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MOLESWORTH***

***CHRISTMAS-
TREE LAND***

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Christmas-Tree Land

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THE WHITE CASTLE



Rollo could not help noticing the pretty picture the two made.

CHAPTER I. THE WHITE CASTLE.

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

Miss Ferrier.

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

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

clear frosty night, that struck them with surprise and admiration. The little girl caught her breath with a strange thrill of pleasure, mingled with awe.

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

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

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

Maia smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maia gave a merry little laugh.

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

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

'Yes,' interrupted Maia; 'you have rather nice thoughts sometimes, Rollo. After all, I dare say it is not so very stupid to be a tree. I should like the squirrels best of all. I do love

squirrels! Can you see the castle any better now, Rollo? It must be at your side.'

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

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

Rollo drew in his head again.

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

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

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

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

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

sigh was sad.

Maia nestled closer to her brother.

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

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

'Only two years,' interrupted Maia.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and the coachman drew up before a doorway, and a gleam of white walls flashed before the children's eyes.

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

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

'Yes, thank you, cousin,' said both children, and then, as she turned to show them the way, they ventured to look up at their hostess, though they were still dazzled by the sudden light after the darkness outside. Lady Venelda was neither young nor old, nor could one well imagine her ever to have been, or as ever going to be, different from what she was. She was tall and thin, simply dressed, but with a dignified air as of one accustomed to command. Her hair was gray, and surmounted by a high white cap, a number of keys attached to her girdle jingled as she went; her step was firm and decided, but not graceful, and her voice was rather hard and cold, though not sharp. Her face, as Rollo and Maia saw it better when she turned to see if they were

following her, was of a piece with her figure, pale and thin, with nothing very remarkable save a well-cut rather eagle nose and a pair of very bright but not tender blue eyes. Still she was not a person to be afraid of, on the whole, Rollo decided. She might not be very indulgent or sympathising, but there was nothing cruel or cunning in her face and general look.

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

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

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

She was right. What Rollo had at first taken for branches of trees rudely twisted into chair backs and feet were, in fact, the horns of several kinds of deer, and he could not help admiring them, though he thought to himself it was sad to picture the number of beautiful creatures that must have

been slain to please his ancestors' whimsical taste in furniture; but he said nothing, and Lady Venelda, though she noticed the children's observing eyes, said nothing either. It was not her habit to encourage conversation with young people. She had been brought up in a formal fashion, and devoutly believed it to be the best.

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

'How comes it?' she began, but then, seeming to remember something, stopped. 'To be sure, they have but just arrived,' she said to herself. Then turning to one of the old serving-men: 'Conduct the young gentleman to his apartment,' she said, 'that he may arrange his attire before joining us at supper. And you, Delphine,' she continued to one of the ancient damsels, who started as if she were on wires, and Lady Venelda had touched the spring, 'have the goodness to perform the same office for this young lady, whose waiting-maid will be doubtless in attendance. For this once,' she added in conclusion, this time addressing the

children, 'the repast shall be delayed for ten minutes; but for this once only. Punctuality is a virtue that cannot be exaggerated.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

And then Maia, who was of a philosophic turn of mind, made Nanni hurry to take off her wraps and arrange her hair, that she might go down to supper: 'for I'm dreadfully hungry,' she added, 'and it's very funny downstairs, Nanni,' she went on. 'It's like something out of a book, hundreds of years ago. I can quite understand now why father told us to

be so particular always to say "our lady cousin," and things like that. Isn't it funny, Nanni?'

Nanni's spirits seemed to have improved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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