

Charlotte's Quest

Lucy Maud Montgomery
1933

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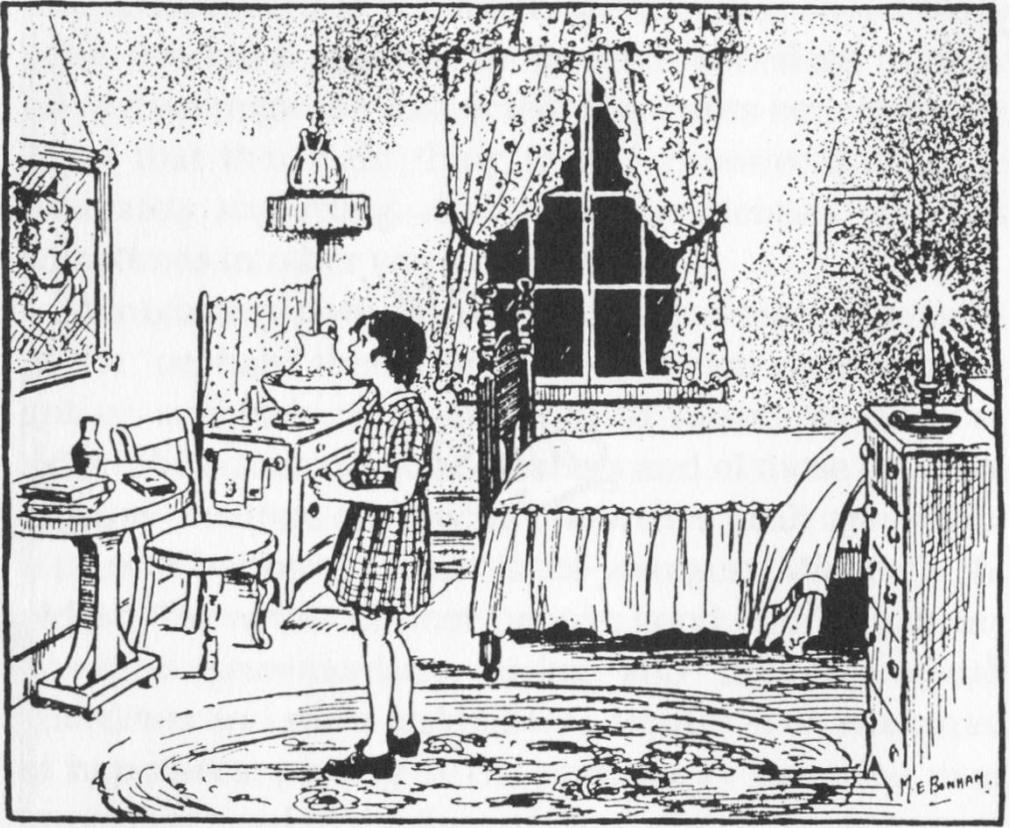
Charlotte's Quest

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“I went to Witch Penny to see if she could find me a mother and she told me to come here.”



Sometime she had been here before. Not in a dream, but really and her mother had been with her.

Charlotte had made up her mind to see the Witch Penny about it. Perhaps God didn't think she ought to be unhappy, in a home of jolly, noisy, rollicking cousins (Charlotte hated noise and rollicking with all the power of her being); where she was continually being pounced on and petted and kissed (Charlotte detested pouncing and petting and kissing); where Aunt Florence or Cousin Edith or Mrs. Barrett, the grandmother of the gang, was always trying to dress her up like a doll (Charlotte hated to be dressed up); and where she was never alone or lonely for a moment (Charlotte loved and longed to be alone—well, not exactly lonely, because Charlotte was never lonely when she was alone). Yes, it was quite likely, Charlotte told herself, on considered reflection, that God couldn't believe that she was unhappy. So there remained only Witch Penny. Charlotte had an idea that witches were kittle cattle to have dealings with and that the thing was not altogether lawful. But she wanted a mother so desperately that she would have gone to any lengths to get one.

It was Jim who had told her about the Witch Penny very soon after she had come to live with Aunt Florence.

“The Witch Penny is going to fly to a witches’ meeting tonight with her old black cat perched behind her,” he told her one windy autumn evening. And then he went on with a fascinating rigmarole about riding on a broomstick over houses and hills. Jim did not mean to be fascinating. He was merely trying to frighten Charlotte “out of her skin.” But Charlotte was not easily frightened and remained in her skin. She found his yarns thrilling, especially the part about flying on a broomstick, although she would have preferred to fly on a swallow’s back. Why couldn’t you, if you were a witch? If you could turn yourself into a grey cat, as Jim said Witch Penny could, why couldn’t you turn yourself into something small enough to ride a swallow? Just think of swooping through the air. Charlotte quivered with ecstasy.

Charlotte wanted a mother terribly. She knew that the thing was quite possible. Before father had gone away and just before she had come to Aunt Florence’s, Nita Gresham had got a new mother. Charlotte heard about it in school. If Nita, why not she? A mother who would take you in her arms and tell you stories. To whom you would belong. It seemed a terrible thing to Charlotte that she didn’t belong anywhere or to anybody. Not even to Father. How could you belong to a father who looked upon you merely as a hindrance to mountain climbing? Charlotte knew perfectly well that was how her father regarded her, although neither he nor anyone else had ever told her so. You couldn’t fool Charlotte in all things. She might fall for a silly story about witches and broomsticks, but in some respects she had a terrible wisdom.

Next to a mother she wanted a quiet place where she could be alone when she wanted to be; to listen to the wind telling strange tales, or hold the big spotted shell that murmured of the sea to her ear, or talk to the roses in the garden. Or just sit still and think and say nothing. If you were quiet at Aunt Florence’s, someone was sure to ask what was the matter with you. And if your visitation of silence was prolonged they said you were sulky. It had not been quite so bad when she had lived at home, a kind of home, with Father and old Mrs. Beckwith. At least they left her alone. If you couldn’t be loved, the next best thing was to be let alone. At Aunt Florence’s she was never let alone and she knew quite well they didn’t love her. They kissed and petted and teased her just because it was one of their customs. Jim thought her a ninny. Edith and Susette thought her a dumb-bell. Mrs. Barrett thought she was “queer,” and Aunt Florence couldn’t make her pretty.

“Goodness, child, are you all corners?” she would exclaim impatiently when Charlotte’s dress wouldn’t hang right. Aunt Florence hadn’t any use for anyone with too many corners. And nothing else about Charlotte pleased her. She was too dark

in a fair clan, her eyes were too big and grey, her eyebrows too bushy and her skin too sallow. "I don't know where she gets such a complexion," Aunt Florence mourned.

"Don't you? I do," said Mrs. Barrett very significantly. "She's the living image of You-Know-Who."

"I never saw her," said Aunt Florence, "but if Charlotte looks like her, I don't wonder Edward isn't fond of her."

So her father wasn't fond of her. Charlotte sighed. She had always suspected it, but it was a little bitter to be sure of it. She had always thought it was because he couldn't be fond of anything but mountain climbing. Now it seemed there was a mysterious You-Know-Who in the business.

Charlotte knew she didn't look like her mother. There was no picture of her mother that Charlotte had even seen, but she knew she had been small and fair and golden. Charlotte wished she looked like her mother. She couldn't remember her mother, that is, not exactly. She could only remember a dream she had had about her, a beautiful dream in which she was in such a beautiful place. And Mother was there with her. Charlotte had never forgotten it—she was always looking for it. An old house fronting seaward, ships going up and down. Spruce woods and misty hills, cold salt air from the water, rest, quiet, silence. And the most beautiful china lady, with blue shoes and a gilt sash and a red rose in her golden china hair, sitting on a shelf.

Mother had been there with her. Charlotte was quite sure of that, though everything else was a little dim, as dreams are. Charlotte always had a queer feeling that if she could find that place she would find Mother again. But it was not likely that even Witch Penny could help her to a place in a dream.

Charlotte determined to slip away on the afternoon they were getting ready for the party. They were always having parties. "Let us eat, drink and be merry," was the motto of the Laurences. Charlotte hated parties and she knew she would hate this more than most because they were going to have tableaux and Charlotte was to take part in one and wear a silly tinsel crown. Somehow, she hated the thought of that tinsel crown venomously.

In the customary scurry and bustle she hoped to get away unseen, but Mrs. Barrett spied her and asked her where she was going.

"I am going hunting for happiness," said Charlotte gravely and simply. The truth had to be told.

Mrs. Barrett stared at her.

"I don't know who you get your peculiar notions from. Any child but you would

be keen to help get ready for a party. Look at your cousins—what a delightful time they're having.”

Probably they were. Everybody was rushing wildly around, moving and dragging furniture about. But they were always doing that. Nothing ever remained in the same place longer than a week. Just as you got used to a thing being in a certain place, Aunt Florence or Susette took a notion it would look better somewhere else; and after much noisy, good-natured argument, there it went. And a party always gave such a grand excuse for moving everything.

Charlotte did not reply to Mrs. Barrett, which was another of her unsatisfactory habits. She simply opened the door, went out and shut it softly behind her. It was hard to shut it softly because, like every other door in the house, it seemed determined to bang shut. But Charlotte managed it.

She stood for a moment in the front porch, drawing a breath of relief. Behind her was noise and commotion. Edith and Susette were wrangling in the hall. The radio was going full blare in the library, Jim was banging on the piano to make the fat dog howl—and the dog was howling. Charlotte put her fingers in her ears and ran down the walk. Over her was a grey, quiet autumn sky, and before her a grey, quiet road. Charlotte suddenly felt as light of being as if she really had been turned into a swallow. She was out, she was alone and she was going to find a mother.

The Witch Penny's house was a little grey one nestling against the steep hill that rose from the pond about half a mile west of the small town. The gate hung slackly on its hinges. The house itself was shabby and old, with sunken window sills and a much-patched roof. Charlotte reflected that being a witch didn't seem to be a very profitable business.

For a moment Charlotte hesitated. She was not a timid child, but she did feel a little frightened. Then she thought of Mrs. Barrett rocking fiercely in her rocker and forever talking in her high, cheerful voice. “Mother is always so bright,” Aunt Florence always said. Charlotte shuddered. No witch could be worse. She knocked resolutely on the door.

A thumping sound inside ceased. Had she interrupted Witch Penny in the weaving of a spell? . . . and footsteps seemed to be coming down a stair. Then the door opened and Witch Penny appeared. Charlotte took her all in with one of her straight, deliberate looks.

She was grey as an owl, with a broad rosy face and tiny black eyes surrounded by cushions of fat. Charlotte thought she looked too jolly for a witch. But no doubt there were all kinds. Certainly the big black cat with fiery golden eyes that sat behind

her on the lower step of the stair looked his reputed part.

“Now who may ye be and what may ye be wanting with me?” said Witch Penny a bit gruffly.

Charlotte never wasted breath, words or time. “I am Charlotte Laurence and I have come to ask you to find me a mother—that is, if you really are a witch. Are you?”

Witch Penny’s look suddenly changed. It grew secretive and mysterious.

“Whist, child,” she whispered. “Don’t be talking of witches in the open daylight like this. Little ye know what might happen.”

“But are you?” persisted Charlotte. If Witch Penny wasn’t a witch, she wasn’t going to bother with her.

“To be sure, I am. But come in, come in. Finding a mother ain’t something to be done on the durestep. Better come right upstairs. I’m weaving a tablecloth for the fairies up there. All the witches in the countryside promised to do one apiece for them. The poor liddle shiftless cratur’s left all their tablecloths out in the frost last Tuesday night, and ’twas their ruination. But I’ve got far behind me comrades and mustn’t be losing any more time. Ye’ll excuse me if I kape on with me work while ye’re telling me your troubles. It’s the quane’s own cloth I’m weaving, and it’s looking sour enough her majesty will be if it’s not finished on time.”

Charlotte thought that Witch Penny’s old loom looked very big and clumsy for the weaving of fairy tablecloths, and the web in it seemed strangely like rather coarse grey flannel. But no doubt witches had their own way of blinding the eyes of ordinary mortals. When Witch Penny finished it, she would weave a spell over it and it would become a thing of gossamer light and loveliness.

Witch Penny resumed her work and Charlotte sat down on a stool beside her. They were on a little landing above the stairs, with one low, cobwebby window and a stained ceiling with bunches of dried tansy and yarrow hanging from it. The cat had followed them up and sat on the top step, staring at Charlotte. Its eyes shone uncannily through the dusk of the staircase.

“Now, out with your story,” said Witch Penny. “Ye’re wanting a mother, ye tell me, and ye’re Charlotte Laurence. Ye’ll be having Edward Laurence for your father, I’m thinking?”

“Yes. But he’s gone west to climb mountains,” explained Charlotte. “He’s always wanted to, but Mother died when I was three, and as long as I was small he couldn’t. I’m eight now, so he’s gone.”

“And left ye with your Uncle Tom and your Aunt Florence. Oh, I’ve heard all about it. Your Aunt Florence’s cat was after telling mine the whole story at the last

dance we had. Your Aunt Florence do be too grand for the likes of us, but it's little she thinks where her cat do be going. Ye don't look like the Laurences—ye haven't got your father's laughing mouth—ye've got a proud mouth like your old Grandmother Jasper. Did ye ever see her?"

Charlotte shook her head. She knew nothing of her Grandmother Jasper beyond the fact of her existence, but all at once she knew who You-Know-Who was.

"No, it ain't likely ye would. She was real mad at your mother for marrying Ned Laurence. I've heard she never would forgive her, never would set foot in her house. But ye have her mouth. And what black hair ye've got. And what big eyes. And what little ears. And ye have a mole on your neck. 'Tis the witch's mark. Come now, child dear, wouldn't ye like to be made a witch? 'Tis a far easier job than the one ye've set me. Think av the fun av riding on the broomstick."

Charlotte thought of it. Flying over the steeples and dark spruces at night. "I think I'm too young to be a witch," she said.

Witch Penny's eyes twinkled.

"Sure, child dear, 'tis the young witches that do be having the most power. Mind ye, everybody can't be a witch. We're that exclusive ye'd never believe. But I'll not press ye. And ye want me to find you a mother?"

"If you please. Nita Gresham got a new mother. So why can't I?"

"Well, the real mothers are hard to come by. All the same, mebbe it can be managed. It's lucky ye've come in the right time of the moon. I couldn't have done a thing for ye next wake. And mind ye, child dear, I'm not after promising anything for sartin. But there's a chanct, there's a chanct . . . seeing as ye've got your grandmother's mouth. If ye'd looked like your father, it wouldn't be Witch Penny as'd help ye to a mother. I'd no use for him."

Witch Penny chuckled. "What kind of a mother do ye be wanting?"

"A quiet mother who doesn't laugh too much or ask too many questions."

Witch Penny shook her head.

"A rare kind. It'll take some conniving. Here . . ." Witch Penny dropped her shuttle, leaned forward and extracted from a box beside the loom a handful of raisins . . . "stow these away in your liddle inside while I do a bit av thinking."

Charlotte ate her raisins with a relish while Witch Penny wove slowly and thoughtfully. She did not speak until Charlotte had finished the last raisin.

"It come into me mind," said Witch Penny, "that if ye go up the long hill . . . and down it . . . then turn yourself about three times, nather more nor less, ye'll find a road that goes west. Folly your nose along it till ye come to a gate with a liddle lane that leads down to the harbour shore. Turn yourself about three times more . . . if ye

forget that part of it, ye may look till your eyes fall out of your head, but niver a mother ye'll see. Then go down the lane to a stone house with a red door in it like a cat's tongue. Knock three times on the door. If there's a mother in the world for ye, ye'll find her there. That's all I can be doing for ye."

Charlotte got up briskly.

"Thank you very much. It sounds like a good long walk, so I ought to start. What am I to pay you for this?"

Witch Penny chuckled again. Something seemed to amuse her greatly.

"How much have ye got?" she asked.

"A dollar."

"How'd ye come by it?"

Charlotte thought witches were rather impertinent. However, if you dealt with them . . .

"Mrs. Beckwith gave it to me before she went away."

"And how come ye didn't spend it for swaties and ice cream?"

"I like to feel I've something to fall back on," said Charlotte gravely.

Witch Penny chuckled for the third time.

"Says your grandmother. Oh, ye're Laurence be name but it goes no daper. Kape your liddle bit av a dollar. Ye've got a mole on your neck. We can't charge folks as have moles anything. It's clane against our rules. Now run along or it'll be getting too late."

"I'm very much obliged to you," said Charlotte, putting her money back in her pocket and offering her thin brown hand.

"Ye do be a mannerly child at that," said Witch Penny.

Witch Penny stood on her sunken doorstep and watched the little, erect figure out of sight.

"Sure, and I do be wondering if I've done right. But she'd never fit in up at the Laurences with their clatter. And once the old leddy lays eyes on her!"

Charlotte had disappeared around the bend in the road. Then Witch Penny said a queer thing for a witch. She said: "God bless the liddle cratur."

Charlotte tramped sturdily on, adventurous and expectant. The sky grew greyer and the wind colder as she climbed the long hill. From the top she caught an unexpected, breath-taking view of a great grey harbour with white-capped racing waves. And beyond its sandy bar something greater and greyer still which she knew must be the sea. Charlotte stood for a few minutes in an ecstasy. She had never seen the harbour before, although she had known it was not far away. And yet, had she

not? Charlotte felt bewildered. Her dream came back to her. She had seen this harbour in her dream, with the big waves racing to the shore and the black crows sitting on the fences of the fields and a white bird flying against the dark sky.

Charlotte went down the hill and gravely turned herself about three times. A wind that smelt of the sea came blowing down a road to the left. This must be what Witch Penny meant by following her nose. And sure enough, after Charlotte had walked along the road for a little while, there was the gate and a grassy, deep-rutted lane leading along the side of a gentle hill that sloped to the harbour.

Again Charlotte turned herself around. If there were no mother at the end of this quest, it should not be for any failure to perform Witch Penny's ritual scrupulously.

Hallway along the hill she came to the house, the grey stone house with the door like a cat's tongue, a house so grey and old that it seemed a part of the hill. It had a dignified, reposeful look as if it feared not what wind or rain could do to it.

Charlotte found her legs trembling under her. She had come to journey's end; and was there a mother in that house for her? Witch Penny hadn't seemed at all sure, she had only said there was a chance. It was beginning to rain, the harbour was dim and misty, it would soon be dark. Charlotte shivered, took her courage in both hands and knocked at the red door.

There was no answer. Charlotte waited awhile and then went around the house to the kitchen door—it was red, too—and knocked again.

The door opened. Charlotte felt a quick pang of disappointment. This was no mother: she was far too old for a mother, this tall, thin woman with a fine old face that might have been a man's and clear grey eyes with black bushy brows under frosty hair. Charlotte had never seen her before yet she had a queer feeling that the face was quite familiar to her.

"Who are you?" said the old woman, neither kindly nor unkindly . . . just in a simple, direct fashion to which Charlotte found it quite easy to respond.

"I am Charlotte Laurence. I went to Witch Penny to see if she could find me a mother and she told me to come here."

The old woman stood still for what seemed to Charlotte a very long moment. Then she stepped back and said, "Come in."

Charlotte looked around the little, white-washed kitchen. There was, to her further disappointment, no one in it, but she liked it. On the floor there was a big, dark-red, hooked rug, with three black cats in it. The cats had yellow wool eyes that were quite bright and catty in spite of the fact that they had evidently been walked over a good many years. There was a great stove with front doors that slid so far back that it was as good as a fireplace. There was a low wide window looking out

on the harbour. There was a table with a red-and-white checkered cloth on it and a platterful of something that smelt very good to Charlotte after her long walk.

“I was just sitting down to supper,” said the old woman. “I had a feeling that I was going to have company so I cooked a bit extra. Take off your cap and coat and sit in.”

Charlotte silently did as she was told. The old woman sat down, said grace . . . Charlotte liked that . . . and gave Charlotte a plentiful helping of crisp bacon and pancakes with maple syrup poured over them. Charlotte devoted herself to the business of eating. She had never been so hungry in her life before and she had never eaten anything that tasted so good as the bacon and pancakes. It was now raining and blowing quite wildly but the stove was glowing clear red in the dusk and the peace and cosiness of the old kitchen was in delightful contrast to the storm outside. And just to eat supper in silence, not having to talk or laugh unless you really wanted to, was so heavenly. Charlotte thought of the noisy meals at Aunt Florence’s where everybody talked and laughed incessantly . . . Aunt Florence liked “cheerful meals.”

Of course, as yet there was no mother. But one must have patience. It was easy to be patient here. Charlotte found herself liking the house . . . feeling at home in it. It was not strange to her . . . and the old woman was not strange. Charlotte wondered where she had seen eyes like that before, many times before. And she loved the house. She wanted to see the hidden things in it—not its furniture or its carpets, but the letters in old boxes upstairs, and faded photos and clothes in old trunks. It seemed as if they belonged to her. She sighed in pure happiness. The old woman did not ask her why she sighed. That, too, was heavenly.

When the meal was over, the old woman—after all Charlotte was beginning to think she wasn’t so very old, it was just her white hair made you think so—put Charlotte in a chair by the stove where she could toast her feet on the warm hearth, and washed the dishes. Her shadow darted in all directions over the kitchen walls and ceiling and sometimes looked more like a witch than Witch Penny. But this woman was not a witch. Somehow, Charlotte felt no qualms on that score.

When the old woman had put her dishes away in a little corner cupboard with glass doors and shelves trimmed with white, scalloped lace paper, she lighted a lamp, got out her knitting and sat down by the table.

“You’re Charlotte Laurence. And your father, I suppose, was Edward Laurence.”

Charlotte nodded.

“Where is he?”

“He has gone to climb mountains in British Columbia and he sent me to stay with Aunt Florence while he was away.”

“How long is he going to be away?”

“Years,” said Charlotte indifferently.

The old woman knitted two rounds of her stocking before she said anything else.

“Do you like it at your Aunt Florence’s?”

“No. It’s too noisy and affectionate,” said Charlotte gravely.

The old woman laid down her knitting and stared at her. There was a queer expression on her face, she might almost have been going to laugh. Her thick black eyebrows twitched.

“Does your aunt know where you are?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“And don’t you think she’ll be worried? I don’t think you can get back tonight in this storm.”

“She’s always worried over something,” said Charlotte, as if it didn’t matter a great deal. Nobody had ever worried much about her. And she was very well satisfied with where she was. She had never been in a place or in such company that suited her so well. Only, as yet, no mother. But it was quiet and peaceful and warm. The wood snapped and crackled in the stove. The rain spattered on the window panes. The wind growled and snarled because it could not get into the sturdy house.

“We’re neither of us much for talking, it seems,” said the old woman.

“No, but I think we are entertaining each other very well,” said Charlotte.

This time the old woman did really laugh.

“I’ve had some such thought myself,” she said.

It was quite a long while, a long, delightful while, after that Charlotte found herself nodding. And the downtrodden black cats had begun to trot around the rug.

“You’re half asleep. You’d be better in bed. Are you afraid to sleep alone?”

Afraid? Charlotte loved to sleep alone. And she never could at Aunt Florence’s. She did not even have a steady room, always being passed about from one to the other. Now Mrs. Barrett who snored, now Jenny who kicked, now Edith or Susette who fussed over her.

“I like sleeping alone,” said Charlotte.

The old woman filled a little blue rubber bag with hot water from the puffing kettle and lighted a candle in a little blue china candlestick. She took Charlotte through a large room, with only a little plain furniture in it. You could move around in it without knocking something over. It was not cluttered up with over-stuffed divans or gilt fandangos, but full of dancing, inviting shadows from the candle. Charlotte felt

sure that this room was never in a hurry. Then they went up a staircase of shining black steps and into a bedroom where there was a bed with a pink flounced spread. The old woman set the candle on the bureau, turned back the bedclothes and put the blue bottle in the bed.

“I hope you’ll be warm and have a good night,” she said. There was something in her face that was very kind. Charlotte felt emboldened to ask a question.

“Would you mind telling me if I’m likely to find a mother here?”

“We’ll see about that in the morning,” said the old woman as she went out and shut the brown door with the big brass latch.

Charlotte looked about the room. She loved it: and it was a room that was used to being loved. Charlotte was quite sure of that. It had a hooked rug on the floor with great soft plushy roses and ferns in it, flowered chintz curtains at the window, and a blue-and-white pitcher and wash basin. And everything in it felt related to her.

On the wall over the table was the picture of a little girl in an old-fashioned dress . . . a little girl not much older than Charlotte. She looked very sweet and young and innocent with the little puffs at her shoulders and the big bow of ribbon in her hair. Charlotte felt acquainted with her.

And then she saw it, the china lady with the blue shoes and the gilt sash and the unfaded red rose in her golden hair, sitting on the little frilled shelf in the corner . . . the china lady of her dream. There could be no mistake about it. Sometime she had been here before . . . not in a dream but really. And her mother had been with her.

Charlotte got into bed, feeling perfectly at home. When she wakened in the morning to see sunshine raining all over her bed, the old woman was bending over her.

“Is that Mother’s picture?” were the first words Charlotte said.

“Yes. This used to be her room. This is not the first time you have been in it. Have you any recollection of it, child?”

“Yes. I thought it was a dream until last night. And Mother was here with me, wasn’t she?”

“Yes. I am your grandmother, Elizabeth Jasper. Your mother married a man I’d no use for. People will tell you I never forgave her. That was nonsense. It’s true I never went to see her. I wouldn’t cross the threshold of Ned Laurence’s house. But she came here to see me and brought you. We made up for all our coolness. She died soon afterwards. I couldn’t bring myself to have anything to do with your father. I see I was wrong. I shouldn’t have left him to bring you up to hate me.”

“But he didn’t. He just never said anything about you,” said Charlotte, sitting up in bed. She knew now that no new mother was to be found, but somehow she did

not feel disappointed. She seemed so close to her own mother. The room, the house, was full of her.

“Judith Penny sent you here to find a mother. She isn’t called a witch for nothing, that one. I’m sorry I haven’t got a mother for you. Do you think a grandmother would do?”

Charlotte knew all at once where she had seen Grandmother Jasper’s eyes so often. In her looking glass. She was suddenly so happy that it seemed to her she must burst with her happiness.

“Can I live here with you?” she whispered. Grandmother Jasper nodded.

“I telephoned your aunt last night after you went to bed and told her where you were. I told her you might stay here quite likely. She didn’t seem to mind.”

“Oh, she wouldn’t. Grandmother, it’s so quiet here!”

Grandmother nodded.

“We’re alike in more than our looks, child. What a turn you gave me when I opened the door last night. I thought I was seeing the ghost of the child I was fifty years ago.”

“Grandmother,” said Charlotte curiously, “is Witch Penny really a witch?”

“If she isn’t, she ought to be,” said Grandmother Jasper.

[The end of *Charlotte’s Quest* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]