Molesworth Mrs.

An Enchanted Garden: Fairy Stories

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
Madam Wren

"No," said Alix, "that's not a good plan at all. It's perfectly stupid. If you've no better ideas than that, Rafe, we needn't talk about it any more."

Rafe looked and felt very snubbed indeed.

He was ten, she was nine. But she generally took the lead; not always, as I daresay you will see when you hear more about them, but *generally*. They were a nice little pair, and they were constantly together, at lessons, at play, at everything. This was a convenient arrangement, for they were a good deal younger than the other brothers and sisters of the family, and what Rafe would have been without Alix, or Alix without Rafe, it would be difficult to imagine. But there is not much use in thinking over about might-have-beens, or would-have-beens, unless to make us more thankful for what *is*. So it is enough to say that as things really were, they were very happy children.

Still they had their troubles, and it was one of these they were discussing this lovely spring morning, when they were sitting under their favourite tree – a magnificent ilex in the garden, at one corner of the great lawn which was one of the beauties of their home.

It was a lovely day, clear and bright and joyous, full of its own delights, and yet almost fuller of the summer ones to come! This is, I suppose, the real secret of the charm of spring-time – the promise and hope it tells of. Everything seemed bursting with good news, the birds most of all perhaps, though the smiling faces of the early flowers, and the tender whispers of the gentle wind through the branches, were not behindhand. But the children's faces were clouded.

This was their trouble. They could not get any one to tell them any more stories! They had read all their books through, over and over again, and besides, books aren't *quite* as nice as "told" stories. At least not when they have to be shared by two. Rafe and Alix had tried several plans – reading aloud did not answer *very* well, and looking over the pages was worse. They never managed to keep quite together, and then the one who got down to the last line first was sure to fidget or to try in some way to hurry up the other, which was apt to lead to unpleasant results. And besides this, at present there was no question of story-books, for, as I said, the children had read all they possessed really *too* often.

Hitherto perhaps they had been a little spoilt about having stories told to them. Papa, who was an old soldier, had a good many tales of adventure; mamma had some lovely ones about "when she was a little girl." And the big brothers and sisters were very kind too, especially if Rafe or Alix, or both, as sometimes was the case, happened to be ill. But their stories were mostly out of books; now and then indeed they would unluckily turn out to be already known to the children, and though they did not altogether object to them on this account – I have noticed that children rather enjoy a book story retold by voice – it was not always so pleasant for Ena or Jean, or Eric when he was at home from college. For Rafe and Alix were so exceedingly particular.

"No," one of them would say, just when Eric had got to the most thrilling part of a robber story, "the entrance to the inner cave was at the *left* side of the big one;" or if Jean was describing her heroine's dress, "It wasn't green – I'm sure it was blue – blue with tiny rosebuds on," so that sometimes Jean would reply, "Really, children, if you interrupt so I can't go on," or Eric would go off with a grunt and tell them to provide stories for themselves.

This had happened the evening before, and this it was which put the idea into Rafe's mind which Alix snubbed so.

"Suppose," he said, "that we make stories for each other – you for me, Alix, and I for you?"

It sounded rather nice, but it did not find favour in her eyes at all.

"I know exactly what they'd be," she said; "just mixings up of all our other ones. It might do to amuse stranger children with, perhaps – but not for us ourselves. I know all that's in your head, and you know what's in mine, far too well. So it would be perfectly stupid."

And Rafe had no more to say.

It was Easter holidays – Easter was as late as it could be that year – and the weather was so beautiful that it really felt like summer. You would think the children should have been content; but they weren't. They had no lessons at all to do, and a whole fortnight of nothing you really must do is, in my opinion, a mistake. During the long summer holidays Miss Brander, their governess, always left them *something* to do, just enough to give a nice fresh taste to the holidaying the rest of their time, and to prevent their feeling the reins *quite* loose on their necks like runaway ponies. And even without this, in the summer it was different, for they generally went to the seaside or to some hilly place for a month or so, to have a change of air, and away from home in a new place time seldom hangs much on children's hands.

This Easter it was certainly doing so a good deal. There were other reasons too why the little couple felt rather at a loose end, rather tired of themselves. The big people were all unusually busy, for Ena was going to be married in June; and she and their mother or she and Jean were always going somewhere or other to order things, or to give their opinion about the doing up of the pretty old house, ten miles or so away, which was to be her new home. And though Ena was very kind when she had time, and the new brother-to-be held out grand promises of the visits they were to pay to their sister, and the fun they should have, still, all that seemed a good way off, and in the meantime Rafe and Alix felt rather out of it all. I am not sure but that they were just a little jealous of the new brother. "It's only a pretence sort of brother," said Alix one day when her feelings had been ruffled. I am afraid they felt as if he had some how put both their small noses out of joint.

So now you understand why Rafe and Alix were sitting rather disconsolately under the ilex, though the sun was shining brightly enough to melt away all clouds and mists inside as well as outside, any one would have thought.

In spite of Alix's snub, Rafe looked up again in a minute or two.

"Why don't you think of a better plan, then, if you don't like mine?" he said. "It's always easy to say things won't do," (which is exceedingly true!), "but why don't you find something that *will* do?"

Alix turned round. She was sitting on the end of the rustic bench, swinging her legs, which was not difficult, as they scarcely reached the ground, and staring up at the thickly-growing branches overhead. But now she looked at Rafe – he felt a little nervous; was she going to take offence at his speech?

No – she had heard what he said, but she was not vexed.

"I know what I wish we *could* find," she said. "Do you remember, Rafe, the story of a white lady, up, up in a room at the very top of a castle somewhere, who was always spinning stories? They came out of the hum of her spinning-wheel somehow, and the children could hear them when they sat down on the floor beside her. *Oh*, if we could find somebody like that!"

"It was fairies," said Rafe doubtfully. "At least the white lady was a fairy, and there aren't any really, I suppose."

"Everybody says so," Alix replied doubtfully, "but I don't quite see why there mightn't be. If there have never been any, what began all the fairy stories? And I know one thing – papa said so himself one day when he was telling some – what's the word? – it means a sort of a fairy story that's been told over and over since ever, *ever* so long ago, ledge —*what* is it?"

"Legends, you mean," said her brother. "Yes, I remember papa telling us some very queer ones he had heard in India."

"And he said there were fairy stories in *every* country," Alix went on. "So what *I* say is there must have been something to make them begin!"

This sounded very convincing to Rafe – Alix certainly had clever ways of putting things.

"Oh!" he said, with a deep sigh. "If we could but find some one old enough to remember the beginnings of them – something like the white lady, you know."

Both children sat silent for a moment or two, their eyes gazing before them. Suddenly on the short green turf appeared a tiny figure, a wren, so tame that she hopped fearlessly to within a very short distance of the little brother and sister, and then, standing still, seemed to look up at them with her bright eyes, her small head cocked knowingly on one side.

"Rafe," exclaimed Alix eagerly, though in a low voice.

"Alix," said Rafe in his turn.

Then they looked at each other, thinking the same thoughts.

"Rafe," whispered Alix, while the wren still stood there looking at them, "just look at her; she's not a bird, she's a fairy – or at least if she's not a fairy she's got some message for us from one."

The wren hopped on a few steps, still looking back at them. The children slipped off the seat and moved softly after her without speaking. On she went, hopping, then fluttering just a little way above the ground, then hopping again, till in this way she had led them right across the wide stretch of lawn to some shrubberies at the far side. Here a small footpath, scarcely visible till you were close to it, led through the bushes to a strip of half-wild garden ground, used as a sort of nursery for young trees, which skirted a lane known by the name of the "Ladywood Path." And indeed it was little more than a path nowadays, for few passed that way, though the story went that in the old days it had been a good road leading to a house that was no longer in existence.

Over the low wall clambered the children, to find to their delight that the wren was in the lane before them, just a little way ahead. But now she took to flying higher and faster than she had yet done; to keep up with her at all they had to run, and even with this they sometimes lost sight of her altogether for a minute or two. But they kept up bravely – they were too eager and excited to waste breath by speaking. The race lasted for some minutes, till at last, just as Alix was about to give in, Rafe suddenly twitched her arm.

"Stop, Alix," he panted – truth to tell, the running was harder on him than on his sister, for Rafe was of an easy-going disposition, and not given to violent exercise – "stop, Alix, she's lighted on the old gateway."

They both stood still and looked. Yes, there was Madam Wren on the topmost bar of a dilapidated wooden gate, standing between two solid posts at what had once been the entrance to the beautiful garden of an ancient house.

How beautiful neither the children nor any one now living knew, for even the very oldest inhabitants of that part of the country could only dimly remember having been told by their grandparents, or great-grandparents perhaps, how once upon a time Ladywood Hall had been the pride of the neighbourhood.

The wren flapped her wings, then rose upwards and flew off. This time, somehow, the children felt that it was no use trying to follow her.

"She's gone for good," said Rafe dolefully; but Alix's eyes sparkled.

"You *are* stupid," she said. "Don't you see what she's told us. We're to look for – for something, or some one, I don't quite know what, in the Lady's garden." For so somehow the grounds of the vanished house had come to be spoken of. "I think it was very dull of us not to have thought of it for ourselves, for it is a very fairy sort of place."

"If it is that way," said Rafe, "*they* must have heard us talking, and sent the wren to tell us."

"Of course," said Alix, "that's just what I mean. Perhaps the wren is one herself."

"Shall we go on now?" said Rafe. "No" – for just at that moment the clear sound of a bell ringing reached them from the direction of their own home – "for there's our dinner." And dinner was an important event in Rafe's eyes, even when rivalled by a fairy hunt.

"How provoking," said Alix. "*How* quickly the morning has gone. We must go in now or they will come hunting us up and find out all about it; and you know, Rafe, if it has anything to do with fairies we must keep it a secret."

Rafe nodded his head sagely.

"Of course," he replied. "When do you think we had best come? This afternoon we are going a walk with nurse, and she'd never let us off."

"No," said Alix, with a sigh, for a walk with nurse was not a very interesting affair. "But I'll tell you what, Rafe; if I can get hold of mamma to-night, just even for a minute, I'll ask her if we mayn't take something for dinner out with us to-morrow, and not come in till tea-time – the way we sometimes did last summer; for just now it's really as fine and warm as if it was June. I think she'll let us."

"I do hope she will," said the boy.

Chapter Two.
Tapping

The children were not very fortunate in their nurse. Perhaps this helped to make them feel lonely and dull sometimes, when there scarcely seemed real reason for their being so. She was a good woman, and meant to be kind, and their mother trusted her completely. But she was getting old, and was rather tired of children. She had had such a lot to bring up – the four big brothers and sisters of Rafe and Alix, and before them a large family of their cousins. And I don't think she was really very fond of children, though she was devoted to tiny babies. She didn't in the least understand children's fancifulnesses or many of their little ways, and was far too fond of saying, "Stuff and nonsense, Master Rafe," or "Miss Alix," as the case might be.

The walk this afternoon would not have been any livelier than usual, so far as nurse was concerned, but the children were so brimful of their new ideas that they felt quite bright and happy, and after a while even nurse was won over to enter into their talk, or at least to answer their questions pretty cheerfully.

For though of course they had not the least idea of telling her their secret, it was too much on their minds for them not to chatter round about it, so to say.

"Have you ever seen a fairy, nurse?" said Alix; and, rather to her surprise, nurse answered quite seriously:

"No, my dear. Time was, I suppose, as such things were to be seen, but that's past and gone. People have to work too hard nowadays to give any thought to fairies or fairyland."

But on the whole this reply was rather encouraging.

"You must have heard of fairies, though," said Rafe. "Can't you remember any stories about them?"

Nurse had never been great at story-telling.

"Oh dear no, Master Rafe," she replied; "I never knew any except the regular old ones, that you've got far prettier in your books than I could tell them. *Sayings* I may have heard, just countryside talk, when I was a child. My old granny, who lived and died in the village here, would have it that, for those that cared to look for them, there were odd sights and sounds in the grounds of the old house down the lane. Beautiful singing *her* mother had heard there when she was a girl; and once when a cow strayed in there for a night, they said when she came out again she was twice the cow she had been before, and that no milk was ever as good as hers."

The children looked at each other.

"I wonder they didn't turn all the cows in there," said Rafe practically.

"Why didn't they, nurse?"

"Oh dear me, Master Rafe, that's more than I can tell. It was but an old tale. You can't expect much sense in such."

"Whom did the old house belong to? Who lived there?" said Alix.

"Nobody knows," said nurse. "It's too long ago to say. But there's always been good luck about the place, that's certain. You've seen the flowers there in the summer time. Some of them look as beautiful as if they were in a proper garden; and it's certain sure there's no wood near here like it for the nightingales."

This was very satisfactory so far as it went, but nurse would say no more, doubtless because she had nothing more to say.

"I do believe, Rafe," said Alix, when they were sitting together after tea, "that the old garden is a sort of entrance to fairyland, and that it's been waiting for us to find it out."

Her eyes were shining with eagerness, and Rafe, too, felt very excited.

"I do hope mamma will let us have all to-morrow to ourselves," he said. "You see, one has to be very careful with fairies, Alix – all the stories agree about that. We must go to work very cautiously, so as not to offend them in any way."

"You're always cautious," said Alix, with a little contempt; "rather too cautious for me. Of course we shall be very *polite*, and take care not to spoil any of the plants, but we'll have to be a little venturesome too. And," she went on, "you may count that they've invited us. The wren brought a regular message. I only hope they're not offended with us for not going to-day."

"If they're good kind of fairies," said Rafe sagely – "and I think they're sure to be – they wouldn't have liked us to be disobedient; and you know mamma's awfully particular about our coming in the moment we hear the bell ring."

"Yes," said Alix; "that's true."

Mamma's heart was extra soft that evening, I think. She had seen so little of the children lately that she was feeling rather sorry for them, and all the more ready to agree to any wish of theirs. So they had no difficulty in getting her consent to their picnic plan for to-morrow. And the weather was wonderfully settled, as it sometimes is even in England, though early in the year.

So the next morning saw them set off, carrying a little basket of provisions and a large parasol, full of eagerness and excitement as to what might be before them.

They did not cross the lawn as they had done the day before, for they had a sort of feeling that they did not wish anyone to see them start, or to know exactly which way they went. It added to the pleasant mystery of the expedition. So they went straight out by the front gates, and after following the high road for a quarter of a mile or so, entered a little wood which skirted the grass-grown lane along one side, and from which they made their way out with some scrambling and clambering at only a few yards' distance from the entrance to the deserted garden where they had last seen the wren.

The sight of the gate-posts reminded Alix of the bird, and she stopped short with some misgiving.

"Rafe," she said, "do you think perhaps we should have waited for her at the ilex tree? I never thought of it before."

"Oh no," said Rafe; "I'm sure it's all right. We've come to the place she led us to. She didn't need to show us the way twice! Fairies don't like stupid people."

"You seem to know a great lot about fairies," said Alix, who had no idea of being snubbed herself, though she was fond of snubbing other people; "so I think you'd better settle what we're to do."

"I expect we'll find the wren inside the gate," said Rafe; and they made their way on in silence.

There was no difficulty in getting into the grounds, for though the gate on its rusty hinges would have been far too heavy for the children to move, there was a space between it and the posts where the wood had rotted away, through which it was easy for them to creep. First came Rafe, then the basket, next Alix, and finally the big parasol.

It was a good while since they had been in the Ladywood garden, and when they had got on to their feet again, they stood still for a minute or two looking round them. It was a curious-looking place certainly; the very beauty of it had something strange and dream-like about it.

Here and there the old paths were clearly to be traced. The main approach, or drive, as we should now call it, leading to where the house had been, was still quite distinct, though the house itself was entirely gone – not even any remains of ruins were to be seen, for all the stone and wood of which it had been built had long since been carted away to be used elsewhere.

But the children knew where the old hall had actually stood – a large, square, level plateau, bordered on three sides by a broad terrace, all grass-grown, showing in two or three places where stone steps had once led down to the lower grounds, told its own tale. Along the front of this plateau, supporting it, as it were, there was still a very strongly-built stone wall banked up into the soil. The children walked on slowly till they were near the foot of this wall, and then stood still again. It was

about five feet high; they seemed attracted to it, they scarcely knew why – perhaps because it was the only remaining thing actually to show that here had been once a home where people had lived.

"I daresay," said Alix, looking up, "that the children used to run along the terrace at the top of that wall, and their mammas and nurses would call after them to take care they didn't fall over. Doesn't it seem funny, Rafe, to think there have *always* been children in the world?"

"I daresay the boys jumped down sometimes," said Rafe. "I'd like to try, but I won't to-day, for I promised mamma to take care of you, and if I sprained my ankle it would be rather awkward."

They had forgotten their little quarrel, and for the moment they had forgotten about the wren.

She was nowhere to be seen.

What was to be done?

"If we were only looking for a nice place for our picnic," said Rafe, "nothing could be better than the shelter of this wall. With it on one side, and the parasol tilted up on the other, it would be as good as a tent."

"But we're not only looking for a picnic place," said Alix impatiently. "The only thing to do is to poke about till we find *something*, for I'm perfectly certain the wren didn't bring us here for nothing; and then, you know, there's even what nurse told us about this garden."

Alix's words roused Rafe's energy again; for he was a trifle lazy, and wouldn't have been altogether disinclined to sit down comfortably and think about dinner. But once he got a thing in his head, he was not without ideas.

"Let's follow right along the wall," he said, "and examine it closely."

"I don't know what you expect to find," said Alix. "It's just a wall, as straight and plain as can be."

And so indeed it seemed from where they stood.

"I'll look all along the ground, in case there might be a ring fixed in a stone somewhere, like in the *Arabian Nights*. That's a regular fairy sort of plan," said Alix.

"Very well," agreed Rafe; "you can do that, and I'll keep tapping the wall to see if it sounds hollow anywhere."

And so they proceeded, Alix carrying the basket now, and Rafe the parasol, as it came in handy for his tapping.

For some moments neither of them spoke. Alix's eyes were fixed on the ground. Once or twice, where it looked rough and uneven, she stooped to examine it more closely, but nothing came of it, except a little grumbling from Rafe at her stopping the way. To avoid this she ran on a few paces in front of him, so that when, within a few yards of the end of the wall, her brother suddenly stopped short, she wasn't aware that he had done so till she heard him calling her in a low but eager voice.

"What is it?" she said breathlessly, hurrying back again.

"Alix," he said, "there's some one tapping back at us from the other side. Listen."

"A woodpecker," said Alix hastily; "or the echo of your tappings."

She was in such a hurry that she didn't stop to reflect what silly things she was saying. To tell the truth, she didn't quite like the idea of Rafe having the honour and glory of the discovery, if such it was.

"A woodpecker," repeated Rafe. "What nonsense! Do woodpeckers tap inside a wall? And an echo wouldn't wait till I had finished tapping to begin. It's just like answering me. Listen again."

He tapped three times, slowly and distinctly, then stopped. Yes, sure enough there came what seemed indeed like an answer. Three clear, sharp little raps – clearer and sharper, indeed, than those he made with the parasol handle. Alix was now quite convinced.

"It sounds like a little silver hammer," she said. "Oh, Rafe, *suppose* we've really found something magic!" and her bright eyes danced with eagerness.

Rafe did not reply. He seemed intent on listening.

"Alix," he said, "the tapping is going on – a little farther off now, and then it comes back again, as if it was to lead us on. It must be on purpose."

Chapter Three.
The Caretaker

"Let's follow it along," said Alix, after another moment or two's hesitation.

They were standing, as I said, not many yards from the end of the wall, and thither the sound seemed to lead them. When they got quite to the corner the tapping had stopped. But the children were not discouraged.

"That's what fairies do," said Alix, as if all her life she had lived on intimate terms with the beings she spoke of. "They show you a bit, and then they leave you to find out a bit for yourself. We must poke about now and see what we can find."

Rafe had already set to work in this way: he was feeling and prodding the big, solid-looking stones which finished off the corner.

"Alix," he exclaimed, "one of these stones shakes a little; let's push at it together."

Yes, there was no doubt that it yielded a little, especially at one side. The children pushed with all their might and main, but for some time an uncertain sort of wobbling was the only result. Rafe stood back a little to recover his breath, and to look at the stone more critically.

"There may be some sort of spring or hinge about it," he said at last. "Give me the parasol again, Alix."

He then pressed the point of it firmly along the side of the stone, down the seam of mortar which appeared to join it to its neighbour in the wall. He need not have pressed so hard, for when he got to the middle of the line the stone suddenly yielded, turning inwards so quickly and sharply that Rafe almost fell forward on the parasol, and a square dark hole was open before them.

Alix darted forward and peeped in.

"Rafe," she cried, "there's a sort of handle inside; shall I try to turn it?"

She did so without waiting for his answer. It moved quite easily, and then they found that the two or three stones completing the row to the ground, below the one that had already opened, were really only thin slabs joined together and forming a little door. It was like the doors you sometimes see in a library, which on the outside have the appearance of a row of books.

The opening was now clear before them, and they did not hesitate to pass through. They had to stoop a little, but once within, it was easy to stand upright, and even side by side. Alix caught hold of Rafe's hand.

"Let's keep fast hold of each other," she whispered.

For a few steps they advanced in almost total darkness, for the door behind them had noiselessly closed. But this was in the nature of things, and quite according to Alix's programme.

"I only hope," she went on, "that we haven't somehow or other got inside the cave where the pied piper took the children. It might have an opening into England somehow, even though I think Hamelin was in Germany; but, of course, there's nothing to be frightened at, is there, Rafe?" though her own heart was beating fast.

Rafe's only answer was a sort of grunt, which expressed doubt, though we will not say fear. Perhaps it was the safest answer he could make under the very peculiar circumstances. But no doubt it was a great relief to both when, before they had time really to ask themselves whether they were frightened or not, a faint light showed itself in front of them, growing stronger and brighter as they stepped on, till at last they could clearly make out in what sort of a place they were.

It was a short, fairly wide passage, seemingly hollowed out of the ground, and built up in the same way as the wall outside into the soil – in fact it was like a small tunnel. The light was of a reddish hue, and soon they saw the reason of this. It came from an inner room, the door of which was half open, where a fire was brightly burning, and by the hearth sat a small figure.

The children looked at each other, then they bent forward to see more. Noiseless though they were, the little person seemed to know they were coming. She lifted her head, and though her face was partly hidden by the hood of the scarlet cloak which covered her almost entirely, they saw that it was that of a very old woman.

"Welcome, my dears," she said at once. "I have been looking for you this long time."

Her voice, though strange – in what way it was strange the children could not have told, for it seemed to come from far away, and yet it seemed to them that they had often heard it before – encouraged them to step forward.

"Good-morning," Alix began, but then she hesitated. Was it morning, or evening, or night, or what? It was difficult to believe that only a few minutes ago they had been standing outside in the warm sunshine, with the soft spring breeze wafting among the fresh green leaves, and the birds singing overhead. *That* all seemed a dream. "I beg your pardon," the little girl began again; "I don't quite know what I should say, but thank you for speaking so kindly. How did you know we were coming?"

"I heard you," replied the old woman. "I heard your little footsteps up to the gateway yesterday, and I knew you'd come again to-day."

By this time Rafe had found his tongue too.

"Did you send the wren?" he said.

"Never mind about that just now," she answered. "I've many a messenger; and what's better still, I've quick eyes, and even quicker ears, for all that I'm so very old. I know what you want of me, and if you're good children you shall not be disappointed. I've been getting ready for you in more ways than one."

"Do you mean you've got stories to tell us?" exclaimed the children eagerly.

"Of course," she replied, with a smile.

"I wouldn't be much good if I hadn't stories for you."

All this time, I must tell you, the old woman had been busily knitting. Her needles made a little silvery click, but there was nothing fidgeting about this sound; now and then her words seemed to go in a sort of time with it. What she was knitting they could not see.

Alix gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"How beautiful!" she said; "and may we come every day, and may we stay as long as we like, and will you sometimes invite us to tea, perhaps? and – "

"Alix!" said Rafe, in a tone of reproval.

"Nay, nay," said their hostess. "Let her chatter. All in good time, my love," she added to Alix, and the click of the needles seemed to repeat the words, "All in good time," like a little song.

Rafe's eyes, which were sometimes more observant than Alix's, as his tongue did not use up so much of his attention as hers, had meanwhile been wandering round the room. It can, I think, be best described as a very cosy kitchen, but, unlike many kitchens, it was fresh and not the least too hot. There was a strange, pleasant fragrance in the air that made one think of pine woods. Afterwards the children found out that this came from the fire, for it was entirely of fir-cones, of which a large heap stood neatly stacked in one corner.

Along chain hung down the chimney, with a hook at the end, to which a bright red copper pan was fastened; a little kettle of the same metal stood on the hearthstone, which was snowy white. The walls of the room were of rough stone, redder in colour than the wall outside, or else the firelight made them seem so. Behind where the old woman sat hung a grass-green curtain, closely drawn; there was no lamp or candle, but the firelight was quite enough. A wooden dresser ran along one side, and on its shelves were arranged cups and plates and jugs of the queerest shapes and colours you could imagine. I must tell you more about these later on. There was a settle with a very curious patchwork cushion, but besides this and the rocking-chair on which sat the old woman – I forgot to say that she was sitting on a rocking-chair – the only seats were two little three-legged stools. The middle of the

floor was covered by matting of a kind the children had never seen; it was shaded brown, and made you think of a path strewn over with fallen leaves in autumn.

The old woman's kindly tone encouraged Rafe to speak in his turn.

"May I ask you one or two things," he said, "before you begin telling us the stories?"

"As many as you like, my boy," she replied cheerfully. "I don't say I'll answer them all – that's rather a different matter – but you can ask all the same."

"It's so puzzling," said Rafe, hesitating a little. "I don't think it puzzles Alix so much as me; she knows more about fairy things, I think. I do so want to know if you've lived here a very long time. Have you always lived here – even when the old house was standing and there were people in it?"

"Never mind about always," replied the old woman. "A very, very long time? Yes, longer than you could understand, even if I explained it! Long before the old house was pulled down? Yes, indeed, long before the old house was ever thought of! I'm the caretaker here nowadays, you see."

"The caretaker!" Rafe repeated; "but there's no house to take care of."

"There's a great deal to take care of nevertheless," she replied. "Think of all the creatures up in the garden, the birds and the butterflies, not to speak of the flowers and the blossom. Ah, yes! we caretakers have a busy time of it, I can tell you, little as you might think it. *And* the stories – why, if I had nothing else to do, the looking after them would keep me busy. They take a deal of tidying. You'd scarcely believe the state they come home in sometimes when they've been out for a ramble – all torn and jagged and draggle-tailed, or else, what's worse, dressed up in such vulgar new clothes that their own mother, and I'm as good as their mother, would scarcely know them again. No, no," and she shook her head, "I've no patience with such ways."

Alix looked delighted. She quite understood the old woman.

"How nicely you say it," she exclaimed. "It's like something papa told us the other day about legends; don't you remember, Rafe?"

Rafe's slower wits were still rather perplexed, but he took things comfortably. Somehow he no longer remembered any more questions to ask. The old woman's bright eyes as she looked at him gave him a pleasant, contented feeling.

"Have you got a story quite ready for us?" asked Alix.

"One, two, three, four," said the old woman, counting her stitches. "I'm setting it on, my dear; it'll be ready directly. But what have you got in your basket? It's your dinner, isn't it? You must be getting hungry. Wouldn't you like to eat something while the story's getting ready?"

"Are you going to *knit* the story?" said Alix, looking very surprised.

"Oh dear no!" said the old woman, smiling. "It's only a way I have. The knitting keeps it straight, otherwise it might fly off once I've let it out. Now open your basket and let's see what you've got for your dinner. There, set it on the table, and you may reach down plates and jugs for yourselves."

"It's nothing much," said Alix, "just some sandwiches and two hard-boiled eggs and some slices of cake."

"Very good things in their way," said the old woman, as Alix unpacked the little parcels and laid them on the plates which Rafe handed her from the dresser. "And if you look into my larder you'll find some fruit, maybe, which won't go badly for dessert. What should you say to strawberries and cream?"

She nodded towards one corner of the kitchen where there was a little door which the children had not before noticed, so very neatly was it fitted into the wall.

The opening of it was another surprise; the "larder" was quite different from the room inside. It was a little arbour, so covered over with greenery that you could not see through the leaves to the outside, though the sunshine managed to creep in here and there, and the twittering of the birds was clearly heard.

On a stone slab stood a curiously-shaped basket filled with – oh! such lovely strawberries! and beside it a bowl of tempting yellow cream; these were the only eatables to be seen in the larder.

"Strawberries!" exclaimed Rafe; "just fancy, Alix, and it's only April."

"But we're in Fairyland, you stupid boy," said Alix; "or at least somewhere very near it."

"Quick, children," came the old woman's voice from the kitchen. "You bring the strawberries, Alix, and Rafe the cream. There'll be no time for stories if you dawdle!"

This made them hurry back, and soon they were seated at the table, with all the nice things neatly before them. They were not greedy children fortunately, for, as everybody knows, fairy-folk hold few things in greater horror than greediness; and they were orderly children too. They packed up their basket neatly again when they had finished, and Alix asked if they should wash up the plates that had been lent to them, which seemed to please their old friend, for she smiled as she replied that it wasn't necessary.

"My china is of a different kind from any you've ever seen," she said. "*Whiff*, plates," she added; and then, to the children's amusement, there was a slight rattle, and all the crockery was up in its place again, shining as clean and bright as before it had been used.

There was now no doubt at all that they were really in Fairyland.

Chapter Four.
The Story of the Three Wishes

"And now for a story," said Alix joyfully. "May we sit close beside you, Mrs – oh dear! Mayn't we call you something?"

"Anything you like," replied the old woman, smiling.

"I know," cried Alix; "Mrs Caretaker – will that do? It's rather a nice name when you come to think of it."

"Yes," agreed their old friend; "and it should be everybody's name, more or less, if everybody did their duty. There's no one without something to take care of."

"No," said Rafe thoughtfully; "I suppose not."

"Draw the two little stools close beside me – one at the right, one at the left; and if you like, you may lean your heads on my knee, you'll hear none the worse."

"Oh, that's beautiful," said Alix; "it's like the children and the white lady. Do you know about the white lady?" she went on, starting up suddenly.

Mrs Caretaker nodded. "Oh yes," she said; "she's a relation of mine. But we mustn't chatter any more if you're to have a story."

And the children sat quite silent. Click, click, went the knitting-needles.

The Story of the Three Wishes.

That was the name of the first of Mrs Caretaker's stories.

Once upon a time there lived two sisters in a cottage on the edge of a forest. It was rather a lonely place in some ways, though there was an old town not more than a mile off, where there were plenty of friendly people. But it was lonely in this way, that but seldom any of the townsfolk passed near the cottage, or cared to come to see the sisters, even though they were good and pretty girls, much esteemed by all who knew them.

For the forest had a bad name. Nobody seemed to know exactly why, or what the bad name meant, but there it was. Even in the bright long summer days the children of the town would walk twice as far on the other side to gather posies of the pretty wood-flowers in a little copse, not to be compared with the forest for beauty, rather than venture within its shade. And the young men and maidens of a summer evening, though occasionally they might come to its outskirts in their strolls, were never tempted to do more than stand for a moment or two glancing along its leafy glades. Only the sisters, Arminel and Chloe, had sometimes entered the forest, though but for a little way, and not without some fear and trembling.

But they had no misgiving as to living in its near neighbourhood. Custom does a great deal, and here in the cottage by the forest-side they had spent all their lives. And the grandmother, who had taken care of them since they had been left orphans in their babyhood, told them there was no need for fear so long as they loved each other and did their duty. All the same, she never denied that the great forest was an uncanny place.

This was the story of it, so far as any one knew. Long, long ago, when many things in the world were different from what they are now, a race of giants, powerful and strong, were the owners of the forest, and so long as they were just and kindly to their weaker neighbours, all went well. But after a while they grew proud and tyrannical, and did some very cruel things. Then their power was taken from them, and they became, as a punishment, as weak and puny as they had been the opposite. Now and then, so it was said about the countryside, one or two of them had been seen, miserable-looking little dwarfs. And the seeing of them was the great thing to be dreaded, for it was supposed to be a certain sign of bad luck.

But the grandmother had heard more than this, though where, or when, or how, she could not remember. The spell over the forest dwarfs was not to be for ever; something some day was to break it, though what she did not know.

"And who can tell," she would say now and then, "how better things may come about for the poor creatures? There's maybe a reason for your being here, children. Keep love and pity in your hearts, and never let any fear prevent you doing a kind action if it comes in your way."

But till now, though they had gone on living in the old cottage since their grandmother's death in the same way, never forgetting what she had said, Arminel and Chloe had never caught sight of their strange neighbours. True, once or twice they had seen a small figure scuttering away when they had ventured rather farther than usual along the forest paths, but then it might have been only some wild wood creature, of whom, no doubt, there were many who had their dwellings in the lonely gloom. Sometimes a strange curiosity really to see one of the dwarfs for themselves would come over them; they often talked about it in the long winter evenings when they had nothing to amuse them.

But it was only to each other that they talked in this way. To their friends in the town, for they had friends there whom they saw once a week on the market-day, they never chattered about the forest or the dwarfs; and when they were asked why they went on living in this strange and lonely place, they smiled and said it was their home, and they were happier there than anywhere else.

And so they were. They were very busy to begin with, for their butter and eggs and poultry were more prized than any to be had far or near. Arminel was the dairy-woman, and Chloe the hen-wife, and at the end of each week they would count up their earnings, eager to see which had made the more by their labours. Fortunately for their happy feelings to each other, up till now their gains had been pretty nearly equal, for there is no saying where jealousy will not creep in, even between the dearest of friends.

But quite lately, for the first time, things had not been going so well. It was late in the autumn, and there had been unusually heavy rains, and when they ceased the winter seemed to begin all at once, and before its time, and the animals suffered for it. The cow's milk fell off before Arminel had looked for its doing so, and some great plans which she had been making for the future seemed likely to be disappointed. She had hoped to save enough through the winter to buy another cow in the spring, so that with the two she would have had a supply of butter for her customers in the town all the year round. And Chloe's hens were not doing well either. One or two of them had even died, and she couldn't get her autumn chickens to fatten. Worst of all, the eggs grew fewer day by day.

These misfortunes distressed the sisters very much. Sadder still, they grew irritable and short-tempered, each reproaching the other, and making out that she herself had managed better.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.