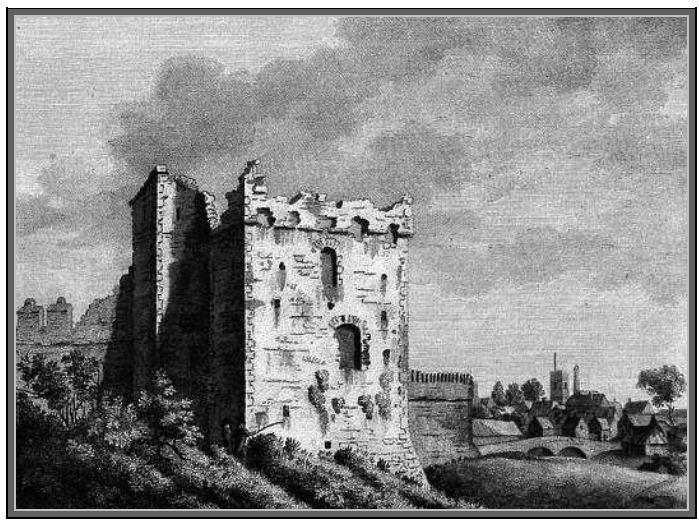
THE CHILDREN OF THE CASTLE

[ILLUSTRATED]

By



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Contents

The Children of the Castle
Contents 3
Chapter One. 4
Ruby and Mavis.
Chapter Two. 16
Winfried.
Chapter Three. 30
The Princess with the Forget-me-not Eyes.
Chapter Four. 43
A Boy and a Boat.
Chapter Five. 57
The Fisherman's Hut.
Chapter Six. 71
Bertrand.
Chapter Seven. 85
In the Turret-Room.
Chapter Eight. 97
A Naughty Plan.
Chapter Nine. 111
Beginnings?
Chapter Ten. 123
"Forget-Me-Not Land."
Chapter Eleven. 133
Down the Well.
Chapter Twelve. 145
Opened Eyes.

Mrs. Molesworth

"The Children of the Castle"

Chapter One.

Ruby and Mavis.



“Hast thou seen that lordly castle,
That castle by the sea?
Golden and red above it
The clouds float gorgeously.” **[Trans. of Uhland: Longfellow.]**

Do you remember Gratian—Gratian Conyfer, the godson of the four winds, the boy who lived at the old farmhouse up among the moors, where these strange beautiful sisters used to meet? Do you remember how full of fancies and stories Gratian's little head was, and how sometimes he put them into words to please Fergus, the lame child he loved so much? The story I am now going to tell you is one of these. I think it was their favourite one. I can not say that it is in the very words in which Gratian used to tell it, for it was not till long, long after those boyish days that it came to be written down. But all the same it is his story.

How long ago it was I cannot say, nor can I tell you exactly where it was. This is not a story for which you will require an atlas, nor a history of England or of any other country, nor a dictionary of dates. All those wise and clever and useful things you may put out of your heads for a bit. I am just going to tell you a story. It was somewhere and somewhen, and I think that will do.

The "it" was a castle—and something else. But first about the castle. It was really worthy of the name, for it was very old and very strong, and in ancient days it had been used as a place of defence, and had a look about it of not having forgotten this. (I am afraid this sounds a *very* little historical. I must take care.) It was very big too, towering over the sea-washed cliffs on which it stood as if defying the winds and the waves to do their worst, frowning at them with the little round window-eyes of its turrets, like a cross old ogre. But it was a two-faced castle; it was only on one side—the rocky side, where the cliffs went down precipitously to the water—that it looked grim and forbidding. Inland, you could scarcely have believed it was the same castle at all. For here, towards the sunny south, it seemed to change into a gracious, comfortable, hospitably-inviting mansion; it did not

look nearly so high on this side, for the ivy-covered turrets had more the effect of dimly dark trees in the background, and the bright wide-windowed rooms opened on to trim lawns and terraces gay with flowers. That was the case in summer-time at least. The whole look of things varied a good deal according to the seasons. In winter, grim as it was, I don't know but that the fortress-front, so to speak, of the great building had the best of it. For it was grand to watch the waves breaking down below when you knew you were safe and cosy behind the barred panes of the turret windows, those windows pierced in the walls through such a thickness of stone that each was like a little room within a room. And even in winter there were wonderful sunsets to be seen from the children's favourite turret-room—the one which had two windows to the west and only one to the cold north.

For the "something else" was the children. Much more interesting than the castle—indeed, what would any castle or any house be without them? Not that the castle was not a very interesting place to live in, as you will hear, but all *places*, I think, need people to bring out their interest. People who have been, sometimes, and sometimes, people that still are. There was a mixture of both in my castle. But first and foremost I will tell you of the children, whose home it was, and perhaps is yet.

There were only two of them, only two, that is to say, who lived there regularly; they were girls, twin-sisters, Ruby and Mavis were their names, and at this time they were nearly twelve years old. I will not say much in description of them, it is best to let you find out about them for yourselves. They were almost exactly the same size; Ruby perhaps a very little the taller, and at first sight every one thought them exceedingly like each other. And so they were, so far as the colour of their hair, the shape of their features, their eyes and complexions went. They were pretty little girls, and they made a pretty pair. But the more you got to know them the less alike you got to

think them, till at last you be an to wonder how you ever could have thought them like at all! And even almost at the first glance *some* differences were to be seen. Ruby was certainly the prettier. Her eyes were brighter, her colour more brilliant, her way of walking and holding herself more graceful, even her very manner of talking was more interesting and attractive.

"What a charming child she is," said strangers always. "Such pretty winning ways, so sweet and unselfish, so clever and intelligent! What a pity that dull little Mavis is not more like her—why, I thought them the image of each other at first, and now I can scarcely believe they are sisters. I am sure poor Ruby must find Mavis very trying, she is so stupid; but Ruby is so good and patient with her—it quite adds another charm to the dear child."

This opinion or one like it was always the first expressed—well, perhaps not *always*, but almost always. Now I will let you judge for yourselves.

It was late autumn. So late, that one felt inclined to wish it were already winter, without any thought or talk of a milder season. For it was very cold, and thick-walled though the castle was, it needed any amount of huge fires and curtains in front of the doorways and double windows, and, in the modern rooms, hot air or water-pipes to make it comfortable in severe weather. And all these things in winter it had. But the housekeeper had rather old-fashioned and stiff ideas. She did everything by rule. On a certain day in the autumn the winter arrangements were begun, on a certain day in the spring they came to an end. And this, whatever the weather was,—not a very good plan, for as everybody knows, the weather itself is not so formal and particular. There are quite warm, mild days sometimes in late November, and really bitterly cold ones in April and May. But there would have been no manner of use in trying to make old Bertha see this. Winter

should stop on a certain day, and summer should come, and *vice versâ*. It had always been so in her time, and Bertha did not like new-fangled ways.

So everybody shivered, and the more daring ones, of whom Ruby was the foremost, scolded and grumbled. But it was no use.

"You may as well try to bear it patiently, my dear," said cousin Hortensia, "the mild weather must come soon. I will lend you one of my little shawls if you like. You will feel warmer when you have been out for a run."

Cousin Hortensia was the lady who lived at the castle to teach and take care of the two little girls. For their mother was dead and their father was often away. He had some appointment at the court. I am not sure what it was, but he was considered a very important person. He was kind and good, as you will see, and it was always a great delight to the children when he came home, and a great sorrow when he had to leave.

Cousin Hortensia was only a very far-off cousin, but the children always called her so. For though she was really with them as a governess as well as a friend, it would not have seemed so nice to call her by any other name. She was very gentle, and took the best care she could of them. And she was clever and taught them well. But she was rather a dreamy sort of person. She had lived for many years a very quiet life, and knew little of the outside world. She had known and loved the twins' mother, and their father too, when they were but boy and girl, for she was no longer young. And she loved Ruby and Mavis, Ruby especially, so dearly, that she could see no fault in them. It was to Ruby she was speaking and offering a shawl. They were sitting in one of the rooms on the south side of the castle, sheltered from the stormy winds which often came whirling down from the north. But even here it was cold, or at least chilly.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders.

"You always offer me a shawl as if I were seventy, cousin Hortensia," she said rather pertly. "It would be much better if you would speak to Bertha, and *insist* on her having the fires lighted now it is so cold. When I'm grown up I can tell you *I* won't stand the old thing's tyranny."

Cousin Hortensia looked rather distressed. There was some sense in what Ruby said, but there were a great many other things to be considered, all of which she could not explain to the children. Bertha was an exceedingly valuable servant, and if she were interfered with and went away it would be almost impossible to get any one like her. For it was necessary that the castle should be managed with economy as well as care.

"I would speak to Bertha if there was anything really important to complain of," she said. "But this weather cannot last, and you are not cold at night, are you?"

"No," said Mavis, "not at all."

"Bertha would never get all the work done unless she took her own way," Miss Hortensia went on. "But I'll tell you what I'll do, Ruby. I will have the fire lighted in my own little room. I don't need to trouble Bertha about that, thanks to your kind father's thoughtfulness. My little wood-cupboard is always kept filled by Tim. And when you come in from your walk we will have tea there instead of here, and spend a cosy evening."

Ruby darted at Miss Hortensia and kissed her.

"That will be lovely," she said. "And as it's to be a sort of a treat evening, do tell us a story after tea, dear cousin."

"If you're not tired," put in Mavis. "Cousin Hortensia had a headache this morning," she said to Ruby, turning to her.

"Rubbish!" cried Ruby, but she checked herself quickly. "I don't mean that," she went on, "but Mavis is such a kill-joy. You won't be tired will you, dear cousin? Mavis doesn't care for stories as much as I do. I've read nearly all the books in the library, and she never reads if she can help it."

"I've enough to do with my lesson-books," said Mavis with a sigh. "And I can scarcely ever find stories to read that I understand. But I like *hearing* stories, for then I can ask what it means if there comes a puzzling part."

"Poor Mavis!" said Ruby contemptuously, "she's always getting puzzled."

"We must try to make your wits work a little quicker, my dear," said Miss Hortensia. "You will get to like reading when you are older, I daresay. I must look out for some easier story-books for you."

"But I love *hearing* stories, cousin," said Mavis. "Please don't think that I don't like your stories. I do so like that one about when you came to the castle once when you were a little girl and about the dream you had."

"I don't care for stories about dreams," said Ruby. "I like to hear about when cousin Hortensia was a young lady and went to balls at the court. I would love to have beautiful dresses and go to the court. Do you think father will take me when I'm grown up, cousin Hortensia?"

"I daresay he will. You will both go, probably," Miss Hortensia replied. "But you must not think too much of it or you may be disappointed. Your mother was very beautiful and everybody admired her when she went out in the world, but she always loved best to be here at the castle."

Ruby made a face.

"Then I don't think I'm like her," she said. "I'm very tired of this stupid old place already. And if you tell your dream-story to Mavis, you must tell me the one about how mother looked when she went to her first ball. She was dressed all in white, wasn't she?"

"No," Mavis answered. "In blue—wavy, changing blue, like the colour the sea is sometimes."

"*Blue*," Ruby repeated, "what nonsense! Isn't it nonsense, cousin Hortensia? Didn't our mother wear all white at her first ball—everybody does."

Miss Hortensia looked up in surprise.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Who ever told you she wore blue, Mavis?"

Mavis grew very red.

"I wasn't speaking of our mother," she said. "It was the lady you saw in your dream I meant, cousin Hortensia."

"You silly girl!" said Ruby. "Isn't she stupid?" Mavis looked ready to cry.

"You must get out of that habit of not listening to what people say, my dear," said Miss Hortensia. "Now you had better both go out—wrap up warmly, and don't stay very long, and when you come in you will find me in my own room."

"And you'll tell us stories, won't you, dear good cousin?" said Ruby coaxingly, as she put up her pretty face for a kiss. "If you'll tell me *my* story, you may tell Mavis hers afterwards."

"Well, well, we'll see," said Miss Hortensia, smiling.

"I do so like the story of the blue lady," said Mavis, very softly, as they left the room.

Five minutes later the twins were standing under the great archway which led to the principal entrance to the castle. At one end this archway opened on to a winding road cut in the rock, at the foot of which was a little sandy cove—a sort of refuge among the cliffs. On each side of it the waves broke noisily, but they never entirely covered the cove, even at very high tides, and except in exceedingly rough and stormy weather the water rippled in gently, as if almost asking pardon for intruding at all. When the sea was out there was a scrambling path among the rocks to the left, by which one could make one's way to a little fishing-hamlet about a quarter of a mile off on the west. For, as I should have explained before, the castle stood almost at a corner, the coast-line turning sharply southwards, after running for many miles almost due east and west.

The proper way to this hamlet was by the same inland road which led to the castle, and which, so the legend ran, was much more modern than the building itself, much more modern at least than the north side of it. That grim fortress-like front was very ancient. It had been built doubtless for a safe retreat, and originally had only been accessible from the sea, being in those days girt round on the land side by enormous walls, in which was no entrance of any kind. A part of these walls, ivy-clad and crumbling, still remained, but sufficient had been pulled down to give space for the pleasant sunny rooms and the sheltered garden with its terraces.

Ruby shivered as she and Mavis stood a moment hesitating in the archway.

"It is cold here," she said; "the wind seems to come from everywhere at once. Which way shall we go, Mavis?"

"It would be a little warmer at the back, perhaps," said Mavis. "But I don't care much for the gardens on a dull day like this."

"Nor do I," said Ruby, "there's nothing to see. Now at the front it's almost nicer on a dull day than when it's sunny—except of course for the cold. Let's go down to the cove, Mavis, and see how it feels there." It was curious that they always spoke of the fortress side as the front, even though the southern part of the building was what would have naturally seemed so.

"I'd like to stay out till sunset and see the colours up in the turret windows," said Mavis, as they clambered down the rocky path. "I wish I knew which of these rooms is the one where the blue fairy lady used to come. I do think cousin Hortensia might have found out."

"Rubbish!" said Ruby. It was rather a favourite expression of hers, I am afraid. "I don't believe cousin Hortensia ever saw her. It was all a fancy because she had heard about it. If ever she did come, it was ages and ages ago, and I don't believe she did even then. I don't believe one bit about spirits and fairies and dreams and things like that." Mavis said nothing, but a puzzled, disappointed look crept into her eyes.

"Perhaps it's because I'm stupid," she said, "but I shouldn't like to think like you, Ruby. And you know the story wouldn't have come all of itself, and cousin Hortensia, though she calls it a dream, can't really explain it that way."

"If you know so much about it, why do you keep teasing to have it told again?" said Ruby impatiently. "Well, here we are at the cove; what are we to do now?"

Mavis looked about her. It was chilly, and the sky was grey, but over towards the west there was a lightening. The wind came in little puffs down here, now and again only, for they were well under the shelter of the cliffs. And up above, the old castle frowning down upon them—his own children, whose ancestors he had housed and sheltered and protected for years that counted by centuries—suddenly

seemed to give a half unwilling smile. It was a ray of thin afternoon sunshine striking across the turret windows.

"See, see," said Mavis. "The sun's coming out. I'm sure the sky must be pretty and bright round where the cottages are. The sea's quite far enough back, and it's going out. Do let us go and ask how the baby—Joan's baby, I mean—is to-day."

"Very well," said Ruby. "Not that I care much how the baby is, but there's rather a nice scrambly way home up behind Joan's house. I found it one day when you had a cold and weren't with me. It brings you out down by the stile into the little fir-wood—just where you'd never expect to find yourself. And oh, Mavis, there's such a queer little cottage farther along the shore, at least just above the shore that way. I saw it from the back, along the scrambly path."

"I wonder whose it is," said Mavis. "I don't remember any cottage that way. Oh yes, I think I remember passing it one day long ago when Joan was our nurse, and she made me run on quick, but she didn't say why."

"Perhaps it's haunted, or some nonsense like that," said Ruby with her contemptuous air. "I'll ask Joan to-day. And if we pass it I'll walk just as slow as ever I can on purpose. You'll see, Mavis."

"We'd better run now," said Mavis. "The sands are pretty firm just here, and cousin Hortensia said we were to make ourselves warm. Let's have a race."

They had left the cove and were making their way to the hamlet by the foot of the rocks, where at low tide there was a narrow strip of pebbly sand, only here and there broken by out-jutting crags which the children found it very amusing to clamber over. Their voices sounded clear and high in the air. For the wind seemed to have fallen with the receding tide. By the time they reached the cottages they

were both in a glow, and Ruby had quite forgotten her indignation at old Bertha's fireless rooms.

Chapter Two.

Winfried.



"And somewhat southward toward the noon,
Whence lies a way up to the moon;
And thence the fairy can as soon
Pass to the earth below it."

Drayton.