

Aialunda

Once there lived a girl in a small room high up under the roof of a great house. At least she believed it was a great house because the walls and ceilings held a quietness that hinted of more walls and ceilings beyond them. But morning and evening for more years than she could remember she had stayed in that one little room, in the day lit only by the dim light drifting in through a small painted window over the door, and in the evening lit

by a smoky oil lamp hanging from a large brass hook on the wall beside her bed.

Many times she wondered what was beyond that door, beyond the other walls and ceilings behind the ones that closed her in. But old Grunilsa warned her of dangers that she must not face. Every morning the old woman brought her a little breakfast of dry bread and stale cheese, and every evening a little thin soup. In between there were reading lessons in strange little books with strange words and strange marks around the pages. Grunilsa told her she must learn well, for there were important large books to be mastered when she grew up, books that would give her everything she ever wanted.

But Aialunda sat and wondered why she would have everything she wanted when she grew up, yet could not have now the one thing she wanted most, to see beyond the walls of her tiny room and find some person to talk to besides the old woman. She watched Grunilsa carefully day by day, and though the old woman seemed kind enough to her, there seemed to hang between them a curtain of estrangement that Aialunda could not understand.

One night long after her smoky oil lamp was put out, she lay still awake, listening to the silences that hung about her narrow walls, and she determined to discover for herself what was beyond the door. Quietly she crept from her bed, tiptoed to the door and gently pulled the

latch. The door came open in her hand, and carefully she stepped out into a great long passage.

She stood still a long, long time, until her eyes accustomed to the pale moonlight that drifted in through a high window far down a long hallway. Left and right she could see other doors very like her own, and around a corner just ahead, another long hallway seemed to reach far into the darkness. But just as she was ready to take another step, she saw the old woman sitting in a chair, rocking slowly, slowly back and forth.

Carefully Aialunda crept back into her room, closed the door, and got back into her little bed. For a long while she lay awake listening, hoping the old Grunilsa would not come and punish her. But after

a long wait she knew the woman had not heard her, and she fell asleep again.

It was several nights before she tried again. This time she stood long and still outside her door before taking another step. When her eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, she again saw the old Grunilsa rocking in her chair. But as she waited, she heard a murmur, then a scratchy old voice as if trying to hum a song. Then there were mutterings, like the telling of a tale, then silence, then a burst of snoring. She waited a long time until the old woman awoke, muttered and snored again, then she crept back into her room and to bed.

The next night it was the same, and the next, and the next. Gradually Aialunda learned to tell when the old woman would

start to mutter and when she would sleep, and gradually she became bolder. Finally she was bold enough to steal down the hallways, first one way, then another, and to get back again before Grunilsa awoke. She learned that all of the hallways came to a quick end except the one guarded by old Grunilsa in her chair, and from the echoes of the old woman's snoring, that one seemed to be longer and broader than any of the others.

As the days and nights went by, Aialunda found growing in her heart a great longing to go beyond the old woman and learn where that great hallway would lead her. Even during her reading lessons her mind wandered on her adventures, until old Grunilsa sometimes became cross and threatened to cane her if she would not

pay better mind to her work. One day, when she was having a very hard time minding her reading, old Grunilsa suddenly jumped up, grabbed the book away and said, "Oh, I see it all now. You are ready for the great step, and these little books don't interest you any more. We shall prepare." And with that she disappeared out the door and down the hallway.

Soon Aialunda heard a distant scraping and pounding far down the hallway, and it went on for such a long time, she felt sure the old woman would not see her if she peeked out the door. But when she looked out, she was amazed, for the halls were much larger and longer than she had believed on her night journeys. And beyond where the old woman's chair sat

empty, the great hall stretched ahead, growing bigger and brighter the farther it went. Far ahead there was a branch off on the side that seemed to enter at the top of a wide curving stairway. And there were marble columns topped with bright gilded capitals. And there were spider webs hanging there over the entrance to the stairs and dust on the sill, so that she was sure no one had ever gone down those stairs for many a year.

Her eyes drank in the scene, drawing a map in her mind, for she knew in her heart that she must go down those stairs this very night. When the distant pounding and scraping ceased, she went back into her room, softly closed the door, and lay down on her bed. Soon old Grunilsa returned, and Aialunda thought there was

a strange excitement in her eyes. The old woman looked at her closely for a long time, and Aialunda felt a new heaviness of evil about her. For the first time she began to be truly frightened of this woman who had cared for her so many years. In her heart she knew that danger hovered over her, and she felt a whiteness and a little sweat creep across her brow.

Suddenly Grunilsa relaxed and said, "Well, now. You are a sensitive one after all, my dear. From yet so far away you felt the force upon you. I must be careful. When you have learned, you will do very well." And quickly she disappeared again down the long hallway.

Aialunda lay without moving all the rest of the day, and she left untouched the soup Grunilsa brought that evening.

When it was dark she listened carefully until the old woman had settled down in her chair, then waited for her to snore. But first she heard such a muttering and chortling as never before. She pressed her ear to the door and heard the old woman snort, "Ah, she'll be a fine one, she will!" Then a long silence, then finally the familiar snore.

Quickly Aialunda found her way out into the hallway, barely waiting for her eyes to find directions for the map she had stored in her mind during the day. Quietly she slipped by the old woman in her chair, went to the stairs and started down. Suddenly she noticed that the darkness was greater than ever before, and the spiderwebs clawed at her face, yet she walked down the stairs as fast as the quietness

would let her. She could tell from the echoes of her breathing that the room was getting larger in front of her, when suddenly her foot bumped something on the stair that rolled down with a clatter.

Behind her she heard an angry shriek and pounding feet that told her old Grunilsa was awake and running after her. She reached out, touched something long and narrow and hard, took it in her hand and quickly stepped to the side of the stairs. With a burst of curses and shouts and a cascade of pounding steps the old woman raced down toward her. And Aialunda reached out and struck her with the object in her hand.

There was a scream, a crash, then absolute silence for a long moment, until she began to notice two very different

kinds of sound at once. Far up beyond the top of the stairs a sudden loud whistle rose and fell, joined by a chorus of angry moans, then rattles and poundings, all little by little growing lower and softer until they disappeared. But in the great space where she stood a slight rustle as of fine cloth, then shuffling as of fine slippers, then a soft whisper, first of one voice, then others, then a flicker of flame, another, then a forest of torches burst into light.

She found herself standing in a great banquet hall bathed in warm dancing light, holding a golden scepter in her hand. A festive table was set, and all around it sat people dressed in the finest silks and ribbons as she imagined only kings and queens might wear. As she cast her eyes around that company, she saw that only

one chair remained empty, which appeared to be the seat of honor at the head table. Beside it sat a beautiful young prince, and as his eyes met hers, he stood, bowed low to her and motioned for her to come sit beside him.

At first she shrank back, ashamed of the poor thin gown that old Grunilsa made her wear. But as she looked down, she saw that she wore a gown lovelier and finer than any of those in the room. She found that her braids were fallen into bright ringlets, and as she put her hands to her head, she found she was wearing a crown.

She returned a shy bow to the prince, and a great cheer went up around the tables. Drums and trumpets broke into a jubilee as she walked to her place at the table and let the prince seat her in her chair.

But back at the foot of the stairs the form of old Grunilsa melted and ran until it left an ugly black stain on the floor.

As the last of the old woman melted into the stone, the king stood up and said, "You are well come, sweet maid. Your place here is earned. For you have freed us from a great enchantment. This chair was meant for another, but this old woman, whom you have vanquished this day, meant to rule the kingdom through her arts. The princess for whom this table was set fell on those stairs by the hand of this old crone, who carried her away we know not where, and we were put into a deep sleep to wait until you had grown and been taught the evil science, when you would rule as queen and oppress us all at the

command of the witch. Now we are free, and the kingdom is yours.”

After the feast, there was a great tour through the entire castle, and Aialunda saw the many rooms with mirrors, golden curtains and marble walls that were her home. But as for the rooms where the old Grunilsa had done her scraping and pounding, the place where the last whistles and moans died with the melting of the witch, there remained only a black hole reaching down into the earth. Aialunda took a petal from the garland about her neck and cast it into the pit, and after a short boiling of sulphurous flame, the hole filled with light and color and became a sunken tropical garden of bright flowers and cheerfully singing birds.

And Aialunda lived happily with her prince ever after as queen of a blessed land, where no witch or goblin or gnome ever dared set foot again.