

Out of the Woods

THE STORY OF AN ARTLESS GIRL, A HUNGRY
WOLF, AND
A WONDERFUL GRANDMOTHER

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When you learn that this story begins with the heroine setting off through the woods to visit her grandmother, who was ill, you may guess that it is the familiar tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. I must admit that that is what it is, and I warn you that you may count upon a very artless little heroine and a wolf of insinuating manners and glib tongue; but *this* grandmother will not be eaten up.

Nor did Ethel carry a basket containing a little pat of butter and a cake. She had, instead, a large and luxurious box of candied fruit under her arm; and instead of singing through the woods, she wore a sulky and miserable expression. Unfortunately red hoods are not in vogue, for such a thing would have been notably becoming to her little gypsy face. However, she was young enough and lovely enough to look well in anything, even a sulky expression.

She was not without some excuse for her discontented air. Ethel was one of those unfortunate little bones of contention so often to be found in divided families, and she had been so much disputed over and argued about, and so rarely consulted or even questioned, that she had grown to think of herself as a helpless pawn in an incomprehensible game, where she could never win anything.

The disputes had begun long before she was born. Her father's family had that pride of newly acquired wealth beside which pride of ancestry shrinks to nothing. Indeed, to spring from

splendid ancestors may often make one feel a little humble, but to feel that one is vastly more important than any of one's forbears makes for arrogance.

The Taylors had objected very much to the marriage of their only son. Even when the marriage was made, and there was no earthly use in objecting, they kept on, in a very unpleasant way. All the misfortunes which the young man brought upon his wife and child by his recklessness and folly only increased their anger against the victims; and when he died, they all came forward with helpful suggestions as to what he should have done when he was alive.

Ethel had been a small girl of nine then, and not yet looked upon as guilty; but when she refused to leave her mother and take advantage of the offers made by several of the Taylors, she lost their sympathy. Her mother, with criminal selfishness, hadn't made the least attempt to persuade her child to leave her. On the contrary, she had gone back to her own people, and had lived with them in quiet contentment.

It was to these people of hers that the Taylors so strongly objected. She herself was a quiet and inoffensive creature who gave little trouble, but her parents were Italians, and poor, and not ashamed of either of the two things.

Dr. Mazetti had been professor of romance languages in a small Western college, but he had become so absorbed in the enormous commentary upon Dante which he was writing that he found his teaching very much in the way; so he gave up his chair. Mrs. Taylor, the paternal grandmother, had spoken about this.

“Of course,” she had said, not very pleasantly, “it’s a good thing to have faith in your husband’s work; but suppose it’s *not* a financial success?”

“We don’t expect it to be,” replied Mrs. Mazetti, in her excellent English. “Such work as that is not undertaken for money.”

“Do you mean to say that you’ll permit your husband to give up his—” began Mrs. Taylor, but the other interrupted her.

“A *man* does not ask the permission of others to do what he thinks best,” she said quietly. “I should be ashamed of myself if I were even to suggest that he should sacrifice his life’s work on my account.”

“What about yourself? Aren’t you sacrificing—”

“I sacrifice nothing,” said Mrs. Mazetti. “I am very, very happy and proud.”

And so she was, and so was her only child until she married young Taylor; and so she was again when she came home with the little Ethel, to live with those simple, gentle people once more. Not for long, however, for she died some two years later.

Then the arguments and disputes began again, and this time the Taylors won. Children of eleven are pitifully easy to bribe, and while Ethel was still dazed and stricken after the loss of her mother, all these relations competed for her favor. She was petted and pampered as she had never been before in her life.

It is regrettable to admit that she liked all this, liked the toys and the pretty clothes and the indulgence better than the benign and quiet régime of her grandfather Mazetti, who

believed that children should be literally “brought up” to the level of the wiser and more experienced adults about them, instead of bringing a whole household down to childish standards. He was always very patient and gentle, but he was too fond of talking about Dante, and of relating anecdotes about an Italian poet who insisted upon being tied into his chair, so that he couldn’t run away from his studies.

Moreover, old Dr. Mazetti had no money to spend upon toys and clothes. The Taylors took no interest in Dante or any other poet, but they took Ethel to the circus; so she said she wanted to live with Aunt Amy, her father’s sister.

She wasn’t aware, at the time, how terribly she had hurt the Mazettis. They said very little. Indeed, they discussed it in private, and decided that it was their duty to say very little. Aunt Amy could give Ethel material benefits which they could not give; and if the child preferred that sort of thing, it was, after all, neither unnatural nor unexpected.

“Each must find his own,” said Dr. Mazetti. “What is joy for one is a burden for another.”

So they let her go, and they did it beautifully, without saddening her little heart with reproaches or tears. She came back to visit them once a month or so, but somehow, in her new existence, this quiet old couple had begun to seem very foreign, very unreal.

She was abroad with her aunt when Dr. Mazetti died. Though she grieved for him honestly, she was too young and too busy to nourish any sorrow long.

II

When Ethel Taylor came home, at nineteen, her grandmother seemed like a little ghost from the past, utterly unconnected with her present life. She still went to visit the old lady, and sat in the familiar room in her little cottage, where the bronze bust of Dante appeared to impose a dignified calm; but these visits were nothing but interludes to real life, and real life, just now, was a miserable thing.

The trouble was that Aunt Amy kept on being Aunt Amy, while the childish Ethel and the nineteen-year-old one were entirely different persons. Aunt Amy wanted her to come out, and to be a nice, happy *débutante* like other girls; but something in Ethel's blood rebelled against that. She called it a "modern spirit," and never realized that instead of being modern, it was the old Mazetti strain, come down to her from people who for generations had not lived by bread alone.

She told her aunt that she wanted to be a singer.

"That's a charming accomplishment," said Aunt Amy affably.

"I mean I want really to study—for years and years!"

"Certainly, dear, if you can find the time."

"Time!" said Ethel. "What else do I ever do but waste time?"

"Naturally you can't neglect your social duties—"

"Duties!"

“Please don’t repeat my words in that odd way,” said Aunt Amy, a little hurt. “If you want to study singing, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t, so long as you’re not excessive about it.”

“But I want to be excessive! I want to give all my time to it! I want to be a professional singer!”

Aunt Amy laughed, not in order to be irritating, but because she really thought it was funny. Not being a woman of much penetration, she told some of her friends about that absurd little Ethel’s fantastic idea.

As a result, the girl was teased about it. Ethel couldn’t endure being teased. She had that queer lack of self-confidence, combined with tremendous resolution and a little vanity, that belong to young artists, and she felt that she was absurd, although she really knew that she wasn’t. She was ashamed to practice now, and at the same time she exulted in her clear, strong, flexible voice. When she was asked to sing, she refused; yet sometimes, when she knew there were people in the drawing-room, she would go up the stairs or through the hall, singing her loudest and sweetest, half terrified, half delighted, at the glorious flood of melody that rose from her heart.

She didn’t want anything else. She couldn’t and wouldn’t be bothered with “social duties.” She wanted to work hard, all day and every day, until she was mistress of this great gift of hers, until she could sing in reality as she did in imagination. She had fits of black depression, when the sounds that came from her throat seemed a mockery of what she intended. At other moments she was in wild spirits, because she was sure she had made a little progress.

Her changing humors were so marked that Aunt Amy was gravely perturbed. She felt that Ethel was becoming “eccentric,” which was the worst thing any one could be, and she attributed it all to this annoying obsession with singing. In all good faith, she did what she thought best for the girl—she stopped her lessons.

Ethel wept and stormed and entreated and argued until she was almost ill, but without moving Aunt Amy.

“No!” that lady said firmly. “If you’ll put all that nonsense out of your head, and lead a normal, sensible life like other girls, I’ll let you take up singing again in a year.”

She hoped and believed that within a year’s time such a pretty and delightful girl would surely find something better to think about.

Ethel was helpless. She was exquisitely dressed, and she lived in great comfort and luxury, but she hadn’t a penny of her own to pay for lessons.

Artists, however—even young and undeveloped ones—are very hard to deal with, because they will not give up and be sensible. Instead of resigning herself to doing without what she wanted, Ethel did nothing but think how she could get at least a part of it. Being nineteen, and rash, and terribly in earnest, she was dallying with a singularly unsuitable idea.

“Hello, Lad!” she said, not at all surprised, and apparently not very much pleased, at the sudden appearance of a young man on that quiet path through the woods.

“Hello, Ethel!” he returned, and fell into step beside her.

She didn’t trouble to glance at her companion. She knew exactly how he looked, anyhow. He was slender and supple and dark, and handsome in his way—which was not her way.

There were times when the sleekness of his hair and the brightness of his smile and the extreme fastidiousness of his clothes exasperated her. There were other times when his talk about music made her see in him the one sympathetic, understanding person on earth. He had learned to read the signs, and to tell which sort of time it was; and he fancied that this was a favorable moment.

“Have you been thinking—” he began softly.

“Naturally,” said she. “I suppose every one does, once in a while.”

Young Ladislaw Metz was not easily discouraged. He, too, was an artist.

“Do you mind my walking with you, Ethel?” he asked patiently. “I came all the way out from the city on the chance of meeting you here, because I had something special to tell you.”

She thought she knew what he meant, and frowned; but when he began to speak, the frown vanished, and she sat down on the grass to listen.

Old Mrs. Mazetti was waiting and waiting in her chair by the window. All the bright spring afternoon had passed. The sky was blue no more, but faint and mournful as the sun went down. Outside, the light lingered, but in the room it was dark—very dark, very quiet. Ethel had written to say that she would come early, and for hours the old lady had been watching the road along which her granddaughter must come. It always made her uneasy to think of a girl as young and pretty as Ethel traveling alone.

This was one of the very few ideas that Aunt Amy shared with Mrs. Mazetti. Aunt Amy wanted Ethel to go properly in a motor car, but her niece was so obstinately set on going by train that she had yielded. After all, it was such a trifling matter—an hour's journey to a suburb, to visit a grandmother. The good lady never so much as imagined the existence of Ladislaw Metz, or any one like him.

But old Mrs. Mazetti did. Not that she knew anything of this particular young man, but she had had opportunity, in her long life, to observe that in such cases there generally was a young man. When Ethel began taking more and more time between the station and the house, the old lady grew more and more sure, and more distressed.

She said nothing, however, because her grandchild showed no disposition to confide in her, and she knew that more harm than good would result from asking questions. She couldn't get near to Ethel. She had tried time after time, with all her quiet subtlety, to bring about a greater intimacy, to show how steadfast and profound was her sympathy; but Ethel never saw.

In fact, Ethel didn't know that she needed sympathy. She thought that all she wanted was to be let alone. Without in the least meaning to be unkind, she ignored the invaluable love that would so greatly have helped her.

For the third time the servant came in to light the lamp, and this time Mrs. Mazetti permitted it. She had given up expecting Ethel for that day.

"She has forgotten," she thought.

In spite of her bitter disappointment, she could still smile a little over the girl's careless youth. The sun had vanished now, and a strange yellow twilight lay over the earth like a sulphurous mist. It was a melancholy hour. The brightness of the little room made the outside world more forlorn and dim by contrast.

Mrs. Mazetti was about to turn away from the window with a sigh, when she caught sight of Ethel hurrying along the road—with a young man. The girl's companion left her when they were still some distance from the house. If the old lady hadn't had remarkably sharp eyes, she would never have seen him.

Ethel came in alone.

"Grandmother!" she said. "I'm awfully ashamed of myself for being so late!"

She really was ashamed and sorry, but it was not her nature to invent excuses, and she had no intention of explaining. Mrs. Mazetti saw all this perfectly, and did not fail to note something

defiant in her grandchild's expression. Nevertheless, she meant to come to the point this time.

"You were with a friend?" she asked mildly.

"Yes, grandmother."

"Your Aunt Amy knows this friend?"

Ethel tried to imitate that tranquil, affectionate tone.

"No, grandmother, she doesn't. He's just a boy I met at the studio where I used to take singing lessons."

"And you think she would not care for him?"

"I know she wouldn't," Ethel answered candidly. "I don't care for him so very much myself; but we're interested in the same things, and nobody else is."

"In music?"

"Yes. He's—" Ethel began, but she stopped.

What was the use of going on, and being told again how absurd she was? Mrs. Mazetti was silent, too, but not because she felt discouraged. She was thinking, trying to understand.

"You are still always thinking of the singing?" she asked softly.

Ethel's face flushed, and her young mouth set in a harsh line.

"I'm not going to listen to any more lectures," she thought. "No one understands. No one ever will!"

"This young man is a musician?" her grandmother asked.

“Yes, in a way,” said Ethel. “Isn’t the country pretty at this time of the year, grandmother?”

The old lady looked out of the window at the rapidly darkening sky, against which the trees stood out as black as ink. It seemed to her not at all pretty now, but vast and terrible.

“My little Ethel!” she thought. “My little bird, who longs to sing! What is this going on now, poor foolish little one? What am I to do?”

She missed her husband acutely. She missed him always, but more than ever at this instant. Ethel would have listened to him, for every one did. Quiet and tranquil as he was, there had been an air of authority about him that she had never seen disregarded.

Ethel was very still. The lamp threw a clear light on her warm, vivid young face, downcast and plainly unhappy.

“If I spoke to your Aunt Amy about those lessons?” suggested the old lady.

“It wouldn’t do the least bit of good, grandmother. I’ve said everything there is to be said; and—anyhow, I don’t care now.”

“Why not, Ethel? Why not now?”

“Oh, I don’t know!” Ethel replied airily. “Let’s not talk about it, grandmother. I’ve brought some candied fruit. You like that, don’t you?”

The old lady untied the flamboyant package with fingers that were not very steady. While she was doing so, the clock struck six.

"I'll have to go," said Ethel quickly. "I'm sorry I came so late and had such a tiny visit, grandmother, but—"

"Wait, my little Ethel. Gianetta will order a taxi."

"Oh, no, thanks!" said Ethel. "I like the walk."

"Not now, in the dark, my dear."

"I don't mind the dark. It's really not at all late. I'll—"

"No!" said the old lady with unexpected firmness. "There must be a taxi, and Gianetta will go with you to the train."

Ethel answered politely, but with equal firmness, that she didn't want that.

"Come here, my little Ethel!" said her grandmother. When the girl stood before her, she took both of her hands. "This friend — this young man — is waiting for you?"

Ethel flushed, but she answered with the fine honesty that had been hers all her life.

"Yes!" she said, in just the sturdy, defiant tone she used to confess a piece of childish mischief years and years ago.

"You see me here," said Mrs. Mazetti, "unable even to rise from my chair. I could do nothing to stop you, if I wished. I do not wish, because I trust you; only I ask you to tell me a little."

Ethel was more moved than she wished to be. She bent to kiss the soft white hair.

"I'd rather not, please!" she said.

"If you will remember, my little Ethel, that your mother always came to me, always told me what troubled her! I am very old. I have learned very much, seen very much. I could help you."

"But you wouldn't, grandmother. You wouldn't like my—plan."

"Then perhaps I could make a better one."

Mrs. Mazetti felt the girl's warm hands tremble, and saw her lip quiver. She waited, terribly anxious.

"You see," said Ethel, "all I care about is being able to sing. Nobody believes that. No one understands except Ladislaw!"

"That is the young man?"

"Yes—Ladislaw Metz," said Ethel, a little impatient at this interest in the least important part of her story. "He knows what it means to me."

"What is he? He sings?"

"He's a barytone. He's going to be a wonderful singer some day."

"But now? What is he now?"

"Well, you see, he's poor, and he can't afford to go on studying just now. So—I don't like to tell you, because you'll think he's not really a musician—he's on the stage."

“Ah!” said the old lady, with perfect composure. “The theater? An operetta?”

“Well, no—it’s vaudeville. He’s been singing awful, cheap, popular songs, just to keep himself alive. Now he wants a partner for a better sort of turn—an act, you know. We should sing—”

“We?”

“He’s going to give me a chance,” said Ethel quietly. The old lady was silent for a moment.

“I should like to hear about it,” she told the girl at last, in a voice that touched Ethel profoundly—a voice so determined to sound cheerful and sympathetic.

“I can’t tell you, grandmother,” she said gently; “because you’d think it was your duty to tell Aunt Amy, and she’d try to stop me. I don’t intend to be stopped. I may never have another chance. I don’t care what I have to sacrifice. I’d gladly give up anything on earth for my singing. You can’t think what it’s like to have that in you—such a terrible longing—to know that you *can* do it, and to be stopped and turned aside and laughed at!” She bent and kissed the old lady again. “I’ve got to go now, grandmother dear!” she said, with a sob.

“No! Little Ethel! No!”

“I’ve got to, grandmother. I promised.”

“Ethel! You promised what?”

The girl was frankly crying now.

“Good-by, darling!” she said. “You’ve always been my dearest, kindest friend. If I hadn’t been a little beast, I’d never have left you; but I am a little beast. I must go my own way. I’ve got to go. Good-by, dear!”

Her hand was on the door knob.

“No, Ethel, no!” cried the old lady.

With one backward glance, tearful, soft, but utterly resolute, the girl was gone.

“Gianetta!” called Mrs. Mazetti.

Gianetta came in from the kitchen with the querulous expression natural to her. She had been the old lady’s servant for nearly twenty years. She adored her, and had never found her anything but just, kind, and generous. Nevertheless, Gianetta had a great many grievances, and did not keep them to herself.

“Telephone,” said her mistress, “and order me a taxi.”

“You? You a taxi?” cried Gianetta. “But that is mad!”

“Quick, Gianetta!”

“But you are very ill! With this rheumatism, you can’t walk! How do you think then that you—”

“Quick, Gianetta!”

“Patience! Patience!” said Gianetta, in her most annoying tone. “I order this taxi, but you cannot get into it. It is only a waste of money. No matter—you are the mistress. I telephone!”

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