

Molesworth Mrs.

Tell Me a Story



Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth M.

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Mrs. Molesworth

Tell Me a Story

Chapter One. Introduction

The children sat round me in the gloaming. There were several of them; from Madge, dear Madge with her thick fair hair and soft kind grey eyes, down to pretty little Sybil – Gipsy, we called her for fun, – whom you would hardly have guessed, from her brown face and bright dark eyes, to be Madge’s “own cousin.” They were mostly girls, the big ones at least, which is what one would expect, for it is not often that big boys care much about sitting still, and even less about anything so sentimental as sitting still in the twilight doing nothing. There were two or three *little* boys however, nice round-faced little fellows, who had not yet begun to look down upon “girls,” and were very much honoured at being admitted to a good game of romps with Madge and her troop.

It was one of these – the rosiest and nicest of them all, little Ted – who pulled my dress and whispered, but loud enough for every one to hear, with his coaxingest voice – “Tell me a story, aunty.” And then it came all round in a regular buzz, in every voice, repeated again and again – “O aunty! do; dear, dear aunty, tell us a story.”

I had been knitting, but it had grown too dark even for that. I could not pretend to be “busy.” What could I say? I held up my hands in despair.

“O children! dear children!” I cried, “truly, truly, I don’t know what stories to tell. You are such dreadfully wise people now-a-days – you have long ago left behind you what *I* used to think wonderful stories – ‘Cinderella,’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ and all the rest of them; and you have such piles of story-books that you are always reading, and many of them too written for you by the cleverest men and women living! What could I tell you that you would care to hear? Why, it will be the children telling stories to amuse the papas and mammas, and aunties next, like the ‘glorious revolution’ in ‘Liliput Levée!’ No, no, your poor old aunty is not quite in her dotage yet. She knows better than to try to amuse you clever people with her stupid old hum-drum stories.”

I did not mean to hurt the poor dear little things – I did not, truly – I spoke a little in earnest, but more in jest, as I shook my head and looked round the circle. But to my surprise *they* took it all for earnest, and the tears even gathered in two or three pairs of eyes.

“Aunty, you *know* we don’t think so,” began Madge, gentle Madge always, reproachfully.

And “It’s too bad of you, aunty, *too* bad,” burst out plain-speaking Dolly. And worst of all, Ted clambered manfully up on to my knees, and proceeded to shake me vigorously. “*Naughty* aunty,” he said, “naughty, *naughty* aunty. Ted will shake you, and shake you, to make you good.”

What could I do but cry for mercy? and promise anything and everything, fifty stories on the spot, if only they would forgive me?

“But, truly children,” I said again, when the hubbub had subsided a little, “I am afraid I do *not* know any stories you would care for.”

“We should care for anything you tell us,” they replied, “about when you were a little girl, or anything.”

I considered a little. “I might tell you something of that kind,” I said, “and perhaps, by another evening, I might think over about some other people’s ‘long agos’ – your grandmother’s, for instance. Would that please you?”

Great applause.

“And another thing,” I continued, “if I try to rub up some old stories for you, don’t you think you might help? You, Madge, dear, for instance, you are older than the others – couldn’t you tell them something of your own childish life even?”

I was almost sorry I had suggested it; into Madge’s face there came a look I had seen there before, and the colour deepened in her cheeks. But she answered quite happily.

“Yes, aunty, perhaps they would like to hear about – you know who I mean, and my other aunties, who are mammas now as well; if you wouldn’t mind writing it down – I don’t think I could tell it straight off.”

“Very well,” I said, “I’ll remember. And if, possibly, some not *real* stories come into my head – there’s no saying what I can do till I try,” for I felt myself now getting into the spirit of it, – “you won’t object, I suppose, to a fairy tale, or an adventure, for instance – just by way of a change you know?”

General clapping of hands.

“Well then,” I said, “to begin with, I’ll tell you a story which is – no, I won’t tell you what it is, real or not; you shall find out for yourselves.”

And in this way it came to pass, you see, that there was quite a succession of “blind man’s holidays,” on which occasions poor aunty was always expected to have a story forthcoming.

Chapter Two. The Reel Fairies

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.”

Louisa was a little girl of eight years old. That is to say, she was eight years old at the time I am going to tell you about. She was nothing particular to look at; she was small for her age, and her face was rather white, and her eyes were pretty much the same as other people’s eyes. Her hair was dark brown, but it was not even curly. It was quite straight-down hair, and it was cut short, not *quite* so short as little boys’ hair is cut now-a-days, but not very much longer. Many little girls had quite short hair at that time, but still there was something about Louisa’s that made its shortness remarkable, if anything about her could have been remarkable! It was so very smooth and soft, and fitted into her head so closely that it gave her a small, soft look, not unlike a mouse. On the whole, I cannot describe her better than by saying she was rather like a mouse, or like what you could fancy a mouse would be if it were turned into a little girl.

Louisa was not shy, but she was timid and not fond of putting herself forward; and in consequence of this, as well as from her not being at all what is called a “showy” child, she received very little notice from strangers, or indeed from many who knew her pretty well. People thought her a quiet, well-behaved little thing, and then thought no more about her. Louisa understood this in her own way, and sometimes it hurt her. She was not so unobservant as she seemed; and there were times when she would have very much liked a little more of the caressing, and even admiration, which she now and then saw lavished on other children; for though she was sensible in some ways, in others she was not wiser than most little people.

Her home was not in the country: it was in a street, in a large and rather smoky town. The house in which she lived was not a *very* pretty one; but, on the whole, it was nice and comfortable, and Louisa was generally very well pleased with it, except now and then, when she got little fits of wishing she lived in some very beautiful palace sort of house, with splendid rooms, and grand staircases, and gardens, and fountains, and I don’t know all what – just the same sort of little fits as she sometimes had of wishing to be very pretty, and to have lovely dresses, and to be admired and noticed by every one who saw her. She never told any one of these wishes of hers; perhaps if she had it would have been better, but it was not often that she could have found any one to listen to and understand her; and so she just kept them to herself.

There was one person who, I think, could have understood her, and that was her mother. But she was often busy, and when not busy, often tired, for she had a great deal to do, and several other little children besides Louisa to take care of. There were two brothers who came nearest Louisa in age, one older and one younger, and two or three mites of children smaller still. The brothers went to school, and were so much interested in the things “little boys are made of,” that they were apt to be rather contemptuous to Louisa because she was a girl, and the wee children in the nursery were too wee to think of anything but their own tiny pleasures and troubles. So you can understand that though she had really everything a little girl could wish for, Louisa was sometimes rather lonely and at a loss for companions, and this led to her making friends in a very odd way indeed. If you guessed for a whole year I do not think you would ever guess whom, or I should say *what*, she chose for her friends. Indeed, I fear that when I tell you you will hardly believe me; you will think I am “story-telling” indeed. Listen – it was not her doll, nor a pet dog, nor even a favourite pussy-cat – it was, they were rather, *the reels in her mother’s workbox*.

Can you believe it? It is quite, quite true. I am not “making up” at all, and I will tell you how it came about. There was one part of the day, I daresay it was the hour that the nursery children were asleep, when it was convenient for Louisa to be sent down-stairs to sit beside her mother in

the drawing-room, with many injunctions to be quiet. Her mother was generally writing or “doing accounts” at that time, and not at leisure to attend to her little girl; but when Louisa appeared at the door she would look up and say with a smile, “Well, dear, and what will you have to amuse yourself with to-day?” At first Louisa used to consider for a minute, and nearly every day she would make a different request.

“A piece of paper and a pencil to write,” she would say on Monday perhaps, and on Tuesday it would be “The box with the chess, please,” and on Wednesday something else. But after a while her answer came to be always the same – “Your big workbox to tidy, please, mamma.”

Mamma smiled at the great need of tidying that had come over her big workbox, but she knew she could certainly trust Louisa not to *un*-tidy it, so she used just to push it across the table to her without speaking, and then for an hour at least nothing more was heard of Louisa. She sat quite still, fully as absorbed in her occupation as her mother was in hers, till at last the well-known tap at the door would bring her back from dream-land.

“Miss Louisa, your dinner is waiting,” or “Miss Louisa, the little ones are quite ready to go out;” and, with a deep sigh, the workbox would be closed and the little girl would obey the unwelcome summons.

And next day, and the day after, and a great many days after that, it was always the same thing. But nobody knew anything about these queer friends of hers, except Louisa herself.

There were several families of them, and their names were as original as themselves. There were the Browns, reels of brown wood wound with white cotton; as far as I remember there were a Mr and Mrs Brown and three children; the Browns were supposed to be quiet, respectable people, who lived in a large house in the country, but had nothing particularly romantic or exciting about them. There were the De Cordays, so named from the conspicuous mark of “three cord” which they bore. They were a set of handsome bone, or, as Louisa called it, *ivory* reels, and she added the “De” to their name to make it sound grander. There were two pretty little reels of fine China silk, whom she distinguished as the Chinese Princesses. Blanche and Rose were their first names, to suit the colours they bore, for Louisa, you see, had learnt a little French already; and there were some larger silk reels, whom she called the “Lords and Ladies Flossy.” Altogether there were between twenty and thirty personages in the workbox community, and the adventures they had, the elegance and luxury in which they lived, the wonderful stories they told each other, would fill more pages than I have time to write, or than you, kind little girls that you are, would have patience to read. I must hasten on to tell you how it came to pass that this queer fancy of Louisa’s was discovered by other people.

One morning when she was sitting quietly, as usual, beside her mother, a friend of Mrs no, we need not tell her name, I should like you best just to think of her as Louisa’s mamma – well then, a friend of Louisa’s mamma’s came to call. She was a lady who lived in the country several miles away from Smokytown, but she was very fond of Louisa’s mamma, and whenever she had to come to Smokytown to shop, or anything of that kind, perhaps to take her little girl (for she too had a little girl as you shall hear) to the dentist’s, she always came early to call on her friend. Louisa’s mamma jumped up at once, when the servant threw open the door and announced the lady by name, and then they kissed each other, and then Louisa’s mamma stooped down and kissed the lady’s little girl who was standing beside her, but Louisa sat so quietly at her corner of the table, that for a minute or two no one noticed her. She was just thinking if she could manage to creep down under the table and slip away out of the room without being seen, when her mamma called her.

“Louisa, my dear,” she said, “come here and speak to Mrs Gordon and to Frances. You remember Frances, don’t you, dear?”

Louisa got down slowly off her chair and came to her mamma. She stood looking at Frances for a minute or two without speaking.

“Don’t you remember Frances?” said her mamma again.

“No,” said Louisa at last, “I don’t think I do.” Then she turned away as if she were going back to her place at the table. Her mamma looked vexed.

“Poor little thing,” said Mrs Gordon, “she is only rather shy. Frances, you must make friends with her.”

“Louisa, I am not pleased with you,” said her mamma gravely, and then she went on talking to Mrs Gordon.

Frances followed Louisa to the table, where all the reels were arranged in order. There was a grand feast going on among them that day: one of the Chinese princesses was to be married to one of the Lords Flossy, and Louisa had been smartening them up for the occasion. But she did not want to tell Frances about it.

“I am only playing with mamma’s workbox things,” she said, looking up at Frances, and wishing she had not come. She had taken a dislike to Frances, and the reason was not a very nice one – she was envious of her because she had such a pretty face and was very beautifully dressed. She had long curls of bright light hair, and large blue eyes, and she had a purple velvet coat trimmed with fur, and a sweet little bonnet with rosebuds in the cap, and Louisa’s mamma would never let her have rosebuds or any flowers in *her* bonnets. To Louisa’s eyes she looked almost as beautiful as a fairy princess, but the thought vexed her.

“Playing with your mamma’s workbox things,” said Frances, “how very funny! You poor little thing, have you got nothing else to play with?”

She spoke as if she were several years older than Louisa, and this made Louisa still more vexed.

“Yes,” she answered, “of course I have got other things, but I like these. *You* can’t understand.” Frances smiled. “How funny you are!” she said again, “but never mind. Let us talk of something nice. Perhaps you would like to hear what things *I* have got to play with. I have a room all for myself, *filled* with toys. I have got a large doll-house, as tall as myself, with eight rooms; and I have sixteen dolls of different kinds. They were mostly birthday presents. But I am getting too big to care for them now. My birthday was last week. What *do* you think papa gave me? Something so beautiful that I had wanted for such a long time. I don’t think you *could* guess.”

In spite of herself Louisa was becoming interested. “I don’t know, I’m sure,” she said; “perhaps it was a book full of stories.”

Frances shook her head. “O no,” she answered, “it wasn’t. *That* would be nothing particular, and my present *was* something particular, very particular indeed. Well, you can’t guess, so I’ll tell you – it was a Princess’s dress; a *real* dress you know; a dress that I can put on and wear.”

“A Princess’s dress!” repeated Louisa, opening her eyes.

“Yes, to be sure,” said Frances. “I call it a Princess’s dress, because it is copied from one the Princess Fair Star wore at the pantomime last Christmas. It was there I saw it, and I have teased papa ever since till he got it for me. And it *is* so beautiful; quite beautiful enough for a queen for that matter. My papa often calls me his queen, sometimes he says his golden-haired queen. Does yours?”

“No,” said Louisa sadly; “my papa sometimes calls me his pet, and sometimes he calls me ‘old woman,’ but he never says I am his queen. I suppose I am not pretty enough.”

“I don’t know,” said Frances, consideringly, “I don’t think you’re ugly exactly. Perhaps if you asked your papa to get you a Princess’s dress – ”

“He wouldn’t,” said Louisa decidedly, “I know he wouldn’t. It would not be the least use asking him. Tell me more about yours – what is it like, and does it make you feel like a real princess when you have it on?”

“I suppose it makes me *look* like one,” replied Frances complacently, “and as for feeling, why one can always fancy, you know.”

“Fancying isn’t enough,” said Louisa. “I know I should dreadfully like to *be* a princess or a queen. It is the first thing I would ask a fairy. Perhaps *you* don’t wish it so much because every one pets you so, and thinks you so pretty. Has your dress got silver and gold on it?”

“O yes, at least it has silver – silver spots,” began Frances eagerly, but just then her mamma turned to tell her that they must go. “The little people have made friends very quickly after all, you see,” she said to Louisa’s mamma. “Some day you must really bring Louisa to see Frances – it has been such an old promise.”

“It is not often I can leave home for a whole day,” said Louisa’s mamma; “and then, dear, you must remember not having a carriage makes a difference.”

Louisa’s cheeks grew red. She felt very vexed with her mamma for telling Mrs Gordon they had no carriage, but of course she did not venture to say anything, so no one noticed her. She was not sorry when Mrs Gordon and Frances said good-bye and went away.

That same evening, a little before bed-time, Louisa happened to be again in the drawing-room alone with her mother.

“Louisa,” said her mother, who was sewing at the table, “you did not leave my workbox as neat as usual this morning. I suppose it was because you were interrupted by Frances Gordon. Come here, dear, and take the box and put it on a chair near the fire and arrange it rightly. Here is a whole collection of reels rolling about. Put them all in their places.”

Louisa did as she was told, but without speaking. Indeed she had been very silent all day, but her mother had been occupied with other things and had not noticed her particularly. Louisa quietly put the reels into their places, giving the most comfortable corners to her favourites as usual, and huddling some of the others together rather unceremoniously. Then she sat down on the hearth-rug, and began to think of what Frances Gordon had said to her, and to wish all sorts of not very wise things. She felt herself at last growing drowsy, so she leant her little round head on the chair beside her, and was almost asleep, when she heard her mother say, “Louisa, my dear, you are getting sleepy, you must really go to bed.”

“Yes, mamma,” she said, or intended to say, but the words sounded faint and dreamlike, and before they were fully pronounced she was fairly asleep!

She remembered nothing more for what seemed a very long time – then to her surprise she found herself already undressed and in her own little bed! “Nurse must have carried me upstairs and undressed me,” she thought, and she opened her eyes very wide to see if it was still the middle of the night. No, surely it could not be; the room was quite light, yet where was the light coming from? It was not coming in at the window – there was no window to be seen; the curtains were drawn across, and no tiny chink even was visible; there was no lamp or candle in the room, – the light was simply there, but where it came from Louisa could not discover. She got tired of wondering about it at last, and was composing herself to sleep again, when suddenly a small but very clear voice called her by name. “Louisa, Louisa,” it said. She did not feel at all frightened. She half raised herself in bed and exclaimed, “Who is speaking to me? what do you want?”

“Louisa, Louisa,” the voice repeated, “would you like to be a queen?”

“Very much indeed, thank you,” Louisa replied promptly.

“Then rub your eyes and look about you,” said the voice.

Louisa rubbed her eyes and looked about her to some purpose, for what *do* you think she saw? All the white counterpane of her little bed was covered with tiny figures, of various sizes, from one inch to three or four in height. They were hopping, and dancing, and twirling themselves about in every imaginable way, like nothing anybody ever saw before, or since, or ever will again.

“Fairies!” thought Louisa at once, and without any feeling of overwhelming surprise, for, like most children, she had always been hoping, and indeed half expecting, that *some day* an adventure of this kind would fall to her share.

“Yes, fairies,” said the same voice as before, which seemed to hear her thoughts as distinctly as if she had spoken them; “but what kind of fairies? Look at us again, Louisa.”

Louisa opened her eyes wider and stared harder. There were all kinds of fairies, gentlemen and ladies, little and big; but as she looked she saw that every one of them, without exception, wore a

curious sort of round stiff jacket, more like a little barrel than anything else. It gave them a queer high-shouldered look, very like the little figures of Noah and his family in toy arks; but as Louisa was staring at them the mystery was explained. A big, rather clumsy-looking gentleman fairy, stopped for a moment in his gymnastics, and Louisa read on the ledge round his shoulders the familiar words “Clarke and Company’s best six-cord, extra quality, Number 12.”

“I know,” she cried, clapping her hands; “you’re mamma’s reels!”

At these words a sensation ran through the company; they all stood stock-still, and Louisa began to feel a little afraid.

“She says,” exclaimed the voice, “she says *we’re her mamma’s reels!*”

There fell a dead silence; Louisa expected to be sentenced to undergo capital punishment on the spot. “It’s too bad,” she said to herself, “it’s too bad; they asked me to guess who they were.”

“She says,” continued the voice, “she says ‘it’s too bad.’ *What* is too bad? My friends, let the deputation stand forward.”

Instantly about a dozen fairies separated themselves from the others and advanced, slowly marching two and two up the counterpane, till having made their way across the various hills and valleys formed by Louisa’s little figure under the bedclothes, they drew up just in front of her nose. Foremost of the deputation she recognised, the one clad in pink satin, the other in glistening white, her two favourites the Princesses Blanche and Rose.

“Beautiful Louisa,” said the deputation, all speaking at once, “we have come to ask you to be our queen.”

“Thank you,” said Louisa, not knowing what else to say.

“She consents!” exclaimed the deputation, “let the royal chariot appear.”

Thereupon there suddenly started up in the middle of the bed, as large as life, but no larger, her mamma’s big workbox! The fairies all clambered on to it with a rush, and hung upon it in every direction, like bees on a hive, or firemen on a fire-engine; and no sooner were they all mounted than the workbox slowly glided along till it was close to Louisa’s face.

“Will your majesty please to get in?” said one of the fairies, “Clarke’s Number 12, extra quality,” I think it was.

“How can I?” said Louisa piteously, “how can I? I’m far too big. How can I get into a workbox?”

“Please to rub your eyes and try,” said the big fairy, “right foot foremost, if you please.”

Louisa rubbed her eyes, and pulling her right foot out from under the clothes, stepped on to the workbox.

To her surprise, or rather not to her surprise, everything seemed to come quite naturally, she found that she was not at all too big, and she settled herself in the place the fairies had kept for her, the nice little division lined with satin, in which her mamma’s thimble and emery cushion always lay. It was pretty comfortable, only rather hard, but Louisa had no time to think about that, for no sooner was she seated than off flew the workbox, that is to say the royal chariot, away, away, Louisa knew not where, and felt too giddy to try to think. It stopped at last as suddenly as it had started, and quick as thought all the fairies jumped down. Louisa followed them more deliberately. She found herself in a great shining hall, the walls seemed to be of looking-glass, but when she observed them more closely she found they were made of innumerable needles, all fastened together in some wonderful fairy fashion, which she had not time to examine, for just then the Chinese princesses approached her, carrying between them a glistening dress, which they begged her to put on. They were quite as tall as she by-the-by, so she allowed them to dress her, and then examined herself with great satisfaction in the looking-glass walls. The dress was lovely, of that there was no doubt; it was just such a one, curiously enough, as Frances Gordon had described; the only drawback was her short hair, which certainly did not add to her regal appearance.

“It won’t show so much when your majesty has the crown on,” said the Chinese princesses, answering as before to Louisa’s unspoken thoughts. Then some gentlemen fairies appeared with the

crown, which fitted exactly, only it felt rather heavy. But it would never do for a queen to complain, even in thought, of so trifling a matter, so with great dignity Louisa ascended the throne which stood at one end of the hall, and sat down upon it to see what would come next.

The *Fairies* came next. One after the other, by dozens, and scores, and hundreds, they passed before her, each as he passed making the humblest of obeisances, as if to the great Mogul himself. It was very fine indeed, but after a while Louisa began to get rather tired of it, and though the throne was very grand to look at, it too felt rather hard, and the crown grew decidedly heavier.

“I think I’d like to come down for a little,” she said to some of the ladies and gentlemen beside her, but they took no notice. “I’d like to get down for a little and to take off my crown – it’s hurting my head, and this spangly dress is *so* cold,” she continued. Still the fairies took no notice.

“Don’t you hear what I say?” she exclaimed again, getting angry; “what’s the use of being a queen if you won’t answer me?”

Then at last some of the fairies standing beside the throne appeared to hear what she was saying.

“Her majesty wishes to take a little exercise,” said “Clarke’s Number 12,” and immediately the words were repeated in a sort of confusing buzz all round the hall. “Her majesty wishes to take a little exercise” – “her majesty wishes to take a little exercise,” till Louisa could have shaken them all heartily, she felt so provoked. Then suddenly the throne began to squeak and grunt (Louisa thought *it* was going to talk about her taking exercise next), and after it had given vent to all manner of unearthly sounds it jerked itself up, first on one side and then on the other, like a very rheumatic old woman, and at last slowly moved away. None of the fairies were pushing it, that was plain; and at first Louisa was too much occupied in wondering what made it move, to find fault with the mode of exercise permitted to her. The throne rolled slowly along, all round the hall, and wherever it appeared a crowd of fairies scuttled away, all chattering the same words – “Her majesty is taking a little exercise,” till at last, with renewed jerks and grunts and groans, her queer conveyance settled itself again in its old place. As soon as it was still, Louisa tried to get down, but no sooner did she put one foot on the ground than a crowd of fairies respectfully lifted it up again on to the footstool. This happened two or three times, till Louisa’s patience was again exhausted.

“Get out of my way,” she exclaimed, “you horrid little things, get out of my way; I want to get down and run about.”

But the fairies took no notice of what she said, till for the third time she repeated it. Then they all spoke at once.

“Her majesty wants to take a little *more* exercise,” they buzzed in all directions, till Louisa was so completely out of patience that she burst into tears.

“I won’t stay to be your queen,” she said, “it’s not nice at all. I want to go home to my mamma. I want to go home to my mamma. I want to go home to my mamma.”

“We don’t know what mammas are,” said the fairies. “We haven’t anything of that kind here.”

“That’s a story,” said Louisa. “There – are mammas here. I’ve seen several. There’s Mrs Brown, and there’s Lady Flossy, and there’s – no, the Chinese princesses haven’t a mamma. But you see there are two among my mamma’s own reels in her workb – .”

But before she could finish the word the fairies all set up a terrific shout. “The word, the word,” they cried, “the word that no one must mention here. Hush! hush! hush!”

They all turned upon Louisa as if they were going to tear her to pieces. In her terror she uttered a piercing scream, and – woke.

She wasn’t in bed; where was she? Could she be in the workbox? Wherever she was it was quite dark and cold, and something was pressing against her head, and her legs were aching. Suddenly there came a flash of light. Some one had opened the door, and the light from the hall streamed in. The some one was Louisa’s mamma.

“Who is in here? Did I hear some one calling out?” she exclaimed anxiously.

Louisa was slowly recovering her wits. “It was me, mamma,” she answered; “I didn’t know where I was, and I was so frightened and I am so cold. Oh mamma!”

A flood of tears choked her.

“You poor child,” exclaimed her mamma, hurrying back to the hall to fetch a lamp, as she spoke, “why, you have fallen asleep on the hearth-rug, and the fire’s out; and my workbox – what is it doing here? Were you using it for a pillow?”

“No,” said Louisa, eyeing the workbox suspiciously, “it was on the chair, and the corner of it has hurt my head, mamma; it was pressing against it.” Her mamma lifted the box on to the table.

“Are they all in there, mamma?” whispered Louisa, timidly.

“All in where? All who? What are you speaking about, my dear?”

“The fairies – the reels I mean,” replied Louisa. “My dear, you are dreaming still,” said her mamma, laughing, but seeing that Louisa looked dissatisfied, “never mind, you shall tell me your dreams to-morrow. But just now you must really go to bed. It is nine o’clock – you have been two hours asleep. I went out of the room in a hurry, taking the lamp with me because it was not burning rightly, and then I heard baby crying – he is very cross to-night – and both nurse and I forgot about you. Now go, dear, and get well warmed at the nursery fire before you go to bed.”

Louisa trotted off. She had no more dreams that night, but when she woke the next morning, her poor little legs were still aching. She had caught cold the night before, there was no doubt, so her mamma, taking some blame to herself for her having fallen asleep on the floor, was particularly kind and indulgent to her. She brought her down to the drawing-room wrapped in a shawl, and established her comfortably in an arm-chair.

“What will you have to play with?” she asked. “Would you like my workbox?”

“I don’t know,” said Louisa, doubtfully. “Mamma,” she continued, after a moment’s silence, “can queens never do what they like?”

“Very often they can’t,” replied her mamma. “What makes you ask?”

“I dreamt I was a queen,” said Louisa.

“Did you? What country were you queen of?”

“I was queen of the reel fairies,” replied the child gravely. Her mother looked mystified “Tell me what you mean, dear,” she said. “Tell me all about it.”

So bit by bit Louisa explained the whole, and her mamma had for once a peep into that strange, fantastic, mysterious world, which we call a child’s imagination. She had a glimpse of something else too. She saw that her little girl was in danger of getting to live too much alone, was in need of sympathy and companionship.

“I think it was what Frances Gordon said that made me dream about being a queen,” she said.

“And do you still wish you were a queen?” said her mamma.

“No,” said Louisa.

“A princess then?”

“No,” she replied again. “But, mamma – ”

“Well, dear?”

“I do wish sometimes that I was pretty, and that – that – I don’t know how to say it – that people made a fuss about me sometimes.”

Her mamma looked a little grave and a little sad; but still she smiled. She could not be angry – thought Louisa.

“Is it naughty, mamma?” she whispered.

“Naughty? No, dear; it is a wish most little girls have, I fancy – and big ones too. But some day you will understand how it might grow into a wrong feeling, and how on the other side a little of it may be useful to help good feelings. And till you understand better, dear, doesn’t it make you happy to know that to me you could not be dearer if you were the most beautiful little princess in the world.”

“As beautiful as Princess Fair Star, mamma?”

“Yes, or any other princess you can think of. I would rather have my little mouse of a girl than any of them.”

Louisa nestled closer to her mamma with great satisfaction. “I like you to call me your mouse, mamma; and do you know I almost think I like having a cold.”

Her mother laughed. “Am I making a little fuss about you? Is that what you like?”

Louisa laughed too.

“Do you think I should leave off playing with the reels, and making stories about them, mamma? Is it silly?”

“No, dear, not if it amuses you,” said her mother.

But though Louisa did not leave off playing with the reels altogether, she gradually came to find that she preferred other amusements. Her mother taught her several pretty kinds of work, and read aloud stories to her more often than formerly. And, somehow, Louisa never again cared quite as much for her old friends. She thought the Chinese princesses had grown rather “stuck-up” and affected, and she could not get over a strong suspicion that “Clarke’s Number 12” was very ready to be impertinent, if he could ever again get a chance.

Chapter Three.

Good-Night, Winny

“Say not good-night – but, in some brighter clime, Bid me good-morning!”

When I was a little girl I was called Meg. I do not mean to say that I have got a different name now that I am big, but my name is *used* differently. I am now called Margaret, or sometimes Madge, but never Meg. Indeed I do not wish ever to be called Meg, for a reason you will quite understand when you have heard my story. But perhaps I am wrong to call it a “story” at all, so I had better say at the beginning that what I have to tell you is only a sort of remembrance of something that happened to me when I was very little – of some one I loved more dearly, I think, than I can ever love any one again. And I fancy perhaps other little girls will like to hear it.

Well then, to begin again – long ago I used to be called Meg, and the person who first called me so was my sister Winny, who was not quite two years older than I. There were four of us then – four little sisters – Winny, and I, and Dolly, and Blanche, baby Blanche we used to call her. We lived in the country in a pretty house, which we were very fond of, particularly in the summer time, when the flowers were all out. Winny loved flowers more dearly than any one I ever knew, and she taught me to love them too. I never see one now without thinking of her and the things she used to say about them. I can see now, now that I am so much older, that Winny must have been a very clever little girl in some ways, not so much in learning lessons as in thinking things to herself, and understanding feelings and thoughts that children do not generally care about at all. She was very pretty too, I can remember her face so well. She had blue eyes and very long black eyelashes – our mamma used to tease her sometimes, and say that she had what Irish people call “blue eyes put in with dirty fingers” – and pretty rosy cheeks, and a very white forehead. And her face always had a bright dancing look that I can remember best of all.

We learnt lessons together, and we slept together in two little beds side by side, and we did everything together, from eating our breakfast to dressing our dolls – and when one was away the other seemed only half alive. All our frocks and hats and jackets were exactly the same, and except that Winny was taller than I, we should never have known which was which of our things. I am sure Winny was a very good little girl, but when I try to remember all about her exactly, what seems to come back most to me is her being always so happy. She did not need to think much about being good and not naughty; everything seemed to come rightly to her of itself. She thought the world was a very pretty, nice place; and she loved all her friends, and she loved God most of all for giving them to her. She used to say she was sure Heaven would be a very happy place too, only she did so hope there would be plenty of flowers there, and she was disappointed because mamma said it did not tell in the Bible what kinds of flowers there would be. Almost the only thing which made her unhappy was about there being so many very poor people in the world. She used to talk about it very often and wonder why it was, and when she was very, very little, she cried because nurse would not let her give away her best velvet jacket to a poor little girl she saw on the road.

But though Winny was so sweet, and though we loved each other so, sometimes we did quarrel. Now and then it was quite little quarrels which were over directly, but once we had a bigger quarrel. Even now I do not like to remember it; and oh! how I do wish I could make other boys and girls feel as I do about quarrelling. Even little tiny squabbles seem to me to be sorrowful things, and then they so often grow into bigger ones. It was generally mostly my fault. I was peevish and cross sometimes, and Winny was never worse than just hasty and quick for a moment. She was always ready to make friends again, “to kiss ourselves to make the quarrel go away,” as our little sister Dolly used to say, almost before she could speak. And sometimes I was silly, and then it was right for Winny to find fault with me. My manners used occasionally to trouble her, for she was very particular about such

things. One day I remember she was very vexed with me for something I said to a gentleman who was dining with our papa and mamma. He was a nice kind gentleman, and we liked him, only we did not think him pretty. Winny and I had fixed together that we did not think him pretty, only of course Winny never thought I would be so silly as to *tell* him so. We came down to dessert that evening – Winny sat beside papa, and I sat between Mr Merton and mamma, and after I had sat quite still, looking at him without speaking, I suddenly said, – I can't think what made me – “Mr Merton, I don't think you are at all pretty. Your hair goes straight down, and up again all of a sudden at the end, just like our old drake's tail.”

Mr Merton laughed very much, and papa laughed, and mamma did too, though not so much. But Winny did not laugh at all. Her face got red, and she would not eat her raisins, but asked if she might keep them for Dolly, and she seemed quite unhappy. And when we had said good-night, and had gone upstairs, I could see how vexed she was. She was so vexed that she even gave me a little shake. “Meg,” she said, “I am so ashamed of you. I am really. How *could* you be so rude?”

I began to cry, and I said I did not mean to be rude; and I promised that I would never say things like that again; and then Winny forgave me; but I never forgot it. And once I remember, too, that she was vexed with me because I would not speak to a little girl who came to pay a visit to her grandfather, who lived at *our* grandfather's lodge. Winny stopped to say good-morning to her, and to ask her if her friends at home were quite well; and the little girl curtsied and looked so pleased. But I walked on, and when Winny called to me to stop I would not; and then, when she asked me what was the matter, I said I did not think we needed to speak to the little girl, she was quite a common child, and we were ladies. Winny *was* vexed with me then; she was too vexed to give me a little shake even. She did not speak for a minute, and then she said, very sadly, “Meg, I *am* sorry you don't know better than that what being a lady means.”

I do know better now, I hope; but was it not strange that Winny *always* seemed to know better about these things? It came of itself to her, I think, because her heart was so kind and happy.

Winny was very fond of listening to stories, and of making them up and telling them to me; but she was not very fond of reading to herself. She liked writing best, and I liked reading. We used to say that when we were big girls, Winny should write all mamma's letters for her, and I should read aloud to her when she was tired. How little we thought that time would *never* come! We were always talking about what we should do when we were big; but sometimes when we had been talking a long time, Winny would stop suddenly, and say, “Meg, growing big seems a dreadfully long way off. It almost tires me to think of it. What a great, great deal we shall have to learn before then, Meg!” I wonder what gave her that feeling.

Shall I tell you now about the worst quarrel we ever had? It was about Winny's best doll. The doll's name was “Poupée.” Of course I know now that that is the French for all dolls; but we were so little then we did not understand, and when our aunt's French maid told us that “poupée” was the word for doll, we thought it a very pretty name, and somehow the doll was always called by it. Grandfather had given “Poupée” to Winny – I think he brought it from London for her – and I cannot tell you how proud she was of it. She did not play with it every day, only on holidays and treat-days; but every day she used to peep at “Poupée” in the drawer where she lay, and kiss her, and say how pretty she looked. One afternoon Winny was going out somewhere – I don't remember exactly where; I daresay it was a drive with mamma – and I was not to go, and I was crying; and just as Winny was running down-stairs all ready dressed to go, she came back and whispered to me, “Meg, dear, don't cry. It takes away all my pleasure to see you. Will you leave off crying and look happy if I let you have ‘Poupée’ to play with while I am out?”

I wiped away my tears in a minute, I *was* so pleased. Winny ran to “Poupée's” drawer and got her out, and brought her to me. She kissed her as she put her into my arms, and she said to her, “My darling ‘Poupée,’ you are going to spend the afternoon with your aunt. You must be a very good little girl, and do exactly what she tells you.”

And then Winny said to me, “You *will* be very careful of her, won’t you, Meg?” and I promised, of course, that I would.

I did mean to be careful, and I really was; but for all that a sad accident happened. I had been very happy with “Poupée” all the afternoon, and I had made her a new apron with a piece of muslin nurse gave me, and some ribbon, which did nicely for bows; and I was carrying her along the passage to show nurse how pretty the apron looked, when the housemaid, who was coming along with a trayful of clean clothes from the wash in her arms, knocked against me, and “Poupée” was thrown down; and, terrible to tell, her dear, sweet little right foot was broken. I cannot tell you how sorry I was, and nurse was sorry too, and so was Jane; but all the sorrow would not mend the foot. I was sitting on the nursery floor, with “Poupée” in my lap, crying over her, as miserable as could be, when Winny rushed in, laden with parcels, in the highest spirits.

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