which they had not noticed, she drew out several tiny bunches of spring flowers, tied with green and white ribbon — so pretty; oh, so very pretty!

“So you scented my flowers,” she said. “No wonder; you have never scented any quite like them before. They come from the other country. Here, dears, catch,” and she tossed them up in the air, all four children jumping and darting about to see who would get most. But at the end, when they counted their treasures, it was quite right, each had got three.

“Oh, how sweet!” cried Maia. “May we take them home with us, godmother?” It seemed to come quite naturally to call her that, and Maia did it without thinking.

“Certainly,” godmother replied; “but remember this, don’t throw them away when they seem withered. They will not be really withered; that is to say, long afterwards, by putting them in the sunshine, they will — some of them, anyway — come out quite fresh again. And even when dried up they will have a delicious scent; indeed, the scent has an added charm about it the older they are — so many think, and I agree with them.”

Rollo and Maia looked at their flowers with a sort of awe.

“Then they are *fairy* flowers?” they half whispered. “You said they came from the other country. Do you come from there too, godmother? Are you a fairy?”

Godmother smiled.

“Fancy me one if you like,” she said. “Fancy me whatever you like best, you will not be far wrong; but fairyland is only one little part of that other country. You will find that out as you get older.”

“Shall we go there some day, then?” exclaimed Maia. “Will you take us, dear godmother? Have Waldo and Silva ever been?”

“Oh, what a lot of questions all at once!” cried godmother. “I can’t answer so many. You must be content to find out some things for yourself, my little girl. The way to the other country for one. Shall you go there some day? Yes, indeed, many and many a time, I hope.”

Maia clapped her hands with delight.

“Oh, how nice!” she said. “And when? May we go to-day? Oh, Silva, do ask godmother to let us go to-day,” she exclaimed, catching hold of Silva in her eagerness. But Silva only smiled, and looked at godmother; and somehow, when they smiled, the two faces—the young one with its bright rich colour, and the old one, white, so white, except for the wonderful, beautiful eyes, that it might have been made of snow—looked strangely alike.

“Silva has learned to be patient,” said godmother, “and so she gets to know more and more of the other country. You must follow her example, little Maia. Don't be discouraged. How do you know that you are not already on the way there? What do you think about it, my boy?” she went on, turning to Rollo, who was standing a little behind them listening, but saying nothing.

Rollo looked up and smiled.

“I'd like to find the way myself,” he replied.

“That's right,” said godmother. And Maia felt more and more puzzled, as it seemed to her that Rollo understood the meaning of godmother's words better than she did.

“Rollo,” she exclaimed, half reproachfully.

Rollo turned to her with some surprise.

“You understand and I don't,” she said, with a little pout on her pretty lips.

“No,” said Rollo, “I don't. But I like to think of understanding some day.”

“That is right,” said godmother again. “But this is dull talk for you, little people. What is it to be to-day, Silva? What is old godmother to do for you?”

Silva glanced out of the window.

“The day will soon be closing into evening,” she said, “and Rollo and Maia cannot stay after sunset. We have not very long, godmother — no time to go anywhere.”

“Ah, I don’t know about that,” godmother replied. “But still — the first visit. What would you like, then, my child?”

“Let us gather round the fire, for it is a little chilly,” said Silva, “and you, dear godmother, will tell us a story.”

Maia’s eyes and Rollo’s, too, brightened at this. Godmother had no need to ask if they would like it. She drew the large chair nearer the fireplace, and the four children clustered round her in silence waiting for her to begin.

“It is too warm with my cloak on,” she said, and she raised her hand to unfasten it at the neck and loosen it a little. It did not entirely fall off; the dark green hood still made a shade round her silvery hair and delicate face, but the cloak dropped away enough for Maia’s sharp eyes to see that the dress underneath was of lovely crimson stuff, neither velvet nor satin, but richer and softer than either. It glimmered in the light of the fire with a sort of

changing brilliance that was very tempting, and it almost seemed to Maia that she caught the sparkle of diamonds and other precious stones.

“May I stroke your pretty dress, godmother?” she said softly. Godmother started; she did not seem to have noticed how much of the crimson was seen, and for a moment Maia felt a little afraid. But then godmother smiled again, and the child felt quite happy, and slipped her hand inside the folds of the cloak till it reached the soft stuff beneath.

“Stroke it the right way,” said godmother.

“Oh, *how* soft!” said Maia in delight. “What *is* it made of? It isn't velvet, or even plush. Godmother,” she went on, puckering her forehead again in perplexity, “it almost feels like *feathers*. Are you perhaps a *bird* as well as a fairy?”

At this godmother laughed. You never heard anything so pretty as her laugh. It was something like — no, I could never tell you what it was like — a very little like lots of tiny silver bells ringing, and soft breezes blowing, and larks trilling, all together and *very* gently, and yet very clearly. The children could not help all laughing, too, to hear it.

“Call me whatever you like,” said godmother. “A bird, or a fairy, or a will-o'-the-wisp, or even a witch. Many people have called me a witch, and I don't mind. Only, dears,” and here her pretty, sweet voice grew grave, and even a little sad, “never think of me except as loving you and wanting to make you

happy and good. And never believe I have said or done anything to turn you from doing right and helping others to do it. That is the only thing that could grieve him. And the world is full of people who don't see things the right way, and blame others when it is their own fault all the while. So sometimes you will find it all rather difficult. But don't forget."

"No," said Maia, "we won't forget, even though we don't quite understand. We will some day, won't we?"

"Yes, dears, that you will," said godmother.

"And just now," said Silva, "it doesn't matter. We needn't think about the difficult world, dear godmother, while we're *here* — ever so far away from it."

"No, we need not," said godmother, with what sounded almost like a sigh, if one could have believed that godmother *could* sigh! If it were one, it was gone in an instant, and with her very prettiest and happiest smile, godmother turned to the children.

"And now, dears," she said, "now for the story."

The four figures drew still nearer, the four pair of eyes were fixed on the sweet white face, into which, as she spoke, a little soft pink colour began to come. Whether it was from the reflection of the fire or not, Maia could not decide, and godmother's clear voice went on.

"Once —"

"Once upon a time; do say 'once upon a time,'" interrupted Silva.

“Well, well, once upon a time,” repeated godmother, “though, by the by, how do you know I was *not* going to say it? Well, then, once upon a time, a long ago once upon a time, there lived a king’s daughter.”

“A princess,” interrupted another voice, Maia’s this time. “Why don’t you say a princess, dear godmother?”

“Never mind,” replied godmother. “I like better to call her a king’s daughter.”

“And don’t interrupt any more, please,” said Waldo and Rollo together, quite forgetting that they were actually interrupting themselves.

“And,” continued godmother, without noticing this last interruption, “she was very beautiful and very sweet and good, even though she had everything in the world that even a king’s daughter could want. Do you look surprised at my saying ‘even though,’ children? You need not; there is nothing more difficult than to remain unselfish, which is just another word for ‘sweet and good,’ if one never knows what it is to have a wish ungratified. But so it was with Auréole, for that was the name of the fair maiden. Though she had all her life been surrounded with luxury and indulgence, though she had never known even a crumpled rose-leaf in her path, her heart still remained tender, and she felt for the sufferings of others whenever she knew of them, as if they were her own.

“‘Who knows?’ she would say softly to herself, ‘who knows but what some day sorrow may come to me, and then how glad I should be to find kindness and sympathy!’

“And when she thought thus there used to come a look in her eyes which made her old nurse, who loved her dearly, tremble and cross herself.

“‘I have never seen that look,’ she would whisper, though not so that Auréole could hear it — ‘I have never seen that look save in the eyes of those who were born to sorrow.’

“But time went on, and no sorrows of her own had as yet come to Auréole. She grew to be tall and slender, with golden fair curls about her face, which gave her a childlike, innocent look, as if she were younger than her real age. And with her years her tenderness and sympathy for suffering seemed to grow deeper and stronger. It was the sure way to her heart. In a glade not far from the castle she had a favourite bower, where early every morning she used to go to feed and tend her pets, of which the best-loved was a delicate little fawn that she had found one day in the forest, deserted by its companions, as it had hurt its foot and could no longer keep pace with them. With difficulty Auréole and her nurse carried it home between them, and tended it till it grew well again and could once more run and spring as lightly as ever. And then one morning Auréole, with tears in her eyes, led it back to the forest where she had found it.



IT WAS THE PRETTIEST SIGHT IN THE WORLD TO SEE AUREOLE IN HER
BOWER EVERY MORNING. — p. 69.

“ ‘Here, my fawn,’ she said, ‘you are free as air. I would not keep you a captive. Hasten to your friends, my fawn, but do not forget Auréole, and if you are in trouble come to her to help you.’

“But the fawn would not move. He rubbed himself softly against her, and looked up in her face with eyes that almost spoke. She could not but understand what he meant to say.

“ ‘I cannot leave you. Let me stay always beside you,’ was what he tried to express. So Auréole let him follow her home again, and from that day he had always lived in her bower, and was never so happy as when gambolling about her. She had other pets too—numbers of birds of various kinds, none of which she kept in cages, for all of them she had in some way or other saved and protected, and, like the fawn, they refused to leave her. The sweetest, perhaps, were a pair of wood-pigeons which she had one day released from a fowler’s snare, where they had become entangled. It was the prettiest sight in the world to see Auréole in her bower every morning, the fawn rubbing his soft head against her white dress, and the wood-pigeons cooing to her, one perched on each shoulder, while round her head fluttered a crowd of birds of different kinds—all owing their life and happiness to her tender care. There was a thrush, which she had found half-fledged and gasping for breath, fallen from the nest; a maimed swallow, who had been left behind by his companions in the winter

flight. And running about, though still lame of one leg, a tame rabbit which she had rescued from a dog, and ever so many other innocent creatures, all with histories of the same kind, and each vying with the other to express gratitude to their dear mistress as she stood there with the sunshine peeping through the boughs and lighting up her sweet face and bright hair.

“But summer and sunshine do not always last, and in time sorrow came to Auréole as to others.

“Her mother had died when she was a little baby, and her father was already growing old. But he felt no anxiety about the future of his only child, for it had long been decided that she was to marry the next heir to his crown, the Prince Halbert, as by the laws of that country no woman could reign. Auréole had not seen Halbert for many years, when, as children, they had played together; but she remembered him with affection as a bright merry boy, and she looked forward without fear to being his wife.

“‘Why should I not love him?’ she said to herself. ‘I have never yet known any one who was not kind and gentle, and Halbert will be still more so to me than any one else, for he will be my king and master.’

“And when the day came for the Prince to return to see her again, she waited for him quietly and without misgiving. And at first all seemed as she had pictured it. Halbert was manly and handsome,

he had an open expression and winning manners, he was devoted to his gentle cousin. So the old King was delighted, and Auréole said to herself, 'What have I done to deserve such happiness? How can I ever sufficiently show my gratitude?'

"She was standing in her bower when she thought thus, surrounded as usual by her pets. Suddenly among the trees at some little distance she heard a sound of footsteps, and at the same time a harsh voice, which she scarcely recognised, speaking roughly and sharply.

"'Out of my way, you cur,' it said, and then came the sound of a blow, followed by a piteous whine.

"Auréole darted forward, and in another instant came upon Halbert, his face dark and frowning, while a poor little dog lay bleeding at his feet.

"'Halbert!' exclaimed Auréole. Her cousin started; he had not heard her come. 'Did *you* do this? Did *you* strike the little dog?'

"Halbert turned towards her; he had reddened with shame, but he tried to laugh it off.

"'It is nothing,' he said; 'the creature will be all right again directly. Horrid little cur! it rushed out at me from that cottage there and yelped and barked just when I was eagerly hastening to your bower, Princess.'

"But Auréole hardly heard him, or his attempts at excusing himself. She was on her knees before the poor dog.

“‘Why, Fido,’ she said, ‘dear little Fido, do you not know me?’ Fido feebly tried to wag his tail.

“‘Is it *your* dog?’ stammered Halbert. ‘I had no — not the slightest idea —’

“But Auréole flashed back an answer which startled him. ‘*My* dog,’ she said. ‘No. But what has that to do with it? Oh, you cruel man!’

“Then she turned from him, the little dog all panting and bleeding in her arms. Halbert was startled by the look on her face.

“‘Forgive me, Auréole,’ he cried. ‘I did not mean to hurt the creature. I am hasty and quick-tempered, but you should not punish so severely an instant’s thoughtlessness.’

“‘It was not thoughtlessness. It was cowardly cruelty,’ replied Auréole slowly, turning her pale face towards him. ‘A man must have a cruel nature who, even under irritation, could do what you have done. Farewell,’ and she was moving away when he stopped her.

“‘What do you mean by farewell? You are not in earnest?’ he exclaimed. But Auréole looked at him with indignation.

“‘Not in earnest?’ she repeated. ‘Never was I more so in my life! Farewell, Halbert.’

“‘And you will not see me again?’ he exclaimed.

“‘I will never see you again,’ Auréole replied, ‘till you have learnt to feel for the sufferings of your fellow-creatures, instead of adding to them. And

who can say if that day will ever come? Farewell again, Halbert.'

"The Prince stood thunderstruck, watching her slight figure as it disappeared among the trees. He felt like a man in a dream. Then, as he gradually became conscious that it was all true, his hot temper broke out in anger at Auréole, in mockery at her absurdity and exaggeration, and he tried to believe what he said, that no man could be happy with so fanciful and unreasonable a wife, and that he had nothing to regret. In his heart he was angry with himself, though to this he would not own, and conscious also that Auréole's instinct had judged him truly. He was selfish and utterly thoughtless for others, and far on the way therefore to becoming actually cruel. He had, like Auréole, been surrounded by luxury and indulgence all his life, but had not, like her, acquired the habit of feeling for others and looking upon his own blessings as to be shared with those who were without them.

"Auréole kept to her word. She would not see Halbert again, though the King, her father, did his utmost to shake her resolution. She remained firm. It was better so for both of them, she repeated. It would kill her to be the wife of such a man, and do him no good. So in bitter and angry resentment, rather than sorrow, Prince Halbert went away, and Auréole's life returned to what it had been before his coming.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF A KING'S DAUGHTER — (*Continued*).

“I have been enchanted, and thou only canst set me free.”

GRIMM'S *Raven*.

“IT seemed so at least, but in reality it was very different. Auréole had received a shock which she felt deeply, and which she could not forget. It grieved her, too, to see her father's distress and disappointment, and sometimes she asked herself if perhaps she had done wrong in deciding so hastily. But the sight of the little dog Fido, which had recovered, though with the loss of one eye, always removed these misgivings. ‘A man who could be so cruel to a harmless little creature, would have quickly broken my heart,’ she said to herself and sometimes to her father. And as time went on, and news came that Prince Halbert was becoming more and more feared and disliked in his own home from the increasing violence of his temper, the old King learnt to be thankful that his dear Auréole was not to be at the mercy of such a man.

“‘But what will become of you, my darling, when I am gone?’ he would say.

“‘Fear not for me,’ Auréole assured him. ‘I have no fear for myself, father, dear. Why, I could live

safely in the woods with my dear animals. If I had a little hut, and Fido to guard me, and Lello my fawn, and the little rabbit, and all my pretty birds, I should be quite happy!’

“For the forester to whom Fido belonged had begged Auréole to keep him, as even before its hurt the dog had learnt to love her and spring out to greet her, and wag his tail with pleasure when she passed his master’s cottage, which lay on the way to her glade. But though Auréole was not afraid for herself, she was often very miserable when she thought of her country-people, above all the poor and defenceless ones, in the power of such a king as Halbert gave signs of being, after the long and gentle rule of her father. Yet there was nothing to be done, so she kept silence, fearing to cloud with more sorrow and anxiety the last days of the old King.

“They were indeed his last days, for within a year of Halbert’s unfortunate visit her father died, and the fair Auréole was left desolate.

“Her grief was great, even though the King had been very old, and she had long known he could not be spared to her for many more years. But she had not much time to indulge in it, for already, before her father was laid in his grave, her sorrow was disturbed by the strange and unexpected events which came to pass.

“These began by a curious dream which came to Auréole the very night of her father’s death.

“She dreamt that she was standing in her bower with her pets about her as usual. She felt bright and happy, and had altogether forgotten about her father’s death. Suddenly a movement of terror made itself felt among her animals — the birds fluttered closer to her, the little rabbit crept beneath her skirt, the fawn and Fido looked up at her with startled eyes, and almost before she had time to look round their terror was explained. A frightful sound was heard approaching them, the terrible growl of a bear, and in another moment the monster was within a few yards. Even then, in her dream, Auréole’s first thought was for her pets. She threw her arms round all that she could embrace, and stood there calmly, watching the creature with a faint hope that if she showed no terror he might pass them by. But he came nearer and nearer, till she almost felt his hot breath on her face, when suddenly, to her amazement, the monster was no longer there, but in his place the Prince Halbert, standing beside her and looking at her with an expression of the profoundest misery.

“‘I have brought it on myself,’ he said. ‘I deserve it; but pity me, oh, Auréole! Sweet Auréole, pity and forgive me!’ Then a cry of irrepressible grief burst from his lips, and at this moment Auréole awoke, to find her eyes wet with tears, her heart throbbing fast with fear and distress.

“‘What can have made me dream of Halbert?’

she said to herself. 'It must have been seeing the messengers start yesterday,' and then all came back to her memory, which at the first moment of waking had been confused, and she remembered her father's death and her own loneliness, and the scarcely-dried tears rushed afresh to her eyes.

"'Has any news come from Prince Halbert?' she inquired of her attendants when they came at her summons. And when they told her 'none,' she felt a strange sensation of uneasiness. For the messengers had been despatched at once on the death of the old King, which had been sudden at the last, to summon his successor, and there had been time already for their return.

"And as the day went on and nothing was heard of them, every one began to think there must be something wrong, till late at night these fears were confirmed by the return of the messengers with anxious faces.

"'Has the Prince arrived?' was their first question, and when they were told that nothing had been seen of him, they explained the reason of their inquiry.

"Halbert, already informed of the illness of the old King, had quickly prepared to set out with his own attendants and those who had come to summon him. They had ridden through the night, and had nothing untoward occurred, they would have ended their journey by daybreak. But the Prince had lost

his temper with his horse, a nervous and restless animal, unfit for so irritable a person to manage.

“‘We became uneasy,’ said the messengers, ‘on seeing the Prince lashing and spurring furiously the poor animal, who, his sides streaming with blood, no longer understood what was required of him, and at last, driven mad with pain and terror, dashed off at a frantic pace which it was hopeless to overtake. We followed him as best we could, guided for some distance by the branches broken as they passed and the ploughed-up ground, which, thanks to a brilliant moonlight, we were able to distinguish. But at last, where the trees began to grow more thickly—’ and here the speaker, who was giving this report to Auréole herself, hesitated—‘at last these traces entirely disappeared. We sought on in every direction; when the moon went in we waited for the daylight, and resumed our search. But all to no purpose, and at last we resolved to ride on hither, hoping that the Prince might possibly have found his way before us.’

“‘But this is terrible!’ cried Auréole, forgetting all her indignation against Halbert in the thought of his lying perhaps crushed and helpless in some bypath of the forest which his followers had missed. ‘We must at once send out fresh horsemen in every direction to scour the country.’

“The captain who had had command of the little troop bowed, but said nothing, and seemed without much hope that any fresh efforts would succeed. Auréole was struck with his manner.

“‘You are concealing something from me,’ she said. ‘Why do you appear so hopeless? Even at the worst, even supposing the Prince is killed, he must be found.’

“‘We searched too thoroughly,’ replied the officer. ‘Wherever it was *possible* to get, we left not a square yard unvisited.’

“‘Wherever it was *possible*,’ repeated Auréole; ‘what do you mean? You do not think —’ and she too hesitated, and her pale face grew paler.

“The captain glanced at her.

“‘I see that you have divined our fears, Princess,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Yes, we feel almost without a doubt that the unfortunate Prince has been carried into the enchanted forest, from whence, as you well know, none have ever been known to return. It is well that his parents have not lived to see this day, for, though he brought it on himself, it is impossible not to feel pity for such a fate.’

“Auréole seemed scarcely able to reply. But she gave orders, notwithstanding all she had heard, to send out fresh horsemen to search again in every direction.

“‘My poor father,’ she said to herself; ‘I am glad he was spared this new sorrow about Halbert.’ And as the remembrance of her strange dream returned to her, ‘Poor Halbert,’ she added, ‘what may he not be suffering?’ and she shuddered at the thought.

“For the enchanted forest was the terror of all that

country. In reality nothing, or almost nothing, was known of it, and therefore the awe and horror about it were the greater. It lay in a lonely stretch of ground between two ranges of hills, and no one ever passed through it, for there was no pathway or entrance of any kind to be seen. But for longer than any one now living could remember, it had been spoken of as a place to be dreaded and avoided, and travellers in passing by used to tell how they had heard shrieks and screams and groans from among its dark shades. It was said that a magician lived in a castle in the very centre of the forest, and that he used all sorts of tricks to get people into his power, whence they could never again escape. For though several were known to have been tempted to enter the forest, none of them were ever heard of or seen again. And it was the common saying of the neighbourhood, that it would be far worse to lose a child by straying into the forest than by dying. No one had ever seen the magician, no one even was sure that he existed, but when any misfortune came over the neighbourhood, such as a bad harvest or unusual sickness, people were sure to say that the wizard of the forest was at the bottom of it. And Auréole, like every one else, had a great and mysterious terror of the place and its master.

“‘Poor Halbert!’ she repeated to herself many times that day. ‘Would I could do anything for him!’”

“The bands of horsemen she had sent out returned one after the other with the same tidings, — nothing had been seen or heard of the Prince. But late in the day a woodman brought to the castle a fragment of cloth which was recognised as having been torn from the mantle of the Prince, and which he had found caught on the branch of a tree. When asked where, he hesitated, which of itself was answer enough.

“‘Close to the borders of the enchanted forest,’ he said at last, lowering his voice. But that was all he had to tell. And from this moment all lost hope. There was nothing more to be done.

“‘The Prince is as lost to us as is our good old King,’ were the words of every one on the day of the funeral of Auréole’s father. ‘Far better for him were he too sleeping peacefully among his fathers than to be where he is.’

“It seemed as if it would have certainly been better for his people had it been so. It was impossible to receive the successor of Halbert as king till a certain time had elapsed, which would be considered as equal to proof of his death. And the next heir to the crown being but an infant living in a distant country, the delay gave opportunity for several rival claimants to begin to make difficulties, and not many months after the death of the old King the once happy and peaceful country was threatened with war and invasion on various sides. Then the heads of

the nation consulted together, and decided on a bold step. They came to Auréole offering her the crown, declaring that they preferred to overthrow the laws of the country, though they had existed for many centuries, and to make her, at the point of the sword if necessary, their queen, rather than accept as sovereign any of those who had no right to it, or an infant who would but be a name and no reality.

“Auréole was startled and bewildered, but firm in her refusal.

“‘A king’s daughter am I, but no queen. I feel no fitness for the task of ruling,’ she replied, ‘and I could never rest satisfied that I was where I had a right to be.’

“But when the deputies entreated her to consider the matter, and when she thought of the misery in store for the people unless something were quickly done, she agreed to think it over till the next day.

“The next day came, Auréole was ready, awaiting the deputies. Their hopes rose high as they saw her, for there was an expression on her face that had not been there the day before. She stood before them in her long mourning robe, but she had encircled her waist with a golden belt, and golden ornaments shone on her neck and arms.

“‘It is a good sign,’ the envoys whispered, as they remarked also the bright and hopeful light in her eyes, and they stood breathless, waiting for her reply. It was not what they had expected.

“‘I cannot as yet consent to what you wish,’ said Auréole; ‘but be patient. I set off to-day on a journey from which I hope to return with good news. Till then I entreat you to do your best to keep all peaceful and quiet. And I promise you, that if I fail in what I am undertaking, I will return to be your queen.’

“This was all she would say. She was forbidden, she declared, to say more. And so resolute and decided did she appear, that the envoys, though not without murmuring, were obliged to consent to await her return, and withdrew with anxious and uneasy looks.

“And Auréole immediately began to get ready for the mysterious journey of which she had spoken. Her preparations were strange. She took off, for the first time since her father’s death, her black dress, and clad herself entirely in white. Then she kissed her old nurse and bade her farewell, at the same time telling her to keep up her courage and have no fear, to which the old dame could not reply without tears.

“‘I do not urge you to tell me the whole, Princess,’ she said, ‘as it was forbidden you to do so. But if I might but go with you.’ Auréole shook her head.

“‘No, dear nurse,’ she replied. ‘The voice in my dream said, “Alone, save for thy dumb friends.” That is all I can tell you,’ and kissing again the

poor nurse, Auréole set off, none knew whither, and she took care that none should follow her. Some of her attendants saw her going in the direction of her bower, and remarked her white dress. But they were so used to her going alone to see her pets that they thought no more of it. For no one knew the summons Auréole had received. The night before, after tossing about unable to sleep, so troubled was she by the request that had been made to her, she at last fell into a slumber, and again there came to her a strange dream. She thought she saw her cousin; he seemed pale and worn with distress and suffering.

“‘Auréole,’ he said, ‘you alone can rescue me. Have you courage? I ask it not only for myself, but for our people.’

“And when in her sleep she would have spoken, no words came, only she felt herself stretching out her arms to Halbert as if to reach and save him.

“‘Come, then,’ said his voice; ‘but come alone, save for thy dumb friends. Tell no one, but fear not.’ But even as he said the words he seemed to disappear, and again the dreadful, the panting roar she had heard in her former dream reached Auréole’s ears, in another moment the terrible shape of the monster appeared, and shivering with horror she awoke. Yet she determined to respond to Halbert’s appeal. She told no one except her old nurse, to whom she merely said that she had been summoned in a dream to go away, but that no harm would

befall her. She clad herself in white, as a better omen of success, and when she reached her bower, all her creatures welcomed her joyfully. So, with Fido, Lello the fawn, and the little rabbit gambolling about her feet, the wood-pigeons on her shoulders, and all the strange company of birds fluttering about her, Auréole set off on her journey, she knew not whither.

“But her pets knew. Whenever she felt at a loss Fido would give a little tug to her dress and then run on barking in front, or Lello would look up in her face with his pleading eyes and then turn his head in a certain direction, while the birds would sometimes disappear for a few moments and then, with a great chirping and fluttering, would be seen again a little way overhead, as if to assure her they had been to look if she was taking the right way. So that when night began to fall, Auréole, very tired, but not discouraged, found herself far from home in a part of the forest she had never seen before, though with trembling she said to herself that for all she knew she might already be in the enchanter's country.

“‘But what if it be so?’ she reflected. ‘I must not be faint-hearted before my task is begun.’

“She was wondering how she should spend the night when a sharp bark from Fido made her look round. She followed to where it came from, and found the little dog at the door of a small hut cleverly

concealed among the trees. Followed by her pets Auréole entered it, when immediately, as if pulled by an invisible hand, the door shut to. But she forgot to be frightened in her surprise at what she saw. The hut was beautifully made of the branches of trees woven together, and completely lined with moss. A small fire burned cheerfully in one corner, for the nights were still chilly; a little table was spread with a snow-white cloth, on which were laid out fruits and cakes and a jug of fresh milk; and a couch of the softest moss covered with a rug made of fur was evidently arranged for Auréole's bed. And at the other side of the hut sweet hay was strewn for the animals, and a sort of trellis work of branches was ready in one corner for the birds to roost on.

“‘How pleasant it is!’ said Auréole, as she knelt down to warm herself before the fire. ‘If this is the enchanted forest I don't think it is at all a dreadful place, and the wizard must be very kind and hospitable.’

“And when she had had some supper and had seen that her pets had all they wanted, she lay down on the mossy couch feeling refreshed and hopeful, and soon fell fast asleep. She had slept for some hours when she suddenly awoke, though what had awakened her she could not tell. But glancing round the hut by the flickering light of the fire, which was not yet quite out, she saw that all her pets were awake, and

when she gently called 'Fido, Fido,' the little dog, followed by the fawn and the rabbit, crept across the hut to her, and when she touched them she felt that they were all shaking and trembling, while the birds seemed to be trying to hide themselves all huddled together in a corner. And almost before Auréole had time to ask herself what it could be, their fear was explained, for through the darkness outside came the sound she had twice heard in her dreams — the terrible panting roar of the monster! It came nearer and nearer. Auréole felt there was nothing to do. She threw her arms round the poor little trembling creatures determined to protect them to the last. Suddenly there came a great bang at the door, as if some heavy creature had thrown itself against it, and Auréole trembled still more, expecting the door to burst open. But the mysterious hand that had shut it had shut it well. It did not move. Only a low despairing growl was heard, and then all was silent till a few minutes after, when another growl came from some distance off, and then Auréole felt sure the danger was past: the beast had gone away, for, though she had not seen him, she was certain he was none other than the monster of her dreams. The poor animals cowered down again in their corner, and Auréole, surprised at the quickness with which her terror had passed, threw herself on her couch and fell into a sweet sleep. When she woke, the sun was already some way up in the sky; the door was

half open, and a soft sweet breeze fluttered into the hut. All was in order; the little fire freshly lighted, the remains of last night's supper removed, and a tempting little breakfast arranged. Auréole could scarcely believe her eyes. 'Some one must have come in while I was asleep,' she said, and Fido seemed to understand what she meant. He jumped up, wagging his tail, and was delighted when Auréole sat down at the little table to eat what was provided. All her pets seemed as happy as possible, and had quite forgotten their fright. So, after breakfast, Auréole called them all about her and set off again on her rambles. Whither she was to go she knew not; she had obeyed the summons as well as she could, and now waited to see what more to do. The animals seemed to think they had got to the end of their journey, and gambolled and fluttered about in the best of spirits. And even Auréole herself felt it impossible to be sad or anxious. Never had she seen anything so beautiful as the forest, with its countless paths among the trees, each more tempting than the other, the sunshine peeping in through the branches, the lovely flowers of colours and forms she had never seen before, the beautiful birds warbling among the trees, the little squirrels and rabbits playing about, and the graceful deer one now and then caught sight of.

“ ‘Why,’ exclaimed Auréole, ‘*this* the terrible enchanted forest! It is a perfect fairyland.’

“‘You say true,’ said a voice beside her, which made her start. ‘To such as *you* it is a fairyland of delight. But to *me!*’ and before Auréole could recover herself from her surprise, there before her stood the Prince Halbert! But how changed! Scarcely had she recognised him when every feeling was lost in that of pity.

“‘Oh, poor Halbert,’ she cried, ‘so I have found you! Where have you been? What makes you look so miserable and ill?’

“For Halbert seemed wasted to a shadow. His clothes, torn and tattered, hung loosely about him. His face was pale and thin, and his eyes sad and hopeless, though, as he saw the pitying look in her face, a gleam of brightness came into his.

“‘Oh, Auréole, how good of you to come! It is out of pity for *me*, who so little deserve it. But will you have strength to do all that is required to free me from this terrible bondage?’

“‘Explain yourself, Halbert,’ Auréole replied. ‘What is it you mean? What bondage? Remember I know nothing; not even if this is truly the enchanted forest.’

“Halbert glanced at the sun, now risen high in the heavens. ‘I have but a quarter of an hour,’ he said. ‘It is only one hour before noon that I am free.’

“And then he went on to relate as quickly as he could what had come over him. Fallen into the

power of the invisible spirits of the enchanted land, whose wrath he had for long incurred by his cruelty to those beneath him, among whom were poor little Fido, and the unhappy horse who had dropped dead beneath him as soon as they entered the forest, his punishment had been pronounced to him by a voice in his dreams. It was a terrible one. For twenty-three hours of the twenty-four which make the day and night, he was condemned to roam the woods in the guise of a dreadful monster, bringing terror wherever he came. ‘I have to be in appearance what I was formerly in heart,’ he said bitterly. ‘You cannot imagine how fearful it is to see the tender innocent little animals fleeing from me in terror, though I would now die rather than injure one of them. And even you, Auréole, if you saw me you too would rush from me in horror.’

“‘I have seen you,’ she replied. ‘I have twice seen you in my dreams, and now that I know all I shall not fear you.’

“‘Do you indeed think so?’ he exclaimed eagerly. ‘Your pity and courage are my only hope. For I am doomed to continue this awful life—for hundreds of years perhaps—till twelve dumb animals mount on my back and let me carry them out of this forest. In my despair, when I heard this sentence, I thought of you and your favourites, whom I used to mock at and ill-treat more than you knew. They love and trust you so much that it is possible you

may make them do this. But I fear for your own courage.'

"'No,' said Auréole, 'that will not fail. And Fido is of a most forgiving nature. See here,' she went on, calling to the little dog, 'here is poor Halbert, who wants you to love him. Stroke him, Halbert,' and as the Prince gently did so, Fido looked up in his face with wistful eyes, and began timidly to wag his tail, while Lello and the rabbit drew near, and the birds fluttered, chirping above their heads. It was a pretty picture.

"'See,' said Auréole, raising her bright face from caressing the good little creatures, 'see, Halbert, how loving and gentle they are! It will not be difficult. In many ways they are wiser than we. But I can never again believe that the spirits of the forest are evil or mischievous. Rather do I now think them good and benevolent. How happy seem all the creatures under their care!'

"'I know no more than I have told you,' said Halbert; 'but I too believe they must be good, cruelly as they have punished me, for I deserved it. And doubtless all those who are said to have disappeared in the forest have been kept here for good purposes. And such as you, Auréole, have nothing to fear in any country or from any spirits. But I must go,' he exclaimed. 'I would not have you *yet* see me in my other form. You must reflect over what I have said, and prepare yourself for it.'

“‘And when, then, shall I see you again?’ she asked.

“‘To-night, at sunset, at the door of your hut, you will see — alas, not *me!*’ he whispered, and then in a moment he had disappeared.

“At sunset that evening Auréole sat at the door of the little hut, surrounded by her animals. She had petted and caressed them even more than usual, so anxious was she to prepare them for their strange task. She had even talked of it to Fido and Lello with a sort of vague idea that they might understand a little, though their only answer was for Fido to wag his tail and Lello to rub his soft nose against her. But suddenly both pricked up their ears, and then clinging more closely to their mistress, began to tremble with fear, while the birds drew near in a frightened flock.

“‘Silly birds,’ said Auréole, trying to speak in her usual cheerful tone, ‘what have *you* to fear? Bears don’t eat little birds, and you can fly off in a moment. Not that I want you to fly away;’ and she whistled and called to them, at the same time caressing and encouraging the animals, whose quick ears had caught sooner than she had done the dreadful baying roar which now came nearer and nearer. It was exactly the scene of her dreams, and notwithstanding all her determination, Auréole could not help shivering as the form of the monster came in sight. ‘Suppose it is not Halbert,’ she thought. ‘Suppose it is all a



AURÉOLE COULD NOT HELP SHIVERING AS THE FORM OF THE MONSTER
CAME IN SIGHT. — p. 92.

trick of the spirits of this enchanted country for my destruction!' And the idea nearly made her faint as the dreadful beast drew near. He was so hideous, and his roars made him seem still more so. His great red tongue hung out of his mouth, his eyes seemed glaring with rage. It was all Auréole could do to keep her pets round her, and she felt that her terror would take away all her power over them.

“‘Oh, Halbert,’ she exclaimed, ‘is it you? I know you cannot speak, but can you not make some sign to show me that it is you? I am so frightened.’ She had started up as if on the point of running away. The monster, who was close beside her, opened still wider his huge mouth, and gave a roar of despair. Then an idea seemed to strike him—he bent his clumsy knees, and rubbed his great head on the ground at her feet; Auréole’s courage returned. She patted his head, and he gave a faint groan of relief. Then by degrees, with the greatest patience, she coaxed the animals to draw near, and at last placed Fido and Lello on the beast’s immense back. But though they now seemed less frightened they would not stay there, but jumped off again, and pressed themselves close against her. It was no use; after hours, at least so it seemed to Auréole, spent in trying, she had to give it up.

“‘I cannot do it, Halbert,’ she said. A groan was his reply. Then another thought struck her.

“ ‘I will climb on your back myself,’ she exclaimed; ‘and then perhaps I can coax the animals to stay there.’

“The poor beast tried to stoop down still lower to make it easier for Auréole to get on. She managed it without much difficulty, and immediately Fido and Lello and the rabbit saw her mounted, up they jumped, for they had no idea of being left behind. The wood-pigeons came cooing down from the branch where they had taken refuge in their fright, and perched on her shoulders. Auréole looked up, and called and whistled to the other birds. Down they came as if bewitched, and settled round her, all the seven of them on the beast’s furry back.

“ ‘Off, Halbert,’ cried Auréole, afraid to lose an instant, and off, nothing loath, the beast set. It was hard work to keep on. He plunged along so clumsily, and went so fast in his eagerness, that it was like riding on an earthquake. But when now and then he stopped, and gave a low pitiful roar, as if begging Auréole’s pardon for shaking her so, she always found breath to say: ‘On, Halbert, on; think not of me.’

“And so at last, after hours of this terrible journey, many times during which Auréole’s heart had been in her mouth at the least sign of impatience among the animals, they reached the borders of the enchanted country, and as the panting beast emerged from the forest with his strange burden, poor Auréole slipped fainting off his back. Her task was done.

“When she came back to her senses and opened her eyes, her first thought was for the beast, but he had disappeared. Fido and Lello, and all the others were there, however; the dog licking her hands, the fawn nestling beside her, and at a little distance stood a figure she seemed to know, though no longer miserable and wretched as she had last seen him. It was Halbert, strong and handsome and happy again, but with a look in his eyes of gentleness and humility and gratitude that had never been there in the old days.

“‘Halbert,’ said Auréole, sitting up and holding out her hand to him, ‘is all then right?’

“‘All is right,’ he replied; ‘you can see for yourself. But, oh, Auréole, how can I thank you? My whole life would not be long enough to repay or —’

“‘Think not about thanking me,’ interrupted Auréole. ‘My best reward will be the delight of restoring to my dear country-people a king whose first object will *now*, I feel assured, be their happiness;’ and her eyes sparkled with delight at the thought.

“She was right. Nothing could exceed the joy of the nation at the return of Auréole, and thanks to her assurances of his changed character, they soon learned to trust their new king as he deserved.

“No one ever knew the true history of his disappearance, but all admired and respected the noble and

unselfish courage of Auréole in braving the dangers of the enchanted forest itself. Her pets all lived to a good old age, and had every comfort they could wish for. It was said that Halbert's only sorrow was that for long he could not persuade Auréole to fulfil her father's wishes by marrying him. But some years later a rumor came from the far-off country where these events happened, telling of the beautiful 'king's daughter' having at last consented to become a king's wife as well, now that she knew Halbert to be worthy of her fullest affection.

“And if this is true, I have no doubt it was for their happiness as well as for that of their subjects, among whom I include the twelve faithful animals.”

CHAPTER VII.

A WINDING STAIR AND A SCAMPER.

“But children, to whom all is play,
And something new each hour must bring,
Find everything so strange, that they
Are not surprised at anything.”

THE FAIRIES' NEST.

GODMOTHER'S voice stopped. For a moment or two there was silence.

“I hope it *was* true,” said Maia, the first to find her tongue. “Poor Halbert, I think he deserved to be happy at the end. I think Auréole was rather — rather — *cross*, don't you, Silva?”

Silva considered. “No,” she said. “I can't bear people that are cruel to little animals. Oh!” and she clasped her hands, “if only Rollo and Maia could see some of our friends in the wood! May they not, godmother?”

“All in good time,” said godmother, rather mysteriously.

Maia looked at her. “Godmother,” she said, “how funny you are! I believe you like puzzling people better than anything. There are such a lot of things I want to ask you about the story. Who was it lived in the forest? *Was* it a wizard? I

think that would be much nicer than invisible spirits, even though it is rather frightening. And who was it made Auréole's breakfast and shut the door, and all that? I am sure you know, godmother. I believe you've been in the enchanted forest yourself. *Have you?*"

Godmother smiled. "Perhaps," she said. But when Maia went on questioning, she would not say any more. "Keep something to puzzle about," she said. "Remember that that is half the pleasure."

And then she took Maia up on her knee and gave her such a sweet kiss that the child could not grumble.

"You are *very* funny, godmother," she repeated.

Suddenly Rollo started.

"Maia," he exclaimed, "I am afraid we are forgetting about going home and meeting Nanni and everything. It must be getting very late. It is so queer," he added with a sigh, glancing round the dear little kitchen, "I seemed to have forgotten that *this* isn't our home, and yet we have only been here an hour or two, and —"

"Yes," said Maia, "I feel just the same. Indeed Auréole and her pets seem far more real to me now than Lady Venelda and the white castle."

"And the old doctor and all the lessons you have to do," said godmother; and somehow the children no longer felt surprised at her knowing all about everything. "But you are right, my boy, good

boy," she went on, turning to Rollo. "There is a time for all things, and now it is time to go back to your other life. Say good-bye to each other, my children," and when they had done so — very reluctantly, you may be sure — she took Rollo by one hand and Maia by the other, Waldo and Silva standing at the cottage-door to see them off, and led them across the little clearing, away into the now darkening alleys of the wood.

"Are you going with us to where Nanni is?" asked Maia.

"Not to where you left her. I will take you by a short cut," said godmother, who, since they had left the cottage, had seemed to grow into just an ordinary-looking old peasant woman, very bent and small, for any one at least who did not peep far enough inside her queer hood to see her wonderful eyes and gleaming hair, and whom no one would have suspected of the marvellous crimson dress under the long dark cloak. Maia kept peeping up at her with a strange look in her face.

"What is it, my child?" said godmother.

"I don't quite know," Maia replied. "I'm not quite sure, godmother, if I'm not a little — a very little — frightened of you. You change so. In the cottage you seemed a sort of a young fairy godmother — and now —" she hesitated.

"And now do I seem very old?"

"*Rather,*" said Maia.

“Well, listen now. I’ll tell you the real truth, strange as it may seem. I am *very* old — older than you can even fancy, and yet I am and I always shall be young.”

“In fairyland — in the other country, do you mean?” asked Rollo.

Godmother turned her bright eyes full upon him. “Not only there, my boy,” she said. “Here, too — everywhere — I am both old and young.”

Maia gave a little sigh.

“You are very nice, godmother,” she said, “but you are *very* puzzling.” But she had no time to say more, for just then godmother stopped.

“See, children,” she said, pointing down a little path among the trees, “I have brought you a short cut, as I said I would. At the end of that alley you will find your faithful Nanni. And that will not be the end of the short cut. Twenty paces straight on in the same direction you will come out of the wood. Cross the little bridge across the brook and you will only have to climb a tiny hill to find yourselves at the back entrance of the castle. All will be right — and now good-bye, my dears, till your next holiday. Have you your flowers?”

“Oh, yes,” exclaimed both, holding up the pretty bunches as they spoke; “but how are we to —”

“Don’t trouble about how you are to see me again,” she interrupted, smiling. “It will come — you will see,” and then before they had time to won-

der any more, she turned from them, waving her hand in farewell, and disappeared.

“Rollo,” said Maia, rubbing her eyes as if she had just awakened, “Rollo, is it all *real*? Don’t you feel as if you had been dreaming?”

“No,” said Rollo. “I feel as if *it*” — and he nodded his head backwards in the direction of the cottage — “were all real, and the castle and our cousin and Nanni and all *not* real. You said so too.”

“Yes,” said Maia meditatively, “while I was there with them, I felt like that. But now I don’t. It seems not real, and I don’t want to begin to forget them.”

“Suppose you scent your flowers,” said Rollo; “perhaps that’s why godmother gave them to us.”

Maia thought it a good idea.

“Yes,” she said, poking her little nose as far as it would go in among the fragrant blossoms, “yes, Rollo, it comes back to me when I scent the flowers. I think it is because godmother’s red dress was scented the same way. Oh, yes!” shutting her eyes, “I can *feel* her soft dress now, and I can hear her voice, and I can see Waldo and Silva and the dear little kitchen. How glad I am you thought of the flowers, Rollo!”

“But we must run on,” said Rollo, and so they did. But they had not run many steps before the substantial figure of Nanni appeared; she was looking very comfortable and contented.

“You have not stayed very long, Master Rollo and Miss Maia,” she said, “but I suppose it is getting time to be turning home.”

“And have you spent a pleasant afternoon, Nanni?” asked Rollo quietly. “How many stockings have you knitted?”

“How many!” repeated Nanni; “come, Master Rollo, you’re joking. You’ve not been gone more than an hour at the most, but it is queer—it must be the smell of the fir-trees—as soon as ever I sit down in this wood, off I go to sleep! I hadn’t done more than two rounds when my head began nodding, so I had to put my knitting away for fear of running the needles into my eyes. And I had such pleasant dreams.”

“About the beautiful lady again?” asked Maia.

“I think so, but I can’t be sure,” said Nanni. “It was about all sorts of pretty things mixed up together. Flowers and birds, and I don’t know what. And the flowers smelt, for all the world, just like the roses round the windows of my mother’s little cottage at home. I could have believed I was there.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. It was all godmother’s doing, they felt sure. How clever of her to know just what Nanni would like to dream of.

By this time they were out of the wood. The light was brighter than among the trees, but still it was easy to see that more than Nanni’s “hour” must have passed since they left her.

“Dear me,” she exclaimed, growing rather frightened, “it looks later than I thought! And we’ve a long way to go yet,” she went on, looking round; “indeed,” and her rosy face grew pale, “I don’t seem to know exactly where we are. We must have come another way out of the wood — oh, dear, dear —”

“Don’t get into such a fright, Nanni,” said Rollo; “follow me.”

He sprang up the hilly path that godmother had told them of, Maia and Nanni following. It turned and twisted about a little, but when they got to the top, there, close before them, gleamed the white walls of the castle, and a few steps more brought them to a back entrance to the terrace by which they often came out and in.

“Well, to be sure!” exclaimed Nanni, “you are a clever boy, Master Rollo. Who ever would have guessed there was such a short cut, and indeed I can’t make it out at all which way we’ve come back. But so long as we’re here all in good time, and no fear of a scolding, I’m sure I’m only too pleased, however we’ve got here.”

As they were passing along the terrace the old doctor met them.

“Have you had a pleasant holiday?” he asked.

“Oh, *very*,” answered both Rollo and Maia, looking up in his face, where, as they expected, they saw the half-mysterious, half-playful expression they had learnt to know, and which seemed to tell that their

old friend understood much more than he chose to say.

“Did you find any pretty flowers?” he asked, with a smile, “though it is rather early in the year yet — especially for scented ones — is it not?”

“But we *have* got some,” said Maia quickly, and glancing round to see if Nanni were still by them. She had gone on, so Maia drew out her bunch, and held them up. “*Aren't* they sweet?” she said.

The old man pressed them to his face almost as lovingly as Maia herself. “Ah, how *very* sweet!” he murmured. “How much they bring back! Cherish them, my child. You know how?”

“Yes, *she* told us,” said Maia. “You know whom I mean, don't you, Mr. Doctor?”

The old doctor smiled again. Maia drew two or three flowers out of her bunch, and Rollo did the same. Then they put them together and offered them to their old friend.

“Thank you, my children,” he said; “I shall add the thought of you to many others, when I perceive their sweet scent.”

“And even when they're withered and dried up, Mr. Doctor, you know,” said Maia eagerly, “the scent, *she* says, is even sweeter.”

“I know,” said the doctor, nodding his head. “Sweeter, I truly think, but bringing sadness with it too; very often, alas!” he added in a lower voice, so low that the children could not clearly catch the words.

“We must go in, Maia,” said Rollo; “it must be nearly supper-time.”

“Yes,” said Maia; “but first, Mr. Doctor, I want to know when are we to have another holiday? Lady Venelda will do any way you tell her, you know.”

“All in good time,” replied the doctor, at which Maia pouted a little.

“I don’t like all in good time,” she said.

“But you have never known me forget,” said the old doctor.

“No, indeed,” said Rollo eagerly, and then Maia looked a little ashamed of herself, and ran off smiling and waving her hand to the doctor.

Lady Venelda asked them no questions, and made no remarks beyond saying she was glad they had had so fine a day for their ramble in the woods. She seemed quite pleased so long as the children were well and sat up straight in their chairs without speaking at meal-times, and there were no complaints from their teachers. That was the way *she* had been brought up, and she thought it had answered very well in her case. But she was really kind, and the children no longer felt so lonely or dull, now that they had the visits to the wood to look forward to. Indeed, they had brought back with them a fund of amusement, for now their favourite play was to act the story which godmother had told them, and as they had no other pets, they managed to make

friends with the castle cat, a very dignified person, who had to play the parts of Fido and Lello and the rabbit all in one; while the birds were represented by bunches of feathers they picked up in the poultry-yard, and the great furry rug with which they had travelled turned Rollo into the unhappy monster. It was very amusing, but after a few days they began to wish for other companions.

“If Silva and Waldo were here,” said Rollo, “what fun we could have! I wonder what they do all day, Maia.”

“They work pretty hard, I fancy,” said Maia. “Waldo goes to cut down trees in the forest a good way off, I know, and Silva has all the house to take care of, and everything to cook and wash, and all that. But *I* should call that play-work, not like lessons.”

“And *I* should think cutting down trees the best fun in the world,” said Rollo. “That kind of work can’t be as tiring as lessons.”

“Lessons, lessons! What is all this talk about lessons? Are you so terribly overworked, my poor children? What should you say to a ramble in the woods with me for a change?” said a voice beside them, which made the children start.

It was the doctor. He had come round the corner of the wall without their seeing him, for they were playing on the terrace for half an hour between their French lesson with Mademoiselle and their history with the chaplain.

“A walk with you, Mr. Doctor!” exclaimed Maia. “Oh, yes, it *would* be nice. But it isn’t a holiday, and —”

“How do *you* know it isn’t a holiday, my dear young lady,” interrupted the doctor. “How do you know that I have not represented to your respected cousin that her young charges had been working very hard of late, and would be the better for a ramble? If you cannot believe me, run in and ask Lady Venelda herself; if you are satisfied without doing so, why then, let us start at once!”

“Of course we are satisfied,” exclaimed Rollo and Maia together; “but we must go in to get our thick boots and jackets, and our nicer hats,” added Maia, preparing to start off.

“Not a bit of it,” said the doctor, stopping her. “You are quite right as you are. Come along;” and without giving the children time for even another “but,” off he strode.

To their amazement, however, he turned towards the house, which he entered by a side door that the children had never before noticed, and which he opened with a small key.

“Doctor,” began Maia, but he only shook his head without speaking, and stalked on, Rollo and his sister following. He led them some way along a rather narrow passage, where they had never been before, then, opening a door, signed to them to pass in in front of him, and when they had done so, he too

came in, and shut the door behind him. It was a queer little room — the doctor's study evidently, for one end was completely filled with books, and at one side, through the glass doors of high cupboards in the wall, all kinds of mysterious instruments, chemical tubes and globes, high bottles filled with different-coloured liquids, and ever so many things the children had but time to glance at, were to be perceived. But the doctor had evidently not brought them there to pay him a visit. He touched a spring at the side of the book-shelves, and a small door opened.

“Come, children,” he said, speaking at last, “this is another short cut. Have no fear, but follow me.”

Full of curiosity, Rollo and Maia pressed forward. The doctor had already disappeared — all but his head, that is to say — for a winding staircase led downwards from the little door, and Rollo first, then Maia, were soon following their old friend step by step, holding by one hand to a thick cord which supplied the place of a handrail. It was almost quite dark, but they were not frightened. They had perfect trust in the old doctor, and all they had seen and heard since they came to the white castle had increased their love of adventure, without lessening their courage.

“Dear me,” said Maia, after a while, for it was never easy for her to keep silent for very long together, “it isn't a *very* short cut! We seem to have been going down and down for a good while. My

head is beginning to feel rather turning with going round and round so often. How much farther are we to go before we come out, Mr. Doctor?"

But there was no answer, only a slight exclamation from Rollo just in front of her, and then all of a sudden a rush of light into the darkness made Maia blink her eyes and for a moment shut them to escape the dazzling rays.

"Good-bye," said a voice which she knew to be the doctor's; "I hope you will enjoy yourselves."

Maia opened her eyes. She had felt Rollo take her hand and draw her forwards a little. She opened her eyes, but half shut them again in astonishment.

"*Rollo!*" she exclaimed.

"And you said it was not much of a short cut," replied Rollo, laughing.

No wonder Maia was astonished. They were standing a few paces from the cottage door! The sun was shining brightly on the little garden and peeping through the trees, just in front of which the children found themselves.

"Where have we come from?" said Maia, looking round her confusedly.

"Out of here, I think," said Rollo, tapping the trunk of a great tree close beside him. "I think we must have come out of a door hidden in this tree."

"But we kept coming *down*," said Maia.

"At first; but the last part of the time it seemed to me we were going up; we must have come down

the inside of the hill and then climbed up a little way into the tree."

"Oh, I am sure we weren't going *up*," said Maia. "I certainly was getting quite giddy with going round and round, but I'm *sure* I could have told if we'd been going up."

"Well, never mind. If godmother is a witch, I fancy the doctor's a wizard. But anyway we're here, and that's the principal thing. Come on, quick, Maia, aren't you in a hurry to know if Waldo and Silva are at home?"

He ran on to the cottage and Maia after him. The door was shut. Rollo knocked, but there was no answer.

"Oh, what a pity it will be if they are not in!" said Maia. "Knock again, Rollo, louder."

Rollo did so. Still there was no answer.

"What shall we do?" said the children to each other. "It would be too horrid to have to go home and miss our chance of a holiday."

"We might stay in the woods by ourselves," suggested Rollo.

"It would be very dull," said Maia disconsolately. "I don't think the old doctor should have brought us without knowing if they would be here. If he knows so much he might have found that out."

Suddenly Rollo gave an exclamation. He had been standing fumbling at the latch.

"What do you say?" asked Maia.

“The door isn’t locked. Suppose we go in? It would be no harm. They weren’t a bit vexed with us for having gone in and drunk the milk the first time.”

“Of course not,” said Maia; “they wouldn’t be the least vexed. I quite thought the door was locked all this time. Open it, Rollo. I can’t reach so high or I would have found out long ago it wasn’t locked.”

With a little difficulty Rollo opened the door.

Everything in the tiny kitchen looked as they had last seen it, only, if that were possible, still neater and cleaner. Maia stared round as if half expecting to see Waldo or Silva jump out from under the chairs or behind the cupboard, but suddenly she darted forward. A white object on the table had caught her attention. It was a sheet of paper, on which was written in round clear letters:

“Godmother will be here in a quarter of an hour.”

“See, Rollo,” exclaimed Maia triumphantly, “this must be meant for *us*. What a good thing we came in! I don’t mind waiting a quarter of an hour.”

“But that paper may have been here all day. It may have been sent for Waldo and Silva,” said Rollo. “You know they told us godmother only comes sometimes to see them.”

“I don’t care,” said Maia, seating herself on one of the high-backed chairs. “I’m going to wait a quarter of an hour, and just *see*. Godmother doesn’t do things like other people, and I’m sure this message is for us.”

Rollo said no more, but followed Maia's example. There they sat, like two little statues, the only distraction being the tick-tack of the clock, and watching the long hand creep slowly down the three divisions of its broad face which showed a quarter of an hour. It seemed a very long quarter of an hour. Maia was so little used to sitting still, except when she was busy with lessons, to which she was obliged to give her attention, that after a few minutes her head began to nod and at last gave such a jerk that she woke up with a start.

"Dear me, isn't it a quarter of an hour *yet?*" she exclaimed.

"No, it's hardly five minutes," said Rollo, rather grumpily, for he thought this was a very dull way of spending a holiday, and he would rather have gone out into the woods than sit there waiting. Maia leant her head again on the back of her chair.

"Suppose we count ten times up to sixty," she said. "That would be ten minutes if we go by the ticks of the clock, and if she isn't here then, I won't ask you to wait any longer."

"We can see the time," said Rollo; "I don't see the use of counting it loud out."

Maia said nothing more. Whether she took another little nap; whether Rollo himself did not do so also I cannot say. All I know is that just exactly as the hand of the clock had got to fourteen minutes from the time they had begun watching it,

both children started to their feet and looked at each other.

“Do you hear?” said Maia.

“It’s a carriage,” exclaimed Rollo.

“How could a carriage come through the wood? There’s no path wide enough.”

“But it *is* a carriage;” and to settle the point both ran to the door to see.

It came swiftly along, in and out among the trees without difficulty, so small was it. The two tiny piebald ponies that drew it shook their wavy manes as they danced along, the little bells on their necks ringing softly. A funny idea struck Maia as she watched it. It looked just like a toy meant for some giant’s child which had dropped off one of the huge Christmas-trees, waiting there to be decked for Santa Claus’s festival! But the queerest part of the sight for them was when the carriage came near enough for them to see that godmother herself was driving it. She did look so comical, perched up on the little seat and chirruping and wo-wohing to her steeds, and she seemed to have grown so small, oh, so small! Otherwise how could she ever have got into a carriage really not much too large for a baby of two years old?

On she drove, and drew up in grand style just in front of where the children were standing.

“Jump in,” she said, nodding off-handedly, but without any other greeting.

“But how —?” began Maia. “How can Rollo and I possibly get into that tiny carriage?” were the words on her lips, but somehow before she began to say them, they melted away, and almost without knowing how, she found herself getting into the back seat of the little phaeton, with Rollo beside her, and in another moment — crack! went godmother’s whip, and off they set.

They went so fast, oh, so fast! There did not seem time to consider whether they were comfortable or not, or how it was they fitted so well into the carriage, small as it was, or anything but just the delicious feeling of flying along, which shows that they must have been very comfortable, does it not? In and out among the great looming pine-trees their strange coachman made her way, without once hesitating or wavering, so that the children felt no fear of striking against the massive trunks, even though it grew darker and gloomier and the Christmas-trees had certainly never looked anything like so enormous.

“Or *can* it be that we have really grown smaller?” thought Maia; but her thoughts were quickly interrupted by a merry cry from godmother, “Hold fast, children, we’re going to have a leap.”

Godmother was certainly in a very comical humour. But for her voice and her bright eyes when they peeped out from under her hood the children would scarcely have known her. She was like a little mischievous old sprite instead of the soft, tender, mys-

terious being who had petted them so sweetly and told them the quiet story of gentle Auréole the other day. In a different kind of way Maia felt again almost a *very* little bit afraid of her, but Rollo's spirits rose with the fun, his cheeks grew rosier and his eyes brighter, though he was very kind to Maia too, and put his arm round her to keep her steady in preparation for godmother's flying leap, over they knew not what. But it was beautifully managed; not only the ponies, but the carriage too, seemed to acquire wings for the occasion, and there was not the slightest jar or shock, only a strange lifting feeling, and then softly down again, and on, on, through trees and brushwood, faster and faster, as surely no ponies ever galloped before.

"Are you frightened, Rollo?" whispered Maia.

"Not a bit. Why should I be? Godmother can take care of us, and even if she wasn't there, one couldn't be frightened flying along with those splendid little ponies."

"What was it we jumped over?" asked Maia.

Godmother heard her and turned round.

"We jumped over the brook," she said. "Don't you remember the little brook that runs through the wood?"

"The brook that Rollo and I go over by the stepping stones? It's a very little brook, godmother. I should think the carriage might have driven over without jumping."

“Hush!” said godmother, “we’re getting into the middle of the wood and I must drive carefully.”

But she did not go any more slowly; it got darker and darker as the trees grew more closely together. The children saw, as they looked round, that they had never been so far in the forest before.

“I wonder when we shall see Silva and Waldo,” thought Maia, and somehow the thought seemed to bring its answer, for just as it passed through her mind, a clear bright voice called out from among the trees:

“Godmother, godmother, don’t drive too far. Here we are waiting for you.”

“Waldo and Silva!” exclaimed the children. The ponies suddenly stopped, and out jumped or tumbled into the arms of their friends Rollo and Maia.

“Oh, Waldo! oh, Silva!” they exclaimed. “We’ve had *such* a drive! Godmother has brought us along like the wind.”

Silva nodded her head. “I know,” she said, smiling. “There is no one so funny as godmother when she is in a wild humour. You may be glad you are here all right. She would have thought nothing of driving on to —” Silva stopped, at a loss what place to name.

“To where?” said the children.

“Oh, to the moon, or the stars, or down to the bottom of the sea, or anywhere that came into her head!” said Silva, laughing. “For, you know, she can go *anywhere*.”

“*Can* she?” exclaimed Maia. “Oh, what wonderful stories we can make her tell us, then! Godmother, godmother, do you hear what Silva says?” she went on, turning round to where she thought the carriage and ponies and godmother were standing. But —

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SQUIRREL FAMILY.

“How extremely pretty!
Won't you jump again?”

CHILD-WORLD.

—GODMOTHER was no longer there. She and the carriage and the ponies had completely disappeared. Maia opened her eyes and mouth with amazement, and stood staring. Waldo and Silva and Rollo too could not help bursting out laughing; she looked so funny. Maia felt a little offended.

“I don't see what there is to laugh at,” she said; “especially for *you*, Rollo. Aren't you astonished too?”

“I don't think I should ever be astonished at anything about godmother,” said Rollo. “Besides, I saw her drive off while you were kissing Silva. She certainly went like the wind.”

“And where are we?” asked Maia, looking round her for the first time; “and what are we going to do, Silva?”

“We are going to pay a visit,” said Silva. “Waldo and I had already promised we would when we got the message that you were coming, so godmother said she would go back and fetch you.”

“But who brought you a message that we were coming?” asked Maia.

“One of godmother’s carrier pigeons. Ah, I forgot, you haven’t seen them yet!”

“And *where* are we going?”

“To spend the afternoon with the squirrel family. It’s close to here, but we must be quick. They will have been expecting us for some time. You show us the way, Waldo; you know it best.”

It was dark in the wood, but not so dark as it had been when they were driving with godmother, for a few steps brought them out into a little clearing, something like the one where the cottage stood, but smaller. The mossy grass here was particularly beautiful, so bright and green and soft that Maia stooped down to feel it with her hand.

“I suppose no one ever comes this way?” she said. “Is it because no one ever tramples on it that the moss is so lovely?”

“Nobody but us and the squirrels,” said Silva. “Sometimes we play with them out here, but to-day we are going to see them in their house. Sometimes they have parties, when they invite their cousins from the other side of the wood. But I don’t think any of them are coming to-day.”

Silva spoke so simply that Maia could not think she was making fun of her, and yet it was very odd to speak of squirrels as if they were *people*. Maia could not, however, ask any more, for suddenly Waldo called out:

“Here we are! Silva, you are going too far.”

Rollo and Maia looked round, but they saw nothing except the trees. Waldo was standing just in front of one, and as the others came up to him he tapped gently on the trunk.

“Three times,” said Silva.

“I know,” he replied. Then he tapped twice again, Rollo and Maia looking on with all their eyes. But it was their ears that first gave them notice of an answer to Waldo’s summons. A quick pattering sound, like the rush of many little feet, was heard inside the trunk, then with a kind of squeak, as if the hinges were somewhat rusty, a door, so cleverly made that no one could have guessed it was there, for it was covered with bark like the rest of the trunk, slowly opened from the inside, showing a dark hollow about large enough for one child at a time to creep into on hands and knees.

“Who will go first?” said Waldo, lifting his little rep cap as he looked at Maia.

“What nice manners he has,” she thought to herself. “I think you had better go first, please,” she said aloud. For though she would not own it, the appearance of the dark hole rather alarmed her.

“But we can’t *all* get in there,” said Rollo.

“Oh, yes,” replied Waldo. “I’ll go first, and when I call out ‘all right,’ one of you can come after me. The passage gets wider directly, or — anyway there’s lots of room — you’ll see,” and, ducking down,

he crept very cleverly into the hollow, and after a moment his voice was heard, though in rather muffled tones, calling out "all right." Rollo, not liking to seem backward, went next, and Maia, who was secretly trembling, was much comforted by hearing him exclaim, "Oh, how beautiful!" and when Silva asked her to go next, saying "Maia might like to know she was behind her," she plunged valiantly into the dark hole. She groped with her hands for a moment or two, till the boys' voices a little way above her led her to a short flight of steps, which she easily climbed up, and then a soft light broke on her eyes, and she understood why Rollo had called out, "Oh, how beautiful!"

They stood at the entrance of a long passage, quite wide enough for two to walk abreast comfortably. It was entirely lined and carpeted with moss, and the light came from the roof, though *how* one could not tell, for it too was trellised over with another kind of creeping plant, growing too thickly for one to see between. The moss had a sweet fresh fragrance that reminded the children of the scent of their other world flowers, and it was, besides, deliciously soft and yet springy to walk upon.

Waldo and Rollo came running back to meet the little girls, for Silva had quickly followed Maia.

"Isn't this a nice place?" said Rollo, jumping up and down as he spoke. "We might run races here all the afternoon."

“Yes; but we must hasten on,” said Silva. “They’re expecting us, you know. But we can run races all the same, for we’ve a good way along here to go. You and Waldo start first, and then Maia and I.”

So they did, and never was there a race pleasanter to run. They felt as if they had wings on their feet, they went so fast and were so untired. The moss gallery resounded with their laughter and merry cries, though their footfalls made no sound on the floor.

“What was the pattering we heard after Waldo knocked?” asked Maia suddenly.

“It was the squirrels overhead. They all have to run together to pull open the door,” said Silva. “The rope goes up to their hall. But you will see it all for yourself now. This is the end of the gallery.”

“This” was a circular room, moss-lined like the passage, with a wide round hole in the roof, from which, as the children stood waiting, descended a basket, fitted with moss cushions, and big enough to hold all of them at once. In they got, and immediately the basket rose up again and stopped at what, in a proper house, one would call the next floor. And even before it stopped a whole mass of brown heads were to be seen eagerly watching for it, and numbers of little brown paws were extended to help the visitors to step out.

“Good-day, good-day,” squeaked a multitude of shrill voices; “welcome to Squirrel-Land. We have been watching for you ever so long, since the pigeon brought the news. And the supper is all ready. The acorn cakes smelling so good and the chestnut pasties done to a turn.”

“Thank you, thank you, Mrs. Bushy!” said Silva. “I am sure they will be excellent. But first, I must introduce our friends and you to each other. Maia and Rollo, this is Mrs. Bushy,” and as she said so the fattest and fussiest of the squirrels made a duck with its head and a flourish with its tail, which were meant for the most graceful of curtsies. “Mr. Bushy —” she stopped and looked round.

“Alas! my dear husband is very lame with his gout to-day,” said Mrs. Bushy. “He took too much exercise yesterday. I’m sure if he went once to the top of the tree he went twenty times — he is *so* active, you know; so he’s resting in the supper-room; but you’ll see him presently. And here are my dear children, Miss Silva. Stand forward, my dears, you have nothing to be ashamed of. *Do* look at their tails — though I say it that should’nt, *did* you ever see such tails?” and Mrs. Bushy’s bright eyes sparkled with maternal pride. “There they are, all nine of them: Nibble, Scramble, Bunchy, Friskit, and Whiff, my dear boys; and Clamberina, Fluffy, Tossie, and sweet little Curletta, my no less beloved daughters.”

Whereupon each one of the nine, who had collected in a row, made the same duck with its head and flourish with its tail as Mrs. Bushy, though, of course, with somewhat less perfection of style and finish than their dear mamma.

“Such manners, such sweet manners!” she murmured confidentially to Silva and Maia.

Maia was by this time nearly choking with laughter — “Though I say it that should’nt say it, I am sure you young ladies must be pleased with their sweet manners.”

“Very pleased, dear Mrs. Bushy,” said Silva; “I’m sure they’ve learned to duck their heads and wave their tails beautifully.”

“Beautifully,” said Maia, at which Mrs. Bushy looked much gratified.

“And shall we proceed to supper, then?” she said. “I am sure you must be hungry.”

“Yes, I think we are,” said Waldo; “and I know your chestnut cakes are very good, Mrs. Bushy.”

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. *Chestnuts* were very nice, but what would chestnut cakes be like? Besides, it wasn’t the season for chestnuts; they must be very old and stale.

“How can you have chestnuts now?” asked Maia. Mrs. Bushy looked at her patronisingly.

“Ah, to be sure,” she said, “the young lady does not know all about our magic preserving cupboards, and all the newest improvements. To be sure, it is

her first visit to Squirrel-Land," she added encouragingly; "we can make allowance. Now, lead the way, my dears, lead the way," she said to her nine treasures, who thereupon set off with a rush, jumping and frisking and scuttering along, till Maia could hardly help bursting out laughing again, while she and Silva and Rollo and Waldo followed them into the supper-room, where, at the end of a long narrow table, covered with all sorts of queer-looking dishes, decorated with fern leaves, Papa Bushy, in a moss arm-chair, his tail comfortably waving over him like an umbrella, was already installed.

"I beg your pardon, my dear young friends," he began, in a rather deeper, though still squeaky voice, "for receiving you like this. Mrs. Bushy will have made my apologies. This unfortunate attack of gout! I am, I fear, too actively inclined, and have knocked myself up!"

"Ah, yes," said Mrs. Bushy, shaking her head; "I'm sure if Mr. Bushy goes once a day to the top of the tree, he goes twenty times."

"But what does he go for if it makes him ill?" exclaimed Maia.

Mrs. Bushy looked at her and gasped, Mr. Bushy shut his eyes and waved his paws about as if to say, "We must excuse her, she knows no better," and all the young Bushys ducked their heads and squeaked faintly, — evidently Maia had said something very startling. At last, when she had to some extent

recovered her self-control, Mrs. Bushy said faintly, looking round her for sympathy :

“Poor child! Such deplorable ignorance; but we must excuse it. Imagine her not knowing — imagine *any one* not knowing what would happen if Mr. Bushy did not go to the top of the tree!”

“What *would* happen?” said Maia, not sure if she felt snubbed or not, but not inclined to give in all at once.

“My poor child,” said Mrs. Bushy, in the most solemn tone her squeaky voice was capable of, “*the world would stop!*”

Maia stared at her, but what she was going to say I cannot tell you, for Silva managed to give her a little pinch, as a sign that she had better make no more remarks, and Mrs. Bushy, feeling that she had done her duty, requested everybody to take their places at table. The dishes placed before them were so comical-looking that Rollo and Maia did not know what to reply when asked what they would have.

“An apple, if you please!” said Maia, catching sight at last of something she knew the name of. But when Mrs. Bushy pressed her to try a chestnut cake she did not like to refuse, and seeing that Waldo and Silva were careful to eat like the squirrels, holding up both hands together like paws to their mouths, she and Rollo did the same, which evidently gave the Bushy family a better opinion of the way in which they had been brought up. The

chestnut cakes were rather nice, but poor Rollo, having ventured on some fried acorns which smelt good, could not help pulling a very wry face. Supper however, was soon over, and then Waldo and Silva asked leave very politely to go "up the tree," which in squirrel language was much the same as if they had asked to go out to the garden, and Mrs. Bushy, with many excuses for not accompanying them on account of her household cares, and Mr. Bushy, pleading his gout, told her nine darlings to escort the visitors upstairs.

Now began the real fun of the afternoon. A short flight of steps, like a little ladder, led them to the outside of the tree. The nine Bushys scampered and rushed along, squeaking and chattering with the greatest good-nature, followed more slowly by the four children. For a moment or two, when Rollo and Maia found themselves standing on a branch very near the top of the tree, though, strange to say, they found it wide enough to hold them quite comfortably, they felt rather giddy and frightened.

"How dreadfully high up we seem!" said Maia. "Rollo, I'm *sure* we must have grown smaller. The trees never looked so big as this before. It makes me giddy to look either up or down."

"You'll get used to it in a minute," said Waldo. "Silva and I don't mind it the least now. Look at the Bushys, Maia, isn't it fun to see them?"

And Maia forgot her fears in watching the nine

young squirrels. Had Mrs. Bushy been with them, her maternal vanity would have been gratified by the admiration their exploits drew forth. It really was the funniest and prettiest sight in the world to see them at their gambols. No dancers on the tight-rope were ever half so clever. They swung themselves up by the branches to the very top of the tree, and then in an instant — flash! — there they were ever so far below where the children were standing. And in another instant, like a brown streak, up they were again, darting hither, there, and everywhere, so that one felt as if the whole tree were alive. When they had a little worked off their spirits they squeaked to the children to join them; Waldo and Silva did so at once, for they were used to these eccentric gymnastics, and to Rollo and Maia they looked nearly as clever as the squirrels themselves, as, holding on by their companions' paws and tails, they jumped and clambered and slid up and down. So in a little while the new-comers too took courage and found the performances, like many other things, not half so hard as they looked. And oh, how they all laughed and screamed, and how the squirrels squeaked with enjoyment! I don't think ever children before had such fun. Fancy the pleasure of swaying in a branch ever so far overhead quite safe, for their were the nine in a circle ready to catch you if you slipped, and then hand in hand, or rather hand in paw, dancing round the trunk by



I DON'T THINK EVER CHILDREN BEFORE HAD SUCH FUN.— p. 123.

hopping two and two from branch to branch, nine squirrels and four children — a merry baker's dozen. Then the sliding down the tree, like a climber on a May-pole, was great fun too, for the Bushys had a way of twisting themselves round it so as to avoid the sticking-out branches that was really very clever. So that when suddenly, in the middle of it all, a little silvery tinkling bell was heard to ring, and they all stood still looking at each other, Rollo and Maia felt quite vexed at the interruption.

“Go on,” said Maia, “what are you all stopping for?”

“The summons,” said Waldo and Silva together. “We must go. Good-night, all of you,” to the squirrels. Had their mother been there, I fancy they would have addressed Clamberina and her brothers and sisters more ceremoniously. “Good-bye and thank you for all the fun.”

“Good-bye, and thank you,” said Rollo and Maia, rather at a loss as to whether they should offer to shake paws, or if that was not squirrel fashion. But before they had time to consider, “Quick,” said a voice behind them, which they were not slow to recognise, “slide down the tree,” and down they slid, all four, though, giving one glance upwards, they caught sight of the nine squirrels all seated in a row on a branch, each with their pocket-handkerchief at their eyes, weeping copiously.

“Poor things,” said Maia, “how tender-hearted they are!”

“They always do that when we come away,” said Waldo; “it’s part of their manners. But they are very good-natured.”

“And where’s godmother,” said Maia, when they found themselves on terra-firma again. “Wasn’t it her voice that spoke to us up on the tree, and told us to come down?”

“Yes,” said Silva; “but she called up through a speaking-trumpet. I don’t know where she is herself. She may be a good way off. But that doesn’t matter. We can tell what to do. Lay your ear to the ground, Waldo.”

Waldo did so.

“Are they coming?” asked Silva.

“Yes,” said Waldo, getting up; “they’ll be here directly;” and almost before he had left off speaking the pretty sound of tinkling bells was heard approaching, nearer and nearer every second, till the children, to their delight, caught sight of the little carriage and the tiny piebald ponies, which came dancing up to them all of themselves, and stood waiting for them to get in.

“But where’s godmother?” exclaimed Maia; “how can we get home without her?”

“All right,” said Waldo; “she often lends Silva and me her ponies. I can drive you home quite safely, you’ll see. Get in, Maia and Silva behind — Rollo and I will go in front.”

And off they set. It was not quite such a harum-

scarum drive as it had been coming. Waldo did not take any flying leaps — indeed, I think nobody but godmother herself could have managed that! but it was very delightful all the same.

“Oh, Silva,” exclaimed Maia, “I do so wish we need not go back to the white castle and Lady Venelda and our lessons! I do so wish we might live in the cottage with you and Waldo, *always*.”

Silva looked a little sorry when Maia spoke thus.

“Don’t say that, Maia,” she said. “Godmother wouldn’t like it. We want to make you happy while you’re here — not to make you impatient. If you and Rollo were always at the cottage, you wouldn’t like it half so much as you do now, coming sometimes. You would soon get tired of it, unless you worked hard like Waldo and me.”

“Do you work hard?” said Maia, with some surprise.

“Yes, of course we do. You only see us at our playtime. Waldo goes off to the forester’s at the other side of the wood every morning at six, and I take him his dinner every day, and then I stay there and work in the dairy till we come home together in the evening.”

“But you sometimes have holidays,” said Maia.

“Yes, of course we do,” said Silva, smiling. “Godmother sees to that.”

“How?” asked Maia. “Does she know the for-

ester and his wife? Does she go and ask them to give you a holiday?"

"Not exactly," said Silva, smiling. "I can't tell you how she does it. She has her own ways for doing everything. How does she get you *your* holidays?"

"Does *she* get us them?" said Maia, astonished. "Why, Lady Venelda never speaks of her. Do you think she knows her?"

"I can't tell you," said Silva, again smiling in the same rather strange way as before, and somehow when she smiled like that she reminded Maia of godmother herself; "but she does know *somebody* at the white castle, and somebody there knows her."

"The old doctor!" exclaimed Maia, clapping her hands. "I'm *sure* you mean the old doctor. Ah! that's how it is, is it? Godmother sends to the old doctor or writes to him, or — or — I don't know what — and then he finds out we need a holiday, and — oh, he manages it somehow, I suppose!"

"Yes," said Silva; "but as long as you get your holiday it's all right. When godmother tells us of anything we're to do, or that she has settled for us, we're quite pleased without asking her all the little bits about it."

"I see," said Maia; "but then, Silva, you're different from me."

"Of course I am," said Silva; "but it wouldn't be at all nice if everybody was the same. That's one of the things godmother always says."

“Yes, like what she says about how stupid it would be if we knew everything, and if there was nothing more to puzzle and wonder about. It is nice to wonder and puzzle sometimes, but not always. Just now I don't mind about anything except about the fun of going so fast, with those dear little ponies' bells tinkling all the way. I shall be so sorry to get to the cottage, for we shan't have time to go in, Silva. We shall have to hurry home not to be too late for supper.”

Just as she spoke Waldo pulled up sharply.

“What's the matter?” called out Maia. She had been talking so much to Silva that she had not noticed the way they were going. Now she looked about her, and it seemed to her that she recognised the look of the trees, which were much less close and thick than in the middle of the forest. But before she had time to think more about it a voice close at hand made both her and Rollo start.

“Well, young people,” it said, “you have had, I hope, a pleasant day? You, too, Waldo and Silva? It is some time since I have seen you, my children.”

It was, of course, the voice of the doctor. All the four jumped out of the little carriage and ran forward to their old friend, for to Rollo's and Maia's surprise, the two forest children seemed to know him quite as well as they did themselves.

He seemed delighted to see them all, and his kind old face shone with pleasure as he patted the curly

heads of the boys and Maia, and stroked gently Silva's pretty, smooth hair.

"But you must go home," he said to Waldo and Silva. "Good-night, my children;" and quickly bidding their little friends farewell, the brother and sister sprang up again into the tiny carriage, and in another moment the more and more faintly-tinkling bells were all left of them, as Rollo and Maia stood a little sadly, gazing in the direction in which they had disappeared.

"And you have been happy?" said the old doctor.

"*Very* happy," both replied together. "We have had such fun." But before they had time to tell their old friend anything more he interrupted them.

"You, too, must hurry home," he said. "You see where you are? Up the path to the right and you will come out at the usual place just behind the castle wall at the back."

Rollo and Maia hastened to obey him.

"How queer he is!" said Maia. "He doesn't seem to care to hear what we've been doing — he never asks anything but if we've been happy."

"Well, what does it matter?" said Rollo. "I like only to talk to ourselves of the queer things we see when we're with Waldo and Silva. I wonder what they will show us or where they will take us the next time?"

"So do I," said Maia.

"Waldo said something about the eagles that live up in the high rocks at the edge of the forest," said

Rollo. "He did not exactly say so, but he spoke as if he had been there. Wouldn't you like to see an eagles' nest, Maia?"

"I should think so, indeed!" replied Maia eagerly. "But I don't think that's what they call it, Rollo; there's another name."

"Yes, I think there is, but I can't remember it," he answered. "But never mind, Maia, here we are at the gate. We must run in and get ready for supper."

CHAPTER IX.

A COMMITTEE OF BIRDS.

“ Then a sound is heard,
A sudden rushing sound of many wings.”

NOTHING was asked of the children as to where or how they had spent their day. Lady Venelda looked at them kindly as they took their places at the supper-table, and she kissed them when they said good-night as if she were quite pleased with them. They were not sorry to go to bed; for however delightful squirrel gymnastics are, they are somewhat fatiguing, especially to those who are not accustomed to them, and I can assure you that Rollo and Maia slept soundly that night; thanks to which, no doubt, they woke next morning as fresh as larks.

Their lessons were all done to the satisfaction of their teachers, so that in the afternoon, when, as they were setting off with Nanni for their usual walk, they met the old doctor on the terrace, he nodded at them good-humouredly.

“ That’s right,” he said; “ holidays do you no harm, I see.”

“ And we may have another before very long, then, mayn’t we?” said Maia, whose little tongue was always the readiest.

“All in good time,” said the old man, and as they had found his memory so good hitherto, the children felt that they might trust him for the future.

They did not go in the direction of the cottage to-day. Though they had not exactly been told so, they had come to understand that when godmother wanted them, or had arranged some pleasure for them and her forest children, she would find some means of letting them know, and the sort of desire to please and obey her which they felt seemed even stronger than if her wishes had been put down in plain rules. And when Nanni was with them they now took care not to speak of the cottage or their friends there, for she could not have understood about them, and she would only have been troubled and frightened. But yet the thought of Waldo and Silva and godmother and the cottage, and all the pleasure and fun they had had, seemed never quite away. It hovered about them like the impression of a happy dream, which seems to make the whole day brighter, though we can scarcely tell how.

The spring was now coming on fast; and what *can* be more delightful than spring-time in the woods? With the increasing warmth and sunshine the scent of the pines seemed to waft out into the air, the primroses and violets opened their eyes, and the birds overhead twittered and trilled in their perfect happiness.

“How can any one be so cruel as to shoot them?”

said Maia one afternoon about a week after the visit to the squirrels.

“I don’t think any one would shoot these tiny birds,” said Rollo.

“I am afraid they do in some countries,” said Maia. “Not here; I don’t think godmother would let them. I think nobody can do anything in these woods against her wishes,” she went on in a lower tone, glancing in Nanni’s direction. But that young woman was knitting away calmly, with an expression of complete content on her rosy face.

“Rollo,” Maia continued, “come close to me. I want to speak in a whisper;” and Rollo, who, like his sister, was stretched at full length on the ground, thickly carpeted with the tiny dry-brown spikes which had fallen from the fir-trees during the winter, edged himself along by his elbows without getting up, till he was near enough to hear Maia’s lowest murmur.

“Lazy boy,” she said, laughing. “Is it too much trouble to move?”

“It’s too much trouble to stand up anyway,” replied Rollo. “What is it you want to say, Maia? I do think there’s something in these woods that puts one to sleep, as Nanni says.”

“So do I,” said Maia, and her voice had a half sleepy sound as she spoke. “I don’t quite know what I wanted to say, Rollo. It was only something about *them*, you know.”

“You needn’t be the least afraid — Nanni can’t hear,” said Rollo, without moving.

“Well, I only wanted to talk a little about them. Just to wonder, you know, if they won’t soon be sending for us — making some new treat. It seems such a long time since we saw them.”

“Only a week,” said Rollo, sleepily.

“Well, a week’s a good while,” pursued Maia; “and I’m sure we’ve done our lessons *very* well all this time, and nobody’s had to scold us for anything. *Rollo —*”

“Oh, I do wish you’d let me take a little sleep,” said poor Rollo.

“Oh, very well, then! I won’t talk if you want to go to sleep,” said Maia, in a slightly offended tone; “though I must say I think it is very stupid of you when we’ve been shut up at our lessons all the morning, and we have only an hour to stay out, to want to spend it all in sleeping.”

But she said no more, for by this time Rollo was quite asleep, and the click-click of Nanni’s knitting-needles grew fainter and fainter, till Maia, looking round to see why she was stopping, discovered that Nanni too had given in to the influence of the woods. She was asleep, and doubtless dreaming pleasantly, for there was a broad smile on her good-natured face.

“Stupid things!” thought Maia to herself. And then she began wondering what amusement she

could find till it was time to go home again. "For *I'm* not sleepy," she said; "it is only the twinkling way the sunshine comes through the trees that makes my eyes feel rather dazzled. I may as well shut them a little, and as I have no one to talk to I will try to say over my French poetry, so that I shall know it *quite* well for Mademoiselle Delphine tomorrow morning."

The French poetry was long and dull. The complaint of a shepherdess for the loss of her sheep was the name of it, and Maia had not found it easy to learn, for, like many things it was then the custom to teach children, it was neither interesting nor instructive. But if it did her good in no other way, it was a lesson of patience, and Maia had worked hard at it. She now began to say it over to herself from the beginning in a low monotonous voice, her eyes closed as she half lay, half sat, leaning her head on the trunk of one of the great trees. It seemed to her that her poetry went wonderfully well. Never before had it sounded to her so musical. She really felt quite a pleasure in softly murmuring the lines, and quite unconsciously they seemed to set themselves to an air she had often been sung to sleep to by her nurse when a very little girl, till to her surprise Maia found herself singing in a low but exquisitely sweet voice.

"I *never* knew I could sing so beautifully," she thought to herself; "I must tell Rollo about it."

But she did not feel inclined to wake him up to listen to it. She had indeed forgotten all about him being asleep at her side — she had forgotten everything but the beauty of her song and the pleasure of her newly-discovered talent. And on and on she sang, like the bewitched Princess, though what she was singing about she could not by this time have told, till all of a sudden she became aware that she was not singing alone — or, at least, not without an accompaniment. For all through her singing, sometimes rising above it, sometimes gently sinking below, was a sweet trilling warble, purer and clearer than the sound of a running brook, softer and mellower than the music of any instrument Maia had ever heard.

“What can it be?” thought Maia. She half determined to open her eyes to look, but she refrained from a vague fear that if she did so it might perhaps scare the music away. But unconsciously she had stopped singing, and just then a new sound as of innumerable wings close to her made her forget all in her curiosity to see what it was. She opened her eyes in time to see fluttering downwards an immense flock of birds — birds of every shape and colour, though none of them were very big, the largest being about the size of a parrot. There lay Rollo, fast asleep, in the midst of the crowd of feathered creatures, and something — an instinct she could not explain — made Maia quickly shut her eyes again.

She was not afraid, but she felt sure the birds would not have come so near had they not thought her asleep too. So she remained perfectly still, leaning her head against the trunk of the tree and covering her face with her hand, so that she could peep out between the fingers while yet seeming to be asleep.

The flutter gradually ceased, and the great flock of birds settled softly on the ground. Then began a clear chirping which, to Maia's delight, as she listened with all her ears, gradually seemed to shape itself into words which she could understand.

"Do you think they liked our music?" piped a bird, or several birds together — it was impossible to say which.

"I think so," answered some other; "*he*" — and Maia understood that they were speaking of Rollo — "has heard it but dimly — he is farther away. But *she* was nearer us and will not forget it."

"They seem good children," said in a more squeaky tone a black and white bird, hopping forward a little by himself. He appeared to Maia to be some kind of crow or raven, but she disliked his rather patronising tone.

"Good children," she said to herself. "What business has an old crow to talk of us as good children!"

"Ah, yes!" replied a little brown bird which had established itself on a twig just above Rollo's head. "If they had not been so, you may be sure *she* would

have had nothing to do with them, instead of making them as happy as she can, and giving orders all through the forest that they are to be entertained. I hear they amused themselves very well at the squirrels' the other day."

"Ah, indeed! A party?"

"Oh, no — just a simple gambolade. Had it been a party, of course *our* services would have been retained for the music."

"Naturally," replied the little brown bird. "Of course no musical entertainment would be complete without *you*, Mr. Crow."

The old black bird giggled. He seemed quite flattered, and was evidently on the point of replying to his small brown friend by some amiable speech, when a soft cooing voice interrupted him. It was that of a wood-pigeon, who, with two or three companions, came hopping up to them.

"What are we to do?" she said. "Shall we warble a slumber-song for them? They are sleeping still."

The old crow glanced at the children.

"I fancy they have had enough music for to-day," he said. "I think we should consult together seriously about what we can do for their entertainment. It won't do to let the squirrels be the only ones to show them attention. Besides, children who come to our woods and amuse themselves without ever robbing a nest, catching a butterfly, or causing the slight-

est alarm to even a hare — such children *deserve* to be rewarded.”

“What can we do for them?” chirruped a brisk little robin. “We have given them a concert, which has had the effect” — and he made a patronising little bow in the direction of Rollo and Maia — “the effect — of sending them to sleep.”

“I beg your pardon,” said a sparrow pertly. “They were asleep before our serenade began. It was *intended* to lull their slumbers. That was *her* desire.”

“Doubtless,” said the crow snappishly. “Mr. Sparrow is always the best informed as to matters in the highest quarters. And, of course — considering his world-wide fame as a songster — ”

“No sparring — no satirical remarks, gentlemen,” put in a bird who had not yet spoken. It was a blackbird, and all listened to him with respect. “We should give example of nothing but peace and unity to these unfeathered visitors of ours, otherwise they might carry away a most mistaken idea of our habits and principles and of the happiness in which we live.”

“Certainly — certainly,” agreed the crow. “It was but a little amiable repartee, Mr. Blackbird. My young friend Sparrow has not quite thrown off the — the slight — sharpness of tone acquired, almost unconsciously, by a long residence in cities.”

“And you, my respected friend,” observed the sparrow, “are naturally — but we can all make allowance for each other — not altogether indisposed to

croak. But these are trifling matters in no way interfering with the genuine brotherliness and good feeling in which we all live together in this favoured land."

A gentle but general buzz, or twitter rather, of applause greeted this speech.

"And now to business," said the robin. "What are we to arrange for the amusement of our young friends?"

"A remark reached my ears — I may explain, in passing, that some members of my family have a little nest just under the eaves of the castle, and — and — I now and then hear snatches of conversation — not, of course, that we are given to *eavesdropping* — of course, none of my family could be suspected of such a thing — but, as I was saying, a remark reached my ears that our young friends would like to visit what, in human language, would be called our king's palace — that is to say, the eyrie of the great eagle at the summit of the forest," said a swallow, posing his awkward body ungracefully on one leg and looking round for approval.

"Nothing easier," replied the robin. "We are much obliged to you for the suggestion, Mr. Swallow. If it meets with approval in the highest quarters, I vote that we should carry it out."

Another twitter of approval greeted this speech.

"And when shall the visit take place?" asked the wood-pigeon softly, "and how shall it be accomplished?"

“As to *when*, that is not for us to decide,” said the robin. “As to *how*, I should certainly think a voyage through the air would be far the greatest novelty and amusement. And this, by laying our wings all together, we can easily arrange. The first thing we have to do is to submit the idea for approval, and then we can all meet together again and fix the details. But now I think we should be on the wing to regain our nests. Besides, our young friends will be awaking soon. It would not do for them to see us here assembled in such numbers. It might alarm them.”

“That is true,” said the crow. “Their education in some respects has been neglected. They have not enjoyed the unusual advantages of Waldo and Silva. But still — they are very good children, in their way.”

This last speech made Maia so angry that, forgetting all pretence of being asleep, she started up to give the old crow a bit of her mind.

“You impertinent old croaker,” she began to say, but to her amazement there was neither crow nor bird of any kind to be seen! Maia rubbed her eyes — was she, or had she been dreaming? No, it was impossible. But yet, how had all the birds got away so quickly, without the least flutter or bustle, and in less than half a second? She turned to Rollo and gave him a shake.

“Rollo,” she said, “do wake up, you lazy boy. Where have they all gone to?”

CHAPTER X.

A SAIL IN THE AIR.

“Bright are the regions of the air,
And among the winds and beams
It were delight to wander there.”

SHELLEY.

“WHAT are you talking about?” said Rollo, sitting up, and in his turn rubbing his eyes. “Where have ‘who’ gone to?”

“The birds, of course,” replied Maia. “You can’t be so stupid, Rollo, as not to have seen them.”

“I’ve been asleep,” said the poor boy, looking rather ashamed of himself. “What birds were they? Did you see them? I have a queer sort of feeling,” and he hesitated, looking at Maia as if she could explain it, “as if I had dreamt something about them — as if I heard some sort of music through my sleep. What did *you* see, Maia? do tell me.”

Maia described it all to him, and he listened with the greatest interest. But at the end he made an observation which roused her indignation.

“I believe you were dreaming too,” he said. “Nobody ever heard of birds speaking like that.”

“And yet you say you heard something of it through your sleep? Is it likely we both dreamt the same thing all of ourselves?”

“But I didn’t dream that birds were talking,” objected Rollo. “They can’t talk.”

Maia glanced at him with supreme contempt.

“Can squirrels talk?” she said. “Would anybody believe all the things we have seen and done since we have been in this Christmas-tree land? Think of our drives in godmother’s carriage; think of our finding our way through a tree’s trunk; think of godmother herself, with her wonderful ways and her beautiful dress, and yet that she can look like a poor old woman! Would anybody believe all that, do you think? And we know it’s all true; and yet you can’t believe birds can talk! Oh, you are too stupid.”

Rollo smiled; he did not seem vexed.

“I don’t see that all that prevents it being possible that you were dreaming all the same,” he said. “But dreams are true sometimes.”

“Are they?” said Maia, looking puzzled in her turn. “Well, what was the use of going on so about birds never talking, then? Never mind, now; just wait and see if what I’ve told you doesn’t come true. *I shall go, Rollo; if the birds come to fetch us to go to see the eagle, I shall go.*”

“So shall I,” said Rollo coolly. “I never had the slightest intention of not going. But we must go home now, Maia; it’s getting late, and you know we were not to stay long to-day.”

“Where’s Nanni?” said Maia.

“Perhaps the birds have flown off with her,” said Rollo mischievously. But for a moment or two neither he nor Maia could help feeling a little uneasy, for no Nanni was to be seen! They called her and shouted to her, and at last a sort of grunt came in reply, which guided them to where, quite hidden by a little nest of brushwood, Nanni lay at full length, blinking her eyes as if she had not the slightest idea where she was.

As soon as she saw them, up she jumped.

“Oh, I am so ashamed,” she cried. “What could have come over me to fall asleep like that, just when I thought I should have got such a great piece of Master Rollo’s stockings done! And you have been looking for me, lazy girl that I am! But I can assure you, Miss Maia, when I first sat down I was not here — I was sitting over there,” and she pointed to another tree-stump a little way off, “not asleep at all, and knitting so fast. There are fairies in the wood, Miss Maia,” she added in a lower voice. “I’ve thought it many a time, and I’m more sure than ever of it now. I don’t think we should come into the woods at all, I really don’t.”

“We shouldn’t have anywhere to walk in, then,” said Rollo. “I don’t see why you should be afraid of fairies, Nanni, even supposing there are any. They’ve never done us any harm. Now, have they?”

But though she could not say they had, Nanni did

not look happy. She was one of those people that did not like anything she did not understand. Maia gave Rollo's sleeve a little pull as a sign to him that he had better not say any more, and then they set off quickly walking back to the castle.

For some days things went on as usual, though every morning when she got up and every evening when she went to bed Maia wondered if the summons would not come soon. She went all round the castle, peeping up into the eaves to see if she could find the swallows' nest; but she did not succeed, and it was no wonder, for the solitary nest was hidden away in a corner where even Maia's sharp eyes could not penetrate, and the swallows flew out and in through a hole in the parapet round the roof which no one suspected.

"I know there *are* swallows here," she said to Rollo, "for I've seen them. But I can't fancy where they live."

"Nanni would say they were fairies," said Rollo, smiling. He was more patient than his sister, and he was quite sure that godmother would not forget them. And by degrees Maia began to follow his example, especially after Rollo happened to remark one day that he had noticed that it was always when they had been working the most steadily at their lessons, and thinking the least of holidays and treats that the holidays and treats came. This counsel Maia took to heart, and worked so well for some

days that Mademoiselle Delphine and the old chaplain had none but excellent reports to give of both children, and Lady Venelda smiled on them so graciously that they felt sure her next letter to their father would be a most satisfactory one.

One evening — it was the evening of a most lovely spring day — when Rollo and Maia had said good-night in the usual ceremonious way to Lady Venelda, they were coming slowly along the great corridor, white like the rest of the castle, which led to their own rooms, when a sound at one of the windows they were passing made them stop.

“What was that?” said Maia. “It sounded like a great flutter of wings.”

Rollo glanced out of the window. It was nearly dark, but his eyes were quick.

“It was wings,” he said. “Quite a flight of birds have just flown off from under the roof.”

“Ah,” said Maia, nodding her head mysteriously, “I thought so. Well, Rollo, *I* don’t intend to go to sleep to-night, whether you do or not.”

Rollo shook his head.

“I shall wake if there’s anything to wake for,” he said. “I’m much more sure of doing that than you can be of keeping awake.”

“Why, I couldn’t *go* to sleep if I thought there was going to be anything to wake for,” said Maia.

Before long they were both in bed. Rollo laid his head on the pillow without troubling himself about

keeping awake or going to sleep. Maia, on the contrary, kept her eyes as wide open as she could. It was a moonlight night; the objects in the room stood out in sharp black shadow against the bright radiance, seeming to take queer fantastic forms which made her every minute start up, feeling sure that she saw some one or something beside her bedside. And every time that she found it a mistake she felt freshly disappointed. At last, quite tired with expecting she knew not what, she turned her face to the wall and shut her eyes.

“Stupid things that they all are!” she said to herself. “Godmother, and the birds, and Waldo, and Silva, and the old doctor, and everybody. They’ve no business to promise us treats, and then never do anything about them. I shan’t think any more about it, that I won’t. I believe it’s all a pretence.”

Which you will, I am sure, agree with me in thinking not very reasonable on Maia’s part!

She fell asleep at last, and, as might have been expected, much more soundly than usual. When she woke, it was from a deep, dreamless slumber, but with the feeling that for some time some one had been calling her, and that she had been slow of rousing herself.

“What is it?” she called out, sitting up in bed, and trying to wink the sleep out of her eyes. “Who is there?”

“Maia!” a voice replied. A voice that seemed to

come from a great distance, and yet to reach her as clearly as any sound she had ever heard in her life.

“Maia, are you ready?”

Up sprang Maia.

“Godmother, is it you calling me?” she said. “Oh, yes, it must be you! I’ll be ready in a moment, godmother. If I could but find my shoes and stockings! Oh, dear! oh, dear! and I meant to keep awake all night. I’ve been expecting you such a long time.”

“I know,” said the voice, quite close beside her this time; “you have been expecting me too much,” and, glancing round, Maia saw in the moonlight—right *in* the moonlight, looking indeed almost as if the bright rays came from her—a shadowy silvery figure, quite different from godmother as she had hitherto known her, but which, nevertheless, she knew in a moment could be no one else. Maia flung her arms round her and kissed her.

“Yes,” she said, “now I’m *quite* sure it’s you and not a dream. No dream has cheeks so soft as yours, godmother, and no one else kisses like you. Your kisses are just like violets. But what am I to do? Must I get dressed at once?”

Godmother passed her hands softly round the child. She seemed to stroke her.

“You are dressed,” she said. “The clothes you wear generally would be too heavy, so I brought some with me. You do not need shoes and stockings.”

But Maia was looking at herself with too much surprise almost to hear what she said. "Dressed," yes, indeed! She was dressed as never before in her life, and though she turned herself about, and stroked herself like a little bird proud of its plumage, she could not find out of what her dress was made, nor what exactly was its colour. Was it velvet, or satin, or plush? Was it green or blue?

"I know," she cried at last joyously; "it's the same stuff your red dress is made of, godmother! Oh, how nice, and soft, and warm, and light all together it is! I feel as if I could jump up to the sky."

"And not be seen when you got there," said godmother. "The colour of your dress *is* sky colour, Maia. But when you have finished admiring yourself we must go—the others have been ready ever so long. They had not been expecting me *too* much, like you, and so they were ready all the quicker."

"Do you mean Rollo?" said Maia. "Rollo, and Silva, and Waldo?"

Godmother nodded her head.

"I'm ready now, anyway," said Maia.

"Give me your hand," said godmother, and taking it she held it firm, and led Maia to the window. To the little girl's surprise it was wide open. Godmother, still holding her hand, softly whistled—once, twice, three times. Then stood quietly waiting.

A gentle, rustling, wafting sound became gradually audible. Maia remained perfectly still — holding her breath in her curiosity to see what was coming next. The sound grew nearer and louder, if one can use the word loud to so soft and delicate a murmur. Maia stretched out her head.

“Here they are,” said godmother, and as she spoke, a large object, looking something like a ship with two great sails swimming through the air instead of on the sea, came in sight, and, as if steered by an invisible hand, came slowly up to the window and there stopped.

“What is it?” cried Maia, not quite sure, in spite of godmother’s firm clasp, whether she was not a little frightened, for even godmother herself looked strangely shadowy and unreal in the moonlight, and the great air-boat was like nothing Maia had ever seen or dreamt of. Suddenly she gave a joyful spring, for she caught sight of what took away all her fear. There in the centre of the huge sails, seated in a sort of car, and joyfully waving their hands to her, were Rollo, and Silva, and Waldo.

“Come, Maia,” they called out; “the birds have come to fetch us, you see. There’s a snug seat for you among the cushions. Come, quick.”

How was she to come, Maia was on the point of asking, when she felt godmother draw her quickly forward.

“Spring, my child, and don’t be afraid,” she said,

and Maia sprang almost without knowing it, for before she had time to ask or think anything about it, she found herself being kissed by Silva, and comfortably settled in her place by the boys.

“All right — we’re off now,” Waldo called out, and at once, with a steady swing, the queer ship rose into the air.

“But godmother,” exclaimed Maia, “where is she? Isn’t she coming with us?”

“I am with you, my child,” answered godmother’s clear, well-known voice. But where it came from Maia could not tell.

“Godmother is steering us,” said Silva softly, “but we can’t see her. She doesn’t want us to see her. But she’ll take care of us.”

“But where are we?” asked Maia bewildered. “What is this queer ship or balloon that we are in? What makes it go?”

“Look closer, and you’ll see,” said Silva. “Look at the sails.”

And Maia looking, saw by the bright moonlight something stranger than any of the strange things she had yet seen in Christmas-tree land. The sails were made of an immense collection of birds all somehow or other holding together. Afterwards Silva explained to her that they were all clinging by their claws to a great frame, round which they were arranged in order according to their size, and all flapping their wings in perfect time, so as to have



“ ALL RIGHT — WE’RE OFF NOW,” WALDO CALLED OUT, AND AT ONCE, WITH A STEADY SWING, THE QUEER SHIP ROSE INTO THE AIR. — p. 156.

much the same effect in propelling the vessel through the air as the regular motion of several pairs of oars in rowing a boat over the sea. And gradually, as Maia watched and understood, a soft murmur reached her ears — it was the waft of the many pairs of wings as they all together clove the air.

“Oh, the dear, sweet birds!” she exclaimed. “They have planned it all themselves, I am sure. Oh, Silva, isn’t it lovely? Have you ever had a sail in the air like this before?”

“Not exactly like this,” said Silva.

“We’ve had *rides* in the air,” said Waldo mysteriously.

“*Have* you?” said Maia eagerly. “Oh, do tell us about them!”

But Rollo laid his hand on her arm.

“Hush!” he said softly; “the birds are going to sing,” and before Maia had time to ask him how he knew, the song began.

“Shut your eyes,” said Waldo; “let’s all shut our eyes. It sounds ever so much prettier.”

The others followed his advice. You can imagine nothing more delicious than the feeling of floating — for it felt more like quick floating than anything else — swiftly through the air, with the sweet warbling voices all keeping perfect time together, so that even the queer sounds which now and then broke through the others — a croak from the crow, who was quite satisfied that he alone conducted the bass voices, or

a sudden screech from an owl, who had difficulty in subduing his tones — did not seem to mar the effect of the whole. The children did not speak; they did not feel as if they cared to do so. They held each others' hands, and Maia leant her head on Silva's shoulder in perfect content. It was like a beautiful dream.

Gradually the music ceased, and just as it did so godmother's well-known voice came clearly through the air. It seemed to come from above, and yet it sounded so near.

“Children,” she said, “we are going higher. It will be colder for a while, for we must hasten, to be in good time for the dawn. Wrap yourselves up well!”

And as she spoke down dropped on their heads a great soft fleecy shawl or mantle. Softer and fleecier and lighter than any eider-down or lambs' wool that ever was seen or felt, and warmer too, for the children had but to give it the tiniest pull or pat in any direction and there it settled itself in the most comfortable way, creeping round them like the gentle hand of a mother covering up the little ones at night.

“It must be godmother who is tucking us up, though we can't see her,” said Rollo.

“Dear godmother,” said Maia, and a sort of little echo was murmured all round, even the birds seeming to join in it, of “dear godmother.”

It did get colder, much colder; but the well-protected children, nestling in the cushions of their air-boat, did not feel it, except when inquisitive

Maia poked up her sharp little nose, very quickly to withdraw it again.

“Oh, it *is* so freezy,” she said. “My nose feels as if it would drop off. Do rub it for me, Silva.”

“I told you it would be cold,” said godmother’s voice again. “Stay where you are, Maia; indeed, I think I don’t need to warn you now. A burnt child dreads the fire. I will tell you all when the time comes for you to peep out.”

Maia felt a very little ashamed of her restlessness, and for the rest of the journey she was perfectly quiet. Especially when in a few moments the birds began to sing again — still more softly and sweetly this time, so that it seemed a kind of cradle song. Whether the children slept or not I cannot tell. I don’t think they could have told themselves; but in any case they were very still for a good long while after the serenade had ceased.

And then once more — clearer and more ringing than before — sounded godmother’s voice.

“Children, look out! The dawn is breaking.”

And as the strange air-boat slowly relaxed its speed, floating downwards in the direction of some great cliffs almost exactly underneath where it was, the four children sat up, throwing off the fairy mantle which had so well protected them, and gazed with all their eyes, as well they might, at the wonderful beauty of the sight before them.

For they had sailed up to the eagles’ eyrie in time to see the sun rise!

CHAPTER XI.

THE EAGLES' EYRIE.

“Where, yonder, in the upper air
The solemn eagles watch the sun.”

DID you ever see the sun rise? I hope so; but still I am sure you never saw it from such a point as that whereon their winged conductors gently deposited the castle and the forest children that early summer morning.

“Jump out,” said the voice they had all learnt to obey, when the air-boat came to a stand-still a few feet above the rock. And the children, who as yet had noticed nothing of the ground above which they were hovering, for their eyes were fixed on the pink and azure and emerald and gold, spreading out like a fairy kaleidoscope on the sky before them, joined hands and sprang fearlessly on to they knew not what. And as they did so, with a murmuring warble of farewell, the birds flapped their wings, and the air-boat rose swiftly into the air and disappeared from view.

The four looked at each other.

“Has godmother sailed away in it? I thought she was going to stay with us,” exclaimed Maia in a disappointed tone.

“Oh, Maia,” said Silva, “you don’t yet understand godmother a bit. But we must not stand here. You know the way, Waldo?”

“Here,” where they were standing, was, as I said, a rock, ragged and bare, though lower down, its sides were clothed with short thymy grass. And stretching behind them the children saw a beautiful expanse of hilly ground, beautiful though treeless, for the heather and bracken and gorse that covered it looked soft and mellow in the distance, more especially with the lovely light and colour just now reflected from the sky.

But Waldo turned in the other direction. He walked a little way across the hard, bare rock, which he seemed to be attentively examining, till suddenly he stopped short, and tapped on the ground with a little stick he had in his hand.

“It must be about here,” he said. The other three children came close round him.

“Here,” exclaimed Silva, and she pointed to a small white cross cut in the stone at their feet.

Waldo knelt down, and pressed the spot exactly in the centre of the cross. Immediately a large slab of rock, forming a sort of door, but fitting so closely when shut that no one would have suspected its existence, opened inwards, disclosing a flight of steps. Waldo looked round.

“This is the short cut to the face of the cliff,” he said. “Shall I go down first?”

“Yes, and I next,” said Rollo, eagerly springing forward.

Then followed Silva and Maia. The flight of steps was a short one. In a few moments they found themselves in a rocky passage, wide enough for them to walk along comfortably, one by one, and not dark, as light came in from little shafts cut at intervals in the roof. The passage twisted and turned about a good deal, but suddenly Waldo stopped, calling out:

“Here we are! Is not this worth coming to see?”

The passage had changed into a gallery, with the rock on one side only, on the other a railing, to protect those walking along it from a possible fall; for they were right on the face of an enormous cliff, far down at the bottom of which they could distinguish the tops of their old friends the firs. And far as the eye could reach stretched away into the distance, miles and miles and miles, here rising, there again sweeping downwards, the everlasting Christmas-trees!

The passage stopped suddenly. It ended in a sort of little shelf in the rock, and higher up in the wall, at the back of this shelf as it were, the children saw two large round holes cut in the rock: they were the windows of the eagles' eyrie.

Waldo went forward, and with his little stick tapped three times on the smooth, shining rock-wall. But the others, intently watching though they were, could not see how a door opened — whether it drew

back inwards or rolled in sideways. All they saw was that just before them, where a moment before there had been the rock-surface, a great arched doorway now invited them to enter.

Waldo glanced round, though without speaking. The other three understood, and followed him through the doorway, which, in the same mysterious way in which it had opened, was now closed up behind them. But that it was so they hardly noticed, so delighted were they with what they saw before them. It was the prettiest room, or hall, you could imagine — the roof rising very high, and the light coming in through the two round windows of which I told you. And the whole — roof, walls, floor — was completely lined with what, at first sight, the children took for some most beautifully-embroidered kind of velvet. But velvet it was not. No embroidery ever showed the exquisite delicacy of tints, fading into each other like the softest tones of music, from the purest white through every silvery shade to the richest purple, or from deep glowing scarlet to pink paler than the first blush of the peach-blossom, while here and there rainbow wreaths shone out like stars on a glowing sky. It was these wreaths that told the secret.

“Why,” exclaimed Maia, “it is all *feathers!*”

“Yes,” said Silva, “I had forgotten. I never was here before, but godmother told me about it.”

“And where — ?” Maia was going on, but a sound interrupted her. It was that of a flutter of wings

over their heads, and looking up the children perceived two enormous birds slowly flying downwards to where they stood, though whence they had come could not be seen.

They alighted and stood together — their great wings folded, while their piercing eyes surveyed their guests.

“We make you welcome,” they said at last, in a low soft tone which surprised the children, whose heads were full of the idea that eagles were fierce and their only voice a scream. “We have been looking for your visit, of which our birds gave us notice. We have ordered a collation to be prepared for you, and we trust you will enjoy the view.”

Waldo, who seemed to be master of the ceremonies to-day, stepped forward a little in front of the others.

“We thank you,” he said quietly, making his best bow as he spoke.

The eagle queen raised her great wing — the left wing — and with it pointed to a spot among the feather hangings where, though they had not noticed it, the children now saw gleaming a silver knob.

“Up that stair leads to the balcony overhanging the cliff,” she said. “There you will find our respected attendants, the falcon and the hawk, who have purveyed for your wants. And before you leave, the king and I hope to show you something of this part of our domains. *Au revoir!* — the sun awaits us to bid him good-morning.”

And with a slow, majestic movement the two strange birds spread their wings and rose upwards, where, though the children's eyes followed them closely, they disappeared they knew not how or where.

Then Waldo turned the silver knob and opened a door, through which, as the eagle queen had said, they saw a staircase mounting straight upwards. It led out on to a balcony cut in the rock, but carefully carpeted with moss, and with rustic seats and a rustic table, on which were laid out four covers evidently intended for the four children. Two birds, large, but very much smaller than the eagles, stood at the side, each with a table-napkin over one wing, which so amused the children that it was with difficulty they returned the exceedingly dignified "reverence," with which the hawk and the falcon greeted them. And they were rather glad when the two attendants spread their wings and flew over the edge of the balcony, evidently going to fetch the dishes.

"What will they give us to eat, I wonder?" said Maia. "I hope it won't be pieces of poor little lambs, all raw, you know. That's what they always tell you eagles eat in the natural history books."

"Not the eagles of *this* country," said Silva. "I am sure you never read about them in your books. *Our* eagles are not cruel and fierce; they would never eat little lambs."

"But they must kill lots of little birds, whether

they eat them or not," said Maia, "to get all those quantities and quantities of feathers."

"Kill the little birds!" cried Silva and Waldo both at once. "Kill their own birds! Maia, what are you thinking of? As if any creature that lives in Christmas-tree Land would kill any other! Why, the feathers are the birds' presents to the king and queen. They keep all that drop off and bring them once a year, and that's been done for years and years, till the whole of the nest is lined with them."

"How nice!" replied Maia. "I'm very glad the eagles are so kind. But they're not so *funny* as the squirrels. They look so very solemn."

"They must be solemn," said Waldo. "They're not like the squirrels, who have nothing to do but jump about."

"I beg your pardon," said Rollo. "Have you forgotten that the world would stop if Mr. Bushy didn't climb to the top of the tree?"

"And what would happen if the eagles left off watching the sun?" said Waldo.

"I don't know," said Maia eagerly. "Do tell us, Waldo."

Waldo looked at her.

"I don't know either," he said. "Perhaps the sun would go to sleep, and then there would be a nice confusion."

"You're laughing at me," said Maia, in rather an offended tone. "I don't see how I'm to be expected

to know everything; if the squirrels and the eagles and all the creatures here are different from everywhere else, how could I tell?"

"Here's the collation!" exclaimed Rollo, and looking up, the others saw the falcon and the hawk flying back again, carrying between them a large basket, from which, when they had set it down beside the table, they cleverly managed, with beaks and claws, to take all sorts of mysterious things, which they arranged upon the table. There was no lamb, either raw or roasted, for all the repast consisted of fruits. Fruits of every kind the children had ever heard of, and a great many of which they did not even know the names, but which were more delicious than you, who have never tasted them, can imagine.

"You see the eagle king and queen have no need to kill poor little lambs," said Silva. And Maia agreed with her that no one who could get such fruits to eat, need ever wish for any other food. While she was speaking, the same soft rustle which they had heard before sounded overhead, and again the two great majestic birds alighted beside them. The four children started to their feet.

"Thank you so much for the delicious fruit, eagle king and eagle queen," said Maia, who was seldom backward at making speeches.

"We are glad you found it to your taste," said the king. "It has come from many a far-away land—

lands you have perhaps scarcely even dreamt of, but which to us seem not so strange or distant."

"Do you fly away so very far?" asked Maia, but the eagles only gleamed at her with their wonderful eyes, and shook their heads.

"It is not for us to tell what you could not understand," said the king. "They who can gaze undazzled on the sun must see many things."

Maia drew back a little.

"They frighten me rather," she whispered to the others. "They are so solemn and mysterious."

"But that needn't frighten you," said Silva. "Rollo isn't frightened."

"Rollo's a boy," replied Maia, as if that settled the matter.

Waldo now pointed out some steps in the rock leading up still higher.

"The eagles want us to go up there," he said. "We shall see right over the forest and ever so far."

And so they did, for the steps led up a long way till they ended on another rock-shelf right on the face of the cliff. From here the great fir-forests looked but like dark patches far below, while away, away in the distance stretched on one side the great plain across which the children had journeyed on their first coming to the white castle; and on the other the distant forms of mountain ranges, gray-blue, shading fainter and fainter till the clouds themselves looked more real.

It was cold, very cold, up here on the edge of the great bare rocks. The beauty of the sunrise had sobered down into the chilly freshness of an early summer morning; the world seemed still asleep, and the children shivered a little.

"I don't think I should like to live always as high up as this," said Maia. "It's very lonely and very cold."

"You would need to be dressed in feathers like the eagles if you did," replied Silva; "and if one had eyes like theirs, I dare say one would never feel lonely. One would see so much."

"I wonder," said Maia — and then she stopped.

"What were you going to say?" asked Rollo.

Maia's eyes looked far over the plain as if, like the eagles, they would pierce the distance.

"It was from there we came," she said. "I wonder if it will be from there that father will come to take us away. Do you think that the eagles will know when he is coming? do you think they will see him from very far off?"

Silva looked over the plain without speaking, and into her dark eyes there crept something that was not in Maia's blue ones.

"Maia," exclaimed Rollo reproachfully, "Silva is crying. She doesn't like you to talk of us going away."

In an instant Maia's arms were round Silva's neck.

"Don't cry, Silva — you mustn't," she said. "When

we go away you and Waldo shall come too — we will ask our father, won't we, Rollo?"

"And godmother?" said Silva, smiling again. "What would she say? We are her children, Maia, and the children of the forest. We should not be fit to live as you do in the great world of men out away there. No; we can always love each other, and perhaps you and Rollo will come away out of the world sometimes to see us — but we must stay in our own country."

"Never mind — don't talk about it just now," said Maia. "I wish I hadn't said anything about father coming. I dare say he won't come for a very long while, and when we can see you and Waldo we are never dull. It's only at the castle when they give us such lots of lessons and everybody is so prim and so cross if we're the least bit late. Oh, dear! — I was forgetting — shan't we be late for breakfast this morning? Is godmother coming to fetch us?"

"We are going home now," said Waldo. "But first we must say good-bye to the eagles. Here they are," for as he spoke the two royal birds came circling down from overhead and settled themselves on the very edge of the cliff, whose dizzy height they calmly overlooked — their gaze fixed far beyond.

"That is where they always stay watching," said Waldo, in a low voice, and then the children went forward till they were but a few steps behind the pair. Farther it would not have been safe to go.

“Good-bye, king and queen,” they said all together, and the eagles, slowly turning round, though without moving from their places, answered in their grave voices :

“Farewell, children. We will watch you, though you may not know it. Farewell.”

Then Waldo led the others down the rock stair by which they had come up — down past the balcony where they had had their collation of fruit, till they found themselves in the feather-lined hall.

“There is something rather sad about the eagles,” said Maia. “Do you think it is watching so much that makes them sad?”

“Perhaps,” said Silva. “Come and sit down here in this snug corner. Look, there is a feather arm-chair for each of us — it is a little chilly, don’t you think?”

“Yes, perhaps it is. But tell me if you know why the eagles are sad.”

“I think they are more grave than sad,” replied Silva. “I dare say watching so much does make them so.”

“Why? Do they see so far? Do they see all sorts of things?” asked Maia in a rather awe-struck tone. “Are they like fairies, Silva?”

“I don’t know exactly,” said Silva. “But I think they are very wise, and I expect they know a great deal.”

“But they can’t know as much as godmother, and she isn’t sad,” said Maia.

“Sometimes she is,” said Silva. “Besides, she has more to do than the eagles. They have only to watch—she puts things right. You’ll understand better some day,” she added, seeing that Maia looked puzzled. “But isn’t it cold? Oh, see there—that’s to wrap ourselves up in,” for just at this moment there flapped down on them, from no one could tell where, the great soft fluffy cloak or rug which had kept them so beautifully warm during their air-journey.

“Come under the shawl,” cried Maia to the two boys, and all the children drew their seats close together and wrapped the wonderful cloak well round them.

“But aren’t we going home soon?” said Maia. “I’m so afraid of being late.”

“Godmother knows all about it,” said Waldo. “She’s sent us this cloak on purpose. There’s nothing to do but sit still—till she tells us what we’re to do. I don’t mind, for somehow I’m rather sleepy.”

“I think I am too,” said Rollo, and though Silva and Maia were less ready to allow it, I think they must have felt the same, for somehow or other two minutes later all the four were taking a comfortable nap, and knew nothing more till a soft clear voice whispered in their ears:

“Children, it is time to wake up.”

“Time to go home! Are the birds coming for us

again?" said Maia, rubbing her eyes and staring about her. A voice softly laughing replied to her:

"Birds — what birds are you talking about? You're not awake yet, Maia, and I've been telling you to wake ever so long."

It was Rollo.

"You, why I thought it was godmother," said Maia; "I heard her say, 'Children, it is time to wake up,' and I thought we were all in the feather-hall still. How did we get back, Rollo?"

For "back" they were. Maia in her own little bed in the white castle, and Rollo standing beside her in his ordinary dress. Where were Waldo and Silva — where the feather-hall — where the wonderful dresses in which godmother had clothed them for the air-journey? Maia looked up at Rollo as she spoke, with disappointment in her eyes.

"We *are* back," he said, "and that's all there is to say about it, as far as I can see. But come, Maia, don't look so unhappy. We've had great fun, and we must be very good after it to please godmother. It's a lovely day, and after we've finished our lessons we can have some nice runs in the fields. Jump up — you're not a bit tired, are you? I'm not."

"Nor am I," said Maia, slowly bestirring herself. "But I'm rather dull. I'm afraid we shan't see them again for a good while, Rollo."

CHAPTER XII.

A VISION OF CHRISTMAS TREES.

“The angels are abroad to-night.”

AT CHRISTMAS-TIDE.

IT was early summer when *we* saw them last. It is mid-winter — December — now. And winter comes in good earnest in the country where I have shown you the white castle, and told you of the doings and adventures of its two little guests. Many more could I tell you of — many a joyous summer day had they spent with their forest friends, many a wonderful dance had godmother led them, till they had got to know nearly as much as Waldo and Silva themselves of the strange happy creatures that lived in this marvellous Christmas-tree Land, and in other lands too. For as the days shortened again, and grew too cold for air-journeys and cave explorings and visits to many other denizens of the forest than I have space to tell you about, then began the season of godmother's story-tellings, which I think the children found as delightful as any other of her treats. Oh, the wonderful tales that were told round the bright little fire in Silva's dainty kitchen! Oh, the wood-fairies, and water-sprites, and dwarfs, and gnomes that they learnt about! Oh, the lovely songs that godmother

sang in that witching voice of hers — that voice like none other that the children had ever heard! It was a true fairy-land into which she led them — a fairy-land where entered nothing ugly or cruel or mean or false, though the dwellers in it were of strange and fantastic shape and speech, children of the rainbow and the mist, unreal and yet real, like the cloud-castles that build themselves for us in the sky, or the music that weaves itself in the voice of the murmuring stream.

But even to these happy times there came an end — and the beginning of this end began to be felt when the first snow fell and Christmas-tree Land was covered with the thick white mantle it always wore till the spring's soft breath blew it off again.

“A storm is coming — a heavy storm is on its way, my darlings,” said godmother one afternoon, when she had been spinning some lovely stories for them with her invisible wheel. She had left the fireside and was standing by the open doorway, looking out at the white landscape, and as she turned round, it seemed to the children that her own face was whiter than usual — her *hair* certainly was so. It had lost the golden tinge it sometimes took, which seemed to make a gleam all over her features — so that at such times it was impossible to believe that godmother was old — and now she seemed a very tiny little old woman, as small and fragile as if she herself was made out of a snowflake, and her face looked anxious

and almost sad. "A storm is on its way," she repeated; "you must hasten home."

"But why do you look so sad, godmother dear?" said Maia. "We can get home quite safely. *You* can see to that. Nothing will ever hurt us when *you* are taking care of us."

"But there are some things I cannot do," said godmother, smiling, "or rather that I would not do if I could. Times and seasons pass away and come to an end, and it is best so. Still, it may make even me sad sometimes."

All the four pairs of eyes looked up in quick alarm. They felt that there was something — though what, they did not know — that godmother was thinking of in particular, and the first idea that came into their minds was not far from the truth.

"Godmother! oh, godmother!" exclaimed all the voices together, so that they sounded like one, "you don't mean that we're not to see each other any more?"

"Not yet, dears, not yet," said godmother. "But happy times pass and sad times pass. It must be so. And, after all, why should one fret? Those who love each other meet again as surely as the bees fly to the flowers."

"In Heaven, godmother? Do you mean in Heaven?" asked Maia, in a low voice and with a look in her eyes telling that the tears were not far off.

Godmother smiled again.

“Sooner than that sometimes. Do not look so distressed, my pretty Maia. But come now. I must get you home before the storm breaks. Kiss each other, my darlings, but it is not good-bye yet. You will soon be together again — sooner than you think.”

No one ever thought of not doing — and at once — what godmother told them. Rollo and Maia said good-bye even more lovingly than usual to their dear Waldo and Silva, and then godmother, holding a hand of each, set out on their homeward journey.

It was as she had said — the storm-spirits were in the air. Above the wind and the cracking of the branches, brittle with the frost, and the far-off cries of birds and other creatures on their way to shelter in their nests or lairs, came another sound which the children had heard of but never before caught with their own ears — a strange, indescribable sound, neither like the murmuring of the distant sea nor the growl of thunder nor the shriek of the hurricane, yet recalling all of these.

“’Tis the voice of the storm,” said godmother softly. “Pray to the good God, my darlings, for those that travel by land or sea. And now, farewell! — that beaten path between the trees will bring you out at the castle gate, and no harm will come to you. Good-bye!”

She lingered a little over the last word, and this encouraged Maia to ask a question.

“When shall we see you again, dear godmother? And will you not tell us more about why you are sad?”

“It will pass with the storm, for all is for the best,” said godmother dreamily. “When one joy passes, another comes. Remember that. And no true joy is ever past. Keep well within shelter, my children, till the storm has had its way, and then —” she stopped again.

“Then? What then? Oh, *do* tell us,” persisted Maia. “You know, dear godmother, it is *very* dull in the white castle when we mayn’t go out. Lady Venelda makes them give us many more lessons to keep us out of mischief, she says, and we really don’t much mind. It’s better to do lessons than nothing. Oh, godmother, we would have been *so* miserable here if we hadn’t had you and Waldo and Silva!”

Godmother stroked Maia’s sunny head and smiled down into her eyes. And something just then — was it a last ray of the setting sun hurrying off to calmer skies till the storm should have passed? — lighted up godmother’s own face and hair with a wonderful glow. She looked like a beautiful young girl.

“Oh, how pretty you are!” said the children under their breath. But they were too used to these strange changes in godmother’s appearance to be as astonished as many would have been.

“Three nights from now will be the day before Christmas Eve,” said godmother. “When you go to

bed look out in the snow and you will see my messenger. And remember, remember, if one joy goes, another comes. And no true joys are ever lost."

And as they listened to her words, she was gone! So hand-in-hand, wondering what it all might mean, the children turned to the path in the snow she had shown them, which in a few minutes brought them safely home.

Though none too soon — scarcely were they within shelter when the tempest began. The wind howled, the sleet and hail dashed down, even the growling of distant thunder, or what sounded like it, was heard — the storm-spirits had it all their own way for that night and the day following; and when the second night came, and the turmoil seemed to have ceased, it had but changed its form, for the snow again began to fall, ever more and more heavily, till it lay so deep that one could hardly believe the world would ever again burst forth from its silent cold embrace.

And the white castle looked white no longer. Amid the surrounding purity it seemed gray and soiled and grimly ashamed of itself.

Three days had passed; the third night was coming,

"The snow has left off falling, and seems hardening," Lady Venelda had said that afternoon. "If it continues so, the children can go out to-morrow. It is not good for young people to be so long deprived of fresh air and exercise. But it is a hard

winter. I only hope we shall have no more of these terrible storms before —,” but then she stopped suddenly, for she was speaking to the old doctor, and had not noticed that Rollo and Maia were standing near.

The children had seen with satisfaction that the snow had left off falling, for, though they had faith in godmother's being able to do what no one else could, they did not quite see how she was to send them a message if the fearful weather had continued.

“We might have looked out the whole of last night without seeing anything,” said Maia, “the snow was driving so. And if godmother means to take us anywhere, Rollo, it *is* a good thing it's so fine to-night. She was afraid of our being out in the storm the other day, you remember.”

“Because there was no need for it,” said Rollo. “It was already time for us to be home. I'm sure she could prevent any storm hurting us if she really wanted to take us anywhere. There's Nanni coming, Maia — as soon as she's gone call me, and we'll look out together.”

Maia managed to persuade Nanni that she — Nanni, not Maia — was extra sleepy that evening, and had better go to bed without waiting to undress her. I am not quite sure that Nanni *did* go at once to bed, for the servants were already amusing themselves with Christmas games and merriment down in the great kitchen, where the fireplace itself was as large

as a small room, and she naturally liked to join the fun. But all Maia cared about was to be left alone with Rollo. She called to him, and then in great excitement the two children drew back the window-curtains, and extinguishing their candles, stood hand-in-hand looking out to see what was going to happen. There was no moon visible, but it must have been shining all the same, faintly veiled perhaps behind a thin cloud, for a soft light, increased by the reflection of the spotless snow, gleamed over all. But there was nothing to be seen save the smooth white expanse, bounded at a little distance from the house by the trees which clothed the castle hill, whose forms looked strangely fantastic, half shrouded as they were by their white garment.

“There is no one — nothing there,” said Maia in a tone of disappointment. “She must have forgotten.”

“*Forgotten* — never!” said Rollo reproachfully. “When has godmother ever forgotten us? Wait a little, Maia; you are so impatient.”

They stood for some minutes in perfect silence. Suddenly a slight, very slight crackling was heard among the branches — so slight was it, that, had everything been less absolutely silent, it could not have been heard — and the children looked at each other in eager expectation.

“Is it Silva — or Waldo?” said Maia in a whisper. “She said her *messenger*.”

“Hush!” said Rollo, warningly.

A dainty little figure hopped into view from the shade of some low bushes skirting the lawn. It was a robin-redbreast. He stood still in the middle of the snow-covered lawn, his head on one side, as if in deep consideration. Suddenly a soft, low, but very peculiar whistle was heard, and the little fellow seemed to start, as if it were a signal he had been listening for, and then hopped forward unhesitatingly in the children's direction.

"Did *you* whistle, Rollo?" said Maia in a whisper.

"No, certainly not. I was just going to ask if *you* did," answered Rollo.

But now the robin attracted all their attention. He came to a stand just in front of their window, and then looked up at them with the most unmistakable air of invitation.

"We're to go with him, I'm sure we are," said Maia, beginning to dance with excitement; "but *how* can we get to him? All the doors downstairs will be closed, and it's far too high to jump."

Rollo, who had been leaning out of the window the better to see the robin, suddenly drew his head in again with a puzzled expression.

"It's *very* strange," he said. "I'm *sure* it wasn't there this morning. Look, Maia, do you see the top of a ladder just a tiny bit at this side of the window? I could get on to it quite easily."

"So could I," said Maia, after peeping out. "It's all right, Rollo. *She's* had it put there for us. Look

at the robin — he knows all about it. You go first, and when you get down call to me and tell me how to manage.”

Two minutes after, Rollo's voice called up that it was all right. Maia would find it quite easy if she came rather slowly, which she did, and to her great delight soon found herself beside her brother.

“Dear me, we've forgotten our hats and jackets,” she exclaimed. “But it's not cold — how is that?”

“*You* haven't forgotten your — what is it you've got on?” said Rollo, looking at her.

“And you — what have you got on?” said Maia in turn. “Why, we've *both* got cloaks on, something like the shawl we had for the air-journey, only they're quite, *quite* white.”

“Like the snow — we can't be seen. They're as good as invisible cloaks,” said Rollo, laughing in glee.

“And they fit so neatly — they seem to have grown on to us,” said Maia, stroking herself. But in another moment, “Oh, Rollo!” she exclaimed, half delighted and half frightened, “they *are* growing, or we're growing, or something's growing. Up on your shoulders there are little *wings* coming, real little white wings — they're getting bigger and bigger every minute.”

“And they're growing on you too,” exclaimed Rollo. “Why, in a minute or two we'll be able to fly. Indeed, I think I can fly a little already,” and Rollo began flopping about his white wings like a newly-

fledged and rather awkward cygnet. But in a minute or two Maia and he found — thanks perhaps to the example of the robin, who all this time was hovering just overhead, backwards and forwards, as if to say, “do like me” — to their great joy that they could manage quite well; never, I am sure, did two little birds ever learn to fly so quickly!

All was plain-sailing now — no difficulty in following their faithful little guide, who flew on before, now and then cocking back his dear little head to see if the two queer white birds under his charge were coming on satisfactorily. I wonder in what tribe or genus the learned men of that country, had there been any to see the two strange creatures careering through the cold wintry air, would have classed them!

But little would they have cared. Never — oh, never, if I talked about it for a hundred years — could I give you an idea of the delightfulness of being able to fly! All the children’s former pleasures seemed as nothing to it. The drive in godmother’s pony-carriage, the gymnastics with the squirrels, the sail in the air — all seemed nothing in comparison with it. It was so perfectly enchanting that Maia did not even feel inclined to talk about it. And on, and on, and on they flew, till the robin stopped, wheeled round, and looking at them, began slowly to fly downwards. Rollo and Maia followed him. They touched the ground almost before they knew

it; it seemed as if for a moment they melted into the snow which was surrounding them here, too, on all sides, and then as if they woke up again to find themselves wingless, but still with their warm white garments, standing at the foot of an immensely high tree — for they were, it was evident, at the borders of a great forest.

The robin had disappeared. For an instant or two they remained standing still in bewilderment; perhaps, to tell the truth, a *very* little frightened, for it was much darker down here than it had been up in the air; indeed, it appeared to them that but for the gleaming snow, which seemed to have a light of its own, it would have been quite, *quite* dark.

“Rollo,” said Maia tremulously, “hold my hand tight; don’t let it go. What — ” “Are we to do?” she would have added, but a sound breaking on the silence made her stop short.

A soft, far-away sound it was at first, though gradually growing clearer and nearer. It was that of children’s voices singing a sweet and well-known Christmas carol, and somehow in the refrain at the end of each verse it seemed to Rollo and Maia that they heard their own names. “Come, come,” were the words that sounded the most distinctly. They hesitated no longer; off they ran, diving into the dark forest fearlessly, and though it was so dark they found no difficulty. As if by magic, they avoided every trunk and stump which might have

hurt them, till, half out of breath, but with a strange brightness in their hearts, they felt themselves caught round the necks and heartily kissed, while a burst of merry laughter replaced the singing, which had gradually melted away. It was Waldo and Silva of course!

“Keep your eyes shut,” they cried. “Still a moment, and then you may open them.”

“But they’re *not* shut,” objected the children.

“Ah, aren’t they? Feel them,” said Waldo; and Rollo and Maia, lifting their hands to feel, found it was true. Their eyes were not only shut, but a slight, very fine gossamer thread seemed drawn across them.

“We could not open them if we would,” they said; but I don’t think they minded, and they let Waldo and Silva draw them on still a little farther, till —

“Now,” they cried, and snap went the gossamer thread, and the two children stood with eyes well open, gazing on the wonderful scene around them.

They seemed to be standing in the centre of a round valley, from which the ground on every side sloped gradually upwards. And all about them, arranged in the most orderly manner, were rows and rows — tiers, perhaps, I should say — of Christmas trees — real, genuine Christmas trees of every kind and size. Some loaded with toys of the most magnificent kind, some simpler, some with but a few

gifts, and those of little value. But one and all brilliantly lighted up with their many-coloured tapers — one and all with its Christmas angel at the top. And nothing in fairy-doll shape that Rollo and Maia had ever seen was so beautiful as these angels with their gleaming wings and sweet, joyous loving faces. I think, when they had a little recovered from their first astonishment, that the beauty of the tree-angels was what struck them most.

“Yes,” said a voice beside them, in answer to their unspoken thought; “yes, each tree has *always* its angel. Not always to be seen in its true beauty — sometimes you might think it only a poor, coarsely-painted little doll. But *the* angel is there all the same. Though it is only in Santa Claus’ own garden that they are to be seen to perfection.”

“Are we in Santa Claus’ garden now, dear godmother?” asked Maia softly.

“Yes, dears. He is a very old friend of mine — one of my oldest friends, I may say. And he allowed me to show you this sight. No other children have ever been so favoured. By this time to-morrow night — long before then, indeed — these thousands of trees will be scattered far and wide, and round each will be a group of the happy little faces my old friend loves so well.”

“But, godmother,” said Maia practically, “won’t the tapers be burning down? Isn’t it a pity to keep them lighted just for us? And, oh, dear me! how-

ever can Santa Claus get them packed and sent off in time? I *hope* he hasn't kept them too late to please us?"

Godmother smiled.

"Don't trouble your little head about that," she said. "But come, have you no curiosity to know which is your own Christmas tree? Among all these innumerable ones, is there not one for you too?"

Maia and Rollo looked up in godmother's eyes — they were smiling, but something in their expression they could not quite understand. Suddenly a kind of darkness fell over everything — darkness almost complete in comparison with the intense light of the million tapers that had gleamed but an instant before — though gradually, as their eyes grew used to it, there gleamed out the same soft faint light as of veiled moonbeams, that they had remarked before.

"You can see now," said godmother. "Go straight on — quite straight through the trees" — for they were still in the midst of the forest — "till you come to what is waiting for you. But first kiss me, my darlings — a long kiss, for it is good-bye — and kiss, too, your little friends, Waldo and Silva, for in this world one may *hope*, but one can never be as *sure* as one would fain be, that good-byes are not for long."

Too overawed by her tone to burst into tears, as they were yet ready to do, the children threw themselves into each other's arms.



“SEE, ROLLO,” CRIED MAIA; “SEE, THERE IS *our* CHRISTMAS TREE.”

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“We *must* see each other again, we must; oh, godmother, say we shall!” cried all the four voices. And godmother, as she held them all together in her arms seemed to whisper —

“I hope it. Yes, I hope and think you will.” And then, almost without having felt that Waldo and Silva were gently but irresistibly drawn from them, Rollo and Maia found themselves again alone, hand-in-hand in the midst of the forest, as they had so often stood before. Without giving themselves time to realise that they had said good-bye to their dear little friends, off they set, as godmother had told them, running straight on through the trees, where it almost seemed by the clear though soft light that a little path opened before them as they went. Till, suddenly, for a moment the light seemed to fade and disappear, leaving them almost in darkness, which again was as unexpectedly dispersed by a wonderful brilliance, spreading and increasing, so that at first they were too dazzled to distinguish whence it came. But not for long.

“See, Rollo,” cried Maia; “see, there is *our* Christmas tree.”

And there it was — the most beautiful they had yet seen — all radiant with light and glistening with every pretty present child-heart could desire.

“We are only to *look* at it, you know,” said Maia; “it has to be packed up and sent us, of course, like the others. But,” she stopped short, “who is that,

Rollo," she went on, "standing just by the tree? Can it be Santa Claus himself come to see if it is all right?"

"Santa Claus," exclaimed a well-known voice, "Santa Claus, indeed! Is that your new name for me, my Maia?"

Then came a cry of joy—a cry from two little loving hearts—a cry which rang merry echoes through the forest, and at which, though it woke up lots of little birds snugly hidden away in the warmest corners they could find, no one thought of grumbling except, I think, an old owl, who greatly objected to any disturbance of his nightly promenades and meditations.

"Papa, papa, dear papa!" was the cry. "Papa, you have come back to us. *That* was what godmother meant," they said together. And their father, well pleased, held them in his arms as if he would never again let them go.

"So you have learnt to know what godmother means—that is well," he said. "But kiss me once more only, just now, my darlings, and then you must go home and sleep till the morning. And keep it a secret that you have seen me to-night."

He kissed them again, and before their soft childish lips had left his face, a strange dreamy feeling overpowered them. Neither Rollo nor Maia knew or thought anything more of where they were or how they had come there for many hours.

And then they were awakened — Rollo first, then Maia — by the sound of Nanni's delighted voice at their bedside.

“Wake up, wake up,” she said, “for the most beautiful surprise has come to you for this happy Christmas Eve.”

And even without her telling them, they knew what it was — they knew who was waiting for them downstairs, nor could all their awe of Lady Venelda prevent them rushing at their father and hugging him till he was nearly choked. But Lady Venelda, I must confess, was too happy herself to see her kinsman again to be at all vexed with them. And her pleasure, as well as that of the kind old doctor, was increased by the thanks they received for all their care of the children, whom their father declared he had never seen so bright or blooming.

And, a few days afterwards, they went back with him to their own happy home; and what then? — did they ever see godmother and Waldo and Silva again? I can only answer, like godmother herself, “I hope so; yes, I hope so, and think so.” But as to how or where — ah, that I cannot say!

THE END.



GRANDMOTHER DEARS OLD WATCH.
"Come out here for a moment, Sylvia," she
called to her sister; "we can see her as far
as the corner" p. 2

— Frontispiece.

·A· CHRISTMAS· POSY
·BY· MRS· MOLESWORTH·
·WITH· ILLUSTRATIONS· &
·BY· WALTER· CRANE·



·LONDON·:·MACMILLAN·&
·AND· CO·:
1893·

TO
My Two Little Friends
JULIA AND ISABEL
TWIN SISTERS

LONDON, 29th February, 1888

A CHRISTMAS POSY.

GRANDMOTHER DEAR'S OLD WATCH.

A FRAGMENT.

PART I.

“Those never loved
Who dream that they ‘loved once.’”

E. B. BROWNING.

“You won’t be long anyway, dear Auntie?” said Sylvia with a little sigh. “I don’t half like your going. Couldn’t you wait till the day after tomorrow?”

“Or at least take me with you,” said Molly, Sylvia’s younger sister, eagerly.

Auntie hesitated — she glanced up at as much of the sky as could be seen through the lace-shrouded windows of their pretty Paris *salon* — it was already beginning to grow dusky, for though only half-past three, it was the thirty-first of December, and a dull day — and then turned with decision towards the door.

“No, dears,” she said; “I shall go more quickly alone. Sylvia’s cold would be none the better for

going out so late, and I would rather you, Molly, stayed with her. So good-bye, darlings; I shall not be long."

"I should not like to think of poor Sylvia sitting alone in the gloaming, to-day of all days," said Auntie to herself as she made her way down the three flights of handsome marble stairs which led to their *appartement*. "I can see she is very sad—remembering how different it was this day last year. And dear Molly's good spirits are an inestimable blessing. Ah, my darlings, I may do my best, I *will* do my best, but I cannot make up to you for grandmother;" and with the tears in her eyes, and many a tender thought in her heart, Auntie made her way along the street.

The two girls were watching her, though she did not know it. There was a tiny balcony outside the window on to which Molly stepped almost as soon as the door had closed on Auntie.

"Come out here for a moment, Sylvia," she called to her sister; "we can see her as far as the corner"—for the street was one of the wide handsome avenues in the new part of Paris, and there were few passers-by. "As far as the corner," therefore, it was easy to distinguish Auntie's figure in its deep mourning dress—not *quite* so erect or active as it used to be, for Auntie was no longer young, and this year, so nearly ended now, had brought her the greatest sorrow of her life—as she quickly made her way.

“Dear Auntie,” said Sylvia; “I wish she were back again. I am sure we could have done without money for a day.”

“*Two* days it would have been,” corrected Molly; “the bank will be closed to-morrow, you know.”

“Of course I know that,” said Sylvia, a little testily.

“And there are some people coming to be paid, and Auntie never likes to keep any one waiting,” continued Molly imperturbably. “If Auntie had only taken me with her —”

“How absurd you are!” said Sylvia. “You speak as if Auntie were a baby, or as if no one could take care of her but you—no, dear,” she broke off hastily, “I should not speak like that. I don’t mean to be cross—but oh, Molly, how we do miss grandmother,” and the quickly rising tears in the pretty eyes raised to her sister’s face at once subdued any resentment Molly may have felt. She bent her tall figure—for, though nearly two years younger, she was taller than her sister—and enveloped Sylvia in a loving hug.

“My darling,” she said—the mass of fair hair, which, even at eighteen, she found it no easy matter to keep in order, mingling with Sylvia’s soft clustering chestnut locks; “my darling—of course we do—but, Sylvia, we must try to be happy. Think how *she* always said so. And next year—next year may be happier. Papa and Ralph are almost sure to be with us again by this time next year.”

“*This* year has certainly only brought us sorrow,” said Sylvia mournfully; “I wish Auntie had not gone out. I have a presentiment something will go wrong.”

“Don’t be fanciful, dear; Auntie will soon be back. Come in and let us get ready a cosy tea for her, and finish the old year as cheerfully as we *can*. And oh, Sylvia — your cold! — and you’ve been out on the balcony without even a shawl.”

No wonder these girls loved their aunt. Since their infancy their grandmother and she had replaced to them the mother they had never known — and the father who was but seldom able to be with them. And now the grief, the inexpressible grief of having lost that dearest of grandmothers had deepened and strengthened the affection of the three for each other. Their life was somewhat lonely at present. Grandmother had died in the south, at the pretty villa which, after so many years passed in it, had come to seem “home.” But she had wished her grandchildren to return to England, their real home; there, before long to be rejoined by their father and elder brother at present in the East. And they were spending this winter in Paris — “on the way,” as it were — for the benefit of Sylvia’s drawing and Molly’s music; and partly, too, perhaps, because the old home in the south, *without* “grandmother dear,” would have seemed too unbearably desolate.

The curtains were drawn, the fire blazed brightly,

the lamp on the *console* at the side of the room threw a soft pleasant glow on the dainty table set out temptingly for "afternoon tea," which, notwithstanding their long residence in France, Auntie and her nieces were very fond of. And with the little exertion of making all as bright and pretty as they could, the girls' spirits had come back.

"It *does* look nice," said Molly approvingly, as she stepped back towards the door to judge of the general effect. "How I do wish dear grandmother were here to see how neat and nice it looks. I really do think, Sylvia, that I am getting to be very 'handy,' and to have a good deal of taste in nice little ways — just what grandmother used to wish for me;" and the candour and honesty in her fair face as she innocently expressed her little bit of self-approval made Sylvia turn away so that Molly should not see the smile of amusement it was impossible altogether to repress. For Molly's open satisfaction with herself when it seemed to her that she deserved a little encouragement, was one of the funniest things about her still.

"Yes, dear, it does look very nice," said Sylvia. "And — Can that be Auntie's ring already?" she broke off. "How very quick she has been."

And almost before she had finished the words the door was thrown hastily open, and Auntie was beside them. But what an Auntie! Pale, looking older by ten years than when she had left them, breath-

less, her lips for a moment trembling so that she could not speak. The girls' warm words of welcome died away as they gazed at her in terror.

"Auntie, Auntie dearest, what is it; oh, what is it?" they exclaimed, while visions of every possible and impossible misfortune — a telegram with bad news of papa or Ralph taking front place as the worst of all — rushed before their imaginations with the inconceivable rapidity with which such speculations picture themselves at such times of excitement. Auntie struggled for self-control.

"No, no — not bad news," she whispered at last, in answer to some all but inaudible breath which had perhaps escaped the poor children's lips. "You must — oh, you must forgive me. It was all my own fault. I should not have gone."

"Oh Auntie, Auntie," cried Molly, by this time in sobs, "what is it then? Have you been run over?"

"How could Auntie be here if she had been?" said Sylvia, hardly able to help smiling, even in the midst of her fright, at the Molly-like question. "But oh, Auntie, do try to tell us."

Auntie was a little calmer by now. She looked up with a piteous expression in her still white face.

"My dears, my dears," she said, "you must not be vexed with me, and yet I feel that you have a right to be so. I have had such a misfortune — I have lost — just now, on my way to or from the bank, I don't know which — I have *lost* dearest

mother's — your grandmother's old watch! And with it the locket that was always attached to it, you know — the one with *her* great-grandfather's and his daughter's hair."

"I know," said Molly, "gray hair on one side and bright brown like Sylvia's on the other. Oh, Auntie, Auntie — *poor* Auntie."

And Sylvia flung herself down beside poor Auntie and burst into tears of sympathy. It was sweet to Aunt Laura, even in the midst of her acute distress, to feel that their first thought was not for the loss itself — much as it could not but touch them — but of sorrow for *her*.

"Grandmother's old watch — grandmother dear's old watch," repeated the two girls, as if they could not believe it. The old watch they remembered all their lives, whose face was almost as familiar to them as that of grandmother herself — the watch and locket which seemed almost a part of her — it was terrible, it was too bad to be true!

"How did it happen?" said Sylvia, trying to choke down her tears. "Tell us more, Auntie. Can nothing be done? You don't think it was stolen?"

"No — I feel sure I dropped it. I remember now that it was not securely fastened. That is what vexes me so terribly — to think it was my own fault! Oh, Sylvia — oh, Molly, when I saw it was gone I felt as if I should go out of my mind! It was just as I came out of the bank that I missed it, but it may

have dropped some minutes before. I was hesitating as to whether I should have time to walk home, or if I should take a *coupé* so as to get back to you quicker, my dears — ”

“ And we had made all so cosy for you — such a dear little tea — just look, Auntie ; ” and herself casting a glance round at their pretty preparations, Molly’s tears flowed afresh.

“ I had a presentiment, ” said Sylvia. “ But go on, Auntie. ”

“ And I looked at my watch — I mean, I was going to do so, ” continued Auntie, “ and found it was gone. Of course I ran back to the bank, but it was not there. I rushed up and down the street and asked everybody I saw — I even went into some of the shops — I am afraid I must have seemed quite dazed. Then my only idea was to get back to you, so I called a *coupé* and — ” here poor Auntie broke down again.

“ And is there nothing to be done ? ” repeated Sylvia.

“ The coachman, ” said Auntie, “ the coachman advised me to go to the ‘ commissaire de police ’ nearest to where I lost it. I have the name of the street. So now that I have seen you, I will go there at once, ” and she rose as she spoke. “ Take my bag, Molly dear, ” she added, handing it to her. “ The money is in it. ”

“ It is a good thing *it* wasn’t lost too, ” said Molly,

whose spirits were already beginning to reassert themselves. "But, Auntie, you must have some tea before you go. It is *quite* ready."

Auntie, whose hand was already on the door, was beginning to refuse when Sylvia interrupted. "Yes, Auntie dear, you *must*," she said. "And while you are taking it, it will give me time to get ready."

"You, my child! I will not let you come — with your cold too."

"My cold is very little, Auntie dearest; I must come — I should come," she added pleadingly. "You can't go about by yourself, so upset as you are too. *Grandmother* told me I was to take care of you. Yes, Molly dear, I know you would go, but I am a year and nine months older," continued Sylvia, rising to the dignity of her nineteen years. "It is right I should go."

She gained the day, and so did Molly, to the extent of persuading her aunt to swallow a cup of tea, — what a different tea-taking to that they had been looking forward to! — and in five minutes Auntie and Sylvia were driving along the streets which the former had but so lately passed through.

"Poor Molly," said Auntie.

"She will be getting up her hopes and expecting us to bring back good news," said Sylvia. "Well, we *may* find it, Auntie. They say honest people *sometimes* take things at once to the nearest police-office."

But this small grain of hope was quickly crushed. The “commissaire de police” was civil, but not encouraging. The ladies would do better to wait a day or two and then apply to the “Préfecture de Police,” in other words the central office, where waifs and strays of private property, should they chance to fall into honest hands, were pretty sure to be eventually deposited.

“A day or two,” repeated Auntie, appalled. “Can I do nothing at once?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “That was as Madame chose. It would do no harm to write at once, describing the lost articles and giving her address. But as for hearing of them at once, that was more than improbable. It was the eve of the New Year — the worst day of all the year on which to have such a misfortune; everybody respectable was busy with their own affairs; and yet there were lots of beggars and such like about the streets. If — even supposing,” as if the supposition were of the wildest — “that the watch had fallen into honest hands, a week or ten days would probably pass before Madame would have news of it.”

“And if it were deposited *here*,” said Auntie timidly — “that does sometimes happen, I suppose?”

“If it were deposited here, it would be as if it were not here,” said the commissaire sententiously. “That is to say we should send it on to the Préfec-

ture. I have not even the right to tell you if it is at this moment here or not, though to give you pleasure," he proceeded with unconscious sarcasm, "I will declare to you that it is *not*."

"Then there is no use my returning here again to inquire?"

"Not the least — write to the Préfecture making your statement, and call there four or five days hence — no use going sooner," said the commissaire with a wave of his hand in token of dismissal. So Auntie and Sylvia, with sinking hearts, turned sadly away.

"Little does he understand what four or five days of suspense seem to me," said Auntie.

"To *us* too, dear Auntie," said Sylvia, squeezing Auntie's arm under her cloak as they made their way home through the now dark streets, Auntie preferring to walk now that there was plainly no more to be done that called for haste.

"That is the worst of it — I have made this New Year time still sadder than it need have been for you two, my darlings."

It was hard to go in with no good news for Molly, whose spirits, as Sylvia had foreseen, had already risen to the point of feeling sure her aunt and sister would return triumphant, treasure-*retrove* in hand! But even now she was not disconcerted. "A week or ten days," she repeated, when she had heard all there was to tell; "ah, that shows, Auntie dear, we need not give up hope for ever so long."

She had need of her good spirits for herself, and the others too, during the days that followed. It would be impossible and wearisome to relate all that Auntie did and tried to do. The letters to "all in authority" in such matters, the visits to the *Préfecture de Police*, to the company who took charge of printing and posting handbills promising rewards for the restoring to their owners of lost objects, to the famous "Mont de Piété," the great central pawnbroker's of Paris, even — For a week and more Auntie and the two girls, so far as it was possible for them to help her, did little else than exhaust themselves in such efforts, seizing every suggestion held out by sympathising friends, from the *concierge* to their old friend the white-haired Duchesse de St. Gervais, who related to them a long and interesting but slightly irrelevant story of how a diamond ring of her great-grandmother's had been found by the cook in the heart of a cauliflower just as she was about to boil it for dinner!

"I really think," said Auntie weariedly, as she threw herself down on the sofa after an expedition to the office of the most widely read Paris daily paper, where she had spent a small fortune in advertisements, "I really think quite half the world is constantly employed in finding, or rather searching for, the things that the other half is as constantly employed in losing. I could fill a three-volumed novel with all I have seen in the last few days — the

strange scenes, the real tragedies of feeling — the truly wonderful mechanism of all this world of functionaries and offices and regulations. And some of these people have been really so kind and sympathising — it is astonishing — one would think they would be too sick of it all to have any feeling left.”

“I am sure *anybody* would be sorry if they understood that it was dear, *dear* grandmother's watch — and even if they knew nothing, any one would be sorry if they saw your poor dear sweet little unhappy face,” said Molly consolingly.

But though her words called forth a rather wintry smile from Auntie and Sylvia, it was with sad hearts that all three went to bed on the night of the ninth day since the loss.

PART II.

UP ever so many pairs of steep winding stairs, somewhat later that same evening, in a small barely furnished little room in one of the busiest and most thickly inhabited parts of Paris, a young woman with a baby on her knees was seated in front of a small fire. It was cold — for, alas, in the dwellings of the poor want of fresh air and ventilation does not mean *warmth* — and now and then she stirred the embers, though carefully, as if anxious to extract what warmth she could without exhausting its source.

“I must keep a little fire together for Bernard,”

she said to herself. "He is late this evening. Perhaps I had better put the little one to bed — still it is cold for her, for it would not yet be prudent to lay her beside Paul, though he is so much better. What a blessing he is so much better, my poor little boy! One should not complain, even though it is hard to think of what this fortnight's illness has cost, fifty francs at least, and my work in arrears. And to think of that watch lying there useless all this time! Not that I would have Bernard sell it, even if we dared. But still I can understand the temptation were it a thing one *could* sell, to many even poorer than we. To-morrow, if there is still no advertisement in any of the papers, I really think I will no longer oppose Bernard's taking it to the police, and giving up all hopes of any reward, and even of the satisfaction of knowing its real owner has got it. For they say lost objects sometimes lie at the Préfecture for years, and it does not look as if the person it belongs to was very eager to get it back, otherwise it would have been advertised or placarded. Perhaps it is some one very rich, who has many watches; and yet — that old locket with the date of more than a hundred years ago, so simple too, evidently preserved as a family relic, and the watch too, old, though still so good, as the watchmaker next door assured Bernard, worth quite two or three hundred francs. Perhaps the owner is very distressed about it, but still three or four hundred francs could not

possibly be to him or her what they would be to us just now! Why, even *one* hundred would get us nicely round the corner again!"

For Madame Bernard was a sensible little woman with no exaggeration about her. But it is growing colder, and still her husband does not return. She must gather the remnants of the fire together, and baby at all costs must go to bed, and if Bernard does not soon come she herself must go too. She cannot risk catching a bad cold herself just as Paul is recovering from an attack of bronchitis. And she is turning to open a door leading into the one bedroom of their *appartement*, when the well-known sound of a latch-key in the door of the tiny vestibule arrests her.

"Bernard, at last!" she exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

A man, young still, though older than she, entered. He was thin and pale and poorly clad. But his face was intelligent and pleasant, and he had an undoubted air of respectability. And to his wife's accustomed eye, late as it was and tired as he should have been, his face had a flush of excitement on it which half prepared her for news of some kind.

"At last," he repeated. "Yes, I am very late, but I will not grumble as I did this evening when we were told we must work overhours, for it is thanks to the lateness that I have — prepare yourself, my girl — I have found the owner of the watch!"

“The owner of the watch!” repeated his wife. “How? where? But you had not the watch with you? You have not given it back? Not without —” and the little woman hesitated; her husband seemed so pleased, so excited. “If possibly it is a poor person,” she reflected, “Bernard is quite capable of giving it back with delight for nothing but a word of thanks! Yet what would not forty, nay even fifty francs be to us just now.” Still she did not like to say anything to damp his pleasure. But he read her misgiving — he had perhaps a little enjoyed teasing her!

“Calm yourself, my child,” he said, though Madame Bernard was certainly much less excited than he; “it is all right. When I said I had found the owner, I meant to say I know *where* to find him, or her. Twenty minutes ago I knew as little as you do at this moment. But coming along the Boulevard, suddenly the light of a gas-lamp flaring up a little fell on a yellow paper on the wall — had it been in the daytime I should never have seen it, it was so badly placed — ‘fifty francs reward.’ I scarcely thought I would stop to read it at first; how many yellow posters have I not read these last few days! But in an instant ‘watch’ caught my eyes. Here is the description;” and he drew out a shabby pocket-book in which he had copied it word for word. “You see it is our old friend, and no other — ‘English watch, locket, *souvenir de famille*, etc. Owner

to be found at 99 Avenue Malmaison.' So off I go to No. 99 to-morrow morning as early as I possibly can."

"And you will be very careful, Bernard," said his wife. "Give it up to no one but the owner himself."

"And make sure of the reward, eh, my girl?" said he, laughing. "Yes, yes — you may trust me. I know fifty francs will not fall to us badly just now. And if it is a rich person I shall take it with a clear conscience, for I really have worked to find the owner."

And in very much better spirits than they had been since the beginning of little Paul's illness, the poor young couple betook themselves to their night's rest.

One person at No. 99 Avenue Malmaison had not known what a good night's rest was for some time. Poor Auntie! she was beginning to feel that she must make an effort to resign herself, and to throw off the excessive depression which the loss of "grandmother's" watch was causing her. It was not fair, she argued, to make Sylvia and Molly suffer for what she and she alone deserved to be blamed for. So she tried to look more cheerful than she felt. I don't think her efforts deceived the two pairs of sympathising young eyes, but the sisters nevertheless understood and appreciated them, and felt that they too must put on a braver face than came quite

easy. So to all outward appearance the trio had recovered their usual bearing. And Sylvia and Molly, as was only natural, went to bed and slept soundly, though never without a last waking thought of "Poor Auntie! oh, if the watch *could* but be found!" while the watch's owner tossed about in wakeful distress. The more she tried to look bright in the day, the more impossible it seemed to forget her troubles in the temporary oblivion of a sound sleep. "It is really wrong of me to fret so about the loss of any *thing*," she would say to herself. "I seem more overwhelmed than even during the first few terrible days after mother's death. Though after all, *were* those first few days terrible? Just at the first when the door seems still as it were half-open, and we feel almost as if we could see a little way *in*, where our dear ones have gone — no, those first days are *not* the worst."

And somehow, as she said so to herself, there seemed to fall over Auntie a feeling of calm and peacefulness such as she had known little of for long. Then came before her the remembrance of "grandmother dear's" sweet, quiet face as she had seen it the last time, in the beautiful calm of holy death. "It is *wrong* to fret so, my child," the well-known voice seemed to say. And listening to it Auntie fell into a quiet and profound sleep.

It was curious — a sort of coincidence, I suppose, one would call it — that this peaceful sleep came to

poor Auntie just at the moment at which Bernard, on his way home, espied by the light of the flaring gas-lamp the yellow poster with its "fifty francs reward" in big black letters!

When Auntie woke she saw at once by the light that it was much later than her usual time. But she felt so quiet and peaceful and rested — almost as one does on waking from the first real sleep after an illness — that she tried to fancy she was still half-dreaming, and that it could not yet be time to get up. A slight noise — a *very* slight noise it was — at the side of her bed made her at last, though reluctantly, open her eyes again and turn slightly round. Quick ears and watchful eyes were on the alert —

"Oh, Auntie — Auntie dear — you are awake at last. You have had a nice sleep?"

"Very — a very sweet sleep, my darling," said Auntie, smiling, for the last night's impressions were strong upon her. She was not going to make herself unhappy any more about that which could not be cured.

Molly's bewildered eyes turned towards her sister.

"She looks so happy," she whispered. "Can she know, can she have heard us talking?"

No — she had heard nothing — but *something*, some indefinable instinct now seemed suddenly to awaken her suspicions.

"Molly — Sylvia!" she exclaimed, starting up. "What is it? What are you saying? It cannot

be —” But before she had time to say more she was interrupted.

“Yes, it *can* be — it *is*,” they called out. And something, a softly shining something, round and smooth, with a smaller shining thing attached to it, dangled above her eyes.

“The watch, Auntie — grandmother dear’s own old watch, and the locket! A man — such a nice civil poor man — found them, and has brought them back, while you were still asleep.”

“And we could not bear to waken you. You looked so tired and white, and were sleeping so quietly. But it was all right,” Molly hastened to assure her. “We lent the money — the fifty francs reward, you know — and he was so pleased, poor man. I am afraid he is *very* poor.”

“He asked for a certificate — a little note to say he had been honest in bringing it back,” added Sylvia. “But we thought, and so did he, that it would be better for you to write it. So he is going to call again — to-morrow or the day after in the evening — it is such a long way off where he lives, he says.”

“What good will the certificate do him?” asked Auntie, stroking and smoothing her dear watch all the time.

“He said it might get him promoted in the office where he works,” said Molly. “And he says the watch is a *very* good one — he took it to a friend of

his who is a jeweller. So you see, Auntie, though he couldn't have sold it here — you remember they told us it was impossible to sell jewellery that isn't one's own here, as one has to tell all about where one got it and all that — he might have kept it for himself.”

“Or sent it away to be sold somewhere else,” said Sylvia.

“Oh yes, no doubt he could have done something with it, if he hadn't been really honest.”

“And yet so poor,” said Auntie thoughtfully. Then she looked again at the watch with such a loving gaze that it brought tears to the girls' eyes.

“Oh, Auntie darling, *how* nice it is to see you looking like yourself again,” said Molly. “It seems almost, doesn't it,” she added in a lower voice, “as if its coming back were a little message from grandmother?”

How different appeared everything that happy day! How bright the sunshine, even though but some pale wintry beams struggling through the cold gray sky; how nice everything they had to eat seemed — was it, perhaps, that the kind-hearted cook in her sympathy took unusual pains? — how Auntie smiled, nay, laughed right out, when Molly suddenly checked herself in saying something about what o'clock it was, forgetting that it was no longer a painful subject! How grateful they all felt to be able to go to bed in peace without the one ever-

recurring, haunting thought, "If the watch could but be found!"

And with the night came another thought to Auntie.

"Sylvia and Molly," she said the next morning, "I have been thinking so about those poor people — the man who found the watch I mean — and his family," for he had told them he was married and had children. "I do feel so grateful to him. I feel that I must go and see for myself if they are so very poor. You have the exact address?"

"Oh yes," Molly replied, "we wrote it down. But oh, Auntie dear, you *will* let us go with you."

Auntie hesitated a little, but yielded in the end.

"You will promise to let me go in first," she said, "just to see that it is quite respectable, and no infectious illness or anything that could hurt you."

* * * * *

Bernard hardly knew his little wife again when he got home that evening. The fifty francs had greatly cheered her the night before, but their influence could not explain the state of delight between tears and laughter in which he found her this time.

"Oh, my friend — oh, Bernard," she exclaimed, "what a happy thing it was for us that you found the watch's owner and took it at once! They have been here; only fancy such distinguished ladies coming themselves so far just to see if they could be of any service to us in return for ours to them.

That was how they put it — was it not touching? The old lady” — poor Auntie, I don't think she would *quite* have liked that! — “to whom belongs the watch, so good and kind, oh, so kind; and the younger ones two angels, *angels* simply, I repeat it, Bernard. And when they heard all — I could hide nothing, they questioned me with such sympathy, about Paul's bronchitis and all — they set to work to consider how best they could help us. The lady gave Paul, into his own little hand, another note of fifty francs. That will clear off everything, and make us quite as well off as before his illness; and besides that, they have a good deal of work they want me to do, that will be well paid, better paid than what I do for the shops. And they will try to recommend me to some of their friends, — what I have always wished for, to work for ladies direct instead of for the shops. Oh, Bernard, it was a happy day for us when you found that old watch!”

There is no need to say that Auntie and her nieces were as good as their word.

“On the whole,” said Molly, with her customary philosophy, “it was almost worth while to go through all the unhappiness for the sake of the delight of getting the watch back again, especially as it really has been a good thing for those nice poor people. But, Auntie, you will have all your dresses made with watch-pockets now, won't you?”

“Indeed I will,” said Auntie with a smile, “and

thank you for your good advice, my Molly. Who would think you had ever been the complacent possessor of six pinless brooches?"

At which Molly and Sylvia both laughed, though Molly blushed a little too.

"I am really careful now, I do think," she said. "You know, dear Auntie," she added in a lower voice, "Sylvia and I, more than ever, *now*, try to do and be all that *she* wished, in little as well as in big things. Dear, dear grandmother!"

MY PINK PET.

CHAPTER I.

“For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather —.”

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

IT is getting to be “a good while ago” since I was a little girl. Sometimes this comes home to me quite distinctly: I feel that I am really growing an old woman, but at other times I cannot believe it. I have to get up and cross the room and look at myself in the mirror, and see with my own eyes the gray hairs and the wrinkles in order to convince myself that childhood, and maidenhood, and even middle age, are all left far behind. At these times “now” appears the dream, “then” the reality; and, strangely enough, this very feeling, I am told, is one of the signs of real old age, of our nearing the land that at one time we fancied so “very far off” — farther off, it seems to me, in middle age than in early childhood, when it is easier for us to believe in what we cannot see, when no clouds have come between us and the true sky beyond.

I have been in many countries, and lived many different lives, since I was a little girl. I have been months together at sea, when dry land itself seemed

almost to become a dream. I have been for long years in India, and grown so used to burning skies and swarthy faces that I could hardly believe in the reality of cool England, with its fresh fields and shady lanes; yet all these scenes are growing hazy, while clearly, and yet more clearly, there rises before me the picture of my old, old home and childish days, of special things that happened to me then, of little pleasures and troubles which then seemed very great, and in one sense really were so, no doubt, for they were great to *me*.

I will tell you about a trouble I once had, if you like. I am afraid you will hardly count it a *story*, but still some among you may find it interesting. For, after all, children are children even nowadays, when so much more is done to make them clever and wise than was the case when I was a little girl; and the feeling that your parents and grandparents had their childish sorrows and joys, and hopes and fears and wonders, just as you have, is always a good and wholesome feeling to foster on both your side and theirs.

Our home was in a small town in rather an out-of-the-way part of the country. It is out of the way still, I believe, as the railways have not gone very near it, but I know little about it now. It is many years since I was last there, and I do not think I wish ever to see it again. I would rather keep my memory's picture of it unchanged.

Our house stood at the outskirts of the little town; in front of it there stretched a wide heathery common, which extended a mile or two into the country; and over this common, at certain seasons, the west wind blew so strongly that it was, we used to say, really like living at the seaside. The sea was only six or eight miles away; sometimes we fancied the wind "tasted salt."

The house itself was comfortable and old-fashioned, and had plenty of rooms in it, which you will allow to have been necessary when I tell you that I was the youngest of nine children, most, or at least many, of whom had been brought up at home. My eldest sister was married — she had always been married, I thought, for I could not remember her anything else. My other three sisters were all more or less grown up, and the only brother at all near my own age was away at a boarding-school. So it came to pass that, though I had so many brothers and sisters, I was rather a solitary little girl.

But I was not an unhappy child by any means. I had everything I wanted, even down to a tiny little bedroom all to myself; and though I was not perhaps indulged as much as some children I see nowadays, I don't think I was on that account to be pitied. My parents were quiet, and perhaps rather unusually undemonstrative; and indeed it was not then the fashion to be very familiar with one's father and mother. We always said "sir" and

“ma’am” to them, and I never thought of entering or leaving the drawing-room without stopping to curtsy at the door. How would you like that, children? My father was very particular about such matters, more so than most, perhaps, from having been many years in the army, where, I once overheard an old brother-officer say, he had been considered rather a “martinet,” if you know what that means; and my dear mother, who by herself, perhaps, would have been almost too gentle to keep all her family in good order, was firm as a rock where any wish of *his* was concerned.

Till I was nearly nine years old I was exceedingly fond of dolls, of which I had several of different degrees of ugliness. But about that age I was taken away for a few weeks to visit an aunt of my mother’s at the seaside, and as we travelled all the way there and back in the coach, our luggage had to be much less in quantity than can now be comfortably stowed away in the van of an express train. And “Lois must leave her dolls at home” was the decision of my sixteen-year old sister Emilia, who, with my mother and myself, was to make the journey.

At first I was greatly distressed, though, being a very quiet and uncomplaining child, I said little.

“Mayn’t I take one?” I said humbly to my mother. “Miss Trotter or Lady Mirabelle would take up so little room; or might I carry one in my arms?”

Emilia, my sister, was desired to look over the dolls and report on them. She did so, but, alas! most unfavourably.

“They are such disreputable-looking things,” she said half-laughingly to my mother, “I should really be ashamed for my aunt to see them. She likes everything so neat, you know. And mother, Lois is really growing a great girl — don’t you think it is a good time to break her of dolls?”

So my dolls were left behind. I don’t think I grieved *very* much over them. The excitement of the journey and the being considered a great girl by Emilia went far to console me. Besides, I had been beginning to find such big dolls rather inconvenient, as I did not care to play with them in the common way merely. My great pleasure was in making them act the different characters in some romance of my own concoction, and I found smaller *dramatis personæ* more easily managed. Of late I had even tried to cut out figures in paper for this purpose, but I could not make them anything but grotesque and ugly, and had for some time past been “casting about” in my mind as to some less objectionable puppets.

How well I remember the first night at Sandilands! The journey I have somehow almost forgotten. I suppose it was in no way very remarkable, and it is not unlikely that I fell asleep in the coach, and that this had to do with what followed.

My great-aunt was a tiny little old lady, so tiny that small as I was myself she made me feel clumsy. Her house, too, was in proportion to herself. She received us with the greatest affection, but was so nervously anxious to make us comfortable that I could not but feel strange and shy than usual. Notwithstanding my mother's encouraging whispers and Emilia's tugs and nods, I showed myself to sad disadvantage, which was especially unfortunate, as I was Aunt Lois's god-daughter, and had been brought to see her on purpose to please her. I spilt my tea, I trod on the cat's tail, I knocked over a valuable Indian jar filled with pot-pourri, which fortunately, however, was not broken, till at last, in despair, my mother agreed to Emilia's repeated suggestion that I had better go to bed.

And to bed I went, in considerable distress, though a little consoled by the kind way in which my aunt kissed me and patted me on the back as she said good-night.

I was to sleep in a small room, generally used as a sort of study. My aunt had thoughtfully arranged a little bed in it for me, thinking the only other unused bedroom, which was up at the top of the house, would be so far away from my mother and Emilia that I should feel lonely. I went to bed quietly, and, notwithstanding the strangeness of everything about me, soon fell asleep. But an hour or two later, just when my mother and aunt were sitting comfortably chat-

ting, and Emilia trying over some old songs on the thin-toned piano, they and the two maid-servants in the kitchen were suddenly startled by piercing screams from my room.

Upstairs they all ran — Emilia arriving the first.

“What is the matter, Lois?” she exclaimed. “Have you set yourself on fire?”

I was sitting up in bed, my eyes almost starting out of my head with fright.

“The faces, the faces!” I cried. “See, Emilia, up there!”

It was a minute or two before she could see what I meant, and by that time my mother and aunt and the servants were all in the room. Emilia would have scolded me, but Aunt Lois hurried forward and soothed me, oh, so kindly, while she explained that what in my half-awakened state I had taken for two faces were nothing but two Dutch china vases, standing on the top of a high old-fashioned cabinet in a corner of the room. The door having been left slightly ajar, a ray of light from the lamp on the landing had penetrated into the room, just catching the cabinet, while leaving everything else in darkness.

I sobbed and cried for some time, but persisted in staying where I was instead of changing places with Emilia, as was proposed, now that I really knew there was nothing to be afraid of.

“Brave girl!” said my aunt approvingly. “And

to-morrow, for a reward, you shall have the key of the cabinet and examine it for yourself. It is filled with curious foreign shells, and if you care for them you shall have some to take home with you."

And with this delightful anticipation I fell peacefully asleep.

CHAPTER II.

MY aunt was as good as her word. The next morning, when breakfast was over, she went up with me to my little room and unlocked the cabinet. It was, as she had said, filled with lovely curious shells, of every size and shape. Some of the trays were in considerable disorder.

"You may put them straight for me, Lois, my dear," she said, "and when you have done so, you may play with them every day while you are here. And when you go away I shall give you a few. I cannot give you many, for the cabinet was arranged and given to me by my dear brother, who is dead, and I should not like to spoil the look of it. But before you go you may choose twenty to take away with you."

"Thank you, Aunt Lois," I said soberly. But she must have seen by my face that I was pleased, for she added —

"And when I die, Lois, you shall have the cabinet and all the shells."

“Thank you, Aunt Lois,” I said again, not indeed knowing what else to say, though I felt rather uncomfortable when she talked of dying.

After this, for some days to come, I was perfectly happy. Morning, noon, and night I was at the shells. The only trouble was that it was a grief to me ever to leave them, and of course, as I had been brought to Sandilands partly for the benefit of the sea-air, my mother could not allow me to spend all my time in one small room.

One day, just after our early dinner, I had escaped to my treasures as usual, when Emilia followed me upstairs to tell me to put on my hat and cape for a walk by the sea-shore. My face fell, but of course I did not venture to make any objection.

“Can’t you bear to tear yourself away from your shells even for an hour?” said Emilia. “What a queer child you are! What can you find to play at with them; they are all arranged with perfect order long ago?”

“They are so pretty. I like putting their colours together,” I said, fondly touching, as I spoke, the shells of one tray, which were my especial favourites.

“Yes, they *are* pretty,” said Emilia. “How lovely that delicate pink one is, in the middle of those dark-brown tortoiseshell-looking ones! It is like a princess surrounded by her slaves.”

I started with pleasure. Emilia’s suggestion opened a new world to me. Here before me, in

my shells, were the very puppets I had been in search of!

“Oh, Emilia!” I exclaimed, “*what* a good idea!”

But when she questioned me as to what I meant, I got shy again, and refused to explain. I was afraid of her laughing at me, and hurried away to put on my hat, more eager than ever to get back to these delightful playfellows, as I really considered them.

And what games did I not have with them! I made them act far more wonderful dramas than I could possibly describe to you, children. I went through ever so many of the *Arabian Nights* stories, with the shells for caliphs and weseers, genii, and enchanted damsels. I acted all the well-known old fairy tales, as well (or better) known in my childish days as now: Cinderella and dear Beauty and the Riquet with the tuft. There was one brown shell with a little hump on its back which did splendidly for Riquet. Then for a change to more sober life I dramatised *The Fairchild Family* and *Jemima Placid*, taking for my model a little book of plays for children, whose name, if I mistake not, was *Leisure Hours*.

But through all my fanciful transmogrifications I was constant in one particular: the beautiful pale-rose-coloured shell which Emilia had admired was ever my *prima donna* and special favourite. It — I very nearly had said “she” — was in turn the lovely wife of Hassan of Balsora, Princess Graciosa, and

Lucy Fairchild, whom, on mature consideration, I preferred to her sister Emily, as, though not so pretty, she was never guilty of such disgraceful conduct as eating "plum jam" on the sly and then denying it! And when no special "actings" were on hand, and my beautiful shell might have been supposed to be nothing but a shell, the pleasures of my fertile imagination were by no means at an end. The pretty thing then became a sort of beloved friend to me. I talked to it, and imagined it talked to me; I confided to it all my hopes and fears and disappointments, and believed, or pretended to myself to believe rather, that the shell murmured to me in reply sweet whispers of affection and sympathy; I carried it about with me everywhere, in a tiny box lined with tissue-paper and cotton-wool; indeed it seems to me now that many, perhaps most people, if they had heard what nurses call "my goings-on," would have thought my wits decidedly wanting. But *of course* I told no one of my new fancy. I don't think at that time I *could* have done so. I lived in a happy dream-world of my own alone with "my pink pet," for that was the only "real" name I ever gave to the shell, and no longer in the least regretted Miss Trotter or Lady Mirabelle, though I often "amused" my present favourite with stories of the sayings and doings of its predecessors in my affections.

Of course my pink pet accompanied me home.

There was great consultation with my shell as to the nineteen others to be chosen, and there was one moment's breathless suspense when my aunt told me to show her my selection, and I gravely did so, watching her face the while.

What if she should refuse to me the gift of the one, for which I would gladly have gone without all the others?

"You have made a very modest choice, Lois," she said at last. "Are you sure you wouldn't like any others better? These are rather rare shells," she added, touching a little group of two or three that generally figured as my pink pet's maids of honour, "but these, and this, and this — are common enough."

"But this is the only one of the sort in the cabinet," I replied, reddening with vexation, for my favourite had been one of those Aunt Lois had described as "common." Actually, at the risk of losing my beautiful shell, I could not help standing up in its defence.

"Why, that's the one I thought so pretty, isn't it?" said Emilia, coming forward. "Lois thinks it worth its weight in gold, aunt. She keeps it in an old pill-box, and —"

"You're *very* unkind, Emilia," I exclaimed angrily; "you've no business to pry into what I do."

"Hush — hush! my dear," said Aunt Lois in her fussy way, yet not unkindly, and looking at me with

some curiosity. "Give me my spectacles, and let me see this remarkable shell better. Yes — you are right, your young eyes are sharper than mine, it *is* a rare shell. I think there were only two of them in the cabinet, and one must have been broken, though I did not know it."

Oh, how I trembled! Supposing Aunt Lois were to say she could not spare this one precious specimen! Emilia put my thoughts into words for me, for which I did not thank her.

"If it is the only one," she said, "of course Lois won't expect you to give it to her." She glanced at me reproachfully. My eyes fell, but I did not speak.

"I would not on any account go back from my promise," said my aunt. "If the child has a special fancy for the shell, let her have it by all means, even were it far more valuable than it is."

I could hardly speak, so great had been my suspense, but I whispered "Thank you, Aunt Lois," in a husky voice, and I fancy by the way my aunt again looked at me that she saw there were tears in my eyes. And the next day we went home.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER this I grew fonder than ever of my pink pet. But at the same time I was more careful than before to let no one know of my queer fancy.

Emilia's remarks had alarmed me, for I had had no idea that she had noticed my treasure. I could not bear being laughed at, and I intensely dreaded my brothers getting hold of the story and playing me some trick which might deprive me of my favourite. I never played with my shells except when I was quite alone, and deeply regretted there being no key to the lock of my room, by which I might have secured myself against intruders. But as I had always been in the habit of playing a great deal by myself, and had always, too, been quiet and reserved, no one took any special notice of me or my occupations, particularly as every one in the house was just then much occupied with preparations for the approaching marriage of my second sister, Margaret. So I spent hours and hours by myself — or rather not by myself, for I had for my companions far more wonderful beings than were ever dreamt of anywhere save in a child's brain, and with my pink pet went through more marvellous adventures by far than Munchausen himself.

One day I was playing as usual in my own little room, when the door suddenly opened and Emilia and Margaret came in. They were both laughing. I started up in terror and threw my handkerchief over the little group of shells, who had just been performing a tournament on a cane-bottomed chair, on the seat of which, with an old piece of French chalk, I had marked out the lists, the places for



MY · PINK · PET

“One day I was playing as usual in my own little room, when the door suddenly opened — ”

spectators, and the daïs of honour for the queen, represented of course by my rose-coloured shell.

“What are you doing, Lois?” said Emilia.

“Nothing, at least only playing,” I said confusedly.

“We didn’t suppose you were doing anything naughty,” said Margaret. “Don’t look so frightened. Let us see what you are playing at.”

I hesitated.

“Come now,” said Emilia laughingly, “do let us have it. You had got as far as — let me see what was it, ‘Oh ladye fair, I kneel before thee,’ wasn’t that it, Margaret?”

I turned upon her in sudden fury. But before I could speak, Emilia, not noticing my excitement, had snatched away the handkerchief from the chair, and with mischievous glee picked out my pink pet.

“See, Margaret,” she cried, “this is the ‘ladye fair,’ Lois’s familiar.”

I had found my voice by now — found it indeed; it would have been better had I remained silent.

“Oh, you mean girl!” I exclaimed. “Oh, you bad, wicked sister! You’ve been listening at the door; am I not even to be allowed the privacy of my own chamber?” I was growing dramatic in my excitement, and unconsciously using the language of some of my persecuted heroines.

“Lois,” cried Margaret, “do not excite yourself so. We did not listen at the door, but you were

speaking so loud, I assure you it was impossible not to hear you.”

Somewhat softened and yet inexpressibly annoyed, I turned to Margaret, unfortunately in time to see that it was only by the greatest efforts she was controlling her laughter. My words and manner had been too much for her, anxious as she was to quell the storm.

“I will bear no more,” I said passionately. “Unnatural sisters that you are to jeer and mock at me. Give me my shell, Emilia. How dare you touch it?”

Startled, and really a little frightened by my manner, Emilia silently held out the shell. I snatched at it, how it was I never could tell — whether she or I dropped it I know not, nor do I know whose foot trod on it, but so it was. In the scuffle my treasure fell to the ground; my pink pet was crushed into a little heap of shell dust.

“Oh, Lois, dear Lois, I am so sorry,” exclaimed Emilia, all her mischief and glee at an end. But I did not speak. For a moment I stared at the fatal spot on the floor, then stooping down I scooped up as well as I could the fragments of what had been so dear to me, and hiding them in my hand rushed from the room, still without speaking. I really hardly knew what I was doing; afterwards I remembered hearing Emilia say in a frightened tone —

“Margaret, what can we do? I never saw Lois like that before. Can she be going out of her mind?”

I thought I *was* going out of my mind. Even now, children, old woman as I am, I cannot bear to recall the misery of that time. I ran out into the garden, and lay with my face hidden in an old deserted arbour, where I trusted no one would come to seek me. I had put the "ashes" of my favourite into the pill-box, and held it in my hands while I cried and sobbed with mingled anger and grief. The afternoon went by, but no one came to look for me.

"It must be nearly tea-time," I said to myself, though reluctant to own that I was hungry. "No one cares what becomes of me."

Just then I heard a step approaching. It was Emilia.

"Oh, Lois!" she exclaimed; and I could tell by her voice that she had been crying. "I have been looking everywhere for you. Oh, dear Lois, do say you forgive me?"

"No," I said sullenly, turning from her and pushing away her outstretched arms, "I will *never* forgive you."

And this was my only reply to her repeated words of sorrow and affection, till at last in despair she went away. Then, knowing that my retreat was discovered, I got up and went into the house, up to my own room. I sent down word by one of the servants that my head ached, and I did not want any tea, and my mother, judging it wiser from my sisters' account of me not to drive matters to ex-

tremity, let me have my own way. She came up to see me, and said quietly that she hoped my head would be better to-morrow, but that was all, and I encouraged nothing more, and when Emilia came to my door to say good-night, I would not answer her.

The next day things were no better. By this time my continued crying had really made my head ache more badly than it had ever ached before. I got up and dressed, but had to lie down again, and thus I spent the day; and when my sisters came in to see me I would not speak to them. Never, I think, was child more perfectly miserable; and though I gave little thought to that part of the matter, I can now see that I must have made the whole household wretched. And yet by this time I was doing myself the greatest injustice. I was no longer angry with Emilia. I was simply sunk in grief. My pink pet was crushed into dust; how it had happened, or who was to blame, I did not care. I was just broken-hearted.

I think it must have been the evening of the second day after the tragedy of the shell that I was sitting alone in my little room, when there came a tap at the door. "Come in," I said listlessly, never for a moment supposing it to be any one but the housemaid. The door opened and I glanced up. My visitor was Aunt Lois. I had forgotten all about her coming, though I now remembered hear-

ing that she was expected a week or two before Margaret's marriage.

"Aunt Lois!" I exclaimed, starting up, but when I felt her bright kindly eyes looking at me inquiringly, I grew red and turned away; but she came forward all the more eagerly.

"So my poor little girl," she said, "I hear you have been in great trouble."

I did not speak — I began to cry quietly.

"And some one else has been in trouble too," she said; "you have made Emilia very unhappy."

I raised my head in surprise. "Emilia!" I repeated; "she doesn't care. She only laughed at me."

"She *does* care, Lois," said my aunt. "She has tried to tell you so several times."

"Yes," I said confusedly, "she did; but I didn't think anybody cared *really*."

"No, you have been thinking of no one but yourself, Lois; that is the truth, dear. But now listen to me, and don't think I am going to laugh at you. I understand how you have been feeling. Once, when I was a little girl, I was very nearly as miserable about the loss of a — guess now — what *do* you think?"

I looked up with interest.

"I don't know," I said; "was it a pet bird, or something like that?"

"No," replied Aunt Lois, "nothing half so sensible.

I don't think you could guess. It was nothing but a little sugar mouse, which I had had for some weeks, till at last one day, forgetting that it was only sugar, I left it so close to the fire that it melted. But many times in my life I have thought of my poor mouse with gratitude, Lois. It taught me some good lessons. Can you guess what they were?"

"Not to care too much for things, I suppose," I said.

"Not *exactly* that. I don't think 'caring' ever does us harm; but *what* one cares for, that is the thing. You will understand in good time."

I looked up again, thoughtfully this time.

"I think I do understand, a little," I said. "You are so kind, Aunt Lois."

"I don't like to see people unhappy if I can cheer them," she said. "Do you, Lois?"

I did not reply.

"Shall I call Emilia?" she said. "You can make *her* happy again."

"Please," I whispered.

Aunt Lois went to the door, and I heard her call my sister. She must have been waiting somewhere near, for in a moment she was in the room. She ran up to me and put her arms round me and kissed me fondly — more fondly I think than ever any one had kissed me before.

"Dear little Lois," she said, "I have been *so* sorry about you. Won't you forgive me? And I have

not been a good sister to you — I have left you alone to make amusement for yourself when I might have helped you. Aunt Lois has shown me it all, and I want to begin now quite differently, so that you shall never feel lonely again.”

I kissed her in return. Who could have helped doing so? There were tears in her eyes — those merry bright eyes that I had never before seen looking sad; and it seemed to me that all of a sudden I found out how sweet and pretty Emilia was.

“Dear Emilia,” I said, and then touching a little knot of pale-rose-coloured ribbon that she happened to be wearing, and which seemed just to match the pretty flush in her cheeks, I whispered very low, “Will *you* be my pink pet, Emilia?”

She laughed happily. “That reminds me,” she said, and out of her pocket she drew a tiny box, which she gave me. I opened it, and gave a little cry of surprise. There, in a nest of cotton-wool, there lay before me, lovely as ever, my beloved shell!

“Emilia!” I exclaimed, “where did you get it? It was broken to bits.”

“I brought it,” said Aunt Lois. “Don’t you remember my saying there had once been two of those rare shells? Emilia wrote to ask me to hunt all through the cabinet to see if possibly the other was still there; and I actually did find it. It was hidden in a very large shell, that somehow or other

it had got into — one of the large shells you seldom played with.”

“How kind of you, and of Emilia,” I said. Then I looked at the shell again. “I should like to keep it *always*,” I said, “but I won’t make a pink pet of it.”

And I always did keep it. It lies now in a corner of my trinket-case, where it has lain for many years, and where little fingers have often reverently touched it, when I told them it was a keepsake from the dear, merry Aunt Emilia their young eyes had never seen — sister and dearest of friends while she lived, most precious of memories when she died. For she died many years ago; but before many years more have passed, I smile to think that God will let us be again together, and this is one of the thoughts that makes me not regret to feel that I am really growing into quite an old woman.

AN HONEST LITTLE MAN.

OUR Baby is very fond of coming down to dessert. I almost think it is the greatest pleasure in his small life, especially as it is not one that very often happens, for, of course, as a rule, he has to go to bed before father and mother begin dinner, and dessert comes at the end of all, even after grace, which I have often wondered at. Our Baby is four; he has rather red hair, and merry-sad eyes, if you know what I mean; and in summer, because his skin is so very fair — “quite lost on a boy,” nurse says — he has a great many freckles, especially on his dear little nose. He is a great pet, of course, but not in a very babyish way — he seems too sensible for that; and he is very gentle and thoughtful, but not at all “soft” or cowardly. Our Baby has a brother — he is really, of course, brother to us all; but Baby seems to think he is only “budder” to him — a very big, almost grown-up brother, Baby considers him, for he is nearly seven! Well, one evening lately both these little boys came down to dessert for a great treat, because an auntie had come on a visit, and this was the first night. They were both so pleased. “Brother” was chattering and laughing in what we

call his "big man way," and Baby smiling soberly. That is his way when he is pleased, and that reminds me how we did laugh the first night he ever came down! He was so dreadfully solemn and quiet we thought he was going to cry, and father said, "That child had better go to bed, he looks so miserable;" but when I asked him if he would like to go up, he looked at me and smiled, and said, "Oh no, Cissy. He's very happy;" and then we saw he really was, only he thought looking solemn was the best of good manners, for afterwards he told "Brother" he thought "gemplemens and ladies never laughed at dinner!" But he was more at home this evening that Auntie had come, and though he did not make any noise, any one could see he was happy. He was sitting by Auntie, who was very pleased with him, and without any one happening to notice, she took a cocoa-nut biscuit from a plate in front of her and gave it to him. He took it quietly, but did not eat it, for he saw that "Budder" had not got one, and though our little boys are not the least jealous of each other, they are very fond of being what they call "egwall," and if one gets anything, he likes the other to get the same.

Auntie went on speaking, and did not see that Baby did not eat his biscuit, but held it tight in his little hand. And in a minute or two mother looked round and said, "I must find something my little boys will like." Then she drew the cocoa-nut biscuits to



'AN HONEST LITTLE MAN'
"Him has one, zank you." p. 49

her and chose two, a pink one and a white one — you must know there is nothing we children think such a treat as cocoa-nut biscuits — and handed them to them.

“Budder” took his and said, “Thank you, mother;” but what do you think dear Baby did? Instead of taking it, as he might easily have done, without any one’s ever knowing of the other — and, indeed, if they had known, they couldn’t have said it was naughty of him — he held out his hand with the biscuit already in it, and said quite simply, not the least as if he thought he was doing anything very good, “Him has one, zank you.”

“Honest little man,” said mother, and then Baby’s face got red, and he did look pleased. For mother does not praise us often, but when she does it is for something to be a little proud of, you see, and even Baby understands that.

And Auntie turned and gave him a kiss.

“You dear little fellow,” she said; and then in a minute, she added, “that reminds me of something I came across the other day.”

“What was it? Oh, do tell us, Auntie,” we all cried.

Auntie smiled — we are always on the look-out for stories, and she knows that.

“It was nothing much, dears,” she said, “nothing I could make a story of, but it was pretty, and it touched me.”

“Was it a bear,” said Baby, “or a woof that touched you?”

“Silly boy,” said “Budder”; “how could it be a bear or a woof? Auntie said it was something pretty.”

And when she had left off laughing, she told us.

“It was the other day,” she said, “I was walking along one of the principal streets of Edinburgh, thinking to myself how bitterly cold it was for May. Spring has been late everywhere this year, but down here in the South, though you may think you have had something to complain of, you can have no idea how cold we have had it; and the long light days seem to make it worse somehow! Well, I was walking along quietly, when I caught sight of a poor little boy hopping across the road. I say ‘hopping,’ because it gives you the best idea of the queer way he got along, for he was terribly crippled, and his only way of moving was by something between a jerk and a hop on his crutches. And yet he managed to come so quickly! You would really have been amused to see the kind of fly he came with, and how cleverly he dodged and darted in and out of the cabs and carriages, for it was the busiest time of the day. And fancy, children, his poor little legs and feet from his knees were quite bare. That is not a very unusual sight in Edinburgh, and not by any means at all times one to call forth pity. Indeed, I know one merry family of boys and girls who all

make a point of 'casting' shoes and stockings when they get to the country in summer, and declare they are much happier without. Their father and mother should be so, anyway, considering the saving in hosiers' and shoemakers' bills. But in the case of my poor little cripple it was pitiful; for the weather was so cold, and the thin legs and feet so red, and the poor twisted-up one looked so specially unhappy.

"'Poor little boy,' I exclaimed to the lady I was with; "just look at him. Why he has hopped all across the street merely for the pleasure of looking at the nice things in that window!"

"For by this time the boy was staring in with all his eyes at the confectioner's close to where we were passing.

"'Give him a penny, do,' said my friend, 'or go into the shop and buy him something.'

"We went close up to the boy, and I touched him on the shoulder. He looked up—such a pretty, happy face he had—and I said to him—

"'Well, my man, which shall I give you, a penny or a cookie?'

"He smiled brightly, but you would never guess what he answered. Like our 'honest little man' here," and Auntie patted Baby's head as she spoke, "he held out his hand—not a dirty hand 'considering'—and said cheerfully—

"'Plenty to buy some wi', thank ye, mem;' and spying into his hand I saw, children, one halfpenny."

Auntie stopped. I think there were tears in her eyes.

“And what did you do, Auntie?” we all cried.

“What could I have done but what I did?” she said. “I don’t know if it would have been better not—better to let his simple honesty be its own reward. I could not resist it; of course I gave him another penny! He thanked me again quite simply; I am sure it never struck him that he had done anything to be praised for, and I didn’t praise him, I just gave him the penny. And oh, how his bright eyes gleamed! He looked now as if he thought he had wealth enough at his command to buy all the cookies in the shop.”

“So he hadn’t only been pretending to buy,” said “Budder.” “Poor little boy, he had been toosing—toosing what he would buy. I’m so glad you gave him anoder penny, Auntie.”

“He’s so gad him got anoder penny,” echoed Baby; though, to tell the truth, I am not sure that he had been listening to the story. He had been making up for lost time by crunching away at his biscuit. And when the boys said “Good-night,” Auntie gave them each another biscuit, and mother smiled and said it was because it was Auntie’s first night. But “Budder” told Baby afterwards, by some funny reasoning of his own, that they had got another biscuit each, “’cos of that poor little boy who wasn’t greedy.”

And Baby, of course, was quite satisfied, as "Budder" said so.

I think I shall always remember that little cripple boy when I see cocoa-nut cakes, and it will make me like them, if possible, better than ever.

THE SIX POOR LITTLE PRINCESSES.

“ And all the Christ Child’s other gifts . . .

. . . but still — but still —

The doll seem’d all my waking thoughts to fill. . . .”

THE DOLL THAT NE’ER WAS MINE.

THERE were six of them, beginning with Helen and ending with Baby, and as Helen was only twelve and Baby already five, it is easy to understand that they were all pretty near of a size. But they weren’t really princesses. That was all Jinny’s planning. Indeed most things which were nice or amusing or at all “out-of-the-way” were Jinny’s planning.

Jinny’s long name was Ginevra. She came third. Helen and Agatha were in front of her, and below her came Elspeth and Belinda and Baby. Baby had a proper name, I suppose, but I never heard it, and so I can’t tell you what it was. And as no one ever did hear it, I don’t see that it much matters. Nor would it have mattered much if Belinda had had no proper name either, for she was never called anything but Butter-ball. The story was that it was because she was so fat; and as, like many fat people, she was very good-natured, she did not mind.

They were all together in the nursery, together

but alone, as was rather often the case; for they had no kind, comfortable old nurse to spoil and scold them by turns, poor children, only a girl that Miss Burton, the lady whom they lived with, kept "to do the nursery work," which does not sound like being a nice nurse at all, though I suppose Miss Burton did not understand the difference. There were a good many things she did not understand. She liked the children to be neatly dressed, and to have good plain food in plenty; she was very particular that they should do their lessons and go for a walk every day when it was fine enough, but that was about all she thought of. She did not think they needed any fun except what they could make for themselves, and even then it must not be too noisy; she could not understand that they could possibly be "dull," caged up in their nursery. "Dull," when there were six of them to play together! She would have laughed at the idea.

They had few story-books and fewer toys. So they had to invent stories for themselves, and as for the toys, to make believe very much indeed. But how they would have succeeded in either had it not been for Jinny I should be afraid to say.

"It's a shame—a regular shame," said Ginevra. She was sitting on the table in the middle of the room with Elspeth beside her. The two little ones were cross-legged on the floor, very disconsolately nursing the battered remains of two very hideous

old dolls, who in their best days could never have been anything but coarse and common, and Helen and Agatha sat together on a chair with a book in their hands, which, however, they were not reading. "It's a shame," Ginevra repeated; "even the little princes in the tower had toys to play with."

"Had they?" said Helen. "Is that in the history, Jinny?"

"It's in some history; anyway, I'm sure I've heard it," Jinny replied.

"But this isn't a tower," said Agatha.

"No, it's a dungeon," replied Ginevra grimly. "And if any of you besides me had the spirit of a true princess, you wouldn't stand it."

"We don't want to stand it any more than you do," Helen said quietly. "But what are we to do? You don't want to run away, do you? Where could we run to? It isn't as if papa was anywhere in England. Besides, we're not starved or beaten, and we're in no danger of having our heads cut off."

"I'd rather we were — there'd be some fun in that," said Princess Jinny.

"Fun!" repeated Agatha.

"Well, it wouldn't be as stupid as being shut up here in this dreary old nursery — I mean dungeon," said Ginevra. "And now that our cruel gaoler has refused to let us have the small solace of — of a —" she could not find any more imposing word — "*doll* to play with, I think the time has come to take matters into our own hands, princesses."

“I’ve no objection,” said Helen and Agatha, speaking together. “But what do you mean to do?”

“You shouldn’t call Miss Burton a gaoler — she isn’t as bad as *that*; besides, she’s not a man,” said Elspeth, who had not before spoken. “We might call her the governor — no, governess; but that sounds so funny, ‘governess of the tower,’ or *custo* — then some word like that, of the castle.”

“But this isn’t a tower — we’ve fixed that — nor a castle. It’s just a dungeon — that’ll do very well, and it’s great fun at night when we put out the candles and grope about in the dark. And gaoler will do very well for Miss Burton — some are quite kind, much kinder than she.”

“It’s all along of our never having had any mamma,” said a slow, soft little voice from the floor.

“Princess Butter-ball, what a vulgar way of speaking you have! — ‘all along of’ — I’m ashamed of you,” said Jinny severely. “Besides, we did have a mamma once — all except —” and she glanced at Baby, but without finishing her sentence. For had she done so poor Princess Baby would have burst into loud sobs; it was a very sore point with her that she had never had a mamma at all, whereas all the others, even Butter-ball, were perfectly sure they could remember their mother.

“If Aunt Ginevra would come home,” sighed Elspeth. “We’ve always been promised she would.” “And she’s written us kind letters,” added Agatha.

“What’s letters?” said Jinny contemptuously.

“Well, you needn’t complain,” said Helen. “She sent you a silver mug — real silver — and that’s more than any of our godmothers did for the rest of us.”

“Yes, she did,” said Jinny, “and it’s fortunate for us all, princesses, that through all our troubles I have always kept that one — memento of happier days about my person — ”

“What stories, Jinny!” Agatha exclaimed. “At least it’s stories if you’re being real just now. You mix up princess-ing and real, so that I get quite muddled. But, you know, you *don’t* carry the mug about with you.”

For all answer, Princess Ginevra, after some fumbling in her pocket, drew out a short, thick parcel wrapped in tissue-paper, which she unfolded, and held up to view a silver mug.

“There now,” she said.

Agatha looked rather crestfallen.

“It must be very uncomfortable to have that lumpy thing in your pocket, and some day Miss Burton will be asking where it’s gone,” she said. “I suppose it makes you fancy yourself more a princess, but I’m getting rather tired of fancies. Now if we only had a beautiful doll, and could all work at dressing it, that *would* be worth something.”

“And we might go on being princesses all the same, or even more,” put in Elspeth.

“Patience,” said Jinny, “patience and courage.

Leave it to me. I think I see my way. I have my eye on a trusty adherent, and if I am not much mistaken, you shall have a doll before Christmas."

All five pricked up their ears at this — they had all at the bottom of their hearts the greatest faith in Ginevra, though the elder ones now and then felt it necessary to snub her a little.

"Are you in earnest, Jinny?" said Helen; "and if you are, I wish you'd tell us what you mean. Who is the trusty adherent?"

"I know," said Agatha. "It's the red-haired boy next door. Jinny dropped her umbrella the other day and he picked it up for her, and she stopped to thank him — that day we had colds and couldn't go out, Helen."

"No," said Elspeth; "it was Jinny that picked up some of his books that dropped — he was carrying such a pile of awful messy ragged ones. He must go to a messy school."

"He was not going to school," said Ginevra. "He was taking these old books to — but no, I must not betray him."

"Rubbish," said Agatha; "he can't be more than nine. What could there be to betray? *He's* not a shut-up prince, Jinny. Do talk sense for once."

Ginevra changed her tone.

"I don't want to tell you," she said in a matter-of-fact voice, "for fear of disappointing you all. Just wait a very few days and then I'll tell you. But first,

supposing we could get a doll, what should it be like — fair or dark?"

"Dark, black hair and brown eyes," replied all the five voices. For the six princesses had fair curls and blue eyes, so, naturally, they preferred a contrast.

"Hum," said Jinny. "Brown hair, perhaps, but not black. The black-haired dolls in the shop-windows look common."

"Never mind. *Any* haired would do so long as we got her," said Agatha. "But don't talk about it. It does make me want her *so* dreadfully."

Late that afternoon, just about the time that the little boy next door would be coming home from school, a small figure with a shawl drawn over its head might have been seen at Miss Burton's front gate. She had waited patiently for some minutes. At last she was rewarded by the sight, or the sound rather, for it was almost too dark to see any one, of Master Red-Head coming up the road. When he got close to his own door she called out. It was rather difficult to do so, for she had no idea what his name was.

"Master — Mr. —" she began, and then changing suddenly, "boy, please, I don't know your name."

He stopped and came up to her, exclaiming of course, "I say, who's there? What's up?"

"It's me — Prin — I mean one of the little girls next door, the one who picked up your old books

the other day. I want to ask you something, please.”

Red-Head was all attention, and the two went on talking for some minutes.

“You’re sure he will?” said Jinny at last.

“Quite positive. I’ll get all out of him I can. It’s real silver, you say.”

“Real, pure silver,” she replied.

“And—and it’s your very own? I mean you may do what you like with it?” Red-Head went on, for he was a boy with a conscience.

“Of course it’s my own. Do you think I’d steal?” exclaimed Jinny indignantly, so indignantly that she omitted to answer his second question, not even asking it of herself.

“No, no, of course not. But you know—I wouldn’t get leave to sell my watch though it’s my own. Only I suppose it’s all because you’ve no father and mother to look after you. It’s very hard on you to have no toys. I suppose girls can’t live without dolls. But I say, tell me again about the doll. I’ll have to do it all at once, for we’re going away for the holidays the day after tomorrow.”

“You’re to get all the money you can, and the very prettiest doll you can have for the money. With brown hair, remember—not light, we’re tired of light, we’ve all got it ourselves—and not black, black’s common.”

“And not red, I suppose. You may as well say it. I don't mind.”

“Well, no,” said Ginevra hesitatingly. She would not for worlds have hurt his feelings — no princess would so treat a trusty adherent — yet she could not pretend to a weakness for red hair. “I *think* we'd like brown best.”

“All right. Then to-morrow afternoon, just about this time. It's a half-holiday — we're breaking up, but it's best to wait till dark for fear you should get a scolding. I'll be here just about this time, with — you know what.”

“Thank you, oh thank you so much,” and Ginevra held out her hand, half expecting him to kiss it, instead of which, however, he gave it a schoolboy shake.

“I can excuse it, however; he could not be expected to understand,” she said to herself as she flew up to the nursery.

She could scarcely sleep that night, and the next morning it was all she could do to keep her secret. But there was plenty of determination under Princess Jinny's fair curls, and by dint of much squeezing of her lips together and saying to herself what a pity it would be to spoil the beautiful “surprise,” she managed to get through the morning without doing more than dropping some mysterious hints. But how long the day seemed, short as it really was! Would it never get dark? For it was clear and frosty, and



THE SIX POOR LITTLE PRINCESSES

-Cinevra found herself running upstairs, though not so fast as the evening before, for fear of dropping the precious parcel she held in her arms."

the afternoon, to Jinny, appeared, out of contradiction, to be twice as long as usual of closing in.

“All comes, however, to him (or her) who waits,” and the blissful moment at last arrived when Ginevra found herself running upstairs, though not so fast as the evening before, for fear of dropping the precious parcel she held in her arms.

“The dear, sweet boy,” she said to herself. “I’d have liked to kiss him. Perhaps we all might when he comes home again.”

For Red-Head’s last words had been a charge not to forget to let him know after the holidays if Miss Dolly was approved of.

Ginevra burst into the nursery.

“Princesses,” she exclaimed, “shut your eyes, while I unwrap her. I’ll shut mine too. I haven’t seen her myself.”

“Is it — can it be — the doll?” they all cried, and their hearts nearly stopped beating with excitement.

“Now,” Jinny exclaimed.

They all pressed forward. All six pairs of eyes were fixed on Jinny’s lap, but not a sound was heard. A blank look of disappointment fell over every face. Red-Head, poor Red-Head had done his best, but oh, what a mistake! He had bought a *dressed* doll, and as ten and sixpence, which was all he had got for the mug, will not go very far in such articles, it can be imagined that Dolly herself, notwithstanding the gorgeousness of her attire, fell short, lamentably short, of the poor princesses’ expectations.

“She’s only china, and her hair’s a put-on wig,” said Agatha, with tears in her eyes.

“Her clothes don’t even take off and on, and they’re not a bit like a little girl’s clothes,” said Elspeth.

Ginevra said not a word; her face told of nothing less than despair.

“And poor darling Jinny has sold her mug to buy it with — all to please us. I found it out, but it was too late to stop it,” said Helen. “Jinny darling, we must like her, we *will* — anyway she’ll be better than nothing. We’ll make her new clothes, and then perhaps she won’t look so vulgar,” whereupon, Helen setting the example, all the five princesses fell upon Jinny’s neck and hugged and kissed her and each other amidst their tears.

“And we mustn’t tell Red-Head,” said Jinny; “he’d be *so* disappointed. He did his best. I never thought of saying she wasn’t to be dressed. He’s going away to-morrow, and of course they wouldn’t change the doll after he comes back. Besides, she *is* better than nothing, surely?”

Christmas Eve — the six princesses sat on the window-sill looking out on the fast-falling snow. Dolly — partially denuded of her gorgeous attire, but looking rather woe-begone, if less self-satisfied and vulgar, for new clothes “to take on and off,” and of irreproachable good taste, are not to be fashioned by little fingers in a day — was reposing in Butter-ball’s

fat arms. They "took turns" of her, as was the fairest arrangement under the circumstances of six little girls and only one doll; and, true to the sound philosophy of her being "better than nothing," a certain half-contemptuous affection for her had taken the place of the first dislike.

Suddenly — rat-tat-tat at the front knocker.

"The postman," said Helen. "*Possibly* there may be a Christmas card for us."

It was for "us," but it was not a card. No; a letter, addressed outside to Helen as the eldest, but inside beginning "My six dear little nieces."

"From Aunt Ginevra," Helen exclaimed; "and oh, she is coming home at last. And oh, oh, just fancy, we are all to go to live with her. And — and —"

"Read it aloud," said Jinny quickly. But Helen was all trembling with excitement. Jinny seized it and read.

Delightful news truly for the six imprisoned princesses!

"She *must* be nice," said Jinny; "she writes so sweetly. And what can the presents be that she says she is sending us for Christmas?"

Agatha looked over her shoulder.

"I have chosen what I think would have pleased me most when I was a little girl. The box is sent off by express from Paris, where your uncle and I are resting for a few days, so that you may have it

by Christmas. And before the new year begins, my darlings, I hope to be at last with you."

Rat-tat-tat again. The railway van this time. Such a big box comes up to the nursery. Dear, dear, what a business to get it opened. How the six pairs of eyes shine, how the six pairs of hands tremble with eagerness as each undoes her own specially marked parcel. And oh, the cries of delight at last! What could be lovelier, what more perfect, than the six exquisite dolls, each more beautiful than her sisters!

"Real wax, real hair, real everysing," cries Princess Baby.

"One suit of clothes ready, taking off and on ones, and lots of stuff to make more," adds Butter-ball.

"Oh, how sweet Auntie must be, how happy we are going to be!" cry all.

But Jinny's face is sad.

"My poor, ugly dolly," she murmurs. "And oh, what shall I say if Auntie asks for my jug?"

"We'll tell her — all of us together. It was all for our sakes you did it, and so she can't be angry," say the other five.

"And, Jinny, I do think the old doll would make a beautiful maid for the others; she really couldn't look vulgar in a neat print frock and white apron."

Ginevra brightens up at this.

"All the same," she said, "I wish now we had waited a little and believed that Auntie would come

as soon as she could. I see that it would have been better. And oh, I do so hope she won't be vexed."

She was not vexed; only very, *very* sorry. More deeply sorry than the princesses themselves could understand.

"I had no idea of it all," said poor Auntie. "Yet I could not have come to you sooner, my darlings. Still — if I had known — But it is all over now, and you are going to be as happy as ever your Auntie can make you."

"And it's *almost* the same as having a mamma, isn't it?" said Baby, satisfied that in this possession she had an undoubted share.

The mug was reclaimed. And the dealer, who had paid far too little for it, was well frightened by no less a person than Uncle himself.

Poor Red-Head never knew how he had failed. But Auntie, who got to know his father and mother, was able, without hurting his feelings, to make him understand that little boys do well to keep out of such transactions even when inspired by the kindest of motives.

BASIL'S VIOLIN.

PART I.

“THANK you so much for telling me about it. I am pleased, for it is just what I wanted to hear of.”

“And I am so glad for Herr Wildermann’s sake. It rarely happens in this world that one hears of a want and a supply at the same time;” and the speaker, laughing as she said the last words, shook hands once again with her hostess and left her.

Lady Iltyd went to the window, — a low one, leading on to the garden, and looked out. Then she opened it and called out clearly, though not very loudly —

“Basil, Basi — i — il, are you there, my boy?”

“Yes, mother; I’m coming.” And from among the bushes, at a very short distance, there emerged a rather comical little figure. A boy of eight or nine, with a bright rosy face and short dark hair. Over his sailor suit he had a brown holland blouse, which once, doubtless, had been clean, but was certainly so no longer. It stuck out rather bunchily behind, owing to the large collar and handkerchief worn beneath, and as the child was of a sturdy make to begin with, and was extra flushed with his exer-

tions, it was no wonder that his mother stopped in what she was going to say to laugh heartily at her little boy.

“You look like a gnome, Basil,” she said. “What have you been doing to make yourself so hot and dirty?”

“Transplanting, mother. It’s nearly done. I’ve taken a lot of the little wood plants that I have in my garden and put them down here among the big shrubs, where it’s cool and damp. It was too dry and sunny for them in my garden, Andrew says. They’re used to the nice, shady, damp sort of places in the wood, you see, mother.”

“But it isn’t the time for transplanting, Basil. It is too late.”

“It won’t matter, Andrew says, mother. I’ve put them in such a beautiful wet corner. But I’m awfully hot, and I’m rather dirty.”

“Rather,” said his mother. “And, Basil, your lessons for to-morrow? It’s four o’clock, and you know what your father said about having them done before you come down to dessert.”

Basil shook himself impatiently.

“Oh bother!” he said; “whenever I’m a little happy somebody begins about something horrid. I’ve such a lot of lessons to-day. And it’s a half-holiday. I think it is the greatest shame to call it a half-holiday, and then give more lessons to do than any other day.”

At the bottom of her heart Lady Iltyd was a little of Basil's opinion; but she felt it would do no good, and might do a great deal of harm to say so. Basil went as a day-scholar to a very good private school at Tarnworth, the little country town two miles off. He rode there on his pony in the morning, and rode home again at four o'clock. He liked his school-fellows, and did not *dislike* his teachers, but he could not bear lessons! There was this much excuse for him, that he was not a clever boy in the sense of learning quickly. On the contrary, he learned slowly, and had to read a thing over several times before he understood it. Sometimes he would do so patiently enough; but sometimes — and these "times," I fear, came more frequently than the good ones — he was so *impatient*, so easily discouraged, that it was not a pleasant task to superintend his lessons' learning. Yet he was not without a queer kind of perseverance of his own — he could not bear to go to bed leaving any of his lessons unfinished, and he would go on working at them with a sort of dull, hopeless resolution that was rather piteous, till one reflected that, after all, he might just as well look cheerful about it. But to look cheerful in the face of difficulties was not Basil's "way." With the first difficulty vanished all his brightness and good temper, and all he could do was to work on like a poor little over-driven slave, with no pleasure or satisfaction in his task. And many an evening bed-

time was long past before his lessons were ready, for though Basil well knew how long he took to learn them, and how the later he put them off the harder they grew, there was no getting him to set to work at once on coming home. He would make one excuse after another — “it was not worth while beginning till after tea,” or his little sister Blanche had begged him to play with her just for five minutes, and they “hadn’t noticed how late it was,” or — or — it would be impossible to tell all the reasons why Basil never could manage to begin his lessons so as to get them done at a reasonable hour. So that at last his father had made the rule of which his mother reminded him — that he was not to come down to dessert unless his lessons were done.

Now, not coming down to dessert meant more to Basil than it sounds, and nothing was a greater punishment to him. It was not that he was too fond of nice things, for he was not at all a greedy boy, though he liked an orange, or a juicy pear, or a macaroon biscuit as much as anybody, and he liked, too, to be neatly dressed, and sit beside his father in the pretty dining-room, by the nicely arranged table with the flowers and the fruit and the sparkling wine and shining glass. For though Basil was not in some ways a clever child, he had great taste for pretty and beautiful things. But it was none of the things I have mentioned that made him so *very* fond of “coming down to dessert.” It was another thing. It was his mother’s playing on the piano.

Every evening when Lady Iltyd left the dining-room, followed by Basil and Blanche, she used to go straight to the grand piano which stood in one corner of the library, where they generally sat, and there she would play to the children for a quarter of an hour or so, just whatever they asked for. She needed no "music paper," as Blanche called it; the music seemed to come out of her fingers of itself. And this was Basil's happiest moment of the day. Blanche liked it too, but not as much as Basil. She would sometimes get tired of sitting still, and begin to fidget about, so that now and then her mother would tell her to run off to bed without waiting for nurse to come for her. But not so Basil. There he would sit, — or lie perhaps, generally on the white fluffy rug before the fire, — with the soft dim light stealing in through the coloured glass of the high windows, or in winter evenings with no light but that of the fire fitfully dancing on the rows and rows and *rows* of books that lined the walls from floor to ceiling, only varied here and there by the portrait of some powdered-haired great-grandfather or grandmother smiling, or sometimes, perhaps, frowning down on their funny little descendant in his sailor-suit, with his short-cropped, dark head. A quaint little figure against the gleaming white fur, dreaming — what? — he could not have told you, for he had not much cleverness in telling what he thought. But his music-dreams were very charming nevertheless, and

in after life, whenever anything beautiful or exquisite came in his way, Basil's thoughts always flew back to the old library and his mother's playing.

For long he had imagined that nothing of music kind could be more delightful. But a short time before this little story begins a new knowledge had come to him. At a concert at Tarnworth — for once or twice a year there were good concerts at the little town — he had heard a celebrated violinist play, and it seemed to Basil as if a new world had opened to him.

“Mother,” he said, when the concert was over, looking up at his mother with red cheeks and sparkling eyes, “it's better than the piano — that little fiddle, I mean. It's like — like —”

“Like what, my boy?”

“I can't say it,” said Basil, “but it's like as if the music didn't belong to *here* at all. Like as if it came out of the air someway, without notes or anything. I think if I was an awfully clever man I could say things out of a fiddle, far better than write them in books.”

His mother smiled at him.

“But you mustn't call it a fiddle, Basil. A violin is the right name.”

“Violin,” repeated Basil thoughtfully. And a few minutes later, when they were in the carriage on their way home, “Mother,” he said, “do you think I might learn to play the violin?”

“I should like it very much,” said his mother. “But I fear there is no teacher at Tarnworth. I will inquire, however. Only, Basil, there is one thing. The violin is difficult, and you don’t like difficulties.”

Basil opened his eyes.

“Difficult,” he said, and as he spoke he put up his left arm as he had seen the violinist do, sawing the air backwards and forwards with an imaginary bow in his right — “difficult! I *can’t* fancy it would be difficult. But anyway, I’d awfully like to learn it.”

This had been two or three months ago. Lady Iltyd had not forgotten Basil’s wish; and, indeed, if she had been inclined to do so, I don’t think Basil would have let her. For at least two or three times a week he asked her if she had found a violin teacher yet, and whether it wouldn’t be a good plan to write to London for a violin. For, at the bottom of his heart, Basil had an idea which he did not quite like to express, in the face of what his mother had said as to the difficulty of violin playing, namely, that teaching at all would be unnecessary!

“If I only had a violin in my arms,” he used to say to himself as he fiddled away with his invisible bow, “I am *sure* I could make it sing out whatever I wanted.”

And I am afraid that this idea of violin playing which had taken such a hold of him, did not help

him to do his lessons any the quicker. He would fall into a brown study in the middle of them, imagining himself with the longed-for treasure in his possession, and almost *hearing* the lovely sounds, to wake up with a start to his half-finished Latin exercise or French verb on the open copy-book before him, so that it was really no wonder that the complaint, evening after evening repeated, "Basil hasn't finished his lessons," at last wore out his father's patience.

We have been a long time of returning to the garden and listening to the conversation between Basil and his mother.

"Yes, I think it's a shame," repeated Basil, *à propos* of Wednesday afternoon lessons.

"But it can't be altered," said his mother, "and instead of wasting time in grumbling, I think it would be much better to set to work. And Basil, listen. If you really exert yourself to the utmost, you may still get your lessons done in time this evening. And if they *are* done in time, and you can come down to dessert, I shall have something to tell you in the library after dinner."

"Something to tell me," repeated Basil, looking rather puzzled. "How do you mean, mother? Something nice, do you mean?"

He did not take up ideas very quickly, and now and then looked puzzled about things that would have been easily understood by most children.

“Nice, of course it is nice, you stupid old fellow,” said his mother, laughing. “Are you in a brown study, Basil? That bodes ill for your lessons. Come, rouse yourself and give *all* your attention to them, and let me see a bright face at dessert. *Of course* it is something ‘nice’ I have to tell you, or I wouldn’t make a bribe of it, would I? It’s very wrong to bribe you, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said Basil. “I don’t think it can be if you do it. Kiss me, mother. I’ll try to do my lessons quickly,” and lifting up his rosy face for his mother’s kiss, he ran off. “But oh, how I do hate them!” he said to himself as he ran.

After all, “they” were not so very difficult to-day, or perhaps Basil really did try hard for once. However that may have been, the result was a happy one. At dessert two bright little people made their appearance in the dining-room, and before his father had time to ask him the question he had hitherto so dreaded, the boy burst out with the good news —

“All done, father, every one, more than half an hour ago.”

“Yes,” said Blanche complacently, “he’s been *werry* good. He’s put his fingers in his ears, and kept bumming to himself *such* a lot, and he hasn’t played the vi’lin one time.”

“Played the violin!” repeated her father. “What does she mean? You didn’t tell me Basil had already be —” he went on, turning to the children’s mother; but she hastily interrupted him.

“Blanche means playing an imaginary violin,” she said, smiling. “Ever since Basil heard Signor L—— at Tarnworth, his head has been running on violins so, that he stops in the middle of his lessons to refresh himself with a little inaudible music.”

As she spoke she got up and moved towards the door.

“Bring your biscuits and fruit into the library, children,” she said. “You can eat them there. I’m not going to play to you this evening. We’re going to talk instead.”

Up jumped Basil.

“I don’t want any fruit,” he said, “I really don’t. Blanche, you stay with father and eat all you want. I want to be a little while alone with mother in the library. Mayn’t I, mother?” he added coaxingly. “Blanche doesn’t mind.”

“You are really very complimentary to *me*,” said his father, laughing. “Why should Blanche mind?”

“I doesn’t,” said Blanche, very contentedly watching her father peeling a pear for her. So Basil and his mother went off together for their talk.

“About the ‘something nice,’ mother?” began Basil.

“Well, my boy, I’m quite ready to tell you. Mrs. Marchcote was here to-day. You know who I mean—the lady who lives in that pretty house at the end of Tarnworth High Street. You pass it every morning going to school.”

“I know,” said Basil, nodding his head. “But I don’t care about Mrs. Marchcote, mother. Is she going to have a children’s party—is that it? I don’t think I care about parties, mother.” And his face looked rather disappointed.

“Basil, Basil, how impatient you are! I never said anything about a children’s party. Mrs. Marchcote told me something quite different from that. Listen, Basil. A young German—Herr Wildermann is his name—has come to Tarnworth in hopes of making his living by teaching the violin. He can give pianoforte lessons also, but he plays the violin better. He plays it, she says, *very* beautifully. He has got no pupils yet, Basil. But—who do you think is going to be his first one?”

Basil gazed at his mother. For a moment he felt a little puzzled.

“Mother,” he said at last, “do you mean—oh, mother, *are* you going to let me have lessons? Shall I have a dear little violin of my own? Oh, mother, mother!”

And he jumped up from the rug where he had been lying at his mother’s feet, and looked as if he were ready to turn head over heels for joy!

“Yes, my boy,” said his mother; “you are going to have your first lesson the day after to-morrow, and Herr Wildermann is to choose you a violin. But listen, Basil, and think well of what I say. It is *not* easy to learn to play the violin. Even if a child

has a great deal of taste — talent even — for music, it requires great patience and perseverance to learn to play the violin at all well. No instrument requires more patience before you can arrive at anything really good. I would not say all this to another child — I would let Blanche, for instance, find out the difficulties for herself, and meet them as they come, cheerfully and brightly as she always does. But you are so exaggerated about difficulties, Basil, that I want to save yourself and me vexation and trouble before you begin the violin. You are too confident at first, and you cannot believe that there will be difficulties, and then you go to the other extreme and lose heart. Now, I warn you that the violin is *very* difficult. And it is not a thing you *must* learn — not like your lessons at school. It will be a great, an immense pleasure to you once you master it, but unless you resolve to be patient and persevering and *hopeful* in learning it, you had better not begin it.”

Lady Iltyd spoke very earnestly. She was anxious to make an impression on Basil, for she saw more clearly than any one the faults of his character, and longed to help him to overcome them. For a moment or two Basil remained silent, for he was, as she had hoped he would be, struck by what she had said, and was thinking over it. Then he jumped up, and throwing his arms round his mother's neck, kissed her very lovingly.

“Mother dear,” he said, “I do want to learn it,

and I will try. Even if it is very difficult, I'll try. You'll see if I won't, for I do love music, and I love *you*, mother. And I would like to please you."

Lady Iltyd kissed him in return.

"My own dear boy," she said, "you will please me very much if you overcome that bad habit of losing heart over difficulties."

"He may learn more things than music in learning the violin," she thought to herself.

But as Basil went upstairs to bed, fiddling at his invisible violin all the way, and whistling the tune he liked to fancy he was playing, *he* said to himself: "I do mean to try, but I *can't* believe it is so difficult as mother says."

PART II.

THAT same afternoon an elderly woman was sitting alone by the window of a shabby little parlour over a grocer's shop in the High Street of Tarnworth. She had a gentle, careworn face — a face that looked as if its owner had known much sorrow, but had not lost heart and patience. She was knitting — knitting a stocking, but so deftly and swiftly that it was evident she did not need to pay any attention to what her fingers were doing. Her eyes, — soft, old, blue eyes, with the rather sad look those clear blue eyes often get in old age, — gazed now and then out of the window — for from where she sat a corner of the ivy-covered church tower was to be seen making

a pleasant object against the sky — and now and then turned anxiously towards the door.

“He is late, my poor Ulric,” she said to herself. “And yet I almost dread to see him come in, with the same look on his face — always the same sad disappointment! Ah, what a mistake it has been, I fear, this coming to England — but yet we did it for the best, and it seemed so likely to succeed here where there are two or three such good schools and no music teacher. We did it for the best, however, and there is no use regretting it. The good God sees fit to try us — but still we must trust Him. Ah, if it were only I, but my poor boy!”

And the old eyes filled with slow-coming tears.

They were hastily brushed away, however, for at that moment the door opened and a young man, breathless with excitement, hurried into the room.

“Mother!” he exclaimed, but before he could say more she interrupted him.

“What is it, my boy? What is it, Ulric?” she exclaimed. “No bad news, surely?”

“Bad news, mother dear? I scarcely see what more bad news *could* come to us. As long as we have each other, what is there for us to lose? But I did not mean to speak gloomily this morning, for I have brought you *good* news. Fancy, mother, only fancy — I have got a pupil at last.”

“My Ulric — that *is* good news!” said poor Frau Wildermann.

“And who knows what it may lead to,” said the young man. “I have always heard that the *first* pupil is the difficulty — once started, one gets on rapidly. Especially if the pupil is one likely to do one credit, and I fancy this will be the case with this boy. Mrs. Marchcote — it is through her kindness I have been recommended — says he has unusual taste for music. He has been longing to learn the violin.”

“Who is he?” asked the mother.

“The son of Sir John Iltyd — one of the principal families here. I could not have a better introduction. I am to go the day after to-morrow — three lessons a week, and well paid.”

He went on to explain all about the terms to his mother, who listened with a thankful heart, as she saw Ulric's bright eyes and eager, hopeful expression.

“He has not looked like that for many a long day,” she thought to herself, “and the help has not come too soon. Ulric would have been even more unhappy had he known how very little we have left.”

And she felt glad that she had struggled on without telling her son quite the worst of things. What would she not have borne for him — how had she not struggled for him all these years? He was the only one left her, the youngest and last of her children, for the other three had died while still almost infants, and Ulric had come to them when she and her husband were no longer young, and had lost hopes

of ever having a child to cheer their old age. So never was a son more cherished. And he deserved it. He had been the best of sons, and had tried in his boyish way to replace his father, though he was only twelve years old when that father died. Since then life had been hard on them both, doubly hard, for each suffered for the other even more than personally, and yet in another sense not so hard as if either had been alone. They had had misfortune after misfortune — the little patrimony which had enabled Frau Wildermann to yield to Ulric's darling wish of being a musician by profession, had been lost by a bad investment just as his musical education was completed, and it seemed too late in the day for him to try anything else. And so for a year or two they had struggled on, faring not so badly in the summer when living is cheaper, and Ulric often got engagements for the season in the band at some watering-place, but suffering sadly in the long, cold German winters — suffering as those do who will not complain, who keep up a respectable appearance to the last. And then came the idea of emigrating to England, suggested to them by a friend who had happened to hear of what seemed like an opening at Tarnworth, where they had now been for nearly two months without finding any pupils for Ulric, or employment of any kind in his profession for the young musician.

So it is easy to understand the delight with which

he accepted Lady Iltyd's proposal, made to him by Mrs. Marchcote.

It would be difficult to say which of the two, master or pupil, looked forward the more eagerly to the first music-lesson. Basil dreamed of it night and day. Herr Wildermann on his side built castles in the air about the number of pupils he was to have, and the fame he was to gain through his success with Lady Iltyd's boy. Poor fellow, it was not from vanity that his mind dwelt on and so little doubted this same wonderful success!

And in due course came the day after to-morrow, neither hastened nor retarded by the eagerness with which it was looked forward to.

“What a beautiful home! The child cannot but be refined and tender in nature who has been brought up in such a home,” thought Herr Wildermann, ready at all times to think the best, and more than usually inclined to-day to see things through rose-coloured spectacles.

He was walking up the long avenue of elms, leading to the Hall. The weather was lovely, already hot, however, and he would have liked to take off his hat and let the breeze — what there was of it, that is to say — play on his forehead. But he had not a free hand, for he was loaded with no less than three violins, his own and two others, what are called half and three-quarters sized, as, till he saw his little pupil, he could not tell which would suit him. He

did look rather a comical object, I dare say, to the tall footman at the door, but not so to the eager child who had spent the last hour at least in peeping out to see if his master was not yet coming.

“Mother,” he exclaimed, rushing back into the room, “he’s come. And he’s brought loads of violins.”

“*Loads,*” repeated Lady Iltyd, smiling down at her boy, whose rosy cheeks and bright eyes were still rosier and brighter than usual; “well, among them it is to be hoped there will be one to suit you.”

Then she turned to Ulric, who was standing in the doorway, half dazzled by the brightness of the pretty room into which he was ushered after the darker hall, and still more confused by his intense anxiety to please the graceful lady who was greeting him so kindly, and to win the liking of the child he was to teach. But Basil’s mother’s pleasant manner soon set him at his ease, and in a minute or two he was opening the violin cases and discussing which would be the right size for the boy. Basil gazed and listened in silence. At the first glance Herr Wildermann had felt a little disappointed. His new pupil was not certainly a poetical looking child! His short sturdy figure and round rosy face spoke of the perfection of hearty boyish life, but nothing more. But his breathless eagerness, the intense interest in his eyes — most of all the look in his face as he listened to a little caprice which Ulric played

on his own violin as a sort of introduction to the lesson, soon made the musician change his opinion.

“He has it — he has the musician’s soul. One can see it!” he half said, half whispered to Lady Iltyd, though he had the good sense to understand what might have seemed a little cold in her answer.

“I think Basil truly loves music,” she said, “but you will join with me, I am sure, Herr Wildermann, in telling him that to be a musician at all, to play *well* above all, takes much patience and perseverance. Nothing in this world can be done without trouble, can it?”

“Ah no,” said Herr Wildermann, “that is true.”

But Basil, whose fingers were fidgeting to touch at last the violin and dainty bow, said nothing.

“I will leave you,” said his mother. “I think you will find it better to be alone with Basil, Herr Wildermann.”

And she left the room.

She listened with some anxiety to the sounds which now and then made their way to the room where she sat writing. Sweet clear sounds occasionally from the master’s violin, but mingled, it must be confessed, with others the reverse of musical. Squeakings and gruntings, and a dreadful sort of scraping whine, not to be described in words.

“My poor Basil,” thought his mother, though it was a little difficult not to smile at a *most* unearthly shriek that just then reached her ears. “I hope he is not losing his temper already.”

But she waited quietly till the sounds ceased. Then came the soft sweet notes of a melody which she knew well, played by Herr Wildermann alone; and a few minutes after she saw among the trees the tall thin figure of the young German, laden with but two violins this time as he made his way down the avenue.

She waited a minute or two to see if Basil would come to her. Then, as he did not, she returned to the morning room where he had had his lesson. He was still there, standing by the window, but she was pleased to hear as she went in that he was humming to himself the air that Ulric had played last.

“Well, Basil?” she said, “and how did you get on?”

The boy turned round — there was a mixture of expressions on his face. A rather dewy look about his eyes made his mother wonder for a moment if he had been crying. But when he spoke it was so cheerfully that she thought she must have been mistaken.

“He plays so beautifully, mother,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “I knew he did. I heard him one day at Mrs. Marchcote’s, and I listened this morning.”

“You listened, mother?” he said. “Did you hear how awfully it squeaked with me?”

“Of course,” said Lady Iltyd, in a matter-of-fact way; “it is always so at first.”

Basil seemed relieved.

“Yes,” he said, “*he* said so too. But I don’t mind. He says I shall very soon be able to make it sound prettily — to get nice *sounds*, you know, even before I can play tunes, if —” and Basil hesitated.

“If what?”

“If I practise a lot. But I think I shall. It’s rather fun after all, and I do so like to have that ducky little violin in my arms. It does feel so jolly,” and he turned with sparkling eyes again to the dainty little case containing his new treasure.

His mother was pleased. The first brunt of disappointment which she was sure Basil had felt, whether he owned to it or not, had passed off better than she had expected.

And for some days his energy continued. At all hours, when the boy was at home, unearthly squeaks and shrieks were to be heard in various parts of the house, for it was not at all Basil’s way to confine his practisings to his own quarters. Anywhere that came handy — on the staircase, in the pantry, when he took it into his head to pay a visit to the footmen, the boy and his violin were to be seen at all sorts of odd hours, and alas, still more surely to be *heard!* For a while his mother thought it best not to interfere, she did not wish to check his ardour, and the second and third lessons went off, as far as she could judge, very well. But gradually the violin grew less talkative — a day, then a couple of days, then even longer,



BASIL'S VIOLIN

“—In the pantry, when he took it into his head to pay a visit to the footmen,”

passed without its voice being heard, and one day, towards the close of the fifth or sixth lesson, Lady Iltyd, going into the room, saw a look she knew too well on her little son's face. He flung down the violin and turned to Herr Widermann —

“ I *can't* play any more — nasty thing — I believe it's got a bad fairy inside it,” he said, half in fun, half in petulance.

“ Why, Basil — ” began his mother, but her glance happening at the moment to fall on the young German, she stopped short, startled at the look of intense distress that overspread his features. “ He thinks I shall blame *him*, poor fellow,” she thought, and, with her quick kindness, she tried, indirectly, to reassure him. —

“ Don't look so grave about this silly little boy, Herr Wildermann,” she said brightly. “ Suppose you drive away the bad fairy by playing to us, and let lazy Basil rest a little.”

Basil's face, which had clouded over at the beginning of this speech, brightened up again. He flung himself down on the rug with the air of one intending to enjoy himself. And for the next ten minutes or so not a sound was heard but the exquisite tones of the master's violin, thrilling with intensity, then warbling like a bird in the joyous spring-time, bringing the tears to the boy's eyes with its tender pathos, and then flushing his cheeks with excitement, till at last they died away in the distance as it were, as if re-

turning to the enchanted land from whence they came.

Basil gave a deep sigh.

“Ah,” he said, in a low voice, “to play like *that* —”

Herr Wildermann’s face lighted up.

“He *has* it — he loves it so much, madame,” he said half apologetically to Lady Iltyd.

“Yes,” she said, but her tone was rather grave. “But it is not enough to love it. He must learn not to be so easily discouraged. You know, my boy, what I said to you at the beginning,” she went on, turning to Basil, “it is not a *necessity* to learn the violin. I would rather you gave it up than make it a worry and vexation to yourself and others.”

Basil stopped her with a kiss.

“It’s only when the bad fairy comes,” he said. “Don’t be vexed with me, mother. I’m in a beautiful good temper now.”

A day or two after this, Basil’s mother left home for a fortnight. She said a few words to him before she went, about his violin lessons, but not much, for she had heard him practising again with more attention, and she had begun to hope his impatience and discouragement had been merely a passing fit. So she only repeated to him what she had said already. Basil listened in silence, with an expression on his face she did not quite understand. But she thought

it better to say no more, especially when the boy flung his arms round her neck, and repeated more than once —

“I do want to please you, little mother; I do, I do,” he cried; and her last sight of him, as the carriage drove away, was standing with his violin in his arms at the hall-door, pretending to fiddle away at a great rate.

“He is only a baby after all,” said Lady Iltyd to herself. “I must not be too anxious about his faults. This fortnight will test his perseverance about the violin. If he is not going to be steady about it, he must give it up.”

Alas! the fortnight tested Basil and found him wanting. There were some excuses perhaps. It was very hot, and the half-yearly examinations were coming on. In his parents' absence it had been arranged that he was to stay later at school so as to get his lessons done before coming home — a very necessary precaution; for without his mother at hand to keep him up to his work, it is to be doubted if the lessons would often have been finished before midnight! Basil would not have gone to bed and left them undone — that was not his way; but he would have wasted three hours over what with energy and cheerfulness might have been well done in one. At school, under the eye of a master, this was less likely to occur — the boy was to some extent *forced* to give his attention and keep up his spirit,

though the master, whose business it was to superintend the lessons preparing, found his labours increased in no trifling way during the fortnight of Basil's staying later.

And when he got home after all this hard work, the boy felt inclined for a romp with Blanche, or a stroll in the garden, far more than for practising the violin! Half-holidays, too, in hot weather, presented many temptations. The hay was down in the park on the side nearest the house, the strawberries were at their prime; there seemed always something else to do than struggling with the capricious little instrument, whose "contrariness," as he called it, really made Basil sometimes fancy it was bewitched.

"You've got it inside you; why won't you let it come out for me as well as for him?" he would say, addressing his violin, half in fun, half in petulance, after some vain but not very sustained effort to draw out of it tones in any way approaching those which in Herr Wildermann's hands seemed to come of themselves. "No, I've no patience with you. It's too bad," and down he would fling violin and bow, declaring to himself he would never touch them again. But when the day for the music lesson came round, and Herr Wildermann drew out some few lovely notes before Basil was ready to begin, all the boy's impatience disappeared, and he listened as if entranced till his master recalled his attention. And thus, seeing the child's undoubted love for music,

Ulric could not yet feel altogether discouraged, though again there were times when he doubted if his efforts would ever succeed in making a musician of the boy.

“But as long as he likes it so much,” he would say to himself, “and provided he does not *wish* to give it up, it would be wrong of me to suggest it. In any case it is for his mother to judge.”

Before the fortnight was over, however, Herr Wildermann's patience was sorely tried. There came a day on which, with a sudden outburst of temper, Basil refused to try any more, and only by dint of promising to play to him for a quarter of an hour after the lesson was over, could his master get him to make any effort. Nor was it worth much when made.

And poor Ulric walked home that day to the little lodging over the grocer's shop with a heavy heart.

PART III.

IN the first pleasant excitement of her return home and finding the children well, and to all appearance happy, Lady Iltyd did not think of what had, nevertheless, been often in her mind during her absence — namely, Basil's violin!

But the day after, when he came back from school and was beginning to tell her all he had been

busied about while she was away, the question soon came to her lips, "And what about your violin, my boy?"

Basil hesitated — then his rosy face grew rosier than before, and he stood first upon one leg and then upon the other, a habit of his when not quite easy in his mind.

"Well?" said Lady Iltyd.

Then out it came.

"Mother," he began, "I didn't like to tell you yesterday just when you first came back, but I was going to tell you. I know you'll be vexed, but I must tell you the truth. I haven't got on a bit — I tried to practise at first, but I *can't* get to play, and I hate it — I mean I hate not being able to play — and please, mother, I want to leave it off."

A rather sad look came over Lady Iltyd's face, but she only said quietly —

"Very well, Basil. You have quite made up your mind, I suppose?"

"Yes," he replied. "You know you always said, mother, I needn't go on with it if I didn't — if it was too difficult," for he could not truthfully say "if I didn't care for it."

"Yes. I told you it was no *necessity*. Very well, then, I will tell Herr Wildermann to-morrow."

"But, mother," Basil hesitated, "I didn't want you to be vexed about it."

"I am not *vexed*," his mother replied. "My dis-

appointment is another matter. But I will keep to what I said. It is better for you to give it up than to make a trouble of it to yourself and others. Now run away, for I am busy."

Basil went out of the room slowly, and not feeling altogether happy in his mind. "It isn't fair of mother," he said to himself; "she told me I needn't go on with it if I didn't like, and she never said she'd be vexed if I gave it up, and she *is* vexed." But he would not remember how much and often his mother had warned him before he began, how she had told him of the patience and perseverance required, and how he had refused to believe her! And, boy-like, he soon forgot all about it in a game with Blanche and the dogs in the garden, or remembered it only with a feeling of relief that he need not cut short his play to go in to practise his unlucky violin. But a remark of his little sister's rather destroyed his equanimity.

"I'm going in now, Basil," she said with the little "proper" air she sometimes put on; "I've not finished my scales yet, and I won't have time after tea. And you should go in for your violin, Basil. Come along."

"No," said Basil, rolling himself again lazily on the smooth lawn; "I'm not going to bother with it any more. I've given it up."

Blanche's eyes opened wide.

"Oh, Basil!" she exclaimed. "How sorry mother will be!"

“Rubbish,” said Basil, roughly. “Mother always said I might leave it off if I liked. I don’t want you to preach to me, Blanche.” Upon which Blanche walked away, her little person erect with offended dignity.

Basil did not feel happy, but he called the dogs to him and went off whistling.

The next day was a half-holiday. Basil came home at mid-day, and the violin lesson was in the afternoon.

“Am I to have a lesson to-day, mother?” said the boy at luncheon.

“Herr Wildermann is coming,” replied his mother, “it would be very rude to let him come for nothing. I will see him first, and then you can go to him for the hour. If he likes to play to you instead of your having a lesson, I do not care. It does not signify *now*.”

The idea would have been very much to Basil’s taste, but the tone in which his mother said that “now,” made him again feel vexed. He tried to fancy he had cause for being so, for he would not own to the real truth — that he was vexed with himself, and that “himself” deserved it.

“It isn’t fair,” he repeated half sullenly.

Two hours later he was summoned to the library. Herr Wildermann had come fully a quarter of an hour before — he had heard his ring, and he knew his mother was in the drawing-room waiting for him.

When he entered the library he thought at first there was no one there — the violin cases lay open on the table, the music-stand was placed ready as usual; but that was all. No pleasant voice met him with a friendly greeting in broken English and words of kindly encouragement.

“Can Herr Wildermann have gone already?” thought the boy. “He might have waited to say good-bye. What did Sims call me for if he had gone?”

And he was turning to leave the room with a mixture of feelings — irritation and some disappointment, mingled nevertheless with a certain sense of relief, for he had dreaded this last lesson — when a slight, a very slight sound seeming to come from somewhere near the windows, caught his ear. He had come into the room more softly than his wont, and his footfall had made no sound on the thick carpet. The person who was hidden by the curtains had not heard him, had no idea any one was in the room, for through a sort of half-choked sob the child heard two or three confused words which, though uttered in German, were easy enough to understand —

“My mother, ah, my poor mother! How can I tell her? Oh, my mother!”

And startled and shocked, Basil stopped short in the question that was on his lips. “Who’s there? Is it you, Blanche?” he had been on the point of saying, when the words caught his ears.

“It must be Herr Wildermann — can he be *crying?*” said Basil to himself, his cheeks growing red as the idea struck him. “What should I do?”

He had no time to consider the question, for as he stood in perplexity his little dog Yelpie, who had followed him into the room, suddenly becoming aware of the state of things, dashed forward with a short sharp bark.

“Yelpie — Yelpie,” cried Basil; “be quiet, Yelpie. It’s only Herr Wildermann. Don’t you know him, Yelpie? What a stupid you are!”

He went on talking fast to give the young German time to recover himself, for, on hearing Basil’s voice, Ulric had come forward from the shelter of the curtain. He was not red, but pale, — very pale, with a look of such intense misery in his eyes, that Basil’s momentary feeling of contempt entirely faded into one of real anxiety and sympathy.

“Are you ill, Herr Wildermann? You look so strange. Is your mother ill? Is anything dreadful the matter?” he asked hurriedly, pressing forward nearer to the young man.

Ulric tried to smile, but it was a poor attempt, and he felt that it was so. Suddenly a sort of weak, faint feeling came over him — he had walked over to the Park in the full heat of the day, and the meals that were eaten over the grocer’s shop were very frugal! — he had not been prepared for the news that had met him. “Could I — might I have a glass of

water, Master Basil?" he said, drawing to him a chair and dropping into it.

"I'll ring for — no, stay, I'll fetch it myself," said Basil, with quick understanding. "I shouldn't like the servants to know he had been *crying* — poor man," he thought to himself as he left the room. And in two minutes he was back with a glass of wine and water.

"I made Sims put some sherry in it," he said half apologetically. "You've knocked yourself up somehow, Herr Wildermann, haven't you?"

And Ulric drank obediently, and managed this time to smile more successfully. "How kind and thoughtful the boy was — how could he be the cause of such sorrow, if indeed he understood it!" thought the young man to himself.

"I — yes — perhaps it was the hot sun," he said confusedly, as he put down the glass. "Thank you, very much. I am all right now. Had we not better begin? Not that I am hurried," he went on. "I can stay a full hour from now. I have no engagements — nothing to hurry me home," he added sadly, for in his heart he was thinking how he dreaded the return home, and what he would have to tell his poor old mother.

"But what's the matter?" persisted Basil, who, now that the ice was broken, felt inclined to get to the bottom of things. "What are you so troubled about — what were you —?" He hesitated and

stopped short, and again his rosy cheeks grew redder than usual.

Herr Wildermann looked up. He was still very pale, but he did not seem self-conscious or ashamed.

“You saw my distress?” he said quietly. “Ah, well, I could not help it—the thought of my poor mother—” He turned away and bit his lips. “I thought you knew the cause of it,” he went on; “your lady mother, did you not know—did she not tell you that she meant to-day to give me notice that the lessons are to cease—that this is to be the last?”

Basil opened his mouth as if he meant to say something, and stood there, forgetting to shut it again, and staring up in Ulric’s face, though no words came. Ulric, after waiting a moment or two, turned away and began arranging the violins. Then at last the boy ejaculated—

“Herr Wildermann, you—you don’t mean to say—” and stopped short again.

“To say what?” asked the young German, but without much tone of interest in his voice. He had quite mastered himself by now—a sort of dull, hopeless resignation was coming over him—it did not seem to matter what Basil said about it; it was all settled, and the momentary gleam of good-fortune which had so raised his hopes had faded into the dark again. “We must go back to Germany,” he was saying to himself. “Somehow or other I must

scrape together money enough to take my mother back to her own country. There at least she need not starve. I can earn our daily bread, even if I have to give up music for ever."

But again Basil's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Herr Wildermann," said the boy, speaking now with eagerness, and throwing aside his hesitation, "is it possible that it is about my lessons that you're unhappy? Does it *matter* to you if I give them up? I never thought of it."

"Master Basil," said the young man sadly, "it does not signify now. It is all settled. But I do not blame you. It is not your fault—at least, it is not exactly your fault. You are so young, and the violin is very difficult. I am sorry to lose you as a pupil, for I think you could have learnt well, if you had had more hopefulness and perseverance."

And again he turned away as if there were no more to be said.

But Basil was not to be so easily satisfied.

"Herr Wildermann," he exclaimed, going nearer to his master and pulling him gently by the sleeve, "that can't be all. I dare say you're vexed at my giving it up when you've tried so hard to teach me, but that wouldn't make you so *dreadfully* sorry. Herr Wildermann, do tell me all about it? Is it because—because of the money?" he whispered at last. "Are you so—does it matter so much?"

Ulric turned his pale face to the boy. Its ex-

pression was still sad — very sad, but quiet and resigned.

“Yes, my child,” he said composedly. “Why should I hide it? There is no shame in it — yes, it is because of the money. We are *very* poor. And also I had hoped much from giving you lessons. I thought if I succeeded as I expected it would have brought me other pupils.”

Basil gazed up in the young man’s face for a moment or two without speaking. He did not take in ideas very quickly, and perhaps he had never before in his life thought so seriously as at this moment.

“I see,” he said at last. “I did not understand before. If I had known — but even now it is not too late, Herr Wildermann. I need not give up my lessons. I will ask mother to let me go on with them, and you will see she will agree in a moment.”

A gleam of pleasure lighted up Ulric’s pale face, but it faded almost as quickly as it had come.

“Thank you for your kind thought, my little friend,” he said; “but what you propose would not be right. It would not be right for your mother to pay me money for teaching you when she had decided that she did not want me to teach you any more. It would be a mere charity to me — it would be more honest for me to ask for charity at once,” he went on, the colour mounting to his face. “No, Basil, it could not be; but thank you as much. Now let us go on with our lesson.”

Basil understood, but was not satisfied. The lesson passed quietly. Never had the boy so thoroughly given his attention, or tried so hard to overcome the difficulties which had so disheartened him.

“It is too bad,” he said to himself; “but it is all my own fault. I believe I could have got on if I had really tried. And now it is too late. He wouldn't give me lessons now, for he would think it was only for him.”

Suddenly an idea struck him.

“Herr Wildermann,” he said, “won't you do *this*? Suppose I ask for just six lessons more, and I *will* try. You'll see if I don't. Well, after these six, if I'm not getting on any better, it'll be given up. But if I am, and if I really *want* to go on, you won't think it's not right, will you?”

Ulric hesitated.

“No,” he said; “I have no scruples in going on teaching you, for I feel certain you could learn well if you were more hopeful. But you must explain it all to your mother, and — and —” He stopped short, and then went on resolutely. “I will not be ashamed. It is for my mother — anything for her. It was only the feeling, my boy — but perhaps you are too young to understand — the feeling that it was almost like asking charity.”

“I do understand,” exclaimed Basil, “and I don't think I need tell mother *yet*, Herr Wildermann. I

don't want to promise again, and perhaps not keep my promise. I'll just ask for the six lessons, and tell mother I can't tell her why just yet. And then think how surprised she'll be if I really do get on;" and the boy's eyes sparkled with delight. But to Ulric's there came tears of thankfulness.

If Lady Iltyd suspected in part what had worked the change in Basil's ideas and prompted his request, she was too wise to say so. His petition for six lessons more was granted willingly, but not lightly.

"Do you really mean to profit by them, Basil?" she asked. "If so, I am only too willing that you should go on and give yourself a fair trial."

"That is it, mother," said the boy eagerly, "I want to see, to try if I can't do better. At least that is *partly* it," he went on, for he had already told her that he could not explain the whole just yet.

So poor Ulric Wildermann went home with a lighter heart than he had expected. He hoped much from these six lessons, for it was evident that Basil meant to put his heart into them.

"I need not tell my mother of my fears," thought Ulric to himself, "for they may, after all, prove to be only fears, and what would be the use of making her miserable in such a case?" And he was so bright and cheerful that evening in the little sitting-room over the grocer's shop, that even his mother's eyes

failed to discover that he had had more than usual anxiety that day.

One week, two weeks, three weeks passed. It was the day of the last of the six lessons.

“Mother,” said Basil that morning when he was starting for school, “I have my violin lesson this afternoon when I come home, you know. Herr Wildermann told me to ask you if you would come in to-day while I am playing. Not at the beginning, please, but about half-way through. He wants you to see if I am getting on better,” and then, with a very happy kiss, he was off.

Lady Iltyd had left Basil quite to himself about his violin these last weeks. She had not *heard* much of his practising, but she had noticed that he got his school lessons done quickly and without needing to be reminded, and then regularly disappeared in his own quarters, and she had her private hopes and expectations.

Nor were they disappointed. What cannot be done with patience and cheerfulness? Those three weeks had seen more progress made than the three months before, and Basil's eyes danced with pleasure when he left off playing and stood waiting to hear what his mother would say.

She said nothing, but she drew him to her and kissed him tenderly, and Basil, peeping up half shyly — for somehow, as he told Blanche afterwards, “mother's *pleased* kisses” always made him feel a little shy — saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“You *are* pleased, mother?” he whispered, and another kiss was the answer. Then the young stranger came forward.

“Herr Wildermann, I must thank you for all the trouble you have taken. I am more than pleased,” said Lady Iltyd warmly. “How have you succeeded so well? You have taught him more than his music — you have taught him to persevere, and to keep up heart in spite of difficulties.”

“He has taught himself, madame,” said Ulric eagerly, his face flushing. “It was his kind heart that gave him what he needed. Ah, Master Basil,” he went on, turning to his little pupil, “I must now tell the whole, and then it will be to say if you are still to continue your lessons.”

“The whole” was soon told, and it is easy to understand that it did not lessen Lady Iltyd’s pleasure. She had been glad to find her boy capable of real effort and determination — she was still more glad to find that the new motive which had prompted these was unselfish sympathy and kindness.

“I thank you *again*, Herr Wildermann,” she said, when the young man had told her all, “you have, as I said, taught Basil more lessons than you knew. And your mother is happy to have so good a son.”

Better days began for the young music-master. Thanks to Basil’s mother and to Basil himself, for the boy became a pupil who would have done credit to any master, Herr Wildermann gradually made his

way in the neighbourhood he had chosen for his new home, and his old mother's later days were passed in peace and comfort. He always counted Tarnworth his home, though as time went on he came to be well known as one of the first violinists of the day, in London and others of the great capitals of Europe.

But sometimes when his success and popularity were at the highest, he would turn to the friend who had been his first pupil, and say half regretfully —

“*You* might excel me if you chose, Basil. I could sometimes find it in my heart to wish that you too had been born a poor boy with his way to make in the world.”

And Basil Iltyd would laugh as he told Ulric that his affection made him over-estimate his pupil's talent.

“Though, such as it is,” he added, “I have to thank you for having drawn it out, and added untold pleasure to my life.”

For though Basil had too many other duties to attend to for it to be possible for him to devote very much time to music, he never neglected it, and never forgot the gratitude he owed his mother for encouraging his boyish taste.

“Above all,” Lady Iltyd used often to say, “as in mastering the violin, you gained your first battle over impatience and want of perseverance.”

“My first but not my last,” he would answer

brightly. For Basil came to be known for steady, cheerful determination, which, after all, is worth many more brilliant gifts in the journey through life, which to even the most fortunate is uphill and rugged and perplexing at times.

THE MISSING BON-BONS.

A TRUE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

“ Let it either be grave or glad
If only it may be true.”

DEAR me, such a lot of children! At first you could hardly have believed that they were all brothers and sisters — such a number there seemed, and several so nearly of a size. There were — let me see — two, three, four, actually five girls of varying heights, the two elder, twins apparently, for in all respects they resembled each other so closely; three or four boys, too, from Jack of fourteen to little hop-o'-my-thumb Chris of six. There they were all together in the large empty playroom at Landell's Manor, dancing, jumping, shouting, as only a roomful of perfectly healthy children, under the influence of some unusual and delightful excitement, can dance, and jump, and shout.

“ Miss Campbell's coming to-day — joy, jey!” exclaimed one or two of the little girls.

“ Miss Campbell is coming, hurrah, hurrah!” sang Jack to the tune irresistibly suggested by the words,

and others joining in the chorus, till the next boy created a diversion by starting the rival air of —

“Home for the holidays here we be,
Out of the clutches of LL.D.”

“’Tisn’t home for the holidays,” objected the smallest girl but one. “Miss Campbell’s never going to school no more. Her’s coming home for all-a-ways.”

But in defiance of her remonstrance, the stirring strains continued, till suddenly through the clamour a tiny shrill voice made itself heard.

“Let Towzer sing, let Towzer sing,” it pleaded. “Towzer wants to sing all be-lone.”

There was a rush in the three-year-old baby’s direction.

“Sing, of course she shall, the darling!” cried Maggie, the “Jack-in-the-middle” of the five little sisters, and the first to reach the small aspirant to vocal honours. “She shall stand on the table,” she continued, struggling breathlessly with “Towzer,” as she tried to lift her in her arms, “and —”

“Out of the way, Maggie. Out of the way, Flop!” shouted Jack, charging down ruthlessly on to the little girls, sending Maggie to the right-about and Flop to the left. “You are not to try to lift Towzer, Maggie; mother has said so, ever so many times. You’ll be dropping her and smashing her to pieces some day, the way you smashed Lady Rosa-

linda — you're far too little. There now, Towzer, my pet," as he safely established her on the sturdy wooden table; "sing, and we'll all clap."

Maggie retreated resentfully, muttering as she did so, "I'm not little — I'm seven; and Towzer isn't made of wax."

"Silence," shouted Jack, and the baby began her song.

"Miss Tammel are coming out of L.D.," she began. Shouts of laughter.

"Go on, darling; that's beautiful. Clap, clap, can't you! She thinks we're laughing at her," said Jack, the latter part of his speech an "aside" to the audience.

But it was too late; Towzer's feelings were deeply wounded.

"Towzer won't sing no more, naughty Jack, and naughty Patty, and Edith, and naughty all boys and girls to laugh at Towzer," she cried, her very blue eyes filling with tears. She was such a pretty little girl, "fair, fair, with" not "golden," I should rather say, "silvern hair," so very pale were the soft silky locks that clustered round her little head. How she ever came to be called "Towzer," her real name being Angela, would have puzzled any one unused to the extraordinary things invented by children's brains, and the queer grotesque charm which the "rule of contrary," especially as applied to nicknames, seems to possess for them.

Towzer's tears flowed piteously; everybody at once was trying to console her, and poor Towzer was all but suffocated among them, when there came a sudden interruption—a maid servant appeared at the door.

“Master Jack and Master Max,” she said as soon as she could make herself heard, “your mamma wished me to say as she hoped you were remembering about finishing your lessons early, for Miss Campbell's train is due at Stapleham at five, and your papa's ordered the carriage at four, and will be annoyed if you're not ready. And Miss Patty, I was to say,” she was continuing, when suddenly she caught sight of “the baby” still on the table, in a sad state of crush and discomposure, as, Jack and Max having already rushed off, all the remaining children were fighting for her possession. “Now that is too bad, I do declare! What are you all pulling and dragging at the dear child for? Making her cry, too. Miss Maggie, you've been teasing her, I'm certain—you're always in mischief. I'm sure I don't know whatever nurse will say—Miss Hangel's frock just clean on! I'm sure I hope Miss Campbell will keep you in better order, I do; for since your mamma's been ill, it's just dreadful the way you go on.”

“I didn't make her cry,” “And I'm sure I didn't,” cried Patty and Edith at once.

“Then it's Miss Maggie, as usual; you come too,

Miss Florence," said Dawson, as she walked off with the rescued Towzer in her arms and Flop at her heels, taking no notice of Maggie's indignant exclamation — "You're a nasty, horrid, cross thing, Dawson! and I only hope Miss Campbell will set you down when she comes."

Great things were evidently expected of "Miss Campbell," and by no one in the house was her return looked for more eagerly than by her invalid mother, who had of late found the care of her many boys and girls, weigh heavily on her. For this reason Eleanor, the eldest daughter of the family, a girl of seventeen, had been recalled from a school in Paris sooner than would otherwise have been the case, and it was her expected arrival this very evening that had caused all the playroom commotion. It was a year, fully a year, since she had been at home, and it was no wonder that all her brothers and sisters rejoiced at her return, for she was kind and unselfish, bright and merry, and the old Manor House without her had lost half its sunshine.

Five o'clock — all the children are already at the windows, some at the door, though "she cannot be here till six or half-past," says mamma; and nurse valiantly refuses to put on Towzer's second clean frock for another hour at least.

Six o'clock at last — five minutes, ten minutes, a quarter past — oh, how slowly the time goes! At last wheels, unmistakable wheels up the drive! Jack's

head poked ever so far out of the carriage window on one side, and Max's on the other. A general shriek, "They've come! they've come!" and in another minute Eleanor is in her mother's arms, to be released from them only to be hugged and re-hugged and hugged again; while from every direction comes the cry, "Miss Campbell has come, dear Miss Campbell." "Miss Tammel are tum, dear Miss Tammel."

* * * * *

At last they are all in bed — Jack, Max, Harry, Chris, Patty, Edith, Maggie, Flop, and Towzer; and Miss Campbell is free to sit quietly beside her mother's sofa, with her soft thin hands in hers.

"Oh, dear Eleanor, how nice it is to have you home again!"

"Oh, dear mamma, how nice it is to be at home again!"

Then they talked together of many things — of Eleanor's school-life and friends, of all that had happened at home while she was away, of all the girl hoped to do to help her mother.

"I shall be so thankful if you do not find the children too much for you," said Mrs. Campbell. "You see, Miss Fanshawe is excellent as a daily governess, but she could not possibly stay here altogether, on account of her invalid father; if only it is not putting too much on you, my darling," she added anxiously.

Eleanor stooped over and kissed her mother.

“Don’t fear, dear; I may make mistakes, but I shall learn. They are dear children; how funny it is how my old name for myself has clung to me! I could fancy myself a baby again when I heard that tiny Towzer calling me ‘Miss Tammel.’”

“You will never get them to call you anything else,” said her mother. “It must sound rather odd to strangers.”

“And at school I was always Eleanor! But how glad I am to be ‘Miss Tammel’ again. I have brought some small presents for the children,” she went on; “books for Patty and Edith, and dolls for the three little ones and a few bon-bons — not many, but coming from Paris I thought they would expect some. There are two little boxes exactly alike for Flop and Towzer, and a rather larger one for Maggie. So there will be no excuse for squabbling.”

“No; that will be very nice. Poor Maggie,” said Mrs. Campbell; “I fear you will find her the most troublesome. She is an ‘odd’ one; perhaps that has to do with it, but somehow she seems always getting into scrapes, and I fancy the others are a little sharp on her. She has a queer temper, but she is a very clever child.”

“She is honest and truthful, however, is she not?” said Eleanor. “I can stand anything if a child is that; but deceitfulness —” Her fair young brow contracted, and a slightly hard expression came over her face.

“I hope so,” said her mother; “I have no reason to think otherwise. But she has an extraordinary vivid imagination, and she is curiously impressionable—the sort of child that might be worked upon to imagine what was not true.”

“Still truth is truth. There can be no excuse for a falsehood,” said Eleanor.

“Mother is too indulgent and gentle in some ways,” she thought. “I must look after Maggie, and be firm with her.”

“But gentleness encourages truth, where severity might crush it,” said her mother softly, as if she had heard Eleanor’s unspoken words.

Miss Campbell made no reply, but she pressed her mother’s hand.

“And the day after to-morrow, mother dear, you will be leaving us!” she said regretfully.

“Yes, but only for a month; and now that you are here, your father and I can leave with such lightened hearts. I feel sure that the change to St. Abbots will do me good now,” replied Mrs. Campbell cheerfully.

CHAPTER II.

TO-MORROW—the first part of it at least—found the excitement scarcely less great than on the day of Miss Campbell’s arrival. For there were the presents to distribute! A delightful business to all

concerned, as Eleanor had invariably succeeded in choosing "just what I wanted more than anything," and the hugs she had again to submit to were really alarming, both as to quantity and quality. And among all the children none hugged her more than Maggie.

"It's like Santa Claus morning — goodies too," she exclaimed, dancing about in delight.

"Don't talk nonsense, you silly child," said Patty, who was of a prosaic and literal turn of mind. "You wouldn't believe, Miss Campbell," she went on, turning to her elder sister, "would you, that Maggie last Christmas went and told Flop that Santa Claus was a real old man, and that he really came down the chimney, and poor Flop wakened in the night, quite frightened — screaming — and so mamma said Maggie was never to speak about Santa Claus again, and you *are* doing so, Maggie," she wound up with, virtuously.

"But it's so pretty about Santa Claus, and so funny, isn't it, Miss Campbell?" said Maggie, peering up into Eleanor's face with her bright, restless, gray-green eyes.

"Nothing can be funny or pretty that mamma tells you not to talk about, Maggie," said Miss Campbell.

"Oh no; I know that, and I didn't mean to speak of it again. But except for that — if Flop hadn't got frightened, it would be nice, wouldn't it? I have such a lot of fairies all my own, and I wanted Flop to have some, and she wouldn't."

“She was very wise; and I think, Maggie, you might find some better things to amuse yourself with than such fancies,” said Eleanor rather severely.

Maggie’s face fell.

“I’m always naughty,” she whispered to herself. “Even Miss Campbell thinks me so already, and I’m sure fairies teach me to be good.”

In her vague childish way she had been looking forward to full sympathy from her eldest sister, and her hard tone disconcerted her.

“Now run off, dears, quickly,” said Eleanor; “you’ve got your goodies safe.”

Off they trotted, Towzer’s little fat hands clasping tight her treasures.

“Dollies and doodies; Towzer and Flop dot just the same,” she said with delight to nurse when they reached their own domain.

“And don’t you think, dearie, you’d better let nurse keep the goodies for you? See here, dears,” said nurse to the two little girls, “we’ll put both boxes up on the high chest of drawers, where they’ll be quite safe, and you shall have some every day. Shall we finish Miss Flop’s first and then Miss Baby’s? It’ll keep them fresher, not to have one box opened till the other’s done. Miss Maggie, I suppose you’ll keep your own?”

“Yes,” said Maggie; and so it was arranged.

“I’ll keep mine till my birthday, and then I’ll have a fairy feast, and invite Flop and Towzer,” was

Maggie's secret determination, which, however, she communicated to no one. And though she spent a great part of her playtime unobserved in arranging and rearranging the pretty bon-bons, not one found its way to her mouth. Her birthday was to be in a fortnight.

The next day Mr. and Mrs. Campbell left home, and Eleanor's reign began; auspiciously enough to all appearance.

"You'll be gentle with them all, dear, especially Maggie; they have not been under regular discipline for some time, you know?" said Mrs. Campbell as she kissed Eleanor.

"Of course, mamma dear; can't you trust me?" was the reply, with the slightest touch of reproach; and to herself the girl whispered, "Real kindness and gentleness are not incompatible with firmness, however."

On the fourth day the calm was interrupted. Eleanor had just returned from a drive to Stapleham, to fetch the afternoon letters, when she was seized upon by Patty and Edith in hot indignation.

"Miss Campbell! Miss Campbell!" they cried. "What do you think that naughty, greedy, mean Maggie has done? She's stolen poor Towzer's goodies — all of them — at least, half — the box was half full, nurse says, and though nurse all but saw her, she will say she didn't take them, and there was no one else in the night nursery this afternoon.

Maggie was left in alone for half an hour, because she had a little cold, and when nurse and the little ones came in Towzer's box was gone."

Eleanor leant on the hall table for a moment. A sick faint feeling went through her. Maggie, her own sister, to be capable of such a thing! To her rigorous inexperience it seemed terrible. The idea that taking what was not one's own and then denying it was hardly, at seven years old, to be described by the terms such actions on the part of an older person would deserve, would have seemed to her weak tampering with evil.

"Oh, Patty," she exclaimed, "are you sure?"

"Come up and see for yourself. Nurse will tell you," said the twins, too eagerly indignant to notice or pity their sister's distress; and Eleanor followed their advice.

The charge seemed sadly well founded. Nurse described the position of the boxes.

"Up on the high chest of drawers, where none of the littler ones than Miss Maggie could climb," she said. Flop's was empty, Towzer's still half full, when they went out that afternoon, and nurse returning unexpectedly, had caught sight of Maggie running out of the night nursery — "where she had no business to be. I had told her to stay in the other room by the fire, and there's nothing of hers in there; for you know, miss, she sleeps in Miss Patty's room."

“And what reason did she give for being there?”

“She got very red, miss, and at first wouldn't say anything; but I saw she had been clambering up — a chair was dragged out of its place — and so then she said it was to stretch out of the window to gather some of the ivy leaves to ornament her goodies. And I was that silly, I believed her,” said nurse, with considerable self-disgust.

“You didn't look at the bon-bons then?”

“Never thought of them, miss, till we came in, and the little ones asked for some, and I reached up and found only the one box, and that empty.”

“And you've looked all about? You're sure it hasn't fallen down?”

“Oh dear, no! Of course I looked everywhere. Besides, I saw Miss Maggie after something in there,” said nurse conclusively, “and my parasol that always lies on the drawers was on the floor when I came in.”

“Maggie,” said Eleanor, “do you hear that? You must have climbed up to the drawers.”

“Yes,” said Maggie; “I did.”

Eleanor breathed more freely.

“What for?”

Maggie hesitated.

“I wanted the parasol to hook the leaves,” she said; “I saw it when I stood on the chair.”

“Patty,” said Eleanor, “go and see if there are any leaves on Maggie's goodies.”

Patty returned. No, there were none.

“Well, Maggie?” said Eleanor.

“I know there aren’t. I didn’t get them. Nurse scolded me, and I didn’t like to go back to get them.”

“Was she near the window when you saw her, nurse?”

“No, miss; she was nearer to the drawers, and so was the chair.”

“Yes,” said Maggie, “I was getting the parasol.”

Eleanor said no more, but, rather to nurse’s annoyance, went herself to the night nursery and thoroughly examined it. There was no trace of the lost bon-bons.

“And supposing she has eaten the bon-bons, where is the box?” she said.

“She may have thrown it in the fire; very likely she didn’t mean to keep the box. She may have slipped it into her pocket in a fright,” said nurse. But no trace of it was now to be seen in Maggie’s pocket.

“Maggie,” said Eleanor, “I cannot send you to your room on account of your cold. But no one is to speak to you till you confess all. I shall ask you again at bedtime, and I trust you will then speak the truth. Now Patty, and Edith, and Flop, remember Maggie’s not to be spoken to.”

“Nasty greedy thing; and not one of her own goodies eaten,” muttered Patty. “I’m sure no one will want to speak to her.”



THE MISSING BON-BONS
"Yes," said Maggie, "I was getting the para
-sol"

“Hush, Patty. Don’t cry, Towzer darling,” said Eleanor, for poor Towzer was sobbing bitterly, though her grief was inconsistent in its objects.

“No doodies, and poor Maggie!” was her lament.

To divert her “Miss Tammel” carried her off to the drawing-room. And thus Maggie was sent to Coventry.

By bedtime her features were hardly to be recognised, so blurred and swollen with crying was the poor little face. But still there was no confession. “I didn’t touch Towzer’s goodies,” she persisted over and over again. Eleanor’s heart ached, but still duty must be done.

“How can she persist so?” she said, turning to nurse.

“Yes indeed, Miss Maggie, how can you?” said nurse. “It would almost make one believe her if there was a chance of it, but I’ve had every bit of furniture out of the room, or turned about just to make sure. Miss Maggie’s a queer child, once she takes a thing into her head; but she’s not exactly obstinate either.”

So Maggie, “unshriven and unforgiven,” was put to bed in her misery, with no kind kiss or loving “good-night.” “If she would but own to it, dreadful though it is,” sighed Eleanor. But two days — two days, and, worse still, two nights — went by, and still the child held out. Eleanor herself began to feel quite ill, and Maggie grew like a little ghost.

Her character seemed to have changed strangely — she flew into no passions, and called no one any names; apparently she felt no resentment, only misery. But how terribly crushing was the Pariah-like life she led in the nursery, probably none of those about her had the least idea of. On the third morning there came a change.

“Miss Campbell! Miss Campbell!” said Patty and Edith, slipping with bare feet and night-gowned little figures into their sister’s room — quite against orders, but it was a great occasion — “wake up, wake up, Maggie’s confessed!”

And so it proved. There sat Maggie upright in her cot, with flushed face and excited eyes.

“I took them, Miss Campbell. I did take Towzer’s goodies, and eatened them up.”

Eleanor sat down on the side of the little bed.

“Oh, Maggie!” she said reproachfully. “How could you! But, still more, how could you deny it so often?”

Maggie looked at her bewilderedly, then meeting the stern reproach in her sister’s eyes, hid her face in the bed-clothes while she murmured something about not having remembered before.

“Hush!” said Eleanor, “don’t make things worse by false excuses.”

“Make her tell all about it,” whispered Patty.

“No,” said Eleanor; “it would only tempt her to invent palliations. It is miserable enough — I don’t want to hear any more.”

What "palliations" were, to Patty was by no means clear.

"At least," she persisted, "you might ask her what she did with the box."

Maggie caught the words.

"I didn't touch the box," she said, "only the goodies."

"Oh, what a story!" exclaimed the twins.

"Be quiet, children; I will not have any more said. Don't you see what it will lead her into," said Eleanor.

But some of her old spirit seemed to have returned to Maggie. Her eyes sparkled with eagerness as she repeated, "I didn't touch the box; no, I never did. Only the goodies."

"Maggie, you are to say no more, but listen to me," said Eleanor. Then sending Patty and Edith away, she spoke to the culprit as earnestly as she knew how of the sin of which she had been guilty, ending by making her repeat after her a few simple words of prayer for pardon. All this Maggie received submissively, only whispering, as if to herself, "But I do think God might have made me remember before!" which remark Eleanor judged it best to ignore. Then she kissed Maggie, and the child clung to her affectionately. But still Eleanor could not feel satisfied; there was a dreamy vagueness about the little girl, a want, it seemed to Eleanor, of realising her fault to the full, which puzzled and perplexed her.

Still Maggie was restored to favour, and in a day or two seemed much the same as usual, even flying into a passion when, contrary to Eleanor's order, the subject was alluded to in the nursery and curiosity expressed as to what had become of the box. "I don't mind you saying I took the goodies," she said. "I did; but I never touched the box."

A week, ten days, went by. It was the evening before Maggie's birthday. All the children were in bed, Jack and Max at their lessons in their own room, when a tap came at the door of the library, where Miss Campbell was sitting alone, and in answer to her "come in," nurse entered. She looked pale and discomposed. Eleanor could almost have fancied she had been crying.

"What is the matter?" she exclaimed.

"This, Miss Campbell, this is the matter," said nurse, laying a little box on the table; "and, oh! when I think what that poor child suffered, I feel as if I could never forgive myself."

"Flop's box!" said Eleanor, bewildered; "it can't be — surely it is Towzer's — and," as she opened it, "half full of bon-bons!"

"Yes, miss; just as it was left."

"And Maggie never touched them?"

"Never touched them, miss," said nurse solemnly. Then she explained. A dressmaker from the neighbouring town had been in the nursery the day the bon-bons were missed, fitting nurse in the very room

where they were. And on this person's return home, she had found the little box among the folds of the material. "I remember tossing a lot of things up on to the drawers to be out of the way, because Miss Baby would climb on to my bed, where they were, and I thought she would crush them," said nurse; "and Miss Weaver never thought it of any consequence, or she would have brought it before. It's a long walk from Stapleham, and she knew she would be coming in a few days with my new dress, so thought it wouldn't matter."

Nurse was so genuinely distressed that Eleanor could not find it in her heart to say anything to add to her trouble. Besides, how could she, of all others, do so?

"I," she reflected, "with mamma's warning in my ears. Ah yes, I see now what she meant by Maggie's impressionableness, and imaginativeness, and the tender treatment she needs."

The next day Eleanor herself told Maggie of the discovery, and showed her the box. For a moment an expression of extreme perplexity clouded the child's face. Then like a sudden ray of sunshine, light broke over it.

"I know, Miss Campbell!" she exclaimed, "I know how it was. I thinkened and thinkened so much about it that at last I dreamed it. But only about the goodies, not the box. So I didn't tell a story, did I, Miss Campbell? Dreams aren't stories."

“No, darling. And will you forgive me for doubting you?” said Eleanor.

“But how could you help it, Miss Campbell, dear Miss Campbell?” cried Maggie, without a touch of resentment.

So Maggie was cleared, and the new sympathy with her, born of this grievous mistake, never failed her on the part of her eldest sister; and Maggie's temper and odd ways gradually softened down into no worse things than unusual energy and very decided talent. She became undoubtedly the “clever woman of the family,” but as her heart expanded with her head, Eleanor had good reason to feel happy pride in her young sister. And when the mother came home, after a month's absence, to find all prospering under Miss Campbell's care, and Eleanor felt free to tell her all that happened — which by letter, for fear of troubling her, she had refrained from doing — she felt that her one misgiving as to her eldest daughter's influence over the younger ones was removed. The lesson of the missing bon-bons would never be forgotten. Poor Maggie's three days of suffering had not been in vain.

LOST ROLLO.

CHAPTER I.

EVER since Persis and I were quite little there was one thing we longed for more than anything else. I think most children have some great wish, or fancy, perhaps grown-up people would call it, like that. But with many it changes, especially of course if they get the thing — *then* they set to work longing and planning for something else. But Persis and I didn't change — not even when we got it, or thought we had got it, for good. We wished for it for *so* long that it really seemed to grow with us; the older and bigger we grew, the stronger and bigger our wish seemed to grow. We were only seven and five — that sounds rather awkward, but I don't see how else to put it, for Persis is a girl, so I must put her age first! — she was seven and I was five (that sounds better), when we first began wishing for it. It was a story that first put it into our heads, and after that, nearly every story we read or heard seemed to have to do with it somehow, and to put it still more into them. And we were — I mean to say Persis was eleven, and I was nine when what we thought was going to be the fulfilment of our wish came. That

was really a long time. Four years — four summers and winters and autumns and springs — to keep on thinking about a thing and wishing for it!

I have not yet said what it was we wished for so much. It was to have a dog of our very own. Not a stupid little dog, though even that would perhaps have been better than nothing, but a great beautiful *big* dog. We did change about a little, as to the exact kind we wished for most, but that was partly because at first we didn't understand very well about all the sorts of big dogs there are, and whatever kind we happened to read about or see a picture of, we fancied would be the nicest. But in the end we came back pretty near to what we had begun with. We settled that we would like a collie best of all, because they are so faithful and intelligent, and as the dog in the story which had made us think of it first was a sheep-dog. That was almost the same thing, for though all sheep-dogs are not collies, all collies *are* sheep-dogs.

It was two years ago that it all happened. I am eleven now, and Persis of course is thirteen, as she is two years older. That year we didn't know where we were to go to for the holidays. Papa is a lawyer; I can't exactly tell you what kind of a lawyer, but I think he is rather a grand one, for he is always very busy, and I know he can't do half what people want him to do, though there are many lawyers in London who have very little indeed to do, mamma

says. I always think it is such a pity papa can't give them some of *his* work, isn't it? But with being so busy, of course he gets very few holidays, and sometimes he can't tell till just the day or so before whether he will be able to go away or not. And mamma doesn't like to go without him, so two or three times we children have had to be sent away alone with our governess and Eliza the schoolroom maid, and we don't like that at all.

It was getting very near the holidays, already the middle of July, and though we had several times asked mamma where we were going, she had never been able to tell us, and at last she got tired of our asking, and said in her rather vexed voice — she has a vexed voice, and a *very* vexed voice as well, but when it isn't as bad as either of these we call it her "*rather* vexed" voice.

"Persis and Archie, I wish you would not ask the same thing so often. When I have anything to tell you I promise you I will do so at once."

Then *we* promised we would not tease her about it any more, though we could not help talking about it a good deal to ourselves.

"I'm afraid we're going to be sent with Miss Ellis and Eliza like last year," I said.

"It'll be too bad — two years running," Persis replied. "But it wouldn't be nearly so bad if we had a dog, would it, Archie? Miss Ellis couldn't be so frightened then of going nice long walks. But

it's no use thinking about it. Mamma will never let us have one, I'm afraid."

For though mamma is very kind to animals — she wouldn't hurt any creature for the world, and she doesn't even like killing a wasp — she does not care much about pets, particularly not in town. She always says they are not happy except in the country. At least she used to say so. I think she has rather changed her opinion now.

"No," I said, sighing; "I'm afraid it's best to try to leave off thinking about it. We have thought about it such a long time, Persis."

But I don't think our fixing not to think any more about it really did make us leave off doing so. The only sensible way of putting a thing out of your head is by putting something else there instead, and this happened to us just then, though it didn't make us really forget about our dog for *good*, of course.

One morning, about a week after the day she had told us we weren't to tease any more, mamma called us into the drawing-room.

"Persis and Archie," she said, "I promised I would tell you as soon as I knew myself about going to the country. And you have been good children in not teasing again about it. So I am pleased to have good news for you. We are going next week to a lovely place where you have never been before. It is on the borders of Wildmoor — that beautiful great moor where I used sometimes to go when I was little.

There are lovely walks, and it is *quite* country, so I hope you will be very happy there."

"And we are *all* going — you and papa too?" we said.

"Yes, *all*," mamma answered, smiling. "Would you rather have gone without us?"

Of course she only said that to tease us — she knew quite well we wouldn't. And of course we both jumped up and hugged her and told her she was a very naughty little mamma to speak like that.

"We like Miss Ellis very well, you know, mamma," said Persis, "but still we *couldn't* like going with her as well as with you and papa."

"Indeed," said mamma, "and supposing, just *supposing* Miss Ellis couldn't come too, would it spoil your pleasure very much?"

We looked rather grave at this, for we hardly knew what to answer. It seemed unkind to say we should *not* much mind, for Miss Ellis is really very kind, especially when we are left alone with her. But yet it wouldn't have been true to say it *would* spoil our pleasure, and if you children are *real* children who read this, or even if you are big people who haven't forgotten about being children, you will know how nice it is sometimes to get quite away from lessons and lesson-books, and as it were to forget all about them — to be something like lambs, or squirrels, or rabbits, in one's feelings, just thinking about nothing except how lovely the sunshine is,

and the grass, and the trees, and being alive altogether. And I don't think it does us any harm, for afterwards, I think it makes us like lessons better again, when we come back to them, partly because it's a change, and partly too because after so much play, the least we can do is to try to work well. But still it seemed unkind to Miss Ellis to say we wouldn't mind.

At last Persis, who generally thinks of the right thing to say, looked up brightly.

"If Miss Ellis herself didn't mind, and was perhaps going to see her own friends and be very happy, *then* we wouldn't mind, mamma."

Mamma smiled.

"That's right, Persis, and that's just how it is. Miss Ellis is going to have a holiday, so you and Archie may enjoy your own holiday with clear consciences."

We were awfully glad after that. Everything seemed right.

"If *only*," I said, "we had our dog, Bruno, Persis."

For we had given our fancy dog a name, and spoke of him as if he really lived.

"Hush, Archie," said Persis, "you promised to leave off thinking about him. It seems greedy to want everything. Just *fancy* what we have compared with poor children. Lots of them don't even have one single day in the country, Archie," which made me feel rather ashamed of wishing for anything more. It was good of Persis to put it that way.

CHAPTER II.

WE were to go to Wildmoor the very next week, but still it seemed a long time off. If it hadn't been for the packing, I don't know how we'd have got over the time, for Miss Ellis's holiday began almost immediately, and we hadn't anything to do. Only Eliza was to go with us, as there were to be servants left in the house we were going to, but of course we were very glad she was coming, as we liked her to go out walks with us; she let us do whatever we took into our heads.

It was a nice day, though rather too hot to be pleasant for travelling, when we at last started for Wildmoor. It wasn't a very long journey, however, only about three hours in the railway, and the nicest part came at the end. That was a drive of nearly six miles. Persis and I don't count driving as travelling at all, and this drive was perfectly lovely. Papa had ordered a sort of covered waggonette to meet us at the station, and as it was a very fine evening he let us two go outside beside the coachman, and he went inside with mamma and Eliza, though I'm sure he'd much rather have been on the box. For some way the road was very pretty, but just something like other country roads. But after going about two miles or so we got on to the moor, and then it just was lovely. We had never seen

moorland before, and the air was so fresh and breezy, Persis said it made her think of the sea. Indeed, I think a great big moor, a *very* big one, is rather like a rough sea; the ground is all ups and downs like big waves, and when you look far on you could almost fancy the green ridges were beginning to heave and roll about.

“Won’t we have lovely walks here, Archie?” said Persis, and “I should just think we would,” I answered.

And after a bit it grew even prettier; the sun began to set, and all the colours came out in the sky, and even the ground below seemed all burning and glowing too. I never have seen any sunsets so beautiful as those on the moor, and of course we remember this one the best as it was the first we saw.

Just as it was fading off into gray we turned sharply to the left, leaving the moor, and after five minutes’ driving down a lane, we drew up at the door of the little house that was to be our home for the next few weeks. It was a dear little house, just exactly what we had wished for. It had a good many creepers over the walls, roses and honeysuckle and clematis, and the garden was beautifully neat. And inside there was a tiny dining-room and a rather bigger drawing-room, and upstairs three or four very neat bedrooms, besides those for the servants. Persis and I had two little white rooms side by side. There

were white curtains to the beds and to the windows, and the furniture was light-coloured wood, so they really looked white all over.

That first evening we thought most of the dining-room, or rather of the tea that was spread out for us there. For we were so very hungry, and the things to eat were so very good, and quite a change from London. There were such very nice home-made bread, and tea-cakes, and honey — honey is never so good as in moor country, you know, it has quite a different taste.

And when we had eaten, if not quite as much as we *could*, anyway quite as much as was good for us, we went a little turn round the garden while Eliza was getting our trunks open, and then we said good-night to papa and mamma and went to bed as happy, or almost as happy, as we could be. There was just one thought in both our minds that prevented our being *quite* happy, but we had fixed not to speak about it.

The next day and the days that followed were delightful. The weather kept fine and the walks were endless. Papa enjoyed it as much as we did. He took us out himself, and when it was not to be a very, very long walk, mamma came too. Once or twice we carried our dinner with us and didn't come home till evening, and several times we had tea on the moor near our house.

After about a week papa told us one evening that

he had to go to London the next day to stay one night. He had ordered a carriage to come to take him to the station early, and he said if it was fine Persis and I and Eliza might drive with him and walk back across the moor, if we didn't think we'd be tired. Of course we didn't, and though we were sorry for him to go, we liked the idea of the drive. And as the morning did turn out fine, it all happened as he had planned. We saw him off, and then we started for our walk back. We had never been at this side of the moor since the day we arrived, and papa told us we might vary the walk by going down a lane that skirted it for some way.

“There is a farmhouse there,” he said, “where I dare say they would give you some milk if you are thirsty.”

We thought it a very good idea, and after going about half a mile down the lane we came upon the farmhouse just as he had said. A little girl was feeding some chickens just in front, and when we asked her if we could have a cup of milk, she said she would run in and see. While we were waiting we heard a voice, a laughing merry voice it sounded, calling out in a sort of orchard close by —

“Down, Rollo, down — oh, you naughty old dog,” it said.

Just then the little girl came out to ask Eliza if she'd mind coming in to fetch the milk, as she couldn't carry both the jug and the cups. Eliza

went in, and I suppose she stayed chatting to the farmer's wife, who, she told us afterwards, was busy churning, for she was certainly five minutes gone. While she was away, the gate into the orchard opened and a girl — not a little girl, but a grown-up young lady — came running out, followed by a beautiful big dog. He was really a splendid fellow, and as she ran, he ran, half jumping against her — I think she had something in her hand he wanted to get — and again we heard the laughing voice call out —

“Down, Rollo — you naughty old fellow. You'll knock me over if you don't take care, you great, clumsy darling.”

They rushed across the road — the girl and the dog — and down a little lane just opposite. They were gone like a flash, but we did, at least *I* did see them, the dog especially, quite clearly. Afterwards I tried to fancy I hadn't, but that was not true. I did see the dog perfectly.

I turned to Persis.

“Did you ever see such a beauty?” I said. But just then Eliza came out with the milk, and we didn't say any more about the dog. We both kept thinking about it all the way home, I know, but somehow we didn't care to talk about it before Eliza. The wish for a dog of our own had become such a very deep-down thought in our hearts that we could not talk about it easily or lightly — not even to each other always.

Papa came back from London the next day, but mamma was disappointed to hear that he was obliged to return there again the end of the week, this time to stay two nights. We did not drive with him again to the station because it was a wet day, otherwise we should have wished it doubly, in the chance of having another sight of the beautiful dog.

It was the very day after papa had gone this second time that a strange thing happened. Persis and I were out in the garden rather late in the evening before going to bed, and we had just gone a tiny bit out into the lane to see if the sky looked red over the moor where the sun set, when we heard a sort of rushing, pattering sound, and looking round, what should be coming banging along towards us, as fast as he could, but a great big dog. He stopped when he got up to us and began wagging his tail and rubbing his head against us in the *sweetest* way, and then we saw that his tongue was hanging out, and that his coat was rough and dusty, and he breathed fast and pantingly — he was evidently very tired, and, above all, thirsty. I was off for a mug of water for him before we said a word, and oh how glad he was of it! He really said “Thank you” with his tail and his sweet nose as plainly as if he had spoken. And he didn’t seem to think of leaving us — he was alone, there was no one in sight, and he seemed as if he was sure he had found friends in us.

“He is very like — he is just like —” Persis began at last. But I interrupted her.



LOST "ROLLO"

"He stopped when he got up to us and began wagging his tail and rubbing his head against us in the sweetest way"

“There are lots of dogs like him,” I said. “He is lost — we must take him in for the night. Oh, Persis, just fancy — if he is really *quite* lost, we may have to keep him for good. Mamma might perhaps let us. Oh, Persis !”

We took him in with us and called to mamma to come out to the door to look at him. She saw what a beauty he was at once, and stroked his head and called him “poor doggie,” for, as I said, she is always kind to animals, though she doesn’t care for pets.

“We must take him in for the night anyway,” she said. “Perhaps in the morning we may find out where he comes from.”

There was an empty kennel in the yard, and we found some nice clean hay in the hampers that we had brought with groceries from London. And the cook gave us some scraps and one or two big bones. So “Bruno,” as of course we called him, was made very comfortable.

And you can fancy — no, I really — I don’t think you *can* — the state of excitement in which Persis and I went to bed.

CHAPTER III.

WE got up very early indeed the next morning, and of course we both rushed straight to the yard. We had had a dreadful feeling that perhaps somebody would have come to claim the dog, and that we

should find him gone. But no — there he was, the beauty, and as soon as ever he saw us, out he came wagging his dear tail and looking as pleased as pleased.

“Do you see how he knows us already, Archie?” said Persis. “Isn’t he *too* sweet? Couldn’t you really think the fairies had sent him to be our very own?”

We could scarcely eat any breakfast, and the moment it was over we dragged mamma out to look at him. She was as nearly much taken with him as we were, we could see, only she said one thing which I wished she hadn’t.

“How unhappy his owners must be at having lost him!” it was.

And then she began talking about what could be done to find them. Persis and I didn’t say anything. We wouldn’t speak even to each other about what we both knew deep down in our hearts — we wouldn’t even think of it.

Papa was not to be back till the next day. Nothing could be done till he came, anyway, so all that day Persis and I had the full happiness of Bruno. He was so good and obedient and seemed so perfectly at home with us, that we even ventured to take him out a walk, though not of course a very long one. He gambolled over the moor with us, seemingly as happy as could be, and the very moment we called him back he came. It was won-

derful how he seemed to know his name, especially when we called it out rather long, making the last "o" sound a good deal — "Bruno — o," like that, you know. Oh, he was so delightful! All our fancies about having a dog seemed nothing compared to the reality.

The next day papa came back. He was almost as pleased with Bruno as we were.

"Yes," he said, after looking him well over, "he is a beauty and no mistake. A collie of the very best kind. But some one or other must be in trouble about him."

"That's just what I have been saying," mamma put in. "If this weren't such an out-of-the-way place, no doubt we should have seen advertisements about him."

"I'll look in the local papers," said papa.

And that evening when we were at tea, he came in with a little thin-looking newspaper in his hand, which he seemed to be searching all through for something. Persis and I shivered, but we didn't dare to say much.

"Have you been at Local, papa?" I asked. "Is it far from here?"

"Been at where?" papa said. "What in the world is the child talking about?"

Papa has *rather* a sharp way sometimes, but he doesn't mean it, so we don't mind.

"At Local," I said again, "the place where you

said there was a newspaper. Is it anywhere near the station?" (I *hoped* of course it was not, for the nearer the station the more likely that the dog should be advertised for in the newspaper. You know of course what I mean by "near the station.")

To my surprise papa burst out laughing.

"You little goose," he said, holding out the paper. "There, look for yourself;" and I saw that the name of the paper was *The Wildmoor Gazette*. I was quite puzzled, and I suppose my face showed it.

"Local," said papa, "only means connected with the place — with any place. I just meant that I would get the newspaper of this place to see if any such dog as Bruno was advertised for. But I don't see anything of the kind. I think I must put in an advertisement of having found him."

"Oh, papa, you surely won't!" Persis burst out.

Papa turned upon her with a sort of sharpness we did mind this time, for we saw he was quite in earnest.

"My dear child," he said, "what are you thinking of? It would not be honest not to try to restore the dog to those he belongs to. I have already told all the neighbours about him."

Persis said no more, but she grew very red indeed. I think I did too, but I'm not quite sure, and I couldn't ask Persis afterwards, for we had fixed in our minds we wouldn't speak of that thing. I turned my face away, however, for fear of papa seeing it.

He would have thought there was something very queer the matter if he had seen we were both so red.

That afternoon he went out without saying where he was going, but we both felt quite sure he had gone about putting that horrid advertisement in the paper. And even without that, we knew that if he went telling about Bruno to everybody he'd be *sure* to be claimed. The country's not like town, you see. Everybody knows everybody else's affairs in the country.

We took Bruno out, feeling that we only loved him the more for not knowing how soon he might be taken from us. We both hugged him and cried over him that afternoon, and the dear fellow seemed to understand. He looked up in our faces with such *very* "doggy" eyes.

And after that, there never, for some days, came a knock at the door, or the sound of a strange voice in the kitchen, without our trembling. And we never came in from a walk with Bruno without getting cold all over at the thought that perhaps some one might be waiting for him.

But nothing of the sort did happen. And time went on, till it grew to be nearly three weeks that our dear dog had been with us.

One evening papa came to us in the yard when we were saying good-night to Bruno.

"I suppose you're getting to think him quite

your own," he said. "It certainly does not seem as if he were going to be owned. But what will mamma say to taking him home with us — eh, little people?"

"I don't think she'll mind," said Persis. "She loves him too — awfully. And Archie and I are full of plans about how to manage him in London."

"Ah, indeed," said papa. "Well, one of the first things to be done, it seems to me," he went on, "is to get him a collar," and he drew a yard measure out of his pocket and measured Bruno's neck. "I am going up to town to-morrow for two nights," he then told us. "You two can come to meet me at the station when I come back, with Eliza, of course, and this fellow, and you shall see what I can get in the way of a collar. I'll tell mamma the train, and you can all drive home with me."

We thanked papa — it was very kind of him, and we said we'd like to go to meet him very much. But things seldom turn out as one expects. The day papa was to come mamma had to go to the little town near the station herself — something about a washerwoman it was — so she ordered a carriage, and we drove over with her. We were all at the station together to meet papa, and when he came he had brought the loveliest collar for Bruno — with his name on, and ours, and our address in London!

"We won't risk losing him," papa said.

Then he asked us if we wouldn't rather walk

home, and we said we should, as we had driven there, and mamma didn't mind going back alone. So we set off, us two and papa. And we were so happy and so sure now of Bruno being ours, that we didn't notice that papa took the way down the lane that we had been once before.

We never noticed it, till we were close to the gate of the farm — the very farm where we had got milk — the very gate where —

And, just as we got up to it, it opened, and a girl, a lady, *the very one*, came out, not running and jumping, but walking quite quietly. But when she caught sight of us, of Bruno, and when he caught sight of her! Oh! He rushed at her, and she threw her arms round him.

“Oh, my Rollo, my own dear naughty Rollo,” she called out, and I believe she was crying. “Have you come back to me at last? Where *have* you been?”

And Bruno — *our* Bruno — went on wagging his tail and rubbing his nose on her, and pawing at her, just as he had done to us, only *more!*

Persis and I stood stock-still, feeling as if we *couldn't* bear it.

CHAPTER IV.

PAPA was the first to speak. The young lady went on hugging at Bruno, and taking no notice of any of us. Papa looked very grave. I think he thought it rather rude of her, even if she was so

pleased to find her dog again, for she might have seen how well he had been taken care of, and what a beautiful new collar he had. Papa waited a minute or two, and then he said, rather grandly, you know —

“Excuse me, madam, for interrupting you. I should be glad of some explanation about the dog. Is he your dog?”

“*My* dog,” said the girl, half sitting up and shaking her hair back. It had got messy with all her hugging at Bruno. “I should rather think so. I have nothing to explain. What do you mean?”

“I beg your pardon,” said papa. “I have had the dog nearly a month, and during that time I have advertised him regularly. I have sent all about the neighbourhood to ask if any one had lost a dog, and altogether I have had a good deal of trouble and expense.”

The girl got rather red.

“I see,” she said, “I didn’t think of that. I was only so glad to find my dear dog. I’m very much obliged to you, I’m sure. I can tell you why your advertisements were never answered. We’ve been away for nearly a month, and the people here whom we lodge with have been very stupid about it. They missed Rollo as soon as we left, and took for granted we’d taken him with us after all. And we never knew till we came back two days ago that he was lost. He was lonely, you see, when he found I

had gone, and I suppose he set out to look for me."

"Yes," said papa. "Then I suppose there is nothing more to be said. My children must bear the disappointment; they had naturally come to look upon him as their own."

Persis and I had turned away, so she couldn't see we were crying. We didn't want her to see; we didn't like her.

"I — I can't offer to pay you anything of what he's cost you, I suppose?" she said, getting redder still.

"Certainly not. Good-morning," and papa lifted his hat. And we all went off.

"My poor Persis and Archie," said papa very kindly. And when he said that, we felt as if we couldn't keep it in any longer. We both burst out crying — loud.

Just then we heard steps behind us. It was the girl running with the lovely new collar in her hand.

"This at least is yours," she said, holding it out to papa. He smiled a little.

"You will please us by keeping it," he said. "It fits him; you can easily have the engraving altered."

"Thank you," she said; "thank you very much. I am very sorry indeed for the children," she went on, for she couldn't have helped seeing how we were crying; and a nice look came into her eyes, which made us like her better. She was very pretty. I

forget if I said so. "Shall I — shall I bring Rollo some day to see you?"

But we shook our heads.

"No, thank you," Persis managed to get out.

"Ah," she said, "I'm sorry; but I understand."

And then we liked her *quite*.

We trotted on beside papa, none of us speaking. At last Persis touched me.

"Archie," she said, "I think it's for a punishment. May I tell?"

I just nodded my head.

Then Persis went close up to papa and put her hand through his arm.

"Papa," she said, "we've something to tell you. We're not crying *only* for Bruno, we're unhappy because — because we've not been good."

"We've not been *honest*," I said. That word "honest" had been sticking in my throat ever since the day papa had said it when he was speaking about it being right to advertise the dog. And now, when *I* said it, I felt as if I was going to choke. It felt so awful, you don't know.

Papa looked very grave, but he held out his other hand to me, and I was glad of that.

"Tell me all about it," he said; and then we told him everything — all about how in our real hearts we had known, or *almost* known, where Bruno came from, but how we had tried to pretend to ourselves — separately, I mean; Persis to herself and me to

myself — that we didn't know, so that we wouldn't even say it to each other, and how it did seem now as if this had come for a punishment.

Papa was very kind, so kind that we went on to tell him how great the temptation had been, how *dreadfully* we had longed for a dog, and how it had seemed that our only chance of ever having one would be one coming of itself, like Bruno had done.

“Why did you not tell mamma or me how very, very much you wished for one?” asked papa. “It would have been better than bottling it up so between yourselves. You have made yourselves think you wished for one even more than you really did.”

But we couldn't quite agree with that.

“We did speak of it sometimes,” we said, “but we knew mamma didn't want to have a dog — not in London. And —” but there we stopped. We really didn't quite know why we hadn't said more about it. I think children often keep their fancies to themselves without quite knowing why. But we didn't think it had been a fancy only, after all. “We *couldn't* have loved him more,” we said. “The real of it turned out quite as nice as the fancy.”

Then papa spoke to us very seriously. I dare say you can tell of yourselves — all of you who have nice fathers and mothers — the sort of way he spoke. About being quite, *quite* true and honest even in thinkings, and about how dangerous it is to try to deceive *ourselves*, for that the self we try to deceive

is the best part of us, the voice of God in our hearts, and it can never *really* be deceived, only, if we don't listen to it, after a while we can't hear it any more.

"Yes," said Persis, "I did know I was shamming to my good self all the time."

Then she cried a little more — and I did too. And papa kissed us, and we went on home, rather sadly of course, but still feeling, in a good way, glad too. And papa told it all to mamma, so that she kissed us *very* nicely when she said good-night, and called us her poor darlings.

You may think that is the end. But it isn't. The end is lovely.

About a week after that day, one afternoon we heard that a lady and gentleman with a big dog had come to call on papa and mamma. We were afraid it was Bruno, and the people belonging to him, and as we didn't want to see him again, we were just going to run out and hide in the garden for fear we should be sent for, when papa himself came calling for us.

"Persis. Archie." And we dared not run away.

"Papa," we said, "we don't want to come if it is Bruno."

"It is Bruno," he said; "but, all the same, you must come. You must trust me."

We had to go into the drawing-room. There was the girl talking quite nicely to mamma, and a gentleman with her, who we saw was her brother, and

— there was Bruno! We tried not to look at him, while we shook hands. How silly we were!

“Children,” said papa, “this young lady has come to say something which will please you very much. She finds, quite unexpectedly, that she cannot keep her dog, as she and Mr. Riverton” — papa made a little bow to her brother — “are going abroad. Miss Riverton wants a good home for her dog. Do you think we could promise him one?”

We could scarcely speak. It seemed too good to be true.

“Would he be ours for always?” I asked, and the young lady said, “Yes, of course. I wouldn’t want to give you the pain of parting with him *twice*, you poor children.”

“And mamma says we may?” we asked. And mamma nodded. Then Persis had a nice thought.

“Aren’t you very sorry?” she asked the girl. But *she* only smiled. “No, I can’t say I am,” she said, “because I know he’ll be very happy with you. And though I love him very much, I love my brother better, and I’m *very* glad to go with him instead of being left behind, even with Rollo.”

We *quite* liked her then. Her face was so nice. And she kissed us when she went away. Persis liked it, and I didn’t mind.

Our Bruno has been with us ever since, and we love him more and more. He is quite happy, even in London, for he has a nice home in the stables, and

we take him a walk every day, and he comes very often into the house. And in the country, where we now go for much longer every year, he is always with us.

The girl writes to us sometimes, and we answer, and tell her about Bruno. She is coming to see him next year, when they come back to England. She calls him "Rollo," but we like "Bruno" best, and *he* doesn't mind, the dear old fellow.

THE BLUE DWARFS:

AN ADVENTURE IN THÜRINGEN.

“And then on the top of the Caldou Low
There was no one left but me.”

MARY HOWITT.

“I LIKED the blue dwarfs the best — far, far the best of anything,” said Olive.

“‘The blue dwarfs!’” repeated Rex. “What *do* you mean? Why can’t you say what you mean plainly? Girls have such a stupid way of talking!”

“What can be plainer than *the blue dwarfs?*” said Olive rather snappishly, though, it must be allowed, with some reason. “We were talking about the things we liked best at the china place. *You* said the stags’ heads and the inkstands, and *I* say the blue dwarfs.”

“But I didn’t see any dwarfs,” persisted Rex.

“Well, I can’t help it if you didn’t. You had just as much chance of seeing them as I had. They were in a corner by themselves — little figures about two inches high, all with blue coats on. There were about twelve of them, all different, but all little dwarfs or gnomes. One was sitting on a barrel, one was turning head-over-heels, one was cuddling his

knees—all funny ways like that. Oh, they were lovely!”

“I wish I had seen them better,” said Rex regretfully. “I do remember seeing a tray full of little blue-looking dolls, but I didn’t notice what they were.”

Olive did not at once answer. Her eyes were fixed on something she saw passing before the window. It was a very, very little man. He was not exactly hump-backed, but his figure was somewhat deformed, and he was so small that but for the sight of his rather wizened old face one could hardly have believed he was a full-grown man. His eyes were bright and beady-looking, like those of a good-natured little weasel, if there be such a thing, and his face lighted up with a smile as he caught sight of the two, to him, strange-looking children at the open window of the little village inn.

“Guten Tag,” he said, nodding to them; and “Guten Tag,” replied the children, as they had learnt to do by this time to everybody they met. For in these remote villages it would be thought the greatest breach of courtesy to pass any one without this friendly greeting.

Rex drew a long breath when the dwarf had passed.

“Olive —” he began, but Olive interrupted him.

“Rex,” she said eagerly, “that’s *exactly* like them—like the blue dwarfs, I mean. Only, of course,

their faces were prettier — nice little china faces, rather crumply looking, but quite nice; and then their coats were such a pretty nice blue. I think," she went on consideringly — "I think, if I had that little man and washed his face *very* well, and got him a bright blue coat, he would look just like one of the blue dwarfs grown big."

Rex looked at Olive with a queer expression.

"Olive," he said in rather an awe-struck tone; "Olive, do you think perhaps they're *real*? Do you think perhaps somewhere in this country — in those queer dark woods, perhaps — that there are real blue dwarfs, and that somebody must have seen them and made the little china ones like them? Perhaps," and his voice dropped and grew still and solemn; "*perhaps*, Olive, that little man's one of them, and they may have to take off their blue coats when they're walking about. Do you know, I think it's a little, just a very little frightening? Don't you, Olive?"

"No, of course I don't," said Olive, and, to do her justice, her rather sharp answer was meant as much to reassure her little brother as to express any feeling of impatience. Rex was quite a little fellow, only eight, and Olive, who was nearly twelve, remembered that when she was as little as that, she used sometimes to feel frightened about things which she now couldn't see anything the least frightening in. And she remembered how once or twice some of her

big cousins had laughed at her, and amused themselves by telling her all sorts of nonsense, which still seemed terrible to her when she was alone in her room in the dark at night. "Of course there's nothing frightening in it," she said. "It would be rather a funny idea, I think. Of course it can't be, you know, Rex. There are no dwarfs, and gnomes, and fairies now."

"But that little man was a dwarf," said Rex.

"Yes, but a dwarf needn't be a fairy sort of person," explained Olive. "He's just a common little man, only he's never grown as big as other people. Perhaps he had a bad fall when he was a baby—that might stop his growing."

"Would it?" said Rex. "I didn't know that. I hope I hadn't a bad fall when I was a baby. Everybody says I'm very small for my age." And Rex looked with concern at his short but sturdy legs.

Olive laughed outright.

"Oh, Rex, what a funny boy you are! No, certainly, you are not a dwarf. You're as straight and strong as you can be."

"Well, but," said Rex, returning to the first subject, "I do think it's very queer about that little dwarf man coming up the street just as you were telling me about the blue dwarfs. And he *did* look at us in a funny way, Olive, whatever you say, just as if he had heard what we were talking about."

"All the people look at us in a funny way here,"

said Olive. "We must look very queer to them. Your sailor suit, Rex, and my 'Bolero' hat must look to them quite as queer as the women's purple skirts, with bright green aprons, look to us."

"Or the bullock-carts," said Rex. "Do you remember how queer we thought them at first? *Now* we've got quite used to seeing queer things, haven't we, Olive? Oh! now do look there — at the top of the street — there, Olive, did you *ever* see such a load as that woman is carrying in the basket on her back? Why, it's as big as a house!"

He seemed to have forgotten about the dwarfs, and Olive was rather glad of it. These two children were travelling with their uncle and aunt in a rather out-of-the-way part of Germany. Out-of-the-way, that is to say, to most of the regular summer tourists from other countries, who prefer going where they are more sure of finding the comforts and luxuries they are accustomed to at home. But it was by no means out-of-the-way in the sense of being dull or deserted. It is a very busy part of the world indeed. You would be amazed if I were to tell you some of the beautiful things that are made in these bare homely little German cottages. For all about in the neighbourhood there are great manufactories and warehouses for china and glass, and many other things; and some parts of the work are done by the people at home in their own houses. The morning of the day of which I am telling you had been spent

by the children and their friends in visiting a very large china manufactory, and their heads were full of the pretty and wonderful things they had seen.

And now they were waiting in the best parlour of the village inn while their uncle arranged about a carriage to take them all on to the small town where they were to stay a few days. Their aunt was tired, and was resting a little on the sofa, and they had planted themselves on the broad window-sill, and were looking out with amusement at all that passed.

“What have you two been chattering about all this time?” said their aunt, suddenly looking up. “I think I must have been asleep a little, but I have heard your voices going on like two birds twittering.”

“Have we disturbed you, Auntie?” asked Olive, with concern.

“Oh no, not a bit; but come here and tell me what you have been talking about.”

Instantly Rex’s mind went back to the dwarfs.

“Auntie,” he said seriously, “perhaps you can tell me better than Olive can. Are there really countries of dwarfs, and are they a kind of fairies, Auntie?”

Auntie looked rather puzzled.

“Dwarfs, Rex?” she said; “countries of dwarfs? How do you mean?”

Olive hastened to explain. Auntie was very much amused.

“Certainly,” she said, “we have already seen so many strange things in our travels that it is better not to be too sure what we may not see. But anyway, Rex, you may be quite easy in your mind, that if ever you come across any of the dwarfs, you will find them very good-natured and amiable, only you must be very respectful—always say ‘Sir,’ or ‘My lord,’ or something like that to them, and bow a great deal. And you must never seem to think anything they do the least odd, not even if they propose to you to walk on your head, or to eat roast fir-cones for dinner, for instance.”

Auntie was quite young— not so very much older than Olive—and very merry. Olive’s rather “grown-up” tones and manners used sometimes to tempt her to make fun of the little girl, which, to tell the truth, Olive did not always take quite in good part. And it must for Olive be allowed, that Auntie did sometimes allow her spirits and love of fun to run away with her a little too far, just like pretty unruly ponies, excited by the fresh air and sunshine, who toss their heads and gallop off. It is great fun at first and very nice to see, but one is sometimes afraid they may do some mischief on the way—without meaning it, of course; and, besides, it is not always so easy to pull them up as it was to start them.

Just as Auntie finished speaking the door opened and their uncle came in. He was Auntie’s elder brother—a good deal older—and very kind and

sensible. At once all thoughts of the dwarfs or what Auntie had been saying danced out of Rex's curly head. Like a true boy he flew off to his uncle, besieging him with questions as to what sort of a carriage they were to go on in — *was* it an ox-cart; oh, mightn't they *for once* go in an ox-cart? and might he — oh, might he sit beside the driver in front?

His uncle laughed and replied to his questions, but Olive stayed beside the sofa, staring gravely at her aunt.

“Auntie,” she said, “you're not *in earnest*, are you, about there being really a country of dwarfs?”

Olive was twelve. Perhaps you will think her very silly to have imagined for a moment that her aunt's joke could be anything but a joke, especially as she had been so sensible about not letting Rex get anything into his head which could frighten him. But I am not sure that she was so very silly after all. She had read in her geography about the Lapps and Finns, the tiny little men of the north, whom one might very well describe as dwarfs; there might be dwarfs in these strange Thüringian forests, which were little spoken of in geography books; Auntie knew more of such things than she did, for she had travelled in this country before. Then with her own eyes Olive had seen a dwarf, and though she had said to Rex that he was just an odd dwarf by himself as it were, not one of a race, how could she tell but

what he might be one of a number of such queer little people? And even the blue dwarfs themselves — the little figures in the china manufactory — rather went to prove it than not.

“They may have taken the idea of dwarfs from the real ones, as Rex said,” thought Olive. “Anyway I shall look well about me if we go through any of these forests again. They must live in the forests, for Auntie said they eat roast fir-cones for dinner.”

All these thoughts were crowding through her mind as she stared up into Auntie’s face and asked solemnly —

“Auntie, were you in earnest?”

Auntie’s blue eyes sparkled.

“In earnest, Olive?” she said. “Of course! Why shouldn’t I be in earnest? But come, quick, we must get our things together. Your uncle must have got a carriage.”

“Yes,” said he, “I have. *Not* an ox-cart, Rex. I’m sorry for your sake, but for no one else’s; for I don’t think there would be much left of us by the end of the journey if we were to be jogged along the forest roads in an ox-cart. No! I have got quite a respectable vehicle; but we must stop an hour or two on the way, to rest the horses and give them a feed, otherwise we could not get through to-night.”

“Where shall we stop?” said Auntie, as with

the bundles of shawls and bags they followed the children's uncle to the door.

"There is a little place in the forest, where they can look after the horses," said he; "and I dare say we can get some coffee there for ourselves, if we want it. It is a pretty little nook. I remember it long ago, and I shall be glad to see it again."

Olive had pricked up her ears. "A little place in the forest!" she said to herself; "that may be near where the dwarfs live: it is most likely not far from here, because of the one we saw." She would have liked to ask her uncle about it, but something in the look of her aunt's eyes kept her from doing so.

"Perhaps she *was* joking," thought Olive to herself. "But perhaps she doesn't know; *she* didn't see the real dwarf. It would be rather nice if I did find them, *then* Auntie couldn't laugh at me any more."

They were soon comfortably settled in the carriage, and set off. The first part of the drive was not particularly interesting; and it was so hot, though already afternoon, that they were all — Olive especially, you may be sure — delighted to exchange the open country for the pleasant shade of a grand pine forest, through which their road now lay.

"Is it a very large forest, Uncle?" said Olive.

"Yes, very large," he replied rather sleepily, to tell the truth; for both he and Auntie had been

nodding a little, and Rex had once or twice been fairly asleep. But Olive's imagination was far too hard at work to let her sleep.

"The largest in Europe?" she went on, without giving much thought to poor Uncle's sleepiness.

"Oh yes, by far," he replied, for he had not heard clearly what she said, and fancied it was "the largest hereabouts."

"Dear me!" thought Olive, looking round her with awe and satisfaction. "If there are dwarfs anywhere, then it must be here."

And she was just beginning another. "And please, Uncle, is —?" when her aunt looked up and said lazily —

"Oh, my dear child, do be quiet! Can't you go to sleep yourself a little? We shall have more than enough of the forest before we are out of it." Which offended Olive so much that she relapsed into silence.

Auntie was a truer prophet than she knew; for when they got to the little hamlet in the wood, where they were to rest, something proved to be wrong with one of the horse's shoes; so wrong, indeed, that after a prolonged examination, at which all the inhabitants turned out to assist, it was decided that the horse must be re-shod before he could go any farther; and this made it impossible for the party who had come in the carriage to go any farther either. For the nearest smithy was two miles off;

the horse must be led there and back by the driver, which would take at least two, if not three, hours. It was now past six, and they had come barely half way. The driver shook his head, and said he would not like to go on to the town till morning. The horse had pricked his foot; it might cause inflammation to drive him farther without a rest, and the carriage was far too heavy for the other horse alone, which had suddenly struck the children's uncle as a brilliant idea.

“There would be no difficulty about the harnessing, anyway,” he said to Auntie, laughing; “for all the vehicles hereabouts drawn by one horse have the animal at one side of a pole, instead of between shafts.”

But Auntie thought it better to give in.

“It really doesn't much matter,” she said; “we can stay here well enough. There are two bedrooms, and no doubt they can give us something to eat; beer and sausages, and brown bread anyway.”

And so it was settled, greatly to Olive's satisfaction; it would give her capital opportunities for a dwarf hunt! though as to this she kept her own counsel.

The landlady of the little post-house where they had stopped was accustomed to occasional visits of this kind from benighted or distressed travellers. She thought nothing of turning her two daughters out of their bedroom, which, it must be owned, was

very clean, for Auntie and Olive, and a second room on the ground-floor was prepared for Rex and his uncle. She had coffee ready in five minutes, and promised them a comfortable supper before bedtime. Altogether, everything seemed very satisfactory, and when they felt a little refreshed, Auntie proposed a walk — “a good long walk,” she said, “would do us good. And the landlady says we get out of the forest up there behind the house, where the ground rises, and that there is a lovely view. It will be rather a climb, but it isn't more than three-quarters of an hour from here, and we have not walked all day.”

Uncle thought it a good idea, and Rex was ready to start at once; but Olive looked less pleased.

“Don't you want to come, Olive?” said Auntie. “Are you tired? You didn't take a nap like the rest of us.”

“I am a little tired,” said Olive, which was true in one sense, though not in another, for she was quite fit for a walk. It struck her that her excuse was not quite an honest one, so she added, “If you don't mind, I would rather stay about here. I don't mind being alone, and I have my book. And I do so like the forest.”

“Very well,” said her uncle; “only don't lose yourself. She is perfectly safe,” he added, turning to her aunt; “there are neither wolves, nor bears, nor robbers nowadays, in these peaceful forests.”

So the three set off, leaving Olive to her own devices. She waited till they were out of sight, then she made her preparations.

“I’d better take my purse,” she said to herself, “in case I meet the dwarfs. Auntie told me to be very polite, and perhaps they would like some of these tiny pieces; they just look as if they were meant for them.” So she chose out a few one-pfennig copper coins, which are much smaller than our farthings, and one or two silver pieces, worth about twopence-halfpenny each, still smaller. Then she put in her pocket half a slice of the brown bread they had had with their coffee, and arming herself, more for appearance’s sake than anything else, with her parasol and the book she had with her in her travelling bag, she set off on her solitary ramble.

It was still hot — though the forest trees made a pleasant shade. Olive walked some way, farther and farther, as far as she could make out, into the heart of the forest, but in her inexperience she took no sort of care to notice the way she went, or to make for herself any kind of landmarks. She just wandered on and on, tempted first by some mysterious little path, and then by another, her mind full of the idea of the discoveries she was perhaps about to make. Now and then a squirrel darted across from one tree to another, disappearing among the branches almost before Olive could be sure she had seen it, or some wild wood birds, less familiar to the little

foreigner, would startle her with a shrill, strange note. There were here and there lovely flowers growing among the moss, and more than once she heard the sound of not far off trickling water. It was all strangely beautiful, and she would greatly have enjoyed and admired it had not her mind been so full of the queer fascinating idea of the blue dwarfs.

At last — she had wandered about for some time — Olive began to feel tired.

“I may as well sit down a little,” she thought; “I have lots of time to get back. This seems the very heart of the forest. They are just as likely to be seen here as anywhere else.”

So Olive esconced herself in a comfortable corner, her back against the root of a tree, which seemed hollowed out on purpose to serve as an arm-chair. She thought at first she would read a little, but the light was already slightly waning, and the tree shadows made it still fainter. Besides, Olive had plenty to think of — she did not require any amusement. Queer little noises now and then made themselves heard — once or twice it really sounded as if small feet were pattering along, or as if shrill little voices were laughing in the distance; and with each sound, Olive’s heart beat faster with excitement — not with fear.

“If I sit very still,” she thought, “who knows what I may see? Of course, it would be much nicer

and prettier if the dwarfs were quite tiny — not like the little man we saw in the street at that place — I forget the name — for he was not pretty at all — but like the blue dwarfs at the manufactory. But that, I suppose, is impossible, for they would be really like fairies. But they might be something between: not so big as the little man, and yet bigger than the blue dwarfs.”

And then Olive grew a little confused in trying to settle in her mind how big, or how small rather, it was possible or impossible for a nation of dwarfs to be. She thought it over till she hardly seemed sure what she was trying to decide. She kept saying to herself, “ Anyway, they could not but be a good deal bigger than my thumb! What does that mean? Perhaps it means more in German measures than in English, perhaps — ”

But what was that that suddenly hit her on the nose? Olive looked up, a very little inclined to be offended; it is not a pleasant thing to be hit on the nose; could it be Rex come behind her suddenly, and playing her a trick? Just as she was thinking this, a second smart tap on the nose startled her still more, and this time there was no mistake about it; it came from above, and it was a fir-cone! Had it come of itself? Somehow the words, “ Roast fir-cones for dinner,” kept running in her head, and she took up the fir-cone in her fingers to examine it, but quickly dropped it again, for it was as hot as a coal.



THE BLUE DWARFS
“They were sliding down the branches of the tree in all directions.” p.17.

“It has a very roasty smell,” thought Olive; “where can it have come from?”

And hardly had she asked herself the question, when a sudden noise all round her made her again look up. They were sliding down the branches of the tree in all directions. At first, to her dazzled eyes, they seemed a whole army, but as they touched the ground one by one, and she was able to distinguish them better, she saw that after all there were not so *very* many. One, two, three, she began quickly counting to herself, not aloud, of course—that would not have been polite—one, two, three, up to twelve, then thirteen, fourteen, and so on up to—yes, there were just twenty-four of them.

“Two of each,” said Olive to herself; “a double set of the blue dwarfs.”

For they were the blue dwarfs, and no mistake! Two of each, as Olive had seen at once. And immediately they settled themselves in twos—two squatted on the ground embracing their knees, two strode across a barrel which they had somehow or other brought with them, two began turning head-over-heels, two knelt down with their heads and queer little grinning faces looking over their shoulders, twos and twos of them in every funny position you could imagine, all arranged on the mossy ground in front of where Olive sat, and all dressed in the same bright blue coats as the toy dwarfs at the china manufactory.

Olive sat still and looked at them. Somehow she did not feel surprised.

“How big are they?” she said to herself. “Bigger than my thumb? Oh, yes, a good deal. I should think they are about as tall as my arm would be if it was standing on the ground. I should think they would come up above my knee. I should like to stand up and measure, but perhaps it is better for me not to speak to them till they speak to me.”

She had not long to wait. In another moment two little blue figures separated themselves from the crowd, and made their way up to her. But when they were close to her feet they gave a sudden jump in the air, and came down, not on their feet, but on their heads! And then again some of her aunt's words came back to her, “If they should ask you to stand on your head, for instance.”

“Dear me,” thought Olive, “how did Auntie know so much about them? But I do hope they won't ask me to stand on *my* head.”

Her fears were somewhat relieved when the dwarfs gave another spring and came down this time in a respectable manner on their feet. Then, with a good many bows and flourishes, they began a speech.

“We are afraid,” said the first.

“That the fir-cones,” said the second.

“Were rather underdone,” finished up the first.

Olive really did not know what to say. She was

dreadfully afraid that it would seem so very rude of her not even to have *tasted* the cones. But naturally she had not had the slightest idea that they had been intended for her to eat.

“I am very sorry,” she said, “Mr. —, sir! my lord! I beg your pardon. I don’t quite know what I should call you.”

“With all respect,” said the first.

“And considering the circumstances,” went on the second.

Then, just as Olive supposed they were going to tell her their names, they stopped short and looked at her.

“I beg your pardon,” she began again, after waiting a minute or two to see if they had nothing else to say; “I don’t quite understand.”

“Nor do we,” they replied promptly, speaking for the first time both together.

“Do you mean you don’t know what *my* name is?” said she. “It’s Olive, *Olive!*” for the dwarfs stood staring as if they had not heard her. “OLIVE!” she repeated for the third time.

“Green?” asked the first.

“No!” said Olive. “Of course not! *Green* is a very common name — at least —”

“But you called us ‘blue,’” said the second; and it really was a relief to hear him finish a sentence comfortably by himself, only Olive felt very puzzled by what he said.

“How do you know?” she said. “How could you tell I called you the blue dwarfs?” and then another thought suddenly struck her. How very odd it was that the dwarf spoke such good English! “I thought you were German,” she said.

“How very amusing!” said the dwarfs, this time again speaking together.

Olive could not see that it was very amusing, but she was afraid of saying so, for fear it should be rude.

“And about the fir-cones,” went on the first dwarf. “It is distressing to think they were so underdone. But we have come, all of us,” waving his hand in the direction of the others, “to invite you to supper in our village. There you will find them done to perfection.”

Olive felt more and more uncomfortable.

“You are very kind,” she said. “I should like to come very much if it isn’t too far; but I am afraid I couldn’t eat any supper. Indeed, I’m not hungry.” And then a bright thought struck her. “See here,” she went on, drawing the half slice of bread out of her pocket, “I had to put this in my pocket, for I couldn’t finish it at our afternoon coffee.”

The two dwarfs came close and examined the piece of bread with the greatest attention. They pinched and smelt it, and one of them put out his queer little pointed tongue and licked it.

“Not good!” he said, looking up at Olive and rolling about his eyes in a very queer way.

“I don’t know,” said Olive; “I don’t think it can be bad. It is the regular bread of the country. I should have thought you would be accustomed to it, as you live here.”

The two dwarfs took no notice of what she said, but suddenly turned round, and standing with their backs to Olive called out shrilly, “Guten Tag.” Immediately all the other dwarfs replied in the same tone and the same words, and to Olive’s great surprise they all began to move towards her, but without altering their attitudes — those on the barrel rolled towards her without getting off it; the two who were hugging their knees continued to hug them, while they came on by means of jerking themselves; the turning head-over-heels ones span along like wheels, and so on till the whole assemblage were at her feet. Then she saw unfolded before her, hanging on the branches of the tree, a large mantle, just the shape of her aunt’s travelling dust-cloak, which she always spread over Olive in a carriage, only, instead of being drab or fawn-coloured, it was, like the dwarfs’ jackets, bright blue. And without any one telling her, Olive seemed to know of herself that she was to put it on.

She got up and reached the cloak easily; it seemed to put itself on, and Olive felt very happy and triumphant as she said to herself, “Now I’m really going to have some adventures.”

The dwarfs marched — no! one cannot call it

marching, for they had about a dozen different ways of proceeding — they moved on, and Olive in the middle, her blue cloak floating majestically on her shoulders. No one spoke a word. It grew darker and darker among the trees, but Olive did not feel frightened. On they went, till at last she saw twinkling before them a very small but bright blue light. It looked scarcely larger than the lamp of a glow-worm, but it shone out very distinct in the darkness. Immediately they saw it the dwarfs set up a shout, and as it died away, to Olive's surprise, they began to sing. And what do you think they sang? Olive at first could hardly believe her ears as they listened to the thoroughly English song of "Home, sweet Home." And the queerest thing was that they sang it very prettily, and that it sounded exactly like her aunt's voice! And though they were walking close beside her, their voices when they left off singing did not so much seem to stop as to move off, to die away into the distance, which struck Olive as very odd.

They had now arrived at the trunk of a large tree, half way up which hung the little lamp — at least Olive supposed it must be a lamp — from which came the bright blue light.

"Here we are," said one of the dwarfs, she did not see which, "at the entrance to our village." And thereupon all the dwarfs began climbing up the tree, swarming about it like a hive of bees, till they got

some way up, when one after another they suddenly disappeared. Olive could see all they did by the blue light. She was beginning to wonder if she would be left standing there alone, when a shout made her look up, and she saw two dwarfs standing on a branch holding a rope ladder, which they had just thrown down, and making signs to her to mount up by it. It was quite easy; up went Olive, step by step, and when she reached the place where the two dwarfs were standing, she saw how it was that they had all disappeared. The tree trunk was hollow, and there were steps cut in it like a stair, down which the dwarfs signed to her that she was to go. She did not need to be twice told, so eager was she to see what was to come. The stair was rather difficult for her to get down without falling, for the steps were too small, being intended for the dwarfs, but Olive managed pretty well, only slipping now and then. The stair seemed very long, and as she went farther it grew darker, till at last it was quite dark; by which time, fortunately, however, she felt herself again on level ground, and after waiting half a minute a door seemed to open, and she found herself standing outside the tree stair, with the prettiest sight before her eyes that she had ever seen or even imagined.

It was the dwarf village! Rows and rows of tiny houses — none of them more than about twice as high as Olive herself, for that was quite big enough for a

dwarf cottage, each with a sweet little garden in front, like what one sees in English villages, though the houses themselves were like Swiss châlets. It was not dark down here, there was a soft light about as bright as we have it at summer twilight; and besides this, each little house had a twinkling blue light hanging above the front door, like a sign-post. And at the door of each cottage stood one of the dwarfs, with a little dwarf wife beside him; only, instead of blue, each little woman was dressed in brown, so that they were rather less showy than their husbands. They all began bowing as Olive appeared, and all the little women curtsying, and Olive seemed to understand, without being told, that she was to walk up the village street to see all there was to be seen. So on she marched, her blue cloak floating about her, so that sometimes it reached the roofs of the houses on each side at the same time.

Olive felt herself rather clumsy. Her feet, which in general she was accustomed to consider rather neat, and by no means too large for her age, seemed such great awkward things. If she had put one of them in at the window of a dwarf house, it would have knocked everything out of its place.

“Dear me!” thought Olive, “I had no idea *I* could seem clumsy! I feel like a great ploughman. I wish I were not so big.”

“Yes,” said a voice beside her, “it has its disadvantages;” and Olive, looking down to see who

spoke — she had to look down for everything — caught sight of one of the two dwarfs with whom she had first spoken. She felt a little ruffled. She did not like this trick of the dwarf hearing what she thought before she said it.

“Everything has its disadvantages,” she replied. “Don’t you find yourself very inconveniently small when you are up in *our* world?”

“Exactly so,” said the dwarf; but he did not seem the least put out.

“They are certainly very good-tempered,” said Olive to herself. Then suddenly a thought struck her.

“Your village is very neat and pretty,” she said; “though, perhaps — I don’t mean to be rude, not on any account —”

“No,” interrupted the dwarf; “Auntie told you on no account to be rude.”

“Auntie!” repeated Olive, in astonishment; “she is not *your* auntie!”

“On no account,” said the dwarf, in the same calm tone, but without seeming to take in that Olive meant to reprove him.

“It’s no use trying to make them understand,” said Olive to herself.

“Not the least,” said the dwarf; at which Olive felt so provoked that she could have stamped her feet with irritation. But as *thinking* crossly seemed in this country to be quite as bad as *speaking* crossly,

she had to try to swallow down her vexation as well as she could.

“I was going to say,” she went on quietly, “that to my taste the village would be prettier if there was a little variety. Not all the houses just the same, you know. And all of *you* are so like each other, and all your little brown wives too. Are there no *children* dwarfs?”

“Doubtless. Any quantity,” was the answer.

“Then where are they all?” said Olive. “Are they all asleep?” She put the last question rather sarcastically, but the sarcasm seemed to be lost on the little man.

“Yes, all asleep,” he replied; “all asleep, and dreaming. Children are very fond of dreaming,” he went on, looking up at Olive with such a queer expression, and such a queer tone in his voice too, that Olive got a queer feeling herself, as if he meant more than his words actually said. Could he mean to hint that *she* was dreaming? But a remark from the dwarf distracted her thoughts.

“Supper is ready,” he said. “They are all waiting.” And turning round, Olive saw before her a cottage a good deal larger than the others; in fact, it was almost high enough for her, with considerable stooping, to get in at the door. And through the windows she saw a long table neatly covered with a bright blue table-cloth, and spread with numbers of tiny plates, and beside each plate a knife and fork

and a little blue glass cup. Two great dishes stood on the table, one at each end. Steam was rising from each, and a delicious smell came out through the open windows.

“I did not know I was so hungry,” thought Olive; “but I do *hope* it isn’t fir-cones.”

“Yes,” said the dwarf; “they’ll be better done this time.”

Then he gave a sort of sharp, sudden cry or whistle, and immediately all the dwarfs of the village appeared as if by magic, and began hurrying into the house, but as soon as they were in the middle of the passage they fell back at each side, leaving a clear space in the middle.

“For you,” said the first dwarf, bowing politely.

“Do you always have supper here altogether like that?” said Olive. “How funny!”

“Not at all,” said the dwarf; “it’s a table d’hôte. Be so good as to take your place.”

Olive bent her head cautiously in preparation for passing through the door, when again the same sharp cry startled her, and lifting her head suddenly she bumped it against the lintel. The pain of the blow was rather severe.

“What did you do that for?” she exclaimed angrily. “Why did you scream out like that? I—” But she said no more. The cry was repeated, and this time it did its work effectually, for Olive awoke. Awoke — was it waking? — to find herself all in the

dark, stiff and cold, and her head aching with the bump she had given it against the old tree-trunk, while farther off now she heard the same shrill hoot or cry of some early astir night-bird, which had sounded before in her dreams.

“Oh dear! oh dear!” she sobbed, “what shall I do? Where am I? How can I ever find my way in the dark? I believe it was all a trick of those nasty blue dwarfs. I don’t believe I *was* dreaming. They must be spiteful goblins. I wish I had not gone with them to see their village.” And so for some minutes, half asleep and half awake, Olive stayed crouching by the tree, which seemed her only protector. But by degrees, as her senses — her common sense particularly — came back to her, she began to realise that it was worse than useless to sit there crying. Dark as it was, she must try to find her way back to the little inn, where, doubtless, Auntie and the others were in the greatest distress about her, the thought of which nearly made her burst out crying again; and poor Olive stumbled up to her feet as best she could, fortunately not forgetting to feel for her book and parasol which were lying beside her, and slowly and tremblingly made her way on a few steps, hoping that perhaps if she could manage to get out of the shadow of the trees it might not be quite so dark farther on. She was not altogether disappointed. It certainly grew a very little less black, but that it was a very dark night there was no denying. And,

indeed, though it had not been dark, she would have had the greatest difficulty in finding her way out of the wood, into which she had so thoughtlessly penetrated. Terrifying thoughts, too, began to crowd into her mind, though, as I think I have shown you, she was not at all a timid child. But a forest on a dark night, and so far away from everywhere—it was enough to shake her nerves. She hoped and trusted there was no fear of wolves in summer-time; but bears!—ah! as to bears there was no telling. Even the hooting cries of the birds which she now and then again heard in the distance frightened her, and she felt that a bat flapping against her would send her nearly out of her mind. And after a while she began to lose heart—it was not quite so dark, but she had not the very least idea where she was going. She kept bumping and knocking herself against the trunks; she was evidently not in a path, but wandering farther and farther among the forest trees. That was about all she could feel sure of, and after two or three more vain efforts Olive fairly gave up, and, sinking down on the ground, again burst into tears.

“If I but had a mariner’s compass,” she thought, her fancy wandering off to all the stories of lost people she had ever heard of. Then she further reflected that a compass would do her very little good if it was too dark to see it, and still more as she had not the slightest idea whether her road lay north, south,

east, or west. "If the stars were out!" was her next idea; but then, I am ashamed to say, Olive's ideas of astronomy were limited. She could have perhaps recognised the Plough and the Pole star, but she could not remember which way they pointed. Besides, she did not feel quite sure that in Thuringen one would see the same stars as in England or Paris; and, after all, as there were none visible, it was no good puzzling about it, only if they *had* been there it would not have seemed so lonely. Suddenly — what was that in the distance? A light, a tiny light, bobbing in and out of sight among the trees? Could it be a star come out of its way to take pity on her? Much more likely a Will-o'-the-wisp; for she did not stop to reflect that a dry pine forest in summer-time is not one of Will-o'-the-wisp's favourite playgrounds. It was a light, as to that there was no doubt, and it was coming nearer. Whether she was more frightened or glad Olive scarcely knew. Still, almost anything was better than to sit there to be eaten up by bears, or to die of starvation; and she eagerly watched the light now steadily approaching her, till it came near enough for her to see that it was a lantern carried by some person not high above the ground. A boy perhaps; could it be — oh, joyful thought! — could it be Rex? But no; even if they were all looking for her it was not likely that they would let Rex be running about alone to get lost too. Still, it must *be* a boy, and without waiting to think more Olive called out —

“Oh, please come and help me! I’m lost in the wood!” she cried, thinking nothing of German or anything but her sore distress.

The lantern moved about undecidedly for a moment or two, then the light flashed towards her and came still nearer.

“*Ach Gott!*” exclaimed an unfamiliar voice, and Olive, peering forward, thought for half a second she was again dreaming. He was not, certainly, dressed in blue, and he was a good deal taller than up to her knee; but still he was — there was no doubt about it — he was a dwarf! And another gaze at his queer little figure and bright sparkling eyes told Olive that it was the very same little man who had smiled at Rex and her when he saw them leaning out of the inn window that very afternoon.

She didn’t feel frightened; he looked so good-natured and so sorry for her. And somehow Olive’s faith in the possible existence of a nation of dwarfs had received a shock; she was much more inclined to take things prosaically. But it was very difficult to explain matters. I think the dwarf at the first moment was more inclined to take *her* for something supernatural than she was now to imagine him a brownie or a gnome. For she was a pretty little girl, with a mass of golden fair hair and English blue eyes; and with her hat half fallen off, and her cheeks flushed, she might have sat for a picture of a fairy who had strayed from her home.

Her German seemed all to go out of her head. But she managed to remember the name of the village where they had been that afternoon, and a sudden recollection seemed to come over the dwarf. He poured out a flood of words and exclamations, amidst which all that Olive could understand was the name of the village and the words "*verirrt,*" "*armes Kind,*" which she knew meant "lost" and "poor child." Then he went on to tell that he too was on his way from the same village to somewhere; that he came by the woods, because it was shorter, and lifting high his lantern, gave Olive to understand that he could now show her the way.

So off she set under his guidance, and, only fancy! a walk of not more than ten minutes brought them to the little inn! Olive's wanderings and straying had, after all, drawn her very near her friends if she had known it. Poor Auntie and Rex were running about in front of the house in great distress. Uncle and the landlord and the coachman had set off with lanterns, and the landlady was trying to persuade Auntie that there was not *really* anything to be afraid of; neither bears, nor wolves, nor evilly-disposed people about: the little young lady had, doubtless, fallen asleep in the wood with the heat and fatigue of the day; which, as you know, was a very good guess, though the landlady little imagined what queer places and people Olive had been visiting in her sleep.

The dwarf was a well-known person thereabouts, and a very harmless, kindly little man. A present of a couple of marks sent him off to his cottage near by very happy indeed, and when Uncle returned a few minutes later to see if the wanderer had been heard of, you can imagine how thankful he was to find her. It was not so *very* late after all, not above half-past ten o'clock, but a thunderstorm which came on not long after explained the unusual darkness of the cloud-covered sky.

"*What* a good thing you were safe before the storm came on!" said Auntie, with a shudder at the thought of the dangers her darling had escaped. "I will take care never again to carry my jokes too far," she resolved, when Olive had confided to her the real motive of her wanderings in the wood. And Olive, for her part, decided that she would be content with fairies and dwarfs in books and fancy, without trying to find them in reality.

"Though all the same," she said to herself, "I should have liked to taste the roast fir-cones. They did smell so good!" "And, Auntie," she said aloud, "were you singing in the wood on your way home with Uncle and Rex?"

"Yes," said Auntie, "they begged me to sing 'Home, sweet Home.' Why do you ask me?"

Olive explained. "So it was *your* voice I heard when I thought it was the dwarfs," she said, smiling.

And Auntie gave her still another kiss.



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