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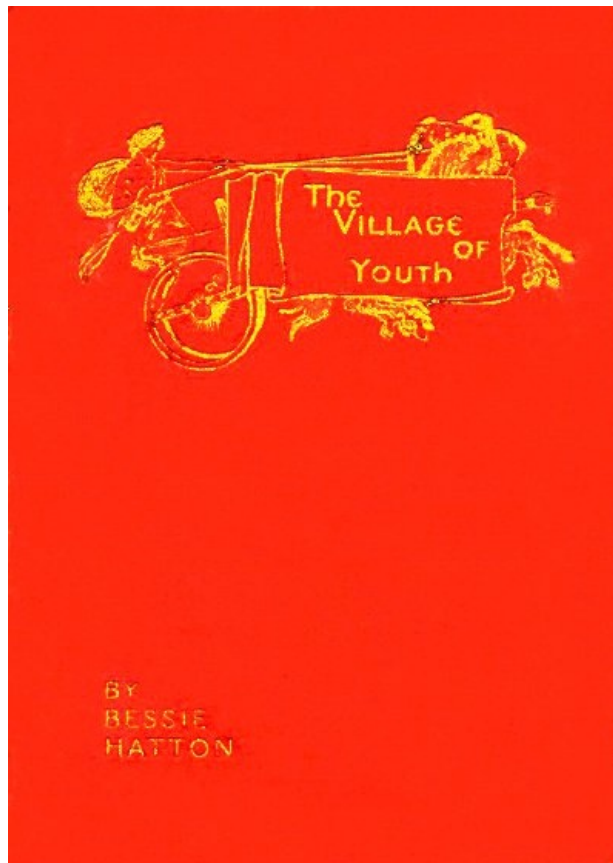
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VILLAGE OF YOUTH, AND OTHER
FAIRY TALES ***





**THE VILLAGE
OF YOUTH**
And Other Fairy Tales

BY

BESSIE HATTON

Author of "Enid Lyle," etc.

With Numerous Illustrations

BY

W. H. MARGETSON

London, 1895

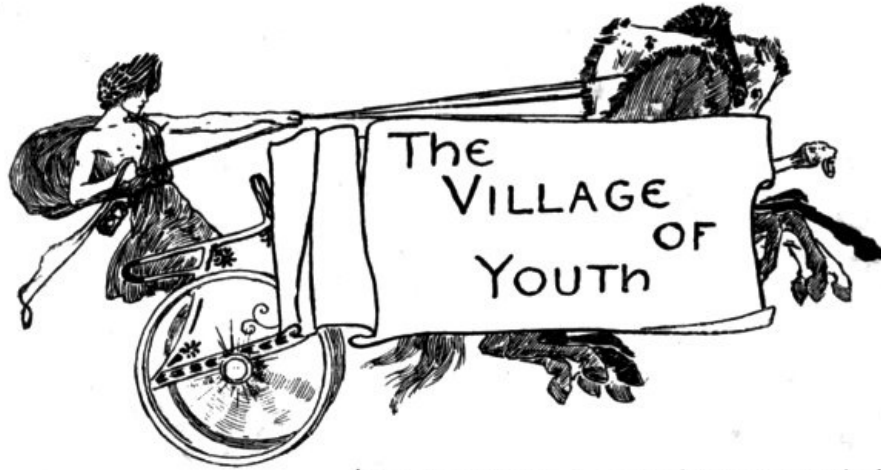
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"Yet Ah! that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should
close!"

I.

There was a young King who ought to have been the happiest monarch in the world. He was blessed with everything a mortal could desire. His palace might have been designed by the Divine architect Himself, so perfect was it in all its parts; and it stood amidst gardens with its dependent village at its gates, like a dream of feudal beauty in a story of romance. Notwithstanding his good fortune, the King was oppressed with what he conceived to be a great trouble. From the happy ruler of a happy people he gradually became grave and anxious, as if an intense fear had taken possession of his soul; and so it had. It was the fear of Age. He could no longer bear to meet old people, and eventually grew to hate the hoary heads and time-worn faces of his venerable subjects. He therefore divided his kingdom into two parts. The elders lived in one half of the realm, under the government of his mother, while he was King of the young. Riding, hawking, or sailing along the grey river, he never saw a wrinkled visage. Hence his kingdom was called the Village of Youth.

The King was betrothed to a fair Princess named Rowena. She loved her future husband dearly, though his strange malady and the exodus of the old people from his dominions had clouded her happiness, and made her long for some way of alleviating his suffering.

When the lovers were together they held no gentle, tender discourse. Uriel would only gaze at his betrothed with mournful eyes, and when she besought him not to be sorrowful he would say, "Sweet lady, how can I be other than I am? Each loving word that falls from thy lips, each sweet smile that plays upon thy face, is as a dagger in my heart; for I remember how soon the bloom of youth will pass from thy cheeks and the softness from thy lips. Our village, too, will become the Village of Eld, grim with unlovely age."



Interviews of this kind saddened the Princess to such an extent, that while she sat sewing among her women tears would often fall upon the embroidery, and she would be obliged to leave her work.

Among the many fair maidens who attended upon Rowena, the fairest of them all was the Lady Beryl. She grieved sincerely to see her mistress so dejected, and taxed her brain night and day for some plan by which she might save the Village of Youth. With this thought deep in her heart, she rose early one morning and rode away to seek advice from the people who lived in the Village of Eld. It was spring; the grass was green, the sky was blue. The sunshine gleamed on the maiden's hair and on her dove-coloured garments.

As she rode into the village the inhabitants gathered around her. She found herself in the midst of a crowd of grey-headed men and women, many of whom touched her dress and kissed her hand, while others knelt down and almost worshipped her; she reminded them of their own early days, a sweet personification of the young spring. Beryl lifted up her voice, and said,—

"Dear reverend people, you all know of the sadness of our sovereign and of its cause; and now our dear Princess shares his sorrow. We are ignorant and inexperienced, neither have we any wise men or women to counsel us; therefore I pray you tell me, is there any way to keep our youths and maidens always young, that they may never know age?"

A long wailing cry was heard from the people of the village,—

"There is no way—no way!" One old man, who was bent and tottering, raised his wrinkled face to the maiden's, and said,—

"Spring gives place to summer, and summer to autumn, and autumn to winter. What would you? Age is beautiful; it is a time of peace, of meditation. Youth knows not rest; it is ever striving, fighting, suffering. When age comes upon us we cease to enjoy as keenly as the young, but we cease to suffer as bitterly as they who are in the spring of life. If the scent of the air is less fresh and the voice of the brook is less sweet, why, the thunder clouds are less dark and the storm is robbed of its fury."

Beryl bowed her head and rode away. As she passed through the gate an old woman followed her, and whispered these words,—

"An hour before sunset, on the longest day of summer, Time, in his chariot, rides through the Village of Youth. If each year thou canst prevent his doing so, the world will still grow old, but the Village of Youth will remain young for ever."

"Alas, good dame, how can I hope to succeed in this endeavour?"

"Sweet maiden, thou art beautiful, thou art in the April of life. Time is gentle and pitiful; throw thyself before his chariot. Thou wilt stay his flying feet, and thy sovereign will bless thee."

Beryl returned, pondering over the woman's words. She entered that portion of the palace occupied by the Princess and her suite, and proceeded to her own chamber.

The hangings were of white silk, and the floor was of ivory. Silver vases, filled with purple lilacs, perfumed the air. Presently three maidens entered, to attire their mistress for the evening banquet. One bathed her face and hands with spring-water, another combed her hair with a silver comb, and the third robed her in a gown of soft silk, edged with pearls.

Beryl's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled with excitement, as she hastened along the corridor to the apartments of the Princess. Her royal mistress was seated in the portico which looked on to the palace gardens. Never had Beryl seen the future Queen so sad. Forgetting her news in her anxiety, she threw herself at Rowena's feet, and besought her to say what ailed her.

"It is the old trouble that afflicts me, dear child. The King grows worse, and I fear that if he cannot conquer his melancholy he will go mad."

Then Beryl, in hurried words, told Rowena of her visit to the Village of Eld, and of the woman's message.

The Princess became deeply interested in the recital, and as her handmaiden unfolded her plan of waiting for Time on the longest day of summer, she gradually caught her excitement.

"Young for ever," she murmured, with a sigh, "young for ever in a summer world! It is too good to be true, Beryl; besides, if it were not, how could I let thee depart upon such a quest? Better far that I should go myself."

"Nay, sweet lady; thou art espoused to our lord, the King, but I have no lover who would grieve for me. Besides, I can but fail; and so thou wilt pity my unsuccess, I shall be content."



The air was filled with the scent of spring flowers, and of the many roses which had clambered over the portico. Beryl sat at the Princess' feet, and lifted up a pair of beseeching eyes to her face. At that moment the young King entered. He was made acquainted with the question in dispute. On hearing of Beryl's plan a joyful expression lighted up his sad features, and at his earnest entreaty Rowena gave her consent to the undertaking.

II.

Summer had laid her hands upon the land, broadening with vigorous strokes the delicate colours of the faded spring. Fields of corn and barley were ripening, and far away on the uplands crimson poppies lay sleeping in the sunlight.

Beryl waited outside the village on the longest day of the year. In white robes and silken cap she

watched for the passing of Time. Before the day began to wane a chariot, drawn by the Winds, dashed along the road which led to the Village of Youth. The maiden, though half dead with terror, flung herself down before the gates with a loud cry. She felt herself raised from the ground, and on opening her eyes found that she was in the arms of a ragged youth. His face was beautiful beyond all description, though its expression was full of sorrow; his garments were smirched with mud and hung in tatters, but they were jewelled from shoulder to hem with diamonds, whiter and more brilliant than any she had ever seen. Awed and wondering, Beryl laid her finger softly upon one of the gems. But it dissolved and vanished at her touch; and she realised that Time's garments were jewelled with the world's tears.

Presently the youth addressed her, and his voice was the saddest of all the music that she had ever heard,—

"Maiden, what wouldst thou with me?"

"Good sir, I pray thee to spare the Village of Youth. Let its young days last for ever."

"For ever!" he sighed. "What spell is there in this 'for ever' that mortals must always crave after it? I am the spirit of Time, the king of change. The Winds are my servants. My palace is built on the shores of Eternity; and yet, for one hour passed in the Village of Youth, or for knowledge of the peace which reigns in the Village of Eld, I would lay down my immortality without a pang. In my flight through the world I see little joy. I ring the bells of birth, of marriage, and of death. Upon my garments the tears of humanity gather fast. Still, my task is not all unhappy, in that a day comes when I have healed their wounds with my touch, though scars remain, which even I, an Immortal, cannot efface. Alas, sweet maiden! I dare not leave the Village of Youth unvisited, even at the prayer of the fairest of its daughters."

Nevertheless, after many a sigh and many a tear, Beryl touched the changeful heart of Time; and because she was so beautiful the youth loved her, and he bore her away in his chariot, leaving the Village of Youth unvisited.

Desolate, and misty, and grey, was the country of Time, and rugged the castle built on the shores of Eternity. Strange, colourless flowers bloomed in the garden, and the paths were heavy and wet. In the great hall of the palace there were tables laden with fruit and wine, and after Beryl had eaten she felt refreshed. The place was lonely. There was not a sigh nor a token of any living creature within its walls.

Some of the sorrow seemed to pass out of the youth's face as he watched the maiden. And when she looked up at him and smiled all the tears on his dress melted away.

"Sweet lady," he presently said, "I did unwisely to bring thee here, for when thou art gone I shall feel more lonely than ever before. Until I met thee, I had never exchanged words with an earthly maid. Thy presence gives me much comfort; I am so weary of travel, so tired of this grim country. I must, nevertheless, leave thee at sunrise. Remain here until I return, and I will not pass through the Village of Youth."

Beryl's heart leapt with gratitude. Her mission was accomplished. Then a sudden fear smote her. Must she remain alone in this weird place, and walk continually in this garden of colourless flowers?

"Good my lord, how long wilt thou be gone?" she tremblingly inquired.

"A year, though it will seem but as a day to thee, for here time counts not; this is his resting-place. In his palace there is no change; it is built on the everlasting shore."

As the youth finished speaking Beryl observed that the hall was full of weird shades, in jewelled cloaks of tears; but amongst them there was one whose garments were of shining white, gemmed with violets.

"These," said Time, "are the hours of to-day."

The shades flitted past, bending before their King. Beryl noticed that the sadness in their faces was akin to that of Time, with one exception. He of the white garments wore an expression that was smiling and happy, and the violets on his dress filled the hall with perfume.

"Good my lord, why doth this last shadow look so different from all the rest?" asked Beryl.

At a sign from Time the shadow spoke,—

"I am the death-hour of a great poet. He died happily, having enriched the world with his song. The moon kissed his lips as he breathed his last in my arms."

"Whither are they going?" asked Beryl, as the hours floated through the hall.

"I will show thee," said the youth, leading her into the open.

The air was keen. In the distance, Beryl could hear the sound of the sea. Heavy clouds of mist hung around the castle. The maiden stooped to pluck one of the colourless flowers that bloomed in the garden. To her surprise, she could not break its stalk. She hurried after the youth, who was standing on a jutting piece of rock, some paces away.

"Look," he said, "yonder, to westward."

The maiden saw the winged hours floating over the sea. Far away she beheld a dim coast-line of a distant country. The sky on that far shore was a mass of rosy clouds, rosier still to Beryl's eyes, accustomed as she had become to the greyness and mist of the country of Time.

"The sea which lies beneath us is the sea of Eternity, and yonder land is the Garden of the Past. The sun always shines there; the past forges its own halo."

Beryl watched in silence the flying shadows floating over the Eternal Sea. The hours of her earliest days were there, in that Garden of the Past. If she went thither, should she find them, and with them the playmates and the innocence of childhood?

Time noticed the sorrowful expression of her face, and pitied her.

"Maiden," he said, "thou must not look backwards. Let the aged dream of the days that are gone; thy future is before thee. It waits for thee, yonder behind the sun that is rising on the world. Wilt thou go with me and give up thy wish, content to let the Village of Youth grow old, as is the fate of all things mortal? Thou wilt be happier in thine own country. Far away, in its valleys, the flowers and the summer call for thee. Come."

He stepped into his chariot, and held out his arms towards her.

"Nay, good my lord; I will await thee here, and try to forget the flowers and the summer, remembering only thee and thy promise."

The youth waved his hand in token of adieu, and vanished from her sight.



After her companion's departure she roamed about the garden. That portion of it which surrounded the palace was bare and treeless, but in the distance she could see forests of white poplars. She found some grey poppies in the garden not unlike those that bloomed in the Village of Youth, excepting that these of the country of Time had thick pulpy stems, resembling the water-lily. A straggling plant attracted her notice; it looked like hemlock, only that the flower was of a deep purple. Lifting her face from the gloom of the floral beds, her eyes rested on the Garden of the Past. The wish to explore it, and to find in its green mazes her early days once more, was irresistible.

Trembling with excitement, she sought for a path that should lead her to the seashore. With much difficulty, she succeeded in clambering down the steep descent. Upon the strand she found a tiny boat, with quaint paddles, in which she made for the shining coast. The skiff progressed rapidly. As it neared the land, Beryl noticed a great change in the atmosphere. The cold and mist of the country of Time were left behind her. Resting upon her oars, she cooled her hands in the

sea. To her astonishment, she discovered that the water was not salt; it tasted as fresh and as pure as the crystal stream that flowed through the Village of Youth. Great as was her desire to enter the wonderful garden that lay stretched before her, she almost regretted this last adventure. The heat became intense. There was no longer a ripple on the sea. Everything lay dead still. When close in shore, all suddenly she could make no further progress; the more she plied her paddles, the further she drifted backwards. At length exhausted, she lost consciousness.

On recovering Beryl was surprised to find herself in the misty garden again, Time bending over her with a pitying expression on his face.

"Thou shouldst not have gone to seek the Garden of the Past; even I cannot gain access to its groves," he said, when she had revived.

"I am grieved, and wish I had not ventured thither."

Touched by her sorrowful contrition, the youth held up a bunch of faded red poppies and said soothingly,—

"I thought of thee as I passed by the Village of Youth."

"Tell me, my dear lord, why is it that the sea washing the shores of the Garden of the Past is not salt, but fresh as a mountain spring?" said Beryl, taking the dead flowers and holding them tenderly in her hand.

"All bitterness is purged from the Past, my child; therefore the waters that wash its shores are sweet."

III.

So years and years fled by, but there was no change in the Village of Youth. It was always summer and always daylight. In the success of Beryl's scheme the King found the dearest wish of his heart gratified. His face regained its former beauty, and his manner its old charm. But at length, although he would not breathe the fact aloud, the unending season began to pall upon him.

Always summer and always daylight! His wedding-day would never come, for the present time would never pass. At length the sun grew hateful to him. He longed for night, and he gazed with agony upon the face of his ever-youthful love. When he walked through the gardens he prayed that the flowers might wither. He was weary of seeing them always the same, shedding the same scent on the air, never less, never more. The lark soaring upwards sang the same song of liberty and hope all through the unending day. No change in the Village of Youth, young for ever.

The Princess, however, felt differently. A maiden wants so little to make her happy. The eternal day was not long to her; her King was with her through its everlasting hours, and summer would never leave them and their love would never die. Had she only known whether Beryl was safe, her mind would have been quite at rest.

Meeting her Lord one day in the palace gardens, she read the agony in his face; and after listening to his complaints, she gently, though fearlessly, reprimanded him.

"Methinks, dear love, that we shall all be punished yet for thy discontent. Thou art placed upon the throne of a great kingdom as its sovereign. Thy subjects are true and loyal. Thy betrothed, as is well known, is neither clever enough nor good enough to fill the high post for which thou hast selected her; but she loves thee, and would lay down her life for thee without regret. She sends her favourite maiden on a quest which is fraught with much danger; on the accomplishment of that mission thy happiness depends. It succeeds; but the royal attendant does not return. Time visits the Village of Youth no more; and yet thou dwellest in its vernal freshness, ill-content."

"Thou hast good cause to reproach me, dear one, erring only when thou dost affirm that she whom I love is not worthy to be my Queen. Were I but fit to tie her sandal or kiss the hem of her robe, I were glad indeed."



He took her in his arms and pressed her to his heart, while the hot sun beat down upon the weary village.

It was thus that Beryl returned to her sovereign's kingdom, on the same day and at the same hour she had left it, though the world was older by forty years. She walked through the streets, a bent, grey-haired woman. Everywhere smiling youth met her gaze. Little children had remained little. They gathered round her, pulling at her dress, and gazing wonderingly into her lined and worn face.

"Where art thou going, good dame?" a girl inquired.

"To the palace. I wish to see the King."

"In good sooth, they will never admit thee into the palace; and did his majesty know that thou wert in the village he would have thee conducted thence."

"Ah, maiden! I know of his folly, which will be punished yet, rest assured. I was once a girl like thee, had hair like thine, and smooth white skin."

"That must have been a long time ago."

"It seems but as yesterday," said Beryl.

She dragged her tired limbs to the palace gates, and stood there, bent and tottering. The guard who kept the door refused her admittance, saying that his master would not allow the aged within the precincts of the village; but the King happened to overhear the argument, and at once gave orders to have the woman brought before him. Although she appeared quite unknown to him, he fell upon her neck and embraced her, so wearied was he of the perpetual youth around him. But when she told them who she was, and her story, they greatly marvelled.

"Why didst thou leave the Palace of Time, dear Beryl?" asked Rowena.

"Sweet Princess, I learned to love the Spirit, forgetting how great, how godlike he was. And little understanding the difference between us, I grew unhappy because he never embraced me. What would you? I was but a woman, still chained to earth, though the companion of an Immortal in the courts of Eternity. I grew to believe that he did not love me; and he, seeing sorrow in my face, thought that I longed to go back to the world. I gave him my love, which was all I had of spiritual to give, and he was happy; but I lived within his home ill-content. One night, when he returned from his yearly circle, I threw my arms around him and kissed him. All the palace shook, and he looked at me with strange, wistful eyes. I felt tired and weak; and I remember nothing more until I awoke, as from a long dream, and found that I was lying on the banks of the stream yonder. I arose and washed in the river, and realised that I was bent, and grey. Then I knew that the fault had been mine; his unwilling lips had given me age, and taken my youth for ever."



They led her within the palace, and she was clothed and fed. Rowena looked at her, and marvelled. In the worn, faded face she tried to trace some of the beauty that had been Beryl's; but all in vain. Once they were of the same years, but now Beryl was old and the Princess was in the springtime of life.

During the watches of the night the aged woman heard the wings of Time sweeping through the silent village. Hurrying from the palace, she stretched out her arms to him in mute entreaty.

There was a tone of sorrow in his voice as he cried, "Too late—too late; only Youth with its beacon-light of Hope can stay the flying feet of Time!"

Morning came in the full glory of the risen sun, but the Village of Youth was no more. It was as a dream that had passed. Again old age gossiped in the streets and sat serene at its board of council. The King bowed his head, and accepted his punishment with a dignified humility. In the autumn of his life he found joy his youth had never known. He became wise in judgment, patient in sorrow, and was beloved by all his subjects. In latter years his kingdom grew large and prosperous, and it was no longer known as the Village of Youth, but was called the City of Content.





A CHILD OF THE WINDS

Love, like an Alpine
harebell hung
with tears
By some cold morning
glacier.

LORD TENNYSON

I.

When Sorrow was a little child and the Sea yet nursed pale Grief on her breast, there lived in a distant country a great and wise King. Renowned for justice, he was both loved and revered by his subjects, and if God had blessed him with a child to inherit his lands he could have died without a regret. However, time passed, and it seemed that his wish was to remain ungratified. Being a noble and sagacious man, he reconciled himself to the will of his Creator; but his Queen still hoped against hope. The King's time was fully occupied. Each day brought its different tasks. There was much state business to be discussed in council, and the administration of justice made great demands on the monarch's leisure. His spouse, on the other hand, had little to do, excepting to tend her flowers and to ply her needle. She took to brooding and wishing impiously for what God evidently did not intend she should have. Unknown to the King, she visited all the magicians in his realm, and sought their help to aid her in the fulfilment of her wish; but in vain.

When very much depressed, it was the Queen's habit to wander by the sea and speak her thoughts aloud. One day, feeling more wretched than she had ever done before, she left the palace secretly, and walked some miles along the coast, unburdening her mind as she went.

It was late autumn. The approaching death of the year struck her majesty painfully. The ocean was a dull green under the heavy sky. She turned, and looked at the silver spires of the palace which lay in the distance. "Ah! what a difference it would have made in our dear home," she said, "had we been blessed with a child." She clasped her hands in a frenzy of desire. It seemed to her agitated mind that the sea too was perturbed, that its rippling waves kissed her sandalled feet lovingly. At length, tired with her walk, she lay down and wept herself to sleep.



When she awoke it was evening. The woodlands and mountains lay in deep shadow.

The Queen started up, scarcely remembering where she was. When she quite realised her position she drew her hooded cloak more tightly around her, and prepared to return home. She had scarcely made any progress, when suddenly, a few feet from her, she observed in the sea a face of surpassing beauty. The hair lay floating on the waves like red weed; the eyes were as green as emeralds, with a fierce tenderness in them. The Queen stood transfixed with amazement, gazing at the woman's face. She was uncertain what to do, whether to remain where she was, or whether to fly homewards along the shore. The royal lady had been reared in the simplest manner; she had been taught to distrust her imagination, so she rubbed her eyes, expecting that when she looked again the vision would have vanished. But she was mistaken; moreover, the apparition began to address her in throbbing bursts of song.

"Mortal, I am here to grant thy desire. I have heard thy complaints and caught thy tears, and I have sorrowed for thee and tried to soothe thy woe, for I too have known bitterness and despair. I was once the love of the North Wind. He wooed me amidst the ice-plains, in a world of crystal glaciers. He chased me through space, until we lay panting on the shores of Africa. But he has left me for the South Wind, with her golden hair and her hot breath. They have made their home on a mountain-top, where the snow-flowers bloom in profusion, where the sea can never go. Four years since he came, bearing a child in his arms. He laid it on my breast, saying that I was to keep it and rear it for his sake. That child I will give to thee. She knows nothing of her parentage, and it would be best that thou shouldst never tell her to whom she owes her being."

"But when the North Wind finds that thou hast parted with thy precious charge what will he do?" panted the Queen.

"He will storm and tear and lash my waves into mountains, and moan round continent and island, and search my ocean from the North to the South Pole. His spouse will scorch me with her breath till I am forced to dive down to cool crystal caverns, where, upon a bed of seaweed, I shall laugh loud and long, a conqueror."

The Queen held her breath in terror. She would have liked to escape from the fierce Sea, whose face wore a look of wild triumph; but her anxiety to see the Child of the Winds overcame her fear, and she waited patiently, her hands clasped tightly together to quell her rising agitation.

By this time it was quite dark; the sky was starless, there was not a breath of air. In her imagination the Queen seemed to see the Winds in their mountain home, unconscious of the peril of their daughter. The Sea had disappeared, and was so long absent that the Queen began to think she had been dreaming, when suddenly, by invisible hands, a child was placed in her arms.

"Thou must call her Myra," said a voice, "for she hath known only bitterness on the breast of her foster-mother."

The Queen looked around, but saw no one. Pressing the burden to her heart, she started

homewards. She dared not look at the little one; but she felt the tiny arms clasped confidently round her neck, and the sweet mouth pressed against her cheek gave her more happiness than she had ever known.

The Sea followed her, washing the shore with phosphorescent waves to light her steps homewards. The royal lady flew along with the agility of early youth, and the burden in her arms was made light by love.

At length the marble steps were reached. She hurried up them and through the golden gates—along winding passages and across alabaster halls, until at length, breathless and trembling with excitement, she burst into the King's apartments, where she placed Myra in the arms of her amazed and happy husband.

Cognisant of his just and upright nature, she did not tell him of the child's parentage, knowing that he would have been the first to restore it to its rightful owners. She said that she had found the little creature on the shore, and that fearing it would be drowned by the incoming tide, she had borne it to the palace, hoping that, should it be unclaimed, her royal lord would, in pity of her loneliness, and in consideration of their desire for a daughter, allow her to keep and rear it as their own.

Long into the night they sat, admiring the lovely waif.

"She must be royally born, my love," said the King. "Washed overboard, perhaps, from some regal ship. Be sure she will be claimed of thee."

Suddenly Myra awoke, and the Queen set her on her feet, that they might the better observe her.



She was about four years old. Heavy black hair fell around her face, which was lit with wild, pale eyes. Her small seamless garment was embroidered with pearls and shells, and through its transparent folds the little body looked like a blush rose with the dew upon it. The Queen, in an ecstasy of happiness, drew Myra's hands within her own and kissed them; her heart went out in motherly tenderness to the poor babe, hitherto unloved by mortal lips, though born of the Winds and rocked by the Sea. Yet, as she gazed into the child's sorrowful face, a strange fear smote her, and she almost wished that she had left the eerie creature in its salt sea home, or that she had told her husband the story of its birth. Still, she could not go back now.

In the night a great storm arose. The Queen lay trembling in her chamber. Myra's powerful father had learned of the loss of his daughter. He lashed the Sea from Pole to Pole; it thundered on the shore, and burst into wild shrieks of triumph. The night was long and tempestuous; whole towns were destroyed, and many ships were sunk; but towards morning the North Wind subsided into low wails of pain, which were answered by the languorous sighs of the South, as they returned to their mountain home sad and desolate, while in a marble palace a Queen awoke pressing their child to her breast. She had taken the weird sea-tossed thing to her heart, for weal or woe.

II.

Myra's first years in her new home were trying ones to her foster-parents. Nothing in the palace seemed to please her. Not that she ever in any way testified her dislike of anybody or anything; but there was a wistful look in her face, and she had a listless way of sitting for hours on the floor, her elbows resting on her knees and her hands supporting her chin. Asked what she thought about at these times her reply was an odd one, and always gave the Queen a creepy feeling. "I am not thinking; I am only seeing things," she would say.

A spacious nursery had been built for the child's use in the grounds of the palace. It had a walled-in garden of its own, in which there were flowers, fruit trees, soft lawns, and sparkling fountains. All the toy-makers in the kingdom had been employed to furnish the nursery with ingenious inventions. There were dolls by the hundred, tea and dinner services, farmyards, woolly animals, games innumerable, everything that the heart of the most petted child could desire; yet Myra took no pleasure in them. The only playthings she appeared to care for were a collection of shells, which had been gathered for her on the beach and pierced with holes; these she would string and re-string for hours.

Time passed, and Myra grew into a lovely woman. The King was exceedingly proud of her, and he made her heiress to his crown and estates. One thing alone troubled him deeply. Myra would not consent to marry any of the great nobles who had frequented his court. All the high-born princes of his realm had wooed her in vain, and many others from distant lands had failed to please her. The King had often heard of princesses who set so high a value on themselves that they did not think any man good enough for them in the light of a husband, but Myra was not proud. She was of a very gentle nature, and he could not believe that she was cold-hearted; yet she appeared to be so, for none of her noble lovers could boast the smallest word of encouragement from her sweet lips. She moved through the palace, a slim, dark beauty, in her pale draperies, her hair half hidden beneath her jewelled head-dress, her face, though calm and serene, still lit by the strange, wistful eyes which had so struck the Queen on that night seventeen years ago when the Winds had lost their daughter.

As she grew to womanhood Myra delighted in her garden. She often sat there most of the day, reading or sewing or talking with the flowers. It amused the Princess to find that, from simple daisy to proud tiger-lily, they were all in love. With one exception.

Near the wall there grew a purple Hollyhock or Rose-Mallow. The Princess preferred to call him by his latter name, because it seemed to her the grander and also the more euphonious of the two. He, of all the flowers in the enclosure, was her favourite, and he alone had not yet found a lady upon whom to bestow his affections.

Myra always attended upon the garden herself. She cut off the dead blossoms, raked the soil with a golden rake, and gave the plants water out of a golden pitcher when the heat of the sun had been oppressive. Therefore, she participated in all their secrets. She knew that, although the Rose-Mallow was not in love with any inmate of the garden, there was an humble Violet which grew at his feet, in whose eyes he was the rarest and most lovely flower in the world. It amused Myra to see the Violet peep from its green leaves at the stately Mallow, and then, if he chanced to be looking, which, of course, was just what the Violet wanted, she would hide herself, in a strange tremor of excitement.

"I feel so happy, and yet so miserable, to-day," said the Rose-Mallow to the Princess one morning. "Last night, when all the others were asleep, I heard, from over the wall, a sweet voice singing a hymn to Night. I asked the Poplar who it was, and he said it was the Evening Primrose; that there were none of her race in our garden, and that she was more beautiful than daylight."

"And why should that knowledge distress thee?" asked the Princess, sitting down at his feet.

"Because I love her. Her voice is music. I am pining to see her."

He trembled as he spoke. The Princess rose, laughing.

"Well, this is a strange garden," she said. "I did think my Rose-Mallow was sensible. What is it," she cried aloud, "what is this Love, for which all Nature pines?"

There was no answer; but the sun shot down a handful of golden sunbeams upon her face, which dazzled her and made her laugh again.

"Ah! thou wilt know ere long," said the Rose-Mallow, much hurt at her want of sympathy. "Do not think, Princess, that the most beautiful of women will be allowed to go unscathed."

Myra threw her arms around him, to make up for her unfeeling remarks, and then in soft tones advised him to climb the wall and look over at his lady-love.

"But it will take so long, and be so hard!" he replied.

"Still, thy reward may be great, sweet flower. Look higher than the homely flowers of thy home, for the blossom beyond the walls may be far more rare, and may outshine them all."

So the Rose-Mallow prepared to follow the Princess's advice, and to leave the lilies, and lupins, and all the sweets of the garden behind him.

As Myra turned to go, she noticed that the Violet had drooped and lay panting. She hurried to

fetch it some water, for which it returned her modest thanks. She wondered what ailed it to faint in the cool of the morning, when the earth was yet damp with early rain. Then it struck her that the Violet's love for the Rose-Mallow would be of no use if he found the Evening Primrose. "And I suppose that would make her unhappy," she said aloud, as she plucked a bunch of heartsease and placed it in her dress, the wonder in her eyes deepening into an expression of grave, severe thoughtfulness.

III.

Protected by a hedge of myrtle, in the heart of a mighty forest, Love had fashioned his bower. His couch was strewn with honey-flowers and rose-leaves. Stately red chrysanthemums made splashes of crimson brilliance against the dark green of the scented myrtle. Pink carnations, roses of every hue, sweetbriar, ambrosia, balsams, forget-me-nots, and every flower sacred to the great god, Love, grew in profusion, to make his bower into a resting-place worthy of him.

He lay tossing on his fragrant couch in a fit of anger. For some time Princess Myra's disdain of all the great princes and nobles whom he had sent to woo her had offended him deeply. But on this particular afternoon his messengers had informed him of the maiden's morning interview with the Rose-Mallow, and of the question she had asked with regard to himself. Unable to forget the Princess's impertinence, he lay brooding and fretting, until the position of the sun warned him that the day was passing away.

"What is this Love for which the whole earth pines?" he murmured, as he bounded from his couch into a cluster of forget-me-nots. "Ah! I will teach thee. Thou shalt learn, ere the day is dead, what Love is. In the semblance of an earthly prince, I will woo thee myself. I will adore thee, sweet Myra, gaze into thine eyes, and pretend that there is only one woman in all the world for me. I will do as men do—pet thee, and coax thee, and win thy affections by the thousand little nothings that make up a courtship. When I have conquered thee, and thy heart is mine, I will break it and trample it under foot, and leave thee all thy life a remembrance of the power of Love. Thou shalt never hear sweet music, but a desperate longing for my presence shall come over thee. Thou shalt never see a rose, but thy heart shall bleed. The sight of a lark, winging his morning flight heavenwards, shall draw tears to thy weary eyes. Ah! woe betide the mortal maid when Eros is her lover!"

"These," he said, choosing a hundred chrysanthemums, "shall be my escort."

As he spoke, the flowers were transformed into a hundred gallant knights; their dresses were of crimson brocade, and on their heads were caps of chrysanthemum petals. Then Love took up honey-flowers and rose-leaves, and changed them into a suit of rich purple silk.

Meanwhile the King had been having a far from pleasant interview with Her Majesty on the subject of their daughter.

"Indeed, it is not my fault," the Queen had said. "I cannot help it if our child's heart is still whole."

"But, my dear love, thou never givest her any counsel. If thou wert to tell her that it is meet she should marry one of the many lords who desire her I feel assured she would do thy will."

The Queen burst into tears. Knowing the girl's parentage as she did, how could she advise her to accept a mortal for her husband? Yet she dared not tell the King of Myra's birth; she must always keep the hateful secret to herself. Oh that she had chosen the straight path when the choice had been hers!

The King was distressed to see her weep. But just at that moment he observed a small fleet with crimson sails flying up the river towards the royal landing-stage.

"Why, that must be another suitor for our daughter's hand!" he exclaimed.

All the flowers remarked the pretty boats scudding along in the late afternoon sunlight. The Rose-Mallow alone was too busily employed in climbing the wall to observe what circumstance was disturbing the flower-garden. The ladies of the palace, the lords and the pages, were aware of the visit of the Prince long before he had landed. The household was greatly agitated. Their Majesties hurried to the audience chamber, to find the Court already assembled to receive the high-born visitor. Myra alone was unconscious of the advent of another suitor. Had she known of it, the fact would only have annoyed her somewhat, and made her eyes a trifle more wistful than they usually were.

Suddenly the Queen entered the Princess's room trembling with excitement.

"My child, my child! thou must proceed at once to the audience chamber, by the King's commands. A great Prince has come to woo thee."

Myra was robed in a loose gown of fine linen, her dark hair hung upon her shoulders, and a book which she had been reading lay open on her knee.

"Oh, come, let me clothe thee!" cried the Queen, assisting the girl to her feet and hurrying her into the adjoining room, where, with nervous fingers, she bound up the thick hair in embroidered bands of opals and diamonds. Then, opening a cedar chest which stood at the end of the apartment, she drew forth a dress, and was about to slip it over the Princess's head, when Myra started back in amazement.

"My royal Queen, I cannot wear that garment," she said. "Why, it cost the King, my father, over a hundredweight in gold. I was warned to keep it only for great occasions."

"Foolish girl, is not thy betrothal a great occasion? Ah! I do not jest. Pause until thou hast seen the youth who awaits thee. He is handsome beyond all men that even I, old as I am, have ever looked upon."

The Princess was struck by the Queen's enthusiasm. She allowed herself to be attired in the superb robe which had been a present from the King. It was fashioned of rich silk, and had a design of lilies round the hem and on the sleeves, each flower being worked with opals and diamonds. Twenty maidens had been employed for twenty months embroidering the costly pattern. In sunlight the fabric was pale sea-green, bordering on silver-grey; but when the sky was dull there were faint purple tones in its folds, like the soft bloom on the fruit of the plum-tree.

When Myra entered the hall a murmur of admiration fell from the lips of the assembly. She had never looked so lovely. She seemed to stand in a halo of light; the opals on her dress reflected themselves in the diamonds, making a haze of pale fantastic colour, strange as it was beautiful. As she entered, the Prince was talking apart with the King; so she had a moment in which to observe him before he knew of her advent. He appeared to be a merry youth, with golden curls and blue eyes that were full of mirth and the love of fun. He turned and saw her, and fell on one knee and took her hand, lifting up his face to hers. Then, as he gazed upon her, the brightness and the mirth that had illuminated his lovely countenance died away. She looked down to see his eyes filled with a new meaning, a wondrous expression of mingled tenderness and pain shadowed them. She looked down to see large tears furrowing his cheeks. She looked down to love him!

IV.

"In good sooth, sweet lady, thou art beautiful beyond all women that I, old as I am, have ever seen," said the Prince, in curious repetition of the Queen's description of himself, as he and Myra walked in the palace gardens that night.

"But thou art not old, thou art very young, my lord; and perhaps it is thy lack of experience which makes thee think so," answered the Princess, modestly hanging her head and seeking to hide her face.

A deep shadow passed over his countenance, and his heart bled at the thought of the pain that his trick would cause the maiden by his side. Of the everlasting wound it would inflict on him he dared not think.

"And thou hast lived here all thy life?" he asked, desirous of changing the subject.

"All my life," she answered.



"And art thou quite happy?"

"Good sir, I thought I was; I never wished to change my lot until to-day."

"Ah! I have heard of thy dislike of the many suitors who sought thy hand."

"Not my dislike, but my indifference. I did not believe in Love. Though it was all around me in Nature, still I had never known it; and there was something so imperfect, so earthly, in the great princes who wished to marry me. Until to-day I was blindly ignorant."

"Until to-day!" reiterated the Prince, gazing at her with eyes indescribably tender and yearning.

"But since thou hast asked my father for my hand, and he hath given his consent, I may tell thee all I feel, may I not?"

"Ah, sweet Princess! I know all that thou dost feel; I feel all that thou wouldst say."

Then they were silent for some time. The moon shone, and the floor of heaven was studded with silver stars. The flowers were asleep, excepting the Evening Primrose. Myra saw her in the arms of Night, and heard their gentle voices. She thought of the Rose-Mallow, and pondered with newborn sympathy on the Violet's pain.

"Dear one, we must part now," said the Prince, as they paused before the palace gates. "But ere thou goest, tell me, wouldst thou be very unhappy if I never came to thee again?"

A cold fear entered the Princess's heart.

"My dear lord," she said, "I was only born to-day. My past was not life, therefore I am as a little child, and cannot answer thee with wisdom; but inquire of the flowers, whether they would be sad should the sun rise no more. Ah! would they not perish? Would not the world lie down and die from cold? Then, good my lord, and thou lovest me, ask me not so cruel a question."

"It is fate," he murmured, as he held her in his arms and soothed away her pain with tender words.

The Princess awoke the next morning to find the Queen seated beside her bed. Myra was too much in love to notice things which would have impressed her under ordinary circumstances, else she would have thought her royal mother's manner unnecessarily excitable, and would have wondered what secret trouble had suddenly so changed the stately Queen's appearance.

"My child, thy lover waits for thee in thy workroom, therefore rise and robe thee. But before thou goest to him I want thee to refuse the gift with which he will present thee. I am sure it will bring thee ill-luck."

"But good my mother, the Prince loves me too well to offer me aught that could be a source of sorrow to me. What is the gift?"

"It is an Æolian harp," said the Queen, in a whisper.

"An Æolian harp! I have never seen one. Methinks it must be a sweet instrument."

The Queen sighed heavily. She feared that her sin against truth would overtake her at last.

Myra found the Prince and his attendants engaged in fixing the wind harp outside her casement.

"There," he said, as he bent his knee and saluted her hand, "when I am away this will discourse to thee of love."

"But why place it outside the casement, good my lord? I cannot learn to play upon it there."

"Sweet Princess, thou couldst never play upon it, nor could I. The Wind alone can draw music from its heart. When he sweeps the strings the melody is as the very breath of love, so tender and yet so wailing is the strain."

"The Wind!" exclaimed the Princess. "Hast ever seen the Wind?"

"Ay, and romped with him and flown with him over sea and earth."

"Ah! now thou art pleased to be merry, as thou wert yesterday when I saw thee talking to the King, ere we had met. Thy countenance was full of mirth and sunlight then. Tell me, why art thou changed? Wherefore art thou sad?"

"Dear one, I am not sad when I have thy companionship. It is only the thought of losing thee that shadows my face."

So they passed out of the chamber into the garden.

Thus the time wore away. Summer began to wane. The nights grew longer and the days more brief.

The King's impatience to see his daughter married increased hourly. Yet the Prince daily put him off with excuses when asked to fix the date of the wedding. At length His Majesty grew angry at the delay.

"It is time," he said to Myra, "that thou wast settled in life. We are old, and in all probability have little longer to live. Thy good lord seemeth all he should be. In grace of form and beauty of face he stands unsurpassed. But methinks, for all that, he means thee ill."

"Indeed, my father, thou art wrong to say so," replied the Princess, with difficulty suppressing

her anger. "He is truth itself, and he loves me."

"But he will not marry thee!" the King muttered.

"There, again, thou art mistaken, my lord. He will marry me to-day—at once, so thou stand pleased withal!"

"Bring him before us, then, and let us hear his vow."

Myra made a deep obeisance, and left the King's closet.

Immediately she had gone His Majesty despatched a page to summon the Queen and Council. They were all assembled before Myra entered with her lover. She had not told him for what reason she had been sent in search of him; therefore, when he saw the grave faces of those present, he was surprised. The King rose and addressed him in dignified words, Myra making her way to her royal mother's side.

"Good my lord, our daughter tells us that thou art willing thy nuptials should be celebrated as soon as we consider meet. We have conferred with these grave counsellors, and they think with us that the ceremony should take place to-day."

"To-day, most powerful sovereign! Is not to-day somewhat soon? Methinks it were not well to hurry the Princess."

"Our child hath given her consent, noble sir. Hast thou not, my daughter?"

"An' it please my dear lord, I have," was the low reply.

There was a long silence in the chamber. Every eye was fixed on Myra's lover. He stood gazing on the beautiful face of her whom he worshipped—a gloomy figure in his purple garments, his eyes full of infinite sorrow.

"It seemeth that the Prince hesitateth," said the King, in a threatening voice.

Myra left the Queen, and with bent head approached her love.

"My good knight," she said, "methinks I do but dream; or, if I am awake, then hast thou changed, or some trouble hath befallen thee. Speak; my father awaits thine answer. Shall our wedding be to-day?"

"Fair lady, nothing could change my love, nor hath any trouble befallen me; and yet, our marriage ceremony cannot be solemnised to-day."

"Then to-morrow, good sir," said the King, "or the week after?"

"Your Majesty, the daughters of earth will never see the celebration of our nuptials."

The King turned grey with wrath, and gasped for breath as if death was upon him. The Council rose; the Queen rushed to her royal consort's side. Myra sank down in a heap at her lover's feet. He knelt beside her for one brief second.

"Forgive me," he murmured, "forgive me, in that I shall suffer eternally, whilst thy pain will end in the grave. Farewell, dear one; would I were mortal for thy sake. Love bids thee farewell."

When the King recovered his senses the Prince had disappeared. The country was scoured for miles round, but not a trace of him nor his followers could be found. No member of the royal household noticed a hundred beautiful red chrysanthemums, which had suddenly rooted themselves in the palace garden.

V.

Myra wandered about the precincts of her home like one distraught with sorrow. The sun of her life had gone out, and left all dark and cold and desolate. The flowers had lost their rare colours, and had clothed themselves in sombre tints of red and purple. The river had lost its merry voice, and went sobbing through the grounds. Many days passed, and life became one long memory. With brooding and sorrowing over her lost Love she grew pale and thin. Her eyes became wan and hollow, and misery closed her lips.

Some weeks after the Prince had disappeared she visited her garden. The flowers had grown tall and straggling, the walks were weedy, the lawn had lost its velvet softness, and all was desolation. As she walked, weeping, beside the once brilliant border, she saw the Rose-Mallow lying half-dead across her path.

"Alas, sweet flower! what aileth thee?" she said, lifting his head and looking into his face.

"My dear mistress, I am hurt to death," he murmured.

"Speak. Tell me thy sorrow."

"I worked by day and by night to climb the wall of the garden, and after much labour I reached the summit, just as the sun was setting. There I saw the lady whose melodious voice had won my heart. Ah, fair Princess! she was more beautiful than dawn or daylight. I gazed at her, and told her that I loved her; but she would not even look at me; she spread forth her pale blossoms with sweet pride. 'I love the Night alone, and only raise my face to his,' she said. Then I drooped and

drooped with pain. I am indeed hurt to death," he moaned.

She threw her arms around him, while her tears fell on his poor faded leaves; and when the moon had risen her favourite lay dead in the once happy garden.

The Princess fetched her golden spade, and dug his grave where he had lived. Then she bent down and plucked a little cluster of flowers from the Violet whose love had been wasted, to place upon the earth above his resting-place; and from each blossom a tear-drop flowed from the Violet's heart.

"Ah! if I had not advised him to seek his love away from those with whom his life had been passed," moaned Myra. "He could have cared for one of the flowers in the garden before he saw the Evening Primrose; his life was spoilt through my counsel, and ended in pain. And, oh! that I had been as other women, and had taken a knight of my father's court for husband. If only I had put up with little imperfections, then this trouble had not come upon me. But now life is over, and I can never know happiness again."

That night Fate told the North Wind the story of his child. On his mountain home he learned of the Queen's treachery, of Myra's early life, and of Love's hateful blunder.

Spreading his powerful wings, by Fate's command, he flew earthwards, to bear his daughter to the halls of that dread arbiter of destiny. He was oppressed with sorrow. The snow-flowers hid their heads as he rushed, sobbing, down the mountain; the earth shook at his voice as he shrieked through village and valley; the dead leaves sighed as he scattered them in thousands before him. But when he gained the palace gardens and approached his daughter's window his fierce sorrow abated, and he touched the strings of her harp with gentle fingers. The first strains were more like the voice of the South Wind than that of the wilder North. Then followed long wailing strains of melody, as of a soul in distress.

Myra, sitting brooding on her misery, became strangely roused, as she heard the weird instrument played upon by a master hand. Often the sad music seemed to be the voice of her lover; then the tones softened to a sigh; it was the Rose-Mallow's dying sob.

An overmastering wish seized her to open the casement. She must admit those pleading tones, or her heart would break. Unable to quell the desire, she threw wide the window.



There stood a tall, winged man. His shaggy hair was heavy and black, his face was gaunt and wild. He was sweeping the harp-strings with long, bony fingers. Strange and uncouth and terrible as he looked, there was such strength about the great figure, such power in the face, that the Princess, though terror-stricken, was drawn towards him. And when he saw her leaning from her casement, so gentle an expression crossed his worn visage, that her fear of him departed

instantly, and she said:—

"I know thee, great master. Thou art the Wind, and thou hast met my Love. Ah, in mercy take me to him!"

"Wilt thou not be afraid to entrust thyself to my arms?" he whispered.

"Good sir, carry me all over the earth, through frozen worlds of endless ice, so thou layest me at my lord's feet at last, and I shall not know a moment's fear. I love him!" she said simply.

The Wind clasped her in his arms and flew away, lulling her to sleep as he went.

When the Princess awoke she was standing in a gloomy cavern. The walls were of black onyx. A stream of crystal water ran gurgling at her feet.

When her eyes became more accustomed to the haze and dimness of the place, she saw a sight which made her wish to shriek aloud; but her voice seemed to have gone, and she stood powerless and terror-stricken. As she gazed a light seemed to break upon her mind.

Fate, robed in lowering mists, sat gazing into a divining glass, with keen, prophetic eyes; with her right hand she held Love in strong and terrible grasp. In the crouching, penitent figure, Myra recognised, with bursting heart, that her Prince and Love were one. Then she became conscious of the deep voice of Fate ringing through the gloom in threatening tones.

"Thou didst think thou couldst play with her affections as thou dost with those of a mortal maid, couldst win her love and break her heart by thy desertion! But, trickster as thou art, in thine own net art thou caught. See, where each tear she lets fall, a lily springs."

Myra's eyes followed Fate's pointing finger. Love looked up and saw the Princess standing in a cluster of white lilies.

"Know that she is a spirit, immortal as thyself; a child of the Winds, nursed on the salt Sea's breast. Therefore, as thou only canst feel punishment in her agony, she shall be called Grief. Henceforth, in all Love there shall be much of bitterness. Parting from the thing loved shall be the keenest pang of human pain. She shall visit her foster-parents but once again, and mingle her sobs with theirs. She shall pursue thee through the ages, and fear of her coming shall lessen thy rapture. Disappointment, despair, and misery, shall walk in her train. Man shall weep tears of blood in that thou hast created Grief!"

Love shrieked aloud in pain, and flinging aside the cruel hand of Fate, threw his arms about the shrinking girl. They stood in the misty gloom together, his brilliant form regained its strength. Grief lifted her brimming eyes to his and caught their power.



A great wave of tenderness broke over the mournful face of Fate; her calm glance rested prophetically on the two figures as she addressed them for the last time.

"But her love of thee shall endure until the Lilies of Grief are lost in the Roses of Love; for Love shall be king of Grief, and of Time, and of Eternity."



UNTIL THE LILIES OF GRIEF ARE LOST IN THE ROSES OF LOVE



I.

Though only a miserable little waif, born in sorrow and nurtured in poverty, George Ermen had resolved to be a great man.

He earned six shillings a week at sorting rags and paper, adding frequently to this a smaller sum gained by cleaning pots at a public-house. It was a miserable pittance. He and his mother could hardly be said to live upon it, they only existed; and they found this still more difficult when George's father, a lazy, ne'er-do-well, came to visit them.

The boy and his mother dwelt in a garret in Paradise Court. It was a bare, miserable room, its only furniture an old iron bedstead, a rickety table, and two chairs. Opening out of the attic was a tiny chamber with a mattress in one corner, on which George slept. He had no bed-clothes, and was in the habit of covering himself with papers during the chill winter nights.

On the wall hung a small plaster crucifix. A sprig of box was thrust through the ring by which the cross was suspended. The window looked out upon a wilderness of chimneys and grimy tenement houses.

It seemed to George that God had been very good to him, although he was poor and ragged and half starved, for besides his old mother, whom he loved above everything, he had three good friends—Father Francis, the Roman Catholic priest; Miss Brand, who was devoting both time and money to the suffering poor in the district; and Maggie Reed, his little sweetheart, who was as poverty-stricken and as tattered as himself.

George sang in the choir at the church. He possessed a beautiful voice, and the priest felt sure that were it possible to procure him an efficient musical training he would have a future. But it seemed rash to even hope for a chance for the boy among the squalor and misery and sin which surrounded the poor. Father Francis, however, did not lose heart, because he was a good man,

believing in God, and feeling convinced that He would stretch forth His hand to the waif and help him in His own good time. The lad himself was even more hopeful than the priest, because he was young, and had resolved that death alone should prevent the fulfilment of his vow.

Not that poor George Ermen had much idea of what the term "a great man" meant, excepting that they usually dressed in frock coats, wore gaiters over their boots, and drove about in a carriage, all of which seemed very pleasant and most desirable to the bare-footed waif.

Strangely enough, he was frequently pondering over very material things when he sang his best and when his eyes seemed most dreamy.

"What were you a-thinking of this mornin' in church when you was singin' the *Ave Maria*?" his mother had once inquired.

"Why, didn't I sing it well?" he asked anxiously.

"Yaas, better than ever before, and yer faice looked loike an angel's."

"Well, I was promisin' God that if ever I got rich enough to ride about in a carriage like the lords do that come and lay foundation stones and opens schools and things, I'd invite all the little children what's so miserable to tea and muffins."

Mrs. Ermen smiled sadly. She had no belief in her son ever rising to be anything better than a wretched waif, fated to live and die in Paradise Court. But as long as he was honest, and brave, and true to his friends, she must not complain. She was content, almost happy indeed, when she looked around her and saw boys of George's age swearing and fighting and drinking, while George was sober, well behaved, and industrious.

Maggie Reed knew in her young soul that George would surely live to be a great man, and often when they roamed about the weary streets together, she would cheer him with her childish confidence.

"We'll live on 'Ampstead 'Eath, George, when you're rich and we're married, at one of them big 'ouses by the pond, and we'll 'ave donkey rides and bicycles and things."

"Yes, darling," George would answer.

By the advice of Father Francis they often spent hours in the parks and squares, where the air was sweeter than that of Paradise Court; but frequently George's little sweetheart grew so tired that he had to carry her on his back most of the way home again.

It was a cold day in early spring. Mrs. Ermen sat shivering in a corner of their garret, when her boy bounded into the room carrying a geranium in a pot.

"Mother, mother," he cried in wild excitement, "Miss Brand is gettin' up a geranium show! It's ter come off in July. Four hundred plants have been given out to the children this morning. They are to keep them, water them, attend to them, make them grow and flower, and when the day comes round for the show the plants must be taken to the schoolroom, and the best will get a prize."

"Who is ter judge?" asked Mrs. Ermen, catching George's excitement.

"A lord!"

"A lord?"

"Yes, one of them that wears gaiters over their boots. And I am going to win the first prize!" he added firmly, his sharp face wearing an expression of happy anticipation.

"I 'ope you will, my dear," she answered, kissing him, and breathing a prayer from her poor ignorant soul for the good woman whose unselfish devotion had brought that look into her boy's face.

Time passed, and the bitter, easterly winds proved to be more than Mrs. Ermen could bear. She became too weak to rise, and when George grew alarmed she tried to comfort him by saying that she felt warmer in bed; and when June came she should be about again, and he must not distress himself for her sake.

Supposing she should die! Men and women died frequently in Paradise Court. Their bodies were carried out of the squalid dwellings and rattled over the streets to the crowded burial ground. The thought smote him painfully, and made a burning flush mount to his face. She must not die! What would riches and greatness mean to him unless she were there to share in his good fortune?

II.

The geranium was not at all happy in her new quarters. Although George attended to her wants most carefully she still thought with bitter regret of the greenhouse where she had been reared, and of the old gardener who had ministered to her. Here on the window sill of George's attic thousands of smuts settled daily upon her leaves, and the air was heavy. So great was her discomfort that she would have most certainly ceased to live had not a sunbeam lost his way among the narrow courts of the city, and while darting in and out of the grimy streets in his endeavours to find the sun, espied the unhappy flower. He immediately climbed up his golden ladder, and rested among the broad green leaves, much to her delight.

She confided her pitiful history to this new-found friend, who was so kind and sympathetic that the geranium grew warm and happy. Presently the sun shone out in the murky sky, and immediately the sunbeam glided along his golden thread and rejoined his parent. He did not, however, forsake the plant which had sheltered him, but frequently visited her, so that she forgot her struggle for life, and grew into a fine healthy geranium, much to the delight of her young master.

As time passed George began to realise that his mother would never rise from her bed again. Father Francis had gently told him that there was little hope of her recovery, and that when the great blow fell upon him he must reconcile himself to the will of the Almighty.

The poor waif suffered many hours of agony alone in his garret. Kneeling before the crucifix, he would beg God to spare the one thing he loved in all the world.

"I have so few comforts, dear Lord," he would say, "no clothes, little food; I can stand wait if only you will not take her away." But when he was tired out with pain, he would raise his lips to the pierced feet, and kissing them, murmur, "Thy will be done."

His imagination had so often realised the picture that one morning, on finding his mother dead in her bed, he was hardly shocked.

The doctor said that death had resulted from syncope, accelerated by want of nourishment and neglect.

So the waif was left alone. His bright look departed. The wish for greatness was forgotten in his sorrow, and even his little sweetheart failed to comfort him.

On hearing of George's sad plight his father returned to live with him. The boy's saddened face touched Ermen's hard heart, and for a time the son's misery was alleviated by his parent's kindness. His father was decently dressed, and evidently had a little money, for food was more plentiful in the garret than it had ever been during George's remembrance.

Thanks to the sunbeam's care, the geranium continued to thrive marvellously, and as show day drew near she approached her prime.

Miss Brand gave George a clean collar and a decent jacket, and Father Francis bought him his first pair of shoes for the great occasion.

On the morning of the distribution he was up at five o'clock, for at that early hour he had been told to take his geranium to the schoolroom, and enter it for the competition.

Very gently he watered the leaves, taking care that not a drop should fall upon one of the five brilliant blossoms. As he stood admiring the plant he was surprised to hear footsteps in the adjoining room. His father had been away some days. He thought he must have returned earlier than he had expected. He therefore hurried to the door, and opened it, a joyful expression on his face. But it was the landlady, who stood there holding a dirty-looking letter in her hand.

"Look 'ere, sonnie, your father's been took ter gaol. 'E was on 'is way 'ome when the perlice took 'im in charge for that big jewel robbery at Manchester. 'E's wrote me this letter," she said, pausing to unfold the dirty piece of paper, while George stood pale to the lips with terror.

"'E sends you this message: 'Tell my son not ter grieve for me. It's all quite true what they says against me. I am a scamp, and always have been.'"

"'E'll get a lifer, that's a certainty," she observed to the lodgers downstairs when she had left the horror-stricken boy alone.

George couldn't weep at this last blow. He had not shed a tear since his mother's death. The agony in his heart was therefore all the more unbearable. He clenched his hands in pain.

Hours passed, the bitterest he had ever spent. Whatever suffering the future held for him he never experienced such anguish again.

At last he raised his head. His face was white, his eyes were heavy and dull.

"Everything is against me," he moaned. "My mother's dead; my father, who had become so kind, taken and thrown into gaol. Why should I suffer hunger and cold and disgrace and beggary? Other boys, through no merit of theirs, are born rich. Why wasn't I a lord's son instead of a waif of the streets? Why should my mother die of neglect, when others have all they need? Oh! I'll ask God to kill me; death ain't so very terrible. I've seen lots of boys of my age fished out of the river. It's only a few moments' pain, and Jesus wouldn't be 'ard on a little chap what's ben drove to it."

The geranium trembled with fear as she heard the boy's wild words. She spread out her blossoms and endeavoured to attract his attention.

Suddenly the garret was brilliantly illuminated. The sunbeam had glided down his golden ladder, and stood on the window sill.

George was amazed. He must be dreaming! What was this beautiful tiny creature enveloped in a haze of glory?

"The angels are sad when you despair, little boy. Gather your energies. Receive your prize! You are ungrateful to the flower which has grown into so beautiful a plant for your sake. You are

ungrateful to your God thus to abandon hope when you possess one of His greatest gifts."

"What gift?"

"Youth, a magic watchword that can open the enchanted gates in the land of genius."

"Genius?" said the boy wonderingly. "I have never heard of it."

"Live your life. Lose not a moment. At your years time flies. Be a great and a good man. Persevere. Out of the mire of this wilderness a golden flower shall rear its head, and grow in beauty day by day. It may even reach the Sun-lands."

III.

The schoolroom looked like a little paradise to the poor waifs assembled there. Many flags hung from the roof, and festoons of evergreens decorated the walls. A raised platform was covered with scarlet cloth. On this were many well-dressed ladies, the seat of honour being filled by Lord Eltonville, who had consented to distribute the prizes. The geraniums were displayed around the room. Some amongst them were frail and sickly looking,—they had not been able to thrive in their squalid and sunless abodes,—others appeared more promising, and a few amongst the number had grown strong and handsome.



Of the four hundred plant cuttings thirty alone had not been returned for competition.

At one side of the platform was a table upon which the prizes were arranged. They consisted of workboxes, paints, tops, knives, drums, books, blotters, aprons, pencils, etc.

Miss Brand, much distressed at the news of Ermen's arrest, and at his son's nonappearance, had told the story to some of the visitors, and a great deal of interest and sympathy were excited in his favour.

Father Francis had just uncovered the prizes. The crowd of children pushed and scrambled to get a look at the good things; but at a word from their lady chief even the most turbulent grew quiet.

Some lovely countenances were discernible among the little gathering. Under ordinary circumstances they would hardly have been noticed for the dirt and grime which covered them; but this was a gala day, and, thanks to Miss Brand's kind care, each child's face and hands had been washed, and their white collars lent an air of cleanliness even to the most ragged and worn dress.

Suddenly there was a stir in the room. A boy was seen advancing through the crowd holding a magnificent geranium in his arms.

Father Francis welcomed George in a quiet, kindly way. His plant was placed upon the platform for inspection, and it was universally agreed that had it been in time for the competition George would have taken the first prize.

Grieved that her little friend should be too late, Miss Brand hastily unfastened a silver compass from her watch chain and gave it to Lord Eltonville, to whom she said a few private words.

The atmosphere was stifling, and George was faint for want of food. Many of the children's mothers were present holding infants in their arms. Their worn, anxious faces beamed with delight as Lord Eltonville rose to distribute the prizes.

"George Ermen, in consideration of your misfortune, Miss Brand wishes to overlook the fact that your geranium was not entered for the competition this morning. I have, therefore, the great pleasure of awarding you a special extra prize, the presentation of which shall have precedence in our day's business."

George walked to the platform and received the pretty silver compass, a flush of pride and delight colouring his pale cheek.

"Let me advise you to cultivate smilax round your window," added his lordship, doubtless thinking of his magnificent greenhouses, and little realising the misery and squalor in which the waifs of the great city dwelt.

"Smilax!" murmured George wonderingly.

"Yes, it is a beautiful creeper, and ought to grow nicely round your window and make you quite a little bower."

The excitement of the children could no longer be curbed. Miss Brand was heartily glad when the distribution was over, and she could see the poor waifs happy with their little presents. It would be difficult to describe their joy. Many of their number had never possessed anything before. To have a book, a doll, a top, a pencil—something that was their very own—seemed like a delightful dream.

Father Francis had resolved to strike a blow for his *protégé* before the day was over. Just as Lord Eltonville was preparing to depart, he told him that there was a little chorister among his flock who had a lovely voice, and that if his lordship would oblige him by staying through the short prayer with which they were about to end the day's pleasure he would hear the boy sing.

The nobleman graciously complied, and stood, hat in hand, while the priest said a Paternoster and three Aves, the children joining in fervently. Then Father Francis rose and sat at the harmonium. His lordship watched George take his place beside his spiritual director. He noticed the lad's pale, worn face, his ragged clothes, and his air of utter helplessness, and felt sorry that the good priest should have prevailed upon him to stay and witness the poor little fellow's failure.

There was not a sound in the schoolroom. The grand ladies held their breath in pity. Miss Brand looked anxious. The children longed for the success of their gentle comrade, and Maggie's heart beat with suppressed excitement.

"*Te Deum Laudamus, te Dominum confitemur.*"

The voice seemed to pierce the heavens, so fresh and pure was its tone. Lord Eltonville's heart stood still. The waif's face had changed with those first words of praise; it had become illuminated with a great light, his insignificant little figure had gained a king's dignity.

"*Te æternum Patrem omnis terra veneratur.*"

Lord Eltonville's imagination was fired by the music. He seemed to be in a little church of his own that was full of the perfume of incense. The low of distant oxen and the ripple of the river came through the open window. His only son, who died at about George's age, lay buried in the churchyard; the small grave was yellow with early primroses. He, too, had an angel's voice, stilled for ever excepting in his father's memory.

"*Tu Rex gloriæ, Christe.*"

Tears fell from the nobleman's eyes. Nor song of lark, nor rustle of waving grass, nor anything he had ever heard in all nature, had touched him so deeply as the waif's rendering of that hymn of praise.

As the last words died away Lord Eltonville stepped forward with outstretched hand; but George's strength was exhausted, the flush died away from his face, and he fell backwards into the priest's arms.

IV.

Time and circumstances change men, some for good and some for ill. It is an acknowledged fact that success often spoils the best natures, although to those on whom Fortune seldom smiles, this is hard to realise.

Thanks to Lord Eltonville's generosity and kind care, George Ermen had become a great man. His wish had been gratified; he had earned money and position.

Twenty years had passed since the geranium show. The ragged waif of that day had owned a sweet, loving nature, which seemed lost in the great musician of St. James's.

His father had died in prison. His mother's memory had scarcely survived. He never spoke of his early days, and looked upon them as a disgrace. Miss Brand's name seldom occurred to him,

Father Francis was forgotten, and Maggie Reed languished in poverty.

In a gorgeous mansion, replete with every luxury, the musician sat at dinner with his young wife. The room was elegantly furnished; the walls were hung with fine oil-paintings. The table was decorated with hot-house flowers. Outside it was snowing, and the night was bitterly cold.

There was a great hush in the house. In the morning they had buried their only child. She had lived a year, and the first snow of winter had covered her grave.

George Ermen's selfish heart had been deeply touched by the loss of the little one, and somehow, when dinner was over, and he sat alone in his study, the remembrance of his childhood came over him like a forgotten strain of music.

The snow, every now and then, fell hissing into the fire which blazed upon the hearth.

The musician sat down to the organ and sang a few snatches from his Mass, which was to be given for the first time on Christmas Day.

"There is a poor woman at the door, dear," said his wife, coming in silently and standing near him, a pathetic figure in her black dress.

"Oh, Mary, I can't see anybody to-day," he answered, placing his arm round her with unwonted gentleness.

"Gordon tried to dismiss her, George; but she seemed so distressed, and begged so hard to be allowed to speak with you, that he came to me, and when I saw her——"

"I understand, dear, I know your tender heart. If I gave in to you we shouldn't have a penny in the world——"

"We are so rich, George, we could give and give, and never feel it——"

"Well, well, don't cry, Mary. What is the woman's name?"

"Maggie Reed!"

Maggie Reed. The little face seemed to rise up before him as an angel's among the squalid surroundings of his childhood.

"Let her come in, dear," he said, with a tenderness in his voice that she had seldom heard of late.

Presently Maggie stood before him, ragged and wet, her pale face worn with want and suffering. She must have been about twenty-eight; but she looked ten years older.

"Maggie!" he cried, taking her hand, and placing her in a chair.

"Mr. Ermen. I came ter ask yer somethin, not ter beg. Don't think I've come ter beg. I want yer ter let Father Francis say yer Mass. 'E's seen all about it in the papers, how it's ter be sung on Christmas Day. 'E's an old man, and he would never ask yer 'imself, but 'e always thinks of yer, and prays for yer."

"And do you?" murmured George.

What a low cur he had been to let this poor girl suffer all her life! And his other humble friends, too, whom he had vowed never to forsake!

"I hev' prayed for yer every night and morning since yer left us. I've said, 'God bless him, and make him great.' Yer see, sir, women don't forget."

V.

It was Christmas Day. The church was filled with great and fashionable people. Among the gorgeous crowd were to be seen Miss Brand and Maggie Reed, the latter in a warm dress of grey cloth.

Nearer the altar knelt George and his wife, his eyes often seeking the place where his friends were seated.

Father Francis, assisted by two other priests, was officiating.

George looked happier to-day. The presence of his hitherto forgotten companions had revived him, and the good father had spoken soothing words to him about his child's death. George had been overcome, and unaccustomed tears coursed down his face as he clasped the father's hand, and said,—

"Ah! one's early friends are true. Their love makes life worth having."

While the choir sang the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the musician's thoughts had strayed to his early days. He was thinking of the sunbeam, and wondering whether its visit was a dream. If so, it must have been a dream straight from God, for that day had gained him his career.

The golden flower had reared its head very near to the Sun-lands. Would it ever reach them?

He remembered a secret drawer in his escritoire, in which there was a small plaster crucifix, a faded geranium leaf, and a silver compass. He had kept these little relics, and yet he had ceased

to remember the friends who had smoothed the rough pages of his childhood and pencilled his name in the book of fortune.

But Father Francis and Maggie and Miss Brand should be safe now; they should know no further sorrow!

The sun burst forth in the winter sky, shone into the church, and brightened the gloomy corners.

George knew well in his heart that it was not his care that had made the geranium thrive. The sunbeam which he pretended to treat as a dream had nourished it. However, if that chapter in his life was blurred and misty, to-day's was clear.

The Mass that was being sung was his masterpiece. It was the outpouring of his soul. He would compose still greater religious works. What more wonderful theme could he have than a God's agony!

"*Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!*" muttered the priest. The consecration drew near, the people bent their heads.

Still the musician remained lost in his thoughts. All over the world the advent of the Babe of Bethlehem was being celebrated. What a wonderful story it was! The star in the East, the wise men, the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and cradled in a manger. His unrecorded childhood, His love for little children, the more forsaken and forlorn, the greater His love. And he had been rich and prosperous, and yet had never given a thought to those poor little waifs whose life he himself had once lived. Happy in the love of his own child, he had forgotten the woes of others. God had taken her away; but he would accept the Divine warning, and follow in the Divine footsteps. He would open his heart to the children of the poor; he would clothe them and give them bread.

The priest lifted the chalice. On the incense veiled altar the musician saw a sunbeam dart into the Holy Cup, and he heard the well-remembered voice breathe forth a glorious message,—

"Clothe them and give them bread. In that last vow the flower has reached the Sun-lands."



"THOU SHALT CLOTHE THEM AND GIVE THEM BREAD"



I.

Many a year ago, in a land that was washed by the sea, there lived a King who had an only son whom he loved very dearly.

Fertile gardens surrounded the palace. They extended for miles and miles. In the distance the sapphire sea looked like a calm lake. The gardens were rich in flowers, which bloomed all the year in this land of perpetual summer. There were lilies and violets, hyacinths, carnations, cyclamens, and orchids; but the rose was mistress of the land, and they called it the "Rose Islands." The trees were filled with song-birds, and the air was fragrant with perfume tempered by the sea.

If ever mortal man was framed for happiness, the Prince of the Rose Islands was he—a youth of a gallant disposition, his golden hair hanging from beneath his jewelled cap, his brown eyes half hidden by their long lashes. His doublet was of white brocade, his hose and pointed shoes of silk; he was the *beau idéal* of a prince in form and figure, and brave as he was amiable, two royal qualities.

The King, his father, observing that he appeared to be sad when it seemed to him he should be most happy, asked Ulric what troubled him.

"I am lonely, so please your Grace, and I would fain have a friend."

"I am thy friend, sweet son. Have I done aught that should forfeit me thy friendship?"

"My lord the King, I am always thine—thine in true obedience, thine in the sight of God, thine in filial love, but not in friendship. Though I dream of it night and day, I have never known friendship; sometimes, indeed, I fear that it cannot exist," replied the Prince sadly.

"Nay, Ulric, in good sooth, thou art mistaken. Look about thee, in the palace. The noble lords of our Court, the high-born pages who minister to thy wants, are all thy humble and devoted friends."

"Father, prithee pardon me for my temerity in differing from thy gracious word; but those of whom thou speakest are not my friends. They know that I am all-powerful with thee. They are but fawning sycophants, who feed upon thy bounty. If the sentiment they profess to cherish for me be friendship, then indeed my dreams of the meaning of the word are hollow, as hollow as is my life in this paradise of beauty."

The King laid his hand upon his son's head, and looked into his sad face.

"My poor child," he said, "God knows I love thee better than myself. Art thou not my successor to these fair islands? Tell me, what can a King do for thy comfort?"

"Prithee, good my lord, send for the Lady Christabel, the daughter of the great Earl, thy subject, and for Prince Winfred, the heir of that land yonder, which reflects itself in our sea; let them live here for a time, and help me to discover the meaning of that magic word friendship."

The King gave orders that an escort should start at once to bring the Lady Christabel to his palace. He also commanded that a ship should be built, in which to fetch Prince Winfred of the Sea Islands.

Lady Christabel arrived in the evening of the next day. She was mounted on a white steed, and was clad in a silken robe of opaline hue, her cloak and cap jewelled with moonstones. Ulric stood

on the steps of the palace to receive her. She knelt and kissed his hand, and then looked upwards into his face. He noted the abundance of her dark hair and the strange beauty of her changing eyes, which were grey and blue by turn, as were the hues of her silken gown.

"Welcome, sweet Christabel, to our palace," said the Prince. "Dost think thou canst be happy here?"

"Ah, my dear lord, ask me if I could be happy in Paradise."

Ulric flushed with pleasure, and led her up the marble steps to the King's audience chamber. As the doors unclosed a sweet melody floated on the air, increased in volume for a brief space, then grew fainter and died away. Christabel found herself in an immense room. The walls were set with rubies, the floor was of rock crystal, strewn with pink and white rose-leaves. In the centre of the hall, upon a daïs covered with cloth of gold, sat the King, in his robes of state. The ladies of the Court, the lords and the pages, were clad in silks of various colours. Prince Ulric led Christabel to the foot of the throne.

"Welcome to our Court, my child," said the King. "Our dear son is lonely; wilt thou befriend him? Wilt thou teach him the solace of friendship? Wilt thou prove to him that it is a reality and not a dream?"

"Most gracious King," replied Christabel, "I will teach him all I know of selfless, sacrificing, eternal friendship."

"It does exist, then?" asked the Prince eagerly.

"Do the stars exist, my good lord, or the sun or the roses?"

"The roses wither, sweet lady, even here, in paradise."

"But friendship, good my lord, is a deathless rose; its leaves are immortal."

II.

At last Prince Ulric was happy. The days passed freighted with golden hours. He roamed with Christabel among the Rose Islands, and showed her the wonders thereof. Every day they inspected the progress made in the building of the ship which was to carry Prince Winfred to their shores. At length the vessel was finished, and she sailed away, the two companions watching her from the beach until her rosy flag and glittering figure-head were but specks in the distance. Then the Prince handed Christabel into a boat that spread its silken sails to the breeze, and they sailed along the coast.



"Art thou quite happy now, my gracious lord?" asked Christabel.

"Ay, in good sooth, sweet lady. Have I not found solace in thy companionship? Do I not at length possess the white rose of friendship?"

"My dear Prince, I am indeed thy true, though humble, friend for ever."

"For ever!" sighed Ulric. "Ah, Christabel, I was so sad before thou camest. Thou hast saved me. I lived in doubt of honest friendship until now."

Ulric gazed into her face. She took up her lute and sang to him, a song of youth and springtime.

Some days afterwards the ship which bore Prince Winfred anchored off the Rose Islands, and for the first time the two Princes met. Winfred, as became a son of the sea, was clothed in a garb of emerald tone, embroidered with shells. His cap was woven of strange sea-flowers. Great was the rejoicing in the Rose Islands over the advent of Prince Winfred. And as time went by great was

the happiness of Ulric, for now he had another friend, a youth like unto himself.

Months passed, scarcely making a ripple on the sea of Time. The three companions basked in an eternal sunshine. Sometimes they sailed over the blue water, sometimes they sat among the flowers, while Winfred told them tales of his life and home—of strange caverns along the coast, of yellow sand-dunes covered with sea-flowers, of moorlands where purple heather bloomed, of long days passed in fishing, of stress and storms, of a sea that was often stern and angry, with crested waves beating shoreward. Ulric would gaze at his guest in wonder, but Christabel's eyes swam in a mist of tears, and when Winfred's hand touched hers she would tremble. He gazed into her eyes, and understood their meaning. As time went by Winfred grew silent, but each day he looked oftener at Christabel.

The roses withered, and bloomed again. Morning followed evening, hour succeeded hour. One day, as Prince Ulric wandered in the forest, he came suddenly upon his two friends. They did not see him, and he was spell-bound by the picture that met his gaze. Christabel was standing under a rose-bush, her hair falling from beneath a crown of flowers, and at her feet knelt Winfred, with upturned wondrous eyes. They remained long thus, in a blaze of sunlight from no earthly sun.

Ulric stole away, hurt to death. "Alas! I have been deceived," he moaned. "This is friendship, but I have never known it. They have found it; but not I—not I!"

Prince Winfred sailed away to his own land, with the Lady Christabel and many of the noblest members of the King's Court. Ulric would not accompany them. He preferred to be alone now that his companions had failed to teach him the secret of that friendship, the existence of which he had discovered in the forest. Furthermore, neither Winfred nor Christabel were solicitous for Ulric to journey with them to the Sea Islands. They had latterly grown strangely oblivious of their host's presence. The young Prince, however, only blamed himself. He felt that his was not a nature to inspire friendship, but he longed for the great gift more and more, until his life became almost unbearable. Seeking for the white rose among the people of his father's realm, he saw that they were only kind to him either through fear of his power or from motives of self-interest.

One day, as he rode through the kingdom attended by his pages, he came upon a garden where a young girl was gathering fruit. Ulric, thinking she had not observed his approach, dismounted hastily, and throwing his dark cloak around him, entered the garden. The maiden was well pleased to see the youth, in whom she recognised her future King. She had used all her feminine arts to entertain her guest, when suddenly the Prince's cloak slipped from his shoulders, and he stood before her in all the radiance of his princely garments.

For a moment the maiden feigned surprise, and her companion observed a new expression upon her face. He had almost guessed her thoughts before she threw herself upon her knees, and said, "Most gracious lord, prithee give me some jewels like unto these which adorn thy doublet."

Ulric cast down his cap in sorrow, for he remembered that it had remained undisguised upon his head all through the interview. From the first the maiden must have guessed his high degree. It was revealed by the royal badge of the pink rose, which glittered among its jewelled ornaments.

"She only was good to me because I could be of use to her," mused the Prince, as he rode homewards. "She flattered me and smiled upon me because I am supposed to be one of the lucky ones of the earth. Had I been a poor man's son it had been different."

The thought was an inspiration to him. Why should he not search for the deathless rose, disguised, that none might seek his friendship falsely? The idea haunted him. At length he discussed it with the King, who, seeing that the Prince was nearly desperate with grief, consented to his plan. Ulric dressed himself as a minstrel, and having received his father's blessing, left the palace and rode through the territory of the Rose Islands, opening his purse to the poor, and comforting the sorrowful with the strains of his lyre. As long as his supply of gold lasted he was well received; when it was gone his troubles commenced. He was hungry, and none would give him to eat or to drink. Moreover, he had crossed the sea, and had left the Islands of Summer behind him. The kingdom in which he was now travelling was a land of mist and storm. He rode bravely on, nevertheless. Often, when he asked for help at the cottagers' doors, they laughed at him, and the children beat him with sticks. Winter was severe in the land of mist and storm, and the Prince turned his horse's head southwards. After some days the character of the scenery changed. The climate became warm and sunny. One morning he led his steed through the mazes of a great forest. It was springtime; the birds were singing, the valleys were blue with wild hyacinths, and here and there Ulric came upon clusters of late primroses. Looking up, he could scarcely see the sky, so thick was the tracery of foliage between him and the heavens. They had no spring in the Rose Islands, no faint greens, no tender buds, but always the full glory of summer, with its vivid colouring and its drowsy breath. He was so enchanted with the beauty of this forest, the like of which he had never seen before, that for awhile he had actually forgotten his quest, when suddenly, right in front of him, he saw a beautiful youth. Small and delicately made, his dress was entirely fashioned of pink rose-leaves, and he had golden wings. The Prince stood amazed, the apparition was so sudden, there had not been a sound; he rubbed his eyes, but the stranger did not vanish, he was a reality.

"What dost thou here, son of a King?" asked the youth.

Ulric was still more surprised at being recognised under a disguise that had served him well so far; he could not speak for astonishment.

"Thou seekest the 'deathless rose of friendship,' is it not so?" asked the unknown.

"Ay, good sir. Perhaps thou canst aid me in my search?"

"Fair Prince, I can indeed advise thee how to proceed. First of all, hie thee out of this forest with all speed."

"Why, good sir, methinks it is a lovely place. The air is softer here than any I have known before, the birds sing sweeter songs, the flowers breathe a rarer perfume; for the first time in my life I feel happy; everything is fresh and young, and full of hope."

"Ay, royal minstrel, many love my land. Beware, nevertheless, of journeying through it. It is enchanted; and if thou wouldst indeed follow thy quest, hie thee from the shelter of its trees and from the scent of its flowers; but ere thou goest, I will tell thee what the word *friendship* means. Friends should be as bells upon a hyacinth, fed with the same rain, nourished by the same dew, warmed by the same sun, rocked by the same wind; equal, placid, and calm in their lives; above all, they should possess the virtue of unselfishness. Self-interest is the death of friendship."

"Good sir, I have ever felt thus; and being of this mind, I threw off my habit of a Prince and started in search of the great gift; but I have ridden now for a whole year, and I find it not, neither have I met in all my travels any who possess this 'deathless rose.'"

"Thou wast but a youth when thou didst leave thy father's palace; now thou art a man, and the King mourns thee as dead."

When Ulric heard this he was greatly grieved, and at once resolved to return to the Rose Islands.

"Tell me, before we part, good my lord, hast any proof that this 'rose of friendship' exists?"

Then Ulric told him the story of Winfred and Christabel, and described the scene which he had witnessed in the forest. The youth broke into peals of laughter, and the hues of his flower-dress became so vivid that the Prince's eyes were dazzled. Presently the stranger, assuming a serious manner, said,—

"I will tell thee where the Fairy Friendship dwells. She is my twin sister. Thou shalt make one last attempt to find her. She holds her Court in the clouds of the setting sun. Ere nightfall, go to the seashore, stretch forth thy hands to the garments of departing day, and say, 'Good Fairy Friendship, bring me unto thy chambers of light. If thou canst say this with no thought of self, no longing for a friend because of the pleasure that friendship bestows, but with the same feeling that the hyacinth bells have for each other, then a ladder will be let down from the regions of the sunset, and Friendship will give thee her deathless rose, which is so rare, so scarce a blossom, so seldom possessed by man or woman, so precious beyond all things, that once attained, it will be the most priceless flower in thy kingly crown.'"

"I thank thee, from my heart," said Ulric.

"If thou wouldst succeed, leave this land of mine; it will not bring thee unto the courts of friendship. Give up thy quest, and I will show thee something that is far sweeter than friendship, and far easier to win."

"Nay, fair youth, I will endeavour once more to find what I have so long sought in vain; but, before I bid thy beautiful country farewell, wilt thou tell me why the roses upon thy dress so far surpass those that bloom in my father's kingdom?"

"Good Ulric, hast never heard of Love? Love, who comes to mortals without their knowledge, ay, without their asking; Love, whose voice is sweeter than the nightingale's; Love, who was born of God in the Garden of Eden, and was clothed with the deathless roses that bloomed there?"

He did not wait for Ulric's answer, but vanished; and his laughter echoed through the forest like a peal of silver bells.

III.

At sunset the Prince stood upon the shore and stretched forth his hands heavenwards, uttering the words specified by Love. He never knew whether his mind had not the selfless quality enjoined by the youth, or whether the roses of friendship were all withered and dead; but the sunset and its glory was suddenly hidden from his sight by a veil of mist. When the mist cleared it was night. Ulric lay down upon the sand and wept, for he knew that the gift for which he had sought so long was not for him.

Towards morning he retraced his steps, hoping to meet the youth and to tell him how completely he had again failed in his quest; but he could not find the way to the forest. About mid-day, however, he came upon a hedged-in garden surrounding a lonely villa. Through the maze of boughs and foliage the Prince could see a beautiful maiden. She was clad in white, and her only ornament was a white rose. Ulric had never beheld so pure nor so lovely a maid. Hardly knowing what he did, he dismounted and leaped the hedge. When he was inside the garden he noticed that the trees were white with bloom, and that the path glittered with the fallen blossoms. He saw, too, that no coloured flowers grew in the floral beds; they were all white. As he gazed around, a silvery mist arose, and he could see nothing excepting the maiden, until it seemed to him that the enclosure was filled with her image. Then the mist cleared; the spell was broken, and he was alone.



The Prince was deeply sorry at having lost sight of the beautiful girl; moreover, he hardly dared to seek her in the depths of the snowy garden. An atmosphere of peace, which he feared to disturb, seemed to brood over the place. Before leaving the maiden's home he plucked a rose, as a memento of the fair vision he had seen; but to his surprise it was entirely without perfume. As he examined it, wondering at the strange phenomenon, some one addressed him from outside the hedge. Looking up, he recognised the youth with whom he had conversed in the forest. Ulric hurried towards him, with a cry of joy.

"That scentless bloom is not the rose of friendship, fair Prince," said the youth, taking the flower from Ulric's hand.

"Thou sayest true; I have not yet found it. Nevertheless, methinks I am on the right path. Hope stirs in my heart and whispers 'Courage!' But now, I saw a maiden here, beautiful as an angel. If I only dare seek her yonder, my soul tells me that I may discover in her the deathless rose for which I long."

"Then go, thou King's son. Most like thou art right. Seek her."

"Wilt thou not go too, good youth? In all my travels I have never known fear until now; and yet here, in this land of white flowers and whiter mists, Hope's gentle spur notwithstanding, I am overawed, I dare not venture."

"Ah, my Prince! if thou wilt find what thou desirest thou must be brave, and advance with faith and courage. I cannot lead thee, neither can I follow thee; but yonder the edge of this garden joins my land, the forest where I met thee yesterday. If thou findest not the maiden, seek me there. Farewell. See," he added, "see how sudden red thy white rose hath blushed!"

And vanishing, he dropped Ulric's rose at the Prince's feet. It was of a brilliant red, and gave forth a strangely powerful perfume.

Notwithstanding the encouragement of his unknown preceptor, the Prince would never have ventured far along the glittering path. The Fates seemed to check his progress. If the maiden, whom his heart prompted him to seek, had not left her bower to meet him, his quest, even so near upon success, might yet have ended in disappointment. But with gracious step the maid approached, and, holding forth her hand quite simply, herself led him through the garden.

Ulric walked on, looking into her eyes. His heart beat, and the flower-strewn way seemed to melt from beneath his feet.

"Good minstrel, who art thou?" asked the maiden.

"I am thy devoted servant," murmured the Prince. "Prithee, tell me thy name, gracious lady?"

"I am called Innocent, and I am the Princess of the Garden of Innocence."



"Is this the Garden of Innocence?"

"Yes."

"Is that the reason why the flowers are all white and scentless here?"

"Are they ever different, fair sir?" she asked wonderingly.

"In my land, sweet maiden, they are red, pink, purple, gold, and of every colour. But now, I had one of your own white roses which had changed to red."

The Princess looked at Ulric in amazement as he searched for his rose. There it lay at his feet; but it had again become as white and as scentless as all the other flowers in the garden. The Prince was sorely puzzled. Had he only dreamed that the rose had changed to red in the youth's hands?

They walked on in silence for many a long hour, their eyes meeting in a sympathy too great for words.

"At last," thought the Prince, "I have found the 'white rose of friendship,' the leaves whereof are immortal. I shall never part from it; it will be with me all my life, great, sacrificing, eternal friendship, straight from God."

He told Innocent of his grief, and of the bitter troubles that he had encountered in his search.

"Poor minstrel!" she said softly. "Be happy now, for thy sorrow is ended. I feel this deathless friendship for thee."

"God be thanked, that my quest is crowned with success; but since thou art my true friend, since thou art noble enough to hold me dear, though in thy eyes I seem but a poor beggar, know that I am the Prince of the Rose Islands, which yield the many-coloured flowers I have told thee of."

"Good my lord, that does not make thee more precious to me. Wert thou poor and despised, hated of all the world, weary and sick unto death, I could but hold thee more dear. Didst thou ask me for my life, I could but lay it willingly at thy feet."

Tears stole down her cheeks, and she looked up at Ulric with eyes of doglike fidelity.

"Ah, this is friendship!" sighed the Prince; "this is what Christabel and Winfred discovered in the forest. Come, sweet Innocent, I will take thee to the King, my father, and show him the 'deathless rose.'"



As Ulric finished speaking, he folded her in his arms and kissed her. The air was suddenly filled with ringing peals of laughter, and on the path, close to them, stood the youth who had not dared to venture inside the garden but a few hours before. Why had he come into the depths of the white country now? He waved his arms, and all the flowers changed to a brilliant red. Innocent's white rose fell from her hair, and in its place lay a crimson bloom, the wondrous perfume of which ascended like incense heavenwards.

"Fair Prince, thy search is fruitless," chanted the youth, in low penetrating tones. "Thou hast indeed found a rose which is deathless; but it is the sweet red rose of Love."



I.

It was in a desolate London lodging-house that Marietta's courage gave way. In Italy she could live and be merry on the most frugal fare. A little polenta, a handful of grapes, and a piece of bread sufficed for a good meal. Not so in London; nor were there grapes or polenta even if she desired nothing else. The poor little heart needed nourishment against the gloom and harass of the great dull city. So she laid her head upon her brother's breast in a fit of despair and wept bitterly.

Marietta was seventeen. She had only arrived in England at the end of November. It was now nigh upon Christmas. Her brother Rica had lived in London over a year. He had been engaged by a great artist to sit to him as a model, and to no other.

Rica had saved every penny, being content with the bare necessities of life, so that Marietta might go and stay with him for a few months before she commenced her novitiate, prior to taking the veil at the convent where she had been educated. The nuns had adopted her when the children became orphans, and as time passed she had grown to long for the day which should make her one of the black-robed sisters of the Visitation. Unfortunately, a little time after Marietta's arrival in England, Rica's master had suddenly died, and the two children were left friendless and almost penniless in the great city.

It was Christmas Eve. The snow lay thick upon the ground. There was neither fire on the hearth nor bread in the cupboard, and the night was bitterly cold.

Rica smoothed away the dark hair from his sister's face and tried to comfort her. He could endure want and misery much better than she could. The beautiful face had become delicately *spirituelle* through the rigour of privation.

"Dearest Marietta, I will go and beg some food for you; don't cry any more."

"Oh, I shall die in this gloomy place! Take me back to the kind sisters!" she moaned, giving way to hysterical sobs.

"Have patience, we shall return to Italy some day; but believe me, when once winter goes, England is not such a dreadful country. In summer it is beautiful, and the flowers compare well with those at home."

"Flowers! I don't believe there are any here, not at least in this cruel city, with its yellow fogs and its sunless abodes."

Rica sighed deeply as he kissed her, and turned to go out into the snowy night. It grieved him to see Marietta utterly broken down. She had failed in her first trial. But then, she was so beautiful, she ought to have been a princess instead of the daughter of a poor fisherman. It was all a mistake.

II.

In the garden of a house that was inscribed "To Let" there grew a sad and solitary Christmas Rose, that lifted up pathetic complaint to the leaden sky.

Night heard her, and went to comfort her. He was enchanted with her beauty, and she lifted her face to receive his soft caresses.



"Sweet flower," he murmured, "have you forgotten that it is still winter? Why do you bloom in this dreary garden while the snow yet covers the ground?"

"I am a Christmas Rose, and I blossom on the eve of Jesus' birthday. I was planted a year ago by the people who dwelt here; they left soon afterwards. No human eyes have ever gazed on my face, and yet my heart is full of love for them. A Christmas Rose, I long to help them, to give my life in their service, as did my Infant Master," she said, as a melted drop of snow ran down the white petals into her heart.

"Do not grieve," whispered Night, rocking her in his arms; "but learn to rest all through the winter and be a Summer Rose."

"Ah! my only charm is that I bloom when June's flowers are sleeping; besides, I should lose my birthright, my dedication to the Child Jesus, if I did as you advise."

"Remain then as you are, sweet one. It is midnight. I must proclaim the gracious news of the coming of Christ. When His birthday wanes I will visit you again."

He kissed her tenderly, and there was a lull in his song as he gathered his strength, spread his mighty wings, and took flight.

The flower was lonelier than before, now that her friend had departed. Daylight came. The bells rang out their old story of peace and gladness. Children passed, some with sprigs of holly in their coats.

There was a summons at the gate in the garden of the next house; a voice said, "A Merry Christmas," and another answered, "God bless you to-day and always!"

"Ah, if human lips would say that to me!" thought the flower. "If I could only bring a little joy into a human life!" Her heart ached, for she knew that she would die when the clocks tolled midnight, announcing that Christ's birthday had passed away.

What was that? Are stars visible in the daytime? A little brown face was pressed against the railings, and two brilliant eyes gazed at her. It was a boy dressed in ragged velveteen breeches, and thin discoloured shirt. Curls of black hair surrounded his face. He climbed over the railings, knelt down on the sodden grass, and gazed at the Christmas Rose.

"Ah!" thought Rica, "at last, here is something to remind Marietta of Italy, although this fair blossom breathing here in a London garden is far sweeter than Italy's flowers. It must be the Infant Jesus' rose which blooms on His birthday." His brown fingers closed round the stalk, and the flower felt a thrill of joy as he plucked her; but all the leaves bowed to the ground, and rent the air with sad moans.

Rica carried the Christmas Rose far away from her birthplace, past the Park, through the slushy streets, on—on—until the character of the houses changed. Everything grew gradually sordid. Drunken men reeled against each other, and ill-clad children played about at the mouths of foul alleys.

The Christmas Rose clung tighter to the little brown hand, and drew comfort from the tender grasp. As Rica turned the corner of the street which led to his wretched home he ran against an artist who was sketching some crazy old houses.

"Mind where you are going, my boy! Why! What a beautiful Christmas Rose! How much do you want for it?" he asked, looking at the flower, and not noticing Rica's handsome face.

"I cannot part with it, sir. It is for my sister. She only came from Italy in November, and she has been fretting so because we are in trouble. I think that this beautiful flower may comfort her."

Edward Thornhill was touched, and as he looked into the boy's face he was almost startled by its beauty. It belonged to the sunny skies of Italy, with its brilliant eyes, olive skin, luxuriant hair, and red lips. As he scanned the little Italian's countenance, he also remarked his poverty, and placing his hand on Rica's shoulder he asked,—

"Are you very poor, my child?"

"Oh, sir, we are starving! I don't care for myself, but for my sister. She is beautiful; and she can't stand misery. I am sure God did not mean her to suffer; it's all a mistake," cried the boy, breaking down under the kind glance and the sympathetic words.

"I seem to know your face," said the artist. "Why, of course I do; you were poor Godfrey's model?"

"Yes, sir, I had been in his studio a year when he died. I served him entirely, and now that he is gone I am quite friendless."

"Does your sister sit?"

"Not hitherto, sir. She has not thought of it. Nor have I told her how she might perhaps obtain employment, even easier than I, because I somehow felt that the nuns to whom she owes everything might not like it."

"Did they say they would object?"

"Not in words; but, you see, Marietta has promised to return in May. She came to London to say good-bye to me. I was able to send her money for her passage, being well provided by Mr. Godfrey. She is to take the veil soon after her return, and then, you know, I lose her altogether."

"You don't like that?"

"She will be taken care of," the boy replied, "and she desires to dedicate her life to God, so you see I must be content."

"Poor little chap! But I can help you in your present need. Let the Christmas Rose be a harbinger of joy to both of you. Give it to your sister, and bring her to this address within an hour. You shall have food and warmth, anyhow, and I will help you further."

Rica sped up the court to their miserable quarters. Marietta was watching anxiously for him at the window. He had been out all night, and she was almost in despair.

"Look, dearest, isn't it lovely?" he cried, as he rushed into the room and held up the Christmas Rose for her to see.

She took it in her thin fingers, and her eyes dwelt on its beauty until they filled with tears, which dropped on the rose's face and sank into her grateful heart.

"How exquisite, Rica! The Infant Jesus must have brought it from heaven."

Then her face gradually lost its transient glow, and in a fit of despair she threw the flower on the ground, and cried,—

"But it cannot help us; of what good is it? I thought you went out to beg bread."

"Ah, Marietta! don't scorn it; be grateful all your life that I found the Christmas Rose. It has saved us!"

On hearing her brother's story she was overjoyed. She picked up the trembling flower, and hastily covering her head with a shawl, prepared to accompany Rica.

On the presentation of Thornhill's card they were shown into his studio.

The Christmas Rose thought she was in Fairyland. The room was decorated with festoons of evergreens, wreaths of holly, and bunches of mistletoe. On the platform was a small Christmas tree hung with sweets, crackers, silver ornaments, and coloured beads, surmounted by a fairy doll dressed in white and studded with silver stars. Marietta stood gazing round the studio, holding the trembling Rose in her hand. But what was this? The Fairy Prince off the tree come to life? They had never seen anything so fair before. A boy had risen from a seat by the stove, where he had been amusing himself with a picture book. A slim little fellow, with dreamy, hazel eyes set in a pale spiritual face, and what wonderful hair. It was like golden sunbeams. Angel was the

artist's son. His mother had died two years ago. He was just six years old, a sweet, delicate child. Often he was very lonely, for his father was frequently away, and he was not strong enough to go to school.



How much he missed his mother, and how the memory of her dwelt in his young soul, even his father scarcely guessed. At night he cried himself to sleep thinking of her, and wondering where she was. It had occurred to the child that she had not been very happy, and that his father did not love her as he did.

"I have been watching for you," said Angel, putting out his small hand. "Oh, what a pretty flower! I have never seen one like it before."

"It is a Christmas Rose, dear," said Thornhill, who had entered as the boy spoke.

Marietta placed it in his hair. He looked at her gravely, and then held up his face to be kissed.

The Christmas Rose nearly swooned with joy, for she thought that Angel was the Infant Jesus; and as she was set in the place of honour amongst that golden glory, her heart throbbed with gratitude.

Edward Thornhill had been accustomed to the society of pretty women all his life; but in the presence of this convent girl he was absolutely nervous. Her beauty fascinated him. He longed to take his brush, to portray that face on canvas.

Marietta was shy to a fault, and it was a long time before he could get anything excepting monosyllables from her in conversation.

Christmas dinner was served in another part of the studio. It was not a very grand one. The absence of a woman's hand in the household arrangements had been keenly felt by the artist since his wife's death. But there was a piece of roast beef and a plum-pudding, with dates, apples, and oranges to follow. The two Italians had eaten nothing but a little bread for two days, so to them it was a feast for the Gods.

Later the tree was stripped of its ornaments. Angel pressed nearly all the presents on Rica. He was a kind-hearted little fellow, and very unselfish.

"And so you are going to be a nun, my child?" said the artist, when by sympathetic questioning he had elicited Marietta's story.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you will be happy?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a slight hesitation in her manner. And yet, when she had entered the studio only two hours ago, she had resolved to ask Edward Thornhill to lend her enough money to pay her fare back to the convent, so that she could begin her novitiate at once.

"Your mind is quite made up, nothing could change it?"

"I think not."

How quickly her listener detected the little tremor in her voice, which told him much more than the uncertainty implied in her words.

"And yet I believe you might be happy here. I can help you both; you shall not want for work. Your brother tells me that you have never been a model, but perhaps you would be kind enough to favour me by sitting for my Academy picture. The subject is to be the Annunciation."

She did not answer, and he continued talking,—

"You must remember that the city is not always as gloomy as it looks to-night. We have picture galleries, parks and squares, and the country is beautiful at all seasons. Do you not think you could be content to stay a little?"

"Perhaps a little."

"I will get you some needlework to do, and Rica shall find in me as good a master as the one he has just lost.

"You are very kind," she said, looking up at him with tearful eyes.

"The nuns won't be angry with you for staying a little while with your brother; they will consent to receive you later, will they not?"

"Yes, sir."

"And will you sit for my picture?"

"Yes, as soon as you wish."

Before Marietta left she kissed the Christmas Rose, and whispered, "Dear Infant Jesus, guard the flower which has saved us."

And it murmured:—

"I am happy. My Master is pleased that I have followed in His footsteps, and His reward is beyond all price."

But Marietta did not hear.

Before Angel went to rest he placed the Christmas Rose in a goblet of water, and it lifted up its innocent face and breathed a sweet, faint perfume. The hours flew by, and towards midnight a curious pink hue stole over its white petals, the fragrance died away, the luxuriant stem withered up, and it breathed its last as Christ's birthday passed away.

The star of Bethlehem was alone in the heavens when Night visited the garden to greet the beautiful flower of the morning, but it had vanished. In its place was a tear which sparkled like a diamond, the tear it had shed when yearning to help suffering humanity.

III.

Four months afterwards Marietta received a letter from the superior of her convent. She sat reading it in a clean and comfortably furnished room. Though to all appearances perfectly happy, her face wore an expression of sadness, and tears fell on the missive in her hand.

At length she rose, placed the letter in the pocket of her gown, and after packing up a costume she had just finished making for Edward Thornhill, made her way to his studio.

He praised her work. He had never found anybody so clever at carrying out suggestions as Marietta; but to-day his commendation brought no pleasure into her face, and the artist was quick to notice her changed manner.

"You are sad, Marietta?"

"No," she answered hastily, turning to leave the studio.

"Why no, when you mean yes?" he asked, following her.

She did not reply, but the tears gathered in her eyes and fell upon her dress.

"Tell me what grieves you. I helped you once, and may be able to do so again."

She took the Reverend Mother's letter from her pocket and placed it in his hand. It contained a few lines, saying that they would expect their child back in a fortnight's time.

"Then you are going to leave us after all?"

"It is better so."

"But it makes you sad the thought of going?"

"Yes," she said, with downcast face.

"The sisters would not wish you to take the veil if you or they doubted your vocation for such a surrender?"

"I don't understand."

"Your heart must be in this sacrament, your whole heart, you must have no longings after the world. Is it not so?"

"Oh yes," she said, her voice trembling, tears in her eyes.

"Have you any longings that might be a shadow on your nun's life, my child? Have you? Nay, don't be afraid to speak."

"Oh, don't ask me," she said, repressing her sobs.

"You do not think your life here involves a sin? You have enabled me to paint a heavenly image that might, so far as the pure spirit of it goes, decorate the fairest church. I do not say the work, Marietta, but the intention, the inspiration."

She found this question too subtle for her comprehension, but there was something in the artist's tone and manner that thrilled her, something that was like the influence of the *Magnificat* in the great choir of the cathedral. She turned her wondering eyes towards him, and he took her hands in his.

"You have been happy here?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Yes, very."

"Then why leave me? Put up with the gloom and fog for my sake, Marietta. Be the artist's little wife as well as his model."

The sun came streaming into the studio as he bent over her fair hands and kissed them.

"It is not all gloom and fog," she replied. "To-day the London sun is as bright and warm as it was in Italy when I was a child."

It was not alone the London sun, it was the sunshine of the heart; and it lasted all through the remainder of Marietta's life.





I.

Lady Mercy sat writing of love in the early hours of morning. She had been christened Mercy, but the people called her the "Windflower." She was born in a high March wind, which had once more wooed her sisters into life. They lay like a fall of snow in the adjacent forests.

As the girl grew the title of the "Windflower" suited more and more her long fair hair and clear grey eyes.

She had never known any home beyond this beautiful palace. Here, in the heart of a pastoral country, the birds sang and the flowers bloomed all through the year. It was a haven of peace, of glorious morning dawns and wind-swept evening skies.

Her mother, the widowed Countess, wished to keep her among the flowers and meadows, and she had reached her seventeenth summer without ever having been in a city. She had, indeed, many learned teachers, and had heard and read of the great world which lay beyond the hills surrounding her home, but had no longing in her heart to go there. She found hosts of friends in nature—the flowers, birds, dogs, horses, golden fish in the fountain, and the sun; but most of all the wind. It seemed as though the poetic title, given to her by the good people of the village, had already exercised an influence upon her life. She loved the wind, whether he came from the icefields of the north or the sun-plains of the equator, whether his breath were redolent of western seas or of spices and Arabian perfumes.

To feel his kisses on her face, to have him whirl her round in his strength, to bend before his mighty wings as did her sisters, the Windflowers, this was her delight. Her play hours were passed in dreamland peopled with her own mystical creations. What should she know of love? She was, indeed, an utter stranger to it, and yet she wrote of love, and called her hero "Terah."

But the time had come when the Countess thought her daughter ought to begin to realise that the great world was not an ideal one like that of her dreams.

"Mercy," she said, "why do you always write of 'Terah' as you call him? He seems to be the hero of all your stories, and he is quite impossible. You must not imagine that people in the great world are as lovely in their lives as your flowers are. 'Terah' is an ideal."

"An ideal?"

"Yes, there is no such man."

"In what way is he not true?" asked the girl, her eyes full of wonder.

"Describe him again, and I will explain."

"His name speaks for him; it means that he was a breather of good like the wind, only he was always gentle. Then he drove away sorrow. He was a comforter; his face was most beautiful; he was all mercy, all love; and he had thought of others so much that self was quite dead in him. Is that impossible in that wide world yonder?"

The Countess sighed as she answered, "Do not make him so handsome, Mercy, and then perhaps he will be a more probable character, the man enriched by Providence with perfect beauty such

as your hero cannot help being self-imbued. It is the old story of Narcissus, every glass greets him with the picture he likes best to see; even the eyes of the woman he loves are dimmed by the reflection of his image."



Months passed, and a great change was noticed in Lady Mercy. She grew paler and paler; she wrote no more stories; and all her studies were stopped. She rose very early, and walked miles in the woods and by the river, as if seeking for something. The "Windflower" seemed to have been bruised by a rough tempest.

A renowned doctor came from the metropolis and pressed her to say what ailed her.

"I am looking for 'Terah.' Mother said he was an ideal, merely the creature of my brain, and since then I have lost him," she moaned. "Ask her to take me to the great city that I may seek him, for I think he has gone there to prove that he is true."

And so the "Windflower" was uprooted from among her kith and kin. She journeyed to the distant town, past the river and over the hills.

And all was changed. She was thrust into the world of fashion. Dressed in costly silks with long flowing trains, her hair was not allowed to hang loosely over her shoulders any more. She was "out," so it was dressed high on her head by a French *coiffeur*. She was forbidden to walk unattended in the great city. Even in the parks she was always accompanied by a chaperon. It was not correct to be seen alone, and comfort and freedom had to be sacrificed.

II.

Society made much of the ethereal-looking girl. Society took to her title of the "Windflower"; it was so romantic, so "old world." She went for rides in the Row, drove in the Park, visited the opera and theatres, was present at evening receptions, and at ladies' "tea and scandal" parties—weak tea and strong scandal. Here she learned to fear her own sex.

She was presented at Court in a low dress on a foggy afternoon; she went everywhere in a sort of dream seeking her ideal, but she found no trace of "Terah," the breather of good; and as time passed she grew sick at heart, seeing on all hands the lust of self. Men battled for their idol everywhere, women bartered away their souls to crown self with a diadem of gold.

Presently she was permitted to go about unattended, a freedom that inspired her with new hopes. She went down to the busy part of the city and stood in the surging crowd that battled for life. The "Windflower" was alone in a world of anxious men whose all-consuming passion was self. Time was precious. All was hurry. Everybody had business on hand; even at luncheon they seemed to be racing. Not a minute was to be lost; hesitate but for an instant, and they were pushed aside, the great race of self against self, pursuing its course without them. A few attained

the goal, but many were stricken down by the way. Those who reached it bowed their heads to the ground and worshipped at the glittering shrine where Gold and Self were throned kings of the human heart.

Her quest seemed to be failing entirely. Among the poor, who learned to love her, she now and then found a trace of her lost "Terah," but it was only a straggling ray of light in a nightmare of darkness and sin.

One night she was present at a great ball given in her honour by an intimate friend of the Countess.

The room was filled with sweet perfumes, the mantel-pieces heaped with lilies of the valley and white lilacs. All the wealth of spring flowers lay fainting in the hot atmosphere. Not a drop of water to cool them, not a breath of air to ease their pain. The band shrieked out its cheap melodies, the dancers danced beneath the glare of electric lights. The fashionable throng enjoyed itself. But one out of its number felt as weary as the flowers. Dressed in clinging folds of soft satin, her hair was arranged low in her neck, and in her hand she held a few loose roses. She looked like a garden lily which had strayed from its home, and grieved to find that it had exchanged the evening air and the silence of the night for the glare of electric globes, the heat of a crowded room, and the hubbub of countless voices.

"And so you do not like society?" said her partner, a young fellow whom she had often met before, and whom she greatly interested.

"From what I know of it I do not. I think, too, that people who live in cities are cruel. Look at the poor lilacs and lilies massed together to faint and die. In my home we never think of letting flowers remain without water. We look upon them as living things. Every blossom has a life of its own; it knows pain and thirst. When I see them, torn from hedge and meadow by careless hands and thrown on to the roads to die in the dust, I know that for each flower an angel weeps."

"Do not talk of things that make you sad. I want you to be happy to-night. You are enjoying yourself, are you not?" the young fellow inquired wistfully. Dangerous question to ask the grave idealist, but he had taken a great fancy to her, he sympathised with many of her feelings. "If you cannot say that you are enjoying yourself, please leave my question unanswered," he added hastily.

Lady Mercy looked up in surprise, then partly comprehending his words, she said,—

"I like to talk with you; but I have had to converse with so many others who have nothing to say that I am weary—men who asked me whether I had seen this or that play, if I had been on the great wheel, did I approve of bicycling for women? Had I tried golfing? And then, having finished their stock of small talk, they taxed their poor ingenuity to pay me compliments."

"I am not surprised," was the grave reply.

"Oh! I wish you had not said that. Why should a man seek to flatter a woman; in short, to insult her?"

"I would not offend you for the world!" he cried. "Indeed I am sorry."

"And I am grieved to have spoken bitterly. Pardon me, I do not know how to talk even to you, and everything is so strange," she said, flushing deeply.

"Tell me of what you like most yourself; that will interest me beyond all other subjects."

"I cannot speak of that," she answered, a gentle light playing on her face. "I can only think about it. The remembrance of it is rooted in my heart; it is a part of me."

"Mercy," he cried, his face flushing and his eyes becoming strangely brilliant, "the Countess has told me of your dream, of your search for some one who has never existed. Ah! give it up. Do you not know that the bitterest chapter in the book of life is that which is headed 'Broken Ideals'? The pages are written in blood, they are blistered with tears. The reader must decipher that chapter alone, the shattered remains of what was once his divinity, his sunshine feeding on his heart, and poisoning even his memory."

"But humanity should not let its ideals be broken. It should fight for them, lock them safe in the inmost chamber of its mind. It should never suffer a profane hand to destroy that which is dearer than itself," she answered, with a fixed, far-away look in her eyes.

"Ah, my dear Mercy, believe me, should you appear to find he whom you seek, you will but dream, and then awake to learn that your young, fresh life has been wasted, and that your Ideal is false. Then age will be passed in useless longing and vain regrets."

"I shall find him. I did know him once, and he left me, but he will come back again." Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked so spiritual, so beautiful, that her companion could contain himself no longer.

"Mercy, I love you!" he whispered.

The breathless words brought her back from dreamland, with its mists and its dim beauties—back to a London ballroom, back to fading humanity and faded flowers. The utter weariness and cheapness of it all struck her painfully, the passionate cry of love associated itself in her mind

with the rustle and frippery of fashion.

"My life is his of whom we have spoken," she said gently in response to his beseeching glance, as her hostess, a bright, fashionable woman, hurried up and whispered effusively: "Wait here a moment, dear. I have at last found some one whom I am sure will please you. He is very rich and handsome, quite a king in the world of fashion, and yet a Christian gentleman—and oh, so wise! We call him our Ideal."

She came back accompanied by a tall, fine man. Everybody thought him beautiful—"pure Greek, you know"; but Lady Mercy started back in terror, recovering herself the next minute. To her he was hideous—his mouth misshapen, his eyes a dull red. Was it because her own soul was so pure that she saw people's minds, not their faces, and when a mind was evil its chief vice shone through its fleshly covering like a beacon?

"Delighted to meet you, Lady Mercy; will you dance?"

"No, thank you."

"We will sit it out, then, and talk. By the way, our mutual friend, Lady R—, tells me that you are much distressed over the condition of the unemployed in our great city?"

"Yes, I want mother to devise a scheme for helping them. I have seen so much suffering since I have been here."

"Money thrown away, I assure you; they are a rascally set. If a man is willing to work there is work to be had."

"I disagree, sir; work is most difficult to obtain. A character is needed. Many of these poor, suffering creatures have no recommendation that might entitle them to recognition at the hands of Christ's followers. And most of them are not in a condition to work. They have neither clothes, nor health, nor hope. Could you build with your feet through your boots? Could you lift heavy weights with no strength in your body and no hope in your soul?"

"You forget I am not one of the unemployed," he said, smiling.

"No? What do you do then?"

"Well, I do not exactly do anything."

"Then you are unemployed."

"I have no regular work; but I try to follow in Christ's steps. I am a Christian like yourself. I believe that He was God, and worship Him as such."

"Sir, I fear His would have been a poor, useless martyrdom if you were indeed a Christian. Go home and read His life; see what He says about the poor whom you despise. There, forgive me, I did not mean to say so much. But I think you are in the wrong. Good-night."

"What an awful girl you introduced me to, Lady R—! She was positively insulting; a regular windbag, not a flower."

"Didn't it make any impression? Poor Popsie," she replied, patting him with her fan, "I hoped she would interest you; she is in search of the Ideal. What a pity she did not recognise you! Never mind, I will introduce you to Baby Joy, the music-hall singer who married Lord Clare. You know? Come along."

III.

Years passed. Lady Mercy's first youth was over; her eyes had lost the light of hope—a wild, sorrowful expression filled them. She had never gone back to the country; she could not return to the happy home of her childish ideals, the joyless, broken-hearted creature she was now.

She drove out one day in September. Gaily dressed women were shopping. Flower stalls of roses, carnations, marguerites, gave a foreign look to the city. A wild west wind, fragrant with the breath of autumn, rushed through the streets.

Suddenly there was some confusion in the road. A policeman battled among a host of prancing horses and grand carriages. A victoria containing two gorgeously dressed ladies had run over a mongrel dog. One of its owners, a ragged girl, sobbed on the pavement, as her half-starved brother elbowed his way to the officer's side.

"Our paw Jack; 'is leg's broke."

"You should not let him run about in crowded streets," said one of the smart occupants of the victoria.

"End yer shouldn't let yer cussed 'osses droive over the paw beast," replied the boy, taking it in his arms and trying to soothe its cries.

"I was going to give you money, boy, but I shall not for your impertinence."

Lady Mercy stood on the pavement comforting the little girl.

"Never moind, Puddles," said her brother, coming up with the dog in his arms. "Our Prince will

cure 'im."

"Prince is doying, brother, you know that."

"Who is Prince, my boy?" asked Lady Mercy.

"'E's our only friend. 'E's father and mother to all hus poor."

"Is he beautiful?" she asked eagerly.

"What, in the faice? Rather not."

"Ah! then it cannot be he," said Lady Mercy sadly. "Why do you call him Prince?"

"Becos 'e is Prince—the Prince of Pity. 'E's ill now; but 'e says 'e can't doi till something 'appens."

"What?"

"Oi der know. Somethink."

"Where does he live?"

"Hover there," said the boy, with a vague wave of his hand.

"I will take you there if you will let me. Will you get into the carriage?"

"What, in there?"

"Yes."

"Rather. Come on, Puddles."

Lady Mercy helped the two forlorn creatures into her carriage, and placed the dog tenderly on the front seat.

"Will you tell the coachman where to go?"

"Yaas, droive ter Greenleaf Court."

The Prince of Pity lay dying of want in one of the poorest quarters of the great city. His face was gaunt and weather-beaten, his eyes glazed and dull. A young child sat on the floor nursing a half-starved cat—both waifs of the street rescued from utter misery by the good Samaritan.

Sorrow was always with the poor of Greenleaf Court; but now their affliction was more bitter than ever. Their dear master, who had devoted his life to them, and had given away all his worldly goods until he was as poor and destitute as they, the man who told them of sweet flowers and green meadows and silver streams, he who made peace in their quarrels, divided his scanty earnings among them, taught the children, he, their only stay in a world of suffering and want, was leaving them for ever.

The Prince of Pity lay drowsing away to "poppied death."

The wind wailed and sobbed round the house, and burst in at the door as Lady Mercy entered.

She saw the man. His clothes were worn and old, but she beheld only his face; that face which even the poor who almost worshipped him thought ugly, was beautiful to her; it told of love and charity. She knew his life had been lived for others.

"Ah, you have come at last!" he cried. "Welcome. I so feared I should die without any one to continue my work, and I asked the Wind that sprung up in the early hours to waft me some one hither."

"He has obeyed you. I am named the Windflower; but, sir, you too have a beautiful title; they call you the Prince of Pity. Who are you?"

"I am an unworthy follower of the man Christ."

"You are then a Christian?"

"I said the *man* Christ. I belong to no Church. I profess no creed."

"What do you do?"

"My child," he said, and his voice sounded sorrowful like the sobbing of the sea, "my life's work is all in these simple lines,—

"'Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.'"

"You are then he whom I seek. You are Terah, the breather of good. But, sir, you seem ill. Can I help you?"

"Yes, care for my poor. Be to them all the Wind is to you; rock them into life, soothe them into death; sob with them in grief, shout with them in joy. I am going away."

"Whither?"

"To the earth, to rest and peace at last."

"Not to heaven?"

"My child, have you lived in the great city and not learned that we can imagine no heaven so lovely as the joy of our hearts when we do a good action? I am on the verge of that sleep which knows no awakening. The Halls of Death lead not unto Life."

Mercy was dazed with the beauty of the man's soul. It filled his eyes with a radiance which overwhelmed her.

"I have found Terah," she cried, looking heavenwards, and clasping her hands in an ecstasy of happiness. "The world is bright again. My ideal is true. Beautiful, merciful; and self an immolated sacrifice. Why have I lost my youth in seeking him to lose him now?"

A distant voice seemed to float on the wind. "Had he lived you must have died. The good action has its reward here and hereafter. He has passed through the Halls of Death unto the House of Life. Be content, you have been much blessed. The Ideal is realised in heaven."

The room was filled with a perfume as of many flowers. The wind sobbed out a requiem. Lady Mercy's face shone with a great light. She looked down. The Prince of Pity lay dead.

On the site of Greenleaf Court a beautiful house now stands, every window full of flowers. Designed by a great architect, all the poor of the district were employed to help in its erection. It is called the "House of Pity." In the large hall, where the hungry are fed and the sorrowful are comforted, the following inscription is wrought on the wall in letters of gold, wreathed with windflowers:—



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