

Molesworth Mrs.

Fairies Afield



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Mary Louisa Molesworth

Fairies Afield

"Ask the Robin"

Once upon a time – a fairly long ago time – there lived in a neat little cottage two young girls who were sisters. If you had gone to see them on a bright warm summer's day, I daresay you would have envied them and their life and their lot. For they were pretty and healthy and they loved each other dearly, and the cottage was charming to look at, in its dress of clustering roses and honeysuckle and traveller's joy, and other sweet and beautiful climbing, flowering plants. Furthermore, it stood in a little garden filled with treasures of different kinds, pansies, of which there was a great variety, and lilies and mignonette and all the flowers one loves to see in an old-fashioned garden of the kind. And the sisters kept it in perfect order, the beds were always raked, there was never a weed to be seen, the tiny plots of grass were like velvet.

In spring too it was very pretty, when first the snowdrops and then the crocuses and primroses and violets woke up after their long winter sleep, and in autumn also there was a show of beauties, dahlias and chrysanthemums and kitchen pokers and other pretty things of the season.

And indeed, even in winter, the place had its charm, of evergreen shrubs and bright berries and – till the snow came and made an end of all but the hardiest plants, the still remaining lovely variegated leaves of late autumn.

No care or skill was wanting to keep the whole as pretty as could possibly be, for the sisters' father was a gardener, and from him they had learnt both love of growing things and knowledge of all needed for their welfare. And not so very long before this story begins I doubt if Aria or Linde – these were the girls' names – cared what time of year it was, for all were happy days to them. Glowing summer, sparkling spring, rich mellow autumn, even winter, often cold and grey – all brought joy and gladness, till one sad night terrible sorrow fell upon them. Their father was drowned on his way home from market, in crossing a swollen stream, whose rushing waters broke down the little wooden bridge, over which in the darkness he was driving his small pony-cart. And as the poor girls' mother had died years before, they were now truly orphans.

The neighbours – such as there were, for there were but few – were sorry for them and kind, as far as they could be. But it was a lonely part of the world. The gardens where the drowned man had been one of the labourers belonged to a rich landowner who seldom visited his property, and all that the place produced was sent to the nearest town and there sold. Thus there was no one of importance to take much interest in Aria or Linde, except the steward of the castle, who advised them to look for situations as servants, and when they wept and said they could not bear to be parted, he got angry and called them fools and left them alone.

For a short time they got on pretty well. They were still very young – Aria barely seventeen and Linde only fourteen, but they were active and capable and ready-witted, and their father had managed to save a little, though, alas, but a little.

Aria made it last as long as she possibly could. It was summer, and they needed but small fires and cheaper clothing and even – so it seemed to them – simpler food than in the cold weather. Then they were able to earn a fair amount by odd work in the hay-fields and so on, when work was at its best. And once a week, at least, they trudged all the way to market laden with their loveliest flowers, tied up with great taste and care, and sometimes, as the season advanced, baskets full of the wild fruit that they gathered in the forest hard by. Have I told you that their home was on the edge of a forest? No? Ah well, never mind, we shall hear more of the forest by and by.

But summer, and even autumn, only stay for their appointed time. As they stood at the cottage door one morning late in October, Aria's face grew very grave. It was a chilly day, the sky overcast and steely, a sort of sighing in the air as if the spirits of the summer and the sunshine were bidding the world a reluctant farewell, frightened away by the fast-approaching winter.

It was Friday, the day before the market, to which so far they had never missed wending their way, even if the weather were wet or stormy, as it must be now and then at all times of the year.

"How dull and cold it is!" said Linde with a little shiver. "Aria, I wish we didn't need to go all the way to market to-morrow, if it's going to be like this."

Aria looked at her without speaking for a moment. Then she said very seriously:

"You are thoughtless, Linde, but then of course you are much younger than I, poor child. You say you wish we need not go to the town to-morrow? My dear, I am only afraid that your wish will come true! I don't see what we have to take to market – the fruit is all over and we have but very few flowers to tie up."

Linde's face fell. Then she brightened up a little.

"There are lots of lovely leaves," she said.

Aria glanced over the garden.

"Yes," she replied. "I think we may manage two or three good bunches for to-morrow, and possibly for another Saturday too. And –" she went on, "it has struck me that some of the townsfolk, who are always glad to buy our flowers, might care for our dried rose-leaves – we have quite a large jar-full, you know."

Linde clapped her hands.

"What a good idea!" she cried. "Oh I'm sure the leaves would sell. So few of the ladies in the town have proper gardens of their own."

"Or time to look after them, luckily for us," said Aria, "otherwise our flowers would not be in such request."

For though little Linde spoke of their customers as "ladies," the good housekeepers of the small but busy town were mostly of the working-class themselves – that is to say, wives or mothers of the men employed in the china manufactories on which the place depended, and in those days, long, long before railway lines, there were no such things as flower shops. The only chance of getting fresh garden produce was the market.

"Luckily for us too," Aria went on, "there are no great gardens near, except at the castle, and father often said it was hard work to keep the countess supplied with flowers enough, even though she sent express messengers for them twice a week."

"All the same," said Linde rather dolefully, "I wish father hadn't been a gardener. Flowers are so delicate and wither so soon. If we'd had a little dairy now – or even poultry, and could have sold butter and eggs, and chickens. They'd have gone on all the year round."

"Linde, dear, father never had money enough to buy cows or even poultry," said Aria with a sigh. "And it would have been difficult to get much to the market, so far off as it is, without a cart and pony, and how could we have bought these?"

For the pony which had perished with the poor man was the property of his master, though he was sometimes allowed to carry shrubs and bulbs of his own to market, with the castle vegetables, when he went to sell them at the town.

Linde did not answer. Her spirits were very apt to go up and down all in a minute, so Aria spoke again more cheerfully.

"Yes," she said, "I'm glad I thought of the rose-leaves. They are really most fragrant still. I lifted the lid yesterday for a moment. The powder that father gave me to throw among them was wonderfully good. I wish we had more of it."

"Is it quite done?" asked Linde.

"Very nearly. It was given to mother, you know, when she was a bride by an old woman who was her godmother. She declared it had fairy power and would never grow stale. And so it has proved. We may safely promise any who buy the leaves that they will scent their linen even better than lavender, and more lastingly. Come along, Linde, and let's see how we can best take a good parcel of them with us to-morrow," and Linde's interest revived again, as she followed her sister indoors.

The dried leaves – what are often called "pot pourri," though the simple sisters had never heard the name – were kept in a very large jar, of old-fashioned stoneware. It had a lid, and would nowadays be highly valued as rare and antique. But of this its owners knew nothing. They only loved it for their parents' sake, as it too had been a wedding gift from the godmother. And whence she had got it no one had ever known. She was herself a rather mysterious person. Folks used to say – so Aria remembered having heard when she was a little girl, helping her mother to gather rose-leaves to fill the jar – that there was something of fairy nature about her.

"And however that may have been," said Aria, as she repeated this to Linde, "certainly her gifts have proved lasting. The jar has been knocked over several times, you know, and never broken, and the powder is as fresh as a newly gathered rose."

"Yes," Linde agreed, after a good long sniff at the jar's contents. "It's delicious. It makes me think of all sorts of lovely summer things."

Then they consulted as to how they could best carry the precious leaves to the market for sale.

"We needn't take them *all*," pleaded Linde. "I do wish we needn't sell any. It seems a shame."

"Almost," her sister replied, "but it can't be helped. If only I had had more of the powder," she repeated, "we might have collected and dried quantities of rose-leaves."

"Or if we knew how to make the powder," said Linde.

But that knowledge was not to be had.

Aria had reached down the jar, which stood on a high shelf in a corner, and the fragrance seemed to fill the room.

"Leave off sniffing it, Linde, dear," she said, for the child kept bending over it, "and let us plan how to take the leaves to market. We can't of course carry the jar, but it wouldn't do only to pack them in a sheet of paper. Ah, I have it," and she ran up the tiny ladder-like staircase which led to their little bedroom above, returning with a good-sized old-fashioned box or canister of tin, with a firm lid. "The very thing," she exclaimed joyously.

"It will be dreadfully clumsy and heavy to carry," objected Linde.

"Oh no, I can easily manage it, and a bunch or two of flowers as well, without being overladen," said Aria. "And see here, Linde, I will take this little cup," and she held up a small mug of lustre ware, "I fancy it will hold about two ounces weight of the leaves. For that quantity say we charge half a groat – and if we are lucky enough to sell twenty or even twelve cups full, that will get us through next week beautifully."

Then she filled the little cup and weighed its contents. They were just over her idea. And Linde's spirits rose again as she helped her sister to cleanse the canister from every speck of dust or mould and then to fill it with the perfumed leaves.

All that day the cottage seemed pervaded by the fragrance. Accidentally a few of the leaves and some grains of the powder fell among Linde's curly hair, and when she brushed it out at night she was amused at its scent. It was not to be wondered at perhaps, that as her head lay on the pillow she should have dreamt of the jar and its contents and the old mystery associated with them.

This was her dream.

She thought that she and her sister were standing at their usual corner of the market-place, their posies of flowers and large bunches of autumn leaves carefully arranged before them on the rough wooden table, the tin canister in the middle and a little heap of the leaves displayed in front of it. It seemed very early, there were scarcely any people about. Suddenly up came a small old woman, a stranger and what Linde would have called "a foreigner," for her dress was either that of another

country or of a date already quite passed out of fashion. She glanced at the flowers, and appeared to be passing on, when she caught sight of the little heap of dried leaves, on which she stopped short and Linde felt a pair of bright eyes fixed on her. Then the stranger smiled and nodded, and, bending towards the child, murmured in her ear the mysterious words: "Three times, and then ask the robin."

"How – what do you mean?" exclaimed Linde in her dream, trying to catch hold of the owner of the piercing eyes, as she turned away. But before the little girl could touch her, she was gone, and in the start of disappointment Linde awoke.

"What a queer dream," she said to herself, as she lay thinking of it. "I wish Aria were awake, I do so want to tell it her."

But Aria was fast asleep, her face looking so peaceful in the moonlight that Linde was too unselfish to wish to disturb her, for of late she knew well that the elder girl's waking hours were full of anxiety.

"I must wait till the morning," thought the child, and turning round she herself was soon in a dreamless slumber.

The next day Aria listened with great interest to Linde's story.

"It is queer," she agreed. "It almost sounds like a message from mother's uncanny godmother."

"Don't call her 'uncanny,'" Linde objected. "It's rather a frightening sort of word, and she mightn't like it. Supposing," she went on, lowering her voice, "*supposing* she really was a fairy, or partly one, she may be back in fairyland for all we know, and some day we might see her."

But Aria shook her head.

"No," she said, "she very likely had dealings with the fairies, but that isn't the same as being one herself."

"I'll keep a good look-out for her, nevertheless, at the market to-day," Linde replied.

And so she did. But no one at all resembling the quaint figure in her dream was to be seen, and after a while Linde forgot about her, so busy were the sisters that morning in selling their wares.

The first of their usual customers, a kindly, well-to-do, housewifely woman, who had known their father and always came to them for flowers, was at once attracted by the delicious perfume of the dried leaves.

"Dear, dear," she exclaimed, "it's not often that late autumn flowers are so fragrant. Your posies are always fresh and sweet, but I've never known their scent so beautiful," and she sniffed with satisfaction, looking about to discover from which of the flowers it came.

"It's not the flowers," explained Aria to the good dame. "It's something new we have for sale to-day. I only hope that you and our other customers may take a fancy to it," and she went on to tell of the pleasant qualities of the dried rose-leaves – how their scent, if they were laid among linen, was both fresher and more delicate to begin with, and lasted much longer than that of the finest lavender. But she said nothing of the sort of mystery connected with the powder; some instinct prevented her doing so. Nor did she tell that but a little of it remained, or that their stock of rose-leaves would soon be exhausted.

"Who knows what may happen before that?" she reflected, and the words of Linde's dream-visitor recurred to her, "Three times, and then ask the robin."

Dame Barbara was quite satisfied and greatly delighted.

"Here," she said, fumbling for her substantial purse, "a groat for two ounces of it, did you say? No, a half-groat only? My dear, you'll have to raise your prices if the perfume is so excellent! Well to begin with, give me the four ounces straight away, and here's a half-groat over and above what it all comes to – dried leaves and fresh ones and flowers, all together – just the tiny silver piece for luck, you know."

Aria and Linde smiled and thanked her. And the thanks were repeated, when, as she turned away, she called out, "I'll be the first to tell my cronies of this. Dear, dear, I feel as if I were in a

fairy garden myself with the pleasure of the perfume. I had no idea that the robins' forest had such treasures of roses. For you live in the forest, do you not, or close by?"

"Yes, just at its edge," they replied, "but," Linde went on eagerly, "we never knew it was called after the robins. It is odd that we never heard it."

Dame Barbara nodded sagaciously.

"'Tis a very old name. Scarce a one but myself knows of it, nowadays," she said. "No wonder you children never heard it. There was an ancient story – just a foolish tale – that the fairies haunted the forest, till one day some cruel or stupid person killed a robin. Robins used to abound there, and they are their special favourites, you know, and since then never a fairy or a robin has been seen there. But I must hurry off to finish my marketing."

Aria and Linde looked at each other.

"It must mean something," said Linde in a low and almost awe-struck tone. "My dream, I mean, and the old woman saying, 'Ask the robin.'"

"Yes," her sister agreed. "It is odd too that we never heard the old name or the old story before. I wonder if father had? I have a sort of remembrance of his once saying something about our being too near the forest for robins to make their home with us, but I had a silly childish idea that he only meant that all robins disliked forests."

"I think I must have had the same notion," said Linde, "for we have both of us now and then wished that robins would make their nests in our garden, but we just thought they never would! We have hardly ever seen one."

"Very seldom," said Aria. "I have occasionally noticed a redbreast on the hedge, seeming to look about him, but he was sure to fly away."

But though they felt extremely interested in what they had heard and very curious to find out if, as Linde said, her dream did "mean something," just then they had no time to talk about it any more, for Dame Barbara was as good as her word. Every one of their usual customers for flowers seemed to have met the old woman and been told of the wonderful dried leaves. And some strangers, too, new-comers or visitors to the little town, stopped as they passed by, with exclamations of "What a delicious fragrance! Can it be from these flowers?" and when it was explained to them that the source of the perfume was the contents of the tin canister, one and all immediately bought a cup-full, or two, even in some cases three or four. Long before their usual hour for going home, all the leaves were sold, and some would-be purchasers who came too late were delighted to hear that next market-day there would be a fresh supply of the coveted leaves.

"Never has our purse been so well filled before," said Aria in great content, as she tied up the little purchases of butter and eggs and honey and other luxuries which she had scarcely hoped to be able to afford. "Linde, it really has been a wonderful success. If only we had jars and jars full of the leaves!"

"Don't despair," said Linde. "Remember my dream. Who knows what may come of it?" and very hopeful and happy, the sisters set off for their long walk home.

Nothing out of the common happened to them during the next few days. Though they half laughed at themselves for doing so, they often kept looking out in hopes of catching sight of a redbreast, but none was to be seen, and though they strolled more than once farther than usual into the forest, when their daily work was over, they there met with no adventures.

"I am afraid, Linde, dear," said Aria on the Friday evening, when they had again filled the canister with the precious leaves to be ready for market next day, "I am afraid that we must think no more about your dream, or that it meant anything. We have still leaves enough for one other day's sale after to-morrow, and we must just be thankful for the help it has been, giving us time to consider what we must do to get through the winter," and though she tried to speak cheerfully, the poor girl could not keep back a little sigh, which Linde was quick to hear.

"Aria, sweetheart, Aria," the child exclaimed in a piteous voice, "you don't think, you can't mean that we may have to part? Oh I'd much, much rather die, if we might but die together. Promise me, promise me that you'll never leave me."

"My darling," said Aria, bravely forcing back her tears, "Heaven knows, it half kills me to think of such a possibility. So far, things have gone better with us than we could have dared to hope; let us therefore go on praying and trusting that we may keep together."

Linde cheered up again.

"Yes, yes, that is the best thing to do," she agreed. "And do you know, Aria, though I get frightened sometimes, deeper down I have a feeling that we shall get on well, after all. It is ever since my dream that I seem to get this sort of comforting hope," she added, with a curious light in her eyes.

The elder sister, to tell the truth, had less faith in dreams and presentiments than little Linde, but she was glad of anything to cheer the child. So with a loving kiss they went to bed betimes, in preparation for their long walk to market the next day, and soon fell asleep.

Aria woke first on Saturday morning. It was still very early, the dawn barely breaking. But there was light enough to see Linde's face, all rosy and smiling in her sleep. She quickly roused when she heard her sister moving about the room.

"Aria," she exclaimed, "Aria, darling, it's come again. The dream, I mean."

Aria turned and looked at her. At first the elder sister was inclined to say that she was not very surprised. A dream that has made much impression on one is apt to return, especially in this case, remembering their conversation the previous evening. But the sight of Linde's happy and excited face checked her.

"I must not damp her hopefulness," she thought, "and after all – who knows?" – "Was it the same as before?" she asked, "exactly the same old woman and all?"

"Yes," Linde replied, "just the same. We were in the market, and she came by, and then stopped and seemed to be attracted by the rose-leaves' scent. Then I felt her eyes on me and heard her voice – low but clear – saying – , " and here the little girl interrupted herself, "Oh yes, there were just two words different, and that makes it seem more real. She did not say 'three times,' but '*twice* more and then ask the robin.' I wonder," Linde continued, "I wonder if possibly we shall see her herself. No – I don't think we shall. I feel that she can only come in dreams."

They were at their place in the market in good time as usual. Their posies of late flowers and autumn foliage had, alas, diminished, but their supply of the fragrant leaves was rather larger than the week before, for, influenced perhaps by the "twice more" of Linde's dream visitor, Aria had divided the contents of the jar into two equal portions, each of which proved to be rather more than the first lot she had carried off for sale. In fact the useful tin canister was this time completely filled.

And the demand for their new wares was even greater than the last time. Dame Barbara and her friends had spread the fame of the wonderful leaves. Aria could have sold what she had twice over, and more than one of her customers assured her that if she could keep up the supply during the winter, orders would be forthcoming from more distant parts of the country.

"I mean to make pretty bags and fill them with your leaves, for Christmas presents to my friends," said one smiling young lady. "So don't forget that I shall want ever so much of them a little later on," and Aria thanked her and wisely refrained from saying that she feared her stock was all but exhausted.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Linde, when Aria sighed about it. "My hopes have risen sky-high since the dream came again, though how we are to 'ask the robin,' seeing that none of his kind ever come near us, or how he could help us if we did come across him, is more than I can in any way imagine! And after all, we have still enough leaves for next market-day, which will be the *third* time."

"Yes," Aria agreed, "it is much the best to hope on and keep up our spirits. And for the present we have no reason to despond. My old purse is delightfully well filled to-day even though I could not

make up my mind to raise the price of the leaves as Dame Barbara urged me to do. I felt somehow as if it would not bring me good luck."

"I felt the same," said Linde.

They spent a cheerful evening, and the following day, Sunday, passed peacefully. When they returned from the ancient church in the neighbouring village whither since their infancy they had always gone with their parents, Linde asked Aria to let her go for a stroll in the forest by herself, to which the elder sister, who was feeling a little tired, agreed.

"You are going to look for a robin, I know," she said with a smile, "and possibly as the dreams have come to you and not to me, you may succeed where I could not. But don't go too far, dear child. I should be anxious if you were long away, for no doubt the forest *is* rather uncanny, somehow."

"I won't go far," said Linde. "And I hardly hope to find out anything. But I shall just look well about me. You see the real time has not yet come. We are not to 'ask the robin' till after three market-days."

When she returned home an hour or two later, she seemed thoughtful, though not exactly depressed.

"Well," asked her sister, "had you any adventures?"

Linde shook her head, yet she smiled a little.

"Only a very tiny thing happened to me," she said, "hardly worth noticing. I strolled some way along the path that leads straight to the heart of the forest – the main path, you know, Aria – and I was just thinking of turning home, when, a short way down a much smaller path, scarcely one at all, I caught sight of something bright lying on the ground. At first I thought it was a scarlet berry or two, or some of the red leaves one often sees, but when I stooped to pick it up, it was this," and she held out a small feather.

Aria took it – it was of a peculiar shade, almost more orange than red.

"I know what you are thinking," said the elder sister, – "that it is a robin's feather – from his red breast, and it certainly looks very like it, but –"

"Wait, Aria, till you hear the rest," interrupted Linde, and she opened her other hand, in which lay two more of the fairy-like feathers, exactly similar to the first. "The wonderful part of it was that though they are *so* tiny," and she glanced at the treasures tenderly, "and though it was not a bright day, there was no sunshine, they glowed and gleamed as if they were gems. I walked on a little way, you see, after I had picked up the one, and there, some yards ahead, lay the second, and the same with the third. But it was the last. I feel sure it was the last, though I went on some distance. And somehow, three seem the right number for a fairy message. It matches the three times in my dreams."

"Then you do think they are a message?" asked Aria.

"Of course I do. I marked the path well by breaking off twigs and making a little heap of pebbles. Indeed it was necessary, for I had never noticed before that there was a path there at all," and when she went on to describe its position Aria agreed with her that it seemed quite a new discovery.

For the rest of the week Linde appeared satisfied to rest quietly on her oars. She made no more expeditions to the forest, and indeed spoke less than she had done of her dreams and their interpretation, though that she was thinking much about them her sister felt sure, from the look in her pretty eyes and the way she sometimes smiled to herself for no apparent reason.

So the days passed till again it was Friday evening and the sisters went early to bed. Everything was ready for their little stall at the market, but Aria sighed as she remarked that their autumn posies now made but a poor show.

"But there are the rose-leaves," said Linde.

"Yes," her sister replied, "but the last of them, alas! See, Linde, the jar is quite emptied!"

"Do not be so downcast, darling," said Linde as they kissed each other for good-night. "Why, we have seemed to change places of late! It used to be you always cheering me – now it is I to cheer you."

Aria smiled. She felt sure that it was the hope of the dream being repeated for the magic third time that was brightening her sister. But she said nothing that night. Only the next morning when she woke very early, just as the first faint streaks of coming dawn were beginning to appear, she listened anxiously, wondering if Linde was still asleep, and felt glad when a tiny rustle, followed by a whisper, showed that the little girl was also awake.

"Aria," she said, "Aria."

"Yes, dear, what is it?"

"It's come again, the third time," she exclaimed joyously. "My dream! Quite the same as before, only that the old woman just smiled at me, and said, 'Once more, then ask the robin.' Aria, darling, it *must* mean something."

And Aria herself was impressed.

"But where are we – or you – to find the robin?" she questioned.

"You're forgetting about the feathers, and the mysterious path," replied Linde.

She had carefully wrapped up the tiny treasures and hidden them in the front of her frock. The knowledge that she had them safely there seemed to give her courage and hope. That Saturday's sale was again a great success, and on the following day, as on the Sunday before, when they returned from church and their simple mid-day dinner was over, Linde told her sister that she was going to the forest. This time she scarcely asked Aria's leave, and though the elder girl was a little anxious, she felt that it would have been useless to attempt to stop her.

"Very well, darling," she said. "But don't go very far or stay very long. Promise me."

Linde considered.

"I think I can promise," she said, "to be back by sundown. But, Aria, I believe I may have to go again much farther, or to do – I know not what – but feelings are coming to me," and she unconsciously touched the place where the redbreast feathers were nestling. "You won't forbid it, sister, will you?"

Aria's face grew very grave.

"Whatever has to be done, and wherever," she said, "why cannot we go together? I am afraid of the forest. Even father believed that there was some spell or enchantment over it. You remember he never allowed us to go into it beyond a certain distance.

"Yes," said Linde dreamily, "I remember. But maybe," and her face lighted up with a bright smile, "maybe, Aria, the spell, or whatever it is, is going to be broken," and though the elder sister trembled a little at the words, she, too, felt a curious thrill of pleasant excitement.

So the two kissed each other fondly and Linde set off. She was well wrapped up in a warm cloak, for the autumn days were fast growing chilly, especially of course in the forest, where the short amount of mid-day sunshine scarcely penetrated, so closely growing were the trees. The cloak had originally been their mother's, then Aria's, and now the elder girl had refreshed and rebound it for her sister. It was of good, thick stuff and red in colour, and as Linde turned for a moment to wave another good-bye at the entrance to the wood, it struck Aria that the child looked rather like a human robin redbreast herself. She smiled at the idea; somehow it cheered her. "May all good angels and the saints guard her," she murmured as she re-entered the cottage.

Linde walked on steadily. Not very fast, for she was keenly on the look-out for any signs or tokens to direct her, and most anxious not to miss the opening to what in her own mind she called "the feather path."

And to her satisfaction she found it without any difficulty. It was still of course broad daylight, that is to say as light as was usual among the trees, and as she made her way along she kept her eyes on the ground in hopes of seeing some more tiny specks of the unmistakable orange-red.

But in vain. There were no more feathers waiting for her.

Feeling rather discouraged, Linde stopped short, and looked around her.

"I must have quite passed the place where I picked up the third feather," she said to herself. "I did not come as far as this the last time. Must I go home – what shall I do?"

She drew her cloak a little closer, and as she did so, her fingers touched the spot where nestled her treasures. Immediately her hopes revived.

"Go on, go on," something above her seemed to say. She glanced upwards, almost fancying that a voice had spoken to her, but nothing was to be seen – except – yes, on the branch of a fir-tree near at hand, some yards overhead, a bird was perching, and not only a bird, to her immense delight she saw that it was a robin!

Had it *spoken*? She gazed at it. It chirped encouragingly and spreading its wings flew down, and then flew onwards in front of her.

"Stay, robin, stay, and tell me what to do," cried the child. But it only turned its little head towards her for half a second, and then continued its flight. Linde by this time, however, had lost all hesitation. On she ran, as fast as she could go, though now and then, as if in consideration for her, her small winged friend stopped for a moment or two, and Linde grew less breathless. Then it looked back at her again, and in this way they got over a good deal of ground, till at last – why, she could not have told – Linde stopped. And looking up, she saw that her guide had disappeared.

She gazed round her. It was a strange spot. She had never been here before. Of that she felt certain, for she could not have forgotten it.

She was standing by the edge of a small clearing among the trees. It was in the shape of a circle, and in front of the firs, whose stems are of course as a rule bare, were planted short thick bushes as if for still greater enclosing of the spot. So thickly indeed were these placed, that turning round to look behind her, Linde wondered how she had come through them, for no opening was to be seen. It was like standing in a room of which the doorway is in some way or other completely concealed. Her heart began to beat faster, for even though she had scarcely moved she felt as if she could never find her way out again.

Suddenly a clear chirping made her look up, and to her amazement she saw, in the very centre of the circular clearing, an object which she was almost certain had not been there a moment before. And it was not only her eyes which told her this, for her nostrils at once inhaled a delicious perfume which she could not, for an instant, have been unconscious of. It was that of the precious leaves!

And the object which she was gazing at was an indescribably beautiful rose-bush in full bloom, on the topmost branch of which sat her friend the robin!

He nodded encouragingly – and now his chirps took shape. They grew into words, but whether other ears than little Linde's would have heard this I cannot say. Enough that *she* understood.

"Yes," he said, as if in answer to her unexpressed surprise, "yes, I went down to fetch it up," and she knew that he was speaking of the rose-bush, "for you to see it for yourself, my child."

Linde gazed at him for a moment or two without speaking. Was she dreaming? she asked herself. But the familiar fragrance reassured her.

"Is it – ?" she began, "are these the roses that our fairy powder came from?"

Again the robin bent his little head.

"Even so," he replied. "Fairy roses, that never lose their perfume. And you would gladly fill the old jar again, would you not?"

Linde clasped her hands.

"Oh yes, yes!" she exclaimed. "The leaves mean everything to us. Not only food and clothing, but a home – a home for us two together, instead of terrible separation. Oh Robin, darling, may I gather the flowers and dry the leaves, ready for the market? I'd come any day – or every day, to fetch them, and oh how grateful we should be," and the tears rushed to her eyes in her eagerness.

But the redbreast's tone grew grave, and Linde began to tremble with fear that he would say it could not be. But when he spoke again his words surprised her.

"Do you know the story of the forest?" he asked.

"Yes – some part of it, at least. We know that – that – " for she felt his bright eyes fixed upon her, and it made her hesitate, "something very sad happened, and since then, no robins ever come here," she murmured.

"Sad – yes indeed," he repeated, "and worse than sad. Wicked, cruel! A monster in the shape of a boy shot one of our favoured tribe, deservedly favoured, for, as a Christian child you know since when, we have been honoured for our faithful service?"

Linde bowed her head reverently.

"I know," she whispered. "It was very wicked of the boy. But it was a long time ago," she went on. "Can't you forgive it, and come back to the forest again?"

"'Tis almost fifty years ago," the robin said. "And for fifty years the place has been under the ban. Our queen – call her fairy queen, or guardian angel as best pleases you – pronounced it. But around the tomb of the innocent victim," and he pointed downwards, "she planted the rose-trees, of whose flowers by special favour the old godmother, of whom you have heard, was allowed to gather a few. For she it was who found our poor brother – here on this very spot – and summoned us to his side. Our ancestor, I should call him, for it was long ago, and our bird lives are very short – so surely they should not be cut still shorter?"

"Surely not," said Linde. "Then are those the leaves we had in our jar? I thought it was a powder – a fairy powder that the godmother bequeathed?"

"So it was. She dried and ground the precious leaves, and with the powder perfumed the petals of her own garden roses, every year, so long as she lived. But she never re-visited the spot. It has been closed ever since the day when, the arrow still transfixing his tender body, the robin was buried, though not dead."

"Not dead," cried Linde. "What can you mean?"

"That was the decree," he replied. "For fifty years he was to lie here, till the forest could be purified from the pollution of cruelty."

"And how can that be done?" Linde asked eagerly.

"By the hands of a maiden – a child-maiden, who never, *never* has been guilty of cruelty to any living thing. Linde, are you that maiden?"

The little girl was silent. Then she looked up, and her blue eyes did not falter beneath the piercing gaze of the bird.

"I think, yes, I think," she said, "no, I *know* that I have never wished or meant to cause suffering. If ever it has come through me, it has not been by any intention of mine."

"You speak the truth. We have watched and tested you, though you knew it not," was the reply. "Now something more is asked of you. Courage!"

"I'm afraid, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm not very brave," said poor Linde, all sorts of alarming ideas rushing through her brain as to what might be asked of her. Were they going to shoot *her*, possibly? Or to shut her up in the tomb with the dead, or not dead robin?

"Do not look so terrified," said the robin. "More shall not be asked of you than you can do. We are not a revengeful race, as you well know. We have always been faithful and loving friends to human beings. You know the story of – "

"Of the Babes in the Wood," interrupted Linde. "Of course I do. It was partly that, that made me think of you, about *leaves*, you know," and her face brightened. "I will try to be brave," she added.

"That is right," said the bird. "Some expiation *must* be made for that boy's evil deed, and, as I have already told you, it was decreed that the one to offer it must be a child entirely innocent of cruelty or unkindness. For this, *you*, little Linde, have been chosen. Three nights hence the fifty years come to an end – the moment for the spell to be broken will arrive. Before midnight, you must be here, standing on this very spot, where you now see me."

Linde started. Had she shut her eyes for an instant? – what had happened to them? For, to her amazement, the rose-bush was no longer there! The robin stood on the grass, in the centre of the cleared circle. Yet she had not seen the disappearance, nor heard the faintest rustle!

"Oh dear," she thought, "magic doings are very queer. There *was* a rose-bush there, I am quite certain," but she said nothing. Some instinct told her it was best to take things calmly, and to listen attentively to the robin's instructions. "Where you now see me," he went on, "till you hear the clock strike twelve."

"The clock," Linde repeated. "There's no clock here in the middle of the wood."

"Indeed," said the robin. "Would you like to know the time at the present moment?"

"Yes," Linde replied. "I suppose it's nearly four o'clock."

"Listen," whispered the bird, and as she obeyed, there fell on her ears the prettiest bell-like chimes she had ever heard. "One, two, three – " on to twenty, then a pause and in deeper tones, "one, two, three, four."

"Twenty minutes to four," said her friend. "If it had been *past* four, the four would have struck first. All *our* clocks are what your clumsy human watchmakers call 'repeaters,' you see."

"And what do you do to make them tell you the time?" asked the little girl eagerly.

"You just say 'What o'clock is it?' That is of course if you are at one of the entrances to fairyland. You can generally find one if you look about. They are always in the centre of a ring."

"Oh," replied Linde, "that's a good thing to know. I often see fairy rings, but I had no idea they had a door in the middle. Then tell me more, please. I must wait till I hear the fairy clock strike twelve, and then – will the door open? And – what do you want me to do? And – if I can do it, will you let me gather some roses?"

"Not so fast, not so fast," said the robin. "Let me see – what was I saying? You stand here – the clock strikes, at the twelfth stroke you tap the ground with the three feathers – you have them safe?"

"Yes," replied Linde, feeling for them as she spoke.

"The door will then open and you will descend. That is all you require to know at present. Three nights hence, three nights hence."

"But," began the little girl, "I must know something more. How am I to find my way here in the middle of the night when it is all dark? It wasn't easy to distinguish the path even by daylight, and now, even now, I don't know how to get through these thick bushes on to it. I can't see any opening in them."

Instead of replying the robin suddenly spread his wings and alighted on a bush close beside her, and at once Linde perceived that there was a narrow sort of passage through the hedge. She turned towards it.

"Thank you," she said, adding timidly, "May Aria come with me? Together we might find our way better perhaps. We might bring a little lantern."

"It will not be needed, and you must come alone. You may tell Aria all I have told you; and if she is wise she will encourage you. I make no promises. It is not for me to do so. But this you may depend upon – never will you have cause to regret obedience to this summons," and as he spoke, he spread his wings again and flew upwards. As he passed her, there came a breath of the delicious perfume, and Linde felt that it meant a promise after all, which raised her spirits, as pushing her way through the hedge she found herself on the path outside and started on her way home.

"Aria will be getting anxious," she thought. "I must hurry. I do believe it is all going to come right, but – oh dear, I do feel frightened at the idea of finding my way here alone through these gloomy woods in the very middle of the night. Why wouldn't the robin let Aria come too? I suppose it *had* to be a rather dreadful thing to do, to make up for that cruel boy's wickedness. Oh dear, oh dear!"

But as she ran on as fast as her feet would take her, some things grew clearer. She must make the best of it to her sister. She must conceal her terrors as much as possible.

"For supposing," she reflected, "that dear Aria really *wouldn't* let me go and that it all came to nothing – the dreams and the feathers and this wonderful talking robin, how could I ever get over it?"

We should have to be parted pretty certainly, and would not that be a thousand times more terrible than having to face the dark forest for once? For deep down in my heart I feel certain that I shall be taken care of. I am proud to be chosen to break the spell and to make the forest again a happy place – a home for the dear robins, and favoured by the fairies as it used to be all those years ago – yes, I am proud to be the chosen one. And I know it will lead to our getting the precious leaves to sell, as many as we want, and *that* means everything to us, home and comfort and the being together. Yes, I *will* be brave."

So when, at some little distance from the boundary of the forest, she caught sight in the gloaming of her sister's figure anxiously looking out for her, she ran towards her with cheerful eagerness, calling out as loudly as she could, "It's all right, darling. Good news – good news."

Nevertheless, when Aria had heard the whole strange story, her face grew very grave.

"Linde, my sweetest," she said, "I *cannot* let you do it. Alone in the middle of the night, and winter close at hand! Wolves have been known to find their way into the forest, and not only that, we ourselves have every reason to believe there is some unhappy enchantment over the place – "

"Yes," Linde agreed. "That is exactly why I have been chosen – to break the spell."

"But," persisted poor Aria, "how do we know that the robin may not be deceiving us? Possibly he is a witch or wizard in disguise! Possibly a fairy, not wishing you harm, but hoping to steal you away. Fairies always try to lure human children to live with them. Folks say it prolongs their own spell of life if they succeed."

Linde considered.

"No," she said at last. "The fairies who love these woods are good and true, I feel certain. I daresay there are different kinds of fairies, just as there are of people. But you can feel that these ones are kind and loving by their care for the robins. Then, remember my dreams, sister. Our mother's godmother would not wish harm to come to us, and so far, all her messages to us have only brought us great good, and greater is in store for us, I am firmly convinced. Be quite happy about it, darling. You know I am naturally rather cowardly, much less courageous than you, yet see how cheerful I feel about it. I have no misgivings."

And this was true. For the time, at least, all the little girl's fears had flown away. So Aria said no more, though from time to time during the next few days when she glanced at her sister she could not repress a sigh.

"Supposing," she thought to herself, "*supposing* I never see her again! They might steal her away and let her come back twenty or even fifty years hence without her knowing that more than a few hours had passed. She would find me an old broken-down woman, if she found me at all, which I doubt, for I could not live without her."

As these gloomy ideas floated through her mind she was standing in the porch of the cottage, gazing at the forest. Suddenly, a soft chirping reached her ears, and looking up, she caught sight of a redbreast perching on the little garden gate. He seemed to look at her, then spread his wings and flew away, passing near her overhead. And at that moment there came to the elder girl the same breath of the familiar delicious perfume which had cheered Linde when she parted with the robin, and with the same effect. From that moment Aria's misgivings left her, and to a great extent even her anxiety.

"Yes," she said to herself, "she must go. It is meant. It would be useless for me to interfere."

This happened on the very morning of the fated day.

The weather was already almost wintry.

"Linde," said her sister that evening, "I won't ask you to undress and go to bed, but I will keep up a good fire here in the kitchen, so that you shall at least start warm. And you shall have a cup of good hot soup last thing."

"Very well and thank you, dear," Linde replied. "I will sit here in father's comfortable old chair till the time comes for me to go. And I will promise to drink all the soup and to put on all my wraps, if you, Aria, will go to bed as usual and try to sleep till I come back again. The only thing that would

make me lose courage would be to leave you standing at the door looking after me. I may sleep myself. I daresay I shall, if I know you are in bed. For I am certain I shall wake in good time. As to that I have no fear."

Rather reluctantly, Aria consented to do as Linde wished, on condition that the little girl gave her promise to come to her at once on her return, and to arouse her if by chance she were sleeping.

Linde sat by the fire and listened to the ticking of the old clock, and the occasional fall of a cinder, till her eyes grew drowsy and she dozed. Though not conscious of being really asleep, she felt as if but a few minutes had passed, when the clock striking – more loudly than usual, it seemed to her – made her start.

"One, two, three," she counted, on to eleven.

"Yes, actually eleven," she said to herself. "I have had a nice long sleep and I feel quite fresh, and it is time to be off."

She drank the soup, and wrapped herself up; and after laying a large log on the fire, there to smoulder till she came back, she softly opened the door and stepped out, closing it again, though happily, in that peaceful and friendly part of the world, there was no need for bars or bolts.

A little exclamation of surprise escaped her as she glanced about her. It was full moon – the garden and the open space between it and the beginning of the forest were flooded with light. Somehow she had not expected this. In fact, relying upon the mysterious guidance and help which she felt sure would be given to her, she had not troubled herself beforehand about how it was all to be managed, and the sisters went so early to bed that they were often asleep before moonrise, if it were late.

Linde smiled to herself with pleasure and ran gaily through the garden and along the field-path. And for some little way inside the forest her route was quite clear. But after a while it grew darker. The trees became more dense, and denser still she knew they would be the farther she advanced. So she walked more slowly, looking well about her, and now and then pressing the three precious feathers in the front of her bodice.

"The great thing is not to miss the little path," she kept repeating, and after she had walked what seemed a considerable way, she began to fear she had done so.

Then for the first time her courage threatened to fail her, and her heart took to beating much faster than was pleasant. She stood still. Strange uncanny sounds seemed in the air. Wailings far off among the trees; faint groans and stealthy rustlings as if some weird creatures were trying to get near her, a sudden sharp screech – it was only an owl, but that the child did not know! – and then the very curious, very thin and minute squeal of a bat, so seldom audible to human ears.

"Oh dear," whispered Linde. "Robin, have you tricked me? I don't know where I am, and though it is so lonely, I seem to feel invisible creatures all about me. Oh, robin, you didn't tell me it would be so difficult to find the way."

Then something touched her foot; she gave a little scream, till looking down she perceived a point of light just in front of her, and heard a well-known voice.

"Foolish child," it said. "You might trust me. This is the entrance to the path. You have only to follow me."

"Are you carrying a lamp – a fairy lamp?" asked Linde in a tone of great relief. "Why – I could fancy it was a glow-worm, only it is far too late in the year."

"You are right," said her guide. "It is a glow-worm. We take care of them – they sleep down below all the winter. But I woke up this fellow on purpose. He is quite comfortable on my back. Now we must make haste. Follow me steadily till we come to the magic circle. Then you must act for yourself – you know what to do."

He flew forward – near enough to the ground for Linde to keep the tiny light well in view. And to her surprise she found she could make her way quite easily without stumbling or hesitation, and now and then a faint whiff of scent reached her, as if to increase her confidence, though whether it

was wafted back from the redbreast's wings or upwards from the little bunch of feathers, she could not have told.

And at last – for, after all, making your way in the dark is very monotonous work – the light stopped just in front of her, and she realised that she was standing before the thickly growing bushes which hedged the clearing. And before she had time to wonder how to push her way through, the shrubs seemed to divide, as if held back by invisible hands, and through the opening thus made, Linde caught sight of the magic circle gleaming like silver in the moonlight.

Her guide had vanished, but now without hesitation she ran forward, till she reached the central spot, where the rose-bush had risen to view, and whence she had been told she would find her way to the unknown regions below.

She stood still for a moment or two, somewhat dazzled by the sudden radiance, soft and lovely though it was. Then she stooped and examined the ground, but the smooth, even turf showed not the least sign of an opening of any kind, such as she had half expected to see. As she stood up again her fingers touched the front of her dress and she remembered the feathers.

"I am to tap with them," she reminded herself. "But not till the fairy clock strikes twelve. Shall I ask what time it is now? No, I think it is better to wait quietly. I am sure I am not too late, but I think it must be nearly midnight."

She felt curiously calm, and very wide-awake. There was not the very slightest sound to be heard – a complete contrast to the surrounding forest – not a rustle, not a murmur, never had Linde before realised what utter silence could be. She almost felt as if she herself should not move a finger, scarcely even breathe. And when in a little she became conscious that her heart was again beating much faster than its wont, she felt as if she must press it tightly to make it be quiet. And the gesture once more recalled the feathers. She drew them out.

"Best have them ready," she thought.

Then she stood motionless.

And suddenly, coming upwards to her, and yet sounding in the silent air as if all around her, came the fairy chimes – one, two, three, four, for the completed hour, and then the sweet musical deeper note, twelve times repeated.

Linde was all alert.

She stooped at once and tapped three times with the three tiny feathers.

And then what exactly happened she could not have told. She felt herself lifted a little way and made somehow or other to sit down on what seemed a soft cushion. It was really a thick, round sod of turf, and as soon as she was seated on it, it began to descend – down, down, making her at first feel rather giddy, though it moved slowly. She shut her eyes, and the giddiness left her. Then she opened them, but all seemed darkness for some seconds, till a faint light began to creep up, growing brighter as her strange journey continued, and at last steadying into a pleasant glow, not glaring or bewildering, but clear and bright, so as to show all surrounding objects distinctly.

Linde sprang to her feet in delight. She was in the sweetest place she had ever dreamed of. Sweet in every sense, for it was a small garden of the beautiful rose-bushes, like the one the robin had shown her. And the scent was the exquisite one so familiar to her.

She was standing at the entrance to a sort of bower, or niche, in the midst of the fragrant bushes, and glancing into it she saw that there was a little hillock in its centre, and on this hillock were perched what at first seemed to her hundreds of redbreasts. In reality, I think there were about fifty – all motionless, till from their midst flew out one, whom by some instinct Linde recognised as her old friend.

"Birds," he said, for, to the fairy-touched ears of the child, chirps were words, "birds! She has come. And the time has come. Friends, bid her welcome."

And a lovely welcome it was which poured from the many little throats.

"Thank you, dear robins," said Linde, feeling sure that she was expected to say something, "thank you, dear birds. You know I love you, and I do hope you will soon come to live in the forest again. But now please tell me what it is you want me to do."

There was a sudden loud flutter of wings. All the robins at the same moment flew upwards from the hillock and perched themselves in clusters among the rose-trees which formed the bower. Only one remained on the hillock. Linde knew him for her guide. Beside him lay a small bright object. It was a finely made and polished spade.

He touched it with one of his claws.

"Take this, Linde," he said solemnly, "and dig. But first, stroke it with the three feathers."

"Where am I to dig?" asked the little girl, as she obeyed him.

"Here of course," was the reply, "here. It is the tomb of our ancestor, where for fifty years he has lain entranced."

Linde lifted the spade. It was beautifully light.

"What a dear little tool it is!" she thought to herself. "I wish they would let me keep it. It would be lovely for careful digging round the delicate tiny roots that are so easily damaged."

But these reflections she kept to herself, for she felt the fifty pairs of bright eyes upon her. Just at present it was a question of doing what she was told.

So she stroked the spade with her tiny feather posy, and then stepped forward close to the green mound. In her heart she felt doubtful as to whether the toy spade would be strong enough to cut through the turf. But as the robin flew up to a neighbouring branch, thus leaving the coast quite clear for her operations, there was nothing for it but to try. And to her satisfaction the blade glided through the sods almost without any effort of hers. In fact it seemed to direct her movements, so that in a very short time a neat round hole was made in the little hillock, revealing a sort of nest of the well-known dried rose-leaves, in the midst of which lay the tiny body of a – to all appearance dead – robin redbreast.

"Lift him," whispered her friend, evidently in the greatest excitement.

Linde did so, carefully and almost reverently. He was a most beautiful bird, a king of his kind. His feathers were smooth, his breast rich in colouring, his eyes closed. There was nothing death-like or painful about him, except – ah yes – Linde could not repress a little shiver at the sight – a small dart or arrow transfixed the dainty body, pinning one wing to his side, where a drop of blood told its cruel tale.

"Draw it out," came the next command.

"I feel as if it would hurt him," murmured Linde tremulously. But there came a sort of trill of entreaty from the fifty watchers, and she felt that she must obey. So mastering her own misgiving, she took firm hold of the head of the dart, and deftly drew it out, thinking as she did so, "It will hurt him less if I do it quickly."

It took some little strength, but it did not break, and to her surprise the hole it should have left, disfiguring the pretty creature, closed at once. Then the bird gave a sudden shiver, a thrill of returning life passed through him – Linde herself was conscious of it in her fingers – his eyes unclosed; he looked up at her, then, with a wonderful note of exceeding joy, he spread his wings and flew round the bower, returning again to perch on the child's still outstretched hand, as if in gratitude.

And then – and then – oh if you could have heard the carol of delight that burst out from the comrades of the spell-freed redbreast! It was too beautiful to describe; nor could it be described in human language. For after all, exquisite as may be the bird songs – nightingales' or thrushes', blackbirds' or larks', which delight us, it cannot, I fear, fall to our lot to hear them, as did favoured Linde, in fairyland!

She stood enraptured till the melody subsided and there was silence again, broken by the voice of the small master of the ceremonies.

"It is done," he said, "and perfectly done. The spell is broken, the sad enchantment ended. The forest is our own again. Our beloved ancestor restored to us and to the life of which he was so cruelly deprived before he had had his rightful share."

"Oh the joy of it, the joy of it!" trilled the resuscitated bird, as he fluttered from Linde's hand to her shoulder, and a chorus of sympathy burst out again.

But Linde's guide had not yet finished his speech. He held up one claw and there was silence.

"Friends," he began again. "What is to be this maiden's reward for what she has done? Our gracious lady protector, the Queen of the Fairies, has left it to us to decide. We must be generous as well as grateful, for Linde deserves it of us – and remember, but for her sweet and loving nature, not all her courage in braving alone the cold and darkness could have succeeded. Brothers, shall we let her choose her reward?"

A universal chirp of "Yes, yes" was the reply.

So the speaker turned again to the little girl.

"Linde," he said, "good Linde, you who have never been guilty of a cruel unkind deed, Linde, you who have been brave and obedient, what do you choose?"

"Oh robin, dear robin," she exclaimed, "I think you must know already. The leaves, the delicious leaves from the redbreast's roses – if we may always have these, Aria and I will be safe and happy. I will come to fetch them in the middle of the night or whenever you like – and," she added, with a little smile, "*might* I have the fairy spade too?"

The robin held up his claw again.

"Yes, yes," came the answer in bird language, followed by some chirps which Linde's ears were not yet "fairy-wise" enough to translate.

"Your requests are granted," said the president. "You may keep the spade," for it was still lying beside her. "Small as it is, it is endowed with magic power. If you keep it bright and clean it will do good work in your garden. And my friends and relations, headed by our revered ancestor," he waved his claw, and the kingly robin fluttered to Linde's head, where he gave an approving chirp, replied to by the audience, "desire me to say that it will not be necessary for you to fetch the leaves. You will only require to place the old jar on the window-sill overnight whenever it needs replenishing, laying the three feathers inside it; and in the morning it will be filled as you wish."

"Thank you, thank you," cried Linde again, "and now, dear robins, I must hurry home. I shall never forget this lovely place. May I never come again?"

Her guide answered rather sadly.

"I fear not. Few, very few, mortals have come even as far as an entrance to fairyland. Nor could you ever find this spot again, try as you might. But we – we robins, will often see you in the forest, no longer forbidden ground."

"Yes, that is true," Linde replied cheerfully. "Then good-night – not good-bye, to you all, and please tell me how I am to get up again to the clearing, so as to run home to relieve Aria's anxiety and tell her the good news."

"That *we* will manage," said her first friend. "Birds!"

There was an answering flutter.

"Seat yourself comfortably, my child, and close your eyes."

Linde obeyed, but not before seeing and feeling that all the assembled robins were flying down and surrounding her, so that with the velvety softness of the grassy sod and the fluffy feeling of the feathered creatures encircling her, she seemed in a cosy nest, and already somewhat sleepy. Then a slight touch on the top of her head made her start a little.

"It is only we two," chirped her guide, "I and the noble bird who owes his life to you. We are here to direct the air voyage. Rest, my child, rest and be at peace."

Linde did not know that she fell asleep, though afterwards she knew it must have been so. She felt herself rising, rising – then a breath of colder air met her face, and – that was all she knew, till

– she awoke, and found herself in the porch of the cottage, and – to prove the night's adventures had been no dream, in one hand the little spade, in the other the three red feathers, still firmly clasped.

She was a very practical maiden, in spite of her fairy perceptions, so the first thing she did was to lay the small treasures safely in the old jar, saying to herself, and "to-morrow night – no, I should say to-night, we will place it outside on the window-sill and in the morning it will be filled with the lovely leaves. What news, what joy to tell Aria!"

She ran upstairs – softly – but her sister was awake.

"Darling," she said, "are you really safely back? Yet I have not been anxious. Somehow I felt you were all right and I have had a peaceful sleep."

Then Linde told her the whole wonderful story and showed her the little spade. And at night you may be sure they did not forget to put the jar in the appointed place, to find it in the morning replenished with rose-leaves whose perfume seemed even more delicious than ever before. So Saturday found them with plenty of their treasured wares for sale, and quickly were they bought.

Nor was this only temporary good fortune.

The fame of their dried roses spread far and wide, and orders came from great distances, so that the two sisters were able not only to go on living together in greater comfort than they had ever known, but even to lay aside savings for a possible "rainy day."

Though as far as I could learn – this story, you know, is of a fairly long ago "once upon a time" – that day never came to the happy girls. The robins never failed them. The cottage garden and the neighbouring forest grew to be famed for the peculiarly beautiful redbreasts which there abounded. The uncanny reputation of the woods was quite forgotten, and on the contrary it was said to bring good luck to those who often strolled about in them.

I think both Aria and Linde married in due time and had happy homes of their own. One or other certainly did so, for the country-folk of that remote part of the world, from whom I learnt the story, showed me a specially lovely rose – "the robins' rose," it was called, and told me that it had been cultivated by the descendants of the sisters, till, for some reasons which I could not discover, the family had moved elsewhere.

"And they do say," added one aged dame, "that they grew to be rich and important, much looked up to and respected, which one can believe, if they took after their great-grandmothers and were favoured by the 'good people,' as those pretty maidens were."

I suppose the old jar and the magic spade were carried away as heirlooms, for though I looked about in some very curious antique shops in the neighbouring town, hoping to find one or both, I never succeeded in doing so, nor could I trace the family at all, which is scarcely to be wondered at, as no one still living remembered the sisters save by the quaint names of "Aria" and "Linde" – names which I love, and which I hope this story may lead others to love also.

A Magic Table

Once upon a time – how long ago really does not matter – there lived in a certain country – and where that country is, does not matter either – three young men of about the same age. They were not brothers, but they had always been neighbours, and they must have been some sort of cousins, for they had an old relation whom they all called uncle and who called them all nephews.

"Nephew Hodge," "nephew Giles," and "nephew Michael." Those were their names, though I fancy the last – he was the youngest – was more often "Mike" than "Michael."

They were all three steady, well-behaved fellows, and very friendly with each other, which was natural as in several ways their circumstances were curiously alike. They were all orphans, and though Hodge and Giles had sisters, these were married and settled at a distance, and as for Mike he had nobody at all belonging to him, and as he was a very affectionate creature, but for his two friends he would have felt lonely indeed. They were all poor – very poor – the one thing each had inherited from his parents was a home, such as it was. Just a small cottage with a bit of garden ground, which in their leisure hours each cultivated to the best of his ability, thus growing some hardy fruit and vegetables which helped to support them, and a few pretty flowers, to brighten things up a bit.

They had a little friendly rivalry over these tiny gardens. Hodge's produced the best vegetables, Giles's the finest fruit, but young Michael's far and away the loveliest flowers. And instead of quarrelling as to which of them deserved the most praise as a gardener, like sensible fellows, each gave a present to the other two of his special triumphs.

There was still another curious bond between the three – which in most cases would have been the very reverse of a bond, and pretty certainly would have dissolved the friendship. They were all in love with the same girl. A charming girl she was, but of her, more shall be told hereafter. Perhaps the hopelessness of their admiration for her helped to keep the peace, for they were far too poor to aspire to her, as she was a damsel with a dowry of gold and silver, as well as of sweet looks and sweet character. So the three used to sit together and sing her praises with no bitterness or jealousy.

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