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Alice's Godmother

by

Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947])

Though Alice sat steadily looking out of the small square pane of glass in the railway carriage, she was not really seeing the green and hilly country through which the train now clattered on its way. While everything near—quickenings hedges, grazing cattle, galloping calves, wood, farm and stony foaming brook—swept past far too swiftly for more than a darting glance; everything in the distance—hill, tree and spire—seemed to be stealthily wheeling forward, as if to waylay the puffing engine and prevent it from reaching her journey's end.

'If only it would!' sighed Alice to herself. 'How much—much happier I should be!' Her blue eyes widened at the fancy. Then once more a frown of anxiety drew her eyebrows together; but she said nothing aloud. She sat on in her corner gently clasping her mother's hand and pondering in dismay on what might happen to her in the next few hours.

Alice and her mother a little prided themselves on being just 'two quiet ordinary people', happy in each other's company, and very seldom going out or paying calls and visits. And the particular visit that Alice was about to make when they reached the little country station of Freshing, she was to make alone. It was this that alarmed her. The invitation in that queer scrabbling handwriting had been to herself only. So though her mother was with her now, soon they would be parting. And every now and again Alice would give the hand she held in hers a gentle squeeze of self-reassurance. It was the Good-bye—though it would be only for a few hours—that she dreaded.

And yet their plans had all been talked over and settled again and again. Alice must, of course, take a fly from the station—whatever the expense. After telling the cabman when she would need him again, she would get into it and her mother would wait for her in a room at the village Inn until she herself returned in the early evening from her visit. Then everything would be safely over. And to imagine the joy of seeing all these fields and woods come racing back the other way round almost made Alice ill.

It was absurd to be so nervous. Alice had told herself that a hundred times. But it was no use. The very thought of her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother filled her heart with a continuous foreboding. If only she were a little stronger-minded; if only this old old lady, who was also her godmother, had asked her mother to come with her; if only her heart would stop beating so fast; if only a wheel would come off the engine!

But then, after all, Alice had never before so much as seen her godmother. Even now she could not be quite certain that she had the number of 'greats' to the 'grandmama' quite right. Not even strong-minded people, she supposed, are often suddenly invited to tea with relatives aged three-hundred-and-forty-nine. And not only that either; for this day—this very Saturday—was her godmother's birthday: her three-hundred-and-fiftieth!

Whenever Alice remembered this, a faint smile stole into her face. At seventeen a birthday is a real 'event'. Life is galloping on. You are sprouting up like a beanstalk. Your hair is 'put up' (or at least it was when Alice was a girl), your skirts 'come down', and you're soon to 'come out'. In other words you are beginning to be really and truly 'grown-up'. But three-hundred-and-fifty! Surely by that time.... It must be difficult even to be certain you have the total right. Surely there can't be *any* kind of a change by then! Surely not!

Still, Alice thought, it is perhaps the *name* of the number that chiefly counts. She herself had known what an odd shock it had been to slip into her teens, and could guess what the shivers would be like of the plunge into her twenties. Yet even if it were only the name of the number—why, at the end of three centuries you must be beginning to be getting accustomed to birthdays.

It was a little odd that her godmother had never asked to see her before. Years ago she had sent her a squat parcel-gilt mug—a mug that her godmother herself used to drink her beer out of when she was a child of ten in Queen Elizabeth's

reign. A little sheepskin, illuminated Prayer Book, too, that had once been given to her godmother by Charles the First, and a few exquisite little old gold trinkets had come too. But receiving presents is not the same thing as actually meeting and talking with the mysterious giver of them. It is one thing to imagine the unknown; another thing altogether to meet it face to face. What would her godmother look like? What *could* she look like? Alice hadn't the faintest notion. Old ladies of eighty and upwards are not unusual; but you can't just multiply eighty by four as if growing older were merely a sum in arithmetic.

Perhaps when you are very old indeed, Alice suspected, you have no wish to sit for a portrait or to be photographed. It is a petrifying experience even when you are young. When you are—well, very old indeed, you may prefer to—well, to keep yourself *to* yourself. *She* would.

'Mamma dear,' she suddenly twisted round on her hard seat, her straight ribboned straw-coloured hair slipping over in one smooth ripple on her shoulder as she did so; 'Mamma dear, I can't think even now what I ought to do when I go into the room. Will there be anybody there, do you think? Do I shake hands? I suppose she won't kiss me? I simply can't think what I ought to do. I shall just hate leaving you—being left, I mean.'

She stroked hard with her fingers the hand that was in her own, and as she gazed at her mother's face in this increasing anxiety, she knew that the smile on it was just like a pretty blind over a window, and that her mother's self within was almost as much perturbed over this visit as she was herself.

'It's getting nearer, darling, at any rate, isn't it?' her mother whispered. 'So it will sooner be over.' Whereupon the fat old farmer in the further corner of the carriage emitted yet another grunt. He was fast asleep. '*I think*,' her mother continued softly, 'I should first enquire of the maid if she is quite well—your godmother, I mean, my dear. Say, 'Do you think Miss Cheyney is well enough to see me?' She will know what you ought to do. I am not even certain whether the poor old lady can speak: though her handwriting is simply marvellous.'

'But, Mummie darling, how are we to know that there *will* be a maid? Didn't they, in godmother's time, always have 'retainers'? Supposing there are rows of them in the hall! And when ought I to get up to say Good-bye? If she is deaf and blind *and* dumb I really don't know what I *shall* do!'

A dozen questions at least like this had been asked but not answered during the last few days, and although Alice's cheek, with that light hair, was naturally pale, her mother watched it grow paler yet as the uncomfortable old-fashioned railway-carriage they sat in jogged steadily on its way.

'Whenever I am in any difficulty, sweetheart,' she whispered close up to her daughter's ear, 'I always say a little prayer.'

'Yes, yes, dear dearest,' said Alice, gazing at the fat old farmer, fast asleep. 'But if only I weren't going quite alone! I don't think, you know, she can be a very good godmother: she never said a word in her letter about my Confirmation. She's at least old enough to know better.' Once more the ghost of a smile stole softly over her face. But she clasped her mother's fingers even a little tighter, and the hedges and meadows continued to sidle by.

They said Good-bye to one another actually inside the cab, so as to be out of sight of the Inn and the cabman.

'I expect, my sweet,' breathed Alice's mother, in the midst of this long embrace, 'we shall both soon be smiling away like two turtledoves at the thought of all our worry. We can't tell what kind of things she may not be thinking of, can we? And don't forget, I shall be waiting for you in the "Red Lion"—there's the sign, my dear, as you see. And if there is time, perhaps we will have a little supper there all to ourselves—a little soup, if they have it; or at any rate, an egg. I don't suppose you will have a very *substantial* tea. Not in the circumstances. But still, your godmother wouldn't have asked you to visit her if she had not really wanted to see you. We mustn't forget that, darling.'

Alice craned her head out of the window till her mother was out of sight behind the hedge. And the fly rolled gently on and on and on along the dusty lanes in the direction of The Grange. On and on and on. Surely, thought Alice at last, we must have gone miles and miles. At this she sprang up and thrust her head out of the window, and called up to the cabman, 'The Grange, you know, please.'

'That's it, Miss, The Grange,' he shouted back, with a flourish of his whip. 'Not as how I can take you into the Park, Miss. It ain't allowed.'

'Mercy me,' sighed Alice as she sank back on the fusty blue cushions. 'Supposing there are miles of avenue, and the front

door's at the back!

It was a pleasant sunny afternoon. The trim hedgerows were all in their earliest green; and the flowers of spring—primroses, violets, jack-in-the-hedge, stitchwort—in palest blossom starred the banks. It was only half-past three by Alice's little silver watch. She would be in good time, then. In a few minutes, indeed, the fly drew up beside immense rusty wrought-iron gates on the four posts of which stood heavy birds in stone, with lowered heads, brooding with outstretched wings.

'And you will be sure to come back for me at six?' Alice implored the cabman, though she tried to keep her voice natural and formal. 'Not a minute later than six, please. And then wait here until I come.'

The cabman ducked his head and touched his hat; drew his old horse round in the shafts, and off he went. Alice was alone.

With one last longing look at the strange though friendly country lane—and there was not a house in sight—Alice pushed open the little gate at the side of the two large ones. It emitted a faint, mocking squeal as it turned slowly upon its hinges. Beyond it rose a hedge of yew at least twenty feet high, and in a nook there stood a small square lodge, its windows shuttered, a scurry of dead leaves in its ancient porch. Alice came to a standstill. This was a difficulty neither she nor her mother had foreseen. Ought she to knock or to go straight on? The house looked as blind as a bat. She stepped back, and glanced up at the chimneys. Not the faintest plume of smoke was visible against the dark foliage of the ilex behind the house. Some unseen bird flew into the shadows with a cry of alarm.

Surely the lodge was empty. None the less it might be good manners to make sure, so she stepped into the porch and knocked—but knocked in vain. After pausing a minute or two, and scanning once more the lifeless windows, in a silence broken only by the distant laughing of a woodpecker, Alice determined to go on.

So thick and close were the tufted mosses in the gravel of the narrow avenue that her footsteps made no sound. So deep was the shade cast by the immense trees that grew on either side she could have fancied evening was already come, though it was yet early afternoon. Mammoth beeches lifted their vast boughs into the air; the dark hollows in their ancient boles capacious enough for the dwelling-house of a complete family of humans. In the distance Alice could see between their branches gigantic cedars, and others still further, beneath which grazed what she supposed was a herd of deer, though it was impossible to be quite certain from so far.

The few wild creatures which had long ago detected her in these haunts were strangely tame. They did not trouble to run away; but turned aside and watched her as she passed, the birds hopping a little further out of her reach while yet continuing on their errands. In sheer curiosity indeed Alice made an attempt to get as near as she possibly could to a large buck rabbit that sat nibbling under the broken rail of the fence. With such success that he actually allowed her to scratch his furry head and stroke his long lopping ears.

'Well,' thought she with a sigh as she straightened herself, 'there can't be very much to be afraid of in great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother's house if the rabbits are as tame as all that. *Au revoir*,' she whispered to the creature; 'I hope to see you again very very soon.' And on she went.

Now and then a hunchbacked thorn-tree came into view, and now and then a holly. Alice had heard long ago that hollies are wise enough not to grow prickles where no animal can damage their leaves by browsing on them. These hollies seemed to have no prickles at all, and the hawthorns, in spite of their bright green coats, speckled with tight buds, were almost as twisted out of shape as if mischievous little boys had tied knots in them when they were saplings. But how sweet was the tranquil air. So sweet indeed that this quiet avenue with its towering branches and the child-like blue of the skies overhead pacified her mind, and she had almost forgotten her godmother when, suddenly, at a break between the trees there came into view a coach.

Not exactly a coach, perhaps, but a large painted carriage of a faded vermilion and yellow, drawn by two cream-coloured horses—a coachman on the box in a mulberry livery, and a footman beside him. What was really strange, this conveyance was being noiselessly driven round a circular track so overgrown with moss and weeds that it was hardly discernible against the green of the grass. Alice could not but watch it come nearer and nearer—as she stood drawn up close to the furrowed bark of an oak that branched overhead. This must be her godmother's carriage. She must be taking her daily drive in concealment from the wide wide world. But no: it had drawn near; and now, with a glimpse of the faded red morocco within, it had passed; it was empty. Only the backs of coachman and footman now showed above its

sun-bleached panels—their powdered hair, their cockaded hats.

All Alice's misgivings winged back into her mind at sight of this unusual spectacle. She tiptoed out of her hiding-place, and hastened on. Her one wish now was to reach her journey's end. Presently after, indeed, the house itself appeared in sight. The shorn flowerless sward gently sloped towards its dark low walls and grey chimneys. To the right of it lay a pool as flat as a huge looking-glass in the frame of its trees. Behind it rose a smooth green hill.

Alice paused again behind yet another of the huge grey boles to scan it more closely before she herself could be spied out from any of its many windows. It looked as if it had stood there for ever. It looked as if its massive stones had of their own weight been sinking imperceptibly, century after century, into the ground. Not a blossoming shrub, not a flower near by—except only a powder of daisies and a few yellow dandelions.

Only green turf and trees, and the ancient avenue on which she stood, sweeping gently towards its low-porched entrance. 'Well,' she sighed to herself, 'I'm thankful I don't live there, that's all—not even if I were a thousand-and-one!' She drew herself up, glanced at her shoes, gave a little push to her ribboned straw hat, and, with as much dignity as she could manage, proceeded straight onwards.

A hoarse bell responded, after a whole second's pause, to the gentle tug she had given the iron pull that hung in the porch. It cried 'Ay, ay!' and fell silent. And Alice continued to look at the immense iron knocker which she hadn't the courage to use.

Without a sound the door opened at last, and there, as she had feared, stood, not a friendly parlour-maid with a neat laundered cap, but an old man in a black tail-coat who looked at her out of his pale grey eyes as if she were a stuffed bird in a glass case. Either he had been shrinking for some little time, or he must surely have put on somebody else's clothes, they hung so loosely on his shoulders.

'I am Miss Alice Cheyney—Miss Alice Cheyney,' she said. 'I think my great-great ... Miss Cheyney is expecting me—that is, of course, if she is quite well.' These few words had used up the whole of one breath, and her godmother's old butler continued to gaze at her, while they sank into his mind.

'Will you please to walk in,' he said at last. 'Miss Cheyney bade me express the wish that you will make yourself at home. She hopes to be with you immediately.' Whereupon he led the way, and Alice followed him—across a wide hall, lit with low, greenish, stone-mullioned windows. On either side stood suits of burnished armour, with lifted visors. But where the glittering eyes of their long-gone owners once had gleamed, nothing now showed but a little narrow darkness. After a hasty glance or two to either side, Alice kept her eyes fixed on the humped back of the little old butler. Up three polished stairs, under a hanging tapestry, he led her on, and at length, at the end of a long gallery, ushered her into what she supposed was her godmother's sitting-room. There, with a bow, he left her. Alice breathed one long deep sigh, and then, having unbuttoned and buttoned up again one of her grey silk gloves, she sat down on the edge of a chair near the door.

It was a long, low-pitched, but not very wide room, with a coffered ceiling and panelled walls, and never before had Alice seen such furniture. In spite of the dreadful shyness that seemed to fill her to the very brim, at thought of her mother's little pink-and-muslin drawing-room compared with this, she almost burst out laughing.

Make herself at home! Why, any one of those chests would hide her away for ever, like the poor lovely lost one in 'The Mistletoe Bough'. As for the hanging portraits in their great faded frames, though she guessed at once they must be by 'old masters', and therefore eyed them as solemnly as she could, she had never supposed human beings could look so odd and so unfriendly. It was not so much their clothes: their stomachers, their slashed doublets and wide velvet caps, but their faces. Ladies with high bald foreheads and tapering fingers and thumbings, and men sour and dour and glowering.

'Oho! Miss Nobody!' they seemed to be saying. 'And pray, what are *you* doing here?'

The one single exception was the drawing of a girl of about her own age. A dainty cap with flaps all but concealed her yellow hair; a necklet dangled at her breast; the primrose-coloured bodice sloped sharply to the waist. So delicate were the lines of this drawing and so faint the tinted chalk, they hardly stained the paper. Yet the eyes that gazed out across the low room at Alice seemed to be alight with life. A smile half-mocking, half-serious lingered in their depths. See, I am lovely, it seemed to be hinting, and yet how soon to be gone! And even though Alice had never before seen a face so enchanting, she could not but confess it bore a remote resemblance to herself. Why this should have a little restored her

confidence she could not tell. None the less, she deliberately smiled back at the drawing as if to say, 'Well, my dear, I shall have *you* on my side, whatever happens.'

The lagging minutes ticked solemnly by. Not a sound to be heard in the great house; not a footfall. But at last a door at the further end of the room softly opened, and in the greenish light of the deep mullioned window appeared what Alice knew was She.

She was leaning smally on the arm of the butler who had admitted Alice to the house. Quiet as shadows they entered the room; then paused for a moment, while yet another man-servant arranged a chair for his mistress. Meanwhile the old lady was peering steadily in search of her visitor. She must once have been as tall as Alice herself, but now time had shrunken her up into the stature of a child, and though her small head was set firmly on the narrow shoulders, these stooped like the wings of the morose stone birds upon her gates.

'Ah, is that you, my dear?' cried a voice; but so minute was the sound of these words that Alice went suddenly hot all over lest she had merely imagined them.

'I say, is that you, my dear?' repeated the voice. There was no mistaking now. Alice ventured a pace forward into the light, her knees trembling beneath her, and the old lady groped out a hand—its shrunken fingers closed one upon another like the cold claws of a bird.

For an instant Alice hesitated. The dreadful moment was come. Then she advanced, made the old lady a curtsy, and lifted the icy fingers to her lips.

'All I can say *is*,' she confided to her mother when they met again, 'all I can say *is*, Mamma, if it had been the Pope, I suppose I should have kissed his toe. And really, I would have very much rather.'

None the less, Alice's godmother had evidently taken no offence at this gesture. Indeed what Alice thought might be a smile crinkled, as it were, across the exquisite web of wrinkles on her face. On her acorn-shaped head rose a high lace and silver cap resembling the gown she wore; and silk mittens concealed her wrists. She was so small that Alice had to bend almost double over her fingers. And when she was seated in her chair it was as if a large doll sat there—but a marvellous doll that had voice, thought, senses and motion beyond any human artificer's wildest fancy. The eyes in this dry wizened-up countenance—of a much fainter blue than the palest forget-me-not—steadily continued to look at Alice, the while the butler and footman with head inclined stood watching their mistress. Then, as if at a secret signal, they both bowed and retired.

'Be seated, my dear,' the tinkling voice began when they had withdrawn. And there fell a horrifying pause. Alice gazed at the old lady, and like half-transparent glass the aged eyes remained fixed on herself, the bird-like hands crossed daintily over the square lace handkerchief held in the narrow lap. Alice grew hotter and hotter. 'What a very beautiful old house this is, great-grandmamma,' she suddenly blurted out. 'And those wonderful trees!'

No flicker of expression showed that Miss Cheyney had heard what she had said. And yet Alice could not help thinking that she *had* heard, and that for some reason she had disapproved of her remark.

'Now come,' piped the tiny voice, 'now come; tell me what you have been doing this long time. And how is your mother? I think I faintly remember seeing her, my dear, soon after she married your father, Mr. James Beaton.'

'Mr. Beaton, I *think*, was my great-grandfather, great-grand-mamma,' Alice breathed softly. 'My father's name, you know, was John—John Cheyney.'

'Ah well, your great-grandfather, to be sure,' said the old lady. 'I never pay much attention to dates. And has anything been happening lately?'

'Happening, great-grandmamma?' echoed Alice.

'Beyond?' said the old lady. 'In the world?'

Poor Alice; she knew well the experience of nibbling a pen over impossible questions in history examinations, but this was far worse than any she had ever encountered.

'There, you see!' continued her godmother. 'I hear of the wonderful things they are doing, and yet when I ask a simple

question like that no one has anything to say. Have you travelled on one of these steam railway trains yet? Locomotives?'

'I came that way this afternoon, great-grandmamma.'

'Ah, I thought you looked a little flushed. The smoke must be most disagreeable.'

Alice smiled. 'No, thank you,' she said kindly.

'And how is Queen Victoria?' said the old lady. 'She is still alive?'

'Oh yes, great-grandmamma. And that is just, of course, what *has* been happening. It's her Diamond Jubilee this year—sixty years—you know.'

'H'm,' said the old lady. 'Sixty. George III reigned sixty-three. But they all go in time. I remember my dear father coming up to my nursery after the funeral of poor young Edward VI. He was one of the Court pages, you know—that is, when Henry VIII was King. Such a handsome lad—there is his portrait ... somewhere.'

For a moment Alice's mind was a whirlpool of vague memories—memories of what she had read in her history-books.

But Miss Cheyney's bead-like notes had hardly paused. 'You must understand that I have not asked you to come this long way by one of those horrid new-fangled steam-engines just to gossip about my childhood. Kings and Queens come and go like the rest of things. And though I have seen many changes, it seems to me the world is pretty much the same as ever. Nor can I believe that the newspaper is a beneficial novelty. When I was a girl we managed well enough without, and even in Mr. Addison's day one small sheet twice a week was enough. But there, complaint is useless. And you cannot exactly be held responsible for all that. There were changes in my girlhood, too—great changes. The world was not so crowded then. There was nobility and beauty. Yes.' Her eyes wandered, to rest a moment on the portrait of the young woman in the primrose gown. 'The truth is, my dear,' she continued, 'I have to tell you something, and I wish you to listen.'

Once more she remained silent a moment, clutching the handkerchief she held between her fingers. 'What I desire you to tell *me*,' she said at last, leaning stealthily forward in her great chair, 'what I am anxious that you should tell me is, How long do you wish to live?'

For a few moments Alice sat cold and motionless. It was as if an icy breath straight from the North Pole had swept across the room, congealing with its horror the very air. Her eyes wandered vacantly from picture to picture, from ancient object to ancient object—aged, mute and lifeless—to rest at last on a flowering weed that reared its head beyond one of the diamond-shaped panes of glass in the window.

'I have never thought of that, great-grandmamma,' her dry lips whispered. 'I don't think I know.'

'Well, I am not expecting an old head on young shoulders,' retorted the old lady. 'Perhaps if King Charles had realized that—so learned, so generous, so faithful a monarch—I doubt if that vulgar creature Oliver Cromwell would ever have succeeded in having his off.'

The acorn chin drew down into its laces like a snail into its shell. Until this moment Alice might have been conversing with an exquisite image, or an automaton—the glittering eyes, the crooked fingers, the voice from afar. But now it seemed a new life was stirring in it. The tiny yet piercing tones sank almost to a whisper, the head stirred furtively from side to side as if to be sure no eavesdropper were within earshot.

'Now listen close to me, my child: I have a secret. A secret which I wish to share only with you. You would suppose, wouldn't you, that this being the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of my natal day'—and at this the dreadful realization suddenly swept over Alice that she had quite forgotten to wish her godmother 'Many happy returns'—'you might suppose that you are about to meet a gay and numerous company here—young and happy creatures like yourself. But no: not so. Even your dear mother is, of course, only my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter-*in-law*. She was a Miss Wilmot, I believe.'

'Yes, Woodcot, great-grandmamma,' said Alice softly.

'Well, Woodcot,' said the old lady; 'it is no matter. It is you, my child, whom I have made, to be precise, my chosen. In mere men I take no interest. Not only that, but you must now be of the age I was when the portrait you see on yonder wall

was painted. It is the work of a pupil of Hans Holbein's. Hans Holbein himself, I believe, was dead at the time. Dear me, child, I remember sitting for that portrait in this very room—as if it were yesterday. It was much admired by Sir Walter Raleigh, who, you may remember, came to so unhappy an end. That was, I recollect, in my early seventies. My father and his father were boys together in Devonshire.'

Alice blinked a little—she could not turn her eyes away from her godmother's—that mammet-like face, those minute motionless hands.

'Now glance at that picture, please!' the old lady bade her, pointing a tiny crooked-up forefinger towards the further wall. 'Do you see any resemblance?'

Alice looked long and steadily at the portrait. But she had neither the courage nor vanity to deny that the fair smiling features were at least a *little* like her own. 'To whom, great-grandmamma?' Alice whispered.

'"To whom?" Well, well, well!' came the reply, the words sounding like the chiming of a distant silver bell. 'I see it. I see it.... But never mind that now. Did you perhaps look at this *house* as you made your way up the avenue?'

'Oh yes, great-grandmamma—though I couldn't, of course, look close, you know,' Alice managed to say.

'Did you *enjoy* its appearance?'

'I don't think I thought of that,' said Alice. 'The trees and park were very lovely. I have never seen such—*mature* trees, great-grandmamma. And yet all their leaves were budding and some were fully out. Isn't it wonderful for trees so—so long in the world to—why, to come out at all?'

'I was referring to the house,' said the old lady. '*Springs* nowadays are not what they used to be. They have vanished from the England I once knew. I remember once an April when angels were seen on the hilltops above London. But that is no matter for us now: not now. The house?'

Once again Alice's gaze wandered—to come to rest again on the green, nodding weed at the window.

'It is a very very quiet house,' she said.

The child-like tones died between the thick stone walls; and a profound silence followed them, like that of water in a well. Meanwhile, as Alice fully realized, her godmother had been fixedly searching her face with her remote but intent eyes. It was as if Time itself were only a child and that of this aged face he had made his little secret gazebo.

'Now please listen to me very carefully,' she continued at last. 'Such a countenance as yours—one bearing the least resemblance to that portrait over there, must be the possessor of a fair share of wits. I am old enough, my child, not to be charged, I hope, with the folly of vanity. In my girlhood I enjoyed a due share of admiration. And I have a proposal to make to you which will need all the sagacity you are capable of. Don't be alarmed. I have every faith in you. But first, I want you to go into the next room, where you will find a meal prepared. Young people nowadays, I hear, need continuous nourishment. What wonder! Since they have forgotten all the manners of a lady as *I* know them, and are never still for a moment together. What wonder! With all these dreadful machines I hear of, the discontent, the ignorance and folly, the noise and unrest and confusion. In my young days the poor were the poor and the humble the humble, my child; and knew their place. In my young days I would sit contented for hours at a time over a simple piece of embroidery. And if I needed it, my mother never deigned to spare the rod. But there, I didn't invite you to visit an old woman merely to listen to a sermon. When you have refreshed yourself you are to take a little walk through the house. Go wherever you please; look well about you; no one will disturb you. And in an hour's time come back to me here again. Nowadays I take a little sleep in the afternoon. I shall be ready for you then...'

Alice, with a relief beyond words, rose from her chair. She curtsied again towards the small, motionless figure in the distance, and retired through the dark oak door.

The room in which she at once found herself was small, hexagonal, and panelled with the blackest of old oak. A copper candelabrum hung from the dark moulded ceiling, and beyond the leaded panes she could see the gigantic trees in the park. To her dismay the footman who had accompanied the butler into the room when her godmother had first made her appearance, was stationed behind the chair at the table. Never had Alice supposed that it was proper for men-servants, except perhaps gardeners, to wear long grey beards. But there he was, with his dim sidling eyes. And she must needs

turn her back on him to seat herself at the table. She nibbled the fruit and bread, the rich cake and the sweetmeats which he presented in their heavy silver dishes, and she sipped her sweet drink. But it was a hasty and nervous meal, and she tasted nothing of what she had eaten.

As soon as it was over, the servant opened the door for her, and she began her voyage of discovery through the great, deserted house. It was as if her very ghost were her only company. Never had solitude so oppressed her, never before had she been so intensely aware of being wide awake and yet dreaming. The long corridors, the low and crooked lintelled doors, the dark uneven floors, their Persian mats, their tapestries and hangings, only the lovelier in that their colours had been dimmed by so many suns, the angled flights of stairs, the solemn air that brooded between the walls, the multitude of pictures, the huge beds, the endless succession of superannuated coffers, daybeds, cabinets—all this in but a few minutes had tired and fatigued Alice far more even than the long journey from the home of her childhood that morning. Upstairs and downstairs, on she wandered for all the world like the goosey-goosey-gander of the old nursery rhyme.

And when at last with a sigh she glanced at the bright little silver watch which had been her mother's birthday gift, its slender hands told her that she had still a full quarter-of-an-hour before she need return to her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother's room.

That into which she had now admitted herself seemed to be a small library. Its walls were ranged from ceiling to floor with old leather and lambskin folios and quartos and squat duodecimos, while between them hung portraits and the loveliest miniatures and medallions of scores upon scores of persons who she guessed must be her ancestors and ancestresses of goodness knows how many monarchs ago.

One or two of the pictures, indeed, as the crabbed inscriptions showed, had been gifts to the family from those monarchs themselves. In their various costumes, wigs, turbans and furbelows they looked as if they must have been the guests at an immense fancy-dress ball.

*What tho Felicitie befall?
Time makyth shadowes of us all.*

In this room a low recess filled the shallow bow window and on this lay a strip of tapestry. The leaded pane of the window was open. The sun was already westering, its beams slanting in on the gilt and ebony and ivory of the frames suspended from their nails. Alice knelt down at the window; and her mind slipped into a daydream, and her gaze wandered far away over the golden budding tops of the enormous oaks, the flat dark outstretched motionless palms of the cedars—perhaps descendants of those which Sir Philip Sidney had brought home to his beloved England from the East.

The thoughts that had all day been skittering in her mind like midges over a pool gradually fell still, and she sank deeper and deeper into the hush that lay over the ancient house. It was as if its walls were those of an enormous diving-bell sunken beyond measure in an unfathomable ocean of Time. So tranquil was the sweet April air beyond the window that she could actually detect the sound of the browsing of the herd of fallow deer that had now closely approached the lawns of the house itself.

And as, lost in this reverie, she sat entranced, she became conscious that a small living animal—the like of which she had never seen before—had crept up within a pace or two of her on the window-sill, and was now steadily regarding her with its clear bead-brown eyes. In size it was rather larger than a mole, its dark thick fur was soft as a beaver's, and it had a short, furry, and tufted tail. Its ears were cocked on its head, its silvery whiskers turned downwards above its jaws, and Alice could see its tiny ivory claws as it sat there erect on its haunches like a tame cat or a dog begging for a titbit of meat. Alice, alas, had nothing to offer her visitor, not even a cherry-stone, not even a crumb.

'Well, you pretty thing,' she whispered, 'what is it?'

The creature's whiskers moved ever so slightly, its eyes fixed more intently than ever on the face of this strange visitor. Very, very delicately Alice thrust out her finger, and to her astonishment found herself gently caressing the furry nose. 'It was as if I was in Wonderland, myself,' she explained long afterwards to her mother. Perfectly mute and still, the owner of it seemed to enjoy this little courtesy. And when she had withdrawn her finger, it looked at her more closely and searchingly than ever, as if bidding her take heed. It then tapped repeatedly with its ivory-clawed paw on the oak casement, glanced searchingly at her yet again, then shook its furry head vehemently three times, paused, turned swiftly about and pattered away into hiding behind a huge carved Moorish cabinet before Alice could so much as bid it adieu.

Quiet little events in this life, even though we cannot understand what exactly they mean, are apt to *seem* to mean a great deal. So with this small animal and Alice. It was as if—though she was not aware of it—she had been brooding over a problem in Algebra or a proposition in Euclid, and it had ventured out of its living-place to tell her the answer. How fantastic a notion!—when Alice knew neither the problem nor what its solution was.

She glanced at her watch once more; her fair cheeks pinking all over at realizing that she was now ten minutes late for her assignation with her godmother. She must be gone. None the less, she had time to look her farewell at the huge dreaming park before she set out on her return journey.

Before at last finding her way, however, she irretrievably lost it. For the house was a silent maze of deceptive passages and corridors. Every fresh attempt only increased her confusion, and then suddenly she found herself looking into a room utterly different from any she had yet seen. Its low walls were of stone, its dusty windows shuttered; it contained nothing but a chair. And in that chair sat what appeared to be the life-size image of the smiling lovely creature she had seen in the portrait—eyes shut, cheeks a faint rose, hair still shimmering with gold, the hands laid idly in her lap, the fingers of one of them clutching what seemed to be the dried-up fragments of a bunch of roses. What there was to alarm her in this harmless image she could not tell; but she gazed awhile at it in horror, closed to the door and ran off as if pursued by a nightmare, down one corridor and up another, to find herself at last by good fortune once more in the room where she had had her meal. It seemed, as she stood there, her hand upon her breast, as if she would never again recover her breath. She was no longer nervous; no longer merely timid: she was afraid. 'If only, if only I had never come to this house!' was her one terrified thought.

She discovered with relief on re-entering Miss Cheyney's presence that her godmother was still asleep. Alice could see awhile without being seen.

Now one of her mother's brothers—one of Alice's uncles, that is—was an old bachelor who delighted in birthday gifts. Alice had therefore been richer in dolls than most children: wooden, wax, china, Dutch, French, Russian, and even one from the Andaman Islands. But no single one of them had shown a face so utterly still and placid as that now leaning gently aside in its lace and silver cap and mantle. There was no expression whatever on its features. No faintest smile; no shadow of a frown. And yet, the tiny wrinkles all over it, crooking down even from the brows over the eyelids, gave it the appearance of an exquisitely figured map.

And Alice was still surveying it as closely as some old treasure-hunter might the chart of his secret island, when the minute eyes reopened and her godmother was instantly awake and intent.

'Ah,' whispered she, 'I have myself been on a long journey, but I heard you calling. What happens, I wonder,' and the tones sank lower, 'what happens when one has ventured on too far to hear any such rumours? Answer me that, eh? But no matter. There is a more important question first. Tell me now, if you please, what you think of my house.'

Alice moistened her lips. 'That, great-grandmamma,' she managed to reply at last, 'that would take *ages*. It is marvellous: but oh, so very still.'

'What should there be to disturb it?' asked the old lady.

Alice shook her head.

'Tell me,' and her voice tinkled across the air with a peculiar little tang, 'would you like this house for your own?'

'This house—for my own?' breathed the young girl.

'Ay, for your own, and for always—humanly speaking.'

'I don't quite understand,' said Alice.

The little head leaned sidelong like an inquisitive bird's.

'Naturally, my child. You *cannot* until I have gone a little further. The gift I am now offering you is one that few human beings in this world conceive to be possible. It is not merely this house, my child, with all that it contains—much as that may be. It is life. My father, you must understand, was a traveller; and in days when danger was a man's constant companion. In this very room on his return from a many years' journey, he told me as a girl of a dismal mountainous

region of snow and ice and precipices that lies *there*—West of China, I believe. It was from thence that he brought back his secret. It was one that for grievous and tragical reasons he could not follow himself. And I, my child, was his only choice. You will realize there may come a day when the wish to live on may have somewhat dimmed in my mind. I confess to feeling a little weariness at times. But before I go, it is my privilege—my obligation—to confer the secret on another. Look at me!' The voice rose a little; it was as though a wren had uttered its shrill song in the low resounding room. 'I am offering this inestimable benefit to *you*.'

Alice sat straight as a dart in her chair, not venturing to turn her eyes aside even for a moment.

'The secret, great-grandmamma?'

'Aye,' continued the old woman, closing her eyes, 'you heard me aright. I will presently whisper it into your ear. Imagine, my child, the wonder of infinite time! Imagine a life in such surroundings as these, far from all the follies and vexations of the world—and one fear—the most terrible of all fears—gone, or at any rate so remote as to be of no consequence. Imagine that, I say.'

For an instant Alice's gaze wavered. Her eyes glanced swiftly towards the window where shone the swiftly changing colours of the sunset; where sang the wild birds, and Spring was fleeting on its way.

'Take your own time: and do not be afraid of me. I shall make few conditions. Only that you must vow silence, to breathe not one syllable of what I shall tell you—not even to your own mother. All else will be easy—comparatively easy. All else. You will come here and live with me. Rooms are prepared for you—books, music, horses to ride, servants to wait on you, all that you need. And in due season this house, this accumulation of things precious and old and beautiful, this wide park stretching for many more miles than you can see from my topmost windows, will be yours alone. You may pine for a while for old friends. It is an unhappy thing to say good-bye, as I have heard. But all fades, all goes. And in time you will not wish for company. Servants as aged as mine are not difficult to find; they are discreet, and have need to remain faithful. We shall have many a quiet talk together. I have much to tell you. I long, my dear child, to share memories with you that I have never breathed to a living soul. There are wings to this house into which you cannot have penetrated, simply because they are shut off by bolts and bars. They contain much to see: much to linger over; much to wonder at. Yes, and my dear child, in you I should live on—our two minds ... two lives. Tell me now, what do you think of my proposal? And remember this:—Not even Solomon in all his glory could have conferred on you what I now offer.'

The aged head was nodding—as if with fatigue. The cramped fingers fumbled aimlessly with the lace handkerchief, and Alice's poor wits were once more in a desperate confusion. The room swam dizzily before her eyes. She shut them a moment; endeavouring in vain to consider calmly what that remote unhuman voice had been saying to her. She might as well have struggled in sleep to shake off the veils and nets of a dream, the snares of a nightmare. One thing only was audible to her now, a bird singing in the garden and the sound of her shoe tapping on the floor. She listened—and came back.

'You mean,' she whispered, 'on and on and on—like you, great-grandmamma?'

The old lady made no reply.

'May I, do you think, then, if you would be so kind, may I have time to think it over?'

'Think what over?' said her godmother. 'Are you supposing a child of your age can think over three complete centuries before a single moment of them has come into view?'

'No,' said Alice, her courage returning a little, 'I meant, think over what you have said. It is so very difficult to realize what it means.'

'It means,' said the old lady, 'an immeasurable sea, infinite space, an endless vista—of time. It means freedom from the cares and anxieties and follies that are the lot of the poor creatures in the world beyond—living out their few days in brutish stupidity. You are still young, but who knows? It means, my child, postponing a visit to a certain old friend of ours—whose name is Death.'

She breathed the word as if in begrudged pleasure at its sound. Alice shuddered, and yet it gave her fresh resolution. She rose from her chair.

'I am young and stupid, I know, great-grandmamma; and I would do anything in the world not to—not to hurt your feelings. And of course, of course I know that most people have a very hard time and that most of us are not very sharp-witted. But you said *death*; and I think, if you will forgive my saying so, I would rather I should have to die when—just when, I mean, I *must* die. You see, it would be a very sorrowful thing for me if it came after my mother had—if, I mean, she cannot share the secret too? And even then... Why cannot we all share it? I do see, indeed I do, there is very little time in this world in which to grow wise. But when you think of the men who have——'

'You are here, my child,' Miss Cheyney interrupted her, 'to answer questions—not to ask them. I must not be fatigued. Then I should have no sleep. But surely you are old enough to know that there is not a human creature in a thousand, nay, not one in a hundred thousand, who has any hope of growing wise, not if he lived till Doomsday.'

She edged forward an inch in her chair. 'Suppose, my child, your refusal means that this secret will perish with—with *me*? Unless,' the voice sank to a muttering, 'unless *you* consent to share it? Eh, what then?'

Alice found her eyes fixed on the old lady like a bird's on a serpent, and the only answer she could make was a violent shake of the head. 'Oh,' she cried, suddenly bursting into tears, 'I simply can't tell you how grateful I am for all your kindness, and how miserable I seem to myself to be saying this. But please, Miss Cheyney, may I go now? I feel a dreadful thing might happen if I stay here a minute longer.'

The old lady seemed to be struggling in her chair, as if in the effort to rise out of it; but her strength failed her. She lifted her claw-like mittened hand into the air.

'Begone at once, then,' she whispered, 'at once. Even my patience is limited. And when the day comes that will remind you of my kindness, may you wish you had ... Oh, oh!...' The frail voice rose shrill as a gnat's, then ceased. At sound of it the old butler came hastening in at the further door; and Alice slipped out of the other....

Not until the house had vanished from sight behind the leaping branches of its forest-trees did she slacken her pace to recover her breath. She had run wildly on, not daring to pause or even glance over her shoulder, as if her guardian angel were at her heels, lending wings to her feet to save her from danger.

That evening she and her mother—seated in the cosy red-curtained coffee-room of the 'Red Lion'—actually sipped together a brimming glass of the landlord's old Madeira. Alice had never before kept any secret from her mother. Yet though she was able to tell her most of what had happened that afternoon, she could not persuade herself to utter a syllable about the purpose which had prompted Miss Cheyney to send her so improbable an invitation. Not then, nor ever afterwards.

'Do you really mean, my own dearest,' her mother repeated more than once, pressing her hand as they sat in the chill spring night under the old oil-lamp-post awaiting their train in the little country railway station; 'do you mean she never gave you a single little keepsake; never offered you *anything* out of all those wonderful treasures in that dreadful old house?'

'She asked me, mother dear,' said Alice, turning her face away towards the dark-mouthed tunnel through which they would soon be venturing—'she asked me if I would like ever to be as old as she was. And honestly, I said I would much prefer to stay just the silly green creature I am, so long as I can be with you.'

It was an odd thing to do—if the station-master had been watching them—but, however odd, it is certainly true that at this moment mother and daughter turned and flung their arms about each other's necks and kissed each other in such a transport as if they had met again for the first time after an enormous journey.

Not that Alice had been quite accurate in saying that her godmother had made her no gift. For a day or two afterwards there came by post a package; and enwrapped in its folds of old Chinese paper Alice found the very portrait she had seen on the wall on that already seemingly far-off day—the drawing, I mean, made by a pupil of the famous Hans Holbein, depicting her great - great - great - great - great - great - great - great - grandmother in the year of grace 1564, when she was just turned seventeen.

[End of *Alice's Godmother* by Walter de la Mare]