Nesbit Edith

The Enchanted Castle

Эдит Несбит

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Несбит Э.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

There were three of them – Jerry, Jimmy, and Kathleen. Of course, Jerry's name was Gerald, and not Jeremiah, whatever you may think; and Jimmy's name was James; and Kathleen was never called by her name at all, but Cathy, or Catty, or Puss Cat, when her brothers were pleased with her, and Scratch Cat when they were not pleased. And they were at school in a little town in the West of England – the boys at one school, of course, and the girl at another, because the sensible habit of having boys and girls at the same school is not yet as common as I hope it will be some day. They used to see each other on Saturdays and Sundays at the house of a kind maiden lady; but it was one of those houses where it is impossible to play. You know the kind of house, don't you? There is a sort of a something about that kind of house that makes you hardly able even to talk to each other when you are left alone, and playing seems unnatural and affected. So they looked forward to the holidays, when they should all go home and be together all day long, in a house where playing was natural and conversation possible, and where the Hampshire forests and fields were full of interesting things to do and see. Their Cousin Betty was to be there too, and there were plans. Betty's school broke up before theirs, and so she got to the Hampshire home first, and the moment she got there she began to have measles, so that my three couldn't go home at all. You may imagine their feelings. The thought of seven weeks at Miss Hervey's was not to be borne, and all three wrote home and said so. This astonished their parents very much, because they had always thought it was so nice for the children to have dear Miss Hervey's to go to. However, they were "jolly decent about it," as Jerry said, and after a lot of letters and telegrams, it was arranged that the boys should go and stay at Kathleen's school, where there were now no girls left and no mistresses except the French one.

"It'll be better than being at Miss Hervey's," said Kathleen, when the boys came round to ask Mademoiselle when it would be convenient for them to come; "and, besides, our school's not half so ugly as yours. We do have tablecloths on the tables and curtains at the windows, and yours is all deal boards, and desks, and inkiness."

When they had gone to pack their boxes Kathleen made all the rooms as pretty as she could with flowers in jam jars, marigolds chiefly, because there was nothing much else in the back garden. There were geraniums in the front garden, and calceolarias and lobelias; of course, the children were not allowed to pick these.

"We ought to have some sort of play to keep us going through the holidays," said Kathleen, when tea was over, and she had unpacked and arranged the boys' clothes in the painted chests of drawers, feeling very grown-up and careful as she neatly laid the different sorts of clothes in tidy little heaps in the drawers. "Suppose we write a book."

"You couldn't," said Jimmy.

"I didn't mean me, of course," said Kathleen, a little injured; "I meant us."

"Too much fag," said Gerald briefly.

"If we wrote a book," Kathleen persisted, "about what the insides of schools really *are* like, people would read it and say how clever we were."

"More likely expel us," said Gerald. "No; we'll have an out-of-doors game – bandits, or something like that. It wouldn't be bad if we could get a cave and keep stores in it, and have our meals there."

"There aren't any caves," said Jimmy, who was fond of contradicting every one. "And, besides, your precious Mamselle won't let us go out alone, as likely as not."

"Oh, we'll see about that," said Gerald. "I'll go and talk to her like a father."

"Like that?" Kathleen pointed the thumb of scorn at him, and he looked in the glass.

"To brush his hair and his clothes and to wash his face and hands was to our hero but the work of a moment," said Gerald, and went to suit the action to the word.

It was a very sleek boy, brown and thin and interesting-looking, that knocked at the door of the parlour where Mademoiselle sat reading a yellow-covered book and wishing vain wishes. Gerald could always make himself look interesting at a moment's notice, a very useful accomplishment in dealing with strange grown-ups. It was done by opening his grey eyes rather wide, allowing the corners of his mouth to droop, and assuming a gentle, pleading expression, resembling that of the late little Lord Fauntleroy – who must, by the way, be quite old now, and an awful prig.

"Entrez!" said Mademoiselle, in shrill French accents. So he entered.

"Eh bien?" she said rather impatiently.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," said Gerald, in whose mouth, it seemed, butter would not have melted.

"But no," she said, somewhat softened. "What is it that you desire?"

"I thought I ought to come and say how do you do," said Gerald, "because of you being the lady of the house."

He held out the newly-washed hand, still damp and red. She took it.

"You are a very polite little boy," she said.

"Not at all," said Gerald, more polite than ever. "I am so sorry for you. It must be dreadful to have us to look after in the holidays."

"But not at all," said Mademoiselle in her turn. "I am sure you will be very good childrens."

Gerald's look assured her that he and the others would be as near angels as children could be without ceasing to be human.

"We'll try," he said earnestly.

"Can one do anything for you?" asked the French governess kindly.

"Oh, no, thank you," said Gerald. "We don't want to give you any trouble at all. And I was thinking it would be less trouble for you if we were to go out into the woods all day to-morrow and take our dinner with us – something cold, you know – so as not to be a trouble to the cook."

"You are very considerate," said Mademoiselle coldly. Then Gerald's eyes smiled; they had a trick of doing this when his lips were quite serious. Mademoiselle caught the twinkle, and she laughed and Gerald laughed too.

"Little deceiver!" she said. "Why not say at once you want to be free of *surveillance*, how you say – overwatching – without pretending it is me you wish to please?"

"You have to be careful with grown-ups," said Gerald, "but it isn't all pretence either. We *don't* want to trouble you – and we don't want you to – "

"To trouble you. Eh bien! Your parents, they permit these days at woods?"

"Oh, yes," said Gerald truthfully.

"Then I will not be more a dragon than the parents. I will forewarn the cook. Are you content?"

"Rather!" said Gerald. "Mademoiselle, you are a dear."

"A deer?" she repeated – "a stag?"

"No, a – a *chérie*," said Gerald – "a regular A1 *chérie*. And you shan't repent it. Is there anything we can do for you – wind your wool, or find your spectacles, or – ?"

"He thinks me a grandmother!" said Mademoiselle, laughing more than ever. "Go then, and be not more naughty than you must."

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"Well, what luck?" the others asked.

"It's all right," said Gerald indifferently. "I told you it would be. The ingenuous youth won the regard of the foreign governess, who in her youth had been the beauty of her humble village."

"I don't believe she ever was. She's too stern," said Kathleen.

"Ah!" said Gerald, "that's only because you don't know how to manage her. She wasn't stern with *me*."

"I say, what a humbug you are though, aren't you?" said Jimmy.

"No, I'm a dip – what's-its-name? Something like an ambassador. Dipsoplomatist – that's what I am. Anyhow, we've got our day, and if we don't find a cave in it my name's not Jack Robinson."

Mademoiselle, less stern than Kathleen had ever seen her, presided at supper, which was bread and treacle spread several hours before, and now harder and drier than any other food you can think of. Gerald was very polite in handing her butter and cheese, and pressing her to taste the bread and treacle.

"Bah! it is like sand in the mouth – of a dryness! Is it possible this pleases you?"

"No," said Gerald, "it is not possible, but it is not polite for boys to make remarks about their food!"

She laughed, but there was no more dried bread and treacle for supper after that.

"How *do* you do it?" Kathleen whispered admiringly as they said good-night.

"Oh, it's quite easy when you've once got a grown-up to see what you're after. You'll see, I shall drive her with a rein of darning cotton after this."

Next morning Gerald got up early and gathered a little bunch of pink carnations from a plant which he found hidden among the marigolds. He tied it up with black cotton and laid it on Mademoiselle's plate. She smiled and looked quite handsome as she stuck the flowers in her belt.

"Do you think it's quite decent," Jimmy asked later – "sort of bribing people to let you do as you like with flowers and things and passing them the salt?"

"It's not that," said Kathleen suddenly. "*I* know what Gerald means, only I never think of the things in time myself. You see, if you want grown-ups to be nice to you the least you can do is to be nice to them and think of little things to please them. I never think of any myself. Jerry does; that's why all the old ladies like him. It's not bribery. It's a sort of honesty – like paying for things."

"Well, anyway," said Jimmy, putting away the moral question, "we've got a ripping day for the woods."

They had.

The wide High Street, even at the busy morning hour almost as quiet as a dream-street, lay bathed in sunshine; the leaves shone fresh from last night's rain, but the road was dry, and in the sunshine the very dust of it sparkled like diamonds. The beautiful old houses, standing stout and strong, looked as though they were basking in the sunshine and enjoying it.

"But *are* there any woods?" asked Kathleen as they passed the market-place.

"It doesn't much matter about woods," said Gerald dreamily, "we're sure to find *something*. One of the chaps told me his father said when he was a boy there used to be a little cave under the bank in a lane near the Salisbury Road; but he said there was an enchanted castle there too, so perhaps the cave isn't true either."

"If we were to get horns," said Kathleen, "and to blow them very hard all the way, we might find a magic castle."

"If you've got the money to throw away on horns …" said Jimmy contemptuously.

"Well, I have, as it happens, so there!" said Kathleen. And the horns were bought in a tiny shop with a bulging window full of a tangle of toys and sweets and cucumbers and sour apples.

And the quiet square at the end of the town where the church is, and the houses of the most respectable people, echoed to the sound of horns blown long and loud. But none of the houses turned into enchanted castles.

So they went along the Salisbury Road, which was very hot and dusty, so they agreed to drink one of the bottles of gingerbeer.

"We might as well carry the gingerbeer inside us as inside the bottle," said Jimmy, "and we can hide the bottle and call for it as we come back."

Presently they came to a place where the road, as Gerald said, went two ways at once.

"*That* looks like adventures," said Kathleen; and they took the right-hand road, and the next time they took a turning it was a left-hand one, so as to be quite fair, Jimmy said, and then a right-hand one and then a left, and so on, till they were completely lost.

"*Com*pletely," said Kathleen; "how jolly!"

And now trees arched overhead, and the banks of the road were high and bushy. The adventurers had long since ceased to blow their horns. It was too tiring to go on doing that, when there was no one to be annoyed by it.

"Oh, kriky!" observed Jimmy suddenly, "let's sit down a bit and have some of our dinner. We might call it lunch, you know," he added persuasively.

So they sat down in the hedge and ate the ripe red gooseberries that were to have been their dessert.

And as they sat and rested and wished that their boots did not feel so full of feet, Gerald leaned back against the bushes, and the bushes gave way so that he almost fell over backward. Something had yielded to the pressure of his back, and there was the sound of something heavy that fell.

"O Jimminy!" he remarked, recovering himself suddenly; "there's something hollow in there – the stone I was leaning against simply *went!*"

"I wish it was a cave," said Jimmy; "but of course it isn't."

"If we blow the horns perhaps it will be," said Kathleen, and hastily blew her own.

Gerald reached his hand through the bushes. "I can't feel anything but air," he said; "it's just a hole full of emptiness." The other two pulled back the bushes. There certainly was a hole in the bank. "I'm going to go in," observed Gerald.

"Oh, don't!" said his sister. "I wish you wouldn't. Suppose there were snakes!"

"Not likely," said Gerald, but he leaned forward and struck a match. "It *is* a cave!" he cried, and put his knee on the mossy stone he had been sitting on, scrambled over it, and disappeared.

A breathless pause followed.

"You all right?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes; come on. You'd better come feet first – there's a bit of a drop."

"I'll go next," said Kathleen, and went – feet first, as advised. The feet waved wildly in the air.

"Look out!" said Gerald in the dark; "you'll have my eye out. Put your feet *down*, girl, not up. It's no use trying to fly here – there's no room."

He helped her by pulling her feet forcibly down and then lifting her under the arms. She felt rustling dry leaves under her boots, and stood ready to receive Jimmy, who came in head first, like one diving into an unknown sea.

"It *is* a cave," said Kathleen.

"The young explorers," explained Gerald, blocking up the hole of entrance with his shoulders, "dazzled at first by the darkness of the cave, could see nothing."

"Darkness doesn't dazzle," said Jimmy.

"I wish we'd got a candle," said Kathleen.

"Yes, it does," Gerald contradicted – "could see nothing. But their dauntless leader, whose eyes had grown used to the dark while the clumsy forms of the others were bunging up the entrance, had made a discovery."

"Oh, what!" Both the others were used to Gerald's way of telling a story while he acted it, but they did sometimes wish that he didn't talk quite so long and so like a book in moments of excitement.

"He did not reveal the dread secret to his faithful followers till one and all had given him their word of honour to be calm."

"We'll be calm all right," said Jimmy impatiently.

"Well, then," said Gerald, ceasing suddenly to be a book and becoming a boy, "there's a light over there – look behind you!"

They looked. And there was. A faint greyness on the brown walls of the cave, and a brighter greyness cut off sharply by a dark line, showed that round a turning or angle of the cave there was daylight.

"Attention!" said Gerald; at least, that was what he meant, though what he said was "'Shun!" as becomes the son of a soldier. The others mechanically obeyed.

"You will remain at attention till I give the word 'Slow march!' on which you will advance cautiously in open order, following your hero leader, taking care not to tread on the dead and wounded."

"I wish you wouldn't!" said Kathleen.

"There aren't any," said Jimmy, feeling for her hand in the dark; "he only means, take care not to tumble over stones and things."

Here he found her hand, and she screamed.

"It's only me," said Jimmy. "I thought you'd like me to hold it. But you're just like a girl."

Their eyes had now begun to get accustomed to the darkness, and all could see that they were in a rough stone cave, that went straight on for about three or four yards and then turned sharply to the right.

"Death or victory!" remarked Gerald. "Now, then – Slow march!"

He advanced carefully, picking his way among the loose earth and stones that were the floor of the cave. "A sail, a sail!" he cried, as he turned the corner.

"How splendid!" Kathleen drew a long breath as she came out into the sunshine.

"I don't see any sail," said Jimmy, following.

The narrow passage ended in a round arch all fringed with ferns and creepers. They passed through the arch into a deep, narrow gully whose banks were of stones, moss-covered; and in the crannies grew more ferns and long grasses. Trees growing on the top of the bank arched across, and the sunlight came through in changing patches of brightness, turning the gully to a roofed corridor of goldy-green. The path, which was of greeny-grey flagstones where heaps of leaves had drifted, sloped steeply down, and at the end of it was another round arch, quite dark inside, above which rose rocks and grass and bushes.

"It's like the outside of a railway tunnel," said James.

"It's the entrance to the enchanted castle," said Kathleen. "Let's blow the horns."

"Dry up!" said Gerald. "The bold Captain, reproving the silly chatter of his subordinates – "

"I like that!" said Jimmy, indignant.

"I thought you would," resumed Gerald – "of his subordinates, bade them advance with caution and in silence, because after all there might be somebody about, and the other arch might be an ice-house or something dangerous."

"What?" asked Kathleen anxiously.

"Bears, perhaps," said Gerald briefly.

"There aren't any bears without bars – in England, anyway," said Jimmy. "They call bears bars in America," he added absently.

"Quick march!" was Gerald's only reply.

And they marched. Under the drifted damp leaves the path was firm and stony to their shuffling feet. At the dark arch they stopped.

"There are steps down," said Jimmy.

"It *is* an ice-house," said Gerald.

"Don't let's," said Kathleen.

"Our hero," said Gerald, "who nothing could dismay, raised the faltering hopes of his abject minions by saying that he was jolly well going on, and they could do as they liked about it."

"If you call names," said Jimmy, "you can go on by yourself." He added, "So there!"

"It's part of the game, silly," explained Gerald kindly. "You can be Captain to-morrow, so you'd better hold your jaw now, and begin to think about what names you'll call us when it's your turn."

Very slowly and carefully they went down the steps. A vaulted stone arched over their heads. Gerald struck a match when the last step was found to have no edge, and to be, in fact, the beginning of a passage, turning to the left.

"This," said Jimmy, "will take us back into the road."

"Or under it," said Gerald. "We've come down eleven steps."

They went on, following their leader, who went very slowly for fear, as he explained, of steps. The passage was very dark.

"I don't half like it!" whispered Jimmy.

Then came a glimmer of daylight that grew and grew, and presently ended in another arch that looked out over a scene so like a picture out of a book about Italy that every one's breath was taken away, and they simply walked forward silent and staring. A short avenue of cypresses led, widening as it went, to a marble terrace that lay broad and white in the sunlight. The children, blinking, leaned their arms on the broad, flat balustrade and gazed. Immediately below them was a lake – just like a lake in "The Beauties of Italy" – a lake with swans and an island and weeping willows; beyond it were green slopes dotted with groves of trees, and amid the trees gleamed the white limbs of statues. Against a little hill to the left was a round white building with pillars, and to the right a waterfall came tumbling down among mossy stones to splash into the lake. Steps led from the terrace to the water, and other steps to the green lawns beside it. Away across the grassy slopes deer were feeding, and in the distance where the groves of trees thickened into what looked almost a forest were enormous shapes of grey stone, like nothing that the children had ever seen before.

"That chap at school – " said Gerald.

"It *is* an enchanted castle," said Kathleen.

"I don't see any castle," said Jimmy.

"What do you call that, then?" Gerald pointed to where, beyond a belt of lime-trees, white towers and turrets broke the blue of the sky.

"There doesn't seem to be any one about," said Kathleen, "and yet it's all so tidy. I believe it is magic."

"Magic mowing machines," Jimmy suggested.

"If we were in a book it would be an enchanted castle – certain to be," said Kathleen.

"It *is* an enchanted castle," said Gerald in hollow tones.

"But there aren't any." Jimmy was quite positive.

"How do you know? Do you think there's nothing in the world but what *you've* seen?" His scorn was crushing.

"I think magic went out when people began to have steam-engines," Jimmy insisted, "and newspapers, and telephones and wireless telegraphing."

"Wireless is rather like magic when you come to think of it," said Gerald.

"Oh, *that* sort!" Jimmy's contempt was deep.

"Perhaps there's given up being magic because people didn't believe in it any more," said Kathleen.

"Well, don't let's spoil the show with any silly old not believing," said Gerald with decision. "I'm going to believe in magic as hard as I can. This is an enchanted garden, and that's an enchanted castle, and I'm jolly well going to explore. The dauntless knight then led the way, leaving his ignorant

squires to follow or not, just as they jolly well chose." He rolled off the balustrade and strode firmly down towards the lawn, his boots making, as they went, a clatter full of determination.

The others followed. There never was such a garden – out of a picture or a fairy tale. They passed quite close by the deer, who only raised their pretty heads to look, and did not seem startled at all. And after a long stretch of turf they passed under the heaped-up heavy masses of lime-trees and came into a rose-garden, bordered with thick, close-cut yew hedges, and lying red and pink and green and white in the sun, like a giant's many-coloured, highly-scented pocket-handkerchief.

"I know we shall meet a gardener in a minute, and he'll ask what we're doing here. And then what will you say?" Kathleen asked with her nose in a rose.

"I shall say we've lost our way, and it will be quite true," said Gerald.

But they did not meet a gardener or anybody else, and the feeling of magic got thicker and thicker, till they were almost afraid of the sound of their feet in the great silent place. Beyond the rose garden was a yew hedge with an arch cut in it, and it was the beginning of a maze like the one in Hampton Court.

"Now," said Gerald, "you mark my words. In the middle of this maze we shall find the secret enchantment. Draw your swords, my merry men all, and hark forward tallyho in the utmost silence."

Which they did.

It was very hot in the maze, between the close yew hedges, and the way to the maze's heart was hidden well. Again and again they found themselves at the black yew arch that opened on the rose garden, and they were all glad that they had brought large, clean pocket-handkerchiefs with them.

It was when they found themselves there for the fourth time that Jimmy suddenly cried, "Oh, I wish – " and then stopped short very suddenly. "Oh!" he added in quite a different voice, "where's the dinner?" And then in a stricken silence they all remembered that the basket with the dinner had been left at the entrance of the cave. Their thoughts dwelt fondly on the slices of cold mutton, the six tomatoes, the bread and butter, the screwed-up paper of salt, the apple turnovers, and the little thick glass that one drank the gingerbeer out of.

"Let's go back," said Jimmy, "now this minute, and get our things and have our dinner."

"Let's have one more try at the maze. I hate giving things up," said Gerald.

"I *am* so hungry!" said Jimmy.

"Why didn't you say so before?" asked Gerald bitterly.

"I wasn't before."

"Then you can't be now. You don't get hungry all in a minute. What's that?"

"That" was a gleam of red that lay at the foot of the yew hedge – a thin little line, that you would hardly have noticed unless you had been staring in a fixed and angry way at the roots of the hedge.

It was a thread of cotton. Gerald picked it up. One end of it was tied to a thimble with holes in it, and the other —

"There *is* no other end," said Gerald, with firm triumph. "It's a clue – that's what it is. What price cold mutton now? I've always felt something magic would happen some day, and now it has."

"I expect the gardener put it there," said Jimmy.

"With a Princess's silver thimble on it? Look! there's a crown on the thimble."

There was.

"Come," said Gerald in low, urgent tones, "if you are adventurers *be* adventurers; and anyhow, I expect some one has gone along the road and bagged the mutton hours ago."

He walked forward, winding the red thread round his fingers as he went. And it *was* a clue, and it led them right into the middle of the maze. And in the very middle of the maze they came upon the wonder.

The red clue led them up two stone steps to a round grass plot. There was a sun-dial in the middle, and all round against the yew hedge a low, wide marble seat. The red clue ran straight across the grass and by the sun-dial, and ended in a small brown hand with jewelled rings on every finger.

The hand was, naturally, attached to an arm, and that had many bracelets on it, sparkling with red and blue and green stones. The arm wore a sleeve of pink and gold brocaded silk, faded a little here and there but still extremely imposing, and the sleeve was part of a dress, which was worn by a lady who lay on the stone seat asleep in the sun. The rosy gold dress fell open over an embroidered petticoat of a soft green colour. There was old yellow lace the colour of scalded cream, and a thin white veil spangled with silver stars covered the face.

"It's the enchanted Princess," said Gerald, now really impressed. "I told you so."

"It's the Sleeping Beauty," said Kathleen. "It is – look how old-fashioned her clothes are, like the pictures of Marie Antoinette's ladies in the history book. She has slept for a hundred years. Oh, Gerald, you're the eldest; you must be the Prince, and we never knew it."

"She isn't really a Princess," said Jimmy. But the others laughed at him, partly because his saying things like that was enough to spoil any game, and partly because they really were not at all sure that it was not a Princess who lay there as still as the sunshine. Every stage of the adventure – the cave, the wonderful gardens, the maze, the clue, had deepened the feeling of magic, till now Kathleen and Gerald were almost completely bewitched.

"Lift the veil up, Jerry," said Kathleen in a whisper; "if she isn't beautiful we shall know she can't be the Princess."

"Lift it yourself," said Gerald.

"I expect you're forbidden to touch the figures," said Jimmy.

"It's not wax, silly," said his brother.

"No," said his sister, "wax wouldn't be much good in this sun. And, besides, you can see her breathing. It's the Princess right enough." She very gently lifted the edge of the veil and turned it back. The Princess's face was small and white between long plaits of black hair. Her nose was straight and her brows finely traced. There were a few freckles on cheek-bones and nose.

"No wonder," whispered Kathleen, "sleeping all these years in all this sun!" Her mouth was not a rosebud. But all the same —

"Isn't she lovely!" Kathleen murmured.

"Not so dusty," Gerald was understood to reply.

"Now, Jerry," said Kathleen firmly, "you're the eldest."

"Of course I am," said Gerald uneasily.

"Well, you've got to wake the Princess."

"She's not a Princess," said Jimmy, with his hands in the pockets of his knickerbockers; "she's only a little girl dressed up."

"But she's in long dresses," urged Kathleen.

"Yes, but look what a little way down her frock her feet come. She wouldn't be any taller than Jerry if she was to stand up."

"Now then," urged Kathleen. "Jerry, don't be silly. You've got to do it."

"Do what?" asked Gerald, kicking his left boot with his right.

"Why, kiss her awake, of course."

"Not me!" was Gerald's unhesitating rejoinder.

"Well, some one's got to."

"She'd go for me as likely as not the minute she woke up," said Gerald anxiously.

"I'd do it like a shot," said Kathleen, "but I don't suppose it ud make any difference me kissing her."

She did it; and it didn't. The Princess still lay in deep slumber.

"Then you must, Jimmy. I daresay you'll do. Jump back quickly before she can hit you."

"She won't hit him, he's such a little chap," said Gerald.

"Little yourself!" said Jimmy. "*I* don't mind kissing her. I'm not a coward, like Some People. Only if I do, I'm going to be the dauntless leader for the rest of the day."

"No, look here – hold on!" cried Gerald, "perhaps I'd better – " But, in the meantime, Jimmy had planted a loud, cheerful-sounding kiss on the Princess's pale cheek, and now the three stood breathless, awaiting the result.

And the result was that the Princess opened large, dark eyes, stretched out her arms, yawned a little, covering her mouth with a small brown hand, and said, quite plainly and distinctly, and without any room at all for mistake: —

"Then the hundred years are over? How the yew hedges have grown! Which of you is my Prince that aroused me from my deep sleep of so many long years?"

"I did," said Jimmy fearlessly, for she did not look as though she were going to slap any one.

"My noble preserver!" said the Princess, and held out her hand. Jimmy shook it vigorously.

"But I say," said he, "you aren't really a Princess, are you?"

"Of course I am," she answered; "who else could I be? Look at my crown!" She pulled aside the spangled veil, and showed beneath it a coronet of what even Jimmy could not help seeing to be diamonds.

"But – " said Jimmy.

"Why," she said, opening her eyes very wide, "you must have known about my being here, or you'd never have come. How *did* you get past the dragons?"

Gerald ignored the question. "I say," he said, "do you really believe in magic, and all that?"

"I ought to," she said, "if anybody does. Look, here's the place where I pricked my finger with the spindle." She showed a little scar on her wrist.

"Then this really *is* an enchanted castle?"

"Of course it is," said the Princess. "How stupid you are!" She stood up, and her pink brocaded dress lay in bright waves about her feet.

"I said her dress would be too long," said Jimmy.

"It was the right length when I went to sleep," said the Princess; "it must have grown in the hundred years."

"I don't believe you're a Princess at all," said Jimmy; "at least – "

"Don't bother about believing it, if you don't like," said the Princess. "It doesn't so much matter what you believe as what I am." She turned to the others.

"Let's go back to the castle," she said, "and I'll show you all my lovely jewels and things. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Yes," said Gerald with very plain hesitation. "But – "

"But what?" The Princess's tone was impatient.

"But we're most awfully hungry."

"Oh, so am I!" cried the Princess.

"We've had nothing to eat since breakfast."

"And it's three now," said the Princess, looking at the sun-dial. "Why, you've had nothing to eat for hours and hours and hours. But think of me! I haven't had anything to eat for a hundred years. Come along to the castle."

"The mice will have eaten everything," said Jimmy sadly. He saw now that she really *was* a Princess.

"Not they," cried the Princess joyously. "You forget everything's enchanted here. Time simply stood still for a hundred years. Come along, and one of you must carry my train, or I shan't be able to move now it's grown such a frightful length."

CHAPTER II

When you are young so many things are difficult to believe, and yet the dullest people will tell you that they are true – such things, for instance, as that the earth goes round the sun, and that it is not flat but round. But the things that seem really likely, like fairy-tales and magic, are, so say the grown-ups, not true at all. Yet they are so easy to believe, especially when you see them happening. And, as I am always telling you, the most wonderful things happen to all sorts of people, only you never hear about them because the people think that no one will believe their stories, and so they don't tell them to any one except me. And they tell me, because they know that I can believe anything.

When Jimmy had awakened the Sleeping Princess, and she had invited the three children to go with her to her palace and get something to eat, they all knew quite surely that they had come into a place of magic happenings. And they walked in a slow procession along the grass towards the castle. The Princess went first, and Kathleen carried her shining train; then came Jimmy, and Gerald came last. They were all quite sure that they had walked right into the middle of a fairy tale, and they were the more ready to believe it because they were so tired and hungry. They were, in fact, so hungry and tired that they hardly noticed where they were going, or observed the beauties of the formal gardens through which the pink-silk Princess was leading them. They were in a sort of dream, from which they only partially awakened to find themselves in a big hall, with suits of armour and old flags round the walls, the skins of beasts on the floor, and heavy oak tables and benches ranged along it.

The Princess entered, slow and stately, but once inside she twitched her sheeny train out of Jimmy's hand and turned to the three.

"You just wait here a minute," she said, "and mind you don't talk while I'm away. This castle is crammed with magic, and I don't know what will happen if you talk." And with that, picking up the thick goldy-pink folds under her arms, she ran out, as Jimmy said afterwards, "most unprincesslike," showing as she ran black stockings and black strap shoes.

Jimmy wanted very much to say that he didn't believe anything would happen, only he was afraid something would happen if he did, so he merely made a face and put out his tongue. The others pretended not to see this, which was much more crushing than anything they could have said. So they sat in silence, and Gerald ground the heel of his boot upon the marble floor. Then the Princess came back, very slowly and kicking her long skirts in front of her at every step. She could not hold them up now because of the tray she carried.

It was not a silver tray, as you might have expected, but an oblong tin one. She set it down noisily on the end of the long table and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh! it *was* heavy," she said. I don't know what fairy feast the children's fancy had been busy with. Anyhow, this was nothing like it. The heavy tray held a loaf of bread, a lump of cheese, and a brown jug of water. The rest of its heaviness was just plates and mugs and knives.

"Come along," said the Princess hospitably. "I couldn't find anything but bread and cheese – but it doesn't matter, because everything's magic here, and unless you have some dreadful secret fault the bread and cheese will turn into anything you like. What *would* you like?" she asked Kathleen.

"Roast chicken," said Kathleen, without hesitation.

The pinky Princess cut a slice of bread and laid it on a dish. "There you are," she said, "roast chicken. Shall I carve it, or will you?"

"You, please," said Kathleen, and received a piece of dry bread on a plate.

"Green peas?" asked the Princess, cut a piece of cheese and laid it beside the bread.

Kathleen began to eat the bread, cutting it up with knife and fork as you would eat chicken. It was no use owning that she didn't see any chicken and peas, or anything but cheese and dry bread, because that would be owning that she had some dreadful secret fault.

"If I have, it *is* a secret, even from me," she told herself.

The others asked for roast beef and cabbage – and got it, she supposed, though to her it only looked like dry bread and Dutch cheese.

"I *do* wonder what my dreadful secret fault is," she thought, as the Princess remarked that, as for her, she could fancy a slice of roast peacock. "This one," she added, lifting a second mouthful of dry bread on her fork, "is quite delicious."

"It's a game, isn't it?" asked Jimmy suddenly.

"What's a game?" asked the Princess, frowning.

"Pretending it's beef – the bread and cheese, I mean."

"A game? But it *is* beef. Look at it," said the Princess, opening her eyes very wide.

"Yes, of course," said Jimmy feebly. "I was only joking."

Bread and cheese is not perhaps so good as roast beef or chicken or peacock (I'm not sure about the peacock. I never tasted peacock, did you?); but bread and cheese is, at any rate, very much better than nothing when you have gone on having nothing since breakfast (gooseberries and gingerbeer hardly count) and it is long past your proper dinner-time. Every one ate and drank and felt much better.

"Now," said the Princess, brushing the breadcrumbs off her green silk lap, "if you're sure you won't have any more meat you can come and see my treasures. Sure you won't take the least bit more chicken? No? Then follow me."

She got up and they followed her down the long hall to the end where the great stone stairs ran up at each side and joined in a broad flight leading to the gallery above. Under the stairs was a hanging of tapestry.

"Beneath this arras," said the Princess, "is the door leading to my private apartments." She held the tapestry up with both hands, for it was heavy, and showed a little door that had been hidden by it.

"The key," she said, "hangs above."

And so it did, on a large rusty nail.

"Put it in," said the Princess, "and turn it."

Gerald did so, and the great key creaked and grated in the lock.

"Now push," she said; "push hard, all of you."

They pushed hard, all of them. The door gave way, and they fell over each other into the dark space beyond.

The Princess dropped the curtain and came after them, closing the door behind her.

"Look out!" she said; "look out! there are two steps down."

"Thank you," said Gerald, rubbing his knee at the bottom of the steps. "We found that out for ourselves."

"I'm sorry," said the Princess, "but you can't have hurt yourselves much. Go straight on. There aren't any more steps."

They went straight on – in the dark.

"When you come to the door just turn the handle and go in. Then stand still till I find the matches. I know where they are."

"Did they have matches a hundred years ago?" asked Jimmy.

"I meant the tinder-box," said the Princess quickly. "We always called it the matches. Don't you? Here, let me go first."

She did, and when they had reached the door she was waiting for them with a candle in her hand. She thrust it on Gerald.

"Hold it steady," she said, and undid the shutters of a long window, so that first a yellow streak and then a blazing great oblong of light flashed at them and the room was full of sunshine.

"It makes the candle look quite silly," said Jimmy.

"So it does," said the Princess, and blew out the candle. Then she took the key from the outside of the door, put it in the inside key-hole, and turned it.

The room they were in was small and high. Its domed ceiling was of deep blue with gold stars painted on it. The walls were of wood, panelled and carved, and there was no furniture in it whatever.

"This," said the Princess, "is my treasure chamber."

"But where," asked Kathleen politely, "*are* the treasures?"

"Don't you see them?" asked the Princess.

"No, we don't," said Jimmy bluntly. "You don't come that bread-and-cheese game with me – not twice over, you don't!"

"If you *really* don't see them," said the Princess, "I suppose I shall have to say the charm. Shut your eyes, please. And give me your word of honour you won't look till I tell you, and that you'll never tell any one what you've seen."

Their words of honour were something that the children would rather not have given just then, but they gave them all the same, and shut their eyes tight.

"Wiggadil yougadoo begadee leegadeeve nowgadow?" said the Princess rapidly; and they heard the swish of her silk train moving across the room. Then there was a creaking, rustling noise.

"She's locking us in!" cried Jimmy.

"Your word of honour," gasped Gerald.

"Oh, do be quick!" moaned Kathleen.

"You may look," said the voice of the Princess. And they looked. The room was not the same room, yet – yes, the starry-vaulted blue ceiling was there, and below it half a dozen feet of the dark panelling, but below that the walls of the room blazed and sparkled with white and blue and red and green and gold and silver. Shelves ran round the room, and on them were gold cups and silver dishes, and platters and goblets set with gems, ornaments of gold and silver, tiaras of diamonds, necklaces of rubies, strings of emeralds and pearls, all set out in unimaginable splendour against a background of faded blue velvet. It was like the Crown jewels that you see when your kind uncle takes you to the Tower, only there seemed to be far more jewels than you or any one else has ever seen together at the Tower or anywhere else.

The three children remained breathless, open-mouthed, staring at the sparkling splendours all about them, while the Princess stood, her arm stretched out in a gesture of command, and a proud smile on her lips.

"My word!" said Gerald, in a low whisper. But no one spoke out loud. They waited as if spellbound for the Princess to speak.

She spoke.

"What price bread-and-cheese games now?" she asked triumphantly. "Can I do magic, or can't I?"

"You can; oh, you can!" said Kathleen.

"May we – may we *touch?*" asked Gerald.

"All that is mine is yours," said the Princess, with a generous wave of her brown hand, and added quickly, "Only, of course, you mustn't take anything away with you."

"We're not thieves!" said Jimmy. The others were already busy turning over the wonderful things on the blue velvet shelves.

"Perhaps not," said the Princess, "but you're a very unbelieving little boy. You think I can't see inside you, but I can. *I* know what you've been thinking."

"What?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, you know well enough," said the Princess. "You're thinking about the bread and cheese that I changed into beef, and about your secret fault. I say, let's all dress up and you be princes and princesses too."

"To crown our hero," said Gerald, lifting a gold crown with a cross on the top, "was the work of a moment." He put the crown on his head, and added a collar of SS and a zone of sparkling emeralds,

which would not quite meet round his middle. He turned from fixing it by an ingenious adaptation of his belt to find the others already decked with diadems, necklaces, and rings.

"How splendid you look!" said the Princess, "and how I wish your clothes were prettier. What ugly clothes people wear nowadays! A hundred years ago – "

Kathleen stood quite still with a diamond bracelet raised in her hand.

"I say," she said. "The King and Queen?"

"*What* King and Queen?" asked the Princess.

"Your father and mother, your sorrowing parents," said Kathleen. "They'll have waked up by now. Won't they be wanting to see you, after a hundred years, you know?"

"Oh – ah – yes," said the Princess slowly. "I embraced my rejoicing parents when I got the bread and cheese. They're having their dinner. They won't expect me yet. Here," she added, hastily putting a ruby bracelet on Kathleen's arm, "see how splendid that is!"

Kathleen would have been quite content to go on all day trying on different jewels and looking at herself in the little silver-framed mirror that the Princess took from one of the shelves, but the boys were soon weary of this amusement.

"Look here," said Gerald, "if you're sure your father and mother won't want you, let's go out and have a jolly good game of something. You could play besieged castles awfully well in that maze – unless you can do any more magic tricks."

"You forget," said the Princess, "I'm grown up. I don't play games. And I don't like to do too much magic at a time, it's so tiring. Besides, it'll take us ever so long to put all these things back in their proper places."

It did. The children would have laid the jewels just anywhere; but the Princess showed them that every necklace, or ring, or bracelet had its own home on the velvet – a slight hollowing in the shelf beneath, so that each stone fitted into its own little nest.

As Kathleen was fitting the last shining ornament into its proper place, she saw that part of the shelf near it held, not bright jewels, but rings and brooches and chains, as well as queer things that she did not know the names of, and all were of dull metal and odd shapes.

"What's all this rubbish?" she asked.

"Rubbish, indeed!" said the Princess. "Why those are *all* magic things! This bracelet – any one who wears it has got to speak the truth. This chain makes you as strong as ten men; if you wear this spur your horse will go a mile a minute; or if you're walking it's the same as seven-league boots."

"What does this brooch do?" asked Kathleen, reaching out her hand. The Princess caught her by the wrist.

"You mustn't touch," she said; "if any one but me touches them all the magic goes out at once and never comes back. That brooch will give you any wish you like."

"And this ring?" Jimmy pointed.

"Oh, that makes you invisible."

"What's this?" asked Gerald, showing a curious buckle.

"Oh, that undoes the effect of all the other charms."

"Do you mean *really?*" Jimmy asked. "You're not just kidding?"

"Kidding indeed!" repeated the Princess scornfully. "I should have thought I'd shown you enough magic to prevent you speaking to a Princess like *that!*"

"I say," said Gerald, visibly excited. "You might show us how some of the things act. Couldn't you give us each a wish?"

The Princess did not at once answer. And the minds of the three played with granted wishes – brilliant yet thoroughly reasonable – the kind of wish that never seems to occur to people in fairy tales when they suddenly get a chance to have their three wishes granted.

"No," said the Princess suddenly, "no; I can't give wishes to *you*, it only gives me wishes. But I'll let you see the ring make *me* invisible. Only you must shut your eyes while I do it."

They shut them.

"Count fifty," said the Princess, "and then you may look. And then you must shut them again, and count fifty, and I'll reappear."

Gerald counted, aloud. Through the counting one could hear a creaking, rustling sound.

"Forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty!" said Gerald, and they opened their eyes.

They were alone in the room. The jewels had vanished and so had the Princess.

"She's gone out by the door, of course," said Jimmy, but the door was locked.

"That *is* magic," said Kathleen breathlessly.

"Maskelyne and Devant can do *that* trick," said Jimmy. "And I want my tea."

"Your tea!" Gerald's tone was full of contempt. "The lovely Princess," he went on, "reappeared as soon as our hero had finished counting fifty. One, two, three, four – "

Gerald and Kathleen had both closed their eyes. But somehow Jimmy hadn't. He didn't mean to cheat, he just forgot. And as Gerald's count reached twenty he saw a panel under the window open slowly.

"Her," he said to himself. "I *knew* it was a trick!" and at once shut his eyes, like an honourable little boy.

On the word "fifty" six eyes opened. And the panel was closed and there was no Princess.

"She hasn't pulled it off this time," said Gerald.

"Perhaps you'd better count again," said Kathleen.

"I believe there's a cupboard under the window," said Jimmy, "and she's hidden in it. Secret panel, you know."

"You looked! that's cheating," said the voice of the Princess so close to his ear that he quite jumped.

"I didn't cheat."

"Where on earth – What ever – " said all three together. For still there was no Princess to be seen.

"Come back visible, Princess dear," said Kathleen. "Shall we shut our eyes and count again?"

"Don't be silly!" said the voice of the Princess, and it sounded very cross.

"We're *not* silly," said Jimmy, and his voice was cross too. "Why can't you come back and have done with it? You know you're only hiding."

"Don't!" said Kathleen gently. "She *is* invisible, you know."

"So should I be if I got into the cupboard," said Jimmy.

"Oh yes," said the sneering tone of the Princess, "you think yourselves very clever, I dare say. But *I* don't mind. We'll play that you *can't* see me, if you like."

"Well, but we *can't*," said Gerald. "It's no use getting in a wax. If you're hiding, as Jimmy says, you'd better come out. If you've really turned invisible, you'd better make yourself visible again."

"Do you really mean," asked a voice quite changed, but still the Princess's, "that you *can't* see me?"

"Can't you *see* we can't?" asked Jimmy rather unreasonably.

The sun was blazing in at the window; the eight-sided room was very hot, and every one was getting cross.

"You can't *see* me?" There was the sound of a sob in the voice of the invisible Princess.

"*No*, I tell you," said Jimmy, "and I want my tea – and – "

What he was saying was broken off short, as one might break a stick of sealing wax. And then in the golden afternoon a really quite horrid thing happened: Jimmy suddenly leaned backwards, then forwards, his eyes opened wide and his mouth too. Backward and forward he went, very quickly and abruptly, then stood still.

"Oh, he's in a fit! Oh, Jimmy, dear Jimmy!" cried Kathleen, hurrying to him. "What is it, dear, what is it?"

"It's *not* a fit," gasped Jimmy angrily. "She shook me."

"Yes," said the voice of the Princess, "and I'll shake him again if he keeps on saying he can't see me."

"You'd better shake *me*," said Gerald angrily. "I'm nearer your own size."

And instantly she did. But not for long. The moment Gerald felt hands on his shoulders he put up his own and caught those other hands by the wrists. And there he was, holding wrists that he couldn't see. It was a dreadful sensation. An invisible kick made him wince, but he held tight to the wrists.

"Cathy," he cried, "come and hold her legs; she's kicking me."

"Where?" cried Kathleen, anxious to help. "I don't *see* any legs."

"This is her hands I've got," cried Gerald. "She *is* invisible right enough. Get hold of this hand, and then you can feel your way down to her legs."

Kathleen did so. I wish I could make you understand how very, very uncomfortable and frightening it is to feel, in broad daylight, hands and arms that you can't see.

"I *won't* have you hold my legs," said the invisible Princess, struggling violently.

"What are you so cross about?" Gerald was quite calm. "You said you'd be invisible, and you *are*."

"I'm not."

"You are really. Look in the glass."

"I'm not; I can't be."

"Look in the glass," Gerald repeated, quite unmoved.

"Let go, then," she said.

Gerald did, and the moment he had done so he found it impossible to believe that he really had been holding invisible hands.

"You're just pretending not to see me," said the Princess anxiously, "aren't you? Do say you are. You've had your joke with me. Don't keep it up. I don't like it."

"On our sacred word of honour," said Gerald, "you're still invisible."

There was a silence. Then, "Come," said the Princess. "I'll let you out, and you can go. I'm tired of playing with you."

They followed her voice to the door, and through it, and along the little passage into the hall. No one said anything. Every one felt very uncomfortable.

"Let's get out of this," whispered Jimmy as they got to the end of the hall.

But the voice of the Princess said: "Come out this way; it's quicker. I think you're perfectly hateful. I'm sorry I ever played with you. Mother always told me not to play with strange children."

A door abruptly opened, though no hand was seen to touch it. "Come through, can't you!" said the voice of the Princess.

It was a little ante-room, with long, narrow mirrors between its long, narrow windows.

"Goodbye," said Gerald. "Thanks for giving us such a jolly time. Let's part friends," he added, holding out his hand.

An unseen hand was slowly put in his, which closed on it, vice-like.

"Now," he said, "you've jolly well *got* to look in the glass and own that we're not liars."

He led the invisible Princess to one of the mirrors, and held her in front of it by the shoulders.

"Now," he said, "you just look for yourself."

There was a silence, and then a cry of despair rang through the room.

"Oh – oh – oh! I *am* invisible. Whatever shall I do?"

"Take the ring off," said Kathleen, suddenly practical.

Another silence.

"I *can't!*" cried the Princess. "It won't come off. But it can't be the ring; rings don't make you invisible."

"You said this one did," said Kathleen, "and it has."

"But it *can't*," said the Princess. "I was only playing at magic. I just hid in the secret cupboard – it was only a game. Oh, whatever *shall* I do?"

"A game?" said Gerald slowly; "but you *can* do magic – the invisible jewels, and you made them come visible."

"Oh, it's only a secret spring and the panelling slides up. Oh, what am I to do?"

Kathleen moved towards the voice and gropingly got her arms round a pink-silk waist that she couldn't see. Invisible arms clasped her, a hot invisible cheek was laid against hers, and warm invisible tears lay wet between the two faces.

"Don't cry, dear," said Kathleen; "let me go and tell the King and Queen."

"The – ?"

"Your royal father and mother."

"Oh, *don't* mock me!" said the poor Princess. "You *know* that was only a game, too, like – "

"Like the bread and cheese," said Jimmy triumphantly. "I knew *that* was!"

"But your dress and being asleep in the maze, and – "

"Oh, I dressed up for fun, because every one's away at the fair, and I put the clue just to make it all more real. I was playing at Fair Rosamond first, and then I heard you talking in the maze, and I thought what fun; and now I'm invisible, and I shall never come right again, never – I know I shan't! It serves me right for lying, but I didn't really think you'd believe it – not more than half, that is," she added hastily, trying to be truthful.

"But if you're not the Princess, who *are* you?" asked Kathleen, still embracing the unseen.

"I'm – my aunt lives here," said the invisible Princess. "She may be home any time. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Perhaps she knows some charm – "

"Oh, nonsense!" said the voice sharply; "she doesn't believe in charms. She *would* be so vexed. Oh, I daren't let her see me like this!" she added wildly. "And all of you here, too. She'd be so dreadfully cross."

The beautiful magic castle that the children had believed in now felt as though it were tumbling about their ears. All that was left was the invisibleness of the Princess. But that, you will own, was a good deal.

"I just said it," moaned the voice, "and it came true. I wish I'd never played at magic – I wish I'd never played at anything at all."

"Oh, don't say that," Gerald said kindly. "Let's go out into the garden, near the lake, where it's cool, and we'll hold a solemn council. You'll like that, won't you?"

"Oh!" cried Kathleen suddenly, "the buckle; that makes magic come undone!"

"It doesn't *really*," murmured the voice that seemed to speak without lips. "I only just *said* that."

"You only 'just said' about the ring," said Gerald. "Anyhow, let's try."

"Not *you—me*," said the voice. "You go down to the Temple of Flora, by the lake. I'll go back to the jewel-room by myself. Aunt might see you."

"She won't see *you*," said Jimmy.

"Don't rub it in," said Gerald. "Where *is* the Temple of Flora?"

"That's the way," the voice said; "down those steps and along the winding path through the shrubbery. You can't miss it. It's white marble, with a statue goddess inside."

The three children went down to the white marble Temple of Flora that stood close against the side of the little hill, and sat down in its shadowy inside. It had arches all round except against the hill behind the statue, and it was cool and restful.

They had not been there five minutes before the feet of a runner sounded loud on the gravel. A shadow, very black and distinct, fell on the white marble floor.

"Your shadow's not invisible anyhow," said Jimmy.

"Oh, bother my shadow!" the voice of the Princess replied. "We left the key inside the door, and it's shut itself with the wind, and it's a spring lock!"

There was a heartfelt pause.

Then Gerald said, in his most business-like manner:

"Sit down, Princess, and we'll have a thorough good palaver about it."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Jimmy, "if we was to wake up and find it was dreams."

"No such luck," said the voice.

"Well," said Gerald, "first of all, what's your name, and if you're not a Princess, who are you?"

"I'm – I'm," said a voice broken with sobs, "I'm the – housekeeper's – niece – at – the – castle – and my name's Mabel Prowse."

"That's exactly what I thought," said Jimmy, without a shadow of truth, because how could he? The others were silent. It was a moment full of agitation and confused ideas.

"Well, anyhow," said Gerald, "you belong here."

"Yes," said the voice, and it came from the floor, as though its owner had flung herself down in the madness of despair. "Oh yes, I belong here right enough, but what's the use of belonging anywhere if you're invisible?"

CHAPTER III

Those of my readers who have gone about much with an invisible companion will not need to be told how awkward the whole business is. For one thing, however much you may have been convinced that your companion *is* invisible, you will, I feel sure, have found yourself every now and then saying, "This *must* be a dream!" or "I *know* I shall wake up in half a sec!" And this was the case with Gerald, Kathleen, and Jimmy as they sat in the white marble Temple of Flora, looking out through its arches at the sunshiny park and listening to the voice of the enchanted Princess, who really was not a Princess at all, but just the housekeeper's niece, Mabel Prowse; though, as Jimmy said, "she was enchanted, right enough."

"It's no use talking," she said again and again, and the voice came from an empty-looking space between two pillars; "I never believed anything would happen, and now it has."

"Well," said Gerald kindly, "can we do anything for you? Because, if not, I think we ought to be going."

"Yes," said Jimmy; "I *do* want my tea!"

"Tea!" said the unseen Mabel scornfully. "Do you mean to say you'd go off to your teas and leave me after getting me into this mess?"

"Well, of all the unfair Princesses I ever met!" Gerald began. But Kathleen interrupted.

"Oh, don't rag her," she said. "Think how horrid it must be to be invisible!"

"I don't think," said the hidden Mabel, "that my aunt likes me very much as it is. She wouldn't let me go to the fair because I'd forgotten to put back some old trumpery shoe that Queen Elizabeth wore – I got it out from the glass case to try it on."

"Did it fit?" asked Kathleen, with interest.

"Not it – much too small," said Mabel. "I don't believe it ever fitted any one."

"I do want my tea!" said Jimmy.

"I do really think perhaps we ought to go," said Gerald. "You see, it isn't as if we could do anything for you."

"You'll have to tell your aunt," said Kathleen kindly.

"No, no, no!" moaned Mabel invisibly; "take me with you. I'll leave her a note to say I've run away to sea."

"Girls don't run away to sea."

"They might," said the stone floor between the pillars, "as stowaways, if nobody wanted a cabin boy – cabin girl, I mean."

"I'm sure you oughtn't," said Kathleen firmly.

"Well, what *am* I to do?"

"Really," said Gerald, "I don't know what the girl *can* do. Let her come home with us and have – "

"Tea – oh, yes," said Jimmy, jumping up.

"And have a good council."

"After tea," said Jimmy.

"But her aunt'll find she's gone."

"So she would if I stayed."

"Oh, come on," said Jimmy.

"But the aunt'll think something's happened to her."

"So it has."

"And she'll tell the police, and they'll look everywhere for me."

"They'll never find you," said Gerald. "Talk of impenetrable disguises!"

"I'm sure," said Mabel, "aunt would much rather never see me again than see me like this. She'd never get over it; it might kill her – she has spasms as it is. I'll write to her, and we'll put it in the big letter-box at the gate as we go out. Has any one got a bit of pencil and a scrap of paper?"

Gerald had a note-book, with leaves of the shiny kind which you have to write on, not with a blacklead pencil, but with an ivory thing with a point of real lead. And it won't write on any other paper except the kind that is in the book, and this is often very annoying when you are in a hurry. Then was seen the strange spectacle of a little ivory stick, with a leaden point, standing up at an odd, impossible-looking slant, and moving along all by itself as ordinary pencils do when you are writing with them.

"May we look over?" asked Kathleen.

There was no answer. The pencil went on writing.

"Mayn't we look over?" Kathleen said again.

"Of course you may!" said the voice near the paper. "I nodded, didn't I? Oh, I forgot, my nodding's invisible too."

The pencil was forming round, clear letters on the page torn out of the note-book. This is what it wrote: —

> "Dear Aunt, —
>
> "I am afraid you will not see me again for some time. A lady in a motor-car has adopted me, and we are going straight to the coast and then in a ship. It is useless to try to follow me. Farewell, and may you be happy. I hope you enjoyed the fair.
>
> *"Mabel."*

"But that's all lies," said Jimmy bluntly.

"No, it isn't; it's fancy," said Mabel. "If I said I've become invisible, she'd think that was a lie, anyhow."

"Oh, *come* along," said Jimmy; "you can quarrel just as well walking."

Gerald folded up the note as a lady in India had taught him to do years before, and Mabel led them by another and very much nearer way out of the park. And the walk home was a great deal shorter, too, than the walk out had been.

The sky had clouded over while they were in the Temple of Flora, and the first spots of rain fell as they got back to the house, very late indeed for tea.

Mademoiselle was looking out of the window, and came herself to open the door.

"But it is that you are in lateness, in lateness!" she cried. "You have had a misfortune – no? All goes well?"

"We are very sorry indeed," said Gerald. "It took us longer to get home than we expected. I do hope you haven't been anxious. I have been thinking about you most of the way home."

"Go, then," said the French lady, smiling; "you shall have them in the same time – the tea and the supper."

Which they did.

"How *could* you say you were thinking about her all the time?" said a voice just by Gerald's ear, when Mademoiselle had left them alone with the bread and butter and milk and baked apples. "It was just as much a lie as me being adopted by a motor lady."

"No, it wasn't," said Gerald, through bread and butter. "I *was* thinking about whether she'd be in a wax or not. So there!"

There were only three plates, but Jimmy let Mabel have his, and shared with Kathleen. It was rather horrid to see the bread and butter waving about in the air, and bite after bite disappearing from it apparently by no human agency; and the spoon rising with apple in it and returning to the plate empty. Even the tip of the spoon disappeared as long as it was in Mabel's unseen mouth; so that at times it looked as though its bowl had been broken off.

Every one was very hungry, and more bread and butter had to be fetched. Cook grumbled when the plate was filled for the third time.

"I tell you what," said Jimmy; "I did want my tea."

"I tell *you* what," said Gerald; "it'll be jolly difficult to give Mabel any breakfast. Mademoiselle will be here then. She'd have a fit if she saw bits of forks with bacon on them vanishing, and then the forks coming back out of vanishment, and the bacon lost for ever."

"We shall have to buy things to eat and feed our poor captive in secret," said Kathleen.

"Our money won't last long," said Jimmy, in gloom. "Have *you* got any money?"

He turned to where a mug of milk was suspended in the air without visible means of support.

"I've not got much money," was the reply from near the milk, "but I've got heaps of ideas."

"We must talk about everything in the morning," said Kathleen. "We must just say good-night to Mademoiselle, and then you shall sleep in my bed, Mabel. I'll lend you one of my nightgowns."

"I'll get my own to-morrow," said Mabel cheerfully.

"You'll go back to get things?"

"Why not? Nobody can see me. I think I begin to see all sorts of amusing things coming along. It's not half bad being invisible."

It was extremely odd, Kathleen thought, to see the Princess's clothes coming out of nothing. First the gauzy veil appeared hanging in the air. Then the sparkling coronet suddenly showed on the top of the chest of drawers. Then a sleeve of the pinky gown showed, then another, and then the whole gown lay on the floor in a glistening ring as the unseen legs of Mabel stepped out of it. For each article of clothing became visible as Mabel took it off. The nightgown, lifted from the bed, disappeared a bit at a time.

"Get into bed," said Kathleen, rather nervously.

The bed creaked and a hollow appeared in the pillow. Kathleen put out the gas and got into bed; all this magic had been rather upsetting, and she was just the least bit frightened, but in the dark she found it was not so bad. Mabel's arms went round her neck the moment she got into bed, and the two little girls kissed in the kind darkness, where the visible and the invisible could meet on equal terms.

"Good-night," said Mabel. "You're a darling, Cathy; you've been most awfully good to me, and I sha'n't forget it. I didn't like to say so before the boys, because I know boys think you're a muff if you're grateful. But I *am*. Good-night."

Kathleen lay awake for some time. She was just getting sleepy when she remembered that the maid who would call them in the morning would see those wonderful Princess clothes.

"I'll have to get up and hide them," she said. "What a bother!"

And as she lay thinking what a bother it was she happened to fall asleep, and when she woke again it was bright morning, and Eliza was standing in front of the chair where Mabel's clothes lay, gazing at the pink Princess-frock that lay on the top of her heap and saying, "Law!"

"Oh, don't touch, *please!*" Kathleen leaped out of bed as Eliza was reaching out her hand.

"Where on earth did you get hold of that?"

"We're going to use it for acting," said Kathleen, on the desperate inspiration of the moment. "It's lent me for that."

"You might show *me*, miss," suggested Eliza.

"Oh, please not!" said Kathleen, standing in front of the chair in her nightgown. "You shall see us act when we are dressed up. There! And you won't tell any one, will you?"

"Not if you're a good little girl," said Eliza. "But you be sure to let me see when you *do* dress up. But where – "

Here a bell rang and Eliza had to go, for it was the postman, and she particularly wanted to see him.

"And now," said Kathleen, pulling on her first stocking, "we shall have to *do* the acting. Everything seems very difficult."

"Acting isn't," said Mabel; and an unsupported stocking waved in the air and quickly vanished. "I shall love it."

"You forget," said Kathleen gently, "invisible actresses can't take part in plays unless they're magic ones."

"Oh," cried a voice from under a petticoat that hung in the air, "I've got *such* an idea!"

"Tell it us after breakfast," said Kathleen, as the water in the basin began to splash about and to drip from nowhere back into itself. "And oh! I do wish you hadn't written such whoppers to your aunt. I'm sure we oughtn't to tell lies for anything."

"What's the use of telling the truth if nobody believes you?" came from among the splashes.

"I don't know," said Kathleen, "but I'm sure we ought to tell the truth."

"*You* can, if you like," said a voice from the folds of a towel that waved lonely in front of the wash-hand stand.

"All right. We will, then, first thing after brek —*your* brek, I mean. You'll have to wait up here till we can collar something and bring it up to you. Mind you dodge Eliza when she comes to make the bed."

The invisible Mabel found this a fairly amusing game; she further enlivened it by twitching out the corners of tucked-up sheets and blankets when Eliza wasn't looking.

"Drat the clothes!" said Eliza; "anyone ud think the things was bewitched."

She looked about for the wonderful Princess clothes she had glimpsed earlier in the morning. But Kathleen had hidden them in a perfectly safe place under the mattress, which she knew Eliza never turned.

Eliza hastily brushed up from the floor those bits of fluff which come from goodness knows where in the best regulated houses. Mabel, very hungry and exasperated at the long absence of the others at their breakfast, could not forbear to whisper suddenly in Eliza's ear: —

"Always sweep under the mats."

The maid started and turned pale. "I must be going silly," she murmured; "though it's just what mother always used to say. Hope I ain't going dotty, like Aunt Emily. Wonderful what you can fancy, ain't it?"

She took up the hearth-rug all the same, swept under it, and under the fender. So thorough was she, and so pale, that Kathleen, entering with a chunk of bread raided by Gerald from the pantry window, exclaimed: —

"Not done yet. I say, Eliza, you do look ill! What's the matter?"

"I thought I'd give the room a good turn-out," said Eliza, still very pale.

"Nothing's happened to upset you?" Kathleen asked. She had her own private fears.

"Nothing only my fancy, miss," said Eliza. "I always was fanciful from a child – dreaming of the pearly gates and them little angels with nothing on only their heads and wings – so cheap to dress, I always think, compared with children."

When she was got rid of, Mabel ate the bread and drank water from the tooth-mug.

"I'm afraid it tastes of cherry tooth-paste rather," said Kathleen apologetically.

"It doesn't matter," a voice replied from the tilted mug; "it's more interesting than water. I should think red wine in ballads was rather like this."

"We've got leave for the day again," said Kathleen, when the last bit of bread had vanished, "and Gerald feels like I do about lies. So we're going to tell your aunt where you really are."

"She won't believe you."

"That doesn't matter, if we speak the truth," said Kathleen primly.

"I expect you'll be sorry for it," said Mabel; "but come on – and, I say, do be careful not to shut me in the door as you go out. You nearly did just now."

In the blazing sunlight that flooded the High Street four shadows to three children seemed dangerously noticeable. A butcher's boy looked far too earnestly at the extra shadow, and his big, liver-coloured lurcher snuffed at the legs of that shadow's mistress and whined uncomfortably.

"Get behind me," said Kathleen; "then our two shadows will look like one."

But Mabel's shadow, very visible, fell on Kathleen's back, and the ostler of the Davenant Arms looked up to see what big bird had cast that big shadow.

A woman driving a cart with chickens and ducks in it called out: —

"Halloa, missy, ain't you blacked yer back neither! What you been leaning up against?"

Every one was glad when they got out of the town.

Speaking the truth to Mabel's aunt did not turn out at all as any one – even Mabel – expected. The aunt was discovered reading a pink novelette at the window of the housekeeper's room, which, framed in clematis and green creepers, looked out on a nice little courtyard to which Mabel led the party.

"Excuse me," said Gerald, "but I believe you've lost your niece?"

"Not lost, my boy," said the aunt, who was spare and tall, with a drab fringe and a very genteel voice.

"We could tell you something about her," said Gerald.

"Now," replied the aunt, in a warning voice, "no complaints, please. My niece has gone, and I am sure no one thinks less than I do of her little pranks. If she's played any tricks on you it's only her light-hearted way. Go away, children, I'm busy."

"Did you get her note?" asked Kathleen.

The aunt showed rather more interest than before, but she still kept her finger in the novelette.

"Oh," she said, "so you witnessed her departure? Did she seem glad to go?"

"Quite," said Gerald truthfully.

"Then I can only be glad that she is provided for," said the aunt. "I dare say you were surprised. These romantic adventures do occur in our family. Lord Yalding selected me out of eleven applicants for the post of housekeeper here. I've not the slightest doubt the child was changed at birth and her rich relatives have claimed her."

"But aren't you going to do anything – tell the police, or – "

"Shish!" said Mabel.

"*I* won't shish," said Jimmy. "Your Mabel's invisible – that's all it is. She's just beside me now."

"I detest untruthfulness," said the aunt severely, "in all its forms. Will you kindly take that little boy away? I am quite satisfied about Mabel."

"*Well*," said Gerald, "you *are* an aunt and no mistake! But what will Mabel's father and mother say?"

"Mabel's father and mother are dead," said the aunt calmly, and a little sob sounded close to Gerald's ear.

"All right," he said, "we'll be off. But don't you go saying we didn't tell you the truth, that's all."

"You have told me nothing," said the aunt, "none of you, except that little boy, who has told me a silly falsehood."

"We meant well," said Gerald gently. "You don't mind our having come through the grounds, do you? We're very careful not to touch anything."

"No visitors are allowed," said the aunt, glancing down at her novel rather impatiently.

"Ah! but you wouldn't count *us* visitors," said Gerald in his best manner. "We're friends of Mabel's. Our father's Colonel of the – th."

"Indeed!" said the aunt.

"And our aunt's Lady Sandling, so you can be sure we wouldn't hurt anything on the estate."

"I'm sure you wouldn't hurt a fly," said the aunt absently. "Goodbye. Be good children."

And on this they got away quickly.

"Why," said Gerald, when they were outside the little court, "your aunt's as mad as a hatter. Fancy not caring what becomes of you, and fancy believing that rot about the motor lady!"

"I knew she'd believe it when I wrote it," said Mabel modestly. "She's not mad, only she's always reading novelettes. *I* read the books in the big library. Oh, it's such a jolly room – such a queer smell, like boots, and old leather books sort of powdery at the edges. I'll take you there some day. Now your consciences are all right about my aunt, I'll tell you my great idea. Let's get down to the Temple of Flora. I'm glad you got aunt's permission for the grounds. It would be so awkward for you to have to be always dodging behind bushes when one of the gardeners came along."

"Yes," said Gerald modestly, "I thought of that."

The day was as bright as yesterday had been, and from the white marble temple the Italian-looking landscape looked more than ever like a steel engraving coloured by hand, or an oleographic imitation of one of Turner's pictures.

When the three children were comfortably settled on the steps that led up to the white statue, the voice of the fourth child said sadly: "I'm not ungrateful, but I'm rather hungry. And you can't be always taking things for me through your larder window. If you like, I'll go back and live in the castle. It's supposed to be haunted. I suppose I could haunt it as well as any one else. I am a sort of ghost now, you know. I will if you like."

"Oh no," said Kathleen kindly; "you must stay with us."

"But about food. I'm not ungrateful, really I'm not, but breakfast is breakfast, and bread's only bread."

"If you could get the ring off, you could go back."

"Yes," said Mabel's voice, "but you see, I can't. I tried again last night in bed, and again this morning. And it's like stealing, taking things out of your larder – even if it's only bread."

"Yes, it is," said Gerald, who had carried out this bold enterprise.

"Well, now, what we must do is to earn some money."

Jimmy remarked that this was all very well. But Gerald and Kathleen listened attentively.

"What I mean to say," the voice went on, "I'm really sure is all for the best, me being invisible. We shall have adventures – you see if we don't."

"'Adventures,' said the bold buccaneer, 'are not always profitable.'" It was Gerald who murmured this.

"This one will be, anyhow, you see. Only you mustn't all go. Look here, if Jerry could make himself look common – "

"That ought to be easy," said Jimmy. And Kathleen told him not to be so jolly disagreeable.

"I'm not," said Jimmy, "only – "

"Only he has an inside feeling that this Mabel of yours is going to get us into trouble," put in Gerald. "Like La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and he does not want to be found in future ages alone and palely loitering in the middle of sedge and things."

"I won't get you into trouble, indeed I won't," said the voice. "Why, we're a band of brothers for life, after the way you stood by me yesterday. What I mean is – Gerald can go to the fair and do conjuring."

"He doesn't know any," said Kathleen.

"*I* should do it really," said Mabel, "but Jerry could look like doing it. Move things without touching them and all that. But it wouldn't do for all three of you to go. The more there are of children the younger they look, I think, and the more people wonder what they're doing all alone by themselves."

"The accomplished conjurer deemed these the words of wisdom," said Gerald; and answered the dismal "Well, but what about us?" of his brother and sister by suggesting that they should mingle unsuspected with the crowd. "But don't let on that you know me," he said; "and try to look as if you belonged to some of the grown-ups at the fair. If you don't, as likely as not you'll have the kind

policemen taking the little lost children by the hand and leading them home to their stricken relations – French governess, I mean."

"Let's go *now*," said the voice that they never could get quite used to hearing, coming out of different parts of the air as Mabel moved from one place to another. So they went.

The fair was held on a waste bit of land, about half a mile from the castle gates. When they got near enough to hear the steam-organ of the merry-go-round, Gerald suggested that as he had ninepence he should go ahead and get something to eat, the amount spent to be paid back out of any money they might make by conjuring. The others waited in the shadows of a deep-banked lane, and he came back, quite soon, though long after they had begun to say what a long time he had been gone. He brought some Barcelona nuts, red-streaked apples, small sweet yellow pears, pale pasty gingerbread, a whole quarter of a pound of peppermint bull's-eyes, and two bottles of gingerbeer.

"It's what they call an investment," he said, when Kathleen said something about extravagance. "We shall all need special nourishing to keep our strength up, especially the bold conjurer."

They ate and drank. It was a very beautiful meal, and the far-off music of the steam-organ added the last touch of festivity to the scene. The boys were never tired of seeing Mabel eat, or rather of seeing the strange, magic-looking vanishment of food which was all that showed of Mabel's eating. They were entranced by the spectacle, and pressed on her more than her just share of the feast, just for the pleasure of seeing it disappear.

"My aunt!" said Gerald, again and again; "that ought to knock 'em!"

It did.

Jimmy and Kathleen had the start of the others, and when they got to the fair they mingled with the crowd, and were as unsuspected as possible.

They stood near a large lady who was watching the cocoanut shies, and presently saw a strange figure with its hands in its pockets strolling across the trampled yellowy grass among the bits of drifting paper and the sticks and straws that always litter the ground of an English fair. It was Gerald, but at first they hardly knew him. He had taken off his tie, and round his head, arranged like a turban, was the crimson school-scarf that had supported his white flannels. The tie, one supposed, had taken on the duties of the handkerchief. And his face and hands were a bright black, like very nicely polished stoves!

Every one turned to look at him.

"He's just like a nigger!" whispered Jimmy. "I don't suppose it'll ever come off, do you?"

They followed him at a distance, and when he went close to the door of a small tent, against whose door-post a long-faced melancholy woman was lounging, they stopped and tried to look as though they belonged to a farmer who strove to send up a number by banging with a big mallet on a wooden block.

Gerald went up to the woman.

"Taken much?" he asked, and was told, but not harshly, to go away with his impudence.

"I'm in business myself," said Gerald, "I'm a conjurer, from India."

"Not you!" said the woman; "you ain't no nigger. Why, the backs of yer ears is all white."

"Are they?" said Gerald. "How clever of you to see that!" He rubbed them with his hands. "That better?"

"That's all right. What's your little game?"

"Conjuring, really and truly," said Gerald. "There's smaller boys than me put on to it in India. Look here, I owe you one for telling me about my ears. If you like to run the show for me I'll go shares. Let me have your tent to perform in, and you do the patter at the door."

"Lor' love you! I can't do no patter. And you're getting at me. Let's see you do a bit of conjuring, since you're so clever an' all."

"Right you are," said Gerald firmly. "You see this apple? Well, I'll make it move slowly through the air, and then when I say 'Go!' it'll vanish."

"Yes – into your mouth! Get away with your nonsense."

"You're too clever to be so unbelieving," said Gerald. "Look here!"

He held out one of the little apples, and the woman saw it move slowly and unsupported along the air.

"Now —*go!*" cried Gerald, to the apple, and it went. "How's that?" he asked, in tones of triumph.

The woman was glowing with excitement, and her eyes shone. "The best I ever see!" she whispered. "I'm on, mate, if you know any more tricks like that."

"Heaps," said Gerald confidently; "hold out your hand." The woman held it out; and from nowhere, as it seemed, the apple appeared and was laid on her hand. The apple was rather damp.

She looked at it a moment, and then whispered: "Come on! there's to be no one in it but just us two. But not in the tent. You take a pitch here, 'longside the tent. It's worth twice the money in the open air."

"But people won't pay if they can see it all for nothing."

"Not for the first turn, but they will after – you see. And you'll have to do the patter."

"Will you lend me your shawl?" Gerald asked. She unpinned it – it was a red and black plaid – and he spread it on the ground as he had seen Indian conjurers do, and seated himself cross-legged behind it.

"I mustn't have any one behind me, that's all," he said; and the woman hastily screened off a little enclosure for him by hanging old sacks to two of the guy-ropes of the tent. "Now I'm ready," he said. The woman got a drum from the inside of the tent and beat it. Quite soon a little crowd had collected.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Gerald, "I come from India, and I can do a conjuring entertainment the like of which you've never seen. When I see two shillings on the shawl I'll begin."

"I dare say you will!" said a bystander; and there were several short, disagreeable laughs.

"Of course," said Gerald, "if you can't afford two shillings between you" – there were about thirty people in the crowd by now – "I say no more."

Two or three pennies fell on the shawl, then a few more, then the fall of copper ceased.

"Ninepence," said Gerald. "Well, I've got a generous nature. You'll get such a nine-pennyworth as you've never had before. I don't wish to deceive you – I have an accomplice, but my accomplice is invisible."

The crowd snorted.

"By the aid of that accomplice," Gerald went on, "I will read any letter that any of you may have in your pocket. If one of you will just step over the rope and stand beside me, my invisible accomplice will read that letter over his shoulder."

A man stepped forward, a ruddy-faced, horsy-looking person. He pulled a letter from his pocket and stood plain in the sight of all, in a place where every one saw that no one could see over his shoulder.

"Now!" said Gerald. There was a moment's pause. Then from quite the other side of the enclosure came a faint, far-away, sing-song voice. It said: —

"'Sir, – Yours of the fifteenth duly to hand. With regard to the mortgage on your land, we regret our inability – '"

"Stow it!" cried the man, turning threateningly on Gerald.

He stepped out of the enclosure explaining that there was nothing of that sort in his letter; but nobody believed him, and a buzz of interested chatter began in the crowd, ceasing abruptly when Gerald began to speak.

"Now," said he, laying the nine pennies down on the shawl, "you keep your eyes on those pennies, and one by one you'll see them disappear."

And of course they did. Then one by one they were laid down again by the invisible hand of Mabel. The crowd clapped loudly. "Brayvo!" "That's something like!" "Show us another!" cried the people in the front rank. And those behind pushed forward.

"Now," said Gerald, "you've seen what I can do, but I don't do any more till I see five shillings on this carpet."

And in two minutes seven-and-threepence lay there and Gerald did a little more conjuring.

When the people in front didn't want to give any more money, Gerald asked them to stand back and let the others have a look in. I wish I had time to tell you of all the tricks he did – the grass round his enclosure was absolutely trampled off by the feet of the people who thronged to look at him. There is really hardly any limit to the wonders you can do if you have an invisible accomplice. All sorts of things were made to move about, apparently by themselves, and even to vanish – into the folds of Mabel's clothing. The woman stood by, looking more and more pleasant as she saw the money come tumbling in, and beating her shabby drum every time Gerald stopped conjuring.

The news of the conjurer had spread all over the fair. The crowd was frantic with admiration. The man who ran the cocoanut shies begged Gerald to throw in his lot with him; the owner of the rifle gallery offered him free board and lodging and go shares; and a brisk, broad lady, in stiff black silk and a violet bonnet, tried to engage him for the forthcoming Bazaar for Reformed Bandsmen.

And all this time the others mingled with the crowd – quite unobserved, for who could have eyes for any one but Gerald? It was getting quite late, long past tea-time, and Gerald, who was getting very tired indeed, and was quite satisfied with his share of the money, was racking his brains for a way to get out of it.

"How are we to hook it?" he murmured, as Mabel made his cap disappear from his head by the simple process of taking it off and putting it in her pocket. "They'll never let us get away. I didn't think of that before."

"Let me think!" whispered Mabel; and next moment she said, close to his ear: "Divide the money, and give her something for the shawl. Put the money on it and say…" She told him what to say.

Gerald's pitch was in the shade of the tent; otherwise, of course, every one would have seen the shadow of the invisible Mabel as she moved about making things vanish.

Gerald told the woman to divide the money, which she did honestly enough.

"Now," he said, while the impatient crowd pressed closer and closer. "I'll give you five bob for your shawl."

"Seven-and-six," said the woman mechanically.

"Righto!" said Gerald, putting his heavy share of the money in his trouser pocket.

"This shawl will now disappear," he said, picking it up. He handed it to Mabel, who put it on; and, of course, it disappeared. A roar of applause went up from the audience.

"Now," he said, "I come to the last trick of all. I shall take three steps backward and vanish." He took three steps backward, Mabel wrapped the invisible shawl round him, and – he did not vanish. The shawl, being invisible, did not conceal him in the least.

"Yah!" cried a boy's voice in the crowd. "Look at 'im! 'E knows 'e can't do it."

"I wish I could put you in my pocket," said Mabel. The crowd was crowding closer. At any moment they might touch Mabel, and then anything might happen – simply anything. Gerald took hold of his hair with both hands, as his way was when he was anxious or discouraged. Mabel, in invisibility, wrung her hands, as people are said to do in books; that is, she clasped them and squeezed very tight.

"Oh!" she whispered suddenly, "it's loose. I can get it off."

"Not – "

"Yes – the ring."

"Come on, young master. Give us summat for our money," a farm labourer shouted.

"I will," said Gerald. "This time I really will vanish. Slip round into the tent," he whispered to Mabel. "Push the ring under the canvas. Then slip out at the back and join the others. When I see you with them I'll disappear. Go slow, and I'll catch you up."

"It's me," said a pale and obvious Mabel in the ear of Kathleen. "He's got the ring; come on, before the crowd begins to scatter."

As they went out of the gate they heard a roar of surprise and annoyance rise from the crowd, and knew that this time Gerald really *had* disappeared.

They had gone a mile before they heard footsteps on the road, and looked back. No one was to be seen.

Next moment Gerald's voice spoke out of clear, empty-looking space.

"Halloa!" it said gloomily.

"How horrid!" cried Mabel; "you did make me jump! Take the ring off. It makes me feel quite creepy, you being nothing but a voice."

"So did you us," said Jimmy.

"Don't take it off yet," said Kathleen, who was really rather thoughtful for her age, "because you're still black, I suppose, and you might be recognised, and eloped with by gipsies, so that you should go on doing conjuring for ever and ever."

"I should take it off," said Jimmy; "it's no use going about invisible, and people seeing us with Mabel and saying we've eloped with her."

"Yes," said Mabel impatiently, "that would be simply silly. And, besides, I want my ring."

"It's not yours any more than ours, anyhow," said Jimmy.

"Yes, it is," said Mabel.

"Oh, stow it!" said the weary voice of Gerald beside her. "What's the use of jawing?"

"I want the ring," said Mabel, rather mulishly.

"Want" – the words came out of the still evening air – "want must be your master. You can't have the ring. *I can't get it off!*"

CHAPTER IV

The difficulty was not only that Gerald had got the ring on and couldn't get it off, and was therefore invisible, but that Mabel, who had been invisible and therefore possible to be smuggled into the house, was now plain to be seen and impossible for smuggling purposes.

The children would have not only to account for the apparent absence of one of themselves, but for the obvious presence of a perfect stranger.

"I can't go back to aunt. I can't and I won't," said Mabel firmly, "not if I was visible twenty times over."

"She'd smell a rat if you did." Gerald owned – "about the motor-car, I mean, and the adopting lady. And what we're to say to Mademoiselle about you – !" He tugged at the ring.

"Suppose you told the truth," said Mabel meaningly.

"She wouldn't believe it," said Cathy; "or, if she did, she'd go stark, staring, raving mad."

"No," said Gerald's voice, "we daren't *tell* her. But she's really rather decent. Let's ask her to let you stay the night because it's too late for you to get home."

"That's all right," said Jimmy, "but what about you?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.