Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Snow-White or, The House in the Wood

Laura Richards

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Richards L.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
THE HOUSE

The house was so well hidden, one might almost stumble against it before one became aware of it. All round the woods stood tall and dense, old woods of pine and hemlock, with here and there great smooth, squat beeches, and ragged, glistening yellow birches. For the most part they jostled one another so close that one almost fancied they must be uncomfortable; but in one spot they fell away from a steep, rocky bank or ledge, drawing back and standing in a circle at some little distance, leaving an open space of sunny green, at the foot of the rock. It was on this open space that the house looked; and as the house was built of stone, and leaned up against the ledge behind it, one could hardly tell where man's hand had begun, or where left off. The stones might almost have been flung together by a boy at play; yet, rough as they were, they fitted close, and kept the weather out. The roof was of bark; the whole thing was half-covered with creepers that made their way down in a leisurely fashion from the ledge above, not too inquisitive, but still liking to know what was going on. To this end they looked in at the windows, which stood open all summer long, and saw many things which must have surprised them. The squirrels went in boldly, several times a day; so did the birds, the braver of them; and all came out looking pleased with themselves and with things in general. So there was necessarily something or somebody pleasant inside the house.

I said that the trees stood well back from the house in the wood. I ought to have excepted three, a stately pine, and two glorious yellow birches, which stood close to it, as close as might be. In fact, part of the hut seemed to be built round the bole of the pine, which disappeared for several feet, as if the stones had clasped it in a rough embrace, and refused to let go their hold. The birches were a few feet from the door, but near enough for one to lean out of window and pull off the satin fringes. Their roots swelled out above the ground, and twisted themselves into curves that might make a delightful seat, under the green bending canopy, through whose waving folds the trunk glistened like a giant prince of rags and tatters. In the centre of the tiny glade stood a buttonwood-tree, whose vast girth seemed curiously out of proportion to its surroundings. The pine and the birches were noble trees; all the forest round was full of towering stems and knotted, powerful branches; but beside the great buttonwood, they seemed like sturdy dwarfs. If there had been any one to measure the trunk, he would have found a girth of twenty-five feet or more, near the base; while above the surrounding forest, it towered a hundred feet and more in air. At a height of twelve or fifteen feet appeared an opening, two or three feet in diameter. A hollow? surely! not so large as that in the Lycian plane-tree, where Licinius Mucianus dined with nineteen companions, – yes, and slept too, and enjoyed himself immensely, – but large enough to hold two or three persons with all comfort, if not convenience. As for the number of squirrels it might hold, that was past counting; they were running in and out all day long, and made such a noise that they disturbed the woodpeckers, and made them irritable on a hot day.

There never was such a wood for birds! Partly from its great age, partly from favourable accidents of soil and aspect, it had accumulated an unusual variety of trees; and any bird, looking about for a good building site, was sure of finding just the particular tree he liked best, with building materials, food, and every other requisite to heart's desire. So the trees rustled and quivered with wings, and rang with song, all day long, except in the hot sleepy noons, when most respectable birds keep within nests, and only the woodthrush from time to time sends out his few perfect notes, to show

that all times are alike to the true singer. Not content with the forest itself, some families – I think they were ruby-crowned wrens and bluebirds – had made their nests in the creepers that matted the roof of the hut with green; and the great buttonwood was a positive metropolis, densely populated with titmice, warblers, and flycatchers of every description. If anybody lived in the stone hut, he would not want for company, what with the birds and the squirrels, and the woodchucks that came and went across the little green as unconcernedly as if it were their own front dooryard. Decidedly, the inhabitant, if there were one, must be of kin to the wildwood creatures, for his dwelling and its surroundings evidently belonged as much to the forest people as to him.

On the day when my story begins, the house in the wood was the only lifeless thing, or so it seemed, in the whole joyous little scene. It was a day in early May, and the world was so delighted with itself that it laughed and twinkled all over. The trees were hardly yet in full leaf, but had the gray-green misty look of spring, that makes one see Erl-König's daughters shimmering in every willow, and rustling out of sight behind the white birch-trunks. The great buttonwood had put out its leaves, covered with thick white down; the air was full of sweet smells, for it had rained in the night, and wet leaves, pine needles, new ferns, and a hundred other lovely awakening things, made the air a life-giving ether. The little green was starred with anemones and eyebrights; under the cool of the trees one might see other things glimmering, exquisite shadowy forms, – hepaticas, were they, or fairies in purple and gray fur? One felt the presence of mayflowers, though one could not see them unless one went close and pulled away the brown dry leaves; then the lovely rosy creatures would peep out and laugh, as only mayflowers can when they play at hide and seek. There seemed to be a robin party going on under the buttonwood-tree. A dozen of them or more were running and hopping and strutting about, with their breasts well forward, doing amazing things in the matter of worms. Yes, it must surely have rained in the night, or there could not have been such a worm-harvest. There seemed almost to be enough for the robins, and any one who knows robins is aware that this is an extravagant statement. The titmice had apparently not been invited; they sat in the branches and looked on, or hopped and ran about their green leafy city. There was no need for them to travel all that distance to the ground; besides, they considered worms vulgar and coarse food. A self-respecting titmouse, who provides over two hundred grubs a day for himself and his family, may well be content to live in his own city, the murmuring, rustling place where grubs lie close on the bough and under the bark, and where flies are ready for the bill; he has no need to pierce the friendly earth, and drag up her unsightly creeping things, to swallow piecemeal. A titmouse has his opinion of robins, though he is on intimate terms with most birds in the forest.

Now and then some sudden wave of instinct or purpose would run through all the great army of birds, – those in the buttonwood city, the robins struggling on the green, and far in the dim forest depths thrush and song-sparrow and warbler. First a stray note here and there, setting the pitch, it might be; then, fuller and fuller, a chorus, rising high and higher, fluting, trilling, whistling, singing away like mad, every little ruffled throat of them all. Praise, was it, or profession of belief, or simply of joy of being alive and able to sing under green leaves and summer sun?

But even these outbursts of rapture did not rouse the house in the wood. It lay there in the morning glory, gray, silent, senseless, crouched against the wall of rock behind it.

CHAPTER II.
THE CHILD

The child had grown tired of the road. At first it had been delightful to patter along in the soft white dust, leaving the print of her feet so clear behind her. She might be a hundred little girls, she thought, instead of one. The prints reached away back, as far as she could see, hundreds and hundreds of little trotty feet, each with its toes marked as plain as if you drew them with a pencil. And the dust felt soft and smooth, and when you put your foot down it went up puff in the air, and made little clouds; only when it got in your throat it made you cough and sneeze, and it was gritty in your eyes, too. By and by, as I said, she grew tired of this, and it was a new joy to see the little river that came running along just then.

"Running and running, without any feet;
Running and running, and isn't it sweet!"

That was what the child sang, for she had a way of singing when she was alone. Without hesitating, she plumped into the river, and the water was cool and delicious to her hot little toes. She walked along, holding her petticoats high, though there was no need of that, as they were short enough before; splashing just enough to make silver sparkles at every step. The river did not seem to grow deeper; it was just precisely made to wade in, the child thought. For some way the banks were fringed with meadow-rue, and she had to stop every little while to admire the fluffy white blossoms, and the slender, graceful stems. Then came alders, stubby and thick, with last year's berries still clinging here and there to the black twigs. Then, somehow, all at once there began to be trees along by the river side. The child had been so absorbed in making sparkles and shouting at them, she had forgotten the banks for awhile; now, when she looked up, there was no more meadow-rue. Trees came crowding down to the water's edge; trees were all about her, ranks upon ranks of them; wherever she looked, she saw only green rustling tents and waving curtains.

"I am in a woods!" said the child. She laughed aloud at the idea, and looked round again, full of joy and wonder. It was pretty enough, surely. The woods were not so thick but that sunbeams could find their way down through the branches, dappling the green gloom with fairy gold. Here and there the gold lay on the river, too, and that was a wonderful thing, handfuls of gold and diamonds flung down from the sky, shimmering and sparkling on a crystal floor; but in other places the water slept still and black in the shadow, only broken where a stone humped itself out, shining and mossy, with the silver breaking over it and running down with cheerful babblings into the soft blackness below.

By and by there was a stone so big that its top stood out dry and brown above the water. It was a flat top, and the child sat down on it, and gathered her petticoats about her, and let her feet rest in the cool flowing. That was a great pleasure, to be really part of the brook, or of the rock. She laughed aloud, suddenly, and kicked a little; till the bright drops flew over her head; then she began to sing and talk, both together.

"And I comed away,
And I runned away,
And I said I thought I did not
Want to stay!

"Well, and if Miss Tyler won't be surprised! she will say 'Oh, dear me! where *is* that child?' and then she will look everywhere, and everywhere, *and* everywhere, and I won't be nowhere!" She

broke out into a funny little bubbling laugh, and the brook laughed in almost exactly the same way, so that the child nodded at it, and kicked up the sparkles again, to show her appreciation.

"And then they will send out all over the village, and everybody will say, 'Oh, yes, we seed that child. We seed her going into the store, and we seed her going into the house, and we seed her running about all over the place.' Yes! but, nobody seed me run, and nobody seed me go, and nobody don't know nothing, and nothing don't nobody know!" and she bubbled again. This time a green frog came up out of the water and looked at her, and said "Croak," in an inquisitive tone.

"Why did I?" said the child, looking at him sidewise. "Well, if I tell, won't you tell anybody, never no more? honest Injun? Well, then, I won't tell you! I don't tell things to frogs!" She splashed a great splash, and the frog departed in anger.

"Huh!" said the child. "He was noffin but an old frog. He wasn't a fairy; though there *was* the Frog Prince, you know." She frowned thoughtfully, but soon shook her head. "No, that wasn't him, I'm sure it wasn't. He'd have had gold spots on his green, and this frog hadn't a single one, he hadn't. He wasn't a prince; I'd know a frog that was a prince, minute I seed him, I 'spect. And he'd say:

"'King's daughter youngest, open the door!'

"And then I would, and he would come in, and – and – I'd put him in Miss Tyler's plate, and wouldn't she yellup and jump? and Mamma – "

Here the child suddenly looked grave. "Mamma!" she repeated, "Mamma. Well, she went away and left me first, and that was how it was. When you leave this kinds of child alone, it runs away, that's what it does; and Miss Tylers isn't any kind of persons to leave this kinds of child wiz, anyhow, and so I told them at first.

"And I comed away,
And I runned away,
And I said I thought I did not
Want to stay!
And they teared their hair,
And they made despair,
And – and —
And I said I thought perhaps I did not care!

"That's a long one. When I come to some fairies I'll make more. When I am big, I'll talk that way all the time, wiz poetry in it."

She was silent for a few minutes, watching the bubbles that came sailing down the stream. Most of the way they were clear like glass, with a little rim of foam where they joined on, she thought; but when they came to a certain place, where a shaft of yellow light came down and made sparkles on the water, every bubble turned rainbow colour, most beautiful. Only, some of them would go the wrong way, over into the shadow.

"Hi!" she shouted to them. "Come over here and be rainbows! you are a stupid, you are! If I was a bubble, I would know enough to come to the right place, and be a rainbow, yes, I would. I'll kick you, old bubble, if you go there!" Stretching out her foot, she stretched it a little too far, and sat down in the stream with a souse. She scrambled out hastily, but this time on the bank. She had had enough of the brook, and was red with anger. "You needn't have your old stones so slippery!" she said. "I needn't have sat on your old stone, anyhow, but I thought it might be pleased. And my feet was cold, and I won't stay there any more, not a single minute, so you can make all the noise you want to, and noffin but frogs will stay in you, and not prince frogs One Bit, only just common ones, so now!"

She shook her head at the brook, and turned away. Then she turned back again, and her baby forehead clouded.

"See here!" said the child. "I 'spect I'm lost."

There seemed no doubt about that. There was no sign of a path anywhere. The still trees came crowding down to the water's edge, sometimes leaning far over, so that their drooping branches met across the still pools. On every side were green arcades, long reaches of shimmering leaves, cool deeps of fern; nothing else. The child had never known fear, and it did not come to her now. She reflected for a moment; then her brow cleared. "I must find a House in the Wood!" she announced to the brook. She spoke with decision, and cheerfulness reigned in her mind. Of course there was a house somewhere; there always was, in every wood. Sometimes two children lived in it, and the brother was a white fawn all day, and turned into a boy at night; that would be fun! and sometimes it was an old woman – oh, dear, yes, but sometimes that old woman was a witch, and put you in a chicken-coop, and ate you up when you were fat. Yes; but you would know that house, because it was all made of candy and pancakes and things, and you could just run round behind it, and pull off some pancakes from the shed, p'r'aps, and then run away as fast as ever you could, and old womans couldn't run half so fast as children, and so! But the best house, on the whole, would be the Dwarf House. Yes, that was the one to look for. The house where seven dwarfs lived, and they had the table all ready set when you came, and you took a little out of one bowl, and a little out of another cup; and then they came in and found you asleep, and said, "Who is this sweet maiden?" and then you stayed and cooked for them, just like Snow-white, and – and – it was just lovely!

"Well, I wish it would be pretty soon!" said the child. "I'm pretty hungry, I 'spect p'raps."

She was a brave child; she was hungry, and her legs and feet ached; but she pushed on cheerfully, sometimes talking and singing, sometimes silent, making her way through the tangle of ferns and hanging branches; following the brook, because there was a little boy in the newspaper that her papa read, and he got lost, and just he followed the brook, and it brought him right along to where there were people, and he had blackberries all the way. She looked for blackberries, but they are hard to find in early May, except in the Fairy Books. There, as the child knew very well, you had only to go to the right place and take a broom and brush away the snow, and there you found strawberries, the finest that ever were seen, to take home to your sick sister. It was true that you had to be very good and polite to the proper old woman, or else you would never find the strawberries; but the child would be polite, she truly would. She would sweep the old woman's house, and give her half her own bread – only she had no bread! Here a great pang of emptiness smote the child; she felt that there was a sob about somewhere, waiting to get into her throat. It should not come in; she shook her head, and pressed on. It was all right; God was close by, anyhow, and he had to take care of children, because he said he would. So it was all right, only —

Suddenly the child stopped; for it *was* all right. She had found the House in the Wood.

Standing breast-high in ferns, she looked away from the brook; and there was a break in the trees, and beyond the break a space of sunny green, with a huge tree in the middle; and on the farther side the house itself. Gray and silent; leaning against a great rock-face behind it; the door shut, but the windows standing wide open; the roof all green and blossoming, like a queer little garden place, – there it was, exactly the way it was in the Fairy Books. The child saw at once that there was no danger of cannibal old women here. This house was not made of pancakes, and the windows were not barley sugar at all, but plain glass. No, this was the house of the Seven Dwarfs; and she was really in a fairy story, and she was going to have the best time she had ever had in her life.

The child stood quiet for a few minutes, looking in pure delight. Perhaps one of the dwarfs would come out. She thought she might feel a little shy if one were to come out just this very minute. Then she remembered that they must all be out at work in the forest, for they always were, and they did not come back till night.

"Well, I can't wait!" she said, decidedly. "First place, Snow-white didn't, not a minute she didn't wait. And besides, I'm too hungry, and I s'pose everything is ready and waiting inside, and so I'll go."

She advanced boldly across the green, but paused again at the door. No sound came from the house. The creepers waved on the roof, the birds made an amazed and amazing chatter in the great

buttonwood-tree; but that was all. The child pushed the door, the latch yielded, and the door swung slowly open. Two steps, and she stood inside.

Even the very bravest child may be excused for feeling a little strange in such a house as this. She felt her heart beating in her ears, and her throat was dry; but as she looked about her, everything was so perfectly right that her sense of fitness asserted itself once more, and she was content and glad. The room in which she stood was not large, except for dwarfs; for them it would be a great hall. It was floored and walled with clean, shining wood, and there were two doors, one at either end. There was an open fire-place, in which two black iron dogs with curly tails held up some logs of wood that were smouldering and purring in a comfortable way, as if they had been lighted more for pleasure than for warmth. Near the fire stood an easy-chair, and another chair was drawn up by a table that stood in the window. It was on seeing this table that the child began to fear all was not quite right. It was a neat little table, just about high enough for dwarfs, if they were not very short dwarfs; it was laid with a snowy cloth, as they always are; but – where were the seven places? there was only one at this table. There was a plate, a knife and fork, a cup and saucer, a little loaf of bread and a little pat of butter, a pitcher of milk, and a comb of golden honey. What did this mean?

"Well, I can't help it," said the child, suddenly. "If they is gone away all but one of them, I can't help it; they shouldn't play that way, and I'm hungry. Just I'll take a little bit, as Snow-white did. Just that's what I'll do!"

She seated herself at the table, and poured some milk into the cup. Oh, how good it was! She broke off a bit of bread, and nibbled it; her spirits rose, and she began to feel again that she was having the most splendid time that ever was. She broke out into her song —

"And I comed away,
And I runned away,
And I said I thought I did not – "

Then she stopped, for the door of the further room opened quietly, and the dwarf came in.

CHAPTER III.
THE MAN

The child's song broke off in a little scream, for things are sometimes startling even when you have been expecting them; but the scream bubbled into a laugh. "Ah! I – I mean I'm laughing because you look so funny. I took some bread and milk because I was hungry." She stopped abruptly, feeling that sob somewhere about her again. The dwarf advanced toward her, and she held on to the back of the chair; but he held out his hand and smiled.

"How do you do?" he said. "I am very glad to see you; pray sit down again and finish your supper."

"It's your supper," said the child, who was honest. "I didn't mean to steal it; I don't know p'r'aps there isn't enough for both of us." She had a way of leaving out words in her sentences that sometimes confused people, but the dwarf seemed to understand.

"There's plenty for both!" he said. "Come! I'll sit down here, and you shall give me some milk. I am hungry, too. Have some honey!" He nodded at her, and smiled again; he had the most delightful smile the child had ever seen. Somebody once said you could warm yourself at it as at a fire. The child took a piece of bread, and looked at him over it as she nibbled. He was not a tiny dwarf, not one of the kind that get into flowers, and fight with grass-blades, and that sort of thing. No, indeed! he was just a little man; why, he was taller than she was, though not so very much taller. He had brown hair and a soft brown beard; his eyes were brown, too, and full of light. All brown and gray, for his dress was gray and soft, "kind of humplety velvet," the child said to herself, though it was really only corduroy. He seemed all of a piece with the house, and the gray rock behind it. Now he looked at her, and smiled again.

"You look as if you were wondering something very much," he said. "Have some more milk! What are you wondering?"

"Partly I was wondering where the rest of you was!" said the child.

"The rest of me?" said the man. "There isn't any more of me. This is all there is. Don't you think it's enough?" He smiled still, but this time it was only his mouth, and his eyes looked dark, as if something hurt him.

"I mean the others," the child explained. "The rest of the seven. I guess it's six, p'r'aps. There was seven of 'em where Snow-white came to, you know."

"Seven what?" asked the man.

"Dwarfs!" said the child.

"Oh!" said the man.

He was silent for a moment, as if he were thinking; then he laughed, and the child laughed, too. "Isn't it funny?" she said. "What are you laughing at?"

"Yes, it is funny!" said the man. "Why, you are just like Snow-white, aren't you? but there aren't any more dwarfs. I'm the only one there is here."

The child thought that was a pity. "You could have much more fun if there were seven of you," she said. "Why don't you get some more?" Then suddenly recollecting herself, she added, hastily, "I never did cook, but I can stir porridge, and dust I can, too, and I 'spect I could make your bed, 'cause it wouldn't be so big, you see. I tried to make beds, but I get all mixed up in the sheets, and the blankets are horrid, and I never know which is the wrong side of the spread. So you see!"

"I see!" said the man.

"But I 'spect I could make yours, don't you? Should you mind if once I didn't get the spread right, you know?"

"Not a bit. Besides, I don't like spreads. We'll throw it away."

"Oh, let's!" said the child. "Hurrah! Do you say hurrah?"

"Hurrah!" said the man. "Do you mind if I smoke a pipe?"

No, the child did not mind at all. So he brought a most beautiful pipe, and filled and lighted it; then he sat down, and looked at the child thoughtfully.

"I suppose you ought to tell me where you came from," he said. "It isn't half so much fun, but I suppose they will be missing you at home, don't you? Your mamma – "

The child hastened to explain. Her mamma was away, had gone quite away with her papa, and left her, the child, alone with Miss Tyler and the nurse. Now Miss Tyler was no kinds of a person to leave a child wiz; she poked and she fussed, and she said it was shocking whenever you did anything, but just anything at all except sit still and learn hymns. "I hate hymns!" said the child.

"So do I!" said the man, fervently. "It's a pity about Miss Tyler. Where is it you came from, Snow-white?"

"Oh! it's somewhere else; a long way off. I can't go back there. Dwarfs never send people back there; they let them stay and do the work. And I'm almost as big as you are!" the child ended, with a little quaver.

"So you are," said the man. "Now we'll wash the dishes, and forget all about it for to-night, anyhow."

It was glorious fun washing the dishes, such pretty dishes, blue and white, with houses and birds on them. They went into the kitchen through one of the doors, and there all the things were bright and shining, as if they were made of silver. The child asked the dwarf if they were really silver, but he said oh, dear, no, only Britannia. That sounded like nonsense, because the child knew that Britannia ruled the waves, her papa sang a song about it; but she thought perhaps dwarfs didn't understand about that, so she said nothing. The dwarf brought a little cricket, and she stood on that and wiped the dishes while he washed them; and he said he never liked washing them so much before, and she said she never liked wiping them so much. Everything was as handy as possible. The dish-pan was as bright as the rest of the things, and there were plenty of clean towels, and when you shook the soap-shaker about, it made the most charming bubbles in the clean hot water.

"Do you ever make bubbles in your pipe?" said the child.

"Not in this one," said the dwarf. "I used to have a pipe for them; perhaps I can find one for you by and by."

"I made bubbles in the river," she announced, polishing a glass vigorously. "There was a stone, and I sat on it, and bubbles I made wiz kicks, you know, in the water; and songs I made, too, and the river went bubble, too, all the time. There was a frog, too, and he came and said things to me, but I kicked at him. He wasn't the Frog Prince, 'cause he had no gold spots on him. Do you know the Frog Prince? Does he live here in this river? Do you have gold balls when you play ball?"

"I'll get one," said the dwarf, recklessly. "It's no fun playing ball alone, but now we'll have one, I shouldn't wonder. How far did you come along the river, Snow-white?"

"Miles!" said Snow-white.

"And didn't you have shoes and stockings when you started?"

Yes, the child had had shoes and stockings, but she took them off to see her toes make dust-toes in the dust. Did ever the dwarf do that? It was fun! She left them away back there, miles away, before she came to the river and the woods. And her hat —

She laughed suddenly. "Did ever you put flowers in your hat and send it sailing for a boat?"

"Is that what you did, Snow-white?"

"Yes! and it was fun. It went bob, bob, right along wiz the water and bubbles; and then it tipped against a stone, and then it went round the corner, and – and that's all I know," she ended, suddenly.

"You are sleepy, Snow-white," said the dwarf. "See! the dishes are all done; now we will put them away in the cupboard, and then we will see about putting you away to bed."

The child objected that it was still daylight; she tried to look wide awake, and succeeded for a few minutes, while they were putting away the dishes in the most charming little hanging cupboard with glass doors; but after that her head grew heavy, and her eyelids, as she expressed it, kept flopping into her eyes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.