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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LITTLE JOHANNES ***

LITTLE JOHANNES

Translated from the Dutch of

FREDERIK VAN EEDEN

By CLARA BELL

With an Introductory Essay

by ANDREW LANG

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN

MDCCCXCV

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INTRODUCTION

LITERARY FAIRY TALES

The *Märchen* or child's story, is a form of literature primevally old, but with infinite capacity of renewing its youth. Old wives' fables, tales about a lad and a lass, and a cruel step-mother, about three adventurous brothers, about friendly or enchanted beasts, about magical weapons and rings, about giants and cannibals, are the most ancient form of romantic fiction. The civilised peoples have elaborated these childlike legends into the chief romantic myths, as of the Ship Argo, and the sagas of Heracles and Odysseus. Uncivilised races, Ojibbeways, Eskimo, Samoans, retain the old wives' fables in a form far less cultivated,—probably far nearer the originals. European peasants keep them in shapes more akin to the savage than to the Greek forms, and, finally, men of letters have adopted the *genre* from popular narrative, as they have also adopted the Fable.

Little Johannes, here translated from the Dutch of Dr. Frederik van Eeden, is the latest of these essays, in which the man's fancy consciously plays with the data and the forms of the child's imagination. It is not my purpose here to criticise *Little Johannes*, an *Allegory of a Poet's Soul*, nor to try to forestall the reader's own conclusions. One prefers rather to glance at the history of the Fairy Tale in modern literature.

It might, of course, be said with truth that the Odyssey, and parts of most of the world's Epics are literary expansions of the *Märchen*. But these, we may be confident, were not made of set literary purpose. Neither Homer, nor any poet of the French *Chansons de Geste*, cried, 'Here is a good plot in a child's legend, let me amplify and ennoble it.' The real process was probably this: adventures that from time immemorial had been attributed to the vague heroes of *Märchen*

gradually clustered round some half divine or heroic name, as of Heracles or Odysseus, won a way into national traditions, and were finally sung of by some heroic poet. This slow evolution of romance is all unlike what occurs when a poet chooses some wild-flower of popular lore, and cultivates it in his garden, when La Fontaine, for example, selects the Fable; when the anecdote is developed into the *fabliau* or the *conte*, when Apuleius makes prize of *Cupid and Psyche* (a *Märchen* of world-wide renown), when Fénelon moralises the fairy tale, or Madame d'Aulnoy touches it with courtly wit and happy humour, or when Thackeray burlesques it, with a kindly mockery, or when Dr. Frederik van Eeden, or Dr. Macdonald, allegorises the nursery narratives. To moralise the tale in a very ancient fashion: Indian literature was busy to this end in the Buddhist Jatakas or Birth-stories, and in the *Ocean of the Stream of Stories*. Mediæval preachers employed old tales as texts and as illustrations of religious and moral precepts. But the ancient popular fairy tale, the salt of primitive fancy, the drop of the water of the Fountain of Youth in modern fiction, began its great invasion of literature in France, and in the reign of Louis XIV. When the survivors of the *Précieuses*, when the literary court ladies were some deal weary of madrigals, maxims, *bouts-rimés*, 'portraits,' and their other graceful bookish toys, they took to telling each other fairy tales.^[1]

On August 6, 1676, Madame de Sévigné tells her daughter that at Versailles the ladies *mitonnent*, or narrate fairy tales, concerning the Green Isle, and its Princess and her lover, the Prince of Pleasure, and a flying hall of glass in which the hero and heroine make their voyages. It is not certain whether these exercises of fancy were based on memories of the *Pentamerone*, and other semi-literary Italian collections of Folk-Tales, or whether the witty ladies embroidered on the data of their own nurses. As early as 1691, Charles Perrault, inventing a new *genre* of minor literature, did some Folk-Tales into verse, and, in 1696, he began to publish his famous *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Puss in Boots*, in Moetjens's miscellany, printed at the Hague. In 1696 Mlle. L'Héritière put forth a long and highly embroidered fairy tale, *Les Enchantements de l'Eloquence*, in her *Bizarres Ingénieuses* (Guignard), while Perrault's own collected *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* were given to the world in 1697 (Barbin, Paris).

The work of Mlle. L'Héritière was thoroughly artificial, while the immortal stories of Perrault have but a few touches of conscious courtly wit, and closely adhere to the old nursery versions. Perrault, in fact, is rather the ancestor of the Grimms and the other scholarly collectors, than of the literary letters of fairy tales. The Fairy Godmothers of modern *contes* play quite a small part in Perrault's works (though a larger part than in purely popular narrative) compared with their rôle in Madame d'Aulnoy, and all her successors. Much more truly than la Comtesse de M—— (Murat), author of *Contes des Fées* (1698), Madame d'Aulnoy is the true mother of the modern fairy tale, and the true Queen of the *Cabinet des Fées*.^[2] To this witty lady of all work, author of *Mémoires de la Cour d'Espagne*, and of many novels, a mere hint from tradition was enough. From such hints she developed her stories, such as *Le Mouton*, *Le Nain jaune*, *Finette Cendron*, *Le Bon petit Souris*, and very many others. She invented the modern Court of Fairyland, with its manners, its fairies—who, once a year, take the forms of animals, its Queens, its amorous, its cruel, its good, its evil, its odious and its friendly *fées*; illustrious beings, the counsellors of kings, who are now treated with religious respect, and now are propitiated with ribbons, scissors, and sweetmeats.

The Fairies are as old as the Hathors of Egypt, the Moerae who came to the birth of Meleager, the Norns of Scandinavian myth. But Madame d'Aulnoy first developed them into our familiar *fées* of fairy tale. Her *contes* are brilliant little novels, gay, satirical, full of hits at courts and kings. Yet they have won a way into true popularity: translated and condensed, they circulate as penny scrap-books, and furnish themes for pantomime.^[3] It is from Madame d'Aulnoy that the *Rose and the Ring* of Thackeray derives its illustrious lineage. The banter is only an exaggeration of her charming manner. It is a pity that Sainte-Beuve, in his long gallery of portraits, found no space for Madame d'Aulnoy. The grave Fénelon follows her in his *Rosimond et Braminte*, by no means the worst effort of the author of *Télémaque*.^[4] From Madame d'Aulnoy, then, descend the many artificial stories of the *Cabinet des Fées*, and among these the very prolix novel out of which *Beauty and the Beast* has been condensed takes a high place. The tales of the Comte de Caylus have also humour, wit, and a pleasant invention.^[5]

The artificial fairy tale was in the eighteenth century a regular literary *genre*, a vehicle, now for satire, now for moralities. The old courtly method has died out, naturally, but the modern *Märchen* has taken a hundred shapes, like its own enchanters. We have Kingsley's *Water Babies*, a fairy tale much too full of science, and of satire not very intelligible to children, and not always entertaining to older people, but rich in tenderness, poetry, and love of nature. We have the delightful *Rose and the Ring*, full of characters as real to us, almost, as Captain Costigan, or Becky Sharpe. Angelica is a child's Blanche Amory; Betsinda is a child's Laura Bell, Bulbo is the Foker of the nursery, and King Valoroso a potentate never to be thought of without respectful gratitude. How noble is his blank verse.

—'He laid his hands on an anointed king,
—Hedzoff! and floored me with a warming pan!'

Then we have the *Phantastes* of Dr. Macdonald, which the abundant mysticism does not spoil, a book of poetic adventure perhaps too unfamiliar to children. To speak of Andersen is superfluous, of Andersen so akin in imagination to the primeval popular fancy; so near the secret of the heart of childhood. The *Tin Soldier*, the *Ugly Duckling* and the rest, are true *Märchen*, and Andersen is the Perrault of the North, more grave, more tender, if less witty, than the kind Academician who kept open for children the gardens of the Louvre. Of other modern *Märchen*, the delightful,

inimitable, irresponsible nonsense of *Alice in Wonderland* marks it the foremost. There has been, of course, a vast array of imitative failures: tales where boisterousness does duty for wit, and cheap sentiment for tenderness, and preaching for that half-conscious moral motive, which, as Perrault correctly said, does inform very many of the true primeval *Märchen*. As an inveterate reader of good fairy tales, I find the annual Christmas harvest of them, in general, dull, imitative, —*Alice* is always being imitated,—and, in brief, impossible. Mere vagaries of absurdity, mere floods of floral eloquence, do not make a fairy tale. We can never quite recover the old simplicity, energy, and romance, the qualities which, as Charles Nodier said, make Hop o' my Thumb, Puss in Boots, and Blue Beard 'the Ulysses, the Figaro and the Othello of children.' There may possibly be critics or rather there are certain to be critics, who will deny that the modern and literary fairy tale is a legitimate *genre*, or a proper theme of discussion. The Folklorist is not unnaturally jealous of what, in some degree, looks like Folk-Lore. He apprehends that purely literary stories may 'win their way,' pruned of their excrescences, 'to the fabulous,' and may confuse the speculations of later mycologists. There is very little real danger of this result. I speak, however, not without sympathy; there was a time when I regarded all *contes* except *contes populaires* as frivolous and vexatious. This, however, is the fanaticism of pedantry. The French *conteurs* of the last century, following in the track of Hop o' my Thumb, made and narrated many pleasing discoveries, if they also wrote much that was feeble and is faded. To admit this is but common fairness; literary fairy tales may legitimately amuse both old and young, though 'it needs heaven-sent moments for this skill.' The *conteurs*, like every one who does not always stretch the bow of Apollo till it breaks, had, of course, their severe censors. To listen to some persons, one might think that gaiety was a crime. You scribble light verses, and you are solemnly told that this is not high poetry, told it by worthy creatures whose rhymes could be uncommonly elevated, if mere owl-like solemnity could make poetry and secure elevation. You make a fairy tale, and you are told that the incidents border on the impossible, that analysis of character, and the discussion of grave social and theological problems are conspicuously absent. The old *conteurs* were met by those ponderous objections. Madame d'Aulnoy, in *Ponce de Léon*, makes one of her characters defend the literary *Märchen* in its place. 'I am persuaded that, in spite of serious critics, there is an art in the simplicity of the stories, and I have known persons of taste who sometimes found in them an hour's amusement.... He would be ridiculous who wanted to hear and read nothing but such legends, and he who should write them in a pompous and inflated style, would rob them of their proper character, but I am persuaded that, after some serious occupation, *l'on peut badiner avec.*' 'I hold,' said Melanie, 'that such stories should be neither trivial nor bombastic, that they should hold a middle course, rather gay than serious, not without a shade of moral, above all, they should be offered as trifles, which the listener alone has a right to put his price upon.'

This is very just criticism of literary fairy tales, made in an age when we read of a professional *faiseur des contes des fées vieux et modernes*.

Little Johannes is very modern, and, as Juana says in *Ponce de Léon*:

'Vous y mettez le prix qu'il vous plaira, mais je ne peux m'empêcher de dire que celui qui le compose est capable de choses plus importantes, quand il veut s'en donner la peine.'

ANDREW LANG.

- [1] Part of what follows I have already stated in a reprint of *Perrault's Popular Tales*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1888.
- [2] In forty-one volumes, Paris, 1785-89.
- [3] There are complete English translations of the eighteenth century. Many of the stories have been retold by Miss M. Wright, in the *Red and Blue Fairy Books*.
- [4] I am unacquainted with the date of composition of this story about a Ring more potent than that of Gyges. (It is printed in the second volume of *Dialogues des Morts* Paris, 1718).
- [5] From one of these tales by Caylus the author, who but recently made their acquaintance, finds that he has unconsciously plagiarised an adventure of Prince Prigio's.

I

I will tell you something about little Johannes. My tale has much in it of a fairy story; but it nevertheless all really happened. As soon as you do not believe it you need read no farther, as it was not written for you. Also you must never mention the matter to little Johannes if you should chance to meet him, for that would vex him, and I should get into trouble for having told you all about it.

Johannes lived in an old house with a large garden. It was difficult to find one's way about there, for in the house there were many dark doorways and staircases, and cupboards, and lumber-lofts, and all about the garden there were sheds and hen-houses. It was a whole world to Johannes. He could make long journeys there, and he gave names to all he discovered. He had named the rooms in the house from the animal world; the caterpillar-loft, because he kept caterpillars there; the hen-room, because he had once found a hen there. It had not come in of itself; but Johannes' mother had set it there to hatch eggs. In the garden he chose names from plants, preferring those of such products as he thought most interesting. Thus he had Raspberry Hill, Cherry-tree Wood, and Strawberry Hollow. Quite at the end of the garden was a place he had called Paradise, and that, of course, was lovely. There was a large pool, a lake where white water-lilies floated

and the reeds held long whispered conversations with the wind. On the farther side of it there were the dunes or sand-hills. Paradise itself was a little grassy meadow on the bank, shut in by bushes, among which the hemlock grew tall. Here Johannes would sometimes lie in the thick grass, looking between the swaying reeds at the tops of the sand-hills across the water. On warm summer evenings he was always to be found there, and would lie for hours, gazing up, without ever wearying of it. He would think of the depths of the still, clear water in front of him—how pleasant it must be there among the water-plants, in that strange twilight; and then again of the distant, gorgeously coloured clouds which swept across the sand-downs—what could be behind them? How splendid it would be to be able to fly over to them! Just as the sun disappeared, the clouds gathered round an opening so that it looked like the entrance to a grotto, and in the depths of the cavern gleamed a soft, red glow. That was what Johannes longed to reach. 'If I could but fly there!' thought he to himself. 'What can there be beyond? If I could only once, just for once, get there!'

But even while he was wishing it the cavern fell asunder in rolling dark clouds before he could get any nearer. And then it grew cold and damp by the pool, and he had to go back to his dark little bedroom in the old house.

He did not live all alone there; he had his father, who took good care of him, his dog Presto and the cat Simon. Of course he loved his father best: but he did not love Presto and Simon so very much less, as a grown-up man would have done. He told Presto many more secrets than he ever told his father, and he held Simon in the greatest respect. And no wonder! Simon was a very big cat with a shining black coat and a bushy tail. It was easy to see that he was perfectly convinced of his own importance and wisdom. He was always solemn and dignified, even when he condescended to play with a rolling cork or to gnaw a stale herring's head behind a tree. As he watched Presto's flighty behaviour he would contemptuously blink his green eyes and think: 'Well, well, dogs know no better!'

Now you may understand what respect Johannes had for him. But he was on much more familiar terms with little brown Presto. He was not handsome nor dignified, but a particularly good-natured and clever little dog, who never went two yards from Johannes' side, and sat patiently listening to all his master told him. I need not tell you how dearly Johannes loved Presto. But he had room in his heart for other things as well. Do you think it strange that his dark bedroom with the tiny window-panes filled a large place there? He loved the curtains with the large-flowered pattern in which he could see faces, and which he had studied so long when he lay awake in the mornings or when he was sick; he loved the one picture which hung there, in which stiff figures were represented in a yet stiffer garden, walking by the side of a tranquil pond where fountains were spouting as high as the clouds, and white swans were swimming. But most of all he loved the hanging clock. He pulled up the weights every day with solemn care, and regarded it as an indispensable civility to look up at it whenever it struck. This of course could only be done as long as Johannes remained awake. If by some neglect the clock ran down Johannes felt quite guilty, and begged its pardon a dozen times over. You would have laughed, no doubt, if you had heard him talking to his room. But perhaps you sometimes talk to yourself; that does not seem to you altogether ridiculous; and Johannes was perfectly convinced that his hearers had quite understood him, and he required no answer. Still he secretly thought that he might perhaps have a reply from the clock or the curtains.

Johannes had schoolmates, but they were not exactly friends. He played with them, and plotted tricks with them in school, and robber-games out of school; still he never felt quite at home but when he was alone with Presto. Then he never wanted any boys, and was perfectly at his ease and safe.

His father was a wise, grave man, who sometimes took Johannes with him for long walks through the woods and over the sand-hills; but then he spoke little, and Johannes ran a few steps behind, talking to the flowers he saw, and the old trees which had always to stay in the same place, stroking them gently with his little hand on the rough bark. And the friendly giants rustled their thanks.

Sometimes his father traced letters in the sand as they went along, one by one, and Johannes spelt the words they made: and sometimes his father would stop and tell Johannes the name of some plant or animal.

And now and then Johannes would ask about what he saw, and heard many strange things. Indeed, he often asked very silly questions: Why the world was just as it was, and why the plants and animals must die, and whether miracles could ever happen. But Johannes' father was a wise man, and did not tell him all he knew; and this was better for Johannes.

At night before he went to sleep Johannes always said a long prayer. His nurse had taught him this. He prayed for his father and for Presto. Simon did not need it, he thought. He had a long prayer for himself too, and almost always ended with the wish that just for once a miracle might happen. And when he had said *Amen* he would look curiously round the half-dark room at the figures in the picture, which looked stranger than ever in the dim twilight, at the door-handle and the clock, wondering how the miracle would begin. But the clock always ticked in its own old fashion, and the door-knob did not stir, and it grew darker and darker, and Johannes fell asleep without any miracle having happened.

But it would happen some day; of that he was sure.

II

It was a warm evening, and the pool lay perfectly still. The sun, red and tired with its day's work, seemed to pause for a moment on the edge of the world, before going down. Its glowing face was reflected, almost perfect, in the glassy water. The leaves of the beech-tree which overhung the lake took advantage of the stillness to gaze at themselves meditatively in the mirror. The solitary heron, standing on one leg among the broad leaves of the water-lilies, forgot that he had come out to catch frogs, and looked down his long nose, lost in thought.

Then Johannes came to the meadow to look into the cloud-cavern. Splash, dash! the frogs went plump off the bank. The mirror was rippled, the reflection of the sun was broken up into broad bands, and the beech-leaves rustled indignantly, for they were not yet tired of looking at themselves.

A little old boat lay tied up to the bare roots of the beech-tree. Johannes was strictly forbidden ever to get into it. Oh! how strong was the temptation this evening! The clouds were parting into a grand gateway, through which the sun would sink to rest. Shining ranks of small clouds gathered on each side like life-guards in golden armour. The pool glowed back at them, and red rays flashed like arrows between the water-reeds.

Johannes very slowly untied the rope that moored the boat to the beech-root. Oh, to float out there in the midst of that glory! Presto had already jumped into the boat; and before his master knew what he was doing, the reeds had pushed it out, and they were drifting away together towards the setting sun.

Johannes lay in the bows staring into the heart of the cavern of light. 'Wings!' thought he. 'Oh, for wings now, and I should be there!'

The sun was gone. The clouds were of fire. The sky in the east was deep blue. A row of willows grew on the bank. Their tiny silvery leaves stood motionless in the still air, looking like pale green lace against the dark background.

Hark! What was that? A breath flew over the surface of the pool—like a faint gust of wind making a little groove in the water. It came from the sand-hills, from the cloud-cavern. When Johannes looked round he saw a large blue dragon-fly sitting on the edge of the boat. He had never seen one so large. It settled there, but its wings quivered in a large circle; it seemed to Johannes that the tips of them made a ring of light.

'It must be a glow-worm dragon-fly,' thought he, 'and they are very seldom seen.'

But the circle grew wider and wider, and the wings fluttered so fast that Johannes saw them only as a mist. And by degrees he saw out of the mist two dark eyes gleaming, and a slender, shining figure in a pale blue dress sat in the place where the dragon-fly had been. Its fair hair was crowned with a garland of white convolvulus, and on its shoulders were gauzy insect-wings glittering like a soap-bubble, with a thousand colours.

A shiver of delight tingled through Johannes. Here was a miracle!

'Will you be my friend?' he whispered.

It was an odd way of addressing a stranger, but this was not a common case. And he had a feeling as though he had always known this strange sky-blue creature.

'Yes, Johannes!' he heard, and the voice sounded like the rustling of the sedges in the evening breeze, or the whisper of rain on the leaves in the wood.

'What is your name?' asked Johannes.

'I was born in the bell of a bindweed flower. Call me Windekind.'^[1] And Windekind laughed and looked so kindly into Johannes' eyes that he felt strangely happy.

'To-day is my birthday,' Windekind went on, 'I was born close to this spot. The last rays of the sun and the first beams of the moon are my father and mother. People in Holland call the sun *she*, but that is not right. The sun is my father.'

Johannes made up his mind to call the sun *he* in school to-morrow.

'And look! There comes my mother's round shining face. Good-day, mother! Oh, oh! But she looks very sad!'

He pointed to the eastern horizon. The moon was rising, broad and bright in the grey heavens, behind the lace-work of willow-twigs which stood out black against the silver disc. It really had a melancholy face.

'Come, come, mother. There is nothing wrong. I can trust him.'

The fair being fluttered his gauzy wings gleefully, and tapped Johannes on the cheek with an iris flower he had in his hand.

'She does not like my having come to talk to you. You are the first, you see; but I trust you, Johannes. You must never, never mention my name to any human being, nor speak of me at all. Will you promise me this?'

'Yes, Windekind,' said Johannes. It was still very strange to him. He felt happy beyond words, but feared lest his happiness should vanish. Was he dreaming? By his side, on the seat, lay Presto, sleeping quietly. His dog's warm breath reassured him. The gnats crept over the surface of the water and danced in the sultry air, just as usual. Everything about him was quite clear and real.

It must be true. And he felt all the time that Windekind's trustful look was on him. Then again he heard the sweet low voice:—

'I have often seen you here, Johannes. Do you know where I was? Sometimes I sat on the sand at the bottom of the pool among the thicket of water-plants, and looked up at you when you bent over to drink, or to catch the water-beetles or the efts. But you did not see me. Then again I would hide near you among the reeds. There I was very comfortable; I sleep there most times when it is warm, in an empty reed-warbler's nest. And that is deliciously soft!'

Windekind rocked himself contentedly on the edge of the boat, hitting at the gnats with his flower.

'Now I have come to keep you company. Your life is too dull. We shall be good friends, and I will tell you a great many things—much better things than the schoolmaster teaches you. He knows nothing about them. And if you do not believe me I will let you see and hear for yourself. I will take you with me.'

'Oh, Windekind! Dear Windekind! Can you take me with you out there?' cried Johannes, pointing to the spot where the purple rays of the vanished sun had streamed out of the golden gate of clouds. The glorious structure was already fading into grey mist, but the rosy light still could be seen in the farthest depths.

Windekind looked at the glow, which tinged his delicate face and fair hair, and he gently shook his head.

'Not now, not now. You must not ask too much at once, Johannes. I myself have never been to my father's home.'

'I am always at my father's,' said Johannes. 'No; he is not your father. We are brothers. My father is your father too. But the earth is your mother and so we are very different. And you were born in a house among men, and I in a bindweed flower; and that is much better. But we shall get on very well together nevertheless.'

Then Windekind sprang lightly into the boat, which did not rock under his weight, and kissed Johannes on the forehead.

What a strange change then came over Johannes! Everything about him seemed different. He saw everything better and more clearly, as he fancied. He saw the moon look down with a kinder glance, and he saw that the water-lilies had faces, and gazed at him in pensive amazement. He now suddenly understood why the gnats danced so merrily up and down, and round and round each other, touching the water with the tips of their long legs. He had often wondered and thought about it, but now he understood it at once.

He heard too what the reeds whispered to the trees on the bank, softly complaining that the sun had gone down.

'Oh! Windekind, thank you, this is glorious. Yes; we shall be very happy together!'

'Give me your hand,' said Windekind, spreading his many-coloured wings. Then he drew Johannes in the boat over the pool through the splashing leaves which glistened in the moonlight. Here and there a frog was sitting on a leaf; but he did not now leap into the water when Johannes came by. He only made a little bow and said, 'Quaak.' Johannes politely bowed in return; above all, he would not seem ill-bred.

Then they came to the reeds; they grew so far out into the water that the whole boat was swallowed up in them without touching the shore. But Johannes held fast to his leader and they scrambled to land between the tall stems. It seemed to Johannes that he had grown quite small and light, but perhaps that was fancy. Still, he could not remember that he had ever before been able to climb up a sedge.

'Now, keep your eyes open,' said Windekind, 'and you shall see something pretty.'

They walked on among the tall grass and under dark brushwood which here and there let through a bright narrow streak of moonlight.

'Did you ever hear the crickets of an evening out on the sand-hills, Johannes? It is as if they were giving a concert, isn't it? And you can never find out exactly where the sound comes from. Now they do not sing for pleasure: the voices come from the crickets' school, where hundreds of little crickets are learning their lessons. Be quite still, for we are near them now.'

Shurr! Shurr!

The bushes were thinner here, and when Windekind pushed the grass stems aside with his flower, Johannes saw a beautiful open glade where, among the fine spiky grass of the down, the crickets were busy reading their lessons. A great stout cricket was master and teacher. One after another the pupils skipped up to him with one leap forward and one leap back again. The cricket who missed his leap had to stand on a toadstool.

'Now listen, Johannes,' said Windekind; 'you too may perhaps learn something.'

Johannes could understand what the little crickets said. But it was not at all the same as the master at his school taught him. First came geography: they knew nothing of the quarters of the world. They only knew twenty-six sand-hills at most, and two ponds. No one could know of anything beyond, said the master, and what was told of it was mere idle fancy.

Then came the botany lesson. They were all very sharp at this, and many prizes were given, consisting of the youngest and sweetest blades of grass of various length. But the zoology was

what most puzzled Johannes. The animals were classified as leaping, flying, and creeping. The crickets could leap and fly, and thus stood at the head of all; next to them the frogs. Birds were mentioned with every sign of horror, as most malignant and dangerous creatures. Finally man was spoken of. He was a huge useless and mischievous being, very low in the scale, as he could neither leap nor fly; but happily he was very rarely met with. A very tiny cricket, who had never yet seen a man, had three blows with a reed for including man among the harmless beasts.

Johannes had never heard anything like this before. Then the master called out: 'Silence! Leaping exercise!' And the little crickets immediately ceased conning their lessons, and began to play leap-frog, in the cleverest and nimblest way, the big teacher at their head. It was such a merry sight that Johannes clapped his hands with glee; but at that sound, the whole school vanished in an instant into the sand-hills, and the grass plot was as still as death.

'There, that is your doing, Johannes! You must not behave so roughly. It is easy enough to see that you were born among men.'

'I am so sorry! Twill do my best. But it was so funny!'

'It will be still funnier,' said Windekind.

They crossed the grass plot and went up the down on the other side. Oof! it was hard walking in the heavy sand; but as soon as Johannes held on to the pale-blue robe he flew upwards, lightly and swiftly. Half-way up there was a rabbit-burrow. The rabbit who lived there was lying with his head and forepaws over the edge. The wild roses were still in bloom, and their sweet, delicate fragrance mingled with that of the thyme which grew on the sand-hill.

Johannes had often seen rabbits pop into their holes, and had wondered what the burrows looked like inside, and how they sat there together, and would they not be stifled?

So he was very glad when he heard his companion ask the rabbit whether they might step in.

'So far as I am concerned, and welcome,' said the rabbit. 'But it most unfortunately happens that I have this very evening lent my burrow for a charitable entertainment, and so am not properly master in my own house.'

'Dear, dear! Has some disaster occurred?'

'Oh, yes!' said the rabbit sadly—'a terrible misfortune! It will take us years to get over it. About a dozen jumps from here, a man's house has been built, so big, so big! And its men are come to live there with dogs. Seven members of my family have already perished, and three times as many holes have been robbed. The mouse family and the mole tribe have fared no better. Even the toads have suffered. So now we are giving an entertainment for the benefit of the survivors. Every one does what he can; I have lent my burrow. One must find something to spare for one's fellow-creatures.'

The polite rabbit sighed and passed his long ear over his face with his right forepaw, as though to wipe a tear from his eye. It was his pocket-handkerchief. There was a rustling sound in the grass and a fat, heavy body came shuffling up to the hole.

'Look,' said Windekind, 'here comes daddy toad too, all humped up. Well, how are you getting on, old fellow?'

The toad made no reply. He carefully laid an ear of corn neatly wrapped in a dry leaf close to the entrance, and nimbly climbed over the rabbit's back into the hole.

'May we go in?' said Johannes, who was excessively inquisitive. 'I will give something.'

He remembered that he still had a biscuit in his pocket—a little round biscuit, from Huntley and Palmer's. When he took it out he at once observed how much smaller he had grown. He could scarcely grasp it with both hands, and could not understand how his breeches pocket had still held it.

'That is most rare and precious!' cried the rabbit. 'That is a princely donation!'

And he respectfully made way for them to pass. It was dark in the burrow, and Johannes let Windekind lead the way. Soon they saw a pale-green light approaching them. It was a glow-worm, who obligingly offered to light them.

'It promises to be a delightful evening,' said the glow-worm as they went forward. 'There are a great number of guests. You are elves as it seems to me—are you not?' And the glow-worm glanced doubtfully at Johannes as he spoke.

'You may announce us as elves,' replied Windekind.

'Do you know that your king is of the party?' the glow-worm went on.

'Is Oberon here? Well, I am pleased indeed,' cried Windekind. 'He is a personal friend of mine.'

'Oh!' said the glow-worm. 'I did not know that I had the honour—' and his light almost went out with alarm. 'Yes, his Majesty prefers the outer air as a rule, but he is always to be seen at a beneficent meeting. It will be really a most brilliant affair.'

And so indeed it was. The chief apartment in the rabbit-burrow was beautifully decorated; the floor was patted flat and strewn with scented thyme, and over the entrance a bat hung head downwards. He called out the names of the guests, and at the same time his wings served as curtains—a most economical arrangement. The walls were tastefully lined with dry leaves, cobwebs, and tiny hanging bats. Glowworms innumerable crept between them and over the ceiling, forming a very pretty and twinkling illumination. At the end of this hall stood a throne

made of fragments of decayed wood which gave a light of themselves. That was a very pretty sight.

There were a great many guests. Johannes felt very shy in this crowd of strangers, and clung closely to Windekind. He saw wonderful things there. A mole was talking to a field-mouse of the charming effect of the lighting and decorations. Two fat toads sat together in a corner, shaking their heads and lamenting over the persistent drought. A frog tried to walk round the room arm in arm with a lizard; but this was a failure, for he was embarrassed and excited, and now and then made too long a leap, whereby he somewhat damaged the wall decorations.

On the throne sat Oberon, the Elfin King, surrounded by his little train of elves who looked down on the rest of the company with some contempt. The King himself was full of royal condescension, and conversed in the most friendly way with several of the company. He had just arrived from a journey in the East, and wore a strange garment of brightly coloured flower-petals. 'Such flowers do not grow here,' thought Johannes. On his head he had a dark blue flower-cup which still shed a fresh perfume as though it had but just been plucked. In his hand he carried the stamen of a lotus-flower as a sceptre. All the company were struck with silent admiration of his condescension. He had praised the moonlight over the downs, and had said that the glow-worms here were as beautiful as the fire-flies in the East. He had also glanced with approval at the decorations, and a mole had observed that he had nodded his head very graciously.

'Come along,' said Windekind to Johannes. 'I will present you.' And they made their way to the King's throne.

Oberon opened his arms with joy when he saw Windekind, and embraced him. There was a murmur among the guests, and unfriendly glances from the Elfin court. The two fat toads in the corner muttered something about 'flattery' and 'servility' and 'it would not last'—and nodded significantly to each other.

Windekind talked to Oberon for a long time in an unknown language, and then beckoned to Johannes to come forward. 'Shake hands, Johannes,' said the King. 'Windekind's friends are my friends. So far as I can, I will gladly serve you. I will give you a token of our alliance.'

Oberon took a tiny gold key from the chain he wore about his neck and gave it to Johannes, who received it with great respect and clasped it tightly in his hand.

'That key may bring you luck,' the King went on. 'It opens a golden casket which contains a priceless treasure. But where that is I cannot tell you; you must search for it diligently. If you remain good friends with me, and with Windekind, and are steadfast and true, you may very likely succeed.' The Elfin King nodded his handsome head with hearty kindness, and Johannes thanked him, greatly delighted.

Hereupon three frogs, who sat perched on a little cushion of moist moss, began to sing the prelude to a slow waltz, and the couples stood up. Those who did not dance were requested by a green lizard—who acted as master of the ceremonies and who rushed hither and thither very busily—to move into the corners; to the great indignation of the two toads, who complained that they could not see; and then the dancing began. It was very droll at first. Each one danced after his own fashion and naturally imagined that he did it better than any one else. The mice and frogs leaped as high as they could on their hind legs; an old rat spun round so roughly that all the rest had to keep out of his way; and even a fat slug ventured to take a turn with a mole, but soon gave it up, excusing herself by saying that she had a stitch in her side—the real reason was that she could not do it well.

However, the dance went on very gravely and ceremoniously. Every one regarded it as a matter of conscience, and glanced anxiously at the King to see some token of approval on his countenance. But the King was afraid of causing jealousies, and looked quite unmoved. His suite thought it beneath them to dance with the rest.

Johannes had stood among them quite quietly for a long time; but he saw a little toad waltzing with a tall lizard who sometimes lifted the hapless toad so-high above the ground that she described a semicircle in the air, and his amusement burst out in a hearty laugh. What an excitement it caused! The music ceased. The King looked angrily about him. The master of the ceremonies flew in all haste to implore Johannes to behave less frivolously.

'Dancing is a very serious thing,' said he, 'and certainly no subject for laughter. This is a very distinguished party, where people do not dance for amusement. Every one is doing his best and no one expects to be laughed at. It is extremely rude. Besides, this is a mourning feast, on a very melancholy occasion. You must behave suitably, and not as if you were among men and women.'

Johannes was quite alarmed. On every side he met disapproving looks; his intimacy with the King had already made him some enemies. Windekind led him aside.

'We shall do better to go, Johannes,' he whispered. 'You have spoilt it all. Yes, yes; that comes of having been brought up among men.'

They hastily slipped out under the wings of the porter bat, into the dark passage. The glow-worm in waiting attended them to the door.

'Have you been amused?' he asked. 'Did King Oberon speak to you?'

'Oh, yes; it was a beautiful party,' replied Johannes. 'Must you stay here in the dark passage all the time?'

'It is my own free choice,' said the glow-worm in a tone of bitter melancholy. 'I have given up all such vanities.'

'Come,' said Windekind; 'you do not mean that.'

'Indeed I do. Formerly—formerly—there was a time when I too went to banquets, and danced and cared for such frivolities. But now I am crushed by suffering—now—'

And he was so much overcome that his light went out. Fortunately they were close to the opening, and the rabbit, who heard them coming, stood a little on one side so that the moonlight shone in.

As soon as they were outside with the rabbit, Johannes said—

'Tell us your history, Glow-worm.'

'Alas!' sighed the glow-worm, 'it is simple and sad. It will not amuse you.'

'Tell it, tell it all the same,' they all cried.

'Well—you all know of course, that we glow-worms are very remarkable creatures. Yes, I believe that no one will venture to dispute that we are the most gifted creatures in existence.'

'Pray why? I do not see that!' said the rabbit.

'Can you give light?' asked the glow-worm contemptuously.

'No, certainly not,' the rabbit was forced to admit.

'Well, *we* give light! all of us. And we can let it shine or extinguish it at will. Light is the best of nature's gifts, and to give light is the highest function to which a living creature can attain. Can any one now doubt our pre-eminence? Besides, we, the males, have wings and can fly for miles.'

'That I cannot do,' the rabbit humbly owned.

'For the divine gift of light which we possess, all other creatures look up to us; no bird may attack us. One animal alone, the lowest of them all, seeks us out and carries us off. That is man—the vilest monster in creation!'

At this Johannes looked round at Windekind as though he did not understand the meaning of it. But Windekind smiled and nodded to him to say nothing.

'Once I flew gaily about the world like a bright will-o'-the-wisp among the dark bushes. And in a lonely damp meadow, on the bank of a stream, dwelt she whose existence was inseparably bound up with my happiness. She glittered in exquisite emerald green light as she crept among the grass stems, and she entirely possessed my youthful heart. I fluttered round her and did my utmost to attract her attention by changing my light. I gladly perceived that she noticed my salutation and eclipsed her own light. Tremulous with devotion, I was about to fold my wings and drop in ecstasy at the side of my radiant and adored one, when a tremendous noise filled the air. Dark figures were approaching: they were men. I fled in terror. They rushed after me and struck at me with great black tilings, but my wings were swifter than their clumsy legs.—When I returned—'

Here the narrator's voice failed him. It was only after a pause of silent meditation, while his three hearers reverently kept silence, that he went on: 'You have guessed the rest. My gentle bride, the brightest and most sparkling of her kind, had disappeared, carried away by cruel men. The peaceful, moist grass plot was trodden down, and her favourite place by the stream was dark and desolate. I was alone in the world.'

Here the tender-hearted rabbit again used his ear to wipe a tear from his eyes.

'From that night I am an altered creature. I have a horror of all vain amusements. I think only of her whom I have lost, and of the time when I may see her again.'

'What, have you still a hope?' asked the rabbit in surprise.

'I have more than hope; I have assurance. Up there I shall see my beloved once more.'

'But—' the rabbit put in.

'Rab,' said the glow-worm solemnly, 'I can understand the doubts of those who must feel their way in the dark. But to those who can see with their own eyes!—then all doubt is to me incomprehensible. There!' cried the glow-worm, looking reverently up at the twinkling, starry sky, 'I see them there! All my ancestors, all my friends,—and she among them—they shine up there in still greater radiance than here on earth. Ah! when shall I be released from this lower life and fly to her who twinkles at me so tenderly. When, ah! when?'

The glow-worm turned away with a sigh, and crept back into the dark again.

'Poor fellow!' said the rabbit, 'I hope he may be right.'

'I hope so too,' added Johannes.

'I have my fears,' said Windekind. 'But it was very interesting.'

'Dear Windekind,' Johannes began, 'I am very tired and sleepy.'

'Come close to me, then, and I will cover you with my cloak.'

Windekind took off his blue mantle and spread it over Johannes and himself. So they lay down together in the sweet moss on the down, their arms round each other's necks.

'Your heads lie rather low,' cried the rabbit. 'Will you rest them against me?' And so they did.

'Good-night, mother!' said Windekind to the Moon.

And Johannes shut his hand tight on the little golden key, laid his head on the downy fur of the good-natured rabbit, and slept soundly.

[1] The child of the bindweed.

III

'Well, where is he, Presto? Where is your little master then?' How alarming to wake in the boat among the reeds—quite alone—the master vanished entirely! this is something indeed to be frightened at.

And now run about, hunting on all sides with timid little whinings, poor Presto! How could you sleep so soundly as not to notice when your master left the boat? Generally you are wont to wake if only he moves a little. Here—you can see here where your master landed; but now you are on land the track is very much confused. All your busy snuffing is in vain! What a misfortune! The little master gone, quite lost! Seek, Presto, seek him then!

'Look! There, against that low mound just before you—Is there not a little dark figure lying? Look at it closely!'

For a moment the dog stood motionless, looking eagerly into the distance. Then he suddenly stretched out his head and flew as fast as his four slender legs could carry him to the dark object on the mound. And when he found that it really was the little master he had so sorely missed, all his powers were too feeble to express his joy and thankfulness. He wagged his tail, his whole body wriggled with glee, he leaped, barked, yelped, and laid his cold nose against his re-found friend, licking and sniffing all over his face.

'Down, Presto! Go to your basket!' cried Johannes, but half awake. How stupid of master! There was no basket to be seen, look where he might.

Slowly, slowly, light began to dawn on the little sleeper's mind. Presto's sniffing!—he was used to that, every morning. Faint images still floated before his soul, dream-pictures of elves and moonlight, like morning mists over a landscape of sand-hills. He feared that the cold breath of day would waft them away. 'Keep your eyes shut,' said he to himself, 'or you will see the clock against the wall where it always hangs!'

But there was something strange about his bed. He felt that he had no bed-clothes over him. Gently and warily he opened his eyes, just a little way.

Bright daylight. Blue sky. Clouds.

Then Johannes opened his eyes very wide and said: 'Then it was true?'

Yes. He was lying among the sand-hills. The cheerful sunshine warmed him; he breathed the fresh morning air; a filmy mist hung over the woods beyond. He saw the tall beech-tree by the pool, and the roof of his own home rising above the shrubbery. Bees and beetles were buzzing around him, overhead a lark was singing; in the distance he could hear dogs barking and the hum of the neighbouring town. It was all real, beyond a doubt.

What then had he dreamed, and what was true? Where was Windekind? And the rabbit? He saw nothing of either. Only Presto, who sat as close to him as possible and looked at him expectantly.

'Can I have been walking in my sleep?' Johannes murmured softly to himself.

By his side there was a rabbit's burrow; but there were so many in the down. He sat up to see more plainly. What was this in his tightly clasped fingers? A glow flashed through him from head to foot as he opened his hand. In it lay a bright little gold key.

For a few moments he sat silent.

'Presto,' said he then, and the tears almost came into his eyes, 'Presto. Then it *was* true!'

Presto sprang up, and tried by barking to make his master understand that he was hungry and wanted to go home.

Home? To be sure. Johannes had not thought of that, and he did not particularly care to go. However, he presently heard his name called by loud voices. Then he began to understand that his proceedings would certainly not be regarded as right and satisfactory, and that far from kindly words awaited him on his return.

For a moment he could hardly be sure whether his tears of joy had not, in vexation, turned to tears of fear and contrition; but then he remembered Windekind, who was now his friend, his friend and ally; and the Elfin King's gift; and the splendid, indisputable reality of all that had happened;—and so he made his way homeward calmly, and prepared for whatever might betide.

It fell out as he had anticipated. But he had not imagined that the distress and alarm of the house-hold could be so serious a matter. He must solemnly promise never again to be so naughty and heedless. This quite restored his presence of mind.

'That I cannot promise,' he said very resolutely.

They looked at him in amazement. He was questioned, coaxed, threatened. But he thought of Windekind and was firm. What did he care for punishment so long as he had Windekind for his friend—and what would he not endure for Windekind's sake? He clutched the little key tightly to his breast and shut his mouth firmly, answering every question with a shrug of his shoulders.

'I cannot promise,' was all he replied.

But his father said: 'Leave him in peace; he is quite in earnest about it. Something strange must have happened to him. He will tell us all about it some day.'

Johannes smiled, ate his breakfast in silence, and crept up to his little room. There he nipped off a bit of the blind-cord, slipped it through his precious little key and hung it round his neck next to his breast. Then he very contentedly went to school.

Things went ill with him at school that day. He knew none of his lessons and paid no attention at all. His thoughts were constantly wandering to the pool, and the wonderful things which had happened last evening. He could scarcely believe that a friend of the fairy king's could be expected and required to do sums and conjugate verbs. But it had all been true, and no one there knew anything about it, or would believe it or understand it; not even the master, however cross he might be, calling Johannes an idle little boy in a tone of great contempt. He took the bad marks he had earned with a light heart, and did the task set him as a punishment for his inattention.

'You, none of you understand anything about it. You may scold me as much as you please. I am Windekind's friend, and Windekind is worth more to me than all of you put together. Ay, with the master into the bargain!'

This was not respectful of Johannes. But his estimation of his fellow-creatures had not been raised by all the evil he had heard said of them the evening before.

But, as is often the case, he was not yet wise enough to use his wisdom wisely, or, better still, to keep it to himself.

When the master went on to say that man alone of all creatures was endowed by God with speech, and appointed lord over all other animals, Johannes began to laugh. This cost him a bad mark and serious reproof. And when his next neighbour read the following sentence out of an exercise-book: 'The age of my wilful aunt is great, but not so great as that of the Sun'—parsing 'the Sun' correctly as feminine, Johannes shouted out loudly, correcting him: 'Masculine, masculine!'

Every one laughed excepting the master, who was amazed at such utter stupidity as he thought it, and he desired Johannes to remain in school and write out a hundred times: 'The age of my wilful aunt is great, but not so great as that of the Sun (feminine), and greater still is my arrogant stupidity.'

His school-fellows had departed, and Johannes sat alone writing, in the great empty school-room. The sun shone in brightly, making the dust-motes glitter in its beams, and painting the wall with patches of light which crept round as time went on. The master, too, was gone, slamming the door behind him. Johannes had just got to the fifty-second 'wilful aunt' when a tiny, brisk mouse, with black, beady little eyes and erect ears, came out of the farthest corner of the room and ran noiselessly along by the wall. Johannes kept as still as death, not to scare the pretty little thing; but it was not shy and came close to where he was sitting. It looked sharply about for a minute or two, with its small, bright eyes; then with one spring leaped on to the bench, and with a second on to the desk on which Johannes was writing.

'Well done!' said he half to himself, 'you are a very bold little mouse.'

'I ought to know whom I should be afraid of,' said a wee-wee voice, and the mouse showed his little white teeth as if he were laughing.

Johannes was by this time quite used to marvels; still, this made him open his eyes very wide. Here, in school, in the middle of the day—it was incredible.

'You need not be afraid of me,' said he, very gently for fear of frightening the mouse. 'Did Windekind send you?'

'I am sent to tell you that the master was quite right, and that you thoroughly deserved your extra task.'

'But it was Windekind who told me that the sun was masculine. He said he was his father.'

'Yes; but no one else need know it. What have men to do with that? You must never discuss such delicate matters with men; they are too gross to understand them. Man is an astonishingly perverse and stupid creature that only cares to catch or kill whatever comes within his reach. Of that we mice have ample experience.'

'But why then, little mouse, do you live among men? Why do you not run away to the woods?'

'Oh, that we cannot do now. We are too much accustomed to town living. And so long as we are prudent, and always take care to avoid their traps and their heavy feet, we get on very well among men. Fortunately we are very nimble. The worst of it is, that man ekes out his own slowness by an alliance with the cat; that is a great grievance. But in the woods there are owls and hawks, and we should all be starved. Now, Johannes, mind my advice—here comes the master.'

'Mouse, mouse; do not go away. Ask Windekind what I am to do with my little key. I have tied it

round my neck, next my skin. But on Saturday I am tubbed, and I am so afraid that it will be found. Tell me, where can I hide it?'

'Underground, always underground, that is always safest. Shall I keep it for you?'

'No, not here in school.'

'Then bury it out in the sand-hills. I will tell my cousin the field-mouse that he must take care of it.'

'Thank you, little mouse.'

Tramp, tramp! In came the master. While Johannes was dipping his pen the mouse had vanished. The master, who wanted to go home, let Johannes off the other forty-eight lines.

For two days Johannes lived in constant dread. He was kept strictly within sight, and had no opportunity of slipping off to the sand-hills. It was already Friday, and still the precious key was about his neck. The following evening he would inevitably be stripped; the key would be discovered and taken from him—his blood turned cold at the thought. He dared not hide it in the house or garden—no place seemed to him safe enough.

Friday afternoon, and dusk was creeping down! Johannes sat at his bedroom window, gazing with longing at the distance, over the green shrubs in the garden to the downs beyond.

'Windekind, Windekind, help me!' he whispered anxiously.

He heard a soft rustling of wings close at hand, he smelt the scent of lilies of the valley, and suddenly heard the sweet, well-known voice. Windekind sat by him on the window-sill, waving the bells of a lily of the valley on their slender stems.

'Here you are at last!' cried Johannes; 'I have longed for you so much!'

'Come with me, Johannes, we will bury your little key.'

'I cannot,' said Johannes sadly.

But Windekind took him by the hand and he felt himself wafted through the still evening air, as light as the wind-blown down of a dandelion.

'Windekind,' said Johannes, as they floated on, 'I love you so dearly. I believe I would give all the people in the world for you, and Presto into the bargain.'

'And Simon?'

'Oh, Simon does not care whether I love him or not. I believe he thinks it too childish. Simon loves no one but the fish-woman, and that only when he is hungry. Do you think that Simon is a common cat, Windekind?'

'No, formerly he was a man.'

Whrrr—bang! There went a fat cockchafer buzzing against Johannes.

'Can you not look where you are going?' grumbled the cockchafer, 'those Elves fly abroad as though the whole air were theirs by right. That is always the way with idlers who go flitting about for pleasure; those who, like me, are about their business, seeking their food and eating as hard as they can, are pushed out of their road.' And he flew off, scolding loudly.

'Does he think the worse of us because we do not eat?' asked Johannes.

'Yes, that is the way of cockchafers. According to them, the highest duty is to eat a great deal. Shall I tell you the history of a young cockchafer?'

'Ay, do,' said Johannes.

'There was a pretty young cockchafer who had just crept out of the earth. That was a great surprise. For a whole year he had sat waiting in the dark earth, watching for the first warm summer evening. And when he put his head out of the clod, all the greenery, and the waving grass, and the singing-birds quite bewildered him. He had no idea what to be about. He touched the blades of grass with his feelers, spreading them out in a fan. Then he observed that he was a male cockchafer, very handsome in his way, with shining black legs, a large, fat body, and a breastplate that shone like a mirror. As luck would have it, he at once saw, not far off, another cockchafer, not indeed so handsome as himself, but who had come out the day before and who was quite old. Very modestly, being still so young, he crept towards the other.

'What do you want, my friend?' said the second cockchafer rather haughtily, seeing that the other was a youngster, 'do you wish to ask me the way?'

'No, I am obliged to you,' said the younger one civilly, 'but I do not know what I ought to be doing. What is there for cockchafers to do?'

'Dear me,' said the other, 'do not you know that much? Well, I cannot blame you, for I was young myself once. Listen, then, and I will tell you. The principal thing in a cockchafer's life is to eat. Not far from this is a delicious lime-walk which was placed there for us, and it is our duty to eat there as diligently as we can.'

'Who put the lime-walk there?' asked the younger beetle.

'Well, a great being who means very kindly to us. He comes down the Avenue every morning, and those who have eaten most he takes away to a splendid house where a beautiful light shines, and where chafers are all happy together. Those, on the other hand, who, instead of eating, spend the night in flying about are caught by the Bat.'

'What is that?' asked the young one.

'A fearful monster with sharp teeth who comes flying down on us all on a sudden and eats us up with a horrible crunch.

As the chafer spoke they heard a shrill squeak overhead which chilled them to the very marrow.

'Hark! There he is!' cried the elder, 'beware of him, my young friend, and be thankful that I have given you timely warning. You have the whole night before you. Make good use of your time. The less you eat, the greater the risk of the bat's seizing you. And none but those who choose a serious vocation in life ever go to the house where the beautiful light is. Mark that; a serious vocation.'

Then the chafer, who was by a whole day the elder, disappeared among the blades of grass, leaving the other greatly impressed.

'Do you know what a vocation is, Johannes? No? Well, the young chafer did not know. It had something to do with eating—he understood that. But how was he to find the lime-walk? Close at hand stood a slender but stalwart grass-stem, waving softly in the evening air. This he firmly clutched with his six crooked legs. It seemed a long journey up to the top, and very steep. But the cockchafer was determined to reach it. 'This is a vocation!' he thought to himself, and began to climb with much toil. He went but slowly and often slipped back; but he got on, and when at last he found himself on the slender tip, and rocked with its swaying, he felt triumphant and happy. What a view he had from thence! It seemed to him that he could see the whole world. How blissful it was to be surrounded by air on all sides! He eagerly breathed his fill. What a wonderful feeling had come over him! Now he craved to go higher!'

'In his rapture he raised his wing-cases and quivered his gauzy wings. Higher! and yet higher! His wings fluttered, his legs released the grass-stem, and then—oh joy! Whoo-oo! He was flying—freely and gladly, in the still, warm evening air!'

'And then?' said Johannes.

'The end is not happy. I will tell it you some day later.'

They were hovering over the pool. A pair of white butterflies fluttered to meet them.

'Whither are you travelling, elves?' they asked.

'To the large wild rose-tree which blooms by yonder mound.'

'We will go with you; we will go too!'

The rose-bush was already in sight in the distance, with its abundance of pale-yellow sheeny blossoms. The buds were red and the open flowers were dashed with red, as if they remembered the time when they were still buds.

The wild down-rose bloomed in peaceful solitude, and filled the air with its wonderfully sweet odours. They are so fine that the down-elves live on nothing else. The butterflies fluttered about and kissed flower after flower.

'We have come to place a treasure in your charge,' cried Windekind. 'Will you keep it safe for us?'

'Why not—why not?' whispered the rose. 'It is no pain to me to keep awake—and I have no thought of going away unless I am dragged away. And I have sharp thorns.'

Then came the field-mouse—the cousin of the school-mouse—and burrowed quite under the roots of the rose-tree. And there he buried the little key.

'When you want it again you must call me; for you must on no account hurt the rose.'

The rose twined its thorny arms thickly over the entrance and took a solemn oath to guard it faithfully. The butterflies were witnesses.

Next morning Johannes awoke in his own little bed, with Presto, and the clock against the wall. The cord with the key was gone from round his neck.

IV

'Children! children! A summer like this is a terrible infliction!' sighed one of three large stoves which stood side by side to bewail their fate in a garret of the old house. 'For weeks I have not seen one living soul or heard one rational remark. And always that hollow within! It is fearful!'

'I am full of spiders' webs,' said the second. 'And that would never happen in the winter.'

'And I am so dry and dusty that I shall be quite ashamed when, as winter comes on, the Black Man appears again, as the poet says.'

This piece of learning the third stove had of course picked up from Johannes, who had repeated some verses last winter, standing before the hearth.

'You must not speak so disrespectfully of the smith,' said the first stove, who was the eldest. 'It annoys me.'

A few shovels and tongs which lay on the floor, wrapped in paper to preserve them from rust, also expressed their opinion of this frivolous mode of speech.

But suddenly they were all silent, for the shutter in the roof was raised; a beam of light shone in on the gloomy place, and the whole party lapsed into silence under their dust and confusion.

It was Johannes who had come to disturb their conversation. This loft was at all times a delightful spot to him, and now, after the strange adventures of the last few days, he often came here. Here he found peace and solitude. There was a window, too, closed by a shutter, which looked out towards the sand-hills. It was a great delight to open the shutter suddenly, and, after the mysterious twilight of the garret, to see all at once the sunlit landscape shut in by the fair, rolling *dimes*.

It was three weeks since that Friday evening, and Johannes had seen nothing of his friend since. The key was gone, and there was nothing now to assure him that he had not dreamed it all. Often, indeed, he could not conquer a fear that it was all nothing but fancy. He grew very silent, and his father was alarmed, for he observed that since that night out of doors Johannes had certainly had something the matter with him. But Johannes was only pining for Windekind.

'Can he be less fond of me than I of him?' he murmured, as he stood at the garret window and looked out over the green and flowery garden. 'Why is it that he never comes near me now? If I could—but perhaps he has other friends, and perhaps he loves them more than me. I have no other friend, not one. I love no one but him! I love him so much—oh so much!'

Then, against the deep blue sky he saw a flight of six white doves, who wheeled, flapping their wings, above the roof over his head. It seemed as though they were moved by one single impulse, so quickly did they veer and turn all together, as if to enjoy to the utmost the sea of sunshine and summer air in which they were flying.

Suddenly they swept down towards Johannes' window in the roof, and settled with much flapping and fussing on the water-pipe, where they pattered to and fro with endless cooings. One of them had a red feather in his wing. He plucked and pulled at it till he had pulled it out, and then he flew to Johannes and gave it to him.

Hardly had Johannes taken it in his hand when he felt that he was as light and swift as one of the doves. He stretched out his arms, the doves flew up, and Johannes found himself in their midst, in the spacious free air and glorious sunshine. There was nothing around him but the pure blue, and the bright shimmer of fluttering white wings.

They flew across the great garden, towards the wood, where the thick tree-tops waved in the distance like the swell of a green sea. Johannes looked down and saw his father through the open window, sitting in the house-place,—Simon was lying in the window seat with his crossed forepaws, basking in the sun.

'I wonder if they see me!' thought he; but he dared not call out to them.

Presto was trotting about the garden walks, sniffing at every shrub and behind every wall, and scratching against the door of every shed or greenhouse to find his master.

'Presto, Presto!' cried Johannes. The dog looked up and began to wag his tail and yelp most dolefully.

'I am coming back, Presto! only wait,' cried Johannes, but he was too far away.

They soared over the wood, and the rooks flew cawing out of the top branches where they had built their nests. It was high summer, and the scent of the blossoming limes came up in steamy gusts from the green wood.

In an empty nest, at the top of a tall lime-tree, sat Windekind, with his wreath of bindweed. He nodded to Johannes.

'There you are! that is good,' said he. 'I sent for you; now we can remain together for a long time—if you like.'

'I like it very much,' said Johannes.

Then he thanked the friendly doves who had brought him hither, and went down with Windekind into the woods. There it was cool and shady. The oriole piped his tune, almost always the same, but still a little different.

'Poor bird!' said Windekind. 'He was once a bird of Paradise. That you still may see by his strange yellow feathers; but he was transformed and turned out of Paradise. There is a word which can restore him to his former splendid plumage, and open Paradise to him once more; but he has forgotten the word; and now, day after day, he tries to find his way back there. He says something like the word, but it is not quite right.'

Numberless insects glittered like dancing crystals in the sun's rays where they pierced between the thick leaves. When they listened sharply they could hear a humming, like a great concert on one string, filling the whole wood. This was the song of the sunbeams.

The ground was covered with deep dark-green moss, and Johannes had again grown so tiny that it appeared to him like another wood on the ground, beneath the greater wood. What elegant little stems! and how closely they grew! It was difficult to make a way between them, and the moss forest seemed terribly large.

Presently they crossed an ants' track. Hundreds of ants were hurrying up and down, some dragging chips of wood or little blades of grass in their jaws. There was such a bustle that Johannes was almost bewildered.

It was a long time before one of the ants would spare them a word. They were all too busy. At last

they found an old ant who was set to watch the plant-lice from which the ants get honeydew. As his herd was a very quiet one he could very well give a little time to the strangers, and let them see the great nest. It was situated at the foot of an old tree-trunk, and was very large, with hundreds of passages and cells. The plant-louse herd led the way, and conducted the visitors into every part of it, even into the nurseries where the young larvæ were creeping out of their cocoons. Johannes was amazed and delighted.

The old ant told them that every one was very busy by reason of the campaign which was immediately at hand. Another colony of ants, dwelling not far off, was to be attacked by a strong force, their nest destroyed and the larvæ carried off or killed; and as all the strength at their command must be employed, all the most necessary tasks must be got through beforehand.

'What is the campaign about?' said Johannes. 'I do not like fighting.'

'Nay, nay!' replied the herdsman. 'It is a very grand and praiseworthy war. You must remember that it is the soldier-ants we are going to attack; we shall exterminate the race, and that is a very good work.'

'Then you are not soldier-ants?'

'Certainly not. What are you thinking about? We are the peace-loving ants.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Do not you know? Well, I will explain. Once upon a time all ants were continually fighting, not a day passed without some great battle. Then there came a good, wise ant, who thought that he should save much sorrow if he could persuade them all to agree among themselves to fight no more. But when he said so every one thought him very odd, and for that reason they proceeded to bite him in pieces. Still, after this, other ants came who said the same thing, and they too were bitten to pieces. But at last so many were of this opinion that biting them to pieces was too hard work for the others. So then they called themselves the Peaceful Ants, and they did everything which their first teacher had done, and those who opposed them they, in their turn, bit in pieces. In this way almost all the ants at the present time have become Peaceful Ants, and the fragments of the first Peaceful Ant are carefully and reverently preserved. We have his head—the genuine head. We have devastated and annihilated twelve other colonies who pretended to have the True Head. Now there are but four who dare to do so. They call themselves Peaceful Ants, but in fact they are Fighting Ants by nature—but we have the True Head, and the Peaceful Ant had but one head. Now we are going to-morrow to destroy the thirteenth colony. So you see it is a good work.'

'Yes, yes,' said Johannes. 'It is very strange!'

He was in fact a little uneasy, and felt happier when, after thanking the herd-keeper, they had taken their leave, and were sitting far from the Ant colony, rocked on the top of a tall grass-stem, under the shade of a graceful fern.

'Hooh!' sighed Johannes, 'that was a bloodthirsty and stupid tribe!'

Windekind laughed, and swung up and down on the grass haulm.

'Oh!' said he, 'you must not call them stupid. Men go to the ants to get wisdom.'

Then Windekind showed Johannes all the wonders of the wood; they flew up to visit the birds in the tree-tops and in the thick shrubs, went down into the moles' clever dwellings, and saw the bees' nest in the old hollow tree.

At last they came out on an open place surrounded by brushwood. Honeysuckle grew there in great abundance. Its luxuriant trails climbed over everything, and the scented flowers peeped from among the greenery. A swarm of tomtits hopped and fluttered among the leaves with a great deal of twittering and chirping.

'Let us stay here a little while,' said Johannes; 'this is splendid.'

'Very well,' said Windekind. 'And you shall see something very droll.'

There were blue-bells in the grass. Johannes sat down by one of them and began to talk with the bees and the butterflies. They were friends of the blue-bells', so the conversation went on at a great rate.

What was that? A huge shadow came across the grass, and something like a white cloud fell down on the blue-bell—Johannes had scarcely time to get away,—he flew to Windekind who was sitting high up in a honeysuckle flower. Then he saw that the white cloud was a pocket-handkerchief, and bump! A sturdy damsel sat down on the handkerchief and on the poor blue-bell which was under it.

He had not time to bewail it before the sound of voices and the cracking of branches filled the glade in the forest. A crowd of men and women appeared.

'Now we shall have something to laugh at,' said Windekind.

The party came on, the ladies with umbrellas in their hands, the men with tall chimney-pot hats, and almost all in black, completely black. In the green sunny wood they looked like great, ugly ink-spots on a beautiful picture. The brushwood was broken down, flowers trodden underfoot; many white handkerchiefs were spread, and the yielding grass and patient moss sighed as they were crushed under the weight they had to bear, fearing much that they might never recover from the blow. The smoke of cigars curled among the honeysuckle wreaths, and enviously supplanted the delicate odour of their blossoms. Sharp voices scared the gleeful tomtits, who, with terrified and indignant piping, took refuge in the nearest trees.

One man rose and went to stand on a little mound. He had long light hair, and a pale face. He said something, and then all the men and women opened their mouths very wide and began to sing so loud, that the rooks flew cawing out of their high nests, and the inquisitive little rabbits, who had come from the sand-hills to see what was going on, ran off in alarm, and were still running fully a quarter of an hour after they were safe at home again in the dunes.

Windekind laughed and fanned away the cigar-smoke with a fern leaf; but there were tears in Johannes' eyes, though not from the tobacco.

'Windekind,' said he, 'I want to go. This is all so ugly and so rude.'

'No, no, we must stay. You will laugh; it will be more amusing.'

The singing ceased and the pale man began to speak. He shouted hard, that every one might hear him; but what he said sounded very kind. He called them all his brothers and sisters, spoke of the glories of nature and the wonders of creation, of God's sunshine and the dear little birds and flowers.

'What is this?' asked Johannes. 'How can he talk of these things? Does he know you? Is he a friend of yours?'

Windekind shook his flower-crowned head disdainfully.

'He does not know me, and the sun and the birds and the flowers even less. What he says is all lies.'

The people listened very attentively. The stout lady who sat on the blue-bell began to cry several times, and wiped her eyes on her skirt, as she could not get at her handkerchief.

The pale man said that God had made the sun shine so brightly for the sake of their meeting here, and Windekind laughed and threw an acorn down from the thick leaves, which hit the tip of his nose.

'He shall learn to know better,' said he; 'my father shines for him, indeed! a fine idea!'

But the pale man was too much excited to pay any heed to the acorn, which seemed to have dropped from the sky; he talked a long time, and the longer the louder. At last he was red and purple in the face, doubled his fists, and shouted so loud that the leaves quivered and the grass stems were dismayed, and waved to and fro. When at last he came to an end they all began to sing again.

'Well, fie!' said a blackbird, who was listening from the top of a high tree, 'that is a shocking noise to make! I had rather the cows should come into our wood. Only listen. Well, for shame!'

Now the blackbird knows what he is talking about, and has a fine taste in music.

After singing, the folks brought all sorts of eatables out of baskets, boxes and bags. Sheets of paper were spread out; cakes and oranges were handed round. And bottles and glasses also made their appearance.

Then Windekind called his allies together, and they began to attack the feasters.

A smart frog leaped up into an old maid's lap, flopped on to the bread she was just about to put into her mouth, and sat there as if amazed at his own audacity. The lady gave a fearful yell, and stared at the intruder without daring to stir. This bold beginning soon found imitators. Green caterpillars crept fearlessly over hats, handkerchiefs and rolls, inspiring terror and disgust; fat field-spiders let themselves down on glittering threads into beer glasses, and on to heads or necks, and a loud shriek always followed their appearance; endless winged creatures fairly attacked the human beings in the face, sacrificing their lives for the good cause by throwing themselves on the food and in the liquor, making them useless by their corpses. Finally the ants came in innumerable troops and stung the enemy in the most unexpected places, by hundreds at once. This gave rise to the greatest consternation and confusion. Men and women alike fled from the long crushed moss and grass. The poor blue-bell, too, was released in consequence of a well-directed attack by two ear-wigs on the stout maiden's legs. The men and women grew desperate; by dancing and leaping with the most extraordinary gestures, they tried to escape their persecutors. The pale man stood still for a long time, hitting about him with a small black stick; but a few audacious tomtits, who were not above any form of attack, and a wasp, who stung him in the calf through his black trousers, placed him *hors de combat*.

Then the sun could no longer keep his countenance, and hid his face behind a cloud. Large drops of rain fell on the antagonistic parties. It looked as though the shower had suddenly made a forest of great black toadstools spring out of the ground. These were the umbrellas, which were hastily opened. The women turned their skirts over their heads, thus displaying their white petticoats, white-stockinged legs, and shoes without heels. Oh, what fun for Windekind! He had to hold on to a flower-stem to laugh.

The rain fell more and more heavily; the forest was shrouded in a grey sparkling veil. Streams of water ran off the umbrellas, tall hats and black overcoats, which shone like the shell of a water-snail; their shoes slopped and smacked in the soaking ground. Then the people gave it up, and dropped off doubtfully in twos and threes, leaving behind them a litter of papers, empty bottles and orange peel, the hideous relics of their visit. The open glade in the forest was soon deserted once more, and ere long nothing was to be heard but the monotonous rush of the rain.

'Well, Johannes! now we have seen what men are like. Why do you not laugh at them?'

'Oh, Windekind! Are all men like these?'

'Indeed, there are worse and uglier. Sometimes they shout and rave, and destroy everything that is pretty or good. They cut down trees and stick their horrible square houses in their place; they wilfully crush the flowers, and kill every creature that comes within their reach, merely for pleasure. In their dwellings, where they crowd one upon another, it is all dirty and black, and the air is tainted and poisoned by the smell of smoke. They are complete strangers to nature and their fellow-creatures. That is why they cut such a foolish, miserable figure when they come forth to see them.'

'Oh dear! Windekind, Windekind.'

'Why do you cry, Johannes? You must not cry because you were born to be a man. I love you all the same and choose you out of them all. I have taught you to understand the language of the butterflies and birds, and the faces of the flowers. The moon knows you, and the good kind earth regards you as her dearest child. Why should you not be glad since I am your friend?'

'You are, Windekind, you are!—still I cannot help crying over men.'

'Why? You need not remain among them if it vexes you. You can live here with me, and always keep me company. We will make our home in the thickest of the wood, in the solitary, sunny downs, or among the reeds by the pool. I will take you everywhere, down under the water among the water-plants, in the palaces of the elves and in the earth-spirits' homes. I will waft you over fields and forests, over strange lands and seas. I will make the spiders spin fine raiment for you, and give you wings such as I have. We will live on the scent of flowers, and dance with the elves in the moonlight. When autumn comes we will follow the summer, to where the tall palm-trees stand, where gorgeous bunches of flowers hang from the cliffs, and the dark blue ocean sparkles in the sun. And I will always tell you fairy tales. Will you like that, Johannes?'

'And I shall never live among men any more?'

'Among men, endless vexations await you, weariness, troubles and sorrow. Day after day you will toil and sigh under the burden of life. Your tender soul will be wounded and tortured by their rough ways. You will be worn and grieved to death. Do you love men more than you love me?'

'No, no! Windekind, I will stay with you.'

Now he could prove how much he cared for Windekind. Yes, he would forsake and forget everybody and everything for his sake: his little room, and Presto, and his father. He repeated his wish, full of joy and determination.

The rain had ceased. A bright smile of sunshine gleamed through the grey clouds on the wet sparkling leaves, on the drops which hung twinkling from every twig and blade of grass, and gemmed the spiders' webs spread among the oak leaves. A filmy mist rose slowly from the moist earth and hung over the underwood, bringing up a thousand warm, sleepy odours. The blackbird flew to the topmost bough and sang a short, passionate melody to the sinking sun—as though he would show what kind of singing befitted the spot—in the solemn evening stillness, to the soft accompaniment of falling drops.

'Is that not more lovely than the noises of men, Johannes? Ah, the blackbird knows exactly the right thing to sing! Here all is harmony; you will find none so perfect among men.'

'What is harmony, Windekind?'

'It is the same thing as happiness. It is that which all agree in striving after. Men too, but they do so like children trying to catch a butterfly. Their stupid efforts are just what scare it away.'

'And shall I find it with you?'

'Yes, Johannes. But you must forget men and women. It is a bad beginning to have been born to be a man; but you are still young. You must put away from you all remembrance of your human life; among them you would go astray, and fall into mischief and strife and wretchedness—it would be with you as it was with the young cockchafer of whom I told you.'

'What happened to him afterwards?'

'He saw the beautiful light of which the old chafer spoke; he thought he could do no better than fly towards it at once. He flew straight into a room, and into a human hand. For three days he lived in torture; he was shut up in a cardboard box; they tied a thread to his feet and let him fly at the end of it; then they untied him, with one wing and one leg torn off; and at last, helplessly creeping round and round on a carpet, trying to feel his way back to the garden, a heavy foot crushed him to death.'

'All the creatures, Johannes, which come out and about at night are just as much children of the Sun as we are. And although they have never seen their glorious father, still an obscure remembrance always tempts them wherever a light is beaming. And thousands of poor creatures of the darkness find a miserable end through their love for the Sun, from which they were so long since parted, and to which they have become strangers. And in the same way a vague and irresistible attraction brings men to ruin in the false image of that Great Light whence they proceeded, but which they no longer know.'

Johannes looked inquiringly into Windekind's eyes, but they were as deep and mysterious as the dark sky between the stars.

'Do you mean God?' he timidly asked.

'God?' There was a soft smile in the deep eyes. 'I know, Johannes, what you are thinking of when you speak that word,—of the chair by your bed-side where you knelt to say your long prayers last

evening—of the green serge curtains in front of the church window, which you gaze at by the hour on Sunday mornings—of the capital letters in your little Bible—of the church-bag with its long pole—of the stupid singing and the stuffy atmosphere. All that you mean by the word, Johannes, is a monstrous, false image. In place of the sun a huge petroleum lamp, to which thousands and thousands of flies are helplessly and hopelessly stuck fast!

'But what then is the name of that Great Light, Windekind? And to whom must I pray?'

'Johannes, it is as though a patch of mould should ask me what was the name of the earth which bears it round in space. Even if there were any answer to your question you would no more understand it than an earthworm can hear the music of the stars. Still, I will teach you to pray.'

And while Johannes was still silently wondering over Windekind's reply, the elf flew out of the wood with him, high up, so high that beyond the edge of the down a long narrow line was visible, gleaming like gold. They flew on and on, the undulating sand-hills beneath them gliding away, and the streak of light growing broader and broader. The green hue faded, the wild broom was grey and thin, and strange bluish-green plants grew among the bushes. Then another range of hills—a long narrow strip of sand—and beyond, the wide unresting sea.

The vast expanse was blue to the very horizon; but out there, under the sun, a small streak shone in blinding red fire. An endless fringe of downy-looking white foam edged the waters, as ermine borders blue velvet. On the horizon a wonderful, fine line divided the air from the ocean. It was indeed a marvel; straight yet curved; sharply defined yet non-existent; visible yet intangible. It was like the vibration of a harp-string, which thrills dreamily for a long time, seeming to die away and yet still be there.

Then little Johannes sat down on the sand-hill and gazed—gazed long—motionless and silent; till he felt as though he were about to die,—as though the great golden gates of the Infinite had opened majestically before him, and his little soul were soaring forth towards the first light of eternity; until the tears, which welled up to his wide-open eyes, had dimmed the radiance of the sun, and the splendour of sky and earth floated off into soft tremulous light.

'That is the way to pray!' said Windekind.

V

Have you ever loitered in the woods on a fresh autumn day? When the sun shines calmly and clearly on the richly-tinted foliage; when the boughs creak, and the dry leaves rustle under foot. The forest seems weary of life; it can merely think, and lives in its memories of the past. A blue mist hangs about it like a dream, full of mysterious splendour, and the glistening gossamers float on the air with slow undulations—a sweet aimless musing.

And now from the moist ground among the mosses and withered leaves suddenly and inexplicably the strange forms of toadstools spring into being. Some sturdy, deformed and fleshy; others slim and tall with ringed stems and gaily painted hats. These are the quaint dream-figures of the forest. On the decayed tree-trunks, too, there are little white columns innumerable, with black heads as though they had been burnt. Certain learned men regard them as a sort of fungus. But Johannes knew better:—

'They are little tapers. In the still autumn nights they burn while the bogey-sprites sit near them, reading their little books.'

Windekind had told him this one such tranquil autumn day, and Johannes dreamily drank in the faint earthy smell which came up from the mouldering ground.

'How is it that the leaves of the ash-trees are so speckled with black?'

'Ah! the bogey-sprites do that too,' said Windekind. 'When they have been busy writing at night, in the morning they throw out what is left in their ink-bottles over the leaves. They do not love the ash-trees; crosses are made of ash-wood, and poles for church bags.'

Johannes was curious to know all about the busy little sprites, and he made Windekind promise to take him to see one of them. He had now stayed some time with Windekind, and he was so happy in his new life that he felt very little regret for his promise to forget all he had left behind him. And he had no hours of loneliness or terror, when repentance is always apt to intrude. Windekind never quitted him, and with him he felt everywhere at home. He slept soundly in the swinging nest, where it hung between the green reeds, however ominously the bittern might boom or the raven croak. He knew no fear of the pelting rain or howling storm—he could creep into a hollow tree or a rabbit's burrow, and hide close under Windekind's cloak, and listen to his voice as he told him tales.

And now he was to see the Wood-Sprites.

It was a good day for such a visit. So calm, so still, Johannes fancied he could already hear tiny voices and the rustle of little feet, though it was mid-day. The birds had almost all fled; only the thrushes were feasting on the scarlet berries. One was caught in a snare. There he hung with flapping wings, struggling till his sharp clenched claws were almost torn away. Johannes made haste to set him free, and he flew off with a happy chirp.

The toadstools had a great deal to say.

'Only look at me!' said a fat puffy Toadstool.

'Did you ever see the like? See how thick and white my stem is, and how my hat shines. I am the biggest of you all. And that in one night!'

'Pooh!' said the red spotted toadstool. 'You are most vulgar!—so brown and clumsy. Now, I sway on a tall stem like a reed; I am of a splendid red like the rowan berries, and most elegantly speckled. I am the handsomest of you all.'

'Hush!' said Johannes, who knew them both of old. 'You are both poisonous.'

'That is a virtue,' said the red fellow.

'Or are you a man by chance?' retorted the fat toadstool. 'Then indeed I wish you would eat me.'

But Johannes did not eat him; he took some dry twigs and stuck them into his round hat. That looked funny, and all the others laughed; even a swarm of slender toadstools with little brown heads who had only come up a few hours since, and pushed themselves everywhere to look out on the world. The fat toadstool turned blue with spite, thus displaying his venomous nature. Earth-stars raised their little pert heads on angular stems. Now and then a little cloud of the finest brown powder puffed out of the opening in a round head. Wherever that dust fell on the moist soil, threads would tangle and plait beneath the dark earth, and next year myriads of fresh stars would come up.

'What a beautiful existence!' they said to each other.

'The happiest lot in life is to shed dust. What joy to think we may do it as long as we live!' And they puffed the little smoke-like cloud into the air with the deepest concentration.

'Are they really happy, Windekind?'

'Why not? What higher joy can they know? They are happy, for they ask no better because they know no better.'

When night fell, and the shadows of the trees were merged in uniform gloom, the mysterious vitality of the forest knew no rest. The branches snapped and cracked, the dry leaves rustled hither and thither among the grass and in the underwood. Then Johannes felt the touch of invisible wings and was aware of the presence of invisible beings. He could plainly hear the murmur of little voices and tripping of little feet. There! there in the darkest depth of the thicket, a tiny blue spark glowed and vanished. There was another and another!—Hark! When he listened attentively he could hear a rustling in the leaf-strewn floor near him, close to the black tree-trunk. The blue lights again were visible and then stood still on the top.

Now Johannes saw such lights all about him; they flitted among the brown leaves, dancing along with airy leaping; and in one place a large sparkling mass beamed like a blue bonfire.

'What fire is that?' asked Johannes. 'It burns splendidly.'

'That is a rotten tree-stump,' replied Windekind.

They went towards a bright light which remained steady.

'Now I will introduce you to Wistik.^[1] He is the oldest and wisest of the Wood-Sprites.

As they approached Johannes saw him sitting by his candle. The wrinkled little face with its grey beard could be plainly seen by the blue light; he was reading diligently with knitted brows. On his head he wore an acorn-cup with a tiny feather in it. Before him sat a wood-spider listening to his reading.

When the pair went near him, the little bogey, without raising his head, looked up from his book and lifted his eyebrows.

The spider crept away.

'Good-evening,' said he. 'I am Wistik. Who are you?'

'My name is Johannes. I should like to make acquaintance with you. What are you reading?'

'It is not meant for your ears,' said Wistik. 'It is only for wood-spiders.'

'Just let me once look at it, dear Wistik,' begged Johannes.

'I cannot. This is the sacred book of the spiders, and is in my charge. I may not let it out of my own hands. I have the keeping of the sacred books of the snails, and the butterflies, and the hedge-hogs, and the moles, and all the creatures that live here. They cannot all read, and when they want to know anything I read it to them. This is a great honour for me, a post of trust, you understand.'

The sprite nodded very gravely several times, and pointed with his tiny forefinger.

'And what were you studying just now?'

'The history of Kribbelgaw, the great hero among spiders, who lived very long ago and had a net which spread over three trees, and in which he caught millions of flies every day. Before the time of Kribbelgaw spiders made no nets, but lived on grass and dead creatures; but Kribbelgaw was a very clever fellow, and proved that all living insects were created on purpose for food for spiders. Then, by the most laborious calculation, Kribbelgaw discovered the art of making nets, for he was very learned. And to this day the wood-spiders make their nets exactly as he taught them, thread for thread, only much smaller. For the spider race is greatly degenerate. Kribbelgaw caught great birds in his net, and murdered thousands of his own children—he was

something like a spider! At last there came a great storm and carried away Kribbelgauw and his net, with the three trees it was made fast to, through the air to a distant wood, where he is now perpetually honoured for his great achievements and sagacity.'

'Is that all true?' asked Johannes.

'It is all in this book,' said Wistik.

'Do you believe it?'

The boguey shut one eye and laid his forefinger to his nose.

'The sacred books of other creatures, when they mention Kribbelgauw, speak of him as a hateful and contemptible monster. But that is no concern of mine.'

'And is there a Sprites' Book, Wistik?'

Wistik looked at Johannes rather suspiciously.

'What sort of creature are you really, Johannes? There is something—just something—human about you, so to speak.'

'No, no; be easy, Wistik,' said Windekind, 'we are elves. But formerly Johannes saw a good deal of men and their doings. You may trust him entirely. It can do him no harm.'

'Ay, ay, well and good. But I am called the wisest of the sprites—and I studied long and hard before I knew what I know. So now I must be cautious with my learning. If I tell you too much, I shall lose my reputation.'

'But in what book do you think that the truth is to be found?'

'I have read a great deal, but I do not believe that I have ever read that book. It is not the Elves' Book nor the Sprites'. Yet it must exist.'

'The Men's Book perhaps?'

'That I do not know, but I do not think it. For the True Book must bring with it great peace and great happiness. In it there must be an exact explanation of why everything is as it is, so that no one need ever ask or inquire any more. Now men, I believe, have not got so far as that.'

'Oh dear, no!' said Windekind, laughing.

'Is there anywhere such a book?' said Johannes eagerly.

'Yes, yes,' whispered the sprite. 'I know there is, from very ancient legends. And—hush!—I know where it is, and who can find it.'

'Oh, Wistik! Wistik!'

'Why then have you not yet got it?' asked Windekind.

'Patience, patience,—it will be found. I know as yet no particulars,—but I shall soon find it. I have toiled for it and sought it all my life. For to him who finds it life shall be one perpetual autumn day—blue air above and blue mists all round,—only no falling leaves shall rustle, no twigs shall snap, no raindrops patter, the shadows shall not change, the sun-gold on the tree-tops shall not fade. What seems to us now to be light shall be darkness; what seems to us now to be joy shall be woe by comparison, to those who read that book! Ay! I know this much, and some day I shall find it.'

The Wood-Sprite raised his eyebrows very much and laid his finger on his lips.

'Wistik, if you could but teach me——' Johannes began; but before he could say more he felt a strong gust of wind and saw a great, broad black shroud overhead, which silently and swiftly swept by. When he looked for Wistik again he saw one little foot just vanishing into the hollow tree. Whisk! the sprite had leapt into his cave, book and all. The candles burnt paler and paler and suddenly went out. Those were very strange little candles.

'What was that?' asked Johannes, clinging in terror to Windekind in the darkness.

'An owl,' said Windekind. Then they were both silent for some time. Presently Johannes said:—

'Do you believe what Wistik said?'

'Wistik is not so wise as he thinks himself. He will never find such a book, nor you either.'

'But does it exist?'

'It exists, as your shadow exists, Johannes. However fast you run, however cautiously you seize it, you can never overtake it or hold it. And at last you discover that you are trying to catch yourself. Do not be foolish; forget the sprite's chatter. I can tell you a hundred finer tales. Come along! We will go to the outskirts of the wood and see how our good father draws off the white woollen coverlets of dew from the sleeping meadows. Come.'

Johannes went; but he did not understand Windekind's words, nor did he follow his counsel. And while he watched the dawn of the glorious autumn morning, he was meditating over the book in which it is written why everything is as it is, and repeating to himself in a low tone, 'Wistik!'

It seemed to him, all the next few days, as though it was no longer so delightful or so beautiful to be with Windekind in the wood or on the sand-hills. His thoughts were no longer wholly occupied with all that Windekind told him or showed him. He could not help thinking of that Book, but he dared not speak of it. The things he saw seemed to him less fine and wonderful than before. The clouds were so black and heavy, he was afraid lest they should fall upon him. It distressed him when the unresting autumn wind shook and bowed the poor weary trees, so that the fallow under side of the leaves was seen, and yellow leaves and dry twigs were swept before the gale.

What Windekind told him had ceased to interest him. A great deal of it he did not understand, and he never got a perfectly clear and satisfactory answer when he asked one of his old questions.

And this again made him think of that Book in which everything was set forth so plainly and simply; and of that everlasting still and sunny autumn day which would ensue.

'Wistik! Wistik!' he murmured.

Windekind heard him.

'Johannes, I am afraid you ought to have remained a human being. Even your friendship is as that of men—the first person who has spoken to you after me has won all your confidence from me. Ah! my mother was right after all!'

'No, Windekind. But you are much wiser than Wistik—as wise as that Book. Why do you not tell me everything? See now! Why does the wind blow through the trees so that they bend and bow? Look, they can bear it no longer; the boughs snap and the leaves are flying by hundreds on all sides, though they are still green and fresh. They are so tired they can no longer hold on, and yet they are constantly shaken and thrashed by the rude, spiteful wind. Why is it so? What does the wind mean?'

'My poor Johannes, you are talking as men talk.'

'Make it stop, Windekind. I want calm and sunshine.'

'You question and want as a man; there is no answer, no fulfilment. If you cannot learn to ask or wish better, the autumn day will never dawn for you, and you will be like the thousands of human beings who have talked to Wistik.'

'What, so many?'

'Yes, thousands. Wistik affects great mystery, but he is a chatterbox who cannot keep his own secrets. He hoped to find the Book among men, and communicates his knowledge to every one who might be able to help him. And he has made many as unhappy as himself. They believe in him, and go forth to seek the Book with as much zeal as some use in seeking the art of making gold. They sacrifice everything, give up their calling and their happiness, and shut themselves up among big volumes or strange matters and instruments. They risk their lives and health, they forget the blue sky and kindly gentle Nature—nay, even their fellow-creatures. Some find good and useful things, as it were gold nuggets, which they throw out of their holes on to the bright sunlit surface of the earth; but they do not themselves care for these; they leave them for others to enjoy, while they dig and grub on in the dark without cessation or rest. They are not seeking gold but the Book. Some lose their wits over the work, forgetting their object and aim, and becoming mere miserable dotards. The sprite has made them quite childish. You may see them building up little castles of sand, and calculating how many grains more are needed to make them fall in; they make little watercourses, and estimate precisely the bends and bays the water will make; they dig trenches, and devote all their patience and reason to making them very smooth and free from stones. If these poor idiots are interrupted in their work and asked what they are doing, they look up with great importance, shake their heads and mutter, 'Wistik, Wistik!' Yes, it is all the fault of that little foolish Wood-Sprite. Have nothing to say to him, Johannes.'

But Johannes stared before him at the swaying, creaking trees. The smooth brow above his clear childish eyes puckered into furrows. He had never before looked so grave.

'And yet—you yourself said—that there is such a Book! And oh! I am quite sure that in it there is all about the Great Light, whose name you will not tell me.'

'Poor, poor little Johannes!' said Windekind, and his voice rose above the dizzy clamour of the storm like a peaceful hymn, sounding very far away. 'Love me, only love me with all your might. In me, you will find even more than you wish. You shall understand that which you cannot conceive of, and be, yourself, what you desire to know. Earth and heaven shall be familiar to you, the stars shall be your neighbours, infinitude shall be your dwelling-place. Love me! only love me! Cling to me as the hop-bine to the tree, be true to me as the lake is to its bed—in me alone shall you find rest, Johannes.'

Windekind ceased speaking, but the choral psalm still went on. It seemed to float at an immense distance, in solemn rhythm, through the raging and sighing of the wind—as tranquil as the moonlight shining between the driving clouds. Windekind opened his arms and Johannes fell asleep on his breast, under the shelter of the blue cloak.

But in the night he awoke. Peace had suddenly and imperceptibly fallen on the world; the moon was below the horizon; the leaves hung limp and motionless; the forest was full of silence and darkness.

And questions came back on Johannes' mind, in swift spectral succession, dislodging all his

newly-born confidence. Why were men thus made? Why must he come away from them and lose their love? Why must the winter come? Why must the leaves fall and the flowers die? Why—why?

Down in the thicket the blue lights were dancing again. They came and went. Johannes gazed at them with eager attention. He saw the larger, brighter light shining on the dark tree-trunk. Windekind was sleeping soundly and peacefully.

'Just one more question!' thought Johannes, creeping out from under the blue mantle.

'So, here you are again!' cried Wistik, with a friendly nod, 'I am very pleased to see you. And where is your friend?'

'Out yonder. But I wanted to ask you one more question—alone. Will you answer it?'

'You have lived among men, I am sure. Has it anything to do with my secret?'

'Who will find the Book, Wistik?'

'Ay, ay! That's it, that's it. If I tell you, will you help me?'

'If I can—certainly.'

'Then listen, Johannes.' Wistik opened his eyes astonishingly wide, and raised his eyebrows higher than ever. Then he whispered behind his little hand. 'Men have the golden casket; elves have the golden key; the foe of the elves can never find it, the friend of men alone can open it. The first night of Spring is the right time, and Robin Redbreast knows the way.'

'Is that true, quite true?' cried Johannes, remembering his little key.

'Yes,' said Wistik.

'How is it that no one has found it yet?' asked Johannes, 'so many men are seeking for it.'

'I have never confided to any man, never to any man, what I have told you. I never before knew a friend of the Elves.'

'I have it, Wistik, I can help you!' Johannes leaped and clapped his hands. 'I will ask Windekind about it.'

Away he flew over the moss and dry leaves. But he stumbled now and then and his feet were heavy. Stout twigs snapped under his tread, while before, it had not even bent the blades of grass. There was the shady fern under which they had been sleeping. Their bed was empty.

'Windekind!' he called. But he started at the sound of his own voice. 'Windekind!' It sounded like a human voice.

A scared night-bird flew up with a shriek.

There was no one under the fern. Johannes could see no one. The blue lights had vanished. It was very cold and perfectly dark on all sides. Overhead, he saw the black tree-tops against the starry sky.

Once more he called. Then he dared no more; his voice was an insult to the silence, and Windekind's name a mockery. Poor Johannes fell on the ground and sobbed in helpless grief.

[1] 'Wistik' means, Could I but know.

VII

The morning was cold and grey. The black shining boughs, swept bare by the storm, dripped in the fog. Little Johannes ran as fast as he could over the wet, down-beaten grass, looking before him in the distance where the wood was thinnest, as though he had some goal beyond. His eyes were red with crying, and dazed with fear and grief. He had been wandering about all night, seeking some light,—the feeling of being safe and at home had vanished with Windekind. The spirit of loneliness lurked in every dark corner; he dared not look round.

At last he came out of the wood; he looked over a meadowland, and fine close rain was pouring steadily. A horse was standing out in the rain close to a bare willow tree. It stood motionless, with bowed head, and the water trickled slowly off its shining flanks and plaited mane. Johannes ran on, along the skirt of the wood. He looked with dim, timid eyes at the lonely beast, and the grey drizzle, and he softly groaned.

'Now it is all over,' thought he. 'Now the sun will never come again. Now everything will always look the same to me as it does here.'

But he dared not stand still in his despair; something most dreadful would befall him, he thought. Then he espied the high wall of a garden, and a little house, under a lime-tree with faded yellow leaves. He went into the enclosure and ran along broad paths where the brown and gold lime-leaves thickly covered the ground. Purple asters and other gay autumn flowers grew by the grass plots in wild abundance. Then he came to a pond. By the side of it was a large house, with windows and doors all opening down to the ground. Climbing roses and other creepers grew against the walls. But it was all shut up and deserted. Half-stripped chestnut trees stood about

the house, and on the earth, among the fallen leaves Johannes saw the shining brown chestnuts.

The cold, dead feeling about his heart disappeared. He thought of his own home—there two chestnut-trees grew, and at this season he always went out to pick up chestnuts. He suddenly longed to be there, as though an inviting voice had called him. He sat down on a bench close to the big house and cried himself to rest.

A peculiar smell made him look up. A man was standing by him, with a white apron on and a pipe in his mouth. Round his waist he had a wisp of bast with which he tied up the flowers. Johannes knew that smell so well! It reminded him of his own garden, and the gardener who brought him pretty caterpillars and showed him starling's eggs.

He was not frightened,—though it was a man who stood before him. He told the man that he had got lost and did not know his way, and thankfully followed him to the little cottage under the lime-tree.

Indoors, the gardener's wife sat knitting black stockings. A large kettle of water was hung to boil over the turf-fire in the hearth-place. On the mat by the fire lay a cat with her forepaws crossed, just as Simon had been lying when Johannes left home.

Johannes was made to sit down by the fire to dry his feet. 'Tick-tick, tick-tick,' said the great hanging clock. Johannes looked at the steam which came singing out of the kettle, and at the little flames which skipped and jumped fantastically about the peat blocks.

'Here I am among men,' thought he.

It was not alarming. He felt easy and safe. They were kind and friendly, and asked him what he would like to do.

'I would rather stay here,' he replied.

Here he was at peace, and if he went home there would be scolding and tears. He would have to listen in silence, and he would be told that he had been very naughty. He would be obliged to look back on the past, and think everything over once more.

He longed, to be sure, for his little room, for his father, for Presto—but he could better endure the quiet longing for them here than the painful, miserable meeting. And he felt as though here he could still think of Windekind, while at home he could not. Windekind was now certainly quite gone. Gone far away to the sunny land where palm-trees bend over the blue sea. He would do penance here and await his friend's return.

So he begged the two good folks to let him live with them. He would be obedient and work for them. He would help to take care of the garden and the flowers, at any rate through this winter; for he hoped in his heart that Windekind would return with the Spring.

The gardener and his wife supposed that Johannes had run away from home because he had been hardly treated. They pitied him, and promised to let him stay. So he remained and helped to work in the garden and attend to the flowers. They gave him a little room to sleep in with a bedstead painted blue. Out of it, in the morning, he could see the wet yellow lime-leaves flutter past the window, and at night the black boughs waving to and fro, and the stars playing hide-and-seek between them. And he gave names to the stars, and the brightest of them he called Windekind.

He told his history only to the flowers, most of which he had known before at home; to the large, solemn asters, the many-hued zinnias, and the white chrysanthemums which bloom on so late into the blustering autumn. When all the rest of the flowers were dead the chrysanthemums still stood upright—even when one morning the first snow had fallen and Johannes came to see how they were getting on, they held up their cheerful faces and said: 'Yes, we are still here. You would never have thought it!' And they looked very brave; but two days later they were all dead.

But palms and tree-ferns were still thriving in the hot-house, and the strange blossoms of orchids hung in the damp heat. Johannes peeped with amazement into their gorgeous cups, and thought of Windekind. How cold and colourless everything seemed then when he came out again—the sloppy snow with black footmarks, and the sighing, dripping branches of the trees!

But when the snow-flakes had been noiselessly falling hour after hour so that the boughs bent under the growing burthen, Johannes ran off gleefully into the purple twilight of the snow-laden wood. That was silence—but not death. It was almost more lovely than summer verdure, as the dazzling whiteness of the tangled twigs made lace-work against the light-blue sky, or as one of the over-weighted boughs shook off its load of snow, which fell in a cloud of glittering powder.

Once in the course of such a walk, when he had gone so far that all round him there was nothing to be seen but snow and snow-wrapped woods, half white and half black, and every sound of life seemed stifled under the glistening downy shroud, it happened that he thought he saw a tiny white creature running swiftly in front of him. He followed it—it resembled no animal that he knew; but when he tried to catch it, it promptly vanished into a hollow trunk. Johannes stared into the hole where it had disappeared and thought to himself: 'I wonder if it was Wistik?'

But he did not think much about him. He fancied it was wrong, and he would not spoil his fit of repentance. And his life with these two kind people left him little to ask for. In the evenings he had indeed to read aloud out of a thick book in which a great deal was said about God; but he was familiar with the book, and read unheeding.

That night, however, after his walk in the snow, he lay awake in his bed, looking at the cold gleam of the moonlight on the floor. All at once he saw two tiny hands which came out from below the bedstead and firmly clutched the edge. Then the top of a little white fur cap came into

sight between the two hands, and at last he saw a pair of grave eyes under uplifted eyebrows.

'Good-evening, Johannes!' said Wistik. 'I am come to remind you of your promise. You cannot yet have found the Book, for it is not yet Spring time. But do you ever think it over? What is that thick book which you are made to read? But that cannot be the right book. Do not imagine that.'

'I do not imagine that, Wistik,' said Johannes.

He turned over to go to sleep again; but he could not get the gold key out of his head. Before now, when reading the big Book, he had thought of that, and he saw plainly that it could not be the right Book.

VIII

'Now he will come back,' thought Johannes, the first time the snow had melted here and there, and the snowdrops peeped out in bunches. 'Will he come now?' he asked of the snowdrops. But they did not know, and stood there with hanging heads, looking down at the earth as if they were ashamed of their haste to come out, and would gladly creep back again.

If only they could have done so! The numbing east wind soon began to blow again, and the snow drifted deep over the foolish, forward little things. Some weeks later came the violets; their sweet smell betrayed them among the brushwood; and when the sun had shone warmly on the mossy ground the pale primroses came out by hundreds and thousands.

The shy violets with their fine fragrance were the mysterious harbingers of coming splendour, but the glad primroses were the glorious reality. The waking earth had caught and captured the first sunbeams and turned them into a golden jewel.

'Now—now he will certainly come!' thought Johannes. He eagerly watched the leaf-buds on the trees as they slowly swelled day by day and freed themselves from the bark, till the first pale-green tips peeped out between the brown scales. Johannes would stand gazing for long at the little young leaves—he could never see them move, but if he only turned round, they seemed to have grown bigger. 'They dare not, so long as I am looking at them,' thought he.

The shade had already begun to be green. Still Windekind did not come, no dove had settled near him, no little mouse had spoken to him. When he spoke to the flowers they merely nodded and never answered.

'My punishment is not yet ended,' thought he.

One sunny spring morning he went to the pond by the great house. The windows were all wide open. Had the people who lived there come back?

The bird-cherry which grew by the water-side was entirely covered with fresh leaves; every twig had a crop of delicate green winglets. On the grass by the tree lay a young girl; Johannes could only see that she had a light-blue dress and fair hair. A robin, sitting on her shoulder, fed out of her hand. She suddenly turned her head and looked at Johannes.

'Good-day, little man!' said she, with a friendly nod.

Johannes felt a glow from head to foot. Those were Windekind's eyes; that was Windekind's voice.

'Who are you?' he asked. His lips trembled with excitement.

'I am Robinetta, and this is my bird. He will not be afraid of you. Are you fond of birds?'

The Redbreast was not afraid of Johannes; it flew on to his arm. This was just as it used to be. The being in blue must be Windekind.

'And tell me what your name is, boy,' said Windekind's voice.

'Do you not know me? Do you not know that my name is Johannes?'

'How should I know that?'

What did this mean? For it was the sweet familiar voice, and those were the same dark, heavenly-deep blue eyes.

'Why do you look at me so, Johannes? Have you ever seen me before?'

'Yes I have, indeed.'

'You must surely have dreamed it.'

'Dreamed it?' thought Johannes. 'Can I have dreamed it? Or can I be dreaming now?'

'Where were you born?' he inquired.

'A long way from hence, in a great town.'

'Among human beings?'

Robinetta laughed—it was Windekind's laugh. 'Why, I should think so. Were not you?'

'Oh yes, I was too.'

'Do you object to that? Do you not like human beings?'

'No. Who could?'

'Who?—Well, Johannes, you are a very strange little boy. Do you like beasts better?'

'Oh, much better,—and flowers.'

'So do I myself sometimes; just for once in a while. But it is not right. We ought to love our fellow-men, my father says.'

'Why is it not right? I love whom I choose, whether it is right or not.'

'Fie, Johannes! Have you no parents or any one to take care of you? And do you not love them?'

'Yes,' said Johannes thoughtfully, 'I love my father. But not because it is right—nor yet because he is a man.'

'Why then?'

'That I do not know,—because he is not like other men; because he too is fond of birds and flowers.'

'And so am I, Johannes, as you may see.' And Robinetta called the robin to sit on her hand and talked to him fondly.

'That I know,' replied Johannes, 'and I love you very much.'

'Already? That is quick work!' laughed the girl. 'And whom, then, do you love best?'

Johannes hesitated. Should he utter Windekind's name? The fear that he might accidentally speak it in the presence of other persons was never out of his thoughts. And yet, was not this fair-haired creature in blue Windekind in person? How else could she give him such a sense of rest and gladness?

'You,' he suddenly replied, looking full into those deep blue eyes. He boldly made a complete surrender; but he was a little alarmed nevertheless, and anxiously awaited her reception of his precious offering.

Robinetta laughed again, a light clear laugh; but she took his hand and her look was no colder nor her voice less full of feeling.

'Why, Johannes,' said she, 'what have I done to deserve it all at once?'

Johannes made no reply, but stood looking at her with trustful eyes. Robinetta rose and laid her arm on his shoulder. She was taller than he. Thus they wandered on through the wood, gathering great bunches of cowslips till they could have hidden under the mass of bright yellow blossoms. The robin flew, as they went on, from branch to branch, and watched them with his glittering little black eyes.

They did not talk much, but looked at each other now and then, with a side glance. They were both embarrassed by this meeting and did not know what to think of each other.

But Robinetta had soon to turn back. It was growing late.

'I must go now, Johannes. But will you come and walk with me again? I think you are a nice little boy,' she said as they turned round.

'Weet, weet!' piped the robin, and flew after her.

When she was away and he had only her image left to think of, he had not a moment's doubt as to who she was. She it was to whom he had given his friendship: the name of Windekind faded from his mind, and that of Robinetta took its place.

And now everything was the same to him again as it had formerly been. The flowers nodded gaily, and their scent drove away the melancholy home-sickness which he had felt and encouraged now and then. Amid the tender greenery, in the warm, soft breeze of spring, he all at once felt himself at home, like a bird that has found its nest. He spread out his arms and drew a deep breath; he was so happy. As he went homewards the figure in light blue with yellow hair, floated before him whichever way he turned his gaze. It was as though he had looked on the sun, and its image danced before his eyes where-ever he looked.

From that day forward Johannes found his way to the pond every fine morning. He went early, as soon as he was roused by the squabbling of the sparrows in the ivy round his window, and by the twitter and wheeze of the starlings as they fluttered on the roof and wheeled in the early sunshine. Then he flew off through the dewy grass, to wait close by the house, behind a lilac-bush, till he heard the glass door open and saw the light figure come out.

Away they went, wandering through the wood and over the sand-hills which skirted it. They talked of all they saw, the trees, and the plants and the downs. Johannes had a strange bewildered feeling as he walked by her side; sometimes he felt so light that he fancied he could fly through the air. But that never happened. He told her all the stories of the flowers and animals that he had heard from Windekind. But he had forgotten who had told them to him, and Windekind did not now stand before him, only Robinetta. He was happy when she smiled at him and he saw her friendship for him in her eyes; and he would talk to her as of old he had talked to his little dog, telling her everything that came into his head, without reserve or timidity. During the hours when he could not see her he thought of her; and in everything he did he asked himself whether Robinetta would think it right or nice. She herself seemed no less pleased to see him; she smiled and ran quicker to meet him. She told him indeed that there was no one she was so glad to walk with as with him.

'But, Johannes,' said she one day, 'how do you know all these things? How do you know what the

cockchafers think about, what the thrushes sing, what the inside of the rabbit-holes is like, and how things look at the bottom of the water?'

'I have been told,' answered Johannes, 'and I have myself been inside a rabbit-burrow, and down to the bottom of the water.'

Robinetta knit her pretty eyebrows and looked at him half mockingly. But he looked as if he were speaking the truth. They were sitting under lilac-trees covered with large bunches of purple blossoms. In front of them was the pond with its reeds and duck-weed. They saw the black water-snails gliding below the surface, and red spiders busily swinging up and down. It was swarming with life and movement. Johannes, lost in remembrance, gazed down into the depths and said—

'I went down there once. I slipped down a reed to the very bottom. It is covered all over with dead leaves which fall so lightly and softly. It is always twilight there—green twilight, because the light comes through the green duck-weed. And over my head I saw the long white rootlets of the duck-weed hanging down. Newts came and swam round me; they are very inquisitive. It is strange to see such great creatures swimming overhead; and I could not see far before me, it was too dark, and all green. In that darkness, the creatures appeared like black shades. Water-snails with their swimming-foot and flat shells, and sometimes a little fish. I went a long way, for hours, I believe, and in the middle was a great forest of water-plants, where snails were creeping and water-spiders wove their glistening nets. Sticklebacks shot in and out, and sometimes paused to stare at me, with open mouth and quivering fins—they were so much astonished. I made friends there with an eel, whose tail I unfortunately trod on. He told me the history of his travels; he had been as far as the sea, he said. For this, he had been chosen king of the pool, for no one else had ever been so far. He always lay sleeping in the mud, except when he got something to eat which the others brought him. He ate a terrible quantity. That was because he was king; they like to have a very fat king; it looks grand. Oh! it was lovely down in that pool.'

'They why do you not go down there again now?'

'Now?' repeated Johannes, looking at her with wide, bewildered eyes. 'Now? I can never go again now. I should be drowned. But I do not care. I had rather stay here, by the lilac-bush, with you.'

Robinetta shook her yellow head, much puzzled, and stroked Johannes's hair. Then she looked at her bird, which seemed to be finding all sorts of delicious morsels by the edge of the pond. It glanced up at that moment, and watched the pair for a moment with its bright little eyes.

'Do you understand anything of all this, Dicky-bird?'

The Robin looked very knowing and went on hunting and pecking.

'Tell me something more, Johannes, of the things you have seen.'

This Johannes was very glad to do, and Robinetta listened with attentive belief in all he said.

'But where did this all happen? Why cannot you go now with me? Everywhere—all about? I should like it so much.'

Johannes did his best to remember, but a sunlit mist covered the dim landscape where he had once wandered. He could not quite make out how it was that his former happiness had deserted him.

'I do not know exactly—you must not ask about that. A foolish little being spoiled it all. But it is all right now—better even than before.'

The scent of the lilac poured down on them from the bushes, and the humming of the insects on the pool, and the peaceful sunshine filled them with pleasant drowsiness, till a bell rang at the great house with a swinging clang, and Robinetta flew off.

When Johannes went into his little room that evening, as he looked at the moon-shadows of the ivy leaves which stole across the brick floor, he fancied he heard a tap at the window. He thought it was an ivy leaf shaken by the wind. But it was such a distinct knocking, three taps each time, that Johannes softly opened the window and cautiously peeped out. The ivy against the wall glistened in the blue gleam—the dark world below was full of mystery; there were hollows and caves, where the moon lighted up small blue sparks, which made the darkness behind seem deeper still. After staring for a long time into the marvels of the shadow-world, Johannes discerned the form of a tiny mannikin, close to the window, screened by a large ivy leaf. He at once recognised Wistik by his large wondering eyes and uplifted eyebrows. The moon had set a spark of light on the tip of Wistik's long nose.

'Have you forgotten me, Johannes? Why do you never think of me? It is the right time of year. Have you asked Robin Redbreast to show you the way?'

'Oh, Wistik, why should I ask? I have all I can wish for. I have Robinetta.'

'But that cannot last long. And you might be happier still—and certainly Robinetta might. And is the little key to lie there? Only think how splendid it would be if you two were to find the Book! Ask Robin Redbreast about it, and I will help as far as I can.'

'I can ask about it at any rate,' said Johannes.

Wistik nodded, and nimbly scrambled down to the ground; and Johannes looked at the deep shadows and the shining ivy leaves for a long time before he went to bed.

Next day he asked the Redbreast whether he knew the way to the golden chest. Robinetta listened in surprise. Johannes saw the Robin nod his head and give a side-glance at Robinetta.

'Not here! not here!' piped the little bird.

'What are you asking, Johannes?' said Robinetta.

'Do you know anything about it, Robinetta? Do you know where it is to be found? Are you not waiting for the little golden key?'

'No, no. Tell me, what is it?'

Johannes told her all he knew about the Book. 'And I have the key, and I thought that you must have the little golden chest. Is it not so, Dicky-bird?'

But the bird pretended not to hear, and flew about among the young pale-green birch boughs. They were sitting under a sand-hill, on which little birches and broom shrubs grew. A grassy path ran up the slope, and they sat at the edge of it, on the thick, dark, green moss. They could see over the tops of the low shrubs, a green sea of leaves with waves in light and shade.

'I believe,' said Robinetta, after thinking for some time, 'that I can find what you want before you do. But what do you mean about the little key? How did you come by it?'

'Ah!—how did I?—How was that?' muttered Johannes to himself, staring across the green landscape into the distance.

Suddenly, as though they had come into being under the sunny blue sky, a pair of white butterflies met his sight. They flitted and wheeled, and shone in the sunshine with purposeless giddy flutterings; but they came close to him.

'Windekind! Windekind!' The name came back to Johannes, and he spoke it in a whisper.

'What is Windekind?' asked Robinetta. The Redbreast flew chirping up, and the daisies in the grass at their feet seemed all at once to be staring at Johannes in alarm with their round white eyes.

'Did he give you the little key?' the girl went on.

Johannes nodded; still he said nothing, but she wanted to know more about it.

'Who was it? Did he tell you all these things? Where is he?'

'He is gone.—Now it is Robinetta—no one but Robinetta—only Robinetta.'

He took her arm and laid his head against it.

'Silly boy!' she said, laughing, 'I will make you find the Book; I know where it is.'

'But then I must go to fetch the key, and it is a long way off.'

'No, no, you need not. I can find it without the key.—To-morrow, I promise you, to-morrow.'

And as they walked homewards, the butterflies flitted in front of them.

That night, Johannes dreamed of his father, of Robinetta, and of many others. They were all good friends; they stood round him and looked at him kindly and trustfully. But on a sudden, their faces were changed, they looked coldly and laughed at him. He gazed about him in terror—on all sides there were none but angry, unfriendly faces. He felt a nameless misery, and awoke with a cry.

IX

Johannes had sat waiting for a long time. The air was chill, and heavy clouds swept over the scene in endless succession. They spread a dark grey mantle in wide folds, and lifted their proud heads to the bright light which shone above them. Sunshine and shadow chased each other with wonderful swiftness across the trees, like a fitfully blazing fire. Johannes was uneasy in his mind; he was thinking of the Book, not really believing that he should ever find it. Between the clouds very, very high up, he saw the clear, deep blue strewn with fleecy white clouds, soft and feathery, floating in calm and motionless rest.

'It must be like that!' thought he. 'So high, so bright, so still!'

Then came Robinetta. Her bird was not with her.

'It is all right, Johannes!' she cried out. 'You may come and see the Book.'

'Where is Robin Redbreast?' said Johannes doubtfully.

'He did not come; as we are not going for a walk.'

So he went with her, still thinking to himself: 'It cannot be.—It will not be like this,—it must be quite different.' However, he followed the shining golden hair which lighted up the way.

Alas! Sad things now befell little Johannes. I wish that his history ended here. Did you ever have a beautiful dream of an enchanted garden, with flowers and beasts who loved you and talked to you? And have you in your dream had the consciousness that you would presently awake, and all the glory of it vanish? Then you try with all your might to hold it fast, and not to see the cold light

of morning.

Johannes had just such a feeling as he followed Robinetta.

She led him into the big house, into a passage where his steps echoed. He could smell the scent of clothes and food; he thought of the long days when he had been kept indoors—of his school-days—and of everything in his life which had been cold and gloomy.

They went into a room full of men and women; how many, he could not see. They were talking, but as he went in they were silent. He noticed that the carpet had a pattern of huge, impossible flowers in gaudy colours. They were as strange and monstrous as those on the curtains in his bedroom at home.

'So that is the gardener's little boy?' said a voice opposite him. 'Come here, my little friend; there is nothing to be afraid of.'

And another voice close to him said—

'Well, Robbie, you have found a nice little companion.'

What did it all mean? The deep lines gathered again above Johannes's dark childlike eyes, and he looked about him in bewilderment and alarm. A man dressed in black sat near him, looking at him with cold, grey eyes.

'So you want to see the Book of Books? I am surprised that your father, whom I know for a pious man, should not have put it into your hands before now.'

'You do not know my father; he is far, far away.'

'Indeed! Well, it is the same thing. Look here, my little friend! Read this diligently; it shall show you the way of life—'

But Johannes had already recognised the Book. This was not what he wanted. No, something very different. He shook his head.

'No, no! that is not what I mean. I know this Book. This is not it.'

He heard exclamations of surprise, and felt the looks which were fixed on him from all sides.

'What? What do you mean, little man?'

'I know this book. It is the book men believe in. But there is not enough in it—if there were, there would be peace and goodwill among men. And there is none. I mean something different—something which no one can doubt who sees it; in which it is written, precisely and clearly, why everything is as it is.'

'How is that possible? Where can the boy have picked up such a notion?'

'Who taught you that, my little friend?'

'I am afraid that you have read some wicked books, child, and are talking like them.'

Thus spoke the various voices. Johannes felt his cheeks burning—his eyes were dim and dazzled—the room turned round, and the huge flowers on the carpet swayed up and down. Where was the little mouse who had so faithfully helped him that day in the school-room? He wanted her badly.

'I am not talking like any book, and he who taught me what I know is worth more than all of you together. I know the language of flowers and animals, and am friends with them all. And I know too what men are, and how they live. I know all the fairies' secrets and the wood-sprites'; for they all love me—more than men do.'

Oh Mousey, Mousey!

Johannes heard sounds of disapprobation and laughter behind him, and all sides. There was a singing and roaring in his ears.

'He seems to have read Hans Andersen's tales.'

'He is not quite right in his head.'

The man opposite to him said: 'If you know Andersen, my little man, you ought to have more of his reverence for God and His Word.'

'For God!' He knew that word, and he remembered Windekind's teaching.

'I have no reverence for God. God is a great Petroleum-lamp which leads thousands to misery and misfortune.'

There was no laughter now, but a terrible silence, in which horror and amazement might be felt on all sides. Johannes was conscious of piercing looks, even at his back. It was like his dream of the night before. The man in black stood up and took him by the arm. This hurt him and almost crushed his courage.

'Listen to me, youngster: I do not know whether you are utterly ignorant or utterly depraved, but I suffer no ungodly talk here. Go away, and never come in my sight again, I advise you. I will keep an eye on what becomes of you, but you never more set foot in this house. Do you understand?'

Every face was cold and hostile as he had seen them in his dream. Johannes looked about him in anguish.

'Robinetta—where is Robinetta?'

'Ay indeed! You would contaminate my child! Beware if you ever dare to come here again!' And the cruel grip led him down the echoing passage—the glass door slammed—and Johannes found himself outside, under the black driving clouds.

He did not turn round, but stared straight before him as he slowly walked away. The sad furrows above his eyes were deeper, and did not smooth out again.

The Redbreast sat in a lime hedge looking after him. He stopped and gazed back, but did not speak; but there was no longer any confidence in the bird's timid sharp little eyes, and when Johannes took a step nearer, the quick little creature shot away in hasty flight.

'Away, away! Here is a man!' piped the sparrows who were sitting in a row on the garden path, and they fluttered away in all directions. Even the open blossoms laughed no more, but looked grave and indifferent, as they do to all strangers. Still Johannes did not heed these signs, but only thought how cruelly he had been hurt by those men; it was as though a cold hard hand had been laid on his inmost secret soul. 'They shall believe me yet!' thought he. 'I will fetch my little key and show it to them.'

'Johannes, Johannes!' called a tiny voice. There was a bird's nest in a holly bush and Wistik's big eyes peeped out over the edge of it. 'Where are you off to?'

'It is all your fault!' said Johannes. 'Leave me in peace.'

'What took you to talk with men? Men can never understand you. Why do you tell men such things? It is most foolish.'

'They laughed at me, and hurt me. They are detestable creatures! I hate them.'

'No, Johannes; you love them.'

'No, no!'

'If you did not, it would not vex you so much to find yourself different from them; it could not matter to you what they say. You must learn to care less.'

'I want my key. I want to show it to them.'

'You must not do that; and they would not even then believe you. Of what use would it be?'

'I want my little key from under the rose-bush. Do you know where to find it?'

'Yes, certainly; by the pool you mean? Yes, I know it.'

'Then take me there, Wistik.'

Wistik clambered up on Johannes's shoulder and showed him the way. They went on and on, all the day; the wind blew, and heavy rain fell from time to time, but towards evening the clouds ceased driving, and packed into long grey and gold bars. When they reached the sand-hills which Johannes knew so well, his heart was sad within him, and he whispered again and again, 'Windekind, Windekind!'

There was the rabbit-hole, and the sand-hill where he had fallen asleep. The grey reindeer-moss was soft and damp, and did not crack under his feet. The roses were all over, and the yellow evening-primroses with their faint oppressive scent opened their cups by hundreds. Higher yet grew the tall mulleins with their thick woolly leaves. Johannes looked carefully to espy the small russet leaves of the wild rose.

'Where is it, Wistik? I do not see it.'

'I know nothing of it,' said Wistik. 'You buried the key, not I.'

Where the rose-tree had stood there was a plot covered with yellow *Oenotheras* staring heedlessly at the sky. Johannes questioned them, and the mullein too; but they were much too proud, for their tall stems rose far above his head; so he asked the little three-coloured pansies on the sandy ground. However, no one knew anything of the wild rose. They were all new-comers this summer, even the mullein, arrogant and tall as it was.

'Oh! where is it? where is it?'

'Have you too deceived me?' cried Wistik. 'I expected it; it is always so with men.'

And he let himself slip down from Johannes's shoulder, and ran away among the broom. Johannes looked about him in despair—there stood a tiny wild rose-bush.

'Where is the big rose-bush?' asked Johannes; 'the big one which used to stand here?'

'We never talk with human creatures,' said the shrub.

That was the last thing he heard; everything remained silent. Only the broom-shrubs sighed in the light evening breeze.

'Am I then a man?' thought Johannes. 'No! it cannot be, it cannot be! I will not be a man! I hate men!'

He was tired and sick at heart. He lay down at the edge of the meadow, on the soft grey moss which gave out a strong, damp scent.

'Now I cannot find my way back, and shall never see Robinetta again. Shall I not die if I have not Robinetta? Shall I live and grow to be a man—a man like those others who laughed at me?'

On a sudden he saw once more the two white butterflies which came flying towards him from the side where the sun was setting. He watched them anxiously; would they show him the way? They

fluttered over his head, sometimes close together and sometimes far apart, flitting about as if in whimsical play. By degrees they went farther and farther from the sun, and vanished at last over the ridge of the sand-hills towards the wood, where only the topmost boughs were now red in the evening glow which blazed out brightly from beneath the long dark levels of cloud.

Johannes rose and went after them, but as they flew up over the first trees he saw that a black shadow followed them and overtook them with noiseless flight. The next instant they were gone. The black shade pounced swiftly down on them, and Johannes in terror covered his face with his hands.

'Well, my little friend, what have you to cry about?' said a sharp mocking voice close at hand. Johannes had seen a big bat coming towards him, but when he now looked up a little black dwarf not much taller than himself was standing on the sand-hill. He had a large head with big ears which stuck out dark against the bright evening sky; a lean shape and thin legs. Johannes could see nothing of his face but the small twinkling eyes.

'Have you lost anything, my little fellow? Can I help you seek it?' said he. But Johannes shook his head in silence.

'Look here. Would you like to have these?' he began again, opening his hand. In it Johannes saw something white which still moved a little. This was the two white butterflies, their crushed and broken wings quivering in their death-struggle. Johannes shuddered as though some one had blown against the nape of his neck, and he looked up in alarm at the strange being.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'You would like to know my name? Well, call me Pluizer^[1]—simply Pluizer. I have other prettier names, but you would not understand them yet.'

'Are you a man?'

'Better and better! Well, I have arms and legs and a head—see what a head—and the boy asks me whether I am a man! Why, Johannes, Johannes!' And the mannikin laughed with a shrill piercing note.

'How do you know who I am?' asked Johannes.

'Oh, that, to me, is a mere trifle. I know a great deal more than that. I know whence you have come and what you came to do. I know a wonderful deal—almost everything.'

'Ah, Master Pluizer—'

'Pluizer, Pluizer—without any fine words.'

'Then do you know anything—' but Johannes was suddenly silent. 'He is a man,' thought he.

'Of the little key, do you mean? Why, to be sure!'

'But I did not think that any man could know about that.'

'Foolish boy! Besides, Wistik has told me all about it.'

'Then do you know Wistik too?'

'Oh yes! One of my best friends—and I have many friends. But I know it without Wistik. I know a great deal more than Wistik. Wistik is a very good fellow—but stupid, uncommonly stupid. Now, I am not! Far from it!'

And Pluizer tapped his big head with his lean little hand. 'Do you know, Johannes,' he went on, 'what Wistik's great defect is?—but you must never tell him, for he would be very angry.'

'Well, what is it?' said Johannes.

'He does not exist. That is a great defect, but he does not admit it. And he says the same of me, that I do not exist. But that is a lie. I not exist, indeed! What next, I wonder?'

And Pluizer put the butterflies into his satchel, and suddenly turning a somersault stood before Johannes on his head. Then, with a hideous grin, he stuck out a vile long tongue. Johannes, who did not feel at all at his ease alone with this strange being in the growing dusk on the deserted sand-hills, now fairly quaked with fear.

'This is a delightful manner of surveying the world,' said Pluizer, still upside down. 'If you like I will teach you to do it. You see everything much clearer, and more life-like.' And he flourished his little legs in the air and waltzed round on his hands. As the red light fell on his inverted face Johannes thought it perfectly horrible; those little eyes twinkled in the glow and showed the whites at the lower edge where it is not generally visible.

'You see, in this position the clouds seem to be the ground and the earth the top of the world. It is just as easy to maintain that as the converse. There is really no above or below. A very pretty place to walk on those clouds must be!'

Johannes looked up at the long stretches of cloud. They looked to him like a ploughed land, with red furrows, as though blood welled up from it. Just over the pool yawned the gate of the cloud-grotto.

'Can any one go there and enter in?' he asked.

'What nonsense!' said Pluizer, suddenly standing on his feet again, to Johannes's great relief, 'Nonsense! If you were there you would find it just the same as here, and it would look as beautiful as that further on again. But in those lovely clouds it is all foggy and grey and cold.'

'I do not believe you,' cried Johannes. 'Now I see you really are a man.'

'Come, come! You do not believe me, my little friend, because I am a man? And what sort of creature are you then, I should like to know?'

'O Pluizer! Am I, too, really a man?'

'What do you suppose? An elf? Elves are never in love.' And Pluizer unexpectedly sat down on the ground at Johannes's feet with his leg crossed under him, staring at him with a villainous grin. Johannes was unutterably embarrassed and uncomfortable under his gaze, and wished he could escape or become invisible. But he could not even take his eyes off him. 'Only men fall in love, Johannes, d'ye hear! And so much the better, or there would be none left by this time. And you are in love like the best of them, although you are but a little fellow. Of whom are you thinking at this moment?'

'Of Robinetta,' whispered Johannes, hardly above his breath.

'Whom do you most long for?'

'Robinetta.'

'Without whom do you think you could not live?' Johannes's lips moved silently: 'Robinetta.'

'Well then, youngster,' grinned Pluizer, 'what made you fancy that you could be an elf? Elves do not love the daughters of men.'

'But it was Windekind,' Johannes stammered out in his bewilderment. But Pluizer flew into a terrible rage and his bony fingers gripped Johannes by the ears.

'What folly is this? Would you try to frighten me with that whippersnapper thing? He is a greater simpleton than Wistik—much greater. He knows nothing at all. And what is worse, he does not exist in any sense, and never has existed. I only exist, do you understand? And if you do not believe me, I will let you feel what I am.' And he shook the hapless Johannes by the ears.

Johannes cried out—

'But I have known him such a long time, and have travelled such a long way with him!'

'You dreamed it, I tell you. Where are the rose bush and the little key, hey? But you are not dreaming now. Do you feel that?'

'Oh!' cried Johannes, for Pluizer nipped him.

It was by this time dark, and the bats flew close over their heads and piped shrilly. The air was black and heavy, not a leaf was stirring in the wood.

'May I go home?' asked Johannes,—'home to my father?'

'To your father! What to do there?' said Pluizer. 'A warm reception you will get from him after staying away so long.'

'I want to get home,' said Johannes, and he thought of the snug room with the bright lamp light where he would sit so often by his father's side, listening to the scratching of his pen. It was quiet there, and not lonely.

'Well then, you would have done better not to come away, and stayed so long for the sake of that senseless jackanapes who has not even any existence. Now it is too late, but it does not matter in the least; I will take care of you. And whether I do it or your father, comes to precisely the same in the end. Such a father—it is a mere matter of education. Did you choose your own father? Do you suppose that there is no one so good or so clever as he? I am just as good, and cleverer—much cleverer.'

Johannes had no heart to answer; he shut his eyes and nodded feebly.

'And it would be of no use to look for anything from Robinetta,' the little man went on. He laid his hands on Johannes's shoulders and spoke close into his ear. That child thought you just as much a fool as the others did. Did you not observe that she sat in the corner and never spoke a word when they all laughed at you? She is no better than the rest. She thought you a nice little boy, and was ready to play with you—as she would have played with a cockchafer. She will not care that you are gone away. And she knows nothing of that Book. But I do; I know where it is, and I will help you to find it. I know almost everything.'

And Johannes was beginning to believe him.

'Now will you come with me? Will you seek it with me?'

'I am so tired,' said Johannes, 'let me sleep first.'

'I have no opinion of sleep,' replied Pluizer, 'I am too active for that. A man must always be wide awake and thinking. But I will grant you a little time for rest. Till to-morrow morning!' And he put on the friendliest expression of which he was capable.

Johannes looked hard into his little twinkling eyes till he could see nothing else. His head was heavy and he lay down on the mossy knoll. The little eyes seemed to go further and further from him till they were starry specks in the dark sky; he fancied he heard the sound of distant voices, as though the earth beneath him were going away and away—and then he ceased to think at all.

[1] The plucker, the spoiler.

Even before he was fairly awake, he was vaguely conscious that something strange had happened to him while he slept. Still he was not anxious to know what, or to look about him. He would rather return to the dream which was slowly fading like a rising mist—Robinetta had come to be with him again, and had stroked his hair as she used to do—and he had seen his father once more, and Presto, in the garden with the pool.

'Oh! That hurt! Who did that?' Johannes opened his eyes, and in the grey morning light, he saw a little man standing at his side who had pulled his hair. He himself was in bed, and the light was dim and subdued, as in a room.

But the face which bent over him at once carried him back to all the misery and distress of the past evening. It was Pluizer's face, less boguey-like and more human, but as ugly and terrifying as ever.

'Oh, no! Let me dream!' cried Johannes.

But Pluizer shook him. 'Are you crazy, sluggard? Dreaming is folly; you will never get any further by that. A man must work and think and search; that is what you are a man for.'

'I do not want to be a man. I want to dream.'

'I cannot help that; you must. You are now in my charge, and you must work and seek with me. With me alone can you ever find the thing you want. And I will not give in till we have found it.'

Johannes felt a vague dismay; still, a stronger will coerced and drove him. He involuntarily submitted.

The sand-hills, trees, and flowers had vanished. He was in a small dimly-lighted room; outside, as far as he could see, there were houses, and more houses, dingy and grey, in long dull rows. Smoke rose from every one of them in thick wreaths, and made a sort of brown fog in the streets. And along those streets men were hurrying, like great black ants. A mingled, dull clamour came up from the throng without ceasing.

'Look, Johannes,' said Pluizer. 'Now is not that a fine sight? Those are men, and all the houses, whichever way you look, and as far as you can see—even beyond the blue towers there—are full of men—quite full from top to bottom. Is not that wonderful? That is rather different from a sand-hill!'

Johannes listened with alarmed curiosity, as though some huge and hideous monster had risen up before him. He felt as if he stood on the creature's back, and could see the black blood flowing through its great arteries, and the murky breath streaming from its hundred nostrils. And the portentous hum of that terrible voice filled him with fears.

'Look how fast the men walk,' Pluizer went on. 'You can see that they are in a hurry and are seeking something, cannot you? But the amusing thing is, that not one of them knows exactly what he is seeking. When they have been seeking for some little time, some one comes to meet them—his name is Hein.'

'Who is he?' asked Johannes.

'Oh, a very good friend of mine. I will introduce you to him some day. Then Hein says to them, "Are you looking for me?" To which most of them reply, "Oh no. I do not want you!" But then Hein says again, "But there is nothing to be found but me." So they have to be satisfied with Hein.'

Johannes understood that he meant death.

'And is it always, always so?'

'To be sure, always. And yet, day after day, a new crowd come on, who begin forthwith to seek they know not what, and they seek and seek till at last they find Hein. This has been going on for a good while already, and so it will continue for some time yet.'

'And shall I never find anything, Pluizer—nothing but—?'

'Ay, you will find Hein some day, sure enough! but that does not matter; seek all the same—for ever be seeking.'

'But the Book, Pluizer, you were to make me find the Book.'

'Well who knows? I have not taken back my word. We must seek it diligently. At any rate we know where to look for it; Wistik taught us that. And there are folks who spend all their lives in the search without even knowing so much as that. Those are the men of science, Johannes. But then Hein comes and it is all over with their search.'

'That is horrible, Pluizer!'

'Oh no, not at all! Hein is a very kind creature; but he is misunderstood.'

Some one was heard on the staircase outside the bedroom door. Tramp, tramp, up the wooden steps—tramp, tramp,—nearer and nearer. Then some one tapped at the door, and it was as though iron rapped against the panel.

A tall man came in. He had deep-set eyes and long lean hands. A cold draught blew into the room.

'Good-day,' said Pluizer, 'so it is you! Sit down. We were just speaking of you. How are you getting on?'

'Busy, busy!' said the tall man, and he wiped the cold dews from his bald, bony forehead.

Without moving Johannes looked timidly into the deep-set eyes which were fixed on his. They were grave and gloomy, but not cruel, not angry. After a few minutes he breathed more freely and his heart beat less wildly.

'This is Johannes,' said Pluizer. 'He has heard of a certain book in which it is written why everything is as it is, and we are now going to seek it together, are we not?' And Pluizer laughed significantly.

'Ay, indeed? That is well!' said Death kindly, and he nodded to Johannes.

'He is afraid he will not find it, but I tell him first to seek it diligently.'

'To be sure,' said Death. 'Seek diligently, that is the best way.'

'He thought, too, that you were very dreadful. But you see, Johannes, that you were mistaken.'

'Oh yes,' said Death good-humouredly, 'men speak much evil of me. I am not attractive to look upon, but I mean well, nevertheless.'

He smiled faintly, as one who is occupied with more serious matters than those he is speaking of. Then he took his dark gaze from Johannes's face, and looked out thoughtfully over the great city.

For a long time Johannes dared not speak; but at last he said in a low voice—

'Are you going to take me with you?'

'What do you mean, my child?' said Death, roused from his meditations. 'No, not now. You must grow up and become a good man.'

'I will not grow to be a man like all the rest.'

'Come, come,' said Death, 'there is no help for it.'

And it was easy to hear that this was a frequent phrase with him. He went on—

'My friend Pluizer can teach you how to become a good man. There are various ways of being good, but Pluizer can teach you admirably. It is a very fine and noble thing to be a good man. You must never look down on a good man, my little fellow.'

'Seek, think, look about you,' said Pluizer.

'To be sure, to be sure,' said Death. And then he inquired of Pluizer: 'To whom will you take him?'

'To Doctor Cypher, my old pupil.'

'Ah yes,—a very good pupil. A very capital example of a man! Almost perfect in his own way.'

'Shall I see Robinetta again?' asked Johannes, trembling.

'What does the boy mean?' asked Death.

'Oh, he was in love, and fancied that he was an elf. Ha, ha, ha!' laughed Pluizer spitefully.

'No, no, my little man, that will never do,' said Death. 'You will soon forget all that when you are with Doctor Cypher. Those who seek what you seek must give up everything else. All or nothing.'

'I shall make a real man of him. I will let him see some day what being in love really means, and then he will cast it from him altogether.'

And Pluizer laughed heartily. Death again fixed his black eyes on poor Johannes, who had some difficulty in refraining from sobbing. But he was ashamed to cry in the presence of Death.

Death suddenly rose. 'I must be going,' said he. 'I am wasting my time in talk, and there is much to be done. Good-bye, Johannes!—We shall meet again. But you must not be afraid of me.'

'I am not afraid of you; I wish you would take me with you.'

But Death gently pushed him away; he was used to such entreaties.

'No, Johannes.—Go now to your work in life; seek and see! Ask me no more. *I* will ask you some day, and that will be quite soon enough.'

When he had disappeared Pluizer again began to behave in the wildest fashion. He leaped over the seats, turned somersaults, climbed up the cupboard and chimney-shelf, and played break-neck tricks at the open window.

'Well, that was Hein, my good friend Hein!' said he. 'Did you not like him greatly? A little unattractive and bony-looking, perhaps. But he can be very jolly too, when he takes pleasure in his work. Sometimes it bores him; it is rather monotonous.'

'Pluizer, who tells him where he is to go next?'

Pluizer stared at Johannes with a look of cunning inquiry.

'What makes you ask?—He goes where he pleases—He takes those he can catch.'

Later, Johannes came to see that it was not so. But as yet he knew no better, and thought that Pluizer was always right.

They went out and up the street, moving among the swarming throng. The men in their black clothes bustled about, laughing and talking so gaily that Johannes could not help wondering. He saw how Pluizer nodded to several, but no one returned the greeting; they all looked in front of them as if they did not even see him.

'They go by and laugh now,' said Pluizer, 'as if they none of them knew me. But that is only make-believe. When I am alone with one of them they cannot pretend not to know me, and then they are not so light-hearted.'

And as they went on Johannes was presently aware of some one following them. When he looked round he saw that the tall pale figure was striding on among the people, with long noiseless steps. He nodded to Johannes.

'Do the people see him too?' asked Johannes of Pluizer.

'Certainly, but they do not choose to know him. Well, I pardon them for their arrogance!'

The crowd and the turmoil produced a sort of bewilderment which made Johannes forget his woes. The narrow streets and the high houses, which cut the blue heavens above into straight strips, the people going up and down them, the shuffling of feet and the clatter of vehicles, ousted the visions and dreams of the night, as a storm dissipates the images in a pool of water. It seemed to him that there was nothing in the world but walls, and windows, and men. He felt as if he too must do the same, and rush and push in the seething, breathless whirl.

Presently they came to a quieter neighbourhood, where a large house stood, with plain grey windows. It looked stern and unkindly. Everything was silent within, and Johannes smelt a mixture of sour, unfamiliar odours, with a damp, cellar-like atmosphere for their background. In a room filled with strange-looking instruments sat a lonely man. He was surrounded by books, and glass and copper objects, all unknown to Johannes. A single ray of sunshine fell into the room above his head, and sparkled on flasks full of bright-coloured liquids. The man was gazing fixedly through a copper tube and did not look up.

As Johannes approached he could hear him murmuring, 'Wistik, Wistik!'

By the man's side, on a long black board, lay something white and furry which Johannes could not see very clearly.

'Good-morning, doctor,' said Pluizer; but the doctor did not move.

But Johannes was startled, for the white object which he was watching intently, suddenly began to move convulsively. What he had seen was the white fur of a rabbit lying on its back. The head, with the mobile nose, was fixed in an iron clamp, and its four little legs were firmly bound to its body. The hopeless effort to get free was soon over, then the little creature lay still again, and only the rapid movement of its bleeding throat showed that it was still alive. And Johannes saw its round, gentle eye staring wide in helpless terror, and he felt as if he recognised the poor little beast. Was not that the soft little body against which he had slept that first delightful night with the elves? Old memories crowded in his mind; he flew to the rabbit.

'Wait, wait! Poor rabbit! I will release you!' and he hastily tried to cut the cords which bound the tender little paws. But his hands were tightly clutched, and a sharp laugh sounded in his ear.

'What do you mean by this, Johannes? Are you still such a baby? What must the doctor think of you?'

'What does the boy want? What brings him here?' asked the doctor in surprise.

'He wants to become a man, so I have brought him to you. But he is still young and childish. That is not the way to find what you are seeking, Johannes.'

'No, that is not the way,' said the doctor. 'Doctor, set the rabbit free!'

But Pluizer held him by both hands till he hurt him.

'What did we agree on, little man?' he whispered in his ear. 'To seek diligently, was it not? We are not on the sand-hills now, with Windekind and the dumb brutes. We are to be men—men. Do you understand? If you mean to remain a child, if you are not strong enough to help me, I will send you about your business and you may seek by yourself.'

Johannes was silent, and believed him. He would be strong. He shut his eyes so that he might not see the rabbit.

'My dear boy,' said the doctor, 'you seem still too tender-hearted to begin. To be sure—the first time it is horrible to look on. I myself, for some time, was most averse to it, and avoided it as far as possible. But it is indispensable; and you must remember we are men and not brutes, and the advancement of mankind and of science is of more importance than a few rabbits.'

'Do you hear?' said Pluizer,—'science and mankind.'

'The man of science,' the doctor went on, 'stands far above all other men. But he must make all the smaller feelings which are common to the vulgar give way to the one grand idea of science. Will you be such a man? Is that your vocation, my boy?'

Johannes hesitated; he did not know justly what a vocation might be—any more than the cockchafer.

'I want to find the book of which Wistik spoke,' said he.

The doctor looked surprised and asked, 'Wistik?'

Pluizer hastened to reply. 'He will, doctor; I know he really will. He desires to seek the highest wisdom and to understand the true nature of tilings.'

Johannes nodded, 'Yes!' So far as he understood the matter, that was what he meant.

'Very well; but then you must be strong, Johannes, and not timid and soft-hearted. Then I can help you. But remember: all or nothing.'

And with trembling fingers Johannes helped to tighten the relaxed cords round the rabbit's little paws.

XI

'Now we shall see,' said Pluizer, 'whether I cannot show you just as pretty things as Windekind did.'

And when they had taken leave of the doctor, promising to return soon, he led Johannes into every nook and corner of the great town; he showed him how the Monster lived, how he breathed and took in food, how he digested within and expanded without. But what he liked best were the gloomy back slums, where men sat closely packed, where everything was grey and grizzly, and the air black and heavy. He took him into one of the great buildings from which the smoke rose which Johannes had seen the first day. The place was filled with deafening noise—thumping, rattling, hammering and droning—great wheels were turning and long belts sliding endlessly onward; the walls and floors were black, the windows broken and murky. The towering chimneys rose high above the dingy structure, and poured forth thick wreaths of smoke. Amid the turmoil of wheels and axles, Johannes saw numbers of men with pale faces and blackened hands and clothes, working busily without a word.

'Who are they?' he asked.

'Wheels, wheels too,' said Pluizer with a laugh, 'or men, if you choose to call them so. And what you see them doing, they do from morning to night. Even so, they can be men—after their own fashion, of course.'

Then they passed along filthy streets, where the strip of heavenly blue seemed no more than a finger's breadth wide, and was still more shut out by clothes hung out to air. These alleys were swarming with people, who jostled each other, shouted, laughed and sometimes even sang. In the houses here, the rooms were so small, so dark and foul, that Johannes could scarcely breathe. He saw squalid children crawling about on the bare floor, and young girls with tangled hair crooning songs to pale, hungry babies. He heard quarrelling and scolding, and every face he looked upon was weary, or stupid and indifferent.

It filled Johannes with a strange sudden pang. It had nothing in common with any former pain, and he felt ashamed of it.

'Pluizer,' said he, 'have men always lived here in such grief and misery? And when I—' he dared not finish the question.

'To be sure, and a happy thing too. They are not in such grief and misery; they are used to it and know no better. They are mere animals, ignorant and indifferent. Look at those two women sitting in front of their door; they look out on the dirty street as contentedly as you used to gaze at the sand-hills. You need not worry yourself about the lot of man. You might as well cry over the lot of the moles who never see daylight.'

And Johannes did not know what to answer, nor what, then, he ought to weep over. And ever through the noisy throng and bustle, he still saw the pale, hollow-eyed figure marching on with noiseless steps.

'A good man, don't you think?' said Pluizer. 'He takes them away from this at any rate. But even here men are afraid of him.'

When night had fallen and hundreds of lights flared in the wind, casting long, straggling reflections in the black water, they made their way down the quiet streets. The tall old houses seemed tired out, and asleep as they leaned against each other. Most of them had their eyes shut; but here and there a window still showed a pale gleam of yellow light.

Pluizer told Johannes many a long tale of those who dwelt within, of the sufferings which were endured there, and the struggle waged between misery and the love of life. He spared him nothing: he sought out the gloomiest, the lowest, the most dreadful facts, and grinned with delight as Johannes turned pale and speechless at his horrible tales.

'Pluizer,' Johannes suddenly asked, 'do you know anything about the Great Light?' He thought the question might deliver him from the darkness which grew thicker and more oppressive about him.

'All nonsense!' said Pluizer. 'Windekind's nonsense! Mere visions and dreams! Men alone exist—and I myself. Do you suppose that a God, or anything at all like one, could take pleasure in governing such a muddle as prevails on this earth? And such a Great Light would not shine here in the dark.'

'But the stars, what about the stars?' asked Johannes as if he expected that the visible Splendour would raise up the squalor before him.

'The stars! Do you know of what you are talking, boy? There are no lights up there like the lamps you see about you here below. The stars are nothing but worlds, a great deal larger than this world with its thousand cities, and we move among them like a speck of dust; and there is no

"above" or "below," but worlds all round, and on every side more worlds, and no end of them anywhere.'

'No, no!' cried Johannes in horror. 'Do not say so, do not say so! I can see the lights against a great dark background overhead.'

'Very true. You cannot see anything but lights. If you stared up at the sky all your life long you would still see nothing but lights against a dark background overhead. But, you know, you must know, that there is no above nor beneath. Those are worlds, amid which this clod of earth, with its wretched, struggling mass of humanity, is as nothing—and will vanish into nothing. Do not ever speak of "the stars" in that way, as though there were but a few dozen of them. It is foolishness.'

Johannes said no more. The immensity which ought to have elevated the squalor had crushed it.

'Come along,' said Pluizer. 'Now we will go to see something amusing.'

At intervals bursts of delightful, soft music were wafted to their ears. On a dark slope in front of them stood a large building with lamps blazing in its numerous long windows. A row of carriages was in waiting outside; the pawing of the horses rang hollow through the silent night, and as they shook their heads, sparks of light shone on the silver fittings of their harness, and on the varnish of the coaches.

Inside, everything was a blaze of light. Johannes was half blinded as he gazed, by the hundreds of candles, the bright colours, the glitter of mirrors and flowers. Gay figures flitted across the windows, bowing to each other, with laughter and gestures. Beyond, at the other side of the room, richly dressed persons were moving about with slow dignity or spinning with swift, swaying motion. A confused sound of laughter and merry voices, of shuffling feet and rustling dresses came through the front door, mingling with the waves of that soft bewitching music which Johannes had already heard from afar. In the street, close to the windows, stood a few dark figures, their faces only strangely lighted up by the illumination within, at which they stared with avidity.

'That is pretty! That is splendid!' cried Johannes, delighted at the sight of so much light and colour, and so many flowers. 'What is going on in there? May we go in?'

'Indeed! So you really think that pretty? Or do you not prefer a rabbit-hole? Look at the people as they laugh, and bow, and glitter. See how stately and polite the men are; and how gay and fine the ladies! And how solemnly they dance, as if it were the most important thing on earth.'

Johannes recalled the ball in the rabbit-burrow, and he saw a great deal which reminded him of it. But here, everything was much grander and more brilliant. The young ladies in their beautiful array seemed to him as lovely as elves, as they raised their long, bare arms, and bent their heads on one side in the dance. The servants moved about incessantly, offering elegant refreshments with respectful bows.

'How splendid! How splendid!' cried Johannes.

'Very pretty, is it not?' said Pluizer. 'But now you must learn to look a little further than the end of your nose. You see nothing there but happy smiling faces? Well, the greater part of all that mirth is falsehood and affectation. The friendly old ladies in the corner sit there like anglers round a pond; the young girls are the bait, the men are the fish. And affectionately as they gossip together, they envy and grudge each other every fish that bites. If either of the young ladies feels some pleasure, it is because she has a prettier dress than the rest, or secures more partners; the pleasure of the men chiefly consists in the bare shoulders and arms of the ladies. Behind all these bright eyes and pleasant smiles there lurks something quite different. Even the thoughts of the respectful servants are very far from respectful. If suddenly every one should give utterance to his real thoughts the party would soon be at an end.'

And when Pluizer pointed it all out to him, Johannes could plainly see the insincerity of the faces and manners of the company, and the vanity, envy, and weariness which showed through the smiling mask, or were suddenly revealed as though it had just been taken off.

'Well,' said Pluizer, 'they must do things in their own way. Human creatures must have some amusement, and they know no other way.'

Johannes was aware of some one standing just behind him. He looked round; it was the well-known tall figure. The pale face was strangely lighted up by the glare, so that the eyes showed as large dark caverns. He was muttering softly to himself and pointed with one finger into the splendid ball-room.

'Look,' said Pluizer, 'he is seeking out some one.'

Johannes looked where the finger pointed, and he saw how the old lady who was speaking closed her eyes and put her hand to her head; and how a fair young girl paused in her slow walk, and stared before her with a slight shiver.

'How soon?' Pluizer asked of Death.

'That is my affair,' was the answer.

'I should like to show Johannes this same company once more,' said Pluizer with a grin and a wink, 'can I do it?'

'This evening?' asked Death.

'Why not?' said Pluizer. 'There, time and the hour are no more. What now is has always been, and

what shall be, is now already.'

'I cannot go with you,' said Death. 'I have too much to do. But speak the name we both know and you can find the way without me.'

Then they went a little way along the deserted streets where the gas was flaring in the night wind, and the dark cold water plashed against the sides of the canals. The soft music grew fainter and fainter, and at last died away in the hush which lay over the town.

Presently, from high above them, a loud and festal song rang out with a deep, echoing, metallic ring. It came down suddenly from the tall church tower on the sleeping city, and into little Johannes' sad and gloomy soul. He looked up much startled. The chime rang on with clear, steady tones, rising joyfully in the air, and boldly scaring the death-like silence. The glad strain struck him as strange—a festal song in the midst of noiseless sleep and blackest woe.

'That is the clock,' said Pluizer, 'it is always cheerful, year in, year out. It sings the same song every hour, with the same vigour and vivacity; and it sounds more gleeful by night than even by day, as if the clock rejoiced that it has no need of sleep, that it can sing at all times with equal contentment, while thousands, just below, are weeping and suffering. But it sounds most gladly when some one is just dead.'

Again the jubilant peal rang out.

'One day, Johannes,' Pluizer went on, 'a dim light will be burning in a quiet room, behind just such a window as that yonder; a melancholy light, flickering pensively, and making the shadows dance on the wall. There will be no sound in that room but now and then a low, suppressed sob. A bed will be standing there, with white curtains, and long shadows in their folds. In the bed something will be lying—white and still. That will have been little Johannes. And then, how loud and joyful will that chime sound, breaking into the room, and singing out the first hour after his death!'

Twelve was striking, booming through the air with long pauses between the strokes. At the last stroke, Johannes, all at once, had a strange feeling as though he were dreaming; he was no longer walking, but floating along a little way above the ground, holding Pluizer's hand. The houses and lamps sped past him in swift flight. And now the houses stood less close together. They formed separate rows, with dark, mysterious gaps between them, where the gas lamps lighted up trenches, puddles, scaffoldings and woodwork. At last they reached a great gate, with heavy pillars and a tall railing. In a twinkling, they had floated over it and come down again on some soft grass by a high heap of sand. Johannes fancied he must be in a garden, for he heard the rustling of trees hard by.

'Now pay attention, and then confess whether I cannot do greater things than Windekind.'

Then Pluizer shouted aloud a short and awful name which made Johannes quake. The darkness on all sides echoed the sound, and the wind bore it up in widening circles till it died away in the upper air.

And Johannes saw the grass blades growing so tall that they were above his head, and a little pebble which but just now was under his feet, seemed to be close to his face. Pluizer, by his side, and no bigger than he was, picked up the stone with both hands and threw it away with all his might. A confused noise of thin, shrill voices rose up from the spot he had cleared.

'Hey day! who is doing that? What is the meaning of it? Lout!' they could hear said.

Johannes saw black objects running in great confusion. He recognised the quick, nimble ground-beetle, the shining, brown ear-wig with his fine nippers, the millipede with its round back and thousand tiny feet, in the midst of them a long earthworm shrank back as quick as lightning into its burrow! Pluizer made his way through the angry swarm of creatures to the worm's hole.

'Hey there! you long, naked crawler! come up and show yourself once more with your sharp red nose!' he cried.

'What do you want?' asked the worm from below.

'You must come out, because I want to go in; do you hear, you bare-skinned sand-eater!'

The worm cautiously put his pointed head out of the hole, felt all round it two or three times, and then slowly dragged his naked ringed body up to the surface. Pluizer looked round at the other creatures who had crowded curiously about them.

'One of you must go first with a light—no, Master Beetle, you are too stout, and you with your thousand feet would make me giddy. Hey, you ear-wig! I like your looks. Come with me and carry a light in your nippers. You, beetle, must look about for a will-o'-the-wisp, or fetch a chip of rotten wood.'

The creatures were scared by his commanding tones and obeyed him.

Then they went down into the worm's burrow; the ear-wig first, with the shining wood, then Pluizer, and then Johannes. It was a narrow passage and very dark down there. Johannes saw the grains of sand glittering in the dim blue gleam. They looked like large stones, half transparent and built up into a smooth firm wall by the worm's body. The worm himself followed, full of curiosity. Johannes saw the pointed head come close up behind him, and then stop till the long body had been dragged after it. Down they went, without speaking, far and deep. When the path was too steep for Johannes, Pluizer helped him. They seemed never to be coming to an end; still fresh galleries of sand, and still the ear-wig crept on, turning and bending with the sinuosities of

the passage. At last this grew broader, and the walls opened out. The grains of sand were black and wet, forming a vault overhead, down which driblets of water made shining streaks, while the roots of trees came through in coils like petrified snakes.

And suddenly there rose before Johannes's eyes an upright wall, black and high, cutting off all space beyond. The ear-wig turned round.

'Here we are. The next question is how to get any further. The worm ought to know; he is at home here.'

'Come on; show us the way,' said Pluizer.

The worm slowly dragged his jointed body up to the black wall and felt it inquisitively. Johannes could see that it was of wood. Here and there it had fallen into brownish powder. The worm bored his way into one such place and the long, wriggling body vanished with three pushes and pauses.

'Now for you,' said Pluizer, pushing Johannes into the little round opening. For a moment he thought he should be suffocated in the soft damp stuff, but he soon felt his head free, and with some trouble worked his way completely through. A large room seemed to lie open before him; the floor was hard and moist, the air thick and intolerably oppressive. Johannes could scarcely breathe, and stood waiting in mortal terror.

He heard Pluizer's voice, which sounded hollow, as in some vast cellar.

'Here, Johannes, follow me.'

He felt the ground before him rise to a hill—and he climbed it, clutching Pluizer's hand in the darkness. He trod, as it were, on a carpet which yielded under his foot. He trampled over hollows and ridges, following Pluizer who led him on to a level spot where he held on by some long stems which bent in his hand like reed-grass.

'Here we can stand very comfortably. Bring a light,' said Pluizer.

The dim light came on from a distance, up and down with its bearer. The nearer it approached, and the more its pale gleam spread in the place they were in, the more terrible became Johannes's anguish of mind. The eminence on which he stood was long and white; the support he clung to was brown, and lay about in glistening waves and curls.

He recognised the features of a human being, and the icy level on which he stood was the forehead. Before him lay the sunken eyes, two deep, dark hollows, and the blue gleam fell on the pinched nose and ashy lips which were parted in the hideous, rigid smile of death.

Pluizer laughed sharply, but the sound seemed smothered by the damp, wooden walls.

'Is not this a surprise, Johannes?'

The worm crept up along the plaits of the shroud: he glided over the chin and the stiffened lips and into the mouth.

'This was the beauty of the ball, whom you thought lovelier even than an elf. Then her hair and dress shed sweet fragrance; then her eyes sparkled and her lips smiled. Now,—look at her!'

With all his horror there was doubt in Johannes's eyes. So soon? The splendour was but now—and already—?

'Do you not believe me?' grinned Pluizer. 'Half a century lies between now and then. Time and the hour are no more. What has been shall always be, and what shall be has ever been. You could not conceive of it, but you must believe it. Everything here is the truth. All I tell you is true! True!—and Windekind could not say that.'

With a nod and a grimace he leaped round the dead face, and played the most horrible antics. He sat on the eyebrows and raised the eyelids by the long lashes. The eye, which Johannes had seen bright with gladness, stared dull and white in the pale light.

'Now onwards!' cried Pluizer. 'There is more yet to be seen.'

The worm came creeping up from a corner of the mouth, and the dreadful march began once more. Not back again, but along new paths, no less long and gloomy.

'This is much older,' said the earthworm as he made his way through another black wall. 'This has been here a very long time.'

It was less dreadful here than before. Johannes saw nothing but a confused mass, out of which brown bones projected. Hundreds of insects were silently busy here. The light startled and alarmed them.

'Where do you come from? Who brings a light here? We want no light.' And they hastily vanished into the folds and crevices. But they recognised a fellow-creature.

'Have you been in the next one?' asked the worms. 'The wood is still hard.'

The first worm denied it. 'He wants to keep the find to himself,' said Pluizer to Johannes in a low voice.

Then they went forward again; Pluizer explained everything, and pointed out persons whom Johannes had known. They came to an ugly face with prominent, staring eyes, and thick dark lips and cheeks.

'This was a very fine gentleman,' said he in high glee. 'You should have seen him—so rich, so

fashionable, so arrogant. He is as much puffed up as ever!

And so they went on. There were lean and haggard faces with white hair that shone blue in the feeble light, and little children with large heads and old-looking, anxious features.

'These, you see, died first and grew old afterwards,' said Pluizer.

They came to a man with a flowing beard and parted lips, showing glistening white teeth. There was a round black hole in the middle of his forehead.

'This one lent Death a helping hand. Why had he not a little patience? He would have come here in the end.'

Through passage after passage, one after another, they passed, no end of them—straight-laid figures, with rigid, grinning faces, and motionless hands laid one over the other.

'Now I can go no further,' said the ear-wig. 'I do not know my way beyond this.'

'Let us turn back,' said the worm.

'One more, one more!' cried Pluizer.

So on they went.

'Everything you see here, actually exists,' said Pluizer, as they made their way forward. 'It is all real. One thing only is not real, and that is yourself, Johannes. You are not here; you cannot come here.'

And he laughed maliciously as he saw Johannes's terrified and bewildered face at these words.

'This is the last, positively the last.'

'The way stops here. I am going no further,' said the ear-wig crossly.

'I will go further,' said Pluizer; and where the path ended he began grubbing the earth with both hands.

'Help me, Johannes.'

And Johannes, submissive with wretchedness, obeyed, scratching away the fine damp soil. Silent and breathless they worked away till they came to the black wood.

The worm had drawn back his ringed head and disappeared. The ear-wig dropped the light and turned away.

'It is impossible to get in, the wood is new,' said he as he withdrew.

'I will do it!' said Pluizer, and with his clawed fingers he tore long white splinters cracking out of the wood.

A fearful anguish came over Johannes. But he could not help himself; there was no escape.

At last the dark thing was opened. Pluizer seized the light and hurried in.

'Here, here!' he cried, running to the head.

But when Johannes came as far as the hands, which lay quietly folded over the breast, he stopped. He gazed at the thin white fingers, dimly lighted from above. On a sudden, he recognised them,—he knew the shape and turn of the fingers, the look of the long nails, now blue and dull. He recognised a brown spot on one of the forefingers. These were his own hands.

'Here, this way!' Pluizer called from the head. 'Only look, do you know him?'

Hapless Johannes tried to stand up and go towards the light which winked at him; but he could not. The gleam died into total darkness and he fell senseless.

XII

He had sunk into deep sleep—that sleep which is too deep for dreams.

When he came out of the darkness—very slowly—into the cool grey light of dawn, he passed through varied and peaceful dreams of an early time. He woke up, and they glided off his soul, like dew-drops off a flower. The look in his eyes was calm and sweet as they still gazed on the crowd of lovely images.

But he closed them again quickly as though the glare were painful, to shut out the pale daylight. He saw just what he had seen the morning before. It seemed to him far away and a long time ago. Still, hour by hour, he remembered it all, from the dreary day-break to the terrible night. He could not believe that all these horrors had come upon him in a single day. The beginning of his wretchedness seemed so remote, lost in grey mist.

The sweet dreams vanished, and left no trace on his spirit; Pluizer shook him, and the dreadful day began, gloomy and colourless; the first of many, many more. But all he had seen last night in that terrible walk dwelt in his mind. Had it been no more than a fearful vision?

When he asked Pluizer doubtfully, he looked at him with mockery and amazement.

'What do you mean?' he said.

But Johannes did not see the sarcasm in his eyes, and asked whether all this, which he still saw

so plainly and clearly, had not indeed been true.

'Why, Johannes, how silly you are! Such a thing could never happen at all.'

And Johannes did not know what to think.

'We must set you to work at once, and then you will ask no more such foolish questions.'

So they went to Doctor Cypher, who was to help Johannes to find what he sought.

But as they went along the crowded street, Pluizer suddenly stood still, and pointed out a man in the throng.

'Do you remember him?' asked Pluizer, and he laughed aloud when Johannes turned pale and stared at the man in terror. He had seen him last night, deep under ground.

The doctor received them kindly and imparted his learning to Johannes, who listened to him for hours that day—and for many days after. The doctor had not found what they sought; but was very near it, he said. He would lead Johannes as far as he himself had gone, and then, together, they would be sure to achieve to it.

Johannes learned and listened, diligently and patiently—day after day, and month after month. He had very little hope, but he understood that he must go on now, as far as possible. He thought it strange that the longer he sought the light the darker it grew around him. The beginning of everything, he learned, was the best part of it, but the deeper he got the duller and more obscure it became. He began with the study of plants and animals, of everything about him, and when he had studied these a long time they all turned to numbers. Everything resolved itself into numbers—pages of figures. This Doctor Cypher thought quite splendid; he said that light would come to them as the numbers came, but to Johannes it was darkness.

Pluizer never left him, and drove and urged him on when he was disheartened or weary. His presence marred every moment of enjoyment and admiration. Johannes was amazed and delighted when he learnt and saw how exquisitely flowers were constructed, how the fruit was formed, and how insects unconsciously helped in the process.

'That is beautiful!' he exclaimed. 'How exactly it is all arranged, and how delicately and accurately contrived!'

'Yes, amazingly contrived,' said Pluizer. 'The pity is that the greater part of this ingenuity and accuracy comes to nothing. How many flowers produce fruit, and how many seeds become trees?'

'But still, it seems to be all wrought by some grand plan,' said Johannes. 'Look, the bees seek honey for their own ends and do not know that they are serving the flowers, and the flowers attract the bees by their colours. That is a scheme, and they both work it out without knowing it.'

'That all looks very pretty, but it fails in many ways. When the bees have a chance, they bite a hole through the flower and make the whole internal structure useless. He is a clever Contriver indeed who can be laughed to scorn by a bee!'

And when he came to study the organism of men and beasts, matters were even worse. Whenever Johannes thought anything beautiful or well adapted, Pluizer would demonstrate its imperfections and inefficiency. He expatiated on the host of ills and woes to which every living creature is liable, selecting by preference the most disgusting and terrible.

'The Contriver, Johannes, was very shrewd, but in everything he made he forgot something, and men have as much as they can do to patch up these defects as best they may. You have only to look about you. An umbrella, a pair of spectacles—for shelter and better sight—these are specimens of man's patching. They are no part of the original plan. But the Contriver never considered that men would have colds, and read books, and do a thousand other things for which his plan was inadequate. He gave his children clothes without reflecting that they would outgrow them. Almost all men have by this time long outgrown their natural outfit. Now they do everything for themselves, and never trouble themselves at all about the Contriver and his schemes. What he failed to give them, they simply take by brute force; and when the obvious result is that they must die, they evade death, sometimes for a long period, by a variety of devices.'

'But it is men's own fault,' said Johannes. 'Why do they wilfully deviate from the laws of nature?'

'Oh, silly Johannes! If a nursemaid lets an innocent child play with fire and it is burned, whose fault is it? The child's, who knew nothing about fire; or the nurse's, who knew that it would burn itself? And who is to blame if men pine in misery and disobedience to nature—they or the all-wise Contriver, compared with whom we are ignorant children?'

'But they are not ignorant, they know—'

'Johannes, if you say to a child: Do not touch that fire, it will hurt you—and if the child touches it all the same because it does not know what pain is, can you then plead your own innocence and say: The child was not ignorant? Did you not know that it would not heed your advice? Men are as foolish as children. Glass is brittle and clay is soft. And He who made men and did not take their folly into account, is like a man who should make weapons of glass and not expect them to break, or arrows of clay and not expect them to bend.'

His words fell like drops of liquid fire on Johannes's soul, and his heart swelled with a great grief to which his former woes were as nothing, and which often made him weep in the silent, sleepless hours of the night.

Oh, for sleep! sleep! There came a time after long days, when nothing was so dear to him as

sleep. Then he neither thought nor suffered; in his dreams he was always carried back to his old life. It seemed to him beautiful as he dreamed of it, but day by day he could never remember exactly how things had then been. He only knew that the vexations and cravings of that former time were better than the vacant, stagnant feeling of the present. He once had longed bitterly for Windekind; he once had waited hour after hour on Robinetta. How delightful that had been!

Robinetta! Did he still long for her? The more he learnt the feebler that craving became. For that too was dissected, and Pluizer showed him what love really was. Then he felt ashamed, and Doctor Cypher said that he could not as yet express it in numbers, but that he should soon accomplish this. Then things grew darker and darker round little Johannes. He had an obscure feeling of thankfulness that he had not seen Robinetta in the course of that fearful expedition with Pluizer.

When he spoke of it to Pluizer he made no reply but a sly laugh; but Johannes understood that this was from no desire to spare him.

Those hours which Johannes did not spend in study or work Pluizer took advantage of to show him the life of men. He managed to take him everywhere—into the hospitals where sick people lay in great numbers—long ranks of pale, haggard faces with a dull, suffering expression—and where unearthly silence reigned, broken only by coughing and groaning. And Pluizer showed him how many of them could never leave the place. And when at a fixed hour streams of men and women came pouring into the place to visit their sick relations, Pluizer said: 'You see, they all know that they too must some day find their way into this house and these gloomy rooms, only to be carried out in a black chest.'

'Then how can they ever be so light-hearted?' thought Johannes.

And Pluizer took him up to a little attic-room where a dismal twilight reigned, and where the distant tinkle of a piano in a neighbouring house made an incessant dreamy noise. Here they found, among others, one man who lay staring helplessly before him at a narrow sunbeam which slowly crept up the wall.

'He has lain there for seven years,' said Pluizer. 'He was a sailor, and has seen the palms of India, the blue seas of Japan, the forests of Brazil; and now, for seven long years, he has amused himself all day and every day with the sunbeams and the sound of the piano. He will never leave this room again; but it cannot last much longer now.'

After this day Johannes had his worst dream; he fancied himself in that little room, listening to the feeble music, in the melancholy half-light, with nothing to look at but the rising and waning sunbeams—never more till the end.

Pluizer took him, too, to the great churches to listen to what was said there. He took him to festivals and grand ceremonies, and made him intimate in many houses. Johannes learnt to study men, and it sometimes happened that he could not help thinking of his past life, of the tales Windekind had told him and of his own disappointments. There were men who reminded him of the glow-worm, who fancied that the stars were his departed friends; or of the cockchafer who was one day older than his comrade, and who had said so much about a vocation; and he heard tales which made him think of Kribbelgaw, the Spider-Hero, and of the eel who did nothing, but was fed because it was a grand thing to have a fat king. Himself, he could only compare to the younger cockchafer, who did not know what a vocation was, and flew to the light. He felt that he in the same way was creeping, helpless and crippled, over the carpet with a string round his body, a cruel string which Pluizer tugged and twitched.

Ah! he should never see the garden again! When would the heavy foot come and crush him to death?

Pluizer laughed at him if he ever spoke of Windekind; and by degrees he began to think that Windekind had never existed.

'But, Pluizer, then the little key does not exist—nothing is real!'

'Nothing, nothing. Men and numbers—those are real and exist, endless numbers!'

'Then you deceived me, Pluizer. Let me go away—let me seek no more—leave me alone.'

'Have you forgotten what Death told you? That you are to become a man, a complete man?'

'I will not! it is horrible!'

'You must. You wished it once. Look at Doctor Cypher, does he think it horrible? Become like him —'

It was very true. Doctor Cypher seemed always content and happy. Unwearied and imperturbable, he pursued his way, studying and teaching, satisfied and equable.

'Look at him,' Pluizer went on, 'he sees everything, and yet sees nothing. He looks on men as though he himself were a being apart, having nothing to do with their sufferings. He moves among griefs and wretchedness as though he were invulnerable, and meets Death face to face as though he were immortal. All he aims at is to understand what he sees, and everything is good in his eyes that comes in the way of knowledge. He is satisfied with everything so long as he understands it. That is what you must be.'

'But that I can never be.'

'Well, I cannot help that.'

This was the hopeless conclusion of all their discussions. Johannes grew dull and indifferent, and

searched and searched, knowing no longer why, or for what. He had become like the multitudes of whom Wistik had spoken.

It was now winter, but he scarcely observed it.

One chill and misty morning, when the snow lay wet and dirty on the roads, and fell from the trees and roofs, he went with Pluizer for his daily walk. In a public garden he met a party of young girls, in a row, and carrying school-books. They pelted each other with snow, and laughed and gambolled; their voices rang out clearly over the snowy plain. There was no sound of feet or wheels to be heard; nothing but the tinkling bells of the horses, or the latch of a shop door. Their merry laughter sounded distinctly through the silence.

Johannes noted that one of these damsels looked at him and stared back after him. She wore a coloured cloak and a black hat. He knew her face very well, but he could not think who she was. She nodded to him once and again.

'Who is that? I know her.'

'Yes, very likely. Her name is Maria, some persons call her Robinetta.'

'No, that cannot be. She is not like Windekind. She is a girl like any other.'

'Ha, ha, hah! She cannot be like Nobody. But she is what she is. You have longed to see her so much; now I will take you to see her!'

'No, I do not want to see her. I would rather see her dead like the others.'

And Johannes would not look round again, but hurried on, murmuring: 'This is the last! There is nothing—nothing!'

XIII

The clear warm sunshine of an early spring morning shone down on the great city. Its bright rays fell into the room where Johannes lived, and on the low ceiling danced and flickered a large patch of light reflected from the rippling water in the canal. Johannes sat by the window in the sunshine, looking out over the town. Its aspect was completely changed. The grey fog was now a sheeny blue sun-mist, veiling the end of the long streets and the distant towers. The slopes of the slate roofs shone like silver. All the houses showed clear outlines and bright surfaces in the sunshine; the pale blue atmosphere was full of glittering warmth. The water seemed alive. The brown buds of the elm-trees were swollen and shiny, and loudly-chirping sparrows fluttered among the branches. A strange feeling came over Johannes as he sat looking out on it all. The sunshine filled him with sweet vague emotion, a mixture of oblivion and ecstasy. He gazed dreamily at the dancing ripples, the bursting leaf-buds; he listened to the chirping of the birds. There was gladness in their tune.

He had not for a long time felt so soft at heart, nor for many a day been so happy.

This was the sunshine of old; he knew it well. This was the sun which of yore called him forth—out into the garden where, under the shelter of a low wall, he would stretch himself on the warm ground, where he might for hours enjoy the light and heat, gazing before him at the grasses and sods basking in the glow.

He was glad in that light; it gave him a safe home-like feeling, such as he remembered long ago when his mother held him in her arms. He thought of all he had gone through, but without either grieving or longing. He sat still and mused, wishing nothing more than that the sun might continue to shine.

'What are you about, mooning there?' cried Pluizer. 'You know I do not approve of dreaming.'

Johannes looked up with absent, imploring eyes. 'Leave me alone for a little longer,' said he; 'the sun is so good!'

'What can you find in the sun?' said Pluizer. 'It is nothing, after all, but a big candle—sunlight or candlelight, it is all the same in the end. Look at the patches of light and shadow in the street—they are nothing more than the effect of a light which burns steadily and does not nicker. And that light is really quite a small flame shining on a quite small speck of the universe. Out there, beyond the blue, above and beneath, it is dark,—cold and dark! It is night there, now and always.'

But his words had no effect on Johannes. The calm warm sunbeams had penetrated him, bathed his whole soul—he was full of light and peace.

Pluizer carried him off to Doctor Cypher's cold house. For some time yet the sunny images floated before his brain; then they slowly faded away, and by the middle of the day all was dark again within him.

But when evening came he made his way through the town once more, the air was soft and full of the vapourous odours of the past. Only the fragrance was ten times stronger, and oppressed him in the narrow streets. But as he crossed the open square he smelt the grass and leaves from the country beyond. And overhead he saw the spring in the tranquil little clouds and the tender rose of the western sky. The twilight shed a soft grey mist, full of delicate tints, over the town. The streets were quiet, only a grinding organ in the distance played a love-sick tune; the houses stood out black against the crimson heavens, their fantastic pinnacles and chimneys stretching up like

numberless arms.

To Johannes it was as though the sun were giving him a kind smile as he shed his last beams over the great city—kind, like the smile which seals a pardon. And the warmth stroked Johannes's cheek with a caress.

Deep tenderness came over his soul, so great that he could walk no farther, but lifted up his face to the wide heavens with a deep sigh. The Spring was calling to him and he heard it. He longed to answer—to go. His heart was full of repentance and love and forgiveness. He gazed up with longing tears flowing from his sad eyes.

'Come, Johannes! do not behave so strangely; people are staring at you!' cried Pluizer.

The long monotonous rows of houses stretched away on each side, gloomy and repulsive—an offence in the soft atmosphere, a discord in the voices of the Spring.

The folk were sitting at their doors and on the steps, to enjoy the warmth. To Johannes this was a mockery. The squalid doors stood open and the stuffy rooms within awaited their inhabitants. The organ was still grinding out its melancholy tune in the distance.

'Oh, if I could but fly away—far away! To the sand-hills and the sea!'

But he must needs go home to the little garret room; and that night he could not sleep.

He could not help thinking of his father, and of the long walks he had been used to take with him, when he trotted ten yards behind, or his father traced letters for him in the sand. He thought of the spots where the violets grew under the brushwood, and of the days when he and his father had hunted for them. All the night he saw his father's face just as he had seen him in the evenings when he sat by his side in the silence and lamplight, watching him and listening to the scratching of his pen.

Every morning now he asked Pluizer when he might once more go home to his father, and see the garden and the sand-hills again. And he perceived now that he had loved his father more than Presto, or his little room, for it was of him that he asked—

'Tell me how he is, and if he is not angry with me for staying away so long.'

Pluizer shrugged his shoulders. 'Even if I could tell you, what good would it do you?'

But the spring still called him, louder and louder. Night after night he dreamed of the dark green moss and the downs, and the sunbeams falling through the fine, fresh verdure.

'I can bear it no longer,' thought Johannes. 'I cannot stay.'

And as he could not sleep he softly got out of bed, went to the window, and looked out on the night. He saw the drowsy, fleecy clouds slowly sailing beneath the full moon, peacefully floating in a sea of pale light. He thought of the downs far away, sleeping through the warm night; how beautiful it must be in the low woods where none of the baby leaves would be stirring, and where the air was smelling of damp moss and young birch sprouts! He fancied he could hear the rising chorus of frogs, sounding mysteriously from afar over the meadows, and the pipe of the only bird which accompanies the solemn stillness—which begins its song with such soft lament and breaks off so suddenly that the silence seems more still than before. And it called to him—everything called to him. He bowed his head on the window-sill and sobbed in his sleeve.

'I cannot, I cannot bear it! I shall die soon, if I do not get away!'

When Pluizer came to call him next day he was still sitting by the window, where he had fallen asleep with his head on his arm.

The days went by, longer and warmer, and still there was no change. But Johannes did not die, and had to bear his troubles.

One morning Doctor Cypher said to him—

'Come with me, Johannes; I have to visit a sick man.'

Doctor Cypher was well known as a learned man, and many appealed to him for help against disease and death. Johannes had already gone with him on such errands now and then. Pluizer was unusually cheerful that morning. He would at times stand on his head, dance and leap, and play all sorts of impudent tricks. He wore a constant mysterious grin, as though he had a surprise in store for some one. Johannes dreaded him most in this mood.

Doctor Cypher was as grave as ever. They went a long way that morning, in a train, and on foot. They went farther than Johannes had ever been before outside the town.

It was a fine hot day. Johannes, looking out from the train, saw the broad green fields fly past, with tall feathery grasses and grazing kine. He saw white butterflies flitting over the flowery land where the air quivered with the heat of the sun.

But suddenly he saw a gleam in the distance.—There lay the long undulating stretch of sand-hills.

'Now, Johannes,' said Pluizer with a grin, 'now you have your wish, you see.'

Johannes, half incredulous, sat gazing at the sand-hills. They came nearer and nearer. The long ditches on each side of the railway seemed to whirl round a distant centre, and the little houses flew swiftly past and away down the road.

Then came some trees: thickly green horse-chestnut trees, covered with thousands of spikes of pink and white blossoms—dark, blue-green pines—tall, spreading lime-trees. It was true, then,—

he was going to see his sand-hills once more. The train stopped; they all three jumped out, under verdurous shade.

Here was the deep, green moss, here were the flecks of sunshine on the ground under the forest-trees—this was the fragrance of birch-buds and pine-needles.

'Is it real—is it true?' thought Johannes. 'Can such happiness befall me?'

His eyes sparkled and his heart beat high. He began to believe in his happiness. He knew these trees and this soil. He had often trodden this forest-path.

They were alone here. But Johannes could not help looking round, as though some one were following him. And he fancied that between the oak boughs he caught sight of a dark figure hiding itself, as they threaded the last turns of the path.

Pluizer looked at him with mysterious cunning. Doctor Cypher hurried forward, with long strides, keeping his eyes on the ground.

At each step the way was more familiar—he knew every stone and every shrub—and suddenly Johannes started violently: he stood before his old home.

The horse-chestnut in front of the house spread the shade of its large, fingered leaves. Above him the beautiful white flowers, and thick, round mass of foliage towered high overhead. He heard the sound of an opening door which he knew well—and he smelt the peculiar smell of his own home. He recognised the passage, the doors, everything, bit by bit—with a keen pang of lost familiarity. It was all a part of his life—of his lonely dreamy childhood. He had held council with all these things, had lived with them his own life of thoughts—to which he had admitted no human being. But now he felt himself dead, as it were, and cut off from the old house, with its rooms and passages and doorways. The severance, he knew, was irremediable, and he felt as melancholy and woeful as though he had come to visit a graveyard. If only Presto had sprung out to meet him, it would have been less dreary. But Presto, no doubt, was gone or dead.

But where was his father?

He looked back through the open door out into the sunny garden, and saw the man who, as he had fancied, was following them on the way, coming towards the house. He came nearer and nearer, and seemed to grow in stature as he approached. When he reached the door a vast cold shadow filled the entrance. Then Johannes knew him.

There was perfect silence indoors, and they went up-stairs without speaking. There was one step which always creaked under foot as Johannes knew; and now he heard it creak three times with a sound like a groan of pain. But under the fourth footstep it was like a deep sob.

Above stairs, Johannes heard moaning, as low and as regular as the slow ticking of a clock. It was a heart-rending and doleful sound. The door of his own little room stood open; he timidly glanced in. The strange flowers on the curtains stared at him with unmeaning surprise. The clock had stopped. They went on to the room whence the groaning came. It was his father's bedroom. The sun shone in brightly, on the green bed-curtains which were drawn close. Simon, the cat, sat on the window-sill, in the sun. There was an oppressive smell of wine and camphor; the low moaning now sounded close at hand.

Johannes heard whispering voices and carefully softened footsteps. Then the green curtains were opened.

He saw his father's face, which had so often risen before him during the last few weeks. But it was quite different. The kind, grave expression had given way to a rigid look of suffering, and his face was ashy pale, with brown shadows. The teeth showed through the parted lips, and the white of the eyes under the half-closed lids. His head lay sunk in pillows, and was lifted a little with every moaning breath, falling back wearily after each effort.

Johannes stood by the bed without stirring, staring with wide fixed eyes at the well-known features. He did not know what he thought; he dared not move a finger, he dared not take the wan old hands, which lay limp on the white linen sheet.

All about him was black, the sun and the bright room, the greenery outside and the blue air he had come in from—all the past was black—black, heavy and impenetrable. And that night he could see nothing but that pale face. He could think of nothing but the poor head which seemed so weary, and yet was lifted again and again with a groan of anguish.

But there was a change in this regular movement. The moaning ceased, the eyes slowly opened and stared about inquiringly, while the lips tried to say something.

'Good-morning, father,' whispered Johannes, looking into the seeking eyes and trembling with terror. The dim gaze rested on him, and a faint, faint smile moved the hollow cheeks; the thin clenched hand was lifted from the sheet and made a feeble movement towards Johannes, but it dropped again, powerless.

'Come, come,' said Pluizer. 'No scenes here.'

'Get out of the way, Johannes,' said Doctor Cypher. 'We must see what can be done.'

The Doctor began his examination, and Johannes went away from the bed-side and stood by the window, looking out at the sunlit grass and broad chestnut leaves on which large flies were sitting which shone blue in the sun.

The groaning began again with the same regularity.

A blackbird was hopping among the tall grass, large red and black butterflies fluttered over the flower-beds, and from the topmost boughs of the highest trees a soft, tender cooing of wood-pigeons, fell on Johannes's ear. In the room the moaning went on—without ceasing. He could not help listening—and it came as regularly, as inevitably as the falling drip which may drive a man mad. He watched anxiously at every interval and it always came again—as awful as the approaching footsteps of Death.

And outside, warm and rapturous delight in the sunshine reigned. Everything was basking and happy. The blades of grass thrilled and the leaves whispered for sheer gladness. High above the trees in the deep, distant blue, a heron was soaring on lazy wing.

Johannes did not understand—it was all a mystery to him. Everything was confused and dark in his soul—

'How can all this exist in me at the same time?' thought he. 'Am I really myself? Is that my father—my own father? Mine—Johannes's?' And it was as though a stranger spoke.

It was all a tale which he had heard. He had heard some one tell of Johannes, and of the house where he dwelt with his father from whom he had run away, and who was now dying. This was not himself—he had only heard of it all; and indeed it was a sad story,—very sad. But it had nothing to do with him.

And yet—and yet.—It was he himself, Johannes.

'I cannot understand the case,' said Doctor Cypher, pulling himself up. 'It is a very mysterious attack.'

Pluizer came up to Johannes.

'Come and look, Johannes; it is a very interesting case. The Doctor knows nothing about it.'

'Leave me alone,' said Johannes, without turning round. 'I cannot think.'

But Pluizer went close behind him and whispered sharply in his ear, as was his wont—

'You cannot think? Did you fancy that you could not think? That is a mistake. You must think. Staring out like this at the green grass and the blue sky will do no good. Windekind will not come to you. And the sick man is sinking fast; that you must have seen as clearly as we did. But what is his disorder, do you think?'

'I do not know!—I do not want to know!'

Johannes said no more, but listened to the moaning; it sounded like a gentle complaint and reproach. Doctor Cypher was taking notes in a book. At the head of the bed sat the dark figure which had followed them in; his head was bowed, his lean hand extended towards the sick man, and his hollow eyes steadfastly gazing at the clock.

That sharp whisper in his ear began again.

'Why are you so unhappy, Johannes? You have got what you wished for. There lie the sand-hills, there is the sunshine through the verdure, there are the dancing butterflies, the singing birds. What more do you want? Are you waiting for Windekind? If he exists anywhere, it must be there. Why does he not come to you? He is frightened, no doubt, by our dark friend by the bed. He always has been afraid of him. Don't you see, Johannes, that it was all fancy? And listen to the moaning. It is weaker than it was just now. You can hear that it will soon cease altogether. Well, and what matter? Many folks must have groaned just so when you were at play here among the wild roses. Why do you now sit here grieving instead of going out to the sand-hills as you used to do? Look! Out there everything is as flowery and fragrant as if nothing had happened. Why do you care no more for all the gladness of that life?'

'First you complained and longed to be here. Now I have brought you where you yearned to be, and yet you are not content. See. I will let you go—go out into the tall grass, lie in the cool shade, let the flies hum about you, and breathe the perfume of growing herbs. You are free! Go. Find Windekind once more. You will not? Then do you now believe in me alone? Is all I have told you true? Am I or is Windekind the false one?'

'Listen to the moans! So short and feeble! They will soon be stilled. But do not look so terrified, Johannes, the sooner it is ended, the better. There could be no long walks now, no more seeking for violets together. With whom has he wandered these two years, do you think, while you were away? You can never ask him now. You can never know. If you had known me a little earlier you would not look so wretched now. You are a long way yet from being what you must become. Do you think that Doctor Cypher in your place would look as you do? It would sadden him no more than it does the cat blinking there in the sunshine. And it is best so. Of what use is brooding sorrow? Have the flowers learnt to grieve? They do not mourn if one of them is plucked. Is not that far happier? They know nothing, and that is why they are thus content. You have begun to know something; now you must learn everything to become happy. I alone can teach you. All, or nothing.'

'Listen to me. What is there remarkable in your father's case? It is the death of a man—that is a common occurrence. Now do you hear the gasping? Weaker still! It must be very near the end!'

Johannes looked at the bed in agonised fear.

Simon the cat jumped down from the window-sill, stretched himself, and then, still purring, lay down on the bed by the dying man.

The poor weak head moved no longer; it lay still, sunk in the pillows, but the short, dull panting

still came through the half-open mouth.

It grew weaker and weaker till it was scarcely audible.

Then Death took his hollow eyes off the clock and looked at the weary head; he raised his hand. Then all was still.

A grey shadow fell on the rigid features.

Silence, oppressive, unbroken silence!

Johannes sat and sat, waiting. But the regular sound was heard no more. All was still—a great, murmuring stillness.

The tension of the last hours of listening was over, and to Johannes it seemed that his soul had been let fall down into black and bottomless space. Deeper and deeper he fell. All about him grew darker and more silent.

Then he heard Pluizer's voice as if it were a long way off.

'There! That tale is told.'

'That is well,' said Doctor Cypher. 'Now you can see what was wrong with him. I leave that to you. I must be off.'

Still, as if half-dreaming, Johannes saw the gleam of bright knives. The cat set her back up. It was cold by the corpse, and she returned to the sunshine.

Johannes saw Pluizer take a knife, which he examined carefully, and then went up to the bed.

Then he shook off his lethargy. Before Pluizer could get to the bed he stood in front of him.

'What do you want?' he asked. His eyes were wide open with horror.

'We must see what he died of,' said Pluizer.

'No,' said Johannes, and his voice was as deep as a man's.

'What is the meaning of this?' said Pluizer, with a glare of rage. 'Can you hinder me? Do you not know how strong I am?'

'I will not have it,' said Johannes. He drew a deep breath and set his teeth, staring firmly at Pluizer, and put out his hand against him.

But Pluizer came nearer. Then Johannes gripped him by the wrists and struggled with him.

Pluizer was strong; he knew that; nothing had ever been able to resist him. But he did not leave go, and his will was steadfast.

The knife gleamed before his eyes; he seemed to see sparks and red flames, but he did not give in, and wrestled on. He knew what would happen if he yielded. He knew—he had seen it before. But that which lay behind him was his father, and he would not see it now.

And while he panted and struggled, the dead body lay stretched out motionless, just as it was lying when the silence fell; the white of the eyes visible through a narrow opening, the corners of the mouth curled to a ghastly smile. Only as the two knocked against the bed in their wrestling, the head gently moved a little.

Still Johannes held his own. His breath came hard and he could not see; a blood-red mist was before his eyes—and still he stood firm.

Then gradually the resistance of those wrists grew weaker in his grasp, his muscles relaxed, his arms fell limp by his sides and his clenched hands were empty.

When he looked up Pluizer had vanished. Death sat alone by the bed and nodded to him.

'That was well done, Johannes,' said he.

'Will he come back again?' whispered Johannes. Death shook his head.

'Never. Those who have once defied him, never see him again.'

'And Windekind? Shall I ever see Windekind again?'

The gloomy man gazed long at Johannes. His look was no longer terrible, but gentle and grave. It seemed to allure Johannes like some great deep.

'I alone can take you to Windekind. Through me alone can you find the Book.'

'Then take me too, there is no one left. Take me with you as you have taken others. I want nothing more.'

But again Death shook his head.

'You love men, Johannes. You do not know it, but you have always loved them. You must grow up to be a good man. It is a very fine thing to be a good man.'

'I do not want that—take me with you.'

'You are mistaken; you do want it; you cannot help it.'

The tall dark figure became dim in Johannes' sight—it melted into a vague shape—a formless grey mist filled its place and floated away on the sunbeams.

Johannes bowed his head on the edge of the bed and mourned for the dead man.

XIV

It was long before he looked up again. The sun's rays fell aslant into the room and were glowing red, looking like straight bars of gold.

'Father, father!' whispered Johannes.

Outside, the sun filled the whole atmosphere with a cloud of glittering golden fire. Every leaf was motionless, and all was still in the solemn, holy sunshine.

A low sighing chant came down on the sun's rays; it was as though they were singing: 'Child of the Sun—Child of the Sun!'

Johannes raised his head and listened. It was in his ears, 'Child of the Sun—Child of the Sun!'

It was like Windekind's voice. No one else had ever called him so. Was it he who called him now? But he looked at the face before him; he would listen no more.

'Poor, dear father!' he murmured.

But suddenly it sounded again close to him, on every side of him, so loud, so urgent, that he thrilled with strange excitement—

'Child of the Sun—Child of the Sun!'

Johannes rose and looked out. What radiance! What a glory of light! It flooded the leafy tree-tops, it sparkled in the grass, and danced even in the dappled shadows. The whole air was full of it, high up towards the blue sky where the first soft clouds of evening were beginning to gather.

Beyond the meadows, between the green trees and shrubs, he could see the sand-hills. They were crowned with glowing gold, and the blue of heaven hung in their dells.

There they lay, at rest, in their robe of exquisite tints. The beautiful curves of their expanse were as peace-giving as a prayer. Johannes felt once more as he had felt when Windekind had taught him to pray.

And was not that he, his slender form in its blue robe? There in the very heart of the light—gleaming in a shimmer of gold and blue—was not that Windekind beckoning to him?

Johannes flew out into the sunshine. There he stood still for a moment. He felt the consecration of the light, and scarcely dared stir where the very leaves were so motionless. But the figure was there, before his eyes. It was Windekind. Certainly, surely! The radiant face was turned towards him with parted lips, as if to call him. He beckoned Johannes with his right hand. In his left he held some object on high. He held it very high with the tips of his slender fingers, and it trembled and shone in his hand.

With a glad cry of joy and yearning, Johannes flew to meet the beloved vision. But it floated up and away before his eyes. With a smile on his face, and waving his hand now and then, he touched the earth, descending slowly; but then he rose again lightly and swiftly, soaring higher than the thistle-down borne by the wind.

Johannes, too, would fain float up and fly, as of yore—and as in his dreams. But the earth clung to his feet, and his tread was heavy on the grassy sod. He had to make his way with difficulty through the brushwood where the leaves caught and rustled against his clothes, and the lithe branches lashed his face. He climbed the moss-grown hillocks panting as he went. Still he went on, unwearied, and never took his eyes off the radiant vision of Windekind and the object which shone in his uplifted hand.

There he was, in the midst of the sandy downs. The wild roses of that soil were in bloom in the warm hollows, with their thousand pale yellow cups gazing up at the sun. There were many other flowers too, light-blue, yellow and purple; sultry heat lurked in the little hollows, warming the fragrant herbs; the air was full of strong aromatic scents. Johannes inhaled them as he toiled onward. He smelt the thyme and the dry reindeer-moss, which crackled under his feet. It was overpoweringly delightful.

Between him and the lovely vision he was pursuing, he saw the gaudy butterflies flitting—small ones, black and red, and the 'sand-eye' as they call it—the restless little flutterer with sheeny wings of tenderest blue. Round his head buzzed golden beetles that live on the wild rose—and heavy bumble-bees buzzed from blade to blade of the scorched short grass. How delicious it all was, how happy he could be, when he should find himself with Windekind once more!

But Windekind glided away, farther and farther, Johannes breathlessly following. The straggling, pale-leaved thorn bushes stopped his way and tore him with their spines; the grey woolly mulleins shook their tall heads as he pushed them aside in his course. He scrambled up the sandy slopes and scratched his hands with the prickly broom. He struggled through the low birch-wood where the tall grass came up to his knees, and the water-fowl flew up from the little pools which glistened among the trees. Thick white-blossomed hawthorns mingled their perfume with that of the birches and of the mints which grew all over the marshy ground.

But presently there were no more trees, or shade, or flowers. Only weird-looking grey eryngium growing amid the parched white-blossomed broom.

On the top of the farthest knoll rested the image of Windekind. That which he held up shone blindingly. From beyond, with mysterious allurements, there came, borne on a cool breeze, the

great unceasing, surging roar. It was the sea. Johannes felt that he was getting near to it, and slowly climbed the last slope. At the top he fell on his knees, gazing over the ocean.

Now he had got above the sand-hills he found himself in the midst of a ruddy glow. The evening clouds had gathered round the departing day. They surrounded the sinking sun like a vast circle of immense rocks with fringes of light. Across the sea lay a broad band of living, purple fire—a flaming sparkling path of glory leading to the gates of distant heaven. Below the sun, on which the eye could not yet rest, soft hues of blue and rose mingled together in the heart of that cave of light; and all over the expanse of sky crimson flames and streaks were glowing, and light fleeces of blood-red down, and waves of liquid fire.

Johannes gazed and waited, till the sun's disc touched the rim of the path of light which led up to him.

Then he looked down; and at the beginning of the path of light he saw the bright form he had followed. A boat, as clear and bright as crystal, floated on the fiery way. At one end of the boat stood Windekind, slender and tall, with that golden object shining in his hand. At the other end, Johannes recognised the dark figure of Death.

'Windekind! Windekind!' he cried.

But as he approached the strange barque, he also saw the farther end of the path. In the midst of the radiant space, surrounded by great fiery clouds, he saw a small dark figure. It grew bigger and bigger, and a man slowly came forward, treading firmly on the surging glittering waters. The glowing waves rose and fell under his feet, but he walked steadily onward. He was a man pale of aspect, and his eyes were dark and deep-set: as deep as Windekind's eyes, but in his look was an infinite, gentle pity, such as Johannes had never seen in any other eyes.

'Who are you?' asked Johannes, 'are you a man?'

'I am more,' was the reply.

'Are you Jesus?—are you God?' said Johannes.

'Do not speak those names!' said the figure. 'They were holy and pure as priestly raiment, and precious as nourishing corn; but they are become as husks before swine, and as motley to clothe fools withal. Speak them not, for their meaning has become a delusion, and their sacredness is laughed to scorn. Those who desire to know me cast away the names and obey themselves.'

'I know Thee! I know Thee!' cried Johannes.

'It was I who made you weep for men when as yet you knew not the meaning of your tears. It was I who made you love before you understood what love was. I was with you, and you saw me not; I moved your soul and you knew me not!'

'Why have I never seen Thee till now?'

'The eyes that shall see Me must be cleared by many tears. And you must weep not for yourself alone, but for Me also; then I shall appear to you, and you will recognise Me for an old friend.'

'I know Thee! I recognised Thee. I will ever remain with Thee!'

Johannes stretched out his hand but the figure pointed to the gleaming barque which slowly drifted off up the fiery path.

'Look!' said he, 'that is the way to all you have longed for. There is no other. Without those two you will never find it. Now, take your choice; there is the Great Light; there you would yourself be what you crave to know. There,' and he pointed to the shadowy East, 'where men are, and their misery, there lies my way. I shall guide you there, and not the false light which you have followed. Now you know—take your choice.'

Then Johannes slowly took his eyes off Windekind's vanishing form, and put up his hands to the grave Man. And led by Him, he turned and faced the cold night wind, and made his toilsome way to the great dismal town where men are, and their misery.

Perhaps I may some day tell you more about Little Johannes; but it will not be like a fairy tale.

THE END.

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