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1. Thackers Farm

I, Penelope Taberner Cameron, tell this story of happenings when I was a young girl. To this day every detail of my strange experience is clear as light. I see the beautiful countryside with its woods and gentle hills stretching out infinitely green, and the little brook shimmering with sunlight as it flows under the hazel groves. I hear the murmur of woodpigeons, sleepy and monotonous in the beech wood, and the warm intimate call of the cuckoo in the orchard by the house. Ice-cold water springs from the mossy earth and I stoop with cupped hands, one clasping the other, to

sip the draught, and the taste of that water is on my lips many years afterwards. I smell the hot scents of the herb garden drenched in sunshine, and the perfume of honeysuckle after rain, but stronger than these is the rich fragrance of the old house, made up of wood-smoke, haystacks, and old old age, mingled together indissolubly. All these scents and sounds are part of the story I have to tell, with light and darkness, shadows and tragedy interwoven.

I was called Taberner after my mother's family, yeoman farmers of Derbyshire stock, and Penelope is a name which was often given to members of that family in bygone days. I was born in Chelsea, and lived with my parents in Cheyne Row, near the river. My sister Alison was older than I and had different interests, and my brother Ian, who was near me in age, was her companion, so I was left very much to myself. I was a delicate girl, and often had to miss school. I was small, too, for my years, and this separated me from the others who were tall and strong.

When I was kept at home through illness I pored over many leather-backed books from my father's shelves, and found my own friends in the pages. I read legends and folk-lore, books of poetry and stories of knights in armour, antique tales which had been forgotten and lay thick with dust under piled-up newspapers and periodicals. My favourite occupations were drawing and modelling, and I worked with my pencil, and a lump of clay, spending hours with them when I ought to have been out of doors taking exercise.

Our house in Cheyne Row was little and old, with four steps leading to the green front door, and a little flight going down to the basement. We had the furniture brought by my Grandmother Penelope from Derbyshire, ancient oak chests with inlaid bands and

carved initials, Bible boxes, tables riddled with worm-holes, and a great arm-chair with scrolls along the front and a hinged seat which held a score of books inside it.

In the oak presses and the writing-desk were queer musty smells, and from my earliest days I used to lean over them and breathe the strange mildewed odours which seemed to rise from them like incense.

When we were allowed a special treat, and it was my turn to choose, I always asked for the pleasure of rummaging in a great oak chest. My mother gave me a worn, heavy key, and I unlocked it, using both hands for it was stiff and the lock in the carved hollowed panel was unyielding. Then as the key turned I lifted the lid and stood for a moment smelling rapturously at a delicate odour of musk and old linen, and the smell of long-ago which came out of the dark depths – for it was pitch-black in that deep chest. Then I plunged in a hand and drew up first one object and then another, and I laid them on the table by my side. As I reached down in the chest I had to bend so low I nearly fell inside and I was fearful lest I should slip and be shut up there. So after the lid was opened a heavy cudgel was propped inside to keep the massive top from dropping upon me and making me lost for ever.

Sometimes Ian and Alison came to help, for they loved the chest as much as I, but I had an advantage. I could invent tales about the things we found – or perhaps I should say I told the stories, certain that they were true. As I picked up the cashmere shawls, the silk-embroidered waistcoats, the pistol with its mother-of-pearl and incised roses and leaves, I seemed to hear a voice telling me about them. Then even clever Alison listened to me.

'Come and hear Penelope,' she cried. 'Quick!

Quick!' and they sat with wide eyes as I told the tales and Ian clapped his hands and made me blush with pleasure.

Then I folded the dresses and smoothed the silks and twisted the tarnished ribbons and tassels, and I replaced all as I had found them, for although I was untidy with my own belongings, I never dared misuse these ancient possessions.

There had never been much money in our house, with three children to feed and educate. Father wrote scientific articles which nobody printed, and Mother did all the housework except the scrubbing which was done by stout Mrs Jakes, our charwoman. Alison and I always made the beds, and Ian helped to wash up, but even then it was a busy household, and there was always some task waiting. I was the lazy one, but Alison usually discovered me hiding in the dark basement kitchen, reading in the corner, and up the stairs she fetched me, an unwilling helper, to dust and tidy the rooms.

I always answered the front door bell, it was my special privilege. Footsteps walked along the pavement in front of our house, people going to see Mr Carlyle's house farther up the street, people going to the Embankment to stare at the great barges on the Thames, people hurrying for buses, or sauntering on pleasure, and I listened to these steps, imagining their owners, inventing adventures for them. Somebody would walk up our four steps, which were stoned with sand as in Mother's country childhood, and the bell clanged and rattled. I opened the green door very gently, just a crack, with intense excitement, wondering if a fairy godmother would be waiting there. It was usually a flower-woman with a basket of tulips on her head, or a man selling muffins, and nobody like the magician I

had imagined. Once a boy came with bunches of cowslips, great golden balls smelling of honey and wine, and this excited me very much. I ran helter-skelter down the crooked narrow stairs to the basement calling: 'Cowslips! Cowslips from the country. Oh Mother!' but I slipped in my hurry and sprained my ankle. This was another expense for us, and I had to lie for days on the couch without even the pleasure of door-opening.

At night, when I was in bed, I had a private joy. I slept in the front attic, a little room with a view sideways to the river. Alison's bed was in a corner and mine by the window. In cold weather we had a fire in the high fireplace with its two hobs, and we roasted chestnuts or made toast and pretended we were at boarding-school or caravanning, and I felt on an equality with Alison. But when my sister was asleep, at eleven o'clock or later, a fiddler used to play at the little inn across the way. I always awoke when he began, and as he walked out of the inn down the street to the river-side, I in my thoughts danced after him on tiptoe, swaying to the music, swinging in the air. Then strange and entrancing visions came to me, flowering trees waved their branches before my eyes, lilies sprang from the earth and blossomed as I watched them, and misted dream-like figures seemed to float up the streets moving and speaking to one another, and I was with them, living another life from my own.

One day I met one of these people of my dreams on our own stairway. Ours was a steep, crooked stair, with a handrail on one side, very narrow, with rooms leading off it so suddenly that it was easy to fall headlong as one stepped from a doorway. We had a Morris wallpaper with leaves on it, like a green wood in spring, and I used to sit on the stairs, pretending I was in a

forest far away from London with birds singing round me. I was sitting there one evening, with my feet tucked under me, in the blue dusk, waiting for the lamplighter to come whistling down the street to bring a gleam to the stairway. There was a street lamp near, and this shone brilliantly through the fanlight over the door and saved us from using our own gas-lamp. We had no electric light, the landlord refused to have the old house wired, so we put pennies in a slot for our gas.

I was suddenly aware how quiet it was, never a sound, I might have been the only person in the world. Even the clock stopped ticking, and the mice ceased rustling in the wainscot. I turned my head and saw a lady coming downstairs from the upper floor. She was dressed in a black dress which swept round her like a cloud, and at her neck was a narrow white frill which shone like ivory. Her eyes were very bright, and blue as violets. I sprang to my feet and smiled up at her, into the beautiful grave face she bent towards me. She gave an answering smile, and her deep-set eyes seemed to pierce me, and I caught my breath as I stood aside to let her pass. I never heard a footstep, she was there before I was aware. She went by as I leaned against the wall, and I pressed myself against the paper to leave room for her full floating skirts which took all the stairway. I never felt them touch me, and this gave me a curious sensation. Soundlessly she swayed down the stairway, and I stood watching her, smelling the sweet, faint odour of her dress, seeing the pallor of the hands which held her ruffled skirts, yet hearing nothing at all.

I leaned over the rail to watch her, and suddenly she was gone. The clock ticked loudly, the sounds of the street came to my ears, the lamplighter's whistle, clear and round, fluted through the air, and the bright gleam of the gas danced through the fanlight upon the pat-

terned wall. I ran downstairs and pushed open the door into the sitting-room, expecting to see her there. The room was empty, and I went thoughtfully down to the basement where my mother was cooking, and asked about the lady.

'There is no one, child,' she exclaimed. 'You've imagined her. It is easy to think you see some one in the dusk with flickering street lights falling on the walls. It was the shadow of somebody in the street perhaps.'

I was positive I had seen the lady and I described her little pleated frill and the way her skirts hung over a quilted petticoat like the skirts in the oak chest.

Mother was very quiet, as if she were thinking what to say next. Then she changed the conversation, asking me if we would all like to make treacle toffee that night, for soon it would be Guy Fawkes's Day, and we should have fireworks as usual in our little paved yard, where the water-tank stood and the tubs which we made into flower-gardens each spring.

We made the toffee, and burnt our fingers as we picked up the little streaky coils which lay in alluring shapes at the bottom of the cup of cold water. I thought no more of the lady, nor did I see her again, but my mother looked at me sometimes with a curious glance, as if she were anxious about me. I overheard my father say very impatiently: 'Nonsense, Carlin. I don't believe such moonshine, for moonshine it is. You with your country superstitions! You say she has inherited second sight from your grandmother, but I think she needs a complete change from London. All three of them ought to go away for a month or two, and breathe fresh air, and these things wouldn't happen. Now let me hear no more of this.' He muttered 'second fiddlesticks' and banged out of the room.

Mother was very kind and gentle with me, as if she realized my solitary life for the first time. When I went to bed she came upstairs with me, pretending she had nothing else to do. She sat for a long time on the window-sill, talking of nice comfortable things, like Christmas presents, and pantomimes, singing happy songs of her own childhood, but I wasn't lonely, and I curled down in bed content.

That winter was very long and trying, but to me it was like other winters, with days of dreariness when things went wrong and the rain soaked me to the skin and my throat was sore, or the fog choked me as I fumbled my way to school, and days too of radiant beauty when snow fell and the church at the bottom of the street near by wore a white bonnet on its tower. Then the gardens and trees of Cheyne Walk were like a fairy-tale and I ran along the paths with Alison and Ian throwing snowballs and shouting with excitement in the clear whiteness and the sharp frostiness of the air. To me it was meat and drink and I wanted to stay out all night, looking up at the sparkling stars above the Thames, catching their glimmer in the whitened boughs of the plane-trees, stepping through the blue shadows on the trampled snow. But the street-cleaners came every morning and swept away the beauty so that the dark pavements were bared. The wintry days passed, the sky dropping its burden of glittering crystals, the dustmen carrying it off as if it were something wicked.

My mother lighted my bedroom fire, and I sat by its glow with her, we two crouched on the hearthrug, the woollen curtains drawn over the window, and a kettle singing on the hob for cocoa. As she told her stories of her own girlhood, how she used to toboggan down the

hills by moonlight, steering the wooden sledge past the holly bushes and by the wild brook to the last dip, how she cooked potatoes in a wood fire under the stars, and walked with the shepherd up the snowy fields to take care of the lambs, I could hear the faint sound of the fiddle in the inn across the road. It seemed to be part of her tales, and I thought of the little girl she described in scarlet tam-o'-shanter and scarlet shawl tied round her body, riding triumphantly down those lovely great hills with a fiddler tall and thin and outlandish playing fantastic icy tunes to her from his seat in the holly bushes.

But I got one cold after another, and then I was very ill. I don't remember that clearly, except the visits of the doctor and whispers behind the screen, and the crackle of the fire as I lay in bed with Mother sitting by me. When I came downstairs I was strangely weak and wretched, and I wanted nothing at all.

'Penelope must go away,' my mother said firmly. 'All three of them are ill with this terrible winter of snow and fogs.'

'We haven't any money,' my father groaned. 'Where can we send them?'

'I'm going to write to Thackers Farm and see if Aunt Tissie will have them for a while. She won't charge much, there are plenty of spare rooms, and the children will enjoy it.'

'Oh Mother! Can we all go?' cried Alison. 'What is it like? Is it real country?'

'Shall I be able to ride and shoot?' asked Ian. But I said nothing.

'I don't even know if Aunt Tissie can take you, children, and I doubt if there will be much riding. Your Great-Aunt Tissie is not young, and she's old-fashioned

in her ways.' My mother pondered, as if she were thinking of reasons to persuade her aunt to have three careless young people suddenly thrust upon her.

'Tell her that I can darn and mend,' cried Alison, 'and I will help with the cooking.' It was noble of her for she hated sewing and cooking.

'And I'll help Great-Uncle What's-his-name. Mother, what is his name, your uncle?' asked Ian.

'Uncle Barnabas. Yes, he might be glad of help, if it is real help and not hindrance,' my mother agreed.

She spent a long time writing the letter that night, and I sat waiting to take it to the pillar-box. I wanted to push it safely deep down with a little prayer that Aunt Tissie would accept us. Mother was offering £2 a week for the lot of us, board and lodging, and we were a hungry three, but that was all she could possibly afford. We always knew about money in our house, just what everything cost, and that made us more careful.

At last the letter was sealed and I slipped it gently into the box with a fervent prayer. Then I stood for a moment by Chelsea Church, thinking of Sir Thomas More and his children who had perhaps walked there when Chelsea was a village and gardens and fields spread around. I thought of them so long, somebody stopped and asked me if anything was the matter, and blushing furiously, I hurried home again. It was always difficult to find a place to think without being noticed and questioned.

A few days later the expected letter came from Thackers. I lay in bed with a sore throat, listening to the noises in the street below, the cat's-meat man, the newsboys, the rumble of barrows and flower-carts. Then the postman's step came tapping down the street, and I was sure there was a letter for us. I flew down-

stairs in my bare feet to the dining-room where my parents were having breakfast alone.

'Go back to bed at once,' scolded my mother, but I begged to stay and curled myself by the fire to hear the news when the postman stopped at our door.

Dear Niece Carlin [my mother read],

I was very pleased to receive your letter. I am sorry the children are badly. I have talked it over with Brother Barnabas, and we shall be glad to take them. I wish I could do it for nothing, but we have had some losses of stock. We had to buy hay, the crop was so light, and the hard winter has made everything dear. We will meet the children if you let us know the train, and we will do our best to make them happy.

I have no more news at present, dear Niece Carlin.

Your affec. aunt,

CICELY ANNE TABERNER

Alison and Ian had come down, and we all shouted together: 'Hurrah! When can we go?' My sore throat miraculously disappeared, so that I was quite well the very same day.

Our clothes were washed and ironed and mended. Our suitcases were brought out of the corner of the top landing, and carried to our room where they stood gaping wide their mouths and swallowing all we put inside. Alison and I folded the garments, our best frocks, Alison's coral-coloured, mine green, and two small aprons with gay French stripes which Mother made for us from a piece of linen she had bought on her honeymoon. These were for housework she said, and I felt I could do anything wearing my little apron, but I never guessed where it would accompany me.

Ian hunted about seeking darkly for catapults and knives. Alison took her workbasket and chose her

favourite authors. As for me I took my sketchbook, and Hans Andersen.

At last all was ready and we set off, carrying our bags to the bus for St Pancras. We settled down in the express which speeded north through the centre of England. We had to change at Derby and a different atmosphere enveloped us as we got into the slow train. It was market-day, and people crowded into our carriage, stout folk with baskets of cabbage plants and bags filled with sausages and pork pies and fresh herrings, and as each large person peered in at the open door at the already full seats, the others called: 'Come along in, there's plenty of room for a little one.' They all knew one another, and we three, squeezed together in the space of one, listened to their talk. A stout lady offered us humbugs from a paper bag, and Alison stiffly refused, but I was glad to eat them. An old bearded man brought red pears out of his bulging pocket, nearly dislocating the whole carriage as he struggled to draw them forth, and again I took some and the others refused.

'And where do you three young people come from?' asked one. 'You're not belonging here, I can tell.'

'From London,' said Alison proudly, as if she had said 'From Buckingham Palace'.

'London! Harkee there, John. They've come from London. Eh! It's a tidy big place. Not like hereabouts. My sister lives there in Camden Town. I don't expect you've ever set eyes on her, but she's the very spit of me.'

The others agreed the two sisters were as alike as two peas in a pod, and they talked of that lady in Camden Town, how London had rubbed the corners off her and how she was smooth as silk.

Ian began to laugh but Alison nudged him to be quiet.

'And where may ye be going?' asked a farmer, and he settled his large shape by my side and lifted his full pockets out of the way so that they did not hurt me.

'To Thackers Farm, near Hollow,' I told him. All eyes were turned on us, and those who had not heard were now told.

'Thackers. To old Barnabas Taberner's. He wasn't at market today. Well I never! Be ye related?'

'Miss Cicely Taberner is my Great-Aunt,' replied Alison primly.

'And Mister Barnabas Taberner is my Great-Uncle,' I added.

'Then ye'll be the childer of Penelope's daughter, Carlin, as married a Scotchman, up Edinburgh way, and went to live at Lunnon. Well I never! Well, ye'll liven 'em up. It's a quiet spot, Thackers. Quieter than most, but ye'll do well there. It'll put some roses in your cheeks, and ye need 'em.'

He pinched my cheeks in a friendly manner, and then turned back to the others. Soon they were all talking of market prices, and the poor prices of cattle, and the frost of winter and deaths and births. We sat silent, looking out at the darkening landscape, with a village here and there, and woods and hills and the little wild river which ran foaming alongside.

At each station somebody got out and the rest cried good night, and sent messages to those at home. We felt they were all one family, they knew everybody and were friendly together. There was a general lifting down of packages and searching under seats for sacks of provender, and we joined in the chorus as we watched them set off with hands laden to be met by others who nodded and smiled back as if they knew us.

Then we came to our station, and our fellow travellers said good night, and started us towards the station yard where they said the cart would be waiting. As we walked down the platform with its tiny roof and little stone booking-office we were hailed by an enormous old man wearing a great top-hat and widely flapping trousers. His red smiling face was wreathed in whiskers, and he waved a large hand and beckoned to us.

'Be ye Niece Carlin's childer from Lunnon?' he asked, and we said we were.

'I'm your Uncle Barnabas,' said he and he shook hands, imprisoning our fingers in his great palms so that mine ached for half an hour afterwards.

'Welcome,' said he. 'I'm right glad to see ye. Come along, for ye'll be starved after your journey. Come along to the cart that's waiting over there.' He nodded to the darkness, and swept up all our bags as if they were straws. I sniffed the cold, scented air as if I could never get enough of it. There was not a light in the countryside, never a house, nothing at all except the river which we could hear roaring in its rocky bed. Then we saw the cart with its couple of lamps, and rugs and cushions piled upon the seat. Uncle Barnabas went to the horse's head and spoke to her, and the solitary porter carried some packages from the van and stowed them under the seat with our luggage.

'Get up, all on ye,' said Uncle Barnabas. 'We'll have to squeeze tight, for I didn't know you were so bigly growed. The little 'un must sit on the stool as I luckily brought down with me.' He drew out a scarlet stool and I perched myself upon it. He wrapped us round with rugs and tucked us up tightly. When he settled himself on the seat he nearly overwhelmed us with his vastness, and sent the shafts of the cart down so that we had to rise again as he readjusted the seat. At last

we were all ready, and the horse, which had been looking round to see what all the pother was about, started off.

Through a long winding valley we drove, between wooded hill-sides, with here and there a cottage or a farm with its point of light. We left the river, and turned into another more open valley, with scattered cottages. At last we came to a sharp bend by a little brook which had wandered about by our side, singing and chattering, for some time.

'It isn't far now,' said Uncle Barnabas, who had been silent for most of the drive. I found out later when I knew him better that he seldom spoke when driving, for he wished to share the peace of the country. 'It isn't far, just round the edge of the road. That's our brook, fed by our springs. Thackers brook that is.' He nodded to it as to a friend and I nodded too.

We drove slowly up a hill, where a dark, mysterious mass of buildings and roofs was reared against the side of the valley. Near it, pricked out in black on the sky was the square tower of a church, and a huddle of pointed haystacks and gable ends of barns, clear in the primrose glow which lingered in the high parts of the hills.

The horse stopped and waited as if it wanted something, and turned its head like Balaam's ass about to speak.

'Out you get, except the little lass,' said Uncle Barnabas. 'She can sit still, for she's tired. Young folk like you walk up the hills. The horses wynd here, you see. Out you get, my dears. Me and the little lass and Sally goes up here alone.'

So out sprang Alison and Ian, and joyfully stretched their cramped limbs.

'Shall I push and help the horse?' asked Ian.

'Aye. Give a good hard shove. Sally will be grateful.'

They pushed and pressed the back of the cart and I wished I could also walk, for I was slipping off my stool all the time. There were lovely smells of flowers and wet moss and trees, and adorable noises of shuffling horses in the fields through which we passed. Creatures ran to the walls, and the lights of the cart fell upon the eyes watching us over ivy-tufts, and we saw the long head of a horse or the horns of a rough-haired bullock.

But the house was near, dogs were barking and rushing out, and there was pandemonium for a few minutes as I climbed down among them, and Uncle Barnabas tried to silence them. Ian stroked them, but I shrank back for a moment.

'They won't hurt ye. Hi! Roger! Sam! Flossie! Off ye go!' called Uncle Barnabas, and the dogs ran back to the great white porch of the house.

Then Aunt Tissie came out through a gold firelit doorway, and clasped us in the darkness. We were surprised how small and odd she was. She was a little old woman, with a clear skin and rosy cheeks and eyes as bright as stars. Her back was rounded with carrying heavy weights, but her foot was neat and trim, and she walked very swiftly, with little quick steps, like a tripping fairy.

She gave us smacking kisses, and led us into the great hot kitchen, where the fire blazed in a wide, open hearth, and a kettle sung and lights came sparkling and glittering from brass and copper and grey pewter. Such a smell of cooking there was – a brown fowl baking in front of the blaze, sausages sizzling in the frying-pan, and the logs hissing and spluttering on the hearth.

'Let me have a look at ye all,' said Aunt Tissie. 'So this is Ian! Ah! He's nearly a man!' She shook Ian's hand as heartily as Uncle Barnabas had shaken it, and he swelled with pride.

'And what's your name, my dear?' she asked, turning to Alison. She kissed her again and looked admiringly up at my tall sister.

'And the little wench? She's a Taberner any one can see! Penelope? Why there's always a Penelope in our family. Us'll be friends, Penelope, won't us?' she said, and I replied fervently: 'Yes, Aunt Tissie.'

'Now come up to your bedrooms at once, for I've got a fine tea ready for you, and I'm sure you're clemmed,' she went on in her soft rolling voice.

She took us through a narrow doorway to the back stairs, for the front stairs were for visitors, and we were relations. It was a crooked twisting stairway, with steps worn and hollow, and we stumbled up them following the flickering light of the candle to the landing.

'Here you two girls will sleep,' said Aunt Tissie, throwing open a door into a large bedroom. 'And next door is Ian's room. If you want anything, my room is at the end of the passage.'

She set the candle on the flowered chintz dressing-table and then lighted another candle from ours and took Ian to his room.

'Mind your head,' I cried as Alison bumped into the oak beam which spanned the sloping ceiling, and we both laughed for we had never hit a ceiling before.

It was a lovely room with the most delicious smell of lavender and strange bitter herbs, an aroma which filled the house. I sniffed round and round, opening drawers and peeping under the glossy chintz which covered the dressing-table like a frilled skirt, and I sat on the rocking-chair and ran my fingertips over

the curious carvings of the great chests and oak boxes.

Alison had an enormous wooden bedstead with 'Sleepe Welle' carved on the head, and a diapered blue-flowered curtain hung in thick folds from the bed-tester over the snowy pillows. I whooped with excitement and sprang on the piled-up feather bed which sank under me like a snowdrift.

'Now, my poppet,' said Aunt Tissie, coming in again. 'Don't you be lepping and cavorting on the beds. You'll spoil 'em for sleeping,' and I sidled off, ashamed.

My own bed was dark oak, smelling of beeswax, with wooden balls on the four posts. It stood on a raised platform so that I had to go up a step to get into it. There was an exquisite patchwork quilt over it, but I had no time to look closely at the myriad colours, for Aunt Tissie told us to hurry downstairs and have a hot wash and come to tea. So we brushed our hair and changed our shoes and ran to peep at Ian's room.

It was as exciting as ours, with its yellow wooden bed, and a bunch of lilies and roses painted upon the head in a circle. A patchwork quilt covered it, but it was plainer than mine.

'Just lift this up,' said Ian.

'It's like padded armour,' I cried, for it was quite heavy and seemed to be stuffed with blankets.

I looked round at the corner washstand with a bowl sunk in a hole, and the sheepskin mat on the bare, white boards.

But Aunt tinkled a bell at the bottom of the stairs, and we scuttled down laughing with our bobbing candles to the great kitchen, to wash at the sink in rain-tub water, which made me think of moss and autumn leaves, to rub our faces on lavender-scented towels

from an oak press in the corner, to warm our hands in front of the blazing fire, where logs crackled and hissed. Tea was on the round table in front of the hearth, and we all sat down to the spread of toasted oatcakes, roast chicken, and yellow cheese-cakes, and queer little knobbly loaves as big as our fists, and golden pats of butter with pictures of corn-sheaves upon them.

There sat Uncle Barnabas with his round, red face, framed in whiskers, and little Aunt Tissie who looked as old as ninety, I thought, but her face was fresh as a girl's and she was spry as a goldfinch and nipped about the room as quickly as a mouse as she opened the oven door and drew out a plate of spiced tea-cakes, or ran to the dairy for a jug of cream. She told me to carry the candle for her, and I felt the cold stones under my feet as if I walked in the Tower of London. I smelled the iciness of the dairy like a dungeon under a castle, but it was all white and beautiful with cheeses and bowls of milk and dishes laden with pats of butter, and I could hardly resist leaping up and down with excitement, and a shivery thrill which came over me.

'Now, my dear, don't do that! You'll spill the candle grease. Don't be a flibberty-gibbert, my dear,' said Aunt, and I followed as sedately as I could after her, but my feet wouldn't move quietly, they felt they must dance as if they were bewitched by the strangeness of everything.

That first evening was a glow of firelight and golden reflections, a babble of voices with rich warm accents, and the all-pervading odours of herbs from the bunches round the ceiling. I talked little, nor did I listen, but I sat by the hot fire in a corner watching the sticks crackle, and the lights flutter on the copper dishes. Uncle Barnabas was near me and I found myself pressing close to him, for he had a smell of something deli-

cious. Afterwards I discovered it was cow-cake, but I leaned against his rough coat and shut my eyes. Candles were lighted, we stumbled upstairs. With us went Aunt Tissie, bearing the copper warming-pan filled with red ashes from the heart of the fire. She rubbed it up and down over our sheets and kissed us good night. Somehow I got undressed and tumbled into the snowy bed which lay with arms waiting to enfold me.