

Molesworth Mrs.

Four Winds Farm



Mrs. Molesworth
Four Winds Farm

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CHAPTER I THE VOICES IN THE CHIMNEY

"Wherefore and whence we are ye cannot know."

"The Winds' Song," Light of Asia.—Edwin Arnold

The first thing that little Gratian Conyfer could remember in his life was hearing the wind blow. It had hushed him to sleep, it had scolded him when he was naughty, it had laughed with him at merry times, it had wailed and sobbed when he was in sorrow.

For the wind has many ways of blowing, and no one knew this better than Gratian, and no one had more right to boast an intimate acquaintance with the wind than he. You would be sure to say so yourself if you could see the place where the boy was born and bred – "Four Winds Farm."

It had not come by this name without reason, though no one still living when Gratian was a boy, could tell how long it had borne it, or by whom it had been bestowed. I wish I could take you there – were it but for five minutes, were it even in a dream. I wish I could make you *feel* what I can fancy I feel myself when I think of it – the wonderful fresh breath on one's face even on a calm day standing at the door of the farm-house, the sense of life and mischief and wild force about you, though held in check for the moment, the knowledge that the wind – the winds rather, all four of them, are there somewhere, hidden or pretending to be asleep, maybe, but ready all the same to burst out at a moment's notice. And when they do burst out – on a blowy day that is to say – ah then, I wouldn't advise you to stand at the farm-house door, unless you want to be hurled out of the way more unceremoniously than you bargained for.

It was a queer site perhaps to have chosen for a dwelling-place. Up among the moors that stretched for miles and miles on all sides, on such lofty ground that it was no wonder the trees refused to grow high, for it was hard work enough to grow at all, poor things, and to keep their footing when they had done so. They did look battered about and storm-tossed – all except the pines, who are used to that kind of life, I suppose, and did their duty manfully as sentinels on guard round the old brown house, in which, as I said, the boy Gratian first opened his baby eyes to the light.

Since that day nine winters and summers had passed. He was called a big boy now. He slept alone in a room away up a little stair by itself in a corner – an outside corner – of the farm-house. He walked, three miles there and three miles back, to school every day, carrying his books and his dinner in a satchel, along a road that would have seemed lonely and dreary to any but a moorland child – a road indeed that was little but a sheep-track the best part of the way. He spent his evenings in a corner of the large straggling kitchen, so quiet that no one would have guessed a child, above all a boy, was there; his holidays, the fine weather ones at least, out on the moor among the heather for the most part, in the company of Jonas the old shepherd, and Watch the collie dog. But he never thought his life lonely, though he had neither brother nor sister, and no one schoolfellow among the score or so at the village school that was more to him than another; he never thought about himself at all in that sort of way; he took for granted that all about him was as it should be, and if things seemed wrong sometimes he had the good sense to think it was very probably his own fault.

But he found things puzzling; he was a child who thought a great deal more than he spoke; he would not have been so puzzled if he had had more of the habit of putting his thoughts into

words. Hitherto it had not seemed to matter much, life had been a simple affair, and what he did not understand he forgot about. But lately, quite lately, he had changed; his soul was beginning to grow, perhaps that was it, and felt now and then as if it wanted new clothes, and the feeling was strange. And then it isn't everybody who is born and bred where the four winds of heaven meet!

What was Gratian thinking of one Sunday evening when, quiet as usual, he sat in his corner? He had been at church and at the Sunday School; but I am afraid he could not have told you much about the sermon, and in his class he had been mildly reproved for inattention.

"You must go to bed," said his mother; "it is quite time, and you seem sleepy."

The boy rose and came round to the table at which sat his father and mother, each with a big book which Gratian knew well by sight – for it was only on Sunday evenings that the farmer and his wife had time for reading, and their books lasted them a good while. In fact they had been reading them fifty-two evenings of each year ever since the boy could recollect, and the marks, of perforated cardboard on green ribbon – his father's bore the words "Remember me," and his mother's "Forget me not" – which once, before he could read, he had regarded with mysterious awe, did not seem to him to have moved on many pages.

He stood at the table for a moment before his mother looked up; he was vaguely wondering to himself if he too would have a big book with a green ribbon-marker when he should be as old as his father and mother; did everybody? he felt half-inclined to ask his mother, but before he had decided if he should, she scattered his thoughts by glancing up at him quickly. She was quick and alert in everything she said and did, except perhaps in reading.

"Good-night, Gratian. Get quickly to bed, my boy."

"Good-night, mother, good-night, father," he said, as his mother kissed him, and his father laid his hand on the child's curly head with a kindly gesture which he only used on Sunday evenings.

"Gratian is in one of his dreams again," said the mother, when the little figure had disappeared.

"Ay," said her husband, "it's to be hoped he'll grow out of it, but he's young yet."

Gratian had stopped a moment on his way across the red-tiled passage, at one end of which was the white stone staircase; he stopped at the front door which stood slightly ajar, and stepped out into the porch. It was autumn, but early autumn only. Something of the fragrance of a summer night was still about, but there was not the calm and restfulness of the summer; on the contrary, there was a stirring and a murmuring, and the clouds overhead were scudding hurriedly before the moon, as if she were scolding them and they in a hurry to escape, thought Gratian; for there was a certain fretfulness in her air – a disquiet and unsettledness which struck him.

"Either she is angry and they are running away, or – perhaps that is it – she is sending them messages as fast as they can take them, like the rooks after they have been having a long talk together," he said to himself. Then as a figure came round the side of the house on its way to what was really the kitchen – though the big room which Gratian had just left went by the name – "Jonas," said the child aloud, "is there anything the matter up in the sky to-night?"

The old shepherd stood still; he rested the empty milkpail he was carrying on the ground, and gazed up to where Gratian was pointing.

"I cannot say," he answered, "but the summer is gone, little master. Up here the winter comes betimes, we must look for the storms and the tempests again before long."

"But not yet, oh not just yet, Jonas; I can't think why they don't get tired of fighting and rushing about and tearing each other – the winds and the rain and the clouds and all of them up there. Listen, Jonas, what is that?"

For a faint, low breath came round the end of the house like a long drawn sigh, yet with something of menace in its tone.

"Ah yes, Master Gratian. It's the winter spirit looking round a bit as I said. They'll be at it to-night, I fancy – just a spree to keep their hands in as it were. But go to bed, little master, and dream of the summer. There'll be some fine days yet awhile," and old Jonas lifted the pail again. "Madge

must give this a scolding before milking time to-morrow morning, careless wench that she is," he said in a half-grumbling tone as he disappeared.

And Gratian climbed upstairs to bed.

He had a candle, and matches to light it with, in his room, but the moonlight was so bright, though fitful, that he thought it better than any candle. He undressed, not quickly as his mother had told him, I fear, standing at the curtainless window and staring out, up rather, where the clouds were still fussing about "as if they were dusting the moon's face," said Gratian to himself, laughing softly at this new fancy. And even after he was in bed he peeped out from time to time to watch the queer shadows and gleams, the quickly following light and darkness that flitted across the white walls of his little room. It was only an attic, but I think almost any little boy would have thought it a nice room. Mrs. Conyfer kept it beautifully clean to begin with, and there was a fireplace, and a good cupboard in the wall, and a splendid view of moor and sky from the window. Gratian was very proud of his room; he had only had it a short time, only since the day he was nine years old, and it made him feel he was really growing a big boy. But to-night he was hardly in his usual good spirits. It weighed on his mind that the teacher at the Sunday School had been displeased with him; for he knew him to be kind and patient, and Gratian liked to win his smile of approval.

"It is always the same with me," thought the little boy, "at school every day too I am the stupidest. I wish there were no lessons in the world. I wish there were only birds, and lambs, and hills, and moors, and the wind – most of all the wind, and no books – no books, and –"

But here he fell asleep!

When he woke the room was quite dark; the clouds had hung their dusters over the moon's face by mistake perhaps, or else she had got tired of shining and had turned in for a nap, thought Gratian sleepily. He shut his eyes again, and curled himself round the other way, and would have been asleep again in half a minute, but for a sound which suddenly reached his ears. Some one was talking near him! Gratian opened his eyes again, forgetting that that could not help him to hear, and listened. Yes, it was a voice – two voices; he heard one stop and the other reply, and now and then they seemed to be talking together, and gradually as he listened he discovered that they came from the direction of the fireplace. Could it be the voices of his father and mother coming up from below, through the chimney, somehow? No, their voices were not so strangely soft and sadly sweet; besides their room was not under his, nor did they ever talk in the middle of the night.

"They are too sleepy for that," thought Gratian with a little smile. For the farmer and his wife were very hard-working, and even on Sunday they were tired. It was a long walk to church, and unless the weather were very bad they always went twice.

Gratian listened again, more intently than ever. The voices went on; he could distinguish the different tones – more than two he began to fancy. But how provoking it was; he *could* not catch the words. And from the strain of listening he almost began to fall asleep again, when at last – yes, there was no doubt of it now – he caught the sound of his own name.

"Gratian, Gra – tian," in a very soft inquiring tone; "ye – es, he is a good boy on the whole, but he is foolish too. He is wasting his time."

"Sadly so – sad – ly so – o," hummed back the second voice. "He only dreams – dreams are very well in their way, they are a beginning sometimes, so – me – ti – mes. But he will never do anything even with his dreams unless he works too – wo – orks too."

"Ah no – no – o. All must work save the will-o'-the-wisps, and what good are they? What good are the – ey?"

Then the two, or the three, maybe even the four, Gratian could not be sure but that there were perhaps four, voices seemed all to hum together, "What good are the – ey?" Till with a sudden rushing call one broke in with a new cry.

"Sisters," it said, "we must be off. Our work awai – aits us, awai – aits us."

And softly they all faded away, or was it perhaps that Gratian fell asleep?

He woke the next morning with a confused remembrance of what he had heard, and for some little time he could not distinguish how much he had dreamt from what had reached his ears before he fell asleep. For all through the night a vague feeling had haunted him of the soft, humming murmur, and two or three times when he half woke and turned on his side, he seemed to hear again the last echoes of the voices in the chimney.

"But it couldn't have been them," he said to himself as he sat up in his little bed, his hands clasped round his knees, as he was very fond of sitting; "they said they were going away to their work. What work could they have – voices, just voices in the chimney? And they said I was wasting my time. What did they mean? *I'm* not like a will-o'-the-wisp; I don't dance about and lead people into bogs. I – "

But just then his mother's voice sounded up the stairs.

"Gratian – aren't you up yet? Father is out, and the breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. Quick, quick, my boy."

Gratian started; he put one pink foot out of bed and looked at it as if he had never seen five toes before, then he put out the other, and at last found himself altogether on the floor. It was rather a chilly morning, and he was only allowed cold water in a queer old tub that he could remember being dreadfully afraid of when he was a *very* little boy – it had seemed so big to him then. But he was not so babyish now; he plunged bravely into the old tub, and the shock of the cold completely awakened him, so that he looked quite bright and rosy when he came into the kitchen a few minutes later.

His mother looked up from the pot of oatmeal porridge she was ladling out into little bowls for the breakfast.

"That's right," she said; "you look better than you did last night. Try and have a good day at school to-day, Gratian. Monday's always the best day for a fresh start."

Gratian listened, but did not answer. It generally took him a good while to get his speeches ready, except perhaps when he was alone with Jonas and Watch. It seemed easier to him to speak to Jonas than to anybody else. He began eating his porridge – slowly, porridge and milk spoonfuls turn about, staring before him as he did so.

"Mother," he said at last, "is it naughty to dream?"

"Naughty to dream," repeated his mother, "what do you mean? To dream when you're asleep?"

"No – I don't think it's that kind," began the child, but his mother interrupted him. Her own words of the night before returned to her mind. Could Gratian have overheard them?

"You mean dreaming when you should be working, perhaps?" she said. "Well, yes – without saying it's naughty, it's certainly not good. It's wasting one's time. Everybody's got work to do in this world, and it needs all one's attention. You'll find it out for yourself, but it's a good thing to find it out young. Most things are harder to learn old than young, Gratian."

Gratian listened, but again without speaking.

"It's very queer," he was thinking to himself – "mother says the same thing."

CHAPTER II AT SCHOOL

"But there all apart,
On his little seat
A little figure is set awry."

C. C. Fraser Tytler

Gratian shouldered his satchel and set off to school. He had some new thoughts in his head this morning, but still he was not too busy with them to forget to look about him. It was evident that old Jonas had been right; the storm spirits had been about in the night. The fallen autumn leaves which had been lying in heaps the day before were scattered everywhere, the little pools of water left by yesterday's rain had almost disappeared, overhead the clouds were gradually settling down in quiet masses as if tired and sleepy with the rushing about of the night before.

It was always fresh up at Four Winds Farm, but to-day there was a particularly brisk and inspiring feeling in the air; and as Gratian ran down the bit of steep hill between the gate and the road which he partially followed to school, he laughed to himself as a little wind came kissing him on the cheek.

"Good morning, wind," he said aloud. "Which of them are you, I wonder?" And some old verses he had often heard his mother say came into his head —

"North winds send hail,
South winds bring rain,
East winds we bewail,
West winds, blow amain."

"I think you must be west wind, but you're not blowing amain this morning. Never mind; you can when you like, I know. *You* can work with a will. There now – how funny – I'm saying it myself; I wonder if that's what the voices meant I should do – work with a will, work with a will," and Gratian sang the words over softly to himself as he ran along.

As I said, his road to school was great part of the way nothing but a sheep-track. It was not that there did not exist a proper road, but this proper road, naturally enough, went winding about a good deal, for it was meant for carts and horses as well as or more than for little boys, and no carts or horses could ever have got along it had the road run in a direct line from the Farm to the village. For the village lay low and the Farm very high. Gratian followed the road for the first half-mile or so, that is to say as long as he could have gained nothing by quitting it, but then came a corner at which he left it to meander gradually down the high ground, while he scrambled over a low wall of loose stones and found himself on what he always considered his own particular path. At this point began the enjoyment of his walk, for a few minutes carried him round the brow of the hill, out of sight of the road and of everything save the sky above and the great stretching moorland beneath. And this was what Gratian loved. He used to throw himself on the short tufty grass, his elbows on the ground, and his chin in his hands – his satchel wherever it liked, and lie there gazing and dreaming and wishing he could stay thus always.

He did the same this morning, but somehow his dreams were not quite so undisturbed. He was no longer sure that he would like to lie there always doing nothing but dreaming, and now that he had got this idea into his head everything about him seemed to be repeating it. He looked at the heather,

faded and dull now, and remembered how, a while ago, the bees had been hard at work on the moors gathering their stores. "What a lot of trouble it must be to make honey!" he thought. He felt his own little rough coat, and smiled to think that not so very long ago it had been walking about the hills on a different back. "It isn't much trouble for the sheep to let their wool grow, certainly," he said to himself, "but it's a lot of work for lots of people before wool is turned into a coat for a little boy. Nothing can be done without work, I suppose, and I'd rather be a bee than a sheep a good deal, though I'd rather be old Watch than either, and *he* works hard – yes, he certainly does."

And then suddenly he remembered that if he didn't bestir himself he would be late at school, which wouldn't be at all the good start his mother had advised him to make as it was Monday morning.

He went on pretty steadily for the rest of the way, only stopping about six times, and that not for long together, otherwise he certainly would not have got to school before morning lessons were over. But, as it was, he got an approving nod from the teacher for being in very good time. For the teacher could not help liking Gratian, though, as a pupil, he gave him plenty of trouble, seeming really sometimes as if he *could* not learn.

"And yet," thought the master – for he was a young man who did think – "one cannot look into the child's face without seeing there are brains behind it, and brains of no common kind maybe. But I haven't got the knack of making him use them; for nine years old he is exceedingly stupid."

Things went better to-day. Gratian was full of his new ideas and really meant to try. But even trying with all one's might and main won't build Rome in a day. Gratian had idled and dreamed through lesson-time too often to lose the bad habit all at once. He saw himself passed as usual by children younger than he, who had been a much shorter time at school, and his face grew very melancholy, and two or three big tears gathered more than once in his eyes while he began to say in his own mind that trying was no good.

Morning school was over at twelve; most of the children lived in the village, and some but a short way off, so that they could easily run home for their dinner and be back in time for afternoon lessons; Gratian Conyfer was the only one whose home was too far off for him to go back in the middle of the day. So he brought his dinner with him and ate it in winter beside the schoolroom fire, in summer in a corner of the playground, where, under a tree, stood an old bench. This was the dining-room he liked best, and though now summer was past and autumn indeed fast fading into winter, Gratian had not yet deserted his summer quarters, and here the schoolmaster found him half an hour or so before it was time for the children's return.

"Are you not cold there, my boy?" he asked kindly.

"No, thank you, sir," Gratian answered, and looking more closely at him the master saw he had been crying.

"What is the matter, Gratian?" he asked. "You've not been quarrelling or fighting I'm sure, you never do, and as for lessons they went a bit better to-day, I think, didn't they?"

But at these words Gratian only turned his face to the wall and wept – wiping his eyes from time to time on the cuff of the linen blouse which he wore at school over his coat.

The schoolmaster's heart was touched, though he was pretty well used to tears. But Gratian's seemed different somehow.

"What is it, my boy?" he said again.

"It's – it's just that, sir – lessons, I mean. I did try, sir. I meant to work with a will, I did indeed."

"But you did do better. I knew you were trying," said the teacher quietly.

Gratian lifted his tear stained face and looked at the master in surprise.

"Did you, sir?" he said. "It seemed to me to go worser and worser."

"No, I didn't think so. And sometimes, Gratian, when we think we are doing worse, it shows we are really doing better. We're getting up a little higher, you see, and beginning to look on and to see how far we have to go, and that we might have got on faster. When we're not climbing at all, but just staying lazily at the foot of the hill, we don't know anything about how steep and high it is."

Gratian had quite left off crying by now and was listening attentively. The master's words needed no explanation to him; he had caught the sense and meaning at once.

"Everybody has to work if they're to do any good, haven't they, sir?" he asked.

"*Everybody*," agreed the master.

"But wouldn't it be better if everybody *liked* their work – couldn't they do it better if they did?" he asked. "That's what I'm vexed about, partly. I don't *like* lessons, sir," he said in a tone of deep conviction. "I'm afraid I'm too stupid ever to like them."

The schoolmaster could scarcely keep from smiling.

"You're not so very old yet, Gratian," he said. "It's just possible you may change. Besides, in some ways the beginning's the worst. You can't read very easily yet – not well enough to enjoy reading to yourself?"

"No, sir," said the boy, hanging his head again.

"Well, then, wait a while and see if you don't change about books and lessons."

"And if I don't ever change," said Gratian earnestly. "Can people ever do things well that they don't like doing?"

The schoolmaster looked at him. It was a curious question for a boy of nine years old.

"Yes," he said, "I hope so, indeed," and his mind went back to a time when he had looked forward to being something very different from a village schoolmaster, when he could have fancied no employment could be less to his liking than teaching. "I hope so, indeed," he repeated. "And if you work with a will you – get to like the work whatever it is."

"Thank you, sir," said the boy, and the master turned away. Then a thought struck him.

"What do you best like doing, Gratian?"

The boy hesitated. Then he grew a little red.

"It isn't doing anything really," he said; "it's what mother calls dreaming – out on the moors, sir, that's the best of all – with the wind all about, and nothing but it and the moor and the sky. And the feel of it keeps in me. Even when I'm at home in the kitchen by the fire, if I shut my eyes I can fancy it."

The master nodded his head.

"Dreaming is no harm in its right place. But if one did nothing but dream, the dreams would lose their colour, I expect."

"That's something like what *they* said, again," thought the boy to himself.

The schoolmaster walked away. "A child with something uncommon about him, I fancy," he said in his mind. "One sees that sometimes in a child living as much alone with nature as he does. But I scarcely think he's clever, and then the rough daily life will most likely nip in the bud any sort of poetry or imagination that there may be germs of."

He didn't quite understand Gratian, and then, too, he didn't take into account what it is to be born under the protection of the four winds of heaven.

But Gratian felt much happier after his talk with the master, and afternoon lessons went better. They were generally easier than the morning ones, and often more interesting. This afternoon it was a geography lesson. The master drew out the great frame with the big maps hanging on it, and explained to the children as he went along. It was about the north to-day, far away up in the north, where the ice-fields spread for hundreds of miles and everything is in a sleep of whiteness and silence. And Gratian listened with parted lips and earnest eyes. He seemed to see it all. "I wish I knew as much as he does," he thought. "I wish I could read it in books to myself."

And for the first time there came home to him a faint, shadowy feeling of what books are – of the treasures buried in the rows and rows of little black letters that he so often wished had never been invented.

"Yes," he said to himself, "I'll try to learn so that I can read it all to myself."

It was growing already a little dusk when he set off on his walk home. The evenings were beginning "to draw in" as the country folk say.

But little cared the merry throng who poured out of the schoolroom gate as five o'clock rang from the church clock, chattering, racing, tumbling over each other, pushing, pulling, shouting, but all in play. For they are a good-natured set, though rough and ready – these hardy moor children. And they grow into honest and sturdy men and women, hospitable and kindly, active and thrifty, though they care for little beyond their own corner of the world, and would scarcely find it out if all the books and "learning" in existence were suddenly made an end of.

There are mischievous imps among them, nevertheless, and none was more so than Tony, the miller's son. He meant no harm, but he loved teasing, and Gratian, gentle and silent, was often a tempting victim. This evening, as sometimes happened, a dozen or so of the children whose homes lay at the end of the village, past which was the road to the Farm, went on together.

"We'll run a bit of the road home with thee, Gratian," said Tony.

And though the boy did not much care for their company, he thought it would be unfriendly to say so, nor did he like to refuse when Tony insisted on carrying his satchel for him. "There's no books in mine," he said; "I took them home at dinner-time, and I'm sure your shoulders will be aching before you get to the Farm with the weight of yours. My goodness, how many books have you got in it? I say," as he pretended to examine them, "here's Gratian Conyfer going to be head o' the school, and put us all to shame with his learning."

But as Gratian said nothing he seemed satisfied, and after stopping a minute or two to arrange the satchel again, ran after the others.

"It's getting dark, Tony," said his sister Dolly, "we mustn't go farther. Good-night, Gratian, we've brought you a bit of your way – Tony, and Ralph, and I," for the other children had gradually fallen off.

"Yes – a good mile of it, thank you, Dolly. And thank you, Tony, for helping me with my satchel – that's right, thank you," as Tony was officiously fastening it on.

"Good-night," said Tony; "you're no coward any way, Gratian. I shouldn't like to have all that way to go in the dark, for it will be dark soon. There are queer things to be seen on the moor after sunset, folks say."

"Ay, so they say," said Ralph.

"I'll be home in no time," Gratian called back. For he did not know what fear was.

But after he had ran awhile, he felt more tired than usual. Was it perhaps the fit of crying he had had at dinner-time that made him so weary? He plodded on, however, shifting his satchel from time to time, it felt so strangely heavy, and queer tales he had heard of the little mountain man that would jump on your shoulders, and cling on till he had strangled you, unless you remembered the right spell to force him off with; or of the brownies who catch children with invisible ropes, and make them run round and round without their knowing they have left the straight road, till they drop with fatigue, came into his mind.

"There must be something wrong with my satchel," he said at last, and he pulled it round so that he could open it. He drew his hand out with a cry of vexation and distress. Tony, yes it must have been Tony – though at first he was half-inclined to think the mountain men or the brownies had been playing their tricks on him – Tony had filled the satchel with heavy stones, and had no doubt taken out the books at the time he was pretending to examine them. It was too bad. And what had he done with the books?

"He may have taken them home with him, he may have hidden them and get them as he passes by, or he may have left them on the moor, and if it rains they'll be spoilt, and the copy-books are sure to blow away."

For in his new ardour, Gratian had brought home books of all kinds, meaning to work so well that his master should be quite astonished the next day, and the poor little fellow sat down on the heather, his arms and shoulders aching and sore, and let the tears roll down his face.

Suddenly a slight sound, something between a murmur and a rustle, some little way from him, made him look round. It was an unusually still evening; Gratian had scarcely ever known the moorland road so still – it could not be the wind then! He looked round him curiously, and for a moment or two forgot his troubles in his wonder as to what it could be. There it was, again, and the boy started to his feet.

CHAPTER III

FLYING VISITS

"I see thee not, I clasp thee not;
Yet feel I thou art nigh."

To the Summer Wind.—Sir Noel Paton

Yes – he heard it again, and this time it sounded almost like voices speaking. He turned to the side whence it came, and to his surprise, in the all but darkness, there glimmered for an instant or two a sudden light. It was scarcely indeed to be called light; it was more like the reflection of faint colour on the dark background.

"It is like a black rainbow," said Gratian to himself. "I wonder if there are some sorts of rainbows that come in the night. I wonder –" but suddenly a waft of soft though fresh air on his cheek made him start. All around him, but an instant before, had been so still that he could not understand it, and his surprise was not lessened when a voice sounded close to his ear.

"What about your books, Gratian? How are you going to find them?"

The boy turned to look who was speaking. His first thought was that one of his companions, knowing of the trick Tony had played him, had run after him with the books. But the figure beside him was not that of one of his companions – was it that of any one at all? Gratian rubbed his eyes; the faint light that remained, – the last rays of reflected sunset – were more bewildering than decided night; was it fancy that he had heard a voice speaking? was it fancy that he had seen a waving, fluttering form beside him?

No, there it was again; softly moving garments, with something of a green radiance on them, a sweet, fair face, like a face in a dream, seen but for an instant and then hidden again by a wave of mist that seemed to come between it and him, a gentle yet cheery voice repeating again —

"What of the books, Gratian? How are you going to find them?"

"I don't know," said the boy. "Who are you? How do you know about them, and can you help me to find them?"

But the sound of his own voice, rough and sharp, and yet thick it somehow seemed, in comparison with the soft clearness of the tones he had just heard, fell on his ears strangely. It seemed to awake him.

"Am I dreaming?" he said to himself. "There is no one there. How silly of me to speak to nobody! I might as well be speaking to the wind!"

"Exactly," said the voice, followed this time by a little burst of the sweetest laughter Gratian had ever heard. "Come, Gratian, don't be so dull; what's wrong with your eyes? Come, dear, if you do want to find your books, that's to say. You see me now, don't you?"

And again the fresh waft passed across his cheeks, and again the flutter of radiant green and the fair face caught his eyes.

"Yes," he said, "I see you now – or – or I did see you half a second ago," for even while he said it the vision had seemed to fade.

"That's right – then come."

He was opening his lips to ask how and where, but he had not time, nor did he need to do so. The breeze, slight as it was, seemed to draw him onwards, and the faint, quivering green light gleamed out from moment to moment before him. It was evident which way he was to go. Only for an instant a misgiving came over him and he hesitated.

"I say," he called out, "you mustn't be offended, but you're not a will-o'-the-wisp, are you? I don't want to follow one of them. They're no good."

Again the soft laughter, but it sounded kind and pleasant, not the least mocking.

"That's right. Never have anything to say to will-o'-the-wisps, Gratian. But I'm not one – see – I keep on my way. I don't dance and jerk from side to side."

It was true; it was wonderful how fast she – if it were she, the voice sounded like a woman's – got over the ground and Gratian after her, without faltering or stumbling or even getting out of breath.

"Here we are," she said, "stoop down Gratian – there are your books hidden beside the furze bush at your feet. And it is going to rain; they would have been quite spoilt by morning even if I had done my best. It was an ugly trick of Master Tony's. There now, have you got them?"

"Yes, thank you," said Gratian, fumbling for his satchel, still hanging round his shoulders, though to his surprise empty, for he did not remember having thrown the stones out, "I have got them all now. Thank you *very* much whoever you are. I would like to kiss you if only I could see you long enough at a time."

But a breath like a butterfly's kiss fluttered on to his cheek, and the gleam of two soft bluey-green eyes seemed for the hundredth part of a second to dance into his own.

"I have kissed you," said the voice, now sounding farther away, "and not for the first nor the thousandth time if you had known it! But you are waking up a little now; our baby boy is learning to see and to hear and to feel. Good-bye – good-night, Gratian. Work your best with your books to-night – get home as fast as you can. By the bye it is late; shall I speed you on your way? You will know how far that is to-morrow morning – look for the furze bush on the right of the path when it turns for the last time, and you will see if I don't know how to help you home in no time."

And almost before the last words had faded, Gratian felt himself gently lifted off his feet – a rush, a soft whiz, and he was standing by the Farm gate, while before him shone out the warm ruddy glow from the unshuttered windows of the big kitchen, and his mother's voice, as she heard the latch click, called out to him —

"Is that you, Gratian? You are very late; if it had not been such a very still, beautiful evening I should really have begun to think you had been blown away coming over the moor."

And Gratian rubbed his eyes as he came blinking into the kitchen. His mother's words puzzled him, though he knew she was only joking. It *was* a very still night – that was the funny part of it.

"Why, you look for all the world as if you'd been having a nap, my boy," she went on, and Gratian stood rubbing his hands before the fire, wondering if perhaps he had. He was half-inclined to tell his mother of Tony's trick and what had come of it. But she might say he had dreamt it, and then it would seem ill-natured to Tony.

"And I don't want mother and father to think I'm always dreaming and fancying," he thought to himself, for just at that moment the farmer's footsteps were heard as he came in to supper. "Anyway I want them to see I mean to get on better at school than I have done."

He did not speak much at table, but he tried to help his mother by passing to her whatever she wanted, and jumping up to fetch anything missing. And it was a great pleasure when his father once or twice nodded and smiled at him approvingly.

"He's getting to be quite a handy lad – eh, mother?" he said.

As soon as supper was over and cleared away, Gratian set to work at his lessons with a light heart. It was wonderful how much easier and more interesting they seemed now that he really gave his whole attention, and especially since he had tried to understand what the teacher had said about them.

"If only I had tried like this before, how much further on I should be now," he could not help saying to himself with a sigh. "And the queer thing is, that the more I try the more I want to try. My head begins to feel so much tidier."

But with all the goodwill in the world, at nine years old a head cannot do *very* much at a time. Gratian had finished all the lessons he *had* to do for the next day and was going back in his books

with the wish to learn over again, and more thoroughly, much that he had not before really taken in or understood, when to his distress his poor little head bumped down on to the volume before him, and he found by the start that he was going to sleep! Still it wasn't very late – mother had said nothing yet about bed-time.

"It is that I have got into such a stupid, lazy way of learning, I suppose," he said to himself, getting up from his seat. "Perhaps the air will wake me up a bit," and he went through the little entrance hall and stood in the porch, looking out.

It was a very different night from the last. All was so still and calm that for once the name of the Farm did not seem to suit it.

Gratian leant against the door-post, looking up to the sky, and just then, like the evening before, old Jonas, followed by Watch, came round the corner.

"Good evening, Jonas," said the boy. "How quiet it is to-night! There wasn't much of a storm after all."

"No, Master Gratian," replied the shepherd; "I told you they were only a-knocking about a bit to keep their hands in;" and he too stood still and looked up at the sky.

"I don't like it so still as this," said the boy. "It doesn't seem right. I came out here for a breath of air to wake me up. I've been working hard at my lessons, Jonas; I'm going always to work hard now. But I wish I wasn't sleepy."

"Sign that you've worked enough for to-night, maybe," said Jonas. But as he spoke, Gratian started.

"Jonas," he said, "did you see a sort of light down there – across the grass there in front, a sort of golden-looking flash? ah, there it is again," and just at the same moment a soft, almost warm waft of air seemed to float across his face, and Gratian fancied he heard the words, "good boy, good boy."

"'Tis a breath of south wind getting up," said old Jonas quietly. "I've often thought to myself that there's colours in the winds, Master Gratian, though folk would laugh at me for an old silly if I said so."

"Colours," repeated Gratian, "do you mean many colours? I wasn't saying anything about the wind though, Jonas – did you feel it too? It was over there – look, Jonas – it seemed to come from behind the big bush."

"Due south, due south," said Jonas. "And golden yellow is my fancy for the south."

"And what for the north, and for the – " began Gratian eagerly, but his mother's voice interrupted him.

"Bedtime, Gratian," she called, "come and put away your books. You've done enough lessons for to-night."

Gratian gave himself a little shake of impatience.

"How tiresome," he said. "I am quite awake now. I want you to go on telling me about the winds, Jonas, and I want to do a lot more lessons. I can't go to bed yet," but even while the words were on his lips, he started and shivered. "Jonas, it can't be south wind. It's as cold as anything."

For a sharp keen gust had suddenly come round the corner, rasping the child's unprotected face almost "like a knife" as people sometimes say, and Watch, who had been rubbing his nose against Gratian, gave a snort of disgust.

"You see Watch feels it too," said the boy. But Jonas only turned a little and looked about him calmly.

"I can't say as I felt it, Master Gratian," he said. "But there's no answering for the winds and their freaks here at the Four Winds Farm, and it's but natural you should know more about 'em than most. All the same, I take it as you're feeling cold and chilly-like means as bed is the best place. You're getting sleepy – to say nothing of the Missus calling to ye to go."

And again the mother's voice was heard.

"Gratian, Gratian, my boy. Don't you hear me?"

He moved, but slowly. A little imp of opposition had taken up its abode in the boy. Perhaps he had been feeling too pleased with his own good resolutions and beginnings!

"Too bad," he muttered to himself, "just when I was getting to understand my lessons better. Old Jonas is very stupid."

Again the short, sharp cutting slap of cold air on his face, and in spite of himself the boy moved more quickly.

"Good-night, Jonas," he said rather grumpily, though he would not let himself shiver for fear he should again be told it showed he was sleepy, "I'm going. I'm not at all tired, but I'm going all the same. Only how you can say it's south wind – !"

"I don't say so now. I said it *was* south – that soft feeling as if one could see the glow of the south in it. Like enough it's east by now; isn't this where all the winds meet? Well, I'm off too. Good-night, master."

"And you'll tell me about all the colours another time, won't you, Jonas?" said Gratian in a mollified tone.

"Or you'll tell me, maybe," said the old man. "Never fear – we'll have some good talks over it. Out on the moor some holiday, with nobody but the sheep and Watch to hear our fancies – that's the best time – isn't it?"

And the old shepherd whistled to the dog and disappeared round the corner of the house.

His mother met Gratian at the kitchen door.

"I was coming out to look for you," she said. "Put away your books now. You'd do no more good at them to-night."

"I wasn't sleepy, mother. I went to the door to wake myself up," he replied. But his tone was no longer fretful or cross.

"Feeling you needed waking up was something very like being sleepy," she answered smiling. "And all the lessons you have to learn are not to be found in your books, Gratian."

He did not at once understand, but he kept the words in his mind to think over.

"Good-night, mother," and he lifted his soft round face for her kiss.

"Good-night, my boy. Father has gone out to the stable to speak to one of the men. I'll say good-night to him for you. Pleasant dreams, and get up as early as you like if you want to work more."

"Mother," said Gratian hesitatingly.

"Well?"

"Is it a good thing to be born where the four winds meet?"

She laughed.

"I can't say," she replied. "It's not done you any harm so far. But don't begin getting your head full of fancies, my boy. Off with you to bed, and get to sleep as fast as you can. Pleasant dreams."

"But, mother," said the child as he went upstairs, "dreams are fancies."

"Yes, but they don't waste our time. There's no harm in dreaming when we're asleep – we can't be doing aught else then."

"Oh," said Gratian, "it's dreaming in the day that wastes time then."

He was turning the corner of the stair as he said so, speaking more to himself than to his mother. Just then a little waft of air came right in his face. It was not the sharp touch that had made him start at the door, nor was it the soft warm breath which old Jonas said was the south wind. Rather did it remind Gratian of the kindly breeze and the sea-green glimmerings on the moor. He stood still for an instant. Again it fluttered by him, and he heard the words, "Not always, Gratian; not always."

"What was I saying?" he asked himself. "Ah yes – that it is dreaming in the day that is a waste of time! And now she says 'Not always.' You are very puzzling people whoever you are," he went on; "you whose voices I hear in the chimney, and who seem to know all I am thinking whether I say it or not."

And as he lifted his little face towards the corner whence the sudden draught had come, there fell on his ears the sound of rippling laughter – the merriest and yet softest laughter he had ever heard, and in which several voices seemed to mingle. So near it seemed at first that he could have fancied it came from the old granary on the other side of the wooden partition shutting off the staircase, but again, in an instant, it seemed to dance and flicker itself away, till nothing remained but a faint ringing echo, which might well be no more than the slight rattle of the glass in the old casement window.

Then all was silent, and the boy went on to his own room, and was soon covered up and fast asleep in his little white bed.

There were no voices in the chimney that night, or if there were Gratian did not hear them. But he had a curious dream.

CHAPTER IV

A RAINBOW DANCE

"Purple and azure, white and green and golden,
and they whirl
Over each other with a thousand motions."

Prometheus Unbound.—*Shelley*

He dreamt that he awoke, and found himself not in his comfortable bed in his own room, but in an equally comfortable but much more uncommon bed in a very different place. Out on the moor! He opened his eyes and stared about him in surprise; there were the stars, up overhead, all blinking and winking at him as if asking what business a little boy had out there among them all in the middle of the night. And when he did find out where he was, he felt still more surprised at being so warm and cozy. For he felt perfectly so, even though he had neither blankets nor sheets nor pillow, but instead of all these a complete nest of the softest moss all about him. He was lying on it, and it covered him over as perfectly as a bird is covered by its feathers.

"Dear me," he said to himself, "this is very funny. How have I got here, and who has covered me up like this?"

But still he did not feel so excessively surprised as if he had been awake; for in dreams, as everybody knows, any surprise one feels quickly disappears, and one is generally very ready to take things as they come. So he lay still, just quietly gazing about him. And gradually a murmur of approaching sound caught his ears. It was like soft voices and fluttering garments and breezes among trees, all mixed together, till as it came nearer the voices detached themselves from the other sounds, and he heard what they were saying.

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