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OSWALD BASTABLE AND OTHERS

By

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'"Don't break down the door! The villains may return any moment and destroy you."'—Page 115.

TO

MY DEAR NIECE

ANTHONIA NESBIT

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OSWALD BASTABLE

OTHERS

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AN OBJECT OF VALUE AND VIRTUE

This happened a very little time after we left our humble home in Lewisham, and went to live at the Blackheath house of our Indian uncle, which was replete with every modern convenience, and had a big garden and a great many greenhouses. We had had a lot of jolly Christmas presents, and one of them was Dicky's from father, and it was a printing-press. Not one of the eighteenpenny kind that never come off, but a real tip-topper, that you could have printed a whole newspaper out of if you could have been clever enough to make up all the stuff there is in newspapers. I don't know how people can do it. It's all about different things, but it is all just the same too. But the author is sorry to find he is not telling things from the beginning, as he has been taught. The printing-press really doesn't come into the story till quite a long way on. So it is no use your wondering what it was that we did print with the printing-press. It was not a newspaper, anyway, and it wasn't my young brother's poetry, though he and the girls did do an awful lot of that. It was something much more far-reaching, as you will see if you wait.

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There wasn't any skating those holidays, because it was what they call nice open weather. That means it was simply muggy, and you could play out of doors without grown-ups fussing about your overcoat, or bringing you to open shame in the streets with knitted comforters, except, of course, the poet Noël, who is young, and equal to having bronchitis if he only looks at a pair of wet boots. But the girls were indoors a good deal, trying to make things for a bazaar which the people our housekeeper's elder sister lives with were having in the country for the benefit of a poor iron church

that was in difficulties. And Noël and H. O. were with them, putting sweets in bags for the bazaar's lucky-tub. So Dicky and I were out alone together. But we were not angry with the others for their stuffy way of spending a day. Two is not a good number, though, for any game except fives; and the man who ordered the vineries and pineries, and butlers' pantries and things, never had the sense to tell the [Pg 3] builders to make a fives court. Some people never think of the simplest things. So we had been playing catch with a fives ball. It was Dicky's ball, and Oswald said:

'I bet you can't hit it over the house.'

'What do you bet?' said Dicky.

And Oswald replied:

'Anything you like. You couldn't do it, anyhow.'

Dicky said:

'Miss Blake says betting is wicked; but I don't believe it is, if you don't bet money.'

Oswald reminded him how in 'Miss Edgeworth' even that wretched little Rosamond, who is never allowed to do anything she wants to, even lose her own needles, makes a bet with her brother, and none of the grown-ups turn a hair.

'But *I* don't want to bet,' he said. 'I know you can't do it.'

'I'll bet you my fives ball I do,' Dicky rejoindered.

'Done! I'll bet you that threepenny ball of string and the cobbler's wax you were bothering about yesterday.'

So Dicky said 'Done!' and then he went and got a tennis racket—when I meant with [Pg 4] his hands—and the ball soared up to the top of the house and faded away. But when we went round to look for it we couldn't find it anywhere. So he said it had gone over and he had won. And Oswald thought it had not gone over, but stayed on the roof, and he hadn't. And they could not agree about it, though they talked of nothing else till tea time.

It was a few days after that that the big greenhouse began to leak, and something was said at brekker about had any of us been throwing stones. But it happened that we had not. Only after brek Oswald said to Dicky:

'What price fives balls for knocking holes in greenhouses?'

'Then you own it went over the house, and I won my bet. Hand over!' Dicky remarked.

But Oswald did not see this, because it wasn't proved it was the fives ball. It was only his idea.

Then it rained for two or three days, and the greenhouse leaked much more than just a fives ball, and the grown-ups said the man who put it up had scamped the job, and they sent for him to put it right. And when he was ready he came, and men came [Pg 5] with ladders and putty and glass, and a thing to cut it with a real diamond in it that he let us have to look at. It was fine that day, and Dicky and H. O. and I were out most of the time talking to the men. I think the men who come to do things to houses are so interesting to talk to; they seem to know much more about the things that really matter than gentlemen do. I shall try to be like them when I grow up, and not always talk about politics and the way the army is going to the dogs.

The men were very jolly, and let us go up the ladder and look at the top of the greenhouse. Not H. O., of course, because he is very young indeed, and wears socks. When they had gone to dinner, H. O. went in to see if some pies were done that he had made out of a bit of putty the man gave him. He had put the pies in the oven when the cook wasn't looking. I think something must have been done to him, for he did not return.

So Dicky and I were left. Dicky said:

'If I could get the ladder round to the roof of the stovehouse I believe I should find my fives ball in the gutter. I *know* it went over the house that day.' [Pg 6]

So Oswald, ever ready and obliging, helped his brother to move the ladder round to the tiled roof of the stovehouse, and Dicky looked in the gutter. But even he could not pretend the ball was there, because I am certain it never went over at all.

When he came down, Oswald said:

'Sold again!'

And Dicky said:

'Sold yourself! You jolly well thought it was there, and you'd have to pay for it.'

This unjustness was Oswald's reward for his kind helpingness about moving the ladder. So he turned away, just saying carelessly over his retiring shoulder:

'I should think you'd have the decency to put the ladder back where you found it.' And he walked off.

But he has a generous heart—a crossing-sweeper told him so once when he gave him a halfpenny—and when Dicky said, 'Come on, Oswald; don't be a sneak,' he proved that he was not one, and went back and helped with the ladder. But he was a little distant to Dicky, till all disagreeableness was suddenly buried in a rat Pincher found in the cucumber frame. [Pg 7]

Then the washing-hands-and-faces-for-dinner bell rang, and, of course, we should have gone in directly, only just then the workmen came back from their dinner, and we waited, because one of them had promised Oswald some hinges for a ferrets' hutch he thought of making, and while he was talking to this man the other one went up the ladder. And then the most exciting and awful thing I ever saw happened, all in a minute, before anyone could have said 'Jack Robinson,' even if they had thought of him. The bottom part of the ladder slipped out along the smooth tiles by the greenhouse, and there was a long, dream-like, dreadful time, when Oswald knew what was going to happen; but it could only have been a second really, because before anyone could do anything the top end of the ladder slid softly, like cutting butter, off the top of the greenhouse, and the man on the ladder fell too. I never saw anything that made me feel so wrong way up in my inside. He lay there all in a heap, without moving, and the men crowded round him. Dicky and I could not see properly because of the other men. But the foreman, the one who had given Oswald the hinges, said:

'Better get a doctor.' [Pg 8]

It always takes a long time for a workman to understand what you want him to do, and long before these had, Oswald had shouted 'I'll go!' and was off like an arrow from a bow, and Dicky with him.

They found the doctor at home, and he came that minute. Oswald and Dicky were told to go away, but they could not bear to, though they knew their dinner-bell must have been already rung for them many times in vain, and it was now ringing with fury. They just lurked round the corner of the greenhouse till the doctor said it was a broken arm, and nothing else hurt; and when the poor man was sent home in a cab, Oswald and Dicky got the cabman, who is a friend of theirs, to let them come on the box with him. And thus they saw where the man lived, and saw his poor wife greet the sufferer. She only said:

'Gracious, Gus, whatever have you been up to now? You always was an unlucky chap.'

But we could see her loving heart was full to overflowing.

When she had taken him in and shut the door we went away. The wretched sufferer, whose name transpired to be Augustus Victor Plunkett, was lucky enough to live in a mews. Noël made a poem about it afterwards: [Pg 9]

'O Muse of Poetry, do not refuse
To tell about a man who loves the Mews.
It is his humble home so poor,
And the cabman who drove him home lives next door
But two: and when his arm was broke
His loving wife with tears spoke.'

And so on. It went on for two hundred and twenty-four lines, and he could not print it, because it took far too much type for the printing-press. It was as we went out of the mews that we first saw the Goat. I gave him a piece of cocoanut ice, and he liked it awfully. He was tied to a ring in the wall, and he was black and white, with horns and a beard; and when the man he belonged to saw us looking at him, he said we could have that Goat a bargain. And when we asked, out of politeness and not because we had any money, except twopence halfpenny of Dicky's, how much he wanted for the Goat, he said:

'Seven and sixpence is the lowest, so I won't deceive you, young gents. And so help me if he ain't worth thribble the money.'

Oswald did the sum in his head, which told him the Goat was worth one pound two shillings and sixpence, and he went away sadly, for he did want that Goat. [Pg 10]

We were later for dinner than I ever remember our being, and Miss Blake had not kept us any pudding; but Oswald bore up when he thought of the Goat. But Dicky seemed to have no beautiful inside thoughts to sustain him, and he was so dull Dora said she only hoped he wasn't going to have measles.

It was when we had gone up to bed that he fiddled about with the studs and old

buttons and things in a velvety box he had till Oswald was in bed, and then he said:

'Look here, Oswald, I feel as if I was a murderer, or next-door to. It was our moving that ladder: I'm certain it was. And now he's laid up, and his wife and children.'

Oswald sat up in bed, and said kindly:

'You're right, old chap. It *was* your moving that ladder. Of course, you didn't put it back firm. But the man's not killed.'

'We oughtn't to have touched it,' he said. 'Or we ought to have told them we had, or something. Suppose his arm gets blood-poisoning, or inflammation, or something awful? I couldn't go on living if I was a doer of a deed like that.' [Pg 11]

Oswald had never seen Dicky so upset. He takes things jolly easy as a rule. Oswald said:

'Well, it is no use fuming over it. You'd better get out of your clothes and go to bed. We'll cut down in the morning and leave our cards and kind inquiries.'

Oswald only meant to be kind, and by making this amusing remark he wished to draw his erring brother's thoughts from the remorse that was poisoning his young life, and would very likely keep him awake for an hour or more thinking of it, and fidgetting about so that Oswald couldn't sleep.

But Dicky did not take it at all the way Oswald meant. He said:

'Shut up, Oswald, you beast!' and lay down on his bed and began to blub.

Oswald said, 'Beast yourself!' because it is the proper thing to say; but he was not angry, only sorry that Dicky was so duffing as not to see what he meant. And he got out of bed and went softly to the girls' room, which is next ours, and said:

'I say, come in to our room a sec., will you? Dicky is howling fit to bring the house down. I think a council of us elder ones would do him more good than anything.' [Pg 12]

'Whatever is up?' Dora asked, getting into her dressing-gown.

'Oh, nothing, except that he's a murderer! Come on, and don't make a row. Mind the mats and our boots by the door.'

They came in, and Oswald said:

'Look here, Dicky, old boy, here are the girls, and we're going to have a council about it.'

They wanted to kiss him, but he wouldn't, and shrugged his shoulders about, and wouldn't speak; but when Alice had got hold of his hand he said in a muffled voice:

'You tell them, Oswald.'

When Oswald and Dicky were alone, you will have noticed the just elder brother blamed the proper person, which was Dicky, because he would go up on the stovehouse roof after his beastly ball, which Oswald did not care a rap about. And, besides, he knew it wasn't there. But now that other people were there Oswald, of course, said:

'You see, *we* moved the men's ladder when they were at their dinner. And you know the man that fell off the ladder, and we went with him in the cab to the place where that Goat was? Well, Dicky has only just thought of it; but, of course, it was really our fault his tumbling, because we couldn't have put the ladder back safely. And Dicky thinks if his arm blood-poisoned itself we should be as good as murderers.' [Pg 13]

Dicky is perfectly straight; he sat up and sniffed, and blew his nose, and said:

'It was my idea moving the ladder: Oswald only helped.'

'Can't we ask uncle to see that the dear sufferer wants for nothing while he's ill, and all that?' said Dora.

'Well,' said Oswald, 'we could, of course. But, then, it would all come out. And about the fives ball too. And we can't be at all sure it *was* the ball made the greenhouse leak, because I know it never went over the house.'

'Yes, it did,' said Dicky, giving his nose a last stern blow.

Oswald was generous to a sorrowing foe, and took no notice, only went on:

'And about the ladder: we can't be quite sure it wouldn't have slipped on those tiles, even if we'd never moved it. But I think Dicky would feel jollier if we could do something for the man, and I know it would me.' [Pg 14]

That looks mixed, but Oswald was rather agitated himself, and that was what he said.

'We must think of something to do to get money,' Alice said, 'like we used to do when

we were treasure-seekers.'

Presently the girls went away, and we heard them jawing in their room. Just as Oswald was falling asleep the door opened, and a figure in white came in and bent above his almost sleeping form. It said:

'We've thought of something! We'll have a bazaar, like the people Miss Blake's elder sister lives with did for the poor iron church.'

The form glided away. Miss Blake is our housekeeper. Oswald could hear that Dicky was already sleeping, so he turned over and went to sleep himself. He dreamed of Goats, only they were as big as railway engines, and would keep ringing the church bells, till Oswald awoke, and it was the getting-up bell, and not a great Goat ringing it, but only Sarah as usual.

The idea of the bazaar seemed to please all of us.

'We can ask all the people we know to it,' said Alice. [Pg 15]

'And wear our best frocks, and sell the things at the stalls,' said Dora.

Dicky said we could have it in the big greenhouse now the plants were out of it.

'I will write a poem for the man, and say it at the bazaar,' Noël said. 'I know people say poetry at bazaars. The one Aunt Carrie took me to a man said a piece about a cowboy.'

H. O. said there ought to be lots of sweets, and then everyone would buy them.

Oswald said someone would have to ask my father, and he said he would do it if the others liked. He did this because of an inside feeling in his mind that he knew might come on at any moment. So he did. And 'Yes' was the answer. And then the uncle gave Oswald a whole quid to buy things to sell at the bazaar, and my father gave him ten bob for the same useful and generous purpose, and said he was glad to see we were trying to do good to others.

When he said that the inside feeling in Oswald's mind began that he had felt afraid would, some time, and he told my father about him and Dicky moving the ladder, and about the hateful fives ball, and everything. And my father was awfully decent about [Pg 16] it, so that Oswald was glad he had told.

The girls wrote the invitations to all our friends that very day. We boys went down to look in the shops and see what we could buy for the bazaar. And we went to ask how Mr. Augustus Victor Plunkett's arm was getting on, and to see the Goat.

The others liked the Goat almost as much as Oswald, and even Dicky agreed that it was our clear duty to buy the Goat for the sake of poor Mr. Plunkett.

Because, as Oswald said, if it was worth one pound two and six, we could easily sell it again for that, and we should have gained fifteen shillings for the sufferer.

So we bought the Goat, and changed the ten shillings to do it. The man untied the other end of the Goat's rope, and Oswald took hold of it, and said he hoped we were not robbing the man by taking his Goat from him for such a low price. And he said:

'Not at all, young gents. Don't you mention it. Pleased to oblige a friend any day of the week.'

So we started to take the Goat home. But after about half a street he would not come [Pg 17] any more. He stopped still, and a lot of boys and people came round, just as if they had never seen a Goat before. We were beginning to feel quite uncomfortable, when Oswald remembered the Goat liked cocoanut ice, so Noël went into a shop and got threepenn'orth, and then the cheap animal consented to follow us home. So did the street boys. The cocoanut ice was more for the money than usual, but not so nice.

My father was not pleased when he saw the Goat. But when Alice told him it was for the bazaar, he laughed, and let us keep it in the stableyard.

It got out early in the morning, and came right into the house, and butted the cook in her own back-kitchen, a thing even Oswald himself would have hesitated before doing. So that showed it was a brave Goat.

The groom did not like the Goat, because it bit a hole in a sack of corn, and then walked up it like up a mountain, and all the oats ran out and got between the stones of the stableyard, and there was a row. But we explained it was not for long, as the bazaar was in three days. And we hurried to get things ready. [Pg 18]

We were each to have a stall. Dora took the refreshment stall. The uncle made Miss Blake get all that ready.

Alice had a stall for pincushions and brush-and-comb bags, and other useless things that girls make with stuff and ribbons.

Noël had a poetry stall, where you could pay twopence and get a piece of poetry and a sweet wrapped up in it. We chose sugar almonds, because they are not so sticky.

H. O.'s stall was to be sweets, if he promised on his word of honour as a Bastable only to eat one of each kind.

Dicky wished to have a stall for mechanical toys and parts of clocks. He has a great many parts of clocks, but the only mechanical toy was his clockwork engine, that was broken ages ago, so he had to give it up, and he couldn't think of anything else. So he settled to help Oswald, and keep an eye on H. O.

Oswald's stall was meant to be a stall for really useful things, but in the end it was just a lumber stall for the things other people did not want. But he did not mind, because the others agreed he should have the entire selling of the Goat, and he racked his young brains to think how to sell it in the most interesting and unusual way. And at last he saw how, and he said: [Pg 19]

'He shall be a lottery, and we'll make people take tickets, and then draw a secret number out of a hat, and whoever gets the right number gets the Goat. I wish it was me.'

'We ought to advertise it, though,' Dicky said. 'Have handbills printed, and send out sandwich-men.'

Oswald inquired at the printers in Greenwich, and handbills were an awful price, and sandwich-men a luxury far beyond our means. So he went home sadly; and then Alice thought of the printing-press. We got it out, and cleaned it where the ink had been upset into it, and mended the broken parts as well as we could, and got some more printers' ink, and wrote the circular and printed it. It was:

SECRET LOTTERY.
Exceptionable and Rare Chance.
An Object of Value—

'It ought to be object of *virtue*,' said Dicky. 'I saw it in the old iron and china and picture shop. It was a carved ivory ship, and there was a ticket on it: "Rare Object of Virtue."' [Pg 20]

'The Goat's an object, certainly,' Alice said, 'and it's valuable. As for virtue, I'm not so sure.'

But Oswald thought the two V's looked well, and being virtuous is different to being valuable; but, all the same, the Goat might be both when you got to know him really well. So we put it in.

SECRET LOTTERY.
Exceptionable and Rare Chance.
An Object of Value and Virtue

> will be lotteried for on Saturday next, at four o'clock. Tickets one or two shillings each, according to how many people want them. The object is not disclosed till after the Lottery, but it cost a lot of money, and is honestly worth three times as much. If you win it, it is the same as winning money. Apply at Morden House, Blackheath, at 3 o'clock next Saturday. Take tickets early to prevent disappointment.

We printed these, and though they looked a bit rum, we had not time to do them again, so we went out about dusk and dropped them in people's letter-boxes. Then next day Oswald, who is always very keen on doing the thing well, got two baking-boards out of the kitchen and bored holes in them with an auger I had, and pasted paper on them, and did on them with a paint-brush and ink the following lines: [Pg 21]

SECRET LOTTERY.

Object of Value and Virtue.

Tickets 1/- and 2/-.

If you win, it will be the same as winning money.

Lottery at Morden House, Blackheath.

Saturday at 4. Come at 3.

And he slung the boards round his neck, and tied up his mouth in one of those knitted comforters he despises so much at other times, and, pulling a cap of father's over his bold ears, he got Dicky to let him out of the side-door. And then the brave boy went right across the heath and three times up and down the village, till those

boys that followed him and the Goat home went for him near the corner of Wemyss Road, and he made a fight for it, taking off the boards and using them as shields. But at last, being far outnumbered, which is no disgrace, he had to chuck the boards and run for it.

Saturday was fine. We had hung the greenhouse with evergreens and paper roses that looked almost like real among the green, and Miss Blake let us have some Chinesy-looking curtains to cover over the shelves and staging with. And the gardener let us have a lot of azaleas and things in pots, so that it was all very bowery and flowery. [Pg 22]

Alice's stall was the smartest looking, because Miss Blake had let her have all the ribbons and things that were over from the other bazaar.

H. O.'s stall was also nice—all on silver tea-trays, so as not to be stickier than needful.

The poetry stall had more flowers on it than any of the others, to make up for the poetry looking so dull outside. Of course, you could not see the sweet inside the packets till you opened them. Red azaleas are prettier than poetry, I think. I think the tropic lands in 'Westward Ho!' had great trees with flowers like that.

We got the Goat into the stovehouse. He was to be kept a secret till the very last. And by half-past two we were all ready, and very clean and dressed. We had all looked out everything we thought anyone could want to buy, and that we could spare, and some things we could not, and most of these were on Oswald's table—among others, several boxes of games we had never cared about; some bags of marbles, which nobody plays now; a lot of old books; a pair of braces with wool-work on them, that an aunt once made for Oswald, and, of course, he couldn't wear them; some bags of odd buttons for people who like sewing these things on; a lot of foreign stamps, gardening tools, Dicky's engine, that won't go, and a stuffed parrot, but he was moth-eaten. [Pg 23]

About three our friends began to come, Mrs. Leslie, and Lord Tottenham, and Albert's uncle, and a lot of others. It was a very grand party, and they admired the bazaar very much, and all bought things. Mrs. Leslie bought the engine for ten shillings, though we told her honestly it would never go again, and Albert's uncle bought the parrot, and would not tell us what he wanted it for. The money was put on a blue dish, so that everyone could see how it got on, and our hearts were full of joy as we saw how much silver there was among the pennies, and two or three gold pieces too. I know now how the man feels who holds the plate at the door in church.

Noël's poetry stall was much more paying than I thought it would be. I believe nobody really likes poetry, and yet everyone pretends they do, either so as not to hurt Noël's feelings, or because they think well-brought-up people ought to like poetry, even Noël's. Of course, Macaulay and Kipling are different. I don't mind them so much myself. [Pg 24]

Noël wrote a lot of new poetry for the bazaar. It took up all his time, and even then he had not enough new stuff to wrap up all the sugar almonds in. So he made up with old poetry that he'd done before. Albert's uncle got one of the new ones, and said it made him a proud man. It was:

'How noble and good and kind you are
To come to Victor A. Plunkett's Bazaar.
Please buy as much as you can bear,
For the sufferer needs all you can possibly spare.
I know you are sure to take his part,
Because you have such a noble heart.'

Mrs. Leslie got:

'The rose is red, the violet's blue,
The lily's pale, and so are you.
Or would be if you had seen him fall
Off the top of the ladder so tall.
Do buy as much as you can stand,
And lend the poor a helping hand.'

Lord Tottenham, though, only got one of the old ones, and it happened to be the 'Wreck of the *Malabar*.' He was an admiral once. But he liked it. He is a nice old gentleman, but people do say he is 'excentric.' [Pg 25]

Father got a poem that said:

'Please turn your eyes round in their sockets,
And put both your hands in your pockets;
Your eyes will show you things so gay,
And I hope you'll find enough in your pockets to pay
For the things you buy.

Good-bye!'

And he laughed and seemed pleased; but when Mrs. Morrison, Albert's mother, got that poem about the black beetle that was poisoned she was not so pleased, and she said it was horrid, and made her flesh creep. You know the poem. It says:

'Oh, beetle, how I weep to see
Thee lying on thy poor back:
It is so very sad to see
You were so leggy and black.
I wish you were crawling about alive again,
But many people think this is nonsense and a shame.'

Noël *would* recite, no matter what we said, and he stood up on a chair, and everyone, in their blind generousness, paid sixpence to hear him. It was a long poem of his own about the Duke of Wellington, and it began: [Pg 26]

'Hail, faithful leader of the brave band
Who went to make Napoleon understand
He couldn't have everything his own way.
We taught him this on Waterloo day.'

I heard that much; but then he got so upset and frightened no one could hear anything till the end, when it says:

'So praise the heroes of Waterloo,
And let us do our duty like they had to do.'

Everyone clapped very much, but Noël was so upset he nearly cried, and Mrs. Leslie said:

'Noël, I'm feeling as pale as a lily again! Take me round the garden to recover myself.'

She was as red as usual, but it saved Noël from making a young ass of himself. And we got seventeen shillings and sixpence by his reciting. So that was all right.

We might as well not have sent out those circulars, because only the people we had written to ourselves came. Of course, I don't count those five street boys, the same Oswald had the sandwich-board fight with. They came, and they walked round and looked at the things; but they had no money to spend, it turned out, and only came to be disagreeable and make fun. So Albert's uncle asked them if they did not think their families would be lonely without them, and he and I saw them off at the gate. Then they stood outside and made rude noises. And another stranger came, and Oswald thought perhaps the circular was beginning to bear fruit. But the stranger asked for the master of the house, and he was shown in. Oswald was just shaking up the numbers in his hat for the lottery of the Goat, and Alice and Dora were selling the tickets for half a crown each to our visitors, and explaining the dreadful misery of the poor man that all this trouble was being taken for, and we were all enjoying ourselves very much, when Sarah came to say Master Oswald was to go in to master's study at once. So he went, wondering what on earth he could have been up to now. But he could not think of anything in particular. But when his father said, 'Oswald, this gentleman is a detective from Scotland Yard,' he was glad he had told about the fives ball and the ladder, because he knew his father would now stand by him. But he did wonder whether you could be sent to prison for leaving a ladder in a slippery place, and how long they would keep you there for that crime. [Pg 27] [Pg 28]

Then my father held out one of the fatal circulars, and said:

'I suppose this is some of your work? Mr. Biggs here is bound in honour to do his best to find out when people break the laws of the land. Now, lotteries are illegal, and can be punished by law.'

Oswald gloomily wondered how much the law could do to you. He said:

'We didn't know, father.'

Then his father said:

'The best thing you can do is to tell this gentleman all about it.'

So Oswald said:

'Augustus Victor Plunkett fell off a ladder and broke his arm, and perhaps it was our fault for meddling with the ladder at all. So we wanted to do something to help him, and father said we might have a bazaar. It is happening now, and we had three pounds two and sevenpence last time I counted the bazaar.'

'But what about the lottery?' said Mr. Biggs, who did not look as if he would take Oswald to prison just then, as our young hero had feared. In fact, he looked rather jolly. 'Is the prize money?' [Pg 29]

'No—oh no; only it's so valuable it's as good as winning money.'

'Then it's only a raffle,' said Mr. Biggs; 'that's what it is, just a plain raffle. What *is* the prize?'

'Are we to be allowed to go on with it?' asked the wary Oswald.

'Why, yes,' said Mr. Biggs; 'if it's not money, why not? What is the valuable object?'

'Come, Oswald,' said his father, when Oswald said nothing, 'what is the object of *virtù*?'

'I'd rather not say,' said Oswald, feeling very uncomfortable.

Mr. Biggs said something about duty being duty, and my father said:

'Come, Oswald, don't be a young duffer. I dare say it's nothing to be ashamed of.'

'I should think not indeed,' said Oswald, as his fond thoughts played with that beautiful Goat.

'Well, then?'

'Well, sir'—Oswald spoke desperately, for he wondered his father had been so patient so long, and saw that he wasn't going to go on being—'you see, the great thing is, nobody is to know it's a G—— I mean, it's a secret. No one's to know what the prize is. Only when you've won it, it will be revealed.' [Pg 30]

'"Here is your prize," said Oswald.'—Page 31.

'Well,' said my father, 'if Mr. Biggs will take a glass of wine with me, we'll follow you down to the greenhouse, and he can see for himself.'

Mr. Biggs said something about thanking father kindly, and about his duty. And presently they came down to the greenhouse. Father did not introduce Mr. Biggs to anyone—I suppose he forgot—but Oswald did while father was talking to Mrs. Leslie. And Mr. Biggs made himself very agreeable to all the ladies.

Then we had the lottery. Everyone had tickets, and Alice asked Mr. Biggs to buy one. She let him have it for a shilling, because it was the last, and we all hoped he would win the Goat. He seemed quite sure now that Oswald was not kidding, and that the prize was not money. Indeed, Oswald went so far as to tell him privately that the prize was too big to put in your pocket, and that if it was divided up it would be spoiled, which is true of Goats, but not of money.

Everyone was laughing and talking, and wondering anxiously whatever the prize

could possibly be. Oswald carried round the hat, and everyone drew a number. The winning number was six hundred and sixty-six, and Albert's uncle said afterwards it was a curious coincidence. I don't know what it meant, but it made Mrs. Leslie laugh. When everyone had drawn a number, Oswald rang the dinner-bell to command silence, and there was a hush full of anxious expectation. Then Oswald said: [Pg 31]

'The prize number is six hundred and sixty-six. Who has it?'

And Mr. Biggs took a step forward and held out his paper.

'The prize is yours! I congratulate you,' said Oswald warmly.

Then he went into the stovehouse, and hastily placing a wreath of paper roses on the Goat's head, that Alice had got ready for the purpose, he got out the Goat by secretly showing it a bit of cocoanut ice, and led it by the same means to the feet of the happy winner.

'Here is your prize,' said Oswald, with feelings of generous pride. 'I am very glad you've got him. He'll be a comfort to you, and make up for all the trouble you've had over our lottery—raffle, I mean.' [Pg 32]

And he placed the ungoated end of the rope in the unresisting hand of the fortunate detective.

Neither Oswald nor any of the rest of us has ever been able to make out why everyone should have laughed so. But they did. They said the lottery was the success of the afternoon. And the ladies kept on congratulating Mr. Biggs.

At last people began to go, and the detective, so unexpectedly made rich beyond his wildest dreams, said he, too, must be going. He had tied the Goat to the greenhouse door, and now he moved away. But we all cried out:

'You've forgotten your Goat!'

'No, I haven't,' he said very earnestly; 'I shall never forget that Goat to my dying hour. But I want to call on my aunt just close by, and I couldn't very well take the Goat to see her.'

'I don't see why not,' H. O. said; 'it's a very nice Goat.'

'She's frightened of them,' said he. 'One ran at her when she was a little girl. But if you will allow me, sir'—and he winked at my father, which is not manners—'if you'll allow me, I'll call in for the Goat on my way to the station.'

We got five pounds thirteen and fivepence by the bazaar and the raffle. We should have had another ten shillings from father, but he had to give it to Mr. Biggs, because we had put him to the trouble of coming all the way from Scotland Yard, because he thought our circular was from some hardened criminal wishing to cheat his trustful fellow-creatures. We took the money to Augustus Victor Plunkett next morning, and I tell you he *was* pleased. [Pg 33]

We waited till long after dark for the detective to return for his rich prize. But he never came. I hope he was not set upon and stabbed in some dark alley. If he is alive, and not imprisoned, I can't see why he didn't come back. I often think anxiously of him. Because, of course, detectives have many enemies among felons, who think nothing of stabbing people in the back, so that being murdered in a dark alley is a thing all detectives are constantly liable to. [Pg 34]

THE RUNAWAYS

It was after we had had the measles, that fell and blighting disorder which we got from Alice picking up five deeply infected shillings that a bemeasled family had wrapped in a bit of paper to pay the doctor with and then carelessly dropped in the street. Alice held the packet hotly in her muff all through a charity concert. Hence these tears, as it says in Virgil. And if you have ever had measles you will know that this is not what is called figuring speech, because your eyes do run like mad all the time.

When we were unmeasled again we were sent to stay at Lymchurch with a Miss Sandal, and her motto was plain living and high thinking. She had a brother, and his motto was the same, and it was his charity concert that Alice held the fatal shillings in her muff throughout of. Later on he was giving tracts to a bricklayer, and fell off a scaffold in his giddy earnestness, and Miss Sandal had to go and nurse him. So the six of us stayed in the plain living, high thinking house by ourselves, and old Mrs. Beale from the village came in every day and did the housework. She was of humble birth, but was a true lady in minding her own affairs, which is what a great many ladies do not know how to do at all. We had no lessons to do, and we were thus free [Pg 35]

to attend to any adventures which came along. Adventures are the real business of life. The rest is only in-betweenness—what Albert's uncle calls padding. He is an author.

Miss Sandal's house was very plain and clean, with lots of white paint, and very difficult to play in. So we were out a good deal. It was seaside, so, of course, there was the beach, and besides that the marsh—big green fields with sheep all about, and wet dykes with sedge growing, and mud, and eels in the mud, and winding white roads that all look the same, and all very interesting, as though they might lead to almost anything that you didn't expect. Really, of course, they lead to Ashford and Romney and Ivychurch, and real live places like that. But they don't look it.

The day when what I am going to tell you about happened, we were all leaning on the stone wall looking at the pigs. The pigman is a great friend of ours—all except H. O., [Pg 36] who is my youngest brother. His name is Horace Octavius, and if you want to know why we called him H. O. you had better read 'The Treasure Seekers' and find out. He had gone to tea with the schoolmaster's son—a hateful kid.

'Isn't that the boy you're always fighting?' Dora asked when H. O. said he was going.

'Yes,' said H. O., 'but, then, he keeps rabbits.'

So then we understood and let him go.

Well, the rest of us were gazing fondly on the pigs, and two soldiers came by.

We asked them where they were off to.

They told us to mind our own business, which is not manners, even if you are a soldier on private affairs.

'Oh, all right,' said Oswald, who is the eldest. And he advised the soldiers to keep their hair on. The little they had was cut very short.

'I expect they're scouts or something,' said Dicky; 'it's a field-day, or a sham-fight, or something, as likely as not.'

'Let's go after them and see,' said Oswald, ever prompt in his decidings. So we did.

We ran a bit at first, so as not to let the soldiers have too much of a lead. Their red coats made it quite easy to keep them in sight on the winding white marsh road. But [Pg 37] we did not catch them up: they seemed to go faster and faster. So we ran a little bit more every now and then, and we went quite a long way after them. But they didn't meet any of their officers or regiments or things, and we began to think that perchance we were engaged in the disheartening chase of the wild goose. This has sometimes occurred.

There is a ruined church about two miles from Lymchurch, and when we got close to that we lost sight of the red coats, so we stopped on the little bridge that is near there to reconnoitre.

The soldiers had vanished.

'Well, here's a go!' said Dicky.

'It *is* a wild-goose chase,' said Noël. 'I shall make a piece of poetry about it. I shall call the title the "Vanishing Reds, or, the Soldiers that were not when you got there."'

'You shut up!' said Oswald, whose eagle eye had caught a glimpse of scarlet through the arch of the ruin.

None of the others had seen this. Perhaps you will think I do not say enough about Oswald's quickness of sight, so I had better tell you that is only because Oswald is me, and very modest. At least, he tries to be, because he knows it is what a true [Pg 38] gentleman ought to.

'They're in the ruins,' he went on. 'I expect they're going to have an easy and a pipe—out of the wind.'

'I think it's very mysterious,' said Noël. 'I shouldn't wonder if they're going to dig for buried treasure. Let's go and see.'

'No,' said Oswald, who, though modest, is thoughtful. 'If we do they'll stop digging, or whatever they're doing. When they've gone away, we'll go and see if the ground is scratched about.'

So we delayed where we were, but we saw no more scarlet.

In a little while a dull-looking man in brown came by on a bicycle. He stopped and got off.

'Seen a couple of Tommies about here, my lad?' he said to Oswald.

Oswald does not like being called anybody's lad, especially that kind of man's; but he

did not want to spoil the review, or field-day, or sham-fight, or whatever it might be, so he said:

'Yes; they're up in the ruins.'

'You don't say so!' said the man. 'In uniform, I suppose? Yes, of course, or you wouldn't have known they were soldiers. Silly cuckoos!' [Pg 39]

He wheeled his bicycle up the rough lane that leads to the old ruin.

'It can't be buried treasure,' said Dicky.

'I don't care if it is,' said Oswald. 'We'll see what's happening. I don't mind spoiling *his* sport. "My ladding" me like that!'

So we followed the man with the bicycle. It was leaning against the churchyard gate when we got there. The man off it was going up to the ruin, and we went after him.

He did not call out to the soldiers, and we thought that odd; but it didn't make us think where it might have made us if we had had any sense. He just went creeping about, looking behind walls and inside arches, as though he was playing at hide-and-seek. There is a mound in the middle of the ruin, where stones and things have fallen during dark ages, and the grass has grown all over them. We stood on the mound, and watched the bicycling stranger nosing about like a ferret.

There is an archway in that ruin, and a flight of steps goes down—only five steps—and then it is all stopped up with fallen stones and earth. The stranger stopped at last at this arch, and stooped forward with his hands on his knees, and looked through the arch and down the steps. Then he said suddenly and fiercely: [Pg 40]

'Come out of it, will you?'

And the soldiers came. I wouldn't have. They were two to his one. They came cringing out like beaten dogs. The brown man made a sort of bound, and next minute the two soldiers were handcuffed together, and he was driving them before him like sheep.

'Back you go the same way as what you come,' he said.

And then Oswald saw the soldiers' faces, and he will never forget what they looked like.

He jumped off the mound, and ran to where they were.

'What have they done?' he asked the handcuffer.

'Deserters,' said the man. 'Thanks to you, my lad, I got 'em as easy as kiss your hand.'

Then one of the soldiers looked at Oswald. He was not very old—about as big as a fifth-form boy. And Oswald answered what the soldier looked at him.

'I'm *not* a sneak,' he said. 'I wouldn't have told if I'd known. If you'd told me, instead of saying to mind my own business I'd have helped you.' [Pg 41]

The soldier didn't answer, but the bicycle man did.

'Then you'd 'a helped yourself into the stone jug, my lad,' said he. 'Help a dirty deserter? You're young enough to know better. Come along, you rubbish!'

And they went.

When they were gone Dicky said:

'It's very rum. I hate cowards. And deserters are cowards. I don't see why we feel like this.'

Alice and Dora and Noël were now discovered to be in tears.

'Of course we did right to tell. Only when the soldier looked at me ...' said Oswald.

'Yes,' said Dicky, 'that's just it.'

In deepest gloom the party retraced its steps.

As we went, Dora said with sniffs:

'I suppose it was the bicycle man's duty.'

'Of course,' said Oswald, 'but it wasn't *our* duty. And I jolly well wish we hadn't!'

'And such a beautiful day, too,' said Noël, sniffing in his turn.

It *was* beautiful. The afternoon had been dull, but now the sun was shining flat across the marshes, making everything look as if it had been covered all over with the best gold-leaf—marsh and trees, and roofs and stacks, and everything. [Pg 42]

That evening Noël wrote a poem about it all. It began:

'Poor soldiers, why did you run away
On such a beautiful, beautiful day?
If you had run away in the rain,
Perhaps they would never have found you again,
Because then Oswald would not have been there
To show the hunter the way to your lair.'

Oswald would have licked him for that—only Noël is not very strong, and there is something about poets, however young, that makes it rather like licking a girl. So Oswald did not even say what he thought—Noël cries at the least thing. Oswald only said, 'Let's go down to our pigman.'

And we all went except Noël. He never will go anywhere when in the midst of making poetry. And Alice stayed with him, and H. O. was in bed.

We told the pigman all about the deserters, and about our miserable inside remorsefulness, and he said he knew just how we felt.

'There's quite enough agin a pore chap that's made a bolt of it without the rest of us a-joinin' in,' he said. 'Not as I holds with deserting—mean trick I call it. But all the same, when the odds is that heavy—thousands to one—all the army and the navy and [Pg 43] the pleece and Parliament and the King agin one pore silly bloke. You wouldn't 'a done it a purpose, I lay.'

'Not much,' said Oswald in gloomy dejection. 'Have a peppermint? They're extra strong.'

When the pigman had had one he went on talking.

'There's a young chap, now,' he said, 'broke out of Dover Gaol. I 'appen to know what he's in for—nicked a four-pound cake, he did, off of a counter at a pastrycook's—Jenner's it was, in the High Street—part hunger, part playfulness. But even if I wasn't to know what he was lagged for, do you think I'd put the coppers on to him? Not me. Give a fellow a chance is what I say. But don't you grizzle about them there Tommies. P'raps it'll be the making of 'em in the end. A slack-baked pair as ever wore boots. *I* seed 'em. Only next time just you take and think afore you pipes up—see?'

We said that we saw, and that next time we would do as he said. And we went home again. As we went Dora said:

'But supposing it was a cruel murderer that had got loose, you ought to tell then.' [Pg 44]

'Yes,' said Dicky; 'but before you do tell you ought to be jolly sure it *is* a cruel murderer, and not a chap that's taken a cake because he was hungry. How do you know what *you'd* do if you were hungry enough?'

'I shouldn't steal,' said Dora.

'I'm not so sure,' said Dicky; and they argued about it all the way home, and before we got in it began to rain in torrents.

Conversations about food always make you feel as though it was a very long time since you had had anything to eat. Mrs. Beale had gone home, of course, but we went into the larder. It is a generous larder. No lock, only a big wooden latch that pulls up with a string, like in Red Riding Hood. And the floor is clean damp red brick. It makes ginger-nuts soft if you put the bag on this floor. There was half a rhubarb pie, and there were meat turnovers with potato in them. Mrs. Beale is a thoughtful person, and I know many people much richer that are not nearly so thoughtful.

We had a comfortable feast at the kitchen table, standing up to eat, like horses.

Then we had to let Noël read us his piece of poetry about the soldier; he wouldn't have slept if we hadn't. It was very long, and it began as I have said, and ended up: [Pg 45]

'Poor soldiers, learn a lesson from to-day,
It is very wrong to run away;
It is better to stay
And serve your King and Country—hurray!'

Noël owned that Hooray sounded too cheerful for the end of a poem about soldiers with faces like theirs were.

'But I didn't mean it about the soldiers. It was about the King and Country. Half a sec. I'll put that in.' So he wrote:

'P.S.—I do not mean to be unkind,
Poor soldiers, to you, so never mind.
When I say hurray or sing,
It is because I am thinking of my Country and my King.'

'You can't sing Hooray,' said Dicky. So Noël went to bed singing it, which was better than arguing about it, Alice said. But it was noisier as well.

Oswald and Dicky always went round the house to see that all the doors were bolted and the shutters up. This is what the head of the house always does, and Oswald is the head when father is not there. There are no shutters upstairs, only curtains. The White House, which is Miss Sandal's house's name, is not in the village, but 'quite a [Pg 46] step' from it, as Mrs. Beale says. It is the first house you come to as you come along the road from the marsh.

We used to look in the cupboard and under the beds for burglars every night. The girls liked us to, though they wouldn't look themselves, and I don't know that it was much good. If there *is* a burglar, it's sometimes safer for you not to know it. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to find a burglar, especially as he would be armed to the teeth as likely as not. However, there is not much worth being a burglar about, in houses where the motto is plain living and high thinking, and there never was anyone in the cupboards or under the beds.

Then we put out all the lights very carefully in case of fire—all except Noël's. He does not like the dark. He says there are things in it that go away when you light a candle, and however much you talk reason and science to him, it makes no difference at all.

Then we got into our pyjamas. It was Oswald who asked father to let us have pyjamas instead of nightgowns; they are so convenient for dressing up when you wish to act clowns, or West Indian planters, or any loose-clothed characters. Then we got into [Pg 47] bed, and then we got into sleep.

Little did the unconscious sleepers reck of the strange destiny that was advancing on them by leaps and bounds through the silent watches of the night.

Although we were asleep, the rain went on raining just the same, and the wind blowing across the marsh with the fury of a maniac who has been transformed into a blacksmith's bellows. And through the night, and the wind, and the rain, our dreadful destiny drew nearer and nearer. I wish this to sound as if something was going to happen, and I hope it does. I hope the reader's heart is now standing still with apprehensionness on our account, but I do not want it to stop altogether, so I will tell you that we were not all going to be murdered in our beds, or pass peacefully away in our sleeps with angel-like smiles on our young and beautiful faces. Not at all. What really happened was this. Some time must have elapsed between our closing our eyes in serene slumber and the following narrative:

Oswald was awakened by Dicky thumping him hard in the back, and saying in accents of terror—at least, he says not, but Oswald knows what they sounded like: [Pg 48]

'What's that?'

Oswald reared up on his elbow and listened, but there was nothing to listen to except Dicky breathing like a grampus, and the giggle-guggle of the rain-water overflowing from the tub under the window.

'What's what?' said Oswald.

He did not speak furiously, as many elder brothers would have done when suddenly awakened by thumps.

'*That!*' said Dicky. 'There it is again!'

And this time, certainly, there it was, and it sounded like somebody hammering on the front-door with his fists. There is no knocker to the plain-living, high-thinking house.

Oswald controlled his fears, if he had any (I am not going to say whether he had or hadn't), and struck a match. Before the candle had had time to settle its flame after the first flare up that doesn't last, the row began again.

Oswald's nerves are of iron, but it would have given anybody a start to see two white figures in the doorway, yet so it was. They proved to be Alice and Dora in their nighties; but no one could blame anyone for not being sure of this at first. [Pg 49]

'Is it burglars?' said Dora; and her teeth did chatter, whatever she may say.

'*I* think it's Mrs. Beale,' said Alice. 'I expect she's forgotten the key.'

Oswald pulled his watch out from under his pillow.

'It's half-past one,' he said.

And then the knocking began again. So the intrepid Oswald went to the landing window that is over the front-door. The others went too. And he opened the window in his pyjamas and said, 'Who's there?'

There was the scraping sound of boots on the doorstep, as somebody down there

stepped back.

'Is this the way to Ashford?' said the voice of a man.

'Ashford's thirteen miles off,' said Oswald. 'You get on to the Dover road.'

'I don't want to get on the Dover road,' said the voice; 'I've had enough of Dover.'

A thrill ran through every heart. We all told each other so afterwards.

'Well,' said Dicky, 'Ashford's thirteen miles——'

'Anybody but you in the house?' [Pg 50]

'Say we've got men and dogs and guns,' whispered Dora.

'There are six of us,' said Oswald, 'all armed to the teeth.'

The stranger laughed.

'I'm not a burglar,' he said; 'I've lost my way, that's all. I thought I should have got to Ashford before dusk, but I missed the way. I've been wandering all over these marshes ever since, in the rain. I expect they're out after me now, but I'm dead beat. I can't go on. Won't you let me in? I can sit by the kitchen fire.'

Oswald drew his head back through the window, and a hasty council took place on the landing.

'It *is*,' said Alice.

'You heard what he said about Dover, and their being out after him?'

'I say, you might let a chap in,' said the voice outside. 'I'm perfectly respectable. Upon my word I am.'

'I wish he hadn't said that,' whispered Dora. [** ']Such a dreadful story! And we didn't even ask him if he was.'

'He sounds very tired,' said Alice.

'And wet,' said Oswald. 'I heard the water squelching in his boots.' [Pg 51]

'What'll happen if we don't let him in?' said Dicky.

'He'll be caught and taken back, like the soldiers,' said Oswald. 'Look here, I'm going to chance it. You others can lock yourselves into your rooms if you're frightened.'

Then Oswald put his brave young head out of the window, and the rain dripped on to the back of his bold young neck off the roof, like a watering-pot on to a beautiful flower, and he said:

'There's a porch to the side door. Just scoot round there and shelter, and I'll come down in half a sec.'

A resolve made in early youth never to face midnight encounters without boots was the cause of this delay. Oswald and Dicky got into their boots and jackets, and told the girls to go back to bed.

Then we went down and opened the front-door. The stranger had heard the bolts go, and he was outside waiting.

We held the door open politely, and he stepped in and began at once to drip heavily on the doormat.

We shut the door. He looked wildly round. [Pg 52]

'Be calm! You are safe,' said Oswald.

'Thanks,' said the stranger; 'I see I am.'

'"Come into the kitchen," said Oswald, "you can drip there quite comfortably."'—Page 52

All our hearts were full of pity for the outcast. He was, indeed, a spectacle to shock the benevolent. Even the prison people, Oswald thought, or the man he took the cake from, would have felt their fierceness fade if they could have seen him then. He was not in prison dress. Oswald would have rather liked to see that, but he remembered that it was safer for the man that he had found means to rid himself of the felon's garb. He wore a gray knickerbocker suit, covered with mud. The lining of his hat must have been blue, and it had run down his face in streaks like the gentleman in Mr. Kipling's story. He was wetter than I have ever seen anyone out of a bath or the sea.

'Come into the kitchen,' said Oswald; 'you can drip there quite comfortably. The floor is brick.'

He followed us into the kitchen.

'Are you kids alone in the house?' he said.

'Yes,' said Oswald.

'Then I suppose it's no good asking if you've got a drop of brandy?'

'Not a bit,' said Dicky.

'Whisky would do, or gin—any sort of spirit,' said the smeared stranger hopefully. [Pg 53]

'Not a drop,' said Oswald; 'at least, I'll look in the medicine cupboard. And, I say, take off your things and put them in the sink. I'll get you some other clothes. There are some of Mr. Sandal's.'

The man hesitated.

'It'll make a better disguise,' said Oswald in a low, significant whisper, and turned tactfully away, so as not to make the stranger feel awkward.

Dicky got the clothes, and the stranger changed in the back-kitchen. The only spirit Oswald could find was spirits of salts, which the stranger said was poison, and spirits of camphor. Oswald gave him some of this on sugar; he knows it is a good thing when you have taken cold. The stranger hated it. He changed in the back-kitchen, and while he was doing it we tried to light the kitchen fire, but it would not; so Dicky went up to ask Alice for some matches, and finding the girls had not gone to bed as ordered, but contrarily dressed themselves, he let them come down. And then, of course, there was no reason why they should not light the fire. They did. [Pg 54]

When the unfortunate one came out of the back-kitchen he looked quite a decent

chap, though still blue in patches from the lining of his hat. Dicky whispered to me what a difference clothes made.

He made a polite though jerky bow to the girls, and Dora said:

'How do you do? I hope you are quite well.'

'As well as can be expected,' replied the now tidy outcast, 'considering what I've gone through.'

'Tea or cocoa?' said Dora. 'And do you like cheese or cold bacon best?'

'I'll leave it to you entirely,' he answered. And he added, without a pause, 'I'm sure I can trust you.'

'Indeed you can,' said Dora earnestly; 'you needn't be a bit afraid. You're perfectly safe with us.'

He opened his eyes at this.

'He didn't expect such kindness,' Alice whispered. 'Poor man! he's quite overcome.'

We gave him cocoa, and cheese, and bacon, and butter and bread, and he ate a great deal, with his feet in Mr. Sandal's all-wool boots on the kitchen fender. [Pg 55]

The girls wrung the water out of his clothes, and hung them on the clothes-horse on the other side of the fire.

'I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you,' he said; 'real charity I call this. I shan't forget it, I assure you. I ought to apologise for knocking you up like this, but I'd been hours tramping through this precious marsh of yours wet to the skin, and not a morsel of food since mid-day. And yours was the first light I'd seen for a couple of hours.'

'I'm very glad it *was* us you knocked up,' said Alice.

'So am I,' said he; 'I might have knocked at a great many doors before I got such a welcome. I'm quite aware of that.'

He spoke all right, not like a labouring man; but it wasn't a gentleman's voice, and he seemed to end his sentences off short at the end, as though he had it on the tip of his tongue to say 'Miss' or 'Sir.'

Oswald thought how terrible it must be to be out alone in the rain and the dark, with the police after you, and no one to be kind to you if you knocked at their doors.

'You must have had an awful day,' he said. [Pg 56]

'I believe you,' said the stranger, cutting himself more bacon. 'Thank you, miss (he really did say it that time), just half a cup if you don't mind. I believe you! I never want to have such a day again, I can tell you. I took one or two little things in the morning, but I wasn't in the mood or something. You know how it is sometimes.'

'I can fancy it,' said Alice.

'And then the afternoon clouded over. It cleared up at sunset, you remember, but then it was too late. And then the rain came on. Not half! My word! I've been in a ditch. Thought my last hour had come, I tell you. Only got out by the skin of my teeth. Got rid of my whole outfit. There's a nice thing to happen to a young fellow! Upon my Sam, it's enough to make a chap swear he'll never take another thing as long as he lives.'

'I hope you never will,' said Dora earnestly; 'it doesn't pay, you know.'

'Upon my word, that's nearly true, though I don't know how *you* know,' said the stranger, beginning on the cheese and pickles.

'I wish,' Dora was beginning, but Oswald interrupted. He did not think it was fair to preach at the man. [Pg 57]

'So you lost your outfit in the ditch,' he said; 'and how did you get those clothes?'

He pointed to the steaming gray suit.

'Oh,' replied the stranger, 'the usual way.'

Oswald was too polite to ask what was the usual way of getting a gray suit to replace a prison outfit. He was afraid the usual way was the way the four-pound cake had been got.

Alice looked at me helplessly. I knew just how she felt.

Harbouring a criminal when people are 'out after him' gives you a very chilly feeling in the waistcoat—or, if in pyjamas, in the part that the plaited cotton cord goes round. By the greatest good luck there were a few of the extra-strong peppermints

left. We had two each, and felt better.

The girls put the sheets off Oswald's bed on to the bed Miss Sandal used to sleep in when not in London nursing the shattered bones of her tract-distributing brother.

'If you will go to bed now,' Oswald said to the stranger, 'we will wake you in good time. And you may sleep as sound as you like. We'll wake you all right.'

'You might wake me about eight,' he said; 'I ought to be getting on. I'm sure I don't know what to say in return for the very handsome reception you've given me. Good-night to you all, I'm sure.' [Pg 58]

'Good-night,' said everyone. And Dora added, 'Don't you bother. While you're asleep we'll think what's best to be done.'

'Don't *you* bother,' said the stranger, and he absently glanced at his own clothes. 'What's big enough to get out of's big enough to get into.'

Then he took the candle, and Dicky showed him to his room.

'What's big enough to get out of,' repeated Alice. 'Surely he doesn't mean to creep back into prison, and pretend he was there all the time, only they didn't notice him?'

'Well, what are we to do?' asked Dicky, rejoining the rest of us. 'He told me the dark room at Dover was a disgrace. Poor chap!'

'We must invent a disguise,' said Dora.

'Let's pretend he's our aunt, and dress him up—like in "Hard Cash,"' said Alice.

It was now three o'clock, but no one was sleepy. No one wanted to go to sleep at all till we had taken our candles up into the attic and rummaged through Miss Sandal's trunks, and found a complete disguise exactly suited to an aunt. We had everything— [Pg 59] dress, cloak, bonnet, veil, gloves, petticoats, and even boots, though we knew all the time, in our hearts, that these were far too small. We put all ready on the parlour sofa, and then at last we began to feel in our eyes and ears and jaws how late it was. So we went back to bed. Alice said she knew how to wake exact to the minute, and we had known her do it before, so we trusted her, and agreed that she was to wake us at six.

But, alas! Alice had deemed herself cleverer than she was, by long chalks, and it was not her that woke us.

We were aroused from deep slumber by the voice of Mrs. Beale.

'Hi!' it remarked,'wake up, young gentlemen! It's gone the half after nine, and your gentleman friend's up and dressed and a-waiting for his breakfast.'

We sprang up.

'I say, Mrs. Beale,' cried Oswald, who never even in sleep quite loses his presence of mind, 'don't let on to anyone that we've got a visitor.'

She went away laughing. I suppose she thought it was some silly play-secret. She little knew. [Pg 60]

We found the stranger looking out of the window.

'I wouldn't do that,' said Dora softly; 'it isn't safe. Suppose someone saw you?'

'Well,' said he, 'suppose they did?'

'They might take you, you know,' said Dora; 'it's done in a minute. We saw two poor men taken yesterday.'

Her voice trembled at the gloomy recollection.

'Let 'em take me,' said the man who wore the clothes of the plain-living and high-thinking Mr. Sandal; '*I* don't mind so long as my ugly mug don't break the camera!'

'We want to save you,' Dora was beginning; but Oswald, far-sighted beyond his years, felt a hot redness spread over his youthful ears and right down his neck. He said:

'Please, what were you doing in Dover? And what did you take yesterday?'

'I was in Dover on business,' said the man, 'and what I took was Hythe Church and Burmarsh Church, and——'

'Then you didn't steal a cake and get put into Dover Gaol, and break loose, and——' said Dicky, though I kicked him as a sign not to. [Pg 61]

'*Me?*' said our friend. 'Not exactly!'

'Then, *what* are you? If you're not that poor escaped thief, what are you?' asked Dora fiercely, before Oswald could stop her.

'I'm a photographer, miss,' said he—'a travelling photographer.'

Then slowly but surely he saw it all, and I thought he would never have done laughing.

'Breakfast is getting cold,' said Oswald.

'So it is,' said our guest. 'Lordy, what a go! This'll be something to talk about between friends for many a year.'

'No,' said Alice suddenly; 'we thought you were a runaway thief, and we wanted to help you whatever you were.' She pointed to the sofa, where the whole costume of the untrue aunt was lying in simple completeness. 'And you're in honour bound never to tell a soul. Think,' she added in persuading tones—'think of the cold bacon and the cheese, and all those pickles you had, and the fire and the cocoa, and us being up all night, and the dry all-wool boots.'

'Say no more, miss,' said the photographer (for such he indeed was) nobly. 'Your will is my law; I won't never breathe a word.'

[Pg 62]

And he sat down to the ham and eggs as though it was weeks since he had tasted bacon.

But we found out afterwards he went straight up to the Ship, and told everybody all about it. I wonder whether all photographers are dishonourable and ungrateful. Oswald hopes they are not, but he cannot feel at all sure.

Lots of people chaffed us about it afterwards, but the pigman said we were jolly straight young Britons, and it is something to be called that by a man you really respect. It doesn't matter so much what the other people say—the people you don't really care about.

When we told our Indian uncle about it he said, 'Nonsense! you ought never to try and shield a criminal.' But that was not at all the way we felt about it at the time when the criminal was there (or we thought he was), all wet, and hunted, and miserable, with people 'out after him.' He meant his friends who were expecting him, but we thought he meant police. It is very hard sometimes to know exactly what is right. If what *feels* right *isn't* right, how are you to know, I wonder.

[Pg 63]

The only comforting thing about it all is that we heard next day that the soldiers had got away from the brown bicycle beast after all. I suppose it came home to them suddenly that they *were* two to one, and they shoved him into a ditch and got away. They were never caught; I am very glad. And I suppose *that's* wrong too—so many things are. But I *am*.

[Pg 64]

THE ARSENICATORS

A TALE OF CRIME

It was Mrs. Beale who put it into our heads that Miss Sandal lived plain because she was poor. We knew she thought high, because that is what you jolly well have to do if you are a vegetationist and an all-wooler, and those sort of things.

And we tried to get money for her, like we had once tried to do for ourselves. And we succeeded by means that have been told alone in another place in getting two golden pounds.

Then, of course, we began to wonder what we had better do with the two pounds now we had got them.

'Put them in the savings-bank,' Dora said.

Alice said:

'Why, when we could have them to look at?'

Noël thought we ought to buy her something beautiful to adorn Miss Sandal's bare dwelling.

H. O. thought we might spend it on nice tinned and potted things from the stores, to make the plain living and high thinking go down better. [Pg 65]

But Oswald knew that, however nice the presents are that other people buy for you, it is really more satisfying to have the chink to spend exactly as you like.

Then Dicky said:

'I don't believe in letting money lie idle. Father always says it's bad business.'

'They give interest at the bank, don't they?' Dora said.

'Yes; tuppence a year, or some rot like that! We ought to go into trade with it, and try to make more of it. That's what we ought to do.'

'If it's Miss Sandal's money, do you think we ought to do anything with it without asking her?'

'It isn't hers till she's got it, and it is hers because it's not ours to spend. I think we're —what is it?—*in loco parentis* to that two quid, because anyone can see poor Miss Sandal doesn't know how to manage her money. And it will be much better if we give her ten pounds than just two.'

This is how Dicky argued. [Pg 66]

We were sitting on the sands when this council took place, and Alice said, 'Suppose we bought a shrimping-net, and sold shrimps from our window in red handkerchiefs and white French caps.' But we asked her how she would like going into the sea nearly up to her neck in all weathers, and she had to own she had not thought of that. Besides, shrimps are so beastly cheap—more than you can eat for twopence.

The conversation was not interesting to anyone but Dicky, because we did not then believe we could do it, though later we thought differently. But I dare say we should have gone on with it just out of politeness to him, only at this moment we saw a coastguard, who is a great friend of ours, waving to us from the sea-wall. So we went up. And he said:

'You take my tip and cut along home. There's something come for you.'

'Perhaps it's heaps of things, like I said, to eat with the plain living,' said H. O.

And bright visions of hampers full of the most superior tuck winged our young legs as we cut along home.

It was not, however, a hamper that we found awaiting us. It was a large box. And besides that there were two cases addressed to Dicky and me, and through the gaps in the boards we could see twisted straw, and our hearts leapt high in our breasts, because we knew that they were bikes. [Pg 67]

And such, indeed, they proved to be—free-wheels of the most unspotted character, the noble gift of our Indian uncle, ever amiable, generous, and esteemed.

While we were getting the glorious bikes from their prison bars, the others were undoing the box which had their names on it.

It contained cakes and sweets, a work-basket for Dora, lined with red satin, and dressed up with silver thimbles, and all sorts of bodkins and scissors, and knives with silver handles. There was a lovely box of paints for Alice.

Noël had a paint-box too, and H. O. had a very good Aunt Sally. And there were lots of books—not the sawdusty, dry kind that Miss Sandal had in her house, but jolly good books, the kind you can't put down till you've finished. But just now we hardly looked at them. For who with a spark of manly spirit would think twice about a book with a new free-wheel champing the oil like a charger in a ballad? [Pg 68]

Dicky and I had a three-mile spin before dinner, and only fell off five times between us. Three spills were Dicky's, one was Oswald's, and one was when we ran into each other. The bikes were totally uninjured.

As time ran its appointed course we got a bit used to the bikes, and, finding that you cannot ride all day and all night, we began to look at the books. Only one of them comes into this story. It was called 'The Youth's Manual of Scientific and Mechanical Recreation,' and, of course, we none of us read it till we'd read everything else, and then we found it wasn't half bad. It taught you how to make all sorts of things—galvanic batteries, and kites, and mouse-traps, and how to electroplate things, and how to do wood-carving and leather-work. We tried as many of the things as we had money for, and some of them succeeded. Then we made a fire-balloon.

It took a long time to make, and then it caught fire and blazed away before we could get it launched.

So we made another, and Noël dropped it near the water-butt, where there was a puddle, and, being tissue-paper, it was unable to stand the strain. [Pg 69]

So we made another. But the paste was bad, and it did not stick.

So we made another.

Then, at last, when all was ready, Oswald climbed on to the pigsty at Mrs. Beales', and held the balloon very steady while Dicky lighted the cotton-wool, soaked in spirits of wine, which hangs from the end (where cars are in larger sizes), and causes it to be called a fire-balloon. A taper is burned inside the balloon, and then, according to the book, 'it readily ascends, and is carried away by the wind, sometimes to a considerable distance.'

Well, this time everything happened just as the book said, which is not always the case.

It was a clear, dark night, bright stars only. And, to our relief and agreeable surprise, our balloon rose up and sailed away, dragging its lighted tail like a home-made comet.

It sailed away over the marshes, getting smaller and smaller, and at last it was, though lost to sight, to memory dear. Some of us thought it wasn't worth doing, but Oswald was glad he had persevered. He does hate to be beaten. However, we none of us cared to make another, so we went to bed. [Pg 70]

Dicky always goes to sleep directly on these occasions, but Oswald, more thoughtful for his years, sometimes reviews the events of the day. He must have been nearly asleep, because he was just reviewing an elephant that flew with a lamp inside, so that it looked like a fire-balloon, when Alice suddenly came and woke him up completely.

'Beware!' she said in tones of awe.

And he said, but not crossly:

'Well, what on earth's up now?'

'The fire-balloon!' replied Alice.

'What about it?' he rejoined, still calm and kind, though roused from his reviews.

'Why, it came to me all in a minute! Oh, Oswald—when it comes down—there are lots of farms in the march. Suppose it comes down and sets light to something! It's a crime—arsenic or something—and you can be hanged for it!'

'Don't be an idiot!' said Oswald kindly. 'The book wouldn't have told youths how to make them if they were crimes. Go back to bed, for goodness' sake!'

'I wish we hadn't—oh, I do!' said Alice.

But she did as she was told. Oswald has taught her this.

Next day her fears had stopped, like silent watches in the night, and we began to [Pg 71] make a trap for badgers—in case we ever found one.

But Dicky went to the top of the mill with some field-glasses he had borrowed from Mr. Carrington to look at distant ships with, and he burst into the busy circle of badger-trap makers, and said:

'I say, come and look! There's a fire in the marsh!'

'There!' said Alice, dropping the wire pliers on her good elder brother's foot. 'What did I tell you?'

We all tore to the top of the mill, and sure enough, far across the sunny green marshes rose a little cloud of smoke, and blue and yellow flames leaped out every now and then. We all took turns to look through the glasses.

Then Oswald said:

'This is no time for looking through field-glasses with your mouths open. We must go and help. We might fetch the fire-engines or something. The bikes, Dicky!'

Almost instantly we were in the saddle and tearing along the level marsh towards the direction of the fire. At first we got down at every crossroad and used the field-glasses to see which way to go; but as we got nearer, or the fire got bigger, or [Pg 72] perhaps both, we could see it quite plainly with the naked eye. It was much further off than we had thought, but we rode on undaunted, regardless of fatigue and of dinner-time, being now long gone by.

We got to the fire at last. It was at Crown Ovender Farm, and we had to lift the bikes over fences and wheel them over ploughed fields to get there, because we did not know the right way by road.

Crown Ovender is a little farmhouse, and a barn opposite, and a great rick-yard, and two of the ricks were alight. They smoked horribly, and the wind blew the hot smoke

into your eyes, and every now and then you saw great flames—yards long they seemed—leap out as if they were crying to get to the house.

We had put our bikes in a ditch a field away, and now we went all round about to ask if we could help; but there wasn't a soul to be seen.

We did not know what to do. Even Oswald—always full of resource—almost scratched his head, which seems to help some people to think, though I don't think it ever would me, besides not looking nice. [Pg 73]

'I wish we'd told them in the village,' said Dicky.

We had not done this, and the reason, the author is ashamed to say, was because we wanted to get there before anyone else. This was very selfish, and the author has often regretted it.

The flames were growing larger and fiercer, and the tar on the side of the barn next the rick-yard was melting and running down like treacle.

'There's a well!' said Dicky suddenly. 'It isn't a deep well, and there are two buckets.'

Oswald understood. He drew up the water, and Dicky took the buckets as they came up full and dripping and dashed the water on to the tarry face of the barn. It hissed and steamed. We think it did some good. We took it in turns to turn the well-wheel. It was hard work, and it was frightfully hot. Then suddenly we heard a horrid sound, a sort of out-of-breath scream, and there was a woman, very red in the face and perspiring, climbing over the fence.

'Hallo!' said Oswald.

'Oh!' the woman said, panting, 'it's not the house, then? Thank them as be it's not the house! Oh, my heart alive, I thought it was the house!' [Pg 74]

'It isn't the house,' said Oswald; 'but it jolly soon will be!'

'Oh, my pore Lily!' said the woman. 'With this 'ere wind the house 'll be alight in a minute. And her a-bed in there! Where's Honeysett?'

'There's no one here but us. The house is locked up,' we said.

'Yes, I know, 'cause of tramps. Honeysett's got the key. I comes in as soon as I've cleared dinner away. She's ill a-bed, sleeping like a lamb, I'll be bound, all unknowing of her burning end.'

'We *must* get her out,' said Oswald.

But the woman didn't seem to know what to do. She kept on saying, 'Where's Honeysett? Oh, drat him! where's that Honeysett?'

So then Oswald felt it was the time to be a general, like he always meant to if he got the chance. He said, 'Come on!' and he took a stone and broke the kitchen window, and put his hand through the jagged hole and unfastened the catch, and climbed in. The back-door was locked and the key gone, but the front-door was only bolted inside. But it stuck very tight, from having been painted and shut before the paint was dry, and never opened again. [Pg 75]

Oswald couldn't open it. He ran back to the kitchen window and shouted to the others.

'Go round to the other door and shove for all you're worth!' he cried in the manly tones that all must obey.

So they went; but Dicky told me afterwards that the woman didn't shove for anything like all she was worth. In fact, she wouldn't shove at all, till he had to make a sort of battering-ram of her, and then she seemed to awake from a dream, and they got the door open.

We followed the woman up the stairs and into a bedroom, and there was another woman sitting up in bed trembling, and her mouth opening and shutting.

'Oh, it's you, Eliza,' she said, falling back against the pillows. 'I thought it were tramps.'

Eliza did not break things to the sufferer gently, like we should have done, however hurried.

'Mercy you aren't burnt alive in your bed, Lily!' she merely remarked. 'The place is all ablaze!'

Then she rolled her sick sufferer in a blanket and took hold of her shoulders, and told us to take her feet. [Pg 76]

But Oswald was too calm to do this suddenly. He said:

'Where are you going to put her?'

'Anywheres!' said Eliza wildly—'anywheres is better than this here.'

'We consented to carry the unfortunate bed-woman to it.'—Page 76

'There's plenty of time,' said Oswald; and he and Dicky rushed into another room, and got a feather-bed and bedclothes, and hunched them down the stairs, and dragged them half a field away, and made a bed in a nice dry ditch. And then we consented to carry the unfortunate bed-woman to it.

The house was full of smoke by this time, though it hadn't yet caught fire; and I tell you we felt just like heroic firemen as we stumbled down the crookety narrow stairs, back first, bearing the feet of the sick woman. Oswald did so wish he had had a fireman's helmet to put on!

When we got the fading Lily to her dry ditch, she clutched Oswald's arm and whispered:

'Save the sticks!'

'What sticks?' asked Oswald, who thought it was the ragings of delirium.

'She means the furniture,' said Eliza; 'but I'm afraid its doom is written on high.'

'Rubbish!' said Oswald kindly; and we flew back, us boys dragging Eliza with us. [Pg 77]

There didn't seem to be much furniture in the house, but when we began to move it, it at once seemed to multiply itself with the rapidity of compound interest. We got all the clothes out first, in drawers and clothes-baskets, and tied up in sheets. Eliza wasn't much use. The only thing she could do was to look for a bed-key to unscrew the iron bedsteads; but Oswald and Dicky toiled on. They carried out chairs and tables and hearthrugs. As Oswald was staggering on under a Windsor armchair, with a tea-tray and an ironing-board under his arms, he ran into a man.

'What's up?' said he.

'Fire!' said Oswald.

'I seed that,' said the man.

Oswald shoved the chair and other things on to the man.

'Then lend a hand to get the things away,' he said.

And more and more people came, and all worked hard; but Oswald and Dicky did

most. Eliza never even found that bed-key, because when she saw people beginning to come thicker and thicker across the fields, like ants hurrying home, she went out and told everyone over and over again that Honeysett had got the key. [Pg 78]

Then a woman came along, and Eliza got her into a corner by the stairs and jawed. I heard part of the jaw.

'An' pore Mrs. Simpkins, her man he's gone to Ashford Market with his beasts and the three other men, and me and my man said we'd have Liz up at my place, her being my sister, so as Honeysett could go off to Romney about the sheep. But she wouldn't come, not though we brought the light cart over for her. So we thought it best Honeysett stayed about his work, and go for the sheep to-morrow.'

'Then the house would ha' been all empty but for her not being wishful to go along of you?' Oswald heard the other say.

'Yes,' said Eliza; 'an' so you see——'

'You keep your mouth shut,' the other woman fiercely said; 'you're Lily's sister, but Tom, he's my brother. If you don't shut your silly mouth you'll be getting of them into trouble. It's insured, ain't it?'

'I don't see,' said Eliza.

'You don't never see nothing,' said the other. 'You just don't say a word 'less you're arst, and then only as you come to look after her and found the fire a-raging something crool.' [Pg 79]

'But why——'

The other woman clawed hold of her and dragged her away, whispering secretly.

All this time the fire was raging, but there were lots of men now to work the well and the buckets, and the house and the barn had not caught.

When we had got out all the furniture, some of the men set to work on the barn, and, of course, Oswald and Dicky, though weary, were in this also. They helped to get out all the wool—bundles and bundles and bundles of it; but when it came to sacks of turnip seed and things, they thought they had had enough, and they went to where the things were that had come out of the larder, and they got a jug of milk and some bread and cheese, and took it to the woman who was lying in the dry ditch on the nice bed they had so kindly made for her. She drank some milk, and asked them to have some, and they did, with bread and cheese (Dutch), and jolly glad they were of it.

Just as we had finished we heard a shout, and there was the fire-engine coming across the field. [Pg 80]

I do like fire-engines. They are so smart and fierce, and look like dragons ready to fight the devouring element.

It was no use, however, in spite of the beautiful costumes of the firemen, because there was no water, except in the well, and not much left of that.

The man named Honeysett had ridden off on an old boneshaker of his to fetch the engines. He had left the key in the place where it was always kept, only Eliza had not had the sense to look for it. He had left a letter for her, too, written in red pencil on the back of a bill for a mowing-machine. It said: 'Rix on fir'; going to git fir'-injins.'

Oswald treasures this letter still as a memento of happier days.

When Honeysett saw the line of men handing up buckets to throw on the tarry wall, he said:

'That ain't no manner of use. Wind's changed a hour agone.'

And so it had. The flames were now reaching out the other way, and two more ricks were on fire. But the tarry walls were quite cool, and very wet, and the men who were throwing the water were very surprised to find that they were standing in a great puddle. [Pg 81]

And now, when everything in the house and the barn was safe, Oswald had time to draw his breath and think, and to remember with despair exactly who it was that had launched a devastating fire-balloon over the peaceful marsh.

It was getting dusk by this time; but even the splendour of all those burning ricks against the darkening sky was merely wormwood and gall to Oswald's upright heart, and he jolly soon saw that it was the same to Dicky's.

'I feel pretty sick,' he said. 'Let's go home.'

'They say the whole eleven ricks are bound to go,' said Dicky, 'with the wind the way it is.'

'*We're* bound to go,' said Oswald.

'Where?' inquired the less thoughtful Dicky.

'To prison,' said his far-seeing brother, turning away and beginning to walk towards the bicycles.

'We can't be sure it was our balloon,' said Dicky, following.

'Pretty average,' said Oswald bitterly.

'But no one would know it was us if we held our tongues.' [Pg 82]

'We can't hold our tongues,' Oswald said; 'if we do someone else will be blamed, as sure as fate. You didn't hear what that woman said about insurance money.'

'We might wait and see if anyone *does* get into trouble, and *then* come forward,' said Dicky.

And Oswald owned they might do that, but his heart was full of despair and remorse.

Just as they got to their bikes a man met them.

'All lost, I suppose?' he said, jerking his thumb at the blazing farmyard.

'Not all,' said Dicky; 'we saved the furniture and the wool and things——'

The man looked at us, and said heavily:

'Very kind of you, but it was all insured.'

'Look here,' said Oswald earnestly, 'don't you say that to anyone else.'

'Eh?' said the man.

'If you do, they're safe to think you set fire to it yourself!'

He stared, then he frowned, then he laughed, and said something about old heads on young shoulders, and went on.

We went on, too, in interior gloom, that only grew gloomier as we got nearer and nearer home. [Pg 83]

We held a council that night after the little ones had gone to bed. Dora and Alice seemed to have been crying most of the day. They felt a little better when they heard that no one had been burned to death. Alice told me she had been thinking all day of large families burned to little cinders. But about telling of the fire-balloon we could not agree.

Alice and Oswald thought we ought. But Dicky said 'Wait,' and Dora said 'Write to father about it.'

Alice said:

'No; it doesn't make any difference about our not being sure whether our balloon *was* the cause of destruction. I *expect* it was, and, anyway, we ought to own up.'

'I feel so too,' said Oswald; 'but I do wish I knew how long in prison you got for it.'

We went to bed without deciding anything.

And very early in the morning Oswald woke, and he got up and looked out of the window, and there was a great cloud of smoke still going up from the doomed rickyard. So then he went and woke Alice, and said: [Pg 84]

'Suppose the police have got that poor farmer locked up in a noisome cell, and all the time it's *us*.'

'That's just what *I* feel,' said Alice.

Then Oswald said, 'Get dressed.'

And when she had, she came out into the road, where Oswald, pale but resolute, was already pacing with firm steps. And he said:

'Look here, let's go and tell. Let's say you and I made the balloon. The others can stop out of it if they like.'

'They won't if it's really prison,' said Alice. 'But it would be noble of us to try it on. Let's——'

But we found we didn't know who to tell.

'It seems so fatal to tell the police,' said Alice; 'there's no getting out of it afterwards. Besides, he's only Jameson, and he's very stupid.'

The author assures you you do not know what it is like to have a crime like arsenic on

your conscience, and to have gone to the trouble and expense of making up your mind to confess it, and then not to know who to.

We passed a wretched day. And all the time the ricks were blazing. All the people in the village went over with carts and bikes to see the fire—like going to a fair or a show. In other circumstances we should have done the same, but now we had no heart for it. [Pg 85]

In the evening Oswald went for a walk by himself, and he found his footsteps turning towards the humble dwelling of the Ancient Mariner who had helped us in a smuggling adventure once.

The author wishes to speak the truth, so he owns that perhaps Oswald had some idea that the Ancient Mariner, who knew so much about smugglers and highwaymen, might be able to think of some way for us to save ourselves from prison without getting an innocent person put into it. Oswald found the mariner smoking a black pipe by his cottage door. He winked at Oswald as usual. Then Oswald said:

'I want to ask your advice; but it's a secret. I know you can keep secrets.'

When the aged one had agreed to this, Oswald told him all. It was a great relief.

The mariner listened with deep attention, and when Oswald had quite done, he said:

'It ain't the stone jug this time mate. That there balloon of yours, I see it go up—fine and purty 'twas, too.' [Pg 86]

'We all saw it go *up*,' said Oswald in despairing accents. 'The question is, where did it come down?'

'At Burmarsh, sonny,' was the unexpected and unspeakably relieving reply. 'My sister's husband's niece—it come down and lodged in their pear-tree—showed it me this morning, with the red ink on it what spelled your names out.'

Oswald, only pausing to wring the hand of his preserver, tore home on the wings of the wind to tell the others.

I don't think we were ever so glad of anything in our lives. It is a frightfully blighting thing when you believe yourself to be an Arsenicator (or whatever it is) of the deepest dye.

As soon as we could think of anything but our own cleanness from guilt, we began to fear the worst of Tom Simkins, the farmer at Crown Ovenden. But *he* came out of it, like us, without a stain on his fair name, because he and his sister and his man Honeysett all swore that he had given a tramp leave to sleep up against the beanstack the night before the fire, and the tramp's pipe and matches were found there. So he got his insurance money; but the tramp escaped.

But when we told father all about it, he said he wished he had been a director of that fire insurance company. [Pg 87]

We never made another fire-balloon. Though it was not us that time, it might have been. And we know now but too well the anxieties of a life of crime. [Pg 88]

THE ENCHANCERIED HOUSE

A STORY ABOUT THE BASTABLES

The adventure which I am about to relate was a very long time ago, and it was nobody's fault. The part of it that was most like a real crime was caused by H. O. not being at that date old enough to know better—and this was nobody's fault—though we took care that but a brief half-hour elapsed between the discovery of his acts and his *being* old enough to know better, and knowing it, too (better, I mean), quite thoroughly. We were residing at the residence of an old nurse of father's while Dora was engaged in the unagreeable pastime of having something catching at home. If she had been with us most likely none of this would have happened. For she has an almost unerring nose for right and wrong. Or perhaps what the author means is that she never does the kind of thing that grown-ups don't like your doing. Father's old nurse was very jolly to us, and did not bother too much, except about wet feet and being late for meals, and not airing your shirt before you put it on. But it is part of the nature of the nicest grown-ups to bother about these little things, and we must not be hard on them for it, for no one can help their natures. [Pg 89]

The part where old nurse's house was was where London begins to leave off being London, but before it can make up its mind not to be it. There are fields and bits of lanes and hedges, but the rows of ugly little houses go creeping along like yellow caterpillars, eating up the green fields. There are brickfields here and there, and

cabbage fields, and places where rhubarb is grown. And it is much more interesting than real town, because there is more room to do things in, and not so many people to say 'Don't!' when you do.

Nurse's house was the kind that is always a house, no matter how much you pretend it is a baron's castle or an enchanted palace. And to play at its being a robber's cave or any part of a pirate ship is simply silly, and no satisfaction to anyone. There were no books except sermons and the Wesleyan Magazine. And there was a green cut-paper fuzziness on the frame of the looking-glass in the parlour. There was a garden—at least, there was enough ground for one, but nothing grew there except [Pg 90] nettles and brick-bats and one elder-tree, and a poor old oak-tree that had seen better days. There was a hole in the fence, very convenient for going through in a hurry.

One morning there had been what old nurse called a 'set out' because Noël was writing some of his world-without-end poetry, and he had got as far as

'How beautiful the sun and moon
  And all the stars appear!
They really are a long way off,
  Although they look very near.'

'I do not think that they are worlds,
  But apples on a tree;
The angels pick them whenever they like,
  But it is not so with me.
I wish I was a little angel-child
  To gather stars for my tea,'

before Dicky found out that he was writing it on the blank leaf at the end of the Latin prize Dicky got at the Preparatory School.

Noël—for mysterious reasons unknown to Fame—is Alice's favourite brother, and of course she stood up for him, and said he didn't mean it.

And things were said on both sides, and the rest of us agreed with Dicky that Noël was old enough to know better. It ended in Alice and Noël going out for a walk by [Pg 91] themselves as soon as Noël had had the crying washed off his hands and face.

The rest of us spent the shining hours in getting a board and nailing it up in the oak-tree for a look-out station, in case of Saracens arriving with an army to attack London. The oak is always hard to climb, and this was a peculiarly hard day, because the next-door people had tied a clothes-line to the oak, and hung their wet washing out on the line.

The sun was setting (in the west as usual) before Alice and Noël returned. They came across the wide fields from the direction of a pinewood that we had never explored yet, though always meaning to.

'There!' said Dicky, 'they've been and gone to the pinewood all by themselves.'

But the hatchet Dicky was still cherishing in his breast was buried at once under the first words spoken by the returning party of explorers.

'Oh, Oswald,' said Alice, 'oh, Dicky, we've found a treasure!'

Dicky hammered the last nail into the Saracen watch-tower. [Pg 92]

'Not a real money one?' he said, dropping the hammer—which was a careless thing to do, and the author told him so at the time.

'No, not a money one, but it's real all the same. Let's have a council, and I'll tell you.'

It was then that Dicky showed that if he dropped hammers it was not because he could not bury hatchets. He said, 'Righto! There's room for us all up here. Catch hold, Noël. Oswald, give him a shove up. Alice and he can sit in the Saracens' watch-tower, and I'll keep hold of H. O. if you'll hand him up.'

Alice was full of the politest compliments about the architecture of the Saracens' watch-tower, and Noël said:

'I say, Dicky, I'm awfully sorry about your prize.'

'It's all right,' said Dicky; 'I rubbed it out with bread.'

Noël opened his mouth. He looks like a very young bird when he does this.

'Then my beautiful poem's turned into dirty bread-crumbs,' he said slowly.

'Never mind,' said Alice; 'I remember nearly every word of it: we'll write it out again after tea.'

'I thought you'd be so pleased,' Noël went on, 'because it makes a book more [Pg 93]

valuable to have an author's writing in it. Albert's uncle told me so.'

'But it has to be the same author that wrote the book,' Alice explained, 'and it was Cæsar wrote that book. And you aren't Cæsar *yet*, you know.'

'Nor don't want to be,' said Noël.

Oswald now thought that politeness was satisfied on both sides, so he said:

'What price treasures?'

And then Alice told. But it had to be in whispers, because the next-door people, who always did things at times when not convenient to us, were now taking in their washing off the line. I heard them remark that it was a 'good drying day.'

'Well,' Alice mysteriously observed, 'it was like this. (Do you think the Saracens' watch-tower is really safe for two? It seems to go down awfully much in the middle.)'

'Sit nearer the ends, then,' said Oswald. 'Well?'

'We thought we would go to the pinewoods because of reading in Bret Harte that the resinous balsam of the pine is healing to the wounded spirit.' [Pg 94]

'I should have thought if anybody's spirit was wounded...' said Dicky in tones of heatening indignantness.

'Yes, I know. But you'd got the oak, and I expect oaks are just as good, if not better, especially for English people, because of Oakapple Day—and——Where was I?'

We told her.

'So we went, and it is a very nice wood—quite tulgy, you know. We expected to see a Bandersnatch every minute, didn't we, Noël? It's not very big, though, and on the other side there's an enchanted desert—rather bare, with patches of grass and brambles. And in the very middle of it we found the treasure.'

'Let's have a squint at the treasure,' said Dicky. 'Did you fetch it along?'

Noël and Alice sniggered.

'Not exactly,' said Alice; 'the treasure is a *house*.'

'It's an enchanted house,' said Noël, 'and it's a deserted house, and the garden is like in "The Sensitive Plant" after the lady has given up attending.'

'Did you go in?' we asked.

'No,' said Alice; 'we came back for you. And we asked an old man, and he *did* say it was in Chancery, so no one can live in it.' [Pg 95]

H. O. asked what was enchancery.

'I'm certain the old man meant enchanted,' said Noël, 'only I expect that's the old-fashioned word for it. Enchanceried is a very nice word. And it means it's an enchanted house, just like I said.'

Nurse now came out to remark, 'Tea, my dears,' so we left the Saracens' tower and went in to that meal.

Noël began to make a poem called 'The Enchanceried House,' but we got him to stop till there was more for him to write about. There soon was more, and more than enough, as it turned out.

The setting sun had set, but it had left a redness in the sky (like one of those distant fires that you go after, and they are always miles from where you are) which shone through the pinetrees. The house looked black and mysterious against the strawberry-ice-coloured horizon.

It was a good-sized house. The bottom-floor windows were boarded up. It had a Sensitive-Plantish garden and a paved yard and outhouses. The garden had a high wall with glass on top, but Oswald and Dicky got into the yard. Green grass was growing between the paving-stones. The corners of the stable and coach-house doors were rough, as if from the attacks of rats, but we never saw any of these stealthy rodents. The back-door was locked, but we climbed up on the water-butt and looked through a little window, and saw a plate-rack, and a sink with taps, and a copper, and a broken coal-scuttle. It was very exciting. [Pg 96]

The day after we went again, and this time we borrowed the next-door people's clothes-line, and by tying it in loops made a sort of rope-ladder, and then all of us got over. We had a glorious game besieging the pigsty, and all the military orders had to be given in whispers for fear of us being turned out if anyone passed and heard us. We found the pinewood, and the field, and the house had all got boards to say what would be done to trespassers with the utmost rigour of the law. It was such a swat untying the knots in the next-door people's clothes-line, that we only undid one; and

then we bought them a new line with our own pocket-money, and kept the rope-ladder in a hidden bed of nettles, always on the spot and ready for us. [Pg 97]

We found a way of going round, and getting to the house through a hole in a hedge and across a lane, so as not to go across the big fields where every human eye could mark our proceedings, and come after us and tell us not to.

We went there every day. It would have been a terrible thing if an army of bloodthirsty Saracens had chosen that way to march on London, for there was hardly ever a look-out in the tower now.

It was a jolly place to play in, and Oswald had found out what 'in Chancery' really means, so he had no fear of being turned into a pig-headed lady, or marble from the waist down.

And after a bit we began to want to get into the house, and we wanted it so much that our hearts got quite cold about the chicken-house and the pigsty, which at first had been a fairy dream of delight.

But the doors were all locked. We got all the old keys we could, but they were all the keys of desks and workboxes and tea-caddies, and not the right size or shape for doors.

Then one day Oswald, with his justly celebrated observingness, noticed that one of the bars was loose in the brickwork of a sort of half-underground window. To pull it [Pg 98] out was to the lion-hearted youth but the work of a moment. He got down through the gap thus obtained, and found himself in a place like a very small area, only with no steps, and with bars above him, broken glass and matted rags and straw beneath his enterprising boots, and on one side a small cobwebby window. He got out again and told the others, who were trying to get up the cobblestones by the stable so as to make an underground passage into the stable at the ratty corner of its door.

They came at once, and, after a brief discussion, it was decided to break the window a little more than it was already, and to try to get in a hand that could unlatch the window. Of course, as Oswald had found the bar, it was to be his hand.

The dauntless Oswald took off his jacket, and, wrapping it round his fist, shoved at the pane nearest the window fastening. The glass fell inwards with the noise you would expect. In newspapers I suppose they would call it a sickening thud. Really it was a sort of hollow tinkling sound. It made even Oswald jump, and H. O. said: [Pg 99]

'Suppose the window opens straight into a bottomless well!'

We did not think this likely, but you cannot be too careful when you are exploring.

Oswald got in his hand and undid the window fastening, which was very rusty. The window opened out like a door. There was only just room in the area under the bars for Oswald and the opening of the window. He leaned forward and looked in. He was not surprised to find that it was not a well, after all, but a cellar.

'Come on,' he said; 'it's all right.'

Dicky came on so rapidly that his boots grazed the shoulder of the advancing Oswald. Alice was coming next, but Noël begged her to wait.

'I don't think H. O. ought to go in till we're sure it's safe,' he said; and Oswald hopes it was not because Noël was in a funk himself, though with a poet you never know.

The cellar into which Oswald now plunged had a damp and mouldering smell, like of mouse-traps, and straw, and beer-barrels. Another cellar opened out of it, and in this there was traces of coal having existed in other ages.

Passing the coal-cellar, we went out to a cellar with shelves on the wall like berths in a ship, or the catacombs where early Christians used to be bricked up. Of course, we [Pg 100] knew it was only a wine-cellar, because we have one at home. Matches had to be used here. Then we found a flight of stone steps and went up. And Oswald is not ashamed to own that, the staircase being of a twisty nature, he did think what it would be like if he and Dicky were to meet Something at one of the corners; but all was peace and solitude. Yet it was with joy, and like meeting an old friend, that we got out of the cellars, stairs, and through a door to the back-kitchen, where the sink was, and the copper and the plate-rack. Oswald felt like a brother to the broken coal-scuttle. Our first instant thought was the back door.

It was bolted top and bottom, and the bolts were sort of cemented into their places with rust. But they were unable to resist our patient and determined onslaught. Only when we had undone them the door kept shut, and by stooping down and looking we saw that this was because it was locked.

Dicky at once despaired, and said, 'It's no go.'

But the researchful Oswald looked round, and there was a key on a nail, which shows how wrong it is to despair. [Pg 101]

It was not the right key, proving later to be the key of the chicken-house. So we went into the hall. There was a bunch of keys on a nail on the back of the front-door.

'There now, you see I was right,' remarked Oswald. And he was, as is so often the case. All the keys had labels, and one of these said 'Back-kitchen,' so we applied it at once, and the locked door yielded to it.

'You can bring H. O. in quite safely,' Oswald said when the door had creakingly consented to open itself, and to disclose the sunshine, and the paved yard with the paving stones marked out with green grass, and the interested expressions on the faces of Alice and the others. 'It's quite safe. It's just a house like anyone else's, only it hasn't got any furniture in it.'

We went all over the house. There were fourteen rooms altogether, fifteen if you counted the back-kitchen where the plate-warmer was, and the copper, and the sink with the taps, and the brotherly coal-scuttle. The rooms were quite different from the ones in old nurse's house. Noël said he thought all the rooms in this house had been the scene of duels or elopements, or concealing rightful heirs. The present author doesn't know about that, but there was a splendid cupboardiness about the place [Pg 102] that spoke volumes to a discerning eye. Even the window seats, of which there were six, lifted up like the lids of boxes, and you could have hidden a flying Cavalier in any of them, if he had been of only medium height and slender build, like heroes with swords so often are.

Then there were three staircases, and these must have been darkly convenient for getting conspirators away when the King's officers were at the door, as so constantly happened in romantic times.

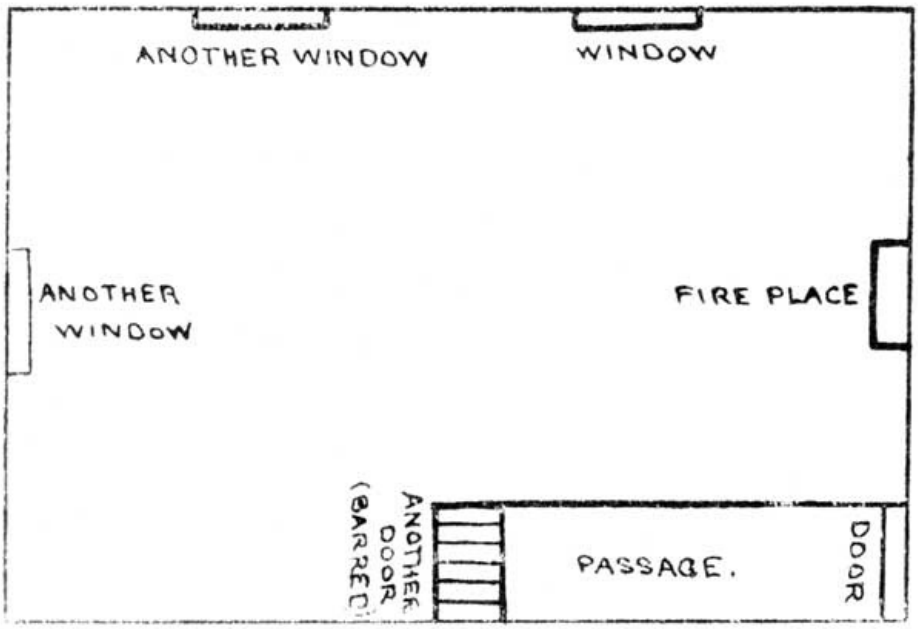
The whole house was full of ideas for ripping games, and when we came away Alice said:

'We must be really better than we know. We must have done *something* to deserve a find like this.'

'Don't worry,' said Oswald. 'Albert's uncle says you always have to pay for everything. We haven't paid for this yet.'

This reflection, like so many of our young hero's, was correct.

I have not yet told you about the finest find of all the fine finds we found finally (that looks very odd, and I am not sure if it is allity-what's-its-name, or only carelessness. I wonder whether other authors are ever a prey to these devastating doubts?) This [Pg 103] find was on the top floor. It was a room with bars to the windows, and it was a very odd shape. You went along a passage to the door, and then there was the room; but the room went back along the same way as the passage had come, so that when you went round there no one could see you from the door. The door was sort of in the middle of the room; but I see I must draw it for you, or you will never understand.



The door that is marked 'Another Door' was full of agitated excitement for us, because it wasn't a door at all—at least, not the kind that you are used to. It was a gate, like you have at the top of nursery stairs in the mansions of the rich and [Pg 104] affluent; but instead of being halfway up, it went all the way up, so that you could see into the room through the bars.

'Somebody must have kept tame lunatics here,' said Dicky.

'Or bears,' said H. O.

'Or enchanceried Princes,' said Noël.

'It seems silly, though,' said Alice, 'because the lunatic or the bear or the enchanted Prince could always hide round the corner when he heard the keepers coming, if he didn't happen to want to show off just then.'

This was so, and the deep mystery of the way this room was built was never untwisted.

'Perhaps a Russian prisoner was kept there,' said Alice, 'and they did not want to look too close for fear he would shoot them with his bomb-gun. Poor man! perhaps he caught vodka, or some other of those awful foreign diseases, and died in his hidden confinement.'

It was a most ripping room for games. The key of it was on the bunch labelled 'Mrs. S.'s room.' We often wondered who Mrs. S. was.

'Let's have a regular round of gaieties,' said Oswald. 'Each of us to take it in turns to have the room, and act what they like, and the others look through the bars.' [Pg 105]

So next day we did this.

Oswald, of course, dressed up in bath-towels and a sheet as the ghost of Mrs. S., but Noël and H. O. screamed, and would not be calm till he tore off the sheet and showed his knickerbockers and braces as a guarantee of good faith. Alice put her hair up, and got a skirt, and a large handkerchief to cry in, and was a hapless maiden imprisoned in a tower because she would not marry the wicked Baron. Oswald instantly took the part of the wicked Baron, and Dicky was the virtuous lover of low degree, and they had a splendid combat, and Dicky carried off the lady. Of course, that was the proper end to the story, and Oswald had to pretend to be beaten, which was not the case.

Dicky was Louis XVI. watch-making while waiting for the guillotine to happen. So we were the guillotine, and he was executed in the paved yard.

Noël was an imprisoned troubadour dressed in bright antimacassars, and he fired off quite a lot of poetry at us before we could get the door open, which was most unfair. [Pg 106]

H. O. was a clown. He had no fancy dress except flour and two Turkish towels pinned on to look like trousers, but he put the flour all over himself, and it took the rest of the day to clean him.

It was when Alice was drying the hair-brushes that she had washed after brushing the flour out of Noël's hair in the back-garden that Oswald said:

'*I* know what that room was made for.'

And everyone said, 'What?' which is not manners, but your brothers and sisters do not mind because it saves time.

'Why, *coiners*,' said Oswald. 'Don't you see? They kept a sentinel at the door, that *is* a door, and if anyone approached he whispered "*Cave*."'

'But why have iron bars?'

'In extra safety,' said Oswald; 'and if their nefarious fires were not burning he need not say "*Cave*" at all. It's no use saying anything for nothing.'

It is curious, but the others did not seem to see this clear distinguishedness. All people have not the same fine brains.

But all the same the idea rankled in their hearts, and one day father came and took Dicky up to London about that tooth of his, and when Dicky came back he said: [Pg 107]

'Look here, talking of coiners, there was a man in St. Swithin's Lane to-day selling little bottles of yellow stuff, and he rubbed some of it on a penny, and it turned the penny into a half-crown before your eyes—a new half-crown! It was a penny a bottle, so I bought three bottles.'

'I always thought the plant for coining was very expensive,' said Alice.

'Ah! they tell you that to keep you from doing it, because of its being a crime,' said Dicky. 'But now I've got this stuff we can begin to be coiners right away. I believe it isn't really a crime unless you try to buy things with the base coin.'

So that very afternoon, directly after dinner, which had a suet pudding in it that might have weighed down the enterprising spirit of anyone but us, we went over to the Enchanceried House.

We found our good rope ladder among its congealing bed of trusty nettles, and got

over into the paved yard, and through the kitchen-door. Oswald always carried the key of this hung round his neck by a bootlace, as if it was a talisman, or the hair of his lost love. Of course, Oswald never had a lost love. He would scorn the action. But [Pg 108] some heroes do have. *De gustibus* something or other, which means, one man's meat is another man's poison.

When we got up into the room with the iron-grated door, it all seemed very bare. Three bottles of yellow stuff and tenpence halfpenny in coppers is not much to start a coining enterprise with.

'We ought to make it *look* like coining, anyway,' said Oswald.

'Coiners have furnaces,' said Dicky.

Alice said: 'Wouldn't a spirit-lamp do? Old nurse has got an old one on the scullery shelf.'

We thought it would.

Then Noël reminded us that coiners have moulds, and Oswald went and bought a pair of wooden lemon squeezers for sevenpence three farthings. In his far-sightedness he remembered that coiners use water, so he bought two enamelled iron bowls at sixpence halfpenny the two. When he came back he noticed the coal-scuttle we had always felt so friendly to, and he filled it with water and brought it up. It did not leak worth mentioning.

'We ought to have a bench,' said Dicky; 'most trades have that—shoemakers and [Pg 109] watchmakers, and tailors and lawyers.'

This was difficult, but we did it. There were some planks in the cellar, and a tub and a beer-barrel. Unluckily, the tub and the beer-barrel were not the same height, but we taught them better by getting old nurse's 'Pilgrim's Progress' and the *Wesleyan Magazine*, to put on top of the tub; and then it was as high as the barrel, and we laid the boards across, and there was a bench as beautiful as you could wish.

Dicky was allowed to put the stuff on the coins, because he had bought the bottles with his own money. But Alice held them for him to do, because girls are inferior beings, except when you are ill, and you must be kind to them or you need never hope to be a hero. There are drawbacks to every ambition.

She let Noël hold them part of the time.

When she was not helping Dicky, she tried covering pennies with the silver paper off chocolate, but it was not the kind of success that would take anyone in.

H. O. and Noël took it in turns to be sentinel, but they said it was dull, so Oswald took it on. And before he had been there three minutes he cried, 'Hist! someone [Pg 110] approaches!' and the coining materials were hastily concealed and everyone hid round the corner, like we had agreed we would do if disturbed in our unlawful pursuits.

Of course, there wasn't anyone really. After this the kids wanted to be sentinels again, but Oswald would not let them.

It was a jolly good game. And there was something about that house that made whatever you played in it seem awfully real. When I was Mrs. S. I felt quite unhappy, and when Dicky was the unfortunate monarch who perished in the French Revolution he told me afterwards he didn't half like it when it came to the guillotine, though, of course, he knew the knife was only the little sliding-door of the chicken-house.

We played coiners for several days, and all learned to give the alarm, but we were beginning to feel it was time for something new. Noël was saving the hairs out of his comb, and pulling them out of the horsehair sofa in the parlour, to make a hair shirt to be a hermit in, and Oswald had bought a file to get through the bars and be an escaped Bastille prisoner, leaving his life-history concealed in the fireplace, when the great event occurred. [Pg 111]

We found the silvered money turned to a dirty black when a few hours had elapsed, and we tried silver paint and gold paint. Our pockets were always full of gold and silver money, and we could jingle it and take it out in handfuls and let people see it—not too near.

Then came the great eventful day.

H. O. had fallen into the water-butt that morning. We dried his holland smock, but it went stiff like paper, so that old nurse noticed it, and thus found out that he was wringing wet underneath. So she put him to bed, for fear of his catching his death of cold, and the inveterate gang of coiners had to go to their fell lair without him. We left all our false money at home, because old nurse had given Alice a piece of trimming, for dolls, that was all over little imitation silver coins, called sequences, I believe, to imitate the coinage of Turkish regions. We reached our Enchanceried

House, got in as usual, and started our desperate work of changing silver sequences into gold half-sovereigns, with gold paint.

Noël was very grumpy: he was odd altogether that day. He was trying to write a poem about a Bastille prisoner. He asked to be sentry, so that he could think about rhymes. [Pg 112]

We had not coined more than about four half-sovereigns when we heard Noël say: 'Hist! Hide the plant!'

We didn't take any notice, because we wanted to get enough of them done to play a game of misers, which was Alice's idea.

'Hist!' Noël said again. And then suddenly he rushed in and said: 'It's a *real* hist! I tell you there's someone on the stairs.'

And he shut the wooden-grated door, and Oswald, with rare presence of mind, caught up the bunch of keys and locked the wooden-grated door with the key labelled 'Mrs. S.'s room.'

Then, breathless and furtive, we all hid in the part of the room near the fireplace, where no one could see us from the door.

We hardly dared to breathe. Alice said afterwards that she could hear Oswald's heart beating with terror, but the author is almost sure that it was only his watch ticking. It had begun to go that week, after days of unexplained idleness. If we *did* have to pay for finding the Enchanceried House, this was when we paid.

There *were* feet on the stairs. We all heard them. And voices. The author distinctly heard the words 'replete with every modern inconvenience,' and 'pleasantly situate ten minutes from tram and rail.' [Pg 113]

And Oswald, at least, understood that, somehow or other, our house had got itself disenchanceried, and that the owner was trying to let it.

We held our breaths till they were nearly choked out of us.

The steps came nearer and nearer. They came along the passage, and stopped at the door.

'This is the nursery,' said a manly voice. 'Ah, locked! I quite understood from the agent that the keys were in the hall.'

Of course *we* had the keys, and this was the moment that Noël chose for dropping them. Why he was fingering them where they lay on the mantelpiece the author does not know, and never will know. There is something about 'previously demented' in some Latin chap—Virgil or Lucretius—that seems to hit the nail on the head. The keys fell on the cracked hearthstone with a clang that Oswald, at any rate, will never forget.

There was an awful silence—quite a long one.

Then another voice said:

'There's someone in there.'

'Look at that bench,' said the other man; 'it's coiners' work, that's what it is, but there's nobody there. The keys must have *blown* down!' [Pg 114]

The two voices talked some time, but we could not hear all their conversation. We were all wondering, as it turned out afterwards, what exactly the utmost rigour of the law was. Because, of course, we knew we were trespassers of the very deepest dye, even if we could prove that we were not real coiners.

'No,' we heard one of them say, 'if we go for the police very likely the gang will return and destroy everything. There's no one here now. Let's secure the evidence. We can easily break the door down.'

It is a sickening feeling when the evidence against you is going to be secured, and you don't know what the punishment for coining is, or whether anyone will believe you if you say you were only playing at it.

We exchanged pallid glances.

We could hear the two men shaking the door, and we had no means of knowing just how weak it was, never having seriously tampered with it ourselves.

It was then that Noël suddenly went quite mad. I think it was due to something old nurse had read to us at breakfast that day about a boy of eight who played on the fiddle, and composed pieces of music. Affected young ass! [Pg 115]

He darted from us into the middle of the room, where the two intruders could see him, and said:

'Don't break down the door! The villains may return any moment and destroy you. Fetch the police!'

The surprised outsiders could find no word but 'Er?'

'You are surprised to see me here,' said Noël, not taking any notice of the furious looks of the rest of us. 'I am an infant prodigy. I play the violin at concerts; I play it beautifully. They take me to London to play in a closed carriage, so that I can't tell anyone my woes on the way.'

'My poor child!' said one of the outsiders; 'tell us all about it. We must rescue you.'

'Born of poor but honest parents,' said Noël—and this was what nurse had read out to us—'my musical talent early manifested itself on a toy violin, the gift of a devoted great-aunt. Torn from my home——I say, do fetch the police. If the monsters who live on my violin-playing return and find you here, they will brain you with the tools of their trade, and I shall be lost.' [Pg 116]

'Their trade?' said one of them. 'What trade?'

'They are coiners,' said Noël, 'as well as what they do to me to make me play.'

'But if we leave you?'

'Oh, they won't hurt *me*,' cried Noël, 'because I have to play to-night at Exeter Hall. Fly—fly for the police! They may come up behind you any moment and cleave you to the chine.'

And they actually flew. The present author would have known instantly that it was rot that about cleaving chines, but the man who wanted to let the Disenchanteried House and the man who wanted to have it let to him were of other mettle.

We had remained perfectly still and silent. Of course, if the outsiders had attacked Noël, his brothers would have rushed to his rescue.

As soon as the retreating boots of the outsiders grew fainter on the stairs, Noël turned green, and had to be revived by splashings from the brotherly coal-scuttle full of water. He got better directly, and we all scooted home to old nurse's, leaving our coining plant without a pang. All great generals say that a retreat is best conducted without impediments. [Pg 117]

Noël was so ill he had to go to bed and stay there. This was as well, because of the neighbourhood being scoured for the ill-used infant prodigy that had been imprisoned in the Enchanceried House. He got all right again in time to go home when father came up for us. While he was in bed he wrote a long poem in six different coloured chalks, called 'The Enchanceried Coiners, or the Liar's Remorse.' So I know he was sorry for what he had done. He told me he could not think what made him, and of course it was very wrong, but it did save our bacon, and preserve us from the noisome cells and bread and water that I am sure are the real meaning of the 'utmost rigour of the law.'

Really the worst of it all was that while we were trembling in the coiners' den, with the two outside gentlemen snorting and whispering on the other side of the gate-door, H. O. had got up out of his bed at home and answered the door. (Old nurse had gone out to get a lettuce and an aerated loaf for tea.) He answered it to a butcher's bill for fifteen and sevenpence that the butcher's little girl had brought, and he paid it with six of the pennies that we had disguised as half-crowns, and told the little girl to call for the sevenpence in the morning. I believe many people have been hanged for less. It was lucky for H. O. that old nurse was a friend of the butcher's, and able to persuade him that it was only a joke. In sterner times, like the French Revolution ... but Alice does not like to think what would have happened then. As this is the twentieth century, and not the eighteenth, our all going down to the butcher and saying we were sorry made it all right. But suppose it had been in other dates! [Pg 118]

The butcher's wife gave us cake and ginger wine, and was very jolly. She asked us where we had got the false half-crowns. Oswald said they had been given us. This was true, but when they were given us they were pennies.

Did Oswald tell a lie to the butcher? He has often wondered. He hopes not. It is easy to know whether a thing is a lie or not when nothing depends on it. But when events are happening, and the utmost rigour of the law may be the result of your making a mistake, you have to tell the truth as carefully as you can. [Pg 119]

No English gentleman tells a lie—Oswald knows that, of course. But an Englishman is not obliged to criminalate himself. The rules of honour and the laws of your country are very puzzling and contradictory.

But the butcher got paid afterwards in real money—a half-sovereign and two half-crowns, and seven unsilvered pennies. So nobody was injured, and the author thinks that is the great thing after all.

All the same, if ever he goes to stay with old nurse again, he thinks he will tell the butcher. All in confidence. He does not like to have any doubts about such a serious thing as the honour of a Bastable.

THE END OF OSWALD'S PART OF THE BOOK.

[Pg 120]

OTHERS

'A little person in a large white cap.'—Page 257

[Pg 123]

MOLLY, THE MEASLES, AND THE MISSING WILL

We all think a great deal too much of ourselves. We all believe—every man, woman, and child of us—in our very insidest inside heart, that no one else in the world is at all like us, and that things happen to us that happen to no one else. Now, this is a great mistake, because however different we may be in the colour of our hair and eyes, the inside part, the part that we feel and suffer with, is pretty much alike in all of us. But no one seems to know this except me. That is why people won't tell you the really wonderful things that happen to them: they think you are so different that you could never believe the wonderful things. But of course you are not different really, and you can believe wonderful things as easily as anybody else. For instance, you will be able to believe this story quite easily, for though it didn't happen to you, that was merely an accident. It might have happened, quite easily, to you or any else. As it happened, it happened to Maria Toodlethwaite Carruthers.

[Pg 124]

You will already have felt a little sorry for Maria, and you will have thought that I might have chosen a prettier name for her. And so I might. But I did not do the choosing. Her parents did that. And they called her Maria after an aunt who was disagreeable, and would have been more disagreeable than ever if the baby had been called Enid or Elaine or Vivien, or any of the pretty names that will readily occur to you. She was called Toodlethwaite after the eminent uncle of that name who had an office in London and an office in Liverpool, and was said to be rolling in money.

'I *should* like to see Uncle Toodlethwaite rolling in his money,' said Maria, 'but he never does it when I'm about.'

The third name, Carruthers, was Maria's father's name, and she often felt thankful

that it was no worse. It might so easily have been Snooks or Prosser.

Of course no one called Maria Maria except Aunt Maria herself. Her Aunt Eliza, who was very refined, always wrote in the improving books that she gave Maria on her [Pg 125] birthday, 'To dearest Marie, from her affectionate Aunt Elise,' and when she spoke to her she called her Mawrie. Her brothers and sisters, whenever they wanted to be aggravating, called her Toodles, but at times of common friendliness they called her Molly, and so did most other people, and so shall I, and so may you.

Molly and her brothers and sisters were taken care of by a young woman who was called a nursery-governess. I don't know why, for she did not nurse them, and she certainly did not govern them. In her last situation she had been called a lady-help—I don't know the why of that, either. Her name was Simpshall, and she was always saying 'Don't,' and 'You mustn't do that,' and 'Put that down directly,' and 'I shall tell your mamma if you don't leave off.' She never seemed to know what you ought to do, but only what you oughtn't.

One day the children had a grand battle with all the toy soldiers, and the little brass cannons that shoot peas, and the other kind that shoot pink caps with '*Fortes Amorces*' on the box.

Bertie, who always liked to have everything as real as possible, did not like the [Pg 126] soldiers to be standing on the bare polished mahogany of the dining-table.

'It's not a bit like the field of glory,' he said. And indeed it was not.

So he borrowed the large kitchen knife-box and went out, and brought it in full of nice real clean mould out of the garden. Half a dozen knife-box-fulls were needed to cover the table. Then the children made forts and ditches, and brought in sprigs of geranium and calceolaria and box and yew and made trees and ambushes and hedges. It was a lovely battlefield, and would have melted the heart of anyone but a nursery-governess.

But she just said, 'What a disgusting mess! How naughty you are!' and fetched a brush and swept the field of glory away into the dustpan. There was only just time to save the lives of the soldiers.

And then Cecily put the knife-box back without saying what it had been used for, and the knives were put into it, so that at dinner everything tasted of earth, and the grit got between people's teeth, so that they could not eat their mutton or potatoes or cabbage, or even their gravy. [Pg 127]

This, of course, was entirely Miss Simpshall's fault. If she had not behaved as she did Bertie or Eva would have remembered to clean out the knife-box. As it was, the story of the field of glory came out over the gritty mutton and things, and father sent all the battlefield-makers to bed.

Molly was out of this. She was staying with Aunt Eliza, who was kind, if refined. She was to come back the next day. But as mother was on her way to the station to meet Aunt Maria for a day's shopping, she met a telegraph boy, who gave her a telegram from Aunt Eliza saying:

> 'Am going to Palace to-day instead of to-morrow. Fetch Marie.—ELISE.'

So mother fetched her from Aunt Eliza's flat in Kensington and took her shopping with Aunt Maria. There were hours of shopping in hot, stuffy shops full of tired shop-people and angry ladies, and even the new hat and jacket and the strawberry ice at the pastrycook's in Oxford Street did not make up to Molly for that tiresome day.

Still, she was out of the battlefield row. Only as she did not know that it could not comfort her.

When Aunt Maria had been put into her train, mother and Molly went home. As their cab stopped, Miss Simpshall rushed out between the two dusty laburnums by the [Pg 128] gate.

'Don't come in!' said Miss Simpshall wildly.

'My dear Miss Simpshall——' said mother.

The hair of the nursery-governess waved wildly in the evening breeze. She shut the ornamental iron gate in mother's face.

'Don't come in!' said Miss Simpshall again. 'You shan't, you mustn't——'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said mother, looking very white. 'Have you gone mad?'

Miss Simpshall said she hadn't.

'But what's the matter?' said mother.

'Measles,' said Miss Simpshall; 'it's all out on them—thick.'

'Good gracious!' said mother.

'And I thought you'd perhaps just as soon Molly didn't have it, Mrs. Carruthers. And this is all the thanks I get, being told I'm insane.'

'I'm sorry,' said mother absently. 'Yes, you were quite right. Keep the children warm. Has the doctor seen them?'

'Not yet; I've only just found it out. Oh, it's terrible! Their hands and faces are all scarlet with purple spots.'

'Oh dear, oh dear! I hope it's nothing worse than measles! I'll call in and send the doctor,' said mother; 'I shall be home by the last train. It's a blessing Molly's clothes are all here in her box.' [Pg 129]

So Molly was whisked off in the cab.

'I must take you back to your aunt's,' said mother.

'But Aunt Eliza's gone to stay at the Bishop's Palace,' said Molly.

'So she has; we must go to your Aunt Maria's. Oh dear!'

'Never mind, mother,' said Molly, slipping her hand into mother's; 'perhaps they won't have it very badly. And I'll be very good, and try not to have it at all.'

This was very brave of Molly; she would much rather have had measles than have gone to stay at Aunt Maria's.

Aunt Maria lived in a lovely old house down in Kent. It had beautiful furniture and beautiful gardens; in fact, as Bertie said, it was a place

> 'Where every prospect pleases,
> And only aunt is vile.'

Molly and her mother arrived there just at supper-time. Aunt Maria was very surprised and displeased. Molly went to bed at once, and her supper was brought up on a tray by Clements, aunt's own maid. It was cold lamb and mint-sauce, and jelly and custard. [Pg 130]

'Your aunt said to bring you biscuits and milk,' said Clements, 'but I thought you'd like this better.'

'You're a darling!' said Molly; 'I was so afraid you'd be gone for your holiday. It's not nearly so beastly when you're here.'

Clements was flattered, and returned the compliment.

'And you aren't so bad when you're good, miss,' she said. 'Eat it up. I'll come back and bring you a night-light by-and-by.'

One thing Molly liked about Aunt Maria's was that there were no children's bedrooms—no bare rooms with painted furniture and Dutch drugget. All the rooms were 'best rooms', with soft carpets and splendid old furniture. The beds were all four-posters with carved pillars and silk damask curtains, and there were sure to be the loveliest things to make believe with in whatever room you happened to be put into. In this room there were cases of stuffed birds, and a stuffed pike that was just like life. There was a wonderful old cabinet, black and red and gold, very mysterious, and oak chests, and two fat white Indian idols sitting cross-legged on the mantelpiece. It was very delightful; but Molly liked it best in the daytime. And she was glad of the night-light. [Pg 131]

She thought of Bertie, and Cicely, and Eva, and baby, and Vincent, and wondered whether measles hurt much.

Next day Aunt Maria was quite bearable. The worst thing she said was about people coming when they weren't expected, and upsetting everything.

'I'll try not to upset anything,' said Molly, and went out and got the gardener to put up a swing for her.

Then she upset herself out of it, and got a bump on her forehead the size of a hen's egg, and that, as Aunt Maria very properly said, kept her out of mischief for the rest of the day.

Next morning Molly had two letters. The first was from Bertie. It said:

> 'Dear Molly,
>
> 'It is rough lines on you, but we did not mean to keep it up, and it is your fault for coming home the day before you ought to have. We did it to kid old Simpshall, because she was so beastly about us making a real battlefield. We only painted all the parts of us that show with vermilion, and put spots—mixed crimson lake and Prussian blue—all over, and we [Pg 132]

pulled down the blinds and said our heads ached, and so they did with crying—I mean the girls cried. She was afraid to come near us; but she was sorry she had been such a beast. And when she had come to the door and said so through the keyhole we owned up, but you had gone by then. It was a rare lark, but we've got three days bedder for it. I shall lower this on the end of a fishingline to the baker's boy, and he will post it. It is like a dungeon. He is going to bring us tarts, like a faithful page.

'Your affectionate bro.,
'BERTRAND DE LISLE CARRUTHERS.'

The other letter was from mother.

'MY DARLING MOLLY,

It was all a naughty hoax, intended to annoy poor Miss Simpshall. Your brothers and sisters had painted their faces red and purple—they had not measles at all. But since you *are* at Aunt Maria's I think you may as well stay ...' [Pg 133]

'How awful!' said Molly. 'It *is* too bad!'

'... stay and make it your annual visit. Be a good girl, dear, and do not forget to wear your pinafores in the morning.

'Your loving MOTHER.'

Molly wrote a nice little letter to her mother. To her brother she said:

DEAR BERTIE,

I think you are beasts to have let me in for this. You might have thought of me. I shall not forgive you till the sun is just going down, and I would not then, only it is so wrong not to. I wish *you* had been named Maria, and had to stay here instead of me.

'Your broken-hearted sister,
'MOLLY CARRUTHERS.'

When Molly stayed at the White House she was accustomed to read aloud in the mornings from 'Ministering Children' or 'Little Pilgrims,' while Aunt Maria sewed severely. But that morning Aunt Maria did not send for her. [Pg 134]

'Your aunt's not well,' Clements told her; 'she won't be down before lunch. Run along, do, miss, and walk in the garden like a young lady.'

'Molly had a splendid ride behind the groom.'—Page 134

Molly chose rather to swagger out into the stableyard like a young gentleman. The groom was saddling the sorrel horse.

'I've got to take a telegram to the station,' said he.

'Take me,' said Molly.

'Likely! And what ud your aunt say?'

'She won't know,' said Molly, 'and if she does I'll say I made you.'

He laughed, and Molly had a splendid ride behind the groom, with her arms so tight round his waistcoat that he could hardly breathe.

When they got to the station a porter lifted her down, and the groom let her send off the telegram. It was to Uncle Toodlethwaite, and it said:

> 'Please come down at once urgent business most important don't fail bring Bates.—Maria Carruthers.'

So Molly knew something very out of the way had happened, and she was glad that her aunt should have something to think of besides her, because the White House would have been a very nice place to stay at if Aunt Maria had not so often remembered to do her duty by you. [Pg 135]

In the afternoon Uncle Toodlethwaite came, and he and Aunt Maria and a person in black with a shining black bag—Molly supposed he was Mr. Bates, who was to be brought by Uncle Toodlethwaite—sat in the dining-room with the door shut.

Molly went to help the kitchenmaid shell peas, in the little grass courtyard in the middle of the house. They sat on the kitchen steps, and Molly could hear the voices of Clements and the housekeeper through the open window of the servants' hall. She heard, but she did not think it was eavesdropping, or anything dishonourable, like listening at doors. They were talking quite out loud.

'And a dreadful blow it will be to us all, if true,' the housekeeper was saying.

'*She* thinks it's true,' said Clements; 'cried her eyes out, she did, and wired for her brother-in-law once removed.'

'Meaning her brother's brother-in-law—I see. But I don't know as I really understand the ins and outs of it even yet.' [Pg 136]

'Well, it's like this,' said Clements: 'missis an' her brother they used to live here along of their uncle, and he had a son, a regular bad egg he was, and the old master said he shouldn't ever have a penny of his money. He said he'd leave it to Mr. Carruthers—that's missis's brother, see?'

'That means father,' thought Molly.

'And he'd leave missis the house and enough money to keep it up in style. He was a warm man, it seems. Well, then the son's drowned at sea—ship went down and all aboard perished. Just as well, because when the old man died they couldn't find no will. So it all comes to missis and her brother, there being no other relations near or far, and they divides it the same as the old man had always said he wished. You see what I mean?'

'Near enough,' said the housekeeper; 'and then?'

'Why, then,' said Clements, 'comes this letter—this very morning—from a lawyer, to say as this bad egg of a son wasn't drowned at all: he was in foreign parts, and only now heard of his father's decease, and tends without delay to claim the property, which all comes to him, the deceased have died insensate—that means without a will.' [Pg 137]

'I say, Clements,' Molly sung out, 'you must have read the letter. Did aunt show it to you?'

There was a dead silence; the kitchenmaid giggled. Someone whispered inside the room. Then the housekeeper's voice called softly, 'Come in here a minute, miss,' and the window was sharply shut.

Molly emptied the peascods out of her pinafore and went in.

Directly she was inside the door Clements caught her by the arm and shook her.

'You nasty mean, prying little cat!' she said; 'and me getting you jelly and custard, and I don't know what all.'

'I'm not,' said Molly. 'Don't, Clements; you hurt.'

'You deserve me to,' was the reply. 'Doesn't she, Mrs. Williams?'

'Don't you know it's wrong to listen, miss?' asked Mrs. Williams.

'I didn't listen,' said Molly indignantly. 'You were simply shouting. No one could help hearing. Me and Jane would have had to put our fingers in our ears *not* to hear.'

'I didn't think it of you,' said Clements, beginning to sniff. [Pg 138]

'I don't know what you're making all this fuss about,' said Molly; 'I'm not a sneak.'

'Have a piece of cake, miss,' said Mrs. Williams, 'and give me your word it shan't go any further.'

'I don't want your cake; you'd better give it to Clements. It's she that tells things—not me.'

Molly began to cry.

'There, I declare, miss, I'm sorry I shook you, but I was that put out. There! I ask your pardon; I can't do more. You wouldn't get poor Clements into trouble, I'm sure.'

'Of course I wouldn't; you might have known that.'

Well, peace was restored; but Molly wouldn't have any cake.

That evening Jane wore a new silver brooch, shaped like a horseshoe, with an arrow through it.

It was after tea, when Uncle Toodlethwaite was gone, that Molly, creeping quietly out to see the pigs fed, came upon her aunt at the end of the hollyhock walk. Her aunt was sitting on the rustic seat that the crimson rambler rose makes an arbour over. Her handkerchief was held to her face with both hands, and her thin shoulders were shaking with sobs. [Pg 139]

And at once Molly forgot how disagreeable Aunt Maria had always been, and how she hated her. She ran to her aunt and threw her arms round her neck. Aunt Maria jumped in her seat, but she let the arms stay where they were, though they made it quite difficult for her to use her handkerchief.

'Don't cry, dear ducky *darling* Aunt Maria,' said Molly—'oh, don't! What *is* the matter?'

'Nothing you would understand,' said Aunt Maria gruffly; 'run away and play, there's a good child.'

'But I don't want to play while you're crying. I'm sure I could understand, dear little auntie.'

Molly embraced the tall, gaunt figure of the aunt.

'Dear little auntie, tell Molly.'

She used just the tone she was used to use to her baby brother.

'It's—it's business,' said Aunt Maria, sniffing.

'I know business is dreadfully bad—father says so,' said Molly. 'Don't send me away, auntie; I'll be as quiet as a mouse. I'll just sit and cuddle you till you feel better.'

She got her arms round the aunt's waist, and snuggled her head against a thin arm. Aunt Maria had always been one for keeping children in their proper places. Yet [Pg 140] somehow now Molly's proper place seemed to be just where she was—where she had never been before.

'You're a kind little girl, Maria,' she said presently.

'I wish I could do something,' said Molly. 'Wouldn't you feel better if you told me? They say it does you good not to grieve in solitary concealment. I'm sure I could understand if you didn't use long words.'

And, curiously enough, Aunt Maria did tell her, almost exactly what she had heard from Clements.

'And I know there was a will leaving it all to your father and me,' she said; 'I saw it signed. It was witnessed by the butler we had then—he died the year after—and by Mr. Sheldon: he died, too, out hunting.'

Her voice softened, and Molly snuggled closer and said:

'Poor Mr. Sheldon!'

'He and I were to have been married,' said Aunt Maria suddenly. 'That's his picture in the hall between the carp and your Great-uncle Carruthers.' [Pg 141]

'Poor auntie!' said Molly, thinking of the handsome man in scarlet next the stuffed

carp—'oh, poor auntie, I do love you so!'

Aunt Maria put an arm round her.

'Oh, my dear,' she said, 'you don't understand. All the happy things that ever happened to me happened here, and all the sad things too; if they turn me out I shall die—I know I shall. It's been bad enough,' she went on, more to herself than to Molly; 'but there's always been the place just as it was when I was a girl, when he used to come here: so bold and laughing he always was. I can see him here quite plainly; I've only to shut my eyes. But I couldn't see him anywhere else.'

'Don't wills get hidden away sometimes?' Molly asked; for she had read stories about such things.

'We looked everywhere,' said Aunt Maria—'everywhere. We had detectives from London, because there were things he'd left to other people, and we wanted to carry out his wishes; but we couldn't find it. Uncle must have destroyed it, and meant to make another, only he never did—he never did. Oh, I hope the dead can't see what we suffer! If my Uncle Carruthers and dear James could see me turned out of the old place, it would break their hearts even up in heaven.' [Pg 142]

Molly was silent. Suddenly her aunt seemed to awake from a dream.

'Good gracious, child,' she said, 'what nonsense I've been talking! Go away and play, and forget all about it. Your own troubles will begin soon enough.'

'I do love you, auntie,' said Molly, and went.

Aunt Maria never unbent again as she had done that evening; but Molly felt a difference that made all the difference. She was not afraid of her aunt now, and she loved her. Besides, things were happening. The White House was now the most interesting place in the world.

Be sure that Molly set to work at once to look for the missing will. London detectives were very careless; she was certain they were. She opened drawers and felt in the backs of cupboards; she prodded the padding of chairs, listening for the crackling of paper inside among the stuffing; she tapped the woodwork of the house all over for secret panels; but she did not find the will.

She could not believe that her Great-uncle Carruthers would have been so silly as to burn a will that he knew might be wanted at any moment. She used to stand in front of his portrait, and look at it; he did not look at all silly. And she used to look at the portrait of handsome, laughing Mr. Sheldon, who had been killed out hunting instead of marrying Aunt Maria, and more than once she said: [Pg 143]

'You might tell me where it is; you look as if you knew.'

But he never altered his jolly smile.

Molly thought of missing wills from the moment her eyes opened in the morning to the time when they closed at night.

Then came the dreadful day when Uncle Toodlethwaite and Mr. Bates came down, and Uncle Toodlethwaite said:

'I'm afraid there's no help for it, Maria; you can delay the thing a bit, but you'll have to turn out in the end.'

It was on that night that the wonderful thing happened—the thing that Molly has never told to anyone except me, because she thought no one could believe it. She went to bed as usual and to sleep, and she woke suddenly, hearing someone call 'Molly, Molly!'

She sat up in bed; the room was full of moonlight. As usual her first waking thought was of the missing will. Had it been found? Was her aunt calling her to tell the good news? No, the room was quite still. She was alone. [Pg 144]

The moonlight fell full on the old black and red and gold cabinet; that, she had often thought, was just the place where a will would be hidden. It might have a secret drawer, that the London detectives had missed. She had often looked over it carefully, but now she got out of bed and lighted her candle, and went over to the cabinet to have one more look. She opened all the drawers, pressed all the knobs in the carved brasswork. There was a little door in the middle; she knew that the little cupboard behind it was empty. It had red lacquered walls, and the back wall was looking-glass. She opened the little cupboard, held up her candle, and looked in. She expected to see her own face in the glass as usual, but she did not see it; instead there was a black space, the opening to something not quite black. She could see lights—candle-lights—and the space grew bigger, or she grew smaller, she never knew which. And next moment she was walking through the opening.

'Now I am going to see something really worth seeing,' said Molly. [Pg 145]

She was not frightened—from first to last she was not at all frightened.

She walked straight through the back of the cabinet in the best bedroom upstairs into the library on the ground-floor. That sounds like nonsense, but Molly declares it was so.

There were candles on the table and papers, and there were people in the library; they did not see her.

There was great-uncle Carruthers and Aunt Maria, very pretty, with long curls and a striped gray silk dress, like in the picture in the drawing-room. There was handsome, jolly Mr. Sheldon in a brown coat. An old servant was just going out of the door.

'That's settled, then,' said Great-uncle Carruthers; 'now, my girl, bed.'

Aunt Maria—such a young, pretty Aunt Maria, Molly would never have known her but for the portrait—kissed her uncle, and then she took a Christmas rose out of her dress and put it in Mr. Sheldon's buttonhole, and put up her face to him and said, 'Good-night, James.' He kissed her; Molly heard the loud, jolly sound of the kiss, and Aunt Maria went away.

Then the old man said: 'You'll leave this at Bates' for me, Sheldon; you're safer than the post.' [Pg 146]

Handsome Mr. Sheldon said he would. Then the lights went out, and Molly was in bed again.

Quite suddenly it was daylight. Jolly Mr. Sheldon, in his red coat, was standing by the cabinet. The little cupboard door was open.

'By George!' he said, 'it's ten days since I promised to take that will up to Bates, and I never gave it another thought. All your fault, Maria, my dear. You shouldn't take up all my thoughts; 'I'll take it to-morrow.'

Molly heard something click, and he went out of the room whistling.

Molly lay still. She felt there was more to come. And the next thing was that she was looking out of the window, and saw something carried across the lawn on a hurdle with two scarlet coats laid over it, and she knew it was handsome Mr. Sheldon, and that he would not carry the will to Bates to-morrow, or do anything else in this world ever any more.

When Molly woke in the morning she sprang out of bed and ran to the cabinet. There was nothing in the looking-glass cupboard. [Pg 147]

All the same, she ran straight to her aunt's room. It was long before the hour when Clements soberly tapped, bringing hot water.

'Wake up, auntie!' she cried.

And auntie woke up, very cross indeed.

'Look here, auntie,' she said, 'I'm certain there's a secret place in that cabinet in my room, and the will's in it; I know it is.'

'You've been dreaming,' said Aunt Maria severely; 'go back to bed. You'll catch your death of cold paddling about barefoot like that.'

Molly had to go, but after breakfast she began again.

'But why do you think so?' asked Aunt Maria.

And Molly, who thought she knew that nobody would believe her story, could only say:

'I don't know, but I am quite sure.'

'Nonsense!' said Aunt Maria.

'Aunty,' Molly said, 'don't you think uncle might have given the will to Mr. Sheldon to take to Mr. Bates, and he may have put it in the secret place and forgotten?'

'What a head the child's got—full of fancies!' said Aunt Maria. [Pg 148]

'If he slept in that room—did he ever sleep in that room?'

'Always, whenever he stayed here.'

'Was it long after the will-signing that poor Mr. Sheldon died?'

'Ten days,' said Aunt Maria shortly; 'run away and play. I've letters to write.'

But because it seemed good to leave no stone unturned, one of those letters was to a cabinet-maker in Rochester, and the groom took it in the dog-cart, and the cabinet-maker came back with him.

And there *was* a secret hiding-place behind the looking-glass in the little red lacquered cupboard in the old black and red and gold cabinet, and in that secret hiding-place was the missing will, and on it lay a brown flower that dropped to dust when it was moved.

'It's a Christmas rose,' said Molly.

'So, you see, really it was a very good thing the others pretended to have measles, because if they hadn't I shouldn't have come to you, and if I hadn't come I shouldn't have known there was a will missing, and if I hadn't known that I shouldn't have found it, should I, aunty, should I, uncle?' said Molly, wild with delight. [Pg 149]

'No, dear,' said Aunt Maria, patting her hand.

'Little girls,' said Uncle Toodlethwaite, 'should be seen and not heard. But I admit that simulated measles may sometimes be a blessing in disguise.'

All the young Carruthers thought so when they got the five pounds that Aunt Maria sent them. Miss Simpshall got five pounds too because it was owing to her that Molly was taken to the White House that day. Molly got a little pearl necklace as well as five pounds.

'Mr. Sheldon gave it to me,' said Aunt Maria. 'I wouldn't give it to anyone but you.'

Molly hugged her in silent rapture.

That just shows how different our Aunt Marias would prove to be if they would only let us know them as they really are. It really is not wise to conceal *everything* from children.

You see, if Aunt Maria had not told Molly about Mr. Sheldon, she would never have thought about him enough to see his ghost. Now Molly is grown up she tells me it was only a dream. But even if it was it is just as wonderful, and served the purpose just as well.

Perhaps you would like to know what Aunt Maria said when the cabinet-maker opened the secret hiding-place and she saw the paper with the brown Christmas rose on it? Clements was there, as well as the cabinet-maker and Molly. She said right out before them all, 'Oh, James, my dear!' and she picked up the flower before she opened the will. And it fell into brown dust in her hand. [Pg 150] [Pg 151]

BILLY AND WILLIAM

A HISTORICAL TALE FOR THE YOUNG

'*Have you found your prize essay?*'
'*No; but I have found the bicycle of the butcher's boy.*'

It is rather trying to have to walk three miles to the station, to say nothing of the three miles back, to meet a cousin you have never seen and never wish to see, especially if you have to leave a kite half made, and there is no proper lock to the shed you are making your kite in.

The road was flat and dusty, the sun felt much too warm on his back, the hill to the station was long and steep, and the train was nearly an hour late, because it was a train on the South-Eastern Railway. So William was exceedingly cross, and he would have been crosser still if he could have known that I should ever call him William, for though that happened to be his name, the one he 'answered to' (as the stolen-dog advertisements say) was 'Billy.' So perhaps it would be kind of me to speak of him as Billy, because it is rather horrid to do things you know people won't like, even if you think they'll never know you've done them. [Pg 152]

Well, the train came in, and it was annoying to Billy, very, that four or five boys should bundle out of the train, and he should have to go up to them one after the other and say:

'I say, is your name Harold St. Leger?'

He did not particularly like the look of any of the boys, and of course it happened that the very last one he spoke to was Harold, and that he was also the one whom Billy liked least particularly of the whole lot.

'Oh, you are, are you?' was all he could find to say when Harold had blushingly owned to his name. Then in manly tones Billy gave the order about Harold's luggage

and the carrier, said 'Come along!' and Harold came.

Harold was a fattish boy with whitey-brown hair, and he was as soft and white as a silkworm. Billy did not admire him. He himself was hard and brown, with thin arms and legs and joints like the lumps of clay on branches that the gardener has grafted. And Harold did not admire *him*.

There was little conversation on the way home; when you don't want to have a visitor and he doesn't want to be one, talking is not much fun. When they got home there was tea. Billy's mother talked politely to Harold, but that did not make anyone any happier. Then Billy took his cousin round and showed him the farm and the stock, and Harold was less interested than you would think a boy could be. At last, weary of trying to behave nicely, Billy said: [Pg 153]

'I suppose there must be *something* you like, however much of a muff you are. Well, you can jolly well find it out for yourself. I'm going to finish my kite.'

The silkworm-soft face of Harold lighted up.

'Oh, *I* can make kites,' he said; 'I've invented a new kind. I'll help you if you'll let me.'

Harold, eager, quick fingered, skilful, in the shed among the string, and the glue, and the paper, and the bendable, breakable laths, was quite a different person from Harold, nervous and dull, among the farmyard beasts. Billy allowed him to help with the kite, and he began to respect his cousin a little more.

'Though it's rather like a girl, being so neat with your fingers,' he said disparagingly.

'I wish I'd got the proper sort of paper,' Harold said, 'then I'd make my new patent kite that I've invented; but it's a very extra sort of kind of paper. I got some once at a butter-shop in Bermondsey, but that was in a dream.' [Pg 154]

Billy stared.

'You must be off your chump,' he said; and he felt more sorry than ever that his jolly country holiday was to be spoiled by a strange cousin, who ought, perhaps, to be in a lunatic asylum rather than at a respectable farm.

That night Billy was awakened from the dreamless sleep which blesses the sort of boy he was to find Harold excitedly thumping him on the back with a roll of stiff paper.

'Wake up,' he said—'wake up! I *will* tell somebody that's awake. I dreamed that a jackdaw came in and flew off with that thin paper thing that was on the chest of drawers with the gilt button at the corner, and then I dreamed I got up and found this roll of paper up the chimney. And when I woke up I found *it* had and *I* had, and it's the real right kite-paper for my patent kite—just like I dreamed I bought in the butter-shop in Bermondsey. And it's five o'clock by the church clock, and it's quite light. I'm going to get up directly minute and make my patent kite.' [Pg 155]

'Patent fiddlestick!' replied Billy, sleepy and indignant. 'You get along and leave me be; you've been dreaming, that's all. Just like a girl!'

'Yes,' repeated Harold gently, 'I *have* been dreaming; but when I woke up I found *it* had and *I* had; and here's the paper, and the flimsy thing with the gold stud's *gone*. You get up and see——'

Billy did. He got up with a bound, and he saw with an eye. And William turned on Harold and shook him till his teeth nearly rattled in his head and his pale eyes nearly dropped out. (I have called him William here because I really think he deserves it. It is a cowardly thing to shake a cousin, even if you do not happen to be pleased with him.)

'Wha—wha—what's the matter?' choked the wretched Harold.

'Why, you miserable little idiot, you've *not* been dreaming at all! You've been lying like a silly log, and letting that beastly bird carry off my prize essay! That's *all*! And it took me ten days to do, and I had to get almost all of it out of books, and the worse swat I ever did in my life. And now it's all no good. And there aren't any books down here to do it again out of. Oh, bother, *bother*, BOTHER!' [Pg 156]

'I'm very sorry for you,' said Harold, 'but I didn't lie like logs—I did dream—and I've got the kite-paper, and I'll help you write the essay again if you like.'

'I shouldn't be surprised if it was all a make-up,' said William. (I *must* go on calling him William at present.) 'You've hidden the essay so as to be able to send it in yourself.'

'Oh, how *can* you?' said Harold; and he turned pale just like a girl, and just like a girl he began to cry.

'Now, look here,' the enraged William went on, 'I've got to be civil to you before

people; but don't you dare to speak to me when we're alone. You're either a silly idiot or a sneaking hound, and either way I'm not going to have anything to do with you.'

I don't know how he could have done it, but William kept his word, and for three days he only spoke to Harold when other people were about. This was horrible for Harold; he had been used to being his father's pride and his mother's joy, and now he was Nobody's Anything, which is the saddest thing in the world to be. He tried to console himself by making kites all day long, but even kites cannot comfort you when nobody loves you, and when you feel that it really is not your fault at all. [Pg 157]

William went about his own affairs; he was not at all happy. He finished his kite and flew it, and he lost it because the string caught on the church weather-cock, which cut it in two. And he tried to rewrite his prize essay, but he couldn't, because he had taken all the stuffing for it out of books and not out of his head, where it ought to have been.

Harold found some moments of forgetfulness when he was making the patent kite. It was very big, and the roll of paper he had found in his dream in the chimney was exactly the right thing for patent kite-making. But when it was done, what was the good? There was no one to see him fly it. He did fly it, and it was perfect. It was shaped like a bird, and it rose up, and up, and up, and hung poised above the church-tower, light and steady as a hawk poised above its prey. William wouldn't even come out to look at it, though Harold begged him to.

The next morning Harold dreamed that he had not been able to bear things any longer, and had run away, and when William woke up Harold was gone. Then William remembered how Harold had offered to help him with his kite, and would have helped him to rewrite the essay, and how through those three cruel days Harold had again and again tried to make friends, and how, after all, he was with his own people, and Harold was a stranger. [Pg 158]

He said, 'Oh, bother, I wish I hadn't!' and he felt that he had been a beast. This is called Remorse. Then he said, 'I'll find him, and I'll be as decent to him as I can, poor chap! though he *is* silly.' This is called Repentance.

Then he found a letter on Harold's bed. It said (and it was blotted with tears, and it had a blob of glue on it):

> 'Dear Billy,
>
> 'It wasn't my fault about your essay, and I'm sorry, and am going to run away to India to find my people. I shall go disguised as a stowaway.
>
> 'Your affectionate cousin,
> 'Harold Egbert Darwin St. Leger.'

Billy did not have to show this letter to his mother, because she had gone away for the day, so he did not have to explain to her what a beast he had been. If he had had to do this, it would have been part of what is called Expiation. [Pg 159]

Then he got the farm men to go out in every direction, furnished with a full description of Harold's silkworm-like appearance, and Billy borrowed a bicycle from a noble-hearted butcher's boy in the village and set out for Plymouth, because that seemed the likeliest place to look in for a cousin who was running away disguised as a stowaway. The wind blew straight towards the sea, and it occurred to Billy—he deserves to be called Billy now, I think—that the great patent kite, which was ten feet high, would drag him along like winking if he could only set it flying, and then tie it to the handle-bar of the bicycle. It was rather a ticklish business to get the kite up, but the butcher's boy helped—he had a noble heart—and at last it was done. Billy saw the great bird-kite flying off towards Plymouth. He hastily knotted the string to the bicycle handle, held the slack of it in his hand, mounted, started, paid out the slack of the string, and the next moment the string was tight, and the kite was pulling Billy and the bicycle along the Plymouth road at the rate of goodness-only-knows-how-improbably many miles an hour. [Pg 160]

At last he came to the outskirts of Plymouth. I shall not tell you what Plymouth was like, because Billy did not notice or know at all what it was like, and there is no reason why you should. Plymouth seemed to Billy very much like other places. The only odd thing was that he could not stop his bicycle, though he pulled in the kite string as hard as he could. He flew through the town. All the traffic stopped to let him steer his mad-paced machine through the streets, and tradespeople, and people walking on business, and people walking for pleasure, all stopped with their respectable mouths wide open to stare at Billy on his bicycle. And the kite pulled the machine on and on without pause, and at a furious rate, and Billy, in despair, was just feeling in his pocket for his knife to cut the string, when some mighty sky-wind seemed to catch the kite, and it gave a leap and went twenty times as fast as it had gone before, and the bicycle had to go twenty times as fast too, and before Billy could say 'Jack Robinson,' or even 'J. R.,' for short, the kite rushed wildly out to sea, dragging the bicycle after it, right slap off the edge of England. So Billy and the [Pg 161]

butcher's boy's bicycle were dragged into the sea? Not at all. They were dragged *on* to the sea, which is not at all the same sort of thing. For the kite was such a very extra patent one, and so perfectly designed and made, that it was just strong enough to bear the weight of Billy and the bicycle, and to keep them out of the water. So that Billy found himself riding splendidly over the waves, and there was no more splashing than there would have been on the road on a very muddy day. Luckily, the sea was smooth, or I don't know what would have happened. It was smooth and greeny-blue, and the sun made diamond sparkles on it, and Billy felt as grand as grand to be riding over such a glorious floor. It was a fine time, but rather an anxious one too. Because, suppose the string had not held? No one could possibly ride a bicycle on the sea unless they had the really only truly right sort of kite to hold the machine up.

Away and away went the kite, through the blue air up above, and away and away went the bicycle over the greeny, foamy sea down below, and away and away went Billy, and the kite went faster and faster and faster, and faster went the bicycle— [Pg 162] much, much faster than you would believe unless you had seen it as Billy did. And just at the front-door of the Bay of Biscay the bicycle caught up with a P. and O. steamer, and the kite followed the course of the ship, and went alongside of it, so you can guess how fast the bicycle was going.

And the Captain of the ship hailed Billy through a speaking-trumpet, and said:

'Ahoy, there!'

Billy replied:

'Ahoy yourself!'

But the Captain couldn't hear him. So the Captain said something that Billy couldn't hear either. But the people who were meant to hear heard, and the great ship stopped, and Billy rode close up to it, and they hauled him up by the string of the kite, and they put the bicycle in a safe place, and tied the string to the mast, and then the Captain said:

'I suppose I'm dreaming you, boy, because what you're doing is impossible.'

'I know it is,' said Billy; 'only I'm doing it—at least, I was till you stopped me.'

They were both wrong, because, of course, if it had been impossible, Billy could not have done it; but neither of them had a scientific mind, as you and I have, dear [Pg 163] reader.

So the Captain asked Billy to dinner, which was very nice, only there was an uncertain feeling about it. And when Billy had had dinner, he said to the Captain:

'I must be going.'

'Is there nothing I can do for you?' said the Captain.

'I don't know,' said Billy, 'unless you happen to have a boy named Harold Egbert Darwin St. Leger on board. He said he was going away in a ship to India, disguised as a stowaway.'

The Captain at once ordered the ship to be searched for a boy of this name in this disguise. The crew looked in the hold, and in the galley, and in the foretop, and on the quarter, and in the gaff, and the jib, and the topsail, and the boom, but they could not find Harold. They ransacked the cross-trees, and the engine-room, and the bowsprit; they explored the backstays, the stays, and the waist, but they found no stowaway. They examined truck and block, they hunted through every porthole, they left not an inch of the ribs unexplored; but no Harold. He was not in any of the belaying-pins or dead-eyes, nor was he hidden in the capstan or the compass. At last, [Pg 164] in despair, the Captain thought of looking in the cabins, and in one of them, hidden under the scattered pyjamas and embroidered socks of a Major of Artillery, they found Harold.

'The bicycle started, Billy in the saddle and Harold on the step.'—Page 165.

He and Billy explained everything to each other, and shook hands, and there was not a dry eye in the ship. (Did you ever see a dry eye? I think it would look rather nasty.)

Then said Billy to Harold:

'This is all very well, but how am I to get you home?'

'I can ride on the step of the bike,' said Harold.

'But the wind won't take us back,' said Billy; 'it's dead against us.'

'Excuse me,' said the Captain in a manly manner; 'you know that Britannia rules the waves and controls the elements. Allow me one moment.'

He sent for the boatswain and bade him whistle for a wind, expressly stating what kind of wind was needed.

And everyone saw with delight, but with little surprise, the kite deliberately turn round and retrace its steps towards the cliffs of Albion.

A cheer rose from passengers and crew alike as the bicycle was lowered to the [Pg 165] waves, the string tightened, and the bicycle started, Billy in the saddle and Harold on the step. The event was a perfect windfall to the passengers. It gave them something to talk of all the way to Suez; some of them are talking about it still.

The kite went back even faster than it had come; it pulled the bicycle behind it as easily as a child pulls a cotton-reel along the floor by a bit of thread. So that Harold and Billy were home by tea-time, and it was the jolliest meal either of them had ever had.

They had determined to stop the bicycle by cutting the string, and then Harold would have lost the patent kite, which would have been a pity. But, most happily, the string of the kite caught in the vane on the top of the church tower, and the bicycle stopped by itself exactly opposite the butcher's boy to whom it belonged. He had a noble heart, and he was very glad to see his bicycle again.

After tea the boys went up the church tower to get the kite; and I don't suppose you will believe me when I tell you that there, in the niche of a window of the belfry, was a jackdaw's nest, and in it the Historical Essay which the jackdaw had stolen, as you [Pg 166] will have guessed, for the sake of the bright gilt manuscript fastener in the corner.

And now Harold and Billy became really chums, in spite of all the qualities which they could not help disliking in each other. Each found some things in the other that he didn't dislike so very much, after all.

When Harold grows up he will sell many patent kites, and we shall all be able to ride bicycles on the sea.

Billy sent in his essay, but he did not get the prize; so it wouldn't have mattered if it had never been found, only I am glad it was found.

I hope you will not think that this is a made-up story. It is very nearly as true as any of the history in Billy's essay that didn't get a prize. The only thing I can't quite believe myself is about the roll of the right kind of paper being in the chimney; but Harold couldn't think of anything else to dream about, and the most fortunate accidents do happen sometimes even in stories. [Pg 167]

THE TWOPENNY SPELL

Lucy was a very good little girl indeed, and Harry was not so bad—for a boy, though the grown-ups called him a limb! They both got on very well at school, and were not wholly unloved at home. Perhaps Lucy was a bit of a muff, and Harry was certainly very rude to call her one, but she need not have replied by calling him a 'beast.' I think she did it partly to show him that she was not quite so much of a muff as he thought, and partly because she was naturally annoyed at being buried up to her waist in the ground among the gooseberry-bushes. She got into the hole Harry had dug because he said it might make her grow, and then he suddenly shovelled down a heap of earth and stamped it down so that she could not move. She began to cry, then he said 'muff' and she said 'beast,' and he went away and left her 'planted there,' as the French people say. And she cried more than ever, and tried to dig [Pg 168] herself out, and couldn't, and although she was naturally such a gentle child, she would have stamped with rage, only she couldn't get her feet out to do it. Then she screamed, and her Uncle Richard came and dug her out, and said it was a shame, and gave her twopence to spend as she liked. So she got nurse to clean the gooseberry ground off her, and when she was cleaned she went out to spend the twopence. She was allowed to go alone, because the shops were only a little way off on the same side of the road, so there was no danger from crossings.

'I'll spend every penny of it on myself,' said Lucy savagely; 'Harry shan't have a bit, unless I could think of something he wouldn't like, and then I'd get it and put it in his bread and milk!' She had never felt quite so spiteful before, but, then, Harry had never before been quite so aggravating.

She walked slowly along by the shops, wishing she could think of something that Harry hated; she herself hated worms, but Harry didn't mind them. Boys are so odd.

Suddenly she saw a shop she had never noticed before. The window was quite full of flowers—roses, lilies, violets, pinks, pansies—everything you can think of, growing in [Pg 169] a tangled heap, as you see them in an old garden in July.

She looked for the name over the shop. Instead of being somebody or other, Florist, it was 'Doloro de Lara, Professor of white and black Magic,' and in the window was a large card, framed and glazed. It said:

ENCHANTMENTS DONE WHILE YOU WAIT.
EVERY DESCRIPTION OF CHARM
CAREFULLY AND COMPETENTLY WORKED.
STRONG SPELLS FROM FIFTY GUINEAS
TO TUPPENCE.
WE SUIT ALL PURSES.
GIVE US A TRIAL.
BEST AND CHEAPEST HOUSE IN THE TRADE.
COMPETITION DEFIED.

Lucy read this with her thumb in her mouth. It was the tuppence that attracted her; she had never bought a spell, and even a tuppenny one would be something new.

'It's some sort of conjuring trick, I suppose,' she thought, 'and I'll never let Harry see how it's done—never, never, never!'

She went in. The shop was just as flowery, and bowery, and red-rosy, and white-lilyish inside as out, and the colour and the scent almost took her breath away. A thin, dark, unpleasing gentleman suddenly popped out of a bower of flowering [Pg 170] nightshade, and said:

'"And what can we do for you to-day, Miss?"'—Page 170.

'And what can we do for you to-day, miss?'

'I want a spell, if you please,' said Lucy; 'the best you can do for tuppence.'

'Is that all you've got?' said he.

'Yes,' said Lucy.

'Well, you can't expect much of a spell for that,' said he; 'however, it's better that I should have the tuppence than that you should; you see that, of course. Now, what would you like? We can do you a nice little spell at sixpence that'll make it always jam for tea. And I've another article at eighteenpence that'll make the grown-ups always think you're good even if you're not; and at half a crown——'

'I've only got tuppence.'

'Well,' he said crossly, 'there's only one spell at that price, and that's really a tuppenny-half-penny one; but we'll say tuppence. I can make you like somebody else, and somebody else like you.'

'Thank you,' said Lucy; 'I like most people, and everybody likes me.'

'I don't mean *that*,' he said. 'Isn't there someone you'd like to hurt if you were as strong as they are, and they were as weak as you?'

'Yes,' said Lucy in a guilty whisper. [Pg 171]

'Then hand over your tuppence,' said the dark gentleman, 'and it's a bargain.'

He snatched the coppers warm from her hand.

'Now,' he said, 'to-morrow morning you'll be as strong as Harry, and he'll be little and weak like you. Then you can hurt him as much as you like, and he won't be able to hurt back.'

'Oh!' said Lucy; 'but I'm not sure I want——I think I'd like to change the spell, please.'

'No goods exchanged,' he said crossly; 'you've got what you asked for.'

'Thank you,' said Lucy doubtfully, 'but how am I——?'

'It's entirely self-adjusting,' said nasty Mr. Doloro. 'No previous experience required.'

'Thank you very much,' said Lucy. 'Good——'

She was going to say 'good-morning,' but it turned into 'good gracious,' because she

was so very much astonished. For, without a moment's warning, the flower-shop had turned into the sweet-shop that she knew so well, and nasty Mr. Doloro had turned into the sweet-woman, who was asking what she wanted, to which, of course, as she had spent her twopence, the answer was 'Nothing.' She was already sorry that she [Pg 172] had spent it, and in such a way, and she was sorrier still when she got home, and Harry owned handsomely that *he* was sorry he had planted her out, but he really hadn't thought she was such a little idiot, and he *was* sorry—so there! This touched Lucy's heart, and she felt more than ever that she had not laid out her tuppence to the best advantage. She tried to warn Harry of what was to happen in the morning, but he only said, 'Don't yarn; Billson Minor's coming for cricket. You can field if you like.' Lucy didn't like, but it seemed the only thing she could do to show that she accepted in a proper spirit her brother's apology about the planting out. So she fielded gloomily and ineffectively.

Next morning Harry got up in good time, folded up his nightshirt, and made his room so tidy that the housemaid nearly had a surprise-fit when she went in. He crept downstairs like a mouse, and learned his lessons before breakfast. Lucy, on the other hand, got up so late that it was only by dressing hastily that she had time to prepare a thoroughly good booby-trap before she slid down the banisters just as the breakfast-bell rang. She was first in the room, so she was able to put a little salt in all the tea-cups before anyone else came in. Fresh tea was made, and Harry was [Pg 173] blamed. Lucy said, 'I did it,' but no one believed her. They said she was a noble, unselfish sister to try and shield her naughty brother, and Harry burst into floods of tears when she kicked him under the table; she hated herself for doing this, but somehow it seemed impossible to do anything else.

Harry cried nearly all the way to school, while Lucy insisted on sliding along all the gutters and dragging Harry after her. She bought a catapult at the toy-shop and a pennyworth of tintacks at the oil-shop, both on credit, and as Lucy had never asked for credit before, she got it.

At the top of Blackheath Village they separated—Harry went back to his school, which is at the other side of the station, and Lucy went on to the High School.

The Blackheath High School has a large and beautiful hall, with a staircase leading down into it like a staircase in a picture, and at the other end of the hall is a big statue of a beautiful lady. The High School mistresses call her Venus, but I don't really believe that is her name.

Lucy—good, gentle, little Lucy, beloved by her form mistress and respected by all the school—sat on those steps—I don't know why no one caught her—and used her [Pg 174] catapult to throw ink pellets (you know what they are, of course) with her catapult at the beautiful white statue-lady, till the Venus—if that is her name, which I doubt—was all over black spots, like a Dalmation or carriage dog.

Then she went into her class room and arranged tintacks, with the business end up, on all the desks and seats, an act fraught with gloomy returns to Blossoma Rand and Wilhelmina Marguerite Asterisk. Another booby-trap—a dictionary, a pot of water, three pieces of chalk, and a handful of torn paper—was hastily sketched above the door. Three other little girls looked on in open-mouthed appreciation. I do not wish to shock you, so I will not tell you about the complete success of the booby-trap, nor of the bloodthirsty fight between Lucy and Bertha Kaurter in a secluded fives-court during rec. Dora Spielman and Gertrude Rook were agitated seconds. It was Lucy's form mistress, the adored Miss Harter Larke, who interrupted the fight at the fifth round, and led the blood-stained culprits into the hall and up the beautiful picture-like steps to the Headmistress's room. [Pg 175]

The Head of the Blackheath High School has all the subtle generalship of the Head in Mr. Kipling's 'Stalky.' She has also a manner which subdues parents and children alike to 'what she works in, like the dyer's hand.' Anyone less clever would have expelled the luckless Lucy—saddled with her brother's boy-nature—on such evidence as was now brought forward. Not so the Blackheath Head. She reserved judgment, the most terrible of all things for a culprit, by the way, who thought it over for an hour and a half in the mistress's room, and she privately wrote a note to Lucy's mother, gently hinting that Lucy was not quite herself: might be sickening for something. Perhaps she had better be kept at home for a day or two. Lucy went home, and on the way upset a bicycle with a little girl on it, and came off best in a heated physical argument with a baker's boy.

Harry, meanwhile, had dried his tears, and gone to school. He knew his lessons, which was a strange and pleasing thing, and roused in his master hopes destined to be firmly and thoroughly crushed in the near future. But when he had emerged triumphantly from morning school he suddenly found his head being punched by [Pg 176] Simpkins Minor, on the ground that he, Harry, had been showing off. The punching was scientific and irresistible. Harry, indeed, did not try to resist; in floods of tears and with uncontrolled emotion he implored Simpkins Minor to let him alone, and not be a brute. Then Simpkins Minor kicked him, and several other nice little boy-friends of his joined the glad throng, and it became quite a kicking party. So that when

Harry and Lucy met at the corner of Wemyss Road his face was almost unrecognisable, while Lucy looked as happy as a king, and as proud as a peacock.

'What's up?' asked Lucy briskly.

'Every single boy in the school has kicked me,' said Harry in flat accents. 'I wish I was dead.'

'So do I,' said Lucy cheerily; 'I think I'm going to be expelled. I should be quite certain, only my booby-trap came down on Bessie Jayne's head instead of Miss Whatshername's, and Bessie's no sneak, though she has got a lump like an ostrich's egg on her forehead, and soaked through as well. But I think I'm certain to be expelled.'

'I wish I was,' said Harry, weeping with heartfelt emotion. 'I don't know what's the matter with me; I feel all wrong inside. Do you think you can turn into things just by reading them? Because I feel as if I was in "Sandford and Merton," or one of the [Pg 177] books the kind clergyman lent us at the seaside.'

'How awfully beastly!' said Lucy. 'Now, I feel as if I didn't care tuppence whether I was expelled or not. And, I say, Harry, I feel as if I was much stronger than you. I know I could twist your arm round and then hit it like you did me the other day, and you couldn't stop me.'

'Of course I couldn't! *I* can't stop anybody doing anything they want to do. Anybody who likes can hit me, and I can't hit back.'

He began to cry again. And suddenly Lucy was really sorry. She had done this, she had degraded her happy brother to a mere milksop, just because he had happened to plant her out, and leave her planted. Remorse suddenly gripped her with tooth and claw.

'Look here,' she said, 'it's all my fault! Because you planted me out, and I wanted to hurt you. But now I don't. I can't make you boy-brave again; but I'm sorry, and I'll look after you, Harry, old man! Perhaps you could disguise yourself in frocks and long hair, and come to the High School. I'd take care nobody bullied you. It isn't nice being bullied, is it?' [Pg 178]

Harry flung his arms round her, a thing he would never have done in the public street if he had not been girlish inside at the time.

'No, it's hateful,' he said. 'Lucy, I'm sorry I've been such a pig to you.'

Lucy put her arms round him, and they kissed each other, though it was broad daylight and they were walking down Lee Park.

The same moment the enchanter Doloro de Lara ran into them on the pavement. Lucy screamed, and Harry hit out as hard as he could.

'Look out,' said he; 'who are you shoving into?'

'Tut-tut,' said the enchanter, putting his hat straight, 'you've bust up your spell, my Lucy—child; no spells hold if you go kissing and saying you're sorry. Just keep that in mind for the future, will you?'

He vanished in the white cloud of a passing steam-motor, and Harry and Lucy were left looking at each other. And Harry was Harry and Lucy was Lucy to the very marrow of their little back-bones. They shook hands with earnest feeling.

Next day Lucy went to the High School and apologised in dust and ashes. [Pg 179]

'I don't think I was my right self,' she said to the Headmistress, who quite agreed with her, 'and I never will again!'

And she never has. Harry, on the other hand, thrashed Simpkins Minor thoroughly and scientifically on the first opportunity; but he did not thrash him extravagantly: he tempered pluck with mercy.

For this is the odd thing about the whole story. Ever since the day when the tuppenny spell did its work Harry has been kinder than before and Lucy braver. I can't think why, but so it is. He no longer bullies her, and she is no longer afraid of him, and every time she does something brave for him, or he does something kind for her, they grow more and more alike, so that when they are grown up he may as well be called Lucius and she Harriett, for all the difference there will be between them.

And all the grown-ups look on and admire, and think that their incessant jawing has produced this improvement. And no one suspects the truth except the Headmistress of the High School, who has gone through the complete course of Social Magic under a better professor than Mr. Doloro de Lara; that is why she understands everything, [Pg 180] and why she did not expel Lucy, but only admonished her. Harry is cock of his school now, and Lucy is in the sixth, and a model girl. I wish all Headmistresses learned Magic at Girton. [Pg 181]

SHOWING OFF; OR, THE LOOKING-GLASS BOY

His parents had thoughtlessly christened him Hildebrand, a name which, as you see, is entirely unsuitable for school use. His friends called him Brandy, and that was bad enough, though it had a sort of pirate-smuggler sound, too. But the boys who did not like him called him Hilda, and this was indeed hard to bear. In vain he told them that his name was James as well. It was not true, and they would not have believed it if it had been.

He had not many friends, because he was not a very nice boy. He was not very brave, except when he was in a rage, which is a poor sort of courage, anyhow; and when the boys used to call him. 'Cowardy custard' and other unpleasing names, he used to try to show off to them, and make them admire him by telling them stories of the wild boars he had killed, and the Red Indians he had fought, and of how he had been [Pg 182] down Niagara in an open boat, and been shipwrecked on the high seas. They were not bad stories, and the boys would not have minded listening to them, but Hildebrand wanted to have his stories not only listened to, but believed, which is quite another pair of shoes.

He had one friend who always liked his stories, and believed them almost all. This was his little sister. But he was simply horrid to her. He never would lend her a any of his toys, and he called her 'Kiddie,' which she hated, instead of Ethel, which happened to be her name.

All this is rather dull, and exactly like many boys of your acquaintance, no doubt. But what happened to Hildebrand does not, fortunately or unfortunately, happen to everybody; I dare say it has never happened to you. It began on the day when Hildebrand was making a catapult, and Billson Minor came up to him in the playground and said:

'Much use it'll be to you when you've made it. You can't hit a haystack a yard off!'

'Can't I?' said Hildebrand. 'You just see! I hit a swallow on the wing last summer, and when we had a house in Thibet I shot a llama dead with one bullet. He was twenty- [Pg 183] five feet long.'

Billson laughed, and asked a boy who was passing if he'd ever been out llama-shooting, and, if so, what his bag was. The other boy said:

'Oh, I see—little Hilda gassing again!'

Billson said:

'Gassing! Lying I call it!'

'Liar yourself!' said Hildebrand, who was now so angry that his fingers trembled too much for him to be able to go on splicing the catapult.

'Oh, run away and play,' said Billson wearily. 'Go home to nurse, Hilda darling, and tell her to put your hair in curl-papers!'

Then Hildebrand's rage turned into a sort of courage, and he hit out at Billson, who, of course, hit back, and there was a fight. The other boy held their coats and saw fair; and Hildebrand was badly beaten, because Billson was older and bigger and a better fighter, so he went home, crying with fury and pain. He went up into his own bedroom and bolted the door, and wildly wished that he was a Red Indian, and that taking scalps was not forbidden in Clapham. Billson's, he reflected gloomily, would have been a sandy-coloured scalp, and a nice beginning to a scalp-album. [Pg 184]

Presently he stopped crying, and let his little sister in. She had been crying, too, outside the door, ever since he came home and pushed past her on the stairs. She pitied his bruised face, and said it was a shame of Billson Minor to hit a boy littler than he was.

'I'm not so very little,' said Hildebrand; 'and you know how brave I am. Why, it was only last week that I was the chief of the mighty tribe of Moccasins, who waged war against Bill Billson, the Vulture-faced Redskin——'

He told the story to its gory end, and Ethel liked it very much, and hoped it wasn't wrong to make up such things. She couldn't quite believe it all.

Then she went down, and Hildebrand had to wash his face for dinner; and when he looked at the boy in the looking-glass and saw the black eye Billson Minor had given him, and the cut lip from the same giver, he clenched his fist and said:

'I wish I could make things true by saying them. Wouldn't I bung up old Billson's peepers, that's all?' [Pg 185]

'Well, you can if you like,' said the boy in the glass, whom Hildebrand had thought

was his own reflection.

'What?' said he, with his mouth open. He was horribly startled.

'You can if you like,' said the looking-glass boy again. 'I'll give you your wish. Will you have it?'

'Is this a fairy-tale?' asked Hildebrand cautiously.

'Yes,' said the boy.

Hildebrand had never expected to be allowed to take part in a fairy-tale, and at first he could hardly believe in such luck.

'Do you mean to say,' he said, 'that if I say I found a pot of gold in the garden yesterday I did find a pot of gold?'

'No; you'll find it to-morrow. The thing works backwards, you see, like all looking-glass things. You know your "Alice," I suppose? There's only one condition: you won't be able to see yourself in the looking-glass any more!'

'Who wants to,' said Hildebrand.

'And things you say to *yourself* don't count.'

'There's always Ethel,' said Ethel's brother.

'You accept, then?' said the boy in the glass. [Pg 186]

'Rather!'

'Right' And with that the looking-glass boy vanished, and Hildebrand was left staring at the mirror, which now reflected only the wash-hand-stand and the chest of drawers, and part of the picture of Lord Roberts pinned against the wall. You have no idea how odd and unpleasant it is to look at a glass and see everything reflected as usual, except yourself, though you are right in front of it. Hildebrand felt as if he must have vanished as well as the looking-glass boy. But he was reassured when he looked down at his hands. They were still there, and still extremely dirty. The second bell had rung, and he washed them hastily and went down.

'How untidy your hair is!' said his mother; 'and oh, Hildebrand, what a disagreeable expression, dear! and look at your eye! You've been fighting again.'

'I couldn't help it,' said our hero sulkily; 'he called names. Anyway, I gave him an awful licking. He's worse than I am. Potatoes, please.'

Next day Hildebrand had forgotten the words he had said at dinner. And when Billson asked him if one licking was enough, and whether he, Billson, was a liar or not, Hildebrand said: [Pg 187]

'You can lick me and make me anything you like, but you *are*, all the same, just as much as me,' and he began to cry.

And Billson called him schoolgirl and slapped his face—because Billson knew nothing of the promise of the looking-glass boy, that whatever Hildebrand said had happened should happen.

It was a dreadful fight, and when it was over Hildebrand could hardly walk home. He was much more hurt than he had been the day before. But Billson Minor had to be carried home. Only he was all right again next day, and Hildebrand wasn't, so he did not get much out of this affair, except glory, and the comfort of knowing that Billson and the other boys would now be jolly careful how they called him anything but Pilkings, which was his father's and his mother's name, and therefore his as well.

He had to stay in bed the next day, and his father punished him for fighting, so he consoled himself by telling Ethel how he had found a pot of gold in the cellar the day before, after digging in the hard earth for hours, till his hands were all bleeding, and how he had hidden it under his bed.

'Do let me see, Hildy dear,' she said, trying hard to believe him. [Pg 188]

But he said, 'No, not till to-morrow.'

Next day he was well enough to go to school, but he thought he would just take some candle-ends and have a look at the cellar, and see if it was really likely that there was any gold there. It did not seem probable, but he thought he would try, and he did. It was terribly hard work, for he had no tools but a spade he had had at the seaside, and when that broke, as it did almost at once, he had to go on with a piece of hoop-iron and the foot of an old bedstead. He went on till long past dinner-time, and his hands were torn and bleeding, his back felt broken in two, and his head was spinning with hunger and tiredness. At last, just as the tea-bell rang, he reached his hand down deep into the hole he had made, and felt something cold and round. He held his candle down. It was a pot, tied over with brown paper, like pickled onions. When he

got it out he took off the paper. The pot was filled to the brim with gold coins. Hildebrand blew out his candle and went up. The cook stopped him at the top of the cellar stairs.

'What's that you got there, Master Hildy? Pickles, I lay my boots,' she said.

'It's not,' said he. [Pg 189]

'Let me look,' said she.

'Let me alone,' said Hildebrand.

'Not me,' said the cook.

She had her hand on the brown paper.

Hildebrand had heard how treasure-trove has to be given up to Government, and he did not trust the cook.

'You'd better not,' he said quickly; 'it's not what you think it is.'

'What is it, then?'

'It's—it's *snakes*!' said Hildebrand desperately—'snakes out of the wine-cellar.'

The cook went into hysterics, and Hildebrand was punished twice, once for staying away from school without leave, and once for frightening the servants with silly stories. But in the confusion brought about by the cook's screams he managed to hide the pot of gold in the bottom of the boot cupboard, among the old gaiters and goloshes, and when peace was restored and he was sent to bed in disgrace he took the pot with him. He lay long awake thinking of the model engine he would buy for himself, also of the bay pony, the collections of coins, birds' eggs, and postage-stamps, the fishing-rods, the guns, revolvers, and bows and arrows, the sweets and cakes and nuts, he would get all for himself. He never thought of so much as a [Pg 190] pennyworth of toffee for Ethel, or a silver thimble for his mother, or a twopenny cigar for Mr. Pilkings.

The first thing in the morning he jumped up and felt under the bed for the pot of gold. His hand touched something that was not the pot. He screamed, and drew his hand back as quickly as though he had burned it; but what he had touched was not hot: it was cold, and thin, and alive. It was a snake. And there was another on his bed, and another on the dressing-table, and half a dozen more were gliding about inquisitively on the floor.

Hildebrand gathered his clothes together—a snake tumbled out of his shirt as he lifted it—and made one bound for the door. He dressed on the landing, and went to school without breakfast. I am glad to be able to tell you that he did say to Sarah the housemaid:

'For goodness' sake don't go into my bedroom—it's running alive with snakes!'

She did not believe him, of course; and, indeed, when she went up the snakes were safe back in the pot. She did not see this, because she was not the kind of girl who sweeps under things every day. That night Hildebrand secretly slept in the boxroom, [Pg 191] on a pile of newspapers, with a rag-bag and a hearthrug over him.

Next day he said to Sarah:

'Did you go into my room yesterday?'

'Of course,' said she.

'Did you take the snakes away?'

'Go along with your snakes!' she said.

So he understood that she had not seen any, and very cautiously he looked into his room, and finding it snakeless, crept in, hoping that the snakes had changed back into gold. But they had not—snakes and gold and pot had all vanished. Then he thought he would be very careful. He said to Ethel:

'I had twenty golden sovereigns in my pocket yesterday.'

This was Saturday. Next day was Sunday, and all day long he jingled the twenty golden sovereigns he had found that morning in his knickerbocker pocket. But they were not there on Monday. And then he saw that though he could make things *happen*, he could not make them *last*. So he told Ethel he had had seven jam-tarts. He meant to eat them as soon as he got them. But the next day when they came he had a headache and did not want to eat them. He might have given them to Ethel, [Pg 192] but he didn't, and next day they had disappeared.

It was very annoying to Hildebrand to know that he had this wonderful power, yet he could not get any good out of it. He tried to consult his father about it, but Mr.

Pilkings said he had no time for romances, and he advised Hildebrand to learn his lessons and stick to the truth. But this was just what Hildebrand could not do, even after the awful occasion when his schoolfellows began to tease him again, and, to command their respect, he related how he had met a bear in the lane by the church and fought it single-handed, and been carried off more dead than alive. Next day, of course, he had to fight the bear, which was very brown and clawy and toothy and fierce, and though the more-dead-than-alive feeling had gone by next day, it was not a pleasant experience. But even that was better than the time when they laughed at a very bad construe of his—the form was in Cæsar—and he told them how he had once translated the inscription on an Egyptian Pyramid. He had no peace for weeks after that, because he had forgotten to say how long it took him. Every time he was alone he was wafted away to Egypt and set down at that Pyramid. But he could not find the [Pg 193] inscription, and if he had found it he could not have translated it. So, in self-defence, he spent most of his waking-time with Ethel. But every night the Pyramid had its own way, and it was not till he had cut an inscription himself on the Pyramid with the broken blade of his pocket-knife, and translated it into English, that he was allowed any rest at all. The inscription was *Ich bin eine Gans*, and you can translate it for yourself.

But that did him good in one way; it made him fonder of Ethel. Being so much with her, he began to see what a jolly little girl she really was. When she had measles—Hildebrand had had them, or it, last Christmas, so he was allowed to see his sister—he was very sorry, and really wished to do something for her. Mr. Pilkings brought her some hothouse grapes one day, and she liked them so much that they were very soon gone. Then Hildebrand, who had been very careful since the Pyramid occasion to say nothing but the truth, said:

'Ethel, some grapes and pineapples came for you yesterday.'

Ethel knew it wasn't true, but she liked the idea, and said: [Pg 194]

'Anything else?'

'Oh yes!' said her brother—'a wax doll and a china tea-set with pink roses on it, and books and games,' and he went on to name everything he thought she would like.

'The alligator very nearly had him.'—Page 195.

And, of course, next day the things came in a great packing-case. No one ever knew who sent them, but Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings thought it was Ethel's godfather in India. And, curiously enough, these things did not vanish away, but were eaten and enjoyed and played with as long as they lasted. Ethel has one of the dolls still, though now

she is quite grown up.

Now Hildebrand began to feel sorry to see how ill and worried his mother looked; she was tired out with nursing Ethel, so he said to Sarah:

'Mother was quite well yesterday.'

Sarah answered:

'Much you know about it; your poor ma's wore to a shadow.'

But next day mother *was* quite well, and this lasted, too. Then he wanted to do something for his father, and as he had heard Mr. Pilkings complain of his business being very bad, Hildebrand said to Ethel: [Pg 195]

'Father made a most awful lot of money yesterday.'

And next day Mr. Pilkings came home and kissed Mrs. Pilkings in the hall under the very eyes of Sarah and the boot-boy, and said:

'My dear, our fortune's made!'

The family did not have any nicer things to eat or wear than before, so Hildebrand gained nothing by this, unless you count the pleasure he had in seeing his father always jolly and cheerful and his mother well, and not worried any more. Hildebrand *did* count this, and it counted for a good deal.

But though Hildebrand was now a much happier as well as a more agreeable boy, he could not quite help telling a startling story now and then. As, for instance, when he informed the butcher's boy that there was an alligator in the back-garden. The butcher's boy did not go into the garden—indeed, he had no business there, though that would have been no reason if he had wanted to go—but next day, when Hildebrand, having forgotten all about the matter, went out in the dusk to look for a fives ball he had lost, the alligator very nearly had him.

And when he related that adventure of the lost balloon, he had to go through with it [Pg 196] next day, and it made him dizzy for months only to think of it.

But the worst thing of all was when Ethel was well, and he was allowed to go back to school. Somehow the fellows were much jollier with him than they used to be. Even Billson Minor was quite polite, and asked him how the kid was.

'She's all right,' said Hildebrand.

'When my kiddie sister had measles,' Billson said, 'her eyes got bad afterwards; she could hardly see.'

'Oh,' said Hildebrand promptly, '*my* sister's been much worse than that; she couldn't see at all.'

When Hildebrand went home next day he found his mother pale and in tears. The doctor had just been to see Ethel's eyes—and Ethel was blind.

Then Hildebrand went up to his own room. He had done this—his own little sister who was so fond of him. And she was such a jolly little thing, and he had made her blind, just for a silly bit of show-off to Billson Minor; and he knew that the things he had said about Ethel before had come true, and had not vanished like the things he [Pg 197] said about himself, and he felt that this, too, would last, and Ethel would go on being blind always. So he lay face down on his bed and cried, and was sorry, and wished with all his heart that he had been a good boy, and had never looked in the glass, and wished to bung up the eyes of Billson Minor, who, after all, was not such a bad sort of chap.

When he had cried till he could not cry any more he got up, and went to the looking-glass to see if his eyes were red, which is always interesting. He never could remember that he couldn't see himself in the glass now. Then suddenly he knew what to do. He ran down into the street, and said to the first person he met:

'I say, I saw the looking-glass boy yesterday, and he let me off things coming true, and Ethel was all right again.'

It was a policeman, and the constable boxed his ears, and promised to run him in next time he had any of his cheek. But Hildebrand went home calmer, and he read 'The Jungle Book' aloud to Ethel all the evening.

Next morning he ran to his looking-glass, and it was strange and wonderful to him to see his own reflection again after all these weeks of a blank mirror, and of parting [Pg 198] his hair as well as he could just by feeling. But it wasn't his own reflection, of course: it was the looking-glass boy.

'I say, you look very different to what you did that day,' said Hildebrand slowly.

'So do you,' said the boy.

That other day, which was weeks ago, the looking-glass boy had been swollen and scowling and angry, with a black eye and a cut lip, and revengeful looks and spiteful words. Now he looked pale and a little thinner, but his eyes were only anxious, and his mouth was kind. It was just the same ugly shape as ever, but it looked different. And Hildebrand was as like the boy in the glass as one pin is like another pin.

'I say,' said Hildebrand suddenly and earnestly, 'let me off; I don't want it any more, thank you. And oh, do—do make my sister all right again.'

'Very well,' said the boy in the looking-glass; 'I'll let you off for six months. If you haven't learned to speak the truth by then—well, you'll see. Good-bye.'

He held out his hand, and Hildebrand eagerly reached out to shake it. He had forgotten the looking-glass, and it smashed against his fist, and cracked all over. He never saw the boy again, and he did not want to. [Pg 199]

When he went down Ethel's eyes were all right again, and the doctor thought it was *his* doing, and was as proud as a King and as pleased as Punch. Hildebrand could only express his own gladness by giving Ethel every toy he had that he thought she would like, and he was so kind to her that she cried with pleasure.

Before the six months were up Hildebrand was as truthful a boy as anyone need wish to meet. He made little slips now and then, just at first, about his escape from the mad bull, for instance, and about the press-gang.

His stories did not come true next day any more, but he had to dream them, which was nearly as bad. So he cured himself, and did his lessons, and tried to stick to the truth; and when he told romances he let people know what he was playing at. Now he is grown up he dreams his stories first, and writes them afterwards; for he writes books, and also he writes for the newspapers. When you do these things you may tell as many stories as you like, and you need not be at all afraid that any of them will come true. [Pg 200]

THE RING AND THE LAMP

You are, of course, a singularly intelligent child, and so must often have wondered what has become of all the interesting things that you read about in the old fairy-tales—the shoes of swiftness, and the sword of sharpness, and the cloak that made its wearer invisible, and things like that. Well, the fact is all these things are still in the world, hidden about somewhere, only people are so busy with new inventions, wireless telegraphs and X rays, and air-ships, that they don't trouble any more to look for the really interesting things. And if you don't look for things, you don't find them—at least, not often; though some lucky persons have only to walk out of doors and adventures happen to them as readily as breakfast and bed happen to ordinary folk. But when people do find any of the wonderful old treasures they generally hold their tongues about it, because it is so difficult to make people believe the truth if it is at all out of the way. Two of the wonder things out of the old stories were found only the other day by a little girl in Sussex; and she never told anyone but me and one other person. I often have things told me that no one else ever hears of, because everyone knows that I can believe anything. [Pg 201]

The little-girl-in-Sussex's name was Seraphina Bodlett. She did not belong to Sussex, having been born in Tooting; but she was staying at a Sussex farmhouse for the summer holidays. It was the very nicest place to stay at, plenty of room to play in—all the Sussex Downs, in fact—and plenty of animals to pet and feed. The only thing was that all the other people at the farm were grown up, and Seraphina longed very much for someone to play with. The farmer's daughter, Miss Patty, was very kind, and always quite willing to play Halma; only it happened that Halma was not what Seraphina wanted to play.

It was summer, and Seraphina went to bed early, while it was still daylight. She used to lie awake in the big four-post bed, with the white dimity curtains, and look at the latticed window and the oak chest of drawers with the shell boxes on it, and try to make herself dream that she had another little girl to play with. But she always surprised herself by waking up in the morning without having dreamed of anything at all. [Pg 202]

The best parlour at the farm was a very nice place, but Seraphina (whose name takes so long to write that I think I had better call her Fina, as everyone else did) was not usually allowed to play there, and the blinds were always drawn down exactly halfway, because that is genteel.

Sometimes Fina was taken into the parlour by Miss Patty, and then Miss Patty would bring out the curiosities that her brother the sailor had brought home from his voyages: South Sea necklaces of seeds and beads and cut-up reeds, and fat idols

from India, with far more arms than most of us could find a use for. Then there were beady pincushions made by seamen, and a stuffed parrot exactly like life, except that one eye was out, and Chinese junks in beautiful carved ivory, and a pagoda (or Chinese temple), and that was of ivory too, and all carved out of one solid block, Miss Patty said. Fina loved the pagoda best of all the curiosities. You could see right into it. It was a tower with seven stories, and it had little gold bells on it that rang when Miss Patty took off the glass case and gently shook the wooden stand. Of course, [Pg 203] Fina was never allowed to shake it herself.

'Where did it come from?' She asked this question every time she was shown the pagoda.

'It came from the Emperor of China's own Summer Palace at Pekin,' Miss Patty always said; 'but my brother Bob never would tell me how he got it.'

Then, when Fina had had a last peep through the windows of the pagoda, the glass case would be put on again, and Fina would be told to 'run along now and play.'

One day she was 'running along and playing' when she met a playfellow. It was a fat foxhound puppy, very clumsy and very affectionate. They had a romp together, and then the puppy blundered off, and Fina went indoors to wash her hands, because the puppy's idea of a romp had been a roll in the dust, which Fina had gladly consented to share.

But as she passed the door of the best parlour she stopped a minute, for the door was open. It was the day for cleaning out the room, but Miss Patty had stopped in the middle of the cleaning to go to the back-door to see a pedlar who had some really wonderful bargains in handkerchiefs and silk dresses, and mixed white pins and [Pg 204] back-hair combs. Fina often wondered afterwards whether that pedlar was a real pedlar or a magician in disguise.

Now, Fina was an obedient little girl. She did *not* slip into the parlour to have a look round just because the door was open and no one was about. But she had not been forbidden to *look* in, if she got the chance, so she stood at the door and looked at the stuffed parrot, and the junk, and the rest of the things; and as she looked she started, and said:

'*Oh!* it will tumble down—I know it will—if a door banged even!'

And just then the front-door *did* bang, and the pagoda trembled; for it was standing at the very edge of the chiffonnier, and one of the little black, carved claw-feet of its stand was actually overhanging the chiffonnier edge.

'I *must* stand it steady,' said Fina. 'If I go and tell Miss Patty it may tumble off before I get back.'

So she went quickly in and took the glass case and stand and pagoda very carefully in her hands to move them back to a safe place.

It was this very moment that the foxhound puppy chose for rushing in—all wriggle [Pg 205] and bark and clumsy paws—and plunging between Fina's feet. She reeled, staggered, and she, the puppy, the stand, the glass case, and the precious pagoda, all went down together in a crushing heap.

When Fina picked herself up the puppy's tail was just disappearing round the door, and at her feet lay a scattered heap of splintered ivory and glass, the hopeless ruins of the beautiful pagoda.

Her heart seemed to stand still, and then began to beat so hard and fast that she felt as though she had a steam-engine in her chest.

Her hands trembled so much that she could hardly pick up the pieces; but she did begin to pick them up.

'Perhaps it could be mended,' she said, 'with glue or white of egg, like nurse did the china basin; only the pieces are so small and chippety, some of them, that I don't see how you could ever fit them together. And Miss Patty will be in in a minute! Oh, I wish I was somebody else and not me! Oh, whatever will she say?'

Among the shivered splinters of ivory the little gold bells were scattered.

'But what's that?' said Fina. 'It's not a bell or——' [Pg 206]

'"Your servant, Miss. Do I understand that you order me to mend this?"'—Page 207.

She picked whatever it was up from among the shattered ivory and glass. It was a gold ring, thick and beautiful, with a strange design on it like on the sides of tea-caddies. She slipped it on her hand to keep it safe while she went on with the dismal work of picking up the pieces. And then, suddenly, the dreadfulness of the deed she had done—though quite the puppy's fault, and not hers at all—came over her. She began to breathe quickly and then to make faces, and in a moment she was sobbing and sniffing, and rubbing her wet eyes with her knuckles, still dirty from her politeness in letting the puppy choose what game she and it should play at.

She was roused from her crying by a voice, and it was not Miss Patty's voice. It said:

'Your servant, miss. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?'

She took her knuckles out of her eyes, and saw, from between her very dirty eyelids, a tall footman who was bowing respectfully before her. He was dressed wonderfully in green satin—his large and lovely legs wore white silk stockings, and his hair was powdered till it was as white as the inside of a newly-sheared fleece.

'Thank you,' said Fina, sobbing, but polite; 'no one can do anything for me, unless they can mend all this, and of course nobody can.' [Pg 207]

'Your servant, miss,' said the footman. 'Do I understand that you order me to mend this?'

'If you can,' said Fina, a ray of hope lighting her blighted existence; 'but, of course ——WHAT?'

The pagoda stood on the table *mended*! Indeed, it seemed as though there had never been any breaking. It was there, safe and sound as it had always been, on its ebony stand, with the shining bubble of its glass case rising dome-like over it.

The footman had vanished.

'*Well!*' said Fina, 'I suppose it was all a waking dream. How horrible! I've read of waking dreams, but I didn't know there were ever waking nightmares. Perhaps I better *had* wash my hands—and my face,' she added, when she saw it, round, red, and streaked with mud (made of dust and tears), in the glass of the chiffonnier.

She dipped her face in fresh water in the willow-patterned basin in her big attic bedroom. Then she washed her hands. And as she began to rub the soap on she heard a noise. [Pg 208]

'Your servant, miss. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?'

And there was that footman again.

'Who are you?' said Fina. 'Why do you follow me about?'

'I am the Slave of the Ring, please, miss,' replied the footman, with another bow. 'And, of course, when you rubs it I appears.'

'The Slave of the Ring?' said Fina, letting the soapsuds drip from her hands to the carpet. 'Do you mean Aladdin's ring?'

'The ring belonged to the gentleman you mentions at one time, miss.'

'But I thought the Slave of the Ring was a genie—a great, foaming, fierce, black slave in a turban.'

'Times is changed, miss,' said the footman. 'In this here civilised country there aren't no slaves, only servants. You have to keep up with the times, even if you're a——'

'But I thought the Slave of the Ring spoke Chinese?'

'So I does, miss, when in that country. But whatever'd be the use of talking Chinese to you?'

'But tell me—oh, there's the dinner-bell! Look here, I wish you'd not keep appearing so suddenly. It does startle me so.' [Pg 209]

'Then don't you go on rubbing the ring sudden, miss. It's that as does it. Nothing I can do for you, miss?'

'Not now,' said Fina, and he vanished as she spoke.

When Fina sat down to dinner in the farm kitchen—a very nice dinner it was, boiled pork and beans, and a treacle-tart to follow—she picked up her horn-handled knife and fork and clutched them hard. They felt real enough. But the footman—she must have dreamed him, and the ring. She had left the ring in the dressing-table drawer upstairs, for fear she should rub it accidentally. She knew what a start it would give Miss Patty and the farmer if a genie footman suddenly appeared from nowhere and stood behind their chairs at dinner.

Miss Patty seemed very cheerful.

'It *was* a piece of luck, father, wasn't it, that pedlar wanting Chinese things? He gave me two pieces of broadcloth that'll cut into three or four coats for you, and a length of black silk that rich it'll stand alone, and ten pounds in gold, and half a dozen silk neck-squares.' [Pg 210]

'Yes,' said the farmer, 'it was a good bargain for you; and Bob give you the pagoda, and you've a right to do as you like with your own.'

'Oh, Miss Patty,' said Fina, 'you've never been and sold the pagoda—the beautiful, darling pagoda?'

'Yes, I have, dear; but never mind, I'll buy you a new doll out of the money I got for it.'

'Thank you,' said Fina; but the pork and beans did not taste so nice now she knew that the pretty pagoda was sold. Also she was rather worried about the ring. Ought she to keep it? She had found it, of course, but someone must have lost it. Yet she couldn't bear to give it up, when she hadn't made the slave of it do a single thing for her, except to mend the pagoda.

After dinner Fina went and got the ring. She was very careful not to rub it till she was safe and alone in a quiet green nook in the little wood at the end of the garden, where the hazels and sweet chestnuts and hornbeams grew so closely that she was quite hidden.

Then she rubbed the ring, and instantly the footman was there. But there was no room for him to stand up under the thicket, so he appeared kneeling, and trying to bow in that position. [Pg 211]

'Then it's not a dream?' said she.

'How often I have heard them very words!' said the Slave of the Ring.

'I want you to tell me things,' said Fina. 'Do sit down; you look so uncomfortable like that.'

'Thank you, miss,' said the footman; 'you're very thoughtful for a child of your age, and of this age, too! Service ain't what it was.'

'Now, tell me,' she said, 'where did the ring come from?'

'There's seven secrets I ain't allowed to tell,' the footman said, 'and that there what you asked me's one of them; but the ring's as old as old—I can tell you that.'

'But I mean where did it come from just now—when I found it?'

'Oh, *then*. Why, it come out of the pagoda, of course. The floor of the third story was made double, and the ring was stuck between the floor of that and the ceiling of the second floor, and when you smashed the pagoda o' course it rolled out. The pagoda was made o' purpose to take care of the ring.'

'Who made it?' asked Fina.

'I did,' said the genie proudly.

'And now,' said Fina, 'what shall we do?' [Pg 212]

'Excuse me,' the footman said firmly; 'one thing I'm *not* bound to do is to give advice.'

'But you'll do anything else I tell you?'

'Yes, miss—almost anything. I'll talk to you willing, I will, and tell you my life's sorrows.'

'I should like that some other time,' said Fina, 'but just now, perhaps, you'd better get me a doll.'

And a doll lay at her feet among the dead leaves. It was a farthing Dutch doll.

'You didn't say what sort of a doll,' said the footman, when she had rubbed the ring and he had reappeared, and she had reproached him. 'I've been in service long enough to do exactly what I am told. My life-sorrow has been——'

'I say,' Fina said suddenly, 'can't you get the pagoda back for me?'

Instantly the pagoda was there and the footman was not. Fina spent the afternoon playing with the beautiful ivory toy, but when it was tea-time she had to ask the genie footman to take it away again, for she dared not face the questions and she could not invent the explanations that would have followed if she had turned up at the house with the pagoda under her arm.

You will think that Fina ought to have been the happiest of little girls, now that she [Pg 213] had a genie footman Slave of the Ring in a green coat to get her anything she wanted, and run her errands on his beautiful balustrade-like white silk legs. But this was not so.

It was all very well to go into the wood every day and make the footman fetch her the most beautiful dolls and toys and sweets, but even sweets are dull if you eat them alone; and what is the use of toys, or even pagodas, if you have no one to show them to, and dare not have them except in a secret corner of the wood?

She tried to get the footman to play with her, but he said that was a little more than anyone could expect, and began again about his sorrows; and as for getting him to take any interest in the wonderful things he fetched for her, she felt at once that these were nothing to a genie footman with such a jewelled and exciting past as his.

She was not a very clever little girl. She wished for a white pony, and, of course, it came, but there was no room for it in the wood, and it walked on her foot and tried to bite her, and she hastily had to send it away. She wished for a pet lamb, but it baaed so loudly that she was almost discovered by the farmer, so that had to go too. And [Pg 214] she had been wishing for these vain and unsatisfying things for more than a week before she thought of asking for a little girl to play with.

'The little girl had slapped Fina and taken the pagoda away.'—Page 214.

The genie brought a little girl at once, but she was a horrid little girl, with a red pigtail and a green frock trimmed with black bead trimming, and she broke the toys and laughed at Fina when she tried to tell her the story of the pagoda and the Ring Slave. Also there was no room to play in the secret nook in the wood, and when the little girl had slapped Fina and taken the pagoda away from her it seemed best to ask the genie to take the little girl herself away. Fina never saw her again, and never wanted to either!

At last Fina knew that what she really wanted was not only someone to play with, but a good place to play in, so she shut her eyes and thought—as hard as a not very clever person of eight can think—and then she rubbed the ring and said:

'Please take me somewhere where there is a little girl who will play with me, a nice little girl, and room to play in.'

And at once the wood vanished—like a magic-lantern picture when the kind clergyman who is showing it changes the slide—and she was in a strange room. [Pg 215]

It was a nursery—very large and light. There were flowers at the window, and pictures on the walls, and many toys. And on a couch, covered with a bright green rug with yellow daisies embroidered on it, lay a little girl with pretty yellow hair and kind, merry blue eyes.

'*Oh!*' said the little girl, very much astonished.

'*Oh!*' said Fina, at the same minute, and with the same quantity of astonishment.

'I've come to play with you, if you'll let me,' said Fina.

'How lovely! But how did you get in?'

'The Slave of the Ring brought me.'

'The Slave of the Ring! How wonderful!'

'Yes, isn't it? What's your name?'

'Ella.'

'Mine's Fina. Wouldn't you like to see my Ring Slave, Ella?'

'Yes—oh yes!' Ella was laughing softly.

Fina rubbed the ring and the footman genie appeared, his silk legs more beautifully silk than ever.

'Please fetch the pagoda.'

The pagoda toppled on to the couch, and the genie vanished, as he always did when he had executed an order. [Pg 216]

When Ella had admired the pagoda, which she did very thoroughly and satisfyingly, she said:

'And now I'll show you *mine*!'

She pulled a battered iron thing from under her pillow and rubbed it. Instantly a very grand stout gentleman in evening dress stood before them. He had most respectable whiskers, and he said:

'What can I do for you, madam?'

'Who is it?' whispered Fina.

'It's the Slave of the Lamp,' said Ella. 'He says he's disguised as a perfect butler because times have changed so since *his* time.'

'Send him away,' said Fina.

'Oh, dear Ella,' she went on, when they were alone, 'tell me all about yours, and I'll tell you all about mine.'

'Well,' said Ella, 'I found the lamp at the seaside, just before I hurt my back. I fell off the sea-wall, you know, and I shan't be able to walk for ever so long. And one day I rubbed it by accident, and since then my beautiful perfect butler gets me anything I want. Look here, I'll tell him to make it like it was yesterday.' [Pg 217]

The lamp was rubbed, the order given, and the nursery became a palace hall hung with cloth of gold and blazing with jewels and softly-coloured lamps.

'But can't your butler cure your back?'

'No. Time is the only genie who can do that, my butler says. You don't know how I've wanted someone to show it all to! But I never thought of wishing for you. It's only a week since I found the lamp——'

'Do they leave you alone all the time?'

'Oh no, only when I say I'm sleepy; and my butler has orders to change everything to ordinary directly the door-handle turns.'

'Have you told anyone?'

'Oh *no*! My butler says if you tell anyone grown-up that you've got the lamp it will vanish away. I can't remember whether it's like that in the "Arabian Nights"; perhaps it's a new rule.'

The two little girls talked all the afternoon about the wonderful things they would make their slaves do for them, and they were so contented with each other's company that they never once called on their slaves for anything.

But when Fina began to feel the inside feeling that means teatime, she rubbed the ring for her slave to take her back to the farm. [Pg 218]

'"We'll see if you are going to begin a-ordering of me about."'—Page 219.

'I'll get my slave to take me to see you home,' said Ella. 'He can carry me quite without hurting me.'

So she rubbed the lamp, and the stately butler instantly appeared.

'Please——' Ella began; but the glorious butler interrupted.

'James,' he said to the footman, 'what are you doing here?'

'I'm in service with this young lady, Mr. Lamp, sir.'

'Give me the ring, James.'

And instantly the footman took the ring, very gently but quite irresistibly, from Fina's finger, and handed it to the butler.

'Oh *no*!' Fina cried, 'you've no right to take my ring. And he's no right to obey you. He's *my* slave.'

'Excuse me, madam,' said the butler, looking more and more perfect, and more and more the sort of person who is sure to know best, 'he is not *your* slave. He is the Slave of the Ring. But then, you see, he is a footman, and footmen have to obey butlers all the world over.'

'That's so, miss,' said the footman; 'but the lamp's stronger than the ring.' He snatched up the lamp. 'Now, then,' he said, turning fiercely to the butler, 'we'll see if you're going to begin a-orderin' of me about!' [Pg 219]

The butler so far forgot himself as to scratch his head thoughtfully.

'Yes,' he said, after a pause; 'I've got to own that you've got the better of me there, James Rings. But why dispute—which is beneath the dignity of a six-foot footman like yourself, to say nothing of the dignity of a butler, which is a thing words can't do justice to? You're my slave because I've got the ring and because I'm a butler and you're a footman. And I'm your slave because you've got the lamp. It's half a dozen of one and six and a half of the other. Can't we come to some agreement between ourselves, James?'

'Oh,' cried Ella, 'what about *us*?'

'We are excessively sorry to cause any inconvenience, madam,' said the butler, 'but we give you five minutes' notice. We are leaving service for good.'

'Oh, Lamps!' cried Ella. 'And you were always such a beautiful butler. I thought you enjoyed being it.' [Pg 220]

'Don't you make any mistake, miss,' the footman put in. 'Nobody *enjoys* being in service, though they has to put up with it. Me and Mr. Lamps is retiring from service. Perhaps we may take a little business and go into partnership, and always wishing you well, young ladies both.'

'But,' said Fina, 'you *can't* go and leave me here! Why, I should never get home. I don't so much as know what county I'm in.'

'You're in Auckland, miss,' said James.

'There isn't such a country.'

'Pardon me, madam,' said the butler, 'there is. In New Zealand.'

'Don't cry, miss,' said James. 'If Mr. Lamps 'll only give the word, I'll take you home.'

'And then I shall never see Ella again.'

'Oh, tell Lamps to rub the ring and tell you to arrange for me to come and live near her in England,' cried Ella; 'if he'll do that I don't care. I'd rather have a friend than twenty slaves.'

'A very proper sentiment, ma'am,' said the butler approvingly. 'Is there any other little thing we could do to oblige you?'

'The pagoda,' said Fina. 'If you could only get it back to Miss Patty, so that she won't [Pg 221] lose the things she sold it for, and won't know about the ring having been in it.'

'Consider it done, madam,' said the Slave of the Lamp, stroking his respectable butlerial whisker. 'Now, if you're ready, your footman shall see you home.'

'Good-bye, oh, good-bye,' said the little girls, kissing each other very much.

Then Fina shut her eyes, and there she was in the wood in Sussex—alone.

'Now, *have* I dreamed it all?' she said, and went slowly home to tea.

The first thing she saw on the tea-table was the pagoda! And the next was a brown-faced sailor eating hot buttered toast in the Windsor armchair.

'Well may you look!' said Miss Patty; 'this is my brother Bob, newly arrived from foreign parts. And he met that pedlar and bought the pagoda off him for two pounds and a highly-coloured cockatoo he was bringing home. And these ten sovereigns the wicked old man gave me are bad ones. But the dresses and the cloth are good. It's a wonderful world!'

Fina thought so too.

Now, the oddest thing about all this is that six months later some new people came [Pg 222] to live in the house next door to the house where Fina lived in Tooting. And those new people came from New Zealand. And one of them was called Ella!

Fina knew her at once, but Ella had forgotten her, and forgotten the beautiful perfect butler and the perfect footman, and the lamp and the ring, and everything. Perhaps a long sea-voyage is bad for the memory. Anyway, the two little girls are close friends, and Ella loves to hear Fina tell the story of the two slaves, though she doesn't believe a word of it.

Fina's father and Ella's father have left Tooting now. They live in lovely houses at Haslemere. And Fina has a white pony and Ella has a brown one. Their fathers are very rich now. They both got situations as managers to branch houses of Messrs. Lamps, Rings, and Co., Electrical Engineers. Mr. Lamps attends to the lighting department, and Mr. Rings is at the head of the bells, which always ring beautifully. And I hear that Ella's father and Fina's father are likely to be taken into partnership. Mr. Bodlett has bought the pagoda, at Fina's earnest request, and it stands on a sideboard in his handsome drawing-room. Fina sometimes asks it whether she really [Pg 223] did dream the whole story or not. But it never says a word.

Of course, you and I know that every word of the story is true. [Pg 224]

THE CHARMED LIFE; OR, THE PRINCESS AND THE LIFT-MAN

There was once a Prince whose father failed in business and lost everything he had in the world—crown, kingdom, money, jewels, and friends. This was because he was so fond of machinery that he was always making working models of things he invented, and so had no time to attend to the duties that Kings are engaged for. So he lost his situation. There is a King in French history who was fond of machinery,

particularly clock-work, and he lost everything too, even his head. The King in this story kept his head, however, and when he wasn't allowed to make laws any more, he was quite contented to go on making machines. And as his machines were a great deal better than his laws had ever been, he soon got a nice little business together, and was able to buy a house in another kingdom, and settle down comfortably with his wife and son. The house was one of those delightful villas called after Queen Anne [Pg 225] (the one whose death is still so often mentioned and so justly deplored), with stained glass to the front-door, and coloured tiles on the front-garden path, and gables where there was never need of gables, and nice geraniums and calceolarias in the front-garden, and pretty red brick on the front of the house. The back of the house was yellow brick, because that did not show so much.

Here the King and the Queen and the Prince lived very pleasantly. The Queen snipped the dead geraniums off with a pair of gold scissors, and did fancy-work for bazaars. The Prince went to the Red-Coat School, and the King worked up his business. In due time the Prince was apprenticed to his father's trade; and a very industrious apprentice he was, and never had anything to do with the idle apprentices who play pitch and toss on tombstones, as you see in Mr. Hogarth's picture.

When the Prince was twenty-one his mother called him to her. She put down the blotting-book she was embroidering for the School Bazaar in tasteful pattern of stocks and nasturtiums, and said: [Pg 226]

'My dear son, you have had the usual coming-of-age presents—silver cigar-case and match-box; a handsome set of brushes, with your initials on the back; a Gladstone bag, also richly initialled; the complete works of Dickens and Thackeray; a Swan fountain-pen mounted in gold; and the heartfelt blessing of your father and mother. But there is still one more present for you.'

'You are too good, mamma,' said the Prince, fingering the nasturtium-coloured silks.

'Don't fidget,' said the Queen, 'and listen to me. When you were a baby a fairy, who was your godmother, gave you a most valuable present—a Charmed Life. As long as you keep it safely, nothing can harm you.'

'How delightful!' said the Prince. 'Why, mamma, you might have let me go to sea when I wanted to. It would have been quite safe.'

'Yes, my dear,' said the Queen, 'but it's best to be careful. I have taken care of your life all these years, but now you are old enough to take care of it for yourself. Let me advise you to keep it in a safe place. You should never carry valuables about on your person.'

And then she handed the Charmed Life over to him, and he took it and kissed her, and thanked her for the pretty present, and went away and hid it. He took a brick out [Pg 227] of the wall of the villa, and hid his Life behind it. The bricks in the walls of these Queen Anne villas generally come out quite easily.

Now, the father of the Prince had been King of Bohemia, so, of course, the Prince was called Florizel, which is their family name; but when the King went into business he went in as Rex Bloomsbury, and his great patent Lightning Lift Company called itself R. Bloomsbury and Co., so that the Prince was known as F. Bloomsbury, which was as near as the King dared go to 'Florizel, Prince of Bohemia.' His mother, I am sorry to say, called him Florrie till he was quite grown up.

Now, the King of the country where Florizel lived was a very go-ahead sort of man, and as soon as he heard that there were such things as lifts—which was not for a long time, because no one ever lets a King know anything if it can be helped—he ordered one of the very, very best for his palace. Next day a card was brought in by one of the palace footmen. It had on it: 'Mr. F. Bloomsbury, R. Bloomsbury and Co.'

'Show him in,' said the King. [Pg 228]

'Good-morning, sire,' said Florizel, bowing with that perfect grace which is proper to Princes.

'Good-morning, young man,' said the King. 'About this lift, now.'

'Yes, sire. May I ask how much your Majesty is prepared to——'

'Oh, never mind price,' said the King; 'it all comes out of the taxes.'

'I should think, then, that Class A ... our special Argentinella design—white satin cushions, woodwork overlaid with ivory and inset with pearls, opals, and silver.'

'Gold,' said the King shortly.

'Not with pearls and ivory,' said Florizel firmly. He had excellent taste. 'The gold pattern—we call it the Anriradia—is inlaid with sapphires, emeralds, and black diamonds.'

'I'll have the gold pattern,' said the King; 'but you might run up a little special lift for the Princess's apartments. I dare say she'd like that Argentinella pattern—"Simple and girlish," I see it says in your circular.'

So Florizel booked the order, and the gold and sapphire and emerald lift was made and fixed, and all the Court was so delighted that it spent its whole time in going up and down in the lift, and there had to be new blue satin cushions within a week. [Pg 229]

Then the Prince superintended the fixing of the Princess's lift—the Argentinella design—and the Princess Candida herself came to look on at the works; and she and Florizel met, and their eyes met, and their hands met, because his caught hers, and dragged her back just in time to save her from being crushed by a heavy steel bar that was being lowered into its place.

'Why, you've saved my life,' said the Princess.

But Florizel could say nothing. His heart was beating too fast, and it seemed to be beating in his throat, and not in its proper place behind his waistcoat.

'Who are you?' said the Princess.

'I'm an engineer,' said the Prince.

'Oh dear!' said the Princess, 'I thought you were a Prince. I'm sure you look more like a Prince than any Prince *I've* ever seen.'

'I wish I was a Prince,' said Florizel; 'but I never wished it till three minutes ago.'

The Princess smiled, and then she frowned, and then she went away.

Florizel went straight back to the office, where his father, Mr. Rex Bloomsbury, was busy at his knee-hole writing-table. [Pg 230]

He spent the morning at the office, and the afternoon in the workshop.

'Father,' he said, 'I don't know what ever will become of me. I wish I was a Prince!'

The King and Queen of Bohemia had never let their son know that he was a Prince; for what is the use of being a Prince if there's never going to be a kingdom for you?

Now, the King, who was called R. Bloomsbury, Esq., looked at his son over his spectacles and said:

'Why?'

'Because I've been and gone and fallen head over ears in love with the Princess Candida.'

The father rubbed his nose thoughtfully with his fountain pen.

'Humph!' he said; 'you've fixed your choice high.'

'Choice!' cried the Prince distractedly. 'There wasn't much choice about it. She just looked at me, and there I was, don't you know? I didn't *want* to fall in love like this. Oh, father, it hurts most awfully! What ever shall I do?'

After a long pause, full of thought, his father replied: [Pg 231]

'Bear it, I suppose.'

'But I *can't* bear it—at least, not unless I can see her every day. Nothing else in the world matters in the least.'

'Dear me!' said his father.

'Couldn't I disguise myself as a Prince, and try to make her like me a little?'

'The disguise you suggest is quite beyond our means at present.'

'Then I'll disguise myself as a lift attendant,' said Florizel.

And what is more, he did it. His father did not interfere. He believed in letting young people manage their own love affairs.

So that when the lift was finished, and the Princess and her ladies crowded round to make the first ascent in it, there was Florizel dressed in white satin knee-breeches, and coat with mother-o'-pearl buttons. He had silver buckles to his shoes, and a tiny opal breast-pin on the lappet of his coat, where the white flower goes at weddings.

When the Princess saw him she said:

'Now, none of you girls are to go in the lift at all, mind! It's *my* lift. You can use the other one, or go up the mother-of-pearl staircase, as usual.' [Pg 232]

Then she stepped into the lift, and the silver doors clicked, and the lift went up, just carrying her and him.

She had put on a white silky gown, to match the new lift, and she, too, had silver buckles on her shoes, and a string of pearls round her throat, and a silver chain set with opals in her dark hair; and she had a bunch of jasmine flowers at her neck. As the lift went out of sight the youngest lady-in-waiting whispered:

'What a pretty pair! Why, they're made for each other! What a pity he's a lift-man! He looks exactly like a Prince.'

'Hold your tongue, silly!' said the eldest lady-in-waiting, and slapped her.

The Princess went up and down in the lift all the morning, and when at last she had to step out of it because the palace luncheon-bell had rung three times, and the roast peacock was getting cold, the eldest lady-in-waiting noticed that the Lift-man had a jasmine flower fastened to his coat with a little opal pin.

The eldest lady-in-waiting kept a sharp eye on the Princess, but after that first day the Princess only seemed to go up and down in the lift when it was really necessary, and then she always took the youngest lady-in-waiting with her; so that though the [Pg 233] Lift-man always had a flower in his buttonhole, there was no reason to suppose it had not been given him by his mother.

'I suppose I'm a silly, suspicious little thing,' said the eldest lady-in-waiting. 'Of course, it was the lift that amused her, just at first. How *could* a Princess be interested in a lift-man?'

Now, when people are in love, and want to be quite certain that they are loved in return, they will take any risks to find out what they want to know. But as soon as they are *quite sure* they begin to be careful.

And after those seventy-five ups and downs in the lift, on the first day, the Princess no longer had any doubt that she was beloved by the Lift-man. Not that he had said a word about it, but she was a clever Princess, and she had seen how he picked up the jasmine flower she let fell, and kissed it when she pretended she wasn't looking, and he pretended he didn't know she was. Of course, she had been in love with him ever since they met, and their eyes met, and their hands. She told herself it was because he had saved her life, but that wasn't the real reason at all.

So, being quite sure, she began to be careful. [Pg 234]

'Since he really loves me he'll find a way to tell me so, right out. It's his part, not mine, to make everything possible,' she said.

As for Florizel, he was quite happy. He saw her every day, and every day when he took his place in his lift there was a fresh jasmine flower lying on the satin cushion. And he pinned it into his buttonhole and wore it there all day, and thought of his lady, and of how that first wonderful day she had dropped a jasmine flower, and how he had picked it up when she pretended she was not looking, and he was pretending that he did not know she was. But all the same he wanted to know exactly how that jasmine flower came there every day, and whose hand brought it. It might be the youngest lady-in-waiting, but Florizel didn't think so.

So he went to the palace one morning bright and early, much earlier than usual, and there was no jasmine flower. Then he hid behind one of the white velvet window-curtains of the corridor and waited. And, presently, who should come stealing along on the tips of her pink toes—so as to make no noise at all—but the Princess herself, fresh as the morning in a white muslin frock with a silver ribbon round her darling [Pg 235] waist, and a bunch of jasmine at her neck. She took one of the jasmine flowers and kissed it and laid it on the white satin seat of the lift, and when she stepped back there was the Lift-man.

'Oh!' said Candida, and blushed like a child that is caught in mischief.

'Oh!' said Florizel, and he picked up the jasmine and kissed it many times.

'Why do you do that?' said the Princess.

'Because you did,' said the Prince. 'I saw you. Do you want to go on pretending any more?'

The Princess did not know what to say, so she said nothing.

Florizel came and stood quite close to her.

'I used to wish I was a Prince,' he said, 'but I don't now. I'd rather be an engineer. If I'd been a Prince I should never have seen you.'

'I don't want you to be a bit different,' said the Princess. And she stooped to smell the jasmine in his buttonhole.

'So we're betrothed,' said Florizel.

'Are we?' said Candida.

'Aren't we?' he said.

'Well, yes, I suppose we are,' said she. [Pg 236]

'Very well, then,' said Florizel, and he kissed the Princess.

'You're sure you don't mind marrying an engineer?' he said, when she had kissed him back.

'Of course not,' said the Princess.

'Then I'll buy the ring,' said he, and kissed her again.

Then she gave him the rest of the jasmine, with a kiss for each star, and he gave her a little keepsake in return, and they parted.

'My heart is yours,' said Florizel, 'and my life is in your hands.'

'My life is yours,' said she, 'and my heart is in your heart.'

Now, I am sorry to say that somebody had been listening all the time behind another curtain, and when the Princess had gone to her breakfast and the Lift-man had gone down in his lift, this somebody came out and said, 'Aha!'

It was a wicked, ugly, disagreeable, snub-nosed page-boy, who would have liked to marry the Princess himself. He had really no chance, and never could have had, because his father was only a rich brewer. But he felt himself to be much superior to a lift-man. And he was the kind of boy who always sneaks if he has half a chance. So [Pg 237] he went and told the King that he had seen the Princess kissing the Lift-man in the morning all bright and early.

The King said he was a lying hound, and put him in prison at once for mentioning such a thing—which served him right.

Then the King thought it best to find out for himself whether the snub-nosed page-boy had spoken the truth.

So he watched in the morning all bright and early, and he saw the Princess come stealing along on the tips of her little pink toes, and the lift (Argentinella design) came up, and the Lift-man in it. And the Princess gave him kissed jasmine to put in his buttonhole.

So the King jumped out on them and startled them dreadfully. And Florizel was locked up in prison, and the Princess was locked up in her room with only the eldest lady-in-waiting to keep her company. And the Princess cried all day and all night. And she managed to hide the keepsake the Prince had given her. She hid it in a little book of verses. And the eldest lady saw her do it. Florizel was condemned to be executed for having wanted to marry someone so much above him in station. But when the axe fell on his neck the axe flew to pieces, and the neck was not hurt at all. [Pg 238] So they sent for another axe and tried again. And again the axe splintered and flew. And when they picked up the bits of the axe they had all turned to leaves of poetry books.

So they put off the execution till next day.

The gaoler told the snub-nosed page all about it when he took him his dinner of green water and mouldering crusts.

'Couldn't do the trick!' said the gaoler. 'Two axes broke off short and the bits turned to rubbish. The executioner says the rascal has a Charmed Life.'

'Of course he has,' said the ugly page, sniffing at the crusts with his snub-nose. 'I know all about that, but I shan't tell unless the King gives me a free pardon and something fit to eat. Roast pork and onion stuffing, I think. And you can tell him so.'

So the gaoler told the King. And the King gave the snub-nosed page the pardon and the pork, and then the page said:

'He has a Charmed Life. I heard him tell the Princess so. And what is more, he gave it to her to keep. And she said she'd hide it in a safe place!'

Then the King told the eldest lady-in-waiting to watch, and she did watch, and saw [Pg 239] the Princess take Florizel's Charmed Life and hide it in a bunch of jasmine. So she took the jasmine and gave it to the King, and he burnt it. But the Princess had not left the Life in the jasmine.

Then they tried to hang Florizel, because, of course, he had an ordinary life as well as a charmed one, and the King wished him to be without any life at all.

Thousands of people crowded to see the presumptuous Lift-man hanged, and the execution lasted the whole morning, and seven brand new ropes were wasted one after the other, and they all left off being ropes and turned into long wreaths of jasmine, which broke into bits rather than hang such a handsome Lift-man.

The King was furious. But he was not too furious to see that the Princess must have taken the Charmed Life out from the jasmine flowers, and put it somewhere else, when the eldest lady was not looking.

And it turned out afterwards that the Princess had held Florizel's life in her hand all the time the execution was going on. The eldest lady-in-waiting was clever, but she was not so clever as the Princess. [Pg 240]

The next morning the eldest lady brought the Princess's silver mirror to the King.

'The Charmed Life is in that, your Majesty,' she said. 'I saw the Princess put it in.'

And so she had, but she had not seen the Princess take it out again almost directly afterwards.

The King smashed the looking-glass, and gave orders that poor Florizel was to be drowned in the palace fishpond.

So they tied big stones to his hands and feet and threw him in. And the stones changed to corks and held him up, and he swam to land, and when they arrested him as he landed they found that on each of the corks there was a beautiful painting of Candida's face, as she saw it every morning in her mirror.

Now, the King and Queen of Bohemia, Florizel's father and mother, had gone to Margate for a fortnight's holiday.

'We will have a thorough holiday,' said the King; 'we will forget the world, and not even look at a newspaper.'

But on the third day they both got tired of forgetting the world, and each of them secretly bought a newspaper and read it on the beach, and each rushed back and met the other on the steps of the boarding-house where they were staying. And the Queen began to cry, and the King took her in his arms on the doorstep, to the horror of the other boarders, who were looking out of the windows at them; and then they rushed off to the railway station, leaving behind them their luggage and the astonished boarders, and took a special train to town. Because the King had read in his newspaper, and the Queen in hers, that the Lift-man was being executed every morning from nine to twelve; and though, so far, none of the executions had ended fatally, yet at any moment the Prince's Charmed Life might be taken, and then there would be an end of the daily executions—a very terrible end. [Pg 241]

Arrived at the capital, the poor Queen of Bohemia got into a hansom with the King, and they were driven to the palace. The palace-yard was crowded.

'What is the matter?' the King of Bohemia asked.

'It's that Lift-man,' said a bystander, with spectacles and a straw hat; 'he has as many lives as a cat. They tried boiling oil this morning, and the oil turned into white-rose leaves, and the fire under it turned to a white-rose bush. And now the King has sent for Princess Candida, and is going to have it out with her. The whole thing has been most exciting.' [Pg 242]

'I should think so,' said the Lift-man's father.

'Of course,' said the bystander in spectacles, 'everyone who has read any history knows that Lift-men don't have charmed lives. But our King never would learn history, so he doesn't see that of course the Lift-man is a Prince disguised. The question is, Will he find out in time? I can't think why the Lift-man doesn't own his Princishness, and have done with it.'

'Perhaps he doesn't know it himself,' said the King of Bohemia.

He gave his arm to his wife, and they managed to squeeze through to the great council hall, where the King of that country sat on his gold throne, surrounded by lords-in-waiting, judges in wigs, and other people in other things.

Florizel was there loaded with chains, and standing in a very noble attitude at one corner of the throne steps. At the other stood the Princess, looking across at her lover with her dear gray eyes.

'Now,' said the King, 'I am tired of diplomacy and tact, and the eldest lady-in-waiting is less of a Sherlock Holmes than I thought her, so let us be straightforward and honest. Have you got a Charmed Life?' [Pg 243]

'I haven't exactly got it,' said Florizel. 'My life is not my own now.'

'Did he give it to you?' the King asked his daughter.

'I cannot tell a lie, father,' said the Princess, just as though her name had been George Washington instead of Candida; 'he did give it to me.'

'What have you done with it?'

'I have hidden it in different places. I have saved it; he saved mine once.'

'Where is it?' asked her father, 'as you so justly observe you cannot tell a lie.'

'If I tell you,' said the Princess, 'will you give your Royal word that the execution you have ordered for this morning shall be really the last? You can destroy the object that I have hidden his Charmed Life in, and then you can destroy him. But you must promise me not to ask me to hide his Life in any new place, because I am tired of hide-and-seek.'

All the judges and lords-in-waiting and people felt really sorry for the Princess, for they thought all these executions had turned her brain. [Pg 244]

'I give you my Royal word,' said the King upon his throne. 'I won't ask you to hide his Life any more. Indeed, I was against the practice from the first. Now, where have you hidden his Life?'

'In my heart,' said the Princess, brave and clear, so that everyone heard her in the big hall. 'You can't take his Life without taking mine, and if you take mine you may as well take his, for he won't care to go on living without me.'

She sprang across the throne steps to Florizel, and his fetters jangled as she threw her arms round him.

'Dear me!' said the King, rubbing his nose with his sceptre; 'this is very awkward.'

The Princess laughed happily.

'Oh, my clever Princess,' whispered Florizel; 'you're as clever as you're dear, and as dear as you're beautiful.'

There was a silence.

'Well, really,' said the King, 'I don't quite see——'

The father and mother of Florizel had wriggled and wormed their way through the crowd to a front place, and now the father spoke. [Pg 245]

'Your Majesty, allow me. Perhaps I can assist your decision.'

'Oh, all right,' said the King upon his throne; 'go ahead. I'm struck all of a heap.'

'You see before you,' said the King of Bohemia, 'one known to the world of science and of business as R. Bloomsbury, inventor and patenter of many mechanical novelties—among others the Patent Lightning Lift—now formed into a company of which I am the chairman. The young Lift-man—whose fetters are most clumsily designed, if you will pardon my saying so—is my son.'

'Of course he's somebody's son,' said the King upon his throne.

'Well, he happens to be mine, and I gather that you do not think him a good enough match for your daughter.'

'Without wishing to hurt your feelings——' began Candida's father.

'Exactly. Well, know, O King on your throne, and everyone else, that this young Lift-man is no other than Florizel, Prince of Bohemia. I am the King of Bohemia, and this is my Queen.'

As he spoke he took his crown out of his pocket and put it on. His wife took off her bonnet and got her crown out of her reticule and put that on, and Florizel's crown was handed to the Princess, who fitted it on for him, because his hands were awkward with chains. [Pg 246]

'Your most convincing explanation alters everything,' said the King upon his throne, and he came down to meet the visitors. 'Bless you, my children! Strike off his chains, can't you? I hope there's no ill-feeling, Florizel,' he added, turning to the Prince; 'you see, an engineer is only an engineer, whereas a Prince is a Prince, be he never so disinherited. Will half an hour from now suit you for the wedding?'

So they were married, and they still live very happily. They will live as long as is good for them, and when Candida dies Florizel will die too, because she still carries his Life in her heart. [Pg 247]

BILLY THE KING

'Now, William,' said Billy King's great-uncle, 'you are old enough to earn your own living, so I shall find you a nice situation in an office, and you will not return to school.'

The blood of Billy King ran cold in his veins. He looked out over the brown wire blinds into Claremont Square, Pentonville, which was where his uncle lived, and the tears came into his eyes; for, though his uncle thought he was old enough to earn his own living, he was still young enough to hate the idea of having to earn it in an office, where he would never do anything, or make anything, or see anything, but only add up dull figures from year's end to year's end.

'I don't care,' said Billy to himself. 'I'll run away and get a situation on my own—something interesting. I wonder if I could learn how to be a pirate captain or a highwayman?' [Pg 248]

And next morning Billy got up very early, before anyone was about, and ran away.

He ran till he was out of breath and then he walked, and he walked till he was out of patience, and then he ran again, and between walking and running he came at last plump up to the door of a shop. And over the shop there were big painted letters saying, 'Registry office for all sorts of persons out of employment.'

'I'm out of employment, anyway,' said he. The window of the shop had big green-baize-shutter sort of things in them, with white cards fastened on to them with drawing-pins, and on the cards were written the kind of persons out of employment the registry office had got places for. And in the very first one he read there was his own name—King!

'I've come to the right shop,' said Billy, and he read the card through. 'Good general King wanted. Must be used to the business.'

'That's not me, I'm afraid,' thought Billy, 'because whatever a general King's business is I can't be used to it till I've tried it.'

The next was: 'Good steady King wanted. Must be quick, willing, and up to his work.'

'I'm willing enough,' said Billy, 'and I'm quick enough—at any rate, at fives or footer —but I don't know what a steady King's work is.' So he looked at another card. [Pg 249]

'Wanted, respectable King to take entire charge of Parliament, and to assist in Cabinet Councils and Reform of the Army, to open Bazaars and Schools of Art, and make himself generally useful.'

Billy shook his head.

'I think that must be a very hard place,' said he.

The next was: 'Competent Queen wanted; economical and good manager.'

'Whatever else I am I'm not a Queen,' said Billy, and he was just turning sadly away, when he saw a little card stuck away in the right-hand top corner of the baize field.

'Hard-working King wanted; no objection to one who has not been out before.'

'I can but try,' said Billy, and he opened the door of the registry office and walked in.

Inside there were several desks. At the first desk a lion with a pen behind its ear was dictating to a unicorn, who was writing in a series of Blue-books with his horn. Billy noticed that the horn had been sharpened to a nice point, like a lead pencil when the drawing-master does it for you as a favour. [Pg 250]

'I think you want a King?' said Billy timidly.

'No, we don't,' said the lion, and it turned on him so quickly that Billy was sorry he had spoken. 'The situation is filled, young man, and we're thoroughly suited.'

Billy was turning away, much dispirited, when the unicorn said: 'Try some of the others.'

So he went on to the next desk, where a frog sat sadly. But it only wanted Presidents; and at the next desk an eagle told him that only Emperors were wanted, and those very seldom. It was not till he got to the very end of the long room that Billy found a desk where a fat pig in spectacles sat reading a cookery-book.

'Do you want a King?' said Billy. 'I've not been out before.'

'Then you're the King for us,' said the pig, shutting the cookery-book with a bang. 'Hard-working, I suppose, as the notice says?'

'I think I should be,' said Billy, adding, honestly, 'especially if I liked the work.'

The pig gave him a square of silver parchment and said, 'That's the address.'

On the parchment was written:

'Kingdom of Plurimiregia. Billy King, Respectable Monarch. Not been out before.' [Pg 251]

'You'd better go by post,' said the pig. 'The five o'clock post will do.'

'But why—but how—where is it?' asked Billy.

'I don't know where it is,' said the pig, 'but the Post-Office knows everything. As to how—why, you just tie a label round your neck and post yourself in the nearest letter-box. As to why, that's a silly question, really, your Majesty. Don't you know the Post-Office always takes charge of the Royal males?'

Billy was just putting the address carefully away in what would have been his watch-pocket if he had had any relation in the world except a great-uncle, when the swing door opened gently and a little girl came in. She looked at the lion and unicorn and the other busy beasts behind their desks, and she did not seem to like the look of them. She looked up the long room and she saw Billy, and she came straight up to him and said:

'Please I want a situation as Queen. It says in the window previous experience not required.'

She was a very shabby little girl, with a clean, round, rosy face, and she looked as little like a Queen with previous experience as anybody could possibly have done. [Pg 252]

'I'm not the registry office, my good kid,' said Billy.

And the pig said, 'Try the next desk.'

Behind the next desk sat a lizard, but it was so large it was more like an alligator, only with a less unpleasant expression about the mouth.

'Speak to him,' said the pig, as the lizard leaned forward on his front paws like a draper's assistant when he says, 'What's the next article?'

'I don't like to,' said the little girl.

'Nonsense, you little duffer!' said Billy kindly; 'he won't eat you.'

'Are you sure?' said the little girl very earnestly.

Then Billy said, 'Look here, I'm a King, and so I've got a situation. Are you a Queen?'

'My name's Eliza Macqueen,' said the little girl. 'I suppose that's near enough.'

'Well, then,' said Billy to the lizard, 'will she do?'

'Perfectly, I should say,' replied the lizard, with a smile that did not become him very well. 'Here is the address.' He gave it to her; it read:

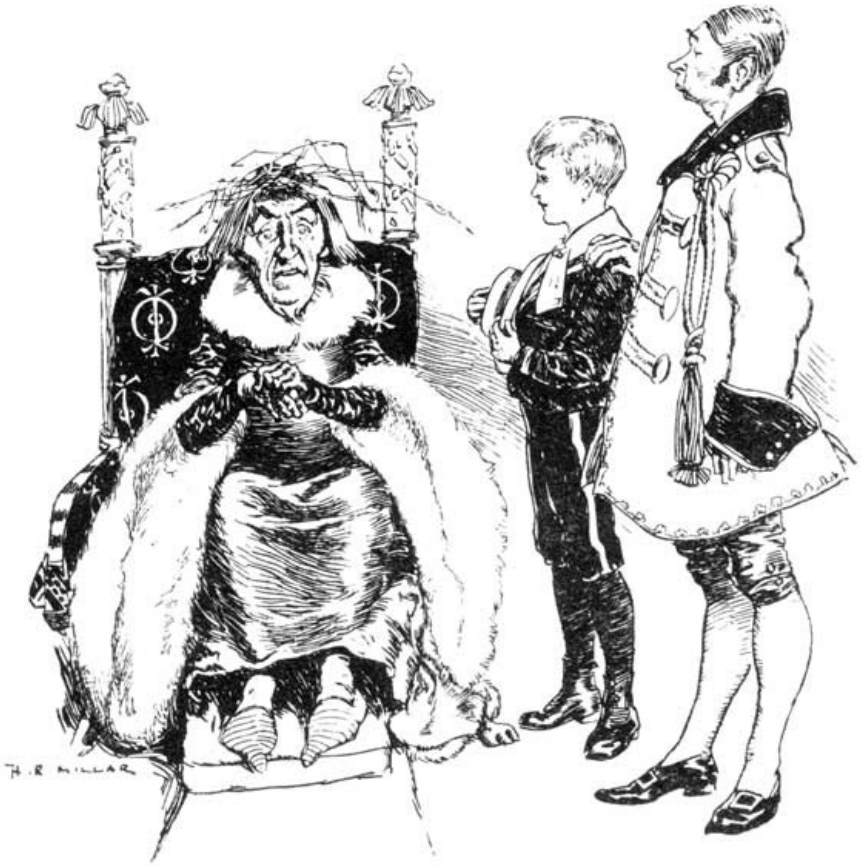
'Kingdom of Allexanassa. Queen, not been out before; willing, obliging, and anxious to learn.' [Pg 253]

'Your kingdoms,' he added, 'are next door to each other.'

'So we shall see each other often,' said Billy. 'Cheer up! We might travel together, perhaps.'

'No,' said the pig; 'Queens go by railway. A Queen has to begin to get used to her train as soon as she can. Now, run along, do. My friend here will see her off.'

'You're sure they won't eat me?' said Eliza—and Billy was certain they wouldn't, though he didn't know why. So he said, 'Good-bye. I hope you'll get on in your new place,' and off he went to buy a penny luggage label at the expensive stationer's three doors down the street on the right-hand side. And when he had addressed the label and tied it round his neck, he posted himself honourably at the General Post-Office. The rest of the letters in the box made a fairly comfortable bed, and Billy fell asleep. When he awoke he was being delivered by the early morning postman at the Houses of Parliament in the capital of Plurimiregia, and the Houses of Parliament were just being opened for the day. The air of Plurimiregia was clear and blue, very [Pg 254] different from the air of Claremont Square, Pentonville. The hills and woods round the town looked soft and green, from the hill in the middle of the town where the Parliament Houses stood. The town itself was small and very pretty, like one of the towns in old illuminated books, and it had a great wall all round it, and orange trees growing on the wall. Billy wondered whether it was forbidden to pick the oranges.



'"Come by post, your Lordship," said the footman.'—Page 255.

When Parliament was opened by the footman whose business it was, Billy said:

'Please, I've come about the place——'

'The King's or the cook's?' asked the footman.

Billy was rather angry.

'Now, do I look like a cook?' he said.

'The question is, do you look like a King?' said the footman.

'If I get the place you will be sorry for this,' said Billy.

'If you get the place you won't keep it long' said the footman. 'It's not worth while being disagreeable; there's not time to do it properly in. Come along in.'

Billy went along in, and the footman led him into the presence of the Prime Minister, who was sitting with straws in his hair, wringing his hands.

'Come by post, your lordship,' the footman said—'from London.' [Pg 255]

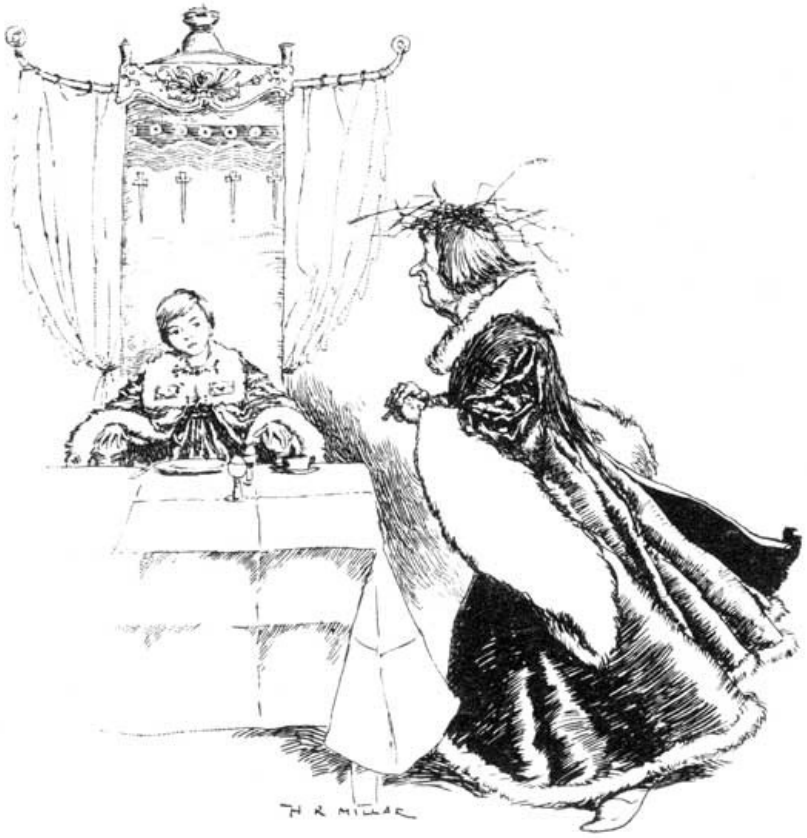
The Prime Minister left off wringing his hands, and held one of them out to Billy. 'You will suit!' he said. 'I'll engage you in a minute. But just pull the straws out of my hair first, will you? I only put them in because we hadn't been able to find a suitable King, and I find straws so useful in helping my brain to act in a crisis. Of course, once you're engaged for the situation, no one will ask you to do anything useful.'

Billy pulled the straws out, and the Prime Minister said:

'Are they all out? Thanks. Well, now you're engaged—six months on trial. You needn't do anything you don't want to. Now, your Majesty, breakfast is served at nine. Let me conduct you to the Royal apartments.'

In ten minutes Billy had come out of a silver bath filled with scented water, and was putting on the grandest clothes he had ever seen in his life. Everything was of thick, soft, pussy silk, and his boots had gold heels with gold spurs on them.

For the first time in his life it was with personal pleasure, and not from a sense of duty, that he brushed his hair and satisfied himself that none of his nails were in mourning. Then he went to breakfast, which was so fine that none but a French cook could have either cooked or described it. He was a little hungry—he had had nothing to eat since the bread and cheese at supper in Claremont Square the night before last. [Pg 256]



'"Excuse my hair, Sire," he said.'—Page 256.

After breakfast he rode out on a white pony, a thing he might have lived in Claremont Square for ever without doing. And he found he rode very well. After the ride he went on the sea in a boat, and was surprised and delighted to find that he knew how to sail as well as how to steer. In the afternoon he was taken to a circus; and in the evening the whole Court played blind-man's buff. A most enchanting day!

Next morning the breakfast was boiled underdone eggs and burnt herrings. The King was too polite to make remarks about his food, but he did feel a little disappointed.

The Prime Minister was late for breakfast and came in looking hot and flurried, and a garland of straw was entwined in the Prime Ministerial hair.

'Excuse my hair, sire,' he said. 'The cook left last night, but a new one comes at noon to-day. Meantime, I have done my best.'

Billy said it was all right, and he had had an excellent breakfast. The second day [Pg 257] passed as happily as the first; the cook seemed to have arrived, for the breakfast was made up for by the lunch. And Billy had the pleasure of shooting at a target at two thousand yards with the Lee-Metford rifle which had arrived by the same post as himself, and hitting the bull's-eye every time.

This is really a rare thing—even when you are a King. But Billy began to think it curious that he should never have found out before how clever he was, and when he took down a volume of Virgil and found that he could read it as easily as though it had been the 'Child's First Reading-Book,' he was really astonished. So Billy said to the Prime Minister:

'How is it I know so many things without learning them?'

'It's the rule here, sire,' said the Prime Minister. 'Kings are allowed to know everything without learning it.'

Now, the next morning Billy woke very early, and got up and went out into the garden, and, turning a corner suddenly, he came upon a little person in a large white cap, with a large white apron on, in which she was gathering sweet pot-herbs, thyme, [Pg 258] and basil, and mint, and savory, and sage, and marjoram. She stood up and dropped a curtsy.

'Halloa!' said Billy the King; 'who are you?'

'I'm the new cook,' said the person in the apron.

Her big flapping cap hid her face, but Billy knew her voice.

'Why,' said he, turning her face up with his hands under her chin, 'you're Eliza!'

And sure enough it was Eliza, but her round face looked very much cleverer and prettier than it had done when he saw it last.

'Hush!' she said. 'Yes, I am. I got the place as Queen of Allexanassa, but it was all horribly grand, and such long trains, and the crown is awfully heavy. And yesterday morning I woke very early, and I thought I'd just put on my old frock—mother made it for me the very last thing before she was taken ill.'

'Don't cry,' said Billy the King gently.

'And I went out, and there was a man with a boat, and he didn't know I was the Queen, and I got him to take me for a row on the sea, and he told me some things.'

'What sort of things?' [Pg 259]

'Why, about us, Billy. I suppose you're the same as I am now, and know everything without learning it. What's Allexanassa Greek for?'

'Why, something like the Country of Changing Queens, isn't it?'

'And what does Plurimiregia mean?'

'That must mean the land of many Kings. Why?'

'Because that's what it is. They're always changing their Kings and Queens here, for a most horrid and frightening reason, Billy. They get them from a registry office a long way off so that they shouldn't know. Billy, there's a dreadful dragon, and he comes once a month to be fed. And they feed him with Kings and Queens! That's why we know everything without learning. Because there's no time to learn in. And the dragon has two heads, Billy—a pig's head and a lizard's head—and the pig's head is to eat *you* with and the lizard's head will eat *me*!'

'So they brought us here for that,' said Billy—'mean, cruel, cowardly brutes!'

'Mother always said you could never tell what a situation was like until you tried it,' said Eliza. 'But what are we to do? The dragon comes to-morrow. When I heard that I asked where your kingdom was, and the boatman showed me, and I made him land [Pg 260] me here. So Allexanassa hasn't got a Queen now, but Plurimiregia has got us both.'

Billy rumpled his hair with his hands.

'Oh, my cats alive!' he said, 'we must do something; but I'll tell you what it is, Eliza. You're no end of a brick to come and tell me. You might have got off all by yourself, and left me to the pig's head.'

'No, I mightn't,' said Eliza sharply. 'I know everything that people can learn, the same as you, and that includes right and wrong. So you see I *mightn't*.'

'That's true! I wonder whether our being clever would help us? Let's take a boat and steer straight out, and take our chance. I can sail and steer beautifully.'

'So can I,' said Eliza disdainfully; 'but, you see, it's too late for that. Twenty-four hours before the beast comes the sea-water runs away, and great waves of thick treacle come sweeping round the kingdoms. No boat can live in such a sea.'

'Well, but how does the dragon get here? Is he on the island?' [Pg 261]

'No,' said Eliza, squeezing up handfuls of herbs in her agitation till the scent quite overpowered the scent of the honeysuckle. 'No; he comes out of the sea. But he is very hot inside, and he melts the treacle so that it gets quite thin, like when it runs out of a treacle-pudding, and so he can swim in it, and he comes along to the quay, and is fed—with *Us*.'

Billy shuddered.

'I wish we were back in Claremont Square,' said he.

'So do I, I'm sure,' said Eliza. 'Though I don't know where it is, nor yet want to know.'

'Hush!' said Billy suddenly. 'I hear a rustling. It's the Prime Minister, and I can hear he's got straws in his hair again, most likely because you're disappeared, and he thinks he will have to cook the breakfast. Meet me beside the lighthouse at four this afternoon. Hide in this summer-house and don't come out till the coast's clear.'

He ran out and took the Prime Minister's arm.

'What is the straw for now?'

'Merely a bad habit,' said the Prime Minister wearily.

Then Billy suddenly saw, and he said: [Pg 262]

'You're a beastly mean, cowardly sneak, and you feel it; that's what the straws are about!'

'"Speak to the dragon as soon as it arrives."' Page 263.

'Your Majesty!' said the Prime Minister feebly.

'Yes,' said Billy firmly; 'you know you are. Now, I know all the laws of Plurimiregia, and I'm going to abdicate this morning, and the next in rank has to be King if he can't engage a fresh one. You're next in rank to me, so by the time the dragon comes you'll be the King. I'll attend your Coronation.'

The Prime Minister gasped, 'How did you find out?' and turned the colour of unripe peaches.

'That's tellings,' said Billy. 'If you hadn't all been such sneaks, I expect heaps of your Kings had sense enough to have got rid of the dragon for you. Only I suppose you've never told them in time. Now, look here. I don't want you to do anything except keep your mouth shut, and let there be a boat, and no boatman, on the beach under the lighthouse at four o'clock.'

'But the sea's all treacle.'

'I said on the beach, not on the sea, my good straw merchant. And what I say you've jolly well got to do. You must be there—and no one else. If you tell a soul I'll abdicate, and where will you be then?' [Pg 263]

'I don't know,' said the wretched Prime Minister, stooping to gather some more straws from the strawberry bed.

'But I do,' said Billy. 'Now for breakfast.'

Before four o'clock that afternoon the Prime Minister's head was a perfect bird's-nest of straws. But he met Billy at the appointed place, and there was a boat—and also Eliza. Billy carried his Lee-Metford.

A wind blew from the shore, and the straws in the Prime Minister's hair rustled like a barley-field in August.

'Now,' said Billy the King, 'my Royal Majesty commands you to speak to the dragon as soon as it arrives, and to say that your King has abdicated——'

'But he hasn't,' said the Prime Minister in tears.

'But he *does now*—so you won't be telling a lie. I abdicate. But I give you my word of honour I'll turn King again as soon as I've tried my little plan. I shall be quite in time to meet my fate—and the dragon. Say "The King has abdicated. You'd better just look in at Allexanassa and get the Queen, and when you call again I'll have a nice fat King all ready for you."' [Pg 264]

The straws trembled, and Eliza sobbed.

Billy went on; and he had never felt so truly regal as now, when he was preparing to risk his life in order to save his subjects from the monthly temptation to be mean and cowardly and sneakish. I think myself it was good of Billy. He might just have abdicated and let things slide. Some boys would have.

The sea of greeny-black treacle heaved and swelled sulkily against the beach. The Prime Minister said:

'Very well; I'll do it. But I'd sooner die than see my King false to his word.'

'You won't have to choose between the two,' said Billy, very pale, but determined. 'Your King's not a hound, like—like some-people.'

And then, far away on the very edge of the green treacly sea, they saw a squirming and a squelching and clouds of steam, and all sorts of exciting and unpleasant things happening very suddenly and all together.

The Prime Minister covered his head with dry seaweed and said:

'That's Him.' [Pg 265]

'That's *He*,' corrected Eliza the Queen and Billy the King in one breath.

But the Prime Minister was long past any proper pride in his grammar.

And then, cutting its way through the thick, sticky waves of the treacle sea, came the hot dragon, melting a way for himself as he came. And he got nearer and nearer and bigger and bigger, and at last he came close to the beach, snouting and snorting, and opened two great mouths in an expecting, hungry sort of way; and when he found he was not being fed the expression of the mouths changed to an angry and surprised question. And one mouth was a pig's mouth and one was a lizard's.

Billy the King borrowed a pin from Eliza the Queen to stick into the Prime Minister, who was by this time nearly buried in the seaweed which he had been trying to arrange in his hair.

'Speak up, silly!' said His Majesty.

The Prime Minister spoke up.

'Please, sir,' he said to the two-headed dragon, 'our King has abdicated, so we've nothing for you just now, but if you could just run over to Allexanassa and pick up their Queen, we'll have a nice fat King ready for you if you'll call on your way home.' [Pg 266]

The Prime Minister shuddered as he spoke. He happened to be very fat.

The dragon did not say a word. He nodded with both his heads and grunted with both his mouths, and turned his one tail and swam away along the track of thin, warm treacle which he had made in swimming across the sea.

Quick as thought, Billy the King signed to the Prime Minister and to Eliza, and they launched the boat. Billy sprang on board and pushed off, and it was not till the boat was a dozen yards from shore that he turned to wave a farewell to Eliza and the Prime Minister. The latter was indeed still on the beach, searching hopefully among the drifts and weeds for more straws, to mark his sense of the constitutional crisis, but Eliza had disappeared.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said Billy the King; 'surely that brute of a Prime Minister can't have killed her right off, so as to have her ready for the dragon when he comes back. Oh, my dear little Eliza!'

'I'm here,' said a thick voice.

And, sure enough, there was Eliza, holding on to the gunwale of the boat and swimming heavily in the warm treacle. Nearly choked with it, too, for she had been under more than once. [Pg 267]

Billy hastened to haul her aboard, and, though she was quite brown and very, very sticky, the moment she was safe in the boat he threw his arms round her and said:

'Dear, darling Eliza, you're the dearest, bravest girl in the world. If we ever get out of this you'll marry me, won't you? There's no one in the world like you. Say you will.'

'Of course I will,' said Eliza, still spluttering through the treacle. 'There's no one in the world like you, either.'

'Right! Then, if that's so, you steer and I'll sail, and we'll get the better of the beast yet,' said Billy.

And he set the sail, and Eliza steered as well as she could in her treacly state.

About the middle of the channel they caught up with the dragon. Billy took up his Lee-Metford and fired its eight bullets straight into the dragon's side. You have no idea how the fire spurted out through the bullet-holes. But the wind from shore had caught the sails, and the boat was now going very much faster than the dragon, who found the bullet-holes annoying, and had slowed up to see what was the matter. [Pg 268]

'Good-bye, you dear, brave Eliza,' said Billy the King. '*You're* all right, anyhow.'

And, holding his reloaded Lee-Metford rifle high over his head, he plunged into the treacly sea and swam back towards the dragon. It is very difficult to shoot straight when you are swimming, especially in nearly boiling treacle, but His Majesty King

Billy managed to do it. He sent his eight bullets straight into the dragon's heads, and the huge monster writhed and wriggled and squirmed and squawked, all over the sea from end to end, till at last it floated lifeless on the surface of the clear, warm treacle, and stretched its wicked paws out, and shut its wicked eyes, all four of them, and died. The lizard's eyes shut last.

Then Billy began to swim for dear life towards the shore of Plurimiregia, and the treacle was so hot that if he hadn't been a King he would have been boiled. But now that the dreadful dragon was cold in death there was nothing to keep the treacle sea thin and warm, and it began to thicken so fast that swimming was very difficult indeed. If you don't understand this, you need only ask the attendants at your nearest [Pg 269] swimming-baths to fill the baths with treacle instead of water, and you will very soon comprehend how it was that Billy reached the shore of his kingdom quite exhausted and almost speechless.

The Prime Minister was there. He had fetched a whole truss of straw when he thought Billy's plan had failed, and that the dragon would eat him as the next in rank, and he wanted to do the thing thoroughly; and when he warmly embraced the treacly King, Billy became so covered with straws that he hardly knew himself. He pulled himself together, however, enough to withdraw his resignation, and then looked out over the sea. In mid-channel lay the dead dragon, and far in the distance he could see the white sails of the boat nearing the shores of Allexanassa.

'And what are we to do now?' asked the Prime Minister.

'Have a bath,' said the King. 'The dragon's dead, and I'll fetch Eliza in the morning. They won't hurt her over there now the dragon's killed.'

'*They* won't hurt her,' said the Prime Minister. 'It's the treacle. Allexanassa is an island. The dragon brought the treacle up by his enchantments, and now there is no one to take it away again. You'll never get a boat to live in a sea like that—never.' [Pg 270]

'Won't I?' said Billy. 'I'm cleverer than you.'

But, all the same, he didn't quite see his way to sailing a boat in that sea, and with a sad and aching heart he went back to the palace to the silver bath. The treacle and straws took hours to wash off, and after that he was so tired that he did not want any supper, which was just as well, because there was no one to cook it. Tired as he was, Billy slept very badly. He woke up again and again to wonder what had become of his brave little friend, and to wish that he could have done something to prevent her being carried away in that boat; but, think as he might, he failed to see that he could have done any differently. And his heart sank, for, in spite of his bold words to the Prime Minister, he had no more idea than you have how to cross the sea of thick treacle that lay between his kingdom and Allexanassa. He invented steamships with red-hot screws and paddle-wheels all through his dreams, and when he got up in the morning he looked out of his window on the dark sea and longed for a good, gray, foamy, salt, tumbling sea like we have at home in England, no matter how high the [Pg 271] waves and the winds might be. But the wind had fallen, and the dark brown sea looked strangely calm.

'The two skated into each other's arms.'—Page 271.

Hastily snatching a dozen peaches out of the palace garden by way of breakfast, Billy the King hurried to the beach by the lighthouse. No heaving of the treacle sea broke the smooth line of it against the beach. Billy looked—looked again, swallowed the last peach, stone and all, and tore back to the town.

He rushed into the chief ironmonger's and bought a pair of skates and a gimlet. In less time than I can write it he had scurried back to the beach, bored holes in his gold heels, fastened on the skates, and was skating away over the brown sea towards Allexanassa. For the treacle, heated to boiling-point by the passing of the dragon, had now grown cold, and, of course, it was now *toffee*! Far off, Eliza had had the same idea as soon as she saw the toffee, and, of course, as Queen of Allexanassa, she could skate beautifully. So the two skated into each other's arms somewhere near the middle of the channel between the two islands.

They stood telling each other how happy they were for a few moments, or it may have been a few hours; and when they turned to go back to Plurimiregia they found [Pg 272] that the toffee-ice of the treacle sea was black with crowds of skaters—for the Allexanassians and the Plurimiregians had found out the wonderful truth, and were hurrying across to pay visits to their friends and relations in the opposite islands. Near the shore the toffee was hidden by troops of children, who had borrowed the family hammers and were chipping into the solid toffee and eating the flakes of it as they splintered off.

People were pointing out to each other the spot where the dragon had sunk, and when they perceived Billy the King and Eliza the Queen they sent up a shout that you could have heard miles out at sea—if there had been any sea—which, of course, there wasn't. The Prime Minister had lost no time in issuing a proclamation setting forth Billy's splendid conduct in ridding the country of the dragon, and all the populace were in a frenzy of gratitude and loyalty.

Billy turned on a little tap inside his head by some means which I cannot describe to you, and a bright flood of cleverness poured through his brain.

'After all,' he said to Eliza, 'they were going to give us to the dragon to save their [Pg 273] own lives. It's bad, I know. But I don't know that's it's worse than people who let other people die of lead-poisoning because they want a particular glaze on their dinner-plates, or let people die of phosphorus-poisoning so that they may get matches at six boxes a penny. We're as well off here as in England.'

'Yes,' said Eliza.

So they agreed to stay and go on being King and Queen, on condition that the Prime Minister consented to give up straws altogether, even in moments of crisis.

'I will, your Majesties,' he said, adding, with a polite bow, 'I shall not need a single straw under your Majesty's able kingship.'

And all the people cheered like mad.

Eliza and Billy were married in due course. The kingdoms are now extremely happy. Both are governed by Billy, who is a very good King because he knows so much. Eliza got him to change the law about Queens knowing everything, because she wanted her husband to be cleverer than she was. But Billy didn't want to make laws to turn his Eliza stupid, so he just changed the law—only a little bit—so that the King knows [Pg 274] everything a man ought to know, and the Queen knows everything that ought to be known by a woman. So that's all right.

Exploring expeditions were fitted out to find the edge of the toffee. It was found to stand up in cliffs two hundred feet high, overhanging the real, live, salt-watery sea. The King had ships built at once to sail on the real sea and carry merchandise to other lands. And so Allexanassa and Plurimiregia grew richer and richer every day. The merchandise, of course, is toffee, and half the men in the kingdoms work in the great toffee-mines. All the toffee you buy in shops comes from there. And the reason why some of the cheaper kinds you buy are so gritty is, I need hardly say, because the toffee-miners will not remember, before they go down into the mines, to wipe their muddy boots on the doormats provided by Billy the King, with the Royal Arms in seven colours on the middle of each mat. [Pg 275]

THE PRINCESS AND THE CAT

The day when everything began to happen to the Princess began just like all her ordinary days. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the Princess jumped out of bed and ran into the nursery to let the mice out of the traps in the nursery cupboard. The traps were set every night with a little bit of cheese in each, and every morning nurse found that not a single trap had caught a single mouse. This was because the Princess always let them go. No one knew this except the Princess and,

of course, the mice themselves. And the mice never forgot it.

Then came bath and breakfast, and then the Princess ran to the open window and threw out the crumbs to the birds that flew down fluttering and chirping into the marble terrace. Before lessons began she had an hour for playing in the garden. But she never began to play till she had been round to see if any rabbits or moles were [Pg 276] caught in the traps the palace gardeners set. The gardeners were lazy, and seldom got to work before half-past eight, so she always had plenty of time for this.

Then came lessons with dear old Professor Ouatidontnoisuntwuthnoing, and then more play, and dinner, and needlework, and play again.

And now it was teatime.

'Eat up your bread-and-butter, your Highness,' said nurse, 'and then you shall have some nice plummy cake.'

'I don't feel plum-cakey at all to-day, somehow,' said the Princess. 'I feel just exactly as if something was going to happen.'

'Something's always happening,' said nurse.

'Ah! but I mean something horrid,' said the Princess. 'I expect uncle's going to make some nasty new law about me. Last time it was: "The Princess is only to wear a white frock on the first Sunday in the month." He said it was economy, but I know it was only spite.'

'You mustn't say that, dear,' said nurse. 'You know your rosy and bluey frocks are just as pretty as the white;' but in her heart she agreed with the Princess Everilda.

The Princess's father and mother had died when she was quite little, and her uncle [Pg 277] was Regent. Now, you will have noticed that there is something about uncles which makes it impossible for them to be good in fairy stories. So of course this uncle was bad, as bad as he could be, and everyone hated him.

In fact, though it was now, as I have said, everybody's teatime, nobody was making any tea: instead they were making a revolution. And just as the Princess was looking at the half-moon-shaped hole left by her first bite into her first piece of bread-and-butter, the good Professor burst into the nursery with his great gray wig all on one side, crying out in a very loud and very choky voice:

'The revolution! It's come at last. I *knew* the people would never stand that last tax on soap.'

'The Princess!' said nurse, turning very pale.

'Yes, I know,' said the Professor. 'There's a boat on the canal, blue sails with gold letters "P.P."—Pupil of the Professor. It's waiting. You go down there at once. I'll take the Princess out down the back stairs.'

He caught the Princess by her pink bread-and-buttery hand, and dragged her away. [Pg 278]

'Hurry, my dear,' he panted; 'it's as much as your life is worth to delay a minute.'

But he himself delayed quite three minutes, and that was one minute too long. He had just run into the palace library for the manuscript of his life's work, 'Everything Easily Explained,' when the revolutionary crowd burst in, shouting 'Liberty and Soap!' and caught him. They did not see the Princess Everilda, because he had just time, when he heard them coming, to throw a red and green crochet antimacassar over her, and to hide her behind an armchair.

'When they've taken me away, go down the back stairs, and try to find the boat,' he whispered, just before they came and took him away.

And then Everilda was left alone. When everything was quiet, she said to herself: 'Now, you mustn't cry; you must do as you're told.' And she went down the palace back-stairs, and out through the palace kitchen into the street.

She had never set foot in the streets before, but she had been driven through them in a coach with four white horses, and she knew the way to the canal.

The canal boat with the blue sails was waiting, and she would have got to it safely enough, but she heard a rattling sound, and when she looked she saw two boys tying [Pg 279] an old rusty kettle to a cat's tail.

'You horrid boys!' she said; 'let poor pussy alone.'

'Not us,' said the boys.

Everilda instantly slapped them both, and they were so surprised that they let the cat go. It scuttled and scurried off, and so did the Princess. The boys threw stones after her and also after the cat, but fortunately they were both very bad shots and nobody was hit.

Even then the Princess would have got safely away, but she saw a boy sitting on a doorstep crying. So she stopped to ask what was the matter.

'I'm hungry,' said the boy, 'and father and mother are dead, and my uncle beat me, so I'm running away——'

'Oh,' said the Princess, 'so am I. What fun! And I've got a horrid uncle, too. You come with me, and we'll find my nurse. *She's* running away, too. Make haste, or it'll be too late.'

But when they got to the corner, it *was* too late.

The revolutionary crowd caught them; they shouted 'Liberty and Soap!' and they sent [Pg 280] the boy to the workhouse, and they put the Princess in prison; and a good many of them wanted to cut off her pretty little head then and there, because they thought she would be sure to grow up horrid like her uncle the Regent.

But all the people who had ever been inside the palace said what a nice little girl the Princess really was, and wouldn't hear of cutting off her darling head. So at last it was decided to get rid of her by enchantment, and the Head Magician to the Provisional Revolutionary Government was sent for.

'Certainly, citizens,' he said, 'I'll put her in a tower on the Forlorn Island, in the middle of the Perilous Sea—a nice strong tower, with only one way out.'

'That's one too many. There's not to be any way out,' said the people.

'Well, there's a way out of everything, you know,' said the Magician timidly—he was trembling for his own head—'but it's fifty thousand millions to one against her ever finding it.'

So they had to be content with that, and they fetched Everilda out of her prison; and the Magician took her hand and called his carriage, which was an invention of his [Pg 281] own—half dragon, and half motor-car, and half flying-machine—so that it was a carriage and a half, and came when it was called, tame as any pet dog.

He lifted Everilda in, and said 'Gee up!' to his patent carriage, and the intelligent creature geed up right into the air and flew away. The Princess shut her eyes tight, and tried not to scream. She succeeded.

When the Magician's carriage got to the place where it knew it ought to stop, it did stop, and tumbled Everilda out on to a hard floor, and went back to its master, who patted it, and gave it a good feed of oil, and fire, and water, and petroleum spirit.

The Princess opened her eyes as the sound of the rattling dragon wings died away. She was alone—quite alone. 'I won't stay here,' said Everilda; 'I'll run away again.'

She ran to the edge of the tower and looked down. The tower was in the middle of a garden, and the garden was in the middle of a wood, and the wood was in the middle of a field, and after the field there was nothing more at all except steep cliffs and the great rolling, raging waves of the Perilous Sea. [Pg 282]

'There's no way to run away by,' she said; and then she remembered that even if she ran away, there was now nowhere to run to, because the people had taken her palace away from her, and the palace was the only home she had ever had—and where her nurse was goodness only knew.

'So I suppose I've got to live here till someone fetches me,' she said, and stopped crying, like a brave King's daughter as she was.

'I'll explore,' said Everilda all alone; 'that will be fun.' She said it bravely, and really it was more fun than she expected. The tower had only one room on each floor. The top floor was Everilda's bedroom; she knew that by her gold-backed brushes and things with 'E. P.' on them that lay on the toilet-table. The next floor was a sitting-room, and the next a dining-room, and the last of all was a kitchen, with rows of bright pots and pans, and everything that a cook can possibly want.

'Now I can play at cooking,' said the Princess. 'I've always wanted to do that. If only there was something to cook!'

She looked in the cupboards, and there were lots of canisters and jars, with rice, and flour, and beans, and peas, and lentils, and macaroni, and currants, and raisins, and [Pg 283] candied peel, and sugar, and sago, and cinnamon. She ate a whole lump of candied citron, and enjoyed it very much.

'I shan't starve, anyway,' she said. 'But oh! of course, I shall soon eat up all these things, and then——'

In her agitation she dropped the jar; it did not break, but all the candied peel rolled away into corners and under tables. Yet when she picked the jar up it was as full as ever.

'Oh, hooray!' cried Everilda, who had once heard a sentry use that low expression; 'of course it's a magic tower, and everything is magic in it. The jars will always be full.'

The fire was laid, so she lighted it and boiled some rice, but it stuck to the pot and got burned. You know how nasty burned rice is? and the macaroni she tried to cook would not get soft. So she went out into the garden, and had a very much nicer dinner than she could ever have cooked. Instead of meat she had apples, and instead of vegetables she had plums, and she had peaches instead of pudding.

There were rows and rows of beautiful books in the sitting-room, and she read a little, and wrote a long letter to nurse, in case anyone ever came who knew nurse's address and would post it for her. And then she had a nectarine-and-mulberry tea. [Pg 284]

By this time the sun was sinking all red and splendid beyond the dark waters of the Perilous Sea, and Everilda sat down on the window seat to watch it.

I shall not tell you whether she cried at all then. Perhaps you would have cried just a little if you had been in her place.

'Oh dear! oh dear! oh dear!' she said, sniffing slightly. (Perhaps she had a cold.) 'There's nobody to tuck me up in bed—nobody at all.'

And just as she said it something fat and furry flew between her and the sunset. It hovered clumsily a moment, and then swooped in at the window.

'Oh!' cried the Princess, very much frightened indeed.

'Don't you know me?' said the stout furry creature, folding its wings. 'I'm the cat you saved from the indignity of a rusty kettle in connection with my honourable tail.'

'But that cat hadn't got wings,' said Everilda, 'and you're much bigger than it, and it couldn't talk.' [Pg 285]

'How do you know it couldn't talk,' said the Cat; 'did you ask it?'

'No,' said the Princess.

'Well, then!' said the Cat 'And as for wings, I needn't wear them if you'd rather I didn't.'

The Cat took off her wings, rolled them neatly up, like your father rolls his umbrella, tied them round with a piece of string, and put them in the left-hand corner drawer in the bureau.

'That's better,' said Everilda.

'And as for size,' said the Cat, 'if I stayed ordinary cat-size I shouldn't be any use to you. And I've come to be cook, companion, housemaid, nurse, professor, and everything else, so——'

'Oh, don't,' said the Princess—'*don't* get any bigger.'

For while she was speaking the Cat had been growing steadily, and she was now about the size of a large leopard.

'Certainly not,' said the Cat obligingly; 'I'll stop at once.'

'I suppose,' said the Princess timidly, 'that you're magic?'

'Of course,' said the Cat; 'everything is, here. Don't you be afraid of me, now! Come along, my pet, time for bed.' [Pg 286]

Everilda umped, for the voice was the voice of her nurse; but it was also the voice of the Cat.

'Oh!' cried the Princess, throwing her arms round the cat's large furry neck, 'I'm not afraid of *any* thing when you speak like that.'

So, after all, she had someone to tuck her up in bed. The Cat did it with large, soft, furry, clever paws, and in two minutes Everilda was fast asleep.

And now began the long, lonely, but all the same quite happy time which the Princess and the Cat spent together on the Forlorn Island.

Everilda had lessons with the Cat—and then it was the Professor's voice that the Cat spoke with; and the two did the neat little housework of the tower together—and then the Cat's voice was like the voices of the palace housemaids. And they did the cooking and then the Cat's voice was the cook's voice. And they played games together—and then the voice of the Cat was like the voices of all sorts of merry children. It was impossible to be dull with a companion who changed so often.

'But who are you *really*?' the Princess used to ask. [Pg 287]

And the Cat always answered:

'I give it up! Ask another!' as if the Princess had been playing at riddles.

'How is it our garden is always so tidy and full of nice fruit and vegetables?' the Princess asked once, when they had been on the island about a year.

'Oh,' said the Cat, 'didn't you know? The moles you used to let out of the traps do the digging, and the birds you used to feed bring the seeds in their little beaks, and the mice you used to save from the palace mouse-traps do the weeding and raking with their sharp little teeth, and their fine, neat, needly claws.'

'But how did they get here?' asked the Princess.

'The usual way—swimming and flying,' said the Cat.

'But aren't the mice afraid of *you*?'

'Of me?' The great Cat drew herself up to her full height. 'Anyone would think, to hear you, that I was a *common* cat.' And she was really cross for nearly an hour.

That was the only approach to a quarrel that the two ever had.

Sometimes, at first, the Princess used to say:

'How long am I to stay here, pussy-nurse?' [Pg 288]

And the Cat always said in nurse's voice:

'Till you're grown up, my dear.'

And the years went by, and each year found the Princess more good, and clever, and beautiful. And at last she was quite grown up.

'Now,' said the Cat briskly, 'we must get to work. There's a Prince in a kingdom a long way off, and he's the only person who can get you off this island.'

'Does he know?' asked Everilda.

'He knows about *you*, but he doesn't know that he's the person to find you, and he doesn't know where you are. So now every night I must fly away and whisper about you in his ear. He'll think it's dreams, but he believes in dreams; and he'll come in a grand ship with masts of gold and sails of silk, and carry my Pretty away and make a Queen of her.'

'Shall I like that, pussy-nurse, do you think?' asked the Princess.

And the Cat replied:

'Yes, very much indeed. But you wouldn't like it if it were any other King than this one, so it's just as well that it's quite impossible for it to *be* any other.'

'How will he come?' asked the Princess. [Pg 289]

'Don't I tell you? In a ship, of course,' said the Cat.

'Aren't the rocks dangerous?' asked the Princess.

'Oh, very,' the Cat answered.

'Oh,' said the Princess, and grew silent and thoughtful.

That night the Cat got out its rolled-up wings, and unrolled them, and brushed them, and fitted them on; then she lighted a large lamp and set it in the window that looked out on the Perilous Sea.

'That's the beacon to guide the King to you,' she said.

'Won't it guide other ships here?' asked the Princess, 'with perhaps the wrong Kings on board—the ones I shouldn't like being Queen with?'

'Very likely,' said the Cat; 'but it doesn't matter: they'd only be wrecked. Serve them right, coming after Princesses that don't want them.'

'Oh,' said Everilda.

The Cat spread her wings, and after one or two trial flights round the tower, she spread them very wide indeed, and flew away across the black Perilous Sea, towards a little half moon that was standing on its head to show sailors that there would be foul weather. [Pg 290]

The Princess leaned her elbows on the window-sill and looked out over the sea. Down below in the garden she could hear the kind moles digging industriously, and the good little mice weeding and raking with their sharp teeth and their fine needly claws. And far away against the low-hanging moon she saw the sails and masts of a ship.

'Oh,' she cried, 'I *can't*! It's sure not to be *his* ship. It mustn't be wrecked.'

And she turned the lamp out. And then she cried a little, because perhaps after all it might be *his* ship, and he would pass by and never know.

Next night the Cat went out on another flying excursion, leaving the lamp lighted. And again the Princess could not bear to go to bed leaving a lamp burning that might lure honest Kings and brave mariners to shipwreck, so she put out the lamp and cried a little. And this happened for many, many, many nights.

When the Cat swept the room of a morning she used to wonder where all the pearls came from that she found lying all about the floor. But it was a magic place, and one soon ceased to wonder much about anything. She never guessed that the pearls were the tears the Princess shed when she had put out the lamp, and seen ship after ship [Pg 291] that perhaps carried her own King go sailing safely and ignorantly by, no one on board guessing that on that rock was a pretty, dear Princess waiting to be rescued —*the* Princess, the only Princess that that King would be happy and glad to have for his Queen.

And the years went on and on. Every night the Cat lighted the lamp and flew away to whisper dreams into the ears of the only King who could rescue the Princess, and every night the Princess put out the lamp and cried in the dark. And every morning the Cat swept up a dustpan full of pearls that were Everilda's tears. And again and again the King would fit out a vessel and sail the seas, and look in vain for the bright light that he had dreamed should guide him to his Princess.

The Cat was a good deal vexed; she could not understand how any King could be so stupid. She always stayed out all night. She used to go and see her friends after she had done whispering dreams to the King, and only got home in time to light the fire for breakfast, so she never knew how the Princess put out the lamp every night, and cried in the dark. [Pg 292]

The years went by and went by, and the Princess grew old and gray, for she had never had the heart to leave the lamp alight, for fear that some poor mariners who were not her King should be drawn by the lamp to those cruel rocks and wrecked on them, for of course it wouldn't and couldn't be the poor mariners' fault that they didn't happen to be the one and only King who could land safely on the Forlorn Island.

And when the Princess was quite old, and the tear pearls that had been swept up by the Cat filled seven big chests in the back-kitchen, the Princess fell ill.

'I think I am going to die,' she said to the Cat, 'and I am not really at all sorry except for you. I think you'll miss me. Tell me now—it's almost all over—who are you, really?'

'I give it up,' said the Cat as usual. 'Ask another.'

But the Princess asked nothing more. She lay on her bed in her white gown and waited for death, for she was very tired of being alive. Only she said:

'Put out that lamp in the window; it hurts my eyes.'

For even then she thought of the poor men whose ships might be wrecked just [Pg 293] because they didn't happen to be the one and only King with whom she could be happy.

So the Cat took the lamp away, but she did not put it out; she set it in the window of the parlour, and its light shone out over the black waters of the Perilous Sea.

And that very night the one and only King—who in all these years had never ceased to follow the leading of the dreams the Cat whispered in his ear—came in the black darkness sailing over the Perilous Sea. And in the black darkness he saw at last the bright white light that his dreams had promised, and he knew that where the light was his Princess was, and his heart leaped up, and he bade the helmsmen steer for the light.

And for the light they steered. And because he was the only possible King to mate that Princess, the helmsman found the only possible passage among the rocks, and the ship anchored safely in a little quiet creek, and the King landed and went up to the door of the tower and knocked.

'Who's there?' said the Cat.

'Me,' said the King, just as you or I might have done. [Pg 294]

'You're late,' said the Cat. 'I'm afraid you've lost your chance.'

'I took the first chance I got,' said the King. 'Let me in, and let me see her.'

He had been so busy all these years trying to find the bright white light of his dreams that he had not noticed that his hair had gone gray long ago.

So the Cat let him in, and led him up the winding stair to the room where the

Princess, very quiet, lay on her white bed waiting for death to come, for she was very tired.

The old King stumbled across the bar of moonlight on the floor, flung down a clanking wallet, and knelt by the bed in the deep shadow, saying:

'Oh, my dear own Princess, I have come at last.'

'Is it really you?' she said, and gave him her hands in the shadow. I hoped it was Death's foot-step I heard coming up the winding stair.'

'Oh, did you hope for death,' he cried, 'while I was coming to you?'

'You were long in coming,' said she, 'and I was very tired.'

'My beautiful dear Princess,' he said, 'you shall rest in my arms till you are not tired any more.' [Pg 295]

'My beautiful King,' she said, 'I am not tired any more now.'

And then the Cat came in with the lamp, and they looked in each other's eyes.

Instead of the beautiful Princess of his dreams the King saw a white, withered woman whose piteous eyes met his in a look of longing love. The Princess saw a bent, white-haired man, but love was in his eyes.

'*I* don't mind.'

'*I* don't mind.'

They both spoke together. And both thought they spoke the truth. But the truth was that both were horribly disappointed.

'Yet, all the same,' said the King to himself, 'old and withered as she is, she is more to me than the youngest and loveliest of all other Princesses.'

'I don't care if he *is* gray,' said the Princess to herself; 'whatever he is, he's the only possible one.'

'Here's a pretty kettle of fish!' said the Cat. 'Why on earth didn't you come before?'

'I came as soon as I could,' said the King.

The Cat, walking about the room in an agitated way, kicked against the wallet the King had dropped. [Pg 296]

'What's this,' she said crossly, rubbing her toes, for the wallet was hard, and she had hurt herself more than a little.

'Oh, that,' said the King—'that's just the steel bolts and hammers and things that my resolves to find the Princess turned into when I failed and never did find her. I never could bear to throw them away; I had a sort of feeling that they might be good for something, since they hurt me so much when they came to me. I thought perhaps I could batter down the doors of the Princess's tower with them.'

'They're good for something better than that,' said the Cat joyously.

She went away, and the two heard her hammering away below. Presently she staggered in with a great basket of white powder, and emptied it on the floor; then she went away for more.

The King helped her with the next basketful, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next, for there were seven of them, and the heap of white powder stood up in the room as high as the King's middle.

'That's powder of pearls,' said the Cat proudly. 'Now, tell me, have you been a good King?'

'I have tried to be,' said the white-haired King 'I was a workhouse boy, and then I was [Pg 297] apprenticed to a magician, who taught me how to make people happy. There was a revolution just at the time when I was put into the workhouse, and they had a Republic. And I worked my way up till they made me President.'

'What became of the King in that revolution?'

'There wasn't a King, only a Regent. They had him taught a trade, and he worked for his living. It was the worst punishment they could invent for him. There was a Princess, too, but she was hidden by a magician. I saw her once when she was trying to run away. She asked me to run too—to her nurse——'

Here his eyes met the Princess's.

'Oh,' she said, 'that was you, was it?'

'Oh,' said he, 'then that was you!'

And they looked long and lovingly in each other's faded eyes.

'Hurry up,' said the Cat impatiently; 'you were made President. And then——'

'Oh, why, then,' said the King, 'they thought it wouldn't be any more dangerous or expensive to have a King than a President, and prettier at State shows—ermine, crown, and sceptre, and all that—prettier than frock-coat and spats. So I agreed.' [Pg 298]

'And do your people love you?' the Cat asked.

'I don't know,' said the King simply; 'I love them——'

As he spoke there came a flutter and flicker of many thousand wings at the closed casement. The Cat threw the window wide, and in swarmed a countless crowd of white pigeons.

'These are the blessings of your people,' said the Cat.

The wings fluttered and flickered and fanned the heap of pearl dust on the floor till it burst into flame, and the flame rose up high and white and clear.

'Quick!' cried the Cat, 'walk through it. Lead her through.'

The old King gave his hand to his poor faded love, and raised her from her couch, and together they passed through the clear fire made of her patience and self-sacrifice, his high resolve, and the blessings of his people. And they came out of that fire on the other side.

'Oh, love, how beautiful you are!' cried the King.

'Oh, my King, your face is the face of all my dreams!' cried the Princess.

And they put their arms round each other and cried for joy, because now they were both young and beautiful again. [Pg 299]

The Cat cried for sympathy.

'And now we shall live happy ever after,' said the Princess, putting her other arm round the Cat. 'Dear pussy-nurse, do tell me, now it's all over, who you really are.'

'I give it up. Ask another,' said the Cat.

But as she spoke she went herself through the fire, and on the other side came out—not one person, but eleven. She was, in fact, the Professor, the nurse, the palace butler, footman, housemaid, parlourmaid, between-maid, boots, scullion, boy in buttons, as well as the rescued cat—all rolled into one!

'But we only used one part of ourselves at a time,' they all said with one voice, 'and I hope we were useful.'

'You were a darling,' said the Princess—'darlings, I mean. But who turned you all into exactly the pussy-nurse I wanted?'

'Oh, that was the Magician,' said all the voices in unison; 'he was your fairy-godfather, you know.'

'What has become of him?' asked the Princess, clinging to her lover's arm. [Pg 300]

'He's been asleep all this time. It was the condition, the only way he got leave to work the good magic for all of us,' said the many voices that were one.

'Let's go and wake him,' said the King.

So they all went. And when they woke the Magician, who was sleeping quietly in his own private room in the palace where the Princess had once lived, he sneezed seven times for pure joy, and then called for Welsh rabbit and baked Spanish onions for supper.

'For after all these years of starvation,' he said, 'I do really think I may for once take a liberty with my digestion.'

So he had the supper he wanted; but the King and the Princess had roses and lilies and wedding-cake, because they were married that very evening.

And when you have passed through exactly the sort of fire those two had passed through, you can never be old, or ugly, or unhappy again, so those two are happy, and beautiful, and young to this very hour. [Pg 301]

THE WHITE HORSE

'Please, father,' Diggory said, 'I want to go out and seek my fortune.'

'Seek your grandmother,' said his father, but not unkindly. He was smoking a pipe outside his cottage door, and he had a red-spotted handkerchief over his head because of the flies. There were flies then, just the same as there are now, though it was a hundred years ago by the church clock.

'I wasn't thinking of my grandmother,' said Diggory; 'I was thinking of my Uncle Diggory. He was the third son of a woodcutter, just like I am, and he saw right enough that that's the sort that *has* to go out and seek its fortune. And I'm getting on, father; I shall be twenty before you know where you are.'

'You'll have to be twenty and more before I agree not to know where *you* are,' said his father. 'Your Uncle Diggory did well for himself, sure enough, and many a turkey [Pg 302] and chine he's sent us at Christmas-time; but he started a-horseback, he did. He got the horse from *his* Uncle Diggory, and he was a rover too. Now, if you went, you'd have to go on Shank's mare, and them that go a-foot comes back a-foot.'

'Will you let me go, then, if I can get a horse?' said Diggory coaxingly. 'Do say yes, dad, and then I won't say another word about it till I've got the horse.'

'Drat the lad—*yes*, then!' shouted the father.

Diggory jumped up from the porch seat.

'Then farewell home and hey for the road,' cried he, 'for I've got the horse, dad. My Uncle Diggory sent it to me this very day, and it's tied up behind the lodge; white it is, and a red saddle and bridle fit for a King.'

The woodcutter grumbled, but he was a woodcutter of honour, and having said 'Yes,' he had to stick to yes.

So Diggory rode off on the white horse with the scarlet saddle, and all the village turned out to see him go. He had on his best white smock, and he had never felt so fine in all his days.

So he rode away. When he came to the round mound windmill he stopped, for there was Joyce taking in the clean clothes from the hedge, because it was Monday [Pg 303] evening.

He told her where he was going.

'You might take me with you,' she said. 'I'm not so very heavy but what we could both ride on that great big horse of yours.' And she held up a face as sweet as a bunch of flowers.

But Diggory said, 'No, my dear. Why, you little silly, girls can't go to seek their fortunes. You'd only be in my way! Wish me luck, child.'

So he rode on, and she folded up the linen all crooked, and damped it down with her tears, so that it was quite ready for ironing.

Diggory rode on, and on, and on. He rode through dewy evening, and through the cool black night, and right into the fresh-scented pinky pearly dawning. And when it was real live wide-awake morning, Diggory felt very thin and empty inside his smock, and he remembered that he had had nothing to eat since dinner-time yesterday, and then it was pork and greens.

He rode on, and he rode on, and by-and-by he came to a red brick wall, very strong and stout, with big buttresses and a stone coping. His horse (whom he had christened Invicta, and perhaps if he had known as much Latin as you do he would [Pg 304] have called him something different) was a very high horse indeed, and by standing up in his stirrups Diggory could see over the wall. And he saw that on the other side was an orchard full of trees full of apples, red, and yellow, and green. He reined Invicta in close under the wall and said, 'Woa, there! stand still, will 'e?' And he stood up on the broad saddle and made a jump and caught at the stone coping of the wall, and next moment he had hung by his hands and dropped into the orchard. And it was a very long drop indeed. For he had quite made up his mind to take some of the apples. First, because he was hungry, and, secondly, because boys *will* take apples—in stories that is, of course; *really*, they would never think of such a thing.

With a practised eye, Diggory chose the tree with the fattest, rosiest apples on it. He climbed the tree, and had just settled himself astride a convenient bough when he heard a voice say: 'Hi! You up there!'

And, looking down, he saw a flat-faced old man with a red flannel waistcoat standing under the tree looking up spitefully.

'Good-morning, my fine fellow,' said the old man. 'You seem a nice honest lad, and I'm sorry for your sake that apple stealing's punished so severely in these parts.' [Pg 305]

'I've not had any apples yet,' said Diggory. 'Look here, I'll go away if you like, and we'll say no more about it.'

'That's a handsome offer, very,' said the nasty old man; 'but this is an enchanted orchard, and you can't go away without with your leave or by your leave, as you came in. Why, you can't even get out of the tree—and as for climbing the wall, no one can do it without a white horse to help him. So now where are you?'

Diggory knew very well where he was, and he tried at once to be somewhere else, but the old man was right. He could move all about the tree from branch to branch, but the tree felt wrong way up and he felt wrong way up; that is to say, he could not get to the ground except by jumping much harder than he knew how to, and then he knew he would only have fallen back again, just as you would fall back if you jumped up to the ceiling. He could have fallen off the tree the other way, of course, but then he would have fallen up into the sky, and there seemed to be nothing there to stop his falling for ever and ever. So he held tight and looked at the old man. And Diggory thought he looked nastier than ever. [Pg 306]

'"Take that," cried he, aiming an apple at the old man's head.'—Page 307.

So he said: 'Well?'

And the old man said: 'Not at all! However, since you had the sense not to fall off wrong way, I suppose you're the boy I want. Now, look here, you throw me down those ten big apples, one by one, so that I can catch them, and I'll let you go out by the Apple Door that no one but me has the key of.'

'Why don't you pick them yourself?' Diggory asked.

'I'm too old; you know very well that old men don't climb trees. Come, is it a bargain?'

'I don't know,' said the boy; 'there are lots of apples you can reach without climbing. Why do you want these so particularly?'

As he spoke, he picked one of the apples and threw it up and caught it. I say up, but it was down instead, because of the apple-tree being so very much enchanted.

'Oh, *don't*!' the old man squeaked like a rat in a trap—'*don't* drop it! Throw it down to me, you nasty slack-baked, smock-frocked son of a speckled toad!'

Diggory's blood boiled at hearing his father called a toad.

'Take that!' cried he, aiming the apple at the old man's head.' I wish I could get out of this tree.' [Pg 307]

The apple hit the old man's head and bounced on to the grass, and the moment that

apple touched the ground Diggory found that he *could* get out of the tree if he liked, for he felt that he was now the proper way up once more, and so was the tree.

'So,' he said, 'these are wish-apples, are they?'

'No, no, no, no!' shrieked the old man so earnestly that Diggory knew he was lying. 'I've just disenchanted you, that's all. You see, most people fall up out of the tree and you didn't, so I thought I'd let you go, because I'm a nice kind old man, I am, and I wouldn't so much as hurt a fly. They aren't wish-apples, indeed they aren't.'

'Really,' said Diggory. 'I wish you'd speak the truth.'

With that he picked the second apple and threw it. And the old man began to speak the truth as hard as ever he could speak. It was like a child saying a lesson it has just learned, and is afraid of forgetting before it can get it said. [Pg 308]

'I am a wicked magician. I have turned hundreds of people's heads in that tree so that they fall into the sky, and when they fall back again, as they have to do when the tide turns, I make them into apple-trees. I don't know why I do, but I like to. I suppose it's because I'm wicked. I never did anything useful with my magic, but I can hurt. And there's only one way out of this, and I don't mean to show it you.'

'It's a pity you're so wicked,' said Diggory. 'I wish you were good.'

He threw down another apple, and instantly the magician became so good that he could do nothing but sit down and cry to think how wicked he had been. He was now perfectly useless. But Diggory was no longer afraid of him, so he gathered the ten apples that were left and put them inside his shirt, and came down the tree.

The old man couldn't tell him how to get out, and he couldn't disenchant the fruit-trees or anything. So Diggory had to spend three wish-apples. First he spent one on making the old man happy. This was done as it is in Miss Edgeworth's stories—by giving him a thatched cottage and a garden, and a devoted grand-daughter to look after him. The next apple showed Diggory the Apple Door, which he had not been [Pg 309] able to find, and he went out by it. You, of course, can find it on the map, but he had no map, and, besides, it is spelt differently. Before he went out of the orchard he threw down another apple, and wished the apple-trees to be disenchanted. And they were. And then the red-walled orchard was full of Kings and Princesses, and swineherds and goosegirls, and statesmen and stevedores, and every kind of person you can or can't think of.

Diggory left them to find their own ways home—some of them lived ever so long before, and ever so far away—and he himself went out by the Apple Door, and found his good white horse, who had been eating grass very happily all the time he had been in the company of the magician, and that had been two days and a night.

So Invicta was not hungry, but Diggory was; and, in fact, he was so hungry that he had to use a wish-apple to get his supper, and that was very, very wasteful of him, and he often regretted it in after years. It is true that he wished for the best supper in the world, and had it; but it was only bread-and-milk! If he had wished for the nicest supper it would have been different, no doubt.

Diggory rode on anxiously, arranging what wishes he should have with the rest of the [Pg 310] apples, but in the dusk he missed his way and was nearly drowned in a rain-flooded ford, and poor white Invicta was quite carried away.

Then Diggory took off his shirt to wring the water out, and as he took it off he said: 'I wish I had my good white horse again.'

And as he said it all the apples but one tumbled out of his shirt on to the ground, and he heard soft neighings and stampings and hustlings and rustlings all round him in the dark, and when the moon rose he saw that he had had his wish—he had his good white horse back again. But as he had dropped eight apples, he had his good white horse back eight times, and as eight times one is eight, he had now eight good white horses, all called Invicta.

'Well, eight horses are better than nothing!' he said; and when he had tethered the horses he went to sleep, for he felt strangely feeble and tired.

In the morning he woke with pains in every limb. He thought it was a cold from the wetting in the ford, but it was really rheumatism. And he could not get rid of it. He tied seven horses together and led them, riding on the eighth. [Pg 311]

'Eight horses are a pretty good fortune for a woodcutter's son,' he said to himself, 'and, anyway, I'm too tired to go looking for any better one.'

So he rode home.

He knew the roads well enough, and yet they seemed different; they were much better roads to ride over, for one thing, and the hedges and trees were odd somehow. And the big wood near his father's house seemed very small as he looked down on it

from the hill. But when he got to the village he thought he must have gone mad, for in the day and two nights and a day that he had been away the village had grown big and ugly and yellow-bricky, and there were eight shops and six public-houses besides the Bill and Billet, and many more people than there used to be, all in ugly, untidy clothes, and the Round Mound windmill was *gone*! The people came crowding round him.

'What's become of the mill?' he asked, trembling all over.

The boys and girls and men and women stared, and a very old man stepped out of the crowd.

'It were pulled down,' he said, 'when I were a boy.'

'And the woodcutter's cottage?' [Pg 312]

'That were burnt down a matter of fifty year ago. Was you a native of these parts, old man?'

There was a large plate-glass shop-window just opposite the crowd that surrounded Diggory. A dark blind was pulled down inside, because it was Wednesday and early-closing day. This made a fine mirror, and Diggory happened to look in it, and there he saw himself—an old, old white-haired man on a white horse. He had a white beard, too, but it was quite short, because it had only had since bedtime last night to grow in.

He almost tumbled off his horse. The landlord of the Ship led him in to sit by the fire in the bar parlour, and the eight horses were put up in the stable.

The old man who had told him about the mill came and sat by him, and poor old Diggory asked questions till he grew tired of hearing the answer, which was always the same: 'Dead, dead, dead!'

Then he sat silent, and the people in the bar talked about his horses, and a young man said:

'I wish I'd got e'er a one on 'em. I'd do a tidy bit in fish, an' set up for myself—so I would.'

'Young man,' said Diggory, 'you may take one of them; its name is Invicta.'

The young man could hardly believe his fortunate ears. Diggory felt his heart warm [Pg 313]
to think that he had made someone else so happy. He felt actually younger. And next morning he made up his mind to give away all the horses but one. That one he would sell, and its price would keep him for the rest of his life: he hoped that would not be long, for he did not care to go on living now that he had seen the tombstones in the churchyard with the names of his father and brothers and little Joyce of the mill.

He led his horses away next day. He did not want to give them all away in one village, because that would have lessened the value of his gift to the young man who was going into fish, and, besides, it would have been awkward to have so many horses of the same name in one village.

He gave away a horse at each village he passed through, and with every horse he gave away he felt happier and lighter. And when he had given away the fourth his rheumatism went, and when he had given away the seventh his beard was gone.

'Now,' he said to himself, 'I will ride home and end my days in my own village, and be buried with my own people.'

So he turned his horse's head towards home, and he felt so gay and light-limbed he [Pg 314]
could hardly believe that he was really an old, old man. And he rode on.

And at the end of the village he stopped and rubbed his eyes, for there stood the Round Mound windmill, and on the slope was Joyce, looking prettier than ever in a russet petticoat and a white neckerchief and a pink print gown with little red rosebuds on it.

'Oh, Diggory, Diggory,' she cried, 'you've come back, then! You'll take me with you now, won't you?'

'Have you got a looking-glass, my dear?' said he. 'Then run in and fetch it.'

She ran. He took it and looked in it. And he saw the same young brown face and the same bright brown hair that he had always known for *him*, and he was not old any more. And there was Joyce holding up a face as sweet as a bunch of flowers.

'Will you take me?' said she.

He stooped down and kissed the face that was so sweet.

'I'll take you,' said he.

And as they went along to his home he told her all the story. [Pg 315]

'Well, but,' she said, 'you've got one wish-apple left.'

'Why, so I have,' said he; 'if I hadn't forgotten it!'

'We'll make that into the fortune you went out to find. Do, do let me look at it!'

He pulled out the apple, and she took it in her hand as she sat behind him on the big white horse.

'Yes, our fortune's made,' he said; 'but I do wish I knew why I turned old like that.'

Just then Invicta stumbled, and Joyce caught at her lover to save herself from falling, and as she caught at him the apple slipped from her hand and the last wish was granted. For as it bounced on the road Diggory did know why he had grown old like that. He knew that the magician had arranged long before that every wish-apple that was used outside the orchard should add ten years to the wisher's age. So that the eight horses had made him a hundred years old, and the spell could only be undone by the wisher's giving away what he'd wished for. So that it was Diggory's generosity in giving away the horses that had taken him back to the proper age for being happy in. I don't want to be moral, and I'm very sorry—but it really was that. [Pg 316]

He carried Joyce home to his father's house. They were much too pleased with each other to bother about the wasted wish-apples.

'You're soon back, my son,' said the woodcutter, laughing.

'Yes,' said Diggory.

'Have you found your fortune?'

'Yes,' said Diggory; 'here she is!'

And he presented Joyce. The woodcutter laughed more than ever, for the miller's daughter was a bit of an heiress.

'Well, well!' he said.

So they were married, and they had a little farm, and the white horse was put to the plough, and to the cart, and the harrow, and the waggon; and he worked hard, and they worked hard, so that they all throve and were very happy as long as ever they lived.

Said Joyce one day to Diggory, 'How was it you wanted to take me with you directly you came back, and when you were going away you didn't.'

'I've often wondered about that myself,' he said; 'I think it must have been the bread-and-milk. You see, it was one of the wish-apple things, just like the horses were, only they were outside things, so they made me old outside; but the bread-and milk——' [Pg 317]

'Was an inside thing, of course—quite inside.'

'Yes, so it made me old inside of my mind, just old enough to have the sense to see that *you* were all the fortune I wanted, and more than I deserved.'

'I didn't have to be so very old to know what fortune *I* wanted,' said Joyce, 'but, then, I was a girl. Boys are always much stupider than girls, aren't they?'

The only person in this story you are likely to have heard of is, of course, Invicta, and he is better known as the White Horse of Kent.

You can see pictures of him all over his county: on brewers circulars and all sorts of documents, and carved in stone on buildings, and even on the disagreeable, insulting fronts of traction-engines. Traction-engines pretend to despise horses, but they carry the image of the White Horse on their hearts. And his name is generally put underneath his picture, so that there shall be no mistake. [Pg 318]

SIR CHRISTOPHER COCKLESHELL

The children called him Sir Christopher Cockleshell.—'Sir,' in token of respect for his gray hairs and noble-looking face; Christopher, because he had once carried Mabel across the road on a very muddy day, when thunder showers and the parish water-carts had both been particularly busy; and Cockleshell, because of the house he lived in.

It was a most wonderful house—like the gateway of an old castle. It had a big arch in

the middle and a window over the arch, and there were windows, too, in the towers on each side of the arch. All along the top were in-and-out battlements. It had been covered with white plaster once, but flakes of this had fallen away and showed the pinky bricks underneath. But the oddest thing about the house was the trimming that ran all round the bottom story about the height of a tall man. This trimming was of oyster-shells, and cockle-shells, and mussel-shells, and whelk-shells, and scallop-shells, all stuck on the wall of the house in patterns. It was a very wonderful house indeed, and the children always tried to go past it on their way to everywhere.

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The children themselves lived in a large, square, ordinary brown-brick house among other ordinary brown-brick houses. Their house had a long garden with tall old trees in it, and so had the other houses. Looking out of the boxroom window was like looking down on the top of a green forest, Phyllis always thought. Only now, of course, the trees were not green any more, because it was nearly Christmas.

'I wish Sir Christopher had a garden to his house,' Phyllis said one day to the new housemaid.

'There used to be a pleasure-gardens there, I've heard father tell,' said the new housemaid. 'Quite a big gardens, it was. The gent as owned it was as rich as rich, kep' his carriage and butlers and all. But when his son come into the property he sold the gardens for building on, and only kep' the gate-house—the Grotto they calls it. An' there 'e's lived ever since in quite a poor way. Nasty old miser, that's what he is!'

'He may be a miser,' said Phyllis, 'but he's not nasty. He carried Mabel as kind as could be.'

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'Have you ever spoke to him since?' demanded the housemaid.

'No,' said Phyllis; 'he always smiles at us, but he's always in a hurry.'

'That's it,' said the housemaid; ''e's afraid to let anyone inside of his house, fear they should get to see all the sacks of money he's got there. And he pokes about and picks things outer the gutters, so he won't get to know anyone. My young brother he knocked at the door once to arst for a drink of water—thought he'd get a squint at the inside of the house while the old chap was gone to draw it. But he shuts the door in Elf's face, and only opens it a crack to hand him the mug through.'

'It was kind of him to give your brother the water,' said Phyllis.

'Elf didun want the water,' said Alf's sister; ''e'd just 'ad a lemonade at the paper shop.'

Phyllis had often wanted to do something kind for Sir Christopher, but she could not think of anything that wasn't just as likely to annoy him as to please him. If she had known when his birthday was, she would have put a birthday card under his door; but no one can be pleased at having a card with 'Bright be thy natal morn' on it when really the natal morn is quite a different date. She would have taken him flowers at the time when dahlias and sunflowers grew at the end of the garden, but perhaps he would not like the bother of putting them in water; and, if he was really poor, and not a miser, as Jane said, he might not have a vase or jug to put them in.

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And now it was Christmas-time. Guy was home for the holidays, and that was splendid. But, on the other hand, mother and father had had to go to granny, who was ill. So there would be no real Christmas in the brown house.

'But I'll tell you what,' said Phyllis; 'there's the Christmas-tree for the poor children at the schools. Suppose we were to make some things for that, and buy some, and go down and help decorate? Mother said we might.'

Guy was rather clever with his fingers, and as we all like doing what we can do really well, he did not make such a fuss over making things as some boys do. He could make doll's furniture out of pins and wool, and armchairs out of the breast-bones of geese; only there are so seldom enough breast-bones of geese to make a complete set of furniture.

There was nearly a week to make things in, and long before its end the schoolroom began to look like a bazaar. There were little boxes of sweets covered with silver paper, and scrapbooks made of postcards covered with red calico, and some little dolls that the girls dressed, as well as all the things that Guy made.

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'How ravishingly beautiful!' said Mabel, when the shiny, shimmery, real Christmas-tree things bought at the shop were spread out with the others.

The day before Christmas Eve the children were very happy indeed, although they had had to be made thoroughly tidy before Jane would allow them to go down to the school; and being thoroughly tidy, as you know, often means a lot of soap in your eyes, and having your nails cleaned by someone who does not know as well as you do where the nail leaves off and the real you begins.

They went to the side-door of the school, and left the baskets and bundles of pretty

things in the porch and went in.

The big tree was there, but it was just plain fir-tree so far, nothing Christmassy about it, except that it was planted in a tub.

'How do you do?' said Guy politely to the stout lady in a bonnet with black beads and a violet feather; 'I'm so glad we're in time.' [Pg 323]

'What for?' said the stout lady. 'The tree's not till to-morrow. Run away, little boy.'

'Oh, Mrs. Philkins,' said Phyllis, 'he's not a little boy, he's Guy; don't you remember him?'

'I remember him in petticoats,' said Mrs. Philkins: 'he's grown. Good-afternoon.'

'Mother said,' said Guy, keeping his temper beautifully, 'that we might come and help.'

'Very kind of your mother to arrange it like that. But *I* happen to be in charge of the tree, and I don't want any outside assistance.'

The children turned away without a word. When they got outside Guy said:

'I hate Mrs. Philkins!'

'We oughtn't to hate anybody,' said Mabel.

'She isn't anybody—at least, not anybody in particular,' said Phyllis; 'I heard father say so.'

'She wouldn't have been such a pig to us if she'd known what we'd brought for the tree,' said Phyllis.

'I'm glad she didn't know. I wish we hadn't done the things at all,' said Guy; 'it's always the way if you try to do good to others.'

'It *isn't*,' said the others indignantly; 'you know it isn't.'

'That's right!' said Guy aggravatingly, 'let's begin to quarrel about it—*us*—that would just please her. Let's drop the whole lot into the canal, and say no more about it.' [Pg 324]

'Oh *no*!' cried both the girls together, clutching the precious parcels they carried.

'But what's the good?' said Guy; 'we don't know anyone who's got a Christmas-tree to give them to.'

Phyllis stopped short on the pavement, struck motionless by an idea.

'I know,' she said: 'we'll have a tree of our very own.'

'What's the good if there's no one to see it?'

'We'll ask someone to see it.'

'Who?'

'Sir Christopher!'

The daring and romance of this idea charmed even Guy. But he thought it would be better not to ask Sir Christopher to come to their house: 'Servants are so odd,' he said; 'they might be rude to him, or something. No; we'll get it ready, and we'll wheel it round after dark, and ask him to let us light it in his yard. Then he won't think we're trying to pry into his house.'

Half an hour later Guy staggered in, bearing a fir-tree.

'Only ninepence,' he said; 'it's a bit lop-sided, but we can tie ivy on or something to make that right. I'm glad that old cat wouldn't let us help. It's much jollier like this.' [Pg 325]

The tree was planted in a pot that a dead azalea had lived in; and Mrs. Philkins was quite forgotten in the joy of trimming their own tree. Besides the things they had made there were the lovely things they had bought—stars and flags, and a sugar bird-cage with a yellow bird in it, and a glass boat with glass sails, and a blue china bird with a tail of spun glass.

Guy went out and borrowed a wheelbarrow from the gardener who cut their grass when it was cut, and when the tree was trimmed he and Phyllis carried it downstairs. The top branch with the star on it got banged against the banisters, and the side branch got into Guy's eye, and Phyllis's thumb got jammed between the pot and the banister rail. But what are trifles like these in an adventure like this?

They got the tree out of the front-door without being seen by the servants—a real triumph. They stood the pot in the barrow, and started to wheel it out of the front-gate. But directly they lifted the handles of the barrow the floor of it naturally ceased to be straight, and the flower-pot toppled over and cracked itself slightly against the [Pg 326]

side of the barrow, while the boughs of the tree, with their gay decorations, took the opportunity to entangle themselves in the bad-tempered leaves of the holly that stood there, and were disengaged with difficulty.

Then the pot refused to stand up, and at last it had to be laid down in the barrow, with its shiny treasures dangling over the front-wheel.

Then, the barrow was extremely heavy even without the tree in it; and the children did not go the nearest way to the Grotto, because they did not want to meet people, so they were thoroughly tired and extremely hot by the time they approached Sir Christopher Cockleshell's castle.

There was a bit of waste land close to it, where someone had once begun to build a house and had then thought better of it. A bit of this house's wall was standing on each side of the space where its front-door would have been if it had ever come to the point of having one. They wheeled the barrow in, and the light of a street lamp that obligingly shone through the door-space made it possible for them to disentangle the little strings that had got twisted round each other, to disengage the gilt fish from the sugar bird-cage, and to take the glass bird out of the goose-bone armchair in which it was trying to sit. Also they set up all the candles—six dozen of them. This is done with tin-tacks, as no doubt you know. [Pg 327]

'Now,' said Guy, 'one of us must go and ask if he'll let us light it in his yard, and one of us must wait here with the tree.'

'What about me?' said Mabel.

'You can do which you like,' said Guy.

'I want to do both,' said Mabel; 'I want to stay with the pretty tree, *and* I want to go and ask him if he wants us.'

Mabel was still too small to understand thoroughly how hard it is, even for a grown-up person, to be in two places at once.

It ended in Guy's staying with the tree.

'In case of attacks by boys,' he said.

'Then I shall go with Phyllis,' said Mabel.

Both girls felt their hearts go quite pitter-pattery when at last they stood on the doorstep of the castle.

'Why don't you knock?' Mabel asked.

'I don't like to,' said Phyllis.

Mabel instantly knocked very loudly with a wooden ninepin-ball that she happened to have in her pocket. [Pg 328]

'Oh, I *wish* you hadn't!' said Phyllis; 'I wanted to think what to say first, and now there's no time.'

There certainly was not. The door opened a cautious inch, and a voice said:

'Who's there?'

'It's us,' said Phyllis, 'please. We don't want to pry into your beautiful house like Jane's brother Alf when he asked you for the drink of water, only we've made up a Christmas-tree, and may we stand it in your yard and light it—the candles, I mean?'

The door opened a little further, and a face looked out—the face, of course, of Sir Christopher. All the house that showed through the crack of the door didn't, as Mabel said afterwards, show at all, because it was pitch-dark.

'I don't quite understand,' said Sir Christopher gently. Phyllis was a little surprised to find that the voice was what she called a gentleman's voice.

'We—you were so kind carrying Mab across the road that water-carty day when it thundered——'

'Oh, it's you, is it?' he said.

'Yes, it's us; and they wouldn't let us help with the school tree, and so we made one of our own and then we wanted someone to see it. And we thought of you, because you don't seem to have many friends, and we thought—— But we'll take it home again if you don't care about it.' [Pg 329]

She stopped, just on the right side of tears.

'There's a glass bird with a spun-lovely tail,' said Mabel persuasively, 'and sweets and fishes, and a crocodile that goes waggle-waddle when you wind him up.'

'My dears,' said Sir Christopher, and cleared his throat. 'My dears,' he began again,

and again he stopped.

'We'll go away if—if you'd rather,' said Phyllis, and sniffed miserably.

'No, no!' he said; 'no, no—I was only thinking. I never thought—would you like to bring the tree into the house? It's just the sort of thing my little girl always liked.'

'Oh yes,' said Phyllis; 'we'll go and fetch it now.'

He closed the door gently. The children flew back to Guy and the tree.

'Oh, Guy! we've to take the tree inside the house! And he's got a little girl—at least, he says so. Come on, quick. We'd better carry it. The barrow's so heavy, and it does interfere so!' [Pg 330]

They carried the pot between them. It was very heavy, and they had to put it down and rest several times. But at last they dumped it down in the dark on the front-door step of the castle, and breathed deep breaths of fatigue, relief, and excitement.

The door opened, and opened wide, and this time light streamed from within.

'Welcome!' said Sir Christopher. 'Come in. Let me help to lift it. What a beautiful tree!'

'It is rather decent, isn't it?' said Guy dispassionately.

Sir Christopher raised the pot, carried it in, and the door was shut. The children found themselves in a small square hall. A winding staircase of iron corkscrewed upwards in one corner. The hall was lighted only by two candles.

The old gentleman led the way through a door on the right into a round room with white walls.

'We're inside the tower now,' said Guy.

'Yes,' said their host, 'this is part of the tower.'

He hastily lighted a big lamp, and then a deep 'Oh!' broke from the children. For the walls were not white, they were all of mother-of-pearl, and here and there all over the walls round pearls shone with a starry, milky radiance. [Pg 331]

'How radishing!' said Mabel in a whisper. 'I always said he wasn't a miser. He's a magician.'

'What a lovely, lovely room!' sighed Phyllis.

'What's it made of?' asked Guy downrightly.

'Oyster-shells,' said Sir Christopher, 'and pearl beads.'

And it was.

'Oh!' said Mabel gaily, 'then that's what you go prowling about in dirty gutters for?'

'Don't be rude, Mab dear!' whispered Phyllis.

But the old gentleman did not seem to mind. He just said, 'Yes, that's it,' in an absent sort of way. He seemed to be thinking about something else. Then he said, 'The Christmas-tree.'

The children had forgotten all about the Christmas-tree.

When its seventy-two candles were lighted the pearly room shone and glimmered like a fairy palace in a dream.

'It's many a year since my little girl had such a Christmas-tree,' he said. 'I don't know how to thank you.'

'Seeing your pearly halls is worth all the time and money,' said Mabel heartily.

And Phyllis added in polite haste:

'And you being pleased.' [Pg 332]

'Would you like to see the black marble hall?' asked Sir Christopher.

And, of course, they said, 'Yes, awfully.'

So he led them into the room on the other side of the hall, and lighted a lamp. And the room was like a room of black marble, carved into little round knobs.

'How lovely!' said Phyllis.

'It's not lovely like the other,' said Mabel; 'but it's more serious, like when the organ plays in church.'

'Why,' said Guy suddenly, 'it's winkle-shells!'

And it was. Hundreds and thousands of winkle-shells sorted into sizes and stuck on the walls in patterns, and then, it seemed, polished or varnished.

'Come,' said Sir Christopher, 'I'll show you the red-room.'

As they turned to go a tall, white figure by the door seemed to come suddenly into the lamplight. It was covered with a sheet.

'Oh!' said all three, starting back, 'what's that?'

'That's my little girl,' he said.

'Is she trying to frighten us? Is she playing ghosts?' asked Guy.

'No,' he said; 'she never plays at ghosts. It isn't her really. That's only my fun. It's a statue really.' [Pg 333]

'Aren't statues very dear?' asked Guy.

'Very,' said Sir Christopher—'very, very dear.'

He led the way up the winding iron stair and showed them the red-room. Its walls were covered with bits of red lobster-shells, overlapping like a fish's scales or the plates of armour.

'How resplendid!' said Mabel; 'I believe you're a mighty magician.'

'No,' he said; 'at least—no, not exactly. There's only one more room.'

The other room was a bedroom, quite dull and plain, with whitewashed walls and painted deal furniture.

'I like the pearly halls best,' said Mabel: 'they're more eloquent;' and they all went down to the room where the seventy-two candles of the Christmas-tree were burning steadily and brightly, though there was no one to see them.

'Won't you call your little girl?' said Phyllis. 'The candles won't last so very long; they're the cheap kind.'

Sir Christopher twisted his fingers together.

'It's no use calling her,'he said. 'Would you mind—do you mind leaving the tree for to-night? You could fetch it to-morrow. And you won't tell anyone about the inside of my house, will you? They'd only laugh at it.' [Pg 334]

'I don't see how they could,' said Mabel indignantly; 'it's the beautifullest, gorgerest house that ever was.'

'But we won't tell anyone,' said Guy. 'And we'll come again to-morrow—about the same time.'

Sir Christopher said, 'Yes, please.'

And they all shook hands with him and came away, leaving the Christmas-tree, with all its seventy-two candles, still making the pearly room a dream of fairy beauty.

They ran all the way home, because it was rather late, and they did not want the servants to fetch them from the parish schoolroom, where they had not spent the evening. It would have been very difficult to explain exactly where and how they *had* spent it, and the fact that they had promised not to say anything about it would have added considerably to the difficulty.

When they had been let in, and had taken off their hats and jackets and got their breaths, they looked at each other.

'Well?' said Phyllis.

'Yes,' said Mabel; 'what an inciting adventure! What a dear he is! I do hope we shall see his little girl to-morrow.' [Pg 335]

'Yes,' said Guy slowly, 'but I don't think we shall.'

'Why ever not?'

'Because I don't believe he's got any little girl. We went into all the rooms, and the hall and landing. There wasn't any other room for the little girl to be in.'

'Perhaps it was really her under the sheet, trying to be ghosts,' said Phyllis.

'It was too high up,' said Mabel.

'She might have been standing on a stool,' said Phyllis.

'Well,' said Guy, with a satisfied look; 'it's a very thrilling mystery.'

It was. And it gave them something to think of for the next few days. For that evening

when they went to fetch the Christmas-tree, they found the door of Sir Christopher's castle tight shut, and their Christmas-tree was standing alone on the doorstep in the dark.

After vainly knocking several times, they put the tree into the wheelbarrow and got it home, only upsetting it three times by the way.

When they got it into the light of their schoolroom they saw that there was a piece of [Pg 336] paper on it—a note.

'My dears,' it said, 'here is your beautiful tree. Thank you very much. If you knew how much pleasure it had given me you would be glad. Why not give the tree to some poor child? Good-bye. God bless you!'

There were some letters tangled together at the bottom of the page.

'His initials, I suppose,' said Guy. But nobody could read them.

'Anyway, it means he doesn't want to see us any more,' said Phyllis. 'Oh, I do wish we knew something more about him.'

But they took his advice, and the tree went to the gardener's little boy, who was ill. It made him almost forget his illness for days and days.

When father came home they asked him who lived in the Grotto. He told them.

'He has lived there for years,' he said. 'I have heard that when he came into his property he found that his property was almost all debts. So he sold the tea-gardens for building on, and has lived there in the Grotto on next to nothing, and all these years he's been paying off his father's creditors. I should think they're about paid off [Pg 337] by now.'

'Has he a little girl?' asked Phyllis.

'Yes—I believe so,' said father absently.

'It's very odd,' Mabel was beginning, but the others silenced her.

After this the children were more interested than ever in Sir Christopher. They used to paint illuminated texts, and make picture-frames of paper rosettes, and buy toys, and leave them on his doorstep in the dark, 'For the little girl,' and as the spring came on, bunches of flowers.

It was one evening when Phyllis came to the castle with a big bunch of plumy purple lilac. She was earlier than usual, and it was not quite dark, and—wonder of wonders—the door of the castle was open. Still more wonderful, Sir Christopher stood on the doorstep.

'I was watching for you,' he said. 'I had a sort of feeling you'd come to-night. Will you come in?'

He led her into the black marble room and stood looking wistfully at her.

'Would you like to see my little girl?' he said suddenly.

'Yes,' said Phyllis. [Pg 338]

'I didn't think you'd understand,' he said, 'when you came at Christmas. But you've been so kind and faithful all these months. I think you will understand. Look!'

He pulled the sheet from the statue, and Phyllis looked on the white likeness of a little girl of her own age, dressed in a long gown like a nightgown.

'It is very beautiful,' she said.

'Yes,' he said. 'Have you ever heard any tales about me?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Phyllis, and told him.

'It's not true,' he said. My father had no debts. But I married someone he didn't like; and then I got ill, and couldn't work. My father was very hard. He wouldn't help us. My wife died, and then my father died, and all his great wealth came to me. Too late! too late! The letter that told me I was rich came to me when I was sitting beside my dead child. The money came *then*—the money that would have saved her. The first money I spent out of it all was spent on that statue. It was done as she lay dead.'

Phyllis looked at the statue, and felt—she didn't know why—very frightened. Then she looked at him, and she was not frightened any more. She ran to him and put her arms round him. [Pg 339]

'Oh, poor, poor, dear Sir Christopher!' she said.

'That's how she looked when she was dead,' he said; 'would you like to see my ladybird as she was when she was alive and well, and I was a strong man able to work for her?'

'Yes—oh yes,' said Phyllis.

He led the way into the pearly room, and drew back a green curtain that hung there. Phyllis caught her breath sharply, and tears pricked her eyes. Not because the picture was a sad one—ah, no! not that!

As the curtain was withdrawn the figure of a child seemed to spring towards them from the canvas—a happy, laughing child, her arms full of roses, her face full of health and beauty and the joy of life; a child whose glad, unclouded eyes met Phyllis's in a free, joyous look.

'Oh no!' cried Phyllis; 'she can't be dead—she *can't*!'

The old man took her in his arms, for she was crying bitterly.

'Thank you—thank you, dear,' he said, soothing her. 'Now I know that you are the right person to help me.'

'I? Help *you*?' [Pg 340]

Phyllis's tears began to dry at the beautiful thought, but she still sobbed.

'Don't cry,' he said, and gently drew the green curtain over the lovely laughing face. 'Don't cry. I want to tell you of many things. When that money came—I've told you when—as soon as I could see or think again, I saw what I ought to do. Ever since I've not spent a penny of that money on myself—on anything but the plainest food, the plainest clothes. If I've made the house beautiful for her picture to live in, it's been with my own work. All the rest of the money has gone to help little girls whose fathers can't work for them—little girls that can be saved, as my little girl could have been saved. That's the work I want you to carry on for me when you grow up. Will you promise?'

'Yes,' said Phyllis; 'only I'm very stupid.'

'I will have you taught. You shall learn how to do my work. Ask your father to come and see me. And now, good-bye. Perhaps I shan't see you again. Will you always remember that your Christmas-tree came to me like a light in a dark night to show me that there was someone still who cared to be kind.... Good-bye.'

Father, when he heard the story, almost thought that Phyllis was dreaming. But he went to the Grotto, and when he came back his face was very sad. [Pg 341]

'It is a very great honour for you, Phyllis,' he said gravely. 'Are you sure that you understand how much hard work it will mean?'

'I don't mind hard work,' said Phyllis, 'if only I can do what he wants.'

So Phyllis is learning many things and preparing for the great work that has so wonderfully come to her. I think she will do it well, because she is not at all stupid really, and she has the gift of being sorry for sad people, and happy with happy ones. I think Sir Christopher chose well.

Some distant relations of Sir Christopher's have tried to make out that he was mad, and so couldn't do what he liked with his money. But when they took the matter to the judges to decide, hundreds and hundreds of people he had been good to and helped broke the promise of secrecy that he had always asked of them. And all England rang with the tale of his goodness, and of all the kind and clever things he had done for poor children all those long years, for the sake of his own little child. And the judges decided he was quite right to use his money in that way, and not mad at all. So the tiresome relations got nothing but lawyers' bills for their pains. [Pg 342]

Phyllis only saw Sir Christopher once again. He sent for her when he was dying. They had moved his bed into the pearly room, and he lay facing the green curtain.

'If it seems too hard when the time comes,' he said, 'you need not do the work. Your father knows how to arrange that.'

'You needn't be afraid,' said Phyllis; 'it's the most splendid chance anyone ever had.'

'Kiss me, dear,' he said, 'and then draw back the curtain.'

But before Phyllis's hand had touched the green curtain he sat up in the bed and held out his arms towards the picture.

'Why, ladybird!' he cried, his face all alight with love and joy. 'Why, my little girl!' [Pg 343]

MUSCADEL

Of course, there was a grand party when Princess Pandora came of age. The palace

was hung with garlands of white roses, all the carpets were taken up, and the floor of every room was covered close with green turf with daisies in it, for in that country the cruel practice of rooting daisies out of lawns with a spud was a crime.

The Queen-mother had died when Pandora was a little baby, so now the Princess had to be hostess, and to receive all the guests, and speak to each one a little, and see that everyone had enough to eat and the right sort of person to talk to.

She did it all very nicely indeed, for she was a properly brought up Princess and had been to a school for the daughters of monarchs only, where, every Wednesday evening, she and her school-fellows were taught 'deportment, manners, and how to behave at Court.'

All the guests went away very pleased with her and with themselves, which is how people ought always to feel after a party. [Pg 344]

When they had all gone she went and curled up at the feet of her father, who had sunk back on his throne exhausted by his hospitable exertions. The two were quite alone, except for a particularly fine house-fly who had settled on the back of the throne, just above the carved Royal arms. Of course, neither the King nor the Princess noticed such a little thing as a fly.

'Well, daddy dear,' said the Princess, 'did it go off all right? Did I behave prettily?'

'Ah!' said the King, 'you're a born Princess, my pet. Pretty face, pretty manners, good heart, good head. You're your dear mother over again. And that reminds me——'

'Yes?' said the Princess.

'When your mother died,' said the King—and he sighed, though it was twenty-one years to a day since he had lost his Queen-love—'I promised her to lock up her apartments, and only to give the keys of them to you when you should be twenty-one. And now you *are*, so here are the keys, my precious. You've always wanted to explore the rooms in the south wing. Well, now you can.' [Pg 345]

'How lovely!' cried the Princess, jumping up; 'won't you come too, daddy?'

'I'd rather not, dear,' said the King, so sadly that Pandora at once said:

'Well, then, *I* won't either. I'll stay with you.'

But the King said 'No,' and she had better take a housemaid or two with brooms and dusters. 'The dust grows thick in twenty-one years,' said he.

But the Princess didn't want any of the palace housemaids to help her to explore her mother's rooms. She went alone, holding up her cloth-of-silver train because of the dust.

And the rooms that she unlocked with the six gold keys with pearls in their handles were very dusty indeed. The windows were yellow with dust, so the Princess threw them all open. And then, even through the dust, she could see how beautiful the rooms were—far more beautiful even than her own—and everyone had always said that hers were the most beautiful rooms in the seven kingdoms. She dusted the tops of a few of the tables and cabinets with her lace handkerchief, so that she could just see how everything was inlaid with ivory and jade and ebony and precious stones.

Six of the keys—the pearly ones—opened six beautiful rooms, but the seventh had rubies in its handle, and it was a little, little key, not at all like a door-key; so Pandora looked about for a little keyhole that the key would fit, and at last she found a cabinet of ebony inlaid with gold and red tortoiseshell, and the little seventh key just fitted through the opening of the gold lock-plate and into the keyhole. Pandora turned the key and opened the cabinet. Inside the cabinet were seven little drawers with gold handles set with rubies, like the key. [Pg 346]

**'In the drawer was just one jewelled ring.
It lay on a written page.'—Page 347.**

Pandora pulled the drawers out one after the other. She was alone, except for the house-fly, who had followed her and now sat on the top of the cabinet door, watching her with all his hundreds of eyes. But no one notices a fly.

Five of the drawers contained jewels. The first was full of necklaces, the second held rings and brooches, the third had tiaras and chaplets, the fourth girdles, and the fifth bracelets, and they were all of the most beautiful jewels in the world—rubies, sapphires, emeralds, pearls and diamonds, and opals, and many other stones that the Princess did not even know the names of.

In the sixth drawer was a dry brown wreath that fell to pieces as Pandora lifted it. It had been jasmine once, and the Queen had worn it at her wedding. [Pg 347]

And in the seventh drawer was just one jewelled ring. It lay on a written page.

The Princess read the writing:

'This ring is for my son's wife, or for my daughter, if I have no son. It is the magic ring given thousands of years ago to a Queen of this country. It has the power of changing the wearer into whatever shapes he chooses. But it has never been used, because the Kings of this country have always been so good and kind, and clever and beloved, that their wives could never think of any change that would not be a change for the worse. There is only one thing in the world that this jewel cannot touch or change. And this is of all things in the world the most important thing.'

Pandora kissed the written words and slipped the ring on to her finger. It was a wonderful stone, like a sapphire that had tried to change into an opal, and stopped halfway.

There was not a happier Princess living than Pandora. Yet she was not afraid of change. Girls are like this sometimes, and she was very young for her age.

She stood looking at the ring and turning it on her finger, and the fly watched her with all its hundreds of eyes. [Pg 348]

Now, you will, perhaps, have guessed that this fly was not an ordinary fly, and you are right. But if you think he was an enchanted Prince or anything of that sort you are wrong. The fly was simply the cleverest fly of all flies—someone must be the cleverest in any society, you know—and he was just clever enough to like to be where the Princess was, and to look at her beauty with all his hundreds of eyes. He was clever enough to like this and to know that he liked it, but he was not clever enough to know why.

So now, as the Princess stood fingering her ring and trying to make her mind up, he

gave an interested buzz, and the Princess jumped.

'Oh,' she said, 'it's only a horrid fly! But it has wings. It must be lovely to have wings. I wish I were a fairy no bigger than that fly.'

And instantly she and her silver-trained gown, and her silver shoes, and the magic ring, and everything about her, grew suddenly small, till she was just as big as the fly and no bigger, and that is flower-fairy size. Silver gauze wings grew out of her shoulders; she felt them unfolding slowly, like a dragon-fly's wings when he first comes out of that dull brown coat of his that hasn't any wing-parts. [Pg 349]

She gave a tiny shriek of joyous surprise, and fluttered out through the open window and down across the marble terraces to the palace flowergarden. The fly buzzed heavily after her.

Pandora fluttered among roses and lilies on her bright, light, white wings, but presently she was tired, because flying is much harder work than you would think, especially when you have not been brought up to it from a child. So she looked about for a place to rest in, and saw near her the cool pink cave of a foxglove flower. She alighted on its lip, folded her wings, and walked in on her little fairy feet. It was very pleasant inside the foxglove. The Princess sat down by a drop of dew, which was quite a pool to the tiny lady, and presently she took off her rings and laid them on the smooth floor of the pink cave, and began to dabble her hands in the dew-pool. The fly had settled on the outer edge of the flower, and watched her with all his hundreds of eyes.

And now the dreadful thing happened. Pandora, her hands and face wet with dew, suddenly saw the daylight darken at the entrance of her foxglove cave. Then a black-winged monster, with hundreds and hundreds of eyes, came quickly towards her on its six legs. Pandora was very frightened, and squeezed herself close to the back of her cave. The fly moved on, and quickly picked up the magic ring, now so tiny that it fitted nicely on to one of its front feet. [Pg 350]

'A black-winged monster, with hundreds and hundreds of eyes.'—Page 350

Next moment it had backed out of the foxglove, taking the ring with it, and had flown off, and the Princess was left alone.

If she cried a little you can hardly blame her. You wait till you find yourself one million three hundred thousand two hundred and seventy-four times as small as you usually are, with no means whatever of getting back to your proper size, then you'll understand how the Princess felt.

But she was a brave Princess; so she soon stopped crying, spread her gauzy wings, and flew across the garden and up over the marble terraces and in at the library window of the palace.

The King was reading the account of the birthday-party in the evening paper, and he did not notice the Princess at all till she settled on his ear. Then he put up his hand to brush her away, for he thought she was a fly. She dodged his hand and settled again, and shouted 'Papa!' into his ear as loud as ever she could. And the shout was no louder than a fly's buzzing, but, as it was close to his ear, the King heard it very distinctly. [Pg 351]

'Bless my soul!' said the King, sitting very bolt upright.

'Don't move, daddy,' said the tiny Princess, 'even if I tickle your ear with my wings. I found a magic jewel in one of dear mother's cabinets, and I made it turn me into a fairy, and now a horrid fly has buzzed off with the jewel, and I can't get back to my right size.'

'I must be dreaming,' said the King.

'I wish you were—I mean I wish I was—but it's true. I'll settle on your hand now, and you'll see.'

The King looked at the tiny winged thing—flower-fairy size—that settled on his hand. And he put on his spectacles and looked again. And then he got a magnifying-glass and looked through that.

'Yes,' he said, 'it certainly is you! What a thing to happen, and on your birthday, too! Oh dear! oh dear!'

'It *is* rather hard, daddy,' said the poor Princess; 'but you are so wise and clever, you'll be able to get me back to my right size again.'

'My dear,' said the King, 'I received a thorough commercial education, but I never learned magic. In fact, I doubt whether it is still taught even at Oxford.' [Pg 352]

'Daddy dear,'said the Princess shyly, 'I've read a good many books about magic—fairy-tales they're called, you know—and——'

'Yes,' said the King, who saw at once what she meant. 'Of course, I shall do that first thing.'

And next morning all the newspapers contained an advertisement:

> 'Wanted, competent Prince to undo magic and restore Princesses to their right size. None but eldest sons need apply. The usual reward offered. Apply at the palace.'

'I think *that's* a mistake, daddy,' said the Princess; 'in the fairy stories it's always the youngest son who makes everything come right. And people don't know their fairy history nowadays; they mayn't know what the reward is.'

So the next day the advertisement was changed to:

> 'Any sons of respectable monarchs may apply. The successful candidate will receive the Princess's hand in marriage.'

'It's all very well to put that in,' said the Princess to herself, 'but if I don't like him I shan't marry him. I'll give him all my jewels instead.' [Pg 353]

But all the Kings' sons in the world had forgotten their magic, if they ever knew any, and not one single Prince applied at the palace.

So the Princess had to do the only possible thing—make the best of it. And she did it bravely.

Now, when the fly, whose name, by the way, was Muscadel, flew off from the foxglove-bell with the magic jewel on his feathery foot, he flew straight to the Princess's boudoir and settled down on his favourite spot, the corner of the frame of her mirror. And there he sat and wondered how he could best use the magic jewel. And he thought so hard that he never noticed a large spider who spun a web right across the corner where he sat, and when he spread his wings to assist his meditations by a little exercise he was caught in the web.

'Aha!' said the spider, smiling greedily.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said the fly.

'How nice you look!' said the spider.

Then very slowly and carefully she began to move towards him. [Pg 354]

'What a terrible thing it is to be a fly!' said he. 'I wish I was a spider.'

And, of course, instantly he was. He broke the web and scrambled down the mirror, for he was still horribly frightened of the other spider. He got out of the window and down into the garden, and hid himself under a leaf of a burdock, which was there because the gardener was a lazy fellow and neglected his business.

But it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Before Muscadel had got his breath after the shock of that dreadful web he saw a slow, wrinkled-skinned creature, with bright yellow eyes, quite close to him. It was a toad, and he knew that toads eat spiders.

'Oh, a spider's life isn't worth living!' he cried; 'I wish I was a toad.'

And, of course, he was, for the magic jewel was still on his front foot.

Now that Muscadel was a toad he felt he should like to find a quiet damp place to live in, so he crawled to the edge of the basin of the palace fountain.

And when he had found a nice damp crack in the marble he squeezed in and stayed there for some days. But one day, when he went out for a breath of air and a [Pg 355] woodlouse or two, a great beak clattered quite near him, and startled him so that he nearly jumped out of his toad's skin.

The person with a beak was a stork, and Muscadel knew what the stork wanted.

'Oh, a toad's life is a dog's life,' said Muscadel; 'I wish I was a stork.'

So he was a stork, and the magic jewel, grown bigger, was round his right leg.

It was fine to be a stork, and he did not envy even the golden eagle that flew down to drink at the fountain. And when the eagle came within a yard or two of him he felt so large and brave that he said:

'Keep to your own side, will you? Where are you shoving to?'

The golden eagle, whose temper is very short, looked at him with evil golden eyes, and said:

'You'll soon see where I am shoving to,' and flew at him.

Muscadel saw that he had made a mistake that might cost him his life.

'Oh, what's the good of being a stork?' he said. 'I wish I was an eagle.'

And as soon as he was one he flew away, leaving the other eagle with its beak open in amazement, too much 'struck of a heap,' as he told his wife afterwards, to follow [Pg 356] the new bird and finish off their quarrel in the air.

'Oh, how grand it is to be an eagle!' said Muscadel, sailing on widespread wings; and just as he said it an arrow caught him under the left wing. It hurt horribly. 'What a powerful thing an arrow is!' he said. 'Dear me, how it hurts! I wish I was an arrow.'

So he was one, but he was an arrow in the quiver of a very stupid bowman, who shot next day at a buzzard and missed it. So the arrow, which was Muscadel, lodged high in an oak-tree, and the stupid bowman could not get it down again.

'I don't like being a slave to a mere bow,' said Muscadel; 'I'll be a bow myself.'

But when he was a bow the archer who owned him hurt his bow-back so in fitting him with a new string that he got very cross, and said:

'This is worse slavery than the other. I want to be an archer.'

So he was an archer. And as it happened he was one of the King's archers. The magic jewel was round his arm like a bracelet, and no one saw it, for he kept it hidden up his arm under the sleeve of his buff coat. [Pg 357]

Now that Muscadel was a man, of course, he read the newspapers, and in them he saw the King's advertisement, which was still appearing every day.

'Dear me!' said Muscadel; 'of course the Princess couldn't get back to her right size when I had taken the magic jewel away. I never thought of that. Flies are thoughtless little things. And, by the way, taking that jewel was stealing. Very wrong indeed. But I didn't know that when I was a fly. So *I'm* not a thief, and no more was the fly, because he didn't know any better.'

That evening he had a little talk with the captain of the King's archers, and in the morning the captain called on the King very early and said:

'Sire, there's a crack-brained chap among my archers who says he can make the Princess her right size again. Of course, it's all tommy-rot, your Majesty, if I may be pardoned the expression, but I thought your Majesty would like to know.'

'Oh, let him try,' said the King wearily; 'it's something to find someone who even thinks he can do it.'

So next day Muscadel, the archer, put on his Sunday clothes and went up to the [Pg 358] palace, and a great, red-faced, burly fellow he was.

"On the table stood the dazzling figure of a real full-sized princess."—Page 359.

The King and all the Court were assembled to see the archer make the Princess her own size again, though nobody believed he could do it.

The King was on his throne, and Pandora, still flower-fairy size, was sitting on one of the carved gold flowers that adorned the throne's right arm.

The archer bowed to the King and the Court, and to the Princess, though he could not see her.

Then he looked round the crowded throne-room and said:

'Look here, your Majesty, this will never do.'

'Eh?' said the King.

'Magic can't be done in this sort of public way. I must be left alone with the Princess. No; I can't have anyone bothering round. Not even you, your Majesty.'

The King was rather offended, but the Princess got to his ear and whispered, and then he gave the order for the throne-room to be cleared; and when that was done, he set the tiny Princess on the table, and went away himself and shut the door honourably behind him.

Then the archer said: [Pg 359]

'Little Princess, you can be made your right size again if you will do just what I tell you. Do you promise?'

The Princess's little voice said, 'Yes.'

'Well, then,' said the archer, 'I have got the jewel here that the fly stole from you, and I will lend it to you, and you can wish yourself Princess-size again, and then you must give me back the jewel.'

'Why, the jewel was stolen! You've no right to it. I shall call the guard,' said Pandora angrily.

'They wouldn't hear you, little Princess, if you did call,' said the archer; 'but I'll call them for you if you like. Only you promised.'

'So I did,' said the Princess. 'Well, lend me the jewel.'

He took it off his arm and laid it upon the table, and as soon as the Princess touched it, it grew small, small, small, so that she could put it on her finger. Then she said:

'I wish I were my right size again!'

And the archer rubbed his eyes, for there on the table stood the dazzling figure of a real, full-sized Princess in a cloth-of-silver gown, and a face more beautiful than the morning. [Pg 360]

'Oh, how lovely you are!' he said, and gave her his hand to help her down.

She jumped lightly from the table and stood before him, laughing with joy at being her own real right size once more.

'Oh, thank you! thank you!' she cried; 'I must run and show my father this very minute.'

'The jewel?' said the archer.

'Oh!' said Pandora. 'Well, yes, I did promise, but—well, I'm a Princess of my word. Here it is.'

She held it out, but he did not take it.

'You may keep it for ever and ever, Princess dear,' he said, 'if you will only marry me.'

'Oh, I can't!' she cried. 'I'm never going to marry anyone unless I love him more than all the world.'

'I feel as if I'd loved you all my lives,' said Muscadel—'all my life, I mean. Couldn't you wish to love me?'

'I don't think I want to,' said the Princess doubtfully.

'Then I must have the jewel. I'll find some way yet of making you love me, and then you shall have it for ever and ever.'

'If I loved you,' said she, 'I suppose I shouldn't mind your having red hair, and a red face, and red ears, and red hands, should I?' [Pg 361]

'Not a bit,' said the archer cheerfully.

She stood there, twisting the magic jewel round and round on her Royal finger.

'I suppose it's more important than anything else to love someone?' she said.

'Much,' said he.

'Well, then,' said she, 'but are you the sort of person I ought to love?'

'No,' said he, 'I'm not half good enough for you. But then nobody is.'

'That's nice of you, anyhow,' she said. 'I'll do it. I wish I loved you!'

There was a silence. Then Pandora said:

'Nothing's happened. I don't love you. I feel just the same as usual. Your hair, and hands, and face, and ears are redder than ever. You'll excuse my candour, won't you?'

'Then there's nothing for it but for me to wish not to love you,' said Muscadel, 'for I really can't bear loving you to this desperate degree when you don't care a snap of your Royal fingers for me. Lend me the jewel a moment. You shall have it back. If you don't care for me, I don't want to care for anything. I'll live and die a red-faced, red-eared, red-haired, red-handed archer, so I will.' [Pg 362]

The Princess lent him the jewel, and he wished and waited. Then, 'It's no good,' he said; 'I adore you as much as ever—more, if possible.'

'A blowzy, frowzy dairymaid.' Page 363.

'Ah, I see,' said the Princess; 'there *is* one thing that the magic ring won't touch. I suppose that's love. How funny!'

'I don't think it's funny at all,' said he. 'I suppose really it's because you're not the sort of person that could love the sort of person I am.'

'Well, then,' said she, 'I'll wish I was the sort of person who *could*. I won't be made a silly of by a stupid magic jewel. Only let me call my father, because goodness knows what sort of person the person who could love you would be like. *I* can't imagine anyone who could!'

'You may be as cruel as you like now,' said Muscadel, 'if only somehow or other you'll get to love me afterwards. I will call the King.'

So he went to the door and shouted:

'Hi, your Majesty! Step this way for a moment, will you, please?'

And His Majesty stepped.

'Look here, daddy,' said the Princess, 'I'm real Princess size again, so give me a kiss!'

When this was done she said very quickly, and before the King could stop her: [Pg 363]

'I wish I was the kind of person that could love this archer.'

And then and there, before the horrified eyes of the other two, the Princess turned into the kind of person who could love the archer.

'Bless my soul and body!' said the King, turning purple.

'Oh, my heart!' said Muscadel, turning white.

For the kind of person the Princess had changed into was a blowzy, frowzy dairymaid, with oily black hair and shining red cheeks, and little black eyes like the currant eyes in gingerbread pigs. Her hands were fat and red, and her feet would not bear looking at for a moment.

'Good old Muscadel!' said the dairymaid that Pandora had turned into; 'now we'll be married and live as happy as two mice in a cheese!'

'Never in this world!' cried Muscadel, snatching the ring from her hand, which was not manners, but we must remember that he was very much upset. He snatched the ring, and he rushed out of the room and out of the palace, and when he got to the archers' quarters he flung himself face down among the rushes on the floor, and lay [Pg 364] there till his comrades began to mock him and even to kick him as he lay; and then he got up and fought them with his red fists, one down, t'other come on, till seven of them had owned that they did not want any more.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said the King in his palace; 'I'd rather have had you flower-fairy size for life than like this! We must get back the jewel and make you into your old self.'

'Not a bit of it,' said the dairymaid Princess. 'I never was so happy in my life. I love that lovely archer, and if I'm a Princess you can order him to marry me, and he'll have to.'

'Lackaday!' said the King. 'Dairymaids don't seem to love like Princesses do.'

'I dare say not,' said she, 'but we know our own minds. I tell you I'm happy, governor, and I'll stay as I am.'

The dairymaid Princess called for cold pork and cheese and beer, and, having had quite enough of all three, she went to bed in the Princess's green and white bedroom.

Now, when all the archers had gone to sleep poor Muscadel stole out and wandered through the palace gardens, and looked at the white fountains rising and falling in the moonlight. He saw the white lilies sleeping standing up, just like real live [Pg 365] sentinels. He saw the white pea-cocks roosting in the yew-trees, and the white swans cuddled up among the reeds by the lake. He went hither and thither through the cold white beauty of the night, and he thought and thought, but he could not think any thought that was worth the trouble of thinking.

And at last he sat down on a marble bench and very nearly wished that he were dead. Not quite, of course, because people very seldom do that; and if he had there would have been an end to this story.

The silence and the moonlight soothed him; his poor brain felt clearer and brighter, and at last he had the sense to say, without at all knowing that he was saying anything sensible, 'I wish I was clever.'

And instantly he was.

The change was so great, so sudden, and so violent that it nearly choked him. He drew two or three difficult breaths, and then he said:

'Oh, I see! How stupid of me! I wish I were the kind of person the real Princess could love.'

And he felt his body change. He grew thinner, and his face seemed to grow a [Pg 366] different shape. He hastened to the lake and leaned over it, and saw by the moonlight the reflection of his own face in the water. It was not particularly handsome, but he was not ashamed of the deep-set eyes, largish nose, and firm lips and chin.

'"You've got a face as long as a fiddle."'—Page 367.

'So that's the sort of man she could love!' he said, and went home to bed like a sensible person.

Early in the morning he went out into the palace garden, and it was not all gray and white, as it had been the night before, with moonlight and white lilies, but gold and red, with sunshine and roses, and hollyhocks and carnations.

He went and waited under the Princess's window, for he had grown clever enough to know that the Princess, since she was now a dairymaid, would be awake betimes. And sure enough the green silk curtains were presently drawn back, and the drowsy, blowzy, frowzy face of the dairymaid looked out.

'Halloa!' she said to Muscadel, among the roses, 'what are *you* up to?'

'I am the archer you love,' said Muscadel, among the roses.

'Not you,' she said.

'But indeed!' said he.

'Lawks!' said the dairymaid. [Pg 367]

'Don't you love me like this?' said Muscadel.

'Not a bit,' said she; 'go along, do! You've got a face as long as a fiddle, and I never could abide black hair.'

'I'm going to stay like this,' said he.

'Then what's to become of me?' she asked, and waited for an answer with her mouth half open.

'I'll tell you,' said Muscadel. 'You can stay as you are all your life, and go on loving an archer who isn't anywhere at all, or I'll lend you the magic jewel, and then you can change back into the Princess. And when you're the Princess, you'll love me ever so much more than you ever loved the archer.'

'Humph!' said the dairymaid, fingering the Princess's pearl necklace. 'Well, if my dear archer really isn't any more, anywhere—— As you say, the really important thing is to love someone.' Although she was a silly dairymaid she had the sense to see that. 'Give me the jewel,' she said.

He threw it up, and she caught it overhand, put it on, and said:

'I wish I was the Princess again.' [Pg 368]

And there was the Princess leaning out of the window and covering her face with her hands.

'Look at me,' said Muscadel; 'am I the sort of person you could love?'

'I don't know,' said Pandora, peeping at him between her rosy finger-tips. 'You had better ask papa.'

'I'd rather ask you,' said Muscadel, as he climbed up the palace ivy and leaned in at her window-sill to ask her.

And she leaned out to answer him.

They were married the very next day, and everyone in the kingdom, rich and poor, had roast beef and plum-pudding for dinner.

And as soon as the wedding was over, Muscadel and his bride went down to the lake, and he threw the magic jewel far, far out. It gleamed redly as it flew through the sunlit air and with a tiny splash sank in the lake, and there it is to this day. You might try to find it one of these days when you have nothing better to do. I dare say you often feel that you would like to change from what you are into something else, and, for anything I know, it might be a very good thing for you, and for the rest of the world. [Pg 369]

But Pandora and Muscadel were so happy at belonging to each other that they never wished to change at all, so they did not want the magic ring, and that is why they threw it away. For, as all good housekeepers know, it is very foolish to keep useless things about—just to litter the house up.

THE END [Pg 370]

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