

Molesworth Mrs.

The Wood-Pigeons and Mary



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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	10
Chapter Three.	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

Mrs. Molesworth

The Wood-Pigeons and Mary

Chapter One. “Such Big Tears.”

“Mary is crying,” said Mr Coo.

“No!” replied Mrs Coo.

But Mr Coo said again —

“Mary is crying,” and though Mrs Coo repeated —

“No!” she knew by the way he held his head on one side and looked at her, that he was very much in earnest indeed.

I must tell you that when Mrs Coo said ‘no,’ it went off into a soft sound that was almost like ‘coo’; indeed most of her talking, and of Mr Coo’s too, sounded like that, which is the reason, I daresay, that many people would not have understood their conversation. But it would be rather tiresome to write “no,” or other words, with double o’s at the end, so I will leave it to be fancied, which will do just as well. There is a great deal of conversation in the world which careless people don’t understand; a great deal which *no one* can understand properly, however much they try; but also a great deal that one *can* get to understand, if one tries, even without the gift which the dear fairy bestowed on the very lucky prince in the long ago story. I forget his name, but I daresay some of you remember it. The gift was the power to understand all that the beasts and birds say.

This very morning the wind has been talking to me a good deal – it was the south wind, and her stories are always very sweet, though sometimes sad, yet I understand a good deal of them.

After this second “No,” Mr and Mrs Coo sat looking at each other for a moment or two, without speaking.

Then said Mr Coo —

“It must be something – serious. For Mary scarcely ever cries.”

“True,” said Mrs Coo, “true.”

But she did not say anything more, only she too held her head on one side and kept her reddy-brown eyes fixed on Mr Coo. They seemed to ask, “What is to be done?” only as she nearly always depended on Mr Coo for settling what was to be done or if anything was to be done, she did not need to say the words.

“Mary scarcely ever cries,” he repeated. “There were large drops, quite large ones on her cheeks.”

“As large as raindrops?” asked Mrs Coo.

“Larger – that is to say as large as large raindrops – the kind that come when it thunders,” said Mr Coo.

“Oh dear,” sighed Mrs Coo, thinking to herself that Mary’s trouble must be a very bad one indeed if her tears were *so* large. She wanted very much for once, to ask what could be done, but she saw that Mr Coo was considering very deeply, so she did not interrupt his thoughts.

At last he turned to her.

“I heard something,” he said. “Very little, but enough to help me to put two and two together.”

“To make four,” said Mrs Coo quickly. She felt rather proud of her arithmetic, though she did not understand what Mr Coo could mean, as she had never heard the saying before. “Four *what*, my dear?”

“Four nothing,” was the reply – rather a cross one. “It is an expression. You are not as used to human talk as I am, you see,” he went on more amiably, for it is not the way with the Coo family ever to be cross for more than a moment, and if ever they are, they are sorry immediately. “Never mind about the two and two. What I heard was only a few words, but it has decided me that I must hear more, for,” and here Mr Coo’s tone grew very solemn, “it had to do with *us*!”

Mrs Coo was so startled that she repeated Mr Coo’s words, which was one of the few things that tried his temper.

“It had to do with *us*,” she said. “How could that be? We have never done anything that could make Mary cry, especially such very large tears.”

“Yes,” said Mr Coo, “we have done one thing. We have left the Square Gardens.”

“But that was some time ago,” said Mrs Coo, “and she did not cry when very sweetly.”

Mr Coo gave what was for him a little cough – a sort of “h’m.”

“To tell you the truth,” he said, “I have never felt perfectly sure that she understood my explanation that day. Still, you are right so far. I have seen her several times since then, and though she was putting her head out of the window as far as she dared, and looking towards our tree, where the nest is already falling to pieces, she was certainly not *crying*.”

“Perhaps she saw you yourself, and felt sure we had not really left for good?”

“No,” said Mr Coo, “she did not see me the day she put her head so far out of the window. I was watching her, for I was a little afraid she might already be missing us. But she only looked at the tree and seemed quite happy.”

“Is it since then that the nest has fallen to pieces, do you think, Mr Coo?” asked Mrs Coo.

She was rather a clever little wood-pigeon after all, though Mr Coo scarcely thought so.

“Yes,” he replied. “There was a great deal of wind last night and the night before – I fancy the wind blew it down. This morning there is almost nothing to be seen of it.”

“Then that was why Mary was crying,” exclaimed Mrs Coo.

But again Mr Coo shook his head, or at least turned it to the other side, which meant that he did not agree with Mrs Coo.

“*That* would not explain the words I heard,” he said.

“What were they?”

“She was crying,” Mr Coo replied, “crying and leaning against the window, and the window was open, and I heard her say, ‘He doesn’t believe me, he doesn’t believe me. It’s too bad of the Cooies –’ she calls us the Cooies, you know, my dear.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Coo, nodding her head gently, “I know.”

“It’s too bad of the Cooies,” she said again, Mr Coo went on. “I believe they’re not Cooies at all, but very unkind, tricky fairies.’ She said *that*– she really did.”

“Dear, dear, it’s very sad, very sad indeed,” said Mrs Coo, and her voice was exceedingly low and mournful. “*Mary* to think that of us. Something must be done, Mr Coo, something must be done.”

“Of course it must,” he agreed. “I must go back then this very afternoon and try to see her and find out all about the trouble.”

“Shall I come too?” asked Mrs Coo.

“Certainly, if you like,” said Mr Coo.

In his heart, he was very pleased to have her company, but he was not very fond of allowing that he was not quite able to manage everything by himself.

“Certainly, if you like,” he repeated, “but just as you choose.”

“Then I think I will come,” she said. “For one thing, Mary will be pleased to see both of us together, I feel sure, and perhaps it may be easier to catch her eyes if we are both there. We can fly about a little just in front of her window as we used to do, and call out to each other. But I hope she will not be crying – at least not such very large tears. It would be almost too much for my feelings,” and she gave a deep sigh – a real sigh, though it sounded like a very soft and melancholy “coo.”

So, rather late that afternoon, the two wood-pigeons set off. It was a pretty long fly to the square where Mary lived, but they thought it better not to go earlier, for as it was now autumn and the days were beginning to get shorter, they knew that the children went out for their second walk soon after their dinner, so as to come in before it got chilly.

And very often just about the time they planned to reach the Square gardens, they had seen Mary at her own window, where she used to stand looking out, after taking off her hat and jacket, and while waiting to be called to tea.

Mary loved the window of her room. It looked out to the back of the house, for the gardens I am speaking of were not those in the middle of the square in front, but much prettier ones, stretching along between one side of Mary's Square, and one side of another Square, whose houses also looked out on them from the back. Mary knew every tree and bush that grew near her house. She used to watch them all the year round, and could tell exactly about what time the leaves began to fade and drop off, and about when the pretty new spring ones first showed, growing a little greener and brighter every day till the trees had all their summer clothes on again. She got to know when the spring was in a lazy mood, and when the autumn was in too great a hurry to come, so that her uncle used sometimes to call her his little "weather prophet." And if she had been clever at drawing, which I am afraid she was not particularly, she could have sketched the shapes and branches of her favourite trees from memory; so well did she know how they looked when quite bare, and how they looked when in full dress, and how the steady old evergreen ones, who never vary much, hold themselves.

Her 'favourite' tree was one that kept its leaves longer, and strange to say, got its new ones earlier, than any of the others. I cannot tell you what kind of tree it was. I am not sure if Mary herself knew its name. She called it in her own mind the "fairy tree," but she did not tell any one this, as she would have been afraid of being laughed at.

But her great reason for liking this tree best of any, you can perhaps already guess.

It was – or had been – the home of the dear wood-pigeons – the Cooies!

Ah – the "had been" makes a great difference. It was their home no longer.

Was that then what Mary was crying about the day Mr Coo saw her and felt so distressed about her?

No, not exactly that.

She had not quite understood Mr Coo's long speech, in which he told her they were going to flit for good. She had only thought he was singing a "cooie" song to her extra sweetly, because they were going away for a day or two, as she had known them do before – for a little change, she supposed, now that the young Cooies were all hatched and fledged and able to look after themselves – "grown-up and out in the world." Next year no doubt there would be eggs in the nest again to hatch and take care of – eggs and then fledglings – a weary business it must be, Mary thought, though happily Mrs Coo did not seem to think so, nor Mr Coo either, as he sat on a branch talking to her while she stayed so patiently and contentedly in the nest, and their soft voices sounded sweetly through the spring air, in at Mary's window, where she never forgot to stand morning and evening to nod and smile to her little friends, and even to talk sometimes when Mr Coo hopped up to a still nearer bough.

No, it was not exactly about the Cooies having gone that Mary was crying so piteously that day. She still thought they would come back again before long, though certainly they had never been away for so many days together as this time, which made her begin to feel rather less sure of their returning, and when she came in from her walk that afternoon and stood at the window looking out, a sad fear stole over her that *perhaps* they would never come back again at all.

Suddenly a faint sound made her start. She had just begun saying to herself again the same words which Mr Coo had overheard, and which had so hurt his feelings as well as Mrs Coo's.

"It's too bad of the Cooies, too bad. I really don't believe –" when the little sound reached her ears, and looking up quickly, she saw that the window was slightly open at the top, and again she heard a soft, very soft "coo."

It only took her a moment to push up the lower sash as high as it would go. Luckily there were bars across, so she could not lean far out; only her forehead and eyes and the top of her curly head got through, but even this gave her a clearer view of the fairy tree and the boughs, lower down than her window, from which Mr Coo had so often “talked” to her, while keeping at the same time his eye on Mrs Coo patiently seated on the nest farther in among the branches, and ready to do any little errand that might be wanted.

The nest, alas, was no longer there; only bits of it, at least were left *Mary* knew so exactly where it had been that she could distinguish the fragments, but no one looking for it for the first time could have seen anything at all. But – something better than the nest met Mary’s delighted eyes. Two little well-known figures were there – on the very end of one of the boughs, so as the better to catch her eye, and now there was no doubt in her mind as to the sound she had heard – her own dear wood-pigeons were back again, and looking to see her at the window!

She was so pleased that she almost screamed!

“Oh, Cooies, Cooies,” she cried, “you’ve come back. But why did you go away for so long? You don’t know how unhappy I’ve been. I wish you’d come up here on to the window-sill and let me tell you all about it.”

There came another “coo,” rather louder and clearer than usual, and then a flutter and movement, a spreading of little wings, and —

“I do believe,” said Mary to herself, “I do believe they’ve heard me and understood what I say.”

She spoke more than half in fun; she did not *really* think it could be true; all the same a sort of tremble of wonder and delight went through her, as she saw her little friends slowly rising upwards and heard the soft swish of their wings as they flew towards – yes actually *towards* her!

Was she dreaming?

She rubbed her eyes, as people always do when they are not quite sure if they are awake, or as they *think* they do when they are really asleep, but the rubbing made no difference. She was not dreaming. She was standing at her own window, it was still broad daylight, and everything was quite natural and real, and the same as usual except that the pair of wood-pigeons were flying towards her and in another moment had perched on her window-sill!

“They are fairies,” Mary decided, “that is it.”

“But not unkind, tricky fairies, I hope,” said a gentle soft voice, and a queer little shiver went through Mary. Fairies or not, a fairy gift had come to *her*. She could understand what the Cooies said!

“Oh dear, oh dear,” she exclaimed, half frightened and half wild with delight. “You *must* be fairies, for I can talk to you and know what you say.”

There was a sound like a murmur of laughter, and then the little voice again. It was *Mrs Coo’s* this time, but Mary had not yet learnt to distinguish between the two, though she soon came to do so.

“No, dear,” it said, “not more fairies than all we wood-creatures are, if only you human beings would take the trouble to get to know us. But some do – some few – and you are one of those it has come to easily, to understand us. We have always understood *you*. And now you must tell us all about what has been the matter.”

“And why you were crying so,” put in Mr Coo, who did not at all intend to be left out, especially as it was he who had made the discovery of Mary’s woe. “Such big tears too,” added Mrs Coo.

“It wasn’t only because we had gone away, was it?” asked Mr Coo.

“No,” replied Mary, finding herself, rather to her surprise, already getting used to the wonderful power that had come to her, “no, it wasn’t only that, because, you see, I thought you would soon come back again, as you have sometimes flown off for a day or two, you know. No, it wasn’t only that. It was that *he* wouldn’t believe me, and I care for him far the most of all my cousins. I mean Michael.”

“Michael,” repeated Mr Coo, “is he the fat little red-haired boy in sailor suits? His hair is something the colour of yours, Mary.”

"I'm sure it isn't," said Mary, rather huffily. "*That* Michael! Of course not. That's Fritz – stupid little thing. *Michael* isn't fat. He's tall and has proper dark hair, and he's very, very brave. Fancy taking Fritz for Michael!"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr Coo, but though his tone was very polite it was rather stiff. "How were we to know, seeing we are *not* nasty tricky fairies, about your relations, unless you explain them?" Mary felt herself growing red.

"I didn't say nasty tricky fairies," she replied very meekly. "I think I said 'unkind,' but I didn't mean you to hear, and it was only just when I was vexed. But I'm sure now that you are very kind, and I *am* so glad you have come back again that I wouldn't for anything be rude."

"All right," said Mr Coo, "I am sure you did not intend to hurt our feelings. We couldn't care for you if you were that sort of little girl. But please be so good as to tell us about Michael, for time is getting on."

"Yes," Mary agreed, "they will soon be calling me to tea. Well – it was this way. *You* know that I've known you – that we've known each other, though not so well as now."

"No, till now it has just been a polite acquaintance, so to say. Good-morning and good-evening, and so on – on your part at least, Mary," interrupted Mr Coo. But Mrs Coo gave him a tiny poke with one of her feet – and Mary went on —

"Now that we can talk to each other it seems quite different, of course. All the same I have watched you ever since I came to live in this house – but somehow I've never spoken about you to any one. I didn't want all the children to come bothering to my window, you see, and the nurseries all look to the front; I wanted to keep you to myself. But when Michael came home – he's a sailor already, that's why he's so very brave – I thought I'd tell *him* about you – I wanted to tell somebody, you see, and – "

A bell sounded – a voice at the door —

"Miss Mary, my dear."

Chapter Two.

“A Few Crumbs and a Little Fresh Water.”

“Oh bother,” said Mary, “it’s tea – and nurse come to fetch me. What shall we do?” – “Yes, yes, nurse,” in a louder voice, “I’m coming in one moment,” and this seemed to satisfy nurse, for her steps sounded going downstairs again. “She needn’t open the door without tapping,” the little girl went on, speaking half to herself and half to her visitors on the window-sill, “I’m not one of the nursery children now. But oh, Cooies, what shall we do? It would take me ever so long to explain about Michael and to plan something to put it all right.”

“Must you go downstairs at once?” asked Mr Coo. “If you told it to us very quickly.”

But Mary shook her head.

“No – I must go. If I don’t, she’ll be coming up again, or sending for me, and I don’t want any one to hear us talking. They would laugh at me so, and say it was all nonsense. They are always calling me so fanciful.”

“I see,” said Mr Coo, thoughtfully.

But Mrs Coo did more than think.

“Of course,” she said, “there’s only one thing to be done. We must come back again to-morrow.”

She spoke just a tiny bit sharply.

“We are very busy,” said Mr Coo, “getting settled, you see, and choosing where our new nest is to be, and returning our neighbours’ calls, and so on.”

“All that can stand over,” said Mrs Coo. “Just say, my dear, what time to-morrow will be best.”

“I *think*” said Mary, “the best time will be when we come in from our walk in the morning. The little ones go to bed then for an hour, and I’ve had my lessons, and nurse generally tells me to take a book and sit still, and if it isn’t cold she lets me come up to my room, and she stays in the night nursery to keep Fritz and Twitter and baby from jumping out of their cots or teasing each other. Yes, please come about twelve o’clock, and would you like anything to eat?”

“You are very kind,” said Mr and Mrs Coo together. “A few crumbs and a little fresh water, perhaps,” and then off they flew.

Mary gazed after them for a moment or two, till their pearly grey wings were almost out of sight. She felt very happy – it was lovely to have seen them again; still more lovely to find that the wonderful, rare gift of being able to understand and talk to them had come to her.

“I won’t tell *any one* about it,” she decided, as she ran downstairs. “They would only laugh and call me fanciful that horrid way. Perhaps Fritz and Twitter wouldn’t; they’d just think it was a sort of fairy story I was making up for them – and it is a sort of fairy story, only it’s true! But they’re too little, they’d repeat it all to nurse, and of course it would be very wrong to tell them anything they *weren’t* to tell nurse. *Michael* wouldn’t have laughed at me; at least he wouldn’t have *before*, but now that he thinks I tell what isn’t true, he’d do worse than laugh at me. He’d look shocked again – oh dear!”

And Mary’s face, which had been so bright a minute or two ago, grew sad and grave, but just as she opened the nursery door another thought struck her.

The Cooies were coming again to-morrow, and she would tell them all about it, and *they* would plan something to make it all right; she felt sure they would.

The three little ones were already seated at the tea-table, and nurse was filling their cups and helping them to bread-and-butter.

“Maly, Maly,” said Fritz, “sit by me.”

“No, no, ’aside *me*,” said Twitter, a funny little girl with short, dark hair and bright dark eyes.

“Thide Baba,” added “baby,” another little fat, fair boy like Fritz.

It was rather nice to be welcomed like this, and Mary's spirits, always very ready to go up or down, rose again.

"I can't sit 'aside' you all three," she said, drawing in her chair, "so as Baba-boy has to be next nurse, I'll sit between Fritz and Twitter."

"And 'mile at Baba ac'oss the table," said the baby.

"Yes, darling, of course I will," said Mary, kindly.

After all, it was easy to forgive Fritz and him for being so fat, when you found how good-natured they were, though Mary did not think it *pretty*! Twitter, whose real name was Charlotte, was good-natured, too, in her own way, but she had a quick temper, and though she was such a little girl, she was very fond, dreadfully fond, of arguing.

"Once start Miss Twitter," nurse used to say, "and you never know when she'll stop," and it was much the same with her if she began to cry. It would go on and on till everybody's patience was worn out, and worst of all when you thought it had really come to an end, some tiny word or look even would begin it all again.

Still, on the whole, Mary cared the most for Twitter of her three little cousins. She was certainly the cleverest, and the most ready to understand what had come to be called "Miss Mary's fancifulness."

Perhaps, as I have spoken of the children as her cousins, I had better explain a little about the family in the Square. Mary herself had no brothers or sisters, and no father or mother; "no nobody," she once said of herself very pitifully when she was *very* little, and before she came to live with her kind relations, who at that time were not in England. But she had always been very well taken care of by a lady who long ago had been Mary's own mother's governess, and *now* she had several "somebodies," her uncle and aunt and the three little ones, and best of all, perhaps, Michael, the big brother of sixteen, who had been her first great friend in her new home. He was then a boy of twelve and Mary was eight, and boys of twelve sometimes look down on little girls who are four or five years younger than they are. Not so with Michael, he *was* so good and kind. He tried to make the shy little cousin, with her curly red hair and soft brown eyes, feel "at home" and happy, by every means in his power, and Mary had never forgotten this, and often said to herself that she never, never would (and I don't think she ever will).

Nurse looked at Mary rather curiously as she handed her her tea-cup.

"Was there any one in the room with you, Miss Mary, my dear, when I went upstairs to fetch you?"

"No," said Mary, but her own tone was perhaps not quite as usual, for she was thinking to herself if the "no" was quite truthful. Yes it was, she decided, the Cooies were not in the room, and besides, nurse meant any *person*—wood-pigeons were not people. So "No," she repeated, more positively, "why do you ask, nurse?"

"Oh," said nurse, "I may have been mistaken, but I thought I heard you speaking as I opened the door."

"I daresay I was," said Mary.

Nurse said something indistinct – a sort of "humph."

"It is not a very good habit to get into – that speaking to yourself," she said. "It makes one seem silly-like."

"Perhaps I *am* silly," answered Mary, half mischievously. "You know, nurse, you are always calling me full of fancies."

"They's very nice fancies," said Twitter, "Maly tells we lubly faily stolies, dudn't her, Flitz?"

Fritz's mouth was full, and the nursery rules for good behaviour at meals were strict, so he only nodded.

"Fairy tales are all very well in their proper place," said nurse.

"What is their proper place?" asked Mary, and I am afraid she spoke rather pertly.

“Pretty picture-books and such like,” nurse replied, for she was very matter-of-fact. “Just like nursery rhymes and songs – ‘Little Boy Blue’ and ‘Bo-peep,’ and all the rest of them. But it would be very silly for young ladies and gentlemen to go on with babyish things like that, when they can read quite well and learn beautiful verses like ‘Old Father William,’ and ‘The Battle of –’ no, I don’t rightly remember the name, but it’s a fine piece of poetry if ever there was one, and I recollect my brother Tom saying it at a prize-giving at our school at home, and the squire’s lady had her handkerchief at her eyes, and the squire himself shook him by the hand, and Tom and me was that proud.”

This was interesting, and Mary could not resist asking a number of questions about Tom, as to how old he had been then, and how old he was now, to which nurse was only too pleased to reply, adding that he was now a schoolmaster himself, with little Toms of his own, whom she went to see when she had her holiday once a year.

So the conversation turned into pleasant directions, and nothing more was said about Mary’s fancifulness.

When she woke the next morning Mary’s first glance, as usual, was towards the window. She never had the blinds drawn down at night, for she loved the morning light, and it did not wake her: she slept too soundly for that. And as there were, as I have told you, gardens – large gardens – at the back of the house, where her room was, there was no one to overlook her window.

Ah – it was a dull morning – a dull, grey, early autumn morning, and “I hope it’s not going to rain,” thought Mary. “I’m so afraid the Cooies wouldn’t come if it did, though *perhaps* they’re not afraid of getting wet.”

There came into her mind, however, the old rhyme about “The morning grey,” and as she dressed she kept peeping up at the sky, and was pleased to see that it was growing rather lighter and clearer. She was very glad of this, for even if it had only rained for an hour or two, it would have stopped the morning walk, and very likely the morning rest for the little ones, and she would not have had the hour to herself “to be quiet in,” as usual, but all, happily, turned out rightly, and some minutes before twelve o’clock Mary was standing by her window looking out for her little visitors.

She had good eyes, and she saw them quite a long way off. There were other birds flying about, of course, but none coming two together, straight on, without making circles or dips or going the least out of their path – two tiny specks they seemed at first, against the blue-grey sky, flying onwards in a most business-like way. For the old saying had proved true again; though not a brilliant day, it was quite fine and mild, and the sky was a soft, friendly colour, with no storm signs about it.

The two specks grew larger and larger, as they came nearer, and after alighting for a moment on the familiar bough of their own old tree home, apparently to smooth their feathers and take a tiny rest, the wood-pigeons fluttered across to the window-sill.

“Oh, I am so pleased to see you,” said Mary. “I was so afraid it was going to rain. Aren’t you tired and out of breath with flying so far?”

“No, thank you – flying never makes us out of breath. It is not like your running – not nearly such hard work. Our wings get a little stiff sometimes, if there is much wind and we have to battle against it. But to-day is very still, and even if it had rained we should have come just the same,” said Mr Coo.

“Thank you,” said Mary. “I have crumbled some nice biscuit all ready for you, you see, and there is some water in the lid of my soap-box; it is quite fresh.”

“Many thanks,” said Mrs Coo, “and all good wishes to you, my dear,” and as she spoke she bent her pretty head to take a drink. Mr Coo followed her example, and then they picked up some crumbs in quite an elegant manner – not at all in the hurried greedy way that some birds do.

“While you are having your luncheon,” said Mary, “I will tell you why I was so anxious to see you. You know my cousin – my big cousin – Michael – no, perhaps you don’t, but it doesn’t matter. He is my favourite cousin, and there isn’t anything I don’t tell him. He always understands and never laughs at me – at least, he has been like that till just now. He is a sailor, and he is very seldom at

home. He's not been to see us since we came to live here till the other day. I had lots of things to tell him, of course, and one of the things I told him was about you, dear Cooies, and how nice it was to have you living in the tree close to my window. I thought he looked a *little* funny when I told it him, and now I'm quite sure they'd been talking to him that horrid way about me being fanciful," Mary stopped a moment to take breath, and Mr Coo, who had picked up as many crumbs as he wanted, cocked his head on one side and looked up at her very gravely.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" he inquired.

"Oh," said Mary, "everybody. I suppose I mean all the big people. Auntie and uncle, for I daresay auntie talks about it to him, and Miss Bray – no, I'm not sure about Miss Bray. She's my daily governess, but I never see her except at lessons, and she never talks about anything except lessons – she's rather dull," and Mary sighed. "And most of all," she went on again, "*nurse*. She is the worst of all, though she's quite kind. She doesn't understand the tiniest bit in the world about fairy stories, you see. She thinks they're just like nursery rhymes. *Fancy*, putting fairy stories and nursery rhymes together!"

"Nursery rhymes are very nice sometimes," said Mrs Coo. "The verse in 'Cock-robin' about our cousins, the Doves, is lovely, only it is too much for my feelings," and she really looked as if she were going to cry.

"But they are only for babies," said Mary, "and I know that *some* big people are just as fond of fairy stories as I am. Michael told me so, and he gave me a book of them, his very own self, on my last birthday. Well – I must go on telling you what happened. The very next morning after I had told him my secret about you, my dear Cooies, I made him come up here to see your nest, though I told him you yourselves hadn't been here for a day or two. And, *wasn't* it unlucky? – there had been lots of wind the night before, and the nest was nearly all blown away; a branch had fallen on it, I think. It was already just like now – really nothing to be seen, except by any one who had known of it before. And *you* were not there either. No sign of you. So Michael looked at me very gravely and he said, 'My dear Mary, you really mustn't let your fancy run away with you. I can't believe there have ever been wood-pigeons in that tree. You may have seen a pair of common pigeons from the stables over there, flying about, but it is *most* unlikely that there ever was a nest there; there certainly isn't now.' And he looked at me as if he really thought I'd been making up a story."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr and Mrs Coo together, "it's certainly very sad."

"I had no time to say much more to him," Mary went on. "He had to go away again to Portsmouth or Plymouth, or one of those 'mouth' places, that very afternoon, and there was no time to say any more or to ask him if he really thought I had been telling stories. But I'm sure he *did*, and so after he'd gone, I just stood up here and cried."

And poor Mary looked as if it would not take much to make her cry again.

"I saw you," said Mr Coo.

"You saw me," exclaimed Mary, rather indignantly, "and you didn't speak to me, or fly up for me to see you?"

Mr Coo cleared his throat.

"I did not know what was the matter," he said, "and – I thought it best to hurry home, to – to talk it over, and then we both came the next morning – yesterday morning."

"Well," said Mary, "it was very good of you, but all the same, I think you might –" but after all, the question was how to put things right with Michael, so she said no more, not feeling sure, you see, but that even the gentle Cooies might feel hurt if she reproached them.

"Michael is coming back again," she said after a moment's silence, "the day after to-morrow, to stay two nights."

"Ah!" said Mr Coo, in a tone which made Mary think to herself that if he had been a dog he would have pricked up his ears.

And "Ah!" repeated Mrs Coo.

Mary was silent.

“Supposing,” began Mrs Coo, “*supposing* we could arrange to spend a day here?”

“A *day*,” repeated Mary; “you don’t mean, you surely don’t mean, dear Cooies, that you are not coming back to live here any more.”

Mr Coo bent his head gravely; so did Mrs Coo.

“Even so,” they murmured.

“Oh!” cried Mary, the tears rushing to her eyes, “do you really mean you won’t count the fairy tree your home any more – that you won’t build another nest, and have new little eggs there next spring? Oh dear, oh dear!”

Mr and Mrs Coo felt very distressed.

“My dear Mary,” said Mr Coo, “it cannot be helped. We have been intending to leave the Square gardens for some time past. It is no longer the place for us: we require more quiet and fresher air, not to speak of the risk of – ” but here he stopped short.

“That’s what Michael said,” sobbed Mary. “He said it wasn’t in nature that cooies – I mean wood-pigeons – would stay in a town, and that’s why he couldn’t believe I had seen you. And now – ”

“Wait a minute, my dear,” said Mrs Coo, “and let me explain. We were both hatched here, you see. There were lots of nests in these trees not so very long ago; but there have been so many human nests – houses, I mean – built here lately that the air is no longer what it used to be. The smoke of so many chimneys is too much for us; sometimes we can scarcely breathe, and really our whole time seems spent in trying to brush our feathers clean.”

“And where are you going to live, then?” asked Mary, who felt interested in her friends’ plans, though so sorry to lose them.

“We have taken a branch in one of the finest elms in Levin Forest,” said Mr Coo. “A charming situation, and where we have a good many relations.”

“Yes,” said Mary, “I daresay it is very nice for you – very nice, indeed; but think of me. You don’t know how I’d got into the way of looking out for you and watching you and listening to you; and now that I can understand what you say, it’s ever so much worse to lose you. Particularly just now, just as it really so matters to me. Michael will always think now that I’d made up a story about you, and he will never care for me again as he used to.”

“Don’t be so unhappy, dear Mary,” said both the Coos together; “most likely things won’t be so bad as you fear.”

“You say,” Mr Coo went on, “that Michael is coming back again soon?”

“Yes,” Mary replied. “Aunt told me that he has written to say he will be here to-morrow evening, but only for two nights. Then he has to go back to his ship, and I daresay he won’t be home again for – oh, I daresay not for a whole year.”

“To-morrow evening,” repeated Mr Coo; “well then, do you think you can promise to make him come up here to your window the morning after, at twelve o’clock?”

“Oh yes, yes,” said Mary, her face lighting up, and looking ready to jump with joy. “You mean that you’ll come then for him to see you? Oh, thank you, dear Cooies, thank you so much. How I do wish you were going to stay, and not go off to that horrid forest!”

“It is a lovely place,” said Mrs Coo, “and so you would think. And who knows – some day you may see it for yourself.”

“But for the present we must be off,” said Mr Coo. “Good-bye till the day after to-morrow, at twelve o’clock; and be sure you don’t cry any more.”

“I’ll have some nice crumbs and fresh water ready for you again,” said Mary.

Chapter Three.

“One on her Shoulder, One on her Outstretched Hand.”

Late the next evening a tall boy in midshipman's uniform ran upstairs and into the drawing-room of Mary's home. His mother was sitting there alone. She looked up brightly.

“I thought it was you, dear Mike,” she said. “No one else comes with such a rush. I am so glad you have got off again; but I suppose it is only for two nights?”

“Only,” he replied; “but it is lucky to have got even that. May I have some tea, mother, or is it too late?”

“Of course not. Ring, dear, and you will have it at once.”

“And how's Mary?” said Michael, as he drank his tea.

His mother looked a little surprised.

“*Mary?*” she repeated. “Quite well. Indeed I think she is scarcely ever ill.”

“Oh, I don't mean really *ill*,” said the boy; “but don't you remember what you were saying – you said nurse had been speaking of it – that Mary is getting fanciful and dreamy, and all that sort of thing, and more like that since I've been so much away. And the other day I did think she seemed rather down in the mouth.”

His mother looked thoughtful.

“I am sure she misses you a great deal,” she said. “The others are so much younger. And then the change from the country to living in a town. I daresay she misses country things.”

“I expect she does – lots,” said Michael; and though he did not speak of it – as he had a feeling that Mary had trusted him with what she counted a sort of secret – his mind went back to what she had told him of the wood-pigeons and their nest. “It must have been all her fancy,” he thought; “but it shows how her head runs on country things like that.”

“She enjoyed the seaside, I think,” his mother went on, “though not as much as the little ones did. She is too big for digging in the sand and paddling, and so on. And the place we were at was bare and uninteresting – not a tree to be seen – what people call an excellent place for children. Yes, perhaps poor Mary has not been quite in her element lately.” And Mary's aunt looked rather distressed. Suddenly her face cleared.

“By the bye, Mike,” she exclaimed, “how stupid of me to have forgotten. I had a letter lately from Mary's godmother – old Miss Verity; she lives at Levinside, near the forest, you know. She wrote to ask how Mary was getting on; and she said she would be delighted to have the child for a visit if ever we thought she would be the better for some country air. It is very charming there, even in late autumn or winter. If Mary seems very dull after you go, I think I will write to Miss Verity and propose a visit.”

Michael gave a sort of grunt.

“I shouldn't think it would be very lively for her,” he said, “going to stay with an old maid like that, all by herself. Better be here with you, mother, and Fritz and Twitter.”

“Ah, but you don't know Miss Verity,” said his mother. “She's not like an old maid, or rather she is the very nicest old maid that ever lived. She is full of spirits and very clever and very kind, and I am sure she would be just the person to understand a rather fanciful child like Mary. Mary has scarcely seen her, but I am sure they would get on, and she knew Mary's own mother so well. And her house is so pretty and so prettily situated.”

“It might be a good plan,” said Mike, “but if I were you, mother, I'd see what Mary herself thinks of it before you settle anything.”

“Yes, I will,” she replied. “It would certainly do Mary no good to go there against her own wishes. For she has decided ideas of her own, though she is a gentle obedient child as a rule. But I

think I hear her coming, Mike, so take care. I don't want her to think we are talking her over. Nurse is not always careful enough in that way; she forgets that Mary is growing older."

The door opened almost as she said the last word, and Michael could not help smiling to himself as he thought how very easily his little cousin might have overheard her own name, though his mother meant to be so thoughtful. He looked up brightly, the smile still on his face, and he was pleased to see an answering-back one on Mary's as she caught sight of him.

"Oh, dear Mike," she exclaimed, "it *is* you! Oh, you don't know how glad I am you've come. I thought I heard you running upstairs, and I wanted to come to see, but nurse said I must be dressed first Auntie, I wish you'd tell nurse sometimes to let me run down to speak to you without such a fuss. I'm not as little as Twitter, you know."

Her aunt glanced at her and smiled, and Michael smiled too.

"Yes, mother," he said, "I think nurse does treat Molly rather too babyishly now."

Mary glanced at him gratefully, and her face brightened still more. Michael seemed quite like himself to her again.

"I rather agree with you," said his mother. "I will give her a hint. Have you been wanting to see me for anything special to-day, Mary dear?"

"Oh no, it was only that I was so hoping Michael would come," she replied; and a moment or two later, when her aunt happened to have gone to the other end of the room to write a letter, the little girl turned to her cousin.

"Mike," she said, speaking almost in a whisper, "have you settled what you are going to do to-morrow, exactly?"

"Well, no, not quite. It depends on mother. I have not much to do, myself. I did all my shopping last week, you see. I thought it would be nice to have the last two days pretty clear. Mother," he went on, raising his voice a little, "what would you like me to do to-morrow – I have kept it quite free for you – and Mary," he added quickly.

"Darling," said his mother. "Well, I was thinking we might go out together in the afternoon, you and I. I want you to say good-bye to your godmother – and if you and Mary can think of anything you would like to do in the morning, that would suit very well," and then she went on writing.

"What would you like to do, then, Moll?" said Michael. "I'm sure you've got something in your head."

Mary clasped her hands in eagerness.

"*Anything* you like, Mike," she said. "The only thing I want you to promise me is that you will come up to my room to-morrow morning at twelve o'clock to see something. I won't tell you what it is, but when you see, you will understand."

"At twelve o'clock," said Michael, "twelve exactly?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"All right," her cousin replied. "You're a queer child, Moll. Well then, I think the best thing we can do is to go shopping for an hour or so about half-past ten. You're to have a holiday, you know, and you like shopping."

"*Dreadfully*," said Mary, "especially with you. What sort will it be?"

"It's some of my Christmas presents that are still on my mind," said Michael. "Mother's, and Twit's – I never know about girls' things. I'm going to leave them with you to give for me. Father's and the little boys' I've got all right."

Mary's face shone with pleasure.

"That will be lovely," she said. "I know several things that Twitter would like, and I daresay nurse would help us to think of something for auntie. Nurse is very good about that sort of thing."

"Isn't she good about everything?" asked Michael. Mary grew a little red.

"She vexes me sometimes," she replied. "P'raps she doesn't understand. I'll explain to you better after to-morrow morning. Oh Mike dear, I *am* so sorry you're going away," and her face got rather sad again.

"But you look ever so much jollier than when I went away on Tuesday," said Michael.

"Well, yes, because I'm feeling so," she answered.

"All the same, Michael, I know it's going to be awfully dull till you come back again. They say it's so gloomy and dark in the winter sometimes; not like the country. I shall always like the country best, Mike."

"So should I," said her cousin, "that's to say if it was a choice between it and a town, though I like the sea best of all, of course. But don't get melancholy again, Moll. Something may turn up to help you through the gloomy months."

"I shall miss you so," said Mary, "and there's something else I shall miss too."

She was thinking of the Cooies, and she was glad to feel that once Michael had seen them and knew about them, she would be able to tell him of their going away, and that they only came back out of affection for her now and then.

More than this she felt she must not tell him, as it was a sort of secret between her and them. There are fairy secrets sometimes which it would be almost impossible to tell to *anybody*.

The rest of that evening and the next morning passed very cheerfully, even though Michael's time was to be so short at home. Nurse proved quite as kind and interested about the Christmas presents as Mary had expected. Indeed there was nothing she would *not* have been interested about if it concerned her eldest nursling, as big Michael was, and she was really fond of Mary too, and pleased to see her happy, though she had only had the care of *her* for a much shorter time than the others.

The two set off for their shopping quite early. They knew pretty exactly what they wanted to buy; which is always a great help when you go on such an expedition; for after a good deal of thought, nurse had decided that a new thimble was what "auntie" would like best. It was to be a really pretty one of a new pattern, and nurse was able to direct them to a jeweller's shop where she had seen some beauties in the window, and it was to have his mother's initials engraved on it, Michael said, and to be in a pretty case, lined with velvet. This important piece of business was quickly completed, as they found the jeweller's without difficulty. Twitter's present took rather longer; it was to be a set of toy tea-things, and as Michael liked china ones with tiny roses on, and Mary preferred some with forget-me-nots, they felt rather at a loss, till luckily the shopwoman, who was very good-natured, found a *third* pattern, of rosebuds and forget-me-nots together, which was a charming way out of the puzzle.

Then Michael proposed that they should go to a confectioner's not far from their own Square, to get a little luncheon. They kept capital buns there, he said, and after eating two of them, and having a glass of delicious milk, Mary quite agreed with him, and they were sitting at the little round marble-topped table very happily, when she happened to glance at a clock hanging up on the wall, and started to see that it was already a quarter to twelve o'clock.

"Oh Mike," she exclaimed, "we must hurry. It is nearly twelve."

Michael glanced at his watch.

"Yes," he said, "but if we're not back quite – oh I forgot – you wanted to show me something in your room at twelve o'clock. But won't it keep? It's not likely to fly away."

Mary's face flushed.

"To fly away," she repeated. "I never spoke of flying."

"No," said Michael, "it's just a way of speaking," but he looked at her rather oddly. "What are you stuffing into your pocket, child?" he went on.

"Only a bit of bun I don't want to eat," she replied, getting still redder, for it had suddenly struck her that she had got no crumbs ready for the Cooies, and that she would not have time to ask for any.

“And if they keep their promise to me,” she said to herself, “I must certainly keep mine to them.” – “Mike, dear,” she went on beseechingly, “do let us hurry. What I want to show you won’t ‘keep’ – perhaps,” in a lower voice, “it may fly away.”

Michael had already paid for their luncheon, and fortunately they were near home, and five minutes’ quick walking covers more ground than you might think. They were soon at their own door, and the moment it opened, up flew Mary to her room.

“Mike,” she had said as they stood on the front steps, “take out your watch and look at it, and when the hand gets to five minutes past twelve, run up to my room after me. Don’t rap at the door, but come straight in.”

Michael laughed, and repeated to himself, though he did not say it aloud —

“You are a queer child, Moll.”

He waited the few minutes, as she had asked, then made his way upstairs after her. It was a pretty and unexpected sight that met his eyes, as he quietly opened the door, without knocking. He felt very curious about this secret of his little cousin’s – half suspecting she had some trick preparing for him, and not wishing to be taken unawares, as what boy would!

But the moment he caught sight of her, and heard the gentle sounds from where she stood by the window, he “understood” – for he was very quick at understanding – and felt ashamed of the doubts he had had of Mary’s truthfulness.

There they were – the wood-pigeons he had almost thought lived only in her imagination – one on her shoulder, one just perching on her outstretched hand, on the friendliest terms, it was easy to see – cooing in the sweetest way, while Mary murmured some caressing words to them. Nor were they startled away when Michael drew near, stepping softly, it is true, but still not so softly but that the little wood-creatures, well used to notice every tiniest sound in their forest homes, heard him, and even, it seemed to Michael, glanced towards him, quite fearlessly – quite secure in Mary’s protection.

“Well, Mike?” she said with a smile. “They are very tame, you can come quite close,” and then Michael heard again her own little murmur, though he did not know that it meant: “of course he won’t harm you, dear Cooies.”

Michael drew near.

“They *are* sweet,” he said, “are they your own, Molly? or have you tamed them?”

Mary shook her head.

“They didn’t need taming,” she replied. “They lived in the tree there,” and she nodded towards it. “They have known me ever since I came to live in the Square, and I have watched them, as I told you the other day. The remains of their old nest are still there, but I am sure they are not going to build there any more. They only fly over here to see me, and I give them crumbs and water whenever they come.”

“Oh,” said Michael, “that was what the bit of bun was stuffed into your pocket for.”

Mary smiled.

“But, Mike,” she said gravely, “you know – I am afraid you did not believe me when I told you about the Cooies.”

It was Michael’s turn to redden a little now.

“The – the what-d’ye-call them?” he said, trying to avoid a reply.

“The Cooies. It’s my name for them,” said Mary, “because of the sweet way they coo. But Mike, do tell me – did you believe me?”

“I don’t quite know,” answered her cousin, honestly. “I didn’t think you were making up a regular story – an untruth, I mean, – I knew you wouldn’t do *that*, but I did think perhaps you’d fancied part of it. You might have seen other birds flying about, that you let yourself imagine were wood-pigeons, and certainly the remains in the tree scarcely look like a nest, do they?”

“No, they don’t,” said Mary. “The wind tore it to pieces that night it blew so.”

“Yes, I understand it all now,” said Michael, “except – it’s quite wonderful how you’ve managed to tame them so. They are like pet doves – I really am afraid I couldn’t have believed it, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes,” and as he spoke, he very gently stroked Mr Coo’s opal-coloured feathers.

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