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Title: The Palace in the Garden

Author: Molesworth, Mary Louisa (1839-1921)

Date of first publication: 1887

Edition used as base for this ebook: London: Hatchards, 1887 [first edition]

Date first posted: 4 August 2011

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20110605

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THE

PALACE IN THE GARDEN.

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH,

AUTHOR OF "CARROTS," "SILVERTHORNS," "FOUR WINDS FARM," ETC.

LONDON:

HATCHARDS, PICCADILLY.

1887.

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THE

PALACE IN THE GARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

WE THREE.

"Sisters and brothers, little maid,
How many may you be?"

I think the best beginning is the morning that grandpapa sent for us to come down to the study. Tib and Gerald, don't think so. They say I should begin by telling our names, and how old we were, and all that—at least, Gerald says so; Tib isn't quite sure. Tib very often isn't quite sure. She has got too grand ideas, and if she were going to write a story, she would make it like poetry, very difficult to understand, and awfully long words, and lots about feelings and sorrows and mysteries. I like mysteries, too—I think they are very interesting, and I *have* one to tell about, as you will see, only I must tell it my own way, and after all, as this story is only to be read by Tib and Gerald—and our children—we have settled that when we are all three grown-up and married, and have children, it shall be made into a book for them—I daresay it doesn't much matter how it is told.

Well, that morning we were all poking our heads as far as we dared out of the school-room window—Miss Evans hadn't yet come—to see the first primrose man that had passed that year. We heard his "All a blowing, all a growing," far off down the street, but we hadn't yet seen him and his basket with the beautiful light yellow bunches at the top, and we were wondering if we could get Fanny to run out and buy us twopence-worth, when Bland stuck his solemn and rather crabbed-looking face in at the door. Bland is grandpapa's "own man," as they say, and his name doesn't suit him at all—at least, it didn't then—he's not so bad now we're older.

"Young ladies and Master Gerald," he said, "my master wishes you all to come down stairs to speak to him before he goes out."

Down we all tumbled from the window-sill. Tib and I began smoothing our aprons and tugging at each other's hair—grandpapa was very particular. Gerald only looked at his hands.

"They are rather dirty," he said seriously. "But I did wash them so very well this morning, and it's not ten o'clock yet. Do you think, Gussie——?"

I knew what he was going to say, so I cut him short.

"Yes, I do think you'd better run and wash them *at once*—why, you might have had them done by now—they are just perfectly grimy."

For Gerald would any day talk for ten minutes about why he *needn't* wash his hands rather than run off and do them. I am afraid he was rather a dirty little boy—he'll be very angry if he sees that, for he is now getting to be very particular indeed—for though he liked bathing in the sea, he would do anything to avoid washing—regular good soapy washing. But he was too afraid of grandpapa to stand out when I said his hands were as bad as "grimy," so off he went.

"Are we to come down at once?" asked Tib.

"Yes, miss. Your grandpapa has ordered the brougham to be round in ten minutes," Bland graciously informed us as Gerald started off.

"I wonder what it's about?" said Tib. "I hope he's not vexed with us."

For it wasn't often that grandpapa sent for us in the morning, except on birthdays or Christmas Day, when he had presents for us. He never forgot about that, I must say.

"Why should he be vexed with us?" I said. "We've not done anything naughty;" for Tib was standing there with the tears on their way to her big blue eyes, as I could see quite well—and I've no patience with people who look as if they had been naughty when they haven't.

"Well, you go in first, then, Gussie," said Tib. "I wish I wasn't frightened, but I can't help it."

By this time we were on the stairs, not far from the study door, and Gerald had run after us, with very red shiny paws, you may be sure, and in another moment we were all three in "the august presence," as Tib called it afterwards.

Grandpapa had just finished his breakfast. He used often to have it like that, just on a little tray in the study. It didn't look very comfortable, and he might quite as well have had it in the dining-room all nicely set out, and Tib and me to pour out his coffee in turns. But he did not think of it, I suppose, and at that time I don't think we did, either. We had never seen any other "ways;" we didn't know how other families lived—families where there were mammas, or any way grandmamas, or aunts, as well as children, and we were so young that we just took things as we found them. I think children are generally like that, especially if they see very little outside their own homes.

Grandpapa was not old-looking at all—not the least like the pictures in old-fashioned books of a very aged man, with a gentle and rather silly face, and a white beard, and a stick, sitting in a big arm-chair by the fire, and patting a very curly-haired grandchild on the head. I'm quite sure grandpapa never patted any of us on the head; and *now*, of course, we're too big. But I didn't mind his not being like the pictures of grandpapas, and now I mind it still less, for I'm really proud of his being so nice-looking. That morning I can remember quite well how he looked as he sat by the table, with the tray pushed away, and a whole bundle of letters before him. He glanced up at us as we came trooping in, with his bright dark eyes and a half smile on his face. We were not very fond of that half smile of his: it made it so difficult to tell if he was in fun or earnest.

"Well, young people," he said, "and how does the wind blow this morning?"

He looked at Gerald as he spoke. Gerald was staring at his red hands.

"I don't know, grandpapa," he said; and then seeing that grandpapa's eyes were still fixed on him, he got uncomfortable, and tugged Tib, who was next him. "Tib knows, p'r'aps," he said. "I'm only seven, grandpapa."

Grandpapa moved his eyes to Tib.

"It strikes me," he said, "that you're getting too big, young woman, to be spoken of as if you were a kitten. You must call your sister by her proper name, Gerald."

"It's hard for him to say, grandpapa," said Tib. "That's why Gussie and he always say Tib, instead of Mercedes."

"Umph!—yes—Tom-fool name!" said grandpapa, which made me rather angry.

"No, grandpapa, it's not a Tom-fool name," I said. "It's Spanish; and it was because our papa and mamma lived in Spain that they called it her."

I daresay I spoke pertly. Any way, I was punished, for my words had the effect of bringing the eyes upon me in my turn.

"Called it her? called it her?" he repeated slowly. "What English! Miss Evans is to be congratulated on her success! So Mercedes is a Spanish name, is it? Thank you—thank you very much indeed for the information. Now perhaps you

will all be good enough to listen to some information from me."

I had got very red while grandpapa was speaking, quite as much from anger as from shame, for I wasn't so easily put down as Tib and Gerald; I had a quicker temper. But when grandpapa spoke of having information to give us, I felt so curious to know what it could be that I tried to look as if I hadn't minded what he said. So he went on:

"I'm going to send you all off to the country next week; I don't want to keep this house open. I am very busy, and I would rather live at my club." Grandpapa stopped a minute. I think he wanted to see what we would say.

"Are we to go to Ansdell Friars so soon?" I said. I suppose I didn't seem very pleased, and no more did Tib or Gerald. It wasn't very long—only three or four months—since we had come from there, and there was nothing at Ansdell we much cared about. We knew it all so well. It was a regular big, grand country house; but its bigness was not much good to us, as we were strictly shut up in our own rooms, and sharply scolded if we were found out of them; and there was nothing amusing or interesting there. The country is not pretty, and the walks are not to be compared with those at—never mind where; I shall tell you the name of the place in a little while. So we had no particular reason for being glad to go back there; on the whole, I think we liked London better. We had less of Miss Evans in London, for she only came every day; but at Ansdell Friars she lived with us. Grandpapa had persuaded her to do so, but she didn't like it, and we didn't like it, so we were not very happy together. She didn't like children, and was only a governess because she had to be, not because she liked it, and she was always telling us so. I used to think then all governesses were the same, but I know better now. There are some *awfully* nice, who really like teaching, and aren't always scolding the children, as if it was their own fault that they are children and have to be taught.

"And is Miss Evans coming?" said Gerald, dolefully.

"You are not going to Ansdell Friars at all; and, I am sorry to say," grandpapa went on, "Miss Evans is not able to go with you. Nurse will have to look after you till I can find another Miss Evans."

Our faces fell, I have no doubt, at the last sentence. Another Miss Evans! Still, it was very nice to think there'd be *no* Miss Evans for a while. Nurse looking after us meant, as we knew very well, that we should do pretty much as we liked; for nurse spoiled us most horribly. It was a very delightful prospect.

"We'll try to be very good, grandpapa," said Tib.

"Umph!" said grandpapa.

"And when are we going, please?" I could not resist putting in. I was burning with curiosity, and so, I am sure, were the others, though they were afraid to ask. Grandpapa looked at me.

"Upon my word, Gustava," he said, "I think you might give me time to tell you. When I was young, children were not allowed to cross-question their elders. You are going to a little country house I have which you have never seen nor heard of. It is much nearer town than Ansdell Friars, so I shall be able to come down every now and then to see you, and to hear if you are behaving properly. It is a much smaller place than Ansdell—in fact, it's quite a small house. But there's a good garden; you will have plenty of space to play in. Only I wish you to understand one thing: there are other houses near—it isn't like Ansdell, all alone in a park—and neighbours, of course. Now, I won't have you make friends with any one unless I tell you you may. You are not to go into other people's houses or to chatter to strangers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, grandpapa," we all three replied, feeling rather frightened. I don't think we did quite understand, for we never had made friends with any one. We had lived very solitary lives, without any companions of our own age—for we had scarcely any relations, and none that we knew anything of. And as people don't miss what they have never had, I don't think it would ever have come into our heads to do what grandpapa was so afraid of. He certainly made us think more about other people than we had ever done before.

"What is the name of the place, please, grandpapa?" asked Tib in her soft voice.

If it had been *me* that had asked it, he would have snubbed me again. But it was certainly true, as the servants all said, that he favoured Tib the most. Perhaps it was that she was so pretty—perhaps it was for a reason that I can't tell just yet.

"The name of the place," he repeated—"of the house, I suppose you mean? The name of the place does not matter to you. You will not have to take your own tickets at the station. The house has an absurd name, but as it has always been called so, it is no use thinking of changing it. It is called 'Rosebuds.'"

Grandpapa stood up as he spoke, and just then Bland opened the door to announce the carriage. So we all said good-bye to him and trotted off. We knew we should probably not see him again for two or three days, but we were so used to it we did not care; and we had plenty to interest our minds and give us something to talk of.

"What a very pretty name 'Rosebuds' is," Tib exclaimed, as soon as we were safely out of hearing. "I'm sure it must be a very pretty place to have such a name. I daresay it's a white cottage, with beautiful old-fashioned windows, and roses climbing all over."

"I don't like cottages with roses growing over them," said Gerald. "There are always witches living in cottages like that, in the fairy tales. There is in *Snow-white and Rose-red*."

"Well," said Tib, "it would be rather fun to have a witch at Rosebuds. I do hope there'll be something interesting and out of the common there—something *romantic*." Tib said the last word rather slowly. I don't think she was quite sure how to say it, and I am quite sure none of us knew what it meant.

"I hope there'll be nice hide-and-seek places in the garden, and nice trees for climbing up, and perhaps grassy hills for rolling down," said I. "If grandpapa only comes to see us now and then, and there's no Miss Evans, and only old Liddy—old Liddy was nurse—it *will* be very jolly. I shouldn't wonder—I really shouldn't—if it was more jolly than we've ever had anything in our lives—more like how the children in story-books are, you know, Tib."

For about this time we had begun to read a good deal more to ourselves, and among the old books in grandpapa's library we had found a nest which contained great treasures; many of the volumes had belonged to our father when he was a boy, and some even had been grandpapa's own childish books. Grandpapa had given us leave to read them, and you can fancy what a treat it was to us, who had had so little variety in our lives, to get hold of *Holiday House*, and the *Swiss Family Robinson*, and the *Parent's Assistant*, and best of all perhaps, the dearest little shabby, dumpy, dark-brown book of real old-fashioned fairy tales. I have it still—no shabbier for all our thumbing of it: it is so strongly bound, though it is so plain and dingy-looking, and I mean to keep it for my children.

"But grandpapa said he was going to find another Miss Evans, Gussie," said Gerald.

"Never mind. She isn't found yet; and I don't believe there *could* be another quite as bad as this one," I said, consolingly.

But a brilliant idea struck Tib. She stopped short on the top step but one—we were climbing up stairs by this time—before the school-room landing, and turned round so as to face us two—Gerald and me.

"I tell you what, Gussie and Gerald," she said: "suppose we were to be very, just *dreadfully* good at our lessons for a little, don't you think it *might* make Miss Evans tell grandpapa that she really thought we should be the better for a holiday. I should think even *she* would like to do something good-natured before she left."

Gerald and I stood listening. It was a grave matter, and we did not want to commit ourselves hastily.

"Do you mean being very quiet in the school-room, never whispering to each other, or making even the least little bit of funny faces when she's not looking? or do you mean doing our lessons for her just awfully well?"

"Both," said Tib, solemnly.

"Oh, I don't think I *could*," I replied. "It is so very nice to be naughty sometimes."

"But, Gussie," said Gerald, "any way, you might settle to do our lessons terribly well. Don't you see, if we did them quite well Miss Evans might think we knew everything, and she might tell grandpapa we didn't need to learn anything more."

"And you might settle to be naughty with *us* or with Liddy," said Tib, persuasively. "Gerald and I will promise not to mind, won't we, Gerald? And we'll explain to Liddy."

"I'll think about it," was all I could say.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCORED-OUT NAME.

"How new life reaps what the old life did sow."

Edwin Arnold.

I was the naughty one of the family. I dare say you—whoever you are—that are going to read this will have found this out already, and it was best to make it plain at the beginning. Tib and Gerald were really very good—at least, they would have been if I had let them. But still, as I used often to say to them as a sort of a make-up for the troubles I got them into, it *would* have been rather dull work had we all three been extra good. And even the great thing that I have to write about, *the* thing that put it into my head to write at all, would never have come but for our being in a way naughty—that is very queer, isn't it? To think that good and nice things should sometimes come out of being naughty! I have often puzzled about it. I think it must be that there are different kinds of naughtiness—*perfectly* different—for nothing good could come out of real, wicked naughtiness—telling lies, or being cruel to each other, or things like that; but the sort of naughtiness of just being mischievous, and of being so bubbling over with the niceness of being alive, that you *can't* keep quiet, and remember about not knocking things over and tearing yourself, and the naughtiness of hating your lessons on a beautiful day, when it's really too tempting out-of-doors—all these kinds of naughtiness and lots of others I could tell you, for I've thought so much about it—all these kinds are different, surely? And one can fancy good and nice things coming out of them without getting one's ideas muddled. That's one thing I'm going to be very particular about with my children—I'm going to explain to them *well* about the two kinds of being naughty, so that they won't get all into a puzzle about it. I think I even shall settle to have two kinds of words for them; for I do know, I am sorry to say, what it is to be really naughty too. Just a few times in my life I can remember the dreadful feeling of real, boiling anger at some one—I had it several times to Miss Evans, and once or twice to—no, I won't say; it's all so different now. And *once* I told what wasn't true, quite knowing all about it. But I *never* did it again. The horribleness of the feeling was too bad, and in *that* way my naughtiness did me good!

Our plan for getting Miss Evans to help us to a holiday hadn't much chance, as you shall hear.

When we got to the school-room we found she hadn't come, though it was a quarter to ten, and she generally came at half-past nine.

"Everything seems going topsy-turvy to-day," said I, seating myself on the high guard, and swinging my feet about. It was a very dangerous seat, as the guard was anything but steady, and if it toppled over, there was no saying but that you might be landed in the middle of the fire. "Miss Evans late—and us going away to a place we never heard of before! It's almost as nice as if the sun had forgotten to get up—what fun that would be!"

"I don't think that would be fun at all," said Gerald. "I'd much rather he should forget to go to bed some night. Which would you rather, Tib?"

But Tib wasn't listening. She was pressing her face against the window, her thoughts intent upon primroses again.

"Hush!" she said; "I'm sure I heard him. He can't be far off yet, or else it's another man. Listen." And as she held up her finger there came softly through the distance again the "All a growing, all a blowing."

"I wonder why things seem so much prettier far off," said Tib, thoughtfully. But just then the cry came again, and this time unmistakably nearer. Off darted Tib. "I will try to get Fanny to catch him," she said; and in five minutes she was back again in triumph.

"Fanny wasn't to be found, of course," she said. "But that good Liddy poked up the little page-boy—he's new, so he hasn't learnt to be impudent yet—and sent him down the street. We shall have the primroses directly. Oh, I say, Gussie and Gerald"—and Tib flung herself down on the hearth-rug, and rolled herself over, as if she were on a lawn of beautiful fresh grass—"just fancy if we were in the country, and could gather primroses for ourselves—as many as ever we wanted. *Wouldn't* it be lovely?"

"Perhaps we may—perhaps they won't be over when we go to that place," said Gerald.

"I wonder when exactly we shall go?" I said. And then our thoughts all returned to Rosebuds, and what our grandfather had said about it.

"I wonder why he doesn't want us to make friends with any of the neighbours?" I said. "I think it's rather crabby of him. There may be some nice children there, and we never have any playfellows."

"I suppose he's got some reason for it," said Tib. "Perhaps the people who live there are all very common. You know, grandpapa is right to be particular about us."

"I don't think it is that. I think he has some other reason. Tib, do you know," I exclaimed, as a curious idea flashed across my mind, "I have an idea that——"

But I was interrupted before I could say more by the entrance of old Liddy, bringing the primroses. They were not very big bunches, but they were very sweet and fresh, and we all sniffed at them in a way that must have astonished the poor things. Nurse smiled at us.

"I'd like to see you gathering them for yourselves, my dears," she said.

"Well, we shall, perhaps, if we go to the country so soon. Do you know that place where we're going to, Liddy?" asked Tib.

She shook her head—she had come to us from mamma's family, and she didn't know much about the Ansdells.

"No, Miss Tib. I never heard of it till your grandpapa told me last night about getting you ready. And that reminds me—Bland told me just now that his master forgot to say Miss Evans wouldn't be coming to-day."

"Miss Evans not coming to-day!" we all three exclaimed in the greatest astonishment, for it must be confessed Miss Evans was the most exact person possible. "Is she never coming any more, Liddy?"

Nurse shook her head.

"Nay, my dear, how should I know? I only heard what Bland said. Miss Evans isn't coming with us to the country, master said."

"But he's going to get another," said Gerald. "Will she be just *exactly* the same—will she have a big freckle on her

cheek, and will she nip up her mouth the same, do you think, nursey?"

We all burst out laughing at poor Gerald.

"It would quite spoil Rosebuds to have the big freckle there," said Tib. "But, nursey, do you know grandpapa says we're not to make any friends there, and not to know anybody?"

This time Liddy nodded her head.

"I know, my dears. Well, it can't be helped. It'll be no duller for you there than at Ansdell Friars, any way, and it's a beautiful country for walks, cook says. She comes from somewhere that way."

"But why does grandpapa not want us to know anybody there—do you know, nursey? Does cook know, perhaps?"

Liddy looked uncomfortable.

"My dears, there may be reasons for many things that you're too young to understand," she said. "If your grandpapa had wanted to give his reasons to you, he'd have done so himself; and if he didn't wish to give you any, it would ill become me to be telling you over any fancies or chatter I might hear about master's affairs."

Tib's eyes grew very round.

"I do believe there's a mystery," she said. "Oh, how beautiful! Nursey, I'm sure you know something. What fun it would be if there was really a mystery, and if we were to find it out. Gussie, do listen."

But I wouldn't listen just that minute. The thought which had been put out of my mind by nurse coming in with the primroses had come back again.

"Wait a minute, Tib," I said, "I've got an idea. I'm only going down to the library to fetch a book. I may go as Miss Evans isn't coming," and off I flew.

The library was not a large room—indeed, it was a good deal smaller than grandpapa's study—but it held a great many books. It was nothing but books, for there were shelves all round it, packed as close as they could hold. In one corner were all the books that grandpapa allowed us to read. He had shown them to us himself, and simply told us we might read any of them we liked, provided we always put them back again in their places, but that we mustn't ever take any other books without asking his leave. That was one thing grandpapa was very nice about; though he was so cold and strict, he always trusted us, and never doubted our words. I'm sure that is the best way to make children quite truthful. Except that one time I've told you of, I don't remember any of us telling a story. It didn't seem to come into our heads to do so—we had been with grandpapa ever since we could remember, and he had always been the same. We had never known what it was to be loved or petted, except by Liddy, for both papa and mamma had died of a fever in Spain, and we had been sent home with old nurse. (I suppose I should have explained this at the beginning; but it doesn't matter.)

Well, I ran down to the library and went straight to our own corner. They were funny-looking books—mostly rather shabby, for they had been children's books for two, and some of them for three, generations. It took me a little while to find the one I was in search of; indeed, I wasn't quite sure which it was, and I had to take out several, and open them to see the page at the beginning before I got the right one. It was a small book; the name of it was *Ornaments Discovered*, and on the first leaf was written the name of the person it had belonged to. There were two names, but the first had been so scored through that one could only distinguish the first letter of it, which was "R," and the second name was our name and grandpapa's name, "Ansdell." And lower down on the page was the date, and the name of a place just above it. But this name also had been scored through, only not so blackly as the other, so that it was still easy to make out that it was that of the house we were going to live at: "Rosebuds."

I remembered it quite well now—I had often puzzled over the writing in this book, and though I had never made out the name before, "Ansdell," I remembered having read that the other was "Rosebuds." I understood now a sort of feeling

I had had when grandpapa had told us the name that morning, that I had heard it before—or, as it turned out, *seen* it before.

I rushed up stairs with the little red book in my hand.

"Tib," I said, looking and feeling very excited, "just look at this."

Up jumped Tib—she had been down on the floor arranging the primroses in some little glasses that we always kept on the mantelpiece for any flowers that came our way. Liddy had left the room, and Gerald had gone with her. We leant over the book together.

"You see?" I said, pointing to the word above the date.

"Yes," said Tib; "it's certainly 'Rosebuds.' I suppose grandpapa had it when he was a little boy, there."

"Oh, you stupid!" I exclaimed. "You're always wanting to make up wonderful stories of adventures and mysteries, and now, when I've found you a real mystery, all ready made, you won't see it. If it had just been grandpapa's book, what would he have scored the name out for? Besides, you know very well that his name is 'Gerald,' like papa and Gerald. And *this* name begins with a 'R.'"

Tib had taken the book in her own hands by this time, and was peering at it.

"You may call me stupid, if you like," she said, "but I've found out something else. The name is 'Regina'—my second name;" for Tib's whole name was Mercedes Regina. "Mercedes Regina Ansdell"—isn't that an awfully grand name for a little girl? She was a little girl then.

I seized the book in my turn. Sure enough, now that Tib had put the idea into my head, it seemed quite plain—even through the very thick crossing-out one could see the confused shapes of the word "Regina."

"You're right, Gussie," said Tib; "there *is* a mystery. You remember that time that grandpapa was grumbling at my name—like he did this morning—and I said, 'Mightn't I be called by my second name?' how he snapped out, 'No, certainly not.' It frightened me so, I remember. There must have been somebody called 'Regina Ansdell' that he didn't like, or he was angry with, or *something*. Oh! how I do wonder who she was, and why he has never told us about her?"

"We might ask nurse," I said. "I am sure she knows something—for you see, this Regina Ansdell must have lived at Rosebuds, and it's something about there that Liddy has heard, and won't tell us. And I shouldn't wonder if it has to do with grandpapa's not wanting us to know any of the people there."

"What can it be?" said Tib, her eyes growing bigger and rounder. "There can't surely be any one shut up there—a mysterious lady called 'Regina.' Oh, no, that can't be it, for grandpapa would never take us there if there were. Besides—though he's rather frightening and strict—grandpapa's not bad and wicked."

"The Queen wouldn't let him be in the Parliament if he were," said I. "At least, I *suppose* not."

"It's good of him to have all of us living with him. Nursey says it is. I don't think we've got any money of our own."

"Well, we're his grandchildren, and it isn't our fault that papa and mamma died," I said. "I don't think *that's* so very good of him. Still, he is good to us in some ways, I know."

Tib was still staring at the book.

"I don't think it's any use asking nurse," she said. "If she does know anything she doesn't want to tell us. And it's no use telling Gerald: he's too little. If we told him not to speak of it, he'd very likely get red the first time grandpapa looked at him—like that day you filled the hood of Miss Evans' waterproof with peas, and he kept staring at it all the time of our lessons, till she found out there was something the matter."

"No," said I; "it's better not to tell him. Of course, Tib, we mustn't do anything *naughty*. It would be naughty to go prying into grandpapa's secrets, if he has any. But what we've found out hasn't been with prying. It's impossible not to *wonder* a little about it. And it's grandpapa's own fault for telling us so sharply not to know anybody or speak to anybody at Rosebuds. Of course, we'll obey him, but we can't help our minds wondering—they're made to wonder."

Tib considered for a while. Then her face cleared.

"I'll tell you what we can do, Gussie," she said; "we can turn it into a play. We can't leave off wondering, as you say, but we can mix up our wondering with fancy, and make up a plan of how it all was. It will be *very* interesting, for we shall know there *is* something real, and yet we can make it more wonderful than anything real could be now that everything's grown so plain and—and—I don't know the word—the opposite of poetry and fairy stories, I mean—in the world. We must think about it, Gussie. We might make it an 'ancient times' story, or an ogre story, or——"

"Yes," I said, "we'll think about it."

I did not want to disappoint Tib, and I thought, in a way, it was rather a good idea. But I am not so fond of fancying or pretending as Tib—I like real things. And the idea of a real secret or mystery had taken hold of my mind, and I wanted to find out about it. Still, the making a play of it wasn't a bad idea. As Tib said, it would be more interesting than an altogether make-up play.

We didn't say anything about the name in the book to Liddy. It was no use worrying the poor old thing by teasing her about what she thought would be wrong to tell; even if it had not anything to do with our mystery, it would have been wrong and unkind of *us*. And we said nothing to Gerald either; and indeed for some days we did not think or speak much about our discovery even to each other; we were so very much taken up about the real preparing to go away.

It was much more of a nice bustle and fuss than it had ever been to go to Ansdell Friars. There, everything was left from year to year just as we had always had it. The rooms had all we needed, and there was very little besides our clothes to pack up and take. But for going to Rosebuds it was quite different. None of the servants had ever been there, and they were all in a to-do about it, especially as only about half of them were to go; and the other half were cross at being sent away, and kept telling the others they'd be sure to find everything wrong there.

Nurse was the only one who was really pleased to go; and I am sure, dear old thing, it was more for our sakes than her own.

"It'll be a real change for them, poor dears," she kept saying; and this gave her patience to bear all our teasing and the servants' grumbling. What a time she had of it, to be sure! From Gerald's "Nurse, may I take *all* my horses? If I leave Sultan in the cupboard won't the mouses and butterflies eat him?"—Gerald always called moths butterflies—"Will there be any wheelbarrows, like at Ansdell?" to Fanny's suggestion that there'd be no nursery tea-service there—"a house that nobody's been in for years and years"—everything fell on old Liddy! And you see she dared not go asking grandpapa all sorts of things, as if he'd been a lady. He was even rather cross when she went trembling one day to ask if there were shops anywhere near Rosebuds, or if she must plan to take everything we could want for all the summer.

"Shops," said grandpapa—I heard him, for Liddy had caught him on his way down stairs one morning, and I was standing just inside the school-room doorway; "of course there are shops near enough—five miles off or so. I'm not going to take you to the middle of Africa. I dare say there are shops enough in the village for common things. Mrs. Munt will tell you all that. No need to worry me about it."

"Mrs. Munt!" I had never heard that name before. I pricked up my ears, but I was dreadfully afraid that Liddy would be too frightened to ask any more. To my satisfaction I heard her meek old voice again:

"And who may Mrs. Munt be, sir, if you please?"

At this grandpapa stopped short and looked at her—I couldn't see him, but I *felt* him stop short and look at her. Poor Liddy!

"Upon my soul!" he said. Then some reflection seemed to strike him, for his next words were more amiable.

"Mrs. Munt is the housekeeper at Rosebuds. She's been there ever since *I* can remember. You didn't suppose I was going to trust to that Mary Ann's cooking?" Mary Ann was the kitchen-maid. She was coming with us, but not the cook, who was leaving to be married. "Mrs. Munt is, or used to be, a very good cook, and a very good sort of person altogether."

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Liddy very heartily. Mrs. Munt was a great relief to her mind, for the idea of Mary Ann's cooking on the days that "master" came down to Rosebuds had been weighing on it. To me the idea of Mrs. Munt brought back the thought of the mystery. If she had been there as long as *grandpapa* could remember, what must she not know?

I flew off to Tib with the news, but she did not receive it with much interest.

"An old cook!" she said disdainfully. "Why, that would spoil it all. It wouldn't matter so much for an ogre story, if we could fancy her a witch, but for an 'ancient times' one, it would never do."

"Oh, bother!" I exclaimed, "I don't want pretending. I want to know about it really. If you only wanted make-ups, you can always get things that will do for them. I am sure Miss Evans would have been a *beautiful* witch! Oh, Tib, aren't you glad she isn't coming any more?"

For Miss Evans had left off coming altogether. She was going to begin a school—how we pitied the scholars!—and had asked grandpapa to let her off at once. She came to say good-bye to us, and gave us each a present of a book—and, to our surprise, there were tears in her eyes when she kissed us! People are really very queer in this world—they never seem to care for things till they know they are not going to have them any more. We all felt rather ashamed that we couldn't cry too, and Tib said she was afraid we must have very little feeling, which made Gerald and me quite unhappy for a while.

All the same, we weren't at all in a hurry to hear of the new "Miss Evans."

CHAPTER III.

"ROSEBUDS."

"To one who has been long in city pent,
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven."

Keats' *Sonnets*.

I suppose it is true, as older people say, that things very seldom turn out as one expects. Sometimes they are not so bad as one feels sure they will be—and very often, or almost always, they are not so nice as one has thought they would be, if one has been fancying and picturing a great deal about them. And any way, they are never quite *what* one expects. I am beginning to find this out for myself now—looking back, I can recollect very few nice things in my life that have turned out as nice as I had imagined them. But of these few, Rosebuds was one, and that has made me always remember with particular distinctness all about our first acquaintance with the dear little place. I think I could tell *everything* about our arrival there, exactly how each room looked, and what we had for tea—oh, how hungry we were that first evening! and I seem to feel again the feeling of the snowy white sheets and the sort of faint hay-ey—Tib said it was lavender—scent in our beds when we got into them that first night—very tired, but very happy.

What plans we made for the next day—how we settled to get up with the sun, to ramble about and see everything—

and how, after all, we slept, of course, much later than usual! Still, it was a delicious waking. Do you know how beautiful a first waking in the real country is when you have been a long time in London? There is a sort of clear stillness in the air that you can *feel*, and then a cock crows—with quite a different crow from the poor London cocks, I always think, and hens cluck a little, just under your window perhaps; or, best of all, a turkey gobble-wobbles and some ducks quack—perhaps there is a rush of all together if your window happens to be not far from the poultry-yard, and the girl is coming out with the creatures' breakfast—and further off you hear a moo from some cows, and nearer, and yet more distant, the clear sweet notes of the ever busy little birds as they pass by on their way up to who knows where? Oh, it is too delicious—and when you hear all those sounds, as you are lying there still dreamy and sleepy, there is a sort of strangeness and *fairy-ness*—I must make up that word—that makes you think of Red Riding-hood setting off in the early morning to her grandmother's cottage, or of the little princess who went to live with the dwarfs to keep house for them.

But I must come back to the evening before—the evening, that is to say, of our arrival at Rosebuds. It had been a pouring wet day when we left London (it went on pouring till we were only about half-an-hour from our journey's end); and just at the last moment grandpapa had got a telegram which stopped his coming with us. He grumbled a little, but I don't think he had been looking forward with *much* pleasure to the journey in our company, and though we thought it our duty to look grave, and Tib said gently, "What a pity!" I don't think *we* minded much either. Indeed, to tell the real truth—and it isn't any harm telling it in here, as grandpapa will never see this story—I think it was his not being with us, and our feeling so lovelily free and unafraid, that made that first evening at Rosebuds so delightful.

And Mrs. Munt!—oh, yes, it had to do with Mrs. Munt. There never was anybody so nice as Mrs. Munt—there never could be!

But I *must* go straight on, and not keep slipping a little bit backwards, and hurrying on too far forwards, this sort of way. Well then, as I was saying, it rained and rained all through the three hours' journey, or at least two hours and a half of it, so that we all felt rather doleful and shivery, and Liddy began hoping there'd be no mistake about the carriage from the inn meeting us at the station, as grandpapa had told her it should. Poor Liddy was rather inclined to get nervous when she was thrown on her own resources.

"Never mind, nurse," we said, all three, to comfort her; "we can easily walk if it isn't there. You know grandpapa said it was only about half a mile, and we've got our big cloaks on—the rain wouldn't hurt us."

But Liddy still looked rather unhappy, till suddenly from her side of the railway carriage Tib called out, "It's clearing up—it's clearing up splendidly; and oh, Gussie! do look—there's such a lovely rainbow!"

So there was. I never before or since saw such a rainbow—it seemed a very nice welcome for us, and after all, Liddy's fears were quite without reason. For the queer old "one-horse fly" was waiting for us, and we all bundled into it and drove off without any mishaps, except that nurse was sure the packet of umbrellas had been left in the railway carriage, and stood shouting to the guard to stop after the train was already moving out of the station, which made us all laugh so, that we hadn't breath to tell her that it was all safe in the fly.

Though Rosebuds is almost *in* the village—at least, a very tiny bit out of it—it is some little way from the station, because for some reason that I've never found out, the station stands away by itself in the fields, as if it and the village had quarrelled and wouldn't have anything to say to each other. I dare say it's not a bad thing that it is so: the nice country-ness of it all would have been a little spoilt by the trains whistling in and out, and as it is, we scarcely hear it, as the railroad is low down and is hardly noticed. And the road from the station to the village *is* so pretty. I never, even now, go along it without remembering that first evening when we drove to Rosebuds in the clear brightness that comes after rain, the fields and the hedges glistening with the water diamonds, the little clouds hurrying away as if they were afraid of being caught, and over all the sort of hush that seems to me to follow a regular rainy day—as if the world were a naughty child that had cried itself to sleep with the tears still on its cheeks.

It is a hilly bit of road—first it goes down, and then it goes up, and when it comes into the village it does so quite suddenly. You see a high, ivy-covered wall, which is the wall of the church-yard, and then comes a row of sweet little alms-houses, and then the inn, and one by one all the village houses and shops in the most irregular way possible. Some

one said once that it was more like an old German village than an English one, but I have never been in Germany, so I can't tell, only it certainly is very unlike everywhere else. We were so pleased to see it so queer and funny, that we kept tugging each other to look out, first at one side, and then at the other, and sometimes at both at once. Then we began wondering which of the houses, as we came to them, could be Rosebuds, and I think we would have been quite pleased whichever it was—they *all* looked so tempting and snug.

But we were all wrong in our guesses, for, as I said, Rosebuds was quite at the end, and, like the village itself, we came upon it quite suddenly, turning sharply down a sort of lane so shaded with trees that you could scarcely see where you were going; then with some tugging at the old horse, and some swaying of the clumsy old fly, in we drove at an open gate, and pulled up in front of a low white house, nestling, so to speak, in thickly-growing, bushy trees.

Never was a house so like its name! The trees were not really planted so very close as they looked, but it seemed at first sight as if it was almost buried in them: it stood out so white against their green. It looks at first sight smaller than it really is, for it extends a good deal out at the back. But large or small, to us it was just perfection, and so was the very rosy old woman who stood smiling and bobbing in the porch. She was so comical-looking that we could hardly help laughing. I think she must find the world a very good-humoured place, for nobody *could* be cross when they look at her!

"Mrs. Munt, ma'am, I suppose?" said nurse as she got down.

And, "Certainly, ma'am," replied Mrs. Munt, and then the two old bodies shook hands very ceremoniously. It was so funny to see their politeness to each other. But Mrs. Munt was too eager to see us to waste much time on Liddy.

"And is these the dear young ladies and gentleman?" she said, hastening forward as we emerged from the fly. "Dear, dear! to think you should be so big already, and me never to have seen you before!"

The tears were in her eyes, and we felt rather at a loss what to say or do. She seemed to know all about us so well that we felt really ashamed to think—though it certainly was not our fault—that we had never heard of her till about two days ago. I felt too shy to speak, but Tib held out her hand.

"I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Munt," she said. "I am the eldest, you know. I am Miss Ansdell."

A slight shadow of pain crossed the old woman's face.

"Miss Ansdell," she repeated, with a strange sadness in her tone: "yes, my dear—to be sure—you *are* Miss Ansdell—Master Gerald's eldest."

"*I'm* Gerald, too," said Gerald himself. "I'm called after grandpapa and papa. Did you know papa when he was as little as me?"

Mrs. Munt smiled.

"I should think so, indeed—and your grandpapa too," she said. "And this is Miss Gustava—you're not like the others, my dear. Perhaps you take after your mamma's family—the Ansdells have all blue eyes and dark hair. I remember Master Gerald writing about his lady's beautiful light hair."

"Yes, indeed," said nurse, rather primly, very anxious to put in a word for her side of the house, "Miss Gussie's hair is very nice, but it's nothing to what her dear mamma's was."

But we didn't want to stand at the door all the evening while the old bodies discussed our looks in this way. Gerald, who somehow seemed less shy with Mrs. Munt than Tib and I, put a stop to it in his own way.

"Mrs. Munt," he said, "I'm dreadfully hungry. I'm only seven years old, you know, though I look more; and nurse says seven's a hungry age."

"And we're hungry too—Tib and I, though I'm ten and Tib's eleven," said I. "And we do *so* want to see all the rooms

and everything. Oh, I do think Rosebuds is far the nicest place in the world."

My words quite gained Mrs. Munt's heart.

"Indeed, miss, I don't think you're far wrong," she said. And then, just for a moment before going in, we stood and looked round. In front of the house there was a beautiful lawn, right down to the low wall which separated it from the high road. And away on the other side of that, the ground sloped down gradually, so that we seemed to have nothing to interfere with the view, which was really a very lovely one—right over the old Forest of Evold, to where the river Rother flows quietly along at the foot of the Rothering Hills. But children don't care much for views—it's since I've got big that I've learnt to like the view—we were much more interested to follow Mrs. Munt into the house, across the low square hall into a short wide passage, with a window along one side, and a flight of steps at one end. A door stood open close to the foot of the stairs, and Mrs. Munt led the way through it into a bright, plainly-furnished room, where tea was already set out for us.

"I might have got it ready in the dining-room this first evening," she said, "but I thought master would be coming, and that there'd be his dinner to see to. This is the old play-room—the school-room as used to be is now a bed-room—and I thought this would be the best for you to have quite as your own."

"It will be very nice, I'm sure," said Tib, whom Mrs. Munt looked at as the eldest. "And there's a door right out into the garden—oh, that will be nice! won't it, Gussie?"

"So that we can come out and in whenever we like. Yes, I'm glad of that," I said. "Is the garden big, Mrs. Munt? I hope it is, because—because we've no chance of being allowed to play in any other," I was going to say, but I stopped, and I felt myself grow a little red. I wondered if Mrs. Munt knew why grandpapa was so strict about our not making any friends; and I fancied she looked at me curiously as she replied—

"Yes, Miss Gustava; it's a good big garden, and it's nice to play in, for there's a deal of rather wild shrubbery—down at the back. Our young ladies and gentlemen long ago used to say there was nowhere like Rosebuds for hide-and-seek."

"Who were your young ladies and gentlemen?" I asked quietly. "Papa had no brothers and sisters, I know."

"Ah! but I was here long before your dear papa's time, Miss Gustava," said Mrs. Munt. "I was here when your grandpapa was a boy. I'm five years older nor master."

"And had *grandpapa* brothers and sisters, then?" I asked again.

Mrs. Munt grew a little uneasy.

"You must have heard of your uncle, the Colonel, who was killed in India," she said. "And there was Miss Mary, who died when she was only fifteen. You must have seen her grave at Ansdell Friars."

I shook my head.

"No, I don't think so. But I do remember the tablet in the church to Colonel Baldwin Ansdell. I often wondered who he was. You remember it, Tib? But hadn't grandpapa any other sisters? You said young *ladies*, Mrs. Munt."

I had forgotten all my shyness now in curiosity. But it was not fated to be satisfied just then. Nurse suddenly interrupted.

"Miss Gussie, dear, you must wait a while to hear all these things from Mrs. Munt. The tea's all ready, and I'm sure you're all hungry. Just run up stairs with Miss Tib to take off your hats, there's a dear. Will you show us the rooms, Mrs. Munt, please?"

So we were all trotted off again—up stairs this time, though it scarcely seemed like going up stairs at all, so broad

and shallow were the steps compared with the high-up flights in our London house. And Tib and I were so pleased with the room which Mrs. Munt told us was to be ours, that we should have forgotten all about the talk down stairs if she hadn't made another remark, which put my unanswered question into my head again.

"Yes, it is a nice room," she said, looking round with pleasure at the light-painted furniture and the two white beds side by side, the old-fashioned cupboards in the wall, two of them with glass doors, letting us see a few queer old china cups and teapots inside; "*and* so little changed, even to its name. We've always called it the young ladies' room."

There it was again—the young *ladies*; but nurse was listening and evidently fussing to get us down to tea. I must trust to cross-questioning Mrs. Munt some other time.

And the tea was really enough to take up all our attention. There was everything of country things—fresh eggs, and butter and milk of the best, and bread, and tea-cakes, and strawberry jam, and potted fish—all "home-made," of course. I think Mrs. Munt and nurse were really a little frightened to see how much we ate.

After tea we wanted, of course, to go out, but Liddy decided that it was too damp, and Mrs. Munt consoled us by giving us leave to go all over the house, for it was barely six o'clock and quite light. She took us into the front hall and showed us the dining-room, out of which opened the study, and beyond that again, what had been the school-room, and was now grandpapa's bed-room. There was nothing *very* interesting in these rooms, though they were all quaint and old-fashioned; and through all the house there was the sort of clean, fresh, and yet *not new* feeling—a mixture of faint old scents that cannot be got away, and wood-fires long ago burnt out, and yet the sweet, pure country air preventing their being musty or stale—that you never notice except in an old country house that has been carefully kept, and yet not really lived in for many years.

And then Mrs. Munt, taking us through the hall again, showed us the door of the drawing-room, and told us we might look at it by ourselves, which we were pleased at.

It was *much* more interesting, for, though a small room, it was filled with pictures and curiosities. The pictures were mostly miniatures—such queer things some of them were; gentlemen in uniform and the funniest fancy dresses, some with wigs down to their waists, some of them with helmets to make them like Roman soldiers. And ladies to match—some looking dreadfully proud, with towers of hair on the top of their heads, and some simpering in a silly way. One of these last was really rather like Tib when she smiles in what I call her "company" manner—though it's hardly fair to say that now, as she has really left it off—and she was very angry at my saying so, and told me that the most stuck-up-looking one of all was very like *me*; "and it's better to look silly than to be so horribly proud," she added. We were really rather near quarrelling, which would have been a bad beginning for our life at Rosebuds, when we caught sight of an old cabinet in one corner, of which the top half stood open, showing rows and rows of little drawers, and here and there queer shaped doors opening into inside places, where there were more drawers and shelves. It was a Japanese cabinet, of course—a very old and valuable one. I have never seen one so large and curious, and it quite absorbed our attention till nurse came tapping at the door—I don't know why she tapped; I suppose she had an idea that, as we were in the drawing-room, she must—to tell us it was time, and more than time, to go to bed.

And though I wanted to talk to Tib in bed about the queerness of there having been young *ladies* long ago in this very room, and that Mrs. Munt evidently didn't want to tell us about them, I was so sleepy, and so was Tib, that our conversation got no further than, "Tib, don't you think——" and a very indistinct murmur of "Yes, Gussie, of course I do," before we were both fast asleep and——

CHAPTER IV.

THE DOOR IN THE GARDEN WALL.

"Deep in a garden, rank and green,
It were scarce older now than then,
For all the seasons gone between."
C. C. Fraser Tytler.

The next thing we knew it was to-morrow morning—our first morning at Rosebuds!

I have told already about this first morning—how beautiful it was to wake to all the fresh sweet country sounds and feelings. I have felt this several times since then in my life, but never quite so newly and strongly as that morning, and every time since then that I have felt it, that day has come back to my mind.

It was very fine and bright, and immediately after breakfast we got leave to go out into the garden.

"Not outside, of course," said nurse, anxiously. "When you want to go a walk I will go with you—I or Fanny. Mrs. Munt will tell us all the nicest walks."

"We shall never want to go walks here, I am sure," said Tib. "The garden is much nicer, and we can find lots of things to amuse us in it. Besides, nurse, you know you don't care about walks with your rheumatics, and Fanny is sure to say she hasn't time, as she has to be housemaid too here."

"It's much best to let us play in the garden always," I said. "I'm sure grandpapa would like it best."

"Any way, till the new Miss Evans comes," said Gerald.

But Tib and I turned on him.

"Oh, you horrid little boy!" we said; "what is the use of spoiling our nice first day by speaking of anything so dreadful?"

"I don't believe there ever could be anybody at all like Miss Evans—that's one comfort, any way," I added. But Gerald looked rather grumpy: he couldn't bear being called a "little boy"—he wouldn't have minded being called "horrid" if we hadn't put in the "little."

All grumpiness, however, was forgotten when we found ourselves out of doors, and free to do as we chose. This first day, of course, the great thing to do was to explore, and that we did pretty thoroughly. The lawn in front was a beautiful place for running races on, or for "Miller's ground," or games like that—and the walk all round it was interesting because Mrs. Munt told us that twelve times round it, made a mile.

"We might have walking matches," said Tib, consideringly. "It wouldn't be very amusing; but still, if we got tired of everything else, it would be worth remembering," and then we proceeded to inspect the rest of our domain.

The place of places was the tangle, or shrubbery, as Mrs. Munt had called it, away down at the back. It was quite a large place, and you could not distinguish easily where it ended, for the wall which edged it was so old, and so covered with ivy and other creepers run wild, that till you actually felt it you couldn't have told it was there. Here and there in the tangle there were little clearings, as it were, carefully enough kept—indeed, the gardeners did clear out the tangle itself once or twice a year, only it was meant to be wild—where you were sure to find a bench, or a rustic seat, and in one place there was even a summer-house, though a rather unhappy looking one.

"I don't suppose," said Tib, when we came upon this arbour, "I don't suppose any one's been here since those children—grandpapa and the brothers and sisters who are dead, or that we can't hear about—played here, ever, ever so long ago. Papa hadn't any brothers or sisters, and he wasn't much here—nurse knows that much. It looks like as if it had never been touched since then—doesn't it? *Isn't* it queer to think of?" and Tib sat down on one of the shady seats, still

feebly holding together, and looked very serious. "Isn't it queer?" she repeated.

"It would be a nice place for a robber's castle," said Gerald, who had mounted up beside Tib, and was peeping out at a little slit in the side which had been meant to let light in by, in the days when the summer-house had a door that would shut. "See here, this hole would just do for an archer to shoot through when he saw the—the others you know," he went on, getting rather muddled, "marching up the hill—we could fancy it was a hill."

"Nonsense, Gerald!" I said. "You're mixing up robbers' dens and feudal castles. You're too little to plan plays. All you can do is to be what Tib and I fix for you in our plans."

Gerald was very indignant. He muttered something about "just like girls," but he dared not say it loud out; we kept him in far too good order for that. Tib and I went on talking without noticing him, and he sat down in a corner, and amused himself by poking about among the dry fir needles that lay like a sort of sand on the floor, for the arbour was made of fir branches and cones. I remembered afterwards hearing him give a sort of little squeak, and say, "Hi! I declare!" or something like that, but at the time I paid no attention, and he stayed quite quiet in his corner.

His words, though I snubbed him so, had reminded Tib of her plans, and we went on talking about them for some time. She was all for a regular romance—there was to be a beautiful lady shut up by a cruel baron, who wanted to get all her money by forcing her to marry his hump-backed son (I am afraid that among the old children's books, one or two not quite children's books had got in; I remember one, called "The Imprisoned Heiress," which we read a chapter or two of, and then it got stupid), and she was to escape by "scaling the fortress wall," which meant, we had a hazy idea, stripping it down stone by stone, as if it were a fish with scales. We decided that the summer-house would do very well for the lonely tower, and we sallied forth at last, all three of us, to inspect the wall and choose a good place for the imaginary escape. But time had fled faster than we fancied; we had only gone a few steps, when we heard Fanny's voice in the distance.

"Miss Tib, Miss Gussie, Master Gerald! Master Gerald, Miss Gussie, Miss Tib! oh, dear, dear, wherever can they be? Your dinner's ready—din—ner! din—ner!" she went on at last, as if she thought the word "dinner" would be the best bait to catch us by.

We were rather hungry again already. We all set up a shout, and set off in a scamper to where Fanny stood, the image of despair, at the beginning of the tangle, which she dared not enter in her thin London slippers, as the moss-grown paths looked damp and dirty.

That afternoon, to our vexation, was showery—it was not so hopelessly rainy as to prevent our going out at all, but nurse told us we must stay in the front, on the short-cropped lawn and the dry gravel paths.

So it was not till the next day that we returned to the old summer-house and the tangle. We had, in the meantime, talked over the plan of the play, and got it more into shape. You will see that it had nothing to do with the "mystery," as Tib and I still called it to ourselves. We had decided to wait a little before playing at *it*. I did not care for Gerald to hear about it, for fear he should chatter to nurse, and I also wanted to see if there really was anything else to find out. There was no knowing but what in time Mrs. Munt would tell us more about the family history, and though Tib was rather reluctant to give up making a story of it, I persuaded her that so far we really knew too little.

We began cleaning out the summer-house, for I wanted to make it habitable for the unfortunate heroine.

"You see," said I, "it would be more natural for the cruel baron to persuade her that he was bringing her here for safety, as he had heard his castle was going to be attacked by some enemy; so he makes it pretty comfortable for her. And then, when she's been living here alone for some time, and she must be finding it very dull, he sends the horrid little hump-back, who pretends to be against his father, and tells her she is going to be kept there unless she'll marry him, and that he is dreadfully sorry for her, and——"

"I don't see why he need pretend to be against his father," said Tib; "he might just say straight off that she must marry him or else she'll never get out. But I think it would be much better to fancy it was a horrid dungeon. Gerald, I don't think

you need trouble to rake up the cones and leaves into a bed for her. I don't see any sense in pretending it's comfortable."

"I do—and it makes it much more of a play," I said. "Any way, we might make it that way at first, and have her thrown into the dungeon afterwards, and escape from there."

Tib did not object to this. But the word "escape" reminded her of the wall. She proposed that we should examine it, and find the best place.

We had to scramble in among the bushes before we got to the wall. And it proved to be a much higher one than we expected.

"The play will have to be all pretence," said Tib; "we couldn't possibly get over this, or pull any stones away. It is far too strong."

We went on, however, a few steps, still at the foot of the wall. Suddenly Tib gave a little exclamation.

"Look here, Gussie," she said, and with her hands she pulled back some branches of ivy—"look here—there's a door in the wall—a very old door, and not opened for ever so long; for see, the ivy has grown right across it."

Gerald and I pushed forward eagerly. Yes, Tib was right. There was a door in the wall—not a very big one, but very strong, for it did not rattle or shake at all when we pounded on it. It was locked, firmly locked we soon found out, when we had torn away as much of the ivy as we could. The lock was a great big one, clumsy, but very strong, and so rusty that, even without the testimony of the ivy, it would have been clear that no one had passed through that doorway for a great number of years.

We all three stood and looked at each other.

"Another mystery," was what Tib and I were thinking, though we did not say it aloud.

But Gerald looked rather "funny;" his round rosy cheeks were rosier than usual, and there was a queer sparkle in his eyes as he said—

"*Wouldn't* you like to open it? *Wouldn't* it be nice if one could find the key?" and he jumped about and turned—or tried to turn—head over heels: there wasn't much room in among the bushes, and he kept saying, "Wouldn't it be nice if somebody could find a key to fit it? But little boys are too little and silly to know anything, aren't they? They're not like big young ladies."

And though Tib got hold of him, and we both *shook* him we were so provoked, that was all he would say. So we settled that he was just in one of his teasing humours; he didn't have them very often, it is true.

So the only use to make of the door in the wall was another pretence. We settled that it should be the entrance to the dungeon; it didn't do badly for that, as two or three steps, looking very black and slimy, led down to it. And we fixed that, instead of "scaling the wall," the lady should escape by hiding in the wood till the prince who was to be her rescuer passed that way. Gerald had to be the prince, in turns with the horrid little hump-back, for I had to be the baron, and also a lady attendant on the heiress, and Tib, of course, was the heiress. We didn't much like having Gerald after the tiresome way he had been going on, but there was no help for it.

And the next two or three days passed very happily. There was still a great deal to see and inspect about Rosebuds; the house itself—especially the drawing-room, with its treasures, which Mrs. Munt showed us, and sometimes, when she found that we were careful children, allowed us to examine for ourselves; the stables, where lived the old pony who was still able to draw the still older pony-carriage, or "shay"—as the farm-man called it—as far as the little town, where Mrs. Munt liked to go once a month, and to bring home her purchases herself instead of trusting them to the railway. Then there were the dairy and poultry-yard, her great pride, though she was rather mortified to hear that we had never known that the butter and fresh eggs we ate in London were sent up from Rosebuds every week.

"Why, we never even heard of Rosebuds till a few days before we came here," I told her.

Her face grew sad at this, and I was sorry I had said it.

"Grandpapa is very *funny*," I went on, thinking, perhaps, we might get round to the subject of the "young ladies" and the scored-out name, which we couldn't help connecting together; "he never tells us anything. I don't believe he'd have ever told us we'd had a papa and mamma if nurse hadn't been our mamma's nurse, and so could tell us all about her."

"Your grandpapa's had a deal of trouble, my dears," said Mrs. Munt. "And there's some as trouble softens and makes more loving to all about them and some as it hardens, or seems to harden, leastways to shut them up in themselves. And I think it's no harm of me to tell you, now I see what sensible children you are, that it's been that way with your grandpapa. It's not really hardened him, for you know he has not got selfish or unmindful of others. He is very good to you?" and poor Mrs. Munt made the question anxiously, as if half afraid of what we might answer.

"Nurse says he's very good to us," said Tib, slowly. "He gives us everything we have."

"But it isn't our fault that we are his grandchildren," I said, rather bitterly. "We didn't ask to be it. And he has plenty of money—what could he do with it if he hadn't us?"

"Gussie," said Tib, reproachfully. But old Mrs. Munt only looked distressed, not vexed.

"He does love you, my dears: I feel sure of it," she said. "Only he's got out of the way of showing it—that's what's wrong. If you had your grandmamma now, or——" and then she stopped. "A lady—a woman in the family makes all so different. But try, my lovies, to believe that he does love you. It is true, as Miss Gussie says—for I'd never be one to say to children what their own sense feels is nonsense—that it would be very wrong of your grandpapa *not* to give you all you should have. You're his own flesh and blood, for sure. Still, he might have done it in a different way—he might have sent you to some sort of school, or to some lady who'd have taken care of you all, and him have no trouble about it. No one would have thought it unnatural if he'd done that way, instead of taking up house again in London, when he'd got quite out of the way of it, and settling all so that he should have you always near him."

We both looked surprised.

"Did he do that?" we said.

"Yes," said Mrs. Munt, "he did indeed; and much more that he didn't, so to speak, *need* to have done—without, all the same, having fallen short of his duty."

"I wish he would tell us things like that," I said. "How are we to know?"

"No," said Tib, "not quite that. I think it seems more for his *not* telling. But I wish—I wish he'd let us feel that he loves us, and then we would, indeed we would, love him;" and some tears slowly made their way into Tib's blue eyes.

"Well, well, dears, that's the right way to feel, any way. And maybe things will change somehow. It's wonderful how things come round when people really mean right. So keep up heart, and don't be afraid of letting master see that you want to please him, and to love him too."

This talk with the old housekeeper made a great impression on us—so great that it almost put the mystery out of our heads altogether. For a great deal seemed explained by the thought of grandpapa's old troubles, and what these had been in time past we knew quite well. He had lost so many dear to him. Grandmamma, to begin with, had died quite young; then there was the brother Baldwin, killed in India, and the sister Mary, buried at Ansdell Friars. That was sad enough—and then his only son to have died too, leaving us three helpless babies.

"I dare say he'd just as soon have been without us, and have had nobody at all belonging to him," I said to Tib. "It must have been a great nuisance to have us stupid little things sent home, and not even poor mamma to take care of us. Do

you remember, Tib, how we used to cry and run back to nurse when he sent for us down to the library to see him? We thought him a sort of an ogre."

A few days after this talk with Mrs. Munt, grandpapa came down to Rosebuds from a Saturday to a Monday. We weren't exactly glad to see him, but what the old housekeeper had said was fresh in our minds, and we were all anxious to do our best to please him. So we made no objection when nurse called us a full hour before he could possibly arrive, "to be made neat against your dear grandpapa comes." Poor old Liddy—she would have thought it her duty to call him our dear grandpapa even if he *had* been an ogre, I do believe!

And we had worked ourselves up to being so extra good, that we did not even grumble at the long time we had to sit still doing nothing on the window-seat in the hall, watching, or listening rather, for the first rumble of the carriage wheels as the signal for all running out into the porch to meet him. That part of it was a "plan" of Tib's—everything with her was sure to run into "plans," and with this new idea of pleasing grandpapa, she was constantly casting about in her head what we could do.

"I think seeing us standing together in the porch will touch him, you see, Gussie," she said. "It is a little like some scene I've read of in a story-book—the orphans, you know—oh, *where* was it?—and the stern guardian, and it quite melts him, and——"

"He begins to cry, I suppose," I said, rather contemptuously, I fear; "I must say I'd be a good deal astonished to see *grandpapa* begin to cry over us, wouldn't you, Gerald?"

But the idea was quite beyond Gerald's imagination.

"I do wish one thing," he said solemnly.

"What?" asked Tib and I eagerly. When Gerald had an idea, it was rather startling.

"If he—grandpapa, you know—really wished to please us—he might be thinking of us on the journey, you know—wouldn't it be beautiful if he was to bring us each a packet of that splendid butter-scotch that there was at the station in London? I looked at it while we were waiting. I really *could* love him if he did."

"You greedy little pig!" said Tib.

It wasn't often Tib condescended to use such expressions, but no doubt Gerald's butter-scotch seemed rather a come-down from her romantic ideas. I was sorry for her, but I *couldn't* help laughing at the look of disgust in her face, and at Gerald's face of astonishment. He muttered something I couldn't hear—of course there was something about "girls," and "sha'n't get it out of me," which I didn't understand. But Tib's indignation next fell upon me.

"How can you laugh at him—such low ideas," she said, reproachfully, to which I answered rather crossly. Indeed, we were all on the verge of a quarrel when at last the sound of wheels turning in at the gate was heard, and up we all jumped.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT GERALD FOUND.

"Give a little love to a child, and you get a great deal back."—Ruskin.

It was very funny, after all poor Tib's great preparations, when she really saw grandpapa that she seemed as if she could say nothing. I had already run forward, and quite without thinking of pleasing him, or of anything except that I was awfully glad he was there, because I *was* so tired of sitting still and squabbling, I called out quite loudly—

"Oh, grandpapa, I *am* so glad you've come!"

He was just getting down from the dog-cart—he had had it and a horse and groom sent down to Rosebuds to be ready for taking him to and from the station; the old one-horse fly wouldn't have suited grandpapa, I can assure you!—and when he heard me he turned round with quite a nice, not the least "making-fun-of-you," smile on his face. I don't think I had ever before seen his face look so nice. "Are you really glad I have come, Gussie? I'm sure I feel very flattered."

I felt both pleased and vexed. I did so wish I could have let him go on thinking I meant it that way, and I felt myself getting very red as I blurted out—

"Yes, grandpapa, I am—we are all glad you've come. But I meant, perhaps, partly that we've been dressed and waiting for you *such* a time, and we were all getting rather cross."

A slight look of disappointment—it was really disappointment, and it made me feel still more sorry—crossed grandpapa's face at my words. Then he smiled again, but this time I was sorry to see there *was* a little of the old smile in it.

"You are candid, at least, my dear granddaughter. Ah, well! we must take the goods the gods send us, and not expect impossibilities, I suppose! And that any one should be glad to see *me*, in the ordinary acceptance of the words, comes within that category, naturally."

He used such long words, he puzzled me. (I must tell you that I have been helped here and there to write things that grandpapa said by some one who knows quite well his sort of way, otherwise I couldn't have got it quite right, though I remember it all in my own way.) I looked up and said, "Grandpapa, I don't understand you."

Then his face grew nicer again, and he stooped down to kiss us in his usual way, saying to me as he did so, "Never mind; such understanding comes soon enough."

And Tib, who, I suppose, had been gathering courage all this time, then looked up, and said very prettily—Tib *is* very pretty, you know, and that makes what she says pretty too, I think—

"Grandpapa, perhaps we could understand some things—nice things—better than you think. We do understand that you're very good to us—it was very good of you to let us come here. We are so happy!"

Grandpapa put his hand under Tib's chin, and raised her face so that he could see straight into her blue eyes.

"Has any one been putting that into your head, Mercedes?" he said, almost sternly. "The truth, now, child—for Heaven's sake let me see if you are true! *Can* she be with those eyes—those very same eyes?" he added to himself, so low that no one but I—for I have dreadfully quick ears—heard it. Tib didn't; she told me so afterwards, but that was perhaps because she was thinking so what she should answer. But she looked up fearlessly, and she didn't get red.

"Mrs. Munt has been speaking to us very nicely, grandpapa," she said. "But she didn't tell me to say anything to you—oh no, grandpapa. All she did was to make us think perhaps better than we have ever done before how very good you are to us;" and then, with the last words Tib's courage began to go away, and the tears came welling up into her eyes.

Grandpapa looked at her still for a minute, and then he said quietly—

"What I do is no more than you have a right to. Still, at your age the less thought about rights—and wrongs too—the better, no doubt. And so you are happy here?"

"Very," we all replied, heartily. And then Gerald—oh, that tiresome boy!—must needs add—

"And it is *so* nice without Miss Evans!"

Grandpapa laughed at this, really laughed; but Tib and I could have pinched Gerald. For, alas! grandpapa added—

"That's right—not to have let me forget about finding a new Miss Evans;" and if he saw—which I don't know—Tib's and my faces when he said that, he must have been satisfied that we could *look* what we felt very candidly.

Grandpapa only stayed two days; but his visit was really much nicer than we had fancied it would be. He took us to church on Sunday himself. But, rather to our disappointment, not to the pretty old church we had passed on first entering the village, but to one at least three miles off, which was not at all pretty nor interesting. There was nobody at all there except very stupid-looking, poor country people, and the sermon was very long, and the clergyman very dull and stupid himself. To be sure, the driving there and back in the dog-cart a *little* made up for it; but still, we were very vexed when grandpapa said we were to come to this church every Sunday, if it was fine, in the dog-cart, Tib in front beside Reeves the groom, and me behind with nurse, and Gerald stuck in beside Tib; and if it was rainy, in the old fly from the inn in the village.

We heard grandpapa giving these orders to Reeves on the way home.

"Oh, grandpapa!" I said—I was sitting on the back seat, so I felt more courageous, I suppose—"must we go every Sunday to that stupid little church? I'm sure the one in the village is much nicer."

"Have you been there?" said grandpapa, very sharply.

"No, grandpapa," I replied; "we've not been anywhere at all in the village. But we saw the church the day we came."

"Then you cannot possibly know anything about it; and if you were even capable of having an opinion, it would not make the slightest difference to mine," he said, in his very horriddest cold way.

But he got nicer again after a bit. He even took us a little walk with him in the afternoon, round a very pretty way, going away down the lane into which the gate of Rosebuds opens, and into some woods and copsey sort of places that were awfully nice. Grandpapa was very quiet, and didn't speak much; but he wasn't sharp or catching up. Once or twice he stood still, and looked about him with an expression on his face I had never seen there before, and he said to us—

"I remember these woods—every tree in them, I believe—as long as I remember myself;" and then he gave a little sigh.

"Do you really, grandpapa?" we said. "Won't you tell us a little about when you were a little boy?"

"Can you remember so long ago? Was it as much as a hundred years ago?" asked Gerald, opening his mouth very wide.

"Not quite so long—but too long ago to tell you stories about," he replied, and then he walked on without speaking.

Grandpapa had taken us an in-and-out sort of way—we hadn't exactly noticed where we were going, and we were surprised to find ourselves suddenly quite near home again. We had come up another lane, on the other side of Rosebuds, as it were; this lane was skirted by a high stone wall, a wall that looked something like the one that bordered our "tangle."

"Is inside there our garden, then?" asked Tib, for grandpapa had just said to us we were close to home.

"No," said grandpapa, but without looking in the direction she pointed, "that is not the Rosebuds' garden yet."

"Then what's behind there, please?" said Gerald, in his slow way. I didn't expect grandpapa to take the trouble of

answering him, but he did.

"There is another garden behind there," he replied, "the garden of another house, that is to say. But it is a house that has been uninhabited for a great number of years—the garden must be a perfect wilderness by now—the place is going to be sold immediately, and the house pulled down most likely, or else turned into a mere farmhouse—the owner of the farm over there," and he pointed over our heads, "wants to buy it. So much the better."

There was a sort of dreaminess in the way grandpapa spoke, as if his thoughts were looking back somehow far beyond his words.

"May we play in that garden if there's nobody there?" asked Gerald.

"Why should you want to play there?" said grandpapa. "It does not belong to me."

"And I'm sure we couldn't have a nicer garden than our own, and it's very big too," said I.

"We may go anywhere we like in *our* garden, mayn't we?" said Gerald.

"Yes," said grandpapa.

"And if we *could* get through the door in the wall, we might, mightn't we?" Gerald continued in his slow, drawly way. He speaks better now, but then he had a way of going on once he began, all in the same tone so that you really hardly noticed that he was talking. I have thought since that grandpapa didn't in the least know what he was consenting to, when for the second time he replied "yes."

Gerald would have gone on, no doubt, but Tib interrupted him.

"Does that door lead into a tool-house, grandpapa?" she said. Her voice was soft and gentle. It was only I that had a quick, sharp way of speaking.

"A tool-house?" repeated grandpapa, "oh, yes, I fancy so." He must have thought that Tib was asking him if there was a tool-house in the garden.

"Oh," she said in a rather disappointed tone. There wasn't much mystery about a tool-house!

Just then the lane stopped, and we came out on a path bordered by a field on one side, and on the other by a wall which *was* that of our own garden. Very near the foot-path in the field lay two or three ponds or pools of water close together, and on one of them floated some large leaves looking like water-lily leaves, with some bushy high-growing green among them. Tib darted forward.

"Oh, look, Gussie," she said, "there'll be the most lovely water forget-me-nots here in the summer, and—" But she stopped short in a fright, for grandpapa had caught her by the arm and was pulling her back.

"Child, take care," he said sharply, "another minute, and you would have been in the water. The edge is as slippery as glass. If the field were mine, I would soon have these pits filled in," he went on, looking round as if he wished there were some one at hand to give the order to on the spot.

"But they are such little pools, grandpapa, they don't take up much room," I objected, "and if there were water-lilies, and forget-me-nots there in the summer, it would be a dreadful pity to take them away."

"And when the lilies and forget-me-nots come out, what is more likely than that you or Mercedes should be stretching over to get them and fall in," said grandpapa.

"But if we did it wouldn't hurt us," said I. "If Tib fell in, I would pull her out, and if I fell in, she would pull me out."

"And if both Tib and Gussie fell in I would pull them both out," said Gerald, feeling, I suppose, that he had been left rather out in the cold.

Grandpapa, who had been poking at the back of the pit with his stick, turned sharp round upon us. "Children," he said, "listen to me. If one of you, or two of you, or all of you fell into one of those ponds, you would be drowned—as certainly as that I am standing here, you would be drowned. They are very, *very* deep—there would be no chance of saving you, far less than in a larger piece of water, even if it were as deep. I cannot have the pits filled up nor railed round, for the place does not belong to me, and I cannot ask anything of the person it does belong to. All I can do is to make you promise—to make you give your word of honour, if you know what that means—that you will never come here alone, and never try to reach flowers; if you come this way with nurse, you must pass by as quickly as possible. Now, do you hear? Do you quite understand? Have I your promise?"

We all stood still, looking and feeling rather frightened.

"Do you promise?" repeated grandpapa.

"Yes, grandpapa," we all said together, "we do promise."

"That's right," he said, and then we all walked on in silence. Grandpapa's earnestness had impressed us. I think the same thought was in all our minds: "He must love us, after all, or he would not be so afraid of our being drowned." I don't think we had ever felt ourselves of so much consequence before.

"Was ever anybody drowned in those pools, please, grandpapa?" I ventured to ask.

"Not that I know of," he said; "but two or three cows have been drowned there. The place is exceedingly dangerous—it is a shame to leave it so. I shall speak to Farmer Blake about it when he comes into possession."

Then we went in to tea, and early the next morning grandpapa went back to London.

But oh! I am forgetting—before he went he told us another thing. Our holidays were over already. He had found us another Miss Evans! No; I am joking. It was not quite so bad as that. He *couldn't* find another Miss Evans, so he had had to make another plan. We were to have a tutor instead of a governess; and I don't think we were sorry to hear it. The tutor was a young man living in the town, two stations from *our* station, and he was to come every morning, except Saturday, for two hours. That wasn't so bad, was it? He wasn't to come before half-past ten, so we could have an hour and a half's play in our dear garden before he came, and all the afternoons to ourselves; for we were quite sure we could do all the preparing of our lessons in the evening, and grandpapa had always been very sensible about not wanting us to have too many lessons to do.

It turned out very well. Mr. Markham began to come that very week, but he was really very nice, and he didn't give us too much to do, though what he did give was pretty hard, for he would have it done very well. Only when we did try he was pleased, and told us so. But of course we did not see very much of him, as he was very busy at his home, and he had to leave as soon as ever lessons were over, to get back in time.

We went on with our fancy play in the tangle. In the mornings it was hardly worth while beginning it, for if you have ever played at that sort of game you will know that it needs a comfortable feeling of plenty of time before you can get into it properly. We should have liked to dress up a little for it, but nurse wouldn't let us do so till the weather was warmer, and we were obliged to promise her never to take off our hats and jackets in the garden for fear of catching cold. We were more in danger of "catching hot," Gerald told her, for we really worked pretty hard, particularly at getting the summer-house into order. We got some nails and a hammer from Mrs. Munt, and hammered the broken seats together again; we fastened on the door rather cleverly by making hinges of an old leather belt of Gerald's, and we put up one or two shelves on the walls, as we called them, on which the princess, or heiress—we called her sometimes one, and sometimes the other—could keep her tea-cups and saucers in her tower. These tea-cups and saucers were the remains of an old toy set, which Mrs. Munt had found and given us to play with—no doubt, Tib and I said to each other, the "young ladies" had played with them long ago!

Then we "carted" heaps of dry leaves from one corner, where they were really dry and not sodden, to make a bed for her. This carting was an uncertain sort of business, for we had to be content with Gerald's wheelbarrow, which was painfully low and little, except when we could get hold of the gardener's standing about. And *his* was, on the contrary, disagreeably heavy and big. But at last, one fine afternoon we came to an end of our labours, and stood surveying them with considerable satisfaction.

"It really looks quite nice and comfortable," Tib said. "I really think to-morrow the baron may carry her off to the tower—he's to pretend, you know, to be only taking her out a walk in her litter."

"A *walk* in a litter," I said; "why, a litter's a lying-down-in thing, and we haven't got anything the least like one."

"Well, then, a walk on her feet," said Tib, testily; "that did very well the other day," for you must understand that we had acted it all several times, and then we found what was wanting in the way of scenery, &c.

"If only we had the dungeon," she went on. "It's a very poor pretence to call those steps the dungeon—besides, they're horribly damp and dirty."

"Oh, for that part of it, all the better," I said. "Dungeons always are damp and dirty."

"But my frock?" said Tib, ruefully. "I *can't* sit down on those steps without getting it horribly spoilt. If we could but get into the tool-house!"

Gerald, who was standing beside us—we were close to the door in the wall—gave a sudden exclamation and darted off. Tib and I looked at each other in surprise. "What's the matter with him?" we said. But he was back again in a moment, holding something in his hand. As he came near us he put both his hands behind his back.

"I've got something," he said. "I'd forgot about it. It was the day you teased me I found it. And I hid it, and I was afraid it was lost among the leaves, and all that, but it wasn't. I'd hidden it safe. Guess what it is."

We tried, but we couldn't. Gerald raised his hand slowly. "Shut your eyes," he said; and we shut them. "Now open them," we opened them. "What is it?" we said, breathlessly.

"The key of the door!" he said, solemnly.

"The key of the tool-house!" exclaimed Tib. "How do you know it is it? Where did you find it?"

"I found it among the prickly things on the floor of the summer-house," he replied. "It's quite dry and clean, see!" and so it was, as if it had been packed in sawdust.

"But how do you know what key it is?" we asked.

"I tried it—I stayed behind a minute that day; you didn't notice. It is the key. It fits *pairfittly*," said Gerald. "Only it's very stiff, and my hands wasn't quite strong enough. If we all try, perhaps."

He put the key into the lock. Yes, it was evident it *was* the key, lost for who knows how many years. How queer that no one had ever had another made; there was another tool-house, and one was enough, perhaps. But still, it did seem queer. First Tib, then I, tried to turn it, but it was no use.

"If we put a stick through the end of the key, we might turn it that way."

"But it might break it; don't you remember we broke the nursery door key in London by trying to turn it with a tooth-brush handle?" I said. "It wants oiling, Tib—that's it; not the key, perhaps, but the lock. We must wait till to-morrow, and get some oil in one of the doll's cups, and a feather, and then I'm sure it'll do. But what a bother to have to wait till to-morrow!"

There was no help for it, however. Wait till to-morrow we must.

CHAPTER VI.

OPEN, SESAME.

"I know thee not; but well my heart
Interprets, darling, what thou art;
Light of some old ancestral hall,
Queen-gem of some proud coronal!
For, certes, such a perfect grace,
Such lustrous loveliness of face,
Such artless majesty as thine
Proclaims thee of no sordid line!"

The Unknown Portrait—Sir Noel Paton.

There was time the next morning, before Mr. Markham came, for coaxing a little oil out of Mrs. Munt, and fetching a feather from the poultry-yard, but for no more. For Mrs. Munt, kind as she was, very naturally objected to giving us the oil in one of the best tea-cups, which Gerald had brought for the purpose, thinking it must be "an old one," which it was indeed, though not in his sense of the word. So Tib ran off to the princess's tower for one of the doll ones, and Gerald and I went in the other direction for a long feather. And by the time that we were ready for operations, it was within a quarter of an hour of lessons, and being rather sensible children in some ways—we had early learnt experience and responsibility in our own affairs, having no one to advise or arrange for us in such matters—we decided it was better to wait till we were sure of plenty of, and uninterrupted, time.

"You see, if Fanny came shouting for us just as we had got into the tool-house, she might see it, and it would be no longer a private place of our own; we must keep it quite for our own," I said.

"*Certainly*," said Tib. "You know I asked grandpapa about it, and he didn't seem to mind."

But lessons that morning did go very slowly. Once or twice Mr. Markham had to call us to attention, and there was even a slight threat on his part of "extra work to be done for to-morrow," if the rest of our preparation should not prove better done. It was not the fault of the preparation—which had been done as well as usual—it was that our heads were all agog over the tool-house! But we pulled up after this, and things ended fairly well.

And at last—though not till after our dinner, for we were never allowed more than "a run," and that well within view of the schoolroom window, between lessons and dinner—we found ourselves again in safety before the door in the wall—oil-cup and feather in hand.

We set to work methodically—with the help of nurse's largest scissors and a skewer—how Gerald had got the skewer I don't know: we raked out all the little bits of dirt and rubbish that had collected in the lock; then we oiled it as thoroughly as we knew how, though under the circumstances this was certainly a process of working in the dark. Then we carefully inserted the key—it went in to perfection, but we all looked at each other, and grew hot with excitement when it came to the moment for trying to turn it.

Tib as the eldest had the first try—a barren honour; she hurt her hands over it, but it would not move—not a hair's breadth! Then it came to me. I have larger hands than Tib, and stronger muscles; I fancy I set to work in a more business-like manner. With me the key turned—with groans and grunts, it must be allowed—but still it turned—half-way! then I too looked blank. Fortunately it did not refuse to turn back again, and then I took it out and looked at it reproachfully.

Gerald laid hands on it. It was *his* turn, but what I had failed in, it was not likely his little, fat, stumpy paws would achieve. But Gerald is sharp in some ways. He first examined the key all over. Then he took up the oily feather again.

"See here," he said, "some parts of the key are quite oily, but some, inside, are quite dry. We should have oiled the key as well as the lock."

He was right; his small grasp did what ours had failed in. Grunting and groaning still, but forced to obey, the old key woke from its sleep of thirty or forty years and did the work it was made for. And in another minute we had tugged at the door till it moved on its rusty hinges—you will understand afterwards how they came to be no rustier—slowly opening and revealed—

What did it reveal? For a few minutes we were too dazzled to tell—really dazzled—as well as amazed. A perfect flood of light seemed to pour out upon us, and instead of the dingy, musty tool-house we had been expecting, we found ourselves standing at what at first sight appeared like the entrance to some fairy palace of brightness and brilliance. We stood, dazed, rubbing our eyes and looking at each other. *Was* it magic? Had we chanced upon some such wonder of old world times as our little heads were stuffed with? Tib—and Gerald too, perhaps—would have been ready to believe it. Had the door there and then shut upon us, leaving us but the remembrance of the vision, they would have lived upon beautiful fancies for the rest of their lives. But I—practical I—did not long stand bewildered. A slight creak of the door brought me back to common-place.

"Come inside, quick!" I said, pulling at the others—we were all huddled together on the steps—"shut the door, or else some one will see the light through the trees," for I have told you how *very* dark the tangle is, even on a bright day. "Stay—dare we shut the door? Is there a keyhole on the inside? Oh, yes; and not rusty at all," and quick as thought I drew the key out and fitted it in to the other side; it turned now with ease. "That's right;" and before Tib or Gerald had found out for certain whether they were awake or dreaming, we were all three safe inside the enchanted palace, at liberty to look about us and find out where we really were.

I feel in a way sorry to explain it. But this is not a fairy story; and in the end I think you will allow, when you have come to know the whole, that it *is* very interesting, perhaps more interesting than a fairy story after all. So I will go on without leaving you in perplexity any more.

The place where we found ourselves was a conservatory: it was prettily built in a high, round-roofed sort of way, so as to catch all the light and sun-heat possible. It was, to begin with, a very bright afternoon; then the shrubbery on our side was *very* dark; high up in the conservatory there was a band of coloured glass, rich red, and little bits of every colour at the edge, like a strip of rainbow, through which the light came in gleams of all sorts of beautiful tints. You can easily see how startlingly brilliant it had seemed to us; and besides this, the conservatory itself was not at all in a neglected state. There were few *pots* of flowers; the shelves were mostly empty; but there were plants growing in earth borders along the sides, which were evidently cared for, as they twined up the walls luxuriantly. And the whole place was heated, though not very much. *That*, you see, was how the door and the lock remained in such good condition.

We found out all these particulars for ourselves by degrees; and gradually we noticed other things. The conservatory had evidently, at some time or other, been a favourite place to sit in. There was a little *very* old and shaky rustic table, and two or three seats to match; there was a little corner shelf on which still lay two or three old books. After we had got over our first surprise, we were conscious of something about the whole place which made the tears come to our eyes. But our spirits soon rose again.

"*What* a bower for the princess!" exclaimed Tib.

I felt quite out of patience with her.

"Rubbish!" I said, "I can't think any more of the princess or any make-up things. This is *far* more interesting. I want to find out all about what place it is, and why it is shut up and deserted, as it evidently is."

"Perhaps it's been shut up for hundreds of years," suggested Gerald.

"That's rubbish, if you like," answered Tib. "It doesn't look as if anybody lived here, but it's not dirty—scarcely even dusty."

"There must be some other way of getting into it besides our door, then," I said, "for certainly the *door* hasn't been opened for a great many years. If we look about, perhaps we'll find some other entrance."

At first sight there was no appearance of any, and we began to think the conservatory must, after all, belong to Rosebuds, and that from time to time the gardener *did* open the door and get in to clean it. Only why, then, was it always locked up? Just as we were feeling quite puzzled, Gerald called out—

"Oh! see here, Tib and Gussie, this is another door—here in the glass; here's a handle that turns. Why, see, it's a door made of looking-glass!"

That was why we had not noticed it. It was cleverly managed to imitate panes, like the rest of the conservatory, and it was somewhat in the shade in one corner. There was no lock to this door; it opened at once, and before us we saw a long, rather narrow, covered passage, lighted by a skylight roof. It was all growing more and more mysterious; half frightened, but too eager and curious to think of being afraid, on we ran. The passage ended in a short flight of steps, at the top of which was another door, a regular proper door this time, with a handle and a lock, but no key in the lock.

"Oh! supposing it's locked," I cried, excitedly; "it will be too bad. We can't find out any more."

But it wasn't. The key, as we afterwards found, was inside, and not turned in the lock. They were evidently not very afraid of robbers. All the years the house had stood empty, no one had ever broken into it; we were the first intruders.

We pressed forward. First we found ourselves in a sort of little ante-room, very small, hardly bigger than a closet, and out of this, through another door, opened a very large and handsome drawing-room. It had a row of windows at one side looking out upon a terrace, and a large bow window at one end, with closely-drawn blinds—we could not see what it looked on to; the floor was of beautifully polished wood, inlaid in a pattern such as you see more often in French houses than in English ones; the two mantelpieces were very high, and beautifully carved, and from the centre of the ceiling hung an immense gilt and crystal chandelier, covered up in muslin. There was not much furniture in the room, and what there was looked stiff and cold: two or three great cabinets against the walls, and some gilt consol-tables, and in one corner a group of sofas, and chairs, and arm-chairs all drawn together, and all in white linen covers. Everything was handsome, and stately, and melancholy; the very feeling of the room told you it had not been really lived in for many a day.

But the one thing which caught our attention was a life-size portrait hanging at the end of the room opposite the bow window. It was the only picture of any kind, and even though we were ignorant children, we could see in a moment that it was a very beautiful one. It represented a young girl, richly dressed in the fashion of a hundred years ago or more, with long-waisted bodice, and skirt of white satin, looped up over an under-one of rose-coloured brocade. She was standing on a terrace—this very terrace we afterwards found—her hat hanging on her arm, and a greyhound beside her. It was all pretty much the same as one often sees in portraits of that time, but her face was *so* charming! And immediately we saw it, both Gerald and I exclaimed—

"Oh, Tib, she is exactly like you!" and going close to examine it more particularly, I saw some letters in one corner, and, to my immense surprise, they were those of the name scored out in the old book, "Ornaments Discovered," and of Tib's second name also—"Regina." The initials of the artist—"L.K.," I think—were there also.

"It is my name," said Tib, opening her eyes in astonishment; "how very strange! Can it be the picture of some great-great-grandmother of ours, I wonder? But this is not grandpapa's house. How could any portrait of our family be here?"

We were completely puzzled, but, children-like, we did not think very much more about it. It was such fun to slide up and down the polished floor, or to climb over among the shrouded chairs and sofas, and make ourselves a comfortable nest among them. For it was plain that our discoveries were not to go further—the large double doors of this drawing-room were securely locked from the outside.

We went close up to this door, putting our ears to the keyhole even, and listened, but not the least sound was to be heard.

"The house must be shut up," I said. "There is certainly no one moving about in it."

"Perhaps it is enchanted," said Gerald, in an awe-struck tone. "Perhaps that lady is *really* alive, and the fairies have fastened her up into that picture till—till—" and he hesitated; his imagination had come to an end of its flight.

Tib and I looked at each other without speaking. We did not snub Gerald as we often did for such speeches—somehow it didn't seem so very impossible! Everything was so strange; the room itself so unlike anything we had ever seen, the mysterious way into it, the silence and desertedness, yet the signs of care; above all, the portrait so wonderfully like Tib, and actually bearing her name. There was no explaining it by anything we could think of or imagine.

"We may as well use it all to make a play of," said Tib, at last, returning to her favourite idea. "We can pretend that the lady in the portrait *is* the princess something, as Gerald says. Yes, it would be still nicer to make her be enchanted instead of only shut up, and then, Gussie, you must help me to plan how she's to be got out."

"But, Tib," I said, "do you think we can come here again? Don't you think grandpapa would mind, after all he said to us about not making friends, or going into any houses in the village?"

"And are we making friends?" said Tib. "Unless the portrait comes out of its frame some day, and begins talking to us, there's certainly nobody else to talk to here."

"Do you think there's nobody living in the house?" I said, doubtfully.

"I'm sure there's not. Most likely some one comes to dust it every now and then."

"And don't you remember," said Gerald, "that last Sunday I asked grandpapa if we might come through the door in the wall if we *could*, and he said 'yes'? P'r'aps he knew about this place, and didn't mind if we did come here to play."

"Perhaps," I said; "anyway we can ask him the next time he comes."

"We needn't say anything about it to Mrs. Munt, or nurse," said Tib, decidedly. "As long as we haven't been told *not* to come, we're not disobeying, and it's much nicer not to ask any one but grandpapa himself."

With that I quite agreed, especially as I felt sure grandpapa himself would like it better. We knew we were doing no mischief; there was nobody to speak to, as Tib had said, so we felt quite at ease, and spent a most agreeable afternoon. When we had examined everything there was in the big drawing-room, or saloon, as Tib preferred to call it—and that did not take us very long; there were no curiosities or small ornaments about, as in the Rosebuds drawing-room—we began to plan again about our play story. We arranged it most beautifully, and the portrait was a great help, for it almost gave us another actor, as we could always pretend it was the princess, when Tib was wanted for another person. And it was such a wonderfully life-like picture—you could really have fancied its expression changed as we talked to it.

But at last we began to get frightened that we should be missed at home if we stayed any longer.

"We must go, Gussie," said Tib, "let us all say good-night to the princess. It is sad to leave you alone here, princess," she went on, turning to the portrait, and speaking in the tone of one of the ladies in the play, who were going to help her to escape, "but, alas, there is no other way to do. If we stayed longer we should only be suspected of plotting, so we must resign ourselves."

"And I dare say you're pretty well accustomed to being left alone by this time. You must be nearly a hundred years old, though you look so young," said Gerald, as he bowed to her. I could not help laughing, though Tib was rather vexed.

"I wish you wouldn't think it clever to turn everything into ridicule, Gerald," but he looked up with such a surprised

face that we saw he hadn't been in fun at all.

"There's one thing we'd better do if we want ever to get in here again," I said. "We must hide the key of the door leading from the passage. I dare say the person who comes to dust will never notice it's not there. They can't be in the habit of locking it regularly; but it's as well to hide it," and so saying, I took the key out of the lock and slipped it inside a drawer of one of the big cabinets, where it may be lying still, for all I know (I must look, by the by: writing this all out has reminded me of several things I had forgotten).

Then we closed the door carefully and ran down the passage to the conservatory again, where we found everything just as we had left it—*our* key, as we called it, sticking in the lock inside. It was still rather stiff to turn—and the next morning we oiled it again—but we managed to unlock it, and then to lock the door again on the outside.

And Gerald ran off with the key to hide it again in the summer-house; only we wrapped it up in paper before burying it in the fir dust.

"Who would have thought," said Tib, as we ran in, "who *could* have thought, what we should find this afternoon?"

But our surprises, as you shall hear, were not yet at an end.

CHAPTER VII.

GRANDPAPA'S SECRETARY.

.... "Children are the best judges of character at first sight in the world."—Hogg.

Grandpapa did not come down to Rosebuds again for three or four weeks. Mrs. Munt wrote to him regularly to tell him how we were, and we, once or twice—it was she who put it in our heads, I must confess—wrote a little scrap to put inside hers, for which he told her to thank us when he wrote back to her, but he never sent *us* any letter.

We didn't mind his not coming, except that now and then we thought we should like to tell him of our discovery, and hear what he said about it. But we were very happy; we never cared to go out for walks, which I don't think nurse regretted; we always said we were much happier playing about. And the conservatory and the saloon became our regular haunts every, or almost every, afternoon. No one ever disturbed us—we never heard the slightest sound in the house where the big drawing-room was; indeed, for all we knew, it might not have been a house at all, but just that one large room, for the other door—the proper door of the room—was never opened. We tried it two or three times; it was always firmly locked. But still it was clear that somebody came to dust the room and the conservatory, if not every day, at least two or three times a week, for they were not allowed to get any dustier.

It was a good thing we were quiet children, not given to mischief, or rough and wild, otherwise we might have done harm in some way, such as breaking the glass in the conservatory, or spoiling the beautiful "parquet" floor. And we certainly would have been discovered. It was partly the fear of this that made us so careful, as well as a queer fancy we had that the picture on the wall—the princess, as we still called her—watched all we did, and that she would be very vexed if we were not quite good.

"Of course," Tib used to say, "it's a great honour to be allowed to play in a palace, and we must show we are to be trusted."

For after a while we got tired of our play-story about the baron and the humpback and all the rest of it, and then we pretended that we came to visit the princess in her beautiful palace, and that she was very kind to us indeed.

Sometimes we brought our books and work with us; on a rainy day we always found it difficult to get to our secret haunts, for of course we wouldn't tell stories about it, and nurse naturally didn't approve of our going out in the damp. But after a while, when nurse found that we came in quite dry, and that we never caught cold even when she left us to our own devices on a wet day, she gave up being so fidgety, and so we often did get to our palace all the same.

One Friday at last there came a letter, saying grandpapa would be down the next day and a gentleman with him.

"What a bore that he's not coming alone," said I. "We shan't have a word with him, and the gentleman's sure to be one of those stupid Parliamentary people that talk to grandpapa about 'the House,' and 'so-and-so's bill,' all the time." For we had had some experience of grandpapa's friends sometimes at Ansdell, when we had come in to dessert and heard them talking. "I wonder if they go on all day long in the 'House' about bills, Tib? There must be a fearful lot of people who never pay theirs if it takes all those clever gentlemen all their time to be settling about them in the 'House.'" We were rather proud of knowing what the "House" meant, you see. We thought from grandpapa's being in it, that we knew all about the government things.

Tib looked rather solemn.

"I suppose it's because of the National Debt," she said. "It shows how careful people should be not to spend too much, doesn't it, Gussie? But I'm not sure that I care to speak to grandpapa more than usual. I'm so awfully afraid of his stopping us going to the palace."

"*Are* you?" said I. "I'm not. That is to say, if I thought he'd mind it, I wouldn't go there. What I want is to *find out* about it from him. I have still such an idea that it has something to do with the old mystery."

"If I thought that," said Tib, "I'd be far too frightened to tell him about it."

We spent a long time that afternoon in the big drawing-room. When we were coming away, we all somehow felt a little melancholy.

"We are pretty sure not to be able to come to-morrow, and certainly not on Sunday," said Tib, sadly. "Dear princess," she went on, looking at the portrait, "you mustn't forget us if we don't come to see you for a few days. It won't be *our* fault, you may be sure;" and really we could have fancied that the sweet face smiled at us as we turned to go.

We were playing on the lawn when grandpapa arrived the next day. Nurse had intended to have us all solemnly prepared, like the last time, but he came by an earlier train, and somehow she didn't know about it early enough, so we were all in our garden things quite comfortably messy, when we heard the sound of wheels, and looking round, saw to our astonishment that it was the dog-cart.

There was no help for it; we hadn't even time to wash our hands, and there was no use trying to get out of the way, for to have gone hurry-skurrying off as if we were ashamed would have vexed grandpapa more than anything, especially as he had a friend with him. So we marched boldly across the lawn and stood waiting, while the gentlemen got down.

"How do you do, grandpapa?" I said. "We didn't expect you quite so soon."

"Indeed," said he, as he kissed us in his usual cool sort of way, "an unwelcome surprise—eh?"

Tib got red at this, and looked as if she were going to cry. But I didn't feel inclined to be put down like that, before a stranger, too.

"No, grandpapa; it's not an unwelcome surprise, but we would have liked to have been tidier; you know we generally are *quite* tidy when you see us."

"For my part, I prefer to see small people when they're *not* very tidy," said a pleasant, hearty voice; and then the owner of it came round from the other side of the dog-cart where he had jumped down. "You must introduce me, Mr.

Ansdell, please, to my—small, I was going to say, but I'm surprised to see the word would be almost a libel—cousins."

"Umph," said grandpapa, "'cousins,' in the Scotch sense; how many degrees removed, it would be difficult to say."

"I've not been taught to count you so very far away," said the gentleman, good-humouredly, but with something in his tone that showed he wasn't the sort of person to be very easily put down; "besides, sir, as I'm your *godson* as well as your cousin——"

"I might be a little more civil, eh, Charles?" said grandpapa, laughing a little. "Ah, well, I'm too old to learn, I fear. Nevertheless, I have no objection to your calling each other cousins if you choose. Mercedes, Gustava, and Gerald—your cousin, Mr. Charles Truro."

We looked at him, and he looked at us. What we saw was a well-made, pleasant-looking young man, not very tall, though not short, with merry-looking grey eyes, close cut brown hair, and a particularly kindly expression, a great improvement upon most of grandpapa's gentlemen friends, who never looked at us as if they saw us.

"Mercedes and Gustava," he repeated, slowly. "I thought one of them was called Re——"

But grandpapa interrupted him.

"Mercedes is an absurd name for an English child," he said. "It was a fancy of poor Gerald's—they were in Spain, you know."

"But you needn't call Tib 'Mercedes,' unless you like," I said, boldly—I don't really know what spirit of defiance, perhaps of curiosity, made me say it—"she has another name; her second name is Regina, like——"

Would you believe it? I was on the point of saying "like the picture;" but I cut myself short before I said more, and even had I not stopped, grandpapa's tone would have startled me into doing so.

"Will you be so good, Gustava, as to answer questions and remarks that are addressed to you, and those only?" he said, in his horrible, icy way.

I felt myself getting red now, especially as I was certain Mr. Truro was looking at me. I made a silent vow that I wouldn't try to be nicer to grandpapa, and that I would *certainly* not tell him about our secret. This comforted me a little, and I glanced up, to find that the stranger was looking at me, but in such a nice way that I couldn't have felt vexed if I had tried.

"Will you take me round the garden?" he said. "I am quite stiff with sitting so long."

He spoke to us all, but I think he meant it most for me. Grandpapa didn't seem to mind. I think that when he had said anything very crabbed, he *was* sorry, though he wouldn't say so.

"Don't be very long, Charles," he said, as he went into the house and we turned the other way, "I shall want you to look over those papers."

"All right, sir, I won't be long," Mr. Truro called back in his cheery tone.

"Why does he want you to do his papers?" I asked.

Mr. Truro laughed.

"Because I'm acting as Mr. Ansdell's secretary just now," he said.

Tib looked disappointed.

"Oh," she said, "I thought you were a——" and she stopped.

"Say on," said Mr. Truro.

"A—a gentleman," said Tib.

"Well, I hope I am," he said, smiling.

"But doesn't he," I said, nodding my head towards the house, for I perfectly understood what Tib meant, "pay you for being that?"

"In point of fact Mr. Ansdell does *not* pay me," he said. "What I learn from being with him is far more valuable than money to me. But all the same, if your grandfather *did* pay me for my services, *that* would not make me less of a gentleman!" and Mr. Truro stood erect, and gave a little toss to his head, which showed he could be in earnest when he liked. But then he laughed again, and we saw he was not really vexed. "May I make a remark in turn?" he said. "Are you young people in the habit of talking of Mr. Ansdell as 'he' and 'him?' 'She,' I know, is 'the cat.' I have yet to learn who 'he' is."

We laughed, but we blushed too, a little.

"We don't always," said Tib; "but you see you *are* a cousin; mayn't we tell him things?" she exclaimed, impulsively, turning to Gerald and me. "He's got such a kind face, and—and we haven't anybody like other children."

Mr. Truro turned his face away for half a second. I fancy he didn't want us to see how sorry he looked. By this time we had sauntered round to the other side of the lawn, out of sight of the house almost. There was a garden seat near where we stood. Mr. Truro took Tib and me by the hand, and Gerald trotted after.

"Let's sit down," he said. "Now, that's comfortable. Yes, dears, I *am* a cousin, and I think you'll find me a faithful one. Do tell me 'things.' I won't let you say anything not right of your grandfather; there is no man living I respect more. But perhaps I may help you to understand him better."

"Is he never cross to you?" asked Tib; "at least, not so much cross as that horrid laughy-at-you-way—laughy without being funny or nice, you know."

"Yes, I do know," he answered. "I think Mr. Ansdell is inclined to be that way to everybody a little. I wish you could hear how he makes some of them smart now and then in the House."

"The people who don't pay their bills—the people who make the National Debt, do you mean?" I asked.

"The how much?" asked our new cousin in his turn, opening his eyes very wide.

And when I explained what I meant, about all the talk we had heard about *bills*, and how Tib had read something about the National Debt, and thought it must mean that, you should have seen how he laughed; not a bit like grandpapa, but just *roaring*. I know better now, of course. I know that there are different kinds of bills, and that the ones we had heard of being talked about in Parliament are new plans or proposals that the gentlemen there—"members," like grandpapa—want to have made into laws, because they think they would be good laws. I know, too, pretty well—at least a little—about the National Debt, and that somehow it isn't a bad thing, though little debts are very bad things. I don't see how, but I suppose I shall understand when *I'm* big, that things that are bad when they're little aren't always bad when they're very big.

When Mr. Truro had finished laughing, he began to listen to all we had to tell him. You would hardly believe how much we told him. Indeed, when we thought it over afterwards we could hardly believe it ourselves; to think that here was a strange gentleman we hadn't known an hour, whose name we had never heard in our lives, and that we were talking to him as we had never before talked to anybody. He had such a way of looking as if he really *cared* to hear. I

think it was that that made it so easy to talk to him; and then, of course, his being a cousin made a difference. He wasn't a very near one, but I have noticed that sometimes rather far-off cousins care for you quite as much or more than much nearer ones. And anything in the shape of a cousin was a great deal to us; we had never heard of having any at all.

After we had chattered away for some time, some little remark, I forget what exactly, something about what we did with ourselves all day after lessons were over, seeing that we had no friends or companions, for we had told him about grandpapa's not allowing us to know any neighbours; something of that kind brought us dreadfully near the subject of our discovery. We had already said *something*, though very little, about the old book with the scored-out name, and Mr. Truro listened eagerly, though it struck me afterwards more than at the time that he had not seemed very surprised.

And when we did not at once answer about how we amused ourselves, he repeated the question. We looked at each other. Then Tib got rather red, and said, quietly,

"We can't tell you all we do, at least, I don't think we can," she said, glancing at Gerald and me.

Mr. Truro looked a little startled.

"Why not?" he said. "I am sure, at least I think I may be, that you wouldn't do anything you shouldn't. If, for example, you had been tempted to make friends with any of the village children, it would be much better to tell your grandfather; he might not mind if they were good children, even if they were not of the same class as you. But it would be wrong not to tell him."

We began to feel a little frightened, and for the first time a misgiving came over us that perhaps grandpapa might be angry at our having played in the palace. I suppose our faces grew so solemn that Mr. Truro felt more uneasy.

"Come now," he said, "can't you tell me all about it? I don't look very ogre-y, do I? That is, if you've no real objection to telling me before you tell Mr. Ansdell."

"We meant to tell him; we were going to tell him to-day," I said. "Indeed, we, at least I, *wanted* to tell him. I thought perhaps he'd explain, or that we'd find out about it. But he isn't as kind this time as he was the last, and perhaps he'd be angry, really angry. I never thought before that it was a thing he could be angry about, did you, Tib?"

"No," said Tib, faintly; "and it would be so dreadful not to go there any more."

Gerald began to cry.

Mr. Truro's face grew graver and graver.

"My dear children," he began, "my dear little cousins, I must speak very earnestly to you. You must tell this secret, whatever it is, to your grandfather. It might not make him angry just now, but if you did *not* tell him, I very much fear it might."

"But he is so very sharp to-day," said Tib; "you could see he was. And when he is like that we can't tell things properly, and it somehow seems as if we were naughty when we aren't really. We can't tell him *to-day*, can we?"

Mr. Truro reflected.

"It is true," he said, "that Mr. Ansdell is *particularly* busy and worried. He has been terribly overworked lately; indeed, he came down here expressly to be able to work without interruption. Can't you confide in me, children? I promise to advise you to the very best of my ability."

"And you wouldn't tell him—grandpapa, I mean," said Tib, correcting herself, "without *telling* us you were going to?"

"Certainly not. I should have no right to tell him without your leave," he replied.

We all looked at each other again.

"I suppose we'd better, then," I said. "You begin, Tib. It's rather difficult to think where it began," I went on. "It had to do with grandpapa telling us so about not knowing the neighbours, or making friends with any one, and we had never heard of Rosebuds before, you know, and then I remembered seeing it in the book, and Tib likes mysteries so, and——"

"Take breath, Gussie, there's no such dreadful hurry," said Mr. Truro, and his face grew more smiling as I went on.

"We fixed to make a story about it. It didn't seem like prying to play at it that way," said Tib.

And then we went on to tell all about the imprisoned princess, and the old arbour, and the supposed tool-house, which was to be a dungeon, and Gerald finding the key, and just everything—all that I have written; I needn't tell it all again. And with every word Mr. Truro's kind face grew kinder and brighter; all the grave, uneasy look went quite out of it, and this, of course, made it much easier to tell it all quite comfortably. By the time we had quite finished—it took a good while, for Gerald *would* interrupt to tell that *he* had found the key, and *he* had made it turn when Tib and Gussie couldn't—Mr. Truro's face had grown more than bright, it looked quite beaming.

"And the portrait of the princess is like Tib, you say—Mercedes, I *should* say? I would like best of all to call you 'Regina';" and he passed his hand softly over Tib's dark hair.

"Awfully like Tib, only prettier," I said, bluntly. But Tib didn't mind. Something in Mr. Truro's tone had caught her attention.

"Did you ever know any one called Regina?" she asked. "You seem to like it so."

Mr. Truro did not answer for a moment. Then he said, quietly, "It is a family name with me, too. I have heard it all my life. You know I am your cousin."

"Oh, of course," we all said.

Then he went on to talk of what we had been telling him.

"Will you let me think over about it?" he said. "I am the last person to advise you not to tell your grandfather *everything*, but I do not think it would be wise to tell him anything just now, as he is extremely busy and worried. I will tell you what I think you should do before I go."

Of course we agreed readily to what he said.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEPPED OUT OF THE FRAME.

"And, even as one on household stairs,
Who meets an angel unawares,
Might hold his breath; in silent awe
We stood."

The Unknown Portrait—Sir Noel Paton.

We saw very little of grandpapa during this visit, and not as much of Mr. Truro as we would have liked. For it was

some very bothering time about government things, and everybody that had to do with them was very busy. We came in to dessert, as we always did, and grandpapa was kind in his own way. He seemed pleased that we were such good friends with Mr. Truro. I remember he said something to him about his having done already what *he*—grandpapa—had not been able to do himself—"gained our hearts," or something like that. And Mr. Truro answered. "You could if you would, sir, or probably you *have* if you would but think so." But grandpapa only shook his head, though he smiled a little in a nice way.

And then they began talking again about all the papers and writings they had to do, and we got tired of sitting still, and fidgeted with the wine glasses and things on the table, so that grandpapa told us we had better go to bed.

The next day, Sunday, was pouring wet.

We didn't see either grandpapa or our cousin till we were sitting in church. We had come with nurse in the one-horse fly, which knew it always had to come for us on wet Sundays, and we didn't hear anything of the two gentlemen. We couldn't bear the long drive in the stuffy fly, and we did not like the church, for the clergyman was old, and mumbled his words, and the music wasn't nice nor anything else.

"If we might only go to the pretty church in the village!" we whispered to each other, as we whispered every Sunday. For this about the church was the thing we disliked at Rosebuds, and at Ansdell we loved going to church. It was so nice; beautiful hummy music and lovely singing, and all so pretty. And the clergyman with a nice clear voice, and not too long sermons. And—perhaps you will be shocked at this—everybody at Ansdell knew us, and there was always a little sort of rustle when we went in, and I could almost hear the school-girls talking in whispers about "our young ladies' hats;" and if we happened to see one of them we knew, and gave her a little nod and smile, she looked as proud as proud! It was just as different as could be from this ugly, stupid little church that grandpapa had taken it into his head to make us go to here, and we were very pleased when we saw Mr. Truro coming up the aisle after grandpapa, both of them looking so nice and grand, even though in a way we felt ashamed for our cousin to see what an ugly little church it was.

"He'll see for himself," I whispered to Tib, "and perhaps he'll say something to grandpapa."

For we were beginning to think of Mr. Truro as a sort of good fairy who was to put everything right.

Grandpapa and he had driven over in the dog-cart of course; they didn't mind the rain, though I'm sure *we* didn't mind it either, for that matter—we should only have been too happy to drive over in the dog-cart under waterproofs and mackintoshes; and when we were getting into the fly after church, Gerald looked so woebegone, that Mr. Truro took pity on him, and picked him out again.

"I'll find a corner for you where you shan't get wet," he said, in his nice, bright way.

Lucky Gerald! we heard him chattering as he went off in Mr. Truro's arms. "You know it *is* worstest for me, isn't it? for I'm only seven, and it does make my head ache so."

I suppose he had—what is it you call it?—squeams of conscience, is that the word? I must ask Re—oh, how stupid I am! that it was selfish of him to desert us. He always takes refuge in his being the youngest and "only seven," as it was *then*, when he is afraid he is going to be blamed.

But, after all, it was a good deal better in the fly without him. Nurse doesn't think it rude of us to whisper when we are alone with her, so Tib and I could say anything we liked to each other all the way home, without Gerald's rosy round face poking in between us every moment to say, "*What* did you say, Tib?" "I can't hear, Gussie!"

What we did keep saying to each other was mostly about Mr. Truro. What was he going to fix we should do? Would he "think it over" till he found out we should tell grandpapa at once; and if grandpapa were worried, and said in a hurry we must never go to our palace any more, how horrible it would be!

"I don't *think* he will," said Tib. "He's so very understanding. If he could only see the place himself, he would quite

understand that we can't get any harm there, or do any mischief."

"Yes," I said, "I wish we could have shown it him. Besides, if he's our cousin, and has heard about 'Reginas,' he *might* find out something about our princess."

But Tib didn't care about this idea.

"I don't want it spoilt," she said; "I've got used to her being just our princess, and to there being a mystery. I don't want to undo it."

It didn't look very like undoing it. We never saw Mr. Truro all that afternoon, and it was one of the longest I ever remember. It cleared up about tea-time, and we went three times round the lawn, on the gravel path, of course, and we saw grandpapa at the drawing-room window, which he had thrown open for some air, as we came in, and he asked us if we had seen Mr. Truro. And when we said no, he turned away, saying, rather crossly, "I wish he'd be quick; I'm sure it's not a very tempting day for a long walk," and Tib and I rather agreed with Gerald that we shouldn't much care to be grandpapa's "Scretchetary."

But late that evening—near bed-time it was—we heard a quick step coming to the schoolroom door.

"May I come in?" said Mr. Truro's voice.

We all jumped up to welcome him, and nurse discreetly retired.

"I can't stay long, dears," he said, "and we are off first thing to-morrow morning. But listen; I don't think you need speak to your grandfather about your discovery just now. Wait till he comes back the next time, a fortnight hence. I shall come with him, and he will not then be nearly so busy. I have satisfied myself that you cannot come to any harm in your palace, and I am sure you will do no mischief there."

"No; and *perhaps* grandpapa knew of it—what do you think?—the day he said we might go through the door in the wall if we could. And he only forbade us making friends with people."

"Not with portraits," said Mr. Truro, with a smile. "Well, good-bye, my dear little cousins. I can't tell you how pleased I am to have made friends with you."

He stooped and kissed us all, hurriedly, for we heard doors opening, and a voice in the distance, which we were quite sure was grandpapa's, "Where is Mr. Truro?" and then he was gone, and we didn't see him again the next morning.

It almost seemed like a dream his having been at Rosebuds at all, especially when we again found ourselves in the saloon that afternoon, our dear princess smiling down at us as usual.

"You don't know, princess, what a nice new cousin we have got," we said to her, for we had got into the way of telling her everything that interested us; "I'm sure you'd like him, and I'm sure he'd like *you*," Tib went on, and we really could have fancied the sweet, proud face gave a little amused smile. "I think he was very sorry not to come to see you, but perhaps he will the next time he's here."

Then we went on with some of our usual plays, and we were as happy as could be. It seemed somehow a good long while since we had been in the palace, though in reality it was only three days, and we were tempted to stay a little later than usual. But just as we were thinking we must go, a rather queer thing happened. You remember my telling you that the other door of the saloon, the real big door, which must have been the regular way of coming into the room from the rest of the house—if there was a house—I don't think we had really ever thought seriously if there was a house, or if the saloon was a sort of pavilion in a garden all by itself—well, this door was locked, firmly locked; we had tried it two or three times, but it was quite fast. Not stuck or stiff, or anything like that, but quite locked. But this day, just as we were coming away, we heard a little, very little, faint squeak, like some one trying to open or shut a door very, very softly, and looking at the big heavy gilt handles—it was a double door, with two sets of handles and all that, you understand—we

distinctly saw one of them turn, and then all was quiet and motionless again.

We looked at each other, and then we all darted forward—I think it *was* rather brave of us—and seized *the* handle. It turned certainly, easily enough, as door handles generally do, but that was all. The door didn't open; it was as firmly fastened as before.

"If we hadn't *all* seen it," said Tib, "I should have thought it was fancy."

But we were satisfied that it wasn't.

"Whoever turned the handle must have locked the door again on the other side as quick as thought," I said. "They must have been peeping in at us without our hearing, and then when they heard the squeak the handle made as they were closing the door again, they must have quietly locked it, expecting us to come to see who was there. I wonder who it was!"

We all wondered, but in vain.

"It *may* have only been the person who comes in to dust," said Tib; "there must be such a person, unless the princess herself comes out of her frame in the night to do it. Only if it were that person, most likely she'd have come in and asked us who we were, and what business we had there; it's very queer."

We decided when we went home that the next day we should make our way in as quietly as we possibly could, so that if any one were there, they shouldn't hear us in time to run away.

"And we'll sit quite still all the afternoon," said Gerald; "we won't make the least bit of noise, so that they'll think we're not there, and then they'll come straight in."

"They must have known we were there to-day; it's not likely they'll come straight in if they don't want us to see them," said Tib. "I can't make it out; whoever they are, they've more right there than we have. I think the only way is to take our books to-day and sit quietly reading; and we had better hide ourselves as much as we can, so that we shouldn't be seen all at once."

"Aren't you at all frightened?" said Gerald. "S'pose it was some kind of robbers?"

"Nonsense," said I. "Mr. Truro said he was satisfied we couldn't come to any harm there: I believe what he said. I'm not going to be frightened—are you Tib?"

"N—no. I don't think so," she replied, rather doubtfully. "Any way, I shouldn't at all like never to go there again."

But we all three did feel very excited the next afternoon, and I think all our hearts were beating a good deal faster than usual as we noiselessly made our way out of the conservatory and along the passage now so familiar to us, through the little anteroom, and then, as quietly as possible, opened the door into the saloon. And then—

You know, I dare say—big people must know all about these things better than children—how *very* quickly thoughts, or feelings, or something not exactly either—since I wrote that, a big person has told me that the word that best says what I mean is *impressions*: I am not sure that it says it to me; but that is, perhaps, because I have never thought of the word in that way before—You must know how *very* quickly one seems to know a thing sometimes, before there could have been time, even, to get to know it by any regular way of hearing or seeing. Well, that was how it was with us that day. The very instant the door opened we knew there was something different in the room—it seemed warmer, more alive, there was more feeling in it; and yet it was darker than we had ever seen it before—at least, that end of the room where our princess was had got into the shade somehow. *Her* face was not the first thing that caught our eyes, as it usually was; or *was* it her face?

I dare say you will think us too silly when I tell you that for about half a second we *did* think the princess had really

stepped down out of the frame. It was *so* like her. There she stood, quite still, but smiling at us as if she had expected us. Her hair was dark—like Tib's and like the picture's—her eyes just the same as both of theirs; but she was far, far prettier than either! She was dressed in something white, and there was some pink about it, too; and though of course it wasn't really made the same way as the dress in the picture, it was like enough to give a confused feeling at the first of being the same. And she was standing a little in the same way, and a hat—a black hat with drooping feathers—was slung on her arm.

We three just stood and gaped, and stared as if our eyes would come out of our heads. And she stood, still smiling, but perfectly motionless.

Gerald was the first to come to his senses. He ran forward a little towards the end of the room where the portrait was—it was still there; it was only that one of the blinds had been drawn down so as to cast it into shade—and glancing up at the wall, he called out,

"It's still there—it isn't *it*. It's another princess."

And at his words a peal of laughter—not very loud, but such pretty clear laughter, I wish you could hear it!—rang through the room, and the new princess, the living, moving princess, came forward to us, holding out her hands.

"So you have come at last," she said; "I expected you this morning. I knew you heard me at the door yesterday, and I thought your curiosity would bring you early."

I didn't quite like her calling us "curious." It wasn't quite the right word to use for all our pretty fancies about the princess, and even about the mystery.

"We never can come in the morning," I said, "because of our lessons. And—it wasn't *curiosity*."

"Indeed!" she replied, a tiny little bit mockingly; "not curiosity. What shall I call it, then, your inquiring minds, eh?"

I felt my face get red, and I felt that Tib's was getting red too.

"I don't know who you are," I burst out, "and if you don't choose to tell us, I am not going to ask. *That* isn't curiosity. But I wish you hadn't come; you've spoilt it all. Our own princess," and I glanced up at the portrait, looking, I could not but confess, like a washed-out doll beside the brilliant living beauty of the girl beside us, "our own princess is much nicer than you. And if we had been so curious we might have tried to find out things in pokey ways. We've never done that."

I looked, I suppose ready to cry. The lady's face changed, and then I knew that while she had been talking in that half-teasing way, something in her voice and smile had reminded me of grandpapa—of grandpapa, I mean, when he was in that sort of laughing-at-us way that we couldn't bear. Perhaps this had made us all feel more vexed at her than she really deserved us to be. But when her face changed, and a soft, sorry look came over it, she reminded me of *more* than any real face I had ever seen—she reminded me of all the prettiest and nicest fancies I had ever had; the sweet look in her eyes was *so* sweet, that I wished I might put my arms round her and kiss her. And Tib told me afterwards that she had felt exactly the same.

"I'm very sorry," she said, simply; "I didn't come here to hurt your feelings. Good fairies never do that, unless to very naughty children, whose feelings need to be hurt. And yours don't need to be hurt, for I know you're not naughty children—very far from it. Of course you wouldn't try to find out things in any way that wasn't nice, I know that. But wouldn't you like to know my name?"

"If you like to tell it," we said, smiling up at her.

"Or would you rather count me a sort of a fairy?" she went on.

"Are you one?" said Gerald, softly stroking the pretty soft stuff of which her dress was made.

"Perhaps," she said, smiling again. "I shouldn't wonder if you could decide that better than I can. Try to find out—think of some things I couldn't know unless I were a fairy."

"I know," said Gerald; "*our* names. You *couldn't* know them if you weren't a fairy, or—or if perhaps you knowed some fairies who had told you them," he added, getting a little muddled.

"If I had a fairy godmother, for instance, who had told me them," she said.

"Yes—that might be it," said Gerald.

"Well, then—dear me, I mustn't make any mistake, or my godmother would be very angry, after all her teaching," she said, pretending to look very trying-to-remember, like Gerald when he stops at "eight times nine," and screws up his mouth and knits his brows. "Well, to begin with, the eldest. This is Tib—but her real name is Mercedes Regina; this is Gustava; and this is Gerald Charles. And Gustava is generally called 'Gussie.' Now, have I said my lesson rightly?"

We all stared at her.

"You must be a fairy," said Gerald. But Tib and I felt too puzzled to say anything.

"What shall we call you?" I asked.

"Anything you like. I've got a lot of names. One of them, curious to say, is the same as the name scribbled on the portrait just above the name of the painter. Did you ever notice it?"

"Do you mean the same name as Tib's second one?" I asked; "Regina?"

The young lady nodded her head.

"That's very funny," we said. "That's the name in the book in London too."

"What book?" she asked, quickly.

I hesitated a moment. Then I thought as I had said so much it would be stupid not to explain. So I told her. She looked sad and thoughtful as she listened.

"It was scored out, you said?" she asked.

"Yes, with a thick black stroke, as if somebody had been very angry when they did it," I said. "If we hadn't known the name, from its being Tib's, I don't think we could ever have made it out."

"Ah," said the young lady, and it sounded like a sigh. But in a moment she smiled again.

"I didn't come here to make you sad," she said. "Won't you tell me about the games you play, and let me play with you. Perhaps my fairy godmother has taught me some that you don't know and that you would like to learn."

But we didn't feel quite ready for playing games yet. There were two or three things on our minds. The new princess saw that we looked uncertain.

"What is it?" she said. "You look as if you were afraid of me."

"No," said Tib, and "No," said I. "It isn't that, but there are some things we want to ask you."

"Ask them. I won't call you curious, I prom——"

But just that moment a bell rang—not loudly, but she heard it at once, and started up. She had been sitting on one of the old couches, with us all about her. "I must go," she said. "Come to-morrow and I will tell you all I can. Good-bye; good-bye till to-morrow," and in half an instant—I never saw any one move so quick—she had gone. We heard a key turn in the lock of the double door outside, and that was all!

We looked at each other again without speaking. Surely she must be a fairy of some kind, after all!

CHAPTER IX.

OUR FAIRY.

"A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food."
Wordsworth.

It seemed a very long time to the next afternoon, and if Liddy hadn't been the most unnoticing old woman in the world, she would certainly have seen that there was something unusual in our heads. We could think of nothing but our new friend the fairy, or "the other princess," as Gerald would call her. Who could she be? where had she come from? how—and this, perhaps, was the thing we wondered most about—how in the world did she know all about us, or our names, even down to our pet names, any way?

Then another thought was in my mind and Tib's. Grandpapa had told us to make no friends with the neighbours. Would it be disobeying him to go to meet the young lady in the saloon and play with her, as she had asked us?

"Is she a neighbour?" said Tib. "We don't know—we don't know if she lives there, or where she lives, or anything."

"We must ask her," I said; "any way, we must go and see her again to ask her. We must go to see her *once*, and we will tell her what grandpapa said."

"I think she is a fairy, and that she lives in Fairyland; and grandpapa didn't say we weren't to speak to fairies," said Gerald.

"Oh! how I wish Mr. Truro was here; we could ask him about it," I said.

"And there's another thing," said Tib: "we almost promised Mr. Truro we wouldn't say anything about the palace and all that to grandpapa just now—not till they came again. It's rather a muddle altogether, don't you think, Gussie?"

"I dare say she—we must get a name for her, Tib——"

"We'd better just call her Regina," Tib said. "She said it was her name."

"Well, I dare say Regina will tell us what she thinks we should do. Any way, as you say, we must go to see her once to tell her about it. I wonder what the bell was that rang, and made her rush off in such a hurry. That part of it was really very like a fairy story."

"If only she had left a slipper behind her, it would have been a little like Cinderella," I said; "though the deserted, quiet rooms, and that part of it, is more like the Sleeping Beauty."

"And the first day, when we were trying to get in at the door in the wall, was like one of the stories of dwarfs and

gnomes in the woods, wasn't it?" said Tib. "We've really had a good many adventures at Rosebuds."

This conversation took place the morning after we had first seen Regina. We were in the schoolroom, waiting for Mr. Markham. It was a little past his usual time when he came in.

"I'm a little late, I fear," he said. "I had to go to the Rectory to settle about giving some holiday lessons to one of the boys there. It will be Whit-week holidays soon, you know."

We didn't care very much; Whit-week would make no difference to us. Indeed, Christmas itself we didn't look forward to in *those* days, as most children do. It brought no happy family meetings, no Christmas-trees, or merry blind-man's buff and snap-dragon to us. But we knew too little about these things in other homes to think about what we missed, and grandpapa always gave us a pound each to spend as we chose. And at Ansdell, the Christmases we happened to be there, the servants had a party, and we used to watch them from the gallery that runs round the big hall. But Whit-week we cared nothing about.

"We're not to have holidays, then, are we?" I asked.

"Oh, no; Mr. Ansdell has said nothing about it," Mr. Markham replied. "By the by, Miss Gussie, you don't know when he will be coming down again, do you?"

"No," I said. "It won't be next Saturday, and perhaps not the Saturday after."

"Ah well! I can write to him. I thought perhaps he would say something for me to the rector—you don't know the family at the Rectory, I think?"

"No," said Tib.

"It is curious," said Mr. Markham—he was rather talkative this morning; perhaps it had put him into an extra good humour to have the hope of some more pupils—"it is curious—I saw a young lady there this morning that I could really have thought was an elder sister of Miss Tib's—she was so very like her."

We were all ears and attention now.

"So like Tib?" said Gerald and I.

"So like me?" said Tib.

"Yes," repeated Mr. Markham, "exceedingly like."

He didn't add, as I have done, "only a great deal prettier." Perhaps it is because Tib is my own sister, and I'm always seeing her and know her face so well, that I don't think her as pretty as other people do—or rather, I don't think about it. When you love people dearly you don't think about whether they're pretty or not—even now with Reg——Oh! I am too stupid again.

"It is very funny," we said, in which Mr. Markham agreed. He was thinking, of course, that the likeness was curious; we were thinking of far more than that—of how strange it would be if our mysterious lady was staying at the Rectory. If so, how did she get into the saloon?—how did she know our names?—how did she know that we went there to play?

"Yes, I should like you to see it for yourselves. But you don't know the family there?"

"No," repeated Tib, rather sharply, "we don't. Grandpapa doesn't wish us to make any friends here."

"Oh, exactly—I beg your pardon," said poor Mr. Markham. Probably grandpapa had said something about it to our tutor himself, which for the moment he had forgotten, for he got rather red, poor young man, and began rather hurriedly to get the books ready. "We mustn't waste any more time," he said, and, as we were sorry to see him looking

uncomfortable, we didn't remind him, as we might have done, that it was he, and not we, who had begun the conversation.

It was a little later than usual when we got out that afternoon. Nurse had kept us to try on some new frocks she was making for us, and we were very cross about it, I remember. But after all, it didn't matter. When we found ourselves at last in the saloon, and looked round eagerly, there was no one to greet us, but the smiling face of the portrait—the same which we had before thought so lovely, but which now seemed uninteresting and disappointing compared to the living, changing, half-mischievous, half-tender face, which already I really believe we had learnt to love.

"She'll be coming soon, I dare say," said Tib. "Let's sit down quietly, and think of all we want to ask her, in case she makes off in a hurry like yesterday," and we were turning towards the end of the room where stood all the old chairs and couches, when something on one of the marble consols caught our eyes. It was something lightly covered with a sheet of white tissue-paper, and lifting it up, there were three little nosegays of lovely flowers—delicate, brilliant hot-house flowers they were, and each nosegay lay on a book, and a card with writing on it was put so that it could be seen at once on the middle nosegay. The words on the card were these:—

"For Tib, Gussie, and Gerald. I am so sorry I cannot come to-day. The books are to amuse you instead, and I will come again the first day I can.

"R."

We were very disappointed. Still, it was very nice and funny to receive messages and presents in this mysterious way. The flowers were really beautiful, and the books were chosen as if she had known us all our lives. We knew at once which was for which, by the way they were lying on the table. Gerald's was about animals—stories, I mean—and Tib's was Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, and mine was *The Wonder Book*.

We sat down and looked at our books, and scented our flowers—don't you think it's very ugly to talk of *smelling* flowers? *we* always say "scenting," though somebody laughs at us for it, and says it isn't the proper meaning of the word—and then we all three made ourselves very comfortable in different corners of the arm-chairs and couches, and read our new stories. And thus we spent the afternoon. It wasn't as long a one as usual, for we had come so late. But before we went away we got into a great puzzle about how to thank her for the books and flowers.

"It would be rude to go away and leave no message," said Tib. "And she doesn't say she'll come to-morrow, only 'The first day I can.' Perhaps she'll come in the morning, and look to see if we've taken the books."

But not one of us had a pencil or a scrap of paper in our pockets, though we turned them inside out. Gerald had a top and some nails, and an awful little pink and white grimy ball that he called his "handkercher"; and Tib had her garden gloves, and a rather clean handkerchief, and some red wool with a crochet needle stuck in it, as she was learning to crochet; and I had nothing at all. What was to be done?

"I know," I said; "you don't mind using your wool, do you, Tib? Well, look here, we'll write with it on the white marble," and I set to work, and very soon I had written the words, "Thank you, kind fairy," to which Gerald made me add, "Come soon," and our initials, "T" and two "G's." It really looked quite pretty, and one comfort was, there was no fear of any one spoiling it before Regina saw it.

And then we went home, but we left our new books in the conservatory, because we shouldn't have known what to say if nurse had asked us about them.

The next day, to our great vexation, something prevented our going at all—I forget what it was—oh no! I remember. It was that nurse took us to the little town where Mr. Markham came from, to get us spring hats. She had got grandpapa's leave to take us when he was at Rosebuds, and she hadn't told us—poor old Liddy!—because she thought it would be such a delightful surprise.

It would have been a great treat if we hadn't had our heads so full of Regina, and wanting to see her again. But we were not so unkind and selfish as not to look pleased when nurse told us about it.

"How are we to go to the station?" I asked, for nurse had said it was two stations off by train, and when she said we should walk to the station—it was quite fine, and if it hadn't been fine we would have had to wait for another day—we were very pleased.

"We can peep in at the Rectory garden as we pass," I said to Tib, "and perhaps we'll see the lady that's like you, whoever she is. I *wonder* if she is Regina?"

"So do I," said Tib; "I wonder about it altogether."

But though we stared in with all our eyes at the garden of the pretty house next the church, on our way to the station, there was nobody to be seen.

"That is the Rectory, isn't it, nurse?" Tib asked her.

"I suppose so, my dears," she replied, rather nervously. "But I couldn't say for certain, having been so little in the village."

She was always in such a fright, for fear of getting to know any one or anything in the village. It was rather stupid of her to show it so, for it only put all grandpapa's funny ways about it more into our heads, but we didn't like to tease her, so we said no more.

But on the way home we took another peep in at the Rectory gates. Nurse was a little way behind, loaded with parcels which she *wouldn't* let us help her to carry; and we ran on a little. It was easy to peep in without being seen, but what we saw added to our puzzle. A lady was walking up and down the avenue with a book in her hand which she was reading, and as she turned our way, we saw her face clearly.

"Tib," I whispered, "*she's* like you, and she's like Regina, too—only she's old. *And*, Tib, she's like grandpapa."

So she was. She had the same straight-up, rather proud way of holding herself as he has, dark hair, which was beginning to get grey, and those pretty blue eyes with the bright eager look which all the blue eyes among us have—yes, she was like them *all*—the portrait, too. And just as we were staring, there came a call from the house, and an old, quite old, lady came to a glass door which opened on to the terrace. I knew afterwards that this old lady was the clergyman's mother or his wife's mother, who lived with them, and they have all lived there a very long time.

"Regina, Queenie, my dear," the old lady called out, "tea is ready. Frances wants you to come in."

The lady turned quickly.

"I'm coming, Mrs. Leslie," she said, and then she walked quickly to the house.

"Regina, another Regina!" we exclaimed. "And Queenie: what a pretty name for a pet name! I wonder our Regina didn't tell us to call her 'Queenie.'"

For of course, as we had learned a little Latin, we knew that Regina meant "queen."

"We must ask her why she didn't," said Gerald.

You can fancy how we looked forward to the next afternoon, and how we hoped our pretty lady would be there.

It all went right for once. Nurse was more busy than usual about all the things she had bought for us at Welford, and very glad to get rid of us as soon as we had had our dinner. For, happily, she had no trying-on to do to-day.

"You may have a good long afternoon in the garden," she said. "I must say you're wonderful good children for amusing yourselves. There's never any tease-teasing, like with some I've known—'What shall we do, nurse?' or, 'We've nothing to play at.' And you're getting very good, too, about never getting into mischief. You're *much* better, Miss Gussie,

than you were last year at Ansdell: for it was you as was the ringleader."

"Yes," said I, not very much ashamed of the distinction. "Do you remember the day I took grandpapa's new railway rug to make a carpet to our tent, and left it out all night, and it rained and all the colour ran? And do you remember when I pushed Gerald into the pond to catch the little fishes, and how he stood shivering and crying?"

"Ah, yes, indeed," said nurse. "But speaking of ponds—the one at Ansdell was nothing; but those nasty pits or pools in the fields near by: you never go near them? Your grandpapa has a real fear of them, and he told me not to let you forget what he'd said."

"No fear," we all answered, "we never go near them. We promised him we wouldn't, nurse."

Then off we ran.

"Even if she isn't there, she's sure to have left some message for us, like the last time," said Gerald as we ran. "I wish she'd bring us some butter-scotch."

"*Gerald!*" exclaimed Tib and I, "what sort of ideas have you? Fairies and butter-scotch mixed in the same breath. I only hope," Tib went on, "that she won't think we're ungrateful for the books, or that we don't care for them, because we had to leave them in the conservatory."

"If only she's there, we can explain everything," said I.

And she *was* there.

Not waiting in the saloon this time, but running down the long passage to meet us as soon as she heard our steps, looking prettier, and merrier, and sweeter than ever. *Dear Regina!*

I have never minded her teasing since that first day, when I really didn't understand her. I shall never mind it again, I am sure.

She led us into the big drawing-room, where she had prepared another little surprise for us. She was as pleased about it as we were ourselves. It was more of Gerald's kind of treat this time—not butter-scotch, but fruit—grapes, and beautiful little Tangiers oranges, and little cakes and biscuits of ever so many kinds. They were so nice, and we ate such a lot of them, and Regina ate a good many herself.

"You see, though I am a fairy, I like nice things," she said.

"Do you have afternoon luncheon every day?" asked Gerald. "Oh, how I would like to be you."

"*Isn't* he a greedy boy?" I said; and then I told her about the butter-scotch, and somehow the butter-scotch led to our talking of grandpapa—you remember about Gerald wishing he'd bring us some—and then we all got rather grave, for we had a great deal to tell our new princess, and to ask her.

We sat together in a little group on one of the arm-chairs, and Regina listened to us very attentively. We told her all that grandpapa had said to us before we came to Rosebuds, and all about the book in the library in London, and how we wanted to love grandpapa better, as Mrs. Munt had told us we should, but that it was rather difficult. We told her all we had told Mr. Truro, only more, for we had to tell her all about him as well. And then we asked her if she thought it was disobeying grandpapa for us to come to see her; and when we had told her all we could think of, we waited very anxiously to hear what she would say. Her face looked grave, though not exactly sad.

"Your friend—Mr. Truro—told you to wait till he came back again?" she said.

"Yes, but that was only about coming in here to play. We hadn't seen you then—and grandpapa told us not to make friends with any of the neighbours. Are you a neighbour? Do you live here?"

"No," said Regina. "I live far from here."

"And how can you come so often to see us, then?" we asked.

She smiled.

"Can't you fancy I come on a sunbeam, or a cloud, or on a broomstick if you like? Or if I had only thought of taking the picture away, you might really have thought I had come out of the frame! No children, I'm not going to tell you where I come from, or how I come, or *anything*. Then you can feel you're not hearing from me anything your grandfather would not wish you to hear, and when he and Mr. Truro come here again, you can tell them all—everything, and see what they say. You can bring Mr. Truro here to see me, if you like, and we'll talk it over. Now, as who knows how seldom we may see each other again, suppose we make the best use of our time. I've got some games to teach you—new games. Let us be as happy and merry as we can be while we *are* together."

And you cannot fancy what fun we had.

She kept us playing, and guessing tricks and riddles, and even singing little glees—she had such a pretty voice—so busily that we hadn't time to ask her any more questions, and indeed forgot to do so. So that when it grew late and we had to go home, and Regina kissed us and said good-bye, we knew as little about her, or where she had come from or was going to, as if she had really flown down to us from some fairy country invisible to mortal eyes.

"And will you come again soon?" we asked.

"Whenever I can, but that is all I can promise," she said, and then she disappeared behind the heavy doors, and we heard the key turn in the lock on the other side.

And we went home, wishing it were to-morrow.

"No, not to-morrow—she's sure not to come so soon again, but, all the same, we must come and see."

CHAPTER X.

THREE STARLINGS.

"'I can't get out; I can't get out,' said the starling.
'God help thee,' said I; 'but I'll let thee out.'"

Sentimental Journey.

She didn't come the next day, but instead of her we actually found three little packets of butter-scotch tied up in white paper, with a different coloured ribbon on each: mine was pink, and Tib's blue, and Gerald's green. I think nothing that had happened to us pleased Gerald as much as this, though he couldn't pretend to think it had come from Fairyland.

And two days after that, the girl herself came again, and we had another merry afternoon of games and fun. How we laughed! there never was any one as clever as our new princess at games. And when we were all too tired and hot to play any more, she told us to sit down quietly to rest, and to shut our eyes, and pretend to go to sleep for five minutes. And when we did so we heard a little faint rustling, and if we had not promised I am sure we should have opened our eyes, we were so afraid she was tricking us, and running away without saying good-bye.

But in a minute we heard the rustling again.

"Open your eyes," said her voice, and when we opened them, lo and behold! there was a glass jug filled with lemonade—it was so good—and four little tumblers, and sponge cakes. The tumblers were red and of a queer shape, and so was the big jug.

"These might have come from Fairyland," I said. "You know, Regina"—for she would make us call her so—"Gerald won't give up about you being a fairy; only when it came to packets of butter-scotch——"

"Even he couldn't believe there were butter-scotch manufactories in Fairyland," said she, laughing. And then we all laughed just because we were so happy.

"We've never laughed so much in our lives before, I don't think," said Tib.

"Poor little pets," said Regina, "it won't do you any harm. It should do the old house good too—it's many a long day since it heard any merry voices."

"The old house," said I; "what do you mean?"

"Why, the old house we're in—the place where you are. Where do you suppose yourself to be at this moment?" she asked, seeing I looked more and more puzzled.

"I don't know," I said. "We thought it was perhaps just this room, or else that it was a sort of a palace. We never thought of it as a regular house."

"A pavilion of some kind, I suppose you mean," said she.

"Why do you call it the *old house*? Is it very old?" asked Tib.

"Yes," said Regina, "it is. It has got into being called the old house because it is the oldest anywhere about, I suppose. And then, you see, when people haven't lived in a place for very, very long, they get into that way of speaking of it—out of a sort of affection—just as one speaks of the old days, you know, when one speaks of long ago."

"Did you live here long ago, and then not for a great while?"

"No, I never lived here, and then I'm not so old as all that. I heard about the old days of course from——" but then she got red, and stopped suddenly. "I think it's time to go," she said.

"Wait a minute," said I; "will you show us some of the rooms of the house? We should so like to see them."

The new princess hesitated. Then she shook her head. "No, dears," she said, "I'd better not. Just try to keep to your old fancies, and take Gerald's way: it's the best just now. And now listen: this is Wednesday. I can't come to-morrow. You'll promise to come on Friday?"

"Yes," we all said.

"I particularly want you to come on Friday," she went on, and her face grew a little sad, "though I can't quite explain why—except—just that after that perhaps I can't see you for a good while."

"Oh! don't say that," we all cried together; "do try and not let it be that way. We will come on Friday, you may be sure."

"But don't expect me very early," she said. "I may not be able to come till pretty late."

And then she kissed us all again, and she went her way, and we ours.

It happened very well that she had asked us to come on Friday, and not on Thursday, for on Thursday it was so *extra* pouring wet that nurse wouldn't let us go out at all. And we were exceedingly anxious on Friday morning to see what the weather was going to be, and we were all delighted to see it was fine.

"We must have a long afternoon to ourselves, nurse," we said. "It's horrid to be cooped up in the house all day."

"Well, I'm sure, my dears, I'm as sorry as you can be when it has to be so," said nurse. "But it's very wet everywhere still to-day. It did pour so yesterday. You must be sure to take your goloshes, and to come in at once if you feel chilly or shivery. I wouldn't for anything have you take cold."

"We never do, nurse," Tib said. "You must allow that we don't give you much trouble about our being ill."

"As if I'd grudge any trouble, my dear," said Liddy—she was very matter of fact. "But it's true you've given no trouble of any kind since you've been here, and so I shall tell your dear grandpapa—and so, I'm sure, will Mrs. Munt. She thinks there never were such children. But do be careful now, dears, not to catch cold just as your dear grandpapa's coming?"

"Grandpapa coming! You never told us," we exclaimed. "When is he coming?"

"To-morrow; and Mr. Truro too. At least, Mrs. Munt's sure it's him, though Mr. Ansdell only says to prepare the same rooms as last time. I meant to tell you when we began speaking—Mrs. Munt just got the letter this morning."

"What a good thing he's not coming to-day," we said to ourselves. "Nurse would never have let us out at all, or else we would have had to come in early, and *she* said she couldn't come early. I wonder, Tib," I went on, "I wonder if somehow her wanting us so much to-day, and what she has said, has anything to do with grandpapa's coming?"

"How could *she* know he was coming before we knew it ourselves, even? Gussie, it's not *me* that's too fanciful nowadays," said Tib. "Of course, on *our* side, knowing he was coming might have made us say perhaps it would be the last time. You know we've promised her and ourselves to tell Mr. Truro all about her, and then he or we must tell grandpapa, and who knows what he'll say? It's to be hoped he's not so busy and worried as he was when he was here before."

But the thought that it *might* be the last time we should see our pretty princess—that grandpapa might even forbid our ever going to our palace, as we still called it, at all, made us rather sad and subdued, and it was not as merrily as usual that we ran through the tangle to the door in the wall.

"Be quick, Gerald," I said, when he had got the key in the lock, and was turning it—he always counted it his business; "what are you pulling at?"

"It's stiff to-day—it may have got rusty with it raining so yesterday," he said. For we still always left the key in the summer-house—we were afraid to take it into the house. "It needs oiling again, perhaps;" but he had managed to open the door by this time, and he took the key out of the lock as he spoke, and we all passed through, Gerald locking the door again *inside*, and leaving the key in the lock, as we always did.

Regina was not yet there, but we were not surprised: she had said she might be late of coming, and we had not waited, just *for fear* of nurse stopping us at the last minute. We amused ourselves with some of the puzzles she had brought and left for us to play with when we were not inclined for noisier games, and in about an hour, to our delight, we heard the key turn in the big door, and in came our princess, a basket on her arm, which she set down on the floor, while she locked the door inside, and put the key in her pocket.

"You needn't do that," said Tib and I, rather offended; "we're not going to try to go out of the room, since you told us you didn't want us to."

"I did it without thinking," said Regina. "I know I can trust you. Now kiss me, darlings, and let us be as happy as we

can."

"But we're not very happy," we answered; and then we told her that grandpapa and Mr. Truro were coming the next day, and that perhaps we wouldn't be allowed to come to see her any more. She looked sorry, but not very surprised.

"We must hope the best," she said. "Mr. Truro is so kind, you say. Won't *he*, perhaps, be able to get your grandpapa to let you come?"

"Perhaps," we said. But it was only "perhaps."

But Regina wouldn't let us be sad. She opened her basket, which was filled with things she thought would please us, and we had our afternoon luncheon, as Gerald called it, together. Then as we weren't much in the humour for games, she sat and told us stories—such pretty ones, I wish I could write some of them down, for I believe she made them up out of her head—till, feeling afraid it was getting late, she looked at her watch, and jumped up in a fright, like Cinderella again.

"Darlings, darlings!" she cried, "I must go," and she kissed us very lovingly, but very hurriedly.

"And when are we to see you again?"

Regina shook her head.

"That is more for you to know than for me," she said. "We must leave it this way—if you *can* come again, you'll find some message from me, and you can leave one for me, and then I'll come."

"But listen," I said; "the other day you said you weren't sure that *you* could come, and to-day you didn't seem surprised that perhaps *we* can't come. Regina, tell me, did you know grandpapa was coming before we did? *Are* you a fairy?"

She shook her head, laughing, but she would say nothing, and in another moment she was gone.

We sat still, talking, for some time after she had gone—we couldn't help feeling dull and sad. We were so afraid of what grandpapa might say.

"It's a very good thing Mr. Truro's coming," said Tib. "It would have been too dreadful to have had to tell grandpapa ourselves."

"I don't see that," I said. "You speak as if we had done something very naughty, that we should be ashamed of telling. I'm not a bit afraid of telling grandpapa, in that way; *I'm* only afraid for fear he should forbid us ever to come to the old house again;" we had left off calling it the palace, since Regina had explained it was really a house, and the "*old* house" sounded nice, somehow.

"Well, yes," said Tib, "that's what I'm the most afraid of too, of course."

"And there's something we can't understand altogether," I went on. "Why did grandpapa stop us knowing anybody here? I'm sure the people at the Rectory would be kind to us, and I daresay there are other nice people. Then, who is Regina? and how does she know about us? and whose house is this? and why is it shut up? and——" I stopped, out of breath.

"And who is the portrait? and why is it like her, and like me? And the lady at the Rectory—the oldish lady, and the young one Mr. Markham spoke of—who are they? Oh yes, there are just thousands of things we don't understand. I don't think I shall ever wish for mysteries again," said Tib, dolefully. "Just because Regina is so fond of us, and we are so fond of her—just because of that you may be sure we shall never see her again."

At these words Gerald began to cry. I was half vexed with him, and half sorry for him.

"Don't cry, Gerald," I said; "though, all the same, Tib, I don't see why you need always make the worst of things. It may be all right, Gerald dear—perhaps grandpapa may not mind. And just think how nice it would be to be able to have her to come to see us at Rosebuds!"

Gerald began drying his eyes, for which purpose another little grimy ball—this time blue and white—was brought into requisition.

"I'm sure I love her the best of us all," he said, as a sort of apology.

"You can't love her more than we do," said Tib and I, rather grumpily.

Then we began to think perhaps we had better be going home. We had some lessons still to do for Mr. Markham, and it must be near tea-time, though we weren't very hungry, on account of the afternoon luncheon we had had.

We left the saloon with a lingering look at all, especially at the old princess, as we now called her—our first friend, whom we felt we had rather neglected of late. There she was, smiling as usual, with the sweet, but slightly contemptuous smile she had always worn—as if she knew herself to be above all foolish weaknesses and changeablenesses, and could afford to smile at them amiably.

"Good-bye, princess," I said. "I don't know if we shall ever see you again, but if not, we thank you for your politeness to us, though we can't pretend to say we love you as much as our new princess."

"It isn't her fault, poor thing," added Tib, "she can't help being only a picture instead of a living person. And, Gussie, she must have been a living person once; I mean there must have been a person just like her, and that person must have been very like Regina. Isn't it sad to think that there's nothing left of her except this cold picture, always smiling the same, whatever happens?"

"It's no more sad about her than about any other picture," I said, rather crossly. Sometimes I do get cross with Tib when she is sentimental. I'm sure I don't know why—it *is* ill-natured. "I wonder," I went on, more eagerly, "I wonder if possibly she could be the portrait of the oldish lady—when the oldish lady was young, you know, Tib, for she is so like Regina."

It was Tib's turn to snub *me* now.

"The portrait of *that* lady," she said. "My goodness, Gussie! for it to be her portrait she would need to be about a hundred and twenty years old. Can't you tell that by the dress, and the *look* of the picture?"

"Well, never mind," I said. "We can't find out anything about her, so it's no use squabbling. We must go, Tib; I'm sure it's late; and we don't want to do anything that could vex nurse just as grandpapa's coming, for you know he always asks her if we've been good."

"Come along, then," said Tib.

We walked slowly down the long passage and into the conservatory, where everything looked just exactly the same as the first day we had seen it.

"Oh dear, I am so unhappy!" said Gerald, again. "I've got a *feeling* that all the nice has finished."

"Open the door quick, Gerald, or let me do it, and don't make things worse by talking nonsense."

Gerald turned to the door—the key was sticking in the lock, as I said—Gerald always left it *after* locking it.

"Do be quick," said Tib, impatiently.

Whether it was her hurrying him that made him awkward or jerky, or whether it was just that something had gone

wrong with the lock or the key—you remember we had noticed it was stiffer than usual when we came in—I can't say. But, however that may have been, this is what happened. The key wouldn't turn in the lock! Gerald fumbled at it for some time, then Tib and I got impatient.

"What *is* the matter?" said Tib.

"What *are* you doing?" said I; and we both ran forward, pushing poor Gerald aside, and each trying to get hold of the key. We each took a turn at it, like the first day, only now our flurry and fear made us less cool and careful. It was no use; we pressed, and pulled, and tugged, we took the key out, and rubbed it and cleaned it as if we had been Bluebeard's wife, and put it back again to try afresh. No use!

"I really think keys have got spirits in them sometimes," said Tib. "They *are* so contrary."

And then, hot and worried, beginning to be frightened too, we looked at our sore fingers, which the horrid key had bruised and scratched, and asked ourselves what to do.

Tib started forward again—she had spied a strong bit of stick in a corner.

"I believe it's only stiffness, after all," she said. "There *can't* be anything the matter with the key."

She seized the stick—it *was* a very stout one—ran it through the ring of the key, and before Gerald and I really knew what she was doing, she had grasped the two ends with her two hands, and was turning vigorously.

"Ah! I told you so," she cried, as she felt that the stick *did* turn, "it only wanted some strength. But oh, Gussie! oh, Gerald!" she screamed the next moment, "see, see!"

She drew back a little—we did see—the key had *broken*, not turned! the ring was still hanging on the stick; the useless end of the key stuck out of the lock as if in mockery.

"Oh, Tib!" I cried, for somehow one's first feeling always is to blame some one, "why were you so hasty? Oh dear! what *shall* we do?"

Tib was too subdued to resent my blame.

"It wouldn't turn before," she said meekly. "Perhaps we are no worse off than before."

"Yes, we are," I said angrily. "Then, at least, we could take the key out and shout through the key-hole. Now we can't even do that," for I had tried, and found that there was now no moving the key the least little bit. There really was *nothing* to be done. But we did not realise that all at once. We set to work shouting and kicking on the door, in hopes that somebody might be passing by the tangle, though nothing was more unlikely. We climbed up on the shelves of the conservatory, in hopes somebody might be in that garden—the garden of the old house, as we now knew it to be. But very little was to be seen—only some grass stretching towards a belt of trees, and no sign of anybody—it wasn't till afterwards that we knew there *was* another door into the conservatory, concealed in a corner—a door for gardeners to come in by, but it hadn't been used for many years, and the key was lost, so the knowledge wouldn't have done us much good—and we gave up that hope in despair.

Then another idea struck us—we ran back to the saloon to try the door by which Regina came in. If *possibly* she hadn't locked it, we might get into the house, and out through it, and so home. But no—the great double doors were as firm as a rock. Regina had locked them only too securely!

"She might have left it unlocked," we said, in a sort of unreasonable rage; "she might have thought perhaps we might need to get out this way." And then we remembered that she had been used to see us coming in and out quite easily. She had had no reason for any misgiving.

"But there may be some one in the house," said Tib. So again we set to work calling, and knocking, and banging at the

doors. In vain—in vain! We were completely locked in, and evidently there was no one near enough to hear us.

Tired out at last, we sat down, huddled together, on one of the arm-chairs, where we had sat so happily with Regina.

"We must stay all night," I said.

"Till the dusting person comes in the morning," said Tib.

"Any way, it's a good thing we had some afternoon luncheon," said Gerald, though even this consoling reflection did not prevent the tears rolling down his poor fat cheeks.

We didn't as yet feel hungry—nor did we feel exactly frightened, though it did begin to feel "eerie." But very soon we felt very cold. It is strange how cold an unused room gets to feel as soon as the bright daylight goes. We had our jackets on, fortunately, and we took some of the linen covers off the chairs, and wrapped them round us, so that we looked like ghosts or dancing dervishes. And thus enveloped, we huddled together as close as we could.

And the last thing we saw as the light faded, so that everything in the room grew dim and shadowy, was the calmly smiling face of the "old princess" up above us on the wall.

I never see it now without remembering that strange evening.

CHAPTER XI.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

"For this relief, much thanks."—*Hamlet*.

My story is getting rather difficult to manage now. Indeed, I don't quite see how to do. I *think*, if I had known how long it would be, and what a lot of half-holidays I should have to stay in to write it, I *think* I would never have begun it. But I won't be laughed at for "beginning, and not ending." And if I get it rather muddley, and can't do it the way authors do who know how to plan stories, and write them so that they seem all to come of themselves, like flowers growing, you good people, whoever you are, that come to read it must forgive me and believe I did my best.

But I can't go on regularly the "I" way now. That is what puzzles me. I have to be, as it were, in three places at once. First of all—we three are all locked up in the old house now—I must tell you what was happening at Rosebuds.

Nurse didn't miss us for a good while; she was busy helping Mrs. Munt, as there was always a good deal of fuss when grandpapa was expected. And just as they were getting things pretty ready, and nurse *would* have begun seeing about our tea, up comes a man from the telegraph office at Welford with the usual brown envelope and pink paper inside, addressed to Mrs. Munt, to say that grandpapa was coming *that* evening, would be there about eight o'clock. Immediately, of course, all the bustle and fuss began over again, only twice as bad; for Mrs. Munt had to get a dinner ready all in a hurry, and to send one running this way and another that way for all the things needed. Nurse went with her to the kitchen, calling to Fanny to take up our tea, and see that we got it properly; you can understand that, just thinking of us as at play in the garden, it never occurred to nurse to ask if we were in, or to feel the least anxious. Fanny, on her side, wasn't at all given to being anxious about anything except her own bonnets and caps, so she merely set the tea, and then, "supposing" we were up stairs, and would come down when we heard the bell, off she went to her own room and her bonnets.

But the tea got cold in the teapot, the bread-and-butter was untouched, the honey was at the disposal of all the flies

who chose to sip it—we three never came! And when nurse, after helping Mrs. Munt till the two old bodies were satisfied that all would be right, trotted up to the schoolroom to put *us* in order next, there was no one to be seen! Just at first, I fancy, she was more vexed than frightened.

"Dear, dear!" says I (this is nurse, you understand, telling it over to me afterwards), "where can they be, the naughty children? But I wasn't not to say afraid of anything wrong. I called Fanny, idle girl that she is, and sent her out into the garden to look for you, never doubting but that in two minutes she'd be back with you all."

But when Fanny, after considerably more than two minutes, reappeared with the news that we were nowhere to be seen, then poor nurse was dreadfully upset. She ran to Mrs. Munt, and the two trotted everywhere about the grounds, giving the alarm to the gardener and his boy, who joined them in the search.

It was getting near the time for grandpapa's arrival. The dog-cart had started for the station before our absence had been discovered, and to add to her own great anxiety, nurse had the fear of grandpapa's driving in every moment and demanding what was the matter. It must really have been a terrible evening for both nurse and Mrs. Munt; and as time passed and grandpapa did not come, their fear of his displeasure gave way to the wish that he were there to advise and direct them what to do.

They had exhausted all their energies when at last—about nine o'clock—the dog-cart appeared with him. He had missed the train which stopped at our little station, and had come on by the next—an express, by which he was obliged to get out at Welford. So he had telegraphed to the groom to drive on, and meet him there instead.

Mrs. Munt met him at the door; a moment before, she had been at the gate, but when she heard the dog-cart approaching, she hurried back to the house. Not even her fears of every kind could set aside her ideas of what was proper and respectful.

"God grant Mr. Truro may be with master!" she said to herself, and her heart sank still lower when she saw that grandpapa was alone.

"Good evening, Mrs. Munt," he said, as he got down; "you will have been wondering what has become of me," and then he quickly explained what had happened. But receiving no distinct reply, he looked at her, and saw that she was crying.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Are the children ill?"

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, "oh, my dear master, I only wish I knew!" and then she told him of our strange disappearance.

He listened, but for some time he could not believe it was quite as she said.

"They are hiding somewhere to trick you, you may be sure," he said.

"But they'd never keep it up so long, sir," she replied. "Nine o'clock at night—their bedtime, and had nothing to eat since their dinner at one. Oh no, sir—I wish I could think it—but it's not in the nature of children to keep it up so long. And not of those dear children: they'd have come out wherever they were, on hearing poor nurse and me a-praying and a-begging of them to come out."

Grandpapa did not speak, but Mrs. Munt saw that he began to take it seriously. He would not go into the house till every corner of the grounds had again been searched under his own eye. And not the grounds only, but the house; and when at last there was nowhere else to look, and grandpapa had shouted to us in every tone—scolding, appealing, entreating—fancy him entreating—us to give some sign of life, promising not to be angry, never again to be vexed with us whatever we did, if we would but answer: when *everywhere* had been searched, and everything said and done that could be thought of, poor grandpapa, looking quite old and shaky all of a sudden, sat down by the table in the dining-room, where his dinner was so neatly set out, and buried his face in his hands.

It was terrible, both nurse and the old housekeeper told us—terrible to see the cold, strong man so overcome, and to hear what he murmured to himself.

"All that I had left—all," he said. "My own children, for she was as my daughter to me, and my poor boy—one gone, one to have deceived me. And now, in my old age, these little creatures whom I was learning to love! Is it my fault? Was I too harsh to them? Did I neglect them? Why is it that all belonging to me seem doomed in some way?"

And then he raised his poor white face, and told what he was thinking.

"Munt," he said, abruptly, "I have refused to allow the idea in my mind—but it must be the truth. I have tried not to entertain it, for I knew if it were the case, there was nothing to be done. It is so dreadfully deep——" and he gave a little shudder. "They must have fallen into the pits at the corner of the Old House fields. I had a presentiment of it from their first coming here. Tell the man to fetch the ropes—there must be the right thing in the village, for cows have fallen in before now; those pools must be dragged."

Mrs. Munt gave a little scream. Then she grew quiet again.

"No, sir," she said, "the dear children are too obedient for that. They remembered what you said to them about not going to those pits, and they repeated their promise to nurse only a day or two ago."

Grandpapa looked up with a gleam of hope. But it faded again, and he only repeated the words—

"Those pools must be dragged. Send the men. I can do no more."

Then he half fell back upon his chair, and stayed thus—almost unconscious, Mrs. Munt thinks—while she went away to obey his orders, till——

But now I must take up another end of the story.

The family at the Rectory went early to bed as a rule, even when they had visitors with them. This eventful evening they and their two visitors were just standing about the drawing-room, preparing to say good-night and to light their bedroom candles, when they were startled by a loud violent ringing at the door.

"Dear me," said they all, "what can that be? So late, too; it is past ten."

"Some one ill, and wanting me, possibly," said the rector, and he went out to the hall, where the footman was already at the door, leaving the four ladies—his mother-in-law, and Mrs. Lauriston, his wife, and the two visitors—looking at each other rather startledly. Still, there was no reason to expect anything wrong—all the young Lauristons were upstairs safe in bed their mother remembered with satisfaction.

They heard voices at the door—then the rector came back, looking shocked and troubled.

"I must go out," he said; "a sad, a terribly sad thing is supposed to have happened."

"Where? Any of our people?" exclaimed his wife.

Mr. Lauriston hesitated—he glanced at the two stranger ladies—at the elder one especially—the lady Tib and I had seen from the Rectory gate.

"You must hear it sooner or later," he said; "I'm very sorry to have to tell it. It is at—at Rosebuds—the children there, poor Gerald's children—are missing, and it is feared they have fallen into the pits—near—near your house, Mrs. Mowbray. They have sent to me for the things to drag with." (There was a pond almost big enough to be called a little lake in the Rectory grounds: that was how they had ropes there.)

Mrs. Mowbray gave a scream.

"The children—*drowned!*" she cried in an agony. "Oh, Edith! oh, William! if it is so, it is my fault. I should not have left these pits to be filled up by Farmer Jackman when he buys the place. The moment I knew the children were at Rosebuds, *I* should have done it. Oh God! it is too awful, and too cruel—just when I was beginning, faintly beginning, to hope."

She seemed as if she were going to faint. But her daughter, *our* Regina, our dear fairy, darted from the room, calling out as she did so—

"Wait a moment, dear mamma. Don't be so miserable. It may be a mistake."

She rushed to the hall, where stood the Rectory servants in a group, and Barstow, grandpapa's very spruce, stuck-up London groom, who had come to ask for the ropes, with a very solemn face, but very proud, all the same, to be the centre of information. Regina seized hold of him by the coat collar, I believe; he told nurse afterwards that the young lady shook him, shook him hard, "as if it was all *my* fault," he said to nurse.

"Leave off chattering and gossiping," she said, for our princess can be very determined when she likes, "and attend to me. Are the children *known* to be in the pool? Were they seen near there? or heard? or how is it?"

"Oh no, bless you, Miss," said Barstow, shaking himself free rather resentfully. "It's only that they're not to be found nowhere else. They've been out a-playing in the garden, as everybody thought, since two or three o'clock, and they've never come home, and they're nowhere to be found; and my master—Gerald Ansdell, Esq., M.P., if you please, Miss,"—for Regina and all the Rectory folk were perfect strangers to him "my master has got it in his head that the young ladies and Master Gerald is—has—must be drowned, Miss, to speak plain."

Regina dashed back to the drawing-room.

"Mamma darling, it's all right. Mr. Lauriston, Mrs. Lauriston, all of you, help me to explain. *I* know where the children are—they're locked in, in the Old House—that's all that's wrong—I'm sure of it. It was a little plan of Charles Truro's and mine; we thought if I got to know the dear little things it might lead to something—to a reconciliation. They had found their way there by themselves, and told him about it. But I must go at once to let them out, the poor darlings. And, mamma, mamma, take courage—seize the moment. While I fetch them, you go to Uncle Ansdell and tell him the good news. You may never have such a chance again. Don't you think so, Mr. Lauriston—you who know the whole story—oh, do say you think she should do it?" and Regina wrung her hands in her eagerness.

It took a little cross-questioning to make them understand all; but Regina got her way. Barstow, to keep him quiet, was allowed to go off with the gardener to get the drags, and in less time than you would have thought it possible they all set off—Mr. Lauriston, Regina, and her mother. But at the gate of Rosebuds they separated. Regina hurried on down the lane with the rector, her mother with trembling, shaking steps, went in and made her way up to the porch.

The front door stood open; in the confusion and excitement nobody had thought of closing it.

Grandpapa—poor grandpapa—was sitting as Mrs. Munt had left him when she went off to give orders about dragging the pools. A little noise, the door softly opening and closing again, made him look up. A tall figure, all dressed in black, with a white, sweet, anxious face and blue eyes, like Tib's and grandpapa's own, streaming with tears, stood beside him. He stared at it half stupefied. I think he thought he was dreaming. But it spoke.

"Brother, dear, dear brother, it is I. Do you know me—will you forgive me at last? Oh, dear, dear brother, forgive me."

He gazed at her as if he did not see her.

"I do not know why you have come," he said. "Do you know what has happened? My children—poor Gerald's children—are drowned, all of them. I am quite alone in the world."

"No, no," she cried, "they are not drowned. They will be here in a few minutes. It was that gave me courage to come—to bring you the good news. Gerald, for *their* sake, for the dear children's sake, won't you at last forgive me and let me help you with them? Oh, I will love them so if you will let me. Brother, say quick before they come—say you will forgive me at last. I have so suffered, I have been punished so long. Brother, say you forgive your poor Queenie."

She half knelt, half sank down beside him—all I am writing is from what Regina has told me, and her mother herself told her—grandpapa stretched out his arms, and she flung herself into them.

"Queenie, my little Queenie," he said, "*you* have brought me the good news—is it true, quite true?"

Auntie—that is, of course, what she is to us—auntie was almost frightened. He was so gentle, so clinging, and unlike his usual cold decided self. And a sort of terror went through her for a moment, "Suppose it didn't turn out to be true that we were safe."

"I should never forgive myself, *never*," she thought, "if I have raised his hopes only for them to be dashed again;" and even while she went on repeating that it was true, he would see us directly, she trembled.

But there came a noise—a very slight, distant sound at first—of many voices and steps approaching. Auntie's ears are quick, and that evening they were quicker than usual, even. She heard it ever so far off, long before grandpapa heard anything. And she listened, trembling. Were the voices cheerful?—*was* it all right?

I have so often heard all the story of that evening—of other people's part of it, I mean—that I seem to be able to see it all for myself as it must have looked to them. I can so picture auntie standing there, scarcely daring to breathe in her anxiety to hear! And the first thing that quite reassured her was Regina's voice speaking in a pitying, petting, yet laughing way to Gerald.

"My poor old man! no one will be vexed with you for crying, for, as you say, you *are* only seven years old." *Of course*, in Gerald's troubles he had begun his old cry!

And in another moment the dining-room door opened and a queer-looking group appeared. There was Regina in a shawl thrown over her head, she had not waited to put on her hat; there was Mr. Lauriston and two or three gardeners and people we had gathered on the way—for, of course, we had come round by the proper entrance to the Old House, and had found them all at the pit—and in the middle of the crowd three very dishevelled-looking little figures, with eyes swollen with crying, and now blinking at the sudden light, who rushed forward to grandpapa, calling out all together—

"Oh! dear grandpapa, please forgive us. We didn't mean to disobey you."

And before we knew where we were he had us all in his arms at once, and he was hugging us as he had never hugged us before.

"My children," he said, "my dear little children."

But when he looked up and saw Regina, he really did start.

"Is it——?" he began, and then he looked round at auntie. "It is yourself over again," he said, "it is you, Queenie—as I last saw you."

Fancy that; fancy the years and years that had gone by since they had met! How very, very strange it must have seemed.

But auntie explained who Regina was, and then grandpapa kissed her too, with a curious wistful look in his eyes. And then came hurrying in nurse and Mrs. Munt, whom the good news of our return had just reached, and we were bundled off to bed, where we each had some nice hot stuff to drink, and Regina explained all the queer story to the two old servants, while down stairs grandpapa and auntie were together alone. And all that *they* had to tell and ask of course

we would never expect to hear, but still, we had enough told to us to make all that had puzzled us plain, and to clear away all remains of our family "mystery."

This I will tell you in the next chapter. And I will also explain to you how Regina had come to know of our having found our way into the Old House, the hopes that this had put into her head—hopes which had been more than fulfilled, thanks to the accident with the key, which had so strangely turned to good.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORY OF THE OLD HOUSE.

"Old house! that time hath deigned to spare,
'Mid sunny slopes and gardens fair."—Sigourney.

It all seemed like a dream the next morning. We slept much later than usual, for we were quite tired out. I can never even now think of that evening—shut up in the dark in the big bare room—without a sort of shudder. It really was dreadful: we were so cold that when we did fall asleep it was only to wake again with a start to find ourselves shivering and aching. And it was frightening, too: though we squeezed together as close as we could, we felt dreadfully alone. And alone we really were; for, as we understood afterwards, there was nobody at all in the Old House. The person who dusted it was the woman who lived at the lodge, and only came up in the mornings. Regina had taken her a little into her confidence. The day she hurried away when a bell rang, it was the woman ringing to let her know the Rectory pony-carriage was coming up the lane. Auntie knew that Regina came to the Old House, but she thought it was just to wander about the garden, and that day she had promised to call for her at the lodge. For the Old House belonged to auntie: it had belonged to the Mowbrays for a very, very great many years. And this brings me to the story of the long-ago troubles which we were told—the story which explained everything which had puzzled us.

It was Mrs. Munt who told it us. She came into our room—Tib's and my room—that morning before we were up—we had had our breakfast in bed—and sat down between our cots.

"My dears," she began, "your dear grandpapa and—and my dear lady, Mrs. Mowbray, Miss Queenie as was—they have asked me to tell you something of the past, so that you may understand all. It is a great honour they have done me, and I will endeavour to show that I feel it such. But oh," and here she fairly broke down, "this is a happy, a blessed day—to see them at one again, and oh, my dears, it was a happy day that brought you to Rosebuds, for all the anguish of heart of Mrs. Liddy and myself last night, we shall never but be thankful to the over-ruling powers as directed the finding of the key, and your innocent minds to the Old House."

At this point Mrs. Munt stopped. It was a sort of little address which she thought it her duty to make, and after this, she went straight on.

"It is a many years ago," she said, "that it all happened. When I first came to Rosebuds as a young girl to help in the cooking, there was living here your grandpapa, then a little boy of ten, and his brother Baldwin, and Miss Mary, with their mother, and their father, who was on the point of going abroad with his regiment. Not long after he left, Miss Regina was born; then came the news of your great-grandpapa's death, and the shock affected your great-grandmamma so much that she never recovered it. She died a year or two after, Master Baldwin being by that time preparing for the army, for he was five years older than Master Gerald, and Miss Mary older than he. Miss Mary took charge of things with a lady to help her. You can fancy that everybody was devoted to Miss Regina, Master Gerald especially. Some years later, Ansdell Friars came to Master Baldwin, by his uncle's death. He came home from time to time, and we used to spend a part of the year there, but it never seemed home to us, like Rosebuds. Your grandpapa married young—he was about

twenty-four, and Miss Queenie was thirteen. Poor Miss Mary died the year before his marriage; you have seen her tomb at Ansdell, and it seemed well to him to marry, to have a lady at the head of things, him having so much charge like, for his brother. And your papa was born when Miss Queenie was about fifteen. Your grandpapa's marriage was a very happy one; Mrs. Ansdell was a very sweet lady, and suited him well. She had not half the spirit nor the cleverness of Miss Queenie, and she gave in to her husband, and she joined with him in thinking there never was so beautiful a creature as Miss Queenie. How they did spoil her! Poor Master Gerald—your papa, my dears, seemed nobody and nothing in the family, compared with his auntie, though he was a dear little boy. Well, to explain—next door to Rosebuds, as you now understand, is the Old House. It is a far finer and larger place than this, and it has always belonged to the Mowbrays, who are cousins of the Ansdells, by a Miss Regina Mowbray having married an Ansdell—your grandpapa's grandmother she was, as well as I can remember. It is her picture that hangs in the big drawing-room—"

"The old princess!" we exclaimed, at which Mrs. Munt smiled—"and," she went on, "it is from her, they always say, that comes the beauty—the dark hair and blue eyes, the Ansdells are, so to say, proud of. Well,"—Mrs. Munt here hurried on a little, I think she thought it not good for us to say much about family beauty; it didn't matter to *me*, with my shaggy light hair, and brownish-green eyes, but Tib is different—"the families at the two houses were very intimate—that door in the wall was made in the Old House conservatory as a short cut for the young ladies to run in and out by—they and the rectory family, this Mr. Lauriston's uncle it was then, but this one was a great deal there, were all most friendly. At the Old House there were some sisters—one is living still, being Mr. Truro's mother—and two brothers. The eldest brother *was* a nice gentleman, just everything a gentleman should be, and your grandpapa was delighted when he spoke to him for Miss Queenie. Miss Queenie laughed and made fun of it, but in the end she said 'yes,' and all would have been well—for he was a gentleman no woman could have failed to care for as a husband—had not the younger brother come home on leave. He had not seen Miss Queenie since she was grown up, for he was a sailor, and had been long away. He was handsome, and had a taking way with him—a sort of dash about him, and he was selfish and false. He fell in love with her, and persuaded her that she had fallen in love with him, and rather than be open about it, bad as it was to have lured her away from his brother, he made it worse by getting her to run away with him, and not let any one know where they were, till he wrote to say they were married. My dears, from that day till yesterday, your grandpapa and she never met again."

"Was he so angry?" we asked.

"Anger is no word for it. He was turned to stone to her. The deceitfulness—that was always his cry. Poor Mr. John Mowbray—his great friend, the one who had really the most to complain of, was far gentler, though it broke his heart. He never married, and at his death, two years ago, all came to your auntie as his brother's widow, for Mr. Conrad, the brother, was dead. That is how the Old House is now your auntie's, but she has never lived there. She could not bear it, seeing her brother would not forgive her, and she had made up her mind to sell it, and came to stay at the Rectory to get it all arranged. It was partly hearing it was going to be sold, made your grandpapa think of coming here again at last—he thought it was all quite settled, and no fear of any one coming about. For he has not even had any friendliness with the Rectory folk all these years; the old rector spoke to him before he died, and begged him to forgive Miss Queenie, but it only made him harder. He would never hear her name—he scored it out wherever he came across it in a book—"

"Oh, yes, we saw that in London," we interrupted.

"*Nothing*," continued Mrs. Munt, "but the sight of her poor, sweet, worn face would have changed him, and to think that *she* should have been the one to tell him the good news last night—it is indeed wonderful how it has come about."

"Was auntie very unhappy with that man—the one she married?" asked Tib in a low voice. Mrs. Munt looked sad and grave.

"My dears," she said, solemnly, "no good comes of ill-doing. The man who deceived his kind brother, who set himself to wile a girl away from her truest and best friends, was not the man to make a good husband. She must have suffered more than you—or we, maybe—could understand. But it is past, and you need never think of it again, except as a warning. Your dear auntie may tell you more herself as you grow older. But for me, I think I have done my part; and,

indeed, I could almost feel the work of my life is near its end now I have lived to see my dear master and his best-loved sister united again," and poor Mrs. Munt wiped her eyes as she kissed us, and said we might get up now—we were to go to the Rectory to luncheon.

You will be glad to hear that she is living still, and likely to live for many peaceful years to come.

We were, of course, very much interested in all she had told us. It took some time to get it quite straight and clear in our heads, especially as we felt that we should not much like to talk over the saddest parts of it with any one but ourselves: not even with Regina, for, of course, the man who had brought so much misery to them all—Mr. Conrad Mowbray—was her father (I am not going to let her read this last chapter if I can help it); and even about dear auntie, we felt it would not be kind to talk about it to Regina—though *now* I can scarcely fancy even Regina herself feeling more tender about anything and everything to do with her mother than Tib and I, who are really only her grandnieces, do.

We were at the same time in a hurry to get dressed, and go down stairs, and yet a little afraid.

"Last night I wasn't afraid of grandpapa," said Tib; "we seemed all worked up, so that only the *realest* feelings mattered. Little top feelings, like being shy and all that, seemed pushed away."

I didn't answer for a moment. I was thinking over what she said.

"Do you think our being afraid of grandpapa and fancying we don't love him is only a top feeling after all?" I said.

"Yes," said Tib, "I do. Anyway, *I'm* going to love him now. Perhaps, if he has so many to love him now—auntie and Regina, and you and me—all at once, the lot of it will make up for his having had so little all these years. Things come like that sometimes, I suppose."

While we were talking—we took a good while to dress, for we wanted to be very neat to go to the Rectory—there came a tap at the door, and in walked Gerald, as cool as a cucumber.

"I'm ready," he said, and indeed one could see by the scrubby look of his cheeks that he had had an extra amount of soap. "I've got my best suit on to go to the Rectory."

"But, Gerald," said Tib, "don't you want to hear all about how it's all been. Gussie and I can tell you," for I forgot to say that Mrs. Munt had told us we had better explain a little to him. "Don't you want to know why the Old House that we called the palace was shut up, and how it comes to be auntie's, and how she is our auntie, and—"

"No," interrupted Gerald. "I don't want to know anything. It puzzles me. I'm only seven years old."

We looked at him in astonishment. Then we fairly burst out laughing.

"I never saw such a boy," said Tib. "You're so lazy, Gerald, you won't even let your mind work enough to understand about your own family."

"I do understand all I need," said Gerald; "I understand that we've got an auntie, and that she's very kind, and that Regina is a cousin, and she's very nice too—so nice that I'm still going to think she's a fairy. That's what I've settled, and I think it's quite enough when I'm only seven."

And from that day to this I have never heard him express any curiosity or make any inquiries as to all that had happened. I fancy Gerald will get through life comfortably—though to do him justice he is working very well at school, and doesn't seem to be considered lazy at all.

Tib and I had still enough questions to ask to make up for his not asking any. We were in a fever to see Regina, and very glad when Gerald ran up stairs again to say that she had just driven over in the Lauristons' pony-carriage to fetch us, and was waiting downstairs, and we hurried down as fast as we could.

"But what about grandpapa?" said Tib, as we got to the first landing. "Should we not go to say good morning or something to him?"

I hesitated, but just at that moment we heard his voice. He was standing in the porch talking to Regina. You can't think how funny it seemed. When he heard us he came into the hall and met us at the foot of the stairs. Then he kissed us each, in a way he had never kissed us before. It was like saying, "You understand all now. Let us begin a new life together;" though his *said* words were only, "Good morning, my dear children. Are you all quite well and not tired now?"

"Quite well, thank you, dear grandpapa," and I am sure he understood "between the lines," as people say of a letter meaning more than it shows.

"I wish you could come with us, Uncle Gerald," said Regina, as we were driving off.

"Thank you, my dear, but I am very busy," he said. There was a look in his eyes to her that I had never seen before.

"But Charlie will be here this afternoon, and he does help you, doesn't he?" she said.

"Very much," grandpapa replied.

We looked back at him, standing there in the doorway.

"Grandpapa is changed since last night," said Tib.

"How?" said Regina, anxiously. "You don't think he's ill?"

"No," said Tib, "though he does look very pale. But his face seems older and *yet* younger. It has got a sort of softer look, as if at last he wasn't going to fight against himself anymore, but that it has tired him."

"Yes," said Regina, "I understand. Then *you* understand now—you and Gussie?"

"Yes," we answered. "Mrs. Munt has told us a great deal. But there are some things only you can tell us, and we want dreadfully to ask you."

"Fire away," said Regina, and she did so laugh when we didn't understand her; for, of course, though she had never had any brothers or sisters, she hadn't lived the shut-up way we had done.

"We want to know," we began, "how you knew about us going to the—the Old House, and how you knew our names and about us altogether."

"It was Charlie Truro that told me about you," she said. "He is my cousin as much—no, a good deal more—than he is yours, and we have always been a great deal together. He has known what a terrible sorrow it was to mamma to be estranged from her only brother, and he and I have often planned what we could do. We were very glad when Uncle Gerald agreed to take him as a sort of secretary for a while—it seemed a sort of beginning."

"I wonder grandpapa ever did," I said. "Wasn't it rather a wonder? For he knew he was a near cousin of yours, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Regina, "but it came about naturally enough, through some friends who had no connection with us. And once he had seen Charlie, Uncle Gerald seems to have taken a fancy to him. We came down here to stay at the Rectory, not knowing any one was at Rosebuds. Your coming was kept very quiet. Then Charlie told us of it, when he wrote, and when he came down here he managed to come to see us one day—a Sunday it was—at the Rectory, and told us all about you. And to me, though to no one else, he told of your funny trouble, about having got into the Old House and wondering if it was naughty, and then we planned together—he and I—that I should meet you there. I don't know exactly what I hoped for—I think Charlie had a vague idea that some day Uncle Gerald might see me, and that—with me being so like mamma—it might do some good. But we hadn't fixed anything, we meant to talk it all over the next time he came—to-

day, that is. He little thought he would find it all done when he came."

"Won't he be surprised!" I said.

"Mamma sent him a telegram this morning," she said. "He deserved it."

But by this time we were at the Rectory.

We couldn't help feeling rather shy; we had really never been out anywhere before except once, in London, when we had gone to have tea with a niece of nurse's, who had a shop in one of the big streets, and we had tea in the parlour behind. So that was *quite* different, of course. At the Rectory it was very nice except for our being shy. But after luncheon, when we went out into the garden with auntie, she soon sent away the shyness. She was just as kind and understanding as she could be, as she has been ever since—such a *perfect* auntie that our only wonder now is how we ever did without her all those years.

We had to tell her all *our* story over again, all from the beginning of grandpapa's telling us we were to come to Rosebuds, and the book with the name scored through; we *had* to tell her, though we were afraid of making her cry, down to our finding the key and getting into the house, and the old princess, and the new princess, and all. She asked us questions, too, about Ansdell Friars, and in what ways it was changed since she had seen it.

"I should like to see it again," she said; "though it would never seem as much home to me as here," and she sighed a little.

"But you're not going away from here now, auntie," we said, "You're not going to sell the Old House?"

Auntie smiled.

"I hope not," she said. "They all think I am in no way bound to Jackman. Indeed, it was his haggling so about the price that brought me down here this summer. But one thing I have already given orders for: those horrid pools are to be filled up at once. I won't have dear Gerald's peace of mind disturbed by any anxiety *I* can do away with."

We stared—it wasn't for a minute or two that we understood whom she was talking of. It was so funny to hear grandpapa spoken of as "Gerald"—and when we found out whom she meant, we all burst out laughing. And while we were still laughing we heard wheels, and there was Mr. Truro, who had looked in for a moment on his way from the station. I don't think I ever saw any one's face look so happy and pleased as his did!

We all went back together to Rosebuds. Auntie and Regina said they were going to have afternoon tea with grandpapa, and you don't know how nice it looked, all neatly put out in the pretty old drawing-room, and poor auntie kept giving little cries of mixed pleasure and pain as she recognised one old friend after another among the china and the silver, and even the *cakes*, which were a secret of Mrs. Munt's that no one could make but herself.

And after tea we had a great treat. Auntie persuaded grandpapa that the air would do him good, and so she coaxed him out into the garden and then down the lane, and so on into the Old House grounds. And then she and Regina took us all over it—"It is best to get over the first seeing it again at once," I heard auntie whisper to grandpapa, "and the children's pleasure will make it seem different."

It *is* such a beautiful old house. I could write almost another book about it, and it was so strange to get into the big drawing-room by the double doors through which Regina used to disappear, to see our old princess smiling down at us in our happiness just exactly as she had done in our trouble!

Poor old, ever young princess! We shall always love you, but nothing, *nothing* like our own dear bright living fairy who has brought such new joy and good into our lives. We have seldom been parted from her and her mother since that day; we are almost always together, grandpapa and auntie and Regina and we children, and very often Mr. Truro too. Grandpapa says he is getting very old, but he *really* doesn't look so, and even when he *does* get "very old," we shall all

only love him the better.

THE END.

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LONDON AND BUNGAY.

[End of *The Palace in the Garden*, by Mrs. Molesworth]