Molesworth Mrs.

Christmas-Tree Land

Mrs. Molesworth

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Molesworth M.

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Содержание

Mary Louisa Molesworth
Christmas-Tree Land

CHAPTER I.
THE WHITE CASTLE

'The way was long, long, long, like the journey in a fairy tale.'
Miss Ferrier.

It was not their home. That was easy to be seen by the eager looks of curiosity and surprise on the two little faces inside the heavy travelling carriage. Yet the faces were grave, and there was a weary look in the eyes, for the journey had been long, and it was not for pleasure that it had been undertaken. The evening was drawing in, and the day had been a somewhat gloomy one, but as the light slowly faded, a soft pink radiance spread itself over the sky. They had been driving for some distance through a flat monotonous country; then, as the ground began to rise, the coachman relaxed his speed, and the children, without knowing it, fell into a half slumber.

It was when the chariot stopped to allow the horses breathing time that they started awake and looked around them. The prospect had entirely changed. They were now on higher ground, for the road had wound up and up between the hills, which all round encircled an open space – a sort of high up valley, in the centre of which gleamed something white. But this did not at first catch the children's view. It was the hills rising ever higher and higher, clothed from base to summit with fir-trees, innumerable as the stars on a clear frosty night, that struck them with surprise and admiration. The little girl caught her breath with a strange thrill of pleasure, mingled with awe.

'Rollo,' she said, catching her brother's sleeve, 'it is a land of Christmas trees!'

Rollo gazed out for a moment or two without speaking. Then he gave a sigh of sympathy.

'Yes, Maia,' he said; 'I never could have imagined it. Fancy, only fancy, if they were all lighted up!'

Maia smiled.

'I don't think even the fairies themselves could do that,' she answered.

But here their soft-voiced talking was interrupted. Two attendants, an elderly man and a young, rosy-faced woman, whose eyes, notwithstanding her healthy and hearty appearance, bore traces of tears, had got down from their seat behind the carriage.

'Master Rollo,' – 'My little lady,' they said, speaking together; 'yonder is the castle. The coachman has just shown it to us. This is the first sight of it.'

'The white walls one sees gleaming through the trees,' said the girl, pointing as she spoke. 'Marc cannot see it as plainly as I.'

'My eyes are not what they were,' said the old servant apologetically.

'I see it,' – 'and so do I,' exclaimed Rollo and Maia. 'Shall we soon be there?'

'Still an hour,' replied Marc; 'the road winds about, he says.'

'And already we have been so many, many hours,' said Nanni, the maid, in doleful accents.

'Let us hope for a bright fire and a welcome when we arrive,' said old Marc cheerfully. 'Provided only Master Rollo and Miss Maia are not too tired, *we* should not complain,' he added reprovingly, in a lower voice, turning to Nanni. But Maia had caught the words.

'Poor Nanni,' she said kindly. 'Don't be so sad. It will be better when we get there, and you can unpack our things and get them arranged again.'

'And then Marc will have to leave us, and who knows how they will treat us in this outlandish country!' said Nanni, beginning to sob again.

But just then the coachman looked round to signify that the horses were rested, and he was about to proceed.

'Get up, girl – quickly – get up,' said Marc, reserving his scolding, no doubt, till they were again in their places and out of hearing of their little master and mistress.

The coachman touched up his horses; they seemed to know they were nearing home, and set off at a brisk pace, the bells on their harness jingling merrily as they went.

The cheerful sound, the quicker movement, had its effect on the children's spirits.

'It *is* a strange country,' said Maia, throwing herself back among the cushions of the carriage, as if tired of gazing out. 'Still, I don't see that we need be so very unhappy here.'

'Nor I,' said Rollo. 'Nanni is foolish. She should not call it an outlandish country. That to *us* it cannot be, for it is the country of our ancestors.'

'But *so* long ago, Rollo,' objected Maia.

'That does not matter. We are still of the same blood,' said the boy sturdily. 'We must love, even without knowing why, the place that was home to them – the hills, the trees – ah, yes, above all, those wonderful forests. They seem to go on for ever and ever, like the stars, Maia.'

'Yet I don't think them as *pretty* as forests of different kinds of trees,' said Maia thoughtfully. 'They are more *strange* than beautiful. Fancy them always, always there, in winter and summer, seeing the sun rise and set, feeling the rain fall, and the snow-flakes flutter down on their branches, and yet never moving, never changing. I wouldn't like to be a tree.'

'But they *do* change,' said Rollo. 'The branches wither and then they sprout again. It must be like getting new clothes, and very interesting to watch, I should think. Fancy how funny it would be if our clothes grew on us like that.'

Maia gave a merry little laugh.

'Yes,' she said; 'fancy waking up in the morning and looking to see if our sleeves had got a little bit longer, or if our toes were beginning to be covered! I suppose that's what the trees talk about.'

'Oh, they must have lots of things to talk about,' said Rollo. 'Think of how well they must see the pictures in the clouds, being so high up. And the stars at night. And then all the creatures that live in their branches, and down among their roots, – the birds, and the squirrels, and the field-mice, and the – '

'Yes,' interrupted Maia; 'you have rather nice thoughts sometimes, Rollo. After all, I dare say it is not so very stupid to be a tree. I should like the squirrels best of all. I do love squirrels! Can you see the castle any better now, Rollo? It must be at your side.'

'I don't see it at all just now,' said Rollo, after peering out for some moments. 'I'm not sure but what it's got round to *your* side by now, Maia.'

'No, it hasn't,' said Maia. 'It couldn't have done. It's somewhere over there, below that rounded hill-top – we'll see it again in a minute, I dare say. Ah, see, Rollo, there's the moon coming out! I do hope we shall often see the moon here. It would be so pretty – the trees would look nearly black. But what are you staring at so, Rollo?'

Rollo drew in his head again.

'There must be somebody living over there,' he said. 'I see smoke rising – you can *hardly* see it now, the light is growing so dim, but I'm sure I did see it. There must be a little cottage there somewhere among the trees.'

'Oh, how nice!' exclaimed Maia. 'We must find it out. I wonder what sort of people live in it – gnomes or wood-spirits, perhaps? There couldn't be any real *people* in such a lonely place.'

'Gnomes and wood-spirits don't need cottages, and they don't make fires,' replied Rollo.

'How do *you* know?' and Rollo's answer was not quite ready. 'I dare say gnomes like to come up above sometimes, for a change; and I dare say the wood-spirits are cold sometimes, and like to warm themselves. Any way I shall try to find that cottage and see who does live in it. I hope she will let us go on walks as often as we wish, Rollo.'

'She – who?' said the boy dreamily. 'Oh, our lady cousin! Yes, I hope so;' but he sighed as he spoke, and this time the sigh was sad.

Maia nestled closer to her brother.

'I think I was forgetting a little, Rollo,' she said. 'I can't think how I could forget, even for a moment, all our troubles. But father wanted us to try to be happy.'

'Yes, I know he did,' said Rollo. 'I am very glad if you can feel happier sometimes, Maia. But for me it is different; I am so much older.'

'Only two years,' interrupted Maia.

'Well, well, I *feel* more than that older. And then I have to take care of *you* till father comes home; that makes me feel older too.'

'I wish we could take care of each other,' said Maia; 'I wish we were going to live in a little cottage by ourselves instead of in Lady Venelda's castle. We might have Nanni just to light the fires and cook the dinner, except the creams and pastry and cakes —*those* I would make myself. And she might also clean the rooms and wash the dishes – I cannot bear washing dishes – and all the rest we would do ourselves, Rollo.'

'There would not be much else to do,' said Rollo, smiling.

'Oh yes, there would. We should need a cow, you know, and cocks and hens; those we should take care of ourselves, though Nanni might churn. You have no idea how tiring it is to churn; I tried once at our country-house last year, and my arms ached so. And then there would be the garden; it must be managed so that there should always, all the year round, be strawberries and roses. Wouldn't that be charming, Rollo?'

'Yes; but it certainly couldn't be done out of fairyland,' said the boy.

'Never mind. What does it matter? When one is wishing one may wish for anything.'

'Then, for my part, I would rather wish to be at our own home again, and that our father had not had to go away,' said Rollo.

'Ah, yes!' said Maia; and then she grew silent, and the grave expression overspread both children's faces again.

They had meant to look out to see if the white-walled castle was once more within sight, but it was now almost too dark to see anything, and they remained quietly in their corners. Suddenly they felt the wheels roll on to a paved way; the carriage went more slowly, and in a moment or two they stopped.

'Can we have arrived?' said Maia. But Rollo, looking out, saw that they had only stopped at a postern. An old man, bent and feeble, came out of an ivy-covered lodge, round and high like a light-house, looking as if it had once been a turret attached to the main building, and pressed forward as well as he could to open the gate, which swung back rustily on its hinges. The coachman exchanged a few words in the language of the country, which the children understood but slightly, and then the chariot rolled on again, slowly still, for the road ascended, and even had there been light there would have been nothing to see but two high walls, thickly covered with creeping plants. In a moment or two they stopped again for another gate to be opened – this time more quickly – then the wheels rolled over smoother ground, and the coachman drew up before a doorway, and a gleam of white walls flashed before the children's eyes.

The door was already open. Marc and Nanni got down at the farther side, for a figure stood just inside the entrance, which they at once recognised as that of the lady of the house come forward to welcome her young relatives. Two old serving-men, older than Marc and in well-worn livery, let down the ladder of steps and opened the chariot door. Rollo got out, waited a moment to help his sister as she followed him, and then, leading her by the hand, bowed low before their cousin Venelda.

'Welcome,' she said at once, as she stooped to kiss Maia's forehead, extending her hand to Rollo at the same time. Her manner was formal but not unkindly. 'You must be fatigued with your journey,' she said. 'Supper is ready in the dining-hall, and then, no doubt, you will be glad to retire for the night.'

'Yes, thank you, cousin,' said both children, and then, as she turned to show them the way, they ventured to look up at their hostess, though they were still dazzled by the sudden light after the darkness outside. Lady Venelda was neither young nor old, nor could one well imagine her ever to have been, or as ever going to be, different from what she was. She was tall and thin, simply dressed, but with a dignified air as of one accustomed to command. Her hair was gray, and surmounted by a high white cap, a number of keys attached to her girdle jingled as she went; her step was firm and decided, but not graceful, and her voice was rather hard and cold, though not sharp. Her face, as Rollo and Maia saw it better when she turned to see if they were following her, was of a piece with her figure, pale and thin, with nothing very remarkable save a well-cut rather eagle nose and a pair of very bright but not tender blue eyes. Still she was not a person to be afraid of, on the whole, Rollo decided. She might not be very indulgent or sympathising, but there was nothing cruel or cunning in her face and general look.

'You may approach the fire, children,' she said, as if this were a special indulgence; and Rollo and Maia, who had stood as if uncertain what to do, drew near the enormous chimney, where smouldered some glowing wood, enough to send out a genial heat, though it had but a poor appearance in the gigantic grate, which looked deep and wide enough to roast an ox.

Their eyes wandered curiously round the great room or hall in which they found themselves. It, like the long corridor out of which opened most of the rooms of the house, was painted or washed over entirely in white – the only thing which broke the dead uniformity being an extraordinary number of the antlered heads of deer, fastened high up at regular intervals. The effect was strange and barbaric, but not altogether unpleasing.

'What quantities of deer there must be here!' whispered Maia to her brother. 'See, even the chairs are made of their antlers.'

She was right. What Rollo had at first taken for branches of trees rudely twisted into chair backs and feet were, in fact, the horns of several kinds of deer, and he could not help admiring them, though he thought to himself it was sad to picture the number of beautiful creatures that must have been slain to please his ancestors' whimsical taste in furniture; but he said nothing, and Lady Venelda, though she noticed the children's observing eyes, said nothing either. It was not her habit to encourage conversation with young people. She had been brought up in a formal fashion, and devoutly believed it to be the best.

At this moment a bell clanged out loudly in the courtyard. Before it had ceased ringing the door opened and two ladies, both of a certain age, both dressed exactly alike, walked solemnly into the room, followed by two old gentlemen, of whom it could not be said they were exactly alike, inasmuch as one was exceedingly tall and thin, the other exceedingly short and stout. These personages the children came afterwards to know were the two ladies-in-waiting, or *dames de compagnie*, of Lady Venelda, her chaplain, and her physician. They all approached her, and bowed, and curtseyed; then drew back, as if waiting for her to take her place at the long table before seating themselves. Lady Venelda glanced at the children.

'How comes it?' she began, but then, seeming to remember something, stopped. 'To be sure, they have but just arrived,' she said to herself. Then turning to one of the old serving-men: 'Conduct the young gentleman to his apartment,' she said, 'that he may arrange his attire before joining us at supper. And you, Delphine,' she continued to one of the ancient damsels, who started as if she were on wires, and Lady Venelda had touched the spring, 'have the goodness to perform the same office for this young lady, whose waiting-maid will be doubtless in attendance. For this once,' she added in conclusion, this time addressing the children, 'the repast shall be delayed for ten minutes; but for this once only. Punctuality is a virtue that cannot be exaggerated.'

Rollo and Maia looked at each other; then both followed their respective guides.

'Is my lady cousin angry with me?' Maia ventured timidly to inquire. 'We did not know – we could not help it. I suppose the coachman came as fast as he could.'

'Perfectly, perfectly, Mademoiselle,' replied Delphine in a flutter. Poor thing, she had once been French – long, long ago, in the days of her youth, which she had well-nigh forgotten. But she still retained some French expressions and the habit of agreeing with whatever was said to her, which she believed to show the highest breeding. 'Of course Mademoiselle could not help it.'

'Then why is my cousin angry?' said Maia, again looking up with her bright brown eyes.

'My lady Venelda angry?' repeated Delphine, rather embarrassed how to reconcile her loyalty to her patroness, to whom she was devotedly attached, with courtesy to Maia. 'Ah, no! My lady is never angry. Pardon my plain speaking.'

'Oh, then, I mistook, I suppose,' said Maia, considerably relieved. 'I suppose some people seem angry when they're not, till one gets to know them.'

And then Maia, who was of a philosophic turn of mind, made Nanni hurry to take off her wraps and arrange her hair, that she might go down to supper: 'for I'm dreadfully hungry,' she added, 'and it's very funny downstairs, Nanni,' she went on. 'It's like something out of a book, hundreds of years ago. I can quite understand now why father told us to be so particular always to say "our lady cousin," and things like that. Isn't it funny, Nanni?'

Nanni's spirits seemed to have improved.

'It is not like home, certainly, Miss Maia,' she replied. 'But I dare say we shall get on pretty well. They seem very kind and friendly downstairs in the kitchen, and there was a very nice supper getting ready. And then, I'm never one to make the worst of things, whatever that crabbed old Marc may say.'

Maia was already on her way to go. She only stopped a moment to glance round the room. It was large, but somewhat scantily furnished. The walls white, like the rest of the house, the floor polished like a looking-glass. Maia's curtainless little bed in one corner looked disproportionately small. The child gave a little shiver.

'It feels very cold in this big bare room,' she said. 'I hope you and Rollo aren't far off.'

'I don't know for Master Rollo,' Nanni replied. 'But this is *my* room,' and she opened a door leading into a small chamber, neatly but plainly arranged.

'Oh, that's very nice,' said Maia, approvingly. 'If Rollo's room is not far off, we shall not feel at all lonely.'

Her doubts were soon set at rest, for, as she opened the door, Rollo appeared coming out of a room just across the passage.

'Oh, that's your room,' said Maia. 'I didn't see where you went to. I was talking to Mademoiselle Delphine. I'm so glad you're so near, Rollo.'

'Yes,' said Rollo. 'These big bare rooms aren't like our rooms at home. I should have felt rather lonely if I'd been quite at the other end of the house.'

Then they took each other's hand and went slowly down the uncarpeted white stone staircase.

'Rollo,' said Maia, nodding her head significantly as if in the direction of the dining-hall, 'do you think we shall like her? Do you think she's going to be kind?'

Rollo hesitated.

'I think she'll be kind. Father said she would. But I don't think she cares about children, and we'll have to be very quiet, and all that.'

'The best thing will be going long walks in the woods,' said Maia.

'Yes, if she'll let us,' replied Rollo doubtfully.

'Well, I'll tell you how to do. We'll show her we're awfully good and sensible, and then she won't be afraid to let us go about by ourselves. Oh, Rollo, those lovely Christmas-tree woods! We can't feel dull if only we may go about in the woods!'

'Well, then, let's try, as you say, to show how very good and sensible we are,' said Rollo.

And with this wise resolution the two children went in to supper.

CHAPTER II.
IN THE FIR-WOODS

…'Gloomy shades, sequestered deep,
…whence one could only see
Stems thronging all around.'…

Keats.

Supper was a formal and stately affair. The children were placed one on each side of their cousin, and helped to such dishes as she considered suitable, without asking them what they liked. But they were not greedy children, and even at their own home they had been accustomed to much more strictness than is *nowadays* the case, my dear children, for those were still the days when little people were expected to be 'seen but not heard,' to 'speak when they were spoken to,' but not otherwise. So Rollo and Maia were not unduly depressed, especially as there was plenty of amusement for their bright eyes in watching the queer, pompous manners of Lady Venelda's attendants, and making notes to discuss together afterwards on the strange and quaint china and silver which covered the table, and even in marvelling at the food itself, which, though all good, was much of it perfectly new to them.

Now and then their hostess addressed a few words to them about their journey, their father's health when they had left him, and such things, to which Rollo and Maia replied with great propriety. Lady Venelda seemed pleased.

'They have been well brought up, I see. My cousin has not neglected them,' she said in a low voice, as if speaking to herself, which was a habit of hers. Rollo and Maia exchanged signals with each other at this, which they had of course overheard, and each understood as well as if the other had said it aloud, that the meaning of the signals was, 'That is right. If we go on like this we shall soon get leave to ramble about by ourselves.'

After supper Lady Venelda told the children to follow her into what she chose to call her retiring-room. This was a rather pretty room at the extreme end of the long white gallery, but unlike that part of the castle which the children had already seen. The walls were not white, but hung with tapestry, which gave it a much warmer and more comfortable look. One did not even here, however, get rid of the poor deer, for the tapestry all round the room represented a hunting-scene, and it nearly made Maia cry, when she afterwards examined it by daylight, to see the poor chased creatures, with the cruel dogs upon them and the riders behind lashing their horses, and evidently shouting to the hounds to urge them on. It was a curious subject to have chosen for a lady's boudoir, but Lady Venelda's tastes were guided by but one rule – the most profound respect and veneration for her ancestors, and as they had seen fit thus to decorate the prettiest room in the castle, it would never have occurred to her to alter it.

She seated herself on an antlered couch below one of the windows, which by day commanded a beautiful view of the wonderful woods, but was now hidden by rather worn curtains of a faded blue, the only light in the room coming from a curiously-shaped oil lamp suspended from the ceiling, which illumined but here and there parts of the tapestry, and was far too dim to have made it possible to read or work. But it was not much time that the lady of the castle passed in her bower, and seldom that she found leisure to read, for she was a very busy and practical person, managing her large possessions entirely for herself, and caring but little for the amusements or occupations most ladies take pleasure in. She beckoned to the children to come near her.

'You are tired, I dare say,' she said graciously. 'At your age I remember the noble Count, my father, took me once a journey lasting two or three days, and when I arrived at my destination I slept twelve hours without awaking.'

'Oh, but we shall not need to sleep as long as that,' said Rollo and Maia together. 'We shall be quite rested by to-morrow morning;' at which the Lady Venelda smiled, evidently pleased, even though they had spoken so quickly as *almost* to interrupt her.

'That is well,' she said. 'Then I shall inform you of how I propose to arrange your time, at once, though I had intended giving orders that you should not be awakened till eight o'clock. At what hour do you rise at home?'

'At seven, lady cousin,' said Rollo.

'That is not very early,' she replied. 'However, as it is but for a time that you are confided to my care, I cannot regulate everything exactly as I could wish.'

'We would like to get up earlier,' said Maia hastily. 'Perhaps not *to-morrow*,' she added.

'I will first tell you my wishes,' said Lady Venelda loftily. 'At eight o'clock prayers are read to the household in the chapel. You will already have had some light refreshment. At nine you will have instruction from Mademoiselle Delphine for one hour. At ten the chaplain will take her place for two hours. At twelve you may walk in the grounds round the house for half an hour. At one we dine. At two you shall have another hour from Mademoiselle Delphine. From three to five you may walk with your attendants. Supper is at eight; and during the evening you may prepare your tasks for the next day.'

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. It was not so very bad; still it sounded rather severe. Rollo took courage.

'If we get up earlier and do our tasks, may we stay out later sometimes?' he inquired.

'Sometimes – if the weather is very fine and you have been very industrious,' their cousin replied.

'And,' added Maia, emboldened by this success, 'may we sometimes ramble alone all about the woods? We do so love the woods,' she continued, clasping her hands.

Now, if Lady Venelda herself had a weakness, it was for these same woods. They were to her a sort of shrine dedicated to the memory of her race, for the pine forests of that country had been celebrated as far back as there was any record of its existence. So, though she was rather startled at Maia's proposal, she answered graciously still:

'They are indeed beautiful, my child. Beautiful and wonderful. There have they stood in their solemn majesty for century after century, seeing generation after generation of our race pass away while yet they remain. They and I alone, my children. I, the last left of a long line!'

Her voice trembled, and one could almost have imagined that a tear glittered in her blue eyes. Maia, and Rollo too, felt very sorry for her.

'Dear cousin,' said the girl, timidly touching her hand, 'are we not a little *little*, relations to you? Please don't say you are all alone. It sounds so very sad. Do let Rollo and me be like your little boy and girl.'

Lady Venelda smiled again, and this time her face really grew soft and gentle.

'Poor children,' she said, in the peculiar low voice she always used when speaking to herself, and apparently forgetting the presence of others, 'poor children, they too have suffered. They have no mother!' Then turning to Maia, who was still gently stroking her hand: 'I thank you, my child, for your innocent sympathy,' she said, in her usual tone. 'I rejoice to have you here. You will cheer my solitude, and at the same time learn no harm, I feel sure, from the associations of this ancient house.'

Maia did not quite understand her, but as the tone sounded kind, she ventured to repeat, as she kissed her cousin's hand for good-night, 'And you will let us ramble about the woods if we are very good, won't you? And *sometimes* we may have a whole holiday, mayn't we?'

Lady Venelda smiled.

'All will depend on yourselves, my child,' she said.

But Rollo and Maia went upstairs to bed very well satisfied with the look of things.

They *meant* to wake very early, and tried to coax Nanni to promise to go out with them in the morning before prayers, but Nanni was cautious, and would make no rash engagements.

'*I* am very tired, Miss Maia,' she said, 'and I am sure you must be if you would let yourself think so. I hope you will have a good long sleep.'

She was right. After all, the next morning Rollo and Maia had hardly time to finish their coffee and rolls before the great bell in the courtyard clanged for prayers, and they had to hurry to the chapel not to be too late. Prayers over, they were taken in hand by Mademoiselle Delphine, and then by the old chaplain, till, by twelve o'clock, when they were sent out for a little fresh air before dinner, they felt more sleepy and tired than the night before.

'I don't care to go to the woods now,' said Maia dolefully. 'I am so tired – ever so much more tired than with lessons at home.'

'So am I,' said Rollo. 'I don't know what is the matter with me,' and he seated himself disconsolately beside his sister on a bench overlooking the stiff Dutch garden at one side of the castle.

'Come – how now, my children?' said a voice beside them; 'why are you not running about, instead of sitting there like two old invalids?'

'We are so tired,' said both together, looking up at the new-comer, who was none other than the short, stout old gentleman who had been introduced to them as Lady Venelda's physician.

'Tired; ah, well, to be sure, you have had a long journey.'

'It is not only that. We weren't so tired this morning, but we've had such a lot of lessons.' 'Mademoiselle Delphine's French is very hard,' said Maia; 'and Mr. – I forget his name – the chaplain says the Latin words quite differently from what I've learnt before,' added Rollo.

The old doctor looked at them both attentively.

'Come, come, my children, you must not lose heart. What would you say to a long afternoon in the woods and no more lessons to-day, if I were to ask the Lady Venelda to give you a holiday?'

The effect was instantaneous. Both children jumped up and clapped their hands.

'Oh, thank you, thank you, Mr. – Doctor,' they said, for they had not heard his name. 'Yes, that is just what we would like. It did not seem any good to go to the woods for just an hour or two. And, oh, Mr. Doctor, do ask our cousin to give us one holiday a week – we always have that at home. It is so nice to wake up in the morning and know there are *no* lessons to do! And we should be so good all the other days.'

'Ah, well,' said the old doctor, 'we shall see.'

But he nodded his head, and smiled, and looked so like a good-natured old owl, that Rollo and Maia felt very hopeful.

At dinner, where they took their places as usual at each side of their cousin, nothing was said till the close. Then Lady Venelda turned solemnly to the children:

'You have been attentive at your lessons, I am glad to hear,' she said; 'but you are doubtless still somewhat tired with your journey. My kind physician thinks some hours of fresh air would do you good. I therefore shall be pleased for you to spend all the afternoon in the woods – there will be no more lessons to-day.'

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' repeated the children, and Maia glanced at her cousin with some thought of throwing her arms round her and kissing her, but Lady Venelda looked so very stiff and stately that she felt her courage ebb.

'It is better only to kiss her when we are alone with her,' she said afterwards to Rollo, in which he agreed.

But they forgot everything except high spirits and delight when, half an hour later, they found themselves with Nanni on their way to the longed-for woods.

'Which way shall we go?' said Maia; and indeed it was a question for consideration. For it was not on one side only that there were woods, but on every side, far as the eye could reach, stretched out

the wonderful forests. The white castle stood on raised ground, but in the centre of a circular valley, so that to reach the outside world one had first to descend and then rise again; so the entrance to the woods was sloping, for the castle hill was bare of trees, which began only at its base.

'Which way?' repeated Rollo; 'I don't see that it matters. We get into the woods every way.'

'Except over there,' said Maia, pointing to the road by which they had come, gleaming like a white ribbon among the trees, which had been thinned a little in that direction.

'Well, we don't want to go there,' said Rollo, but before he had time to say more Maia interrupted him.

'Oh, Rollo, let's go the way that we saw the little cottage. No, I don't mean that we saw the cottage, but we saw the smoke rising, and we were sure there was a cottage. It was – let me see – ' and she tried to put herself in the right direction; 'yes, it was on my left hand – it must be on that side,' and she pointed where she meant.

Rollo did not seem to care particularly about the real or imaginary cottage, but as to him all roads were the same in this case, seeing all led to the woods, he made no objection, and a few minutes saw the little party, already in the shade of the forest, slowly making their way upwards. It was milder than the day before; indeed, for early spring it was very mild. The soft afternoon sunshine came peeping through the branches, the ground was beautifully dry, and their steps made a pleasant crackling sound, as their feet broke the innumerable little twigs which, interspersed with moss and the remains of last year's leaves, made a nice carpet to walk on.

'Let us stand still a moment,' said Maia, 'and look about us. How delicious it is! *What* flowers there will be in a little while! Primroses, I am sure, and violets, and later on periwinkle and cyclamen, I dare say.'

A sigh from Nanni interrupted her.

'What is the matter?' said the children.

'I am so tired, Miss Maia,' said poor Nanni. 'I haven't got over the journey, and I was so afraid of being late this morning that I got up I don't know how early – they told me in the kitchen that their lady was so angry if any one was late. I think if I were to sit down on this nice mossy ground I should really go to sleep.'

'*Poor* Nanni!' said Maia, laughing. 'Well, do sit down, only I think you'd better not go to sleep; you might catch cold.'

'It's beautifully warm here among the trees, somehow,' said Nanni. 'Well, then, shall I just stay here and you and Master Rollo play about? You won't go far?'

'You *would* get a nice scolding if we were lost,' said Rollo mischievously.

'Don't tease her, Rollo,' said Maia; adding in a lower tone, 'If you do, she'll persist in coming with us, and it will be such fun to run about by ourselves.' Then turning to Nanni, 'Don't be afraid of us, Nanni; we shan't get lost. You may go to sleep for an hour or two if you like.'

The two children set off together in great glee. Here and there among the trees there were paths, or what looked like paths, some going upwards till quite lost to view, some downwards, – all in the most tempting zigzag fashion.

'I should like to explore all the paths one after the other, wouldn't you?' said Maia.

'I expect they all lead to nowhere in particular,' said Rollo, philosophically.

'But we want to go somewhere in particular,' said Maia; 'I want to find the cottage, you know. I am sure it must be *somewhere* about here.'

'Upwards or downwards – which do you think?' said Rollo. 'I say, Maia, suppose you go downwards and I upwards, and then we can meet again here and say if we've found the cottage or had any adventures, like the brothers in the fairy tales.'

'No,' said Maia, drawing nearer Rollo as she spoke; 'I don't want to go about alone. You know, though the woods are so nice they're *rather* lonely, and there are such queer stories about forests always. There must be queer people living in them, though we don't see them. Gnomes and

brownies down below, very likely, and wood-spirits, perhaps. But I think about the gnomes is the most frightening, don't you, Rollo?'

'I don't think any of it's frightening,' he replied. But he was a kind boy, so he did not laugh at Maia, or say any more about separating. 'Which way shall we go, then?'

'Oh, we'd better go on upwards. There can't be much forest downwards, for we've come nearly straight up. We'd get out of the wood directly.'

They went on climbing therefore for some way, but the ascent became quickly slighter, and in a short time they found themselves almost on level ground.

'We can't have got to the top,' said Rollo. 'This must be a sort of ledge on the hillside. However, I begin to sympathise with Nanni – it's nice to get a rest,' and he threw himself down at full length as he spoke. Maia quickly followed his example.

'We shan't do much exploring at this rate,' she said.

'No,' Rollo agreed; 'but never mind. Isn't it nice here, Maia? Just like what father told us, isn't it? The scent of the fir-trees is so delicious too.'

It was charmingly sweet and peaceful, and the feeling of mystery caused by the dark shade of the lofty trees, standing there in countless rows as they had stood for centuries, the silence only broken by the occasional dropping of a twig or the flutter of a leaf, impressed the children in a way they could not have put in words. It was a sort of relief when a slight rustle in the branches overhead caught their attention, and looking up, their quick eyes saw the bright brown, bushy tail of a squirrel whisking out of sight.

Up jumped Maia, clapping her hands.

'A squirrel, Rollo, did you see?'

'Of course I did, but you shouldn't make such a noise. We might have seen him again if we'd been quite quiet. I wonder where his home is.'

'So do I. *How* I should like to see a squirrel's nest and all the little ones sitting in a row, each with a nut in its two front paws! *How* nice it would be to have the gift of understanding all the animals say to each other, wouldn't it?'

'Yes,' said Rollo, but he stopped suddenly. 'Maia,' he exclaimed, 'I believe I smell burning wood!' and he stood still and sniffed the air a little. 'I shouldn't wonder if we're near the cottage.'

'Oh, do come on, then,' said Maia eagerly. 'Yes – yes; I smell it too. I hope the cottage isn't on fire, Rollo. Oh, no; see, it must be a bonfire,' for, as she spoke, a smouldering heap of leaves and dry branches came in sight some little way along the path, and in another moment, a few yards farther on, a cottage actually appeared.

Such an original-looking cottage! The trees had been cleared for some distance round where it stood, and a space enclosed by a rustic fence of interlaced branches had been planted as a garden. A very pretty little garden too. There were flower-beds in front, already gay with a few early blossoms, and neat rows of vegetables and fruit-bushes at the back. The cottage was built of wood, but looked warm and dry, with deep roof and rather small high-up windows. A little path, bordered primly by a thick growing mossy-like plant, led up to the door, which was closed. No smoke came out of the chimney, not the slightest sound was to be heard. The children looked at each other.

'What a darling little house!' said Maia in a whisper. 'But, Rollo, do you think there's anybody there? Can it be *enchanted*, perhaps?'

Rollo went on a few steps and stood looking at the mysterious cottage. There was not a sound to be heard, not the slightest sign of life about the place; and yet it was all in such perfect order that it was impossible to think it deserted.

'The people must have gone out, I suppose,' said Rollo.

'I wonder if the door is locked,' said Maia. 'I am *so* thirsty, Rollo.'

'Let's see,' Rollo answered, and together the two children opened the tiny gate and made their way up to the door. Rollo took hold of the latch; it yielded to his touch.

'It's not locked,' he said, looking back at his sister, and he gently pushed the door a little way open. 'Shall I go in?' he said.

Maia came forward, walking on her tiptoes.

'Oh, Rollo,' she whispered, '*suppose* it's enchanted, and that we never get out again.'

But all the same she crept nearer and nearer to the tempting half-open door.

CHAPTER III.
THE MYSTERIOUS COTTAGE

'"A pretty cottage 'tis indeed,"
Said Rosalind to Fanny,
"But yet it seems a little strange,
I trust there's naught uncanny."'

The Wood-Fairies.

Rollo pushed a little more, and still a little. No sound was heard – no voice demanded what they wanted; they gathered courage, till at last the door stood sufficiently ajar for them to see inside. It was a neat, plain, exceedingly clean, little kitchen which stood revealed to their view. Rollo and Maia, with another glance around them, another instant's hesitation, stepped in.

The floor was only sanded, the furniture was of plain unvarnished deal, yet there was something indescribably dainty and attractive about the room. There was no fire burning in the hearth, but all was ready laid for lighting it, and on the table, covered with a perfectly clean, though coarse cloth, plates and cups for a meal were set out. It seemed to be for three people. A loaf of brownish bread, and a jug filled with milk, were the only provisions to be seen. Maia stepped forward softly and looked longingly at the milk.

'Do you think it would be wrong to take some, Rollo?' she said. 'I *am* so thirsty, and they must be nice people that live here, it looks so neat.' But just then, catching sight of the three chairs drawn round the table, as well as of the three cups and three plates upon it, she drew back with a little scream. '*Rollo*,' she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling, half with fear, half with excitement, 'I do believe we've got into the cottage of *the three bears*.'

Rollo burst out laughing, though, to tell the truth, he was not quite sure if his sister was in fun or earnest.

'Nonsense, Maia!' he said. 'Why, that was hundreds of years ago. You don't suppose the bears have gone on living ever since, do you? Besides, it wouldn't do at all. See, there are two smaller chairs and one arm-chair here. Two small cups and one big one. It's just the wrong way for the bears. It must be two children and one big person that live here.'

Maia seemed somewhat reassured.

'Do you think I may take a drink of milk, then?' she said. 'I am *so* thirsty.'

'I should think you might,' said Rollo. 'You see we can come back and pay for it another day when they're at home. If we had any money we might leave it here on the table, to show we're honest. But we haven't any.'

'No,' said Maia, as she poured out some milk, taking care not to spill any on the tablecloth, 'not a farthing. Oh, Rollo,' she continued, '*such* delicious milk! Won't you have some?'

'No; I'm not thirsty,' he replied. 'See, Maia, there's another little kitchen out of this – for washing dishes in – a sort of scullery,' for he had opened another door as he spoke.

'And, oh, Rollo,' said Maia, peering about, 'see, there's a little stair. Oh, *do* let's go up.'

It seemed a case of 'in for a penny, in for a pound.' Having made themselves so much at home, the children felt inclined to go a little farther. They had soon climbed the tiny staircase and were rewarded for their labour by finding two little bed-rooms, furnished just alike, and though neat and exquisitely clean, as plain and simple as the kitchen.

'Really, Rollo,' said Maia, 'this house might have been built by the fairies for us two, and see, isn't it odd? the beds are quite small, like ours. I don't know where the big person sleeps whom the arm-chair and the big cup downstairs are for.'

'Perhaps there's another room,' said Rollo, but after hunting about they found there was nothing more, and they came downstairs again to the kitchen, more puzzled than ever as to whom the queer little house could belong to.

'We'll come back again, the very first day we can,' said Maia, 'and tell the people about having taken the milk,' and then they left the cottage, carefully closing the door and gate behind them, and made their way back to where they had left Nanni. It took them longer than they had expected – either they mistook their way, or had wandered farther than they had imagined. But Nanni had suffered no anxiety on their account, for, even before they got up to her, they saw that she was enjoying a peaceful slumber.

'Poor thing!' said Maia. 'She must be very tired. I never knew her so sleepy before. Wake up, Nanni, wake up,' she went on, touching the maid gently on the shoulder. Up jumped Nanni, rubbing her eyes, but looking nevertheless very awake and good-humoured.

'Such a beautiful sleep as I've had, to be sure,' she exclaimed.

'Then you haven't been wondering what had become of us?' said Rollo.

'Bless you, no, sir,' replied Nanni. 'You haven't been very long away, surely? I never did have such a beautiful sleep. There must be something in the air of this forest that makes one sleep. And such lovely dreams! I thought I saw a lady all dressed in green – dark green and light green, – for all the world like the fir-trees in spring, and with long light hair. She stooped over me and smiled, as if she was going to say something, but just then I awoke and saw Miss Maia.'

'And what do you think *we've* seen?' said Maia. 'The dearest little cottage you can fancy. Just like what Rollo and I would like to live in all by ourselves. And there was nobody there; wasn't it queer, Nanni?'

Nanni was much impressed, but when she had heard all about the children's adventure she grew a little frightened.

'I hope no harm will come of it,' she said. 'If it were a witch's cottage;' and she shivered.

'Nonsense, Nanni,' said Rollo; 'witches don't have cottages like that, – all so bright and clean, and delicious new milk to drink.'

But Nanni was not so easily consoled. 'I hope no harm may come of it,' she repeated.

By the lengthening shadows they saw that the afternoon was advancing, and that, if they did not want to be late for dinner, they must make the best of their way home.

'It would not do to be late to-day – the first time they have let us come out by ourselves,' said Maia sagely. 'If we are back in very good time perhaps Lady Venelda will soon let us come again.'

They *were* back in very good time, and went down to the dining-hall, looking very fresh and neat, as their cousin entered it followed by her ladies.

'That is right,' said Lady Venelda graciously.

'You look all the better for your walk, my little friends,' said the old doctor. 'Come, tell us what you think of our forests, now you have seen the inside of them.'

'They are lovely,' said both children enthusiastically. 'I should like to *live* there,' Maia went on; 'and, oh, cousin, we saw the dearest little cottage, *so* neat and pretty! I wonder who lives there.'

'You went to the village, then,' Lady Venelda replied. 'I did not think you would go in that direction.'

'No,' said Rollo, 'we did not go near any village. It was a cottage quite alone, over that way,' and he pointed in the direction he meant.

Lady Venelda looked surprised and a little annoyed.

'I know of no cottage by itself. I know of no cottages, save those in my own village. You must have been mistaken.'

'Oh, no, indeed,' said Maia, 'we could not be mistaken, for we – '

'Young people should not contradict their elders,' said Lady Venelda freezingly, and poor Maia dared say no more. She was very thankful when the old doctor came to the rescue.

'Perhaps,' he said good-naturedly, 'perhaps our young friends sat down in the forest and had a little nap, in which they *dreamt* of this mysterious cottage. You are aware, my lady, that the aromatic odours of our delightful woods are said to have this tendency.'

Rollo and Maia looked at each other. 'That's true,' the look seemed to say, for the old doctor's words made them think of Nanni's beautiful dream. Not that *they* had been asleep, oh, no, that was impossible.

Everything about the cottage had been so real and natural. And besides, as Maia said afterwards to Rollo, 'People don't dream *together* of exactly the same things at exactly the same moment, as if they were reading a story-book,' with which Rollo of course agreed.

Still, at the time, they were not sorry that their cousin took up the doctor's idea, for she had seemed so very vexed before he suggested it.

'To be sure,' she replied graciously; 'that explains it. I have often heard of that quality of our wonderful woods. No doubt – tired as they were too – the children fell asleep without knowing it. Just so; but young people must never contradict their elders.'

The children dared not say any more, and, indeed, just then it would have been no use.

'She would not have believed anything we said about it,' said Maia as they went upstairs to their own rooms. 'But it isn't nice not to be allowed to tell anything like that. *Father* always believes us.'

'Yes,' said Rollo thoughtfully. 'I don't quite understand why Lady Venelda should have taken us up so about it. I don't much like going back to the cottage without leave – at least without telling her about it, and yet we *must* go. It would be such a shame not to pay for the milk.'

'Yes,' said Maia, 'and they might think there had been *robbers* there while they were out. Oh, we must go back!'

But their perplexities were not decreased by what Nanni had to say to them.

'Oh, Master Rollo and Miss Maia!' she exclaimed, 'we should be *very* thankful that no harm came to you this afternoon. I've been speaking to them in the kitchen about where you were, and, oh, but it must be an uncanny place! No one knows who lives there, though 'tis said about 'tis a witch. And the queer thing is, that 'tis but very few that have ever seen the cottage at all. Some have seen it and told the others about it, and when they've gone to look, no cottage could they find. Lady Venelda's own maid is one of those who was determined to find it, but she never could. And my Lady herself was so put out about it that she set off to look for it one day, – for no one has a right to live in the woods just hereabout without her leave, – and she meant to turn the people, whoever they were, about their business. But 'twas all for no use. She sought far and wide; ne'er a cottage could she find, and she wandered about the woods near a whole day for no use. Since then she is that touchy about it that, if any one dares but to mention a cottage hereabouts, save those in the village, it quite upsets her.'

Rollo and Maia looked at each other, but something made them feel it was better to say little before Nanni.

'So I do beg you never to speak about the cottage to my Lady,' Nanni wound up.

'We don't want to speak about it to her,' said Rollo drily.

'And you won't want to go there again, I do hope,' the maid persisted. 'Whatever would I do if the witch got hold of you and turned you perhaps into blue birds or green frogs, or something dreadful? Whatever *would* your dear papa say to me? Oh, Miss Maia, do tell Master Rollo never to go there again.'

'Don't be afraid,' said Maia; 'we'll take care of ourselves. I can quite promise you we won't be turned into frogs or birds. But don't talk any more about it to-night, Nanni. I'm *so* sleepy, and I don't want to dream of horrible witches.'

And this was all the satisfaction Nanni could get.

But the next morning Rollo and Maia had a grand consultation together. They did not like the idea of not going to the cottage again, for they felt it would not be right not to explain about the milk, and they had besides a motive, which Nanni's strange story had no way lessened – that of great curiosity.

'It would be a shame not to pay for the milk,' said Rollo. 'I should feel uncomfortable whenever I thought of it.'

'So should I,' said Maia; 'even more than you, for it was I that drank it! And I do *so* want to find out who lives there. There *must* be children, I am sure, because of the little beds and chairs and cups, and everything.'

'If they are all for children, I don't know what there is for big people,' said Rollo. 'Perhaps they're some kind of dwarfs that live there.'

'Oh, what fun!' said Maia, clapping her hands. 'Oh, we *must* go back to find out!'

She started, for just as she said the words a voice behind them was heard to say, 'Go back; go back where, my children?'

They were walking up and down the terrace on one side of the castle, where Mademoiselle Delphine had sent them for a little fresh air between their lessons, and they were so engrossed by what they were talking of that they had not heard nor seen the old doctor approaching them. It was his voice that made Maia start. Both children looked rather frightened when they saw who it was, and that he had overheard what they were saying.

'Go back where?' he repeated. 'What are you talking about?'

The children still hesitated.

'We don't like to tell you, sir,' said Rollo frankly. 'You would say it was only fancy, as you did last night, and we *know* it wasn't fancy.'

'Oh, about the cottage?' said the old doctor coolly. 'You needn't be afraid to tell me about it, fancy or no fancy. Fancy isn't a bad thing sometimes.'

'But it *wasn't* fancy,' said both together; 'only we don't like to talk about it for fear of vexing our cousin, and we don't like to go back there without leave, and yet we *should* go back.'

'Why should you?' asked their old friend.

Then Maia explained about the milk, adding, too, the strange things that Nanni had heard in the servants' hall. The old doctor listened attentively. His face looked quite pleased and good-humoured, and yet they saw he was not at all inclined to laugh at them. When they had finished, to the children's surprise he said nothing, but drew out a letter from his pocket.

'Do you know this writing?' he said.

Rollo and Maia exclaimed eagerly, 'Oh, yes; it is our father's. Do you know him? Do you know our father, Mr. Doctor?'

'I have known him,' said the old man, quietly drawing the contents out of the cover, 'I have known him since he was much smaller than either of you is now. It was by my advice he sent you here for a time, and see what he gave me for you.'

He held up as he spoke a small folded paper, which had been inside the other letter. It bore the words: 'For Rollo and Maia – to be given them when you think well.' 'I think well now,' he went on, 'so read what he says, my children.'

They quickly opened the paper. There was not much written inside – just a few words:

'Dear children,' they were, 'if you are in any difficulty, ask the advice of my dear old friend and adviser, the doctor, and you may be sure you will do what will please your father.'

For a moment or two the children were almost too surprised to speak. It was Rollo who found his voice first.

'Give us your advice now, Mr. Doctor. May we go back to the cottage without saying any more about it to Lady Venelda?'

'Yes,' said the old doctor. 'You may go anywhere you like in the woods. No harm will come to you. It is no use your saying any more about the cottage to Lady Venelda. She cannot understand it because she cannot find it. If you can find it you will learn no harm there, and your father would be quite pleased for you to go.'

'Then do you think we may go soon again?' asked the children eagerly.

'You will always have a holiday once a week,' said the doctor. 'It would not be good for you to go *too* often. Work cheerfully and well when you are at work, my children. I will see that you have your play.'

CHAPTER IV.
FAIRY HOUSEKEEPING

'Neat, like bees, as sweet and busy,
. . . . . .
Aired and set to rights the house;
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat —
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat.'

Goblin Market.

The next few days passed rather slowly for the children. There was no talk of another expedition to the woods. And they had a good many lessons to do, so that short walks in the grounds close round the castle were all they had time for. They only saw the old doctor at meal-times, but he always smiled at them, as if to assure them he was not forgetting them, and to encourage them to patience.

There was one person who certainly did not regret the children's not returning to the woods, and that person was Nanni. What she had heard from the servants about the mysterious cottage had thoroughly frightened her; she felt sure that if they went there again something dreadful would happen to them, and yet she was so devoted to them that, however terrified, she would never have thought of not following them wherever they chose to go. But, as day after day went by, and no more was said about it, she began to breathe freely. Her distress was therefore the greater when, one afternoon just six days after the last ramble, Rollo and Maia rushed upstairs after their lessons in the wildest spirits.

'Hurrah for the doctor!' shouted Rollo, and Maia was on the point of joining him, till she remembered that if they made such a noise Lady Venelda would be sending up to know what was the matter.

'We're to have a whole holiday to-morrow, Nanni,' they explained, 'and we're going to spend it in the woods. You're to come with us, and carry something in a basket for us to eat.'

'Very well, Miss Maia,' replied Nanni, prudently refraining from mentioning the cottage, in hopes that they had forgotten about it, 'that will be very nice, especially if it is a fine day, but if not, of course you would not go.'

'I don't know that,' said Rollo mischievously; 'green frogs don't mind rain.'

'Nor blue birds,' added Maia. 'They could fly away if they did.'

At these fateful words poor Nanni grew deadly pale. 'Oh, my children,' she cried; 'oh, Master Rollo and Miss Maia, don't, I beg of you, joke about such things. And oh, I entreat you, don't go looking for that witch's cottage. Unless you promise me you won't, I shall have to go and tell my Lady, however angry she is!'

'No such thing, my good girl,' said a voice at the door. 'You needn't trouble your head about such nonsense. Rollo and Maia will go nowhere where they can get any harm. I know everything about the woods better than you or those silly servants downstairs. Lady Venelda would only tell you not to interfere with what didn't concern you if you went saying anything to her. Go off to the woods with your little master and mistress without misgiving, my good girl, and if the air makes you sleepy don't be afraid to take a nap. No harm will come to you or the children.'

Nanni stood still in astonishment – the tears in her eyes and her mouth wide open, staring at the old doctor, for it was he, of course, who had followed the children upstairs and overheard her remonstrances. She looked so comical that Rollo and Maia could scarcely help laughing at her, as at last she found voice to speak.

'Of course if the learned doctor approves I have nothing to say,' she said submissively; though she could not help adding, 'and I only hope no harm will come of it.'

Rollo and Maia flew to the doctor.

'Oh, that's right!' they exclaimed. 'We are so glad you have spoken to that stupid Nanni. She believes all the rubbish the servants here speak.'

The doctor turned to Nanni again.

'Don't be afraid,' he repeated. 'All will be right, you will see. But take my advice, do not say anything to the servants here about the amusements of your little master and mistress. Least said soonest mended. It would annoy Lady Venelda for it to be supposed they were allowed to go where any harm could befall them.'

'Very well, sir,' replied Nanni, meekly enough, though she still looked rather depressed. She could not help remembering that before he left, old Marc, too, had warned her against too much chattering.

The next morning broke fine and bright. The children started in the greatest spirits, which even Nanni, laden with a basket of provisions for their dinner, could not altogether resist. And before they went, Lady Venelda called them into her boudoir, and kissing them, wished them a happy holiday.

'It's all that nice old doctor,' said Maia. 'You see, Rollo, she hasn't told us not to go to the cottage – he's put it all right, I'm sure.'

'Yes, I expect so,' Rollo agreed; and then in a minute or two he added: 'Do you know, Maia, though of course I don't believe in witches turning people into green frogs, or any of that nonsense, I do think there's *something* funny about that cottage.'

'What sort of something? What do you mean?' asked Maia, looking intensely interested. 'Do you mean something to do with fairies?'

'I don't know – I'm not sure. But we'll see,' said Rollo.

'If we can find it!' said Maia.

'I'm *sure* we shall find it. It's just because of that that I think there's something queer. It must be true that some people can't find it.'

'Naughty people?' asked Maia apprehensively. 'For you know, Rollo, we're not always *quite* good.'

'No, I don't mean naughty people. I mean more people who don't care about fairies and wood-spirits, and things like that – people who call all that nonsense and rubbish.'

'I see,' said Maia; 'perhaps you're right, Rollo. Well, any way, that won't stop *us* finding it, for we certainly do care *dreadfully* about fairy things, don't we, Rollo? But what about Nanni?' she went on, for Nanni was some steps behind, and had not heard what they were saying.

'Oh, as to Nanni,' said Rollo coolly, 'I shouldn't wonder if she took a nap again, as the old doctor said. Any way, she can't interfere with us after *his*

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