

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

A Penny a Day was written by Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), and was included in his *Collected Stories for Children* (1947).

Title: Collected Stories for Children — A Penny a Day

Date of first publication: 1947

Author: Walter de la Mare (1873-1956)

Date first posted: 1 July 2007

Date last updated: October 6, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20141017

This ebook was produced by: Mark Bear Akrigg

A Penny a Day

by

Walter de la Mare

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

Once upon a time, there lived in a cottage that had been built out of the stones of a ruinous Castle and stood within its very walls, an old woman, and her granddaughter—whose name also was Griselda. Here they lived quite alone, being the only two left of a family of farmers who had once owned a wide track of land around them—fields, meadows, heath and moorland—skirting the cliffs and the sea.

But all this was long ago. Now Griselda and her old grandmother had little left but the roof over their heads and a long garden whose apples and cherries and plum-trees flowered in spring under the very walls of the Castle. Many birds nested in this quiet hollow; and the murmur of the sea on the beach beyond it was never hushed to rest.

The old woman tended the garden. And Griselda had very little time wherein to be idle. After her day's work in the farms and fields, she went so weary to bed that however much she tried to keep awake in order to enjoy the company of her own thoughts, she was usually fast asleep before the wick of her tallow candle had ceased to smoulder. Yet for reasons not known even to herself she was as happy as she was good-natured. In looks she resembled a mermaid. Her fair face was unusually gentle and solemn, which may in part have come from her love and delight in gazing at and listening to the sea.

Whenever she had time to herself, which was very seldom, she would climb up by the broken weed-grown steps to the very top of the Castle tower, and sit there—like Fatima's sister—looking out over the green cliffs and the vast flat blue of the ocean. She sat as small as a manikin there. When the sea-winds had blown themselves out she would search the beach for driftwood—the only human creature to be seen—in the thin salt spray blown in on the wind. And the sea-birds would scream around her while the slow toppling Atlantic breakers shook the earth with their thunder. In still evenings, too, when storms had been raging far out over the ocean, and only a slow groundswell poured in its heavy waters upon the shore, it seemed that sunken bells were ringing from a belfry submerged and hidden for ever in the deeps.

But no humans, except Griselda, were there to listen. It was seldom, even, that the people in the nearest village came down to the sea-strand; and never when night was falling. For the Castle was a place forbidden. It was the haunt, it was said, of the Strange Folk. On calm summer evenings unearthly dancers had been seen dancing between the dusk and the moonlight on the short green turf at the verge of the sands, where bugloss and sea-lavender bloomed, and the gulls had their meeting place, gabbling softly together as they preened their wings in the twilight.

Griselda had often heard these tales. But, as she had lived under the walls of the Castle, and had played alone in its ruins ever since she could remember anything at all, she listened to them with delight. What was there to be afraid of? She longed to see these dancers; and kept watch. And when the full moon was ablaze in the sky, she would slip out of her grandmother's cottage and dance alone in its dazzling light on the hard, sea-laid sands of the beach; or sit, half-dreaming, in some green knoll of the cliffs. She would listen to the voices of the sea among the rocks and in the caves; and could not believe that what she heard was only the lull and music of its waters.

Often, too, when sitting on her sun-warmed doorstep, morning or evening, mending her clothes, or peeling potatoes, or shelling peas, or scouring out some old copper pot, she would feel, all in an instant, that she was no longer alone. Then she would stoop her head a little lower over her needle or basin, pretending not to notice that anything was different. As you can hear the notes of an unseen bird or in the darkness can smell a flower past the finding, so it was with Griselda. She had company beyond hearing, touch, or sight.

Now and again, too, as she slid her downcast eyes to right or left, she had actually caught a fleeting glimpse of a shape, not quite real perhaps, but more real than nothing—though it might be half-hidden behind the bushes, or peering down at

her from an ivy-shadowed hollow in the thick stone walls.

Such things did not alarm Griselda—no more than would the wind in the keyhole, or the cry of flying swans at night. They were part of her life, just as the rarer birds and beetles and moths and butterflies are part of the Earth's life. And whatever these shadowy creatures were, she was certain they meant her no harm.

So the happy days went by, spring on to winter, though Griselda had to work nearly all her waking hours to keep herself and her old grandmother from want. Then, one day, the old woman fell ill. She had fallen on the narrow stairs as she was shuffling down in the morning, and there, at the foot of them, looking no more alive than a bundle of old clothes, Griselda found her when she came in with her driftwood.

She was old, and worn and weary, and Griselda knew well that unless great care was taken of her, she might get worse; and even die. The thought of this terrified her. 'Oh, Grannie, Grannie!' she kept whispering to herself as she went about her work, 'I'll do anything—anything in the world—I don't mind what happens—if only you'll promise not to *die*!' But she soon began to take courage again, and kept such a cheerful face that the old woman hadn't an inkling of how sick with care and foreboding Griselda's small head often was, or how near her heart came to despair.

She scarcely had time now to wash her face or comb her hair, or even to sleep and eat. She seldom sat down to a meal, and even when she did, there was but a minute or two in which to gobble it up. She was so tired she could scarcely drag her feet up the steep narrow staircase; the colour began to fade out of her cheeks, and her face to grow haggard and wan.

Still, she toiled on, still sang over her work, and simply refused to be miserable. And however sick and hungry and anxious she might feel, she never let her grandmother see that she was. The old soul lay helpless and in pain on her bed, and had troubles enough of her own. So Griselda had nobody to share hers with; and instead of their getting better they got worse.

And when—after a hot breathless night during which she had lain between waking and dreaming while the lightning flared at her window, and the thunder raved over the sea—when, next morning she came down very early to find that the hungry mice had stolen more than half of the handful of oatmeal she had left in the cupboard, and that her little crock of milk had turned sour, her heart all but failed her. She sat down on the doorstep and she began to cry.

It was early in May; the flashing dark blue sea was tumbling among the rocks of the beach, its surf like snow. The sun blazed in the east, and all around her the trees in their new leaves were blossoming, and the birds singing, and the air was cool and fragrant with flowers after the rain.

In a little while Griselda stopped crying—and very few tears had trickled down from her eyes—and with her chin propped on her hands, she sat staring out across the bright green grass, her eyes fixed vacantly on three butterflies that were chasing one another in the calm sweet air. This way, that way, they glided, fluttered, dipped and soared; then suddenly swooped up into the dazzling blue of the sky above the high broken wall and vanished from sight.

Griselda sighed. It was as if they had been mocking her misery. And with that sigh, there was no more breath left in her body. So she had to take a much deeper breath to make up for it. After that she sighed no more—since she had suddenly become aware again that she was being watched. And this time she knew by what. Not twelve paces away, at the top of a flight of tumbledown stone steps that corkscrewed up to one of the Castle turrets, stood what seemed to be an old wizened pygmy hunched-up old man.

He was of the height of a child of five; he had pointed ears, narrow shoulders, and a hump on his back. And he wore a coat made of a patchwork of moleskins. He stood there—as stock-still as the stones themselves—his bright colourless eyes under his moleskin cap fixed on her, as if Griselda was as outlandish an object to him as he was to Griselda.

She shut her own for a moment, supposing he might have come out of her fancy; then looked again. But already, his crooked staff in his hand, this dwarf had come rapidly shuffling along over the turf towards her. And yet again he stayed—a few paces away. Then, fixing his small bright gaze on her face, he asked her in a shrill, cracked, rusty voice why she was crying. In spite of their lightness, his eyes were piercingly sharp in his dried-up face. And Griselda, as she watched him, marvelled how any living creature could look so old.

Gnarled, wind-shorn trees—hawthorn and scrub oak—grew here and there in the moorland above the sea, and had stood there for centuries among the yellow gorse and sea-pinks. He looked older even than these. She told him she had nothing to cry about, except only that the mice had been at her oatmeal, the milk had turned sour, and she didn't know where to turn next. He asked her what she had to do, and she told him that too.

At this he crinkled up his pin-sharp eyes, as if he were thinking, and glanced back at the turret from which he had come. Then, as if he had made up his mind, he shuffled a step or two nearer and asked Griselda what wages she would pay him if he worked for her for nine days. 'For three days, and three days, and three days,' he said, 'and that's all. How much?'

Griselda all but laughed out loud at this. She told the dwarf that far from being able to pay anyone to work for her, there wasn't a farthing in the house—and not even food enough to offer him a taste of breakfast. 'Unless', she said, 'you would care for a cold potato. There's one or two of *them* left over from supper.'

'Ay, nay, nay,' said the dwarf. 'I won't work without wages, and I can get my own food. But hark now: if you'll promise to give me a penny a day for nine days, I will work here for you from dawn to dark. Then you yourself will be able to be off to the farms and the fields. But it must be a penny a day and no less; it must be paid every evening at sunset before I go to my own parts again; and the old woman up there must never see me, and shall hardly know that I have come.'

Griselda sat looking at him—as softly and easily as she could; but she had never in all her days seen any human being like this before. Though his face was wizened and cockled up like a winter apple, yet it seemed as if he could never have been any different. He looked as old as the stones around him and yet no older than the snapdragons that grew in them. To meet his eyes was like peering through a rusty keyhole into a long empty room. She expected at any instant he would vanish away, or be changed into something utterly different—a flowering thistle or a heap of stones!

Long before this very morning, indeed, Griselda had often caught sight of what looked like living shapes and creatures—on the moorland or the beach—which, when she had looked again, were clean gone; or, when she had come close, proved to be only a furze-bush, or a rock jutting out of the turf, or a scangle of sheep's wool caught on a thorn. This is the way of these strangers. While then she was not in the least afraid of the dwarf, she felt uneasy and bewildered in his company.

But she continued to smile at him, and answered that though she could not promise to pay him a penny until she had a penny to pay, she would do her best to earn some. Now nothing was left. And she had already made up her mind to be off at once to a farm along the sea-cliffs, where she would be almost sure to get work. If the dwarf would wait but one day, she told him, she would ask the farmer to pay her her wages before she came home again. 'Then I *could* give you the penny,' she said.

Old Moleskins continued to blink at her. 'Well,' he said, 'be off then now. And be back before sunset.'

But first Griselda made her grandmother a bowl of water-porridge, using up for it the last pinch of meal she had in the house. This she carried up to the old woman, with a sprig of apple blossom in a gallipot to put beside it and make it taste better. Since she had so promised him, and felt sure he meant no harm, she said nothing to her grandmother about the dwarf. She tidied the room, tucked in the bedclothes, gave the old woman some water to wash in, beat up her pillow, pinned a shawl over her shoulders, and, having made her as comfortable as she could manage, left her to herself, promising to be home again as soon as she could.

'And be sure, Grannie,' she said, 'whatever happens, not to stir from your bed.'

By good fortune, the farmer's wife whom she went off to see along the sea-cliffs was making butter that morning. The farmer knew Griselda well, and when she had finished helping his wife and the dairymaid with the churning, he not only paid her two pennies for her pains, but a third, 'For the sake', as he said, 'of your goldilocks, my dear; and *they're* worth a king's ransom!... What say you, Si?' he called to his son, who had just come in with the calves. Simon, his face all red, and he was a good deal uglier (though pleasant in face) than his father, glanced up at Griselda, but the gold must have dazzled his eyes, for he turned away and said nothing.

At this moment the farmer's wife came bustling out into the yard again. She had brought Griselda not only a pitcher of

new milk and a couple of hen's eggs to take to her grandmother, but some lardy-cakes and a jar of honey for herself. So Griselda, feeling ten times happier than she had been for many a long day, hurried off home.

Now there was a duck-pond under a willow on the way she took home, and there, remembering what the farmer had said, she paused, stooped over, and looked at herself in the muddy water. But the sky was of the brightest blue above her head; and there were so many smooth oily ripples on the surface of the water made by the ducks as they swam and preened and gossiped together that Griselda couldn't see herself clearly, or be sure from its reflection even if her hair was still gold! She got up, laughed to herself, waved her hand to the ducks and hastened on.

When, carrying her pitcher, she had come in under the high snapdragon-tufted gateway of the Castle, and so home again, a marvel it was to see. The kitchen was as neat as a new pin. The table had been scoured; the fire-irons twinkled like silver; the crockery on the dresser looked as if it had been newly painted; a brown jar of wallflowers bloomed sweet on the sill, and even the brass pendulum of the cuckoo-clock, that hadn't ticked for years, shone round as the sun at noonday, and was swinging away as if it meant to catch up before nightfall all the time it had ever lost.

Beside the hearth, too, lay a pile of broken driftwood, a fire was merrily dancing in the grate, there was a fish cooking in the pan in the brick oven, the old iron kettle hung singing from its hook; and a great saucepan, brimful of peeled potatoes, sat in the hearth beneath it to keep it company. And not only this, for there lay on the table a dish of fresh-pulled salad—lettuces, radishes, and young sorrel and dandelion leaves. But of Old Moleskins, not a sign.

Griselda herself was a good housewife, but in all her days she had never seen the kitchen look like this. It was as fresh as a daisy. And Griselda began to sing—to keep the kettle company. Having made a custard out of one of the eggs and the milk she had brought home with her, she climbed upstairs again to see her grandmother.

'Well, Grannie,' she said, 'how are you now? I've been away and come back. I haven't wasted a moment; but you must be nearly starving.'

The old woman told her she had spent the morning between dozing and dreaming and looking from her bed out of the window at the sea. This she could do because immediately opposite her window was the broken opening of what had once been a window in the walls of the Castle. It was a kind of spy-hole into the world for the old woman.

'And what else were you going to tell me, Grannie?' said Griselda.

The old woman spied about her from her pillow as if she were afraid she might be overheard. Then she warned Griselda that next time she went out she must make sure to latch the door. Some strange animal must have been prowling about in the house, she said. She had heard it not only under her open window, but even stirring about in the room below. 'Though I must say', she added, 'I had to listen pretty hard!'

Griselda glanced up out of the lattice window and, since her head was a good deal higher than her grandmother's pillow, she could see down into the green courtyard below. And there stood Old Moleskins, looking up at her.

An hour or two afterwards, when the sun was dipping behind the green hills beyond the village, and Griselda sat alone, beside the fire, her sewing in her lap, she heard shuffling footsteps on the cobbles outside, and the dwarf appeared at the window. Griselda thanked him with all her heart for what he had done for her, and took out of her grandmother's old leather purse one of the three pennies she had earned at the farm.

The dwarf eyed it greedily, then, pointing with his thumb at an old pewter pot that stood on the chimneyshef, told Griselda to put the penny in it and to keep it safe for him until he asked for it.

'Nine days,' he said, 'I will work for you—three and three and three—and no more, for the same wages. And then you must pay me all you owe me. And I will come every evening to see it into the pot.'

So Griselda tiptoed on the kitchen fender, put the penny in the pot, and shut down the lid. When she turned round again Old Moleskins was gone.

Before she went to bed that night, she peeped out of the door. There was no colour left in the sky except the dark blue of

night; but a slip of moon, as thin as an egg-shell, hung in the west above the hill, and would soon be following the sun beyond it. Griselda solemnly bowed to the moon seven times, and shook the old purse in her pocket.

When she came down the next morning, the kitchen had been swept, a fire was dancing up the chimney, her mug and plate and spoon had been laid on the table, and a smoking bowl of milk-porridge was warming itself on the hearth. When Griselda took the porridge up to her grandmother, the old woman's eyes nearly popped out of her head, for Griselda had been but a minute gone. She took a sup of the porridge, smacked her lips, tasted it again, and asked Griselda what she had put in it to flavour it. It was a taste she had never tasted before. And Griselda told the old woman it was a secret.

That day the farmer gave Griselda some old gold-brown Cochin-China hens to pluck for market. 'They've seen better days, but will do for the pot,' he said. And having heard that her grandmother was better, he kept her working for him till late in the afternoon. So Griselda plucked and singed busily on, grieved for the old hens, but happy to think of her wages. Then once more the farmer paid her her twopence; and, once more, a penny over; this time not for the sake of her bright gold hair, but for her 'glass-grey eyes'. So now there was fivepence in her purse, and as yet there had been no need, beyond last night's penny for the dwarf, to spend any of them.

When Griselda came home, not only was everything in the kitchen polished up brighter than ever, but a pot of broth was simmering on the hob, which, to judge by the savour of it, contained not only carrots and onions and pot-herbs but a young rabbit. Besides which, a strip of the garden had been freshly dug; three rows of brisk young cabbages had been planted, and, as Griselda guessed, two more each of broad beans and peas. Whatever the dwarf had set his hand to was a job well done.

Sharp to his time—the sun had but that very moment dipped beneath the hills—he came to the kitchen door for his wages. Griselda smiled at him, thanked him, and took out a penny. He gazed at it earnestly; then at her. And he said, 'Put that in the pot, too.' So now there were two pennies in his pewter pot and four pennies in Griselda's purse.

And so the days went by. Her grandmother grew steadily better, and on the next Sunday—muffled up in a shawl like an old tortoiseshell cat—she sat up a little while beside her window. On most mornings Griselda had gone out to work at the farm or in the village; on one or two she had stayed in the house and sat with her grandmother to finish her sewing and mending or any other work she had found to do.

While she was in the cottage she never saw the dwarf, though he might be hidden away in the garden. But still her grandmother talked of the strange stirrings and noises she heard when Griselda was away. 'You'd have thought', the old woman said, 'there was a whole litter of young pigs in the kitchen, and the old sow, too!'

On the eighth day, the farmer not only gave Griselda her tuppence for her wages and another for the sake of 'the dimple in her cheek', but the third penny had a hole in it. 'And that's for luck,' said the farmer. She went home rejoicing. And seeing no reason why she shouldn't share her luck with the dwarf, she put the penny with the hole in it into the pewter pot when he came that evening. And as usual he said not a word. He merely watched Griselda's face with his colourless eyes while she thanked him for what he had done, and then watched her put his penny into the pot. Then in an instant he was gone.

'That maid Griselda, from the Castle yonder,' said the farmer to his wife that night as, candlestick in hand, the two of them were going up to bed, 'she seems to me as willing as she's neat and pretty. And if she takes as good care of the pence as she seems to, my dear, there's never a doubt, I warrant, but as she will take as good care of the pounds!'

And he was right. Griselda had taken such good care of the pence that at this very moment she was sitting alone in the kitchen in the light of her solitary candle and slowly putting down on paper every penny that she had been paid and every penny that she had spent:

Accounts

received		Spent	
from Farmer for wages	10	oatmeel	2
prezants	5	bones for soop	2
wages for Missus Jakes	2	shuger	2
wages for piggs	1	hair ribon	1

—	wole	1
18	doll	1
	money for Moalskins	8
		—
		17

The doll had been a present for the cowman's little daughter. And though Griselda had made many mistakes before she got her sum right, it was right *now*; and here was the penny over in her purse to prove it.

The next evening, a little before sunset, Griselda sat waiting for the dwarf to come. Never had she felt so happy and lighthearted. It was the last of his nine days; she had all his nine pennies ready for him—one in her purse and eight in the pewter pot; the farmer had promised her as much work as she could manage; her old grandmother was nearly well again; the cupboard was no longer bare, and she was thankful beyond all words. It seemed as if her body could not possibly contain her happiness.

The trees stood in the last sunshine of evening as though they had borrowed their green coats from Paradise; the paths were weeded; the stones had a fresh coat of whitewash; there was not a patch of soil without its plants or seedlings. From every clump of ivy on the old walls of the Castle a thrush seemed to be singing; and every one of them seemed to be singing louder than the rest.

Her sewing idle in her lap, Griselda sat on the doorstep, drinking everything in with her clear grey eyes, and at the same time she was thinking too. Not only of Moleskins and of all he had done for her, but of the farmer's son also, who had come part of the way home with her the evening before. And then she began to day-dream.

But it seemed her spirit had been but a moment gone out of her body into this far-away when the tiny sound of stone knocking on stone recalled her to herself again, and there—in the very last beam of the setting sun—stood the dwarf on the cobbles of the garden path. He told Griselda that his nine days' work for her was done, and that he had come for his wages.

Griselda beckoned him into the kitchen, and there she whispered her thanks again and again for all his help and kindness. She took her last penny out of her purse and put it on the table, then tiptoeing, reached up to the chimney-shelf and lifted down the pewter pot. Even as she did so, her heart turned cold inside her. Not the faintest jingle sounded when she shook it. It seemed light as a feather. With trembling fingers she managed at last to lift the lid and look in. 'Oh!' she whispered. 'Someone...' A dark cloud came over her eyes. The pot was empty.

The dwarf stood in the doorway, his eager cold bright eyes fixed on her face. 'Well,' he croaked. 'Where is my money? Why am I to be kept waiting, young woman? Answer me that!'

Griselda could only stare back at him, the empty pot in her hand. His eyebrows began to jerk up and down as if with rage, like an orang-outang's. 'So it's gone, eh? My pennies are all gone, eh? So you have cheated me! Eh? Eh? *Cheated* me?'

Nothing Griselda could say was of any avail. He refused to listen to her. The more she entreated him only to have patience and she would pay him all she owed him, the more sourly and angrily he stormed at her. And to see the tears rolling down her cheeks on either side of her small nose only worsened his rage.

'I will give you one more day,' he bawled at last. 'One! I will come back to-morrow at sunset, and every single penny must be ready for me. What I do, I can undo! What I make, I can break! Hai, hai! we shall see!' With that he stumped out into the garden and was gone.

Griselda was so miserable and her mind was in such a whirl that she could do nothing for a while but sit, cold and vacant, staring out of the open door. Where could the pennies have gone to? Mice don't eat pennies. Had she been walking in her sleep? Who could have stolen them? And how was she to earn as many more in only one day's work?

And while she sat brooding, there came a *thump, thump, thump* on the floor over her head. She sprang to her feet, lit a candle by the fire-flames, dabbed her eyes in the bucket of cold water that Old Moleskins had brought in from the well, and took up her grandmother's supper.

'Did you hear any noises in the house to-day, Grannie?' she asked cautiously as she put the bowl of broth into her skinny old hands. At this question the old woman, who was very hungry, fell into a temper. Every single evening, she told Griselda, she had warned her that some strange animal had come rummaging into the house below when she was away working at the farm. 'You never kept watch, you never even answered me,' she said. 'And now it's too late. To-day I have heard nothing.'

It was all but dark when, having made the old woman comfortable for the night, Griselda hastened down into the kitchen again. She could not bear to wait until morning. She had made up her mind what to do. Leaving her grandmother drowsy after her broth and nodding off to sleep, she stole out of the house and shut the door gently behind her. Groping her way under the ivied walls into the open she hastened on in the quiet moonlight, climbing as swiftly as she could the steep grassy slope at the cliff's edge. An owl called. From far below she could hear the tide softly gushing on the stones of the beach; and over the sea the sky was alive with stars.

A light was still glimmering at an upper window when she reached the farm. She watched it a while and the shadows moving to and fro across the blind, and at last timidly lifted the knocker and knocked on the door. The farmer himself answered her knock. A candlestick in his hand, he stood there in his shirt sleeves looking out at her over his candle, astonished to find so late a visitor standing there in the starlight, muffled up in a shawl. But he spoke kindly to her. And then and there Griselda poured out her story, though she said not a word about the dwarf.

She told the farmer that she was in great trouble; that, though she couldn't give him any reasons, she must have eight pennies by the next evening. And if only he would lend her them and trust her, she promised him faithfully she would work for just as long as he wanted her to in exchange.

'Well,' said the farmer. 'That's a queer tale, *that* is! But why not work for four days, and I'll give 'ee the eightpence then.' But Griselda shook her head. She told him that this was impossible; that she could not wait, not even for one day.

'See here, then,' said the farmer, smiling to himself, though not openly, for he was curious to know what use she was going to make of the money. 'I can't give you any work to-morrow, nor be sure of the next day. But supposing there's none for a whole week, if you promise to cut off that gold hair of yours and give me that *then*, you shall have the eight pennies now—this very moment—and no questions asked.'

Griselda stood quite still in the doorway, her face pale and grave in the light of the farmer's candle. It seemed that every separate hair she had was stirring upon her head. This all came, she thought, of admiring herself in the duck-pond; and not being more careful with her money; and doing what the dwarf told her to do and not what she thought best. But as it seemed that at any moment the farmer might run in and fetch a pair of shears to cut off her hair there and then, she made her promise; and he himself went back laughing to his wife, and told her what had happened. 'She turned as white as a sheet,' he said. 'And what I'd dearly like to know is what's worriting the poor dear. She's as gentle as the day is long, and her word's as good as her bond. Well, well! But I'll see to it. And we'll have just one lock of that hair, my dear, if only for a keepsake.'

'It looks to *me*', said the farmer's wife, '*that*'ll be for our Simon to say.'

When Griselda reached home again—and a sad and solitary walk it had been through the dewy fields above the sea—she went to an old wooden coffer in which she kept her few 'treasures'. Many of them were remembrances of her mother. And she took out a net for the hair that her mother herself had worn when she was a girl of about the same age as Griselda. Then she sat down in front of a little bare square of looking-glass, braided her hair as close as she could to her head, and drew the net tightly over it. Then she put her purse with the nine pennies in it under her pillow, said her prayers, and got into bed.

For hours she lay listening to the breakers on the shore, solemnly drumming the night away, and watched her own particular star as moment by moment it sparkled on from diamond pane to pane across her lattice window. But when at last she fell asleep, her dreams were scarcely less sorrowful than her waking.

She stayed at home the next day in case the dwarf should come early, but not until sunset did she hear the furtive clatter of his shoes as usual on the stones. She took out her purse to pay him his pennies. He asked her where they had come

from. 'And why', said he, 'have you braided your hair so close and caged it up in a net? Are you frightened the birds will be after it?'

Griselda laughed at this in spite of herself. And she told him that she had promised her hair to a friend, and that she had wound it up tight to her head in order to remind herself that it was not her own any longer, and to keep it safe. At this Old Moleskins himself burst out laughing under the green-berried gooseberry bush—for Griselda had taken him out into the garden lest her grandmother should hear them talking.

'A pretty bargain that was!' he said. 'But *I* know one even better!' And he promised Griselda that if she would let him snip off but one small lock of her hair he would transport her into the grottoes of the Urchin People under the sea. 'And *there*,' he said, 'if you will work for us for only one hour a day for seven days, you shall have seven times the weight of all your hair in fine solid gold. If, after that, I mean,' and he eyed her craftily, 'you will promise to come back and stay with us always. And then you shall have a basket of fruit from our secret orchards.'

Griselda looked at the dwarf, and then at the small green ripening gooseberries on the bush, and then stared a while in silence at the daisies on the ground. Then she told the dwarf she could not give him a lock of her hair because that was all promised. Instead, she would work for him every day for nine days, free. It was the least she could do, she thought, in return for what he had done for her.

'Well then,' said Moleskins, 'if it can't be hair it must be an eyelash. Else you will never see the grottoes. An eyelash for your journey-money!'

To this she agreed, and knelt down beside the gooseberry bush, shutting her eyes tight so that he might more easily pluck out one of the lashes that fringed their lids. She felt his stumpy earthy fingers brush across them, and nothing beside.

But when she opened them, and looked out of her body, a change had come upon the scene around her—garden, cottage, castle walls and ruined turrets, cliffs, sea and caves—all had vanished. No evening ray of sun shone here, not the faintest sea-breeze stirred the air. It was a place utterly still, and lay bathed in a half-light pale and green, rilling in from she knew not where. And around her, and above her head, faint colours shimmered in the quarried quartz of the grottoes. And the only sound to be heard was a distant sighing, as of the tide.

There were many trees here, too, in the orchards of the Urchin People, their slim stems rooted in sands as fine and white as hoarfrost. And their branches were laden with fruits of as many colours as there are precious stones. And there was a charm of birds singing, though Griselda could see none. The very air seemed thin and fine in this dim and sea-green light: the only other sound to be heard was a faint babbling of water among the rocks, water which lost itself in the sands of the orchard.

The dwarf had brought out some little rush baskets, and told Griselda what she must do. 'Gather up the fallen fruit,' he said, 'but pick none from the branches, and sort it out each according to its kind and colour, one colour into each of the baskets. But be sure not to climb into the trees or shake them. And when your hour is finished I will come again.'

Griselda at once set to work. Though the branches overhead were thick with fruit, there were as yet not many that had fallen, and it seemed at first it would take her but a few moments to sort them out into their baskets. But the thin air and twilight of the grotto made her drowsy, and as she stooped again and yet again to pick up the fruit, her eyelids drooped so heavily that at any moment she feared she would fall asleep. And if once she fell asleep what might not happen then? Would she ever win back to earth again? Was this all nothing but a dream? She refreshed her eyes in the trickle of snow-cold water rilling down from the rocks; and now she fancied she heard a faint metallic noise as of knocking and hammering and small voices in the distance. But even when all the fallen fruits had been sorted out into her baskets, emerald-green, orange, amethyst, crystal and blue, her work was not done. For the moment she sat down to rest, yet another of the fruits would plump down softly as an apple into deep grass upon the sand beneath it, and she had to hasten away to put it into its basket.

When the dwarf came back he looked about him to see that no fruits had been left lying in the sand. He squinted here, he squinted there, and even turned over the fruits in the baskets to see that they had been sorted right. 'Well, Griselda,' he said at last, and it was the first time he had used her name, 'what's well done is done for good. And here's the penny for

your wages.'

There was a stealthy gleam in his eyes as he softly fumbled with his fingers in the old moleskin pouch that hung at his side, and fetched out his penny. Griselda held out her hand, and he put the penny into its palm, still watching her. She looked at it—and looked again. It was an old, thick, battered penny, and the king's image on it had been worn very faint. It had a slightly crooked edge, too, and there was a hole in it. There could be no doubt of it—this was the penny the farmer had given her, 'for luck'. Until now Griselda had not realized that she had for a moment suspected it might be Old Moleskins himself who had stolen his pennies out of the pewter pot. Now she was sure of it. She continued to stare at the penny, yet said nothing. After all, she was thinking to herself, the money in the pot belonged to him. He had a right to it. You cannot steal what is yours already! But then, a lie is almost as bad as stealing. Perhaps he hadn't meant it to be a lie. Perhaps he merely wanted to see what she might say and do. That would still be a lie but not such a wicked lie. Perhaps since he wasn't *quite* human he couldn't in any case tell *quite* a lie. Perhaps it was only a dwarf lie, though his kindness to her had certainly not been only dwarf kindness! She smiled to herself at this; lifted up her face again, and seeing the dwarf still watching her, smiled at him also. And she thanked him.

At this he burst out laughing, till the roof and walls of the grotto echoed with the cackle of it, and at least half a dozen of the grotto fruits dropped from their twigs and thumped softly down into the sand. 'Aha,' he cried, 'what did I tell you? Weep no more, Griselda. That is one penny, and here are the others.' He took them out of his pouch, and counted them into her hand, and the eight pennies too that she had given him but a little while before; and as he did so, he sang out in a high quavering voice like a child's:

*'Never whatever the humans say
Have the Urchin Folk worked for any man's pay.'*

Ah, Griselda,' he said, 'if we could keep you, you would scarcely ever have to work at all. No churning and weeding, no sewing and scrubbing, no cooking or polishing, sighing or sobbing; you should be for ever happy and for ever young. And you wouldn't have to scissor off a single snippet of your silk-soft hair!'

Griselda looked at him in the still green light and faintly shook her head. But she made a bargain with him none the less that every year she would work in the grottoes for the Urchin People—if he would come to fetch her—for one whole summer's day. So this was the bargain between them.

And he took out of his breeches' pocket a thick gold piece, about the size of an English crown-piece, and put it into her hand. On the one side of it the image of a mermaid was stamped, on the other a little fruit tree growing out of a mound of sand and knobbed with tiny fruits. 'That's for a keepsake,' he said. And he himself took one of each kind of the orchard fruits out of their baskets and put them into another. 'And since "no pay" is *no* pay,' he went on, 'stoop, Griselda, and I'll give you your eyelash back again.'

Griselda knelt down in the sand, and once more the earthy fingers brushed over her eyelids. The next instant all was dark; and a thin chill wind was stirring on her cheek. She opened her eyes to find herself alone again under the night-sky, and—as though she had been overtaken by the strangeness of a dream—kneeling on the dew-damped mould of her familiar garden under the stars. But for proof that what had happened was no dream, the gold piece stamped with the images of the mermaid and the leafy tree was still clasped in her hand, and in the other was the basket of fruits.

As for the eyelash, since Griselda had never counted how many she had before Old Moleskins plucked one out, she could never tell for certain if it had been put back. But when she told Simon, the farmer's son, that there might be one missing—and she could tell him no more because of her promise to the dwarf—he counted them over again and again. And though he failed to make the total come to the same number twice, he assured Griselda that there couldn't possibly ever have been room for another. And Griselda gave him the green one of the grotto fruits she had brought him for a present from out of the dwarf's basket. This too was for a keepsake. 'It's as hard as a stone,' he said. 'Do we eat it, Griselda?' But hard though it was, there must have been a curious magic in it, for as they sat there together under the willow tree by the duck-pond, it was as if they had been transported not into the grottoes of the Urchin People under the sea, but clean back into the Garden of Eden.

As for Griselda's hair, there it shone as thick as ever on her head. And as for the farmer, he refused every single penny of

the eightpence.

'It's a queer thing to me, mother,' he was saying to his wife at this very moment, as they sat together on either side of the kitchen fire—just as they were accustomed to sit even in the height of summertime—'it's a queer thing to me that this very farm of ours once belonged to that young woman's great-great-grandfather!' He took a long whiff of his pipe. 'And what *I* says is that them who once had, when they gets again, should know how to *keep*.'

'Ay, George,' said she, and she said no more.

[End of *A Penny a Day* by Walter de la Mare]