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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WOOD-PIGEONS AND MARY \*\*\*

Mrs Molesworth

"The Wood-Pigeons and Mary"

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### Chapter One.

#### "Such Big Tears."

"Mary is crying," said Mr Coo.

"No!" replied Mrs Coo.

But Mr Coo said again—

"Mary is crying," and though Mrs Coo repeated—

"No!" she knew by the way he held his head on one side and looked at her, that he was very much in earnest indeed.

I must tell you that when Mrs Coo said 'no,' it went off into a soft sound that was almost like 'coo'; indeed most of her talking, and of Mr Coo's too, sounded like that, which is the reason, I daresay, that many people would not have understood their conversation. But it would be rather tiresome to write "no," or other words, with double o's at the end, so I will leave it to be fancied, which will do just as well. There is a great deal of conversation in the world which careless people don't understand; a great deal which *no one* can understand properly, however much they try; but also a great deal that one *can* get to understand, if one tries, even without the gift which the dear fairy bestowed on the very lucky prince in the long ago story. I forget his name, but I daresay some of you remember it. The gift was the power to understand all that the beasts and birds say.

This very morning the wind has been talking to me a good deal—it was the south wind, and her stories are always very sweet, though sometimes sad, yet I understand a good deal of them.

After this second "No," Mr and Mrs Coo sat looking at each other for a moment or two, without speaking.

Then said Mr Coo—

"It must be something—serious. For Mary scarcely ever cries."

"True," said Mrs Coo, "true."

But she did not say anything more, only she too held her head on one side and kept her reddy-brown eyes fixed on Mr Coo. They seemed to ask, "What is to be done?" only as she nearly always depended on Mr Coo for settling what was to be done or if anything was to be done, she did not need to say the words.

"Mary scarcely ever cries," he repeated. "There were large drops, quite large ones on her cheeks."

"As large as raindrops?" asked Mrs Coo.

"Larger—that is to say as large as large raindrops—the kind that come when it thunders," said Mr Coo.

"Oh dear," sighed Mrs Coo, thinking to herself that Mary's trouble must be a very bad one indeed if her tears were *so* large. She wanted very much for once, to ask what could be done, but she saw that Mr Coo was considering very deeply, so she did not interrupt his thoughts.

At last he turned to her.

"I heard something," he said. "Very little, but enough to help me to put two and two together."

"To make four," said Mrs Coo quickly. She felt rather proud of her arithmetic, though she did not understand what Mr Coo could mean, as she had never heard the saying before. "Four *what*, my dear?"

"Four nothing," was the reply—rather a cross one. "It is an expression. You are not as used to human talk as I am, you see," he went on more amiably, for it is not the way with the Coo family ever to be cross for more than a moment, and if ever they are, they are sorry immediately. "Never mind about the two and two. What I heard was only a few words, but it has decided me that I must hear more, for," and here Mr Coo's tone grew very solemn, "it had to do with *us!*"

Mrs Coo was so startled that she repeated Mr Coo's words, which was one of the few things that tried his temper.

"It had to do with *us*," she said. "How could that be? We have never done anything that could make Mary cry, especially such very large tears."

"Yes," said Mr Coo, "we have done one thing. We have left the Square Gardens."

"But that was some time ago," said Mrs Coo, "and she did not cry when very sweetly."

Mr Coo gave what was for him a little cough—a sort of "h'm."

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I have never felt perfectly sure that she understood my explanation that day. Still, you are right so far. I have seen her several times since then, and though she was putting her head out of the window as far as she dared, and looking towards our tree, where the nest is already falling to pieces, she was certainly not *crying*."

"Perhaps she saw you yourself, and felt sure we had not really left for good?"

"No," said Mr Coo, "she did not see me the day she put her head so far out of the window. I was watching her, for I was a little afraid she might already be missing us. But she only looked at the tree and seemed quite happy."

"Is it since then that the nest has fallen to pieces, do you think, Mr Coo?" asked Mrs Coo.

She was rather a clever little wood-pigeon after all, though Mr Coo scarcely thought so.

"Yes," he replied. "There was a great deal of wind last night and the night before—I fancy the wind blew it down. This morning there is almost nothing to be seen of it."

"Then that was why Mary was crying," exclaimed Mrs Coo.

But again Mr Coo shook his head, or at least turned it to the other side, which meant that he did not agree with Mrs Coo.

"*That* would not explain the words I heard," he said.

"What were they?"

"She was crying," Mr Coo replied, "crying and leaning against the window, and the window was open, and I heard her say, 'He doesn't believe me, he doesn't believe me. It's too bad of the Cooies—' she calls us the Cooies, you know, my dear."

"Yes," said Mrs Coo, nodding her head gently, "I know."

"It's too bad of the Cooies," she said again, Mr Coo went on. "'I believe they're not Cooies at all, but very unkind, tricky fairies.' She said *that*—she really did."

"Dear, dear, it's very sad, very sad indeed," said Mrs Coo, and her voice was exceedingly low and mournful. "*Mary* to think that of us. Something must be done, Mr Coo, something must be done."

"Of course it must," he agreed. "I must go back then this very afternoon and try to see her and find out all about the trouble."

"Shall I come too?" asked Mrs Coo.

"Certainly, if you like," said Mr Coo.

In his heart, he was very pleased to have her company, but he was not very fond of allowing that he was not quite able to manage everything by himself.

"Certainly, if you like," he repeated, "but just as you choose."

"Then I think I will come," she said. "For one thing, Mary will be pleased to see both of us together, I feel sure, and perhaps it may be easier to catch her eyes if we are both there. We can fly about a little just in front of her window as we used to do, and call out to each other. But I hope she will not be crying—at least not such very large tears. It would be almost too much for my feelings," and she gave a deep sigh—a real sigh, though it sounded like a very soft and melancholy "coo."

So, rather late that afternoon, the two wood-pigeons set off. It was a pretty long fly to the square where Mary lived,

but they thought it better not to go earlier, for as it was now autumn and the days were beginning to get shorter, they knew that the children went out for their second walk soon after their dinner, so as to come in before it got chilly.

And very often just about the time they planned to reach the Square gardens, they had seen Mary at her own window, where she used to stand looking out, after taking off her hat and jacket, and while waiting to be called to tea.

Mary loved the window of her room. It looked out to the back of the house, for the gardens I am speaking of were not those in the middle of the square in front, but much prettier ones, stretching along between one side of Mary's Square, and one side of another Square, whose houses also looked out on them from the back. Mary knew every tree and bush that grew near her house. She used to watch them all the year round, and could tell exactly about what time the leaves began to fade and drop off, and about when the pretty new spring ones first showed, growing a little greener and brighter every day till the trees had all their summer clothes on again. She got to know when the spring was in a lazy mood, and when the autumn was in too great a hurry to come, so that her uncle used sometimes to call her his little "weather prophet." And if she had been clever at drawing, which I am afraid she was not particularly, she could have sketched the shapes and branches of her favourite trees from memory; so well did she know how they looked when quite bare, and how they looked when in full dress, and how the steady old evergreen ones, who never vary much, hold themselves.

Her 'favouritest' tree was one that kept its leaves longer, and strange to say, got its new ones earlier, than any of the others. I cannot tell you what kind of tree it was. I am not sure if Mary herself knew its name. She called it in her own mind the "fairy tree," but she did not tell any one this, as she would have been afraid of being laughed at.

But her great reason for liking this tree best of any, you can perhaps already guess.

It was—or had been—the home of the dear wood-pigeons—the Cooies!

Ah—the "had been" makes a great difference. It was their home no longer.

Was that then what Mary was crying about the day Mr Coo saw her and felt so distressed about her?

No, not exactly that.

She had not quite understood Mr Coo's long speech, in which he told her they were going to flit for good. She had only thought he was singing a "cooie" song to her extra sweetly, because they were going away for a day or two, as she had known them do before—for a little change, she supposed, now that the young Cooies were all hatched and fledged and able to look after themselves—"grown-up and out in the world." Next year no doubt there would be eggs in the nest again to hatch and take care of—eggs and then fledglings—a weary business it must be, Mary thought, though happily Mrs Coo did not seem to think so, nor Mr Coo either, as he sat on a branch talking to her while she stayed so patiently and contentedly in the nest, and their soft voices sounded sweetly through the spring air, in at Mary's window, where she never forgot to stand morning and evening to nod and smile to her little friends, and even to talk sometimes when Mr Coo hopped up to a still nearer bough.

No, it was not exactly about the Cooies having gone that Mary was crying so piteously that day. She still thought they would come back again before long, though certainly they had never been away for so many days together as this time, which made her begin to feel rather less sure of their returning, and when she came in from her walk that afternoon and stood at the window looking out, a sad fear stole over her that *perhaps* they would never come back again at all.

Suddenly a faint sound made her start. She had just begun saying to herself again the same words which Mr Coo had overheard, and which had so hurt his feelings as well as Mrs Coo's.

"It's too bad of the Cooies, too bad. I really don't believe—" when the little sound reached her ears, and looking up quickly, she saw that the window was slightly open at the top, and again she heard a soft, very soft "coo."

It only took her a moment to push up the lower sash as high as it would go. Luckily there were bars across, so she could not lean far out; only her forehead and eyes and the top of her curly head got through, but even this gave her a clearer view of the fairy tree and the boughs, lower down than her window, from which Mr Coo had so often "talked" to her, while keeping at the same time his eye on Mrs Coo patiently seated on the nest farther in among the branches, and ready to do any little errand that might be wanted.

The nest, alas, was no longer there; only bits of it, at least were left *Mary* knew so exactly where it had been that she could distinguish the fragments, but no one looking for it for the first time could have seen anything at all. But—something better than the nest met Mary's delighted eyes. Two little well-known figures were there—on the very end of one of the boughs, so as the better to catch her eye, and now there was no doubt in her mind as to the sound she had heard—her own dear wood-pigeons were back again, and looking to see her at the window!

She was so pleased that she almost screamed!

"Oh, Cooies, Cooies," she cried, "you've come back. But why did you go away for so long? You don't know how unhappy I've been. I wish you'd come up here on to the window-sill and let me tell you all about it."

There came another "coo," rather louder and clearer than usual, and then a flutter and movement, a spreading of little wings, and—

"I do believe," said Mary to herself, "I do believe they've heard me and understood what I say."

She spoke more than half in fun; she did not *really* think it could be true; all the same a sort of tremble of wonder and delight went through her, as she saw her little friends slowly rising upwards and heard the soft swish of their wings as they flew towards—yes actually *towards* her!

Was she dreaming?

She rubbed her eyes, as people always do when they are not quite sure if they are awake, or as they *think* they do when they are really asleep, but the rubbing made no difference. She was not dreaming. She was standing at her own window, it was still broad daylight, and everything was quite natural and real, and the same as usual except that the pair of wood-pigeons were flying towards her and in another moment had perched on her window-sill!

“They are fairies,” Mary decided, “that is it.”

“But not unkind, tricky fairies, I hope,” said a gentle soft voice, and a queer little shiver went through Mary. Fairies or not, a fairy gift had come to *her*. She could understand what the Cooies said!

“Oh dear, oh dear,” she exclaimed, half frightened and half wild with delight. “You *must* be fairies, for I can talk to you and know what you say.”

There was a sound like a murmur of laughter, and then the little voice again. It was *Mrs* Coo’s this time, but Mary had not yet learnt to distinguish between the two, though she soon came to do so.

“No, dear,” it said, “not more fairies than all we wood-creatures are, if only you human beings would take the trouble to get to know us. But some do—some few—and you are one of those it has come to easily, to understand us. We have always understood *you*. And now you must tell us all about what has been the matter.”

“And why you were crying so,” put in Mr Coo, who did not at all intend to be left out, especially as it was he who had made the discovery of Mary’s woe. “Such big tears too,” added Mrs Coo.

“It wasn’t only because we had gone away, was it?” asked Mr Coo.

“No,” replied Mary, finding herself, rather to her surprise, already getting used to the wonderful power that had come to her, “no, it wasn’t only that, because, you see, I thought you would soon come back again, as you have sometimes flown off for a day or two, you know. No, it wasn’t only that. It was that *he* wouldn’t believe me, and I care for him far the most of all my cousins. I mean Michael.”

“Michael,” repeated Mr Coo, “is he the fat little red-haired boy in sailor suits? His hair is something the colour of yours, Mary.”

“I’m sure it isn’t,” said Mary, rather huffily. “*That* Michael! Of course not. That’s Fritz—stupid little thing. *Michael* isn’t fat. He’s tall and has proper dark hair, and he’s very, very brave. Fancy taking Fritz for Michael!”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr Coo, but though his tone was very polite it was rather stiff. “How were we to know, seeing we are *not* nasty tricky fairies, about your relations, unless you explain them?” Mary felt herself growing red.

“I didn’t say nasty tricky fairies,” she replied very meekly. “I think I said ‘unkind,’ but I didn’t mean you to hear, and it was only just when I was vexed. But I’m sure now that you are very kind, and I *am* so glad you have come back again that I wouldn’t for anything be rude.”

“All right,” said Mr Coo, “I am sure you did not intend to hurt our feelings. We couldn’t care for you if you were that sort of little girl. But please be so good as to tell us about Michael, for time is getting on.”

“Yes,” Mary agreed, “they will soon be calling me to tea. Well—it was this way. *You* know that I’ve known you—that we’ve known each other, though not so well as now.”

“No, till now it has just been a polite acquaintance, so to say. Good-morning and good-evening, and so on—on your part at least, Mary,” interrupted Mr Coo. But Mrs Coo gave him a tiny poke with one of her feet—and Mary went on—

“Now that we can talk to each other it seems quite different, of course. All the same I have watched you ever since I came to live in this house—but somehow I’ve never spoken about you to any one. I didn’t want all the children to come bothering to my window, you see, and the nurseries all look to the front; I wanted to keep you to myself. But when Michael came home—he’s a sailor already, that’s why he’s so very brave—I thought I’d tell *him* about you—I wanted to tell somebody, you see, and—”

A bell sounded—a voice at the door—

“Miss Mary, my dear.”

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## Chapter Two.

### “A Few Crumbs and a Little Fresh Water.”

“Oh bother,” said Mary, “it’s tea—and nurse come to fetch me. What shall we do?”—“Yes, yes, nurse,” in a louder voice, “I’m coming in one moment,” and this seemed to satisfy nurse, for her steps sounded going downstairs again. “She needn’t open the door without tapping,” the little girl went on, speaking half to herself and half to her visitors on the window-sill, “I’m not one of the nursery children now. But oh, Cooies, what shall we do? It would take me ever so

long to explain about Michael and to plan something to put it all right."

"Must you go downstairs at once?" asked Mr Coo. "If you told it to us very quickly."

But Mary shook her head.

"No—I must go. If I don't, she'll be coming up again, or sending for me, and I don't want any one to hear us talking. They would laugh at me so, and say it was all nonsense. They are always calling me so fanciful."

"I see," said Mr Coo, thoughtfully.

But Mrs Coo did more than think.

"Of course," she said, "there's only one thing to be done. We must come back again to-morrow."

She spoke just a tiny bit sharply.

"We are very busy," said Mr Coo, "getting settled, you see, and choosing where our new nest is to be, and returning our neighbours' calls, and so on."

"All that can stand over," said Mrs Coo. "Just say, my dear, what time to-morrow will be best."

"I *think*" said Mary, "the best time will be when we come in from our walk in the morning. The little ones go to bed then for an hour, and I've had my lessons, and nurse generally tells me to take a book and sit still, and if it isn't cold she lets me come up to my room, and she stays in the night nursery to keep Fritz and Twitter and baby from jumping out of their cots or teasing each other. Yes, please come about twelve o'clock, and would you like anything to eat?"

"You are very kind," said Mr and Mrs Coo together. "A few crumbs and a little fresh water, perhaps," and then off they flew.

Mary gazed after them for a moment or two, till their pearly grey wings were almost out of sight. She felt very happy—it was lovely to have seen them again; still more lovely to find that the wonderful, rare gift of being able to understand and talk to them had come to her.

"I won't tell *any one* about it," she decided, as she ran downstairs. "They would only laugh and call me fanciful that horrid way. Perhaps Fritz and Twitter wouldn't; they'd just think it was a sort of fairy story I was making up for them—and it is a sort of fairy story, only it's true! But they're too little, they'd repeat it all to nurse, and of course it would be very wrong to tell them anything they *weren't* to tell nurse. *Michael* wouldn't have laughed at me; at least he wouldn't have *before*, but now that he thinks I tell what isn't true, he'd do worse than laugh at me. He'd look shocked again—oh dear!"

And Mary's face, which had been so bright a minute or two ago, grew sad and grave, but just as she opened the nursery door another thought struck her.

The Cooies were coming again to-morrow, and she would tell them all about it, and *they* would plan something to make it all right; she felt sure they would.

The three little ones were already seated at the tea-table, and nurse was filling their cups and helping them to bread-and-butter.

"Maly, Maly," said Fritz, "sit by me."

"No, no, 'aside *me*," said Twitter, a funny little girl with short, dark hair and bright dark eyes.

"Thide Baba," added "baby," another little fat, fair boy like Fritz.

It was rather nice to be welcomed like this, and Mary's spirits, always very ready to go up or down, rose again.

"I can't sit 'aside' you all three," she said, drawing in her chair, "so as Baba-boy has to be next nurse, I'll sit between Fritz and Twitter."

"And 'mile at Baba ac'oss the table," said the baby.

"Yes, darling, of course I will," said Mary, kindly.

After all, it was easy to forgive Fritz and him for being so fat, when you found how good-natured they were, though Mary did not think it *pretty*! Twitter, whose real name was Charlotte, was good-natured, too, in her own way, but she had a quick temper, and though she was such a little girl, she was very fond, dreadfully fond, of arguing.

"Once start Miss Twitter," nurse used to say, "and you never know when she'll stop," and it was much the same with her if she began to cry. It would go on and on till everybody's patience was worn out, and worst of all when you thought it had really come to an end, some tiny word or look even would begin it all again.

Still, on the whole, Mary cared the most for Twitter of her three little cousins. She was certainly the cleverest, and the most ready to understand what had come to be called "Miss Mary's fancifulness."

Perhaps, as I have spoken of the children as her cousins, I had better explain a little about the family in the Square. Mary herself had no brothers or sisters, and no father or mother; "no nobody," she once said of herself very pitifully when she was *very* little, and before she came to live with her kind relations, who at that time were not in England.

But she had always been very well taken care of by a lady who long ago had been Mary's own mother's governess, and *now* she had several "somebodies," her uncle and aunt and the three little ones, and best of all, perhaps, Michael, the big brother of sixteen, who had been her first great friend in her new home. He was then a boy of twelve and Mary was eight, and boys of twelve sometimes look down on little girls who are four or five years younger than they are. Not so with Michael, he *was* so good and kind. He tried to make the shy little cousin, with her curly red hair and soft brown eyes, feel "at home" and happy, by every means in his power, and Mary had never forgotten this, and often said to herself that she never, never would (and I don't think she ever will).

Nurse looked at Mary rather curiously as she handed her her tea-cup.

"Was there any one in the room with you, Miss Mary, my dear, when I went upstairs to fetch you?"

"No," said Mary, but her own tone was perhaps not quite as usual, for she was thinking to herself if the "no" was quite truthful. Yes it was, she decided, the Cooies were not in the room, and besides, nurse meant any *person*—wood-pigeons were not people. So "No," she repeated, more positively, "why do you ask, nurse?"

"Oh," said nurse, "I may have been mistaken, but I thought I heard you speaking as I opened the door."

"I daresay I was," said Mary.

Nurse said something indistinct—a sort of "humph."

"It is not a very good habit to get into—that speaking to yourself," she said. "It makes one seem silly-like."

"Perhaps I *am* silly," answered Mary, half mischievously. "You know, nurse, you are always calling me full of fancies."

"They's very nice fancies," said Twitter, "Maly tells we lubly faily stolies, dudn't her, Flitz?"

Fritz's mouth was full, and the nursery rules for good behaviour at meals were strict, so he only nodded.

"Fairy tales are all very well in their proper place," said nurse.

"What is their proper place?" asked Mary, and I am afraid she spoke rather pertly.

"Pretty picture-books and such like," nurse replied, for she was very matter-of-fact. "Just like nursery rhymes and songs—'Little Boy Blue' and 'Bo-peep,' and all the rest of them. But it would be very silly for young ladies and gentlemen to go on with babyish things like that, when they can read quite well and learn beautiful verses like 'Old Father William,' and 'The Battle of —' no, I don't rightly remember the name, but it's a fine piece of poetry if ever there was one, and I recollect my brother Tom saying it at a prize-giving at our school at home, and the squire's lady had her handkerchief at her eyes, and the squire himself shook him by the hand, and Tom and me was that proud."

This was interesting, and Mary could not resist asking a number of questions about Tom, as to how old he had been then, and how old he was now, to which nurse was only too pleased to reply, adding that he was now a schoolmaster himself, with little Toms of his own, whom she went to see when she had her holiday once a year.

So the conversation turned into pleasant directions, and nothing more was said about Mary's fancifulness.

When she woke the next morning Mary's first glance, as usual, was towards the window. She never had the blinds drawn down at night, for she loved the morning light, and it did not wake her: she slept too soundly for that. And as there were, as I have told you, gardens—large gardens—at the back of the house, where her room was, there was no one to overlook her window.

Ah—it was a dull morning—a dull, grey, early autumn morning, and "I hope it's not going to rain," thought Mary. "I'm so afraid the Cooies wouldn't come if it did, though *perhaps* they're not afraid of getting wet."

There came into her mind, however, the old rhyme about "The morning grey," and as she dressed she kept peeping up at the sky, and was pleased to see that it was growing rather lighter and clearer. She was very glad of this, for even if it had only rained for an hour or two, it would have stopped the morning walk, and very likely the morning rest for the little ones, and she would not have had the hour to herself "to be quiet in," as usual, but all, happily, turned out rightly, and some minutes before twelve o'clock Mary was standing by her window looking out for her little visitors.

She had good eyes, and she saw them quite a long way off. There were other birds flying about, of course, but none coming two together, straight on, without making circles or dips or going the least out of their path—two tiny specks they seemed at first, against the blue-grey sky, flying onwards in a most business-like way. For the old saying had proved true again; though not a brilliant day, it was quite fine and mild, and the sky was a soft, friendly colour, with no storm signs about it.

The two specks grew larger and larger, as they came nearer, and after alighting for a moment on the familiar bough of their own old tree home, apparently to smooth their feathers and take a tiny rest, the wood-pigeons fluttered across to the window-sill.

"Oh, I am so pleased to see you," said Mary. "I was so afraid it was going to rain. Aren't you tired and out of breath with flying so far?"

"No, thank you—flying never makes us out of breath. It is not like your running—not nearly such hard work. Our wings get a little stiff sometimes, if there is much wind and we have to battle against it. But to-day is very still, and even if it had rained we should have come just the same," said Mr Coo.

"Thank you," said Mary. "I have crumbled some nice biscuit all ready for you, you see, and there is some water in the lid of my soap-box; it is quite fresh."

"Many thanks," said Mrs Coo, "and all good wishes to you, my dear," and as she spoke she bent her pretty head to take a drink. Mr Coo followed her example, and then they picked up some crumbs in quite an elegant manner—not at all in the hurried greedy way that some birds do.

"While you are having your luncheon," said Mary, "I will tell you why I was so anxious to see you. You know my cousin—my big cousin—Michael—no, perhaps you don't, but it doesn't matter. He is my favourite cousin, and there isn't anything I don't tell him. He always understands and never laughs at me—at least, he has been like that till just now. He is a sailor, and he is very seldom at home. He's not been to see us since we came to live here till the other day. I had lots of things to tell him, of course, and one of the things I told him was about you, dear Cooies, and how nice it was to have you living in the tree close to my window. I thought he looked a *little* funny when I told it him, and now I'm quite sure they'd been talking to him that horrid way about me being fanciful," Mary stopped a moment to take breath, and Mr Coo, who had picked up as many crumbs as he wanted, cocked his head on one side and looked up at her very gravely.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" he inquired.

"Oh," said Mary, "everybody. I suppose I mean all the big people. Auntie and uncle, for I daresay auntie talks about it to him, and Miss Bray—no, I'm not sure about Miss Bray. She's my daily governess, but I never see her except at lessons, and she never talks about anything except lessons—she's rather dull," and Mary sighed. "And most of all," she went on again, "*nurse*. She is the worst of all, though she's quite kind. She doesn't understand the tiniest bit in the world about fairy stories, you see. She thinks they're just like nursery rhymes. *Fancy*, putting fairy stories and nursery rhymes together!"

"Nursery rhymes are very nice sometimes," said Mrs Coo. "The verse in 'Cock-robin' about our cousins, the Doves, is lovely, only it is too much for my feelings," and she really looked as if she were going to cry.

"But they are only for babies," said Mary, "and I know that *some* big people are just as fond of fairy stories as I am. Michael told me so, and he gave me a book of them, his very own self, on my last birthday. Well—I must go on telling you what happened. The very next morning after I had told him my secret about you, my dear Cooies, I made him come up here to see your nest, though I told him you yourselves hadn't been here for a day or two. And, *wasn't* it unlucky?—there had been lots of wind the night before, and the nest was nearly all blown away; a branch had fallen on it, I think. It was already just like now—really nothing to be seen, except by any one who had known of it before. And *you* were not there either. No sign of you. So Michael looked at me very gravely and he said, 'My dear Mary, you really mustn't let your fancy run away with you. I can't believe there have ever been wood-pigeons in that tree. You may have seen a pair of common pigeons from the stables over there, flying about, but it is *most* unlikely that there ever was a nest there; there certainly isn't now.' And he looked at me as if he really thought I'd been making up a story."

"Dear, dear!" said Mr and Mrs Coo together, "it's certainly very sad."

"I had no time to say much more to him," Mary went on. "He had to go away again to Portsmouth or Plymouth, or one of those 'mouth' places, that very afternoon, and there was no time to say any more or to ask him if he really thought I had been telling stories. But I'm sure he *did*, and so after he'd gone, I just stood up here and cried."

And poor Mary looked as if it would not take much to make her cry again.

"I saw you," said Mr Coo.

"You saw me," exclaimed Mary, rather indignantly, "and you didn't speak to me, or fly up for me to see you?"

Mr Coo cleared his throat.

"I did not know what was the matter," he said, "and—I thought it best to hurry home, to—to talk it over, and then we both came the next morning—yesterday morning."

"Well," said Mary, "it was very good of you, but all the same, I think you might—" but after all, the question was how to put things right with Michael, so she said no more, not feeling sure, you see, but that even the gentle Cooies might feel hurt if she reproached them.

"Michael is coming back again," she said after a moment's silence, "the day after to-morrow, to stay two nights."

"Ah!" said Mr Coo, in a tone which made Mary think to herself that if he had been a dog he would have pricked up his ears.

And "Ah!" repeated Mrs Coo.

Mary was silent.

"Supposing," began Mrs Coo, "*supposing* we could arrange to spend a day here?"

"A *day*," repeated Mary; "you don't mean, you surely don't mean, dear Cooies, that you are not coming back to live here any more."

Mr Coo bent his head gravely; so did Mrs Coo.

"Even so," they murmured.

"Oh!" cried Mary, the tears rushing to her eyes, "do you really mean you won't count the fairy tree your home any more—that you won't build another nest, and have new little eggs there next spring? Oh dear, oh dear!"

Mr and Mrs Coo felt very distressed.

"My dear Mary," said Mr Coo, "it cannot be helped. We have been intending to leave the Square gardens for some time past. It is no longer the place for us: we require more quiet and fresher air, not to speak of the risk of—" but here he stopped short.

"That's what Michael said," sobbed Mary. "He said it wasn't in nature that cooies—I mean wood-pigeons—would stay in a town, and that's why he couldn't believe I had seen you. And now—"

"Wait a minute, my dear," said Mrs Coo, "and let me explain. We were both hatched here, you see. There were lots of nests in these trees not so very long ago; but there have been so many human nests—houses, I mean—built here lately that the air is no longer what it used to be. The smoke of so many chimneys is too much for us; sometimes we can scarcely breathe, and really our whole time seems spent in trying to brush our feathers clean."

"And where are you going to live, then?" asked Mary, who felt interested in her friends' plans, though so sorry to lose them.

"We have taken a branch in one of the finest elms in Levin Forest," said Mr Coo. "A charming situation, and where we have a good many relations."

"Yes," said Mary, "I daresay it is very nice for you—very nice, indeed; but think of me. You don't know how I'd got into the way of looking out for you and watching you and listening to you; and now that I can understand what you say, it's ever so much worse to lose you. Particularly just now, just as it really so matters to me. Michael will always think now that I'd made up a story about you, and he will never care for me again as he used to."

"Don't be so unhappy, dear Mary," said both the Coos together; "most likely things won't be so bad as you fear."

"You say," Mr Coo went on, "that Michael is coming back again soon?"

"Yes," Mary replied. "Aunt told me that he has written to say he will be here to-morrow evening, but only for two nights. Then he has to go back to his ship, and I daresay he won't be home again for—oh, I daresay not for a whole year."

"To-morrow evening," repeated Mr Coo; "well then, do you think you can promise to make him come up here to your window the morning after, at twelve o'clock?"

"Oh yes, yes," said Mary, her face lighting up, and looking ready to jump with joy. "You mean that you'll come then for him to see you? Oh, thank you, dear Cooies, thank you so much. How I do wish you were going to stay, and not go off to that horrid forest!"

"It is a lovely place," said Mrs Coo, "and so you would think. And who knows—some day you may see it for yourself."

"But for the present we must be off," said Mr Coo. "Good-bye till the day after to-morrow, at twelve o'clock; and be sure you don't cry any more."

"I'll have some nice crumbs and fresh water ready for you again," said Mary.

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## Chapter Three.

### "One on her Shoulder, One on her Outstretched Hand."

Late the next evening a tall boy in midshipman's uniform ran upstairs and into the drawing-room of Mary's home. His mother was sitting there alone. She looked up brightly.

"I thought it was you, dear Mike," she said. "No one else comes with such a rush. I am so glad you have got off again; but I suppose it is only for two nights?"

"Only," he replied; "but it is lucky to have got even that. May I have some tea, mother, or is it too late?"

"Of course not. Ring, dear, and you will have it at once."

"And how's Mary?" said Michael, as he drank his tea.

His mother looked a little surprised.

"*Mary?*" she repeated. "Quite well. Indeed I think she is scarcely ever ill."

"Oh, I don't mean really *ill*," said the boy; "but don't you remember what you were saying—you said nurse had been speaking of it—that Mary is getting fanciful and dreamy, and all that sort of thing, and more like that since I've been so much away. And the other day I did think she seemed rather down in the mouth."

His mother looked thoughtful.



"I am sure she misses you a great deal," she said. "The others are so much younger. And then the change from the country to living in a town. I daresay she misses country things."

"I expect she does—lots," said Michael; and though he did not speak of it—as he had a feeling that Mary had trusted him with what she counted a sort of secret—his mind went back to what she had told him of the wood-pigeons and their nest. "It must have been all her fancy," he thought; "but it shows how her head runs on country things like that."

"She enjoyed the seaside, I think," his mother went on, "though not as much as the little ones did. She is too big for digging in the sand and paddling, and so on. And the place we were at was bare and uninteresting—not a tree to be seen—what people call an excellent place for children. Yes, perhaps poor Mary has not been quite in her element lately." And Mary's aunt looked rather distressed. Suddenly her face cleared.

"By the bye, Mike," she exclaimed, "how stupid of me to have forgotten. I had a letter lately from Mary's godmother—old Miss Verity; she lives at Levinside, near the forest, you know. She wrote to ask how Mary was getting on; and she said she would be delighted to have the child for a visit if ever we thought she would be the better for some country air. It is very charming there, even in late autumn or winter. If Mary seems very dull after you go, I think I will write to Miss Verity and propose a visit."

Michael gave a sort of grunt.

"I shouldn't think it would be very lively for her," he said, "going to stay with an old maid like that, all by herself. Better be here with you, mother, and Fritz and Twitter."

"Ah, but you don't know Miss Verity," said his mother. "She's not like an old maid, or rather she is the very nicest old maid that ever lived. She is full of spirits and very clever and very kind, and I am sure she would be just the person to understand a rather fanciful child like Mary. Mary has scarcely seen her, but I am sure they would get on, and she knew Mary's own mother so well. And her house is so pretty and so prettily situated."

"It might be a good plan," said Mike, "but if I were you, mother, I'd see what Mary herself thinks of it before you settle anything."

"Yes, I will," she replied. "It would certainly do Mary no good to go there against her own wishes. For she has decided ideas of her own, though she is a gentle obedient child as a rule. But I think I hear her coming, Mike, so take care. I don't want her to think we are talking her over. Nurse is not always careful enough in that way; she forgets that Mary is growing older."

The door opened almost as she said the last word, and Michael could not help smiling to himself as he thought how very easily his little cousin might have overheard her own name, though his mother meant to be so thoughtful. He looked up brightly, the smile still on his face, and he was pleased to see an answering-back one on Mary's as she caught sight of him.

"Oh, dear Mike," she exclaimed, "it *is* you! Oh, you don't know how glad I am you've come. I thought I heard you running upstairs, and I wanted to come to see, but nurse said I must be dressed first Auntie, I wish you'd tell nurse sometimes to let me run down to speak to you without such a fuss. I'm not as little as Twitter, you know."

Her aunt glanced at her and smiled, and Michael smiled too.

"Yes, mother," he said, "I think nurse does treat Molly rather too babyishly now."

Mary glanced at him gratefully, and her face brightened still more. Michael seemed quite like himself to her again.

"I rather agree with you," said his mother. "I will give her a hint. Have you been wanting to see me for anything special to-day, Mary dear?"

"Oh no, it was only that I was so hoping Michael would come," she replied; and a moment or two later, when her aunt happened to have gone to the other end of the room to write a letter, the little girl turned to her cousin.

"Mike," she said, speaking almost in a whisper, "have you settled what you are going to do to-morrow, exactly?"

"Well, no, not quite. It depends on mother. I have not much to do, myself. I did all my shopping last week, you see. I thought it would be nice to have the last two days pretty clear. Mother," he went on, raising his voice a little, "what would you like me to do to-morrow—I have kept it quite free for you—and Mary," he added quickly.

"Darling," said his mother. "Well, I was thinking we might go out together in the afternoon, you and I. I want you to say good-bye to your godmother—and if you and Mary can think of anything you would like to do in the morning, that would suit very well," and then she went on writing.

"What would you like to do, then, Moll?" said Michael. "I'm sure you've got something in your head."

Mary clasped her hands in eagerness.

"*Anything* you like, Mike," she said. "The only thing I want you to promise me is that you will come up to my room to-morrow morning at twelve o'clock to see something. I won't tell you what it is, but when you see, you will understand."

"At twelve o'clock," said Michael, "twelve exactly?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"All right," her cousin replied. "You're a queer child, Moll. Well then, I think the best thing we can do is to go shopping for an hour or so about half-past ten. You're to have a holiday, you know, and you like shopping."

"*Dreadfully*," said Mary, "especially with you. What sort will it be?"

"It's some of my Christmas presents that are still on my mind," said Michael. "Mother's, and Twit's—I never know about girls' things. I'm going to leave them with you to give for me. Father's and the little boys' I've got all right."

Mary's face shone with pleasure.

"That will be lovely," she said. "I know several things that Twitter would like, and I daresay nurse would help us to think of something for auntie. Nurse is very good about that sort of thing."

"Isn't she good about everything?" asked Michael. Mary grew a little red.

"She vexes me sometimes," she replied. "P'raps she doesn't understand. I'll explain to you better after to-morrow morning. Oh Mike dear, I *am* so sorry you're going away," and her face got rather sad again.

"But you look ever so much jollier than when I went away on Tuesday," said Michael.

"Well, yes, because I'm feeling so," she answered.

"All the same, Michael, I know it's going to be awfully dull till you come back again. They say it's so gloomy and dark in the winter sometimes; not like the country. I shall always like the country best, Mike."

"So should I," said her cousin, "that's to say if it was a choice between it and a town, though I like the sea best of all, of course. But don't get melancholy again, Moll. Something may turn up to help you through the gloomy months."

"I shall miss you so," said Mary, "and there's something else I shall miss too."

She was thinking of the Cooies, and she was glad to feel that once Michael had seen them and knew about them, she would be able to tell him of their going away, and that they only came back out of affection for her now and then.

More than this she felt she must not tell him, as it was a sort of secret between her and them. There are fairy secrets sometimes which it would be almost impossible to tell to *anybody*.

The rest of that evening and the next morning passed very cheerfully, even though Michael's time was to be so short at home. Nurse proved quite as kind and interested about the Christmas presents as Mary had expected. Indeed there was nothing she would *not* have been interested about if it concerned her eldest nursling, as big Michael was, and she was really fond of Mary too, and pleased to see her happy, though she had only had the care of *her* for a much shorter time than the others.

The two set off for their shopping quite early. They knew pretty exactly what they wanted to buy; which is always a great help when you go on such an expedition; for after a good deal of thought, nurse had decided that a new thimble was what "auntie" would like best. It was to be a really pretty one of a new pattern, and nurse was able to direct them to a jeweller's shop where she had seen some beauties in the window, and it was to have his mother's initials engraved on it, Michael said, and to be in a pretty case, lined with velvet. This important piece of business was quickly completed, as they found the jeweller's without difficulty. Twitter's present took rather longer; it was to be a set of toy tea-things, and as Michael liked china ones with tiny roses on, and Mary preferred some with forget-me-nots, they felt rather at a loss, till luckily the shopwoman, who was very good-natured, found a *third* pattern, of rosebuds and forget-me-nots together, which was a charming way out of the puzzle.

Then Michael proposed that they should go to a confectioner's not far from their own Square, to get a little luncheon. They kept capital buns there, he said, and after eating two of them, and having a glass of delicious milk, Mary quite agreed with him, and they were sitting at the little round marble-topped table very happily, when she happened to glance at a clock hanging up on the wall, and started to see that it was already a quarter to twelve o'clock.

"Oh Mike," she exclaimed, "we must hurry. It is nearly twelve."

Michael glanced at his watch.

"Yes," he said, "but if we're not back quite—oh I forgot—you wanted to show me something in your room at twelve o'clock. But won't it keep? It's not likely to fly away."

Mary's face flushed.

"To fly away," she repeated. "I never spoke of flying."

"No," said Michael, "it's just a way of speaking," but he looked at her rather oddly. "What are you stuffing into your pocket, child?" he went on.

"Only a bit of bun I don't want to eat," she replied, getting still redder, for it had suddenly struck her that she had got no crumbs ready for the Cooies, and that she would not have time to ask for any.

"And if they keep their promise to me," she said to herself, "I must certainly keep mine to them."—"Mike, dear," she went on beseechingly, "do let us hurry. What I want to show you won't 'keep'—perhaps," in a lower voice, "it may fly away."

Michael had already paid for their luncheon, and fortunately they were near home, and five minutes' quick walking covers more ground than you might think. They were soon at their own door, and the moment it opened, up flew Mary to her room.

"Mike," she had said as they stood on the front steps, "take out your watch and look at it, and when the hand gets to five minutes past twelve, run up to my room after me. Don't rap at the door, but come straight in."

Michael laughed, and repeated to himself, though he did not say it aloud—

"You are a queer child, Moll."

He waited the few minutes, as she had asked, then made his way upstairs after her. It was a pretty and unexpected sight that met his eyes, as he quietly opened the door, without knocking. He felt very curious about this secret of his little cousin's—half suspecting she had some trick preparing for him, and not wishing to be taken unawares, as what boy would!

But the moment he caught sight of her, and heard the gentle sounds from where she stood by the window, he "understood"—for he was very quick at understanding—and felt ashamed of the doubts he had had of Mary's truthfulness.

There they were—the wood-pigeons he had almost thought lived only in her imagination—one on her shoulder, one just perching on her outstretched hand, on the friendliest terms, it was easy to see—cooing in the sweetest way, while Mary murmured some caressing words to them. Nor were they startled away when Michael drew near, stepping softly, it is true, but still not so softly but that the little wood-creatures, well used to notice every tiniest sound in their forest homes, heard him, and even, it seemed to Michael, glanced towards him, quite fearlessly—quite secure in Mary's protection.

"Well, Mike?" she said with a smile. "They are very tame, you can come quite close," and then Michael heard again her own little murmur, though he did not know that it meant: "of course he won't harm you, dear Cooies."

Michael drew near.

"They *are* sweet," he said, "are they your own, Molly? or have you tamed them?"

Mary shook her head.

"They didn't need taming," she replied. "They lived in the tree there," and she nodded towards it. "They have known me ever since I came to live in the Square, and I have watched them, as I told you the other day. The remains of their old nest are still there, but I am sure they are not going to build there any more. They only fly over here to see me, and I give them crumbs and water whenever they come."

"Oh," said Michael, "that was what the bit of bun was stuffed into your pocket for."

Mary smiled.

"But, Mike," she said gravely, "you know—I am afraid you did not believe me when I told you about the Cooies."

It was Michael's turn to redden a little now.

"The—the what-d'ye-call them?" he said, trying to avoid a reply.

"The Cooies. It's my name for them," said Mary, "because of the sweet way they coo. But Mike, do tell me—did you believe me?"

"I don't quite know," answered her cousin, honestly. "I didn't think you were making up a regular story—an untruth, I mean,—I knew you wouldn't do *that*, but I did think perhaps you'd fancied part of it. You might have seen other birds flying about, that you let yourself imagine were wood-pigeons, and certainly the remains in the tree scarcely look like a nest, do they?"

"No, they don't," said Mary. "The wind tore it to pieces that night it blew so."

"Yes, I understand it all now," said Michael, "except—it's quite wonderful how you've managed to tame them so. They are like pet doves—I really am afraid I couldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," and as he spoke, he very gently stroked Mr Coo's opal-coloured feathers.

"They have tamed themselves, the darlings," said Mary. "I think wild creatures would soon learn to know me."

"It's wonderful," Michael repeated. "I have heard of some people who have a kind of power over animals, and perhaps you are one of them."

"Perhaps I am," said Mary. "Then, Michael," she went on, "you haven't told any one about the Cooies, have you? not about my telling you of them, and your not quite—"

"Of course not," said Michael, interrupting her, "and please don't say any more about that part of it."

"Well, I won't, then," Mary replied, "but I want you not to speak about them at all to any one. You see they are going away—they are not going to build here any more, and nurse, and even auntie perhaps, would scarcely—oh yes, of course they'd believe *you*. But still, I'd rather no one heard about them. I do so wish they hadn't got tired of these

gardens.”

“It’s better than for them to stay to be caught by cats,” said Michael.

This was a possibility which had not struck Mary before, and she shivered at the thought.

“Oh dear, yes,” she said, “what a dreadful idea!” and when Michael, hearing his mother calling, left the room, she turned to her little friends.

“Thank you *so* much, dear Coopies,” she said, “but I won’t ask you ever to come back to see me if there is the least fear of anything so dreadful.”

“We did not like to mention it before,” said Mr Coo, “but it was in our minds, and not without reason. Now we must fly off, but—you will see, Mary—we shall meet again before long.”

Mary shook her head. She was very nearly crying.

“Cheer up,” murmured Mrs Coo, who was still perched on her shoulder.

Then off they flew.

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## Chapter Four.

### “We Shall Meet Again Before Long, Mary.”

It was not easy for either Mary or her aunt to keep up their spirits when the two days were over, and from the drawing-room window they watched their dear Mike driving away.

“To think,” said his mother, almost in a whisper, “to think of the long, long way he is going—and the many, many days and nights that must pass before we see him again, and all the dangers and risks he must pass through—” but a tiny sob beside her made her stop short.

“Mary, dear,” she exclaimed, “I did not mean to make you cry,” and she kissed the little girl very lovingly.

They were quite alone, as Mary’s uncle, Mike’s father, had gone with him to the port from which Michael’s ship was to sail.

Mary wiped her eyes and kissed her aunt in return.

“I didn’t mean to cry,” she said, “Mike told me to cheer you up, auntie. And I think he is very happy. If I were a boy like him, I’d love to go sailing all over the world and to see all the strange wonderful places he is going to see. I’m *sure* he likes being a sailor awfully.”

“Yes,” her aunt agreed, “I am sure too that he was right in choosing the life. Most boys have a fancy for it, but with many it goes off, and Michael loves it more and more. And he is growing so strong—you would scarcely believe, Mary, that long ago, before you came to us, he was rather a delicate little boy, not nearly as sturdy as Fritz.”

“I remember hearing that he was very ill, with that fever,” said Mary, “when—,” but she did not finish the sentence, and her aunt understood why. There had been other children—two dear little daughters were between Michael and Fritz, in that family.

Auntie gave Mary another kiss, and something in Mary’s voice made her look at her.

“Molly, dear,” she said,—she did not often call her by this pet name, but it seemed as if she used it now for Michael’s sake,—“you are looking rather pale, as well as sad. I am afraid town doesn’t suit you as well as the country.”

“It is that I can’t bear—‘people,’” Mary was going to have said, but it struck her that wood-pigeons were scarcely “people,” and she was thinking of them as well as of Michael, “I can’t bear goings away,” she said.

“Could you not bear to go away yourself—for a little while?” said her aunt, “for a little change?”

Mary shook her head.

“No, auntie, dear,” she said, “I’d rather stay with you.”

“But it is dull for you, dear, and I am afraid I shall not be able to have you with me as much as I would like, while our cousins are here.”

Mary’s face fell.

“I’d forgotten about them,” she said.

The cousins were an elderly lady and gentleman who paid a visit every year to Mary’s uncle and aunt, and expected a good deal of attention.

“Never mind, auntie,” she went on, after a moment’s silence, “I won’t be dull. I’ll play a lot with the little ones.”

"But wait a minute, dear," said her aunt. "I won't force it upon you, but it is only right I should tell you of an invitation I have for you—from one of your godmothers—Miss Verity, do you remember her?"

"No," said Mary, "I don't remember *her*, but she always sends me a present on my birthday, doesn't she?"

"Yes," said her aunt, "she is very kind and very nice every way. See here, dear, this is her letter; I think you can read the writing; it is so clear."

It was beautiful writing—almost too fine and small, but such perfectly shaped letters that it was as easy to read as printing.

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"My dear Charlotte," it said—"I have always wished to make the acquaintance of my god-daughter, your little niece, Mary. And now that we are such very much nearer neighbours, this could surely be easily arranged. Will you spare her to me for a few weeks? I think I can almost promise you that I could make her happy, even though I have no young companions for her, and the most beautiful part of the year is past—though to my thinking, it is always beautiful here. I can send my maid, Pleasance, whom I daresay you remember, to fetch her, any day next week that would be convenient. I daresay a little holiday would do Mary no harm, and indeed she can go on with any of her lessons you like while with me, as I am very fond of teaching.—Your affectionate old friend, Felicia Verity."

Mary read the letter slowly and carefully, but still she shook her head as she gave it back to its owner.

"No, auntie, dear," she repeated, "I'd rather stay here."

"It seems a pity," said her aunt, as she slowly folded up the letter. "Levinside is such a pretty place, and Miss Verity's house has such a pretty name, 'Dove's Nest,' doesn't that tempt you, Mary?"

Mary looked up quickly, "Dove's Nest" was very pretty, but another name had caught her attention more sharply, through her memory rather than her fancy.

"Levinside," she repeated, "Dove's Nest at Levinside."

"Yes," said her aunt, "close to Levin Forest. You have heard of Levin Forest?"

Mary did not reply directly, but her aunt saw that her cheeks grew pink.

"May I see the letter again, please, auntie?" she said, and again her aunt unfolded it and handed it to her.

She did not look at the written part this time. Her eyes were fixed on the prettily engraved address at the top, printed in a rather peculiar shade of green—

"Dove's Nest, Levinside."

Then after gazing at it for a moment or two, she handed the sheet back to her aunt.

"Yes, auntie," she said quietly, "I think I *would* like to go to my godmother's."

Her aunt was pleased, though rather puzzled at the sudden change.

"She *is* a funny child," she thought to herself. "It is some fancy about the forest that she has got into her head," and Mary's next words made her more sure of this.

"It is quite close to the forest, isn't it?" the little girl asked rather anxiously.

"Yes," her aunt replied, "the name 'Levinside' almost tells that, and Dove's Nest is actually on the edge of the forest. I was there once—some years ago, when your uncle and I were in that neighbourhood for a few weeks, we spent a day there with old Miss Verity. She has lived there for a long, long time."

"I *should* like to go," Mary repeated, and there was quite a sparkle in the hazel eyes which had been looking rather sad.

So the letter accepting the invitation was written and posted that very day, and when Mary stood by her window and looked out at the deserted fairy tree, it was with much happier feelings than she had ever hoped to do so again.

"*They* must be fairies, or any way they must have to do with some," she thought. "Otherwise how could they have known, as I am sure they did, that my godmother was writing to invite me. Their very last words showed that they did know. Oh, my darling Cooies, how sweet it will be to see you again. 'We shall meet before long, you will see, Mary.' I'm only afraid it won't be a 'surprise' to them, for if they could read godmother's letter they're sure to know when I'm coming."

The next few days passed very happily. Mary was very interested in her packing, and not *very* sorry to find that not many lesson books were to make part of it.

"It will do you no harm to have another holiday—or part-holiday," said her aunt. "And there are many things besides regular lessons that Miss Verity can teach you, almost better than any one I know. She is wonderfully clever about plants and flowers—and knows a great deal about birds, I believe."

Mary listened to this with great interest.

"I wonder," she thought, "if my godmother knows the Cooies. Not *my* Cooies; they've only just gone to live there. But she may know some of their relations and friends."

"In winter, of course," her aunt went on, "there are scarcely any flowers and plants in most places, but the best of a forest is that there is always *something* interesting to a botanist—and in sheltered parts it is wonderful how late and how early one can find pretty 'wood treasures.' I believe that is one reason why Miss Verity loves Levinside so."

"I like flowers and ivy and ferny things," said Mary, "though I don't know the names of many. But I love alive things best, aunt. I mean alive like us—birds, and squirrels, and rabbits, and dormice." Her aunt smiled.

"I am afraid the dormice won't be very alive just now," she replied. "That's to say they will be fast asleep. I have heard that they wake up once or twice in the winter, just to have a good stretch and nibble a few nuts, but I don't know if it is true. You must ask Miss Verity."

Mary's eyes sparkled.

"Oh," she said, "it would be lovely to see them stretching their dear little brown paws! They'd look like baby when he wakes up and is too sleepy to open his eyes, and is all rosy and hot."

Altogether she felt very happy and interested about her visit—besides looking forward to seeing the Cooies again.

And when the day came, and Pleasance, Miss Verity's "old-maid" maid arrived, Mary did not feel at all shy or frightened at setting off with her on the short journey. It would indeed have been difficult to feel shy with Pleasance; she had such a *very* pleasant, cheerful face that Mary could not help thinking how well her name suited her. She was plainly dressed in grey, almost like a quakeress, with net quillings inside her bonnet, but her eyes were bright and her cheeks rosy, and Mary thought that no other kind of dress would suit her as well. Auntie seemed very pleased at Mary's setting off so cheerfully, and kissed her very lovingly, but nurse looked at her almost reproachfully, especially when Twitter set up a sad wail at "Maly's" going away, in which, after staring at her for a moment or two, before making up his mind, Fritz decided to join.

Mary felt rather unhappy. It does seem sometimes as if one could not please everybody, and after all, she had not *asked* to go away, and auntie had been glad when she said she would like to go.

"Don't cry," darlings, she whispered to the little ones, "Maly will soon come back again, and if only it was summer she would bring you some pretty flowers from the forest."

Then Fritz stopped crying to whisper something in return, which at first she could not make out, but at last she did. It was "fir-cones"—nurse said there were fir-cones in the "follest."

At this they all brightened up.

"Of course there are," said Mary, "and I'll bring you some to make a nice blaze in the nursery fire."

"And to play wif," said Twitter.

"Yes, you may keep some to play with," Mary replied.

"Don't make too sure of them, my dears," said nurse, rather shortly; "Miss Mary will most likely be enjoying herself too much to care to be troubled with gathering fir-cones."

Mary felt rather hurt, and before she had time to say anything her aunt turned to nurse, and said rather coldly,—

"Nonsense, nurse. You should know Miss Mary too well by this time to think that she would grudge a little trouble to please her cousins."

Mary felt inclined to hug her aunt, and nurse looked sorry, and glancing at Pleasance, who was standing near the door, she saw by the little smile on the maid's face that she too, as well as the children's mother, had understood Mary's feelings.

"I am sure I shall like her," she thought to herself. Then she kissed Fritz, and Twitter, and Baby-boy again, and nurse too—which was rather nice of her, I think—and last of all her aunt, who gave her a warm hug.

And in another minute or two Mary was rattling to the station in a four-wheeler, with Pleasance beside her, and her luggage in front. And in another quarter of an hour or so, they were comfortably settled in the railway carriage—off to Levinside, Mary busy wondering to herself if this was the way the Cooies came to the Square gardens, or if they had some other "air-path," without following the railway line.

She was roused from these reflections by the maid's voice.

"It is a nice day for the time of year," Pleasance said. "I hope, Miss Mary, it will be bright weather while you are with us."

"Yes," said Mary, rather absently. She was watching the flight of a bird overhead, and wondering if possibly it was one of her friends.

Pleasance thought she might be feeling rather shy and strange, so she went on talking.

"You have never been to Levinside, I think, Miss," she said. "To my mind there's no place like it, and no house like ours, though, to be sure, it's quite small. But there's not a window in it that you can't see a bit of the forest from, not

one, though at the back, of course, you see it best of all.”

Mary’s attention was fully caught by this time. “How nice,” she exclaimed, “how very nice! I do hope my room is at the back.”

“Yes, Miss Mary,” said the maid, pleased at her tone, “that is just what it is. It has two windows, and from one you could almost touch the trees. The other window is larger and gets the morning sun, so the room is not at all dull or chilly, indeed all our rooms are bright, though just at the edge of the forest.”

“I love forests,” said Mary, “at least I mean trees. I have never seen a real forest, only woods. Are there many birds in Levin Forest?” she went on, half timidly.

“A great many in the spring and summer time,” said Pleasance; “not so many now, of course. But enough to keep it cheery, so to say. And my lady has been very pleased lately at finding that the wood-pigeons have come over more to our part than they used. There’s a new road making across at the opposite side, and Miss Verity thinks perhaps that’s the reason; for though wood-pigeons are trusting sort of creatures, they don’t like being disturbed. And I daresay my lady’s right, for we’ve never heard them cooing like this year. It’s just beautiful.” Mary’s heart beat so fast with pleasure that she could scarcely speak. *Could* it be her own Cooies’ voices that Pleasance had heard? It was almost too lovely to hope for.

“I *love* wood-pigeons,” she said.

“Then you and my lady will be the best of friends,” said Pleasance, “for I almost think they are her favourites of all the creatures about.”

Thus beguiling the way with pleasant talk, like the travellers in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the little journey soon came to an end, and long before the autumn afternoon had given any signs of drawing in, the train slackened and pulled up at the small roadside station which was the nearest to Dove’s Nest, though a two-miles’ drive off.

And on the platform stood a lady whom Mary would have guessed to be her godmother, even if Pleasance had not exclaimed, “Here we are, Miss!” as she gathered Mary’s wraps and small luggage together.

Miss Verity had quite white—snow-white—hair. Just at the very first moment, somehow, this gave Mary a little start. She had not expected it, and she was not used to it, as her aunt and those she lived with had always been younger people. And there is something just a very little “uncanny”—till you get used to it—about *very* white hair and dark bright eyes; it is almost too like a “fairy godmother” to seem quite natural. But these dark eyes, though bright, were very, very sweet and soft too.

“If my godmother is at all a fairy,” thought Mary to herself, “she is a very good, kind one.”

So, though her cheeks had got rather pink with the surprise and a sort of sudden shyness, she held up her face to be kissed without hesitation, and slipped her hand into her godmother’s, feeling a pleasant sort of “sureness” that all that her aunt had told her about Miss Verity was going to come true.

There was a little pony-carriage waiting just outside the station gates, and standing in it was a rather fat piebald pony. The carriage only held two, and for a moment or so Mary wondered how she and her godmother and Pleasance were all to get to Dove’s Nest, as the maid had told her it was two or three miles from the station. But just then, glancing round, she saw that there was also a two-wheeled spring-cart, drawn by another piebald; and Miss Verity noticing Mary’s glances, smiled, as if she were answering an unspoken question.

“Yes,” she said, “they are both my ponies. Their names are Magpie and Jackdaw. Sometimes I drive them together, and then we do go pretty fast, though Magpie does not look as if that often happened, does she?”

Magpie was the fat pony that Mary had first noticed, though Jackdaw certainly was not thin!

“No,” said Mary, “she doesn’t. But she is very pretty,” she went on, feeling—as Magpie just then turned her head as if she was listening—that perhaps it might hurt her to hear herself spoken of as at all lazy; “she is very pretty, and I daresay she is fat because she is good-tempered.”

She looked up in her godmother’s face as she spoke, and again there came the quick smile which seemed to say better than words that Miss Verity understood her thoughts.

“Yes,” she replied, “there is a good deal in that. Magpie is very good-tempered; and poor Jackie is not *bad*-tempered, only a little bit fiery now and then. Won’t you pat them, Mary? It will be a sort of ‘How-do-you-do?’”

Mary was only too pleased to do so.

“You shall give them each a lump of sugar every morning,” said Miss Verity; and at this the piebalds pricked up their ears.

“I am sure,” thought Mary, “that they understand what godmother says, just as well as the Cooies understand me.”

And in this she was not far wrong.

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## Chapter Five.

### “A Little Bird Told Me.”

It was a pretty drive to Dove's Nest, even though the summer and early autumn beauty was past, and some of the trees that bordered the road were already bare. But when they had turned a corner of the road they came into clear view of the forest, and then Mary felt perfectly happy.

For a moment or two she did not speak, then she turned to her godmother and said rather shyly—"It's like some of my fairy stories—the forest, I mean; isn't it, godmother?"

Miss Verity smiled, and by the look in her eyes Mary saw that she understood.

"Yes," she said. "I think that is why I like to live close to a forest. It seems full of fairy stories." Mary gave a little sigh of pleasure. It is very nice to feel that big people know what you mean, even though you cannot say what you are feeling in very clear words. Then she sat silent again, gazing before her and feeling that she was already enjoying herself very much.

Magpie trotted along in her usual placid way; now and then pricking up her ears and switching her tail, though there were no flies about.

"What does she do that for?" asked Mary.

"I think it is just a little sign of friendliness," said Miss Verity. "We know each other so well, you see—Magpie and I, I mean; we often jog along together like this for hours and hours. And now and then I talk to her a little, and she answers me in her way. So perhaps when she hears my voice talking to you, she thinks it is to her."

Just then Magpie gave a very big switch Mary laughed.

"Do you know," she said, "I believe she means to be very polite to *me*. I think that is why she switches her tail and cocks her ears to-day, and she wants us to know."

Miss Verity laughed too.

"I daresay you are right," she said. "And now, Mary," she went on, "keep your eyes open even wider than usual, for Dove's Nest comes in sight all of a sudden."

Mary's face sparkled with eagerness. She glanced about her from side to side, and at last there came in view a stop in the hedge at the left side, which, as they got quite close, proved to be the entrance to a fairly wide grassy lane; and a little way farther on a white gate was to be seen, or rather the white posts at each side, for the gate itself was hooked back among the green bushes, so as to leave the entrance open.

"Here we are," said Miss Verity, and as Magpie turned in, her mistress allowed her to go slowly, which the piebald never objected to, even at her own door, so as to let the little guest have a good first sight of the house and garden.

It—the house, I mean—really was rather like a nest. The stone it was built of was a soft brownish-grey colour, and the carefully-trained ivy had grown over it so prettily that even the colour of the walls was shaded and in some places hidden by the rich dark green. And as Mary gazed, a funny fancy came into her head that the windows, which were always kept very bright and clean, were like kind twinkling eyes looking out to welcome you. There was a cosy-looking porch, the roof of which was thatched in a queer fancy way; it looked like moss, and made one think still more what a good name Dove's Nest was for the house.

"I think it's lovely," said Mary, after she had taken a very good look at it all, "lovely and sweet."

Miss Verity seemed pleased. I think it is very nice to say pleasant things to our friends when they want to please us. It is a stupid, selfish kind of shyness that makes children—and big people, too, sometimes—keep back from saying something pretty and admiring, even when they really feel it and would like to say it. And afterwards, perhaps, when it is too late, or the chance is gone, one wishes one *had* said the pleasant little thing.

Yes, a great deal of the sweetness of life depends on very little things. A smile or a loving look, or a word or two of pleasure and admiration are like roses and honeysuckle in the hedges.

"I hope you will like it inside as much as outside," said Miss Verity.

"I'm sure I shall," Mary replied.

And so she did. It would be difficult to describe the whole house, of course, but I must tell you how pretty the drawing-room was. It was almost quite round, with windows at one side, and the fire-place, in which a nice bright fire was burning, underneath the middle window, so that while sitting in front of it and feeling as warm as a toast, you could glance up to the sky, and see the trees moving in the wind and the birds flying across, while the creepers, twined round the panes, nodded at you in a friendly way.

Below the other windows, which were not so high up, were cushioned seats, very tempting, as from them one could see the prettiest parts of the garden and the many birds, who at all seasons of the year had been encouraged by Miss Verity's kindness to look upon Dove's Nest as a home of pleasure and safety. The rest of the room was very pretty too, though just a little old-fashioned. There were not quite so many sofas and low chairs and cushions as one sees in drawing-rooms nowadays, for when Miss Verity was young such things were considered only suitable for quite old people or invalids, and Mary's godmother was certainly not an invalid, and did not feel herself *very* old either, though her hair was so white.

But Mary's eyes travelled at once to the windows, and she darted across the room to look out.



"Oh, how nice!" she exclaimed. "What a lovely lawn, and what dear little birds hopping about!"

"I am so glad you like it," said Miss Verity, "for your room at one side looks out the same way. My own room is over this, the birds and I say 'How-do-you-do?' to each other every morning. Shall we go upstairs at once for you to take off your hat and jacket, and then we can have tea."

Mary was delighted to follow Miss Verity, for Pleasance's description had made her eager to see her own corner of Dove's Nest. Her godmother crossed the square hall and opened a door which led into another little hall or anteroom, from which a wide shallow-stepped staircase led to the next floor.

Here they found themselves in a long passage—Miss Verity walked on quickly, passing two or three doors, and stopping for a moment at one which was slightly open.

"That is my room," she said, and Mary, glancing in, saw the same round shape with windows at one side as downstairs, "and yours," Miss Verity went on, "is *really* almost next it, though I daresay you would not have guessed it, as it seems a long way off."

Then she opened another door, a little farther on, and to Mary's surprise and pleasure a second staircase came in sight. This time it was a narrow "twisty-turny" one, leading up into a kind of turret at one end of the house. This turret was so covered with ivy and other evergreen, or almost evergreen, creepers, that from the outside it was scarcely to be distinguished from the mass of trees in the background. The staircase was not high, as the house was really only a two-storied one, but when Miss Verity got to the top there was another door to open, then a short passage, at one end of which were a few steps leading to a small landing, nearly all window, and at the other end two or three steps down again into another little landing, almost like a room, and across this at last, Mary's own "nest."

A charming nest it was—no little girl could have helped being delighted with it. Miss Verity was rewarded for the trouble she had taken to make it nice for Mary by the look on her god-daughter's face, and the cry of pleasure that she gave.

There was a little bed in one corner, with pink and white curtains at the head, a dressing-table to match, and a wicker-work chair with cushions covered with the same dimity. And all the furniture was light and small, so as to leave plenty of room for moving about. Mary's trunk had already been brought in, and when she had time to notice it Mary wondered how the servants had got it up the tiny staircase. But just at first, *the* thing that caught her eyes was the view from one of the windows. No, one can scarcely call it a "view," a "look-out" is a better word, for, as Pleasance had told her, it was really *into* the trees. Standing there you almost felt as if you were living in a tree yourself. And after a happy glance round, Mary flew to this window.

"It is all lovely," she said, "but this is the nicest of everything."

The window was half open. Miss Verity followed her to it, and laid her hand on Mary's shoulder.

"Listen," she said.

And then from the depths of the dark green shade came, what to Mary was almost the sweetest sound in the world,—"Coo-coo," and again "Coo-coo," as if in reply.

"It is the wood-pigeons," said Miss Verity, and the little girl smiled to herself at her godmother thinking she did not know. "Isn't it sweet? I have never heard them so near as the last few days. Just as if it was to welcome you, Mary!"

And at this Mary's smile almost turned into a laugh.

Then Miss Verity opened a door in a corner which Mary had not seen before, and again there was a short flight of steps, leading downwards.

"This is the near way into my room," said her godmother, "so you will never feel lonely. If you tap at the second door," for there was one at the foot of the steps as well as at the top, "I shall always hear you. Sometimes the door is locked, but I will keep it unfastened while you are here. It is so now, as your trunk has been brought through this way. Now, take off your things, dear, and come down to tea. You will find it and me waiting for you in the drawing-room."

And so saying she went on into her own room. Mary ran back and took off her things as quickly as she could. But before she went downstairs, she could not resist standing a moment at "the forest window" as she had, in her own mind, begun to call it.

"Cooies," she said softly, "dear Cooies, if it is you—*my* Cooies—that I heard just now—do you know that I have come?"

And from a little distance, a little farther off than they had seemed before, came the reply—at least Mary felt sure that it was one,—

"Coo-coo," and again, "Coo-coo."

She could not stay longer just then, but she felt very happy indeed, as she made her way down the cork-screw staircase and along the passages and downstairs again to the drawing-room. She could scarcely help singing as she went, and her face looked so bright as she came into the room that her godmother thought to herself that it was quite a mistake of Mary's aunt to have written to her that the little girl would most likely be very grave and shy at first.

I don't think Mary ever enjoyed anything more than that first tea with Miss Verity. She was very hungry, to begin

with, and everything tasted delicious, and the room was so cosy and yet fresh, with little flutters of air and scent from the garden outside, as one window was a tiny bit open. And there were pretty autumn posies here and there in china bowls about the room, the faint fragrance from which mingled with that of dried rose-leaves and lavender, which the house had never been without since Miss Verity's grandmother had come to live there as a bride, long, long ago.

All these things joined to make Mary feel very happy, though she did not think of them all separately, but behind everything in her mind was the looking forward to seeing her dear Cooies again. She gave one of her little sighs of content, which her godmother quite understood, though she did not seem to notice it.

When tea was over, Miss Verity proposed that Mary should go up to her room again, to see Pleasance unpack her trunk, and explain about her things.

"I have dinner at seven o'clock," she said, "which is of course earlier than your uncle and aunt dine, so I have got leave for you to dine with me, or at least to sit at table with me, though you will not care to have much to eat."

"No, I couldn't be very hungry, so soon after tea," said Mary, gravely, "but sometimes when auntie was alone, I have been at her dinner, and she gave me a little soup, and pudding, and fruit."

"Yes," said Miss Verity, "that is just what I mean." Then Mary went up to her turret, where Pleasance was already busy, and showed the maid which were her best frocks, and sashes, and hair-ribbons, and everything, and herself arranged the few books, and writing things, and little treasures she had brought with her. There was a small bookcase all ready, on which stood some tempting little volumes that Miss Verity had looked out for her.

And through all the pleasant little bustle of the unpacking there came to Mary's ears every now and then the sound they were so ready to hear, of "coo-coo," "coo-coo."

But she was not alone in her room again at all that evening, for Pleasance came to dress her for dinner, and to help her to undress for the night—not at least, till after she was in bed. And she did not dare to get up and open the window after the maid had gone, for Pleasance had told her it was raining, and that she had therefore shut both windows closely.

"It would never do for you to catch cold here," she said, "otherwise your auntie would not let you come again."

So Mary had to console herself by thinking that most likely the Cooies were fast asleep, and by hoping that the next day would be fine and mild.

And so it was!

Mary slept very soundly. When she woke it was already full daylight, and some bright though pale rays of sunshine were creeping in at the side of the blinds and sparkling on the pretty flowery paper of the walls. She rubbed her eyes and could not, for a moment or two, remember where she was—you know the queer, rather interesting, puzzled feeling one has, the first morning in a strange place? and then by degrees it all came back to her, and up she jumped and ran to the window. But it was cold, so she very wisely peeped out for a moment only, just to satisfy herself that it was a fine day, and then hopped into bed again.

She had not long to wait before there came a knock at the door, followed by Pleasance and a younger servant with a big can of water for her bath.

"Wide-awake already, Miss Mary?" said the maid, in her kind cheerful voice. "Well, I am glad it is a nice morning for you; the rain last night was only a heavy shower after all, for the trees are scarcely wet and the birds are chirping away as if it was the spring."

"And are the pigeons cooing?" asked Mary.

"You may be sure of that," said Pleasance. "They are always the first to be heard about here, though I've never known them to roost so near the house as this last week or two. I'll unfasten the window bolt, so that you can push it open a bit after you've had your bath, and listen to them. It *is* sweet, like wishing you a happy day."

"I'm sure I am going to have a happy day," said Mary, jumping out of bed.

You may be sure her bath did not take very long that day. She was soon dressed; at least enough to open the window as Pleasance had proposed, and while finishing her morning "toilet," she listened for the familiar sounds she was hoping to hear.

Yes—she was not disappointed—they came, the sweet caressing "coo-coo," ever nearer and nearer, till at last, just as Mary was fastening her belt, a little flutter close at hand was followed by the alighting of two feathered figures on her window-sill. One glance told her they were her own Cooies.

"Oh, you darlings," she exclaimed, "how sweet of you to come the first morning! How did you find out I was here?"

Mr Coo glanced round him cautiously, before he replied.

"Ah," he said, "we have ways and means of getting news that would surprise you. There is more truth in the old saying, 'a little bird told me,' than the people who use it in jest have any idea of. Did we not tell you, dear Mary, that we should meet again before along?"

"Yes, yes, indeed you did," said Mary, "and I believed you, you see. Auntie would not have forced me to come, but when I heard of Levin Forest, I felt sure you knew about my godmother living here, and so I said I'd like to come."

"Just so," said Mr Coo, and "just so," Mrs Coo repeated.

"We would have flown here last night to welcome you," Mr Coo went on, "but we thought you might be tired."

"And it came on to rain," added Mrs Coo, "and we did not wish to be wet and draggle-tailed for our first visit."

"No, it would have been a pity," said Mary, "and you are both looking so pretty. I could fancy you had got all new feathers. I never noticed before, how *very* white your neck ones are, just like beautiful clean collars. And what pretty rainbowy colours you have below them."

Both the Cooies cocked their heads on one side; they liked to be admired.

"You have never seen us to advantage before," said Mrs Coo. "Near a town it is impossible to keep one's feathers so fresh."

"Talking of white feathers," began Mr Coo, but he stopped suddenly, as just then the breakfast-bell rang. "We will come again," he said, "we have a great deal to tell you, Mary."

"We want to do all we can to make you enjoy yourself," said Mrs Coo.

"How kind of you!" said Mary. "And when will you come again?"

"I think," said Mr Coo, "the best plan will be for us to have a signal. We roost very near here. If you stand at the window and say 'cooie, cooie,' we are pretty sure to hear you."

"All right," said Mary, "and thank you so much. I wonder what you are going to tell me about white feathers."

She ran off, and the Cooies flew away.

"I think," said Mrs Coo, "I think it would be best for the Queen herself to tell Mary about the competition—that is to say if we succeed in getting an invitation for her. So I was not very sorry that you were interrupted, Mr Coo. I think you should consult me before speaking of anything so important to the dear child."

Mr Coo seemed rather snubbed, but he was always ready to acknowledge Mrs Coo's good sense.

"In future I will do so, my dear," he replied politely.

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## Chapter Six.

### "The Soft Rush of Many Little Wings."

After breakfast Miss Verity turned to Mary.

"Let us talk over our plans a little," she said.

"I like making plans," Mary replied, and in her own mind she added, "it would be a good thing to know what my godmother wants me to do every day, for then I could tell the Cooies the most likely times for me to be at the window."

"That is a good thing," said Miss Verity, smiling. "I will give you an idea of how I usually spend the day. Of course it changes a little between summer and winter, but just now it is rather between the two. Well, as a rule, I am busy about house things for an hour or so after breakfast, and then I generally take a stroll round the garden and go to see the ponies, and *then* I write letters or read till luncheon. In the afternoon I go a drive—once or twice a week I pay calls, and once or twice I go to see some of the cottage people; of course if they are ill or in trouble and I know of it, I go oftener."

"May I come with you when you go to the cottages?" Mary asked. "I like to see the funny little rooms, and sometimes there are such nice babies. But," she went on half timidly, "I'd rather not pay *lady* calls. Auntie takes me with her sometimes, but I generally wait for her outside in the carriage."

"I will not take you to pay any 'lady calls' where you would feel strange or shy," said Miss Verity, "but at one or two of my friends, there are children whom you would like—about your own age."

"Ye-es," Mary replied, rather doubtfully, "but, please, godmother, I should be quite happy here with just you. And sometimes mayn't I go a little walk alone in the forest?"

Miss Verity considered.

"Yes," she said, "I don't see any reason why you should not. It is perfectly safe: there are no tramps or gypsies about here. I will take you there once or twice myself and explain the paths a little, so that there would be no fear of your losing your way. And now I shall be busy for an hour, or half-an-hour any way. After that we can stroll about a little together."

"And then?" said Mary.

"Then," said Miss Verity, with her half comical smile, "supposing we do some lessons? I promised your auntie that I would read French with you, as I have been more accustomed to it than she herself or your governess."

"Would you like me to learn some French by heart to say to you?" asked Mary. She wanted to please her godmother, for she felt how very kind she was, and I think too, she wanted Miss Verity to see that she could be trusted, so that she could now and then be free to talk to her Cooies.

"And perhaps," she thought, "*perhaps* I may meet them in the wood and see where they live, and see some more Cooies—their cousins. That *would* be lovely."

"I should like it very much indeed," said Miss Verity. "I have a dear little book of the old fables—La Fontaine's—oh, by the bye, it is up in your room. And I know how fond you are of animals, so—"

"Oh," exclaimed Mary, and she looked so bright and eager that Miss Verity did not mind her interrupting. "I know what you mean. I have learnt one or two. I'll run upstairs now and find the book, and may I choose a fable?"

"Certainly, dear," said her godmother.

So Mary hastened to her turret, where she soon discovered the fat little old-fashioned volume. Then she chose one fable—not a very long one, but I am afraid I don't remember which it was—and settled herself in the corner of the drawing-room, which, like her own window, looked out towards the forest, to learn two or three verses by heart.

From time to time she glanced out—with a half idea that perhaps she might catch sight of the wood-pigeons.

"They are so clever," she said to herself, "that if they saw me learning my lessons they would quite understand I mustn't be interrupted. But it would be nice just to feel that they were peeping at me through the branches."

She neither heard nor saw anything of them that morning, however. But she now trusted them too much to have any fear of their forgetting her.

And by the time Miss Verity came in from her house-keeping duties, Mary's two or three verses were perfectly learnt.

"But I will not hear them just yet," said her godmother, "put on your hat and jacket, and come out with me to see how the ponies are this morning."

The ponies seemed to Mary even more lovable in the stable than in harness. They both seemed to know their mistress so well, and rubbed their heads against her in the most affectionate way. And when she said to Magpie that she must make friends with Mary too, Magpie really turned her head round and gazed at Mary with her big brown eyes as if she quite understood.

Then Mary gave her and Jackdaw a lump of sugar each, which they seemed to enjoy very much, and after that Miss Verity took her round the kitchen garden and the little poultry-yard, and even to pay a visit to the pig-sty, where lived two fat little pink pigs, looking cleaner, Mary said, than any pigs she had ever seen before.

And just as they were going into the house again Miss Verity stood still for a moment.

"Listen," she said, "is it not pretty?" and then came to their ears the sweet sounds so familiar to Mary—

"Coo-coo, Coo-coo."

Mary's eyes sparkled. She felt sure the voices were those of her own little friends.

Lessons hardly seemed lessons at Dove's Nest. Miss Verity had such an interesting way of explaining things, and seeming as if she herself enjoyed what they talked about. Yet she was very particular too, and I think that sensible children like to feel that their teachers *are* particular, just as sensible ponies like to feel that the person holding the reins knows how to drive. She was not satisfied with Mary's being able to repeat the fable rightly till she had gone through it with her and saw that she understood it all quite thoroughly, and then she corrected some of Mary's pronunciation, which made it all sound ever so much prettier. After that, there was a sort of geography lesson, as Mary was very anxious to see on the map exactly where her dear Michael was going to, and how he would get there, so that the time passed so quickly that Mary could scarcely believe when her godmother looked at her watch and exclaimed—

"My dear child, it is one o'clock, and we have luncheon at a quarter past! Auntie would think I was giving you far too many lessons."

"No, no, she wouldn't," said Mary, laughing and shaking back her curls, which had tumbled over her eyes while she was bending to look at the atlas. "Auntie would be very pleased, for it doesn't seem a bit like lessons. It is almost as nice as hearing stories."

At luncheon, which was of course Mary's real dinner, her godmother began talking about what they should do that afternoon.

"Would you rather drive or go a walk?" she said. Mary was burning with eagerness to explore the forest a little. She knew that till Miss Verity was satisfied that there would be no fear of her losing her way among the trees she could not hope for leave to wander about by herself.

"I would *dreadfully* like to see the forest," she said, "but of course—"

She was going to say that she would be pleased to do whatever her godmother thought best, but she felt rather shy. Miss Verity considered for a minute or two, then,—

"I think we had better do *both*," she said. "Both drive and walk. Magpie needs some exercise, and I want to ask how an old friend of mine is, who lives too far off to walk there; though her house too is on the edge of the forest. That will take us about an hour and a half, so if we start at a quarter past two we shall still have time for a wander on this side of the woods before it gets too chilly and dusk."

"Thank you," said Mary. In her heart she felt rather disappointed that she would have no time, or very little, that day to see her Cooies, but still, after all, it was a great thing to see something of the forest and get leave, perhaps, to stroll about there by herself.

"And *possibly*," she thought, "we may meet them. Godmother would not know them, but I am sure I would, and they could not feel frightened of her when she is so sweet and kind."

She was ready in good time, and waiting at the door when Miss Verity came downstairs. It was really quite curious to see how Magpie pricked up her ears the moment she heard her mistress's voice, and the very slightest touch on the reins was enough to tell her which way she was to go or to hurry her up a little if she were jogging along too deliberately.

It was a pretty drive—indeed, Mary thought that all the drives about there were pretty—and quite in a different direction from the way they had come the day before. And when Miss Verity went in to see her friend who was ill, Mary strolled about the garden by herself. It was a nice garden, but not to be compared with the one at Dove's Nest, Mary thought, and there did not seem to be nearly so many birds hopping about, or chirping in the trees. She felt very glad that her godmother did not stay long, as, though she tried not to be impatient, she was very eager indeed to go back for the promised walk in the forest.

And Magpie seemed to understand, or so Mary fancied, though most likely it was that she knew she was going home, for she did not require any sort of cheering up to go quickly, but trotted along as fast as Miss Verity would let her.

The man-servant was waiting for them at the door, so Mary jumped out at once and glanced up at her godmother.

"Yes, dear," said Miss Verity, in reply to the unspoken words, "yes, I have not forgotten. Tell Myrtle,"—Myrtle was the parlour-maid—"to have tea ready for us in an hour," she added, turning to the man. She looked up at the sky as she spoke. "Yes," she went on, "I think we can safely stay out three-quarters of an hour or so before it gets too chilly. And it is not going to rain."

Mary trotted along beside her godmother in silent satisfaction, though beneath her quiet appearance she was bubbling over with excitement.

To get into the forest—into a real big forest!—and above all, the forest where her Cooies lived—she could imagine nothing more interesting. And though she had felt disappointed at not getting there earlier in the day, she could not help agreeing with Miss Verity when, after a minute or two's silence on her side too, she said,—

"The forest, to my mind, is always fascinating, but after all, I don't know that you could make acquaintance with it better than on an afternoon like this. The autumn feeling, this sort of almost solemn quiet, without wind, and the light already beginning to fade—all adds to the mystery of it. And the mystery is one of the greatest charms of a forest." She stood still for a moment. They had entered the trees' home by the little path from the garden—a private way of Miss Verity's, though there was a gate which could be locked when she thought well, in case of tramps, though one of the nice things about Dove's Nest was that tramps very seldom came that way—and by which you found yourself in quite a thick part of the wood almost at once. Mary stood still too, listening and gazing. I think her godmother had forgotten that she was talking to a child, but it did not matter—Mary understood.

And when she did speak, her words showed this. "Mystery means secrets, doesn't it?" she said. "Nice secrets. Yes, it does feel like that. The trees look as if they talked to each other when there is nobody there."

Her godmother smiled.

"And when there is a little wind," she said as they walked on again, "up among their tops, it looks still more as if they were talking and nodding to each other over their secrets. It is really quite comical. Then another charming thing in a forest is when the sunshine comes through in quivering rays, lighting up the green till it looks like emeralds. That is more in the spring-time—when the new leaves are coming out. But there is no end to the beauties of a forest. It is never two days quite the same. I daresay you will always remember this grey day the best—one seldom forgets the first impression, as it is called, of a place, however many different feelings one may come to have about it afterwards, and—"

But a sudden little joyful exclamation from Mary interrupted her.

"Look, godmother, look!" she cried, and she pointed before them; "just what you were saying."

The sun was setting, and some very clear rays had pierced through the grey, and right in front made a network of the branches against the brightness. It was very pretty, and rare too, so late in the day and in the year. They both stood still to admire.

"How dark the trees look where the light stops," said Mary. "Are they thicker there?"

"Yes," Miss Verity replied. "That is a part that I call to myself one of the forest's secrets. For some reason the trees are allowed to grow very thick there, and it is impossible to get in among them without tearing one's clothes and scratching one's face and hands. But it is a favourite haunt of the birds. I often stand near there to watch them flying in and out—pigeons especially. I could fancy it was a very favourite meeting-place for them. You can hear their

murmuring voices even now.”

Mary held her breath to listen. They were at some little distance from the spot her godmother was speaking of, and though the cooing was to be heard, it sounded muffled and less distinct than she had ever noticed it before. The foliage, of which a good deal still remained on the trees, dulled the sound.

“It seems as if they were talking in whispers,” she said to her godmother, smiling.

“Or as if they were all half asleep,” Miss Verity added, “which I daresay they are. It is getting late, Mary; the light will soon be gone, and we have walked farther than you would think. We had better turn.”

They did so. Mary took good notice, by her godmother’s wish, of the paths they came by. Not that there was any real fear of her getting lost in the forest, but it was better for her to know her way about.

“That dark place can be seen so far off,” said Mary, “that I should always know pretty well whereabouts I was.”

“I think,” said Miss Verity, “I think I shall tell Pleasance to ring the big bell for you, if you are strolling about alone, and it is getting time for you to come in. You can hear it a long way off—farther off than you would ever care to go: sounds carry far in the forest.”

“That would be a very good plan,” said Mary, thinking to herself that it would be lovely to get the “run” of the forest, so as sometimes to meet her Cooies without fear of interruption.

They walked on, not speaking much. Mary was thinking of her feathered friends, and her godmother, from living so much alone, perhaps, was at no times a great talker. And the evening feeling in the air—the *autumn* evening feeling—seemed to make one silent. The feeling that children sometimes describe as being “as if we were in church.”

And then through the cool clear air came a soft rushing sound—nearer and nearer. There is no sound quite like it—the soft rush of many little wings. Without saying anything to each other, Mary and Miss Verity stood still and listened, looking upwards.

“It is the wood-pigeons,” said Miss Verity; “but what a quantity! I have often seen them flying together in the evening—going home, I suppose, but never so many together. And they are coming from the dark planting, as it is called. I have often wondered if they roosted there, but it does not look like it.”

Mary gazed still—even after her godmother had walked on a few paces; and just as she was turning to run after her, a sound still nearer at hand stopped her again. One of the birds had swooped downwards, and its murmured “coo-coo” made her stop.

“Mary,” said the little voice, “be at your window early to-morrow morning. We want to talk to you.”

“Yes,” whispered Mary in return; “yes, Cooie, dear, I will be there.”

And then, full of pleasure, she hastened to overtake her godmother.

“You are not cold, dear, at all, are you?” Miss Verity asked.

“Oh no, not the least, thank you,” said Mary. “I’m just—” and she gave a little skip.

“What?” asked her godmother, smiling.

“As happy as *anything*” replied Mary, with another hop.

Miss Verity smiled with pleasure.

“I think Levinside is the beautifulest place in the world,” said Mary. “And oh, godmother, I do hope you will let me go about here in the forest by myself. I *know* I won’t get lost.”

“I don’t think you would,” said Miss Verity. “I have a feeling that the forest is half a fairy place. I don’t think any harm could come to you in it.”

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## Chapter Seven.

### “There are Rules, you see, Mary.”

There was a red glow in the sky where the sun had disappeared, as Mary and her godmother came out from the shade of the trees, and stood for a moment or two on the lawn at the side of the house, before going indoors. I think one is often inclined to do this in the country, especially when it is no longer summer, and the evenings are less warm and mild—it is a sort of “good-night” to the outside world before you have to close the doors and windows of your own nest, hoping that all the furred and feathered friends are snug and cosy in theirs.

“It will be fine to-morrow, I feel pretty sure,” said Miss Verity, “and perhaps milder. I hope so, for my own sake as well as yours, Mary, for I have to drive rather a long way. Now run upstairs and take off your things quickly, for tea will be quite ready, I am sure.”

Mary was down again in a minute: she was not tempted to linger at her window, as she knew the Cooies would not come there till the morning. She only thought to herself that she would be very glad if Miss Verity proposed her

staying at home the next day, while she herself went the long drive she had spoken of.

"I could be in the forest all the afternoon," she thought.

And that evening, just before she went to bed, it seemed as if her wish had found its way into her godmother's mind.

"Would you like to go with me to Metherley—the place I have to drive to," she said, "or would you rather stay at home and amuse yourself? Do you think you could do so? Tell me truly."

"I'm *sure* I could," said Mary. Then, fearing that her wish to be left behind might not sound very polite, she added, "I don't mean that I would not like the drive with you, godmother, but I know I should be quite happy if I might go into the forest."

"There is no reason why you should not do so, dear, if it is a fairly good, dry day—and in the forest it dries so quickly; the moisture soaks through the 'fir needles' carpet almost at once. And I will tell Pleasance to ring the big bell now and then, so that if you should possibly feel at a loss as to your whereabouts, you would soon know."

"Oh thank you," said Mary, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, "that would be beautiful I might fix with Pleasance to ring it twice, perhaps—once at three o'clock, and once at four. Wouldn't that be a good plan?"

"A very good plan," said Miss Verity. "And you will promise to come home after you hear the second bell, for it will be getting late and chilly. I shall be back by half-past four or so and quite ready for tea."

"Yes," said Mary. "I'll run home when I hear the four o'clock bell. It will be like Cinderella." Then came bed-time, and Mary was glad to go to sleep "for the morning to come sooner."

And when it did come, she jumped out of bed the instant Pleasance awoke her, and hurried to get dressed as quickly as possible, so that she might have a few minutes at the window with her faithful little friends.

They were true to their promise. Mary had scarcely pushed up the sash when she heard their voices, and in another moment they had both hopped on to the sill.

"Coo-coo," they began, "good-morning, Mary dear. We have been watching for you."

"Good-morning, dear Cooies," she said. "I have only a very few minutes before the breakfast-bell rings, but this afternoon—"

"We know," interrupted Mr Coo. "You are to be alone, and you have got leave to be in the forest."

"How *do* you know?" said Mary, opening her eyes very wide.

Mr Coo shook his head; Mrs Coo held hers on one side.

"Never mind how we know," said Mr Coo. "To begin with, we are 'little birds'—"

"Not so very little," Mary interrupted.

"—And," Mr Coo continued, without noticing what Mary said, "everybody knows that little birds hear more than any one else. Besides, we are such near neighbours."

"Oh," exclaimed Mary, "that was what I wanted so much to ask you. Do you live in that dark place in the forest? I mean do you roost there?"

Both the wood-pigeons put their heads on one side and looked at her—"rather funnily," Mary thought to herself, afterwards.

"We roost close to your garden," said Mr Coo. "What you call the dark place in the forest is not what you think it."

Mary listened eagerly.

"Do tell me about it," she said.

"There is not time just now," Mrs Coo replied. "Besides—" and she glanced at Mr Coo.

"We hope to do much better than tell you about it," he said. "We mean to *show* it to you—that is what we want to settle about. You must meet us in the forest as soon as you go out this afternoon."

"Yes," said Mary. She was beginning to find out that the best way with the Cooies was to agree with their plans and never to argue with them. For sooner or later, somehow or other, they carried out what they settled, and as she was by no means sure that they were not half or three-quarters "fairies," she did not mind giving in to them, little birds though they were.

So "yes," she said, "I have got leave to go into the forest immediately after luncheon, and if you will tell me where to meet you—"

"You need do nothing but walk straight on through the gate from this garden," said Mr Coo. "We shall manage all the rest. It is not going to rain, you need not be afraid," he added, seeing that Mary was glancing up rather anxiously at the sky.

"I'm so glad," she replied, with a sigh of relief, and just then the breakfast-bell rang.

"Good-bye, dear Cooies, good-bye till this afternoon," she exclaimed as she ran off, and the soft coo-coo sounded in her ears on her way downstairs.

"Dear me," said Myrtle to Pleasance, as they met on the landing, "just hearken to those wood-pigeons. They might be living in the house. I never, no never, have known them come about so, as just lately. They seem as if they knew Miss Mary was here, and were particular friends of hers," and the old servant laughed at her own joke.

The morning passed as usual. Mary did her best to give her attention to her lessons, which as a rule she found no difficulty in doing, for her godmother's pleasant teaching was so interesting and often indeed so amusing that it did not seem like lessons at all. But this morning her head was running so much on what her Cooies had said and promised, that more than once Miss Verity had to ask her what she was thinking about.

"Is it your afternoon in the forest that you are dreaming of?" said her godmother. "Are you intending to explore it and make wonderful discoveries?"

Mary grew rather pink.

"Godmother," she replied, "you have such a way of guessing what I am thinking about! I never knew any one like you for that."

Miss Verity smiled.

"You need not mind," she said. "I have not forgotten about my own dreams and fancies when I was a little girl like you. Perhaps they were not altogether dreams and fancies, after all. However that may have been, they did me no harm, and I don't think yours will do you any harm either."

"Were some of them about the forest?" asked Mary, rather shyly.

Miss Verity nodded.

"Yes," she replied, "I think they nearly all had to do with the forest. You know—or perhaps you don't know—that this was my own old home, long, long ago, when I was a very little girl. Then, when I was nearly grown-up, we left it, and I did not see it again for many years. But it always seemed 'home' to me, and you can imagine my delight when I heard it was again to be sold and I was able to buy it for my very own. And I hope to end my days here, at the edge of the dear forest I love so well."

Mary listened with great interest. She thought to herself that she would soon get to feel just as her godmother did about Dove's Nest.

"Especially," she added in her own mind, "as the forest is the Cooies' home."

"Now, let me hear you go over that page of French again," said Miss Verity. "You will enjoy your afternoon all the more if you have done your best this morning."

As she said this, a low "coo-coo" caught Mary's ear. It was soft and faint—perhaps it came from some little distance—perhaps it was very low on purpose, so that no one but herself should hear it. But she knew whose voice it was; she knew too what the Cooies' advice would be, so, though it called for some effort on her part, she determined to leave off thinking of anything but the matter in hand, and gave her full attention to her French reading. And by the end of her lesson time she felt well rewarded when her godmother told her she had done "very well indeed."

The day had grown steadily brighter. When luncheon was over, Miss Verity went upstairs almost immediately to put on her out-door things, and Mary waited in the porch to watch for the ponies coming round and to see her godmother start.

Jackdaw and Magpie seemed very bright and eager to be off, and they looked so pretty that for a moment or two Mary half regretted that she had asked to be left behind. But just as she was thinking this, she heard again the voice from the trees, "coo-coo," and she looked up with a smile.

"Oh my dear Cooies," she said, "you are getting *too* clever! I believe you know what I am thinking even—but you need not remind me of our plans, and you needn't be afraid that I *really* want to go a drive instead of staying with you."

Then she heard her godmother coming downstairs, and as Miss Verity got into the pony-carriage she nodded brightly to Mary.

"Good-bye, dear," she said. "Be sure you enjoy yourself, but don't forget to run home when you hear the bell for the second time."

Mary nodded. "I won't forget," she said.

Then the ponies tossed their heads, as if to say good-bye, and started off briskly, their bells tinkling clearly at first, then more and more faintly as they trotted away, till at last they were not to be heard at all.

Mary gave herself a little shake. She had been standing listening in a half dreamy way. Now she ran across the lawn and through the wicket-gate and into the wood as quickly as she could go. But once she was well among the trees she walked more slowly; somehow she never felt inclined to run very fast in the forest or to talk loudly. There was



something soft and soothing in the air, in the gentle rustle high up among the branches and the uncertain light, a feeling of “mystery,” to put it shortly.

“I wonder,” said the little girl to herself, “I wonder if it all looked just as it does now when godmother was like me and strolled about the paths. I wonder if it will look just the same when I get to be quite old, as old as dear godmother is now. I wonder if it will look the same—let me see—a hundred years from now.”

“It will not take a hundred years for you to be an old woman,” said a voice close to her ear.

Mary gave a little start. Then, glancing up, she saw the two wood-pigeons perched on a low-growing branch just where she was passing. They had not been there a moment or two before, she was certain, and she felt a little vexed with them—with Mr Coo, at least, for she now knew their voices well enough to distinguish that it was he who had spoken to her—for startling her.

“Of course it won’t,” she replied rather crossly. “I am not so silly as all that. I shall be quite old in fifty years, or less than that I wasn’t thinking of godmother’s age when I wondered about a hundred years from now, nor about myself either, and if you please, Cooies, when you guess what I am thinking in my own mind, please guess the whole, and not odd bits.”

“All right,” said Mr Coo.

“No,” said Mary, “I think it’s all wrong when you get into that teasing way.”

“He doesn’t mean it, my dear,” said Mrs Coo, who was always a peacemaker, “but perhaps you are tired to-day. Would you rather not—”

“Oh,” interrupted Mary, “if you are going to say would I rather not go to see that secret part of the forest, please don’t say it. Of course I’m not tired or anything. I’ve just been *longing* to come.”

“Well then,” said Mr Coo, “listen, Mary, and I will tell you exactly what to do. Walk straight on till you come to the place where you stood still with your godmother yesterday and looked at the dark part among the trees. Then glance about you on the left, and after a little you will perceive lying on the ground a small grey feather. Note well the spot where it lies, then pick it up and fasten it on to your cap in the front.”

“My cap,” exclaimed Mary, putting up her hand to her head, “my hat, you mean—oh no, by the bye, I have my little fur cap on. How quickly you notice everything, dear Cooie! I remember thinking that my cap would be more comfortable for getting in and out among the bushes.”

The Cooies did not answer, but Mary felt sure that both their heads were well on one side, which she had found out for them meant a kind of smile, and when she glanced at them she saw that it was so.

“Well then,” she went on, “I beg your pardon for interrupting you—after I have stuck the grey feather in my cap?”

“Walk on seven paces from the exact spot—right foot one—left foot two—*exactly* seven, you understand. Then stand still and you will see a very small opening in the brushwood and bushes, by this time very thick and close, you know. It will seem almost too small an opening for you to push into, but don’t be afraid. You shall neither scratch your face nor tear your clothes, I promise you. The only thing you may dislike will be that for a little way it may be very dark—darker the farther you go, till—”

Mary felt a tiny bit frightened, and this made her interrupt again—

“I wouldn’t mind if you were with me,” she exclaimed. “Why can’t you stay with me now? You might perch on my shoulders, both of you—or I will carry you very carefully if you like.”

“No,” said both the wood-pigeons together, so that their voices sounded like one, “that would not do. There are rules, you see, Mary. You must do part of it for yourself. Don’t be afraid—the darkness won’t hurt you, and after a bit you will get out of it, and then—”

“Then, what?”

“You will see *us*, and—a good deal more,” was the reply, followed by a slight flutter, and when Mary looked up, both her friends had disappeared!

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## Chapter Eight.

### “A Little White Gate.”

Mary stood still for a moment or two, gazing after them, or rather gazing at the place where they had been. She felt, as she would have said herself, “rather funny”; not frightened exactly, and certainly very curious to see what was going to happen next, but just a *little* timid about making the plunge into the dark mysterious depths of the forest.

But it was now or never.

“If I let myself get silly and run back home, or anything like that,” she thought, “I daresay the Cooies will never care for me again, or come to see me or show me things. For I can see they are rather obstinate, and of course if they are fairies, or partly fairies, they like to be obeyed—fairies always do. And godmother too—I believe she understands

about fairies much more than she says—and she always is sure no harm can come to me in the forest. So I'd better be quick and look out carefully for the little grey feather."

She walked on therefore, not too fast, for fear of passing the signal, and with her eyes fixed on the bushes on the left. But it seemed to her that she had walked a good long way, farther than she expected, before she felt satisfied that she had got to the place where Miss Verity and she had stood the day before.

"Can I have passed it?" she asked herself, "and can I *possibly* have missed the feather, or can it have blown away?" and she stopped short, feeling a little anxious.

But just then a very faint "coo" reached her ears; it was scarcely to be heard, more like the shadow of the sound, but still it was plainly in front of her, and it encouraged Mary. She had not come too far, and stepping on again, she soon recognised the spot, and—a little bit on again, and she gave a tiny cry—there, safely nestling among the branches, within reach of her hand—was the wee grey, or rather "dove-coloured" feather.

"I might have known it would be all right—and of course anything fairy-ish *couldn't* blow away," she thought.

She picked up the feather, and took off her little fur cap, into which she fastened it without any difficulty, for though she had no pin—it isn't often, is it, that little girls have pins "handy" when wanted?—it seemed to catch into the skin of the fur, all of itself.

"It reminds me," thought Mary, "of 'Up the airy mountain—' that part about bed jacket, green cap, and white owl's feather—though I certainly don't want to be stolen away, like little Bridget, for seven years long, even by the Cooies. But I can trust them."

Then she placed her foot exactly below the branch where she had found the feather and stepped forward carefully, one, two, three, four—up to seven, and then stood still again.

At first she really thought for a moment or two that the wood-pigeons had been playing her a trick. The bushes and trees on both sides seemed to have got so very thick and close; she could not see the least sign of an opening for even a rabbit to get through on either the left or the right! And it felt so cold; so much colder, suddenly, it had become.

"I must go home," thought Mary, feeling ready to cry. "I believe the Cooies are imps after all, and not nice fairies. Yes, I'd better go home," and just at that moment came the sound of the big bell, not very loud, but quite distinct. Pleasance had not forgotten to ring it. "Three o'clock," thought Mary, "I had no idea I had been so long. Yes, I must turn back."

But—what was that other sound? Again, from among the bushes on the left, came the soft, encouraging little voice, "coo-coo,"—"don't be so distrustful, Mary; try again," it seemed to say, and as the little girl still hesitated a sudden glimmer of light flickered for a moment through the branches somehow, down to the ground, and then faded as quickly as it had come.

Mary stooped, and with her hands, well protected in their thick winter gloves, tried to push back some of the leaves. To her surprise they, or rather the branches on which they were growing, yielded to her touch in a wonderful way, as if they had been waiting to be put aside, and then she saw before her a very narrow, very dark little path, *but* a path, though it scarcely looked as if even a little doggie could have made its way along it! But her spirits had got up again by this time, and she pressed on bravely. It took some courage—it was like walking through the very high corn in a very fully grown corn-field, if ever you have done such a mischievous thing?—only with dark trees overhead, and no light anywhere scarcely—all gloom instead of golden, sunlight yellow. Still it could be done, and though Mary's heart was beating very fast, she persevered.

And before long she was rewarded. As the Cooies had promised, a few minutes were enough to bring her to the end of the chilly dark path, then she saw before her, close at hand, a little white gate.

When I say a *little* white gate, I do not mean a low one. On the contrary it was high, a good deal higher than the top of Mary's head, but quite narrow, and it seemed closely barred or wired, so that she could scarcely see through it. She had not time, however, to judge as to this, for almost as soon as she came to a stop in front of it she heard a swish and rustle in the air, and down came from she knew not where a whole flight, or flights of birds, in great excitement, who settled themselves on the gate, inside and outside, so to say, as if to defend it.

They did not chirp or chatter or even coo—"cooing" indeed would not have seemed to suit the state they were in, though she very quickly saw that they were all pigeons, or doves, or birds of that family, though of very varying sizes and colour, but so many, and all so plainly intending to prevent her trying to open the gate that she would have been quite afraid to try to do so. There was perfect silence, however.

"They must be all the uncles and aunts and cousins and relations of the Cooies," thought Mary. "I expect I shall have to go home, after all, without seeing the secret of the forest, as they certainly don't seem to want to let me pass in." She was again mistaken.

Another little rustle in the air, quite a tiny one this time, and Mary felt something alight on each of her shoulders. She glanced up—yes, it was her own friends.

"Coo-coo," they whispered to her. Then one of them or both—she was often not sure if only one, or the two together, were speaking—turned to the mass of birds clinging to the gate.

"How inhospitable you are!" they said. "What a welcome to a friend! Don't you see she *is* a friend? She has the

Queen's feather, and she has learnt our language," and then Mary felt that all the pairs of eyes of all the many birds were looking at her, and scarcely knowing that she did so, she raised her hand to her head, and touched the little grey feather nestling in her cap.

Instantly there came another flutter, and in the twinkling of an eye the gate was cleared. Still more, in some way which she could not see, it was opened, or opened itself, dividing, narrow though it was, in the middle, and the birds, as if by magic, arranged themselves in two long rows on each side, seeming to mark a path for her to step along, for of actual path there was none. Inside the gate there was just the very softest, shortest, greenest grass you could imagine, like lovely springy velvet or plush to walk on, and Mary stepped forward, feeling as if each time she put down her foot a sort of pleasure came through it.

Just at first, she scarcely took in all the wonderful things that had happened since she passed through the white gate. The rows of birds made her feel a little shy, for she saw that all their round eyes were fixed on her. But by degrees she began to notice everything more closely.

She seemed still to hear a sort of flutter and rustle that kept on steadily, and yet the birds were quite motionless—those in front of her, that is to say, but after a moment or two she turned round to see if she could find out the cause of the sounds she heard, and then she discovered that as soon as she had passed, the birds rose in couples and flew off, as if to say, "we have received her politely, and now we have other things to attend to."

On the whole Mary was rather glad of this. The numbers of birds made her, as I have said, feel rather shy and confused.

"I only want my own Cooies," she thought, "and not all their uncles and aunts and cousins," and she glanced forward again, trying to see how many more she would have to pass, and at that moment, to her great delight, she caught sight of something she had not seen before.

Right in front of her was another gate, but this time it was quite a low one, she could almost have jumped over it, she fancied, and it was not white, but green—grass green, which was perhaps the reason she had not seen it till she was quite near it. And the rows of birds stopped on this side of it, and, best of all, her Cooies flew down from her shoulders and perched themselves on the gate, which opened as the other had done, for her to pass through, the last of the stranger birds fluttering off as she did so, leaving her alone with her own two friends.

"Oh, I'm so glad they've all gone except you two," she said, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "What quantities of relations you have, Cooies! Do you know, they made me feel quite giddy? I shall have you all to myself now, and you can explain everything to me, and show me all over this beautiful place."

"Suppose you sit down and rest for a few minutes first," said Mr Coo. His manners became doubly polite and kind, now that Mary was his guest. "You have walked a good way, farther than you think, and you can see a great many things you may like to ask about, from where you are."

"Where," began Mary, "where shall I sit down?" she was going to say, but before she got further she found this was a question she did not need to ask, for just at one side of where she was standing she caught sight of the dearest and queerest arm-chair you ever saw. It was made of moss, or at least covered in moss, green and fresh, but not at all damp-looking. Nor was it so; on the contrary it was deliciously dry and springy.

Mary seated herself with great satisfaction, and the Cooies settled themselves on each arm of her chair and looked at her, their heads well on one side, which she had come to know meant that they were in high good humour.

Then she gazed about her.

She seemed to be in a very, very large bower, all carpeted with the same lovely short grass that she had noticed on first entering, and with smaller bowers opening, like cloisters, on all sides. Up above, it was very high, so high that she could not clearly see if there was any kind of roof or ceiling, or only the interlacing branches of the great tall trees meeting overhead. These trees walled it all in very thickly, it was easy to see, and thus made the dark, almost black look which this innermost spot of the forest had when seen from the outside.

But indeed everything was different from what Mary could have had any expectation of.

To begin with, the air was deliciously mild and warm, though not too hot, or with the shut-in feeling of a conservatory. On the contrary, little breezes were fluttering about, bearing the sweet fresh scents of a garden in late spring or early summer. And the light?

Where did it come from?

Mary gazed about for a minute or two before she spoke. She felt content for a little just to sit and look, and then she was rather afraid of asking any "silly" questions, for she had found out that the Cooies were far cleverer than any one could have imagined, which she explained to her own satisfaction by deciding that they were half, if not whole, fairies!

And this she felt more sure of than ever before, now that she had been led by them into this wonderful bower.

But where did the light come from?

It did not seem like sunshine; it was almost too soft and mellow, and yet it was certainly not moonlight, which is always cold and thin. It was more like sunshine coming through some gently tinted glass, or even silk, but it was *different* from any light that Mary could liken it to, in her own mind. So this seemed a sensible question to ask.

"Cooies, dear," she began, "I do feel so happy, and I do thank you for having brought me here to this lovely place. I really feel as if I never wanted to go away. But—it is very, very strange. My head is full of puzzles. And you did say I might ask questions?"

"Certainly," Mr Coo replied, "ask any you like, though you must understand that we cannot promise you answers to all. Or at least not the kind of answers you want, exactly."

Mary nodded her head. A feeling came over her that perhaps she would not really want answers to all, that it might spoil the nice part of the puzzles. Still, some things she did want to know.

"Then, first of all," she said, "where does the light come from? It is so beautifully clear and yet so soft I have never seen any light quite like it."

"No," said Mr Coo. "I don't suppose you ever have," and Mrs Coo murmured something which sounded like, "How could she?"

"And," Mr Coo continued, "I am sorry to say that your very first question is one which it is impossible for me to answer in any way which it would be possible for you to understand. I can only *half* do so, by asking *you* a question. Have you never heard or read that in fairy-land, real fairy-land, no mortal among the very few who have ever found their way there could tell how it was lighted?"

And as he said this, Mr Coo held his head further on one side than Mary had ever yet seen it.

She gave a little jump; she almost thought she would like to clap her hands.

"Oh, Cooie, dear," she cried, "that is much nicer than any explanation! Do you really mean that—"

"Sh—softly, please," he said. "I don't want you to think I really mean anything. It is just a tiny bit of an idea that I have got leave to put into your head."

"Leave—got leave," Mary repeated. "Whom have you got leave from?"

"This place does not all belong to us," was the reply. "You saw by the sign of the grey feather that I had to get leave to bring you in here. And that is all I can say—at present, any way."

"But it does mean," Mary persisted, "it must mean that this is fairy-land?"

"No," said Mr Coo, "that does not follow. You don't need to be in the sun to feel the good of its light and warmth."

"Certainly not," said Mary, laughing. "There wouldn't be much left of us in the sun. We'd be frizzled up in a moment, of course, before one could say 'tic,' wouldn't one?"

"Most likely," replied Mr Coo.

"But still—even if this isn't fairy-land, it might be close to it?" she went on.

"Yes, it might be," was the reply.

"Well, then, mayn't I think it is?"

"It will not do you any harm to do so."

But here Mrs Coo interrupted.

"Do not tease the dear child," she said, for Mrs Coo could speak up sometimes. "I promise you you are not far wrong, very far from far wrong indeed, if you do think so."

Mary felt very pleased and quite ready to go on with her questions. She looked about her to settle what to ask next.

"Please tell me," she said, "what are all those lots and lots of little harbours opening out of this very big one, and may I run about and peep into them?"

"One question at a time, if you've no objection," said the pigeon on her right hand again. "The small bowers are arranged for separate families when we have our great assemblies. We do everything in a very orderly way. As for looking into them, you may certainly do so—there is a great deal for you to see here, otherwise we would not have brought you. It would not be very amusing to spend all the time in just sitting still, talking to us."

"I don't know," said Mary, rather lazily. "It might not be very amusing, but it is very *nice*. It is so lovelily warm. But I am not tired now, mayn't I walk on?"

"I am afraid that to-day," said one of the Cooies,—which, Mary was not quite sure, as it was sometimes difficult to tell,—"I am afraid—" but just then Mary gave a great start.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I believe that's the bell; the four o'clock bell that Pleasance was to ring for me. I must go. It will take me a good while to get home," and she looked rather distressed.

"No, it won't. We will show you a short-cut," said both the Cooies together. This time she had no doubt that both were speaking. "Do not be afraid. We knew it was about time for you to go home, and we were just going to tell you so when you heard the bell. This is only a first visit, to teach you the way, as it were."

"Then may I come again very soon, and see all over, and peep into all the little arbours and everything?" asked Mary, her spirits rising again.

"Of course you may. It will be all arranged, you will see," said Mr Coe. "There are plans which we will tell you about, all in good time. But you may stay a few minutes longer. Pleasance will not expect you back the very moment she has rung for you."

And Mary was pleased to lean back in her mossy chair for a little bit.

"It is the warm feeling that is so nice here," she said presently. "Just right—neither too hot nor too cold. I don't mind its being a little cold, now the winter is coming, of course. Out-of-doors one can run, and in the house Pleasance says my godmother is sure to give me a fire in my own room as soon as I like, so I daresay I shall be warmer even than at auntie's house. But it *is* nice to have the summery feeling back again."

"Coo-coo," the wood-pigeons replied, which meant that they quite agreed with her.

"Is it always mild and warm in this funny place?" Mary went on.

"Always, just as you feel it," said Mr Coe.

"How nice!" said Mary. "I don't wonder you removed to the forest from the Square gardens. Yet you never seemed cold there. I used to watch you last spring, soon after the winter, before it had begun to get warm, you know, and wish I was dressed in feathers like you. That was before I knew you, or had learnt to talk to you. It *is* cold in the nursery early in the morning sometimes, if the fire hasn't burnt up well, and the little ones sit at the warm side of the table, you see. I shall love to come back here again," she went on. "You'll *promise* to settle about it soon, won't you? I do so want to see everything you can show me."

"We won't forget," was the reply. "But it is time for you to be going. Lean back a little more."

Mary did so, though wondering why, for she was quite getting into the way of obeying her little friends without hesitation.

And to her surprise she felt that the chair, which had seemed almost as if growing out of the ground, tilted back with her, though gently, as if on rockers. Then it swung forwards again, though gently still, and ended by very politely, so to say, though decidedly, turning her out. The surprise, it was all too gentle to make her start, confused her a little. Afterwards she felt almost sure that she must have shut her eyes for half a second, for the next thing she knew, she was standing quite steadily just on the forest-side of the small wicket-gate through which one entered into the garden of Dove's Nest.

"Dear me, Cooies," exclaimed Mary, "that *was* a short-cut. *Now*, you can never say you are not."

But before she had time to add "fairies," she found she was talking to the air, or at any rate not to the wood-pigeons, for they had disappeared.

Mary almost laughed, though she felt a tiny bit provoked too.

"They do treat me *rather* too babyishly," she thought. "They might explain what they are going to do, a little more. But then, after all, in fairy stories they never do, and I am now quite sure that I *am* in a sort of fairy story—that is to say in all to do with the Cooies. If it was the night I should think I was dreaming; but it isn't the night, and I am very glad of it. It is much nicer to have really to do with fairies."

And she ran across the lawn in good spirits, not sorry to have missed the chilly walk through the wood.

"It couldn't but have felt cold after that deliciously warm place," she thought to herself. "Perhaps that is why they brought me home in that magic way. They wouldn't like me to get a sore throat, or a sneezing cold, or any of these horrible things. Yes, I may be quite sure they are very, very kind fairies, whatever sort they are exactly."

Pleasance was in the hall as Mary came in. She looked up brightly.

"Well, you have come home punctually, Miss Mary," she said. "I suppose you heard the bell quite distinctly?"

"Quite," said Mary, "both times."

"That is very nice," said the maid. "Now we can feel quite comfortable about you when you are amusing yourself in the forest. And you don't feel chilly, I hope, Miss? It would never do for you to catch cold while you are with us."

"No, indeed," said Mary, smiling. "I shouldn't like it at all. But you needn't be afraid. It felt *quite* warm in—the forest. At least after the first it did. Shall I get ready for tea now? I suppose godmother will be home soon."

"Sure to be so," replied Pleasance. "My lady is always punctual. Indeed I thought I heard the ponies' bells in the distance just before you came in. It will be nice for Miss Verity to find you back and ready to welcome her."

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## Chapter Nine.

### "That Means Good Luck, I am Sure."

Pleasance's last words were Miss Verity's first ones.

"It *is* nice to find you back," she said to Mary, as she drove up, with a cheery ting-ting from the ponies' bells. "And I hope tea is quite ready, for I have had rather a cold drive," she added, as she got out.

"Yes, yes, godmother, dear," said Mary, who was standing in the porch. "I'm sure it is. And I'm so glad I was here just a few minutes before you."

"I can see you managed to amuse yourself in the forest," said Miss Verity, when she had taken off her wraps and they were sitting together in the drawing-room, the tea-table in its "winter place" near the fire. "You are looking so rosy and bright."

"I did enjoy myself very much indeed," said Mary.

"I thought you would; indeed I knew you would," her godmother said. But she did not ask any questions, and there was rather a dreamy tone in her voice and a look in her eyes as she leant back in her chair and gazed into the fire, which made Mary again think to herself, as she had thought several times already, that "godmother herself knows something about the fairy secrets of the forest."

And Mary felt still surer of this when, after a little silence, Miss Verity said quietly—

"I shall never feel uneasy about you when you are in the forest—even quite alone—now that I see that you are obedient and thoughtful about keeping promises, my little Cinderella," and she smiled the pretty smile that made her face look quite young again.

"But Cinderella *did* forget," said Mary, laughing; "at least she only remembered *just* in time, didn't she?"

"She had no Pleasance to ring a big bell," replied her godmother. "Still, she did not mean to disobey, and the very moment she found how late it was, she ran off, even at the risk of offending the prince. I have always thought that one of the nicest parts of the story. For so many would have said to themselves, 'Oh, I'm sure to be too late, so I'll just stay on and enjoy myself a little longer.' If I had not satisfied myself that you are to be trusted, my Mary, I could not let you stay alone in the forest, though for a good dutiful child there can be no safer place." Mary felt very pleased. And—was it fancy—just then a tiny "coo-coo!" seemed to breathe itself across the room from the side where the window on to the lawn was.

"How brightly the fire is burning!" Miss Verity went on, after a little pause. "I wonder if there is frost in the air."

"I don't know," said Mary, adding merrily, "but I can tell you, godmother, these are fir-cones in the fire! Perhaps it is that."

"No doubt of it," said Miss Verity. "I might have guessed it. Did you bring any in with you?"

"Not to-day, but I brought some, a few at a time, before. And I think some of the servants have been gathering them. I saw Myrtle with some in her apron, and I have scented them several times about the house. It is such a nice smell."

"Yes, and they burn so beautifully. I have never known any fir-cones like those in our forest, not even in Germany," replied her godmother.

"They're like everything else about here, I think," said Mary.

Miss Verity looked pleased.

"Do look, godmother," Mary added quickly. "There *are* such funny pictures in the fire. There, over at your side, do you see? It is like the edge—what should I call it?—of a ship, and somebody looking up as if he was watching something. I know what it makes me think of; it is Michael, I wonder if it is the middle of the night just now where he is, and if perhaps he is standing at the side of his ship looking up at the stars?"

"And thinking of home and the dear ones there, and of his little cousin Mary," added Miss Verity. "Perhaps so, though I think sailors are generally too busy, or too glad to go to sleep when their busy time is over, to have much leisure for star-gazing."

"But I am sure Michael is *always*, nearly, thinking of home," said Mary, with a touch of reproach in her voice. "You don't know, godmother, how very loving and kind he is."

"I am sure of it," said Miss Verity, quickly. "Do not mistake me, dear. The brother I loved best of all, long ago, was a sailor, and it is very rarely that sailors have not loving faithful hearts, I think. Does Michael know that you are here with me?"

"Oh yes," said Mary. "He knew it before he went away. He was very glad I was coming. He was sure I would be happy here. You see it is a little lonely sometimes at auntie's when Michael's away for such a long time. The little ones are so little."

"Yet here you haven't even little ones," said her godmother, smiling. "How is it you are not lonely then?"

"I have *you*" said Mary, "and—and the forest, and you let me go about by myself. And I like the country much better than a town."

"Even in winter?" asked Miss Verity.

Mary hesitated.

"Yes, I think so," she said, "though the shops are *very* pretty about Christmas time, and the streets lighted up when it begins to get dark in the afternoons, do look so nice. But I daresay, godmother, *here* it is never dull or gloomy, even in winter. The forest must look lovely with snow on the branches, and shiny icicles, and I should think it's always rather dry to walk about there, on the fir needles."

"It is never wet for very long, certainly, in the forest," said her godmother, "but still we have dull gloomy days, and days when it never leaves off raining at all, and one is glad to stay at home beside a bright cheery fire like this."

Mary glanced at the fire again—the picture she had seen in it had melted or changed by this time, but in another corner she saw what seemed to her like a sort of arbour, with a bird at the entrance. This reminded her of the secret of the forest, and she wondered to herself what it was like inside the white gate on a dull rainy day such as Miss Verity had been speaking of. Was it *always* warm and bright there? Yes, she could not remember if the wood-pigeons had said so, but she felt sure it must be so.

"Otherwise," she thought, "it would not be even the edge of fairy-land."

Then her mind strayed to other things. She began wondering if she would soon have a letter from Michael, and if the picture in the fire could have been a sort of fairy message from him, and she quite started when her godmother spoke again.

"The next time you are in the forest, Mary dear," she said, "or the first time you feel at a loss for anything to amuse yourself with, I should be very glad of more fir-cones. I like to make a provision of them while they are still perfectly dry and crisp."

"Yes, I am very fond of picking them up," said Mary. "I might have brought some in already, if I had had a basket with me."

"Pleasance has one or two nice light ones on purpose," said Miss Verity. "She will show you where she keeps them. If to-morrow is fine again, like to-day," she went on, "I should like you to go a drive with me. I think Jackdaw and Magpie were very surprised at my not taking you to-day: I often fancy they go along with more spirit when there is some one with me; they like to hear our voices, and little Thomas and I seldom converse." Little Thomas was the small groom who sat in the back seat, and he was noted for his silence, an uncommon quality in a boy!

Mary laughed.

"No," she said, "I couldn't fancy you having much conversation with little Thomas, certainly."

She felt in her heart just a tiny bit disappointed that there was no likelihood of her going to the forest again the next day. But then her godmother was so good to her that she knew it would be very wrong and ungrateful not to be glad to do all she wished. And besides—

"If I wasn't quite good, or at least trying to be so," she said to herself, "the Cooies wouldn't care for me, or make plans for me or show me things or anything. I am quite sure they would not."

This was her last waking thought that night, and almost, I think, her first the next morning.

And when she was dressed, and stood for a moment or two at the casement window, which she had opened a little to have a breath of the forest air, there seemed to come an answer to her thought.

"Coo-coo, coo," sounded softly from the direction of the trees, and Mary just at first hoped that it would be followed by the rustle of little wings and a morning visit from her two friends. But no, only the sweet voices again, this time a little farther off, and Mary, who was getting wonderfully quick at understanding her Cooies' ways, knew that this meant they were not coming to visit her to-day, but that they were pleased with what she meant to try to do and feel.

The morning passed pleasantly, and the sky, which had been rather grey and overcast early in the day, cleared up about noon and promised to be bright and sunny for the remaining hours.

So Mary felt quite light-hearted when, shortly after luncheon, Miss Verity sent her to get ready for their drive.

"Wrap yourself up warmly," her godmother said. "It gets chilly in the afternoon—or stay—I have an idea," and with a smile on her kind face Miss Verity went upstairs, and Mary heard her talking to Pleasance.

In a few minutes she came back, carrying something over her arm which looked to Mary as if her Cooies and all their numerous relations had helped to make it! It was a little cape—made, not of fur, but of tiny feathers, too soft and small to bristle or break, of every shade of bluey-grey, and lined with white, still quite clean, though the cape was evidently old, and the white had grown rather creamy-coloured through lying by for many years.

"It was mine when I was a little girl like you," said her godmother. "It was considered my very best, and somehow it never got dirty or seemed to need cleaning, though some of the shades are very delicate, as you see. It will be just the thing for you to wear when you drive with me these chilly afternoons."

Mary eyed the cloak with great interest and approval.

"It is lovely," she said, "and wonderful I don't think you could get one like it in any shop now, godmother, could you?"

Miss Verity shook her head.

"I doubt if you could," she said. "And I do not even know if it came from a shop long ago. It was given to my mother for me when I was only a baby by some friend of *her* mother's, and it came 'from abroad,' which was all I ever knew about it. But we must be quick, dear; Jackdaw and Magpie are not fond of waiting at the door."

Nor were they; as Mary ran downstairs she heard their bells tinkling impatiently. And when she called out cheerfully—

"We're coming, ponies, we're coming," it seemed as if the little satisfied toss of their heads meant that they were pleased that she was coming too!

It was a cold day, but dry and crisp, and Mary felt very cosy with the soft grey cape on the top of her own little scarlet cloth jacket. Miss Verity drove quickly, though, as she told Mary, they had not so very far to go.

"But I shall have to stay half-an-hour or so at Crook Edge, the house I want to call at," she added. "I am going to say good-bye to two girls, who have lived there for some years with their father. He died last year, and now they are leaving for good. Blanche, the elder, is going to be married, and her younger sister, who is scarcely grown-up, is to live with her. They are very sweet girls."

"Are you very sorry to say good-bye to them?" Mary asked.

Miss Verity hesitated.

"For my own sake, yes. But I am glad for them. It would have been too quiet a life at Crook Edge. It is an out-of-the-way place, at the side of the loneliest part of the forest."

"Everywhere about here seems to have to do with the forest, doesn't it?" said Mary.

"Yes, it never lets itself be forgotten," her godmother replied, glancing as she spoke at the dark green line a little distance off, which seemed as it were to follow them as they went, "and we who love it and almost feel as if we were its children, don't want ever to forget it."

"No, no, of course not," said Mary eagerly. "I feel like that too, though I haven't been very long here. I know quite how you mean."

Miss Verity smiled, the very pleased kind of smile that, as Mary had learnt to know, told of her liking to feel that her little god-daughter understood and sympathised in feelings that some children would not have been able to share.

They did not talk much more till they reached Crook Edge, where Miss Verity's young friends were looking out for them. The elder of the two girls, whose name was Blanche, was very pretty, almost the prettiest person, Mary thought, that she had ever seen. She was tall and slight and very fair; perhaps the black dress she still wore made her seem taller and slighter and fairer than if she had been in colour, and her expression was very sweet. She looked so lovingly at her younger sister, who was also pretty, though not as pretty as Blanche, that Mary could not help thinking to herself that it must be very nice to have a kind grown-up sister! And also felt very pleased when both the girls kissed her as she sprang out of the pony-carriage.

"What a delicious cloak," said Blanche, as she was helping her visitors to take off some of their wraps in the hall. "It suits your house, Miss Verity. It is really like a dove's mantle."

"Yes," Miss Verity replied, "it is a rather remarkable cloak, and the odd thing is that though I have had it nearly all my life, I do not really know its history, and there is no one who can tell it to me."

"I have never seen a cloak the least like it," said Blanche, stroking the soft feathers as she spoke. "But then," she went on, half-laughingly, "it only suits Dove's Nest. Nothing there seems quite like anywhere else: don't you think so, Mary?"

"Yes," said Mary. "Everything is prettier and funnier than anywhere else."

"I always envy the name," said Blanche. "*Our* name is so ugly and rough—Crook Edge; but it doesn't matter now, as it will so soon be our home no longer," and she gave just a little sigh.

"Are you sorry to go away?" asked Mary, looking up gently with her wistful hazel eyes.

"One is always sorry to go away from what has been a home," said Blanche. "And Milly and I love the forest. By the bye, Miss Verity, we have had the white dove here again since I saw you,—the large white dove."

"Have you, my dear?" said Miss Verity, looking interested. "That means good luck, I feel sure."

"Good luck and good-bye," said Blanche. "Yes, she came and perched on a tree in the garden, and cooed so sweetly. The gardener says she is too large for a dove; that she must be some kind of wood-pigeon only."

"Unless," added Milly, "unless, as he says, 'she's one as has strayed from furrin parts.' But I don't think so. She looks quite at home, and not at all cold or starved. Anyway Blanche and I always call her the white dove. She *is* so pretty, and one day we thought we saw something gleaming on her neck, like a tiny gold chain—that almost seems as if she was a pet bird, doesn't it?"

"Or a fairy one?" said Miss Verity, smiling.

They had lingered at Crook Edge rather longer than Mary's godmother had intended, and though the day was still fine, it was beginning to get dark and the clouds were massing as if rain might be not very far off. Mary gave a little



shiver, and Miss Verity looked a trifle uneasy.

"You are not cold, dear?" she said.

"Oh no," said the little girl, "I don't think I *could* be, with this cloak. It was just a sort of feeling, you know, when the night seems to be coming."

All the same, she said to herself, though Miss Verity whipped up the ponies and they went along at a good pace:

"I wish we were at home."

And, wonderful to tell, before she had time to wish it again, there they were! For the next words Mary heard were,—

"Wake up, dear. We are at Dove's Nest."

And when she opened her eyes, there was Miss Verity's face smiling down on her, as she half-lay, half-sat in her place with her head on her godmother's shoulder, and Myrtle and Pleasance looking a little concerned, as "the ladies" had been later of returning than usual, but rather amused too, and both quite ready to lift "Miss Mary" out and carry her to the warmth and brightness indoors.

How Miss Verity had managed to drive with her godchild peacefully making a pillow of her arm is a puzzle I cannot explain.

But as Mary slipped off the feather cloak, feeling as warm as a toast, she looked at it rather curiously, for she had her own thoughts about it.

"Shall I keep it in my room, godmother?" she asked. "That is to say, if you mean to lend it me again."

"You may count it yours as long as you are here," Miss Verity replied. "I am sure you will take care of it. And—then we shall see."

"Thank you very much," said Mary, adding, "I don't think I should like to take it away with me. It would get dirty in a town, and that would make me unhappy. I have one drawer upstairs with nothing in. I should like to keep it in there."

"Very well, you may, and Pleasance will give you some nice tissue-paper to cover it with."

Pleasance did not forget to do so. Mary found two or three large sheets of pale-blue paper lying ready on her bed late that evening, in which she carefully wrapped the mantle.

Perhaps it was because she did this the last thing before going to sleep, that she had strange dreams that night, in which the cloak, and the wood-pigeons, and pretty Blanche and her cousin Michael and her godmother all seemed to be mixed up together, though in the morning she could not distinctly remember anything except that the dreams had been interesting and pleasant.

"I wonder if my Cooies could tell anything about the feather cloak," she thought, "and oh, I do wonder if the white dove is any relation of theirs, or if they know her."

And this morning too she jumped out of bed the very moment Pleasance came to call her, so that she might dress quickly and have a minute or two to stand at the window before the bell rang, so that if the wood-pigeons were anywhere near, they could come to talk to her.

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## Chapter Ten.

### "You Cannot Have Read Many Fairy Stories."

But no, she stood there, opening the window a little, though it was decidedly cold, in vain. There was no sign or sound of her friends, and Mary felt disappointed and rather cross when the bell rang, and she had to hasten downstairs without even the pretty greeting, she loved so well, reaching her from the neighbouring trees.

"They are really rather unkind," she thought. "I do believe they know everything, or at least most things about me. I am sure they know I want to see them this morning. I daresay I shall hear nothing more of them—ever—or perhaps they'll come, but after I am gone; very likely the white dove will come back to Crook Edge after Blanche and Milly are gone. I don't believe birds have got any hearts, whether they're half fairies or not."

"Mary," said Miss Verity, who noticed Mary's moods more than the little girl knew, "will you gather some fir-cones for me this afternoon? I shall not be going a drive, as the ponies need shoeing, and besides that, I have some long letters to write. So you can amuse yourself in the forest if you like." Somehow Mary's spirits rose when she heard this; for though feeling, as she was, rather offended with the wood-pigeons, it made her, all the same, hopeful that she might come across them.

And as soon as possible after her early dinner she set off, carrying the basket that Pleasance had given her to fill with fir-cones.

"I think I must look like a rather big Red-Riding-Hood," she thought, as she passed through the wicket between Dove's Nest and the forest; "though my basket is empty and hers was full, and I am hoping to meet the Cooies and not fearing to meet a wolf! And though my coat is red like hers, it is a jacket and not a cloak."

But she walked a good way without meeting anything, and again she began to feel rather cross with her little friends.

"I shall just not think any more about them," she said to herself. "I need not go farther; there are lots of nice cones here. I will just fill the basket and go home, and I will tell godmother that I don't care to come to the forest after all. It is too dull."

It did seem very silent that afternoon; all the summer and even autumn sounds had gone, only the wintry ones of a branch snapping and falling, or leaves softly dropping, their little lives over. And now and then some faint strange bird's note or cry, as the winged traveller passed rapidly overhead, which sounded to Mary's fancy like a farewell.

"It's going away," she thought, "to some lovely warm place for the winter. Perhaps it has come from far north, where it is still colder than here, and is just only passing. I don't think I like the winter after all, I wish you would take me with you, birdie," and she gave a little shiver, for she had been standing about, as she picked up the cones. And the cold feeling reminded her of the soft, bright warmth of the secret part of the forest, and made her again reproach the Cooies in her heart, for she felt sure there would be no use in trying to find the white gate or to pass through it, if she did find it, without their help.

But patience is generally rewarded in the end, and Mary had shown patience in her actions if not in her thoughts, for she had by this time well filled her basket. And as she dropped into it the last cone or two it would hold, she heard the murmur that she had, though scarcely owning it to herself, been listening for all the afternoon.

"Coo-coo,"—very faint and distant at first, then clearer and nearer, till, on to each shoulder there came a rustle and a tiny weight, and—they were there! In rather a teasing mood, however!

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary," they cooed. "How is your basket filled?"

Mary shrugged her shoulders, but she only heard a "cooey" laugh.

"No, no, you can't shake us off," they said.

"Quite contrary, indeed," quoted Mary. "I should say it to you, not you to me. You know how I've been wanting you and watching for you at my window, and now you've let half the afternoon go without coming near me. It's too late now for anything."

"You are quite mistaken," was the reply. "There is plenty of time. Business first and pleasure afterwards. You have got a nice basketful of cones, so now you can come with us with a clear conscience."

"I wish you wouldn't bother about my conscience; it's all right," said Mary, rather crossly still, though in her heart she quite trusted the Cooies, and was delighted to go with them. "What shall I do with the basket?" she went on.

"Leave it here—on the path. It will be quite safe. You are close to the white gate, though you did not know it," said Mr Coo. "Turn round."

So Mary did, putting down her basket, and feeling rather like a big ship steered by a very small person at the helm. And sure enough, the tiny path, or passage rather, scarcely to be called a path, was there at her side, though she had not seen it when busy gathering the cones.

It seemed less of a scramble this time, and only a very few paces to go, before they were at the gate. Mary had no grey feather in her cap this time as an "open sesame," and no need for one apparently, for the white gate opened of itself as soon as they reached it, "without the least fuss. I suppose it is because the Cooies are on my shoulders," thought she.

And just as they got to the other gate the wood-pigeons hopped down, and actually, with their beaks, or feet, or *somehow*, pushed it open, without any difficulty, holding it back till Mary had passed through, when it gently closed.

The little girl stood still, looking round her in expectation of seeing the crowds of birds as before. But not one was there! The place, though lovelier than ever, she thought, as she glanced at the beautiful light, flickering and filtering through the interlacing bushes, and rested her eyes on the fresh green, and felt the soft warmth creeping caressingly round her, was quite deserted. And as she turned to her little friends in surprise, they answered, as now often happened, her unspoken question.

"No," they said, "you will not meet any of our relations to-day. They are very busy elsewhere, as you will hear. But that will make it all the easier to show you the arbours you so much want to see."

"Thank you," said Mary, not sorry to hear this, for the crowds of birds had just a little worried her, and she was feeling rather stiff and tired with the cold and with stooping so much to pick up the cones.

"But in the first place," said one of the Cooies—I think it was Mr Coo—"you must rest a little and get warm."

He looked at her as he spoke, with his head on one side. He and Mrs Coo were not on her shoulders now, as I said, but on the ground a little in front of her. "You have not got on your new cloak to-day," he said. "It would have kept you warm."

"Of course I couldn't wear it to run about the forest in," said Mary. "Well, to pick up cones in—I've not had much running about to-day, certainly. But how did you know about it?"

"Never mind just now," was the reply. "Sit down," and glancing round, Mary saw her mossy chair there as before, though she felt sure that a moment or two ago its place had been empty. But she was very glad to settle herself in it

all the same, and before she had sat still for two minutes she felt rested and refreshed.

"It is a nice chair," she said, patting the arms, on which the Cooies were now perched, approvingly. "Now tell me, please, where are all your hundreds of relations to-day? What are they busy about?"

"They are preparing for a great ceremony," said Mr Coo, solemnly. "The day after to-morrow is fixed for it to take place. Our Queen—Queen White Dove—every year gives—"

"Your Queen," exclaimed Mary. "I never heard of her before—I did not know you had a Queen! Queen White Dove," and something seemed to come into her mind as she spoke, as if she *did* remember—what was it?

"Are you sure you never heard of her before?" asked the wood-pigeons, their heads very much on one side. "But it does not matter. You will, I hope, see her for yourself, as I will explain, if you will not interrupt. She gives a prize every year for some special thing, the finding or making of which calls for skill and perseverance on the part of her subjects. This year the prize is promised to the bringer of the whitest feather. It must be as white as her own plumage, which I must tell you has never yet been matched. So there has been a great deal of search for such a feather, and work too, as some of us have endeavoured in various ways to whiten to great perfection some of our own feathers, though it remains to be seen if we have succeeded. Myself, I doubt it," he went on (for Mr Coo had taken up the thread of the discourse), "and as the ceremonial will be a very great and beautiful sight, we have obtained leave for you, Mary, to be present at it, provided—this condition cannot be avoided—you yourself are one of the competitors."

"I don't know what that means," said Mary. "Please explain. I should *so* like to come, and you would manage somehow, wouldn't you, for me to get leave from godmother."

"One question at a time, *if* you please," said Mr Coo, in the tone which rather provoked Mary always. "Being a competitor simply means that you too will try to win the prize."

Mary's face fell.

"Oh then it's no good," she said. "I can't possibly find the whitest of white feathers."

Neither of the wood-pigeons spoke for a moment or two. They only looked at each other. Then said Mr Coo,—

"You are not a stupid child, Mary, yet you are rather slow and dull sometimes. How about your feather cloak?"

"Oh," said Mary again, "*that's* no good. If you know about the cloak, and I suppose you do, in some queer way, for *I've* never told you what it's like, you must know that it isn't white at all. It's made up of all sorts of shades of bluey-grey—like your feathers—even pinky-looking here and there."

"Ah," said Mr Coo. "Yes, I am aware of that." Mary opened her eyes.

"Then what do you mean?" she asked.

This time Mrs Coo replied. She never liked to be left out of the conversation for long.

"You cannot have read or heard many fairy stories, my dear."

"Yes indeed I have, heaps," said Mary, more and more puzzled. "Tell me why you think that."

"We cannot explain," said Mrs Coo. "It's against the rules. There are *some* things that humans must find out for themselves," and Mary understood that it would be no use questioning more.

Then, as she was now quite rested, the wood-pigeons proposed that they should take her round the bowers. They hopped on in front, Mary following. And oh, how pretty the bowers were! They were alike and yet different. Inside each, hung, quite high up, a little coloured lamp. It did not seem as if anything were burning in it: it was more as if some of the wonderful light in the whole place, whose source was one of the secrets, had been caught into the lamp and tinted with its exquisite colour. Such colours as Mary had never dreamt of, even though they somehow reminded her of the countless shades of her own little cloak. And there were no two lamps the same, nor were there any two bowers the same, as I have said.

For the varieties of foliage were endless. Some were very fine and small—like great masses of what we call "maiden-hair fern"; some larger and richer, like the trees Mary had read of in the tropics of the everyday world, but all foliage only—no flowers. And in each bower there were cosy-looking nests, and silvery-looking perches, and trickling water, as clear as crystal—everything to make a birds' paradise. No wonder that the Cooies and their countless relations loved to come for a rest, in the midst of their busy lives, to the secret place of the great forest.

"Now you have visited all the bowers," said the wood-pigeons at last, and Mary, glancing round, saw that they were back again at the entrance, where stood the mossy chair.

"Not your Queen's one?" she asked. "Has she not one of her very own, even though I suppose in a way the whole place belongs to her. *Our* Queen, you know, Queen Victoria, has several palaces just for herself, though of course all our country is hers too."

"No," was the reply. "This is not our Queen's home. She only visits it. Even this beautiful place is not beautiful enough for her."

Mary drew a deep breath.

"Then," she said, "I suppose her home is in real real fairy-land, and you say this is only on the borders. And," as a sudden thought struck her, "she visits outside of here too, sometimes. I remember now why I seemed to know about her. It must be the Queen who goes now and then to coo to Blanche and Milly at Crook Edge. A most beautiful, quite, *quite* white dove, with a ring of gold round her neck."

"You may call it gold," said Mr Coo, "but it is really more beautiful than any gold you have ever seen. Yes—that is our Queen. Your friends are highly favoured. They are good, and they have had sorrow—"

"Yes," Mary interrupted, "they are still dressed in black, and I am sure they are good."

"That is reason enough for the Queen's favour," said Mrs Coo, "and now they are going to be happy."

"I am so glad," said Mary. "How I *would* like to see the Queen! But there is no use thinking of it I could *never* find a feather white enough, however I searched, and there is no time now. Thank you very much, Cooies, for getting leave for me to come; but it is no good, you see. And—oh there is my bell! Shall I go home by the short-cut again?" and she glanced at the chair.

"And what about your basket of cones, then?" said Mr Coo. "It is outside, and you promised to get them."

"Oh I forgot," said Mary. "Well, never mind. I daresay I shan't see you again for a good while, so you might come part of the way with me."

They did not answer; but when Mary had passed through the two gates into the forest, where it was beginning to look quite dark and to feel very chilly, there was the basket, and the Cooies on the handle.

"You sit down on the cones," they said; and as she did so, without questioning, she felt herself uplifted, and glancing at the wood-pigeons, she saw that their wings were outspread for full flight.

It all seemed to pass in a moment; she had not time to think to herself that she and the basket and the birds were all flying together in some wonderful way, before there came—no, it could not be called a bump, it was too gentle for that, but a sudden stop, and there they were all of them just at the little wicket-gate leading through into Dove's Nest garden.

"Thank you, Cooies," said Mary, feeling as if she *should* be out of breath, though she wasn't, "and—and—good-bye."

"For the present," added Mr Coo. "But, Mary, remember, if you want to join our great gathering the day after to-morrow, there *is* a way for you to do so; you have only to sharpen your wits and remember some of the fairy tales."

"There is one," said Mrs Coo softly, "about a prince who had a wishing—"

"Hush," said Mr Coo, "it is against the rules to give such *very* broad hints. But I may tell you this without any hinting at all, Mary. If you come you need only walk through the forest to the place where you found us—"

"Or you found me," interrupted Mary.

"Where we met to-day," he went on, "and there we shall meet you again"; and before Mary had time to say any more, the wood-pigeons were off, out of sight!

And Mary rather slowly made her way to the house, carrying the basket of fir-cones and thinking over all she had seen, and wondering what her friends meant by their curious hints.

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## Chapter Eleven.

### "From The Islands of Gorgeous Colours."

Miss Verity took Mary a drive again the next day. It was not as interesting as the last one—the one to Crook Edge, I mean, to see Blanche and Milly. They did not pay any visits, as Miss Verity had several messages in the little town two or three miles off, where she had to go once a week or so to the shops.

Mary went into one or two of them with her godmother, and was amused by their quaint old-fashionedness; but when it came to a call at the Post-Office, where Miss Verity had some business to see to, she told Mary she had better wait outside in the pony-carriage, as it was a bright sunny afternoon, and she was well wrapped up in her feather cloak.

So Mary sat there thinking, and I daresay you can guess what her thoughts were about. She was wondering and wondering what the wood-pigeons had meant by their hints; and just as her godmother came out again and stepped into the carriage, she had got the length of saying to herself—

"Oh, I *can't* guess, and I'm tired of puzzling about it any more. I just wish—oh, how I do wish—that I could find a *perfectly* white feather, the whitest that ever was seen! If only one of those dear little fluffy clouds would drop down and turn into one, it would do beautifully."

She was looking up at the sky as she thought this; it was very blue, and the scudding cloudlets were very white; and—was it fancy?—just at that moment it seemed to Mary that a little quiver went through her cloak, as if it, or something about it, had suddenly "come alive," or as if a tiny breeze had passed through it. But no; there was no wind at all that afternoon. Miss Verity remarked as they drove home how very still it was.

Something more than a quiver ran through Mary herself when she got out of the carriage and went into the hall. It

was still full daylight, and there on the table lay a letter—a foreign letter—addressed to herself; and with a thrill of delight Mary saw that the writing was her cousin Michael's!

"Oh, godmother!" she exclaimed, "it is for me—all for myself, not just a scrap inside auntie's, and it has come straight from—from India, is it?"

"From the West Indies, dear," said Miss Verity. "I know his ship was to be at one of the principal islands there a short time ago. Now just throw off your cloak and run into the drawing-room and read your letter. It won't do you any harm to keep on your other things for a few minutes."

Mary did as her godmother said. She put down her feather cloak carefully on a seat in the hall—somehow she never felt inclined to handle it carelessly,—and ran in to read her precious letter by the fire.

Surprises were not at an end for her to-day.

As she opened the envelope and drew out its contents something fluttered down to the floor. At first sight she could not believe her eyes; she thought she was dreaming, for when she stooped to pick the little object up, she saw that it was a small feather—white, *perfectly* white, "as white," thought Mary to herself, with astonished delight, "as white as snow." She scarcely dared to touch it, but slipping it back into the envelope, she went on to read the letter. It was not a very long one, but most kind and affectionate, as Michael's always were, and it contained one piece of news which was full of interest. Through some quite unexpected changes, her cousin wrote, it was possible, just *possible*, that he might be home again by Christmas, and able to be "backwards and forwards" among them all for some weeks or even months. And then he went on to explain about the feather. It had dropped at his feet, he said, from some bird passing overhead, while he was standing, idle for once, looking over the sea and thinking of home, "and of you, little Mary," he added, "so I thought I would just slip it into my letter."

"He has no idea *how* pleased I am with it," thought Mary. "It has come just in time for me to go to the Dove Queen's great party, and I shouldn't wonder—no, I really shouldn't—if it gained the prize, for I am almost sure it is a fairy feather."

And the word fairy reminded her of what the Cooies had said, and all of a sudden another idea came into her mind.

"I do believe *that* was it," she said, speaking aloud in her excitement. "Yes, it all fits in with what they said and didn't say. The feather cloak is a fairy cloak, a 'wishing cloak.' It brought me home in what seemed a moment the other day, by making me fall asleep, and to-day it has brought this beautiful white feather just in time! Oh what fun and how nice! I am sure I have guessed right."

And as if in reply, at that moment she heard, though the windows were all closed, faintly, yet distinctly, "coo-coo," from the side of the room nearest the gate into the forest. But Mary knew it meant,—

"Yes, you *have* guessed right at last, Mary."

She was in great spirits all that evening, and her godmother quite sympathised in her pleasure at having heard from Michael. And when Mary showed her the feather, Miss Verity looked at it most admiringly.

"It is a lovely feather," she said. "I don't think I ever saw anything, except snow, so perfectly white." This pleased Mary very much, and made her feel still happier about her chance of the Queen Dove's prize.

"Godmother," she said, "may I spend to-morrow afternoon again in the forest? You don't particularly want me to drive with you, do you?"

She could not help feeling a *little* anxious as to the answer, but yet—the Cooies had managed everything all right so far. She felt that she might trust them.

"No, dear," said Miss Verity. "I do not mean to drive myself to-morrow, for I am going to send to fetch some rather large parcels from the railway station. And in any case I like you to play in the forest when you wish it. It will be fine to-morrow, too, I think, as the sun has set very red."

"I'm so glad," said Mary, "and thank you very much. Shall I get any more cones?" she added.

"Yes, please, as many as you can, but don't stand about too much, so as to get chilled."

"I almost wish," thought Mary, as she was going to bed, "that I hadn't reminded godmother of the fir-cones. I am *so* afraid of being too late for the Queen's party. But perhaps it wouldn't have been kind not to offer to get them. I know what I'll do, I'll start as early as ever I can, and run all the way to the place near the white gate—I am sure I know it now—and pick up the cones *there*; there are lots. So the Cooies are sure not to miss me, and if my basket is not full, they will manage to help me in some of their queer fairy ways."

Then she thought how and where she could keep the feather safe, and secure from getting the least spotted. She decided that its old home—the inside of Michael's letter—was as safe as anywhere, but first she tore off a little piece of the blue tissue-paper round the "fairy cloak" and folded the feather in it.

To-morrow *was* fine, and all went as Mary hoped. Very soon after luncheon she set off, basket on arm, to the forest. Without difficulty she found the spot where the wood-pigeons had met her the last time, and which she knew was close to the entrance to the "secret place," and there set to work to gather cones as fast as she could.

There were plenty, but still it *was* rather tiring, to keep stooping for them, scarcely allowing herself a moment's rest, and more than once she wished that the Cooies would make haste and come to her help.

She was not afraid of their forgetting her, however, she knew they would come in time, and so they did, for before her basket was more than three-quarters full she heard the slight rustle in the air and felt the little feet on her shoulders.

"There you are!" she exclaimed joyfully, "and oh, dear Cooies, *do* you know what I have got?" and she drew out the precious feather.

Whether they had known about it or not, she could not tell, for they said nothing in reply to her question. They just hopped down and looked at her basket, their heads on one side.

"It is time to be going in," they said. "All the others are in their bowers, getting ready."

"But my cones," said Mary. "The basket is not nearly full, and I shouldn't like godmother to think I had got fewer this time."

The wood-pigeons looked up—not to the sky, but to the nearest fir-trees. And two or three cones dropped—straight into the basket.

"It will be quite full when you come back again," they said.

And Mary, wondering, but feeling it better to ask no more questions, followed them down the little path and through the two gates, both of which this time stood open. And when they first entered into the great, leafy hall, for a minute or two it seemed as deserted as the last time. But only for a minute or two.

"Sit down," said the Cooies, very softly. "There is your place. They are all coming, and the rush may make you feel giddy."

Then Mary saw in front of her a little mossy bank—large enough for herself and another child, perhaps. She sat down—something made her sit quite in the middle, and on each side of her, greatly to her satisfaction, for she was feeling rather shy and even a tiny atom frightened, her two friends settled themselves.

Not a moment too soon. There came such a rush through the air that she could have fancied a great wind had suddenly burst into the peaceful place, and round her, above, on every side, such a whizz and flutter of wings as would, it seemed to her, have whirled her down had she been standing upright and unprepared for them, and for a moment Mary closed her eyes.

Then the rush quieted down, and when Mary looked up again she saw a wonderful sight. Clusters and clusters of birds, on branches all round the great arbour—so many that the greenery was almost hidden. But they were all in order. As her eyes grew accustomed to them, she noticed that no two clusters were quite alike, either in size or colour or shape; they were all a little different, and then she understood that each "family" of her own Cooies' numerous relations kept itself distinct, though all were evidently on most friendly terms, and her own two wood-pigeons seemed to have a specially important position, which pleased her to see.

But the principal personage of the day was yet to make her appearance, and the kind of hush and expectation which followed the rush of the innumerable little wings told its own tale to Mary. She sat, almost holding her breath.

Eight in front of her, though at some little distance, was a pillar or pedestal, perfectly covered with moss of an even more beautiful green than that of the beautiful exquisitely fine grass at her feet. And as Mary kept her eyes fixed on this pillar—something told her to do so—at last what they were all, the child and the hundreds of birds, waiting for, came. How it came, she could never tell. There was a movement, not as loud as a rustle even, just a movement in the air, and then—on the top of the pillar she saw the loveliest thing she had ever seen in her life. A large white dove—so white, so beautiful; and as the lovely creature slightly turned her snowy neck, Mary caught a moment's gleam of something golden, like a thread of vivid sunshine, more than gold, if you can picture such a thing to yourselves.

It was Blanche's dove—Mary felt sure of it now.

Then the queenly bird spoke. Her voice was like music—whether the words that came to Mary's ears would have sounded to others like murmuring "coo-coo" only, or not, I cannot say, and it does not matter, for the little human guest understood.

"The procession may pass," said the Queen.

Then from every cluster two birds detached themselves, all meeting together behind Mary's seat. And in another moment, reminding her a little of a long line of tiny choristers that she had once seen in a great cathedral, they appeared two by two—fifty couples or more—and passing forward, each pair stopped in front of the Queen and laid down a feather at the foot of her pillar. White feathers they all were.

It was so pretty—the birds' perfect order and slow movement—the Queen's stately beauty—that Mary forgot for a moment that she herself was to take any part in the ceremony, till a little peck on her cheek told her that the right-hand Cooie was calling her to attention.

"It is your turn now," he whispered. "Draw out your feather. We will lead the way."

And they did so, Mary following, the precious feather in her hand, till at the foot of what to herself she had begun to call "the throne," she felt she should stop, and with the prettiest curtsy she could make, she laid her treasure down, a very little in front of the long row already there, and then, still guided by the two wood-pigeons, made her way back to her place, where, however, she did not sit down again, but remained standing, her heart beating rather fast, for even in the instant's glimpse of the others that she had had, it seemed to her that hers was the whitest!

The Queen flew down from her pillar, and passed slowly along the front, looking carefully at the feathers. Then she bent down and picked one up in her beak and flew back with it. Mary shut her eyes for a moment, afraid to look, but when she opened them again and dared to glance before her, she saw that her hopes had been well-founded—Michael's gift was no longer where she had laid it.

And there stood the Queen, the quill of the feather in her beak, so that the rest of it lay across her own snowy plumage, not snowier than it, however. She was quite silent for a minute, as if she wanted them all to see for themselves, and then came again the beautiful tones of her voice.

"This feather," she said, "has won the prize. It has come from the islands across the sea—the islands of gorgeous colours and rich fragrance—this simple snow-white feather. Our human guest, Mary, our child-visitor, has brought it, and you see for yourselves that it has won the prize. It is the whitest of them all," and she bent her head towards the feathers on the ground, "beautiful as they are."

Then there came a great wave through the air; a murmur of many voices, which sounded like one solitary note on some strange soft organ: then silence again, till again Queen White Dove spoke.

"I see you all agree with me," she said, "and I think you are generous and kind. For there is one thing to be said still, before the prize is given. You, my birds and relations, have been for many weeks seeking to win the prize: you have worked for it; you have travelled far, many of you. But Mary has not needed to do any of these things. Her feather came to her without any effort on her part—"

"Never say roast larks don't drop into some people's mouths," whispered Mr Coo, who by this time was perched on his old place on Mary's shoulder. Mary gave a little shrug, but he clung on all the same.

"And therefore," continued the Queen, "I think it is only fair that a short trial and test should be laid upon her."

Mary began to feel rather frightened. What was the Queen going to do? Turn her into a wood-pigeon perhaps, or something of the kind. But such fears were soon laid at rest.

"It is not a severe test," the Queen continued, and Mary felt that she was now speaking to herself directly, and that her tone was very gracious. "It is this. For one week you must keep the feather as spotless as it is now, and if at the end of that time you bring it here again—perfect and unsullied—you will have gained the prize. Do you agree?" Mary hesitated. She felt somehow a little confused. Mr Coo gave her an invisible peck.

"Say 'Yes, I will,'" he murmured.

"I do, you mean," whispered Mary, rather pleased to snub him. And she made another curtsey, and said in a clear voice,—

"I do."

"Then come forward," and Mary did so, till she was close to the pillar, on which Queen White Dove was again standing. It was not much higher than Mary herself. The Queen raised one dainty claw, and taking the end of the feather from her beak, she placed it just inside the brim of Mary's close-fitting fur hat, or cap, where the grey feather had been on the day of Mary's first visit to the "forest's secret."

"It is safe and firm," she said. "It will be by your own fault, Mary, if it drops out or is in any way spoilt."

And Mary curtseyed for the third time, murmuring thanks, and went back to her place, wondering to herself what was going to happen next.

The two wood-pigeons were there as before.

"We are all about to disperse," they said. "Lie down and close your eyes for a moment, till the rush is over."

She did so, and again came the great noise of wings, and—when she looked up, reassured by the silence, she was half-sitting, half-lying at the gate of her godmother's garden, the basket, well filled with cones, beside her, and the two Cooies perched on it!

And just then, Pleasance came out of the house and rang the big bell.

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## Chapter Twelve.

### "Come Back in the Spring, Mary."

Mary sprang up. She had been half-sitting on the little gate, for the surprise of finding herself at home again so quickly had almost taken away her breath. But the wood-pigeons calmed her down.

"You need not hurry," they said. "Pleasance never expects you for ten minutes or longer after she has rung. Sit down on the basket and we will keep you warm."

And when Mary had done so, they flew on to her shoulders and spread out their little wings as if ready for flight, and Mary felt a nice soft glow of heat going through her.

"Now," they continued, "we can talk comfortably—do you want to ask us anything?"

"Of course I do," said Mary. "A great big thing. I want to know how I can keep my feather perfectly white."

"The Queen told you almost as much as we can," was the reply. "She said it would be your own fault if it dropped out or got spoilt in any way."

"I know she did," said Mary, "but that's very puzzling. I can't go about with my hand to my head holding it in."

"You don't need to do so. As the Queen spoke of 'fault'—'your own fault'"—said Mr Coe, "I would advise you to think over what is most likely to be a fault of yours."

"I know," said Mary quickly. "Hasty temper—that's my worst fault. Auntie always says so. But sometimes when I've been very unhappy about it, she has said any way it doesn't last long; she has said it to comfort me, you see, and it's true—I scarcely ever feel cross with anybody for more than a minute."

"A minute may leave many minutes of trouble behind it," said Mrs Coe, gently.

"I know that," said Mary. "Once at home poor baby got a knock that was black and blue for a week, just because we'd given him a little push to get him out of the way."

"Then be on your guard," the wood-pigeons replied, "and this day week come to the meeting-place in the forest again, at the same time. You will have no difficulty."

"And shall I not see you till then?" asked Mary, rather dolefully, "a whole week?"

But she was speaking to the air! Her Cooes had disappeared.

"A whole week," however, sometimes passes very quickly, though sometimes, it is true, a week seems to have leaden wings. This time it was not so. Miss Verity was more than kind in her ways of interesting and amusing her little god-daughter; so that even though the weather grew dull, and rainy, and disagreeable, and it was scarcely possible to go out, either driving or walking, Mary was happy and bright. The only thing that she felt uneasy about was as to the appointed day for her visit to the secret of the forest.

"If it should be a regular bad day," she said to herself, "godmother will certainly not let me go out, and it would seem silly of me to expect it."

But she wisely consoled herself by remembering that, so far, nothing that had to do with the wood-pigeons *had* gone wrong. And as it was a "fairy" matter, she might safely leave it in fairy hands!

"Or in fairy beaks and claws," she added, laughingly, to herself, "as *my* fairies are all birds."

And her trust was well-founded. For the day before *the* day there came a complete change in the weather. There was a change of moon, Pleasance told her, but, however that may have been, there was a great improvement in out-of-doors things. It grew colder, certainly, but bright, and clear, and bracing; the sort of weather that healthy children love, and indoors plenty of good fires kept away all fear of colds, and chilblains, and miseries of that kind.

Mary was delighted; both because she was so glad to get out again, and also to have her fears about the important day dispelled. For it was not now likely, indeed almost impossible, that the weather should change again for some little time to come.

"What a good thing it is that I have got all my Christmas presents finished before this nice frost began, isn't it?" she said to Pleasance, as she was dressing to go out, that first fine day. For one of her godmother's ways of interesting and amusing her in the house had been to give her some charming scraps and patches of silks and satin, besides other odds and ends of pretty cord and fringe and such things, with which Miss Verity had helped her to make sweet and dainty little pincushions and pen-wipers and so on to take home with her.

"Yes, indeed it is, Miss," said the maid. She was taking Mary's jacket, and cap, and fur boa, and thick gloves out, for she was very afraid of her catching cold, as this was the most wintry weather there had been during the little girl's visit to Dove's Nest. "Miss Mary," she went on, "why do you keep this one tiny white feather in your cap? It looks quite out of place, stuck into the brim all by itself, and if you care for it, it would be much safer in your work-box or your writing-case."

She had the cap in her hand as she spoke, and seemed, or at least Mary thought so, on the point of taking out the feather. But before there was time for anything more, Mary darted forward, tore the cap out of the maid's hand, turning upon her almost fiercely.

"Don't touch it," she cried, "if you—" but the words died upon her lips, for as she spoke the cap fell to the ground in the sort of little struggle there had been, as poor Pleasance, not really understanding what Mary meant, had kept her hold for a moment or two. The cap fell to the ground—unluckily they were standing close to the fire-place—and when Mary stooped to pick it up she saw that the feather had dropped out, and lay where it had fallen, just within the fender. The fire was not yet lighted, but there must have been a little coal or cinder dust about, for when Mary, scarcely daring to breathe, stooped again for her treasure, she saw that the mischief was done—a black or grey spot now sullied the feather's perfect whiteness.

And, without a word of explanation to Pleasance, who stood there in half-stupefied astonishment, the little girl burst into tears.

"Miss Mary!" she exclaimed at last; "my dear, I am so sorry. I had no idea that you cared about the feather so much. I can get you another like it, I daresay, or very likely the spot will rub off," and she held out her hand for it.



"Oh no, no," sobbed Mary, "you could never get another like it—never; and I am sure the spot won't rub off."

All the same, she drew out her handkerchief and tried with great care what she could do. But in vain; the poor feather's perfect spotlessness was gone.

"It was my own fault—all my own fault," murmured Mary to herself, "that is why it won't rub off. Oh dear, oh dear! Just at the last."

And though after a while she dried her eyes and tried to look as usual, telling Pleasance she was sorry she had been so cross, she looked a very unhappy little girl when at last she set off for a walk, leaving the feather in its first home—the inside of Michael's letter, which was lying on the table.

She would not, she felt she could not, go to the forest, and it was getting late. The misfortune to the feather and her own crying had wasted time, the finest part of the afternoon was over already. So she went out at the front gate and trotted down the road, in a kind of "duty" way that was very dull and depressing. The sky and the look of things in general seemed to have caught her sadness, for there was a dark blue-grey look in one direction which cast a strange kind of shadow over all, and every trace of sunshine had gone.

Miss Verity had driven out by herself that afternoon, to see the old lady-friend who lived at some distance, and who, she had heard, was more ill and weak than usual, and it suddenly struck Mary that if she walked on much farther she might meet her godmother coming home. She did not wish this, as she felt sure that her eyes were still red and swollen, and she did not want to be asked, even by kind Miss Verity, "what she had been crying about."

So she turned and walked home again, without any adventure except passing two country people, who were saying to each other that it was blowing up for snow.

"Not to-night," said one, "nor yet to-morrow morning, but it's on the way all the same."

"That will be the end of it, I daresay," thought Mary. "If there is a snow-storm, godmother of course will not let me go out to-morrow, and everything will be over."

For deep down in her heart there was still a sort of hope, that if she could get to the secret of the forest the next day at the appointed time, *somehow*, things might yet be put right. Perhaps the beautiful dove, when she saw how dreadfully sorry she was, would give her another trial, or tell her of some magic way of cleaning the feather? at worst Mary felt that she would be able to explain how it had happened; anything would be better than her not seeing her dear bird friends again, which might easily happen if to-morrow were impossible for her, as the time for her returning to her aunt's was fast drawing near.

Miss Verity seemed a little sad and anxious herself when she came home that evening, and if she did notice Mary's still rather swollen eyes, and face whiter than usual, she said nothing.

But when the little girl had bidden her good-night and was going off to bed, she called her back again.

"Mary, dear," she said, "can you manage to amuse yourself again to-morrow afternoon? My kind old friend is not at all well, not able to leave her room, and rather lonely and dull, and she begged me to go to her if I possibly could?"

Mary's face brightened.

"Of course I can," she replied, "if only—oh, godmother, do you think I can go to the forest?"

"Why not?"

"I heard some people on the road say that it was going to snow, by to-morrow afternoon, certainly."

"Well, what then?" said Miss Verity, smiling. "It may snow without being a snow-storm. And that will not be just yet. I know the signs of the weather here pretty well by this time, my dear."

So Mary went to sleep with a lighter heart.

And her godmother was right. It was cold the next day, it is true, but not very cold, nor very gloomy; nothing to prevent the little girl's setting off in good time to the spot where she usually met the Cooies. But how slowly and sadly she made her way there. She could scarcely help crying again, as she looked at the poor feather she carried in her hand—not wrapped up, what was the use of wrapping it up now?—instead of in its former place in spotless whiteness on the front of her cap. Indeed more than once she felt on the point of turning back altogether, and when she got near the entrance to the hidden path she stood still, feeling as if she could not bear to see the two wood-pigeons.

Just then something cold fell on her face; she looked up; there it was again—yes, it *was* snowing, after all, though not much. A few flakes, that was all—and a ray of wintry sunshine came out as she glanced upwards, so there was not much fear of any great fall. Nor did Mary mind now.

"The Cooies will take me safe home, I am sure," she said to herself. "They'll take care of me, I know, even if they are very vexed with me."

They were not to be seen as yet, however, so Mary made her way along the little path to the white gate, which, as she half expected, stood open. So was the inner one, and in another moment she found herself inside the great arbour hall. And though there was complete silence, a glance showed her that it was quite full—all the birds were there in their places, waiting for the Queen, and—for her. Her own wood-pigeons perched one on each side of the

green bench.

"You are late," they murmured, as she took her place.

"Oh Cooies," she whispered in reply, "it doesn't matter. I am so unhappy. I was nearly not coming at all, only then you would have thought I had broken my promise, and perhaps I should never have seen you again."

"It was better to come," said Mr Coo, "but—hush!"

The Queen had alighted—where from, Mary could not see, but there she was, on the green pillar, as before, and it scarcely needed the sound of the lovely voice calling her, for the little girl to know that she was summoned.

"Have you proved worthy of the prize," the Queen asked, when Mary had curtseyed low and stood waiting, the feather in her hand.

"No," she said in a low voice, choking back her tears, and then she told what had happened.

"Give me the feather," said the Queen.

Mary did so, but even in the moment of holding it up it seemed to her—what was it?—the feather looked a little different, and a curious thrill of hope passed through her.

Then the Queen spoke again, and soft though her voice was, it was very clear. Every bird in the great arbour heard what she said.

"Mary," she began, "you are a very fortunate child. The winter spirits, the snow-fairies, have taken you into favour. See—a flake has fallen on your feather, a fairy flake, for even the warmth of our bower has not melted it, and nothing ever will. Your feather is again spotless, and the snowflake has added a silvery glistening to its whiteness. As the winter spirits have thus favoured you, no one may dispute that you have won the prize; before another day has passed you will receive it. A golden chain will encircle your neck. Farewell for the present, happy Mary."

And as she bent her beautiful head, the gleam of the wonderful thread of sunshine round her own neck flashed on Mary's eyes.

She took the feather from the Queen, and almost breathless with delight, began to thank her. But a great sound drowned her first words. It was a sound she had heard before—the rushing of countless little wings—but this time it was still louder. Mary turned her head to see; yes, that was it, but the birds were still in their places, they were not flying away, though all their wings were in motion. And when she glanced round again, the Queen had disappeared.

"What—" she was beginning to ask, but before she could say more Mr Coo interrupted her.

"They are clapping their wings to congratulate you and wish you joy," he said. "Make a curtsey to them; they will understand."

So Mary turned towards them and curtseyed in her prettiest manner, though she felt rather shy, and then, taking this as her farewell, the great flight of birds rose—in every direction the air seemed full of them, and again, as had been the case before, the rush and flutter made her feel confused and giddy. But her own Cooies were perched on her shoulders.

"Shut your eyes and count eleven slowly," one, or both of them whispered; "then it will be all right, you will see."

Mary did so: before she got to "eleven" she had become rather sleepy, and began to dream that she was the little sister in the fairy story of the *Eleven White Swans*, and that it was *their* wings she heard; then something touched her cheek, and she started and opened her eyes, and, she was standing at the gate leading into her godmother's garden, the two wood-pigeons on the path in front of her, looking up at her!

"Oh Cooies," she exclaimed, half-laughing, "you *have* brought me back quickly this time. How *did* you do it?"

"Never mind about that," they replied. "Here you are all safe and sound."

But it seemed to her that their voices were rather sad.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked.

Their heads were both very much on one side.

"No," was the reply, "it is all quite right. Only saying good-bye is always rather sad."

"Saying good-bye," Mary repeated.

"Not for always. Come back in the spring, Mary. Run in now, but come back in the spring," and then in an instant they were up in the air, ever, ever so high, and Mary was standing there alone, Michael's feather still in her hand, and from above there came the "coo-coo" she had learnt to know so well, and the echo of the last words, "come back in the spring, Mary."

Feeling rather strange, *almost* as if she were going to cry, Mary crossed the little lawn to the house. And just as she got to the door she met Pleasance coming out with the big bell in her hand.

"Oh, Miss Mary," she said, "I am so glad you have come back. I was just going to the gate to ring. But it is getting so

dark and chilly already, I am glad you came home earlier, and so will Miss Verity be.”

She was right. Mary’s godmother drove in a few minutes later, and her first words to the little girl were the same as her maid’s.

Miss Verity was rather silent that evening, though as kind as ever. She seemed to have a good deal to think of.

And the next morning there were several letters for her, which she read carefully.

After breakfast she called Mary into the drawing-room.

“I think, dear,” she said, “we will not have any lessons to-day. I have two or three things to tell you—one, rather sad, at least to me it is so, and I fancy you will feel the same about it. And two or three pleasant things—which will you have first?” Mary considered.

“The sad one,” she replied, “and then the others will make me feel happy again.”

Miss Verity smiled, and then Mary noticed that she was holding a small packet in her hand.

“After all, it is nothing so very bad,” she said. “It is only, dear, that your visit must come to an end a few days sooner than I had hoped.”

“I believe the Cooies knew it,” thought Mary to herself.

“My old friend,” continued her godmother, “whom I have been to see several times lately, is failing fast. She is feeling lonely too, and has begged me to go to stay with her for some weeks as soon as possible. I have promised to do so the day after to-morrow, so *to-morrow*, dear, Pleasance will take you home. I have a letter from your aunt, saying they will be very happy to have you back, but—this is the first of the pleasant things, she promises that I shall have you again in the spring. And you will be glad to hear that it is really quite settled that Michael will be home for Christmas.”

“Oh, I *am* glad!” exclaimed Mary.

“And another nice thing is that Blanche and Milly are going to be your neighbours in the Square.” Mary’s face brightened still more.

“Blanche and her husband have taken a house there, and Milly will live with them, and be a nice companion for you. They hope to see you very often. *Thirdly*, I have a rather curious nice thing to tell you and to show you,” and Mary somehow felt sure it had to do with the little parcel.

“Last night,” continued her godmother, “thinking of your leaving, I opened the drawer in my old cabinet where I keep the feather mantle, and where I will again lay it away till I lend it to you some other time. I meant to tell Pleasance to put fresh paper and lavender in the drawer, if they were needed, and as I was looking in, I noticed a little piece of crumpled paper, as I thought, in one corner. I picked it up, and fortunately began to smooth it out, before throwing it away. And—look, dear, what was in it.”

She held out the paper packet, which she had unfolded, and there lay a little coil of gold, so fine and thin, it was like a thread of sparkling silk. It was a very delicately made, but strong, nevertheless, gold chain for the neck, clasped by one pure white pearl, which, as soon as Mary saw it, made her think of Queen White Dove.

“Oh!” she murmured breathlessly, “how lovely!”

“Yes,” said her godmother, “and it is for you, dear. How it came there, I cannot exactly say, but I feel sure it must have dropped out of the pocket of the feather mantle, where it may have lain for nearly half a century. I was never allowed to *wear* the mantle except a very few times, on great occasions, and it got too small for me before long. And,” here Miss Verity’s face and voice grew rather dreamy, “I have a faint, very faint remembrance of *something* my mother said about a chain lost on its way here from the place where the mantle came from. This chain is certainly of foreign make; it might really be a fairy one, so strong, though so fine.”

She clasped it round Mary’s neck as she spoke.

“Yes,” she said, “it fits you perfectly. I felt sure it would. I should like you always to wear it.”

“I will,” said Mary, and she held up her face to kiss her godmother.

So it was a happy little Mary who went back that day to the friends in the Square, happy to have her again.

For though there was no wood-pigeons’ nest in the gardens, there was the thought in her heart of seeing her Cooies again “in the spring.”

And when Michael came home she showed him his feather, safe in its old place—the inside of his letter—in her little writing-case.

“It is a pretty feather,” he said, “it has such a nice sparkle on it too.”

Mary smiled. She had her own little secrets, you see!

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The End.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WOOD-PIGEONS AND MARY \*\*\*

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