GENE STRATTON-PORTER

LADDIE

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Chapter I - Little Sister

"And could another child-world be my share,
I'd be a Little Sister there."

"Have I got a Little Sister anywhere in this house?" inquired Laddie at the door, in his most coaxing voice.

"Yes sir," I answered, dropping the trousers I was making for Hezekiah, my pet bluejay, and running as fast as I could. There was no telling what minute May might take it into her head that she was a little sister and reach him first. Maybe he wanted me to do something for him, and I loved to wait on Laddie.

"Ask mother if you may go with me a while."

"Mother doesn't care where I am, if I come when the supper bell rings."

"All right!" said Laddie.

He led the way around the house, sat on the front step and took me between his knees.

"Oh, is it going to be a secret?" I cried.

Secrets with Laddie were the greatest joy in life. He was so big and so handsome. He was so much nicer than any one else in our family, or among our friends, that to share his secrets, run his errands, and love him blindly was the greatest happiness. Sometimes I disobeyed father and mother; I minded Laddie like his right hand.

"The biggest secret yet," he said gravely.

"Tell quick!" I begged, holding my ear to his lips.

"Not so fast!" said Laddie. "Not so fast! I have doubts about this. I don't know that I should send you. Possibly you can't find the way. You may be afraid. Above all, there is never to be a whisper. Not to any one! Do you understand?"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Something serious," said Laddie. "You see, I expected to have an hour or two for myself this afternoon, so I made an engagement to spend the time with a Fairy Princess in our Big Woods. Father and I broke the reaper taking it from the shed just now and you know how he is about Fairies."

I did know how he was about Fairies. He hadn't a particle of patience with them. A Princess would be the Queen's daughter. My father's people were English, and I had heard enough talk to understand that. I was almost wild with excitement.

"Tell me the secret, hurry!" I cried.

"It's just this," he said. "It took me a long time to coax the Princess into our Big Woods. I had to fix a throne for her to sit on; spread a Magic Carpet for her feet, and build a wall to screen her. Now, what is she going to think if I'm not there to welcome her when she comes? She promised to show me how to make sunshine on dark days."

"Tell father and he can have Leon help him."

"But it is a secret with the Princess, and it's HERS as much as mine. If I tell, she may not like it, and then she won't make me her Prince and send me on her errands."

"Then you don't dare tell a breath," I said.

"Will you go in my place, and carry her a letter to explain why I'm not coming, Little Sister?"

"Of course!" I said stoutly, and then my heart turned right over; for I never had been in our Big Woods alone, and neither mother nor father wanted me to go. Passing Gypsies sometimes laid down the fence and went there to camp. Father thought all the wolves and wildcats were gone, he hadn't seen any in years, but every once in a while some one said they had, and he was not quite sure yet. And that wasn't the beginning of it. Paddy Ryan had come back from the war wrong in his head. He wore his old army overcoat summer and winter, slept on the ground, and ate whatever he could find. Once Laddie and Leon, hunting

squirrels to make broth for mother on one of her bad days, saw him in our Big Woods and he was eating SNAKES. If I found Pat Ryan eating a snake, it would frighten me so I would stand still and let him eat me, if he wanted to, and perhaps he wasn't too crazy to see how plump I was. I seemed to see swarthy, dark faces, big, sleek cats dropping from limbs, and Paddy Ryan's matted gray hair, the flying rags of the old blue coat, and a snake in his hands. Laddie was slipping the letter into my apron pocket. My knees threatened to let me down.

"Must I lift the leaves and hunt for her, or will she come to me?" I wavered.

"That's the biggest secret of all," said Laddie. "Since the Princess entered them, our woods are Enchanted, and there is no telling what wonderful things may happen any minute. One of them is this: whenever the Princess comes there, she grows in size until she is as big as, say our Sally, and she fills all the place with glory, until you are so blinded you scarcely can see her face."

"What is she like, Laddie?" I questioned, so filled with awe and interest, that fear was forgotten.

"She is taller than Sally," said Laddie. "Her face is oval, and her cheeks are bright. Her eyes are big moonlit pools of darkness, and silken curls fall over her shoulders. One hair is strong enough for a lifeline that will draw a drowning man ashore, or strangle an unhappy one. But you will not see her. I'm purposely sending you early, so you can do what you are told and come back to me before she even reaches the woods."

"What am I to do, Laddie?"

"You must put one hand in your apron pocket and take the letter in it, and as long as you hold it tight, nothing in the world can hurt you. Go out our lane to the Big Woods, climb the gate and walk straight back the wagon road to the water. When you reach that, you must turn to your right and go toward Hoods' until you come to the pawpaw

thicket. Go around that, look ahead, and you'll see the biggest beech tree you ever saw. You know a beech, don't you?"

"Of course I do," I said indignantly. "Father taught me beech with the other trees."

"Well then," said Laddie, "straight before you will be a purple beech, and under it is the throne of the Princess, the Magic Carpet, and the walls I made. Among the beech roots there is a stone hidden with moss. Roll the stone back and there will be a piece of bark. Lift that, lay the letter in the box you'll find, and scamper to me like flying. I'll be at the barn with father."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite," said Laddie. "It's possible that the Fairy Queen may have set the Princess spinning silk for the caterpillars to weave their little houses with this winter; and if she has, she may have left a letter there to tell me. If there is one, put it in your pocket, hold it close every step of the way, and you'll be safe coming home as you were going. But you mustn't let a soul see it; you must slip it into my pocket when I'm not looking. If you let any one see, then the Magic will be spoiled, and the Fairy won't come again."

"No one shall see," I promised.

"I knew you could be trusted," said Laddie, kissing and hugging me hard. "Now go! If anything gets after you that such a big girl as you really wouldn't be ashamed to be afraid of, climb on a fence and call. I'll be listening, and I'll come flying. Now I must hurry. Father will think it's going to take me the remainder of the day to find the bolts he wants."

We went down the front walk between the rows of hollyhocks and tasselled lady-slippers, out the gate, and followed the road. Laddie held one of my hands tight, and in the other I gripped the letter in my pocket. So long as Laddie could see me, and the lane lay between open fields,

I wasn't afraid. I was thinking so deeply about our woods being Enchanted, and a tiny Fairy growing big as our Sally, because she was in them, that I stepped out bravely.

Every few days I followed the lane as far back as the Big Gate. This stood where four fields cornered, and opened into the road leading to the woods. Beyond it, I had walked on Sunday afternoons with father while he taught me all the flowers, vines, and bushes he knew, only he didn't know some of the prettiest ones; I had to have books for them, and I was studying to learn enough that I could find out. Or I had ridden on the wagon with Laddie and Leon when they went to bring wood for the cookstove, outoven, and big fireplace. But to walk! To go all alone! Not that I didn't walk by myself over every other foot of the acres and acres of beautiful land my father owned; but plowed fields, grassy meadows, wood pasture, and the orchard were different. I played in them without a thought of fear.

The only things to be careful about were a little, shiny, slender snake, with a head as bright as mother's copper kettle, and a big thick one with patterns on its back like those in Laddie's geometry books, and a whole rattlebox on its tail; not to eat any berry or fruit I didn't know without first asking father; and always to be sure to measure how deep the water was before I waded in alone.

But our Big Woods! Leon said the wildcats would get me there. I sat in our catalpa and watched the Gypsies drive past every summer. Mother hated them as hard as ever she could hate any one, because once they had stolen some fine shirts, with linen bosoms, that she had made by hand for father, and was bleaching on the grass. If Gypsies should be in our west woods to-day and steal me, she would hate them worse than ever; because my mother loved me now, even if she didn't want me when I was born.

But you could excuse her for that. She had already bathed, spanked, sewed for, and reared eleven babies so big and strong not one of them ever even threatened to die.

When you thought of that, you could see she wouldn't be likely to implore the Almighty to send her another, just to make her family even numbers. I never felt much hurt at her, but some of the others I never have forgiven and maybe I never will. As long as there had been eleven babies, they should have been so accustomed to children that they needn't all of them have objected to me, all except Laddie, of course. That was the reason I loved him so and tried to do every single thing he wanted me to, just the way he liked it done. That was why I was facing the only spot on our land where I was in the slightest afraid; because he asked me to.

If he had told me to dance a jig on the ridgepole of our barn, I would have tried it.

So I clasped the note, set my teeth, and climbed over the gate. I walked fast and kept my eyes straight before me. If I looked on either side, sure as life I would see something I never had before, and be down digging up a strange flower, chasing a butterfly, or watching a bird. Besides, if I didn't look in the fence corners that I passed, maybe I wouldn't see anything to scare me. I was going along finely, and feeling better every minute as I went down the bank of an old creek that had gone dry, and started up the other side toward the sugar camp not far from the Big Woods. The bed was full of weeds and as I passed through, away! went Something among them.

Beside the camp shed there was corded wood, and the first thing I knew, I was on top of it. The next, my hand was on the note in my pocket. My heart jumped until I could see my apron move, and my throat went all stiff and dry. I gripped the note and waited.

Father believed God would take care of him. I was only a little girl and needed help much more than a man; maybe God would take care of me. There was nothing wrong in carrying a letter to the Fairy Princess. I thought perhaps it

would help if I should kneel on the top of the woodpile and ask God to not let anything get me.

The more I thought about it, the less I felt like doing it, though, because really you have no business to ask God to take care of you, unless you KNOW you are doing right. This was right, but in my heart I also knew that if Laddie had asked me, I would be shivering on top of that cordwood on a hot August day, when it was wrong. On the whole, I thought it would be more honest to leave God out of it, and take the risk myself. That made me think of the Crusaders, and the little gold trinket in father's chest till. There were four shells on it and each one stood for a trip on foot or horseback to the Holy City when you had to fight almost every step of the way. Those shells meant that my father's people had gone four times, so he said; that, although it was away far back, still each of us had a tiny share of the blood of the Crusaders in our veins, and that it would make us brave and strong, and whenever we were afraid, if we would think of them, we never could do a cowardly thing or let any one else do one before us. He said any one with Crusader blood had to be brave as Richard the Lion-hearted. Thinking about that helped ever so much, so I gripped the note and turned to take one last look at the house before I made a dash for the gate that led into the Big Woods.

Beyond our land lay the farm of Jacob Hood, and Mrs. Hood always teased me because Laddie had gone racing after her when I was born. She was in the middle of Monday's washing, and the bluing settled in the rinse water and stained her white clothes in streaks it took months to bleach out. I always liked Sarah Hood for coming and dressing me, though, because our Sally, who was big enough to have done it, was upstairs crying and wouldn't come down. I liked Laddie too, because he was the only one of our family who went to my mother and kissed her, said he was glad, and offered to help her. Maybe the reason he

went was because he had an awful scare, but anyway he WENT, and that was enough for me.

You see it was this way: no one wanted me; as there had been eleven of us, every one felt that was enough. May was six years old and in school, and my mother thought there never would be any more babies. She had given away the cradle and divided the baby clothes among my big married sisters and brothers, and was having a fine time and enjoying herself the most she ever had in her life. The land was paid for long ago; the house she had planned, builded as she wanted it; she had a big team of matched grays and a carriage with side lamps and patent leather trimmings; and sometimes there was money in the bank. I do not know that there was very much, but any at all was a marvel, considering how many of us there were to feed, clothe, and send to college. Mother was forty-six and father was fifty; so they felt young enough yet to have a fine time and enjoy life, and just when things were going best, I announced that I was halfway over my journey to earth.

You can't blame my mother so much. She must have been tired of babies and disliked to go back and begin all over after resting six years. And you mustn't be too hard on my father if he was not just overjoyed. He felt sure the cook would leave, and she did. He knew Sally would object to a baby, when she wanted to begin having beaus, so he and mother talked it over and sent her away for a long visit to Ohio with father's people, and never told her. They intended to leave her there until I was over the colic, at least. They knew the big married brothers and sisters would object, and they did. They said it would be embarrassing for their children to be the nieces and nephews of an aunt or uncle younger than themselves. They said it so often and so emphatically that father was provoked and mother cried. Shelley didn't like it because she was going to school in Groveville, where Lucy, one of our married sisters, lived, and she was afraid I would make

so much work she would have to give up her books and friends and remain at home. There never was a baby born who was any less wanted than I was. I knew as much about it as any one else, because from the day I could understand, all of them, father, mother, Shelley, Sarah Hood, every one who knew, took turns telling me how badly I was not wanted, how much trouble I made, and how Laddie was the only one who loved me at first. Because of that I was on the cordwood trying to find courage to go farther. Over and over Laddie had told me himself. He had been to visit our big sister Elizabeth over Sunday and about eight o'clock Monday morning he came riding down the road, and saw the most dreadful thing. There was not a curl of smoke from the chimneys, not a tablecloth or pillowslip on the line, not a blind raised. Laddie said his heart went—just like mine did when the Something jumped in the creek bed, no doubt. Then he laid on the whip and rode.

He flung the rein over the hitching post, leaped the fence and reached the back door. The young green girl, who was all father could get when the cook left, was crying. So were Shelley and little May, although she said afterward she had a boil on her heel and there was no one to poultice it. Laddie leaned against the door casing, and it is easy enough to understand what he thought. He told me he had to try twice before he could speak, and then he could only ask: "What's the matter?"

Probably May never thought she would have the chance, but the others were so busy crying harder, now that they had an audience, that she was first to tell him: "We have got a little sister."

"Great Day!" cried Laddie. "You made me think we had a funeral! Where is mother, and where is my Little Sister?"

He went bolting right into mother's room and kissed her like the gladdest boy alive; because he was only a boy then, and he told her how happy he was that she was safe, and then he ASKED for me.

He said I was the only living creature in that house who was not shedding tears, and I didn't begin for about six months afterward. In fact, not until Shelley taught me by pinching me if she had to rock the cradle; then I would cry so hard mother would have to take me. He said he didn't believe I'd ever have learned by myself.

He took a pillow from the bed, fixed it in the rocking chair and laid me on it. When he found that father was hitching the horses to send Leon for Doctor Fenner, Laddie rode back after Sarah Hood and spoiled her washing. It may be that the interest he always took in me had its beginning in all of them scaring him with their weeping; even Sally, whom father had to telegraph to come home, was upstairs crying, and she was almost a woman. It may be that all the tears they shed over not wanting me so scared Laddie that he went farther in his welcome than he ever would have thought of going if he hadn't done it for joy when he learned his mother was safe. I don't care about the reason. It is enough for me that from the hour of my birth Laddie named me Little Sister, seldom called me anything else, and cared for me all he possibly could to rest mother. He took me to the fields with him in the morning and brought me back on the horse before him at noon. He could plow with me riding the horse, drive a reaper with me on his knees, and hoe corn while I slept on his coat in a fence corner. The winters he was away at college left me lonely, and when he came back for a vacation I was too happy for words. Maybe it was wrong to love him most. I knew my mother cared for and wanted me now. And all my secrets were not with Laddie. I had one with father that I was never to tell so long as he lived, but it was about the one he loved best, next after mother. Perhaps I should never tell it, but I wouldn't be surprised if the family knew. I followed Laddie like a faithful dog, when I was not gripping his waving hair and riding in triumph on his shoulders. He never had to go so fast he couldn't take me

on his back. He never was in too big a hurry to be kind. He always had patience to explain every shell, leaf, bird, and flower I asked about. I was just as much his when pretty young girls were around, and the house full of company, as when we were alone. That was the reason I was shivering on the cordwood, gripping his letter and thinking of all these things in order to force myself to go farther.

I was excited about the Fairies too. I often had close chances of seeing them, but I always just missed. Now here was Laddie writing letters and expecting answers; our Big Woods Enchanted, a Magic Carpet and the Queen's daughter becoming our size so she could speak with him. No doubt the Queen had her grow big as Shelley, when she sent her on an errand to tell Laddie about how to make sunshine; because she was afraid if she went her real size he would accidentally step on her, he was so dreadfully big.

Or maybe her voice was so fine he could not hear what she said. He had told me I was to hurry, and I had gone as fast as I could until Something jumped; since, I had been settled on that cordwood like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. I had to get down some time; I might as well start.

I gripped the letter, slid to the ground, and ran toward the big gate straight before me. I climbed it, clutched the note again, and ran blindly down the road through the forest toward the creek. I could hurry there. On either side of it I could not have run ten steps at a time. The big trees reached so high above me it seemed as if they would push through the floor of Heaven. I tried to shut my ears and run so fast I couldn't hear a sound, and so going, I soon came to the creek bank. There I turned to my right and went slower, watching for the pawpaw thicket. On leaving the road I thought I would have to crawl over logs and make my way; but there seemed to be kind of a path not very plain, but travelled enough to follow. It led straight to the thicket. At the edge I stopped to look for the beech. It could be

reached in one breathless dash, but there seemed to be a green enclosure, so I walked around until I found an entrance. Once there I was so amazed I stood and stared. I was half indignant too.

Laddie hadn't done a thing but make an exact copy of my playhouse under the biggest maiden's-blush in our orchard. He used the immense beech for one corner, where I had the apple tree. His Magic Carpet was woolly-dog moss, and all the magic about it, was that on the damp woods floor, in the deep shade, the moss had taken root and was growing as if it always had been there. He had been able to cut and stick much larger willow sprouts for his walls than I could, and in the wet black mould they didn't look as if they ever had wilted. They were so fresh and green, no doubt they had taken root and were growing. Where I had a low bench under my tree, he had used a log; but he had hewed the top flat, and made a moss cover. In each corner he had set a fern as high as my head. On either side of the entrance he had planted a cluster of cardinal flower that was in full bloom, and around the walls in a few places thrifty bunches of Oswego tea and foxfire, that I would have walked miles to secure for my wild garden under the Bartlett pear tree. It was so beautiful it took my breath away.

"If the Queen's daughter doesn't like this," I said softly, "she'll have to go to Heaven before she finds anything better, for there can't be another place on earth so pretty."

It was wonderful how the sound of my own voice gave me courage, even if it did seem a little strange. So I hurried to the beech, knelt and slipped the letter in the box, and put back the bark and stone. Laddie had said that nothing could hurt me while I had the letter, so my protection was gone as soon as it left my hands.

There was nothing but my feet to save me now. I thanked goodness I was a fine runner, and started for the pawpaw thicket. Once there, I paused only one minute to see whether the way to the stream was clear, and while

standing tense and gazing, I heard something. For an instant it was every bit as bad as at the dry creek. Then I realized that this was a soft voice singing, and I forgot everything else in a glow of delight. The Princess was coming!

Never in all my life was I so surprised, and astonished, and bewildered. She was even larger than our Sally; her dress was pale green, like I thought a Fairy's should be; her eyes were deep and dark as Laddie had said, her hair hung from a part in the middle of her forehead over her shoulders, and if she had been in the sun, it would have gleamed like a blackbird's wing. She was just as Laddie said she would be; she was so much more beautiful than you would suppose any woman could be, I stood there dumbly staring. I wouldn't have asked for any one more perfectly beautiful or more like Laddie had said the Princess would be; but she was no more the daughter of the Fairy Queen than I was. She was not any more of a Princess. If father ever would tell all about the little bauble he kept in the till of his big chest, maybe she was not as near! She was no one on earth but one of those new English people who had moved on the land that cornered with ours on the northwest. She had ridden over the roads, and been at our meeting house. There could be no mistake.

And neither father nor mother would want her on our place. They didn't like her family at all. Mother called them the neighbourhood mystery, and father spoke of them as the Infidels. They had dropped from nowhere, mother said, bought that splendid big farm, moved on and shut out every one. Before any one knew people were shut out, mother, dressed in her finest, with Laddie driving, went in the carriage, all shining, to make friends with them. This very girl opened the door and said that her mother was "indisposed," and could not see callers. "In-dis-posed!" That's a good word that fills your mouth, but our mother didn't like having it used to her. She said the "saucy chit"

was insulting. Then the man came, and he said he was very sorry, but his wife would see no one. He did invite mother in, but she wouldn't go. She told us she could see past him into the house and there was such finery as never in all her days had she laid eyes on. She said he was mannerly as could be, but he had the coldest, severest face she ever saw.

They had two men and a woman servant, and no one could coax a word from them, about why those people acted as they did. They said 'orse, and 'ouse, and Hengland. They talked so funny you couldn't have understood them anyway. They never plowed or put in a crop. They made everything into a meadow and had more horses, cattle, and sheep than a county fair, and everything you ever knew with feathers, even peacocks. We could hear them scream whenever it was going to rain. Father said they sounded heathenish. I rather liked them. The man had stacks of money or they couldn't have lived the way they did. He came to our house twice on business: once to see about road laws, and again about tax rates. Father was mightily pleased at first, because Mr. Pryor seemed to have books, and to know everything, and father thought it would be fine to be neighbours. But the minute Mr. Pryor finished business he began to argue that every single thing father and mother believed was wrong. He said right out in plain English that God was a myth. Father told him pretty quickly that no man could say that in his house; so he left suddenly and had not been back since, and father didn't want him ever to come again.

Then their neighbours often saw the woman around the house and garden. She looked and acted quite as well as any one, so probably she was not half so sick as my mother, who had nursed three of us through typhoid fever, and then had it herself when she was all tired out. She wouldn't let a soul know she had a pain until she dropped over and couldn't take another step, and father or Laddie carried her

to bed. But she went everywhere, saw all her friends, and did more good from her bed than any other woman in our neighbourhood could on her feet. So we thought mighty little of those Pryor people.

Every one said the girl was pretty. Then her clothes drove the other women crazy. Some of our neighbourhood came from far down east, like my mother. Our people back a little were from over the sea, and they knew how things should be, to be right. Many of the others were from Kentucky and Virginia, and they were well dressed, proud, handsome women; none better looking anywhere. They followed the fashions and spent much time and money on their clothes. When it was Quarterly Meeting or the Bishop dedicated the church or they went to town on court days, you should have seen them—until Pryors came. Then something new happened, and not a woman in our neighbourhood liked it. Pamela Pryor didn't follow the fashions. She set them. If every other woman made long tight sleeves to their wrists, she let hers flow to the elbow and filled them with silk lining, ruffled with lace. If they wore high neckbands, she had none, and used a flat lace collar. If they cut their waists straight around and gathered their skirts on six yards full, she ran hers down to a little point front and back, that made her look slenderer, and put only half as much goods in her skirt. Maybe Laddie rode as well as she could; he couldn't manage a horse any better, and aside from him there wasn't a man we knew who would have tried to ride some of the animals she did.

If she ever worked a stroke, no one knew it. All day long she sat in the parlour, the very best one, every day; or on benches under the trees with embroidery frames or books, some of them fearful, big, difficult looking ones, or rode over the country. She rode in sunshine and she rode in storm, until you would think she couldn't see her way through her tangled black hair. She rode through snow and in pouring rain, when she could have stayed out of it, if she

had wanted to. She didn't seem to be afraid of anything on earth or in Heaven. Every one thought she was like her father and didn't believe there was any God; so when she came among us at church or any public gathering, as she sometimes did, people were in no hurry to be friendly, while she looked straight ahead and never spoke until she was spoken to, and then she was precise and cold, I tell you.

Men took off their hats, got out of the road when she came pounding along, and stared after her like "be-addled mummies," my mother said. But that was all she, or any one else, could say. The young fellows were wild about her, and if they tried to sidle up to her in the hope that they might lead her horse or get to hold her foot when she mounted, they always saw when they reached her, that she wasn't there.

But she was here! I had seen her only a few times, but this was the Pryor girl, just as sure as I would have known if it had been Sally. What dazed me was that she answered in every particular the description Laddie had given me of the Queen's daughter. And worst of all, from the day she first came among us, moving so proud and cold, blabbing old Hannah Dover said she carried herself like a Princess—as if Hannah Dover knew HOW a Princess carried herself!—every living soul, my father even, had called her the Princess. At first it was because she was like they thought a Princess would be, but later they did it in meanness, to make fun. After they knew her name, they were used to calling her the Princess, so they kept it up, but some of them were secretly proud of her; because she could look, and do, and be what they would have given anything to, and knew they couldn't to save them.

I was never in such a fix in all my life. She looked more as Laddie had said the Princess would than you would have thought any woman could, but she was Pamela Pryor, nevertheless. Every one called her the Princess, but she couldn't make reality out of that. She just couldn't be the

Fairy Queen's daughter; so the letter couldn't possibly be for her.

She had no business in our woods; you could see that they had plenty of their own. She went straight to the door of the willow room and walked in as if she belonged there. What if she found the hollow and took Laddie's letter! Fast as I could slip over the leaves, I went back. She was on the moss carpet, on her knees, and the letter was in her fingers. It's a good thing to have your manners soundly thrashed into you. You've got to be scared stiff before you forget them. I wasn't so afraid of her as I would have been if I had known she WAS the princess, and have Laddies letter, she should not. What had the kind of girl she was, from a home like hers, to teach any one from our house about making sunshine? I was at the willow wall by that time peering through, so I just parted it a little and said: "Please put back that letter where you got it. It isn't for you."

She knelt on the mosses, the letter in her hand, and her face, as she turned to me, was rather startled; but when she saw me she laughed, and said in the sweetest voice I ever heard: "Are you so very sure of that?"

"Well I ought to be," I said. "I put it there."

"Might I inquire for whom you put it there?"

"No ma'am! That's a secret."

You should have seen the light flame in her eyes, the red deepen on her cheeks, and the little curl of laughter that curved her lips.

"How interesting!" she cried. "I wonder now if you are not Little Sister."

"I am to Laddie and our folks," I said. "You are a stranger."

All the dancing lights went from her face. She looked as if she were going to cry unless she hurried up and swallowed it down hard and fast.

"That is quite true," she said. "I am a stranger. Do you know that being a stranger is the hardest thing that can happen to any one in all this world?"

"Then why don't you open your doors, invite your neighbours in, go to see them, and stop your father from saying such dreadful things?"

"They are not my doors," she said, "and could you keep your father from saying anything he chooses?"

I stood and blinked at her. Of course I wouldn't even dare try that.

"I'm so sorry," was all I could think to say.

I couldn't ask her to come to our house. I knew no one wanted her. But if I couldn't speak for the others, surely I might for myself. I let go the willows and went to the door. The Princess arose and sat on the seat Laddie had made for the Queen's daughter. It was an awful pity to tell her she shouldn't sit there, for I had my doubts if the real, true Princess would be half as lovely when she came—if she ever did. Some way the Princess, who was not a Princess, appeared so real, I couldn't keep from becoming confused and forgetting that she was only just Pamela Pryor. Already the lovely lights had gone from her face until it made me so sad I wanted to cry, and I was no easy cry-baby either. If I couldn't offer friendship for my family I would for myself.

"You may call me Little Sister, if you like," I said. "I won't be a stranger."

"Why how lovely!" cried the Princess.

You should have seen the dancing lights fly back to her eyes. Probably you won't believe this, but the first thing I knew I was beside her on the throne, her arm was around me, and it's the gospel truth that she hugged me tight. I just had sense enough to reach over and pick Laddie's letter from her fingers, and then I was on her side. I don't know what she did to me, but all at once I knew that she was dreadfully lonely; that she hated being a stranger; that

she was sorry enough to cry because their house was one of mystery, and that she would open the door if she could.

"I like you," I said, reaching up to touch her curls.

I never had seen her that I did not want to. They were like I thought they would be. Father and Laddie and some of us had wavy hair, but hers was crisp—and it clung to your fingers, and wrapped around them and seemed to tug at your heart like it does when a baby grips you. I drew away my hand, and the hair stretched out until it was long as any of ours, and then curled up again, and you could see that no tins had stabbed into her head to make those curls. I began trying to single out one hair.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I want to know if only one hair is strong enough to draw a drowning man from the water or strangle an unhappy one," I said.

"Believe me, no!" cried the Princess. "It would take all I have, woven into a rope, to do that."

"Laddie knows curls that just one hair of them is strong enough," I boasted.

"I wonder now!" said the Princess. "I think he must have been making poetry or telling Fairy tales."

"He was telling the truth," I assured her. "Father doesn't believe in Fairies, and mother laughs, but Laddie and I know. Do you believe in Fairies?"

"Of course I do!" she said.

"Then you know that this COULD be an Enchanted Wood?"

"I have found it so," said the Princess.

"And MAYBE this is a Magic Carpet?"

"It surely is a Magic Carpet."

"And you might be the daughter of the Queen? Your eyes are 'moonlit pools of darkness.' If only your hair were stronger, and you knew about making sunshine!"

"Maybe it is stronger than I think. It never has been tested. Perhaps I do know about making sunshine. Possibly

I am as true as the wood and the carpet."

I drew away and stared at her. The longer I looked the more uncertain I became. Maybe her mother was the Queen. Perhaps that was the mystery. It might be the reason she didn't want the people to see her. Maybe she was so busy making sunshine for the Princess to bring to Laddie that she had no time to sew carpet rags, and to go to quiltings, and funerals, and make visits. It was hard to know what to think.

"I wish you'd tell me plain out if you are the Queen's daughter," I said. "It's most important. You can't have this letter unless I KNOW. It's the very first time Laddie ever trusted me with a letter, and I just can't give it to the wrong person."

"Then why don't you leave it where he told you?"

"But you have gone and found the place. You started to take it once; you would again, soon as I left."

"Look me straight in the eyes, Little Sister," said the Princess softly. "Am I like a person who would take anything that didn't belong to her?"

"No!" I said instantly.

"How do you think I happened to come to this place?"

"Maybe our woods are prettier than yours."

"How do you think I knew where the letter was?"

I shook my head.

"If I show you some others exactly like the one you have there, then will you believe that is for me?"

"Yes," I answered.

I believed it anyway. It just SEEMED so, the better you knew her. The Princess slipped her hand among the folds of the trailing pale green skirt, and from a hidden pocket drew other letters exactly like the one I held. She opened one and ran her finger along the top line and I read, "To the Princess," and then she pointed to the ending and it was merely signed, "Laddie," but all the words written between were his writing. Slowly I handed her the letter.

"You don't want me to have it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I want you to have it if Laddie wrote it for you—but mother and father won't, not at all."

"What makes you think so?" she asked gently.

"Don't you know what people say about you?"

"Some of it, perhaps."

"Well?"

"Do you think it is true?"

"Not that you're stuck up, and hateful and proud, not that you don't want to be neighbourly with other people, no, I don't think that. But your father said in our home that there was no God, and you wouldn't let my mother in when she put on her best dress and went in the carriage, and wanted to be friends. I have to believe that."

"Yes, you can't help believing that," said the Princess.

"Then can't you see why you'll be likely to show Laddie the way to find trouble, instead of sunshine?"

"I can see," said the Princess.

"Oh Princess, you won't do it, will you?" I cried.

"Don't you think such a big man as Laddie can take care of himself?" she asked, and the dancing lights that had begun to fade came back. "Over there," she pointed through our woods toward the southwest, "lives a man you know. What do his neighbours call him?"

"Stiff-necked Johnny," I answered promptly.

"And the man who lives next him?"

"Pinch-fist Williams."

Her finger veered to another neighbour's.

"The girls of that house?"

"Giggle-head Smithsons."

"What about the man who lives over there?"

"He beats his wife."

"And the house beyond?"

"Mother whispers about them. I don't know."

"And the woman on the hill?"

"She doesn't do anything but gussip and make every one trouble."

"Exactly!" said the Princess. "Yet most of these people come to your house, and your family goes to theirs. Do you suppose people they know nothing about are so much worse than these others?"

"If your father will take it back about God, and your mother will let people in—my mother and father both wanted to be friends, you know."

"That I can't possibly do," she said, "but maybe I could change their feelings toward me."

"Do it!" I cried. "Oh, I'd just love you to do it! I wish you would come to our house and be friends. Sally is pretty as you are, only a different way, and I know she'd like you, and so would Shelley. If Laddie writes you letters and comes here about sunshine, of course he'd be delighted if mother knew you; because she loves him best of any of us. She depends on him most as much as father."

"Then will you keep the secret until I have time to try—say until this time next year?"

"I'll keep it just as long as Laddie wants me to."

"Good!" said the Princess. "No wonder Laddie thinks you the finest Little Sister any one ever had."

"Does Laddie think that?" I asked

"He does indeed!" said the Princess.

"Then I'm not afraid to go home," I said. "And I'll bring his letter the next time he can't come."

"Were you scared this time?"

I told her about that Something in the dry bed, the wolves, wildcats, Paddy Ryan, and the Gypsies.

"You little goosie," said the Princess. "I am afraid that brother Leon of yours is the biggest rogue loose in this part of the country. Didn't it ever occur to you that people named Wolfe live over there, and they call that crowd next us 'wildcats,' because they just went on some land and took it, and began living there without any more permission

than real wildcats ask to enter the woods? Do you suppose I would be here, and everywhere else I want to go, if there were any danger? Did anything really harm you coming?"

"You're harmed when you're scared until you can't breathe," I said. "Anyway, nothing could get me coming, because I held the letter tight in my hand, like Laddie said. If you'd write me one to take back, I'd be safe going home."

"I see," said the Princess. "But I've no pencil, and no paper, unless I use the back of one of Laddie's letters, and that wouldn't be polite."

"You can make new fashions," I said, "but you don't know much about the woods, do you? I could fix fifty ways to send a message to Laddie."

"How would you?" asked the Princess.

Running to the pawpaw bushes I pulled some big tender leaves. Then I took the bark from the box and laid a leaf on it.

"Press with one of your rings," I said, "and print what you want to say. I write to the Fairies every day that way, only I use an old knife handle."

She tried. She spoiled two or three by bearing down so hard she cut the leaves. She didn't even know enough to write on the frosty side, until she was told. But pretty soon she got along so well she printed all over two big ones. Then I took a stick and punched little holes and stuck a piece of foxfire bloom through.

"What makes you do that?" she asked.

"That's the stamp," I explained.

"But it's my letter, and I didn't put it there."

"Has to be there or the Fairies won't like it," I said.

"Well then, let it go," said the Princess.

I put back the bark and replaced the stone, gathered up the scattered leaves, and put the two with writing on between fresh ones.

"Now I must run," I said, "or Laddie will think the Gypsies have got me sure."

"I'll go with you past the dry creek," she offered.

"You better not," I said. "I'd love to have you, but it would be best for you to change their opinion, before father or mother sees you on their land."

"Perhaps it would," said the Princess. "I'll wait here until you reach the fence and then you call and I'll know you are in the open and feel comfortable."

"I am most all over being afraid now," I told her.

Just to show her, I walked to the creek, climbed the gate and went down the lane. Almost to the road I began wondering what I could do with the letter, when looking ahead I saw Laddie coming.

"I was just starting to find you. You've been an age, child," he said.

I held up the letter.

"No one is looking," I said, "and this won't go in your pocket."

You should have seen his face.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

I told him all about it. I told him everything—about the hair that maybe was stronger than she thought, and that she was going to change father's and mother's opinions, and that I put the red flower on, but she left it; and when I was done Laddie almost hugged the life out of me. I never did see him so happy.

"If you be very, very careful never to breathe a whisper, I'll take you with me some day," he promised.

Chapter II - Our Angel Boy

"I had a brother once—a gracious boy,
Full of all gentleness, of calmest hope,
Of sweet and quiet joy,—there was the look
Of heaven upon his face."

It was supper time when we reached home, and Bobby was at the front gate to meet me. He always hunted me all over the place when the big bell in the yard rang at meal time, because if he crowed nicely when he was told, he was allowed to stand on the back of my chair and every little while I held up my plate and shared bites with him. I have seen many white bantams, but never another like Bobby. My big brothers bought him for me in Fort Wayne, and sent him in a box, alone on the cars. Father and I drove to Groveville to meet him. The minute father pried off the lid, Bobby hopped on the edge of the box and crowed—the biggest crow you ever heard from such a mite of a body; he wasn't in the least afraid of us and we were pleased about it. You scarcely could see his beady black eyes for his bushy topknot, his wing tips touched the ground, his tail had two beautiful plumy feathers much longer than the others, his feet were covered with feathers, and his knee tufts dragged. He was the sauciest, spunkiest little fellow, and white as muslin. We went to supper together, but no one asked where I had been, and because I was so bursting full of importance, I talked only to Bobby, in order to be safe.

After supper I finished Hezekiah's trousers, and May cut his coat for me. School would begin in September and our

clothes were being made, so I used the scraps to dress him. His suit was done by the next forenoon, and father never laughed harder than when Hezekiah hopped down the walk to meet him dressed in pink trousers and coat. The coat had flowing sleeves like the Princess wore, so Hezekiah could fly, and he seemed to like them.

His suit was such a success I began a sunbonnet, and when that was tied on him, the folks almost had spasms. They said he wouldn't like being dressed; that he would fly away to punish me, but he did no such thing. He stayed around the house and was tame as ever.

When I became tired sewing that afternoon, I went down the lane leading to our meadow, where Leon was killing thistles with a grubbing hoe. I thought he would be glad to see me, and he was. Every one had been busy in the house, so I went to the cellar the outside way and ate all I wanted from the cupboard. Then I spread two big slices of bread the best I could with my fingers, putting apple butter on one, and mashed potatoes on the other. Leon leaned on the hoe and watched me coming. He was a hungry boy, and lonesome too, but he couldn't be forced to say so.

"Laddie is at work in the barn," he said.

"I'm going to play in the creek," I answered.

Crossing our meadow there was a stream that had grassy banks, big trees, willows, bushes and vines for shade, a solid pebbly bed; it was all turns and bends so that the water hurried until it bubbled and sang as it went; in it lived tiny fish coloured brightly as flowers, beside it ran killdeer, plover and solemn blue herons almost as tall as I was came from the river to fish; for a place to play on an August afternoon, it couldn't be beaten. The sheep had been put in the lower pasture; so the cross old Shropshire ram was not there to bother us.

"Come to the shade," I said to Leon, and when we were comfortably seated under a big maple weighted down with trailing grapevines, I offered the bread. Leon took a piece