Molesworth Mrs.

The Oriel Window

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A HAPPY WAKING

I do not think you could anywhere have found a happier little boy than Ferdy Ross when he woke on the morning of his ninth birthday.

He was always – at least almost always – happy, and he had good reason for being so. He had everything that children need to make life bright and joyous: kind parents, a dear sister, a pretty home, and, best of all, a loving, trusting, sunshiny nature, which made it easy for him to be very happy and loving, and made it easy too for others to love him in return and to feel pleasure in being with him. But to-day, his birthday, the fourteenth of May, he was very particularly, delightfully happy.

What a very long time it seemed that he and Chrissie had been looking forward to it! Ever since Christmas, or New Year at least. That was how he and Chrissie had settled to do about their lookings-forwards. Chrissie's birthday was in September. She was a year and four months older than Ferdy, so it fitted in very well. As soon as her birthday was over they began the Christmas

counting, and this in one way was the biggest of all the year, for their father's and mother's birthdays both came in Christmas week, and it had been found very convenient to "keep" them and Christmas Day together. So Christmas Day at Evercombe Watch House, which was Ferdy's home, was a very important day for more reasons than the great Christmas reasons which we all join in.

And then when Christmas time was over and Ferdy and Christine began to feel a little dull and unsettled, as children are pretty sure to do after a great deal of pleasure and fun, there was Ferdy's birthday to think of and prepare for; for it was not only just looking forward and counting the days, or rather the months first, and then the weeks and then the days to their "treat" times, that they divided the seasons into; there were separate and different things to do, according to which of the three parts of the year it was. For Christmas, of course, there was the most to do – all the little things to get ready for the Christmas tree as well as the presents for papa and mamma and lots of other people. And for Ferdy's birthday Chrissie had always to make something which had to be done in secret, so that he should not know what it was; and for Chrissie's birthday it was Ferdy's turn to prepare some delightful surprise for her. He was very clever at making things, even though he was a boy! He was what is called "neat-handed," and as this little story goes on, you will see what a good thing it was that he had got into the way of amusing himself and using part of his playtime in carrying out some of his inventions

and ideas.

"I don't know how I should bear it, Ferdy," Christine used to say sometimes, "if you were one of those tiresome boys that do nothing but fidget and tease their sisters when they want to sit still and work quietly for their dolls. Just think of Marcia Payne now. These two *horrible* boys, Ted and Eustace, think there is nothing so nice as to snatch away her work and throw it into the fire or out of the window, or to nearly *kill* her poor dolls with their cruel tricks. I really don't know how poor Marcia ever gets their clothes made, for it takes *all* my time to keep my children tidy, even though you never worry me," and Chrissie sighed, for she was a very anxious-minded doll-mother.

Ferdy's presents to his sister were very often for her dolls, rather than for herself, though, like most mothers, it pleased her much more, she used to say, for her dear pets to be kindly treated than any attention to their little mamma could do.

She was very amusing about her dolls. She used to talk about them in such an "old-fashioned" way that if any grown-up person had overheard her, I think they would have laughed heartily. But Chrissie took care to keep all private conversation about her four girls and two sons for herself and Ferdy only.

Besides these *big* dolls, she had a large party of tiny ones who lived in the doll house, and I think Ferdy's prettiest presents were for this miniature family. These small people really were almost as much his as Chrissie's, for he took the greatest interest in them, especially in their house and their carriages and horses and in

all kinds of wonderful things he had made for them. Several of the doll-house rooms were entirely furnished by him, and he was builder and paper-hanger and cabinet-maker and upholsterer for Doll Hall, all in one. But now I think I must return to the history of his ninth birthday.

The fourteenth of May – just about the middle of the month which is the best loved, I almost think, of all the twelve. And oh it was such a lovely day! Ferdy woke early – though not quite as early as he had meant to do, for when he bade his sister good-night he told her he would be *sure* to knock at her door not later than five. But the sun was a good way up in the sky when he did wake – so far up indeed that Ferdy got quite a fright that he had overslept himself altogether, and it was a relief to see by the old clock which stood on the landing just outside his door that it was only half-past six.

"And after all," he said to himself, "now I come to think of it, I don't believe mamma would have liked me to wake Chris so very early. I remember last year, on *her* birthday, she had a headache and was quite tired by the afternoon with having got up so soon."

He rubbed his eyes, – to tell the truth he was still rather sleepy himself, though it *was* his birthday, – and downstairs he heard the servants moving about and brushing the carpets. The schoolroom would certainly not be in order just yet; it never took him very long to have his bath and dress, and he knew by experience that housemaids are not the most amiable of human beings when little boys get in their way in the middle of their cleanings and dustings.

So on the whole Ferdy decided that the best thing to do was to go back to bed again and not get up till Flowers – Flowers was Chrissie's maid, and she looked after Ferdy too, since nurse had left to be married – came to wake him at his usual time, for he could hear no sound of any kind in his sister's room, though he listened well, outside the door.

It was very comfortable in bed, for May mornings, however lovely, are often chilly. And as Ferdy lay there he could see out of the window, and enjoy the sight of the clear bright sunshine and the trees moving softly in the wind, their leaves glittering green and gold, and even silver, as the gentle breeze fluttered them about. The birds too, they were up and about of course; now and then there came quite a flight of them, and then one solitary soarer would cross the blue sky up at the very top of the window – he would see it for half a moment, and then it disappeared again. On the whole, he had more view of sky than of anything else from his bed, though when standing by the window he could see a good long way down the road, and, by craning his neck a little, some way across the fields past the church.

For the Watch House stood at the very end of the village, near the church, so that strangers often thought it must be the Vicarage, and envied the vicar for having such a charming home, whereas the real Vicarage was a pretty but small cottage-like house, quite at the other side of the church, and not nearly as old as it was, or as the Watch House was.

It, Ferdy's home, was very, very old. And the story went

that long ago some part of it had really been a kind of watch tower, though there was nothing remaining to show this except the name and the fact that you could, from the upper windows especially, see a very long way. The nicest window of all was one in Mrs. Ross's own sitting-room, or "boudoir," as it was sometimes called. This was a corner room on the floor just below the children's, and the beauty of it was this window, – an oriel window, – projecting beyond the wall, as such windows do, and so exactly at the corner that you could see, so to say, three ways at once when you were standing in it: right down the village street to begin with, and down the short cross-road which led to the church, and then over the fields between the two, to where Farmer Meare's duckpond jutted out into the lane – "the primrose lane" – as not only Ferdy and Christine but all the children of the neighbourhood had long ago named it. For here the first primroses were *always* to be found, year after year; they never forgot to smile up punctually with their little bright pale faces before you could see them anywhere else. Chrissie sometimes suspected that the fairies had a hand in it. Everybody knows that the good people "favour" certain spots more than others, and perhaps Chrissie's idea was right.

Any way this oriel window was a charming watch tower. Ferdy always said that when he grew to be a man he would build a house with an oriel window at each corner.

But again I am wandering from the morning of Ferdy's birthday, when he lay in bed wide awake and gazed at as much

as he could see of the outside world, that lovely May morning.

It *was* lovely, and everything alive seemed to be thinking so, as well as the little hero of the day – birds, trees, blossoms – even the insects that were beginning to find out that the warm days were coming, for a great fat blue-bottle was humming away with the loud summery hum which is the only nice thing about blue-bottles, I think. And not always nice either perhaps, to tell the truth. If one is busy learning some difficult lesson, or adding up long columns of figures, a blue-bottle's buzz is rather distracting. But this morning it was all right, seeming to give just the touch of summer *sound* which was wanting to the perfection of Ferdy's happiness as he lay there, rather lazily, I am afraid we must confess – a little sleepy still perhaps.

What a nice beautiful place the world is, he thought to himself! How can people grumble at anything when the sun shines and everything seems so happy! In winter perhaps – well, yes, in winter, when it is very cold and grey, there *might* be something to be said on the other side, even though winter to such as Ferdy brings its own delights too. But in summer even the poor people should be happy; their cottages do look so pretty, almost prettier than big houses, with the nice little gardens in front, and roses and honeysuckle and traveller's joy climbing all over the walls and peeping in at the windows. Ferdy did not think he would at all mind living in a cottage, for Evercombe was a remarkably pretty village, and to all outside appearance the cottages were very neat and often picturesque, and the children

had never been *inside* any, except a few of the clean and nicely kept ones where their mother knew that the people were good and respectable. So they had little idea as yet of the discomfort and misery that may be found in some cottage homes even in the prettiest villages, though their father and mother knew this well, and meant that Ferdy and Christine should take their part before long in trying to help those in need of comfort or advice.

"I suppose," Ferdy went on thinking to himself – for once he got an idea in his head he had rather a trick of working it out – "I *suppose* there are some people who are really unhappy – poor people, who live in ugly dirty towns perhaps," and then his memory strayed to a day last year when he had driven with his father through the grim-looking streets of a mining village some distance from Evercombe. "That must be horrid. I wonder any one lives there! Or very old people who can't run about or scarcely walk, and who are quite deaf and nearly blind. Yes, they can't feel very happy. And yet they do sometimes. There's papa's old, old aunt; she seems as happy as anything, and yet I should *think* she's nearly a hundred, for she's grandpapa's aunt. She's not blind though; her eyes are quite bright and smily, and she's not so very deaf. And then she's not poor. Perhaps if she was very poor – " but no, another aged friend came into his mind – old Barley, who lived with his already old daughter in the smallest and poorest cottage Ferdy had ever been in.

"And he's quite happy too," thought the little boy, "and so's poor Betsey, though she can't scarcely walk, 'cos of her

rheumatism. It is rather funny that they are happy. The worst of all would be to be lame, *I* think – 'cept p'r'aps being blind. Oh dear! I *am* glad I'm not old, or lame, or blind, or things like that. But I say, I do believe the clock's striking seven, and – oh, there's Flowers! I might have run in to see Chrissie just for a minute or two first if I hadn't got thinking. I – " but then came an interruption.

An eager tap at the door, – not Flowers's tap he knew at once, – and in reply to his as eager "Come in" a rush of little bare feet across the floor, and Chrissie's arms round his neck in a real birthday hug.

"Flowers is just coming. I meant to wake *so* early. I've brought your present – mine's always the first, isn't it, darling?"

And Chrissie settled herself at the foot of the bed, curling up her cold toes, and drawing her pink flannel dressing-gown more closely round her that she might sit there in comfort and regale her eyes on her brother's delight as he carefully undid the many papers in which her present to him was enfolded.

It was a very pretty present, and Ferdy's natural good taste knew how to admire it, as his affectionate heart knew how to feel grateful to Chrissie for the real labour she had bestowed upon it. "It" was a writing-case, embroidered in silks of many lovely shades, and with a twisted monogram of Ferdy's initials – "F.. R." – "Ferdinand Walter Ross" – worked in gold threads in the centre of the cover. It was a very good piece of work indeed for a little girl of Chrissie's age, and promised well for

her skill and perseverance in days to come. Ferdy's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Oh, Chrissie," he said, "you've never made me anything quite as pretty as this! How clever you are getting, and how did you manage to work it all without my seeing?"

"It *was* rather difficult," said Chrissie, with satisfaction in her tone. "Ever so many times I had to bundle it away just as I heard you coming. And do you know, Ferdy, it's a very ancient pattern – no, pattern isn't the word I mean."

"Design?" said Ferdy. He knew some words of this kind better than Chrissie, as he was so often planning and copying carved wood and brasswork and such things.

"Yes, that's what I mean – it's a very ancient design. Miss Lilly drew it for me from an old book-cover somebody lent her, and she helped me to arrange the colours. I *am* so pleased you like it, Ferdy, darling. I liked doing it because it was such pretty work, but if it hadn't been a present for you, I think I would have got tired of it – it *was* rather fiddly sometimes. And after working ever, ever so long, I didn't seem to have done hardly any."

"I know," said Ferdy thoughtfully. "I think that's always the way with any really nice work. You can't scurry it up. And it wouldn't be worth anything if you could."

But just then there came a tap at the door, and Flowers's voice sounding rather reproachful.

"Miss Chrissie," she said, "I couldn't think where you'd gone to. I do hope you've got your dressing-gown and slippers on, or you will be sure to catch cold."

"All right, Flowers," said Chrissie, "I'm *quite* warm;" and as the maid caught sight of the little pink-flannelled figure her face cleared, for, fortunately for her peace of mind, the pink *toes* were discreetly curled up out of sight.

Who could expect a little girl to remember to put on her slippers on her brother's birthday morning, when she had been dreaming all night of the lovely present she had got for him?

"Many happy returns of the day, Master Ferdy, my dear," Flowers went on, growing rather red, "and will you please accept a very trifling present from me?"

She held out a little parcel as she spoke. It contained a *boy's* "housewife," if you ever saw such a thing. It was neatly made of leather, and held needles of different sizes, strong sewing cotton and thread, various kinds of useful buttons, a sturdy little pair of scissors, pins, black and white, small and large, and several other things such as a school-boy might be glad to find handy now and then.

"Mother always gives one to my brothers when they leave home," said the maid, "and I thought as no doubt Master Ferdy will be going to school some day – "

"It's capital, Flowers," Ferdy interrupted; "thank you ever so much; it's first-rate. I needn't wait till I go to school to use it. It's just the very thing I'm sure to want when I go yachting with papa next summer – this summer – in uncle's yacht. It's *capital*!"

And Flowers, who had not been very long at the Watch House, and had felt rather uncertain as to how her gift would suit the

young gentleman's taste, smiled all over with pleasure.

Master Ferdy had certainly a very nice way with him, she thought to herself.

"Miss Christine," she said aloud, "you really must come and get dressed, or instead of being ready earlier than usual, you'll be ever so much later."

And Chrissie jumped down from the bed and went off to her own quarters.

CHAPTER II
THE PEACOCK'S CRY

Half an hour or so later the children met again, and together made their way downstairs to the dining-room, Ferdy carefully carrying his presents, which had been increased by that of a nice big home-made cake from cook, and a smart little riding-whip from two or three of the other servants.

Papa and mamma had not yet made their appearance; it was barely half-past eight.

Ferdy's eyes and Chrissie's too wandered inquiringly round the room. Neither knew or had any sort of idea what *the* present of the day – their parents' – was to be. Many wonderings had there been about it, for Mrs. Ross had smiled in a very mysterious way once or twice lately, when something had been said about Ferdy's birthday, and the children had half expected to see some veiled package on the sideboard or in a corner of the room, ready for the right moment.

But everything looked much as usual, except that there was a lovely bouquet of flowers – hot-house flowers, the gardener's best – beside Ferdy's plate.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, as he took it up and sniffed it approvingly, "what a good humour Ferguson must be in to have given me these very best flowers. Why, he doesn't even like

mamma herself to cut these big begonias. They *are* splendiferous, aren't they, Chris? I shall take one out for a button-hole, and wear it all day. But oh, Chrissie, I *do* wonder what papa's and mamma's present is going to be – don't you?"

"I should just think I did," his sister replied. "I haven't the very least inch of an idea this time, and generally, before, I have had *some*. It isn't in this room, any way."

"No, I expect it's some little thing, something mamma has kept safe in a drawer, a pair of gold sleeve-links, or, or – no, not a writing-case, for she'd know about yours. P'r'aps a pocket microscope or some book."

"Would you like any of those?" asked Chrissie.

"I'd like anything, I think. At least I mean papa and mamma'd be sure to give me something nice. Of course, *the* present of presents would be – "

"We fixed not to speak about it, don't you remember?" said his sister quickly. "It's a bad habit to get into, that of fancying too much about impossible things you'd like to have."

"But this wouldn't be quite an impossible thing," said Ferdy. "I may get it some day, and one reason I want it so is that it would be just as nice for you as for me, you see, Chris."

"I know," said Christine. "Well no, it's not a couldn't-possibly-ever-be thing, like the magic carpet we planned so about once, or the table with lovely things to eat on it, that there's the fairy story about, though I always think that's rather a greedy sort of story – don't you?"

"Not if you were awfully hungry, and the boy in that story was, you know," said Ferdy. "But I didn't mean quite impossible in a fairy magic way. I mean that papa and mamma *might* do it some day, and it's rather been put into my head this morning by this," and he touched the riding-whip. "It's far too good for Jerry, or for any donkey, isn't it? I shall put it away till I have a – "

Chrissie placed her hand on his mouth.

"Don't say it," she said. "It's much better not, after we fixed we wouldn't."

"Very well," said Ferdy resignedly. "I won't if you'd rather I didn't. Now let us think over what it really *will* be, most likely. A – "

But no other guess was to be put in words, for just then came the well-known voices.

"Ferdy, my boy" – "Dear little man," as his father and mother came in. "Many, many happy returns of your birthday," they both said together, stooping to kiss him.

"And see what Chrissie has given me, and Flowers, and cook, and the others!" exclaimed the boy, holding out his gifts for admiration.

Mr. and Mrs. Ross looked at each other and smiled. Neither of them had anything in the shape of a parcel big or little. Ferdy and Christine felt more and more puzzled.

"They are charming presents, dear," said Mrs. Ross, "and ours – papa's and mine – is quite ready. How are you going to do about it, Walter?"

"We had better have prayers first," Ferdy's father replied. "And – yes, breakfast too, I think, and then – "

In their own minds both Ferdy and Christine thought they would not be able to eat much breakfast while on the tenter-hooks of curiosity. But kind as their father was, he had a way of meaning what he said, and they had learned not to make objections. And, after all, they did manage to get through a very respectable meal, partly perhaps because the breakfast was particularly tempting that morning, and mamma was particularly anxious that the children should do justice to it.

Nice as it was, however, it came to an end in due time, and then, though they said nothing, the children's faces showed what was in their minds, Chrissie looking nearly as eager as her brother.

"Now," said Mr. Ross, taking out his watch, "I have just half an hour before I must start. Leila," – "Leila" was mamma's "girl name" as Chrissie called it, – "Leila, you keep these two young people quietly in here for five minutes by the clock. Then all three of you come round to the porch, but Ferdy must shut his eyes – tight, do you hear, young man? Mother and Chrissie will lead you, and I will meet you at the front door."

Did ever five minutes pass so slowly? More than once the children thought that the clock must really have stopped, or that something extraordinary had happened to its hands, in spite of the ticking going on all right. But at last —

"We may go now," said mamma. "Shut your eyes, my boy.

Now, Chris, you take one hand and I'll take the other. You won't open your eyes till papa tells you, will you, Ferdy?"

"No, no, I promise," said Ferdy.

But his mother looked at him a little anxiously. His little face was pale with excitement and his breath came fast. Yet he was not at all a delicate child, and he had never been ill in his life.

"Dear Ferdy," she said gently, "don't work yourself up so."

Ferdy smiled.

"No, mamma," he replied, though his voice trembled a little. "It is only – something we've tried not to think about, haven't we, Chrissie? Oh," he went on, turning to his sister, and speaking almost in a whisper, "*do* you think it can be – you know what?"

Christine squeezed the hand she held; that was all she could reply. Though her face had got pink instead of pale like Ferdy's, she was almost as "worked up" as he was.

There was not long to wait, however. Another moment and they were all three standing in the porch, and though Ferdy's eyes were still most tightly and honourably shut, there scarcely needed papa's "Now," or the "*Oh!*" which in spite of herself escaped his sister, to reveal the delightful secret. For his ears had caught certain tell-tale sounds: a sort of "champing," and a rustle or scraping of the gravel on the drive which fitted in wonderfully with the idea which his brain was full of, though he had honestly tried to follow his sister's advice and not "think about it."

What was the "it"?

A pony – the most beautiful pony, or so he seemed to Ferdy

and Christine at any rate – that ever was seen. There he stood, his bright brown coat gleaming in the May sunshine, his eager but kindly eyes looking as if they took it all in as he rubbed his nose on Mr. Ross's coat-sleeve and twisted about a little, as if impatient to be introduced to his new master.

"Papa, mamma!" gasped Ferdy, with a sort of choke in his throat, and for a moment – what with the delight, and the sudden opening of his eyes in the strong clear sunshine – he felt half dazed. "Papa, mamma, a pony of my very own! And Chrissie can ride him too. He is a pony a girl can ride too, isn't he?" with a touch of anxiety.

"He is very gentle, and he has no vices at all," said his father. "I am quite sure Chrissie will be able to ride him too. But you must get to know him well in the first place."

Ferdy was out on the drive by this time, his face rosy with delight, as he stood by his father patting and petting the pretty creature. The pony was all saddled and bridled, ready for Ferdy to mount and ride "over the hills and far away." The boy glanced up at Mr. Ross, an unspoken request trembling on his lips.

"Yes," said his father, seeing it there and smiling. "Yes, you may mount him and ride up and down a little. He'll be all right," he added, turning to the coachman, who had been standing by and enjoying the whole as much as any of them.

"Oh yes, sir. He's a bit eager, but as gentle as a lamb," the man replied.

"And this afternoon," Ferdy's father continued, "if I can get

home between four and five, I'll take you a good long ride – round by Durnham and past by Mellway Sight, where you have so often wanted to go."

"Oh, papa," was all Ferdy could get out.

Merton meanwhile had been examining the stirrup straps.

"They're about the right length for you, I think, sir," he said, and then in a moment Ferdy was mounted.

Pony pranced about a little, just a very little, – he would not have seemed a real live pony if he had not, – but nothing to mind. Indeed, Ferdy, to tell the truth, would have enjoyed a little more. The coachman led him a short way along the drive, but then let go, and Ferdy trotted to the gates in grand style and back again.

"Isn't he *perfect*, Chris?" he exclaimed as he came up to the group in front of the porch. "Mayn't I gallop him, papa, this afternoon when we go out? Round by Mellway there's beautiful grass, you know."

"All right," Mr. Ross replied. "We shall see how you get on outside on the road. I don't know that he has any tricks, but every pony has *some* fad, so for a few days we must just be a little cautious. Now trot back to the gates once more, and then I think you had better dismount for the present. You may go round to the stable with him. It's always a good thing for your horse to know you in the stable as well as outside."

Off Ferdy went again, a little bit faster this time, his spirits rising higher and higher. Then he turned to come back to the house, and his mother was just stepping indoors, her face still

lighted up with pleasure, when there came a sudden cry, – a curious hoarse cry, – but for a moment she was not startled.

"It is the peacocks," she thought, for there were a couple of beautiful peacocks at the Watch House. "I hope they won't frighten the pony."

For the peacocks were allowed to stalk all about the grounds, and they were well-behaved on the whole; though, as is always the case with these birds, their harsh cry was not pleasant, and even startling to those not accustomed to it.

Was it the cry, or was it the sudden sight of them as they came all at once into view on a side-path which met the drive just where Ferdy was passing?

Nobody ever knew, – probably pony himself could not have told which it was, – but as Mrs. Ross instinctively stopped a moment on her way into the house, another sound seemed to mingle with the peacock's scream, or rather to grow out from it – a sort of stifled shriek of terror and rushing alarm. Then came voices, trampling feet, a kind of wail from Chrissie, and in an instant – an instant that seemed a lifetime – Ferdy's mother saw what it was. He had been thrown, and one foot had caught in the stirrup, and the startled pony was dragging him along. A moment or two of sickening horror, then a sort of silence. One of the men was holding the pony, Mr. Ross and the coachman were stooping over something that lay on the ground a little way up the drive – something – what was it? It did not move. Was it only a heap of clothes that had dropped there somehow? It couldn't, oh no,

it *couldn't* be Ferdy! *Ferdy* was alive and well. He had just been laughing and shouting in his exceeding happiness. Where had he run to?

"Ferdy, Ferdy!" his mother exclaimed, scarcely knowing that she spoke; "Ferdy dear, come quick, come, Ferdy."

But Chrissie caught her, and buried her own terror-stricken face in her mother's skirts.

"Mamma, mamma," she moaned, "don't look like that. Mamma, don't you see? Ferdy's *killed*. That's Ferdy where papa is. Don't go, oh don't go, mamma! Mamma, I can't bear it. Hide me, hide my eyes."

And at this frantic appeal from the poor little half-maddened sister, Mrs. Ross's strength and sense came back to her as if by magic. She unclasped Chrissie's clutching hands gently but firmly.

"Run upstairs and call Flowers. Tell her to lay a mattress on the floor of the oriel room at once; it is such a little way upstairs; and tell Burt to bring some brandy at once – brandy and water. Tell Burt first."

Chrissie was gone in an instant. Ferdy couldn't be dead, she thought, if mamma wanted brandy for him. But when the mother, nerved by love, flew along the drive to the spot where her husband and the coachman were still bending over what still was, or had been, her Ferdy, she could scarcely keep back a scream of anguish. For a moment she was sure that Chrissie's first words were true – he was killed.

"Walter, Walter, tell me quick," she gasped. "Is he – is he alive?"

Mr. Ross looked up, his own face so deadly pale, his lips so drawn and quivering, that a rush of pity for *him* came over her.

"I – I don't know. I can't tell. What do you – think, Merton?" he said, in a strange dazed voice. "He has not moved, but we thought he was breathing at first."

The coachman lifted his usually ruddy face; it seemed all streaked, red and white in patches.

"I can feel his heart, sir; I feel fairly sure I can feel his heart. If we could get a drop or two of brandy down his throat, and – yes, I think I can slip my arm under his head. There's Burt coming with some water."

"And brandy," said Mrs. Ross. "Here, give it me – a spoon – yes, that's right. And, Walter, have you sent for the doctor?"

Mr. Ross passed his hand over his forehead, as if trying to collect himself.

"I will send Larkins now," he said, "on the pony – that will be the quickest," though a sort of shudder passed over him as he spoke of the innocent cause of this misery. "Larkins, go at once for Mr. Stern; you know the shortest way," for there was no doctor within a mile or two of Evercombe village, and Mr. Ross raised himself to give exact directions to the young groom.

When he turned again they had succeeded in getting a spoonful of brandy and water between Ferdy's closed lips – then another; then poor old Merton looked up with a gleam of hope

in his eyes.

"He's coming to, sir – ma'am – I do believe," he said.

He was right. A quiver ran through the little frame, then came the sound of a deep sigh, and Ferdy's eyes opened slowly. They opened and – it was like Ferdy – the first sign he gave of returning consciousness was a smile – a very sweet smile.

"Papa, mamma," he whispered, "is it time to get up? Is it – my birthday?"

That was too much for his mother. The tears she had been keeping back rushed to her eyes, but they were partly tears of joy. Her boy was alive; at worst he was not killed, and perhaps, oh *perhaps*, he was not badly hurt.

Ferdy caught sight of her tears, though she had turned her face away in hopes of hiding them. A pained, puzzled look came over him. He tried to raise his head, which was resting on Merton's arm, but it sank down again weakly; then he glanced at his left arm and hand, which were covered with blood from a cut on his forehead.

"What is the – mamma, why are you crying?" he said. "Have I hurt myself? Oh dear, did I fall off my beautiful pony? I am so, *so* sorry."

"My darling," said his mother, "it was an accident. I hope you will soon be better. Have you any pain anywhere?"

"I don't think so," said he, "only I wish I was in bed, mamma. What is it that is bleeding?"

"Nothing very bad, sir," said Merton cheerfully; "only a cut on

your forehead. But that'll soon heal. Your handkerchief, please, ma'am, dipped in cold water."

"Yes," said Mr. Ross, "that is the best thing for the moment," and he folded the handkerchief up into a little pad, which he soaked in the fresh cold water, and laid it on the place. "I think we must move him," he went on. "Ferdy, my boy, will you let us try?"

Ferdy stretched out his right arm and put it round his father's neck. But the movement hurt somehow and somewhere, for he grew terribly white again.

"My back," he whispered.

A thrill of new anguish went through his parents at the words.

"Don't do anything yourself," said Mr. Ross; "lie quite still and trust to me."

Ferdy closed his eyes without speaking, and skilfully, though with infinite pains, his father raised him in his arms, Ferdy making no sound – perhaps he half fainted again; there he lay quite helpless, like a little baby, as with slow, careful tread Mr. Ross made his way to the house, from which, not a quarter of an hour ago, the boy had flown out in perfect health and joy.

At the door they met Chrissie. She started violently, then covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, papa," she began, but her mother was close behind and caught her in her arms.

"Hush, dear," she said. "No, no," in answer to the little girl's unuttered question. "Ferdy has opened his eyes and spoken to us;

he knew us – papa and me."

Chrissie's terrors at once made place for hope. Her white face flushed all over.

"He's spoken to you, mamma? What did he say? Oh, then he can't be so *very* badly hurt. Oh, *mamma*, how glad I am!"

"Be very, very quiet, dear. We can do nothing, and be sure of nothing, till the doctor comes, but – oh yes, thank God, we may hope."

But by the time they had laid him on the mattress in the oriel room Ferdy looked again so ghastly pale that the poor mother's heart went down. There was little they could do; they scarcely dared to undress him till the surgeon came. It was a terrible hour or two's waiting, for Mr. Stern was out, and Larkins had to ride some considerable way before he caught him up on his morning rounds.

CHAPTER III
A STRANGE BIRTHDAY

Late on the afternoon of that sad day the doctor, coming out of the oriel room, was met by little Christine. She had been watching for him on the stairs. It was his second visit since the morning, and his face was very grave; but its expression altered at once when he caught sight of Chrissie. Though Stern by name, he was very far from stern by nature, and he was very fond of the Ross children, whom he had known nearly all their lives. Besides, it is a doctor's business to cheer up people as much as possible, and he was touched by poor Chrissie's white face. Never had the little girl spent such a miserable day, and thankful though she had been that her darling Ferdy's life had been spared, she was beginning to doubt if after all he *was* going to get better. Her mother had scarcely left him for an instant; she had been busy arranging the room for him, or rather she had been sitting beside him holding his hand while she gave directions to the servants.

By the doctor's advice Ferdy's own little bed had been brought into the room, and he himself moved on to it, lifted upon the mattress as he lay; and it had, of course, been necessary to carry out some of the other furniture and rearrange things a little. This would not disturb Ferdy, Mr. Stern said, but Ferdy's head was now aching from the cut on his forehead, though it was not a very

bad one, and he was tired and yet restless, and could not bear his mother to move away.

So there she sat, and Mr. Ross had gone off to Whittingham by a mid-day train, and no one had given much thought to poor Christine.

"My dear child," said the doctor, "how ill you look! Have you been wandering about by yourself all day?"

"Yes," said Chrissie simply, her lip quivering as she spoke. "There was nothing I could do to help, and they were all busy."

"Where is Miss Lilly?" asked Mr. Stern.

"She wasn't coming to-day. We were to have a holiday. It – it is Ferdy's birthday, you know, and we were going to be so happy. *Oh*," she cried, as if she could keep back the misery no longer, "to think it is Ferdy's birthday!" and she burst again into deep though not loud sobbing.

Mr. Stern was very, very sorry for her.

"Dear Chrissie," he said, "you must not make yourself ill. In a day or two you will be wanted very much indeed, and you must be ready for it. Your brother will want you nearly all day long."

Chrissie's sobs stopped as if by magic, though they still caught her breath a little, and her face grew all pink and rosy.

"Will he, *will* he?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean that he is really going to get better? I thought – I thought – mamma kept shut up in the room, and nobody would tell me – do you really think he is going to get better soon?"

Mr. Stern took her hand and led her downstairs, and then into

the library. There was no one there, but he closed the door.

"My dear child," he said, "I will tell you all I can," for he knew that Christine was a sensible little girl, and he knew that anything was better than to have her working herself up more and more with miserable fears. "I think Ferdy will be *better* in a day or two, but we cannot say anything yet about his getting *well*. Your father has gone to Whittingham to see one of the best doctors, and ask him to come down here to-night or to-morrow to examine your brother, and after that we shall know more. But I am afraid it is very likely that he will have to stay in bed a long time, and if so, you know how much you can do to make the days pass pleasantly for him."

Chrissie's eyes sparkled through the tears still there. "I don't mind that," she began. "Of course I know it will be very dull and tiresome for him, but *nothing* seems very bad compared with if he was going to – " she stopped short, and again she grew very white. "Oh, you are *sure* he isn't going to get worse?" she exclaimed. "I do get so frightened every now and then when I think of how his face looked, and it was bleeding too."

Mr. Stern patted her hand.

"You have not seen him since this morning?" he said.

Chrissie shook her head.

"Not since papa carried him in," she replied.

"Would you like to see him very much?"

"Oh, *may* I? I'll be very, very quiet and good. I'll bathe my eyes, so that he won't find out I've been crying, and I'll only stay

a minute."

"Run upstairs then and make yourself look as much as usual as you can. I will go back for a moment and tell Mrs. Ross I have given you leave to come in."

Two minutes or so later Chrissie was tapping very softly at the door of the oriel room.

"Come in," said Mr. Stern.

He was not looking at all grave now, but very "smily" and cheerful, which Chrissie was glad of, as it reminded her that she herself must not cry or seem unhappy. But how strange it all was! She would scarcely have known the pretty little sitting-room: Ferdy's bed with a screen round it standing out at one side of the curiously shaped window, her mother's writing-table and other little things gone. Chrissie could not help staring round in surprise, and perhaps because she had a nervous dread of looking at Ferdy.

He saw her, however, at once.

"Chrissie," said a weak, rather hoarse little voice, "Chrissie, come here."

Chrissie choked down the lump in her throat that was beginning to make itself felt again.

"Kiss me," he said when she was close beside him. He did not look so unlike himself now, though there was a bandage round his forehead and he was very pale. "Kiss me," he said again, and as she stooped down to do so, without speaking, "Chrissie," he whispered, "I don't want mamma to hear – Chrissie, just to think

it's my birthday and that it's all through our great wish coming true. Oh, Chrissie!"

The little girl felt, though she could not see him, that Mr. Stern was watching her, so she made a great effort.

"I know," she whispered back again, and even into her whisper she managed to put a cheerful sound. "I know, Ferdy darling. But you're going to get better. And you haven't any very bad pains, have you?"

"Not very bad," he replied. "My head's sore, but I daresay it'll be better to-morrow. But that won't make it right, you see, Chrissie. It's it being my birthday I mind."

Christine did not know what to say. Her eyes were filling with tears, and she was afraid of Ferdy seeing them. She turned away a little, and as she did so her glance fell on the window, one side of which looked to the west. She and Ferdy had often watched the sunset from there. It was too early yet for that, but signs of its coming near were beginning; already the lovely mingling of colours was gleaming faintly as if behind a gauzy curtain.

"Ferdy," said Chrissie suddenly, "I think there's going to be a beautiful sunset, and you can see it lovelily the way you're lying. Aren't you awfully glad you're in here? It wouldn't be half so nice in your own room for seeing out, would it?"

"No, it wouldn't," said Ferdy, more brightly than he had yet spoken. "I can't move my head, only the least bit, but I can see out. Yes, Chrissie, I can see the people on the road – I mean I could if the curtain was a little more pulled back."

"Of course you could," said Mr. Stern, coming forward. "But you must wait till to-morrow to try how much you can see."

"Shall I have to stay in bed all to-morrow?" said Ferdy.

"We must hear what the big doctor says," Mr. Stern replied, for he had already told Ferdy that another surgeon was coming to see him, so that the sudden sight of a stranger should not startle the little fellow. "Now, Chrissie, my dear, I think you must say good-night; you shall see much more of Ferdy to-morrow, I hope."

They kissed each other again, and Chrissie whispered, "Don't mind about its being your birthday, darling. Think how much worse you might have been hurt."

"I know. I *might* have been killed," said Ferdy in a very solemn tone.

"And do watch the sunset. I think it's going to be extra pretty," Chrissie went on cheerfully. "If you *have* to stay in bed, Ferdy, it will be nice to have this lovely window."

And Ferdy's face grew decidedly brighter.

"Good little woman," said the doctor in a low voice as she passed him, and by the way mamma kissed her Chrissie knew that she too was pleased with her.

So the little sister was not altogether miserable as she fell asleep that night, and she was so tired out that she slept soundly – more heavily indeed than usual. She did not hear the sound of wheels driving up to the house soon after she had gone to bed, and this was a good thing, for she would have guessed they were

those of the carriage bringing her father and the doctor he had gone to fetch, from the station, and her anxiety would very likely have sent away her sleepiness.

Nor did she hear the carriage drive away again an hour or two later. By that time she was very deeply engaged, for she was having a curious and very interesting dream. She had forgotten it when she woke in the morning, but it came back to her memory afterwards, as you will hear.

Ferdy did not much like the strange doctor, though he meant to be very kind, no doubt. He spoke to him too much as if he were a baby, and the boy was beginning at last to feel less restless and more comfortably sleepy when this new visitor came. And then the library lamp was brought up, and it blinked into his eyes, and he hated being turned round and having his backbone poked at, as he told Chrissie, though he couldn't exactly say that it hurt him. And, worst of all, when he asked if he might get up "to-morrow" the strange doctor "put him off" in what Ferdy thought a silly sort of way. He would much rather have been told right out, "No, certainly not to-morrow," and then he could have begun settling up things in his mind and planning what he would do, as Chrissie and he always did if they knew a day in bed was before them; for they had never been very ill – never ill enough to make no plans and feel as if they cared for nothing in bed or out of it.

No, Ferdy was quite sure he liked Mr. Stern much better than Dr. Bigge, for, curiously enough, that was the great doctor's name, though by rights, as he was a very clever surgeon and not

a physician, I suppose he should not be called "doctor" at all.

When at last he had gone, Mr. Stern came back for a moment to tell Ferdy's mother and Flowers how it would be best to settle him for the night. They put the pillows in rather a funny way, he thought, but still he was pretty comfortable, and he began to feel a little sleepy again; and just as he was going to ask his mother what they were doing with the sofa, everything went out of his head, and he was off into the peaceful country of sleep, where his troubles were all forgotten, hushed into quiet by the soft waving wings of the white angel, whose presence is never so welcome as to the weary and suffering.

When he woke next there was a faint light in the room. For a moment or two he thought that it was the daylight beginning to come, and he looked towards where the window was in his own little room; but even the tiny motion of his head on the pillow sent a sort of ache through him, and that made him remember.

No, he was not in his own room, and the glimmer was not that of the dawn. It was from a shaded night-light in one corner, and as his eyes grew used to it he saw that there was some one lying on the sofa – some one with bright brown hair, bright even in the faint light, and dressed in a pale pink dressing-gown. It was mamma. Poor mamma, how uncomfortable for her not to be properly in bed! Why was she lying there? He hoped she was asleep, and yet – he almost hoped she wasn't, or at least that she would awake just for a minute, for he was thirsty and hot, and the fidgety feeling that he *couldn't* keep still was beginning again. He

did not know that he sighed or made any sound, but he must have done so, for in another moment the pink dressing-gown started up from the sofa, and then mamma's pretty face, her blue eyes still looking rather "dusty," as the children called it, with sleep, was anxiously bending over him.

"What is it, dear? Did you call me?"

"No, mamma. But why aren't you in bed, and why is there a light in the room? Aren't you going to bed?"

"Yes, in an hour or two Flowers will come and take my place. You see we thought you might be thirsty in the night, and the doctor said you mustn't move."

"I *am* thirsty," said Ferdy. "I'd like a drink of water."

"Better than lemonade? There is some nice fresh lemonade here."

Ferdy's eyes brightened.

"Oh, I *would* like that best, but I didn't know there was any."

Mamma poured some out into such a funny cup – it had a pipe, so Ferdy called it, at one side. He didn't need to sit up, or even to lift his head, to drink quite comfortably.

"And I think," Mrs. Ross went on, "I think I will give you another spoonful of the medicine. It is not disagreeable to take, and it will help you to go to sleep again."

Yes, it did; very, very soon he was asleep again. This time he dreamt something, though when he awoke he could not clearly remember what. He only knew that it was something about birds. He lay with his eyes shut thinking about it for a few minutes, till

a sound close to him made him open them and look round. It was morning, quite morning and daylight, and from the window came the gentle twittering of some swallows, who had evidently taken up their summer quarters in some corner hard by.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.