EDITH NESBIT

WET MAGIC

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EAN 8596547396345

DigiCat, 2022
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Table of Contents

The sea came pouring in.

To
Dr. E. N. da C. Andrade,

FROM
E. Nesbit

Chapter I.

Sabrina Fair

Table of Contents

That going to the seaside was the very beginning of everything—only it seemed as though it were going to be a beginning without an end, like the roads on the Sussex downs which look like roads and then look like paths, and then turn into sheep tracks, and then are just grass and furze bushes and tottergrass and harebells and rabbits and chalk.

The children had been counting the days to The Day. Bernard indeed had made a calendar on a piece of cardboard that had once been the bottom of the box in which his new white sandshoes came home. He marked the divisions of the weeks quite neatly in red ink, and the days were numbered in blue ink, and every day he crossed off one of those numbers with a piece of green chalk he happened to have left out of a penny box. Mavis had washed and ironed all the dolls' clothes at least a fortnight before The Day. This was thoughtful and farsighted of her, of course, but it was a little trying to Kathleen, who was much younger and who would have preferred to go on playing with her dolls in their dirtier and more familiar state.

"Well, if you do," said Mavis, a little hot and cross from the ironing board, "I'll never wash anything for you again, not even your face."

Kathleen somehow felt as if she could bear that.

"But mayn't I have just one of the dolls" was, however, all she said, "just the teeniest, weeniest one? Let me have

Lord Edward. His head's half gone as it is, and I could dress him in a clean hanky and pretend it was kilts."

Mavis could not object to this, because, of course, whatever else she washed she didn't wash hankies. So Lord Edward had his pale kilts, and the other dolls were put away in a row in Mavis's corner drawer. It was after that that Mavis and Francis had long secret consultations—and when the younger ones asked questions they were told, "It's secrets. You'll know in good time." This, of course, excited everyone very much indeed—and it was rather a comedown when the good time came, and the secret proved to be nothing more interesting than a large empty aquarium which the two elders had clubbed their money together to buy, for eight-and ninepence in the Old Kent Road. They staggered up the front garden path with it, very hot and tired.

"But what are you going to do with it?" Kathleen asked, as they all stood around the nursery table looking at it.

"Fill it with seawater," Francis explained, "to put sea anemones in."

"Oh yes," said Kathleen with enthusiasm, "and the crabs and starfish and prawns and the yellow periwinkles—and all the common objects of the seashore."

"We'll stand it in the window," Mavis added: "it'll make the lodgings look so distinguished."

"And then perhaps some great scientific gentleman, like Darwin or Faraday, will see it as he goes by, and it will be such a joyous surprise to him to come face-to-face with our jellyfish; he'll offer to teach Francis all about science for nothing—I see," said Kathleen hopefully.

"But how will you get it to the seaside?" Bernard asked, leaning his hands on the schoolroom table and breathing heavily into the aquarium, so that its shining sides became

dim and misty. “It’s much too big to go in the boxes, you know.”

“Then I’ll carry it,” said Francis, “it won’t be in the way at all—I carried it home today.”

“We had to take the bus, you know,” said truthful Mavis, “and then I had to help you.”

“I don’t believe they’ll let you take it at all,” said Bernard—if you know anything of grown-ups you will know that Bernard proved to be quite right.

“Take an aquarium to the seaside—nonsense!” they said. And “What for?” not waiting for the answer. “They,” just at present, was Aunt Enid.

Francis had always been passionately fond of water. Even when he was a baby he always stopped crying the moment they put him in the bath. And he was the little boy who, at the age of four, was lost for three hours and then brought home by the police who had found him sitting in a horse trough in front of the Willing Mind, wet to the topmost hair of his head, and quite happy, entertaining a circle of carters with pots of beer in their hands. There was very little water in the horse trough and the most talkative of the carters explained that, the kid being that wet at the first start off, him and his mates thought he was as safe in the trough as anywhere—the weather being what it was and all them nasty motors and trams about.

To Francis, passionately attracted as he was by water in all forms, from the simple mud puddle to the complicated machinery by which your bath supply is enabled to get out of order, it was a real tragedy that he had never seen the sea. Something had always happened to prevent it. Holidays had been spent in green countries where there were rivers and wells and ponds, and waters deep and wide—but the water had been fresh water, and the green grass had been

on each side of it. One great charm of the sea, as he had heard of it, was that it had nothing on the other side “so far as eye could see.” There was a lot about the sea in poetry, and Francis, curiously enough, liked poetry.

The buying of the aquarium had been an attempt to make sure that, having found the sea, he should not lose it again. He imagined the aquarium fitted with a real rock in the middle, to which radiant sea anemones clung and limpets stuck. There were to be yellow periwinkles too, and seaweeds, and gold and silver fish (which don’t live in the sea by the way, only Francis didn’t know this), flitting about in radiant scaly splendor, among the shadows of the growing water plants. He had thought it all out—how a cover might be made, very light, with rubber in between, like a screw-top bottle, to keep the water in while it traveled home in the guard’s van to the admiration of passengers and porters at both stations. And now—he was not to be allowed to take it.

He told Mavis, and she agreed with him that it was a shame.

“But I’ll tell you what,” she said, for she was not one of those comforters who just say, “I’m sorry,” and don’t try to help. She generally thought of something that would make things at any rate just a little better. “Let’s fill it with fresh water, and get some goldfish and sand and weeds; and I’ll make Eliza promise to put ants’ eggs in—that’s what they eat—and it’ll be something to break the dreadful shock when we have to leave the sea and come home again.”

Francis admitted that there was something in this and consented to fill the aquarium with water from the bath. When this was done the aquarium was so heavy that the combined efforts of all four children could not begin to move it.

“Never mind,” said Mavis, the consoler; “let’s empty it out again and take it back to the common room, and then fill it by secret jugfuls, carried separately, you know.”

This might have been successful, but Aunt Enid met the first secret jugful—and forbade the second.

“Messing about,” she called it. “No, of course I shan’t allow you to waste your money on fish.” And Mother was already at the seaside getting the lodgings ready for them. Her last words had been—

“Be sure you do exactly what Aunt Enid says.” So, of course, they had to. Also Mother had said, “Don’t argue,” so they had not even the melancholy satisfaction of telling Aunt Enid that she was quite wrong, and that they were not messing about at all.

Aunt Enid was not a real aunt, but just an old friend of Grandmamma’s, with an aunt’s name and privileges and rather more than an aunt’s authority. She was much older than a real aunt and not half so nice. She was what is called “firm” with children, and no one ever called her auntie. Just Aunt Enid. That will tell you in a moment.

So there the aquarium was, dishearteningly dry—for even the few drops left in it from its first filling dried up almost at once.

Even in its unwatery state, however, the aquarium was beautiful. It had not any of that ugly ironwork with red lead showing between the iron and the glass which you may sometimes have noticed in the aquariums of your friends. No, it was one solid thick piece of clear glass, faintly green, and when you stooped down and looked through you could almost fancy that there really was water in it.

“Let’s put flowers in it,” Kathleen suggested, “and pretend they’re anemones. Do let’s, Francis.”

“I don’t care what you do,” said Francis. “I’m going to read *The Water Babies*.”

“Then we’ll do it, and make it a lovely surprise for you,” said Kathleen cheerily.

Francis sat down squarely with *The Water Babies* flat before him on the table, where also his elbows were, and the others, respecting his sorrow, stole quietly away. Mavis just stepped back to say, “I say, France, you don’t mind their putting flowers? It’s to please you, you know.”

“I tell you I don’t mind *anything*,” said Francis savagely.

When the three had finished with it, the aquarium really looked rather nice, and, if you stooped down and looked sideways through the glass, like a real aquarium.

Kathleen took some clinkers from the back of the rockery —“where they won’t show,” she said—and Mavis induced these to stand up like an arch in the middle of the glassy square. Tufts of long grass, rather sparingly arranged, looked not unlike waterweed. Bernard begged from the cook some of the fine silver sand which she uses to scrub the kitchen tables and dressers with, and Mavis cut the thread of the Australian shell necklace that Uncle Robert sent her last Christmas, so that there should be real, shimmery, silvery shells on the sand. (This was rather self-sacrificing of her, because she knew she would have to put them all back again on their string, and you know what a bother shells are to thread.) They shone delightfully through the glass. But the great triumph was the sea anemones—pink and red and yellow—clinging to the rocky arch just as though they were growing there.

“Oh, lovely, lovely,” Kathleen cried, as Mavis fixed the last delicate flesh-tinted crown. “Come and look, France.”

“Not yet,” said Mavis, in a great hurry, and she tied the thread of the necklace round a tin goldfish (out of the box

with the duck and the boat and the mackerel and the lobster and the magnet that makes them all move about—you know) and hung it from the middle of the arch. It looked just as though it were swimming—you hardly noticed the thread at all.

"*Now*, France," she called. And Francis came slowly with his thumb in *The Water Babies*. It was nearly dark by now, but Mavis had lighted the four dollhouse candles in the gilt candlesticks and set them on the table around the aquarium.

"Look through the side," she said; "isn't it ripping?"

"Why," said Francis slowly, "you've got water in it—and real anemones! Where on earth...?"

"Not real," said Mavis. "I wish they were; they're only dahlias. But it does look pretty, doesn't it?"

"It's like Fairyland," said Kathleen, and Bernard added, "I *am* glad you bought it."

"It just shows what it will be like when we *do* get the sea creatures," said Mavis. "Oh, Francis, you do like it, don't you?"

"Oh, I like it all right," he answered, pressing his nose against the thick glass, "but I wanted it to be waving weeds and mysterious wetness like the Sabrina picture."

The other three glanced at the picture which hung over the mantelpiece—Sabrina and the water nymphs, drifting along among the waterweeds and water lilies. There were words under the picture, and Francis dreamily began to say them:

"'*Sabrina fair,*
Listen where thou art sitting,
Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave

In twisted braids of Lillies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair....'"

"Hullo—what was that?" he said in quite a different voice, and jumped up.

"What was what?" the others naturally asked.

"Did you put something alive in there?" Francis asked.

"Of course not," said Mavis. "Why?"

"Well, I saw something move, that's all."

They all crowded around and peered over the glass walls. Nothing, of course, but the sand and the grass and the shells, the clinkers and the dahlias and the little suspended tin goldfish.

"I expect the goldfish swung a bit," said Bernard. "That's what it must have been."

"It didn't look like that," Francis answered. "It looked more like—"

"Like what?"

"I don't know—get out of the light. Let's have another squint."

He stooped down and looked again through the glass.

"It's not the goldfish," he said. "That's as quiet as a trout asleep. No—I suppose it was a shadow or something."

"You might tell us what it looked like," said Kathleen.

"Was it like a rat?" Bernard asked with interest.

"Not a bit. It was more like—"

"Well, like what?" asked three aggravated voices.

"Like Sabrina—only very, very tiny."

"A sort of doll—Sabrina," said Kathleen, "how awfully jolly!"

"It wasn't at all like a doll, and it wasn't jolly," said Francis shortly—"only I wish it would come again."

It didn't, however.

“I say,” said Mavis, struck by a new idea, “perhaps it’s a magic aquarium.”

“Let’s play it is,” suggested Kathleen—“let’s play it’s a magic glass and we can see what we like in it. I see a fairy palace with gleaming spires of crystal and silver.”

“I see a football match, and our chaps winning,” said Bernard heavily, joining in the new game.

“Shut up,” said Francis. “That isn’t play. There was something.”

“Suppose it is magic,” said Mavis again.

“We’ve played magic so often, and nothing’s ever happened—even when we made the fire of sweet-scented woods and eastern gums, and all that,” said Bernard; “it’s much better to pretend right away. We always have to in the end. Magic just wastes time. There isn’t any magic really, is there, Mavis?”

“Shut up, I tell you,” was the only answer of Francis, his nose now once more flattened against the smooth green glass.

Here Aunt Enid’s voice was heard on the landing outside, saying, “Little ones—bed,” in no uncertain tones.

The two grunted as it were in whispers, but there was no appeal against Aunt Enid, and they went, their grunts growing feebler as they crossed the room, and dying away in a despairing silence as they and Aunt Enid met abruptly at the top of the stairs.

“Shut the door,” said Francis, in a strained sort of voice. And Mavis obeyed, even though he hadn’t said “please.” She really was an excellent sister. Francis, in moments of weakness, had gone so far as to admit that she wasn’t half bad.

“I say,” she said when the click of the latch assured her that they were alone, “how could it be magic? We never said

any spell."

"No more we did," said Francis, "unless—And besides, it's all nonsense, of course, about magic. It's just a game we play, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Mavis said doubtfully; "but what did you mean by 'unless'?"

"We weren't saying any spells, were we?"

"No, of course we weren't—we weren't saying anything —"

"As it happens *I* was."

"Was what? When?"

"When it happened."

"What happened?"

Will it be believed that Aunt Enid chose this moment for opening the door just wide enough to say, "Mavis—bed." And Mavis had to go. But as she went she said again: "What happened?"

"*It*," said Francis, "whatever it was. I was saying...."

"MAVIS!" called Aunt Enid.

"Yes, Aunt Enid—you were saying *what?*"

"I was saying, '*Sabrina fair*,'" said Francis, "do you think —but, of course, it couldn't have been—and all dry like that, no water or anything."

"Perhaps magic *has* to be dry," said Mavis. "Coming, Aunt Enid! It seems to be mostly burning things, and, of course, that wouldn't do in the water. What *did* you see?"

"It looked like Sabrina," said Francis—"only tiny, tiny. Not doll-small, you know, but live-small, like through the wrong end of a telescope. I do wish you'd seen it."

"Say, 'Sabrina fair' again quick while I look."

"'*Sabrina fair,*

Listen where thou art sitting,

Under the—’”

“Oh, Mavis, it is—it did. There’s something there truly. Look!”

“Where?” said Mavis. “I can’t see—oh, let me look.”

“MAVIS!” called Aunt Enid very loud indeed; and Mavis tore herself away.

“I must go,” she said. “Never mind, we’ll look again tomorrow. Oh, France, if it *should* be—magic, I mean—I’ll tell you what—”

But she never told him what, for Aunt Enid swept in and swept out, bearing Mavis away, as it were, in a whirlwind of impatient exasperation, and, without seeming to stop to do it, blowing out the four candles as she came and went.

At the door she turned to say, “Good night, Francis. Your bath’s turned on ready. Be sure you wash well behind your ears. We shan’t have much time in the morning.”

“But Mavis always bathes first,” said he. “I’m the eldest.”

“Don’t argue, child, for goodness’ sake,” said Aunt Enid. “Mavis is having the flat bath in my bedroom to save time. Come—no nonsense,” she paused at the door to say. “Let me see you go. Right about face—quick march!”

And he had to.

“If she must pretend to give orders like drill, she might at least learn to say ‘’Bout turn!’” he reflected, struggling with his collar stud in the steaming bathroom. “Never mind. I’ll get up early and see if I can’t see it again.”

And so he did—but early as he was, Aunt Enid and the servants were earlier. The aquarium was empty—clear, clean, shining and quite empty.

Aunt Enid could not understand why Francis ate so little breakfast.

“What has she done with them?” he wondered later.

“*I* know,” said Bernard solemnly. “She told Esther to put them on the kitchen fire—I only just saved my fish.”

“And what about my shells?” asked Mavis in sudden fear.

“Oh, she took those to take care of. Said you weren’t old enough to take care of them yourself.”

You will wonder why the children did not ask their Aunt Enid right out what had become of the contents of the aquarium. Well, you don’t know their Aunt Enid. And besides, even on that first morning, before anything that really *was* anything could be said to have happened—for, after all, what Francis said he had seen might have been just fancy—there was a sort of misty, curious, trembling feeling at the hearts of Mavis and her brother which made them feel that they did not want to talk about the aquarium and what had been in it to any grown-up—and least of all to their Aunt Enid.

And leaving the aquarium, that was the hardest thing of all. They thought of telegraphing to Mother, to ask whether, after all, they mightn’t bring it—but there was first the difficulty of wording a telegram so that their mother would understand and not deem it insanity or a practical joke—secondly, the fact that ten-pence half-penny, which was all they had between them, would not cover the baldest statement of the facts.

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alone would be eightpence—and the simplest appeal, such as “May we bring aquarium please say yes wire reply” brought the whole thing hopelessly beyond their means.

“It’s no good,” said Francis hopelessly. “And, anyway,” said Kathleen, “there wouldn’t be time to get an answer before we go.”

No one had thought of this. It was a sort of backhanded consolation.

“But think of coming back to it,” said Mavis: “it’ll be something to live for, when we come back from the sea and everything else is beastly.”

And it was.