Molesworth Mrs.

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
Ruby and Mavis

"Hast thou seen that lordly castle, That castle by the sea?
Golden and red above it The clouds float gorgeously."
Trans. of Uhland: Longfellow.

Do you remember Gratian – Gratian Conyfer, the godson of the four winds, the boy who lived at the old farmhouse up among the moors, where these strange beautiful sisters used to meet? Do you remember how full of fancies and stories Gratian's little head was, and how sometimes he put them into words to please Fergus, the lame child he loved so much? The story I am now going to tell you is one of these. I think it was their favourite one. I can not say that it is in the very words in which Gratian used to tell it, for it was not till long, long after those boyish days that it came to be written down. But all the same it is his story.

How long ago it was I cannot say, nor can I tell you exactly where it was. This is not a story for which you will require an atlas, nor a history of England or of any other country, nor a dictionary of dates. All those wise and clever and useful things

you may put out of your heads for a bit. I am just going to tell you a story. It was somewhere and somewhen, and I think that will do.

The "it" was a castle – and something else. But first about the castle. It was really worthy of the name, for it was very old and very strong, and in ancient days it had been used as a place of defence, and had a look about it of not having forgotten this. (I am afraid this sounds a *very* little historical. I must take care.) It was very big too, towering over the sea-washed cliffs on which it stood as if defying the winds and the waves to do their worst, frowning at them with the little round window-eyes of its turrets, like a cross old ogre. But it was a two-faced castle; it was only on one side – the rocky side, where the cliffs went down precipitously to the water – that it looked grim and forbidding. Inland, you could scarcely have believed it was the same castle at all. For here, towards the sunny south, it seemed to change into a gracious, comfortable, hospitably-inviting mansion; it did not look nearly so high on this side, for the ivy-covered turrets had more the effect of dimly dark trees in the background, and the bright wide-windowed rooms opened on to trim lawns and terraces gay with flowers. That was the case in summer-time at least. The whole look of things varied a good deal according to the seasons. In winter, grim as it was, I don't know but that the fortress-front, so to speak, of the great building had the best of it. For it was grand to watch the waves breaking down below when you knew you were safe and cosy behind the barred panes of

the turret windows, those windows pierced in the walls through such a thickness of stone that each was like a little room within a room. And even in winter there were wonderful sunsets to be seen from the children's favourite turret-room – the one which had two windows to the west and only one to the cold north.

For the "something else" was the children. Much more interesting than the castle – indeed, what would any castle or any house be without them? Not that the castle was not a very interesting place to live in, as you will hear, but all *places*, I think, need people to bring out their interest. People who have been, sometimes, and sometimes, people that still are. There was a mixture of both in my castle. But first and foremost I will tell you of the children, whose home it was, and perhaps is yet.

There were only two of them, only two, that is to say, who lived there regularly; they were girls, twin-sisters, Ruby and Mavis were their names, and at this time they were nearly twelve years old. I will not say much in description of them, it is best to let you find out about them for yourselves. They were almost exactly the same size; Ruby perhaps a very little the taller, and at first sight every one thought them exceedingly like each other. And so they were, so far as the colour of their hair, the shape of their features, their eyes and complexions went. They were pretty little girls, and they made a pretty pair. But the more you got to know them the less alike you got to think them, till at last you be an to wonder how you ever could have thought them like at all! And even almost at the first glance *some* differences

were to be seen. Ruby was certainly the prettier. Her eyes were brighter, her colour more brilliant, her way of walking and holding herself more graceful, even her very manner of talking was more interesting and attractive.

"What a charming child she is," said strangers always. "Such pretty winning ways, so sweet and unselfish, so clever and intelligent! What a pity that dull little Mavis is not more like her – why, I thought them the image of each other at first, and now I can scarcely believe they are sisters. I am sure poor Ruby must find Mavis very trying, she is so stupid; but Ruby is so good and patient with her – it quite adds another charm to the dear child."

This opinion or one like it was always the first expressed – well, perhaps not *always*, but almost always. Now I will let you judge for yourselves.

It was late autumn. So late, that one felt inclined to wish it were already winter, without any thought or talk of a milder season. For it was very cold, and thick-walled though the castle was, it needed any amount of huge fires and curtains in front of the doorways and double windows, and, in the modern rooms, hot air or water-pipes to make it comfortable in severe weather. And all these things in winter it had. But the housekeeper had rather old-fashioned and stiff ideas. She did everything by rule. On a certain day in the autumn the winter arrangements were begun, on a certain day in the spring they came to an end. And this, whatever the weather was, – not a very good plan, for as everybody knows, the weather itself is not so formal and particular. There are

quite warm, mild days sometimes in late November, and really bitterly cold ones in April and May. But there would have been no manner of use in trying to make old Bertha see this. Winter *should* stop on a certain day, and summer should come, and *vice versâ*. It had always been so in her time, and Bertha did not like new-fangled ways.

So everybody shivered, and the more daring ones, of whom Ruby was the foremost, scolded and grumbled. But it was no use.

"You may as well try to bear it patiently, my dear," said cousin Hortensia, "the mild weather must come soon. I will lend you one of my little shawls if you like. You will feel warmer when you have been out for a run."

Cousin Hortensia was the lady who lived at the castle to teach and take care of the two little girls. For their mother was dead and their father was often away. He had some appointment at the court. I am not sure what it was, but he was considered a very important person. He was kind and good, as you will see, and it was always a great delight to the children when he came home, and a great sorrow when he had to leave.

Cousin Hortensia was only a very far-off cousin, but the children always called her so. For though she was really with them as a governess as well as a friend, it would not have seemed so nice to call her by any other name. She was very gentle, and took the best care she could of them. And she was clever and taught them well. But she was rather a dreamy sort of person. She had lived for many years a very quiet life, and knew little of the

outside world. She had known and loved the twins' mother, and their father too, when they were but boy and girl, for she was no longer young. And she loved Ruby and Mavis, Ruby especially, so dearly, that she could see no fault in them. It was to Ruby she was speaking and offering a shawl. They were sitting in one of the rooms on the south side of the castle, sheltered from the stormy winds which often came whirling down from the north. But even here it was cold, or at least chilly.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders.

"You always offer me a shawl as if I were seventy, cousin Hortensia," she said rather pertly. "It would be much better if you would speak to Bertha, and *insist* on her having the fires lighted now it is so cold. When I'm grown up I can tell you *I* won't stand the old thing's tyranny."

Cousin Hortensia looked rather distressed. There was some sense in what Ruby said, but there were a great many other things to be considered, all of which she could not explain to the children. Bertha was an exceedingly valuable servant, and if she were interfered with and went away it would be almost impossible to get any one like her. For it was necessary that the castle should be managed with economy as well as care.

"I would speak to Bertha if there was anything really important to complain of," she said. "But this weather cannot last, and you are not cold at night, are you?"

"No," said Mavis, "not at all."

"Bertha would never get all the work done unless she took her

own way," Miss Hortensia went on. "But I'll tell you what I'll do, Ruby. I will have the fire lighted in my own little room. I don't need to trouble Bertha about that, thanks to your kind father's thoughtfulness. My little wood-cupboard is always kept filled by Tim. And when you come in from your walk we will have tea there instead of here, and spend a cosy evening."

Ruby darted at Miss Hortensia and kissed her.

"That will be lovely," she said. "And as it's to be a sort of a treat evening, do tell us a story after tea, dear cousin."

"If you're not tired," put in Mavis. "Cousin Hortensia had a headache this morning," she said to Ruby, turning to her.

"Rubbish!" cried Ruby, but she checked herself quickly. "I don't mean that," she went on, "but Mavis is such a kill-joy. You won't be tired will you, dear cousin? Mavis doesn't care for stories as much as I do. I've read nearly all the books in the library, and she never reads if she can help it."

"I've enough to do with my lesson-books," said Mavis with a sigh. "And I can scarcely ever find stories to read that I understand. But I like *hearing* stories, for then I can ask what it means if there comes a puzzling part."

"Poor Mavis!" said Ruby contemptuously, "she's always getting puzzled."

"We must try to make your wits work a little quicker, my dear," said Miss Hortensia. "You will get to like reading when you are older, I daresay. I must look out for some easier story-books for you."

"But I love *hearing* stories, cousin," said Mavis. "Please don't think that I don't like your stories. I do so like that one about when you came to the castle once when you were a little girl and about the dream you had."

"I don't care for stories about dreams," said Ruby. "I like to hear about when cousin Hortensia was a young lady and went to balls at the court. I would love to have beautiful dresses and go to the court. Do you think father will take me when I'm grown up, cousin Hortensia?"

"I daresay he will. You will both go, probably," Miss Hortensia replied. "But you must not think too much of it or you may be disappointed. Your mother was very beautiful and everybody admired her when she went out in the world, but she always loved best to be here at the castle."

Ruby made a face.

"Then I don't think I'm like her," she said. "I'm very tired of this stupid old place already. And if you tell your dream-story to Mavis, you must tell me the one about how mother looked when she went to her first ball. She was dressed all in white, wasn't she?"

"No," Mavis answered. "In blue – wavy, changing blue, like the colour the sea is sometimes."

"*Blue*," Ruby repeated, "what nonsense! Isn't it nonsense, cousin Hortensia? Didn't our mother wear all white at her first ball – everybody does."

Miss Hortensia looked up in surprise.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Who ever told you she wore blue, Mavis?"

Mavis grew very red.

"I wasn't speaking of our mother," she said. "It was the lady you saw in your dream I meant, cousin Hortensia."

"You silly girl!" said Ruby. "Isn't she stupid?" Mavis looked ready to cry.

"You must get out of that habit of not listening to what people say, my dear," said Miss Hortensia. "Now you had better both go out – wrap up warmly, and don't stay very long, and when you come in you will find me in my own room."

"And you'll tell us stories, won't you, dear good cousin?" said Ruby coaxingly, as she put up her pretty face for a kiss. "If you'll tell me *my* story, you may tell Mavis hers afterwards."

"Well, well, we'll see," said Miss Hortensia, smiling.

"I do so like the story of the blue lady," said Mavis, very softly, as they left the room.

Five minutes later the twins were standing under the great archway which led to the principal entrance to the castle. At one end this archway opened on to a winding road cut in the rock, at the foot of which was a little sandy cove – a sort of refuge among the cliffs. On each side of it the waves broke noisily, but they never entirely covered the cove, even at very high tides, and except in exceedingly rough and stormy weather the water rippled in gently, as if almost asking pardon for intruding at all. When the sea was out there was a scrambling path among the

rocks to the left, by which one could make one's way to a little fishing-hamlet about a quarter of a mile off on the west. For, as I should have explained before, the castle stood almost at a corner, the coast-line turning sharply southwards, after running for many miles almost due east and west.

The proper way to this hamlet was by the same inland road which led to the castle, and which, so the legend ran, was much more modern than the building itself, much more modern at least than the north side of it. That grim fortress-like front was very ancient. It had been built doubtless for a safe retreat, and originally had only been accessible from the sea, being in those days girt round on the land side by enormous walls, in which was no entrance of any kind. A part of these walls, ivy-clad and crumbling, still remained, but sufficient had been pulled down to give space for the pleasant sunny rooms and the sheltered garden with its terraces.

Ruby shivered as she and Mavis stood a moment hesitating in the archway.

"It is cold here," she said; "the wind seems to come from everywhere at once. Which way shall we go, Mavis?"

"It would be a little warmer at the back, perhaps," said Mavis. "But I don't care much for the gardens on a dull day like this."

"Nor do I," said Ruby, "there's nothing to see. Now at the front it's almost nicer on a dull day than when it's sunny – except of course for the cold. Let's go down to the cove, Mavis, and see how it feels there." It was curious that they always spoke of the

fortress side as the front, even though the southern part of the building was what would have naturally seemed so.

"I'd like to stay out till sunset and see the colours up in the turret windows," said Mavis, as they clambered down the rocky path. "I wish I knew which of these rooms is the one where the blue fairy lady used to come. I do think cousin Hortensia might have found out."

"Rubbish!" said Ruby. It was rather a favourite expression of hers, I am afraid. "I don't believe cousin Hortensia ever saw her. It was all a fancy because she had heard about it. If ever she did come, it was ages and ages ago, and I don't believe she did even then. I don't believe one bit about spirits and fairies and dreams and things like that." Mavis said nothing, but a puzzled, disappointed look crept into her eyes.

"Perhaps it's because I'm stupid," she said, "but I shouldn't like to think like you, Ruby. And you know the story wouldn't have come all of itself, and cousin Hortensia, though she calls it a dream, can't really explain it that way."

"If you know so much about it, why do you keep teasing to have it told again?" said Ruby impatiently. "Well, here we are at the cove; what are we to do now?"

Mavis looked about her. It was chilly, and the sky was grey, but over towards the west there was a lightening. The wind came in little puffs down here, now and again only, for they were well under the shelter of the cliffs. And up above, the old castle frowning down upon them – his own children, whose ancestors

he had housed and sheltered and protected for years that counted by centuries – suddenly seemed to give a half unwilling smile. It was a ray of thin afternoon sunshine striking across the turret windows.

"See, see," said Mavis. "The sun's coming out. I'm sure the sky must be pretty and bright round where the cottages are. The sea's quite far enough back, and it's going out. Do let us go and ask how the baby – Joan's baby, I mean – is to-day."

"Very well," said Ruby. "Not that I care much how the baby is, but there's rather a nice scrambly way home up behind Joan's house. I found it one day when you had a cold and weren't with me. It brings you out down by the stile into the little fir-wood – just where you'd never expect to find yourself. And oh, Mavis, there's such a queer little cottage farther along the shore, at least just above the shore that way. I saw it from the back, along the scrambly path."

"I wonder whose it is," said Mavis. "I don't remember any cottage that way. Oh yes, I think I remember passing it one day long ago when Joan was our nurse, and she made me run on quick, but she didn't say why."

"Perhaps it's haunted, or some nonsense like that," said Ruby with her contemptuous air. "I'll ask Joan to-day. And if we pass it I'll walk just as slow as ever I can on purpose. You'll see, Mavis."

"We'd better run now," said Mavis. "The sands are pretty firm just here, and cousin Hortensia said we were to make ourselves warm. Let's have a race."

They had left the cove and were making their way to the hamlet by the foot of the rocks, where at low tide there was a narrow strip of pebbly sand, only here and there broken by out-jutting crags which the children found it very amusing to clamber over. Their voices sounded clear and high in the air. For the wind seemed to have fallen with the receding tide. By the time they reached the cottages they were both in a glow, and Ruby had quite forgotten her indignation at old Bertha's fireless rooms.

Chapter Two.
Winfried

"And somewhat southward toward the noon,
Whence lies a way up to the moon;
And thence the fairy can as soon
Pass to the earth below it."

Drayton.

Joan, a pleasant-faced young woman who had once been the children's nurse, and was now married to a fisherman who owned several boats, and was a person of some consequence among the villagers, was standing at the door of her cottage with a baby in her arms as the children came up. Her face beamed with smiles, but before she had time to speak Ruby called out to her.

"How are you, Joan? We've come round to ask how baby is, but it's very easy to see he is better, otherwise you wouldn't be so smiling."

"And here he is to speak for himself, Miss Ruby," said Joan. "How very kind of you to think of him! And you too, Miss Mavis, my dear. Are you both quite well?"

"Yes, thank you, Joan," said Mavis quietly. But Ruby was fussing about the baby, admiring him and petting him in a way that could scarcely fail to gain his mother's heart. Joan, however,

though fond of both the children, had plenty of discernment. She smiled at Ruby – "Miss Ruby has pretty ways with her, there's no denying," she told her husband afterwards, – but there was a very gentle tone in her voice as she turned to Mavis.

"You've had no more headaches, I hope, Miss Mavis? Have you been working hard at your lessons?"

"I have to work hard if I work at all, Joan," said the little girl rather sadly.

"She's so stupid," said Ruby; "and she gets her head full of fancies. I daresay that prevents her having room for sensible things. Oh, by-the-bye, Joan, tell us who lives in that queer cottage all by itself some way farther along the coast. I never saw it till the other day – it's almost hidden among the rocks. But Mavis says she once passed it with you, and you made her run by quickly. Why did you, Joan? I do so want to know."

Joan looked rather at a loss.

"You mean old Adam's cottage," she said. "I really don't know why people speak against him. He's never done any harm, indeed, he's a kind old man. But he's come from a long way off, and he's not like the other folk, and they got up a tale that there were queer sounds and sights in his cottage sometimes – singing and lights late at night, that couldn't be canny. Some spoke of mermaids swimming down below in front of his hut and him standing talking to them quite friendly-like. But that's a good while ago now, and I think it's forgotten. And he goes to church regularly. You'll always be sure of seeing him there."

"Then why don't people like him?" said Mavis.

"Perhaps it's just because he is good and goes to church," said Ruby. "I'm not at all sure that I like extra good people myself. They're so tiresome."

"He's not one to meddle with others," said Joan. "He keeps very much to himself, and his talking doesn't sound like ours. So they call him a foreigner. Indeed, he's often not heard of or seen for weeks and even months at a time, unless any one's ill or in trouble, and then he seems to know it all of himself, and comes to see if he can help. That's one reason why they think him uncanny."

"Did he come when baby was ill?" asked Ruby. Joan shook her head.

"No, for a wonder he didn't."

"Perhaps he's dead," said Ruby indifferently.

"We're going past that way, Mavis. Let's peep in and see."

Mavis grew rather pale.

"Ruby," she said, "I wish you wouldn't – you frighten me."

"Miss Ruby would be frightened herself. She's only joking," said Joan. "I don't suppose there's aught the matter, still I don't think you'd better stop at old Adam's. It isn't like as if he was one of our own folk."

"Rubbish!" said Ruby again. "I'm off. You can send your husband to see if the old wizard has turned us into frogs or seagulls, in case we are not heard of any more. Good-night;" and off she ran.

Mavis had to follow her. There was not much fear of Ruby's really doing anything rash, for she was by no means a very brave child, still Mavis always felt uncomfortable when her sister got into one of these wild moods.

"Good-bye, Joan," she said gently. "I'm so glad baby's better. I daresay Ruby's only joking;" and then she ran along the path, which just here in the hamlet was pretty level and smooth, after Ruby.

They had quite half a mile to go before they got to the lonely cottage. It stood some way back from the shore, and great craggy rocks near at hand almost hid it from sight. One might have passed by that way often without noticing that there was any human dwelling-place there. But the children were on the look-out.

"There," said Ruby, "the old ogre can't be dead: there's smoke coming out of the chimney. And – oh, just look, Mavis, what a big fire he must have; do you see the red of it in the window?"

"No," said Mavis, "it's the sun setting. Look out to sea – isn't it splendid?"

But Ruby had set her heart upon exploring the fisherman's hut. She began scrambling up the stones, for there was really nothing worthy of the name of a pathway, quite regardless of the beautiful sight behind her. And as usual. Mavis had to follow, though reluctantly. Still she was not quite without curiosity about the lonely cottage herself. Suddenly, when within a short distance of the hut, Ruby stopped short, and glancing back towards her

sister, lifted her hand as if to tell her to be silent and listen. Then Mavis became conscious of the sound of voices speaking – not old Adam's voice certainly, for these sounded soft and clear, and now and then came a ripple of silvery laughter, very sweet and very delicate. The little girls, who had drawn near together, looked at each other.

"Who can it be?" said Mavis in a whisper.

"The mermaids," replied Ruby mockingly. "Perhaps old Adam has invited them to tea."

But as she spoke there came distinctly the sound of the words "Good-bye, good-bye," and then there was silence.

Somehow both children felt rather frightened. "Suppose old Adam's really dead," said Ruby, looking rather pale, "and that these are – fairies, or I don't know what, come to fetch him."

"Angels," said Mavis. "Joan says he's good. But – Ruby – I shouldn't think angels would laugh." She had scarcely said the words when they saw running down the rough slope from the hut the figure of a boy. He ran fast and lightly, his feet scarcely seeming to touch the stones; he was slight and very active-looking; it was pretty to watch him running, even though as he came close it was plain that he was only a simple fisher-boy, in rough clothes, barefoot and sunburnt. He slackened his pace a little as he came near the children, then glancing at them with a smile he lifted his dark blue cap and stopped short.

"Can I?" he began, then hesitated. He had a pleasant face and clear grey eyes, which looked one straight in the face with interest

and inquiry.

"What do you say?" asked Ruby rather haughtily.

"I thought perhaps you had lost your way," he answered quietly. "There's not many gentry comes round here;" and then he smiled, for no very particular reason apparently, though his smile nevertheless gave one the feeling that he had a reason if he chose to give it.

"No, we haven't lost our way," said Ruby; "we came here on purpose. Do you know the old man who lives up there?" and she pointed to the hut.

"Is it true that there's something queer about him?"

The boy looked at her, still smiling.

"Queer?" he repeated.

Ruby began to feel annoyed. She tapped her foot impatiently.

"Yes," she said, "*queer*. Why do you repeat my words, and why don't you say 'Miss,' or 'My Lady?' Lots of the people here call me 'My Lady.' Do you know who I am?"

The boy's face had grown graver.

"Yes," he said. "You are the little ladies from the castle. I have seen you sometimes. I have seen you in church. We always call you the little ladies – grandfather and I – when we are talking. He has told me about you – and – I've heard about the castle, though I've never been in it. It's very fine. I like to look up at it from the sea."

Ruby felt a little smoothed down. Her tone became more gracious. Mavis, who had drawn near, stood listening with great

interest, and as the boy turned towards her the smile came over his face again.

"Who do you mean by 'grandfather'?" asked Ruby eagerly. "Is it old Adam? I didn't know he had any children or grandchildren."

"Yes," the boy replied, "I'm his grandson. Was it grandfather you meant when you said he was queer?"

"Oh," said Mavis, "Ruby didn't mean to be rude. It was only nonsense. People say – "

"They say he's very queer indeed," said Ruby, who had no intention of deserting her colours. "They say he's a kind of a wizard or an ogre, and that you hear all sorts of sounds – music and talking and I don't know all what – if you're near his cottage in the evening, and that there are lights to be seen in it too, not common lights like candles, but much more. Some say he's friends with the mermaids, and that they come to see him – is that true?" and notwithstanding her boasted boldness Ruby dropped her voice a little, and glanced over her shoulder half nervously seawards, as if not quite sure but that some of the tailed ladies in question might be listening to her.

The boy did more than smile now. He laughed outright; but his laugh, though bright and ringing, was not the laugh the sisters had heard from the cottage.

"The mermaids," he said. "No, indeed, poor little things, they never visit grandfather."

"Well, why do you laugh?" said Ruby angrily again. "You

speak as if there *were* mermaids."

"I was thinking of stories I have heard about them," said the boy simply. "But I couldn't help laughing to think of them coming to see grandfather. How could they ever get up these stones?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure," Ruby answered impatiently. "If he's a wizard he could do anything like that. I wish you'd tell us all about him. You must know, as you live with him."

"I've not been long with him," said the boy. "He *may* be friends with the mermaids for all I know. He's friends with everybody."

"You're mocking at me," said Ruby, "and I won't have it. I'm sure you could tell me things if you chose."

"We did hear talking and laughing," said Mavis gently, speaking almost for the first time, "and it seemed as if there was some one else there."

The boy looked at her again, and a very pleasant light came into his eyes – more than that, indeed, as Mavis watched him it seemed to her that they changed in colour. Was it the reflection from the sky? No, there was a mingling of every hue to be seen over by the western horizon certainly, but scarcely the deep clear midsummer sky-blue they suddenly became.

"What funny eyes you've got," exclaimed the child impulsively. "They're quite blue now, and they weren't a minute ago."

Ruby stared at him and then at Mavis. "Nonsense," she said, "they're not. They're just common coloured eyes. You shouldn't

say such things, Mavis; people will think you're out of your mind." Mavis looked very ashamed, but the boy's face flushed up. He looked both glad and excited.

"If you please, miss," he said, "some people see things that others don't. I don't even mind that nonsense about gran and the mermaids; those that say it don't know any better."

Ruby looked at him sharply.

"Then there is something to know," she said. "Now you might as well tell us all about it. Is old Adam a wizard?"

"That he's not," answered the boy stoutly, "if so be, as I take it, that a wizard means one that has to do with bad spirits – unkind and mischief-making and unloving, call them what you will. None of such like would come near gran, or, if they did, he'd soon send them to the right-about. I'd like you to see him for yourself some day, but not to-day, if you'll excuse it. He's very tired. I was running down to the shore to fetch a pailful of sea water to bathe his lame arm."

"Then we mustn't keep you," said Mavis. "But might we really come to see your grandfather some day, do you think?"

"I'll ask him," said the boy; "and I think he'd be pleased to see you."

"You might come up to the castle if there's anything he would like – a little soup or anything," said Ruby in her patronising way. "I'll speak to the housekeeper."

"Thank you, miss," said the boy, but more hesitatingly than he had spoken before.

"What's your name?" asked Ruby. "We'd better know it, so that you can say who you are when you come."

"Winfried," he answered simply.

"Then good-bye, Winfried," said Ruby. "Come on, Mavis;" and she turned to pursue her way home past the cottage.

Winfried hesitated. Then he ran a step or two after them.

"I can show you a nearer way home to the castle," he said, "and if you don't mind, it would be very kind of you not to go near by our cottage. Grandfather is feeble still – did you know he had been very ill? – and seeing or hearing strangers might startle him."

"Then you come with us," said Ruby. "You can tell him who we are."

"I'm in a hurry to get the salt water," said the boy. "I have put off time already, and if you won't think me rude I'd much rather you came to the cottage some day when we could invite you to step in."

His manner was so simple and hearty that Ruby could not take offence, though she had been quite ready to do so.

"Very well," she said, "then show us your nearer way."

He led them without speaking some little distance towards the shore again. After all there was a path – not a bad one of its kind, for here and there it ran on quite smoothly for a few yards and then descended by stones arranged so as to make a few rough steps.

"Dear me," said Ruby, "how stupid we were not to find this

path before."

Winfried smiled. "I scarce think you could have found it without me to show you," he said, "nor the short way home either for that matter. See here;" and having come to the end of the path he went on a few steps along the pebbly shore, for here there was no smooth sand, and stopped before a great boulder stone, as large as a hay-cart, which stood out suddenly among the broken rocks. Winfried stepped up close to it and touched it apparently quite gently. To the children's amazement it swung round lightly as if it had been the most perfectly hung door. And there before them was revealed a little roadway, wide enough for two to walk abreast, which seemed to wind in and out among the rocks as far as they could see. It was like a carefully rolled gravel path in a garden, except that it seemed to be of a peculiar kind of sand, white and glistening.

Ruby darted forward.

"What a lovely path!" she exclaimed; "will it take us straight home? Are you sure it will?"

"Quite sure," said Winfried. "You will see your way in no time if you run hand-in-hand."

"What a funny idea," laughed the child; and Mavis too looked pleased.

"I'm quite sure it's a fairy road," she was beginning to say, but, looking round, their little guide had disappeared. Then came his voice:

"Good-night," he said cheerfully. "I've shut-to the stone door,

and I'm up on the top of it. Good-night, little ladies. Run home hand-in-hand."

The girls looked at each other.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Ruby, not quite knowing what to say, "if old Adam isn't a wizard his grandson is. I think we'd better get out of this as quick as we can, Mavis."

She seemed half frightened and half provoked. Mavis, on the contrary, was quite simply delighted.

"I shouldn't wonder if this was the mermaid's own way to the cottage," she said. "I'm sure old Adam and Winfried aren't wizards; but I do think they must be some kind of good fairies, or at least they must have to do with fairies. Come along, Ruby, hand-in-hand;" and she held out her own hand.

But Ruby by this time had grown cross.

"I won't give in to such rubbish," she said. "I don't want to go along hand-in-hand like two silly babies. If it was worth the trouble I'd climb up to the top of the stone and go home the proper way."

This was all boasting. She knew quite well she could not possibly climb up the stone. But she walked on a few steps in sulky dignity. Suddenly she gave a little cry, slipped, and fell.

"Oh, I've hurt my ankle!" she exclaimed. "This horrid white gravel is so slippery."

Mavis was beside her almost before she had said the words, and with her sister's help Ruby got on to her feet again, though looking rather doleful.

"I believe it's all a trick of that horrid boy's," she said. "I wish you hadn't made me come to see that dirty old cottage, Mavis."

Mavis stared.

"*Me* make you come, Ruby?" she said. "Why, it was yourself."

"Well, you didn't stop it, any way," said Ruby, "and you seem to have taken such a fancy to that boy and his grandfather, and – "

"Ruby, we must go home," said Mavis. "Try if you can get along."

They were "hand-in-hand." There was no help for it now. Ruby tried to walk; to her surprise her ankle scarcely hurt her, and after a moment or two she even began urging Mavis to go faster.

"I believe I could run," she said. "Perhaps the bone in my ankle got out of its place and now has got into it again. Come on, Mavis."

They started running together, for in spite of her boasting Ruby had had a lesson and would not let go of Mavis. They got on famously; the ground seemed elastic; as they ran, each step grew at once firmer and yet lighter.

"It isn't a bit slippery now, is it?" said Mavis, glowing with the pleasant exercise. "And oh, Ruby, do look up at the sky – isn't it lovely? And isn't that the evening star coming out – that blue light up there; no, it's too early. See – no, it's gone. What could it be? Why, here we are, at the gate of the low terrace!"

They had suddenly, as they ran, come out from the path, walled in, as it were, among the broken rocky fragments, on

to a more open space, which at the first moment they scarcely recognised as one of the fields at the south side of the castle.

Ruby too gazed about her with surprise.

"It *is* a quick way home, certainly," she allowed, "but I don't see any star or blue light, Mavis. It must be your fancy."

Mavis looked up at the sky. The sunset colours were just beginning to fade; a soft pearly grey veil was slowly drawing over them, though they were still brilliant. Mavis seemed perplexed.

"It is gone," she said, "but I did see it."

"It must have been the dazzle of the light in your eyes," said Ruby. "I am seeing lots of little suns all over – red ones and yellow ones."

"No, it wasn't like that," said Mavis; "it was more like – "

"More like what?" asked Ruby.

"I was going to say more like a forget-me-not up in the sky," said her sister.

"You *silly* girl," laughed Ruby. "I never did hear any one talk such nonsense as you do. I'll tell cousin Hortensia, see if I don't."

"I don't mind," said Mavis quietly.

Chapter Three.
The Princess with the Forget-me-not Eyes

"For, just when it thrills me most,
The fairies change into phantoms cold,
And the beautiful dream is lost!"

Miss Hortensia was looking out for the little girls as they slowly came up the terraces.

"There you are at last," she called out. "You are rather late, my dears. I have been round at the other side, thinking I saw you go out that way."

"So we did," said Ruby. "We went down to the cove and along the shore as far as – . Oh, cousin Hortensia, we have had *such* adventures, and last of all, what *do* you think? Mavis has just seen a forget-me-not up in the sky."

Miss Hortensia smiled at Mavis; she had a particular way of smiling at her, as if she was not perfectly sure if the little girl were quite like other people. But Mavis, though she understood this far better than her cousin imagined, never felt angry at it.

"A forget-me-not in the sky," said the lady; "that is an odd idea. But you must tell me all your adventures when we are

comfortably settled for the evening. Run in and take your things off quickly, for I don't want you to catch cold, and the air, now the sun is set, is chilly. There is a splendid fire burning, and we shall have tea in my room as I promised you."

"Oh, how nice," said Ruby. "Come along, Mavis. I'm as hungry as a hawk."

"And you'll tell us stories after tea, cousin Hortensia, won't you?" said Mavis; "at least you'll tell us about your queer dream."

"And about mamma's going to court," added Ruby, as she dashed upstairs. For by this time they were inside the house.

The part of the castle that the children and their cousin and the few servants in attendance on them occupied was really only a corner of it. A short flight of stairs led up to a small gallery running round a side-hall, and out of this gallery opened their sleeping-rooms and what had been their nursery and play-rooms. The school-room and Miss Hortensia's own sitting-room were on the ground-floor. To get to any of the turrets was quite a long journey. They were approached by the great staircase which ascended from the large white and black tiled hall, dividing, after the first flight, into two branches, each of which led to passages from which other smaller stairs went upwards to the top of the house. The grandest rooms opened out of the tiled hall on the ground-floor, and out of the passages on the first floor. From this central part of the house the children's corner was shut off by heavy swing doors seldom opened.

So when Ruby and Mavis visited the turrets they had to pass

through these doors, and go some way along the passages, and then up one of the side stairs – up, up, up, the flights of steps getting steeper and narrower as they climbed, till at last they reached the door of the turret-chamber itself. Of these chambers there were two, one in each turret, east and west. The west was their favourite, partly because from it they saw the sunset, and partly because it was nearer their own rooms. They had been allowed to make a sort of private nest of it for themselves, and to play there on rainy days when they could not get out, and sometimes in very cold or snowy weather they had a fire there, which made the queer old room very cheery. There were three windows in each turret, and they were furnished in an odd, irregular way with all sorts of quaint old-fashioned furniture discarded from other parts of the castle. In former days these turret-rooms had sometimes been used as guest-chambers when the house was very full of visitors. For the large modern rooms and the hall I have spoken of had been added by the children's grandfather – a very hospitable but extravagant man. And before he made these improvements there were often more guests than it was easy to find room for.

Ruby and Mavis were not long in taking off their out-door things and "tidying" themselves for their evening in Miss Hortensia's pleasant little room. They made a pretty picture as they ran downstairs, their fair curls dancing on their shoulders, though if I were to describe to you how they were dressed, I am afraid you would think they must have been a very old-world

looking little pair.

"Here we are, cousin Hortensia," exclaimed Ruby as they came in, "and I do hope it's nearly tea-time."

"Not quite, my dear," Miss Hortensia replied, glancing at a beautifully carved Swiss clock which stood on the mantelpiece; "the little trumpeter won't tell us it's six o'clock for half an hour yet – his dog has just barked twice."

"Lazy things," said Ruby, shrugging her shoulders, "I'd like to shake that old trumpeter sometimes."

"And sometimes you'd like to pat him to sleep, wouldn't you?" said Mavis. "When cousin Hortensia's telling us stories, and he says it's bed-time."

Miss Hortensia looked at Mavis in some surprise, but she seemed very pleased too. It was not often Mavis spoke so brightly.

"Suppose you use up the half-hour in telling *me* stories," said their cousin. "Mine will keep till after tea. What were all the adventures you met with?"

"Oh," said Ruby, "it was too queer. Did you know, cousin, that there was a short way home from the sea-shore near old Adam's cottage? *Such* a queer way;" and she went on to describe the path between the rocks.

Miss Hortensia looked very puzzled.

"Who showed it to you?" she said; for Ruby, in her helter-skelter way, had begun at the end of the story, without speaking of the boy Winfried, or explaining why they – or she – had been

so curious about the old man whom the villagers called a wizard.

"It was the boy," Mavis replied; "such a nice boy, cousin Hortensia, with funny bluey eyes – at least they're *sometimes* blue."

"Oh, Mavis, do not talk so sillily," said Ruby; "his eyes aren't a bit blue. She's got blue on the brain, cousin, she really has. Seeing forget-me-nots in the sky too! I don't think he *was* a particularly nice boy. He was rather cool. I'm sure we wouldn't have done his grandfather any harm. Did you ever hear of him, cousin? Old Adam they call him;" and then she went on to give a rather more clear account of their walk, and all they had seen and heard.

Miss Hortensia listened attentively, and into her own eyes crept a dreamy, far-away, or rather long-ago look.

"It is odd," she said; "I have a kind of fancy that I have heard of the old 'solitary,' for he must be almost a hermit, before. But somehow I don't think it was here. I wonder how long he has lived here?"

"I don't know," said Ruby. "A good while, I should think. He was here when Joan was our nurse."

"But that was only two years ago," said Miss Hortensia, smiling. "If he had been here many years the people would not count him so much of a foreigner. And the boy you met – has he come to take care of the old man?"

"I suppose so. We didn't ask him," said Ruby carelessly. "He was really such a cool boy, ordering us not to go near the cottage indeed! I told him he might come up to get some soup or jelly

for his grandfather," she went on, with a toss of her head. "I said it, you know, just to put him in his place, and remind him whom he was speaking to."

"I'm sure he didn't mean to be rude," said Mavis; "and, cousin, there really was something rather 'fairy' about him. Isn't it *very* queer we never heard of that path before?"

"Yes," Miss Hortensia replied. "Are you sure you didn't both fall asleep on the shore and dream it all? Though, to be sure, it is rather too cold weather for you to have been overcome by drowsiness."

"And we couldn't both have dreamt the same thing if we had fallen asleep," said Mavis, in her practical way. "It wasn't like when you were a little girl and saw or dreamt – "

"Don't you begin telling the story if cousin Hortensia's going to tell it herself," interrupted Ruby. "I was just thinking I had forgotten it a good deal, and that it would seem fresh. But here's tea at last – I am so glad."

They were very merry and happy during the meal. Ruby was particularly pleased with herself, having a vague idea that she had behaved in a very grand and dignified way. Mavis's eyes were very bright. The afternoon's adventure had left on her a feeling of expecting something pleasant, that she could hardly put in words. And besides this, there was cousin Hortensia's story to hear.

When the table was cleared, cousin Hortensia settled herself with her knitting in a low chair by the fire, and told the children to bring forward two little stools and seat themselves beside

her. They had their knitting too, for this useful art had been taught them while they were so young that they could scarcely remember having learnt it. And the three pairs of needles made a soft click-click, which did not the least disturb their owners, so used were they to it. Rather did it seem a pleasant accompaniment to Miss Hortensia's voice.

"You want me to tell you the story of my night in the west turret-room when I was a little girl," she began. "You have heard it before, partly at least, but I will try to tell it more fully this time. I was a very little girl, younger than you two – I don't think I was more than eight years old. I had come here with my father and mother and elder sisters to join a merry party assembled to celebrate the silver wedding of your great-grandparents. Your grandfather himself, their eldest child, was about three and twenty. He was not then married, so it was some time before your father was born. I don't quite know why they had brought me. It seems to me I would have been better at home in my nursery, for there were no children as young as I to keep me company. Perhaps it was that they wished to have me to represent another generation, as it were, though, after all, that might have been done by my sisters. The elder of them, Jacintha, was then nineteen; it was she who afterwards married your grandfather, so that besides being cousins of the family, as we were already, I am your grandmother's sister, and thus your great-aunt as well as cousin."

The little girls nodded their heads.

"I was so much younger than Jacintha," Miss Hortensia went on, "that your father never called me aunt. He and I have always been Robert and Hortensia to each other, and to me he has always been like a younger brother."

"But about your adventure," said Ruby, who was not of a sentimental turn.

"I am coming to it," said their cousin. "Well, as I said, the party was a merry one. They had dancing and music in plenty every evening, and the house, which was in some ways smaller than it is now, was very full. There were a great many bedrooms, though few of them were large, and I and my sisters, being relations, were treated with rather less ceremony than some of the stranger guests, and put to sleep in the turret-room. I had a little bed in one corner, and my sisters slept together in the same old four-poster which is still there. I used to be put to bed much earlier than they came, for, as I said, there were dancing and other amusements most evenings till pretty late. I was not at all a nervous or frightened child, and even sometimes when I lay up there by myself wide awake – for the change and the excitement kept me from going to sleep as quickly as at home – I did not feel at all lonely. From my bed I could see out of the window, for the turret windows are so high up that it has never been necessary to have blinds on them, and I loved to lie there watching the starlit sky, or sometimes, when the moon was bright and full, gazing up at the clouds that went scurrying over her face. One night I had been unusually wakeful. I lay there, hearing now and then

very, very faint, far-off sounds of the music down below. It was a mild night, and I think the windows were a little open. At last I must have fallen asleep. When I awoke, or rather when I *thought* I awoke, the room was all in darkness except in one corner, the corner by the west window. There, there was a soft steady light, and it seemed to me that it was on purpose to make me look that way. For there, sitting on the old chair that still stands in the depth of that window was some one I had never seen before. A lady in a cloudy silvery dress, with a sheen of blue over it. My waking, or looking at her, for though it must all have been a dream, I could not make you understand it unless I described it as if it were real, seemed to be made conscious to her, for she at once turned her eyes upon me, then rose slowly and came over the room towards me."

"Weren't you frightened?" said Ruby breathlessly. In spite of her boasted disbelief in dreams and visions her cousin's story had caught her attention. Miss Hortensia shook her head.

"Not in the *very* least," she said. "On the contrary, I felt a strange and delightful kind of pleasure and wonder. It was more intense than I have ever felt anything of the kind in waking life; indeed, if it had lasted long I think it would have been more than I could bear – " Miss Hortensia stopped for a moment and leant back in her chair. "I have felt *something* of the same," she went on, "when listening to very, *very* beautiful music – music that seemed too beautiful and made you almost cry out for it to stop."

"I've never heard music like that," whispered little Mavis, "but

I think I know what you mean."

"Or," continued Miss Hortensia, "sometimes on a marvellously beautiful day – what people call a 'heavenly' day, I have had a feeling rather like it. A feeling that makes one shut one's eyes for very pleasure."

"Well," said Ruby, "did you shut your eyes then, or what did you do?"

"No," said her cousin. "I could not have shut them. I felt she was looking at me, and her eyes seemed to catch and fasten mine and draw them into hers. It was her eyes above all that filled me with that beautiful wonderful feeling. I can never forget it – never. I could fancy sometimes even now, old woman as I am, that I am again the little enraptured child gazing up at the beautiful vision. I feel her eyes in mine still."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.