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## MISS MOUSE AND HER BOYS

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'OH, WHAT A LOT OF BOYS!'—p. 2. *Front.*

## MISS MOUSE AND HER BOYS

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BY MRS. MOLESWORTH

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ILLUSTRATED BY L. LESLIE BROOKE



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1897

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To the dear memory of  
MY BROTHER-IN-LAW  
SIR CRAVEN CHARLES GORING, BART.  
WHOSE UNFAILING INTEREST IN MY WORK  
HAS BEEN AN ENCOURAGEMENT THROUGH MANY YEARS  
19 SUMNER PLACE, S.W.,  
*May 1897.*

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# CHAPTER I

## 'WHAT A LOT OF BOYS!'

It was before the days of sailor suits and knickerbockers. Nowadays boys would make great fun of the quaint little men in tight-fitting jackets, and trousers buttoning on above them, that many people still living can remember well, for it is not so very long ago after all.

And whatever the difference in their clothes, the boys of then were in themselves very like the boys of now—queer, merry, thoughtless fellows for the most part, living in the pleasant present, caring much less for the past or the future than their girl-companions, seldom taking trouble of any kind to heart, or if they did, up again like a cork at the first chance. But yet how dull the world, now as then, would be without them and their bats and balls, and pockets full of rubbish, and everlasting scrapes and mischief, and honest old hearts!

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I always like to hear any one, young or old, man or woman or girl, say, as one often does hear said, 'I do love boys.'

There were five of them—of the Hervey boys. They began at thirteen and ended at three, or began at three and ended at thirteen, if you like to put it that way. But when they were all together in the nursery, or playroom as they called it more often—to see them, still more to hear them, you would certainly have said there were at least ten—above all if a scrimmage of any kind was going on, for then the number of legs and arms all belonging to everybody apparently, seemed to be multiplied in an astonishing manner.

You would, I think, have sympathised with a small person, almost as small as three-years-old Ger, whose first words when the door was opened were, in an awe-struck whisper,

'Oh, what a *lot* of boys.'

She was dressed in pale grey, grey all over, made rather long in the skirt, and she had a little drawn bonnet of the same colour—a quaint little figure; but we are used to quaint little figures of *her* kind now—fashions repeat themselves, wise people say; and so they do in some cases, though not in all. I cannot believe that boys will ever again be buttoned up and choked as they used to be, above all in summer, when their hot, red faces seemed on the point of bursting out of their 'nankeen' suits, held together by brass buttons.

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But the little grey figure standing at the doorway of the Herveys' playroom was pretty as well as quaint, though the small face was pale, and the eyes just a quiet grey like the colour of her clothes, and her dark-brown hair cropped quite short.

She was holding on tightly to the hand of a young lady, and as one of the scrimmagers caught sight of this same young lady, and immediately broke into a shout of welcome—'Aunt Mattie—boys, don't you see Aunt Mattie?' and the noise became really deafening, our little girl squeezed the fingers she held still more firmly, and an *almost* frightened look crept into her eyes.

'Boys, boys,' exclaimed Aunt Mattie in turn, 'don't *you* see that—somebody you have never seen before is here? Do disentangle yourselves if you can—Archie, Hector—I can't tell which is which of you—and Ger, dear old Ger, as plump as ever, and—yes, that's right, Justin—you and Pat really should keep the pickles in order.'

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Justin got red—redder even than he was already—as he pushed his way out of the scramble.

'If you knew what it was, auntie,' he said, in a tone half of despair, half of apology. 'The pickles get worse every day, and Pat's always asleep or nearly asleep over his books and plans. I really —'

'Well, never mind about that just now,' said his aunt. 'I must introduce you all properly,' and she led the little girl gently forward into the room, looking round for a seat, which was not so easy to find, as every chair was either upside down or else hoisted on to the top of another.

'I'll get you one down,' Archie called out when he saw the state of things. 'Get out of the way, Hec and Ger, can't you?'

But in getting out of the way, Hec tumbled over Ger, and Ger, who was really only a baby, though a very independent one, kicked out at Hec, which he thought more manly than crying, though one or other he must have done, of course, to relieve his feelings. Whereupon Aunt Mattie, not seeming very surprised, though in her heart she was startled at the look in the big grey eyes under the shade of the grey bonnet, picked him up, still kicking, and plumped him down between herself and the little grey person, who by this time was seated beside her, two chairs having somehow been got at.

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Ger was too surprised to go on kicking, *or* to cry. He just opened his mouth wide and stared. Then 'Aunt-ie,' he began slowly, in a tone of reproach, 'thoo——'

But he got no further.

'Ger,' said auntie gravely, 'I'm ashamed of you. You haven't even said "How do you do?" or shaken

hands with this young lady. She isn't accustomed to see little boys fighting and kicking each other.'

'I diddun fight,' said Ger, 'I on'y kicked. Hec begunned.'

'I!' exclaimed Hec, ready to swell up with indignation like an angry turkey-cock, 'I— I were fetchin' a chair and—'

'Stop, boys,' said Aunt Mattie again. 'Now let's go on nicely. This is Ger, and he wants to be very polite now and shake hands—eh, Ger?'

Ger's round blue eyes were fixed on the small stranger.

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'Her's not a young lady,' he said at last. 'Ger 'ud rather kith her.'

The little girl leaned forward at once, and kissed his firm, plump cheek.

'Thoo ith tho thoft,' he said, and he stroked her cape and the chinchilla muff she was holding. 'I know—thoo's a *mouse*.'

He said the 's' quite plainly, for his lisp was a very changeable one, and already he was on the way to lose it altogether.

Everybody laughed. Ger liked the sound of the laugh—it was not making fun of him.

'Yeth,' he went on, 'uth'll call thoo'—with some effort—'Mith Mouse.'

Miss Mouse leant forward a second time and kissed him again.

'You funny little boy,' she said. 'You may call me "Miss Mouse" if you please, but wouldn't you like to know my proper name?'

Ger shook his head.

'No thank thoo. I like Mith Mouse best.'

'But *we'd* like to know your real name,' said Archie. 'Wouldn't we—Justin and Hec, and—oh Pat's asleep over a book again, I suppose.'

'I'm not,' growled a voice from an opposite corner.

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'Well then, behave properly. Come out of there, can't you? Aunt Mattie, make him.'

'Patrick,' said Aunt Mattie, and Pat got up and came slowly forward. He was not like Justin, and Hec, and Ger, who were all fair and ruddy; he was dark-haired and dark-eyed and pale, while Archie, the best-looking of the five, came between the two, for he had bright brown hair and merry hazel eyes.

'Now,' said Aunt Mattie, 'now, dear, you see them all— Ger, you have shaken hands with, or rather, kissed. Ger is three and three quarters, and his real name is Gervais. Hector is—let me see—six and a half—no, seven, just struck. Shake hands, Hec, if you're too big to be kissed.'

'I'm not,' said Hec, and he stretched up his rosy mouth to Miss Mouse, and then, like Ger, he stroked her chinchilla muff softly.

'And Archie,' Aunt Mattie proceeded. Archibald is nearly ten,' and Archie held out a rather grimy paw and shook hands heartily. 'Next comes Patrick, eleven past.' Pat's mouth was shut tight, and he only just touched the little girl's fingers. 'And, last and eldest, Justin, who is thirteen and—' she hesitated.

'Thirteen and a quarter,' said Justin cheerily.

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'Then,' said Miss Mouse, speaking almost for the first time, 'I come between Pat and Archie. I'm nine—nine past, my birthday was last Christmas.'

'Are you staying with Aunt Mattie?' asked Justin. 'When did you come? You weren't there on Sunday.'

The little girl turned to the young lady with a puzzled look.

'Don't they know?' she said in a half whisper.

Aunt Mattie smiled and shook her head slightly.

'Didn't your mother tell you that I was expecting a visitor, Justin?' she asked, turning to the eldest boy, who was now employing the time of waiting for his question to be answered by tilting another unfortunate chair as far back as he could get it to go without tumbling over.

'Expecting a visitor,' he repeated. 'Oh yes, she said something about—about—a girl, but I thought she meant somebody like you used to be, auntie, before you were married—a grown-up girl. And I forgot about it with her being away. Papa and mamma went away yesterday, you know, and—' Over went the chair, its patience at an end, with a good clatter. The chairs in the playroom were pretty stout, as they needed to be.

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'O Justin,' said Aunt Mattie, 'do be quiet for a minute and leave the chairs alone. How is it that you and Pat and Archie aren't at school this afternoon?'

'Half-holiday,' said Justin.

'Of course— I forgot,' Aunt Mattie replied, thinking to herself that if she had remembered what day it was, she would have chosen some quieter time for introducing her little guest to the Herveys. She had expected only to find the two younger ones with their nursery governess. 'Where is Miss Ward?' she went on.

'Got a headache,' said Hector. 'Leave off, Ger,' he went on. 'It's my turn,' for the two had been stroking the chinchilla muff with great satisfaction while Aunt Mattie had been speaking to the elder boys.

Ger gave a yell. Hec had nipped his fingers to make him give up his share of the muff. Miss Mouse's face grew red, and she very quietly took her hands out of the muff, and put it behind her, between her shoulders at the back of her chair, though without speaking. Aunt Mattie saw what she did and smiled to herself. Hector and Gervais only stared.

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'If you will be quiet, Justin—you and Pat and Archie, I will explain about Rosamond,' and she put her arm round the little girl affectionately.

'Her's Mith Mouse, not Lotha—wubbish,' said Ger.

'Hold your—' began Justin.

Ger shut his mouth up tight.

'Miss Mouse then,' said Aunt Mattie, 'is my niece, just as you are my nephews, only she's not your cousin.'

'Why not?' said Pat, suddenly waking up. This sounded rather like a riddle, or a puzzle of some kind, and Pat loved puzzles.

'Because she is Uncle Ted's niece—she is my niece now because I am married to Uncle Ted, but that doesn't make her your cousin.'

'Then she *isn't* your niece the same as we're your nephews,' said Pat, preparing for a good argument.

'Well, no, not exactly. But still she *is* my niece, just as much as Uncle Ted is your uncle, and you wouldn't like any one to say he is not your proper uncle, would you, for I know you are very fond of him?'

There was no reply to this for a moment or two. The boys *were* very fond of Uncle Ted, but yet the relationship was a little perplexing. They had never thought of it before, and even Pat felt that it might seem rude if he did not agree that Uncle Ted was as much an uncle as Aunt Mattie was an aunt.

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It was Miss Mouse who came to the rescue.

'I know what,' she said, and her voice was very clear indeed, 'I know what, boys—we'll settle that I *am* to be your cousin, and that'll make it all right. Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie will be our uncle and aunt to all of us just the same, once we're cousins.'

'All right,' said Justin and Archie, who were longing to begin another scrimmage of some kind. 'All right,' said Pat, not quite so heartily, for he was disappointed of his argument with Aunt Mattie. 'All zight,' said Hec and Ger—Ger adding, 'but thoo'll be Mith Mouse *always*. Are thoo goin' to live here in thit houth?'

All the boys stopped short at this. It had never struck them till this moment that such a thing was possible. They had only thought of the little girl as just coming in to see them for a short time, as other children did now and then, and Rosamond herself looked up at her aunt in surprise at their not understanding. For she herself was an only child accustomed to hear a good deal more of the family plans than were the Hervev boys.

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'Oh no,' she began to say, 'oh no, Ger, dear. I'm not going to live in your house. I've come to stay with Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie for a—for a long time,' and there was a slight tremble in her voice at the last words.

Aunt Mattie felt a little vexed at having to speak of what she knew must be sad for her young guest.

'I thought your mother had told you something,' she said, turning to Justin. 'Most likely she did, and that it was you who did not listen. You are so very scatter-brained. Rosamond's father and mother have gone to India, a few weeks ago, and she is going to stay with Uncle Ted and me till they come back again.'

The little girl's face had grown red while Aunt Mattie was speaking, and at the last few words she squeezed tightly the kind hand she had managed to get hold of.

'Oh,' said the boys, two or three of them at once, in a tone of some awe, and looking at Miss Mouse with increased respect. For India, and goings-to and comings-from there, were not nearly such every-day matters forty or fifty years ago as they are now.

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'Will they come back thoon?' asked Ger, looking up in Rosamond's face with his innocent baby-

blue eyes. 'I don't want them to, 'cos——' and here he suddenly stopped. 'Her's c'ying,' he announced to his brothers in a half whisper.

'No, I'm not,' said Miss Mouse in her clear voice. 'At least I'm not going to cry. I've promised I wouldn't.'

'Dear,' said Aunt Mattie, 'you can't help it a little, sometimes. No,' she went on, 'her papa and mamma can't come home for a good while. India is a long way off, you know. Why don't you want them to come back, Ger? It isn't very kind to say that.'

'Yeth, it is', said Ger, 'it's 'cos I want her to stay here. I like Mith Mouse.'

This made Rosamond smile through the tears which had nearly dried up already.

'I am glad of that,' said Aunt Mattie. 'For I want you all to be very kind to Rosamond, and make up to her for her papa and mamma being away.'

'Does she mind so much?' said Hec, poking his curly head very close under the grey bonnet. 'I don't think I would—not so very much.'

'Cos you've got no feelings,' said Archie, pulling him back, 'and you're as rude as rude too. I say, Miss Mouse,' he went on, 'would you like to come out and see some of the animals?' [Pg 14]

'What?' said Rosamond; 'do you mean Noah's Ark animals?'

Justin and Pat, though Pat was again in his corner with a book, both began to laugh, and Archie's indignation was now turned on them.

'You're ruder than Hec,' he said, 'cos he's little and you're big.'

'None of your impertinence,' began Justin, seconded by a growl from Pat. 'I'll teach you to meddle with——'

Aunt Mattie rose to her full height, and she was tall. Somehow her nephews struck her to-day in a new light. She had known they were wild and unruly, but the waves of expression that followed each other over Rosamond's face almost startled her—the child had never seen this rough side of boy-life, if indeed boy-life at all. Aunt Mattie felt as if she had made a mistake in bringing her into it, and almost ashamed of Justin and his brothers.

'Boys,' she said, speaking to the two elder ones, 'you may not like Archie's interfering, but what he says is perfectly true; you are both very rude, though perhaps you don't mean it. But you know very well how angry you'd be if any one laughed at *you*. I tell you plainly that unless you can be gentle and more polite I will take Rosamond away, and find other playfellows for her while she is living with your uncle and me.' [Pg 15]

Pat said nothing, but Justin got red.

'Oh come now, auntie,' he said. 'You know very well we didn't mean it, and I don't believe Miss Mouse minds. Do you?' he went on, turning to Rosamond.

The little girl hesitated.

'I— I don't know,' she began, 'but,' as a bright idea struck her, 'I'd like to see your animals and then I'd understand.'

Justin turned to his aunt in triumph.

'There now,' he exclaimed, 'I told you so! Can't she come out with us now? You needn't *all* come,' he added to the others; 'I don't want the kids, but they'd get into mischief if we leave them here alone,' and he glanced at Hec and Ger doubtfully. [Pg 16]

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## CHAPTER II

### PAT AND PETS

Aunt Mattie smiled again to herself at Justin's last words. She felt very much inclined to say that in *her* opinion the two youngest boys were much less likely to get into mischief if left by themselves than under the elders' care. But just now, for Rosamond's sake, she thought it better to say nothing which would lead to any more discussions. So after a moment's thought she turned again to Justin.

'I will stay here with the little ones,' she said, 'if you take Rosamond out to see your pets——'

'Oh!' interrupted Miss Mouse. 'It's *pets* you mean! I didn't think of pets when you said "animals."'

'Pets' is a girl's word, you see,' said Justin loftily, for he was already quite getting over his aunt's snub.

'Now, Justin,' said Aunt Mattie quietly, 'I haven't finished. If you take Rosamond out, she is under your charge, you understand? You mustn't let the dogs jump on her, or let her be teased or [Pg 17]

frightened in any way.'

'All right,' said Justin. 'Come along, Miss Mouse.'

Rosamond got up and half timidly took the hand which the boy held out to her.

'I'm coming too,' said Archie, at which the little girl's face brightened up.

'Don't till——' began Justin, stopping short, however, when he caught his aunt's eye, for Aunt Mattie's control over the boys was no new thing.

'Yes,' she said. 'Archie may go too, certainly, and remember, both of you, that you are on your honour to have no squabbling or fighting of any kind while Rosamond is with you.'

The trio set off. Rosamond between the boys, holding a hand of each. Aunt Mattie smiling and nodding encouragingly, for there was still a half-frightened look on the little face.

'It is best,' thought she, 'to test them, for they are not bad boys at heart, and she is far from childish for her age. But if they are really too rough, our plan must be given up. I am very much afraid that Miss Ward is not a success. Patrick,' she said aloud, 'I didn't want to keep on finding fault this first time of Rosamond's seeing you all, but I must say to you, now that we are alone, that I am surprised at your not knowing that it is not polite to go on reading in a corner when any one comes to see you. It is not polite even to *me*.'

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'I didn't know you'd come to see *me*,' said Pat gruffly, 'and I don't like girls.'

'I really don't care whether you like them or not,' said his aunt, getting rather angry in spite of herself, 'and that is not the question. The point is that you should and must behave like a gentleman to any visitors in your father's house, and I shall certainly insist on your doing so to any *I* bring here.'

Pat did not reply. He had left off reading, but he sat still, with the book open on his knees and a far from amiable look on his face.

Aunt Mattie felt troubled. Of all the boys, Pat, she well knew, was the most difficult to understand, but during the years that her home had been with her sister, Mrs. Hervey, she had come to be like a second mother to the children, and Pat, every one said, was more manageable by 'Miss Mattie' than by any one else. And now he was as sulky and disagreeable to her as ever he had been to old nurse, whom he was always fighting with, or to any one.

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'Pat,' she said suddenly, 'come over here. Hec, you and Ger can go back to your own corner,' for there was one specially counted 'the kids,' where the old toy cupboard stood, and where the elder ones were not allowed to interfere with them, on the principle that an Englishman's house is his castle, I suppose.

'Us diddun want to play with Jus and Pat,' said Ger, 'but they made us be "'orses.'''

'Never mind,' said Hector, 'Aunt Mattie won't let us be teased any more. We was tidyin' the cupboard,' he went on; 'it wanted tidyin' awful bad.' Hec was that very uncommon thing, a neat little boy.

So Mrs. Mattie and her nephew were as good as alone.

'Pat,' she began again, 'why are you so surly to me?'

Pat got red and mumbled something about 'not meaning.'

'But you must mean the words you say,' said his aunt. 'It wasn't kind or nice to tell me you hated—or "didn't like"—girls, when I had brought my little niece to make friends with you all.'

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Pat stood silent, but his face had softened a little.

'She'd not make friends with me,' he said, 'nobody does. She can make friends with Jus and Archie. Besides, what does it matter—she's not going to live here.'

'No, not exactly. But we have been thinking of planning for her to come here every day to have lessons with Miss Ward. And of course it would be nice for her to be friends with you all if she was so much here. On half-holidays, for instance, Justin and you could sometimes let her be with you and take part in your pleasures. There are lots of things that a little girl can join in, and she is a very sensible little girl as well as a sweet one.'

Pat shuffled about, first on one foot, then on the other. He did not want to vex his aunt, and he was rather pleased by her talking to him in this way, but he did not care to make friends with Miss Mouse, and he wanted to get back to his book.

'I'm not going to hurt her,' he said. 'I don't want to be rude to her, but it's no good humbugging. I don't like girls and I don't think I like anybody—not much. She'll be all right with Jus and Archie. Why don't you tell them to be nice to her?'

'Because,' said Aunt Mattie slowly, 'I want you all to be nice to her, and in some ways I had thought you would suit her the best, Pat. You are quieter than Jus and Archie, and little Rosamond has not been used to boys, or indeed to playfellows at all. And she is fond of reading, like you.'

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'I'm always being scolded for reading,' grumbled Pat. 'It's often that that Jus and I fight about, and then mamma takes for granted it's all my fault, and they call me surly and ill-natured and all that. And it's like that at school too—only—'

'Only what?' asked his aunt, delighted to get him to speak out to her in the old way.

'I— I didn't mind so much when—when *you* were here and I could tell you things,' said Pat. 'I've nobody now—nobody who cares. O auntie, I do so wish you hadn't gone and got married.'

Aunt Mattie's face had grown very kind and gentle. She had sometimes fancied that, little though he said about it, Pat really did care for her.

'I'm not so far away after all,' she said, 'and I'm sure you know that I'm always ready to talk to you, or to help you in any way I can.'

'Oh, but it's different,' said Pat. 'It's not like living in the house, and taking my part a little, and explaining to them—oh! it's quite different, and then—there's Uncle Ted—'

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A little smile crept into Mattie's eyes at this; she had suspected more than once that Pat was rather jealous of his new uncle.

'Of course,' she said, 'I know it can't be quite the same, but it might be a good deal worse; I might have had to go to India, like Rosamond's father and mother. And if you knew Uncle Ted better, you would find him awfully kind and understanding about boys.'

Pat grunted.

'He likes the others, I know,' he said gloomily.

His aunt's face grew graver again. This touch of jealousy in Pat made her anxious about him.

'It is such a pity,' she said, 'that you get these ideas into your head—of people not liking you or liking the others better, and uncomfortable fancies of that kind.'

'They are *not* fancies,' said Pat; 'they are true.'

'Well, if they are true, make them not true,' was the reply. 'Try to be a little brighter and pleasanter to other people, especially to your own people, and see if that doesn't make a difference. Just *try*, for my sake, and as far as Rosamond is concerned I am sure you won't find the trying difficult.'

 [Pg 23]

Pat did not speak. He stood there looking before him gravely. But the hard gloomy expression had gone, and after a while he said quietly,

'I *will* try, but, auntie— I'm not made right, somehow— I don't care for their animals and things like that, and I don't care much for games, and I *hate* ferreting!'

'You care for dogs,' said his aunt.

'Some,' he replied. 'I like clever, affectionate dogs. I don't care for those that think about nothing except hunting and chasing cats and making a row. I like a dog like your Flip, that sits beside you and understands when you want to be quiet.'

'Flip *is* a dear,' Aunt Mattie agreed. 'But, O Hec! what are you doing?' for at that moment a pile of toys came clattering down within an ace of Ger's head, from the top shelf of the cupboard, whereupon Ger set up a scream, though he was not the least hurt, and the toys, being principally wooden bricks, were not hurt either.

Still peace was destroyed between the two little boys, and their aunt proposed that they should get their hats and go out with her and Pat to meet the others.

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These 'others,' in the meantime, had been enjoying themselves more or less—very much as regarded the boys, Justin especially, for there was nothing he liked better than showing off his animals, and Archie's pleasure was only damped by his noticing signs of fear every now and then on Rosamond's part. She did her best to hide them, poor little girl, and to trust Justin's loud assurances that the growls of the puppies' mother were only meant for 'how do you do? so pleased to see you. Aren't the little people looking well?' or civil speeches of that kind, translated into dog-language, though these assurances were not quite in keeping with the quick way in which he pulled back her hand when she timidly stooped down to stroke one of the black-and-tan babies.

'I'll pick it up for you,' he said, and so he did, taking care first to shut the stable door on the anxious mother.

'It *is* a nice soft little thing,' said Miss Mouse, when she had got it safe in her arms, 'but—oh it's going to bite me,' and but for fear of hurting it, she would have got rid of master puppy in double-quick time.

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'He won't really hurt you—it's only little snaps that do no harm,' said Archie; 'but I'll put him back again, and then p'raps we'd better show her the rabbits and the pigeons—*they're* not frightening.'

'No,' agreed Rosamond, 'I'd like to see them very much.'

'And,' said Justin, forgetting his promise to his aunt, 'the ferrets— Tom Brick has got his ferrets



here to-day, you know, Archie. They are going to have a good rat hunt to-morrow morning.'

'Ferrets,' said Rosamond innocently, 'what are they? I never heard of them. Are they nice and tame and pretty?'

'Oh lovely,' said Justin, beginning to laugh. 'They're the hideousest things there are. And if you get one up your sleeve—ugh—it does feel horrid. All the same they're splendid chaps for rats. I'd give anything to have a pair of my own, I can tell you.'

'I don't want to see them, thank you,' said the little girl. 'Do they eat rats? I don't like pets that eat each other.'

Justin laughed more loudly.

'Eat each other,' he repeated. 'Rats and ferrets don't eat each other. Besides, ferrets aren't like foxes—they're not fierce; they're jolly little beggars. I only wish I had a couple.' [Pg 26]

'Oh, I say, Justin,' exclaimed Archie, 'I wouldn't call them not fierce. Why does Bob Crag muzzle his when he's going to catch rabbits with them?'

'Because they would eat rabbits if they were hungry. Rabbits would be nicer to eat than rats, I should think, though I daresay they'd eat rats too if they were ravenous—and they have to be ravenous when they're used for ratting, to make them eager, for when they've had lots to eat they are sad lazy little beggars.'

'That's like snakes,' said Rosamond, with a small shudder. 'I'm sure I shouldn't like ferrets, Justin. Don't let's talk about them any more. Who is Bob Crag?'

'Oh, he's a boy,' said Justin, with some slight hesitation. 'He lives out on the moor with his grandmother.'

'You can see their cottage,' said Archie, 'from the top of the mound behind the paddock, such a queer, wild sort of place; we pass it on our way to the vicarage, when it's a fine day.' [Pg 27]

'I'd like to see the moor,' said Rosamond, her eyes brightening.

'Come along then,' said Justin, 'it won't take us two minutes to run up the mound,' and off they set. [Pg 28]

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## CHAPTER III

### GUESTS AT TEA

Rosamond drew a long breath as they reached the top of the mound.

'Oh!' she said. 'I never saw a moor before. What a long, long way you can see!' and her eyes, full of wonder and pleasure, gazed before them over the brown expanse, broken here and there by patches of green or by the still remaining purple of the fast-fading heather; here and there, too, gleams of lingering gorse faintly golden, and the little thread-like white paths, sometimes almost widening into roads, crossing in all directions, brightened the effect of the whole. For it was autumn now—late autumn indeed—and the sun was well down on his evening journey.

The breeze blew freshly in the little girl's face.

'It's rather cold,' she said, 'but I like it.'

'You might have brought your muff,' said Archie; 'though I thought people only had muffs when it was real winter.' [Pg 29]

Miss Mouse reddened a little.

'So they do,' she said, 'but mine is such a dear little one, so light and fluffy, and it was mamma's last present, so Aunt Mattie lets me take it out in the pony-carriage.'

Justin and Archie had, like all boys, a horror of tears, and the sad tone in Rosamond's voice made them quickly change the subject.

'Has Aunt Mattie never driven you round by the moor before?' said Justin. 'She's so fond of it.'

'But I only came the day before yesterday, and her house is quite on the other side, not wild-looking like here.'

'Of course I know that,' said Justin. 'I think it's ever so much jollier up here. Indeed, I would like to live in a cottage on the moor itself. Fancy what fun it would be to race right out first thing in the morning when you woke up, and see all the creatures waking up too—rabbits scuttering about, and the wild birds, and the frogs, and rummy creatures like that, that live about the marshy bits!'

Rosamond looked up at him with some surprise and more sympathy in her eyes than she had yet felt for the eldest of her newly-adopted cousins. [Pg 30]

'I know,' she said, 'it's like some fairy stories I've read.'

'Oh rubbish,' said Justin. 'If you want fairy stories you must go to Pat for them. His head's full of them.'

Miss Mouse felt a little hurt at Justin's rough way of speaking. Archie, always inclined to make peace, came to the rescue.

'You were asking about Bob Crag,' he said. 'That's where he lives.'

He pointed to a spot where a clump of bushes or stunted trees stood a little way back from one of the wider tracks which ran like white tapes across the moor. No house or cottage was to be seen, but a thin waft of smoke rose slowly from the middle of the little planting.

'It's the queerest place you ever saw,' Archie went on. 'Papa says it's something like an Irish cabin, only cleaner and tidier, for Bob's old granny isn't dirty, though she's extremely queer, like her house. People say she's a gipsy, but she's lived there so long that no one is sure where she comes from. She's as old as old! I shouldn't wonder if she were really Bob's great-grandmother.'

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'Has *he* always lived with her?' asked Rosamond. 'Fancy! *great*-grandmother.'

'I don't know,' said Archie; 'he's been there as long as I can remember.'

'And that's not very long,' said Justin, with the superiority of his four more years of life. '*You* can't remember more than six or seven years back at most, Archie! I can remember ten good, if not eleven. And Bob's two years older than I am. I should think he was about four or five when I first remember him. Nurse wouldn't let Pat and me stop to talk to him when we passed the cottage going a walk, he was such a queer, black-looking little creature. Old Nancy went away once for ever so long, and when she came back she brought this rum little chap with her, and the people about said he was as uncanny as she. Nobody's very kind to them, even now.'

'Poor things,' said Miss Mouse. 'They must be very dull and lonely.'

'They don't mind,' said Justin. 'Nance says she wouldn't stay if they had neighbours, and she's jolly glad to have no rent. Once they tried to make her pay for her cottage, but papa got her off, and ever since then she'd do anything for us, and she always smiles and curtsies and blesses us in her way when we pass. Yes, she'd do anything for us, and so would poor old Bob.'

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'Yes, but——' began Archie, but stopped short, for Justin's eye was upon him.

'You're not to begin abusing Bob,' he said. 'It's not fair, *I* count him a friend of mine, whatever you do.'

Rosamond looked puzzled.

'Is he a naughty boy?' she said half timidly.

'No,' said Justin, 'I say he's not. He gets blamed for lots of things he doesn't deserve, just because he and old Nancy are strange and queer.'

'I'd like to see them,' said Rosamond. 'It *does* sound like a fairy story, and it looks like one. Won't you take me to their cottage some day?'

But before either Justin or Archie had time to reply, there came an interruption.

'They're whistling for us,' exclaimed Archie. 'Yes, it's Pat and Aunt Mattie coming across the paddock—and the little ones too. Isn't it nice to hear Aunt Mattie whistling just like she used to, when she lived here? Let's go back and meet them.'

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'No,' said Justin, 'I'll stay here with Miss Mouse, and you run down to them, Archie. Most likely Aunt Mattie wants to come up here too. She always says there's a breeze up here almost as good as the sea.'

'I wish Aunt Mattie's house was near the moor too,' said Miss Mouse. 'Where is it you go to school, Justin, and how do you mean you only pass the Crag's house on fine days?'

'Because when it's *awfully* rainy or snowy, or anything out of the common, we go in the pony-cart by the proper road, and when it's middling we go half-way by the moor, turning into the road a good bit before we come to Bob's. It's rather boggy land about there, and we get all muddy and wet unless it's really dry weather. We don't go to school, we go to Mr. Pierce's—at Whitcrow—two miles off—the *road* to Whitcrow crosses the road to Aunt Mattie's, farther on. You look out on your way home, and you'll see a signpost with Whitcrow on one of the spokes.'

'I'll ask auntie to show it me,' said Miss Mouse. 'O auntie,' she exclaimed, as the newcomers came within speaking distance, 'it *is* so nice up here looking over the moor.'

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Her little face had got quite rosy. Aunt Mattie was pleased to see it, pleased too that Rosamond had evidently already begun to make friends with Justin—girl-despiser though he was.

'Yes, dear,' she said, 'I love the moor, and I am very glad you do. I love it all the year round, though it's pretty cold up here in winter, isn't it, boys?'

Pat came forward a little. He wanted to please his aunt by being nicer to Rosamond.

'It's *awfully* cold going to the vicarage some mornings,' he agreed, 'but there's some nice things in winter. Can you skate, Miss Mouse?'

The little girl shook her head.

'No, but I'd like very much to learn,' she replied.

'Then I'll teach you,' said Pat, his face getting a little red, for it was not certainly his way to put himself about to be amiable. And he had to suffer for it.

'How polite we are growing all of a sudden,' said Justin, with a laugh. But he could not mock at Pat's offer, for skating was the one thing of outdoor exercises in which the younger brother outshone the elder.

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Aunt Mattie was quick to scent any approach to a quarrel.

'It must be getting near tea-time,' she said. 'Are you going to invite us to your schoolroom tea, Justin?'

'Oh yes, of course, if you like,' he answered, in a rather off-hand tone, 'or we could bring you a cup into the drawing-room; mamma often has it like that.'

For it was rather before the days of regular drawing-room 'afternoon' teas.

'Thank you,' replied his aunt. 'I should much rather have it in the schoolroom, and if Miss Ward isn't better, I can pour it out for you.'

'She's sure to be better by tea-time,' said Hec. 'She always is'—without much satisfaction in his voice.

But this did not alter Aunt Mattie's choice. To tell the truth, she thought it a good opportunity to see how things were going on in the schoolroom in her sister's absence.

Just then a bell sounded.

'That is the tea-bell,' said Archie. 'Come along. The first in the schoolroom to sit beside auntie.'

Off they set, all except little Gervais, but they had not gone many paces before Pat turned back again.

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'What's the matter?' said his aunt, and then she felt sorry that she had said anything, when she saw it was an effort on the boy's part to behave politely to the ladies of the party.

'Oh,' he replied, rather gruffly, 'I think I had better carry Ger down till we get to the paddock.'

'No, you *san't*' said Ger ungratefully. 'Auntie, tell him he's not to,' for Pat was preparing to pick him up willy-nilly, and a roar would no doubt have been the consequence.

'I'll tell you what, Ger,' said Rosamond quickly, 'I'll take one hand and Pat one, and then we'll all run down together, and wait for auntie at the bottom.'

To this arrangement Ger condescended, and Aunt Mattie, as she followed the three more slowly, gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

'It's all quite true that her mother said of her,' she thought to herself. 'She's a dear little soul, full of tact and good feeling. I wonder why our boys are so very tiresome?'

For it was new to her to think of them as not *hers* as much as their parents'.

'I wonder if it's just that they *are* boys, or have we mismanaged them somehow or other? I did so hope that my being with Harriet since I grew up had been a real help to her, but it scarcely looks like it. These boys are very troublesome.'

Tea was ready when they all got back to the house—tea and the dispenser of it, in the shape of Miss Ward, very meek and evidently rather sorry for herself, though her face brightened as she caught sight of Aunt Mattie and rose to greet her.

'I am sorry you have got a headache, Miss Ward,' said the young lady, 'I'm afraid you are rather subject to them.'

'N—no, I can't say that I am, or rather I never used to be, and I am particularly sorry to have had one to-day when Mrs. Hervey was away. But I daresay a cup of tea will put it all right—it often does,' replied the governess.



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**'I'LL TAKE ONE HAND AND PAT ONE, AND THEN WE'LL ALL RUN DOWN TOGETHER.'**

'Then why didn't you ask for one early in the day; I'm sure you could get it at any time,' said Aunt Mattie a little coldly. She was feeling rather irritated with Miss Ward for seeming so doleful, for she had come to them with the recommendation of being specially clever in managing boys. She was no longer very young, but active and capable, at least so she had appeared at first. She grew a little red as she replied,

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'Oh! I don't want to give in to these headaches or to make any fuss about them.'

'Poor Mith Ward,' said little Ger, 'all-bodies would have headaches if naughty Jus throwed books at them!'

'Ger, Ger,' exclaimed Miss Ward; while up started Justin in a fury.

'I throw books at Miss Ward; what do you mean, you sneaking little tell-tale?' he exclaimed. 'No, you're worse than that, you are a right-down story-teller.'

'He's not,' said Hec. 'You've done it *twicet*, Jus, you know you have.'

Justin was on the point of rushing off from his place to seize Hec, when Aunt Mattie turned to him.

'Be quiet, Justin,' she said, 'and behave like a gentleman. If not, you must leave the room.'

The old habit of obedience to his young aunt told, and Justin sat down again, though not without mutterings to himself.

'I don't want to spoil our tea-time,' said Aunt Mattie quietly, turning to Miss Ward, 'but I think it would be best for you to explain what the little boys mean, and—what *you* mean, Justin.'

'I didn't mean to hurt Miss Ward,' said Justin, 'and it was settled that nothing more was to be said about it.'

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'I don't think Hec and Ger were in the room when we settled that,' said Miss Ward, smiling a little. 'The facts are these, Mrs. Caryll. Justin meant to play a trick on Pat, some days ago—what they call a "book-trap"—some volumes balanced on the top of a door—you have heard of it, I daresay?—so that they fall on the head of the first person who goes into the room. Unluckily for me, I was that person, as I had to go into Pat's room unexpectedly. I did get a bad blow, but Justin was very sorry and promised never to do it again.'

'But you say that was some days ago,' said Aunt Mattie.

'Well, yes,' the governess allowed. 'This morning it was quite a different thing. Pat was not ready to go out when Justin wanted him, or something of that kind, and Justin threw a book *at* his door, to make him hurry, I suppose, and again it hit *me*, as I was crossing the passage. And—and—somehow a very little thing seems to make my head ache lately.'

In her heart Aunt Mattie did not feel surprised.

'If what I have seen to-day goes on from morning till night, I am sure I don't wonder,' she thought to herself, as she turned again to Justin. But he stopped her before she had time to speak.

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'Auntie,' he said, looking, and it is to be hoped, still more *feeling*, very much ashamed of himself—'auntie, I *was* very sorry the books hit Miss Ward, especially this morning. But I didn't in the least mean it for her—'

'I should hope not, indeed,' interrupted Mrs. Caryll.

'And,' continued Justin, 'Miss Ward knows I didn't, and we had made it all up and nothing more would have been heard about it but for that little sneak, Hec.'

'You meant to have told your father and mother about it when they came home, surely?' said his aunt.

Justin reddened again, and muttered something about getting into scrapes enough without needing to *put* himself into them; remarks which Mrs. Caryll thought it wiser not to hear.

'Please don't say anything more about it,' said Miss Ward, speaking more decidedly than she had yet done. 'It is not often we have the pleasure of visitors at tea, and my head is really much better now. I am *sure* nothing of the kind will happen again, and—and—little Miss—'

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'Mouth,' said Gervais quite gravely.

'Mouth?' repeated Miss Ward, looking very puzzled.

'No,' Hec corrected, '*Mouse*.'

'Miss Mouse,' she went on, 'will think us a party of—'

'Wild cats,' interrupted Archie.

And at this everybody burst out laughing, Miss Ward included, for she *was* very good-natured—and on the whole perhaps the laughing was the best thing that could have happened. Then Aunt Mattie had to explain that her little niece's name was not really 'Miss Mouse,' but Rosamond—Rosamond Caryll, as her father was Uncle Ted's brother—though the boys all joined, for once, in saying that *they* were always going to call her Miss Mouse, 'it suited her so well,' in which their

governess agreed.

And tea went on peacefully and pleasantly on the whole, though Miss Mouse's eyes grew very round with surprise more than once at the pushes and thumps that passed between the boys, and the growls and snaps and mutterings, even though the five were decidedly on their best behaviour. Aunt Mattie did her utmost quietly to keep things smooth, and so did Miss Ward. But Aunt Mattie was feeling sorry and disappointed, though she tried not to show it.

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'I think Pat might do so much to make things better,' she thought to herself. 'He is cleverer than Justin, who is just a great, rough, clumsy schoolboy, not bad at heart, but awfully careless and thoughtless. Pat is not thoughtless, but he keeps himself far too apart from his brothers; if he would try to interest himself in their pleasures a little, he might get to have far more influence. I must speak to him again.'

And so she did. There was an opportunity for a little more talk when tea was over and before the pony-carriage came round. Pat was quick at noticing things, and he saw that his aunt's sweet face was less cheerful than usual.

'You're not vexed with me now, auntie,' he said, half wistfully. 'I know it was rather disgusting, that row at tea-time. Miss Mouse won't want to come much to see us.'

'I hope she will,' said Mrs. Caryll. 'Of course I was ashamed for her to hear of those quarrels between you and Justin, Pat. How is it you can't get on better with him? Archie does.'

'Archie's better tempered than me, I suppose,' said Pat, 'and then he daren't check Jus; he's a good bit younger, you see. And then they care for the same sort of things'—

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'Ah yes, there's a good deal in that,' she said. 'If you could manage to show some interest in Justin's games and animals and all these things, instead of reading quite so much, you might win him by sympathy and really make home life happier.'

'It hasn't been very happy, lately, I know. And it worries mamma,' said Pat gruffly. 'Aunt Mattie, I'll try. But I wish you were here again.'

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## CHAPTER IV

### WANTED—A SISTER

Aunt Mattie seemed rather absent-minded during the drive back—quite different from what she had been on their way to Moor Edge, which was the name of the boys' home. *Then* she had talked brightly and cheerfully, pointing out the places they passed—here a wood famed for the earliest primroses, there a cottage burnt down so long ago that no one could remember how it happened, though the dreary, blackened remains still stood, and amusing Rosamond as well with stories of 'the boys' and all their doings.

But the little girl was not sorry that now it was different. She was feeling tired and very puzzled. In one way the afternoon's visit had brought her a good deal of disappointment—her new friends were not at all what she had pictured them—at least—and then her mind went on to what it was that had disappointed and almost shocked her. She was too sensible a little woman to mind their being noisy and even rather rough. But—'it wasn't a nice kind of noisiness,' she thought, 'they all seemed against each other, as if they were going to begin quarrelling every minute, even though they didn't quite. I'm very glad I live with Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie. I'd rather have no one to play with than be always afraid of quarrelling.'

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Suddenly Mrs. Caryll glanced at her little companion, and it struck her that Rosamond's face was pale and that she was very silent.

'My dear,' she said, 'I don't mind the boys calling you Miss Mouse—it is a nice, funny little name—but I don't want you to grow *quite* into a mouse. I have not heard the faintest, tiniest squeak from you since we left Moor Edge.'

Rosamond smiled a little, but it was not a very bright smile.

'I— I thought you were thinking, auntie,' she said, 'and p'raps you were tired.'

'Just a scrap tired, I daresay,' said Aunt Mattie, 'and—yes I *was* thinking, but I shouldn't have forgotten you, my pet. Are *you* not tired?'

'I don't know, auntie,' the little girl replied. 'My head feels rather buzzy, I think. It gets like that sometimes when I've been in the railway and coming to see places and—and— I never played with such a lot of boys before, you see, auntie. I'm not accustomed to them yet,' and she could not keep back a tiny sigh.

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It was repeated, though not to be heard, in Aunt Mattie's heart.

'I am dreadfully afraid I have made a great mistake,' thought the young lady to herself, 'in believing she could get on with them and be happy there. She is too delicate and fragile for them. I must arrange something different and not attempt her going there for lessons.'

But just as she was saying this to herself with a good deal of disappointment, Rosamond called out eagerly, with quite a different tone in her voice.

'Auntie, auntie,' she said, 'is that the signpost with "Whitcrow" on one of the spokes? Justin told me to look out for it. They pass by here when they go to their lessons on rainy days. I mean they turn off here instead of going on to your house. Yes'—as her aunt drew in the pony and passed the signpost at a walk, to let the little girl have a good look at it, and at the road beyond—'yes, that's it, "To W, h, i, t,— Whitcrow," quite plain. I wonder if Whitcrow once was White Crow, auntie? Do you think so? I'd like to see the house they go to school at—at least to lessons to. Can we drive that way some day?'

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She was in a little flutter of interest and excitement. Mrs. Caryll looked at her with a smile.

'What funny creatures children are,' she thought to herself. 'A moment ago Rosamond was quite melancholy and depressed, as if the boys had really overwhelmed her, and now she is as bright as anything about them again.'

'Certainly, dear,' she said, her own spirits rising, 'I can show you Mr. Pierce's vicarage any day. What were you asking about Whitcrow? I don't think it ever struck me before that it may have come from White Crow. But a *white crow*, Rosamond, that would be a funny thing!'

'Yes,' said the little girl, laughing, 'when we always say "as black as a crow." But— I think I *have* heard of a white crow—or was it perhaps in a fairy story? I can't think.'

'We must ask Uncle Ted,' said her aunt. 'He knows all about curious things like that—all about wild birds and country things. But why do you say when they go to their lessons on rainy days? They go every day.'

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'Oh yes, of course,' Rosamond replied. 'But it's only on rainy days they go by the road,' and she explained to her aunt the different plans that Justin had explained to her.

'That is new since my time,' said Mrs. Caryll. 'They used to drive to Whitcrow every morning and walk back if it was fine—and on rainy days the pony-cart was put up at the rectory. On fine days the stable boy went with them and brought it back. I used very often to go to meet them in the afternoons across the moor.'

'Oh then,' said Rosamond eagerly, 'you know the cottage where Bob Crag lives and the queer old woman. I do so want to see her. Will you take me there some day?'

Her aunt hesitated.

'What have they been telling you about Bob and his grandmother?' she asked.

'Oh, only just about how queer they are, and that people aren't very kind to them, because they don't know where they come from and things like that, and I was wondering— I couldn't help wondering'—the little girl went on in a somewhat awe-struck tone of voice—'if perhaps the old woman is a sort of a witch. I've never seen a witch, but I've read about them in fairy stories.'

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'And is that why you so much want to go to see old Mrs. Crag,' said her aunt, half laughing.

'I don't quite know,' said Rosamond. 'Yes, I think it is partly. It's a little frightening to think of, but frightening things are rather nice too sometimes—in a sort of fancying way, I mean. For there aren't really any witches now, are there, auntie?'

She was not quite sure of this all the same, for as she spoke, she crept a little closer to Mrs. Caryll. It was beginning to get dusk, and the part of the road along which they were then passing ran through a wood; at all times it was rather gloomy just here.

'Real witches,' repeated her aunt; 'of course not, though I daresay Pat could tell you stories by the dozen about them, and no doubt Bob's grandmother is a curious old body. Long ago I daresay she would have been called a witch. I don't think she is *quite* right in her head, and Bob is a wild, gipsy-like creature. I don't think their father and mother care for the boys to see much of him, though both he and his grandmother are devoted to them. Some day——' but before Mrs. Caryll had time to say more, the sound of some one whistling in a peculiar way, two or three notes almost like a bird call, made her stop short.

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'Why, that must be your uncle,' she exclaimed, 'coming to meet us,' and she whipped up the pony to make him go faster.

They were not far from home by this time, and when Uncle Ted, for he it was, got into the pony-cart beside them, there was no more talk between Aunt Mattie and her little niece.

'How are they all getting on at Moor Edge?' was the first thing he asked.

'Oh—all right—at least well enough,' Mrs. Caryll replied, 'though I'm not sorry that their father and mother are coming back to-morrow,' and by something in her tone Uncle Ted understood that she was not quite happy about her five nephews, but that she did not want to say any more at present.

So he went on talking about other things—he had been away all day—which did not interest Rosamond, and the little girl fell back into her own thoughts, companions she was well accustomed to.

Aunt Mattie's house was quite a contrast to Moor Edge. It stood in the midst of a small but pretty park. Everything about it was peaceful and sheltered and charming. The flower gardens were the pride of the neighbourhood. There was a great variety of rare shrubs and plants, which could not have stood the keen blasts that blew over Moor Edge, perched up as it was on high ground. The trees grew luxuriantly at Caryll Place, and there was a little lake famed for the great variety of water-birds who found their home on its borders. This lake, I believe, was the one thing which made the Hervey boys envious. For everything else they much preferred their own home, which they described as 'ever so much jollier,' with the moor close at hand, and the fresh breezes that blew across it at almost all times of the year.

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But in Rosamond's eyes, though she had felt the charm of the moorland also, her aunt's home seemed perfection. All about it was in such perfect order, and Rosamond dearly loved order. The Moor Edge schoolroom had been a real trial to her, and as she ran upstairs to her own dainty little bedroom, she gave a great sigh of content.

'I am glad,' she thought to herself, 'to live here, instead of with all those boys. Though I *like* them very much. At least I *would* like them if they were just a little quieter, and not quite so squabbly. I wonder if I had had brothers if they'd have been like that? Perhaps I'm a little spoilt with being an only child, and I'm afraid I don't want to have brothers or sisters. All I do want is my own mamma, and that's just what I can't have. O mamma, mamma, if only you hadn't had to go away and leave me;' and the tears began to creep up again, as they had got sadly into the way of doing during the last few weeks, into her pretty grey eyes.

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But she bravely brushed them away again, for she knew that nothing would have distressed her dear mother more than for her to give way to unhappiness about a trouble which could not be helped. And after all she had a great deal to be glad about. Many children, as her mother had often told her, whose parents were in India, had no home in England but school, or perhaps with relations who cared little about them, and took small trouble to make their lives happy. How different from Caryll, and dear Uncle Ted and Aunt Mattie, and as she reached this point in her thoughts she heard her aunt's voice calling her, as she passed along the passage on her way downstairs.

Rosamond ran after her and slipped her hand through Mrs. Caryll's arm.

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'You don't feel cold after our drive, do you, darling?' said Aunt Mattie.

'No, not the least, thank you, auntie,' the little girl replied, and something in her voice told Mrs. Caryll that Rosamond had cheered up again.

'Uncle Ted says he would like a cup of tea after his journey,' her aunt went on, 'and I have a letter I want to send this evening, so you must pour it out for him while I write.'

Rosamond was only too pleased to do so; they found her uncle waiting in the drawing-room, where some tea had just been brought in. It was a pretty sight, so at least thought Uncle Ted, to watch the little girl's neat and careful ways, as she handled the tea-things with her tiny fingers, looking as important as if it were a very serious affair indeed.

'I suppose you've often made tea for your father and mother; you seem quite at home about it,' said her uncle, as she brought him his cup.

'Yes,' Rosamond replied, 'I used to have breakfast alone with papa sometimes when mamma was tired and didn't get up early. What pretty cups these are, Uncle Ted! I do love pretty things, and you and Aunt Mattie have so many.'

These cups are very old,' said Mr. Caryll, 'they belonged to our—your father's and my great grandmother—your great, great grandmother that would be, so they are rather precious.'

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Rosamond looked at the cups with still greater admiration.

'I'll be *very* careful of them,' she said; then, after a pause—'the cups at Moor Edge were *so* thick. I never saw such thick cups.'

There came a little laugh from Aunt Mattie in her corner at the writing-table.

'Things need to be pretty strong at Moor Edge,' she said.

'Yes,' said Uncle Ted, 'the young men there do a good deal of knocking about, I fancy. How did you get on with them, my little Rose? You are not accustomed to racketty boys. I hope they didn't startle you?'

Rosamond's quiet little face grew rather pink.

'N—no,' she said slowly, 'I like them very much, Uncle Ted—and— I don't mind them being noisy, but'—here she broke off—'they didn't think *me* noisy,' she went on with a twinkle of fun in her eyes. 'They made a new name for me; they call me "Miss Mouse."'

'A very good name too,' said her uncle. 'I didn't think they had so much imagination, except perhaps Pat, who's got rather too much; he seems always in a dream. Was it he who thought of the name?'

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'Oh no,' Rosamond replied, 'it was the littlest one, Ger they call him. He's a dear, fat little boy. I don't *think*—' and again she hesitated.

'Don't be afraid of speaking out about them,' said Uncle Ted. 'I saw you had something more in your little head when you stopped short before.'

Rosamond grew redder.

'I don't want to seem unkind,' she said, 'but are boys always like that, Uncle Ted? I don't mean noisy, but so *fighting*. The big ones teach it to the little ones. I was going to say that I'm sure Ger would be very good-tempered if they didn't tease him so. They all seemed to be teasing each other the whole time.'

'It's boy nature, I'm afraid, to some extent,' said Uncle Ted, 'especially where there are only boys together. It's a pity they haven't a sister or two to soften them down a bit.'

Miss Mouse's eyes grew bright.

'I don't mind their not having a sister,' she said, 'if they'd let me be like one. Do you think they would, uncle? They were all very nice to *me*, though they squabbled with each other.' [Pg 56]

'They're not bad boys,' said Uncle Ted, 'in many ways. And boys must fight among themselves more or less, though I think our English ideas about this go rather too far. I can't stand anything like bullying, and there's a little of it about Justin.'

'I *think* I like Archie best of the big ones,' said Rosamond. 'But I'm not frightened of any of them, though I was a little at first.'

Uncle Ted looked pleased at this.

'That's right, my little girl,' he said kindly. 'It never does any good to be frightened. And you may be of a great deal of use to Aunt Mattie's nephews while you're here. I can never forget how much *I* owed to a dear little girl cousin of ours when I was a small boy with a lot of brothers like the Herveys—a very rough set we were too.'

'How nice,' said Rosamond, looking very interested. 'Do I know her, Uncle Ted?'

He shook his head.

'I don't think so,' he replied. 'She's never been in our part of the world since she married. But, oddly enough, you rather remind me of her sometimes, Miss Mouse.' [Pg 57]

And when Miss Mouse went to bed that night, her thoughts about Moor Edge and the five boys there were all very bright and pleasant. It *would* be so nice if she could be 'of use to them all,' like that cousin of Uncle Ted's long ago. [Pg 58]

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## CHAPTER V

### Bob

When the boys had watched their aunt and Rosamond drive away, Justin turned to Archie.

'Come along,' he said, 'I want to go and ask Griffith about the ferrets. I wonder if Tom Brick has brought them.'

The two walked off together, but they had not gone far before they were overtaken by Pat, who came running after them.

'What do *you* want?' said Justin, not too amiably. 'I didn't ask you to come.'

'You're not my—' began Pat, but checked himself. 'Why shouldn't I come?' he went on in a pleasanter tone. 'I should like to see the ferrets too.'

'Yes,' put in Archie, 'why shouldn't he, Justin, if he wants to?'

'I suppose you've finished your story,' said Justin gruffly, 'and then when you've nothing better to do you condescend to give *us* your company. But I warn you, if you come with us, I won't have any sneaking or tell-taleing about anything we do.' [Pg 59]

Pat opened his eyes—they were large dark eyes with a rather sad expression, quite unlike any of his brothers'—with a look of great surprise.

'What on earth could there be for me to tell-tale about,' he said, 'in just going to look at Tom Brick's ferrets? And what's more,' he added, with some indignation in his voice, 'it'll be time enough for you to speak to me like that when you do find me tell-taleing.'

'Yes,' chimed in peace-loving Archie, who was struck by Pat's unusual gentleness, 'I think so too, Jus. You're rather difficult to please, for you're always going on at Pat for not joining in with us, and when he does come you slang him for that.'

Apparently Justin found self-defence rather difficult in the present case, for he only muttered something to the effect that Pat might come if he chose—it was all one to him.



But Pat already felt rewarded for what he had tried to do by Archie's taking his part. For though Archie was a most thoroughly good-natured boy, he had come to be so entirely under Justin's influence that his acting upon his own feelings could scarcely be counted upon. And he himself was a little puzzled by what Justin had said. There could not be anything to sneak or tale-tell about if old Griffith had to do with it—Griffith had been with their father long before they were born, and Mr. Hervey trusted him completely.

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Justin led the way to the stable-yard, which was at some little distance from the house. There was no one to be seen there, though the boys called and whistled.

'Griffith may be in the paddock,' said Archie, 'looking after mamma's pony,' for Mrs. Hervey's pony had not been driven lately, having got slightly lame.

The paddock was some way farther off, but as the boys ran along the little lane leading to it, they heard voices in its direction which showed that Archie's guess was correct, and soon they saw a little group of men and boys, old Griffith in the middle of them.

Justin ran up to them eagerly.

'I say,' he began, in his usual rather masterful tone, 'has Tom——' and then he stopped, for Tom Brick, a labourer on a neighbouring farm, was there to answer for himself. 'Have you brought the ferrets?' the boy went on, turning to him. 'I suppose it's too late to do anything with them this afternoon?'

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Tom Brick touched his cap, looking rather sheepish.

'I've not brought 'em, sir,' he replied; 'fact is, I've not got 'em to bring. I just stepped over to tell Master Griffith here as I've sold 'em—for a good price too; so I hope you'll excuse it. I didn't want to keep 'em, as they're nasty things to have about a little place like mine with the children and the fowls, and my missus as can't abide 'em.'

'I certainly think you should have kept your promise to us before you parted with them,' said Justin, in his lordly way. 'I think it's a great shame. What's to be done now, Griffith?' he went on, to the coachman. 'The place will be overrun with rats.'

But Griffith was just then absorbed by the pony, for the third man in the group was the 'vet' from the nearest town, who had come over to examine its leg again, and, before replying to Justin, he turned to the stable-boy, bidding him fetch something or other from the house which the horse-doctor had asked for.

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'Griffith!' repeated Justin impatiently, 'don't you hear what I say?'

Griffith looked up, his face had a worried expression.

'Is it about these ferrets?' he said. 'I can't be troubled about them just now, Master Justin. It's this here pony needs attending to. We'll get rid of the rats, no fear, somehow or other.'

Justin was too proud to begin any discussion with the coachman before the 'vet,' who was an important person in his way. So he walked off, looking rather black, followed by his brothers, Pat, to tell the truth, by no means sorry at the turn that things had taken.

'Griffith is getting too cheeky by half,' said Justin at last, in a sullen tone.

'He's in a fuss about mamma's pony, I suppose,' said Archie. 'But it is rather too bad of that Tom Brick, only——'

'What?' said Justin. 'Why don't you finish what you've got to say?'

'It's only that I don't know if papa and mamma care much about our ferreting; at least mamma doesn't, I know,' said Archie. 'I've heard her say it's cruel and ugly.'

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'All women think like that,' said Justin; 'my goodness, if you listen to them you'd have a pretty dull time of it. I don't see anything cruel about it when they're just muzzled, and as for killing the rats!—they *have* to be killed.'

'All the same,' said Pat, 'it must be rather horrid to see.'

'It's no horrider than heaps of other things that are awfully jolly too,' said Justin. 'I suppose when you're a man you won't hunt, Pat, for fear you should be in at the death.'

'Hunting's different,' said Pat. 'There's all the jolliness of the riding. And shooting's different. There's the cleverness of aiming well, and papa says that when a bird's killed straight off, it's the easiest death it could have.'

'It's bad shots that make them suffer most,' said Archie. 'But I say, Jus, where are you going to. It must be nearly six. Have you finished your lessons?'

'Mind your own business,' said Justin, 'I'm not going in just yet, to be mewed up with Miss Ward in the schoolroom. I want a run across the moor first.'

To this neither of his brothers made any objection. There was one point in common among all the Hervey boys, and that was love, enthusiastic love, of their moor—its great stretch, its delicious, breezy air, the thousand and one interests they found in it, from its ever-changing colouring, its

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curious varieties of moss, and heather, and strange little creeping plants, to be found nowhere else, to the dark, silent pools on its borders, with their quaint frequenters; everything in and about and above the moor—for where were such sunsets, or marvellous cloud visions to be seen as here?—had a charm and fascination never equalled to them in later life by other scenes, however striking and beautiful.

Pat felt all this the most deeply perhaps, but all the others too, even careless Archie, and Justin, rough schoolboy though he was, loved the moor as a sailor loves the sea.

This evening the sunset had been very beautiful, and the colours were still lingering about the horizon as the boys ran along one of the little white paths towards the west.

'It's a pity Miss Mouse can't see it just now,' said Archie suddenly. 'She's a jolly little girl. I liked her for liking the moor. The next time she comes we can take her a good way across it, as far as Bob Crag's; she'd like to see the queer cottage.'

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'I bet you she'd be frightened of old Nance,' said Justin, with some contempt, 'she'd think her a witch; girls are always so fanciful.'

'You can't know much about girls,' said Pat. 'I'm sure Miss Mouse isn't silly. If she did think Nance a witch she'd like her all the better. You heard what she said about fairy stories.'

'Fairy rubbish,' said Justin. 'I believe you were meant to be a girl yourself, Pat.'

Pat reddened, but, wonderful to say, did not lose his temper, and before Justin had time to aggravate him still more, there came an interruption in the shape of a boy who suddenly appeared a few paces off, as if he had sprung up out of the earth. He had, in fact, been lying at full length among the heather.

'Master Justin!' he exclaimed. 'I heard you coming along and I've been waiting for you. I were going home from Maxter's,' and he nodded his head backwards, as if to point out the direction whence he had come.

'Well,' said Justin, 'and what about it?'

'I axed about them there ferrets as I was telling you about t'other day,' said the boy.

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Justin threw a doubtful glance over his shoulder at his brothers. Bob, for Bob Crag it was, caught it at once.

'It was just when we was talking about what they cost,' he said carelessly, 'I thought maybe you'd like to know.'

'Tom Brick has sold his, did you know that?' said Pat, by way of showing interest in the subject.

'He's been talkin' about it for a long time,' said Bob. 'But *his* weren't up to much. Those I've been told about are—why, just tip-toppers!' and out of his black eyes flashed a quick dart to Justin.

He was a striking-looking boy, with the unmistakable signs of gipsyhood about him, sunburnt and freckled, as if his whole life had been spent out of doors, which indeed it mostly had. His features were good, his eyes especially fine, though with an expression which at times approached cunning. His teeth, white as ivory, gleamed out when he smiled, and in his smile there was something very charming. It was curiously sweet for such a rough boy, and with a touch of sadness about it, as is often to be seen in those of his strange race. He was strong and active and graceful, like a beautiful wild creature of the woods. Nevertheless it was not to be wondered at, that, in spite of his devotion to the boys, to Justin especially, Mr. Hervey had often warned his sons against making too much of a companion of old Nance's grandson, for hitherto no one had succeeded in taming him—clergyman, schoolmaster, kind-hearted ladies of the country-side had all tried their hands at it and failed. Bob was now thirteen, and did not even know his letters! Yet in his own line he was extremely clever, too clever by half in the opinion of many of his neighbours, though not improbably it was a case of giving a dog a much worse name than he deserved. Never was a piece of mischief discovered, which a boy could have been the author of—from bird's nesting to orchard robbing—without gipsy Bob, as he was called, getting the credit of it. And this sort of thing was very bad for him. He knew he was not trusted and that he was looked upon askance, and he gradually came to think that he might as well act up to the character he by no means altogether deserved, and his love of mischief, innocent enough as long as it was greatly mingled with fun, came to have a touch of spite in it, which had not been in Bob's nature to begin with.

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There were two things that saved him from growing worse. One was his intense, though half-unconscious, love of nature and all living things, with which he seemed to have a kind of sympathy, and to feel a tenderness for, such as are not often to be found in a boy like him. The second was his grateful devotion to the Hervey family, which his strange old grandmother, or great-grandmother, maybe, had done her utmost to foster.

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'Where are they to be seen?' said Justin, in a would-be off-hand tone. 'It would do no harm to have a look at them.'

'In course not,' said Bob eagerly. 'It's a good bit off—the place where they are—but I know what I could do—I could fetch 'em up to our place to-morrow or next day, and you could see them there.'

Justin glanced at his brothers, at Pat especially, but, rather to his surprise, Pat's face expressed no disapproval, but, on the contrary, a good deal of interest. It was from Archie that the objection came.

'I don't see the good of Bob getting them, as we can't buy them,' he said.

'How do you know we can't buy them?' asked Justin sharply.

'They cost a lot,' Archie replied, 'and, besides, I'm sure papa and mamma wouldn't like us to have them. Mamma can't bear them, as you know.' [Pg 69]

'She need never see them,' said Justin, whose spirit of contradiction was aroused by Archie's unusual opposition, 'and as for what they cost—how much *do* they cost, Bob?'

'I couldn't say just exactly,' said Bob, 'but I can easy find out, and I'd do my best to make a good bargain for you. Five to ten shillin' a couple, any price between those they might be,' he went on, 'and if you really fancied them—why, I daresay granny'd let me keep them for you, and when there come a holiday I could fetch 'em to wherever you like.'

'There's the old out-houses that papa thought of pulling down,' said Justin. 'They're a nest of rats, I know, and we might be there a whole afternoon without any one finding out, or we might use them for rabbiting sometimes.'

Bob's face grew rather serious.

'That's not as good fun,' he said quickly. To tell the truth he had a very soft corner in his heart for the poor little bunnies, with their turned-up, tufty white tails, scampering about in their innocent happiness. 'Rats is best, and a good riddance.'

'Five to ten shillings a couple,' repeated Justin. 'I have only got two, if that. What are you good for, Archie?' [Pg 70]

'Precious little,' the younger boy replied. 'And I don't know that I care about——'

'You are a muff,' said Justin crossly, 'a muff and a turncoat. You were hotter upon ferreting than I was.'

'I'd be hot upon it still,' said Archie, 'if we could do it properly, with Griffith at home. But I don't think it worth spending all our money upon when very likely we wouldn't be allowed to keep them.'

'We could keep them at Bob's place,' said Justin. 'But as we haven't got the money there's no more to be said, I suppose.'

'*I've* got some money,' said Pat. 'Why don't you ask me to join, Justin?'

'*You!*' said Justin, in a tone of mingled contempt and surprise. 'When do you ever spend money on sensible things?— Would they want to be paid the whole at once, do you think, Bob?' he went on, turning to him.

'I shouldn't think so,' the boy replied, 'anyway I could see about that.'

'How much have you got, Pat?' Justin now condescended to ask. Pat considered. [Pg 71]

'Three shillings, or about that,' he answered.

'Three and two, and something to make up another shilling with Archie's,' said Justin. 'Well we shouldn't be far short. I think you may as well fetch them, Bob, and let us know. You can look out for us on our way home to-morrow afternoon.'

They had not been standing still all this time. The ground was a little clearer where they had met, and they had been able to stroll on abreast, though scarcely noticing they were moving. And now they were but a short way from Bob's home.

He was always eager to show such hospitality as was in his power to 'his young gentlemen,' as he called them, and he knew that few things pleased his granny more than to have a word with them.

'I'll show you the corner where I could put up a box for the ferrets, if you'll step our way,' he said, and in a minute or two the four boys had reached the cottage, if cottage such a queer erection could be called.

Justin and his brothers knew it well by sight, but they had very seldom gone inside, and, to Pat especially, there was a good deal of fascination about the Crag's dwelling-place. He was not sorry, as they came near to it, to see old Nance herself standing in the doorway, a smile of welcome lighting up her brown wrinkled face, and showing off her still strong even white teeth and bright black eyes. [Pg 72]

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## CHAPTER VI

## FERRETS AND FAIRIES

Old Nance's way of speaking, like everything else about her, was peculiar to herself. Nobody could tell by it from what part of the country she had come, all that they could say was, that her talk was quite unlike that of her neighbours. Neighbours, in the common sense of the word, the Craggs had none, for their cottage was very isolated. Moor Edge was the only house within a couple of miles, and except for the Herveys themselves, its nearness would have been no good to the old woman, for the servants were all full of prejudice against her and her grandson. This she well knew, but she did not seem to mind it.

'Good-day, Master Justin,' she said, as the boys came within speaking distance. 'I *am* pleased to see you. You won't be on your way to school just now, so you'll spare the old woman a few minutes, won't you? and give her some news of your dear papa and mamma, bless them, and Miss Mattie that was, and the little young lady that's biding with her, and is going to have her lessons with the little young gentlemen at the house.'

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The three Hervey boys stared.

'Who told you so, Nance?' said Archie, the readiest with his tongue. 'There is a little girl at Aunt Mattie's, but we never saw her till this afternoon, and nobody has said anything about her having lessons at our house.'

'How do you hear things?' added Pat, looking the old woman straight in the face, for he had had, before this, experience of old Nance's extraordinary power of picking up news. 'Is she really a witch?' he added to himself, though he would not have dared to say it aloud.

Nance smiled, but did not reply.

'Won't you step in?' she said, pushing the door of the cottage wider open. 'I've just tidied up, and I was fetching in a handful of bracken. It flames up so brightly.'

It was chilly outside, and Nance's fire was very inviting. Pat stepped forward to it, and stood warming his hands over the blaze.

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'And so your papa and mamma are away?' continued the old woman. 'You'll be missing them, though it's not for long.'

'There you are again!' said Pat. 'You know more about us than we do ourselves. *We* have not heard for certain when they're coming back.'

'I don't mind if they stay away a little longer,' said Justin. 'It's rather fine being alone for a bit. If only we had holidays just now, and Miss Ward was away too, it would be very jolly.'

Nance patted his shoulder with her thin brown hand.

'Book learning's all very well,' she said. 'Young gentlemen like you must have it. But it do seem against nature for young things to be cooped up the best part of the day. There's my Bob now, there's no getting him to stay indoors an hour at a time, be the weather what it will,' and she glanced at her grandson with a certain pride.

Bob laughed, and in the dancing firelight his teeth glistened like pearls.

'I think we mustn't stay longer,' said Archie suddenly. He meant what he said, but, besides this, somehow or other, he always felt a little afraid of Nance, and this evening the feeling was stronger than usual. The growing darkness outside, the peculiar radiance of the fire, for the flames were dancing up the chimney like live things, and, above all, the old woman's strange knowledge of matters which it was difficult to account for her having heard, all added to this creepy feeling. And added to this, Archie had a tender conscience, and he knew that though they had never been actually forbidden to speak to the Craggs, their father and mother did not care about their doing so, more than was called for in a kindly, neighbourly way.

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Justin and Patrick had consciences too, though Justin was very clever at 'answering his back,' and trying to silence its remarks, while Pat was so often in a kind of dreamland of his own fancy, that he slipped into many things without quite realising what he was about. Just now he was enjoying himself very much. He loved the queerness and fascination of old Nance and her belongings. It was like living in a fairy-story to him, and he felt rather cross at Archie for interrupting it, though he said nothing.

'I'm not going,' said Justin, 'till I've seen the corner where Bob means to keep our ferrets if we get them.'

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'To be sure,' said Bob eagerly. 'I'll show you where in a minute if you'll come with me, Master Justin.'

And the two went out together. Archie got up to follow them, but stopped short in the doorway, for, in spite of his fears, he was really more interested in Nance than in the ferrets. Her first remark surprised him again exceedingly.

'And you'll bring the little young lady to see me some day soon, Master Pat, won't you?' she said. 'She'd like to come, I know, for she's heard tell of me, and she loves the moor.'

'Nance,' said Pat gravely, 'I do believe you heard us talking on the mound this afternoon, when

Miss Mouse was with us, and that's how you know all these things.'

Nance only laughed.

'Think what you're saying, Master Pat,' she replied. 'Could I have been near you and you not see me? Unless I had the hiding-cap that the fairies left behind them on the moor many a year ago, but that nobody's found yet, though many have looked for it.'

'Then how do you know they left it,' said Pat quickly.

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'Tis just an old tale,' she said carelessly. 'These days are past and gone—worse luck. It was fine times when the good people came about—fine times for those they took a fancy to, at least. Why, there was my own great-grandmother had many a tale to tell, when I was a child, of what they did for her and hers to help them through troubles and bring them good luck.'

'Your great-grandmother,' repeated Pat, 'why what an awfully long time ago that must have been! For I suppose you are very old yourself, Nance, aren't you?'

She did not seem at all offended at this remark. On the contrary she nodded her head as if rather pleased, as she replied,

'You're in the right there, Master Pat,' she said. 'I've lived a good while; longer than you'd think for, perhaps, and I've seen strange things in my time. And my great-grandmother was a very old woman when I remember her. And yet it was seldom, even in those days, that the good people showed themselves.'

'Do they *never* come now?' inquired Archie, from the doorway. 'Not even in wild, lonely places like this,' for he was gazing out upon the moor, and the fast-falling darkness added to the mysterious loneliness of the far-stretching prospect before him.

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His words gave Pat a new idea.

'Your stories can't have to do with this moor, Nance,' he said. 'You didn't live here when you were young, I know.'

Nance shook her head.

'Deed no,' she replied. 'Many a long mile away from here. The place I first remember *was* lonesome, if you like. There's not many such places to be found now, and they're getting fewer and fewer. No wonder the good people are frightened away with the railways coming all over the country. Why, the stage-coaches were bad enough, and some folks say there'll be no more of them,' and again Nance shook her head.

'Was your old home a moor too?' asked Pat. 'Was that why you came to live here?'

'You've guessed true,' replied the old woman. 'The moorland air is native air to me, though this is a small place compared to where I was born. It'll last my time, however, and yours too for that matter. There'll be no railroads across it till the world's a good many years older.'

'How do you know that?' asked Pat, with increasing curiosity. 'Do you know things that are going to happen as well as things that have happened? I wish you'd tell me how you find them out!'

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'That I can't do,' was the reply. 'There's some as has the gift, though how it comes they can't tell. It's like music, there's some as it speaks to more than any words, and others to whom one note of it is like another. And who can say why!' She ended, drawing a deep breath.

This talk was growing rather beyond Archie. He strolled into the little kitchen again towards his brother, who was still seated by the fire, where Nance had by this time settled herself opposite him. The flames were still dancing gaily up the chimney. It almost seemed to Pat as if they leaped and frolicked with increased life as the old woman held out her hands to their pleasant warmth. But then of course Pat was very fanciful.

'Tell us a story of the fairies and your great-grandmother,' said Archie. 'What was it they did to help her?'

'There's not time for it now,' Nance replied. 'There's Master Justin and Bob at the door,' and, sure enough, as Archie looked round the two other boys made their appearance, though not the slightest sound of their footsteps had been heard.

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Certainly, old as she was, Nance's hearing seemed as quick as that of the fairy Five-Ears.

'I don't want to keep you longer,' she went on, 'or your folk wouldn't be best pleased with me. You must come another day, and bring the little young lady, and old Nance will have some pretty stories ready for you.'

So the three boys bade her good evening and set off homewards, Bob accompanying them a part of the way, talking eagerly to Justin about the ferret scheme they were so full of.

Pat was very silent.

'What are you thinking about?' said Justin, when Bob had left them. 'You seem half asleep, both you and Archie.'

'I was thinking about old Nance,' said Pat; 'she's awfully queer.'

'Yes,' Archie agreed. 'I like her and I don't like her. At least I felt to-night as if I were a little afraid of her.'

'Rubbish,' said Justin. 'That's Pat putting nonsense in your head. If you're going to stuff him with all your fancies, Pat, I'd rather you didn't come with us.'

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Archie turned upon him.

'That's not fair of you, Jus,' he said indignantly. 'I think Pat's been very good-natured this evening. And if I were he I wouldn't give you any money for those ferrets if you spoke like that.'

This reminder was not lost upon Justin.

'Pat's all right,' he said. 'He wants the little beasts too, don't you, Pat?' turning to him.

Pat murmured something, though not very clearly, to the effect that he didn't mind, Jus was welcome to the money. Then another thought struck Archie.

'I say!' he exclaimed. 'I wonder if it's true about Miss Mouse coming to have lessons with Miss Ward? That'd mean her being at our house every day.'

'We shouldn't see much of her,' said Justin, 'we'd be at the vicarage. So we needn't bother about it. It wouldn't interfere with us.'

'Bother about it!' repeated Archie. 'I think it would be rather nice. I like her. But we'd have to leave off racketing about so, I suppose. She *did* look frightened once or twice this afternoon.'

'Perhaps it would be a good thing,' said Pat. 'I don't think we were like what we are now, when Aunt Mattie was with us, and yet nobody could say that she would like boys to be muffs.'

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'Speak for yourself,' said Justin. 'There's always been one muff among us, and that's you!'

It was too dark for Pat's face to be seen, and he controlled himself not to reply. It was easier to do so as he was, to confess the truth, feeling not a little pleased with himself for his good-nature to his elder brother.

'I'm sure Aunt Mattie would think I'd done my best this evening,' he thought; 'Justin hasn't been a bit nicer and I've not answered him back once, and I really will give him the money for the ferrets, though I'm sure I never want to see the nasty little beasts. I don't mind them so much if they're kept down at old Nance's, for then when Justin goes to see them I can go too and make old Nance tell me some of her queer stories.'

For Pat was very much fascinated by the old woman and her talk—more than he quite knew indeed. He put down the whole of his amiability to Justin to his wish to follow his aunt's good advice.

Justin was struck by Pat's forbearance.

'What's coming over him?' he said to himself, 'I've never known him so good-tempered before.'

Archie noticed it too, as he had already done earlier in the afternoon, and he was not afraid to say so.

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'You're really too bad, Jus,' he exclaimed. 'Pat's far too patient. If I were he I wouldn't stand it.'

This gave Pat great satisfaction, for though he seemed unsociable and morose he was really very sensitive to other people's opinion of him, and eager for approval.

'Don't you meddle,' said Justin. 'Pat and I can manage our affairs without you. We're both older than you, remember.'

But before Archie had made up his mind what to reply, the threatening quarrel was put a stop to by an unexpected diversion. They had by this time left the moor and were making their way home by a little lane which skirted their own fields, across which it was not always easy to make one's way in the dark. A few yards ahead of them this lane ran into the road, and just at this moment, to their surprise, they caught sight of a carriage driving slowly away from Moor Edge.

'What can that be?' said Justin. 'It's the fly from the station, I'm almost sure. I know it by the heavy way it trundles along.'

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'I do believe,' said Archie joyfully, 'that it's papa and mamma come back without warning!'

His brothers did not seem equally pleased.

'If it is,' said Justin, 'we'll get into a nice scrape for being out so late. Run on, Archie, you're mamma's pet, and tell her we're just behind.'

Archie made no objection to this, he was not unused to being employed in this way, and when a few minutes later the elder boys entered the house, they found that their pioneer had done his work well.

Their mother was crossing the hall on her way upstairs when she caught sight of them coming in by a side door; Archie was beside her, laden with bags and rugs.

'My dear boys,' said Mrs. Hervey, 'you shouldn't be out so late. I was just beginning to wonder

what had become of you when Archie ran in.'

'We never thought you'd come back to-night,' said Justin, as he kissed her, 'or we'd have been in, or gone along the road to meet you.'

'That's not the question,' said their father's voice from the other side of the hall, where he was looking over some letters that had come for him. 'I'm afraid it's a case of "when the cat's away,"' but by the tone of his voice they knew he was not very vexed. 'So, Pat,' he went on, 'you were out too. I'm glad of that, it's better than being always cooped up indoors. What have you all been after? Archie says you weren't far off—were you with Griffith?'

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'Part of the time,' said Justin. 'The vet came over to look at mamma's pony.'

'Oh, by the bye, how is it?' asked Mr. Hervey quickly, but Justin could not say.

'I'll run out and ask Griffith now,' he volunteered, and off he ran.

Pat followed his mother and Archie upstairs. He did not quite own it to himself, but he had a strong feeling of not wishing his father to know that they had been for some time at the Crag's cottage.

On the landing upstairs, Mrs. Hervey and the boys were met by the two nursery children. Hec kissed his mother in a rather off-hand way—there was a good deal of Justin about Hec—but fat little Ger ran forward with outstretched arms.

'Mamma, mamma!' he cried. 'I am *so* glad you've comed home. And Mith Mouse has been here, did you know? Aunt Mattie brought her.'

'My darling, what are you talking about?' said his mother. 'Pat— Archie, what does he mean?'

'The little girl,' said Archie, 'Aunt Mattie's own little girl. Didn't you know she was coming, mamma?'

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Mrs. Hervey's face cleared.

'Do you mean little Rosamond Caryll?' she said. 'Oh yes, of course I knew she was expected to stay with your Aunt Mattie. But I forgot she was coming so soon. And so she has been to see you already? That is very nice. She must be a dear little girl, I am sure.'

'Hers *juth* like a mouse,' said Ger, 'all tho thoft and juth the right colour—greyey, you know!'

His mother laughed.

'You funny boy,' she said. 'When are you going to leave off lipping altogether? You can say S's quite well if you like. Did she mind your calling her "Miss Mouse"?' she went on, turning to the elder boys.

'No, not a bit,' said Archie. 'I think she liked it.'

'And so did Aunt Mattie,' added Pat. 'She said it suited her. Is it true that she's coming here to have lessons, mamma?'

'Who told you so?' asked his mother, with some surprise. 'There's nothing settled about it.'

Pat and Archie glanced at each other, but neither replied. Their mother, however, did not notice their silence, for just then Miss Ward made her appearance. She was all smiles and cheerfulness now, for Mr. and Mrs. Hervey's return was the greatest possible relief to her.

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'I hope everything has been all right while we were away?' said the boys' mother kindly.

'Yes, thank you,' said Miss Ward, 'at least everything is quite right now. I had just a little trouble, but it was really accidental, and Mrs. Caryll's coming this afternoon was such a pleasure.'

Mrs. Hervey saw that Miss Ward did not wish to say any more before the children. Her face fell a little.

'I am afraid,' she thought to herself, 'that Justin may have been unmanageable, but I shall hear about it afterwards if there is anything that must be told. Pat,' she went on to herself, 'looks wonderfully bright and cheerful, more like what he used to be when Mattie was here. I do hope it will turn out nicely about little Rosamond coming.'

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## CHAPTER VII

### NANCE'S STORY

The next day Mrs. Hervey drove over to Caryll Place, where she had a long talk with her sister, and made acquaintance with little Rosamond.

'She is a sweet little girl,' she said, when she and Aunt Mattie were by themselves. 'I do hope it will answer for her to come over to us, as we had thought of. Even though she would be mostly

with the little ones, you could let her spend a day now and then with all the boys, I hope, Mattie? It would be so good for them, and I *think*, I *hope* they would not be too rough for her. They must have been unusually unruly yesterday.'

Mrs. Caryll hesitated. She was anxious not to disappoint her sister, as she looked up in her face with her gentle, pleading brown eyes—eyes so like Archie's. Mrs. Hervey was several years older than Aunt Mattie, and yet in some ways she seemed younger. There was something almost child-like about her which made it difficult to believe that she was the mother of the five sturdy boys. And to tell the truth, she often felt overwhelmed by them. 'If only one of them had been a girl!' she used to say to herself. 'She would have had such a softening influence upon the others!' and she had hailed with delight the prospect of little Rosamond making one of the Moor Edge party to some extent for a time.

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'You're not thinking of giving it up?' she went on anxiously.

'No,' replied Aunt Mattie. 'I think now that Rosamond herself would be very disappointed. Her uncle said something to her last night which I see has made a great impression upon her. She really wants to be a sister to them all, for the time. But I think it *will* be necessary for you—or his father rather—to speak very seriously to Justin. I am afraid there is a touch of the bully about him which seems to have got worse of late, and it is such a bad example for the younger ones.'

'Of course it is,' Mrs. Hervey agreed. 'We have been speaking to him this morning about his rudeness to Miss Ward while we were away. We made her tell about it, poor thing—and on the whole I must say he took it well. He didn't attempt any excuses. And Pat has been *very* nice, much brighter than usual. I can't help hoping that the thought of Miss Mouse—she smiled as she said the name—is going to put them all on their mettle.'

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'I shall be very glad indeed if it is so,' said Mrs. Caryll, and when her sister went home again, she carried with her, to her houseful of boys, the news that the little stranger was to join the schoolroom party the next day but one, for to-day was Saturday.

They were all more or less pleased. Justin the least so perhaps, unless it were that he thought it rather beneath him to seem to care one way or another about a thing of the kind, and he repeated that it would make no difference to *him*, as Miss Mouse's companions were to be the two little boys.

'Oh, but she's going to be with us on half-holidays, very often,' said Archie.

'What a nuisance!' said Justin, but in his heart he was not ill-pleased. There was a good deal of love of show-off about him, and a little girl, especially a quiet, gentle child like Rosamond, seemed to him very well suited to fill the place of admirer to his important self.

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'We must take her to see old Nance, the first chance we get,' said Pat. 'We almost promised we would, you remember?'

'Do you think Aunt Mattie wouldn't mind,' said Archie doubtfully.

'*Mind*,' repeated Pat, 'of course not. We've never been told we're not to speak to the Craggs. All papa said was that he didn't want us to have Bob too much about the place. And I daresay that was partly because the servants are nasty to him, and might get him into trouble somehow or other.'

'Oh well yes,' said Archie, who was always inclined to see things in the pleasantest light, 'I daresay it was for that, and Miss Mouse does want very much to go to see their queer cottage.'

And on Monday morning little Rosamond made her appearance for the second time at Moor Edge. She had come over in her aunt's pony-cart, which was to fetch her again in the afternoon, Mrs. Caryll intending very often to drive over for this purpose herself.

Things promised very well in the schoolroom. Miss Ward was a good teacher, and Rosamond was a pleasant child to teach. Three days in the week she was alone with the little ones, the three other days Archie and she did several of their lessons together, for it was only on alternate mornings that he went with his brothers to the vicarage for Latin and Greek, which Miss Ward did not undertake. So a week or more passed quietly and uneventfully. The two first half-holidays were not spent by Rosamond at Moor Edge, as her aunt thought it better not to throw the little girl too much with the elder boys till she had grown more accustomed to being among so many, for a change of this kind is often rather trying to an only child.

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But on the second Wednesday, when the little girl was starting in the morning, she asked her aunt if she might spend that afternoon with 'the boys,' and not come home till later.

Mrs. Caryll was pleased at her expressing this wish.

'Certainly, dear,' she said. 'I shall very likely drive over myself to bring you back. I have not seen Aunt Flora,—for so Rosamond had been told to call Mrs. Hervey—for some days. Have you made some plan for this afternoon?'

'Only to go for a walk with the big ones,' Miss Mouse replied. 'I daresay we'll go on the moor, for I've hardly been there at all.' And after the early dinner at Moor Edge the children set off for their ramble, having informed Miss Ward that they had no intention of coming home till tea-time.

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'Aunt Mattie's coming to fetch me herself,' said Rosamond, 'and now the evenings are rather cold



and get so soon dark, she is sure to come in a close carriage, so mightn't we have tea a *little* later, Miss Ward, so as to be able to stay out as long as it's light?'

She looked up coaxingly in Miss Ward's face.

'I don't think it would do to change the hour,' the governess replied. 'But I won't mind if you're not in just to the minute.'

Miss Ward's not often so good-natured as that,' said Justin. 'I suppose she "favours" you because you're a girl, Miss Mouse.'

'I think she's very kind to everybody,' said Rosamond.

'I'm sure she's had nothing to complain of lately,' said Justin. 'We've been as good as good. I'm getting rather tired of it.'

They were close to the moor by this time. It was a mild day for the time of year, and the sky was very clear.

'We might go a good long walk,' said Archie.

'Humph,' said Justin, 'I don't call that much fun. Anyway I mean to go first to Bob Crag's. I don't know what he's doing about those ferrets. He's had time enough to find out about them by now.' [Pg 95]

'What was there to find out?' asked Archie. 'He told us ever so long ago that he could get them at Maxter's.'

'Oh, but you didn't hear,' said Pat. 'It was one morning you weren't with us. He ran after us to say that these ones were sold too. And he had heard of some other place farther off. I don't believe we'll ever get any.'

'Is that the boy whose old grandmother lives in the queer hut on the moor?' asked Rosamond eagerly. 'I remember the first time I came here you said you'd take me to see it some day. Can't we go that way now?'

'We *are* going that way,' said Justin. 'You're sure you won't be frightened of the old granny? For if you were, Aunt Mattie wouldn't let you come with us again.'

Rosamond opened her eyes very wide.

'Frightened of her,' she repeated. 'Why should I be? Isn't she a kind old woman?'

'Yes,' said Pat, 'but she's very queer. If you don't like her, you need never come back to see her again.' [Pg 96]

'And in that case you needn't say anything about it to Aunt Mattie,' added Justin.

'But *of course* I won't be frightened,' said Rosamond, a little indignantly. 'I've never been easily frightened. Even when I was only two, mamma said I laughed at the niggers singing and dancing at the seaside. Aunt Mattie would think me very silly if I were frightened.'

'She'd be more vexed with us than with you,' said Justin. 'I think on the whole you needn't say anything about the Craggs to her. You see you don't quite understand being with boys. *We* don't go in and tell every little tiny thing we've done. Miss Ward would be sure to find fault with *something*. And *we* hate tell-taleing; girls don't think of it the same way.'

'*I do*,' said Rosamond, flushing a little. 'If you think I'd be a tell-tale I'd rather not go with you.'

'Oh nonsense,' said Archie. 'I'm sure Jus can't think that. Anybody can see you're not that sort of a girl.'

All these remarks put the little girl on her mettle, and, besides this, she was most anxious to gain the good opinion of the two elder boys and to get on happily with them as her aunt had so much wished. Nor was she by nature in the least a cowardly child. [Pg 97]

Still when they reached the little cottage on the moor, and she caught sight of Nance standing in the doorway as if looking out for them, she could not help giving a tiny start, for no doubt the old woman *was* a very strange-looking person.

'She really does look like one of the witches in my picture fairy-book,' thought Rosamond.

But with the first words that fell from Nance's lips, the slight touch of fear faded away. There was something singularly sweet in the old woman's voice when it suited her to make it so, and she was evidently very pleased to see the little stranger.

'Welcome, missie dear,' she said. 'I was thinking you'd be coming to-day, and proud I am to see you all.'

Rosamond felt a little surprised at finding herself expected, but no doubt, she thought to herself, the boys had told the old woman that they would bring her.

'Thank you,' she said, in her pretty, half-shy way. 'I wanted to come very much. I think it must be so nice to live on the moor as you do.' [Pg 98]

'Nance has always lived on a moor,' said Archie, 'ever



**NANCE.**

since she was quite a little girl. That's why she came here instead of going to the village.'

'Aye, Master Archie,' said the old woman, 'I'd choke in a village, let alone a town, but there was a time that I was far away from moorland, though my life began on one and 'twill end on one too. But won't you come in, my dears. I was baking this morning—there's some little cakes maybe you'd like a taste of, and some nice fresh milk.'

None of the children had any objection to an afternoon luncheon of this kind, and Nance's little cakes were certainly very good. Miss Mouse felt exceedingly happy. The inside of the cottage was beautifully clean, and uncommon-looking in some ways, for Nance had trained a creeping plant so well that one side of the room was nearly covered by it, and, besides this, there was a kind of rockery in one corner with smaller plants growing in its crannies. The furniture, though plain and strong, was of quaint, uncommon shapes, and on the high mantelshelf stood some queer pieces of china, more rarely to be seen in those days than now, when the curiosities of the East can be bought by any one for very little. Rosamond knew more about such things than the boys, as her father had been so much in India, and she thought to herself that perhaps the old woman had had sons or brothers who were sailors.

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The little room was pleasantly warm without being too hot; indeed Nance loved fresh air so much that it was rarely her door was shut closely even in winter. The fire was dancing brightly, and there was a peculiar fragrance which seemed to come from it.

'I've been burning pine-cones and other sweet-smelling things,' said Nance.

Rosamond gave a sigh of satisfaction.

'It's perfectly lovely in here every way,' she said. 'It's like a fairy-house.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' said Pat, 'you promised to tell us a fairy story, Nance, at least I think it was to be a fairy one. Anyway it was about the great big moor where you lived when you were a little child.'

Pat had seated himself comfortably in his favourite corner near the fire, Miss Mouse and Archie opposite him, but Justin was fidgeting about in his usual way; he was the most restless boy possible.

'I say, where is Bob?' he asked suddenly.

Nance stepped to the door and looked out.

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'He should be coming by now,' she said. 'He went about your ferrets to another place, Master Justin. He's been in a fine way at not getting them for you before. Ah! yes, there he is,' and she pointed to a black speck appearing on one of the little white paths at some distance.

'I'll go and meet him,' exclaimed Justin, 'perhaps he's bringing them with him. I don't care about fairy stories. So when you're ready to go,' he went on, turning to his brothers, 'you can call me. I'll be somewhere about with Bob,' and he ran off.

Nance stood looking after him for a moment. Then she came in, half-closing the door.

'That's right,' said Archie, 'now we'll be very comfortable without Jus fidgetting about. Go on, Nance, we're all ready.'

Nance drew forward a stool, and seated herself upon it, between the children, in front of the fire. She had a pleasant, rather dreamy smile upon her face.

'I've plenty of stories in my head,' she said. 'The one I was going to tell you the other day was an old one of my grandmother's. It was about a moor, though I can't say for certain if it was the one I remember best myself. It was told her by the one that was best able to tell it, and that was the very man it had happened to many years before, when he was a boy. They were poor folk, very poor folk, and they had hard work to keep the wolf from the door. The father was dead, and there were several little ones. This boy, Robin was his name, was the eldest, and the only one fit for regular work, and he was but twelve. He must have been a right-down good boy, though he didn't say so of himself, for he worked early and late and brought every penny home to his mother. Well, one night, 'twas the beginning of winter too, like it is now, he was going home from the farm where he worked, right across the moor. It was a good long way to the farm, for it was a lonely place where his home was, but there was no rent to pay for the bit of a place, so they stayed there, lonesome as it was, and worse than that sometimes, for the children were delicate,

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from want of good food most likely, and more than once the poor mother had had a sad fright, thinking the baby, the frailest of them all, would have died before the doctor could come to them. In the summer-time they got on better, and, putting one thing with another, they'd have been sorry to move.

'This winter promised to be a very hard one—all the wise folk had said so, and they weren't often mistaken. There were signs they could read better than people can nowadays, and Robin's heart was heavy. For if the snow came his work might stop, or it might be almost impossible to go backwards and forwards to it. There had been times when for days together the moor could not be crossed. The boy was tired too, and hungry, and he knew well there was not much of a meal waiting for him at home. But at least there would be shelter and warmth, for there was no lack of fuel ready to hand—same as we have it here. The wind whistled and moaned, and felt as if it cut him. More than once he put his hands up to his ears, just to feel like if they were still there and to shut out the dreary sound for a moment. And one time after doing so, it seemed to him that he heard a new sound mixing with the wind's wail. A cry, with more in it than the wind was telling: for it sounded like the cry of a living being. He hurried on, feeling a little frightened as well as troubled——'



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**'I'VE PLENTY OF STORIES IN MY HEAD,' SHE SAID.**

'Were there wolves about that place then, do you think, Nance?' Archie interrupted eagerly. 'I have read in stories that they make a sort of a cry—a baying cry. Perhaps the boy thought it was wolves?'

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Nance shook her head.

'There's been no wolves in this country, Master Archie, since much farther back than my grandmother's time. No, it wasn't that sort of a cry. He heard it again and again. And each time it grew plainer and plainer to him that it was some creature in trouble, and bit by bit it came stronger upon him that he must seek it out whatever it was; that he would be a cruel boy if he didn't. So he stood quite still to listen, and through and above the wind he heard it still clearer, and then he turned to the side where it seemed to come from, though it was hard to make his way. But strange to say he hadn't gone many steps before he felt he was on a path, and, stranger still, all of a sudden the moon came out from behind the clouds, and he heard the cry almost at his feet, though before then it had seemed a good way off. He went on a few steps, peering at the ground, and soon he saw a little white shape lying huddled up among the withered heather, and sobbing fit to break your heart to hear. It was a little girl; she seemed about two years old, and when she felt him trying to lift her up, she stopped crying and wound her tiny arms about his neck, so that, if he had wanted to set her down again, he could scarce have done so. And before he knew where he was there she had settled herself in his arms as content as could be. He spoke to her, thinking she might understand.

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"Who are you, baby?" he said, "and where have you come from? And what am I to do with you?"

'It was half like speaking to himself, and no answer did he get, except that she cuddled herself closer into his arms, and it came over him that take her home he must, whatever came of it, and in less than a minute she seemed to have fallen asleep. He drew what he could of his coat over her, for it was bitter cold, and it was hard work fighting against the wind, tired as he was too, and misdoubting him sorely as to what his poor mother would say, and small blame to her, when she saw what he had brought with him. But queer things happened during that walk; whenever his heart went down the most, he'd feel her little hand patting at his cheek, or one of her fair curls would blow across his lips, as if it was kissing him, and with that he'd cheer up again and his feet would feel new spring in them. So they came at last to his home, and there was his mother peeping out, wild night though it was, and listening for his coming, for she had been getting very frightened.

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"Is it you, Robin?" she called out, and sad as her heart was that evening, it gave a leap of joy when she heard her boy's voice in return.

'But it was as he had been fearing, when he came in and she saw by the firelight what he was carrying.

"I couldn't help it, mother," he said, "nobody could have helped it," and he told his story.

"No," said the poor woman, "you couldn't have left the baby to die all alone out on the moor a night like this. Though it's little but shelter and warmth we can give her. There's but a crust for your own supper, my poor Robin."

'She took the child from him and laid it down on the settle by the fire, and as she did so it opened its eyes and smiled at her, and for a minute her heart felt lightened, just as it had been with

Robin. And the baby shook its pretty curls, and sat straight up, looking about it quite bright and cheery-like, and then it made signs that it was hungry, and Robin took the piece of bread waiting for him on the table, and give the biggest half to the little creature, who ate it eagerly. His two next brothers stood staring at her—the little sisters were in bed and asleep, his mother told him. They were so hungry, she said, 'twas the best place for them.

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"And how we're to get food for to-morrow, heaven only knows," she went on. "I've not a penny left, and if this wind brings the snow there'll be no getting across the moor even to beg a loaf for charity," and her tears fell fast.

'Robin felt half wild. Hungry as he was he couldn't bear to think of the little ones in bed without a proper meal, and he was half angry when he heard his little brothers give a shout of laughter.

"Be quiet, can't you?" he was going to say. But what he saw made him stop short. There was the little stranger, as grave as a judge, taking turn about with the two boys at the crust of bread, and they were laughing with pleasure at her feeding them, and calling out that the bread had honey on it.

"They must be hungry to think that," said the mother; "but the little one has a kind heart, and maybe she's not very hungry herself, though she's so poorly clad," and both she and Robin felt happier to see how pleased the boys were.

'The good woman undressed the little child and put her to bed with her own, and with no supper but his half crust, Robin fell asleep that night, feeling, all the same, cheerier than might have been.

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"I'll be up betimes, mother," were his last words, "whatever the weather is. I must make sure of some food for you and the children before I go to work."

'He woke early the next morning, earlier than usual, tired though he was, and the moon was shining so brightly in at the little window that at first he thought it was daylight. And when he looked round the kitchen, for he slept in a corner of it, he could scarce believe it wasn't, for it was all tidied up, the fire burning beautiful, and everything spick and span as his mother loved to have it. "Poor mother," thought Robin, "why has she got up so early? and how sound I must have been sleeping not to hear her!"

'He called out to her, but there was no answer, and when he got up and peeped into the inner room, why! there they were all fast asleep, and as he turned back again, he saw something still stranger, for there was the table all spread ready for breakfast—better than that indeed, for the breakfast itself was ready. There was a beautiful, big, wheaten loaf, and a roll of butter, a treat they seldom tasted, and a great bowl full of milk, and on the hob by the fire stood the coffee-pot, and it was many a day since that had been used, with the steam coming out at its spout, and the nice smell of fresh ground berries fit to make your mouth water.

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'There was no thought of going to bed again for Robin when he had seen all this, though he'd been half wishing he could, he was that tired from the night before, and by the clock he now saw that it was half-past six. He gave a cry of joy which awoke his mother, and brought her and the children in to see what had happened.'

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## CHAPTER VIII

### NANCE'S STORY (*continued*)

'At the first glance,' continued Nance, 'the poor woman thought that it was all Robin's doing, but in another moment she saw that was impossible. The boy was only half-dressed and had plainly not been outside, and he was looking quite as surprised as the rest.

"Mother, mother," cried Robin, "where has it all come from? Did you get up in the night? Has any one been here?"

'His mother was too surprised herself to know what to say. She glanced round at the children.

"Let us get dressed quick and have some of this beautiful breakfast," said the little girls, "we are so hungry;" and the baby held out its arms and crowed, and then the mother bethought herself of the little visitor of the night before. She was the only one who had not been awakened by Robin's cry of joy—there she was still sleeping soundly, with a smile on her little fair face.

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"She has brought us good luck," said Robin and his mother, "whoever she is, and wherever she came from."

'But wonderful as it was they were too hungry to keep on thinking about it, and soon they were all seated round the table, enjoying themselves as they hadn't done for many a day.

'And that wasn't the end of it either. When the good woman carried the remains of the breakfast into the lean-to where their food was kept, when they had any, what did she find but a beautiful cut of bacon and a bowl full of eggs.

"Why, Robin," she said, "there'd be no fear of our starving now, even if we couldn't cross the moor," and she looked out as she spoke, but the weather had taken a turn for the better, and Robin was able to go to his work with a light heart, feeling strong and fresh after his good night's rest and his good meal.

"And you'll ask all about," said his mother, "if any one has lost their child. There must be sore hearts somewhere, I'm afraid," and she lifted the tiny waif for Robin to kiss her before he set off.

'But ask as he might there was nothing to be heard of a strayed child, and as the day went on the boy felt more and more puzzled. He had plenty to think of that day, for, to his great surprise, the farmer for whom he worked told him that he was so pleased with his industry and good-nature that, be the weather what it would that winter through, he might count on regular work and better wages.

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'Robin was so eager to carry this news to his mother that he could scarce wait till the time came for him to go home, and once he set off 'twas more like dancing across the moor than walking, so happy did he feel.

"And even if we can't find the baby's friends," he thought to himself, "mother'll be able to keep her, and glad to do it too, seeing the good luck she's brought us."

'As this passed through his mind he stopped short and looked about him. 'Twas just about the place where he had heard the cry the night before, but the evening was mild and clear, and though the sun had set it was not cloudy, and as the moon came sailing up he could see a long way round him, and what breeze there was, was soft and gentle compared to the storm wind of yesterday. And just then a sudden sound reached him. No cry of trouble this time, but a burst of pretty laughter, ringing and joyous as if it came from some little child bubbling over with fun—and mischief too! It seemed to be just in front of him, then just behind, then just at one side, then at the other. Wherever he turned it came from a different point, till he felt half-provoked to be so tricked. So he ran on at last all the faster, thinking he was bewitched, till he got within sight of his home, and there, coming to meet him, was his mother, with a look on her face half-pleased, half-vexed.

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"She's gone, Robin," she called out, "the pretty baby's gone. But there's no call to be afraid for her. She ran off when she was playing with your little sisters in front of the house, and chase her as we might, we couldn't catch her. She danced away like a will-o'-the-wisp, laughing as I've never heard a child laugh, so fine and pretty and mischievous it was. And I've bethought me what it means. 'Twas the day for the moor-fairies to show themselves, it comes but once in seven years, and we've been in luck indeed."

'Then Robin told her of the laughing he, too, had heard, and of the good news he was bringing, and together they went on to the cottage, thankful that they had not missed the chance which had come to them by fear or selfishness. And from that day for seven years to come anyhow it did seem as if they were specially befriended, everything went well with them, and so far as I remember what my grandmother said, this good turn helped Robin on through his life. He was a grandfather himself when he told the story, much respected through the country-side—a good, kind man, as he had been a good, kind boy.'

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Nance stopped. Rosamond gave a sigh of satisfaction.

'What a pretty story,' she said, 'and how nicely you've told it—Mrs. Crag,' for she did not quite know what to call the old woman.

Nance smiled, well pleased. It was true; she had a real gift for story-telling, and though her accent sounded strange, her words were so correctly chosen, and her whole tone had so much charm about it, that it was almost difficult to believe that she had not at some time of her life been in a much better position than now.

'I'm right glad that you've liked my old story,' she said. 'But don't call me Mrs. Crag, missie dear; it doesn't suit me. Say "Nance," like the young gentlemen. I've plenty more stories packed away somewhere in my head that I can get out for you if you care to hear them.'

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'I wonder,' said Pat, 'if the fairies were seen again ever? Do you think they kept coming back every seven years, Nance?'

The old woman shook her head.

'I can't say, Master Pat,' she replied, 'but I'm afraid those days are over now, the world's too changed, and all the new-fangled ways frighten the good people away.'

'Do you think there were ever fairies on *this* moor?' said Archie. 'It says in our story-books that there are ever so many different kinds, some in forests, some in brooks and rivers, but I never heard of moor ones before. Are you sure, Nance, that if we sat up all night, or got up very, very early in the morning some particular day, we mightn't see something queer, or hear something? Like the boy, Johnnie— Somebody? who climbed up the mountain on Midsummer's eve.'

'No, no, Master Archie,' said Nance. 'Times are changed, as I told you. You'd catch nothing but a bad cold. You mustn't try any of those tricks, my dear, or you'll be getting old Nance into trouble for filling your head with nonsense, and then you'd not be let come to see me, which would be sad for me,' and she gave a little sigh. 'Promise me, you'll never do anything your dear papa and

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mamma wouldn't like.'

Archie laughed.

'I was really half joking,' he said. 'I know there aren't really any fairies, nowadays anyway. Pat, don't you go and tell Justin what I was saying, or he'd make fun of me.'

'I'm not going to,' said Pat. 'Jus doesn't care about things like that.'

'I think they're lovely,' said Miss Mouse. 'Fancying about pretty things is almost as nice as having them really, don't you think?'

There was no time, however, for any more talk, for at that moment Justin, followed by Bob, made his appearance at the door.

'I say,' he called out, 'I'm going home, and you'd better all come with me.'

'It's not late,' objected Pat, who was feeling very comfortable and disinclined to move, 'and we had leave to stay out later.'

'I can't help it,' said Justin. '*I* want to go back now. I've a reason for it. I'll tell you about it as we go.'

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The others had to give in to him, as was generally the case. They all said good-bye to their old friend, Rosamond holding up her little face to be kissed as she thanked Nance again, for which she was rewarded by a hearty—'Bless you, my sweet,' and then the whole party of children set off for Moor Edge, Bob making one of them.

'Why is he coming?' said Pat in a low voice to Justin, nodding his head backwards towards Bob, who was walking behind them.

'That's what I've got to tell you about,' said Justin in the same tone. 'It's about the ferrets. He's found a splendid pair after a lot of bother, but he must have the money. You've got yours ready, I suppose?'

'Bother,' said Pat. 'I don't care about the nasty little beasts. I did hope you'd give them up.'

'But you promised,' said Justin, ready to be angry. 'I've never spoken of giving them up, and you offered the money at the first. You seemed as if you wanted to have them as much as I did.'

'I'm not going back from my promise,' said Pat, half-sulkily, remembering his Aunt Mattie's advice to try to show more interest in the things Justin cared for. 'You can have the money whenever you like,' he went on in a brighter tone, as he remembered also that the ferrets, being kept at Bob's, would be a certain reason for frequent visits to the cottage, and more of Nance's stories; 'but do you mean,' he added, 'that we've got money enough to pay for them?'

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Justin hesitated.

'No, of course not,' he said at last, 'your own sense might tell you that. We've not got much more than half.'

'Then they must be dearer than you thought at first,' said Pat sturdily. 'I remember quite well you counting that you'd have nearly enough.'

'But these are far better ones,' said Justin. 'You must expect to pay more for a better thing. They won't hurry about the rest of the money once they've got half, or rather more than half.'

'You'll have to pay up some time or other though,' said Pat. 'And I don't know where you'll get it from. *I* can't go on giving you all my pocket-money. There are other things I want to get.'

'Wait till you're asked,' said Justin sharply. 'I can manage my own affairs.'

Pat thought it better to say no more, though in his heart he did not think Justin's talk of independence was very well-timed. He did grudge the money now that the first feeling of generosity had had time to cool down. But he felt there was no help for it.

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When they got to their own gate Justin told Bob to wait about outside till he came back again. This surprised Rosamond a little; it struck her as scarcely kind to the boy, who on his side had been so hospitable. But she said nothing, only when bidding Bob good-bye, she held out her hand to him, repeating how much she had liked her visit to the cottage. And from that moment Bob's wild, warm heart was completely won by the little lady.

They were not as late as Miss Ward had laid her account to their perhaps being, still, schoolroom tea was half over before Justin and Pat made their appearance, and both came in looking rather cross. Miss Ward glanced at them, seeming slightly annoyed.

'As you came in in good time,' she said, 'you should have come to tea punctually. Rosamond and Archie have been here for ten minutes at least. What have you been doing?'

The boys sat down without replying.

'Has Bob gone?' asked Miss Mouse innocently.

Justin glanced at her with a frown, and Pat, who was seated next to her, touched her foot under the table with his. She looked up in surprise, but nothing more was said, Miss Ward not having

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noticed the little girl's question. Tea was proceeding peacefully, though rather more silently than usual, when the door opened and Mrs. Caryll looked in.

'Are you nearly ready, dear?' she said to Rosamond, after a word of greeting to Miss Ward and the elder boys, whom she had not seen before that day. 'It's getting rather late.'

Rosamond jumped up.

'I can come now, auntie,' she said. 'I've had quite enough tea.' But this Mrs. Caryll would not allow.

'I can wait five or ten minutes longer,' she said, looking at her watch. 'Perhaps Miss Ward can spare me a cup of tea.'

Miss Ward was delighted to do so, and Archie was on his feet in an instant, ringing the bell and then running out into the passage to save time by meeting the servant and asking for another cup and saucer.

'And have you had a pleasant afternoon?' said Aunt Mattie, when she was seated at the table. 'Have you no adventures to tell me about, Jus? or you, Pat?'

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She looked at the two boys a little curiously, for she had noticed that they were silent and rather gloomy.

'It was all right,' said Justin in his somewhat surly way. 'We didn't keep together all the time. I don't know what the others were doing.'

'Oh! it was lovely,' exclaimed Rosamond, 'Pat and Archie and I were——'

'Miss Mouse does so like the moor,' interrupted Pat, 'though there wasn't any sunset to speak of this evening.'

And again Rosamond felt a warning touch on her foot as Pat went on talking rather eagerly about the sunsets that were sometimes to be seen, which interested his aunt, and turned the conversation from what the children had been about that special afternoon.

The little girl felt uneasy and perplexed. Were the boys afraid of her 'tale-telling,' as they called it? And even if she had told everything that had happened that afternoon, what harm would it have done, or who could have found fault with it? Nothing could have been prettier or nicer than Nance's story, and Rosamond felt sure that she was a good old woman. She had been so afraid of their doing anything that Mr. and Mrs. Hervey might not like too, and her whole manner showed how much respect she felt for the boys' parents.

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'I'm *sure*,' thought Miss Mouse, 'nobody could think it wasn't nice for us to go there. I don't understand what the boys mean. I suppose it's just that they've different ways from girls, and like to be very independent. And I promised them I wouldn't tell things over if they'd rather I didn't. So I won't, unless of course it was anything *wrong*, and then I'd have to, but I'd first tell them what I meant to do.'

And with this decision in her mind the little girl's face cleared, and she felt quite happy again.

She was bright and cheerful during the drive home, so that the very slight misgiving which the elder boys' manner had caused Mrs. Caryll quite faded away, and she talked happily to her little niece of plans for other half-holidays. It would be nice sometimes, she said, to invite the Moor Edge party to Caryll for a change, 'though,' as she added with a smile, 'they all say they don't care for anything there half as much as for running wild on their dear moor.'

'The moor *is* nice, isn't it, auntie?' said Rosamond. 'Such a beautiful place for fancying things, with its being so wild and lonely.'

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'You mustn't get your little head too full of fancies,' said her aunt. 'Has Pat been entertaining you with his pet stories? It is a pity that he and Justin cannot be mixed up together, one is so much too dreamy, and the other too rough and ready. But I hoped they were getting on better together lately, though I was rather disappointed this evening, Justin looked so cross.'

'I think Pat tries to be very nice to Justin,' said Miss Mouse. 'And Justin wasn't at all cross when we were out.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said her aunt. 'There is certainly room for improvement in him. But I trust it is beginning. He has never been rude or unkind to you, dear, I hope?'

'Oh no, auntie, though of course I've not seen much of him till to-day,' answered Rosamond. 'I like him quite well—though not so much as Archie, or—' with a little hesitation—'or Pat.'

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## CHAPTER IX

### MISS MOUSE 'AT HOME'

The next half-holiday came on a Saturday—the Saturday of that same week—and as the weather

was lovely just then, Aunt Mattie begged her sister to allow the three elder boys to spend it at Caryll, as she had planned with Rosamond.

So it was arranged that, as soon as morning lessons were over, the four children should walk back together in time for early dinner at Rosamond's home. In one sense it was scarcely correct to call Saturday a half-holiday, as the boys did not go to the vicarage at all that day, though they were supposed to spend two hours at home in preparation of Monday's lessons.

By twelve o'clock they were all under way, Rosamond feeling not a little important at the prospect of acting hostess to the Hervey boys.

'How shall we go?' said Archie, as they stood on the drive for a moment or two looking about them. [Pg 124]

'By the moor, of course,' said Justin at once, 'turning down the path that brings us out near the cross-roads—the way we go on middling days, you know,' he added to Rosamond.

'I think it would be more of a change to go all the way by the road,' said Pat. 'We've gone so much by the moor lately with its being so fine. You can't be wanting to see Bob again to-day, you'd quite a long talk with him on our way home yesterday.'

'As it happens,' said Justin, 'I do want to see him, and he'll be on the look-out for us,' and without saying more he turned towards the kitchen garden, from which a door in the wall opened on to the fields, beyond which lay the moor.

The others followed without saying anything more; cool determination to have your own way reminds one of the old saying that 'possession is nine points of the law'—it generally carries the day, as Justin had learnt by experience.

Rosamond did not care particularly which way they went, but she did mind Justin's masterful manner of settling things according to his own wishes, so there was a slight cloud over the little party following him, and some half-muttered 'too bads' and 'never lets us choose,' from Pat and Archie. But once out on the moorland the bright sunshine and fresh bracing air blew away all cobwebs of discontent. [Pg 125]

'How very pretty it is to-day!' said Miss Mouse eagerly, 'I've never seen it like this—the sunshine makes all the colours different, but, oh! how cold it must be in winter when it snows! I couldn't help thinking ever so many times of old Nance's story of the poor boy crossing it that winter night. I do so want to hear some more of her stories. Of course we can't stop at the cottage to-day, but don't you think we might next Wednesday perhaps?'

'That depends on those horrid little beasts of Justin's,' said Pat crossly, 'if Bob's got them by then Justin will always be wanting to go there.'

'Hasn't he got them yet?' asked Rosamond in surprise. 'I thought it was all settled about them.'

'Settled enough if we'd got the rest of the money,' said Justin gruffly. 'But the people won't give Bob credit. You see he hasn't told whom he's getting them for, or they'd add on to the price thinking papa would pay. But he was to see them again this morning and try to get them to say they'd wait a week or two for the rest of it.' [Pg 126]

'How much are you short?' asked Miss Mouse.

'Half, or as good as half,' answered Justin. 'They cost twelve shillings, and we've only got six and fourpence, or fivepence, I forget exactly.'

'Nearly six shillings,' repeated the little girl; 'that's a lot of money. I've never had as much at a time, except——'

'Except when?' asked Justin, eyeing her rather curiously.

'Except when I was collecting for something,' she replied, 'for papa's or mamma's birthday, or something like that.'

'Are you collecting just now?' asked Justin.

Rosamond's little face grew pink.

'I'd rather——' she began, 'rather not——' and then again she hesitated. 'It's a sort of a secret.'

'Well, you might as well tell us about it,' said Justin. Rosamond looked distressed.

'I think it's not fair of you to tease her, Justin,' said Archie indignantly. 'You don't like people prying into your secrets, I know that,' and Justin looked a little ashamed of himself, while Miss Mouse gave Archie's hand a grateful squeeze. [Pg 127]

They had been walking fast all this time as well as talking, and they were now within sight of the cottage, but no Bob was to be seen, and when they came nearer they saw to their surprise that the door was shut, and the usually open window closed also.

'Where can they be?' said Justin, stopping short in front of the hut. 'I told Bob we'd be passing about now, and he said he'd be sure to be back. I wonder if the old woman knows?' and he was preparing to knock at the door when Pat stopped him.



'It's no good, Jus,' he said, 'there's no one there. I know how it is, it's Saturday morning, and Nance has gone to buy her marketings for the week. You see we never come by on Saturdays, so we've not noticed it before.'

'It's too bad of Bob,' said Justin, falling back. 'I'll come home this way, for I must see him to-day.'

'You can come by yourself then,' said Pat. 'I wish to goodness I hadn't given you my money. You worry one's life out when you take a thing in your head.'

Justin was about to make an angry reply, pretty sure to be followed by a quarrel, when Rosamond interposed.

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'Much the best thing would be to make some plan for getting more money,' she said, 'and then it would be all right, wouldn't it? I'm sure poor Bob has done his best. If you want the ferrets so very much why don't you ask your papa to lend it to you, and you would pay it back by degrees out of your pocket-money?'

'He'd never do that,' said Justin, 'at least not to help me to get ferrets.'

Rosamond opened her eyes very wide.

'Why, he doesn't mind you having them, does he?' she said.

'He doesn't want us to have them at home,' the boy replied. 'You see mamma doesn't like them, but there's no reason why we shouldn't keep them somewhere else; besides——' but here he stopped and began talking of other things.

They had a pleasant walk to Caryll Place, and a pleasant afternoon followed. Uncle Ted was at home, and both he and Aunt Mattie did their utmost to make the children happy. And there were plenty of nice things at Caryll to make up to the boys for its being farther away from the moor. First and foremost among these was a little boat on the lake, which the boys were allowed, to their great delight, to row about in two at a time. This boat was a novelty, as their uncle had only just got it, and as the lake was shallow there was no danger of anything worse than a good wetting even if it did capsize, and when the afternoon began to get chilly, and Aunt Mattie was afraid of Rosamond's remaining out any longer, she brought them into the hall, which was a big square one, and let them have a capital game of blind man's buff, in which even Justin did not think it beneath him to join, as Uncle Ted proved the best blind man of them all.

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Miss Mouse had never seen Justin to such advantage. He was really quite pleasant and hearty, and she began to think him a much nicer boy than she had yet done. No doubt the improvement was greatly owing to his uncle's presence, but this did not strike the kind-hearted little girl, and Aunt Mattie was very pleased to see the two on such good terms. For it was on Justin and Pat especially that she hoped much, in different ways, from her little niece's good influence.

So it was with very cheerful feelings that their aunt watched the three boys set off on their return home.

For some distance there was no question as to which way they should choose, so they walked on very friendlyly.

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'I say, we have had a jolly afternoon at Caryll for once, haven't we?' said Archie.

'Not so bad,' Justin allowed; 'I'm glad Uncle Ted's had the sense to get a boat at last.'

'I have always liked Caryll awfully,' said Pat, 'even when you two thought it dull. Everything about it is so pretty, and there are such jolly books in the library too. Rosamond's got some very nice ones of her own; she took me up to her room to see them just before tea, while you and Archie were still in the boat. She's got a splendid *Hans Andersen*, for one; she's going to lend it to me. It's got ever so many more stories in it than ours.'

'She's a spoilt little thing,' said Justin, rather crossly. 'I don't suppose she's ever wanted anything that she didn't get.'

'She's not spoilt,' said Pat. 'Several of the books she bought with her own money, that she'd saved up on purpose. She told me so.'

'I wonder if it's something like that she's saving for now,' said Justin quickly. 'I've a good mind to ask her. It wouldn't hurt her to wait a little while to buy a book, and then she could lend me the money. She might have done worse than offer it already, when she heard that we were short of some.'

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'Don't say "we," if you please,' replied Pat. 'I don't want to have anything more to do with your nasty animals, and I think it would be horribly mean to borrow from a girl.'

'Yes,' chimed in Archie, 'I wonder you can think of such a thing, Jus.'

'I'd pay her interest,' said Justin indignantly, 'a penny a month on each shilling. That would be awfully high interest, I know.'

'She wouldn't want your interest,' said Pat. 'She'd want her own money, and I'd be ashamed of you if you borrowed it from her.'

Justin made no reply, and they walked on in silence till they came to the point at which they had

to choose their way home.

'I'm going back by the moor,' said Justin abruptly.

'I'm not then,' said Pat, marching straight on as he spoke, Archie, as often happened, standing wavering between the two, for he loved to keep on good terms with everybody. But this time his sympathy was decidedly with Pat, and he was much relieved when Justin called out to him, not too amiably, that he didn't want him.

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'I'd rather go by myself, and manage my own affairs,' he called out, walking off without replying to Archie's good-natured reminder not to be very long, and then the younger boy ran on to overtake Pat.

The two boys were glad they had kept to the road, for when they reached their own door they were met by Hec, who told them that their mother had been wondering why they were so late.

'Where's Jus?' he added. 'Papa wanted him for something or other.'

'He's coming round the other way,' said Archie, and as he spoke his father looked out of his study door, and caught the words. He looked annoyed.

'When you go out together, I expect you to come home together,' he said. 'How did you two come?'

'By the road,' said Pat.

'Then that means that Justin is coming by the moor. I hope he doesn't see too much of that Crag boy; I don't hear any too good an account of him. I must speak to Justin about it,' said Mr. Hervey, as he turned back into his room again.

Archie followed him before he shut the door, feeling somehow a little guilty for having deserted Justin, and a little uneasy too at what his father had said of poor Bob.

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'Hec said there was something you wanted one of us to do for you, papa,' he began. 'Can I do it?'

Mr. Hervey, already seated at his writing-table, looked up.

'Well, yes,' he said, 'I want a message taken out to Griffith. Tell him he must keep your mother's pony in the stables altogether, till the second vet has seen it on Monday.'

'Is it worse?' asked Archie. 'Is that why you are going to get another vet, papa?'

'Never mind,' said Mr. Hervey, rather sharply. He had been annoyed at several things that afternoon, and the best of papas cannot *always* be perfectly gentle. 'Run off with my message, and when Justin comes in tell him—no, don't tell him anything,' for their father knew by experience that messages through one boy to another were very apt to 'grow' on their way.

Off ran Archie, stopping some minutes to chatter about the pony with Griffith after executing his errand, in consequence of which he came across Justin making his way in by the back gate from the fields.

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'I say, Jus,' he began, 'you'd better look sharp. Papa didn't tell me to say so, but I know he's vexed at you for not coming back with Pat and me.'

'You needn't have put yourselves in the way then,' said Justin.

'We didn't—he was in the hall, or at least he looked out of his door when we came in. And— I say, Jus—'

'Well—what next? Why don't you go on?'

'I was thinking if I should tell you or not. I mean whether I've any right to,' said Archie, who was very honest and truthful, 'for papa did say "don't tell Justin anything." But that was after he'd said it.'

'It,' repeated Justin, growing impatient. '*What?*'

'Something about not wanting you to see much of Bob—people aren't speaking too well of him.'

'Is that all?' said his elder brother with some contempt. 'People never have spoken too well of him. But papa has always known that, and I can't be horrid to Bob just when he's been taking a lot of trouble to please me. He needn't ever come about here if papa doesn't want him to. And I don't suppose *he* wants to. Our servants are beastly to him. But I can go to see him if I choose—I've never been told not to. And he's not a bad fellow at all.'

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'No, I don't think he is,' Archie agreed. 'But if papa orders you not to go there?'

'He won't, unless somebody tells tales or meddles,' said Justin. 'If I catch you or Pat at that sort of thing, I'll—' but he said no more. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie. 'Papa won't think any more about it, I don't suppose.'

'Perhaps not,' said Archie, not feeling quite easy in his mind all the same. 'Were you there just now, Jus?' he added, for he had rather a big bump of curiosity.

'Only for a minute. I didn't go in. Bob was looking out for me,' and here Justin's tone became very

friendly and confidential. 'You needn't go talking about it,' he said, 'but, Archie, Bob's *got them*. He's to fetch them on Monday morning. Isn't it splendacious?'

'You mean the ferrets,' said Archie, growing excited in spite of himself, for both he and Pat had been getting rather tired of the subject. 'He's actshally *got them!*'

Justin nodded.

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'And what about the money—the rest of it—what's short, you know?' Archie went on.

'Oh—that'll be all right. We'll manage it somehow. The people'll wait a week or two. Don't you tell any one. Where's Pat? I want to tell him myself.'

'He went upstairs to look for mamma and the little ones,' said Archie. 'Mamma was wondering why we were so late.'

'It isn't late,' said Justin, 'anyway I've not finished my Monday lessons,' and he went off to the schoolroom, turning back to say to Archie that if he heard their father asking for him again he was to reply, 'Oh yes, Jus has been in some time.'

Archie made no promise, but he resolved to keep out of the way, for though there was no actual untruth in what Jus denoted, he felt that his brother's motive rather savoured of wishing to mislead, and anything of that kind went against his own instincts.

But no more inquiries about Justin reached him. Mr. Hervey, as Justin had thought probable, seemed to have forgotten all about the matter—as often happened, he was absorbed by his own reading and writing, and the warnings he had received about Bob Crag went out of his head for the time being.

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Sunday morning broke clear and bright, but increasingly cold.

'It might really be Christmas already,' said the boys' mother at breakfast-time. 'I am afraid it looks like a very severe winter, the cold beginning so early.'

'Yes,' Mr. Hervey agreed, 'I fancy we shall have it pretty sharp this year.'

'All the better,' said Justin, 'if it gives us lots of skating,' which put it into Hector's head to ask if *he* mightn't have skates this winter. Hec always wanted to do whatever Justin did.

'It wouldn't matter if they got too small for me soon,' he added, 'for they'd do for Ger after me.'

'I don't never want to thkate,' said Gervais—all five boys had breakfast downstairs on Sunday morning—'you have to go so fast.'

Ger was fat and round and slow in his movements.

'Oh you lazy boy,' said his mother, laughing, as she kissed his firm, plump cheeks. Ger *was* rather spoilt, but then of course he was the baby.

She got up as she spoke.

'Now don't be late any of you this morning,' she said. 'A quarter past ten punctually. And Hec and Ger, take care that you are warmly wrapped up, for you know you are going to dine at Caryll, and very likely auntie will send you home in the pony-cart, which will be colder than walking.'

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'How nice for you,' said Archie to the little ones. 'I didn't know you were going home from church with Aunt Mattie.'

'Well, you were there yesterday,' said Hec. 'It's only fair we should have our turn. Miss Mouse asked for us—to make up, you know, for our not going with you on Saturday.'

'Mith Mouse is very kind,' said Ger.

And so she was. Rosamond loved children younger than herself. Her face was all over smiles when, after church, she stood waiting for the two little boys in the porch with her aunt, and set off with a small cavalier at each side to walk home to Caryll Place.

It was the first visit Hec and Ger had paid there since Miss Mouse's arrival, and they had lots of things to see and ask about. Several of their little friend's treasures made them rather envious, especially a new kind of ball, an india-rubber one—and india-rubber or gutta-percha toys were then something quite new—as round and plump as his own cheeks, filled Ger's heart with great longing.

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'It *is* a beauty,' he said. 'Hec, if anybody asks you what you think I'd like for a Chrithiemuss present, just you tell them a ball like Mith Mouse's, only p'raps even a little bigger. Do you think, Mith Mouse, that they cost a great lot of money?'

Rosamond shook her head.

'Not such a very great lot, I don't think,' she replied. 'When I was in London with papa and mamma, just before I came here, I saw balls like that in several of the toyshops, and I *think*, but I'm not quite sure, that the other day when I was out with auntie, and I was waiting for her in the carriage at Crowley— I *think* I saw some like it in that shop opposite the church. It's not exactly a toyshop, you know, but they have toys in one window.'

'Oh, I know where you mean,' said Hec. 'It's Friendly's—it's a mixty sort of shop.'

'Do look again, Mith Mouse,' said Gervais, 'the venny first time you go that way, and *p'raps* somebody will give me one at Chrithiemuss.'

He heaved a deep sigh of hope and anxiety in one. And Rosamond smiled to herself as she made a little plan.

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## CHAPTER X

### THE STORY OF THE LUCKY PENNY

The winter was not going to set in just yet after all. That bright, clear, cold Sunday was followed by a week or two of milder but very disagreeable weather—almost constant rain and very few glimpses indeed of blue sky or sunshine. Miss Mouse arrived every morning muffled up almost to her eyes to keep her dry in the pony-cart, and most afternoons the close carriage was sent from Caryll to fetch her.

There was no question of the boys going to the vicarage across the moor, and even by the road, which dried quickly, every time they walked home they could not help getting very muddy and splashed, and they could not have their own pony cart as much as usual, as their mother's pony was laid up, and old Bobbin had extra work on this account.

On the first half-holiday of this rainy weather the three elder boys went off after dinner and did not come in till tea-time, in consequence of which Pat woke next morning with a bad cold, and Archie with a slight one. So orders were issued that there were to be no more expeditions or long walks till the wet days were over—indeed, Pat had to stay indoors altogether for nearly a week, as he had a delicate throat, which was apt to get very sore when he caught cold.

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'And if you go out, Justin,' said his mother, 'you must be in early, and not hang about with damp things on.'

She knew that a 'whole half-holiday,' as the boys called it, in the house would be a terrible trouble to Justin, and even worse for other people, and as he was very strong and had never had a cold in his life, there was not much fear of his getting any harm.

'All right, mamma,' he replied. 'I'll take care of myself. I don't want to get soaked, it's so uncomfortable—I can amuse myself about the out-houses. But mayn't Archie come with me?'

This was on the first Wednesday.

No—Mrs. Hervey shook her head—Archie must not go out again to-day, as the walk to Whitcrow in the morning had been a wet one. But if Saturday was finer he might go out with Justin as usual.

'I really think Justin is improving,' she thought to herself with satisfaction, 'he gives in so much more readily, instead of arguing and discussing.'

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The truth was that Justin was very much afraid of a talk with his father, which would probably have put him under orders to keep away from Bob Crag altogether, and this would not have suited Master Justin at all, now that the ferrets had arrived and were comfortably installed at the Moor Cottage.

So for one or two half-holidays Justin went off on his own account, returning home in good time, and as no complaints reached Mr. Hervey about him, I suppose his father took for granted that everything was right. Very likely, for Mr. Hervey was rather absent-minded at times; he thought that he *had* warned Justin, forgetting that it had been Archie and not his eldest brother to whom he had spoken of Bob that Saturday evening.

After a time the weather 'took up again,' as the country folk say. Pat's cold got better, and then came a Wednesday morning on which Rosamond asked and received leave to spend the afternoon with the big boys, her aunt saying she herself would drive over to fetch her, as she had not seen her sister, Mrs. Hervey, for some days.

There was no discussion between the four children as to where the afternoon should be spent. Almost without a word they all turned in the direction of the moor.

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'Justin will be off with Bob and the ferrets, of course,' said Pat to Rosamond. 'So you and I can have a jolly time with old Nance and make her tell us some more stories.'

'And Archie?' inquired the little girl.

'Oh, he can do whichever he likes,' said Pat. 'I daresay he'll stay with us. He's been once or twice with Jus while my throat was bad, you know, but I don't think he cared about it much.'

And so it proved. When they got to the Crag's, Bob, as well as his grandmother, was on the look-out for them, old Nance's face lighting up with pleasure.

'Are you glad to see us again?' asked Archie. 'I hope you've got some stories for us. If you know so much about fairy things, Nance, why don't you manage to get us nice fine days for our half-holidays?'

The old woman smiled.

'It's a fine day for me when I see your faces, Master Archie,' she replied, 'and that you know well enough. But to be sure the weather has been contrary the last week or two. Come in, come in, missie dear—there's some of my little cakes all ready. Won't you come in too, Master Justin, before you go off with Bob? I've been fearing you might have got cold when you were here last week; it was such a very wet day.'

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'No fear,' said Justin amiably. 'Bob and I aren't made of sugar or salt, are we, Bob? I'll come in for a minute, thank you, Nance, but we mustn't be long, or we'll have no fun. It gets so soon dark now, and papa's vexed if we don't all go home together.'

'To be sure,' said the old woman, 'and quite right too. You'll never find me wanting you to do anything your dear papa and mamma wouldn't like, my dears.'

So saying she led the way into her quaint little kitchen, all tidied up and bright as the children always found it—the cakes and a large jug of milk set out as before on a small table near the pleasantly glowing fire.

'Are you coming with Bob and me, Archie?' Justin inquired. 'Pat's a donkey—no use asking him.'

Pat took this uncomplimentary speech very calmly. Archie hesitated.

'Come along,' said Justin, 'that's to say if you're coming,' for having made away with at least three of the tempting little cakes, he was now in a hurry to be off.

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'Don't go, Archie,' said Rosamond, speaking low, so that the elder boys could not hear, and her words decided Archie.

'I'd rather stay here, thank you, Jus,' he said. 'You've got Bob, so you don't really need me.'

'You are a softy,' said Justin as he ran off, but Archie, backed by Pat and Rosamond, did not care.

'Now, Nance,' said Pat, when most of the cakes and milk were disposed of, 'we're ready for your stories.'

The old woman had drawn a stool to the fire and was sitting there facing it, the reflection casting a pleasant glow on her sunburnt cheeks and keen bright eyes. She was always a nice-looking old woman, but just now she really looked quite pretty.

'How fond you are of the fire, Nance,' said Archie; 'do you have one all the year round?'

'Mostly so, Master Archie,' she replied. 'You see old folk like me grow chilly. It's not often I feel too hot, even in the midsummer days. And here on the moorside there's always a breeze more or less. Yes, I love my bit o' fire, Master Archie—you're about right there, but all the same I'd rather face cold than be choked in a town and have no fresh air, like some poor things have to bear their lives.'

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'Nance,' said Miss Mouse suddenly; she had been sitting silent watching Bob's granny, 'it's so funny, it seems to me that when you stretch out your hands to the flames they give a little jump towards you and then dance up the chimney ever so much higher than before. Are you a sort of a fairy, dear Nance?'

Pat glanced at the little girl half uneasily. He knew that some of the people about called Mrs. Crag a witch, and 'uncanny,' and words like that, just because she was a stranger and different in her ways and looks from her present neighbours, and he was afraid that Nance's feelings might be hurt by little Rosamond's question.

But it was not so—on the contrary the old woman seemed pleased, and smiled brightly.

'You must have a bit of the fairy knowing yourself, missie dear, to have noticed it,' she said. 'I've been told I get it from my grandmother, who had fairy ways, there's no denying. And no harm in them either, if one doesn't think too much of them, or fancy oneself more than one is. But I've always had a kind of luck, hand-in-hand with troubles, for troubles I've had, and many of them, in my long life. More than once when I've thought they'd be too much for me there's come a turn I had little hope of. Maybe the good people aren't gone so far as we think, after all,' and old Nance smiled at the idea.

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'Tell us some story of your good luck,' said Pat suddenly. 'It's always so nice to hear a story from the person it really happened to.'

Nance considered. Then she suddenly slipped her hand inside the front of her bodice and drew out a tiny little chain; it was only a steel chain, but very finely worked, so that it looked more like a silver thread, and on it hung a tiny coin with a hole in it through which a ring had been passed. She held it out for the children to see.

'Oh what a weeny, weeny little sixpenny, or threepenny—which is it?' exclaimed Rosamond.

'It's neither, missie dear,' the old woman replied. 'It's a lucky penny, and if you like I'll tell you

the story of how I came by it.'

'Oh do, do,' said all three together; Archie adding, 'Did you really get it from the fairies, Nance?'

'You shall hear,' she replied, smiling, and then they all settled themselves to listen.

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'When I was a little girl,' she began, 'you'll remember, my dears, that my home was on the edge of a moor, something like this, but wilder and far larger and farther away from any village or town—railways I needn't speak of, for such a thing hadn't even been dreamt of in these long-ago days,' and the far-away look came into the old woman's eyes as she stopped speaking for a moment.

'Is it a hundred years ago since you were a little girl?' asked Miss Mouse.

Nance smiled again.

'Not quite,' she replied, 'though none so far off it either. But long ago as it is, I remember that first part of my life so well, so clear and distinct it seems sometimes that I could fancy it much nearer than things that happened a few years back only. I was an orphan, like my poor Bob now, and I lived with my granny, same as Bob lives along wi' me. 'My granny had come of——' here Nance hesitated, but went on again—'after all there's no shame in it,' she said—'she'd come of gipsy-folk, and when her husband died—he was a steady, settled sort of man, a gardener at some big house, but he died young—she was that lonely and lost-like, she went back to her own people with her little son, and he married among them, so I'm three parts gipsy, you may say. Both father and mother of mine died too—there's many that dies young among our people, and some that lives on and on till you'd think death had forgotten them, and that was the way with my granny. But she wasn't so very old when the feel took her that she'd like to settle down again, she'd got into the habit of a home of her own while her husband lived. So one time when the vans were passing near by where had been her little place, she takes a sudden thought that she'd like to see the fam'ly again, and what did she do but she carried me in her arms and walked some miles to the big house. The Squire was dead, but his lady was living in the Dower House hard by, and the young Squire—none so young by now—was at the hall with his wife and children. And they were pleased to see her and kindly sorry for her troubles, and the Squire said she should have a cottage if there was one to be had, if she'd settle down near them. For my grandmother, for all her gipsying, was a clever, useful woman, as good as a doctor for the cures and comforts she could make with her knowledge of herbs and wild growing things, and where she once gave her faithfulness she'd never draw it back again. So it was fixed that she should make her home there again, though her own folk were none best pleased to lose her.

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'At first we lived in two rooms in the village, but granny felt choked like, and she found a bit of a place on the moorside which had once been used for the gentry to eat their lunch in when they were out shooting, and the Squire was very kind and did it up for us quite tidy, and there we lived, though it was sometimes harder than any one knew; for all we had was what granny made by odd days' work here and there, and by selling her dried herbs and drinks she made of them. But as I got bigger the quality at the big house were very kind to me—it was seldom granny needed to buy clothes for me, and the housekeeper taught me nice ways about a house, so that when the time came I was ready for a good service. That's neither here nor there, though, that came afterwards; the time I got my lucky penny I was still a slip of a child, nine or ten at most.

"Twas haymaking—a beautiful dry haymaking, hot and sunny, I remember well. Granny was out with the best of them, hard at work early and late. I went to school in the village, but there wasn't much schooling that week or two. 'Twasn't so strict as now—an hour or two in the morning and then we'd be told we might all run home, to help while the splendid weather lasted. Grandmother worked for the Squire; I was always sure to find her about the fields and have my bite of dinner with her, and then the little ladies and gentlemen would have me play with them at what *they* called "haymaking," though it was a funny kind enough—more tossing and tumbling and laughing and shouting than any help to the haymakers. But we did enjoy it.

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'Well there came an afternoon that my granny was off working in a field a good bit farther away than usual. She told me in the morning not to go after her, for she didn't care for me to walk so far in the hot sun—she was very careful of me, poor dear—and she'd asked the housekeeper if I might have a bit of dinner at the big house, seeing that the young ladies and gentlemen wanted me to make hay with them in what they called their own field, a paddock just outside the kitchen garden. And there I found them, and a rare good play we had that afternoon, finishing up with a nice treat of cakes and milk when we were too tired and hot to play any more.'

'Were the cakes like those you make for us?' asked Rosamond.

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Nance nodded, well pleased.

'You've guessed it, missie,' she said. 'They're the very same. 'Twas there I learnt to make them. And then I was starting to go home when I heard a cry from Miss Hetty, the youngest and sweetest, to my thinking, of all the young ladies. "My ring, oh my ring, with the blue stone," she called out. "My birthday ring! I've lost it. I pulled it off and was trying if it would swing on a blade of grass—oh, do help me to find it—my dear little ring."

'Poor Miss Hetty—she'd only had the ring since her birthday the week before, when her mamma had given it her, telling her to be sure not to lose it, for it was one that had been a long time in the family. So no wonder she was vexed about it. How we did hunt for it—we searched and we

searched where we had been playing, though feeling all the time there was scarce any use looking for so small a thing in such a place. And Miss Hetty cried till her eyes were all swollen at the thought of having to go home to tell her mamma. And when I went back to my granny and told her about it, it was all I could do not to cry too.

'Granny had her own thoughts about most things.

"Go to bed, lovey," she said, "and I'll wish a wish for you into your pillow and see what'll come of it." [Pg 153]

'And sure enough the next morning I'd a strange dream to tell her.



**'ALL OF A SUDDEN HE STOOD STRAIGHT UP AND BEGAN THROWING THINGS AT ME FOR ME TO CATCH—IT WAS THE LITTLE SUNS!'**

"Granny," I said, "this was the dream that came out of my pillow. I thought I was standing on the moor watching the sun set, and I kept looking at it and the beautiful colours in the sky till my eyes seemed to be full of them, and whichever way I turned there was little suns dancing about—on the ground and everywhere. And then I caught sight of an odd-looking figure stooping down as if looking for something. It was a little old hunch-backed man, and I knew without being told that he was one of the good people. All of a sudden he stood straight up and began throwing things at me for me to catch—it was the little suns! They came flying towards me, red and yellow and all colours, but like soap-bubbles they melted before I could catch them, till at last, to my great delight, I did catch one and held it tight in my hand, when it felt firm and hard, like a round coin.

""I've got it,' I cried, and the old man laughed.

""Keep it,' he said, 'it's not everybody that catches a lucky penny. And maybe it'll help you to get back missie's ring for her,' and with that I awoke. But oh, granny," I went on, "it can't be all a dream, for look here," and I held out my hand to her, "I *have* got something—see I've got a real little piece of money." [Pg 154]

'And that very coin is the one I've worn round my neck for all these many, many years.'

'What *did* your granny say?' asked the children breathlessly.

'Not very much,' Nance went on, 'she smiled and told me I was a lucky girl, and I must think on what I'd been told by the old man in my dream. And so I did. Before the sun was any height in the sky, long before the young ladies

at the big house would be stirring, I was up at the paddock again searching for the ring. And granny told me what to do. I was to put the lucky penny as near as I could guess in the very centre of the field and then to walk round it in widening circles, always looking carefully downwards while I said this rhyme to the good people—

Here's my lucky penny, take it an ye will,  
But give me back the treasure hidden by you still.

All this I did, and—'

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'What? do say quick,' cried the children.

'Before I had made many circles I saw something glittering, and stooping down there it was—the tiny ring with the blue stone, sparkling in the morning sunshine. You can fancy how pleased I was, and how I hurried up to the house with the good news for Miss Hetty, who had just awakened. The ring was really hanging on a blade of grass, just as she said. Oh, she *was* delighted!'

'And how did you get the silver penny back again?' asked Pat. 'You couldn't have looked for it, for you see you had promised it to the fairies, hadn't you?'

'Yes, of course, and one must always keep to their bargain with the fairies,' said Nance. 'No, I didn't look for it, but late that evening when granny was closing the shutters, she called me to look at something sparkling in the moonlight on the window-sill. It was my lucky penny. And from that day to this I've never been without it, and many a time it's seemed to give me fresh courage and spirit in the midst of troubles, and one thing is true—all my life through I've never been brought to such a pass as to have to part with it, though now and then the need has come very near. But something's always turned up just in the nick of time to save it; I've always pulled through, though I had an ailing husband for many a year, and the father of poor Bob there, my only son, was cut down in the prime of life, he and his young wife, leaving me another young boy

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to bring up when I was more fit myself to be sleeping quiet and peaceful in the old churchyard.'

And old Nance wiped away a gentle tear or two that were struggling down her brown cheeks.

Little Rosamond stole her hand into Nance's.

'You've got friends now, haven't you? And I'm sure Uncle Ted or Mr. Hervey would help you about Bob any time if you needed help.'

'Yes, missie dear, I've much to be thankful for, and I hope and trust poor Bob'll take to steady ways like his father and grandfather before him, though there's times I worry about him a bit—he's a loving boy, but he's got the gipsy restlessness in him too.'

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## CHAPTER XI

### A GREAT SACRIFICE

Nance's story had taken longer to tell than might seem the case. For she had stopped now and then, and the children had asked questions and made remarks. So they were all a little startled when, glancing out of doors, they saw how fast the daylight was fading and the twilight creeping on.

'We must be going,' said Pat, starting up, 'and there's Justin not back, and if he's late we'll *all* be scolded. Papa has made a regular rule that we're all to come in together.'

Nance looked anxious.

'Bob's that feather-brained,' she said, for she never liked to blame the Hervey boys. 'But you'd best start, my dearies, and I'll whistle. It'll bring them back if they're anywhere near, and I don't fancy they're farther off than one of the farms straight across from here. And will it be next holiday you'll come for some more of old Nance's little cakes and long tongue?'

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'Not next half-holiday,' said Miss Mouse with some regret, 'for Auntie Mattie is going to take me to—the town—where there are shops, you know—there's something I want to buy, *very* particular.'

'Ah, well, you'll always be welcome—welcome as the flowers in May whenever you do come,' said their old friend, and she stood at the door whistling, a curious clear whistle which carried far, as the three set off for home.

'I do hope Justin will overtake us,' said Miss Mouse. 'It would be such a pity if your papa was vexed, for then he might say we mustn't go to old Nance's any more. Wasn't it queer about the lucky penny? Do you think the fairy man really brought it back or that it was a sort of little trick of her granny's?'

'I don't know,' said Pat. 'I was wondering about it, but I wouldn't have liked to say to her that perhaps it was a trick.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Archie, with the tone of one who has quite settled the question, 'I believe the grandmother herself was partly a fairy—gipsies are a little like fairies, you know.'

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Neither Pat nor Rosamond laughed at this, for in their hearts they had a feeling that Nance herself had something—I won't say 'uncanny,' for the old woman was too sweet and kind for that word quite to suit her—but something not quite like other people about her. But none of the three would have hinted at anything of the kind before Justin—he would only have made fun of it. And there was no time to say more, for almost as Archie left off speaking, they heard rapid footsteps behind them, and then a whistle and then Justin's voice, calling to them to stop till he came up to them.

'It's a good thing you've come,' said Pat. 'I don't know what we could have said to papa—he'd have been sure to ask why we hadn't kept all together. What have you done with Bob?'

'He's looking after the ferrets, of course,' said Justin. 'We were only at Bream's farm, and Bob heard Nance's whistle. We did have a jolly good rat-hunt,' and he was beginning a description, when the others stopped him.

'Archie and I don't want to hear about it,' said Pat, 'and I'm sure Miss Mouse doesn't.'

'She has a fellow-feeling for rats perhaps,' said Justin, laughing at what he thought his own wit.

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'No girl would like horrid things like ridding,' said Pat, 'and if papa knew——' he stopped short.

'Doesn't Mr. Hervey know that you've got ferrets?' asked Rosamond.

'I don't suppose he's ever thought about it,' said Justin; 'he's never said we weren't to have them. It's our own money—the only thing was that mamma doesn't like them kept at home.'

'Oh then,' said Miss Mouse, 'you've managed to pay them, have you?'



'Not *all* the money,' said Justin, hesitating a little, 'and indeed Bob was saying to-day we'll have to be thinking about it. He's had rather to keep out of the way of the place where he got them, for fear of the people bothering.'

'You won't let poor Bob get into any trouble, will you?' said Rosamond anxiously.

'Of course not,' said Justin; 'all the same it was he that made the bargain, and he knew we hadn't got all the money ready. Of course I don't *want* him to get into any bother.'

'You'd better take care,' said Archie, 'papa was saying that Bob's getting spoken against a good deal, though he didn't exactly say how. I don't believe the least bit that he's a naughty boy, but it would be too bad to let him get into a scrape for us—or for you, rather, Justin.'

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'It's no more for me than for you,' said Justin. 'You're a turncoat, as I've told you, Archie. You were just as pleased about the ferrets as I was, at the beginning.'

Archie did not reply; and it certainly would not have been a good time to begin a quarrel—if *ever* there is a good time for a bad thing?—for they were just at home by now, and Hec and Ger met them on their way in with the news that Aunt Mattie had come for Miss Mouse and that schoolroom tea was quite ready. Rosamond had to hurry over her tea, as Mrs. Caryll did not think it worth while to 'put up,' and yet it was too chilly to keep the horse standing long.

'You shall have a little extra supper to-night, dear, to make up,' she said. 'You shall come in to pudding with Uncle Ted and me, instead of only to dessert.'

'Thank you, auntie,' said the little girl. 'I wasn't very hungry at tea-time, for I had two cakes at old Nance's and some beautiful milk.'

Mrs. Caryll turned round in some surprise—they were in the brougham on their way home—'Cakes and milk at old Nance's,' she repeated. 'I didn't know the boys were allowed to go there. Why have you never told me about it before, or is this the first time you have been?'

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'Oh no,' Miss Mouse replied, for she had no thought of concealment or deception, beyond her wish not to chatter about the Hervey children's affairs unnecessarily—what Justin called 'tell-taleing'—'oh no, auntie. I think it's the third time we've been there. The boys often go—old Nance is very good and kind, and she tells us such pretty stories.'

Mrs. Caryll felt a little perplexed. It seemed curious that Rosamond should never have spoken of these visits before—and yet—it was so impossible to think of the little girl as anything but frank and truthful that her aunt did not even like to repeat her question as to why she had kept silence about the cottage on the moor. It would seem like doubting Rosamond. So for a moment or two Aunt Mattie sat thinking without speaking.

She had not long to wait.

'Auntie,' said Rosamond, in a puzzled tone, 'it wasn't wrong of me not to tell you before about our going to see Nance, was it? It was only that Justin explained to me that boys are different from girls—they don't like every little thing they do to be told over at home, and I have seen for myself that Miss Ward is rather fussy. Justin and Pat call it "tell-taleing," so I thought I just wouldn't talk about them *unless* they did anything naughty, and even then I wouldn't have told without telling *them* I was going to tell, though I'm sure they wouldn't do anything naughty, not Pat and Archie, anyway. And I really don't see much of Jus—he doesn't care for stories, and he goes off with Bob and the ferrets.'

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'Ferrets,' repeated Mrs. Caryll, 'have they got ferrets?'

'Yes,' Rosamond replied. 'I've not seen them, but I know they've got them. And they don't keep them at Moor Edge, because Mrs. Hervey doesn't like them. It isn't tell-taleing of me to have told you about them, is it, auntie?' she asked anxiously.

Mrs. Caryll felt distressed at the little girl's rather troubled tone.

'Of course not, dearie,' she said lightly. 'You may trust me not to make mischief. I quite see that it has been a little difficult for you.'

In her own mind she decided, however, that she would take measures to find out quietly, without involving little Rosamond, something more as to these very independent doings of her nephews, especially Justin.

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'They had no right to take her to the Crag's cottage without special and distinct leave,' she thought to herself, 'though I feel pretty sure no harm would come to them through old Nance.'

For Aunt Mattie had often seen and talked to the old woman, and had a high opinion of her, though she thought it a pity that Nance kept on such distant terms with her neighbours, and she feared too that his grandmother was not quite strict enough with Bob, as there was no doubt that the prejudice against the boy's wild, untameable ways was doing him harm, and would do him still more harm in the future unless it could be got rid of.

'I will talk it over with Ted,' she said to herself. 'He always sees ways out of difficulties. Now it would be the very making of the boy if we could find a place for him in our stables under Peterson.'

Peterson was Mr. Caryll's coachman, and a very superior man, for he had travelled with his master at one time—not like Griffiths at Moor Edge, who, though most trustworthy in every way, had never been very many miles distant from home in his life, and was full of all the prejudices and even superstitions of that part of the country.

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But Aunt Mattie kept all these thoughts in her own mind, and after a minute or two's silence she began to talk to Rosamond about other things, as she did not want the little girl to trouble herself about what she had told or not told of the boys' affairs.

'Next Saturday,' said Mrs. Caryll, 'I shall have to drive to Weadmere—there is a better toyshop there than at Crowley. Would you like to go with me and try if we can get a ball for little Ger like yours? And you have never been at Weadmere, I think—it would be a little change for you.'

Rosamond's face brightened up at once.

'Oh, thank you, auntie,' she said; 'yes, I should like very much to go and to see the toyshop, because, you know, there'll soon be Christmas presents to think about, and it would be a very good thing to find out in plenty of time where I could get them best. I did tell the boys I didn't think I could spend next half-holiday with them, because I was sure you wouldn't forget about the ball for Ger, auntie. I've got the money quite ready.'

She was again her own bright womanly little self, eager and delighted in the thought of doing something or anything for others.

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'And I'm getting on nicely with my savings for Christmas,' she chattered on happily; 'you know, auntie, I don't wear out nearly so many gloves here as when I was with mamma in London and Paris, so I really can save a lot.'

'All right, darling,' said her aunt, 'we shall go to Weadmere on Saturday and you shall have a good look round. It is wise to prepare in plenty of time, for I shall be sending a box to your mother very soon, and the Christmas presents can go in it. By the bye, how is the lamp-mat you are making for her getting on?'

'Oh, quite well,' Miss Mouse replied. 'Miss Ward lets me do a little every day while we're reading aloud. It'll be finished very soon.'

'That's a good thing,' said Mrs. Caryll, and by her tone Rosamond felt satisfied that her aunt was quite pleased with her, and it was a very contented and light-hearted Miss Mouse who fell asleep that evening at Caryll after her usual pleasant half-hour or so with her uncle and aunt before bed-time.

Mrs. Caryll did not forget to talk over things with her husband when they were alone, and he listened attentively, as he knew Aunt Mattie was too sensible to imagine or exaggerate such matters, and he was really interested in the Hervey boys.

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'Yes,' he said, 'it might be, as you say, the making of Bob Crag to get him into some good steady place where there would be no prejudice against him, and yet where he would be looked after with some strictness. I don't myself believe there's any harm in him. To tell you the truth,' and here he hesitated a little—'to tell you the truth I feel more anxious about Justin. There is a touch of the bully in him that I don't like, and— I don't feel sure that he is always quite straightforward and truthful.'

'That would be worse than anything,' said Aunt Mattie, rather sadly. 'I have tried to draw him and Pat more together, and I think Pat *has* been more companionable. But I don't feel happy about Justin, either. I don't like his trying to stop little Rosamond's innocent chatter—it is a pity to put it into a child's head that there *can* be such a thing as "tell-taleing" when children are simple and obedient.'

'Yes,' said her husband, 'I agree with you. I will think it over, and perhaps I may manage to have some talk with Justin one of these days. He will soon be going away to school, and if he has been getting out of good habits at home in any way, it will not be a strengthening preparation for the new trials and temptations of school life.'

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And as Mrs. Caryll knew that she could depend upon Uncle Ted always to do more rather than less of anything he promised, she too went to bed that night with an easier mind, little thinking that a shock was on its way to startle selfish Justin far more than any words, however serious and earnest, of his uncle's.

On Saturday afternoon, as it was a fairly good day, though cold and not without signs of snow not very far away, Mrs. Caryll and Rosamond set off, as had been planned, for Weadmere, the other little town for shopping in the neighbourhood. It was rather a larger place than Crowley, though not so prettily placed, but Rosamond enjoyed the drive in a new direction, and was eager to pay a visit to the 'toy-and-fancy-shop,' as it was called.

In those days a half-holiday once a week for shop-keepers was not as generally the rule as it is now, but at Weadmere it had for long been the custom to close on Thursday afternoons. And Saturday was quite a lively day in the little town, as the country folk came in to make their purchases for the following week. So Rosamond found it very amusing; even at the draper's, where she went in with her aunt—and a draper's is not usually counted an interesting kind of shop by children—she was much entertained by watching and listening to the conversation of the

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farmers' wives and others over their purchases. The way they tugged at merino, and rubbed calico between their fingers to see that there was not too much 'dressing' in it, made her feel as if it would be very difficult indeed to be sure of a 'genuine article,' as the shopman called all his stuffs in turn.

At this shop and at the toyshop, where, to her great delight, Rosamond found just the kind and size of ball she had set her heart on for little Gervais, the proprietor made one of his boys go out to hold the pony. But after this Mrs. Caryll had to drive to a less busy part of the town, to order some wire baskets to hang ferns in, at a working tinsmith's. And here there was no odd boy in the shop. She did not like to leave Rosamond alone outside, as she was afraid of the pony starting, but just as she was looking about her what to do, she caught sight of a little fellow sauntering down the street, and called out to him. He ran up at once.

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'Will you hold the pony for a few minutes?' she was saying, when Rosamond interrupted her.

'It's Bob, auntie,' she said, 'Bob Crag. Of course he'll hold Tony, and may I stay out? I'm quite warm, and I've got the parcels all nicely packed under the rug.'

'Very well,' replied Mrs. Caryll, for she knew the tinsmith's would not be interesting to her little niece, and with a friendly nod to Bob, who was tugging at his cap, she went into the shop, or workroom, for it was scarcely like a shop.

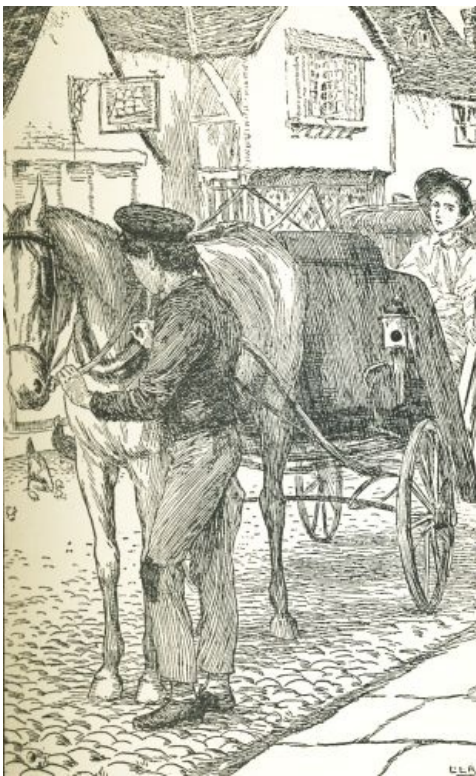
Miss Mouse was quite excited at meeting Bob.

'How funny for you to be here,' she said. 'Have you come to do some messages for your grandmother?'

'No thank you, miss,' said the boy, meaning to be very polite. 'Granny buys all she wants at Crowley; no, I didn't come here for no messages of hers.'

Something in the sound of his voice made the little girl look at him more closely, and she saw that he had been crying, though he turned away quickly and began fiddling at the pony's harness as an excuse for hiding his face. But Miss Mouse was not going to be put off like that.

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**'BOB,' SHE SAID, HE  
PRETENDED NOT TO HEAR HER.**

'Bob,' she said. He pretended not to hear her.

'Bob,' again more loudly and determinedly this time.

'Beg pardon, miss, did you speak?' said the boy.

'Yes, Bob, I did, and you heard me. You were only pretending not to, because you didn't want me to see that there's something the matter with you. Look at me, Bob,' and he dared not disobey. When Rosamond spoke in that queenly way she was very awe-inspiring.

'I see,' she said, 'you have been crying, Bob. Now what is the matter? Have you been doing anything naughty, or what is it?'

He brushed his coat sleeve across his eyes, and tried to choke down a sob.

'No, miss,' he managed at last to get out; 'leastways I never meant to do anything wrong— I never did, for certain sure, I never did. And I dursn't tell you, miss, for fear of worser trouble— I really dursn't, unless—' he looked up, his eyes brimming over—his sweet, pathetic dark eyes; and Rosamond's tender heart grew very sore.

'Unless what?' she said.

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'Twouldn't be right to say it, I don't think,' he replied hesitatingly; 'twas only if you'd not mind promising not to tell—it'd make such a trouble up to Moor Edge. I dursn't try to see Master Justin, and I don't believe he can do aught to put it right. But poor granny, she'd be that worried, and I know she's a bit short just now.'

'Short of what? What do you mean?' asked the little girl.

'Short of money, miss, to be sure,' replied Bob. 'I dursn't ask her for it—it'd put her about so, and she'd worry terrible about it all.'

'But I don't understand what it is,' said Rosamond. 'I do wish you'd explain quickly.' Then, as a sudden idea flashed into her mind—'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'can it be about the ferrets? Have you got into trouble about them? If you have, it's all Justin's fault, and he should get you out of it.'

Again Bob brushed his sleeve across his eyes.

'He's done all he could, he has indeed, miss,' he said. 'It's them I bought the creatures from that's making all the trouble—there's stories about, you see, again' me—that I've been ferreting for rabbits—and that'd be *stealing*; and the man who sold them to me says he'll have me up for it if I

don't pay all that's still owing very first thing to-morrow morning. And he's put on to the price—he has for sure, though he says he hasn't. It's six shilling still to pay, and how or where I'm to get it, goodness only knows,' and here Bob's feelings entirely overcame him, and he burst into tears.

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Miss Mouse had hard work to keep back her own—she could not bear to see the change in the poor boy, who had always before seemed so full of life and spirits. And she knew that all he had done and risked had been out of his unselfish devotion to Justin. Half unconsciously her hand went into her pocket, where, safely nestling, was her little purse; but she did not draw it out, for she remembered that it only contained sixpence. Miss Mouse was a careful little person; she kept her money in a tiny cash-box, and only took out what she needed to use. The ball for Gervais had cost a shilling, and she had brought eighteenpence with her.

'Six shillings,' she repeated, 'it's a lot of money!'

'That it is,' said Bob, with despair in his voice.

Miss Mouse considered. She had been hoping to have ten shillings for her Christmas presents. There was still to come her December pocket-money, out of which she was expected to buy her gloves, and in the country, as she had told Aunt Mattie, gloves last much longer, so that she was not far off her goal. But six shillings! That would leave her at most only four. It was something very like a sob that the little maiden choked down before she spoke again.

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'Bob,' she said, 'I'll—I'll lend it you—or give it you, for I don't see how you can ever pay it me back, unless—unless Justin does,' and, to tell the truth, she had small hopes of Justin. He was selfish and thoughtless.

Bob looked up at her with brimming over eyes.

'Miss— O miss!' was all he could say.

'Yes,' she repeated, 'I'll give it you. I couldn't bear you to get into trouble, or for poor Nance to be unhappy. She's been so good to us. I haven't got the money with me. We must plan how you can fetch it, for I suppose you must have it to-night?'

'Or to-morrow morning, miss, so early that I couldn't disturb you. Yes, to-night would be best, and I *will* pay it you back, miss, first earnings as ever I get. You'll see—but—but won't your folk—beg pardon—won't the lady and gentleman at Caryll Place be angry with you, miss?'

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Rosamond considered.

'No,' she replied, 'it's my very own money. But don't trouble about that part of it, Bob. I'll take care not to get you into any fresh trouble, nor,' with a little smile, 'myself either.'

And in her own mind Miss Mouse decided that once she was sure poor Bob was safe, she would tell Aunt Mattie 'all about it.' 'I don't think that would be a wrong kind of tell-taleing,' she decided. 'It wouldn't be right not to tell, for Justin shouldn't have risked poor Bob's getting into trouble. I'll tell auntie *everything*, and then she'll know how to do without making Justin angry with Bob.'

And when Mrs. Caryll came out of the tinsmith's Bob was standing quietly by the pony's head—he had quite left off crying. She thanked him with a pleasant nod and smile, and hoped she had not kept him waiting too long.

'I didn't give him anything for holding Tony,' she said to Rosamond. 'I think perhaps it would have hurt his feelings.'

'Oh, I'm sure he'd rather do it for nothing, auntie,' answered the little girl.

But she said no more about Bob. She meant to do right, and she thought she was doing right, but yet it gave her a rather unhappy feeling not to be able at once to tell her aunt the whole story.

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She had planned with Bob to meet him that very evening with the money, so she was glad that Mrs. Caryll, finding it a little later than she thought, drove home at a good pace.

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## CHAPTER XII

### OUT ON THE MOOR

Uncle Ted was on the look-out for them when they got home.

'It's cold, isn't it?' he said. 'Still I don't think we shall have snow just yet,' and he glanced up at the sky. 'I want you, as soon as you can spare me a few minutes, Mattie, to look over these letters we were speaking about.'

'I shall be down directly,' said Mrs. Caryll. 'Run off, Rosamond dear, and get ready for your tea. It is pretty sure to be ready for you.'

And so it was. Everything seemed to fit in for the little girl's plans. The maid who waited on her was not in Rosamond's own room when she went upstairs, so Miss Mouse contented herself with

taking off her hat and jacket, keeping on her boots to be ready for her expedition to meet Bob. She also got out a fur-lined cloak, which had been put away as too shabby for anything but a wrap, and a little close-fitting fur cap to match. These she carried downstairs and hid them in a corner of the sofa in the small breakfast-room which was considered her own quarters. And safe in her pocket nestled her oldest purse—Miss Mouse liked to have 'best' and 'common' among nearly all her possessions—containing the exact sum, six shillings, which she had promised Bob.

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She ate her tea quickly; her little heart was beating faster than usual with excitement, some fear, and a good deal of real regret at having to part with her precious savings, though, on the other hand, there was a feeling of great pleasure at being able to get poor Bob out of trouble, and to save his kind old grandmother the distress of mind she would certainly have felt.

For, as I have said before, Miss Mouse was a very sensible little girl. She quite understood that any trouble of the kind would have done special harm to poor Nance and her grandson, on account of the prejudice already felt against them.

Her heart began to beat still more quickly when she found herself out of doors, and though she was so warmly wrapped up, a queer cold feeling ran down her back, and her arms seemed all shivery.

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'I'll take a good run,' she thought. 'That will make me feel better, and I've scarcely walked or run at all to-day.'

So it did. She was a strong little girl in many ways, and accustomed to plenty of exercise, and the keen fresh air soon made her glow all over, as she ran along the smooth, hard road.

Bob had fixed on a certain corner as the best meeting-place. This was the end of a short lane, which led on to the moor at a point Rosamond had never come out at. But it was easy to find, and a short distance farther on, by following one of the small paths in a line with the lane, the boy had explained to her that she would soon come to a sort of dip in the ground, where there was a thick clump of shrubs.

'And there, missie, if I don't meet you before, you'll be certain sure to see me a-comin' over from the other side, as fast as I can get along. It won't be dark by then—and p'raps it'll be a moonlight night, unless the clouds thicken up for snow.'

It did seem, all the same, rather gloomy in the lane—'because of the trees and the hedges,' thought Miss Mouse—and certainly when she got to the end and came out on the moor, it looked a little lighter.

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She stood still and looked about her, drawing a deep breath. But she felt a little disappointed; the moor here seemed quite different from up at Moor Edge—it was so much lower, more like a rough field.

'I don't care for it a bit down here,' she thought. 'And then it's so much, much farther to get to, than at the boys'. Why, there you run almost straight out of the garden on to the dear real moor. I quite know the way Archie and the others feel about it.'

She trotted on—straight on, as Bob had directed, and before very long she came to the little hollow with the clump of bushes in the centre which he had described. But there was no Bob there, and at first her heart went down a little—supposing he had not been able to come, supposing the people he owed the money to had refused after all to wait till to-morrow morning, and had done something dreadful—put him in prison, perhaps, for Miss Mouse's ideas as to what might or might not be done to people, poor boys especially, who owed money, were very vague, or gone to frighten old Nance—oh dear, dear, what a pity it was, thought the little girl, that she had not taken her purse and all her riches with her to Weadmere that afternoon. Then she might have given Bob the six shillings at once, and not run any risk of delay, or have needed to come out to meet him in the—yes, it was almost getting to be the dark—and Rosamond gave a little shiver. But at that moment a welcome sound fell on her ears—the sound of rapidly running feet. She heard the boy before she saw him, but he it was. A small dark figure, darker than the dusky ground, soon became visible, running as fast as he could, and, as soon as he caught sight of her, calling out breathlessly, 'O miss, O miss, have you been waiting long?' and as soon as he came nearer, out poured a torrent of explanations as to how they had kept him waiting and waiting for the things he had been at Weadmere to fetch for the 'missus' at the farm where he worked.

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'Well, never mind now,' said sensible Miss Mouse, 'I've got the money all right. Here it is, Bob, just exactly six shillings. I did it up into a little packet inside my purse, but you can count it if you like.'

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'No, no, thank you, miss,' said the boy. 'I'm sure it's all right, and as like's not if we undid it, it'd drop out, and we'd have hard work to find it again in this brushwood. No, it's sure to be all right—and I'll never be able to thank you enough, that I won't, not if I live to be as old as gran herself.'

He was intensely grateful, there was no mistake about that, and already the little girl felt rewarded for the sacrifice she had made. Bob was evidently anxious too to get off, as he was still carrying the packages he had been to fetch, having come by this very roundabout way from the town, and he was anxious, too, to get 'miss' home, for fear of her being 'scolded' through what she had so kindly done for him.

They turned to go.

'I wish you could come home with me, Bob,' said Rosamond, 'it does look so dark. I don't mind here or on the road. It's the bit of lane that's so dark.'

Bob looked about and considered.

'I'm afraid I just dursn't go round by your place, miss,' he said. 'I must run all the way or the missus'll be terrible put out, though—'

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'No, no,' interrupted the little lady. 'I wouldn't let you. Why, it would be worse than owing the money for the ferrets if you got scolded and lost your place perhaps—'

'I have it,' exclaimed the boy. 'If you don't mind comin' out a bit farther up the road, you needn't have no lane at all. And I daresay it'll be quicker in the end, for you'd almost have to *feel* your way along the lane by now—it is a very dark bit, I know. And I can run with you till I put you on the straight path to the road.'

'Oh yes,' said Rosamond gladly, 'I'd far rather do that. Come along quick then, Bob.'

He set off, running, though not nearly as fast as before, in front of her, looking back every moment or two to see if she was following all right. Neither spoke, as Rosamond did not want to waste either her own or her companion's breath.

'I shall have to run as fast as ever I can when I get on to the smooth road,' she thought.

So for upwards of a quarter of a mile the two trotted on in silence, till Bob pulled up.

'Miss,' he said, 'this is where I have to turn.' As a matter of fact he had been out of his way till now. 'If you go straight on, you can't miss now. See,' and he pointed before him in the gloom, 'the hedge stops a bit farther on, and there's a clear piece of grass on to the road.'

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'Ye-es,' said Miss Mouse, peering before her, 'I think I see.'

'Anyway you'll see it all right as soon as you come to it, and you go straight till then.'

'Yes, yes,' said Rosamond, anxious to see him off. 'Take care of the money, Bob, and the first time we go to see your grandmother I shall expect to hear from you that it's all right. Now, run off as fast as you can and I will too.'

He started at a good pace, and as Miss Mouse trotted in the opposite direction, from time to time she looked over her shoulder, till the ever-lessening black speck that she knew to be Bob had altogether melted into the gloom. Bob's eyes were keener than hers; as he ran, he too kept glancing backwards to watch the little figure of the child towards whom his wild but true heart was bursting with gratitude. He distinguished her for some distance, and when he lost sight of her it seemed to be rather suddenly, and for a moment or two, hurried though he was, he stood still with a slight misgiving.

'I saw her half a minute ago,' he thought. 'She must have set to running very fast. I hope nothing's wrong. She can't have fallen and hurt herself,' and at the mere idea he had to put force on himself not to rush back again to see. 'Oh no, it can't be that—why, if she'd hurt herself, she'd have called out and I'd have heard her. It's got so still—and oh, my, it's cold. I shouldn't wonder if it started snowing before morning.'

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And off set Bob again, with a lighter heart than if he had yielded to his impulse and run back, setting his 'missus's' scolding at defiance, to see that no misadventure had happened to his generous little lady.

Alas! this was what had happened—in the gloom, fast turning into night, even out here on the open ground it was impossible to see clearly where one was going. It was even more dangerous in a sense than if it had been quite dark, for then Miss Mouse would have stepped more cautiously. But as all was open before her she ran fearlessly, forgetting that here and there across the white sandy path the low-growing little plants which mingled with the heather and bracken sent a trail across to the other side, in which nothing was easier than to catch one's foot. Once or twice she nearly did so, but no harm coming of it, she paid no attention to the momentary trip up, and ran on again fearlessly, even faster than before. So that when a worse catch came—a long, sturdy branch sprawling right across, which clutched at the dainty little foot, refusing to let it go—she fell, poor darling, with a good deal of violence, twisting her ankle as she did so in a way which hurt her terribly. At first she thought she had broken her leg, but the pain went off a little after she had lain still for a few minutes, and she began to take heart again and managed to get up. It was really not a bad sprain—scarcely a sprain at all—but she was tired and cold and a little frightened, for it was now so dark, and the fall had jarred her all over; her head felt giddy and confused.

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What happened was not, I think, to be wondered at—poor Miss Mouse took a wrong path, and instead of keeping straight on in the line Bob had started her, she turned, without knowing it, almost directly sideways. For two of the little paths crossed each other, as ill-luck would have it, close to where she had fallen.

Her ankle was not so very painful; with care not to turn her foot in one particular way, she found she could hobble on pretty well. But, oh dear, how far off the road seemed! And Bob had told her she would reach it in a few minutes. And *how* cold it was—were those flakes of snow falling on her face? She wished now that she had called out very

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loudly when she fell— Bob might have heard her; but she had been afraid of getting him into great trouble at the farm if he had run back to her and made himself so late. Now she began to feel as if that wouldn't have mattered—Uncle Ted would have put it right somehow for him—nothing would matter much if she *could* but get to the road and know that home was straight before her. Perhaps some cart would come past and she would get the man to stop and take her in—for oh, she *was* so tired! She walked more and more slowly, and at last—

'I *must* sit down and rest for a minute,' she thought, 'even if it is cold, and p'raps if I can unfasten my boot, it wouldn't hurt so.' Yes—it was delicious to sit still, even for a minute, and—were those snow-flakes again, or leaves? No—it couldn't be leaves; there were no trees about here—how stupid of her to think—to think what? Of course it couldn't be leaves, or flakes—she was in bed. They—they couldn't get in through the window, could they? She must be dreaming—how silly she was—how—



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**AND—WERE THOSE SNOW-  
FLAKES AGAIN?**

'What is the matter? What do you say?' asked Mr. Hervey that evening about eight o'clock, when, with a startled face, the footman came into the drawing-room, where he and Mrs. Hervey and the three elder boys were sitting.

'It's a groom from Caryll Place, if you please, sir,' the man replied. 'They've sent over to say as Miss Rosamond, little Miss Caryll, can't be found, and do the young gentlemen know anything about it?'

All the Herveys started to their feet, with different exclamations of distress.

'*Rosamond*, little Rosamond,' cried Mrs. Hervey.

'Miss Mouse *lost!*' exclaimed the boys, while Mr. Hervey went to the door, and called to the Caryll Place groom, who was standing, anxious and uneasy, at the door which led to the offices.

'What's all this?' he inquired.

The man came forward and told all there was to tell. Miss Rosamond had been at Weadmere with Mrs. Caryll that afternoon, had driven home, had her tea as usual, etc. All that we know already. But when the time came for her to be dressed to go down to the dining-room, she was not to be found. They had searched the house through, thinking she might be playing some trick, though it wasn't like her to do so; then the grounds, making inquiries at the cottages about—all in vain; and now he had been sent off here with some hope—what, he did not know—that at Moor Edge he might hear something.

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'Of course not,' Mr. Hervey replied impatiently, for he was very troubled and it made him cross, 'we should not have kept her here without sending word at once.'

He glanced at the boys—they were all three standing there, pale-faced and open-mouthed, Archie on the point of tears.

'Go back at once, and say we know nothing,' Mr. Hervey went on, 'but that I am following with Mr. Justin to help in the search.'

'Papa, papa, mayn't we come too?' Pat and Archie entreated, but their father shook his head, and in five minutes he and Jus were off in the dog-cart to Caryll.

Justin was very silent.

'Can you think of anywhere she can be?' asked his father, 'or any explanation? The child can't be stolen—what good would it do any one to steal her?'

Justin was in some ways a slow-witted boy.

'I can't think of anything, I'm sure,' he said. But a confused feeling was working at the back of his mind. *Could* it have anything to do with Bob and the ferrets? He knew that Bob was getting anxious as to paying the rest of the money, though he did not know how bad this anxiety had become—he knew, too, that he himself had been selfish and to some extent deceitful in the

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matter. But he could not see clearly how the two troubles could be mixed up, so he put the idea out of his mind, not sorry to do so—that was Justin's way.

'No, I can't think of anything,' he repeated.

It had been snowing lightly, and now again a few flakes began to fall.

'Do you think it's coming on to snow, papa?' he inquired, partly to change the subject, partly because it came into his mind—for he was not a heartless boy—that *if* Miss Mouse was lost anywhere out of doors a snowstorm would certainly not mend matters.

Mr. Hervey looked up with some anxiety.

'No,' he said, 'I think not, and I certainly hope not if that poor child is by any chance out of doors.'

They were soon at Caryll Place. Here all was miserable anxiety, for so far no traces of the poor little girl were to be found, though there were men out in all directions. Mr. Caryll had been out some distance himself, but had just come back for a moment to see Aunt Mattie before driving off to Weadmere to speak to the police. Aunt Mattie, choking down her tears, repeated to Justin's father all there was to tell—how Miss Mouse must have gone out of her own accord, as her warm cloak and cap were missing, and how she had evidently not wanted any one to know, adding, 'The *only* thing at all unusual to-day was our meeting Bob Crag in the town, and Rosamond may have been talking to him while I was in the shop. *Can* he have anything to do with it? Justin, you know him well?'

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She looked keenly at Justin, and she fancied he grew red. He hesitated before answering.

'I— I don't see how, auntie,' he said at last. Then he went on more courageously. 'Bob is quite a good boy—he really is, though people speak against him. I'm sure he *never* would have tried to get money from—from Miss Mouse, in any naughty way, or anything like that,' and, in spite of himself, his voice faltered as he uttered the pet name of their little friend.

His father turned upon him sharply.

'Get money from her,' he repeated. 'What do you mean? What put such a thing in your head?'

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'I— I don't—' Justin was beginning, when Uncle Ted interrupted.

'I think we are wasting time,' he said; 'the whys and wherefores can be gone into afterwards—the thing to do first is to find our poor darling. If there is the least chance of the Craggs knowing anything about her some one had better go there at once. Mattie, I wonder you did not mention the boy, Bob, having spoken to her this afternoon, before?'

'It only now came into my mind,' she replied gently. She was too unhappy to feel hurt at Uncle Ted's tone; she knew he was so terribly unhappy himself. Justin felt himself growing more and more miserable.

'Uncle Ted,' he exclaimed, 'may I go to the Craggs? I can run very quickly, and—' But his uncle and father had already left the hall, where they had all been standing, and had gone off again, probably to give fresh orders in the stables. Only Aunt Mattie was still there, and she had sat down on a chair by the large fire and was shading her eyes with her hand. She was feeling dreadfully tired and more and more wretched.

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'If the darling has been out in the cold all this time,' she was saying to herself, 'it is enough to kill her, even if no accident has happened to her,' and all sorts of miserable thoughts came into her mind—of the letters that might have to be written to Rosamond's father and mother, telling—oh, it was too dreadful to think of *what* might not have to be told! She sat there motionless, except that now and then she shivered, though not with cold. Justin saw that she was not thinking of or noticing him at all, and he suddenly made up his mind to wait no longer. He crossed the hall softly, and in another moment was out in the dark drive in front of the house, unseen by any one. But once there, he turned quickly, and ran, at the top of his speed, his eyes, as he went, growing accustomed to the gloom, in the direction of the bit of lane leading towards the moor, which Miss Mouse had traversed a few hours earlier. Thence—as Justin knew well, even by the little light there was—he could, by careful noticing of some landmarks, make his way to the 'real' moor, as the boys called it, for the more or less grassy part nearer Caryll Place they did not think worthy of the name, and reach the Craggs' cottage more quickly than it could be got to by the road.

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He ran, steadily and not too fast, for he had a good deal of common sense and did not want to exhaust his 'wind' before he had reached his goal. And well it was that he kept his pace moderate and was able to look about him as he ran, for it was lighter out here and he had good eyes. What was that? A dark thick clump of—of what? No, there was something different about this object, and, eager as he was to get to his destination, the boy slackened his pace, hesitated, then dashed off, at full speed this time, in the direction of the something that had caught his sight.

Some snow had fallen, and now again flakes began to show themselves on his jacket. There were white dashes, too, on the strange, motionless shape he was making for. Was it setting in for a snowstorm? the boy asked himself with a curious anxiety, for there are times at which our thoughts seem to run before our reason. If so—and if—no, he would not think of such dreadful things; he would first—he was running now too fast to think—and—a minute more and he was stooping over the silent, dead-still figure of the faithful little girl. For it was Miss Mouse, her face as white as the snow, which, had it fallen already, as it was now beginning to do, would have

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covered her more completely than the robins covered the long-ago baby pair in the old forest; would have hidden her till it was indeed too late.

'Thank God,' whispered Justin, as he thought this; and perhaps it was the very first time he had *felt* what these two words mean. But then terror seized him again, was it already too late?

He rubbed her little hands, he called her by name, his hot boy's tears fell on her cold white face. He did not yet understand how it had all come about, but something seemed to tell him that his selfish thoughtlessness had to do with it. But there was no answer, no movement.

'She will die,' he thought, 'if she is not dead. I must carry her.'

He lifted her, though with difficulty, and glanced about him. Oh, joy! they were nearer Bob's cottage than he had thought; he stood still and whistled, the peculiar 'call' his brothers and he used for each other, and that Bob, too, knew. Then he moved on again, though but slowly—now and then it seemed scarcely more than a totter, his legs trembled so, and Rosamond was so strangely heavy. But it was not for long in reality, though it seemed to him hours, before help reached him. A figure came rushing across the moor, and a voice called out loudly,

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'Who is it? What is the matter? It's not—oh, Master Justin, is it you? And—no, no, don't say it's the little lady—I've killed her, I've killed her. It's all my fault.'

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It was in kind old Nance's cottage that the little girl came back to consciousness. Bob's grandmother was clever and skilful, and, though sadly alarmed at first, soon saw that the two boys' very natural terror was greater than need be. The child was in a sort of stupor from cold and fright and pain too, for her ankle had swelled badly by this time, from the pressure of her boot. But careful management brought her round, and she was soon able to look about her and to drink the wonderful herb tea of some kind which Nance prepared. And then she sat up and explained what she could of how the misadventure had come to pass, helped by Bob, whom she glanced at doubtfully, till he said out manfully,

'Tell it all, miss, tell it all. It's me that's to blame, only me.'

But no, it was not only at poor Bob's door that lay the blame, and so Justin well knew, and so Justin had the honesty to confess when the anxiety and distress were to some extent past, though for a few days great care had to be taken of little Rosamond.

[Pg 197]

It would be difficult to describe the joy with which Uncle Ted carried her off to the carriage waiting at the nearest point on the road, wrapped up in his strong arms so that she *couldn't* get chilled again, or Aunt Mattie and the Herveys' delight at the happy news of the little lost one being found. These things are more difficult to *tell* than to picture to oneself.

So, too, it would be difficult to relate the change in Justin which those who cared for him always dated from the night on which Miss Mouse was lost—the night of which, had worse come of it to the kind little girl, he would never have been able to think without misery beyond words.

The ferrets were paid for, of course, though not with Rosamond's money, which was now happily spent on her Christmas presents. But though paid for, Justin's pets were soon sold again, and replaced by some more lovable and attractive creatures, whom his mother and Miss Mouse and everybody could take pleasure in too. I rather think the new treasures were some particularly pretty guinea-pigs—curly-haired ones; though to be quite sure of this I should have to apply to some boys and girls of my acquaintance whose grandfather has often told them the long-ago story of Miss Mouse and the good that came of her gentle influence on him and his brothers when they were all children together.

[Pg 198]

And dear Miss Mouse herself—what of her? Where is she now? It is so many years ago, is she still alive?

Yes. I have nothing sad with which to end my little story. She is now, what most of you, I daresay, would consider a very old lady, for her hair is quite white, though her pretty gray eyes are as clear as ever. Not that they have not known tears, those kind eyes, many tears, I daresay, for the sorrows of others more than for her own, perhaps. Life would not be what it has to be, what God means it to be, without tears as well as smiles.

And Bob Crag. You will not be surprised to hear that Uncle Ted took him thoroughly in hand, and that the wild but affectionate boy grew up to be a good and useful man.

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