LITTLE MISTRESS GOOD HOPE

LONG, long ago — let us try to remember exactly how long — two hundred and forty years at least, there lived a little girl in one of the loveliest of England's southern counties, that was called then, as now, Devon, or Devonshire. She was just like other little girls — in many ways just like the children of to-day, only, perhaps, her cheeks were even rosier and her large eyes brighter, for she was a stout little country lass, a farmer's daughter. Neither rich, nor great, nor very beautiful, and yet the heroine of a story, and quite a wonderful story, too, in its way, though, perhaps, it will lose a little in the telling; just as a very beautiful gem often loses a little in the setting, though it sparkles for more eyes than it did before the jeweller cut away

the outer portions of it, and polished it according to his fancy. This little Devonshire girl had lived ever since her birth in a long, low house, built of granite stones, rough hewn and roughly laid together, too, with a hipped roof and a mighty chimney in the middle of the house, with a fireplace in the kitchen so large that a whole tree trunk could be laid in it for the fire; and there were great iron hooks in the chimney-back, where the meat was spitted for roasting, and where the huge iron kettle boiled. The floors of the house were of stone — sometimes strewn with rushes — but never covered by a carpet or a rug; and it was a very cold place, too, and the wind blew in at the windows and doors, and howled down the chimneys, and, in winter, the snow came in, in little flurries; for they have fearful snow-storms in the valley of the Dart, and wayfarers have been frozen out on that great plain that was in sight of the house, and was called Dartmoor. There were no cushioned chairs or comfortable lounges in this stone house in Devon, two hundred and forty years ago, but instead, the main pieces of furniture were high-backed wooden settles that could be drawn near the fire, and the backs kept off the draughts. The plates, too, that

they ate from were of pewter, and the food was put on the table in great wooden platters called trenchers; and the table itself was only a long board, laid on trestles, with benches each side, instead of chairs. The chickens, too, and the dogs came in to pick up the crumbs that fell from the table; and the people did not eat the same food that we do; for all winter, from Martinmas, they had nothing but salted meat that had been stored away in their cellars with their cider; for there were a great many apple orchards in Devon, and in the spring they blossomed white and pink with apple-blooms, and the honey-bees had a festival.

This particular stone farmhouse had the letters T. T. cut in a long stone over the door, and the date 1525, which was to show that it had been built by one Thomas Tarkenwell, a franklin. It was when little Kathleen Tarkenwell was born already over a hundred years old, which we think very old, indeed, and was really old for England then. A great many Tarkenwells had lived in this house, but all were dead except our little lass, Kathleen, and her widowed mother, good Dame Agnes Tarkenwell. The family had once owned a large farm, a gift from the king to the first Tarken-

well for some good deed that he had done, and there were wide fields, that had been sown with oats and barley, and there was an orchard; but after Kathleen's father died things did not go well with her mother. Crops failed — crops do very often — a blight fell on the orchard, and there was so much ill fortune that people wagged their heads, saying the "hill folk" had a grudge against the Tarkenwells. The hill folk, as you will presently learn, were the fairies of Devon, but the peasants called them pixies instead of fairies, and were afraid of them; for these little people were, by repute, very malicious, and played strange tricks on the sober folk, and often — so they said — stole into the houses and whipped babies out of their cradles, and left nothing behind but a gray goose quill. Then, there were derricks, too, the dwarfs, who were also mightily mischievous creatures, bobbing up quite unexpectedly, and doing harm enough for much larger people. Besides these elves, there were some fairy dogs, called "wishhounds," whole packs of them, that ran about on the moors and barked and howled in the twilight. So, Devon was as full as it could be of all sorts of strange creatures and stranger doings; yet it was lovely for all that, for

the banks of the river Dart were green, and feathery with ferns, and lovely with wild flowers, and the moors — rolling away, one softly rising slope behind another — were sometimes golden with the blossoming of the gorse; and away, in the distance, rose the twin peaks of Heytor, while, near at hand, those rolling uplands were skirted here and there with great cliffs of wonderful colored rocks, and the blue sea — like a sapphire — shimmered at their base.

It was a lovely country, and Kathleen had been happy until she began to understand why her mother was so sad and thoughtful. The truth is they were very poor, and Dame Agnes found it hard to live; and, in those times, there was a tax that was very hard upon the poor — it was called the chimney tax. People had to pay the government a certain sum of money for living in any house in England, and it was called "hearth money," or the "chimney tax," and, considering how large the chimneys really were, we will call it that. Now, the king appointed certain men — not always good men, I fear — to collect that money from every house and pay it into his treasury; but, because it was a hard tax on the poor, and not an easy one to gather,

these officers of the king sold their places to very low, and often very wicked men, who made the people pay sometimes more than the law really required, and never gave any one a moment to collect the money, but, if they did not get it at once, seized all the household goods and left the families without a bed to lie on, no matter how poor and wretched they were. There were a great many poor people then, too, for there had been fearful wars in England, and a great deal of suffering and sorrow, as there always must be, in the train of war.

It was nearly time to gather this chimney tax in Devon, and poor Dame Tarkenwell had no money at all to pay it, only — out of all her labors — some food stored for herself and her child, and the clothing that she had made from cloth of her own weaving. Moreover, she had been very poor since her husband's death, and she had been foolish enough to borrow money from the tax-gatherer himself, promising if she did not pay the debt to give him her property. Such a promise is called a mortgage, and the tax-gatherer was a hard man. So Kathleen's mother knew that when he came, as he would in a few days, she and her little girl would be turned out of doors and have no roof to shelter them; and Dame Agnes

wept a great deal; and Kathleen saw it and came to understand — with a dull pain and horror — that something dreadful was going to happen, and the child was sad, too. These two, mother and little girl, went about as usual, and ate their simple meals; the woman worked her spinning-wheel and Kathleen fed the poultry; but they were very miserable, and the child thought that the sun did not shine so brightly on Dartmoor as it used to do, and she wondered at the roses for blooming in the garden.

One night, when they were eating their supper together, she saw her mother wipe away a tear, trying to hide it from her, and Kathleen began to feel as if she could not eat at all.

"Mother," she said sadly, "do other people have to pay chimney taxes, too?"

"Yes, child," her mother answered, trying to speak bravely, "we all do."

"And is it always hard?" asked the little girl; "will they turn out the people at the castle, if they do not pay?"

"At Berry-Pomeroy?" exclaimed Dame Agnes, smiling in spite of herself. "No, no, little lass; the people at the castle are great and rich, and they

have never had to borrow money from the tax-gatherer."

"Then, why do they not help us, mother?" asked the child, wondering.

Dame Agnes shook her head. "Great folk forget the poor, Kathie," she said; "perhaps they can't help it. We must not judge our neighbors, the Bible says. Rich people very seldom help the poor in this world."

"I would, if I had riches," Kathie declared stoutly.

"Nay, child," replied her mother, "if you had the riches, you would lie on a soft bed and sleep so well that you would forget the poor man on his bed of straw."

And while she spoke, they heard — far off — the strangest, weirdest sound, like the baying of a thousand hounds at the full moon.

"Hark!" cried the good dame, turning pale, "'t is the wishhounds, Kathleen. The pixies are abroad and it means something will happen — good or ill — erelong."

Kathleen's eyes grew large, and she cast a strange look over her shoulder, and could not finish her bowl of bread and milk. The pixies, ah, why did

not the pixies help them? She wondered, too, what the wishhounds looked like, that every one heard, but hardly any one had ever seen. She was a brave little girl, and she was not so much frightened, after all, and she thought she would dearly love to see a pixy, or a derrick, or a wishhound, for they must be wonderful creatures — good or evil — and very strange to see. That night, when Kathleen went to her little room, she peeped cautiously out of the window in hopes of catching a glimpse of a wishhound; but no, she saw nothing — that is, nothing new. Really, she saw a beautiful scene: Dartmoor lay before her, rolling away in the moonlight, like the billows of the sea, and way off was the shadowy bracken at the edge of the forest, and behind all, those twin peaks. It was a country for fairies and happiness; and Kathleen sighed. She knew that her mother was weeping and praying in the next room, and the child began to wonder if there was nothing at all that she could do to pay the chimney tax and the mortgage; but she could think of nothing, and, at last, sobbed herself to sleep, a sad little girl, though there were so many happy ones in England who could have paid the whole sum twice over and never missed it. "Bear ye one another's

burdens," says the Bible, but no one was willing to bear little Kathleen's.

She awoke next morning to begin all over again with the horror of it; and it was only three days now before the tax-gatherer would turn them out of the house in which she had been born. She would have to lose her home, which she loved so dearly, and it is a hard and bitter thing indeed to lose a home, though none know how hard and cruel it is, who do not feel the ache and the pain of homelessness way down in their hearts. Poor little Kathleen, she could hardly eat any breakfast because her mother's face was so sad. Dame Agnes had written for help to a rich uncle who lived in London; and that morning the post-boy came riding up to the door, with his mail-bags hanging across his saddle, and blowing his horn as he came. In those days, the postman came once a month and rode all the way from London on horseback, carrying his letters in great bags on the saddle; and sometimes the robbers that infested the lonely places caught him on the way and took all his letters and money from him. But this morning he came along, as blithe as a bird, and blew a blast at Dame Tarkenwell's gate; and she ran out — poor woman — betwixt hope and

fear, and got the answer to her letter; and Kathleen waited eagerly to hear it, for surely — thought the child — my uncle, being rich, will help us. But the uncle said no, and not kindly either, but with some abuse of poor dead Tom Tarkenwell, for leaving his niece so poor; and Dame Agnes had very red cheeks as she wiped away her tears, without telling little Kathleen of the cruel words about her father.

"Be a brave lass, Kathie," said the poor woman; "doubtless you and I can make a living some way, but the house — the dear, old house and all the furniture must go;" and she wept with all her heart.

As for Kathleen, she crept out, very softly and slowly, into the garden — into a corner of it that was full of tall, nodding hollyhocks, white and pink and red, and where a climbing rose bloomed all summer, hanging on the branches of a dead apple tree. Here the child sat down, and, being all alone, as she thought, hid her face in her hands and cried her heart out. What would they do? she thought; be beggars on the roadside, as she had seen others? She wondered if it could be those terrible wish-hounds that made all this trouble. And just at this moment she heard a voice close to her ear.