

## THE PALACE UNDER THE BIG OAK TREE

FLORENCE BARR

"OH! you horrid, horrid little creatures. Go away! go away!" said Rosalie, stamping her little foot. The tears sprang to her eyes and her mouth was pouting. "Go!"

Just then Secret Thoughts kissed her. "Sh! Rosalie Dear, remember, only this morning you said, 'I will be kind to every living thing'." Then Secret Thoughts gently brushed away the tears, whispering, "Tell the ants you are sorry you were unkind."

Rosalie was ashamed, and she was very still for a few minutes. Then she said: "I am sorry; truly I am. But you see, I never had a piece of wedding cake before. I laid it down for a minute, and when I turned to get it, it was covered with black ants."

A soft laugh from somewhere near made Rosalie's face brighten up, and her smiling mouth called: "Where are you, Elf-kin?"

"If you take another step I shall be under your feet," said he.

That made Rosalie laugh right out loud. Then she looked a little sad as she said: "Did you hear me a minute ago, Elf-kin?"

"Yes, I heard," replied Elf-kin, "but since you are really sorry, it is best to forget it now. The trouble is, you don't know about all the wonderful things around you. Come with me and I will take you to a royal palace. Be sure you take Kind Heart

along though, for Love rules this palace in the hill."

Across the garden Rosalie followed Elf-kin, wondering where on earth there could be a palace. She had never heard of one nearby, but she never doubted Elf-kin for a minute. Finally they stopped under the big oak tree. Rosalie looked about her, then down at Elf-kin. He was all smiles and he was looking straight ahead.

"Where is the palace?" whispered Rosalie.

Elf-kin pointed to the ant hill under the big oak tree.

"A palace!" exclaimed Rosalie.

"Yes, a palace," laughed Elf-kin, "and we are just in time for the wedding."

Above the ground this ant palace was made of a strange mixture of bits of leaves, stalks of plants, little pieces of moss, and tiny stones all held together by little bits of earth. Then underground were tunnels, and long passages, and great halls and galleries, each having a special use. The inside of the ant hill was almost like a small city, with its streets and many houses.

"Inside the palace," said Elf-kin, "are many rooms, and it is a busy place. In the palace live many queen ants, and there are hundreds of ant children. They were once tiny eggs, and then they became funny white, roly-poly ant babies, with neither hands nor feet. They had to be fed quite like baby birds, and they had to be bathed and combed and cared for. But now they are all grown up, and this is their wedding day. The brides are quite gay in their wedding dresses of black with touches of red, and

they have tiny red shoes. Be sure you notice their gauzy wings, Rosalie, for they wear wings instead of veils. The grooms are dressed all in black. They have wings too. All is excitement inside the gloomy palace, for this will be the first trip out into the great wide world for the royal princesses."

"Princesses!" exclaimed Rosalie.

"Yes, princesses," said Elf-kin. "Every little bride is a princess of royal blood. Sit down, Rosalie, but keep your eyes bright and watch for the opening of the palace gates."

"Who takes care of the queens and princesses and babies?" asked Rosalie.

"The slaves do all the work," replied Elf-kin. "There are thousands of slaves in every ant colony, for there is always so much work to do. They have no wings, so they can't fly away. Some are builders and dig tunnels, and build bridges. They are helping the mineral kingdom by pulverizing the Earth, breaking it up into powder. Others keep the streets clean. Some do the work in the palace and wait on the other ants. Others go out and milk the cow ants to get milk for the baby ants. This milk is so sweet that it is called honeydew, and the baby ants are very fond of it. The slaves feed the queens and princesses and keep them well and happy. Others tidy up the long halls, carrying out bits of grass or straw!"

Just then the gateways of the palace were thrown open wide, and out came some of the slaves making everything ready for the wedding party. When all was quite ready, the slaves passed the word along and out rushed the wedding couples — hundreds of

them. Oh, how happy they were to have their first taste of sunshine! They swarmed on the pretty flowers nearby and stretched and unfolded their gauzy wings. How good the warm air felt! Oh, it was lovely in the great outdoors. Then all at once they rose like a tiny cloud, all flying up, up, up, and then they were lost to sight.

“Where did they go?” whispered Rosalie to Elf-kin.

“Far away from here, but they will come back tomorrow,” said Elf-kin. “And when they come back, the brides will be different, for they will have lost their beautiful gauzy wings, their wedding veils. They will go back into the gloomy palace and live just as all of the other queens have lived. They will lay eggs, and by and by they will have baby ants of their own.”

“And what will the groom ants do, Elf-kin?”

“Oh, they will never be allowed to go back into the palace again. No, indeed; only queens and slaves live in the palace under the big oak tree.”

“Oh, I am truly sorry I was such a stupid little girl. Just think, Elf-kin, I never knew how wonderful the little ants are. I just thought they were crawly insects.” Then of a sudden a thought came into Rosalie’s mind: “Elf-kin, those must have been some of the slaves that took my wedding cake — they wanted crumbs for the wedding feast. Don’t you think so?”

“Well, I shouldn’t be surprised if that were the reason; anyway we will pretend it was. Run along now, Rosalie, I have to be about my work. Good-bye.” And Elf-kin was gone.