

At that moment the children heard some one approaching and next instant into the kitchen walked tall Tom, Aunt Nanny's son. He fetched an armload of wood.

"Say, Tom, can you hitch up the pony cart for me now?" asked Paul. "I'm going to take sister riding down the road."

"Sho', Marster Paul," said Tom, grinning. He, like his mother, loved these two little Downses. They were the sunshine of the place.

"But mustn't we ask mamma?" said Janey.

"It would break the spell," informed Paul mysteriously. "When you go out to find a fairy no living mortal must know of it, or the fairy will hide away and absolutely refuse to peek its head out."

"Oh-oh-oh!" said Janey. And she believed what Paul believed. And they both believed as Aunt Nanny believed, and all Aunt Nanny's folks before and since her believed.

"We'll not be gone long," explained Paul. "We'll drive Peggy in a gallop, fast as ever she can go. We'll be home before supper time. Mamma won't miss us till we're back."

A few minutes later Paul and Janey were riding out of the stable yard toward the big road a quarter of a mile from the house. Trees, draped with streamers of gray moss, hid them soon after they turned into the lane, and they were not seen by any one save tall Tom. Even Aunt Nanny had paid no attention to Paul's request to have her son hitch up the pony cart for him. Paul was in the habit—young as he was—of driving the cart about the plantation, and sometimes Janey bore him company.

Supper time came, and the children were missed. Mrs. Downs sent a maid to look for them in the garden, where they liked to play. Then the stable yard was searched, loud calling of their names echoing everywhere.

Then it came dimly to Aunt Nanny's mind about having heard in an uninterested way her young darlin' Paul's request to Tom to hitch up the pony cart. And then something else came to her mind—the children's eagerness to know just how to find a water lily fairy.

"Tom," she called, "for the dear Lor's sake, git the hoss an' buggy hitched up fer me quick. An' you alls come 'long with me. I know whar dem blessed chilluns gone to. Doan ask no questions now, fer we's got to get 'long fas'er we eber got befo'."

Tom, without a word to any one (he knew his mother would do what talking was necessary) reached the stable and led one of the fastest driving horses out and within a jiffy had him hitched to the farm buggy.

Aunt Nanny went puffing into the front yard, where she found Mrs. Downs and the other members of the family in a state of excitement and distress. On seeing her mistress, pale and trembling, Aunt Nanny went up to her and said: "Doan you fret, Miss Mary; I done fotch your darlin's home in de twinkle ob de eye. I tell you, Aunt Nanny knows what she's a-sayin'. Heah, Tom, you creepy-bones, drive heah quick." And Aunt Nanny rushed out to the gate and climbed briskly into the buggy in which Tom already sat.

"Say, hold on there, Tom!" cried Mr. Downs, going to the gate just as Aunt Nanny had taken her seat inside the buggy. "What's all this mean? Do you know where the children are? If so, don't keep us in suspense."

"It's my religious belief," asserted Aunt Nanny solemnly, "dat dem chilluns hab gonod to de swamp to—to—look foh a—a—fairy. You alls know, dey lubs me to tell 'em fairy tales. An' I jest can't refuse 'em, bless der honey souls! So I tells 'em dat de fairies air in de water-lilies in de swamp. I neber reckoned dey would try to go dare. I'll fotch home the darlin's sho'."

Then off drove Tom, and Mr. Downs returned to his wife and said: "I do believe Aunt Nanny knows just what has happened. She has been telling the children stories of fairies in the swamp. Tom hitched up the pony-cart for them and off they drove—down the road. Tom will easily overtake them. So we need feel no more uneasiness."

But while Mr. Downs said this, he was very anxious and worried, and sought the stable, where he had a groom saddle a riding horse for him. Soon he was mounted and off down the road in pursuit of the buggy. Tom did not spare his horse, urging the animal on. The buggy and its two nervous occupants reached the edge of the swamp before Mr. Downs came galloping up. There was bad ground to go over, so Tom got out and hunted for wheel tracks. Yes, there they were, the tracks of the cart and the prints of the pony's hoofs. Tom followed these, leading the horse, and Mr. Downs followed the buggy, keeping on the lookout for safe ground. It was almost miraculous that Paul had driven over the safe places, for there was ground where the cart wheels would have sunk to their hubs.

Tom and Aunt Nanny found the cart and pony first; then a little further on they came to the two children, down on their knees, bending over a little cluster of water lilies which grew in green, slimy water. So engrossed were the children that they did not hear the persons coming behind them and did not know they were not alone till Aunt Nanny's voice cried out: "Oh, honey chilluns! You done scaret us mos' all to death. Come this minit to yo' maw. She's done near crazy!"

"We just went to find the fairies," the children confided to their discoverers.



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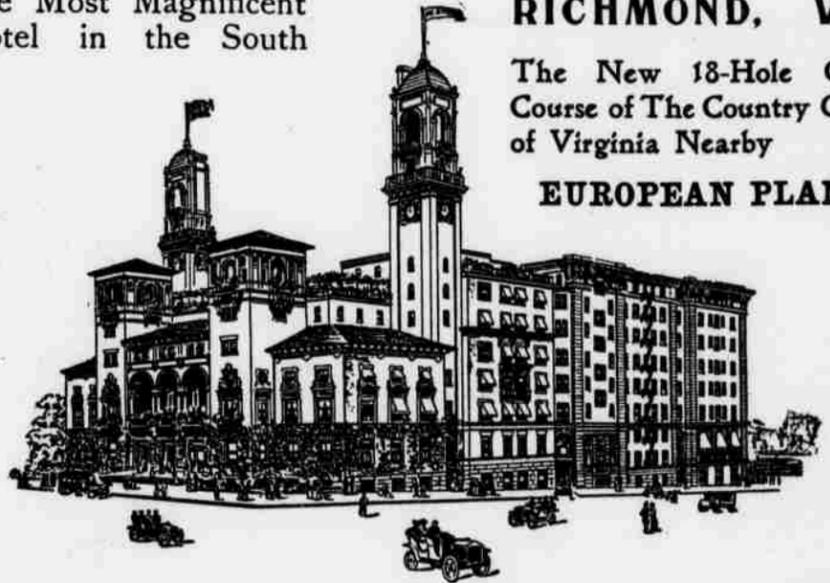
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