

The Magic of the Forest.

By Temple Bailey.

Vaille was telling a story to the Small Girl. They sat on the porch of the hotel in two big rocking-chairs. The Small Girl had a perky pink bow on the top of her head. Vaille wore her hair in a shining swirl held by two small shell pins.

"And the Prince carried the Princess into the depths of the beautiful forest where the birds sang and the leaves rustled and the little stream murmured, and they lived happy ever after."

The Small Girl drew a breath of rapture. "Did you ever go into the depths of a beautiful forest?" she asked.

Before Vaille could answer, a deep voice boomed, "She wouldn't go into a forest if she could help it. The modern Princess prefers city streets."

Vaille's head went up. "Life isn't a fairy tale," she said. "I might like a castle in a forest, but not a cottage."

The Small Girl meditated. "But the Princess loved the Prince a whole lot," she said; "I guess she'd have been happy anywhere with him."

The eyes of the man and the girl met. "Oh, of course, that—" Vaille murmured.

"It makes a difference—whether she loved him," the man said, and sat down on the steps at Vaille's feet.

The Small Girl demanded more fairy tales, but Vaille was tired. "You let Mr. Hoosier tell them."

The man's eyes lighted up at her use of the child's pet name for him. Vaille was of the East and he was of the West, the great Middle West, conquered by the ancestors whose pioneer strength had come down to him and was shown in the breadth of his shoulders and the straightness of his figure.

Mr. Hoosier's fairy tales were different from Vaille's. They did not deal with princes and princesses, with gnomes and dwarfs. He told, rather, of the lambs in spring, all white and weak-kneed, of squirrels and of rabbits, of pussy cats and of kittens, ending with a fascinating tale of the frogs he had tamed in the pond.

"Well, mine are the real ones," Mr. Hoosier said. "And some day I'll tell you nicer ones, of life on the mountains where the winds sing you to sleep at night and the busy world is miles away."

His eyes went toward the low line of the hills as he spoke, and Vaille asked abruptly, "Are you going to waste the rest of your life buried among the trees?"

He nodded. "If you call it wasted, I studied forestry because I love it. My father wanted me to study law. He made his fortune working for corporations, and he wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but—I love the trees—it is my life."

"But to live always away from the world—how can you stand it?"

He smiled. "Are you happy in your world?"

"Of course," she faltered. "That is—nobody is really happy."

"Except the Prince and Princess," the Small Girl interposed; "they lived happy ever after."

The man picked up the Small Girl and set her on his shoulder. "But princesses in these days," he said again, "don't do such foolish things."

Then he carried the Small Girl off to her mother, and Vaille sat and thought about the things he had said.

The night before he had asked her to marry him. She had said "No." She had not denied that she loved him a little, that she might love him more. But he was not of her world. All her life she had danced, and dined, had spent her summers in a cottage at Newport, and her winters cruising in tropic seas. And now this man asked her to leave her world and to enter his, to go with him into the depths of the dim Northern forest.

She wished that chance had not brought her to this hotel, set so near the fastnesses of the forest that was his domain.

She resolved that she would leave next morning, but the aunt who chaperoned her was ill, too ill to be carried off to a hotel.

Vaille's remark, at the delay, made the little lady comfortable, left her with a guess and went off for a ramble with the Small Girl. Almost instinctively they followed the path to the forest. Half way they met another man who

wanted to marry Vaille. He was essentially a man of her own kind, a man from the city, rich, unromantic, but desiring her very much.

"Where are you going, my pretty maid?" he asked lightly.

She was not sure, she said. Her manner was not inviting, but he refused to notice, and continued the quotation, "May I go with you, my pretty maid?"

She told him "No" flatly. "I am going to tell fairy tales to the Small Girl as soon as we reach that shady place under the trees. And you would be bored; you don't like fairy tales."

"I'd like to carry a certain princess to my castle," he said; "and some day I'll do it."

At the note of security in his voice, Vaille flung up her head, her eyes flashing. "Your castle would be a prison."

He laughed again. "You better think it over. I'd let you lead the life you like—dinners and dances, and nothing to do."

Vaille caught her breath at his estimate of her. This man always made her feel like a useless toy; to the man of the forest she was a being with all the great possibilities of womanhood.

"Go away," she said, and turned from him. Then she called back over her shoulder, "Please tell Aunt Serena that I may not be back until afternoon. I have some crackers in my pocket, and the Small Girl and I are going to look for berries to add to our lunch."

The Small Girl was rapturous in the quest of adventure. They found berries, and Vaille told fairy tales while they ate their simple meal. After that they explored the forest. It was a place of mystery and of charm. On and on they went, so happy in little discoveries of red berries or frail flowers that they did not notice the darkening of the light, and they failed to hear the low moan of thunder or to heed the fitful rushes of wind that stirred the leaves.

Thus the storm came upon them, suddenly. The Small Girl screamed as a flash of lightning made everything gold, and then left the darkness of early twilight.

Vaille picked up the Small Girl and started to run. She realized that they had gone deep into the wilderness and that the hotel was too far for them to reach. There seemed to be no shelter anywhere. The big trees that a moment before had seemed so protecting, now seemed a menace. A second crash of thunder made her stand still and clasp the Small Girl tightly. The wind came then and the rain. Vaille's bronze hair was blown about her shoulders, and her white gown was drenched. The Small Girl shrieked without stopping, "I am frightened; oh, I am so frightened!"

It was almost dark, and Vaille's eager eyes, searching for shelter, saw in the distance a spark of light. It looked like the glow of a candle or of a lamp set in a window, yet so thick were the trees and undergrowth that she could see no sign of habitation. Into the chaos of her mind came the thought of the fairy tales she had been telling the Small Girl. Was this a witch's hut, or an ogre's castle? She ran toward it, the Small Girl in her arms. About them was the crash of trees, the roar of the wind, the swish of the rain. The door of the little house was open, for it was a little house built of stone and of logs in modern bungalow fashion. There was a wide porch; and the glow that Vaille had seen was the light of burning wood in an open fireplace.

Vaille rushed in, set the Small Girl on the floor, and shut the door against the tempest. The quiet of the big room after the uproar without seemed heavenly. The Small Girl, her pink topknot all drenched and flattened, looked at Vaille with big eyes. "Is it the house of the three bears?" she whispered.

Vaille laughed nervously. "Maybe," she said. "We'll see if we cannot find the soup, and then we'll run away before they get home."

"Won't it be lovely?" said the venturesome Small Girl. "We'll eat the soup and rock in their chairs and go to sleep on their beds, and the storm will keep them away, so they won't know it."

There was no soup in the little kitchen; but a great refrigerator of modern build held bottles of cream, butter that smelled like clover, and honey. In the pantry were fresh bread and spice-cake.



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