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The Field of Clover

By Laurence Housman.

ENGRAVED BY

CLEMENCE HOUSMAN



MERCURY GOD OF MERCHANDISE LOOK ON WITH FAVOURABLE EYES



BE KINDLY TO THE WEARY DROVER & PIPE THE SHEEP INTO THE CLOVER

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TO MY DEAR WOOD-ENGRAVER

THE BOUND PRINCESS



THE BOUND PRINCESS

I

THE FIRE-EATERS



long time ago there lived a man who had the biggest head in the world. Into it he had crammed all the knowledge that might be gathered from the four corners of the earth. Every one said he was the wisest man living. "If I could only find a wife," said the sage, "as wise for a woman as I am for a man, what a race of head-pieces we could bring into the world!"

He waited many years before any such mate could be found for him: yet, at last, found she was—one into whose head was bestowed all the wisdom that might be gathered from the four quarters of heaven.

They were both old, but kings came from all sides to their wedding, and offered themselves as god-parents to the first-born of the new race that was to be. But, to the grief of his parents, the child, when he arrived, proved to be a simpleton; and no second child ever came to repair the mistake of the first.

That he was a simpleton was evident; his head was small and his limbs were large, and he could run long before he could talk or do arithmetic. In the bitterness of their hearts his father and mother named him Noodle, without the aid of any royal god-parents; and from that moment, for any care they took in his bringing-up, they washed their wise hands of him.

Noodle grew and prospered, and enjoyed life in his own foolish way. When his father and mother died within a short time of each other, they left him alone without any friend in the world.

For a good while Noodle lived on just what he could find in the house, in a hand-to-mouth sort of way, till at last only the furniture and the four bare walls were left to him.

One cold winter's night he sat brooding over the fire, wondering where he should get food for the morrow, when he heard feet coming up to the door, and a knock striking low down upon the panel. Outside there was a faint chirping and crackling sound, and a whispering as of fire licking against the woodwork without.

He opened the door and peered forth into the night. There, just before him, stood seven little men huddled up together; three feet high they were, with bright yellow faces all shrivelled and sharp, and eyes whose light leaped and sank like candle flame before a gust.

When they saw him, they shut their eyes and opened famished mouths at him, pointing inwards with flickering finger-tips, and shivering from head to foot with cold, although it seemed to the youth as if the warmth of a slow fire came from them. 'Alas!' said Noodle, in reply to these signs

of hunger, 'I have not left even a crust of bread in the house to give you! But at least come in and make yourselves warm!' He touched the foremost, making signs for them all to enter. 'Ah,' he cried, 'what is this, and what are you, that the mere touch of you burns my finger?'

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Without answer they huddled tremblingly across the threshold; but so soon as they saw the fire burning on the hearth, they yelped all together like a pack of hounds, and, throwing themselves face forwards into the hot embers, began ravenously to lap up the flames. They lapped and lapped, and the more they lapped the more the fire sank away and died. Then with their flickering finger-tips they stirred the hot logs and coals, burrowing after the thin tapes and swirls of vanishing flame, and fetching them out like small blue eels still wriggling for escape.

After each blue wisp had been gulped down, they sipped and sucked at their fingers for any least tricklet of flavour that might be left; and at the last seemed more famished than when they began.

'More, more, O wise Noodle, give us more!' they cried; and Noodle threw the last of his fuel on the embers.

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They breathed round it, fanning it into a great blaze that leaped and danced up to the rafters; then they fell on, till not a fleck or a flake of it was left. Noodle, seeing them still famished, broke up a stool and threw that on the hearth. And again they flared it with their breath and gobbled off the flame. When the stool was finished he threw in the table, then the dresser, and after that the oak-chest and the window-seat.

Still they feasted and were not fed. Noodle fetched an axe, and broke down the door; then he wrenched up the boards from the floor, and pulled the beams and rafters out of the ceiling; yet, even so, his guests were not to be satisfied.

'I have nothing left,' he said, 'but the house itself; but since you are still hungry you shall be welcome to it!'

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He scattered the fire that remained upon the hearth, and threw it out and about the room; and as he ran forth to escape, up against all the walls and right through the roof rose a great crackling sheaf of flame. In the midst of the fire, Noodle could see his seven guests lying along on their bellies, slopping their hands in the heat, and lapping up the flames with their tongues. 'Surely,' he thought, 'I have given them enough to eat at last!'

After a while all the fire was eaten away, and only the black and smouldering ruins were left. Day came coldly to light, and there sat Noodle, without a home in the world, watching with considerate eye his seven guests finishing their inordinate repast.

They all rose to their feet together, and came towards him bowing; as they approached he felt the heat of their bodies as it had been seven furnaces.

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'Enough, O wise Noodle!' said they, 'we have had enough!' 'That,' answered Noodle, 'is the least thing left me to wonder at. Go your ways in peace; but first tell me, who are you?' They replied, 'We are the Fire-eaters: far from our own land, and strangers, you have done us this service; what, now, can we do to serve you?' 'Put me in the way of a living,' said Noodle, 'and you will do me the greatest service of all.'

Then the one of them who seemed to be chief took from his finger a ring having for its centre a great firestone, and threw it into the snow, saying, 'Wait for three hours till the ring shall have had time to cool, then take it, and wear it; and whatever fortune you deserve it shall bring you. For this ring is the sweetener of everything that it touches: bread it turns into rich meats, water into strong wine, grief into virtue, and labour into strength. Also, if you ever need our help, you have but to brandish the ring, and the gleam of it will reach us, and we will be with you wherever you may be.'

With that they bowed their top-knots to the ground and departed, inverting themselves swiftly till only the shining print of seven pairs of feet remained, red-hot, over the place where they had been standing.

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Noodle waited for three hours; then he took up the firestone ring, and putting it on his finger set out into the world.

At the first door he came to, he begged a crust of bread, and touching it with the ring found it tasted like rich meats, well cooked and delicately flavoured. Also, the water which he drew in the hollow of his hand from a brook by the roadside tasted to him like strong wine.

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II

THE GALLOPING PLOUGH

Noodle went on many miles till he came near to a rich man's farm. Though it was the middle of winter, all the fields showed crops of corn in progress; here it was in thin blade, and here green, but in full ear; and here it was ripe and ready for harvest. 'How is this,' he said to the first man he met, 'that you have corn here in the middle of winter?' 'Ah!' said the man, 'you have not heard of the Galloping Plough; you too have to fall under bondage to my master.' 'What is your master?' inquired Noodle, 'and in what bondage does he bind man?'

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'My master, and your master that shall soon be,' answered the old man, 'is the owner of all this land and the farmer of it. He is rich and sleek and fat like his own furrows, for he has the Galloping Plough as his possession. Ah, that! 't is a very miracle, a wonder, a thing to catch at the heartstrings of all beholders; it shines like a moonbeam, and is better than an Arab mare for swiftness; it warms the very ground that it enters, so that seeds take root and spring, though it be the middle of winter. No man sees it but what he loses his heart to it, and sells his freedom for the possession of it. All here are men like myself who have become slaves because of that desire. You also, when you see it, will become slave to it.'

[pg 15]

Noodle went on through the summer and the spring corn, till he came to bare fields. Ahead of him on a hill-top he saw the farmer himself, sleek and rosy, and of full paunch, lolling like a lord at his ease; yet with a working eye in the midst of his leisure.

To and fro, up to him and back, shot a silver gleam over the purple brown of the fields; and Noodle's heart gave a thump at the sight, for the spell of the Galloping Plough was on him.

Now and then he heard a clear sound that startled him with its note. It was like the sweet whistling cry of a bird many times multiplied. Ever when the silver gleam of the Plough had run its farthest from the farmer, the cry sounded; and at the sound the gleam wavered and stayed and flew back dartingly to the farmer's side. So Noodle understood how this was the farmer's signal for the Plough to return; and the Plough knew it as a horse its master's voice, and came so fast that the wind whistled against its silver side.

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As he watched, Noodle's heart went down into the valley and up the hillside, following in the track of the Galloping Plough. 'I can never be happy again,' thought he; 'either I must possess it, or must die.'

He came to the farmer where he sat calling his Plough to him and letting it go; and the farmer smiled, the wide indulgent smile of a man who knows that a bargain is about to fall his way.

'What is the price,' asked Noodle, 'of yonder Galloping Plough, that runs like an Arab mare, and returns to you at your call?'

Said the farmer, 'A year's service; and if the Plough will follow you, it is yours; if not, then you must be my bondman until you die!'

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Noodle looked once the way of the Galloping Plough, and his heart flapped at his side like a sail which the wind drops and lets go; and he had no thought or will left in him but to be where the Galloping Plough was. So he closed hands on the bargain, to be the farmer's servant either for a year, or for his whole life.

For a year he worked upon the farm, and all the while plotted how he might win the Galloping Plough to himself. The farmer kept no watch upon it, nor put it under lock and key, for the Plough recognised no voice but his own, nor went nor came save at his bidding. In the night Noodle would go down to the shed or field where it lay, and whistle to it, trying to put forth notes of the same magical power as those which came through the farmer's lips.

But no sound that came from his lips ever stroked life into its silver sides. The year was nearly run out, and Noodle was in despair.

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Then he remembered the firestone ring, the Sweetener. 'May be,' said he, 'since it changes to sweetness whatever I eat and drink, it will sweeten my voice also, so that the Plough will obey.' So he put the ring between his lips and whistled; and at the sound his heart turned a somersault for joy, for he felt that out of his mouth the farmer's magic had been over-topped and conquered.

The Galloping Plough stirred faintly from the furrow where it lay, breaking the ground and marring its smooth course. Then it shook its head slowly, and returned impassively to rest.

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In the morning the farmer came and saw the broken earth close under the Plough's nose. Noodle, hiding among the corn hard by, heard him say, 'What hast thou heard in the night, O my moonbeam, my miracle, that thy lily-foot has trodden up the ground? Hast thou forgotten whose hand feeds thee, whose corn it is thou lovest, whose heart's care also cherishes thee?'

The farmer went away, and presently came back bearing a bowl of corn; and Noodle saw the Plough lift its head to its master's palm, and feed like a horse on the grain.

Then Noodle, gay of heart, waited till it was night, and surely his time was short, for on the morrow his wages were to be paid, and the Plough was to be his, or else he was to be the farmer's bondservant for the rest of his life. He took with him three handfuls of corn, and went down to where the Plough stood waiting by the furrow. Shaping his lips to the ring, he whistled gently like a lover, and immediately the Plough stirred, and lifted up its head as if to look at him.

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'O my moonbeam, my miracle,' whispered Noodle, 'wilt thou not come to the one that feeds thee?' and he held out a handful of corn. But the Plough gave no regard to him or his grain: slowly it moved away from him back into the furrow.

Then Noodle laughed softly and dropped his ring, the Sweetener, into the hand that held the grain; and barely had he offered the corn before he felt the silver Plough nozzling at his palm, and eating as a horse eats from the hand of its master.

Then he whistled again, placing the Sweetener back between his lips; and the Galloping Plough sprang after him, and followed at his heels like a dog.

So, finding himself its master, he bid it stay for the night; and in the morning he said to the farmer, 'Give me my wages, and let me go!' And the farmer laughed, saying, 'Take your wages, and go!'

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Then Noodle took off his ring, the Sweetener, and laid it between his lips and blew through it; and up like a moonbeam, and like an Arab mare, sprang the Galloping Plough at his call. So he leaped upon its back, crying, 'Carry me away out of this land, O thou moonbeam, and miracle of beauty, and never slacken nor stay except I bid thee!'

Vainly the farmer, borne down on a torrent of rage and amazement, whistled his best, and threw corn and rice from the rear; for the whistling of Noodle was sweeter to the ear, and his corn sweeter to the taste, and he nearer to the heart of the Galloping Plough than was the old master whom it left behind.

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THE THIRSTY WELL



o they escaped, slitting the swift hours with ungovernable speed. The furrow they two made in the world that day, as they went shooting over the round of it, was called in after times the Equator, and men still know it by the heat of it, though it has since been covered over by the dust of ages.

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To Noodle, as he went careering round it, the whole world's circuit ran in a line across his brain, entering his vision and passing through it as a thread through the needle's eye. Nor would he of his own will ever have stopped his galloping, but that at the completion of the first round a mighty thirst took hold of him. 'O my moonbeam,' he said, choking behind parched lips, and sick at heart, 'check me, or I faint!' And the Galloping Plough stopped at once, and set him to earth in a green space under the shadow of overhanging boughs.

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He found himself in a richly grown garden, a cool paradise for a traveller to rest in. Close at hand and inviting to the eye was a well with a bucket slung ready to be let down. Noodle had little thought of seeking for the owner of the garden to beg for a drink, since water is an equal gift to all and the right of any man; but as he drew near he found the means to it withheld from him, the lid being fast locked. He went on in search of the owner, till at length he came upon the same lying half asleep under a thorn-bush with the key in her hand. She was an old woman, so withered and dry, she looked as if no water could have ever passed her lips.

When Noodle asked for a drink from the well, she looked at him bright and sharp, and said: 'Before any man drinks of my water he must make a bargain with me.' 'What is the bargain?' asked Noodle; and she led him down to the well.

Then she unlocked the lid and bade him look in; and at the sight Noodle knew for a second time that his heart had been stolen from him, and that to be happy he must taste that water or die.

Again he asked, with his eyes intent upon the blue wrimpling of the water in the well's depth, 'What is the bargain?' And the old woman answered, 'If you fail to draw water out of the well you must fling yourself into it.' For answer Noodle swung down the bucket, lowering it as fast as it would go; then he set both hands to the windlass and wound.

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He heard the water splashing off the sides of the bucket all the way up, as the shortening rope brought it near; but when he drew it over the well's brink wonder and grief held him fast, for the bucket was as empty as vanity. From behind him came a noise of laughter, and there was the old witch running round and round in a circle; and everywhere a hedge of thorns came shooting up to enclose him and keep him fast for her.

'What a trap I am in!' thought Noodle; but once more he lowered the bucket, and once more it returned to him empty.

The old woman climbed up into the thorn-hedge, and sat on its top, singing:

'Overground, underground, round-about spell;
The Thirsty has come to the Thirsty Well!'

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Again Noodle let down the bucket; and this time as he drew it up he looked over into the well's heart, and saw all the way up the side a hundred blue arms reaching out crystal scallops and drawing water out of the bucket as hard as they could go. He saw thick lips like sea-anemones thrust out between the crevices of the wall, sucking the crystals dry as fast as they were filled. 'Truly,' he said to himself, 'this is a thirsty well, but myself am thirstier!'

When he had drawn up the bucket empty for the third time, he stood considering; and at last he fastened to it the firestone ring, the Sweetener, and lowered it once more. Then he laughed to himself as he drew up, and felt the bucket lightening at every turn till it touched the surface of things.

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Empty he found it, with only his firestone hanging by the rim, and once again he let it down to be refilled. But this time as he wound up, nothing could keep him from letting a curious eye go over the brink, to see how the Well-folk fared over their wine; and in what he beheld there was already comfort for his soul.

The blue arms went like oars out of unison; like carpet-beaters stricken in the eyes and throat with dust, they beat foolishly against the sides and bottom of the bucket, shattering and letting fall their goblets in each unruly attempt. And because Noodle wound leniently at the rope, willing that they should have their fill, at the last gasp they were able to send the bucket empty to the top. It was the last staving off of destiny that lay in their power to make; thereafter wine conquered them.

Quickly Noodle drew out the ring, and sent the bucket flying on its last errand. It smacked the

water, heeled over, and dipped under a full draught. Then Noodle spun the windlass with the full pinch of his energies, calling on the bucket to ascend. He heard the water spilling from its sides, and knew that the blue arms were there, battling to arrest it as it flew, and to pay him back once more with emptiness and mockery. Yet in spite of them the bucket hastened and lightened not, but was drawn up to the well's head brimming largely, and winking a blue eye joyously to the light of day.

Over head and ears Noodle plunged for the quenching of his thirst, nor stayed nor drew back till his head had smitten upon the bottom of the bucket in his pursuit of the draught. Then it was apparent that only a third of the water remained, the rest having obeyed the imperative suction of his throat, and that the thirsty well had at last found a master under the eye of heaven.

In the depth of the bucket the water flashed like a burning sapphire and swung circling, curling and coiling, tossing this way and that, as if struggling to get out. At last with a laugh it threw down the bucket, and tore back into the well with a crash like thunder.

Up from the well rose a chant of voices:

'Under Heaven, over Hell,
You have broken the spell,
You are lord of the Well.'

Noodle stepped over the brink of his new realm, calling the Well-folk to reach hands for him and bear him down. All round, the blue arms started out, catching him and handing him on from one to another ladderwise, down, and down, and down. As he went, anemone lips came out of the crannies in the wall, and kissed his feet and hands in token of allegiance. 'You are lord of the well!' they said, as they passed him each one to the next.

He came to the bottom of the well; under his feet, wherever he stepped upon its waters, hands came up and sustained him. The knowledge of everything that was there had become his. 'Give me,' he said, 'the crystal cup that is for him who holds kingship over you; so shall I be lord of you in all places wherever I go.'

A blue arm reached down and drew up from the water a small crystal, that burned through the darkness with a blue fire, and gave it to Noodle. 'Now I am your king, however far from you!' said Noodle. And they answered, chanting:

'Under Heaven, over Hell,
You have broken the spell,
You are lord of the Well.'

'Lift me up!' said he; and the blue arms caught him and lifted him up; from one to another they passed him in ascending circles, till he came to the mouth of the well.

There overhead was the old witch, crouching and looking in to know what had become of him; and her hair hung far down over her eyes into the well. He caught her to him by it over the brink. 'Old witch,' he said, 'you must change places with me now!' and he tossed her down to the bottom of the well.

She went like a falling shuttlecock, shrieking as she fell; and as she struck the water, the drowned bodies of the men she had sent there came to the surface, and caught her by the feet and hair, and drew her down, making an end of her, as she also had made of them.



THE PRINCESS MELILOT



hen Noodle, carrying the crystal with him, set foot once more upon dry land, straightway he was again upon the back of the Galloping Plough, with the world flying away under him. But now weariness came over him, and his head weighed this way and that, so that earth and sky mixed themselves before his gaze, and he was so drugged with sleep that he had no wits to bid the Plough slacken from its speed. Therefore it happened that as they passed a wood, a hanging bough caught him, and brushed him like a feather from his place, landing him on a green bosom of grass, where he slept the sleep of the weary, nor ever lifted his head to see the Plough fast disappearing over hill and valley and plain, out of sound of his voice or sight of his eye.

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When Noodle awoke and found that the Plough was gone, he was bitter against himself for his folly. 'So poor a use to make of so noble a steed!' he cried; 'no wonder it has gone from me to seek for a worthier master! If by good fortune I find it again, needs must I do great things by its aid to be worthy of its service.' So he set out, following the furrow of its course, determined, however far he must seek, to journey on till he found it.

For a whole year he travelled, till at length he came, footsore and weary, to a deserted palace standing in the midst of an overgrown garden. The great gates, which lay wide open, were overrun with creepers, and the paths were green with weeds. That morning he had thought that he saw far away on the hills the gleam of his silver Plough, and now hope rose high, for he could see by its track that the Plough had passed before him into the garden of the palace. 'O my moonbeam,' he thought, 'is it here I shall find you at last?'

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Within the garden there was a sound of cross questions and crooked answers, of many talking with loud voices, and of one weeping apart from the rest. When he got quite close, he was struck still with awe, and joy, and wonder. For first there lay the Galloping Plough in the middle of a green lawn, and round it a score of serving-men, tugging at it and trying to make it move on. Near by stood an old woman, wringing her hands and begging them to leave it alone: 'For,' cried she, 'if the Plough touches but the feet of the Princess, she will be uprooted, and will presently wither away and die. Of what use is it to break one, if the other enchantments cannot be broken?'

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In the centre of the lawn grew a bower of roses, and beneath the bower stood the loveliest princess that ever eye beheld; but she stood there motionless, and without sign of life. She seemed neither to hear, nor see, nor breathe; her feet were rooted to the ground; though they seemed only to rest lightly under her weight upon the grass, no man, nor a hundred men, could stir her from where she stood. And, as the spell that held her fast bound to the spot, even so was the spell that sealed her senses,—no man might lift it from her. When Noodle set eyes upon her he knew that for the third time his heart had been stolen from him, and that to be happy he must possess her, or die.

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He ran quickly to the old woman, who, unregarded by the serving-men, stood weeping and wringing her hands. 'Tell me, said Noodle, 'who is this sleeper who stands enchanted and rooted like a flower to earth? And who are you, and these others who work and cry at cross purposes?'

The old woman cried from a wide mouth: 'It is my mistress, the honey-jewel of my heart, whom you see here so grievously enchanted. All the gifts of the fairies at her christening did not prevent what was foretold of her at her birth. In her seventeenth year, as you see her now, so it was told of her that she should be.'

'Does she live?' asked Noodle; 'is she asleep? She is not dead; when will she wake? Tell me, old woman, her history, and how this fate has come upon her.'

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'She was the daughter of the king of this country by his first wife,' said the old woman, 'and heir to the throne after his death; but when her mother died the king married again, and the three daughters he had by his second wife were jealous of the beauty, and charm, and goodness which raised their sister so high above them in the estimation of all men. So they asked their mother to teach them a spell that should rob Melilot of her charms, and make them useless in the eyes of men. And their mother, who was wise in such arts, taught to each of them a spell, so that together they might work their will.

'One day they came running to Melilot, and said, "Come and play with us a new game that our mother has taught us!" Then they began turning themselves into flowers. "I will be a hollyhock!" said one. "And I will be a columbine!" said another; and saying the spell over each other they became each the flower they had named.

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'Then they unloosed the spells, and became themselves again. "Oh, it is so nice to be a flower!" they cried, laughing and clapping their hands. But Melilot knew no spell.

At last, seeing how her sisters turned into flowers, and came back safe again, "I will be a rose!" she cried; "turn me into a rose and out again!"

Then her three sisters joined their tongues together, and finished the spell over her. And so soon as she had become a rose-tree, the three sisters turned into three moles, and went down under the earth and gnawed at the roots.

Then they came up, and took their own forms again, and sang,—

"Sister, sister, here you are now,
Till the ploughman come with the Galloping Plough!"

Then they turned into bees, and sucked out the honey from the roses, and coming to themselves again they sang,—

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"Sister, here you must doze and doze,
Till they bring you a flower of the Burning Rose!"

'Then they shook the dewdrops out of her eyes, crying,—

"Sister, your brain lies under our spell,
Till water be brought from the Thirsty Well!"

'Then they took the top blossom of all, and broke it to pieces, and threw the petals away as they cried,—

"Sister, your life goes down for a term,
Till they bring you breath from the Camphor-Worm!"

'And when they had done all this, they turned her back into her true shape, and left her standing even as you see her now, without warmth, or sight, or memory, or motion, dead saving for her beauty, that never changes or dies. And here she must stand till the spells which have been fastened upon her have been unloosed. No long time after, the wickedness of the three sisters and of their cruel mother was discovered to the king, and they were all put to death for the crime. Yet the ill they had done remained; and the king's grief became so great to see his loved daughter standing dead before him that he removed with his court to another place, and left this palace to the care of only a few serving-men, and myself to keep watch and guard over the Princess.

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'So now four-fold is the spell that holds her, and to break the lightest of them the water of the Thirsty Well is needed; with two of its drops laid upon her eyes memory will come back to her, and her mind will remember of the things of the past. And for the breaking of the second spell is needed a blossom of the Burning Rose, and the plucking of that no man's hand can achieve; but when the Rose is laid upon her breast, her heart will belong to the world once more, and will beat again under her bosom. And for the breaking of the third spell one must bring the breath of the Camphor-Worm that has lain for a whole year inside its body, and breathe it between her lips; then she will breathe again, and all her five senses will return to her. And for the last spell only the Galloping Plough can uproot her back to life, and free her feet for the ways of earth. Now, here we have the Galloping Plough with no man who can guide it, and what aid can it be? If these fools should be able to make it so much as but touch the feet of my dear mistress, she will be mown down like grass, and die presently for lack of earth; for only the three other charms I have told you of can put whole life back into her.'

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'As for the mastery of the Plough,' said Noodle, 'I will fetch that from them in a breath. See, in a moment, how marvellous will be the uplifting of their eyes!' He put to his lips the firestone ring—the Sweetener—and blew but one note through it. Then in a moment the crowd divided hither and thither, with cries of wonder and alarm, for the Plough turned and bounded back to its master quickly, as an Arab mare at the call of her owner.

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The old woman, weeping for gladness, cried: 'Thou art master of the Plough! Art thou master of all the other things as well?'

He said: 'Of one thing only. Tell me of the Burning Rose and the Camphor-Worm; what and where are they? For I am the master of the ends of the earth by reason of the speed with which this carries me; and I am lord of the Thirsty Well, and have the Fire-eaters for my friends.'

The old woman clapped her hands, and blessed him for his youth, and his wisdom, and his courage. 'First,' she said, 'restore to the Princess her memory by means of the water of the Thirsty Well; then I will show you the way to the Burning Rose, for the easier thing must be done first.'

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Then Noodle drew out the crystal and breathed in it, calling on the Well-folk for the two drops of water to lay on Princess Melilot's eyes. Immediately in the bottom of the cup appeared two blue drops of water, that came climbing up the sides of the glass and stood trembling together on the brim. And Noodle, touching them with the firestone ring to make the memory of things sweet to her, bent back the Princess's face, and let them fall under her closed lids.

'Look!' cried the faithful nurse, 'light trembles within those eyes of hers! In there she begins to remember things; but as yet she sees and hears nothing. Now it is for you to be swift and fetch her the blossom of the Burning Rose. Be wise, and you shall not fail!'



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V

THE BURNING ROSE



he told him how he was to go, across the desert southward, till he found a giant, longer in length than a day's journey, lying asleep upon the sand. Over his head, it was told, hung a cloud, covering him from the heat and resting itself against his brows; within the cloud was a dream, and within the dream grew the garden of the Burning Rose.

Than this she knew no more, nor by what means Noodle might gain entrance and become possessor of the Rose.

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Noodle waited for no more; he mounted upon the Galloping Plough, and pressed away over the desert to the south. For three days he travelled through parched places, refreshing himself by the way with the water of the Thirsty Well, calling on the Well-folk for the replenishment of his crystal, and turning the draught to wine by the sweetness of his magic ring.

At length he saw a cloud rising to him from a distance; like a great opal it hung motionless between earth and heaven. Coming nearer he saw the giant himself stretched out for a day's journey across the sand. His head lay under the colours of the dawn, and his feet were covered with the dusk of evening, and over his middle shone the noonday sun.

Under the giant's shadow Noodle stopped, and gazed up into the cloud; through the outer covering of its mists he saw what seemed to be balls of fire, and knew that within lay the dream and the garden of the Burning Rose.

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The giant laughed and muttered in his sleep, for the dream was sweet to him. 'O Rose,' he said, 'O sweet Rose, what end is there of thy sweetness? How innumerable is the dance of the Roses of my Rose-garden!'

Noodle caught hold of the ropes of the giant's hair, and climbed till he sat within the hollow of his right ear. Then he put to his lips the ring, the Sweetener, and sang till the giant heard him in his sleep; and the sweet singing mixed itself with the sweetness of the Rose in the giant's brain, and he muttered to himself, saying: 'O bee, O sweet bee, O bee in my brain, what honey wilt thou fetch for me out of the Roses of my Rose-garden?'

So, more and more, Noodle sweetened himself to the giant, till the giant passed him into his brain, and into the heart of the dream, even into the garden of the Burning Rose.

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Far down below the folds of the cloud, Noodle remembered that the Galloping Plough lay waiting a call from him. 'When I have stolen the Rose,' thought he, 'I may need swift heels for my flight.' And he put the Sweetener to his lips and whistled the Plough up to him.

It came, cleaving the encirclement of clouds like a silver gleam of moonlight, and for a moment, where they parted, Noodle saw a rift of blue sky, and the light of the outer world clear through their midst.

The giant turned uneasily in his sleep, and the garden of the Burning Rose rocked to its foundations as the edge of things real pierced into it.

'While I stay here there is danger,' thought Noodle. 'Surely I must make haste to possess myself of the Rose and to escape!'

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All round him was a garden set thick with rose-trees in myriads of blossom, rose behind rose as

far as the eye could reach, and the fragrance of them lay like a heavy curtain of sleep upon the senses. Noodle, beginning to feel drowsy, stretched out his hand in haste to the nearest flower, lest in a little while he should be no more than a part of the giant's dream. 'O beloved Heart of Melilot!' he cried, and crushed his fingers upon the stem.

The whole bough crackled and sprang away at his touch; the Rose turned upon him, screaming and spouting fire; a noise like thunder filled all the air. Every rose in the garden turned and spat flame at where he stood. His face and his hands became blistered with the heat.

Leaping upon the back of his Plough, he cried, 'Carry me to the borders of the garden where there are open spaces! The price of the Princess is upon my head!'

[pg 50] The Plough bounded this way and that, searching for some outlet by which to escape. It flew in spirals and circles, it leaped like a flea, it burrowed like a mole, it ploughed up the rose-trees by the roots. But so soon as it had passed they stood up unharmed again, and to whatever point of refuge the Plough fled, that way they all turned their heads and darted out vomitings of fire.

In vain did Noodle summon the Well-folk to his aid; his crystal shot forth fountains of water that turned into steam as they rose, and fell back again, scalding him.

Then with two deaths threatening to devour him, he brandished the ring, calling upon the Fire-eaters for their aid.

They laughed as they came. 'Here is food for you!' he cried. 'Multiply your appetites about me, or I shall be consumed in these flames!'

'Brandish again!' cried they—the same seven whom he had fed. 'We are not enough; this fire is not quenchable.'

[pg 51] Noodle brandished till the whole garden swarmed with their kind. One fastened himself upon every rose, a gulf opposing itself to a torrent. All sight of the conflagration disappeared; but within there went a roaring sound, and the bodies of the Fire-eaters crackled, growing large and luminous the while.

'Do your will quickly and begone!' cried the Fire-eaters. 'Even now we swell to bursting with the pumping in of these fires!'

[pg 52] Noodle seized on a rose to which one hung, sucking out its heats. He tugged, but the strong fibres held. Then he locked himself to the back of the Plough, crying to it and caressing its speed with all names under heaven, and beseeching it in the name of Melilot to break free. And the Plough giving but one plunge, the Rose came away into Noodle's hand, panting and a prisoner. All blushing it grew and radiant, with a soft inner glow, and an odour of incomparable sweetness. He seemed to see the heart of Melilot beating before him.

[pg 53] But now there came a blast of fire behind him, for the Fire-eaters had disappeared, and all was whirling and shaken before his eyes; and the Plough sped desperately over earthquake and space. For the plucking of the Rose had awakened the giant from his sleep; and the dream shrivelled and spun away in a whirl of flame-coloured vapours. Leaping into clear day out of the unravelment of its mists, Noodle found himself and his Plough launching over an edge of precipice for a downward dive into space. The giant's hair, standing upright from his head in the wrath and horror of his awakening, made a forest ending in his forehead that bowered them to right and to left. Quitting it they slid ungovernably over the bulge of his brow, and went at full spurt for the abyss.

Dexterously the Plough steered its descent, catching on the bridge and furrowing the ridge of the nose; nine leagues were the duration of a second.

[pg 54] The giant, thinking some venomous parasite was injuring his flesh, aimed, and a moment too late had thumped his fist upon the place. But already the Plough skirting the amazed opening of his mouth was lost in the trammels of his beard. Thence, as it escaped the rummaging of his fingers, it flew scouring his breast, and inflicted a flying scratch over the regions of his abdomen. Then, still believing it to be the triumphal procession of a flea, he pursued it to his thigh, and mistaking the shadow of the substance allowed it yet again to escape. At his knee-cap there was but a hair's-breadth between Noodle and the weight of his thumb; but thereafter the Plough out-distanced his every effort, and, with Noodle preserved whole and alive, sped fast and far, bearing the Burning Rose to the heart of the beloved Melilot.

The crone was aware of his coming before she heard him, or saw the gleam of his Plough running beam-like over the land. From her seat by the Princess's bower she clapped her hands, and springing to his neck ere he alighted: 'A long way off, and a long time off,' she cried, 'I knew what fortune was with you; for when you plucked off the Rose, and bore it out of the heart of the dream, the scent of it filled the world; and I felt the sweetness of youth once more in my blood.'

[pg 55] Then she led him to the Princess, and bade him lay the Rose in her breast, that her heart might be won back into the world. Looking at her face again, Noodle saw how memory had made it more beautiful than ever, and how between her lips had grown the tender parting of a smile. Then he laid the Rose where the movement of the heart should be; and presently under the white

breast rose the music of its beating.

'Ah!' cried the old nurse, weeping for happiness, 'now her heart that loved me is come back, and I can listen all day to the sound of it! You have brought memory to her, you have brought love; now bring breath, and the awakening of her five senses. Surely the light of her eyes will be your reward!'

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VI

THE CAMPHOR-WORM



ell me quickly of the Camphor-Worm, cried the youth as he feasted his eyes on the Princess's loveliness, made more unendurable by the awakening within of love. 'Where and what is it?' 'It is not so far as was the way to the Burning Rose,' answered the crone; 'an hour on the back of the Plough shall bring it near to you; but the danger and difficulty of this quest is more, not less. For to reach the Camphor-Worm you need to be a diver in deep waters, whose weight crushes a man; and to touch its lips you must master the loathing of your nature; and to carry away its breath you must have strength of will and endurance beyond what is mortal.' 'You trouble me with things I need not know,' cried Noodle. 'Tell me,' he said, 'how I may reach the Camphor-Worm; and of it and its ways.'

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'By this path, and by that,' said the old woman, pointing him, 'go on till you come to the thick waters of the Bitter Lake; they are blacker than night, and their weight is heavier than lead, and in the depths dwells the Camphor-Worm. Once a year, when the air is sweetest with the scents of summer, she rises to breathe, lifting her black snout through the surface of the waters. Then she draws fresh air into her lungs, flavoured with leaves and flowers, and after she has breathed it in she lets go the last bubble of the breath she drew from the summer of the year before; and it is this bubble of breath alone that will give back life to the five senses of Princess Melilot. But the Worm's time for rising is far; and how you shall bear the weight in the depths of those waters, or make the Worm give up the bubble before her time, or at last bear back the bubble to lay it on the lips of the Princess so that she may wake,—these are things I know not the way of, for to my eyes they seem dark with difficulty and peril.'

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Then Noodle, opening the petals of the Burning Rose as it lay upon the heart of Melilot, drew out honey from its centre, filling his hand with the golden crumbings of fragrance; and he leapt upon the Galloping Plough, urging it in the way the Princess's nurse had pointed out to him. As they went he caressed it with all the names under heaven, stroking it with his hand and praising it for the delicacy of its steering: saying, 'O my moonbeam, if thou wouldst save the life of thy master, or restore the five senses of the Princess Melilot, thou must surpass thyself to-day. Listen, thou heaven-sent limb, thou miracle of quicksilver, and have a long mind to my words; for in a short while I shall have no speech left in me till the thing be done, and the deliverance, from head to feet, of my Beloved accomplished.'

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Even while he spoke they came to the edge of the Bitter Lake—a small pool, but its waters were blacker than night, and heavier than lead to the eye. Then Noodle leapt down from the Plough, and caressed it for the last time, saying: 'Set thy face for the garden where the Princess Melilot is; and when I am come back to thee speechless out of the Lake and am striding thee once more, then wait not for a word but carry me to her with more speed than thou hast ever mustered to my aid till now; go faster than wind or lightning or than the eye of man can see! So, by good fortune, I may live till I reach her lips; but if thou tarry at all I am a dead man. And when thou art come to Melilot set thy share beneath the roots of her feet, and take her up to me out of the ground. Do

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this tenderly, but abate not speed till it be done!

Then the youth put into his mouth the honey of the Burning Rose, and into his lips the Sweetener, and stripped himself as a bather to the pool. And the Plough, remembering its master's word, turned and set its face to where lay the garden with Melilot waiting to be relieved of her enchantment. Whereat Noodle, bowing his head, and blessing it with lips of farewell, turned shortly and slid down into the blackness of the lake.

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The weight of that water was like a vice upon his limbs, and around his throat, as he swam out into the centre of the pool. As he went he breathed upon the water, and the scent of the honey of the Burning Rose passing through the Sweetener made an incomparable fragrance, gentle, and subtle, and wooing to the senses.

When he came to the middle of the lake he stayed breathing full breaths, till the air deepened with fragrance around him. Presently underneath him he felt the movement of a great thing coming up from the bottom of the pool. It touched his feet and came grazing along his side; and all at once shuddering and horror took hold upon him, for his whole nature was filled with loathing of its touch.

Out of the pool's surface before him rose a great black snout, that opened, showing a round hole. Then he thought of Melilot and her beauty laid fast under a charm, and drawing a full breath he laid his lips containing the ring, the Sweetener, to the lips of the Worm.

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The Worm began to breathe. As the Worm drank the air out of him, he drew in more through his nostrils, and more and more, till the great gills were filled and satisfied.

Then the Worm let go the last bubble of air which remained from the year before, and had lain ever since in its body, by which alone life could be given back to the five senses of Melilot. Then drawing in its head it lowered itself once more to the bottom of the pool; and Noodle, feeling in his mouth the precious globule of air, fastened his lips upon it and shot out for shore.

Against the weight of those leaden waters a longing to gasp possessed him; but he knew that with the least breath the bubble would be lost, and all his labour undone. Not too soon his feet caught hold of the bank, and drew him free to land. He cast himself speechless across the back of the Galloping Plough and clung.

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The Plough gathered itself together and sprang away through space. Remembering its master's word it showed itself a miracle of speed; like lightning became its flight.

The eye of Noodle grew blind to the passing of things; he could take no count of the collapsing leagues. More and more grew the amazingness of the Plough's leaps, things only to be measured by miles, and counted as joltings on the way; while fast to the back of it clung Noodle, and endured, praying that shortness of breath might not overmaster him, or the check of his lungs give way and burst him to the emptiness of a drum. His senses rocked and swayed; he felt the gates of his resolve slackening and forcing themselves apart; and still the Galloping Plough plunged him blindly along through space.

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But now the shrill crying of the crone struck in upon his ears, and he stretched open his arms for the accomplishment of the deliverance. Even in that nick of time was the end of the thing brought about; for the Plough, guiding itself as a thread to the needle's eye, gave the uprooting stroke to the white feet of Melilot; and Noodle, swooning for the last gasp, saw all at once her beauty swaying level to his gaze and her body bending down upon his.

Then he fastened his lips upon hers, and loosed the bubble from his mouth; and panting and sobbing themselves back to life they hung in each other's arms. She warmed and ripened in his embrace, opening upon him the light of her eyes; and the greatness and beauty of the reward abashed him and bore him down to earth.

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He heard the old crone clucking and crowing, like a hen over its egg, of the happiness that had come to her old years; till recognising the youth's state she covered him over with a cloak amid exclamations of astonishment.

The Princess saw nothing but her lover's face and the happy feasting of his eyes. She bent her head nearer and nearer to his, and the story of what he had done became a dream that she remembered, and that waking made true. 'O you Noodle,' she said, laughing, 'you wise, wise Noodle!' And then everything was finished, for she had kissed him!

So Noodle and the Princess were married, and came to the throne together and reigned over a happy land. The Fire-eaters were their friends, and the gifts of fortune were theirs. The Galloping Plough made all the waste places fertile; and the water of the Thirsty Well rose and ran in rivers through the land; and over the walls of their palace, where they had planted it, grew the flower of the Burning Rose.

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THE CROWN'S WARRANTY

Five hundred years ago or more a king died, leaving two sons: one was the child of his first wife, and the other of his second, who surviving him became his widow. When the king was dying he took off the royal crown which he wore, and set it upon the head of the elder born, the son of his first wife, and said to him: 'God is the lord of the air, and of the water, and of the dry land: this gift cometh to thee from God. Be merciful, over whatsoever thou holdest power, as God is!' And saying these words he laid his hands upon the heads of his two sons and died.

Now this crown was no ordinary crown, for it was made of the gold brought by the Wise men of the East when they came to worship at Bethlehem. Every king that had worn it since then had reigned well and uprightly and had been loved by all his people: but only to himself was it known what virtue lay in his crown; and every king at dying gave it to his son with the same words of blessing.

So, now, the king's eldest son wore the crown; and his step-mother knew that her own son could not wear it while he lived, therefore she looked on and said nothing. Now he was known to all the people of his country, because of his right to the throne, as the king's son; and his brother, the child of the second wife, was called the queen's son. But as yet they were both young, and cared little enough for crowns.

After the king's death the queen was made regent till the king's son should be come to a full age; but already the little king wore the royal crown his father had left him, and the queen looked on and said nothing.

More than three years went by, and everybody said how good the queen was to the little king who was not her own son; and the king's son, for his part, was good to her and to his step-brother, loving them both; and all by himself he kept thinking, having his thoughts guarded and circled by his golden crown, 'How shall I learn to be a wise king, and to be merciful when I have power, as God is?'

So to everything that came his way, to his playthings and his pets, to his ministers and his servants, he played the king as though already his word made life and death. People watching him said, 'Everything that has touch with the king's son loves him.' They told strange tales of him: only in fairy books could they be believed, because they were so beautiful; and all the time the queen, getting a good name for herself, looked on and said nothing.

One night the king's son was lying half-asleep upon his bed, with wise dreams coming and going under the circle of his gold crown, when a mouse ran out of the wainscot and came and jumped up upon the couch. The poor mouse had turned quite white with fear and horror, and was trembling in every limb as it cried its news into the king's ear. 'O king's son,' it said, 'get up and run for your life! I was behind the wainscot in the queen's closet, and this is what I heard: if you stay here, when you wake up to-morrow you will be dead!'

The king's son got up, and all alone in the dark night stole out of the palace, seeking safety for his dear life. He sighed to himself, 'There was a pain in my crown ever since I wore it. Alas, mother, I thought you were too kind a step-mother to do this!'

Outside it was still winter: there was no warmth in the world, and not a leaf upon the trees. He wandered away and away, wondering where he should hide.

The queen, when her villains came and told her the king's son was not to be found, went and looked in her magic crystal to find trace of him. As soon as it grew light, for in the darkness the crystal could show her nothing, she saw many miles away the king's son running to hide himself in the forest. So she sent out her villains to search until they should find him.

As they went the sun grew hot in the sky, and birds began singing. 'It is spring!' cried the messengers. 'How suddenly it has come!' They rode on till they came to the forest.

[pg 74] The king's son, stumbling along through the forest under the bare boughs, thought, 'Even here where shall I hide? Nowhere is there a leaf to cover me.' But when the sun grew warm he looked up; and there were all the trees breaking into bud and leaf, making a green heaven above his head. So when he was too weary to go farther, he climbed into the largest tree he could find; and the leaves covered him.

The queen's messengers searched through all the forest but could not find him; so they went back to her empty handed, not having either the king's crown or his heart to show. 'Fools!' she cried, looking in her magic crystal, 'he was in the big sycamore under which you stopped to give your horses provender!'

[pg 75] The sycamore said to the king's son, 'The queen's eye is on you; get down and run for your life till you get to the hollow tarn-stones among the hills! But if you stay here, when you wake to-morrow you will be dead.'

When the queen's messengers came once more to the forest they found it all wintry again, and without leaf; only the sycamore was in full green, clapping its hands for joy in the keen and bitter air.

The messengers searched, and beat down the leaves, but the king's son was not there. They went back to the queen. She looked long in her magic crystal, but little could she see; for the king's son had hidden himself in a small cave beside the tarn-stones, and into the darkness the crystal could not pry.

[pg 76] Presently she saw a flight of birds crossing the blue, and every bird carried a few crumbs of bread in its beak. Then she ran and called to her villains, 'Follow the birds, and they will take you to where the little wizard is; for they are carrying bread to feed him, and they are all heading for the tarn-stones up on the hills.'

The birds said to the king's son, 'Now you are rested; we have fed you, and you are not hungry. The queen's eye is on you. Up, and run for your life! If you stay here, when you wake up to-morrow you will be dead.'

'Where shall I go?' said the king's son. 'Go,' answered the birds, 'and hide in the rushes on the island of the pool of sweet waters!'

When the queen's messengers came to the tarn-stones, it was as though five thousand people had been feeding: they found crumbs enough to fill twelve baskets full, lying in the cave; but no king's son could they lay their hands on.

The king's son was lying hidden among the rushes on the island of the great pool of sweet waters; and thick and fast came silver-scaled fishes, feeding him.

[pg 77] It took the queen three days of hard gazing in her crystal, before she found how the fishes all swam to a point among the rushes of the island in the pool of sweet waters, and away again. Then she knew: and running to her messengers she cried: 'He is among the rushes on the island in the pool of sweet waters; and all the fishes are feeding him!'

The fishes said to the king's son: 'The queen's eye is on you; up, and swim to shore, and away for your life! For if they come and find you here, when you wake to-morrow you will certainly be dead.'

'Where shall I go?' asked the king's son. 'Wherever I go, she finds me.' 'Go to the old fox who gets his poultry from the palace, and ask him to hide you in his burrow!'

[pg 78] When the queen's messengers came to the pool they found the fishes playing at *alibis* all about in the water; but nothing of the king's son could they see.

The king's son came to the fox, and the fox hid him in his burrow, and brought him butter and eggs from the royal dairy. This was better fare than the king's son had had since the beginning of his wanderings, and he thanked the fox warmly for his friendship. 'On the contrary,' said the fox, 'I am under an obligation to you; for ever since you came to be my guest I have felt like an honest man.' 'If I live to be king,' said the king's son, 'you shall always have butter and eggs from the royal dairy, and be as honest as you like.'

The queen hugged her magic crystal for a whole week, but could make nothing out of it: for her

crystal showed her nothing of the king's son's hiding-place, nor of the fox at his nightly thefts of butter and eggs from the royal dairy. But it so happened that this same fox was a sort of half-brother of the queen's; and so guilty did he feel with his brand-new good conscience that he quite left off going to see her. So in a little while the queen, with her suspicions and her magic crystal, had nosed out the young king's hiding-place.

The fox said to the king's son: 'The queen's eye is on you! Get out and run for your life, for if you stay here till to-morrow, you will wake up and find yourself a dead goose!'

'But where else can I go to?' asked the king's son. 'Is there any place left for me?' The fox laughed, and winked, and whispered a word; and all at once the king's son got up and went.

The queen had said to her messengers, 'Go and look in the fox's hole; and you shall find him!' But the messengers came and dug up the burrow, and found butter and eggs from the royal dairy, but of the king's son never a sign.

The king's son came to the palace, and as he crept through the gardens he found there his little brother alone at play,—playing sadly because now he was all alone. Then the king's son stopped and said, 'Little brother, do you so much wish to be king?' And taking off the crown, he put it upon his brother's head. Then he went on through underground ways and corridors, till he came to the palace dungeons.

Now a dungeon is a hard thing to get out of, but it is easy enough to get into. He came to the deepest and darkest dungeon of all, and there he opened the door, and went in and hid himself.

The queen's son came running to his mother, wearing the king's crown. 'Oh, mother,' he said, 'I am frightened! while I was playing, my brother came looking all dead and white, and put this crown on my head. Take it off for me, it hurts!'

When the queen saw the crown on her son's head, she was horribly afraid; for that it should have so come there was the most unlikely thing of all. She fetched her crystal ball, and looked in, asking where the king's son might be, and, for answer, the crystal became black as night.

Then said the queen to herself, 'He is dead at last!'

But, now that the king's crown was on the wrong head, the air, and the water, and the dry land, over which God is lord, heard of it. And the trees said, 'Until the king's son returns, we will not put forth bud or leaf!'

And the birds said, 'We will not sing in the land, or breed or build nests until the king's son returns!'

And the fishes said, 'We will not stay in the ponds or rivers to get caught, unless the king's son, to whom we belong, returns!'

And the foxes said, 'Unless the king's son returns, we will increase and multiply exceedingly and be like locusts in the land!'

So all through that land the trees, though it was spring, stayed as if it were mid-winter; and all the fishes swam down to the sea; and all the birds flew over the sea, away into other countries; and all the foxes increased and multiplied, and became like locusts in the land.

Now when the trees, and the birds, and the beasts, and the fishes led the way the good folk of the country discovered that the queen was a criminal. So, after the way of the flesh, they took the queen and her little son, and bound them, and threw them into the deepest and darkest dungeon they could find; and said they: 'Until you tell us where the king's son is, there you stay and starve!'

The king's son was playing all alone in his dungeon with the mice who brought him food from the palace larder, when the queen and her son were thrown down to him fast bound, as though he were as dangerous as a den of lions. At first he was terribly afraid when he found himself pursued into his last hiding-place; but presently he gathered from the queen's remarks that she was quite powerless to do him harm.

'Oh, what a wicked woman I am!' she moaned; and began crying lamentably, as if she hoped to melt the stone walls which formed her prison.

Presently her little son cried, 'Mother, take off my brother's crown; it pricks me!' And the king's son sat in his corner, and cried to himself with grief over the harm that his step-mother's wickedness had brought about.

'Mother,' cried the queen's son again, 'night and day since I have worn it, it pricks me; I cannot sleep!'

But the queen's heart was still hard; not if she could help, would she yet take off from her son the crown.

Hours went by, and the queen and her son grew hungry. 'We shall be starved to death!' she cried.

'Now I see what a wicked woman I am!'

'Mother,' cried the queen's son, 'some one is putting food into my mouth!' 'No one,' said the queen, 'is putting any into mine. Now I know what a wicked woman I am!'

Presently the king's son came to the queen also, and began feeding her. 'Someone is putting food into *my* mouth, now!' cried the queen. 'If it is poisoned I shall die in agony! I wish,' she said, 'I wish I knew your brother were not dead; if I have killed him what a wicked woman I am!'

[pg 85] 'Dear step-mother,' said the king's son 'I am not dead, I am here.'

'Here?' cried the queen, shaking with fright. 'Here? not dead! How long have you been here?'

'Days, and days, and days,' said the king's son, sadly.

'Ah! if I had only known *that!*' cried the queen. '*Now* I know what a wicked woman I am!'

Just then, the trap-door in the roof of the dungeon opened, and a voice called down, 'Tell us where is the king's son! If you do not tell us, you shall stay here and starve.'

'The king's son is here!' cried the queen.

'A likely story!' answered the gaolers. 'Do you think we are going to believe that?' And they shut-to the trap.

[pg 86] The queen's son cried, 'Dear brother, come and take back your crown, it pricks so!' But the king's son only undid the queen's bonds and his brother's. 'Now,' said he, 'you are free: you can kill me now.'

'Oh!' cried the queen, 'what a wicked woman I must be! Do you think I could do it now?' Then she cried, 'O little son, bring your poor head to me, and I will take off the crown!' and she took off the crown and gave it back to the king's son. 'When I am dead,' she said, 'remember, and be kind to him!'

The king's son put the crown upon his own head.

Suddenly, outside the palace, all the land broke into leaf; there was a rushing sound in the river of fishes swimming up from the sea, and all the air was loud and dark with flights of returning birds. Almost at the same moment the foxes began to disappear and diminish, and cease to be like locusts in the land.

[pg 87] People came running to open the door of the deepest and darkest dungeon in the palace: 'For either,' they cried, 'the queen is dead, or the king's son has been found!'

'Where is the king's son, then?' they called out, as they threw wide the door. 'He is here!' cried the king; and out he came, to the astonishment of all, wearing his crown, and leading his step-mother and half-brother by the hand.

He looked at his step-mother, and she was quite white; as white as the mouse that had jumped upon the king's bed at midnight bidding him fly for his life. Not only her face, but her hair, her lips, and her very eyes were white and colourless, for she had gone blind from gazing too hard into her crystal ball, and hunting the king's son to death.

[pg 88] So she remained blind to the end of her days; but the king was more good to her than gold, and as for his brother, never did half-brothers love each other better than these. Therefore they all lived very happily together, and after a long time, the queen learned to forget what a wicked woman she had been.

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THE WISHING-POT

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THE WISHING-POT

Tulip was the son of a poor but prudent mother; from the moment of his birth she had trained him to count ten before ever he wanted or asked for anything. An otherwise reckless youth, he acquired an intrinsic value through the practice of this habit. Only once, just as he was reaching, but had not quite reached, years of discretion, did his habit of precaution fail him; and this same failure became in the end the opening of his fortunes.

[pg 92]

Bathing one day in the river, to whose banks the woods ran down in steep terraces, he heard a voice come singing along one of the upper slopes; and looking up under the boughs of cedar and sycamore, he saw a pair of green feet go dancing by, up and down like grasshoppers on the prance.

There was such rhythm in them, and such sweetness in the voice, that his heart was out of him before he could harness it to the number ten, and he came out of the water the most natural and forlorn of lovers.

Before he was dressed the green feet and the voice were gone, and before he got home his health and his appetite seemed to have gone also. He pined industriously from day to day, and spent all his hours in searching among the woods by the river side for his lady of the dear green feet. He did not know so much as the size or colour of her face; the sound of her voice alone, and the running up and down of her feet, had, as he told his mother, 'decimated his affections.'

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In his trouble he could think of only one possible remedy, and that he counted well over, knowing its risk. Away in the loneliest part of the forest there lived a wise woman, to whom, now and then, folk went for help when everything else had failed them. So he had heard tell of a certain Wishing-Pot that was hers in which people might see the thing they desired most, and into which for a fee she allowed lovers and other poor fools of fortune to look. One thing, however, was told against the virtues of this Wishing-Pot, that though many had had a sight of it, and their wishes revealed to them therein, others had gone and had never again returned to their homes, but had vanished altogether from men's sight, nor had any news ever been heard of them after. There were some wise folk who held that they had only gone elsewhere to seek the fortune that the Wishing-Pot had shown to them. Nevertheless, for the most part the wise woman and her Wishing-Pot had an ill name in that neighbourhood.

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To a lover's heart risk gives value; so one fine morning Tulip kissed his mother, counted ten, and set out for the woods.

Towards evening he came to the house of the witch and knocked at the door. 'Good mother,' said he, when she opened to him, 'I have brought you the fee to buy myself a wish over the Wishing-Pot.' 'Ay, surely,' answered the crone, and drew him in.

In one corner of the room stood a great crystal bowl. Nearly round it was, and had a small opening at the top, to which a man might place his eye and look in. To Tulip, as he looked at it, it seemed all coloured fires and falling stars, and a soft crackling sound came from it, as though heat burned in its veins. It threw long shapes and lustres upon the walls, and within innumerable things writhed, and ran, and whiffed in the floating of its vapours.

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'You may have two wishes,' said the old witch, 'a one and a two.' And she said the spell that undid the secret of the Pot to the wisher.

Then Tulip bent down his head and looked in, counting softly to himself, and at ten, he let the

wish go to his lady of the dear green feet.

The colours changed and sprang, as though stirred and fed with fresh fuel; and down in the depths of the Wishing-Pot he saw the feet of his Beloved go by in twinkling green slippers.

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As soon as he saw that he began counting ten in great haste for the second wish. 'O to be inside the Wishing-Pot with her!' was his thought now. He had got to nine, and the wish was almost on his tongue, when he caught sight of the old woman's eye looking at him. And the eye had become like a large green spider, with great long limbs that kept clutching up and out again!

His heart queegled to a jelly at the sight; but the green feet lured him so, that he still thought how to get to them and yet be safe. Surely, to be in the Wishing-Pot and out by the sound of the next Angelus became the shape of his wish. He shut his eyes, cried ten upon the venture, and was in the Wishing-Pot!

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The little green feet were trebling over the glass with a sound like running water; and he himself began running at full speed, shot off into the Wishing-Pot like a pellet from a pop-gun. Nothing could he see of his dear but her wee green feet. But above them as they ran he heard showery laughter, and he knew that his lady was there before him, though invisible to the eye.

The Pot, now he was in it, seemed bigger than the biggest dome in the world; to run all round it took him two or three minutes. Away in the centre of its base stood a great opal knob, like the axle to a wheel round which he and the green feet kept circling.

However much he wished and wished, the green feet still kept their distance, for now he was *in* the Wishing-Pot wishes availed him nothing. The green feet flew faster than his; the light laugh rang further and further away; right across to the other side of the hall his lady had passed from him now.

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The magic fires of the crystal leapt and crackled under his tread; now it seemed as if his feet ran on a green lawn, out of which broke crocuses and daffodils, and now roses reddened in the track, and now the purple of grapes spurted across the path like spilled wine. The sound of the green feet and the running of overhead laughter, as they distanced him in front, came nearer and nearer behind him from across the hall. He felt that he must follow and not turn, however beaten he might be.

Presently a voice, that he knew was his Beloved's, cried,—

'Heart that would have me must hatch me!
Feet that would find me must catch me!
Man that would mate me must match me!'

Oh, how? wondered spent feet, and failing heart, and reeling brain. He stumbled slower and slower in the race, till presently with quick innumerable patterings the green feet grew closer, and were overtaking him from the rear.

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Warm breath was in his hair,—lips and a hand; he turned, open armed, to snatch the mischievous morsel, but all that he clasped was a gust of air; and he saw the green feet scudding out and away on a fresh start before him.

Again, with laughter, the voice cried,—

'Lap for lap you must wind me:
Equal, before you can find me!
You are a lap behind me!'

Where they raced the surface of the glass sloped slightly to the upward rise of its walls; Tulip shifted his ground, and ran where the footing was leveller toward the centre, and the circle began to go smaller. So he began to gain, till the green slippers, seeing how the advantage had come about, shifted also in their turn.

Thus they ran on; there were no inner posts to mark the course, only the great opal standing in the centre of all formed the pivot of the race, and round and round it, a great way off, they ran.

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All at once a big thought came into Tulip's head; he waited not to count ten, but, before Green Slippers knew what he was after, he had reached the opal centre, and was circling it. Then quickly all the laughter stopped; the green feet came twinkling sixteens to the dozens, so as to get round the post before him and away.

One lap, he was before her; two laps, he turned again to her coming, and found her falling into his arms. She blossomed into sight at his touch: from top to toe she was there! All rosy and alive he had her in his clasp, laughing, crying, clinging, yet struggling to be free. She made a most endless handful, till Tulip had caught her by the hair and kissed her between the eyes.

[pg 101]

All round and overhead the magic crystal reared up arches of fire, to a roof that dropped like rain, while Tulip and his prize sank down exhausted on the great hub of opal to rest. As he touched it all the secret wonders of the Wishing-Pot were opened and revealed to his gaze.

Crowds and crowds of faces were what he most saw; everywhere that he turned he saw old friends and neighbours who, he thought, had been dead and gone, looking sadly, and shaking long sorrowful faces at him. 'You here too, Tulip?' they seemed forever to be saying. 'Always another, and another; and now you here too!'

There was the dairyman's wife, who had waited seven years to have a child, holding a little will-o'-the-wisp of a thing in her arms. Now and then for a while it would lie still, and then suddenly it would leap up and dart away; and she, poor soul, must up and after it, though the chase were ever so long!

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There also was Miller Dick with his broad thumbs, counting over a rich pile of gold, which, ever and anon, spun up into the air, and went strewing itself like dead leaves before the wind. Then he too must needs up and after it, till it was all caught again, and added together, and made right.

There were small playmates of Tulip's childhood, each with its little conceit of treasure: one had a toy, and another a lamb, another a bird; and all of them hunted and caught the thing they loved, and kissed it and again let go. So it went on, over and over again, more sad than the sight of a quaker as he twiddles his thumbs.

Whenever they were at peace for a moment, they turned their eyes his way. 'What, you here too, Tulip?' was always the thing they seemed to be saying.

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While Tulip sat looking at them, and thinking of it all, suddenly his lady disappeared, and only her green feet darted from his side and began running round and round in a circle. Then was he just about to set off running after them, when he felt himself caught up to the coloured fires of the roof and sent spinning ungovernably through space. Suddenly he was dumped to the ground, and just as his feet were gathering themselves up under him he heard the Angelus bell ringing from the village below the slopes of the wood.

He was standing again by the side of the Wishing-Pot, and the old woman sat cowering, and blinking her spider-eye at him, too much astonished to speak or move.

Tulip looked at her with a pleasant and engaging air. 'Oh, good mother, what a treat you have given me!' he said. 'How I wish I had money for another wish! what a pity it was ever to have wished myself back again!'

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When the old witch heard that she thought still to entrap him, and answered joyfully, 'Why, kind Sir, surely, kind Sir, if you like it you shall look again! Take another wish, and never mind about the money.' So she said the spell once more which opened to him the wonders of the Wishing-Pot.

Then cried Tulip, clapping his hands, 'What better can I wish than to have you in the Wishing-Pot, in the place of all those poor folk whom you have imprisoned with their wishes!'

Hardly was the thing said than done; all the children who had been Tulip's playmates, and Miller Dick with his broad thumbs, and the dairyman's wife, were every one of them out, and the old witch woman was nowhere to be seen.

But Tulip put his eye to the mouth of the Wishing-Pot; and there down below he saw the old witch, running round and round as hard as she could go, pursued by a herd of green spiders. And there without doubt she remains.

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And now everybody was happy except Tulip himself; for the children had all of them their toys, and the old miller his gold, and as for the dairyman's wife, she found that she had become the mother of a large and promising infant. But Tulip had altogether lost his lady of the dear green feet, for in thinking of others he had forgotten to think of himself. All the gratitude of the poor people he had saved was nothing to him in that great loss which had left him desolate. For his part he only took the Wishing-Pot up under his arm, and went sadly away home.

But before long the noise of what he had done reached to the king's ears; and he sent for Tulip to appear before him and his Court. Tulip came, carrying the Wishing-Pot under his arm, very downcast and sad for love of the lady of the dear green feet.

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At that time all the Court was in half mourning; for the Princess Royal, who was the king's only child, and the most beautiful and accomplished of her sex, had gone perfectly distraught with grief, of which nothing could cure her. All day long she sat with her eyes shut, and tears running down, and folded hands and quiet little feet. And all this came, it was said, from a dream which she could not tell or explain to anybody.

The king had promised that whoever could rouse her from her grief, should have the princess for his wife, and become heir to the throne; and when he heard that there was such a thing in the world as a Wishing-Pot, he thought that something might be done with it.

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From Tulip he learned, however, that no one knew the spell which opened the resources of the Wishing-Pot save the old witch woman who was shut up fast for ever in its inside. So it seemed to the king that the Pot could be of no use for curing the princess.

But it was so beautiful, with its shooting stars and coloured fires, that, when Tulip brought it,

they carried it in to show to her.

After three hours the princess was prevailed upon to open her eyes; and directly they fell upon the great opal bowl, all at once she started to her feet and began laughing and dancing and singing.

These are the words that they heard her sing,—

'Lap for lap I must wind you;
Equal, before I can find you;
I am a lap behind you!'

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Tulip, as soon as he heard the sweetness of that voice, and the words, pushed his way past the king and all his court, to where the princess was. And there over the heads of the crowd he saw his lady of the dear green feet laughing and opening her white arms to him.

As she set eyes on his face the dream of the princess came true, and all her unhappiness passed from her. So they loved and were married, to the astonishment and edification of the whole court; and lived to be greatly loved and admired by all their grandchildren.

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THE FEEDING OF THE EMIGRANTS

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THE FEEDING OF THE EMIGRANTS



ver the sea went the birds, flying southward to their other home where the sun was. The rustle of their wings, high over head, could be heard down on the water; and their soft, shrill twitterings, and the thirsty nibbling of their beaks; for the seas were hushed, and the winds hung away in cloud-land.

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Far away from any shore, and beginning to be weary, their eyes caught sight of a white form resting between sky and sea. Nearer they came, till it seemed to be a great white bird, brooding on the calmed water; and its wings were stretched high and wide, yet it stirred not. And the wings had in themselves no motion, but stood rigidly poised over their own reflection in the water.

Then the birds came curiously, dropping from their straight course, to wonder at the white wings that went not on. And they came and settled about this great, bird-like thing, so still and so grand.

Onto the deck crept a small child, for the noise of the birds had come down to him in the hold. 'There is nobody at home but me,' he said; for he thought the birds must have come to call, and he wished to be polite. 'They are all gone but me,' he went on, 'all gone. I am left alone.'

The birds, none of them understood him; but they put their heads on one side and looked down on him in a friendly way, seeming to consider.

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He ran down below and fetched up a pannikin of water and some biscuit. He set the water down, and breaking the biscuit sprinkled it over the white deck. Then he clapped his hands to see them

all flutter and crowd round him, dipping their bright heads to the food and drink he gave them.

They might not stay long, for the waterlogged ship could not help them on the way they wished to go; and by sunset they must touch land again. Away they went, on a sudden, the whole crew of them, and the sound of their voices became faint in the bright sea-air.

'I am left alone!' said the child.

[pg 114]

Many days ago, while he was asleep in a snug corner he had found for himself, the captain and crew had taken to the boats, leaving the great ship to its fate. And forgetting him because he was so small, or thinking that he was safe in some one of the other boats, the rough sailors had gone off without him, and he was left alone. So for a whole week he had stayed with the ship, like a whisper of its vanished life amid the blues of a deep calm. And the birds came to the ship only to desert it again quickly, because it stood so still upon the sea.

But that night the mermen came round the vessel's side, and sang; and the wind rose to their singing, and the sea grew rough. Yet the child slept with his head in dreams. The dreams came from the mermen's songs, and he held his breath, and his heart stayed burdened by the deep sweetness of what he saw.

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Dark and strange and cold the sea-valleys opened before him; blue sea-beasts ranged there, guarded by strong-finned shepherds, and fishes like birds darted to and fro, but made no sound. And that was what burdened his heart,—that for all the beauty he saw, there was no sound, no song of a single bird to comfort him.

The mermen reached out their blue arms to him, and sang; on the top of the waves they sang, striving to make him forget the silence of the land below. They offered him the sea-life: why should he be drowned and die?

And now over him in the dark night the great wings crashed, and beat abroad in the wind, and the ship made great way. And the mermen swam fast to be with her, and ceased from their own song, for the wind sang a coronach in the canvas and cordage. But the little child lifted his head in his sleep and smiled, for his soul was eased of the mermen's song, and it seemed to him that instead he heard birds singing in a far-off land, singing of a child whose loving hand had fed them, faint and weary, in their way over the wide ocean.

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In that far southern land the dawn had begun, and the birds, waking one by one, were singing their story of him to the soft-breathing tamarisk boughs. And none of them knew how they had been sent as a salvage crew to save the child's spirit from the spell of the sea-dream, and to carry it safely back to the land that loved him.

But with the child's body the white wings had flown down into the wave-buried valleys, and to a cleft of the sea-hills to rest.

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THE PASSIONATE PUPPETS

[pg 118]





hen the long days of summer began, Killian, the cow-herd, was able to lead his drove up into the hills, giving them the high pastures to range. Then from sunrise to sunset he was alone, except when, early each morning, Grendel and the other girls came up to carry down the milk to the villages.

All day long the cow-bells sounded in his ears, but still the time of his wedding was a long way off; it would be five years before he and Grendel could afford to set up a house and farm, with cows of their own.

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The great stretch of world that lay out under him, like a broad map coloured blue and green, made him full of a restless longing for a move in life. Yonder he could pick out the towns with their spires and glittering roofs, and the overhead mists, that gave token of crowded life below. It was there that wealth could be got; and with wealth men married soon, and were at ease. Somewhere, he had heard, lived kings and queens, wearing rich robes and gold crowns on the top of their heart's desire. For kings and queens, he supposed, loved as did he and Grendel, regarding nothing else as much in the world besides.

So Killian put heart into his deft hands, and presently had set to work.

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One evening Grendel came up from the valley, after her day's work, to have a look at her lover; she had brought him some brown cakes and a bottle of wine. But Killian, who had caught sight of her eyes over the green rise at his feet, was hiding something behind his back.

'Whatever have you there?' she asked, as she saw chips, and tools, and bits of bright foil, lying scattered about the ground. Yet for three days he would show her nothing, only he said, 'What I do is because we love each other so.'

At the end of that time, he showed her what he had done. There she saw a little king and queen, about six inches high; he was in blue, and she in white; and they were both as dear as they were small. The king was partly like a cow-herd, having a crown over his broad-brimmed hat, with thick wooden shoes, and leather-bound legs; and the queen was like Grendel, with great long plaits past her waist, and a gold-worked bodice, such as Grendel had for Sunday wear. 'Aye, aye,' cried Grendel, 'why, it is you and me!'

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Then Killian showed her how the joints of the little puppets moved on delicate wires, and how five strings ran up, one from each limb, to be fastened to the player's fingers, so that he might make them act as though life were in them.

'I shall take these down with me to the valley,' said Killian. 'First I shall go about among the villages; then, when I can do better, I shall go to the towns. After that no doubt the kings and queens will hear of me, and will send for me to play before them, and I shall become rich. Then I shall come home and marry you.'

Grendel thought her lover the most wonderful man in the world, and it is the truth he was very clever; she kissed him a hundred times, and the little marionettes also. 'Ah,' she said, 'now we shall not have to wait five years! in five months you will come back rich and famous, and we shall marry, and live happily.'

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How Killian had loved her while making his puppets, only she knew as well as he. Truly, he had put his heart into them, so that they were like living beings,—and so small that their very smallness made them a marvel. Being a lover, he had put inside each breast a little heart, and, for the luck of the thing, had christened them with a drop of his own blood, and a drop of Grendel's; so each heart had in it one little drop of blood. Now he was to go out, and try his fortune.

He found a lad to come and take his place and see after the cows; then he said good-bye to Grendel, and set off on a round of all the villages of the plain.

[pg 124]

At every inn where he put up, he called the country folk together to the sound of his shepherd's bag-pipes, and showed them his play. It was only himself and Grendel, no story at all, merely lovers parting and meeting again, each believing the other dead, and in the end living happily to the sound of cow-bells, that showed how rich they were in herds.

And the villagers laughed and cried, and gave him pence, and a night's lodging, and food; so that presently he was able to make himself a little travelling-stage, and hire a piper to play dance-music for him. But it was always the one story of himself and Grendel, and no other, though the two puppets wore crowns upon their heads.

The little marionettes had hearts. That was the beginning of things: they remembered nothing else. When their eyes had grown open to the fact, then for them life had begun. After that they lived like bee and blossom, only that the bee never flew away, and the honey remained in the blossom.

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How this came to pass was a question they never asked; why they loved each other they did not know. If they had had to think of it they would have said, 'It is because we cannot help it.' And

every day one same thing happened to them that they could not help, the most beautiful thing in life. It came to them by instinct, taking hold of them from head to feet and saying, 'love, love, love,' in all sorts of wonderful ways.

Whenever this thing happened they began to move about softly, going to and fro, and round and round, dancing, and holding each other by the hand, putting their cheeks so close together that their eyelids brushed, and sometimes their little hearts that heaved. And all the while music from somewhere was giving a meaning to these things; and over and over again, 'love, love, love,' was what it kept saying to them.

[pg 126] Their happiness was so great, that they would begin playing with it, pretending that it was all turned into grief. First he would kiss her from forehead to chin, and into the hollow of her little throat; and then all down each dear arm, even to the finger-tips; and last of all her feet; and again last of all her lips, and again last of all her breast. And then he would go away, walking backwards most of the time, or if not, still turning round and round to take another look at her. Then when he was altogether out of sight, she would sit down and cry, though all the while he would be peeping at her from his hiding-place, to let her know that he was not really gone. Then she would lie down, and cry more, and at last leave off crying and stay almost still on a little bed, that seemed to come to her from nowhere, just when she was ready to fall on it. Then, at last, she would shut her eyes, and cover her face up very slowly with a sheet, and lie so still that he would grow quite frightened, and come running from his hiding-place, and lift the sheet, and look at her; then he would fall down as if his legs had been cut from under him; then he would get up and throw flowers over her, and at last catch her up and begin to carry her; and at that she would wake up all at once and kiss him, to a sound of bells.

[pg 127] They did not know why they did this; it was so beautiful they could not have thought of it for themselves, and yet it said everything of life that they wanted to say. For love was the beginning and the end of it; and always, as they came to the sad part, they had tender tremblings for fear the other should think the sorrow was real: he, lest she should think he had really gone away and left her, never to return; and she, lest he should believe that she always meant to lie so cruelly still, with a sheet over her eyes. Yet the kissings that came after made the fearfulness almost the sweetest thing in their prayer-sayings to each other.

[pg 128] For to them this was a daily prayer, the most solemn thing in their lives; heart praying to heart, and hand reaching to hand; and from somewhere overhead gentle monitions as to what they must do next coming to them, so that they knew how to pray best, now by lifting a hand, or now by turning the head, or now by running fast with both feet. And all this beautiful worship of love their bodies learned to do more perfectly day by day; yet the little quaking of fear was still in the centre of it all.

[pg 129] Killian's fingers grew nimble; and yet he often wondered to see how true to life his puppets were, how they sighed, how they embraced and clung, as if their hearts were coming in two when the parting drew near. How lingeringly the little queen drew up the sheet over her face, when her lover did not return, and let it fall to cover her with a quiet sigh. Often he cried when she did that part, so like Grendel was it,—the tender waiting, and the last giving in! And then, how the little king shuddered as he drew the cloth from her face; and how he threw the flowers, as if there were not enough in the world to express his grief! And yet it was only a play, made by the twitching of the strings tied to his fingers, with love as the beginning and end of it.

[pg 130] Killian was getting quite rich in copper coin, so he sent some of it home to Grendel, that she might buy stock for the home that was so soon to be theirs. And presently he made bold to go into the towns, where, instead of copper, he might gain silver. He built a bigger stage, and had more music to go to the dance; but still it was the story of himself and Grendel, with crowns upon their heads, and nothing more.

And now, indeed, people began to cry, 'Here is a wonderful new actor! He has it all at the ends of his fingers! What a pity he has no better play in which to show himself off!' But Killian said, 'It is the only play I know how to do.'

Presently there came a sharp fellow to him, who said: 'If you will go shares with me, I will make your fortune. We have only to put our heads together, and the thing is done. I will write the plays for you, and you shall play them on the strings. What is wanted is a little more real life.'

[pg 131] Killian was a simple fellow, who believed all the world to be wiser than himself. He was glad enough to meet with a clever fellow who could write plays for him. His partner wanted him to make new dresses for the marionettes, to suit their new parts; but to that Killian would not agree. So whatever they were they still wore their broad hats and crowns, and their wooden shoes, that still he might watch in his own mind himself and Grendel making their way to fortune and happiness.

The marionettes grew bewildered with their new taking; they did not understand the meaning of all the coarse things they had to do. So in the middle of a play, the little queen would fail now and then in her part, and move awkwardly, wondering what her lover meant when he sprawled to and fro, and seemed trying to find in the air more feet than he had upon the ground.

[pg 132] Yet the crowd found her bashful fear so irresistibly funny, that it roared again. Also, when the

little cow-herd with a crown on his head, lifted his hand or foot toward his partner, and then shrank trembling away, it roared yet more at the poltroon manner of the thing.

Killian's partner said, 'You alter all my plays, but the way you do them is something to marvel at. Only, why do you always bring them round again to that silly lover's ending?'

'I cannot help it,' said Killian; 'often now, with these new plays, I can't get the strings to work properly. I think the poor puppets are getting worn out.'

[pg 133]

His partner began examining the puppets, and watching how Killian played them, with more attention; and presently he knew that there was more in it than met the eye. 'It is the puppets who are the marvel, not the man,' he said to himself. 'I could work them better myself, if I had practice.'

Soon after this he proposed that they should set off for another town; it was the chief town of all, where they hoped at last to be allowed to show their plays to the queen herself. 'It must be a real play this time,' said the partner, 'a tragedy; but it wants a third person. You must make another puppet, while I write the play!'

So Killian set to work. But he had no love for the third puppet, which was neither himself nor Grendel, and he put no heart inside it, and no little drop of blood. So the new marionette was but limbs, and a head drawn on wires.

[pg 134]

'Soon,' thought Killian, 'I shall be rich enough to go home and marry Grendel. Then I will throw this stupid third one away; but the other two we will always keep close to the niche with the statue of Saint Lady, to help to make us thankful for the good things God gives us in this world.'

It was beautiful late spring weather when he and his companion set out for the capital. On the way Killian's partner told him the play that would have to be played before the queen, and said, 'In case three should be too much for you to manage, you had better teach me also to handle the strings.' So Killian began to teach him, with the two little marionettes alone, the first play which he had brought down with him from the mountains,— that being the easiest of all to learn, and the one he loved best to teach.

The partner was surprised to find how wonderfully the puppets followed the leading-strings; in spite of his clumsiness the story acted itself to perfection.

[pg 135]

Simple-hearted Killian was charmed. 'Ah! you clever townsman,' said he, 'see how at first trial you equal poor me, who have been at it for months! It had better be you, after all, to do the play when it is called for at the court.' And this Killian proposed truly out of pure modesty, but also because he did not like the play his partner had made for him. 'It is too cruel a one!' he said. 'After they have played it together so long, I feel as if my two puppets can do nothing else so well as love each other, and live happily.'

'Ah, but,' said his partner, 'the queen would find that very dull!' Killian could not see why, but he believed that the townsman was wiser than himself, and gave in. All he wanted now was to get money enough to run back home with, and throw himself into his dear Grendel's arms for life.

[pg 136]

So they journeyed on, and at last, one day, they came in sight of the capital. But it had been such a long way to come that when they reached the gates they found them shut.

The night was warm, and a high moon was overhead. 'Come,' said Killian, 'and let us lie down in one of these orchards that are outside the walls!' So they left the high-road, and went and lay down.

First they ate some food that they carried with them. Then Killian opened the case in which lay the two marionettes, and looked them over to see that they were in working order. His partner took up the odd number, and began practising it; but Killian's attention all went to the little king cow-herd and his queen.

He fondled them gently with his hands, and as he looked at them his heart went up into the mountains to pray for his dear Grendel.

[pg 137]

Presently he began dreaming to himself like Jacob, only his dream was just of the simple things of earth. Down the great green uplands came troops of white cattle; but to him they seemed to be bridesmaids coming to Grendel's wedding day, and the ringing of the cow-bells was as sweet to him as the songs of angels. Before he was fast asleep the two marionettes had slipped off his knee and lay in the deep grass looking up at the sky.

They had never seen so beautiful a sight before, for never had they spent a night in the sweet open air till now. Over their heads swung dusky clusters of blossom, that would look white by day; and over them the moon went kissing its way from star to star.

Now and then single blossoms dropped as if they had something to say to the little cow-herd and his queen, lying there in the cool grass.

[pg 138]

But the marionettes said nothing; their hearts were very full; now, at last, they found their old

happiness return to them. Their prayers, that they used to say to each other so tenderly, had been going wrong for quite a long time; sudden starts and tremblings of fear had taken hold of their light-hearted deceptions of each other; and every day things had been going worse. But now they felt like entering upon a long rest.

As they lay, their hands met together. The little cow-herd could count her fingers across the palm of his hand, and never once did she pretend to be drawing them away. How good it all seemed!

[pg 139]

Close by them the odd man was strutting in stiff, ungainly attitudes, cricking his neck and elbows, and tossing up his toes. How foolish he seemed to them in their innocent wisdom! They knew he was nothing to them, for he had no heart; he was nothing but a trick on springs. Yet they wished he would go away, and give them room to be alone, while the moon was making a white dream over their lives.

The partner grumbled to himself at the awkward ways of the new puppet. Instead of obeying, it kicked at the leading strings, and did everything like a stick, all angles and corners. Presently he put it back into its box; and then he saw the little king and queen lying together on the damp grass. He picked them up, growling at Killian as a simpleton, for leaving them there to get rusty with the dew. Then he put them also away, and curled himself up to dream about the success of his play on the morrow.

[pg 140]

Quite early in the morning he and Killian went into the city, and set up their stage in a corner of the marketplace. The wonderful acting of the little king and queen, compared with the ungainly hobblings and jerkings of the odd man, threw the townspeople into ecstasies of laughter. They declared they had never seen so funny a sight in their lives as the beautiful nervous acting of the pair, side by side with the stiff-jointed awkwardness of the other.

Presently, sure enough, the queen heard tell of this new form of entertainment, and sent word for the mummers to appear at the palace.

Killian said to his partner: 'There is something the matter with the puppets to-day; they want careful handling. I am glad we settled that you are to do the new play; for, before the queen and her great ladies, I am likely to lose my head.'

[pg 141]

All the court was gathered together to watch the puppet-play, while behind the scenes the partner took all the leading strings into his own hands.

The two marionettes opened their eyes, and saw daylight; they began moving to and fro softly; every now and then they put their faces together and kissed. The stupid odd man seemed to have gone; they were so glad to be left alone.

Soon the little king lay down, pretending to be tired, but it was only that he might put his head in the queen's lap. She bent over him, and laid her fingers on his eyes, seeming to say, 'Go to sleep, then! I will shut your eyes for you.' How pretty it was of her!

[pg 142]

Then she covered his face over with her handkerchief; and all at once in came the odd man, walking on the points of his toes. The little king, now that the handkerchief was over his face, opened his eyes, and looked through it, to see what his dear queen would be doing now. The odd man had his arms round her neck, and was kissing her, and the queen looked as if she were going to kiss him back; but all at once she had pushed away the odd man so hard that he fell down with his heels in the air; and then she snatched the handkerchief from the king's face, and began trembling, and kissing him.

The whole of the court shouted, first with laughter at the odd man's fall, and then with admiration at the wonderful acting of the little queen.

Behind the scenes the partner began grumbling to Killian: 'They are going all wrong! It's all your doing, leaving them to lie in the damp grass last night!'

[pg 143]

But still the whole court shouted and applauded. So the play went on; and now, more and more, the showman had cause to grumble. Whenever he came to a part where the play required that the queen should turn from her own cow-herd to the ugly odd man, everything went wrong. 'Very well,' thought he at last, 'she may be as innocent as Desdemona but it will all come to the same at the last!'

And so, still more, as the play went on, the little marionettes trembled and shook with fear. They wished the silly odd man would go away, and not come interrupting their prayers; and all the while they loved each other so! No idea of jealousy ever entered the little king's head; and as for the queen, if the odd man came and put his arms round her neck and kissed her, could she help it? All she could do was to run and put her arms round her own lover when he reappeared; and how the court shouted and applauded, when she went so quick from one to the other.

[pg 144]

At last the final act was begun; the king came running in with a sword in his hand, why, he did not know, until he saw his poor little queen struggling in the arms of the odd man. 'Ah,' thought he, 'it is to drive him away! Then we shall be by ourselves again, and happy.'

No one ever fought so wonderfully on a stage before as the little cow-herd. All the court started

to their feet, shouting; and still, while they shouted, they laughed to see the impossible odd man scooping about with his sword, and jerking head over heels, and high up into the air, to get away from the little king's sword-play. The partner had to keep snatching him up out of harm's way, for fear of a wrong ending. Then, suddenly he let him come down with a jump on the little king's head. And at that the king fell back upon the ground, and felt a sharp pain go through his heart.

[pg 145] The odd man drew out his sword and laughed; on the end of it was a tiny drop of blood. The poor little queen ran up, and bent down to look in her lover's face, to know if he were really hurt. And then a terrible thing happened.

Three times the little king raised his sword and pointed it at her heart, and dropped it again. And all the time the partner was tugging at the strings, and swearing by all the worst things he knew.

The little king felt himself growing weak; he was very frightened. He felt as if he were going away altogether, and leaving her to think he did not love her any more. And still his arm went up and down, pointing the sword at her heart.

The showman tugged angrily; then there was the sound of a wire that snapped—the king had thrown away his sword.

[pg 146] He reached up his two arms, and laid them fast round the queen's neck. 'Now at last she knows that I have not left off loving her.' He felt her drawing herself away, he held her more and more tightly to his breast; and now her little face lay close against his. Nothing should take her away from him now!

The showman pulled violently with all his might, to get her away; there was a snapping of strings, and then—the queen reached out two weak little hands, and laid them under her lover's head.

They lay quite still, quite still for a long time, and never moved. 'The play is over!' said the showman, disgusted and angry at the wreck of his plot.

Suddenly the whole stage became showered with gold; the great queen and all her court threw out showers of it like rain. It fell all over the two marionettes, covering them where they lay, just as the babes in the wood when they died were covered over with leaves.

[pg 147] Killian dropped his head on to the boards of the little stage, and sobbed. The partner let down the curtain, and began gathering up the gold.

And still, from without, the queen and her court clapped, and cried their applause; and still within lay Killian with his head upon the stage, sobbing for the two little marionettes, lying still with all the springs and strings of their bodies quite broken. Inside, though he could not see them, their hearts were broken also. 'Now,' he thought, 'I must go back to Grendel, or I too shall die!'

That night, in the middle of the night, the partner went away, carrying with him all the gold that the little marionettes had earned by their deaths. And these, indeed, he left, seeing that they were useless any more. But to Killian, when he woke the next morning, they were the only things left him in the world, to take back to Grendel.

[pg 148] He took them just as they were, locked in each other's arms, and went back all the long way to Grendel, up into the hills of his home, as poor in money as when he first started.

But Grendel saw that he had come back rich; for his face was grown tender and wise. And for five years they waited very patiently together, till by cow-keeping he had earned enough for them to keep some cows of their own, and to live in married happiness.

The little marionettes they put on a shelf, beneath the cross, and the statue of our Lady; and there, locked in each other's arms, those two disciples and martyrs of love lie at peace, feeling no pain any more in their broken hearts.

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