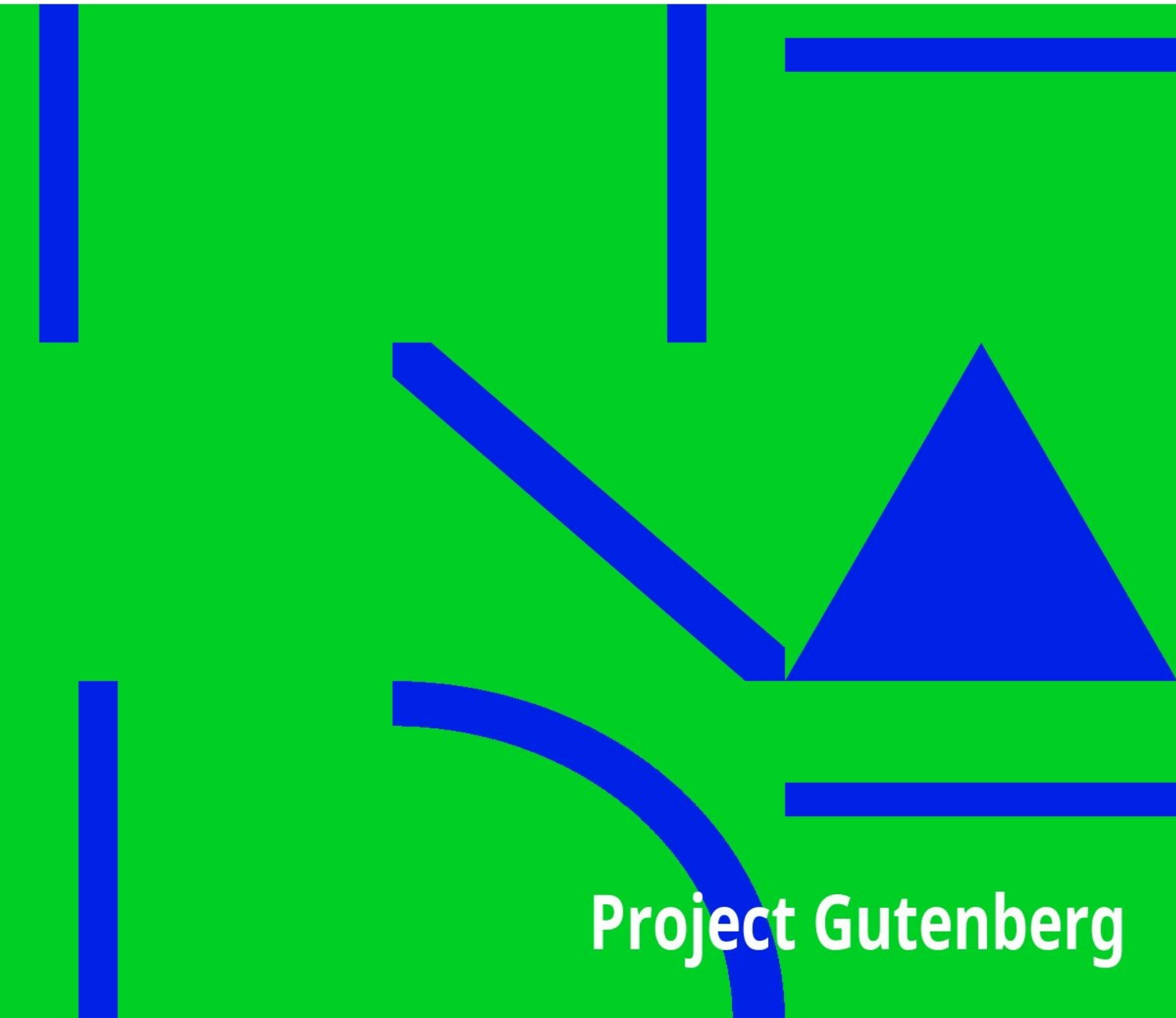
The Magic Nuts

Mrs. Molesworth



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THE MAGIC NUTS

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BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH

AUTHOR OF 'CARROTS,' 'CUCKOO CLOCK,' 'TELL ME A STORY,' ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY ROSIE M. M. PITMAN

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In childhood, when with eager eyes
I viewed,
The season-measured years
All garbed in fairy guise.

NEWMAN.

I DEDICATE THIS LITTLE STORY

TO MY GRAND-DAUGHTER

VIOLET SARA MOLESWORTH

19 SUMNER PLACE, S.W.,
February 1898.

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CHAPTER I

NIGHT AND MORNING

The way was long.

Lay of the Last Minstrel.

Little Leonore pressed her face against the window of the railway carriage and tried hard to see out. But it was no use. It all looked so dark and black, all the darker and blacker for the glimmer of the rain-drops trickling down thickly outside, and reflecting the feeble light of the lamp in the roof of the compartment.

Leonore sighed deeply. She was very tired, more tired than she knew, for she did not feel sleepy, or as if she would give anything to be undressed and go to bed. On the contrary, she wished with all her heart that it was daylight, and that it would leave off raining, and that she could get out of the stuffy old railway train, and go for a good run. It had been raining for *so* long, and they had been such a lot of hours shut in and bum-bumming along in this dreary way—it even seemed to her now and then as if she had *always* been sitting in her corner like this, and that it had *always* been night and *always* raining outside.

'I don't believe I'm going to be happy at all at Alten,' she said to herself. 'I'm sure it's going to be horrid. It's always the way if people tell you anything's going to be lovely and nice, it's sure to be dull, and—just horrid.'

She glanced at the other end of the railway carriage where a lady, comfortably muffled up in the corner, was sleeping peacefully. She was not an old lady, but she was not young. To Leonore she seemed past counting her age, for she never appeared to get older, and during the six or seven years she had been the little girl's governess she had not changed at all.

'I wish I could go to sleep like Fraulein,' was the next thought that came into her busy brain. 'When she wakes she'll think I have been asleep, for she did tuck me up nicely. And I'm feeling as cross as cross.'

Then her eyes fell on the little cushion and the railway rug that she had thrown on to the floor—should she try to settle herself again and *perhaps* manage to go to sleep? It would be so nice to wake up and find they had got there, and *surely* it could not be very much farther. Fraulein had said ten o'clock, had she not? Leonore remembered sitting up one night till ten o'clock—more than a year ago—when her father was expected to arrive, and Fraulein was sure he would like to find her awake to welcome him. It hadn't seemed half so late that night as it did now—would ten o'clock *never* come?

She stooped down and pulled up the rug, and tried to prop the cushion against the back of the seat for her head. It was not very easy to manage, but Leonore was not a selfish child; it never occurred to her to disturb her governess for the sake of her own comfort, though Fraulein would not have been the least vexed with her had she done so.

Just as she had made up her mind that she would try to go to sleep, she felt a slight change in the motion of the train—the bum and rattle, rattle and bum, grew fainter—was it only her fancy, or could it, oh! could it be that they were slackening speed? If so, it could only mean arriving at Alten, for her governess had distinctly told her they would not stop again till they had reached their journey's end.

'Sleep, my dear,' she had said, 'sleep well till I wake you, and then we shall be *there*. There will be no other stopping anywhere to disturb you.'

Leonore held her breath in anxiety—yes, it was no fancy—they *were* moving more and more slowly, and through the darkness lights, which were not the glimmer of the rain-drops, began to appear. Then at last there was a pull-up.

'Fraulein, Fraulein,' cried Leonore, in great excitement, 'wake up, quick. We're *there*—do you hear? The train has stopped.'

Poor Fraulein had started up at the first words, but Leonore was too eager to leave off talking all at once, and in another moment the governess's head was out of the window, calling to a porter, for there was not too much time to spare, as the train had to start off again, not having finished *its* journey, though some of its passengers had done so. And almost before our little girl had quite taken in that the dreary rattle and bum in the darkness were over, she found herself on the platform, her own little travelling-bag and warm cloak in her grasp, while Fraulein, who insisted on loading herself as much as the porter, was chattering away to him in the cheeriest and liveliest of voices, far too fast for Leonore to understand much of what she said, as if she had never been asleep in her life.

'I suppose she's very pleased to be in her own country,' thought Leonore. 'I wish it wasn't night, so that I could see what it all looks like,' and she gazed about her eagerly, as she followed Fraulein and the porter out of the station.

Something, after all, *was* to be seen. The rain was clearing off; overhead it was almost dry, though very wet and puddly underfoot. In front of the station was a wide open space, with trees surrounding it, except where a broad road, at the end of which lamps showed some carriages waiting, led away to somewhere, though no streets or even houses were to be seen. The air felt fresh and pleasant, and Leonore's spirits began to rise.

'It feels like the country,' she said to herself; 'I wonder where the town is.'

But Fraulein was still too busy talking to the porter and to two or three other men who had somehow sprung up, to be asked any questions just yet. One of the men had a band round his cap with some words stamped on it in gilt letters. Leonore could only make out one word, 'Hotel ——,' and then he turned away, and she could not see the others.

By this time her governess was picking up her skirts in preparation for crossing the wet space before them.

'He says we had better step over to where the carriages are standing,' she explained to the little girl; 'it will be quicker'; and when, a moment later, the two found themselves alone, with plenty of room, in the comfortable omnibus, she lent back with a sigh of satisfaction.

'It is so pleasant to be in a land where things are well managed,' she said. 'We do not need to wait for our big luggage. I give the paper to the hotel porter, he sees to it all for us.'

'Yes,' said Leonore, though without paying much attention; the care of the luggage did not trouble her; 'but do tell me, Fraulein, dear, where is the hotel? Where are the streets and—and—everything? It seems like the country, and oh, aren't you glad to be out of the train? I thought we should never get here, and it was so dark and raining so hard, and I *couldn't* go to sleep.'

'Poor dear,' said tender-hearted Fraulein, 'and I who slept comfortably for so long. Had I known you were awake I would have kept awake also.'

'Never mind now,' said Leonore amiably; 'but tell me where we are going.'

'The station is half a mile or so out of the town,' explained the governess. 'See now, the houses are appearing. We cross the bridge—by daylight it is beautiful,

such a view down the river.'

But Leonore did not care very much about beautiful views—not just now especially.

'I wish it wasn't so far to the town,' she said wearily, though almost as she said the words her tone changed. 'Oh now,' she exclaimed brightly, 'we are really getting into the streets. How queer everything looks—do you think the people are all in bed, Fraulein?'

It was a natural question, for as they drove through the wide dark streets, faintly lighted by an occasional lamp, there was nothing to be seen but closed shutters and barred doors. The houses, for the most part, looked large, particularly as regarded the entrance, for many of these led into courtyards, with great double gates.

Fraulein nodded her head.

'They are all in their houses,' she said, 'though perhaps not all in bed yet, for it is not really so very late. In Alten we keep to the good old ways, you see, my dear —"early to bed and early to rise," as your rhyme says.'

'It's very dull-looking,' said Leonore discontentedly. 'It seems like a lot of prisons, and—oh——'

She broke off suddenly, for they were stopping at last, or at least preparing to stop, as they turned in through a large doorway standing open to admit them into a courtyard, paved with cobble stones, and dimly lighted like the streets by an old-fashioned lamp or lantern at one side.

There was more light at the other side, however, where a short flight of steps led into the hotel, and here they pulled up, to be received by a funny little man in black, with a large expanse of shirt-front, and by what looked to Leonore's half-dazzled eyes like a whole troop of waiters, also in black, fluttering about him, though in reality there were only three—all the party bowing in the most polite way, and almost tumbling over each other in their eagerness to help the ladies to alight.

This sort of thing was quite to Leonore's taste, and for the moment all feeling of dullness or tiredness left her. She bent her head graciously to the little fat man, who was really the landlord, and allowed one of the others to take her cloak and bag. Fraulein seemed more than ever in her element. Yes; rooms were ready for the ladies—two bedrooms opening into each other—would they have supper upstairs, or (and as he spoke the polite little man threw open a door they were

passing) in here? 'Here' being the large dining-room. They would be quite undisturbed.

'Oh, in here, Fraulein, do say in here,' said Leonore, 'I don't like eating in bedrooms; it makes me feel as if I had the measles or something. And, I'm not sure, but I think I'm rather hungry, so mayn't we have supper at once?'

Fraulein was quite willing, and supper, in the shape of chocolate and an omelette, would be ready immediately. So the two settled themselves at one end of the long narrow table, and Leonore's eyes set to work to see what they could see by the light of the two not very bright lamps.

'What a funny old man,' she exclaimed. 'Look, Fraulein, the walls are all dark wood like a church, and the ceiling has white carvings on it, and the floor is red and black squares like the kitchen at Aunt Isabella's. And it isn't like a hotel, is it? Not like the one at Paris, where there was such a bustle. I don't believe there's anybody staying here except you and me.'

'Oh yes, there are probably other people,' said Fraulein, 'but it is long past proper supper-time, you see, my dear. It is very polite of the landlord to have received us himself, and to have all the waiters in attendance.'

And by the way Fraulein leant back in her chair Leonore saw that she was in a state of great satisfaction with everything, and exceedingly delighted to find herself again in her own country.

Upstairs, where they soon made their way, guided by two, if not three, of the attentive waiters, the house seemed even queerer and older than down below. Leonore was now getting too sleepy to notice anything very clearly, but the dark wainscotted walls, the long passages and funny little staircases, struck her as very mysterious and interesting, and she said to herself that she would have a good exploring the next day.

The bedrooms prepared for them looked large and imposing, partly perhaps because the candles left the corners in darkness. The beds were small and cosy, with their white eider-down quilts, and very comfortable too, as the tired little girl stretched herself out with a sigh of relief and content, to fall asleep long before Fraulein had completed her unpackings and arrangements.

If Leonore had any dreams that night she did not know it, for the sun had been up some hours before she awoke, though it was already late autumn. She did not feel at all ashamed of her laziness however, and considering everything I do not see that she had any reason to feel so. And she gave a cry of welcome and

pleasure as she caught sight of the merry little rays of sunshine creeping over the white bed as if to wish her a kindly good morning.

'Oh I *am* glad it is a fine day,' she thought to herself, 'and I am so glad we are not going in that horrid old train again.'

She lay still and looked about her. Yes, it was a curiously old-fashioned room; even a child could see at once that the house must be very, very old.

'I wonder if many little girls have slept here and waked up in the morning, and looked at the funny walls and queer-shaped ceiling just like I'm doing,' she thought to herself. 'Some of them must be quite old women by now, and perhaps even, lots who have been dead for hundreds of years have lived here. How queer it is to think of! I wonder if Fraulein is awake, and I do hope we shall have breakfast soon. I'm so hungry.'

The sound of a tap seemed to come as an answer to these questions and hopes, and as Fraulein put her head in at one door, a maid carrying a bath and a large can of hot water appeared at the other. She was a pleasant-faced girl with rosy cheeks, and as she passed the bed she wished the young lady good morning with a smile.

'You are awake, my child?' said the governess. 'That is right. You have slept well? Call me as soon as you want me to help you to do your hair, and then we shall have our breakfast. You would rather have it downstairs, I suppose?'

'Oh yes,' said Leonore decidedly. 'I am quite rested, Fraulein, and I want dreadfully to go downstairs and see this funny old place by daylight, and I want to look out of the window to see if the streets look nice, and—and——'

'Well, get dressed first, my dear,' said her governess, pleased to find the little girl in such a cheerful frame of mind. 'It is just a trifle cold, though it will probably be warmer as the day goes on, thanks to this bright sunshine. You have had rainy weather lately, I suppose?' she went on, turning to the maid-servant.

The girl held up her hands.

'Rain,' she repeated, 'yes, indeed, I should rather think so—rain, rain, rain, for ever so many days. The ladies have brought us the sunshine.'

So it seemed, for when they made their way downstairs, Leonore scarcely knew the dining-room again, it looked so bright and cheerful in comparison with the night before. Their coffee and rolls had not yet made their appearance, so the little girl flew to the window to see what she could through the muslin blinds.

For the window opened straight out on to the pavement, so that any inquisitive passer-by could peep in, which made the blinds quite necessary, as, though it is very pleasant to look out, it is not equally so to feel that strangers can look in when one is sitting at table.

Leonore pulled a tiny corner of the blind aside.

'Oh, Fraulein,' she exclaimed, 'it is such a nice street. And there are lots of people passing, and shops a little way off, and I see the top of a big old church quite near, and—and—a sort of open square place up that short street—do you see?' Fraulein having joined her by this time.

'That is the market-place,' said her governess, 'and I rather think—yes, I am sure it is market-day to-day.'

Leonore danced about in excitement.

'Oh, *please* take me to see it,' she said. 'I have never seen a proper market, and perhaps the people would have funny dresses—costumes like what you were telling me about. Do you think we should see any of them?'

'I hope so,' said Fraulein, 'we must go out as soon as we have had breakfast and see. I have to ask about a carriage to take us to Dorf. I almost wish——'

'What?' asked Leonore.

'That we could stay till to-morrow, if Alten amuses you so—indeed, I do not see why we need hurry. My aunt is not quite certain what day we are coming, and she is *quite* certain to be ready for us whenever we arrive. Indeed, I have no doubt she has had our rooms prepared for weeks past, so good and careful a housewife is she. Our beds will have been aired every day, I daresay.'

But Leonore was scarcely old enough to care whether the beds were aired or not. For the moment her whole thoughts were running on having a good exploring of the quaint town which had so taken her fancy, and while she drank her coffee and munched the nice crisp rolls, which tasted better than any bread she had ever eaten before, she kept urging her governess to stay another day where they were.

'You see,' she said, 'I'm so used to the country, and we shall be there all the winter, and I daresay it *will* be rather dull.'

'I hope not,' said Fraulein, somewhat anxiously. 'I shall do my best, you know, my child, to make you happy, and so will my good aunt, I am sure.'

'Oh yes, I know you are always very kind,' said Leonore, with a funny little tone

of condescension which she sometimes used to her governess. 'But, you see, it *must* be dull when anybody has no brothers and sisters, and no mamma—and papa so far away.'

She gave a little sigh. She rather liked to pity herself now and then, and it made Fraulein all the kinder, but in reality she was not in some ways so much to be pitied as might have seemed. For she could not remember her mother, and she had been accustomed all her life to her father's being as a rule away from her, though when he *was* in England he spent most of his time in planning pleasures for his little daughter. Then she had had plenty of kind aunts and uncles, and, above all, the constant care of her devoted Fraulein.

But Fraulein's heart was *very* tender. She kissed Leonore fondly, and as soon as breakfast was over, out they sallied, after settling that they should stay at Alten another night, to please the little lady.

CHAPTER II

APPLES AND NUTS

I love old women best, I think;
She knows a friend in me.—ASHE.

It *was* market-day, to Leonore's great delight, and scarcely less to that of her governess. The scene was a busy and amusing one, and added to that was the charm of everything being so new to the little girl. She wanted to buy all sorts of treasures, but when Fraulein reminded her that there was no hurry, and that she would probably have plenty of chances of choosing the things that took her fancy at the yearly fair at Dorf, or in the little village shops there, she gave in, and contented herself with some delicious tiny pots and jugs, which she declared must *really* have been made by fairies.

'You are in the country of fairies now,' said Fraulein, smiling. 'Not Fairyland itself, of course, but one of the earth countries which lie nearest its borders.'

Leonore looked up gravely. Some feeling of the kind had already come over her —ever since their arrival the night before at the queer old inn, she had felt herself in a sort of new world, new to her just because of its strange oldness.

'Oh, Fraulein,' she said, 'I do like you to say that. Do you really mean it? And is Dorf as near Fairyland as this dear old town, do you think?'

'Quite, I should say,' replied Fraulein, taking up the little girl's fancy. 'Even nearer, perhaps. There are wonderful old woods on one side of the village, which look like the very home of gnomes and kobolds and all kinds of funny people. And——' she broke off abruptly, for Leonore had given her arm a sudden tug.

'Do look, Fraulein,' she said in a half whisper. '*Isn't* she like an old fairy? And she's smiling as if she understood what we were saying.'

'She' was a tiny little old woman, seated in a corner of the market-place, with her goods for sale spread out before her. These were but a poor display—a few common vegetables, a trayful of not very inviting-looking apples, small and

grayish, and a basket filled with nuts. But the owner of these seemed quite content. She glanced up as Leonore stopped to gaze at her and smiled—a bright, half-mischievous sort of smile, which was reflected in her twinkling eyes, and made her old brown wrinkled face seem like that of an indiarubber doll.

Fraulein looked at her too with interest in her own kindly blue eyes.

'She must be very poor,' she said.

Fraulein was very practical, though she was fond of fairy stories and such things too.

'Oh, do let us buy something from her,' said Leonore. 'I've plenty of money, you know—and if you'll lend me a little, you can pay yourself back when you get my English gold pound changed, can't you, dear Fraulein? I have spent those funny pretence-silver pennies you gave me yesterday.'

Fraulein opened her purse and put two small coins into the child's hand.

'Buy apples with one of these,' she said; 'that will be enough to please the poor old thing.'

'And nuts with the other?' asked Leonore.

Fraulein shook her head.

'Nuts are so indigestible, my little girl,' she replied; 'and though these apples are not pretty, I am not sure but that they may taste better than they look. I have a sort of remembrance of some ugly little gray apples in this neighbourhood which were rather famous.'

Her 'pretence-silver' penny procured for Leonore a good handful, or handkerchief-full—for the fruit-seller had no paper-bags to put them in—of the apples. And when she had got them safe, and was turning away, the old woman stretched out a brown wizened hand again with another of her queer smiles.

"TAKE THESE," SHE SAID, "FOR GOOD LUCK."

'Take these,' she said, 'for good luck.'

'These' were a few of the nuts. If Leonore had wished to refuse them, she could hardly have done so, for before she had time to do more than thank the giver politely, the dame was busy talking to some other customer, who had stopped in front of her little table.

Fraulein had walked on. Leonore ran after her.

'See,' she said, holding out her nuts, 'see what the old woman gave me. What shall I do with them, if I mustn't eat them? I don't like to throw them away, when she gave me them as a present.'

'No, of course not,' said Fraulein at once. 'Put them in your jacket pocket, dear, and perhaps you may eat two or three of them when we go in.'

Leonore slipped the nuts into her pocket as she was told, and soon after, the clock of the great church striking twelve, she and her governess made their way back to the hotel.

'I do not want you to be tired,' said Fraulein, 'for this afternoon I should like to take you to see one or two of the curious old houses here, as well as the interior of the church'; for the market and the shops had taken up Leonore's attention so much, that they had had no time for anything else in the way of sight-seeing.

Dinner was rather a long affair, and tried the little girl's patience. There seemed twice or three times as many dishes as were needed, even though there were several other guests at the long table besides themselves, none of whom, however, were very interesting.

'I hope we shan't have such a lot to eat at your aunt's house, Fraulein,' said Leonore in a low voice, towards the end of the meal, with a sigh. 'It seems such a pity not to be out-of-doors, when it's so bright and sunny.'

'We shall have plenty of time, dear,' said her governess. 'See, we are at dessert now. And you will probably feel more tired this evening than you expect. No, my aunt lives more simply, though you will like her puddings and cakes, I am sure.'

The afternoon passed very pleasantly and quickly, though, as Fraulein had expected, Leonore did feel more tired when they came in for the second time than she had thought she would be, and quite ready for bed-time when it came—indeed, not sorry to allow that the dustman's summons was there, half an hour or so earlier than usual.

'Your eyes are looking quite sleepy, my child,' said Fraulein; 'and though we have no more long railway journeys before us, we have a drive of some hours to-morrow, and I should like you to reach Dorf feeling quite fresh. It makes such a difference in one's impressions of things if one is tired or not, and I do want your first feelings about our temporary home to be very pleasant ones.'

Leonore was used to her governess's rather prim, long-winded way of saying things, and had learnt by practice to pick out the kernel—always a kind one—of

her speeches very quickly.

'Yes,' she said, 'I know how you mean. Last night in the railway train, before we got here, I thought everything was perfectly horrid and miserable and would never get nice again. And to-day I've been so happy—even though I *am* tired and sleepy now,' she added, looking rather puzzled. 'There must be different ways of being tired, I suppose.'

'Undoubtedly there are—but we won't talk any more to-night. I am so glad you have been happy to-day.'

And sleepy Leonore went off to bed, and was soon in dreamland. She had forgotten all about her apples and nuts—the former Fraulein found tied up in the handkerchief after the little girl had fallen asleep, and put them into her travelling-bag, thinking they might be nice to eat during the drive the next day, but the nuts did not come into her mind at all.

'We certainly seem very lucky,' she said to Leonore the next morning, as they were at breakfast. 'The weather could not be better, especially when we remember that it is already late autumn. My aunt will be so pleased at it; her last letter was full of regrets about the rain and fears of its lasting.'

Leonore glanced towards the window. The clear gray-blue sky was to be seen above the blinds, and the pale yellow sunshine was straying in as if to wish them good-morning.

'Is it a very long drive to Dorf?' she asked.

'About three hours,' Fraulein replied. 'It is longer through being partly uphill; but at the steepest bit the road is very pretty, so it may be pleasant to get out and walk a little.'

'Yes, I should like that,' said Leonore. And then Fraulein went on to tell her that she had arranged for them to have dinner a little earlier than usual by themselves, so as to start in good time to reach Dorf by daylight.

And when they started in a comfortable though rather shabby carriage, with their lighter luggage strapped on behind, the horses' collar bells ringing merrily, and the wheels making what Leonore called a lovely clatter on the old paved streets, the little girl's spirits rose still higher, and she began to think that Fraulein's praises of her own country had not been too great.

The first half of the way was fairly level, and not, so it seemed to Leonore, very unlike the part of England where she had spent most of her life, except, that is to

say, the two or three villages through which they passed. These reminded her of pictures of Switzerland which she had seen—the houses having high pointed roofs, with deep eaves, and many of them little staircases outside. Some of them too were gaily painted in colours on a white ground, which she admired very much. And after a time the road began gently to ascend, and then indeed, as Fraulein said, the likeness to Switzerland grew greater. For now it skirted pine woods on one side, and on the other the ground fell away sharply, here and there almost like a precipice; and before very long the driver pulled up, getting down to push a heavy stone behind the wheel, to prevent the carriage slipping back while he gave the horses a rest.

'Mayn't we get out here and walk on a little way?' asked Leonore, and Fraulein said 'Yes,' it was just what she had been intending.

'It *is* pretty here,' said Leonore, looking about her with satisfaction; 'the woods are so thick and dark—I love Christmas-tree woods—and the road goes winding such a nice funny way. And see, Fraulein, there's another little well, all mossy, and the water *so* clear. Doesn't the running and trickling sound pretty? And, oh yes, there are goats down there, goats with bells. I hear them tinkling, and the man with them has some kind of a music-pipe—listen, Fraulein.'

They stood still for a moment, the better to catch the mingled soft sounds which Leonore spoke of. And behind them, some little way off, came the tingling of their horses' louder bells, and the voice of the driver talking to them and cracking his whip encouragingly.

'It *is* nice,' said Leonore. 'I'm getting to be very glad papa settled for me to come here with you, Fraulein.'

The good lady's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

'And I am glad too, more glad than I can say,' she replied, 'and so will my kind aunt be, if we can make you really happy at Dorf.'

'Are we half-way there yet?' asked Leonore.

'Quite that, but the rest of the way is mostly uphill, so it takes longer, you see.' As she spoke, Fraulein drew something out of the little bag on her arm which she was seldom without. It was one of the small grayish apples which they had bought from the old woman in the market-place. 'You forgot these,' she said, holding the apple out to Leonore. 'I found them last night after you were asleep, and I thought you might like one or two on our way to-day. I believe they will prove very good.'

'How stupid of me to have forgotten them,' said the little girl, as she bit off a piece. 'Yes,' she went on, 'it is very good indeed—you would not believe how sweet and juicy it tastes. Won't you eat one yourself?'

Fraulein was quite willing to do so, and soon got out another. 'The rest,' she said, 'are in my travelling-bag in the carriage. I am glad I was not mistaken,' she went on. 'I felt sure they were the same ugly little apples I remember as a child.'

'And oh,' said Leonore, suddenly diving into her jacket pocket, 'that reminds me, Fraulein—where are the nuts she gave me? They're not in this pocket, and,' feeling in the other, 'oh dear! they must have dropped out; there are only three left, and I am sure she gave me at least twenty.'

'Well, never mind, dear,' said the governess, who was contentedly munching her apple. 'They would not have been good for you to eat—you would have had to throw them away, and so long as the poor old dame's feelings were not hurt, it really is of no consequence.'

But Leonore was still eyeing the three nuts in her hand with a look of regret.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I might have used them for counters, or played with them somehow. It seems unkind to have lost them—do you want me to throw these last three away?' she went on rather plaintively.

'Oh no,' said Fraulein, 'you may keep them certainly if you like. And even if you eat them, *three* can't do you much harm.'

'I don't want to eat them,' said Leonore, 'but I should like to *keep* them,' and she stowed them away in her pocket again with a more satisfied look on her face.

As she did so, a sound, seemingly quite near, made her start and look round. It was that of a soft yet merry laugh, low and musical and clear, though faint.

'Did you hear that, Fraulein?' said the little girl.

'What?' asked her governess.

'Somebody laughing, close to us—such a pretty laugh, like little silver bells.'

'Most likely it was the bells, the goats' little bells. I heard nothing else,' Fraulein replied.

Leonore shook her head.

'No,' she said,' it was different from that, quite different. And the goats are some way off now; listen, you can only just hear them. And the laughing was quite near.'

But Fraulein only smiled.

'There could not have been any one quite near without my hearing it too,' she replied, 'even if——' but here she stopped. She had said enough, however, to rouse her pupil's curiosity.

'Even if what?' repeated Leonore; 'do tell me what you were going to say, dear Fraulein.'

'I was only joking, or going to joke,' her governess answered. 'It came into my head that the woods about here—as indeed about most parts of this country—are said to be a favourite place for the fairies to visit. *Some* kinds of fairies, you know—gnomes and brownies and such like. The kinds that don't live in Fairyland itself make their homes in the woods, by preference to anywhere else.'

'And do you think it *might* have been one of them I heard laughing?' asked Leonore eagerly. 'Oh, how lovely! But then, why didn't you hear it too, Fraulein, and what was it laughing at, do you think? I wasn't saying anything funny. I was only——'

'Dear child,' said Fraulein, 'do not take me up so seriously. I am afraid your papa and your aunts would not think me at all a sensible governess if they heard me chattering away like this to you. Of course I was only joking.'

Leonore looked rather disappointed.

'I wish you *weren't* joking,' she said. 'I can't see that people need be counted silly who believe in fairies and nice queer things like that. *I* think the people who don't are the stupid silly ones. And you will never make me think I *didn't* hear some one laugh, Fraulein—I just know I did.' Then after a little pause she added, 'Would your old aunt think me very silly for believing about fairies? If she has lived so near Fairyland all her life I shouldn't think she would.'

This was rather a poser for poor Fraulein.

'She would not think you *silly*!' she replied; 'that is to say, she loves fairy stories herself. Life would indeed be very dull if we had no pretty fancies to brighten it with.'

'Oh, but,' said Leonore, 'that's just what I don't want. I mean I don't want to count fairy stories *only* stories—not real. I like to think there *are* fairies and brownies

and gnomes, and all sorts of good people like that, though it isn't very often that mortals'—she said the last word with great satisfaction—'see them. I am always hoping that some day *I* shall. And if this country of yours, Fraulein dear, is on the borders of Fairyland, I don't see why I don't run a very good chance of coming across some of them while we are here. They are much more likely to show themselves to any one who does believe in them, I should say. Don't you think so?'

Fraulein laughed.

'I remember feeling just as you do, my child, when I was a little girl,' she said. 'But time has gone on, and I am no longer young, and I am obliged to confess that I have never seen a fairy.'

'Perhaps you didn't believe *enough* in them,' said Leonore sagely; and to herself she added, 'I have a sort of idea that Fraulein's aunt knows more about them than Fraulein does. I shall soon find out, though I won't say anything for a day or two till I see. But nothing will ever make me believe that I didn't hear somebody laughing just now.'

Her hand had strayed again to her jacket pocket as she said this to herself, and her fingers were feeling the nuts.

'It is funny that just three are left,' she thought, 'for so often in fairy stories you read about three nuts, or three kernels. I won't crack *my* nuts in a hurry, however.'

A few minutes more brought them to the summit of the steep incline, and soon the driver's voice and the cracking of his whip as he cheered up his horses sounded close behind them. He halted for a short time to give his animals a little rest, and then Fraulein and Leonore got back into the carriage.

'The rest of the way is almost level,' said the former; 'quite so as we enter Dorf. You will see, Leonore, how fast we shall go at the end. The drivers love to make a clatter and jingle to announce their arrival. No doubt my aunt will hear it, and be at the gate some minutes before she can possibly see us.'

PORTRAIT OF HILDEGARDE.

CHAPTER III

IT IS HILDEGARDE

A pair of friends.

—WORDSWORTH.

Fraulein was right. Both driver and horses woke up wonderfully as the first straggling houses of the village came in sight; it would be impossible to describe the extraordinary sounds and ejaculations which Friedrich, as he was called, addressed to his steeds, but which they evidently quite understood.

'How nice it is to go so fast, and to hear the bells jingling so,' said Leonore. 'I wish we had farther to go.'

'If that were the case we should soon sober down again,' said Fraulein with a smile, adding the next moment, 'and here we are. See the good aunt, my child, as I told you—standing at the gate, just as I last saw her, when I left her five years ago! But then it was parting and tears—now it is meeting and joy.'

Tears nevertheless were not wanting in the eyes of both the good ladies—tears of happiness, however, which were quickly wiped away.

'How well you are looking—not a day older,' said the niece.

'And you, my Elsa—how well *you* look. A trifle stouter perhaps, but that is an improvement. You have always been too thin, my child,' said the aunt, fondly patting Fraulein's shoulders, though she had to reach up to do so. Then she moved quickly to Leonore with a little exclamation of apology.

'And I have not yet welcomed our guest. Welcome to Dorf, my Fraulein—a thousand times welcome, and may you be as happy here as the old aunt will wish to make you.'

Leonore had been standing by eyeing the aunt and niece with the greatest interest. It amused her much to hear her governess spoken to as 'my child,' for to *her* Fraulein seemed quite old, long past the age of thinking *how* old she was. Indeed, the white-haired little lady did not seem to her much older!

'Thank you,' she said in reply to the aunt's kind words. 'I hope I shall be very

happy here, but please don't call me anything but Leonore.'

'As you please,' her new friend replied, while Fraulein smiled beamingly. She was most anxious that her aunt and her pupil should make friends, and she knew that, though Leonore was a polite and well-mannered little girl, she had likes and dislikes of her own, and not always quite reasonable ones. Perhaps, to put it shortly, she felt anxious that her charge was just a trifle spoilt, and that she herself had had a hand in the spoiling.

'A motherless child,' she had said to herself many and many a time in excuse during the five years she had had the care of Leonore, for Fraulein had gone to her when the little girl was only four years old, 'and her papa so far away! Who could be severe with her?'

Not tender-hearted Fraulein Elsa, most certainly!

So she felt especially delighted when Leonore replied so prettily to her aunt, and still more so when the child lifted up her face for the kiss of welcome which Aunt Anna was only too ready to bestow, though she would have been rather surprised had she known the thoughts that were in Leonore's head at the moment.

'I believe she *does* know something about fairies,' the little girl was saying to herself. 'She has nice twinkly eyes, and—oh, I don't know what makes me think so, but I believe she *does* understand about them. Any way, she won't be like my aunts in England who always want me to read improving books and say I am getting too big for fairy stories.'

That first evening in the quaint old village was full of interest for Leonore. Aunt Anna's house in itself was charming to her, for though really small as to the size and number of its rooms, it did not seem so. There were such nice 'twisty' passages, and funny short flights of steps, each leading perhaps to only one room, or even to nothing more than a landing with a window.

And, standing at one of these, the little girl made a grand discovery, which took her flying off to the room where Fraulein was busily unpacking the boxes which the carrier had already brought.

'Fraulein, Fraulein,' she cried; 'I've been looking out at the back of the house, and just across the yard there's a lovely sort of big courtyard and buildings round it, and I saw a man all white and powdery carrying sacks. Is there a mill here?'

'Yes, my dear,' Fraulein replied. 'Did I not tell you? It is a very old mill, and the same people have had it for nearly a hundred years—such nice people too. I will

take you all over it in a day or two—it will amuse you to see the different kinds of grain and flour, all so neatly arranged.'

'And the same people have been there for nearly a hundred years!' exclaimed Leonore. 'How *very* old they must be.'

Fraulein laughed. Though Leonore was so fond of wonders and fancies, she was sometimes very matter-of-fact. Aunt Anna, who just then joined them, smiled kindly.

'Elsa did not mean the same *persons*,' she explained, 'but the same family—the same name. Those there now—the miller himself—is the great-grandson of the man who was there first when the mill was built, which was, I think, fully *more* than a hundred years ago,' she added, turning to her niece.

Leonore looked rather disappointed.

'Oh,' she said, 'I thought it would be so nice to see people who were a hundred. Then, I suppose, the people here aren't any older than anywhere else.'

'I can scarcely say that,' Aunt Anna replied. 'There are some very old, and—there are odd stories about a few of the aged folk. I know one or two who do not seem to have grown any older since *I* can remember, and my memory goes back a good way now. But, my dears, I came to tell you that supper is ready—we must not let it get cold.'

She held out her hand to Leonore as she spoke. The little girl took it, and went off with her very happily, Fraulein calling after them that she would follow immediately.

'Please tell me, Aunt Anna,' said Leonore—it had been decided that she should thus address the old lady—'please tell me, do you mean that some of these very old people who don't grow any older are a kind of *fairy*?'

She spoke almost in a whisper, but she was quite in earnest.

'Well,' said Aunt Anna, 'this country is on the borders of Fairyland, so who can say? When we were children—I and my brothers and sisters and the little barons and baronesses up at the Castle—when we all played together long ago, we used often to try to find the way there—and fairies, of course, are much cleverer than we are. I don't see why some of them may not stray into our world sometimes.'

'And pretend to be *not* fairies,' said Leonore eagerly. 'P'raps they go back to Fairyland every night, and are here every day; fairies don't need to go to sleep ever, do they?'

But Aunt Anna had not time to reply just then, for supper was on the table, and all her attention was given to seeing that the dishes were what they should be, and in helping her little guest to Leonore's liking.

When Fraulein joined them, however, the conversation took a more general turn.

'I was speaking just now to Leonore,' Aunt Anna began, 'of my childhood—when your dear father, Elsie, and the others, and I used to play with the castle children. And that reminds me that I have a piece of news for you—things repeat themselves it is said. It will be strange if a second generation——' she said no more, and for a moment or two seemed lost in thought—the thought of the past!

Fraulein was used to her aunt's ways; the old lady was a curious mixture of practical commonsense and dreamy fancifulness. But after a little pause the niece recalled her to the present.

'A piece of news, you said, aunt? Good news, I hope?' she inquired.

'I think so,' said the aunt. 'It is about the family at the Castle. Little Baroness Hildegarde is probably, almost certainly, coming here to spend the winter with her grandparents. She may arrive any day.'

'Oh I *am* pleased to hear it,' said Fraulein. 'It was just what I was hoping might happen, but I dared scarcely think of it. It would be so nice for our dear Leonore to have a companion.'

Leonore pricked up her ears at this.

'Yes, my dear,' Fraulein went on, in answer to the question in her eyes, 'I have not spoken of it to you before, for there seemed so little chance of its coming to pass. It is about the little Hildegarde who would be such a delightful companion for you. She is just about your age, an only child as you are, and such a dear little girl by all accounts. I have not seen her since she was six, but Aunt Anna knows her well, and the family at the Castle have been our most kind friends for so long.'

Leonore looked full of interest but rather perplexed.

'I don't quite understand,' she said. 'Do you mean that the little girl is perhaps coming to live here in this house with us?'

'Oh no, my dear. Her own home is a good way off, but her grandpapa and grandmamma live at the Castle—a large old gray house half way up the hill above the village. I will show it to you to-morrow. It is a wonderfully quaint old place. And the little Baroness comes sometimes on long visits to her

grandparents, who love to have her.'

'Only they fear it is lonely for her, as she is accustomed to the life of a great capital,' said Aunt Anna. 'They were delighted to hear I was expecting a little guest, when I saw them the other day, and they told me of the probability of Hildegarde's coming.'

Fraulein almost clapped her hands at this.

'Nothing could be more fortunate,' she said. 'There will be no fear now of your finding Dorf dull, my dearest Leonore.'

Leonore smiled back in return. It was impossible not to be touched by her kind governess's anxiety for her happiness, but she herself had had no fears about being dull or lonely at Dorf. She was not much accustomed to companions of her own age, and just a little shy of them, so the news of Hildegarde's coming was not quite as welcome to her as to her friends.

'I should have been quite happy without anybody else,' she said to herself. 'I love old Aunt Anna, and I am sure she knows plenty of fairy stories whether she has ever seen any fairies herself or not.'

Still she felt, of course, a good deal of curiosity to see the grandchild of the Castle, and could not help letting her thoughts run on her. Would she be taller or smaller than herself—dark or fair, merry or quiet? Above all, would she care for the same things—would she love fairies, and be always hoping to see one some day?

There was plenty for Leonore to think about, and dream about, that first night in the quaint little house, was there not?

And dream she did. When she woke in the morning it seemed to her that she had been busy at it all night, though only one bit of her dreams remained in her memory. This bit was about Hildegarde, and, strange as it seemed, about a person she had only given a passing moment's attention to—the old dame in the market-place at Alt.

She dreamt that she was walking along the village street, when she heard a voice calling. She was alone, and she looked back expecting to see Fraulein. But no—a queer little figure was trotting after her, and as it came nearer she heard that the name that reached her ears was not 'Leonore,' but 'Hildegarde,' and with that, some queer feeling made her slip inside the shade of a gateway she was passing to watch what happened. And as the figure came quite close she saw that it was that of the old apple-woman—then to her surprise there came flying down the

hill, for the village street lay closely below the rising ground at one side, a child all dressed in white, with fair hair blowing about her face as she ran.

'Here I am,' she said, 'what is it?'

And now glancing at the dame, Leonore saw that she was quite changed—at first indeed she thought she was no longer there, till some unuttered voice seemed to tell her that the figure now before her was still the same person. She had grown tall and wavy-looking—her wrinkled face was smooth and fair—only the bright dark eyes remained, and as she held out her hand as if to welcome the pretty child, Leonore saw that in it lay three nuts small and dry and brown—just like the three still stored in her own jacket pocket.

'Take these,' said a sweet low voice, 'they will match hers. You will know what to do with them, and by their means you will bring her to me. We must make her happy—she has travelled far, and she has longed to cross the borderland.

And Hildegarde, for the same inner voice seemed to tell Leonore that Hildegarde it was, took the nuts and nodded, as if to say 'I understand,' and with that, to her great disappointment, Leonore awoke!

Awoke, however, to what goes far to take away disappointment of such a kind. For the sun was shining brightly, her simple but cosy little room seemed painted in white and pale gold, and a soft green by the window told her that the creepers had not yet faded into their winter bareness.

'I wonder what o'clock it is,' thought the little girl, as she gazed about her in great content. 'How glad I am that it is such a fine day! I do want to go all about the village, and especially to see the Castle. I *wonder* if Hildegarde is like the little girl in my dream. I do hope she is. And how funny that I should have dreamt about the nut-woman turning into a fairy—it does seem as if Hildegarde must care for fairies just as I do—and as if she knew a good deal about them, too. By the bye I do hope my nuts are safe. I never remembered to take them out of my jacket pocket!'

She was on the point of jumping up to see if they were still there when the door opened softly and Fraulein peeped in. She was already dressed, and her face was beaming; it seemed to reflect the sunshine coming in at the window.

'Oh, Fraulein, dear,' said Leonore, 'how lazy I am! You are dressed, and I only woke up a few minutes ago.'

'All the better, my child,' was Fraulein's kind reply. 'It means, I hope, that you have slept well and soundly. My native air brings back old habits to me, you see.

I was always accustomed to getting up very early here. And see, what a lovely day it is! As soon as we have had breakfast I must take you out to see the village and——'

'The Castle,' interrupted Leonore. 'Can't we go to the Castle? I do so want to know if Hildegarde has come. I have been—' 'dreaming about her,' she was going to say, but something, she knew not what, made her hesitate and change the words into 'thinking of her—' 'so much.'

Which was of course quite true.

And something of the same feeling prevented her looking for the nuts till Fraulein left the room.

'It is not likely that the little Baroness has already arrived,' her governess replied. 'We shall be sure to hear as soon as she comes. But we can see something of the Castle *outside* at any rate. For the next few days I think it must be all holiday-time,' she went on, smiling. 'Aunt Anna begs for it, and we have been working pretty steadily these last months.'

Leonore had no objection to this proposal, though she was fond of lessons, never having been over-dosed with them, and she jumped out of bed and bathed and dressed in the best of spirits. The nuts were quite safe in her jacket pocket. She wrapped them in a piece of paper for better security and put them back again.

'I should not like to lose them,' she thought. 'My dream has given me a feeling that there is something out of the common about them, and I should like to take them with me wherever I go. Just *supposing* I ever met any fairy sort of person, perhaps the nuts might turn out to be of use in some queer way.'

After breakfast, and when Fraulein had helped Leonore to arrange her books and work and other little things in the room that was to serve as her schoolroom during the winter, they set off on their first ramble through and round the village.

It was a pretty village—lying as it did at the foot of the hills, which were beautifully wooded, it could scarcely have been ugly. But besides these natural advantages, it was bright and clean; many of the houses, too, were pretty in themselves, with deep roofs and carved balconies, and in some cases many coloured designs painted on the outside walls. Leonore was delighted; it was so different from any place she had ever seen before.

'Oh, Fraulein,' she exclaimed, 'it's like a toy-town. It doesn't look as if real people had built it.'

'But it looks as if very real people had built *that*, does it not?' said Fraulein, stopping short and drawing Leonore a little backward.

'*That*' was the grim old Castle, of which they now had the first view, standing lonely and gray up on the heights overlooking the village, like a stern guardian keeping watch on the doings of playful children at his feet.

The little girl gazed at it with all her eyes.

'It's a real Castle,' she exclaimed; 'I *am* so pleased. It looks as if it had dungeons and—and—forti— What is the word, Fraulein?'

'Fortifications,' said her governess. 'You mean that it is fortified. Yes; at least it used to be in the old days. There are the holes in the walls which the defenders used to shoot through in time of siege, and there are battlements still quite perfect round the front. It is so pleasant to saunter on them, and think of the strange scenes the old place must have witnessed. We can walk up the hill towards the gates if you like, and you will see a little more.'

Leonore, of course, *did* like, and the nearer they got to the Castle the more was she fascinated by the view of the ancient building. Just outside the entrance they stood still, and Fraulein began pointing out to her its different parts and giving her a little historical account of it, to which she listened with interest. Suddenly —for all was very silent just then—they heard steps approaching and a clear young voice singing softly. And—Fraulein stopped talking and stood gazing before her, as did Leonore, till—from among the trees which bordered the short approach to the inner gateway, there appeared a childish figure, running towards them, singing as she came. A young girl, dressed all in white, with fair floating hair——

'It is Hildegarde,' said Leonore, growing pale with excitement. For the figure was exactly like the little girl in her dream!

CHAPTER IV

ON THE WAY

Oh, what is that country,
And where can it be?—ROSSETTI.

If Fraulein heard what Leonore said, she did not seem surprised, for though she did not, of course, know about the little girl's curious dream, she knew that Hildegarde's coming had been freely talked about the evening before. But she *was* very astonished a moment later when Hildegarde, looking up quietly, said with a smile—

'I have come to meet you. I was sure I should.'

'My dear child!' exclaimed Fraulein. 'How could you know? The fairies must have told you!'

The little stranger smiled again.

'This is Leonore,' she said, taking the other child's hand. 'Grandmamma told me her name, but grandmamma did not know I should meet you'; and she shook her head with a funny little air of mystery.

'It is wonderful,' said Fraulein; 'it is even wonderful that you should know *me* again. It is five years—*five years*—since you saw me last—half your life.'

'Yes,' said Hildegarde, 'but I can remember longer ago than that.'

She was still holding Leonore's hand, and though the little English girl felt rather shy, and had not yet spoken to her new friend, yet she liked the touch of the gentle fingers and pressed them in return, while she looked at Hildegarde's pretty fair face in admiration.

'I am coming soon to see Aunt Anna,' Hildegarde went on. 'Will you give her my love, Fraulein Elsa, and tell her so? May I come this afternoon?'

'Certainly, certainly,' said Fraulein; 'the sooner you and Leonore make friends,

the better pleased we shall all be.'

At this Leonore took courage.

'Yes,' she said, looking earnestly at Hildegarde with her serious dark eyes. 'I want *very much* to be friends.'

'It will not take long,' said Hildegarde, and then, for the first time, Leonore noticed that the little girl's eyes were not like any she had ever seen before. They were not blue, as one would have expected from her light, almost flaxen hair and fair complexion, but a kind of bright hazel-brown—with lovely flashes, almost, as it were, of sunshine, coming and going.

'They are *golden* eyes,' thought Leonore; and when she repeated this to Fraulein afterwards, her governess agreed with her that she was right.

'I remember noticing their colour when she was a very tiny child,' said Fraulein, thinking to herself that the two little girls made a pretty contrast, for Leonore's hair was dark, as well as her eyes.

Hildegarde held up her face for Fraulein to kiss, and then she ran off again, saying as she did so—

'Do not forget to tell Aunt Anna I am coming, and perhaps she will make some of those dear little round cakes I love so—she knows which they are. Leonore will like them too, I am sure.'

The day was getting on by this time; it was past noon.

'We will just stroll to the other end of the village,' said Fraulein; 'from there we shall have the side view of the Castle—there is a short cut down to the street at that end, by some steps, but they are rough and in need of repair, so we generally prefer the longer way. The old Baron has spoken of shutting off the side entrance; he says it is only fit for goats to scramble up.'

Leonore thought, though she did not say so, that it would be very amusing for little girls all the same, and determined to ask Hildegarde about it. She thought the Castle even more interesting seen sideways than in front; it looked so very close to the thick dark trees behind, almost as if it touched them.

'I shall have lots of things to talk to Hildegarde about,' she said to herself. 'These woods are *very* fairy-looking. And I think I must tell her my strange dream about her and the nuts. I don't *think* she would laugh at it. I hope I have them quite safe.'

Yes, they lay snugly in her pocket, wrapped up in the piece of paper—a nice piece of pink paper that she had found among her things.

'I will leave them where they are,' she thought, 'and then I shall be sure to remember to tell Hildegarde my dream.'

It was nearly dinner-time when they got back to Aunt Anna's, for in that part of the world big people as well as little dine in the middle of the day. Aunt Anna was most interested in hearing of Hildegarde's arrival, and quite as delighted as Fraulein had been.

'And was it not strange that she should have come to meet us?' said Fraulein. 'She must have had a presentiment about it.'

'What is a presentiment?' asked Leonore.

'A sort of knowing beforehand about something that is going to happen,' answered Fraulein. 'Many people have the feeling, but very often it does not come true, and then it is not a real presentiment. It is not everybody that has real presentiments.'

Aunt Anna smiled. Leonore was learning to love her smiles. They reminded her of some other smile—whose was it? Hildegarde's?—yes, a little, perhaps, but no, she had seen Hildegarde for the first time that morning, and this feeling about Aunt Anna's smile had come to her already yesterday. Whose smile could it be?

'Hildegarde is a dear child,' said Aunt Anna, 'and perhaps she is one of the few who know more than the everyday people. And she was born at the Castle and spent her babyhood there. How well I remember the day she was christened!'

'Oh, do tell me,' exclaimed Leonore impulsively. 'Did they have a grand feast, and did they invite any fairies? Perhaps she had a fairy godmother.'

'Leonore!' said Fraulein, beginning to laugh. 'You are getting too fanciful—you really——'

'Nay, Elsa,' interrupted Aunt Anna. 'Let the child say out what is in her mind, and remember, we are here in our dear country, close on the borders of Fairyland ——'

'Yes, Fraulein,' Leonore interrupted in her turn. 'You said so yourself.'

'And assuredly,' Aunt Anna went on, 'if Hildegarde has a fairy godmother, she has given her none but good gifts.'

'You speak as if such things were possible, my dear aunt,' said Fraulein. 'We

must not let Leonore grow too fanciful. I shall have you and her taking flight in an airy chariot drawn by white swans or something of that kind some fine day, if I don't take care.'

'Well, you and Hildegarde can come after us in another chariot if we do,' said Aunt Anna, laughing.

But Leonore remained serious.

'Please tell me, Aunt Anna,' she said, 'as you were at Hildegarde's christening, was there any one there who *might* have been a fairy?'

Aunt Anna hesitated.

'There was an odd story,' she replied, 'about a beautiful lady who was met coming away from the nursery, when the baby had been left alone in her cot for a moment or two. And when the nurse went back she found her smiling and crowing and chuckling to herself as if she were six months instead of only a few days old, and in her little hand she was tightly clasping——'

'What?' asked Leonore breathlessly.

'Three nuts,' replied Aunt Anna impressively. 'Three common little brown hazel-nuts. That part of the story is true, for Hildegarde has the nuts to this day, I believe—at least she had them the last time she was here.'

'She must have picked them up somehow,' said Fraulein.

Aunt Anna shook her head.

'A baby of a few days old cannot pick things up,' she said. 'No, it has never been explained. None of the servants had put them into her hand—indeed they would not have been so foolish, and they could scarcely have had the chance of doing so. And it was said by the one or two who declared they had met her, that the beautiful lady was carrying a basket on her arm filled with common hazel-nuts, and some days afterwards one of the foresters said that late that same evening a little old woman whom he had never seen before stopped him up in the high woods to ask the way to some strange place of which he had never heard, and she—the little old woman—was carrying a basket of nuts. She offered him some, but he thought she was a witch and would not have any.'

'Dear me, Aunt Anna,' exclaimed her niece, 'I did not know all these wonderful tales. Surely they grew out of finding the nuts in the baby's hands. I do remember hearing *that*, though I had forgotten it.'

'Perhaps that was the origin of it all,' said her aunt quietly. 'Still, Hildegarde is an uncommon child. It certainly seems as if she had received some fairy gifts, however they came to her.'

Leonore did not speak, but she listened intently. She would probably have not contented herself with listening but for knowing that she was so soon to see Hildegarde herself again.

'*She* will be the best person to ask,' thought Leonore. 'I will tell her about *my* nuts and the little old woman who gave me them, and about the pretty laugh I heard in the wood, and then, I feel sure, she will tell me all *she* knows.'

She could scarcely finish her dinner, so eager and excited did she feel. And she was more than delighted when, at the close of the meal, kind Fraulein proposed to her that, as Hildegarde had come to meet *them* that morning, Leonore should show her new little friend the same attention.

'You can scarcely miss her,' she said. 'She is sure to come the same way that I took you this morning. If you get ready now, and start in a quarter of an hour or so, you will be about right, I should say. They dine early at the Castle. But I should like you to change your dress in case you should be presented to the Baroness—Hildegarde's grandmamma.'

Leonore ran off to get ready. She was not long about it, but all the same her new little friend must have been even quicker, for Leonore met her a very few steps only from Aunt Anna's gate. Hildegarde's face lighted up with a smile when she caught sight of the other little girl.

'So you have come to meet me,' she said; 'that is very nice of you. I hope I have not come too soon. Shall I go in now to see Aunt Anna?'

Leonore looked a little disappointed, which Hildegarde seemed at once to understand.

'I don't mean to *stay* with Aunt Anna,' she added quickly; 'what I want is for you and me to go out somewhere together. It is a lovely day, and I have leave to stay out till dusk. My grandmamma is going to pay some visits, so she hopes to see you some other day—perhaps to-morrow. I think we shall get to know each other far the best by being alone by ourselves—don't you think so?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Leonore, her face clearing. 'I am so glad you understand. I have such a lot of things to talk to you about.'

Hildegarde nodded her head. It was a little habit of hers to do so without

speaking sometimes.

'Then we must not lose any of our time,' she said, after a moment's pause. 'But first I will run in to give Aunt Anna a kiss, and then we can go off somewhere together.'

Aunt Anna's face was full of pleasure at the sight of her little friend—the two were evidently old acquaintances.

'How well you are looking, my child,' she said, 'and how much you have grown! Let me see, which is the taller, you or our little Leonore,' and she drew the two children together. 'There is not a quarter of an inch between you,' she exclaimed. 'If you were ponies you would be a perfect match—one dark and one fair,' she added musingly. 'Yes, my dears, you are evidently intended to be friends.'

'And that is just what we mean to be,' said Hildegarde. 'May we go now, Aunt Anna? You will not be anxious even if Leonore does not come home till dark?'

'Oh no,' said the old lady tranquilly, 'I know you are as safe as you can be—you are going to the woods, I suppose?'

'I think so,' Hildegarde replied.

As soon as they found themselves out of doors again, she took Leonore's hand.

'Let us run quickly through the village,' she said, 'and then when we get inside the Castle grounds we can go slowly and talk as we go. Or perhaps we can sit down—it is so mild, and there are lots of cosy places among the trees.'

Leonore was quite pleased to do as Hildegarde proposed; indeed she had a curious feeling that whatever her new little friend wished she would like. She did not speak much, for it seemed to her as if she were meant in the first place to listen.

The woods were very lovely that afternoon. Hildegarde led the way round the Castle without approaching it quite closely, till they stood in a little clearing, from which they looked upwards into the rows of pine-trees, through which here and there the afternoon sunshine made streaks of light and brightness.

'Isn't it pretty here?' said Hildegarde. 'Hush—there's a squirrel—there are lots about here; they are so tame they like to be near the house, I think. Shall we sit down? It is quite dry.'

Leonore was not troubled with any fears of catching cold—and indeed the day was as mild as summer.

'Yes,' she said, 'it is a very pretty place. I have never seen such big woods before.'

'They go on for miles and miles—up ever so far,' said Hildegarde, 'though here and there the ground is quite flat for a bit. And over there,' she pointed to the left, 'they are not pine woods, but all sorts of other trees. I don't know which I like best.'

'Pine woods *I* should say,' Leonore replied. 'Perhaps because I have never seen such beautiful high fir-trees before. And the way the sun peeps through them is so pretty.'

As she spoke, half unconsciously her hand strayed to her jacket pocket. There lay safely the little packet containing the three nuts.

'Hildegarde,' she said, 'I heard the story about you when you were a baby, and what they found in your hand. And—it is very odd—do you know—no, of course you couldn't—but just fancy, *I* have three nuts too!'

Hildegarde nodded her head.

'I *did* know,' she said, smiling. 'And—look here.'

From the front of her frock she drew out a little green silk bag drawn in at the top with tiny white ribbon. She opened it carefully, and took out something which she held towards Leonore—on her pretty pink palm lay three nuts, common little brown nuts, just like Leonore's. And Leonore unwrapped her own packet and in the same way held out its contents.

'Yes,' said Hildegarde, 'it is all right. I knew you had them.'

Leonore stared at her in astonishment.

'How could you know?' she exclaimed.

'I suppose people would say I dreamt it,' Hildegarde replied, 'but I don't call it dreaming. I have always known things like that since I was a baby. And I knew that some day I should have a friend like you, and that together we should have lovely adventures, and now it is going to come true.'

Leonore grew rosy red with excitement.

'Do you mean,' she began, 'Hildegarde, *can* you mean that perhaps we are going to find the way to Fairyland? *I* have been thinking about it ever since I can remember anything.'

Hildegarde nodded.

'Yes,' she said, 'I am sure you have. But I don't quite know about Fairyland itself. I am not sure if any one ever gets *quite* there—into the very insidest part, you know. I almost think we should have to be turned into fairies for that, and then we never could be little girls again, you see. But I am sure we are going to see some wonderful things—there are the outside parts of Fairyland, you know.'

'Fraulein says all this country is on the borders of Fairyland,' said Leonore.

'Well, so it is, I daresay, for fairies *do* come about here sometimes. You've heard the story of the one that came to my christening feast?'

'Yes,' said Leonore, 'and I am beginning to think that I have seen her too,' and she went on to tell Hildegarde about the little old dame in the market-place at Alt who had given her the nuts, and about the mischievous laugh she had heard in the wood on the way to Dorf, and all her own thoughts and fancies, including her dream of Hildegarde herself.

Hildegarde listened attentively.

'I feel sure you are right,' she said, 'and that the dame *was* my own fairy, as I call her. And I believe the laugh you heard in the wood was when you were hoping you hadn't lost the last three nuts. I don't believe you could have lost them; if you had thrown them away they would have come back to you. Just think how my three have always been kept safe, even though I was only a tiny baby when they were put into my hand.'

Both little girls sat silent for a moment or two, gazing at the six brown nuts.

'And what do you think we are meant to do now?' asked Leonore at last.

'To do,' repeated Hildegarde in some surprise; 'why, of course it's quite plain—to crack the nuts! Not all of them at once—one, or perhaps two—one of yours and one of mine, I daresay.'

'Oh,' exclaimed Leonore, 'do you really think we should? *How* I wonder what we shall find! Just supposing there is nothing but a kernel inside.'

'There's no good in supposing it,' said Hildegarde; 'we shall soon see. As I have had the nuts the longest perhaps it's meant for me to crack one first—so——'

She put the nut between her teeth. Of course if it *had* been a common nut this would not have been a sensible thing to do, as she would probably have broken her teeth and not cracked the nut, but Hildegarde knew what she was about. The nut gave way with a touch, and in another moment the little girl had broken off enough of the shell to see what was inside, Leonore bending over her in

breathless eagerness.

CHAPTER V

'WHAT'S O'CLOCK?'

'You had best come with me,' says he.

.... And so they did.—*The Brown Bear.*

The first exclamation came from Leonore. It was one of disappointment.

'Oh, Hildegarde,' she cried, 'it *is* only a common kernel,' for nothing was to be seen but what looked just like the browny-gray skin of the inside of a nut.

'No,' Hildegarde replied, 'it isn't that at all'; and with her clever little fingers she carefully drew out what was in reality a small sheet of thin brown paper or tissue of some curious kind, rolled into a ball, and which, when she had carefully unfolded it, was shown to have a few lines of words stamped or impressed upon it in gilt letters.

These were the lines. I have translated them to give the exact meaning, though as rhymes they were prettier in the original language:—

Right behind the Castle
Is hid a tiny door;
This let thy comrade open—
Nuts you still have four.

Hildegarde smoothed it out and held it for Leonore to see.

'What can it mean?' Leonore asked breathlessly.

'First,' said Hildegarde, 'it means that you are to crack one of your nuts too. Don't you see—it says "*thy* comrade," and then "nuts *you* still have four." That shows that the "you" means us both together—four nuts between us. So please crack

your one.'

Leonore did so between her teeth, as her friend had done, and quite as easily. This time there was no exclamation of disappointment, for the first glimpse of the contents showed something glittering, and with trembling eagerness the little girl, breaking away still more of the shell, drew out a little ball of very fine but firm gilt thread. This, by Hildegarde's advice, she gently untwined, till she came to something hard in the middle. It was a small, very small, gold key, hanging on the long gilt thread, which proved to be in a ring, with no knot or join to be seen.

Leonore, without speaking, glanced up at Hildegarde, who was earnestly examining their new discovery.

"'Right behind the Castle,"' Hildegarde murmured to herself. 'Let me see—yes, I think I know what it means. See, Leonore, "right behind" must be from the centre of the wall of the Castle yard down below us, I should say. It is easy to find, as there is a door just in the middle. Look, you can see it from here. Well, now, if one of us stands as near the middle as we can guess, holding the thread, and the other goes straight on, holding the thread too, as far as it will reach, and running the key on as she goes, then she would get to the place that I fancy is meant. The thread must be meant to be double, or it would not be in a ring.'

Leonore looked at Hildegarde admiringly.

'Yes,' she said, 'I'm sure that's the best thing to do; anyway, we can try. But, Hildegarde, the key is *so* small.'

Hildegarde examined it closely; suddenly Leonore heard a tiny click.

'It is not so very small now,' said Hildegarde; 'see, it pulls out,' and so it did. It was now a long-stemmed, very delicately-made key, small still in the actual words, but quite easy to hold firmly.

Hildegarde moved a few paces to one side.

'I think we are about even with the centre of the Castle here,' she said, stopping short. 'Now, it is for you to look for the door, while I stand here holding the thread, for my rhyme says, "thy comrade," I shall stand quite still, and you walk on as straight as you can go.'

'I am so afraid of the thread breaking,' said Leonore, taking it and the key from Hildegarde.

'I don't think there is any fear of that, if you handle it gently,' said Hildegarde. 'Remember, it must be some kind of a fairy thread.'

Leonore set off, her heart beating with excitement. As she went on she felt the thread sliding gently through her fingers, so she allowed her hold of it to slacken, while she grasped the tiny key more firmly. It seemed to her that she had walked a good way, and she was marvelling at the length of the thread, when she felt it tighten, and, slender as a hair though it was, pull her up with a little jerk. She stopped at once—yes, it was at its full stretch now, and she looked around her eagerly.

The trees were growing thicker and closer here; in front the wood seemed almost dark, though here and there a streak of sunshine broke the gloom. But of a *door* of any kind she could see no trace! She gazed downwards, for she had a vague idea that it might be a trap-door in the ground—a great stone with a ring in it, such as one reads of in old stories of enchantment and magic; but no, there was nothing of the kind to be seen, and she was on the point of calling back to Hildegarde that she could find no trace of a door, when, lifting her eyes suddenly, she caught sight of a gleam—a tiny spot of light—on the trunk of a tree in front of her.

It was an old tree; the trunk was much thicker than those around it, the bark was rugged. Leonore hastened close up to it, the thread seeming to become elastic to allow of her doing so. To her delight, as she peered in at the spot, she descried the outline of a very small keyhole in bright gold. She almost screamed with pleasure, and had to conquer her first impulse, which was to try to unlock it at once, for this would have been contrary to what she and Hildegarde had planned. So she did as she had promised, giving a soft jerk to the thread, the signal agreed upon.

And in a minute Hildegarde was beside her, her blue eyes sparkling, her fair hair flying behind her.

'You have found it?' she cried; and Leonore, too excited to speak, pointed to the golden rim.

'The key,' exclaimed Hildegarde, and with careful though trembling fingers Leonore fitted it into the lock. It turned without the slightest difficulty, and there before them stood open a narrow entrance into what looked like a dark hole, about as high as the children themselves.

Leonore was darting forwards when her friend stopped her.

'Take out the key,' she said, 'it must not be left in the lock'; but when Leonore turned to obey her, lo and behold, the key was no longer there, and the thread had slipped from the hold of both! Only a very tiny shiny ball, like a gold bead,

was lying among the fir-needles at their feet, and as Hildegarde stooped to pick it up, it seemed to sink into the ground, and disappeared!

She stood up again, laughing.

'All right,' she said, 'it has done its work.'

Then hand-in-hand they crept through the doorway sideways, for it was only wide enough to admit one at a time. But no sooner were they well within, the door closing of itself behind them, than they were able to stand abreast, for they found themselves in a wide passage. But before looking about them, Hildegarde stopped short for a moment.

'What has become of the little brown paper?' she said. 'Perhaps there was something else on it.'

Leonore shook her head.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'I looked at it well. Is it not in your pocket?'

No, it was not there. It had evidently disappeared, like the contents of Leonore's own nut.

'Then we are meant to find our own way now,' said Hildegarde cheerfully. 'At present there is not much difficulty, for there is plainly only one way to go,' and that was straight before them. The passage was dimly lighted, though how or from where they could not tell, but by degrees, as their eyes grew accustomed to the dusk, they saw that the way sloped downwards, and was a sort of path between rows of curiously twisted pillars or columns at each side. Leonore squeezed Hildegarde's arm.

'What are these things?' she said. 'I don't like them—they look like snakes.'

Her little friend laughed.

'You silly girl,' she replied. 'Don't you see—they are the roots of the trees. We have got right down underneath.'

Leonore stared in wonder.

'I thought their roots were in the *earth*,' she said.

'Perhaps the earth doesn't go down so far as we thought,' said Hildegarde, 'or perhaps it has been cleared away here to make a path. Yes, I should think that's how it is. But you see, Leonore, if we're getting into Fairyland we must expect to see a good many queer things, not like what we are accustomed to.'

'Of course,' Leonore agreed, her eyes sparkling at the idea. 'I don't think I should really feel *surprised* at anything. But do let us hurry on, Hildegarde.'

They took hands again and ran on. It was quite easy to do so, as there was light enough to see where they were going, and the way still sloped gently downwards. Suddenly Hildegarde stopped.

'Hark!' she exclaimed; 'do you hear that sound, Leonore? What can it be?' for a very soft monotonous sort of whirr was plainly to be distinguished.

'Can it be water?' Leonore was beginning, when Hildegarde interrupted her.

'It is a spinning-wheel,' she whispered eagerly. 'Now, Leonore, our adventures are really beginning.'

Almost as she spoke, they became aware that just in front of them the passage made a turn; and another minute brought them within sight of a kind of niche at one side, within which sat a not altogether unfamiliar figure. It was that of the old dame of the market-place at Alt. She was spinning busily.

The children stopped. They felt her bright eyes fixed upon them, but neither liked to speak. They waited in respectful silence.

'Welcome,' she said at last, while a smile broke over her face. 'I have been expecting you.'

They drew a little nearer.

'Then you *are* a fairy,' Leonore burst out, 'and it was you I heard laugh on our way here—wasn't it?'

'Never mind about that,' said the dame. 'Tell me what you want.'

'Oh,' said Hildegarde softly, 'you know that better than we do. You know all about us. We want to get to Fairyland, and you can show us the way, can you not?'

To their disappointment and surprise, the dame shook her head. But her words softened the disappointment a little.

'No—not quite that,' she replied. 'Into actual Fairyland itself I cannot take or lead you. No one but yourselves can do that—and,' with a little sigh, 'there are but few who ever really penetrate there. It cannot be otherwise. But I can help you and show you a good deal, so do not look sad about it. There are many, many wonderful things to see between this and actual Fairyland.'

At this the little girls brightened up.

'Please tell us,' said Leonore timidly, 'do you always sit here, except when you come up to where we live? And are you always spinning?'

The dame shook her head and smiled again.

'No,' she replied. 'This is only one of my posts. I am here to-day because I expected you. And I spin when I have no other special work to do. We do not love idleness.'

Hildegarde had moved quite close up to her.

'What are you spinning now?' she said softly. Oh, I see—it is cobwebs, is it not?'

'You have good eyes, my child,' said the dame; and so indeed she had, for, but for a certain glistening as the light caught the almost invisible ball of threads, nothing could have been perceived. 'Yes, our fairy looms use a good deal of cobweb yarn—there is nothing like it for our gossamer tissue, nothing that takes such shades of colour.'

Leonore listened with wide-open eyes.

'Oh,' she said beneath her breath, 'I wish I could see it—I——'

'So you shall,' said the dame; 'that is a wish it is easy to grant'; and as she spoke she rose from her seat, giving a touch to the spinning-wheel which made it revolve with double speed, and changed the soft whirr into a louder sound, almost like a note of music. The children stared at the wheel, and in that moment of their attention being distracted the old dame had vanished, and in her stead stood a lovely figure, smiling down upon them.

'Oh,' exclaimed Hildegarde, 'you are my own fairy lady. I remember you now—it was you that gave me the nuts when I was a baby.'

'And I have dreamt of you,' added Leonore eagerly. 'And this is the gossamer—may I touch it?' she went on, softly stroking the gleaming garment which floated round the fairy. 'I can *scarcely* feel it.'

'It says much for you if you feel it at all,' said the lady. 'But now, my children, if you want to see some of the things open to you to visit, you must be on your way. Go straight on till you come to a barred gate—that is one of the doors into gnomeland. Knock and say that the fairy of the spinning-wheel sent you, and asks for you courtesy and kindness.

Leonore looked a very little frightened.

'Is there any fear?' she began. 'Could the gnomes be vexed at our coming?'

Hildegarde turned to her with a little impatience.

'Of course not,' she said, 'if our fairy lady sends us.'

"I MUST GIVE YOU ONE OR TWO WARNINGS."

'But still,' said the lady, though she smiled, 'I must give you one or two warnings. Gnomes are gnomes, remember—not angels, not even fairies. They are queer-tempered folk. In speaking to them you must be very respectful and never interrupt them. And you must never seem to pity them in the very least; they think their underground country is far more wonderful and delightful than any other, and you must not disagree with this opinion.'

'No,' said Hildegarde, 'we shall be very careful. Come along, Leonore.'

'Shall we find you here when we come back, please, dear fairy lady?' asked Leonore.

'You will not return this way,' their friend answered. 'But you will see me again before long—never fear.'

She pointed towards the passage, and as she did so it seemed to the children that the light increased, as if her white hand had touched some unseen spring in the air. Nor did it grow dimmer again—though not very bright, it was now twice as bright as when they first entered, only the colour had grown reddish; and as they walked on, they noticed this more and more.

'It looks like the light of a fire, of a great fire,' said Leonore.

'Or of a great many fires,' said Hildegarde. 'I daresay it is that, for I have heard stories of the gnomes working at metals, and to do that they must have big fires like blacksmiths, you know.'

'I hope it won't be very hot in their country,' said Leonore, who was more timid than Hildegarde.

'It will be all right whatever it is,' replied her friend, 'otherwise you may be sure our fairy would not have let us come. Gnomeland is the nearest to our world of all the fairy countries—or the border countries, as they are, I suppose—so it is right to begin with it. But you needn't be frightened, Leonore. I hope we shall have lots of adventures, now we have really got started.'

'You are so brave,' said Leonore admiringly, 'and you seem to know so much about fairy things. What are all the other countries, do you think?'

Hildegarde smiled.

'Oh, more, far more, than we have any idea of,' she said. 'Just think how many

kinds of fairies we have *names* for even. Gnomes, and pixies, and brownies, and wood-sprites, and water-sprites, and mermaids, and——'

'I think I should like most of all to go to the sea-fairies,' said Leonore. 'I do so love stories of mermaids, though they are nearly always rather sad. But oh, Hildegarde, that must be the gate into gnomeland—I am so glad it does not feel any hotter; it is quite nice and cool, isn't it?'

Just before them stood a wrought-iron gate or door; it had bars across and was beautifully worked in all sorts of curious patterns and designs. On the top of each gate-post sat a bird—one was like an owl, and at first the little girls thought it must be really alive, for its eyes seemed to blink and its feathers to move softly. And opposite it was an eagle, whose keen eyes gleamed redly, while its wings sparkled like burnished gold. But neither was a living bird, and soon the children discovered that it was only the reflection of the light on the polished metal that gave the look of life to the eyes and plumage. The birds were placed sideways as if to see both inside the gate and outwards along the passage, and from the claw of the eagle hung a chain, ending in a fawn's foot also in bronze, or some such metal.

'That must be the gnomes' front-door bell,' said Hildegarde. 'Shall I ring it, or will you?'

Leonore was creeping behind Hildegarde a little.

'Oh you, please,' she replied, and Hildegarde took the fawn's foot in her hand and pulled it—gently and carefully, for she remembered the fairy's warning—and a good thing it was that she did so, for softly though she had touched it, the result was rather startling. It rang out at once with a deep clang, which, strange to say, went sounding on and on, very loudly at first, then by degrees more faintly, till it was lost in the distance—it was as if hundreds of bells or echoes of bells had been pulled instead of one.

Even Hildegarde looked a little alarmed.

'I hope they won't think us rude,' she said, 'I really scarcely——' but before she had time to say more, a face appeared behind the bars of the gate. It was a gnome—a regular, proper sort of gnome—about half the height of the children, with a pointed cap and a mantle tossed over one shoulder, a queer wrinkled-up face, a big nose, and black bead-like eyes. He did not look particularly good-natured; he was evidently not one of the laughing order of gnomes, not at any rate at the present moment. But neither did he seem exactly surly; his expression was rather as if he were waiting to see what kind of beings were these audacious

visitors!

But his first words were a great surprise, for instead of asking what they wanted, or any natural question of that kind, he tilted back his head, so that if his peaked cap had not been firmly fitted it would certainly have fallen off, and peering up into Hildegarde's face—Leonore by this time had crept well behind her companion—said sharply—

'What's o'clock?'

CHAPTER VI

GNOMELAND

He appeared,
sniffed, and sneered,
In a fairy pet.
—*Child Nature.*

For a moment or two Hildegarde stared down at the little man without speaking. Then her face lighted up again, and she replied—

'I am very sorry, sir, that I can't tell you, for I have no watch and I don't know.'

Something like a smile broke over the gnome's countenance.

'All right,' he said, 'you don't know, and you don't pretend you do. And *I* don't want to know. Here in our country,' and he waved his hand in a lordly fashion, 'we have nothing to do with clocks and watches, and time and hours, and all such fiddle-faddle. We leave that to the poor folk who can't settle things for themselves, but have to be ruled by the sun and the moon, and the stars too, for all I know. Some people up there, where you come from, fancy we make the cuckoo-clocks down here, but that's all nonsense—we wouldn't waste our time over such rubbish.'

'I thought you said——' began Leonore impulsively. She was getting over her alarm a little by now—'I thought you said you didn't trouble about time,' she was *going* to have added, but a touch from Hildegarde came, luckily, quickly enough to stop her, and to remind her of the fairy's warning.

The gnome did not seem to have heard her; he was unfastening the gates. When he had got them ajar, he stood right in the middle, his head cocked on one side and his feet well apart, and surveyed the children coolly.

'And who sent you?' he said at last.

'The fairy of the spinning-wheel,' Hildegarde replied.

'Humph—I thought as much,' he remarked. 'And what for, if you please?'

'To pay you and your wonderful country a visit, if you will kindly allow us to do so,' Hildegarde answered.

'That means that I am to——' he cleared his throat and hesitated for a moment, then went on again, 'to tire myself out doing showman; I suppose?' he said rather grumpily.

'I hope not to tire yourself out, sir,' Hildegarde returned in her politest tone. 'We shall give you as little trouble as possible, but we are of course very anxious to see all you will kindly show us.'

'All right,' the gnome replied. 'Enter, children of the upper world, and be welcome,' and he flung open the gates with a flourish, while Hildegarde and Leonore passed through.

It had seemed to them as they stood waiting that within the entrance was much the same as outside, but no sooner had they stepped across the boundary, the doors clanging behind them as they did so, than they found everything quite different. They were no longer in a rather narrow passage, but on a broad road, bordered on each side by magnificent rocks which stretched up so high that they could not see their summit or the roof. The ground was covered with very fine gravel or white silvery sand, firm and pleasant to walk upon, and which glistened like pale pink tinsel in the light. For everywhere was flooded with the soft red or rosy brilliance they had noticed before they entered, though whence it came they could not see.

'Why is the light so red?' asked Leonore, gaining some courage again, though since her last attempt she had not dared to speak. 'We noticed it outside, and we thought perhaps it came from big fires—furnaces you know, or forges—like what blacksmiths have.'

The gnome was walking a little in front—at this he turned round.

'And why should we have "big fires," or furnaces, or whatever you call the clumsy things?' he said, fixing his small bright eyes, which gleamed redly themselves, on Leonore.

'Oh,' said Leonore, dreadfully afraid that he thought her rude, 'because—because—everybody says you make things like—like blacksmiths do—with iron and metal stuffs like that.'

'Indeed,' said the gnome, 'and what then? Do you think we denizens of the under-world are as stupid as your clumsy workmen up above? Wait a bit; you shall soon see for yourselves.'

'You mustn't think Leonore meant to be rude,' said Hildegarde. 'You see we are only children, and we don't understand about wonderfully clever things.'

'Humph,' said the gnome, but he seemed pleased.

They had walked some little way by now, and once or twice their guide had stopped at what looked like a narrow passage between the rocks, as if uncertain if he should turn down it or not. Just then they came to another of these passages, and he looked back at the children.

'Follow me,' he said, 'and you shall see how we work. I am going to show you the manufacturing of the lucky pennies and horse-shoes.'

'What are lucky pennies?' whispered Leonore to Hildegarde. 'I think I have heard of them, but I'm not sure.'

'Never mind,' Hildegarde replied in the same tone. 'The gnomes won't be vexed with us for not knowing things if we are polite and admire their cleverness, and I am sure they *are* very clever.'

Then they followed their guide in silence, which soon, however, came to be broken by the sound of tapping, light sharp tapping, and in another moment or two, there was added to this a whizzing sound, and now and then short clear whistles. But the little girls asked no questions and made no remarks, till suddenly, the passage along which they were walking coming to an end, they found themselves in a very large rock-chamber—the sides of which towered up so high that their tops could not be seen, though everywhere the same clear rose-coloured light penetrated.

The air was fresh and pleasant, though not cold. The gnomes evidently possessed the secret of warming their habitation as well as lighting it! And now were explained the several sounds the children had heard as they approached the 'manufactory' as their guide had called it.

MANUFACTURING LUCKY PENNIES.

For the great room—one would have called it a cave perhaps, except that no cave ever was so lofty—was filled with a crowd of busy workers. Gnomes of course, some smaller, some a little bigger than the one who was guiding the children, but all as like each other as a lot of Chinese seem to us—and all apparently of the same age. A few were standing, but most were sitting, and in front of each was a small rock-table, on which lay tools of glistening silver. There were tiny hammers which explained the tapping, and little wheels

revolving so rapidly that when in motion they could not be seen. And every now and then a gnome lifted a kind of tube or pipe to his mouth, through which he blew with a whistling sound, on to the piece of metal he was working at. None of them spoke; they all seemed absorbed in what they were doing.

The guide-gnome signed to the children to come close up to one little earth-man and watch what he was doing.

He was beating a round piece of copper with his fairy-like hammer, and blowing upon it between times through his whistling tube.

'There now,' said the first gnome, speaking at last. 'Is not that better than your scorching furnaces? That tube is a heat-tube—every time he blows through it, it melts, or at least softens the metal, without any fuss or trouble.'

'Really!' exclaimed Hildegarde, 'what a good plan! I wish we had heat-tubes to warm our fingers with in winter.'

'Better not wish for anything of the kind,' replied their guide. 'You up-above people are a long way from such things yet. You'd only burn your fingers off.'

'Thank you,' said Hildegarde respectfully. 'I daresay we should. But will you kindly explain about lucky pennies. Is that one he is making?'

'Yes,' replied the gnome. 'You good, near-sighted people,' and he jerked his thumb upwards, 'don't see the difference. You don't know when you get hold of a lucky penny or not—but a great many are sent up to your world, all the same, and that is why some folk seem to succeed with you and some not. *Partly* the reason, that is to say, for the holders of lucky pennies must be honest, otherwise our coins do them more harm than good.'

'How wonderful!' said Leonore. 'But if you make such a great many, where do you send the others to? *All* our pennies are not lucky pennies.'

The gnome screwed up his eyes and looked at her.

'That's all I am at liberty to tell you,' he said. 'There are other worlds besides yours that *we* know about though you don't,' and Leonore saw that she was not to question him further.

'Perhaps,' she thought to herself, 'there are people in the moon after all, and some of the lucky pennies go there.'

The gnome seemed pleased by her respectful manner. He said something in a low voice to the little man they had been watching, who thereupon handed him

two bright copper pieces.

'Here,' he said, 'here is a souvenir for each of you—a real lucky penny. Never part with them except in direst need, which with them in your possession is not likely ever to befall you.'

The children were very pleased, and thanked him most politely.

'And now,' he said, 'as we pass on, you may glance at the other side of the manufactory, where we are employed on horse-shoes,' and he crossed between the rows of little men, each at his table, to where several were seated together at a larger one.

Hildegarde gave an exclamation of disappointment.

'What are they doing?' she cried. 'Mending *old* horse-shoes? What ugly things!'

'You foolish child,' said the gnome. 'How little you appreciate our skill! Of course the work they are doing is much more difficult than making pretty things. They are copying old horse-shoes after the clumsy earth fashion. Who would use a *new* one for luck, I should like to know, and how little do you people up there think when you pick up an old cast-off horse-shoe, as you think, what it really is, and where it has come from.'

Hildegarde felt rather snubbed. It was the first time she had forgotten the fairy's warning.

'How *very* clever!' she said.

'Yes, indeed,' Leonore agreed. 'I shall always pick up horse-shoes when I see them now. And if you please, Mr. Gnome——'

But her sentence was never finished, for just as she had got so far, their guide suddenly clapped his hands. There came a rush of cold air in the children's faces, so sharply, that without knowing it, they both shut their eyes. And when they opened them again, the big chamber and the busy workers had disappeared—they found themselves—still in the under-world, but in quite a different part of it.

Here the light was no longer red, but a pale pretty green—a green which did not make things or people look pale and sickly, but only cast a soft radiance, such as one sees in the woods in the early spring. And to add to this impression there was a faint sound of running or trickling water near at hand.

Hildegarde and Leonore rubbed their eyes and looked at each other; they almost

felt as if they were dreaming.

'Where have we got to?' said Leonore; but as she looked about her a little she saw that they were still surrounded by the high rocks which seemed to be the walls and boundaries of the under-world.

'And how did we get here?' added Hildegarde laughing. 'It felt as if we were *blown* here.'

'And so you were,' said a voice beside them, and turning, they caught sight of their old friend the gnome again. 'There was no object in tiring you with walking all through our domains—what brought you was one of our little inventions—the simplest in the world—for those who understand such things,' he added with condescension.

'And if you please where are we, and what are you going to show us now?' they inquired.

'You are at the entrance to our gardens, where I am going to show you our flower designs. You have doubtless never been told how many of your upper-world plants and flowers owe their existence to *us*.'

'Really!' exclaimed Hildegarde; and then, as a sudden thought struck her, 'oh, I *wonder*,' she cried, 'if those very, very queer flowers that we see in hot-houses and sometimes in gardens too—what do they call them—or—or—? I wonder if *they* are invented by your gardeners.'

The gnome smiled condescendingly.

'You mean orchids,' he said. 'Ah well, you will soon see for yourselves. And now,' he went on, 'I must bid you farewell, for the present at any rate, though who knows but that some day you may again visit the under-world. You will meet with no difficulties now. On leaving the gardens you may, if you like, pass through toy-land, and there you will see some of *our* children. That, I think, must be the limit of your sight-seeing—any more would be too much for you to take in. I have the honour to bid you adieu.'

He took off his cap with a flourish, bowing like a master of ceremonies.

'Goodbye, sir, and thank you very much,' said the little girls, but as they said the words, lo and behold the gnome had disappeared!

'That must be another of their inventions,' said Hildegarde, at which they both laughed.

All the same, in their hearts they were not quite sure if they were glad or sorry to be left to themselves, though neither liked to say so to the other.

They gazed about them. Behind were the rock passages they had grown accustomed to, but looking longer and dimmer, perhaps in contrast with the pale green light which had something more natural and more like the upper world about it.

And just in front of them was a curious sort of palisade—or paling—with openings at regular intervals, though too narrow to see anything through, unless one placed one's eyes quite close. And this it was not worth while to do, for another glance showed them a door in the paling, and a bell, of the same pattern as the one at the first entrance, only in silver instead of in bronze or copper.

Hildegarde rung it. The door opened almost at once, but no one was to be seen. So they walked in.

The change of scene was complete. It was a garden, but a very queer one. Instead of lawns of grass, there were wide spaces covered with fine glittering sand of different shades of green; the paths between were brown, and stooping closer to examine them the children found that they consisted of very small round pebbles, something like toffee drops, so smooth and yet elastic that they did not hurt the feet at all. But the flower-beds were the oddest of all. They were filled with plants and flowers of the strangest shapes and colours you can—or rather 'can*not*'—imagine. And when Leonore put out her hand to touch one, she started in surprise; they were made of fine metal.

So far, they had seen no one, but just as they were beginning to wonder which way they should go, and if they were to meet no more of the inhabitants of gnomeland, they saw toddling towards them the very queerest little figure they had ever seen out of a picture-book! It was that of a very *very* old gnome—'the great-grandfather of all the gnomes surely,' whispered Hildegarde to Leonore. And it was with difficulty they restrained their laughter.

Nor was it easier to do so when the little man came closer to them. He was so *very* comical-looking. But mindful of the fairy's advice, both children kept perfectly grave and greeted the newcomer with a low courtesy.

'Well,' was all he said, and then stood wrinkling up his face, though you would have thought he could not screw it any higher than it was, and blinking up at them with his funny little eyes. Somehow they did not feel much in awe of him after all.

'Well?' he said again, this time in a more questioning tone of voice.

'If you please,' Hildegarde replied. 'May we walk through your—garden?' She could not help hesitating a little at the last word, for somehow the more she looked at the queer place they were in, the less like a garden it seemed. 'We won't pick any of the flowers.'

'You couldn't if you tried,' said the old gnome.

'Why not?' asked Hildegarde. 'I don't see any gardeners about.'

'They are all at their supper,' he replied.

'Supper,' replied Hildegarde. 'How early they must have it.'

'We don't know anything about late and early,' he said. 'But young things like them need plenty of food. Why, I don't believe the eldest of them is more than three hundred years old, counting the way you do up in your country.'

It was all the children could do not to call out in astonishment; they did not do so, however, fearing it might sound rude.

'Do you count gardening easy work, then, if you put such young gnomes to do it?' Leonore inquired.

The gnome nodded—a sort of nod that took in things in general——

'This kind of gardening—yes,' he replied. 'It's only dusting the plants, and straightening the stems if they are bent, and raking the beds and paths. Designing's a different thing—*that* takes experience. But you can stroll through if you like, and see for yourselves,' and with another nod, he toddled off again.

'How old must *he* be,' exclaimed Leonore in an awe-struck tone, 'if he counts hundreds of years nothing! I wonder what he meant by saying we could not pick flowers if we tried.'

Hildegarde walked on to where a border of strange blossoms, brilliant in colour and most grotesque in shape, stood in perfect motionlessness. She touched two or three of them gently before she spoke. Then——

'Leonore,' cried she, 'they're *not* flowers. They're made of metal.'

Leonore sprang forward.

'Oh that's what he meant by saying they needed "dusting" and "straightening,"' she exclaimed. 'Oh, Hildegarde, how queer everything is down here—don't you think we had better go home?'

'Not till we have seen a little more,' said Hildegarde. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. My fairy wouldn't have let us come if there could be anything to hurt us.'

'No—not exactly that,' said Leonore, 'but it's all so *queer*.'

'Come along quickly then,' Hildegarde replied. 'I don't care for this garden, if there's nothing really alive and growing in it. But I daresay we will soon get to somewhere else.'

And so, before very long, they did. They passed quantities of flower-beds and rows, so dazzling in colour and extraordinary in shape that they felt as if they were looking through some fantastic kaleidoscope.

Suddenly a rushing noise made them glance round in the direction whence it came. It was soon explained—a crowd of gnomes were racing towards them; on they came, running, jumping, chattering, and shouting at the top of their voices.

'It's the gardeners,' said Leonore. 'Oh, Hildegarde, I am rather frightened—they might play tricks on us. Do let us get out of their way,' and Hildegarde, to confess the truth, was not unwilling to do so.

'Let us run down here,' she said, turning as she spoke, for they were just then passing a side row of high plants which could hide them from view of the approaching crowd.

No sooner said than done. They set off running at full speed, scarcely glancing where they were going, the noise behind them lessening as they ran, till it ceased altogether; and breathless, but glad to have escaped the bevy of gnomes, they at last stood still.

'Now,' said Hildegarde, 'let's look about and see where we've got to.'

CHAPTER VII

A COLLATION UNDER DIFFICULTIES

D'une façon fort civile.

Le rat de ville et le rat des champs.

They were at the opposite side of the garden from that by which they had entered it, and just before them was a large white tent. A faint sound reached them—a rustle and murmur, as of people moving about busily, but not of voices. The tent appeared closed, but as they went nearer they saw that there were doors or flaps in the stuff it was made of, which could be opened either from within or without.

Hildegarde turned to Leonore.

'We may as well go in,' she said. 'We weren't told not to, and we want to see all we can.'

Leonore was looking a little frightened again.

'We can't knock,' she said; 'there's nothing to knock on. And we can't ring; there's no bell.'

'So the only thing is to walk in,' said Hildegarde.

She drew aside the first flap they came to, and both entered.

It was a busy scene. There was a table right round the tent, and at it gnomes were working actively. A moment's glance sufficed to show that they were packing, for queer-shaped boxes and baskets stood about, and quantities of moss. For a minute or so no one seemed to notice the visitors. These gnomes were evidently not of the young and giddy class; they did not seem to be speaking to each other at all. The children drew still closer to the table. The gnome nearest to them was laying a bright scarlet flower, in shape like a large pitcher with half a dozen small jugs hanging round it, in a basket well filled with moss. He glanced at the newcomers.

'If you please,' said Hildegarde, 'are you packing flowers?'

'You can see that for yourself,' was the reply.

'Yes,' she agreed, 'but we would like to know why you are doing it—I mean where are all the packages to be sent to, and what for?'

'Who sent you down here?' asked the gnome.

'The spinning-wheel fairy,' Hildegarde replied.

The gnome's manner became more cordial.

'Ah well, then,' he said, 'I don't mind explaining things a little. She would not send idle folk to tease us; she is always busy herself. We are packing pattern-flowers. Our artists design them, and our most skilful metal-workers make them, and then we send them up to be copied again.'

'Up to our world, do you mean?' asked Leonore. 'I didn't know we had so many new patterns of flowers.'

The gnome shook his head.

'You don't,' he said; 'only a very few find their way to the place you come from. We send them first to the flower-fairies, and they copy them in common stuff—stuff like what all your flowers up there are made of,' with a tone of contempt, 'and then they send them off again—seeds or roots—whichever they think best, and that's how new flowers start.'

'But where do they send them to?' asked Hildegarde curiously. 'You say not many come to our world.'

'That's not my business,' he replied. 'Your world isn't the only one. You can ask the flower-fairies if ever you pass their way. Now I must get on with my work. If you cross the tent you will see the toy-packers at the other side.'

The children's eyes sparkled.

'Toys,' they repeated. 'Do you make toys down here?'

The gnome nodded.

'That's our principal dealing with your world,' he said. 'You don't mean to say you thought all the toys your shops are full of are made by clumsy human fingers! You should see our toy factory about Christmas-time. Santa Claus has a time of it, choosing and settling, I can tell you.'

Hildegarde and Leonore were breathless with eagerness.

'Oh, how interesting!' they exclaimed. 'Mayn't we see the toy factory? Do tell us

which way to go to get to it.'

But to their disappointment the little packer shook his head.

'Can't be done,' he said. 'Doors are closed to all visitors for six months before Christmas. That's the arrangement with Santa Claus. It would never do for it to leak out about the new inventions before the time. You can see some of the regular toys over there where they're packing, for even on them we're always improving.'

The children saw that it was no use persisting, for there was something very decided about the gnomes' manner even when they were the most amiable. And the small man was busily at work again. So they made their way quietly to the other side of the tent.

There they saw displayed, waiting to be packed, a good many toys they had often seen before, and some not so familiar. There were queer little doll gnomes, or groups of them for ornaments—not very like those the children had seen alive in one way, for as a rule the living gnomes were grave and pompous, and the figures were represented as laughing and rollicking.

'They must be taken from the young gnomes, the ones who are only two or three hundred years old,' said Leonore, smiling. 'But, oh, Hildegarde, do look at that doll-house furniture half packed over there. Isn't it too lovely? I've often wondered—haven't you?—how people's fingers *could* make such tiny things, but now I understand. Oh, I do wish we could have seen the toy manufactory!'

But it was no use wishing. None of the packers took much notice of them, so they thought it as well to pass out of the tent, trusting that somehow or other they would find their way home, for they were sure that the spinning-wheel fairy would not forget them.

And in this they were right.

A straight path between the rocks was before them as they came out of the tent, so there was no question of which way to go. They ran on fearlessly for some distance, till the passage they were following suddenly emerged into a large square, or 'round' rather, on all sides of which stood tiny little houses, each exactly like its neighbours, with a door in the middle, and a window at both sides. And at every doorway appeared a little gnome woman, with a gnome baby in her arms. You never saw anything so funny.

Hildegarde and Leonore stopped short in astonishment; they could scarcely help bursting out laughing, the whole scene was so comical.

'This must be the gnome village,' said Hildegarde in a low voice. 'I wonder how old these "babies" are—fifty or sixty, perhaps!'

Before Leonore had time to reply, one of the little women stepped forward. She curtsied very politely, and when she spoke her voice, though rather squeaky, was meek and gentle. It was evident that the Mrs. Gnomes were kept in good order by their lords and masters.

'We have received a message to tell us you would be honouring us with a visit,' she said, 'and we have prepared a little collation for you. May I ask you to step inside?'

She pointed as she spoke to the door of her own little house, and the children turned to follow her. But, alack and alas, with all the goodwill in the world, they could not have availed themselves of the good lady's invitation! The door of the cottage was not as high as their waists, and even if they had crept in, they could not possibly have stood or even crouched inside. It would have been a tighter fit than in a fair-sized dog's kennel!

'I am very sorry,' began Hildegarde, but she was interrupted by a burst of wailing. All the little women had rushed forward, each clutching her baby, and all the babies roared too, rubbing their fists in their eyes, and looking more grotesquely gnome-like—as indeed they had a good right to do—than ever.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' sobbed the little women, 'what *shall* we do? We never thought of our houses being too small for the gracious ladies, and our masters will be so angry if they find the collation has not been partaken of, for they sent strict orders by an electric bird.'

'An electric bird,' repeated the children, very much interested. 'Do let us see it,' but the gnome lady nearest them shook her head.

'It's gone back again,' she said, 'and it flies so fast you couldn't see it. It just whistles a message. Oh, it's quite a common thing; but, oh dear, dear, what *shall* we do about the collation?' and at her words all the other little women started wringing their hands again, while the babies screamed.

Hildegarde looked as if she did not know whether to laugh or to pity them, but Leonore felt very sorry for them; then a brilliant thought struck her.

'Supposing you carry it out here,' she said, 'to the middle of the square—the collation, I mean. We could sit down on the ground and eat it quite comfortably.'

And indeed so far as the *quantity* was concerned, there was not likely to be any

difficulty. 'If they've planned it according to their own size,' Leonore whispered to Hildegarde, 'we could eat it all up like a dolls' feast in half a minute.'

'Yes,' Hildegarde replied in the same tone. 'I only hope it is something we *can* eat. Not roasted flies, or anything like that.'

The little women had seized Leonore's suggestion with delight, and were now busily employed in carrying out the feast. They first placed a table—a huge table they evidently thought it, though it was only about two feet long—in the middle of the square, and then carried out the dishes, of which, the little girls were glad to see, there were not, after all, above half a dozen.

Then the gnome lady who had first spoken to them seated herself at one end, and Hildegarde and Leonore took their places on the ground at each side, the crowd of little women, rushing about to wait upon them, tucking their babies under one arm in an original fashion of their own.

'What may I have the pleasure of helping you to first?' said the small hostess. She had now quite recovered her spirits, and spoke in a very elegant manner, moving her hands airily over the dishes, having plumped down *her* baby on the ground beside her, where it lay quite contentedly sucking its thumbs.

'Thank you,' said Hildegarde, 'please give us anything you like.'

'It is a little difficult to choose, you see,' said Leonore, who felt quite at ease with the gnome ladies, 'as we do not know what the things are—though,' she added quickly, 'they look very nice.'

The small woman looked rather disappointed.

'They should not be strange to you,' she said. 'They are all—or nearly all—made of our upper-world supplies, as we thought you would prefer them. The dish before you contains blackberries, with just a touch of pine-cone flavouring; the one opposite is wild honey—we deal regularly with the bees through the flower-fairies, who understand their language. Then these are cakes of acorn flour, and the jelly at the other side is a special recipe of our own made from the moss which grows thickly where the streamlets trickle down from the upper world.'

'Thank you,' said Hildegarde again, 'may I have some blackberries? It is very late for them, isn't it?'

Their hostess shook her head.

'They are not freshly gathered,' she said, 'but they are just as good—nothing ever gets stale in our rock larders.'

'How very convenient,' said Hildegarde, as she tasted the blackberries. They were not bad, though they had a curious aromatic flavour. But after all, it did not much matter, as one good-sized teaspoon would have held all her helping!

Leonore had chosen a tiny cake and honey, and then their hospitable friend insisted on both children tasting every other dish on the table, which they had to do, though in one or two cases they tried to hide how very little they took. The moss jelly was decidedly peculiar!

'Aren't you going to eat anything yourselves?' Leonore inquired. The gnome ladies gave a wail of disapproval—such a thing was quite contrary to their ideas of good manners.

'Never, never would we be so rude,' they said. And the children, remembering the fairy's warning, said no more on this point, for fear of offending even these meek little women.

But they felt very curious to hear more of the ways and customs of their underground friends.

'Do you have all you eat sent down from our country, or from Fairyland?' asked Leonore in a very polite tone.

'Oh dear, no,' was the reply. 'Just occasionally. We have plenty of supplies of our own.'

'Do tell us what,' said Hildegarde.

Their hostess hesitated a little.

'You might not appreciate our national dishes,' she said. 'We are very fond of stewed frogs, and find them most nourishing, and a good fat toad makes an excellent dish.'

Even politeness could not keep back an exclamation of horror from the visitors, though they tried to smother it.

'Ugh!' said Hildegarde with a shiver.

'Ugh!' said Leonore. But Hildegarde went on speaking so quickly, that it is to be hoped the gnome ladies did not hear the 'ughs.' 'I think,' she said, getting up from the ground as she spoke, 'I think we must be going—don't you, Leonore?'

'Yes,' said Leonore eagerly, 'I am sure we must.' And when they were alone together, each owned to the other that she felt as if there must be toads and frogs all about! 'We thank you very much for your kindness,' they went on, 'and please

tell the—the gentlemen that the collation was excellent. And we should like to know the nearest way home, if you will kindly show it us.'

The little lady gnome got up from her seat and curtsied graciously. So did all the others, though the effect in their case was a little spoilt by the tucked-in baby gnome under each arm. Apparently the lady who had done the honours of the feast was the only one to whom it was permitted to deposit *her* baby on the floor!

She waved her hand towards the opposite side of the square, or circle of houses.

'You will have no difficulty in finding your way,' she said. 'All arrangements have been made.'

She did not press them to stay longer, so they bowed in return, most politely of course, and went off in the direction pointed out.

'Perhaps,' said Leonore, 'they are afraid of the gnome gentlemen coming home to supper and scolding them for having the collation outside. I should not like to be a gnome lady.'

'Nor should I,' Hildegarde agreed. 'Certainly the collation could not have been *indoors*. But I should have liked to peep into the houses—wouldn't you, Leonore? And I *almost* think I should have liked to pick up one of the gnome babies, though they *are* rather froggy.'

Leonore shuddered.

'Don't speak of frogs or toads,' she said, and she hastened on more rapidly. 'Do let us get away quickly,' she added. 'I have got such a feeling that we shall be treading on some.'

Hildegarde laughed at her.

'Nonsense,' she said, 'they couldn't live on this dry gravel or sand, or whatever it is. I expect the gnomes find them where the little streams trickle down. Oh, Leonore, I do hope we shall find our way! This path looks just exactly like the one we came in by.'

And so it did. But they had not far to go before all misgivings were set at rest by the unexpected appearance of a very fine gray donkey standing on the path before them. He was handsomely caparisoned, and a pannier hung at each side, large enough for a child of our little girls' size to sit in comfortably; and if any doubt remained in their minds as to what they were meant to do, it was soon put to flight, for as they came close up to the donkey, they saw that one pannier was

labelled 'Hildegarde,' and the other 'Leonore.'

'Oh, what fun!' they exclaimed. 'What nice arrangements the gnomes make! This time they have not forgotten how big we are. What a beautiful donkey!'

A very quiet donkey too, apparently. He stood perfectly still while the little girls mounted into their places, which was all very well, but he showed no signs of moving after they were settled either, though they shook the reins and begged him to gee-up!

Suddenly Hildegarde turned to Leonore.

'Leonore,' she said, 'I don't believe he's a live donkey! Feel him—he's quite cold—he's like the magic horse in the *Arabian Nights*, who moved by a spring. How can we find out how to make him go?'

They had no need to do so after all. Almost before Hildegarde finished speaking, a short shrill whistle was heard, and off the same instant started the donkey!

'Up,' I should say—rather than 'off.' For, greatly to the children's astonishment, they felt themselves rising from the ground. Up, up, up they went, the light growing gradually dimmer and dimmer, till but for a round spot which gradually appeared white, high above them, they would have been in total darkness.

'Hildegarde,' whispered Leonore, 'are you frightened? It's a nice feeling, going up so fast, isn't it, but I wonder where we are going to?'

The star of white light overhead grew larger; they became able to distinguish that they were in a kind of shaft; it was not cold or uncomfortable in any way, and the panniers in which they sat were easily cushioned.

'I believe,' began Hildegarde, but she did not finish her sentence. There came another whistle, softer and longer than the first, and something—was it a gentle hand, or the touch of a bird's feathered wing?—they could not tell—made both little girls close their eyes for a moment. And when they opened them again—where were they?

"WHO SENT YOU TO KISS US, YOU BREEZES OF MAY?"

CHAPTER VIII

TREE-TOP LAND

Where were you taught your song, little bird?
Who sent you to kiss us, you breezes of May?
There are secrets, yes secrets you never have heard,
Whispered breezes and bird as they fluttered away.

Song.

Where were they?

Why, sitting on the short thymy grass just behind the Castle, not a stone's throw from the old tree trunk where they had found the little door, which the golden key had opened.

They gazed at each other, then rubbed their eyes and gazed again.

'How did we get out of the panniers?' said Hildegarde. 'I never felt anything, did you, Leonore?'

Leonore's reply was another question.

'Have we been dreaming?' she said. 'No, of course it couldn't be that, people can't dream the same dream together; it is too funny and queer.'

'It's just what it is,' said Hildegarde laughing. 'We've been to gnomeland, and now we've come back again. And after all, Leonore, we haven't been two hours away. Look at the sun, it is not near setting yet, but of course in gnomeland, as they told us, they don't count time as we do.'

She got up as she spoke and gave herself a little shake.

'I want to be sure I have not been dreaming,' she went on. 'Even though I *know* I

haven't. Pinch me, Leonore, just a nice little gentle pinch to make me feel real, and I'll pinch you in return.'

The pinching made them both laugh, which took away the dreamy feeling better than anything else.

'And now,' said Hildegarde, 'I suppose we had best make our way home—to your home I mean, Leonore, as fast as we can. Grandmamma gave me leave to stay out till sunset, and Aunt Anna will be expecting us back in time for coffee.'

'Yes,' said Leonore. 'She hoped you would come back with me after our walk; but, Hildegarde, what shall we say if they ask where we have been?'

'Say?' repeated Hildegarde, 'why, that we have been up in the woods behind the Castle. We mayn't tell anything more, and I don't believe we could if we tried. That is always the way with people who have been to Fairyland, or at least part of the way there—besides——' but she hesitated.

'Besides what?' asked Leonore curiously.

'Oh,' said Hildegarde, 'I was only going to say that I am not sure but what Aunt Anna understands a great deal more than she says. There is something very fairyish about her sometimes. I don't think she'll question us much.'

'Perhaps,' said Leonore, in her funny rather prim matter-of-fact little way, 'she has been there herself when she was a little girl.'

'I shouldn't much wonder,' Hildegarde replied, and then they turned to descend the hill towards the village street.

'Hildegarde,' said Leonore as they were walking on, 'how shall we know when we are meant to crack the next two nuts?'

'I can't tell you just now,' her little friend replied, 'for I don't know myself. But I am quite sure we shall know in good time. My fairy won't forget about us, and she will tell us somehow.'

Fraulein Elsa was looking out for them at the gate. She welcomed them with a cheerful smile.

'You are just in good time for coffee,' she said. 'Aunt Anna sent me out to look for you. Have you had a pleasant afternoon?'

'Very pleasant indeed,' Hildegarde replied. The governess asked no more, nor did Aunt Anna, who was seated at the table, where there was a tempting display of the cakes which she knew to be Hildegarde's favourites.

'I thought you would be punctual,' she said to the children; 'you have been up in the woods behind the Castle, I suspect, and I hope you have brought back a good appetite?'

'Very good indeed,' they replied together, and at the same moment a funny thought struck them both. The 'collation' had not been of a kind to prevent their feeling hungry now! And Aunt Anna was quite satisfied with the way the cakes disappeared.

'I think I must be going home,' said Hildegarde a little later on. 'Grandmamma will like to find me there when she returns from her drive. May Leonore come to the foot of the Castle hill with me?'

'Certainly,' said Fraulein, 'and to-morrow I hope you may meet again, indeed every day, unless the weather should be very bad.'

'Oh in that case,' said Hildegarde eagerly, 'I hope Leonore will wrap herself up well and come to spend the day with me. Of course I could come here—I am not the least afraid of rain, or wind, or snow, or anything like that—but the Castle is so big and such a splendid place for playing in, when there is any one to play with, though it is rather dull all alone. And about to-morrow,' she went on, 'may Leonore come up immediately after dinner? Grandmamma would like to see her.'

To this request too, Fraulein willingly consented, and the two children set off.

'You have your nuts quite safe?' said Leonore, as they kissed each other in saying goodbye. Hildegarde nodded reassuringly.

'You needn't be afraid,' she said, 'after keeping them all these years, since I was a little baby; it isn't likely that I should lose them now, just when they've come to be of use. I should be more afraid of yours, Leonore, except that, to tell you the truth, I don't believe either of us could lose them if we tried.'

'Mine are quite safe,' said Leonore, slipping her hand into her jacket pocket to feel them, 'and I certainly won't risk trying whether they would find their way back or not.' And so saying she ran off.

Nothing came to interfere with their plans. The weather continued lovely, and the children spent every afternoon together. For the old Baroness, Hildegarde's grandmother, to whom Leonore was introduced the next day, was just as pleased on her side, as were Fraulein and Aunt Anna on theirs, that each, otherwise lonely little girl, should have a companion. And for two or three weeks nothing special happened. They searched in vain among the trees behind the Castle for the old trunk in which was the little door. No trace of it was to be seen. But this

scarcely disappointed them.

'It wouldn't be a magic door,' said Hildegarde, 'if it was always there, or at least, always to be found. No, Leonore, we must just wait till the spinning-wheel fairy sends us some message or tells us somehow what we are to do.'

To which Leonore agreed. Nevertheless, on many an afternoon they lay down with their ears to the ground near the spot where they believed the entrance to gnomeland to be, listening if no murmur of the queer underground life, which they had had a glimpse of, could reach them. But it never did.

At last one day Hildegarde appeared with a look on her face which told Leonore that she had something to tell, and as soon as they were by themselves she began eagerly.

'Leonore,' she said, 'I believe I have got a message at last from our fairy. I am not sure if it was a dream or if she was really there. It was quite early this morning before I was up, I thought I saw her standing beside my bed—her real self, you know, not the little old market-woman—she smiled and said, "You have been very patient children, and now you shall be rewarded. Crack two more of your nuts this afternoon when you are up in the woods. Throw high and throw together, and you will see." And then, when I was going to speak to her and thank her, and ask her to explain a little more, she was gone.'

'Of course it was a message,' said Leonore; 'let us hurry off as fast as we can,' for it was already afternoon. 'I should think the best place would be just where we cracked the first ones.'

'No,' said Hildegarde, '*I* think, as near as we can guess to the magic door, would be the best. Further up in the woods I mean, than where we cracked the nuts.'

So thither they hastened, full of eagerness and excitement.

'You crack first this time,' said Hildegarde, 'as I did the last.'

Leonore obeyed her, and both little girls peered anxiously into the nutshell. Their first idea was that it would contain some paper of directions, as had been the case before, but it was not so. On the contrary, the only thing they saw was a little mass of very, very fine colourless thread or silk, so fine indeed as to seem almost like cobweb. With the utmost care Leonore drew it out—it was stronger than it looked, for at one end was attached to it a small, delicately-fashioned silver hook, like the finest fairy fish-hook.

The children stared at each other.

'What can it mean?' they said.

Leonore gave the threads a little shake, one end dropped to the ground and, in doing so, unravelled itself.

'I see what it is,' exclaimed Hildegarde. 'It is a rope ladder, a fairy's rope ladder of course, for nothing stronger than a spider could possibly climb up it. Perhaps my nut will explain.'

So saying, she hastened to crack it, but to their surprise and momentary disappointment its contents were precisely the same as those of Leonore's nut.

'Well,' said Hildegarde, after a moment or two's reflection, 'we're evidently meant to find out for ourselves what to do with these queer things.'

'But the fairy did say something to you,' Leonore reminded her, '"throw high," wasn't that what she said?'

'Yes,' said Hildegarde, 'how stupid of me to have forgotten, we must be meant to throw these little hooks which are at one end up into the air, like the Indian jugglers I have heard about, and, as they are fairy hooks, I suppose they will find something to catch on to. "Throw high and throw together," was what she said, so here goes. Hold your hook carefully Leonore, as I do. I will count, and when I get to three we must throw—one, two——' And at 'three' both children flung up the tiny missiles into the air.

Up, up, they flew, or seemed to fly, as straight as a rocket, till nothing was to be seen but the quivering thread gleaming brightly in the sunshine, which at that moment broke through the branches. And then, so quickly that they could not watch the change, the fairy ladders grew and swelled, till the threads of which they were made were as firm and strong as tightly twisted fine rope. They grew taut too, the lower end disappearing into the ground, as if held there by invisible hands.

Hildegarde's eyes shone with delight.

"Tis plain what we are meant to do,' she said; 'we are to climb up.'

Leonore, on the contrary, looked a little frightened. 'Up to where?' she said timidly.

'Oh,' said Hildegarde, 'that remains to be seen, of course. Don't be silly, Leonore. I think it was far more frightening to go down underground than to climb up into the beautiful sky. Come along.'

And they set off on their strange journey.

It was not difficult after all. The rope felt firm and substantial, even though soft to the touch, so that it in no way rasped their hands. And when they got a little higher, they began to see that the hooks had attached themselves to the very top of an immensely tall tree, which somehow gave Leonore more confidence.

'I am not in the least giddy; are you?' said Hildegarde. 'I am beginning to feel like a bird.'

And Leonore agreed that she too felt perfectly at ease.

'That's what comes of having to do with fairies,' said Hildegarde with satisfaction; 'with a fairy like ours, at least. You see she plans everything so nicely for us.'

A few moments more and their heads were on a level with the topmost branches. Just as they were wondering what was coming next, they heard a voice a little above them.

'Jump,' it said. 'First Hildegarde, then Leonore; don't be frightened, I will catch you.'

Up they sprang fearlessly, for something in the voice made fear impossible, though instinctively they closed their eyes, and——. When they opened them again, there stood the spinning-wheel fairy, smiling at them, as they lay together on a couch of something soft and blue, soft yet firm.

'Are we on the other side of the sky?' asked Hildegarde. The fairy nodded.

'You are in tree-top land,' she said, 'the country of the air-fairies. When you have rested after your ascent, I will show you the way on, and before long you will meet some old friends. In the meantime I will draw up your ladders, for they may serve again, and we don't like wasting anything. I spun them for you myself long ago. I have a spinning-wheel up here as well as down below.'

She moved away, seeming to melt into the lovely blue which was all around them. But in a moment or two she returned again and held out a hand to each child, and, springing to their feet, Hildegarde and Leonore gladly took hold of her.

Then just before them, to their surprise, if they had still been able to feel surprise, they saw a little silver gate, which opened of itself as they approached it, and passing through with the fairy, they found themselves at the edge, of what they at first thought was a lovely lake of water, sparkling blue in the sunshine.

But there were no boats upon it.

'How are we to cross it,' asked Hildegarde. 'Surely this is Fairyland itself at last?' but their guide shook her head.

'No, not Fairyland itself,' she replied, 'though on the way to it. Real Fairyland is still far away. I can only do as I promised you—show you some of the countries that lie between your land and it. Boats are not needed here. What you see is not water but air, and with these you will easily make your way across the lake.'

So saying, she drew from under her mantle something white and fluffy, which proved to be two little pairs of wings, one pair for each child, which she slipped over their heads. They fitted as if they had always grown there, and, light as they had felt themselves before, Hildegarde and Leonore now seemed to themselves to be made of air itself.

'Off with you,' said the fairy laughing, with a little toss of her hand towards the children as if they had been two balls of thistle-down. 'When you have seen enough and want to go home you will easily find me; you have only to listen for the whirr of my spinning-wheel.'

And she was no longer there.

Flying or swimming, which was it? They could scarcely have told. For though their wings kept them up as lightly as any bird, their feet too seemed to move in time with their wings.

'Isn't it lovely?' said Hildegarde, and Leonore, who at first felt a little breathless, laughed back in agreement. But this journey through the blue soon came to an end. The wings seemed to be their guides, for they suddenly dropped on their shoulders, and the children found themselves standing in front of another silver gate, higher and more imposing than the former one. It glittered so that for a moment or two they were dazzled, but as their eyes grew accustomed to the brilliance, looking up, they saw worked in, among the silvery trellis, some letters, which with a little difficulty they spelt out.

'Singing-school,' were the words they read.

'Singing-school,' repeated Hildegarde, 'what can that mean?'

'And the fairy said we should soon meet some old friends,' added Leonore. 'Oh, Hildegarde,' and she held up her hand, 'I think I understand, listen.' They stood perfectly still and gradually sweet sounds reached their ears—a soft warbling as of many little voices in harmony. Then came a moment's silence, followed by the

notes of a single singer, then warbling again—and again another voice alone, trilling high, high, till it seemed to melt away in the distance.

'That was a lark,' said Leonore, 'the last one, and the one before a blackbird, I think.'

'Or a thrush,' said Hildegarde, 'yes, I rather think it was a thrush.'

But in the eagerness with which they had been listening, they had not noticed that the high gates had opened gently inwards, and in the centre between them stood two charming figures smiling at the children.

'Come in,' said one of them, 'we have been expecting you for some time.'

'Are you the air-fairies?' asked Hildegarde. She spoke with more confidence than to the gnomes; there was something so sweet and gracious about these pretty creatures that no one could feel afraid of them.

'Yes,' was the reply, 'and we are also the birds' singing-teachers. Here you will see many of your old friends—nightingales, larks, blackbirds, robins, all of them, even down to the poor little sparrows, whom we teach to chirp and twitter.'

'How wonderful!' exclaimed the children.

'Are they all the little young birds?' asked Leonore; 'no, of course not,' she added, 'they can't be, for this is autumn.'

'We have classes all the year round,' said one of the fairies, 'except in the very middle of your summer, when we give them a holiday, that you may all enjoy the bird concerts to perfection.'

They had been walking slowly onwards till now, through a wide passage, the walls of which were like the whitest marble, though without its hard coldness. And now the fairy opening a door signed to them to pass in, and as they did so, the music they had heard grew clearer and louder. For they were in the central hall of the great bird singing-school.

There they were, rows and rows of them, each family by itself, the smaller birds higher up, the bigger ones nearer the ground, and at the end of each row, perched a little apart from the others, was the head bird of his tribe—these, as the fairies afterwards explained, being the monitors of each class.

But the queerest thing was, that every kind of bird was there, even such as we never think of as musical in any way, for down the central passage were strolling some magnificent peacocks, long red-legged storks; and in a large basin of water

at the farther end, graceful swans, snowy ducks, and even homely gray-plumaged geese were contentedly enjoying themselves.

Hildegarde and Leonore gazed in surprise.

'Peacocks,' they exclaimed, 'peacocks and ducks and geese—why, none of them can sing!'

The fairy smiled.

'Ah,' she said, 'the ears that hear have something to do with true music; down below in your world it is not like here with us. Much that is true music sounds to you harsh and unlovely. Wait a little and you shall hear for yourselves.'

CHAPTER IX

A CONCERT

A kiss on each forehead and she was gone!

Fairy's Visit.

Greatly wondering, Hildegarde and Leonore followed the fairy to the end of the large hall, where there hung by silver cords from the roof two little seats, cushioned with the softest down.

'Rest yourselves in there,' she said; and though the little swinging chairs were a few feet from the ground, they sprang into them without the least difficulty, as their wings at once unfolded to waft them upwards.

'You may swing yourselves in time to the music, if it amuses you,' said the fairy; 'and now I must meet my sisters to get all ready for our concert.'

The children were well content to stay where they were, watching and listening with the greatest eagerness. A door at the farther end from that by which they had entered opened, admitting the sound of soft music, and in a few moments a procession of air-fairies appeared, marching two and two, each with some instrument on which she was playing.

They ranged themselves in the very centre of the hall, the two fairies who had received the children standing at each end of the group to command and direct. The music stopped; there was a flutter of excitement among the birds. Then the accompaniment of the instruments began again—softly at first, then louder, then sinking once more to gentler tones. But now—words fail to describe the wonderful sounds which filled the air in one great harmony, though to those learned in such things, and with ears endowed with the magic gift of perfect hearing, every little voice could be distinguished.

In such company the peacock's harsh cry sounded like a distant but musical call, the duck's quacking like the pleasant clatter of castanettes; all was lovely, for all

told of happiness and harmony, and the children felt as if they could sit there listening for ever. And when, almost suddenly, the music stopped in one great triumphant outburst, it seemed to them as if, for the first time in their lives, they had known what it was truly to *hear*.

Then came a loud, merry flapping of wings; the birds flew off their perches and soared about the hall, then ranged themselves again, and passed in rows before the fairies, with twitters of farewell before they flew, or hopped, or waddled out of the doors and windows of the great hall, many more of which had opened of themselves as the music ceased. The fairies who had taken part in the concert glided out, two and two, as they had entered, playing a soft, low march, and then the great hall was empty again, save for the two children and their two fairy hostesses.

At a sign from their friends, Hildegarde and Leonore sprang to the ground.

'Have you enjoyed the concert?' asked one of the fairies.

'Oh,' exclaimed the children together, it was too wonderful, too beautiful.' 'We can never hear anything like it again,' added Leonore half-sadly; 'down where we live the air is too thick and heavy, I suppose, to hear anything so perfectly.'

'Yes,' said the fairy, 'that is so; but those who have once heard can never again be as if they had not done so. You will always remember and be able to catch the echoes, though far away, of perfect harmony, even in common sounds.'

For a moment or two the children were silent; perhaps they did not quite understand, but they remembered, which was as good, or better.

'Is it time for us to go home now?' asked Hildegarde. 'The spinning-wheel fairy said we should easily find her, and she will show us how to get back.'

'There is no hurry,' said one of their friends. 'Would you not like to see a little more of our country? We are always busy, for we have much to do, but to those sent by the spinning-wheel fairy we have time to give.'

She held out a hand to each child, the second fairy smiling in token of farewell.

'I will go now, sister,' she said. 'I must see to some of the fledglings who are just beginning to chirp. For the birds come to us from all parts of your world,' she added, turning to the children, 'and it is not autumn everywhere, you know!'

'May we ask you questions?' said Hildegarde. 'You won't think it rude, will you? We were so afraid of offending the gnomes that we scarcely dared to speak when we were with them.'

'Ask what you like,' was the reply, 'and what I may I will answer. But we needn't stay here any longer. Outside you will see more of our country.'

Outside the great hall it was still brighter and more sunshiny than within, though over everything was the lovely faint blue haze which had met them when they passed through the first silver gate. It was like, and yet not like, a garden—for there was nothing distinct in the shape of plants or flowers, though everywhere beautiful tree-like forms, quivering amidst waves of opal colour, were to be seen.

'It must be something like the bottom of the sea,' said Hildegarde, 'where the mermaids live.'

'No,' said Leonore, 'I think it is just like the sky at sunset. I have often wished I could get up on one of the clouds and see over to the other side.'

'And now that is what you are seeing,' said the fairy.

'But please,' began Hildegarde again, 'if I may ask you questions, do tell me what you are all busy about, besides teaching the birds to sing?'

'I will tell you a few things,' said the fairy, 'though you would not understand if I tried to tell you all. We have charge of the zephyrs and the breezes. We send them out on their errands, and we have to see that each does its appointed task.'

'Oh,' interrupted Leonore, 'is this the home of the Four Winds?—is this the place where they start from, and meet again and make all their plans?'

The fairy shook her head.

'No,' she replied, 'the Four Winds are not fairies, they are spirits, and above us all; it is only the little winds, so to say—which are to the great ones like the little brooks compared to the great ocean—over whom we have authority. And,' she added more lightly, 'they are troublesome enough sometimes, I assure you—mischievous little imps—though they can be very sweet too, and seldom do real harm, and indeed, as a rule, a great deal of good. But for them your world would be dull and dreary.'

'Yes,' said Leonore, 'I should not like to live where everything was always quite still. And the little breezes are kind, aren't they? When it is very hot, it is lovely to feel one of them softly blowing round your face.'

'They are kind and tender too,' said the fairy; 'some of the gentlest among them are specially employed in refreshing poor sick people in their hot stifling rooms. They wait outside the windows patiently till they get a chance of entering. Then some of them spend most of their time in playing with little children, filling the

sails of their tiny boats, or flying their kites and shuttlecocks for them.' While talking thus, the fairy had led them onwards. But now she stopped in front again of another silver gate.

'Inside here,' she said, 'is one of the nurseries of the little clouds; we let them out every now and then for a race. Would you like to see them? It is prettiest perhaps by moonlight, but I must not keep you here till night.'

She opened the gate, and out flew a crowd of feathery forms, dancing, leaping, tumbling over each other in their hurry to escape; then at a sign from the fairy, off they flew, upwards, a dozen or more together, in a whirl and flutter.

You can scarcely imagine anything prettier than it was.

They flew so high that for a minute or two they were out of sight, then back they came again, some much in advance of the others, till the first one who had gained the race floated down to the fairy's feet, taking shape as it did so till it grew into the shadowy form of a little cherub, smiling up with its sky-blue eyes for its reward.

'Well done,' said the fairy. 'Now off you can go, all of you, for an hour or two; some little streams are very thirsty to-day, I hear, and will be glad to see you.'

And at once the whole feathery troop disappeared. The children turned to the fairy with smiling delight.

'How pretty and good they are,' said Hildegarde. 'I shall always think of you when I see the little clouds scudding across the sky—I have often thought they looked so alive. Do you never come down to our world yourself, fairy?'

'Oh yes,' she replied, 'we have to keep all the wind instruments in order. Some we bring back with us here to repair, in the middle of the night, so that nobody misses them; but some we work at down where they are, and people say the weather has changed, and that somehow their instruments have got right again of themselves. That is one of our secrets, you see.'

'I wish you would let us know when you come,' said Hildegarde.

'We wouldn't tell anybody, and I am sure we would gladly sit up all night.'

But the fairy shook her head.

'That cannot be,' she said, 'you would not be able to see me down there. Still, I can send you messages sometimes; the little breezes will always be glad to carry you my love or to kiss you for me.'

Suddenly she stopped speaking and held up her hand.

'Hush,' she said; 'yes, I thought I heard it. It is the spinning-wheel fairy—don't you hear the whirr? It means, I fear, that you must be going. Yes, there she is, though your eyes can't see her; she is almost straight above us. She has caught two of the little clouds on their way down, and is sailing on them.'

'How shall we get to her?' exclaimed the children.

'You forget,' laughed the fairy, 'you forget what wings are for,' and with the words she blew softly on their shoulders, the wings stretched themselves, and off flew the children.

The quickness of their flight made them close their eyes, and for a moment or two they could hear nothing but the rush of the air as they met it. Soon, however, came the sound of a now well-known voice.

'So I had to come to fetch you,' it said, 'instead of your looking for me. That shows, I hope, that the air-fairies entertained you well?'

'Yes, indeed,' said both the children. 'It was all so pretty, and they were so kind that we didn't feel the least frightened of offending them. It was quite different from gnomeland,' Hildegarde went on, 'and yet you say that both these countries are on the way to real Fairyland?'

'Yes,' replied their friend, 'so they are, and so are many, many others.'

'I wish we could see them all,' said Leonore.

'That would not do,' said the fairy. 'It would take you too much out of your own country, which is not good for any one. But now, dears, I want you to rest a little; even if you go to sleep it won't matter, while I am taking you home.'

She held out her arms, and both little girls nestled down beside her.

'Are you going to take us all the way home yourself?' asked Leonore. 'That will be very nice.' The fairy did not reply, but she began spinning again, which certainly no one but a fairy could do seated on a cloud, and with a little girl tucked under each arm. The soft whirr was very soothing and pleasant to hear; soon both pairs of eyes closed drowsily, and it seemed to their little owners that quite a long time had passed when they awoke, roused by the touch of a feathery kiss on their foreheads, and a softly whispered 'Goodbye, my dears, goodbye for the present.'

And again they found themselves among the trees a little to the rear of the

Castle. It was quite daylight, though the afternoons were drawing in now. They felt perfectly bright and rested, and looked at each other with happy faces.

'It was all too lovely, wasn't it?' said Leonore, 'and this time I don't feel as if we had been dreaming, do you, Hildegarde?'

Hildegarde was on the point of replying, when from far above their heads came the note of some bird as it flew by.

'To think that we know where you were taught to sing, you little dear,' she said, gazing upwards. 'There will be lots of things to remind us always of the air-fairies—every time we feel the little breezes on our cheeks, or see the clouds chasing each other across the sky!'

'And we have still two nuts left,' said Leonore. 'I wonder what will happen when we crack *them*, Hildegarde?'

'We must be patient,' was the reply; 'perhaps we may have to wait a good while before the time comes for that. But we must hurry home now, I think, or grandmamma may be getting anxious.'

For this day was one which Leonore was spending with Hildegarde at the Castle, as happened now and then for a change, especially when the weather was unsettled. And these were happy days; for the Castle, as Hildegarde had said, was a splendid place for playing in when there were two to play, though rather too large and lonely for one little girl by herself.

Their coffee and cakes were waiting for them in the little turret-room, which was Hildegarde's own when on a visit to her grandparents. And when they had thoroughly enjoyed these, for travels through the air naturally make little flesh-and-blood girls hungry and thirsty, Hildegarde took her friend to the drawing-room, where the old Baroness usually sat. She was a tall, fine-looking old lady, a little bit 'frightening' at first, till one got to know her, for her dark eyes were still bright and piercing, not like Aunt Anna's gentle, dreamy, blue ones. She spent a great deal of her time in working at beautiful embroidery, as her sight was still good, though in the cold weather, which was now coming on, she was not strong enough to go out of doors except on very fine days.

She looked up with a smile as they entered the room.

'Well, my dear children,' she said, 'I hope you have had some good hot coffee, for you have stayed out rather late, and the evenings are getting very cold. Soon you will scarcely be able to go out after dinner, especially as every one is prophesying that we are to have an early winter and a severe one.'

'We have not been at all cold, thank you, grandmamma,' said Hildegarde. 'I hope it won't be a very severe winter, at least not before Christmas—for do you know, Leonore,' and she turned to her little friend, 'that sometimes when it snows heavily here, we cannot even get from the Castle to Aunt Anna's house?'

'Oh dear,' said Leonore, rather startled, 'I shouldn't like that at all; it would be dreadfully dull if we couldn't be together at Christmas.'

'Dull for us too,' said the Baroness, 'for many, many years my dear friend, Fraulein Anna, has spent Christmas with us. But if there is any sign of snowstorms before then, the best plan will be for you three to come and stay at the Castle for a week or two.'

The children's faces lighted up with pleasure at the idea.

'In that case,' said Hildegarde, 'I shall almost hope for signs of a snowstorm. You have no idea how nice and warm the Castle can be made. Grandpapa loves huge fires, and the walls are so thick that once the rooms get well heated they don't get cold again quickly.'

'Not in your turret, I am afraid, Hildegarde,' said her grandmother. 'You will have to move out of it, I expect. Indeed, this very day I have been talking to old Maria about preparing a room for you on the south side. The turret-rooms cannot but be cold, as they have so much outer wall.'

Hildegarde looked a little distressed.

'I do so love my turret-room,' she murmured, 'unless,' and she hesitated, 'oh grandmamma,' she went on after a moment's pause, 'if I might have the blue-silk room. I should be so careful to keep it very nice, and in the alcove two little beds could stand, so that if Leonore comes to stay here we might be together all night as well as all day.'

Her grandmother smiled.

'We shall see,' she said, but even this seemed to satisfy the little girl. She jumped up and threw her arms round the Baroness.

'Most big people when they say "We shall see" mean "No," she said, but you are not like that, grandmamma. *Generally*, your "We shall sees" mean "Yes, you shall have what you want if it is possible."'

'I should like to see the blue-silk room,' said Leonore, half timidly, 'it is such a pretty name. Are the chairs all covered with blue silk?'

'Better than that,' said Hildegarde, 'the walls are hung with blue silk, and there are wreaths of roses worked at the top of the curtains and on the sofas and everywhere. Who was it that worked them, grandmamma? My great-great-great-grandmother, wasn't it?'

'No; two "greats" are enough,' said the Baroness, 'the embroidery was done by my grandmother; it is really wonderfully beautiful, and it is difficult to believe that one pair of hands did it all. So it is scarcely surprising that there should be an old story telling that the fairies helped my grandmother to do it.'

The children glanced at each other.

'I daresay it's quite true,' said Hildegarde, but her grandmother only laughed.

'Come now, my dear,' she said, 'you must not be too fanciful. The fairies who helped our ancestors were probably those of industry and perseverance—very good fairies too.'

'But now, my child,' she went on, turning to Leonore, 'I do not, of course, want to hurry you away, but I am afraid Aunt Anna and Elsa will be wondering what has become of you, besides which, I do not want you to catch cold through coming to visit my Hildegarde.'

Leonore started up. 'Yes, I must go,' she said.

Hildegarde accompanied her as usual to the foot of the hill.

'Ask Fraulein Elsa,' said Hildegarde, as they parted, 'to let you come to-morrow morning instead of my going to you, and I will get grandmamma's leave to show you the blue-silk room by full daylight. Then in the afternoon, I daresay, grandmamma will let me run down to you.'

'Yes,' Leonore replied, 'I should like that very much; I have a feeling, Hildegarde, that there must be something "fairy" about that room.' And so saying she ran off.

CHAPTER X

THE BLUE-SILK ROOM

For this let each remember—life cannot all be play.

New Year's Answer.

But the children's plans for the next day did not come to pass. Unluckily, Leonore had caught cold. It was nothing very bad, but she was subject to sore throats sometimes, which made Fraulein doubly careful, if ever she saw any symptoms of her having had a chill. And for some days to come the little girl was not allowed to go out.

At first she felt rather dull and depressed, but as her friends were soon satisfied that there was not much the matter with her, Hildegarde was allowed to come to see her.

'How did you catch cold?' were her visitor's first words; 'it couldn't surely have been from——' and she stopped short with a smile, for curiously enough the children did not talk very much when they were together, in an ordinary way, of their fairy adventures.

Leonore gave a little laugh.

'From riding on a cloud,' she said softly. 'No, I am quite sure it was not from that, though certainly if we told anybody about it, they would think it a sure way of catching cold.'

'They wouldn't believe it,' said Hildegarde, 'or at least they would think we had been dreaming, but do you know, Leonore,' she went on eagerly, 'I shouldn't wonder if some good came of your cold; it's only a fortnight to Christmas now, and what grandmamma said that last day you were at the Castle seems coming true. There are all the signs of a hard winter, they say, and though grandmamma hasn't told me so, I have a great idea that they are planning for you all to come and stay at the Castle with us.'

Leonore's eyes danced with pleasure.

'How lovely that would be,' she said, 'do tell me what makes you think so, Hildegarde?'

'Two or three things,' was the reply. 'I heard grandpapa talking about this house, "Aunt Anna's little house," he called it. He said the roof should have something done to it, in case of heavy snow, and that the bailiff should have told him of this before, for it scarcely could be done while the ladies were living in it. Then grandmamma smiled, and said that she thought the difficulty might be got over. And once or twice lately I have met old Maria on her way to the blue-silk room. One day, she and another maid were carrying mattresses and things in there, and when I asked her what it was for, she looked funny, and said something about airing things, and evidently didn't want me to go into the room, or ask her any more questions about it. So I shouldn't wonder at all if they are preparing for your all coming. You see grandmamma is like that; she doesn't do things by halves, and if you are to come, she would like to add to our pleasure by giving us the blue-silk room together.'

Leonore felt so excited that she could scarcely speak.

'I wonder how soon we shall know?' she said at last. 'It wouldn't do to ask Aunt Anna, or Fraulein, I suppose?'

Hildegarde shook her wise little head very decidedly.

'Oh no,' she said, 'if they wanted us to know they would have told us. If it is to be at all, it is to be a surprise; we must just be patient for a few days.'

Their patience, as it proved, was not very sorely tried. The very first day that Leonore was well enough to go out again without fear of fresh cold, she was met by Hildegarde at the foot of the hill, and Hildegarde's beaming face told its own tale.

'May I, oh may I tell Leonore?' she said to Fraulein Elsa, 'grandmamma has given me leave provided you and Aunt Anna have no objection.'

Fraulein could not help smiling.

'My dear child,' she said, 'there would not be much use in stopping you now; Leonore cannot but guess that there is a surprise in store; the very way you came dancing down the hill was enough to show it. But we must not keep Leonore standing. Come home with us and chatter as much as you like.'

And in another moment the secret, which of course Leonore had already

guessed, was told.

'You are all coming to stay at the Castle for Christmas,' she exclaimed, 'that is to say if your cold doesn't get worse, or——'

Here Fraulein positively laughed.

'And that was to be decided by testing, if it did her no harm to come out to-day,' she said. 'You should have waited till to-morrow, Hildegarde.'

The little girl looked rather penitent, but Leonore soon reassured her—

'Of course it won't get worse,' she said, 'I haven't the least, tiniest bit of a scrap of sore throat now; the only thing is,' she went on, 'that it doesn't seem as if any snowstorms were coming,' and she looked up doubtfully into her governess's face.

'But why should you want snowstorms?' asked Fraulein, 'one can be very happy at Christmas time, even if the weather is mild and the fields still green.'

'Oh,' said Leonore, a little confused, for she did not want to take away the pleasure of the 'surprise,' 'it was only that I thought——' and she hesitated.

Hildegarde came to the rescue.

'Oh,' she said, 'it was only that grandmamma had already mentioned something to us about your perhaps coming to stay at the Castle for Christmas, if the weather got very bad; and there was something about Aunt Anna's house needing repair. But all that doesn't matter now in the least. It is fixed, quite fixed, do you hear, Leonore?—that you are all coming next Monday, whether it snows, or hails, or thunders, or whatever it does.'

So far as the present was concerned, there was not much sign of any great weather disturbance, for the day was mild and bright, and Leonore was by no means the worse, but decidedly the better, for her little expedition. Both children, as children always do, whenever there is any pleasure in prospect, thought that the days would never pass till 'next Monday.' But pass they did, and it would have been difficult to find two happier little maidens than Hildegarde and her guest, when the rather lumbering old carriage, which had been sent to fetch the three visitors, drew up in front of the Castle door.

'Come, come, quick,' were Hildegarde's first words to Leonore, 'I am in such a hurry to take you to our room,' and scarcely allowing her little friend time to receive the greetings of the Baron and Baroness, and their two younger sons, Hildegarde's uncles, who had arrived the night before to spend Christmas at

home, she seized her little friend's hand, and hurried her off to a part of the Castle, which Leonore had not yet seen.

'Leonore,' she said, stopping to take breath, for though the steps of the staircase which they were mounting were shallow, she had raced up them at a tremendous rate. 'Leonore, it is as I thought, we are to have the blue-silk room.'

Up one other little flight they went, across a small landing and along a corridor, at the end of which a door stood partly open. A pleasant sparkle of firelight met them, and in another moment they were in the most fascinating room that Leonore had ever seen or even dreamt of.

As Hildegarde had described, it was all hung with blue silk, round which were worked lovely wreaths of rosebuds. And the remarkable thing was that the colours both of the silk and the embroidery were as fresh as if they had only just been made, though, as the Baroness had told her, Leonore knew that certainly more than a century and a half had passed since the room had first been furnished. She stood still, gazing round her.

'Oh what a lovely room!' she exclaimed. 'I had no idea any room could have been so beautiful, though you told me about it. But where are our beds, Hildegarde?'

Hildegarde laughed.

'That's the beauty of it,' she said, drawing back, as she spoke, the blue hangings at one end, thus disclosing to view a recess in which stood two little beds side by side. 'It is like several rooms instead of one, there are two or three alcoves that you don't see when the curtains are drawn at night; one of them has a great big window to the south, where it is beautifully warm. I think we shall call that alcove our boudoir.'

It was a delightful room, and the two children were very happy, till summoned downstairs to supper, in arranging the newcomer's possessions, and planning how they should spend their time during Leonore's stay at the Castle.

'We are sure to have a good deal of fun,' said Hildegarde, 'for the next week or so while my uncles stay; it is rather a pity that the hard winter that was talked so much about hasn't begun yet, for they would have skated with us.'

'I have never learnt to skate,' said Leonore, 'but your uncles look very kind, and perhaps they would have taught me.'

'Yes,' Hildegarde replied, 'I am sure they would; they are very nice, though not to

be compared with papa. If only he and mamma were here, and your father, Leonore, we should have everything we could want in the world, wouldn't we?'

'Even to knowing that we have still two nuts to crack,' said Leonore in a low voice.

Hildegarde's grandfather looked round the well-filled table with pleasure, when all had taken their places.

'This is much better,' he said heartily, 'than being alone, as we were last Christmas, not even our little Hildegarde was here. If only your father and mother and our little friend's father too,' he added kindly, turning to Leonore, 'were here, I should feel quite satisfied.'

'That is just what we were saying on our way downstairs,' said Hildegarde, 'I do believe grandpapa, you have something of a fairy about you too, to guess one's thoughts as you often do. Grandmamma is certainly a kind of fairy godmother, as well as being grandmamma. She plans such lovely surprises. Leonore and I are *so* happy in the blue-silk room.'

'Oh that is where you have taken up your quarters, is it?' said her grandfather. 'Well, you could not be anywhere better; it has the name of being the luckiest room in the Castle under fairy guardianship, not that I quite believe in such things, though I do think the Castle has some fairy visitors,' he went on more gravely; 'the fairies of love and kindness are with us I hope; indeed, when I look back through a long life, mostly spent here, I think we have been a specially favoured family. My own parents and grandparents were good and kind to everybody.'

'And so, I am sure, are you and grandmamma,' said Hildegarde eagerly.

Leonore looked up half timidly.

'There are other fairies too, the fairies of industry and perseverance, that your grandmother told us about,' she said to Hildegarde.

The Baroness overheard her.

'Yes,' she said, with a smile, 'they must have had a hand in the adornment of the blue-silk room.'

It was a charming nest in which to fall asleep, with the firelight dancing on the lovely colours of the sheeny silk, and it was a charming room to wake up in the next morning, when the first rays of the pale wintry sunshine began to creep in through the one window, which the little girls had left uncurtained the night

before. They were later than usual of getting up, for they had been later than usual of going to bed. Rules were to be relaxed somewhat during the Christmas holidays.

'Are you awake, Hildegarde?' said Leonore. 'Oh yes,' was the reply. 'Doesn't the room look pretty?'

Leonore raised herself on her elbow. 'Yes,' she said, 'and so beautifully neat. Did you tidy it at all after I got into bed last night, Hildegarde?'

'No indeed,' laughed her friend, 'I was too sleepy. I wonder if Amalia has been in already this morning without waking us.'

'I could almost fancy she had,' said Leonore, for I have a dreamy feeling of having heard some one moving about softly, as if they were putting things straight or dusting.'

Just then came the maid's tap at the door; but on being questioned as to whether she had been in before, she laughingly shook her head, owning that she herself had slept later than usual that morning—if the young ladies had heard any one arranging the room, it must have been a 'brownie.'

The children were not unwilling to think so.

'I daresay it was,' said Hildegarde in a whisper, 'it is only to be expected in a fairy room like this.'

And certainly the next few days passed happily enough to justify the pleasant belief that the blue-silk room brought joy to those who inhabited it. Though frost and snow kept off, and there was no chance of skating, there were plenty of other amusements out of doors, as well as indoors; for Hildegarde's uncles proved quite as kind as Leonore thought they looked, and planned pleasant walks and drives and games for the two little girls.

Then came Christmas itself, the happiest that Leonore had ever known, for her father had never been with her, that she could remember, at that season, and she had often, at home in England, felt it a little lonely. They had a Christmas-tree of course, a great beauty, provided with exactly the right presents for everybody, servants and humble friends connected with the Castle, as well as for the family itself and their visitors. And in the midst of all this enjoyment and excitement,

the little girls almost forgot that they had still two magic nuts to crack, when the right time should come.

Two days after Christmas the scene changed. In the first place, the uncles had to leave to rejoin their regiments—greatly to the little girls' regret, and then began the fulfilment of the weather prophet's predictions. There came sudden and severe cold, soon followed by a heavy fall of snow, accompanied by gales, such as were seldom known in that inland part of the country; weather indeed, almost approaching what is nowadays called a 'blizzard.'

At first the children found it rather amusing, though the Baron looked grave, as news was brought in of the destruction among his trees, and after a day or two, the wind fell, but the snow continued. And even when it ceased to fall, leaving the house was completely out of the question, so deep did it lie, and to such a height had it, in many parts, drifted. After some days of this enforced imprisonment, Hildegarde and Leonore began to think a snowstorm by no means a laughing matter. They had played all their games so often, that they were growing tired of them; they had read and re-read their books, of which there was no great number suitable for children in the Castle, and one afternoon, when they were by themselves, in their own room, they looked at each other rather disconsolately, the same question rising to the lips of both.

'What shall we do with ourselves?'

Fraulein had done her utmost to amuse them, but she too, by this time, was almost at the end of her resources, and they knew it was no use to apply to her again, unless they wished to begin lessons, in earnest before the holidays were over! So they sat down together on the floor, in front of the fire, half laughing at their own dullness.

Suddenly, in one corner of the room, they heard a little tapping; had it been summer, and had the windows been open, they could have fancied it the tap of a wood-pecker, so clear and dainty did it sound.

'What can that be?' exclaimed Hildegarde; 'listen, Leonore,' and again came the tapping.

The children held their breath to listen. Then——

THE UNSELFISH MERMAID.

CHAPTER XI

'THE UNSELFISH MERMAID'

The stranger viewed the shore around.

Lady of the Lake.

Leonore sprang to her feet, and as she did so something fell on the floor; it was her last remaining nut! She gazed at Hildegarde.

'Look,' she exclaimed, 'it dropped out of my pocket of itself; it means a message, I am sure it does. Where is your nut, Hildegarde?'

'Here,' was the reply, as she held it out.

'The time has come for cracking them,' said Leonore, and as she uttered the words the tapping in the corner of the room was repeated more loudly and rapidly, as if to say, 'Quite right, quite right.'

Then it suddenly stopped.

'Here goes,' said Hildegarde, cracking her nut as she spoke, and the two pair of eyes peered eagerly into the shell. There lay a neat little roll of tiny blue ribbon. Hildegarde drew it out. It was only an inch or two in length, but on it were clearly printed six words:—

Tap, tiny hammer, till you find.

But where was the tiny hammer? This question did not trouble the children for long. Without speaking, Leonore cracked *her* nut, disclosing to view, as they expected, a 'tiny hammer' indeed—so tiny that even the little girls' small fingers had difficulty in holding it firmly.

'How can I tap with it?', she was on the point of saying to Hildegarde, when, as she gazed, she saw the little hammer stretch itself out till it grew to an inch or two in length, the silver head increasing also in proportion, so that it was now much easier to grasp it.

'How convenient it would be,' said Hildegarde, 'if we could pack up luggage in the way things are packed into our nuts; but let us be quick, Leonore. I wonder where we should begin tapping.'

'In the corner where we heard the other tapping, of course,' said Leonore. But this did not prove to be the right spot. There was no reply to their summons, and some patience and perseverance were required to prevent their yielding to disappointment.

They had no reason, however, for distrusting their fairy friend, and a new idea struck Hildegarde.

'Leonore,' she exclaimed, 'perhaps we are meant to tap on the wall itself, behind the silk hangings. See, if I hold them back carefully, you can creep in and tap right into the corner.'

No sooner said than done, and this time not in vain. With almost the first blow of the little hammer, a small door in the wall opened inwards, and before them the children saw the first steps of a narrow spiral staircase winding upwards. They fearlessly entered, the little door closing behind them, and began to ascend the steps. It was not dark, for slits in the wall let in from time to time tiny shafts of light; nor was it cold, though where the warmth came from they could not tell.

'To think,' said Hildegarde, 'of there being a secret staircase that nobody knows of, for I am sure no one does know of it. But oh, Leonore, how very high we seem to be going'; for though they had been mounting for some minutes, there was no sign of the staircase coming to an end.

This time it was Leonore who encouraged her friend.

'Hush!' she said, 'I hear something; it is the sound of the spinning-wheel, Hildegarde; I believe we shall see our fairy in a second now.'

She was right. They found themselves on a little landing, the entrance to which was screened by blue silk hangings, just like those in their room below, and as they stood, uncertain what to do next, the curtains were drawn apart, revealing the prettiest picture they had ever seen; for there sat the spinning-wheel fairy, busy at work as usual, but the thread she was spinning was neither flax nor wool, nor even silk. What it was the children could not tell, unless, as they said afterwards to themselves, it was made of rainbows. Fine as it was, it glittered and shone, seeming of every colour in turn, sparkling against the pure white robe of the fairy spinner. For a moment or two she did not speak to them, and they stood silent in admiration.

Then she stopped and greeted them with a smile. 'I had not forgotten you, you see,' were her first words. 'I have been spinning for you all to-day.'

'Are you going to take us somewhere?' asked Hildegarde; 'is the thread to make ladders of again?' and she touched it gently as she spoke.

The fairy shook her head.

'No,' she replied, 'guess once more.'

'I had thought,' said Leonore, 'that our next treat would perhaps have to do with the sea. We have been down in the ground with the gnomes, and up in the sky with the air-fairies, and we don't want to go into fire-land, but we *should* like to hear about mermaids and sea-fairies.'

'I could not show you the secrets of the ocean,' said the fairy gravely; 'that is not in my power. It has its own voice, and only those who live on it, or by it, for generations can understand its mystery. True, it is one of the border countries between your world and Fairyland, but your little feet are not prepared for travelling there.'

The two children listened in silence, with a look of disappointment on their faces.

'We have read such lovely stories,' said Hildegarde, 'about the palaces down in the sea.'

'Stories,' repeated the fairy. 'Ah, well, how would you like to hear a story, instead of paying another visit?'

'We should like it very much indeed,' they said together. 'It is so cold and snowy outside, we would rather stay with you, if you will tell us stories, dear fairy,' 'But first,' continued Hildegarde, 'would you mind telling us where we are?' and she glanced round at the pretty little room in which they found themselves. It was like a tent, all draped in blue silk, of the same shade as the hangings of their room below, but the wreaths embroidered upon it were of white lilies instead of rosebuds. 'Are we up on the roof of the Castle, or where?'

'Never mind where you are,' the fairy replied; 'is it not enough for you to know that you are with me? But something I *will* explain to you. This thread,' and she touched it as she spoke, 'is spun from gossamer which has come from a long way off. I fetched it myself for you from Fairy-tale-land. Sit down beside me while I pass it through your fingers. Hold it very gently, for a rough touch would destroy it, and while I tell you my story close your eyes. The thread has the power of

causing pictures to pass before you of all that I relate.'

'That will be beautiful,' exclaimed the children. 'Quite as nice as travelling there ourselves, and much cosier,' and they both settled themselves on a soft white fleecy rug at the fairy's feet, while she carefully caused the rainbow thread to pass through their hands.

And in a moment or two she began her tale.

'You have asked for a story of the sea,' she said. 'There are many such—many, many—but some too sad for my little girls to hear—sad, that is to say, for those who are not yet able to understand the whole of the mystery of the great ocean. So I have chosen one which, though partly sad, is happy too.'

'Thank you,' murmured the children dreamily, for their eyes were already shut, and with these first words of the fairy there began to steal over them the feeling of the sea, though scarcely yet a picture. But they felt or saw the gleaming of the water, the rippling of the little waves on the shore, the far-off boom of the greater ones as they dashed against some rocky cliffs; nay, more, the very fragrance of the sea seemed to steal upon them as the magic thread passed slowly through their little fingers.

'Long, long ago,' continued the fairy, 'down below in one of the most beautiful parts of the ocean world, there lived a race of sea folk. Their lives are much longer, as I daresay you have heard, than those of dwellers in your earth-country, so that the youngest of those I am telling you of counted her age by scores of years, where you count by one, and yet, compared to many of her companions, she seemed still quite a child. Until now, childish things had been enough for her. Day after day brought its own delights; playing about among the sea-caves; swimming races with her brothers and sisters; adorning their home with rare sea-flowers and wonderful shells, to get which they thought nothing of journeying hundreds of miles; these and such-like pastimes were enough for the little sea-maiden. She had even, so far, no wish to rise to the surface and look out beyond the ocean borders; it would frighten her she said, or maybe she would see something sad, and she had no mind to be frightened or saddened, she would say laughingly, as she swam off, on some new game of play, heedless of her elders' reminders that it was time, even for a mermaid, to begin to take life more seriously. But at last a time came, even to this thoughtless little sea-maiden, when she began to think. It was partly the doing of one of the most aged of her race, one to whom all looked for counsel and advice, one who knew much more than even her own people suspected, and whose heart was full of love for all

living things.

"'My child," she said one day to Emerald, for such was the name of that little sea-maiden; "my child, does it never strike you that you cannot always be young? A day will come when you will be old like me, and dull and dreary would my life be now if I had no stores of the past to look back upon; if I had learnt nothing but to amuse myself, without thought for the future."

'Emerald looked up at her with a smile.

"'But that time is still far off," she said, "and I am so content with the present. It is all so bright and happy. I want nothing else. When I feel myself beginning to get tired of fun and play, I will come to you kind grand-dame, and you shall teach me some of your knowledge, of the worlds outside ours, and of the beings that live in them."

"'When that day comes," said the ancient sea-lady, "I shall be no longer here, and, after all, knowledge is not the greatest thing. I would fain see your heart enlarged by wider sympathy, my little one; even if some sadness and sorrow come with it," but the last few words she murmured so low that Emerald did not hear them.

"'What are the memories of the past that make you happy to remember now?" said Emerald, suddenly, for something in her old friend's words had touched her, in a way she had never felt before.

"'They are many," was the reply, "some you could not understand; others you might already learn for yourself. I love to think of the services to others I have, in my time, been allowed to render. More than once it has been my happiness to save the lives of dwellers on the land, human beings, as they are called. I have saved them when they were drowning and carried them in safety to their own shores, little as they knew that it was my doing, or that the friendly wave which floated them out of danger was in reality the arm of a mermaid. I have sung sweet songs and lullabies to the suffering and weary in the great ships that pass above us, or even, sometimes, to the fishermen's children in their humble homes on our borders, soothing them into life-giving sleep, though they thought my song was but the gentle wailing of the wind. Such services as these, Emerald, you might soon take your share of; for like all our race you have a lovely voice, and our gift of song should ever be used for good, if our hearts are true, and not to lure human beings to destruction. For after all they are our brothers and sisters."

'Emerald thanked her gently as she swam away, and the words she had heard

took root in her merry little heart. Especially did she like the idea of using her beautiful voice to please or benefit others—those strange dwellers on the land, whom she had often heard about, though not till now with any wish to see or know them for herself. They were to be pitied, she had been told, for life was hard upon them; toil and pain and weariness, such as her race knew nought of, seemed to be their common lot. And among the best of her own people she knew, too, that it was accounted a good deed to minister to them. So from that time Emerald began to pay more attention when she heard her friends or companions talking together, as often happened, of their excursions to the upper world and of what they saw there.

'"Some day," she said to one of her older sisters, "some day I should like to go with you when you swim up to the surface, or when you sit among the rocks and caves on the shore, watching the ships pass, and hearing the talk of these human beings in the little boats, which you say they love to sail in when the weather is calm."

'Her companions looked at her in surprise.

'"Why, Emerald," said one of them, "you have always been content, and more than content, to frolic and play in our own beautiful world. I think you would do better to stay there; the weather is not always bright and calm up above, and there are sad sights and sounds, such as you have no idea of."

'But the little mermaid persisted.

'"All the same," she replied, "I should like to see and hear for myself. I am growing older now, and new thoughts come when one ceases to be a child."

'Some time passed, however, before she had any opportunity of following the counsel of her aged friend. There were great doings just then in the sea-country, for the daughter of the king was to wed with the son of another great ocean sovereign far away on the other side of the world, and the only talk that went on was of festivity and rejoicing, and in this Emerald was ready enough to take her share. One day, however, when she was amusing herself as usual, she came upon a group of her friends who were consulting together earnestly about some matter of importance.

'"What are you all talking about?" she asked.

'"Nothing that you can help in," was the reply, "for you know nought of such matters. Our princess has expressed a wish that among her wedding gifts should be something from the upper world. She is tired of all our ocean treasures, and

would fain have something rarer and more uncommon."

"'What sort of thing?" asked Emerald curiously.

"'Nay," they answered, "that remains to be seen. There are not many things within our power to get, as we dare not linger long on dry land, nor many things that would preserve their earthly beauty, if brought down here to our sea home. The flowers, for instance, are such poor frail things; they would wither into nothing at once. It is a serious matter, and we are arranging that the cleverest and most experienced of us should be entrusted with the matter."

'Emerald clasped her hands in appeal. "Oh, I pray you," she said, "let me be one of those whom you send. True, I have never been up to the surface before, but I am quick and agile, as you know, and young like the princess herself. I am sure I could find something that would please her, if you will but let me go too."

'The elder ones smiled at her, but she was a sort of spoilt child among them, and any request of hers was rarely refused. So almost to her surprise her wish was granted, and the very next day the little party set forth on their voyage upwards.

'It was somewhat toilsome work for Emerald, unaccustomed as she was to ascending to any distance, and when at last they reached the surface, she was half exhausted, and thankful to rest a little with her companions on a small islet, not far from the shore.

'After a short while, when they felt refreshed, the little party of mermaids separated, agreeing to meet again at the same place, before the sun should set.

"'But we cannot tarry here long," said the eldest, "so do not let us wait for each other more than a short time"; for it was scarcely safe to show themselves much so near the shore, for among the human beings on the land there were, as the sea-folk well knew, cruel and mischievous ones, as well as kind and gentle.

'The eldest sister wished to take Emerald with her, as the child was so unaccustomed to the strange land, but Emerald begged to be allowed to stay by herself.

"'I shall be very cautious," she said, "and if you do not find me here on your return, you may be pretty sure that I shall have gone home already. I have a strong belief that, if you trust me, I shall find something that will delight the princess as our wedding gift."

'So the others swam away, leaving Emerald alone. She remained on the rocks for a little while gazing around her, then taking courage, she dived into the water

again, and swam straight to the shore.

'The coast at this part was very pretty, green lawns, bordered by graceful trees, sloped down almost close to the water's edge, and on rising ground, a little inland, Emerald perceived the white walls of a beautiful house. "A palace"—she called it to herself, for in the sea country their king and his court lived in a shining dwelling, adorned with shells and coral, and other ocean treasures; while the rest of his people made their homes in the deep sea caves.

'She nestled into a shady corner, sheltered by some drooping trees and flowering shrubs, finding pleasure and amusement enough in gazing at the pretty scene around her,—"though I wish," she said to herself, "I could see some of these wonderful human beings that the others talk so much about." And after a time, she began to ask herself how and where she was to seek for the treasure she had felt so confident of finding for the princess?

'She was too timid to venture ashore altogether, so she sat there, idly dabbling in the clear water, waiting for something, she knew not what, which would put her in the way of redeeming her pledge. Suddenly, the sound of voices reached her ears. Down a sloping path, through the pleasure grounds, two children came running—one some yards in advance of the other, the second one being rather taller and bigger than the little creature in front whom he was playfully pretending to chase. On ran the tiny girl, shouting in glee at the idea of winning the race. She was scarcely more than a baby, and the boy behind her was also very young. As they drew yet nearer to Emerald, she saw that the first comer held in her hand something which sparkled in the sun—it was a necklet of finely wrought gold, which she had run off with in a frolic.

'With a cry of triumph she ran to the water's edge, at a spot where the bank dropped suddenly, and flung the ornament into the sea, close to where Emerald was concealed; then turning to call back to her brother, in defiance, her little foot slipped, and she herself in another moment disappeared from sight.

'With a cry of terror the elder child was about to throw himself after her, when the nurse in charge of them, whom the mermaid had not before noticed, darted forward and caught him by the arm, herself uttering shrieks of dismay and calls for help. Her cries almost immediately brought down two or three gardeners, one of whom, on hearing what had happened, pulled off his coat and flung himself into the water. He struck out bravely, for he was a good swimmer, and felt no doubt of rescuing the child, knowing the exact spot where she had fallen in; but to his surprise, clear and almost shallow though the water was, the little creature

was nowhere to be seen. She had utterly disappeared!'

CHAPTER XII

'THE UNSELFISH MERMAID' (*continued*)

What then?—the saddest things are sweet.

Boy Musician.

The spinning-wheel fairy stopped for a moment.

'Oh, go on, go on, please,' said the two little girls. 'It is so interesting, and it has been just as you said; we have seen the pictures of it all gliding before us, as the thread passed through our fingers. Do go on, dear fairy; it must be that Emerald had caught the little girl.'

'Yes,' the fairy continued, 'so it was. Small wonder that her rescuer could not find the child. She was lying safe, though as yet unconscious, in the mermaid's arms, the golden chain thrown round Emerald's own neck, for she had found it when she stooped to take up the baby. As yet the sea-maiden scarcely realised what she had done, in yielding to the impulse of hiding the child from her friends. And it was not till they had left the spot, in the vain hope that the little creature might have drifted farther down the coast, that Emerald dared to breathe freely, and think over what had happened. By this time her little "treasure-trove" had half opened her eyes, and murmured some baby words, for, after all, she had been but momentarily under the water. Emerald had no difficulty in soothing her, and in a minute or two the little girl sank into a sweet and natural slumber. Then, without giving herself time to think, her new nurse, drawing out a tiny phial, without which no mermaid is allowed to swim to the surface, poured out of it a few drops of a precious liquid, with which she anointed the baby's face and lips. This liquid has the magic power of enabling a human being to live under water without injury, and of restoring to life those on whose behalf all the science of the landsmen would be exerted in vain.

'"Now, my darling," she whispered to herself, "you are safe, and you belong to me. I can carry you down to our beautiful home, for it must be that you are

meant for me, and the jewel, which your little hands flung before you, is the gift that I was to seek for our princess."

'And so saying, though casting cautious glances on all sides, she swam rapidly away till she reached the rocky islet where she had parted from her sisters. There, being well out of sight of the shore, she rested for a time. No one as yet but herself had reached the meeting-place, which Emerald by no means regretted. She wished to have the pride and pleasure of exhibiting her treasures down below to all the mermaids who were joining in the gift to the princess, when they assembled together to hear the result of the expedition. Possibly, too, at the very bottom of her heart there may have been hidden some little misgiving as to her right to carry away the child, and she may have dreaded her elder sisters' opinion as to this. As regarded the golden necklet, her conscience was quite at rest, for before leaving the shore she had placed there some of the rare shells and pearls which the sea-folk knew to be so highly valued on land, that they were ample payment for anything they might carry off with them from the upper country.

'Now, rapidly, she made her way homewards, seeking her own little bower at once, and there, on her couch, she laid the still sleeping child; then drawing from her own neck the beautiful chain, she sought about for the prettiest shell she could find, in which to lay it ready for the princess's acceptance.

'Before very long she heard the voices of her sisters and friends returning; she hastened out to meet them. Her eldest sister gave an exclamation of pleasure as soon as she caught sight of her.

'"Oh, Emerald," she cried, "I am so glad to see you. We couldn't help feeling a little anxious at not finding you on the rock; it seems you did not enjoy your visit to the surface, as you hastened back so soon."

'"That was not my reason for returning so quickly," said Emerald, with a smile. "I found what I sought"—"and more too," she added to herself in a low voice —"so there was no reason for delay. See, sisters, and all of you, what I have found. Could anything be prettier or rarer as a gift to our princess?"

'Her companions crowded round her eagerly, and all united in admiring and approving of the beautiful gold ornament.

'"And you shall have the full credit of having found it, little Emerald," they said; "but for you we should have been sadly discouraged."

'For they had returned either empty-handed, or at best bringing trifles, scarcely

worth offering to the princess.

'The chain was carefully put away till the next day, when it was to be presented, and then the little crowd dispersed, which Emerald was glad of, as she was anxious to confide to her most trusted sister the secret of the *living* treasure which she had hidden in her bower.

'The elder mermaid looked at the sleeping child with startled eyes.

'"Emerald," she exclaimed, "you did not steal her surely?"

'"No, no," the little mermaid replied, "she fell almost into my arms—but for me she would have lost her life; she is mine, my very own, and I do not pity her people for losing her; they should have taken more care of the little darling."

'Just then the baby awoke and gazed about her in surprise. Then her little face puckered up for a cry at the strangeness of everything she saw, but before she had time to utter it Emerald caught her in her arms.

'"My sweet," she said, and the child looked up at once at the sound of the lovely voice, "my sweet, you must not cry, I have so many pretty things to show you. You shall be quite safe and happy here with us in the beautiful sea."

'The little girl looked up at her, and a smile gradually broke over her face.

'"Show me the pretty things," she said, "and then, then you will take me home, kind lady, won't you? home to brother and nurse and mamma—they will cry if baby doesn't come soon."

'Her sister glanced at Emerald as she heard these words, but the younger mermaid would not see the glance.

'"Baby shall see all the beautiful things now at once," she replied; "she shall catch the little fishes in her hands as they swim past, and gather the pretty sea-flowers and pick up shells, such as you have never seen. And I will sing songs to baby, such pretty ones." The little creature smiled again.

'"Baby would like that," she whispered. "Baby will take the pretty flowers and shells home to show brother and nurse."

'"Yes, yes," said Emerald hastily, "baby is going to be such a happy little girl," and then, taking her hand, she led her away to the sea-gardens round the palace, amusing her so well, and singing to her when she grew tired, that at first it seemed as if all thought of her home and former life would soon fade from her infant memory.

'And thus things went on for some little time. While the child was happy and merry, she seldom spoke of returning to the upper world; but if anything crossed her baby wishes, or at night when she grew sleepy, her cry was sure to be again, "Oh please, kind lady, take me home."

'Then Emerald would rock her in her arms, and sing to her the wonderful songs of the mermaidens, so strange and lovely that the child seemed bewitched by them, and her little face would lose all look of distress. And when this happened, Emerald's spirits rose again and she would murmur to herself, "My darling is growing quite happy and contented. I shall never need to part with her. The upper world would seem coarse and clumsy to her now."

'The young mermaid's own character seemed quite changed by the charge of the tiny foundling. Instead of being the first to propose new games of play, or even mischief, she now grudged every moment that separated her from the little human girl, and her companions often rallied her about her devotion to her "new toy," as they called it.

'"You will get tired of her after a while," they said, laughing. "You are too young to make yourself into such a mother-slave to her. Why, no one would know you for the same maiden!"

'But Emerald only smiled in return.

'"I shall never get tired of her," she said; "she is my own treasure-trove."

'Nevertheless, during all this time some misgiving, low down in her heart or conscience, made her keep away from the aged sea-lady, who had often in time past reproved her for her thoughtlessness. Why she did so she excused to herself by saying she had no leisure now for anything but care for the little girl.

"And the great-grandmother could not but be pleased if she knew how my time is spent," she would say to herself; "she was always the one to tell me to be of use to others and to be more sedate, and I am certainly now following her counsel." Yet notwithstanding these assurances to herself, she took care that in their playing and gambolling she and the baby should keep away from the cave where dwelt the aged grand-dame.

'So time went on. It passes perhaps more quickly, or its passing is less noticed, down in the under-world of the ocean, than with the dwellers on the land. It seemed to Emerald but a few days since the coming of her little pet, when her happy belief that all was right received a sudden blow. Baby was growing big now, for nearly as much of her life had by this time been spent in the sea as on

land, and Emerald had fondly hoped that all remembrance of her own home had faded from the child's mind. The princess arrived one day on a visit to her parents. Emerald had always been a favourite of hers, and meeting her playing in the palace gardens with her little charge, she stopped to speak to them.

"'Ah, Emerald," she said, "so this is the pretty child you saved? I have heard of her. How well you have treasured her, and I, too, have been careful of *my* treasure." She touched the long golden chain hanging round her neck as she spoke, and playfully tossed it towards the little girl, who caught it, laughing. But as she looked more closely at the golden links in her fingers, a change came over her little face; it grew troubled, and Emerald, fearful lest she should begin to cry, made some excuse to the princess and carried her away, talking merrily as they went. But the child's face did not clear.

"'Emerald," she said, for by this time she could talk quite perfectly, "something has come back to me. I remember that pretty chain. I threw it into the water, when brother was running after me. Oh, Emerald, I want to go home to him and the others. You may come too, dear Emerald, but I must go home."

'Her words sent a thrill of fear through the heart of her young sea-mother.

"'Oh, baby darling," she said, "what has put such fancies in your little head? Are you not happy with Emerald and all your pretty toys and games? Emerald cannot go away from her own country, and she would be too miserable without you. And you—you would cry sadly at night, if she was not there to sing you to sleep."

'And the trouble on the mermaiden's face, as she spoke thus, grieved the little girl, for she had a tender heart. She gently stroked Emerald's cheeks, and said no more for the time. But from that moment, ever and anon, there crept into her soft blue eyes the strange, sad, far-away look which told that the charm was broken. She was pining for her own race and her own land.

'Emerald tried not to see it, tried to persuade herself that the child would be miserable away from the sea country, that it would be cruel to the little creature herself to restore her to her friends. Gradually, however, it became impossible to go on deceiving herself. Baby grew thin and pale—every one noticed it. Though gentle and tender as ever to her mermaid nurse, it was rarely now that her voice was heard in laughter or glee; and her smiles were even sadder than the wistfulness in her face.

'But all this time, though Emerald knew it not, her aged friend had kept watch over her and her new experience; and one day there came a message, bidding her

go to the grand-dame's cave, as she had something to say to her. This was a summons no young mermaid would have dared to disobey, and so, holding the little girl as usual by the hand, she made her way thither.

'Her old friend looked at her earnestly.

'"It is long since you have been to see me, my child," she said, "and this is your little charge."

'She drew the little girl towards her as she spoke, and kissed her.

'"Are you happy with Emerald?" she asked her gently. The child's pale face flushed deeply.

'"Emerald is very good to me," she replied, "and sometimes I am very happy, but I have a pain here," and she touched her heart. "I want to go home, I want to see brother and mamma and nurse again; until I do, the pain won't go away."

'"It will get better soon, I think," said the sea lady, and then she drew the child's attention to a charming rockery in one corner of her cave, so that she could speak to Emerald without being heard.

'"You have known this, I fear," she began. "You are not doing right, my child, and your own heart must tell you so."

'Emerald hung her head.

'"You told me," she said, "you told me not to live for myself, but for the service of others—have I not been doing so?"

'"You did well," was the reply, "in saving the child's life, and since then you might have had other chances of the same kind, but you have never returned to the upper world to seek for them. You have yielded to the pleasure to yourself, of giving all your time to her, forgetting or refusing to believe that you have no right to her. She is neither of our race nor blood—think of the bitter tears that must have been shed for her by her own people. See now—now that she is growing older and nature is speaking to her—the suffering that is beginning for herself. No child's face should look as hers does."

'It was enough. Emerald threw herself at her old friend's feet in deepest repentance.

'"It is all true," she cried; "I see it now, and indeed I knew it before, but I would not let myself think of it. I will take baby back to her home—now, at once, before my courage fails me."

'And the little girl, hearing the distress in her dear Emerald's voice, ran forward.

'"What is it," she said; "is the lady angry with you?"

'"No, no," was the reply, "I am very pleased with Emerald; and now, my little girl, the pain at your heart will go. Emerald is going to take you home, home to your mother and your brother, and you will be very happy."

'"But Emerald will come too?" asked the little girl; for though her face grew rosy with delight, her heart misgave her for her mermaid friend.

'Emerald drew her towards her and kissed her fondly.

'"My darling," she whispered, "I will carry you home myself, but I could not stay in your country."

'"And shall I never see you again, then?" asked the little girl sadly.

'"I cannot say," Emerald replied; "but sometimes, if I may, I will come to the edge of the beautiful garden where is your home, and sing softly, so that you will know I am there. But this must be a secret between you and me. And now," she went on, "there is no time to lose; clasp your arms tightly round my neck, my little one, for we have a long way to go."

'Their old friend smiled in approval.

'"Sing to her, my child," she murmured, "it will lull her to sleep and save her the pain of parting from you. The sun is still high in the heavens, it will be still full daylight when you reach the upper world. Lay her on the grass near the spot where you found her and kiss her on the brow. But do not linger yourself; she will wake to full remembrance of her life before she came to you, and all will be well."'

With these words the spinning-wheel fairy's voice ceased, but Hildegarde and Leonore did not move or speak for some moments. Then they raised their heads and gazed at their kind friend. 'Oh, thank you, thank you,' they said, 'for the story and the pictures; we couldn't look up at first, for we saw something more than you had told us. Almost the loveliest pictures of all came at the end.'

'There was one,' said Hildegarde, 'of the baby running to her mother in the garden, and the little brother came too, and they knew her again in a moment, though she had been so long away—oh, it was beautiful!'

'And,' added Leonore, 'the last of all nearly made me cry. The baby had grown quite big and was standing near the water's edge. Emerald had been singing to her, and just for one moment we saw her face—so sad, but so sweet. Oh, how I should love to have a mermaid friend.'

But even as she spoke, her voice grew drowsy. She knew the spinning-wheel fairy was smiling at her and Hildegarde, and they both felt her gently releasing the rainbow thread from their fingers, but after that they knew no more, till a sound of tapping woke them up.

It was Amalia, knocking at the door of the blue-silk room; and when they opened their eyes, there they were, lying on the soft fleecy rug in front of the fire, as if they had never moved the whole afternoon.

'What a nice little sleep you have had, young ladies,' said the maid; 'and now coffee is waiting in the drawing-room, and the Baroness has sent me to fetch you. There is good news for you, too; the snow has ceased falling and the wind has gone down. Old Rudolph says we shall probably have nice clear frost now, and he is talking of getting the pond ready for you to skate.'

'It will be nice to be able to go out again,' said Hildegarde to Leonore with a smile, 'especially as we have no more nuts to crack.'

'Yes,' said Leonore with a sigh; 'but some day, Hildegarde, surely *some* day, the dear fairy will send for us again. Don't you think so?'

THE END

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