

MARION ST.

WEBB

KNOCK THREE TIMES!

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CHAPTER I

Aunt Phœbe sends a Birthday Present

THIS story really begins with the arrival of a brown paper parcel addressed to Molly, but while the postman is bringing it along the road, there may be just time to explain about Jack and Molly's birthday, so that you will understand why Molly sat down to supper wishing earnestly that silver bangles were considered useful and necessary presents.

Jack and Molly were twins, and this was their ninth birthday. Such a happy, exciting day it had been; it *felt* like a birthday all day long, so you can guess how jolly it was, and how special it made Jack and Molly feel. Little did they guess what a weird and mysterious end to the day was now approaching!

They had received a number of beautiful presents, and, to their unbounded joy, a fine new bicycle each from Mother and Father. But there was one particular thing that Molly had wanted for her birthday, and that was a silver bangle.

"Like Mother's," she had told Jack, "only silver. One that nearly slips off when I hang my hand down and that I have to push back up my arm—and it jingles."

As there happened also to be one other thing that Jack wanted specially, a box of paints, the two children had decided some days ago to write to their Aunt Phœbe, who always remembered their birthday, and hint to her as delicately as possible what the most acceptable presents would be. It had been a forlorn hope for Molly, because Aunt Phœbe had fixed ideas about useless and useful presents. Probably she might consider a box of paints useful to encourage Jack's artistic leanings; but a bangle—! Still, Molly sent her letter and hoped for the best.

On looking at Jack and Molly you would have noticed at once that they both had the same kind of brown, curly hair and the same frank expression about the eyes; but while Molly's eyes were brown, and her face often wistful and dreamy, Jack's eyes were blue, and his expression alert and full of energy; there was a certain reckless air about Jack....

But the postman has reached their house, and is handing in two brown paper parcels, and so the story really begins.

"It's Aunt Phœbe's handwriting!" Jack exclaimed, as he seized his parcel.

"Yours looks flat—like a paint-box, Jack," said Molly breathlessly, tugging at the string of her parcel.

"Yours looks like something in a box too. Probably it will be a bracelet," Jack said encouragingly, hoping that it would be, for he felt he should be almost as disappointed as Molly if it wasn't.

Jack was the first to vanquish strings and paper, and with a yell of delight he tore the wrapper off his parcel and disclosed a beautiful, shiny black paint-box. For a few moments Mother and Father and Jack were so engrossed in examining and admiring the box that they did not notice that Molly had unwrapped her parcel, until her intense quietness was borne in upon them, and they all three turned round.

Molly stood by the side of the table gazing tearfully at a round, grey-looking thing half buried in a mass of tissue paper.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mother, crossing over to her side.

"It's not—" began Molly, then stopped because of an uncomfortable lump in her throat.

“Let me see,” said Mother, and she picked up the grey thing and turned it over in her hands. On the other side was pinned a slip of paper, on which was written:

For Molly

*Hoping she will be a good girl on her birthday and have many happy returns.
I thought this useful little thing would do for her dressing-table.
With love from Aunt Phæbe*

“Why, it’s a pincushion!” said Mother.

“What a beastly shame!” said Jack.

“Be quiet, Jack. It’s a very pretty one,” Mother added consolingly.

“Funny shape, isn’t it?” queried Father.

“It’s—let me see—why, it’s the shape of a—what do you call those things?—pumpkins. It’s shaped like a pumpkin,” answered Mother.

“But it’s grey,” objected Father. “Why didn’t they make it yellow or green while they were about it?”

“I suppose Aunt Phœbe thought grey would keep clean longer,” said Jack: “that’s why she chose it.”

Had Aunt Phœbe known when she bought ‘this useful little thing’ what it Really Was—could she have foreseen any of the mysterious happenings that were to follow the arrival of her birthday present—she would have preferred to send her niece half a dozen of the most jingly silver bangles ever made; for she disapproved of adventures in any shape or form, even more than she disapproved of bangles. Yet it was entirely through Aunt Phœbe that Jack and Molly took part in the adventure of the Grey Pumpkin at all.

CHAPTER II

The Adventure Begins

WHEN Molly went up to bed that night she took the pincushion with her and placed it on the dressing-table, and tried her best to think that it looked nice. “It really will be useful,” she told herself, and to prove this she picked up a long pin and stuck it into the pumpkin pincushion, though with a little more violence than was necessary. Then she ran across the room and tumbled into bed.

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and the moonbeams streaming into the room made it almost as light as day. Molly lay there snug, drowsily planning out lovely rides that she and Jack would go as soon as they had both learnt how to manage their cycles; the thought of her bicycle sent a warm thrill through her heart and a smile of content hovering about her mouth.

She could hear Jack in the next room moving noisily about; he always made a dreadful noise in his room, thumping and banging things down and whistling shrilly, until he got into bed. And tonight the extra excitement of having a birthday seemed to make the thumping extra heavy and the whistling extra shrill. Presently the thuds and bumps and whistles ceased abruptly, and she knew that Jack was in bed; and to be in bed and to be asleep were practically the same thing with Jack. No sooner did his head touch the pillow than he was as good as asleep, and no sooner did he open his eyes in the morning than he was out of bed and hunting for his stockings. Sleep did not come so readily to Molly. She would often lie awake for a long time after she had gone to bed, thinking and planning, her brain ticking busily.

Molly was just wondering whether it would be possible for her and Jack to cycle to Brighton and back in a day, and whether Mother would let them go, when all at once she became aware that something was moving in her room; a soft, rolling sound came from the direction of the window.

Molly raised her head and gazed with startled eyes across the moonlit room. She could see something large and round moving softly on the dressing-table. It looked just as if— Surely her eyes were playing her some trick! She stared across at the dressing-table, frightened, yet fascinated. Then she sat up. No, her eyes had not deceived her.

There, in front of the looking-glass, rocking gently from side to side, was the pumpkin pincushion, grown to nearly three times its original size, and growing still larger every second.

Bigger and bigger it grew, until it had grown almost as big round as the front wheel of Molly’s bicycle; then it ceased rocking (and growing) and remained still for a few seconds; then, rolling quietly along the dressing-table and over the edge, it fell with a dull thud to the floor. Across to the door it rolled, bumped softly against it, and drew back a few paces. Molly watched as the door swung open, and the Grey Pumpkin passed out on to the landing.

Molly was filled with amazement. What had happened? What did it mean? She remained quite still, hesitating for a moment. Then she sprang out of bed. Her first fear had vanished, leaving in its place an overwhelming curiosity—and another feeling that she couldn’t define—she just felt that she *must* follow the Pumpkin.

Her mind once made up, she felt perfectly calm and collected; even collected enough to slip hastily into some clothes and put on her little blue-and-white frock and her outdoor shoes. Never before in all her short life had Molly dressed so quickly.

Meanwhile the Grey Pumpkin was making its way along the moonlit landing to the top of the stairs. She heard it begin to descend—thud, thud—as she whisked into Jack’s room.

“Jack! Jack!” she called in a loud whisper. “Don’t be frightened; it’s only me—Molly. Hush! Are you awake? Oh, Jack, hush!” as Jack uttered a sound between a loud yawn and a groan. “Get up quickly. It’s all right. Only do be quick, quick!”

Jack sat up with a jerk.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” he exclaimed.

“Hush! Don’t make a sound or you’ll spoil everything, p’raps. Put on some clothes, quickly, and come with me. Oh, don’t ask questions, Jack, but do be quick, and don’t make the slightest noise.” And Molly ran back to the landing and listened. Thud, thud, thud, the Pumpkin was rolling steadily and slowly from stair to stair, and, judging by the sound, was already a long way down. “Hurry, Jack,” said Molly.

It was easy for Jack to be quick, though not so easy to refrain from asking questions, but to tell him not to make the slightest noise was expecting a little too much of him. However, he only bumped twice against the water-jug and knocked his hair-brush off the dressing-table and fell over a chair before he was ready, and, all things considered, he behaved in a very creditable manner.

Afterward, when thinking things over, Molly was surprised at her own calmness in remembering to tell him about clothes and being quiet; but remember she did, and found herself explaining to her brother as rapidly as possible just what had happened.

“I know it sounds impossible, Jack,” she said, “but it’s true, and you’ll see it yourself in a minute.”

The two children sped quickly along the landing and down the first flight of stairs, passing from dark shadows into moonlit patches as they went by landing windows, then back into the shadows again and down another flight, and out into the moonlight once more; so on and on, guided by the dull thud, thud of the Pumpkin on the soft stair-carpet below them.

As they reached the top of the last flight the sound ceased.

“It’s reached the bottom,” whispered Molly.

Jack shook his head incredulously; he had not seen the Pumpkin yet and could not believe it was the sole cause of the bumping noise he had heard on the stairs. When the noise ceased they hesitated about continuing their descent. It was pitch-black at the bottom of the last flight, and Molly thought it would be so horrible if one of them put their foot on that rolling grey thing in the dark.

As they waited they heard a slight bump—then a streak of light appeared, and they saw the back door swing quietly open. The Pumpkin—and Jack could see plainly that it was a huge pumpkin—rolled ponderously out, and the door began slowly to close again.

“Quick!” gasped Molly; and the two sped down the last flight, and the next moment were standing breathless outside the back door.

Their garden was long, and backed on to a small wood (which had been the scene of many a picnic during the summer months). A low, broken fence divided the wood from the garden; and it was for this fence that the Pumpkin was heading. It rolled steadily on in a quiet, deliberate way that made it the more uncanny.

Jack and Molly followed—two quaint little figures, moving warily over the grass, with glistening eyes and rapidly beating hearts, half fearful, half curious, and very excited. Jack could scarcely believe his eyes even now, and stared fascinated at the moving grey thing in front of him, as it glided under the broken fence and into the wood beyond. As it gained the woodland path the sound of little twigs and dried leaves crackling as it rolled over them came to the children’s ears.

Jack and Molly clambered over the fence, and in doing so Jack lost one of his slippers, but did not miss it in his excitement, and they both ran a few steps along the path to get in sight of the Pumpkin again.

It was not so easy to see in the wood, for the trees met overhead and screened out the moonlight. Here and there a stray beam penetrated, scattering little pools of silver light on the ground; and each time the Pumpkin passed into these pools of light the children hastened their footsteps, but faltered again each time it glided into the gloom, where it was difficult to see and there was nothing save the crackling of the twigs to guide them.

Suddenly Molly caught hold of her brother’s arm, and they both stood still. The Pumpkin had stopped in the dim light at the foot of a gigantic old tree with a gnarled and twisted trunk. Watching

breathlessly, they saw it knock three times deliberately and heavily against the bark, and then roll back a few paces and wait.

There was a low, creaking sound, and the side of the tree swung outward like a door; and the Pumpkin passed in.

The door began slowly to close again. Jack and Molly looked at each other. What should they do? They both felt it was now or never.

“Now!” said Jack.

“Quick!” assented Molly.

Like a flash they reached the door and slipped through—just in time. It closed behind them with a muffled thud, catching the sleeve of Jack’s coat as it did so, and they found themselves in complete darkness.

Their curiosity and excitement turned to sudden fear when they heard the door close behind them, and they stood quite still, with their backs pressed hard against the interior of the tree-trunk, not daring to move. A soft, familiar rolling sound could be heard a short way in front of them. It ceased, there was a short silence, then came three distinct knocks, followed by a creaking noise, and another door opened on the other side of the tree. As the light crept into the interior of the tree the children saw to their astonishment that it was not moonlight, but daylight, the subdued light of evening.

A quick glance showed them the hollow interior of the huge tree and the distance they were from the open door. As they caught sight of the ground they both gave a start, for it was composed solely of half a dozen branches stretched across from side to side, and beneath the branches was a big black hole that went down and down and looked as if it had no bottom. They realized that they were standing at the extreme edge of the hole, on a little step of thick, sticky clay. However were they to walk over on one of those thin branches to the door on the other side without missing their footing and falling down into the hole? But even as they caught hold of hands, determined to make a desperate effort to cross while there was light to see, the Grey Pumpkin passed out into the daylight, and the door swung slowly to again, and they were left in darkness once more.

They stood stock still, not daring to move.

“Oh, Jack, whatever shall we do?” said Molly, almost crying.

“Knock on the door behind us and go back home,” suggested Jack. “Let’s get out of this old dark hole, and the Pumpkin can go where it jolly well likes.... Leave go my arm a moment, Molly, and I’ll turn round and knock.” He turned to suit the action to his words, tearing the corner of his sleeve out of the crack as he did so.

“But, Jack,” Molly said hurriedly. “Wait a minute.... Somehow ... I’ve got a feeling that we *ought* to go on, if only we could.... Don’t knock yet, Jack.... I feel as if somebody wants us, through that door on the other side ... if only we could get across. Oh, Jack, do be careful—you’ll slip!”

“Look here,” said Jack, “are you afraid to chance the crossing—do you really think it’s worth it?”

“The Pumpkin must have rolled across without the floor giving way—but then, it—he—I mean, what shall we do, Jack?”

“Shall we try?” suggested Jack.

Molly hesitated. Then “Yes, let’s,” she said. “Only—shall we?” she faltered.

“You stay here while I go across and knock three times on the other door,” said Jack, at once decided. “Then while it’s light you run across.”

“Oh, Jack, do be careful,” cried Molly.

For Jack had already started. He felt with his foot for the thickest branch and stepped recklessly forward. To his delight he found that it was quite easy to walk across, and all their fears had been groundless.

“Why, Moll,” he called joyfully, “it’s as easy as anything. Wait a sec. I’m almost there.”

He reached the clay step on the other side and gave three good knocks to relieve his feelings. With a low creaking the door opened slowly, and as the light streamed in Molly ran quickly and easily across, and the next moment they both stood outside the tree, and the door was shut.

CHAPTER III

The Other Side of the Tree

THE two children gazed in astonishment at the unfamiliar scene in front of them, for here was a place they had never seen before, and yet, apparently, a place within ten minutes' walk of their home—a place that led out of the little wood at the end of their garden. And they thought they knew every nook and corner of that wood, and of the fields and lanes beyond for several miles round their house. Yet here was a place they had never seen before; and, more puzzling still, the soft glow of evening and sunset had taken the place of the moonlight and gloom which had been all around them in the wood. For they were still standing close to the same big old tree, but instead of the wood continuing for a quarter of a mile on, and ending at the edge of Farmer Hart's cornfields as it always *had* done, it ended abruptly right in front of them, by the side of a broad white road. This road stretched away to the left, up and up a big hill. You could see it winding like a white ribbon, bordered by the green and brown trees of the woods that clustered on each side. And, at the top of the hill, where the road ended, glistened the white walls and roofs of a distant city. To the right the road continued past the wood where the children were standing, and sloped down, down, till it was lost to sight in the burning crimson and gold afterglow of the sunset.

Jack and Molly looked up the road and down the road, but all was silent, and not a soul in sight. Then a wisp of blue smoke among the trees on the opposite side of the road caught their attention, and they saw that it was curling from the chimney of a snug little red-roofed cottage, which nestled, half hidden, on the fringe of the wood across the road.

The children looked at each other in bewilderment. Then they turned and examined the giant tree behind them, but that did not help them much. It was certainly the same tree, but it was not the same wood. Something queer had happened—it did not seem to be even the same country. They looked up and down the road again, and behind them and before them—and listened. But all was silent. Their eyes wandered back to the curling blue smoke, the only sign of life within sight.

“Better ask some one where we've got to,” said Jack, eyeing the smoke.

“But where's IT gone?” began Molly, then broke off quickly. “Hush! What's that!” she said.

She plucked Jack's sleeve and drew him into the shadow of the trees. A distant sound of voices came floating through the still evening air. There were evidently two speakers, for, as the sounds drew nearer the children could hear a high, loud, jolly voice, flowing continuously, and punctuated every now and then by a low, mumbling voice. After a few seconds the words of the high-voiced speaker became distinguishable.

“Stuff and nonsense!” it cried shrilly. “Pull yourself together, Father. Come now, come now, snap your fingers in its face! Laugh at it, I say, and—tss—” The speaker made a little hissing noise. “Where is it?”

The other voice here murmured some reply too low for the children to catch.

“What's that?” replied the first speaker. “No—not *you*. But I'll tell you what will happen, you'll be having an attack of melancholia—”

“Oh, not that, not that!” The low voice was raised and pleading. “Don't talk of melons, Glan, don't, I pray you. They make me think of those lemons—and the—and—”

“Now don't you think of that any more,” ordered the high voice. “Come, come, come. Pull yourself together....”

The speakers became visible, wending their way through the wood in which the children were standing. One was a young, fat, rosy-cheeked man, with a jolly smile, wearing a white overall and white baker's cap; he was clean-shaven, and was the possessor of the high voice. His companion was a striking contrast to him, being old and thin and pale, with a long white beard; he was dressed in

a rich, dark-coloured robe, and had a number of keys dangling from his belt. They pulled up short when they caught sight of Jack and Molly; then advanced slowly, with sidelong glances at each other and low whispers.

Molly stepped forward.

“If you please,” she said, very politely, “could you tell us where we are?”

“Could you tell us *who* you are, little lady?—that’s more to the point,” said the young man pleasantly.

“I’m Molly, and this is my brother Jack,” the little girl replied; which did not enlighten the young man very much.

The old man gazed at them with his small, dull eyes, and ran his fingers nervously through his beard.

“We’ve only just come—through that tree,” volunteered Jack, pointing to the giant tree behind them.

“Through the tree!” exclaimed the old man and the young man together.

“Then you are from the Impossible World,” added the young man in an excited, high voice.

“We live in England,” said Jack with dignity.

“That may be. I don’t know England. But if it lies on the other side of that Tree it is in the Impossible World.”

“Why do you call it that?” asked Molly.

“Because that’s its name in our geography books. This is the Possible World, and always was—except—” The young man glanced at the old man, who turned his head aside.

“Don’t speak of that,” groaned the old man.

“Cheer up, Father,” cried the young man. “Pull yourself together now. Snap your fingers and—tss—it is gone, remember.” And he beamed encouragingly down at the thin little old man beside him, who only looked more depressed than ever at his son’s efforts to cheer him up.

“But how is it we’ve played in this wood—I mean that wood—ever so many times and never found our way here before?” inquired Jack.

“Because though you’ve walked *round* that tree many times you’ve never come *through* it before,” said the young man. “There are two sides to every tree, just as there are two sides to every question. When you ‘walk round’ a question, do you see both its sides? No. It is only if you go *into* a question that you see this side and that. Well, then—when you only walked round that tree it stands to sense that you couldn’t find yourself here. But when you go into the tree—tss”—he threw out his hand—“behold! here you are. It’s perfectly simple.”

It certainly sounded sensible and quite simple as the young man explained it, but Jack and Molly still felt rather mystified.

“But *why* do you call ours the Impossible World?” asked Jack.

“Because it’s full of impossible things,” replied the young man. “Impossible people, impossible ideas, impossible laws, impossible houses, there is so much impossible misery and injustice, and impossible talk, that it’s quite impossible for any possible creature to live in it. On the other hand, this land (which is the other side of yours) is the Possible World now; for a time it was Impossible, but we sent—” Here the old man winced. “I’m sorry, Father. But you must let me tell the little lady and her brother where they are. I know. You go and sit down under that tree, and think of buttercups.”

“But they’re the colour of lemons,” whined the old man feebly.

“Not all of them—think of the ones that aren’t. There; run along. I shan’t be two minutes explaining.”

And he patted his father on the shoulder as the old man shuffled across the leaves to the foot of a tree some yards away, where he sat down, and remained shaking his head and looking on the ground, mumbling to himself, while the young man explained the cause of his depression to Jack and Molly.

“It’s this way!” he began, after glancing over his shoulder to make sure his Father couldn’t hear. “For hundreds of years this has been the Possible World, because it was possible for everyone in it to be happy. But there came a time when an evil influence crept into the land and made it Impossible. It was through this evil Thing that my Father, who was one of the King’s Advisers, lost his place at Court. The whole country was under a cloud. Then, Old Nancy—she lives in the cottage yonder”—he pointed to the little red-roofed cottage with the smoke curling from the chimney, on the opposite side of the road—“Old Nancy, she discovered a spell, and she saved us—she banished the evil Thing to the Impossible World and our world became Possible again. Lately, my Father has been afflicted with dreams that he says always come to him before trouble overtakes the country, and he fears by some mishap that the country may become Impossible again.”

“What does he dream of?” inquired Molly.

“Lemons,” said the young man; “and do what I can I cannot shake him out of the gloom into which he has fallen.... It’s strange,” the young man continued, “but poor old Father seems the only person who did not cheer up when the World became Possible again. It was a nasty shock for him, being banished from Court; and although they’ve taken him back and given him another post—I suppose he’s getting old. And then those dreams—” Glan’s face became serious for a moment. “However, they mean nothing, I’m sure. And now you are here you’d like to see our Possible Country, wouldn’t you? I’m afraid as you are from the Impossible World you’ll have to get a Pass before you can come into the City—but that’ll be all right. You must come and have tea with us. I opened a little baker’s and pastry-cook’s business when Father lost his place at Court, and I still keep it up—fascinating work, making puff pastry and currant buns. I run a special line in gooseberry-jam puffs. I used to do a lovely line in lemon cheese-cakes, but I’ve had to leave them off since Father’s had those dreams. He can’t bear to be reminded—” He stopped, a little out of breath.

“We’d love to come up to the City; where can we get a Pass?” said Molly.

“But, I say, what about that thing we were following,” broke in Jack, suddenly remembering what it was they had followed through the tree; the interest of meeting their new acquaintances had made the children forget for a few minutes. “We’d forgotten, hadn’t we, Molly? We were really following a Pumpkin, you know,” he said, turning to the young man.

“A what!” and the young man’s voice rose to a shriek, and his eyes grew round.

“A Pumpkin,” faltered Jack, a little dismayed, “A Grey Pumpkin.”

“Father! Father! It’s come back,” shouted the young man, wheeling round excitedly.

“Come back!” repeated the old man, rising to his feet and stumbling toward them. “Come back! What has come back? Not the—not—”

“The Pumpkin,” gasped Glan, his fat, jolly face pale and his hands trembling.

“Oh, my heart and soul,” cried the old man, his eyes wild with fear, wringing his hands together. “What did I warn you! What did I warn you! I said those lemons meant trouble. Oh, my heart and soul, what shall we do!”

The father and son stared wildly into each other’s eyes for a second.

“What shall we do, Glan? What shall we do?” the old man quavered, shaking from head to foot.

“Where has the Pumpkin gone?” asked Glan, turning to the children.

“We don’t know,” said Molly, frightened at the distress of the two men. “It came through the tree before us, we followed it, and by the time we got through it had disappeared.”

“I must go and spread the alarm. I must go and warn. Oh, my heart and soul!” the old man sobbed, and turning, he stumbled out on to the white road and waddled rapidly up the hill toward the walls of the city, mumbling and chattering and sobbing to himself, the keys at his belt jangling a dismal accompaniment.

“If it’s back, then the country will be Impossible again,” groaned Glan. “It was through the Grey Pumpkin that it became Impossible before. But just tell me quickly—how did it happen? What do you know about the Pumpkin, and where did you first see it?”

The children explained as quickly as they could, while Glan stood nodding his head and glancing every other second over his shoulder at the receding figure of his father.

“I wondered how you discovered the three knocks on the tree,” he muttered. “It can only be done when the moon is full, you know. You didn’t know? I thought you might have discovered it accidentally, when you were playing, p’raps. Somebody from the Impossible World did that before—many years ago. Well, go on.”

The children finished their story.

“Oh, it’s the Pumpkin right enough,” said Glan. “Now what can have happened. Old Nancy must have forgotten the usual sunset spell.... No, no, she’d never forget . . . she’s never forgotten. There must be foul play somewhere. We must go to her at once and see what’s happened. Come!”

And followed by the two children he hurriedly crossed the road to the little cottage opposite, and rapped loudly with his knuckles on the door.

CHAPTER IV

Why Old Nancy Slept through the Sunset Hour

THERE was no sound from within the cottage, and the three waited impatiently for a second or two, then Glan rapped again more loudly. The sound of his knuckles against the little brown door rang sharp and clear in the quiet of the evening. They waited. Glan called “Nancy!” and “Is any one in?” but as there was still no answer he lifted the latch, and discovered that the door was unbolted. He pushed it open.

They found themselves in an old-fashioned, low-ceilinged room, full of shadows cast by the flickering firelight. The trees outside the house excluded the faint sun-glow, so that the room was dim and nothing could be clearly defined in the farther corners. A quaint red-brick fireplace took up nearly one side of the room, and in a chair by the hearth there sat a huddled-up figure.

“Nancy! Old Nancy!” said Glan, breathlessly, stepping further into the room. “What’s the matter, Nancy?”

The figure remained motionless. He bent over it, shaking it gently by the shoulder.

“There’s something queer about this. By thunder!” he exclaimed, peering closer. “She ... No, she’s not ... she’s breathing!” He stood back and gazed at the sleeping figure earnestly. “It’s not a natural sleep, though. I don’t like it at all. If I’m not greatly mistaken the Grey Pumpkin has had something to do with this.”

“What shall we do?” said Molly, in an awed whisper.

“If it is any way possible, we *must* wake her somehow. Nancy! Nancy! Wake up!” cried Glan, and he shook her arm again; there was such despair in his voice that the children took courage to move toward the sleeping Nancy to try and help him.

The light from the fire shed a dull red glow over Old Nancy, and looking at her Molly thought she had the sweetest face she had ever seen. Though much wrinkled, her skin was clear and her expression full of kindness and quiet strength. Her hair was pure white and peeped out from beneath a snowy mob cap.

“Oh, do please wake up,” said Molly, laying her hand on Old Nancy’s lap.

Old Nancy stirred, turned her head from side to side and gave a great sigh; then she slowly opened her eyes. Her gaze travelled from Molly to Jack, and then on to Glan. She sat up. Then passed her hand across her eyes and stared, dazed, in front of her for a moment. Her glance came back to Molly.

“Who are you?” she said, in a low voice. “And what’s the matter?”

It was Glan who answered.

“The sun has set,” he said gravely, “and you were asleep.”

With a cry Old Nancy started to her feet.

“No, no, Glan; it can’t be true!” she exclaimed. “Oh, what have I done! What have I done! It cannot be sunset yet.”

She crossed hurriedly to the window and peered through. A glance at the darkening countryside was sufficient. She turned away, and creeping back to her chair sank into it and buried her face in her hands.

There was a dead silence in the room. A cinder fell out of the fire on to the red hearth.

“Well, well.” Glan cleared his throat and tried to speak cheerfully. “What isn’t well must be made well, you know. No good crying over spilt milk, Old Nancy. Come, come, snap your fingers at adversity, you know. We must all put our heads together and see what we can do. What’s the best thing to do first?” he smiled bravely, and Jack and Molly took heart and things looked brighter, although they scarcely knew what all the trouble meant.

“Is it back then?” asked Old Nancy, raising her head.

“The Pumpkin?—yes, it’s back,” said Glan.

“Then there’s not a moment to be lost,” said Old Nancy firmly, and with an effort she pulled herself together and sat up straight.

“How did it happen—your going to sleep?” inquired Glan.

“I don’t know,” said Old Nancy, with a puzzled frown. “Never have I missed doing the spell at sunset. I think I must have been ... drugged. The Pumpkin must still have a few followers in the country—perhaps one of them drugged me—but I don’t know how they did it, they must have chosen the opportunity carefully, so that I fell asleep just before sunset.... I remember looking out and seeing the sun about half an hour before sunset time: and then I sat down for a few minutes ... and I don’t remember anything more. When did the Pumpkin come back?”

“About half an hour ago,” said Glan.

“He came through the tree,” said Jack, “and we followed him.”

“You are from the Impossible World, then,” murmured Old Nancy, “where I sent the Pumpkin. But now—this will be the Impossible World again soon, I fear, unless—” She looked earnestly into the faces of the two children, then she smiled faintly. “Will you stay and help us,” she asked. “Help us to make our world Possible again?”

“We’ll stay. Rather!” began Jack.

“Only—only—what about Mother?” Molly interrupted.

“I will tell you the history of the Pumpkin first of all,” said Old Nancy; “and then you shall decide whether you will stay and help us, or go home. If you decide to stay I will see that your Mother is not made anxious about you, until your work is finished and you return to her. But, meanwhile, Glan, what are you going to do?”

“Father has already gone to arouse the City,” said Glan. “I think I will follow him and see what I can do; then I will come back and see what the little lady and her brother have decided. But before they can do a thing they must hear the Pumpkin’s story from you.”

So saying he took off his cap with a flourish and opened the door.

“Keep up heart. Laugh at misfortune, remember, and—tss— We shall win!” he cried, his fat face all a-smile; and he was gone.

“Sit down on the rug,” said Old Nancy, “and tell me, first of all, what you know about the Pumpkin, and then I will tell you why it is the Pumpkin is so dreaded in our country, and how he came to be what he is.”

So Jack and Molly sat down on the rug, and after relating what they knew of the Pumpkin and how they happened to come across him, they listened while Old Nancy told them the following story, fascinated by her low, sweet voice, and her kind eyes.

CHAPTER V

Which Explains who is Inside the Grey Pumpkin

“LONG ago,” began Old Nancy, gazing dreamily into the fire, “a great King ruled over this country who had an only daughter to whom he was passionately attached. She was a sweet, frail little creature—very delicate. In spite of all the care and attention bestowed upon her, she grew no stronger; indeed, as time passed, she seemed to grow weaker and weaker, until at length it became obvious to all that the Princess was dying. The King was in despair. All that love, money, doctors, and nurses could do for her was done—but all in vain.

“Then, one evening, someone found a shabby old book at the back of a shelf in the Royal Library. To whom it belonged and how it got there no one seemed to know, but anyway, the book proved of priceless value as it contained a remarkable recipe for curing just such an illness as the Princess was suffering from. I need not tell you all about this recipe now: it is sufficient that one of the most important items was—pumpkin juice. Needless to say, the King seized eagerly at any chance to save his daughter’s life, and so all the pumpkins available were quickly purchased and the recipe made up, and a dose of this new cure was given to the Princess. From the very first dose there was a marked change for the better, and with perseverance this new remedy gradually worked wonders in the Princess; she grew stronger and stronger and was soon on the road to a complete recovery.

“And then—

“But first you must know that in order to have plenty of pumpkins on hand to complete the cure, the delighted King had a special garden made in which to grow nothing but pumpkins; and he employed a special staff of gardeners to look after this garden. And every day he would go to the garden himself to see how the pumpkins were getting on. One night, a fearful storm swept over the country; and while the thunder growled and the lightning flashed and the wind and rain struggled for mastery—some strange things were taking place down in the pumpkin garden. For when morning broke—there was not a single pumpkin left in the garden: nor in the whole of the country, apparently. But it was not the storm that had destroyed them all. Under cover of the black night and the storm somebody had come and had deliberately cut off the pumpkins, and destroyed them.

“Now this somebody—although he was not discovered for days afterward—was an evil little dwarf man, who imagined that he owed the King a grudge—and sought to punish him this way.

“Nor was this all. When the Princess’s nurse went to fetch her medicine—there was none left. All the bottles were smashed to pieces and the precious liquid was spilled all over the floor.

“The King was terribly upset, and sent messengers far and wide, post haste, to try to get some more pumpkins. But they could not get any. And from that time, as each hour passed, the Princess began to decline again. She got steadily worse, and weaker and weaker as days went by. You can imagine what grief it must have been to her father to see her losing her newly-gained health, to see her cheeks growing pale and thin again—to see her gradually fading away. He made every attempt possible to get hold of a pumpkin—but it seemed as if all the pumpkins in the land had suddenly vanished.

“At length the Princess lay at death’s door; the doctors gravely shook their heads at each other; while the King paced ceaselessly up and down the corridor outside her room. He was waiting thus, torn with anxiety and suspense, when a messenger arrived at the palace with a note for the King, which contained the news that a pumpkin had been found! The owner of the pumpkin would give it up to no one but the King himself (the note continued). Would his Majesty kindly walk down into a certain part of the City, and go to a certain house (the address was given), where he would be met by someone who would place the pumpkin in the King’s hands. The King, wondering why the person

who had the pumpkin did not hasten with it to the palace, nevertheless did not wait to question, but went at once to the house down in the City.

“It was a quaint, stubby little house; and inside he found a little dwarf man. (The King did not know at the time that this was the person who had destroyed the pumpkin garden on the night of the storm.) Anyway, the dwarf began immediately to pour out some of the grievances that he imagined he had against the King. And then he discovered that the King was not to blame at all. There was some sort of muddle and misunderstanding, and one of the grievances the King had never even heard about. When the dwarf realized that he had endangered the Princess’s life for no reason, that it had all been a mistake, and that he had no cause at all for the spiteful and wicked thing he had done, he got unreasonably angry (as people often do when they have wronged someone who hasn’t deserved it). And so the dwarf fell to blaming and cursing the King, and finally tried to make a bargain with him concerning the pumpkin, which he had hidden, he said, refusing to disclose its hiding-place until his demands were granted. The King, whose sole idea was to get the pumpkin as quickly as possible, first pleaded, then commanded the dwarf to fetch the pumpkin immediately: he was willing to give any price for his daughter’s sake. But still the dwarf haggled and delayed, until the King lost all patience and a fierce quarrel ensued. In the midst of their quarrel there came the clattering of horses’ hoofs on the cobbled road without, and then someone rapped at the door of the dwarfs house. The angry voices within ceased, and in the silence that followed a bell could be heard tolling. And the King learnt that his daughter was dead.

“He returned to the palace, telling the messengers to arrest the dwarf, and place him in the palace dungeon. ‘For I shall hold you responsible for my daughter’s death,’ said the King.

“Afterward, when the whole story of the dwarf’s treachery became public, it was discovered that he had not been alone on the night of the storm: others had helped him to destroy the pumpkins: it would have been impossible for him to make such a clean sweep of all the pumpkins in the countryside by himself. It had been a carefully organized plan, of which the dwarf was the ringleader and originator. But none of the others were half so blameworthy as the dwarf; they obeyed his orders without knowing his motives, and did not realize the mischief they were doing was so serious. One or two of them were arrested and received light punishments; some the authorities could not find. But the gravest offender was the dwarf, of course, and for him was reserved the heaviest punishment.

“And this was his punishment. The pumpkin that was found hidden in his garden, the last remaining pumpkin in the country, was brought to the palace, and with the help of a little magic the dwarf was shut up *inside* the pumpkin—where he remains to this day.

“They say that when the dwarf found what his fate was to be, he got very enraged and vowed that if this punishment was carried out, he would make the King and his people rue it, and suffer for it for ever and ever.

“His threat was laughed at, and the punishment duly carried out. About that time a weird old magician happened to pass through the country, and his aid was secured to help with the punishment. He made a spell, and the big yellow pumpkin slowly opened—like a yawn—of its own accord. The little dwarf was lifted, struggling and screaming, and placed in the centre; the magician waved his hands and the pumpkin closed to again. The magician waved his hands again, and a curious grey shade crept over the pumpkin; and it is this grey shade that keeps the dwarf imprisoned. He might force his way out—perhaps even *eat* his way out, who knows—if the pumpkin were still yellow. The grey is part of the magic.

“Well, the King then called a council of Wise Men together, to consider what should be done with the Grey Pumpkin. Some were for keeping it in a museum (and charging a fee of 6d. for visitors to go and look at it); while others advised burying it away in the deepest dungeon of the City, just in case the dwarf ever got out of the Pumpkin; while a third section of the Council, deriding the two former suggestions, urged that the Grey Pumpkin be flung into a ditch beside the High Road, outside the City Gates. The spokesman for this last section was a brilliant, reckless young man, an

eloquent speaker; he laughed at the caution which prompted the first two parties to suggest a museum or a dungeon, and looked upon the latter as a grave reflection on the Magician who had so kindly come to their aid. Did they not trust in the spell which kept the Pumpkin tightly closed? he asked the Council. And besides, what person, dwarf, man, woman, or child, would be alive after being shut up in a Pumpkin for twenty-four hours? No, let them show their scorn for the thing by flinging it away, outside the walls of their City.

“Much more than this did the young man say, and in the end he gained his way. The Grey Pumpkin was carried to the gates of the City, escorted by a solemn procession, and thrown into a ditch outside the walls, amid much hissing and booing from the populace. The young Councillor who had suggested all this got carried away by the excitement of the moment, and he dashed forward and gave the Grey Pumpkin that was lying quietly at the bottom of the ditch a good hearty kick: this act was greeted with cheers and shouts of approval from the crowd, until they saw that the Pumpkin, which had been sent spinning, had landed on the High Road, a dozen yards away, and was slowly rolling down the hill. The crowd fell silent, and watched. On, on the Grey Pumpkin rolled, down the hill from the City, past my cottage door—I remember—on, on, until it disappeared at length into a dark forest right down at the bottom of the High Road.

“And after that, all our troubles began. The dwarf kept his vow, and made us suffer. Somewhere, down in that dark forest, he got hold of some black magic—no one knows how, or who helped him. All we know is that since that time he has become possessed of certain magic powers, and that one misfortune after another has overtaken our country—all caused by the Pumpkin. Wherever he goes he makes misery and mischief: I cannot tell you all the horrible things he has done, he and his little band of followers—those faithful few who helped him in the beginning to destroy the pumpkins, you remember. They went right over to his side after they were punished, and he seemed to gain some evil influence over them. There are not many of them, but they are in all parts of the country, ready to help him when he needs them. And with his knowledge of magic he could so disguise them that we could not recognize them. But they are powerless without him, and when after suffering him for a long time (because we could not find a way to escape him) we finally discovered a way of banishing the Grey Pumpkin out of our World into your World where he could do no harm, his followers became practically harmless, until to-day.

“That is the story of how the Grey Pumpkin came to be what he is. The King, whom he hated, has been dead many years and another King reigns in his stead. And the young Councillor, the eloquent young Councillor who advised the people so unwisely, was banished from Court; he has grown old and timid and querulous, and is a disappointed man whose career was blighted at the outset through the Pumpkin. You have seen this once reckless, dashing young man; you met him just now in the wood. He is Glan’s father.”

CHAPTER VI

The Black Leaf

“WHAT dreadful things the Pumpkin must do,” said Molly, “to make every one so frightened of him.”

“He does do dreadful things,” said old Nancy.

“What a mean revenge—on innocent people,” Jack commented.

“And the worst part of it is,” Old Nancy continued, “that no one knows how much evil power he has, nor what he can do to them if he likes. He evidently has his limits, for there seem to be some things that he cannot do: for instance, he cannot roll along quickly—he always moves at the same slow pace; and he cannot climb up walls or trees, though he can roll up hills. So as long as you keep out of his reach he cannot hurt you.”

“If he never comes out of the Pumpkin—the little Dwarf—what does he do when he catches any one?” inquired Molly.

“Just rolls up to them and touches them—bumps against them softly—and then—something queer happens to them. Perhaps they are changed into some strange animal, or maybe they shrink until they are only a few inches high, or suddenly they find they have lost their nose or their eyesight—or worse things than these may happen. The misery caused by the Pumpkin is unthinkable; and more often than not—incurable.”

“Oh,” shuddered Molly. “Well, however did you manage to get rid of him?—to send him into our World?”

“I was just going to tell you about that,” said Old Nancy. There was a moment’s pause, then, “I am a kind of magician, you know,” she went on. The children glanced quickly up at her, startled at her words, but her gentle face reassured them as she smiled kindly down. “And being a kind of magician I discovered a spell that would send the Pumpkin out of our country into the Impossible World. So I turned him into a pincushion, a grey pincushion, and transported him into your World, where I thought he could do no harm; and you know what happened there. I believed we were rid of him for ever, and we would have been—but for me. It was part of the spell that every evening at sunset I should stand with my face turned to the sinking sun, and, making a certain sign with my arms outstretched, should repeat some magic words. As long as I did this each evening the Pumpkin could not come back, and our country was safe. But I knew that if I chanced to be a minute after sunset any evening the spell which bound the Pumpkin would break, and he would return to us.” A sorrowful look came over Old Nancy’s face. “And to-night,” she said, “I failed to say the magic words at sunset—and he has come back. I am certain it is one of the Pumpkin’s followers who has foiled me; though how—I do not know.”

“Can’t you use the spell and turn him into a pincushion again?” asked Jack.

“No,” said Old Nancy, shaking her head. “That spell could only be used once, and once only; and I know no others.”

“Then however can we—” began Jack.

“Patience,” said Old Nancy. “There is one way of thwarting the Pumpkin which everybody in our country knows of. But they can’t do it, because they can’t find the Black Leaf.... You must know that when the little dwarf was thrust into the Pumpkin, the plant in the dwarf’s garden on which the Pumpkin had grown, immediately turned black. For thirteen days it remained so, bearing one solitary giant leaf—then, all at once it vanished! And now, each year it comes up in a different part of the country—just this one immense Black Leaf—and it remains for thirteen days, and then it disappears again. We have not looked for it these last few years—there has been no need: still, some people have seen it. But now we want it badly. For if you can find the Black Leaf, and pluck it, you have but to

turn your face to the West and say some words (which I can tell you) and wherever the Pumpkin is he will be compelled to come to you: then you must touch him with the Leaf and—you have him in your power. We were in despair before, when no one could find the Black Leaf, until I discovered that spell. And now, as I know no other spell we shall be in despair till someone does find the Black Leaf. And that is what I want you both to stay and help us do. Strangers are often lucky.”

“Oh, we *must* stay and help,” cried Jack, impulsively, “mustn’t we, Molly?”

“I should love to,” said Molly, “but couldn’t we just let Mother know so that she wouldn’t be anxious?”

“If you decide to stay,” said Old Nancy, “I will take care that your Mother is not worried in any way by your absence. I will send a message to her.”

“Then we’ll stay,” decided both children at once.

“I am so glad,” Old Nancy said simply. “And now, if either of you should be lucky enough to find the Black Leaf remember what to do. Pluck it immediately, and stand with your face toward the West, and say: ‘Come to me, Grey Pumpkin! I command you by the Black Leaf!’ ... You can remember that?”

Jack and Molly repeated it to make sure, and then Old Nancy went on,

“When the Pumpkin appears—as he must appear—rolling toward you, touch him with the Leaf, quickly, before he can touch you. Then he cannot harm you, but will be compelled to follow you wherever you lead him.”

“And where should we lead him?” asked Molly.

“Bring him to me,” said Old Nancy grimly.

“There was something I wanted to ask you,” said Jack, “and I can’t think what it was now.... Oh, I know.... Does the Pumpkin know where the Black Leaf is?”

“We are not quite sure about that, but even if he does, it is evidently of no use to him; I mean, he dare not *touch* it—that would be fatal to him. But he can guard it, if he knows where it is, and try to prevent you getting it: and this is what he will try to do whether he knows where it is or not; he is sure to try to delay you or trap you, as soon as he discovers that you are searching for the Leaf. And he will soon know what you are trying to do—one of his followers will tell him, you may be sure. So, beware of the Pumpkin and his little band of people. You are in less danger of being caught by the Pumpkin than you are by one of his band, because you will know the Pumpkin when you see him, but you won’t know which are his decoys, his spies, and which are not. And I can’t help you about this, you must simply be very, very careful, and do not trust anyone until you are sure. Of course, people like Glan and his father, or anyone inside the City, are quite all right—because nobody will be allowed within the City Gates now without a pass; and they cannot get a pass, if they are one of the Pumpkin’s people.”

“Mightn’t one of the Pumpkin’s people find the Leaf?” inquired Jack.

“They dare not touch it either, even if they do know where it is,” replied Old Nancy. “But they can guard it—as the Pumpkin can.”

“If the Black Leaf only appears for thirteen days each year, how do you know which thirteen days they are?” asked Molly, thoughtfully.

“Because the thirteen days start on the anniversary of the day on which the little dwarf was put inside the Pumpkin,” said Old Nancy. “And, as fate decrees, it was the anniversary yesterday, *so the Black Leaf is somewhere above ground now....* Oh, I do hope and trust you will be successful, my dears.” Old Nancy clasped her hands together nervously. “And don’t be ashamed to *run* if the Pumpkin tries to catch you before the Leaf is found. You are powerless against him and his magic—until you have the Leaf. But he can only use his magic and hurt you if he touches you, remember. So don’t let him touch you!”

“We’ll *run* all right, if we see him coming,” said Jack. “Or else we’ll climb up a tree or something.”

“Well, that’s a good idea, too,” said Old Nancy.

“I suppose it’s really a rather—dangerous sort of work we’re going to do,” said Molly.

“It is dangerous, and very brave of you to attempt it,” Old Nancy said. “It needs courage and perseverance. I think you both have pluck, and you both have perseverance; somehow I think one—but only *one* of you will be successful.”

“Which one?” cried Jack and Molly eagerly.

“Ah!” Old Nancy replied, and shook her head mysteriously. “I cannot tell you any more than that.... But now we must get to work immediately. There is no time to be lost. Wait here for a moment.”

She rose, and smiling at the children, made her way across the firelit room and passed out through a doorway at the far end of the room.

Jack and Molly sat still and gazed silently round the shadowy room. They could never afterward describe the feeling that came over them, alone in that room—even to themselves. They were not afraid. A curious feeling crept over them, and they both felt sure that there was something or someone in the room with them, although they felt equally sure there was no one. There was an air of mystery and secrecy in the room. No shadows danced on walls quite in the way that they danced in Old Nancy’s room; no smoke curled in such weird and fantastic shapes as the smoke that curled up the wide chimney in front of them; while it almost seemed ridiculous to say that the chairs were empty when the *something* in the room crowded into each of them.

“I am a kind of magician, you know,” repeated Molly softly, nodding her head at Jack. “Do you know I can *feel* that she is.”

“So can I,” whispered Jack, hoarsely. The children looked at each other seriously for a few seconds, then they turned their heads, and saw that Old Nancy was standing in the doorway watching them. She came forward into the firelight, and they saw that she carried two small satchels in her hands. They were something like the children’s school satchels, only they were smaller and stronger in appearance, being made of soft black leather; they had long straps attached to them, to pass over the shoulders.

“These are your knapsacks,” said Old Nancy, smiling. “You will find them useful on your journey. This is yours,” she said to Molly, “and this is yours,” to Jack. “Now if you will open them and take out what is inside, I will explain what they are meant for.”

The children thanked her and eagerly unbuckled their satchels and felt inside. The contents of each were the same: a sealed envelope, a box of matches, and a little packet of square, brown things that looked like caramels.

“Inside the envelopes are your Passes into the City. Give them up at the City Gates. Take care of them, without them they would not let you in. The matches in those two boxes are not quite ordinary matches—though they look like ordinary ones. I think they’ll help you over one or two difficulties. Use them carefully as there are not many matches in each box. Whatever you do don’t light them in the daytime, but light them when you are in the dark and want to see.”

“Do we strike them just in the ordinary way?” asked Molly.

“Just in the ordinary way,” said old Nancy. “And the little brown squares in the packets are for you to eat, should you be very hungry, and unable to obtain food. You will find them wonderfully refreshing—it is something I make specially.... And here,” she continued, turning to Jack, and holding something out to him, “is another shoe for you. I see you have only got one on.”

“Why, so I have,” cried Jack, noticing for the first time that one of his slippers was missing. “Now wherever did I lose that, I wonder!” (Poor little slipper, it takes no part in these adventures, as it is left behind in the Impossible World. It is lying by the fence at the bottom of the children’s garden, you remember.) “I never noticed it before. Thanks awfully, though. This slipper fits splendidly. How did you know my size?”

“Oh, I knew,” Old Nancy laughed, and would say no more.

She helped the children buckle on their satchels, telling them that once they were inside the City they would learn what plans were being made for the search. “I wish I could give you some magic charm to defend you against the Pumpkin,” she said. “But that is impossible. The Black Leaf is the only thing that can harm him, and save us all. Be very careful, dear children.... Ah!” she broke off with a sharp exclamation.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” cried Jack and Molly, as Old Nancy stood gazing at her left hand which she held out in front of her.

“So that’s how it was done,” she cried. “Look! Look!” and she held her hand toward them. A dark grey mark stained the middle finger from base to tip.

“What is it?” Molly repeated.

“The stain,” whispered Old Nancy excitedly, “do you see? It’s grey! The Grey Pumpkin’s mark! It *was* one of his spies then, who made me sleep through the sunset hour. But why to-day should they have been able to do this, when they have been powerless for so long?” she muttered to herself. “Could anything have happened to the Pumpkin in—in your world, that enabled him to exert his evil magic all the way into our world, and so the spies were able to begin their black magic again? Can you think of anything that happened?” she asked Molly eagerly.

Molly tried hard to think of something. “Of course, as it was a pincushion—I stuck a pin in it,” she said presently.

Old Nancy gazed at her strangely. “In the moonlight?” she asked. “Was the moonlight shining on it when you stuck the pin in?”

“Yes,” said Molly, nervously. “Oh, did that do it? Oh, I am so dreadfully sorry—then it is all my fault that the Pumpkin has returned?”

“No, no,” said Old Nancy, “you are not to blame. How were you to know? It was my fault for not being more careful, then they could not have drugged me.” She crossed quickly to the window. “Yes—see—here—here on the sill. There’s a trace of grey powder. I know what has happened. When I went out of this room earlier in the evening—I did for a few minutes, I remember—yes, just before sunset time—someone must have opened the window and scattered the powder on the sill, hoping that I should go to the window at sunset and that I should put my hand on the sill and touch the powder. And I did. And the powder must have been magic and made me go to sleep. I wonder I never noticed it.... But never mind now, never mind now.... It is too late. We must get to work at once to remedy the evil.”

But Molly still had a feeling that it was partly her fault and she was glad that she and Jack had decided to stay. She felt it was the least they could do—to try to find the Black Leaf.

As Glan had not returned they decided to start out, for the hour was getting late, and Old Nancy thought it would be wiser for them to be inside the City as soon as possible. She told them that they were almost sure to meet Glan on the hill—he had evidently been delayed—they couldn’t miss him.

“Good-bye, dears, good-bye,” said Old Nancy. “My thoughts will be constantly with you till we meet again. Good luck go with you both.”

Leaving Old Nancy standing in the doorway, with the firelight glowing warmly in the room behind her, the two children started out in the dusk and began to ascend the hill.

CHAPTER VII

Glan Opens the Gate in the Nick of Time

THE children walked briskly, glancing from the City lights to the dark woods on either side of the road. Everything lay quiet and peaceful, and overhead the moon was now visible. It seemed impossible to believe that a cloud of fear hung over the City ahead. As they drew nearer the top of the hill the sound of a bell tolling came floating down to their ears.

“What’s that for, I wonder,” said Molly.

“P’raps it’s a sort of warning,” suggested Jack, “to tell people the Pumpkin’s back again.”

Molly shivered. “Let’s hurry a bit more, shall we?” she said. “I’ll be glad when we’re inside the City, won’t you, Jack?”

So they quickened their footsteps.

“I do hope we meet Glan,” Molly went on. “We couldn’t very well miss him, though, could we? ... You’re sure you’ve got your Pass safely!”

“Rather,” said Jack. “At least I think I put it back in my satchel.” And diving his hand in to make sure, he jerked the envelope which contained the Pass out on to the road. A passing breeze caught it and turned it over and over on the ground, and there was a hurried scramble on Jack’s part to get it back again. He had just put it safely back in his satchel, when a sudden cry from Molly made him wheel round to see what was the matter.

Molly was standing gazing down the hill. “Oh, Jack! Jack! Look!” she cried, pointing to the dark wood on their left. About thirty yards away down the hill, something was slowly emerging from the black shadows of the trees.

It was the Grey Pumpkin.

It rolled leisurely out into the moonlit road, paused for a moment, then turned and moved up the hill toward them.

“Don’t be ashamed to run,” Old Nancy had said. And they were not ashamed. Jack and Molly took to their heels and ran. They did not want to be stopped by the Pumpkin at the very beginning of their quest, knowing how powerless they were until the Black Leaf was found. So they ran with all their might, on, on, until the City Gate was but a little farther ahead of them, and the tolling bell clanged loudly from within.

“Jack, oh, Jack—I—can’t—run—any—more,” gasped poor Molly. “Oh—what—what shall—we—do?”

“Were just there—keep—up—old girl—only a—little—bit more—we’re—just—there,” panted Jack.

With a final effort they rushed forward and reached the gate at last. Jack flung himself against it and started beating on it with his fists, and then snatching up a large stone from the road he hammered it with that; while Molly seized the thick bell chain at the side and began pulling it vigorously.

It was a curious gate—more like a door than a gate—made of solid iron; and at the top, high above the children’s heads, was a tiny grating through which the citizens could see who stood without.

Jack glanced despairingly up at the high white walls and the black iron gate, while he continued to beat wildly with the stone and shout as loudly as he could for help. There seemed no way of escape if they did not open the gate, and looking back he saw the Pumpkin coming silently onward.

“It’s no good making a dash for the woods, Molly,” he exclaimed, “he’d cut us off. Pull harder, and shout too.”

So Molly pulled harder at the bell chain and cried out for someone to come and open the gate and let them in.

Suddenly, above the noise they were making and the sound of the tolling bell within, the children heard voices, and a clattering on the other side of the gate. Then a face appeared at the grating.

“Open the gate!” cried Jack. “Quick! Quick! We’ve got a pass. Open the gate and save us!”

A loud murmuring arose within, and they heard the jangling of keys. When all at once a voice shrieked, “Look! Look! On the hill. It’s the Pumpkin! Don’t open the gate! Don’t open the gate, it’s a decoy!”

“It’s not, it’s not,” cried Jack. “Oh, save us, save us. We *have* got a pass. Let us in and save us from the Pumpkin. For pity’s sake open the gate!”

The voices inside were now loud and angry; the people were evidently not inclined to believe him.

“Oh, Jack, Jack!” screamed Molly. “He’s just behind us, Jack!”

Jack wheeled round and saw to his horror that the Pumpkin was near the top of the hill and close upon them. He was desperate. Raising the stone above his head, he flung it with all his strength at the big, grey, moving thing. There was a dull thud as the stone struck the Pumpkin and sent it back a few paces; but it quickly came to a standstill, and began at once to cover the ground it had lost.

Meanwhile a fresh arrival had come upon the scene behind the gate. In the midst of all the hubbub, the angry voices, the clanging bell, the pattering feet, there was a moment’s lull, and Jack and Molly could distantly hear the sound of running feet. Then a familiar voice exclaimed: “Hi, there! What’s all the fuss about?”

A score of voices started to explain.

Molly gave a sob of relief, “Oh, it’s Glan!” she cried.

“Glan! Glan!” the children called imploringly. “Open the gate quick and save us. Oh, *do* be quick!”

Glan’s face appeared at the grating.

“Bless my soul!” he cried in his big voice. “Here, give me the keys! Yes, I know it’s the Pumpkin too, but if we don’t open the gate this instant the little lady outside and her brother will be.... Give me the keys ... give me the keys! Decoys?... Bah!”

There was a jangling of keys again, the sound of a lock being turned, and the huge gate swung back.

Jack and Molly dashed in, and Glan slammed the gate behind them—just in time. Another minute and the Pumpkin would have got through.

“But can’t he open the gate if he just touches it?” cried Jack, tugging Glan’s sleeve excitedly.

“No, no, he can’t do that!” Glan said, shaking his head as he stood on tiptoe to bolt and padlock the gate securely. “Thank goodness there are some limits to his magic!”

Jack and Molly found themselves in the centre of an excited crowd of people who regarded them curiously, but without anger or fear, since Glan had befriended them. Most of them were chattering and waving their hands toward the gate, but some watched the children with narrowed eyes and then whispered behind their hands to their neighbours, while others stood and gazed gloomily at them in silence. They were a picturesque race of people, these citizens of the Possible World, clothed in a bewildering variety of dresses, of no particular style; apparently each person dressed in whichever style took his or her fancy, or which was best suited to the occupation carried on by that person. And this, after all, is the only sensible way to dress. The result of these numerous styles and colours was very pleasing to the eye: at least, so thought Jack and Molly as they gazed round at the animated scene before them.

“Don’t you fret,” said a kindly-looking woman dressed in dark blue with a blue cap on her head and a chain of dull yellow beads round her neck. “We took care to have the gate washed with a magic lotion, and the Pumpkin cannot touch it—nor the gate at the other end of the City—though we have

to keep both safely locked in case a friend of the Pumpkin's were to get in and open the gate for him.” She looked straight into the eyes of first Jack and then Molly—and then she smiled.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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