

Coolidge Susan

A Round Dozen



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Susan Coolidge

A Round Dozen

TO

V V V V V

Five little buds grouped round the parent stem,
Growing in sweet airs, beneath gracious skies,
Watched tenderly from sunrise to sunrise,
Lest blight, or chill, or evil menace them.

Five small and folded buds, just here and there
Giving a hint of what the bloom may be,
When to reward the long close ministry
The buds shall blossom into roses fair.

Soft dews fall on you, dears, soft breezes blow,
The noons be tempered and the snows be kind,
And gentle angels watch each stormy wind,
And turn it from the garden where you grow.

THE LITTLE WHITE DOOR

I SUPPOSE that most boys and girls who go to school and study geography know, by sight at least, the little patch of pale pink which is marked on the map as "Switzerland." I suppose, too, that if I asked, "What can you tell me about Switzerland?" a great many of them would cry out, "It is a mountainous country, the Alps are there, Mont Blanc is there, the highest land in Europe." All this is true; but I wonder if all of those who know even so much have any idea what a beautiful country Switzerland is? Not only are the mountains very high and very grand, but the valleys which lie between are as green as emerald, and full of all sorts of wild flowers; there are lakes of the loveliest blue, rivers which foam and dash as merrily as rivers do in America, and the prettiest farmhouses in the world, — *châlets* the Swiss call them, — with steep roofs and hanging balconies, and mottoes and quaint ornaments carved all over their fronts. And the most peculiar and marvellous thing of all is the strange nearness of the grass and herbage to the snows. High, high up in the foldings of the great mountains on whose tops winter sits all the year long, are lovely little valleys hidden away, where goats and sheep feed by the side of glacier-fed streams; and the air is full of the tinkle of their bells, and of the sweet smells of the mountain flowers. The water of these streams has an odd color which no other waters have, — a sort of milky blue-green, like an opal. Even on the hottest days a chilly air plays over their surface, the breath, as it were, of the great ice-fields above, from whose melting snows the streams are fed. And the higher you climb, still greener grow the pastures and thicker the blossoms, while the milk in the *châlet* pans seems half cream, it is so rich. Delicious milk it is, ice cold, and fragrant as if the animals which produce it had fed on flowers. Oh, Switzerland is a wonderful land indeed!

One day as I sat in a thicket of Alp roses in one of those lovely, lonely upper valleys, I happened to raise my eyes, and noticed, high in the cliff above, a tall narrow rock as white as snow, which looked exactly like a door set in the face of the gray precipice. An old shepherd came by, and I asked him about it. He said it was called "The Door," and that the valley was called "The Valley of the Door" by some folks because of it, but that its real name was "*Das Fritzethal*," or "Fritz's Valley," on account of a boy called Fritz who once lived there. I wanted to know about the boy, and as the old man had a little time to spare, he sat down beside me and told this story, which I will now tell you.

"It was many, many years ago," the shepherd said, "so many that no man now remembers exactly when it happened. Fritz's mother was a widow, and he was her only child. They were poor people, and had to work hard for a living. Fritz was a steady, faithful lad, and did his best. All day long he dug and toiled, and herded and milked and fed his goats; in the winter he carved wooden bowls for sale in the lower valley; but, work as he would, it was not always easy to keep the meal-bin full. What made it harder, were the strange storms which every few months swept the valley and damaged the crops. Out of the blue sky, as it were, these storms would suddenly drop. The sun would be shining one moment; the next, great torrents of rain would begin to fall and fierce winds to blow, flooding the crops and carrying drifts of sand and gravel across the fields. Then, at other times, no rain would fall for months together, and every green thing would be burned and dried up, while perhaps at the very same time the lower valleys had plenty of rain. This happened so often that people gave the Thal the name of "The Unlucky Valley," and it was accounted a sad thing to have to get a living there. The climate is very different now — praised be God.

"You can see, madame, that Fritz's lot was not strewn with roses. Still he was a brave lad, and did not lose heart. He had no play-fellows, but sometimes in the long summer days when he sat to watch the herd, he would tell himself stories by way of amusement, and almost always these stories were about the White Door up there, which was as much a marvel then as now. At last, by dint of looking and dreaming, it grew to be so like a real door to him, that he resolved one day to climb up and see it closer."

"Up there!" I cried with horror.

"Yes, madame. It was very rash. Any ordinary boy would have been dashed to pieces, but Fritz was wiry, strong, and active as a mountain goat. There are no such boys left nowadays. One night, while his mother slept, he stole away, climbed as high as he dared by moonlight, took a wink of sleep under a shelving rock, and with the first dawn began to make his way upward, testing every foothold, and moving cautiously; for though he loved adventure, Fritz was by no means a foolhardy boy, and had no mind to lose his life if wit and care could keep it safe. But the climb was a terrible one. He had been on precipices before, but never on such as this. Only God's goodness saved him again and again. A hundred times he wished himself back, but to return was worse than to go on. So up and up he went, and at last, scaling that sheer brown cliff which you see there, and throwing himself breathless on a narrow ledge, he found himself close to the object of his desires. There, just before him, was the Little White Door.

"The sight restored his energies at once. It was a real door – that he saw at a glance, for there was a latch and a keyhole and a knocker – all carved of white stone, and on the door a name in good German characters, '*Die Wolken*.' I do not know the name in English."

"It is 'Clouds,'" I told him.

"Ah, yes, 'die clouds.' Fritz could hardly believe his eyes, as you may imagine.

"Pretty soon he grew bold, and seizing the knocker he gave a loud rap. Nobody answered at first, so he rapped again, louder and louder, until the sound echoed from the rocks like thunder. At last the door opened very suddenly, and some one drew Fritz in and shut the door again quickly. All was dark inside, but he felt a cool touch on his wrist, and a hand he could not see led him along a rocky passage into the heart of the cliff.

"After a while a glimmering light appeared, and the passage turned suddenly into a large hall, which was full of people, Fritz thought at first; but then he saw that they were not people, but strange rounded shapes in white or gray, who moved and bounded, and seemed to be playing a game of some sort. It was like a game of bowls, but the things they rolled to and fro on the rocky floor were not balls, but shapes like themselves, only smaller and rounder, and of all beautiful colors, red and purple and yellow. The creatures liked to roll, it would seem, for they skipped and jumped as they went along, and laughed with a sort of crackling laughter, which echoed oddly back from the roof of the cave. The big shapes laughed too in great booming tones. Altogether they made a great deal of noise. Still the damp little hand clasped Fritz's wrist, and looking down he saw that his guide was no other than one of those same small shapes which were the balls of the game. There was something so familiar in the pink-cheeked fleecy outline, that in his surprise Fritz forgot to be afraid, and spoke aloud, crying, 'Why! It's a cloud!'

"'To be sure. What did you suppose me to be, and why did you come to the clouds' house if you didn't want to see clouds?'" replied the thing.

"'Didn't you see our name on the door? Or perhaps you can't read, Stupid!'" demanded a large white cloud, leaving the group of players and coming up to Fritz and his companion.

"'Yes, I can read, and I did see the name,' stammered Fritz; 'still I didn't –'

"'You did and you didn't; how intelligent you seem to be!'" said the white cloud, with a toss and curl; while a big black thunder-cloud, pitching a little yellow one clear across the cave, shouted in sullen tones which echoed frightfully from the rocks overhead, 'What's that boy doing here spoiling our game? Cumulus, it's your roll. Turn that little beggar out. He has no business here, interfering with the sports of his betters!'

"Fritz trembled, but his small conductor faced the black cloud undauntedly.

"'Hold your tongue!' he said. 'This boy is my visitor. I let him in, and you're not to bully him. I won't permit it.'

"'You, indeed!' blustered the thunder-cloud. 'Pray, what can you do about it, Little Pink? I shall say what I like, and do as I like.'

"'No, you won't,' cried all the small clouds together, rearing themselves up from the floor. 'We fair-weather clouds are not a bit afraid of you, as you know. We know very well how to drive you black ones away, and we will do it now if you are not civil.' Their voices though bright were threatening, and one little violet bit made a dash straight at the nose of the thunder-cloud, who shrank into a corner, muttering wrathfully.

"'Don't be at all afraid,' said Little Pink to Fritz, in a patronizing tone. 'He shan't do you any harm. That sort of cloud is always afraid to face us, because we are so many, you see, and can serve him as he deserves. Well, now, and what brought you up here, pray?'

"'I didn't know who lived here, and I wanted so much to see,' replied Fritz, shyly.

"'You didn't? Didn't you know that this was our house?' demanded the little cloud, astonished.

"'No, indeed. I didn't even know that you had a house.'

"'What! Not know that? Pray, where did you suppose we were when you didn't see us in the sky?' cried Little Pink. 'A house! Of course we have a house. Everybody has one. You've got a house yourself, haven't you? Why, we've lived here always, all we clouds. Sometimes we have great family meetings, when we get together and indulge in all sorts of fun and frolic, never going out doors for weeks at a time.'

"'Oh, those must be the times when our fields all burn up, and the streams run dry, and the poor cattle low with thirst!' said Fritz, suddenly enlightened. 'So you are enjoying yourselves up here all the time, are you? I call that very unkind, and – ' Suddenly recollecting where he was, he hung his head, abashed at his own daring.

"'Little Pink hung his head too, with a grieved face.

"'I never thought of that before,' he said penitently. 'It was pleasant for us, and the time went fast. I recollect now that the world has looked rather queer and yellow sometimes when we have come out again after a long absence, but it grew green presently, and I did not suppose any one minded – '

"'All this while a strange growling sound had been going on in a room opening from the hall, across whose entrance stout bars were fixed.

"'What *is* that?' asked Fritz, unable longer to restrain his curiosity.

"'That? That's only the North Wind,' replied Little Pink, in an absent tone. 'We've shut him up, because he has no business to be abroad in the summer; and he's such a restless creature, and so violent, that he will break loose if he can, and do all manner of mischief. Last year, about this time, he got out and raised a great storm, and made a fearful mess of it down below.'

"'I recollect. That was the storm that killed three of our sheep, and ruined the barley crop,' exclaimed Fritz. 'Oh, it was dreadful! We had to make half a loaf do the work of a whole one all winter long in consequence. It was hungry times in the valley, I can tell you. Oh, the evil Wind!'

"'You poor fellow!' cried the little cloud. 'Well, he's safe now, as you see. He can't get out and plague you this year, at least. But I'm so sorry you went hungry. It wasn't our fault, really it wasn't; still I should like to make it up to you somehow, if I could.' He reflected a moment, then he went forward and gave a call which collected all the other clouds around him. Fritz watched them consulting together; at last they moved toward him in a body.

"'Now, Boy,' said Little Pink, who seemed to have elected himself spokesman, 'because you're a good boy and have had bad luck, and because you're the first boy who ever came up here and rapped on our door, we're going to propose a bargain. So long as you live in the valley below and are steady, and work hard and keep a kind heart in your bosom for people not so well off as yourself, so long we will look after your farm and befriend it. Water shall fall on it regularly, flood and tempest shall spare it, the grass shall never dry, nor the brook fail, nor the herds lack for food. We shall watch closely, and so long as you keep your word we will keep ours. Do you agree?'

"'What! never any more droughts, never any floods,' cried Fritz, unable to believe such good news. 'Oh, how happy mother will be! Indeed, indeed I will do my best – pray believe that I will.'

"'The proof of the pudding,' began Cumulus, but Little Pink silenced him with a wave of his hand.

"'Very well, you do your best and we will do ours,' he said in a cheery tone. 'Now about getting you home. Do you know how late it is?'

"'No,' said Fritz, who had forgotten all about time.

"'It is just noon.'

"'Really? Oh, how frightened the mother will be!' cried Fritz, his heart sinking as he thought of the terrible cliffs which he must descend.

"'He never can go home as he came,' declared a rainbow, craning its long curved neck like a giraffe's over the heads of the others.

"'I'll tell you, let us all carry him down on our shoulders,' suggested Little Pink.

"'So we will,' shouted the clouds in a chorus; and jostling and laughing they all crowded into the narrow passage, bearing Fritz in their midst. As the door swung open, in swept fresh visitors, a crowd of tiny scurrying shapes, and some one behind, whipping them along with a lash of many-colored air.

"'Why, where are you all going?' demanded the new-comer, in a breezy voice. 'I've collected these stray lambs from hither and yon, and now I'm in for the day. What takes you out, pray?'

"'We'll not be gone a minute. We're only going to carry this boy home,' answered the rest; while Little Pink whispered in Fritz's ear, 'That's the West Wind. He's a great favorite with us all.'

"'Hallo! A boy! Why, so it is,' cried West Wind. He pounced on Fritz as he spoke, kissed him, ruffled his hair, boxed his ears softly, all in a minute. Then, with a gay, whooping laugh he vanished into the passage, while the clouds, raising Fritz, floated downward like a flock of white-winged birds. Little Pink lay under his cheek like a pillow. Softly as thistle-down touches earth they landed on the valley floor, laid Fritz on a bed of soft grass, and rose again, leaving him there. He looked up to watch them rise, bright and smiling. Little Pink waved a rosy hand. Higher and higher sailed the clouds, then they vanished into the door, and the door was shut."

I am telling the story, as you see, rather in my own words than in those of the old shepherd, but you won't mind that. The truth is, I cannot remember the exact language he used, but so long as I keep to the main points of the history it doesn't much matter, does it?

"In a few minutes Fritz recovered his wits and made haste home, for he feared his mother might be alarmed at his long absence. She was not, however, for she supposed that he had risen early, as he sometimes did, and taking a piece of bread in his hand, had followed the goats up the valley, breakfasting by the way. She met him, full of wonder at a strange thing that had happened.

"'Such a queer mist filled the valley just now,' she said, 'I could not see the sun at all. I feared a storm was coming, but presently it rolled away all in a minute, and left the day as fine as ever. Did you notice it? I never saw anything like it before.'

"Fritz let his mother wonder, and held his peace. She would think that he had fallen asleep and dreamed it all, he was sure; in fact, after a little he himself began to believe that it was a dream.

"But, dream or no dream, the strange thing was that it came true! From that time on, the climate of the Unlucky Valley seemed to change. Years passed by without a single drought or inundation. When the pastures below were parched with thirst, rain fell on Fritz's fields, keeping them green as emerald. All his crops succeeded; his goats and sheep gave double share of milk, and little by little he grew rich.

"'The Lucky Valley,' people now called the once unlucky spot, while to Fritz they gave the name of 'The Favored of the Saints.' Year after year his gains went on increasing. Gradually all the land in the valley became his, except one tiny strip, there at the upper end, which belonged to a widow, poor as Fritz's mother once had been. This strip Fritz desired to buy, but the widow refused to sell, though he offered a large price. She had come there a bride, she declared, with the myrtle-crown on her head, and there she wished to die and be buried when her time should come. The memory of his own poor mother, who had died some time before, should have made Fritz pitiful to this lonely

woman, but his heart had grown hard with continued prosperity, and it angered him to be opposed. So when after many attempts she persisted in her resolution, he tried harsher means. The widow had debts. These he bought up, and when she could not pay he brought the pressure of the law to bear, and turned her from her home.

"The very night after he had watched her depart, weeping and broken-hearted, as he lay on his bed, feeling at last that the valley was all his own, the Little White Door opened on the cliffs far above, and out came the clouds.

"Not pink and purple now, smiling and full of good will, but black and wrathful. Like a flock of dark vultures they swooped at the sleeping valley. Floods of rain fell, fierce winds tore and raved, the river rose and burst its bounds, carrying all before it; and Fritz, awakened by the fearful roar, had just time to escape from his bed and gain the nearer hillside, when the waters struck the *châlet* and bore it away in ruins down the valley, as though it were no more than a bubble of foam. The crops were swept off, the flocks drowned in the fields. Fritz clung to a tree-trunk through that fearful night, listening to the hiss and rush of the flood, and the bleatings of the drowning sheep; and ever and anon it seemed as if shapes, dimly seen through the darkness, swooped at and buffeted him, while voices cried in his ear, 'Promise-breaker! Widow-spoiler! Is *this* the way you keep faith with the clouds?'

"When morning dawned it revealed a scene of ruin. Not a blade of barley remained in the meadows, not a blade of grass in the fields. The labor of years had vanished in a single night."

"It served him right," said I.

"Ah, my lady," replied the old shepherd, "God is more merciful to sinners than we men can be. Fritz was not wicked at heart. He saw his fault now in the light of his misfortune, and was sorry for it. Gladly would he have made amends, but he was now poor as the poorest, for the waters lay over the earth, and did not run off as waters generally do. The fertile valley was become a lake, into which points of land, fringed with broken and battered trees, pushed themselves. It was a sad sight.

"News of the disaster reached the lower valleys, and the kindly peasants flocked to help. But what could they do till the water receded? Nothing. They could only say comforting words and return to their homes, leaving Fritz to his fate.

"He waited many days, then he formed a bold resolution. He determined to climb the cliff once more, knock at the Little White Door, and plead with the clouds for forgiveness."

"That was bold indeed," I said.

"It was a much harder task than it had been years before, when he was a boy and his joints were supple," continued the old shepherd. "Only desperation carried him upward, but at last he did reach the door. He knocked many times without answer, and when at length the door opened, it was not a merry little cloud which appeared, but a tall, gloomy white one, which looked like a sheeted ghost. No game was going on in the great hall. The clouds, dressed in black, each with his thunder-cap on, sat side by side, and frowned on Fritz as he stood in the midst and made his plea.

"'I have sinned,' he said sadly, as he ended, 'I have sinned grievously, and I am justly punished. I forgot my promise to you, *meine Herren*, and I cannot complain that you broke yours to me. But give me one more chance, I implore you. Let me atone for my fault, and if I fail again, punish me as you will.'

"It seemed to him that the clouds grew a little less gloomy as he spoke, and their voices were gentle as they replied, 'Very well, we will consider of it. Now go.' There was no offer to carry him this time. Exhausted and weary he groped his way down at peril to life and limb, and more dead than alive crept into the miserable shed which had replaced his home, with no assured hope as to what the clouds might elect to do.

"But lo, in the morning the waters had begun to fall. He hardly dared believe his eyes, but day by day they slowly grew less. By the end of a fortnight the ground was left bare. Such land! Rough, seamed, gullied by the flood, covered with slime from the mountain side and with rocks and gravel, – it seemed a hopeless task to reclaim it again into pasture.

"But Fritz was a strong man and his will was good. Little by little the rocks were removed, the fields resown, and the valley restored to its old fruitfulness. The soil seemed richer than ever before, as if the mud and slime which had lain so long on the surface were possessed of some fertilizing quality. Another *châlet* in time arose, in place of the old one. By the end of fifteen years Fritz again was a rich man, richer than before. But his hard heart had been drowned in the flood, and the new heart which he brought back from the Little White Door was soft and kind. As soon as he could, he sought out the poor widow and restored to her all she had lost, land and home and goats. Later on he wedded her niece, a good and honest maiden, and they took the widow to live under their own roof, and were to her as a son and daughter. So the last years of Fritz were his best years, and his name, 'The Favored of the Saints,' stuck to him for the rest of his life. And it is from him that this valley is named *Das Fritzethal*, my lady."

"And is the story really a true one?" I asked.

"Ah, who knows?" said the old shepherd, shaking his head wisely. "The world has so many liars in it that no one can be sure." Then he took off his odd pointed hat, made a bow, called to his goats, and went his way down the valley, followed by the herd with their many-keyed tinkling bells.

I looked up. The Little White Door shone out of the face of the cliff all rosy pink with sunset. It was time for me to go also.

"At least," I thought, "if the story is not all true, if it has changed and grown a little during the course of the years, – at least it is a good story, and I am glad I heard it."

LITTLE KAREN AND HER BABY

THE cottage in which little Karen lived stood high up on the hillside, close to the edge of a great forest. It was a strange, lonely place for a young wife, almost a girl, to be so happy in; but Karen was not afraid of the forest, and never thought her home lonely, not even when the strong winds blew in winter-time, and brought the far-off baying of wolves from the mountains beyond. Her husband, her boy, her housewifely cares, her spinning-wheel, and her needle kept her busy all day long, and she was as cheerful as busy. The cottage was not large, but it was strongly built of heavy beams and stones. Its low walls seemed to hug and clasp the ground, as if for protection in time of storm. The casement windows, with their very small panes of thick glass, let in little sun, but all summer long they stood open, and in winter, what with the crackling fire, the hum of the wheel, and Karen's bright face, the living-room never looked dark, and, for all its plainness, had an air of quaint comfort about it. Fritz, Karen's husband, who was skilful with tools, had ornamented the high-backed chair, the press for clothes, and the baby's oaken cradle, with beautiful carving, of which little Karen was exceedingly proud. She loved her cottage, she loved the great wood close by; her lonely life was delightful to her, and she had not the least wish to exchange it for the toy-like village in the valley below.

But Karen was unlike other people, the neighbors said, and the old gossips were wont to shake their heads, and mutter that there was a reason for this unlikeness, and that all good Christians ought to pity and pray for the poor child.

Long, long ago, said these gossips, – so long that nobody now could remember exactly when it was, – Karen's great-great-great-grandfather, (or perhaps *his* grandfather – who could tell?) when hunting in the high mountains, met a beautiful, tiny maiden, so small and light that a man could easily carry her in the palm of one hand. This maiden he fell in love with, and he won her to be his wife. She made a good wife; kept the house as bright as new tin; and on her wheel spun linen thread so fine that mortal eye could hardly see it. But a year and a day from the time of her marriage she went out to walk in the wood, and never came back any more! The reason of this was, that she was a gnomide, – daughter of one of the forest gnomes, – and when her own people encountered her thus alone, they detained her, and would not suffer her to return to her husband. The baby she left in the cradle grew to be a woman, – bigger than her gnome mother, it is true, but still very small; and all the women of the race have been small since that time. Witness little Karen herself, whose head only came up to the shoulder of her tall Fritz. Then her passion for woods and solitary places, her beautiful swift spinning, her hair, of that peculiar pale white-brown shade, – all these were proofs of the drops of unearthly blood which ran in her veins. Gnomes always had white hair. This was because they lived in holes and dark places. Even a potato would throw out white leaves if kept in a cellar, – everybody knew that, – and the gossips, ending thus, would shake their heads again, and look very wise.

Karen had heard these stories, and laughed at them. No fairy or gnome had ever met her eyes in the woods she loved so well; and as for hair, Rosel Pilaff's, and Gretchen Erl's too, was almost as pale as hers. Fair hair is common enough in the German mountains. Her little boy – bless him! – had downy rings which promised to become auburn in time, the color of his father's beard. She did not believe in the gnome story a bit.

But there came a time when she almost wished to believe it, for the gnomes are said to be wise folk, and little Fritz fell ill of a strange disease, which neither motherly wisdom nor motherly nursing was able to reach. Each day left him thinner and weaker, till he seemed no more than half his former size. His very face looked strange as it lay on the cradle-pillow, and Karen was at her wits' end to know what to do.

"I will go to the village and ask Mother Klaus to come and see the child," said Fritz. "She may know of a remedy."

"It will be of no use," declared Karen, sadly. "She went to the Berards' and the baby died, and to Heinrich's and little Marie died. But go, go, Fritz! – only come back soon, lest our angel take flight while you are away!"

She almost pushed him from the door, in her impatience to have him return.

A while after, when the baby had wailed himself to sleep, she went again to the door to look down the path into the valley. It was too soon to hope for Fritz, but the movement seemed a relief to her restlessness. It was dusk, not dark, – a sweet, mild dusk, with light enough left to show the tree-branches as they met and waved against the dim yellow sky. Deep shadows lay on the moss-beds and autumn flowers which grew beneath; only a faint perfume here and there told of their presence, and the night was very near.

Too unhappy to mind the duskiess, Karen wandered a little way up the wood-path, and sat down on the root of an old oak, so old that the rangers had given it the name of "Herr Grandfather." It was only to clear her brimming eyes that she sat down. She wiped them with her kerchief, and, with one low sob, was about to rise, when she became aware that somebody was standing at her side.

This somebody was a tiny old woman, with a pale, shadowy, but sweet face, framed in flossy white hair. She wore a dark, foreign-looking robe; a pointed hood, edged with fur, was pulled over her head; and the hand which she held out as she spoke was as white as the stalk of celery.

"What is the matter, my child?" she asked, in a thin, rustling voice, which yet sounded pleasantly, because it was kind.

"My baby is *so* ill," replied Karen, weeping.

"How ill?" inquired the old woman, anxiously. "Is it cold? Is it fever? Do its eyes water? My baby once had a cold, and her eyes – " She stopped abruptly.

"His eyes do not water," said Karen, who felt singularly at home with the stranger. "But his head is hot, and his hands; he sleeps ill, and for these ten days has hardly eaten. He grows thinner and whiter every hour, and wails whenever he is awake. Oh, what am I doing? I must go back to him." And, as she spoke, she jumped from her seat.

"One minute!" entreated the little old woman. "Has he pain anywhere?"

"He cries when I move his head," said Karen, hurrying on.

The stranger went too, keeping close beside her in a swift, soundless way.

"Take courage, Liebchen, child to her who was child of my child's child," she said. "Weep not, my darling. I will send you help. Out of the wisdom of the earth shall come aid for the little dear one."

"What *do* you mean?" cried Karen, stopping short in her surprise.

But the old woman did not answer. She had vanished. Had the wind blown her away?

"How could I wander so far? How could I leave my baby? Wicked mother that I am!" exclaimed Karen, in sudden terror, as she ran into the cottage.

But nothing seemed disturbed, and no one had been there. The baby lay quietly in his cradle, and the room was quite still, save for the hiss of the boiling pot and the fall of an ember on the hearth. Gradually her heart ceased its terrified beating; a sense of warmth and calm crept over her, her eyes drooped, and, seated at the cradle-foot, she fell asleep in her chair.

Whether it was an hour or a minute that she slept, she never knew. Slowly and dimly her waking senses crept back to her; but though she heard and saw and understood, she could neither stir nor speak. Two forms were bending over the cradle, forms of little men, venerable and shadowy, with hair like snow, and blanched, pale hands, like her visitor of the afternoon. They did not look at Karen, but consulted together above the sleeping child.

"It is *here*, brother, and *here*," said one, laying his finger gently on the baby's head and heart.

"Does it lie too deep for our reaching?" asked the second, anxiously.

"No. The little herb you know of is powerful."

"And the crystal dust *you* know of is more powerful still."

Then they took out two minute caskets, and Karen saw them open the baby's lips, and each drop in a pinch of some unknown substance.

"He is of ours," whispered one, "more of ours than any of them have been since the first."

"He has the gift of the far sight," said the other, lightly touching the closed eyes, "the divining glance, and the lucky finger."

"I read in him the apprehension of metals," said the second old man, "the sense of hidden treasures, the desire to penetrate."

"We will teach him how the waters run, and what the birds say – yes, and the way in and the way out!"

"Put the charm round his neck, brother."

Then Karen saw the little men tie a bright object round the baby's neck. She longed to move, but still she sat mute and powerless, while the odd figures passed round the cradle, slowly at first, then faster and faster, crooning, as they went, a song which was like wind in branches, and of which this scrap lodged in her memory: —

"Eyes to pierce the darkness through,
Wit to grasp the hidden clew,
Heart to feel and hand to do, —
These the gnomes have given to you."

So the song and the circling movement went on, faster and more fast, and round and round, till Karen's head swam and her senses seemed to spin in a whirling dance; and she knew no more till roused by the opening of the door, and Fritz's voice exclaiming: "Come in, Dame Klaus – come in! Karen! Where are you, wife? Ah, here she is, fast asleep, and the little man is asleep too."

"I am not asleep," said Karen, finding her voice with an effort. Then, to her husband's surprise, she began to weep bitterly. But, for all his urgings, she would not tell the cause, for she was afraid of Dame Klaus's tongue.

The dame shook her head over the sick baby. He was very bad, she said; still, she had brought through others as bad as he, and there was no telling. She asked for a saucepan, and began to brew a tea of herbs, while Karen, drawing her husband aside, told her wonderful tale in a whisper.

"Thou wert dreaming, Karen; it is nothing but a dream," declared the astounded Fritz.

"No, no," protested Karen. "It was not a dream. Baby will be well again, and great things are to happen! You will see! The little men know!"

"Little men! Oh, Karen! Karen!" exclaimed Fritz.

But he said no more, for Karen, bending over the cradle, lifted the strange silver coin which was tied round the baby's neck, and held it up to him with a smile. A silver piece is not a dream, as every one knows; so Fritz, though incredulous, held his tongue, and neither he nor Karen said a word of the matter to Mother Klaus.

Baby *was* better next day. It was all the herb-tea, Mother Klaus declared, and she gained great credit for the cure.

This happened years ago. Little Fritz grew to be a fine man, sound and hearty, though never as tall as his father. He was a lucky lad too, the villagers said, for his early taste for minerals caught the attention of a rich gentleman, who sent him to the school of mines, where he got great learning. Often when the mother sat alone at her wheel, a smile came to her lips, and she hummed low to herself the song of the little old men: —

"Eyes to pierce the darkness through,
Wit to grasp the hidden clew,
Heart to feel and hand to do, —

These the gnomes have given to you."

HELEN'S THANKSGIVING

MAMMA, would you mind *very* much if I should learn to make pies?"

This request sounds harmless, but Mrs. Sands quite started in her chair as she heard it. She and Helen were sitting on either side of a wood-fire. The blinds had been pulled down to exclude the chill November darkness, and the room was lit only by the blazing logs, which sent out quick, bright flashes followed by sudden soft shadows, in that unexpected way which is one of the charms of wood-fires. It was a pretty room, in a pretty house, in one of the up-town streets of New York, and the mother and daughter looked very comfortable as they sat there together.

"Pies, my dear? What *do* you mean?"

"I'll tell you, mamma. You're going to Grandmamma Ellis for Thanksgiving, this year, you know, and papa and I are going up to Vermont, to Grandmother Sands?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't remember grandmother much, because it is so long since she was here, but the one thing I do recollect is how troubled she was because I didn't know anything about housekeeping. One day you had a headache, and wanted some tea; and you rang and rang, and Jane was ever so long in fetching it, and at last grandma said, 'Why don't you run down and see to it, Helen?' And when I told her that I wasn't allowed to go into the kitchen, and beside that I didn't know how to make tea, she looked so distressed, and said, 'Dear me, dear me! Poor little ignorant girl! What a sad bringing up for you in a country like ours!' I didn't understand exactly what she meant, but I have never forgotten it, and do you know, mamma, just that one speech of grandma's has made me want to do ever so many things. I never told you, but once I made my bed for more than a week, – till Bridget said I was 'worth my salt as a chambermaid,' and I used to dust the nursery, and sweep. And the other day it came into my head suddenly how pleased grandmother would be if I carried her a pumpkin-pie that I had made myself; so I asked Morrison, and she said she'd teach me, and welcome, if you didn't mind. Do you mind, mamma?"

"You know, dear, I don't like to have you about with the servants, and I never wanted you to become a drudge at home, as so many American girls are. Then you have your lessons to attend to besides."

"Yes, mamma, I know, but it will only take one morning, and I'll not begin till school closes, if you'd rather not. I really would like to so much, mamsie?"

Helen's pet name for her mother was coaxingly spoken, and had its effect. Mrs. Sands yielded.

"Very well, dear; you may, if you like, only I wish you could wear gloves."

"O mamma! nobody makes pies in gloves. But I needn't put my hands in at all, except for rolling the paste, Morrison says so."

Mrs. Sands was not so silly a woman as she sounds. Born and bred in the West Indies, the constant talk about servants and housekeeping, that met her ears when she came to New York, a young married woman, so puzzled and annoyed her that she somewhat rashly decided that her child should never know anything about such matters. Morrison, the good old cook, had lived with her since Helen was a baby, and all had gone so smoothly that there had never seemed occasion for interference from anybody. And Helen would have grown up in utter ignorance of all practical matters, had not a chance remark of her thrifty New England grandmother piqued her into the voluntary wish of learning.

It was with a good deal of excitement, and a little sense of victory as well, that Helen went downstairs, a few days later, to take the promised lesson. The kitchen looked very cheerful and neat, and Morrison was all ready with her spice-box, eggs, pie-dishes, and great yellow bowl full of strained pumpkin; likewise a big calico apron to tie over Helen's dress. First they made the crust. It was such good fun pinching the soft bits of lard into the nice, dry-feeling flour, that Helen would willingly have prolonged the operation, but Morrison objected. Pastry didn't like to be fingered, she said; and

she made Helen wash her hands, and then mix in the ice-water with a thin-bladed knife, cutting and chopping till all was moistened into a rough sort of dough. Next, she produced the rolling-pin, and showed her how to beat the dough with dexterous strokes, up and down, and cross-ways, till it became a smooth paste, which felt as soft as velvet, and then how to roll it into a smooth sheet, lay on the butter in thin flakes, fold and roll again.

"Now wrap this towel all round it, and I'll set it into the ice-chest till we want it," she said. "It'll puff the minute it goes into the oven, never fear; I can always tell. You like it, – don't you, – Miss Helen dear?"

"Yes, indeed, ever so much. I *hope* the pies will be good; grandmamma will be so pleased."

"They'll be good," pronounced Morrison, confidently. "Now sift in plenty of sugar, miss."

So Helen put in "plenty" of sugar, and then, as directed, grated lemon-peel, lemon-juice, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, melted butter, a pinch of salt, beaten eggs, a dash of rose-water, and then a little more sugar, and "just the least taste of cinnamon," till Morrison pronounced the flavor exactly right, and Helen declared that for all she could see, pumpkin-pies were made of anything in the world except pumpkins. Last of all went in a great pour of hot milk; then the pie-dishes were lined, filled, and set in the oven, after being ornamented with all manner of zigzags and curly-queues of paste round their edges; and Helen rushed upstairs to tell her mother that pie-making was "just lovely," and she would like to be a cook always, she thought. By Morrison's advice she wrote the whole process down in a book while it was fresh in her mind, and she was glad afterwards that she had done so, as you will see.

That same afternoon Mrs. Sands went on to Philadelphia, and next morning early Helen and her father started for their journey to Vermont. It was gray, blustering weather, but neither of them cared for that. Papa was in high spirits, and full of fun as a school-boy. Their baggage comprised, besides two valises, a big hamper full of all sorts of nice things for grandmother, game and fruit and groceries, and Helen carried a flat basket in her hand, in which, wrapped in a snowy napkin, reposed one of the precious pies.

"Bless me, how raw it is! It looks as though it were going to snow," said Mr. Sands, as he came in from a walk up and down the platform of one of the little stations at which the train stopped; and five minutes later Helen, with a little scream of surprise, cried out, "Why, papa, it *is* snowing!" Sure enough it was, – in fine snow-flakes, which before long thickened into a heavy fall.

"It will only be a squall," Mr. Sands said; but the conductor shook his head, and remarked that up there so near the mountains there was no calculating on weather. It might stop in half an hour, or it might go on all night: no one could pretend to say beforehand which it would do.

By the time they reached Asham, their stopping-place, the ground was solid white. The wind, too, had risen, and was drifting the snow in all directions. The tavern-keeper at Asham, to whom Mr. Sands went for "a team," advised them to stay all night, but this both Helen and her father agreed was not to be thought of. It was only fourteen miles. Grandmamma was expecting them, and must not be disappointed. So, well wrapped in carriage blankets and buffalo robes, they set out in a light covered rockaway, with a stout horse, their baggage packed in behind them.

Fourteen miles may seem a very short distance or a very long one, according to circumstances. Before they had gone half-way both of them began to think it an extremely long one. The road lay up hill for the greater part of the way. Night was coming on fast, and every moment the drift grew thicker and more confusing. Mr. Sands in his secret heart repented that he had not taken the tavern-keeper's advice, and stayed at Asham. At last the horse, which had halted several times and been urged on again, came to a dead stop. Mr. Sands touched him with the whip, but he would not stir. He jumped up to see what was the matter, and found the poor animal up to his chest in snow. He had wandered from the road a little and plunged into a drift. Mr. Sands tried to turn him toward the road, when, lo, a loud and ominous crack was heard, and Helen gave a scream. One of the shafts had snapped in two.

Matters now looked serious. Mr. Sands undid the harness as fast as possible, for he feared the horse might flounder to release himself, and upset the carriage. Then he climbed into the rockaway again, and stood up to see if he could anywhere see the light of a house. No; a twinkling beam was visible farther up the hill, about a quarter of a mile away.

"Helen," he said, "I'll have to ask you to sit here quietly for ten minutes or so, while I ride on to a house which I see up there, and get some one to help us. Will you be afraid to be left alone? It's only for a little while."

"N-o; but O papa! must you go? I'm so afraid the horse will kick, or you'll tumble off."

"Never fear," – trying to laugh, – "I really must go, dear; it's our only chance of getting out of this scrape. Promise me to sit perfectly still, and on no account to leave the carriage."

It seemed much longer than ten minutes before papa got back, but there he was at last, with another man carrying a lantern, both of them white with snow up to their waists.

"All right, Helen," he cried cheerily. "Wrap all the blankets round your shoulders; I'm going to set you on the horse, and Mr. Simmons and I – this is Mr. Simmons, my dear – will walk on either side and hold you on; we'll have you up the hill in a trice."

Helen did not like it at all. The horse felt dreadfully *alive* under her, and jerked so, as he plunged up hill through the snow, that she was constantly afraid of tumbling off. It did not last long, however. In five minutes her father had lifted and carried her in, and set her down in a kitchen, where a woman with a candle in her hand stood waiting for them.

"This is Mrs. Simmons," he said. "She is so kind as to say that she will keep us till to-morrow morning, when perhaps the snow will have stopped, and, at all events, we shall have daylight to find our way with. Mr. Simmons and I are going back now to fetch up the luggage. The rockaway will have to take care of itself till to-morrow, I fancy."

Left alone, Helen looked curiously about her. The kitchen was a bare-looking place to her eyes. There was a stove with a fire in it, a rocking-chair covered with faded "patch," some wooden chairs, a table, and a sort of dresser with dishes. A large wheel for spinning wool stood in one of the windows. Everything was clean, but there was an air of poverty, and to Helen it seemed a most dismal place. She could not imagine how people could live and be happy there.

Mrs. Simmons herself looked very ill and tired.

"I enjoy such poor health," she explained to Helen, as she took some plates and bowls down from the dresser. "I got the ague down to Mill Hollow, where we lived, and we moved up here, hoping to get rid of it. I am some better, but it took me powerful hard yesterday, and I suppose I'll have it bad again to-morrow. Mr. Simmons, he's got behindhand somehow, and it's hard work trying to catch up in these times. What with one thing and another, both of us have felt clean discouraged this fall. Glory, fetch the milk."

"Yes, mother." And out of the buttery came a girl of about Helen's age, with a pan in her hands. She had apparently tumbled out of bed to help in the entertainment of the strangers, for her hair was flying loose, and she looked only half dressed; but she had pretty brown eyes and a bright smile.

"I feel real bad to think I'm out of tea," said Mrs. Simmons. "Father, he was calculating to get some later on, when he'd finished a job of lumber-hauling. And the hens have 'most stopped laying, too; I hain't but four eggs in the house."

"Oh, don't give us the eggs!" cried Helen; "you'll want them yourself for Thanksgiving, I'm sure."

"Thanksgiving! Dear me, so it is!" said Mrs. Simmons. "I'd forgot all about that. Not that it'd have made much difference, any way. You can't make something out of nothin', and that's about what we've come to."

"I've got a pie," cried Helen, with a sudden generous impulse, but feeling a little pang meanwhile, as she recalled her vision of putting the pie into grandmamma's own hands. But where

was the pie? She recollected now, – the basket was in her lap when papa lifted her out of the carriage. It must have fallen out, and probably was now buried deep in snow.

A great stamping of boots just then announced the entrance of the two men with the valises and hamper. Mrs. Simmons renewed her apologies about the tea. Hot milk, a little fried pork, two of the eggs, and a loaf of saleratus bread were all she had to offer, but it was very welcome to the hungry travellers. There was some choice tea in grandmother's hamper, but Mr. Sands very rightly judged it better to say nothing about it just then, as it might have seemed that he and Helen were not satisfied with their supper. They ate heartily, and soon after went to bed in two chilly little lofts upstairs, where all the buffalo robes and blankets from the carriage could not *quite* keep them warm.

Helen lay awake a long time, thinking of her own disappointment and grandmamma's, but more still about the Simmons family. How hard and melancholy their life seemed, struggling with poverty and ague up here among the lonely hills, with no doctor near them, and no neighbors! A great sympathy and pity awoke in her heart. Her first impulse, when she roused next morning, was to hurry to the window. It was still snowing, and the drifts seemed deeper than ever! "Oh, dear!" she thought, "we shall have to stay in this forlorn place another day, I am afraid." A more generous thought followed: "If it seems so hard to me to have to spend one day here, what must it be to live here always?" And she made up her mind that, if they were forced to stay, she would do all she could to make Thanksgiving a little less forlorn than it seemed likely to be to Mrs. Simmons and Glory.

It did look forlorn downstairs in the bare little kitchen. Mrs. Simmons's chill was coming on. She was up and dragging herself about, but she looked quite unfit to be out of bed. Two little children, a boy and a girl, whom Helen had not seen the night before, clung close to her dress, and followed wherever she moved, hiding their shy faces from the strangers. They got over their shyness gradually as Helen laughed, and coaxed them, and by the time breakfast was over had grown good friends.

"Now," said Helen, gayly, after a last glance at the window, which showed the snow-storm still raging, "I am going to propose a plan. You shall go to bed, Mrs. Simmons, – I'm sure you ought to be there at this moment, – and Glory and I will wash the dishes, and we will cook the Thanksgiving dinner."

"Oh, dear! there ain't nothing worth cooking," sighed poor Mrs. Simmons, but she was too ill to make objections. So Glory, or Glorvina, put the kitchen to rights with Helen's help, and then the two girls sat down to consult over dinner.

"Could you roast a turkey, do you think?" asked Helen.

"There ain't no turkey to be roasted," objected Glory.

"Yes, but could you if there were? Because I think there's one in the hamper, papa, and I know grandmamma would let us have it if she knew."

"Why, of course she would. Use everything in the hamper if you like; grandma would never think of objecting, and there's plenty more to be had where those came from," said her father.

So the hamper was unpacked, and the turkey extracted, and a package of tea and another of lump sugar, and a tumbler of currant jelly; and Helen filled a big dish with oranges and white grapes, and the preparations went merrily on. There proved to be half a squash in the cellar, and Glory, wading out in the snow, fetched in a couple more eggs from the barn, so pies were possible. Helen produced her recipe-book.

"Now I'm going to show you just how to make pies," she said; "I only learned myself day before yesterday." And she thought, "How lucky it is that I did learn, for now I can show Glory, and she'll always know. But wouldn't Morrison open her eyes if she could see me?"

The spices and lemons came out of the hamper, of course, and the crust had to be made of salt butter and no lard; but the pies turned out very good, for all that, and no one was in the least disposed to find fault with their flavor. Really, the little dinner was a great success. Glory's potatoes were a little underdone, but that was the only failure. The children ate as though they could never be satisfied. Mr. Simmons cheered up and cracked one or two feeble jokes; and even Mrs. Simmons,

propped high in bed to survey the festive scene, called out that it "looked something like," and she didn't know when there had been so much laughing going on in their house before.

The clock struck three just as the last nicely washed plate was set away on the dresser. Helen quite jumped at the sound. How short, after all, the day had seemed which promised to be so long and dismal! And just then a bright yellow ray streamed through the window, and, looking out, she saw blue sky.

"Papa," she screamed, "it has cleared up! I do believe we shall get to grandmamma's to-night, after all!"

And so they did. Mr. Sands, with Mr. Simmons's assistance, fitted the rockaway on to a pair of old sledge-runners, and, with many warm good-byes from the whole family, they drove off. Just at sunset they reached Morrow Hill, and grandma was so glad to see them, and they so glad to get there, that it was easy to forget all their disappointment and delay. In fact, after a little while Helen convinced herself that the whole thing was rather a piece of good fortune than otherwise.

"For, don't you see, papa," she exclaimed, "we had all Thanksgiving evening with grandmother, you know, and she had it with us, so we only lost part of our pleasant time? But if it hadn't been for the snow and the breakdown, the poor Simmonses wouldn't have had any Thanksgiving at all – not a bit; so it really was a great deal better, don't you see that it was, papa?"

AT FIESOLE

FIESOLE is a quaint old town which perches on a hill-top above the valley of the Arno and the city of Florence. You must not pronounce it as it is spelt, but like this – Fee-es-o-lee. From the Florence streets people catch glimpses of its bell-towers and roofs shining above the olive orchards and vineyards of the hillside. A white road winds upward toward it in long, easy zigzags, and seems to say, "Come with me and I will show you something pretty."

Not long ago there were two girls in Florence to whom, plainly as road could speak, the white road seemed to utter these very words. Pauline and Molly Hale were the names of these girls. It was six months since they had left America with their father and mother, and it seemed much longer, because so much had happened in the time. First, the sea voyage, not pleasant, and yet not exactly unpleasant, because papa got better all the way, and that made mamma happy. Now papa would be quite well at once, they thought. His people (for papa was a clergyman) had sent him away for that purpose. They were not a rich people, but each gave a little, and all together it made enough to carry the pastor and his family across the sea and keep them there one year, with very prudent management. The Hales, therefore, did not travel about as most people do, but went straight to Italy, where they hoped to find that sun and warm air which are an invalid's best medicines.

"Going straight to Italy" means, however, a great many pleasant things by the way. Molly was always reminding Maria Matilda, her doll, of the sights she had seen and the superior advantages she enjoyed over the dolls at home.

After this mention of a doll, what will you say when I tell you that Molly was almost thirteen? Most girls of thirteen scorn to play with dolls, but Molly was not of their number. She was childish for her years, and possessed a faithful little heart, which clung to Maria Matilda as to an old friend whom it would be unkind to lay aside.

"First, there was Paris," Molly would say to her. "No, first there was *Deep*, where the people all talked so queerly that we couldn't understand a word. That was funny, Matilda, wasn't it? Then, don't you recollect that beautiful church which we saw when we went past *Ruin*?" (Molly meant Rouen, but I am sorry to say her pronunciation of French names was rather queer.) "And Paris too, where I took you to walk in the gardens, and papa let us both ride in a whirligig. None of the home dollies have ever ridden in whirligigs, have they? They won't understand what you mean unless I draw them a picture on my slate. Then we got into the cars, and went and went till we came to that great dark tunnel. Weren't we frightened? And you cried, Matilda – I heard you. You needn't look so ashamed, though, for it *was* horrid. But we got out of it at last, though I thought we never should; and here we are at the padrona's, and it's ever so nice, only I wish papa would come back."

For Florence had proved too cold, and papa had joined a party and gone off to Egypt, leaving mamma and the children to live quietly and cheaply at Signora Goldi's boarding-house. It was a dingy house in the old part of Florence, but for all that it was a very interesting place to live in. The street in which the house stood was extremely narrow. High buildings on either side shut out the sun, the cobblestone pavement was always dirty, but all day long a stream of people poured through it wearing all sorts of curious clothes, talking all sorts of languages, and selling all sorts of things. Men with orange-baskets on their heads strolled along, crying, "Oranges, sweet oranges!" Others, with panniers of flowers, chanted, "Fiori, belli fiori!" Pedlers displayed their wares or waved gay stuffs; boys held up candied fruits, wood-carvings, and toys; women went to and fro bearing trays full of a chocolate-colored mixture dotted with the white kernels of pine-cones. This looked very rich and nice, and the poor people bought great slices of it. Pauline once invested a penny therein, but a single taste proved enough; it was sour and oily at once, and she gave the rest to a small Italian girl, who looked delighted, and gobbled it up in huge mouthfuls. Whenever they went out to walk, there were fresh pleasures. The narrow street led directly to a shining sunlit river, which streamed through the heart

of the city like a silver ribbon. Beautiful bridges spanned this river, some reared on graceful arches, some with statues at either end, one set all along its course by quaint stalls filled with gold and silver filigree, chains of amber, and turquoises blue as the sky. All over the city were delightful pictures, churches, and gardens, open and free to all who chose to come. Every day mamma and the children went somewhere and saw something, and, in spite of papa's absence, the winter was a happy one.

Going to and fro in the city, the children had often looked up the Fiesole hill, which is visible from many parts of Florence, and Pauline had conceived a strong wish to go there. Molly did not care so much, but as she always wanted to do what Pauline did, she joined her older sister in begging to go. Mamma, however, thought it too far for a walk, and carriage hire cost something; so she said no, and the girls were forced to content themselves with "making believe" what they would do if ever they went there, – a sort of play in which they both delighted. None of the things they imagined proved true when they did go there, as you shall hear.

It was just as they were expecting papa back, that, coming in one day from a walk with Signora Goldi, Pauline and Molly found mamma hard at work packing a travelling-bag. She looked very pale, and had been crying. No wonder, for the mail had brought a letter to say that papa, travelling alone from Egypt, had landed at Brindisi very ill with Syrian fever. The kind strangers who wrote the letter would stay with and take care of him till mamma could get there, but she must come at once.

"What *shall* I do?" cried poor Mrs. Hale, appealing in her distress to Signora Goldi. "I cannot take the children into a fever-room, and even if that were safe, the journey costs so much that it would be out of the question. Mr. Hale left me only money enough to last till his return. After settling with you and buying my ticket, I shall have very little remaining. Help me, padrona! Advise me what to do."

Signora Goldi's advertisement said, "English spoken," but the English was of a kind which English people found it hard to understand. Her kind heart, however, stood her instead of language, and helped her to guess the meaning of Mrs. Hale's words.

"Such peety!" she said. "Had I know, I not have let rooms for week after. The signora said 'let' and she sure to go, so I let, else the *piccoli* should stay wiss me. Now what?" and she rubbed her nose hard, and wrinkled her forehead in a puzzled way. "I have!" she cried at last, her face beaming. "How the *piccolini* like go to Fiesole for a little? My brother who dead, he leave Engleis wife. She lady-maid once, speak Engleis well as me! – better! She have *pensione*– very small, but good – ah, so good, and it cost little, with air *si buono, si fresco!*"

The signora was drifting into Italian without knowing it, but was stopped by the joyous exclamations of the two girls.

"Fiesole! Oh, mamma! just what we wanted so much!" cried Pauline. "Do let us go there!"

"Do, do!" chimed in Molly. "I saw the padrona's sister once, and she's so nice. Say yes, please, mamma."

The "yes" was not quite a happy one, but what could poor Mrs. Hale do? No better plan offered, time pressed, she hoped not to be obliged to stay long away from the children, and, as the signora said, the Fiesole hill-top must be airy and wholesome. So the arrangement was made, the terms settled, a carriage was called, and in what seemed to the girls a single moment, mamma had rattled away, with the signora to buy her ticket and see her off at the station. They looked at each other disconsolately, and their faces grew very long.

"We're just like orphans in a book," sobbed Pauline at last, while Molly watered Matilda's best frock with salt tears. The signora had a specially nice supper that night, and petted them a great deal, but they were very homesick for mamma, and cried themselves to sleep.

Matters seemed brighter when they woke up next morning to find a lovely day, such a day as only Italy knows, with sunshine like gold, sky of clearest blue, and the river valley shining through soft mists like finest filtered rainbows. By a happy chance the Fiesole sister-in-law came to Florence that morning, and drove up to the door in a droll little cart drawn by a mouse-colored mule, with a green carrot-top stuck over his left ear and a bell round his neck. She gladly agreed to lodge the

children, and her pleasant old face and English voice made them at once at home with her. There was just room in the cart for their trunk, and about five in the afternoon they set out, perched on the narrow bench in front, one on each side of their new friend, and holding each other's hands tightly behind her ample back. Signora Bianchi was the sister-in-law's name, but "padrona" was easier to say, and they called her so from the beginning.

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