

Molesworth Mrs.

The Magic Nuts



Mrs. Molesworth

The Magic Nuts

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CHAPTER I NIGHT AND MORNING

*The way was long.
Lay of the Last Minstrel.*

Little Leonore pressed her face against the window of the railway carriage and tried hard to see out. But it was no use. It all looked so dark and black, all the darker and blacker for the glimmer of the rain-drops trickling down thickly outside, and reflecting the feeble light of the lamp in the roof of the compartment.

Leonore sighed deeply. She was very tired, more tired than she knew, for she did not feel sleepy, or as if she would give anything to be undressed and go to bed. On the contrary, she wished with all her heart that it was daylight, and that it would leave off raining, and that she could get out of the stuffy old railway train, and go for a good run. It had been raining for *so* long, and they had been such a lot of hours shut in and bum-bumming along in this dreary way – it even seemed to her now and then as if she had *always* been sitting in her corner like this, and that it had *always* been night and *always* raining outside.

'I don't believe I'm going to be happy at all at Alten,' she said to herself. 'I'm sure it's going to be horrid. It's always the way if people tell you anything's going to be lovely and nice, it's sure to be dull, and – just horrid.'

She glanced at the other end of the railway carriage where a lady, comfortably muffled up in the corner, was sleeping peacefully. She was not an old lady, but she was not young. To Leonore she seemed past counting her age, for she never appeared to get older, and during the six or seven years she had been the little girl's governess she had not changed at all.

'I wish I could go to sleep like Fraulein,' was the next thought that came into her busy brain. 'When she wakes she'll think I have been asleep, for she did tuck me up nicely. And I'm feeling as cross as cross.'

Then her eyes fell on the little cushion and the railway rug that she had thrown on to the floor – should she try to settle herself again and *perhaps* manage to go to sleep? It would be so nice to wake up and find they had got there, and *surely* it could not be very much farther. Fraulein had said ten o'clock, had she not? Leonore remembered sitting up one night till ten o'clock – more than a year ago – when her father was expected to arrive, and Fraulein was sure he would like to find her awake to welcome him. It hadn't seemed half so late that night as it did now – would ten o'clock *never* come?

She stooped down and pulled up the rug, and tried to prop the cushion against the back of the seat for her head. It was not very easy to manage, but Leonore was not a selfish child; it never occurred to her to disturb her governess for the sake of her own comfort, though Fraulein would not have been the least vexed with her had she done so.

Just as she had made up her mind that she would try to go to sleep, she felt a slight change in the motion of the train – the bum and rattle, rattle and bum, grew fainter – was it only her fancy, or could it, oh! could it be that they were slackening speed? If so, it could only mean arriving at Alten, for her governess had distinctly told her they would not stop again till they had reached their journey's end.

'Sleep, my dear,' she had said, 'sleep well till I wake you, and then we shall be *there*. There will be no other stopping anywhere to disturb you.'

Leonore held her breath in anxiety – yes, it was no fancy – they *were* moving more and more slowly, and through the darkness lights, which were not the glimmer of the rain-drops, began to appear. Then at last there was a pull-up.

'Fraulein, Fraulein,' cried Leonore, in great excitement, 'wake up, quick. We're *there*– do you hear? The train has stopped.'

Poor Fraulein had started up at the first words, but Leonore was too eager to leave off talking all at once, and in another moment the governess's head was out of the window, calling to a porter, for there was not too much time to spare, as the train had to start off again, not having finished *its* journey, though some of its passengers had done so. And almost before our little girl had quite taken in that the dreary rattle and bum in the darkness were over, she found herself on the platform, her own little travelling-bag and warm cloak in her grasp, while Fraulein, who insisted on loading herself as much as the porter, was chattering away to him in the cheeriest and liveliest of voices, far too fast for Leonore to understand much of what she said, as if she had never been asleep in her life.

'I suppose she's very pleased to be in her own country,' thought Leonore. 'I wish it wasn't night, so that I could see what it all looks like,' and she gazed about her eagerly, as she followed Fraulein and the porter out of the station.

Something, after all, *was* to be seen. The rain was clearing off; overhead it was almost dry, though very wet and puddly underfoot. In front of the station was a wide open space, with trees surrounding it, except where a broad road, at the end of which lamps showed some carriages waiting, led away to somewhere, though no streets or even houses were to be seen. The air felt fresh and pleasant, and Leonore's spirits began to rise.

'It feels like the country,' she said to herself; 'I wonder where the town is.'

But Fraulein was still too busy talking to the porter and to two or three other men who had somehow sprung up, to be asked any questions just yet. One of the men had a band round his cap with some words stamped on it in gilt letters. Leonore could only make out one word, 'Hotel – ,' and then he turned away, and she could not see the others.

By this time her governess was picking up her skirts in preparation for crossing the wet space before them.

'He says we had better step over to where the carriages are standing,' she explained to the little girl; 'it will be quicker'; and when, a moment later, the two found themselves alone, with plenty of room, in the comfortable omnibus, she lent back with a sigh of satisfaction.

'It is so pleasant to be in a land where things are well managed,' she said. 'We do not need to wait for our big luggage. I give the paper to the hotel porter, he sees to it all for us.'

'Yes,' said Leonore, though without paying much attention; the care of the luggage did not trouble her; 'but do tell me, Fraulein, dear, where is the hotel? Where are the streets and – and – everything? It seems like the country, and oh, aren't you glad to be out of the train? I thought we should never get here, and it was so dark and raining so hard, and I *couldn't* go to sleep.'

'Poor dear,' said tender-hearted Fraulein, 'and I who slept comfortably for so long. Had I known you were awake I would have kept awake also.'

'Never mind now,' said Leonore amiably; 'but tell me where we are going.'

'The station is half a mile or so out of the town,' explained the governess. 'See now, the houses are appearing. We cross the bridge – by daylight it is beautiful, such a view down the river.'

But Leonore did not care very much about beautiful views – not just now especially.

'I wish it wasn't so far to the town,' she said wearily, though almost as she said the words her tone changed. 'Oh now,' she exclaimed brightly, 'we are really getting into the streets. How queer everything looks – do you think the people are all in bed, Fraulein?'

It was a natural question, for as they drove through the wide dark streets, faintly lighted by an occasional lamp, there was nothing to be seen but closed shutters and barred doors. The houses,

for the most part, looked large, particularly as regarded the entrance, for many of these led into courtyards, with great double gates.

Fraulein nodded her head.

'They are all in their houses,' she said, 'though perhaps not all in bed yet, for it is not really so very late. In Alten we keep to the good old ways, you see, my dear – "early to bed and early to rise," as your rhyme says.'

'It's very dull-looking,' said Leonore discontentedly. 'It seems like a lot of prisons, and – oh –'

She broke off suddenly, for they were stopping at last, or at least preparing to stop, as they turned in through a large doorway standing open to admit them into a courtyard, paved with cobble stones, and dimly lighted like the streets by an old-fashioned lamp or lantern at one side.

There was more light at the other side, however, where a short flight of steps led into the hotel, and here they pulled up, to be received by a funny little man in black, with a large expanse of shirt-front, and by what looked to Leonore's half-dazzled eyes like a whole troop of waiters, also in black, fluttering about him, though in reality there were only three – all the party bowing in the most polite way, and almost tumbling over each other in their eagerness to help the ladies to alight.

This sort of thing was quite to Leonore's taste, and for the moment all feeling of dullness or tiredness left her. She bent her head graciously to the little fat man, who was really the landlord, and allowed one of the others to take her cloak and bag. Fraulein seemed more than ever in her element. Yes; rooms were ready for the ladies – two bedrooms opening into each other – would they have supper upstairs, or (and as he spoke the polite little man threw open a door they were passing) in here? 'Here' being the large dining-room. They would be quite undisturbed.

'Oh, in here, Fraulein, do say in here,' said Leonore, 'I don't like eating in bedrooms; it makes me feel as if I had the measles or something. And, I'm not sure, but I think I'm rather hungry, so mayn't we have supper at once?'

Fraulein was quite willing, and supper, in the shape of chocolate and an omelette, would be ready immediately. So the two settled themselves at one end of the long narrow table, and Leonore's eyes set to work to see what they could see by the light of the two not very bright lamps.

'What a funny old man,' she exclaimed. 'Look, Fraulein, the walls are all dark wood like a church, and the ceiling has white carvings on it, and the floor is red and black squares like the kitchen at Aunt Isabella's. And it isn't like a hotel, is it? Not like the one at Paris, where there was such a bustle. I don't believe there's anybody staying here except you and me.'

'Oh yes, there are probably other people,' said Fraulein, 'but it is long past proper supper-time, you see, my dear. It is very polite of the landlord to have received us himself, and to have all the waiters in attendance.'

And by the way Fraulein leant back in her chair Leonore saw that she was in a state of great satisfaction with everything, and exceedingly delighted to find herself again in her own country.

Upstairs, where they soon made their way, guided by two, if not three, of the attentive waiters, the house seemed even queerer and older than down below. Leonore was now getting too sleepy to notice anything very clearly, but the dark wainscotted walls, the long passages and funny little staircases, struck her as very mysterious and interesting, and she said to herself that she would have a good exploring the next day.

The bedrooms prepared for them looked large and imposing, partly perhaps because the candles left the corners in darkness. The beds were small and cosy, with their white eider-down quilts, and very comfortable too, as the tired little girl stretched herself out with a sigh of relief and content, to fall asleep long before Fraulein had completed her unpackings and arrangements.

If Leonore had any dreams that night she did not know it, for the sun had been up some hours before she awoke, though it was already late autumn. She did not feel at all ashamed of her laziness however, and considering everything I do not see that she had any reason to feel so. And she gave a

cry of welcome and pleasure as she caught sight of the merry little rays of sunshine creeping over the white bed as if to wish her a kindly good morning.

'Oh I *am* glad it is a fine day,' she thought to herself, 'and I am so glad we are not going in that horrid old train again.'

She lay still and looked about her. Yes, it was a curiously old-fashioned room; even a child could see at once that the house must be very, very old.

'I wonder if many little girls have slept here and waked up in the morning, and looked at the funny walls and queer-shaped ceiling just like I'm doing,' she thought to herself. 'Some of them must be quite old women by now, and perhaps even, lots who have been dead for hundreds of years have lived here. How queer it is to think of! I wonder if Fraulein is awake, and I do hope we shall have breakfast soon. I'm so hungry.'

The sound of a tap seemed to come as an answer to these questions and hopes, and as Fraulein put her head in at one door, a maid carrying a bath and a large can of hot water appeared at the other. She was a pleasant-faced girl with rosy cheeks, and as she passed the bed she wished the young lady good morning with a smile.

'You are awake, my child?' said the governess. 'That is right. You have slept well? Call me as soon as you want me to help you to do your hair, and then we shall have our breakfast. You would rather have it downstairs, I suppose?'

'Oh yes,' said Leonore decidedly. 'I am quite rested, Fraulein, and I want dreadfully to go downstairs and see this funny old place by daylight, and I want to look out of the window to see if the streets look nice, and – and –'

'Well, get dressed first, my dear,' said her governess, pleased to find the little girl in such a cheerful frame of mind. 'It is just a trifle cold, though it will probably be warmer as the day goes on, thanks to this bright sunshine. You have had rainy weather lately, I suppose?' she went on, turning to the maid-servant.

The girl held up her hands.

'Rain,' she repeated, 'yes, indeed, I should rather think so – rain, rain, rain, for ever so many days. The ladies have brought us the sunshine.'

So it seemed, for when they made their way downstairs, Leonore scarcely knew the dining-room again, it looked so bright and cheerful in comparison with the night before. Their coffee and rolls had not yet made their appearance, so the little girl flew to the window to see what she could through the muslin blinds. For the window opened straight out on to the pavement, so that any inquisitive passer-by could peep in, which made the blinds quite necessary, as, though it is very pleasant to look out, it is not equally so to feel that strangers can look in when one is sitting at table.

Leonore pulled a tiny corner of the blind aside.

'Oh, Fraulein,' she exclaimed, 'it is such a nice street. And there are lots of people passing, and shops a little way off, and I see the top of a big old church quite near, and – and – a sort of open square place up that short street – do you see?' Fraulein having joined her by this time.

'That is the market-place,' said her governess, 'and I rather think – yes, I am sure it is market-day to-day.'

Leonore danced about in excitement.

'Oh, *please* take me to see it,' she said. 'I have never seen a proper market, and perhaps the people would have funny dresses – costumes like what you were telling me about. Do you think we should see any of them?'

'I hope so,' said Fraulein, 'we must go out as soon as we have had breakfast and see. I have to ask about a carriage to take us to Dorf. I almost wish –'

'What?' asked Leonore.

'That we could stay till to-morrow, if Alten amuses you so – indeed, I do not see why we need hurry. My aunt is not quite certain what day we are coming, and she is *quite* certain to be ready for

us whenever we arrive. Indeed, I have no doubt she has had our rooms prepared for weeks past, so good and careful a housewife is she. Our beds will have been aired every day, I daresay.'

But Leonore was scarcely old enough to care whether the beds were aired or not. For the moment her whole thoughts were running on having a good exploring of the quaint town which had so taken her fancy, and while she drank her coffee and munched the nice crisp rolls, which tasted better than any bread she had ever eaten before, she kept urging her governess to stay another day where they were.

'You see,' she said, 'I'm so used to the country, and we shall be there all the winter, and I daresay it *will* be rather dull.'

'I hope not,' said Fraulein, somewhat anxiously. 'I shall do my best, you know, my child, to make you happy, and so will my good aunt, I am sure.'

'Oh yes, I know you are always very kind,' said Leonore, with a funny little tone of condescension which she sometimes used to her governess. 'But, you see, it *must* be dull when anybody has no brothers and sisters, and no mamma – and papa so far away.'

She gave a little sigh. She rather liked to pity herself now and then, and it made Fraulein all the kinder, but in reality she was not in some ways so much to be pitied as might have seemed. For she could not remember her mother, and she had been accustomed all her life to her father's being as a rule away from her, though when he *was* in England he spent most of his time in planning pleasures for his little daughter. Then she had had plenty of kind aunts and uncles, and, above all, the constant care of her devoted Fraulein.

But Fraulein's heart was *very* tender. She kissed Leonore fondly, and as soon as breakfast was over, out they sallied, after settling that they should stay at Alten another night, to please the little lady.

CHAPTER II

APPLES AND NUTS

*I love old women best, I think;
She knows a friend in me. – Ashe.*

It was market-day, to Leonore's great delight, and scarcely less to that of her governess. The scene was a busy and amusing one, and added to that was the charm of everything being so new to the little girl. She wanted to buy all sorts of treasures, but when Fraulein reminded her that there was no hurry, and that she would probably have plenty of chances of choosing the things that took her fancy at the yearly fair at Dorf, or in the little village shops there, she gave in, and contented herself with some delicious tiny pots and jugs, which she declared must *really* have been made by fairies.

'You are in the country of fairies now,' said Fraulein, smiling. 'Not Fairyland itself, of course, but one of the earth countries which lie nearest its borders.'

Leonore looked up gravely. Some feeling of the kind had already come over her – ever since their arrival the night before at the queer old inn, she had felt herself in a sort of new world, new to her just because of its strange oldness.

'Oh, Fraulein,' she said, 'I do like you to say that. Do you really mean it? And is Dorf as near Fairyland as this dear old town, do you think?'

'Quite, I should say,' replied Fraulein, taking up the little girl's fancy. 'Even nearer, perhaps. There are wonderful old woods on one side of the village, which look like the very home of gnomes and kobolds and all kinds of funny people. And – ' she broke off abruptly, for Leonore had given her arm a sudden tug.

'Do look, Fraulein,' she said in a half whisper. '*Isn't* she like an old fairy? And she's smiling as if she understood what we were saying.'

'She' was a tiny little old woman, seated in a corner of the market-place, with her goods for sale spread out before her. These were but a poor display – a few common vegetables, a trayful of not very inviting-looking apples, small and grayish, and a basket filled with nuts. But the owner of these seemed quite content. She glanced up as Leonore stopped to gaze at her and smiled – a bright, half-mischievous sort of smile, which was reflected in her twinkling eyes, and made her old brown wrinkled face seem like that of an indiarubber doll.

Fraulein looked at her too with interest in her own kindly blue eyes.

'She must be very poor,' she said.

Fraulein was very practical, though she was fond of fairy stories and such things too.

'Oh, do let us buy something from her,' said Leonore. 'I've plenty of money, you know – and if you'll lend me a little, you can pay yourself back when you get my English gold pound changed, can't you, dear Fraulein? I have spent those funny pretence-silver pennies you gave me yesterday.'

Fraulein opened her purse and put two small coins into the child's hand.

'Buy apples with one of these,' she said; 'that will be enough to please the poor old thing.'

'And nuts with the other?' asked Leonore.

Fraulein shook her head.

'Nuts are so indigestible, my little girl,' she replied; 'and though these apples are not pretty, I am not sure but that they may taste better than they look. I have a sort of remembrance of some ugly little gray apples in this neighbourhood which were rather famous.'

Her 'pretence-silver' penny procured for Leonore a good handful, or handkerchief-full – for the fruit-seller had no paper-bags to put them in – of the apples. And when she had got them safe, and was turning away, the old woman stretched out a brown wizened hand again with another of her queer smiles.

'Take these,' she said, 'for good luck.'

'These' were a few of the nuts. If Leonore had wished to refuse them, she could hardly have done so, for before she had time to do more than thank the giver politely, the dame was busy talking to some other customer, who had stopped in front of her little table.

Fraulein had walked on. Leonore ran after her.

'See,' she said, holding out her nuts, 'see what the old woman gave me. What shall I do with them, if I mustn't eat them? I don't like to throw them away, when she gave me them as a present.'

'No, of course not,' said Fraulein at once. 'Put them in your jacket pocket, dear, and perhaps you may eat two or three of them when we go in.'

Leonore slipped the nuts into her pocket as she was told, and soon after, the clock of the great church striking twelve, she and her governess made their way back to the hotel.

'I do not want you to be tired,' said Fraulein, 'for this afternoon I should like to take you to see one or two of the curious old houses here, as well as the interior of the church'; for the market and the shops had taken up Leonore's attention so much, that they had had no time for anything else in the way of sight-seeing.

Dinner was rather a long affair, and tried the little girl's patience. There seemed twice or three times as many dishes as were needed, even though there were several other guests at the long table besides themselves, none of whom, however, were very interesting.

'I hope we shan't have such a lot to eat at your aunt's house, Fraulein,' said Leonore in a low voice, towards the end of the meal, with a sigh. 'It seems such a pity not to be out-of-doors, when it's so bright and sunny.'

'We shall have plenty of time, dear,' said her governess. 'See, we are at dessert now. And you will probably feel more tired this evening than you expect. No, my aunt lives more simply, though you will like her puddings and cakes, I am sure.'

The afternoon passed very pleasantly and quickly, though, as Fraulein had expected, Leonore did feel more tired when they came in for the second time than she had thought she would be, and quite ready for bed-time when it came – indeed, not sorry to allow that the dustman's summons was there, half an hour or so earlier than usual.

'Your eyes are looking quite sleepy, my child,' said Fraulein; 'and though we have no more long railway journeys before us, we have a drive of some hours to-morrow, and I should like you to reach Dorf feeling quite fresh. It makes such a difference in one's impressions of things if one is tired or not, and I do want your first feelings about our temporary home to be very pleasant ones.'

Leonore was used to her governess's rather prim, long-winded way of saying things, and had learnt by practice to pick out the kernel – always a kind one – of her speeches very quickly.

'Yes,' she said, 'I know how you mean. Last night in the railway train, before we got here, I thought everything was perfectly horrid and miserable and would never get nice again. And to-day I've been so happy – even though I *am* tired and sleepy now,' she added, looking rather puzzled. 'There must be different ways of being tired, I suppose.'

'Undoubtedly there are – but we won't talk any more to-night. I am so glad you have been happy to-day.'

And sleepy Leonore went off to bed, and was soon in dreamland. She had forgotten all about her apples and nuts – the former Fraulein found tied up in the handkerchief after the little girl had fallen asleep, and put them into her travelling-bag, thinking they might be nice to eat during the drive the next day, but the nuts did not come into her mind at all.

'We certainly seem very lucky,' she said to Leonore the next morning, as they were at breakfast. 'The weather could not be better, especially when we remember that it is already late autumn. My aunt will be so pleased at it; her last letter was full of regrets about the rain and fears of its lasting.'

Leonore glanced towards the window. The clear gray-blue sky was to be seen above the blinds, and the pale yellow sunshine was straying in as if to wish them good-morning.

'Is it a very long drive to Dorf?' she asked.

'About three hours,' Fraulein replied. 'It is longer through being partly uphill; but at the steepest bit the road is very pretty, so it may be pleasant to get out and walk a little.'

'Yes, I should like that,' said Leonore. And then Fraulein went on to tell her that she had arranged for them to have dinner a little earlier than usual by themselves, so as to start in good time to reach Dorf by daylight.

And when they started in a comfortable though rather shabby carriage, with their lighter luggage strapped on behind, the horses' collar bells ringing merrily, and the wheels making what Leonore called a lovely clatter on the old paved streets, the little girl's spirits rose still higher, and she began to think that Fraulein's praises of her own country had not been too great.

The first half of the way was fairly level, and not, so it seemed to Leonore, very unlike the part of England where she had spent most of her life, except, that is to say, the two or three villages through which they passed. These reminded her of pictures of Switzerland which she had seen – the houses having high pointed roofs, with deep eaves, and many of them little staircases outside. Some of them too were gaily painted in colours on a white ground, which she admired very much. And after a time the road began gently to ascend, and then indeed, as Fraulein said, the likeness to Switzerland grew greater. For now it skirted pine woods on one side, and on the other the ground fell away sharply, here and there almost like a precipice; and before very long the driver pulled up, getting down to push a heavy stone behind the wheel, to prevent the carriage slipping back while he gave the horses a rest.

'Mayn't we get out here and walk on a little way?' asked Leonore, and Fraulein said 'Yes,' it was just what she had been intending.

'It *is* pretty here,' said Leonore, looking about her with satisfaction; 'the woods are so thick and dark – I love Christmas-tree woods – and the road goes winding such a nice funny way. And see, Fraulein, there's another little well, all mossy, and the water *so* clear. Doesn't the running and trickling sound pretty? And, oh yes, there are goats down there, goats with bells. I hear them tinkling, and the man with them has some kind of a music-pipe – listen, Fraulein.'

They stood still for a moment, the better to catch the mingled soft sounds which Leonore spoke of. And behind them, some little way off, came the tingling of their horses' louder bells, and the voice of the driver talking to them and cracking his whip encouragingly.

'It *is* nice,' said Leonore. 'I'm getting to be very glad papa settled for me to come here with you, Fraulein.'

The good lady's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

'And I am glad too, more glad than I can say,' she replied, 'and so will my kind aunt be, if we can make you really happy at Dorf.'

'Are we half-way there yet?' asked Leonore.

'Quite that, but the rest of the way is mostly uphill, so it takes longer, you see.' As she spoke, Fraulein drew something out of the little bag on her arm which she was seldom without. It was one of the small grayish apples which they had bought from the old woman in the market-place. 'You forgot these,' she said, holding the apple out to Leonore. 'I found them last night after you were asleep, and I thought you might like one or two on our way to-day. I believe they will prove very good.'

'How stupid of me to have forgotten them,' said the little girl, as she bit off a piece. 'Yes,' she went on, 'it is very good indeed – you would not believe how sweet and juicy it tastes. Won't you eat one yourself?'

Fraulein was quite willing to do so, and soon got out another. 'The rest,' she said, 'are in my travelling-bag in the carriage. I am glad I was not mistaken,' she went on. 'I felt sure they were the same ugly little apples I remember as a child.'

'And oh,' said Leonore, suddenly diving into her jacket pocket, 'that reminds me, Fraulein – where are the nuts she gave me? They're not in this pocket, and,' feeling in the other, 'oh dear! they must have dropped out; there are only three left, and I am sure she gave me at least twenty.'

'Well, never mind, dear,' said the governess, who was contentedly munching her apple. 'They would not have been good for you to eat – you would have had to throw them away, and so long as the poor old dame's feelings were not hurt, it really is of no consequence.'

But Leonore was still eyeing the three nuts in her hand with a look of regret.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I might have used them for counters, or played with them somehow. It seems unkind to have lost them – do you want me to throw these last three away?' she went on rather plaintively.

'Oh no,' said Fraulein, 'you may keep them certainly if you like. And even if you eat them, *three* can't do you much harm.'

'I don't want to eat them,' said Leonore, 'but I should like to *keep* them,' and she stowed them away in her pocket again with a more satisfied look on her face.

As she did so, a sound, seemingly quite near, made her start and look round. It was that of a soft yet merry laugh, low and musical and clear, though faint.

'Did you hear that, Fraulein?' said the little girl.

'What?' asked her governess.

'Somebody laughing, close to us – such a pretty laugh, like little silver bells.'

'Most likely it was the bells, the goats' little bells. I heard nothing else,' Fraulein replied.

Leonore shook her head.

'No,' she said, 'it was different from that, quite different. And the goats are some way off now; listen, you can only just hear them. And the laughing was quite near.'

But Fraulein only smiled.

'There could not have been any one quite near without my hearing it too,' she replied, 'even if – ' but here she stopped. She had said enough, however, to rouse her pupil's curiosity.

'Even if what?' repeated Leonore; 'do tell me what you were going to say, dear Fraulein.'

'I was only joking, or going to joke,' her governess answered. 'It came into my head that the woods about here – as indeed about most parts of this country – are said to be a favourite place for the fairies to visit. *Some* kinds of fairies, you know – gnomes and brownies and such like. The kinds that don't live in Fairyland itself make their homes in the woods, by preference to anywhere else.'

'And do you think it *might* have been one of them I heard laughing?' asked Leonore eagerly. 'Oh, how lovely! But then, why didn't you hear it too, Fraulein, and what was it laughing at, do you think? I wasn't saying anything funny. I was only – '

'Dear child,' said Fraulein, 'do not take me up so seriously. I am afraid your papa and your aunts would not think me at all a sensible governess if they heard me chattering away like this to you. Of course I was only joking.'

Leonore looked rather disappointed.

'I wish you *weren't* joking,' she said. 'I can't see that people need be counted silly who believe in fairies and nice queer things like that. *I* think the people who don't are the stupid silly ones. And you will never make me think I *didn't* hear some one laugh, Fraulein – I just know I did.' Then after a little pause she added, 'Would your old aunt think me very silly for believing about fairies? If she has lived so near Fairyland all her life I shouldn't think she would.'

This was rather a poser for poor Fraulein.

'She would not think you *silly!*' she replied; 'that is to say, she loves fairy stories herself. Life would indeed be very dull if we had no pretty fancies to brighten it with.'

'Oh, but,' said Leonore, 'that's just what I don't want. I mean I don't want to count fairy stories *only* stories – not real. I like to think there *are* fairies and brownies and gnomes, and all sorts of good people like that, though it isn't very often that mortals' – she said the last word with great satisfaction – 'see them. I am always hoping that some day *I* shall. And if this country of yours, Fraulein dear, is on the borders of Fairyland, I don't see why I don't run a very good chance of coming across some of

them while we are here. They are much more likely to show themselves to any one who does believe in them, I should say. Don't you think so?'

Fraulein laughed.

'I remember feeling just as you do, my child, when I was a little girl,' she said. 'But time has gone on, and I am no longer young, and I am obliged to confess that I have never seen a fairy.'

'Perhaps you didn't believe *enough* in them,' said Leonore sagely; and to herself she added, 'I have a sort of idea that Fraulein's aunt knows more about them than Fraulein does. I shall soon find out, though I won't say anything for a day or two till I see. But nothing will ever make me believe that I didn't hear somebody laughing just now.'

Her hand had strayed again to her jacket pocket as she said this to herself, and her fingers were feeling the nuts.

'It is funny that just three are left,' she thought, 'for so often in fairy stories you read about three nuts, or three kernels. I won't crack *my* nuts in a hurry, however.'

A few minutes more brought them to the summit of the steep incline, and soon the driver's voice and the cracking of his whip as he cheered up his horses sounded close behind them. He halted for a short time to give his animals a little rest, and then Fraulein and Leonore got back into the carriage.

'The rest of the way is almost level,' said the former; 'quite so as we enter Dorf. You will see, Leonore, how fast we shall go at the end. The drivers love to make a clatter and jingle to announce their arrival. No doubt my aunt will hear it, and be at the gate some minutes before she can possibly see us.'

CHAPTER III

IT IS HILDEGARDE

A pair of friends. – Wordsworth.

Fraulein was right. Both driver and horses woke up wonderfully as the first straggling houses of the village came in sight; it would be impossible to describe the extraordinary sounds and ejaculations which Friedrich, as he was called, addressed to his steeds, but which they evidently quite understood.

'How nice it is to go so fast, and to hear the bells jingling so,' said Leonore. 'I wish we had farther to go.'

'If that were the case we should soon sober down again,' said Fraulein with a smile, adding the next moment, 'and here we are. See the good aunt, my child, as I told you – standing at the gate, just as I last saw her, when I left her five years ago! But then it was parting and tears – now it is meeting and joy.'

Tears nevertheless were not wanting in the eyes of both the good ladies – tears of happiness, however, which were quickly wiped away.

'How well you are looking – not a day older,' said the niece.

'And you, my Elsa – how well *you* look. A trifle stouter perhaps, but that is an improvement. You have always been too thin, my child,' said the aunt, fondly patting Fraulein's shoulders, though she had to reach up to do so. Then she moved quickly to Leonore with a little exclamation of apology.

'And I have not yet welcomed our guest. Welcome to Dorf, my Fraulein – a thousand times welcome, and may you be as happy here as the old aunt will wish to make you.'

Leonore had been standing by eyeing the aunt and niece with the greatest interest. It amused her much to hear her governess spoken to as 'my child,' for to *her* Fraulein seemed quite old, long past the age of thinking *how* old she was. Indeed, the white-haired little lady did not seem to her much older!

'Thank you,' she said in reply to the aunt's kind words. 'I hope I shall be very happy here, but please don't call me anything but Leonore.'

'As you please,' her new friend replied, while Fraulein smiled beamingly. She was most anxious that her aunt and her pupil should make friends, and she knew that, though Leonore was a polite and well-mannered little girl, she had likes and dislikes of her own, and not always quite reasonable ones. Perhaps, to put it shortly, she felt anxious that her charge was just a trifle spoilt, and that she herself had had a hand in the spoiling.

'A motherless child,' she had said to herself many and many a time in excuse during the five years she had had the care of Leonore, for Fraulein had gone to her when the little girl was only four years old, 'and her papa so far away! Who could be severe with her?'

Not tender-hearted Fraulein Elsa, most certainly!

So she felt especially delighted when Leonore replied so prettily to her aunt, and still more so when the child lifted up her face for the kiss of welcome which Aunt Anna was only too ready to bestow, though she would have been rather surprised had she known the thoughts that were in Leonore's head at the moment.

'I believe she *does* know something about fairies,' the little girl was saying to herself. 'She has nice twinkly eyes, and – oh, I don't know what makes me think so, but I believe she *does* understand about them. Any way, she won't be like my aunts in England who always want me to read improving books and say I am getting too big for fairy stories.'

That first evening in the quaint old village was full of interest for Leonore. Aunt Anna's house in itself was charming to her, for though really small as to the size and number of its rooms, it did not seem so. There were such nice 'twisty' passages, and funny short flights of steps, each leading perhaps to only one room, or even to nothing more than a landing with a window.

And, standing at one of these, the little girl made a grand discovery, which took her flying off to the room where Fraulein was busily unpacking the boxes which the carrier had already brought.

'Fraulein, Fraulein,' she cried; 'I've been looking out at the back of the house, and just across the yard there's a lovely sort of big courtyard and buildings round it, and I saw a man all white and powdery carrying sacks. Is there a mill here?'

'Yes, my dear,' Fraulein replied. 'Did I not tell you? It is a very old mill, and the same people have had it for nearly a hundred years – such nice people too. I will take you all over it in a day or two – it will amuse you to see the different kinds of grain and flour, all so neatly arranged.'

'And the same people have been there for nearly a hundred years!' exclaimed Leonore. 'How very old they must be.'

Fraulein laughed. Though Leonore was so fond of wonders and fancies, she was sometimes very matter-of-fact. Aunt Anna, who just then joined them, smiled kindly.

'Elsa did not mean the same *persons*,' she explained, 'but the same family – the same name. Those there now – the miller himself – is the great-grandson of the man who was there first when the mill was built, which was, I think, fully *more* than a hundred years ago,' she added, turning to her niece.

Leonore looked rather disappointed.

'Oh,' she said, 'I thought it would be so nice to see people who were a hundred. Then, I suppose, the people here aren't any older than anywhere else.'

'I can scarcely say that,' Aunt Anna replied. 'There are some very old, and – there are odd stories about a few of the aged folk. I know one or two who do not seem to have grown any older since *I* can remember, and my memory goes back a good way now. But, my dears, I came to tell you that supper is ready – we must not let it get cold.'

She held out her hand to Leonore as she spoke. The little girl took it, and went off with her very happily, Fraulein calling after them that she would follow immediately.

'Please tell me, Aunt Anna,' said Leonore – it had been decided that she should thus address the old lady – 'please tell me, do you mean that some of these very old people who don't grow any older are a kind of *fairy*?'

She spoke almost in a whisper, but she was quite in earnest.

'Well,' said Aunt Anna, 'this country is on the borders of Fairyland, so who can say? When we were children – I and my brothers and sisters and the little barons and baronesses up at the Castle – when we all played together long ago, we used often to try to find the way there – and fairies, of course, are much cleverer than we are. I don't see why some of them may not stray into our world sometimes.'

'And pretend to be *not* fairies,' said Leonore eagerly. 'P'raps they go back to Fairyland every night, and are here every day; fairies don't need to go to sleep ever, do they?'

But Aunt Anna had not time to reply just then, for supper was on the table, and all her attention was given to seeing that the dishes were what they should be, and in helping her little guest to Leonore's liking.

When Fraulein joined them, however, the conversation took a more general turn.

'I was speaking just now to Leonore,' Aunt Anna began, 'of my childhood – when your dear father, Elsie, and the others, and I used to play with the castle children. And that reminds me that I have a piece of news for you – things repeat themselves it is said. It will be strange if a second generation – ' she said no more, and for a moment or two seemed lost in thought – the thought of the past!

Fraulein was used to her aunt's ways; the old lady was a curious mixture of practical commonsense and dreamy fancifulness. But after a little pause the niece recalled her to the present.

'A piece of news, you said, aunt? Good news, I hope?' she inquired.

'I think so,' said the aunt. 'It is about the family at the Castle. Little Baroness Hildegard is probably, almost certainly, coming here to spend the winter with her grandparents. She may arrive any day.'

'Oh I *am* pleased to hear it,' said Fraulein. 'It was just what I was hoping might happen, but I dared scarcely think of it. It would be so nice for our dear Leonore to have a companion.'

Leonore pricked up her ears at this.

'Yes, my dear,' Fraulein went on, in answer to the question in her eyes, 'I have not spoken of it to you before, for there seemed so little chance of its coming to pass. It is about the little Hildegard who would be such a delightful companion for you. She is just about your age, an only child as you are, and such a dear little girl by all accounts. I have not seen her since she was six, but Aunt Anna knows her well, and the family at the Castle have been our most kind friends for so long.'

Leonore looked full of interest but rather perplexed.

'I don't quite understand,' she said. 'Do you mean that the little girl is perhaps coming to live here in this house with us?'

'Oh no, my dear. Her own home is a good way off, but her grandpapa and grandmamma live at the Castle – a large old gray house half way up the hill above the village. I will show it to you tomorrow. It is a wonderfully quaint old place. And the little Baroness comes sometimes on long visits to her grandparents, who love to have her.'

'Only they fear it is lonely for her, as she is accustomed to the life of a great capital,' said Aunt Anna. 'They were delighted to hear I was expecting a little guest, when I saw them the other day, and they told me of the probability of Hildegard's coming.'

Fraulein almost clapped her hands at this.

'Nothing could be more fortunate,' she said. 'There will be no fear now of your finding Dorf dull, my dearest Leonore.'

Leonore smiled back in return. It was impossible not to be touched by her kind governess's anxiety for her happiness, but she herself had had no fears about being dull or lonely at Dorf. She was not much accustomed to companions of her own age, and just a little shy of them, so the news of Hildegard's coming was not quite as welcome to her as to her friends.

'I should have been quite happy without anybody else,' she said to herself. 'I love old Aunt Anna, and I am sure she knows plenty of fairy stories whether she has ever seen any fairies herself or not.'

Still she felt, of course, a good deal of curiosity to see the grandchild of the Castle, and could not help letting her thoughts run on her. Would she be taller or smaller than herself – dark or fair, merry or quiet? Above all, would she care for the same things – would she love fairies, and be always hoping to see one some day?

There was plenty for Leonore to think about, and dream about, that first night in the quaint little house, was there not?

And dream she did. When she woke in the morning it seemed to her that she had been busy at it all night, though only one bit of her dreams remained in her memory. This bit was about Hildegard, and, strange as it seemed, about a person she had only given a passing moment's attention to – the old dame in the market-place at Alt.

She dreamt that she was walking along the village street, when she heard a voice calling. She was alone, and she looked back expecting to see Fraulein. But no – a queer little figure was trotting after her, and as it came nearer she heard that the name that reached her ears was not 'Leonore,' but 'Hildegard,' and with that, some queer feeling made her slip inside the shade of a gateway she was passing to watch what happened. And as the figure came quite close she saw that it was that of the old apple-woman – then to her surprise there came flying down the hill, for the village street lay closely below the rising ground at one side, a child all dressed in white, with fair hair blowing about her face as she ran.

'Here I am,' she said, 'what is it?'

And now glancing at the dame, Leonore saw that she was quite changed – at first indeed she thought she was no longer there, till some unuttered voice seemed to tell her that the figure now before her was still the same person. She had grown tall and wavy-looking – her wrinkled face was smooth and fair – only the bright dark eyes remained, and as she held out her hand as if to welcome the pretty child, Leonore saw that in it lay three nuts small and dry and brown – just like the three still stored in her own jacket pocket.

'Take these,' said a sweet low voice, 'they will match hers. You will know what to do with them, and by their means you will bring her to me. We must make her happy – she has travelled far, and she has longed to cross the borderland.'

And Hildegard, for the same inner voice seemed to tell Leonore that Hildegard it was, took the nuts and nodded, as if to say 'I understand,' and with that, to her great disappointment, Leonore awoke!

Awoke, however, to what goes far to take away disappointment of such a kind. For the sun was shining brightly, her simple but cosy little room seemed painted in white and pale gold, and a soft green by the window told her that the creepers had not yet faded into their winter bareness.

'I wonder what o'clock it is,' thought the little girl, as she gazed about her in great content. 'How glad I am that it is such a fine day! I do want to go all about the village, and especially to see the Castle. I *wonder* if Hildegard is like the little girl in my dream. I do hope she is. And how funny that I should have dreamt about the nut-woman turning into a fairy – it does seem as if Hildegard must care for fairies just as I do – and as if she knew a good deal about them, too. By the bye I do hope my nuts are safe. I never remembered to take them out of my jacket pocket!'

She was on the point of jumping up to see if they were still there when the door opened softly and Fraulein peeped in. She was already dressed, and her face was beaming; it seemed to reflect the sunshine coming in at the window.

'Oh, Fraulein, dear,' said Leonore, 'how lazy I am! You are dressed, and I only woke up a few minutes ago.'

'All the better, my child,' was Fraulein's kind reply. 'It means, I hope, that you have slept well and soundly. My native air brings back old habits to me, you see. I was always accustomed to getting up very early here. And see, what a lovely day it is! As soon as we have had breakfast I must take you out to see the village and –'

'The Castle,' interrupted Leonore. 'Can't we go to the Castle? I do so want to know if Hildegard has come. I have been –' 'dreaming about her,' she was going to say, but something, she knew not what, made her hesitate and change the words into 'thinking of her –' 'so much.'

Which was of course quite true.

And something of the same feeling prevented her looking for the nuts till Fraulein left the room.

'It is not likely that the little Baroness has already arrived,' her governess replied. 'We shall be sure to hear as soon as she comes. But we can see something of the Castle *outside* at any rate. For the next few days I think it must be all holiday-time,' she went on, smiling. 'Aunt Anna begs for it, and we have been working pretty steadily these last months.'

Leonore had no objection to this proposal, though she was fond of lessons, never having been over-dosed with them, and she jumped out of bed and bathed and dressed in the best of spirits. The nuts were quite safe in her jacket pocket. She wrapped them in a piece of paper for better security and put them back again.

'I should not like to lose them,' she thought. 'My dream has given me a feeling that there is something out of the common about them, and I should like to take them with me wherever I go. Just *supposing* I ever met any fairy sort of person, perhaps the nuts might turn out to be of use in some queer way.'

After breakfast, and when Fraulein had helped Leonore to arrange her books and work and other little things in the room that was to serve as her schoolroom during the winter, they set off on their first ramble through and round the village.

It was a pretty village – lying as it did at the foot of the hills, which were beautifully wooded, it could scarcely have been ugly. But besides these natural advantages, it was bright and clean; many of the houses, too, were pretty in themselves, with deep roofs and carved balconies, and in some cases many coloured designs painted on the outside walls. Leonore was delighted; it was so different from any place she had ever seen before.

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