



**SEVEN STORIES
FOR
CHILDREN**

Stella Soulioti

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FOR GIBSON AND SNOWDEN

STAR ADVENTURE

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a little girl whose name was Alexia. She lived in a lovely island called Cyprus, where the sun shines almost every day and the sea is blue and warm and calm as a lake. The children have a wonderful time in Cyprus – they spend most of their days swimming and playing in the sea.

Alexia always slept out on the verandah. She was never lonely as all the stars were her friends, and every night before going to sleep she had long talks with them. She told them how she spent her day and all about her friends and what they did and said. And the stars told Alexia about their friends and what they did and said and what games they played.

"But where do you go during the day?" asked Alexia.

"We go to the other side of the world", the youngest star answered. "And we watch and talk to the children who live there".

"What are they like?"

"Just like you. Except that some of them are darker and some fairer".

"Can' t you take me with you? I' d so love to meet them".

"Well..." Little Star hesitated, "I'll have to ask my mother about that and I'll tell you to-morrow".

And off he ran to his mother who, in the meantime, had gone on with the other grown up stars. You must have seen stars running in the sky, so you know how they run. But if you haven't noticed them before, just watch carefully next time you are allowed up late and you are sure to see them.

Then the stars sang Alexia to sleep as they always did when they saw that she was sleepy and tired. When you are in bed to-night, listen for the song of the stars. It's soft and sweet as a lullaby and only children can hear it.

Alexia was impatient to go to bed early the next evening so that Little Star could tell her what his mother had said.

"Mummy, I'm going to bed now", she said as soon as her bath was over.

"My goodness, this is a change; what's all the hurry?"

"Oh, Nothing...."

As soon as she was in bed and the light was out on her verandah, Alexia turned towards the sky. There was a special twinkle in the Little Star to-night, so she knew even before he spoke that the news was good.

"Alexia", he called. "Mummy says you can come, but only for one night so that your mummy and daddy won't worry".

"Well, I'm ready. When do we start?"

"Don't be so impatient. I'll tell you in a minute. Just listen carefully. Get out of bed softly and stand by the railing of your verandah. I'll shoot down and get you. You won't actually see me or touch me. It'll feel like a gust of wind carrying you off. But it'll be me all the time and you'll be able to hear me, whispering in your ear. Alright now, get out of bed and here I come".

Alexia's mummy and daddy were sitting on the front verandah talking and, as people do, often glancing up at the sky.

"My! Did you see that star just now?" asked Alexia's daddy. "I thought it was coming straight for us".

"Look, there's another little star beside the first one, now. Can you see it?"

"Oh yes, they're so close – it's as if they were holding hands".

Little Star and Alexia went all over the sky. They visited several star families, and at each home they stayed and played with the starchildren for a while.

"Let's play stardust", said the tiniest member of one star family.

"What's that?" asked Alexia.

"It's a special game starchildren play. You see, when there's a strong wind some of the star shine blows off the stars and whirls around for a while, then settles in little hills here and there. Naturally, stars immediately grow some more shine, that's why they are never dull. Anyway, starchildren love to play in the

stardust. They roll in it, they hide behind the stardust dunes and have all sorts of fun with it".

You, children, who have never been up to the stars like Alexia, must look hard next time and, here and there between the stars, you will see what looks like fine dust. That's stardust.

So off they all went and played in the stardust dunes. Alexia was delighted. The time passed so quickly.... it was heaven. Then Little Star said it was time to go and look for his mother, and they started off to find her. They danced about the sky like skaters, shouting "Mummy... Mummy...", but there was no answer. Suddenly, they realised that they were lost. They looked down at the earth but they could no longer see Alexia's home. They were on the other side of the world. Alexia became frightened.

"Let's go back home", she said.

"I've never been this far without my mummy", said Little Star. "I'm afraid I don't know how to get back. We'd better see whether the children on this side of the world can help us. Don't worry, Alexia, I'll take you home somehow".

So Little Star started calling "Andrew.... John... Mary...", hoping that one of his friends on the other side of the world was near enough to hear him. After a while, when they had despaired of finding any of them, a faint little voice reached them:

"I'm Mary's sister Susan. What do you want, Mary's asleep".

"We want to ask her whether she knows how we can get back to the other side of the world", said Little Star.

"What nonsense you do talk. What other side of the world?"

"The side where it's beginning to get light now, while it's getting dark here".

"Oh, I can't tell you that; But if you look behind you, you'll see a big beautiful lady dressed in silver. She is much bigger than you or your mummy even. She is called Mrs. Moon. Go up to her and ask her politely. I'm sure she'll help you".

"Oh thank you so much, give my love to Mary".

And off they went to talk to Mrs. Moon. When they got near her castle, they asked the guard who stood outside it whether they could talk to Mrs. Moon. Have any of you children ever seen Mrs. Moon's guard? Next time Mrs. Moon is on your side of the world look out for a bright star standing next to her – that's Mrs. Moon's Guard Star.

Mrs. Moon was very kind to Little Star and Alexia.

"I'll guide you back home", she said. "But you must promise never to go out on a picnic again without telling your mothers first".

"We promise!", they both said in one breath.

"And talking of picnics", said Little Star, "I'm awfully hungry, aren't you, Alexia?"

"Oh, yes, terribly. I could eat tons and tons of anything!"

"The table is laid for you", said kind Mrs. Moon. "Go and help yourselves, but don't eat too much, or you won't be able to run back home".

Little Star and Alexia had sandwiches and cream cakes and heavenly ice cream. Then Mrs. Moon told them how to get back home. She stood on the steps of her castle and pointed to the right.

"Do you see that white road? That's called 'The Milky Way'. You follow it as far as it goes, and you'll find yourselves in the home of a family of bears. They are nice kind star bears; there are big ones and little ones. They'll show you where to go from there".

They thanked Mrs. Moon and started off singing. They were not frightened any longer because they knew that they would soon be home.

Sure enough, where the Milky Way ended they found the Star Bears' house. It was brightly lit so that they wouldn't miss it. They knocked and the door was immediately opened by one of the little star bears.

"Come in", he said. "We've been expecting you. Mrs. Moon sent one of her shooting stars to tell us you were coming; and your mother, Little Star, will soon be

here to collect you with one of the Comets. You can ride in his train as you must be tired".

"Oh, thank you, thank you", said Little Star and Alexia.

They were given two little chairs to sit on, but they were so exhausted that they instantly fell asleep. And when they awoke Alexia was back in her bed again and Little Star back in his home in the sky. Alexia just had time to wave him goodbye before he sailed with his mother to the other side of the world.

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"Oh alright, alright" said Little Star. "I'm sorry. It was all my fault. But don't let's quarrel, we are wasting our time and the night is so short. I have wonderful plans for us".

"What plans?" asked Alexia trying to sound indifferent.

"We'll go and visit my cousins the Stars of the Sea".

"Oh no, we won't" said Alexia. "Last time we went out together we nearly lost our way and couldn't get back. Remember?"

"Pfui... That was ages ago when I was a little star. You can trust me now. Come along, hurry".

"What must I do?" asked Alexia doubtfully.

"You must run down to the beach where the river joins the sea and wait for me".

"You promise we'll come back in time?"

"I do". And off went Little Star.

Alexia did not have far to go as the house was quite near the sea. Besides, she felt as if she was floating on air. You've probably felt like that yourself when going somewhere exciting.

"I wonder if I've been turned into a fairy" thought Alexia. And indeed she looked like a fairy with her fine white nightgown and her long golden hair shimmering in the moonlight.

When she arrived at the rendez-vous she waited anxiously wondering how and when Little Star would appear. She stood looking up at the moon whose light made a silver path on the sea.

"Booh!..." said a voice in her ear. "Here I am".

"You did startle me", said Alexia to Little Star who was standing by her side. "How did you come?"

"Oh, gliding down a moonshaft. That's what starchildren use for shoots; didn't you know?"

"Well, what do we do next?" prompted Alexia.

"Wait and see" said Little Star, picking up a bit of seaweed and throwing an end into the sea.

"Hallo, hallo", he said holding the other end to his mouth and speaking into it. "This is Little Star. Would you please tell my cousin Big Star of the Sea that Alexia and I want to visit him".

Then he put the end of the weed he was holding to his ear and listened for a bit, nodding with pleasure.

"Good" he said to Alexia, when he'd put the weed down. "My cousin's sending his coach for us".

No sooner had he finished than Alexia heard the sound of rushing water, and there, before her astounded eyes, floated the most magnificent coach she had ever seen. It was made of a single huge seashell that shone all colours in the light of the moon, and was drawn by two beautiful seahorses harnessed with strings of pearls. Sitting erect on the coachman's seat was a tall fish in a striped gold and black livery. Soft yellow sponges served as cushions.

"Here we go" said Little Star, lifting Alexia into the seat beside him.

The coach slowly sank lower and lower until it floated just above the bottom of the sea. Alexia was so excited, she could hardly take in the lovely sights about her. Beautiful plants that looked like small glittering Christmas trees grew everywhere. And in and out of the rocks swam fishes of all shapes, sizes and colours. They all greeted Little Star and Alexia by raising a friendly fin and shouting "Hi!"

"Tell me about your cousins, the Starfish", said Alexia.

"I expect you know what they look like, don't you?"

"Oh yes, I've often seen them lying in the sand at the bottom of the sea" answered Alexia. "They're like you, only smaller and not so shiny".

"Of course they're like me", said Little Star. "Starfish are really stars of the sky who try to sail before they are old enough, and they fall into the sea".

By this time the coach had reached the gate of a house built of rock.

"Here we are", said Little Star. "Out you jump".

The coach had hardly come to a standstill when out rushed two big Starfishes and about five little Starfishes, who were so excited at seeing Little Star and Alexia that they started climbing up the seahorses' backs and on to the coach, babbling at the tops of their voices.

"Welcome to the bottom of the sea", said the bigger of the two big Starfishes.

"This is my cousin Big Starfish and his wife", said Little Star to Alexia. "And these are my little Starfish cousins".

"Hallo, hallo", the little ones shouted. "Come and play with us".

"Children, children" said their father. "Have you forgotten that this is Monday and that you must go to school?"

"Then Alexia and Little Star must come with us", they all shouted.

"May we?" asked Alexia.

"Of course", said Mummy Starfish.

The little Starfish ran in and came out with their satchels. Then they all started off together swimming as hard as they could go, with Alexia trying to keep up with them.

They soon reached a rocky enclosure from which Alexia could hear the sound of little fish voices. The starfish and Alexia went right in and were immediately surrounded by the little fishes in the school yard all asking questions and trying to touch Alexia. A middle-aged lady fish came out into the yard ringing a huge bell. Alexia remembered seeing one like it on board ship.

The fish children immediately stopped talking and went into the classroom. Each sat on a little sand bank in a crevice in the rock that seemed specially designed for them. The school teacher sat on a sponge set high in the middle of the classroom.

"So there really are schools of fishes", thought Alexia. "And I always laughed to myself when the teacher talked of them in class".

"Now" said the Lady Fish Teacher, beating a long stick on the rock to stop the fish children talking.

"Let's begin our lesson. Who can tell me about the habits of surface people?"

"Please, miss, I can", said a tiny red mullet.

"Alright, go ahead".

"Surface people" began the Red Mullet, "are the people who live on the earth but who try to imitate us who live in the sea. I know because I have seen them on my trips to the surface. They have four tails, each of which ends in five little fins. Some of them have long scales on their heads and others short. When they are hungry they eat pearls in bunches".

"No, no" said the Lady Fish Teacher. "Of course they don't eat pearls".

"But I have seen them", insisted the Red Mullet, "and anyway if they don't eat pearls, then what does the expression 'casting pearls before swine' mean?"

"Please, may I say something", said Alexia.

"Of course, Alexia", said the Lady Fish Teacher.

"I think what the Red Mullet has seen the surface people eat are sultana grapes"..

"Thank you, Alexia. I'm sure that must be what the Red Mullet means. Can anyone else add anything to what the Red Mullet has told us?"

"I can", said a small Sole. "Surface people play a funny game – they sit for hours dangling from a string with a little hook at the end. My mummy says it's a dangerous game and I mustn't go near but...."

He was interrupted by two fish children who came in dancing and shouting, "please, miss, let the children come out, it's salting and we must play".

"Alright, it's time anyway", said the Teacher, "off you go".

The fish children scrambled out of the classroom like mad.

"What's all the fuss and excitement about?" asked Alexia.

"Didn't you hear? It's salting!"

"What do you mean, it's salting".

"Oh dear I forgot" said one of the Starfishes, "you don't know. It means that lots and lots of salt is falling from the top of the sea and piling up at the bottom. It's lovely to play games in the salt".

By that time they were out of school and Alexia saw that the bottom of the sea was now white as snow. The fish children were rolling in the salt and making salt balls to throw at each other.

"Let's make a saltfish", said Alexia.

And she immediately started moulding a beautiful fish out of salt. The fishchildren were delighted as no one had ever shown them how to make a saltfish before. They helped Alexia by bringing her little twigs from the plants at the bottom of the sea, shells and weeds to decorate him with. He looked really beautiful when he was finished and the fishchildren took Alexia by the hand, made a ring and danced round the saltfish singing.

"We are happy as can be
When salt falls in the sea
and Alexia is with us
to show us how to sculpt
a saltfish of beauty
Ta-tam, ti-tim, Pom-pom
Tar-ra-ram, ti-ri-rim, po-ro-rom".

"Oh look!" said Alexia suddenly.

In the corner of the park was a tiny fish being tossed up and down on the edge of what looked like a saw.

"What's that?"

"They are playing sea-saw, over there" said the Red Mullet. "That's a sawfish lending its back for the game. Would you like to try?"

"No thank you", said Alexia hurriedly not relishing the idea of sitting astride a saw. "I'll tell you what I would like to see though", she said "Mermaids".

"Come on then" said the Red Mullet dragging her along. "I know where they live".

They swam and swam and swam for what seemed like hours, getting further and further from the other fish children. It was very dark among the caves now, and Alexia was a little frightened.

"Don't you think we'd better turn back?" she said.

"Of course not, don't be such a baby", said the Red Mullet. "We are nearly there, anyway".

"Wow, wow", heard Alexia suddenly. It sounded just like a bark, only it was much more frightening. Alexia stiffened and stopped swimming.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Oh, that's only a dogfish. Come along", said the Red Mullet impatiently.

"A dogfish! But they eat children", said Alexia in a panic. "I won't go any further".

"You can go back on your own if you like. I'm not coming. I'll have tea with the merchildren".

Alexia hesitated. She did not know what to do. She was afraid to go back and she was afraid to go forward. In the end she decided to follow the Red Mullet and a moment later she was glad she had done so. They arrived at a huge cave and Alexia could hear the sound of children's voices.

"Thank Goodness!" she thought. "We are there".

Out of the cave rushed a playful fish with the face of a dog and with a baby girl sitting astride it and several other little girls and boys running after it, jumping about and laughing.

"Hallo, Red Mullet", said one of the little girls. "Is this another Mermaid with you?"

"This is Alexia, a surface girl", said the Red Mullet. "Alexia, meet the merchildren".

"But I thought mermaids had fishes' tails", said Alexia puzzled.

"Oh, we only wear those when we are going far. They don't grow on us. We are really children like you who fall from ships and make their home at the bottom of the sea".

"Oh, I see", said Alexia. "I always thought you were different".

"If you come with me, I'll show you what I mean", said the Mermaid whose name was Shona.

They went together into the Mermaids' cave, and Shona showed Alexia rows and rows of fishes' tails of all sizes hanging on the cloakroom walls.

"You try one", said Shona, putting one on.

Alexia wriggled into the tail that Shona gave her and looked into the rockpool that the merchildren used as a mirror. She was now a real mermaid.

"It's time I went home", said Alexia to Shona. "It must be getting light up top and my mummy and daddy will worry if I'm not in my bed when they wake. I wonder where Little Star is. I must find him at once".

"You'll never get home if you start looking for Little Star", said Shona.

"Goodness knows where he is. I'll get you home in no time. Keep your tail on and just come with me".

Shona went out of the cave and began calling: "Dolpho! Dolpho! where are you?"

A beautiful dolphin swam up to them and asked Shona what she wanted.

"Can you take Alexia home, please, Dolpho. She is very late and her mummy and daddy are worrying".

"Of course", said Dolpho. "On you jump, both of you, and we'll see Alexia home in two ticks".

Shona climbed on to Dolpho's back first and Alexia climbed on behind her and put her arms around her. Then, before Alexia quite realised what was happening, they were rushing up to the top almost vertically at a terrific speed.

"Here we are", said Shona in what seemed like only a minute. "Bye-bye, Alexia, come again".

"Thank you very very much", said Alexia. "Please say goodbye to everyone down below. I didn't have time to do it".

"Don't worry, we'll do it for you", Shona said as she and Dolpho began sinking.

"Shona, Shona", shouted Alexia, "My tail..."

But Shona and Dolpho had already disappeared.

Alexia tucked the tail under her arm and ran home. She put it under her bed and climbed in hurriedly. Then she turned and looked at the sky, wondering whether Little Star had got back home. And sure enough, there he was, looking rather pale and wagging an angry finger at her.

"You are a nice one", he said, "Running off and leaving me like that. I was terribly worried about you".

"Sorry", said Alexia. "I just didn't have time to look for you".

"Never mind", said Little Star generously, "I forgive you. Now we are quits. See you again", and he faded from the sky.

The next thing Alexia knew was her mother shaking her and saying: "Wake up, darling. I'm sure you'd like to go down to the sea and hear all about the Mermaids a fisherman swears he saw last night".

Alexia smiled and got out of bed, wondering where she could hide the Mermaid's tail.

* * *

THE KINGDOM OF THE BIRDS BELOW THE STREAM

Like all children Alexia hated having her hair washed. At least, she hated it until that day in August when she went out for a walk with her daddy.

She was about five then and spending the summer on Mount Olympus, whose top touches the sky.

Alexia and her daddy were walking along a path on a wooded slope, when Alexia heard a twitter.

"Alexia..... Alexia....."

"Daddy, did you hear that bird calling me?" she asked.

"I did see a bird flitting by, yes, but I didn't hear anything".

Then Alexia knew for certain what she had always suspected, that only children understand the language of birds and animals.

Alexia's daddy soon grew tired of walking and suggested that they should have a little rest. No sooner had they sat down than he lay back against the trunk of a tree and fell fast asleep. The little bird, who had followed them all the way, peeped out from a bush beside Alexia.

"Come with me", he whispered.

"I can't leave daddy. I promised I wouldn't go away".

"Oh do come", he pleaded. "It won't be for long and I'll show you such lovely things. Please come.."

Alexia glanced at her daddy who was snoring gently and decided that he was safe for at least an hour, so she let herself be persuaded.

The little bird sat on Alexia's shoulder but was so full of beans that he kept flitting from her shoulder to her hair, on to her other shoulder and back again.

"Oh do sit still", said Alexia "you are making me quite nervous".

"I'm so excited that you are coming with me, I can't sit still".

In a little while they reached a small stream winding down the hill, and the little bird got off Alexia's shoulder and sat on the ground.

"Here we are. Look", he said, his beak pointing to the bottom of the stream.

Alexia looked down into the water, but such was the sight that met her eyes that at first she could not believe what she saw. It looked like the gate of a fairy castle made of gold and glittering with jewels. "I must be dreaming or imagining things", she thought. She shook her head vigorously from side to side to clear her brain, rubbed her eyes to make sure she was awake, took a deep breath and looked again. Sure enough, the gate was still there.

The little bird plunged into the water and started beating on the gate with his beak. Tit-tit-tit..... Tit-tit-tit... And Alexia heard from below an answering Tit-tit-tit..... Tit-tit-tit. Then there was the sound of pebbles moving and the gate opened slowly. The little bird beckoned to her to follow him.

"But how can I?" she said "I'll get wet".

"No, you won't, come along. This isn't ordinary water".

Alexia stepped carefully into the stream and found herself standing in the middle of the gate. The little bird sat on her hair and said: "Quick, the gate won't stay open for ever. We must hurry".

They started walking along a beautiful drive. Alexia looked right and left, trying to pick out something familiar. But all she could see was trees and bushes and all she could hear was the twitter of birds.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We are in the Kingdom of the Birds below the Stream" said the little bird.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my home. I want you to meet my little brothers and sisters. I'm sure you'll love them".

After a few minutes' walk Alexia saw in the distance what looked like a huge nest. Only it wasn't like any other nest she'd seen before. It was about a thousand times as large and it was divided into hundreds of compartments. Like the gate, it

was glittering with jewels and the roof was in the shape of a crown. Outside the front door stood a large eagle, wearing a long red cloak trimmed with gold and holding a sword.

"Here we are", said Little Bird, "This is where I live".

"It looks like a Palace".

"That's because my father is the Bird King".

"Welcome home, Prince Wanderer", said the guard. "Your brothers and sisters have been looking for you".

And the guard took a small crown from a little alcove by his side and handed it to Alexia's bird friend, "Prince Wanderer", who set it on his head and tripped into the Palace with Alexia hard on his heels.

He went straight into the nursery, where lots of little girl and boy birds were playing. Each had a little crown on his head. Alexia was quite deafened by the sound of their twittering.

"These are my brothers and sisters", said Prince Wanderer.

At the sound of his voice they stopped twittering and rushed up to him. They wanted to know where he'd been and who Alexia was.

"She's a friend of mine from the top of the Mountain" said Prince Wanderer. "You must be nice to her so that she'll want to come again".

"What sort of animal is she?" asked one of the bird children. "I've never seen one like her before".

"Oh, that's because you are too young to go up to the children's world. She is what they call a little girl".

In the meantime, Alexia who had been looking round the room noticed a little bird girl standing in a corner all by herself. Her feathers were matted, dull and shabby and of a dirty grey colour. She was scratching furiously and even drawing blood in some spots. When Alexia went nearer she noticed little insects running up and down the girl bird's body.

"Oh! Don't go near her" said Prince Wanderer. "We call her Princess Dirty".

"What's the matter with her?" asked Alexia. "She looks ill and miserable".

"There's nothing wrong with her, really. She just won't wash".

"Is that all?" And Alexia went up to Princess Dirty: "Won't you come and play with me?" she asked.

"I don't know how to play. No-one even wants to play with me", she answered.

"If you come with me and do as I say, I promise we'll all have lovely games together", said Alexia.

Princess Dirty was persuaded and she followed Alexia out of the nursery. The others were so busy listening to Prince Wanderer's tales of the top of the mountain, that no-one noticed them go. Alexia remembered that somewhere to the left of the Palace she had seen a magnificent bird bath. Sure enough, there it was.

"If you think you'll get me to go in, you are mistaken", said Princess Dirty.

"Don't you want to look pretty like the other bird children?"

Princess Dirty looked at Alexia in wonder. "What's prettiness got to do with a bath?" she asked.

"Everything", answered Alexia. "Just try and see".

"Alright, if you say so, but come with me into the bird bath".

Alexia promptly took her clothes off and jumped in. Princess Dirty shyly came and sat on her shoulder and then hesitantly tripped down her arm and on to her hand. Alexia gently started splashing water on her. At first she gave a little shiver but gradually she began to like it until, at last, of her own accord she jumped off Alexia's hand and plunged right into the water. Then she got hold of a bird soap lying on the edge of the bath and started scrubbing furiously and with obvious delight.

When it was time to go back to the Palace, Alexia climbed out of the bath, and the Princess flew out and stood beside her.

Alexia hardly recognised her as the same girl bird who had come out of the Palace with her. Her plumage shone splendidly in the sun and Alexia now saw that the colours of her feathers were beautiful: bright blue and red and golden yellow. She was the loveliest bird princess of them all.

"So that's why mummy insists on washing my hair regularly" thought Alexia.

"Come on, let's go and find the rest", said Alexia, eager to see what impression the Princess would make.

When they entered the nursery, the other bird children looked round.

"Here you are, Alexia", Prince Wanderer said. "Where have you been, and who is this with you?"

"Guess!" said Alexia and when they shook their heads wonderingly she said: "It's your sister 'Princess Dirty'".

"It can't be", they shouted, unbelieving, "this girl bird is beautiful".

"It is me", said the Princess. "Don't you know me?"

"But we must find a new name for you now" said Prince Wanderer. "We can't call you Princess Dirty any more. We'll call you Princess Beautiful".

At that moment a bird footman put his head round the door and shook a bunch of bluebells. A lovely soft tinkle filled the room.

"There's the gong. Let's go and have some dinner. You'll meet our mummy and daddy, Alexia", said Prince Wanderer.

The bird children lined up on either side of the long table in the Palace dining room, but did not sit down.

Alexia stood between Prince Wanderer and Princess Beautiful. Then the guard at the door tapped his golden staff on the floor twice and said.

"Princes and Princesses, the King and Queen are coming. Please be quiet".

The door opened wide and in swept the Bird King and the Bird Queen, their beautiful plumage studded with magnificent jewels; from their shoulders hung cloaks made of gossamer and the finest spider web. As soon as they took their places at either end of the table, Prince Wanderer said:

"Mother and father, may I present Alexia, a friend of mine from the children's world at the top of the mountain".

"Alexia, we are pleased to have you with us", said the Bird Queen. "I hope you will enjoy our food".

After they had all sat down, bird footmen placed before each a tiny plate of gold full of the choicest seeds. The royal bird family began eating by picking the seeds off the plate with their beaks, as, I am sure, you have often seen birds do.

But there was no way in which Alexia could eat. So she just sat there feeling more and more embarrassed. As soon as Prince Wanderer noticed this, he motioned to one of the footmen and said something to him in a low voice. The footman left the room and soon returned with a silver tray which he presented to Prince Wanderer. Alexia saw that on the tray was a bird's beak, made of gold. Prince Wanderer took it off the tray and fixed it over Alexia's mouth.

"You can eat now", he said. And Alexia did. The food was delicious.

After dinner, Alexia suddenly realised that it was getting late and she must get back to her daddy. She thanked the Bird King and Queen and all the princes and princesses.

"Thank you so much, Alexia" said Princess Beautiful. "I'll never forget you and I hope you'll come again. I shall have my bath regularly so that I'll stay clean and beautiful like my brothers and sisters, and never be lonely again. Perhaps Wanderer will take me up to the children's world some day".

"Come on, climb on to my wings" said Prince Wanderer to Alexia "and I'll take you back a shorter way. Just shut your eyes and hold on tight".

And before Alexia realised what was happening she found herself standing beside her daddy, below the tree, and Prince Wanderer waving goodbye and hurrying towards a hole in the trunk. "So that's how we came up", thought Alexia.

Her daddy was just stirring. He stretched and yawned, and finally sat up.

"Oh, Alexia" he said, "I had such a funny dream, and so vivid too. I dreamt you had gone to the Kingdom of the Birds below the Stream. What funny things one dreams about. Come along, I'll tell you about it on our way home".

Alexia said nothing. She just smiled and pressed with her fingers the golden beak which she carried in her pocket as a souvenir of her friends below the stream.

* * *

ALEXIA IN THE KINGDOM OF THE DOLLS

Alexia sat up with a start rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Something had wakened her. She looked round the room slowly, wondering what it was, when her eyes came to rest on a big unfamiliar shadow on the carpet. Naturally enough, she felt rather frightened and, instead of trying to find out what it was, she curled up, pulling the bedclothes right over her head.

No matter how hard she tried, she could not help looking. She peeped cautiously over the bedclothes and, sure enough, there, on her window sill sat the largest and most magnificent bird she had ever seen.

"Well, at last", said the bird, "I've been trying to wake you gently for the last half-hour. You are a heavy sleeper, I must say".

"Who are you?" asked Alexia, dazzled by the bird's silver wings.

"I'm the Bird from Beyond the Sky. I thought you might like to visit us up there", he answered.

"How? I can't fly!"

"Oh, don't worry about that", said the bird. "All you have to do is sit on my back. I'll do the flying".

"Will I be back before morning?" asked Alexia anxiously. "I shouldn't like mummy and daddy to worry about me".

"Of course you will, if you don't waste all your time talking about it. Come on, Hurry".

Alexia was by now quite awake. She jumped out of bed and climbed on to the bird's back putting her arms round his neck.

"Ready? Off we go", said the Bird and flew off the window sill towards the sky.

At first it was smooth going. Gradually, however, as they got further and further from the earth, the breeze that had helped them on at the beginning of their journey, became stronger and stronger until it turned into a gale. The stars

One of the eagles led Alexia to the bathroom. Plenty of hot water was gushing out of the side of the rock, and Alexia was given a dress made of eagles' feathers to wear after her bath.

Then she was led to one of the bedrooms, where she sank exhausted on the feather bed and in a minute was fast asleep.

It was almost light when a small sound made her stir. She lay still for a minute listening, and was sure she could hear children's voices. She turned towards the entrance and was just in time to catch a glimpse of a little skirt disappearing round the corner. She got up quietly and ran to the entrance. There, huddled against the wall, stood five little girls, trying to stifle their giggles.

"Hallo, who are you", said Alexia.

The little girls turned round and looked at her but did not speak. Alexia was puzzled. She was sure she had seen one of them before.

"Your face seems familiar", said Alexia to the little girl. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I don't know" said the little girl. "My name is Maria. I don't remember seeing you before".

"Maria..... Maria....." said Alexia reflectively. Then, suddenly, it came to her. "Of course", she cried out excitedly, "you are mine. You are my doll Maria. I lost you one day in the park and I thought some naughty boy had carried you off. You must come home with me".

Maria was quite overcome, and was beginning to cry when one of the Eagles of the night before came up to them and asked what was the matter. When Alexia explained, the Eagle, who looked very old, said:

"Yes, Maria, that's right, you are Alexia's. It was I who carried you off. You see, Alexia, we eagles are always hovering over parks on the lookout for unhappy toys. Maria was all alone in a pram and was frightened and weeping. So I swapt down and brought her up here where I was sure she would be happy".

"I had only gone off for a minute", said Alexia, "to look at the ducks in the pond. I didn't realize Maria would be lonely. I promise I'll never leave her alone again".

"But I don't want to go back, please don't make me. Please, Alexia, please", begged Maria.

Alexia was torn between her desire to have Maria back and pity for her. So she decided to postpone the moment of decision.

"Well, we'll have to think it over", she said. "We'll decide after I return from my trip to the Sky".

And off she went to find the Bird from Beyond the Sky.

He was already waiting for her, she climbed gingerly on his back, and they flew off. The storm had cleared and the air was lovely and fresh.

At last they reached the Sky.

"How shall we get in?" asked Alexia.

"Don't be impatient", said the Bird. "Just sit tight and watch".

Then he plucked a feather from his breast and blew it off in the direction of the sky. In a minute or two, Alexia heard a heavy rumbling and was blinded for a moment by a lightning flash. When she opened her eyes again, they were already beyond the sky. Instead of blue, the sky was now silver.

"So this is the silver lining!" thought Alexia. "Where are you taking me now?" she asked.

"I shall take you to meet the Queen of Dolls" said the Bird, pointing to a tall glistening castle in the distance, set in the middle of a huge garden.

"Oh, I'd like that", said Alexia.

Soon they were at the castle gates; the two toy soldiers standing guard opened them at once. They were shown into a huge room decorated red and gold. It looked like a ballroom; at the end of it stood a lovely throne set in rubies. A beautiful lady sat on it, dressed in a long flowing white dress embroidered with pearls. On her head she wore a diamond. Alexia had got off the Bird's back and

was standing there not knowing what to do next. The Doll Queen beckoned to her kindly to come nearer. Alexia approached and stood just below the throne.

"You are welcome, Alexia" said the Queen. "I know you well. Your dolls always tell me how kindly you treat them. So your name is marked in the Book of Doll Lovers. Here, I'll show you". And she took a lovely book and opened it at the "A"s.

There, in gold letters, Alexia saw her name, and below her name the names of all her dolls.

"Because you are so kind to your dolls", continued the Queen "you may ask me anything you like".

"Please", said Alexia, "I should like to ask for your advice about something".

The Queen inclined her head to indicate that she was ready to listen, and Alexia told her about Maria.

"You see", said the Queen, "the eagles are our soldiers. They patrol the gardens and parks where children play and if they see any dolls that look unhappy they swoop down and get them. The dolls spend a little while in the eagles' nest learning how to move and talk, and then they come up here and live happily with the other dolls and toys. When they are old enough they marry and have their own families".

"No wonder Maria was so unhappy when I wanted to take her back with me".

"Of course, it's up to you to decide", said the Queen. "If you insist on taking her with you, she must go".

Alexia thanked the Queen and went out with the Bird. But though the Kingdom of the Dolls was wonderful, she was too worried to enjoy it. One minute she would decide that Maria must stay, and the next she would think of all the lovely hours she would spend with her and change her mind.

The time soon came for them to leave and Alexia's anxiety grew greater and greater as they approached the Eagles' nest. Now they were hovering over it, preparing to land, and still Alexia had not made up her mind.

When they were low enough, Alexia saw Maria standing on the edge of the rock dressed in her little coat and bonnet and holding her small suitcase. She looked so sad and forlorn that, in a flash, Alexia knew what to do.

"I'm ready to go with you", said Maria as soon as they landed, bravely trying to control the tremor of her lower lip.

"But you are staying", said Alexia "I don't want you to be unhappy".

Maria looked at Alexia, trying to guess if she was joking. And when she realised that Alexia meant it, she put her arms around her and began kissing and hugging her.

"On, thank you, thank you", she kept saying. "You don't know how happy I am. It's not that I don't love you because I do. It's just that it's so wonderful to be alive once more, and to be able to walk and talk".

"I know, I know", said Alexia, "don't worry about that".

"Please say you'll come and see us again", said Maria.

"Of course I will", said Alexia. And just at that moment the Bird tapped her on the shoulder with his beak and said it was time to go.

Alexia and Maria kissed again and Alexia climbed on to the Bird's wings. Maria stood on the rock and waved goodbye with her tiny handkerchief until she could see them no longer.

The sun was already quite high when the Bird landed Alexia on her bedroom window sill and flew off. Alexia crawled into bed trying to make as little noise as possible, and then she remembered that it was Sunday and that her mummy and daddy would not be up yet.

No sooner did her head touch the pillow than she was asleep and there was nothing to show for her night's adventure but a small blue feather stuck in her hair.

* * *

ALEXIA AND THE POPPETS

IT HAD JUST stopped raining and the sun was out. Alexia and her daddy were sitting on the verandah of their house at the top of the hill watching the birds flying about looking for food.

"Oh!" sighed Alexia, "I'm tired of sitting here".

"Let's go for a walk, then". And off they went.

But no sooner were they out of the house, than Alexia's daddy, being a grown up, met a friend and stopped to talk.

Alexia ran on ahead and it was not long before she found herself alone. She did not worry, as she knew the forest well and was sure she could find her way back easily. So she skipped along happily, humming to herself and looking at the birds and the mice and the lizards, sliding in and out of the pine needles. Time passed so quickly and she was so busy looking around that she did not notice she had come to the end of the wood and of the mountain itself. In fact, she had already put her foot over the edge of the cliff before she realized that she was stepping into space. It was too late to step back, so she just closed her eyes, covered them with her hands and let out a terrific scream. And then, the most miraculous thing happened. The foot that was over the cliff touched something soft, like snow. Slowly, still terrified, Alexia opened first one eye, then the other and peeped through her fingers. She was not suspended in midair. There, before her unbelieving eyes, stretched a wide multicoloured path. It was uphill and seemed to go all the way up to the sky.

"It looks like a rainbow", thought Alexia, "I wonder...."

"Of course it is", said a little voice from somewhere over her head.

Alexia looked up but could see nothing.

"Who are you? Where are you?" she asked.

"Just here" said the voice. "Only you can't see me. I'm a poppet".

"Oh, really? And what's a poppet?"

"You'll soon find out. My name's Jackie Poppet".

"And mine's Alexia. I'm a little girl".

"Oh, I know that!" answered the poppet importantly.

Alexia felt light as a feather. She was floating upwards along the path, without even having to move her legs.

"I know", she thought to herself "this is an escalator".

"You are quite right", said the Poppet. "The rainbow is fitted with escalators of all colours. Little girls like you use the pink escalator".

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"A poppet always knows what children think. He keeps popping in and out of their heads".

So Alexia tried to make her mind a blank in case she had some bad thoughts about the Poppet.

They went on in silence for a few minutes and then the Poppet said:

"We'll soon get to the end of the rainbow. So get ready to jump off when I tell you".

"Will you hold me if I fall?"

"Of course I will. Don't be frightened. When I say 'Jump' you'll give a little jump like you do when you get off an ordinary escalator. Now get ready....'Jump!'"

Alexia jumped and found herself stepping on cotton wool. She looked about her wondering where she had landed.

"We are in a cloud" said the Poppet in answer to her thoughts. "This is where I live. In fact, here we are".

Though Alexia looked hard she could see nothing but a hole in a hill.

"Come in", said the Poppet, "through the hole in front of you".

Alexia lowered her head and stepped carefully through the hole expecting to find herself in the dark. Instead of that, however, she was dazzled: the walls were

made of mirrors, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, the furniture was made of clean transparent ice, the windows of little crystal drops.

"How beautiful!!" she gasped.

"And now at last you can see me", said the Poppet, from somewhere behind her back.

Alexia turned slowly round but, however hard she looked, she could see nothing.

"Where are you?" she asked exasperated.

"Look down, by your feet", said two little voices.

And sure enough, standing no higher than a thimble were two round little pearls with two wisps of thread for legs. They looked like tiny humpty dumpties.

"I'm Jackie Poppet" said one. "And I'm Jannie Poppet" said the other. "We are twins".

"I'm pleased to meet you", said Alexia.

"Let's go and play", said Jackie, "Come along" and he and Jannie floated slowly off the floor and flew in front of Alexia. "Follow us".

But just then, there was a terrifying booming noise and crash, as if thunder had struck the Poppets' house.

"Don't be frightened", said Jannie, "it's only our cloud bumping into another one".

But hard though she tried, Alexia could not help being alarmed; there, before her very eyes, the Poppets' house was falling to pieces and dissolving. Soon there would be no piece of floor for her to stand on at all.

"Just put your arms round our heads", said Jackie "and we'll see you safely home. What bad luck we shan't be able to play now".

So Alexia put a Poppet in either arm and felt herself being lifted slowly and gently off the floor.

"Aren't we going down the rainbow?" she asked.

"There's no rainbow now", laughed Jannie "it's raining hard. But don't worry, we'll go down with the thunderbolt".

Alexia froze with fright.

"Quick", cried Jackie, "there's the thunderbolt going down now. We mustn't miss it or it may be ages before we get another chance".

Alexia looked in the direction of the big flash ahead of them. She was being propelled hurriedly towards it.

"We've made it", said Jackie breathlessly, pulling Alexia up.

And Alexia found herself sitting on what felt like a huge matchstick and being carried downwards at a thousand miles an hour.

"This is the match with which Grand Poppet strikes his fires" said Jackie "when he throws it away, it goes down to the earth. I think people down below call it thunder".

"But then we must get off it at once", shrieked Alexia, "we'll burn to death".

The Poppets were really amused. "No we won't. We'll jump off before it hits the ground. Just trust us and see".

Alexia looked down trying to see how near the earth they were so as not to miss jumping off in time. But it was so dark she could see nothing.

All she knew was that they kept going down and down. And then she saw a light.

"That must be the searchlight at the top of the mountain where I live", she thought "I'd better jump off at once".

And before the Poppets could keep her back, she jumped off the thunderbolt into space.

She was going down so fast that she was spinning like a top. The mountain seemed to be coming up to meet her at a terrific speed. She closed her eyes and drew her legs up, curling up into a bundle.

"I wish I hadn't jumped off", she kept repeating to herself trying to hold back her tears.

"At last we've caught up with you", whispered two little voices in her ears, and she felt herself being lifted up firmly by the elbows. "We thought we'd lost you in the dark. That was a very silly thing to do, jumping off like that".

"I don't know what made me do it. I really am sorry", said Alexia sobbing with relief.

By this time they were only a few feet from the ground and in a moment or two Alexia's feet touched the earth. She looked about, trying to find her bearings. She was standing almost exactly on the spot where she'd stepped on to the rainbow. The poppets were nowhere to be seen.

"Jackie, Jannie", she called, but there was no answer.

"Oh, there you are", called her daddy coming up the path. "I didn't realise I'd stayed talking with my friend so long. You must have been quite bored standing there waiting for me".

Alexia smiled up at him. "Oh, no, I wasn't. I just had time to pop up to that cloud and back".

Her father laughed and put out his hand to touch her hair.

"Oh look", he said, "there are two huge raindrops on your hair, just like pearls. I didn't know it had been raining".

Alexia put her hand up to touch the Poppets, but they had already vanished.

* * *

ALEXIA AND THE MOTHS

As her daddy drew the curtains Alexia noticed a slight movement behind them. Although her curiosity was great, she did not say anything, as she wanted to explore on her own, after the grown-ups had left the room. So she kept her nose glued to her book pretending to be deeply absorbed in it, until her mummy and daddy, who were going out for the evening, finally kissed her goodnight.

"Be sure to go to bed the minute you finish the story you are reading, or you'll never wake up in the morning", said her mummy smiling, knowing full well that Alexia would read at least two more stories before she closed the book for the night.

Alexia nodded and smiled back, concealing her impatience with difficulty. She waited for the sound of her daddy's car to die out before she uncurled herself from the armchair. She tiptoed carefully to the window trying to make as little noise as possible.

She lifted the curtain cautiously and peeped behind it. But though she looked and looked she could see nothing out of the ordinary.

"I must have been mistaken", she thought, and reluctantly went back to her armchair and her book.

She had just settled down, however, when a little noise attracted her attention. It seemed to come from the direction of the same curtain. She held her breath and listened. It sounded like hammering, only the knocks were so muffled that they were hardly recognisable.

Alexia could stand it no longer. She had to find out what it was. Again she uncurled herself, and in her stockinged feet tiptoed to the window. Again she lifted the curtain, and just as she did so, the light fell on something shiny no bigger than a thumb nail. But it disappeared before Alexia could see what it was. It seemed to her that it had gone into the wall just below the window.

She knelt down and examined the window frame carefully, but all she could see was a tiny hole such as you often see in woodwork. The funny thing was that this particular hole had been stopped up, from the inside.

"How could anyone have got in there", Alexia said, forgetting herself and talking aloud.

"Come with me and I'll show you", whispered someone in her ear.

Alexia turned round to see who it was, but all she could see was a moth hovering about her head.

"Surely it can't have been the moth", Alexia thought. But just then, the moth brushed past her cheek and again she heard the tiny whisper in her ear. "Come with me. Don't be frightened", and the moth sat on her hand and Alexia felt herself being pulled gently forward towards the tiny hole in the window.

"Take a deep breath and you'll be through", he said. "Of course, that's ridiculous", thought Alexia. Still she drew in a long breath and lo and behold, without knowing how, she found herself in a huge square among thousands of moths.

Bugles were sounding, and everyone was running or flying here and there. Alexia watched fascinated. The moths were lining up on the square each wearing a shield and holding a small pick and bucket.

"Give Alexia an outfit", shouted the officer in charge. And before Alexia could say or do anything, two moths had stepped forward and fitted her with wings, a shield and a small pick and bucket like everyone else's. At a signal from the officer, the whole army of moths rose off the ground and began to fly in formation. At first Alexia was held up by two moths on either side but gradually she felt their grip relaxing and realised that she was flying on her own. Sometimes they were flying over fields and forests, at other times over cities whose lights twinkled like stars as if the world had turned upside down.

"Prepare to charge when I give the word", shouted the Commanding Officer, as they approached a city. At these words the moths held their picks under their arms with the heads pointing front like spears.

"Charge!" boomed the Officer a few minutes later.

Alexia then saw that they were outside a huge house and that the front lines were already pushing their way in through the slats of a shutter on the ground floor. One by one the lines disappeared into the house, and when Alexia's turn came, she too found herself going through the slats. They were in a large, beautifully furnished sitting room hung with heavy silk curtains. Alexia, who was feeling sleepy and tired, stretched herself out on a comfortable armchair and watched the moths. They had gone straight for the curtains and were already beginning to dig into the fabric for all they were worth, filling up their buckets.

They were so busy with their work that they did not bother with Alexia. Nor did they hear footsteps approaching the room, until the young boy and girl had actually come in and switched on the light. Then, in a flash, and before Alexia could follow them, the moths were through the slats again and outside the house.

"Look at that huge moth on the armchair", said the girl. "Let's shoo it off, or it will ruin the cloth".

Alexia suddenly realised they were talking about her. She sat up with a start, but when she tried to fly she found that she had lost the knack.

"Oh dear!" she thought panic stricken. "They are sure to kill me now. They don't know I'm a little girl".

By this time she had slid off the chair and was making for the curtains. She thought that if she could hide behind them, the boy and girl would forget about her.

"Oh dash, I've lost that moth", said the girl holding a fly switch at the ready and looking up above her head.

Alexia was now safely behind the curtain and found that her teeth were chattering.

"How on earth shall I get out" she thought. "I'm much too big to go through the slats without help. I'll just have to wait till the morning when the windows are opened".

She was beginning to get resigned to this, when her eyes started stinging unbearably. "I must be getting sleepy. Oh dear!" and she began rubbing them furiously with her fists trying to keep herself awake. But the stinging would not go, it was as if she had grit in her eyes. And then she noticed that her fists were covered with fine silver dust. "It must have come off my wings" she thought. She looked down at herself and noticed for the first time a small silver path at her feet. She decided she had nothing to lose by following it and started walking along it.

The path was so bright that Alexia could see nothing on either side of it. She walked on and on for what seemed like hours, and still she could not see the end of the path nor anything on either side. She looked back over her shoulder, and you can imagine how surprised she was to find that the silver path along which she had come was no longer there; all was darkness. She gave a little shiver and turned to continue on her way, feeling by now quite exhausted. Her relief was great when, a few minutes later, she saw a lot of lights shining in the distance. They were all shapes and colours and seemed to be bobbing up and down. So excited was she at having arrived somewhere at last that, in spite of her tired legs, she began to run, and soon found that she had soared above the ground and was flying again. In no time at all she reached the lights only to find that they were nothing but glowworms.

One of them immediately came up to her and said:

"Oh there you are at last! We've been looking for you all over the place".

"Me? But how did you know I was coming?"

"The moths sent us. They cast their silver carpet to pull you in but they thought you might need some light, too".

"I must say I'm glad to see you".

The glowworms flew on either side lighting the way, and it was not long before Alexia found herself outside her own house.

"Now, close your eyes and take a deep breath", said one of the glowworms.

She did as she was told, and when she opened her eyes again found herself in a huge unfamiliar dining room. The long tables were crowded with moths eating away for all they were worth. Alexia looked at their plates curiously. She had never seen food like that before; it looked like bits of cloth. How could anybody be eating that? "But how foolish of me", she said to herself almost at once. "These aren't people, they are moths!"

She looked closer and saw that the food was what the moths had collected from the curtains of the big house.

Alexia was by this time quite hungry herself but she did not somehow fancy eating bits of cloth. She did not like to be rude, however, so a plate was set before her with a special two-pronged fork. Alexia steeled herself and prepared the first mouthful. But before she had got it to her mouth a tremendous earthquake shook the moths' dining-room. They scattered in all directions disappearing as if by magic. Alexia was left quite alone. She looked around her wondering what she should do.

"Alexia... Alexia..." a familiar voice was saying insistently in her ear. Peering into her face and shaking her violently by the shoulder was her nanny.

"Come along, it's time you were in bed. And, anyway, what do you think you are doing lying under the curtain with a tassel in your mouth".

"It's my supper" said Alexia sleepily as her nanny carried her off to bed.

* * *

ALEXIA IN FAIRY BOOK LAND

It was a bright spring morning and Alexia was walking to school with her satchel slung over her shoulder.

"I wish I didn't have to stay cooped up in a class-room all day", she thought. "I wish, I wish I could go and gather anemones on the hills". But she still went on, getting slowly nearer and nearer the school, her head in the air. It was no wonder that she tripped up on something and nearly fell. She looked down to see what it was, and you can imagine her surprise when she heard a voice from somewhere on the footpath.

"Look out, Alexia. You are killing me".

Alexia squatted down to have a look, and saw a tiny little girl looking up at her, smiling. She was no taller than an inch.

"I am Thumbellina", said the little girl.

"You can't be!" laughed Alexia. "Thumbellina is only a fairy-tale".

"But that's who I am. The Thumbellina of the fairy-tale. I've just jumped out of the story book in your satchel. I was sick of being cooped up in there on such a lovely day. And something tells me you are not looking forward to spending the day in a class-room, either".

"What shall we do, then?"

"We'll go for a walk, of course. Come on". And Thumbellina jumped on Alexia's shoulder and Alexia felt her hair being pulled gently.

They soon found themselves out of the town, and in the open fields that sloped down to the sea.

Thumbellina now jumped off Alexia's shoulder and seemed to be floating over the anemones looking for something. At last she came to what she was looking for. It was a tiny anemone, smaller and brighter than the rest. Alexia came nearer to have a look.

"Pick that anemone", commanded Thumbellina.

Alexia pulled and pulled but the anemone would not come off the ground.

"Oh" said Thumbellina, "I forgot. She doesn't know you – let me". And she jumped on to the flower and whispered something in its black centre. Alexia saw the little anemone bow.

"Try again now", said Thumbellina. This time, as soon as Alexia touched the stem, the anemone came away in her hand, leaving a huge black hole in the ground.

"Look what we've done", she said. "We seem to have opened a tunnel".

Thumbellina laughed and pushed Alexia forward and into the tunnel. At first she could see nothing, but as her eyes grew used to the darkness, Alexia saw that they were in a corridor with closed doors on either side.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We are in my winter house", said Thumbellina. "But we won't stay here, I'll take you somewhere much more exciting than this".

And at the far end of the tunnel, Alexia saw the light shining through. She was now all excited to see where they would come out. As they got nearer, she heard a sound which she had not heard before. But when she asked Thumbellina what it was, she was told not to be impatient but to wait and see.

When they came to the end of the tunnel, Thumbellina took a handkerchief out of her pocket, made of the softest silk and said to Alexia:

"I am afraid I must blindfold you now, for you are not allowed to see the way".

Alexia let herself be blindfolded, more excited and curious than ever. As soon as the handkerchief was safely tied over her eyes, she felt herself being lifted off the ground; and yet, there was nothing touching or holding her. "Magic", she thought.

In a few minutes, she felt herself going down, and her feet soon touched something soft. Then the handkerchief was untied.

"Where am I?" she exclaimed, looking at the smiling faces all around her.

"Can't you guess?" said Thumbellina jumping up and down her arm. "Come. I am sure you know everyone here".

Alexia was opening her mouth to say she'd never been there before, when she suddenly realised that, of course, she knew every one there. And so, I'm sure, would you if you were in her place.

There was Alice with her blue frock and white apron waving at her and smiling. And next to Alice stood Noddy – there could be no mistake about that. His head was going up and down in great excitement. And there was Peter Rabbit and Peter Pan and Christopher Robbin and Cinderella and Winnie the Pooh, all smiling gaily and holding out their hands to Alexia.

But Alexia was looking around as if trying to find someone in particular. Her face lit up as she spotted a little girl standing behind the others. And she went straight to her. The little girl was dressed very plainly and was holding a box of matches in her hand.

"So you, too, are here", said Alexia delightedly, taking the little girl's hands in hers. "The girl with the matches! I needn't have cried over your story, after all!"

"Oh no, I'm just as much of a fairy tale as all the others, but thank you for worrying about me all the same. I often wanted to jump out of the picture in your story book and tell you not to cry over my tale, but I couldn't. I'm so glad you've come".

They put their arms about each other and joined the rest of the company. Alexia looked around her properly for the first time. They seemed to be neither on land nor on sea nor yet in the sky. It looked as if they were standing on a huge open book which was hovering over land and sea and below the sky. Every now and then its leaves fluttered as they caught a gust of wind, and Alexia felt as if she were being tipped over slightly but no-one else appeared to notice it, so she did not say anything.

They played Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses and Musical Chairs and Hide-and-Seek – there were wonderful hiding places between the leaves of the book. They had

just finished a game and were organising the next one, when the book gave a huge tilt, and before she could tell what was happening Alexia felt herself being compressed between two heavy things.

"Your turn to read now, Alexia", a voice was saying.

Alexia looked up, in a daze, and there was her teacher standing over her patiently waiting for her to start reading.

Alexia looked down at her desk. Her fairy-tale book lay open before her and there, staring up from the page, was the Little Girl with the Matches. Alexia was sure there was a twinkle in the little girl's eyes that had not been there before.

"Once upon a time", Alexia began, and the beautiful story came to life again, more real now than ever.

* * *

Stella Soulioti,
Limassol,
Cyprus
1954