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FAIRIES AFIELD

BY MRS. MOLESWORTH

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GERTRUDE DEMAIN HAMMOND

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TORONTO

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO ONE WHO LOVES FAIRY STORIES
THE REVEREND JOHN CYRIL HOWELL

155 SLOANE STREET, S.W.

May 8, 1911.



Pretty Ysenda.

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"Ask the Robin"

Once upon a time—a fairly long ago time—there lived in a neat little cottage two young girls who were sisters. If you had gone to see them on a bright warm summer's day, I daresay you would have envied them and their life and their lot. For they were pretty and healthy and they loved each other dearly, and the cottage was charming to look at, in its dress of clustering roses and honeysuckle and traveller's joy, and other sweet and beautiful climbing, flowering plants. Furthermore, it stood in a little garden filled with treasures of different kinds, pansies, of which there was a great variety, and lilies and mignonette and all the flowers one loves to see in an old-fashioned garden of the kind. And the sisters kept it in perfect order, the beds were always raked, there was never a weed to be seen, the tiny plots of grass were like velvet.

In spring too it was very pretty, when first the snowdrops and then the crocuses and primroses and violets woke up after their long winter sleep, and in autumn also there was a show of beauties, dahlias and chrysanthemums and kitchen pokers and other pretty things of the season.

And indeed, even in winter, the place had its charm, of evergreen shrubs and bright berries and—till the snow came and made an end of all but the hardiest plants, the still remaining lovely variegated leaves of late autumn.

No care or skill was wanting to keep the whole as pretty as could possibly be, for the sisters' father was a gardener, and from him they had learnt both love of growing things and knowledge of all needed for their welfare. And not so very long before this story begins I doubt if Aria or Linde—these were the girls' names—cared what time of year it was, for all were happy days to them. Glowing summer, sparkling spring, rich mellow autumn, even winter, often cold and grey—all brought joy and gladness, till one sad night terrible sorrow fell upon them. Their father was drowned on his way home from market, in crossing a swollen stream, whose rushing waters broke down the little wooden bridge, over which in the darkness he was driving his small pony-cart. And as the poor girls' mother had died years before, they were now truly orphans.

The neighbours—such as there were, for there were but few—were sorry for them and kind, as far as they could be. But it was a lonely part of the world. The gardens where the drowned man had been one of the labourers belonged to a rich landowner who seldom visited his property, and all that the place produced was sent to the nearest town and there sold. Thus there was no one of importance to take much interest in Aria or Linde, except the steward of the castle, who advised them to look for situations as servants, and when they wept and said they could not bear to be parted, he got angry and called them fools and left them alone.

For a short time they got on pretty well. They were still very young—Aria barely seventeen and Linde only fourteen, but they were active and capable and ready-witted, and their father had managed to save a little, though, alas, but a little.

Aria made it last as long as she possibly could. It was summer, and they needed but small fires and cheaper clothing and even—so it seemed to them—simpler food than in the cold weather. Then they were able to earn a fair amount by odd work in the hay-fields and so on, when work was at its best. And once a week, at least, they trudged all the way to market laden with their loveliest flowers, tied up with great taste and care, and sometimes, as the season advanced, baskets full of the wild fruit that they gathered in the forest hard by. Have I told you that their home was on the edge of a forest? No? Ah well, never mind, we shall hear more of the forest by and by.

But summer, and even autumn, only stay for their appointed time. As they stood at the cottage door one morning late in October, Aria's face grew very grave. It was a chilly day, the sky overcast and steely, a sort of sighing in the air as if the spirits of the summer and the sunshine were bidding the world a reluctant farewell, frightened away by the fast-approaching winter.

It was Friday, the day before the market, to which so far they had never missed wending their way, even if the weather were wet or stormy, as it must be now and then at all times of the year.

"How dull and cold it is!" said Linde with a little shiver. "Aria, I wish we didn't need to go all the way to market to-morrow, if it's going to be like this."

Aria looked at her without speaking for a moment. Then she said very seriously:

"You are thoughtless, Linde, but then of course you are much younger than I, poor child. You say you wish we need not go to the town to-morrow? My dear, I am only afraid that your wish will come true! I don't see what we have to take to market—the fruit is all over and we have but very few flowers to tie up."

Linde's face fell. Then she brightened up a little.

"There are lots of lovely leaves," she said.

Aria glanced over the garden.

"Yes," she replied. "I think we may manage two or three good bunches for to-morrow, and possibly for another Saturday too. And—" she went on, "it has struck me that some of the townsfolk, who are always glad to buy our flowers, might care for our dried rose-leaves—we have quite a large jar-full, you know."

Linde clapped her hands.

"What a good idea!" she cried. "Oh I'm sure the leaves would sell. So few of the ladies in the town have proper gardens of their own."

"Or time to look after them, luckily for us," said Aria, "otherwise our flowers would not be in such request."

For though little Linde spoke of their customers as "ladies," the good housekeepers of the small but busy town were mostly of the working-class themselves—that is to say, wives or mothers of the men employed in the china manufactories on which the place depended, and in those days, long, long before railway lines, there were no such things as flower shops. The only chance of getting fresh garden produce was the market.

"Luckily for us too," Aria went on, "there are no great gardens near, except at the castle, and father often said it was hard work to keep the countess supplied with flowers enough, even though she sent express messengers for them twice a week."

"All the same," said Linde rather dolefully, "I wish father hadn't been a gardener. Flowers are so delicate and wither so soon. If we'd had a little dairy now—or even poultry, and could have sold butter and eggs, and chickens. They'd have gone on all the year round."

"Linde, dear, father never had money enough to buy cows or even poultry," said Aria with a sigh. "And it would have been difficult to get much to the market, so far off as it is, without a cart and pony, and how could we have bought these?"

For the pony which had perished with the poor man was the property of his master, though he was sometimes allowed to carry shrubs and bulbs of his own to market, with the castle vegetables, when he went to sell them at the town.

Linde did not answer. Her spirits were very apt to go up and down all in a minute, so Aria spoke again more cheerfully.

"Yes," she said, "I'm glad I thought of the rose-leaves. They are really most fragrant still. I lifted the lid yesterday for a moment. The powder that father gave me to throw among them was wonderfully good. I wish we had more of it."

"Is it quite done?" asked Linde.

"Very nearly. It was given to mother, you know, when she was a bride by an old woman who was her godmother. She declared it had fairy power and would never grow stale. And so it has proved. We may safely promise any who buy the leaves that they will scent their linen even better than lavender, and more lastingly. Come along, Linde, and let's see how we can best take a good parcel of them with us to-morrow," and Linde's interest revived again, as she followed her sister indoors.

The dried leaves—what are often called "pot pourri," though the simple sisters had never heard the name—were kept in a very large jar, of old-fashioned stoneware. It had a lid, and would nowadays be highly valued as rare and antique. But of this its owners knew nothing. They only loved it for their parents' sake, as it too had been a wedding gift from the godmother. And whence she had got it no one had ever known. She was herself a rather mysterious person. Folks used to say—so Aria remembered having heard when she was a little girl, helping her mother to gather rose-leaves to fill the jar—that there was something of fairy nature about her.

"And however that may have been," said Aria, as she repeated this to Linde, "certainly her gifts have proved lasting. The jar has been knocked over several times, you know, and never broken, and the powder is as fresh as a newly gathered rose."

"Yes," Linde agreed, after a good long sniff at the jar's contents. "It's delicious. It makes me think of all sorts of lovely summer things."



"It makes me think of all sorts of lovely summer things."

Then they consulted as to how they could best carry the precious leaves to the market for sale.

"We needn't take them *all*," pleaded Linde. "I do wish we needn't sell any. It seems a shame."

"Almost," her sister replied, "but it can't be helped. If only I had had more of the powder," she repeated, "we might have collected and dried quantities of rose-leaves."

"Or if we knew how to make the powder," said Linde.

But that knowledge was not to be had.

Aria had reached down the jar, which stood on a high shelf in a corner, and the fragrance seemed to fill the room.

"Leave off sniffing it, Linde, dear," she said, for the child kept bending over it, "and let us plan how to take the leaves to market. We can't of course carry the jar, but it wouldn't do only to pack them in a sheet of paper. Ah, I have it," and she ran up the tiny ladder-like staircase which led to their little bedroom above, returning with a good-sized old-fashioned box or canister of tin, with a firm lid. "The very thing," she exclaimed joyously.

"It will be dreadfully clumsy and heavy to carry," objected Linde.

"Oh no, I can easily manage it, and a bunch or two of flowers as well, without being overladen," said Aria. "And see here, Linde, I will take this little cup," and she held up a small mug of lustre ware, "I fancy it will hold about two ounces weight of the leaves. For that quantity say we charge half a groat—and if we are lucky enough to sell twenty or even twelve cups full, that will get us through next week beautifully."

Then she filled the little cup and weighed its contents. They were just over her idea. And Linde's spirits rose again as she helped her sister to cleanse the canister from every speck of dust or mould and then to fill it with the perfumed leaves.

All that day the cottage seemed pervaded by the fragrance. Accidentally a few of the leaves and some grains of the powder fell among Linde's curly hair, and when she brushed it out at night she was amused at its scent. It was not to be wondered at perhaps, that as her head lay on the pillow she should have dreamt of the jar and its contents and the old mystery associated with them.

This was her dream.

She thought that she and her sister were standing at their usual corner of the market-place, their posies of flowers and large bunches of autumn leaves carefully arranged before them on the rough wooden table, the tin canister in the middle and a little heap of the leaves displayed in front of it. It seemed very early, there were scarcely any people about. Suddenly up came a small old woman, a stranger and what Linde would have called "a foreigner," for her dress was either that of another country or of a date already quite passed out of fashion. She glanced at the flowers, and appeared to be passing on, when she caught sight of the little heap of dried leaves, on which she stopped short and Linde felt a pair of bright eyes fixed on her. Then the stranger smiled and nodded, and, bending towards the child, murmured in her ear the mysterious words: "Three times, and then ask the robin."

"How—what do you mean?" exclaimed Linde in her dream, trying to catch hold of the owner of the piercing eyes, as she turned away. But before the little girl could touch her, she was gone, and in the start of disappointment Linde awoke.

"What a queer dream," she said to herself, as she lay thinking of it. "I wish Aria were awake, I do so want to tell it her."

But Aria was fast asleep, her face looking so peaceful in the moonlight that Linde was too unselfish to wish to disturb her, for of late she knew well that the elder girl's waking hours were full of anxiety.

"I must wait till the morning," thought the child, and turning round she herself was soon in a dreamless slumber.

The next day Aria listened with great interest to Linde's story.

"It is queer," she agreed. "It almost sounds like a message from mother's uncanny godmother."

"Don't call her 'uncanny,'" Linde objected. "It's rather a frightening sort of word, and she mightn't like it. Supposing," she went on, lowering her voice, "*supposing* she really was a fairy, or partly one, she may be back in fairyland for all we know, and some day we might see her."

But Aria shook her head.

"No," she said, "she very likely had dealings with the fairies, but that isn't the same as being one herself."

"I'll keep a good look-out for her, nevertheless, at the market to-day," Linde replied.

And so she did. But no one at all resembling the quaint figure in her dream was to be seen, and after a while Linde forgot about her, so busy were the sisters that morning in selling their wares.

The first of their usual customers, a kindly, well-to-do, housewifely woman, who had known their father and always came to them for flowers, was at once attracted by the delicious perfume of the dried leaves.

"Dear, dear," she exclaimed, "it's not often that late autumn flowers are so fragrant. Your posies are always fresh and sweet, but I've never known their scent so beautiful," and she sniffed with satisfaction, looking about to discover from which of the flowers it came.

"It's not the flowers," explained Aria to the good dame. "It's something new we have for sale to-day. I only hope that you

and our other customers may take a fancy to it," and she went on to tell of the pleasant qualities of the dried rose-leaves—how their scent, if they were laid among linen, was both fresher and more delicate to begin with, and lasted much longer than that of the finest lavender. But she said nothing of the sort of mystery connected with the powder; some instinct prevented her doing so. Nor did she tell that but a little of it remained, or that their stock of rose-leaves would soon be exhausted.

"Who knows what may happen before that?" she reflected, and the words of Linde's dream-visitor recurred to her, "Three times, and then ask the robin."

Dame Barbara was quite satisfied and greatly delighted.

"Here," she said, fumbling for her substantial purse, "a groat for two ounces of it, did you say? No, a half-groat only? My dear, you'll have to raise your prices if the perfume is so excellent! Well to begin with, give me the four ounces straight away, and here's a half-groat over and above what it all comes to—dried leaves and fresh ones and flowers, all together—just the tiny silver piece for luck, you know."

Aria and Linde smiled and thanked her. And the thanks were repeated, when, as she turned away, she called out, "I'll be the first to tell my cronies of this. Dear, dear, I feel as if I were in a fairy garden myself with the pleasure of the perfume. I had no idea that the robins' forest had such treasures of roses. For you live in the forest, do you not, or close by?"

"Yes, just at its edge," they replied, "but," Linde went on eagerly, "we never knew it was called after the robins. It is odd that we never heard it."

Dame Barbara nodded sagaciously.

"'Tis a very old name. Scarce a one but myself knows of it, nowadays," she said. "No wonder you children never heard it. There was an ancient story—just a foolish tale—that the fairies haunted the forest, till one day some cruel or stupid person killed a robin. Robins used to abound there, and they are their special favourites, you know, and since then never a fairy or a robin has been seen there. But I must hurry off to finish my marketing."

Aria and Linde looked at each other.

"It must mean something," said Linde in a low and almost awe-struck tone. "My dream, I mean, and the old woman saying, 'Ask the robin.'"

"Yes," her sister agreed. "It is odd too that we never heard the old name or the old story before. I wonder if father had? I have a sort of remembrance of his once saying something about our being too near the forest for robins to make their home with us, but I had a silly childish idea that he only meant that all robins disliked forests."

"I think I must have had the same notion," said Linde, "for we have both of us now and then wished that robins would make their nests in our garden, but we just thought they never would! We have hardly ever seen one."

"Very seldom," said Aria. "I have occasionally noticed a redbreast on the hedge, seeming to look about him, but he was sure to fly away."

But though they felt extremely interested in what they had heard and very curious to find out if, as Linde said, her dream did "mean something," just then they had no time to talk about it any more, for Dame Barbara was as good as her word. Every one of their usual customers for flowers seemed to have met the old woman and been told of the wonderful dried leaves. And some strangers, too, new-comers or visitors to the little town, stopped as they passed by, with exclamations of "What a delicious fragrance! Can it be from these flowers?" and when it was explained to them that the source of the perfume was the contents of the tin canister, one and all immediately bought a cup-full, or two, even in some cases three or four. Long before their usual hour for going home, all the leaves were sold, and some would-be purchasers who came too late were delighted to hear that next market-day there would be a fresh supply of the coveted leaves.

"Never has our purse been so well filled before," said Aria in great content, as she tied up the little purchases of butter and eggs and honey and other luxuries which she had scarcely hoped to be able to afford. "Linde, it really has been a wonderful success. If only we had jars and jars full of the leaves!"

"Don't despair," said Linde. "Remember my dream. Who knows what may come of it?" and very hopeful and happy, the

sisters set off for their long walk home.

Nothing out of the common happened to them during the next few days. Though they half laughed at themselves for doing so, they often kept looking out in hopes of catching sight of a redbreast, but none was to be seen, and though they strolled more than once farther than usual into the forest, when their daily work was over, they there met with no adventures.

"I am afraid, Linde, dear," said Aria on the Friday evening, when they had again filled the canister with the precious leaves to be ready for market next day, "I am afraid that we must think no more about your dream, or that it meant anything. We have still leaves enough for one other day's sale after to-morrow, and we must just be thankful for the help it has been, giving us time to consider what we must do to get through the winter," and though she tried to speak cheerfully, the poor girl could not keep back a little sigh, which Linde was quick to hear.

"Aria, sweetheart, Aria," the child exclaimed in a piteous voice, "you don't think, you can't mean that we may have to part? Oh I'd much, much rather die, if we might but die together. Promise me, promise me that you'll never leave me."

"My darling," said Aria, bravely forcing back her tears, "Heaven knows, it half kills me to think of such a possibility. So far, things have gone better with us than we could have dared to hope; let us therefore go on praying and trusting that we may keep together."

Linde cheered up again.

"Yes, yes, that is the best thing to do," she agreed. "And do you know, Aria, though I get frightened sometimes, deeper down I have a feeling that we shall get on well, after all. It is ever since my dream that I seem to get this sort of comforting hope," she added, with a curious light in her eyes.

The elder sister, to tell the truth, had less faith in dreams and presentiments than little Linde, but she was glad of anything to cheer the child. So with a loving kiss they went to bed betimes, in preparation for their long walk to market the next day, and soon fell asleep.

Aria woke first on Saturday morning. It was still very early, the dawn barely breaking. But there was light enough to see Linde's face, all rosy and smiling in her sleep. She quickly roused when she heard her sister moving about the room.

"Aria," she exclaimed, "Aria, darling, it's come again. The dream, I mean."

Aria turned and looked at her. At first the elder sister was inclined to say that she was not very surprised. A dream that has made much impression on one is apt to return, especially in this case, remembering their conversation the previous evening. But the sight of Linde's happy and excited face checked her.

"I must not damp her hopefulness," she thought, "and after all—who knows?"—"Was it the same as before?" she asked, "exactly the same old woman and all?"

"Yes," Linde replied, "just the same. We were in the market, and she came by, and then stopped and seemed to be attracted by the rose-leaves' scent. Then I felt her eyes on me and heard her voice—low but clear—saying——," and here the little girl interrupted herself, "Oh yes, there were just two words different, and that makes it seem more real. She did not say 'three times,' but *twice* more and then ask the robin.' I wonder," Linde continued, "I wonder if possibly we shall see her herself. No—I don't think we shall. I feel that she can only come in dreams."

They were at their place in the market in good time as usual. Their posies of late flowers and autumn foliage had, alas, diminished, but their supply of the fragrant leaves was rather larger than the week before, for, influenced perhaps by the "twice more" of Linde's dream visitor, Aria had divided the contents of the jar into two equal portions, each of which proved to be rather more than the first lot she had carried off for sale. In fact the useful tin canister was this time completely filled.

And the demand for their new wares was even greater than the last time. Dame Barbara and her friends had spread the fame of the wonderful leaves. Aria could have sold what she had twice over, and more than one of her customers assured her that if she could keep up the supply during the winter, orders would be forthcoming from more distant parts of the country.

"I mean to make pretty bags and fill them with your leaves, for Christmas presents to my friends," said one smiling young

lady. "So don't forget that I shall want ever so much of them a little later on," and Aria thanked her and wisely refrained from saying that she feared her stock was all but exhausted.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Linde, when Aria sighed about it. "My hopes have risen sky-high since the dream came again, though how we are to 'ask the robin,' seeing that none of his kind ever come near us, or how he could help us if we did come across him, is more than I can in any way imagine! And after all, we have still enough leaves for next market-day, which will be the *third* time."

"Yes," Aria agreed, "it is much the best to hope on and keep up our spirits. And for the present we have no reason to despond. My old purse is delightfully well filled to-day even though I could not make up my mind to raise the price of the leaves as Dame Barbara urged me to do. I felt somehow as if it would not bring me good luck."

"I felt the same," said Linde.

They spent a cheerful evening, and the following day, Sunday, passed peacefully. When they returned from the ancient church in the neighbouring village whither since their infancy they had always gone with their parents, Linde asked Aria to let her go for a stroll in the forest by herself, to which the elder sister, who was feeling a little tired, agreed.

"You are going to look for a robin, I know," she said with a smile, "and possibly as the dreams have come to you and not to me, you may succeed where I could not. But don't go too far, dear child. I should be anxious if you were long away, for no doubt the forest *is* rather uncanny, somehow."

"I won't go far," said Linde. "And I hardly hope to find out anything. But I shall just look well about me. You see the real time has not yet come. We are not to 'ask the robin' till after three market-days."

When she returned home an hour or two later, she seemed thoughtful, though not exactly depressed.

"Well," asked her sister, "had you any adventures?"

Linde shook her head, yet she smiled a little.

"Only a very tiny thing happened to me," she said, "hardly worth noticing. I strolled some way along the path that leads straight to the heart of the forest—the main path, you know, Aria—and I was just thinking of turning home, when, a short way down a much smaller path, scarcely one at all, I caught sight of something bright lying on the ground. At first I thought it was a scarlet berry or two, or some of the red leaves one often sees, but when I stooped to pick it up, it was this," and she held out a small feather.

Aria took it—it was of a peculiar shade, almost more orange than red.

"I know what you are thinking," said the elder sister,—"that it is a robin's feather—from his red breast, and it certainly looks very like it, but——"

"Wait, Aria, till you hear the rest," interrupted Linde, and she opened her other hand, in which lay two more of the fairy-like feathers, exactly similar to the first. "The wonderful part of it was that though they are *so* tiny," and she glanced at the treasures tenderly, "and though it was not a bright day, there was no sunshine, they glowed and gleamed as if they were gems. I walked on a little way, you see, after I had picked up the one, and there, some yards ahead, lay the second, and the same with the third. But it was the last. I feel sure it was the last, though I went on some distance. And somehow, three seem the right number for a fairy message. It matches the three times in my dreams."

"Then you do think they are a message?" asked Aria.

"Of course I do. I marked the path well by breaking off twigs and making a little heap of pebbles. Indeed it was necessary, for I had never noticed before that there was a path there at all," and when she went on to describe its position Aria agreed with her that it seemed quite a new discovery.

For the rest of the week Linde appeared satisfied to rest quietly on her oars. She made no more expeditions to the forest, and indeed spoke less than she had done of her dreams and their interpretation, though that she was thinking much about them her sister felt sure, from the look in her pretty eyes and the way she sometimes smiled to herself for no apparent reason.

So the days passed till again it was Friday evening and the sisters went early to bed. Everything was ready for their little stall at the market, but Aria sighed as she remarked that their autumn posies now made but a poor show.

"But there are the rose-leaves," said Linde.

"Yes," her sister replied, "but the last of them, alas! See, Linde, the jar is quite emptied!"

"Do not be so downcast, darling," said Linde as they kissed each other for good-night. "Why, we have seemed to change places of late! It used to be you always cheering me—now it is I to cheer you."

Aria smiled. She felt sure that it was the hope of the dream being repeated for the magic third time that was brightening her sister. But she said nothing that night. Only the next morning when she woke very early, just as the first faint streaks of coming dawn were beginning to appear, she listened anxiously, wondering if Linde was still asleep, and felt glad when a tiny rustle, followed by a whisper, showed that the little girl was also awake.

"Aria," she said, "Aria."

"Yes, dear, what is it?"

"It's come again, the third time," she exclaimed joyously. "My dream! Quite the same as before, only that the old woman just smiled at me, and said, 'Once more, then ask the robin.' Aria, darling, it *must* mean something."

And Aria herself was impressed.

"But where are we—or you—to find the robin?" she questioned.

"You're forgetting about the feathers, and the mysterious path," replied Linde.

She had carefully wrapped up the tiny treasures and hidden them in the front of her frock. The knowledge that she had them safely there seemed to give her courage and hope. That Saturday's sale was again a great success, and on the following day, as on the Sunday before, when they returned from church and their simple mid-day dinner was over, Linde told her sister that she was going to the forest. This time she scarcely asked Aria's leave, and though the elder girl was a little anxious, she felt that it would have been useless to attempt to stop her.

"Very well, darling," she said. "But don't go very far or stay very long. Promise me."

Linde considered.

"I think I can promise," she said, "to be back by sundown. But, Aria, I believe I may have to go again much farther, or to do—I know not what—but feelings are coming to me," and she unconsciously touched the place where the redbreast feathers were nestling. "You won't forbid it, sister, will you?"

Aria's face grew very grave.

"Whatever has to be done, and wherever," she said, "why cannot we go together? I am afraid of the forest. Even father believed that there was some spell or enchantment over it. You remember he never allowed us to go into it beyond a certain distance.

"Yes," said Linde dreamily, "I remember. But maybe," and her face lighted up with a bright smile, "maybe, Aria, the spell, or whatever it is, is going to be broken," and though the elder sister trembled a little at the words, she, too, felt a curious thrill of pleasant excitement.

So the two kissed each other fondly and Linde set off. She was well wrapped up in a warm cloak, for the autumn days were fast growing chilly, especially of course in the forest, where the short amount of mid-day sunshine scarcely penetrated, so closely growing were the trees. The cloak had originally been their mother's, then Aria's, and now the elder girl had refreshed and rebound it for her sister. It was of good, thick stuff and red in colour, and as Linde turned for a moment to wave another good-bye at the entrance to the wood, it struck Aria that the child looked rather like a human robin redbreast herself. She smiled at the idea; somehow it cheered her. "May all good angels and the saints guard her," she murmured as she re-entered the cottage.

Linde walked on steadily. Not very fast, for she was keenly on the look-out for any signs or tokens to direct her, and

most anxious not to miss the opening to what in her own mind she called "the feather path."

And to her satisfaction she found it without any difficulty. It was still of course broad daylight, that is to say as light as was usual among the trees, and as she made her way along she kept her eyes on the ground in hopes of seeing some more tiny specks of the unmistakable orange-red.

But in vain. There were no more feathers waiting for her.

Feeling rather discouraged, Linde stopped short, and looked around her.

"I must have quite passed the place where I picked up the third feather," she said to herself. "I did not come as far as this the last time. Must I go home—what shall I do?"

She drew her cloak a little closer, and as she did so, her fingers touched the spot where nestled her treasures. Immediately her hopes revived.

"Go on, go on," something above her seemed to say. She glanced upwards, almost fancying that a voice had spoken to her, but nothing was to be seen—except—yes, on the branch of a fir-tree near at hand, some yards overhead, a bird was perching, and not only a bird, to her immense delight she saw that it was a robin!

Had it *spoken*? She gazed at it. It chirped encouragingly and spreading its wings flew down, and then flew onwards in front of her.

"Stay, robin, stay, and tell me what to do," cried the child. But it only turned its little head towards her for half a second, and then continued its flight. Linde by this time, however, had lost all hesitation. On she ran, as fast as she could go, though now and then, as if in consideration for her, her small winged friend stopped for a moment or two, and Linde grew less breathless. Then it looked back at her again, and in this way they got over a good deal of ground, till at last—why, she could not have told—Linde stopped. And looking up, she saw that her guide had disappeared.

She gazed round her. It was a strange spot. She had never been here before. Of that she felt certain, for she could not have forgotten it.

She was standing by the edge of a small clearing among the trees. It was in the shape of a circle, and in front of the firs, whose stems are of course as a rule bare, were planted short thick bushes as if for still greater enclosing of the spot. So thickly indeed were these placed, that turning round to look behind her, Linde wondered how she had come through them, for no opening was to be seen. It was like standing in a room of which the doorway is in some way or other completely concealed. Her heart began to beat faster, for even though she had scarcely moved she felt as if she could never find her way out again.

Suddenly a clear chirping made her look up, and to her amazement she saw, in the very centre of the circular clearing, an object which she was almost certain had not been there a moment before. And it was not only her eyes which told her this, for her nostrils at once inhaled a delicious perfume which she could not, for an instant, have been unconscious of. It was that of the precious leaves!

And the object which she was gazing at was an indescribably beautiful rose-bush in full bloom, on the topmost branch of which sat her friend the robin!

He nodded encouragingly—and now his chirps took shape. They grew into words, but whether other ears than little Linde's would have heard this I cannot say. Enough that *she* understood.

"Yes," he said, as if in answer to her unexpressed surprise, "yes, I went down to fetch it up," and she knew that he was speaking of the rose-bush, "for you to see it for yourself, my child."

Linde gazed at him for a moment or two without speaking. Was she dreaming? she asked herself. But the familiar fragrance reassured her.

"Is it—?" she began, "are these the roses that our fairy powder came from?"

Again the robin bent his little head.

"Even so," he replied. "Fairy roses, that never lose their perfume. And you would gladly fill the old jar again, would you not?"

Linde clasped her hands.

"Oh yes, yes!" she exclaimed. "The leaves mean everything to us. Not only food and clothing, but a home—a home for us two together, instead of terrible separation. Oh Robin, darling, may I gather the flowers and dry the leaves, ready for the market? I'd come any day—or every day, to fetch them, and oh how grateful we should be," and the tears rushed to her eyes in her eagerness.

But the redbreast's tone grew grave, and Linde began to tremble with fear that he would say it could not be. But when he spoke again his words surprised her.

"Do you know the story of the forest?" he asked.

"Yes—some part of it, at least. We know that—that—" for she felt his bright eyes fixed upon her, and it made her hesitate, "something very sad happened, and since then, no robins ever come here," she murmured.

"Sad—yes indeed," he repeated, "and worse than sad. Wicked, cruel! A monster in the shape of a boy shot one of our favoured tribe, deservedly favoured, for, as a Christian child you know since when, we have been honoured for our faithful service?"

Linde bowed her head reverently.

"I know," she whispered. "It was very wicked of the boy. But it was a long time ago," she went on. "Can't you forgive it, and come back to the forest again?"

"'Tis almost fifty years ago," the robin said. "And for fifty years the place has been under the ban. Our queen—call her fairy queen, or guardian angel as best pleases you—pronounced it. But around the tomb of the innocent victim," and he pointed downwards, "she planted the rose-trees, of whose flowers by special favour the old godmother, of whom you have heard, was allowed to gather a few. For she it was who found our poor brother—here on this very spot—and summoned us to his side. Our ancestor, I should call him, for it was long ago, and our bird lives are very short—so surely they should not be cut still shorter?"

"Surely not," said Linde. "Then are those the leaves we had in our jar? I thought it was a powder—a fairy powder that the godmother bequeathed?"

"So it was. She dried and ground the precious leaves, and with the powder perfumed the petals of her own garden roses, every year, so long as she lived. But she never re-visited the spot. It has been closed ever since the day when, the arrow still transfixing his tender body, the robin was buried, though not dead."

"Not dead," cried Linde. "What can you mean?"

"That was the decree," he replied. "For fifty years he was to lie here, till the forest could be purified from the pollution of cruelty."

"And how can that be done?" Linde asked eagerly.

"By the hands of a maiden—a child-maiden, who never, *never* has been guilty of cruelty to any living thing. Linde, are you that maiden?"

The little girl was silent. Then she looked up, and her blue eyes did not falter beneath the piercing gaze of the bird.

"I think, yes, I think," she said, "no, I *know* that I have never wished or meant to cause suffering. If ever it has come through me, it has not been by any intention of mine."

"You speak the truth. We have watched and tested you, though you knew it not," was the reply. "Now something more is asked of you. Courage!"

"I'm afraid, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm not very brave," said poor Linde, all sorts of alarming ideas rushing through her brain as to what might be asked of her. Were they going to shoot *her*, possibly? Or to shut her up in the tomb with the

dead, or not dead robin?

"Do not look so terrified," said the robin. "More shall not be asked of you than you can do. We are not a revengeful race, as you well know. We have always been faithful and loving friends to human beings. You know the story of——"

"Of the Babes in the Wood," interrupted Linde. "Of course I do. It was partly that, that made me think of you, about *leaves*, you know," and her face brightened. "I will try to be brave," she added.

"That is right," said the bird. "Some expiation *must* be made for that boy's evil deed, and, as I have already told you, it was decreed that the one to offer it must be a child entirely innocent of cruelty or unkindness. For this, *you*, little Linde, have been chosen. Three nights hence the fifty years come to an end—the moment for the spell to be broken will arrive. Before midnight, you must be here, standing on this very spot, where you now see me."

Linde started. Had she shut her eyes for an instant?—what had happened to them? For, to her amazement, the rose-bush was no longer there! The robin stood on the grass, in the centre of the cleared circle. Yet she had not seen the disappearance, nor heard the faintest rustle!

"Oh dear," she thought, "magic doings are very queer. There *was* a rose-bush there, I am quite certain," but she said nothing. Some instinct told her it was best to take things calmly, and to listen attentively to the robin's instructions. "Where you now see me," he went on, "till you hear the clock strike twelve."

"The clock," Linde repeated. "There's no clock here in the middle of the wood."

"Indeed," said the robin. "Would you like to know the time at the present moment?"

"Yes," Linde replied. "I suppose it's nearly four o'clock."

"Listen," whispered the bird, and as she obeyed, there fell on her ears the prettiest bell-like chimes she had ever heard. "One, two, three—" on to twenty, then a pause and in deeper tones, "one, two, three, four."

"Twenty minutes to four," said her friend. "If it had been *past* four, the four would have struck first. All *our* clocks are what your clumsy human watchmakers call 'repeaters,' you see."

"And what do you do to make them tell you the time?" asked the little girl eagerly.

"You just say 'What o'clock is it?' That is of course if you are at one of the entrances to fairyland. You can generally find one if you look about. They are always in the centre of a ring."

"Oh," replied Linde, "that's a good thing to know. I often see fairy rings, but I had no idea they had a door in the middle. Then tell me more, please. I must wait till I hear the fairy clock strike twelve, and then—will the door open? And—what do you want me to do? And—if I can do it, will you let me gather some roses?"

"Not so fast, not so fast," said the robin. "Let me see—what was I saying? You stand here—the clock strikes, at the twelfth stroke you tap the ground with the three feathers—you have them safe?"

"Yes," replied Linde, feeling for them as she spoke.

"The door will then open and you will descend. That is all you require to know at present. Three nights hence, three nights hence."

"But," began the little girl, "I must know something more. How am I to find my way here in the middle of the night when it is all dark? It wasn't easy to distinguish the path even by daylight, and now, even now, I don't know how to get through these thick bushes on to it. I can't see any opening in them."

Instead of replying the robin suddenly spread his wings and alighted on a bush close beside her, and at once Linde perceived that there was a narrow sort of passage through the hedge. She turned towards it.

"Thank you," she said, adding timidly, "May Aria come with me? Together we might find our way better perhaps. We might bring a little lantern."

"It will not be needed, and you must come alone. You may tell Aria all I have told you; and if she is wise she will

encourage you. I make no promises. It is not for me to do so. But this you may depend upon—never will you have cause to regret obedience to this summons," and as he spoke, he spread his wings again and flew upwards. As he passed her, there came a breath of the delicious perfume, and Linde felt that it meant a promise after all, which raised her spirits, as pushing her way through the hedge she found herself on the path outside and started on her way home.

"Aria will be getting anxious," she thought. "I must hurry. I do believe it is all going to come right, but—oh dear, I do feel frightened at the idea of finding my way here alone through these gloomy woods in the very middle of the night. Why wouldn't the robin let Aria come too? I suppose it *had* to be a rather dreadful thing to do, to make up for that cruel boy's wickedness. Oh dear, oh dear!"

But as she ran on as fast as her feet would take her, some things grew clearer. She must make the best of it to her sister. She must conceal her terrors as much as possible.

"For supposing," she reflected, "that dear Aria really *wouldn't* let me go and that it all came to nothing—the dreams and the feathers and this wonderful talking robin, how could I ever get over it? We should have to be parted pretty certainly, and would not that be a thousand times more terrible than having to face the dark forest for once? For deep down in my heart I feel certain that I shall be taken care of. I am proud to be chosen to break the spell and to make the forest again a happy place—a home for the dear robins, and favoured by the fairies as it used to be all those years ago—yes, I am proud to be the chosen one. And I know it will lead to our getting the precious leaves to sell, as many as we want, and *that* means everything to us, home and comfort and the being together. Yes, I *will* be brave."

So when, at some little distance from the boundary of the forest, she caught sight in the gloaming of her sister's figure anxiously looking out for her, she ran towards her with cheerful eagerness, calling out as loudly as she could, "It's all right, darling. Good news—good news."

Nevertheless, when Aria had heard the whole strange story, her face grew very grave.

"Linde, my sweetest," she said, "I *cannot* let you do it. Alone in the middle of the night, and winter close at hand! Wolves have been known to find their way into the forest, and not only that, we ourselves have every reason to believe there is some unhappy enchantment over the place——"

"Yes," Linde agreed. "That is exactly why I have been chosen—to break the spell."

"But," persisted poor Aria, "how do we know that the robin may not be deceiving us? Possibly he is a witch or wizard in disguise! Possibly a fairy, not wishing you harm, but hoping to steal you away. Fairies always try to lure human children to live with them. Folks say it prolongs their own spell of life if they succeed."

Linde considered.

"No," she said at last. "The fairies who love these woods are good and true, I feel certain. I daresay there are different kinds of fairies, just as there are of people. But you can feel that these ones are kind and loving by their care for the robins. Then, remember my dreams, sister. Our mother's godmother would not wish harm to come to us, and so far, all her messages to us have only brought us great good, and greater is in store for us, I am firmly convinced. Be quite happy about it, darling. You know I am naturally rather cowardly, much less courageous than you, yet see how cheerful I feel about it. I have no misgivings."

And this was true. For the time, at least, all the little girl's fears had flown away. So Aria said no more, though from time to time during the next few days when she glanced at her sister she could not repress a sigh.

"Supposing," she thought to herself, "*supposing* I never see her again! They might steal her away and let her come back twenty or even fifty years hence without her knowing that more than a few hours had passed. She would find me an old broken-down woman, if she found me at all, which I doubt, for I could not live without her."

As these gloomy ideas floated through her mind she was standing in the porch of the cottage, gazing at the forest. Suddenly, a soft chirping reached her ears, and looking up, she caught sight of a redbreast perching on the little garden gate. He seemed to look at her, then spread his wings and flew away, passing near her overhead. And at that moment there came to the elder girl the same breath of the familiar delicious perfume which had cheered Linde when she parted with the robin, and with the same effect. From that moment Aria's misgivings left her, and to a great extent even her anxiety.

"Yes," she said to herself, "she must go. It is meant. It would be useless for me to interfere."

This happened on the very morning of the fated day.

The weather was already almost wintry.

"Linde," said her sister that evening, "I won't ask you to undress and go to bed, but I will keep up a good fire here in the kitchen, so that you shall at least start warm. And you shall have a cup of good hot soup last thing."

"Very well and thank you, dear," Linde replied. "I will sit here in father's comfortable old chair till the time comes for me to go. And I will promise to drink all the soup and to put on all my wraps, if you, Aria, will go to bed as usual and try to sleep till I come back again. The only thing that would make me lose courage would be to leave you standing at the door looking after me. I may sleep myself. I daresay I shall, if I know you are in bed. For I am certain I shall wake in good time. As to that I have no fear."

Rather reluctantly, Aria consented to do as Linde wished, on condition that the little girl gave her promise to come to her at once on her return, and to arouse her if by chance she were sleeping.

Linde sat by the fire and listened to the ticking of the old clock, and the occasional fall of a cinder, till her eyes grew drowsy and she dozed. Though not conscious of being really asleep, she felt as if but a few minutes had passed, when the clock striking—more loudly than usual, it seemed to her—made her start.

"One, two, three," she counted, on to eleven.

"Yes, actually eleven," she said to herself. "I have had a nice long sleep and I feel quite fresh, and it is time to be off."

She drank the soup, and wrapped herself up; and after laying a large log on the fire, there to smoulder till she came back, she softly opened the door and stepped out, closing it again, though happily, in that peaceful and friendly part of the world, there was no need for bars or bolts.

A little exclamation of surprise escaped her as she glanced about her. It was full moon—the garden and the open space between it and the beginning of the forest were flooded with light. Somehow she had not expected this. In fact, relying upon the mysterious guidance and help which she felt sure would be given to her, she had not troubled herself beforehand about how it was all to be managed, and the sisters went so early to bed that they were often asleep before moonrise, if it were late.

Linde smiled to herself with pleasure and ran gaily through the garden and along the field-path. And for some little way inside the forest her route was quite clear. But after a while it grew darker. The trees became more dense, and denser still she knew they would be the farther she advanced. So she walked more slowly, looking well about her, and now and then pressing the three precious feathers in the front of her bodice.

"The great thing is not to miss the little path," she kept repeating, and after she had walked what seemed a considerable way, she began to fear she had done so.

Then for the first time her courage threatened to fail her, and her heart took to beating much faster than was pleasant. She stood still. Strange uncanny sounds seemed in the air. Wailings far off among the trees; faint groans and stealthy rustlings as if some weird creatures were trying to get near her, a sudden sharp screech—it was only an owl, but that the child did not know!—and then the very curious, very thin and minute squeal of a bat, so seldom audible to human ears.

"Oh dear," whispered Linde. "Robin, have you tricked me? I don't know where I am, and though it is so lonely, I seem to feel invisible creatures all about me. Oh, robin, you didn't tell me it would be so difficult to find the way."

Then something touched her foot; she gave a little scream, till looking down she perceived a point of light just in front of her, and heard a well-known voice.

"Foolish child," it said. "You might trust me. This is the entrance to the path. You have only to follow me."

"Are you carrying a lamp—a fairy lamp?" asked Linde in a tone of great relief. "Why—I could fancy it was a glow-worm, only it is far too late in the year."

"You are right," said her guide. "It is a glow-worm. We take care of them—they sleep down below all the winter. But I woke up this fellow on purpose. He is quite comfortable on my back. Now we must make haste. Follow me steadily till we come to the magic circle. Then you must act for yourself—you know what to do."

He flew forward—near enough to the ground for Linde to keep the tiny light well in view. And to her surprise she found she could make her way quite easily without stumbling or hesitation, and now and then a faint whiff of scent reached her, as if to increase her confidence, though whether it was wafted back from the redbreast's wings or upwards from the little bunch of feathers, she could not have told.

And at last—for, after all, making your way in the dark is very monotonous work—the light stopped just in front of her, and she realised that she was standing before the thickly growing bushes which hedged the clearing. And before she had time to wonder how to push her way through, the shrubs seemed to divide, as if held back by invisible hands, and through the opening thus made, Linde caught sight of the magic circle gleaming like silver in the moonlight.

Her guide had vanished, but now without hesitation she ran forward, till she reached the central spot, where the rose-bush had risen to view, and whence she had been told she would find her way to the unknown regions below.

She stood still for a moment or two, somewhat dazzled by the sudden radiance, soft and lovely though it was. Then she stooped and examined the ground, but the smooth, even turf showed not the least sign of an opening of any kind, such as she had half expected to see. As she stood up again her fingers touched the front of her dress and she remembered the feathers.

"I am to tap with them," she reminded herself. "But not till the fairy clock strikes twelve. Shall I ask what time it is now? No, I think it is better to wait quietly. I am sure I am not too late, but I think it must be nearly midnight."

She felt curiously calm, and very wide-awake. There was not the very slightest sound to be heard—a complete contrast to the surrounding forest—not a rustle, not a murmur, never had Linde before realised what utter silence could be. She almost felt as if she herself should not move a finger, scarcely even breathe. And when in a little she became conscious that her heart was again beating much faster than its wont, she felt as if she must press it tightly to make it be quiet. And the gesture once more recalled the feathers. She drew them out.

"Best have them ready," she thought.

Then she stood motionless.

And suddenly, coming upwards to her, and yet sounding in the silent air as if all around her, came the fairy chimes—one, two, three, four, for the completed hour, and then the sweet musical deeper note, twelve times repeated.

Linde was all alert.

She stooped at once and tapped three times with the three tiny feathers.

And then what exactly happened she could not have told. She felt herself lifted a little way and made somehow or other to sit down on what seemed a soft cushion. It was really a thick, round sod of turf, and as soon as she was seated on it, it began to descend—down, down, making her at first feel rather giddy, though it moved slowly. She shut her eyes, and the giddiness left her. Then she opened them, but all seemed darkness for some seconds, till a faint light began to creep up, growing brighter as her strange journey continued, and at last steadying into a pleasant glow, not glaring or bewildering, but clear and bright, so as to show all surrounding objects distinctly.

Linde sprang to her feet in delight. She was in the sweetest place she had ever dreamed of. Sweet in every sense, for it was a small garden of the beautiful rose-bushes, like the one the robin had shown her. And the scent was the exquisite one so familiar to her.

She was standing at the entrance to a sort of bower, or niche, in the midst of the fragrant bushes, and glancing into it she saw that there was a little hillock in its centre, and on this hillock were perched what at first seemed to her hundreds of redbreasts. In reality, I think there were about fifty—all motionless, till from their midst flew out one, whom by some instinct Linde recognised as her old friend.

"Birds," he said, for, to the fairy-touched ears of the child, chirps were words, "birds! She has come. And the time has

come. Friends, bid her welcome."

And a lovely welcome it was which poured from the many little throats.

"Thank you, dear robins," said Linde, feeling sure that she was expected to say something, "thank you, dear birds. You know I love you, and I do hope you will soon come to live in the forest again. But now please tell me what it is you want me to do."

There was a sudden loud flutter of wings. All the robins at the same moment flew upwards from the hillock and perched themselves in clusters among the rose-trees which formed the bower. Only one remained on the hillock. Linde knew him for her guide. Beside him lay a small bright object. It was a finely made and polished spade.

He touched it with one of his claws.

"Take this, Linde," he said solemnly, "and dig. But first, stroke it with the three feathers."

"Where am I to dig?" asked the little girl, as she obeyed him.

"Here of course," was the reply, "here. It is the tomb of our ancestor, where for fifty years he has lain entranced."

Linde lifted the spade. It was beautifully light.

"What a dear little tool it is!" she thought to herself. "I wish they would let me keep it. It would be lovely for careful digging round the delicate tiny roots that are so easily damaged."

But these reflections she kept to herself, for she felt the fifty pairs of bright eyes upon her. Just at present it was a question of doing what she was told.

So she stroked the spade with her tiny feather posy, and then stepped forward close to the green mound. In her heart she felt doubtful as to whether the toy spade would be strong enough to cut through the turf. But as the robin flew up to a neighbouring branch, thus leaving the coast quite clear for her operations, there was nothing for it but to try. And to her satisfaction the blade glided through the sods almost without any effort of hers. In fact it seemed to direct her movements, so that in a very short time a neat round hole was made in the little hillock, revealing a sort of nest of the well-known dried rose-leaves, in the midst of which lay the tiny body of a—to all appearance dead—robin redbreast.

"Lift him," whispered her friend, evidently in the greatest excitement.

Linde did so, carefully and almost reverently. He was a most beautiful bird, a king of his kind. His feathers were smooth, his breast rich in colouring, his eyes closed. There was nothing death-like or painful about him, except—ah yes—Linde could not repress a little shiver at the sight—a small dart or arrow transfixed the dainty body, pinning one wing to his side, where a drop of blood told its cruel tale.

"Draw it out," came the next command.

"I feel as if it would hurt him," murmured Linde tremulously. But there came a sort of trill of entreaty from the fifty watchers, and she felt that she must obey. So mastering her own misgiving, she took firm hold of the head of the dart, and deftly drew it out, thinking as she did so, "It will hurt him less if I do it quickly."

It took some little strength, but it did not break, and to her surprise the hole it should have left, disfiguring the pretty creature, closed at once. Then the bird gave a sudden shiver, a thrill of returning life passed through him—Linde herself was conscious of it in her fingers—his eyes unclosed; he looked up at her, then, with a wonderful note of exceeding joy, he spread his wings and flew round the bower, returning again to perch on the child's still outstretched hand, as if in gratitude.



With a wonderful note of exceeding joy, he spread his wings and flew round the bower, returning again to perch on the child's still outstretched hand, as if in gratitude.

And then—and then—oh if you could have heard the carol of delight that burst out from the comrades of the spell-freed redbreast! It was too beautiful to describe; nor could it be described in human language. For after all, exquisite as may be the bird songs—nightingales' or thrushes', blackbirds' or larks', which delight us, it cannot, I fear, fall to our lot to hear them, as did favoured Linde, in fairyland!

She stood enraptured till the melody subsided and there was silence again, broken by the voice of the small master of the ceremonies.

"It is done," he said, "and perfectly done. The spell is broken, the sad enchantment ended. The forest is our own again. Our beloved ancestor restored to us and to the life of which he was so cruelly deprived before he had had his rightful share."

"Oh the joy of it, the joy of it!" trilled the resuscitated bird, as he fluttered from Linde's hand to her shoulder, and a chorus of sympathy burst out again.

But Linde's guide had not yet finished his speech. He held up one claw and there was silence.

"Friends," he began again. "What is to be this maiden's reward for what she has done? Our gracious lady protector, the Queen of the Fairies, has left it to us to decide. We must be generous as well as grateful, for Linde deserves it of us—and remember, but for her sweet and loving nature, not all her courage in braving alone the cold and darkness could have succeeded. Brothers, shall we let her choose her reward?"

A universal chirp of "Yes, yes" was the reply.

So the speaker turned again to the little girl.

"Linde," he said, "good Linde, you who have never been guilty of a cruel unkind deed, Linde, you who have been brave and obedient, what do you choose?"

"Oh robin, dear robin," she exclaimed, "I think you must know already. The leaves, the delicious leaves from the redbreast's roses—if we may always have these, Aria and I will be safe and happy. I will come to fetch them in the middle of the night or whenever you like—and," she added, with a little smile, "*might* I have the fairy spade too?"

The robin held up his claw again.

"Yes, yes," came the answer in bird language, followed by some chirps which Linde's ears were not yet "fairy-wise" enough to translate.

"Your requests are granted," said the president. "You may keep the spade," for it was still lying beside her. "Small as it is, it is endowed with magic power. If you keep it bright and clean it will do good work in your garden. And my friends and relations, headed by our revered ancestor," he waved his claw, and the kingly robin fluttered to Linde's head, where he gave an approving chirp, replied to by the audience, "desire me to say that it will not be necessary for you to fetch the leaves. You will only require to place the old jar on the window-sill overnight whenever it needs replenishing, laying the three feathers inside it; and in the morning it will be filled as you wish."

"Thank you, thank you," cried Linde again, "and now, dear robins, I must hurry home. I shall never forget this lovely place. May I never come again?"

Her guide answered rather sadly.

"I fear not. Few, very few, mortals have come even as far as an entrance to fairyland. Nor could you ever find this spot again, try as you might. But we—we robins, will often see you in the forest, no longer forbidden ground."

"Yes, that is true," Linde replied cheerfully. "Then good-night—not good-bye, to you all, and please tell me how I am to get up again to the clearing, so as to run home to relieve Aria's anxiety and tell her the good news."

"That *we* will manage," said her first friend. "Birds!"

There was an answering flutter.

"Seat yourself comfortably, my child, and close your eyes."

Linde obeyed, but not before seeing and feeling that all the assembled robins were flying down and surrounding her, so that with the velvety softness of the grassy sod and the fluffy feeling of the feathered creatures encircling her, she seemed in a cosy nest, and already somewhat sleepy. Then a slight touch on the top of her head made her start a little.

"It is only we two," chirped her guide, "I and the noble bird who owes his life to you. We are here to direct the air voyage. Rest, my child, rest and be at peace."

Linde did not know that she fell asleep, though afterwards she knew it must have been so. She felt herself rising, rising—then a breath of colder air met her face, and—that was all she knew, till—she awoke, and found herself in the porch of the cottage, and—to prove the night's adventures had been no dream, in one hand the little spade, in the other the three red feathers, still firmly clasped.

She was a very practical maiden, in spite of her fairy perceptions, so the first thing she did was to lay the small treasures safely in the old jar, saying to herself, and "to-morrow night—no, I should say to-night, we will place it outside on the window-sill and in the morning it will be filled with the lovely leaves. What news, what joy to tell Aria!"

She ran upstairs—softly—but her sister was awake.

"Darling," she said, "are you really safely back? Yet I have not been anxious. Somehow I felt you were all right and I have had a peaceful sleep."

Then Linde told her the whole wonderful story and showed her the little spade. And at night you may be sure they did not forget to put the jar in the appointed place, to find it in the morning replenished with rose-leaves whose perfume seemed even more delicious than ever before. So Saturday found them with plenty of their treasured wares for sale, and quickly were they bought.

Nor was this only temporary good fortune.

The fame of their dried roses spread far and wide, and orders came from great distances, so that the two sisters were able not only to go on living together in greater comfort than they had ever known, but even to lay aside savings for a possible "rainy day."

Though as far as I could learn—this story, you know, is of a fairly long ago "once upon a time"—that day never came to the happy girls. The robins never failed them. The cottage garden and the neighbouring forest grew to be famed for the peculiarly beautiful redbreasts which there abounded. The uncanny reputation of the woods was quite forgotten, and on the contrary it was said to bring good luck to those who often strolled about in them.

I think both Aria and Linde married in due time and had happy homes of their own. One or other certainly did so, for the country-folk of that remote part of the world, from whom I learnt the story, showed me a specially lovely rose—"the robins' rose," it was called, and told me that it had been cultivated by the descendants of the sisters, till, for some reasons which I could not discover, the family had moved elsewhere.

"And they do say," added one aged dame, "that they grew to be rich and important, much looked up to and respected, which one can believe, if they took after their great-grandmothers and were favoured by the 'good people,' as those pretty maidens were."

I suppose the old jar and the magic spade were carried away as heirlooms, for though I looked about in some very curious antique shops in the neighbouring town, hoping to find one or both, I never succeeded in doing so, nor could I trace the family at all, which is scarcely to be wondered at, as no one still living remembered the sisters save by the quaint names of "Aria" and "Linde"—names which I love, and which I hope this story may lead others to love also.



A Magic Table

Once upon a time—how long ago really does not matter—there lived in a certain country—and where that country is, does not matter either—three young men of about the same age. They were not brothers, but they had always been neighbours, and they must have been some sort of cousins, for they had an old relation whom they all called uncle and who called them all nephews.

"Nephew Hodge," "nephew Giles," and "nephew Michael." Those were their names, though I fancy the last—he was the youngest—was more often "Mike" than "Michael."

They were all three steady, well-behaved fellows, and very friendly with each other, which was natural as in several ways their circumstances were curiously alike. They were all orphans, and though Hodge and Giles had sisters, these were married and settled at a distance, and as for Mike he had nobody at all belonging to him, and as he was a very affectionate creature, but for his two friends he would have felt lonely indeed. They were all poor—very poor—the one thing each had inherited from his parents was a home, such as it was. Just a small cottage with a bit of garden ground, which in their leisure hours each cultivated to the best of his ability, thus growing some hardy fruit and vegetables which helped to support them, and a few pretty flowers, to brighten things up a bit.

They had a little friendly rivalry over these tiny gardens. Hodge's produced the best vegetables, Giles's the finest fruit, but young Michael's far and away the loveliest flowers. And instead of quarrelling as to which of them deserved the most praise as a gardener, like sensible fellows, each gave a present to the other two of his special triumphs.

There was still another curious bond between the three—which in most cases would have been the very reverse of a bond, and pretty certainly would have dissolved the friendship. They were all in love with the same girl. A charming girl she was, but of her, more shall be told hereafter. Perhaps the hopelessness of their admiration for her helped to keep the peace, for they were far too poor to aspire to her, as she was a damsel with a dowry of gold and silver, as well as of sweet looks and sweet character. So the three used to sit together and sing her praises with no bitterness or jealousy.

The cottages stood at some distance apart, half or a quarter of a mile or so between them. So that in busy seasons, such as hay-making or harvesting, our friends sometimes saw very little of each other for days at a time, as they were not labourers on the same farm. But the long dull winter evenings they made a point of spending together, taking their cottages in turns as a meeting-place, for as to comfort, the three dwellings were much of a muchness, though Mike's somehow always looked the nicest, as in summer he adorned it with his flowers, and even in winter managed to tie up bunches of pretty leaves and bright-coloured berries to give his kitchen a cheerful air.

And besides these friendly evenings, the three young men always met on Sundays, and that all the year round. For on that day they had a standing invitation to dine with the old uncle, who was, as I forgot to say, also godfather to all three.

This personage was in some ways very peculiar and indeed rather mysterious. Strange stories were whispered concerning him through the country-side. Some said that he was a wizard; nearly all agreed that, at best, he had dealings with "the good people." But though to a certain extent he was feared, he was not disliked, as on more than one occasion he was known to have shown great kindness to families in distress, though how he came to hear so quickly of other folks' troubles remained a mystery, as he lived at a considerable distance from any other dwelling, and was too infirm ever to leave his own cottage.

He was of course reputed to be very rich, but that, as you will learn, was a mistake. And a miser he could not well be called, considering the kind actions I have alluded to, and the steady hospitality he showed to his godsons, Hodge, Giles, and Michael. The truth was—and there need be no secret about it—that "Uncle Peter" had a small pension for life, sufficient to keep him in simple comfort. For long ago he had been a soldier and a brave one, though he seldom talked of those old days. Sad things had happened to him, and for many years he had been a lonely man before, just about the time these grandnephews of his were born, he wandered back to the part of the country which had been his home as a boy, there, like Rip Van Winkle, to find none of his generation left, though he made friends in his own way with the remaining members of his family and their children.

Peter had travelled far and had seen queer places and queer people and had learnt some queer things. It was no great wonder that he got the name of being something of a wizard, for there was no doubt that he knew of things happening or going to happen in ways that could not be explained. But notwithstanding this, he was not regarded with fear, only with a

kind of respectful awe. Even his godsons felt this, though at the same time they were really attached to him and grateful for his hospitality, in itself of a very strange character. For though he was never known to buy food of any sort, and was supposed to live entirely upon the fruit and vegetables he himself grew, and though he had no one to cook for him and no fireplace or stove where anything but the very simplest things could be boiled or roasted or even heated, the weekly dinner provided for his three guests, every Sunday, was of the very best. Not only was the food of excellent quality, it was also abundant. Indeed, at times when work was short, as in the winter often is the case, both for artisans in towns and for labourers in the country, I doubt if the three cousins would have kept as well and hearty as they did but for this substantial and nourishing meal regularly once a week.

They had often wondered how Uncle Peter managed it, and once or twice they had hazarded a tactful enquiry of their host on the subject. But it had served no purpose. On the contrary, both Hodge and Giles, who had been the questioners, had been quickly silenced by the old man's reply.

"Did you never hear the proverb about not looking a gift horse in the mouth?" he said the first time. "True, there is nothing about my dishes which you are not free to test if you choose, both as to quality and cooking. All the same, I think the saying conveys a broad hint as to the courtesy suited to those who accept a gift."

And to Giles he was even more severe.

"When you invite me to a Sunday feast, my good nephew," he said, "I promise to eat thereof with gratitude, and with no curiosity as to whence or how you procured it," at which reprimand Giles looked very foolish, and could only humbly ask Peter's pardon, adding, "That day, I misdoubt me, my respected uncle, will never dawn."

For, as I have already said, the three young men were very poor.

Still, when they were sitting of an evening by themselves, with no fear of offending the old man by their talk, it was only natural that they should discuss the mystery. There was a peculiar rule about their Sunday visit. They were obliged to be exceedingly punctual, by which I mean, neither too early nor too late. Half an hour after noon was the appointed time, so they arranged to meet at church, and when the service was over to wait in the porch till the ancient clock struck twelve, as they found that by then starting at once for Peter's cottage and walking rather quickly they reached it just a minute or two before the dinner hour.

Often, when waiting thus at the church door, they would receive a smile and a nod from the girl they all adored—pretty Ysenda—and now and then she would even stop a moment and say to whichever of the three happened to be nearest at hand, "My love to Uncle Peter, and a pleasant visit to him." Not that he was her uncle or any relation, but she had got into the habit of going to see him sometimes out of pity for his loneliness, and the old man had taken a great fancy to her. In fact she was the only visitor he ever received, with of course the exception of the nephews on Sunday.

Once—some time ago it was, when the custom had first begun—Michael had by accident arrived at Peter's cottage some minutes before the others. He was on the point of knocking at the door when something stopped him. He afterwards declared that he did not know what. But standing there, he heard sounds within—curious sounds—his uncle's voice, slow and solemn as if reciting something, then a very delicate tinkle as of a tiny bell, and lastly a whirring sound as of wheels moving quickly, and then complete silence. And while he was debating as to whether he should knock or not, to his relief he heard his cousins' footsteps approaching. He turned back a little way to meet them, but before he had time to tell them what he had heard, the door opened and their host stood there bidding them welcome.

Ever after that they all three came together as I have told you, and waited at a little distance till their uncle made his appearance. For Michael confided to his cousins that there had been something uncanny about the mysterious sounds. Furthermore he felt instinctively that he had not been meant to overhear them, and that if Peter knew of it he might have been angry, and possibly would never have invited them again.

Hence, Michael, of the three, was the most careful as to what he said to the old man, and never did he venture to show any curiosity on the subject of the whence or how of the mysterious feast.

But now and then he had a queer feeling that pretty Ysenda *knew*—what?—he could not define it, more clearly than by suspecting that she was in old Peter's confidence in a way that he and his friends were not.

And one evening—it was a Saturday—when the three were sitting together in his cottage, he expressed something of the

kind to Hodge and Giles. They were very much surprised.

"She is a good, true-hearted maiden," he added. "I don't for a moment mean that she has any selfish motives for her attentions to our godfather."

"That's to say you don't suspect her of trying to supplant us in his favour, as to inheriting whatever he has to leave?" said Hodge. There was some suspicion in his tone, much as he admired Ysenda.

"One never knows," added Giles. "*She* may have no thought of the kind—why should she? She is rich already—all the same, Uncle Peter may make her his heir, without her being to blame."

"I think it most unlikely," replied Michael. "No such idea was in my mind. Besides," he went on, growing rather indignant, "Ysenda is just the girl to put a stop to anything unfair. She is as kind and generous as a woman can be. We all know of her goodness in any case of poverty or distress that she hears of. No, all I meant was that she may know something of Uncle Peter's dealings with the 'good people'; she is just the sort of sweet maiden that the fairies love."

"Maybe," said Giles, who was not very ready to believe in anything he could not see with his own eyes, "maybe she herself is the only fairy in the matter. Maybe *she* provides the feast."

"Impossible," said Hodge and Mike, and so it was.

"Anyway," persisted Giles, "I daresay it's she who tells him of the misfortunes and accidents he gets to know of so quickly."

"On the contrary," replied Michael, "she has told me herself that it has often been Uncle Peter who has been *her* informant in such matters, and that he has employed her to carry assistance to the sufferers. There was that great fire last winter at Olden Wood. She happened to see him the very same morning while it was still blazing, five miles off, and no one hereabouts knew of it! And the letter from over the sea telling of Widow Martha's son's death, reducing her to poverty, for he'd been a good son, always sending her money. *Why*," Mike went on very solemnly, "*he knew what was in that letter* before it had reached Martha's hands!"

There was no reply to this. Even Giles was much impressed, and all three started when just at that moment there came a tap at the door, for it was getting late, and being far on in the autumn the evening grew dark very early.

The cousins looked at each other half timorously, for even the bravest of men—and they were by no means cowards—may be momentarily frightened by anything uncanny.

The tap was repeated.

Michael got up and opened the door cautiously. What he expected to see he could not have said, but a witch astride on a gander, or a goblin with scarlet ears as big as a donkey's and a long tail, would scarcely have surprised him!

Instead—how different!—there stood two small figures—children evidently, and as a very plaintive little voice reached him, he threw open the door more widely, so that the light from within fell on the new-comers, and he perceived that they were a boy and girl, apparently about twelve or fourteen years old, poorly though decently clad, each carrying a bundle, and with pale, travel-tired faces.

"Please," said the voice—it was the boy's, the elder of the two—"oh please can you tell me if Dame Martha Swann lives here or near here?"

Michael started again. It was of this very dame he had just been speaking. Were these two of the "good people" in disguise, come to visit him for some mysterious reason? He took care to answer very politely.

"Not here, but not so very far off," he replied, and the gentleness of his tone encouraged the child to ask further. "Then can you show us the road there? We are dreadfully tired—at least my little sister is, and we have lost our way somehow."

As the boy went on speaking, Michael's misgivings left him. The two were plainly ordinary human beings, though something in the child's voice or accent showed that they did not belong to this part of the world.

"Come in and rest yourselves for a while," said Mike. "Warm yourselves too. It is a chilly evening."

"Oh thank you," was the reply, as the two eagerly accepted his invitation. He led them towards the fire and drew forward seats, while Hodge and Giles, their pipes in their hands, stared in surprise.

"Whom have we here?" exclaimed Hodge; his tone sounded suspicious, and Giles too hung back a little.

"How should I know?" said Michael sharply. "You see as much as I. Whoever they are and wherever from, it's surely the least one can do to let them rest for a few minutes. No doubt they can explain about themselves. You were asking for old Dame Martha, my boy?" he went on.

"Yes, yes," was the ready reply, "we are her grandchildren. My name is Paul—Paul Swann, like father," his voice shook, "and——"

"I'm Mattie," said the girl, speaking for the first time. "That's for 'Martha,' like granny. Oh how I wish this was her house! I'm so tired."

"Poor little maid," said Michael kindly. "Well it's not so far to your granny's, and I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll carry you there myself. But first you must have a bite of bread and a drink of milk. I'll have it ready in a minute," and he turned to the cupboard, which was almost as bare as Mother Hubbard's, for the bread and milk were all there was for his own breakfast!

The children were famishing. The food disappeared in a twinkling. Then the boy explained that they had come all across the sea to take refuge with their grandmother in their desolation since their father's death, for their mother had died five years ago. Some kindly disposed people had seen them on board the ship, and given them a little money to carry them the rest of the way on landing. But the very first night ashore some wicked person had stolen it, so there was nothing for it but to come on, on foot. It was really no very great distance, not more than eight to ten miles from the seaport, but they were strangers in a strange land, almost afraid to ask their way, and they had probably wandered astray. This was their pitiful story.

But already Michael's kindness had revived them, and they stood up, eager to get to the only home they had now a chance of. The cousins looked at each other. What was in store for the poor things? Their grandmother, a loving soul, would welcome them no doubt, and share with them all she had. But that "all" was really nothing. She was feeble and crippled with rheumatism. But for old Peter and his friend Ysenda, she would before this have risked dying of starvation.

However—"Cheer up," said Michael, as he hoisted little Mattie on to his shoulder, Paul loading himself with the bundles. "Cheer up. We'll be at the good dame's in no time. Giles," he went on, for Hodge was looking sulky and disapproving, "Giles, you might do worse than help the boy—or at least bring a bundle of my faggots and come with us. Martha's fire will be none too big."

Giles started forward, half shamed into doing his part—and Hodge, who was, after all, more stupid than bad-hearted, drew out of his pocket two small copper coins, which he handed to Paul.

"Tell your granny," he said, "that's to help to get you some milk for breakfast from the farm near by her cottage."

Paul smiled gratefully and thanked him.

Then they set off—Hodge walking with them a part of the way, till he reached the turning to his own home.

The poor dame was still up—sitting by the tiny fire in her kitchen, grudging to lose any of its welcome warmth, when Michael—leaving the others at the door—stepped in warily with a cheerful "good evening," so as not to terrify the lonely old woman.

Mingled indeed were her feelings, as you can imagine. Loving delight as she clasped the little travellers in her trembling arms, though even in that first moment the dire misgiving seized her as to how they were to be fed and clothed! So pathetic are often the greatest joys of the very poor.

But the children for the moment had no such fears.

"Oh granny, granny," cried the little girl, "it is so sweet, so lovely to have found you," and Paul turned away to hide the

tears which he thought himself too big a boy to give way to.

They were near Michael's own eyes, and even Giles had a lump in his throat as he set to work to build up the fire with the bundle of his cousin's faggots.

The dame looked about her anxiously.

"My darlings, you must be hungry," she was beginning, but the little new-comers interrupted her.

"No, no," they said, with the quick thoughtfulness of the children of their class, "this kind man," pointing to Michael, "gave us supper at his house. We only want to go to bed, and it will be so beautiful to wake in the morning and to find we are with our own granny."

"And I have money to get some more bread and milk for breakfast," added Paul, jingling the two coppers in his pocket, "so that will be all right."

With the help of the two young men, a bed was soon made up for the boy on the old kitchen settle, as there was room for little Mattie beside the dame. Everything in the cottage was scrupulously clean, for to have had it otherwise would have broken Dame Martha's heart, and by the handy way that the children moved about, tired though they were, she was pleased to see that they had been well and carefully brought up. So for the moment she tried to dismiss her anxiety.

But when the cousins said good-night and set off on their way home Michael's heart felt heavy for the little family.

"Good Lord!" he murmured, "if only I were rich!"

"What then?" asked Giles. "You'd be for taking the lot of them on your shoulders, I suppose. Well, as things are, you can't do so. Of course they must all go to the workhouse, though to-night it would have been cruel to hint at such a thing."

Michael said nothing, but he had some hope that this might be avoided.

That very day—I have said it was a Saturday—a long conversation had taken place at old Peter's between himself and his favourite Ysenda.

She had looked in as she often did, and was startled and distressed to find him far from well.

"Yes," he said, in answer to her kindly enquiries, "yes, my dear young friend, I am failing fast. You must not grieve about it—the thought of dying is very familiar to me and far from unwelcome. But there is something I wish to consult you about. You know my secret. You know the only legacy I can leave behind me. It is as to this that I want to know your opinion, for you have a good sound judgment as well as a kind heart. To me myself the greatest pleasure would be to bequeath my magic gift to *you*, my dear Ysenda."

But the girl, as he had in his heart expected, shook her head.

"No, dear Peter," she replied. "There are those nearer to you than I, and more in need of help. Besides—I know the secret; the fulfilling its conditions would therefore be no test of my deserving its benefits. Nor do I stand in want of them. No—dear friend—if, as you kindly say, you consider my advice worth attending to, I would propose this. Bequeath the enchanted table to whichever of your three nephews discovers the inner spell which governs it. In this there will be nothing unfair. You can teach them the magic words, and then inform them that the further secret must be sought and found by themselves—or by himself. Hodge is the eldest—let him have the first trial, then Giles, and lastly Michael."

"And if—supposing Hodge succeeds?" said Peter with a rather curious enquiry in his tone.

Ysenda's face flushed a little.

"Well then, it would be all right. He would continue to use his power as it should be used."

"And Giles?"

"In the same way, of course," she replied.

"But—if both failed, and Mike came to have his try at it?"

Ysenda raised her pretty head with a gesture of pride.

"Then," she replied, "it would most certainly be all right. As to *Michael's* good heart I have no misgiving whatever. Quite independently of the spell, no sooner would he have it in his power to show kindness to any one in need of it than he would be eager to do so."

"I agree with you," said her old friend; and to himself he added, "I suspected as much. Ah well, they are worthy of each other, and I trust that all will prosper with them."

Then after a moment's silence he went on again:

"I will do as you advise, my child. To-morrow I will announce my intention, and take the three into my confidence as far as is necessary. Then when my own summons comes I shall feel that I have acted for the best—fairly by all, though my own wishes are with that good young fellow, Michael."

Ysenda rose to go.

"You will come again soon?" said the old man. "The sands are running out quickly, I feel, and I am not likely to be mistaken."

"Dear Peter," whispered the young girl, and the tears rose to her eyes.

"Bless you, my child," laying his hand on her shoulder. Then just as she was turning away, a curious, listening expression crept over his face. "Yes, yes," he murmured, as if in reply to some inaudible voice, "yes."

Ysenda felt a little frightened, and of this Peter seemed at once aware. He patted her again.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, with a smile. "I have no dealings with the black arts. But certain things are communicated to me in ways that I must not reveal. And just now—I am glad you were still here. Trouble, or rather perplexity—for the trouble is mingled with joy—is at hand for our good old friend Dame Martha. Will you go to see her to-morrow, Ysenda, and learn about it?"

"I was already intending to enquire how she is," said the girl. "I will certainly not fail to see her, and I will do all I can to help her, you may be sure."

"Of that I have no doubt," said Peter. "Good-night, my child."

Many things passed through Ysenda's mind as she walked slowly home. She had no mother, and her father, though devoted to her, his only child, was a hard man. He thought her fanciful and romantic, as she had on several occasions refused to marry to please him. For his great idea was that her husband should be a wealthy man.

"He must at least show on his side as handsome a sum as will be the dowry I give you," he had often repeated. But so far, none of the suitors that in this respect were approved of by the father had found favour in his daughter's eyes, so that he began to think the girl had determined against marrying at all, little suspecting the love that had already crept into her sweet heart.

"Ah, well," he thought to himself, "better live single than make a poor choice of some pauper who would squander her fortune, though for that matter, unless I look to it, she will be for giving it all away in charity once the breath's out of my body. Ysenda is too 'giving' by half."

And with this idea, rich though he was, the father kept the girl but slenderly supplied with money. She had to account to him for every farthing, and only by denying herself many little things she had naturally a right to expect, was she able to help her poorer neighbours. And without old Peter's contributions, though in cash he had not much to give, still less would it have been possible for her to assist those in need.

"How I shall miss him!" she said to herself. "For some reasons I could wish he had bequeathed the magic table to me—to what advantage I could have used it! But it would not have been fair or right. Oh if only Michael wins it! Somehow——" and vague hopes began to flutter in her heart, for that the young fellow—no less than the others, in their own way—adored her, she could not doubt. "It might make things different," she thought. But then she resolutely put the idea away. "No, no, I must not dwell on it. It is almost as if I were looking forward to dear old Peter's death. And oh, by the

bye, I must not forget to go to see old Martha Swann to-morrow. I wonder what new trouble has befallen her—trouble mingled with joy, he said, and of course *I* know, as no one else knows, that Peter is in touch with the good people; the really good fairies, they must be, for he would have no dealings with mischievous, spiteful imps."

Now I must tell you what happened the next day—the eventful Sunday on which the old man felt that the time had come for his strange secret to be revealed to his three godsons.

They were there in good time as usual, waiting outside for the opening of the door and their host's appearing.

Hodge, as was his way, was very hungry and in a hurry to set to work at the excellent dinner which no doubt awaited them. Giles too agreed with him that under the circumstances time passed far too slowly. Michael, who of the three had every reason for more than ordinary hunger, as he had not tasted food since his early supper the day before, his breakfast, as you will remember, having been otherwise disposed of—poor Michael said nothing. His thoughts were running on the two little waifs that he had escorted to their grandmother, and not only on them and Dame Martha, but on kind Ysenda. For, coming out of church, she had whispered to him that she feared their old friend was in trouble. "I am going to her at once," she said, and ran off before the young man had time to reply.

"How did she know?" Michael wondered. "Perhaps through Uncle Peter's queer ways. However, she'll look after the poor things for a day or two, though it isn't very much that even Ysenda, bless her, can do, rich though her father is," for the farmer's peculiarities were no secret.

So Michael had plenty to think of, as well as of being hungry, while standing with his cousins outside the old man's cottage.

And after all, they were kept waiting a shorter time than usual. It still wanted some minutes to the half-hour after noon when the door opened and their uncle beckoned to them to enter.

Even as they did so, they felt that things were not quite the same as on former occasions. To begin with, the dinner was not ready; far from it, the table was not even to be seen!

Hodge's face fell, so did Giles's, as the same misgiving seized them.

"Supposing he's not going to give us any dinner at all," they thought. "Maybe he's been too feeble to see to it."

For a glance showed them that their host had sadly changed, even in a week. His face was as white as his hair, and as he sank into his old armchair he almost looked as if he was going to faint. Michael sprang forward.

"Dear uncle," he cried, and you may be sure that the fear of losing his dinner had no place in his thoughts, "dear uncle, you are ill—suffering. Will you let me run for the doctor?"

But even as the young man spoke, a little colour returned to Peter's cheeks and he smiled.

"No, no, my boy," he said, and his voice was very gentle, "no need for doctors. I can manage for myself. It was just a turn, but I shall be better again now for a bit, though not for long. I have been anxious to see you all to-day, for I misdoubt me if it is not the last time——" Michael gave a little exclamation of distress, and the other two looked very grave. "I am very old, you know, my dear nephews, and tired. I shall be glad to rest. But first I have something to tell you. I have no money to leave behind me, and but few little possessions, but I have a secret, and the time has now come for me to reveal it to you three, my only living relations."

He stopped for a moment and drank a little water, which seemed to revive him.

"The country-folk, you know, call me a wizard," he went on. "Well—well—it does me no harm! I have learnt some strange things—I have wandered some little way into regions where few mortals are allowed to tread; I have had some dealings with beings of another kind of life than ours; in some ways I have been of use to the 'good people,' as they are called, and they to me. But such knowledge as I have acquired I can truly declare I have only used for the advantage of my fellows. My learning of this sort will pass away with me—I can leave behind me none of my secrets save one, and this—this spell I am now about to reveal to you three."

He stopped again. The eyes of the young men were fixed upon him in breathless eagerness. What were they about to hear? But some instinct kept them all silent. Time enough for thanks, thought Hodge and Giles, when they knew what

there was to thank for. And as for Michael, his curiosity was kept back by the real sorrow he felt at the idea of the old man's approaching death.

Peter went on again:

"As children," he said, "I daresay you heard many of the old fairy tales handed down for generations—tales to be found in one shape or another all the world over, it seems to me. So it often struck me that for some of them, at least, there must be a foundation of truth at bottom, and I set myself to use my little knowledge of these matters to discover it. I failed in several cases—I was wanting in certain qualifications. But as to one so-called legend I succeeded. Do you remember the old tale of the grateful gnome who taught his human benefactor how to make sure of a good dinner, by using a certain spell?"

Hodge pricked up his ears at the word "dinner." So did Giles, but though they had some vague memory of the well-known story, they were half afraid to say so, for fear of Peter's cross-questioning them. But Michael answered at once, for he had always loved fairy stories, that he remembered the one of the magic table quite distinctly.

"Well, then," said the old man, "I am going to show you that it was true, for the spell by which the feast was made to appear still exists. Now, all of you, listen carefully to my words. I may repeat them thrice, which will enable you to learn them perfectly, but after the third time you must trust to your memory."

Then sitting up erect on his chair, he recited, slowly and distinctly thrice, as he had said, these words:

"Little table, fair to see,
Magic bell now summons thee.
Spread with viands good to taste,
Fairy table, prithee haste!"

and after a moment's silence, when he had ended the incantation, he drew out a tiny silver bell—a mere toy of a thing—and rang it sharply.

Then there reached the ears of the astonished guests a whirring sound as if of invisible wheels revolving quickly. It was faint at first, but gradually seemed to come nearer, or rather, I should say, to rise upwards. It was of course the same sound which Michael had heard that Sunday, when he had unwittingly approached too near the cottage before the appointed time. And suddenly, with a sort of swing as of well-oiled doors opening swiftly, the flooring drew apart, and before the watchers could see how or whence it came, there stood in its accustomed place, in the centre of the kitchen, the table they all knew so well, bearing on its snow-white cover the tempting savoury dishes, neatly arranged and steaming hot. Enough truly, so tempting did they look, so excellently did they smell, to make even the least greedily disposed person's mouth water.

For a minute or two the young men were too astounded to speak. Then Peter smiled.

"Do not look so startled," he said reassuringly. "The dinner is what you have enjoyed many and many a time, and it has been sent in the same way. Have no misgivings. Draw round it, and make a hearty meal."

They did so with many murmurs of surprise and admiration; and for once, perhaps, it may be of interest to know of what the dinner consisted. At one end was a roast capon, cooked to perfection, at the other a ham, of so delicate a colour and flavour that it must surely have belonged to a fairy pig! Then there were potatoes, so white and floury that I feel convinced they must have been whisked over from Ireland, and delicious green sprouts of the kind that I, as a child, and I daresay many other children with me, used always to call "fairy cabbages," so exactly like miniatures of the large ordinary kind are they. And as side dishes, which apparently were still in fashion in the land of the gnomes or brownies, stood fruit pies whose pastry melted in your mouth, so light and flaky was it. And last, not least, a crystal bowl filled with cream, which surely must have come from Devon or Cornwall, or the places which match those in fairyland!

And in spite of their wonder and astonishment the three guests did justice to the feast, I assure you, for they were all very hungry.

Their host watched them with satisfaction, though eating but little himself. And when they had finished and turned to him, as was their custom, to thank him for their excellent repast, he smiled kindly.

"Now," he said, "you shall see the end of the matter."

He rang the bell, and in a moment or two the whirring noise was heard, the floor gently opened and the table descended, then the aperture closed and all was as it had been when the three entered the cottage. And again they gazed in amazement, for on former occasions they had bidden Peter good-bye and taken leave, with the table and the remains of the meal still standing in the kitchen.

"Yes," said the old man. "I do not wonder at your surprise. And now I must explain further. It is in my power to bequeath my secret to one of you. In fact I have told a part of the spell to you all. But a part only. There is a condition attached to its acting successfully which I cannot and must not tell you. The very fact of my doing so would destroy the whole. You shall each have a fair chance. You, Hodge, as the eldest must have the first. Here is the magic bell," and he handed him the pretty toy as he spoke. "Keep it safely, and use it as you have seen me do, after repeating the verse I have taught you. Next Sunday at the same hour; that is the appointed time. But—remember there is a condition which you must fulfil; consider the matter well in your own mind; ponder it during the next few days. If you succeed, well and good; if not, you must pass on the bell to Giles, that he may have his chance. And if he fails, it will be for Michael. There must be no disputes about it—to do you justice I do not fear that there will be, for I have watched you all, and have been pleased to see that you lived in amity, without jealousy or ill-will. And I have treated you all with perfect fairness."

"You have indeed," said all the three together, adding, "and we shall not forget it. Fair play's a jewel."

"But," said Michael anxiously, "you speak of next Sunday, dear uncle. May we not meet here again as usual while you are still with us?"

The old man laid his withered hand kindly on the young fellow's shoulder.

"I shall not be here next Sunday, my boy," he said, "and for this you must not grieve. Now farewell to you all."

And realising that he wished to be alone, they wrung his hand and went quietly away.

And before the sun sank on the following evening the old man had gone, as he had predicted.

The three young men all felt saddened by their loss—Michael especially, the more so when he saw Ysenda dissolved in tears, at the simple little funeral. How he longed to have a right to comfort her!

Hodge and Giles, though not without good feeling and gratitude to their old uncle, were too excited at the prospect of trying to benefit by his strange legacy, to give very much thought to mourning him.

"It's my turn first," said Hodge, "and I mean to succeed. But I'm not going to talk about it. Just you, Giles, and you, Mike, leave me alone. I have my own ideas."

"All right," said Giles, "I'm not going to meddle."

"And as for me," said Michael, "I've really scarce given the matter a thought."

Both noticed, however, that Hodge said nothing about their joining him on Sunday at the usual hour, as they had naturally expected. The loss of the one really good meal they had till now been sure of, was of consequence to them, though they were not greedy. To Mike, just at present, it mattered the most, for the poor fellow was denying himself in every way he could, so as to help Dame Martha with her grandchildren. Ysenda was doing her utmost, but just now her father was in a far from amiable humour, as she had again refused to accept a wealthy suitor, and to punish her the farmer was doling out even less money than his wont. So several people whom this little story concerns were in rather low spirits—Paul and Mattie less so than their elders, for though it was all their grandmother could do to give them the plainest of food and by no means very much of that, her love made up for her poverty, and they were at an age when hopefulness is easy.

Well—the days passed till came the Sunday on which Hodge was to try the working of the spell. He was up with the dawn, and instead of going to church as usual, spent the morning in scrubbing and scouring, till his kitchen shone like a new pin. For this was the idea that had come to him as the condition of success. Perfect cleanness! Peter's cottage had always been a marvel of this; it was whispered that the brownies or some mysterious beings of the kind acted as his housemaids, and perhaps it was so, for feeble and stiff as he was, it seemed impossible that he himself could have kept the boards so spotless, the stove so polished, the few pots and pans, which were of antique copper, so shining. And for

all we know, the saying was a true one.

Now Hodge was naturally a bit lazy, and his house by no means as well cared for as it might have been, and knowing this, it is scarcely to be wondered at that he hit upon this solution of the riddle. But he was not of course absolutely certain that it was correct, and for this reason, regardless of the probable disappointment to his companions, he let them understand that he did not expect them to be his guests.

"Another time I may invite them," he said to himself, "but best not begin by making a rule of it. Besides, if I fail I don't want them to sit here laughing at me. Not that there's much fear. The good people can't but be pleased with the way I've scrubbed and tidied. And I don't object to dining alone. I feel as if I could eat a whole capon to myself, not to speak of the other toothsome things! And after dinner I'll be glad of a rest, for working as hard as I've been doing, makes one ache."

He tidied up himself as well as his room, and then sat down to wait, the little bell in his hand. Twelve o'clock, a quarter past, then the half-hour, and at the moment, Hodge, having locked the door and closed the shutters for fear of intrusion or interruption, began solemnly to recite the incantation, which he had got well by heart, and as he uttered the last words "prithee haste" he lifted the silver toy and rang it vigorously, then sat listening with intensity.

For a moment or two he fancied he heard the whirring sound drawing near, but no—it was the buzzing in his head from his nervousness, for, stolid as he was, he was strung up with mingled hopes and fears. He rang again—no result; again he repeated the lines, half hoping he had not been quite accurate. No—they were as he had written them down and as he had compared them with the copies taken by his cousins. All was correct. But—nothing happened! And Hodge, slow and unemotional though he was, felt ready to shed tears!

Then he remembered that he was very hungry, and there was nothing but a crust of dry bread and a scrap of cheese in the house, and on Sundays there was no means of getting anything else. He had to be content, therefore, and to make the best of his scanty fare, and then he lay down on his bed and went to sleep and slept till it was dark, consoling himself with the thought that as he had failed there was not much chance of either of the others succeeding, and when he awoke, being on the whole a good-natured sort of fellow, he put his pride in his pocket and set off for Giles's, inspired partly, I dare say, by the hope of getting something to eat!

He found his two cousins supping together. Their fare was not luxurious nor abundant, but as he handed the bell to Giles and they saw his downcast face they at once understood the state of things and invited him to join them. He was glad enough to do so, and told them his story.

"And now, Giles," he ended, "it's your turn. Though what you can do to please the good people more than I did, I can't think."

"I'll tell you where you went wrong," said Giles. "You should have invited us too! There's something in numbers, you know—especially in the number three. And we've always been together at the dinner. Anyway, I now ask you two to be here next Sunday at the usual time to see me try my luck."

"Thank you," said Hodge rather sheepishly.

"Thank you," repeated Michael half absently, for his thoughts were running on other things. Ysenda's face had looked very sad in church that morning, and he fancied that Dame Martha and her charges were growing thinner and paler steadily.

"I'm certain they haven't enough to eat," he thought. "Maybe Giles will help a bit, if he succeeds," but in his heart he doubted if either Giles or he himself would fare better than Hodge had done.

"Yet," he said to himself, "Uncle Peter wasn't the sort to play a trick on us. And we saw the magic with our own eyes! But I scarce dare hope that we'll find the secret."

Sunday—the second Sunday—arrived in due time, and the three cousins met as arranged at Giles's cottage. Hodge was feeling of two minds. In one way he did not want Giles to succeed when he had failed; on the other hand, he greatly missed the excellent weekly dinner, and said to himself that after all it would be better to enjoy it at his cousin's than not to get it at all.

Giles was awaiting them at his door, the little bell in his hand.

"Come along in," he said. "Uncle Peter used to keep his guests waiting outside till it was all ready, but as we all saw the whole of it that last day, I don't see that I need start it all alone. It makes one a bit shaky and nervous, you see."

So Hodge and Mike, by no means unwillingly, followed him into the kitchen. Hodge was as usual very hungry, and again rather excited in hopes of a good dinner. Michael seemed depressed. He didn't care whether he was hungry or not; he was far from sanguine as to success for either Giles or himself; he missed his old uncle, and was rather in low spirits all round. Still of course he had no thought of refusing to take part in Giles's effort.

The three seated themselves, leaving the space for the table's hoped-for appearance. Giles held the bell in his hand, every now and then glancing at the old clock in the corner, of which he was the happy possessor.

"It doesn't keep such very good time," he said in a low voice, "but I set it right this morning, so it can't be more than a moment or two slow."

And then they waited till the long hand approached and slightly passed the twenty-nine minutes to the fateful half-hour.

Giles began to recite the charm, the two others listening. He said it quite correctly, then slowly raising the bell he rang it clearly. Utter silence. Then—yes—the first whirring was heard, gradually growing louder as it went on, till with the same sort of spring or swing the floor opened and up came the table, the mysterious space closing again at once.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Giles, starting up, and even Michael's heart beat faster with excitement. But Hodge, whose one thought was his dinner, Hodge's red face grew paler and his expression darkened.

"Not so fast," he said; "not much hurraing about it." And then the others saw what his greedy eyes had at once perceived. The table was, as ever, covered with a spotless cloth—three places were laid for, as far as plates and knives were concerned, but on each lay a small loaf of black or brown bread and a wedge of cheese. That was all! No end dishes, no side ones—no centre with fruit—nothing but the plain everyday luncheon they were used to when at work in the fields, and none too much of it either, and as Hodge added, muttering, "not even a glass of beer!"

The three looked at each other. Giles and Mike began to laugh, as much at Hodge's angry disgust as at the thing itself.

"You've not hit it off, after all," said Michael to his host. "Still, anything's better than nothing. I vote that we eat what there is," and he cut a slice off his loaf. The others—Hodge very gloomily—did the same and began to eat. The provisions were good of their kind.

"I wonder what I did wrong, or didn't do right," said Giles. "At worst, Hodge, I've got on better than you, and next Sunday maybe Michael will manage best of all. Surely you'll get some hot potatoes at least, Mike?"

"I don't think I'm going to try at all," said the youngest of the cousins.

"It's been a mean sort of lega——" began Hodge.

But before he finished the word, Michael stopped him. "You mustn't speak against Uncle Peter," he said. "He did his best for us, of that I'm sure. The spell was not of his making. He had no power over it. He taught us all he could. Strikes me we're not *good* enough to succeed, somehow. Think what he was! So contented and patient, and so unselfish! Giving away of the little he had, keeping scarce anything for himself."

"He was always sure of a good Sunday dinner, anyway," grumbled Hodge.

"And did he keep even that to himself?" queried Michael.

By this time the table was cleared of the little it had offered. Giles stood up and held out the bell.

"We may as well send it back again," he said, ringing, as he spoke, and in a few moments the whole had disappeared as they had seen it do that last Sunday at old Peter's.

Hodge walked off without speaking. Giles turned to Michael—he was still holding the little bell.

"Are you in earnest, Mike," he asked, "about giving up your try? If so, what's to be done with this?"

He waved the pretty thing in his hand as he spoke. Strange to say, it gave out no sound. The cousins looked at it curiously. The queer incident impressed them afresh, and Michael hesitated in his reply.

"There is no tricking of us in it," he murmured. Then he turned to Giles.

"You may as well give it to me," he said. "I'll think it over and let you know before next Sunday—and Hodge too, for that matter."

A new idea had struck him and his face brightened. He would consult Ysenda and abide by her advice, and in the meantime he carefully hid away the silver bell.

For two or three days to come he had no opportunity of meeting the farmer's pretty daughter. But one evening when he had looked in at Dame Martha's to see how she and the orphans were getting on, he met Ysenda, on her way thither. She was carrying a basket with what provisions she had got leave to bring them. For she was too honest to give away anything belonging to her father without his permission. She stopped at once, on seeing Mike, who doffed his hat.

"Good evening," she said, "I am——" but he interrupted her. "Let me carry that for you. It is heavy," he began, taking hold of the handle.

"I could wish it were heavier," she said, with a rather pitiful smile. "I do what I can for the good dame and those dear children, but it isn't much."

"It's more than I do," said Michael regretfully.

"Don't say that," she replied eagerly. "You give all you have to give. But what irks me is the knowing I *should* be able to do all needed for the poor things, if only—my father——" she stopped short. "How are they?" she went on again. "You have been there, I make sure?"

Michael blushed.

"They're fairly well," he said. "It was only a bundle of fire-wood, and, and—some windfall apples I found—nothing to speak of. The boy—Paul—has had a bit of work this week. I spoke to our master for him, but it's a slack time of year, you see."

Ysenda nodded. Michael had turned and was retracing his steps with her. For a moment or two neither spoke. Then suddenly the young man looked at her, with a grave face.

"Ysenda," he said, "I want your advice," and he went on hurriedly to relate to her the experiences of the last two Sundays in his cousins' cottages. She listened attentively, but somewhat to his perplexity she seemed in no way surprised or discouraged by his story, for when he ended by saying, "Don't you think I'd best give it up? It doesn't seem meant for the like of us. Uncle Peter didn't understand maybe that we're not the same as him—we're too thick-skulled and dull, and not full of benevolence and charity as he was. The good people don't care to bestow their benefits on common rough fellows like us," she replied quietly:

"No, Michael, I don't agree with you. You've got wrong notions. There's a condition attached to the spell, which must be discovered by yourself. Uncle Peter told you this plainly. He said nothing about success depending on your being very clever, or learned in the ways he was, and he knew none of you were. He knew the condition was one quite possible for you to fulfil, but it had to be your own doing. Well—Hodge and Giles have failed—Giles less than Hodge——"

"Because he wasn't such a selfish pig as Hodge," Michael interrupted, "still——"

Ysenda smiled.

"Still," she went on, "a meal of bread and cheese isn't worth the trouble. I agree with you. But I don't see why *you* should not succeed, though the others have failed."

"I don't know why I *should*!" exclaimed he. "I can think of nothing new to try, and it worries me. I keep dreaming about it night and day, till I want to throw it over and have done with it. I had a plan——" but he hesitated.

"Tell me your plan," she urged.

"It was this. I thought maybe Hodge and Giles would forget the right words or miss the time or do something stupid that I could see and guard against when my turn came, and if so I had planned how I'd invite the poor dame and her children to the Sunday feast—I'd have just bid them come a few minutes before the time, the way uncle did with us—and when I'd got it all ready—steaming hot and all beautiful and tempting, I'd throw open the door and show them in. My! just to think of it," and his blue eyes danced with pleasure.

So did Ysenda's pretty grey ones, but she kept her self-control.

"Well," she said gently, "why shouldn't you carry out your plan?"

"Ysenda!" exclaimed Michael, "how could I risk it after the failure of the others? Supposing I had as good luck as Giles—and how can I be sure of even that?—a nice feast it would be to invite the poor things to—a lump of bread and a wedge of cheese! I'd be ashamed past words."

"You'd have a nice, dainty table, and no doubt, if the good people knew how many guests you'd asked, they'd lay places for them all, as has always been the case so far as I understand," said Ysenda. "I'll tell you what I'd do—I'll help you all I can—let's have some simple fare ready to fall back upon if need be. I'm sure I can manage a joint of cold meat and some potatoes, which you can roast in readiness. Then when you invite Dame Martha and the children just say it's really to take 'pot-luck' with you, so they won't expect over much."

Michael's face brightened.

"Thank you, Ysenda," he said, "thank you a thousand times. You've cheered me greatly, and made me think I'd be a coward not to take my chance. So I'll do as you say. Maybe I can get some vegetables or fruit to help out the dinner. And I'll just invite them in an off-hand sort of way, as you advise. A case of 'pot-luck' it certainly will be, if there never was one before!" and he laughed quite heartily.

That very evening he invited the dame and her grandchildren, and the first time he met Hodge and Giles he told them of these expected guests. Hodge was rather scornful about it, but Giles was more cheery.

"There's something in numbers," he maintained, "and three's a lucky one. You're the third to try, and you've invited three, besides us three ourselves. And—" he added, slapping his cousin on the shoulder as he spoke—"why yes, Mike, old fellow, fate's smiling on you and no mistake! Sunday's the third of the month, for sure!"

Michael's spirits rose still higher.

"Thank you, Giles," he said. "Well, we'll know before long. And you two mustn't fail me. If we don't meet at church, I'll depend on you soon after twelve o'clock on Sunday. Don't be late."

"No fear," said Giles, and Hodge, who was influenced by the others' hopefulness, felt his mouth already watering in anticipation of the excellent fare, echoed "no fear."

And some quarter of an hour or so before the usual time the three were settled in their places, Mike, bell in hand, all three pair of eyes glancing every minute or so at the clock. Now and then Michael's strayed to the cupboard in the corner, with a comfortable expression, for there, thanks to Ysenda and his own precautions, there was a good piece of meat and a few other odds and ends, sufficient for a plain though not very choice or ample meal.

At last—and how very slowly do the hands of a clock seem to move, if one is watching them!—at last the long needle approached the figure "six" at the bottom of the dial. Mike glanced at his companions.

"Now for it," he said, and for the life of him he could not prevent his voice shaking a little. "Here goes," and then pulling himself together he repeated the rhyme of incantation in a firm clear voice:

"Little table, fair to see,
Magic bell now summons thee.
Spread with viands good to taste,
Fairy table, prithee haste!"

and after a moment's pause he lifted the silver toy and rang it cheerily.

Then—utter silence, save for Michael's drawing a deep breath or two—and—oh, joy! the whirring sounds began to be heard—no mistake about it, as they grew louder and nearer. Giles chuckled as he whispered, "Some good honest bread and cheese, hey, Mike?"

But he laughs best who wins!

Michael made no reply. In another moment came the soft swing of the invisible hinges—the floor opened, and up came the table. You could almost have fancied that it or its burdens were laughing with pleasure, for there was a merry clatter among the pretty china plates and dishes—so closely were they packed, so many were they, though as the whole finally emerged and settled down as it were, the table seemed to grow longer, till there was ample space for its six guests. Then the floor closed, and all was quiet.

Not so the three cousins.

"Hurrah in good earnest this time," cried Giles.

"Hush, my good fellow," said Michael, though his own face was by this time one broad smile "they'll have come, I'm sure. I must fetch them in," and he turned towards the door.

"Stay a moment," interrupted Hodge, who by this time was in high spirits, busily lifting the covers and examining the viands, "stay, till I tell you what there is for dinner. The giver of the feast should know the fare."

"Well, then," said Michael, "tell me quickly."

"There's a couple of ducks," replied Hodge, "stuffed, and roasted to a turn. How good they smell! And apple sauce and mashed potatoes, and a plum-pudding—to be sure Christmas is not so very far off now—and a whole pile of gingerbread snaps with whipped cream, and oranges galore, for dessert. My word, but the brownies keep first-rate cooks and caterers."

Michael had opened the door before his hungry friend had left off speaking, but he heard Hodge calling after him, "Stop, stop, I've forgotten the pork pie. Oh, my goodness, such a beauty!"

In another moment Michael had seized Dame Martha by the hand and was leading her into the cottage, followed by Paul and Mattie, looking very neat and clean in spite of their poor clothes, and in not a little excitement at this visit to the kind young man who had been their first friend in this strange land.

"I hope you've not been waiting long," said Mike.

"Oh no, thank you," the dame replied. "Just a very few minutes. We heard the church clock strike the half-hour as we drew near."

The door was wide open. Hodge and Giles greeted the new-comers heartily, Hodge adding that they'd better set to at once, before the dishes got cold. But though Dame Martha had very good manners by nature and even by habit, for in her better days she had been a much-respected upper servant in an excellent family, she could not restrain an exclamation of the greatest astonishment when she caught sight of the wonderful display of good things, and perceived their appetising odour.

"My dear boy—Michael!" she cried. "What extravagance is this? And you said it would be just a simple meal—'pot-luck' you called it, if I remember right?"

"And pot-luck it is," he replied, laughing. "There's no reason that I know of why pot-luck shouldn't be good fare, as I hope you will find our dinner to be."

There is no need to tell you how the feast was enjoyed. To begin with, it was flavoured not only with the "best sauce" of the old proverb—hunger—but also with the excellent additions of friendliness and gratitude and goodwill, and besides these even, there was a mysterious feeling of graciousness and prettiness over it all, which I am inclined to think must have been wafted with the viands from fairyland itself.

Never had the children had such a treat, and being modest and unselfish and far from greedy they enjoyed it all the more, nor was there any necessity for their grandmother to warn them not to eat too much.

Every one had enough—indeed Hodge's appetite seemed equal to that of two ordinary people—but yet when all had replied, "No thank you, nothing more," to Michael's hospitable offers, the dishes looked by no means empty, and though he made the children carry off a couple of oranges each, for a little Sunday treat at home, the pile of fruit scarcely appeared to have been touched. The thought did cross Michael's head that he wished he could keep the remains of the feast in his larder. But "No," he decided, "it would be greedy and might displease the fairies."

So when the dame and her grandchildren, with many and many expressions of gratitude, took their leave—though, by the bye, I must not forget to tell you that what brought the poor things' pleasure to the *highest* height was Michael's telling them that he would expect them at the same hour and in the same way the following Sunday, "and every Sunday, so long as my pot-luck continues to suit you," he added—well then, as soon as the three had left he re-entered the cottage with his cousins and carefully closing the door, rang the fairy bell for the invisible attendants to remove the table.

It disappeared as it had come, obediently to his summons. Then Hodge and Giles turned to him.

"The luck's with you, Mike, no doubt about it," they said, but without any ill-will, it must be allowed.

"Let's count it as belonging to us all," said hospitable Michael. "It shall be a fixed rule that you two dine with me every Sunday, same as to-day. And as long as the good people favour us as they've done this time, the least *we* can do is to let those who are less well off than we, share in our prosperity. I've a feeling that it's what old Uncle Peter would wish."

"That's why you mean to have the dame and her boy and girl every Sunday?" said Hodge. "Well, for my part I wouldn't take upon me to object. They're nice-mannered children, and the dame's an old friend. And there was enough and to spare."

Giles was looking very thoughtful.

"Yes, indeed," he exclaimed. "It's the right thing to do, and, as you say, it's following after our kind old godfather. I say, Mike," he went on, "maybe—I shouldn't be very surprised if that's how you've hit the nail on the head—eh, what do you think of that?"

Michael stared. Such an idea had never occurred to him, and indeed he scarcely understood what Giles meant. He thought of it afterwards, however.

Then his cousins left him, and he began to wish he could manage to see Ysenda to tell her the good news.

"She'll be as pleased as I am myself," he thought, "as pleased as if the good luck had been her own. And after all, it's thanks to her I persevered. By the bye, I wonder what I should do with that nice piece of meat she brought me, to fall back upon in case of need. I shouldn't keep it—maybe she'd like me to take it to the dame. I'll just have a look at it."

He turned to the cupboard—it was a sort of larder with a wired opening to the fresh air, which he had arranged himself for he was very neat-handed. But when he drew back the door, he started with surprise. He could scarcely believe his eyes, and rubbed them hard to make sure he was not dreaming! For there, neatly placed on the shelves, was not only kind Ysenda's gift, but all the remains of the dinner—cold duck, pork pie, plum-pudding, sauces, vegetables, fruit! almost as tempting a sight as had been the viands on their first appearance, so daintily were they all arranged, so clean and bright were the china and glass.

Michael really laughed with pleasure.

"If only I could tell Ysenda," he said aloud.

The opportunity for so doing was coming nearer, though he knew it not.

On their way home Dame Martha and the children met the farmer and his daughter. Ysenda stopped to speak to them, and her father, who happened to be in a very good humour, as he had made excellent terms for the sale of his numerous stacks of hay, accosted the old woman kindly enough, though he had been one of those who had called her very foolish for accepting the charge of the penniless orphans.

"Well, dame," he began, "and how goes the world with you?" and almost before Ysenda heard the first words of her reply, the young girl guessed, what indeed she was already sure of, that Michael's trial of the magic spell had succeeded—so bright and happy looked the dame, so bursting with joyful excitement were Paul and Mattie.

"Oh, I am all of a tremble with thankfulness," replied Martha. "Such a feast as we have had! Never was there a kinder host than young Michael——"

"And, and," interrupted the children, forgetting their shyness, "we're to have dinner with him every Sunday—just fancy that! And see what we've got to take home for a treat," and they held out the beautiful oranges.

"I *am* pleased——" began Ysenda, but her father interrupted her.

"Young Michael, did you say," he inquired, turning to the dame, "young *Michael!* How comes it that he can afford to give feasts? I thought it was all he could do to keep himself—not to speak of feasting."

"And a real feast it was," said Martha, "roast ducks, and pies, and——"

"Plum-pudding, and these oranges and apples," the children went on. "And every Sunday, sir, every Sunday it's to be the same—dinner with him."

"Glad to hear it," said the farmer, rather shortly.

Then with a nod of farewell, and a sweet smile from his daughter, the two walked on.

For a few moments neither spoke. They were near their own home by this time. Suddenly the farmer exclaimed:

"Queer business this seems of young Michael's. He's a steady, hard-working fellow, but none too well-off. Maybe old Peter left him something after all—unbeknown to any one?"

He did not exactly ask the question of Ysenda, but he looked at her as he spoke. He knew how very friendly she had been with the old man. She smiled, and her pretty eyes lighted up.

"Maybe," was all she said.

But an hour or two later, when her father had finished smoking his Sunday afternoon pipe, he called her.

"Ysenda," he said,—he was sitting in the porch, for the day was mild for the time of year,—"Ysenda, I'm thinking about that young fellow—Michael."

"Yes, father?" she said questioningly.

"You know that old Thomas is leaving us." Thomas was the farmer's head man. "He's getting past work, and he's got some tidy savings put by. He won't be badly off. I'm not sorry. I'd like some one younger and sharper about the place, though I'd scarce have found it in my heart to dismiss him. But he wants to go. I've been casting about for a new man. I wonder how Michael would do."

"Was it what you heard this afternoon that's made you think of him?" the girl asked, straight-forwardly.

The farmer seemed a little taken aback.

"Well—not exactly. But you see," he replied, "if so be that old Peter did leave him something, well then, Peter was a wise man, a very wise man—it shows he thought highly of the young fellow, and if he was to come to me instead of Thomas, I'd as lief as not that he had a something of his own. It would give him a better position over the others, you see."

From her father's practical point of view, Ysenda did "see"; and when he went on to propose that they should stroll round by Michael's cottage for their evening walk, "just to have a look at things," she made no objection.

"We might say we heard of his kindness to the dame, and ask about her and how she's getting on," added the farmer.

So Michael, sitting ruminating by the fire, was not a little surprised when, on opening the door in answer to a knock, he was confronted by the two visitors.

"We thought we'd look in to—to congratulate you on your—your kindness to our old friend and her grandchildren," the farmer began, very amiably. "We've heard all about it from them, you must know."

Michael's sunburnt face had grown very red, first with the delight of seeing Ysenda, and then by the startling word "congratulate." For he knew that the secret confided to him and his cousins would be of no value if it were made known to others, so that Peter had trusted to them to keep it faithfully.

Ysenda seemed to guess his alarm, and with a smile and a whisper she reassured him, even before her father had finished speaking.

"It is all right," she said. "I know you have won"; and later on, she added, "It is what Peter hoped and wished for."

So nothing was wanting to Michael's satisfaction. He begged his visitors to honour him by staying to supper, and when the farmer saw the good fare so quickly and neatly laid before them, his opinion of Michael, needless to say, rose still higher, and before he took leave of the young man he had hinted at the proposal he was thinking of.

This was the beginning of a happy life for Mike. He became the farmer's right hand, and before long his son-in-law. Nor in his prosperity did Michael ever forget his old friends. Never a Sunday passed without his cousins and his poorer neighbours—Martha and her grandchildren—being his guests. Never, therefore, did the "good people" fail to respond to his summons.

And even before Ysenda became the hostess on these occasions, she felt that she might reveal to him the secret of the condition which in his generosity he had unconsciously fulfilled.

"Peter told me what it was," she said. "The magic feast is only bestowed on him who invites as his guests those poorer than himself. But had you known this, the charm would have been lost. Your motive was pure kindness—free from all selfishness, therefore you succeeded where Hodge and even Giles, good-natured though he is, failed!"



"Your motive was pure kindness—free from all selfishness, therefore you succeeded."

"All the same, sweetheart," said Michael, "I feel that I owe my happy fortune to *you*, as well as to dear old Peter and to

the 'good people' themselves. May I always have a grateful heart and remember those whose lives are less favoured than mine."

The Weather Maiden

Once upon a time—it does not matter if it was a long ago "once," or not a long ago one; it does not matter what country it was in, whether far off or near at hand—it was just a "once upon a time," somewhere and somewhen—a little girl sat crying quietly but very sadly, all by herself in a queer room which I will describe. But first I must tell you that she was not crying from temper, or from having been naughty and now being sorry, no, she was just crying because she was lonely and unloved and in a sense friendless. And it had not always been so with her. Some years ago—to her they seemed many, for she was only twelve, but in reality they were but few—she had had kind parents, father and mother both, who loved their only child very dearly, though she was not a very pretty or "taking" little girl. She was small for her age and more thoughtful than clever or amusing. And now that the dear ones whom she belonged to were gone, and her only home as an orphan, and a poor orphan, was with cousins, who, though good worthy people, had adopted her out of duty and did not understand the shy silent child, or care to do so, it is not to be wondered at that she grew shyer and silter and often seemed what she was really far from being, stupid and slow and even sullen.

Her new home—though "new" it no longer was to her, for it was now nearly four years since Farmer Mac, as we will call him, had brought her back with him from the desolate house where she had been so happy and cared for since her birth—this new home was a large rambling old farm-house. A busy beehive of a place, cheerful enough to its owners and their sons, who were strong and active and hard-working from morning to night, but to Merran a sort of incessant worry and bustle, of loud voices and hurrying steps and noisy laughter, or noisier scolding, not really as cross or angry as it sounded, but startling to her sensitive nerves and childish timidity. So she grew duller and slower and thinner and whiter, till at last those about her began to say she was in a "dwine," and "maybe all for the best if so it were, for—" and at this, voices were lowered—"it's plain to see the child's 'not all there.'"

And her aunt, as she had been told to call the farmer's wife, a strong hearty woman, who had done and meant to do her best for the little maiden, grew tired of worrying about her, and trying to feed her up and turn her into the sort of girl a daughter of her own would have been. Merran did her no credit, and the mixture of shame and pity Dame Mac came to feel about her gradually grew into a kind of constant, half-repressed irritation. She made her work, which of course was right, the child would have pined and "dwindled" still more had she been left alone to do nothing but creep about and dream in corners, but the worst of it was that what Merran did, or tried to do, seldom pleased her aunt. As often as not, after telling her to sweep or dust, the dame would snatch the cloths or brush out of her hand, crying that she'd rather do it all herself than see the girl's feckless ways of going about the work.

This had happened the day that this story begins. Merran had had an even worse scolding than usual, and though she set her face hard and said not a word in self-defence, when she got upstairs to the hiding-place where first we see her, she let her tears burst out and sobbed and wept to her heart's content.

There was a special reason for her aunt's vexation with her that morning. Merran had had a soaking in the rain the day before, when she had gone out without an umbrella and with the clean, freshly starched and ironed frock on, which should have lasted her the whole week, as yesterday had been Monday. Now it was not only limp and dragged but on one side a mass of mud, for in her hurry to get home the child had slipped in the lane, always a rather watery one from the overhanging trees and want of sun, and fallen at full length, so of course there was nothing for it but to have the unlucky garment returned to the wash-house six days before it was due there, and as a punishment Merran was now arrayed in an old stuff skirt, too short for her, which she particularly disliked, and a kind of loose jacket or bed-gown once her aunt's, in which, it must be allowed, she did look rather a figure of fun, something like a very shabby Dutch doll.

"And Dirk will see me like this," she said to herself, "after the long time he's been away. He will think me so ugly and untidy, and he's the only person in the world who cares for me at all," and at these thoughts her sobs redoubled.

Dirk was the youngest of the farmer's five sons, the youngest but by no means the favourite or the spoilt one, as a youngest is generally supposed to be. He was not as strong or fine a fellow as his brothers; indeed as a baby he had been so puny and delicate that his mother was half ashamed to let him be seen for fear of its being said or hinted that he was a changeling. There was some reason for this, as the first few months of his life had been spent in much wailing and crying, poor little chap. And even when he got over this stage and grew into boyhood, his position in the family was rather a Cinderella-like one. Yet to those who took the trouble to notice and encourage him, he quickly showed himself to be a sweet-tempered, cheerful and intelligent child. So by degrees things had improved for him, and now when he was

expected home from a long sea-voyage on which he had been sent to strengthen him after growing too fast, his relations were ready to welcome him back with heartiness.

He was four years older than Merran, so when she first came to the farm he was only a boy of eleven or twelve, sorry for the orphan, and in his awkward way very kind to her. So naturally she turned to him gratefully. But now he had been absent so long that she felt shy at the thought of meeting him again.

"He'll be big and strong like the others now," she said to herself; "he'll not think me worth speaking to, looking like a beggar-girl as I do. Oh, oh, I wish I could die! I wish it wasn't wrong to wish I could die! I wish I could fly away somewhere, quite, quite away. Everybody dislikes me—even the doll-woman up there in the rain-house seems to be laughing at me, 'cos I'm so ugly and stupid."

What she called the "rain-house" was one of those old-fashioned toy barometers, or weather-tellers, now so seldom seen. It had been discarded long ago, as broken and out of order, years before Merran had come to the farm. She had never seen it except up on a high shelf in the garret, standing among other old things, broken or chipped or useless, and yet which Dame Mac, if ever she remembered them, had not the time to sort or look over. Possibly too, unsentimental as she was, there were certain objects among the "rubbish" which she had not found it in her heart to burn or throw away.

This, the garret, was the queer room which I said I would describe. It was large, as it covered a good part of the first story of the farm-house, which was a long, rather low building, and only one end of this second floor had been plastered and boarded and turned into habitable rooms. And these, where some of the younger sons and farm-servants slept, had a separate staircase; the garret was approached by a ladder-like flight of steps leading to nowhere else. So Merran had long ago appropriated it as a place of refuge for herself when her head ached, or her cousins had been teasing her, or her aunt scolding. She grew to love it dearly. There were queer corners where she could hide; there were one or two small unglazed storm-windows, in whose eaves the swallows built, and from which she had a wide view of the country, in its own way a beautiful part of the world, for though flat and what some call "tame," it was well wooded—the trees in summer and autumn, even in early spring, when the first tender greens began to shimmer and sparkle, were a sight to be seen, so lofty and spreading were they. And not very far off, though too far to be perceived from the lower windows, was a silvery glimmer which Merran knew was the sea.

She knew by heart every inch of the place and everything it contained. She made up stories to herself about the old pieces of furniture—quaint chairs short of a leg or two, a tumble-down chest of drawers, with a marble top, which must, in the far past, have stood in a handsome, perhaps in a beautiful, room; a cracked and blackened mirror or two; a pathetic old cradle on rockers, which seemed asking for a baby to nurse. Merran talked to and pitied them all; sometimes even she sang in her very thin tiny voice to the cradle, "just to make it think it's not empty," she would say to herself as a sort of excuse.

Among the things on the shelf, nothing interested her much except the "rain-house." She had never been able to examine it, for it was too high up for her to reach, and there was nothing in the shape of a ladder in the garret. Now and then she had thought of climbing up by the help of some of the chairs, but they were all too rickety to be of any use. So she contented herself with fancies about the queer little cottage with its two doors, out of one of which the woman could be seen peeping—the man never appeared, and Merran used to picture to herself that perhaps there was a pretty fairy garden behind the house, in which he was always busy working, while his wife kept everything neat and clean inside and cooked the dinner, pretending that the little woman only looked out now and then just to wish her—Merran—good-morning.

But to-day she was too unhappy to have cheerful fancies about anything at all, and she even felt vexed with the doll, imagining that its face was laughing at her as she sat there crying, and as she gazed up at it the fancy increased till she began to feel quite angry.

"You'd cry too, if you were me," she said at last. "You are up there quite safe and snug—nobody to scold you, or order you about. *You're* not forced to wear ugly dirty old clothes 'cos you got caught in the rain—no, of course, you never come out in the rain. I wish I lived in a country where it was always dry and clean, instead of muddy and wet."

There was some excuse for this wish. For though it was not a hilly part of the world—and one generally imagines that it is in mountainous districts that the weather is the most uncertain—the country where the farm-house, now Merran's home, stood, was extraordinarily trying in this respect. It was very fertile, as it was well watered, but changeable past

description, quite enough to try the farmers' tempers, not to speak of little girls'. Never, for two days together, could even the oldest inhabitants, naturally supposed to be the most weather-wise, prophesy with any security what was coming. Barometer after barometer proved all but useless. I believe it was in a fit of irritation that Farmer Mac had knocked over the old "rain-house," and broken it, because he imagined "the pair who tell the weather" had misled him. They had not done so, as you will hear, and it would have been better for him if he had not treated them as he did. But of this Merran knew nothing.

"Yes," she repeated angrily, for it seemed to her that the figure had moved forward a little and was really looking down at her as if it were alive, "yes," she said, "*you* wouldn't like it, I can tell you, so you needn't stare at me so. If only I could get up to you, I'd tell you things that would make even you, a silly wooden doll, sorry for me."

To her amazement, a voice replied to her.

"Close your eyes," it said, and even if Merran had felt inclined to disobey, I doubt if she could have done so. "Hold out your hands—upwards," it went on, and then the child became aware that whoever it was that spoke was somewhere above her, and again she obeyed, stretching up her hands as far as she could reach. Then for a third time came a command. "Spring," said the voice, "spring, high, into the air. Yes, that is right," and as she gave the leap upwards, instead of at once dropping down again as one naturally would, she felt her fingers grasped, gently but firmly, and in another moment her feet touched ground again, and the same voice now said gently, "Good girl. Now, Merran, you may look about you."

You may be sure she lost no time in availing herself of the permission. But—just at first, she did not feel sure that her eyes were not somehow or other playing her a trick. What she saw, the place where she found herself, seemed so strange; still more so the person who, still holding her by the hands, was looking down at her, smiling.

"Who are you?" said Merran, drawing away a little, for she felt half frightened.

"Don't you know? Look at me well—you have often done so, though you never saw me so plainly before."

It was the same voice, and though sweet and gentle it had to be obeyed. So Merran looked at her, and gradually she began to understand, though vaguely.

"Yes," she said, "I seem to know your face, and your dress, and—and—but yet you can't be the figure in the rain-house. You are so pretty, so very pretty, and even your dress—oh what lovely stuff it's made of."

And so it was. The "doll-woman," as Merran had called her, was attired in a short, queerly spotted red skirt, with a white jacket—only painted wood, of course, to mortal eyes—and a kind of kerchief on her head. Now the skirt had changed into fine, rose-coloured silky stuff, beautifully embroidered all over with tiny daisies; the hard stiff upper dress was of snowy, delicate muslin, such as Merran had never before seen or dreamt of; the head-gear a gauzy scarf of golden tissue; the little feet were shod with slippers of the same lovely red as the skirt, gleaming against the whitest and finest of stockings.

"Oh," exclaimed Merran again, "how pretty, oh how *very* pretty you are; your dress too! I can't believe you're the doll-woman. I didn't think her at all pretty, and yet——" she felt too puzzled to explain, and no wonder, for the face still smiling at her was so very charming. Blue eyes like forget-me-nots; cheeks like delicate blush roses; lovely bright brown hair, some ends of which came straying out of the graceful head-dress, and above all such a sweet and kindly expression!

"Yet," said the fairy lady, for that this she was the little girl began to feel sure, "yet, Merran, your idea is right. I am the same, and this place where you are standing is what you have called the 'rain-house.' Look about you—this is only the entrance—and then I will take you inside and you shall see my husband, who will welcome you as I do. We have expected you for a long time, but till you spoke to me in your trouble I had no power to bid you come."

Then Merran turned and gazed around her, and strange as it had seemed at first, she began to recognise the roughened walls, the branches wreathed round the porch with its two open doorways, even the flooring on which she stood, painted to look like tiles.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "it *is* like the rain-house, as much as I could see of it. But——" and then for the first time a new perplexity struck her, "if it really is it," she asked, "how can I be in it? How can I be littler even than you? Why I could have held you in my hand when I was down in the garret, if I could have got you? Have you grown big, or have I grown

tiny?"

The Sunshine fairy—we can call her by her name now—laughed, and oh how pretty her laugh was!

"My dear Merran," she said, "it doesn't matter. Perhaps, however, it is less confusing for you to think you have grown tiny. But I needn't puzzle you if you understand that to all intents and purposes you are in fairyland—as much there as it is well for a mortal child to be. Your old rain-house is one of its entrances. Come now, and you shall see more."

She opened a door in the back of the hut—or what seemed the back—and led Merran through. The little girl gave a cry of pleasure. They were standing in the prettiest room you could imagine. It was all brightness and cosiness, the chairs and tables of white wood, the carpet like green moss, the walls hung with soft pink silk, and above all the "window-doors," as Merran called them to herself, opened on to—surely the loveliest garden that ever was seen, "out of fairyland" I was going to say, forgetting that it was, if not fairyland itself, just at the entrance to it. It did not seem a very large garden, or rather one could not quite tell how far it extended, for at the farther end it sloped down rather suddenly and beyond, a great thicket of beautiful trees and bushes gave a misty, vague appearance, through which Merran only caught sight of gleams of sky and sunshine—almost, she fancied, of blue hills far in the distance.

"That must be the real fairyland," she thought. But she did not feel much curiosity about it; the pretty room and lovely garden were too full of delight. And as she gazed, another object attracted her. This was a fountain in the centre of one of the velvety lawns. She had never seen a fountain before, but she was a clever child in her own way, and she remembered pictures which she had seen, of which the dancing silvery drops reminded her.

"Is that a—a waterfall?" she asked.

The fairy lady shook her head.

"Not exactly," she replied, "though for a little girl like you it is a very good guess. No, it is the fountain by which we know about the rain and showers. We send messages far and wide by its means. You could not understand if I explained. But we work very hard. Fairy folk are not idle, as some foolish mortals imagine. See—my husband is coming to speak to you. He and I work together, though behind there in your world people fancy we don't! Rain without sunshine, or sunshine without rain, would make a sad state of things."

"Yes, indeed," said a merry voice, and from behind the mist and dazzle of the fountain Merran perceived a new-comer—a man with a nice brown face, dressed something like a charming old china figure which her aunt greatly treasured—brown velvet jacket and breeches, flowered waistcoat, a scarlet cap on his short curls—altogether quite the right sort of person to match the lovely Sunshine fairy.

He doffed his cap as he came forward, Merran gazing at him in surprise. She would much have liked to ask him how ever he managed to keep so beautifully clean and smart if he was always working away at the water, but she felt rather shy, and only gazed.

"So you have come at last, little maiden," he said pleasantly. "We have been waiting here a good while for you."



"So you have come at last, little maiden."

Merran felt greatly astonished and puzzled.

"Yes," said the Sunshine fairy, "our queen knows all about you. She always cares for lonely or unhappy children more than for any others, though they may not be aware of it. And she told us to stay here till the time came for us to be of service to you, poor little Merran. Not that it matters much to us where we live. Rain and I can do our work wherever we are, and move our abode in less time than it would take you to run downstairs."

"I wish you would stay here always and let me come and live with you," pleaded Merran. "Nobody cares for me down there," and she nodded towards where she supposed the farm must be. "Couldn't you—couldn't your queen turn me into a fairy for good? I shouldn't ever want to be a real little girl again, and nobody would mind. They'd just think I'd got lost—they'd never imagine I'd gone to fairyland."

"Would nobody mind—would nobody miss you?" the Sunshine fairy asked gently.

Merran's eager face fell. She hesitated.

"P'raps Dirk would have minded once, before he went away," she said ruefully. "But not now—oh no—they say he's grown so fine and strong like the others. He won't care for me any more, I'm sure. That's another reason why I wish you'd let me stay with you and never go back to the farm again. Aunt says I grow stupider and stupider, and uglier too, I daresay she thinks, though she doesn't exactly say so. And just look at me"—she held out her shabby old skirt as she spoke—"this horrid dress is only fit for a beggar girl, and I'll have to wear it all the week, though it wasn't my fault that I dirtied my nice clean one. The lane was so slippery, and so muddy. It had been raining so hard."

The Sunshine fairy smiled.

"Yes," she said, "but you don't know what it would be like in your country if it didn't rain a good deal."

"I know it has to, of course," said Merran, "but if only we knew better, everything would be easier. Uncle Mac often says there never was such changeable weather as we have. I don't believe he'd be so cross and surly if he wasn't always

worrying about what the sky's like and what it's going to do. And if *I* knew, I'd take care not to go out without an umbrella, if it was going to be wet, nor along that muddy lane."

The Rain fairy had gone back to the fountain while Merran was speaking, and by this time she had quite lost all feelings of shyness with the pretty Sunshine lady. Just then the sound of the rushing water stopped suddenly. The fairy looked up and called out. The words seemed strange, and Merran could not understand them, nor the reply which came back. But Sunshine turned to her.

"You will find bright weather on your return," she said, "and I promise you a pleasant surprise as well. So do not be low-spirited, little Merran. You have been watched over in ways you know not of, and you may cheer up from now."

But it was difficult for the child to believe this all at once.

"Oh mayn't I stay with you, dear kind fairy?" she pleaded again. "It wouldn't matter to me how the time passed. I shouldn't be like little Bridget, who found her friends all gone, for you see I should never want to go back at all. Oh do let me stay. Can't you turn me into a fairy altogether?" she repeated. "I'd be your servant or anything you like."

Still Sunshine shook her head.

"No, my little maiden," she replied. "What you ask is impossible. You can never become one of us—a human child you are, a woman you must before long become. But a happy woman you may be, and to help you to be happy is the task that has been appointed to us. Long ago, but for love and pity for you, the old rain-house, as you call it, would have fallen to pieces, and we should have deserted the farm altogether, as indeed its master deserved after his treatment of us. He has been punished for it, however, and now by your means great and unusual good fortune may be before him and his. And this I will now explain to you, but on one condition."

Merran felt a little frightened.

"Is it something very difficult that I have to do?" she asked timidly.

The Sunshine lady shook her head.

"No, indeed," she replied. "It is simply to keep carefully two gifts which we have prepared for you, and to use them as I will describe. But—there is the condition."

"What is it?" said Merran eagerly. "I'm sure you wouldn't want me to do anything wrong, or to promise anything I can't be sure of being able for, so I do promise now, this very minute, even before you tell me."

She was rewarded by a smile.

"You do right to trust me," said the fairy. "All I bind you to is this—to tell no one of the magic gifts, to keep your possession of them a complete secret, until——"

"Till when?" Merran interrupted.

"Till you are grown up, and only then if you marry and love your husband dearly. For I know that without complete confidence, little rifts are sadly apt to come between even those who love each other most truly."

"I don't think I'll ever marry," said the poor little maiden. "I'm too ugly and stupid. But still, if ever I did, I know I'd love my husband, 'cos you see it would be so kind of him to love *me*. And then it would be nice to tell him the secret, if it would do him good too. Oh I do wonder what it is you're going to give me!"

Fairy Sunshine slipped her hand into the front of her bodice and drew out something. At the same moment the Rain brownie, or gnome—no, he was too handsome to be a gnome—or whatever you like to call him, came forward again, and he too was holding something. Together the pair presented their gifts, and Merran gave a little cry of delight as she saw what they were. One was a tiny umbrella, a real umbrella, not a sham toy one, or a gold or silver "charm," such as ladies hang by their watch-chains, no, a real, exquisitely made and finished umbrella of green silk and with a beautifully carved ivory handle.

"I have made it myself," said the Rain man. "It will never wear out and never lose its power, unless you forget your

promise."

"And for my gift I say the same," echoed Fairy Sunshine. Hers was even prettier, for it was a parasol, smaller of course than the umbrella, but just as beautifully perfect—of rose-coloured gauze, lined with white, and the handle was in the form of a daisy, of silver and enamel.

Merran was silent with pleasure and admiration.

"Oh thank you, thank you," she was beginning, but the fairy stopped her. "Wait a moment," she said, "wait till you learn the real value of these two things. They are not merely pretty toys. It would be foolish to give them to you if they were nothing better than that. But they are much better. We have endowed them with fairy power. See here—if you want to know what the weather is going to be, you must test them—by yourself, of course, and when no one can see you, for magic gifts belong to their owner alone. You must test by trying to open them. If the umbrella refuses to spread itself, you will know that it is not going to rain. If so, turn to the parasol. If it opens quite widely you may count on plenty of sunshine; if only partly, then though the day will be dry, it will not be very bright. But you must be gentle; it would be useless to try to force either of them, for then they would break and you would have lost them for ever."

Merran's eyes were gleaming with delight.

"I will be very gentle, I promise you. Oh it will be splendid always to know about the weather, and uncle and all of them will never again think me stupid or useless if they find I can foretell it. It will make them much nicer to me, won't it?"

"Yes," replied her friend. "That is the reason of our giving you this secret power. But I must tell you a little more. You must not only be gentle in touch, you must have gentle feelings in your heart, otherwise you will fail. Neither umbrella nor parasol will open if you apply to them with any unkind feeling or wish. For instance, if the farmer or his sons have been sharp or rough to you and you wish it *would* rain just to vex them, it would be no good at all for you to try to open either—and if your aunt has been cross to you some very hot day——"

"She often is when it is very hot," interrupted Merran. "More than when it's cold. She gets headaches in summer."

"Just so—then if you take hold of the parasol with a secret hope that the sun is going to blaze away all day, without any cooling summer rain, so that the dame will be punished for scolding you—no—it would be no good at all! Inside your heart must be the *hope* that the wishes of others shall be fulfilled, whether it come to pass or not; otherwise all the magic will be gone for the time," and at this Merran looked grave, very grave, for she had known what it was to long for power to annoy others. But the fairy's next words cheered her. "I don't think there is much fear of your having those unkind feelings," she said. "I know that you are going to be a much happier little girl than ever before, and remember to begin with, I have promised you a pleasant surprise when you go home to-day."

"I wonder what it will be," thought Merran, and she felt so anxious to know, that it took away part of her reluctance to leave the charming "rain-house," as just then the Sunshine fairy, taking her hand, added, "I will show you now how to find your way back."

They were turning to enter the house again when a sudden thought struck Merran, who was carrying her new treasures with the greatest care.

"Where shall I hide them?" she asked anxiously. "I *am* so afraid of any one finding them, or taking them, and there's nowhere in the little room where I sleep that I can lock up. Aunt comes in any time and looks all about, to see that I keep things tidy."

"Quite right of her," said the fairy. "I can help you to keep your treasures in perfect safety, much more so than if you locked them up in the strongest box that ever was made. Hold them out—one in each hand."

Merran did so—the fairy touched them both, first the umbrella, then the parasol, murmuring some word or words that the child could not hear.

"Now," she said, "I have made them become invisible to all eyes but your own, or those of the one to whom you may some day confide your secret, as you have permission to do. See—just to prove it to you, I will for a moment make them invisible even to yourself. Shut your eyes."

Merran did so.

"Open," said the Sunshine lady.

Merran obeyed, but gave a cry of dismay.

"They've gone, they've gone," she exclaimed, "and yet I didn't feel you touching them."

The fairy laughed.

"Wink your eyes," she said. "Now look again," and there sure enough were the magic gifts safe and sound.

Merran laughed too.

"So you don't need to be afraid of any one stealing them," said her friend.

"N-no," said the child. "But still—where had I best keep them? For you see in my own room they might get knocked or brushed away, even without being seen?"

"How about the garret?" asked the fairy. "No one ever interferes with you there—they are used to your playing there by yourself, aren't they?"

"Oh yes," Merran replied. "Only sometimes aunt goes up to look over things, or dust a little. Why the other day she said she was going to throw away the rain-house, as it was no use. I was glad she didn't, for I have always liked seeing it. And fancy! if she had, I should never have come up here and seen this lovely place and you, dear Sunshine fairy, or the Rain fairy, or got your magic gifts! How dreadful to think of!" But her friend only smiled.

"She could not have done it," she said. "She had no power to touch it while we were still here, while it was still one of the secret entrances to fairyland. But as to a hiding-place for your charms," she went on. "Have you ever peeped up at the eaves above the little storm-window where you are so fond of sitting?"

"Yes, often," said Merran. "There is an old swallows' nest there, but," and she shook her head sadly, "they have quite deserted it for the last two years. I used to love to watch them and to hear their twittering."

"Nevertheless the old nest will serve your purpose perfectly," said the fairy lady. "Hide your treasures in it; you can easily reach up without any danger of falling, as there is a good stretch of flat roof outside. And then, if by any chance you were seen there, it would only be supposed that you were looking out of the window at the view—trying to catch the peep of the sea, as you often do."

"Yes, yes," replied Merran, greatly pleased. "What a good idea, and how clever of you to think of it! How do you know so much about me and the garret and everything, dear Sunshine fairy? I suppose you really could see me when you were the little toy woman in the rain-house? But it won't be easy to believe she's you! You are *so* pretty compared with her. Mayn't I come up here again and see you as you really are?"

The fairy shook her head.

"Our task here is accomplished," she said. "You will not need to puzzle about the toy woman, and how she and I can be the same and yet not the same. And this way into fairyland will now be closed. But when the sunshine peeps in at your window and lights up your fair hair and puts some colour into your cheeks, you may believe, my little maiden, that I am kissing you. Or when some drops of rain make you start by their cool touch, you may say to yourself that the Rain fairy is sending you his greeting. Both of us, first one and then the other, working together. That is how it is and should be. And now," she went on, "we will see you safe home again," and glancing up, Merran saw that beside the lovely lady stood the picturesque figure of the Rain fairy, with his dark but kindly face. "Together," for once, "the pair that tell the weather."

They turned and entered the pretty room, passing through it, however, till at the other side, where a door led into the familiar "rain-house," or hut, they stood still, beckoning to Merran, who had followed them in silence, feeling excited and happy, and yet a little sad. Then each took one of her hands—her gifts were safely nestling inside her bodice—and whispering softly, in a sort of musical murmur, which made her close her eyes half sleepily:

"Farewell, little Merran, farewell. In sunshine or in rainy weather, little maiden, fare thee well."

And before she had time to look round or wonder what was going to happen to her, she felt herself gently pushed over the edge of the rain-house, like a fledgling which the parent birds are training to fly, and though she had no wings, fly or flutter she did, down, down, till she found herself standing safely on the floor of the old garret, just in front of the storm-window, in her favourite nook.

She rubbed her eyes. Was it all a dream?

She might almost have thought so, but—feeling in her bodice for her handkerchief, her fingers touched something, and she drew out the fairy gifts. Yes—there they were all right, and evidently changed in size like her own small self, for they lay in her hands in the same way as above in the fairy house, "and up there," said Merran, "I must have been much, much littler than I am now, for I could go in and out quite easily."

The thought made her glance at the high shelf where ever since she could remember had stood the toy hut, with the woman's figure just peeping out. But what she now saw made her start.

The rain-house had fallen—its walls and roof were in pieces, as if a fairy earthquake had shattered them! Merran felt half inclined to cry, but before she had decided if she should do so or not she caught sight of a tiny figure peering at her from behind the rubbish. It was the toy woman, just as she had always been, dress and all, but as Merran gazed, the stiff wooden doll seemed to melt away, giving place to the lovely Sunshine fairy, who smiled and waved her hand as if in farewell, and the little girl, feeling that this was indeed her last sight of the so long unknown friends, who had watched over and cared for her, allowed some tears to trickle down her face unchecked, while she waved and kissed her hand in return till the pretty vision disappeared and nothing was left to tell her that her visit had not been all a dream, except the broken bits of painted wood and cardboard which she had called the rain-house!



She caught sight of a tiny figure peering at her from behind the rubbish.

No—I am wrong—there were her magic gifts! She looked at them with delight; they seemed even more dainty and charming than when she had first been given them, and then, remembering the Sunshine fairy's instructions, she climbed up on her stool till she reached the top of the small window and could touch the old nest, still there, and still quite whole. It was a splendid hiding-place. Without any difficulty Merran gently pushed the umbrella and parasol in, through the moss, till she felt they were quite secure, just leaving the handles out enough for her readily to catch hold of them whenever she needed to do so.

Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, she sat down again in her usual corner and thought over her wonderful adventures quietly for some minutes. Suddenly the remembrance struck her of a hint the fairy lady had given her, about a pleasant surprise in store for her on her return, and full of curiosity as to what it could be Merran jumped up and made her way across the garret and down the narrow staircase to the floor below.

"It can't be about Dirk's coming," she said to herself, "for I knew that already. And—that wouldn't be a pleasant thing, for I shall be ashamed for him to see me in this horrid old dress," and she glanced at herself disconsolately.

But just then she heard a voice calling her, a well-known voice, her aunt's.

"Merran, Merran," it said, "where are you, child? Come quick. I want you."

And something in the tone made the child feel that she was not going to be scolded. It sounded much kinder than usual.

"Aunt must be in a good humour," she thought, and indeed so it was. Nothing makes people feel better tempered and pleased with themselves than the consciousness of having done a kindly action.

"I'm coming, auntie," Merran answered brightly, though in her heart she was not without misgiving. "I hope it isn't that Dirk has arrived already," she thought, with again the mortifying remembrance of her ugly dress.

The dame was standing at the foot of the staircase holding up something for the little girl to see. It was the unfortunate frock, already washed and ironed and looking quite pretty, for it really was a nice garment, white with pink sprigs and flowers running over it, and a neat frill at the neck. It was Merran's favourite frock—for everyday wear, of course, that is to say. Her Sunday one was a cornflower blue merino, and she was very proud of it, especially as it and indeed most of her clothes had been made out of those left by her own young mother, so that on the whole it was not often that the orphan child looked like a small Cinderella.

"Well, what do you say to this?" said her aunt with great pride, waving the frock about to show it off the better.

"Auntie!" cried Merran, who for a moment had been struck dumb with delight and astonishment. "Have you really washed it and ironed it and all, already? Oh *how* good of you! Now I shan't be ashamed for Dirk to see me. Oh, auntie, I don't know how to thank you."

"Mind you don't get it dirtied again, then," said the dame, "and get yourself tidied as quick as you can, for there's no saying how soon the boy may be here. It was pretty tiresome, you know, for you to go and tumble into the mud to-day of all days. But I didn't want Dirk, who's always been so good to you, to find you looking such a little drab."

"Of course not," said Merran. "Thank you, thank you. I'll be very careful. It's getting to be quite a fine day now; the sun's come out, and it's not going to rain again," she added confidently. For I should have mentioned that before hiding away her new treasures she had tried in vain to open the fairy umbrella, whereas the parasol spread itself out like a flower with but the gentlest touch.

"I hope not," said her aunt, "but there's no saying, and the master's in a sad fix about the hay—when to start it. Never was such a place as this for not knowing what the weather's to be. And I would like it to look bright for Dirk when he first sees his home again, after the beautiful countries he's been in, where the sun's always shining, so they say. Though how things can grow without rain passes me!"

"It says in my lesson-books at school that there's places where it rains straight on for a good bit and then it's fine and hot for a good bit," said Merran.

"Maybe that's how it is," said her aunt. "Well, Dirk'll tell us all about it and the other things he's seen. Now run off, child, and change your frock."

Away flew Merran, her spirits higher than for many a long day, for it was not often that the dame talked to her so pleasantly, and as she ran off she repeated her prophecy. "You'll see, auntie," she said. "It's not going to rain at all to-day. It'll be lovely weather."

And so it proved. The few clouds that had still looked somewhat threatening, gradually dispersed; when the farmer came in he too seemed very cheery.

"If this weather holds on for a while, we'll do famously," he said. "A good thing for Dirk to be back. We'll be none the worse for another pair of strong arms, such as I hope his are by now," and almost as he spoke, there was the sound of wheels approaching the farm-house,—for one of the elder brothers had driven in the market-cart to meet Dirk at the village where the coach was to drop him,—and in another minute in came the traveller himself, eager to greet and be greeted.

And a hearty welcome awaited him.

He had grown and improved in every way. In fact he was no longer the ugly duckling of the family, but bid fair in a year or two to rival his stalwart brothers. So, naturally, of course, his parents were delighted.

"Your uncle has done well by you, and that's a fact," said the farmer, giving the boy a hearty slap on the shoulders. "All the same, I hope he's not given you a liking for his way of life."

For the uncle with whom Dirk had been seeing the world for the last year or two, for the benefit of his health, was a sea-faring man—the captain and owner of a small trading vessel.

Dirk laughed, but shook his head.

"No fear of that," he replied. "I like the sea well enough, but I don't want to be a sailor. No, father, I'm a farmer, at least going to be one I hope."

"That's all right," said his father. "And there's no life to compare with the life of the fields, to my mind. There's just one thing to complain of, especially in these parts, and that is the uncertain weather. No telling any day what it may change to—and none of the glasses as I've ever come across is much good, if any. And this year's been one of the changeablest I remember. I wonder why it's so, for we've no hills close about. Maybe it's through being near the sea. I've half a mind to send for a strand of seaweed and hang it in the porch, and see what that'll tell."

"Not much good—it changes when the weather does, but not far ahead," said Dirk. Then a sudden idea struck him. "Mother," he went on, "long ago there used to be an old-fashioned kind of weather-teller, up in the garret, do you remember? And not long ago, in Holland, where uncle had to take a cargo, I came across one just like it, and the goodwife of the house told me it never failed them. Suppose we get out our one?"

The dame shook her head.

"Strange you should speak of it, Dirk," she replied. "It's many a day since I've given it a thought, till this very afternoon—when—" and here she gave a little smile half of apology for her own childishness, "I went up to the garret to look out of the end window, which has such a good view of the road, to see if the cart and you boys were in sight. And glancing up at the shelf, I missed something I was used to see there. It was the old toy hut with the man and the woman. It's all in pieces—just a crumbled heap, and no man nor woman to be seen. Maybe the cat's knocked it down."

"Then it's no good," said Dirk, "for I don't think they make them now—not in England, anyway.—But, mother," he continued, "I've not seen little Merran yet. Where is she, and is she all right?"

The dame started.

"To be sure. I was forgetting about her," she said, "and she was here not five minutes ago. I told her to stay—not that she needed telling when it was to see you again, Dirk. Merran, child," she called, raising her voice, whereupon the little girl came forward shyly from the deep recess of the old-fashioned window where she had been partly hidden.

"I did stay, auntie," she said. "I was only waiting for you and uncle to see Dirk first," and as she spoke, she held out her hand to the new-comer. He took it, but also stooped down to kiss her. "You've grown a bit, quite a tidy bit, little Merran," he said, "and you're looking well too—more colour in her cheeks, and so fresh and smart. Is that a new frock

she's on, eh, mother?"

His praise went far to reward the dame for the trouble she had given herself. She smiled, and catching Merran's eye, the smile was returned.

"She's growing a big girl now, you see," said the aunt. "Old enough to be always tidy, and beginning to be handy too, we'll hope."

"Yes," said the farmer, turning from the window where he had been standing looking out. "You can be useful in the hay-field now, child. If I did but know what the weather's like to be to-morrow, so as to begin!"

"Uncle," exclaimed Merran eagerly. "It's going to be fine, very fine all to-day, and I'm almost sure all to-morrow, and I think for a lot of days."

Her uncle glanced at her and gave a little laugh.

"I hope you're right, child," he said. "But how should you know? You can't be a weather prophet at your age!"

"I can't tell you how I know," began Merran, reddening a little, "but I feel——" and just then Dirk broke in, and what he said was very lucky, as, both then and afterwards, it served the good purpose of saving her from cross-questioning about her curious power.

"Don't be too sure of that, father," he said. "There's queer things we can't explain, but true for all that. I've seen a good many of them at sea, and in the far-off places I've been at. There was one old sailor who always dreamt before we put in at any port who'd find letters and who wouldn't, and he never was wrong. And away in the far East, as for prophets!—my! I could tell you stories as'd seem like magic. Over here we're thicker-headed, and maybe it's just as well. But for *nature* things, there needn't be much doubt but what some are far cuter than others, and maybe Merran's one who has the weather gift."

The little girl glanced at him gratefully, though she did not speak. In her heart she was saying to herself, "I shouldn't wonder if the dear Sunshine fairy hasn't put it into his head to say these things."

As for the farmer and his wife, they were both much impressed, and when an hour or two later the sun set in a glow of crimson and rose, the child's pleasant augury seemed still more trustworthy.

And the next morning proved its correctness.

Little did any one suspect that long before the rest of the household had begun to think of awaking, in the early summer dawn, Merran had crept up to her garret, and there, half trembling with excitement, though much more of hope than fear, had drawn out her magic gifts to test them afresh. Nor was she disappointed. The parasol flew open in her hands, almost before she touched it; the umbrella resisted every effort, though of course she avoided any rough force. It might have been glued or nailed together!

"Fine!" exclaimed Merran joyfully. "Of course it's going to be fine all day—as bright and sunshiny as any one could wish. And after to-day too, and for some time to come I am almost certain. There's something in the feeling of the dear things that I can't describe—I'm getting to understand them. The parasol seems to jump at me in a sort of assuring way that must mean even more than just for to-day, and the umbrella—you *are* a determined fellow, Mr. Umbrella!"

She laughed merrily in her delight and satisfaction, and the brightness in her face when she went downstairs to breakfast made the others smile at her.

Happily for us all, good spirits are quite as infectious as low ones, if not indeed more so.

"I'm glad I washed her frock for her yesterday," thought the dame, taking credit to herself for the girl's pleasant looks. "Children are easy up and easy down. Maybe I've been a bit too sharp with her now and then."

And Dirk thought to himself that poor little Merran had certainly greatly improved, and even the other brothers refrained, half unconsciously, from teasing or jeering at her, as they had too often done.

The farmer came in after they were all seated at table. He had been having a good look at the sky, and his eyes fell on the

small prophethess, with approval.

"You've been right, Merran," he said. "It does look now as if we were in for a spell of real summer weather. And who'd have thought it this time yesterday. If only it lasts till we get the hay in."

"It will, uncle, it will. You'll see," said she. "Just you trust me a bit. I'll know, I'm sure, when it's going to change."

And strange to say, no one laughed at her or her predictions. On the contrary, all of the family seemed impressed. Dirk's remarks the evening before were not forgotten.

And for some time to come Merran had no reason for misgiving. Morning after morning the lovely fairy parasol flew open at her tiniest touch; morning after morning the umbrella refused to yield in even the faintest degree. So the Seaview Farm hay was mown, and dried, and stacked under the most favourable circumstances, and more than one of the neighbouring yeomen wished that they had been as quick about it as Mac and his sons, though at the first start most of the wiseacres had told them they would find it had been better to put off a while.

And once it was all safe, there came a change. One warm bright morning, Merran looked up at the sky silently and then turned to her uncle.

"It's going to rain," she said. "Before night it'll be raining heavily."

The farmer glanced in his turn at the blue, almost cloudless heavens.

"Not a bit of it," he said. "You're out for once, child. No sign whatever of rain. It's market-day, and I'm off. I've got a good bit of business to see to, to-day, at the town. No, no, the weather's all right. You'll see. I may be a trifle late, dame. Don't you be uneasy."

"You'll take your overcoat, anyway, father," said his wife, who was not so unbelieving in Merran's foresight as her husband.

He replied by a hearty laugh.

"Overcoat," he repeated. "Bless me, what are you thinking of? Overcoat in weather like this! Why, it's as settled as can be—warm and fine, like it's been for the last week or two. Couldn't be more settled."

"That's a new word to use for these parts," said Dirk quietly. Merran said nothing. The dame turned to her sons.

"Which of you's going with father?" she said, adding in a whisper to Dirk, who was next her at table, "You'll see to it if you go," she said, "see that he takes his coat. Think of his rheumatism if he gets soaked."

But Dirk shook his head, which was explained by the farmer's next words.

"None of 'em," he said, in reply to the goodwife's enquiry. "There's too much to do at home just now for more than me to be spared. You've all got your work cut out for you—eh, boys?"

Then followed some field and crops talk, and no more was said about the weather, and soon after Farmer Mac set off.

Merran felt sorry and a little anxious. She knew that there would have been no use in her saying anything more, for her uncle was one of the most obstinate of men, but several times that day she made her way up to the garret to test her strange barometers, half in hopes that the bad weather would hold off till the farmer was safe home again. The first time the result was much the same as it had been on her early morning visit. The parasol opened slowly and refused to spread out far. The umbrella responded to her touch as it had never before done—yet it did not *spring* apart, but gradually allowed itself to stretch a certain amount.

"That means," said Merran, "that the rain's not coming just yet," for she was growing curiously sensitive to the shades of forecast in the magic toys. It was almost as if they spoke to her. But the second trial, later in the day, told of nearer approach of the change, and an hour or two after that, when Merran's anxiety and in a sense, too, her curiosity lured her again to her garret window, the parasol was as if glued together, while the umbrella flew open in her hands, like a bird eager for flight.

Merran felt at the same time satisfied and yet distressed.

"It shows how true they are, and that I can correctly understand them," she said to herself. "Still I do wish poor uncle could get home safely before the rain begins, for evidently it will be very heavy indeed. I wish he had listened to me this morning, but I didn't like to be *too* certain, for if I had foretold it wrongly they'd have lost faith in me, and I couldn't feel quite sure if it meant that the weather would change so soon."

But even as she reached up to restore her treasures to their hiding-place in the deserted nest, something cold fell on her hand and made her start. The rain had begun!

She made her way downstairs feeling somewhat distressed, for she was by nature affectionate and most ready to sympathise, and of late her aunt had been so much kinder and gentler that the little maid's heart was quite won over.

She was standing by the window, gazing out at the fast increasing downpour, when the dame came in. "Supper-time, Merran," she said briskly, though there was no ill-temper in her tone. "We must be setting the table."

Merran turned with a little start.

"I'm so sorry——" she was beginning, when her aunt interrupted her. "Don't look so scared, child," she said, "I wasn't for scolding you."

"And I wasn't forgetting about supper, auntie," replied the little girl. "It's only that I was wishing poor uncle had got safe back before the rain began——"

"Why," exclaimed the dame, interrupting a second time, as she hurried to the window, "you don't mean to say it's started already? I was so busy in the laundry I hadn't noticed. Deary, deary," she went on, "but it is coming down! And the master without his coat—he'll be soaked through and through. I wish he'd listened to you, child, that I do, though I was hoping it'd hold off till night."

"I wish so too, auntie," said Merran. "I'd rather have been in the wrong than that poor uncle should suffer through me being in the right."

"I'm sure you would," said the dame heartily. Then she stood silent for a moment or two, gazing in distress at the rain, which by this time was indeed a case of "cats and dogs," really waterspouts. The anxious wife sighed deeply.

"He's in for it and no mistake," she said. "Men's that obstinate. Well, well, all we can do is to have hot water ready and make him change his things at once. I'll fetch some of his clothes down to air them—no, I'll do better still, we'll light a small fire upstairs, for, summer though it is, the evening's very chilly. And Merran, child, from now I'll stick to you as my weather-glass. It's a wonderful gift you've got, and we'll do well to believe in it."

"I think so too, auntie," said Merran. "I really can foretell about it," and her quiet tone impressed her hearers still more, for by this time Dirk and one of his brothers had hurried in.

Supper was an uncomfortable meal that evening. They were all anxious, for they all remembered the father's weary weeks of rheumatic fever the year before, and one or other of the "boys" kept running to the door to look out, or to listen for the sound of wheels, not easy to distinguish through the torrents of rain. And Merran was up and downstairs every few minutes to see that the fire was all right, and the clothes safely getting aired. And at last he came, poor man!

He looked very white and shivery, and, to tell the truth, rather ashamed of himself, when he came in. For besides the miserable state of drenchedness he was in, he had to own that the discomfort was all thanks to his obstinacy, and distrust of the little "weather prophet's" warning. Few elderly men of any class, more especially a self-willed old farmer like Mac, would like to allow that they had been outdone in wisdom by a child, but on the whole Merran's uncle was more ready to give in than might have been expected.

"I'll listen to you next time, child," he said. "That I promise you. And to you too, dame," turning to his wife, "for it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd taken my thick coat. Where Merran gets her weather knowledge from beats me," he went on, "but there it is, and that's a fact. I'm not the only one that's been caught in the rain to-day, I can tell you. For at market all the talk was of the fine weather lasting a good bit longer."

"I daresay it'll come back again," said Merran. "But I do wish the storm had held off till you were safe home, poor uncle."

"And so do I," said Dirk, who was busy helping the farmer to throw off his streaming garments. "As it is, father," he added in a lower voice, "you'll do well to keep that promise. I tell you I've seen queerish things in my wanderings—things beyond us to explain, and there's no doubt in my mind that little Merran has got this strange power, and lucky for us that she has."

The farmer looked much impressed, for since his travels Dirk had come to be looked upon as an authority.

"You don't think," said old Mac hesitatingly, "that there's anything uncanny about it. I wouldn't like the maid to get called a witch, though the days of ill-treating such are past and gone, thank Heaven."

Dirk did not reply directly.

"There's things we can't explain," he repeated. "There's good mysteries and bad mysteries. But Merran's all right. I'd trust her to use her extra sense for kindness, so she'll earn no ill-will by it."

By this time the farmer, who was unusually meek, had been put to bed and made to drink hot possets and all the rest of it, in hopes of warding off another bad rheumatic attack. To some extent the treatment was successful, but not entirely. The poor man had to keep his room for over a fortnight, which was very trying, as harvest was by no means over. Still, two weeks' illness is less than two months, and on the whole he bore his troubles patiently, and one thing which made this attack of his less wearisome both to himself and to his family than those that had laid him up before was the great fancy he had taken to Merran—his "weather maiden," as he had dubbed her. She proved to be an excellent little nurse, and the farmer was never as content and patient as when she was sitting by him, chatting cheerfully, as she was now able to do, since she was no longer frightened of being scolded, or reading aloud some of her favourite stories. For she was naturally far from stupid. Every morning and evening the invalid was sure to ask her about the weather, and, as we know, she was always ready with a forecast, which never once proved mistaken. Every day, many times a day indeed, did she say to herself how different her life now was from what it had been before her wonderful visit to the old "rain-house."

The farmer recovered; the harvest proved a good one, time passed and winter came again, and with every season Merran's fame spread. All over that corner of the country she came to be talked of as the "weather maiden," her uncle's name for her, and many a farmer, many a peasant, many a goodwife came to consult her and to hear her predictions. Her fame spread farther indeed than among her own people. The squire's lady never fixed the day for her summer parties or for the school children's feast without looking in to ask little Merran's opinion. For by long practice and delicate care in handling her magic gifts the girl came to foretell for days beforehand which of them—umbrella or parasol, "Rain-man" or "Sunshine fairy"—was to be in the ascendant.

Time passed, weeks became months, months years, as is the appointed way in this round old world of ours. From a plain, unnoticeable little girl Merran grew into a tall sweet-faced maiden. She was not exactly pretty, she was quiet and rather serious, but her dark eyes, though somewhat dreamy in expression, were very charming, and the tones of her voice were very musical. So she was not without admirers, you may be sure. Many a man would have liked to marry her—some among them, no doubt, influenced by the knowledge of her wonderful gift, for of course the possession of it could not be kept a secret if she had wished, and she was far from desiring this. On the contrary, her kind heart rejoiced when she was able to use it for the advantage of her neighbours as well as for the relations whom she now loved as if they were her very own, and who on their side loved her.

But she kept her secret, faithful to the promise she had given to the lovely Sunshine fairy, though there were times when she longed to share it with one in whom she could safely confide. And now and then at intervals she had a strange feeling that Dirk suspected something, for she sometimes caught his eyes fixed on her with a kind of veiled enquiry, and once he said in a low voice, with a curious smile, "Little Merran, you are not like the rest of us."

"Are you, yourself, Dirk?" she replied. "There are things you know and feel that the others don't—the voices in the wind, the burden of the birds' songs, the secrets of the restless waves—oh, Dirk, if one lived a thousand years, there would still be mysteries upon mysteries of beautiful things to learn!"

Then she grew shy again, for she was always quiet and timid and wondered how she had found courage to say so much. But Dirk seemed pleased.

"Yes," he said, nodding his head gently. "Maybe we are a bit different from most of those about us. You, anyway, Merran. I've seen strange lands and beautiful places, but you—you give me the feeling that once upon a time you must

have had a glimpse of real fairyland."

Merran grew red at this, but she made no reply.

Only to herself she said, "I wish—I do wish I might tell him," and then she grew still redder when the words of the Sunshine fairy returned to her memory that only to *one* person might she ever reveal her secret.

"And that one will never be my fate," thought the girl sadly. "Dirk will never care for me in *that* way, and never could I care for any one but him."

Whereas on his side, Dirk said to himself that he must never hope to win the sweet weather maiden for himself. "Why, half the young fellows in the country-side, and old ones too, are ready to woo her if she'd let them! They think she'd bring good luck to her husband, and so she would. But it's not for that I'd care for her—it's that I love her for her own self, luck or no luck."

And one day—one happy day—had the Sunshine fairy whispered to him to take courage, I wonder?—he determined to risk it, and told the maiden his hopes and fears, and found how little reason for the latter there had been, and the two young things, who had drawn to each other from their first meeting, before long were married, carrying with them to a home of their own the magic gifts, now, to Merran's delight, her husband's as much as her own.

Good fortune was theirs. Whatever Dirk undertook, whatever Merran planned, prospered. And that it should be so, they deserved. For they remained kindly and unselfish, ever ready to help others less happy than themselves, grateful for their blessings, patient under trials, of which, as life cannot be *always* sunshine, they had their share. They lived, I was told, to a good old age. What became of the fairy treasures, I cannot say. Whether they were handed down to their children, or whether they were whisked back to fairyland, I know not, not any more than I know what has become of all the toy "rain-houses" which in our grand-parents' times were so often to be seen. The world is growing too clever for the fairies, I fear, unless perhaps, unseen and unsuspected, they are still behind the scenes in some of the marvels and inventions all around us. Who can say?

And by the bye, I have heard it whispered that in a certain out-of-the-way corner of this dear old country there lives a family whose sons and daughters have a curious gift of "weather wisdom." Maybe they are the descendants of our Dirk and his Merran?

The Enchanted Trunks

Once upon a time, on a very hot summer's day, a girl stood waiting at the door of a small old-fashioned inn, beside a little heap of luggage. She was quite young, about sixteen, or seventeen at the most. Her face was sweet in expression, and would have been pretty if she had not looked so tired and anxious. She was quite alone and seemed shy and timid, for now and then, when some of the folk belonging to the place, passing in and out, wished her good-day, or made any friendly remark, she started and grew crimson even though she replied politely. And when after a time the landlady herself came to the door and asked the girl if she would not step inside and wait in the parlour, she answered hesitatingly that she thought she had better stay in the porch.

"I'm so afraid of missing the coach, or losing my seat in it," she said.

"No fear of that, Miss," said the comfortable-looking dame. "Your place is engaged, no doubt."

"Oh yes, I suppose so," the stranger replied. "My name is O'Beirne—Clodagh O'Beirne."

"That's all right," said the landlady; "I remember the name. The master—that's my husband—called out to the coachman last night that he must secure a place for you to-day. You'd written for it, no doubt?"

"Yes, the friends I stayed the night with—I only came over from Ireland yesterday—did so. It was their gig that brought me here just now, to catch the coach as it passed."

The landlady's good-humour seemed to cheer the girl a little; she began to look less frightened.

"You've come a long way," the older woman remarked. "Right across the sea, I take it?" The girl nodded, and looked as if she were going to cry. The landlady's curiosity was aroused. "And it's the first time you've left home, I daresay, and all by yourself too. It must feel strange-like."

"I wasn't alone till to-day. A friend came over with me," Clodagh replied. "And I shan't be alone long. I'm to meet a—a lady, a cousin, and we are to travel together."

"Ah indeed, that'll be much pleasanter for you," said her companion.

The young girl murmured something. But to herself she was saying that she was by no means sure of it. And after a little silence she went on, "I don't think I'd mind travelling alone—I don't mind anything very much now that I haven't any home—except," and she glanced at the heap of rather heterogeneous baggage, "except for all these things. I'm so afraid of losing half of them, and yet Bidy and I packed as neatly as ever we could. Bidy was grandmother's maid, and she stayed with me after dear granny died, till it was settled for me to go to live with my cousin and travel about with her."

"It'll be fine and amusing for you," said the landlady.

"I—I don't know," said Clodagh. "I'm not used to travelling, and I've not seen my cousin for a good while, and she may think me stupid."

"But she's a young lady, I suppose?" said her questioner.

"Not very. She's—oh, she's seven or eight years older than I, and she wants to travel all about till she finds a place to suit her. She's like me, except that she's rich. She's got no parents and can do as she likes."

Then suddenly it seemed to strike the young stranger that she was perhaps too communicative, and she grew rather pink. "I shouldn't perhaps——" she began, but the kind-hearted woman understood and interrupted. "It's me, Miss, that's in fault," she said. "I shouldn't make free to ask so many questions. But it went to my heart to see you standing there alone, so young and half-frightened like. I had a little daughter once—she'd have been not so much older than you if she'd lived——" She stopped for a moment, then she went on again: "Wouldn't you like a cup of tea now, Miss?" she said. "It's a time o' day I often has one, for we've no lie-abeds in our house, and it's a good while since we'd breakfast, and if you've come some distance you'll have been up betimes, I'd daresay."

Clodagh's face brightened.

"It's very kind of you," she said. "I would like it uncommonly. I couldn't eat any breakfast, I was so afraid of being too

late. But—please tell me how much it will cost. I mustn't spend anything I can help, you see. Once I'm with Cousin Paulina, she will pay things like that for herself and me."

"Don't trouble your pretty head about it," said the goodwife. "We're well-to-do, my man and me, and neither chick nor kin to come after us, more's the pity—and—you do make me think of what my little maid would have been by now, Missy, if you'll pardon the liberty. Now just step inside—to my own parlour—the kettle's on the hob—you'll feel quite a different young lady once you've had a bit of breakfast, better late than never."

"And you promise me I won't miss the coach," said the girl, as she followed the kind woman into the little sitting-room behind the bar.

"No fear, no fear," replied her hostess, and as Clodagh sat down in the comfortable chintz-covered old armchair—the landlady's own, which she drew forward for the unexpected guest—the girl gave a sigh of content. "It is nice and cool in here," she said, "and I *am* so tired already and so thirsty. I wish I were going to stay here for a bit."

"Indeed and I wish it too, Miss, and it's our best we'd do to make you comfortable," said the dame, as she bustled about to make the tea, which she fetched from the kitchen hard by, and to cut some tempting slices of bread and butter. "But travelling's very pleasant, some folks say. There's an old lady not far from here—that's to say, her own home is—but she's for ever on the go. They do say as she's been all over the world, and old as she is, she seldom rests."

"Is she so very old?" asked Clodagh.

"No one knows," was the mysterious reply. "My husband's mother, and she's no chicken as you can fancy, remembers her as quite aged when she was young. But she never seems to get no older. Some say she was spirited away by the good folk when she was a baby and that she's got a fairy's life—indeed there's some that will have it she's not really one of us at all."

Clodagh, by this time refreshed by the tea, sat up eagerly. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I'm so glad you talk of the good folk. I thought it was only at home—in Ireland, I mean, that people still believed in them."

"Dear me, no," said her hostess, with a smile. "Maybe in the big towns you never hear of them nowadays, and no wonder. They can't abide noise and bustle and dirt. But in these parts, oh dear yes. I've heard tell of them all *my* life, I know, and of their tricky ways. They can be the best of friends, but, my word! if they take offence they can worry one's life out."

Clodagh was listening with all her ears. Her eyes had grown brighter, and some colour had come into her cheeks, with the mere mention of fairy folk, so familiar to her since her infancy.

"Oh," she said with a little sigh, "what you say does make me wish still more that I could stay here a few days and get rested, and you would tell me stories, as my dear old nurse used to do."

"That I would," said the landlady, "and indeed I wish you could stay to hear them. Not that I've ever really come across the fairies—brownies and pixies, they call them in some parts—myself, nor even set eyes on one of them—unless indeed——" and here she stopped abruptly, lowering her voice.

"Unless what?" asked Clodagh. "Do tell me."

"Just what I was saying a minute ago," the dame went on. "Unless that strange old lady is one herself, as I'm more than half inclined to think by what I've heard tell of her."

"Then you've seen her?" questioned the girl eagerly.

The landlady nodded.

"Just seen her," she said. "Twice—no, I think three times, she's passed in the coach, and I've just said a word to her at the door. Once she asked for a glass of milk. 'Twas a very hot morning, like as it might be to-day."

"How I wish she might be in the coach this morning!" exclaimed the traveller, her eyes sparkling. "It would be so interesting, and if she knew I was Irish she might take a fancy to me, for the good people do love the Irish!" and at the idea the girl laughed merrily for the first time.

"Yes," agreed the dame, "indeed she might, my pretty young lady. But it's a long time since she's passed this way. One never knows where she is, or how she'll travel. Now and then she'll set off in her own coach and four, like any princess, and I've heard it whispered that she'll sometimes disappear from her home, no one knows how."

"Oh, a broomstick, maybe, or has she a pet gander?" laughed Clodagh.

But the landlady looked a little frightened.

"Hush, Missy, my dear," she whispered, "it doesn't do to——" Then she suddenly started. "I'm afraid that's the coach," she exclaimed, "and sorry I am to part with you, but if you're bound to go, we'd best be at the door ready."

Clodagh jumped up at once.

"And thank you a thousand times," she said, "for all your kindness. Yes, I must go. My cousin will be looking out for me. I've not seen her for five years," she added nervously. "Wish me good luck, my kind friend."

"That I will," said the dame heartily.

"You've cheered me greatly," said the girl, and in her impulsive Irish way she held up her sweet young face for a kiss.

The coach it was, sure enough. There was some trouble about getting Clodagh's rather complicated belongings on to it, it was already so piled up. But with difficulty all was at last disposed, outside and in, and thanks to the landlady nothing was left behind.

There were tears in the kind woman's eyes when at last it rumbled off, her young guest of an hour waving good-bye out of the window.

But it is Clodagh's adventures we have to follow. For a minute or two the bustle of getting her bags and boxes settled prevented her realising that there was already a passenger in the coach, and before looking round she felt obliged to lean out once again in a last farewell to her kind new friend. She was soon, however, recalled to the present.

"Who is there?" said a voice—a rather petulant one—from the corner. "Whatever is the matter? I was fast asleep till there was all this fuss! Oh!—" with an exclamation, "can it be you, Clodagh O'Beirne? I had no idea we were at Crossway Corner already?"

"Yes, indeed," Clodagh replied, "it is I. I didn't know it was you, Cousin Paulina. I wasn't sure, you see, if I would find you here, or if you would only meet me at the next stage. Lady Roseley wasn't certain from your letter which it would be."

"Humph," murmured Mistress Paulina. "Well, after all I decided that to avoid any mistake I'd get up for once by cock-crow, so as to start from Stracey. I hate getting up early, and I was fast asleep as you saw. Did Lady Roseley send some one with you, then, to see you off? You seemed to be nodding good-byes."

"No," said Clodagh. "That's to say only the old coachman who drove me over and left me at the inn. I was all right. No, it was only the landlady I was waving to. She was so kind, helping to carry out my things," and she glanced round at the various encumbrances. The place was certainly inconveniently crowded, and so Paulina, now wide-awake, seemed to think, as she took it all in, and that with evident annoyance.

"I must say, Clodagh," she remarked, "that you have a queer collection of luggage. I hope you will get rid of some of these bags and baskets before we start again. I don't deny that I travel with a fair amount myself," and indeed the coach had seemed well packed inside and out, before the younger girl's belongings had been added, "but a child like you can't need such an amount. You'll have to learn to be a clever traveller, my dear, if we're to get on together."

"I'm very sorry," said Clodagh apologetically. "You see, cousin, I never have left home before, and I didn't know how to manage. I'll do my best, and I hope I'll soon learn, for of course I shall pack for you as well as for myself. That I quite understand."

"Well, yes," said Paulina. "I can't go about with you *and* a maid. And as things have unfortunately turned out so sadly for you, it seemed to me you'd be better off with me than going among strangers. And on my side, I'm sick of maids with their airs and graces and vulgarities. I prefer to have a companion of my own class."

"Yes, thank you," Clodagh replied. "It was a very kind thought of yours, and I shall soon learn to manage well, I hope. To begin with, I think we might arrange all these things better," and she stood up and pulled about and pushed and lifted, till the narrow space looked more orderly, Paulina from her corner now and then directing and advising. She was a handsome young woman, with a by no means disagreeable expression. Indeed there was often a kindly light in her bright eyes, and gentle curves about her mouth. But she was self-willed and quick-tempered, "spoilt" in short, though generous and well-meaning, entirely unused to contradiction and impatient of any obstacles in the way of her wishes or fancies.

"Thank goodness," she ejaculated, as she settled herself down again in her wraps, "thank goodness, we have no fellow-passengers. Now I mean to go to sleep again, and so may you, child, if you like. We shall stop at Oddingstowe for dinner and fresh horses, and by four o'clock we should be at Felway, where the Marristons' carriage—and, it is to be hoped, a cart for the luggage—is to meet us. They expect us to stay at the Priory for two or three days. They know you will be with me."

"Yes, thank you," replied Clodagh again, feeling mortally shy at the prospect before her, yet not venturing to say so.

Paulina composed herself to sleep once more, and before long, in spite of the thoughts that crowded her mind—anxieties, hopes, and fears, as she realised more clearly her new position as her kinswoman's companion—Clodagh too, though a few minutes ago she would not have believed it possible, Clodagh too dozed off.

And she slept, as did Paulina, for some time. The stopping of the vehicle, the cessation of the monotonous rumbling, aroused them both.

Paulina sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Dear me," she exclaimed, "Oddingstowe already!"

Clodagh looked out of the window.

"No," she said hesitatingly. "I don't think it can be. There's no village or houses; only a turnpike. Oh, yes," she went on, "I see what it is. We're stopping to take up another passenger."

"What sort of one?" her cousin demanded. "I hope to goodness it's not a first-class one—an inside one—we are stuffed up enough already. There's scarcely air to breathe."

"N-no," Clodagh replied, continuing to look out. "I don't think it can be. It's only a little old woman, quite poor, and she doesn't seem to have any luggage. She's only carrying a hand-bag—just a sort of reticule."

"All right," Paulina responded, lazily settling herself again for another nap. "All the same, I wish they wouldn't pull up in this unnecessary way. I was so comfortably asleep. It's the only thing to do in this tropical heat."

Clodagh too was sitting down again, congratulating herself, more on Paulina's account than her own, that their privacy was not to be disturbed—when, alas, her unspoken relief proved premature. To her astonishment, the guard approached the door, which he opened, and with a "your pardon, ladies," to the two girls, held it civilly by the handle, for the new-comer to enter.

Clodagh instinctively drew back a little for her to pass. There were four places—two and two—facing each other. Hitherto the younger girl had been sitting beside her cousin—the opposite seat covered with their possessions. But now she at once began to clear a space on it for herself, for she saw at a glance that the stranger was old, and looked fragile and delicate, and in spite of the extreme simplicity of her attire—she wore only a clean but faded cotton of an old-fashioned flowery pattern, half covered by a sort of market-woman's cloak, and surmounted by a huge black straw bonnet—in spite of this there was a certain dignity about her as in reply to Clodagh's silent attention she murmured, "I thank you, young lady. But do not disturb yourself. I can occupy the back seat."

"I should think so indeed," exclaimed Paulina angrily. "Indeed, my good woman, I am inclined to believe that your coming in here at all is some mistake. This is for first-class passengers, and moreover our places have been engaged for some days ahead.—What are you thinking of, you silly child?" she went on sharply, turning to her cousin. "Why should you give up your place to this person and her bundles? I won't have it. Sit down beside me at once," for Clodagh with a crimson face was still hesitating and moving about the bags and baggage nervously, though the new-comer had already settled herself quietly with her back to the horses.

"Paulina," said the younger girl in a low voice, "*do* not be so excited. She has no bundles, or anything, so it cannot really inconvenience us. And she is old, and looks so fragile. It is only right that I should offer her my seat."

Paulina was about to reply in the same irritated tone, when she was interrupted.

"I thank you, my kind young lady," said the stranger in a clear voice, which somehow enforced attention, "I thank you for your courtesy and consideration. But I have no desire to take your place, I assure you. In fact I prefer this side. I am an old traveller. Nor will my presence incommode you for long. I shall leave the coach before we reach Oddingstowe."

Clodagh murmured a gentle "Thank you." She was grateful to the old woman for not resenting her cousin's rudeness. And to Paulina she whispered, "She *cannot* be a mere peasant. Her voice and words show it"; and to do her justice, the elder girl looked a little ashamed of herself.

"Don't tease me," she said. "It always upsets me to be wakened suddenly. I'm going to sleep again," and so saying she leant back and closed her eyes.

And after a few minutes Clodagh followed her example, though she was no longer sleepy. But something—a vague feeling of slight shyness—made her do so, for she was conscious of her opposite neighbour's scrutiny. Now and then from the depths of the quaint black bonnet she caught the gleam of dark bright eyes, and the sensation caused her cheeks to grow pink again.

"Who and what can she be?" the girl said to herself. "She certainly looks like a peasant, but her voice—her expressions—her dignity belie it," and thus puzzling over the anomaly, Clodagh after all fell asleep.

Now I must mention what may seem strange and most improbable. You will remember the description given to the young traveller only an hour or two before the coach stopped at the turnpike, of the old lady in the neighbourhood, concerning whom such curious and even uncanny things were said?

Yes—well, this is the strange fact. Though Clodagh was at once impressed in an unusual way by the personality of their fellow-traveller, and perplexed to explain her inconsistencies, never once during the day's journey did it occur to her to put "two and two together"; to guess, as no doubt you, children, who are reading this little old story, will already have done, that here in person was the mysterious lady of the landlady's legend—the being who, if not actually of fairy race herself, still had much in common with the "good people," and doubtless dealings with them.

But so it happened with Clodagh, and afterwards—not a long-delayed afterwards either, as you will hear—she felt quite unable to explain her own forgetfulness, or "stupidity" as she called it.

In the meantime what occurred was this. She slept and Paulina slept on uninterruptedly till the coach drew up at Oddingstowe. And when it did so, and the clatter over the cobble-stones of the old inn's courtyard aroused them, lo and behold, they were alone! The strange new-comer had disappeared. The whole episode might have been a dream, only that rarely, if ever, do any two people dream the same and at the same time.

Paulina stared.

"She's gone," she exclaimed.

"Yes," said her cousin, feeling very much inclined to add, "You needn't have been so rude to her."

"I never felt or heard the coach stop to let her get out," added the elder girl.

"Nor did I," said Clodagh, "only——"

"Only what?"

"Nothing. I was dreaming, I suppose. But I have a misty recollection of hearing some one say, almost in a whisper, 'Good-bye for the present, my dear. We shall meet again.'"

"I hope not," said Paulina, with a slight shudder. "Clodagh, you don't think possibly she's a witch?"

Clodagh's spirit of mischief inclined her to frighten her cousin a little, but she refrained.

"No, of course not," she replied. "She's a very polite and harmless old woman, though, no doubt, there did seem something rather odd—mysterious almost—about her. But if I may say it, Paulina, I think, in travelling especially, it is best to be so—polite I mean—to everybody one is thrown into contact with."

Paulina muttered something which sounded like "rubbish" or "nonsense," but aloud she only said snappishly, "You know nothing about travelling, child. One has to keep up one's dignity."

"There is a good way and a bad way of doing so," thought the younger girl, though she said nothing more. She was relieved, however, to see that her cousin was not really vexed with her, for she had spoken impulsively, forgetting that it was scarcely her place to reprove Paulina, all things considered.

"I think she is really gentler and kinder than she sometimes appears," Clodagh's reflections went on. "I fancy I shall be able to get on with her if I am patient, and if I try my best. The only thing I am depressed about is the luggage! I don't know *how* to get my own things into smaller compass, and when it comes to all her belongings too, I don't see my way at all. I am so afraid of losing any of her beautiful clothes, and no doubt she has valuable jewellery too, and she is very changeable in her plans. Lady Roseley warned me that sometimes I should have to pack and unpack at very short notice indeed!" and she could not help sighing a little. But Paulina did not observe it, for by this time, as I said, they were at Oddingstowe, the small town where they were to stop to change horses and to have some early dinner, of which the elder girl declared that she felt much in need.

An hour later they started again, to Paulina's satisfaction no other inside passenger appearing. A short though heavy thunder shower had somewhat cleared the air, the simple meal had refreshed them, and Paulina seemed quite to have recovered her good-temper. She grew talkative.

"Have you ever heard of the Marristons?" she asked. "My friends at the Priory, you know, where we are to spend a few days."

Clodagh shook her head.

"No," she replied. "You said in your last letter that you had a visit to pay on your way to the place where you intend to drink the waters, but you did not mention any names."

"Didn't I?" said Paulina carelessly. "Oh well, I'm not good at letter-writing. They're very nice people, and very kind. You needn't feel shy about going there," for Clodagh's manner and rising colour had already shown that shy she was. "It won't be a large party, as they are quite alone just now; just the father and mother, elderly people, their married son and his wife and two daughters, older than you and I." Paulina rather liked to make herself out younger than she was, when it suited her, though at other times she treated her cousin as if she were a complete child.

"I am glad of that," Clodagh replied. "Then," she went on, somewhat nervously, "perhaps you won't wear your very best dresses there, or shall I take out everything?" for this terrifying question of packing and unpacking was still uppermost in her mind.

"Oh dear me!" exclaimed Paulina crossly, "perhaps not. How can I say? You'll just have to see. That's what I want you for—to use your intelligence; don't you understand? I hate being asked about every trifle." Then, feeling that she had been speaking irritably, she went on more kindly: "I suppose you've got some tidy gowns of your own—your granny liked you to look nice, I know."

"I haven't got any proper evening gowns," said Clodagh. "I used to wear simple white muslin—not grown-up gowns, you know, but since grandmother died I've only had black."

"Ah yes, of course," Paulina agreed. "Well, just wear your nicest black in the evening. Your being in mourning will explain it's not being full dress. When we get to St. Aidan's—the place where she intended to drink the waters—I'll see about some gowns for you. I hear that the shops there are quite modish."

"Thank you," said Clodagh gratefully. But in her heart she was thinking: "Oh dear, if I'm to have more clothes, it will make the packing still worse, and where am I to put them if Cousin Paulina complains already of my luggage?"

But no more was said on the subject just then, and before very long they found themselves at Felway, where they left the coach, to complete the rest of the day's journey in Squire Marriston's chariot, which was awaiting them, as well as, to

Paulina's satisfaction, a cart for their voluminous belongings.

The elder girl stepped into the roomy vehicle and glanced round her with approval.

"What a comfort to be less crowded up!" she exclaimed. "Clodagh, tell them to put everything in the cart. Just give me my satin mantle—these hot days sometimes end in chilly evenings—nothing else," and as her cousin obeyed her, "You are sure nothing was left in the coach?"

"Nothing," replied Clodagh confidently. "Still, I'll glance inside again, to make quite sure," and she did so, for the stage-coach was still there, waiting for fresh horses.

She came back to report satisfactorily, and they set off.

It was a longish drive, five or six miles, and the latter part through rough roads and lanes which reminded Clodagh of her native land.

"Thank goodness," said Paulina more than once, "that it is not winter or very wet weather. We should stick fast in the mud in these cart-tracks, to a certainty."

But before long they reached the Priory, safe and sound, and as they drove up the avenue, caught sight of two or three figures waiting to welcome them in front of the picturesque old house.

It was not a very large place, but home-like and attractive. Clodagh, who was accustomed to huge rambling "castles," often in a more or less dilapidated state, felt glad that this, the first English country-house she had seen, was smaller and less imposing, and the kind greetings of the Misses Marrison soon helped her to feel less shy and timid. It was long before these modern days of "five o'clock teas," but then dinner was proportionately early, and when the new-comers had shaken hands with the rest of the family, assembled in the hall to welcome them, Annot Marrison, the younger of the daughters and Paulina's special friend, proposed that the cousins should at once go up to their rooms.

"You will be glad to take off your travelling things," she said, "and dinner will be ready in less than an hour."

At this, Paulina's face fell, and Clodagh looked rather blank. For by this time they were standing in the spacious and comfortable guest-chamber prepared for the former, out of which opened a smaller but pleasant little room for her young cousin companion. But in neither, naturally enough, was there as yet any sign of their belongings.

"Dinner in less than an hour!" exclaimed Paulina; "and how am I to change my dress? I suppose, my dear Annot, the luggage-cart won't be here in time?"

Miss Annot shook her head.

"Not for an hour or nearly that, I fear," she replied. "It comes slowly. But there is room on the chariot for a box or two. I wish I had told the men to mention this, and then you could have brought on with you whatever you needed at once."

Paulina looked extremely annoyed.

"Clodagh," she said sharply, "you really might have thought of it."

Clodagh looked and felt guilty.

"I will do so another time," she murmured.

Annot felt sorry for her.

"I'll run down and enquire about the cart," she said. "Possibly it may not take as long as I said," and she was hastening off when Paulina stopped her, for she had sufficient good sense and feeling not to wish to begin their visit by a scene of ill-temper.

"After all," she said, "it does not very much matter, my dear Annot, if you all will kindly excuse our enforced *deshabille*, as I understand you are quite alone—just your own family party."

Annot hesitated a little.

"Ye-es," she replied. "Certainly only a family party. But I was just going to tell you that Cousin Felicity has arrived unexpectedly. She had retired to her own apartment before you drove up. That is her way, you know. She swoops down upon us without the slightest warning and off again in the same way."

"How very disagreeable!" ejaculated Paulina, but Miss Marrison hastened to correct her.

"No," she said, "on the contrary, we are always very pleased to see her. She is a most interesting person and has travelled immensely. At the same time, I confess that we are somewhat in awe of her, and always behave to her with the greatest deference and respect. She is a strange mixture. Sometimes she goes about like an old peasant or gipsy—no one knows how old she really is! But on occasions, always at dinner for instance, she dresses magnificently—her diamonds are a sight to see! That was why I hesitated just now, for I should have liked you to be in correct attire. I will just ask about the cart," and off she went, to return in a minute or two with the cheering information that there was every chance of the luggage arriving in about half an hour.

"And in the meantime," she said, "let me lend you brushes and combs, or whatever will help you to begin your toilet."

"Oh pray do so," said Clodagh gratefully. "Cousin Paulina, I am at least sure that I can arrange your hair so as to please you. I have really practised hair-dressing. I have so much of my own."

"Well, then," said Paulina, when kind Annot returned with the promised articles, "you may as well set to at once," and she proceeded to take off her hat and veil and other things. "I don't think I ever heard of this eccentric relative of yours before," she went on, turning to her friend. "She must be quite a character."

"That she is," was the reply. "I wonder I never told you about her. Mother is not sure that she really is a cousin, but she likes us to call her so. The relationship must be very distant, dating back to former generations, for both my parents remember her as an old lady when they were only children."

Here Clodagh gave a little exclamation. Annot stopped politely.

"Did you speak?" she said.

Clodagh blushed, as she often did.

"I beg your pardon," she replied. "I don't know what I meant. It suddenly struck me that I had already heard of some one like your cousin, so very old that no one living could remember the person, whoever it was, as anything but old. It is curious," she went on dreamily, "that I cannot recall where I heard it," for even then no remembrance of the landlady's mysterious description awoke in her mind.

"Well, what does it matter?" said Paulina sharply. "Don't worry about it when you are doing my hair. You gave it such a tug just now when you started so."

"I'm very sorry," said the girl, and she gave her whole attention to the work in hand, as to which she was really skilful.

Then Annot left them, repeating her hopes that the luggage would not be long of coming. "I quite think it may," she said, "for they took a good strong horse in the cart—not one of the ponies only."

But time went on. Paulina's "coiffure" was completed, happily to her satisfaction; the hands of the clock were fast approaching the dinner-hour, and no sign of the longed-for arrival.

"Only twenty minutes now," said Paulina. "Really I have never been so awkwardly placed before. I must say, Clodagh, I do think——" But these thoughts were destined to remain unrevealed, for at that moment there came portentous but most welcome sounds in the corridor outside the room, and in another moment a servant tapped at the door, and entering, requested the ladies kindly to direct the placing of the boxes.

Clodagh hurried out.

"All of yours had better be brought in here, I suppose, cousin?" she asked as she went.

"Of course, but not yet," Paulina exclaimed. "What are you thinking of, child? First of all I must get dressed. My black lace will be the quickest for to-night. It is in the brown leather imperial. Have that brought in, and—and the large

despatch-box, and the rest can wait till we go downstairs."

The first-named case was carried to its place, and Paulina was busy selecting the key when Clodagh ran in with a startled face.

"Cousin," she exclaimed, "the despatch-box is not there!"

Paulina gave a shriek.

"Impossible—and with all my jewellery! Clodagh, you vowed that you saw everything off the coach, and I vow that I saw it lifted inside when I started."

"I did, I did see that everything was brought out," exclaimed Clodagh, now on the point of tears, when luckily, oh the relief of it, a highly respectable functionary in irreproachable attire appeared at the end of the passage, carrying with his own majestic hands the missing case.

"I have brought this myself, Madam," he said, addressing Paulina, "to see it delivered into your personal keeping, surmising that it was of importance."

"Oh thank you, thank you a thousand times," cried the younger girl impulsively in her joy, forgetting that she was not the person to reply, till her cousin, with a condescending gesture, answered stiffly: "I am obliged to you. You are quite right. The contents are of great value, and but for carelessness," with a glance at Clodagh, "the case should have come with ourselves in the chariot. It is not the kind of thing to be sent in a cart."

The butler, for such he was, bowed in reply.

"Exactly so," he said. "Another time I should advise——"

"Yes, yes," Clodagh interrupted. "I know it was my fault, but I shall understand better in future. Paulina, do make haste. I have got your dress out. We will be as quick as possible," she added, turning to the butler, who took the hint and with another bow his departure also.

And in an incredibly short time, thanks to Clodagh, whose eagerness seemed to give her two or three pairs of hands instead of one, the elder girl was attired, jewellery and all. She looked very handsome, and her young companion stepped back a step or two to admire her.

"Yes," said Paulina, glancing at the mirror with complacency, "I think I look all right. You're not half a bad maid, child, or let us say——"

"Never mind, if you're pleased, I don't care what I'm called," Clodagh interrupted. "If only," she added, with a little sigh, "if only I can learn about the luggage, the packing and unpacking and not losing things."

She opened the door as she spoke for her cousin to pass out, and for the first time, as she stood there, the colour of excitement in her face and the sparkle in her eyes, it struck Paulina that the "child," as she called her with half-contemptuous affection, was fast becoming a very pretty creature, and with this came a sudden flash of self-reproach, for there was nothing consciously selfish or small-minded about the elder girl, spoilt and self-willed and autocratic as she was.

She stopped short with a gesture of horror.

"What have I been thinking of?" she exclaimed, "and you yourself, Clodagh? You're not dressed—you've not begun to dress, and the dinner-hour already or almost. Why didn't you remind me that you had to get ready too?"

Clodagh smiled.

"I really don't think it matters," she said. "I haven't got a proper grown-up gown to begin with, and really there wasn't time to get out my things too. I'm sure Mrs. Marriston will understand, and I daresay I can have a little dinner sent up to me, if you——"

But she stopped short, for just then Annot came running along the passage towards them. "Can I——?" she was beginning, when, glancing at them and the confusion of boxes and bags lying about, she saw that there was something the

matter. Paulina rapidly explained, and "Need I come down?" pleaded Clodagh.

"If she doesn't," persisted her cousin, "it will put everything wrong. It will look as if—as if—you know, Annot, I want her to be considered a sort of younger sister of mine. We *are* near relations. Clodagh, you don't want me to seem selfish and unkind."

Miss Annot considered.

"After all," she said, "Clodagh—may I call you so?—is scarcely grown-up, and being in mourning too. If you just arrange your hair a little, though really it does not look bad—it is so bright and wavy—and—let me see, I can lend you a pretty simple fichu—over your plain black bodice it will look rather well. Come with me—my room is close at hand."

And in two or three minutes they returned to where Paulina was anxiously awaiting them—Clodagh looking quite fresh and sweet in the half Puritan-like garb, with a bow of black velvet in her hair and a bunch of violets as a breast-knot.

"Yes," thought her cousin, "she's going to be quite a beauty. I must get her some proper clothes, but"—as her eye fell on the confused pile of their possessions beside her—"I don't know how ever she will manage all this, and yet I can't go about with a maid as well! I do hope for her sake as well as my own that I haven't been rash in this plan."

But she smiled pleasantly enough as she thanked Annot for her kind offices, and then the three made their way downstairs together.

The drawing-room, or "long parlour" as the Marrisonists called it, deserved the latter name, for long it was. In fact it had originally been two if not three rooms, of which the end one was the most important, as it was considerably wider than the other part. It was the "saloon" of the house, where on more formal occasions the family received their guests, though in an ordinary way their manners and customs, as was the case in those days, while by no means "free and easy," were simple and homely enough.

But a visit from Cousin Felicity, however sudden and unexpected, at once necessitated gala gowns; the opening of the "withdrawing-room"; longer and more ceremonious meals, and all things in accordance with what the strange guest considered due to her.

For the time being the upset concerning the luggage and the consequent hurry had caused both the new-comers to forget all about their fellow-visitor, and it was with no preoccupation of mind concerning her that Paulina and Clodagh, escorted by Annot, made their way down the long room, to where at the end the members of the family group, whose greetings they had already received, were awaiting them. As they drew near, their hostess approached.

"You have made good speed, dear Miss Paulina," she said kindly, "dinner is not yet announced. In the meantime allow me to introduce you to our esteemed friend and relative, whose visit has happily coincided with your own," and she took the young lady's hand and led her towards a large chair of state covered with magnificent brocade, on one side of the fireplace, in which sat a small figure—small, but for that very reason perhaps among others—so startling was the contrast with its costly attire and with its extraordinary dignity and stateliness—the very reverse of insignificant or unnoticeable.

Paulina half unconsciously drew back a little, slightly turning away. She was naturally of a haughty disposition, added to which, adulation and flattery had helped to spoil her, and at once she felt annoyed at being led forward like a child, to be presented to a complete stranger, and this disagreeable sensation was increased by the fact that the figure in the great chair remained motionless—motionless and mute. The small lady might have been a statue or a wax doll. But in spite of herself something made Paulina look straight at "Cousin Felicity," and now that she saw her at close quarters, the splendour of her jewels, the priceless lace in which she was draped, almost took away the younger woman's breath. She half gasped—and then, feeling her eyes caught and held as it were by the strange power of the piercing black ones, gleaming in the midst of the colourless little old face, Paulina, mistress of her emotions as she prided herself on being, Paulina, to whom timidity and shyness were unknown, felt her cheeks crimson, and hardly realising what she was doing, she curtsied low and deferentially.

"Though, after all," as she said to herself a minute or two later, when she had recovered her usual, somewhat arrogant self-possession, "after all, hateful old cat though she is, she is an aged woman—too old to act these ridiculous travesties—and I hope I know what good breeding demands of politeness to our elders."

For, as this mention of her later reflections shows, Paulina was by no means as yet out of the wood.

The ancient lady held out her glittering hand.

"Does she expect me to kiss it?" the girl asked herself, when, to her horror, came a reply to the unspoken query.

"No," said Cousin Felicity, as she touched the tips of Paulina's now extended fingers, "no," and this was the first word she had uttered, "she does not. But what she sets far before curtsies and deference to fine clothes and diamonds is respectful behaviour to the poor and aged. How about the old peasant who presumed to intrude upon you this morning?"

Then Paulina knew, and she shivered. But her courage was good. "It was not only what you think, Madam," she replied, "you do me scarce justice. I desire to show respect to age. This morning I was taken aback. I was so newly roused."

Cousin Felicity bent her head, as if in royal pardon, though she did not speak, and Paulina turning quickly, was glad to catch hold of Annot, who with some of the others had drawn near in curiosity, though this was tempered by their familiarity with the strange old dame's eccentricity.

"You have met before?" Annot whispered. "She often frightens people at first," for she felt that her friend was trembling.

"I am not frightened," returned Paulina in the same tone. "I was only startled and—rather angry. I had forgotten all about what you told us. I will explain afterwards. I don't think people—especially old ladies—should play tricks to catch others."

Annot smiled, but she herself looked nervous.

"Dear Paulina," she pleaded, "for goodness sake, don't be angry. I told you she was not to be counted in any way as an ordinary person. Don't frown so. She may see it—oh no, she is now occupied with Clodagh. Just watch."

For by this time it was the younger girl's turn to be led up to the great armchair.

She had been standing a little in the background, standing there dreamily, as if she were trying to remember something. But she did not seem timid or shy when at a touch on the arm from her hostess she came quietly forward, her sweet Irish blue eyes, looking almost black under their long lashes, lifted with a sort of gentle, half-bewildered enquiry, as she drew near to the formidable little old lady.

And for the first time, as the keen, piercing glance of this redoubtable personage fell upon the young girl, a smile, softening the hard expression and marvellously rejuvenating the small dried-up features, crept over Cousin Felicity's face.

"Welcome, my dear," she said, as she held out her hand in an inviting though yet regal manner, and Clodagh, feeling, she knew not why, impelled to do so, stooped and kissed it gently and respectfully.



Stooped and kissed it gently and respectfully.

"Thank goodness," murmured such of the family as were near enough to watch the small drama, "thank goodness, she has taken a fancy to the child, and Clodagh is much more tactful than Paulina," for in their heart both Mrs. Marriston and her daughters had been trembling, especially since the reproof which the elder girl had received.

"I am glad to thank you for your courtesy to a lonely and homely old fellow-traveller this morning," Cousin Felicity continued, and then Clodagh's grave face brightened and a touch of colour came into it. She had scarcely overheard what had passed between Paulina and the aged guest, or rather perhaps she had been in too absent a mood to take it in. But now a look of relief spread over her, and she answered in her usual frank and simple way.

"Oh!" she said, "I am so glad you got here comfortably. I think we had both fallen asleep at the time you left the coach, and I—I was so sorry not to have been of any service to you—I had no idea we were bound for the same place," she added, with a little smile of surprise.

"Naturally," Cousin Felicity replied; "that is why I so fully appreciate your courtesy." And she gave an odd though not disagreeable little laugh as she went on: "I hope you lost none of your goods and chattels on the way? You seemed to be somewhat overburdened."

Clodagh drew still nearer to the old lady.

"Yes, indeed," she said. "I am not surprised at your noticing it." Paulina was not near enough to overhear, "We have a terrible number of packages," and her face grew anxious at the remembrance. "It was that, partly, that made my cousin seem so cross," she went on, lowering her voice. "We were so crowded up. And I am so unused to travelling. I don't know how I shall manage. Paulina is so kind to me, and of course I must learn to be of real use to her."

The elder Miss Marriston, Thomasine by name, was standing near. She smiled at Clodagh's sudden, almost childish outburst of confidence—afterwards Clodagh felt at a loss to explain it to herself, for as a rule she was by no means a chatterbox—and remarked, though with a touch of deferential apology in her tone:

"Our Cousin Felicity is the genius of travelling in person. If she would teach you some of her experience, Miss Clodagh,

you would indeed be fortunate. We always do say, you know, dear cousin, that you manage as if by magic."

The old lady smiled. She did not seem ill-pleased.

"Yes," said Clodagh, glancing almost with reverence at the exquisite yellowish lace, of cobweb-like texture, draping its owner's skirt, "to see all these lovely treasures of attire, one wonders how it can be so quickly arranged and re-arranged—and packed! For, as far as I remember, Madam, you carried but little with you."

Cousin Felicity smiled again.

"You are right," she said. "I detest encumbrances. I travel with the smallest amount of luggage possible. Not that this lace would add to it——" and she passed her jewelled fingers over it fondly. "All I am wearing could go through a wedding ring. It belonged to my—ah, well, we need not say how far back among my ancestors it dates from."

"It was made in fairyland, I believe," murmured Clodagh, and then there stole across her memory some of the old tales and sayings she had heard in her nursery—how that the "good folk," the "little people," reckon not age and time as we do—that five centuries is in fairyland but as five years, if that, to us. And the story of little Bridget, whose human life ebbed out "between the dawn and morrow," poor little Bridget! recurred to her with a slight shiver. It must have shown in her eyes as she raised them again to her new friend's strange face. But what she read there reassured her in some mysterious way, and then, as if a door or window had suddenly opened in her mind, there flashed into her remembrance all that the landlady of the old inn had told her that very morning about the mysterious and fitful lady in the neighbourhood.

"It is she herself," thought Clodagh. "How extraordinary that I did not guess it before! But, fairy or no fairy, she wishes me nothing but good," and a sweet, grateful smile lighted up the young girl's face, chasing away the first vague misgivings.

"Yes," came in a very soft whisper to her ears, "yes, my dear, you know something about me, and before we part we must have some talk together," but to this there was no time for her to reply, as at that moment dinner was announced and the elder Mr. Marriston came forward to offer his arm to the venerable guest.

Somehow, though she found herself for the first time in her life among strangers, Clodagh did not feel shy or ill at ease. She had an underlying consciousness that she was kindly regarded, for her own sake as well as to please her cousin. Paulina, who by this time had regained her self-possession, was gentler than her wont, and did not speak much. Indeed, though all passed pleasantly there was an indefinite feeling of formality and ceremony not usual in the cheerful and friendly family group.

"It is not half as lively and amusing with that old——" "cat," Paulina was probably going to say but for a "hush" from Clodagh, for it was to her young cousin she was whispering on their way to the drawing-room. "Well—with *her* here," she continued. "They are all so desperately in awe of her, I can't understand it."

"But do be careful," urged Clodagh. "She may overhear, and you really should be polite and respectful. As you say yourself, age alone demands it."

"I'm not going to be rude," Paulina replied, and she meant what she said, though in her heart she had not forgiven the reproof she had received, especially as she knew she had deserved it. But just as they were entering the long parlour, Clodagh stopped her.

"Cousin," she said, "I cannot rest with the thought of all our things—yours especially—in such confusion upstairs. Will you allow me to go to our rooms now and arrange them, partly at least? I am sure Mrs. Marriston and her daughters will excuse me, if you explain to them."

Paulina hesitated. She had a horror of seeming to treat her young relation as an inferior, and yet she saw that it would really be kinder to agree. Just then Thomasine came up to them, and on Paulina's putting the question to her she took Clodagh's part.

"Yes," she said, "I think it would be far better than for this child to stay down till late, and then probably not get to bed for ever so long." For the Marristons fully understood the position. So Clodagh, much relieved, bade Thomasine a cheerful good-night and ran off.

She worked hard—unpacking, separating, to some extent packing again, for the weather was very hot and she knew that certain clothes could not possibly be required during the few days of their stay at the Priory. She was quick and intelligent and sensible, still she was very young and her task was not an easy one, and but for her extreme anxiety to be of real use to her cousin, she would almost have despaired of managing it.

"But it would never do for me to lose heart at the first start," she said to herself, "and of course, unless I prove fit for the post, Paulina could not afford to keep me with her, as Lady Roseley explained. For she is not *very* rich, and it is such a blessing to be with her instead of with strangers who knew nothing about me except that I was poor and homeless."

So she cheered up and worked on bravely. The evenings were long, for it was barely past midsummer, and the dinner had been early, so she had time enough to arrange her cousin's belongings, though she had scarcely touched her own, when Paulina made her appearance yawning and wishing herself in bed.

"Good gracious, child!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of Clodagh, "are you at it still? Why, I expected to find you undressed at least, if not in bed. But I must say you seem to have a head on your shoulders. My things look most methodically arranged. And how about your own?"

"Oh," said Clodagh, much pleased, in spite of feeling very sleepy and tired, "I shall soon get them done. I will not make any noise if you go to bed now, but I should like to feel things were tidy before——"

But Paulina interrupted her.

"Nonsense," she said. "I insist on your going to bed yourself. Just get out what is absolutely necessary. You can finish in the morning, and remember," she went on, for she was standing with the door open, and the corridor was still encumbered, "remember to ask the servants to pile up or carry away some of these boxes. One can scarcely get in and out of the rooms. I wish your luggage were a little more concentrated. You have such a number of small cases and bags."

"Yes," Clodagh agreed. "You see I have never travelled any distance till now," and she eyed her goods and chattels somewhat disconsolately.

"We must arrange about it," said Paulina vaguely. "But now, get to bed quickly," and after all, Clodagh felt that she really was getting too sleepy to do more than was unavoidable, and in a short time both girls were fast asleep, Clodagh's last waking thought being a resolve to get up very early indeed to complete her arrangements.

"I wish I could have got it all done to-night, but anyway the confusion outside could not be cleared till to-morrow."

She was tired and she slept soundly, still not quite dreamlessly. One very queer experience she had, and even when she was wide-awake, and daylight streaming in, she could not make up her mind if it had been dream or reality.

This was it, "and," she said to herself, "I am almost certain I was awake."

It was midsummer weather, as I said, so the window was wide open, and suddenly through the silence Clodagh heard a familiar sound. It was that of bees humming. It grew nearer and nearer, and opening her eyes—or dreaming that she did so—she looked up. The room was flooded with moonlight, and in it she perceived the source of the sound. Two large bees were buzzing about, very busy apparently, but as there were no flowers on the table or mantelpiece, Clodagh wondered sleepily what could have attracted them.

"I hope they won't sting me," she thought, for the humming grew nearer, and then, strange to say, out of it gradually soft-whispering words shaped themselves.

"Don't wake her, whatever you do," said one bee. "She is fast asleep and we must obey orders."

"But we can't help humming," murmured the other.

"Well, hum gently. It will soothe her, and let us set to work, for there is plenty to do before daylight."

That was all she heard, and soothe her the sound must have done, for she knew nothing more till she really and unmistakably awoke, to see the sunshine—the lovely, clear early summer morning sunshine—pouring in, to hear the dear birds welcoming another happy beautiful day.

Clodagh started up. She had never felt fresher or brighter; all last night's tiredness had gone. She was used to early rising, and felt that to stay lazily in bed was impossible.

"It would be delicious out-of-doors," she thought, "but I *must* finish the tidying and sorting, if possible before Paulina awakes," and she sprang out of bed.

But—she rubbed her eyes—was she dreaming? The cupboards, of which there were two in the old-fashioned room, the roomy chest of drawers, all stood open, as if to exhibit their contents and demand approval, and in them were arranged with the perfection of neatness and judiciousness all her possessions, last night in disorder and barely unpacked. And on a chair lay her garments for the day, not only those she had herself placed there, but a spotless cool white gown—much cooler than the black one she had travelled with—the very one she had been hoping to get out and don that morning.

"Have I done it all in my sleep?" she asked, and then some undefined feeling made her open the door and peep out into the passage. Wonder of wonders! All the confusion had disappeared. There stood there, in dignified importance, two roomy, substantial trunks only, one of which she recognised as her cousin's principal one, with her initials in small brass nails on the lid, the other, similar in make and appearance, with the first letters of her own two names marked in the same way. The very sort of thing she had begun to long for since seeing Paulina's.

She lifted the lid—a series of trays was disclosed, and examining further, she perceived at the bottom, most beautifully folded, all her own thicker clothing, gowns and woollens quite unsuitable for present wear, and as she went on in breathless excitement to peer into her cousin's, there was the same arrangement. The very garments she had herself put aside for the present, the evening before, lay there undisturbed, or rather, she suspected, far more exquisitely folded than she had left them. And all the rest, the bandboxes and carpet-bags and unbusiness-like odds and ends she had brought over the sea, had disappeared, as if by magic.

"And magic it is," she said to herself, for, as she stood there listening, a clock in the distance struck five, not another sound or rustle was to be heard. Not a soul was as yet astir in the old house.

Clodagh danced back into her room.

"The fairies are afield," she sang to herself softly. Never had she felt so gay and light-hearted. "I shall dress and run out into the garden," she thought. "There is nothing to keep me indoors. Everything is safe"—for the heavy despatch-box she knew to be in Paulina's keeping. "What will the servants think when they see it?"

What they did think was that each thought the others had cleared away the pile of the young ladies' luggage, leaving only what was required. Or at least, as no questions were asked, no remarks made, they probably thought so, if they thought about it at all! Perhaps their curiosity was put to sleep by some uncanny though not maleficent influence. Who can say?

And in a very short time Clodagh was ready, and hat in hand, looking like the very spirit of the morning in person, she ran downstairs to find the old hall-porter sleepily unbarring the great door, though, sleepy as he was, he could not restrain a smile of admiration and a respectful "You be early about, Miss," to which she laughingly replied, "Who could help it, once they were awake, on such a morning?"

Yet another surprise awaited her, as you shall hear.

The Priory grounds were fairly extensive and delightfully quaint. Great laurel hedges, alternating with curiously high-clipped yews, and some magnificent elms added to the impression of space, as well as to that sort of pleasant "mystery" without which no garden is thoroughly fascinating.

"What a lovely place to explore!" said Clodagh to herself, as she turned down one long shady path, streaked here and there with the early sun-rays filtering through the foliage. Then a sound reached her ears, which recalled her experience of the night before. It was the humming of bees. She stood still for a moment to listen, feeling as if she were on the confines of some enchanted region. Then slowly, treading very softly, she went on. Yes—in a minute or two she saw at the end of the path a huge beautiful beehive, its inhabitants flying in and out, buzzing away, like the busy creatures they are. And in front of it stood a quaint little figure, whom Clodagh this time had no difficulty in at once recognising as the mysterious "Cousin Felicity" again.

Her laces and diamonds of the evening before seemed a dream, though her dress was dainty enough, much finer in quality than the very homely attire in which Clodagh had first seen her. It was a gown of flowered chintz, of the delicate

colouring and excellent material that one now and again finds treasured among family relics—such as "my great-grandmother's" or even "great-great-grandmother's dresses." And the skirt was drawn through the pocket-holes in the orthodox old-fashioned way, showing the pink cotton petticoat and the neat little high-heeled shoes. The whole figure, as she stood with her back to the new-comer, was so trim and slim and youthful, that it gave almost a shock to Clodagh when the little lady turned suddenly and she caught sight of the tiny, withered, white face, surmounted by a kind of mob cap, from beneath which escaped a few soft grey curls. Yet it was evident that Cousin Felicity was in very good health and spirits, for she smiled beamingly as she accosted the young girl.

"The top of the morning to you, my dear," she said. "That's your national greeting, is it not? I knew you were not a lie-abed. Well, and how wags the world with you? I have been visiting my friends here, you see. We understand each other, these clever little creatures and I," and she fixed her bright eyes on Clodagh.

For a moment or two Clodagh stood silent. Then a smile broke over her face.

"Madam, lady, what shall I call you?" she exclaimed. "I must say it. I know the truth. You *are* a fairy. It is you I have to thank for what has been done to help me in the night!"

"Call me what you please, my dear, when we are alone," said the old lady, "but keep what you know, or suspect—rather more than the actual fact, by the bye," she added—"keep it to yourself. I know you are discreet, otherwise I could not be of service to you as I intend to be. Now tell me, child, what are your troubles or anxieties, for some I know you have _____"

"I don't feel as if I had any at all this morning," Clodagh interrupted laughingly.

"Ah, well—so much the better, it shows a healthy nature," was the reply. "But, tell me, is that very autocratic young woman, your cousin, good to you? Are you happy to be with her?"

"Yes, yes, truly I am," Clodagh replied eagerly. "That is to say, I feel sure I am going to be so. You see we only met again yesterday, after not having seen each other for several years, not since I have been grown-up. But I must explain. Paulina is very kind. I am sorry she was rude to you yesterday. She was sorry herself afterwards, but she is only quick-tempered and spoilt. She has a kind heart. When my dear grandmother died I should have been homeless, forced to earn my living with strangers, but for her," and by this time Clodagh's eyes were filled with tears.

Cousin Felicity nodded her head slowly, and in a moment or two she spoke again.

"Did you love your Irish home very dearly?" she asked.

"Did I? *Do* I, rather," the girl replied. "Oh, dear lady, I adore it! But it is mine no longer. It belongs to strangers, it is best for me not to think of it; though I have known all my life that I should have to leave it when Granny left me, I don't think I realised it. That is why I am glad to travel. It is interesting, and takes my thoughts off, to see new places and people. I am glad that Paulina travels so much, if only——" and here she gave a deep sigh.

"Ah, ha," cried the little old lady, but though slightly mocking, her tone was not the least unkindly, "now we are getting to your troubles. What is that deep sigh about?"

"It's my fear that I can't manage things properly for Paulina," said Clodagh, "and if so, I must leave her. She is not *very* rich. She can't afford to buy me pretty gowns and things, as she means to do, if I cannot save her having a maid. She cannot take two about with her. Oh, it's the luggage! Do you know, yesterday I thought I had lost her jewellery—I'll never forget my horror!"

"Would you like to know how *I* travel? Shall I show you?" said her new friend.

Clodagh looked at her wonderingly.

"Indeed I would," she said. "But then," she went on, "though I am afraid you do not like me to say it, I *know* you are a _____"

"S-sh. Never mind about that. Come with me," was the reply.

It was still very early. No one was about. Cousin Felicity took the girl's hand and turned to re-enter the house by a

different way from that by which Clodagh had come. But before doing so, she stopped a moment and waved her tiny hand as if in adieu to the beehive.

"Thanks many," her companion heard her murmur. "You did your work well last night," and to Clodagh she went on, with a twinkle in her bright eyes, "Were you pleased with what you found this morning—the new trunk and all?"

"Pleased!" exclaimed the girl rapturously, "I couldn't believe my eyes. Not that I mind work," she went on, "I think I can soon learn to pack and unpack cleverly. It is the responsibility of all the things, the terror of losing them, that distresses me."

"Yes, yes," said her friend, "I understand. I do not mean to do all your work for you. It is the industrious and active, not the idle and lazy, that"—and here she gave her funny twinkling smile again—"that *they* help, as all the stories you have heard over the sea always tell. You shall see what I can do, and what you must do yourself."

By this time they had reached a side entrance to the house. The door stood open; a small staircase faced them, up which with wonderful quickness, considering her great age, Cousin Felicity sprang, followed by Clodagh, and crossing a landing, opened the door of a room, inviting the girl to enter with her.

It was a pleasant room; the first impression it made on Clodagh was of whiteness—and exquisite neatness. It matched the little old lady to perfection.

"This is where I always am, when I visit these kind people," she said. "No one ever has this room but myself. And," she went on in a low voice as if speaking to herself, "who, if I tried to tell it, would believe for how many generations it has been appropriated to me?"

Clodagh felt a thrill of awe as she caught the mysterious words. But in another moment Cousin Felicity had turned to her briskly, pointing to a neat, good-sized trunk standing in front of the fireplace.

"That is all *my* luggage," she announced. "It holds more than Paulina's fine lady's maid would have got into half-a-dozen like it, because *I* know how to pack. But—look at it well."

Clodagh stared at it obediently.

"Shut your eyes." She did so. Then it seemed to her that she heard a murmur of words.

"Open." Clodagh again obeyed. And this time, stare she did, for—the box was no longer there, it had vanished from view!

She was too astonished to speak.

"Hold out your hand," was the next command.

Cousin Felicity laid something on the outstretched palm. Clodagh gazed at it in amazement and admiration. It was a miniature trunk, evidently of the finest make. Never had she seen such a perfect toy of its kind, and it was an exact facsimile of her strange old friend's substantial box, which a minute before had been standing in front of her in the most matter-of-fact way. It was small—not above a couple of inches in length, and half as much in width and depth, but curiously heavy. It might almost have been a small block of lead, fashioned to represent a Liliputian portmanteau, and still Clodagh stood there staring at it, without speaking.

"That is how *I* travel," said the mysterious little lady at last. "It contains all my belongings, just as I told you the other—or rather itself in its other proportions—does. See, I slip it in here," and she held out the black hand-bag, or reticule, which the girl had noticed in the coach, and taking the little box from Clodagh she did as she said, "I draw the strings, I hang it over my arm," accompanying her explanations by the appropriate actions, "and there I am, ready to journey from one end of Europe to the other, or farther still, with no anxiety."

Her young protégée lifted her eyes.

"It is too marvellous, too delightful for words!" she exclaimed.

The little old lady smiled graciously.

"I knew you would say so," she replied. "Well, now, I can extend this magical power to you, on two conditions. You must keep the secret, absolutely and entirely, and you must do your own work perfectly. There must be no untidiness or hurry-scurry; you must never leave things behind, or tear or crumple them—if so, your carelessness will bring its own punishment, for it would prevent the spell's working, and even I—fairy or witch as you think me——"

"No, no," Clodagh interrupted eagerly, "not witch. You are too kind and charming to be that."

"Ah, well, we can leave aside the question of what or who I am. The point is what I can *do*, and what I cannot. And counteract the working or not working of the spell if the rules are broken, is beyond my power."

"But I *will* keep them," exclaimed Clodagh. "That is to say, I will do my very best to be most neat and methodical. Granny trained me to be neat. And I will keep the secret; that I promise, *only*——" and her face fell as a sudden idea disconcerted her.

"What?"

"If Paulina suspects anything? If she notices, and thinks there is something strange about it all?"

Cousin Felicity smiled.

"I will see to that. You need not be afraid. If you fulfil your part, you will have *no* trouble, as regards Paulina or any one else. Come now—I will go with you to your rooms to explain all, before any one is about. But first—close your eyes for a moment. Yes——" and when Clodagh opened them, there stood the trunk again, as she had first seen it!

She followed the old lady down a passage or two, and up some steps, till at the end of the corridor she saw that they were in the part of the house familiar to her. Cousin Felicity stopped in front of the two trunks, Paulina's and Clodagh's new one, standing just outside the doors of their rooms, and glanced at them approvingly. She was just going to speak when the girl touched her on the arm.

"I am afraid," she began timidly, "I am afraid that Paulina may be awake by now, and if she heard us and looked out ——?"

Her friend nodded reassuringly. Then she noiselessly opened the door of the sleeper's room and stepped in, Clodagh close behind her. It was almost dark inside, for Paulina was not one of the people who like to see the dawn gradually creeping up—she always had her blinds drawn down. Still it was light enough for Clodagh to see the mysterious visitor make her way, swiftly and soundlessly, to the side of the bed. Then she stooped over the pretty face lying on the pillow, touched the closed eyelids softly, murmuring something inaudible, then came back to Clodagh waiting near the entrance and led the way outside again, closing the door behind them.

"*That* is quite safe," she said, smiling. "Have no fears for the present or the future. You will have no difficulties, I assure you. Now——" and she stood before the two closed boxes. "See," she said, "and listen. Whenever you have packed them neatly and perfectly, sure that nothing is forgotten, you lock as usual, deposit the keys safely, then stand in front of each in turn, touch the initials with your fore-finger—you have each three, 'P. O'B.' and 'C. O'B.'—saying slowly and clearly as you do so

"One, two, three,
Dwindle, says Felicity.

"Then close your eyes for a moment, and you will see—hold, I will show you now. Shut your eyes." Clodagh did so. "Open." She obeyed, and there in front of her lay, so small that at the first moment she scarcely perceived them, two miniature editions of her own and Paulina's trunks, brass nails, letters and all.

"Feel them," said her companion.

Clodagh stooped and picked them up, her eyes sparkling with eagerness. They were heavy, certainly, but less so than the old lady's own one.

"You have a hand-bag?" this personage enquired.

"Oh yes," replied Clodagh, and in a moment she had fetched it. It held the toy trunks perfectly.

"Take them out again," came the order.

"Now," her friend continued, "listen. When you reach your destination, withdraw them from your reticule, place them wherever is most convenient, touch the letters again, beginning with the last, and say this time

"Three, two, one,
Journey's done,

and—all will be as you desire."

She smiled as she spoke.

"You may test it at once," she said. "Place them on the floor. Now——"

"Three, two, one,
Journey's done,"

repeated Clodagh, touching the letters, as she did so, "B," the last, first. Then she shut her eyes, and when she looked again—yes—there they were, the two neat capacious trunks, as before.

"Oh," she said, with a sigh of delight. "It is too good to be true! How can I thank you?"

But as she looked up, holding out her hands in gratitude, lo and behold—Cousin Felicity had vanished. Glancing round quickly, however, Clodagh fancied she saw a shadow of something disappearing at the turn in the passage. Whether this was so or not, who can say?



Lo and behold—Cousin Felicity had vanished.

"I will thank her again when we meet downstairs," thought the girl, little imagining that this was not to be.

Just then the door behind her opened, and Paulina, her eyes still but half-awake, peeped out.

"Oh, child," she said, "is it late? You up and dressed already! I must hurry."

"There is plenty of time," Clodagh replied. "It is still early."

"How well and bright you look!" Paulina exclaimed. "You must have slept well. So unlike my last travelling companion—that silly P❖lagie—not of course, dear, that I mean to compare you with a maid-servant—but the airs she gave herself! She could never sleep the first night in a strange place, nor the last, because she was nervous about the pack—Oh," she broke off, "I see you've got rid of all the old bags and bandboxes. What a good thing! I didn't know you had such a nice sensible trunk, so neat, and just like mine."

"Yes," said the young girl. "It really holds more than I require. I have planned it all, Paulina. You shall never have any trouble about the luggage if you will leave the whole to me."

"I shall only be too thankful to do so," said her cousin lazily. "I think you are a genius, my dear. The way you have arranged my dresses and everything is simply perfection."

Half an hour or so later, the two, summoned by the breakfast gong, made their way downstairs, where most of the family were already assembled, and as the others dropped in, Clodagh looked round eagerly for her new-old friend. But come she did not, and after a short delay Mrs. Marriston turned to her elder daughter.

"Thomasine, my dear," she said. "I think you had better go upstairs to enquire for Cousin Felicity and offer to escort her. I scarcely like to begin breakfast without her, for fear of seeming to lack respect."

For those old-fashioned days were very ceremonious and any want of deference to the eccentric old lady was not to be thought of. Thomasine went at once, but in a very few minutes returned alone, holding a scrap of paper in her hand, looking somewhat disconcerted, though she was half laughing also.

"She has gone!" she exclaimed, "bag, baggage and all, leaving this."

Mrs. Marriston took the paper eagerly. "Oh, *can* we have offended her?" she said anxiously, but a moment after, she too laughed. "No, I see it is all right," she went on, reading aloud the note in her hand.

"Farewell for the present, kind friends," it said. 'A sudden summons to——'—no, I can't decipher the word—'cuts short my visit. Fare you well, one and all.'"

They looked at each other. Annot took the paper from her mother. "No," she agreed, "I cannot read it. But we never do know where she goes or how she goes! It may be Kamschatka or the moon."

"Or fairyland," murmured Clodagh.

"All the same," said Paulina, who, for her part, was by no means sorry for the mysterious lady's flight, "it cannot but be rather trying to have such a guest. She expects to be received with regal honours, and then off she goes like 'old Mother Goose when she wanted to wander.'"

The others laughed.

"My dear Paulina," said Annot, "you are a *young* 'Mother Goose' yourself, with your love of travelling."

"Quite so," Paulina agreed. "But you will allow that I give my hospitable friends *some* notice of my intentions. And, after all," she added, "some day, when Clodagh and I have had enough of wandering, we shall settle down, no doubt."

"And, to do our late guest justice," said Mrs. Marriston, "erratic as she is, her visits have never brought us anything but good luck. Her crossing the threshold is always beneficent. This very morning we have excellent news from India of our dear Humphrey, who, we heard by the last mail, was seriously ill. He has quite recovered."

She spoke of a younger son in the—in those days—*very* far-off East.

Clodagh had glanced up with quick interest when Paulina alluded to "some day settling down." Her feelings at present were very mingled. She scarcely understood them herself. She was ready keenly to enjoy the novelty and exhilaration of travel, seeing new places and people, and now that her one misgiving had been so marvellously removed, her spirits rose high. But still—she had not yet been away a week from her own old home, hers no longer, and already there were moments when, if she closed her eyes, she saw in fancy the dear rugged walls of Grey Rocks—the scene of her own and Paulina's childhood—and heard the splash of the waves at the foot of the cliffs, and then she would feel the tears creeping into her eyes, and she thought to herself, "I suppose it is what is called 'home-sickness,' but I must not give way to it. If only I could hope some day to go there again!"

It was not a very ambitious hope, for Grey Rocks was but a small domain, and had Clodagh's father lived it might have still been their own.

In the meantime, however, she greatly enjoyed the stay at the Priory, and every day she grew cleverer with regard to her duties. She practised folding and arranging Paulina's many garments till she really reached perfection, and she was so methodical and careful, yet never fussy or overwhelmed, that Paulina declared she had never been so splendidly looked after in her life. So far this was most satisfactory. Still, when the week to which their visit had been extended drew to its close, it must be confessed that Cousin Felicity's young protégée was not without nervousness as to the working of the spell.

"Suppose," she thought, "suppose I had dreamt it all!" But then her glance fell on her own beautiful new trunk—"No, no," she added, "of course it was real and true."

And when the morning of their departure came, nothing could have exceeded her care to remember everything.

She waited till Paulina, fully attired for the journey, had gone downstairs for a few last minutes with her hosts, then she rapidly deposited the precious despatch-box in a corner of her own trunk, in which there was still room; closed and locked both; recited as directed the words of the spell, shut her eyes, and waited, as before.

Yes—all was right. There lay the miniature luggage, and in another moment both toy boxes were safe in her reticule, and with light feet and a light heart she ran down to join the others, just as the chariot which was to take them to the nearest posting-house drew up at the door.

"Everything is ready," she said to Paulina. "I have seen to the luggage," and Paulina nodded carelessly.

"The ladies' things have gone on in a cart, I suppose?" asked one of the Marristons. The dignified butler replied that he understood it had been seen to, the truth being that he had not thought about it; and on his side the old hall-porter took for granted that the housemaids had had it conveyed down the back-stairs, that is to say if *he* thought about it at all!

Anyway, as the mysterious lady had promised, so it fell out. Clodagh was troubled with no enquiries, no interference.

And arrived at St. Aidan's Wells, where they were to spend some weeks, all continued satisfactory. Once, it must be confessed, on their way, Clodagh had a fright. For they had to make two breaks in the long journey, spending one night at each, and on the second occasion, after Clodagh had closed and locked and repeated the spell, lo and behold, it refused to act! She started in terror, then her eyes fell on her own little slippers, which she had forgotten to pack. In a moment she had repaired the mistake, and then—yes, all went as before.

"But," said the girl to herself, "I must be *more* than careful. For possibly a second lapse on my part might not be forgiven."

They remained at the watering-place for a month or two, then started off again; this time for a lively seaside town where Paulina had arranged to meet friends; then, as the autumn drew on, to country-houses in the hunting districts, for the elder girl was a good horsewoman, as indeed was Clodagh also. What true Irish girl is not?

It was all very pleasant and exciting and the cousins enjoyed it, yet sometimes Paulina declared herself tired and wishful for a rest, even though her journeys were accomplished with the smallest possible trouble. The variety of their visits called of course for constant renewal of dresses and additions to them, but never did the two spell-bound trunks seem too full, and every time she packed and unpacked, Clodagh thought with inexpressible gratitude of the "fairy lady," as to herself she called her, and her bestowal of the strange secret.

"But for her, I could not have managed," she often reflected. "I should have had to give it up—it would not have been fair to Paulina, and then where could I have gone, for home in my own country I have none? And oh, how, through all the novelty and amusement and excitement of travelling, in spite of the kindness I meet with, oh how I sometimes long to be in dear grandmother's old turret room, listening to the faint whirr of her spinning-wheel, and the louder sound of the waves breaking on the cliffs below! I can feel the breeze that always blew in if the casement in the deep window-seat was open; I can taste the salt flavour of the spray that sometimes on stormy days flew up to where I sat! Oh dear old home! I wonder if Paulina ever feels about it in the least as I do?" and then she would fall to wishing that she could somehow earn money enough to buy back the old "eyrie," and be its little ch \heartsuit telaine. "How I would enjoy receiving Paulina, and making *her* enjoy it!"

But for these day-dreams she had not much leisure, and she knew that she should not indulge in them. Still the longing was always there, and as time went on it grew more persistent and intense.

"It is just home-sickness," thought Clodagh, and she felt that she must not give way to it.

"I wish I could meet 'Cousin Felicity' again," she often said to herself. "She was so wise. I am sure she would advise me how to keep cheerful and content. And yet she must have understood, for I remember her asking me if I loved my home very dearly."

The weeks and months and almost the years—for one had fully gone, and the second since Clodagh's arrival on this side of the water was well on its way—passed, and then one day came little looked-for tidings.

The cousins were just then again at St. Aidan's, which Paulina, who had great faith in its waters, made a point of visiting once or twice a year. One morning, when Clodagh came in from doing some little commissions on the Parade, she found her friend, pale as death, half fainting in her chair, an open letter in stiff, formal writing on her knee.

"Clodagh, oh Clodagh," she exclaimed, "read, read. Who could have dreamt of it?"

And truly her distress was not to be wondered at, for the news was appalling, being nothing less but that of the poor young woman's almost total ruin by the failure of a bank. Clodagh for a moment felt stunned, but she soon collected herself and did her best to comfort her cousin.

"Take courage, dear Paulina," she said. "There is no need for despair. You have still enough for comfort of a simple kind, and I will work for you. It will be my turn to repay your generosity."

"Dear child," murmured her poor cousin, all her high spirit broken, "you have already far more than repaid anything I have done for you. But don't leave me, promise me. If we must starve, let it be together."

"We shall not starve," said Clodagh cheerfully. "If—oh, Paulina, I wonder if you could make up your mind to live at Grey Rocks. My old nurse would take us in. She has a little farm and a nice clean house. Granny gave it to her and furnished it. We could live there on almost nothing, and every one would know who we were and be good to us." Her eyes actually sparkled at the prospect.

And after a little Paulina caught some of the younger girl's spirit.

"Yes," she said, "it is the best thing we can do. I have none but happy remembrances of the old place."

So Clodagh wrote to the friend of her grandmother who had been her guardian, asking him to see her nurse and arrange it. Writing direct would have been useless, as the simple woman had never learnt to read. And as quickly as the slow mails of those days could bring it, came Mr. Fitzgerald's reply. More than a reply indeed, for he began the letter by saying that he had pen in hand to write to her when her request reached him, for he had an extraordinary communication to make.

"Grey Rocks, my dear Clodagh," he wrote, "is yours, your own property. It has again been for sale, as the late purchaser inherited unexpectedly a large property and did not care to retain the smaller one, and on the very day before I heard from you, a certain firm of lawyers, well known to me and entirely trustworthy, sent over a confidential clerk to arrange for the purchase for yourself—Miss Clodagh O'Beirne—of the entire little property, as a gift, an absolute gift from an unknown friend, on one condition only, that you will never seek to discover the giver. I rejoiced inexpressibly, but my rejoicing is doubled and trebled since the receipt of your distressing news this morning. Surely never was a kind deed

more appropriate. All is already in train, and whenever it suits you to return, you, accompanied I hope by Miss Paulina O'Beirne, will be welcomed with heartfelt joy by us all."

Clodagh's delight may be imagined, and to Paulina also the news was an immense relief.

"Who can be the unknown friend?" she exclaimed, adding, however, "But as you must never try to find out, perhaps it is better not to speak of it."

"Much better," said Clodagh, and they never did.

And a happy home old Grey Rocks proved. It was but seldom they cared to leave it. But when they did "want to wander," and with good management their joint means were enough to enable them to do so now and then, you may be sure that their only luggage was the two well-tested trunks, whose marvellous properties never failed. Clodagh, of course, in her heart had her own secret belief as to the identity of her benefactor or benefactress, but the mysterious "fairy lady" she never saw again. And whether her visits to the Marrisones at the Priory continued or not, I cannot say.

Nor can I tell you the after history of the cousins, though something whispers to me that their lives were happy. But it all happened a long time ago. I cannot go over to Grey Rocks, for I do not know, to tell the truth, in what part of old Ireland it stands. Possibly still, in some forgotten corner of a deserted attic are hidden away the enchanted trunks, no one guessing their fairy powers! Who can say, though I am sure most of us wish that they, or others of their kind, belonged to us. How delightful it would be!

THE END

[The end of *Fairies Afield* by Mary Louisa Molesworth]