

Molesworth Mrs.

The Cuckoo Clock



Mrs. Molesworth
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"Now, these little folks, like most girls and boys,
Loved fairy tales even better than toys.

* * * * *

And they knew that in flowers on the spray
Tiny spirits are hidden away,
That frisk at night on the forest green,
When earth is bathed in dewy sheen —
And shining halls of pearl and gem,
The Regions of Fancy – were open to them."

"... just as any little child has been guided towards the
true paradise by its fairy dreams of bliss."

– E. A. Abbott.

I

THE OLD HOUSE

"Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned country seat."

Once upon a time in an old town, in an old street, there stood a very old house. Such a house as you could hardly find nowadays, however you searched, for it belonged to a gone-by time – a time now quite passed away.

It stood in a street, but yet it was not like a town house, for though the front opened right on to the pavement, the back windows looked out upon a beautiful, quaintly terraced garden, with old trees growing so thick and close together that in summer it was like living on the edge of a forest to be near them; and even in winter the web of their interlaced branches hid all clear view behind.

There was a colony of rooks in this old garden. Year after year they held their parliaments and cawed and chattered and fussed; year after year they built their nests and hatched their eggs; year after year, I *suppose*, the old ones gradually died off and the young ones took their place, though, but for knowing this *must* be so, no one would have suspected it, for to all appearance the rooks were always the same – ever and always the same.

Time indeed seemed to stand still in and all about the old house, as if it and the people who inhabited it had got *so* old that they could not get any older, and had outlived the possibility of change.

But one day at last there did come a change. Late in the dusk of an autumn afternoon a carriage drove up to the door of the old house, came rattling over the stones with a sudden noisy clatter that sounded quite impertinent, startling the rooks just as they were composing themselves to rest, and setting them all wondering what could be the matter.

A little girl was the matter! A little girl in a grey merino frock, and grey beaver bonnet, grey tippet and grey gloves – all grey together, even to her eyes, all except her round rosy face and bright brown hair. Her name even was rather grey, for it was Griselda.

A gentleman lifted her out of the carriage and disappeared with her into the house, and later that same evening the gentleman came out of the house and got into the carriage which had come back for him again, and drove away. That was all that the rooks saw of the change that had come to the old house. Shall we go inside to see more?

Up the shallow, wide, old-fashioned staircase, past the wainscoted walls, dark and shining like a mirror, down a long narrow passage with many doors, which but for their gleaming brass handles one would not have known were there, the oldest of the three old servants led little Griselda, so tired and sleepy that

her supper had been left almost untasted, to the room prepared for her. It was a queer room, for everything in the house was queer; but in the dancing light of the fire burning brightly in the tiled grate, it looked cheerful enough.

"I am glad there's a fire," said the child. "Will it keep alight till the morning, do you think?"

The old servant shook her head.

"'Twould not be safe to leave it so that it would burn till morning," she said. "When you are in bed and asleep, little missie, you won't want the fire. Bed's the warmest place."

"It isn't for that I want it," said Griselda; "it's for the light I like it. This house all looks so dark to me, and yet there seem to be lights hidden in the walls too, they shine so."

The old servant smiled.

"It will all seem strange to you, no doubt," she said; "but you'll get to like it, missie. 'Tis a *good* old house, and those that know best love it well."

"Whom do you mean?" said Griselda. "Do you mean my great-aunts?"

"Ah, yes, and others beside," replied the old woman. "The rooks love it well, and others beside. Did you ever hear tell of the 'good people,' missie, over the sea where you come from?"

"Fairies, do you mean?" cried Griselda, her eyes sparkling. "Of course I've *heard* of them, but I never saw any. Did you ever?"

"I couldn't say," answered the old woman. "My mind is not

young like yours, missie, and there are times when strange memories come back to me as of sights and sounds in a dream. I am too old to see and hear as I once could. We are all old here, missie. 'Twas time something young came to the old house again."

"How strange and queer everything seems!" thought Griselda, as she got into bed. "I don't feel as if I belonged to it a bit. And they are all *so* old; perhaps they won't like having a child among them?"

The very same thought that had occurred to the rooks! They could not decide as to the fors and againsts at all, so they settled to put it to the vote the next morning, and in the meantime they and Griselda all went to sleep.

I never heard if *they* slept well that night; after such unusual excitement it was hardly to be expected they would. But Griselda, being a little girl and not a rook, was so tired that two minutes after she had tucked herself up in bed she was quite sound asleep, and did not wake for several hours.

"I wonder what it will all look like in the morning," was her last waking thought. "If it was summer now, or spring, I shouldn't mind – there would always be something nice to do then."

As sometimes happens, when she woke again, very early in the morning, long before it was light, her thoughts went straight on with the same subject.

"If it was summer now, or spring," she repeated to herself, just as if she had not been asleep at all – like the man who fell into a

trance for a hundred years just as he was saying "it is bitt – " and when he woke up again finished the sentence as if nothing had happened – "erly cold." "If only it was spring," thought Griselda.

Just as she had got so far in her thoughts, she gave a great start. What was it she heard? Could her wish have come true? Was this fairyland indeed that she had got to, where one only needs to *wish*, for it to *be*? She rubbed her eyes, but it was too dark to see; *that* was not very fairyland like, but her ears she felt certain had not deceived her: she was quite, quite sure that she had heard the cuckoo!

She listened with all her might, but she did not hear it again. Could it, after all, have been fancy? She grew sleepy at last, and was just dropping off when – yes, there it was again, as clear and distinct as possible – "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!" three, four, *five* times, then perfect silence as before.

"What a funny cuckoo," said Griselda to herself. "I could almost fancy it was in the house. I wonder if my great-aunts have a tame cuckoo in a cage? I don't *think* I ever heard of such a thing, but this is such a queer house; everything seems different in it – perhaps they have a tame cuckoo. I'll ask them in the morning. It's very nice to hear, whatever it is."

And, with a pleasant feeling of companionship, a sense that she was not the only living creature awake in this dark world, Griselda lay listening, contentedly enough, for the sweet, fresh notes of the cuckoo's friendly greeting. But before it sounded again through the silent house she was once more fast asleep. And

this time she slept till daylight had found its way into all but the *very* darkest nooks and crannies of the ancient dwelling.

She dressed herself carefully, for she had been warned that her aunts loved neatness and precision; she fastened each button of her grey frock, and tied down her hair as smooth as such a brown tangle *could* be tied down; and, absorbed with these weighty cares, she forgot all about the cuckoo for the time. It was not till she was sitting at breakfast with her aunts that she remembered it, or rather was reminded of it, by some little remark that was made about the friendly robins on the terrace walk outside.

"Oh, aunt," she exclaimed, stopping short half-way the journey to her mouth of a spoonful of bread and milk, "have you got a cuckoo in a cage?"

"A cuckoo in a cage," repeated her elder aunt, Miss Grizzel; "what is the child talking about?"

"In a cage!" echoed Miss Tabitha, "a cuckoo in a cage!"

"There is a cuckoo somewhere in the house," said Griselda; "I heard it in the night. It couldn't have been out-of-doors, could it? It would be too cold."

The aunts looked at each other with a little smile. "So like her grandmother," they whispered. Then said Miss Grizzel —

"We have a cuckoo, my dear, though it isn't in a cage, and it isn't exactly the sort of cuckoo you are thinking of. It lives in a clock."

"In a clock," repeated Miss Tabitha, as if to confirm her sister's statement.

"In a clock!" exclaimed Griselda, opening her grey eyes very wide.

It sounded something like the three bears, all speaking one after the other, only Griselda's voice was not like Tiny's; it was the loudest of the three.

"In a clock!" she exclaimed; "but it can't be alive, then?"

"Why not?" said Miss Grizzel.

"I don't know," replied Griselda, looking puzzled.

"I knew a little girl once," pursued Miss Grizzel, "who was quite of opinion the cuckoo *was* alive, and nothing would have persuaded her it was not. Finish your breakfast, my dear, and then if you like you shall come with me and see the cuckoo for yourself."

"Thank you, Aunt Grizzel," said Griselda, going on with her bread and milk.

"Yes," said Miss Tabitha, "you shall see the cuckoo for yourself."

"Thank you, Aunt Tabitha," said Griselda. It was rather a bother to have always to say "thank you," or "no, thank you," twice, but Griselda thought it was polite to do so, as Aunt Tabitha always repeated everything that Aunt Grizzel said. It wouldn't have mattered so much if Aunt Tabitha had said it *at once* after Miss Grizzel, but as she generally made a little pause between, it was sometimes rather awkward. But of course it was better to say "thank you" or "no, thank you" twice over than to hurt Aunt Tabitha's feelings.

After breakfast Aunt Grizzel was as good as her word. She took Griselda through several of the rooms in the house, pointing out all the curiosities, and telling all the histories of the rooms and their contents; and Griselda liked to listen, only in every room they came to, she wondered *when* they would get to the room where lived the cuckoo.

Aunt Tabitha did not come with them, for she was rather rheumatic. On the whole, Griselda was not sorry. It would have taken such a *very* long time, you see, to have had all the histories twice over, and possibly, if Griselda had got tired, she might have forgotten about the "thank you's" or "no, thank you's" twice over.

The old house looked quite as queer and quaint by daylight as it had seemed the evening before; almost more so indeed, for the view from the windows added to the sweet, odd "old-fashionedness" of everything.

"We have beautiful roses in summer," observed Miss Grizzel, catching sight of the direction in which the child's eyes were wandering.

"I wish it was summer. I do love summer," said Griselda. "But there is a very rosy scent in the rooms even now, Aunt Grizzel, though it is winter, or nearly winter."

Miss Grizzel looked pleased.

"My pot-pourri," she explained.

They were just then standing in what she called the "great saloon," a handsome old room, furnished with gold-and-white chairs, that must once have been brilliant, and faded yellow

damask hangings. A feeling of awe had crept over Griselda as they entered this ancient drawing-room. What grand parties there must have been in it long ago! But as for dancing in it *now*—dancing, or laughing, or chattering – such a thing was quite impossible to imagine!

Miss Grizzel crossed the room to where stood in one corner a marvellous Chinese cabinet, all black and gold and carving. It was made in the shape of a temple, or a palace – Griselda was not sure which. Any way, it was very delicious and wonderful. At the door stood, one on each side, two solemn mandarins; or, to speak more correctly, perhaps I should say, a mandarin and his wife, for the right-hand figure was evidently intended to be a lady.

Miss Grizzel gently touched their heads. Forthwith, to Griselda's astonishment, they began solemnly to nod.

"Oh, how do you make them do that, Aunt Grizzel?" she exclaimed.

"Never you mind, my dear; it wouldn't do for *you* to try to make them nod. They wouldn't like it," replied Miss Grizzel mysteriously. "Respect to your elders, my dear, always remember that. The mandarins are *many* years older than you – older than I myself, in fact."

Griselda wondered, if this were so, how it was that Miss Grizzel took such liberties with them herself, but she said nothing.

"Here is my last summer's pot-pourri," continued Miss Grizzel, touching a great china jar on a little stand, close beside

the cabinet. "You may smell it, my dear."

Nothing loth, Griselda buried her round little nose in the fragrant leaves.

"It's lovely," she said. "May I smell it whenever I like, Aunt Grizzel?"

"We shall see," replied her aunt. "It isn't *every* little girl, you know, that we could trust to come into the great saloon alone."

"No," said Griselda meekly.

Miss Grizzel led the way to a door opposite to that by which they had entered. She opened it and passed through, Griselda following, into a small ante-room.

"It is on the stroke of ten," said Miss Grizzel, consulting her watch; "now, my dear, you shall make acquaintance with our cuckoo."

The cuckoo "that lived in a clock!" Griselda gazed round her eagerly. Where was the clock? She could see nothing in the least like one, only up on the wall in one corner was what looked like a miniature house, of dark brown carved wood. It was not so *very* like a house, but it certainly had a roof – a roof with deep projecting eaves; and, looking closer, yes, it *was* a clock, after all, only the figures, which had once been gilt, had grown dim with age, like everything else, and the hands at a little distance were hardly to be distinguished from the face.

Miss Grizzel stood perfectly still, looking up at the clock; Griselda beside her, in breathless expectation. Presently there came a sort of distant rumbling. *Something* was going to happen.

Suddenly two little doors above the clock face, which Griselda had not known were there, sprang open with a burst and out flew a cuckoo, flapped his wings, and uttered his pretty cry, "Cuckoo! cuckoo! cuckoo!" Miss Grizzel counted aloud, "Seven, eight, nine, ten." "Yes, he never makes a mistake," she added triumphantly. "All these long years I have never known him wrong. There are no such clocks made nowadays, I can assure you, my dear."

"But *is* it a clock? Isn't he alive?" exclaimed Griselda. "He looked at me and nodded his head, before he flapped his wings and went in to his house again – he did indeed, aunt," she said earnestly; "just like saying, 'How do you do?' to me."

Again Miss Grizzel smiled, the same odd yet pleased smile that Griselda had seen on her face at breakfast. "Just what Sybilla used to say," she murmured. "Well, my dear," she added aloud, "it is quite right he *should* say, 'How do you do?' to you. It is the first time he has seen *you*, though many a year ago he knew your dear grandmother, and your father, too, when he was a little boy. You will find him a good friend, and one that can teach you many lessons."

"What, Aunt Grizzel?" inquired Griselda, looking puzzled.

"Punctuality, for one thing, and faithful discharge of duty," replied Miss Grizzel.

"May I come to see the cuckoo – to watch for him coming out, sometimes?" asked Griselda, who felt as if she could spend all day looking up at the clock, watching for her little friend's

appearance.

"You will see him several times a day," said her aunt, "for it is in this little room I intend you to prepare your tasks. It is nice and quiet, and nothing to disturb you, and close to the room where your Aunt Tabitha and I usually sit."

So saying, Miss Grizzel opened a second door in the little ante-room, and, to Griselda's surprise, at the foot of a short flight of stairs through another door, half open, she caught sight of her Aunt Tabitha, knitting quietly by the fire, in the room in which they had breakfasted.

"What a *very* funny house it is, Aunt Grizzel," she said, as she followed her aunt down the steps. "Every room has so many doors, and you come back to where you were just when you think you are ever so far off. I shall never be able to find my way about."

"Oh yes, you will, my dear, very soon," said her aunt encouragingly.

"She is very kind," thought Griselda; "but I wish she wouldn't call my lessons tasks. It makes them sound so dreadfully hard. But, any way, I'm glad I'm to do them in the room where that dear cuckoo lives."

II

IMPATIENT GRISELDA

"... fairies but seldom appear;
If we do wrong we must expect
That it will cost us dear!"

It was all very well for a few days. Griselda found plenty to amuse herself with while the novelty lasted, enough to prevent her missing *very* badly the home she had left "over the sea," and the troop of noisy merry brothers who teased and petted her. Of course she *missed* them, but not "dreadfully." She was neither homesick nor "dull."

It was not quite such smooth sailing when lessons began. She did not dislike lessons; in fact, she had always thought she was rather fond of them. But the having to do them alone was not lively, and her teachers were very strict. The worst of all was the writing and arithmetic master, a funny little old man who wore knee-breeches and took snuff, and called her aunt "Madame," bowing formally whenever he addressed her. He screwed Griselda up into such an unnatural attitude to write her copies, that she really felt as if she would never come straight and loose again; and the arithmetic part of his instructions was even worse. Oh! what sums in addition he gave her! Griselda had never

been partial to sums, and her rather easy-going governess at home had not, to tell the truth, been partial to them either. And Mr. – I can't remember the little old gentleman's name. Suppose we call him Mr. Kneebreeches – Mr. Kneebreeches, when he found this out, conscientiously put her back to the very beginning.

It was dreadful, really. He came twice a week, and the days he didn't come were as bad as those he did, for he left her a whole *row*, I was going to say, but you couldn't call Mr. Kneebreeches' addition sums "rows," they were far too fat and wide across to be so spoken of! – whole slatefuls of these terrible mountains of figures to climb wearily to the top of. And not to climb *once* up merely. *The* terrible thing was Mr. Kneebreeches' favourite method of what he called "proving." I can't explain it – it is far beyond my poor powers – but it had something to do with cutting off the top line, after you had added it all up and had actually done the sum, you understand – cutting off the top line and adding the long rows up again without it, and then joining it on again somewhere else.

"I wouldn't mind so much," said poor Griselda, one day, "if it was any good. But you see, Aunt Grizzel, it isn't. For I'm just as likely to do the *proving* wrong as the sum itself – more likely, for I'm always so tired when I get to the proving – and so all that's proved is that *something's* wrong, and I'm sure that isn't any good, except to make me cross."

"Hush!" said her aunt gravely. "That is not the way for a little girl to speak. Improve these golden hours of youth, Griselda; they

will never return."

"I hope not," muttered Griselda, "if it means doing sums."

Miss Grizzel fortunately was a little deaf; she did not hear this remark. Just then the cuckoo clock struck eleven.

"Good little cuckoo," said Miss Grizzel. "What an example he sets you. His life is spent in the faithful discharge of duty;" and so saying she left the room.

The cuckoo was still telling the hour – eleven took a good while. It seemed to Griselda that the bird repeated her aunt's last words. "Faith – ful, dis – charge, of – your, du – ty," he said, "faith – ful."

"You horrid little creature!" exclaimed Griselda in a passion; "what business have you to mock me?"

She seized a book, the first that came to hand, and flung it at the bird who was just beginning his eleventh cuckoo. He disappeared with a snap, disappeared without flapping his wings, or, as Griselda always fancied he did, giving her a friendly nod, and in an instant all was silent.

Griselda felt a little frightened. What had she done? She looked up at the clock. It seemed just the same as usual, the cuckoo's doors closely shut, no sign of any disturbance. Could it have been her fancy only that he had sprung back more hastily than he would have done but for her throwing the book at him? She began to hope so, and tried to go on with her lessons. But it was no use. Though she really gave her best attention to the long addition sums, and found that by so doing she managed them

much better than before, she could not feel happy or at ease. Every few minutes she glanced up at the clock, as if expecting the cuckoo to come out, though she knew quite well there was no chance of his doing so till twelve o'clock, as it was only the hours, not the half hours and quarters, that he told.

"I wish it was twelve o'clock," she said to herself anxiously more than once.

If only the clock had not been so very high up on the wall, she would have been tempted to climb up and open the little doors, and peep in to satisfy herself as to the cuckoo's condition. But there was no possibility of this. The clock was far, very far above her reach, and there was no high piece of furniture standing near, upon which she could have climbed to get to it. There was nothing to be done but to wait for twelve o'clock.

And, after all, she did not wait for twelve o'clock, for just about half-past eleven, Miss Grizzel's voice was heard calling to her to put on her hat and cloak quickly, and come out to walk up and down the terrace with her.

"It is fine just now," said Miss Grizzel, "but there is a prospect of rain before long. You must leave your lessons for the present, and finish them in the afternoon."

"I have finished them," said Griselda, meekly.

"*All?*" inquired her aunt.

"Yes, all," replied Griselda.

"Ah, well, then, this afternoon, if the rain holds off, we shall drive to Merrybrow Hall, and inquire for the health of your dear

godmother, Lady Lavander," said Miss Grizzel.

Poor Griselda! There were few things she disliked more than a drive with her aunts. They went in the old yellow chariot, with all the windows up, and of course Griselda had to sit with her back to the horses, which made her very uncomfortable when she had no air, and had to sit still for so long.

Merrybrow Hall was a large house, quite as old and much grander, but not nearly so wonderful as the home of Griselda's aunts. It was six miles off, and it took a very long time indeed to drive there in the rumbling old chariot, for the old horses were fat and wheezy, and the old coachman fat and wheezy too. Lady Lavander was, of course, old too – very old indeed, and rather grumpy and very deaf. Miss Grizzel and Miss Tabitha had the greatest respect for her; she always called them "My dear," as if they were quite girls, and they listened to all she said as if her words were of gold. For some mysterious reason she had been invited to be Griselda's godmother; but, as she had never shown her any proof of affection beyond giving her a prayer-book, and hoping, whenever she saw her, that she was "a good little miss," Griselda did not feel any particular cause for gratitude to her.

The drive seemed longer and duller than ever this afternoon, but Griselda bore it meekly; and when Lady Lavander, as usual, expressed her hopes about her, the little girl looked down modestly, feeling her cheeks grow scarlet. "I am not a good little girl at all," she felt inclined to call out. "I'm very bad and cruel. I believe I've killed the dear little cuckoo."

What *would* the three old ladies have thought if she had called it out? As it was, Lady Lavander patted her approvingly, said she loved to see young people modest and humble-minded, and gave her a slice of very highly-spiced, rather musty gingerbread, which Griselda couldn't bear.

All the way home Griselda felt in a fever of impatience to rush up to the ante-room and see if the cuckoo was all right again. It was late and dark when the chariot at last stopped at the door of the old house. Miss Grizzel got out slowly, and still more slowly Miss Tabitha followed her. Griselda was obliged to restrain herself and move demurely.

"It is past your supper-time, my dear," said Miss Grizzel. "Go up at once to your room, and Dorcas shall bring some supper to you. Late hours are bad for young people."

Griselda obediently wished her aunts good-night, and went quietly upstairs. But once out of sight, at the first landing, she changed her pace. She turned to the left instead of to the right, which led to her own room, and flew rather than ran along the dimly-lighted passage, at the end of which a door led into the great saloon. She opened the door. All was quite dark. It was impossible to fly or run across the great saloon! Even in daylight this would have been a difficult matter. Griselda *felt* her way as best she could, past the Chinese cabinet and the pot-pourri jar till she got to the ante-room door. It was open, and now, knowing her way better, she hurried in. But what was the use? All was silent, save the tick-tick of the cuckoo clock in the corner. Oh, if

only the cuckoo would come out and call the hour as usual, what a weight would be lifted off Griselda's heart!

She had no idea what o'clock it was. It might be close to the hour, or it might be just past it. She stood listening for a few minutes, then hearing Miss Grizzel's voice in the distance, she felt that she dared not stay any longer, and turned to feel her way out of the room again. Just as she got to the door it seemed to her that something softly brushed her cheek, and a very, very faint "cuckoo" sounded, as it were, in the air close to her.

Startled, but not frightened, Griselda stood perfectly still.

"Cuckoo," she said, softly. But there was no answer.

Again the tones of Miss Grizzel's voice coming upstairs reached her ear.

"I *must* go," said Griselda; and finding her way across the saloon without, by great good luck, tumbling against any of the many breakable treasures with which it was filled, she flew down the long passage again, reaching her own room just before Dorcas appeared with her supper.

Griselda slept badly that night. She was constantly dreaming of the cuckoo, fancying she heard his voice, and then waking with a start to find it was *only* fancy. She looked pale and heavy-eyed when she came down to breakfast the next morning; and her Aunt Tabitha, who was alone in the room when she entered, began immediately asking her what was the matter.

"I am sure you are going to be ill, child," she said, nervously. "Sister Grizzel must give you some medicine. I wonder what

would be the best. Tansy tea is an excellent thing when one has taken cold, or – "

But the rest of Miss Tabitha's sentence was never heard, for at this moment Miss Grizzel came hurriedly into the room – her cap awry, her shawl disarranged, her face very pale. I hardly think any one had ever seen her so discomposed before.

"Sister Tabitha!" she exclaimed, "what can be going to happen? The cuckoo clock has stopped."

"The cuckoo clock has stopped!" repeated Miss Tabitha, holding up her hands; "*impossible!*"

"But it has, or rather I should say – dear me, I am so upset I cannot explain myself – the *cuckoo* has stopped. The clock is going on, but the cuckoo has not told the hours, and Dorcas is of opinion that he left off doing so yesterday. What can be going to happen? What shall we do?"

"What can we do?" said Miss Tabitha. "Should we send for the watch-maker?"

Miss Grizzel shook her head.

"'Twould be worse than useless. Were we to search the world over, we could find no one to put it right. Fifty years and more, Tabitha, fifty years and more, it has never missed an hour! We are getting old, Tabitha, our day is nearly over; perhaps 'tis to remind us of this."

Miss Tabitha did not reply. She was weeping silently. The old ladies seemed to have forgotten the presence of their niece, but Griselda could not bear to see their distress. She finished her

breakfast as quickly as she could, and left the room.

On her way upstairs she met Dorcas.

"Have you heard what has happened, little missie?" said the old servant.

"Yes," replied Griselda.

"My ladies are in great trouble," continued Dorcas, who seemed inclined to be more communicative than usual, "and no wonder. For fifty years that clock has never gone wrong."

"Can't it be put right?" asked the child.

Dorcas shook her head.

"No good would come of interfering," she said. "What must be, must be. The luck of the house hangs on that clock. Its maker spent a good part of his life over it, and his last words were that it would bring good luck to the house that owned it, but that trouble would follow its silence. It's my belief," she added solemnly, "that it's a *fairy* clock, neither more nor less, for good luck it has brought there's no denying. There are no cows like ours, missie – their milk is a proverb hereabouts; there are no hens like ours for laying all the year round; there are no roses like ours. And there's always a friendly feeling in this house, and always has been. 'Tis not a house for wrangling and jangling, and sharp words. The 'good people' can't stand that. Nothing drives them away like ill-temper or anger."

Griselda's conscience gave her a sharp prick. Could it be *her* doing that trouble was coming upon the old house? What a punishment for a moment's fit of ill-temper.

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way, Dorcas," she said; "it makes me so unhappy."

"What a feeling heart the child has!" said the old servant as she went on her way downstairs. "It's true – she is very like Miss Sybilla."

That day was a very weary and sad one for Griselda. She was oppressed by a feeling she did not understand. She knew she had done wrong, but she had sorely repented it, and "I do think the cuckoo might have come back again," she said to herself, "if he is a fairy; and if he isn't, it can't be true what Dorcas says."

Her aunts made no allusion to the subject in her presence, and almost seemed to have forgotten that she had known of their distress. They were more grave and silent than usual, but otherwise things went on in their ordinary way. Griselda spent the morning "at her tasks," in the ante-room, but was thankful to get away from the tick-tick of the clock in the corner and out into the garden.

But there, alas! it was just as bad. The rooks seemed to know that something was the matter; they set to work making such a chatter immediately Griselda appeared that she felt inclined to run back into the house again.

"I am sure they are talking about me," she said to herself. "Perhaps they are fairies too. I am beginning to think I don't like fairies."

She was glad when bed-time came. It was a sort of reproach to her to see her aunts so pale and troubled; and though she tried

to persuade herself that she thought them very silly, she could not throw off the uncomfortable feeling.

She was so tired when she went to bed – tired in the disagreeable way that comes from a listless, uneasy day – that she fell asleep at once and slept heavily. When she woke, which she did suddenly, and with a start, it was still perfectly dark, like the first morning that she had wakened in the old house. It seemed to her that she had not wakened of herself – something had roused her. Yes! there it was again, a very, *very* soft distant "cuckoo." *Was* it distant? She could not tell. Almost she could have fancied it was close to her.

"If it's that cuckoo come back again, I'll catch him!" exclaimed Griselda.

She darted out of bed, felt her way to the door, which was closed, and opening it let in a rush of moonlight from the unshuttered passage window. In another moment her little bare feet were pattering along the passage at full speed, in the direction of the great saloon.

For Griselda's childhood among the troop of noisy brothers had taught her one lesson – she was afraid of nothing. Or rather perhaps I should say she had never learnt that there was anything to be afraid of! And is there?

III

OBEYING ORDERS

"Little girl, thou must thy part fulfil,
If we're to take kindly to ours:
Then pull up the weeds with a will,
And fairies will cherish the flowers."

There was moonlight, though not so much, in the saloon and the ante-room, too; for though the windows, like those in Griselda's bed-room, had the shutters closed, there was a round part at the top, high up, which the shutters did not reach to, and in crept, through these clear uncovered panes, quite as many moonbeams, you may be sure, as could find their way.

Griselda, eager though she was, could not help standing still a moment to admire the effect.

"It looks prettier with the light coming in at those holes at the top than even if the shutters were open," she said to herself. "How goldy-silvery the cabinet looks; and, yes, I do declare, the mandarins are nodding! I wonder if it is out of politeness to me, or does Aunt Grizzel come in last thing at night and touch them to make them keep nodding till morning? I *suppose* they're a sort of policemen to the palace; and I dare say there are all sorts of beautiful things inside. How I should like to see all through it!"

But at this moment the faint tick-tick of the cuckoo clock in the next room, reaching her ear, reminded her of the object of this midnight expedition of hers. She hurried into the ante-room.

It looked darker than the great saloon, for it had but one window. But through the uncovered space at the top of this window there penetrated some brilliant moonbeams, one of which lighted up brightly the face of the clock with its queer over-hanging eaves.

Griselda approached it and stood below, looking up.

"Cuckoo," she said softly – very softly.

But there was no reply.

"Cuckoo," she repeated rather more loudly. "Why won't you speak to me? I know you are there, and you're not asleep, for I heard your voice in my own room. Why won't you come out, cuckoo?"

"Tick-tick," said the clock, but there was no other reply.

Griselda felt ready to cry.

"Cuckoo," she said reproachfully, "I didn't think you were so hard-hearted. I have been *so* unhappy about you, and I was so pleased to hear your voice again, for I thought I had killed you, or hurt you very badly; and I didn't *mean* to hurt you, cuckoo. I was sorry the moment I had done it, *dreadfully* sorry. Dear cuckoo, won't you forgive me?"

There was a little sound at last – a faint *coming* sound, and by the moonlight Griselda saw the doors open, and out flew the cuckoo. He stood still for a moment, looked round him as it

were, then gently flapped his wings, and uttered his usual note – "Cuckoo."

Griselda stood in breathless expectation, but in her delight she could not help very softly clapping her hands.

The cuckoo cleared his throat. You never heard such a funny little noise as he made; and then, in a very clear, distinct, but yet "cuckoo-y" voice, he spoke.

"Griselda," he said, "are you truly sorry?"

"I told you I was," she replied. "But I didn't *feel* so very naughty, cuckoo. I didn't, really. I was only vexed for one minute, and when I threw the book I seemed to be a very little in fun, too. And it made me so unhappy when you went away, and my poor aunts have been dreadfully unhappy too. If you hadn't come back I should have told them tomorrow what I had done. I would have told them before, but I was afraid it would have made them more unhappy. I thought I had hurt you dreadfully."

"So you did," said the cuckoo.

"But you *look* quite well," said Griselda.

"It was my *feelings*," replied the cuckoo; "and I couldn't help going away. I have to obey orders like other people."

Griselda stared. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Never mind. You can't understand at present," said the cuckoo. "You can understand about obeying *your* orders, and you see, when you don't, things go wrong."

"Yes," said Griselda humbly, "they certainly do. But, cuckoo," she continued, "I never used to get into tempers at home —*hardly*

never, at least; and I liked my lessons then, and I never was scolded about them."

"What's wrong here, then?" said the cuckoo. "It isn't often that things go wrong in this house."

"That's what Dorcas says," said Griselda. "It must be with my being a child – my aunts and the house and everything have got out of children's ways,"

"About time they did," remarked the cuckoo drily.

"And so," continued Griselda, "it is really very dull. I have lots of lessons, but it isn't so much that I mind. It is that I've no one to play with."

"There's something in that," said the cuckoo. He flapped his wings and was silent for a minute or two. "I'll consider about it," he observed at last.

"Thank you," said Griselda, not exactly knowing what else to say.

"And in the meantime," continued the cuckoo, "you'd better obey present orders and go back to bed."

"Shall I say good-night to you, then?" asked Griselda somewhat timidly.

"You're quite welcome to do so," replied the cuckoo. "Why shouldn't you?"

"You see I wasn't sure if you would like it," returned Griselda, "for of course you're not like a person, and – and – I've been told all sorts of queer things about what fairies like and don't like."

"Who said I was a fairy?" inquired the cuckoo.

"Dorcas did, and, *of course*, my own common sense did too," replied Griselda. "You must be a fairy – you couldn't be anything else."

"I might be a fairyfied cuckoo," suggested the bird.

Griselda looked puzzled.

"I don't understand," she said, "and I don't think it could make much difference. But whatever you are, I wish you would tell me one thing."

"What?" said the cuckoo.

"I want to know, now that you've forgiven me for throwing the book at you, have you come back for good?"

"Certainly not for evil," replied the cuckoo.

Griselda gave a little wriggle. "Cuckoo, you're laughing at me," she said. "I mean, have you come back to stay and cuckoo as usual and make my aunts happy again?"

"You'll see in the morning," said the cuckoo. "Now go off to bed."

"Good night," said Griselda, "and thank you, and please don't forget to let me know when you've considered."

"Cuckoo, cuckoo," was her little friend's reply. Griselda thought it was meant for good night, but the fact of the matter was that at that exact second of time it was two o'clock in the morning.

She made her way back to bed. She had been standing some time talking to the cuckoo, but, though it was now well on in November, she did not feel the least cold, nor sleepy! She felt

as happy and light-hearted as possible, and she wished it was morning, that she might get up. Yet the moment she laid her little brown curly head on the pillow, she fell asleep; and it seemed to her that just as she dropped off a soft feathery wing brushed her cheek gently and a tiny "Cuckoo" sounded in her ear.

When she woke it was bright morning, really bright morning, for the wintry sun was already sending some clear yellow rays out into the pale grey-blue sky.

"It must be late," thought Griselda, when she had opened the shutters and seen how light it was. "I must have slept a long time. I feel so beautifully unsleepy now. I must dress quickly – how nice it will be to see my aunts look happy again! I don't even care if they scold me for being late."

But, after all, it was not so much later than usual; it was only a much brighter morning than they had had for some time. Griselda did dress herself very quickly, however. As she went downstairs two or three of the clocks in the house, for there were several, were striking eight. These clocks must have been a little before the right time, for it was not till they had again relapsed into silence that there rang out from the ante-room the clear sweet tones, eight times repeated, of "Cuckoo."

Miss Grizzel and Miss Tabitha were already at the breakfast-table, but they received their little niece most graciously. Nothing was said about the clock, however, till about half-way through the meal, when Griselda, full of eagerness to know if her aunts were aware of the cuckoo's return, could restrain herself no longer.

"Aunt Grizzel," she said, "isn't the cuckoo all right again?"

"Yes, my dear. I am delighted to say it is," replied Miss Grizzel.

"Did you get it put right, Aunt Grizzel?" inquired Griselda, slyly.

"Little girls should not ask so many questions," replied Miss Grizzel, mysteriously. "It *is* all right again, and that is enough. During fifty years that cuckoo has never, till yesterday, missed an hour. If you, in your sphere, my dear, do as well during fifty years, you won't have done badly."

"No, indeed, you won't have done badly," repeated Miss Tabitha.

But though the two old ladies thus tried to improve the occasion by a little lecturing, Griselda could see that at the bottom of their hearts they were both so happy that, even if she had been very naughty indeed, they could hardly have made up their minds to scold her.

She was not at all inclined to be naughty this day. She had something to think about and look forward to, which made her quite a different little girl, and made her take heart in doing her lessons as well as she possibly could.

"I wonder when the cuckoo will have considered enough about my having no one to play with?" she said to herself, as she was walking up and down the terrace at the back of the house.

"Caw, caw!" screamed a rook just over her head, as if in answer to her thought.

Griselda looked up at him.

"Your voice isn't half so pretty as the cuckoo's, Mr. Rook," she said. "All the same, I dare say I should make friends with you, if I understood what you meant. How funny it would be to know all the languages of the birds and the beasts, like the prince in the fairy tale! I wonder if I should wish for that, if a fairy gave me a wish? No, I don't think I would. I'd *far* rather have the fairy carpet that would take you anywhere you liked in a minute. I'd go to China to see if all the people there look like Aunt Grizzel's mandarins; and I'd first of all, of course, go to fairyland."

"You must come in now, little missie," said Dorcas's voice. "Miss Grizzel says you have had play enough, and there's a nice fire in the ante-room for you to do your lessons by."

"Play!" repeated Griselda indignantly, as she turned to follow the old servant. "Do you call walking up and down the terrace 'play,' Dorcas? I mustn't loiter even to pick a flower, if there were any, for fear of catching cold, and I mustn't run for fear of overheating myself. I declare, Dorcas, if I don't have some play soon, or something to amuse me, I think I'll run away."

"Nay, nay, missie, don't talk like that. You'd never do anything so naughty, and you so like Miss Sybilla, who was so good."

"Dorcas, I'm tired of being told I'm like Miss Sybilla," said Griselda, impatiently. "She was my grandmother; no one would like to be told they were like their grandmother. It makes me feel as if my face must be all screwy up and wrinkly, and as if I should have spectacles on and a wig."

"*That* is not like what Miss Sybilla was when I first saw her," said Dorcas. "She was younger than you, missie, and as pretty as a fairy."

"*Was* she?" exclaimed Griselda, stopping short.

"Yes, indeed she was. She might have been a fairy, so sweet she was and gentle – and yet so merry. Every creature loved her; even the animals about seemed to know her, as if she was one of themselves. She brought good luck to the house, and it was a sad day when she left it."

"I thought you said it was the cuckoo that brought good luck?" said Griselda.

"Well, so it was. The cuckoo and Miss Sybilla came here the same day. It was left to her by her mother's father, with whom she had lived since she was a baby, and when he died she came here to her sisters. She wasn't *own* sister to my ladies, you see, missie. Her mother had come from Germany, and it was in some strange place there, where her grandfather lived, that the cuckoo clock was made. They make wonderful clocks there, I've been told, but none more wonderful than our cuckoo, I'm sure."

"No, I'm *sure* not," said Griselda, softly. "Why didn't Miss Sybilla take it with her when she was married and went away?"

"She knew her sisters were so fond of it. It was like a memory of her left behind for them. It was like a part of her. And do you know, missie, the night she died – she died soon after your father was born, a year after she was married – for a whole hour, from twelve to one, that cuckoo went on cuckooing in a soft, sad

way, like some living creature in trouble. Of course, we did not know anything was wrong with her, and folks said something had caught some of the springs of the works; but *I* didn't think so, and never shall. And – "

But here Dorcas's reminiscences were abruptly brought to a close by Miss Grizzel's appearance at the other end of the terrace.

"Griselda, what are you loitering so for? Dorcas, you should have hastened, not delayed Miss Griselda."

So Griselda was hurried off to her lessons, and Dorcas to her kitchen. But Griselda did not much mind. She had plenty to think of and wonder about, and she liked to do her lessons in the ante-room, with the tick-tick of the clock in her ears, and the feeling that *perhaps* the cuckoo was watching her through some invisible peep-hole in his closed doors.

"And if he sees," thought Griselda, "if he sees how hard I am trying to do my lessons well, it will perhaps make him be quick about 'considering.'"

So she did try very hard. And she didn't speak to the cuckoo when he came out to say it was four o'clock. She was busy, and he was busy. She felt it was better to wait till he gave her some sign of being ready to talk to her again.

For fairies, you know, children, however charming, are sometimes *rather* queer to have to do with. They don't like to be interfered with, or treated except with very great respect, and they have their own ideas about what is proper and what isn't, I can assure you.

I suppose it was with working so hard at her lessons – most people say it was with having been up the night before, running about the house in the moonlight; but as she had never felt so "fresh" in her life as when she got up that morning, it could hardly have been that – that Griselda felt so tired and sleepy that evening, she could hardly keep her eyes open. She begged to go to bed quite half an hour earlier than usual, which made Miss Tabitha afraid again that she was going to be ill. But as there is nothing better for children than to go to bed early, even if they *are* going to be ill, Miss Grizzel told her to say good-night, and to ask Dorcas to give her a wine-glassful of elderberry wine, nice and hot, after she was in bed.

Griselda had no objection to the elderberry wine, though she felt she was having it on false pretences. She certainly did not need it to send her to sleep, for almost before her head touched the pillow she was as sound as a top. She had slept a good long while, when again she wakened suddenly – just as she had done the night before, and again with the feeling that something had wakened her. And the queer thing was that the moment she was awake she felt so *very* awake – she had no inclination to stretch and yawn and hope it wasn't quite time to get up, and think how nice and warm bed was, and how cold it was outside! She sat straight up, and peered out into the darkness, feeling quite ready for an adventure.

"Is it you, cuckoo?" she said softly.

There was no answer, but listening intently, the child fancied

she heard a faint rustling or fluttering in the corner of the room by the door. She got up and, feeling her way, opened it, and the instant she had done so she heard, a few steps only in front of her it seemed, the familiar notes, very, *very* soft and whispered, "Cuckoo, cuckoo."

It went on and on, down the passage, Griselda trotting after. There was no moon to-night, heavy clouds had quite hidden it, and outside the rain was falling heavily. Griselda could hear it on the window-panes, through the closed shutters and all. But dark as it was, she made her way along without any difficulty, down the passage, across the great saloon, in through the ante-room door, guided only by the little voice now and then to be heard in front of her. She came to a standstill right before the clock, and stood there for a minute or two patiently waiting.

She had not very long to wait. There came the usual murmuring sound, then the doors above the clock face opened – she heard them open, it was far too dark to see – and in his ordinary voice, clear and distinct (it was just two o'clock, so the cuckoo was killing two birds with one stone, telling the hour and greeting Griselda at once), the bird sang out, "Cuckoo, cuckoo."

"Good evening, cuckoo," said Griselda, when he had finished.

"Good morning, you mean," said the cuckoo.

"Good morning, then, cuckoo," said Griselda. "Have you considered about me, cuckoo?"

The cuckoo cleared his throat.

"Have you learnt to obey orders yet, Griselda?" he inquired.

"I'm trying," replied Griselda. "But you see, cuckoo, I've not had very long to learn in – it was only last night you told me, you know."

The cuckoo sighed.

"You've a great deal to learn, Griselda."

"I dare say I have," she said. "But I can tell you one thing, cuckoo – whatever lessons I have, I *couldn't* ever have any worse than those addition sums of Mr. Kneebreeches'. I have made up my mind about that, for to-day, do you know, cuckoo – "

"Yesterday," corrected the cuckoo. "Always be exact in your statements, Griselda."

"Well, yesterday, then," said Griselda, rather tartly; "though when you know quite well what I mean, I don't see that you need be so *very* particular. Well, as I was saying, I tried and *tried*, but still they were fearful. They were, indeed."

"You've a great deal to learn, Griselda," repeated the cuckoo.

"I wish you wouldn't say that so often," said Griselda. "I thought you were going to *play* with me."

"There's something in that," said the cuckoo, "there's something in that. I should like to talk about it. But we could talk more comfortably if you would come up here and sit beside me."

Griselda thought her friend must be going out of his mind.

"Sit beside you up there!" she exclaimed. "Cuckoo, how *could* I? I'm far, far too big."

"Big!" returned the cuckoo. "What do you mean by big? It's all a matter of fancy. Don't you know that if the world and

everything in it, counting yourself of course, was all made little enough to go into a walnut, you'd never find out the difference."

"*Wouldn't I?*" said Griselda, feeling rather muddled; "but, *not* counting myself, cuckoo, I would then, wouldn't I?"

"Nonsense," said the cuckoo hastily; "you've a great deal to learn, and one thing is, not to *argue*. Nobody should argue; it's a shocking bad habit, and ruins the digestion. Come up here and sit beside me comfortably. Catch hold of the chain; you'll find you can manage if you try."

"But it'll stop the clock," said Griselda. "Aunt Grizzel said I was never to touch the weights or the chains."

"Stuff," said the cuckoo; "it won't stop the clock. Catch hold of the chains and swing yourself up. There now – I told you you could manage it."

IV

THE COUNTRY OF THE NODDING MANDARINS

"We're all nodding, nid-nid-nodding."

How she managed it she never knew; but, somehow or other, it *was* managed. She seemed to slide up the chain just as easily as in a general way she would have slidden down, only without any disagreeable anticipation of a bump at the end of the journey. And when she got to the top how wonderfully different it looked from anything she could have expected! The doors stood open, and Griselda found them quite big enough, or herself quite small enough – which it was she couldn't tell, and as it was all a matter of fancy she decided not to trouble to inquire – to pass through quite comfortably.

And inside there was the most charming little snuggerly imaginable. It was something like a saloon railway carriage – it seemed to be all lined and carpeted and everything, with rich mossy red velvet; there was a little round table in the middle and two arm-chairs, on one of which sat the cuckoo – "quite like other people," thought Griselda to herself – while the other, as he pointed out to Griselda by a little nod, was evidently intended

for her.

"Thank you," said she, sitting down on the chair as she spoke.

"Are you comfortable?" inquired the cuckoo.

"Quite," replied Griselda, looking about her with great satisfaction. "Are all cuckoo clocks like this when you get up inside them?" she inquired. "I can't think how there's room for this dear little place between the clock and the wall. Is it a hole cut out of the wall on purpose, cuckoo?"

"Hush!" said the cuckoo, "we've got other things to talk about. First, shall I lend you one of my mantles? You may feel cold."

"I don't just now," replied Griselda; "but perhaps I *might*."

She looked at her little bare feet as she spoke, and wondered why *they* weren't cold, for it was very chilblainy weather.

The cuckoo stood up, and with one of his claws reached from a corner where it was hanging a cloak which Griselda had not before noticed. For it was hanging wrong side out, and the lining was red velvet, very like what the sides of the little room were covered with, so it was no wonder she had not noticed it.

Had it been hanging the *right* side out she must have done so; this side was so very wonderful!

It was all feathers – feathers of every shade and colour, but beautifully worked in, somehow, so as to lie quite smoothly and evenly, one colour melting away into another like those in a prism, so that you could hardly tell where one began and another ended.

"What a *lovely* cloak!" said Griselda, wrapping it round her

and feeling even more comfortable than before, as she watched the rays of the little lamp in the roof – I think I was forgetting to tell you that the cuckoo's boudoir was lighted by a dear little lamp set into the red velvet roof like a pearl in a ring – playing softly on the brilliant colours of the feather mantle.

"It's better than lovely," said the cuckoo, "as you shall see. Now, Griselda," he continued, in the tone of one coming to business – "now, Griselda, let us talk."

"We have been talking," said Griselda, "ever so long. I am very comfortable. When you say 'let us talk' like that, it makes me forget all I wanted to say. Just let me sit still and say whatever comes into my head."

"That won't do," said the cuckoo; "we must have a plan of action."

"A what?" said Griselda.

"You see you *have* a great deal to learn," said the cuckoo triumphantly. "You don't understand what I say."

"But I didn't come up here to learn," said Griselda; "I can do that down there;" and she nodded her head in the direction of the ante-room table. "I want to play."

"Just so," said the cuckoo; "that's what I want to talk about. What do you call 'play' – blindman's-buff and that sort of thing?"

"No," said Griselda, considering. "I'm getting rather too big for that kind of play. Besides, cuckoo, you and I alone couldn't have much fun at blindman's-buff; there'd be only me to catch you or you to catch me."

"Oh, we could easily get more," said the cuckoo. "The mandarins would be pleased to join."

"The mandarins!" repeated Griselda. "Why, cuckoo, they're not alive! How could they play?"

The cuckoo looked at her gravely for a minute, then shook his head.

"You have a *great* deal to learn," he said solemnly. "Don't you know that *everything's* alive?"

"No," said Griselda, "I don't; and I don't know what you mean, and I don't think I want to know what you mean. I want to talk about playing."

"Well," said the cuckoo, "talk."

"What I call playing," pursued Griselda, "is – I have thought about it now, you see – is being amused. If you will amuse me, cuckoo, I will count that you are playing with me."

"How shall I amuse you?" inquired he.

"Oh, that's for you to find out!" exclaimed Griselda. "You might tell me fairy stories, you know: if you're a fairy you should know lots; or – oh yes, of course that would be far nicer – if you are a fairy you might take me with you to fairyland."

Again the cuckoo shook his head.

"That," said he, "I cannot do."

"Why not?" said Griselda. "Lots of children have been there."

"I doubt it," said the cuckoo. "*Some* may have been, but not lots. And some may have thought they had been there who hadn't really been there at all. And as to those who have been there,

you may be sure of one thing – they were not *taken*, they found their own way. No one ever was *taken* to fairyland – to the real fairyland. They may have been taken to the neighbouring countries, but not to fairyland itself."

"And how is one ever to find one's own way there?" asked Griselda.

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