

Meade L. T.

# The Lady of the Forest: A Story for Girls



L. Meade

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### CHAPTER I. – FAIR LITTLE MAIDS

“And then,” said Rachel, throwing up her hands and raising her eyebrows – “and then, when they got into the heart of the forest itself, just where the shade was greenest and the trees thickest, they saw the lady coming to meet them. She, too, was all in green, and she came on and on, and –”

“Hush, Rachel!” exclaimed Kitty; “here comes Aunt Grizel.”

The girls, aged respectively twelve and nine, were seated, one on a rustic stile, the other on the grass at her feet; a background of splendid forest trees threw their slight and childish figures into strong relief. Rachel’s hat was tossed on the ground and Kitty’s parasol lay unopened by her side. The sun was sending slanting rays through the trees, and some of these rays fell on Kitty’s bright hair and lit up Rachel’s dark little gypsy face.

“Aunt Grizel is coming,” said Kitty, and immediately she put on a proper and demure expression. Rachel, drawn up short in the midst of a very exciting narrative, looked slightly defiant and began to whistle in a boyish manner.

Aunt Griselda was seen approaching down a long straight avenue overshadowed by forest trees of beech and oak; she held her parasol well up, and her face was further protected from any passing gleams of sunlight by a large poke-bonnet. She was a slender old lady, with a graceful and dignified appearance. Aunt Griselda would have compelled respect from any one, and as she approached the two girls they both started to their feet and ran to meet her.

“Your music-master has been waiting for you for half an hour, Rachel. Kitty, I am going into the forest; you can come with me if you choose.”

Rachel did not attempt to offer any excuse for being late; with an expressive glance at Kitty she walked off soberly to the house, and the younger girl, picking up her hat, followed Aunt Griselda, sighing slightly as she did so.

Kitty was an affectionate child, the kind of child who likes everybody, and she would have tolerated Aunt Griselda – who was not particularly affectionate nor particularly sympathetic – if she had not disturbed her just at the moment when she was listening with breathless interest to a wonderful romance.

Kitty adored fairy tales, and Rachel had a great gift in that direction. She was very fond of prefacing her stories with some such words as the following:

“Understand now, Kitty, that this fairy story is absolutely true; the fairy was seen by our great-great-grandmother;” or “Our great-uncle Jonas declares that he saw that brownie himself as he was going through the forest in the dusk;” then Kitty’s pretty blue eyes would open wide and she would lose herself in an enchanted world. It was very trying to be brought back to the ordinary everyday earth by Aunt Griselda, and on the present occasion the little girl felt unusually annoyed.

Miss Griselda Lovel, or “Aunt Grizel” as her nieces called her, was a taciturn old lady, and by no means remarked Kitty’s silence. There were many little paths through the forest, and the two soon found themselves in comparative night. Miss Lovel walked quickly, and Kitty almost panted as she kept up with her. Her head was so full of Rachel’s fairy tale that at last some unexpected words burst from her lips. They were passing under a splendid forest tree, when Kitty suddenly clutched Aunt Grizel’s thin hand.

“Aunt Grizel – is it – is it about here that the lady lives?”

“What lady, child?” asked Miss Lovel.

“Oh, you know – the lady of the forest.”

Aunt Grizel dropped Kitty's hand and laughed.

“What a foolish little girl you are, Kitty! Who has been putting such nonsense into your head? See, my dear, I will wait for you here; run down this straight path to the Eyres' cottage, and bring Mrs. Eyre back with you – I want to speak to her. I have had a letter, my dear, and your little cousin Philip Lovel is coming to Avonsyde to-morrow.”

Avonsyde was one of the oldest places in the country; it was not particularly large, nor were its owners remarkable for wealth, or prowess, or deeds of daring, neither were the men of the house specially clever. It was indeed darkly hinted at that the largest portion of brains was as a rule bestowed upon the female side of the house. But on the score of antiquity no country seat could at all approach Avonsyde. It was a delightful old place, homelike and bright; there were one or two acres of flower-garden not too tidily kept, and abounding in all kinds of old-fashioned and sweet-smelling flowers; the house had a broad frontage, its windows were small, and it possessed all the charming irregularities of a family dwelling-place which has been added to piece by piece. At one end was a tower, gray and hoary with the weight of centuries; at the further end were modern wings with large reception-rooms, and even some attempts at modern luxury and modern ornamentation. There were two avenues to the place: one the celebrated straight avenue, which must have been cut at some long-ago period directly out of the neighboring forest, for the trees which arched it over were giant forest oaks and beeches. This avenue was the pride of the place, and shown as a matter of course to all visitors. The other avenue, and the one most in use, was winding and straggling; it led straight up to the old-fashioned stone porch which guarded the entrance, and enshrined in the most protective and cozy manner the principal doors to the house.

Avonsyde had belonged to the Lovels for eight hundred years. They were not a rich family and they had undergone many misfortunes; the property now belonged to the younger branch; for a couple of hundred years ago a very irate and fiery Squire Lovel had disinherited his eldest son and had bestowed all his fair lands and the old place upon a younger son. From that moment matters had not gone well with the family; the younger son who inherited the property which should have been his brother's made an unfortunate marriage, had sickly children, many of whom died, and not being himself either too strong-minded or in any sense otherwise, had sustained severe money losses, and for the first time within the memory of man some of the Avonsyde lands had to be sold.

From the date of the disinheritance of the elder branch the family never regained either their wealth or prestige; generation after generation the Lovels dwindled in strength and became less and less able to cope with their sturdier neighbors. The last squire of Avonsyde had one sickly son and two daughters; the son married, but died before his father, leaving no son to inherit the old place. This son had also, in the family's estimation, married beneath him, and during the squire's lifetime his daughters were afraid even to mention the names of two bonny little lasses who were pining away their babyhood and early youth in poky London lodgings, and who would have been all the better for the fresh breezes which blew so genially round Avonsyde. After the death of his son Squire Lovel became very morose and disagreeable. He pretended not to grieve for his son, but he also lost all interest in life. One by one the old pleasures in which he used to delight were given up, his health gave way rapidly, and at last the end drew near.

There came a day when Squire Lovel felt so ill that he sent first of all for the family doctor and then for the family solicitor. He occupied the doctor's attention for about ten minutes, but he was closeted with the lawyer for two or three hours. At the end of that time he sent for his daughters and made some strong statements to them.

“Grizel,” he said, addressing the elder Miss Lovel, “Dr. Maddon has just informed me that I am not long for this world.”

“Dr. Maddon is fond of exaggerating matters,” said Miss Grizel in a voice which she meant to be soothing; “neither Katharine nor I think you very ill, father, and – and –”

The squire raised his eyebrows impatiently.

“We won’t discuss the question of whether Maddon is a wise man or a silly one, Griselda,” he said. “I know myself that I am ill. I am not only ill, I am weak, and arguing with regard to a foregone conclusion is wearisome. I have much to talk to you and Katharine about, so will you sit down quietly and listen to me?”

Miss Griselda was a cold-mannered and perhaps cold-natured woman. Miss Katharine, on the contrary, was extremely tender-hearted; she looked appealingly at her old father’s withered face; but she had always been submissive, and she now followed her elder sister’s lead and sat down quietly on the nearest chair.

“We will certainly not worry you with needless words, father,” said Miss Griselda gently. “You have doubtless many directions to give us about the property; your instructions shall of course be carried out to the best of my ability. Katharine, too, although she is not the strongest-minded of mortals, will no doubt, from a sense of filial affection, also respect your wishes.”

“I am glad the new poultry-yard is complete,” here half-sobbed Miss Katharine, “and that valuable new breed of birds arrived yesterday; and I – I – ”

“Try to stop talking, both of you,” suddenly exclaimed the squire. “I am dying, and Avonsyde is without an heir. Griselda, will you oblige me by going down to the library and bringing up out of the book-case marked D that old diary of my great-grandfather’s, in which are entered the particulars of the quarrel?”

Miss Katharine looked in an awe-struck and startled way at her sister. Miss Griselda rose at once and, with a bunch of keys in her hand, went downstairs.

The moment she had left the room Miss Katharine got up timidly and, with a certain pathos, stooped down and kissed the old man’s swollen hand.

The little action was done so simply and naturally that the fierce old face relaxed, and for an instant the wrinkled hand touched Miss Katharine’s gray head.

“Yes, Kitty, I know you love me; but I hate the feminine weakness of tears. Ah, Kitty, you were a fair enough looking maid once, but time has faded and changed you; you are younger than Grizel, but you have worn far worse.”

Miss Katharine did not say a word, but hastily resumed her seat; and when Miss Lovel returned with the vellum-bound diary, she had not an idea that her younger sister had ever moved.

Sitting down by her father, she opened the musty old volume and read aloud certain passages which, written in fierce heat at the time, disclosed a painful family scene. Angry words, bitter recriminations, the sense of injustice on one side, the thirst for revenge on the other, were faithfully portrayed by the dead-and-gone chronicler.

The squire’s lips moved in unspoken accompaniment to the words which his daughter read aloud, and Miss Katharine bent eagerly forward in order not to lose a syllable.

“I am dying, and there is no male heir to Avonsyde,” said the squire at last. “Griselda and Katharine, I wish to state here distinctly that my great-great-grandfather made a mistake when he turned the boy Rupert from the old place. Valentine should have refused to inherit; it is doubtless because of Valentine’s weakness and his father’s spirit of revenge that I die to-day without male issue to inherit Avonsyde.”

“Heaping recriminations on the dead won’t help matters now,” said Miss Griselda in a sententious voice. As she spoke she closed the diary, clasped it and locked it, and Miss Katharine, starting to her feet, said:

“There are the children in London, your grandchildren, father, and our nearest of kin.”

The squire favored his younger daughter with a withering look, and even Miss Griselda started at what were very bold words.

“Those children,” said the squire – “girls, both of them, sickly, weakly, with Valentine’s miserable pink-and-white delicacy and their low born mother’s vulgarity; I said I would never see them, and I surely do not wish to hear about them now. Griselda, there is now one plain and manifest

duty before you – I lay it as my dying charge on you and Katharine. I leave the search which you are to institute as your mission in life. While you both live Avonsyde is yours, but you must search the world over if necessary for Rupert Lovel's descendants; and when you discover them you are to elect a bonny stalwart boy of the house as your heir. No matter whether he is eldest or youngest, whether he is in a high position or a low position in the social scale, provided he is a lineal descendant of the Rupert Lovel who was disinherited in 1684, and provided also he is strong and upright and well-featured, with muscle and backbone and manliness in him, you are to appoint him your heir, and you are to bequeath to him the old house, and the old lands, and all the money you can save by simple and abstemious living. I have written it down in my will, and you are tied firmly, both of you, and cannot depart from my instructions; but I wished to talk over matters with you, for Katharine there is slow to take in a thing, and you, Grizel, are prejudiced and rancorous in your temper, and I wish you both clearly to understand that the law binds you to search for my heir, and this, if you want to inherit a shilling from me during your lifetime, you must do. Remember, however, and bear ever strongly in mind, that if, when you find the family, the elder son is weakly and the younger son is strong, it is to the sturdy boy that the property is to go; and hark you yet again, Griselda and Katharine, that the property is not to go to the father if he is alive, but to the young boy, and the boy is to be educated to take up his rightful position. A strong lad, a manly and stalwart lad, mind you; for Avonsyde has almost ceased to exist, owing to sickly and effeminate heirs, since the time when my great-great-grandfather quarreled with his son, Rupert Lovel, and gave the old place to that weakly stripling Valentine. I am a descendant of Valentine myself, but, 'pon my word, I rue the day."

"Your directions shall be obeyed to the letter," said Miss Griselda; but Miss Katharine interrupted her.

"And we – we have only a life-interest in the property, father?" she inquired in a quavering voice.

The old squire looked up into his younger daughter's face and laughed.

"Why, what more would you want, Kitty? No longer young nor fair and with no thought of marrying – what is money to you after your death?"

"I was thinking of the orphan children in London," continued Miss Katharine, with increasing firmness of manner and increasing trembling of voice. "They are very poor, and – and – they are Valentine's children, and – and – you have never seen them, father."

"And never mean to," snapped the squire. "Griselda, I believe I have now given implicit directions. Katharine, don't be silly. I don't mean to see those children and I won't be worried about them."

At this moment the door behind the squire, which was very thick and made of solid oak, worn nearly black with age, was opened softly, and a clear voice exclaimed:

"Why, what a funny room! Do come in, Kitty. Oh, what a beautiful room, and what a funny, queer old man!"

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine both turned round abruptly. Miss Griselda made a step toward the door to shut it against some unexpected and unwelcome intruder. The old man muttered:

"That is a child's voice – one of the village urchins, no doubt."

But before Miss Griselda could reach the door – in short, before any of the little party assembled in the dying squire's bedroom could do anything but utter disjointed exclamations, a child, holding a younger child by the hand, marched boldly and with the air of one perfectly at home into the chamber.

"What a very nice room, and what funny ladies, and oh! what a queer, cross old man! Don't be frightened, Kitty, we'll walk right through. There's a door at the other end – maybe we'll find grandfather in the room beyond the door at that end."

The squire's lower jaw quite dropped as the radiant little creatures came in and filled the room with an unlooked-for light and beauty. They were dressed picturesquely, and no one for an instant could mistake them for the village children. The eldest child might have been seven; she was tall and

broad, with large limbs, a head crowned with a great wealth of tangly, fuzzy, nut-brown hair, eyes deeply set, very dark in color, a richly tinted dark little face, and an expression of animation which showed in the dancing eyes, in the dancing limbs, in the smiling, dimpled, confident mouth; her proud little head was well thrown back; her attitude was totally devoid of fear. The younger child was fair with a pink-and-white complexion, a quantity of golden, sunny hair, and eyes as blue as the sky; she could not have been more than four years old, and was round-limbed and dimpled like a baby.

“Who are you, my dears?” said Miss Katharine when she could speak. Miss Katharine was quite trembling, and she could not help smiling at the lovely little pair. Squire Lovel and Miss Grizel were still frowning, but Miss Katharine’s voice was very gentle.

“Who are you, my dear little children?” she repeated, gaining courage and letting an affectionate inflection steal into her voice.

“I’m Kitty,” said the younger child, putting her finger to her lip and looking askance at the elder girl, “and she – she’s Rachel.”

“You had better let me tell it, Kitty,” interrupted Rachel. “Please, we are going through the house – we want to see everything. Kitty doesn’t want to as badly as me, but she always does what I tell her. We are going straight on into the next room, for we want to find grandfather. I’m Rachel Lovel and this is Kitty Lovel. Our papa used to live here when he was a little boy, and we want to find grandfather, please. Oh, what a cross old man that is sitting in the chair!”

While Rachel was making her innocent and confident speech, Miss Katharine’s face turned deadly pale; she was afraid even to glance at her father and sister. The poor lady felt nearly paralyzed, and was dimly wondering how she could get such audacious intruders out of the room.

Rachel having finished her speech remained silent for a quarter of a minute; then taking Kitty’s hand she said:

“Come along, Kit, we may find grandfather in the other room. We’ll go through the door at that end, and perhaps we’ll come to grandfather at last.”

Kitty heaved a little sigh of relief, and the two were preparing to scamper past the deep embrasure of the mullioned window, when a stern voice startled the little adventurers, and arresting them in their flight, caused them to wheel swiftly round.

“Come here,” said Squire Lovel.

He had never spoken more sternly; but the mites had not a bit of fear. They marched up to him boldly, and Kitty laid her dimpled baby finger, with a look of inquiry, on his swollen old hand:

“What a funny fat hand!”

“What did you say you called yourself?” said the squire, lifting Rachel’s chin and peering into her dark face. “Griselda and Katharine, I’ll thank you not to stand staring and gaping. What did you call yourself? What name did you say belonged to you, child? I’m hard of hearing; tell me again.”

“I’m Rachel Valentine Lovel,” repeated the child in a confident tone. “I was called after my mamma and after father – father’s in heaven, and it makes my mother cry to say Valentine, so I’m Rachel; and this is Kitty – her real name is Katharine – Katharine Lovel. We have come in a dog-cart, and mother is downstairs, and we want to see all the house, and particularly the tower, and we want to see grandfather, and we want a bunch of grapes each.”

All the time Rachel was speaking the squire kept regarding her more and more fiercely. When she said “My mother is downstairs,” he even gave her a little push away. Rachel was not at all appalled; she knit her own black brows and tried to imitate him.

“I never saw such a cross old man; did you, Kitty? Please, old man, let us go now. We want to find grandfather.”

“Perhaps it’s a pain him got,” said Kitty, stroking the swollen hand tenderly. “Mother says when I’s got a pain I can’t help looking cross.”

The fierce old eyes turned slowly from one lovely little speaker to the other; then the squire raised his head and spoke abruptly.

“Griselda and Katharine, come here. Have the goodness to tell me who this child resembles,” pointing as he spoke to Rachel. “Look at her well, study her attentively, and don’t both answer at once.”

There was not the slightest fear of Miss Katharine interrupting Miss Griselda on this occasion. She only favored dark-eyed little Rachel with a passing glance; but her eyes, full of tears, rested long on the fair little baby face of Kitty.

“This child in all particulars resembles the portrait of our great-uncle Rupert,” said Miss Griselda, nodding at Rachel as she did so. “The same eyes, the same lift of the eyebrows, and the same mouth.”

“And this one,” continued the squire, turning his head and pointing to Kitty – “this one, Griselda? Katharine, you need not speak.”

“This one,” continued Miss Griselda, “has the weakness and effeminate beauty of my dead brother Valentine.”

“Kitty isn’t weak,” interrupted Rachel; “she’s as strong as possible. She only had croup once, and she never takes cold, and she only was ill for a little because she was very hungry. Please, old man, stop staring so hard and let us go now. We want to find our grandfather.”

But instead of letting Rachel go Squire Lovel stretched out his hand and drew her close to him.

“Sturdy limbs, dark face, breadth of figure,” he muttered, “and you are my grandchild – the image of Rupert; yes, the image of Rupert Lovel. I wish to God, child, you were a boy!”

“Your grandchild!” repeated Rachel. “Are you my grandfather? Kitty, Kitty, is this our grandfather?”

“Him’s pain is better,” said Kitty. “I see a little laugh ’ginning to come round his mouth. Him’s not cross. Let us kiss our grandfader, Rachel.”

Up went two rosy, dimpled pairs of lips to the withered old cheeks, and two lovely little pairs of arms were twined round Squire Lovel’s neck.

“We have found our grandfather,” said Rachel. “Now let’s go downstairs at once and bring mother up to see him.”

“No, no, stop that!” said the squire, suddenly disentangling himself from the pretty embrace. “Griselda and Katharine, this scene is too much for me. I should not be agitated – those children should not intrude on me. Take care of them – take particular care of the one who is like Rupert. Take her away now; take them both away; and, hark you, do not let the mother near me. I’ll have nothing to say to the mother; she is nothing to me. Take the children out of the room and come back to me presently, both of you.”

## CHAPTER II. – MAKING TERMS

The moment the two little girls found themselves outside their grandfather's door they wrenched their little hands away from Miss Griselda's and Miss Katharine's, and with a gay laugh like two wild, untamed birds flew down the wide oak staircase and across the hall to a room where a woman, dressed very soberly, waited for them. She was sitting on the edge of a hard cane-bottomed chair, her veil was down, and her whole attitude was one of tense and nervous watchfulness. The children ran to her with little cries of rapture, climbed together on her knee, pulled up her veil, and nearly smothered her pale dark face with kisses.

"Mother, mother, mother, he was so cross!"

"He had pain, mother, and his eyes were wrinkled up so."

"But, mother, we gave him a kiss, and he said I was strong and Kitty was weak. We have not seen the tower yet, and we haven't got our grapes, and there are two old ladies, and we don't like them much, and we ran away from them – and – oh, here they are!"

The children clung tightly to their mother, who struggled to her feet, pushed them aside with a gesture almost of despair, and came up at once to the two Miss Lovels.

"I know this visit is unwarranted; I know it is considered an intrusion. The children's father was born here, but there is no welcome for them; nevertheless I have brought them. They are beautiful children – look at them. No fairer daughters of your house ever were born than these two. Look at Rachel; look at Kitty. Is it right they should be brought up with no comforts in a poor London lodging? Rachel, kiss your aunts. Kitty, little one, kiss your aunts and love them."

Rachel skipped up gayly to the two stiff old ladies, but Kitty began at last to be influenced by the frowns which met her on all sides; she pouted, turned her baby face away, and buried it in her mother's lap.

"Look at them – are they not beautiful?" continued the mother. "Is it fair that they should be cooped up in a London lodging when their father belonged to this place? I ask you both – you who are my husband's sisters; you who were children when he was a child, who used to play with him and kiss him, and learn your lessons out of the same book, and to sleep in the same nursery – is it fair?"

"It is not fair," said Miss Katharine suddenly. She seemed carried quite out of herself; her eyes shone, and the pink of a long-gone beauty returned with a transient gleam to her faded cheek. "It is not fair," she repeated. "No, Griselda, I am not afraid of you. I will say what is in my mind. Valentine's face speaks to me again out of the baby face of that dear little child. What was Rupert Lovel to us that we should place a likeness to him before a likeness to our own dead brother? I say it is unfair that Valentine's children should have neither part nor lot in his old home. I, for one, am willing to welcome them to Avonsyde."

Miss Griselda had always a most placid face; she now said in her calmest tones:

"There is no need to excite yourself, Katharine. I too think the children have a claim on us. An arrangement can easily be made about the children – their mother is the difficulty."

The face of the plainly dressed young woman could scarcely grow any paler. She gave a quick, very quick glance at handsome little Rachel, who stood with her head thrown back and her eyes eagerly watching each movement of the excited group around her; then the mother's hand touched Kitty's golden head with a very faint caressing touch, and then she spoke:

"I have come to make terms. I knew I should be considered an obstacle, but that is a mistake. I will be none. I am willing – I am willing to obliterate myself. I would talk to you and make terms, but I would make them alone – I mean I would rather not make them in the presence of the children."

"I will take the children," said Miss Katharine eagerly; "they want to see the house; I will take them round. They want grapes; I will take them to the vineries."

“Oh, yes, we want grapes,” said Rachel in an excited voice; “we want lots of grapes – don’t we, Kitty?”

“Yes; lots,” answered Kitty, turning her flushed little face once more to view. She had been hiding it for the last few minutes against her mother’s black dress.

“That is my father’s bell,” said Miss Griselda suddenly. “I must hurry to him. I will see you presently, Mrs. Lovel; and, Katharine, you too must be present at our interview. I must ask Mrs. Martin to take the children round the place.”

Miss Griselda opened the thick oak door of the squire’s bedroom and went in. Her face was changed in expression and her usual self-possession had to a certain extent deserted her.

“What an age you have been away, Grizel,” said the old man testily. “You might have known that I’d want you. Did I not tell you to take the children out of the room and to come back to me presently? Did you not hear me when I said, ‘Come back to me presently?’ Oh, I see how things are!” continued the irate old man, with a burst of fury. “I am weak and ill now and my commands are nothing – my wishes are not of the slightest consequence. I know how it will be when I’m gone. You and Katharine promise faithfully to obey me now, but you’ll forget your promises when I’m gone. Even you, Griselda, who have always had the character of being strong-minded, will think nothing of your given word when I’m in my grave.”

“You’re tired, father,” said Miss Griselda, “and the unexpected intrusion of the children has excited you. Let me pour you out a dose of your restorative medicine. Here, drink this; now you will feel better.”

The old squire’s hand shook so much that he could not hold the glass which Miss Griselda tendered to him; but she held it herself to his lips, and when he had drained off its contents he grew a shade calmer.

“One of those children is very like Rupert Lovel,” he murmured. “A strong girl, with a bold, fine face. You never would have supposed that that weak stripling Valentine would have had a child of that build, would you, Grizel?”

“No, father. But the little girl has a likeness to her mother, and it is about the mother I have now come to speak to you. Oh, come now, you must try and listen to me. You must not get over-excited, and you must not begin to talk absolute rubbish about my disobeying your wishes; for you have positively got to settle something about Valentine’s children.”

“I said I’d have nothing to say to them.”

“Very likely; but you said so before you saw them. Having seen them, it is absolutely impossible for you to turn Valentine’s orphan children from the doors. Their mother cannot support them, and she has brought them to us and we must not turn them away. I may as well tell you plainly that I will never consent to the children being sent away from Avonsyde. I won’t wait to disobey you until you are dead in that matter. I shall do so at once, and quite openly, for I could never have another easy night on my pillow if I thought Valentine’s children were starving.”

“Who wants them to starve?” grumbled the squire.

But Miss Griselda’s firm words had an effect, and he lowered his chin on his chest and looked gloomily straight before him.

“The mother has come here to make terms,” said Miss Griselda. “Now what shall they be?”

“At least she shall not sleep under my roof! A low girl – no match for Valentine! If I said it once I repeat it fifty times. I will never look on that woman’s face, Grizel!”

“I don’t want you to, father. I agree with you that she had better go. Now let me tell you, in as few words as I can, what I intend to propose to Katharine and to Mrs. Lovel, with your sanction, presently. The children must stay at Avonsyde. If the heir is never found, well and good; they are provided for. If, on the other hand, the heir turns up, they are, according to the present conditions of your will, absolutely penniless. Now I don’t choose this. Valentine’s children must be provided for under any emergency, and you must make a fresh codicil to your will.”

“I will not!”

“Father, you must. Valentine was your own son; these children are your rightful and legitimate heirs. I am heart and soul with you in your wish to find the lawful descendant of Rupert Lovel – I promise to devote my life to this search; but Valentine’s children must not go penniless. You must make a codicil to your will providing comfortably for them in case the lawful heir turns up.”

“How can I? The doctor says I have not many hours to live.”

“Long enough for that, no doubt. We cannot, unfortunately, send for Mr. Baring from London, but I will send a man on horseback to Southampton, and Mr. Terry, the Barings’ country partner, will be here in two or three hours.”

“I tell you I have only a few hours to live,” repeated the squire, sinking his head lower on his chest and looking daggers at his daughter.

“Long enough for that,” she repeated.

She rose from her seat and went across the room to ring the bell. When the servant entered the room she gave some very clear and emphatic directions, and then desiring the nurse who waited on her father to be summoned, she left the room.

Her interview had scarcely been a peaceable one, and as she went downstairs her usually calm expression was considerably disturbed.

“I can make terms with the mother now,” she murmured. “But I am not going even to tell my father what they are.” And she went downstairs.

Floating in through the open window came the sound of gay, childish mirth, and looking out she saw the little strangers dancing and laughing and chatting merrily to old Mrs. Martin, the housekeeper, as she took them round the grounds.

Then Miss Griselda went downstairs, and she and Miss Katharine had their interview with the grave, quiet young mother, who had come, as she said, to make terms. No one heard what they said to her nor what she said to them; no one knew what arrangements were arrived at between the three; no one guessed either then or long years afterward what the terms were. When the somewhat protracted interview had come to an end, the young mother left Miss Griselda’s study with her veil drawn tightly over her face. If her eyes were red and her lips trembled, no one noticed those signs of grief through her thick crape veil. Miss Griselda offered her food, and Miss Katharine wanted to take her hand and wring it with a kindly pressure; but she shook her head at the one and drew back proudly from the other’s proffered hand-shake.

The dog-cart was waiting at a side entrance, and she got into it and drove away. Nor did she once look back as she drove down the long straight avenue under the shade of the old forest trees.

That night Squire Lovel said a word or two to his daughters.

“So you have kept the children?”

“We have kept the children,” repeated Miss Griselda tersely.

“It is nothing to me. I have made that codicil to my will. You have had your way in that.”

“You have done justice, father – you will die happier,” replied Miss Griselda.

“Have you made arrangements with the mother?” questioned the squire.

“The mother will not trouble us; we have arranged with her,” answered the elder Miss Lovel.

“We have made arrangements with her,” echoed Miss Katharine, and here she bent her head and gave vent to a little choking sob.

The squire was very restless all night, and several times the words “Kitty” and “Valentine” escaped his lips. The end was near and the poor old brain was wandering.

Toward morning he was left alone for a few moments with Miss Katharine.

“Father,” she said suddenly, kneeling by his bedside, clasping his hand, and looking at him imploringly, “father, you would bid us be kind to Valentine’s children?”

“Valentine’s children?” repeated the old man. “Ay, ay, Kitty. My head wanders. Are they Valentine’s children or Rupert’s children? – the Rupert who should have inherited Avonsyde.

Somebody's children were here to-day, but I cannot remember whether they belonged to Valentine or Rupert."

"Father, they belong to Valentine – to your son Valentine. You are dying. May I bring them to you, and will you bless them before you go?"

The old squire looked up at his daughter with dim and fading eyes. She did not wait to listen for any assent from his lips, but flying from the room, returned presently with two rosy, cherub-like creatures.

"Kiss your grandfather, Kitty; his pain is bad. Kiss him tenderly, dear little child."

Kitty pursed up her full red lips and gave the required salute solemnly.

"Now, Rachel, kiss your grandfather; he is very ill."

Rachel too raised herself on tiptoe, and bending forward touched the old man's lips lightly with her own.

"Rupert's child," he murmured; "ay, ay, just like Rupert."

Shortly afterward he died.

## CHAPTER III. – PREPARING FOR THE HEIR

“I wonder, Rachel,” said Kitty, “I wonder when the heir will be found.”

Rachel had curled herself up in a luxurious arm-chair, was devouring a new story-book, and was in consequence displeased with Kitty for her question.

“Let me read, Kitty. In half an hour I have to go to my drill, and then practicing, and then learning those tiresome lessons. I don’t care if an heir is never found; do let me read!”

“There’s another one coming to-morrow,” continued Kitty in a by no means abashed voice; “his name is Philip and his mother is coming with him. I heard Aunt Grizel telling Mrs. Eyre all about it, and, Rachel – oh, Rachel, do listen! they are to sleep in the bedroom directly under Aunt Katharine’s and Aunt Grizel’s room in the tower.”

This last piece of information was sufficiently interesting to Rachel to make her fling down her book with an impetuous gesture.

“What a tiresome Kitty you are. I never can read when you come into the room. I was in a most exciting part, but never mind. My half-hour of quiet will be gone in no time. I had better keep the book until I can steal away into the forest and read it in peace.”

“But isn’t it exciting,” pursued Kitty, “to think that they are going to sleep in the tower bedroom?”

“And his name is Philip!” repeated Rachel, “Philip is the name of this one – the last was Guy, and the one before was Ferdinand, and the one before that was Augustus. I want an heir to come of the name of Zerubbabel. I like Zerubbabel, and it’s uncommon. What a pity this one’s name is Philip!”

“Oh, he’s not the real heir,” said little Kitty, shaking her head solemnly; “he’s only another make-believe; but it’s rather exciting his mother coming too and the tower room being prepared. Rachel, aren’t you almost certain that when the real, true heir comes his name will be Rupert? Why, of course it must be Rupert – mustn’t it, Rachel?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” answered Rachel, tumbling out of her luxurious chair and shaking back her dark, untidy locks. “How old is Philip, Kitty? Poor Philip, I wish him joy of the place! He’ll find it dull enough, and he’ll find Aunt Grizel very tiresome and Aunt Katharine very sweet, but very stupid, and he’ll wish he wasn’t the heir a thousand times in the twenty-four hours. How old is he, Kitty-cat? Just tell me quickly, for I must go.”

“He’s eight years old,” replied Kitty in a very interested tone; “that’s another thing that’s exciting – his being so near to my age. Aunt Grizel says that he’ll be a sort of a companion for me. I do hope he’ll be a nice little boy.”

“I don’t care anything at all about him,” said Rachel; “he may be the heir or he may not. I’m not in the least interested. I don’t see anything exciting in the fact of a stupid little boy coming to Avonsyde with his mother; it’s a slow place and he’ll have a slow life, and there’s nothing to interest me about it.”

“Oh, Rachel, I never could guess that you found Avonsyde slow. If you do, why do you laugh so merrily and why do you look so gay?”

“I never said that I found Avonsyde dull,” answered Rachel, turning round with a quick, flashing movement. “No place is slow or dull to me. But I’m not going to stay here; I’m going to school, and then afterward I’m going right round the world looking for mother. Oh, that’s my drill-sergeant’s bell! What a worry he is! Good-by, Kitty-cat.”

Rachel skipped out of the room, banging the door after her, and Kitty climbed into her chair, and leaning back in it shut her pretty blue eyes.

It was five years now since the children had come to Avonsyde, and Kitty had absolutely forgotten the dismal day of their arrival. She knew that she had a mother, for Rachel reminded her of the fact; but she could recall no outline of her face.

Rachel not only spoke of her mother, but remembered her. Vivid memories of a grave, sweet, sad face came to her at intervals, and when these memories visited the child longings came also. Why had her mother gone away? Why were Kitty and she practically motherless? Who were the wicked people who had divided this mother and these children?

When these thoughts came Rachel's dark little face would work with strong emotion; and if Aunt Griselda or Aunt Katharine happened to be near, she would feel tempted to answer them defiantly and to favor them with flashing, angry glances.

"I miss my mother!" she would sob sometimes at night. "I wish – oh, how I wish I could give her a long, big, great kiss! Well, never mind: when I am old enough I'll go all round the world looking for her, for I know she is not dead."

These storms of grief did not come often, and on the whole the children had spent five very happy years at Avonsyde. Aunt Grizel and Aunt Katharine had each in her own way been good to them – Aunt Grizel erring on the side of over-severity, Aunt Katharine on the side of over-indulgence. But the children had no fear in their natures, and were so bright and frank and charming that even Aunt Katharine's petting could not do them any harm. They were well taught and well cared for, and were universal favorites wherever they went – the extreme side of Kitty being prone to over-tenderness; the extreme side of Rachel to over-brusqueness and almost fierceness.

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine said very little about their affection for the children – very little either to the children themselves or to one another. They were reserved women and thought it undignified to speak of their feelings. Neither Rachel nor Kitty was at all proud of being Lovels of Avonsyde; but Miss Griselda thought her position above that of a countess, and Miss Katharine supported her great honors with a meek little air of becoming pride. The old ladies' great object in life was to find the missing heir, and Miss Griselda had even once picked up sufficient courage to go to America, accompanied by the family lawyer and his wife, in search of him; but though many little boys came to Avonsyde and many fathers and mothers sent in all kinds of extraordinary claims, the heir who could claim direct descent from Rupert Lovel, the strong and sturdy boy who was to bring back a fresh epoch of health and life and vigor to the old family tree, and not yet arrived.

Now, however, shortly after Rachel's twelfth birthday and in the middle of a glorious summer, little Philip Lovel was expected. His mother was to bring him and he was to sleep in the tower room, which, as Kitty said, was most exciting. Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine too were excited; and Miss Griselda said with an unusual burst of confidence to her younger sister:

"If the boy turns out to be a true descendant of Rupert's, and if he is blessed with good physical health, I shall feel a great load off my mind."

Miss Katharine smiled in reply.

"God grant the little boy may be the heir," she said; "but, Griselda, I don't like the tone of the mother's letters."

## CHAPTER IV. – A SPARTAN BOY

“Philip?”

“Yes, mother.”

“You quite understand that you have got to be a very good little boy?”

“Oh, yes, mother, I understand.”

“It’s a big, grand place – it’s what is described as an ancient place, and dates back hundreds and hundreds of years, and you, you – why, what is the matter, Philip?”

“Is it antediluvian?” asked Philip, jumping up from his seat opposite his mother in the railway carriage. “Oh, I do hope and trust it’s antediluvian!”

“How you do puzzle me with your queer words, Philip. Antediluvian! – that means before the Flood. Oh, no, Avonsyde wasn’t in existence before the Flood; but still it is very old, and the ladies who live there are extremely grand people. You haven’t been accustomed to living in a great ancient house, and you haven’t been accustomed to the manner of such grand ancient ladies as the Misses Griselda and Katharine Lovel, and I do trust – I do hope you will behave properly.”

“Hullo! There’s a spider up in that window,” interrupted the boy. “I must try to catch him. There! he has run into his hole. Oh, mother, mother, look! there’s a windmill! See, it’s going round so fast! And, I say, isn’t that a jolly river? I want to fish and to shoot when I get to the grand place. I don’t care what else I do if only I have plenty of fishing and shooting.”

Philip Lovel’s mother knit her brows. She was a tall, fashionably dressed woman, with a pale face, a somewhat peevish expression, and a habit of drawing her eyebrows together until they nearly met.

“Philip, you must attend to me,” she said, drawing the little boy down to stand quietly by her side. “I have got you a whole trunkful of nice gentlemanly clothes, and I have spent a heap of money over you, and you must – yes, you must please the old ladies. Why, Phil, if this scheme fails we shall starve.”

“Oh, don’t, mother, don’t!” said little Phil, looking full up into his mother’s face, and revealing as he did so two sensitive and beautiful brown eyes, the only redeeming features in a very plain little countenance. “Don’t cry, mother! I’ll be a good boy, of course. Now, may I go back and see if that spider has come out of his hole?”

“No, Philip, never mind the spider. I have you all to myself, and we shall be at Avonsyde in less than an hour. I want to impress it upon you, so that you may keep it well in your memory what you are to do. Now, are you listening to me, Phil?”

“I am trying to,” answered Philip. “I do hope, mother, you won’t tell me too many things, for I never can remember anything for more than a minute at a time.”

Philip smiled and looked up saucily, but Mrs. Lovel was far too much absorbed in what she was about to say to return his smiling glance.

“Philip, I trained you badly,” she began. “You were let run wild; you were let do pretty much as you liked; you weren’t at all particularly obedient. Now, I don’t at all want the Miss Lovels to find that out. You are never to tell how you helped Betty with the cakes, and you are never to tell about polishing your own boots, and you are not to let out for a moment how you and I did our own gardening. If you speak of Betty you must call her your nurse; and if you speak of Jim, who was such a troublesome boy, you can mention him as the gardener, and not say that he was only twelve years old.”

“What a lot of lies I’m to tell,” said Philip, opening his eyes wider and wider. “Go on, mother – what else am I to do?”

Mrs. Lovel gave the little speaker a shake.

“Philip, what an exasperating child you are! Of course you are not to be so wicked as to attempt to tell lies. Oh, what a bad boy you are even to think of such a thing! I only want you to be a nice,

gentlemanly little boy and not to speak of vulgar things, and of course it is very vulgar to allude to a maid-of-all-work like Betty and to cleaning one's own boots; but as to lies – what do you mean, sir? Oh, there, the train is slackening speed. We'll soon be at the station, and the carriage was to meet us. Remember, Philip, always be on your best behavior at Avonsyde! Don't speak unless you are spoken to, and always be on the lookout to please the old ladies. There are two little girls, I believe; but they are not of the slightest consequence. Dear, dear, I feel quite trembling! I hope – I trust all will go well! Philip, dear, you have not felt that pain in your side all day, have you?"

"No, mother; I have not felt it for days. I am much better really."

"I don't want you to speak of it, love. I am most anxious that the ladies should consider you a strong boy. The doctors say you are almost certain to get over the pain; and when the Miss Lovels appoint you their heir it will be time enough to mention it. If the pain comes on very badly you will keep it to yourself – won't you, Phil? You won't groan or scream or anything of that sort; and you can always run up to my room and I can give you the drops. Oh, Phil, Phil, if this scheme fails we shall simply starve!"

Philip, with his queer, old-fashioned face, looked full at his mother.

"I'll be a Spartan boy and bear the pain," he said. "I don't care a bit about being rich or having a big place; but I don't want you to starve, mother. Oh, I say, there's that jolly little spider again!"

When the London express halted at last at the small country station, Philip was gazing in ecstasy at a marvelous complication of web and dust, at one or two entrapped flies, and at a very malicious but clever spider. His mother was shaking out her draperies, composing her features, and wondering – wondering hard how a very bold scheme would prosper.

"Jump down, Phil. Here we are!" she called to her boy.

The child, an active, lithe little fellow, obeyed her. Not a trace of anxiety could be discerned on his small face. In truth, he had forgotten Avonsyde in the far more absorbing interest of the spider.

"I am glad to welcome you, Mrs. Lovel!" said Miss Griselda as she came forward to greet the new-comers. She was standing in the old hall, and the light from a western window of rich old stained glass fell in slanting hues on a very eager and interested group. Behind Miss Griselda stood her shadow, Miss Katharine, and Rachel's bold dark face and Kitty's sunny one could be seen still further in the background. Rachel pretended not to be the least interested in the arrival of the strangers, nevertheless her bright eyes looked singularly alert. Kitty did not attempt to hide the very keen interest she took in the little boy who was so nearly her own age, and who was to be so greatly honored as to sleep in the tower room. Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine wore their richest black silks and some of their most valuable lace; for surely this was the real heir, and they intended to give him a befitting reception. The old housekeeper and one or two other servants might have been seen peeping in the distance; they were incredulous, but curious. Mrs. Lovel took in the whole scene at a glance; the aspect of affairs pleased her and her versatile spirits rose. She took Philip's little hand in hers and led him up to Miss Griselda.

"This," she said in a gentle and humble voice – "this is my little boy."

"Philip Lovel," responded Miss Griselda, "look up at me, child – full in the face. Ah! you have got the Lovel eyes. How do you do, my dear? Welcome to Avonsyde!"

"Welcome to Avonsyde!" repeated Miss Katharine, looking anxiously from the fashionably dressed mother to the precocious boy. "Are you very tired, my dear? You look so pale."

Phil glanced from one old lady's face to the other. His mother felt herself shaking. She saw at once that he had forgotten their conversation in the train, and wondered what very malapropos remark he would make. Phil had a habit of going off into little dreams and brown-studies. He looked inquiringly at Miss Katharine; then he gazed searchingly at Miss Griselda; then he shook himself and said abruptly:

"I beg your pardon – what did you ask me?"

“Oh, Phil, how rude!” interrupted Mrs. Lovel. “The ladies asked you if you were tired, love. Tell them at once that you are not in the least so. Pale children are so often considered delicate,” continued Mrs. Lovel anxiously, “whereas they are quite acknowledged by many physicians to be stronger than the rosy ones. Say you are not tired, Phil, and thank Miss Katharine for taking an interest in your health.”

Phil smiled.

“I’m not tired,” he said. “I had a pleasant journey. There was a spider in the carriage, and I saw a windmill. And oh! please, am I to call you auntie, or what?”

“Aunt Katharine,” interposed the lady.

“Aunt Katharine, do you fish? and may I fish?”

Here Kitty burst into a delighted chuckle of amusement, and going frankly up to Phil took his hand.

“I can fish,” she said; “of course Aunt Katharine can’t fish, but I can. I’ve got a rod, a nice little rod; and if you are not tired you may as well come and see it.”

“Then I’m going out with my book,” said Rachel. “I’m going into the forest. Perhaps I’ll meet the lady there. Good-by, Kitty-cat; good-by, little boy.”

Rachel disappeared through one door, Kitty and Phil through another, and Mrs. Lovel and the two old ladies of Avonsyde were left to make acquaintance with one another.

“Come into the drawing-room,” said Miss Griselda; “your little boy and the children will get on best alone. He is a muscular-looking little fellow, although singularly pale. Where did you say he was born – in Mexico?”

“In Mexico,” replied Mrs. Lovel, repressing a sigh. “The true Mexican lads are about the strongest in the world; but he of course is really of English parentage, although his father and his grandfather never saw England. Yes, Phil was born in Mexico, but shortly afterward we moved into the American States, and before my husband died we had emigrated to Australia. Phil is a strong boy and has had the advantage of travel and constant change – that is why he is so wiry. The hot country in which he was born accounts for his pallor, but he is remarkably strong.”

Mrs. Lovel’s words came out quickly and with the nervousness of one who was not very sure of a carefully prepared lesson. Suspicious people would have doubted this anxious-looking woman on the spot, but neither Miss Griselda nor Miss Katharine was at all of a suspicious turn of mind. Miss Griselda said:

“You have traveled over a great part of the habitable globe and we have remained – I and my sister and our immediate ancestors before us – in the privacy and shelter of Avonsyde. To come here will be a great change for you and your boy.”

“A great rest – a great delight!” replied Mrs. Lovel, clasping her hands ecstatically. “Oh, dear Miss Lovel, you don’t know what it is to weary for a home as I have wearied.”

Her words were genuine and tears stood in her pale blue eyes.

Miss Griselda considered tears and raptures rather undignified; but Miss Katharine, who was very sympathetic, looked at the widow with new interest.

“It is wonderfully interesting to feel that your little boy belongs to us,” she said. “He seems a nice little fellow, very naïve and fresh. Won’t you sit in this comfortable chair? You can get such a nice view of the forest from here. And do you take cream and sugar in your tea?”

“A very little cream and no sugar,” replied Mrs. Lovel as she leaned back luxuriously in the proffered chair. “What a lovely view! And what a quaint, beautiful room. I remember my husband telling me that Avonsyde belonged to his family for nearly eight hundred years, and that the house was almost as old as the property. Is this room really eight hundred years old? It looks wonderfully quaint.”

“You happen to be in the most modern part of the house, Mrs. Lovel,” replied Miss Griselda icily. “This drawing-room and all this wing were added by my grandfather, and this special room was first opened for the reception of company when my mother came here as a bride. The exact date

of this room is a little over half a century. You shall see the older part of the house presently; this part is very painfully modern.”

Mrs. Lovel bowed and sipped her tea as comfortably as she could under the impression of being snubbed.

“I have never been in a very old house before,” she said. “You know in Mexico, in the States, in Australia, the houses must be modern.”

“May I ask if you have brought your pedigree?” inquired Miss Griselda. “Yes, Katharine, you need not look at me in such a surprised manner. We neither of us have an idea of troubling Mrs. Lovel to show it to us now – not indeed until she has rested; but it is absolutely necessary to trace Philip’s descent from Rupert Lovel at as early a date as possible. That being correctly ascertained and found to be indisputable, we must have him examined by some eminent physician; and if the medical man pronounces him to be an extremely strong boy our quest is ended, and you and I, Katharine, can rest in peace. Mrs. Lovel, you look very tired. Would you like to retire to your room? Katharine, will you ring the bell, dear? We will ask Newbolt to accompany Mrs. Lovel to her room and to attend on her. Newbolt is our maid, Mrs Lovel, and quite a denizen of the forest; she can tell you all the local traditions.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Lovel. “Yes, I shall be glad to lie down for a little. I do hope Philip is not tiring himself – not that he is likely to; he is so strong. Thank you, Miss Lovel, I will lie down for a little. Yes, of course I brought the pedigree – and – and – a very quaint house; even the new part looks old to me!”

Mrs. Lovel tripped out of the room, and the two old ladies looked at one another.

“What do you think of her, Katharine?” inquired Miss Griselda. “You are dying to speak, so let me hear your sentiments at once!”

“I don’t quite like her,” said Miss Katharine. “She seems very tired and very nervous, and perhaps it is unfair and unkind to say anything about her until she is rested. I can’t honestly say, however, that my first impression is favorable, and she may be much nicer when she is not so tired and not so nervous. I don’t like her much at present, but I may afterward. What are your opinions, Griselda?”

“Katharine,” said Miss Griselda, “you are the most prosaic and long-winded person I know. You don’t suppose for an instant that I am going to say what I think of Mrs. Lovel to-day. After all, it is the boy in whom we are interested. Time alone can show whether these two are not another couple of impostors. Now, I wonder where that child Rachel has taken herself!”

## CHAPTER V. – IN THE FOREST

Kitty and Philip ran off together hand in hand. They were about the same height, but Kitty's fair, healthy, flushed face showed in strong contrast to Phil's pallor, and her round and sturdy limbs gave promise of coming health and beauty; whereas Phil's slight form only suggested possible illness, and to a watchful eye would have betokened a short life. But the boy was wiry and just now he was strongly excited. It was delightful to be in the real country and more than delightful to go out with Kitty.

"You are my cousin, aren't you?" said the little maid, favoring him with a full, direct glance.

"I suppose so," he answered. "Yes, I suppose so. I don't quite know."

Kitty stamped her foot.

"Don't say that!" she replied. "I hate people who are not quite sure about things. I want to have a real boy cousin to play with. Two or three make-believes came here, but they went away again. Of course we all found them out at once, and they went away. I do trust you are not another make-believe, Philip. You're very pale and very thin, but I do hope what's of you is real."

"Oh, yes; what's of me is real enough," said Phil, with a little sigh. "Where are you going to take me, Kitty? Into the forest? I want to see the forest. I wonder will it be as fine as the forest where Ru – I mean where a cousin of mine and I used to play?"

"Oh, have you another cousin besides me? How exciting!"

"Yes; but I don't want to talk about him. Are we going into the forest?"

"If you like. You see those trees over there? All that is forest; and then there is a bit of wild moorland, and then more trees; and there is a pine wood, with such a sweet smell. It's all quite close, and I see it every day. It isn't very exciting when you see it every day. Your eyes need not shine like that. You had much better take things quietly, especially as you are such a very thin boy. Aunt Katharine says thin people should never get excited. She says it wears them out. Well, if you must come into the forest I suppose you must; but would you not like something to eat first? I know what we are to have for tea. Shall I tell you?"

"Yes," said Phil; "tell me when we have got under the trees; tell me when I am looking up through the branches for the birds and the squirrels. You have not such gay birds as ours, for I watched yours when I was coming in the train from Southampton; but oh! don't they sing!"

"You are a very queer boy," said Kitty. "Birds and squirrels and forest trees, when you might be hearing about delicious frosted cake and jam roly-polies. Well, take my hand and let's run into the forest; let's get it over, if we must get it over. I'll take you down to the Avon to fish to-morrow. I like fishing – don't you?"

"Yes," said Phil. "I like nearly everything. Do you fish with flies or bait?"

"Oh, with horrid bait! that is the worst of it; but I generally get Robert – one of our grooms – to bait my lines."

The children were now under the shade of the trees, and Kitty, after running about until she was tired, climbed into one of the branches of a wide-spreading beech tree and rocked herself in a very contented manner backward and forward. Phil was certainly a very queer little boy, but she was quite convinced he must be her real true cousin, that he was not a make-believe, that he would stay on at Avonsyde as the heir, and that she would always have a companion of her own age to play with.

"He will get tired of the forest by and by," she said to herself, "and then he will like best to play with me, and we can fish all day together. How jolly that will be! What a good thing it is that he is so nearly my own age, and that he is not older; for if he were he would go every where with Rachel and be her friend. I should not like that at all," concluded the little girl, with a very selfish though natural sigh of satisfaction.

Presently Phil – having wandered about to his heart's content, having ascertained the color of several birds which sang over his head, having treasured up the peculiar quality of their different

notes, and having ascertained beyond all doubt that the English forest was quite the quaintest and most lovely place in the world – came back and climbed into the tree by Kitty’s side.

“I’d like him to see it awfully,” he said.

“Who, Phil?”

“I can’t tell you – that’s my secret. Kitty, you’ll never find that I shall get accustomed to the forest – I mean so accustomed that I shan’t want to come here. Oh, never, never! A place like this must always have something new to show you. Kitty, can you imitate all the birds’ notes yet?”

“I can’t imitate one of them,” said Kitty, with an impatient frown coming between her eyebrows.

“But I know what I want to be doing, and I only wish you had the same want.”

“Perhaps I have. What is it?”

“Oh, no, you haven’t. You’re just like the goody-goody, awfully learned boys of the story-book. I do wish you wouldn’t go into raptures about stupid trees and birds and things!”

Phil’s little pale face flushed.

“Rupert – I mean – I mean my dearest friend – a boy you know nothing about, Kitty – never spoke about its being goody-goody to love things of this sort, and he is manly if you like. I can’t help loving them. But what is your want, Kitty?”

“Oh, to have my mouth crammed full of jam roolly-polly! I am so hungry!”

“So am I too. Let’s run back to the house.”

When Philip and Kitty had gone off together for their first exploring expedition, when the two little strangers to one another had clasped hands and gone out through the open hall-door and down the shady lawns together, Rachel had followed them for a few paces.

She stood still shading her eyes with one hand as she gazed after their retreating figures; then whistling to an English terrier of the name of Jupiter, she ran round to the stables and encountered one of the grooms.

“Robert, put the side-saddle on Surefoot and come with me into the forest. It is a lovely evening, and I am going for a long ride.”

Robert, a very young and rather sheepish groom, looked appealingly at the bright and pretty speaker.

“My mother is ill, Miss Rachel, and Peter do say as I may go home and see her. Couldn’t you ride another evening, missy?”

“No, I’m going to ride to-night. I wish to and I’m going; but you need not come with me; it is quite unnecessary. I should like nothing so well as having a long ride on Surefoot all alone.”

“But the ladies do say, Miss Rachel, as you are not to ride in the forest by yourself. Oh, if you will go, missy, why, I must just put off seeing my poor mother until to-morrow.”

Rachel stamped her foot impatiently.

“Nonsense, Robert!” she said. “I am going to ride alone. I will explain matters to my aunts, so you need not be at all afraid. Put the side-saddle on Surefoot at once!”

Robert’s conscience was easily appeased. He ran off and quickly returned with the rough little forest pony, and Rachel, mounting, cantered off.

She was an excellent rider and had not a scrap of fear in her nature. She entered the forest by the long straight avenue; and Surefoot, delighted to feel his feet on the smooth, velvety sward, trotted along gayly.

“Now I am free!” said the girl. “How delightful it is to ride all by myself. I will go a long, long way this beautiful evening.”

It was a perfect summer’s evening, and Rachel was riding through scenery of exquisite beauty. Birds sang blithely to her as she flew lightly over the ground; squirrels looked down at her from among the branches of the forest oaks; many wild flowers smiled up at her, and all nature seemed to sympathize with her gay youth and beauty.

She was a romantic, impulsive child, and lived more or less in a world of her own imaginings.

The forest was the happiest home in the world to Rachel; Avonsyde was well enough, but no place was like the forest itself. She had a strong impression that it was still peopled by fairies. She devoured all the legends that Mrs. Newbolt, her aunt's maid, and John Eyre, one of the agisters of the forest, could impart to her. Both these good people had a lurking belief in ghosts and fairies. Eyre swore that he had many and many a time seen the treacherous little Jack-o'-lanterns. He told horrible stories of strangers who were lured into bogs by these deceitful little sprites. But Mrs. Newbolt had a far more wonderful and exciting tale to tell than this; for she spoke of a lady who, all in green, flitted through the forest – a lady with a form of almost spiritual etherealness, and with such a lovely face that those who were fortunate enough to see her ever after retained on their own countenances a faint reflection of her rare beauty. Rachel had heard of this forest lady almost from the first moment of her residence at Avonsyde. She built many brilliant castles in the air about her, and she and Kitty most earnestly desired to see her. Of course they had never yet done so, but their belief in her was not a whit diminished, and they never went into the forest without having a dim kind of hope that they might behold the lady.

Newbolt said that she appeared to very few, but she admitted that on one or two occasions of great and special moment she had revealed herself to some fair dames of the house of Lovel. She never appeared to two people together, and in consequence Rachel always longed to go into the forest alone. She felt excited to-night, and she said to herself more than once, "I wonder if I shall see her. She comes on great occasions; surely this must be a great occasion if the long-looked-for heir has come to Avonsyde. I do wonder if that little boy is the heir!"

Rachel rode on, quite forgetful of time; the rapid motion and the lovely evening raised her always versatile spirits. Her cheeks glowed; her dark eyes shone; she tossed back her rebellious curly locks and laughed aloud once or twice out of pure happiness.

She intended to go a long way, to penetrate further into the shades of the wonderful forest than she had ever done yet; but even she was unconscious how very far she was riding.

It is easy to lose one's way in the New Forest, and Rachel, accustomed as she was to all that part which immediately surrounded Avonsyde, presently found herself in a new country. She had left Rufus' Stone far behind and was now riding down a gentle descent, when something induced the adventurous little lady to consult her watch. The hour pointed to six o'clock. It would be light for a long time yet, for it was quite the middle of summer, and Rachel reflected that as tea-time was past, and as she would certainly be well scolded when she returned, she might as well stay out a little longer.

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" she said. "The aunties will be so angry with me, but I don't care; I mean to enjoy myself to-night. Oh, what a tempting green bank, and what a carpet of bluebells just there to the right! I must get some. Surefoot shall have a rest and a nibble at some of the grass, and I'll pick the flowers and sit on the bank for a little time."

Surefoot was very well pleased with this arrangement. He instantly, with unerring instinct, selected the juiciest and most succulent herbage which the place afforded, and was happy after his fashion. Rachel picked bluebells until she had her hands full; then seating herself, she began to arrange them. She had found a small clearing in the forest, and her seat was on the twisted and gnarled roots of a giant oak tree. Her feet were resting on a thick carpet of moss; immediately before her lay broken and undulating ground, clothed with the greenest grass, with the most perfect fronds of moss, and bestrewn with tiny silvery stems and bits of branches from the neighboring trees. A little further off was a great foreground of bracken, which completely clothed a very gentle ascent, and then the whole horizon was bounded by a semicircle of magnificent birch, oak, and beech. Some cows were feeding in the distance – they wore bells, which tinkled merrily; the doves cooed and the birds sang; the softest of zephyrs played among the trees; the evening sun flickered slant-wise through the branches and lay in brightness on the greensward; and Rachel, who was intensely sensitive to nature, clasped her hands in ecstasy.

“Oh, it is good of God to make such a beautiful world!” she said, speaking aloud in her enthusiasm; but just then something riveted Rachel’s attention. She sprang to her feet, forgot her bluebells, which fell in a shower around her, and in this fresh interest became utterly oblivious to the loveliness of the scene. A lady in a plain dark dress was walking slowly, very slowly, between the trees. She was coming toward Rachel, but evidently had not seen her, for her eyes were fixed on the pages of an open book, and as she read her lips moved, as though she were learning something to repeat aloud. This part of the forest was so remote and solitary for it was miles away from any gentleman’s seat, that Rachel for a moment was startled.

“Who can she be?” was her first exclamation; her second was a delighted —

“Oh, perhaps she is the lady of the forest!”

Then she exclaimed with vexation:

“No, no, she cannot be. The lady always wears green and is almost transparent, and her face is so lovely. This lady is in dark clothes and she is reading and murmuring words to herself. She looks exactly as if she were learning a stupid lesson to say aloud. Oh, I am disappointed! I had such a hope she might be the lady of the forest. I wonder where she can live; there’s no house near this. Oh, dear! oh, dear! she is coming this way; she will pass me. Shall I speak to her? I almost think I will. She seems to have a nice face, although she is not very young and she is not very beautiful.”

The lady walked slowly on, her eyes still bent on her book, and so it happened that she never saw the radiant figure of pretty little Rachel until she was opposite to her. Her quiet, darkly fringed gray eyes were lifted then and surveyed the child first with astonishment; then with curiosity; then with very palpable agitation, wonder, and distress.

Rachel came a step nearer and was about to open her lips, when the lady abruptly closed her book, as abruptly turned on her heel, and walked rapidly, very rapidly, in the opposite direction away from the child.

“Oh, stop!” cried Rachel. “I want to speak to you. Who are you? It’s very interesting meeting you here in the very midst of the forest! Please don’t walk away so fast! Do tell me who you are! There, you are almost running, and I can’t keep up with you! What a rude forest lady you are! Well, I never knew any one so rude before!”

The lady had indeed quickened her steps, and before Rachel could reach her she had disappeared through a small green-covered porch into a tiny house, so clothed with innumerable creepers that at a distance it could scarcely be distinguished from the forest itself. Rachel stood panting and indignant outside the door. She had forgotten Surefoot; she had forgotten everything in the world but this rude lady who would not speak to her.

Rachel was a very passionate child, and in her first indignation she felt inclined to pull the bell and insist upon seeing and conversing with the strange, silent lady. Before she could carry this idea into execution the door was opened and a neatly dressed elderly servant came out.

“Well, little miss, and what is your pleasure?” she said.

“I want to see the lady,” said Rachel; “she is a very rude lady. I asked her some civil questions and she would not answer.”

The old servant laid her hand on Rachel’s arm and drew her a few steps away from the bowerlike house.

“What is your name, little miss?” she said.

“My name? Rachel Lovel, of course. Don’t you know? Everybody knows me in the forest. I’m Rachel Lovel of Avonsyde, and my pony’s name is Surefoot, and I have a sister called Kitty.”

“Well, missy,” continued the old woman, “I have no reason at all to misdoubt your tale, but the forest is a big place, and even the grandest little ladies are not known when they stray too far from home. I have no doubt, missy, that you are Miss Lovel, and I have no doubt also that you have a kind heart, although you have a hasty tongue. Now, you know, it was very rude of you to run after my lady

when she didn't want to speak to you. My lady was much upset by your following her, and you have done great mischief by just being such a curious little body."

"Mischief, have I?" said Rachel; then she laughed. "But that is quite impossible," she added, "for I never even touched the rude lady."

"You may do mischief, Miss Lovel, by many means, and curiosity is one of the most spiteful of the vices. It's my opinion that more mischief can be laid to curiosity's door than to any other door. From Eve down it was curiosity did the sin. Now, missy, my lady is lonely and unhappy, and she don't want no one to know – no one in all the wide world – that she lives in this little wild forest house; and if you tell, if you ever tell that you have seen her, or that you know where she lives, why, you will break the heart of the sweetest and gentlest lady that ever lived."

"I don't want to break any one's heart," said Rachel, turning pale. "What very queer things you say. I don't want to break any one's heart. I think I'll go home now."

"Not until you have promised me first, Miss Lovel – not until you have promised me true and faithful."

"Oh, I'll only tell Kitty and my aunties. I never care to talk to strangers about things. There's a new little boy come to Avonsyde – a new little boy and his mother. Of course I won't say anything to either of them, but I never keep secrets from Kitty – never!"

"Very well, miss; then my lady will have to go away. She is very tired and not strong, and she has just settled down in this little house, where she wants to rest and to be near – to be in the forest; and if you tell those aunts of yours and your little sister – if you tell anybody in all the wide world – she will have to go away again. We must pack up to night and we will be off in the morning. We'll have to wander once more, and she'll be sad and ill and lonely; but of course you won't care."

"What a cruel old woman you are!" said Rachel. "Of course I don't want anybody to be sad and lonely. I don't want to injure the forest lady, although I cannot make out why she should have to live so secret here. Is she a wicked lady and has she committed a crime?"

"Wicked?" said the old woman, her eyes flashing. "Ah, missy, that such words should drop from your lips, and about her! Are the angels in heaven wicked? Oh, my dear, good, brave lady! No, missy. She has to keep her secret, but it is because of a cruel sin and injustice done to her, not because of any wrong done by her. Well, good-night, miss. I'll say no more. We must be off, we two, in the morning."

"No, don't go!" called out Rachel. "Of course I won't tell. If she's such a dear, good lady, I'll respect her and love her and keep her secret; only I should like to see her and to know her name."

"All in good time, my dear little missy. Thank God, you will be faithful to this good and wronged lady."

"Yes, I'll be very faithful," said Rachel. "Not even to Kitty will I breathe one word. And now I must really go home."

"God bless you, dear little miss – eh, but you're a bonny child. And is the one you call Kitty as fair to look at?"

"As fair to look at?" laughed Rachel. "Why, I'm as brown as a nut and Kitty is dazzling. Kitty is pink and white, and if you only saw her hair! It's like threads of gold."

"And the little gentleman, dear? – you spoke of a little gentleman as well. Is he your brother, love?"

"My brother?" laughed Rachel. "I have no one but Kitty. I have a mother living somewhere – she's lost, my mother is, and I'm going all round the world to look for her when I'm old enough; but I have no brother – I wish I had. Philip Lovel is a little new, strange boy who is going to be heir of Avonsyde. He came to-day with his mother. I don't much like his mother. Now good-night, old woman. I'll keep the good lady's secret most faithfully."

Rachel blew a kiss to the anxious-looking old servant, then ran gayly back to where she had left Surefoot. In the excitement of the last half-hour she had quite forgotten her withered bluebells.

Mounting her pony, she galloped as fast as she could in the direction of Avonsyde. It was very late when she got back, but, strange to say, the old aunts were so much interested in Mrs. Lovel and in Mrs. Lovel's boy that they forgot to scold her or to remark her absence. She longed intensely to tell Kitty all about the thrilling and romantic adventure she had just gone through, but she was a loyal child, and having once passed her word, nothing would induce her to break it. Kitty, too, was taken up with Philip Lovel, and Rachel, finding she was not wanted, ran up to her bedroom and lost herself in the charms of a fairy tale.

## CHAPTER VI. – THE TOWER BEDROOM

Avonsyde was a very old property. The fair lands had been bestowed by William Rufus on a certain Rupert Lovel who was fortunate enough to earn the gratitude of this most tyrannical and capricious of monarchs. Rupert Lovel had laid the first stone of the present house and had lived there until his death. He was succeeded by many wild and lawless descendants. As time went on they added to the old house, and gained, whether wrongly or rightly no one could say, more of the forest lands as their own. Avonsyde was a large property in the olden days, and the old squires ruled those under them by what was considered at that period the only safe and wholesome rule – that of terror. They were a proud, self-confident, headstrong race, very sure of one thing – that whatever happened Avonsyde would never cease to be theirs. An old prophecy was handed down from father to son to this effect. It had been put into a couplet by a rhymers as great in his way as Thomas of border celebrity:

“Tyde what may betyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde.”

These words were taken as the motto of the house, and could be deciphered in very quaint lettering just over the arch which supported a certain portion of the tower. The tower was almost if not quite seven hundred years old, and was another source of great pride and interest to the family.

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine could not have done little Philip Lovel a greater honor than when they arranged the tower bedroom for his reception. In their opinion, and in the opinion of every retainer of the family, they indeed showed respect to the child and the child's claim when they got this gloomy apartment into order for him and his mother; but when Mrs. Lovel, a timid and nervous woman, saw the room, she scarcely appreciated the honor conferred upon her and hers.

Avonsyde was a house which represented many periods; each addition was a little more comfortable than its predecessor. For instance, the new wing, with the beautiful drawing-rooms and spacious library, was all that was luxurious; the cozy bedrooms where Rachel and Kitty slept, with their thick walls and mullioned windows and deep old-fashioned cupboards, were both cheerful and convenient; but in the days when the tower was built ladies did without many things which are now considered essential, and Mrs. Lovel had to confess to herself that she did not like her room. In the first place, the tower rooms were completely isolated from the rest of the house; they were entered by a door at one side of the broad hall; this door was of oak of immense thickness, and when it was shut no sound from the tower could possibly penetrate to the rest of the house. At the other side of the oak door was a winding stone staircase, very much worn and hollowed out by the steps of many generations. The stairs wound up and up in the fashion of a corkscrew; they had no rail and were very steep, and the person who ascended, if at all timid, was very glad to lay hold of a slack rope which was loosely run through iron rings at intervals in the wall.

After a great many of these steps had been climbed a very narrow stone landing was discovered; three or four steps had then to be gone down, and Mrs. Lovel found herself in an octagon-shaped room with a very low ceiling and very narrow windows. The furniture was not only old-fashioned, but shabby; the room was small; the bed was that monstrosity, a four-poster; the curtains of velvet were black and rusty with age and wear. In short, the one and only cheerful object which poor Mrs. Lovel found in the apartment was the little white bed in one corner which had been prepared for Philip's reception.

“Dear, dear, what remarkably steep stairs; and what a small – I mean not a very large room! Are all the bedrooms of Avonsyde as small as this?” she continued, interrogating Newbolt, who, starched and prim, but with a comely fresh face, stood beside her.

“This is the tower bedroom, mem,” answered the servant in a thin voice. “The heir has always slept in this room, and the ladies has the two over. That has always been the fashion at Avonsyde – the heir has this room and the reigning ladies sleep overhead. This room is seven hundred years old, mem.”

Mrs. Lovel shivered.

“Very antiquated and interesting,” she began, “but isn’t it just a little cold and just a little gloomy? I thought the other part of the house so much more cheerful.”

Newbolt raised her eyebrows and gazed at Mrs. Lovel as if she were talking the rankest heresy.

“For them as don’t value the antique there’s rooms spacious and cheerful and abundantly furnished with modern vanities in the new part of the house,” she replied. “Miss Rachel and Miss Kitty, for instance; their bedroom isn’t built more than three hundred years – a big room enough and with a lot of sunlight, but terrible modern, and not to be made no ’count of at Avonsyde; and then there are two new bedrooms over the drawing-rooms, where we put strangers. Very large they are and quite flooded with sunlight; but of course for antiquity there are no rooms to be compared with this one and the two where the ladies sleep. I am sorry the room don’t take your fancy, mem. I suppose, not being of the blood of the family, you can’t appreciate it. Shall I speak to the ladies on the subject?”

“Oh! by no means, my good creature,” replied poor Mrs. Lovel in alarm. “The room of course is most interesting and wonderfully antiquated. I’ve never seen such a room. And do your ladies really sleep higher up than this? They must have wonderfully strong hearts to be able to mount any more of those steep – I mean curious stairs.”

Newbolt did not deign to make any comment with regard to the sound condition of Miss Griselda’s and Miss Katharine’s physical hearts. She favored the new-comer with a not-too-appreciative glance, and having arranged matters as comfortably as she could for her in the dismal chamber, left her to the peace and the solitude of a most solitary room.

The poor lady quite trembled when she found herself alone; the knowledge that the room was so old filled her with a kind of mysterious awe. After her experiences in the New World, she even considered the drawing-rooms at Avonsyde by no means to be despised on the score of youth. Those juvenile bedrooms of two hundred or three hundred years’ standing where Rachel and Kitty reposed were, in Mrs. Lovel’s opinion, hoary and weighted with age; but as to this tower-room, surely such an apartment should only be visited at noon on a sunny day and in the company of a large party!

“I’m glad the old ladies do sleep overhead,” she said to herself. “What truly awful attics theirs must be! I never saw such a terribly depressing room as this. I’m certain it is haunted; I’m convinced there must be a ghost here. If Philip were not sleeping here I should certainly die. Oh, dear! what a risk I am running for the sake of Philip. Much of this life would kill me! I find, too, that I am not very good at keeping in my feelings, and I’ll have to act – act all the time I am here, and pretend I’m just in raptures with everything, when I am not. That dreadful Newbolt saw through me about this room. Oh, dear! I am a bad actor. Well, at any rate I am a good mother to Philip; it’s a splendid chance for Philip. But if he speaks about that pain in his side we are lost! Poor Phil! these steep stairs are extremely bad for him.”

There was plenty of daylight at present, and Mrs. Lovel could move about her ancient chamber without any undue fear of being overtaken by the terrors of the night. She took off her traveling bonnet and mantle, arranged her hair afresh before a mirror which caused her to squint and distorted every feature, and finally, being quite certain that she could never lie down and rest alone on that bed, was about to descend the stone stairs and to return to the more cheerful part of the house, when gay, quick footsteps, accompanied by childish laughter, were heard ascending, and Philip, accompanied by Kitty, bounded without any ceremony into the apartment.

“Oh, mother, things are so delightful here,” began the little boy, “and Kitty fishes nearly as well as Rupert. And Kitty has got a pony and I’m to have one; Aunt Grizel says so – one of the forest ponies, mother. Do you know that the forest is full of ponies? and they are so rough and jolly.

And there are squirrels in the forest – hundreds of squirrels – and all kinds of birds, and beetles and spiders, and ants and lizards! Mother, the forest is such a lovely place! Is this our bedroom, mother? What a jolly room! I say, wouldn't Rupert like it just?"

"If you're quick, Phil," began Kitty – "if you're very quick washing your hands and brushing your hair, we can go back through the armory – that's the next oldest part to the tower. I steal into the armory sometimes in the dusk, for I do so hope some of the chain-armor will rattle. Do you believe in ghosts, Phil? I do and so does Rachel."

"No, I'm not such a silly," replied Phil. "Mother, dear, how white you are! Don't you like our jolly, jolly bedroom? Oh! I do, and wouldn't Rupert love to be here?"

Mrs. Lovel's face had grown whiter and whiter.

"Phil," she said, "I must speak to you alone. Kitty, your little cousin will meet you downstairs presently. Oh, Phil, my dear," continued the poor lady when Kitty had succeeded in banging herself noisily and unwillingly out of the room – "Phil, why, why will you spoil everything?"

"Spoil everything, mother?"

"Yes; you have spoken of Rupert – you have spoken twice of Rupert. Oh, we had better go away again at once!"

"Dear Rupert!" said little Phil, with a sigh; "darling, brave Rupert! Mother, how I wish he was here!"

"You will spoil everything," repeated the poor lady, wringing her hands in despair. "You know what Rupert is – so strong and manly and beautiful as a picture; and you know what the will says – that the strong one, whether he be eldest or youngest, shall be heir. Oh, Phil, if those old ladies know about Rupert we are lost!"

Phil had a most comical little face; a plain face decidedly – pale, with freckles, and a slightly upturned nose. To those who knew it well it had many charms. It was without doubt an expressive and speaking face; in the course of a few minutes it could look sad to pathos, or so brimful of mirth that to glance at it was to feel gay. The sad look now filled the beautiful brown eyes; the little mouth drooped; the boy went up and laid his head on his mother's shoulder.

"Do you know," he said, "I must say it, even though it hurts you. I want Rupert to have everything. I love Rupert very dearly, and I think it would be splendid for him to come here, and to own a lot of the wild ponies, and to fish in that funny little river which Kitty calls the Avon. Rupert would let me live with him perhaps, and maybe he'd give me a pony, and I could find squirrels and spiders and ants in the forest – oh! and caterpillars; I expect there are splendid specimens of caterpillars here. Mother, when my heart is full of Rupert how can I help speaking about him?"

Mrs. Lovel pressed her hand to her brow in a bewildered manner.

"We must go away then, Philip," she said. "As you love Rupert so well, better even than your mother, we must go away. It was a pity you did not tell me something of this before now, for I have broken into my last – yes, my very last £20 to come here. We have not enough money to take us back to Australia and to Rupert; still, we must go away, for the old ladies will look upon us as impostors, and I could not bear that for anything in the world."

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