

Molesworth Mrs.

The Palace in the Garden



Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth M.

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CHAPTER I

WE THREE

"Sisters and brothers, little maid,
How many may you be?"

think the best beginning is the morning that grandpapa sent for us to come down to the study. Tib and Gerald, don't think so. They say I should begin by telling our names, and how old we were, and all that – at least, Gerald says so; Tib isn't quite sure. Tib very often isn't quite sure. She has got too grand ideas, and if she were going to write a story, she would make it like poetry, very difficult to understand, and awfully long words, and lots about feelings and sorrows and mysteries. I like mysteries, too – I think they are very interesting, and I *have* one to tell about, as you will see, only I must tell it my own way, and after all, as this story is only to be read by Tib and Gerald – and our children – we have settled that when we are all three grown-up and married, and have children, it shall be made into a book for them – I daresay it doesn't much matter how it is told.

Well, that morning we were all poking our heads as far as we dared out of the school-room window – Miss Evans hadn't yet come – to see the first primrose man that had passed that year. We heard his "All a blowing, all a growing," far off down the street, but we hadn't yet seen him and his basket with the beautiful light yellow bunches at the top, and we were wondering if we could get Fanny to run out and buy us twopence-worth, when Bland stuck his solemn and rather crabbed-looking face in at the door. Bland is grandpapa's "own man," as they say, and his name doesn't suit him at all – at least, it didn't then – he's not so bad now we're older.

"Young ladies and Master Gerald," he said, "my master wishes you all to come down stairs to speak to him before he goes out."

Down we all tumbled from the window-sill. Tib and I began smoothing our aprons and tugging at each other's hair – grandpapa was very particular. Gerald only looked at his hands.

"They are rather dirty," he said seriously. "But I did wash them so very well this morning, and it's not ten o'clock yet. Do you think, Gussie – ?"

I knew what he was going to say, so I cut him short.

"Yes, I do think you'd better run and wash them *at once*– why, you might have had them done by now – they are just perfectly grimy."

For Gerald would any day talk for ten minutes about why he *needn't* wash his hands rather than run off and do them. I am afraid he was rather a dirty little boy – he'll be very angry if he sees that, for he is now getting to be very particular indeed – for though he liked bathing in the sea, he would do anything to avoid washing – regular good soapy washing. But he was too afraid of grandpapa to stand out when I said his hands were as bad as "grimy;" so off he went.

"Are we to come down at once?" asked Tib.

"Yes, miss. Your grandpapa has ordered the brougham to be round in ten minutes," Bland graciously informed us as Gerald started off.

"I wonder what it's about?" said Tib. "I hope he's not vexed with us."

For it wasn't often that grandpapa sent for us in the morning, except on birthdays or Christmas Day, when he had presents for us. He never forgot about that, I must say.

"Why should he be vexed with us?" I said. "We've not done anything naughty;" for Tib was standing there with the tears on their way to her big blue eyes, as I could see quite well – and I've no patience with people who look as if they had been naughty when they haven't.

"Well, you go in first, then, Gussie," said Tib. "I wish I wasn't frightened, but I can't help it."

By this time we were on the stairs, not far from the study door, and Gerald had run after us, with very red shiny paws, you may be sure, and in another moment we were all three in "the august presence," as Tib called it afterwards.

Grandpapa had just finished his breakfast. He used often to have it like that, just on a little tray in the study. It didn't look very comfortable, and he might quite as well have had it in the dining-room all nicely set out, and Tib and me to pour out his coffee in turns. But he did not think of it, I suppose, and at that time I don't think we did, either. We had never seen any other "ways;" we didn't know how other families lived – families where there were mammas, or any way grandmammas, or aunts, as well as children, and we were so young that we just took things as we found them. I think children are generally like that, especially if they see very little outside their own homes.

Grandpapa was not old-looking at all – not the least like the pictures in old-fashioned books of a very aged man, with a gentle and rather silly face, and a white beard, and a stick, sitting in a big arm-chair by the fire, and patting a very curly-haired grandchild on the head. I'm quite sure grandpapa never patted any of us on the head; and *now*, of course, we're too big. But I didn't mind his not being like the pictures of grandpapas, and now I mind it still less, for I'm really proud of his being so nice-looking. That morning I can remember quite well how he looked as he sat by the table, with the tray pushed away, and a whole bundle of letters before him. He glanced up at us as we came trooping in, with his bright dark eyes and a half smile on his face. We were not very fond of that half smile of his: it made it so difficult to tell if he was in fun or earnest.

"Well, young people," he said, "and how does the wind blow this morning?"

He looked at Gerald as he spoke. Gerald was staring at his red hands.

"I don't know, grandpapa," he said; and then seeing that grandpapa's eyes were still fixed on him, he got uncomfortable, and tugged Tib, who was next him. "Tib knows, p'r'aps," he said. "I'm only seven, grandpapa."

Grandpapa moved his eyes to Tib.

"It strikes me," he said, "that you're getting too big, young woman, to be spoken of as if you were a kitten. You must call your sister by her proper name, Gerald."

"It's hard for him to say, grandpapa," said Tib. "That's why Gussie and he always say Tib, instead of Mercedes."

"Umph! – yes – Tom-fool name!" said grandpapa, which made me rather angry.

"No, grandpapa, it's not a Tom-fool name," I said. "It's Spanish; and it was because our papa and mamma lived in Spain that they called it her."

I daresay I spoke pertly. Any way, I was punished, for my words had the effect of bringing the eyes upon me in my turn.

"Called it her? called it her?" he repeated slowly. "What English! Miss Evans is to be congratulated on her success! So Mercedes is a Spanish name, is it? Thank you – thank you very much indeed for the information. Now perhaps you will all be good enough to listen to some information from me."

I had got very red while grandpapa was speaking, quite as much from anger as from shame, for I wasn't so easily put down as Tib and Gerald; I had a quicker temper. But when grandpapa spoke of having information to give us, I felt so curious to know what it could be that I tried to look as if I hadn't minded what he said. So he went on:

"I'm going to send you all off to the country next week; I don't want to keep this house open. I am very busy, and I would rather live at my club." Grandpapa stopped a minute. I think he wanted to see what we would say.

"Are we to go to Ansdell Friars so soon?" I said. I suppose I didn't seem very pleased, and no more did Tib or Gerald. It wasn't very long – only three or four months – since we had come from there, and there was nothing at Ansdell we much cared about. We knew it all so well. It was a regular big, grand country house; but its bigness was not much good to us, as we were strictly shut up in our own rooms, and sharply scolded if we were found out of them; and there was nothing amusing or interesting there. The country is not pretty, and the walks are not to be compared with those at – never mind where; I shall tell you the name of the place in a little while. So we had no particular reason for being glad to go back there; on the whole, I think we liked London better. We had less of Miss Evans in London, for she only came every day; but at Ansdell Friars she lived with us. Grandpapa had persuaded her to do so, but she didn't like it, and we didn't like it, so we were not very happy together. She didn't like children, and was only a governess because she had to be, not because she liked it, and she was always telling us so. I used to think then all governesses were the same, but I know better now. There are some *awfully* nice, who really like teaching, and aren't always scolding the children, as if it was their own fault that they are children and have to be taught.

"And is Miss Evans coming?" said Gerald, dolefully.

"You are not going to Ansdell Friars at all; and, I am sorry to say," grandpapa went on, "Miss Evans is not able to go with you. Nurse will have to look after you till I can find another Miss Evans."

Our faces fell, I have no doubt, at the last sentence. Another Miss Evans! Still, it was very nice to think there'd be *no* Miss Evans for a while. Nurse looking after us meant, as we knew very well, that we should do pretty much as we liked; for nurse spoiled us most horribly. It was a very delightful prospect.

"We'll try to be very good, grandpapa," said Tib.

"Umph!" said grandpapa.

"And when are we going, please?" I could not resist putting in. I was burning with curiosity, and so, I am sure, were the others, though they were afraid to ask. Grandpapa looked at me.

"Upon my word, Gustava," he said, "I think you might give me time to tell you. When I was young, children were not allowed to cross-question their elders. You are going to a little country house I have which you have never seen nor heard of. It is much nearer town than Ansdell Friars, so I shall be able to come down every now and then to see you, and to hear if you are behaving properly. It is a much smaller place than Ansdell – in fact, it's quite a small house. But there's a good garden; you will have plenty of space to play in. Only I wish you to understand one thing: there are other houses near – it isn't like Ansdell, all alone in a park – and neighbours, of course. Now, I won't have you make friends with any one unless I tell you you may. You are not to go into other people's houses or to chatter to strangers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, grandpapa," we all three replied, feeling rather frightened. I don't think we did quite understand, for we never had made friends with any one. We had lived very solitary lives, without any companions of our own age – for we had scarcely any relations, and none that we knew anything of. And as people don't miss what they have never had, I don't think it would ever have come into our heads to do what grandpapa was so afraid of. He certainly made us think more about other people than we had ever done before.

"What is the name of the place, please, grandpapa?" asked Tib in her soft voice.

If it had been *me* that had asked it, he would have snubbed me again. But it was certainly true, as the servants all said, that he favoured Tib the most. Perhaps it was that she was so pretty – perhaps it was for a reason that I can't tell just yet.

"The name of the place," he repeated – "of the house, I suppose you mean? The name of the place does not matter to you. You will not have to take your own tickets at the station. The house has an absurd name, but as it has always been called so, it is no use thinking of changing it. It is called 'Rosebuds.'"

Grandpapa stood up as he spoke, and just then Bland opened the door to announce the carriage. So we all said good-bye to him and trotted off. We knew we should probably not see him again for two or three days, but we were so used to it we did not care; and we had plenty to interest our minds and give us something to talk of.

"What a very pretty name 'Rosebuds' is," Tib exclaimed, as soon as we were safely out of hearing. "I'm sure it must be a very pretty place to have such a name. I daresay it's a white cottage, with beautiful old-fashioned windows, and roses climbing all over."

"I don't like cottages with roses growing over them," said Gerald. "There are always witches living in cottages like that, in the fairy tales. There is in *Snow-white and Rose-red*."

"Well," said Tib, "it would be rather fun to have a witch at Rosebuds. I do hope there'll be something interesting and out of the common there – something *romantic*." Tib said the last word rather slowly. I don't think she was quite sure how to say it, and I am quite sure none of us knew what it meant.

"I hope there'll be nice hide-and-seek places in the garden, and nice trees for climbing up, and perhaps grassy hills for rolling down," said I. "If grandpapa only comes to see us now and then, and there's no Miss Evans, and only old Liddy" – old Liddy was nurse – "it *will* be very jolly. I shouldn't wonder – I really shouldn't – if it was more jolly than we've ever had anything in our lives – more like how the children in story-books are, you know, Tib."

For about this time we had begun to read a good deal more to ourselves, and among the old books in grandpapa's library we had found a nest which contained great treasures; many of the volumes had belonged to our father when he was a boy, and some even had been grandpapa's own childish books. Grandpapa had given us leave to read them, and you can fancy what a treat it was to us, who had had so little variety in our lives, to get hold of *Holiday House*, and the *Swiss Family Robinson*, and the *Parent's Assistant*, and best of all perhaps, the dearest little shabby, dumpy, dark-brown book of real old-fashioned fairy tales. I have it still – no shabbier for all our thumbing of it: it is so strongly bound, though it is so plain and dingy-looking, and I mean to keep it for my children.

"But grandpapa said he was going to find another Miss Evans, Gussie," said Gerald.

"Never mind. She isn't found yet; and I don't believe there *could* be another quite as bad as this one," I said, consolingly.

But a brilliant idea struck Tib. She stopped short on the top step but one – we were climbing up stairs by this time – before the school-room landing, and turned round so as to face us two – Gerald and me.

"I tell you what, Gussie and Gerald," she said: "suppose we were to be very, just *dreadfully* good at our lessons for a little, don't you think it *might* make Miss Evans tell grandpapa that she really thought we should be the better for a holiday. I should think even *she* would like to do something good-natured before she left."

Gerald and I stood listening. It was a grave matter, and we did not want to commit ourselves hastily.

"Do you mean being very quiet in the school-room, never whispering to each other, or making even the least little bit of funny faces when she's not looking? or do you mean doing our lessons for her just awfully well?"

"Both," said Tib, solemnly.

"Oh, I don't think I *could*," I replied. "It is so very nice to be naughty sometimes."

"But, Gussie," said Gerald, "any way, you might settle to do our lessons terribly well. Don't you see, if we did them quite well Miss Evans might think we knew everything, and she might tell grandpapa we didn't need to learn anything more."

"And you might settle to be naughty with *us* or with Liddy," said Tib, persuasively. "Gerald and I will promise not to mind, won't we, Gerald? And we'll explain to Liddy."

"I'll think about it," was all I could say.

CHAPTER II

THE SCORED-OUT NAME

"How new life reaps what the old life did sow."

Edwin Arnold.

was the naughty one of the family. I dare say you – whoever you are – that are going to read this will have found this out already, and it was best to make it plain at the beginning. Tib and Gerald were really very good – at least, they would have been if I had let them. But still, as I used often to say to them as a sort of a make-up for the troubles I got them into, it *would* have been rather dull work had we all three been extra good. And even the great thing that I have to write about, *the* thing that put it into my head to write at all, would never have come but for our being in a way naughty – that is very queer, isn't it? To think that good and nice things should sometimes come out of being naughty! I have often puzzled about it. I think it must be that there are different kinds of naughtiness – *perfectly* different – for nothing good could come out of real, wicked naughtiness – telling lies, or being cruel to each other, or things like that; but the sort of naughtiness of just being mischievous, and of being so bubbling over with the niceness of being alive, that you *can't* keep quiet, and remember about not knocking things over and tearing yourself, and the naughtiness of hating your lessons on a beautiful day, when it's really too tempting out-of-doors – all these kinds of naughtiness and lots of others I could tell you, for I've thought so much about it – all these kinds are different, surely? And one can fancy good and nice things coming out of them without getting one's ideas muddled. That's one thing I'm going to be very particular about with my children – I'm going to explain to them *well* about the two kinds of being naughty, so that they won't get all into a puzzle about it. I think I even shall settle to have two kinds of words for them; for I do know, I am sorry to say, what it is to be really naughty too. Just a few times in my life I can remember the dreadful feeling of real, boiling anger at some one – I had it several times to Miss Evans, and once or twice to – no, I won't say; it's all so different now. And *once* I told what wasn't true, quite knowing all about it. But I *never* did it again. The horribleness of the feeling was too bad, and in *that* way my naughtiness did me good!

Our plan for getting Miss Evans to help us to a holiday hadn't much chance, as you shall hear.

When we got to the school-room we found she hadn't come, though it was a quarter to ten, and she generally came at half-past nine.

"Everything seems going topsy-turvy to-day," said I, seating myself on the high guard, and swinging my feet about. It was a very dangerous seat, as the guard was anything but steady, and if it toppled over, there was no saying but that you might be landed in the middle of the fire. "Miss Evans late – and us going away to a place we never heard of before! It's almost as nice as if the sun had forgotten to get up – what fun that would be!"

"I don't think that would be fun at all," said Gerald. "I'd much rather he should forget to go to bed some night. Which would you rather, Tib?"

But Tib wasn't listening. She was pressing her face against the window, her thoughts intent upon primroses again.

"Hush!" she said; "I'm sure I heard him. He can't be far off yet, or else it's another man. Listen." And as she held up her finger there came softly through the distance again the "All a growing, all a blowing."

"I wonder why things seem so much prettier far off," said Tib, thoughtfully. But just then the cry came again, and this time unmistakably nearer. Off darted Tib. "I will try to get Fanny to catch him," she said; and in five minutes she was back again in triumph.

"Fanny wasn't to be found, of course," she said. "But that good Liddy poked up the little page-boy – he's new, so he hasn't learnt to be impudent yet – and sent him down the street. We shall have

the primroses directly. Oh, I say, Gussie and Gerald" – and Tib flung herself down on the hearth-rug, and rolled herself over, as if she were on a lawn of beautiful fresh grass – "just fancy if we were in the country, and could gather primroses for ourselves – as many as ever we wanted. *Wouldn't it be lovely?*"

"Perhaps we may – perhaps they won't be over when we go to that place," said Gerald.

"I wonder when exactly we shall go?" I said. And then our thoughts all returned to Rosebuds, and what our grandfather had said about it.

"I wonder why he doesn't want us to make friends with any of the neighbours?" I said. "I think it's rather crabby of him. There may be some nice children there, and we never have any playfellows."

"I suppose he's got some reason for it," said Tib. "Perhaps the people who live there are all very common. You know, grandpapa is right to be particular about us."

"I don't think it is that. I think he has some other reason. Tib, do you know," I exclaimed, as a curious idea flashed across my mind, "I have an idea that –"

But I was interrupted before I could say more by the entrance of old Liddy, bringing the primroses. They were not very big bunches, but they were very sweet and fresh, and we all sniffed at them in a way that must have astonished the poor things. Nurse smiled at us.

"I'd like to see you gathering them for yourselves, my dears," she said.

"Well, we shall, perhaps, if we go to the country so soon. Do you know that place where we're going to, Liddy?" asked Tib.

She shook her head – she had come to us from mamma's family, and she didn't know much about the Ansdells.

"No, Miss Tib. I never heard of it till your grandpapa told me last night about getting you ready. And that reminds me – Bland told me just now that his master forgot to say Miss Evans wouldn't be coming to-day."

"Miss Evans not coming to-day!" we all three exclaimed in the greatest astonishment, for it must be confessed Miss Evans was the most exact person possible. "Is she never coming any more, Liddy?"

Nurse shook her head.

"Nay, my dear, how should I know? I only heard what Bland said. Miss Evans isn't coming with us to the country, master said."

"But he's going to get another," said Gerald. "Will she be just *exactly* the same – will she have a big freckle on her cheek, and will she nip up her mouth the same, do you think, nurse?"

We all burst out laughing at poor Gerald.

"It would quite spoil Rosebuds to have the big freckle there," said Tib. "But, nurse, do you know grandpapa says we're not to make any friends there, and not to know anybody?"

This time Liddy nodded her head.

"I know, my dears. Well, it can't be helped. It'll be no duller for you there than at Ansdell Friars, any way, and it's a beautiful country for walks, cook says. She comes from somewhere that way."

"But why does grandpapa not want us to know anybody there – do you know, nurse? Does cook know, perhaps?"

Liddy looked uncomfortable.

"My dears, there may be reasons for many things that you're too young to understand," she said. "If your grandpapa had wanted to give his reasons to you, he'd have done so himself; and if he didn't wish to give you any, it would ill become me to be telling you over any fancies or chatter I might hear about master's affairs."

Tib's eyes grew very round.

"I do believe there's a mystery," she said. "Oh, how beautiful! Nurse, I'm sure you know something. What fun it would be if there was really a mystery, and if we were to find it out. Gussie, do listen."

But I wouldn't listen just that minute. The thought which had been put out of my mind by nurse coming in with the primroses had come back again.

"Wait a minute, Tib," I said, "I've got an idea. I'm only going down to the library to fetch a book. I may go as Miss Evans isn't coming;" and off I flew.

The library was not a large room – indeed, it was a good deal smaller than grandpapa's study – but it held a great many books. It was nothing but books, for there were shelves all round it, packed as close as they could hold. In one corner were all the books that grandpapa allowed us to read. He had shown them to us himself, and simply told us we might read any of them we liked, provided we always put them back again in their places, but that we mustn't ever take any other books without asking his leave. That was one thing grandpapa was very nice about; though he was so cold and strict, he always trusted us, and never doubted our words. I'm sure that is the best way to make children quite truthful. Except that one time I've told you of, I don't remember any of us telling a story. It didn't seem to come into our heads to do so – we had been with grandpapa ever since we could remember, and he had always been the same. We had never known what it was to be loved or petted, except by Liddy, for both papa and mamma had died of a fever in Spain, and we had been sent home with old nurse. (I suppose I should have explained this at the beginning; but it doesn't matter.)

Well, I ran down to the library and went straight to our own corner. They were funny-looking books – mostly rather shabby, for they had been children's books for two, and some of them for three, generations. It took me a little while to find the one I was in search of; indeed, I wasn't quite sure which it was, and I had to take out several, and open them to see the page at the beginning before I got the right one. It was a small book; the name of it was *Ornaments Discovered*, and on the first leaf was written the name of the person it had belonged to. There were two names, but the first had been so scored through that one could only distinguish the first letter of it, which was "R," and the second name was our name and grandpapa's name, "Ansdell." And lower down on the page was the date, and the name of a place just above it. But this name also had been scored through, only not so blackly as the other, so that it was still easy to make out that it was that of the house we were going to live at: "Rosebuds."

I remembered it quite well now – I had often puzzled over the writing in this book, and though I had never made out the name before, "Ansdell," I remembered having read that the other was "Rosebuds." I understood now a sort of feeling I had had when grandpapa had told us the name that morning, that I had heard it before – or, as it turned out, *seen* it before.

I rushed up stairs with the little red book in my hand.

"Tib," I said, looking and feeling very excited, "just look at this."

Up jumped Tib – she had been down on the floor arranging the primroses in some little glasses that we always kept on the mantelpiece for any flowers that came our way. Liddy had left the room, and Gerald had gone with her. We leant over the book together.

"You see?" I said, pointing to the word above the date.

"Yes," said Tib; "it's certainly 'Rosebuds.' I suppose grandpapa had it when he was a little boy, there."

"Oh, you stupid!" I exclaimed. "You're always wanting to make up wonderful stories of adventures and mysteries, and now, when I've found you a real mystery, all ready made, you won't see it. If it had just been grandpapa's book, what would he have scored the name out for? Besides, you know very well that his name is 'Gerald,' like papa and Gerald. And *this* name begins with a 'R.'"

Tib had taken the book in her own hands by this time, and was peering at it.

"You may call me stupid, if you like," she said, "but I've found out something else. The name is 'Regina' – my second name;" for Tib's whole name was Mercedes Regina. "Mercedes Regina Ansdell" – isn't that an awfully grand name for a little girl? She was a little girl then.

I seized the book in my turn. Sure enough, now that Tib had put the idea into my head, it seemed quite plain – even through the very thick crossing-out one could see the confused shapes of the word "Regina."

"You're right, Gussie," said Tib; "there *is* a mystery. You remember that time that grandpapa was grumbling at my name – like he did this morning – and I said, 'Mightn't I be called by my second name?' how he snapped out, 'No, certainly not.' It frightened me so, I remember. There must have been somebody called 'Regina Ansdell' that he didn't like, or he was angry with, or *something*. Oh! how I do wonder who she was, and why he has never told us about her?"

"We might ask nurse," I said. "I am sure she knows something – for you see, this Regina Ansdell must have lived at Rosebuds, and it's something about there that Liddy has heard, and won't tell us. And I shouldn't wonder if it has to do with grandpapa's not wanting us to know any of the people there."

"What can it be?" said Tib, her eyes growing bigger and rounder. "There can't surely be any one shut up there – a mysterious lady called 'Regina.' Oh, no, that can't be it, for grandpapa would never take us there if there were. Besides – though he's rather frightening and strict – grandpapa's not bad and wicked."

"The Queen wouldn't let him be in the Parliament if he were," said I. "At least, I *suppose* not."

"It's good of him to have all of us living with him. Nurse says it is. I don't think we've got any money of our own."

"Well, we're his grandchildren, and it isn't our fault that papa and mamma died," I said. "I don't think *that's* so very good of him. Still, he is good to us in some ways, I know."

Tib was still staring at the book.

"I don't think it's any use asking nurse," she said. "If she does know anything she doesn't want to tell us. And it's no use telling Gerald: he's too little. If we told him not to speak of it, he'd very likely get red the first time grandpapa looked at him – like that day you filled the hood of Miss Evans' waterproof with peas, and he kept staring at it all the time of our lessons, till she found out there was something the matter."

"No," said I; "it's better not to tell him. Of course, Tib, we mustn't do anything *naughty*. It would be naughty to go prying into grandpapa's secrets, if he has any. But what we've found out hasn't been with prying. It's impossible not to *wonder* a little about it. And it's grandpapa's own fault for telling us so sharply not to know anybody or speak to anybody at Rosebuds. Of course, we'll obey him, but we can't help our minds wondering – they're made to wonder."

Tib considered for a while. Then her face cleared.

"I'll tell you what we can do, Gussie," she said; "we can turn it into a play. We can't leave off wondering, as you say, but we can mix up our wondering with fancy, and make up a plan of how it all was. It will be *very* interesting, for we shall know there *is* something real, and yet we can make it more wonderful than anything real could be now that everything's grown so plain and – and – I don't know the word – the opposite of poetry and fairy stories, I mean – in the world. We must think about it, Gussie. We might make it an 'ancient times' story, or an ogre story, or –"

"Yes," I said, "we'll think about it."

I did not want to disappoint Tib, and I thought, in a way, it was rather a good idea. But I am not so fond of fancying or pretending as Tib – I like real things. And the idea of a real secret or mystery had taken hold of my mind, and I wanted to find out about it. Still, the making a play of it wasn't a bad idea. As Tib said, it would be more interesting than an altogether make-up play.

We didn't say anything about the name in the book to Liddy. It was no use worrying the poor old thing by teasing her about what she thought would be wrong to tell; even if it had not anything to do with our mystery, it would have been wrong and unkind of *us*. And we said nothing to Gerald either; and indeed for some days we did not think or speak much about our discovery even to each other; we were so very much taken up about the real preparing to go away.

It was much more of a nice bustle and fuss than it had ever been to go to Ansdell Friars. There, everything was left from year to year just as we had always had it. The rooms had all we needed, and there was very little besides our clothes to pack up and take. But for going to Rosebuds it was quite

different. None of the servants had ever been there, and they were all in a to-do about it, especially as only about half of them were to go; and the other half were cross at being sent away, and kept telling the others they'd be sure to find everything wrong there.

Nurse was the only one who was really pleased to go; and I am sure, dear old thing, it was more for our sakes than her own.

"It'll be a real change for them, poor dears," she kept saying; and this gave her patience to bear all our teasing and the servants' grumbling. What a time she had of it, to be sure! From Gerald's "Nurse, may I take *all* my horses? If I leave Sultan in the cupboard won't the mice and butterflies eat him?" – Gerald always called moths butterflies – "Will there be any wheelbarrows, like at Ansdell?" to Fanny's suggestion that there'd be no nursery tea-service there – "a house that nobody's been in for years and years" – everything fell on old Liddy! And you see she dared not go asking grandpapa all sorts of things, as if he'd been a lady. He was even rather cross when she went trembling one day to ask if there were shops anywhere near Rosebuds, or if she must plan to take everything we could want for all the summer.

"Shops," said grandpapa – I heard him, for Liddy had caught him on his way down stairs one morning, and I was standing just inside the school-room doorway; "of course there are shops near enough – five miles off or so. I'm not going to take you to the middle of Africa. I dare say there are shops enough in the village for common things. Mrs. Munt will tell you all that. No need to worry me about it."

"Mrs. Munt!" I had never heard that name before. I pricked up my ears, but I was dreadfully afraid that Liddy would be too frightened to ask any more. To my satisfaction I heard her meek old voice again:

"And who may Mrs. Munt be, sir, if you please?"

At this grandpapa stopped short and looked at her – I couldn't see him, but I *felt* him stop short and look at her. Poor Liddy!

"Upon my soul!" he said. Then some reflection seemed to strike him, for his next words were more amiable.

"Mrs. Munt is the housekeeper at Rosebuds. She's been there ever since *I* can remember. You didn't suppose I was going to trust to that Mary Ann's cooking?" Mary Ann was the kitchen-maid. She was coming with us, but not the cook, who was leaving to be married. "Mrs. Munt is, or used to be, a very good cook, and a very good sort of person altogether."

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Liddy very heartily. Mrs. Munt was a great relief to her mind, for the idea of Mary Ann's cooking on the days that "master" came down to Rosebuds had been weighing on it. To me the idea of Mrs. Munt brought back the thought of the mystery. If she had been there as long as *grandpapa* could remember, what must she not know?

I flew off to Tib with the news, but she did not receive it with much interest.

"An old cook!" she said disdainfully. "Why, that would spoil it all. It wouldn't matter so much for an ogre story, if we could fancy her a witch, but for an 'ancient times' one, it would never do."

"Oh, bother!" I exclaimed, "I don't want pretending. I want to know about it really. If you only wanted make-ups, you can always get things that will do for them. I am sure Miss Evans would have been a *beautiful* witch! Oh, Tib, aren't you glad she isn't coming any more?"

For Miss Evans had left off coming altogether. She was going to begin a school – how we pitied the scholars! – and had asked grandpapa to let her off at once. She came to say good-bye to us, and gave us each a present of a book – and, to our surprise, there were tears in her eyes when she kissed us! People are really very queer in this world – they never seem to care for things till they know they are not going to have them any more. We all felt rather ashamed that we couldn't cry too, and Tib said she was afraid we must have very little feeling, which made Gerald and me quite unhappy for a while.

All the same, we weren't at all in a hurry to hear of the new "Miss Evans."

CHAPTER III

"ROSEBUDS."

"To one who has been long in city pent,
'Tis very sweet to look into the fair
And open face of heaven."

Keats' Sonnets.

suppose it is true, as older people say, that things very seldom turn out as one expects. Sometimes they are not so bad as one feels sure they will be – and very often, or almost always, they are not so nice as one has thought they would be, if one has been fancying and picturing a great deal about them. And any way, they are never quite *what* one expects. I am beginning to find this out for myself now – looking back, I can recollect very few nice things in my life that have turned out as nice as I had imagined them. But of these few, Rosebuds was one, and that has made me always remember with particular distinctness all about our first acquaintance with the dear little place. I think I could tell *everything* about our arrival there, exactly how each room looked, and what we had for tea – oh, how hungry we were that first evening! and I seem to feel again the feeling of the snowy white sheets and the sort of faint hay-ey – Tib said it was lavender – scent in our beds when we got into them that first night – very tired, but very happy.

What plans we made for the next day – how we settled to get up with the sun, to ramble about and see everything – and how, after all, we slept, of course, much later than usual! Still, it was a delicious waking. Do you know how beautiful a first waking in the real country is when you have been a long time in London? There is a sort of clear stillness in the air that you can *feel*, and then a cock crows – with quite a different crow from the poor London cocks, I always think, and hens cluck a little, just under your window perhaps; or, best of all, a turkey gobble-wobbles and some ducks quack – perhaps there is a rush of all together if your window happens to be not far from the poultry-yard, and the girl is coming out with the creatures' breakfast – and further off you hear a moo from some cows, and nearer, and yet more distant, the clear sweet notes of the ever busy little birds as they pass by on their way up to who knows where? Oh, it is too delicious – and when you hear all those sounds, as you are lying there still dreamy and sleepy, there is a sort of strangeness and *fairy-ness*– I must make up that word – that makes you think of Red Riding-hood setting off in the early morning to her grandmother's cottage, or of the little princess who went to live with the dwarfs to keep house for them.

But I must come back to the evening before – the evening, that is to say, of our arrival at Rosebuds. It had been a pouring wet day when we left London (it went on pouring till we were only about half-an-hour from our journey's end); and just at the last moment grandpapa had got a telegram which stopped his coming with us. He grumbled a little, but I don't think he had been looking forward with *much* pleasure to the journey in our company, and though we thought it our duty to look grave, and Tib said gently, "What a pity!" I don't think *we* minded much either. Indeed, to tell the real truth – and it isn't any harm telling it in here, as grandpapa will never see this story – I think it was his not being with us, and our feeling so lovelily free and unafraid, that made that first evening at Rosebuds so delightful.

And Mrs. Munt! – oh, yes, it had to do with Mrs. Munt. There never was anybody so nice as Mrs. Munt – there never could be!

But I *must* go straight on, and not keep slipping a little bit backwards, and hurrying on too far forwards, this sort of way. Well then, as I was saying, it rained and rained all through the three

hours' journey, or at least two hours and a half of it, so that we all felt rather doleful and shivery, and Liddy began hoping there'd be no mistake about the carriage from the inn meeting us at the station, as grandpapa had told her it should. Poor Liddy was rather inclined to get nervous when she was thrown on her own resources.

"Never mind, nursesey," we said, all three, to comfort her; "we can easily walk if it isn't there. You know grandpapa said it was only about half a mile, and we've got our big cloaks on – the rain wouldn't hurt us."

But Liddy still looked rather unhappy, till suddenly from her side of the railway carriage Tib called out, "It's clearing up – it's clearing up splendidly; and oh, Gussie! do look – there's such a lovely rainbow!"

So there was. I never before or since saw such a rainbow – it seemed a very nice welcome for us, and after all, Liddy's fears were quite without reason. For the queer old "one-horse fly" was waiting for us, and we all bundled into it and drove off without any mishaps, except that nurse was sure the packet of umbrellas had been left in the railway carriage, and stood shouting to the guard to stop after the train was already moving out of the station, which made us all laugh so, that we hadn't breath to tell her that it was all safe in the fly.

Though Rosebuds is almost *in* the village – at least, a very tiny bit out of it – it is some little way from the station, because for some reason that I've never found out, the station stands away by itself in the fields, as if it and the village had quarrelled and wouldn't have anything to say to each other. I dare say it's not a bad thing that it is so: the nice country-ness of it all would have been a little spoilt by the trains whistling in and out, and as it is, we scarcely hear it, as the railroad is low down and is hardly noticed. And the road from the station to the village *is* so pretty. I never, even now, go along it without remembering that first evening when we drove to Rosebuds in the clear brightness that comes after rain, the fields and the hedges glistening with the water diamonds, the little clouds hurrying away as if they were afraid of being caught, and over all the sort of hush that seems to me to follow a regular rainy day – as if the world were a naughty child that had cried itself to sleep with the tears still on its cheeks.

It is a hilly bit of road – first it goes down, and then it goes up, and when it comes into the village it does so quite suddenly. You see a high, ivy-covered wall, which is the wall of the churchyard, and then comes a row of sweet little alms-houses, and then the inn, and one by one all the village houses and shops in the most irregular way possible. Some one said once that it was more like an old German village than an English one, but I have never been in Germany, so I can't tell, only it certainly is very unlike everywhere else. We were so pleased to see it so queer and funny, that we kept tugging each other to look out, first at one side, and then at the other, and sometimes at both at once. Then we began wondering which of the houses, as we came to them, could be Rosebuds, and I think we would have been quite pleased whichever it was – they *all* looked so tempting and snug.

But we were all wrong in our guesses, for, as I said, Rosebuds was quite at the end, and, like the village itself, we came upon it quite suddenly, turning sharply down a sort of lane so shaded with trees that you could scarcely see where you were going; then with some tugging at the old horse, and some swaying of the clumsy old fly, in we drove at an open gate, and pulled up in front of a low white house, nestling, so to speak, in thickly-growing, bushy trees.

Never was a house so like its name! The trees were not really planted so very close as they looked, but it seemed at first sight as if it was almost buried in them: it stood out so white against their green. It looks at first sight smaller than it really is, for it extends a good deal out at the back. But large or small, to us it was just perfection, and so was the very rosy old woman who stood smiling and bobbing in the porch. She was so comical-looking that we could hardly help laughing. I think she must find the world a very good-humoured place, for nobody *could* be cross when they look at her!

"Mrs. Munt, ma'am, I suppose?" said nurse as she got down.

And, "Certainly, ma'am," replied Mrs. Munt, and then the two old bodies shook hands very ceremoniously. It was so funny to see their politeness to each other. But Mrs. Munt was too eager to see us to waste much time on Liddy.

"And is these the dear young ladies and gentleman?" she said, hastening forward as we emerged from the fly. "Dear, dear! to think you should be so big already, and me never to have seen you before!"

The tears were in her eyes, and we felt rather at a loss what to say or do. She seemed to know all about us so well that we felt really ashamed to think – though it certainly was not our fault – that we had never heard of her till about two days ago. I felt too shy to speak, but Tib held out her hand.

"I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Munt," she said. "I am the eldest, you know. I am Miss Ansdell."

A slight shadow of pain crossed the old woman's face.

"Miss Ansdell," she repeated, with a strange sadness in her tone: "yes, my dear – to be sure – you *are* Miss Ansdell – Master Gerald's eldest."

"*I'm* Gerald, too," said Gerald himself. "I'm called after grandpapa and papa. Did you know papa when he was as little as me?"

Mrs. Munt smiled.

"I should think so, indeed – and your grandpapa too," she said. "And this is Miss Gustava – you're not like the others, my dear. Perhaps you take after your mamma's family – the Ansdells have all blue eyes and dark hair. I remember Master Gerald writing about his lady's beautiful light hair."

"Yes, indeed," said nurse, rather primly, very anxious to put in a word for her side of the house, "Miss Gussie's hair is very nice, but it's nothing to what her dear mamma's was."

But we didn't want to stand at the door all the evening while the old bodies discussed our looks in this way. Gerald, who somehow seemed less shy with Mrs. Munt than Tib and I, put a stop to it in his own way.

"Mrs. Munt," he said, "I'm dreadfully hungry. I'm only seven years old, you know, though I look more; and nurse says seven's a hungry age."

"And we're hungry too – Tib and I, though I'm ten and Tib's eleven," said I. "And we do *so* want to see all the rooms and everything. Oh, I do think Rosebuds is far the nicest place in the world."

My words quite gained Mrs. Munt's heart.

"Indeed, miss, I don't think you're far wrong," she said. And then, just for a moment before going in, we stood and looked round. In front of the house there was a beautiful lawn, right down to the low wall which separated it from the high road. And away on the other side of that, the ground sloped down gradually, so that we seemed to have nothing to interfere with the view, which was really a very lovely one – right over the old Forest of Evold, to where the river Rother flows quietly along at the foot of the Rothering Hills. But children don't care much for views – it's since I've got big that I've learnt to like the view – we were much more interested to follow Mrs. Munt into the house, across the low square hall into a short wide passage, with a window along one side, and a flight of steps at one end. A door stood open close to the foot of the stairs, and Mrs. Munt led the way through it into a bright, plainly-furnished room, where tea was already set out for us.

"I might have got it ready in the dining-room this first evening," she said, "but I thought master would be coming, and that there'd be his dinner to see to. This is the old play-room – the school-room as used to be is now a bed-room – and I thought this would be the best for you to have quite as your own."

"It will be very nice, I'm sure," said Tib, whom Mrs. Munt looked at as the eldest. "And there's a door right out into the garden – oh, that will be nice! won't it, Gussie?"

"So that we can come out and in whenever we like. Yes, I'm glad of that," I said. "Is the garden big, Mrs. Munt? I hope it is, because – because we've no chance of being allowed to play in any other," I was going to say, but I stopped, and I felt myself grow a little red. I wondered if Mrs. Munt

knew why grandpapa was so strict about our not making any friends; and I fancied she looked at me curiously as she replied —

"Yes, Miss Gustava; it's a good big garden, and it's nice to play in, for there's a deal of rather wild shrubbery – down at the back. Our young ladies and gentlemen long ago used to say there was nowhere like Rosebuds for hide-and-seek."

"Who were your young ladies and gentlemen?" I asked quietly. "Papa had no brothers and sisters, I know."

"Ah! but I was here long before your dear papa's time, Miss Gustava," said Mrs. Munt. "I was here when your grandpapa was a boy. I'm five years older nor master."

"And had *grandpapa* brothers and sisters, then?" I asked again.

Mrs. Munt grew a little uneasy.

"You must have heard of your uncle, the Colonel, who was killed in India," she said. "And there was Miss Mary, who died when she was only fifteen. You must have seen her grave at Ansdell Friars."

I shook my head.

"No, I don't think so. But I do remember the tablet in the church to Colonel Baldwin Ansdell. I often wondered who he was. You remember it, Tib? But hadn't grandpapa any other sisters? You said young *ladies*, Mrs. Munt."

I had forgotten all my shyness now in curiosity. But it was not fated to be satisfied just then. Nurse suddenly interrupted.

"Miss Gussie, dear, you must wait a while to hear all these things from Mrs. Munt. The tea's all ready, and I'm sure you're all hungry. Just run up stairs with Miss Tib to take off your hats, there's a dear. Will you show us the rooms, Mrs. Munt, please?"

So we were all trotted off again – up stairs this time, though it scarcely seemed like going up stairs at all, so broad and shallow were the steps compared with the high-up flights in our London house. And Tib and I were so pleased with the room which Mrs. Munt told us was to be ours, that we should have forgotten all about the talk down stairs if she hadn't made another remark, which put my unanswered question into my head again.

"Yes, it is a nice room," she said, looking round with pleasure at the light-painted furniture and the two white beds side by side, the old-fashioned cupboards in the wall, two of them with glass doors, letting us see a few queer old china cups and teapots inside; "*and* so little changed, even to its name. We've always called it the young ladies' room."

There it was again – the young *ladies*; but nurse was listening and evidently fussing to get us down to tea. I must trust to cross-questioning Mrs. Munt some other time.

And the tea was really enough to take up all our attention. There was everything of country things – fresh eggs, and butter and milk of the best, and bread, and tea-cakes, and strawberry jam, and potted fish – all "home-made," of course. I think Mrs. Munt and nurse were really a little frightened to see how much we ate.

After tea we wanted, of course, to go out, but Liddy decided that it was too damp, and Mrs. Munt consoled us by giving us leave to go all over the house, for it was barely six o'clock and quite light. She took us into the front hall and showed us the dining-room, out of which opened the study, and beyond that again, what had been the school-room, and was now grandpapa's bed-room. There was nothing *very* interesting in these rooms, though they were all quaint and old-fashioned; and through all the house there was the sort of clean, fresh, and yet *not new* feeling – a mixture of faint old scents that cannot be got away, and wood-fires long ago burnt out, and yet the sweet, pure country air preventing their being musty or stale – that you never notice except in an old country house that has been carefully kept, and yet not really lived in for many years.

And then Mrs. Munt, taking us through the hall again, showed us the door of the drawing-room, and told us we might look at it by ourselves, which we were pleased at.

It was *much* more interesting, for, though a small room, it was filled with pictures and curiosities. The pictures were mostly miniatures – such queer things some of them were; gentlemen in uniform and the funniest fancy dresses, some with wigs down to their waists, some of them with helmets to make them like Roman soldiers. And ladies to match – some looking dreadfully proud, with towers of hair on the top of their heads, and some simpering in a silly way. One of these last was really rather like Tib when she smiles in what I call her "company" manner – though it's hardly fair to say that now, as she has really left it off – and she was very angry at my saying so, and told me that the most stuck-up-looking one of all was very like *me*; "and it's better to look silly than to be so horribly proud," she added. We were really rather near quarrelling, which would have been a bad beginning for our life at Rosebuds, when we caught sight of an old cabinet in one corner, of which the top half stood open, showing rows and rows of little drawers, and here and there queer shaped doors opening into inside places, where there were more drawers and shelves. It was a Japanese cabinet, of course – a very old and valuable one. I have never seen one so large and curious, and it quite absorbed our attention till nurse came tapping at the door – I don't know why she tapped; I suppose she had an idea that, as we were in the drawing-room, she must – to tell us it was time, and more than time, to go to bed.

And though I wanted to talk to Tib in bed about the queerness of there having been young *ladies*

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