

12 THE QUALITIES OF MERCY

anyone see them, and trumpet the recall which there was no disobeying?

But no! Fortune favoured the little fugitive. Here was the bridge; yonder was the wood! To-day she dared not linger to listen to the song of the rippling water. She plunged headlong into the hazel copse, and, avoiding all beaten tracks, raced through the tangled undergrowth with eager feet, till she felt she had left the world behind. Then, sinking down parting at the foot of a giant oak which reared its bare branches out of a tangle of clasping and adoring ivy, she flung her arms about the neck of Captain Muggs, crying out between gusts of panting breath and baby laughter.

"Oh, Captain Muggs, we've wunned away—we've wunned away!"

Then began one of those rambles which belong to the golden era of childhood, where every flower is a gem fit for a diadem, every shadowy nook a lurking-place for mystery, every green glade a road towards some possible ecstasy of adventure.

Here was the tinkling music of some little laughing rivulet, to which the child-ears listened in a speechless rapture. There grew those delicate mosses which formed the fairy tables for moonlight feasts and elfin revels.

Here was a little open dell, alive with the frolics of rabbits, who scattered and vanished at sight of Captain Muggs in a flurry of white scuts: yonder a squirrel, racing up a perpendicular trunk, stared down from some lofty height at the intruders, evoking from Mercy a cry of rapture and loving entreaty, to which no heed was paid; for the squirrel declined all blandishment, and whisked away into the mystery of twig and tiny leaf-tassels far away overhead.

Then Captain Muggs discovered a prickly ball of spines, which he was convinced he had seen walking about a moment before. The Captain's philosophy invariably broke down over a hedgehog—an aggravating monstrosity which would not run, but yet was indubitably alive. The woodland rang to the sound of his barkings, and no doubt this was what called the attention of the only other inmate of