

## THE GROOVES OF CHANGE.

By H. LOUISA BEDFORD, Author of "Prue, the Poetess," "Mrs. Merriman's Godchild," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

"WELL, of all the rum, out-of-the-way holes that I've ever set foot in, this is the queerest," said David Russell, aloud.

He was alone, and the sound of his own voice startled him, breaking, as it did, the excessive stillness around him. He seemed the solitary representative of youth, in a place where all was old. Even the trees, whose fresh green leaves betokened that spring had scarcely given way to summer, were clearly affecting a youthfulness that did not belong to them. The oak, at whose far-reaching branches David stood gazing with something akin to reverence in his glance, needed much propping to prevent those same boughs from breaking off from the parent stem, so gnarled and knotted were they with age, so bowed down with infirmity, and the magnificent group of elms a little further off leant towards each other rather pathetically, as though they had found the storms of many a winter too much for them. The cedars which half-obscured, half-revealed the low wide house in the distance, spread out their sombre arms with an air of sturdy independence. They wore no garb of youth, but they seemed able to defy time to leave any mark upon them, and David noted that the weeds which covered the mile of drive from end to end were certainly not of this year's growth. They had evidently been left in undisturbed possession for years past.

David Russell, with the strong blood of youth coursing through his veins, felt the atmosphere of the whole place depressing. True, there was a certain melancholy beauty in it all, but it was a beauty that would appeal rather to the old than the young.

The young man's knickerbockered legs and the knapsack on his back showed that he was on a walking tour, and he had availed himself of a short cut through the park of Boscombe Hall, and after delivering himself of the one outburst of astonishment at the forlornness of his surroundings, he pursued the narrow pathway that cut at right angles across the path, whistling as he went, to shake off the subtle sadness that seemed to weigh upon his spirit. A sudden curve brought him to the side of a dell, on whose steep sides a few late bluebells blossomed, and he stooped to pick them. At the very bottom he saw a little girl seated on a big stone. Roused by the sound of his footsteps, she lifted her head, pushing back the flapping Leghorn hat that shaded her eyes, and surveyed the stranger with a grave questioning glance. She looked so quaint and old-fashioned, with her hair parted on her forehead, and left to fall in irregular curls on her neck, and a holland overall covering her from head to foot, that David broke into a merry little laugh.

"Little Miss Muffett," he began, but the child shook her head in quick denial.

"No; they don't call me that. My name is Deborah—Deborah Menzies."

"Then may I come and talk to you, Miss Deborah Menzies?" said David, clambering down the sides of the dell. "You've found a lovely place to sit in, quite the jolliest place in the park, I should say."

"Oh, please take care! You'll tumble them all down, and it takes me such a time to prop them up," said Deborah hastily.

In a circle round her were about a dozen fir-cones, that by dint of digging holes for them in the ground, and with the help of a few supporting twigs, had been induced to stand on end. They were not all the same size. Some were big and decidedly the worse for wear, and some were small, and round one was laid a little wreath of flowers.

"Is it a game?" inquired David, treading with delicate care.

"Yes; the fir-cones are the people who come to stay, you know. There are such a lot of them. When I run short of cones I make up with chestnuts. I keep the fir-cones in a box in the school-room."

"Do so many people come to stay, then?" asked David wonderingly.

"Lots," said Deborah laconically; "but no little boys and girls that I can play with."

"Is not that a little girl with the wreath round her chair?" asked David, pointing to the decorated fir-cone.

"Oh, no; that's Miss Laing. She's very beautiful, mother says, and I think so too."

"Does she live here?"

"No; she's come to stay. I suppose you have too."

"I hadn't thought of it," laughed David, feeling as if he had suddenly been landed in a fairy tale. "Then mother is the mistress of the big house yonder?"

"No; it belongs to grandfather," touching with a small finger the tallest of the fir-cones that was left of a few of its scales. "The one next to him is step-grandmother. Grandfather has had three wives, and this is the last one."

"A very Blue-beard of a grandfather," was David's mental comment. "Has he many children?" he asked aloud.

"Only father, and that's what makes him so sad, mother says. He had four sons, but the three others died, and father does not live here. He's a long, long way off in South America. That's where I was born, and I talk Spanish always to mother."

"Dear me, how clever! Then mother lives with you here?"

"Yes; if you bend down your head you can see her room through this weeny hole in the trees. Look at the window with the torn blind. That's mother's room and mine."

David prostrated himself as desired, and was rewarded by catching a glimpse of the torn blind.

"Thank you," he said, re-seating

himself. "Now I know all about it. Couldn't you have dolls instead of fir-cones? It would make it seem more natural, and they'd sit up with much less propping."

"I should like one, just one," admitted Deborah, lighting her desires to the realm of possibility. "A very beautiful one, like Miss Laing."

David began to feel some curiosity about the beauty who had so fired the child's imagination.

"It should have dark hair—lots and lots of it, and eyelashes all round its eyes, beautiful curly ones, and it should have a white frock. Miss Laing wears white frocks."

"Then have you no playthings, no china tea-service, nor doll's-house?" inquired David, struck with a sort of amused compassion for the little girl who seemed to have neither playmates nor toys.

Deborah shook her head. "There's only the Noah's Ark, and I don't have that except on Sundays. It belonged to step-grandmother when she was a little girl, and she keeps it in the store-room. It's very old. Noah's all right, and his wife, but he has only one son left, and two of the son's wives. When Sunday is fine I bring the Ark down here to let the animals feed. Last Sunday I broke the elephant's leg off and buried it because I daren't tell. You won't tell, shall you?"

"I can't if I wish. I don't know step-grandmother," replied David, smothering a laugh.

"But you will, if you've come to stay," persisted Deborah.

There came the sound of a voice calling from above, a musical girl's voice.

"Deborah, De-bo-rah," more slowly, and the child's face flushed with pleasure.

"It's Miss Laing; she said perhaps she'd come and fetch me. Please help me to pick up my fir-cones. There are twelve, and two chestnuts. You must put them gently in my pinafore; they break so easily."

"Deborah," called the voice again, and, by the nearness, David knew that its owner must be close upon them. His desire to see Miss Laing was apparently to be granted.

A tall girl in a white frock peered down into the dell with laughing eyes. She answered accurately to Deborah's description. Even at this distance David could see the curling lashes that surrounded those eyes, and the masses of curling hair. That passing glimpse made him long for a closer inspection.

"The little one is right. She's beautiful as a goddess," thought David, who, at twenty, was readily stirred to enthusiasm over a pretty face. As a tribute to the beauty he instinctively took off his cloth cap, and smiled, and she smiled back.

"Who is it, Deborah?"

"Somebody who's come to stop,"